Cabin Fever

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Summary

Kenny Ackerman is placed under house-arrest and only Levi and Mikasa are suited for guard-duty. They set up a temporary base at an isolated cabin in the mountains, but a sudden storm brews and they get snowed in. Once the cold starts kicking in, it's only logical to huddle your body heat together to avoid frost bite, but that's when Levi and Mikasa both realize they're experiencing more than just cabin fever.

Notes

My love for the Ackerman's has reached unhealthy heights, so naturally it's time I write a fanfic. I'm not sure how many chapters this will end up being (it was originally supposed to be a oneshot) but it looks like it will take a little longer than I thought.
"So basically what you're saying is...that man...is my uncle?"

The least Levi could offer Mikasa was a sympathetic look. Learning you share the blood of a serial killer must be a bitter pill to swallow—but now that he thought about it, this really shouldn't be a shocking revelation to anyone. Mikasa is a killing machine and God rest his soul, but not long ago did she threaten Reeves flesh with her blade. Only difference is that Kenny Ackerman has more bite than bark.

"On my...dad's side?"

"Yup."

"But my father looked nothing like that savage of a man."

There was a miffed rumble coming from the other room. The two strongest ignored the rude interruption.

"...I'm pretty sure Kenny took after a rotten gene." Levi let on in a whisper.

Mikasa sat in silence, absorbing all the information Levi shared with her. She stared down at the murky Grey Earl tea that Levi had brewed and set out for her, but it remained untouched for the duration of their conversation.

To take her mind off this dreadful news, she wondered why in the world Levi made it a top priority to bring this tea along with them. Maybe it was for the best—Mikasa had the misfortune of witnessing how agitated the Captain gets when he doesn't get a fix of his special blended tea. Having a box of teabags conveniently available to him during their stay here just might make this mission a little more bearable for her too.

This triggered the recall of her time spent at the Survey Corps HQ. It was indeed a simpler time with much less worries and more members then. There was some piece of mind for a brief moment before all Hell broke loose during their trip outside the Walls. Before their leisure days there, life seemed excruciating but compared to the flesh wound that opened up now, it was nothing but a blemish.

During her stay at the castle she wasn't all that fond of Captain Levi for what he did to Eren at his court hearing, but eventually she realized that the man wasn't some under-developed bully picking on kids—he has a sense of purpose that's even stronger than Eren at times. Above all, he's strong but when he's not fighting he's just an abnormal man with awkward social skills. Ever since she realized that, she's never felt intimidated by him. In fact—she started to look up to him. She relates to him, in some ways and not at all in others. When it came down to it, they both had a knack for fighting, but had zero skills (or patience) for dealing with people.

With a sudden realization hitting her, she flicked her bangs from her eyes and let them pierce through Levi. "Why didn't you tell me about this sooner? Don't tell me it slipped your mind or you couldn't find the right opportunity, either. Hiding this just makes you seem suspicious."

"It wasn't relevant. None of this mattered until recently."
A skeptical hum vibrated in her throat. She'll give him that, but she still had a bone to pick with him. It's no surprise that the Captain of the Survey Corps hid the fact that one of his recruits was related to a serial killer; it really didn't hold any relevance until the man himself showed up—but that didn't explain why he hid another vital piece of information from her. "Why didn't you tell me we have the same last name—that's what I'm asking."

"Because," he picked up his cup in his usual unstable fashion, using it as an excuse to give himself time to think. "Ackerman is...a common surname, isn't it? Didn't mean we were connected by the same Ackerman. I didn't want to make assumptions." He drowned out his half-assed lie with a swig from his teacup.

The line of her lip tightened as she glared. She could smell it; his bullshit.

This is when Levi remembered that Mikasa is much sharper than she puts on. Sometimes she resembles a brainless kitten chasing its own tail with the way she shadows around Eren. But surprise, surprise, she had more contents in her head that didn't only involve creepy facts about the Titan shifter child like he's a damn celebrity and she's a mindless fan.

"Don't give me that look." Levi warned, "Do you have any idea how many recruits have the last name Smith? Doesn't mean Erwin is connected to all those people."

Mikasa's pupils whirled around the room, like she was spun by a loop on a bad trip on 3DMG. The wave of dizziness made it clear she should gave up at this point. There's no convincing the truth from this stubborn little man. She knew he knew all this time. Looking back it was painfully obvious, but she'll let it slid under the rug just for the sake of not attracting a headache. "Speaking of which, how exactly are we connected, anyway? And don't tell me we're related. Please, please don't."

"Tch. I'm offended." His shoulders rolled back, working out the knots in his tendons that would put sailors to shame. "What would be so horrible about being related to me? I'd probably make a better brother than Eren any day. You wouldn't have to save me every five seconds, for starters. And my voice isn't as loud as his, so just think of how much your liver would thank you for not shoving migraine meds in it every day."

Levi stepped on a landmine. Mikasa is pissed. A fight to the death between Humanity's Strongest Soldiers pended between them. The battle would be long and bloody—and they both didn't have the time nor the motivation for it right now, so Levi simply calmed her little defensive stance by saying, "At ease. You and I aren't related. I just lived with that nutjob when I was younger. I share no blood with him. He saw me as a prodigy and I was supposed to become his successor; he couldn't get himself a wife to bare kids of his own which is why I took his last name. But you see, I rather cut the back of necks than the front. It's more my style."

"I heard that." A gruff, tired tone traveled in from the next room. Leaning his head back, Levi closed his eyes, his lip curled irritation. Mikasa ignored the interruption that triggered Levi's apparent headache and lashed her head at him, intending to make the pounding in his skull worse.

"And explain to me again why we have to babysit that man like he's a damn three year old? Shouldn't he be in jail for his crimes? He attacked and nearly killed you!"

"Yeah...We used to do that a lot. Our neighbors really hated us. Good times."

Horrified, Mikasa scooted back to make a further gap between them; her chair scuffling against the wore floorboards. She could never tell when Levi was joking or not. The Captain is the type of person who could talk about shit the same way he'd talk about the weather. But for everyone's sake (even her own, since she shared blood with the lunatic in the other room) she prayed that he
was just joking about that twisted version of roughhousing.

"But keep in mind he is in our custody." Levi started, "Just because he hasn't been officially charged doesn't mean he's innocent. Right now, we can safely say he's under house-arrest and warranted for questioning."

"I understand that from the briefing, but I still don't understand why I'm here with you two weirdo's and not with the rest of the group. Why am I forced to be here?"

"Backup. Your skills are similar to mine, Mikasa. We're the only ones that could take him on." He hunched forward and craned his neck up at her, keeping his voice as low as the hollowing wind outside. "He's killed hundreds of MPs without even batting a lash. But I know his mindset, I know what he might, will and won't plan in terms of escaping. I could also get him to talk, eventually. If he proves to outsmart me, though, I trust that you'll have my back."

Mikasa folded her hands on the table, her long lashes fluttering over her unbreakable stare. She nodded obediently. Never breaking his gaze on her, Levi leaned back his posture; his spine pressing into the pegs of the chair.

Levi didn't like her being here either—he personally knew Kenny and knew the horrible things he was capable of and Levi didn't feel comfortable with anyone but himself within a mile of this maniacs range. He knew how to handle him and if it came down to it, and he knew how to take him down (maybe not kill him, not on his own, but at least restrain him). But Mikasa is nearly a stranger to Kenny, despite their blood connection. Kenny doesn't hesitant when it comes to killing strangers—but he'll show some mercy when it comes to his pride that he put so much time and effort into.

The Captain would much rather know Mikasa was safe with the rest of his squad, but his personal feelings cannot play a role in this mission. If Kenny escapes, it will cost more than a headache. There will be more casualties like Reeves, Nifa and the other valuable people they unfortunately lost. Waiting for the MP heat to die down won't go as smoothly if they're being hunted by that violence-junkie.

To ensure the mission is a success, Levi and Mikasa must work together.

Levi had to admit they made a great team. They fought against impossible odds together in the past and won with only a few injuries. It's been a long time since Levi had partners like that.

"I see... I just don't like being out in the middle of nowhere like this," Mikasa's hand road up the sleeve of her sweater, like a sudden chill ran threw her. Anxiety was clearly written on her face. The three of them were currently located deep in the forest and far from any of the mountain villages. The rest of the Survey Corps (or what's left of them) are located about a day-trip on horseback away. "We're so far from anything. I don't feel comfortable being this far from Eren and Armin and everyone else. I don't know why they couldn't be here with us—shouldn't more backup be better?"

"I assure you they're safe where they are. Safer than they'd be here. The others wouldn't stand a chance against Kenny and he's far too dangerous and good at manipulating people. I do hope you know what kind of formula that creates, hm?"

She bowed her head into a tacit nod and Levi's heart twinged at the sorrow appearing on her delicate features. He stiffly folded his arms, thinking the constriction would cut off enough blood supply to stabilize his heart.

This can't be helped. He knew that people like Armin, Hanji, Moblit knew better than to be
tricked by the enemy, but that obnoxious Springles pair and their horse-face friend proved to be too stupid for their own good on more than one occasion. On top of that, Eren and Historia have been through Hell recently and their state of mind isn't the clearest it's ever been.

Mikasa tends to only act impulsively when Eren is around, but if there's no Eren, there's no irrational Mikasa, which means she's highly trustworthy and follows her Captain's orders without dispute. He couldn't have asked for a better partner to be stuck up here with. What's better is she's one of the few people within his squad he could tolerate being in close-corners with for more than 24-hours. Anyone else would surely drive him up the wall with insanity.

"How long will we have to stay out here?" Mikasa asked.

"A day, maybe two. Mostly everything is under control now that we've successful rescued Eren and Historia. We just need to let some MP heat die down, then we'll all regroup." Levi shot his thumb toward the arch connecting the kitchen and living room. "With him in our custody and off our tail, it'll be easier to move around, but we still need more information out of him; about this coup, his motives, his role in all this. If we get that, we can leave and you can reunite with your precious Eren."

Mikasa gave him a hard stare, her eyes more dull and narrow than the ones staring back at her. "Why did you say it like that?"

"Like what?" he carelessly sipped.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about."

"Oi, don't start getting cabin fever on me now. I need you sharp tonight." He rose from his chair and transferred his cup to the sink.

Levi could feel her dirty look spearing into his back. She was offended, of course, but that's to be expected. Levi blaming his fussy wording on her own delusions was kind of a kick where it hurts, but this cabin is boring and only for so long could Levi talk about the mission without snapping. Teasing Mikasa about her little crush on her brother is a good alternative to entertainment. It may get him stabbed in his sleep later if he's not careful, though.

After taking a careful and critical look around the state of the kitchen and at the grungy cabinets, the rusty sink, and the dust stuck in the crevices of the floorboards, Levi decided the teasing was best saved for later. Right now there were more important matters to tend to. "Since this is going to be our home for a while, let's make it a little more livable. Help me clean up a little."

By the time he turned back around, Mikasa's elbows were propped up on the table, holding up her heavy-looking head. She remained bundled over in pain and she grunted out, "I'm really, really not in the mood."

"Doesn't matter, it's an order."

She glared through her fingers, her teeth clenching tighter than the hands she wished were around Levi's neck. "I just went through Hell today with wackos that tried to kill me and everyone I know. I finally got Eren safe after he's been kidnapped by them, just to be separated from him again. Oh, and don't forget that I'm related to the leader of said wackos. Give me a break."

When worded like that, Levi could consider that yes, maybe Mikasa was having a bad day.

With a huff, Levi lethargically dragged a rag off the counter and left her behind to tend to her headache alone.
Levi skirted around the living room cautiously as his dead-set eyes stayed bolted on the lanky man seated in lone chair in the middle of the room, handcuffed to the armrest.

Kenny regarded him with a shifty grin that was shadowed by his aged hat. The man resembled a bloody-thirsty beast, but Levi courageously approached him like he was a newborn kitten. He stared eye-level with him (because the man shared his height while seated) but Levi rose his chin up, creating the illusion that he towered over him.

"Oi, asshole. I'll make a deal with you. I'll let you walk around and stretch your long-ass legs for a while if you—"

"No."

"Didn't even ask yet."

"I'm not cleaning."

"......"

Levi has still, to this day, never met anyone who could read him as well as Kenny could. Erwin came close, but there's no comparing Kenny's sharp judgment. He was far from accurate all the time, though. Levi never intended to stay loyal to him or what he shaped him up for, but Kenny never predicted the day Levi would run away and use all his training for his own causes, including his teachings of reading others that he makes good use of now.

With his lonely rag swinging in his fist, Levi got closer and kicked the dangerous man in the boot. "C'mon. I'm tired. Thanks to you. I don't want to clean this whole place by myself."

The abandoned cabin wasn't all that huge—just a simple layout with antique furniture scattered about (and a ton of dusty knickknacks everywhere) and a small bedroom located in the back. There's also a basement, but they haven't had time to explore it yet. More than likely, Kenny will be placed down there later tonight to sleep because there's no windows to escape from and only one exit. Levi and Mikasa will take shifts guarding the door while the other catches some rest.

But even though the cabin wasn't all that huge, it's still filthy from sitting unlived-in for so long. Dead flies were laid to rest on every window pane, cobwebs dwelled in every corner, and the dust laid so thick that clouds of it lifted up when you walked.

This isn't a job for one—not if Levi plans on sleeping tonight, and after this crappy day he believes he's entitled to get some rest, and he also believes he's entitled to get some help. He needed to raise the stakes.

"I won't let you eat if you don't help me."

"Isn't that prisoner brutality?"

Levi leaned in nice and close to his face, holding up his weight by the propping his palms on the two armrests. Kenny gave him a sharp smile, one so vile a pack of wolves would gallop at top speed from the sight of it—but not Levi. He's used to that smile. If anything it gave him nostalgia. "After what you did to my soldiers, just thinking of giving you any hospitality is showing you mercy."

Kenny shrugged, looking off over his disciples shoulder, the tight cuff restraining his wrist rattled against the wood. "Not like I give a damn either way."

Levi backed off. "Your loss. Your niece is a really good cook, too bad you'll never get a taste for
yourself." Levi was about to leave with those final words, but spun his heel around when he noticed a tiny flicker of emotion. Levi paced back and forth and Kenny's unsettling eyes followed. "You know, growing up with you was awful because you were a shit cook and you were too creepy to get yourself a wife that could cook anything decent for us—but for the first time, you're being given the chance to get a home-cooked meal from a real woman. All you gotta do is sweep the floor and beat the rug."

Levi came to a sudden stop, like a rabbit caught in the eyes of a predator while he waited for a reply. Kenny blinked a few times, then tilted his head with a roaring 'huh?'. "You really think this shitty negotiating of yours is going to work? C'mon Levi, I raised you better than this."

"Oh fuck off," he stomped off across the room the same way he used to as a kid when he didn't get his way. Fine. He'll clean the whole fucking house himself. Once he approached the window, he started the one-man cleaning show by swatting the dead flies to the floor with the rag, intending to sweep them up later. He mumbled as he worked, "It's not like everyone takes advantage of Humanity's Strongest Solider as it is. It's not like I'm tired or anything. No, not at all. I don't need rest. I'm a fucking machine."

Kenny shifted his body into a slant, the chair creaking as he craned his neck out in Levi direction. "Oi, you still got that weird habit of mumbling to yourself? Didn't I tell you people will think you're crazy if you do that?"

"As-fucking-if you can talk, psychopath. And no. I don't actually do that anymore—you're the only one that irritates me enough to give in to that."

Kenny found this amusing and Levi's skin crawled when he heard the rowdy noise the man made. Even when he was a kid he hated when Kenny laughed at him after making an ass out of himself. A spasm within Levi told him bolt at top speed and wail on him, but he quieted the nerve by scrubbing laps into the window vigorously, clearing the film of dingy dust.

In the circle he created, specs of white clung to the glass and after trying to rub at it for a good second or two while thinking dust was drawing back to the glass like a magnet, Levi realized that it's sticking from the outside.

He cupped his fingers over the clean ring and set his gaze between his hands to get a better look outside. Being out in the middle of nowhere as they were, there were no lights or activity to see—not even the close trees that skirted the cabin were visible. A sheet of black blocked his view.

Judging by the continuous icy droplets sticking to the window, it became apparent that the weather made a slight shift since they first arrived.

"Looks like a flurry is passing." Levi said to himself, because he knew Kenny didn't care and Mikasa wasn't even present to hear him. At the rate it's coming down it might start to stick to the ground and gain a few inches quick, depending on how fast it's descending. It shouldn't be anything too severe so long as it doesn't keep up at this pace all night—but it's nothing they can't manage if it happens. Just more inconveniences to add to the pile.

That's when Levi remembered another problem. He watched his eyes reflecting back at him widening in realization. He dropped what he was doing and rushed into the kitchen, flying past Mikasa who looked to be busy cleaning off dusty pans in the sink. Levi reached the doorknob—only to be interrupted by a clamor, "Wh-What happened? Where are you going?"

She cautiously perked up, stepping toward him with knitted brows. She hooked her head around like a paranoid squirrel, trying to find the apparent problem Levi was running from.
Levi froze like a guilty thief being caught red-handed. Right. He should probably get into the habit—for the time being—of telling people what he's going to do before he just goes and does it.

"I need to get the horses in the barn. It's snowing and it's coming down pretty hard. If it keeps up all night they won't survive the night."

Mikasa tried to glare out the window above the sink to check for herself, but just like the others the glass was hidden with a layer of dust. She grabbed a sponge, cleared it and granted herself a glimpse. "You're right—it doesn't look like it'll be stopping within the next few hours. You should let me go, it's wisest for you to stay with Kenny anyway."

"No, I know my horse and I know he gets spooked in weather like this—he won't obey anyone but me under these conditions."

Nervously, Mikasa flattened the wrinkles in blouse and tucked her hair behind her lobe. She didn't like the idea of being left alone in this creepy cabin with a serial killer, and Levi being reckless and going out in a storm isn't a comforting thought either. But she could argue, not with her reasoning. "Fine. But you can't go out in just that."

Levi took a quick look down at himself. His attire was made up of a button-up shirt and slacks, but he figured he'd be quick enough before the cold could penetrate through them—plus, he didn't have much of a choice. "My cloak was pretty much destroyed in the fight. I'll be back before I could even feel the cold."

"Listen, I'm already babysitting one lunatic, I don't need to nurse my Captain back to health too."

She removed her cloak from the back of the chair hurriedly stepped up and handed it to him. "...Thanks." He secured it around him then started moving toward the door—but once again, his short trip has been delayed. A hand on his shoulder spun him back around.

Tentatively, Mikasa motioned her hands to her neck, as if reaching, then drew her hands away. She repeated his reluctant action a few times as Levi watched the display awkwardly before she finally grabbed hold of her scarf. After unraveling it from her neck, she whirled it around Levi's neck tight (a little too tight) and held it at the ends, reeling him in close to her dire expression.

"Don't you dare lose this scarf. I know it looks old and tattered but it means a lot to me."

Levi swallowed hard; his protruding Adam's apple bobbing against the soft fabric. "If it's so important to you, why are you lending it to me?"

"Because..." She took a step back. "Because it's important that you stay in good health for the mission."

That's beyond considerate of her, but still unnecessary. Levi didn't understand—the cloak was enough, but he couldn't deny that the scarf is definitely warm. With a faithful stance he nodded to her, "I'll take good care of it, Mikasa. Keep a watch on Kenny until I get back."

The wind animated the scarf and his hair the moment he stepped out the door. He shielded his eyes from the fierce winds and flurries that felt more like needles darting into him. Once he was off the porch, his foot landed in a shin-deep sheet of snow. He peered down in disbelief.

"This high already?" he said, but he couldn't hear himself over the screaming gusts. He pulled his leg out and engraved another ditch with his heel. They've only settled in a little before sunset and during their trip the sky gave no signs of a blizzard—which implies this must have happened within the past hour or so. If this keeps up at the rate it's going there's a good chance they'll get snowed in by morning.
Levi tried to bury the dreadful thought as he untied the strap from the post and lured his frightened horse and Mikasa's in the direction of the barn. The short transfer took much longer than planned—trying to guide the horses (while he could barely guide himself) through the deep snow wasn't only strenuous and difficult for the animals, but it was for Levi as well.

An eternity later, the outline of the barn finally became visible between the fog and snowfall. Just a little more to go. The cold was undeniably hitting him hard and his pants were soaked by the puddles of ice. His skin stung like a flaming burn.

Once he unlatched the rusted lock and forced the barn door open with a solid heave, he stepped inside the motionless barn and relished in the small amount of warmth the shelter granted him. His boots tracked snow in over the hay and gravel until he reached the stables. He put his horse in one and Mikasa's in the neighboring one, knowing his companion would feel better being near some company once Levi left back for the cabin.

Its hooves stopped anxiously jogging in place when his master's hand landed on it, stroking its black hair while shushing him. The gentle touch settled the animals nerves. Levi threw bales of hay into each stable before departing back into the blistering storm.

The fog and wind carrying large quantities of snow picked up even more and panic stuck the Captain momentarily when he couldn't make out where the storm had hidden the cabin—but once he trod onwards long enough, the silhouette gradually faded into his sight.

His teeth were chattering by the time he made it back to the porch. After stomping out the slush beneath his boots, he twisted the knob and dragged himself inside to the welcoming warmth.

Immediately after he tore off his hood, he caught a whiff of something that boosted his appetite. A quick look at the stove and the simmering pot on top made it clear that Mikasa started dinner already. Was he really gone that long?

He unraveled the scarf from his neck and hung it neatly on the hook, along with the drenched cloak. With the wet clothing off him, he wondered briefly why he was still freezing. Then he realized his pants and some of his shirt were frosted. He sighed. He didn't have time to pack any spare wardrobes and unless the last occupants left some clean clothes behind, he's going to be stuck in these wet clothes and that's just begging for an illness.

He still had some hope that he could find something, so he stepped toward the threshold of the living room and intended to head straight to the bedroom, but he stopped when he realized unintentionally (and continuously) eavesdropped on the ongoing conversation.

"I'm really not surprised you two had a siblings rivalry—you were total opposites. I remember my dad as a really gentle, shy man. I never thought he could be related to someone like you."

"Yeah, that's what everyone said. He was always the perfect son and I was the black sheep."

"Did you...hate him for that?"

Kenny laughed in a way Levi didn't recognize. "Never. He was my brother, and although he was an annoying goody-goody, he was a good man and I respected the life he picked, even if I thought he had more potential than to be a simpleton. Still don't know how an airhead like him got himself such a good wife—that's all I'll ever hate about him."

Mikasa giggled. "My mom really loved him—I always remember them joking around with each other and teasing."
"He did always say it was his sense of humor that attracted her. Ah, she was a fine-looking woman though. You look exactly like her."

"You think so?" There was a smile in Mikasa's tone. "What was her reaction when you were introduced to her? I'm curious."

"Well, you were there. You were just a little tyke then, so I don't expect you to remember but—"

Levi stepped in abruptly (and purposely), drawing all attention to himself. "Pardon the interruption."

Mikasa eyed him head to toe with a worrisome expression. "Is it really that bad out there?"

Levi let his shoulder fall against the frame of the arch. "Worse than bad. Under these conditions our stay here might drag on a little longer than planned, depending on when the snow stops and when it melts. The horses are locked up tight though, so that's one less thing to worry about."

"But now we have another problem." Mikasa rose out of the chair she placed in front of Kenny and approached Levi. "You're soaked and you're going to catch an awful cold if you don't get out of those clothes right now."

A husky laugh blared behind them. "She gets her boldness from me."

"Would you shut up?" Levi bit back, then let his tired eyes land back up at Mikasa. "I was about to check if there were any clothes laying around from the previous residents. Have you seen any?"

She shook her head unsurely as she pinched the sweater she had on. "No—well, I have, but I'm guessing the person who lived here last was an old woman—so unless you're okay with wearing granny panties I don't think you'll find anything."

Another boisterous laugh from behind, so hoarse and cracked that he nearly choked. "I'm proud to call this girl my niece!" Kenny really was having a blast, wasn't he?

"Please tell me there's at least some dirty socks laying around that I could shove down that bastards throat." Levi eyed the man still chuckling to himself. He didn't have the patience for an audience in the background right now.

"I'll lend you my coat, if you uncuff me." Kenny offered.

"Nice try—but your coat would wrap around me like a king size bed sheet. I'll pass."

Mikasa shuffled in her spot, feeling torn between checking her pot on the stove and continuing the conversation. "Just—go sit by the fireplace for a while. With any luck you'll dry your clothes up before you get sick." To make up for the time she spent chatting, she jogged into the kitchen to tend to the brew, and Levi followed her advice.

Reluctantly, he took a seat in front of the pit. With the way the man behind him shimmied in his chair, Levi knew he'd speak any second. He wondered why his brain remembered his insignificant quirks after all this time.

"She's a good girl, that one. She grew into a fine woman."

"She has." Levi agreed, but with hostility. "She's strong, as strong as myself. But unlike me you wouldn't be able to predict her moves. You wouldn't stand a chance against her."

"I won't argue with you there."
Silence invaded the creaking cabin as Levi rubbed his hands near the fire—watching the wavy designs the flames made. The fireplace emitted a cozy heat that lit his cheeks and thawed his chilled nose. There was another creak behind him with more words pending to be said.

"You like her, don't you?" Kenny's voice leaked out in an affirmative whisper. The branches beating against the sides of the cabin intensified as Levi kept his wide gaze set on the burning wood in the pit. There was another heat radiating on his hunched back—Kenny's eyes were burning right through him.

Levi went to open his lips, that quivered for a reason other than the chill trapped inside him, and finally spat out, "Of course. I like everyone on my squad. Even if they are all annoying brats." His reply sounded more conceited than he originally planned, not to mention forced.

"Hmph. You should know by now that you can't lie to me, Levi. You never succeed in fooling me. Not once."

But that doesn't mean Levi will ever give up trying. He won't be satisfied until he does.

"What are you trying to say, Kenny? Spit it out." He felt cornered. He wanted to run. But then he'll be angry at himself—he needs to stop running from Kenny. He faced him once, he could face him again.

"I already said what I wanted to say. But if you want me to elaborate I will. You're getting old, it's about time you find a partner. Unless you want to end up old and alone like me."

"You're old and alone because you kill people, idiot."

"Touché." Kenny let him have that. "If you want my perspective, I'd say she likes you too."

What was he trying to do? Have a fatherly talk with him about love and relationships? The right time for that long since passed. There's no making up for it now.

"For the record, she already loves somebody else." Levi meant to pass that information along casually in his default, dull tone, but his voice completely flopped once he reached the word 'love' and it went downhill from there. Why was it so hard to say that? It's common knowledge to everyone that she loves Eren—but for some reason his chest caved in when he spoke about it out loud.

"Well whatever that brat can do, you can do better. That's how I raised you. She'll see the truth eventually."

Fussily with aided support from his knees, Levi lifted himself up off the floor as he mumbled into the bedroom and slammed the door. Kenny grinned.

Levi figured the chuckling bastard couldn't stir up much trouble being left unattended for two minutes while he searched for something warm—and other than that, he just needed to get out of that room. Kenny's knack for stepping a little too close to home was not something he could deal with right now. So like always, he hid from the truth, but didn't deny it.

Levi sifted through the draws of the vanity and found nothing. He backed up to the edge of the bed and sat; his pants were still wet, and now to add to it, dust had stuck to him from sitting on that filthy floor. Now more than ever did he want to get out of these clothes. He let his face fall into his hands while he took a few breaths to steady his heart.

Ever since he joined the military, Levi accepted that he became asexual given the fact he lost all interest pursuing urges with females or even males for that matter—but ever since his first glance
on Mikasa, he rethought his preferences. For the longest time after, he couldn't get her out of his mind. There was a part of him that had this unmistakable need to protect her, just as he tries to do with all his men—but the only differentiating part is that he yearned for their relationship to evolve from superior and subordinate, albeit he knew it would never happen, but the fantasy of it kept him sane during hardships.

For many reasons, it wouldn't work. For starters, Mikasa could literally have anyone she wants. Levi noticed how all the boys in his squad drool over her and how she attracts eyes from all ages and genders in public. If she wanted someone, she'd pick someone young with charisma, height and optimism. Levi shrunk even more when he made the comparison.

But for reasons unknown (well, not completely unknown) Mikasa loves Eren. When he's not in Titan-form, he's just an average teen with a temper and no significant skills, but she still has a strange attachment to him and Levi couldn't figure out what he lacked. It's not like he's conceited and thinks he's better than Eren, he's not that shallow, but Eren barely gives her the attention she deserves from what he could tell and sometimes Levi wishes that she'd snap out of that stupid crush and find someone that would take good care of her and give her the love she gives back. Even if it's not Levi (which it never will be) he just wanted to see her happy with someone that would return that passionate dedication she puts into the ones she loves. A bitter part of Levi summoned when he reminded himself that he'll never see the day when Mikasa treats him the same way she treats Eren. That stupid brat doesn't even know what he's taking for granted of.

Pushing back the thoughts, Levi searched through the closet and dressers and still found nothing appropriate to wear. He settled for running a towel over his pants. Some of the dampness disappeared and they were cleaner than a minute ago, but still dingy in spots from the dust. The wind hollowing outside told him the storm still wouldn't let up. If he wanted his extended stay here to a comfortable one, this pigsty of a home needs to be cleaned up. Maybe now he could get some work done now that everything else is taken care of.

He stepped back out into the living room, feeling slightly more rejuvenated. He returned to where he left off at the window, and after some will-power and straining his arm a bit, the window glass resembled a shiny new mirror. Beyond his own reflection, he saw Kenny, sitting there quietly watching him.

"Hey, dinners ready if you're hungry." Mikasa popped in and broke the starring contest within the glass. Levi turned to her, giving a nod, but she was looking else where—he followed her gaze to Kenny.

"What about him? Should we feed him?"

"Ugh..." Levi could do nothing but grunt at the man. Sure, he didn't agree to his deal earlier and Levi threatened to take his meal away (and above all the bastard didn't deserve hospitality) but when it came down to it, they needed him to warm up to them because eventually they needed to question him. Kenny is what you could describe as 'split-personality': if you treat him well, he'll play along if given the right conditions, but if you step out of line or get in his way, he'll depose of you. It's best to keep him happy right now.

"Yeah, why the hell not. Escort him to the kitchen and lock him up to the chair in there. As for myself, I'll be there in a minute, I just need to clean up a few areas first."

Mikasa complied and carefully pulled the key out from her pocket and unlatched him. The man rose to his full height, towering well above Mikasa. Levi might be the shortest in the house, but Kenny could make anyone seem small in comparison.

"You shouldn't keep a woman waiting after she went into the trouble of cooking for you. No
wonder you're still single. Your little cleaning obsession is still aggravating and gets in the way of everything, even after all these years. I thought you'd grow out of that." Kenny started to walk off with Mikasa latched to his arm, but Levi spun around, fury in his heel. Levi never intended to sound rude to Mikasa and keep her waiting, but he won't be able to relax until this place is decent. What the hell does Kenny know about woman, anyway? If anything, Levi thinks they were equally managing the house just fine. She tended to the kitchen duties and he kept up the maintenance. More than that nutcase has done so far.

"You have no room to talk. It wouldn't kill you to learn how to clean up after yourself. Your place must be infested with maggots by now without me there to clean up after you."

"Do you think I have time for house work? I'm a busy man."

"If you have time to kidnap people, kill people and fly around with Anti-3DMG, you have time to clean your fucking toilet, you shit."

"You listen here, you little runt," Kenny lumbered forward and Levi stepped right up for the challenge. Mikasa tried to hold the man back but he still was able to reach out a slender finger to jab into Levi's chest.

Mikasa froze when caught a glance at Levi's face. She hasn't seen an expression that vile on him since he fought against the Female Titan. Maybe she should stay out of this. She took a step back.

Kenny gave no hint of surrendering any time soon. "It's all thanks to me that you get to prance around playing Captain with the title of "Humanity's Strongest". Don't you scold me, boy."

"And I cleaned your shithole of a fucking house as payment! You've well been paid back. Tch. Piece of trash."

"Oi, it's all my doing that you have all the townie girls flocking to you—they sure as hell aren't swarming around over your looks, midget."

Levi didn't look cold anymore. No, he was boiling in rage.

"I don't see any chicks lining up for you, old man. Maybe if you got a wife to clean up after your smelly ass then your house wouldn't be so shitty!"

Unexpectedly, Kenny hung his head as he was scolded by the man standing a foot shorter than him. Mikasa batted her eyes in wonder. It's like witnessing a mouse taming a lion; unbelievable but fascinating at the same time.

"Uh...guys, we should just go in the next room, hm?" Mikasa butted in when she saw the chance, because it only took one of them opening their mouth again to get the house rattling again. "Levi, I'll help you clean later, just relax and have something to eat, alright?"

They complied and after the silent walk to the kitchen, Mikasa asked something that's been picking at her mind as she secured the cuff around Kenny's wrist. "Did you guys always fight like this?"

"Not always." The man smirked. "Just when we wanted to have fun."

Belatedly, Levi walked in and kicked out a chair on the furthest side of the table, far away from his ex-mentor. "Maybe fun for you. You always piss me off and take jokes too far."

"It builds character."
"Great fucking job you did." Levi sat heavy and expanded his arms, like he was showing off the masterpiece Kenny created. He had no problem putting himself down in an attempt to give Kenny a guilt complex because his personality was about 80% his fault. "You should get a father of the year award." He rolled his eyes sarcastically with tightly folded arms.

"Both of you, knock it off." Finally having enough, Mikasa scolded them both. Thankfully, they went quiet. Now she felt like the mouse taming the lions. What a satisfying feeling. But she knew the peace wouldn't last long enough to have a peaceful dinner together as an unusual family. She predicted the kitchen would turn into a battlefield by the time the evening was through.

Chapter End Notes

Important note: I started this fic with only the knowledge up to chapter 57, so I know absolutely nothing about Levi/Kenny's actual relationship or their connection to Mikasa.
Chapter Notes

Just a quick note to anyone who might be wondering about the sudden shifts in POV, the changes in perspectives is actually intentional. This method of writing is called "Third-person Omniscient POV" (aka head-hopping). To avoid confusion, keep in mind this isn't strictly in Levi's POV, he just happened to have more narration in the last chapter. Hopefully it's a little more even this time. Sorry if I gave anyone whiplash from the sudden changes in prose. :x

"Pass the salt."

"Fuck you."

Mikasa rubbed her tender temples to relieve her raging headache. The pounding in her head had been nonstop since earlier today. It went away briefly, right when they secured Eren's safety. Relief poured over her, naturally curing her pains, but when she heard she was being escorted to the mountains with Captain Levi and this deranged man, her headache returned with added intensity. It became even worse when she found out that crazy man is her uncle and the bickering between the two Ackerman's had been the final blow. And even now, they were still going at it.

Being stuck in the middle of two screaming men has been the ultimate test of endurance and patience. Her voice went weak as she plead, "Levi...please. My head is killing me."

"...Sorry." He sewed his lips closed, only to reopen them again as he threw his head back, gulping the rest of his tea in a bitter haste.

The cup had nothing more than thimble full when he set it back down hard enough to nearly shatter it. Tea is meant to calm stress, in this case it was doing absolutely nothing for her Captain, but perhaps with some luck and a few more cups of tea in his system he'd enter a more tranquil state, or at least not get riled up every time the man on the other side of her breathed.

Trying to make her wishful thinking a reality, she asked, "Do you want a refill?"

Levi broke his ugly stare on his ex-mentor and unintentionally shot Mikasa a dirty look. "...What?"

The man is obviously too involved with this pointless head game between him and Kenny to listen to her. She repeated, "Your tea, do you need a refill?"

"Oh." He sat up straighter, trying to rid his vicious posture. "No, I'll get it myself."

Kenny coiled in his seat, filling the kitchen with noises of scuffing and rattling from the cuff. Levi figured he had a splinter in his ass and was trying to rub it free, but instead he had something to say, "Geez, have some backbone. Don't decline a ladies offer."

Levi smacked his fist down on the table, the silverware rattled like a quake shook the Earth. Mikasa tried to ignore it as she stood and escaped the clamor directed right for her ear in the nick of time.
"What is your problem? Stop picking at everything I say and do. I'm not a kid anymore."

The man rolled his neck abhorrently with a cringe-worthy crack. "Could've fooled me, runt."

"Boys." Mikasa took a break from pouring her tea and whirled a lethal gaze over her shoulder. Still continuing to send each other nasty looks, they silently tightened their lips at once at the motherly scold. Mikasa couldn't say anything to stop the silent war between them, but at least it was quiet (for now). Exhausted, she sighed and brought the kettle over to the table. Despite Levi saying he'd refill his own glass, she went ahead and did it herself anyway. Not that the irritated Captain noticed the fresh steam freeing from his cup. He didn't even notice when Mikasa had added his desired amount of sugar and creme, knowing exactly how he took his tea having seen him make it so many times at meal times and squad meetings.

Memories of the past ambushed Levi. He crossed his legs beneath the table and his foot bounced like it had a twitch. It would've been nice having a woman like Mikasa around when he was growing up with Kenny. Once the two of them got into an argument, there was no ending it until someone bled. This is how their own version of roughhousing started in the first place. After they beat the shit out of each other enough, they'd either wear themselves out, call it a draw and go to bed or get enough punches in until they were satisfied. The cycle would repeat over and over, but believe it or not, their home wasn't always that rowdy.

Once in a blue moon, they had quiet nights together and they'd try (and fail) to cook, or Kenny would read to Levi before bed (the kind of stories that gave most kids nightmares) and you can't forget all the time they shared together training (despite it not always being the most pleasant experience for a young boy).

Growing up with him wasn't ideal or normal by any stretch of the imagination, but it wasn't as terrible as many people might assume. But after a long time apart, Levi had trouble adapting to Kenny's attitude again; he had forgotten how terrible it was. It was like trying to get along with a more vocal version of himself. If Levi couldn't stand being around Kenny, he could only imagine how hard it was for his squad when he was in a foul mood, because on those days, Levi was a perfect replica of his ex-mentor.

The man he had been thinking about removed his hat and placed it on the table next to his bowl. An aggravated grunt left him and just the sound made Levi grimace. After flitting his gaze a bit, Kenny asked, "Got any booze?"

"No." Levi quickly answered. "Only water and tea."

"I rather choke than drink that nasty tea you brew. I'll have water."

"Nah, I'd rather you choke."

Mikasa was beyond starving, but her food remained untouched as she rose again, grabbed the pitcher of water and set out a glass for Kenny. She didn't want another fight to rise over something pity like a beverage preference. However, she did say, "I think his tea tastes fine, in my opinion, but I'll pour you some water."

Levi regarded her compliment with unreadable eyes, but didn't comment on it. Instead, he used her words as an excuse to dig, he spoke to her, but his eyes switched over to Kenny's. "Don't pay attention to him. He's always had shit taste. Did you look at his hat? He's been wearing that ugly old thing for years."

"Says the man that wears frilly cravats and an undercut. Seriously, are you even trying to make sense? And what's up with that wardrobe of yours? You still dress the same way you did as a
The comeback was old and has been repeated through his teenage years, but Levi still hissed through his teeth the same way he did a hundred times before. He started to erect from his chair, the way he carried himself resembled the dead rising from the tomb, thirsty for flesh. Kenny was one more word away from getting himself lunched into the side of the house, but Levi's twitching impulses calmed when a gentle hand cupped his shoulder and eased him back down in to his chair. The touch itself wasn't forceful or as strong as it ought of been, but the gentleness was enough to throw him off track, losing the scent of the rage that had lifted him from the chair in the first place. Although he already knew who's hand it was, he followed the arm up and meet with Mikasa's eyes. They glistened in worry.

"Levi...easy. I never saw you lose your nerve so much. You usually handle yourself better than this." Mikasa was beyond surprised with the Captain's behavior. Levi is usually quiet and keeps to himself. Even during the times he overhears some of the other members of his squad making fun of him behind his back, he still kept his cool regardless, never has she seen him lash out or confront anyone over a little teasing. Mikasa always saw him as mature, but with the most child-like sense of humor with the weirdest analogizes she's ever heard, but still, mature. Now, she barely recognized him. The childish jokes he told in the past fit his present behavior.

Levi, much like herself, is usually very indifferent to insults or teasing. The only time Mikasa loses her nerve is when it involves Eren—but now that she thought about it, she only gets so worked up about Eren because he's family. Technically, Kenny is family to Levi, in a very dysfunctional and unhealthy sense. Maybe this is why he can't keep his cool. Family could make a person do crazy things. Mikasa understood this better than anyone. Suddenly, she sympathized with him.

"I have everything under control. I just want him to shut up." Levi finally answered.

"Sure." She said sharply to imply her skepticism, then finally let her hand wipe off his shoulder when she was certain it was safe enough not to restrain him any longer.

They managed to create a few peaceful minutes of eating silently. As Mikasa slipped the liquid from her spoon, she felt her eyes lids getting heavier and her taste buds dulling. No longer did her body desired food, she just needed sleep. It's been such a long day and she's exhausted, but she probably won't get much rest tonight in this creaky, cold cabin. The temperature is dropping quicker than the snow outside and the branches beating on the sides of the house doesn't make a very cozy sleeping environment. And to top it all off, she's sharing a roof with a serial killer. If she's lucky, she'll sleep an hour or two with one eye open.

Trying to estimate his level of fatigue by the face he wore, she scanned over Levi. She frowned. He looks tired, probably miles more than her. He's always had dark circles skirting around his eyes, but the discoloration is much more prominent now. Puffy with strain and lids heavy and low, making his eyes seem even more narrow. Before she had time to hide her gaze, Levi glanced over at her. Their eyes latched for a half a second before awkwardly breaking apart.

The Captain cleared his throat and revved at his neck, his sight not committing to one spot longer than a second, as if he tried to find something to talk about. Finally, he pointed the tip of his spoon to his bowl placed before him. "By the way, this tastes really good, Mikasa."

"You think so? Thanks. It's nothing special, though."

"Still, you're a good cook." Levi tried to bite back the words in his mouth, but he let them out for the sake of letting conversation persist, because this awkward silence if worse than bickering with
that nutjob. "I was always able to tell when you were on cooking-duty. The nights you wouldn't
cook for the squad always tasted God-awful."

Levi unintentionally just settled something Mikasa wondered about. This was something she
noticed, but originally thought it was just her imagination. Levi would never touch much of his
food when she wasn't on kitchen-duty and most would assume he didn't have an appetite, but
he'd always clean his plate when she cooked for the squad, or at last helped out. She really didn't
know what to say back to him—she's speechless and a little flattered. Levi isn't the type to hand
out compliments often. As strange as she felt for admitting it, she felt honored. Instead of saying
something that might sound stupid, she just gave him a little grin to show her thanks.

"If you two are going to flirt," Kenny rasped, "at least be a little less obvious. Consider
how awkward it is for the third party, please."

The two strongest soldiers subtly gasped in unison. Levi's eyes expanding as large as Mikasa's and
her own doubling in size as they lashed their gazes in the chuckling man's perspective.

Levi had to give himself a second to review that baseless claim. How in the hell was that flirting?
All he did was compliment her on her skills. Unless—did the phrase come out wrong? He looked
over at Mikasa, trying to see if he unintentionally made her uncomfortable. He's never been the
best at reciting positivity, (or talking to women for that matter) but by the looks of it, Mikasa gave
no signs of being offended, but then again her hand was partially shielding her face from him,
concealing her expression—but that could be a way of coping with the headache she's had all
evening.

"We're not flirting, please refrain from making implications. Mikasa and I are strictly
superior and subordinate, but I can hand out praise when it's due." He laid on the professional tone thick.

A gravelly huff of jeering amusement roared. Kenny slapped a knee like Levi told the funniest
joke he's ever heard. "Yeah, like that ain't a common scenario. Give it time. People with your
relationship always develop sexual tension eventually. Mark my words."

The only tension Levi felt right now was his muscles twitching in eager fiery; his fingers lusting
for a deadly hold on Kenny's neck. Even if Levi himself didn't already feel anything for Mikasa,
Kenny's words would surely cause awkward complications in their relationship.

"Stop being a dirty pervert, this is your niece you're talking about."

Kenny let his lids seal as he shrugged insensitively. "Just calling it as I see it."

A surge of energy fueled Levi's veins and he impulsively threw the nearest object in sight in
Kenny's direction, which just so happened to be a pepper shaker. In his blind fury, he hadn't
realized Mikasa's head was in the flying shakers path—but luckily her fast reflexives dodged the
blow with a bow. Levi sighed in relief when it didn't hit her and instead landed directly on target;
Kenny's head. "Shut up and eat your soup, asshole."

"I wanted the salt."

And he got it, right after Levi threw it with the intensity of a bullet right at his skull with full force.
Not only will that leave a bruise, but Levi will regret the self-inflicted strain he caused on his
shoulder.

Mikasa recovered from ducking not once, but twice, and shook her head in disapproval at the
childish display. She thought she was only babysitting one violent adult. Turns out it's two.

Kenny simply dipped his chin and gave a long glance at Mikasa, legitimate curiosity playing on
his features. It's a soft expression that Levi hasn't seen since a child. The memory of himself a foot smaller and drenched in sweat and covered in dirt after a long day of training in the summer heat came to mind. That was the day Kenny praised him for the first time and call him his pride. He wondered what triggered such a rare expression on him.

Through a grin, Kenny asked in a milder tone than usual, "What do you think about this runt of mine?"

Levi swallowed hard enough to be heard.

Mikasa withdrew her neck like a turtle escaping to its shell; but unfortunately her scarf wasn't there to shield the bashfulness the man's words drew from her. Levi shook Mikasa from his sight after a long glance. He felt guilty for enjoying an expression that was likely provoked from feeling intimidated and uncomfortable.

"Leave her alone and stop putting her on the spot. The only ones that could ask questions is us."

Kenny, suddenly appearing bored, hooked his head away from them. "You're no fun."

After a long while of careful thinking, Mikasa let her soft voice he heard, "Actually, it's okay. I can answer that."

Levi's eyes blinked a few times, then protruded when he finally understood what she said. A part of him didn't really want to hear how she personally thought about him, because he assumed it might not be what he wanted to hear, but he couldn't deny the curiosity begging to be quenched.

Mikasa removed her hands from the wooden surface and tucked them beneath the table, folding them on her lap. Levi's eyes focused on her face, but then switched to Kenny's. He looked just as interested as himself to hear what she had to say.

Seeing that she had an audience, Mikasa decided to keep her focus on her fiddling fingers. "I admit I wasn't very find of Captain Levi at first—I thought he was just a little abnormal, cranky man that bullied defenseless people, but when I saw him risk his life for not only my family member but all of his men, even some who were mere strangers to him, my judgment changed. I admire Captain Levi, and I hope I can learn more from him in the future."

Mikasa refused to look Levi's way—how could she after saying something so embarrassing? Mikasa never really admired anyone before—with the exception of Eren, but he and Levi were on different levels. She admired Eren for teaching her to live all over again, but she admired Levi for his strength and the way he cared for others, even strangers, but wasn't over the top about it. And he certainly doesn't act that way for praise, he does it out of the goodness of his heart and expects nothing in return. Not a lot of people notice how caring Levi is because of his general attitude, but she noticed and understood him. She knows better than anyone that a person doesn't need to be facially or even vocally expressive to show their true emotions.

Some day, she hopes she could become as strong as him so she could protect the ones she loves even better, but she also would like to learn to expand the number of people she could care about at one time. The way Levi goes out of his way to subtly cheer others up and save them is a remarkable type of kindness that she can't help but to idolize. He's truly devoted to both training his body and using that strength to helping others. Mikasa only hopes she could be more like him some day.

"Ain't that sweet."

Levi, recovering from picking his mouth off the table, shot a glare at Kenny for breaking the
mood, but tried to ignore him by soften the wrinkles above his brows as he rotated to face Mikasa fully. "That's nice of you to say, Mikasa, really. I appreciate that." He never would have imagined she looked up to him. Sure, she might just be saying that to not cause any more drama this evening, but Levi is going to take it for the truth.

"Sounds like you like him," Kenny leaned over to her, lowering his scratchy voice to keep the following between him and his niece, "Tell me, is he better that that brat you're in love with?"

Unfortunately, Kenny never was very good at whispering. Levi let out a raucous, "Shut the fuck up."

"Hm?" Mikasa's bland expression popped to confusion. She shook her head between the two men, trying to see who would explain first.

"Don't pay attention to him." Levi bit, a growl simmering in his throat as he eyed Kenny, as if silently warning him not to add another word. He can't believe he brought that up. Levi couldn't believe he told him in the first place, come to think of it.

"Oh? You don't know what I'm talking about, dear niece?" Taking her baffled expression as bait, he spoke playfully, "He told me you were in love with a boy, some brat."

Her attention slowly turned to Levi. Before he could see what face she wore, he pulled away. He couldn't meet her gaze out of humiliation.

"Why were you telling him stuff like that about me?"

"I wasn't saying anything. He just makes people say weird shit by confusing them."

"I taught you to lie better than that," he rasped.

"You also taught me how to kill a man with my bare hands. Want me to fucking demonstrate on you?"

Luckily, Levi didn't have to demonstrate such a violent skill in the middle of the kitchen. The duration of the rest of dinner was held in awkward silence.

~x~

Fire burned on the candle wick after Mikasa had stroke a match to it and extinguished it with her breath. With the fire roaring and a few wax pillars lit, the living room was as bright as early morning despite it being late into the night. This night was darker than most. The storm was still heavy and the wind beat against the windows hard enough to mistake the sound for the stomps of a Titan. Not a stray of moonlight peeked in through the window Levi had cleared off, making the effort useless because nothing but spats of ice could be seen out the glass. Not even the moon hidden under the thick winter clouds could be witnessed even if you strained your eyes.

The room appeared warm from the glow of fire flickering and creating shadows all around the living room, but the wooden walls felt like they were made of blocks of ice. Mikasa ran her hands up her sleeves until her fingers touched the collar of her sweater, she snugged the knit closer to her cold neck, missing the feel of her scarf. She sunk deeper into the couch, the stuffing gifting her with some warmth.

Levi was still in the kitchen, as was Kenny. The man indulged in a cigar that they allowed him to smoke. Levi hated the stench of it, so he traveled into the living room, tea in hand.

"You might want to slow down on the tea. If we're stuck here for a few days, you might want to
make it last. You're kind of difficult to live with without your tea intake." The man was like a
damn junkie. She had heard from Eren's gossip about Levi being an ex-thug from the
underground, but she always thought thugs were addicted to narcotics, liquor and tobacco, but
high-priced tea is something unheard of. Levi gets incredibly irritable without it. It used to be
terrible in the mornings. Dealing with his attitude while he boiled water was a nightmare for all
involved, but as of the past week back at their base she had been setting the kettle on the stove
before he woke up. That way he could go right from the bed to drinking, thus saving everyone
from his cranky wrath.

"Am I really? Hm." He sipped, a thoughtful expression showing where the cup didn't cover. "I
never noticed."

She rose a brow at him, having trouble believing he didn't notice his mood shifts when tea ran out
back at the base. "The last time we ran out of tea, you basically took out your frustrations on Eren
and made him clean the kitchen fifteen times. Fifteen. I counted. And then wound up redoing it
yourself in the end, mumbling curses to yourself the whole time. Then when they returned from
the supply run with your precious tea, your mood completely shifted and you let Eren off the
hook."

"The brat needs to learn how to clean anyway. It was good practice." That was hardly an excuse
for putting a subordinate through slave labor, but he did have one point—Eren never was a very
tidy person. During her stay in the Yeager household, she always found herself cleaning up after
his messes before Carla would see. Mikasa isn't as bad as Levi when it comes to wanting clean
surroundings, but she could definitely relate to the desire of keeping things sterile and organized.
But then again, Eren was just a child back then when she constantly cleaned up after him, which
is a good enough excuse on its own. Now he's a teenager with a lot on his plate. His lack of
cleanliness is to be expected.

"It's not that he doesn't know how to clean, he's just young and has better things to do. He's
suppose to be sloppy."

Levi grunted into his cup, displeased with yet another check crossed off of the number of times
she's stuck up for that brat. If she's going to cover him, she should at least come up with more
believable excuses. That excuse he caught word of about Eren trying to swat a fly and hitting her
by mistake was the richest of them all. The claim was so stupid, yet so innocent that a person
could be tempted to actually believe it. "That's no excuse. You're young as well but you always
clean up after yourself and your little friends." He let in a little breath before he spoke, then
swallowed another mouthful. "And Eren."

Mikasa squinted her eyes on him. "What, is Eren not good enough for the friend category?"

"You tell me."

She was going to retort with 'what is that suppose to mean?', but instead her mind moved her
thoughts else where, to what Kenny told her at dinner. "That reminds me, what did you tell
Kenny? Something about me being in love with someone? That's hardly appropriate, Captain."

Of course bringing up the topic of Eren reminded her of that. That just confirms that she really is
in love with him. Levi stepped over to the fireplace. With a fire iron in hand, he poked through the
flames. "Are you cold? I can add more wood."

"You didn't answer my question." At times like this, Mikasa couldn't help but think he looked and
behaved just like a little child.
In an irritated haste, he spun around at an angle, his weight shifting all to one side as he bore into her with strict eyes. "And I don't have to. I'm your superior and you need to respect that."

Mikasa pouted her lips disdainfully.

So he wouldn't say another word he'd regret, he tightened his lips and tilted his gaze painfully away to escape her peeved eyes. Propping his hand against the cool brick, he focused his view on the flames that burned hotter than his guilt. His personal feelings aside, he never liked using that tone with Mikasa because she's much more than a mere foot soldier that should blindly follow orders. She had the power to take his spot someday and she should be all around respected by everyone, as well as himself. Yet he doesn't set a good example. He's always the first to lash out at her. That's his own fault, though. If she were anyone else, he'd respect her as much as Erwin, but this deep jealousy within him makes him so angry sometimes. Not necessarily at her, hell, he could never be mad at her, but he's angry at the fact that she will never be his. He's nothing but a cruel, jealous child for thinking in such a way.

Levi sat on the opposite side of the couch from Mikasa, landing heavy into the press of the cushion. Dust that had been trapped for years escaped out in a cloud from the impact. Levi shuddered like a piercing cold went through him, but the look on his face suggested feelings of disgust.

He tried to move on from the prior scene by softening his tone and changing the subject. "I wish I could take a bath. But the tub is filthy like everything else in this damn house."

Mikasa played with a loose string of yarn on her sweater. Her tone went flat. "I'll help you clean."

Levi turned a gaze on her, inspecting her state. Her head hung low, like it couldn't hold its own weight up anymore. The bags under her eyes suggested that she was in no condition for even soft labor such as cleaning. It was hard to say given the state of the cabin, but he assured, "Don't worry about it, I'll tackle it slowly. We'll be here a while anyway. I need to keep myself busy somehow."

Just the crackling of the fire filled the void of silence as the two soldiers entertained themselves by aimlessly scouting around the room. Mikasa let out a yawn that sounded like she tried to trap it, but came out despite her efforts. A passing second later, Levi caught the contagious yawn.

"We'll be running out of logs for the fire soon. If we're lucky—really lucky—it will last us until the night after tomorrow." Levi announced his worries as he peered over to the fastly burning wood in the pit. They were never meant to stay here long, just tonight and maybe a little tomorrow, but given the circumstances their trip will be prolonged. If it weren't for the danger of the situation, that might've been a beneficial. It would have gave them more time to question Kenny. They didn't bother getting into it tonight, and Levi had zero strength to start getting into it now. Best left up to tomorrow. "We should check if there's any stocked in the basement."

"I'll check, if you un cuff me." A gruff voice called in from the kitchen. From the couch Levi checked on him with a quick adjustment of his head. Kenny still puffed on his cigar with curved lips at the table. That irritated Levi to no end because the reply implied that asshole had been eavesdropping all along.

"Shut your big-ass mouth up." As if he's stupid enough to let his prisoner preform duties. His eyes slid to Mikasa pleadingly, then his head bowed to pinch his brow. "Do me a favor and go check if there's any—see if there's any food or supplies down there while you're at it. I'm not saying we'll need it but we have to be prepared for an emergency."

"No problem, I'll be right back." Mikasa removed herself from the mold she had created on the couch and headed off down the hall. Levi listened to her footsteps descending down the stairs
until they were out of range.

While waiting Mikasa's return, Levi peeled himself off the couch with a reluctant huff and sauntered into the kitchen. He circled around the table thoughtlessly.

"Ain't this fucking dandy." Kenny took another drag, Levi waved the wisps of smoke away the same way he used to as a child. "Were all going to freeze to death."

Coming to a stop, Levi crossed his arms. "I'm sure it won't be any inconvenience to you, you cold heartless bastard."

"Tch. You should have just let me go, I backed off. Now were all in prison here." Kenny waved his cigar around with a sour scowl. "Were not gonna be able to leave until the snow clears and who knows how long that will take. This shithole will be our graves."

Well isn't he a pocket full of sunshine. Maybe he'll melt the snow with that bright personality of his.

"If there needs to be an emergency rescue I'm sure my squad can handle it." Levi assured.

"So the Survey Corps are professional snow removers now? Silly me, I was under the impression you guys killed Titans."

Growing tried of his snarky attitude, Levi turned his body with a grunt in the direction of the basement door, hoping Mikasa would hurry so he wouldn't be alone with this asshole for long.

Mikasa knelled down on the cold cement floor, blowing on a dusty container and coughing a little from the dust rising. Unfastening the lid, she sifted through it, finding some junk, like playing cards that might come in handy if they get bored enough, but also she found some things they could put to use. Along with some of the other supplies she found, she hoisted the box up on her hip and climbed the stairs. Arriving in the kitchen, she set the box on the table. Kenny sat and Levi stood of each side of her.

"Okay, I didn't find any wood but I found more blankets, a little more food that may or may-or-may-not be outdated along with a jar of coffee, a little medicine and...there's also something else down there." She quit reciting the contents she found and suddenly peered at Levi.

"Is it useful? If it's too heavy to bring up I could help you—"

"No, it's...A barrel of moonshine."

An excited clap drew the soldiers attention. "Oho, I'm definitely going to sleep in the basement tonight." Kenny hopped in his seat like a happy kid that heard there's free candy being handed out.

"I hope it makes you blind." Levi spat down at him, an aggravated roll in his hip as he regarded him with hostility.

"That's just a myth."

"A true myth."

Mikasa rolled her eyes and broke the meaningless spat, "Oh, and this." She tossed it to Levi. He caught the tiny object awkwardly against his chest. "I'm pretty sure its the key to the basement."

"Hm. Good findings. Let's test this key out. Come on, asshole. On your feet."
The two soldiers clicked the door closed, like two parents putting a restless child to bed. The hall in which they stood was dark and colder than the living room. Mikasa scarcely made out Levi's outline.

"With any luck he'll drink and pass out. He won't be much trouble, I don't think. But one of us needs to keep watch. We'll take shifts."

"I'll go first. You should get some rest." Mikasa offered.

"No, I think you should. I'm not ready to sleep yet anyway. I plan on cleaning the house up a bit, then we'll switch after a few hours."

"Are you sure?"

He nodded. Mikasa looked drained in more ways than one. On top of that, she's been having nonstop headaches all evening. Levi admittedly was beyond the point of exhaustion and didn't know how much longer his body would properly operate, but he'll be able to rest easy later if he makes some progress on the house and knows Mikasa got a good night rest, knowing she's fully alert when it's her time to guard.

"Well, alright. I'll head into the bedroom, then. Wake me up the second you're feeling drowsy."

He propped himself against the basement door with folded arms. "Goodnight, Mikasa."

She twitched her lips into a brief smile and clicked the door shut.

Mikasa woke with a stretch. A noticeable temperature drop spread throughout the room since she drifted off. Closing her eyes again, she tucked herself deeper beneath the blankets to make the warmth trapped inside last. Sleepy thoughts that tend to run through the average person's head upon waking lulled her. She told herself after a quick stretch, she'll get up. That was the last thought she had before all conscious activity in her mind turned off again.

When she opened her eyes up again, she felt that she only drifted off for a few minutes—but the room looked different from when she fell asleep. The bedroom lit with a winter glow seeping in from the curtains, washing the color from the room. The dull colors made the room look even more depressing.

"It's morning?" She rubbed her eye, her words spoken in disbelief. Suddenly remembering her duties as a soldier, she jumped out from bed and rushed out the door (but not before grabbing a blanket to drape over her chilly shoulders).

She replayed the established plan last night, that her and Levi were to switch shifts after a few hours, but she had slept through the night. She only hoped that she didn't inconvenience Captain Levi. She feared she didn't hear his call. If that were the case she's apologize profusely. She was just so tired—she must have slept deep enough that even a roar of a Titan wouldn't wake her up.

When she arrived in the living room, her blanket sweeping along behind her on the polished floor, she walked up behind Levi, who looked entranced as he peered out a slit of the curtain.

Trying not to startle him (if it's even possible to startle Levi) she approached him slowly, calling out in a whisper. "Sir?"
Glancing over his shoulder at angle to the voice, he regarded the speaker with baggy eyes that looked icier than the frosted glass. The curtain swung closed as he spun to face her.

"I mean no respect Captain, but you look like shit. Did you have trouble waking me? If that's the case then I'm very sor—"

"No, I let you sleep."

Her brow sunk over her lids, her mouth a little parted as she tilted her head. "Why didn't you wake me up sooner? I thought we were going to take shifts."

"I need you in good shape. You won't last long if you just have short cat naps."

"Lot a good that did." She folded her arms motherly. "Have you seen the shape you're in?"

"I'll go to sleep soon," he promised, but it sounded like a fib.

She sighed, knowing she couldn't just pick him up and carry him to bed forcefully. Actually, she could. Probably with one arm. But that might be a tad disrespectful. "You better go to sleep soon, I mean it." Dragging her blanket along like a long cape, she headed for the kitchen. "I'm gonna make some coffee."

"About that," Mikasa paused her footing to listen. "I might have drank the whole supply last night."

Mikasa spun back around, a sardonic twist in her lips. "Great. You wasted supplies because you didn't follow your own order. But it's fine. It's not like two guards might need caffeine for emergencies situations where we actually can't sleep."

He rose his brows, impressed. "Who knew, you're capable of being sarcastic. Must be an Ackerman thing," he meant as praised, but it came out rudely. His exhausted eyes suddenly popped brightly in concern. "Do you feel any better? How's your head?"

She tucked a loose strain of hair behind her lobe. "It's fine now, I don't have any pains. I slept well, which helped. Believe it or not the bed is comfortable." She thought she wouldn't get any sleep, but the moment her head touched the pillow she was out for the count.

Levi nodded his head, glad to hear that she's in better shape. His eyes followed her as she went over to the end of the couch and snuggled herself in the blanket. He joined her, sitting down in the middle.

"Why's the fireplace off?" she observed the unlit pit.

Levi hunched over, folding his hands. "Didn't want to waste it."

Mikasa tucked her lips together. She didn't understand. "But you were awake, that's not wasting it."

"Yeah, well, I wasn't too cold anyway. I ran around most of the night cleaning."

"I noticed, it looks good." Mikasa bounced her foot, her toes practically reflecting the surface of the floorboards. "Still, you might get sick if you—"

Before she could finish, the unfamiliar and unexpected sound of Levi sneezing interrupted her. She must be psychic. "Looks like it's too late. You're sick."
"It's just a sneeze," he sniffled and spoke nasally. "It's probably from the dust."

Mikasa hoped so. It wouldn't make this bad situation any better to have a sick Captain on her hands.

"What's the update on Kenny?" She wondered.

"I tried talking to him about an hour ago, but he has a nasty hangover. Dumbass drank himself to sleep last night. He said it helped cure the cold, though."

Maybe it's a good thing Mikasa found that moonshine, if they're lucky he'll keep knocking himself out and save Levi from forcing him quiet. If he keeps his drinking at a minimal, though, it might work out in their favor. He gets rather affectionate and sentimental if he drinks just the right amount. That may come in handy when they get around to questioning him.

"What about the storm? Is it any better?"

Levi really didn't want to deliver bad news to those hopeful eyes. His gazed dropped. "It seems worse, actually. It didn't stop for a second all the through the night. And in case that isn't bad enough news, I need to confess that I have no idea what to do. I was never in a situation like this before."

Mikasa mimicked his depressed expression, but tried to brightened the mood with, "It'll work out. Your squad and the rest of the Survey Corps know we're here. It might take them a litter longer to regroup with us, but they'll make it. All we have to do is wait and finish out our mission in the meantime."

Levi tried nodding to agree, but ended up bopping his head nearly into his lap with an impressively loud sneeze.

"Yup. You're sick." Mikasa claimed as if she were angry at the fact.

"No I'm not. Really, it's just—" Another sneeze. That confirms it.

Mikasa erected up on her knees and hovered over Levi, removing the blanket from her and tossing it neatly over him. Levi melted from Mikasa's warmth still trapped in the blanket.

"Thanks...but I'm not cold."

"Probably because you have a fever." She inspected his flushed cheeks, it wasn't the pale skin she's used to. "Can I feel your head?" she asked, already extending her hand.

"Can you what?" he pulled his head back like a frightened animal that didn't want to be pet.

She paused her hand and curled her fingers tentatively. "I'm just going to check if you have a fever."

He couldn't look at those concerned eyes any more. He gave his consent with a shrug. He stiffened when her soft finger tips swept above his brow. The hand lingered there, only moving slightly to check another area of his forehead. His bangs fell back into place when she retracted her hand and sat face forward. The touch felt like it lasted an eternity, but the moment her hand left he missed her warmth dearly.

"You're definitely warm. But what do you expect after keeping the fire place unlit all night and staying in wet clothes?"
"There was no helping it. I had the choice between staying in these filthy clothes or putting on a
dress."

Mikasa giggled. Levi swallowed hard at the heavenly sound.

"I can wash them for you when you go to sleep, if you want."

"What would I wear to bed?"

Mikasa gave him a bold look. "I'll give you double blankets and privacy. How's that sound?"

He gave her a small smile. Her offer was tempting. "So you're saying I need to sleep in the nude if
I want my clothes washed." He paused to prop his elbow on the backrest and shook his head.
"This little adventure of ours keeps getting better."

"It's not so bad."

"You were the one complaining last night."

"Yes," she agreed quickly, "But I wasn't feeling well and I was tired at the time. This isn't so bad,
though." She let herself scope out the cabin. It looked so creepy last night under the vile of night,
but now that Levi had cleaned it up and natural light poured in from the windows, Mikasa would
go as far as saying it's cozy. "It's a change of pace. I like spending time in a house setting without
a ton of people around all the time or worrying about what Eren's up to. Well, I still worry about
him but I know everyone is looking after him, so I get a little break from dwelling."

Levi took a look around himself, his head bobbing in approval. "Now that you word it like that, I
guess it isn't so bad. It's like a little vacation."

Or honeymoon, but Levi wouldn't dare say that.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I took the liberty of changing the name Kaney to Kenny, since that's the official translation and it was kind of bugging me so I needed to fix it. Just thought I'd point that out to avoid confusion. :x

Hovering her knuckle against the door, Mikasa sucked in a breath and held it in her throat. After giving herself a second, she tapped in a gentle string of beats. "Sorry for disturbing you, Captain. I'm coming in." She spoke up against the door and gave warning of her entry before twisting the knob with a rusty click.

In preparation for an exposed display, she had shielded her eyes with her palm, but she feared her small hand wasn't enough to conceal the flaming tint dying her cheeks. This part wasn't in the mission briefing at all, nor was it in any of her years of training. This is a scenario she quite frankly felt unprepared for, despite it being her own idea.

To put it simply, she felt awkward about walking in on Captain Levi while he's half asleep and in the nude. Never had she imagined being in his presence during such a vulnerable state.

At Mikasa's arrival, Levi groggily peeled his head off the pillow and sat himself up so that his back reclined against the head board. When he had noticed the bashful gesture, he adjusted the blankets and covered his chest. "I'm decent, just so you know. I wouldn't just lay here naked without any covers on."

Anxiously, she made an incision through her fingers and peeked through the slit, cautiously checking on his exposed state for herself.

Levi found that unbearable endearing, but managed to keep his default expression, which was a damn miracle. For such a pretty girl that attracts so much male attention, she sure does get flustered easy—but Levi knew she was reacting shyly simply because he's a boy and she's a young girl, not because she was getting flustered at the thought of him.

After clicking the door shut with her back, she rove into the dim bedroom, burning a path with the flickering candle in hand. Her eyes flitted everywhere around the bedroom, avoiding Levi's direct gaze. "I'm sorry if I woke you up. But I heard you coughing so I figured you were awake. I washed your clothes, by the way. They're nearly dry."

"Thanks."

"Are you feeling any better?" She asked the oil lamp on the dresser, still not brave enough to look directly at him.

He sighed, shaking his head. "As you heard, I have a cough now. Judging by the symptoms I think it's pretty clear I have a full-blown flu. I'm not sure if my fever went down—I doubt it."

She finally looked at his disenchanted expression with bowed brows, but now he was looking away, into his lap sighing.
"Let me feel."

Gulping stiffly at the offer, Levi cornered his eyes to the side as she approached with her hand leading the way. With the furry blanket, he covered himself up to the neck defensively as her slender fingers reached out to him. After setting down the candle on the nightstand, the tips of her nails traced above his brow. Levi's eyes hooded contently when she pushed up his bangs and pressed her hand firmly over his burning forehead.

He had plenty of other places to set his view, but with Mikasa leaning in close range as she were, his perverted gaze remained centered on her chest as she determined his temperature.

He knows damn well that he's taking inappropriate advantage of the situation; for someone in his position, that's truly disgraceful—but he couldn't deny that he was glad (and disgusted with himself for feeling glad) to have a fever right now because it meant he could relish the tender touch of Mikasa's hand on him, even if it's just for a brief period.

"You're still burning up." She pulled her hand away, curling her fingers with a look of concern. Levi's head dropped weakly without the aid of her hand supporting the weight any longer. Her features drooped, along with her posture until she forced her stance high again. "I found some fever reducer last night, I'm not sure how well it works but it might help."

He had started to reply but choked on the header of his sentence. He rubbed at his watery eyes, peevled. "It's worth a shot."

She backed up promptly as if he gave her a direct order and blindlessly headed toward the door. "I'll get it, stay here."

The covers sagged off his chest as he hunched forward to cradle his head. He kept his gaze on the blankets short-hair fur pooled in his lap. "I don't have a choice. I'm naked, remember?"

"Oh. Right." Holding onto the slab of the opened door, Mikasa ran her eyes over his covers, looking at them as if he was covered with an invisible cloth.

Feeling insecure, he peeked at himself to make sure no part other than his chest was exposed, because judging from her reaction you'd think he had his piece springing through the fabric—luckily, he had more self-control than that.

The sight of Levi bare of a shirt made Mikasa want to dash for cover and bury her head outside; with how flaming hot her head is, she wouldn't be surprised if that alone could melt all the snow away.

Mikasa knew that Levi was ridiculously strong, so naturally he had a body like herself to aid in the strength—but it's difficult to accept that a man she deemed as small packed overwhelming amounts of thick muscle. Hell, his muscle had muscles. She's never saw a body filled out as fully as his, even her own ripped and overworked body dulled in comparison. His body would have looked stunningly flawless if it weren't for the splotches of purple bruises spotting on his pale skin and deep trail marks from the gear harness that had dented deep into him. Also, there were fresh scars that had made a permit home on his body, including the deep one across his face that mirrored her own.

Before leaving, she pointed aimlessly out the door and tamed her tongue enough not to stutter. "I'll...get that medicine now." He gave her a solid nod and she took off to retrieve the medication.

He ruffled up his hair and let out the breath he'd stored while she stared at him with unreadable eyes. Well, that certainly was the most awkward five seconds of his life.
Levi flopped back down on the bed, arms sprawled while sending dirty looks to the creaky ceiling. He lost his spirit the moment Mikasa clicked the door behind her, but the room still had a diluted aura of her presence. With the image of her dimming from his mind, all motivation and will left him. He just wanted to lay there and savor the warm tingles that manifested when she touched him. At least he got a tiny glimpse of how she'd be if she was his wife taking care of him. That's about as close as he'll ever get.

It appears she would have been a suitable wife after all—he cringed bitterly while downing a gulp just as sour and pinched the bridge of his brow. He's a dirty old man for thinking these things. He's taking her pure intentions and turning them into sick, selfish delusions. He's disgusted with himself for thinking that, and also at the far away cobweb-ridden images revealing from the back of his mind. Rolling to his side, he suffocated his frown in the pillow and punished himself in the only way his weak self could manage right now.

Another knock and a confirm to enter later, Mikasa returned with a bundle of his folded clothes draped over an arm that she set on the dresser before sitting on the end of the bed, denting the mattress with her weight. A glass of water was placed on the nightstand and the bottle in hand shook out two capsules. Levi peeled himself off the mattress and watched her read the label in silence, double-checking the dosage, then she passed two pills to him.

He glanced down at the pills thoughtfully, rattling them around in his palm. Before popping them in his mouth he said, "Sorry for getting sick like this. You already have enough on your plate, you shouldn't have to take care of me on top of it."

Watching him carefully, Mikasa reached for the glass and held it out to him. "It's no trouble. Besides, it's not like you can help it. It happens to everyone whether we like it or not. Here, drink."

He took a small sip, enough to just wash down the pills and nothing more. He had a bad case of cotton-mouth, but strangely enough, he had no thirst for water—it actually made him sick thinking of swallowing an entire mouthful. He was about to remove the rim from his lips, but the bottom of the glass tilted up and a flow of water traveled down his windpipe like a raging current. His brows scrunched as he tried to reclaim control over the glass, but Mikasa was the one assuming direct control now.

"Keep drinking." Mikasa said motherly as she kept tilting up the glass with a press of her fingers. "Fevers dehydrate, you'll need to drink plenty of water tonight."

Levi felt more like a drowning victim than someone with the flu. He gasped when his mouth finally escaped the glass with a slight shove. "You could've told me that instead of drowning me."

Mikasa just realized something. This isn't Eren or Armin she's dealing with, but her Captain—how did she manage to mix that up? She scrambled to justify herself. "Sorry sir... I get forceful when I worry. Bad habit."

It's always been like that—when Eren or Armin get ill she does the same; hovering over them and forcing them to drink, eat and take their medicine while staying dehydrated. It takes a good fight sometimes for them to do as she says in their sickly states, but she always gets the job done. Even all these years later she still will shove a loaf of bread in Eren's mouth when he gets too carried away and forgets to eat.

That was the first time she's ever displayed that worrisome quirk to anyone else, though, and surprisingly enough Levi, of all people, was on the receiving end. She hadn't expected that. Not even her other teammates on the squad got that treatment from her, she always told herself it was their problem or someone else's, not hers. She established some time ago that there was a limit to how many people she could care about at a time—she already had two reckless boys to look after.
and she couldn't possibly afford to make any room for more.

But—she had just proved herself wrong. She had even just justified her actions with saying she was worried. Does this mean she's starting to care about Levi? Maybe...there is a tiny Captain-size space left after all.

Staring off, Mikasa started to ponder the relationship between her and her Captain. She's not as close to him as Eren and Armin, but there's no denying that they've become close since she joined the Survey Corps. They work great together, which is surprising since the two of them don't exactly mark teamwork as their strong points. On top of that, she admires him greatly—but she still can't label the relationship between them.

Friends? No—that's pushing it. They aren't on a personal level with each other, except after recent events, perhaps. His last name being revealed and their relationships with Kenny could be deemed personal, but it didn't feel like enough to consider them as pals.

They're more than just acquaintances, since they work together every day and live together—so he's more than just some stranger she bumps into some times.

Subordinate and superior comes close to describing them, even though they've been through quite a lot to be strictly that, in spite of Levi supposedly seeing them as just that and that only. However, there's a flaw in that—she's not some cowardly follower that obeys him like a dog and he's no authority figure to begin with, so that can't be it either. She looked back to him puzzlingly, filtering through a string of descriptive words and disregarding them all. What in the world do you call the relationship between them?

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Levi's squared his bare shoulders defensively under the crushing stare she set on him. She's been staring at him blankly for the past few minutes. It's kind of creepy, but above all he wondered what her head was mulling over.

She brought herself back to reality with a quick shake of the head. "Sorry, I was spacing out. Drink more," she motioned the glass to his mouth again and a moaned echoed into the cup like a child, but he still did as he was told—until he pulled back and wheezed uncontrollably into his hand.

Mikasa thought he was choking on the water at first, but it was similar to the coughing attack she heard earlier, but this time it wouldn't let up.

"Ugh..." Levi's coughing finally subsided long enough to let out a painful groan. He collapsed backwards onto the bed, squishing his features bitterly at the stinging in his throat.

Mikasa's brows curved upwards as she watched her suffering Captain. She tried to recall if she had anything to help him, but in terms of medicine she had nothing to reduce the symptoms other than the fever. "I wish I had something for your cough. But I could make some tea if you think that will soothe your throat a little."

"Sounds good to me." His spirit lifted a little, because in Levi's perspective tea cures just about everything; headaches, depression, insomnia—you name it and tea could fix it. Just that small list alone should justify why he's so addicted to the choice of beverage given the life he leads. "I'll be out there in a second, after another coughing attack and getting dressed I'll be good to go."

She offered him a thin wary smile and readied to leave, but with a sudden thought popping in her mind, she stopped short and spun on her heel, sucking in a breath but not letting out a word. Levi noticed her hesitation and lifted his head from the pillow. "What is it?"
"It's—it's nothing. Nothing important."

Anything she had to say was important, but instead of saying something sappy like that, he let out a strict, "Do I really have to pull the whole 'I'm your superior and I order you to tell me' speech? I hope not, it's getting quite tedious, Mikasa."

She rolled her eyes in jest, escaping his gaze. She caved with a sigh. "Kenny and I had a long talk about you, that's all—about when you were a boy living with him. And he told me you always got sick as a kid. I don't know, I just suddenly remembered. Like I said, it wasn't important."

Levi sealed his eyes closed, his lip curling in disgust as he cocked his head to her with disapproving eyes. "You're suppose to be questioning him, Mikasa, not talking about me."

"I tried," she snapped her chin up at the accusation, her eyes flared defensively from her efforts being discarded. "I tried for a few hours, actually. But he kept dodging my questions. He...He kept wanting to tell me about you." When Mikasa saw him cringe again, this time more gravely, she assured, "All good things, I promise. Well, mostly."

Levi didn't like how she said mostly. Knowing Kenny, he probably told a number of embarrassing tales about his upbringing, and likely went into detail about how big of a crybaby he was as a child. Now that is a version of him he'd like to forget permanently.

Or worse—maybe he told her about that...

Panic struck through him when he recalled exactly what that is; he wasn't even brave enough to ponder how that truth would carry out. But based on how calm Mikasa has been with him, he figured Kenny didn't speak a word about it, thankfully, because surely Mikasa would have something to say about it if she found out.

It's for the best if Mikasa never finds out. Or at the very least, he hopes she doesn't find out through a third party. If she must be filled in about that, then he'd like to do it on his own and keep the discussion between them privately, but he hoped the day never came that he would have to tell her. He pushed the thought away, hoping he didn't have to dig it back up again anytime soon.

She took a tiny step forward, her cold hands tucking under her biceps. "For someone who tried to kill you, he sure does speak highly of you; like how a proud dad talks about a successful son. If he wasn't, you know, insane he might've been a cool family member."

Now he knows for sure; she still doesn't know—she probably wouldn't speak highly about Kenny if she knew of the past plans he made. "Believe it or not, Kenny does actually have some good qualities about him, if you look passed the whole 'homicidal manic' thing." And that is quite a tricky point to look over. Nothing about his personality could redeemed his sins, but Levi still considered him a decent person during his upbringing. He wasn't the best father figure, but a father figure at all is better than none and if it wasn't for him, he'd never be as strong as he is today. The hell he endured during his training was worth it, because it means he could protect the people he cares about—and also, he could still keep a decade-old promise.

A blurry memory passed through his mind—and then it was gone.

It's not until he learned Kenny's true nature that he lost all respect for him. Levi used to be so shamefully loyal to him and the memory still sends him dishonor. It's still hard for Levi to hate him truly, though, even after all he's done. That alone makes him feel guilty, but it couldn't be helped given their history together.

Now that they were on the topic of Kenny and himself and Mikasa now involved in the whole
Levi couldn't help but to feel uneasy. Being in this tight space together will not only rise conflict, but it may eventually let other issues rise to the surface. Maybe he's just being paranoid, but when you have a secret and you're trapped with the sole person who knows about it (who happens to be untrustworthy) and also the person you absolutely do not want to find out about it all together under one roof, it's only natural to start fearing the worse.

Levi couldn't just order Mikasa not to speak to Kenny. That would be suspicious on his end. Their whole purpose of being here is to talk to him, after all. And if he went ahead and warned Kenny not to tell her, he might do just that out of spite, or he'll remind the old man after he might've forgotten after all these years.

At this point, all he could do is sit back and cross his fingers. He sighed with a grimace as he turned his head to the frosted window. A cold hollowing draft slipped in through the cracks. He's already got enough to worry about, but now that this paranoia settled on him, he realized this Ackerman reunion wasn't the greatest idea, but the realization came too late. Now there's no way out of it.

~x~

Feeling slightly better with clean clothes on and some medicine activating in his system, Levi stumbled in from the icy bedroom, stupor powering his steps. The sudden draft gusting through him forced him to rub his hands together to charge some heat.

After a quick glance lat the stock of wood left by the fireplace, it became clear that they'd be running out soon.

He made a face, cursing the wood for burning so fast. The pile is quickly disappearing while the snow outside is far from thawed, making it impossible to go out and replace what they used. This might be their last night with some warmth—surely it will run out by tomorrow night no matter how much they cut back.

"About time you woke up, lazy lump."

When the hoarse voice hit his back like a sparing icicles, Levi strained his eyes skyward with a clenched jaw. "Excuse you, but I haven't slept in God knows how long and I'm sick with the flu."

"Boo-hoo. Man up."

With a twitching lid, Levi stomped his foot in irritation. How foolish of him to think Kenny would care to listen to his reasoning and offer any sympathy. Not even when he was a child would he nurse him back to heath. He'd tell him to sweat his fevers out with training and kill the cold with exertion. Given that he got sick often, like Mikasa had mentioned, it wasn't easy getting through the winters and made his training ten times worse (and the sessions were already shitty to begin with). Sick or not, Levi wasn't allowed to sleep in. Never. That was the first strict rule on the list of many. He'd be up until the wee hours of the night, whether from getting home from training late or waiting for Kenny to get home. And God help him if he didn't wake up before the sun the next morning.

It was a strict schedule that was tough to break once he grew into an adult, but now he can't help but to sleep when he can. Even if that means wasting the entire day in bed and rising for the first time in the evening like right now. The life he leads now doesn't offer much time to relax, so he can only take advantage of the free time given to scavenge some sleep.

Kenny didn't have to say another word, it was clear to Levi that he disapproved, but he didn't care. He's not his child, not his successor, not anymore or ever again. Him sleeping in would've been a
grave offense in the past, but his opinion didn't matter anymore.

Feeling riled up, Levi turned with a pointed finger and expected to jab it right in Kenny's face as he sat there defenselessly—but he disregarded the insult storing in his throat when he met a broad chest. His gaze followed up the man lumbering over him like a Titan as he searched for his face high in the clouds. Levi's arm fell slowly to his side.

Trying to play it casual, his hand was moved to his hip as he inspected him. "Why are you out of your cuffs?"

Kenny stared off to the side, his voice went flat with indifference. "Mikasa said if I could manage to escape in this weather she'd be impressed enough to let me go on my merry way. Obviously, I'm not suicidal."

Levi could feel his face tightening at the thought of being disobeyed, not merely because he cares so strongly for order right now, but Mikasa's safety is a top priority of his and for her to be so reckless and free a prisoner from his restraints could have created a deadly outcome. "That wasn't my order. I'm the one in charge here."

"But Mikasa said—"

"I don't care. Do I look like Mikasa to you?"

"A little. I'm kind of buzzed."

"Please, don't."

But he didn't take Levi's warning and instead continued on with intentions of sending Levi more annoyance. "Come to think of it, you're not actually that much alike. Mikasa actually slaved away while you were sleeping on your face: cleaning your clothes, cooking, cleaning the house so you wouldn't bitch like a wench—"

Levi leaned in, glaring up with an offended gleam in his eyes. "And I appreciate that. Yet according to you, praising her is flirting."

"A pathetic attempt at flirting, you mean. You were much better with her when she was a tyke. Pretty pathetic that you get all flustered at the sight of a grown woman."

With protruding eyes, Levi rushed his head around, darting his sight to all corners of the room, fearing he wasn't the only one to hear what Kenny just carelessly blabbed out. When he realized she was in the kitchen preparing his tea, Levi turned back to him.

"Would you be quiet?" he hushed urgently in a whisper. "She might hear us and she doesn't need to be reminded, if you catch my drift."

Kenny adjusted his hat with a careless shrug. "Whatever."

All the fuel he acquired during his daytime nap had burned out faster than the fire. With a sigh, Levi's eyes followed the man as he walked around the coffee table and took a seat on the sofa.

A brow rose as curiosity showcased on Levi face. On the table, a ray of scattered playing cards sat. He looked down at what looked like fifty-two pick up from the way the cards sprawled everywhere like they were thrown around in a competitive rage.

"We were playing Go Fish..." Kenny noticed his gaze and filled him in."There was nothing else to do," seemingly ashamed, he explained further, typical for a criminal that's used to fast talking
his way out of binds.

Arriving with a tray holding three tea cups, Mikasa walked in from the kitchen and right into the flow of conversation. "He's a no good cheater, though." She glared grudgingly at her uncle.

Levi squinted at the two, feeling like he just entered an alternate universe. A serial killer and the world's strongest woman playing Go Fish? This mission couldn't get any weirder. He shook the thought from his head. There were more pressing matters to tend to. He hooked a stern gaze over his shoulder, feeling her presence approaching behind him. "You." He bit back at her, annoyed with her carelessness. "Explain why our prisoner isn't handcuffed."

Once she placed down the tray on the plane of the coffee table, Mikasa spun back to her Captain, looming over him with a bite just as sharp as his. "Take it easy. Everything is under control. He just kept complaining, saying he felt stiff sitting in the chair. I couldn't take another second of it."

"I don't give a shit if the old man is having a heart attack, don't disobey my orders."

For a few passing moments a silent staring contest as hard as steel ensued between them, but Mikasa blinked first and cornered her eyes away. She decided to keep a cool head and explain herself maturely. It's not wise on her part to get on Levi's bad side and lose his trust, especially under these circumstances. They all need to work together right now; the worse case scenario would be fighting in the confinements of this small cabin. She saw her mistake and his reason for being angry at her carelessness was understandable, but she can't allow this grudge to prolong or else their situation may become worse and she won't be trusted with responsibility anymore.

"Technically..." This reaction of his was foreseen and she had prepared. While he was asleep, she searched for a loophole in his order. Now was the time to let the loophole be voiced, just as she recited in her head. "You only told me to watch him. I have been. Whether he's locked up or not doesn't matter."

With a wide, elongated stance, he folded his arms. "You're getting a little better at coming up with excuses, but I'm still going to give you a low score of three out of ten, for effort."

"Captain..." she could tell Levi was peeved, and he had right to be; Kenny is a dangerous man, but she knows she could take him and handle any situation she found herself in. He seemed more interested in talking about his family all day, anyway. Ashamed to admit it, she enjoyed a few of the conversations they held, mainly because he brought up her parents a few times. She enjoyed hearing about the relationship between her father and Kenny. Also, some of the embarrassing stories he told about Levi wasn't bad either. She found herself chuckling at some stories and frowning at others. Levi lived a very isolated childhood much like herself—but she at least had a close bond with her parents. Levi didn't have anyone but Kenny (which she thinks might have been worse than being alone).

After gaining a deeper perspective, it's not surprising that Levi filled the role of a lone-wolf and always looks as cranky as he does. She always assumed that he simply handled his stress that way; that keeping it all bottled up was a characteristic that formed after he joined the military. But that side of him manifested long before. He was robbed of his childhood, untimely death took his birth parents away long ago, and he was forced to become a beggar as a child until Kenny took him in. He may have been off the streets, but judging by their hostile relationship, Levi probably never got one moment of peace his whole life.

Recalling all that helped her deal with the situation in front of her—or rather, she decided to let it go completely to save them both from a headache.

"I was out cold and you were alone with him. He could have tried to hurt you."
Dismissing the prolonged topic, she breezed pass him with a subtly bump into his shoulder and took a seat on the floor, picking up her cards and seemingly set on starting a new card game with her uncle. "I'd like to see him try," she shot a glare over her fan of cards. While shuffling his deck, Kenny smirked proudly at the challenging glow in his nieces eyes.

Instead of pushing the topic, Levi let it go and sat beside Kenny, propping up an elbow on the rest—but this gnawing in the back of his brain just wouldn't let him rest. He still felt the need to continue their prior debate. "You can't even beat him at Go Fish. If he pulls a ruse with a game imagine what else he could do."

"That's awfully sweet of you to say, Levi. You know me too well." Kenny was about to say more, but Levi, still holding his pain-ridden head, hovered his other hand in his face, gesturing him to not continue.

"Just be quiet and Go Fish."

"That's my line." Mikasa then repeated, "Go Fish."

Sometime in the night, when Levi grew frustrated of seeing Kenny play unfairly game after game against Mikasa, Levi joined in. After losing, (and then childishly accusing Kenny of false bluffs) he suggested a new card game, one he couldn't cheat at. Levi removed one of the queens from the deck and gave Mikasa the duty of the dealer. The room grew pathetically quiet as everyone focused on their hands and discarded the pairs in the middle of the table.

Mikasa ran out of cards first. The game continued and after setting down his final pair, Levi declared his and Mikasa's victory and pointed out Kenny's lone queen card.

"Old maid."

"You're an old maid."

Levi could have swore he just saw Mikasa smirk in the corner of his eye, followed by what sounded like it could have been a chortle. He would have lectured her not to encourage his awful sense of humor, but if she's finding joy in any way (no matter how inappropriate), he'll be damned if he's taking it away from her.

They continued playing through dinner and after a number of card games that became boring over time, Mikasa and Levi found a better use for the deck and silently worked together on a house of cards; folding the cards at the tip and balancing it carefully together to create a new floor. The structure became massively tall after a while, tall enough to force Levi to stand to reach the top, but with one intentional gust of air from Kenny's mouth, the house of cards crumbled faster than Wall Maria.

Previously Levi had been ready to place two more cards to the tower, but with fuming temper he let the cards fall from his steady hands to join the rest of the pile. "Must you be unnecessarily evil?" Levi swiveled back and blared at his ex-mentor, and the man simply grinned happily, satisfied with his evil deed.

Mikasa lost count of how many times they fought this evening. You wouldn't think two grown men would fight over childish games, but they found a way. When she saw another dispute forming on the horizon she intruded and tried to sway the conversation somewhere else. "I haven't heard you cough in a while, Levi. Is the tea helping your throat a little?"

Levi took a while to reply, not knowing how to reply to the sudden benevolence. He let out a string of awkward words, then gave a decent response. "Oh, right, yeah. It helped. Thanks."
Kenny thrusted out his chest with air in preparation for a blaring groan. "Ugh. You two act like an old married couple." His slit eyes popped open a little in recall, then contently closed again with a grumble, "Hm, I suppose that's appropriate."

Mikasa tilted her head with a flicker of question in her eyes. "Why would that be appropriate?"

The sudden dangerous and unperceived turn in conversation had Levi straining his eyes between them, his chest thumping like a guilty accomplice withholding information from the MP. How the fuck did the subject of tea derail the whole flow of conversation and lead them here?

A line of a smile stretched across Kenny's cheeks. His intentions were clear to Levi before he even spoke. "Well, the two of you—AH! You little runt!"

After stomping on his foot like he was crushing a pesky cockroach, Levi bared his teeth, like an animal warning another not to cross its territory.

Fed up, Mikasa tossed down her cards in a fit. "That's it. What's going on," she said and it wasn't a question. It was a demand.

"I lost the motivation to help you two idiots. Suffer in oblivion."

Mikasa sunk her brows at her uncle, confused and angry by his vague phrasing, but it was completely crystal clear to Levi—and yes, he's completely content with Mikasa staying in oblivion.

"Captain."

Levi heard her, but never took his eyes from Kenny's lips, fearing he'd speak if he removed his watch from them. "He says weird things because he's a weird man. Don't pay attention to him."

"I'm the weird one? Tch, is this a cabin or a damn fun house? I'm trying to be helpful and you nearly broke my foot."

Helpful? With what? Mikasa focused on getting to the bottom of this. "Kenny." Levi wont give her the attention she begged for, so she'll work on him. The look on Levi's face displayed a type of fear she hadn't witnessed before, but this only encouraged her further and she went on to say, "You and I are family, so if you got something to say, then tell me."

Kenny peeked over at Levi and the man glared back, steaming like a block of dry ice in boiling water.

"Not another word," he said flatly, but his words still penetrated like a whip.

"Levi, let him talk," Mikasa narrowed her eyes, almost in disbelief. What the hell has gotten into him?

"Oh, I'll let him talk alright," his expression turned deadly on Kenny, "May I speak to you in private?" The combination of the polite phrasing and the way he hovered over the man like an ominous black cloud, ready to strike him with a deadly bolt, sketched a terrifying image before her.

The man chuckled but was cut off abruptly when Levi forced him to his feet with a strong tug of his collar and escorted him down into the dark hall.

Levi didn't even know he still remembered—he figured he forgot about it. After the scene he pulled, he knew that wasn't the case and that was enough of a scare to set him into action and
make sure the truth never came out.

Assuring Mikasa didn't follow, he surveyed the length hallway, then shot his head up at Kenny's grin. "Do not tell Mikasa about that. Do you understand? Don't."

Kenny peered down at him, showing zero fear of the undertones of Levi's demand, like what would happen if he disobeyed. "You'll have to refresh my memory and be more specific."

Levi didn't have time for his games right now. He readjusted his hold on him and pinned his hostile stance against him, close enough to make sure Kenny heard every sharply whispered word. "You know damn well what I'm taking about. I'm not your successor anymore. I'm never going to pass down your work so there's no point in bringing that up ever again. Give it up."

"Mikasa is a sweet girl, why won't you tell her about it?"

It's because she's a sweet girl that he doesn't want to tell her. She'd probably feel disgusted or betrayed if she knew—besides, like he said, there's no point anymore. All it would do is stir up a headache for all involved and maybe even ruin the relationship they formed. What they had wasn't much, but he still held what they had very dearly.

"There's nothing between us, that's why. It was a long time ago and it's time to forget it. It doesn't matter now. Besides, I'd never force my subordinate to go through with some scheme that was made without her consent."

"You can ask her for consent. She's of age now..." Kenny looked off in the direction of the living room wistfully. Paranoid, Levi followed his gaze to double check, making sure Mikasa didn't just appear. Being on edge as he were, he jumped a little when Kenny continued, "But she needs to know about it in order to give that answer, Levi."

He hissed back up at him, gripping the collar of his coat tighter. "Just shut your fucking mouth. If I even suspect you will mention it to her you won't get a warning with a simple kick next time. I'll rip your tongue out so you'll never speak again."

"Think, runt. Is your brain as undeveloped as your body? If I wanted to tell her badly enough, I would have explained the whole thing earlier while you were sleeping your face off, but I didn't, so back off. I was just trying to give you a little boost. But fine, be alone and miserable. Don't come crying to me years down the line."

"I won't. Now let it go," he shoved his grip off his collar and stomped down the hall, mumbling incompetently under his breath.

Levi walked off, but paused his steps when Kenny added, "She'll find out eventually, you know. You can't hide it forever."

He scowled under a casted shadow as dark as his guilt and drove into the well-lit living room.

"You can't hide what?" Mikasa stood.

Shit. She caught that? That bastard and his big mouth.

"Nothing. Sit down." He gestured to the floor with a pointing finger, but much to Levi's surprise, the usual obedient Mikasa disobeyed.

"No." She approached him fiercely. "Tell me what's going on. I feel like I'm being excluded from something."
"Well, don't place the blame me, dear niece." Kenny finally returned to the family feud belatedly. "You can thank that midget for that."

"What did I just say?" Levi whirled back, looking a second away from snapping his ex-mentors neck.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," he returned to his spot on the couch. "I won't say another word, I like my tongue where it is."

Mikasa forced herself in Levi's sight, her arms folding. "Telling our prisoner not to speak? Nice one, Captain. Really, great job. Tell me what the hell is going on." What excuse could he possibly have for getting so worked up? Is Levi withholding critical information because of his past with Kenny? She started to wonder if he could even be truly trusted due to his relationship with him.

"It doesn't concern you, Mikasa." He walked off, trying to escape to the kitchen, but it was impossible to escape from her in this tiny cabin. She stalked closer to him than his flickering shadow casting off the walls. He wished he could take a long walk outside, but he's trapped in his damn cold forsaken house.

"Like hell it doesn't." Mikasa powered her step and spun him around with a powerful pull, "What are you hiding? Tell me or I'll tell Hanji you're withholding information as soon as we get out of here."

He removed her hand from his shoulder hostility, his eyes warning her not to do that again. She backed off and took a step back, but still stood her ground with balled fists, waiting for the answer she deserved.

"Why the hell would I care if you tell that freak?"

"That freak is our Commander now."

Levi held his head. Shit. She's right. He almost forgot that shitty-glasses has been promoted to Commander. Erwin not only lost his arm, but he lost his God damn mind too for putting that titan-loving scientist in charge. He's not saying Hanji isn't capable of filling in the spot; she definitely does suit the role of Commander—she's always been much more of a leader than Levi. But taking orders from that Titan-loving idiot has got to be the biggest mindfuck of his whole military career.

"Mikasa, must I remind you that I don't have to tell you something if I don't want to? I'm sure I made that clear yesterday. If I tell you to drop it, you better do just that or I'll have to write you up for insubordination." What a pathetic threat, it actually stung his tongue. He never thought he'd resort to such a cowardly thing.

She flicked her bangs with a tsk. "Please, spare me. Do you think I care about formalities anymore? We aren't soldiers anymore, we're all wanted criminals. We're in this together now and we have no reason to hide anything. You need me, you made that clear, so write me up all you want. It won't make a difference in my standing."

Not able to look her in the eyes, he lowered his head. She's so painfully right. She's a valuable soldier and even if she became a no-good nuisance that disobeyed every order, he'd still need her on his side because she, much like himself, is an irreplaceable white knight on the board. There aren't many pawns left and most of their important pieces, like their queen and coordinate king, are always in check and the rest are in captivity and no longer playable.

Regardless, they will always need Mikasa to continue playing. If they lost her it would be game over because there's only so much weight that Levi's shoulders could bear before crushing under
all the responsibility. In other words, there's not a damn thing he could say to whip Mikasa back in line and do as he says.

The problem is, the information he held from her had nothing to do with their current situation. It's an old issue that died long ago and now it has unfortunately resurrected. He wants nothing more than to put it to rest again and forget about it for good.

"Don't make me repeat myself." He replied stubbornly and Mikasa, finally having enough, stormed off to the bedroom, leaving a trail of stomps behind before finally slamming the bedroom door hard enough to quake the house's foundation.

"..." Levi frowned at the door, regret settling on him.

"That didn't go too well, if you ask me. Shit, I never had any luck with women but you're a fucking lost cause."

Levi spun back slowly with vile intentions. For the first time, Kenny's eyes revealed a tiny hint of fear.

The sound of deadly threats and a rumbling ruckus blared in from beyond the door. Mikasa did her best to tune them out by folding the pillow against her ears. Let them kill each other, for all she cares. It's not like it mattered. Whether Mikasa respectfully stood up for Captain Levi or behaves disobediently made no difference; he still treats her the same. She knows he's much older than her, but he doesn't need to treat her like a baby. Her, along with her fellow comrades have been through too much to still be considered children.

She should have known begging that stubborn shorty was futile, but some stupid part of her thought they became a little closer lately, but apparently she's just a nuisance in his eyes, but for the life of her she can't figure out why. She had stuck up for him when others doubted him, always trusted his judgment and battled at his side countless times. She can't think of one time that she went out of line or refused to work with him. Even during the times that she had to sacrifice Eren's safety just because she strongly believed that her Captain knew what he was doing. And after all that, this is how he repays her: by keeping more secrets from her and treating her like a child.

~x~

After a never-ending battle with Kenny to vent his stress, Levi threw him down into the basement and rewarded himself with some silence so he could think. After much pacing and racing thoughts, he cleared his head and came up with a decent excuse for his behavior.

Levi appeared before the bedroom door, summoning up the strength to knock. When there was no answer, he rested his forehead against the door, closing his eyes. "Can I please come in?"

Mikasa stirred in the blanket, frowning at the tone. "Do I have the permission to say no? Oh, wait. Scratch that. You just do whatever you want regardless of what I say."

When she heard the door creak open, Mikasa rolled over to face the wall. Light spilled in and the sound of heavy footsteps followed and caused her to pouted into the press of the pillow. She traced her eyes over the cracks and nicks until his shadow grew and covered the designs of the floral wallpaper.

"Easy there," he tried to tame her as he crossed the room. Before she could rudely remark back he added, "I'm sorry." he said like the word poisoned his tongue. "Kenny was just trying to bring up something from the past, and I lost my head. Not a lot of people know anything about me—you
and him are the only ones who currently know my last name, even." He invited himself to sit on the edge of the bed.

With curiosity fueling her, she stealthily shuffled to face him and bundled the blanket passed her nose and opened her ears to what he had to say.

"I'm not used to being around people that know about my personal shit—shit I don't want coming to the surface. He's kind of like a father that way, he tries to embarrass me and say irrelevant shit in front of others."

"But..." Her gaze wandered as she tried to recall. "I thought he was saying something about us—he said we were like a married couple, then he said that seemed appropriate...but you cut him off before he could explain and you seemed desperate to keep him silent. It made me feel like you're hiding something from me—and at a time like this, that's not a wise idea. We need to stick together, Levi."

He gaped at that. His stunned expression highlighted for all to see from the glow rising off the candle in his hands.

Now, judging from that reaction, Mikasa knew for sure that it did involve her somehow. That's all she needed to know.

He set the candle on the nightstand, trying to hide himself in the shadows, but it was too late. His reaction already gave away an answer.

Damn she's sharp—just like her mother.

"It has something to do with me...doesn't it?" She sat up dizzily, her head spinning from the sudden shift. She leaned in, balancing on herself on her hands as she tried to force a confirmation out of him.

He didn't answer. He came in here with a vague, yet loosely honest excuse, but he wasn't prepared to lie right to her face—and especially not let her in on the truth.

Since asking directly won't work, she'll get it out of him with a new tactic. She whispered softly, "Tell me, Levi."

Tingles surged through him from that precious tone, but the calming effect was burned away with the recall of Kenny's harsh words: She'll find out eventually, you know. You can't hide it forever. He tensed up, his lips pressing together as his knuckles turned white in his lap.

Levi had tried so hard to hide the connection from her and him all this time; his last name, her relation to Kenny—but the truth came to light regardless of his efforts. Their past and the arrangement made between them likely will too, no matter how hard he tries to dodge it. If she must know, he wants her to find out the right way.

"I'll tell you," his voice nearly cracked at the commitment it took to say that. "When the time is right. I promise." His heart raced at the thought, hotness rushed to his face from the adrenaline. But—it's the right thing to do. Now that she knows practically everything else he hid from her, there's only one thing left to reveal. He turned to her, meeting her gaze. He softened up his hard features the best he could. "Just...not right now. I swear, it's nothing serious. It could be easily solved, you have nothing to worry about. Trust me, I wouldn't hide something vital from you."

Closing her eyes, she channeled the impatience from her mind and nodded solidly. She huffed, relived he set aside his stubbornness and at least gave a promise. When it comes to Levi, his promises are nearly set in stone. Never once had he failed to accomplish something he gave his
word on, not unless the matter went out of his hands.

"Okay. I trust your judgment—but I'm holding you to that. You will tell me."

Levi took a deep breath, nodding with a painful swallow down his sore throat. There's no way around it now—eventually, sooner rather than later, he'll have to tell Mikasa about their engagement.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I originally planned on ending this story in the next chapter... BUT since many people seem to enjoy this fic and I absolutely love writing it, I decided to brainstorm some ideas and expand the plot! I'm happy with this decision because I think this story still has some more potential and I want to develop all the relationships a little better. So, yeah! Fans of this fic rejoice! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Mikasa curled herself up on the sofa, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders and an open book in her lap. Earlier that afternoon, Levi had instructed cleaning orders for her to carry out and while she was dusting the top shelf near the fireplace, she had stumbled upon the romance novel. It was covered in dust, the pages were crinkled and discolored and not her preferred genre at all, but now that she finished the chores she decided to give the novel a chance out of boredom.

—Well, at least she tried to, but she found herself rereading the same line over and over again and not a single word penetrated her train of thought.

The distracting ruckus floating up from below the floorboards stole her concentration and pulled her from the prologue numerous times. This was to be expected, though. This mission out in the wilderness may seem peaceful in theory, but her and Levi still had a goal to accomplish.

Levi had been questioning Kenny all day. Presently, a long session of stress-induced interrogation went on below in the basement. It's been going on for the past two hours now—but suddenly the cabin filled with silence and her ears felt blessed.

A second later, the basement door flung open and out Levi came, passing her with adrenaline in his heel, but he abruptly paused his haste and gave her a quick, "Hey," when he noticed the concern held on her face.

"Hey." She mirrored back "How's the interrogation going?"

He didn't say a word, only giving a little ambiguous shrug and continued moving until he disappeared into the kitchen, presumably to reward himself with his favorite beverage. If her small study on Levi's body language was accurate, she can safely assume the questioning is not going too well.

Mikasa returned her concentration to the book in hand, thinking she might finish a page now that it's quiet—but her neck (and mind) suffered from sudden whiplash when Levi returned a second later, fury in his heel.

"I don't think we're going to make it," he announced out of breath, a seldom panic in his voice as if he saw the premonition of their brutal deaths.

She noted the sudden peril and reacted to his urgency, rising to her feet and letting the book fall to the ground with a thud, "What makes you say that? We're doing well on supplies, aren't we?" Her voice rose in uncertain question until she took it upon herself to answer herself,"Well... sort of," her worried gaze strayed over to the burning pit, the flame danced low and weak and practically
powered solely by ash. Levi's prediction hit right on the mark. During their first night here he had predicted that they'd run out of logs the night after tomorrow. That day had unfortunately arrived.

"We will be out of wood soon, but I'm sure we'll figure out a way to stay warm. The important thing is we have enough of food to last us."

But even more horror displayed on Levi face, his lips taut from a frown and bumpy terrains formed on his forehead. There must have been something she missed mentioning.

"No, you don't understand Mikasa—we're running low on tea. I only have enough left for a cup."

Mikasa narrowed her eyes dully and plopped back down on the sofa, picking her book back up. Her voice went flat with nonchalance. "That's hardly a necessity, Captain. Not having tea doesn't complicate our survival."

"Tea helps me think," he disputed and Mikasa rolled her eyes. Is he actually being serious? And he accuses her of coming up with terrible excuses. "If I can't think how am I going to get us out of this predicament?"

Mikasa found it pretty pathetic how a man in his thirties depended on tea the same way an infant depended on his mother's teat. "You'll live."

Levi sucked in a breath to retort back, but he choked on his own air and coughed in his hand. His cold still wouldn't let up. His fever was still high from what Mikasa could tell, but it wasn't as bad as yesterday. If he didn't over exert himself and strain his voice from yelling at Kenny his sore throat probably would have cleared up significantly by now.

Mikasa flipped the page of her book, her eyes tracing along the line of unfiltered words. "I told you to slow down on the tea. But you didn't listen."

Levi wanted to remind her that it's too late to point fingers, but instead used that strength to cross the space and collapse into the couch. He sunk deep into the cushions with an extending arm propped on the backrest that lingered behind Mikasa neck.

As pathetic as it is to sulk over tea, Mikasa still sympathized with him to an extent. Everyone has their own coping mechanisms to help them through this terrible situation, and if Levi found calmness from drinking tea than she won't argue with that.

The book closed and a hopeless gaze fell into her lap, knowing full well that she couldn't say anything to boost his glum mood. Not only did the Captain run low on tea (she wouldn't actually scramble to cheer him up for that sole reason anyway), but it's clear he hasn't found any useful information from Kenny yet. She anticipated that. The man won't tell them anything they want to know. Not unless they resort to violence. If it must come to that, she won't refuse, but she'd like for this peace to last a little longer.

They might be trapped in this isolated place and cold, either sick with illness or homesick and slowly suffering the effects of cabin fever—but like Levi said this has been a vacation; a break from the chaos and hardships and worrying. Being here was like a short semi-peaceful pit stop before trekking back out to that cruel world.

Mikasa noticed the toll all of this had taken on everyone, especially Levi. He had endured a lot, as they all have, but everyone had their own sad tales to tell and since Levi is currently seated beside her, his story retold in her mind first. He's lost valuable, irreplaceable soldiers and he's been fighting tooth and nail harder than most—not because the others don't know how to pull their own weight around, but Levi is burdened with the title of Humanity's Strongest and that is a position
that would send most to insanity overtime. A lot of responsibility was placed upon him, and many of his decisions hold the weight of worlds. Mikasa feared if he made the wrong choice eventually, he'll buckle under the weight.

He wants to make change, but the glory he's reaching for is still far from reach. It's a feeling all of the Survey Corps members could relate to; they're the only ones that could change the world and the only ones who could offer a glimmer of hope to those trapped inside these walls.

It's not much, but being here is a brief interlude before they must voyage back to the long expedition waiting for them outside this cabin. The least Mikasa could do is try to enhance his stay here and use this pit stop to her advantage. Maybe she could lift some of the weight off him just a little and release the pressure smothering him.

If he could forget about the responsibilities that came with being a Captain and just be a human for a short period, it might do wonders on his health and mental state.

"Let's play a game," she proposed, setting her distraction plan into play.

He combed his fingers though his hair and refused with a shake of his head. "I'm sick of card games."

"Me too. But I have another game in mind. Let's play 'Would You Rather'."

"Never heard of it." Levi crossed his legs and turned to her with genuine curiosity. A simple game might help him clear his head, or at least stop it from pounding after the migraine Kenny caused.

"It's just a game the girls used to play back in the training barracks before lights out. It's kind of fun if you get creative. Plus it passes the time."

He gave his consent with a shrug. "Alright. Let's play."

"Okay, I'll start." She gave herself a few seconds to think, scoping the room around her to spark inspiration. "Would you rather live the rest of your life without cleaning anything, or live the rest of your life without tea?"

Heavy depression slumped his posture down. "This isn't making me feel better about the no-tea thing."

"I'm not trying to make you feel better about that. Answer."

Levi pursed his lips in thought, then popped his lips in defeat. "Pass."

"You can't pass. It's really not the difficult."

But it really was for him. It's like forcing a parent to pick a favorite among their children. "Fine. I'd rather not be able to clean—I'll just sip my tea while instructing someone else do the chores for me."

"Someone like Eren."

"Mhm." At least it would keep the reckless brat busy. "My turn." He scratched his chin. He had to admit that this game didn't seem too bad and it gave him the opportunity to gain perspectives on Mikasa he might not ever he may never see otherwise. This helped inspire a question. "Would you rather never see Eren again but know he was safe, or would you rather see him everyday but you couldn't protect him yourself and had to rely on others?"
That's a little too specific for a game, but then again, getting nosy is a key point of the game. That's what all the girls would do back at the barracks. They would start off innocently enough, but the questions would quickly become personal and even dark over time.

"That's hard to say." On one hand, being around Eren's lively energy motivated her every step of the way, but keeping him safe is all she ever wanted. "It depends on who would be keeping him safe. If it's anyone on your squad, no way in hell. But if you were the one looking after him, then yes."

His brows spiked in doubt. "You trust me that much?"

Mikasa fidgeted her fingers in her lap, tucking her lip. She didn't realize what she said was embarrassing until he bluntly pointed out the obvious. Well, she made this bed and now she had to sleep in it. "Of course. I've always trusted your judgement. I'm surprised you haven't noticed by now. You trust Eren. There were times when you trusted him and I when no one else did or when you had very little reason to. You also saved him uncountable times. I'd trust him in your hands if I was unable to protect him."

Even hypothetically speaking, that conviction was a shocking blow; an explanation he hadn't foreseen. Mikasa trusted Levi with the one thing she cared about most in this world. Levi tugged at his shirt, trying to quiet the fluttering wings taking flight in his chest.

Mikasa scrambled to break the serious mood and found another question to continue the game. A small smile flicked on her face, but she tried to hide it with a professional tone, "I mean no respect, sir, this is just for fun—would you rather marry Hanji or Historia."

"Oh, wow." Levi let his head recline back in thought. "Now that is impossible to answer because Historia likely hates me with a burning passion and would have me killed on our wedding night, and I'd probably kill Hanji one hour after the ceremony. Or kill myself."

"But if you had to marry one of them for the 'sake of mankind'," she quoted mockingly with her fingers, "Who would you pick?"

He cringed while he mulled over the pros and cons of each suitor. There were so many cons that he lost track, gave up, and picked the one that benefited him. "Hanji, I guess. Only because I might be able to convince her to take a bath more often if I were her husband."

"She's really not as dirty as you make her out to be." Then again, Mikasa scarcely saw her in the communal showers back at HQ.

"No, she really is filthy. She's lucky I became used to her scent or else I would have drowned her in sudsy water years ago." He only made an exception for her lack of hygiene because the two of them, as opposite as they were, do get along well and Levi would go as far as considering her his friend, but he never saw her in the marriage light before, so his answer to Mikasa's question made him feel a little uncomfortable. To get the after taste out of his mouth, he moved on with the game, "Since you gave me a tough question, you're getting one back."

"Oh boy," she braced herself with a little breath.

He tried to think of two men from the Survey Corps that would be impossible to choose as a suitor. Eren, obviously, wouldn't be listed as a candidate. That would be too easy for her and Levi would likely make a sour face and sulk even more if he heard her say she'd marry that brat out loud.

There's two men in particular that he knows Mikasa has zero interest in, so he settled on that. He'd
probably regret this, but this is just a hypothetical game, right?

"Would you rather date that Jean fellow that has his eye on you, or—to make your choices really impossible to choose from—me."

"I'd marry you," Mikasa gave her answer as simply as telling the time.

With wide eyes on her, a subtle gasp lunged into Levi's throat, making him cough again. He hadn't expected that quick response. Hell, he hadn't expected a response at all. Now he wishes he prepared himself beforehand, he would've enjoyed hearing Mikasa say she'd marry him when he was ready because surely he won't hear it again.

"Are you sure you heard the question right? Jean is your age and he seems like a good kid. Why'd you pick an old man like me over him?"

She shrugged, cornering her eyes away indifferently. "You're more mature. Sometimes. Jean could be difficult and stubborn, albeit not as bad as Eren, but still. I'm not saying he's a bad guy, he's just... not my type, that's all."

"And I am?" The words came out before he could deliberate how dangerous they were.

Mikasa tucked her knees against her chest and curled her toes anxiously. She couldn't just be disrespectful and say she found her Captain attractive to some degree, more than Jean or any of the other SC members, at least. Actually...she never outright thought that before now. It was more a subconscious acceptance that she found him handsome. Now that she let herself hear her thoughts, she couldn't help but to stiffen in confusion. She mulled it over a little longer to be certain.

She'll be damned—it's true. She does find him attractive, even on a conscious level. That is a realization she didn't think she'd strike today.

This is just a game and she didn't want to make their future as subordinate and superior together awkward over her confessing that she saw him as a good looking man with credible attributes. She needed to let this topic die, quick. "That's two questions. It's my turn."

"Right." Noticing he was tense and hunched forward, Levi lounged his body back, took a breath and tried to relax. He made a mental review raving about how great this game was. Way better than tea any day.

The two strongest got to know each other over the course of a few rounds back and forth; the questions trickier with each pass. After they exhausted all the questions they could think up, Mikasa introduced Levi to another game of similar in context that allowed them to get a little more personal. The game is called 'Have you ever'.

Levi went static as the next question drifted into his ears.

"Have you ever been in love?"

It was a harmless question she asked, a question that eventually came up when she'd play with the other girls, but perhaps the questions isn't all that simply, because her Captain has remained static and mute beside her ever since she asked.

Love had many definitions, but he couldn't say he loved even those closest to him and he's never been in a serious romantic relationship before—but still, it was hard to say a flat out no. Not because he feared being seen as a cold heartless bastard, but because it would feel like a lie. Realizing he was taking too long to answer, be glanced over at Mikasa. She patiently watched
him, waiting for an answer.

"If that's too personal, you don't have to answer, sir. I was just curious since no one in the Survey Corps really talks about relationships and love, so I figured I'd take advantage of the opportunity."

"No, it's just—I'm not really sure how to answer."

She tilted her head, scrutinizing him as she tried to find the answer on him. "Well, if you never been in love, you'd know and simply say no, but since you're thinking about it so long there must have been people you loved. For the record, people who didn't return the feelings count too, the question just concerns your feelings."

"Ah. That helps. Then yes, I think so."

Mikasa squished her lip into a lopsided line. What he said implied that he may have loved someone, but they didn't love him back. Unrequited love is one of the most bittersweet emotions a human could posses. That stung a little to hear, not only because she felt sorry for him, but it was an issue she thinks she could relate to herself.

"Same question for you."

The quick delivery of words returned right back to the sender. Mikasa flinched. She had a feeling he'd say that. "It's...complicated."

"I'm not an expert on love by any stretch of the imagination, but is there ever a case that isn't complicated?"

"Good point." When she repeated the question back to herself, her mind showed her a picture of Eren, but she was still far from finding her answer. Her love for him could mean so many things. To this day she still cant pinpoint if she loves him romantically or exclusively as a family member. She never imagined herself marrying him or having children with him, or anything like—mainly because she was never given the opportunity to daydream about the future. Half the time she's too busy keeping Eren alive for the day, never mind plan out their future. For now, she'll give the most truthful answer she could.

"I've loved a few people. Like Armin, I love him as a friend and I loved my family, but speaking romantically...I'm still unsure of my feelings or theirs so it's impossible to answer."

"I see. Well, you're still young so you have time to figure it out," Levi gave rare words of encouragement, but it pained him to recite because he knew who she was referring too. Mikasa's relationship with Eren has always been odd and in an effort to make sense of it, Levi silently made the assumption that she was in love with him. Either Eren was too stupid to realize or didn't feel the same—likely because of this, she's confused on the subject. Levi still meant what he said though, as much as he wishes he could selfishly take it back. If she gave their relationship time to mature and blossom it might become clearer for her. Levi's not really a selfish person, even though he has an awful habit of wishing for expensive novelty items and hitting rich fortunes, he still was pleased and satisfied with simple luxuries. The feelings he held for Mikasa weren't much different in comparison. He knows his affections for her are unrealistic and nothing will form from them, but that doesn't stop him from daydreaming. Just like he would settle for moonstones instead of diamonds, in the end he would sacrifice his own desires so long as Mikasa is happy and gets what she wants. If that leads to her and Eren falling in love, so be it. He just wants her to be happy, after all, his happiness on the other hand is unrealistic so he at least wants one of them happy with the person they love.
"Let's try to stick to simpler questions for a while." She wanted to drop this topic, despite that she originally brought it up. The subject of love is a little too heavy for a game that was meant to be used as a stress relief. "Let's see..." she tapped her cheek in thought until a random question popped in her mind. "Have you ever stole anything?"

Levi luckily recovered from his melancholy thoughts in time to hear her question. "I used to be a thug in the underground," he rolled his neck her way, his eyes cold. "What do you think?"

"Hm." Mikasa brewed up an image of Levi decked out in a shady hoodie and armed with a switchblade knife with the slums of the underground as his backdrop. The image alone would terrify the faint of heart, but Mikasa simply squished her lip skeptically instead. "I can't picture you being a bad guy. I mean, I can; your appearance and attitude fits, but you follow orders so well, so it's hard to see you breaking the law."

"People change, I suppose."

"Right. Well, I don't know how you were as a thug, but you make a good solider. I think you made the right choice by leaving that old lifestyle behind."

His eyes glowed softly. "...Thanks. I still don't know if it was the right choice, but I don't regret it."

"You shouldn't, you make a good Captain...when you're not having tea withdrawals or making everyone join in with your cleaning frenzies."

Mikasa displayed a tiny grin. Levi was taken back by the sight and nearly squinted his eyes from the heavenly beam. Mikasa is much like himself and doesn't let her emotions out lightly, she knows how to keep them in and guard them closely. This is the second time he caught her finding amusement in something inappropriate. The fact that she felt comfortable enough to let out an easygoing smile in front of him said a lot, she must feel at ease with him right now.

Levi let his head hang low, his eyes focused on his lap. A spark of curiosity voiced itself, "I'm wondering...Have you ever laughed so hard you couldn't breathe?"

Her mouth scrunched to the side in thought. "I'm sure I have, but I don't recall laughing so hard I lost my breath recently. I'm sure it happened when I was young with my parents. They always made me laugh," Levi pulled his head up in time to see the sad smile on her lips fade. She perked herself up a bit. "Same question to you, I'm curious because I never see you laugh or smile."

"When I was younger too."

"With Kenny?"

"No." He vigorously shook his head at the impossible claim. "It was when—" Recall stuck his face and memories plummeted to the surface of his mind, going too fast to keep up with but leaving a bitter sweet burn on his heart. He heard himself laughing hard. And he also heard another laugh, very clearly. The sweet, high-pitch rang through his ears like a nostalgic lullaby. He glanced over at Mikasa and those familiar doleful eyes of hers. A deep frown formed on his lips.

"What is it, Captain? Are you feeling sick?"

His heart twinges from the sweet words he didn't deserve to hear. He rose to his feet, intending to take his sudden frustrations with him to the basement.

"Thanks, Mikasa. I haven't had that much fun in a while," he said to assure her, then walked off.
Mikasa blinked at his back until he disappeared down the hall. He left so suddenly—was it something she said? She revved her neck and moved her gaze to the window. The hills of white endless beyond the glass. Maybe she let herself get too carried away with the questions.

When Levi closed the basement door, he lingered on the top step; his back throbbing against the door from his heart thumping wildly. The frown on his lips deepened as he stared, but saw nothing but the cherished pictures in his mind. For the first time in recent memory, he felt his tear ducts moisten and burn. But he rubbed all weakness from his eyes until they were sore. Instead of submitting to the sorrow burdening him, he became angry instead, like he always does, and stomped down the flight.

~x~

Mikasa gathered all the blankets she could find and threw them into a heap in the middle of the living room floor. It's going to be a cold night and depending on how long they're going to be out here, it might be the first of many. This is the last night they'll have any warmth, so she intends to take advantage of it by sleeping by the fire.

Levi shared a similar motive and had his back pressed to they brick of the chimney with his legs stretched out and crossed at the ankle. He used the dull flame for reading light and got a lot further in the book than she did. Judging by the the way his eyes raced back and forth and turned pages frequently, he clearly enjoyed the novel.

Kenny was seated on the couch, sulking and mute. After a long day of Levi trying to force information from him, they had little words left to spare, which created a peaceful ambiance.

Mikasa loomed over her captain and offered one of the fur blankets to him. He peeled his gaze up from the book, shaking his head. "I'm not cold, you use it." He spoke low, barely heard over the cackling of the fire.

"Are you sure?"

He nodded and returned to the book.

"Give it here." Kenny announced, reaching out a hand.

"Tch." Levi didn't bother regarding Kenny with a look, instead he wrinkled his nose while keeping his glower locked on the page. "You already have a blanket. Don't be greedy."

"I'm still cold."

After the endless (and unsuccessful) interrogation today, Levi had very little patience left for him. He managed his temper and simply said, "Go to bed Kenny, I'm honestly not in the mood to listen to your complaining. I'm sure you could escort yourself to the basement."

The man gave a grumble in return, and Mikasa feared another argument was spotted on the horizon—but a miracle occurred and Kenny lifted himself off the couch and lumbered down the hall.

When the basement door clicked shut, Levi said, "Remind me to lock him in later."

"One of us will be up anyway, it's not like he could get passed us." She huffed in reply as she dragged the bear skin rug closer to the fireplace.

"True."
Mikasa settled herself down and rolled to her side. The rug wasn't as comfortable as the bed, but it offered some padding and it beat laying on the bare floorboards. After securely tucking the fur blanket around her, she layered the other on top. She nestled her head in the pillow and entertained herself by spotting images and patterns within the flame.

She wasn't really tired yet, but she's freezing and just the constant thought reminding her of how cold she was made her exhausted. Her body shivered on endlessly and her nose went numb long ago. Just knowing she wouldn't even have the fire soon made her body tremble in preparation. Ever since they arrived she's been cold, even when they had a potent fire rolling in the beginning. When she tries to get warm it's not enough because there's a deep lingering chill stuck in her body that not even being engulfed in flames would melt.

She's kind of envious of Levi for having so much cold resistance—or at least envious for his bravery for pretending like he's unaffected by the temperature.

For a few blinks, she watched the low flame burning the last log, then her eyes swept in Levi's direction—

Two blue eyes, gleaming with orbs of fire, were already fixated on her.

"... . . . . . . . . . ." Startled, she flinched under his hard gaze. By the time she broke the stare with a blink, his eyes back on the book.

She clenched a fist amount of fur and dragged it up her chin. Soon after, her eyes left him and returned to the pit.

Why was he...staring at her like that?

That was actually a question she found herself asking a lot, but she had never asked the one person who could give her an answer.

This had become an everyday occurrence. She caught the Captain staring at her quite frequently—she always assumed he was an abnormal little man with a staring problem or that he was never taught how rude it was to stare at people (considering Kenny was his guardian growing up, it wouldn't be a stretch to assume that).

This habit of his, like many of his habits, was very strange and she can't quite depict his motives behind them.

There were even times she could have swore she sensed his eyes on her—it's hard to explain, but sometimes when her back was turned to him, she felt those narrow eyes pinning to her. Maybe it was just her imagination or lack of perception, but she doesn't recall him staring at anyone else likely that. The only time he will regard anyone with a look is when they're talking or when he's talking to them. Other than that his eyes remain on patrol, looking in every direction and never lingering anywhere too long.

However—Mikasa often noticed him staring at her for long seconds at a time, even when they aren't near each other or engaged in conversation.

There were a few times she just wanted to snap and ask, "What are you looking at, shorty?!" But there were many reasons why she kept her mouth shut. For one, it might seem conceited on her end to presume there's even a reason why he stares at her. Maybe it's just a subconscious, unintentional thing. It might be a bad quirk he can't control, just like his cleaning habits, and she wouldn't want to embarrass someone ten years her senior.
A prominent chill shook her from her thoughts. The crackling in the fireplace reduced until a sizzling, dying hiss remained. The last of the wood turned to smoke and ash in the pit and floated up the chimney.

Levi fussily slammed his book shut and flopped it to the side carelessly. Of course his light source would die right when he got to the good part. "Shit. Well, that's the last of it."

Mikasa would have expressed a frown if her lips weren't frozen. "Damn... I thought it would've lasted a little longer. It's gonna be freezing from here on out." If that's even possible. She barely survived until now. Without any fire she might as well sleep outside, it wouldn't make much of a difference.

If she felt this cold between two blankets and a bear rug, she can only imagine how Levi felt. Daringly, she shot her eyes back at him, prepared for his eyes to meet her, but his attention was placed on his lap. "I know this seems redundant to ask at this point, but are you sure you're not cold?"

Levi bent a leg close to his chest and dangled his arm on his knee. "Nah. I feel like I'm sunbathing on a humid summer day."

She huffed out a foggy sigh through her chattering teeth. "Well, at least your brain doesn't appear to be frozen and you can still come up with sarcastic remarks. Not all hope is lost."

If he keep trying to make jokes, both of them would probably stay warm with embarrassment, but putting Mikasa through that type of torture isn't the way he wanted to send the night.

"Anyway," Mikasa lifted a corner of the top blanket, "you should wrap yourself up. You're going to get even sicker if you don't."

"I'm fine."

Her nose curled with impatience. No, he's obviously not fine. The lighting is dim now that the fire went out, but if her eyes aren't playing tricks on her than she's pretty sure Levi's lips are turning blue and his hands are shaking.

"We might be fine now, but without any heating it's just going to get worse." Mikasa pulled the fur over her chattering mouth. The suggestion he was about to voice is rather rash and sudden coming from her, but she's getting desperate. "...We might have to huddle together to conserve heat at this rate."

"Huh?" Levi cocked his head, a brow raised in question. The way he lashed his attention to her made him seem offended at the idea.

"Why do you seem surprised? You should know this. That's a survival strategy they teach you during the first winter of training."

"Oh." Levi laid his head back on the brick, eyes to the ceiling in recall, but there were no strategies to revisit. "I wasn't given the traditional training. Does that actually work?" Levi figured if two people were cold then they would just transfer over the same mutual temperature. He never really put thought into it, he's never been in a situation like this before.

"Yeah, it does help. During my trainee days they sent us off to camp in the mountains in a blizzard. I was paired up with Sasha and I was close to hypothermia, but her and I huddled together and survived the night. I'm not saying we have to do it now, but once the heat leaves the room we might have to."
Levi nodded absently, too focused on the thought of even touching Mikasa and being that close to her and completely forgot this was mentioned for the sake of survival. There he goes again, taking inappropriate advantage of a bad situation.

"Tell me when you're cold, then," he offered with a tremble laced in his tone. His face was surely red, but luckily the darkness played on his side and concealed it.

"I've been cold since we arrived here. But the same applies to you, just let me know."

"The cold doesn't really bother me..." he said, trying to sound casual but it came out arrogant.

"Says the man shivering."

"Alright, so it's a little nippy."

Captain Levi has always been a stubborn man, Mikasa had made that assessment a long time ago and right now he was highlighting that characteristic proudly. She knows he's cold (and sick to top it off), and she is literally freezing. She had offered a solution but Levi is being a difficult as usual. If he, as a Captain, isn't going to come up with a better plan, she might as well enforce hers.

"Listen, you're still sick and you're going to get worse at this rate—and I might fall ill too if I don't get warm. We need to stay healthy for the sake of the mission, so, sir, please get under the blankets with me."

A reverberating knock pounded his chest until he winced in pain. Never did he think he'd hear such a demand—he usually acts accordingly an order, but he hesitated, or rather, his mind abandoned him and he sat there with a blank look on his face.

She know it's an awkward suggestion. As an older man he's probably not eager to go huddle with some bratty subordinate, but Levi should know by now that the Survey Corps had to do things they're not comfortable with if it benefits them.

Noticing that she still hasn't received an answer or even a reaction from Levi, she resorted to a plea, a shameful one that made her dig her nails into the blanket. "Levi, please. I'm seriously freezing. I don't know how much longer I can bare shaking like this."

As if the sweet words motivated him, Levi geared into action after a few failed attempts; his legs were unsturdy and it felt like gravity was pushing him down, but he managed to enter a wobbly stagger with some conscious effort. He circle around the rug, noting Mikasa's shivering frame and knelled down behind her. He lifted the blanket behind her, revealing the body curled beneath. Her shirt was taut and exposing some skin on her lower back, and with the power of all his will he did not let his eyes spectate any lower than that.

The draft he let in made her shiver and contort into herself, but he quickly fixed that by slipping himself behind her and draping the blanket over both of them.

Levi's skin coated with goosebumps and he couldn't determined whether they manifested from the cold or his jittery nerves. When he scooter in closer, he tried to channel in some inner calmness, but it did nothing to quiet his heart pounding against her back. An audible gulp entered the space, a wet, cringe-worthy sound that cut the silence and made Levi bite his lip in self-punishment.

It's awkward for both of them. It would be for anyone who isn't incredibly close to each other, actually. But sometimes you have to think of what is more important and set aside your embarrassment.

While Levi inspected the way her soft hair exposed her nape and how the loose strains laid on the
pillow they now shared, Mikasa asked him something and it made him jump like a guilty criminal caught in the midst of a crime.

"Are you warm?"

Levi didn't want to admit that he's on fucking fire right now, so he simply replied with, "Yeah. You?" He had repeated those two simple words in his head a few times before reciting them. Being in the unpredictable state he found himself in, he knew the words would just scramble and pour out and make a mess if he didn't prep his tongue.

"I'm still a little cold." Mikasa reached her hand back to search for his, "If it's okay, could you put your arm around me?" She asked, but with the way she gripped his wrist he didn't really have room to say no—not that he wanted to, but his heart might conk out at this rate.

She guided his arm around her, but Levi let eagerness get the better of him, causing his aim to be slightly off and he ended up groping her breast instead of her midsection. Only briefly did he unintentionally indulge in the doughy fullness oozing between his cupped fingers before his natural reflexes switched on and he quickly fixed the mistake by correcting his hold on her.

"Sorry..." It had to be said and it just made it worse to acknowledge what he's done. He hoped his rattling voice would be disregarded as an side effect of the cold—he didn't want Mikasa to think he became that pathetic over a simple yet shameful and unforgivable mistake.

"It's...okay," she muttered in a range slightly above mute. From what he could tell, she sounded as embarrassed as he felt. This position is already awkward as it is—Levi cursed himself for making it even worse.

When his nerves finally subsided after a few minutes, he was able to revel in the surreal position he landed himself in.

Mikasa's beautiful soft hair tickled his nose as he snuck a whiff of it. He tightened his hold around her tight abs and her body finally stopped shaking and he felt honored that he was the one who gave her warmth. He nuzzled his chin between her shoulder blades and sealed his eyes closed.

He caught himself hoping that the sun never rose, just so this night could never end and they could lay together like this forever.

Mikasa didn't share mutual thoughts, though. It's true that Levi's body felt incredibly hot against her back but she couldn't help but to wish she was someplace warmer.

"As much as I like it here, I hope we can get back soon," she murmured wistfully to herself.

Levi hoped the complete opposite. He can stand a little cold and struggling if it meant being alone and physically close with Mikasa like this. But that's not something a Captain should say. Actually, that's not normal for anyone to say. Only an idiot with an irrational crush would wish for forced confinement. "Yeah, we will. I'm sure my squad will come to our rescue any day."

"I hope. It's unnerving not knowing where everyone is or what they're doing. I hope Eren's not causing anyone trouble."

Levi stiffened at the name. That brat has the rest of his life to do things like this with Mikasa, but this was Levi's one and only chance and he'd appreciate it if he could enjoy this moment without that troublesome brat being dragged into it. "He's fine," Levi's assurance cut sharply, "You really need to stop babying him. He's a soldier and he can handle himself. He doesn't need you as his personal body guard."
"I do not baby him."

"You do." He tried to end it there, knowing the topic that manifested from jealousy was dangerous. No matter how you look at it, when Levi and Mikasa spoke about Eren, any second one of them would eventually step on a landmine. Between Mikasa's fondness of him and Levi's jealousy toward him, the subject will never end on a good note. Levi knew this, and yet his big mouth kept flapping, "I know why you're protective over him, but you become far too reckless when his safety is involved."

"You're wrong. You know nothing. You only know your assumptions." Mikasa pinched the wrinkles forming above her brow, wincing from the sudden headache. When it comes to Eren, both her and Levi want to protect him, but they're protecting him for entirely different reasons. To Levi, he's Humanity's Last Hope; a valuable piece to the equation. But to Mikasa, he's her world, her family, her strength. That's something Levi can't understand after a simple estimate. "What do you care if I'm overprotective of Eren, anyway? You always make it seem like it's abnormal. You don't know me so you shouldn't be so quick to judge me."

Mikasa writhed her body roughly against him in a fuss. He couldn't make out her expression from this angle, but he knew she was pissed. And it's his own fault, as usual. He sighed, blowing her silky hair. Why didn't he just keep it peaceful and fall asleep with her in his arms?

Levi wasn't making a baseless judgement, though. The fact that Mikasa is abnormally protective of Eren is indisputable. Though, he knows that it comes with good reason. His own stupid jealousy just can't accept it. "I know you better than you think—I know family is important to you. I just don't want you to get hurt."

Mikasa's features morphed bitterly. "Where is this coming from? I'll admit we work well together, but you really don't know me, only your own assumptions. I'm not an idiot. I wouldn't involve myself with people who would hurt me—besides, it's not like caring for Eren will cost me my life, quite the contrary. He helps me stay strong. So it's not like I'm putting others at risk with my own emotions," she paused, "except...well..." and her voice broke off with doubt.

Her memory transported her back to her time in the forest of giant trees. She was so desperate to get Eren back and seek her revenge on the Female Titan that she neglected Levi's orders and costed him an injury. If it were anyone less skilled, surely the heroic act would've ended with them dying in her place.

Levi knew exactly why she halted her dispute, and he's glad he didn't have to scoop low and remind her himself just to prove his point. She does fly off the handle when Eren is in danger. It's because her relationship with him is so uncommon and unpredictable that he fears for her safety.

"I'm sorry." Mikasa's voice hollowed through the space, low as the wind whistling through the shudders. "I shouldn't have lashed out."

"Don't apologize. Everyone has that one person they want to protect more than anyone. I understand."

"Do you?" She voiced skeptically, twisting her neck back but it wasn't enough to judge his expression. "With the way you scold me for Eren, I thought you wouldn't be biased with anyone's safety. I thought you'd see all your men equally."

Levi shrugged against her. "Everyone has their own reckless Eren to look after. You're not the only one."

"And who is that person to you, if you don't mind my asking."
Levi didn't offer a word.

She sighed and pulled face forward again. As expected of him. "Still playing the strong silent type, I see."

He wasn't intentionally, though. The long pause occurred while he built up the courage to tell her. His mouth went dry and his hand shook against her stomach at the confession repeating in his mind until his mouth finally opened and let it erupt, "It's you," he finally spat out, the reply had been brewing in his throat, trying stay trapped but finally detonated. "You're the one I want to protect more than anyone else."

"...Huh...?"

After a few moments of silence and blank thoughts, she let herself think because Levi didn't give her a reply. It didn't make sense. Sure—she's valued for her strength, but wouldn't that imply she could protect herself and doesn't need someone watching over her? "But...why me? I don't understand... I protect Eren because I'm close to him, but you don't really know me, I mean no respect by that."

"Like I said before, I know you better than you think, Mikasa."

Those words speared into her back, giving the boost she needed to heave forward and escaped Levi's hold. She twisted to him, her mouth gaping but no words coming out. She arranged what she wanted to say first, then let it spill, "What is that suppose to mean?" Her face shone with desperate need when she noted his expressionless face. "Stop being so vague, talk to me."

Levi blinked his eyes up at her, still showing zero expression and intention to speak. This made Mikasa boil over. She leaned in on his face, trying to grab his attention. She slammed her fist down on the pillow. "Damnit. What, more secrets you don't want to tell me about?"

It wouldn't be a stretch. The existence of Kenny and his last name was hidden from her for months. When she first met Levi, she assumed he was just a stranger, a stranger she wasn't too fond of, but now she knew they were connected and many more possibilities branched off from that. She's tired of being left in the dark. She's tired of secrets. She's entitled to know everything and if she must, she will beat the truth out of this stubborn little man.

"It's not like I wanted to deceive you. I was trying to protect you. You didn't need to know you had family like that."

What's with this protecting crap all of a sudden? Why the hell does he care about protecting her? Not only physically but emotionally too?

"And what about now? Are you still protecting me by keeping shit you know about me a secret? Captain, we're only supposed to protect each other in combat, keeping things from me that might cause me some unwanted emotions is unnecessary." She let herself catch her breath. "What are you hiding from me? You're not acting like yourself lately at all."

Seeing those glassy, determined eyes pinched his heart. Levi lifted himself up, freeing himself from the warmth beneath the blanket. A sullen frown formed on his lips and the trepidation of revealing the truth idled on the sidelines, waiting for its chance to jump into the spotlight.

She urged him on, her pleading eyes melting him. "Does...Does this relate to last night? The secret you promised to tell me?"

Levi lodged a sore swallow down his throat. There was most definitely a reason why he cared
about her and why he swore a silent oath to keep her safe. He didn't even know where to begin. He didn't even want to begin. With his mind racing as it were, he went with the first thought that crossed his mind.

"Back at the court hearing..." he closed his eyes painfully tight to block the moister from escaping. "When I learned about what happened to your parents...I was devastated. I never had the chance to tell you how sorry I was for that."

Her features twitched though various emotions before settling on bafflement. She appreciated his sympathy...but apologizing now of all times seemed random and uncalled for. What does her parents have to do with this, why bring it up now at all times? Is he stalling or avoiding the subject? And why would he even care about the misfortune of a girl he didn't know?

To an extent she understood why he kept her relations to Kenny from her and even his own last name, but him bringing up his sympathy about her deceased parents didn't match up.

Unless...

Realization shone on her face. Kenny, her uncle and brother of her father was the one who raised Levi.

_I was devastated_, Levi's words echoed in her mind.

His sympathy wasn't groundless at all. Of course—it didn't add up until now; his hint was the final piece of the puzzle she needed to add it all up. She strained her eyes on Levi; the sorrow leaking from his eyes and the way his brows bowed in melancholy made it that much clearer.

Giving herself no extra time to think it over, she quickly whispered, "You knew my parents, didn't you?"

Levi shrunk from her spot-on claim. She should have saw it earlier; looking back on those talks about her parents with Kenny, _of course_ the kid he raised had to meet his family at some point.

However—she still didn't understand why this secret was meant left unspoken.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner? Were you afraid that I'd get upset if you brought up my parents?"

He shook his head. He wished it was that simple. The secret he bared was much more complicated. "There's much more to it than that."

"Then tell me." She wrapped one of the blankets around her shoulders and got comfortable for the lengthy conversation. "I have all night."

Levi warned her with a stern glare. "You're not going to like what I have to say."

She couldn't imagine what it could be. How could Levi knowing her parents create a bad outcome?

Wait—something suddenly dawned on her. Maybe she should think about this for a second. As curious as she is, she needs to be smart about this or else she might learn something she wish she hadn't. Kenny and Levi have notorious backgrounds; Levi used to be a thug. And Kenny is a serial killer. All she had to go by was that they’re both connected to her parents...

"If...If it's something _bad_ about my parents, than I rather not know. I want to remember them as good people."
Levi assured her immediately. "No, they were good people—really, the kindest people I've ever met."

Mikasa just lost her breath—she had just witnessed Levi smile. A pure, genuine smile that she didn't even know his face was capable of displaying. She smiled a little herself, albeit sadly. Her parents must have treated him kindly. Of course they did—she didn't know them long, but she knew her parents would've welcomed Levi and offered him all the kindness in the world without judgement.

"It just..." His smile vanished. "What I have to tell you doesn't really relate to them. It concerns us."

"Us?" She repeated, her eyes blinking in curious wonder.

"You were too young to remember, but we've met before, when you were very little."

Mikasa only gaped her lips in reply. A heavy feeling dropped in her chest. Like that indescribable trepidation you get right before someone tells you life-changing news.

There was no going back now. If he tried to thwart her pleads, this night really wouldn't end and not in the pleasant sense like he envisioned.

"You're my betrothed, Mikasa." His heart stilled in his chest and he ducked his head in shame, rubbing at his tired eyes. The confession caused him to lose all function to think and even breathing felt like a laborious task. He didn't have the bravery to find her reaction.

"I'm your..." She wandered her eyes around, letting the confession simmer until it boiled over. She snapped back to him with a jarring, "Wait, what?!"

"I told you you wouldn't like to hear it."

She didn't even know what she was hearing. Betrothed? Does that mean... "We're engaged? But how..." Her voice broke off in a quiver.

No. He must be joking, she tried to lie to herself, but she knew that wasn't the case. Levi wouldn't joke about something like that and he seems far too beat up from the blow the confession caused.

Levi's heart thumped wilder than the loose shed door flapping back and forth in the wind in the distance. Even though there was a lump in his throat he couldn't quite swallow, he knew he had more explaining to do. "Your parents and Kenny arranged for us to marry."

"But..." she tossed her head in doubt. "Why? Why would they do that when I was so young?"

"It's a long story."

She felt a breath away from hyperventilating. She tried to keep her emotions under control, but a constant ring repeated in her head saying 'Levi is my fiancé?' made it impossible to keep her emotions tamed. She bit her thumb nail nervously as the mantra floated in her mind.

Levi is my fiancé, her inner voice repeated once more and that time it actually penetrated deep.

Slowly, she rose her head to Levi. His eyes were fixated down, his head hanging in shame.

"I—I really don't remember anything about this..." Why her parents agreed to such a thing was a another mystery that needed explaining as well. "M-Maybe if you tell me in detail, it'll trigger a memory."
That wouldn't be a problem for Levi. He remembered the time he spent with her and her family clearly; as crystal clear as the names and faces of everyone he's ever lost. Except this fond memory was a treasured gem that he held dearly.

"Alright." He agreed and prepared himself with a deep breath. A long story awaited to be told, but he owed her that much. He gave himself a moment to gather all the little scraps of the memories and fused them together, then readied them to be projected out through vivid words. "I'll tell you from the beginning."

Chapter End Notes

The engagement between them was inspired by historical betrothals, which basically means the engagement is a formal and official contract and would require a divorce just to terminate the engagement because they are legally considered "husband and wife". Just thought I'd make that clear so everyone understands why it's a big deal and not simply a promise made between guardians.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

A/N: Man, this chapter sure was fun to write—maybe I had too much fun because this turned out much longer than I planned. I apologize for the massive word count. Let's just consider this a 3-chapters-in-1 special, 'kay? This was a nice break away from the main setting of the story and it was fun exploring the personalities of Levi and Mikasa in their younger days. We only saw Mikasa's parents and her life with them for a brief period in canon, so it was really interesting to add to their story with my own personal twist. And even though this is intended to be a happy chapter, it was quite depressing to imagine how Mikasa's life used to be. It helped me realize just how much she had lost in the canon story—in other words, I'm drowning in feels.

OTL

Anyway, enjoy the Ackerman family reunion!

Levi stood beneath the cloudless sky, squinting up at the blinding sun. The humid summer wind swayed the pines and tugged at his clothing, his hair fitful and windblown. The air smelled differently than it did in the filthy cramped streets of the underground—the stench of pines and pollen proved to be quite the refreshing treat for his lungs.

Two vultures circled overhead, looping around in an endless set pattern. There must be a dead animal near by, he thought—no, he hoped, but he then remembered this wasn't the underground where the corpses of the starved or slayed were left to be feasted upon by the hungry feral animals. He's standing in the middle of the wilderness, far from any of the villages and towns. It felt almost peaceful.

The tall blades of grass danced in the infinite meadows like waves in a stream, switching directions now and then. The drone of cicada cries blended with the whispering rustle of the grass. A small log cabin stood out against the backdrop of the huddled pines and mountains—a serene setting that Levi previously only saw in paintings.

The land was kept naturally preserved and untouched by humans except for the cleared patch of land the cabin sat on top of. Skirting the house was a garden filled with vegetables and flowers painted with colors Levi has never even seen before. In comparison with the colorless, gloomy setting where he came from, this place blinded him with clear vivid colors and natural perfumes. The air didn't reek of mold or garbage, the air sprayed with a natural pine, grass and freshly bloomed flowers.

While giving himself a second to stretched out his stiff legs from the long carriage ride, he studied the man-made cabin in the distance. The structure was small but built strong, made to survive the rough storms that were likely attracted to this woodsy area.

The members who live in that home were currently strangers to Levi. Today he is to meet them for the first time.

On the long trip here, Kenny had prepped him. Told him how to behave, how to speak, and what to say while meeting his brother and his family. Levi replayed his instructions to prepare himself before embarking onward.
"Don't screw this up," Kenny had warned. "They have a daughter and I'm going to see to it that you two marry—this way, you can carry on my name and pass down children with my blood."

Levi had pledged his obedience without dispute and they carried on with their quiet trip through the countryside, but on the inside Levi's mind went uproariously wild.

If he didn't feel pressured enough about making a good impression on Kenny's family before, he did then. Kenny had scowled at the idea of his brother's daughter marrying someone else and losing her maiden name to some unworthy suitor. In Kenny's eyes, only Levi was suitable for her; his pride, his successor. Levi is the only one who could pass down Kenny's legacy and his name, and his brother's daughter is the only one who could pass down the blood. In Kenny's eyes, they were destined to be together; a match made in heaven—or rather, they were both convenient tools he could take full advantage of.

There was a lot of pressure placed on Levi today and a lot to lose if this does not go in Kenny's favor. If Levi doesn't prove to them that he's good enough for their daughter, Levi had a swelling fear that Kenny would cut his losses and kill him, deeming him worthless if he can't pass down children of the same name to surpass them both. A lot was on the line right now and even though Kenny called it a family reunion, Levi felt like he was being dragged to a trial to be judged.

Now that he was here, all of this worry hit him at once. During their trip he had pondered it but the new experiences he faced on the road partially eased his tension now and then, right before he felt he would have a nervous breakdown.

They had passed through forest and farmlands, long bridges over sparkling lakes and plains of rolling green hills and treacherous cliffs. Lively, cramped cities and ruins of abandoned villages with only ghostly presences left behind. When night would fall, they stayed in rowdy inns and Levi would tell himself he'd rest in the wagon the next day and opt for venturing through the cities and villages he never visited before, and tried food he'd never tasted and every person was a stranger. Levi had never witnessed such sights before in his life. He spent most of his life living in the slums. From each town they visited, he'd hear common conversation—a few townfolks would comment in a whisper of how very small their world was, and how they would love to see the world outside the walls—but the world he traveled through seemed overwhelming vast to him already. If all he saw on the journey was only a small percentage of what this world had to offer, he couldn't even imagine what kind of wonders and sights awaited outside the walls.

This trip had been enthralling, but now that the journey had ended and they arrived to their destination, Levi felt homesick from the road. The high of traveling wore off and now he had an unsettling mission ahead of him.

Kenny said he was proud to show Levi off somewhere along the long trip, and he felt strangely happy at that and earned himself a little more confidence. They might not be his family, but fooling himself into thinking they are his might make this visit bearable—he only hoped they weren't like his mentor, but since the man grumbled about how perfect, yet air-headed his brother was, Levi was almost convinced that their apples fell from completely different branches off the tree.

Whether they're good people or not didn't matter in the end, though. Levi was forced to tag along regardless and do as Kenny commanded. There was no such thing as choice or opinion in this matter. It was a direct order and Levi knew better to disobey a command, but during other occasions Levi was sure he could follow through and accomplished anything Kenny asked of him—but this time, doubt had sunken its fangs around him. He felt trapped, helpless. Never had he ever felt so out of place and unwelcomed in his life. He felt less shame during his days of a homeless street rat begging for scraps, before Kenny brought him in like a stray cat.
By the time they arrived and reality set in, he knew all efforts to fool himself into getting through this were in vain—he didn’t belong here. This wasn’t his family, even if he pretended the fact still remained. He’s never been very good at make-believe, after all, such concepts were stolen from him long before his childhood even began.

Levi is just some street rat that was taken in from the curb and house-trained like a dog. Bitterly, he figured that Kenny was just proud to show him off because he would be like an obedient pet that would entertain his family by making him do tricks and obey every command. Suddenly, that little confidence he built up decomposed and left him with a rotting feeling in his stomach.

"Quit lollygagging and move, runt," Kenny rasped and lumbered past him, giving him a broad nudge before leading the way.

Levi silently and promptly followed and stuck close to his mentor as he knocked his knuckles hard against the door. After a jingling click, Levi perked his attention up. The door swished open and an energy Levi never felt before poured out.

A peppy man with a smile as bright as this summer afternoon bid their entry. "Kenny! It's been too long!" The man exclaimed and patted the man's shoulder welcoming. Kenny rolled his neck, scowling like a grouch as he forced out a decent greeting. Levi hurled his neck back reflexively, his eyes widening on the strange man.

This is... his brother?

Switching his perspective between the men as they made small talk under the threshold, Levi broodily gawked. Not only do they not share a feature in common, but he already deducted they were as opposite as the sun and moon.

Levi made a quick visual scan around after they were welcomed inside. The home was simple and small, albeit more spacious and clean than his which he could appreciate since he'll be staying here. If Kenny's whole family was as filthy as him, Levi strongly believed he wouldn't survive the week. Along the wall a mantel of sorts was exhibited, decorated with ornaments and bordered with a language Levi's eyes never witnessed before. The script looked complicated, but detailed like a miniature masterpiece.

After his inspected was complete he kept his head low, eyes planted on the floor where they should be as introductions were made. He heard a woman's voice, but didn't look up to her. Despite living in the countryside, she had kind manners and introduced herself as proper as a Sina resident.

Levi heard his name brought up last.

"This midget here is Levi," Kenny thumped his large hand on his shoulder, "the street rat I took in and gave a name."

The woman believed to be his brother's wife let in a subtle gasp. Levi glinted up in time to see her furrow her brows—shooting her brother-in-law a disapproving glare, seemingly not at all impressed with his degrading phrasing.

By the time she looked back down at Levi, she washed the disdain from her face and smiled kindly. They made eye contact and in that very moment Levi could tell from first glance that she was a gentle-hearted woman.

"It's nice to meet you. Could I get you anything, Levi? A drink or something to eat?"
He shook his head quietly, peeping at her for only a moment more. A rueful smile appeared on the woman's face. He returned his eyes to the floor.

Mrs. Ackerman is probably the most beautiful woman he's ever seen—not that he saw a lot of attractive women in his daily life to compare back to. He lives in the slums and the only women he sees are dirty whores and thugs with skin infections, rat nest hair and missing teeth, but she was one of a kind; he could tell by her unique features that he had never saw replicated in any other human before.

However, when Levi's eyes were low, he caught sight of a wave of Mrs. Ackerman's dress. Behind her laid hidden a miniature copy of her. The little clone spied on him with a strikingly stunning silver eye.

Levi called back his claim. Mrs. Ackerman wasn't as rare as he thought...because there's a little girl hiding behind her dress that looked exactly like her. 

"Oh, there you are." The woman jumped a little from the sudden pull on her dress. She looked down to her little replica, combing her fingers through her hair to soothe the shaking child. "Did you want to say hello to our guests?"

The small child shook her head fiercely with a mute pout on her lips. As she buried her face in the fabrics of her mother's dress, her father chuckled proudly and fell back into one of the dining seats. "My little girl has always been the shy type."

Kenny made a miffed grumble, his eyes were thoroughly inspecting the both of them. "Looks like we were both cursed with introverted children."

Mrs. Ackerman gave Kenny another long, hard glare. Levi got the impression she didn't like her husband's brother very much. Not only is she beautiful, but she's a smart woman too.

Hiding behind her mother's dress still, the tiny girl with intrigued eyes peeked out a little further as her mother properly introduced her. "This is Mikasa, our daughter."

Levi internally repeated her name and printed the letters into his mind. Mikasa. He liked the sound of it. It sounded foreign and fresh compared to all the other boring names he hears day after day. The syllables stuck in his head like a catchy song.

"A little scrawny, don't you think?" Kenny commented, brashly. He was never the type of man who kept his thoughts silent, and he also never dulled the sharp edge his words often had.

Levi wish he could have shut him up by punching him in the face right about now and put an end to his useless commentary, but they weren't home. He couldn't. He settled for clenching his fist.

"She eats like a growing piglet but won't gain an ounce," her father explained. Not all parents want their kid to be war machines like him. To Levi, Mikasa looked fine for her age, very tiny and frail with paler skin than his own from sun-neglect, but her complexion had a healthy glow, indicating that she wasn't sickly and that it was just naturally that fine, like a porcelain doll. With her dark eyes and thick black lashes contrasting against that bright skin, an overall stunning combination was created. Her hair flowed straight and wispy like a pony's mane, black like her mother's.

Now that he stole another glance at Mr. Ackerman, he could safely deduce that Mikasa didn't take after her father a bit. He also looked nothing like Kenny. Whoever he took after didn't carry a very potent gene.

Levi stepped forward and knelt to a child's level, trying to approach the frightened girl carefully
like a timid animal that might run away any second. He knew people were often afraid of him, but he didn't mean to scare others off. His face just naturally looked like that, and with a big guy like Kenny looming over her she must be shaking in her boots.

"I'm Levi," he offered.

She didn't reply, only quailed more. Her mother pat her head and spoke in her place, "She rarely meets new people. It takes her a while to warm up to others."

He nodded up to her mother. Levi could relate. Suddenly, with a curious gleam in Mikasa's fixated eyes, she stepped out from the safety of her mother's dress and toddled over to Levi, fumbling nervously as she fiddled with her stubby fingers. She reached out and looked at Levi for consent before ruffling up the cravat around his neck. She giggled a little, happy like a cat flicking a toy with its paw.

"I like your scarf," her voice landed soft on his ears. A smile not only appeared on her lips, but the mirth displayed in her eyes and voice as well.

Since she so kindly gave him a genuine smile...he returned it—but his mouth ached afterward. It didn't feel natural at all and he cringed to think of how odd it must've looked. He doesn't remember the last time he smiled. Sometimes he thought he forgotten how to. All he does is struggle to survive down in the slums and train until he's exhausted. Kenny's no joy to be with and his jokes suck, so he found himself having no reason to smile—until now. This little girl is the most purest person he's ever witnessed. With a background of tainted individuals back home, seeing Mikasa was like finding a gleaming gem buried in dirt.

She's the first that ever complicated his cravat, too. Kenny laughs and teases him about pretending to be high-class; he said it's like putting rubies on a plastic crown. But Levi liked his fashion sense—he didn't want to dress in rags or like a typical peasant. He wanted to appear presentable.

"Oh," Mrs. Ackerman sounded in surprised delight as she watched her daughter interact with the young man, "I never saw Mikasa warm up to anyone that fast."

"Hmph. Good..." Kenny nodded, observing the scene. Levi heard the satisfaction in his tone—he lucked out. Mikasa was already showing a liking to him and that settled his nerves slightly. That's something Levi mulled about endlessly. He never dealt with children before, yet Kenny urged him to get on her good side because if her parents saw their daughter getting along with him there would be a better chance of them considering the marriage proposal when it's presented.

"Mikasa," her father called, "come over here and say hello to your uncle Kenny." The girl looked over the line of Levi's shoulder to the man hulking behind—and her hair stuck up in an instant like a scared kitten and she ducked for cover, blocking her sight from the man with Levi.

"Hah!" Mr. Ackerman roared with a knee slap, "I think it might take a little longer for her to get friendly with you."

"Oh well," he huffed, looking slightly offended. "I was never great with children anyway," Kenny took a load off and sat in the dining chair where his brother sat, and his wife soon joined them.

"You would be if you had some children of your own. I wasn't great with kids either before I had Mikasa, now I'm father of the year! Ain't that right honey?"

"Whatever you say, dear." Mrs. Ackerman chuckled in her hand. They looked like a happy couple that never fought or said harsh words to one another. Their spousal arguments probably
consisted of friendly teasing and playfulness. It must be nice to live in a quiet, tranquil family setting like that.

"You need to tie the knot and make some of your own children!" Mr. Ackerman exclaimed, trying to spark motivation in his brother. His wife gave a doubtful look, struggling to keep her expression polite but she obviously found the likelihood of that slim, and she couldn't be closer to the mark. The war happening on her face was almost amusing.

As if Kenny could find a woman *insane* enough to put up with him. If a young man like Levi found it hell living with that lunatic, a woman wouldn't last through the honeymoon. The sole reason why Kenny dragged Levi in off the street was to make a son out of him; and it wasn't out of the goodness of his heart, that's for damn sure. He saw potential in him and wanted to use him for his own benefit. Levi, of course, benefited from the set up as well, but that doesn't take away from the fact that Kenny is a difficult man to live with. He'll never find a wife with his current attitude—and since the man is also too stubborn and too set in his ways he's more likely to die and take his habits to the grave before changing. This will never change and he knew this. He gave up and settled for adopting a suitable progeny, or perhaps a *prodigy*, as Kenny liked to call him.

The Ackerman’s showered them with all the hospitality they could offer. Mr. Ackerman helped with their luggage and spoiled the horses with a shaded spot with food and water to reward them after their long journey. Mrs. Ackerman set up the guest room and then began to prepare dinner. Once everyone was settled and all belongings found a place, Kenny and his brother caught up with the years with booze outside, their tipsy laughs and bickering chatter heard from the open kitchen window.

As for Levi, he nursed a cool glass of iced tea at the dining table. Compared to the never ending chatter outside, inside the house felt still and quite aside from the occasional creak from the old log walls. That itself made Levi uncomfortable. At least Kenny had his own blood to talk to, he didn't know what to say to the woman of the home—but then, a running beat sounded against the floorboards.

Bright eyed and refreshed, Mikasa ran in with a pile of papers in hand.

"Did you have a good nap, sweetie?" Her mother asked. The little girl answered cheerfully as she climbed up on the neighboring chair beside Levi.

Her mother left her stew to simmer and stepped near the dining table, wiping her hand on a rag as she peered down at her daughter scribbling on her sprawled out papers. A determined look was held on her young features.

"Look at you, studying away on your own. What a good girl."

The praise filtered oddly through Levi's ears, but he supposed that was something normal parents do. Kenny praises him too, sometimes, now that he thought about it, but only if he scored perfectly in his training.

"Lee-vee...?"

He turned to Mikasa, because he could've sworn he was being addressed. But her eyes laid no where near him—the tip of her quill pen tapped the paper as she looked up.

"Lee...vee...La...L...E..."

Levi cocked his head at the string of sounds and letters. He stared at her, eyes filled with silent question. He looked to her mother, but she shared his confusion and questioned her daughter.
"What are you up to?"

"I'm trying to sound out his name..." she said with a defeated pout, pointing subtly to Levi beside her.

"It's Levi," he corrected.

"Le...vi," she repeated, slowly. "How do you spell that?"

"Uh..." he found the sudden question strange, but still spelled it out for her. Her mother noticed his confusion and filled him in after he recited every letter.

"She mastered the alphabet recently and she's always asking how everything is spelled."

"Oh, I see," he cornered his eyes on her work. She rewrote his name a few times each. Her handwriting was neat, a little big and bold, but neat.

"And I'm learning Kana—I'm getting good at that too, right mama?"

"Ah, yes, you are. In no time you'll be fluent enough to move on to Kanji."

"...?" Levi puzzled over the unfamiliar words. Mrs. Ackerman filled him in again.

"Unfortunately it's a dead language now because Mikasa and I are the last of our lineage..." her lip twitched up, sadly. "But I don't want to let go of the language my people once had—it would be a shame if all that culture was lost, so I'm teaching it too Mikasa."

Levi had heard of other languages existing, but he couldn't say he's ever met anyone who knew something other than the common tongue that everyone in the walls spoke.

"I'll show you, it's really easy!" Mikasa scripted down a few characters that looked like a scribble to him.

ミカサ

"That's how you spell my name. Each symbol has a syllable, get it? You try to write it," she passed the pen to him. After balking a moment he relented and gave it a shot. It didn't look anything close to hers; it was uneven and wonky, it looked as if he made up his own written language.

"So you're saying each one of these letters represent a sound, just like the common language? That doesn't seem too hard to remember."

"That's what I thought too until mama showed me Kanji. My head really hurt afterward," she held her temples as if the memory alone caused her pains. Levi found himself intrigued by this. He looked to her mother silently and she already had an answer waiting for him.

"It's just another part of the written language. Some find it hard, but if you keep at it and study every day, the characters will lodge in your brain before you know it."

"I only know a few—" Mikasa seemed eager to show off, but she had to tap the pen on her lips and recall first, then quickly scribbled down before she would forget.

家族

"That means family," she pointed out the characters that took up half the page, her finger tracing along the strokes. "There's Kanji for every expression or phrase you can think of."
Levi took back what he said before. "That seems complicated to remember."

"After some practice it's simple," Mrs. Ackerman started, "but it's easier to learn when you're young. That's why Mikasa is absorbing two languages at the same time with ease."

That's true—kids suck up knowledge like thirsty roots absorbing rain in soil. It was interesting how children learned so much at a young age: how to walk, talk, write... but they never actually remember receiving those lessons into adulthood. Even though you use those teachings everyday, the origin of them are always blurry or lost completely as you age.

"That smells good!" The man of the house sashayed his way inside—or rather, tripped into the house. It seemed him and Kenny lost themselves in a tad too much booze and memories. Kenny followed after, removing his hat and hanging it on a peg in the wall. As playful chatter was made between husband and wife, Kenny hooked a glance over to Mikasa...and then to Levi. His chin dipped down, Levi read it as a show of approval.

Levi wasn't doing much, nor was he going out of his way to make good impressions. Mikasa made this mission easy for him; she's a sweet girl unlike the brats he grew up with on the streets. She also took an immediate liking to him for a reason he will never understand, which again made his job easier. If things keep going as smoothly as they were, then there's a good chance that Mikasa's parents will accept Kenny's proposal when its presented—and if they do, Mikasa will become his wife once she reaches the age of a woman.

There was a sudden flutter in his heart. He couldn't tell whether it manifested from nervousness or excitement.

~X~

Levi woke before the sun the next morning, as he normally did. Even though he's technically on vacation, he still couldn't break the strict habits he formed over the years. When Levi made exit out of the guest room Kenny was snoring like a sleeping bear, likely still exhausted from the long trip. He made sure to click the door shut quietly and step away as if weightless so he wouldn't wake him or anyone else up.

Some time alone will do him good, before he has to begin round two and make good impressions on the Ackerman's—just the thought alone made him want to go back to bed.

The kitchen was dark, not yet naturally lit by the sun. He felt around and luckily stumbled upon the stove without hurting himself, which illuminated enough of light to work with once the range fired red hot.

He filled the kettle with water, placed it on the burning stove top and idled close by so he could grab the pot before it whistled the whole house awake. Once the steam blew out into a thicker flow, he took that as his cue to remove it from the heat. He set out a cup and his own tea that he had brought along, and after searching a few containers, he found the sugar cubes and plopped them into the steaming liquid.

Just as he rose his mug to his lips, smelling the soothing aroma, he heard the squeak of a door opening and all he could do was utter a sharp: "Shit."

He closed his eyes, the steam rising from the cup toasted his outer lids. He hoped to have some quiet time alone before starting the new day, but by the sound of footfalls drawing near, that just wasn't happening.
Though—he soon noted how light and soft the footsteps were and he figured out who it was before they even whipped around the corner—and jumped back around just as fast.

A little shadow, scarcely outlined in the darkness, peeled back out. "Oh, it's you. You scared me." Mikasa whispered alertly.

"Did I wake you up?" he asked as she stepped out from the safety of the wall.

He was about to apologize before she said, "Nu-uh," a yawn broke free as she wiped the sleep from her eyes. "I always wake up early, way before mama and papa." She lifted her chin over the lip of the table, her fingers clutching at the wood. "What are you drinking?"

"Tea," he finally took the first, long waited sip.

"Can I have some?"

"...Sure." He stood again to pour her a cup and Mikasa followed him around like the shadow he lacked in the lightless room.

After setting her all up, he sat back down to enjoy his tea before it went cold. "Be careful," he abruptly warned, "it's hot."

She blew into the steam before taking a sip from her cup that she held with both of her small hands. "That tastes really good. Way better than the yucky coffee papa drinks," she made a sour face, cringing at the memory. "Do you drink coffee?"

"Sometimes," She's quite talkative in the morning, isn't she? Levi tried to imagine how she would behave after a cup of coffee. Tea had some caffeine to it as well, so he might've just dug his own grave by giving her some.

"Can I ask you something?" He had the feeling it wouldn't be the last question this morning. He nodded.

"Why do you hold your cup like that?"

He held up his cup higher, glancing and noting how the tip of his fingers clawed at the rim. It's been a custom quirk of his for so long that he often forgets it isn't a normal way of holding a cup. He doesn't recall anyone pointing out this particular habit, only Kenny, but only when he teased him about it because he bared witness to the origin of the habit and laughed about it until he was in tears.

"When I was a few years older than you, I had an unfortunate accident. The handle of my cup snapped off and I spilled the hot tea all over myself. I never wanted that to happened again, so I started holding it like this."

"Ah," Mikasa let the story brew into her mind, taking a cautious sip. "That must have hurt."

The questions continued with no end in sight. With every answer their cups drained and a light hue of azure tinted the interior of the cabin. From the window, the color of the sky slowly lightened and soon the sun would rise high above the mountains.

Mikasa asked him about where he came from and what his neighborhood back home was like—she was very eager to hear about it, but Levi had trouble finding positive features he could bring up. Everything about the underground didn't feel appropriate to mention to a small child, but she seemed satisfied with just learning about the underground city and the towns and shops and residents and neighbors that ran it.
She must get a little lonely living in the middle of nowhere. There aren't any nearby towns to visit or kids her age to mingle with. Thankfully, she had doting parents giving her constant company. They're probably better influences on her in the long run, anyway. She's better off here, away from the filth of the slums, the greed and corruption of Sina and overall control or lack of control held in all the other cities.

People either live as peasants that just about got by, live as criminals who endanger the innocent, or they live fear of those with power, and the people with power are more corrupt than some of the thugs he came to know in the underground. Good people like Mikasa, her mother and father deserve the safety of being sheltered by isolation. No harm will ever befall them here, they have each other and they'll always be safe; these woods will shield them. That's something many residents in these walls cannot say with certainty.

"It's almost time," Mikasa said suddenly, cutting off her own next question. She lifted off her chair and as she headed for the door, she tugged Levi to his feet with a yank of his sleeve. He finished off his tea in a quick, stiff gulp and slammed it down quickly and followed her haste.

The front door open and they stepped outside.

The field that carpeted around the cabin was coated with morning dew, the wetness sprinkled with golden glitter. Humid fog seeped low and cold. Beyond that, the sight of twin mountains in the distance stood strong, split apart by radiating light squeezing between. The new dawn birthed, bleeding its glow throughout the lands and sky, burning through the clouds and leftover stars.

The early morning sunbeams burned Levi's eyes, but the thought of looking away or even blinking right now never once crossed his mind.

"Isn't it pretty?" Mikasa beamed up with a smile brighter than the sun, swinging their conjoined hands happily.

"Yeah." Levi never saw anything like it. In the underground the sun is a foreign concept, but here he is in the countryside with the fresh morning rays basting him. The nature lit all around. The flowers in the garden vivid under the fresh amber glow. The birds taking their first flight after their slumber. The tall trees greeting the new day.

"Do you watch the sunrise every morning?" he asked her.

"Uh huh," a little gasped giggle sounded from her, and as an afterthought she added, "but I never got to watch it with anyone else before. My parents always sleep for another hour or two after dawn. You're the first person I watched the sunrise with."

And Levi felt pretty honored to be gifted that privilege. They stood out a little longer in silence, marveling at the view, but soon Levi felt himself being swept back inside by a little tug. He followed without resisting, but not before he stole one more long stare over his shoulder at the breathtaking scenery.

"You're an adult, so you're allowed to use stoves, right?" Mikasa had ran off ahead, scuffling through the cabinets.

"Yeah..." Levi closed the door behind him with a slow click. He rode up a brow up skeptically, watching her dig around the kitchen as she pulled out a pan, bowls, and utensils. "Where are you going with this?"

"Well I was thinking..." she started shyly, "we should make breakfast for everyone. Can you cook?"
"I could," whether he could cook well was the real question, though. He often cooked for Kenny, but the man never was much of a picky eater. So long as Levi didn't serve him anything raw or burnt he never complained.

"Then let's get started!"

Levi spent more time cleaning up Mikasa's messes than prepping. She cracked eggs into the bowl and pieces of the shell joined the gooey pool. She picked out the fragments and flicked them aside—and they disappeared in an instant when a sponge too fast to follow swiped them away. She began mixing, the sticky mix whirling over the lip, and again, the mess was cleaned just as fast as it was made. Being so concentrated on her work, she did not notice Levi hovering close behind, detecting the messes before she even made them. She brought the mixed eggs to the stove and poured them into the pan. "Your turn."

Before he turned on the range, she proved to be quite the helper as she gathered a spatula, but there was a thoughtful frown on her lips when she returned.

"Hm. This omelet needs more special ingredients."

"Like what?"

"Hm. Oh, I know, a tomato!" She rushed over to the corner of the room, where the vegetables were stored in baskets, only to find it empty. She sighed at the little inconvenience "Wait here, I'll go pick one fresh from the garden."

Mikasa rushed out the door and Levi craned his neck to watch her from the window. She inspected every tomato, looking for the most flawless one on the vine that she could harvest.

Is this what living in a normal household felt like? He'd trade his right arm to wake up every morning to this routine. Maybe—when Mikasa gets older and they wed it could always be like this. They could wake up early, drink tea together and watch the sun rise, then prepare breakfast for their children and tend to a beautiful garden...

He shook his head. The engagement isn't even a go yet. The last thing he should do is set his hopes on this. Although—thinking of returning to the hard life in the underground and struggling everyday made him cringe, but he might be able to get through it if he knew this lifestyle was waiting for him at the end of the long dark tunnel. Damnit. He couldn't help it. It's too late now. He was looking forward to it.

"Here, you cut it." Mikasa returned with a freshly picked tomato, "I'm not allowed to touch knives."

Mikasa got to work on smearing her 'special jam' on the toast, using the back of a spoon because she is a good girl that obeys her parents even when they're not around.

Looks like they're both very obedient and well-behaved. Levi is the same way when it comes to Kenny, but there are times, especially recently, that he found himself disagreeing with his methods and even someone as loyal as himself will disobey him time to time because of it.

Kenny did so much for him—and the man definitely did ask for a lot in return, but Levi has always been eager to follow him and do everything he asked of him without question because he saved him as a child and offered him shelter, food and clothing. Levi hoped the negative feelings about Kenny were just a phase of rebellion that would pass. Without him, he wouldn't really have anything and the thought of disobeying him the wrong way one day scared the shit out of him—
The eggs bubbled, then solidified with sizzling and hisses as he pondered... When was it again that he started to fear Kenny?

"Watch the eggs! You're going to burn them!" Mikasa warned and with a jolt Levi removed the pan from the flame just in time. Shelving the dreary thoughts for another time, he preoccupied himself with preparing the rest of breakfast. When they were just about done and setting up the table, Levi perked up at the sound of a stifled yawn and aching grumbles drawing near.

Mikasa did not notice the signs and it was too late when she whirled around, unprepared, with Kenny towering before her—sleepy and not yet seeing straight, but that didn't make him any less intimidating.

"...!"

Levi had never witnessed a standoff between a human and a Titan before, but with the way Mikasa looked up quailing at Kenny, it simulated a similar image.

"Good morning, Kenny," Levi recited dryly.

"What's so damn good about it?" He stomped away from Mikasa and found himself a seat. Levi slammed down a mug in front of him, pouring in the coffee that just finished brewing.

"You've been telling that damn joke for ten years," Levi reminded him, grinding his teeth, "I'm never going to laugh at it, you know."

Instead, Kenny laughed hoarsely. Obviously, the man didn't repeat the joke in hopes of inducing laughter from Levi, he did it to give himself a chuckle because nothing made Kenny Ackerman laugh more than an irritated Levi.

"I don't get the joke either..." Mikasa's voice sounded smaller than her. "Why wouldn't the morning be good?"

"Ah, it must be great to be that naïve, don't you agree, Levi?"

"There's nothing profitable about being naïve."

"Says the pot to the kettle."

Levi will admit he's still naïve in ways he shouldn't be at his age. That, however, is mainly Kenny's fault for being a terrible role model. The man puts too much time and effort into training and odd life lessons that he neglects the important details Levi should've been taught by now: like how babies were made, for one. Being twenty years old and still not knowing how to make one of those damn things was frustrating to no end. Every time Levi inquired Kenny about it, the man would make a mad dash, saying he's not mentally prepared to discuss the birds and the bees—then he would return home drunk, babbling on about planting seeds and putting nectar on a rose bud, then pass out. Levi gave up and opt for asking his new friends Isabel and Farlan about it once he reached a more personal level with them.

"...What are you talking about? Riddles?"

"Forget it," Levi's head already felt like a damn riddle just trying to ponder the wonders of how babies were made. Kenny wanted him to make a son with Mikasa so they could pass down the Ackerman name, but how does he expect him to do that if he doesn't even know how to get the son in her belly?

"Levi?" Mikasa's concerned voice jarred him back to reality and he shook off the thought of birds,
bees, nectar and seeds and served up breakfast for everyone present. They started without
Mikasa's parents since they would be sleeping a while longer. The meal went along quiet and
undisturbed until Kenny stirred up the calm flow.

"Do you like Levi, dear niece?"

She nodded her head shyly after some hesitation.

"Do you like Kenny?" Levi asked her with deliberate twitting. He wouldn't last this entire week if
he didn't push at Kenny's buttons at least once or twice.

Agitated, the man Shimmed in his chair when no answer was given and Levi almost felt satisfied
enough to smirk, but Mikasa belatedly asked her uncle, "Are you Levi's papa?"

"No," Levi answered for him, "he only raised me."

"Oh, do you get along like me and my papa?"

Kenny rumbled so much with laughter that Levi thought he'd spill his coffee on himself. And he
half wished he did.

"Maybe I should start doting on you and call you sweetie-pie," Kenny japed at his successor, but
not even a flicker of amusement showed on Levi.

"Don't even joke about that. It's creepy."

Left over laughter dispersed and Kenny tried to mimic a serious tone of voice, "Would you hand
me the salt, sweetie-pie?"

Levi whipped his head at him with a pointed finger. "I warned you, now I can't be held
responsible for what happens next."

"Oho, I'm shaking, you're so intimating sweeti—"

Mikasa had come between them, daringly close to the monsters mouth and muffled that God
awful nickname just in time by plugging a piece of toast in his mouth, "No fighting!" she
demanded so fiercely that Levi misplaced his anger.

The room settled for only a brief moment, unfortunately.

"This jam is disgusting," Kenny spat the toast out finicky. A solid kick under the table rattled the
silverware.

"What the—?!"

"Mikasa made that." Levi hissed gratingly at Kenny.

"That doesn't change the fact that it's d—"

Another thump, another rattle.

"—Delicious." Levi insisted, even though the jam did have a little sour aftertaste to it. A teaspoon
of sugar would probably fix that, but he wouldn't dare tamper with something Mikasa worked
hard on.

"Do you too always bicker like this?" she folded her little arms, looking between them with a
worrismome expression.
"Not always. If the stars are aligned right we get along." Levi said. Mikasa giggled but probably didn't understand his figure of speech.

"It has nothing to do with stars," Kenny bit, chewing as he spoke, "You're just an ungrateful brat."

"And you're a miserable and selfish old man with not an ounce of sympathy for others."

"See how he tries to make me look bad?" he confided with his niece, trying to recruit her to his side.

Mikasa let in a little exhausted breath, playing referee between them must be tiring. She let herself mull over a solution. "How about this—Kenny, stop teasing him and think before you speak. Levi, don't be a brat and talk back to your elders. Could you both do that?"

"I don't know, could King Flitz take down a Titan on his own?"

Kenny caught his sarcasm with a glower. He returned a quip with a personal twist. "Could Levi not clean for a damn day without emotionally breaking down?"

Levi's voice became higher, indirected at Kenny but intended for him. "Could Kenny ever clean up after himself and not make a mess out of everything his dirty hands touch?"

"Boys." Mikasa interrupted the banter. "You guys are hopeless."

"Nah. If anything, hope is the only thing Levi and I have common," Kenny reflected.

Levi considered his words. Both of them wanted change—a better life; a way out of the struggling and hardships. They pinned their hopes on a way out and they tried just about everything and anything to reach that light at the end of the dark, cavernous tunnel. Even if they had to claw their way to the top and fight and beg and cheat to get through everything blocking their path they would because they wanted to get out of the filthy underground and live a good life.

When it came to bettering their future, they didn't argue or disagree while discussing plans. They took their future seriously because they both had the same goal in mind. Even enemies will come together to form alliances when they share a similar objective. This is why Levi and Kenny worked well together. They fought, they pushed each others buttons, and sometimes they wanted to kill each other, but at the end of the day they both saw the same future because they both shared the same hope.

That's why they came all the way here, so Kenny could ensure Levi's future and even his own long after he's dead.

Levi looked down at Mikasa, and Kenny did as well. When they broke apart from her, their eyes made contact. The glimmer of playful anger previously stored in their eyes had faded. The graveness of their mission presented itself again and they did not argue for the rest of the day.

~x~

Around midday when the sun was high and brutal, Levi found himself idling outside, wiping the sweat from his brow as the heat drained his energy before he even began the eventful journey ahead of him.

During breakfast, when Mikasa's parents finally woke, Levi tried to show the only manners he owned and had offered to earn his keep here. He asked if any chores or tasked needed help
completing, and Mikasa's father asked Levi to accompany him during his hunting trek today.

Now he stood outside waiting for Mr. Ackerman to prepare and escort him to the forest. He was just about to meet up with him, but he was welcomed with another presence when the front door swung open.

Mikasa ran out, attired in an airy white summer dress that reached down to her ankles. Her small feet were strapped in weaved sandals and her head was topped with a floppy straw hat to protect her from the baking sun.

Levi didn't own clothing appropriate for summer temperatures. It's normally nippy in the underground regardless of the season. He settled for a thin buttoned blouse and rolled the cuffs up to his elbows.

The heat was thick and suffocating. It felt as if the sky draped a thick wool blanket over him, toasting him until he was seared and burnt. The fabric of his blouse soon stuck to his chest as if boiling glue was poured over him.

Mikasa and her parents appeared unaffected by the heat. Mikasa frolicked with bouncing energy, her father had not a bead of sweat on him even while he tended to laboring tasked, and her mother tended to cleaning, cooking and gardening without a tad of heat fatigue. Since they're native to these lands their body must've created an immunity for the weather. Levi will never get used to it during his week here, likewise with Kenny who complained about the heat ever since he arrived, but admittedly the warmness toasting Levi's bones did feel comforting in a way.

"Do you like my dress?" Mikasa's glowed livelier than the sun shining down on them, but unlike the sun, her aura wasn't unpleasant. She gave a twirl, Levi nodded when she stumbled back to face him, a little dizzy, but she managed to never break her smile.

"Did your mother make it?"

"Yup! And I did the embroidery." There was a design that bordered the helm of the collar; it was quite complicated and the fact that a five year old had committed herself to the task was quite impressive. He would never have the patience to use needle and thread to make something like that. "Not bad. You did a nice job."

The compliment made her liven up, her cheeks powered with pink. In an excited burst, she grabbed his hand and capered forward, chasing after her father once he made exit out the house.

"You're coming too?" He asked his daughter, a musket propped up on his shoulder.

"Yup, I wanna go hunting with you guys!"

"Oh yeah? You never seem interested any other time... If I didn't know better, I'd say you were tagging along because Levi is coming. Hm. I think someone might have a little crush~" Her father winked back at his daughter on the spot and chuckled at Levi, expecting agreement from him to further tease his child, but Levi wouldn't dare say a word. Not after he checked on Mikasa's reaction and saw how much that cute face of hers flared in anger.

With puffed out rosy cheeks and clenched fist, she replied with, "T-That isn't true! Stop embarrassing me, papa!"

They followed Mr. Ackerman's trail of carefree laughter down the winding windswept path into the forest. The branches bowed above them, the green roofs creating shade with only a few scarce glowing sun spots splotched here and there. The temperature dropped a few degrees cooler under the shade and Levi was able to quit his squinting from the unforgiving sun rays.
When they trekked deeper, the path was not paved anymore; nature had spread over the ground. The trail had become an obstacle course, making them weary of every step as they maneuvered deeper.

The trees rustled from the forest as it let out a sleepy yawn. A woodpecker drummed its beak into bark as Mr. Ackerman hummed an upbeat tune. Levi looked down to his side, checking if little Mikasa was keeping up with their pace. Distracted by the nature around her and every sound the forest made, she did not notice his eyes on her.

A strange feeling overcame him—if he looked away, or even blinked too long, he feared she would disappear and lose herself in the untraceable depths of the woods. Because of that uneasy feeling, he did not let his eyes linger off her very long. Even though he still sensed her there, he had to look. A strange feeling indeed. He never saw such a protective side of himself show its face in the open before.

Thick bristles of grass and a layer of fallen leaves carpeted their path, the trail growing marshier with each step. Mr. Ackerman kept leading the way, sloshing through a deep puddle of mud that had submerged over the trail of rotten leaves.

The tips of Levi's boots reached the fringe of it before screeching to a stop. He pressed a hand against Mikasa as well to halt her steps.

"A little mud isn't going to hurt you," her father looked back, "if you don't come back dirty after a day of hunting than you're going about it all wrong."

Levi didn't like the notion of that at all and he had no desire to follow through with such a stupid philosophy. He lifted Mikasa effortlessly, tucking her under his arm. She weighed next to nothing. She didn't say anything, only enjoyed the sudden ride as he went the long way around. Off the trail. he cut into the near-impenetrable foliage. Wrestling with bushes and twining vines, he regrouped with Mr. Ackerman on the other side of the mud puddle.

The man lifted his hat to scratch his head, but a shrug later he carried on. Levi didn't want to dirty up his clothes, and he definitely didn't want Mikasa's white dress to dye with brown muck.

They entered a small clearing of land, unshaven emerald carpet padded their tracks. The reek of spores floated all round and the elderly branches bowed at their arrival. The hedged trees skirting around them revealed a hole of sky; the sun was currently behind a thick cloud, which Levi was secretly thankful for.

"Now, I know someone of your age doesn't have much experience with guns," Mr. Ackerman's mouth twisted into a cocky smirk. "but I'm willing to pass my knowledge to you."

The younger handled the gun awkwardly once he passed it to him, adjusting to the weight and shape. He tested it out, raising the gun level with his eyes.

"Give it a practice shot. It's alright if you're not good at it, I don't expect you to be."

Levi has never used a musket before. Shotguns and revolvers were more of his specialty, but a gun is a gun—as Kenny always said—use any one at your disposal if the time comes.

Levi never understood the undertones in that lesson. Why would he ever need to use a gun? The sport of hunting in the underground is nonexistent; humans barely survive down there, never mind huntable animals. If the time comes... What time would that be, he wondered. What situation would he be placed in that he would need to use any gun he could find?
Levi squirmed his way out from the ideas that popped in his head. Adeptly, he thrust the musket into sturdy hold and propped the long barrel in his left hand and readied his finger on the trigger. Locking on to a quick moving blur of gray, he closed an eye on the moving target in the far distance.

Mr. Ackerman snickered. "Don't even bother, such a small target can't be shot from this distance, and if you get any closer that thing will sprout its ears and run for the hills."

Levi watched the rabbits pattern, how it hopped once, twice, then paused to jerk its nervous head around. He adjusted his aim slightly, and Mr. Ackerman sighed humorously. "You're better off finding a prey a little less jumpy."

Ignoring him, Levi kept his focus highlighted on the rabbit. The trigger squeezed steadily. A shot rang out and the shadows of dozens of birds dotted the ground as they cawed cowardly and took to the sky.

A little bundle of fur laid limp and lifeless across the clearing.

"I'll be damned," Mr. Ackerman brushed the stubble on his chin with his fingers, "Either that was a lucky shot or you've done this before."

Levi outstretched his arm and handed the gun back to him. "Kenny and I have often have shooting practice together."

"Does he take you hunting too?" Mikasa saw the opportunity to ask a question and didn't pass it up.

"No," but he felt Kenny was training him to hunt something, he just didn't know what yet.

Their traveling and hunting continued. Mr. Ackerman tried to hunt down a wild boar, they tracked it for nearly a mile, but the missed shot had scared it into a running trot until it escaped. Levi managed to snag a goose in the midst of flight, even after Mr. Ackerman warned it would be tricky. Aiming at flying prey wasn't all that hard, especially if they're as predictable as geese.

"You're...really efficient with a gun. Kenny taught you well—you'd sure be handy to have around!"

Levi was honestly convinced he just fell into a trap. He felt his entire body stiffen, his body curled into itself in a panic when an arm had circle around his neck, reeling him in like an animal trammed in a net.

"Ah!" Mr. Ackerman sighed piercingly loud. "It feels nice to have some company while hunting!" Mr. Ackerman secured his embrace on Levi with a squeeze. The younger boy stood as still, and unaffectionate, as stone. "You must visit more often so we can go on a camping trip together! Wouldn't that be fun? We could make everyone tag along," he paused briefly to plan, still unwilling to removed his arm despite the boy trying to squirm away, "I could talk the misses into coming and I'm sure I could lure Kenny into the woods with a trail of booze," he broke into booming laughter, scaring every animal within a five mile radius.

"I wanna go camping too!" Mikasa reached out, waving for attention.

"Of course you'll come sweetie-pie," he lifted her into his arms merrily. "Just imagine it. Sleeping under the stars..."

"...Laying in the dirt." Levi added with a flinch.
"...Feeling the cold brisk air on your bones as crickets sing you a lullaby..."

"...A million bugs crawling on you as the wild animals prowl around your sleeping flesh."

Mikasa giggled at their mismatched exchanges. Even as young as she was she knew they were on entirely different pages.

Levi really wasn't too keen on the idea of living in nature even for a night, but when he thought about it, housing himself under the trees ought to be more cleanly than the filthy streets he came from. He might take Mr. Ackerman up on his offer next time he visits.

It had been a long day. The light of the forest had dimmed down and the birds had returned to their nests for the evening. Mr. Ackerman had warned about the types of animals that lurked around at dusk: wolves, mountain lions, poisonous snakes—Levi suddenly sensed hungry eyes caging around him. Feeling anxious, he opt for picking Mikasa up and carried her the rest of the way. Besides, the rough ground—with vines and twisting thick roots—had proven that this environment was a hazard for a child and Levi thought it wiser to hold her himself.

She had thanked him shyly, her words laced with drowsiness, saying her feet were sore from walking.

When they neared departure from the woods, Mr. Ackerman had turned back to check on the two youngers and squinted with a smile.

"She seems very taken to you."

"......" Levi peered at the little girl that nestled on his shoulder, breathing slowly and dreaming of the adventurous day they had.

Mr. Ackerman stepped over a fallen log, visoring his eyes from the strong setting sun with his hands as he scoped the area. "Mikasa is usually very shy, especially with adults. I'm glad she made a friend," he said earnestly and Levi felt strangely happy to be called her friend.

By the time they made it back to the house, Levi was tired and starving. The daily routine of training with Kenny was much more strenuous, but between the heat, the company and new surroundings he felt drained. Upon entering, Mr. Ackerman kissed his wife and showed off the prizes they hunted.

Levi secretly envied Mr. Ackerman. It must be nice to come back to a cozy tranquil home with a loving family waiting for you everyday. That's something he's always wanted: his own place he's proud to live in, unlike the dirty, moldy shack back home, and an adoring family that smiles and loves each other dearly. All he had was Kenny, an unaffectionate man. Mr. Ackerman didn't take advantage of this lifestyle, either, he was a humble man who was grateful for what life had handed him.

A long time ago, Levi stopped wishing for that life because he understood how unrealistic that type of dreaming was. Being given the opportunity to give this lifestyle a test drive had been a blessing, though. Even if this is only a mere sample of living his dream, it's better than nothing and he knows he will cherish his time here for the rest of his life.

~x~

Mikasa and Levi had spent the next morning exploring outside. It was hot again, but luckily when the heat was really striking him, they stopped by at the river that ran just behind the house. A spray of moister blew into his face as Mikasa tossed stones into the water. It skipped across the top
of the water, shattering the reflection of the mountains and pines when the stone skipped across the flat top of the water, leaving a trail of ripples. No matter how many times he tried, Levi could not get the swing right and his stones wouldn't even skip once, just plunge with a *splat* and drown immediately on impact.

Levi refreshed himself by splashing the cold water over his face, running the remaining moisture up into his hair. Mikasa mimicked him and did the same.

She brought him to all her favorite spots, like the abandoned windmill that now remained static and crumbling. The unruly grass grew like dry and mangled brunette hair and reached knee-high. An infinite supply of dandelions entertain Mikasa for a good while as she blew out dozens of the feathery weeds one at a time and made untold wishes.

The big orange tree was their next stop. Mikasa picked some fruit off the branch after Levi gave her a boost on his shoulders. The two of them enjoyed the tarty treat together under the shaded tree as they talked and shared stories that made each other laugh. Afterward Mikasa made him a flower crown and giggled when she put the ring of wild flowers on his head, but finding it would suit her better he passed the crown to her, but thanked her regardless.

Later, they lost themselves in a cornfield that belonged to the neighbors a few miles away. Mikasa swore she knew the maze like the back of her hand before they entered, but it was late afternoon by the time they found their way out. Levi lost count somewhere along their adventure the amount of times he had caught Mikasa's fall, it wasn't that she was a clumsy girl—she's quick and light on her feet, but oftentimes gets too excited and stumbles over herself, or fails to notice twining twigs and slick paths.

Levi didn't mind keeping a close eye on her, though. That part came just as natural as breathing. He never imagined he would get along with a child so well, but he dearly enjoyed her company.

Mikasa was about to drag him off to another spot; the chicken coop about a mile down, but fearing her parents might start to worry, they opted back to the house.

Arriving back at the cabin, Levi heard a voice that made his hand pause in the midst of reaching the door knob. Kenny was speaking and building up to something, you could tell by that roundabout, yet specific choice of wording of his.

Mikasa looked up at Levi puzzlingly, hidden by his shadow, but Levi did not regard her face on. As he listened closely, he held her back gently, a hand cupped on her slender shoulder. Nothing could interrupt this. This was the main reason they had come all this way. For now, playtime was over and the relaxed face Levi had wore around Mikasa today had wrinkled in desperation and fear. The fate of Kenny's and Levi's future (and possibly his own life) all depended on how this conversation went.

Here it comes. He took a shallow breath. Levi knew what Kenny would say next already. Word for word. At least knowing how to predict Kenny came in handy at times like this.

The next line flowed calmly, naturally, sounding as simple as a thought made up on the spot; just as Kenny planned. "...Maybe we should arrange them to wed when Mikasa becomes of age." The proposal drifted out from the open left window and ghosted over Levi like a chill. He heard no reactions from the right where Mikasa's parents voices came from shortly before. Kenny pressed on, allowing them no time to brood over his words in silence. "Levi needs to continue the Ackerman name, after all. He'll never be able to pick a suitable wife for himself; the boy is hopeless. We might as well pair him with trusted blood."

"...It's a bit soon to be thinking about *marriage*, isn't it?" His brother questioned. His voice came
off as casually preoccupied. Perhaps he was cleaning his musket or peeling some vegetables, but he knew Kenny was determined now and would gain his attention and convince him—or so Levi hoped.

"Nonsense. Mikasa will grow up in a flash and you'll be running around like chickens with no heads when you try to find a last minute husband for her." The foundation creaked as heavy steps walked from one side of the house to the other.

"Listen, brother," Kenny's voice came from the right now. "Don't forget that our parents had introduced your wife to you—look at all the good it did. You have a your own home, a beautiful daughter, your own income." There was a long pause. The heat baking at the back of Levi's head stung as he idled stiffly. He harbored his breath so he wouldn't miss a word. "As for myself, I ran away from home like a dumb young hoodlum before they found me a wife... and I never had much luck with putting a ring on a broad of my own..."

Something about the way Kenny's voiced dipped in grief there felt off. That right there was something Levi hadn't expected, and that's coming from someone who never had much trouble detecting Kenny's moods. In all the time he had known him, he never heard a tone like that slip from him before. However, Levi forgot all about it once he began talking again.

"I'm too old to turn back time, but Mikasa and Levi are still young. If you want your daughter to have a bright future you need to pick out a husband for her." His voice raised crisply, "Now. Before it's too late. You say it's too soon? No, brother. The sooner you promise her to a good man the better. And after raising Levi myself, I could assure you he is a good man, I made damn sure that he turned out that way. When Mikasa is a woman he will be even stronger, smarter and he will treat your little girl with only the best that she deserves. You do want her to have the best, don't you?"

The conniving bait was laid out—now all they had to do was wait for a nibble and reel them in. The silence was tantalizing. During the void of speech, Levi replayed the words still lingering around in the late summer day.

Over hearing the plans of the arrange marriage made Levi's pounding heart retch to his throat, choking him and leaving him feeling faint. He was prepared for this, but now that the plan was carrying out accordingly and he saw little innocent Mikasa at his hip, the reality was finally settling in.

The long pause finally ended. A considering voice stretched out, "...Mikasa does seem to really like Levi. I never saw her as active and talkative as she is around him." You could detect the muse in her father's words as he reflected. "And I like Levi too. He's still just a boy, but I see a lot of potential in him. In a few years he would make a worthy husband, I think."

"I really like that boy," Mrs. Ackerman let out quickly, sounding as if she carefully let the idea brew in her mind for a while. "And Mikasa likes him too. There aren't many people around here that she'll be able to meet, never mind fall in love with. It will be challenging to find a man as good as Levi in this region."

Kenny had thought the same and had mentioned that in the ride over. The fact that they live in the middle of nowhere could be used to their advantage. Keeping Mikasa isolated as a child is fine so long as her parents are devoted to her and play the role as parent and friend, but when she reached the age of a woman she won't always have her parents and it will be nearly impossible for her to make a family herself if she couldn't even find a mate.

"Maybe it's not such a bad idea, dear." There was a drip of worry in her words, as if she never gave much thought about this subject before. Since Mikasa was so young, Levi didn't blame the
woman for neglecting the thought, but now she was left to face the wonders concerning her daughter's future.

Her husband replied with, "Mikasa will surely grow into a smart and beautiful woman, but that won't help her if she can't even find a man. Do we really want her to settle with one of the country folk around here? Most know how to sow and hunt, but let's face facts, many are inbred and don't know how to read or write. Even it she does miraculously find someone around here, I wouldn't be too happy about handing my daughter to someone like that."

There was a hum of agreement from his wife. Mr. Ackerman continued, "I think you're right, honey. It would be wise to consider the proposal."

That's all Levi needed to hear. He turned the knob and stepped inside. Mikasa followed in after in a logy pace. She was probably too young to comprehend anything she heard.

"Perfect timing," Kenny said, his cunning bright grin displaying proudly. Secretly, the man was celebrating already. Her parents were smiling too, albeit kinder with crinkled mirth skirted around their eyes as they stared at him and Mikasa.

"Did you two have fun exploring?" Mrs. Ackerman asked cheerfully. The mood of her voice altered completely from a second ago.

"Yeah..."

Levi couldn't tell if the five year old was just confused at the strange words flung back and forth between her family, or if she seemed out of it from being long over due for her afternoon nap.

Her mother softly knelt in front of her, patting her head. She was about to break it to her, Levi surmised. "Remember when you told me you can't wait to get married to a man like papa so you could start your own family someday?"

Mikasa nodded, remembering.

"Well, your father and I, and your uncle, are going to ensure that you get your wish, if that's okay with you."

The thumping in Levi's chest amplified. The heat suffocating him felt even less forgiving as the humidity wrapped around him like a confining blanket. If it weren't for the tremble in his knees reminding him to keep balance, surely he would've buckled to the floor by now.

"I know you're too young to give your full consent now," she stroked her daughters cheek, "but I really need to hear your opinion before papa and I give our consent, okay?"

Mikasa bobbed her head timidly, only half-understanding.

"When you grow up, how would you feel about marrying Levi?"

"...Levi?" she echoed and her attention spun to him, cheeks smoldering like burning coal. Her mother looked his way next, smiling genuinely. He swallowed hard—after seeing that smile, he didn't want to ever disappoint her, nor her husband or their child. If they did marry, Levi vowed to make them all proud of him.

Mikasa twisted back to her mother, whispering bashfully in her ear. The woman laughed out, rubbing her back. "Okay, okay," Mrs. Ackerman regarded everyone in the room, lighthearted giggles traveling between mother and daughter. "What she told me was a secret, but let's just say that you have my full consent—now that just leaves you, Levi," she lifted herself back up,
grasping at his low shoulder. "How would you feel about marrying my daughter?"

Levi felt this eyes moisten, but he did not permit any of his tears to leave. He's been trying to fight his pesky habit of being a crybaby, but this has proven to be the most challenging test yet. He didn't even know why he wanted to cry. It all felt like a dream—but he couldn't tell if he wanted to cry because he might wake up, or if he was terrified and wanted to wake up. All emotions, ones he held for days and ones he never knew he had all clung to him at once and Kenny read them all on his face when he peered over to him, as if silently asking for this consent to give his.

"Go on, boy. Give the woman an answer. Do you want us to arrange an engagement between you and Mikasa?" That was not a question, only an order disguised with a rising intonation.

Studying Mikasa a while, his eyes flicked back to her mother with an answer waiting in his clenching throat, an answer he very well might choke on. While replaying all the good that he could come out of this arrangement, he pushed his own personal insecurities down. Now he was ready and showed no fear in his tone.

"You have my consent," he recited clearly like a line from a script written by Kenny.

"Wonderful." Mrs. Ackerman clapped her hands together.

Merry chatter filled the room, but Levi and Mikasa were both silent, stealing looks at one another. Mikasa looked stunned and nervous, and Levi's expression twisted to something indescribable when he tried to focus on keeping his hands from shaking.

"Maybe someday they'll make us some grandkids." Kenny slipped in to add to the parents excitement. Mrs. Ackerman grinned joyfully. That was the first time she ever smile at Kenny...and it was also the last time.

"How would we make grandchildren?" Mikasa looked up at Levi questionably, he shrugged his shoulders up. He hadn't the faintest idea. Since Kenny had been the one who mentioned it, his niece turned to him for answers. "Uncle Kenny, how do you make children?"

"Oh boy," Kenny nursed his head with a stiff rub. "...I-I need a drink."

Even though Levi found the sight of Kenny faltering satisfying, he tried to shift the pressure away from him. "Don't bother asking him," Levi warned her, "he'll just confuse you and blab on about seeding and nectar."

"...Do you plant a seed in the garden and wait for a baby to sprout?" she guessed, looking at everyone in turn around the room for clarification, but all the knowing adults turned into cravens and back away.

Mikasa's parents must know how to make a child—they have one for crying out loud. Levi had enough. He just wanted to know the cold hard facts. No planting metaphors, no talk of birds and bees, just the truth delivered in the bluntest form. "If you want us to make a baby, you'll have to tell us how to make one."

"Right!" Mikasa agreed with a spring in her step.

Curious for his reaction, Mrs. Ackerman searched for her husband, who had backed himself into a shady corner, hoping he would blend into the wall and be forgotten. Frightfully, he chuckled, "We'll have to hold off that discussion until the next time you visit. It'll give us something to look forward to," with the way his face highlighted with panic, Levi could tell he was looking forward to it like the plague. "I'd be an excellent grandpa, if I do say so myself and that's all that matters. Anyway, it's nice Mikasa won't have to change her last name when they wed, talk about
convenient!"

They all flew to the change in topic like flies over a dumpster. All traces of the mysteries of babies and their origin were overwritten with forced chatter as Levi and Mikasa stood there densely.

"Maybe we should get the formalities out of the way," Kenny reached into his jacket, pulling out a slip of paper, "might as well give your written consent while you're all in the mood."

"You seem prepared..." his brother folded his arms, guarding his suspicion. "If I didn't know any better I'd say you planned this."

Kenny snickered slyly at his brother and in turn he rolled his eyes with a smirk back at him. Now that Levi saw them both smiling together, they did look a little alike.

"This is boring grown-up stuff," Mikasa squalled crankily, it was about time for her nap, Levi remembered. She hopped up and yanked him by his cravat and Levi nearly tumbled as he scrambled for balance. It was in that moment, while he nearly fell on his face, that he realized Mikasa was very strong for a five year old. "Let's go to my room and play," she dragged him along and Levi hunched behind, choking on her pull.

"At least we know who will wear the pants in the marriage," Kenny teased as they warped around a corner, leaving behind a room full of smiles.

Mikasa, who only stood under half of Levi's height and weighted about as much as a sack of potatoes, had shoved him into the rocking chair in the corner of her room, he fell back at a dangerously sloped angle. With that presented strength, Levi caught himself wondering why Kenny didn't want Mikasa to take over his work when she's older.

The walls were decorated with scribbles of artwork and canvases of embroidery patterns. The vanity was cluttered with costume jewelry, brushes and an expensive looking porcelain doll that seemed to be for decoration and not for playing. Stuffed bears with ribbons and rag dolls crowded her tiny bed.

Once Levi made his inspection, Mikasa appeared before him with an arm full of handcrafted rag dolls she had collected from all about the room. She pelted them all into his lap. "These are our babies. Take care of them."

"These are dolls." Levi told her prosily, not understanding the concept of playing pretend.

Mikasa, even as young as she was, rolled her eyes with a little sigh. "We're playing House. Pretend they are our real babies."

Levi rose a brow at her and looked back to the button eyed doll staring into his soul; it's stitched lip smirking, its yarn hair tangling in his fingers.

Creepy...

He never had toys growing up and he never desired to own any. Perhaps he grew up too fast—there's something he's not getting. While adjusting himself in the rocking chair, one of the baby dolls slipped between his knees and crashed with a squeak onto the floor.

Mikasa gasped like she witnessed an unspeakable crime. "You're a bad papa!" she pointed accusingly. "You just broke our child's neck!"

A panic rose in his chest. For a second he felt like a utter failure—there had to be a way to fix this. "...I'm a doctor, I could fix it," he said uncertainly. They were playing pretend, after all, right? He
checked Mikasa's reaction. She sighed in relief with a hand on her steadying heart. He must be getting the hang of this.

Like a handy nurse, she passed him a roll of gauze's, and even though he had the urge to say it wasn't wise to waste supplies, he unfurled the bandage and weaved it around the doll's plush head.

"Now that you fixed her boo-boo, you have to read her a bedtime story."

"It's only three in the afternoon."

"Babies need naps!"

"I think you need a nap," he slipped, startled at her sweet voice turning deadly. Now that they're almost officially promised to wed, he only hoped she doesn't become this demanding as a wife and mother.

After gathering a colorful book off the shelf, Mikasa hopped up on Levi's lap and made herself comfortable...but in turn, Levi became uncomfortable at this. He's not used to being around children, for one, and he's never had someone sit in his lap before either. There's a first time for everything, he supposed.

He put an arm around her waist, fearing she might fall off him. One of their children was securely tucked between his arm as he read the short book that was more pictures than words.

"She's sleeping now, put her to bed."

Forgetting they were playing House for the moment, he mistook her demand literally and tossed the doll to her bed. The plush careened off the wall and bounced face down on the bed.

"Levi no! Bad papa! I'm leaving you!"

Great. They're not even married yet and she already wants a divorce. "I'm not very good at playing, sorry."

Letting out a little sigh, she pat his shoulder to reassure him. "Then what do you do when you don't have chores? Don't you play games?"

He thought about it. "Chores are kind of my playtime. I like cleaning."

"Really? Hm. I guess I like it too. It's fun sometimes, especially when were all spring cleaning as a family."

Not bad. If she enjoys cleaning enough to refer to it as fun they really were a match made in heaven like Kenny claimed.

As little snippets of their future together started flashing in his mind, Mikasa rested her head against Levi's shoulder and focused on the wave of his cravat when she flicked it. "Are we really getting married?"

"...Yes. But our engagement won't be finalized for a long time, so don't worry about it now. When you get old enough you decide for yourself what you want." Levi wasn't supposed to say that. Kenny had said if he got Mikasa alone he should convince her to say yes regardless of how she felt when she got older, threaten her if he had to so the memory imprinted.

Levi was many awful things, but he was not and never would be a child abuser. He's not going to force her. Even if she changes her mind when she gets older, he rather suffer the consequences
from Kenny himself instead of making her go through with something that makes her unhappy. Even if Kenny finds him useless and kills him if he is unable to marry Mikasa, then so be it. He rather that than have this little girl miserable and afraid to refuse a man she didn't love.

"I'd marry you," she said groggily after pondering as much as a five year old could.

"Why?"

"Because I like you," she pressed her cheek into his collar bone and shut her eyes. That wasn't an explanation, just another statement that needed to be expanded, but he thought it better not to question her while she's sleepy. "But you need to learn how to be a better papa," she added urgently just before her body weighed down with sleep.

He allowed himself to chuckle. "I promise I wouldn't throw our children. Or drop them. I'd take good care of them."

"And I would take care of you, like how my mama takes care of my papa. I'd cook for you and help you hunt, make sure you're warm in the snowy winter, then I'd take care of you when you get sick anyway..." she giggled wearily.

Levi grinned against her hair and began to give voice to his thoughts, rocking them gently with a light press of his foot. "Maybe one day we'll live in a cabin just like this together. Isolated and away from everyone other than our family."

The chair creaked now and then as it rocked, which broke the silence as Mikasa drifted in and out from her slumber. "I'd really like that, Levi."

Mikasa fell asleep shortly after with a smile on her lips. Soundlessly, Levi cradled her over to the bed, tucking her and her stuffed animals and dolls in for a nap.

With his fingers knitted together between his knees, he sat at the edge of the bed, intending to relax his racing mind by expanding the pleasant ideas they exchanged, but as his hearing heightened he caught the chatter beyond the door.

"I don't have much knowledge about promised brides," Mr. Ackerman started, "so I'm wondering, legally speaking, they'll be considered husband and wife already?"

"Almost. Since Mikasa is underage they will hold the ceremony later and make the union official. For now it's simpler to think of it as an official engagement." Kenny answered.

"What if Mikasa reaches the age of consent and changes her mind? What if she falls in love with another man?"

Levi heard the sound of a growl that tried to be bit back. Just the idea of it must have irritated Kenny. "Then they would have to void the engagement together, it's similar to a divorce. Not worth the hassle, if you ask me. And as for falling in love with another man—that would be adultery. I highly advise against it."

"This seems complicated. Instead of finalizing the engagement in writing, can't we just keep it in mind and see how they feel when they're older? I don't want to force Mikasa into anything," his brother replied.

"But dear..." Mrs. Ackerman's worried tone slipped in. "We already talked about this. This is the right choice. All of my family members were arranged to marry and you and I were promised together young. Arranged marriages do more good than harm so long as you match the right people together. It might seem like were taking freedom away from her but really were doing the
best thing for her. One day she'll thank us, just as we thank our parents for setting us up."

"You're right," he agreed with his wife, the doubt evaporated from his voice. "I only want to give her everything she wants—but I suppose if I really want to make that happen, I have to start planning her future now..."

The rest of their conversation fogged as Levi reflected. They had so much confidence in him. They trusted him, saw him as a worthy suitor for their precious and irreplaceable daughter. The responsibility was heavy, but he pledged to carry it with pride.

Before Levi left the room, he tucked Mikasa and her doll, or rather their baby, in. Brushing the fringe of her hair from her forehead, he spoke low enough not to wake her, "I'll take good care of you, Mikasa. I'll protect you and everything that's special to you. I'll make you as happy as I could. I promise, I promise..."

~x~

The day before the departure back to the underground, Levi went out to the river behind the house with Mr. Ackerman and Mikasa with rods and bait. Levi soon learned that fishing takes a lot of patience, something he didn't have much of, but Mikasa managed to entice some fun when she sung some songs her mother taught her. Some were in another language he didn't understand, but the melody was catchy. As young as she was, her singing voice was as mature and gentle as this old streaming river.

Mrs. Ackerman joined their outing around midday with a quilt draped over her arm and a woven basket in hand.

"Where's Kenny?" Levi asked her after she settled herself down on the laid out on quilt. "I invited him, but he made a sour face and said he's not willingly eating outside like an animal," she tried to hide the roll in her eyes but Levi caught it. That sounded like Kenny.

The sparkling lake reflected the distant mountains like a mirror. The leaves formed a green canopy overhead, protecting them from the sun. The trunk thick and coated with aging bark. The air smelt of pine and a whiff of fresh fruit escaped the basket when Mrs. Ackerman flipped the lid. Birds in the high branches whistled them a song to accompany their picnic.

"Could you peel my apple?" Mikasa asked her father after she settled herself snugly next to Levi, but the man had his hands full with setting the fire in the pit.

Levi brushed off his hands and reached out. "I could do it for you."

Her father smiled back with a nod, appreciating the help, then nudged his chin pointedly to the massive trout laid near him, hook still pierced in its lip. "Whoa-ho, this fish sure is big. You see this, hun? He put up quite a fight!"

"Is that so?" The woman didn't regard her husband much, just simply smiled as she poured freshly squeezed lemonade into four cups.

Mikasa frowned. "Papa don't take credit, Levi caught that fish and you know it."

"...But it was my rod and bait..." he sulked with a pout and looked more childish than his daughter. "You couldn't let me have one good fishing story, could you?"

"How could you steal the achievements of our guest?" his wife asked sternly with a hint of jest.

He mumbled with fake annoyance as he fiddled with the twigs that refused to light, making
Mikasa giggle at her fathers silliness.

"Need help lighting the fire?" Levi offered as he dexterously peeled the skin from the ruby fruit.

"No thank you," her father quickly declared with confidence, his blade scraping the flint without a single spark. The stubborn wood simply refused to kindle.

"Oh come now, dear, don't be one if those prideful old men that can't let the young outshine them."

"I'm not old. I'm hip and cool. Ain't that right, sweetie-pie?"

"Levi is way cooler than you, dad," her normally sweet expression inverted, leaving her looking dead-serious and far ahead of her time. And to top it off, her voice resembled a bratty teenager, which is naturally every father's worse nightmare. If you listened very carefully, you could hear the sound of her father's heart cracking a little. A tear spilled out of his eye as his laugh turned into a sob.

"Now, now," his wife pat at his back.

Levi finished carving the skin off the apple and he went ahead and cut it into small slices for her. It felt strange... Levi almost felt like he belonged here. Even with Kenny absent, he didn't feel out of place. In fact, he felt like he done things like this with them a hundred times. An unusual sense of camaraderie had inhabited him. The atmosphere felt comforting and relaxed, he didn't feel on-guard or anxious at all like he typically did. He had never been blessed with this sort of company before. Even if he was in his own house, he would feel like an uninvited guest when Kenny would invite over coworkers or affiliates.

By the time Mr. Ackerman got the wood to smolder and started grilling, they already filled up half way with fruit and by then Levi accepted the calming sensations he harbored for what they were.

"Do you fish with Kenny a lot, Levi? What about hunting?" Mrs. Ackerman asked to start up small talk.

After taking a sip of the lemonade, he shook his head. "Not really. I never even fished before today. I just got lucky. We have a lot of shooting practice, though."

"My brother has always been a gun-nut—ouch!" Mr. Ackerman scorched himself and aided the burn by sucking on his finger. How is this clumsy guy even related to Kenny?

"I wanna learn how to shoot too!" Mikasa raised her fist at the challenge. She sure did like being included in everything.

"I'll teach you some day. After all, you need to know how to hunt even after I'm gone."

"Gone?" she blinked innocently, "where are you going?"

Mr. Ackerman chuckled in an effort to push the dreary topic away. "I'm not going anywhere, sweetie-pie. I'll teach you how to shoot when you get older, if mama let's me, that is " he looked to his wife for consent.

She shrugged. "As long as you're careful I have no complaints. But that's still a long ways from now. Let's talk about the present," she flicked her eyes to Levi. "What do you plan to do once you get back home? Do you have a job?"

He squirmed back in his seat. "Not exactly. I do some errands for locals in the area."
"I see, what kind of errands?"

"Just odds and ends stuff..." The errands in particular were quite dodgy and legally questionable. The scene he's been getting involved with as of late weren't the best group of people, but they weren't all that bad—though, the only titles appropriate for them were thugs, criminals and the corrupt. He wouldn't dare add in that little detail to her, though. Levi's not too proud of his involvement with illegal activities, but he tried to make an income on the side and also ensure a Plan B with himself, just in case his plans go wrong with Kenny.

"When I was about your age I wanted to join the military." Mrs. Ackerman craned her neck up at the bowing canopy above, her eyes open but not seeing. Memories of the past filmed over her dark steel eyes. "I trained all through my teen years. I was aiming for the Garrison regiment."

"And I wanted to serve under the king," her husband added.

"You wanted to join the Military Police?" Levi questioned.

"No, I just wanted to be his chef or repair man at the castle, or something safe," he chuckled cowardly.

He stared at them in turn. "What made you two change your mind?"

"We fell in love." They said together and stared starry eyed at each other, her husband gave her a smitten look and his wife shied away from his gaze as if they were on a first date.

"We were still going to follow our dreams," she added, "but when we had Mikasa we wanted to devote all our time to her. We didn't want to be so occupied with work like our parents were. Family always comes first and now that you're a member of our family... I want you to know we are here for you, too."

A nervous breath sucked into his throat and he nearly choked on it, but remarkably he was able to calmly reply with, "Thank you. I won't let you down."

"And even if you do now and then, it's okay. No one is perfect," she winked with a thin smirk. No one ever said that to Levi. Anything less than perfection was unheard of and scolded upon.

"Right. If I was a perfect husband, surely this beauty here would've left me years ago. The most important thing you need to focus on is being a good person and a good person is always there for their family."

Levi understood now—the exchanges were odd at first but he figured out their objective here: they were giving him a prep talk now that he's engaged to their daughter. Out of all the useless life lessons Kenny taught him, he could finally say he received some useful advice. Levi isn't the best person right now; he's been going down a dark path and it will only get darker, but he'll be sure to dig himself out before he buried himself with regrets...

These people—all staring at him with warm smiles—were his family now. They trusted him. They were counting on him. He doesn't want to disappoint them. He wants to be a son-in-law they're proud of. He wants to be a husband that Mikasa is pleased to call hers. He wants to be a father that his children will look up to...but before all that, he needed to become a better person. If it's for their sake, he knows he could do it.

~X~

When Levi was packing up his belongings and readying for departure, he heard a light rap at the
door. Before he could bid entry, the handle clicked open and a stealthy figure shouldered into the threshold, shutting the door behind her mutely.

Mrs. Ackerman spun around to face him, her young-looking features looked aged in worry and her swift motions turned bulky and tense as she pressed her back to the door, barring it as if she was keeping out a pack of hungry wolves on the other side, threatening to trample down the door.

"Miss..." he set down his shirt onto the bed in the midst of folding and regarded her fully with a spin on his heel, taking a cautious step toward her. "Is everything alright?"

Mrs. Ackerman crossed the room with the same broadness of a bulky man—she no longer resembled the weak and petite woman he came to know. Before he could even prepare, she took Levi into a shadowed corner of the guest room, both hands digging into his shoulders. Those beautiful narrow eyes of hers flared with fright, like a spooked horse in a storm. "There's something not right about that man."

"Who, Kenny?" It was the first name he thought to mention.

"Shhh," with rising panic she set a finger to her lips. "Keep your voice down. I don't want him to hear..." the whisper cut off, her words clenching in her throat. "I don't trust him, Levi."

"...You shouldn't," he heard himself say. Even though he recognized his own voice, the words did not sound like his own.

Ever since he was young, he's had never spoke ill-word about Kenny behind his back—talking shit about him to his face was another story, but saying he shouldn't be trusted to his brother's wife made him feel dirty...but cleansed at the same time for letting that out. As he got older he realized that something wasn't right about Kenny. Not long ago, he started to have his doubts about what exactly he was being trained for, and also began to wonder what Kenny did for a living. Youth had blinded his judgment and made him into a mindless follower without will or thoughts of his own, but age had made him wise and the wise ask questions—only, he never received answers from Kenny. Suspicious, maybe, or maybe Levi was overreacting. His mind often warred between the two possibilities—is Kenny planning something corrupt? Or is he just thinking too deep about it? But now that Mrs. Ackerman, a woman he quickly came to trust—a smart person and a remarkable judge of character—had voiced her anxieties, Levi couldn't help but to agree.

Her eyes never broke from his. Even while looking down at him, he did not feel inferior or intimidated by her. An equal, an ally; that's what she was. A ray of hope that he had always tried to reach for; someone he could trust and safely confide in. That's how he saw her now.

A barrage of concerns shot at him all at once. "Levi, listen. Don't go back with him. He's dangerous, I could sense it. Stay here with us. You're free to live here...with my husband and I and Mikasa. How would you like that?"

He didn't consider her offer. Not even for a second. He strode back a step, freeing himself from her grasp as he shook his head, feeling like he had deceived Kenny by just listening to the proposal.

"Kenny would never consent. He...he needs me," for what, he still didn't know.

She looked distraught, lost in her own home. Levi searched her whole face, trying to predict that she would say next. A deep breath went in through her nose and a calmer voice exhaled out. "I'll have my husband talk to him, then maybe—"

"It won't work."
"But you can't stay with him." The previous whisper she tried to hold shattered as she tried to convince him. Although, they both knew she was convincing the wrong person. "I can see it in his eyes, he's done horrible things. You're not safe with him. Please, don't go back with him."

Levi looked down, worry swelling up like a fever taking over his body. No one had ever told him that but at the back of his mind he knew Kenny was corrupt and he's suspected that he'd done bad things, but he tried to turn his gaze from the truth. Or maybe he couldn't see at all. Hell, Levi had done bad things himself, but Kenny...Kenny's work goes behind illegal blackmarket smuggling, stealing and brawls, he knows it now. Mrs. Ackerman helped him see. She's sharp. She figured out what he had trouble with concluding ever since he was a child.

The worried mother chewed on her lip in thought, agitated but offered the most possible suggestion. "If the arrangement between the two of you ever gets truly bad, just come stay with us. This is your home. If Kenny ever comes looking for you, we'll hide you."

Your home...

As comforting as it was to hear that, it just wouldn't work. Escaping Kenny would be impossible. Only if he had a death wish would he ever attempt something so risky—but if he did ever find himself in a bad situation like Mrs. Ackerman is implying—no, he mustn't put them in danger. Kenny is violent, stubborn and knows how to take back what is rightfully his. "I couldn't ever do that—I would put you all in danger. Kenny is dangerous, you know that. You figured that out on your own. You, your husband and Mikasa might get hurt, or worse."

Her lips quivered from the thought, rubbing her arms like an icy spirit walked through her. Hopelessness had hugged around her. She no longer could look him in the eye; her eyes looked like dark gray clouds during a rain storm. She casted her gaze to the side, eyes roaming restlessly for an answer to this dilemma. Her eyes held some promise before, but not anymore. Perhaps that is why she couldn't look him in the eye now. There was no hope she could offer him now—but she offered him something else: Comfort and warmth—she took him into a hug, roughly at first but soon she melted around him softly like a home-made sweater stitched with love.

He didn't return the sudden embrace, just stood stiffly like a stone pillar. He's never been hugged before and felt strange and uncomfortable—but safe and warm.

"Just take care of yourself, Levi," she murmured into his neck. "You seem like a very sweet boy and I don't want him corrupting you. I don't care how big and bad he thinks he is, don't let him change you. We won't let him break this family apart." Her hand caressed his hair and Levi caught himself closing his eyes contently at the soothing touch. "Don't you ever force yourself to do anything you're uncomfortable with, alright?"

Those soft words spoken into his ear would stick with him for a lifetime. Her disembodied voice would whisper in his ear again in the future, like a ghostly visit, when Kenny had ordered him to perform his first kill. He followed her orders, not his and escaped Kenny—but he did not return home and that will always be one of his greatest regrets...

He reluctantly pulled away from the closest thing he ever had to a mother.

"I meant what I said, you know." she said, knuckling away a tear, "I want you to marry my daughter." She smiled affably, trying to cheer him up and she caressed his cheek.

"Why me?" he still had no idea why she agreed to the proposal in the first place. He saw her as a smart woman, but the choice she made caused him wonder. "I'm just a street rat with nothing to offer her."
Her brows pulled down, darkening her eyes. "You're much more than that. Don't listen to that man. You're worthy of my daughter—you have more than you think, Levi. You're a good person. You could offer her kindness and respect and a happy life. That is all I want from you. But it's entirely up to you. I'll shred up the arrangements unless you truly want to. Don't do it just because Kenny said so. If you're afraid to tell him that, then I'll tell him I changed my mind or that I decided on another suitor."

"No," he told her in haste. "I like Mikasa. Your family is the kindest I've ever met in my life. I would like to be apart of it."

"And now you are," she took him into another hug and Levi awkwardly returned it that time. "If you ever need anything just come to us. Just promise me that you'll take good care of Mikasa someday, that's all I want in return."

He nodded and swore to the promise like he's never done before, not to Kenny, not anyone. Her words held meaning; the goal was clear unlike Kenny's orders. And her words offered something to look forward to at the end of his dark road. Accepting to protect Mikasa gave him actual hope, and that is the best gift he ever received.

~x~

Levi looked up at the overcast sky. It would rain soon, he thought. The clouds held back its tears just as strongly as he did.

Mikasa and her parents, along with himself and Kenny all rallied up at the front of the cabin. An ominous mist painted the land with a dull, lifeless gray. A shame the weather couldn't remain as cheery and colorful as it did when he first arrived. The smells of summer was covered by a damp odor, he found himself wishing he could smell the pines and flowers around here one more time before returning back home. The drain of color and musky scents reminded him of the underground, the place he would be returning to soon. He frowned at the thought and caught himself thinking he would even miss the sweltering heat. It might be a while until he could soak his bones in the sun again.

He received yet another hug from Mrs. Ackerman as they started exchanging goodbyes, and it took her a long time to let go this time. She whispered something foreign in his ear and said it was an ancient prayer to keep him save.

Next he stood before her husband and extended a hand, but the man passed up the casual handshake and bonded his arms around the boy, squeezing him so hard he couldn't breathe. "Come back soon, will ya'? I need my hunting buddy!" He pat his back hard as he released, and Levi told him he looked forward to hunting with him again.

Kenny chatted with his brother as Levi stepped to the next person in line. With a small smirk on his lips, he crouched down. The little girl curled her fingers into the ruffles of her dress, swaying her body bashfully. "I had a lot of fun with you this week, Levi."

"Me too."

The dampness welling in her eyes contradicted her smile. With a burst of emotionally-driven energy, she leaped forward, binding her arms around his neck and without hesitation he squeezed her right back just as tight—he was finally getting the hang of hugging.

"I'm going to miss you," he couldn't believe he said.

"I'll miss you more," she sounded a hiccup away from full-blown bawling. "When will you visit
"I don't know," he rubbed her back to soothe her, "but I'll try to see all of you again as soon as I can."

"You better. I'll be very mad if you take too long."

He chuckled in the tangle of her hair. "I certainly wouldn't want that."

As they broke apart, a little pair of lips brushed against his cheek, a little wet smack sounded at the spontaneous contact. The air around them held a chill, but both of them burned hot, their flushed red faces contrasting against the gloomy gray hue over the land.

Levi stared, flapping his lips like a dying fish and Mikasa couldn't even look him in the eye. She clenched at a clump of her dress and stuttered incoherently before finally saying, "H-Have a safe trip."

She then dashed off to hide behind her father's leg. It reminded Levi of the first time he laid eyes on her when she was cowering behind her mother's dress. In such a short amount of time the two of them had come a long way from that. The bonds they formed over these past few days tied them closer together than the engagement between them.

Levi clutched his knee for aid as he stood, floundering from the emotional high. If he feels like this from a small peck on the cheek from a kid, he didn't believe he'd ever be prepared for a kiss from Mikasa when she's a grown woman. The image of it made him sweat like a guilty sinner. He brushed the dirt off his pants and began staggering off—and Kenny helpfully repositioned him in the right direction.

"This way to the wagon, loverboy."

Kenny whipped the reins and the horses vaulted into a steady trot down the dirt path. The Ackerman's waved goodbye from their cabin, with little Mikasa hoisted up on her father's back for a better view. When the distant echoes of farewells faded, all that remained was the sound of the wooden wheels of the wagon spinning around wobbly over the uneven terrain.

The cabin shrunk into the landscape the further they rode. He kept watching Mikasa and her parents, they were just blurry dots on the horizon until they were swallowed up by a hill as they descended down a slope. Levi turned back to the road, smiling ruefully. The road ahead stretched on as far as his eyes could see. They had a long trip back home. Reflecting on some of the new memories he made ought to make it go by a little faster.

"When will we get to see them again?" Levi felt so impatient—he just wanted to count down the days until he can visit them again.

The man switched the reins into one hand to rummaged through his jacket, pulling out a cigar that he lit as he spoke. "Not until Mikasa's fifteen, at least. You're engaged to her now, there's no reason to waste our times visiting those morons. We accomplished what we came here to do."

The awning overhead shaded the travelers from the sudden light drizzle of rain wrenching from the clouds, but Levi could still feel the cool spray blowing on his heated face, leaving a glowing sheen on his darkening features. The smile he had before was just a distant memory—and it wouldn't return again for years to come. They rode almost a mile over the boggy path before it finally sunk in.

"That's ten years from now," his voice went flat.
"Yeah," Kenny shrugged as he puffed on his cigar, "and she'll be fertile by then and you could stick a son in her. It's a pointless waste of time to see her before she could marry and have your children."

A clap of thunder rumbled the sky. Levi resented Kenny for the way he talked about Mikasa like she was some baby machine. She was so much more than that. All of them were more than tools used to accomplish a mission. They're special to Levi. They're his family.

They rode for hours without saying a word more. With every inch they moved he felt further away from his family and it broke his heart. Levi refused to look at Kenny or talk to him. He wore a scowl and it honestly hurt going back to that expression after smiling, laughing and relaxing his face all week.

Eventually, Kenny's face softened as much as it possibly should without breaking. "Geez, you get too easily obsessed with shit. You really like her, don't you?"

For the first time in hours, Levi looked away from the passing grim scenery and back to him with a firm nod.

Kenny studied his face and the sincerity his expression held. He rattled a sigh, defeated. "Maybe I could arrange for us to see them again, maybe," he emphasized, "but not anytime soon. If you do as I say in the upcoming months and put your training to the test, I'll let you see her again."

Levi perked up at that. Hope had presented itself again. There's nothing he wouldn't do for Kenny anyway, this would be a cinch.

…Or so he thought. He didn't hold his end of the deal and thus Levi never received his award. Levi didn't want to use his training in the way Kenny ordered—he couldn't bear even the thought of having dead man's blood on his hands. Everything was ruined with that one order, the plans, the goals, the hope—everything was taken from him at once.

Levi levanted deep into the underground and joined a band of thieves after that, but not a day passed by without thinking of Mikasa and her mother and father. Even though he desperately wanted to see them, he stayed far away for their own protection. Kenny's and his men hunted him down every hour of every day, trying to track down his runaway pride. Levi knew he had a home with the Ackerman's in that cozy little cabin in the countryside, but he didn't want the trouble to follow him there and put their peaceful lives in danger.

For as long as he lives, Levi is going to stay true to Mrs. Ackerman's promise. Even if he couldn't always be there physically he'll protect Mikasa. That's all he ever wanted: to keep her and everything precious to her safe.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Levi stared into the hearth of the fireplace, the flaky soot as cold as midnight sand and the metal grate held the void. A dark and cold sight, it was.

The memories Levi revisited were mostly pleasant, but oftentimes the haunting past, whether dreadful or pleasant, could leave a person with their bones rattling inside them, that and the temperature had dropped drastically as the hours crept deeper into the night; though the exact hour couldn't be called. The grandfather clock near the bookshelf never moved its hands off 3:00 since they arrived. Time stretched by slowly in the cabin, but the decade-old story had taken up a good portion of the evening, which left the two soldiers in the dead of night; Levi felt about as stiff and cold as a carcass, thus he found it eerily fitting.

But time wasn't all that important now, neither was the temperature.

There was, however, one element keeping him from full-blown shivering and teeth chattering. Somewhere during the midst of his tale, Mikasa, while still heeding his words, had wordlessly scudded between Levi thighs for warmth. Without hesitation, she had recumbed back on him, listening carefully to every word he spoke. The ghost of the past proven to leave them both with unshakable chills and frankly, they both needed some physically comfort to get through it. And so, Levi had complied with her silent request for warmth and snugged his arms around her, nearing fumbling over his tongue and misplacing vital pieces of memories in the process, for his attention track wore thin at the touch of her curves.

The living room had grown quiet now with the absence of Levi's voice, yet there they still were, huddled together and feeding off each others warmth as they brooded and reflected in the darkness.

While safely concealed from Mikasa's eyes, Levi had caught the strained pull of his lips stretching into an upward curve. Between the nostalgic sting on his jaw and tasting the sequence of treasured memories still fresh on his tongue, his chest ached as if submerged in water, and drowning in the past as he were, he nearly forgot the dire truth of his and Mikasa's engagement. When that thought caught in the web of his mind, everything else dispelled, burning away the memories of the struggles in the underground and even the carefree time spent at the Ackerman's cabin. All that remained was the present and what was before him—Mikasa. Everything else deserted him, all attention silently rested on the static young woman who had yet to say a word.

In response to trying to digest the fact that Levi just revealed his biggest secret, the bind around Mikasa tighten, and she wormed uncomfortably under the restricting embrace. Rather than pull away, she placed a chilled hand on Levi's forearm, giving his goosebump-ridden skin a rub with her thumb to melt his icy nerves; the touch combing the bristled hair that had stuck up.

The soothing gesture reminded him of Mikasa's mother—the way she could sooth him with just a touch. Even after all these years, Levi saw so much similarity between the two of them. Not only in looks, (thought Mikasa was a splitting image of her mother) but she was also compassionate, even if she mainly showed that side exclusively to Eren. That made her resemble her mother even more, Levi thought. All the woman wanted was for her family to be happy and safe. That was why she had welcomed Levi to the family as Mikasa's betrothed. She saw him as family and she saw him as a worthy suitor that would take care of her daughter.
Up until recently, Mikasa believed Eren was her only family, and that protectiveness of her mother and father had passed down to her; that overwhelming importance of family ran through her veins. Maybe that's why she was so devoted to Eren, he was the only person she could release that protective energy toward...or maybe she was simply in love with him. Levi didn't know, and now wasn't the time to start figuring out their relationship.

The press of Levi's fluctuating chest against Mikasa's back felt surprisingly warm to her. Absently, while baking in his heat, she reflected back on his story that had also warmed her in other ways.

Clear pictures from the past still lingering around her, spinning and jumbling up like scattered photographs. A collective montage of her mother and father appeared in the darkness, her old cabin home, the beautiful lands she was born and raised on. All these memories were imprinted and she could picture everything...except for Levi. She remembered a few of the times he mentioned, but she couldn't clearly picture him from her own point of view; all that appeared was a dark cavern of void. It was as if a few fragments of the memories remain, but Levi was erased. It was unsettling, and subconsciously she found herself squeezing at the arm of the man that she could not remember.

A week, that's the amount of time she spent with Levi back then. Considering that, she figured not remembering him from her unripe age wasn't unusual, but still discouraging to know there were pleasant memories of her family she could not be honored to remember. That went for Levi and Kenny too, not just her parents. As hard as it was to swallow the news...they were her family. Kenny was her blood uncle, and she was sure that was the most shocking revelation she would learn on this mission. If only she would've known at the time that there was a whole lot more to it.

Who would've thought—Levi was her family, not by blood, not by two families joining a union and forming into one, but by their own engagement. Feeling limp and heavy with thought, she sunk even deeper against Levi—her betrothed. Through a clenched throat, she sucked in some brisk wind, chattering her cold lips.

He'll give her all the time she needed—it's a lot to absorb, and he didn't skimp out on many details. He even went as far as adding his own commentary, his personal thoughts to heighten the memories. A part of him was overjoyed at the prospect of Mikasa listening to his inner-thoughts, his dear and dreaded memories, and emotions. It was a special thing to share with someone you loved, unrequited or not. Because he opened up, he felt closer to her by sharing a personal moment together.

Froth boiled in his jumpy stomach, his cheeks feeling burned, perhaps from the frost biting him, or because the woman he loved was snug in his arms, and had offered her attentive ears to him. Levi hadn't felt this happy since his time spent with the Ackerman family—but as an afterthought, he couldn't help but feel guilty for taking joy in something that might've caused her pain or discomfort. Bringing up her parents, dropping the betrothed bomb on her... All of that probably left her so miserable she couldn't speak.

Levi didn't feel as happy all of a sudden, but when Mikasa cleared her throat and sniffed from the impending sickness or weep, he minded her fully and closed off his own thoughts as he waited for her to speak for the first time since Levi closed the book on his—

Before Mikasa could bring herself to remark on the past involving her parents, she felt Levi's story was incomplete and had a followup question that she squeezed up from her clenched throat. "What did you do after you ran away from Kenny?"

Although Levi saw her belated response coming, he still became startled by her unexpected words. He had retracted with a jolt, but covered it up with a subtle shift in weight. He expected her to comment on her parents or the engagement, or have some sickened reaction to the story, but
instead she asked about the personal life that followed after they departed ten years ago. "I escaped with my friends Isabel and Farlan. We stayed on the move so Kenny couldn't track me down in the underground. I was filled with guilt for years, Mikasa—I wanted to become a good person so I could make you and your parents proud, but by then I knew our plans to get married were gone and I became more corrupt with every passing day," and then, Levi narrated his tale, beginning to end and he hadn't a doubt in his mind Mikasa would be the first and last to ever hear his pitiful biography. He exposed one of his most cherished memories to her, he might as well level the balance by telling his worse memories as well.

Down in the grungy underground, Levi built up a name and reputation, though not a noble one worth bragging over. Unrestrained and defiant, Levi stole and cheated and fought dirty and bloody. With bad influences all around, he soon learned all he needed to know, and also learned things he shouldn't have. At one point in his corrupt life, he even became promiscuous until even sex felt numb to him.

One day, he simply stopped feeling, forcing him to give up nearly anything that once granted him just a pinch of pleasure because his body naturally counter-reacted anything that could cause eventual harm, like poison or a fever, because his happiness always turned to pain. Soon he couldn't enjoy a single damn thing in his miserable life. The hope he had with Kenny and all his fairy tale dreams of getting married to Mikasa, raising a family, living a normal life and being apart of hers again were all gone. At that point, he went with the muddy current and lost his direction, struggling to keep his head above water, knowing he could drown any second.

Everything was ripped from him at once. His birth parents were dead, Kenny betrayed him and wanted to make him into a monster and he ran away from that fate, but became another species of a monster anyway. He didn't feel pain or emotions and he didn't feel guilt when he hurt others. The only people he came to care for at the time were Isabel and Farlan—but even they were taken from him.

The dread staked in his chest even deeper until he finally buckled under the pain. But while on his knees, begging for his own death to free him from the life of misery, he had looked up. An outlet presented himself before him. Erwin had burned the dreary shadow around him with a hopeful glow. The Commander showed him the hope the Survey Corps could offer, and Levi picked himself up and followed blindly, because the only thing he knew how to do in his pathetic life was follow any thin string of hope.

While always fearing that thread would snap, Levi went on with his new life as a soldier, but even seeing the outside world lost its charm after a while. Killing monsters didn't grant him satisfaction after a few dozen strikes with his blade. Seeing more of his companions die mission after mission just blackened Levi's heart more. The dead haunted him nightly in his dreams, blaming him, calling him a failure, their dying screams waking him repeatedly until he couldn't even enjoy the oblivion that came with sleep anymore.

It didn't matter how many thousands of civilians in these forsaken walls idolize him and called him a hero; Humanity's Strongest, as they dubbed him as. The title meant nothing to him because the people he wanted approval from either betrayed him, died, or were taken from him and overall, he wasn't the hero they wrapped him up to be. Just a corrupt lowlife without a purpose, without happiness or hope, that's all he ever thought he'd be. Just a pathetic man that followed a thin shed of hope.

Levi followed that deteriorating string into the courtroom after hearing about the Titan boy who plugged up Wall Maria. When he heard the sweet name "Mikasa Ackerman" called to speak, all lost hope returned in that hazy instant, strengthening that wearing string.

As she spoke, Levi turned a corner glance at her down the row, her voice still as sweet and
soothing as honey, but there was a sadness laced in now. A low drone of deep sorrow and Levi soon found out why.

All while miraculously maintaining his composure, his emotions warred between the happiness of seeing Mikasa again and the dread of learning the news that her parents were brutally murdered. It felt like someone indirectly told him his own parents were dead. One would think hearing news like that wouldn't hurt as bad the second time—but it hurt even worse; his heart ached and he no longer cared about the scrabble between the conflicting opinions bouncing from one side of the room to the other, but at the same time his chest fluttered at the notion of fate bringing them into same room after ten years.

Maybe his luck ran out at that point, because the Titan boy he was order to beat just so happened to be a close friend of Mikasa's. Levi didn't want to harm a kid, but it was their only chance of gaining custody of him. That, and he couldn't sit back as cravens called Mikasa a conspiring monster, too, and threatened to dissect her. The brutal show luckily distracted everyone from their disputes and worked in the Survey Corps favor, but Mikasa had pinned an immediate grudge on him in that instant. That fierce stare she stabbed him with made him hold back a smirk. There was no mistaking it, even while she wore a face like that, that was definitely his sweet Mikasa.

Even during all the chaos, time seemed to stop for him. Even though her face twisted wickedly and she looked a second away from strangling him with his own cravat, she matured and grew more beautiful than he ever imagined. That innocent threat she had given him as a child before his departure back to the underground replayed in his head during that very moment.

"I'll be very mad if you take too long."

Indeed, her reaction was fitting. He had taken far too long to see her again—so long she didn't even recognized him. But that didn't matter, because once he saw her, he knew he would never take his eyes off her again. Never will he let her fade from his sight again and become a small, unreachable dot on the horizon. The last time he drifted too far he lost her for ten long miserable years.

Never again will he walk through life numb and without purpose. Protect Mikasa in every way he possibly can. That was the goal he needed, the one he thrived for but couldn't complete due to the circumstances, but circumstances had brought them together again. The reason why he felt empty all those years was because he was going down the wrong path, living the wrong life, like an owl soaring in the day; it didn't make sense and it went against his whole purpose and the way he was programmed.

That little girl he once knew had grown, he soon realized, strong and smart and beautiful. And she had just as much taken from her as him, and likely even more. Her wonderful parents, and her home were lost twice. The only family she had left was the Yeager's, and one was dead and the other missing. Eren was all she had left, and the only family Levi truly had left was her.

"I spent every day with you, holding on to this secret, and I'm honestly sorry for lying to you." He sincerely feared she would feel betrayed and he didn't know how to atone. "I just...I didn't know how to tell you. We never had a moment alone like this to talk about it privately."

His follow up story hit Mikasa like a sudden tumble to the ground; leaving her disoriented and queasy, feeling like she was propelled all about. The emotion in Levi's voice was raw and if she felt daring enough, she would've liked to turn to see his expression. Surely, another person sat behind her, not the abnormal man with the stone-cold mask she came to know.

Now that they were on the topic of regrets and grief, she had a few confessions and apologies she wanted to get off her chest. "If anyone should be sorry," she mandered, "it's me. I know I wasn't
the best underling. I talk back to you and let my personal feelings get in the way. You never scolded me for it, though—I guess that's when I realized you were a good person. You've been through a lot, Levi, and that's something I didn't guess. I never could even began to wonder about what sort of background you came from—I appreciate you sharing that with me. I know it took a lot to say." She heard many rough tales while eavesdropping on other recruits sob-stories, but she had to admit that Levi's full story was indeed the saddest her ears had filtered thus far. Levi was truly cursed with a vile case of tragic hero syndrome.

"...And thank you for listening," was all Levi managed to say. He did go overboard here and there, but it only takes one word to turn into a speech, just like it only takes one Titan knocking down a wall to make cities infested with the horrible things.

Looking back, Mikasa made the right choice by choosing to envy him; to secretly look up to him. Levi was strong, not just physically (although that strength of his couldn't be matched) but his mind and emotions were always well guarded, impenetrable, yet he had told her all these private thoughts and snippets of his life. He trusted her with his weaknesses—it took a true warrior to admit to their faults and fears.

With the life he endured, the man deserved to hear some feedback, some praise to know that all his choices weren't made in vain. "You may have made some mistakes, and maybe there's some choices you regret, but at least you kept my mothers promise, if that counts for something," and it did, according to Levi. Her mother was very important to him. Tight lipped, she bobbed her head while replaying the times Levi had protected her and those important to her as if further convincing herself.

"You think so?" Levi's tone spiked dubiously, somehow he gathered enough nerve to prompt her to confirm. The last he checked, he failed her mother's promise. All this time, he hasn't been protecting Mikasa, not her life nor her fragile heart. Only recently had he become involved again in her life, and even now he failed constantly. Eren, someone precious to her, had been kidnapped and hurt more times than Levi could count, her friends were suffering and she had more heartache then she puts on—the cold mask she wore can't disguise her around others like himself that style themselves in the same masks for the same purposes.

Mikasa had, for the most part, been keeping herself alive. While Levi was playing thug in the underground, her parents were murdered. That's something he could have prevented if he were there like he was supposed to be. If things got bad with Kenny, her mother told him to come home and he should have—he would've made sure that no one laid a finger on any of them. It was Eren who saved her then. And it was Eren's parents she lost again. More heartache was placed on Mikasa because Levi wasn't around to protect her. He thought staying away would protect her. How wrong he was.

"You did," she assured him, "you always look out for not just me, but all of us. I know you and I don't always get along—well, that's mainly my fault for talking out of place often, but just know I do appreciate everything you do and all the sacrifices you make, we all do."

It meant a lot to hear that about his squad, out of her mouth too to boot. Those kids were important to Levi; he would've felt like he was floating on clouds if he didn't feel like a block of heavy ice.

"Thanks. That's reassuring."

The silence remained for long minutes after that. Mikasa stared into darkened space that her eyes had adjusted to long ago, tracing the brick crevices of the chimney with her eyes until a question jumped unbidden from her mouth. "Are we...still technically engaged?"

Levi braced himself with a deep breath, inflating his chest against Mikasa's back. "Yes. Your
parents wrote out their consent and Kenny signed it off as my guardian. The sealed document was brought to consultation and validated. It was never broken or voided. He supposed she would've found out about it eventually when she wanted to get married. No one can have two engagements pending at once. At least she heard it from his own mouth first. "I should have told you sooner. Once all this mess is over with, we can go void it together."

Swiveling around in his lap, her face turned to his alarmingly close. "Now, hold on," she said, but she didn't even have a follow up reason at the ready.

Levi wanted to back away, but being pinned as he were he could only flinch back and let down a stiff gulp as Mikasa trapped him in her shadowy gaze. He had expected a quick "okay." This is a direction in the conversation he wasn't prepared to take. What does she plan on saying next?

While she gathered her thoughts with a brooding wrinkle on her brow, Levi waited and it was tantalizing.

"You want to break the engagement?" she asked carefully and dreadfully slow, uncertain of her own words coming out of her mouth.

"...Why wouldn't I?" he questioned with a voice as confused as the outlines of her darkened features. He didn't mean to offend her by questioning her, he just didn't understand how to answer such a question. Yes, they were engaged, but that was all arranged under Kenny's brilliant plan. Now that Levi was no longer an heir to Kenny's work, and her parents were departed, there was no need for the engagement to remain pending.

"I just..." she flushed, tossing her head wildly as if to wake her up. "You're right. That was stupid to ask."

"I didn't say it was stupid, I was just surprised."

Mikasa was quiet for a while, giving her mind a chance to catch up with her heart, which was apparently speaking for her because she hadn't a clue what she was even considering...and then it clicked. Before she could review the new realization, she spoke aloud, "I know you probably just see me as the same child you met back then...but... My parents approved of you," she blurted out. "They wanted us together."

"... . . . . . ." Levi fell speechless. Now he saw where she's going with this. All this time he set himself up for the predictable concerning his and Mikasa's relationship and it's been everything but, and right now proved that. He figured she would want the engagement gone as soon as possible to sever all ties between them—but she was saying she's against that idea. It made it seem like he solely wanted to get the engagement voided (which, of course, wasn't the case). But really, what other option was there? Voiding the engagement was the only thing that would make Mikasa happy in the long run. Going along with some corruptly created engagement wasn't a wise course of action.

It pained him to say, but since he's in a particularly truthful mood, he's going to stick to it. "Mikasa, I know it seems like your parents wanted us together, but you wouldn't be happy marrying a guy like me. I understand that was your parents wish, but when you became of age, you were going to be asked like I was. The engagement wasn't set in stone. Even if your parents were alive today, they were going to give you a choice, just as I was given one."

"And you said yes," she reminded him flatly.

Levi swallowed his words. He didn't have the guts to confirm that.
Mikasa stared blankly, her throat infested with dryness. "All this time, I always felt so alone, like I had no one but Eren and Armin. Now that I know I have an uncle and a fiancé... I don't know, I just..." she thrashing toward him, her sudden burst of energy had Levi recoiling. "I feel happy. Happy. I don't even remember the last time I felt genuinely happy."

Mikasa looked anything but happy as she cradled her head and fought back tears, but it was just so much to absorb. Trying to settle down, she turned her face from him. "When I tried to think of the future, I would become depressed at the idea of getting married because my father and mother would never be there to give their approval or meet the man I love. Without that, the concept of marriage felt pointless. But they met you. Accepted you. They thought you were a worthy man for me. I'd hate to go against my parents judgment—if they saw something in you, then I can't ignore it, I have to try to see what they saw, too." And honestly, she already started to before she even knew about his connection to her family. On the outside, Levi appeared to be a cold and detached man without any care for others, and Mikasa held a grudge against him for a long time before seeing with her own eyes how selfless he was, how he tried to cheer up others in his own roundabout way, and how deeply he cared about others well being.

As much as Levi wanted to selfishly agree and convince her further to follow her parents judgment, he wasn't that cruel. She's still too traumatized and young to realize how big of a mistake that would be. "It was a long time ago. I'm sure your parents would approve any man you picked. You're a smart girl and you'd find a good suitor on your own," he paused here and reluctantly spat out, "like Eren."

"I don't want Eren," she snapped, her expression harsh and an instant later she almost slipped and said 'I want you', but she luckily didn't say it, because she had no idea what those words meant yet. She didn't know how she felt about Levi, or Eren for that matter, and right now she couldn't figure it out because she had enough to think about. Mikasa might not know who or what she wants, but she does know for certain that she undoubtedly wanted to make her parents proud. "I'm not romantically in love with him," she calmed down to explain. "Not anyone. Not at the moment. I thought I never would fall in love. But my parents..." She knew Levi couldn't see her expression well in the darkness, but she tried to render a look worth pitying. "I know, it sounds so stupid and immature but my parents wish was to see us get married. And you made a promise to my mother to take care of me. Levi, isn't this meant to be? Isn't this the right choice? All of this, Kenny suddenly coming back into your life, us all coming here together, the truth rising to the light, I think there was a reason, and I know calling it fate sounds ridiculous but I don't know what else to call it."

With her palm resting on her wavering heart beat, she paused here to suck in a quivering breath, checking on Levi in doing so, who was gingerly staring at her. "I know I sound selfish and immature and I realize the engagement was a plan conducted by Kenny. But Levi, I don't want to void the engagement. Not if I don't have to. You gave your choice, and now I'm old enough to give mine. If we gave it a chance and took it slow, I'm sure we can somehow work together and make it work. But...it's okay if you don't want to. I won't be mad and wherever my parents are, I'm sure they'll understand, but please, Levi, consider it. I lost them before I could ever do anything special for them or make them proud. The least I could do if marry the man they engaged me to."

In that moment something overcame Levi. Emotions energized through him like surging lightening. Thoughts tangled dangerously with impulses. Desire became desperate and his lips became bound to hers before they knew what hit either of them.

With shoulders stiff and erect, Mikasa halted her breathing and her body shut down, aside from her heart that was hammering so hard it hurt. A cold sweat beaded down Mikasa's skin beneath
her clothes, that suddenly felt sweltering and glued to her skin. A burn scorched her ears and her
heartbeat throbbed within the cartilage when her lips were pressed against firmer. Even though her
eyes were wide open, she could scarcely see, but what she focused on was what she could
feel...and she felt everything. Her heart panging, her blood coursing, the heatwave crashing over
her face, the small nose rubbing against hers and the plump press against her tightly locked lips.
All of these intruding sensations barged through her at once, and between her own body heating
up and the warm lips clung to hers, Mikasa melted like ice.

Just as she relaxed her lips and slit her eyes close, Levi had lurched away, scrambling backward.
"Shit." Evident panic struck him, and he panted wildly to catch his breath. "I...I am so sorry. I
don't know why I just did that."

He tapped his lips, as if checking if they were his own that held the touch of hers on them. Why
did he just lose all control over himself? In those short seconds, time entered a slow interval and all
he could think about was her lips—but now everything, fear, regret, guilt, came rushing into his
mind all at once. He never thought he'd ever touch those lips, but he had just forced a kiss upon
Mikasa before she could even refuse.

That's the lowest of the low. He's trash and he was expecting a punch to the face any second, and
he deserved it. Actually, if she didn't punch him, he would encourage her to do so.

"No...it's...okay?" Her statement rose in question, as if she wasn't actually sure.

"What do you mean it's okay? No, it's not." He thrusted his body forward for emphasis, but
Mikasa scooped herself up from his direct scorn, forcing Levi to follow her silhouette around the
room as he yelled at shadows, "I fucked up, and I want you to admit that I fucked up. You don't
have to say it's okay just because you're afraid since I'm your superior." He never wanted her to
feel obligated to agree on everything he said and did just because he's a higher rank than her.
That's a horrible feeling he knew too well.

A match stuck and a somber halo burned the darkness and highlighted Mikasa's face. Levi
gawked, studying the casting shadows flickering on her features. She looked everything and
anything but afraid.

"I didn't say it was okay because I think you can take advantage of me, idiot." The pinched match
hovered over the wick of the candle on the mantel. The flame guttered and a smell of sulfur
perfumed the living room when she shook out the match. "You might be my Captain but I'll call
you out when you're wrong. I just happen to agree with you most of the time."

While Levi brooded densely in silence, Mikasa settled back down on the furry rug beside him.
"So...Let me get this straight," Levi struggled to grasped onto the words he'd thought he'd never
speak in a situation he never thought he'd find himself in. "You...didn't mind me kissing you?"

"Well..." Mikasa leaned back on her hands, tugging her lips to the side; they still felt as tingly as
her fluttering heart. "I would have liked to be a little more prepared. You see, that was my first
kiss."

Covering his face with his hands, Levi clawed at the wrinkles in his forehead. "Damnit. I'm
sorry." Now she had a lousy first kiss with some old pervert because he couldn't control his urges.

"I didn't dislike it." She didn't dislike a kiss from Captain Levi. What a shock, more shocking than
learning she's engaged to the man.

Hands swiping down from his face, he slid them to cover his still tingling lips, unveiling the most
stunned glare Mikasa will ever see from Levi. "...Really?" he didn't trust his hearing at all, but
with his eyes bulged in disbelief, he saw for himself how calm she appeared, with a light layer of
red flushed on her cheeks and a glossy film over her dazed eyes.

Even with her belated consent, Levi still felt like shit for pinning that on her out of the blue and
stealing her first kiss on top of it all. There's only so much shock he could pile on his poor girl
before she snapped under the weight. He made some dangerous risks tonight, and he's willing to
own up to the mistakes fully. "I really fucked up," Levi muttered, ripping on his bangs until it
stung his scalp, punishing himself for acting so impulsively. He had fucked up many times before
and made a lot of regrettable choices—but this was by far the most idiotic things he'd ever done.

Already recovered from the shock, Mikasa leaned closer to her Captain suffering from a nervous
break down, hearing him curse himself out over what just happened.

"Hey..." Mikasa reached out to him tentatively, she's never saw her Captain in such a state. With
all the intense emotion he's showing, she couldn't help but think he resembled Eren. Never once
did she ever think she would see Levi show so much emotion, it's like his inner gears that kept
him under control broke down and now he's malfunctioning.

As he rubbed his face vigorously, she placed her hand on his back to comfort him—and he
nervously jerked a mile, but she kept her hand there, as if trying to tame a feral.

"Please, try to calm down."

After reliving his past and kissing the woman he loved, calm was most definitely not a mood he
could retaliate to right now. But for Mikasa's sake, Levi did try his best to compose himself.
Abrasively frictioning his palms against his lap, he sniffed in a jagged breath through his nose,
trying to disregard the nerves.

"I know this will sound out of line to say, but do I need to remind you that I said I want to marry
you? It will take time until we would behave like a husband and wife, but I know once we got to
that point we would be doing more than kissing, so..."

Slowly, almost frighteningly, Levi swept the room and his small gems of blue landed on her. Both
of them sat still, staring at the others flickering features and the fire orbs swimming in their eyes.

Maybe mentioning her desire to wed him wasn't wise to bring up. He was already battling his
emotions and she went and set a new ton on him. But her mind was already on this track and
following the course. There's no way she could back down once her goals were set.

Right now, Levi was trying to gulp down the lump in his throat while his heart pinched from the
sudden realization he'd just fell on. He had became so tangled in the idea of her wanting to marry
him, just the bland concept of it, that he didn't even realize that Mikasa was suggesting an actual
romantic relationship together. Marriage always felt like a tool that was used for a conned benefit,
with the shitty way Kenny raised him, he half believed that, but reliving his time with Mikasa's
family helped him remember what real marriages were made of. The way her mother and father
were, the bond they shared, the love they had for their daughter—Mikasa didn't want to get
married for the sake of gain, she wanted them together in that same way her parents were.

She might just be considering it for the sake of her parents wish, and she probably doesn't hold
any feelings for Levi, but she's willing to give it a try—willing to give him a try.

Noticing Levi was still quite rattled, Mikasa smacked his back and forced some amusement into
her tone in hopes of lessening the tension. "Geez, you're always so dramatic, don't think I don't
notice you always beating yourself up when things go wrong."
That gesture reminded him of her father, except Mikasa was a hell of a lot stronger than him and the friendly pat felt like a stinging wound.

The friendly smack and cheering words didn't seem to take him out of his trance, though, so she set her mind on another consoling method while she had the floor to herself. Curling her knees to her chest, she wiggling her toes as she reflected back. "You know... I do remember little fragments from the time we met." It had clearly came to her when they kissed, that moment helped clear the dusty memories from a hidden crevice in her mind, it was similar to the special moment they had just created.

The distant-look in his eyes finally melted away, her words had lured him back to her, exposing the attentive stare beneath.

"It's hard to explain, but I didn't remember you exactly, I was never able to remember your face or your name or anything that important. I was very lonely as a child, so when I thought back to certain memories I thought I must have had an imaginary friend or something and my memories were warped because of that. It sounds silly, but I had memories of this faceless man in my mind...I'm pretty sure it was you because one memory stood out to me: when we watched the sunset. I remember that. Every morning I watched it alone, but I knew someone was with me a few times, it must have been during your stay with us. When I would think back to it, I knew it wasn't one of my parents—we rarely had visitors, yet I still remembered another presence there. I always figured I made a very convincing imaginary friend and my memories mistook him for a real person." She let her lips stretch into a smile, shaking her head ironically. "I can't believe it was you all this time. At least one mystery in this world had been solved."

"About damn time." With his elbow propped on his leg, he chortled in his hand in an attempt to loosen up his anxiety. At least she remembered something—that felt comforting that he didn't cherish these memories alone.

Direct affection was not a dish he tasted often, he was unsure how to reply to her—there were no words that he knew of that could describe how he felt right now, about any of this, especially her consent to their engagement. But in spite of being lost for words, that complicated feeling showed physically. His expression felt loose, unwrinkled and soft for the first time in years.

To Mikasa, his kind, unguarded eyes locked on her told her everything she wanted to hear. A complicated feeling began to simmer inside her, too, and without meaning to, she grabbed hold of the sleeve of his arm with a slight tug, not knowing how to word the request she desired.

Bemused, Levi tilted his head at her and approached this unexpected matter as gently as he could. "What is it, Mikasa?"

"I..." her voice cracked, she felt her jaw lock down, as if trying to keep her words sealed, but she pried open her lips by force. "I don't know how to say this subtly—can you kiss me again? This time while I'm prepared."

With his lips partially divided, Levi made a sound here that didn't quite resemble human language; the little breathless utter stretched out on a weak note as he studied her ruddy cheeks, her averted eyes and the way a ball of his sleeve's fabric squeezed in her fist.

He'd kiss her another thousand times if she asked for it. Those silver eyes, swirled with gold from the feeble flame, seemed to melt in their low-lidden sockets when she glanced up at him. With a stiff nod and an even stiffer swallow, he rose a tentative hand and ran it up her cheek, combing the fringe from her face, and then leaned gently into her lips. Their lips only pressed together a few seconds, light like a delicate touch of a feather.
How could such a simple gesture make Mikasa's heart sink to her stomach and pulse through her entire body?

When Levi pulled back to check expression, she had her eyes closed still, her lips tingling and still partially puckered and he relished the expression while he could.

When her eyes finally slit open, she blinked a few times, eyelashes as heavy lead. Her entire body felt heavy, in fact. If it weren't for Levi holding her head in place, she feared it would snap from the weight and roll away.

Raising her numb arm, Mikasa erected a finger up, hoping Levi would catch her drift because she felt too faint to speak, but unfortunately he just looked dumbfounded with an upturned brow. Weakly, she let in a breath, "One more, I need one more kiss to know how I feel," she slurred as if drunk, and a beat later Levi lunged forward for another kiss, his mouth open this time, but with too much acceleration, he toppled over the poor dazed girl, knocking her right onto the rug.

"Didn't mean to do that," he pressed up on his palms to removed some of his weight from her. "I don't know my own strength sometimes."

Stifling a giggle, Mikasa was still dizzy from the sudden shift. "Believe me, I understand."

His eyes melted in hers and soon all tension on his face dispersed. The back of his hand grazed over her face, barely touching the skin, and Mikasa sewed their fingers together into a tight stitch and moved his hand closer, wanting to feel his touch. The pores of his hands were calloused and dry from hard labor, but surprisingly warm. She never realized until now how big his hands were. With their fingers still braided together, he used his other hand to outline the very shape of her lips; his finger tip gliding over her silky lips—the pink hue of them glistened with his own saliva from when he kissed her last.

Levi stared down at her from above, seeing how her hair strains tufted out as wildly and untamed as the fur rug below her. All his mouth could do was gap speechlessly.

"What is it?" She couldn't quite read his eyes, and the line of his lip made it impossible to tell if he was subtly smiling or subtly frowning.

"You're beautiful," he whispered in a voice she never heard before.

Mikasa's back arched before her weak neck could lift her dizzy head, but she managed to reach Levi with pursed lips, joining their lips together softly before reclining back down, taking him with her with a gentle pull on his collar.

She never imagined herself ever touching Levi, only when she would think of beating him in revenge to the court hearing, but in spite of this, Mikasa rode her hands up his chest ever so naturally and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, accepting his body over hers fully.

As his body rubbed up against hers, his stomach felt like it was twisting in a knot, and soon their tongues tied together just as tight.

A type of chill ran through her that she never felt before—it wasn't a shudder from being cold, but a wave of a numbing prickle that covered every inch of her body, paying extra special mind between her thighs, where Levi had snugged his hips between. Mikasa held onto him tight, grasping at the fabric of his shirt, because it felt like the floorboards had disappeared beneath her and she was falling weightlessly in the air.

Mikasa moaned into his mouth, because she had something to say. Rather sloppily, their lips broke apart. "I—" she forced a solemn face to hide her embarrassment. "I like the way you kiss." Not
that she had anyone to compare to, but Levi, without a doubt, knew what he was doing—she didn't know how he did that thing with his tongue, but wow, it certainly felt wonderful.

Rubbing over her facial scar tenderly with a swipe of his thumb, his gaze was permanently locked on her overcast eyes. "And I like kissing you," he offered her a thin smile, and Mikasa couldn't believe she kissed the lips that had formed that beautiful smile.

As she relished in his touch, her lids curtained over her sight. Her emotions gained wings and she felt daring enough to explore even those most risky territories. She had the urge to touch Levi everywhere, and this was the first time in her life that she didn't have full control over her body. She doesn't fully understand these urges or sensations, but she couldn't restrain them either. Another peck landed on her and her eyes popped open, but soon slit closed contently, and the heat of passion between their lips burned twice as hot.

Levi had to be dreaming. Or dead. Maybe he never made it back from the horse stable and his lifeless body was eternally sleeping under a blanket of snow. But if that was the case, so be it. He accepted this version of purgatory, even if he's trapped in this cabin forever it would be a winter paradise. Nothing outside this cabin mattered anymore. Not the war, the Titans, the MP's. Nothing mattered except for Mikasa and that shy, genuine smile she gave him when they parted.

With emotions swelling and overwhelming, they took a break from exploring each others mouths. Resting their heads beside each other on the pillow with the fur blanket pulled up tight, Mikasa scooted in closer, stuffing her chin in his shoulder. Levi wrapped an arm around her, rubbing her shoulder blade.

She murmured into his fabric of his shirt, and Levi hummed to prompt her to repeat herself.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"What are you apologizing for?" He hadn't the faintest clue. If anyone should apologize it's him. He still couldn't fathom what just happened. It would hit him by morning, surely.

"I never knew we were family. I would have treated you much differently if I knew."

"Why are you worrying about something like that now?" He shook her gently to shake her out of those useless thoughts. "You weren't as bad as you might think," it's not like she ever hurt his feeling, and what does him being technical family to her have to do with the way she treats him? Just like the time they played House together, he felt like he wasn't understanding something. He didn't understand how playing pretend worked, and he also had no idea how family worked.

"Family is important to me. Very, very important," her throat sounded slick with saliva, as if on the verge of tears. She couldn't help but feel guilty. It was illogical to beat herself up about it, she knew, because she had no way of knowing the truth before Levi told her, but she wanted to make it up to him, and maybe now she can. She could give him the family he always wanted. He doesn't have to fear losing her like everyone else because she's strong enough so death wouldn't even dare try to part them. He doesn't have to be alone anymore or unloved. She will protect him. Just as she does with Eren and Armin. She had said in the past that there's only so much room in her heart, but she can make room for Levi. Hell, there was a growing slot there even before she knew they were betrothed. She will give that spot to him because he earned it.

Scooting closer, her nose brushed against his, her lips inching near but not touching. Being the impatient man he was, Levi moistened his lips with a lick and connected them, petting her hair as she rolled her hips closer to mold into his body. The rhythm of his heart beat pumping wildly against her chest synced with her own.
Feeling lulled, Mikasa curled her body close his, closing her eyes and Levi soon did the same, exhausted from their most adventuring night yet, and to think they didn't even need to leave the living room for this emotional draining journey.

She fell asleep first, breathing softly against Levi's collarbone. Levi swept her fringe from her face, tucking the strain behind her ear so he could get a look at her. It was dim and the candle was flickering weakly, but his eyes could still make out her glowing features. With their arms and legs tangled together, he kept that beautiful picture in mind when he closed his eyes, as if he couldn’t even bear to not look at her even when he slept.

~x~

The peaceful choir of chirping birds awoke Mikasa from her slumber the next morning. She squirmed, feeling tightly restrained but was too weary to figure out why. With a little grumble, she opened her lids and met two narrow eyes staring intently at her. Startled, she gasped and Mikasa shot straight up into a sitting position, untangling herself from the arms fastened around her.

Her mind and hair sat is disarray as she scanned around the living room, which was brimming with morning sun and looked completely different than it did under the shadows of night. Many things felt different, actually. Short bolts of recent memories swarmed her mind like an ambush. Hunching forward, she clasped her forehead as they all came rushing in like an overflowing river with a broken levee. Kenny, a well know serial killer, was her uncle. Levi knew her parents. They all met when she was a child. Levi was her fiancé. And her and her Captain passionately made-out last night until they fell asleep in each others arms.

As crazy as it all sounded, a normal person would've passed it all off as a dream, and she did for a split second before witnessing those unreadable eyes staring at her upon waking. Massaging her temple, she winced and bared her teeth to the pain. She wondered if this was what hangovers felt like. Her head aching was to be expected, though. Too much to absorb, too much to think about.

Warily with intended discretion, Levi rose off the pillow soon after her, making some space between them by shifting back. He studied her long and hard from his distance; she obviously had a headache, that much was clear and she looked as stressed as ever, but he supposed that was natural. If she woke up chipper he'd probably be terrified. Levi thought it best not to say anything, she's better off mulling over this herself without any of his meddling, unless she wanted to talk to him. A lot happened last night. The realizations might be arriving to her late and she might not be handling it well.

With the two of them alone in silence as they were, Mikasa searched her mind to find a substance to fill the awkwardness. She needed someone to quickly disrupt this uncomfortable aura between them.

"I'll...I'll get Kenny," she stumbled as she shifted to stand, and her knees caved and her body swayed, causing her to ram her shoulder against a corner in the wall. All along she could feel the pressure of Levi's eyes resting on her, seeing her all the way out of view, which made her more self aware of her walking (if you could even call tripping and stumbling walking).

When she escaped into the hall, Mikasa rewarded herself a breath against the log walls. With all that happened last night, it all felt natural under the heat of passion with all those emotions surrounding her, but now that the heat of passion extinguished, she couldn't help but feel uncomfortable. It's not that she regretted it...it's all just a lot to digest right now. It may just be seen as a simple kiss to some, but she kissed a man she never thought she'd kiss, a man she never thought she'd be engaged to, a man she never thought she would still be very willing to marry.

Tousling her hair to clear the thoughts and get back on track, Mikasa approached the basement
door, realizing too late that she had ran out of Levi's range so fast that she forgot to grab the key to the basement, but the thought came to her late when she had already latched a grip on the handle—and a foreboding dread filled her when the knob twisted in her hand.

The door was unlocked. How careless of them, they got so carried away by recalls from the past and emotions that they forgot to lock the basement door last night after Kenny headed off to bed.

Warily, she climbed down the steep steps, calling out to Kenny, but the only reply she received was her own echo. She warped around the brick corner, and set her eyes where Kenny dwelled on the cot.

But only a bundle of blankets met her urgent glare.

Before she let shock invade her face, she warped her head around and powered her steps to every corner of the basement, keeping her eyes open for the tall structure of black that formed her uncle. She looked behind the lined up shelves and clutter and barrels.

But she didn't find a trace of him.

Whirling around, she leaped up the stairs, skipping steps at a time and arrived to the top short of breath, coiling her head left and right down the hall. She shot her eyes forward into the bedroom right across, opening the door hard enough to cause the knob to dent a hole in the wall.

Empty.

She jogged up to the bathroom—empty again.

Mikasa rushed back to the living room, her feet hammering against the old floorboards, her eyes milling around for a sign of movement. The panic rose up her body, slowly, then overflowed, haunting her thoughts with dreary premonitions. The room spun blurry as she headed to the kitchen; the last possible place to check. Braking her pace by barring her hands against the frame of the door, she darted her eyes around frantically, hoping to spot Kenny, but only Levi met her urgent glare.

"Mikasa..." Levi dropped his spoon, for her sudden entrance jarred him from the depressing task of preparing his very last cup of tea. "What is it?"

With the way her shoulders curled tensely, Levi already saw the bad news forming on her lips before she muttered the verdict.

"Kenny...he's...he's missing."

Chapter End Notes

I'll admit I'm a little evil for that cliffhanger. But hey, I gave you kisses and cuddles so I'm safe, r-right? Anyway, the next chapter is going to be fun, it will probably end up being my personal favorite. I can't wait to release it~
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Phew, finally got this chapter up! I've been looking forward to getting to this part, and I gotta say, it was super fun to write. Well. Mostly. You see, I've never really wrote hetero smut before, so there was some struggling. But hey, it was a learning experience. Hope you guys enjoy the M-rated goodness~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Snow no longer fell from the gray overcast; the clouds finally ran out of its icy supply after spitting out an endless bizarre for the past few days. The thick accumulation of snow blanketed over the vast landscape, piles of it packed into dunes below. And above on the high tree branches, it sprinkled down like white powder every time the wind shook the trees.

A strip of red cloth whipped in the wind. A pair of blue gems glinted in the morning sun. Mikasa tucked her scarf into a secure loop around her neck, and Levi momentarily closed his soar, dry eyes.

"I grew up with Kenny, as you know," a thick fog discharged from Levi's chattering lips as he ambled through the crunching snow. Scoping the vast frozen lands, Levi's windburnt eyes landed back on Mikasa, who trudged close behind. "His motives and actions were always crystal clear to me; plans foreseen far before conducted. You could say we share one mind, but I did not see this coming."

The sudden escape was probably a last minute decision on Kenny's end—if they hadn't forgotten to lock the basement door last night, Kenny wouldn't have took the risk to break free. Since the opportunity was practically handed to him, he took it. Because of their carelessness, Mikasa and Levi are being punished, forced to search for their runaway prisoner in post-blizzard conditions.

Mikasa and Levi were both up until late into the night, indicating that Kenny fled sometime during the black of morning. The sun had long awaken from its slumber, meaning Kenny had the lead by a few hours.

"I barely know Kenny and even I didn't see this coming," Mikasa stated crossly; not that she placed any blame on her Captain. The whole dreaded situation just made her short-fused. And trying to keep up with Levi's pace made her far more tired. Also, cold and angry when she realized how difficult it would be to track her uncle down in this frozen wasteland.

"You don't understand what I mean;" he drawled, winded. Already, Levi felt wrung out from the laborious tromp through the high snow. "Kenny isn't stupid—shocker, I know. He might come off as a reckless serial killer, but he's not the type of man to run off into fatal conditions. The Kenny I know would wait for an ideal chance to escape—not spontaneously vanish in the midst of nowhere."

As Mikasa considered his words, she followed him into the forest, leaving behind the scenic view of the white plains that lead to mountains boarding the horizon, tops dipped in golden orange. The forest hadn't yet been touched by light, or perhaps never seen light due to its massive trees and canopies of bare branches.
"I anticipated Kenny trying to flee, but not like this," Levi started, "not while we were here under these dire conditions. I expected him to attempt an escape once we were on the road again, or when the snow thawed. It just doesn't make sense."

"Well," Mikasa caught up to his side in a jog, "don't stress yourself out trying to figure out his motives. We'll question him on his actions ourselves once we secure him back into our custody."

Levi gave her a measured look, accompanied by a nod. "You're right," turning from her, he marveled up at the trees in passing. Particles of snow flaked down from the high branches, melting as soon as they made contact with his cheek. "I'm also kicking his ass for putting us through this trouble."

"Think about punishment later. We have to use our time wisely or else well freeze to death," Mikasa reminded him, again. She first reminded him of their ticking clock after proposing to search for a lead in the horse stable, thinking he might've stole one for transportation. Both of their horses were accounted for, strangely enough, suggesting that Kenny was on foot.

With that known, Levi stubbornly said: "If that bastard could survive on foot in this weather, we can, too."

But something important to consider was that Kenny had a head start and likely had a destination, where Levi and Mikasa were wandering aimlessly in a motionless forest with no leads or hints as to where the man ran off to.

"Of course we'll use our time wisely," Levi assured. "We don't want that shithead getting too far. He'll never make it to civilization, not on foot. Knowing he won't cause anyone other than us trouble is slightly comforting, I guess."

In truth, that granted neither of them comfort, and they both knew those words didn't fool the other as they pushed onward, leaving their mark behind them. There's always unforeseeable possibilities in this unpredictable world they lived in. Too little was know about Kenny to assume anything from him. For all they know, he could've planned an escape route, or had his Central MP buddies pick him up.

Distant ululating from wildlife echoed throughout the dispiriting woods. A growl from a bear. A hiss from a mountain lion. A howl from a wolf sounded the closest. Not even a flicker of fear invaded either Levi or Mikasa.

Creatures in the woods didn't scare them. Very few things scared them, in fact. The few things they did fear had nothing to do with animals or monsters or Titans. No, that's child's play. The real nightmares came from a fear that touched close to home, a fear you couldn't always avoid no matter how hard you try; a fear that affects the very lives of everyone.

Failure.

Losing Kenny ignited that fear.

What would he do if he flees? Would he steal Eren again? Mikasa feared.

Would he kill another ally. Like Nita or Reeves? Levi wondered.

To humanity's strongest duo, that was what fear looked like.

As they entered a clearing, a cloud floated over the freshly risen sun. The forest dimmed more so, as if a blanket tossed over them. With the only heat source covered, it felt more like a warm blanket was ripped off them.
All that stood out in this winter wasteland was the assortment of creaking black trees, shivering from the constant howling gust. That, and the spying black crows perched up on the branches, watching them pass with their beady eyes. They cawed impatiently, as if the crows were hungry and wanted the two soldiers to die already so they could make a chilled snack out of their rotted meat.

The crows made Mikasa anxious. She found her feet stopping, her eyes fixated on the shine of black feathers, and her lips twitching into a distressed frown. She also found her hand reaching blindly for the only other human within reach in this grim forest.

"What is it?" Levi felt the tug on his sleeve and followed her gaze, and noticed the lined up crows overhead, adorning the branches like sprouted black leaves.

Levi discovered for himself what had made Mikasa uneasy. The sight of crows was never a good sign—not that he considered himself to be the superstitious type.

"They're bad omens," her breath steamed a whisper of worry. Her fingers grasped his bunched up sleeve tighter. "Kenny's gone, and I just keep thinking he's going to hurt more people, or take Eren, or—" her voice cracked from the frost biting her throat. She wanted to keep her personal worries to herself, like she always had, but for the first time she felt that she could confide with someone else.

"We'll get him back," Levi promised, clasping her shoulder a moment before setting his eyes on the ground, searching. His fingers burned when he dusted the snow off a jagged surface.

Mikasa saw the rock toss once in his hand before he pitched it with a whipping swing at the spying birds. The flock of them scattered, fluttering their wings in a roaring cry. A swarming black cloud formed above once they ascended to the skies, their black feathers raining down in the place of snow.

"There." Levi looked away from the soaring crows. "No birds, no bad omens."

Mikasa would've smiled at his attempt to cheer her up if her chapped lips weren't frozen into a frown.

Levi didn't want to admit that he, too, felt uneasy. Not at the birds, or at the threatening chill dropping his body temperature, but because he shared the same fears as Mikasa. He did not know what Kenny would do if they could not recapture him in time, either. Even if he Kenny died out here it would be a hindrance to them all. Currently, he's their most valued source for information. As hard as it was to admit, they needed him alive and in their company, but the biggest paradox of all was him being alive and on the run, because that itself caused yet another hindrance.

A gentler breeze ruffled Mikasa hair as she turned direction in time to see Levi hopping up on a rotting log, his eyes searching for tracks. The gust turned harsher at him, tugging at his thin clothing. With the way the wind kept sweeping the ground, it must've covered all of Kenny's tracks. It was as if he disappeared into thin air.

Mikasa looked down at the show crushed beneath her feet, then let her view expand over the white ground surrounded by trees. There wasn't even a foot step made by an animal, never mind a human. Not even the wildlife was foolish enough to venture out in this cold. She pulled her scarf over her numbed nose and red ears to protect them; her eyes teared for uncountable reasons.

Levi looked back at her then with a gaze filtered in a glossy film. His complexion ashen, his lips chapped; his dry cheeks ruddy and fragile looking, like porcelain about to crack.
Levi could feel the cold hug around him, vicious enough to pierce his gut like a cold blade. His skin pricked and his hair bristled when the crying wind tackled him fiercely with no remorse.

Mikasa feared what would happen if Kenny wasn't recovered in time, but checking the current state of Levi now made her far more worried about him. "Captain, I think we should head back. It's entirely too cold, and we have no leads on Kenny. We'll only end up hurting ourselves at this rate." Mikasa peered up at the clear passage of open skies around the trees, holding herself for warmth. The skies were gray but no threatening storm clouds were in sight. There was no worry about another blizzard sweeping up their time. "I don't think it'll snow any more. We can go back to the base and form a plan, then head off in a different direction and track him down when we're more prepared."

Levi kicked up the snow when he hopped off the log, his gait frozen and hard as he walked up to her—his gaze was locked on something in the distance. "I think you're right. But before we head back," he elongated his arm with a point. Mikasa squinted through the mist and tress to the target. A craggy terrain came to view, with sparkling icicles decorating a dark gap.

"Let's inspect that cave," Levi proposed. "There's no way in hell Kenny could survive the long journey back to civilization on foot—hell, there's a fat chance he'd even survive on horseback in this temperature. We can conjecture that he's hiding somewhere warm until he's given the right circumstances to leave."

That's sharp thinking; Mikasa didn't even considered Kenny being somewhere close in the vicinity. Now when she thought it over, it made sense. In these weather conditions without supplies or a horse for travel, Kenny had to be close by. Just like Levi guessed, he's probably waiting out somewhere warm, waiting for the snow to thaw so he could escape for good. Captain Levi wasn't know for his strategics, but Mikasa thought then that he's more intellectual than he puts off.

Before they could reach the cave in the foggy distance, however, they had a bridge to cross. If only they had an actual bridge to use. All they had to walk on was a slippery sheet of ice. The frozen creek shining across their path would only take a few dozen careful strides, but the hazard of walking on frozen water was highlighted without either of them having to point it out.

Levi ran his eyes along the ridged rocks trimming the creek until they disappeared out of sight's range. With no visible way around the frozen water, Levi braved the first step. First he hovered his boot over the sheen and pressed down his weight pound by pound, slowly, as if testing the limit. Once the sheet calculated half his weight, he dared another step. Both his feet were now grounded on the ice, unaffected by the added weight.

"Seems thick enough to walk on." To be absolutely sure, he boldly pounded his foot into a section. Solid as cement.

Mikasa went next, taking her first steps just as cautiously as Levi, who now took the lead about a foot from her.

Trying to concentrate on her steps while witnessing Levi—the great prodigy of the Survey Corps—slip about as if his body was made of rubber in her peripheral vision was not an easy task.

"Careful, it's slippery," he said, skidding again.

"You're telling me?" Her words dipped in a giggle. "You're the only one slipping." She wanted to laugh but her heart leaped into her throat when a step turned into a brief glide. She returned to focusing.
"Shut up," he slipped and did everything but fall, obliquely faltering until he regained his balance. "I don't know what the brats in your graduating class learned in training, but I never learn how to walk on frozen water."

"It's not that hard. You're just walking too hard."

"That's just how I walk," he slued to one side, catching his balance before tipping over.

"Walk gentler," she instructed.

He considered and tried.

"That's worse."

"You are still walking exactly the same," she pointed out.

"I really don't need a lesson on walking right now," he held his arms out as if balancing on a fifty-foot beam. He might fail at walking on ice, but at least his good balance kept him from falling on his tush, so far.

"If Kenny did go this way," he wondered aloud, "how the fuck side he get across this?" Levi was obviously frustrated, and since he wasn't making much progress, Mikasa soon took the lead, flaunting off her lecture stride for his envious eyes.

Just as she passed him, Mikasa whirled around in a jerky glide, detecting Levi's unstable posture before his feet could even leave the ground. Just as he was falling back, she curled her braced fingers around his wrist, her shoes slipping and her posture limbering forward with his weight before tugging him up right.

Even with her tethering aid, he wiggled and flailed, reflexively trying to find the stable balance he lost, and in doing so, caused Mikasa, too, to start losing her balance.

Wobbling as she were, she let go of Levi's wrist, hoping that would help her regain control. Instead, she gained a cold and painful seat when she fell back on her ass.

"You okay?" He said, gliding into a static pose (as static as his slippy feet could manage).

Mikasa felt if she moved, her body would shatter like cracked glass. "If having a broken tailbone is okay, then sure," her voice strained in pain, and after a second of bracing the new pain, she carefully heaved herself up and lifted to her knee.

Just before she stood, she snapped her eyes on Levi, and he looked back at her in disbelieving concern, because what they heard then was more unnerving than the sound of wild animals or crows.

A crunching, snapping crack sounded beneath Mikasa, and the next sound that followed was the sound of flowing water spashing after Mikasa fell straight down into the freezing water.

Not wanting to cause any worry, Mikasa diluted the shock and immediately said, "I'm okay."

Levi barely made out her words through her chattering teeth.

"It's not deep," she demonstrated her ability to stand in the shallow water.

Levi approached slowly as to not disrupt the ice further. "You're going to need to push yourself up. If I come any closer I'll fall in, too."
Luckily the creek wasn't very deep; the frozen water only reached her hip. Getting out was the issue; every time she set her hands on the icy edges, her palms would either slip or her weight would break away more ice, making the hole she sunk into larger.

"Shit," Levi spat as he observed her struggle.

His worried eyes looked sharper than the numbing pain shooting up her legs. Hopelessly, he skimmed his eyes around the deaf woods, as if searching for help. Knowing damn well there was no one else to aid her, Levi inspected the space around her and took a step on a solid-looking area.

"Stop," Mikasa, still clutching at the edge, demanded through blue tinted lips. "You're going to fall in."

"It's fine," he took one more careful step. The ice cracked but didn't break apart. He lurched over, stretching out his arm. "Give me your hand."

Only the brush of their finger tips could reach. He still wasn't close enough, much to their dismay, and getting closer held great risks. Levi dared another careful, light step.

In the next hazy second, the ice broke away beneath Levi's boot, and their hands clasped together. Mikasa was freed by a mighty strength that nearly dislocated her arm from its socket—but in doing so, pressure was added to Levi's feet, so even when he stepped back to escape the broken patch, his leg slipped through the ice.

Mikasa, still having a good hold on his hand, yanked him back toward her, and he effortlessly unclogged his leg from the hole.

They stood perfectly still for a moment, catching their breaths while trying to figure out what happened in those quick seconds.

"Thanks," they both said in unison.

Levi dipped his head meekly. "Don't thank me yet. We still have a few more steps to get through."

"The only reason why the ice shattered was because I fell on it." It was like knocking the ice with a hundred and fifty pound hammer. She took a careful step forward, her wet legs feeling aflame. "I think we'll be fine so long as that doesn't happen again."

And she would be right—they crossed the frozen gap without anymore delays (besides Levi precariously skidding his way to the finish line). Mikasa's pants were fast to frost; the pant sleeves so stiff and solid you would think they were forged from metal rather than woven cloth. Also, her legs were painfully numb and just having the frostbitten fabric friction against her already stinging skin was torture.

Mikasa's lips were dyed a faint blue and her teeth chattered as much as her tittering knees buckling together.

Levi, noticing her condition, rendered up the most sympathetic expression he could. "Are you alright to continue or do you want me to take you back?" Not that being in that freezing cabin would do her much better, but staying in these freezing elements in her condition wasn't wise.

"I'm fine. A little water won't kill me."

"Perhaps. But being half drenched in this temperature might make you lose a leg." He eyed her head to toe—she's gotten so very pale and her shivering was constant. "Are you absolutely sure? I could continue the search alone. It wouldn't be any inconvenience to me." Levi was already used
to doing everything alone until Mikasa joined the SC. She could fight on equal level at him, and
admittedly it was refreshing to have a partner with skills that matched his own. Though,
sometimes when they fought together he found himself keeping a closer watch on her than the
target in front of him, so working together had its inconvenient downsides.

"Really, I'm fine," she repeated for the umpteenth time. Kenny was Mikasa's blood after all. She
couldn't help but to feel a tad bit responsible, plus she felt equally at fault that Kenny escaped in
the first place. In the back of her mind, she blamed Levi's lips most of all; they had made her
forget Kenny even existed in the first place, they made her forget a lot, actually. For the first time
in her life she didn't feel like an older sister or a nagging mother, or an unstoppable soldier—she
felt like a young woman. She felt normal, yet special. Overall, she felt beautiful.

"I hope you're right." Levi's face plagued with worry. The only reason why he didn't abuse his
authority and command her go back to warm up indoors was because he figure the inside of the
cave would offer her some warmth—or at least reward her a break from the remorseless wind.

Once they approached the cave, they stared into the dark abyss of an entrance. The ominous abyss
stared back. Levi and Mikasa exchanged ready glances to each other, then after a nod, they
traveled forth into the mouth of the cave, ducking their heads under the rocky overhang.

Up on the jagged ceiling, crystallized and rocky spears naturally formed, row upon row like the
vicious teeth of a leech. If one would chip off above, it'd pierce them dead.

A drafty wind crawled behind from the outdoors, as if reaching for them with cold hands, and a
notably warmer breath allured them forward. Not able to see much in the darkness, they followed
that yawn emitting from the front of them.

Once they cleared the long throat, they ended up in a spacey clearing. Natural skylights from
above shone down rays of sun light that glistened on the glazed rocks skirting a steaming pool of
water. Thick roots from the bottom of tree trunks twined and twisted around every corner of the
high limestone ceiling. The small trickling fountain ran hot and consistently like a boiling pot
spilling over.

The shift in temperature was drastic: Levi went from shivering to patting sweat beads off his head
in the matter of seconds. The scarcely ventilated moister in the air from the natural hot spring made
it a little stifte and overwhelmingly hot. For the past few days, he did nothing but secretly beg for
warmth, but now that he got it he couldn't believe he was complaining about it.

As he ambled on through the pebble littered floor, he undid a few buttons of his shirt and leaped
on a boulder, giving himself a panoptic view.

An army of stalactite loomed overhead like a bed of spears ready to plummet them with just the
slightest quiver of the earth. Stalagmite caged around them, making them feel as tightly pressed as
their clothes stuck to their dampened skin. The smell of earthly minerals and stagnated musk filled
the air.

After Levi and Mikasa made a few rounds around the heated pool and checked behind every rock
and in between every crevice, they both sat, mirroring each other on flat boulders. They didn't find
any other passage ways that lead elsewhere or places Kenny could've hid. Without confirming it,
they silently agreed that the escaped convict wasn't here.

"I'm stumped." Levi crossed his arms and legs, looking as hard and sharp as the rocks formed
around him. "If he isn't here I don't know where he could be. The idiot probably froze to death in
a ditch."
"There might be other caves like this in the area. Now we know he has to stay somewhere warm and only caves like this can provide that." Mikasa stood then, set on leaving and searching for another cave, but before she cleared a step, a slight tug on her sleeve pulled her attention back.

Levi had pinched the cuff of her sleeve between his fingers. Keeping his focus on the ground, he spoke low enough that the natural walls didn't throw back his echo, "There's time for that later. We know he has to stay put somewhere warm. For now, try to warm up." The gentle (and rare) drop in his voice convinced her to sit back down without any thought.

There was no immediate threat to address, she supposed (although her body still pumped urgently because there were always those unforeseeable possibilities). Now that she thought about it, Kenny couldn't go too far until the snow thawed. Like Levi said, he had to be held up somewhere close by.

Levi's still sick with a fever, she remembered—it would due him some good to warm up. And with some of her clothes frosted and wet she thought it wise to warm up before she permitted herself to catching frostbite.

She entertained her sight by watching the water cascade into the foggy gray waters. She found herself hypnotized by the gentle trickle and the sound of drips bouncing off onto the stalagmite.

"How are you feeling?" Levi said, rubbing his sweaty hands together after fifteen minutes of silence.

"I'm feeling okay," she reported. A little hot, she wanted to add. She slipped a finger in her scarf and loosened the noose-like hold around her neck and folding it in her lap. "Why are you asking so suddenly?"

He kept his eyes pinned down at his fingers, flexing out and curling tensely. He had to bring this up eventually. "It's just," he swallowed dryly. "A lot happened last night."

Mikasa's gaze retracted to her lap. She played with the edged tongs of the scarf and gulped down the scrambled words that wouldn't make sense if she voiced—but this reaction, little did Mikasa know, caused Levi to enter dread-mode.

"I'm sorry...if I put any pressure on you, or forced anything on you..." Levi paused here, trying to organized his choppy words. "If you're having more rational thoughts now, there would be no hard feeling; we can forget it happened, if you feel that way. I know it was a shock, all of it—and you might be having second thoughts. I want you to know that's oka—"

"I don't regret any of it," she snapped in a beat with genuine conviction, straightening her slumped posture. "What happened last night... Yes, it was shocking and apart of me still can't believe it happened. But what you and I did..." she recalled the touch of Levi's lips and the way it felt when his hands touched her in places she's never been touched before. Her skin prickled with goosebumps, her heart fluttered. "I don't regret doing that—not at all. So you don't have a reason to apologize."

Levi, finally looking directly across at her, let out a heavy breath he kept bottled up in his chest. "That's a relief."

The last thing he ever wanted to do was to cause Mikasa discomfort. And he never wanted to take advantage of her. A part of him felt that the heat of the moment brisked her away last night; she might've been shocked from the blow of being engaged to him, and reliving memories of her parents was also added to the confusing mix. He feared, that after some thought, she would have doubts and regrets about the whole ordeal.
Levi wanted to make it absolutely clear that if that were the case, it would be fine, that nothing had to change and no hard feelings would linger. Unbelievable enough, she actually felt okay with it. And so did he. At least they're on mutual grounds.

"And," Mikasa began and Levi placed his undivided attention on her again, making her flush hesitantly under his gaze. She cornered her eyes aside so she could get the words out without tripping over them. "I still...want to marry you."

A few scattered drops of water filled the void of silence. The two strongest could face anything, any difficult obstacle or foe...but they could not face each other. They meekly kept their florid faces down.

Levi couldn't believe his hearing. Mikasa wanted to marry him: the girl he cared for more than anything, the one who taught him how to smile and love and protect was willing to bind herself to him and spend the rest of her days with him.

"I'm not saying you have to start writing vows or anything," Mikasa corrected, her voice light. "I want to spend time with you and get to know you first. That way, it'll be meaningful when we tie the knot. As it should be. If that's okay with you, of course."

"In other words," he blinked in thought. "You want to date me first?"

"If you're comfortable with that," she finished off with a nod to confirm.

Was he comfortable with dating the woman he's in love with? What a tough decision. "That sounds great, Mikasa. Really. We can go at any pace you're comfortable with."

She sucked in an exhilarated breath through a smile. It looked like it took a lot for her to say, and it took a lot for Levi to hear, too, and because of that they fell back into silence for a while.

"It's really beautiful in here," Mikasa said wistfully after a long lapse, reclining back on her hands as she peered up at the sepia stalactite above.

As she wandered her eyes at the earthly art adorning the ceiling, Levi's gaze never divagated from her. "Yes, very beautiful."

Growing stiff from sitting on a hard rock for the past half-hour, Mikasa stretched up, sending a glare at the pool that simmered like a cauldron. "I wanna feel the water, do you think it's safe?"

"I don't see why not."

He approached the ledge and gazed down into the steaming pool as Mikasa squatted down on the soles of her shoes, tentatively pressing a flattened palm over the surface of the water.

"It doesn't appear to be too hot," her fingers cut through the water in a pendulum motion. Vapors rose from the waters, making the water look as tempting as a bowl of soup to a hungry traveler. It was hot, but not piping; about the temperature one would have a bath—and with that thought came an idea. Her head motioned up at Levi.

"We should take a bath. Some therapeutic soaking will do them both some good after dealing with all the recent stress."

"Wha—why," Levi's body harden in defense, the same way it did before he fought. He looked down at her as if she suggested to throw themselves into a Titan's mouth with no logical reason attached.
Mikasa straightened her legs up, wiping her wet hand on her pants. Hitching up a brow, she peered down at him with crossed arms. "Levi: Humanity's Cleanliest Man, is asking me why we should take a bath? Is the heat making you fatigue?" She flatted her hand against his forehead, "or is your fever making you delirious?"

Tightening his lip to block a retort to her teasing, he brushed her hand away and strolled along the edge, gazing down at the tempting water. "It's not that I wouldn't like to take a bath." He's been wanting one for days, actually. "Its just, I mean..."

"I never knew you flustered so easy."

"I'm not flustered," his words whipped the musky air. "You're a young girl and I'm a man, don't you think it would be inappropriate to bath together like you're implying?"

"Hm..." she played off the act of thinking, but her mind was already set. "But you're technically my fiancé—I don't think those rules apply to us. In fact, I think bathing together would be encouraged."

"Mikasa," he actually gasped. He could hardly recognize her through the smug cloud swarming around her, but he couldn't say he hated this side to her. But he was still hesitant to oblige with her risqué suggestion.

With a condescending eye roll, Mikasa tossed up her hands and came up with a compromise. "How about this: we'll close our eyes when we undress and won't open them until were in the bath. Sound reasonable?"

He swallowed loud enough to create an echo. "Fine..."

Standing back to back to back, Levi and Mikasa worked on peeling off their clothes, hearing only the rustling of the others cloths as they unraveled themselves. Mikasa tossed her defrosted clothes onto a pile of stalagmite and Levi set his clothes on a nearby craggy rock.

"I'll head in first," Levi announced bravely and tested the waters with the tip of his toe. He then stepped down onto the flat, stony platform, lowing himself down until submerged in the wispy vapors. Once settled, he situated his elbow back on the boarding rocks.

"Alright, I'm not looking," Levi looked off to his right as Mikasa joined in from the left. The water rippled around her as she eased herself up to her chest.

Gentle splashing and trickling from the cascade filled the overwhelming silence between them, but Mikasa soon broke that. "A natural hot spring. This really is a vacation," she commented, reclining her head back as she let the hot water seep into her aching muscles.

Levi finally looked in her direction, and she welcomed his gaze with a hooked smile. And at that moment, he felt blessed for seeing that smile directed at him.

If their mission in the wilderness could turn into a winter resort in the mountains, he could only imagine what their honeymoon would be like.

Levi entertained himself with the thought. An abstract future entered the forefront of his mind, and for once, he could say he's not completely delusional to imagine this: he pictured Mikasa in a white frilly gown trimmed with silver embroidery with a laced veil crown over her shiny black hair. The ceremony now completely replaced his sight of the steamy water. He envisioned those closest to them there, even ones they had lost were attending in spirit, cheering on their kiss that would seal their bond as man and wife.
The traditional wedding he imagined was inspired from the story book he read yesterday, with church bells and doves flying overhead as they descended down the cathedral steps hand in hand. They would jump into the carriage parked out front and head off to their honeymoon where they could consummate their marriage.

Levi gulped anxiously at that, and his fairy tale dream bubble popped in a flash.

Mikasa was no longer beside him when his surroundings restored around him. She had swam to the middle of the pool and dipped her head back, wetting her hair. Within this action he caught a glimpse of her exposed chest rising from the water. Even though he pulled his head away in a flash, he still couldn't erase the detailed image permanently carved in his memory. He tried not to let the panic show—but after months of trying to picture what Mikasa looked like under her shirt and harness gear in his free time, it was hard to mask his reaction to seeing The Real Thing.

When he dared to peek her way again, she was beneath the narrow waterfall (with the water line up to her neck) using it as a shower.

Immersing her sore neck a while, Mikasa soon rolled her neck back and opened her cloudy eyes on him, and as usual he was staring at her. For the first time, she actually understood why he looked at her like that. Levi broke eye contact then with abrupt haste, like he had something much more interesting to look at in this featureless cave. She dunk down into the foggy water and smirked beneath the surface. Who knew, the Captain of the Survey Corps was the shiest soldier ever recruited.

She swam up to him and took him by the hand. Despite his protest, she escorted him with a pull to the deeper end of the pool. She urged him back until his head submerged under the cascade. Wet hair fringed around her face and stuck to her cheeks. A stain of black tied to the corner of her lip as she kneaded his slick hair back with great concentration.

During the smoothing sensation of her fingers massaging deeply at his scalp, Levi had closed his eyes and relished in the tingling-inducing feelings. When his eyes opened again, his relaxed body tensed up again, for her chest was within inches of his face.

"M-Mikasa," he stammered, his heart hammering and his face heated. He rose up, scrambling backward in splashing resist. When he finally found his balance, he swept up his damp bangs that had fallen out of place from his sudden haste. "Please, cover yourself."

Mikasa sunk back down, blowing bubbles into the water with a grumpy grimace; her silky hair danced above the waters like swirling tendrils. Her eyes drifted low, and she lifted her chin above the water to say: "You should practice what you preach. I can see your penis."

Mikasa's words immobilized Levi. It took a while to comprehend the meaning of those words. Slowly, the ability to think returned to him, and it was then he realized he was in fact standing in the shallow end. He looked down, and there it was, his manhood proudly on display (and also half-awake, as if liking the attention). With cheeks steaming hotter than the pool, he projected himself down into the water, covering his shame, but not the rest of his dignity. He kept sinking down, as if caught in quicksand, hoping he'd drown.

Mikasa giggled. He glowered at her with a bitter, "Quiet."

"I don't know why you're getting so worked up over this," she swam around him swiftly like a prowling piranha. "You're a guy who has a penis, and I'm a girl who has breasts." She paddled behind him, her lips close to his ear, "wow, I'm so shocked."

He slued to face her. Her sarcasm wasn't making him feel any better about this and the disapproval
clearly showed on his face.

"You shouldn't even know about...boy parts," he mumbled, his eyes following her laps around him.


He whipped his neck into an agitated roll. "Last I checked, you didn't even know how babies were made."

"You didn't either," she reminded him. "And in case you haven't noticed, I'm not five anymore."

Moving his eyes away from her, he fixated his sight on the foggy waters. Oh, he had noticed, all right.

"You're so serious," she teased, and he looked up in time to see her mimicking his pouting expression, her brows straightening and bunching up above the bridge, a downward curl on her lip.

She's good at that; like staring into a mirror. She must've had a lot of practice making fun of him behind his back with her friends.

"I said quiet." With a single swing, Levi splashed up a wave and the water washed away her mocking expression, leaving her with one of shock.

"Oh, you don't even know what you started. It's war now." Mikasa retaliated with a splash created with greater intensity, and Levi felt like he was struck with a sudden tidal wave brewed up from a mighty storm. She had a good deal of strength in those arms, that's for certain.

The splashing continued, swishing combers back and forth until Levi clinched her wrists firmly, hauling her counter-splash. "I surrender."

She hummed victoriously. Not everyday do you hear the strongest man surrender.

The rippling whirlpool created by their roughhousing pushed their afloat bodies closer, and once the water stilled, the cave grew so quiet—so peacefully quiet. They stared longingly at one another then; Levi stared into her sharp steel eyes and Mikasa couldn't look away from those small gems of blue.

The water sparkled from the bright ray of light from above, as if a cloud drifted from the sun. The rippling water dispersed with twinkles, creating webbed reflections on their damp skin.

Their vision fogged, making them appear dreamy and soft to one another. Their minds drifted in a haze, and they lost themselves in that deep, longing stare full of intent and desire until Mikasa's eyes aimed at Levi's mouth. She rubbed her fingers along the back of his nape tenderly, gliding her nails over his prickled skin. And then, her voice pierced through the mist.

"Kiss me," she muttered in a humid whisper, her bright eyes switching to each of his in turn almost pleadingly.

Wanting to taste the mouth that made such a sweet request, Levi lightly pinched her chin and reeled her in with hooded eyes.

Mikasa didn't know if it were the stifling heat making her fatigue, but she felt light headed the moment their lips met, as if she'd faint any moment, but Levi's active mouth kept her alert. She pressed her lips, and her body, closer and as the kiss lengthen, the boundaries were no more.
Mikasa could feel Levi's hard pecks rising steeply against her chest as he took deep gasps between their kisses.

And Levi could feel the cushioned plush of Mikasa's breasts. All he could think about was how perfect he felt with her body meshed up against his.

Wanting to get even closer, Mikasa had wrapped her legs around his waist, tightly constricting his hips with her thighs, and her glazed breasts pressed harder against his chest. Every curve and indentation of their muscles were frictioning together, fluctuating and rubbing and fusing unbearably close.

Just before abolishing the levee blocking perilous impulses from overflowing, (and thus allowing himself to drive into mindless pleasure) Levi grabbed onto the only rational thought before it vanished from his fevered mind.

"We should stop," he dipped his head down, reluctantly detaching their lips. It felt like the right thing to say, but pulling away made him feel like a beggar turning down a meal. He wanted her. He had her, right now, in a predicament he never thought he'd be in with her. And that was precisely why he pulled away. This, the sudden shift in his and Mikasa's relationship, wasn't ever supposed to happen. When he'd lay awake and alone, he'd imagine kissing Mikasa, touching her, seeing her nude. Hundreds of times he had seen a scene like this play out in his mind, (albeit not in a cave setting) but having it actually happen was a whole other story.

Levi's dreams and fantasies didn't have consequences. Taking a risqué step with Mikasa now, however, did have consequences. Dire ones that could drastically alter both of their lives forever. Merging fantasy with reality not only didn't settle with him right, but it also terrified him to think of the risks involved.

"You promised me that we could go at any pace I'm comfortable with." Mikasa countered while continuously slicking back his hair and it drove Levi absolutely mad with lust. "Are you going back on your promise, Captain? You don't seem like the type of man who does that," she expressed almost connivingly.

A stroking fingers glided along his cheek and touched his lips. While tracing the plump shape of them, her eyes searched every inch of his face. She examined his equally sharp and delicate features: he had the eyes of a deadly cougar, but had the small nose of a domestic kitten. His whole body was constructed like that: built strong and solid but also small and petite at the same time. She was growing so fond of these little contradictions he possessed.

"We can't, Mikasa," he mustered up a stern tone and attempted to pry her hips from his, but it was like trying to pry a rusted bolt from its groove bare-handed. After a feeble effort to detach himself from her, he gave up after no success and allowed her to squirm even closer until her hip bones jutted into his.

There's nothing he wanted more than to forget the cruel world outside this cave and live in this safe sanctuary where only he and Mikasa existed—but the world had grown too dark and too perilous to allow fantasies to drive a person's mind. Although Mikasa was his top priority, there was a mission and orders at stake that needed to be addressed before delving into leisure pleasure.

"We still need to retrieve—" Levi tried to remind her of the current mission at hand, but forgot the bastards name when Mikasa's breasts emerged up from the misty water with a glossy glaze.

"That's all ever we do, Levi," she kept rubbing his cheek, her brows curled sadly in the center. "We take orders and ensure others survival. Day after day with no reward. I think you know that you and I hold the most weight on our shoulders, but we never complain because we know we're
doing the right thing. But we never take some time for ourselves,” she slithered her arms around his neck and kissed him there, right on his quickening pulse. "We deserve to unwind and have a little fun for a change, don't you think?"

Levi barely comprehended her distant sounding words because he had entered a dreamy state where his brain activity became low to make up for the blood rushing elsewhere. At her silent pecks and airy sighs hitting his ear, he melted and disregarded everything in that moment, and found his eyes closing in content. With his thoughts only teeming of Mikasa now, his hands wandering up Mikasa's hips as she lovingly nibbled on his ear.

Something growing and hardening pressed up against her lower stomach, and it was then that Levi knew something much more breathtaking than the freedom they sought was about to occur between them in this cave. This wasn't just a fantasy or dreams anymore, and that reality hit him just then. There were, of course, still concerns lingering. He wondered if Mikasa actually understood what was about to take place.

"Are you positive you don't want to wait?" he managed to say between her needy sucks along the slope of his neck. "I mean, I'd love to—I want to. But I don't want you making any rash decisions you'd regret."

She dragged her eyes up to look at his, her lashes fluttering heavy. "I'd only regret not doing it. None of us are promised tomorrow anymore, Levi. If you want to do it and I know I want to, then we should. This might be our only chance to go through with it. I know it seems like were moving fast, but we could die tomorrow, or we could even die as soon as we leave this cave. I don't know about you, but the only thing I'd regret would be passing this chance up. For once I just want to do something I want to do, something normal and natural. Something that benefits me and someone I care about,” she traced her fingers along his clenching jaw, her eyes slick. "We should do something selfish for once, we should live. You and I are more than our skills and kill count. We deserve to be normal people with desires and emotions for a change."

Admittedly, he'd hate dying if he knew he had the chance to share a special intimate moment with Mikasa. At least, if Levi does die tomorrow, he'll die feeling a little more human than he did before. He'd let death take him while reflecting on a good memory with someone he cared deeply about. He doesn't want to see a montage of death and sadness when he dies—he wanted to see this moment, right now, the first moment he experienced in years that made him feel alive again.

Mikasa felt the same. When she died, she wanted to see Levi as he looked right now and reflect back to the way he looked at her so preciously. No one had ever looked at Mikasa the way Levi did; with such fond devotion. That welled her up with a feeling so strong because she understood that look—that's the look you give when staring at someone you care about more than anything in the world. Mikasa knows this because she spent the past six years looking at Eren in that very same way. She never thought anyone would look at her like that. For once, she felt special and wanted and most of all, loved.

In the end, neither of them wanted to die as unstoppable, emotionless machines that killed Titans and had tragic tales engraved in their souls. They don't want to be remembered like that. Heartless warriors who never loved or expressed emotion was not a title they wanted to take to the graves.

If Levi must leave people behind someday, he wanted to leave knowing he made a difference in someone's life, knowing they could think back on the good times outside of battle. So far, he hadn't achieved such memories with anyone. Mikasa had her friends, at least, to remember the real her. But Levi never loved, and was never loved by anyone before.

In truth, however, Levi had no plans of dying anytime soon and as long as he's alive he will keep Mikasa alive, too. But he wanted to prove to her now how much she meant to him—but not with
words (because he certainly doesn’t posses the lyrical prose needed to captivate just how much she means to him). Levi might not be well versed in words and expression, but he had always been especially adept in one area of expertise: his body. And right now he planned to use his body to demonstrate to her just how much he cared about her.

No more words, no more struggling for the right expression. All they wanted to see now was the magic both of their skilled bodies could create once linked together.

Levi’s hand swam beneath the current, sweeping up her inner thigh. He focused on her eyes until they squeezed closed tightly, and her bottom lip dropped open with a stuttering breath as Levi grazed virgin territories. A hiccup of a sound sputtered from her, and she herself even looked surprised (and a little abashed) at the sounds she just made.

A burning sting that ached so good swelled up between her, and a part of Levi swelled up against her. Dryness invested her mouth from her steep gasps; leaving her throat stinging. Soon enough, Mikasa felt her thighs quiver and clamp around his caressing hand, her area becoming inflamed more so with every stroke.

Applying more pressure, his finger rubbed in quick semi-circles until Mikasa fell paralyzed with numbness from the waist down, feeling nothing but the surges of pleasure Levi inflicted upon her.

Levi’s attention became memorized by all the expressions she gifted him with. Greedily, he buffed his fingers against her sensitive zone with added pressure, wanting more reactions, wanting her to get louder. He immersed his hearing in every sweet sound that slipped off her tongue, each moan sounding shaky, feeble and just beautiful—he still couldn't fathom how he was making her like this. What had he done to deserve this beauty and have her all to himself?

And just then, Mikasa did something that unleashed a wild rush of seduction: she said his name in a quivering breath.

Simulated with covetous arousal, he backed himself up into the side of the pool and situated her in his lap. In a desperate second he grabbed hold his throbbing piece and slipped into her without so much as a warning. Placing one hand on the small of her back and the other on her vibrating thigh to keep her in place, he pushed himself right into her.

Mikasa’s brows drew down deeply in the center, half pained, half pleasure, but her teary eyes gazed at him as if he single handedly bestowed her with the world itself. She felt the inches slowly insert within her, and she felt herself riven to accommodate him. She grit her teeth and sucked in a fierce breath that lingered in her chest. Unable to move or breath, she bore through the new space taken up within her and remained still.

The same didn't apply for Levi—he started moving immediately inside her, unsettling the water with his thrusting hips. A tinge of galvanizing energy billowed though him, rousing him with a high of adrenaline that he intended to exhaust until he ran low on fumes.

Mikasa’s thighs shuddered as she adjusted to the size spreading her internally. Keeping a confiding hold around her to soothe her thrashing body, Levi plunged deeper between her legs, gliding along her slick inner walls.

While he advanced his way up the tight enclosure, Mikasa placed her hands on either side of his face, holding him like something valuable. Feebly, she scraped her forehead against his, attempting to steady her breath to match his. She kissed the center of his brow, where his wrinkles always bunched up, hoping to iron out the creases with her hot lips. When she pulled back, his face relaxed significantly and Mikasa still couldn't fathom the way he looked at her; like the most valued treasure the world had ever know. It was as if he was the proud owner marveling at his
most prized possession.

"My heart is beating so fast," she maundered flimsily between airy sighs, her eyes brimming with tears. "I feel like it's going to explode."

Levi gave a sensual grunt and sloppily claimed her lips before asking, "Wanna slow down?"

"Actually, I was about to ask you to go faster..." she requested bashfully.

"What the lady wants, the lady gets," he obliged politely, but nothing was chivalrous about his following actions. While he took extra precaution not to hurt her, he drilled in with nearly all his strength and for a hazy beat Mikasa couldn't even recall how to breath—and that's exactly how she wanted it. It felt wonderful to go blank in the mind and allow her body to dip into mindless pleasure for once. Right now, all that existed was her and Levi and the mind blowing stimulus they created together.

Right as he fully buried himself to the hilt, in that moment, Mikasa caught herself thinking that she would never tease Levi about being a little man ever again. Every time he'd move she'd brace herself by clutching him tighter. Levi pulled himself out teasingly slow, then rammed right into her tender zone, making her voice shatter like fragile ice.

The feel of his pulse echoing deep inside her was like nothing she felt before. When he started to pump even harder while fondling her madly, the new sensations racked up by the dozen. The feel of her delicate lips spreading apart for his smoothness drove her to the brink. The labored sighs and moans they made together synced into something as beautiful as music.

Levi clenched his jaw, and the movement of his hips stopped with a jerky halt. "Are you sure I'm not hurting you?"

She shook her head before he was even done speaking, as if she wanted him to keep moving without breaks. Mikasa, too dazed to vocalize, mouthed the word "no" a few times. Then she gave him a weak, needy kiss and rubbed their noses together after their lips parted.

He continued to plow into her, and her body responded with a wild tremble, like a bolt shot through her, leaving her twitching. Levi kept his eyes glued to her, totally absorbed by her lustful gaping mouth, her hooded eyes, her voluptuous body connected to his. Levi memorized every twitch, every sound that was created for him only to witness.

Mikasa, with the flame inside her smoldering hotter, matched his rhythm eventually, meeting him half way in their thrusts until she felt bold enough to take charge. While straddling him, she took hold of his shoulders dearly for balance. Sensuously arching her back, she bobbed in his lap, stirring her hips while cherishing each and every inch of him shifting inside her.

A husky, satisfied moan emitted from Levi, and he kept his hands securely attached to her hips, digging his fingers into her curves when she'd hit against a sensitive spot. Once she was used to the astride position, Mikasa let go of his shoulders and tangled her fingers in his hair while he shifted his palms down to grope behind her, aiding the flow of movement. Rocking together, they united together into a fusion of loud, fast-paced pleasure.

Mikasa practiced no restraint as she drilled down faster, and Levi dug his fingers into her flesh and panted wildly, nearly breathless as she bounced in his lap without a moments rest. Her shrilling moans, seasoned with lustful words and his name, motivated him to take over the movements again. Pumping up faster into her, harder just as she wanted, he gifted her with all the pleasure possible.
Even when they reached an ultimate peek it still wasn't enough. They wanted more. Their lips met rashly, their laving tongues intertwining and their passionate moans echoing in each others mouths. Levi seized a handful of her breasts, and Mikasa took over again, grinding roughly against him until neither of them could even see straight.

Mikasa curved her neck back, freeing a wail in a stiff tremor and Levi brought his head down for a succulent treat. Flicking his tongue pungently, he laved her nipple with a generous layer of saliva and nibbled at her sensitive skin. It felt as if Mikasa's heart dropped down and beat between her legs, and each pulse made her cry out for Levi as her fingers raked along the muscular indentations of his back.

Levi pinched the nub between his teeth and constricted the other between his fingers, and Mikasa screamed so loud her cry echoed off the craggy walls. The cave walls caught her cry and repeated it, over and over, and the walls cracked and settled again from the sound blast assaulting it.

Levi flinched with a twitching shiver and he bit the side of his lip. After sucking in a hissing breath, he let out a gravely sigh. Buzzing tingles spread out all throughout his body and he couldn't help but to convulse in Mikasa arms.

As she came closer to her peek, the lips between her legs clamped down tight around his hardness. That was the final stimulus Levi needed—his body shuddered tightly, then loosened limply, granting him relief. His mind hazed and his vision fringed with fuzzy white during his last stroke before pulling out, where he drained his liquids into the murky waters.

Between the shared climax and the hot vapors, they could hardly inhale a satisfying breath. Mikasa was still clinging to him, her chest rising and falling frantically as she took short rapid breaths. Levi closed his eyes then, indulging in the remaining twitches and numbness before the sensations left his system.

Still panting, Mikasa sunk down and rested her head on his fluctuating chest, and Levi wrapped his arms around her back, kissing the crown of her head lovingly.

~x~

The walk home was the worst. Not only had the temperature dropped drastically due to the sun setting, but neither of them wanted to leave the comfort and warmth of the cave. If it weren't for the light dimming from the skylights in the ceilings and their skin shriveling up like dry prunes from the moister, they probably wouldn't have left that warm and charming cavern.

Levi hated going back out into the cold after spoiling himself in the heat all day, and he hated crossing the slippy patch of ice over the pond again even more (thankfully no one fell, but Levi slipped so much he was sure he pulled his leg out of place).

Mikasa missed the feeling of the trickling warm water basting over her tired bones, and she hated passing the crows again, who were a bit quieter, and less menacing this time around since they were turning in for the night. After a few lazy caws, they ruffled their wings and let them go on their way.

With every step, Mikasa felt a new pain form in her muscles, particularly her thighs, pelvis, even her hips throbbed (and she was almost certain that Levi's hand prints were marked in a bruise there). She might've been a tad too ambitious during her first time—since her and Levi share a similar level of strength she thought she could take him at full power. Lesson learned: Levi outmatched her. The pleasure outweighed the pain, however, so given the chance for a do-over, she'd take it the same way. A little discomfort in payment for that mind blowing experience felt like a steal, in fact.
While walking home, Mikasa strayed a few steps behind and just admired Levi from afar, taking mental notes on the way he walked and the alertness held in his posture. He appeared so intimidating, so much bigger than he was. His gait was bold and rough, but somehow he remained graceful and light on his feet at the same time. Mikasa found herself loving all his contradictions.

Levi twisted his neck back, checking on her. The way a streak of somber sunlight hit the side of his face made him look so breathtakingly handsome, Mikasa thought. She ran up to his side, grabbing his cold hand before he could notice.

Looking down at their joined hands, Levi twitched his lip into a quick curl and squeezed her hand. They ambled on, their hands swinging between them. "You used to do this when you were little, too. You'd always hold my hand when we went out on an adventure."

Mikasa smiled warmly at the memory. She couldn't remember, but his words inspired her heart to recall a sensation of nostalgia. "I think this definitely counts as an adventure. Our biggest one yet, surely."

Coming out in the winterized wilderness with Mikasa, telling her about the engagement and the time they spent together, making love together—indeed, it was one hell of an adventure that topped them all.

When he went over the mission briefing with his squad and Hanji, he never imagined this would happen. A self explanatory mission of guard duty in a disclosed location in the wilderness to extract information from a Central MP: that's all it was meant to be. Boring and eventual, that's how he pictured this job, but it had been anything but that.

The mission never goes as plan, does it? But for once, it didn't end in tragedy, but ended on a beautiful note instead. If only they actually accomplished their key objective of keeping Kenny under house arrest (they royally failed that main objective today). But right now, Levi's only key objective was getting Mikasa back to their temporary home safely so she could get some needed rest.

The white forest was alive with glowing amber from the dulling sun. The waning sun burned like gold, obstructed by the silhouette of trees, and when they exited the woods, they could see the rays glaring on the vast white tops. It was a blinding sight, seeing the cold carpeting dusted with gems, as if the amber sparks were buried in the white powder and winking as they moved.

The rickety cabin drew into their visual range, and it sat there just as they left it. The blanket of snow still piled on the roof, the icicles still dripping from the trim of the poach, the frosted windows still resembling clouded ice, and the brick chimney coughing up gray plumes of smoke...

"......"

With both pairs of eyes clinging to the chimney, Levi and Mikasa balked. In a slow and unsure motion, they turned to gander at one another's reactions. Mikasa had hitched up a brow and tossed a bemused expression to Levi, and he gifted her with the same exact reaction.

They silently held the same thoughts, but dared not speak them because they were both convinced their eyes were playing tricks. The dwindling sunset must be casting shadows that made the illusion, or the white icy wind whirled just above the chimney...

There was no denying it. That smoke was rising from the hearth of a freshly kindled fire.

Certainly, the fire place shouldn't have the resources to manifest any smoke to cough up. The supply of wood ran out last night, and no one chopped down any more to replace the stock (and
no one was even home to have filled the hearth if they had). It couldn't have been Levi's squad that had come to rendezvous with them; the conditions still weren't ideal, and surely if they were here, they would be seeing carriages and horses parked out front.

Unless another unknown traveler made temporary home there, just as they did?

Levi went on ahead, climbing the short flight up the pouch with attentive caution. As Mikasa went up the stairs soundlessly, Levi had sidled over to the window, pressing his back to the logged walls, trying to peek inside for movement or signs of another person inside. All he saw was the kitchen just as they left it, with his cool, untouched tea on the counter.

Realizing he hadn't any weapons on him—which was a dumb, half asleep mistake made earlier in the midst of sullen panic—Levi prepared for the worse and braced himself. After beckoning Mikasa closer with a signal, he pushed the slab of the door open.

At first Levi thought the inside of the home only felt warm in comparison with the outside, but when they heard a blazing crackle coming from the living room, the two strongest sought out one another's reactions, and they both just blinked dumbly at each other—until they heard a creak from the floorboards.

In that instant, they powered their legs into the living room, and there they met the back of tall black stature, outlined with a somber glow, standing in front of the fire burning in the pit.

They didn't know if the fire roaring or the man standing in front of the hearth shocked them more.

Mikasa had taken a step in reverse, lurching her chin back and flapping her lips wordlessly, but Levi heaved forward in a single stomp, his eyes bulging.

"What the..." Levi sucked in a breath. "Kenny?"

The man continued to idly watch the fire below, shifting his weight back on his heels with his hands secured in his pockets.

There's no mistaking it—that's Kenny.

He should be deep within hiding by now. What was he doing here? Never did Levi expect to find him back here of all places. A new traveler making a pit-stop here seemed more plausible than that. Kenny being long gone or long dead made more sense than what his eyes showed him. Kenny escaped them, why would he come back? Levi could always predict Kenny's thoughts and motives, but this left him clueless. It was far too out of character for Kenny to even leave in the first place—but for him to return to imprisonment when he was given the opportunity to flee without even a pesky a quarrel was unbelievable.

"Where were you?" Mikasa, finally catching up with the situation in front of her, step forward, right beside Levi.

The man shot them an indifferent look over his shoulder, which contrasted the doubtful and questioning glares shooting back at him. Kenny sighed, slumping his shoulders as if they rudely barged in and interrupted his peaceful evening. "I went out to get some firewood earlier because you two were afraid of lumbering through some snow."

Based on the new pyramid of chopped wood in the corner, Levi had already made that assessment. Levi was too focused on figuring out Kenny that he decided to let his dig pass—it's not like they were afraid to go out, they were unable to during the blizzard.

"We thought you escaped," Mikasa said like it was a question.
"Ha," the man snorted defiantly and readjusted his hat. "The weather conditions still aren't ideal enough for something that ambitious—but chopping down some wood isn't a problem for me."

Levi took another galvanizing step, growing tense with anger. "You know damn well that you shouldn’t sneak out without permission."

"I didn't sneak out," Kenny countered curtly, pointing down the hall. "You didn't lock the door to the basement last night. You basically invited me to come and go as I please."

Levi cringed. It was a careless mistake on his part. "I...forgot."

"Obviously." Kenny crashed down on the couch, kicking his boots up on the coffee table. "You always chose brawn before brains, after all." Kenny chuckled, and Levi wanted to quip back but seeing Kenny's wet, dirty boots on the coffee table made him go into a trance-like state.

Kenny dug through his coat, pulling out his thick cigar which he parked in the corner of his mouth, he continued rummaging through his many pockets. "I was hoping I'd be back before you two panicked and conducted an all-out man hunt." He puffed his cigar after lighting it, and Levi and Mikasa groaned at the irony of his words. It was a little too late for that. Even if Kenny wasn't gone long, they had no evidence left behind suggesting he would be back. It was more logical to assume he was gone for good, which was why they left immediately and started searching—but in reality, he probably came back home within the hour they left.

"I still stand by what I said, you should've told us." Levi folded his arms and stood his ground.

Mikasa observed the scene quietly for now, knowing she would need to save her strength in case a fight ensued between them (and it always did without fail).

Kenny flicked his ash into a bowl (which he took upon himself to convert into an ashtray). "Tch. Excuse me, but you two looked so cozy this morning, all cuddled up in each others arms—I didn't want to disturb you two."

Both of their cheeks kindled hotter than the end of his cigar. A shiny glint sparked in Kenny's droopy eyes as he looked at them in turn. Smoke emitted from his stretched smile.

"By the way," Kenny paused for another drag, "I didn't get wood to keep you warm, pipsqueak. I did it for myself. And for my dear niece. You would've let her freeze to death," he scolded.

"No I wouldn't have," Levi took offense.

"What, plan on keeping her toasty with your body heat? Hate to break it to you, runt, but you ain't big enough to generate enough of heat for her."

Mikasa stepped in before the banter got out of control. As Mikasa saw it, Kenny carried out a good deed and he should be rewarded for it. Saying how he should’ve went about the deed itself shouldn't be discussed right now; he's back under their watch and that's all that actually mattered. Now was not the time to argue when a big problem was easily resolved by Kenny doing the right thing. "Thanks Kenny, you really helped us all out."

Levi's folded arms braced tighter, his muscles flexing while he kept his eyes locked on Kenny. Obviously, he did not agree with his betrothal. "Oh yeah, really helped us out by making us go out in the fucking snow anyway to look for you. You knew I'd hunt you down so you didn't save us from any trouble."

Kenny found that amusing. "That's a good point. If you can go out to look for me, why couldn't
you get wood? Oh, I know. Because you could use it as an excuse to get close to a pretty lady, what a dog," he quipped.

"It's not like that," Levi muttered. In an emergency, like a prisoner escaping, they are trained to accept their missions even if it kills them and without Kenny there was no mission, but Levi didn't feel like explaining all that. Besides, during the blizzard no one could've went out—not even Kenny. The storm just happened to stop this morning.

Levi would've been much more pissed if he said something like that before he had become an item with Mikasa, but since the relationship changed between them, he didn't feel the need to correct the suggestive remark—and Kenny noticed that. He awaited the lash back, but didn't get any...it almost made the man anxious not to hear a quip from Levi. It was like seeing a deer sensing the hunters aim on him, waiting for the trigger to squeeze but the blow never comes.

"What? You admit it then?" Kenny pressed for a comeback of any kind, not satisfied with the lack of heated retorts from his ex-successor.

"I'm the one who offered to conserve body heat together last night..." Mikasa confessed.

"Oh..." Kenny's hard face softened. "Now I kind of wish I didn't get the wood," Kenny muttered in a drawl, "I feel like I ruined a good system you two had going on...

"For fucks sake, be quiet," Levi finally snapped, having enough of the idiotic chatter. This wasn't a game, but Kenny's making survival seem like it. Levi nursed his head and walked into the kitchen—then twirled right back around and landed in his previous spot beside Mikasa. "I forgot, we have no tea left," he said it with an eerie air of irony.

Kenny chuckled idly at Levi's misfortune like the prick he was.

Levi swooped a hand over his face, revealing a cold stare at his ex-mentor. "If you want to perform good deeds, old man, you should've got me tea."

Kenny balked offensively, brows knitted and posture hunched forward. "Sorry, your highness. Let me just stop by a corner shop in the middle of fucking no where."

Levi shook his hands out, wanting to hit something (preferably Kenny's face), Mikasa stared worryingly between the two hostile boys, and Kenny bit the end of his cigar and eased back into the press of the couch, seemingly done with arguing.

"Now that I think about it, you two have been gone for a really long time," Kenny mused. "I don't know what time you left, but when I came back you were gone, and I've been here waiting all day. Where you two searching for me out in this cold all this time? How are you two alive?"

"We got...lost in a cave." Mikasa spat out in a panic, afraid her uncle might connect some dots due to their absence.

As usual, Mikasa's excuses were fucking horrible, Levi thought, but that's a quirk he came to love.

"Ha. You two aren't known to be humanity's smartest, after all. What a match made in heaven," he puffed wistfully on his cigar, snickering to himself.

For the first time in a while, Levi agreed wholeheartedly with Kenny, not that he'd ever admit it.

Now that everyone was accounted for, and the confused arguments had settled down, Mikasa let her mind—that had been worrying endlessly about Kenny's escape—turn to lazy mush. "My feet are killing me," Mikasa moaned and limped over to the couch to lounge.
Levi sauntered soon after, using the last of his strength to kick Kenny off the couch so he could sit near his bride-to-be.

"Didn't I raise you to have some manners?" Kenny shouted from the floor, rubbing his soar hip.

"No."

Kenny averted his eyes, raising his shoulders meekly. "Okay, you have a point, but you don't have to act like a little shit."

"Well, a big shit raised me, what do you expect?" Levi countered.

"See, this is why I'm the bad guy! I'm treated badly when I do something good!" he whined on the floor like an over-sized baby. "I'm never do a good deed again."

"Yes you are," Levi sharped his words and thrusted a finger down at him. "You're making dinner tonight—you made your dear niece run around the woods all day looking for you. She even fell through ice in the process, don't make her cook on top of all that."

It's not as if Mikasa did anything too strenuous today. Walking around in knee high snow was mild in comparison to her daily duties as a soldier, but sometimes having some R&R time could do more hard than good in the long run; like going on a leisure vacation and bouncing back to the grinding struggle of daily work. Now that her body was soothed (special thanks to Levi and the hot spring) she felt more drained than a day after boot camp.

The post-vacation blues wasn't hitting Levi just yet because he knew they still had time to themselves before they ventured back into the vicious world where they played the role of Humanity's Strongest. They were spoiled these past few days, that's for sure, and returning to what they consider the daily norm after this will surely be tough; but he decided to greedily gobble up all the leisure time with Mikasa while he still could.

"You can't make me cook," Kenny grumbled, and with his childish words, Levi and Mikasa both came to the conclusion that they really were babysitting an over sized baby.

"It's no big deal. I don't mind cooking," Mikasa had blocked the flickering light of the fire by draping her forearm over her eyes. "Just give me a few minutes to recuperate and I'll be back to full charge."

"No. This is his punishment." Levi insisted and shooed the man, who remained still, folding his arms defiantly for a second, but as Levi stare cut him slice by slice, he soon found his feet and slumped into the kitchen, bickering to himself.

"This is going to be a disaster," Mikasa commented, catching a glimpse of her uncle before he disappeared to carry out his kitchen duties.

"Probably," Levi agreed and scooped up her feet, placing them in his lap.

"What're doing?" she asked, straining down her gaze.

"Didn't you say your feet hurt?"

A restrained smirk curled across her face as Levi started to massage her feet, his fingers kneading into her worn tissue with just enough strength to untie the knots beneath the flesh.

"We can't admit we actually had fun today. Keep the guilt trip going," she schemed as he worked his thumbs into her heel.
Amusement played across his features momentary, but snapped back to concentration as he focused on loosening up her muscles.

"Doesn't touching my feet gross you out?" she wondered. Levi held the title as the most cleanliest man. For that reason, Mikasa assumed he'd be repulsed by even the idea of touching another person's foot.

"No way," he bowed down to plant a kiss on the knuckle of her big toe. "Your feet are adorable."

"And my adorable feet thank you for your selfless charity," she took one last fond look at him, then relaxed her head back and closed her eyes.

The moment would've been absolutely serene if it weren't for the clamor of pots banging together and hoarse curses emitting from the kitchen. Still, that didn't dampen Mikasa's peace of mind and contentment. Being in close range of the toasty fire, having her uncle within sight again, and being here with Levi pampering her made the night as perfect as could be.

Chapter End Notes

Psst. Kenny's getting some back story in the next chapter. It's my way of trying to redeem his character by attaching reason behind some of his questionable (okay, evil) actions. Warning, it's pretty sad. But there will be a very adorable Ackerman trio scene that will make up for it. :3
"That was the most disgusting meal I ever had." Levi pat his scowl with a napkin after miraculously swallowing a few bites of the atrocious garbage Kenny put on a plate and called dinner. When water wasn't enough to burn off the aftertaste, Levi snatched up the flagon of moonshine and poured himself a glass. The alcohol managed to scorch off the flavor, if you could even call it that, but the brew tasted awful. He supposed this was what pick your poison meant.

The array of dishes and bowls lined up on the tabletop overflowed with untouched remains, but Levi wouldn't take another share even if it meant the difference between starvation and survival. Residing in the underground as long as he had, Levi had come across his fair share of crappy cuisine, but he could confidently reward Kenny's meal with the top prize.

Lowering his head shamefully, Kenny looked as if he got chewed up and spat out himself. "I tried my best..."

"And I tried my best not to hurl up that shit you call food, but I don't see anyone commending me for my valiant effort."

"Oh, stop it. It wasn't that terrible," Mikasa cut in before Kenny could pelt in his refute and commence another war with Levi. Bearing in mind their limited supplies and his lack of skill, Mikasa was actually surprised her uncle didn't do worse. Though, she wouldn't go so far as applauding him. The meal he prepared certainly wasn't something her taste buds were fond of, and some parts weren't even edible, but Kenny tried his best. Levi skimmed over that verity, but for Mikasa, that dash of selfless exertion made the perfect seasoning.

"Much obliged," Kenny gave her a squinty grin, and then directed his attention back to Levi. The amiable mask he wore disfigured into a baleful one. "This street rat wouldn't know fine cuisine if it bit him in the ass."

"Fine cuisine," repeated Levi with an astonished scoff. His eyes fell to the remnants of the meal on the table, attempting to find where this stunning supper Kenny referred to lay hidden. With a knife, he lifted a cob of corn, which had been seeped in its husk, and tilted his head to peer under. Nope. No fine meal under there. "You Ackerman's must have weird taste buds, because this is literally crap."

"Okay, so some of the vegetables were a little raw." Kenny owned up sheepishly as he scratched the tines of his fork against his plate.

"...And you burnt everything else." Levi elbowed Mikasa, dragging her into the battle she had no wish to fight. "This gross dinner might be the key. I bet if we ate this before going into titan territory, they'd spit us right out."
Having enough of Levi's foul flavor of scorn, Kenny fitfully flung his fork. Without even a flinch, Levi boredly dodged the soaring silverware with a quick shift of the head. Mikasa sighed heavily. Kenny and Levi were no difference than two toddlers throwing a fit.

"Don't act all high and mighty. You of all people should be the last to talk." Inflamed with anger, Kenny lashed a finger at his ex-successor. "You sucked at cooking too. I remember you'd cry every morning 'cause you broke the yolk of your eggs and burnt your toast. I wouldn't even have my morning coffee yet and you were already blubbering."

Evoked with imageries of the sniveling brat he once was, Levi sunk down in his chair, hoping he'd disappear into a puddle of childish shame. "I...didn't cry."

"You cried about everything," Kenny corrected. "You'd cry before we trained, when I said we couldn't keep that flea-infested cat you found, and when I said your tea tasted like ass—"

"I was, what, ten? It's normal for a child to cry about things like that," he retorted, flustered as he took a quick glance at Mikasa listening discreetly from the sidelines. He was relieved to find her nodding a little at him, agreeing.

"But you did that until you were at least twenty," Kenny revealed bluntly.

Shoulders shaking, Mikasa snorted into her hand. Lured by her laughter, Levi pried his eyes off his crackling ex-mentor and confronted Mikasa with thin eyes. "Knock it off. No giggling at my expense."

Wearing the same defiant smirk, Mikasa lifted herself from the chair in a jaunty gait and skirted around the table to collect the dirty dishes. When she sloped over to gather Kenny's she said: "Don't listen to him, Kenny. I appreciate you cooking for us. Levi is just allergic to kindness. The next time he says something snarky think of it as an unintentional sneeze."

He tipped his hat to her, and they shared this look between them like they were in on an inside joke. Quite frankly, Levi found it disgusting.

"At least someone in this house has fine taste. Tch, Disrespectful brat, I cook a fine meal for him and this is how he repays me."

"I hope your own gross food makes you constipated."

"Gesundheit."

Leaning back in his chair, Levi bit his inner cheek as his head rattled at the two giggling Ackerman's. Ever since he was young he always felt like the punch line to all of Kenny's awful jokes. For once, he'd like the guy to treat him with some respect—but then, Levi might have to return the courtesies, and just like Kenny's dinner, that's not something he's prepared to digest just yet.

Mikasa dropped off the dishes in the sink and returned to her seat. The dysfunctional after-dinner table talk her family conducted became her entertainment for the evening. For the next hour, trifling topics, laughter, and reminiscing teemed within the timber walls of the cabin. The level of the moonshine in the flagon reduced, and the level of her company's voices rose with every sip they took.

"You know what your problem is?" Kenny snarled with contempt, his drunken eyes struggling to focus on Levi.

"You?" Levi answered aloofly, swishing around what was likely his third glass.
"Hah?" Spittle flew from his mouth, his noxious breath nearly knocking Mikasa out of her chair. Suddenly confused, Kenny scratched at his temple pensively. "Uh...wait, what was I gonna say?"

"I see you're still a lightweight," said Levi before nonchalantly quaffing down another gulp.

As far as Mikasa could tell, her captain held his liquor well. Sober or not, he still behaved moderately the same. The only difference she could detect was his listless posture and the slack look in his eyes. Her uncle on the other hand looked a sip away from tipping out of his chair, but that didn't stop him from replenishing all empty glasses on the table—including her own.

Repelled, Mikasa inched back in her chair. "Uh, I think you meant to pour that into Levi's glass, not mine."

In an exaggerated motion, Kenny set a finger to his lips and shushed her. "I know what I meant to do, missy."

Breaking her gaze from the drunk, she blinked down at her glass. The liquor sat as clear as water, but bearing in mind how polluted the contents were, doubts clouded her mind. "But I'm not old enough."

Kenny finished off tipping off Levi's glass and sat back, brandishing his drink up to her as he elevated his boot atop the table. "As you're uncle, I grand you permission to drink to your hearts content."

"Put your filthy fucking foot back down or I'll saw it off," Levi said darkly with tightly crossed arms. Mikasa mentally retracted her assumption about Levi being relaxed. He was as tense as ever until Kenny finally threw his foot back down with a heavy thump. Kenny might talk big game but not even he wanted to risk activating Levi's fastidious wrath.

"Anyway," Mikasa swayed her head side to side, sliding her glass away from her. "I'll pass."

"Come on, Mikasa." Levi goaded her by holding up his own glass. "You said so yourself that you want to be more selfish and enjoy life to the fullest."

Face reddening, Mikasa jerked her head at the composed man sitting beside her, conflicted to believe whether he understood what he said or if he unmindfully repeated her weak whispers. Beneath the table, she knocked her knee against his to silence him, and he nearly ingested his drink into his lungs from the startle. With a gaping mouth, Kenny eyed them both. Suspicion passed over his face like a darkened cloud.

"Wha—?" Levi ogled her incredulously.

"Everything said and done in the cave stays in the cave," she hissed through tense lips.

Bobbing his head obediently, Levi buffed the ache out of his knee and rephrased, "All I meant is you should let loose. If you're old enough to be in the Survey Corps, you're old enough to drink in my book," Levi nursed his cup, staring into it broodingly. "Hell, this job practically requires you to drink."

"Yeah," Kenny curtly agreed as he scratched at his whiskers. "If I had to kill giant man-eating monsters, I'd never be sober."

And that was something the two wisecracking men could agree on. With a light clink, they toasted their glasses and upended their drinks.
Amazing, Mikasa thought. They actually agreed on something—was booze actually powerful enough to seal the gap between two foes? With that in mind, Mikasa figured it wouldn't hurt to try something new. Considering the new developments in her and Levi's relationship, this trip was meant to be one big experimental stage for her. A sip or two won't kill her.

"Maybe I'll have just a sip," Mikasa declared. Two pairs of eyes glowed in anticipation as she slowly hovered her lips over the brim. A quick whiff made her head fly back. The smell alone was enough to make her stomach churn.

"I'm curious to see how you act when you're drunk." A lithe palm held up Levi's head as he fondly watched her, as if he did not want to miss the transition from strict-solider-Mikasa to slurring-staggering-Mikasa.

"I'm not going to get drunk on the job," she stalled in taking a drink just to shove him a little, and he went slewing over in his chair with a small smirk.

"Why do you keep trying to wound me? It's a punishable offence to strike your superior," Levi feigned a professional tone.

She decided to answer by playfully striking him again, but he quickly cinched her swinging hand, their fingers reflexively snuggling into a tight stitch. The feel of Levi's warm hand in hers made her forget why she tried to strike him in the first place. His eyes dancing over her blushing face provoked a giggle, but it wasn't heard over Kenny's grisly groan.

"There you two go again, flirting," he snorted with derision before he chugged down his booze.

Before answering, Mikasa sipped the strong flavor carefully, letting the liquid slowly roll over her tongue. Once adjusted to the sting, she threw the shot down her throat, as if challenging her uncle. "I think flirting is appropriate for us," the drink had a strong bite that mingled with her words. "Don't you think?"

A bushy brow rose at his niece's words. Unable to decode her riddle, he frowned cluelessly.

The betrothal couple sat a moment in silence, cherishing Kenny's dumbfounded expression, and as seconds ticked on, the silence only made the man more anxious. Laying his sagging cheek in his fist, he shifted his eyes to both of them, forecasting their secret brewing like a storm about to strike. "What's up with you two?"

Under the table, Mikasa and Levi's conjoined hands laid on top of his thigh. He focused on the way his thumb brushed over hers tenderly before dragging his eyes back to hers. "Do you think we should tell him?"

Before Mikasa even had time to deliberate, Kenny was already strafing them with bulbous eyes, "Tell me what? Tell me. Tell me. For Sina's sake tell me," and so on.

With Kenny's continuous mantra of pleas serving as ambiance, Mikasa tittered and nodded to Levi, saying, "Please tell him, he won't shut up otherwise."

Levi returned his eyes to Kenny. A few preambles that could kick off this topic teemed around his mind, but considering Kenny's current attention span, Levi decided to recite the big news in the best way he knew how: boldly. "I told Mikasa about our engagement."

Excitement flickered in Kenny's aged eyes as he bounced his gaze between them. "...You don't say. And?"

Levi swallowed the lump that manifested in his clenching throat. He didn't know why he was
nervous. Telling anyone about an engagement could be daunting, he supposed, but he never considered himself the type to lose his nerve over such a simple concept. The emotion behind such a tradition wasn't as simple, but the act of actually telling someone, especially Kenny, shouldn't be this difficult. Thinking back to how Mikasa reacted when she found out her parent's offered their consent in the engagement, Levi lightly considered that maybe a thin piece of him still sought Kenny's approval. He would never be able to introduce Mikasa to his parent's, or any other family member, so he supposed that Kenny was the closest thing he had, and some part of him wanted support.

Their locked fingers tighten. Mikasa detected nervousness coming from Levi, which was strange, but this hesitation wasn't without reason. Every unfolded event during this trip had been one unexpected shock after the next. This time, they were in on it, but stating shocking news was no less difficult. At the same time, the couple's eyes strayed from Kenny and they gazed upon another. With a shallow breath, Mikasa's eyes gave consent, and also gave him the power he needed to spit out the conclusion.

"And we decided to go through with it," Levi said at last, then moved his eyes back to Kenny to inspect his reaction.

All sound cut from the room. The flickering flames of the candles between them even stilled from the lack of movement. The shifting shadows casted in the sockets of Kenny's elusive eyes as his uplifted expressed completely wilted. "...You're kidding."

And with those two words mingling with a face of skepticism, the moment was ruined, more so by what he said next as he shifted his frown at Mikasa, "You wanna marry this guy? Seriously?"

"Y-Yeah..." Mikasa weakly faltered, then, with a straightened posture, she repeated herself with an extra dose of conviction. "Yes. I want to marry him."

Levi turned an unbidden grin at her, his eyes crinkling with elation. No matter how many times she said it, he still never believed it. The words will probably still sound foreign to him on their wedding day.

"Well, well well," Kenny said airily, his shock replaced with arrogance as he rested back in the chair with a creak. "Be sure to invite me to the wedding."

"Uh, no." Mikasa laid her foot down before consideration could even bloom. It might sound cruel given that he was her blood, but bearing in mind his penchant for hostility and his relationship with Levi, sending him an invitation would be like sending a declaration of war. "You guys will end up trying to kill each other in the middle of the ceremony."

"But wouldn't that make it memorable?" A warm voice freed from Kenny, a bloodbath of a wedding already projecting out of his eyes.

"Implying you'll even be alive when we tie the knot," Levi taunted crossly.

Kenny thrust out his chest, trying to contain all his anger into one spot before expelling out a throaty threat. "Implying you'll even be alive to get married!"

Levi's grip on Mikasa's hand fastened; his ire pulsing into her palm. "If I haven't gotten eaten by now, I don't think I will anytime soon, and you sure as hell won't kill me."

Convinced by his words, Kenny abandoned their quarrel, upended his drink, and transferred his attention to Mikasa. "You really want to marry him, huh?" Kenny asked again, but this time more gently. The unexpected change in pitch sounded strange to Levi.
Face downturned, she blushed. "We... We still need to work on our relationship and get to know each other more, but I think it could work."

"Yeah. I think so too," agreed Kenny, an affable breath filling his lungs. "Ackerman's are built strong, and if me or the titans can't get in your way, no love quarrels will either."

That almost resembled fatherly affection, Levi thought, but his clenched throat wouldn't permit him to reply without choking on the words of thanks.

"If I'm not allowed to attend the wedding..." Kenny started ruefully. "Then just be sure to name your first son after me."

Levi's entire face twisted with disgust. "No way in hell would I give my kid your name."

"Awh, but you promised you would after the two of you got engaged," Kenny slumped forward with a pout, looking like a drunk toddler.

"No, old man. Let me refresh your memory," Levi leaned over, his elbow propped up on the table as he thrust out a finger. "You ordered me to name my first son after you and I agreed. I don't take orders from you anymore."

"But you still promised..." he mumbled, his redden nose sniffling.

"And I promised not to kill you, but I can easily break promises."

"Fine then, get on with it!" Closing his eyes, Kenny swept his arms out openly, making him vulnerable for an attack. "Kill me and name your first son after me in my memory!"

"Can we please stop talking about children?" Mikasa cut in, aghast. "Levi and I are still adjusting to the whole engagement thing here, children aren't on our mind yet."

With a submissive groan, Kenny slumped over and pinned his smiling eyes on his niece for a long while. "You were practically sewed to Levi when you were a little tyke, you know that?" Just his words alone made Mikasa shrink back into an embarrassed child who desperately wanted to hide behind her mother's dress again. "You took an immediate liking to him," he looked up the ceiling, a wan smirk plastered on his lips. "God only knows why, most kids would piss themselves if they caught a glimpse of such a miserable-looking man, but not you. And from the first time I saw you two together recently, I knew from first glance you still felt the same. Even if you didn't remember the past, I could see it in your eyes that you still looked up to him. That admiration never wavered."

The streak of heat cutting across Mikasa's cheeks dyed redder than her scarf. Saying nothing, her lips pressed into a firm slash.

Kenny shifted his attention to Levi. "And when we were on the road, traveling back to the underground after visiting you and your folks, he wouldn't shut up about you. It was pathetic how a grown man wouldn't stop talking about a five year old girl for nearly a week. I considered driving the carriage off a steep cliff just to end his ceaseless rambling."

Now Levi's cheeks ignited with the matching hue Mikasa wore. They sat shrunched and red, like a pair of trampled roses.

The past twinkled in his aged eyes. "Your folks were good people, Mikasa, and they saw something in Levi. They'd be proud to know you decided to go through with the engagement we
Mikasa could tell Kenny felt uncomfortable expressing himself in such a way, but she appreciated his words nonetheless. When she learned how much her parent's wanted them together, she couldn't imagine herself with anyone else. Not only did she develop feelings for Levi during this mission in the wilderness, but her parent's approved of him years prior and thought he was a good match for her. Mikasa wasn't a firm believer of fate, but something told her they were met to be. They met again after all those years apart for a reason, and Mikasa had no desire to fight against the raging current.

"I also remember you hogging all the cookies my sister-in-law made," Kenny stabbed his eyes at Levi accusingly, extinguishing the warm feeling swelling up in the couple. "She baked them for us to share on the road but you wouldn't give me a crumb."

"You sure do remember the most irrelevant and useless shit." Levi snapped. But that was a memory that he had failed to recall, and he was secretly grateful for Kenny bringing it up. "Your mother was an amazing baker," he filled Mikasa in, keeping his voice gentle. "She made a batch of cookies one evening and I couldn't stop wolfing them down. She had to make another batch and she ended up giving us the leftovers for the road."

"Us," Kenny spat with disdain. "You didn't share any, you greedy glutton."

"It was ten years ago. Are you honestly still mad you didn't get a second helping?"

"Yes, I'm damn mad," he slurred in drunken rage, sloppily hammering down his empty glass. "They were really good."

As the boy's bantered on about old grudges, Mikasa sat placidly still, assaulted by unbidden memories. She didn't know if the drink helped relax her mind enough to open up a clogged flow or if Kenny's and Levi's words helped her remember, but nostalgic memories were flashing in her mind.

"That's so odd. I think I remember that." She squinted up at the ceiling beams as she recalled, still unsure. Her mutter managed to cut off their japes, and the men heeded her with curiosity. It was like a memory triggered off, an unclear one that she had to sort through before speaking further. The feeling was similar to desperately latching onto the details of a dream upon waking before it disappeared forever. "I completely forgot about that, but I think I remember my mom's recipe."

The two men silently stared at her with expanding eyes.

"As soon as we come across ingredients you're making those cookies. That's a direct order," Levi demanded.

"Are you honestly abusing your authority for the sake of cookies, captain?"

"Make two batches," Kenny added. "He'll leave none for me again if you don't."

Levi scoffed. "What makes you think you're getting any? You're a prisoner. Prisoners don't get cookies."

Kenny slammed his cup on the table once more, this time making the other glasses clatter. "It's an Ackerman family recipe, by blood I have more rights to those cookies than you."

"But it's Mikasa's mother's recipe. She was only an Ackerman by name. And as Mikasa's future husband, by law I have more rights."
"I think both of you had too much to drink," Mikasa tried to stifle her quiet laughter as the men argued back and forth, inventing legal claims over cookies. Her family sure was a weird bunch, but they were her weird family and even though they both had many faults, she wouldn't trade them for the world.

"You look tired," Levi remarked some time later in the night, noting the way Mikasa lurched over and cradled her weak head. She barely contributed to conversation, other than a bob or two of the head, but that may have been her nodding off to sleep. After the adventurous day they had, he was surprised she managed to stay awake as long as she did.

"My head's swimming a bit." The vision of Levi began to warp slightly as she ran a hand down her numbed face.

"You should head off to bed."

"Yeah, and he'll join you later." Kenny winked with a risqué chuckle as he poured himself yet another glass. Both of the soldiers had lost count of how many drinks he had, and he didn't look ready to quit any time soon.

Ignoring the inappropriate comment, Levi gave her thigh a reassuring pat. "Really, go get some rest."

"Fine. If you need me just wake me up," she pulled herself away from the table, using the edge to aid her haggard balance.

Kenny flung his hands up, a wounded look on his face. "What, no goodnight kiss?"

Levi rolled his neck back to him with a threatening crack. "One more fucking unnecessary comment Kenny. Come on. Test your luck, you prick."

"Or I could shut both of you up in one fell swoop."

Eyes narrowed in question, Levi moved his head up at Mikasa, but a fast blur blocked his sight and his lips were stolen in a fuse of slick warmness.

Before he could realize what happened, she was already gone and all he had was Kenny speechless and gaping before him and a tingle leftover on his lips. She was right. She stunned them both and buttoned both of their lips.

"She sure is a wonderful girl," Kenny said wistfully into the doorframe she disappeared into. "I'm proud of her. Though her only fault would be her horrible taste in men," he intoned playfully.

Levi clenched his teeth in restraint until Kenny said something that relaxed his jaw so much it unhinged.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "I'm just joking. I know you'll treat her good."

The fact that he corrected an ill-humored joke and apologized left Levi stunned and slightly spooked. "No more booze for you," Levi pinched the brim of his ex-mentors glass and relocated it from his reach.

"Maybe the drink did get to me," he said in an airy voice as he shuffled through the inner pocket of his coat. "But now that were alone…I have something to give you."

Levi dropped his gaze, bracing himself for whatever he might expose. "Unless that's a gun, I'm going to be really crept out. You're not the gift-giving type."
He chuckled despondently. "It's more of a gift for Mikasa, one I want you to deliver to her."

What Kenny pulled out from his coat pocket wasn't a gun, or any weapon at all. It was a simple black box with hinges, gingerly set down in front of Levi.

Warily, Levi reached out to it, fearing it was a trap of some kind. What he saw when he unhinged the box made his furrowed brows join in the center. "...What's this?"

"A ring."

Obviously. Levi made that assessment himself. The band was tucked between frayed padding. The guttering candle flame on the table made the diamond spit vibrant color every which way.

"Who's dead finger did you pry this from?" Levi mused with a crooked brow, holding the band up to the candle to appraise it. The diamond was about the size of an almond, and shared the same shape as one. It almost looked like a shimmering teardrop.

Kenny glowered at him viciously but he bit the side of his cheek, restraining the impulses to whip him for that remark. "I didn't steal it. When I was young, I was going to ask a girl to marry me, but it... didn't work out. I've been holding on to that damn thing ever since."

"You...wait," he flicked his attentive eyes to him. "Back up. You were going to ask an actual female to marry you? A real human? Not like a farmyard animal?"

"Yes, a real fucking woman, and a beautiful one at that. Stop being a disrespectful prick about it." Kenny stirred in his seat, arms folded to the chest as muffled curses hung from a strained frown. He internally fought a war to keep his anger prisoned and continued on in a mild voice, "I've been holding that ring as a token of her since I have nothing else to remember her by."

The shards glistened more so as he shifted the band, igniting his curious eyes with twinkling orbes. "Then why are you giving it to me?"

Looking around aimlessly, Kenny snickered and pushed up his shoulders, as if he hadn't the faintest idea. "I figure you and Mikasa would make better use for it, rather than letting it collect dust in my coat pocket."

Levi examined the ring under a pensive gaze, wondering about the rightful owner. "...What happened to her?"

Kenny leaned back in his chair, letting his knitted fingers slide on top of his stomach. "She died."

"Oh." As touchy as the topic was, he wanted Kenny to elaborate more. He can't just throw a ring in his face from a dead lover and expect not to be questioned. Usually death to Kenny was an insignificant occurrence. Hell, he's the cause of many deaths and didn't bat an eye, but judging by his mien he seemed broken up at just the mention of her—this woman that heartless bastard loved enough to marry. This faceless phantom showed herself in Levi's mind's eye. The image of her beside Kenny presented itself, but it didn't match up at all. A folly of his imagination, that's what it felt like. Too unbelievable to be true.

Even after all these years of knowing him, he never knew Kenny went steady with someone at any point in his life—he never even imagined such a ridiculous idea. How was a man like Kenny even capable of loving? That in and of itself was an ultimate shock to Levi, and since he never felt this kind of energy before from Kenny, he couldn't help but pry, as insensitive as it might be.

"She was special to you, huh..." he prompt him to say more.
"Yeah." Kenny sucked a hissing breath between his grinding teeth; his frown lines deepening. "Her name was Jalia. And she was a breathtakingly beautiful woman; a goddess and a damn blessing in these forsaken walls." His frown lines turned into amused crevices as his eyes reminisced in her memory, swimming slickly and melting as if the ghostly embodiment of this supposed goddess was standing before him.

Kenny never spoke so highly of anyone before. This woman may very well have been a blessing: the mysterious goddess who tamed the hellish beast, Kenny the ripper.

"She was one of the last of her kind, too—just like Mikasa. She had dark skin and corkscrew curls of black hair with eyes like a doe. Such a classy woman she was, tall and elegant with such a beautiful way of carrying herself. But don't let that lyrical description fool you—she was a cold hard bitch and that's what I loved about her." He tried to chuckle in his usual manner, but the noise sounded more like the ironic guffaw a man spills when he welcomed the arms of death.

With Kenny's flowery description in mind, Levi painted her out in his minds canvas and studied her silently. This mysterious woman was important to Kenny. And this ring, that currently fiddled around in his sweaty fingers, was a decoration of Kenny's love for her. This ring alone, while nothing fancy like the heavy rocks the noble woman in Sina wore, was more valuable than the jeweler's it came from or the mines that harvested the diamond.

"How'd you meet her?"

Kenny stiffed in hesitation. "In a pleasure house..."

Any other time, Levi would've teased him for pathetically paying for sex, but as much as a brat he could be, he knew now wasn't the time for that.

It was if Kenny expected him to have a comment about it, and even allowed room for it by pausing, but when Levi said nothing he twitched up a knowing smirk at him. "As soon as I saw her standing there in that golden silk robe I knew I had to have her. God, I remember the night so clearly. We ended up talking for most of the evening; I had so many questions for her—" but he didn't replay any of them or the answers for Levi's ears. A man had to have some sacred memories to take to his grave, after all, and Levi could respect that. "And I fell in love right then and there, before I fucked her, if you could believe it. And soon enough, and miraculously, might I add, she loved me in return."

Levi never heard Kenny express himself so passionately, nor had he ever heard such a tender tone release from him before. The face he wore looked like an unfamiliar mask, or perhaps he wore a mask all along and this was his true face.

"When I found out she was a sex slave, there against her will since she was a teen, I stole her away. We planned on starting a life together, but soon enough she was hunted down by panderers and MPs. The twisted fucks actually saw her as rare property and wanted me to return stolen merchandise." He tsked, shaking his head as if the notion still dug under his skin even after all these years. "The searches died down after a few months and we started to live a peaceful life together in a little cabin just like this one. When I found out Jalia was pregnant with my child, I picked out that ring for her. I thought everything was looking up for us—"

Closing his eyes, Levi felt a heavy weight of trepidation drop in the pit of his stomach, and his muscles cramped with a painful cringe. This story didn't have a happy ending, he already knew; a shame since this was the first time Kenny opened up and shared such a personal memory—but this pleasant tale of love was turning dark and Levi's thumping chest braced for impact as he awaited the conclusion.
"When I was in work one night, the MPs found out where we were held up. That woman was always such a fighter. She always fought with me, but we never were mad at each other a second." Kenny looked almost ruefully bashful as he scratched the whiskers on his cheek. Right then, Levi wondered if fighting was his way of showing affection. "Being the fearless fighter she was, she tried to put up a fight when they all ganged up on her. Put up a good one too, even being pregnant as she was. One defenseless woman against a small army of MPs and pimps couldn't be matched, of course. I always figured if they did ever find her, worse case scenario, she'd be taken back to the brothel against her will. I never anticipated any other consequence. I still don't know why it turned out so ugly. I tried to come up with sensible reason, and figured if they couldn't have her, no one could, but that unknown motivation still haunts me. Maybe they did want to take her back, but she put up too much of a fight and they figured she'd never be tamed again after tasting a sample of freedom. I don't know, but I do know I left my to-be wife with a kiss, thinking she was safe, and when I returned home I was welcomed by her mangled and bloody corpse. The image haunts me to this day."

Every added word sickened Levi more and more. His gums pulsed from how hard he clenched his teeth. The hero side of him wished he could go back in time to put a stop to the mindless crime. A picture of a young Mikasa and her family suddenly flickered in his mind. That family was split apart for similar reasons, if you could call them reasons, he recalled. Even Mikasa fell victim to such atrocious crimes and nearly became sold into slavery for the rarity of her ethnicity. How utterly revolting. Stories like that made Levi wonder why he risked his life to protect the corrupt bastards housed inside these walls—but then he remembered the victims, like Mikasa, her parent's, Jalia, Kenny's unborn child... People like that were worth fighting for.

Ambushed by memories, Kenny wiped a trembling hand down his mouth, trying to gather his cool. A deadly gaze fixated somewhere past Levi's shoulder without a blink. Red flared in his eyes, as if reflecting a bloody sight. He sat mutely for a pensive minute as he chewed at his lip. His eyes turned to hard ice then melted; a hot tear spilled out and rolled down his cheek.

The kitchen went dead silent, aside from the occasional sniffle from Kenny. Even the hollowing winds outside stayed motionless to pay its respects. There was a ringing in Levi's ear until a wet choked-on yip shattered the silence. Levi had never saw Kenny cry before. Out of respect for his privacy, he moved his eyes off him and set them on the table where the guttering flame gave life to the casting shadows.

"I killed every fucking MP I could after that happened," his voice rattled like rusty chains. "They not only killed my bride to be, but they killed my unborn child as well. I snapped."

Levi heard of the rumors of Kenny the Ripper relentlessly slaughtering hundreds of MPs at a time like an unstoppable madman. The tales painted Kenny to be the monster, but hearing his side to the story made him sound like the victim.

"And somehow I ended up as one of those crooked fucks. I thought it would help my own goals: work with the enemy to destroy them from the inside, but I became as bad as the men who took my Jalia away from me." His fist slammed on the table, making an already edgy Levi jump in his seat. "I don't know how I ended up like this. When you left I felt like I had no set path again and at one point, I think I was following orders without thinking like a lifeless hunk of machinery. It may not seem like it, but I suffer incredibly when I lose something. With the loss of her and then you I became the type of person I never wanted to be."

"I had to leave," the words came out colder than Levi intended. "But if you expressed yourself like this earlier, I would've understood. I had every reason to believe you were out of your mind and I didn't want any part in your crazy schemes. This doesn't excuse your actions, but it does explain them. The unknown reasons behind your mindless bloodshed used to haunt me too—we
Kenny bobbed his head, looking poisoned and purified at the same time. "In the long run, I'm glad you left. I didn't want to drag you into that mess—at the time I did, but I wasn't in the right state of mind. During the time we did live together, you did help me. Your presence was almost therapeutic. Instead of darkness and blood, I saw light; I had a future to look forward to thanks to you. In all honesty... it felt like I found the child I lost," he knuckled away a tear, a deep frown engraved on his lips. "I think I took you in because I just couldn't stand being alone after that, but then I stumbled upon the crazy idea of forcing you to help my twisted goals. I was in no condition to raise a child. All I could think about was revenge and murder and I couldn't dig out of that pit. I was still bitter and miserable from the loss of Jalia and I still did many horrible things just to cope with that, but I felt half way whole again with you around—

"but since I was already a monster, I don't blame you for leaving, and I'm sorry that I initially planned on turning you into myself. I placed heavy burdens on you, Levi. I even wanted you to pass down those burdens to your own children. That was a tall order to place and just know that I never meant for our relationship to turn so corrupt and ugly. But being here with you and Mikasa in this little cabin had helped clear my head. The two of you remind me of her and I a lot. It helped me remember that love we shared...and it helped me remember the man I was when I was with her—the man she was proud of. She probably hates the man I am now, though."

"Love doesn't really work that way. If she is somehow a conscious entity, she probably expects better from you, sure, but you can't just turn love on and off just because you disagree about something. I've done things that utterly revolted Mikasa, but she still wants to be with me. Mikasa had also let revenge get in the way of radical thinking and I've suffered as a result, but that didn't cause me to love her any less. I didn't know Jalia, but I don't think she would hate you. If anything, she probably wishes you weren't enduring so much pain."

Kenny's lip tucked morosely. "I'm trying to elevate that pain," he said, pointing his eyes at the ring, "by letting go of the past. Levi, I want you to propose to Mikasa properly. And after you do, make sure you don't ever let any harm come her way. You think you're miserable now? Oh no. If you lose the one you truly love, it's game over. There's no recovering from that." Kenny's demeanor, however, did slowly recover as he pulled himself back together. His hunched pose erected up and he cleared the sorrow accumulation in his throat.

Levi felt honored to be given this ring by the man who raised him and made him into the man he was today: the man that was supposedly worthy enough to marry in Mikasa's eyes. When he slips that band over Mikasa's finger, he hoped that Jalia will look after her lover's niece. What a comforting thought.

"Be good to her, Levi."

"Like you of all people need to tell me that," Levi flipped down the lid and transferred the case to his pocket.

"Quit ruining the moment, runt. I'm happy for you." Kenny paused there, then after swallowing his hesitation, he added in an afterthought, "My brother was a dumb fool and I'm sure his wife hated me, but I'm not blind. I know they were good people and they made a beautiful and strong daughter—I wish I could have gotten to know Mikasa more over the years, but my 'dreams' clouded my mind for so long." Regret crinkled in the outer corners of his eyes. "I just want the last of my family happy. You and Mikasa are the only ones I have left."

Levi opened his mouth to speak, but only Kenny's voice was heard.

"Before you ruin the mood again and speak, let me say I do see you as my son, Levi. I know I
wasn't the best father figure but—"

"Ya' think? You tried to shoot me the other day."

"Overlook the little details and shut up, you little shit." The gravelly tone poisoning his voice diluted with a surrendering sigh. "You're a good kid—ah, well I suppose you're a man now. You didn't grow much over the years, but you still grew in other ways since we've met; you've grown wiser, stronger, matured and you protect the ones you care for. It takes a true man to do that. I don't agree with everything you're doing, but I'm still proud of you."

A surge of heat rose to Levi's face. "...I appreciate you saying that, truly," his voice thickened with compassion. When he was younger, all he wanted was to make Kenny proud. When they would train together, he would replicate a few banal praises, but right now, Kenny was proud of him for other reasons. Reasons Levi cared dearly about. That meant the world to him.

"And for the record, you were a terrible father figure—you were a grumpy prick and worked me to the bone, but looking back, you made my childhood interesting. You kept a roof over my head, food in my stomach, and kept my arms toned with muscle. I don't even know where I'd be if you didn't take me in from the streets." Levi paused to ponder this, and a dreadful feeling crept up his spine. "I'd probably still be there. Or dead."

"And now look at ya'," Kenny made a flourishing gesture at him. "You're humanity's strongest and you're engaged to humanity's most beautiful woman." Kenny chuckled humbly, but his spirits dulled as he bowed down his head. "Thanks for that, though. It's assuring to know I did one thing right in my life."

Life sure was funny. If it weren't for Kenny, Levi would've undoubtedly remained an unwanted orphan on the soiled streets of the underground. By now, he'd probably be dead in an ally or in jail. If it weren't for departing from Kenny, he would've never ended up in the Survey Corps. If it weren't for his training, he wouldn't have survived through his first mission. If it weren't for him, he never would have met Mikasa and her family all those years ago.

Levi never realized it until now, but his current life was built by Kenny. Recently, he even gave him the push he needed to tell Mikasa about their engagement, and as a result, he's getting married to the love of his life.

...All thanks to Kenny.

That warmness Levi searched for all those years after meeting Mikasa's family had started to boil up inside him again. That comforting sensation was something only family could give. It took a long time to realize it, but as sick and crazy as he was, Kenny was Levi's family. Now Levi could finally understand why Mikasa acted so rash when it came to Eren. Family could make you do crazy things, and he's about to prove that.

"Stand up, stay still and don't say a word," Levi barked, pushing himself up from his chair.

"Huh?" Kenny cocked his head up at Levi, who now loomed over him like an ominous shadow. "Why?"

"It's an order. Do as I say."

With an uncertain gait, Kenny eased himself from the table and stood tall before Levi. What am I getting myself in to? he wondered, but his following actions betrayed his feelings of uncertainty.

With expanded arms, Levi hastily lunged himself forward, the momentum nearly enough to knock the six-foot man off balance. With his cheek compressed against Kenny's chest, Levi couldn't see
his reaction, but he could hear the wind wrenching out of his lungs as he squeezed his arms tighter around him. Even though Levi went about this with a bit too much force, he wasn't actually assaulting him or restraining him—he was hugging him.

Within his arms, he could feel Kenny stiffen and writhe from the unwarranted affection, but soon his ex-mentors body mollified inside his arms. Leaning over, Kenny returned the embrace and muttered, "Is...Is this the first time we've hugged?"

"Shut up," Levi mumbled into his coat. "Talking makes this weirder than it already is."

Finally pulling away from the hug that lasted longer than it should have, Levi darted his eyes aside to avoid Kenny's eyes, but what he saw in the threshold of the kitchen turned out to be much more embarrassing than facing Kenny. There, slated on the door frame, he spotted a witness to the shameful affection.

With clenched fists swaying by his hips, Levi hazarded a few steps forward. "How... long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough to see the most awkward hug I've ever seen," Mikasa's eyes were smiling at the two chagrín boys.

Charged with humiliation, Levi stabbed his finger at her, "You didn't see anything."

"Oh, I didn't?" Mikasa flicked her head to the side and found herself entertained by their shocked expressions.

"He tried to escape. And I tried to restrain him. That's all," Levi tacked on his usual dry tone, hoping to fool her.

"What do you call that fighting hold, then? I don't believe I learned that one in training," she skimmed her eyes over both of them in turn, and when they both sulked and hung their heads in shame, Mikasa approached Levi with a curling lip. *His shyness toward affection will only go away through over exposure,* she thought.

"Quit pouting, everyone needs a hug once in a while." She stepped forward and trapped Levi in her hold, but he was still too paralyzed with humiliation to even be conscious of the hug. Spotting Kenny beyond his shoulder, she released Levi and beckoned over her uncle. "Hey, we're family. I think I deserve a hug from you, too."

A wide open grin spread across her uncles cheeks as he eagerly offered his arms to her.

Finally returning to his senses, Levi whipped around, his face twisted with disgust. "I order a stop to this Ackerman hug-fest," shouted Levi, stomping his foot testily. There was too much damn hugging; Ackerman arms everywhere.

"You started it," said Kenny, giving his niece a final heartening squeeze.

"You seem cranky," Mikasa moved away from her uncle, "I think another hug might fix that."

"No. Stop it." Levi lurched back as if Mikasa was a titan closing in on him. Pacing backwards, his back careened against the wall. With no where left to run, Mikasa captured him.

"Don't disobey your captain," he said, but his placid tone disobeyed his words as Mikasa gently wove her arms around him.

There's no way to describe the sensation of being cherished in the arms of another, but when her
arms clung around him, Levi melted. It was the type of nurturing affection he always craved—the kind of affection that could soothe any rattling nerve, or silence any disquiet thought. Mikasa's arms were broad and flexed with muscle, but that only made the hold around him tighter, and despite her strength she cradled him as gently as a newborn. Her arms were like a temple shielding him, and he was the worshiper tucked safely inside, thanking God for blessing him with this angel.

~x~

Later that night in the bedroom, Mikasa finally started to drift back to sleep, but the sound of the bedroom door creaking open shook her awake. A silhouette slipped in and clicked the door shut.

"Levi?" Mikasa called groggily, shifting up to recline on her elbows.

"Sorry for waking you," he said lowly, opening up a draw and clicking it shut again. Mikasa briefly wondered what he was doing before he plodded over to the edge of the bed. He stood there for a while, as black as silent as a shadow. "Mind if I join you?"

She was grateful the darkness hid her delighted expression. Scooting over, she beckoned him by lifting up the covers and he slipped under, her warm body heat already circulating beneath.

"Did you remember to lock the basement?" she asked as he settled in. By the sound of the ruffling, she assumed he was removing his shirt.

"Actually...I'm letting Kenny sleep out in the living room by the fire. He won't be needing any watch on him, either."

"Are you..." Mikasa tried to squint where his face lay hidden in the dark, hoping she could determine what kind of expression he wore. Unable to tell if he was being serious or drily humorous as usual, she asked, "Are you sure that's a good idea? I know we all had that tender moment earlier this evening but Kenny is still our prisoner."

"He's also our family," Levi said as he slid his hands under his head. "I might be wrong, but I think we might have the wrong idea about Kenny. He's done horrible things—things I can't ever forgive him for, but it's hard to play judge when I myself have my own demons and regrets that keep me up at night. People change. I used to mug people and get in to knife fights. Now I'm the respected captain of the Survey Corps. People naturally adapt to their surroundings. If you put a bunch of starving wolves in a cage together, they're bound to attack each other, but outside of that cage they'd would be a benign pack. People are animals, and we do what we need to survive in this shitty world."

Intrigued by his words, Mikasa propped her head up on her hand and pondered his words. Sometimes, the difference between good and evil depended on whose side you're on. Even when contrived plans that hoped to help the betterment of society, it still had consequences and casualties, and even some evil deeds proved to be beneficial for the populace in one way or another. They lived during a time when monsters could become allies, and fellow soldiers could become traitors. The world was entirely too gray to label people with the tags "good" and "evil". It didn't exist, not wholly—not in this life.

Although she was baffled at first, Mikasa understood where Levi was coming from and felt no need to question his insight. If he believed leaving Kenny unguarded was okay, then it was okay.

"I think Kenny is capable of drastic change, too." Mikasa bit her lip in thought. It was hard to admit, especially considering Kenny's notorious title, but she developed a soft spot for the guy and was glad to have a living family member. Was he the ideal depiction of family? Not by a long
shot. But what classified as a perfect family, anyway? "I could tell he's a good man, deep, deep down. I think he just lost his way. It's easy to lose your way in our chaotic world."

Her words triggered him to recall how he too lost his way in the underground. He had no set path engraved before him, not until he reconnected with Mikasa did that path begin to reappear. Right now, Kenny was lost and going down any corrupt road that looked promising. All he needed was to find a moral path worth following.

Mikasa found drastic change very possible, recently more than ever. Not long ago she had a deeply embedded grudged against Levi. She'd cringe in anger just thinking about him, and would lust at the idea of revenge—but now, she only lusted at the idea of touching him.

"I'm cold," she murmured in a luring sigh as she rolled closer to him, tamping her face into his bare chest as her hand tucked under his hip. The beat of his heart throbbing against her ear made her chest flutter soothingly.

That's all Levi needed to hear to animate him—he quickly hooked his arm around her neck and reeled her in closer while planting a few kisses on the crown of her head. "For someone claiming to be cold, you sure do feel hot," Levi commented as his fingers grazed the indentations of her biceps.

"I lied," she admitted victoriously. Getting close to Levi was all she wanted and using that excuse was a sure-fire way to get what she wanted.

He cupped her shoulder proudly, and while he secured his tight hold around her, it felt as if their warm bodies were fusing together.

"Say what you want about Kenny, but you have to admit he's a fantastic matchmaker."

Levi held back a laugh as he massaged her nape lovingly. "Agreed. I think he should retire from combat, buy a caravan and become a traveling love guru."

Together they shared a laugh as their feet twined together playfully. Even though it felt nice, it felt strange to hear his own laugh; it had been kept locked away for so long he nearly forgot how it sounded. And hearing Mikasa's giggles sounded better than a cheer of victory after a long battle. During the time he had known Mikasa as a young woman, he had never saw her even crack a smile, but here she was, unlocking that trove of a sound to bless his ears.

"You're right though. Life is strange. After the court hearing, I really did hate you. Like, hate isn't even a strong enough word. I wanted to beat you. I'd even fantasies about it and—"

"Okay. I get it. You hated me," he cut in, wounded.

"But now..." with the tip of her finger she drew shapes into his chest, and the feathery feeling made him shudder. "I feel a different way about you—and there's not a strong enough word for that emotion, either."

There never would be a strong enough word to describe such a feeling, and Levi understood that well in advance. But there was one phrase that might get the feeling across.

"I love you, Mikasa."

The room fell into silence then, and even Mikasa's artistic finger halted mid-stroke.

"Levi..." her throat filled to the brim with emotion. It felt overbearing to hear. The only people who ever loved her was her parents, but that was a different kind of love. Up until now, she hadn't
realized it, but Levi loved her fiercer than how he fought in battle, and she knew that in time, her love for him would surpass everything in this world.

Curling her body against his, she wished she could go into permanent hibernation and stay like this forever. "You're the first man who ever told me he loved me, you know."

"I find that excruciatingly hard to believe." A beautiful girl must've been confessed to before, surely, even if she didn't return the feelings.

"Okay, you win. Jean mumbled it randomly once, but that doesn't count."

His chest fluctuated with a dry chuckle. "That must've been painfully awkward."

"It was. He said it really quick under his breath in the mess hall, and Eren mistook it for a sneeze and handed him a tissue. I didn't want to admit I heard him, so I played along and said 'gesundheit.'"

"It probably took him days to work up the courage to confess. Poor guy." A rueful sigh freed from his lips. "I miss my squad. Even if they're a bunch of brats—they're good kids."

"I miss them too." The faces of 104 squad flickered like phantoms in the darkness. This time alone with Levi and Kenny had been a life changing experience, but part of her just wanted to reunite with the others and get back out into the world, as cruel as it might be.

"The snow stopped and it's thawing at an alarming rate. They might be able to retrieve us soon."

Mikasa tried to picture the reunion for a passing minute, until a few concerns surfaced when she stumbled upon the realization that she and Levi left for this mission as a superior and underling with no personal ties, but were ending this mission with a romantic relationship and an impending marriage.

"...How are we going to tell them? You know...about us," she asked haltingly, wondering how each of them would react. Mikasa had no desire to keep her and Levi's new relationship a secret, and even if they tried, it would only add unnecessary stress. It's best to get it out in the open as soon as possible, but how to go about it troubled her.

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it," Levi said, not knowing how they should tell them himself. "I imagine they'll all be quite shocked." More shocked than him, if that's possible. The drastic shift in their relationship hadn't even fully registered in his mind yet.

"Shocked isn't even a strong enough word."

"We really need to find stronger words for our vocabulary."

"Ironically, words are not our strong point," she giggled drowsily in Levi's arms, ascending up to plant one last kiss upon his lips, then returned to nuzzling her cheek against his chest. His words may not be strong, but as his loving arms guarded her from the night ahead, she affirmed that his hold around her certainly was.

Returning to the battlefield was going to be tough after this eventful ordeal, but her renewed disposition should serve as aid. Being here with Levi now, in his arms and hearing his soft breathing before he drifted into a dream, made her feel free, more free than what a thousand victories could grant her. This was what true freedom looked like. Freedom wasn't just the end of war and peace on earth because that day will never come, even if the titans are abolished. There would always be those who opposed, those who hate, those who concur the weak. Freedom in this world was a rare smile from a strict, grimacing man. Freedom was feeling content and safe in
the arms of another. Freedom was knowing you shared this cruel world with someone who cared, someone who understood your warped and troubled mind. Mikasa already felt free, and so long as Levi stayed by her side, nothing would ever sway that feeling.
So here's the thing. This chapter was supposed to be twice as long, but I've been struggling with the second half forever so I figured I should release what I have finished. I desperately need to release this portion of the story or else I'll tinker with it forever (and evidently delay the completion of the rest of the chapter). I think I'm just overwhelmed by the never-ending body of text cluttering my word processor, so I might be able to focus better on the later half if I get this out of the way.

Anyway, I'm dearly sorry for the long wait. You guys are amazingly patient!

Mikasa's eyelids flickered open to see the glow of dawn seep between the draperies, diffusing stripes of gold across the quiet bedroom.

A cold draft nipped at her nose then, impelling her to burrow deeper in the heap of fur and flesh she had woken up in. As she lay there, absorbing the warmth of Levi's body nestled up behind her, she wondered how she ever managed to sleep without muscular arms enclosed around her before. Sleeping alone would never be the same now that she had shared a bed with Levi.

Closing her eyes again, Mikasa lapsed in and out of the realms of sleep and reality until her mind was drained of dreams. The lighting and shadows had refracted since the last time she woke, indicating the morning had come and gone without them, but Levi's hold on her never moved. The even breaths grazing the back of her neck affirm he was still fast asleep.

Untangling herself from his hold, Mikasa flipped to her other side, gently enough not to rock the bed. Almost instinctively, Levi restored his embrace with her, pulling her body close to his with a protective squeeze, all while he slept.

Facing him now, she rose a finger to trace his temple, the curve of his jaw, and finally his chin, which jutted out from the touch.

Stirring awake with a little growl, Levi slit open a watery eye to see a blurry shape limned in sunlight. He blinked a few times to clear his vision and saw Mikasa's soft smile welcoming him back to consciousness.

Comfortably reposed, he silently admired her beauty, paying little mind to how stiff his joints had gotten from the long, needed sleep. He couldn't recall the last time he slept that long. Night terrors often shook him awake at dead hours of the night. Loneliness and despair would linger thereafter, preventing him rest. There were no sign of those crippling emotions haunting him now, thankfully. Only the woman he loved blessed his company.

Levi rolled to his back to stretch his limbs, and also his playful lips. "You were staring at me while I slept, weren't you? Creepy."

"You should be the last person to make a comment about staring," she pounded her fist down on his chest, hard enough to make him utter a winded oomph.

"Can't I tease you without painful penalties?" he bravely reached out to pinch her cheek. "You're..."
supposed to blush, not give me a bruise."

The look she gave him sent a chill down his spine.

"What kind of girl do you think I am?" she questioned, dominance ringing in her voice as she swatted his hand away. "I'm not some blushing damsel, you know."

"Perhaps not," he said, his tone scratchy from sleep, but also bold, "although, I do think you're the kind of girl who blushes when touched here..." Biting his lip, Levi slid his hand over the curve of her bottom to give it a hard squeeze.

After a startled gasp, her brows settled low over her narrow eyes and she fired up, agilely whipping her leg over his waist to mount him.

Twitching in excitement, Levi snatched hold of her girth with both hands and savored the reward of her ruddy complexion staring down at him. Nothing was cuter than seeing her normally sullen face flare with embarrassment. Or—Levi squinted—was that anger?

Thinning her eyes on the man under her, she curled her fingers and lightly tapped his cheek with a closed fist. "I'll give you a black and blue blush if you don't knock it off."

"How cute," he responded to the threat. "Will you kiss it better after?"

More heat rose to her face; making her feel as if she were trapped in a furnace with no hope of escaping. As much as she liked Levi's intimate side, she's not used to it yet. During these times, her inability to control her emotional and physical responses to him troubled her most of all. Enduring rough physical training with Humanity's Strongest would be much easier than enduring one gentle touch from him, she realized. As a woman hailed as the prodigy of her generation, Mikasa couldn't fathom how Levi could so easily weaken her with a single touch or word.

Everyone had their weaknesses, she supposed. That might explain why her power drained significantly when Levi used these flirty tactics on her.

Levi must have his own weaknesses, too, she thought. A smirk formed on her lips and an idea formulated in her mind. Sinking herself down low, Mikasa laid flat against his body, his chest fluctuating steeply as she pressed her lips to the spot she had hit him.

Feeling the tables turn, Levi swallowed thickly, his bottom lip drooping in astonishment. He didn't think she'd actually go through with his teasing suggestion.

Mikasa lifted her hooded eyes. "Look who's blushing now," she sang victoriously. "Feeling better?"

He gave a nod, and she gave a timid giggle, her eyes casting aside. "That actually reminds me of a dream I had about you once."

Levi tilted his head, curious. "What was it about?"

"It was a long time ago, a little after the trial. Some of the details are fuzzy now but I dreamt that I punched you in the mouth, and—"

"Ah," he interrupted. "I was expecting something a little more..."

"—I kissed you," she continued. "We didn't have a first-aid kit handy and according to dream logic a kiss would fix up your busted lip," she hung her shaking head. "I avoided you for almost a week after that."
"So that's why you kept running away from me at HQ for a while..." Levi reflected back with this new information in mind, and the recounts began to make more sense now. Levi distinctly recalled Mikasa acting strangely there. At the time, he chalked it up as her avoiding him out of resentment.

When he'd walk into the mess hall in the evenings, she'd thrust herself from the table and flee the room. In the daytime, they'd tend to chores, both inside and outside of HQ, and Mikasa would actively keep at least a five-yard distance from Levi at all times. Naturally, this became inconvenient when Levi would try to hand out commands to his subordinate; he'd either resort to straining his voice to communicate one-sidedly from afar or would chase her down until he lost sight of her. This went on until he finally managed to corner her in a small room one day. There, he confronted her about her odd behavior.

"When we did finally speak, I remember you said something along the lines: 'You're nothing like your friends, you don't kiss up to me.' I nearly fainted, Levi. That was the worst possible phrasing you could've used at that time."

Before Mikasa was even done speaking Levi had flung his head back to laugh; he couldn't help himself. Mikasa's perspective of that situation had spiced up the bland memory more than he expected.

"It's funny. Back when I met you the second time around I thought of you as this unfazed warrior, sullen and strict—and yet you went and got yourself flustered over an imaginary kiss."

"I wasn't flustered," she emphasized. "I just felt...weird being around you."

"Sure," he rasped skeptically.

"Do we have to go through this again? I'm not the type of girl who gets flustered, I told you."

She says as she's gradually becoming more flustered. Levi smiled with his eyes. "Fine then. Prove it to me, change my false impression on you."

Soon after he said that, Levi ate his own words and his heart out when Mikasa worked on unbuttoning her blouse. He felt his composure deteriorate as she rocked in his lap ever so slightly—he couldn't tell if she was doing that purposely or not.

In an attempt to tease him, she only undid the first three buttons; enough to show off some cleavage but not enough to appease his rising passion.

An experienced veteran wouldn't be conquered so easily, nor would he allow this titillating torment to continue. And Mikasa learned that the hard way when he wrestled her to her back, locking her beneath him with a vulgar glint in his eyes.

Dazed from the sudden shift, Mikasa misplaced her fervor and bleakly said, "New rule: The use of fighting techniques are now prohibited in bed."

"What are you talking about? That should be the first enforced rule. Fighting is like foreplay to us."

"You think so?" In an instant, she had Levi locked between her thighs. Reflectively, he tried to counter this move, but by then Mikasa had already flung him off the bed like a weightless pillow—though he did not land as softly.

"Oops," she uttered dryly without a hint of remorse. Levi tumbled harder than she had planned, but maybe from now on he'll heed her rules.
From her lounged position, Mikasa watched Levi's hand sprout up and grasp at the sheet, using the grip to help pick himself and his wounded pride up off the floor.

Feigning a defeated scowl, Levi slid back into bed, leaving a wide berth between him and his perilous lover. Not because he was afraid of her, (that dangerous spirit of hers actually excited him) only to practice some restraint.

"That kinda felt good," Mikasa expressed through exhilarated sighs. "I've been wanting to do something like that to you for a long time."

"I thought we were passed that."

"We are, but I never did get my revenge. I can't help but feel like I accomplished some obsolete goal."

Levi snorted. "Funny how you fell for the man you tried to exact revenge on. Good going. You sure taught me a lesson."

The irony sent Mikasa into a fit of laughter, which caught Levi by surprise.

"You are testing my patience this morning, Levi." The giggling subsided, leaving a grin on her lips. "Nothing ever goes as plan. You'd think we'd be used to that by now. But I think achieving my revenge backward was more effective. Just when you feel vulnerable and content around me, I slammed you to the ground."

"And I wholly support that aberrant mindset you got there, so long as you don't give my heart the same treatment. I don't think it would ever recover if you broke it."

During the following silence, Mikasa adopted a serious expression, her earnest eyes boring into him. "I might not be the gentlest woman in the world, but I swear I'll never hurt you on purpose—not emotionally, at least. Your heart is mine now and I'll have you know I always treat my precious valuables with care."

The softly spoken vow made Levi's chest fill with contentment, though you couldn't tell by the stunned look he wore.

"I'll be honest with you, if someone told me months ago that I'd fall for my cranky captain with a staring problem I would've never believed them. And yet you feel like an extension of myself that has been missing my whole life. Looking back, I don't know how I survived this long without you." Saying those honest words seemed to have paralyzed her momentarily. "What I'm trying to say is, if I ever hurt you, I'd only end up hurting myself more, so you needn't worry."

Just like everything else in this world, Mikasa's feelings were shrouded in mystery; they were hard to decipher and impossible to understand. Little by little, though, with Levi's help, she was figuring it out and making sense of the strange new emotions blossoming inside her. In retrospect, it made sense she'd fall for a man like Levi, but the overall concept still needed adjusting to.

"And if someone told me that the love of my life would return my feelings, I would've never believed them either." Levi savored the truth of his statement. Many years ago, he had reserved a special place in his heart for Mikasa. Up until recently, that spot stored nostalgia, unrequited feelings, and morose jealousy, but the disarray had been cleared and Mikasa claimed her rightful spot. As Mikasa said, he was just a cranky captain with a staring problem. It was a miracle she even developed feelings for him to begin with. Because of that, he'd never take her for granted and was confident he'd never hurt her, either.

"Now that you mention it," curiosity laced his tone, "I'm surprised you never called me out on the
staring-thing despite being well aware—why is that? You look like the type of girl who would kick someone in the face for looking at you the wrong way."

Eyes going astray, Mikasa rested her head on her fist. "I never mulled much about it, at first. Eventually, I came up with my own explanation for it, and..." Levi detected the gradual stress straining her features. "I didn't want you to confirm my suspicions, so that kept me from confronting you about it."

"And what did you come up with?"

"I told myself that you kept a watchful eye on me, as if constantly anticipating my next move, because you were waiting for me to do something stupid again, like that time in the forest..." Mikasa felt her heart sink. Even though Levi was more than just her captain now, she still didn't feel comfortable talking about something that bothered her for so long.

Grimly, Levi moved his attention to the ceiling to avoid the contrite gaze Mikasa had set on him. The panic he felt in that hazy second when Mikasa was mere inches from death revisited him. The memories constricted around his chest and wouldn't let go, and as a result, his words came out stilted, "I'd be lying if I said I didn't keep a closer eye on you after that. My stares were often out of affection, yes...but also out of worry. You had a bad habit of losing your cool when Eren was concerned."

Mikasa slipped down into the sheets, sharing his view of the ceiling now. "I still feel bad about that."

"Don't be," he ordered firmly. The tightness in his chest loosened, for those flashbacks had no more power over him than a bad dream; one he woke up from. He wished he could say the same about the other haunting nightmares that became a reality, but he was able to snatch Mikasa from that horror in the nick of time, and that's all that mattered now.

"It was a mistake conceived by sentiment, not stupidity. Remember that. We all lose our cool sometimes, especially when loved ones are at stake. I've had my fair share of reckless endeavors while in a desperate or angered state of mind."

The way Levi said that, with such dark undertones, only filled Mikasa with more guilt. Levi had witnessed the loss of many important people, and because of her recklessness, she nearly caused him even more suffering. She was all too familiar with that feeling and never wanted to inflict it on anyone. There was no way to erase past mistakes and guilt wouldn't alter the facts, that much she was aware of. All she could do was consider it a lesson learned.

"We've come a long way since that day, Mikasa."

Indeed, they have. The evolution of their relationship was remarkable; she went from resenting this man to sleeping the night away in his arms. Moreover, she learned so much from him. Everything from better self-control out in the field to forgiveness. The two of them were capable of extraordinary things, especially when they worked together. That's why dwelling in the past wasn't a good idea. It would only hinder their potential.

"Thank you..." She wasn't even sure what she was thanking him for specifically. Maybe for cheering her up just now. Or, for everything.

Levi pat the empty space between them. "Come here."

Scooting closer to him, Mikasa snuggled up with him and used her fingers as a comb to tame his tangled bedhead.
There's magic in those hands, he realized, as he cherished the touch of her chilled fingertips grazing his forehead. How could they be so strong and so gentle at the same time? People called her a killing machine, but there was still an evident gentleness about her; the same sweetness she had when she was a child with the whole world in front of her. Even now, with the world in despair and tragedy around every corner, she still maintained an angelic image.

"I don't know if you know this," Levi started, his eyes heavy from her wandering touches. "But you're amazing—thought you should know."

"Shush." Mikasa covered his mouth with her palm, forbidding any more of his flattery.

Levi closed his fingers around her wrist and kissed each of her knuckles lovingly. "It's true, though. You're amazing."

She shook her head shyly. "I'm not."

At first, Levi thought it'd be impossible to convince her, but then… "I'll just have to make you feel amazing, then, won't I?"

In breathless silence, their eyes met and a circuit of lust eddied between them.

"Levi..." The weak note sounded like a distant song, like an enchanting lyric inviting him by name. Slowly, Levi crawled on top of her, situating his hands near her flowing hair spread across the pillow.

Below, Mikasa trembled under his weight as Levi's face loomed closely, close enough that she could feel his bangs tickle her brow and his breath on her lips.

"You certainly are feisty today."

"Can you blame me? I woke up next to a beautiful woman," he shifted his lips to her ear, "and I have her all to myself."

The lustful accent Levi adopted caused Mikasa's body to go limp, but a surge of vim quickly woke her from her trance. Fueled by desire, she seized a fistful of his hair and fastened their mouths together. Levi eagerly complied by angling his head, holding her face in his hands with utmost delicacy—until the kiss grew fierce.

The wet suction of their lips mingled with their quick pants and the rustling of sheets beneath. At one point, their heated kisses weren't enough to satisfy Mikasa, and she tried to remedy that unfulfillment by tugging on his bottom lip with her teeth.

Surprised, Levi yanked his head away, excitement brightening his eyes. Diving back down to her mouth, Levi reamed open the seam of her lips, his tongue swirling with hers like a graceful dance that soon turned raunchy.

Time itself slowed down for Mikasa then, yet her pulse quicken; the throbs dispersed to an area frictioning against Levi's clothed loins. A lively spark flared in Mikasa's eyes when unrestrained sounds came spurting from her as Levi's hips drove in harder, crushing their aroused regions together. Another kiss managed to quiet her, for a time.

Passion possessed Mikasa; she panted hotly into his mouth until her head went flying back, snapping the glossy stripe of saliva connecting their lips. Levi burrowed his face into the crook of her neck, his hips grinding against her, faster now with more pressure. She felt his bulge nudging between her, hardening more by the second.
With heavy sighs, Levi ran his hand over the wrinkles of her shirt, taking the time to feel her thumping heartbeat before groping at a handful of her breast, the nub beneath the cloth hardening from his touch. Moving lower, Levi traced his mouth down her heated neck, immersing himself in her natural scent.

Mikasa flinched when his tongue made contact with her skin, but not as much as she did when he yanked the flap of her shirt aside and sunk his teeth into her collarbone. When he was done nibbling and sucking there, he left his marks behind to move his attention even lower, shuffling backward on his knees.

Levi slipped his fingers into her waistband and tugged; the fabric went sliding down her legs. Mikasa lifted up her head, peeking over her fluctuating chest to see Levi situated at the edge of the bed, spreading her legs far apart to give himself a raw glimpse of her.

Mikasa's heart nearly stopped. Red stained her complexion once again. The cave she had left her virginity in had offered poor lighting and water to cover the areas she was too embarrassed to expose, but here in the bedroom, lit brightly by the afternoon sun, there was no hiding. This realization caused her to stiffen with anxiety.

How she felt must've shown on her face, because when Levi glanced up to check on her he asked, "Am I going to fast? We could stop and pick this back up when you're ready."

She rattled her head. "No, I'm fine. Really," she assured with a quiver.

Levi returned his attention back down to claim a spot on her inner thigh, leaving a gentle kiss upon it. Then, he lolled out his tongue and left a stripe of saliva up her heated flesh. Mikasa jolted when she felt a gust of breath hit her.

"Wh-What are you—" she started, but when she felt a wet lick, she reclined her head back and expressed an airy, "oh."

Shyly, Mikasa spread her thighs even farther apart, giving Levi the room he needed to lather her in as much pleasure as possible. A wet whimper slipped out of her when Levi started slowly simulating a particularly sensitive zone with the tip of his tongue. It didn't take Mikasa long to become paralyzed with mind-numbing sensations. All she could focus on was the wiggling wetness riding up and down her delicate flesh and her breathing, that had become uneven and ragged.

Each flick of his tongue sent her deeper and deeper into a state of absolute bliss. She could hardly even bear it. A clump of the bedsheets tightly clenched in her fingers, for she felt as though she were about to melt into the mattress.

Levi's hands groped her outer thighs and goosebumps festered everywhere his hands touched. The tips of his nails clawed into her skin as his head bobbed between her. Moans and wetness trickled from her with every lick, and the dampness rilled over his tongue. He savored it like a fine wine until his entire mouth tingled from the taste, but his thirst was far from quenched.

The faint sound of birds singing could be heard outside as Mikasa made music of her own. Long sighs and high-pitched notes drifted about the room, with Levi joining in with some bassy hums of his own. Mikasa could feel the sizzling reverberations echoing through her.

"How does that feel? Good?" Levi lifted his head to ask.

Mikasa bobbed her head, unable to pronounce a word. *Don't stop,* she wanted to say, but her breathlessness wouldn't allow her. Instead, she slid her hand over his bristly undercut to forcibly...
urge his mouth back where it belonged.

To brace herself for more vigorous stimulation, she arched her back and sucked in a lungful of air, and the hot breath hissed between her clamped teeth. Her entire body felt inflamed, but the wetness oozing from her did nothing to extinguish it. Levi’s tongue only fanned the blaze more. Mikasa buckled her hips impetuously, her body squirming restlessly as her hands tousled through his hair, her fingers raking through his scalp. Tension ached through her entire body; it was that overwhelming sensation of anticipating climax. Panting, Mikasa tossed her head side to side as he sucked and licked and absorbed all she produced as if he was trying to extract every drop from her and leave her drained.

The indescribable sensations built up like rain clouds. It was only a matter of time before the light drizzle created a flood that would carry her away and leave her drenched. She bit her fist to repress the urge to scream, but when a jolt shot through her, her throat discharged a piercing cry. And with that, Mikasa fell limp. Only racing beads of sweat and her heaving chest stayed in motion.

Lifting himself up, Levi licked the gloss from his lips before wiping the rest on the back of his hand. For a long while, he watched her, carefully observing her trembling frame. One of her arms rested across her forehead, her other fist gradually loosening its grip on the sheets.

"Okay," she let out in an airy sigh. "Now I feel amazing."

His lips quirked up. "I'm only getting started." Without giving Mikasa much time to recover, Levi dove on top of her.

"Are you trying to test my stamina here?" she asked breathlessly under his weight.

"What, don't tell me you're drained after a little warm up," he challenged her, scrabbling desperately at the front of his breeches to lower them. Just as he took hold of himself and was positioning to launch his body into hers, a noise pulled him from his lustful trance.

He perked his head up, listening. Mikasa, who was now peeking over his shoulder, listened too. A succession of rampant noise manifested outside the walls of the bedroom, loud enough to resound through the timber. Expanding her hooded lids, Mikasa exchanged a questioning gaze with Levi.

"...It must be Kenny," he assumed.

Just as he said that a clamor of voices overlapped his words, ranging in tone and pitch. Mingling with that was the distant whicker of horses outside. Alarmed, they both fumbled away from their intimate embrace. While a rhythm of footsteps sounded out in the hall like a ticking countdown, Mikasa snatched up the blanket and bundled it up against herself and Levi tucked his erection back in his pants.

There was no warning, not even a brief knock, only the boisterous sound of the door blasting open, rattling on its hinges.

"Your savior has arrived!" The intruder announced from under the door frame. There, striking a heroic stance, was Hanji Zoë. "We've tromped diligently through relentless snow and persevered through the piercing winter winds and—" Hanji stopped her boasting then. Levi momentarily considered that a miracle—that is until he realized why her speech halted so abruptly. Stepping back a pace, Hanji stared at the couple in bed, her eyes shooting back and forth.
"Well, well, well," she adjusted her glasses, "don't you two look all warm and cozy together."

"Get out," Levi demanded.

"Excuse you?" Testily, Hanji propped a hand on her hip. "You do realize this is an emergency rescue, right? Don't tell me your brain froze." The new commander moved deeper into the room, inspecting them and her surroundings carefully.

Already tired of Hanji's noise, Levi waved her off again. "That doesn't give you the right to barge in here unannounced and give us a wake-up call, shitty-glasses."

"How was I supposed to know you weren't in immediate danger?" Hanji argued. "Do you have any idea how worried your squad and I have been about you two?"

"What he's trying to say is we're not presentable at the moment." Fear was leaking from Mikasa's throat more with every word. "It's not that we don't appreciate you coming to retrieve us. If you can just give us a moment of privacy…" Although she managed to cover herself with the blanket in time, Mikasa still felt naked under Hanji's observant eye. They were in no condition for an audience right now.

"What do you mean you're not…" Hanji started to ask with a tilt of the head, but when those observant eyes fell to the rumpled garments that were hastily tossed to the floor, her question remained unfinished. Slowly, she lifted her head up to say, "No friggin' way."

This was one of those scenarios where saying 'it's not what it looks like' wouldn't work. It was exactly what it looked like. All Mikasa could do now was hang her head and hope Hanji didn't notice how utterly guilty she looked.

"You look guilty of something, Mikasa," Hanji said with shifty eyes, "care to explain what the hell is going on here?"

Levi's tolerance to Hanji's meddling was dwindling. If the titan-loving freak couldn't figure it out at the sight of them half-nude and wrapped up in bed together, then Levi didn't care to explain. Unless you're dense, there was no way to misread this situation, which was unfortunate; Levi only wished such a busybody didn't catch them off guard.

"Out," he urged again with a hostile leer, fiercer this time since passion still swelled his loins below the covers, and he still craved the internal warmth and pleasure only Mikasa's body could offer.

Hanji tentatively looked back into the hall, like she briefly considered his order, but she twirled back around with a stomp. "I can't believe this. And I believe in a lot of explainable things!"

And with that, Hanji killed Levi's erection and dispelled the mood he and Mikasa created. He rolled his body off the bed and leaped to his feet. Aggressively, he charged for Hanji and shoved her out the door. Slamming it shut, he pressed his back against it.

"At least, she's out of our hair for n—"

A mighty force rammed into his back, cutting off his words. The door knocked him off balance and nearly sent him tumbling.

Hanji popped in once again, persistently asking, "C'mon, don't leave me in the dark here, tell me! Did you guys seriously hook up?"

Gritting his teeth, Levi's muscles flexed from a mixture of anger and determination. With all his
strength, he heaved his weight against the door, and Hanji did the same.

The wooden frame cracked from the sheer weight assailing both sides. For a while, the captain and new commander stubbornly clashed between the door, and Mikasa thought it would burst from the hinges any second.

Eventually, though, Hanji submitted under the weight and was locked out from the other side.

"I'll take the hostile silence as a yes! I can't wait to tell Moblit!" Levi heard her say, followed by trotting steps and squeals descending down the hall.

Levi felt a sharp pang where the door had hit him. "That obnoxious idiot," he spat under his breath and rubbed the ache from his shoulder. "Remember last night, when you asked how we'd tell everyone, and I told you we'd cross that bridge when we got to it?" he began, pausing to scoop up Mikasa's pants and his shirt. "Well, I think Hanji burnt that bridge and our business is about to spread like wildfire."

Half-listening, Mikasa kept her eyes down, hardly even reacted when he tossed her pants to her. She just stared listlessly at the rumpled fabric in her lap.

"What's the matter?" he asked, shrugging his shirt over his shoulders.

"I...nothing." She dodged the inquiring eyes set on her and quickly forced herself into motion by stepping into her pants, wriggling them over her hips. But once she buckled them, all energy drained from her fingers, and then her legs. She plopped back down on the bed with a bounce, her eyes down-turned and burdened with gloom.

"You always make that face when you're avoiding a topic."

Hoping to wash all traces of whatever expression he referred to away, she rubbed at her face, but it did no good. Nothing could wash this anxiety building up inside her. It had first triggered off when she saw Hanji; that had been a grim reminder of the difficulties she was soon to face, and then a barrage of dread followed. It took her a moment to lift her head to look at Levi, and even longer to finally answer. "I'm scared," she muttered, but quickly shook her head with a tight gulp. "But don't worry about it. We shouldn't keep everyone waiting."

She stood again, but Levi approached her with a thoughtful strut and urged her to sit again. Mikasa complied stiffly.

Easing himself down beside her, Levi cupped her knee and tried to hide his concern under a blank expression, not wanting to reveal how weak he was to her emotions. "They made us wait long enough. Talk to me."

Just his presence alone managed to mollify her, maybe talking it out with him would reduce this rising dread she felt. "When we were alone here, it felt like we were in our own fantasy world that no one else could invade," Mikasa confided with a smile that slowly morphed into a frown. "But now the reality is starting to sink in and...and I'm afraid these special days we spent together are over."

"It'll never be over," Levi cut her off quickly.

Pity filled her eyes as she cupped Levi's hand. "Levi...you can't honestly believe nothing will change. Once we leave this room, we won't just be lovers anymore. You'll be a captain again, tasked with the responsibility of protecting not only your squad, but the entire human race. I should clarify I'm not saying that out of selfishness; I'll have other concerns as well, one's that will drag my focus from you. I'm afraid of that. I know we're soldiers and we have the fate of the
world in our hands, but the only world I care about is the one we created together during these past few days."

The time they spent together had been nostalgic in a way, akin to the simple days spent with her mother and father, back when life was simpler before she harden from all the horrors she endured and began to repress her emotions. That innocent worldview she once had as a child became foreign to her over the years—she nearly forgot how it felt to be an affectionate person who saw so much beauty in the world. Reuniting with that mindset had been a blessing, and she wasn't ready to let go a second time.

Tight-lipped, Levi ducked his head meekly in acknowledgment. Before, when it was just him and Mikasa (and their reluctant third-wheel, Kenny) everything seemed simpler. From here on out, life was going to get harder. There's no dodging that fact. The days spent in this cozy cabin, where their biggest threat was the cold, were over. From now on they'll be in constant danger. Everything from humans to titans would try to split them up, and when Levi realized this he felt nervous as well. And not only that, but their new relationship will be judged today, perceived in all different flavors. Some might be shocked, happy, angered, indifferent, disgusted...That worried Levi most of all.

"You need to understand, Levi. I never wanted to be a soldier in the first place. I only joined the military to protect Eren and Armin from their dangerous ambitions. My dream was to live a peaceful life away from violence and tragedy—that's all I ever wanted, and I actually got a taste of that thanks to you. I know it sounds selfish, I'm sorry."

"It isn't," he muttered sharply, "you deserve happiness. All of us do. None of us should be burdened with these dire responsibilities, but that's how it is. I can't deny that change will happen, I wish I could refute it, but..."

"I guess we'll learn to adapt to the changes," she said, the knot in her stomach tightening, "but I wish we could have a peaceful life together. We'll have to earn that, I suppose. In the meantime, I can't help but to dwell on the many other concerns racing through my mind." Mikasa eyed the door, listening in on the muffled voices coming from beyond. "Once they find out about us, they might perceive us differently and that will trigger even more changes. I can't even imagine their reactions."

"Especially Eren's," he said.

With a gulp, Mikasa nodded. Levi couldn't picture it either. An imaginary reaction projected in his mind, and it made all confidence evaporate from him. With a subtle cringe, he asked, "What if...he reacts negatively to us?"

"He wouldn't."

"But what if he does?" Levi stressed. They needed to consider that possibility, just in case. Levi realized beforehand that if he wanted Mikasa in his life, Eren would always come with the package, and he fully accepted that (hell, he cared about the brat himself, so in no way was that an inconvenience to him). But if Mikasa were to choose Eren over him after everything they've been through...

Detecting the fear appearing on his face, Mikasa gave Levi's cheek a light kiss and let her head drop upon his shoulder. "I'm afraid of our relationship being shunned by the others too, but don't worry about Eren, okay? If he doesn't approve, then I'll just have to add that to the never-ending list of things we don't agree on. Eren is important to me, as you know, but now you're important too. Rejection would only complicate our relationship more, but it's out of our range of control. Our relationship with each other and everyone else, it's all going to change, that's unavoidable and
I hate it. These past few days with you have been wonderful, Levi, and I'm not ready for them to become a memory. I want this to last."

A long silence later, Mikasa's head rolled from Levi's shoulder when he shifted and stood without a word. Her eyes followed up the seam of his shirt as he fastened each button. "You and I have been a team of two for a while now. I doubt it would happen, but even if everyone outside this room opposed us, we will always have each other, and anything that tries to tear us apart will be taken down without mercy. I know you're scared. So am I. Things just won't ever be the way they were before, or how they were during our time in this cabin; there's no getting around that. Our days ahead won't be easy, but regardless of what happens next you're still my partner and nothing will ever change that."

Stepping forward, Levi lent her his strength to help her to her feet. He pinched her chin to raise her gaze from the ground. "We'll get through this and all the shitty days ahead, just like we always do. No matter what, I'll always make time for you, and during the times we can't be alone together we'll be using that time apart to carve a path to our future."

Their foreheads pressed together and for a final moment of solidarity they collected a few ragged breaths. Those cloudy eyes of hers looked like they were holding back a downpour, but Mikasa kept the tears locked tight, and that showed Levi that she was stronger than she thought.

"Think of our time here as a sneak peek of the life we'll have down the line. We'll use our memories here to fuel us; to keep us motivated so we never stop moving forward. I'll give you the life you deserve someday, Mikasa, I promise. Just give it some time and be strong for me—you know I can't do it alone."

Nodding sharply, Mikasa sniffed and reopened her swollen eyes with a recovered resolve. Taking the lead, she headed for the door, a fluttering sensation in her chest. Once she opened it, Levi set his hand on her back, giving an encouraging rub before lightly urging her forward.

_Levi's right. Now is the time to be strong, not weak_, she thought. Every step forward became stronger, for she knew as long as Levi was close at her side, there was nothing they couldn't do.

Shortly after emerging from the hallway, their determined steps soon slowed to a dejected stop.

It only took a quick scan around to notice the cabin no longer bore the resemblance of a quaint living space. To their dismay, their temporary home reverted back to serving its initial purpose: a militant base. Chatter and commotion livened up the space now. Familiar faces sprinkled here and there. And equipment and baggage collected wherever space was free. That homey vibe Levi and Mikasa came to love had disappeared—but a new hospitable vibe replaced it.

Mikasa tracked the fleeting movement of Connie chasing Sasha around the living room, a lumpy burlap sack hurtled over her shoulder. The sight of their revelry made her grin.

Levi spotted Hanji and Moblit in the near distance, having a one-sided conversation. Hanji briefly turned her beaming expression at Levi and darted back to Moblit, flapping her lips with more enthusiasm. The assistant listened on, looking painfully uncomfortable by whatever Hanji said—Levi had a hunch what it pertained to.

The scent of burnt, ashy wood lingered in the chilled air. Only a few remaining embers smoldered in the fireplace. More logs would need to be added to rekindle the blaze, Levi thought, but before he could consider the task, a gritty voice stole his train of thought.

"Damn brats woke me up with all their ruckus," Kenny rasped, briefly startling both Levi and Mikasa, who hadn't previously noticed him slant up against the wall until now. Chewing his lips
in aggravation, Kenny scanned the fresh activity with judgmental eyes. "Is this a militant brigade or a circus troupe?"

"Some of them are members of my squad," Levi answered crossly.

Kenny gave a throaty chuckle. "Looks like you got last pickings."

"I chose them."

Kenny flashed a quick grin, shaking his head. "I should've spent more time teaching you how to make rational decisions. You're all brawn and no brain."

Leering with derision, Levi stomped down on Kenny's foot with all his weight behind it. Spit flew from the older man's mouth as he sprang up like a startled rabbit. Cursing, he shook the ache from his foot. "You just helped proved my point, you imbecile."

Sensing another feud brewing, Mikasa bravely shouldered between the hostile men, hands raised, and forced some space between them. To show that she was on Levi's side, she gave a supportive pat, although his gaze remained glued over her shoulder. "You're no match for Armin, or Hanji...or Erwin, but you're still smart. Smarter than those two, at least," she pointed over to Sasha and Connie, hopping around like idiots.

The icy glare he had locked on Kenny had transferred over to her. "Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"I complimented you."

"By insulting me?"

Peeved, she stepped back next to her uncle, arms folding tightly. "Kenny has a point, you know. You use violence during times a few strong words would've done the trick," she said, but Levi defiantly shook his head in reply. "Ask Historia, if you need convincing. I'm sure she'd agree with me."

"We have enough traitors to deal with, don't you turn on me too."

Stubbornly, Mikasa remained at Kenny's side.

"Ha, even she's smarter than you," Kenny wheezed on his laughter. "Now we can add Mikasa to the looong list of people who are smarter than Levi."

Bubbling with rage, Levi stalked in closer. Mikasa tried to cut between again, but he practically walked through her.

Meanwhile, Sasha whacked Connie with the sack and gleefully made a dash for the hall. During this, Levi's fist was about to strike Kenny. Just before the blow landed, a collision knocked him astray. Sasha had skidded to a stop before crashing into the group blocking her path, but Connie ended his pursuit by bumping into Sasha from behind, knocking her off balance and right into the captain.

The sack in her possession had tumbled to the ground. Lumpy potatoes went skittering all about the floor.

Levi whipped around, fist still raised. Flinching back, Sasha squeaked in fright.

"Does this look like a damn playground to you?" he scolded, kicking away a rolling potato as he
finally lowered his fist. "Clean this up."

"Right away, sir! I'm sorry!" Teary eyed, Sasha fell to her knees and frantically scooped up the scattered vegetables. "I swear, I was going to share the potatoes with you, captain!"

Levi rose a brow down at her. "...Does it look like I want a potato?"

"I-Is that a trick question? It's impossible to read your expressions..." her smile twitched nervously under his looming shadow.

"C'mon Sasha," Connie tugged at her shawl, "let's go help Jean unload the wagons." Sasha pulled the drawstrings tight and lugged the sack back over her shoulder. Stumbling away, the clumsy duo entered a run, knocking into Jean coming in through the door as they made their escape.

"Nice to see you back to your moody self," Mikasa remarked, almost nostalgically. Just moments before he spoke to her so softly; it was weird seeing how fast he snapped back to his captain persona.

"Don't think our engagement gives you a free pass to disrespect your superior."

"Whatever you say, shorty."

Unblinking eyes flicked up at her in warning.

"I meant sir." Mikasa tried her best to keep a straight face. Sadly, he was right. They still had to maintain a professional relationship together, and Levi had to keep up a respectable image as the authorial figure. Just like everyone else, she had to abide by certain rules—but she couldn't repress the urge to mock him once in awhile. That part of their relationship would never change.

Setting his hands on his hips, Levi overlooked her defiance, just as he always had and asked, "I wonder why they're unloading. Do they plan to stay the night?"

"Probably," she assumed, judging by all the cargo they were unloading. "It's a long trip and I imagine it wasn't an easy one considering the weather conditions. They'll need time to rest."

"Right. We should see if they need any help."

With a nod, Mikasa followed Levi's lead to the kitchen, where she found Jean setting down a crate along the wall of the kitchen. When he erected up, she noted how worn-out he looked, but his face lifted with an energetic grin as soon as his tired eyes focused on her. "H-Hey, long time no __"

"Where's Eren?" she cut him off, motioning her head around, searching.

For a split second, he actually looked pleased to see her, until she said the dreaded E-word. With a grumpy scowl, he curtly shot his thumb over his shoulder. "Outside."

Puddles had flooded the foyer, tracked in by everyone's sodden boots coming and going. To avoid getting her feet wet, Mikasa rose to her toes and walked lightly on dry patches until she reached her boots.

As she laced them up, Levi had grabbed a rag hanging from the back of a chair and tossed it to the ground. Using his feet, he tried his best to sop up the mush to clear a path for himself. As Levi pinched the sodden rag and moved it to the sink with a deep, disgusted frown, Mikasa removed her scarf from the peg on the wall and flicked the red stream over her shoulder.
"Wait up," Levi told her as he flounced his way over, only to be stopped by an unseen force swooping in.

"You don't possibly think I can overlook the incident I walked in on, right?" Hanji had seized him by the arm and dragged him off his set path to back him into a corner. A deranged grin plastered on her face, which annoyed Levi more than frightened him. "I demand a thorough verbal explanation. Or, if you prefer, a strongly written report."

"Die."

Mikasa waited a few more seconds for Levi to rejoin her, but seeing how the interrogation wouldn't end any time soon, she decided to depart solo. "I'm heading out," she announced and quickly dismissed herself, secretly thankful that Hanji kept Levi occupied. It's been awhile since she saw Eren and Armin, so she would like to spend some time with them, just the three of them. Plus, it might be easier to break the news of the engagement to them without Levi looming near. It would have been difficult to express herself if he were there monitoring every word she spoke.

"Moblit, leave us. Go patrol outside or something," Hanji ordered with a flick of her wrist and her assistant rushed for the door without question. Jean and Mikasa headed out with him.

Levi tried to wean away undetected then, and yet again, Hanji blocked his way by stomping her foot down in front of him. Crazed with determination, she poked him back with a finger. "Oh no, you stay here."

" Didn't I tell you to go die?" he attempted another step.

"Is that any way to talk to your superior?" Hanji slewed side to side each time Levi attempted to flee. "Erwin put me in charge, you wouldn't tell him to go die when he gave you a simple command!"

"I would if he kept meddling in my affairs. Quit acting like a child." Levi demonstrated his own maturity by pressing his hand over her face and shoving it away; an effort to make some space between them.

The squad leader—or should he say the commander's behavior was ridiculous and inexcusable, even coming from a curious lunatic like her. In the manner she walked in on them, Levi wasn't surprised by the rise in her curiosity. Nonetheless, her curiosity had always been an unfortunate blemish on her otherwise commendable attributes. Whether she was blabbing about titans or begging for lewd details, Levi didn't want any part of it.

As he cursed under his breath from Hanji's unyielding pressuring, Levi only hoped Mikasa had an easier time talking with her friends.

~X~

Melting icicles lined the eaves of the roof like the fangs of a slobbering beast, dripping down to the wooden planks below. Only yesterday the stairs were a slope of snow, but now the slick steps were clear. Even the railings were missing its white trimming. The backdrop of the memories she created over the past few days were thawing away before her very eyes. Even so, the deathly chill remained, which comforted her in a sense. From now until forever the cold would always remind her of the love that kindled here.

From the porch, Mikasa surveyed the vast wintery landscape. The once empty yard skirted by the dense forest beyond was now tarnished with wagons, horses, and ample amounts of supplies. The carpet of snow, once virgin to man, was now garnished with prints and rutted wagon tracks.
Turning her head toward the echo of laughter, Mikasa spotted Sasha and Connie frolicking in the snowy meadows, engaged in a snow ball fight. So much for helping Jean unpack, she thought as she glimpsed him as well, working hard. Nearby, Moblit stood sentry at the foot of the stairs.

Wisps of mist expelled from Mikasa's chattering lips as her roaming eyes glimpsed tufts of brown and blond hair blowing in the breeze. Mikasa sucked in the crisp breath and descended down the porch steps. Snow crunched underfoot as she hiked between and around the parked wagons. Eren sat on the back of one, a big grin taking up half his face—but the smile wasn't directed at Mikasa. And the blonde hair she had seen before didn't belong to Armin, like she initially thought.

Historia was seated beside him, looking down at her lap after Eren said something that made her giggle. Seeing the two of them smile after everything they had gone through was a rare sight to behold. Mikasa didn't want to be the one responsible for taking away this rare moment of joy, so she twisted her heel in the snow to turn back unnoticed, or at least she tried too.

"Look who it is," said Historia as she gently tapped Eren's shoulder, cutting off the story he was telling. Eren balked cluelessly until smaller girl grabbed him by the chin and directed his face in Mikasa's direction.

A friendly smile pushed up Eren's cheeks as soon as their eyes met. Invitingly, he waved her over. Reluctant as she was, Mikasa zipped over all the same.

Weirdly enough, Mikasa didn't know what to say now that she was finally face-to-face with Eren. It had been a while since she saw him and awkwardness was to be expected, she supposed—especially when she considered all the changes that took place during their brief absence. Not only did the circumstances change, but her own mentality went through a transformation. It was strange, she thought of everything and nothing to tell him at the same time.

Despite this, she soon discovered the motherly-side of herself never altered. Closely, she examined Eren with an attentive eye, making sure he was unharmed and healthy.

"I'm fine, Mikasa," he said her name in a way a kid might say 'mom' when she was being too fretful.

A little embarrassed, Mikasa backed off. Historia's polite smile directed at her somehow soothed her spiking nerves.

"Better than fine, actually, now that that we're off the road," Eren spoke in a familiar tone, as if he hadn't spent any time apart from her. "But I should be asking how you're doing. You're the one that had to endure the last few days with Captain Levi. Must've been brutal," he sounded exhausted at the notion. He exchanged a glance with Historia, expecting her to agree with him, but the girl averted her eyes passively. "Did he make you clean nonstop? Did the two of you have an epic showdown?" Eren chuckled playfully and glimpsed at the exterior of the cabin. "I'm surprised this place is still standing."

Widening her stance, Mikasa crossed her arms. "I'll have you know my time with Levi was surprisingly pleasant."

". . . . . ." Eren blinked at her, smirking, like he was waiting for a punchline that would never come. "Wait, you're not being sarcastic?" He looked at Historia for answers, but she simply blinked her questioning eyes to Mikasa.

"Is it really that hard to believe Levi and I had a pleasant time together?"

"Yes," he spat rather quickly. "I mean, I know you don't want to beat the guy senseless anymore,
"You have no idea," she shook her head with a flimsy smile. Her heart began to pound as the last few days crammed into her mind—all those sweet words only she would ever hear Levi say, and the parts of him that only she'd ever see... She tried to force down the flutters rising up her throat with a thick swallow. Despite the cold, a hot flash billowed through her.

"You... You have a weird look on your face. What's that all about?" Eren squinted suspiciously, leaning in closer to inspect her.

Uncertain noises flooded out of her mouth. Images of this morning wedged in her mind unbidden just to make it worse. In an attempt to drown out the thoughts, she changed the topic; her nerve wasn't worked up enough to tell him about Levi and her yet. "Let's talk about something else for now..."

~x~

Back in the cabin, Levi's mental status was fraying drastically as Hanji orbited around him, rubbing her chin deductively. Being trapped in a twister of judgmental eyes made him dizzy, though you couldn't tell from the utterly dead expression he wore.

"I'm so sick of your shit," he finally snapped.

"I'll quit bugging you when you tell me what happened."

"It's a long story, one I'm not particularly eager to share with you right now," Levi turned dismissively and spied out the frosted glass window, squinting at Mikasa and Eren and their unreadable gestures. It's not that he didn't want to share the news; in fact he felt proud enough to gloat about his relationship with Mikasa (though in truth he wasn't that type of man). He hated being pressured, for starters, and the idea of exposing his private life still made him uncomfortable. Startled by his own thoughts, he turned his head away from the frosted glass. He should respect others privacy, too.

"Hmm." Hanji kept making those irritating sounds as she, once again, disrespected his personal space. This time he suffered negative consequences of being in close proximity to her. With his nose curled, he lurched back, repulsed after catching a whiff of her.

"Your breath is rotten. What crawled into your mouth and died?"

She shrugged prudently. "I had a raw onion on the way over here."

"Fucking disgusting."

"It was actually quite tasty, but if that doesn't fit your fancy, I do have something you might enjoy."

"If it's something that'll freshen up your breath, please, keep it for yourself. I'm more than content with the current taste in my mouth."

Being the deducing creature she was, Hanji caught his subtle, yet risque tone. As the realization came to her, her eyes widened as big as her glasses. "Did someone get a taste of the honey pot this morning?"

"Quit making disgusting assumptions." Just because her assumptions were correct didn't make it okay to say. Levi elbowed her back, cupping his nose. "Seriously, get away from me."
"Fiiiiine," she huffed breathily, polluting the air with toxic breath before scampering off to the supplies accumulating one side of the kitchen. Dropping down to her knees, Hanji set aside a woven basket of harvest atop a crate. Using only the strength in her fingertips, she ripped off the wooden lid and plucked something from within.

Curiously, Levi tilted his weight over to see, but Hanji bounced back up with her hands concealed behind her back, her smile just as sneaky.

"I have something in my possession that just might make you spill all the details."

He feigned a smug scoff, trying to play it cool. Although he couldn't deny that the wicked smile beaming down on him made him fidgety, like she might actually have something up her sleeve. "Yeah, sure, shit-breath—"

"Behold!" At last, she uplifted a small rectangular box garnished with a familiar branding logo. It instantly made his mouth water. To Levi, it was as if the item shone with a heavenly aura. His narrow eyes widened with want and he reached out.

Hanji smirked cunningly, resembling Erwin after one of his harebrained schemes pulled off triumphantly.

"Heh, I figured you'd be out of tea by now~"

Stomping forward, Levi firmly thrust out his arm and presented his flat palm. Though, instead of giving it to him, Hanji dangled it just above his head. Only a nutjob would dare tease Humanity's Strongest in such a cruel way.

"Hand it over," he demanded, shamefully rising to the balls of his feet and even leaping up to reach it, but to no avail. "Stop playing around, give it to me."

"I will—if you give me the dirty details." Hanji sang, waving the box of tea enticingly as Levi's pupils followed as if hypnotized.

"Damn it," he spat. He had absolutely no intentions of sharing any dirty details with Hanji; that was his and Mikasa's business only. However, he would agree to just about anything to get his hands on his favorite blend of tea. "After I make a brew I'll fill you in on recent events. Deal?"

"Fair enough." Hanji unfurled her fingers, dropping the teabox into his hands.

He held it with care to his chest, as if it were a newborn and quickly rushed off to fill the kettle, but he couldn't quite enjoy the task for Hanji loomed close by, breathing her onion-breath near him.

"Quit bugging me."

"I'm observing you."

"Let me rephrase, then: stop stalking me."

As he filled the kettle at the sink, he did his best not to peek out the window. He really wanted to see Eren's reaction but...no. He tethered back the urge.

"The physiological side effects of cabin fever certainly is fascinating," Hanji said wistfully, backing herself up against the counter with folded arms.

Levi slid his eyes to her. "What do you mean?"
Hanji's voice filled the room just as gently as the trickling water, "I heard being trapped in isolation for a long time does crazy things to a person. During times of perilous isolation, humans crave solace by bonding with others, friend or foe it doesn't matter. The brain needs comfort and assurance to retain healthy stability, but that's hard to find during dire times. Humans are complex creatures and they can and will subconsciously create the illusion of genuine comfort, even if it's actually fallacious."

A fierce sound shot through the kitchen like gunfire when Levi slammed the kettle down and stabbed a finger at Hanji. "Don't say that."

From the startled look on Hanji's face, she regretted her words. Not because she understood the harsh impact of them, but because of Levi's wounded reaction. Levi understood she meant no harm—but those words stabbed him right through the chest.

He refused to believe all the special moments he and Mikasa created together in this short span of time were merely a mental illusion because they lost their minds in solitude. What they shared together here was more than just a fantasy they created to cope...Levi was sure of that.

"I...I didn't mean to upset you, Levi," her voice dribbled out regretfully.

"You didn't upset me," he spat, clearly rattled by her words still ringing in his ears. Clutching the edge of the counter, he hunched over and sucked in a breath. "I know you didn't mean anything by it; you're looking at it from a logical standpoint, I get it. You need to understand this is an emotional issue, though. None of your logic will ever explain it. What happened between Mikasa and I might've been spontaneous, but this is more than just a fling or a mental side-effect," he said the past bit with contempt, still hating the idea of it.

"Why didn't you say that sooner?" Hanji slapped him on the back, knocking the wind out of him. "I'll be honest with you—I got the impression that you and Mikasa screwed around and felt ashamed after it was over."

Levi blinked slowly. "What the hell gave you that impression?"

She shrugged. "You two just seemed awkward together. Then again, you're naturally awkward people. Perhaps you're a good match after all," she laughed. "So it's serious... How serious? Should I pick out some formal wear?"

He ran a hand down his face; all the new wrinkles he felt suggested he aged ten years since Hanji's arrival. "Let me make my tea first. Sit down and shut up."

Hanji gasped when another idea popped into her head and flew out of her mouth, "Am I gonna be an aunt soon?"

"Shut up and sit down," he reprised his statment.

~X~

"Where's Armin?"

Eren nudged his chin in the direction of the barn. "He's putting the horses away." With his face lighting in recall and stress, Eren hopped down to his feet. "Crap, I'm supposed to be helping him."

"I'll go with you," Mikasa told Eren, although her eyes glimpsed Historia. "I need to tell you and Armin something. And I would prefer if I told you together, in private."
Receiving the hint, Historia dropped down from the wagon. As soon as her feet touched the ground, her face warped strangely and her head thrashed forward. The sneeze made a louder sound than one might expect from her, even the birds in a nearby tree took flight from the startling sound.

Mikasa looked her over. Historia's face was flushed, her nose red and stuffy. She must've caught a cold on the ride over. "There's some medicine inside if you need it. Levi recently came down with a cold too and it fixed him up pretty fast."

"That's good to hear," she gave a feeble smile as she ran a finger beneath her nose. "I came down with a nasty cold as soon as we entered the northern region and I've been suffering since."

"You guys brought all these supplies with you and didn't think to pack some medicine?" Mikasa wondered.

"It didn't cross our minds at the time," Eren answered. "We anticipated injury so we brought along plenty of medkits, but it's not like getting sick is life-threatening."

"It could be if left untreated," Mikasa's voice rose to shake off Eren's aloofness. "You need to get inside where it's warm," she said softly, her hand pressed against Historia's back.

Anxiously, Historia peered at the cabin as if it were haunted. Quailing back, a nearly inaudible voice asked, "Is...Kenny in there?"

Those lightly spoken words hit Mikasa's eardrum like a sonic blast. Slapping on the most impassively cold expression she could muster, she said, "I'll make sure he's out of sight."

"Thank you, Mikasa," she said, albeit weakly.

It was even harder to muster a reassuring smile.

"I'll catch up with you, Eren." Mikasa broke away from the duo. Feeling heavy with guilt, she held onto the wooden banister for support as she clumped up the few steps of the porch. Moblit gave her a worried look, but she ignored it.

Kenny might be family, but he was still a bad man. During her time here, she had become blissful ignorant to that important fact. Mikasa was so attached to the idea of Kenny being her last remaining family member that all the horrible things he had done slipped her mind. He had been the one to kill Historia's mother, Reeves, and Nifa, and all the others that fell victim during his rampage. He even put Eren and Historia in danger.

The familial love that had began to blossom in her heart snipped at the stem. This was one of the many changes she feared. Why couldn't things stay as they were last night, back when she was ignorant to the truth, when the three of them were a happy family? If only they could've preserved that peace a little longer. Would she have to treat Kenny like the enemy again? No, she couldn't, not her father's blood...but she would have to pretend.

The door frame supported her as she collected her thoughts. Jean slid past her, but circled back to ask, "You okay? You look pale."

"I'm fine," she grumbled.

"What happened?" Her eyes rose to the sound of Levi's voice. Over a teacup she found his eyes, laden with subtle fear.

She shook her head reflexively, wanting so badly to wash away those sad eyes. *It's not what you*
"think," she wanted to say. She didn't even tell Eren about them yet, but he probably mistook her gloomy mood as a result of Eren responding negatively to their relationship.

"Everything is fine," she said as earnestly as she could, even though everything was not fine.

Without another word, she stomped through to the living room.

Up against the wall stood a strip of black; docile and calm, but Mikasa was forced to recognize this man as a dangerous foe once again. "You'll have to stay out of sight for a while," she mumbled down at Kenny's feet, one bruising in the shape of Levi's heel.

To her, he was already out of sight. She couldn't look him in the eyes. When he didn't reply, though, she reluctantly dragged her eyes up to his, wondering if he heard her.

"...Little Historia is here, isn't she?" he asked mournfully, staring right back at her.

"Yes," not a trace of affection mingled with her tone.

Kenny stitched his lips shut, eyes falling to the ground. He bobbed his head with a sniff. "I get it. I guess I'll head to the basement."

"Sorry," she didn't want to say it, but she had to.

"It's fine," he smiled thinly, patting her head. "You gave me plenty of time to roam freely. Truth be told I could go for a few more hours of shut-eye."

He lumbered past Mikasa and she watched him until he was out of sight. Then, she turned back the way she came.

"What's going on?" Levi asked sharply from the table as she tried to slip out undetected. He wore a deepening frown, his eyes curiously thin with a pinch of sadness.

Her teeth clenched and she swung open the door. "I had to secure our prisoner," that came out more crossly than she planned.

"Prisoner?" Levi repeated with an amused tone, forgetting that before the heart-warming moment they all shared, Kenny was just that: a prisoner. An adversary. A murderer. He was harshly reminded of those facts when Historia slipped in the cabin a moment later like a timid mouse. Levi's face softened with grief and a pinch of regret. "Right...I see."

"The medicine is in the back bedroom," Mikasa quickly told the sniffing girl, then her eyes dove down to the ground. She kept them there until she was back outside, where she gazed up at the sky; the overcast gray and thick with clouds.

Both her and Levi felt it, that unavoidable and irrational guilt that came with befriending an enemy. The world was cruel, with many cruel people occupying it—but Mikasa learned that even monsters could possess a beautiful side. Kenny was a bad man, there's no sugarcoating that, but she couldn't bring herself to hate him. Does that make me a bad person? she wondered. Not one person was made perfect, including her. Some are more broken than others, and some, like her, were more forgiving than they should be, down to a fault.

Mikasa followed a snowy trail of foot and hoof prints to the stable and came to a stop at the door. Taking hold of the rusted handle, she thrust it open and rushed herself inside to escape the frosted gale nipping at her. After she latched the door closed, she turned around and spotted Armin and Eren, who were reflecting on a tale from their journey here. Two more people who had monstrous tendencies but were still pure, still good. She wondered if Kenny could ever be viewed as a good
When he saw her, Armin set down a pail of oats and rushed over to her, tripping over a bale of hay in the process. Eren hopped down from the gate he was seated on and wove around a bucket of water to join up with his friends.

"Are all the horses put away?" Mikasa asked, wondering if they needed help collecting more.

"All except Jean." Eren cracked a smile, and Armin's face reddened as he suppressed the urge to laugh.

The quip helped dissolve some of the tension in her shoulders. She could always count on them to flip her mood around. "I've missed you both."

Mikasa pulled both her boys into a close huddle; one arm hooked around Eren's waist and the other laid across Armin's shoulders. She held them both close for a long while, unsure if the pattering sounds she heard was her own tears dripping down her cheek or the melted snow leaking in from the weathered ceiling.

"What're crying for?" Eren's said between her yips. "Did you miss us that much?"

She broke her motherly embrace to wipe away her tears. She nodded silently.

"Well, we're here now." Armin gave her a dazzling smile.

"I'm relieved to see you guys. How was the trip?" she said, her voice wet from crying.


Eren agreed just as miserably before his face warped with anger. "Whose bright idea was it to conduct this mission in the northern region, anyway?"

"That would be my bright idea," Armin reminded him, taking mild offence. "If was our only option. This was the only region that guaranteed absolute isolation." He shifted his eyes over to Mikasa. "All of you must've went out of your minds with boredom out here in the middle of nowhere."

"It was more eventful than you might think."

Armin silently noted her playful tone and cocked his head at her, calculating her words.

"That reminds me," Eren started, hopping up to sit on the gate again. "What was that thing you had to tell us? Sounded important."

The wind sighed against the weak structure of the barn as Mikasa turned away from both pairs of questioning eyes. She reached out to pet the snout of Levi's horse. "I don't even know where to start."

"Is it something bad?"

Armin followed Eren's question with,"Did you extract any vital information from Kenny?"

"No, it has nothing to do with the mission or anything. It's something personal that concerns Levi and I." The horse gave her hand a lick and shook his black mane.

"Something personal..." Eren muttered, then flashed a grin. "What did he do this time? Did you form another grudge against him?"
"Did you have a fight?" Armin tried to guess.

"Come on, guys. Why are you assuming it's something bad?"

"Because it concerns you and Levi," Armin said, but shook his head, silently retracting those words and forcing himself to say, "Well, you two certainly do work well together. That's saying something. Your relationship didn't have the best start though, so you can't blame us for making such assumptions. If it wasn't for me holding you back in court you probably would've given the captain a beating more bloody than Eren's."

"That's the past," she tried to say firmly, but her words quivered. "Things between Levi and I changed...drastically. I don't want to alarm you two, but you need to know that things will be different from now on."

"And why is that?" Eren asked, cocking his head dumbly.

A whistling wind came howling through the cracks, and Mikasa breathed in the crisp air deeply in preparation for a long explanation.

\~x~

Meanwhile, Levi was in the middle of his own explanation, or rather, a watered down and censored one. As much as Hanji wanted to dive into recent events, he had to wade through the shallow preamble first or else Hanji would drown in confusion. Their love might've come into fruition in this cabin, but the beginning to his and Mikasa's relationship lied in the distant past.

During his entire speech, Hanji listened attentively with her hands bridged under her chin, nodding as if she followed every word, but when he reached the end of his long, heartfelt narration, she had only this to say: "You lost me at 'Kenny is Mikasa's uncle'."

The teacups rattled when Levi smacked his fist down on the table. That was the first damn thing he said. "Then stop giving contradicting gestures, idiot. I'm not wasting any more breath on you."

Hanji rubbed at her temple as she organized her thoughts. It was a lot to swallow, Levi knew, but he wasn't about to spoon feed her either. "You lost me but that doesn't mean I wasn't listening. Let me run this by you so I can make sense of this." She scooted in closer by dragging her chair along the flooring, the friction of wood-on-wood made a screeching sound that made Levi wince. "Okay. Mikasa is an Ackerman and Kenny's an Ackerman, related to her late father I presume."

"Correct."

"But how are you an Ackerman?"

"Like I said, he gave me the name. I was to be his successor."

"You mean heir. Kenny is technically your step-father."

Eyes laden with contempt shot at Hanji. "Shut your hole."

A toothy grin stretched across her face; it made Levi want to knock her teeth out. "If he raised you and gave you his last name that means he adopted you. Sorry to break it to you, Levi, but he's your daddy."

He pointed a finger at her. "Don't you ever refer to Kenny as my daddy again."
In brief silence, she tapped her chin. "What about papa?"

Wearily, Levi rubbed the creases of his forehead. "Don't make me resort to vulgar threats, Hanji. You just arrived and I'm already running low on creative ones."

"Okay, okay. Back on track. Let's keep breaking this down piece by piece. You were arranged to marry Mikasa, right?"

"Yes. We were suppose to wed as soon as she came of age."

"And now this is the part in the story where you truly lost me: You said Mikasa still wants to marry you?"

Ignoring her rude undertones, he answered, "Yes."

"...Willingly?" Her voice spiked in doubt.

"Yes," he hissed, his control over the conversation was nearly devoured by his rage, but then he recalled how shocked he was by the same sentiment. A sip of tea managed to subdue his irritation long enough to explain, "I was just as surprised as you. When she was a kid our marriage felt so far away I hardly dwelled about it. I was just happy it meant I'd see her again—but after reuniting with her all these years later I was finally able to picture her as my bride...but then I couldn't imagine her reciprocating the proposal. That's one of the reasons why I didn't see the point in telling her our history. We were betrothed under her parent's and Kenny's consent after they contrived the idea, but after everything that happened the engagement was hardly in effect anymore. I only meant to tell her the truth about everything...Kenny, her parents, my past with her, the engagement...and my feelings. I honestly never expected the outcome to unfold like this."

Hanji leaned forward to cradle her head for what seemed like a long time. "You Ackerman's sure are full of surprises. I'll have to supervise you better. I leave you alone for a few days and you make yourself a family. Geez, Levi."

"It does sound crazy out loud, doesn't it..." Levi broodily set down his cup and stared down at his tawny reflection on the rippling surface. "But I suppose that's fitting. I'm crazy for Mikasa and I can't wait to marry her."

Behind them, they heard a loud crash. Unfazed, Levi swiveled in his seat to find Jean standing there, gaping devastatingly and holding his chest as if he'd been shot. The baggage he dropped rested at his feet. Presumably, it was filled with glass objects, unless that was just the sound of his heart shattering into a million pieces.

"You...Mikasa..."

A fragment of pity filled Levi's eyes as he looked at the heartbroken boy.

"Oh boy. I feel like I'm on the set of a dramatic play. This just keeps getting juicier by the second." Hanji rubbed her hands together as she sat at the edge of her seat, watching intently for how the scene would play out.

More cast members arrived on set, marching in single file to take their places next to Jean.

"Hey man, you're zoning out." Connie snapped his fingers in front of his friends face, but he didn't even budge in reaction.

"Hmm...I think he worked too hard. I told you we should've helped him unload!" Sasha stressed.
"You're the one who said he can handle it!"

The two of them argued back and forth as Jean listlessly gawked between them, his lifeless eyes pinned on Levi.

"Worry not, you're not to blame, guys. Jean just found out the love of his life is to be married to Captain Levi," Hanji cranked up the drama with that. Levi silently disapproved of her exacerbating this situation for her own entertainment, but he couldn't exactly deny her claim either.

An uproar of laughter busted out of Sasha. It took Connie a few dumbfounded moments to let it sink in but he soon joined her choir of gleeful giggles with a knee slap.

Sasha held onto her aching cheeks. "That's a good one, Commander Hanji! Your jokes are the best!"

"It's not a joke," Levi echoed into his cup.

Connie's smile twitched and he spoke slyly from the corner of his mouth. "Is...Is he being ironic? Are we supposed to laugh?"

"I don't know," Sasha whispered back, "wouldn't it be insulting if we didn't laugh at the captain's joke?!"

Abruptly, they broke into blatantly fake laughter. "Good one captain!" they cheered in unison. Hanji joined their forced laugh with a genuine, side-splitting guffaw.

I'm surrounded by morons, Levi thought. Not counting Jean, but he was basically braindead at the moment. Maybe Kenny was right. This lot resembled a comedy trope more than a militant squad.

"Phew, that was funny," Hanji removed her glasses to wipe a tear and cleared the humor from her throat. "But all jokes aside, I'm being serious. Levi is getting married to Mikasa."

The silence was deafening. Levi almost found himself missing the sound of obnoxious laughter.

Hearing it the third time didn't help Jean's grief condition at all; it only threw salt into an already festering wound.

"Um..." Sasha clearly didn't know what to make of this. Part of her still looked eager to laugh, and the other wallowed in a deep pit of confusion. Connie was no different. Taking him by the arm, Sasha began to escort Jean out of the kitchen. It took a few tugs to get him moving, and even then he seemed to have trouble navigating his own legs.

"Let's just get you warm, Jean."

"Yeah..." Connie followed after them. Jean's attention continued to linger on Levi until obscured by a wall.

The face Levi wore must've clearly gave away how he felt about all that, which inspired Hanji to say, "You can't let yourself be insulted by their shock. You had to anticipate that type of reaction, no?"

"I suppose I did." Levi wished it ended at that, but the skit wasn't done yet. From the other room, he could hear Sasha and Connie's voices leaking in.

"Sasha...did Hanji just say what I think she just said?" Connie wondered.
"If you think she said the captain's going to marry Mikasa, I think you're right."

"Gah!" Jean let out a sharp yelp, as if a dagger painfully pierced the remaining fragments of his heart.

Sasha sputtered worriedly, tripping over her words. "I-I'm sure they were just joking, Jean. You know how Levi and Hanji are, they have weird senses of humor! Stop getting so worked up."

"But...Hanji said it wasn't a joke..."

Sasha dismissed Connie by saying, "You don't really buy that, do you? C'mon, Connie, even you're smarter than that. We're talking about Mikasa here, the same girl who vowed bloody vengeance on Levi. Why would she suddenly marry him?"

"You're right." The gloom in Jean's voice uplifted. An uneasy titter followed. "There's no way she'd marry that guy."

The smug tone Jean used made Levi's brow twitched in irritation. "We're already engaged," he directed his roaring voice into the living room.

There was silence, and then there was crying.

"This isn't fair!" Jean roared. "I always thought that little shit Eren was my only rival!"

The sound of Jean hiccuping and Sasha and Connie's failed attempts to console him became the cabin's ambience. Levi did his best to tune it out. Hanji propped both hands behind her head and leaned back on the chair legs, savoring the noisy chaos like music as she tossed Levi a devious grin. "Anyone with eyes could see that boy is in love with Mikasa. You broke the poor kids heart."

"To be fair, he didn't have a chance with her anyway," he sipped his tea carelessly.

"Neither did you." The front chair legs came crashing down with a hard thud and her hands slapped down on the table. "I never wouldn't imagined you two together. But now that you are I can't imagine the two of you with anyone else. You're both humanity's strongest, it makes sense in a way. And yet I never saw this coming. It's strange, isn't it?"

"You have no idea how strange all of this really is," Levi concurred with a contradictory shake of the head. "For a while I was convinced I died and entered a realm where I'm surrounded by everything that makes me happy. But now that you're here I know that can't be the case," he lifted his mug to hide his creeping smirk.

With a gasp, Hanji playfully slap him in the arm. "You know you don't mean that."

"I know," he admitted. "I'm glad you're here."

"And I'm glad you and Mikasa are safe. I was worried about you guys. If only I knew you two were shaking up and having the time of your lives," she huffed in annoyance. "I wouldn't have busted my ass coming here to save you if I knew that."

"It's a good thing you did. I wouldn't have lasted much longer without my tea." Levi stood to make himself another cup, and Hanji's eyes, flaring with mild irritation, followed him as he did.

"Oh, well in that case, I'm so glad I rushed over and exhausted myself, your squad and the horses to give you a special delivery of tea." Hanji sunk her cheek into an upheld fist. "You'd think the prospect of marrying a beautiful and powerful woman would've changed you a little, but you're
Little did Hanji know, he had changed. The change might not be physically noticeable, but it was something he felt inside himself. He could only describe it as a natural occurrence, like the change of seasons—subtle, but also as drastic as winter transitioning into spring. For so long he felt trapped under a gloomy sky, surrounded by hazy fog as a bitter cold drenched his being. The fog had lifted now, and he could clearly see the colorful beauty around him and bask in the warmth.

As Mikasa feared, things would change, but that didn't mean every change would be for the worst. Sometimes, love changed people in the most miraculous ways imaginable.
Chapter 10

Inside the musty barn, Mikasa rewarded herself with a needed breath. Listening to herself speak about her recent romantic adventures with Levi sounded like a work of fiction; lousy fiction at that because Mikasa couldn't—no matter how many times she restarted her sentences or how many tangents she went off on—articulate her feelings clearly.

On the inside, her feelings for Levi were complicatedly beautiful. Outwardly, those feelings manifested into unsure stutters and hand gestures that conveyed nothing more than her frustration when words failed her. Expressing herself verbally wasn't her specialty; Levi and her shared that in common, though unlike her he could at least rely on brazen assertion to get his point across.

Mikasa dared to glance at her friends, hoping they could make sense of her tangle of words. Eren and Armin were sharing a look of confusion, wordlessly pondering everything she had just told them.

"Guys?" she prompted, eager to hear their thoughts.

Armin opened his mouth, his eyes lowering. "This is sudden, Mikasa. I don't know what to say."

"What do you mean?" she asked, her heart sinking. "You always have something to say."

"Well, I have plenty of thoughts, but..."

"Bravely vocalizing yourself is your strong point, isn't it?" Normally, Armin didn't need time to dwell or be told something twice. Nothing he could say could worry Mikasa more than the silence. "Tell me. I want the truth. Don't worry about hurting my feelings if that's what's stopping you."

Armin began to pace, as if he were working out a complicated plan. In a single breath, he regurgitated everything he tried to hold back, "I don't mean to question you on a personal matter, Mikasa, so please don't take this the wrong way. I know your bond with the captain improved, I'll take that into consideration, but I can't ignore the vindictive chemistry you've once had. I'm having trouble understanding how your relationship took a romantic turn. You said so yourself that you don't remember your early history with him—yet you're going through with this engagement confidently as if you've been lovers from the start. I know you're capable of making rational decisions on your own, but I don't want you to do something you might regret later."

"Armin," Eren hissed. "You're thinking too deeply about this. Love can't be calculated and explained. It just happens, like a bolt from the blue that changes your life forever."

Armin uttered a cracked vowel before he hung his head, regretting his words. "I...suppose I might not be considering this from an emotional standpoint. I didn't mean to sound insensitive."

While Armin spoke, Mikasa had let her eyes slide over to Eren, who sat there on the wooden gate casually but not in a withdrawn way. She didn't expect such a mature comment to come from him; a guy that was seemingly clueless in regards to love.

"I'm sorry, Mikasa," Armin said sincerely. "I don't want you to get the wrong idea—I'm not against you and the captain together at all. Honestly. I'm just stunned. If I were here to witness the development at a gradual pace, maybe it wouldn't be so hard to swallow." Armin wanted to say
more, but closed his eyes. "Forget I said anything."

"No, it's alright," Mikasa said at last, gripping his arm softly. She hated seeing her friend struggle to carefully tell her that she sounded like a lovesick idiot. She knew his intentions were good and he was only looking out for her. "As my friend you deserve a better explanation."

Eren was no stranger to complex emotions, perhaps that made it easier for him to understand her and fill in the blanks with his own interpretations. If sharing her feelings will help ease Armin's concerns, she could live with the embarrassment that may come with it.

Hay crackled underfoot as Mikasa made a lap around the barn, her friend's eyes following her carefully. "I don't think my affections for Levi popped up overnight. I think they were always there, buried someplace deep and built up over time. Recently, those feelings finally raised to the surface and overflowed. I wasn't aware at the time, or I was in denial—who knows. All I know is Levi's confession helped me recognize my feelings and a part of myself I never knew existed before.

"In the beginning, I saw him as a strange man that I despised, and yet I've come to admire him over time. Whenever I caught myself praising or idolizing him in the privacy of my own mind I'd always feel alarmed and I would try to push those thoughts back, just for them to return subconsciously. While I can't say for sure whether or not I had a crush on him in the traditional sense back then, I do know these feelings of mine bloomed into something romantic now. As sudden as this transition might seem to everyone else, it all came natural to me—to us. You're not wrong to question our relationship, Armin. Considering how fast Levi and I are moving anyone would wonder if something built so quickly would crumble in time, but I promise you what Levi and I have is authentic and strong. There's no need to repress these feelings for a better time. Life is too short for that, and the life of a soldier is even shorter."

Mikasa sighed. "I don't know if that helped put anything in perspective. You guys know me. When I end up thinking too hard about what I have to say I end up saying nothing or my words get all jumbled."

"You should give yourself more credit, Mikasa," Eren said, giving her a fond gaze. "I understand what you're saying—and I understand how you feel. It's hard to put into words; that feeling when admiration turns into love, when you look up to someone and you think so highly of them and admire their courage. You can't help but to fall in love after a while."

All of her previous thoughts rushed from her body, leaving her with a familiar sensation: a strong sense of worry for Eren. She gave him a thousand yard stare and said, "Eren."

"What?"

"Did you hit your head? Did Hanji run weird experiments on you?" She perked up with a tremble of fury. "If she did I swear I'll——"

"No, no." He waved his open palms at her sincerely. "Nothing like that."

The sudden shift in Eren's personality was starting to worry her, and Eren must've sensed that. He tousled his hair in a bother motion, his eyes straying down to the ground to avoid Mikasa's wide eyes staring at him point blank.

"This might be a good time to tell you." He directed his attention to Armin. "What do you think?"

Armin seemed to have found mental balance within the whirlwind of confusion, and calmly said, "I don't see why not. I understand now that Mikasa's feelings for Levi are genuine. Therefore,
there's no risk of anyone getting hurt now."

Mikasa tilted her head, shifting a glance between them as she stood paralyzed on the spot. "What are you two talking about? Tell me what?"

Eren tried to take a deep breath but it caught in his chest. He used the little air he gathered to say: "I'm dating Historia."

"Dating?" Mikasa nearly choked on the word as she took an unsteady step back and collided with the solid door behind her. She leaned against it, second guessing her hearing—but Eren's words were crystal clear and his cheeks were burning hot. There's no mistaking what he said.

"That's..." she paused. Shocking might not be the most gentle word to use, no matter how much it suited the situation. Mikasa didn't think Eren had any interest in love and dating. Sometimes she wondered if he ever would ever abandon his burdens and rage and settle down with someone special.

"I always thought you had no interest in that stuff."

"Yeah, neither did I until I got closer to her," Eren said. "Historia is more than just a girlfriend—she really helps keep me stable. Before we started dating I wondered if I was losing my sanity sometimes. Because of her I can keep my cool longer and found better ways to relieve my frustrations. She's amazing."

"When did this happen?" Mikasa wondered.

"Suddenly." Eren smiled. "Just like you and Levi."

Dusty shafts of light poured in from a crack in the roof and shone on Eren like a spotlight as he painted the scene for her. Mikasa remembered the day clearly; her and Levi were ordered to infiltrate the warehouse imprisoning a disguised Jean and Armin while the real Eren and Historia were kept in a safe location together.

"We had nothing to do other than nap and talk all day while everyone was out on the mission. I got to know the real her better, and I'm sure you already know the real her is nothing like the bubbly Christa we used to know. She went through so much, and I wracked my brain trying to figure out a way to cheer her up—but then I realized she didn't need fixing. She needed acceptance and love. She was broken and I was too, and somehow when we came together we felt a little whole."

Hearing Eren speak with such gentle passion made Mikasa's heart swell with warmth. "Why didn't you tell me sooner? As shocked as I am I'd always support anything that made you happy, Eren. You know that."

Eren's face lifted with regret. "I wanted to tell you right away...but Armin told me to keep it a secret."

Her eyes, flaring with hurt, shot over to the distressed blond. "How come?" The three of them never kept things from each other, not something big like this. Why was she the only one left in the dark?

"I thought you had romantic feelings for Eren," Armin admitted miserably. "I was afraid you might get heartbroken if you found out. I was only trying to look out for you and preserve your friendship with him."

"I never got that impression from you. You're too much like a mom." Eren shrugged. "But
Armin's intuition is usually spot on, so I decided to wait until things calmed down to tell you. That way we'd have time to repair our friendship in case it did get damaged."

Mikasa taut lips bent into a feeble smile. "And here I was thinking you two didn't think of me as a close friend anymore."

Armin couldn't help but chuckle at that. "I know Eren and I are closer than conjoined twins at times, but you're just as stuck to us."

"He's right. We're family, and nothing will ever change that. The three of us will always be close no matter what, even if we let our little family expand by welcoming in Levi and Historia and whoever Armin falls in love with." At that, Eren's expression popped with realization. Hopping down off the gate, Eren rushed up to Armin energetically and slapped him on the back. "I guess this makes you the only single one left in this trio."

"S-So? I don't have time for that stuff anyway…" Armin stuttered, folding his arms in a bothered motion.

"Neither do Mikasa and I, but we still made time for it. There's gotta be someone you have a crush on by now."

"I don't…" Armin tried to back away with fumbling feet. Behind him, a horse whinnied and made him leap with a startled shriek.

"He definitely has a crush on someone." Mikasa declared, noticing his jittery behavior. She set a tapping finger on her lip. "Could it be Sasha?"

Armin shook his head. "The person I like has no interest in me. At all. There's a zero percent chance of him ever liking me back. Really, guys, just drop it."

"Him?" Eren said as if he struck gold, and Armin winced at his slip up. "That helps narrow it down. It's gotta be Connie then, right? Talk about opposites attract…"

Armin chuckled nervously. "No way. I'm positive this guy isn't interested in other guys, so my feelings are quite pointless and there's no reason to even discuss this."

"How many times do we have to tell you your feelings matter?" Eren raised his voice. "Come on, Armin. Mikasa and I told you all about our love lives. It's only fair if you share yours, even if it's one-sided."

Mikasa nodded. She didn't like putting her friend on the spot but she was very curious. "At least give us a hint."

Knowing how stubborn his friends could be at times, Armin sighed out further protest and admitted defeat with a curt, "Fine."

Stepping up to the pens, Armin reached out and grasped one of the horses by its bridle and urged its face in Eren and Mikasa's direction. "Here's your hint."

"Huh?" Eren cocked up a brow at the horse. "How is that a—oh my god it's Jean."

~X~

Sometime later, Eren busted inside the cabin like a bolt of lightening, smiling and trotting with a bounce as he flew across the kitchen. Mikasa and Armin arrived a few seconds later to see Historia crushed beneath Eren's affectionate huddle.
"Eren…!" Stunned, Historia lightly tried to wriggle free, her face stuck with fear as she glanced at Mikasa. Eren's tufts of hair covered over her expanding blue eye when he kissed her right then and there where everyone could see.

Red-faced and gasping, Historia pushed away and backed into the counter behind her, firmly holding the lip in case her shaky legs gave out.

"It's okay," Eren assured his girlfriend. "I told Mikasa. We don't have to keep it a secret anymore."

"Whoa." Hanji perked her head up. "Those two are dating now too?" She adopted a cautious pose, looking around at the walls suspiciously. "What's with this love shack? Am I next?"

"We've need dating a while," Eren said, proudly.

Levi, nursing his third cup of tea, perked his brows up at the news. He couldn't help but be secretly happy for those two depressing brats.

"Are you sure this is okay?" Historia looked guilty. "I thought you said Mikasa—I-I don't think it's right to hurt her feelings like this right in front of her."

Mikasa stepped forward. "I have nothing but familial love for him. You won't hear any objections from me—in fact you have my blessing."

Then, the widest smile Mikasa ever saw Historia wear spread across her face. It seemed as though Mikasa's words were an antidote to cure Historia of a heavy burden that had infected her so long. With some tears of joy and a perky gait, Historia hopped up and threw her arms around Mikasa, who stiffly caught the girl's weight.

Being with Eren must've been therapeutic for her, she thought as she returned her embrace. The real Historia always had a forlorn look in her eye and seemed so lonely even if she was in a room full of people—there was no trace of that girl now. Mikasa never knew how to relate to her horrible upbringing without love, and fearing she'd say the wrong thing, she decided to say nothing at all back then. But Eren broke that wall Historia built around herself and freed her from that loneliness. Mikasa was proud of Eren for giving his love to this young woman who desperately needed it.

"I'm so relieved, Mikasa. I know how close you and Eren are. You're such an important person in his life. That's why your approval means so much to me. For a while I was worried about how you'd react."

"You had nothing to worry about, Historia." Although Mikasa understood her concern wasn't unfounded; she could get downright scary when it came to Eren. "As long as you make Eren happy, I'm happy."

The sight of his two favorite girls showing affection at last caused Eren to overdose with joy. Slowly, he turned to Levi and spread open his arms.

Levi blinked up at him, his eyes shrinking critically. "What."

"I thought, um…" he mumbled. "Maybe we can hug too?"

Levi bitterly rose his teacup. "Get that idea out of your head this instant, you dirty bastard."

"Quit being such a grouch. Hug the boy!" Hanji pat Levi's back hard, making his tea spill over the brim of his cup and onto the table. Cursing, he stood up. When he went to fetch a rag to clean up
the spill, Eren made an attempt to hug him. Cautiously, Levi paused in his tracks and trapped him in a deadlock stare.


"Captain," Eren said, smiling. "Or should I call you brother from now on?"

"You shall not, you deluded idiot."

"But we're going to be brother-in-laws!"

Unswayed by the sentiment, Levi adopted a stiff stance on the opposite side of the dining table and anxiously looked around in search of an exit. Eren slowly prowled about, and Levi inched his way in the other direction.

"Alright guys, settle down." Mikasa released Historia from her arms and eyed her rattled fiancé and the mischievous smile on Eren's lips.

A second of stillness passed, and then Eren charged for him. Levi bent into a rapid dash. Because of Eren's quick countering, Levi had nowhere to flee. So, round and round they went, their speed increasing until it was hard to tell who was chasing who.

Hanji, being the instigator she was, laughed like a jolly monarch all the while, pointing at Levi and Eren as if they were her own royal fools.

"I had a feeling something like this would happened," Armin said through a smile.

On the contrary, Levi was not prepared by any means and looked like a stressed child refusing his bedtime by running from a parent's arms. Eren was always a few seconds too late, or Levi would manage to slip out from Eren's hold as if he were a pesky bar of soap.

"Captain, listen. Stop running away from me," Eren said, persistent in both words and actions.

"Back off," he ordered, quickly weaving around a chair that he intentionally tipped down as he passed. Eren agilely hopped over the barricade.

Levi made a hard stop, his mussed bangs draping over a nasty glare. Directly across the table, Eren wordlessly consented to a mutual time-out to catch their breath.

"You stay the hell away from me," Levi spat, pointing at Eren. "This is your last warning."

"But captain," he huffed. "I just want a hug."

"A subordinate can't hug his captain. That's highly inappropriate."

Hanji raised a pointed finger. "A captain screwing his subordinate, however, is a-ok."

Smirking, Armin cornered Mikasa with his squinting eyes. "You left that part out earlier."

A bead of sweat glided down her cheek. "Nothing stays private in the Survey Corps for very long, does it?"

"You were naive if you ever thought otherwise, dear," Hanji said without a hint of shame. "Soon enough this news will spread to the other military branches, circulate within the walls and deep below the underground city. Hell, even the titan's will be shocked by this scandalous affair between captain and subordinate."
"I told you, Mikasa. Like *wildfire,*" Levi said. "This idiot can commit arson with her big mouth alone."

Hanji took that as praise and hummed with a satisfied smirk. That only burned Levi's rage more. And as he was distracted Eren went in for the attack, grabbing Levi. By the way Levi jolted he looked as if he'd been stabbed. Quickly, he tried to wrench himself free, but it was no use.

Hanji dabbed a finger under her eyeglasses, sweeping away a tear. "Our little captain learned how to love," she sniffed. The emotions overtook her made her blind: there wasn't a shred of love left in Levi's body as he continued to wrestle against Eren's embrace. If anything, he learned how to curb his violent impulses—if Eren pulled this stunt any other time he'd end up regrowing a fresh row of teeth.

"Mikasa, tell him to back off," Levi ordered as his arms dangling limply at his side.

She hummed a razzed note. "No. Consider this Eren's revenge for going overboard at the trial."

"I'd rather him beat the shit out of me."

"This is a more satisfying alternative." Levi could take a beating just fine, but seeing him squirm like a bratty child being coddled by an overbearing mother was a form of payback she hadn't known she wanted until now.

"Do you hate me that much?" Eren mumbled.

"I don't hate you, but I am a second away from granting Hanji permission to run excruciating experiments on you."

"Even with permission I'd never hurt my dear friend Eren," Hanji said.

"You couldn't play along, could you?"

"And help you wiggle out of this amusing pickle you found yourself in? Never."

Going limp, he put his strength into his words. "Fine, then. Get off me or I'll rip your arms off."

"If you murder Eren we'll have to call off the engagement," Mikasa said dryly.

"Removing his arms won't kill him," he reminded her, his eyes begging for consent, but Mikasa just shook her head in response.

A sigh filtered through his clenched teeth. Reluctantly, Levi not only submitted to Eren's embrace but he also reciprocated the hug, much to Eren's delight.

"Eren...maybe you should let the captain go now," Historia said, and her words tethered him away from Levi at last.

"Sorry," he laughed. "I got a little carried away by the big news."

Levi brushed himself off, as if Eren's affections left a filthy stain on his clothes. "I assume he and Armin took the news about us well?"

Mikasa nodded. "I think he's more excited about us getting married than we are."

"So it's true then..." Historia wondered aloud. All eyes in the room pinned to her. She returned Levi's stare, "I...I couldn't help but overhear you before when you said you and Mikasa were engaged." Historia switched her eyes to Mikasa, and a genuine smile crept up her face. "That's
"You guys should have a double wedding." Armin threw the suggestion out there for the two couples. The idea warmed Mikasa's heart, and she peered over to smile at Levi, and he smiled back.

"Maybe it'll be a triple wedding," Mikasa said, nudging Armin and indicating her head toward the living room, where Jean miraculously napped on the couch through all the commotion. Armin did his best to repress his smile.

~x~

Dinner had been a chaotic mess that night. Once everyone sat down at the crowded table to eat the feast Sasha and Jean had cooked up, a flurry of topics flew around the kitchen. Questions about the engagement and stories about the Survey Corps' journey north were popular topics, but there was also playful gabbing in between, like when Connie and Sasha cracked inappropriate jokes (which Levi found amusing) and when Jean and Eren bickered between bites until they choked themselves quiet.

Afterward, while everyone else settled their stomachs with the tea Levi brewed, Mikasa baked cookies with Historia and exchanged some shy whispers about their lovers as they kneaded out the dough. Mikasa couldn't recall the exact measurements in her mother's recipe, and she had to replace chocolate chips with raisins, but they managed to bake two scrumptious batches of cookies all the same.

Flour and sugar dusted over every surface in the kitchen now and dirty utensils and plates piled up wherever space was free. To Levi, the kitchen looked more horrifying than a field after a bloody battle. Runny egg yolk found its way on the palm of his hand when he leaned up against the counter to assess the state of the kitchen. With the way he looked at his palm with revulsion, one might of thought he considered chopping it off at the wrist.

When a few members of squad Levi tried to whistle away without contributing to the clean up, Levi knocked his fist down on the counter. "You gluttons are forbidden to leave until this pigsty is spotless."

"I'm too full to move." Sasha rubbed her rounded belly softly as if it were a babe growing inside her.

"Same," Connie burped. "I might puke if I move and that will just give you guys more to clean."

Levi smacked them both with a rag. "I suggest you get started, or I'll make sure you'll permanently lose your mobility."

Two hands cupped his stiff shoulders from behind. "Breathe," Mikasa said in an attempt to mollify her fiancé.

"How can I possibly find time to breathe when the kitchen is in shambles?"

"We'll get it cleaned up. Calm down and go have another cookie."

Some anxiety lifted from Levi as he slid his eyes over to the tray of hot cookies. Meekly, he bobbed his head and scuffled his feet across the floor. He watched the crew clean up with narrowed, meticulous eyes as he nibbled. He was impressed how Mikasa managed to bake something reminiscent to her mom's recipe while adding her own unique flair. There was a sour aftertaste, however—by no fault of Mikasa's, but because he realized there was someone else who...
this treat should be shared with. With much reluctance, Levi picked a cookie out of the batch, set it on a smaller plate, and left with it in hand.

Mikasa watched him leave with a knowing smile.

"Thank Sina he's gone." Sasha collapsed to the floor, holding her aching stomach.

"Move it, I'm trying to sweep here." Jean prodded her bulging side with the broom but all she did was groan.

A humming tune drifted into Mikasa's ears. Turning, she saw Eren and Historia at the sink, washing and drying the dishes as a team. Eren dabbed her nose with a finger full of foam and she giggled up at Eren's heartwarming grin. At least they were making the best out of their mandatory chores.

Mikasa broke away unnoticed then to join up with Levi in the basement. Familiar banter filled her ears as she descended down the stairs.

"You're lucky I'm even giving you desert. Actually, you're lucky I even feed you. Don't be greedy about the quantity."

"Listen runt," Kenny rasped, "I'm a big man and I require more food. A little guy like you wouldn't understand a real man's appetite."

Instead of contending, Levi turned at the sound of the creaking stairs. "Don't tell me those brats ditch their duties."

"Nah, I just felt like hanging out with you guys." Mikasa whipped around a support column and leaned her back against it. "$\text{There's a whole other batch of cookies, Kenny. I'll bring you down some more if you'd like.}"

"What a sweetheart," he smiled, then frowned at Levi. "$\text{She's too good for an asshole like you.}"

"I hope you get fat." Levi mumbled.

"Honestly, you two are worse than children." Mikasa shook her head fondly at the pair.

Kenny broke off a piece of the cookie and tossed it in his mouth. As he chewed he asked, "$\text{Are we leaving this shithole soon?}"

Levi glanced down at his hands. "$\text{Yes. Tomorrow morning. What we plan to do or go after that is still a mystery.}"

"Do you plan to lug me along until you figure out what you're doing? I'm not the most compact cargo, you know."

"We can't let you go." Mikasa said, glumly. "$\text{We were supposed to extract information from you here. That was our mission objective and we failed.}"

An amused frown appeared on Kenny's lips. "$\text{Don't look at me like that. You two got distracted with each other and forgot about your own mission.}"

Bashfully, Mikasa and Levi lowered their heads.

Kenny washed out his mouth with a swig of moonshine. "$\text{Honestly, between us, there isn't much I can share. I'm just as much in the dark as anyone.}"
"Bullshit." Levi spat, seeing through his lie.

Kenny rolled his neck with a crack. "For fuck's sake, we're on opposite teams. We gotta keep some secrets from each other."

"If that's how it's going to be, we can't afford to let you go. But for now, can we just…"

"Forget we're enemies?" Mikasa finished and Levi bobbed his head.

Miraculously, the Ackerman's managed to mutually agree with that. For a while longer they spent time together, swapping stories, jokes, insults—the usual. All along, a poignant feeling lingered with them because they knew this camaraderie would disappear by morning and might not ever return.


~x~

"Is the kitchen cleaned?" Levi asked as he emerged from the hall, Mikasa lagging behind to shut the basement door. Exhausted and stuffed, the Survey Corp soldiers had retired in the living room.

"Spotlessly, sir," said Armin, a trusted source. That put Levi at ease.

Fellow comrades did their best to find comfort in their new surroundings, but Mikasa and Levi were right at home as they nestled close on the couch, a quilt spread across their laps.

A wind whistled through gaps in the timber, but the crackling fireplace kept them all toasty warm. The majority of the squad were hunched together in groups of two; Eren sat on the ground with Historia's head resting upon his shoulder, Sasha and Connie were laying on their bellies on the floor, snug between two towers of pillows and a blanket awning over them. Jean, who had been in a dour mood all day, shared witty whispers and a blanket with Armin.

In front of the hearth, Hanji paced in short strides, her shadows dancing all about the room as she prattled on about intricate plans no one cared to hear at the moment. Leaned up against the mantel was Moblit, dozing off to the sound of Hanji's voice.

Drowsiness sprinkled over the room and everyone was affected by the spell, thanks to Sasha unleashing a loud contagious yawn.

"Am I boring you?" Hanji asked.

"Oh give it a rest," Levi yawned at last, "Everyone's tired."

Her jaw snapped closed tightly. She turned around to stare into the flames. "We must go over the mission details before we set out tomorrow."

"Why don't we listen to the plan before we leave, when everyone is refreshed?" Connie suggested with a yawn. Sasha praised his strike of genius.

"No, we have to go through this now because we'll be too busy packing up to hold a meeting, unless you all want to get up earlier."

"Let's vote," Mikasa suggested. "All in favor of listening to the plan now, raise your hand."

Only Hanji's hand rose until she startled Moblit awake with a kick to his leg, and he quickly mimicked Hanji's gesture cluelessly.

"Now, raise your hand if you'd rather hear the plan tomorrow."
Nearly every hand in the room rose. Those who didn't contribute was Hanji, Moblit, and Historia, who was fast asleep.

"Fine," spit flew from her mouth. "But don't complain when I wake you all up at the crack of dawn!" Hanji stomped off, and Levi noted the tension in her stride.

Historia woke briefly to release her hair tie and shake out her golden hair. Then, moaning groggly, she crawled in next to Eren on the sleeping bag he rolled out.

"Dibs on the couch," Jean said, crashing down on his belly as soon as Levi and Mikasa stood.

"I'll let you become king of this pillow fort if you give up the couch," Sasha pleaded.

"Hell no. I had a rough day. I at least deserve some comfort." He rolled over, and that was the end of negotiations.

Mikasa made for the bedroom, tugging the cuff of Levi's sleeve, but he pulled back and kept his gaze fixated on the front door.

"I'll join you in a moment. I need to check up on the horses real quick, a lot of them are cooped up in there and I wanna make sure they're alright."

"Okay, be careful."

Levi held a swinging lantern by the handle, its flame guttering behind the glass. Out on the porch, the light glowed on Hanji, who was crouched down with her hands lost in her tangled hair.

"Cooling off?"

She lifted her head up. "Trying to. Sorry for snapping back there."

"You're the commander now. Emotional outbursts are part of the job."

"Erwin always hid his stress better than me." She wrinkled her nose ruefully at the mention of him.

"Keeping that tension locked up isn't healthy. He must have good genetics, otherwise he'd be as bald and wrinkly as Dot Pixis."

Her eyes rolled under her lenses. "You know what I meant."

"I do." Levi stepped down from the porch and got Hanji to her feet with a beckoning wave. "Walk with me to the barn."

As they followed the scarcely lit path, Levi gazed up at the twinkling stars speckled throughout the dark-blue sky. Other than the rustling bushes and ululating cries from nocturnal creatures lurking nearby, only the sound of their soft footfalls crushing a thin layer of snow could be heard. Residing in the peaceful hinterlands had caused Levi to dissociate himself with all the chaos currently erupting in the cities, though the reality came rushing back to him when he glanced over at Hanji and the stress lines carved on her face.

"What has you so stressed?"

"Everything." She stomped irritably. "Erwin's a step away from hanging off a noose, humans are killing humans, a false king rules the walls and the Survey Corps are wanted. Everything is falling apart and when I try to arrange everything back in order I just end up breaking off more pieces."
"There's no way to uncrack an egg once it falls. You just gotta sop up the mess."

"If our problems manifested into an actual mess I'm sure it would be too much for even you to clean up," she sighed a cloudy breath.

"We'll figure a way out of this." Levi turned his head to the dark unknown in front of them. The life of a soldier was just one long—or short, depending on how unlucky you were—walk through the dark. "You'll figure out a way, I mean. You're the only one among us who has the brains to dig us out of this."

"Don't leave Armin out like that." In the dim light, Levi made out a stripe of a smile. "It was his idea to come here...though I can't help but feel it was a waste."

"I can argue with that."

She chuckled. "You got yourself a lovely bride out of this mission, yes. I guess it wasn't all for nothing. But that doesn't help our situation. It's unfortunate Kenny turned out to be a relative...otherwise might've been able to force information out of him other ways, like we did with Sannes."

"We can still do that."

The icy cadence in which he said that made Hanji halt her footing. Levi walked on ahead up to the barn doors, then turned to shine the light on Hanji, who stood there gaping like a stunned animal.

"We can't."

"Why not?"

Avoiding his gaze, she looked around at the blackness beyond the circle of light, hugging herself with a shiver. "I have to be honest with you, Levi. For what Kenny did to my squad I can't ever forgive him. Having said that, I can clearly see he is special to you and Mikasa."

"Apparently you can't see clearly, shitty glasses. Like hell he's special. What drew you to that conclusion?" Levi did his best to make that sound genuine.

"I know it's complicated. You don't have to feel ashamed. I'd never think any less of you for defending him. Family is family no matter how batshit crazy they are."

Hanji's teasing earlier had some truth to it: Kenny was the closest thing Levi ever had to a father figure. Parents were never perfect, especially in this day and age. Eren's dad left him with the weight of the world on his shoulders and Historia's father left her in the hands of the military and she never received a spec of love from her mother—Kenny fell somewhere on that shitty parental spectrum. He wasn't suited to be a parent, and never tried to be. He went by instinct and followed the scent of anything he desired like a mad dog, but even the wildest wolf in the pack will lick the wounds of an abandoned pup.

Levi let his gaze fall to the rusted handle of door. "Mikasa is the only family I need."

"You say that but..." Hanji slammed her back against the side of the barn and crossed her arms. "Forget it. I still stand by what I said. We'll find a pacified way to deal with him."

"Don't you get soft on me, now." He smirked, and a yank later the doors opened with a creak.

Dark shadows scattered away as Levi walked inside with the lamplight dangling high in his hand.
And a few steps later the light touched upon something no eyes should ever bear witness to.

~x~

The walls of the cabin were made of thick timbers, but that didn't block the muffled noise pouring in beyond the door. There was some giggling and what sounded like an argument between Eren and Jean going on—until a throaty holler cut off the revelry. Levi's tired tone was unmistakable. Once he threatened them to settle down, it went quiet and the bedroom door cracked open. A shadowy figure slunk inside.

"How are the horses?" Mikasa wondered, feeling the mattress sink as Levi crawled in beside her. All Levi could offer was a groan into the pillow he had fallen face-first into.

"Don't tell me you have bad news..." Her heart skipped.

"It's nothing bad," he drawled. What the light touched in that barn came rushing back to his mind, making him cringe. "I saw them...well, let's just say someone didn't secure the hatches to the stalls and our horses decided to get friendly with each other."

"You..." Mikasa snorted into her hand. "Did you walk in on them mating?"

"Yes," he admitted miserably. "I guess I can't blame them; they're war horses, bred for battle and long expeditions. They were probably bored out of their minds and needed to exert some energy."

"That's one way to do that," she laughed. "I wonder if my horse is pregnant."

"If so, I promise, my horse will take full responsibility and father the foal."

"I'm sure you're secretly thrilled at the idea of your horse becoming a father, you're so fond of him."

He shrugged indifferently. "He keeps me alive and gets me where I need to go."

"Your bond is closer than comrades. I saw you hug him once, and you let him lick your hand before."

"...And you dare call me out for having a staring problem? I think you have one too."

"Sorry, I didn't realize I was invading the intimate privacy between you and your horse."

Ripping the pillow out from under her head, Levi hopped to his knees and smothered her giggling. Breathless, Mikasa tossed aside her pillow and pressed him back down to the mattress, then inched in close to rest her head upon his chest.

"Today went well, don't you think?"

"Yeah." His fingertips rubbed along her shoulder in delicate, circular motions. "They took the news better than expected. Well, except Jean."

"I can live with Jean being bitter for a while."

The sound of Levi's heart thumping against her ear lulled her. Just as Mikasa was about to close her eyes, her head shifted up. "This will be the last time we'll have a normal bed to sleep in for a while."

~x~
Levi groaned at the reminder. He dreaded the long, uncomfortable journey south. "I've gotten quite used to this bed, and sharing it with you."

"Me too," she smiled sadly. "If and when the name of Survey Corps is restored, the two of us could christen your bed back in the city. We'd find privacy there. Best of all I won't have to sleep in the noisy barracks anymore."

"That's the best part?" he chuckled. "Here I thought you liked sleeping with your future husband. This was all a big scheme to get into the officer suite, wasn't it?"

She slapped his mouth gently. "Oh quiet, you."

What Mikasa said did give him some needed assurance, though. So long as he could still have one-on-one time with her after their departure here, leaving didn't seem as unbearable.

With her hands pressed to each side of his pillow, Mikasa stared intently down at him. The scant moonlight shining in through the window illuminated half her face. "You know, I never got to return the favor earlier."

"For what?"

The shadows of night hid the crooked smirk tugging at her lips. She spread herself over him, grinding her hips against his groin until it woke with a twitch.

"That certainly refreshed my memory," he said with a rattling breath, his hands wandering up the slopes of her body. "What sort of compensation do you have in mind?"

"I wanted to use my mouth, like you did..."

Levi noticed the strain in her voice, like it took all her willpower to say it. He also noticed his own breath shorten at the very thought of her suggestion.

"But I should warn you, I'll probably be bad at it."

His hand cupped her cheek, his thumb rubbing along her bottom lip. "You'll do fine. You're a woman of natural talent."

She shook her head against his palm. Her natural talents resided in the battlefield, not the bedroom. "To me, killing a man is less intimidating than getting him off..."

"In case you haven't noticed, I'm about to bust out of my laces and you haven't even started yet."

Scooting further down his lap, Mikasa's fingers traced his body down to the protruding bulge between his hips. She cupped it firmly, feeling the heat rising through the fabric. She tucked a few free strands of hair behind her ears as she lowered her head. To familiarize her tongue with the taste of his skin, she licked a few spots below his bellybutton. The way his abdomen rose and fell with unsteady breaths gave away how nervous Levi was. But it was a good kind of nervous, Mikasa could tell, because she felt the same way.

When her lips met fabric she slipped her fingers into his waistband and tugged. Levi stilled, even his breathing was scarce as he listened to the rustle of fabric. To calm the nerves boiling inside him, he tried to loosen his muscles one joint at a time and relax.

His hips buckled as he felt her fingers closing around him.

Mikasa had crafted the art of surprise well, and he suspected she was using that tactic against him.
now. And just when he was about to start begging, he felt wetness glide up the underside of his length. He muffled out a moan with a fist pressed against his lips. He wouldn't want his squad just outside the door to hear their captain make such a weak and embarrassing sound.

"How was that?"

"You'll have to demonstrate again so I can give a full analysis on your skills," he joked.

She gave another long lick.

"One more time."

This time she pampered the tip with a few flicks of her tongue. He twitched.

"Again..."

"...again..."

"...again."

The weakening decline in his voice gave Mikasa the answer she wanted; she was doing a fine job.

~x~

"Mikasa," Levi groaned, rolling and reaching for her. Then he opened his eyes and found the space beside him empty. Mikasa must've started the day without him. In search of her, he crossed down the drafty hall and carefully leaped over Sasha and Connie, who had somehow wormed their way all the way across the floor in their sleep.

Pre-dawn light fell upon his sleeping squad. Historia and Eren cuddled close by the dwindling fire. Armin was lying alongside the couch, and so when Jean's arm fell off the side it lightly smacked him in the face. Levi jolted when Hanji broke the silence with a sleepy laugh (Moblit mumbled a stressed reply). No sign of Mikasa, though. He moved on to the kitchen.

There was no sign of her here either, only a hot kettle and traces of sugar on the counter. He examined them like important clues before making a cup of tea for himself. Framed in the window over the sink he saw the Survey Corps insignia embroidered on a green cloak wrapped over Mikasa's shoulders.

"Morning," Levi greeted, closing the door quietly behind him. The morning was brisk but the steam rising up from his cup kept him warm from the chilled gust rolling in.

"You're just in time," she smiled over her shoulder and turned back around just as the first rays of sunlight peeked over the horizon of trees.

Without looking away, Levi stepped in closer and wrapped an arm around Mikasa's waists, his head falling on her shoulder.

Lingering stars dusted over the tip of the sky, not yet succumbed by the rising sun. Miles of grassy snow blanketed the rural landscape, twinkling brilliantly in the golden light. Mikasa's gleaming eyes soaked up the stunning view, memorizing every detail, from the shivering pines, the wispy clouds, the gleaming frost, the fog sweeping in. The view was worthy of a frame and signature.

A wicker basket of berries sat atop the rail, and Levi plucked one out for himself and popped the treat in his mouth. Cupping a handful, Mikasa threw the berries out into the frosted grass. The chirping birds left their branches, soared into the fresh morning sky, then swooped down for a
Mikasa watched the birds as Levi stepped behind her and buried his face between her shoulder blades, taking a whiff of her scent. He wanted to preserve this moment for as long as he could but he could already feel the moment slipping away when he heard his squad stirring awake inside.

Mikasa twisted in his embrace and saw that Levi's eyes were like blue chips of ice thawing in the glittering sunrise. A mixture of happy and sad tears came seeping from his eyes.

"Are you crying?" she asked.

He rubbed his face against her chest to soak up all evidence of tears, "No," he answered, the word sounded wet.

Mikasa didn't question why because her own supply of tears leaked out for the same unspoken reasons. They'll have to leave this little home they established together today and pack up their memories and peace of mind and store them safely in the back of their minds. Leaving will be hard, but they're leaving with more than they came with. And they'll always find a comforting home within each other, no matter where they are, or what difficulties they faced. Dark days may lie ahead, but they were certain peace would shed upon their lives one day, just as sure as the sun would rise.

Chapter End Notes

This may seem like the end but there's actually one more chapter to come, so stay tuned!

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