

# **Escapism - Levi and Raiyo - World Collection 2024**

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World Collections 2024*

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# Escapism - Levi and Raiyo - World Collection 2024

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## About this collection

*Escapism - Levi and Raiyo* (as it is currently titled) is a story world set into Earth in the 2010s and 2020s (exact placement unknown except for the currently last story, which is set in 2020). It follows the story of Raiyo and Levi, who meet when Raiyo starts working at the same company as Levi, who gets roped into training him. This world started from a story that I stuffed full of *Death Note* references ([\*Hiding in the Office\*](#)) and which then started a life of its very own, diverging from the references it spawned from.

Although the stories are set in a chronological order, there are notable time skips: *Run* happens a good deal of time before the start of the main storyline in [\*Awkward Stranger\*](#) (I guess it could count as a prologue), while the stories starting from [\*Anime Marathon\*](#) happen a good while after [\*Another Phone Number\*](#), which is waiting for its direct continuation to be written.

# Run

Collected in [\*Hunting Inklings\*](#)

Raiyo ran.

He did not want to stop running.

He never wanted to stop.

If only he had a place where he could stop; his body was no perpetual motion machine. It was only a matter of time before he collapsed on the hard, wet asphalt.

The rainfall was getting heavier, so if someone came to him after he collapsed, they would not have good intentions.

He could not afford losing his wallet or anything in his backpack.

His life, on the other hand? Perhaps, if it went out while he was unconscious.

Eventually, Raiyo found that his legs had propelled him all the way to the mall at the city center. A security guard eyed him as he took shaky steps further in, dripping streams of water onto the floor with gratitude that he had managed to get a waterproof backpack for his things. Otherwise, his laptop and phone would have been goners after the rain.

Raiyo only barely had the presence of mind to take his backpack off before half-sitting, half-crashing onto the closest bench. His eyes fluttered shut and the world went blank for a while.

"Young man," a male voice pierced the blankness. "Wake up, young man."

Raiyo forced his eyes open. "What?"

"Are you all right?" The voice belonged to the security guard who had been eyeing him before.

*He probably suspects that I'm drunk.* "Yes... I... I'm just exhausted. I tried to get here before the rain did." Raiyo let a weak laugh out of his mouth and straightened his back. Hopefully, that would reassure the security guard that he was not going to cause trouble. "No need to worry. I'll recover in a while."

"Are you entirely sure? That bruise on your forehead looks bad. Do you need ice for it?"

Raiyo jumped and put his hand on the bruise, then winced when the touch hurt. "Oh, right... No, it's fine. It looks worse than it is."

The security guard did not seem to believe him. "Where did you get it?"

"I hit my head on a corner of a closet at home. I bent down to get some items from a bag and straightened myself too fast and at the wrong angle."

Raiyo chuckled to cover his lie. "It's not my best day with that blunder, forgetting to buy a couple of things and the rain, haha."

If the security guard doubted him, he did not voice it. "Very well. Take better care of yourself. I hope you didn't catch a cold from that rain."

"I hope so too. Thank you." Raiyo finished the act with a grateful smile.

The security guard nodded and left him alone. Raiyo took a few more moments to regather his strength before he stood up, slung his backpack over his shoulder and headed towards the dollar store to get something as the couple of things he "forgot to buy". Waterdrops left a trail behind him.

The rain was bound to last longer than his extempore shopping trip, so he could rest and plan his next move in peace.

The only thing he knew about his next move was that he could not go back home that day.

If only he could afford a tent to spend nights like this in...

# Awkward Stranger

Collected in [\*Hunting Inklings\*](#)

Challenge: Choose one of the following elements to omit from your story: *no filter words, no thought verbs, no adverbs, no bland verbs*. You also must include one of the following elements: *a bargain, a liminal space, a sacrifice, a stranger*.

This this challenge, I believe I fundamentally misunderstood what step one (omitting an element) wanted; I intentionally avoided only filter words. Oh well, despite of that, this is my favorite challenge; it was an excellent learning experience and improved my writing skills a lot.

Raiyo did his best to ignore the shaking of his hands and the uncomfortable feeling of sweat soaking his clothes. If he squeezed his hands together to keep them from shaking and ignored the rest of the issues, perhaps he could make it through his first meeting with the whole department without embarrassing himself.

As his turn to stand up and tell what he had been up to closed in on him, Raiyo thanked his past self for his wise decision of wearing a black shirt.

On the opposite side of the table, one of the coworkers caught his attention when they stood up. The man — their boss, Brian, had addressed them as Levi — sported a plastered, awkward smile on his ghastly pale face and gray eyes that darted all across the room even before he spoke up.

"So, uh..." Levi eyed the other people present. "It's the same old for me. I have nothing new to report. Everything's on schedule on my end."

"You have been here with us for two years now, correct? Have you considered moving up in the hierarchy?" Brian's question made Levi squirm ever so slightly.

Levi's eyes were fixed on the conference table in front of Brian instead of the man himself when he answered. "I'm comfortable where I am now. The

pay and workload I have right now are perfectly suitable for my lifestyle."

Brian's eyebrows shot up. "Don't you have any ambition?"

"Uh... No?" Levi's demeanor was picking up higher levels of awkwardness every minute he had to stand and answer to Brian's questions in front of everyone. "I don't know what to do with my life."

Raiyo's heart jumped at those words; they resonated with him. He had no idea what he wanted to do with his life, either.

Who was this awkward man who seemed to be just as nervous, uncomfortable and aimless as him — and let it show?

In the silence that ensued as Brian tried to come up with something to say, Raiyo made his decision. He wanted to get to know this man and learn how he dealt with life.

Brian's eyes lit up. Levi's own widened a little, as if in anticipation of an unpleasant idea to be launched at him.

"I actually have an idea on what new you could do. We have a new recruit, Raiyo," Brian gestured at Raiyo, who paled when all the eyes turned to him, "who comes from the same studying background as you. He's currently studying at the local university. You could help with training him and perhaps even his studies. Of course, that would mean that you get a raise." Levi stood in place, frozen. Raiyo could have sworn that the poor man's face got even paler than it already was. Everyone's attention was fixed on the awkward man again, and the silence increased the pressure each second.

Levi turned to make eye contact with Raiyo. Raiyo gave him a small, awkward smile, a feeble attempt at saying "I'm awkward as well".

Levi turned back to Brian. "Very well. I'll do it. Can you get the paperwork for adding that to my contract done today?"

"Absolutely!" Brian grinned. "Thank you, Levi. Myra, do you mind if we skip to Raiyo now that I brought him up?"

Raiyo froze. While Levi did his best to sit down without making any noises, the woman next to him replied, "Of course not. Go ahead, Raiyo."



Raiyo took a deep breath through his nose and stood up, then plastered a less awkward but just as fake smile on his face. "Hi everyone. I'm Raiyo. Umm... I started here three days ago, so I've spent my time training until now." As he got nothing more than nods, he sat down, relieved.

The rest of the meeting went in a blur as Levi and Raiyo eyed one another, both confused and intrigued by the other's actions. They could not wait to get out of the meeting to learn more about each other.

*Who are you, awkward stranger?*

# A Hidden Bruise

Collected in [\*Birbs\*](#)

Once Raiyo was absorbed in the day's tutorial and mostly still, Levi was free to observe the younger man. Now, he was able to confirm that the splotch he had spotted on his newest coworker's cheek was indeed a bruise. One half of him wanted to ask where it had come from, the other half to just stay quiet and mind his own business. Interfering with others' business would only cause more trouble than it was worth.

It was easier to stay silent. As long as Raiyo did not bring the cause of the bruise up to him, it was none of his business.

A part of him hoped that Raiyo would not make any kind of trouble that was not related to work his business at any point.

"Uh, Levi?"

Levi startled. "Yes?"

"Do you mind if I take a quick bathroom break? It won't take long, I swear."

Raiyo twisted his hands, unsure where to put them.

"Oh, of course not. Go ahead." Levi made an effort to smile, but it felt too fake to be convincing.

Raiyo made an awkward smile in response. "Thanks."

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Raiyo leaned against the sink and took a few breaths, trembling. Being under Levi's silent watch was even more unnerving than the earlier days. Maybe it was just that he was hiding his bruise and Levi was close enough to spot it if he was attentive enough. Maybe it was just the fight and lack of sleep last night. Maybe it was...

"Fuck it," he hissed through his teeth, took yet another deep breath and left the toilet. He had to keep this job, and that meant not taking long extra toilet breaks.

"Everything all right?" Levi asked out of courtesy when Raiyo returned to the desk.

"Eh, yeah. Just... just too much coffee in the morning." Raiyo forced a chuckle out of his mouth, but he could tell that it was the most unconvincing lie he had told ever since he dropped out of school last time.

This time, Levi's smile was more sympathetic than awkward. "Don't worry. It was the same for me when I started out, except that I drank tea." He paused, trying to figure out how he could lighten the tense mood. "Not that I ever learned not to drink too much tea. Now no one just knows how many bathroom breaks I take during the workday since I'm working from home." Raiyo made an effort to look amused. "Figures."

Levi's smile turned awkward again at the obvious failure of his efforts. He gestured at Raiyo's tutorial. "Shall we continue?"

"Y-yeah." Raiyo sat down and resumed his training.

In the meantime, Levi watched the trainee work through the tasks and prayed for the work day to be over soon. He wanted to get back home.

Actually, once the official break would begin, he had to text Warren to get him some cake for the evening. He desperately needed something sweet to make up for today's awkwardness.

# Birbs

Collected in [Birbs](#)

***Bzz!***

Levi turned his eyes to his phone. A new message in the workplace's group chat. "What now?" There was only one way to find out what was going on: open the chat.

*Melinda: OMG look at this cute birb!*

Levi opened the attached image. It was a small white bird on a branch. It was cute, Levi had to admit that, but he rolled his eyes at the word *birb* nevertheless. Still, it was for the best to write something. Someone else was, fortunately, already on it, so he could take his time to formulate his reply.

*Diego: <3*

*Diego: What birb is that? :D*

*Melinda: It's a long-tailed tit!*

*Tabitha: Awws that's way too cute! <3*

*Tabitha: Where'd you see that?!*

*Melinda: Online haha*

*Melinda: Ran into some talk about a Korean crow tit with a pic of a birb like this attached to it, but it turns out a tit like that doesn't exist*

*Melinda: Some more Google fu told what this cute lil thing is instead*

*Levi: Love it <3*

*Sally: asdfgh*

*Sally: thats so cuuuuteee!!!*

Levi rolled his eyes, his focus now completely broken. The flood of messages continued.

*Raiyo: <3*

*Sally: id love to have a birb like that as a pet*

*Tabitha: I'd be happy with a plush (:*

*Raiyo: Btw, "birb"? Never seen that word*

*Sally: what? you live under a rock raiyo??*

*Tabitha: Sally!*

*Raiyo: Maybe? ^.^'*

*Tabitha: Sorry about that, please ignore her Raiyo*

*Raiyo: Ok ^^'*

*Melinda: Birb is a word for a really cute and fluffy birb*

*Melinda: I mean bird!*

*Melinda: Birb is a cute bird!*

*Raiyo: Okay ^o^*

*Why must they use that word?* Levi rolled his eyes again and opted to return to work. If someone wanted to hear more from him, they would tag him.

# Wasted Time

Collected in [\*Birbs\*](#)

Challenge: The story must include at least three different characters with distinctive voices and personalities, they must work together towards a common goal but they must all have different reasons or personal goals they are trying to achieve with it and only either one or none of the characters may be happy with the story's conclusion.

It took a single step inside the building for Levi to know that this day would be even more miserable than he had expected. He turned to look back only to see Warren's car's taillights. Water was already seeping into his sock so, with a sigh, Levi put his other foot into the water as well and contemplated waterproof sneakers as he made his way past frantic coworkers.

"Levi! Come here!" Tabitha called out the moment Levi trudged into the floor's lobby area. "A pretty bad mess, huh?"

"You could say so." Levi grimaced at his soaked sneakers.

"Ah. The higher-ups probably should've told everyone to put wellies on."

Without her smile fading even for a second, Tabitha gestured to a few pairs of aforementioned footwear and goldfinch-themed socks on a desk. "Good thing I came in prepared! Any chance any of these are your size?"

Levi blinked. Had he not wanted this workday to end as soon as possible, he would have asked where the manager had gotten all of them. He checked the sizes and stated, "Yes, there is my size."

"Good. Change into those — there's a dried chair over there," Tabitha pointed at a chair, "and leave your shoes and socks over there," she pointed at a rack with three pairs of dripping socks and shoes, "then go check your office. Here's a to-do list." She pointed at a pile of papers next to the wellies. "Got it."

"Good luck!" Tabitha walked away to resume whatever she was doing.

Levi rolled his eyes. *Overdoer.*

While going to his office, Levi came across Raiyo, who was taking a close look at each of the soaked papers he was going through. The two men greeted one another as he passed by.

Levi was done with his void office in fifteen minutes. When he went to take his soaked papers to the trash, Raiyo was still going through papers as slowly as possible. Had Levi not wanted this day to end as soon as possible, he would have asked the trainee about his slowness.

When their eyes met, he decided to ask anyway. "Shouldn't Tabitha handle important papers?"

"Oh, no, these aren't... I mean-" Raiyo stammered. "I'm just... uh... I mean, I'm making sure I'm not throwing away any notes. Like, this is all just from my office."

Levi nodded. "Fair enough."

"I'm done."

"Already? That was fast!" Tabitha craned her neck to look at Levi. "Well, I suppose your office is the emptiest one here."

"That's correct."

"Have you seen Raiyo? He's taking pretty long with his office."

Levi could easily report that Raiyo was stalling. Regardless, he passed along what he had heard. "He is trying to save his notes."

"Ah, makes sense. Must really suck, having a disaster like this during training." Tabitha straightened herself. "Well, Samson and I have things covered here in the common areas, so there's not really anything to do for you. Sorry you had to come all the way here for this."

"It's fine." It was not — he could have used the time far better than this — but Levi was not about to start drama by being a prick.

Tabitha's attention turned to someone behind Levi. "You're done with your office, Raiyo?"

"Yeah," the younger man replied. "What can I do next?"

"There's not really anything to do anymore, so you can go home too."

Tabitha chuckled. "Think of this as an extempore half-day off."

"Oh." Raiyo shuffled his feet, making the water slosh. "Umm... If there is something to delegate, I could do it. I-I want to help out."

*Overdoers.* Levi only barely managed not to roll his eyes.

"There's no need; Samson and I can easily handle the common areas. Plus, I'm sure mister Oakley will notice my hard work." Tabitha winked. "Just leave the wellies here — you both can keep the socks — go home and enjoy your time off."

"O-okay..."

"Everything alright?" Tabitha asked.

"Yeah, I just... didn't expect to leave work this soon today, that's all. Gotta stop at the supermarket to get some lunch, haha."

Raiyo's heavy awkwardness was grating Levi's nerves, so he decided it was time to leave. "I'll be off then. Thanks for the loan, Tabitha."

As Levi was waiting for Warren to come pick him up, curiosity got the better of him when he saw Raiyo wracking his brain for places to be. "You don't want to head home?"

"Oh! Uh, well..." Raiyo pondered how to get out of the situation. "No, not really. Useless air conditioning. You could probably fry food there without a stove. You-you know what I mean?"

It sounded disingenuous, but Levi was not one to keep asking. "I do."

"Good, yeah..." Raiyo looked around himself. "Well, I should get to the supermarket first anyway."

"That sounds like a good idea."

"Yeah... Well, I'll be off. See you... when there's a workday again."

"See you then."

"How was your day?" Warren asked with a knowing smile on his face.

"A waste of time." Levi rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Really brought the overdoing side of people out."

Warren chuckled. "At least it was a short day."

"It'll take the rest of the day to get my shoes dry, so not really."

"Just leave it to me." Warren smiled.

"Thank you." That was one of the only things Levi actually meant on that ruined day.



Raiyo picked at his pathetic convenience food lunch. He could hang around in the park only for so long, especially on such a hot day and with so little to drink. If only he could have stayed at work...

Tabitha smiled her best smile at mister Oakley as she reported to him. The disinterest on her manager's face told her everything she needed to know about how much he cared about her — or anyone else's — effort. It was clear that neither she nor Samson were going to be promoted anytime soon. On her way back home, she cried for the uselessness of it all.

# Seen

Collected in [\*Birbs\*](#)

Raiyo slouched in the supermarket, praying that he would not come across anyone who knew him. He was no longer bleeding, but dried blood was caked on his chin and he was certain that he was already sporting either a black eye or a bruise elsewhere on his face. If he had had any idea where he could stay the night without going bankrupt that month — already a constant risk every time he had to unexpectedly diverge from the cheapest pasta he could get — he might have felt better about his current predicament. If only he could find a living arrangement that cost less than the so-called "rent" he was paying his mother...

Raiyo's legs brought him to a halt faster than he fully realized that, like always, his prayers had not been answered.

Just a few meters in front of him was the man who had done the bulk of his training — and probably noticed his bruises — at work, Levi, with an older man whom Raiyo had seen driving Levi to and from work. If his memory served him right, Levi had called the man Warren.

To make matters all the worse, the man noticed him and waved. That attracted Levi's attention. The black-haired pale man's rising eyebrows sealed his fate.

Raiyo turned on his heels. He had to leave now.

Once he got out, he ran. His legs were already screaming but he ran. He had to cover as much distance as he could.

Suddenly, a change in the paving. Into the air and back onto the ground. Luckily, it was the park's smooth sand road.

Raiyo picked himself up. He had to cover more distance. He had to... he had to...

He probably had to rest at the bench first. And contemplate resigning. No, no, that would doom him. And tell the others that something was amiss. Levi would talk, surely he would talk after this. Levi would tell about the bruises for sure. And if Levi talked, someone would take action.

And if someone took action... his mother would kill him.

Raiyo closed his eyes. It was probably for the best to sleep on this bench through the cold night. Maybe he would never wake up.

A raven laughed at him somewhere among the trees.

## A Choice for the Short Run

Collected in [\*Birbs\*](#)

Made for week 4's sidequest (three stories with different pacings) — slow pacing.

"We should try to look for him," Warren remarked. "Something's wrong." "It's not our business." Levi kept his eyes fixed on the cereal selection to avoid Warren's eyes. "If he wanted our help, he would've approached us instead of walking away."

"Not everyone has the courage to ask for help, Levi." Warren shook his head. "I know that outside of work he's not your responsibility, but my gut is telling me there's a lot more going on than he's letting on. He might need help."

Levi thought back to the times he had spotted (usually) poorly-covered bruises and cuts on Raiyo's head, arms and hands. Something fishy was going on indeed, but neither of them had brought it up as a silent agreement. Whatever was going on, it was most likely too unsavory for him to deal with — chances were that he would rather anger a golden eagle than whoever had injured his coworker.

"Levi," Warren spoke up when his employer stayed silent, "please. I'm concerned about him."

Levi made the mistake of looking sideways and saw his butler's pleading eyes. He did not know how Warren could do it, but those eyes had a way to persuade him that he had not been taught to resist. It was probably just that Warren was too humane, too sincere in everything he did and said. He was the antithesis to everything he had grown up around — fake smiles, condescending swank, manners that were just a millimeter away from being contemptuous — and learned to navigate. Knowing that Warren was a father

who had lost his own son years ago only made matters worse for Levi's conscience.

He made his decision and sighed. "Fine, let's look for him. But where do we even start?"

"I've seen him at the nearby park every so often. I think we should look for him there first."

"Very well." Levi did not want to get mixed up in whatever business left Raiyo regularly injured, but appeasing Warren's fatherly instincts was most likely going to give him less headache at least in the short run.

When they had gotten back to their car with whatever groceries they had managed to pick before running into Raiyo, Levi could only hope that this would not backfire in the long run.

# Help Offered

Collected in [\*Birbs\*](#)

Levi looked at the dark skies. The forecast on the car radio said that it would rain tonight.

"If he spends the night outside, he'll freeze to death," Warren muttered.

*Like a swan song*, Levi mused but knew better than to say aloud. He did not know what exactly had happened to Warren's son, but it took even less social skills than he had to tell that Raiyo's situation was bringing up some memories.

When they arrived at the park, it turned out that Warren had been right. There Raiyo was, curled up on a bench.

"Now what?" Levi asked. "He'll probably run away from us again."

"If we can get close enough before he sees us, we might be able to reach him and convince him that we won't put him into danger."

Levi was not a fan of the idea of sneaking up on his coworker — someone he had been training, no less — but he had to admit that he had no better ideas. "Let's go then."

Raiyo startled when a familiar voice called his name. His eyes flew open only to reveal that Levi and Warren had found him. A quick look at the escape routes revealed that he could not get away; the duo was most likely prepared for him bolting.

"We don't mean you any harm, young man," Warren — Raiyo was quite certain that was the man's name — told, his voice soft. "We are merely concerned about your wellbeing."

Sitting up, Raiyo looked at Levi, who was standing awkwardly a bit behind Warren but had a hint of concern on his serious face. When their eyes met, Levi nodded and said, "Please let us help."

Raiyo shook his head. "Leave me be." His voice was weak from exhaustion. "I don't need help."

"You don't plan on spending the night here, do you?" Warren asked. He looked at the clouds. "It's going to rain tonight. You'll freeze out here." Raiyo shrugged. "I'll be fine."

Levi sat down on the other end of the bench to speak without having to make eye contact. "Raiyo, please listen to us. We do not know what is going on in your life, but it is clear that something is wrong."

"It's none of your-"

"Hear me out first, please." When Raiyo did not protest, Levi continued, "If you do not want our help with whatever is going on, that is your prerogative. However, we would prefer not to let you die of hypothermia."

"And how would you help with that?" Raiyo asked, trying find even an iota of faith that the apathetic man was actually going to help him.

"I have an empty guest room. You staying the night there would not be a problem."

Raiyo looked at Warren.

Warren nodded.

"And you... you would not tell about... this?" Raiyo asked.

"If you insist on keeping whatever is going on a secret," Levi answered.

Raiyo considered his options. He could either die tonight in the cold or accept the shelter for tonight and hope that it would not come back to bite him later.

Raiyo looked at Warren again. The grave concern on the man's face convinced him that if nothing else worked, he would take matters into his own hands and alert authorities.

In the end, it was the easiest to accept the help and hope for the best.

"Fine. I'll come with you."

# Minimalism

Collected in [\*Untitled Hearts\*](#)

Levi's home was just as minimalistic and bland as the man himself appeared to be. Raiyo knew better than to say it aloud, though; he had to be on his very best behavior if he was to get through the night without problems. While Levi himself probably did not care enough to contact authorities about his situation in any case, Warren was likely to take action if he was not careful about what he said and did tonight.

Still, it probably was better than dying of hypothermia in the cold rain at the park. At least the guest room he had been shown in was more comfortable than the park bench. He would have to figure out what to eat, however, since he had had to abandon whatever groceries he had picked up to run away from the two (as useful as that had turned out to be).

To his surprise, after a knock Warren appeared at the doorway. "Just a quick inquiry: do you have any allergies or other dietary restrictions?"

Raiyo shook his head. "Uh, no."

Warren nodded. "Thank you. I will let you know when dinner is ready."

"Dinner?"

"Yes, dinner. You're our guest for the night, after all, and it's far from proper to leave a guest hungry."

"A-alright."

With another nod and a smile, Warren left.

Raiyo forced himself not to groan aloud. He had no idea what he was going to owe for all of this by the morning, but he had a bad feeling that he was going to be owing a lot.



# Dinnertime

Collected in [\*Untitled Hearts\*](#)

The dinner was, as Raiyo had expected, simple; it was not like his hosts would put much effort into the extra portion that he required — if the dinners even were more complex than tonight's rice and vegetables in the first place, which Raiyo was not sure about. What surprised him was the amount of food that Warren had made; were the two planning on having leftovers for multiple days?

At least Raiyo hoped that was the case. He did not want to be indebted for a large amount of food, even if it was simple, cost-effective food.

"Feel free to take seconds if you want to," Warren said all of a sudden when Raiyo had finished his portion. "It's not a problem at all."

As much as it felt like a trap, Raiyo figured it was for the best to take Warren up on the offer both to avoid looking rude and to stave off his hunger for longer. More food also gave him more to do in the silence.

It was hard to tell whether or not Levi's distance was worrying. The man had never expressed much interest in anything, yes, but Raiyo could not help thinking that Levi being more involved in him staying the night might have put him more at ease. Then again, it had seemed like taking him in had been more of Warren's idea than Levi's, so maybe it was not so strange that Warren was the one who was more involved.

Eventually, Levi thanked Warren for the food and excused himself, leaving Raiyo with only the older man. The silence seemed to grow more awkward by the minute as they kept eating, yet in a way Raiyo was grateful that Warren did not even attempt to discuss anything. It saved him from having to avoid any potential prying into his situation, after all. He had to keep it a secret, after all, or else he would wind up even worse than he already had.

By some miracle, Raiyo made it back to the guest room without a single question about him even though he could have sworn that Warren's eyes were full of questions that wanted to be answered. Still, the man had chosen tact over curiosity and left his guest be.

When he lay down on the bed, Raiyo could only hope that that would continue beyond the night.

# The Morning After

Collected in [\*Untitled Hearts\*](#)

Upon opening his eyes, Raiyo was filled with dread and confusion. What was this white room? He was not in a hospital, was he?!

No. There was no beeping whatsoever nor a distinct smell of disinfectant. The clothes on him were his day clothes as well. Wherever he was, he was... probably safe?

After sitting up and taking a look at the bland room he remembered what had happened on the previous day. The grocery store. Levi and Warren. The underlying threat of them sending some authorities after him. The dinner.

The mere idea of leaving the room was terrifying, but Raiyo knew that he had lectures to attend, and another workday would come up soon enough. He could not stay there forever.

He had to face the men who had given him shelter for the night and pray that they did not ask for details he could not give.

## Questions I can't answer

Collected in [\*Untitled Hearts\*](#)

Just as Raiyo had expected, he was met with Levi and Warren in the kitchen when he found the courage to exit the guest room.

"Good morning," Levi greeted with his usual deadpan before returning to scrolling his phone.

Warren's greeting was far warmer. "Good morning, Raiyo. Did you sleep well?"

Even though his mouth felt dry, Raiyo managed to force the words out normally, "Good morning. I did, thank you."

Despite having planned on leaving as soon as possible, Raiyo found himself sitting at the table with a cup of coffee in front of him. *So, the questions are about to start.*

"If you don't want us to do anything about whatever is going on in your life, we won't," Warren assured. "However, we are worried about you. Do you have anywhere to go?"

"I do. I've... I've got a roof over my head." *Most of the time.* "Yesterday... just wasn't a day I could be there."

Warren nodded. "Will you be safe there?"

"I will. You don't need to worry about me. I'll be fine."

"Are you certain?"

"I am. I... I appreciate your worry, but there's no need for it. I'll be fine."

"Very well. Nevertheless, if there's a situation where you're unsafe or can't stay at your place, please know that you can let me or Levi know. We'll let you stay the night if you need a place to stay." Warren slid a paper with his name and phone number to Raiyo. "Here's my number. You may call me at any time of the day for absolutely any reason, understand?"

"I understand. Thank you." Raiyo took the paper and committed to never calling the number. He stole a glance at Levi and saw that the other man was still scrolling the phone, although this time the scrolling looked more

absent-minded than before. "I, um, I should probably be going. I don't want to impose any more than I need to, and I have lectures today."

Warren nodded again and went to fetch the lunch he had packed. "You probably won't have time to pick up lunch on your way to campus. It's yesterday's leftovers."

Raiyo had half a mind to decline but since the lunch had already been packed for him, it was for the best to accept it to avoid offending Warren.

"Thank you. You didn't have to."

Warren smiled. "I know. I did it anyway just because I could."

Raiyo put the lunch into his bag and stood up. "I am very grateful that you let me stay the night. Thank you. I should be going now."

"It wasn't a problem," Levi spoke up. He now looked at Raiyo and nodded to him. "See you at work."

Raiyo nodded back. "See you at work."

Warren led the way outside and seemed to bite back worried questions and words simply to give Raiyo the directions to the campus. "Take care and remember what I said."

"Thank you. I will. Take care as well." Before Warren could say anything more, Raiyo walked away and prayed that nothing more would come out of this.

When Warren had returned inside, he looked at Levi. "He is being abused, isn't he?"

"Considering what we know now, it's likely. We can't act without better evidence — and probably Raiyo's cooperation — though."

"Then we must earn his trust."

"...I'll see what I can do. I can't promise anything except that I'll try."

"That's all I'm asking for."

## A Lack of Questions

Collected in [\*Untitled Hearts\*](#)

Raiyo did not know what to make of Levi's lack of questioning when they met at work the next time. Did the man not care? Was this a trick to make him lower his guard? Had he or Warren reported his living situation to authorities?

Well, the last one was probably not the case. He would have already known deep in his bones if a report had been made and acted upon.

It was probably for the best to wait and see and hope that he can avoid trouble. Raiyo knew he could not make it otherwise.

## Another Phone Number

Collected in [\*Untitled Hearts\*](#)

In the lull of the lunch break, Levi slipped a folded piece of paper to Raiyo. "What's this?" Raiyo asked, terror settling into him. "My phone number. In case you need to get a hold of me," Levi murmured, "for any reason, let it be work, studies or personal." "I... I see." Raiyo took the piece of paper and committed to never calling the number.

# Anime Marathon

Collected in [\*Hunting Inklings\*](#)

Raiyo laughed as Levi crouched on his chair, balancing his cake platter on his knees. Levi gave him a mock-glare in response. However, his eyes glimmered with amusement.

"You ready for the next episode?" Raiyo asked as he opened a new bag of potato chips.

"Yup. I want to see how Light tries to get himself out of that mess," Levi answered, his glare already gone.

"Me too. Although, before we start, I'll take a potato chip," Raiyo made direct eye contact as he lifted a chip from the bag, "and eat it!" He crunched the chip as loudly as he could, sending some bits falling into his lap.

Levi snorted and pressed "play" on the remote. "At least Warren isn't much like Watari. That hopefully proves that we're not living in the middle of some iteration of *Death Note*."

Raiyo chuckled at the thought. "It would be funny if we were."

"I'd hate to be L if I had to be crouching nonstop for long periods of time," Levi remarked as he shifted to sit cross-legged instead of crouching.

"I'm sure you'd get used to it. You already have the sweet tooth to match the role, after all." Raiyo smirked.

"Well," Levi mused as he prepared his retaliation, "I also wouldn't want to get killed by you, my only friend, *Light-kun*."

The two men chuckled as they stopped their conversation as the opening ended. The noted similarities — which kept on accumulating as their *Death Note* marathon continued — between the two of them and Light and L had become a staple for their private jokes.

Neither of them was planning to try tennis, though. They were both more comfortable without having balls flying at their direction at high speed;



there was a bunch of other things about the two characters for them to imitate, after all.

# Bonding

Collected in [\*Hunting Inklings\*](#)

"You know, you've listened to me talk about my parents a lot," Raiyo remarked as he leaned against the railing, sipping his coffee, "but I don't remember you saying much about yours."  
Levi downed what was left of his tea. "There's not much to say about them. I hardly know them."

Raiyo frowned. Before he could say anything, however, Levi continued, "They've always been too busy with their work lives to do much with me for longer than I can remember. They pretty much outsourced raising me to butlers, nannies, daycares, schools... anyone who would do it in exchange for money so that they could keep making more." The man flashed an awry smile at his friend. "I'm convinced they made me only so that they could have an heir."

Now Raiyo regretted bringing the topic up. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Yours are far worse," Levi noted. "I have nothing to complain about. They always made sure I had everything I wanted and needed, and everyone has told me that they're not pleasant people, so their decision to have others raise me spared me from that."

Raiyo stayed silent. He did not want to prod further; Levi did not let it show, but he was sure that the topic was sensitive. He could have sworn that the older man's body language was a bit tenser than normal now.

Levi spoke up again after he was certain that Raiyo would not take the initiative to continue the conversation, "I do wish they would've taught me how to be a functional person. They gave me everything when I was a child, but the moment I turned 18 they kind of tossed me out with some money and told me to get my own place and 'learn to be a member of the society' with the promise that if I found a place to work at, they'd send me more

money." Levi tried to mask his discomfort with a chuckle, but it was as unconvincing as it could get.

"Levi, you don't have to tell me everything if you don't want to," Raiyo said quickly.

"But I do want to tell you," Levi said. He turned around so that he could stare into the horizon instead of the crowd while leaning against the railing, certain that no one would hear them. "I mean... you've told me so much even though it's been clear from the beginning that you don't like talking about your parents. Yet you still chose to confide in me. It's admirable, your courage to talk about it."

"You still don't need to force yourself to-" Raiyo started.

"I know," Levi interrupted, his voice soft. "Your choice not to continue asking made it clear. Don't worry, Raiyo. I want to tell you. I really do."

Raiyo nodded. "Okay. Just don't push yourself too far, ok?"

Levi nodded back, grateful. He paused to gather his thoughts. "The first year on my own... it was tough. I knew little of how anything actually worked, having led such a sheltered life, so once I got an apartment, I first used my money to hire someone to teach me basic life skills like paying bills. Then I hired someone to teach me how to invest the money I had left. At some point, it got tedious, so I hired someone to manage the investments with the money I was making. Once that was out of the way, I took some courses to learn how to cook and do other normal things butlers had done for me my whole life."

Roars of laughter coming from the crowd cut him off. Someone staggered to another spot as the main group of their coworkers got yet another round of drinks.

"I can't imagine how hard it must've been," Raiyo remarked. "How did you manage?"

"Luckily, I was a pretty fast learner. It helped a lot," Levi noted. "I guess otherwise it was just making sure all the bills were paid, I ate something, got enough sleep and was everywhere on time, one day at a time. It's not a year I reminisce fondly or am proud of, but I got through it. Once I was comfortable with how I was dealing with my life, I started to apply for jobs and eventually landed myself in a chain of entry-level statistics jobs that led

me here all the while I studied at the open university. Once my parents started to send me money, I hired a butler to take care of the things I couldn't when I was studying and working."

"How did you end up staying here?" Raiyo asked.

"I'm not entirely sure. I guess it was just that they noticed that I'm good even though I don't have a full degree and promoted me to a role where I felt comfortable staying at. It's been two years since that promotion and I still can't see myself going anywhere else." Levi smiled. "The fact that they let me do my work at home and don't force me to come to the workplace often is a bonus that makes up for these outings where the others get drunk and I'm just awkwardly on the sidelines, alone and waiting for the time when it's socially acceptable to leave."

"Good thing that I came along, then," Raiyo noted, smiling. "Now you don't need to be alone at these outings."

Levi turned to smile at him. "Indeed. I'm glad that you're my friend, Raiyo."

"The feeling's mutual, Levi," Raiyo replied.

Another set of roars of laughter rose from the group.

"I don't think they'll notice if we leave now," Raiyo mused. "How about we hit that arcade two blocks away?"

Levi's face lit up at the suggestion. "Let's go."

The two men returned their mugs, said goodbye to their supervisor and left quietly. Raiyo had been right; no one noticed them leaving.

When someone did, the duo was already far away from the bar, competing against each other in various video games.

# Hiding in the Office

Collected in [\*Hunting Inklings\*](#)

David Bowie Day challenge: Collect one bit of lyrics from a David Bowie song, one bit of lyrics from any song you love by any artist and 2 or 3 news/editorial article segments from any online source. Next, put them all together and enter the whole text into [this cut-up text generator](#). Then, collect at least ten pieces of the text output from the cut-up generator and use them to construct your story.

For lyrics, I picked "Won't you tell me/Where have all the good times gone" from *Where Have All The Good Times Gone* by David Bowie and "Forgetting all the hurt inside/You've learned to hide so well" from *Leave out All the Rest* by Linkin Park. For the article segments, I picked paragraphs 4 to 7 (that is, the paragraphs that begin with "Many students struggle..." and "Sayers says learning..." and everything between them) from [Duolingo launches its 'most requested course ever': Finnish](#) and paragraphs 8 to 11 (the paragraphs that begin with "Kuusisto told Yle News..." and "When people got used to it..." and everything between them) from [Pandemic fails to cool Finland's centuries-old passion for coffee](#), both from Yle News.

These bits ended up giving me these ten bits for making this story: *At the workplace., To be scheduled., Currently learning Finnish., Lose the social connections, the tone got lighter, "Topics," he said., [you] have to learn an enormous amount, an unofficial channel to discuss, you can make yourself understood, You [~~to~~] hide so well.*

Raiyo looked at the screen, deep in thought. His workplace had become a strange place after the pandemic had started; the building was mostly deserted. He was one of the very few who had showed up there. He presumed that the others were there because they did not have the needed equipment for working remotely. But Raiyo? He was there to hide.

His parents knew that he was good at hiding, so they went out of their way to try to find him in unusual places where he might hide. That was the most vital part of his plan, though: he usually hid in places they would not even think of, so they assumed that he came up with elaborate plans to be out of sight. In truth, however, Raiyo hid in plain sight wherever he would not stand out and where his parents would not look. This time, it was his office. Because of the pandemic, few left their homes for work if they could work remotely. Therefore, his parents assumed that he would avoid public spaces, which gave him a perfect cover especially since he could stay holed up in the sweet solitude in his office for days without anyone noticing him there after work hours.

Once his break started, Raiyo brought the Discord window onto his main screen. It had become an unofficial channel to discuss work and everything unrelated to it — practically their virtual breakroom — recently, so just to keep up appearances he checked it every now and then. Otherwise, he would not have minded losing the social connections completely after everyone had holed up in their homes.

After all, the only person Raiyo did not want to lose contact with, his best friend Levi, was a hermit by nature — even more so than Raiyo, who preferred not to spend much time with people who were not close to him, namely everyone except Levi — so most of their normal contact occurred via the Internet anyway. There was no natural routine of communication to be disturbed by the lack of meeting face to face. As far as Raiyo knew, Levi was more than content in his characteristic seclusion, completely unaffected by the pandemic.

Levi's Discord status read "Currently learning Finnish". A small smirk rose on Raiyo's face when he reminisced last night's call with him; had he not followed the news, the older man could have very well been unaware of what was going on in the world outside his home.

*"Languages are interesting. You should try one sometime," Levi remarked. "You can make yourself understood with relatively little knowledge, but for proper communication you have to learn an enormous amount of stuff."*

*"Too much work." Raiyo gave a laugh. "English is enough for my needs."  
"It would be fun if we learned together, you know. Especially since we have topics," Levi said. His tone got lighter. "It would be absolutely hilarious to discuss that crush of yours in Finnish!"*

*"She's not my crush!" Raiyo hissed. Levi laughed in response, so he continued. "Levi, we have talked about this. I don't have a crush on her. It's completely one-sided."*

*"Yes, yes, of course." Levi chuckled. "But hey, think about it. You still have time to catch up with me with Finnish."*

*"Okay, I'll think about it," Raiyo conceded.*

They had discussed work and the pandemic for a while before Levi had had to go back to work. Raiyo, on the other hand, had gone to bed before leaving for work in secret early in the morning.

The break was over, so Raiyo shook himself from his reverie, shrunk the Discord window and got back to work. He had statistics to work on, after all, although the thoughts of Levi made the workload easier to bear; he knew that the older man had been working on either them or his writing or translation side projects all night long, munching cake or something else sweet.

Once his shift was over, Raiyo checked in on Discord to let his coworkers know that he was "fine" and looked out of the window. It was dark outside already, so he spreaded his sleeping bag under his desk, took his laptop, and ducked in there. No one was going to see him not leave the building, so he could spend the night there, munching chips in contrast to his sweet-loving friend.

News about Duolingo's new Finnish course came up a few times as Raiyo browsed his social media feed and what Levi had said about learning Finnish came back to his mind. Finnish was a little bit too niche for Raiyo's taste, but Levi had fallen in love with Finland ages ago. They had even planned a trip there, although it was on hold until the pandemic was over. Well, it was more time for Raiyo to save money for souvenirs and whatnot, so he did not mind it too much.

Perhaps learning a new language, especially an unusual one, would be a good idea after all — it would be something good to put in his resume. And, with Levi, it would also be fun.

A new smile came on Raiyo's face. He knew exactly what to do.

He took his phone and texted Levi. *I thought about it. I'll learn Finnish with you if you let me come over. :)*

Levi replied soon. *Yas!! :D I'll ask Warren to get you. You at work?*

*Yup*

*I'll make sure there are apples for you when you get here 8D*

Raiyo packed his things and sneaked outside with a huge grin on his face, trying hard not to jump and/or squeal in excitement. It was always a delight to see Levi in person, especially during a pandemic when they saw each other even less than normally.

After all, he was his best friend, and the only person who understood him so well.

When Warren's car pulled up to the parking lot, Raiyo was ready.

Perhaps this pandemic would not be so bad after all.



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