

CHEMISTRY  
READ

MASKSAREHOT





# CHEMISTRY

# READ

- MASKSAREHOT -



**- SEASON ONE -**

When Levi agreed to a chemistry read, he did not expect actual chemistry.

He has been through dozens of these before. Normally, it's some hot new star—often several years too young for him, since he is usually cast as a teenager. He is getting sick of those roles. He finally broke out of the teen genre last year to do a couple of rom-coms, but he hates how much he has to stretch his personality to utter the lines. And he can't stand all those scripts where the couple needs to just fucking *talk to each other* to solve their problems.

So, when his agent approached him about a historical drama, he jumped at the chance.

“The character’s name is even Levi,” she said on the phone. “Captain Levi Ackerman.”

“The war hero?” This could be a big break. Everyone knows about Humanity’s Strongest, one

of the heroes of the great titan war. Hell, Levi was even named after him. “Anyone attached?”

“The Director is Stephanie Leon, the indie darling.”

Levi’s brows shot up. “She’s selling out?”

“Not really. She’s hoping to put an authentic and artistic twist on the story. You’re their first choice for Levi, of course. No other big names attached yet.”

“Why does she want me?” After being typecast again and again, he was an odd choice for such an important role.

He could practically hear Carolyn’s shrug over the line. “She saw you in that eulogy video that went viral. Thinks you have untapped depth.”

“Huh.” Eulogizing his mother wasn’t really how he wanted to improve his career.

“I’ll send you the pilot script—take a look and tell me what you think.”

“Wait,” he said. “Pilot?”

“It’s a mini-series.”

“A mini-series?” He spun in his chair to look out the window over the city. “I don’t do TV.”

“We’re talking cinematic-quality TV here, not some sitcom. This could be a big step into serious roles. Trust me, Levi, this is the break you’ve been looking for.”

“Fine. I’ll give it a shot.”

The script was tight, and the role of Captain Levi Ackerman looked like a lot of fun: a grumpy

man with a heart of gold. Acting him would barely be a stretch.

And so here he is at the studio at six in the goddamned morning, wondering how he's going to concoct any kind of believable chemistry when he isn't even awake yet.

His agent is already barking out commands at the interns; she rushes up to greet him. "Levi," she says. "Morning!"

"Caro. Do you have the script?"

"It's on its way to the table. They want to do a cold read." She snaps her fingers at an intern and he runs off, looking frightened. Levi doesn't blame him. Carolyn is a force to be reckoned with.

"I'm guessing it's the jail scene, right?" It's the first major interaction he has with Commander Erwin Smith in the series.

"That's right. These two characters have a deep rapport that will become obvious as the series progresses, so feel free to lean into it. Hey, Wardrobe, where's the cape?"

"A cape?" he asks. "For a chemistry read?"

"It'll help you get into character. They have a little cardboard set for you guys, it's quite cute." Someone offers her a green cloak; she fastens it around his shoulders. "There. You already look the part. You really do resemble him."

"Who am I reading with?" He has spent a lot of time wondering who will be playing Erwin Smith. Of all the characters he has scenes with, he

finds Levi's relationship with Erwin to be the most intriguing.

"A stage actor: Eric Beauregard."

"Who?"

"That was my question. They say he's good." She fusses with his hair. "He'll probably be a bit ... theatrical." She looks around, impatient. "Where the hell is that kid with your tea?"

"It's fine. I'm awake enough without it." He's not, but he has never been a fan of the way Carolyn bullies the assistants.

A man walks toward them, holding a clipboard in one hand and a coffee in the other. An earpiece coils around his ear. "Mr. Fielding? We're ready for you."

Levi nods and falls into step.

When they reach the room, Levi sees what Carolyn meant about the cute little cardboard set: brick walls, a leather couch, and a cardboard fireplace. Fake torches on the wall cast warm light into the room.

"I thought this was going to be the jail scene," he says.

"It will be, but Ms. Leon wants you to be comfortable." The man takes a sip of his coffee. "Still waiting for the scripts. Mix-up at the printer. We thought we'd let you and Mr. Beauregard talk for a bit first so we can get a feeling for your banter."

“Our banter,” Levi repeats. Banter has never been his strength.

A knock sounds at the door. A woman with a matching earpiece, clipboard, and coffee enters. “Ah, Mr. Fielding, good, you’re already here.” She opens the door. “Mr. Beauregard, meet Mr. Fielding. He’ll be playing Levi.”

A tall, blond man steps through the doorway, and Levi’s breath catches. He is the kind of handsome that draws the attention of everyone in a room. His face is a charismatic mix of severity and approachability. His theatrical background shows in the way he carries himself. This is a man who is made for leading roles, on stage and in life.

He gives Levi a little smile and holds out a hand. “You can call me Eric,” he says in a sophisticated international accent that suggests he grew up overseas. “Or even Erwin, I suppose.”

“I’m Levi,” he says. “Or ... Levi.” His mouth is too dry.

Eric-Erwin laughs and sits on the couch next to him. The furniture sighs beneath his weight. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Levi. I’ve always been a fan.”

“Oh?”

Is that a blush creeping across those sharp cheekbones? “I had the Kid Corps poster on my wall growing up. You were my favourite. I had a little magnifying glass that I’d use to pretend to solve mysteries like you, well past the film’s target

age.” He clears his throat. “I’m sorry, that’s an embarrassing thing to say to you, isn’t it? This is my first time on a TV set and I’m rather nervous.”

“It’s fine. You have a background in stage, yeah?”

Eric nods. “Between you and me, I wasn’t keen to do a TV series. Not sure how to act without keying off the energy of a room.”

“Then why come to the casting call?”

“Well, it might sound silly, but when the scout offered my agent a copy of the script, I gave it a read, and I immediately felt a kinship with Commander Erwin Smith.”

“Hm,” Levi says, approving. “I get it. That’s how I feel about my character.”

“Well, you do share the same name.”

Levi scoffs. “There were three other Levis on the set of Kid Corps. We’re a dime a dozen.”

Eric’s laugh is warm and musical.

An intern hurries in. “Here are your scripts,” she says, sliding them onto the coffee table in front of them. “And your tea, Mr. Fielding.”

Levi takes the tea in one hand and a script in the other. The tea is steeped exactly to his liking. He hopes Carolyn didn’t give some intern too much grief to get it that way.

“So,” Eric says, “how do you want to approach these two?”

“What do you mean?”

The blue eyes duck away. “Well, there’s clearly that undercurrent of a strong bond between them. I asked around a few historians in my research, and there was some debate about whether they were friends or lovers.”

“Oh,” Levi says, surprised. “That’s ... interesting.” He studies the man, thinking it wouldn’t be so bad to pretend to be in love with him.

“I’m not sure if you’d be comfortable with it, but it might add an element of tragedy if we give them the subtext of lovers. It could lend some real drama to the Commander’s eventual death.”

“Yeah, sounds good to me,” Levi says. “You comfortable with that?”

“Definitely.” Eric gives him a disarming smile, and Levi has the sensation of falling backwards into a pile of rose petals.

“Good,” he says weakly.

Stephanie Leon, a studio exec, and two producers come to sit in the room, and after the introductions, the formal script read begins. Eric immediately slips into a cool and commanding authority figure, but there’s an undercurrent of warmth there that makes Levi feel at ease. He, too, falls easily into his role. It’s been awhile since he could act like himself at a script read.

After about an hour, the Director claps her hands. “Perfect. You two are really nailing it. I’ll talk to your agents to sort out the details and make sure you’re on board, but I have to tell you, all I

can see right now is Levi Ackerman and Erwin Smith in the flesh.”

Eric immediately casts off Erwin’s stiff posture, relaxing into a grin. “Wonderful. I think we have something special here.” His blue eyes sparkle at Levi. “Don’t we?”

The chemistry was good. Too good. Levi clears his throat, but can’t think of what to say. He nods.

After exchanging some notes, their agents file into the room to start whatever boring paperwork they do behind the scenes. Eric and Levi head back to the cloakroom.

Levi hangs up the green cloak and pulls on his jacket. “Looks like we’ll be working together.”

“Seems that way.”

He tries to play it cool: “Can I buy you a drink? We could discuss our character’s rapport some more.”

Eric checks his watch. “It’s eight o’clock in the morning.”

“Oh. Mimosas?”

Eric smiles. “I have to do some paperwork and get settled in my rental, but I like the idea. How about we meet tonight? Know anywhere good around here?”

“What’s your number? I’ll text you a couple options.” Levi pulls out his phone.

Eric has selected an upscale resto-bar near the north end of town. Levi calls ahead to book his favourite booth—it's tucked into the corner and isn't too noisy. He showers, shaves, and puts on the grey suit that makes his butt look perky.

Eric is already at the table when he arrives. He's dressed in a suit, too, his hair neatly parted and styled.

“Good evening,” he says.

“Hi,” Levi replies, a bit thrown off by his formality. He slides into his seat. A menu is waiting for him.

“Nice spot,” Eric says, looking around at the elegant decor.

“Yeah, it's one of my favourites. The cocktails are amazing. Plus they always have a live DJ come in later in the evening and open the dance floor.”

“Ah,” Eric says, eyes sparkling.

“What?”

“I'm just remembering all the gossip magazines following you around during your wild nightclub days. Was this one of your spots?”

Levi flushes. “That was ten years ago.”

“True. You've settled down with—what's her name again? Terra Chang?”

“Oh. Right, Terra.” He's still surprised the press bought that.

“My agent said she was auditioning for the role of Petra Ral?”

“Yeah. She’ll get it, too. She’s good.”

The blue eyes bore through him. “I’m sure it will be nice to work with your partner.”

The server approaches them before Levi can reply. After they order food and cocktails, Levi notices Eric is still watching him.

“What?” he asks.

Eric shrugs. “You don’t seem too ... authentic about Terra. Is it one of those showbiz fake relationships?”

“Keep your voice down.” Levi looks around to make sure no one is within earshot. Maybe it’s naive, but he feels he can trust this man. “Yes. We’re both gay. It keeps the press off our backs.”

Eric looks surprised. “People still care if you’re gay or lesbian?”

“A lot of actors can get away with it, but I had the misfortune of being a teen heartthrob. My image as a hetero playboy helped my box office numbers.” He shrugs. “I could probably come out now that I’m moving away from typecast, but the press is cruel to Terra. So it’s one less thing for her to worry about.”

“I see,” Eric says. “So the playboy thing was just an act.”

“Well ... ” Levi thinks of his early twenties and cringes. “No, I definitely got too wild for a few years there. But not the way the press thinks.”

“Interesting.” Eric gives him a little smile. “If teenaged me had known you were gay, he probably would have shown up on your doorstep with roses.”

“You’re gay?” Levi says, then he scoffs. “Right. You’re a stage actor.”

Eric raises a brow. “Not everyone in theatre is gay, Levi.”

“But you are?”

“Well ... yes. Bisexual, technically.”

The server brings their cocktails and some complimentary oysters that have a strange looking green sauce on them. Levi lifts one to his nose and sniffs, and his suspicion dissipates. It smells herby and delicious.

“So you’re bisexual,” he says, and he’s suddenly wishing he was back in the era when he could guiltlessly bang a man he just met in the men’s room. “Seeing anyone?”

Eric gives a long sigh. “Not yet, no. I’m ... recently divorced.”

“Oh.” Levi lowers the oyster back to the plate. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. It’s been over for a few years, we just didn’t admit it until recently. The relationship had just run its course, you know?”

“Yeah, been there.” Levi eats the oyster. It is delicious. He reaches for another. “How long were you together?”

“Ten years.”

“Wow.” Levi pauses. “So you’re on the market.”

Eric laughs. “No, not really.” He takes a sip of his cocktail, then smiles. “Well, maybe if the right person came around.”

“You should just mess around a bit. Have some fun. You’ve been married for ten years so you haven’t misbehaved for a while, right?”

Eric runs his finger along the rim of his glass. “Not really ever, to be honest. I’m not a one-night stand kind of man.”

“Maybe you would be if you tried it.”

Eric looks up at him, eyelids heavy. “Hmm. Maybe I would. With the right man.”

The server arrives with their food, and for a little while, the conversation pauses.



Their meals are delicious, and they indulge in several drinks. The DJ starts, and they begin to dance. Eric is an amazing dancer—when Levi compliments him, he confesses that he has danced in several musicals.

“Like what?”

“I’d rather not.”

“Cats,” Levi says automatically. Eric laughs.

“I don’t want to say.”

“Okay, so you did Cats. I bet you looked so cute in your furry striped leotard.”

“I’ll have you know I had Bengal spots.”

They return to the table for another round. This time, Eric sits right next to Levi. He leans close, his mouth near Levi’s ear.

“So,” he says. “How many men have you seduced here?”

Levi’s heart jumps into his throat. “What?”

“You’re supposedly a playboy, aren’t you? And this is your favourite spot. Or one of them.”

Levi turns to meet his gaze. “Are you hinting at something?”

Those blue eyes, so piercing and ... familiar? “If you want me to be.”

Levi tries to remember how to play it cool; he’s so out of practice compared to his wild days. And considerably more sober. “We can continue this conversation, but first, I need to excuse myself to the men’s room. Did you know the stalls on the second floor have floor-to-ceiling doors?”

“Oh?”

“The second floor seating is closed on Tuesday nights. I’ll have the whole place to myself.” Levi pulls out his wallet and removes a small square package, then lays it on the seat between them. “My favourite stall is the one on the far end. If ever you feel the need to use the men’s room, I recommend that one.”

“I see.”

“No pressure.”

“Understood.” Eric’s hand closes over the condom.

Levi walks swiftly to the stairs and takes the end stall. It’s disgusting to do this in a bathroom, even though this one is sparkling clean. If he’s honest with himself, the gross idea of it is part of the turn-on, a throwback to the days when his horniness was so strong that even unsanitary conditions didn’t faze him.

A soft knock sounds at the door a few seconds later. He opens it.

Eric pushes into the stall and lunges for him. This kiss—why is it so familiar? His scent, his taste, the feel of his lips and teeth. Levi whimpers a little, and would be embarrassed, but the sound seems to drive Eric into a frenzy. His hands rake down Levi’s back, plunge into the back of his pants.

“Eric,” gasps Levi, tossing his head back.

The man kisses his ear, then whispers there, “You can call me Erwin, if you like.”

“Oh?” Why does that thought turn him on so much?

“We’re supposed to be developing our characters, after all.” He kisses Levi’s jaw “This is just research, right? I bet they sneaked away to fuck all over the military base.”

“Anything for my craft.” Levi closes his eyes as Eric—no, Erwin, he likes that—kisses down his neck. He hovers over a particularly sensitive spot,

and Levi squirms. How did he know that was there?

“Erwin,” he gasps, and the man lets out a shaking breath.

“Say it again.”

“Erwin.” Levi pushes him back against the wall and drops to his knees, eagerly undoing the front of his pants. He’s half-erect and beautiful and familiar, why is all of this so familiar? He plunges the cock deep into his throat, and he knows those moans he hears above him. *Shit.* He knows this, he knows this, those fingers in his hair with careful restraint, the way the hips are just barely rocking. He sees Commander Erwin Smith in his cloak and uniform, sees the resolve on his face, feels the calloused skin under the lines of the 3DMG straps, the wind-damaged hands and cheeks, the sun-bleached hair.

“Levi,” Eric gasps. “Stop, please stop, I’m going to come too fast.”

Pleased, Levi slides his mouth back to the tip and releases him. He drops his own pants and turns, forearms against the wall as he sticks his ass out. He hears the sound of the condom package opening, of it rolling down. Then a hard cock presses against him.

“Fuck me,” Levi gasps.

Eric works his way in, a little too gently. Levi knows this, too, this politeness and the way it

will make him lose patience and drive back onto him.

“Come on.” He shoves his hips back.

“Fuck,” Eric says, and he begins to thrust, hands tight in Levi’s hips.

“Harder,” Levi gasps. Tears spring to his eyes from the size of him. “Come on, deeper.”

“I’m not going to last.”

“Then come. Come on, harder!”

Eric drives into him and Levi grabs himself, jerking hard. It almost hurts, it feels so good.

They come hard together, and then Eric gathers him in his arms, cheek resting against his back.

“Shit,” Levi whispers. Usually this is where his partner would slip from the room, and he’d wash the mess from his hands and slink back after him, feeling dirty and ashamed, at least until the next time his sex drive got the better of him.

But when he turns around and looks into those blue eyes, he doesn’t ever want to slink away.

“Shit,” he says, for a different reason this time.

**- SEASON TWO -**

He feels a searing pain in his right arm.  
The air smells of sulphur and blood.

“Commander!” Soldiers on horseback gallop toward him.

He thrusts his sword forward. “Advance!”

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“Hey!” Levi is shaking him awake.  
Eric sits upright, then frantically scans the room. Where is he? That lamp, this bed, why are they so—

He takes a deep breath. “Sorry. Was I yelling in my sleep again?”

“Yeah. Another nightmare?” Levi’s brow is furrowed.

“The titan scene today is going to be intense. I think I got a bit too deep into Erwin Smith’s head when I was preparing.” Eric smiles

and kisses the tip of Levi's nose. "Sorry to frighten you. I'll be right back."

He walks to the adjoining bathroom and closes the door, then looks at himself in the mirror. He looks like shit. Well, at least Makeup won't have to work too hard to make him look as if he's on death's door.

He splashes cold water on his face. The dream was so real, and it wasn't the first one. He pats his face dry with the hotel towel.

When he returns to the bed, Levi spoons up behind him. Eric turns off the lamp.

The instant the room goes black, his alarm sounds.

He gives a weary sigh and silences it, then turns the lamp back on. "Dammit. It's already 5?"

"When do you have to be in Wardrobe?"

"5:45, and then I have two hours in Make-up."

"Well, then we have a few minutes, and I'm already awake." Levi snuggles closer against his back and snakes a hand down the front of his pajamas.

"Hey," Eric says.

"It won't take long. You need to relax from your nightmare, right?"

He doesn't want to argue with that logic. "True."

Levi kisses between his shoulder blades.

“Besides, I bet Levi used to wake up Erwin like this all the time. You’re getting into character ... Erwin.”

God, he loves it when Levi calls him that. Something about the velvet texture of his voice makes the name feel like his own.

His grip is just the right tension, squeezing a little extra on the upstroke, just the way he likes. He closes his eyes and relaxes back into him.

“Want me to eat your ass?” Levi asks. “Or maybe fuck you a bit?”

“After all the horse-riding takes yesterday? I think I’m permanently bruised. No, this is nice.”

“Nice?” Levi scoffs.

“Look, how am I supposed to think of a better word when—” His breath catches and his eyelids flutter. “Oh god, that feels good.”

“You’re so hard ... Erwin.”

“Jesus.” He clutches the edge of the pillow to his face, biting into it to stifle a moan. He can hear the sound of Levi’s hand working, slick with pre-cum, and he fights to hold on for a bit longer.

“Don’t stifle yourself,” Levi says, gripping the back of his hair with his free hand and tugging his head back. “I want to hear you.”

Eric gasps. “I’m going to—”

“Not yet.”

“Fuck. Levi—”

Levi releases him at the last moment, roll-

ing onto his back. “Straddle me. I want you to come on me.”

Eric is too stupid with hormones to disagree. He rolls over and slings a leg over Levi, sitting on his pelvis. He’s rock hard. “Oh god, oh fuck,” he mutters, grinding a little, head lolling back.

“I thought your ass was sore.”

“I don’t care.”

He opens his eyes to look down at Levi—and sees him wearing a cravat, shirt unbuttoned and hastily pushed to either side under the 3DMG straps, they’re in a room he doesn’t recognize—

“Come for me, Erwin,” Levi says, and he comes harder than he ever has in his life.

He blinks, and it’s the Levi he knows beneath him, naked except for his boxer shorts, liquid spattered beautifully across the muscles of his chest and abdomen.

“Fuck,” he whispers, and he falls to the bed beside Levi, aggressively kissing his ear and neck.

“Hey,” Levi says. “You have to get ready to leave.”

“Do you believe in reincarnation, Levi?” He didn’t mean to ask. Curse his post-orgasm chattiness. “Sorry.”

“That’s a weird question.” Levi pauses. “But ... sometimes.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Sometimes. What about you?” Levi

asks, and there seems to be a secret weight behind the words.

“Yes,” says Erwin Smith, “I do.”

**- SEASON THREE -**

They're grinding in costume in Levi's trailer when the invitation arrives. Levi greets the flustered-looking intern at the door, wondering just how much she overheard. He always loses himself in these moments and forgets the trailer walls are paper-thin.

"What is it?" Eric asks, trying to smooth his rumpled hair. It doesn't work. His hairstylist is going to be pissed.

Levi tosses the invitation on the table. "Season premiere. You'll probably have one waiting in your trailer, too."

"I see," Eric says, and the next words are far too casual: "You taking Terra?" For someone with such magnetic acting skills onscreen and onstage, he's sure terrible at acting in his day-to-day life.

"Nah, Terra and I broke up a few months ago. She finally came out." Levi drops to a seat next to him and kisses his neck, eager to get back to

some coffee break dry humping. But Eric is suddenly still.

“She’s out,” Eric says, surprised.

“Yeah.” Levi senses the sudden dangerous turn of this conversation.

Eric pulls back to look at him. “What about you?”

“Not yet.” He tries to say it in a tone that communicates he doesn’t want to discuss it, but Eric is tenacious.

“But if she came out, then you don’t need to protect her anymore, right? What if we were to attend the premiere together?”

“What?”

Eric shrugs, trying to pretend he’s casual, even though his knee is bouncing. “It would be nice if we could be seen in public together. As a real couple.”

Levi snorts. “You don’t know what you’re asking. The press—”

“—is already speculating. They talk about our chemistry, Levi, and they don’t just mean on the show. And now that Terra has come out, don’t you think they’ll figure out it was a sham relationship?”

“My professional image—”

“—is ultimately yours to control. Besides, the fans won’t care. Have you seen all the lewd fanart out there?”

Levi’s throat is constricting. He feels walls

closing in around him; he shoves them away with everything he has. “Leave.”

Eric’s face falls. “I ... shouldn’t be pressuring you to come out if you’re not ready. I’m sorry.”

“Now.” Levi opens the door and waits.

With a sigh, the man ducks through the doorway. “I’m sorry,” he murmurs on the way out. “I truly am.”

The Wings of Freedom on his cloak glint in the sunlight as he walks away. Levi feels a swell of aching nostalgia so strong that he sits on the steps of his trailer, staring at the sky, until a panicked assistant runs up to him.

“Mr. Fielding, we need you on set,” he yells.

Levi does not have any scenes with Eric that day, and when he doesn’t see him watching from off-set, he realizes his request has been fulfilled.

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He doesn’t see Eric for the rest of the week, and he tries to lose himself in his work, but how is he supposed to distract himself when his character’s motivation is so strongly tied to Erwin Smith?

He stares at the ceiling each night, trying to figure out why he’s so reluctant to be seen in public with Eric. Is he really protecting him from the press? Or is he running from his own past?

Eric knows the sanitized version of Levi Fielding's story: child actor who became famous, got involved with a party crowd, ended up wearing himself down until he was hospitalized with mono, straightened up after that and settled down with Terra Chang. He doesn't know about the massive breakdown, the substance abuse, the rehab stints. One gossip rag got ahold of the information somehow, and Carolyn sued them to hell and back. If the press finds out Terra was a cover-up, they'll start rooting around for others, and his whole past will surface.

Maybe. Or maybe he's just scared. Other child actors have a career in spite of much more difficult pasts. Maybe he's not giving his fans enough credit.

At night, he dreams of Erwin Smith riding a white horse, the Wings of Freedom flying in his wake.

— ♦ —

He shows up at the premiere just in time for the cast photos, and Eric, of course, looks amazing. His suit is so tailored that Levi doesn't know how he's going to sit down without ripping the seat of his pants. Maybe he's planning to lean casually against a wall all night.

"Erwin! Levi!" the photographers yell, grouping them together. Wordlessly, they stand

back-to-back with their arms over their chests, and the crowd goes wild. Eric does the pose where he rests his elbow casually on Levi's head, and Levi looks annoyed. The crowd eats it up.

Suddenly, there's a microphone in Levi's face. "Levi, Levi," says a man, voice so obnoxious that it somehow carries above the noise of the crowd. "Did you know Terra Chang is a lesbian?"

"Back off," Levi snaps.

"Do you have your sights on any other cast members—"

"He said to back off," Eric says politely, and he grips Levi by the shoulder and steers him past.

"I was handling it," Levi says.

"You certainly were." Eric glances down at him, amused. "You were about three seconds away from landing a kick to his face."

Levi stops, frowning. "Why would you say that? I've never kicked anyone in my life."

Eric has stopped, too, but for an entirely different reason; he's staring at the wall, his mouth open. Levi turns.

The wall here is decorated with replicas of the old military portraits of the historical figures. Levi has, of course, seen these all many times before, but he has never seen Erwin and Levi's portraits offset this way: at a slight diagonal, close enough that the frames are touching.

The background lines up. This is one portrait cut into two.

Impatience swells within Levi's memory—why is the artist taking so long?—and he feels Erwin's hand on his shoulder to steady him. They're in Erwin's office, sleep-deprived after Levi spent the entire night cleaning it; it was supposed to be a dual effort, but Erwin kept getting distracted when he tried to put books away. At one point, Levi started sweeping up the books into a pile and threatened to throw them all away if he read *just one more line* aloud. And then somehow, in their sleepless delirium, they ended up laughing until their stomachs hurt and tears ran down their cheeks.

“Holy shit,” Levi says, starting to panic. Where did that memory come from? Was it a forgotten paragraph from some of his character research?

“You were going to throw away my books,” Eric says, sounding very far away. “I kept reading interesting passages to you instead of shelving them.”

“Holy shit.” Levi is still panicking—and yet, beneath it all, he feels like a very old wound is beginning to heal.

He reaches out and grabs Eric's hand. Eric looks down, surprised, and then looks at him with Erwin's eyes.

“Kiss me,” Levi says.

“The press—”

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“I don’t care. We’ll figure it out. If you’re ready, then so am I. Kiss me.”

Eric dips him backwards, giving him a kiss so long that Levi gasps for air when it breaks.

The crowd roars with approval.

**- SERIES WRAP -**

Eric sits in a chair, waiting for Stephanie to approve his final takes: several flashback sequences that will air in the final season. Stephanie finishes her review and gives a thumbs up. “That is a series wrap for Eric Beauregard!” she announces.

The cast and crew begin to applaud, Levi at the front, clapping high above his head with tears in his eyes. The crowd swarms Eric to give him tearful hugs, congratulations, and well-wishes. After a few minutes, Eric realizes Levi has disappeared—where is he?

“Hold on, hold on,” Stephanie yells, checking her phone. “Scratch that. I’m getting word that we need one last take of the crate sequence.”

Eric sighs and drops his head. “Again?” They spent days getting the nuance right, and the scene is emotionally exhausting for both him and for Levi.

“A small rewrite. We can splice most of it together with other footage, so it won’t take long. Allie, can you freshen up Eric’s brows?”

His makeup artist is just wrapping up when Levi appears on set holding a tea. He is in uniform and looks ready to start filming. He must have gotten the call right before Stephanie did.

“Hey.” Levi comes up to him and smooths his hair. He looks nervous.

“Everything okay?” Eric asks, looping his arm around Levi’s waist.

“Of course not. It’s our last day working together.” He’s shifting a little from one foot to the other.

Stephanie approaches them. “Ready?”

“Where’s my copy of the script?” Eric asks.

“Levi has the line changes. We want you to react naturally to them, all right?”

Unusual, but not unheard of. Stephanie has given them plenty of leniency with the characters throughout the series. “Understood.”

He takes his mark on the crate, and Levi finishes his tea, then takes his mark in front of him.

“Quiet on the set,” Stephanie yells. The crowd seems even bigger now, and the hair on the back of Eric’s neck stands on end. Something is different.

The operator calls out the scene and take numbers, then clicks the clapperboard.

“Action,” Stephanie says.

Levi kneels down. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a box.

“What?” Tears well in Eric’s eyes. “Levi?”

“I know it’s the day of your series wrap, and I thought ... all these people have seen how I love you as Erwin Smith, and how I love you as Eric Beauregard.” Levi hesitates, then cringes a little. “Shit. I had a nice speech written.”

A tear spills onto Eric’s cheek. “You’ve always struggled with monologues.”

“Hey, knock it off. I’m trying to build to something here.” Levi blinks, and a tear falls onto his cheek, too. “I want to spend my life with you. And if there’s another life after this one, I want to spend that one with you, too, over and over, any life we live.” He opens the box. There’s a white gold band inside. Levi picks it up, and Eric sees the Wings of Freedom engraved on the inside.

“Will you marry me?”

“Yes,” Eric says.

The ring slides perfectly onto his finger, and then Levi lunges up to kiss him as the cast and crew cheer.

— ♦ —

That night, Eric dreams of Erwin and Levi again.

Erwin is sitting upright in a hospital bed,

hair dishevelled, a days-old beard on his face. Levi is beside the bed, holding Erwin's hand with both of his. Hange stands beside them, a soft smile on their face.

Levi speaks: "I pledge my life to you. My life is yours. It always has been."

Erwin's jaw trembles. "Your life is your own, Levi."

"Okay, yeah, it is, and I make my own choices. I always have. But I've never once regretted following you. I need you to know that. I ..." Levi's grip is tight. "I will follow you anywhere."

"And I'll do the same."

— ♦ —

Eric startles awake.

Levi is asleep beside him, his breath leaving in soft puffs. Eric snuggles up behind him and draws him in close.

*My life is yours as much as yours is mine. We walk side-by-side, always.*

He closes his eyes and breathes in the scent of Levi's hair as he slowly falls back to sleep.

END.

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## CHEMISTRY READ

Actor Levi Fielding is eager to be taken seriously after years of being cast as the teen heartthrob. What better opportunity than a role as his namesake in a historical miniseries?

