Diamonds

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by flightless_pigeon

Summary

Erwin recognises him as soon as he sets eyes on him in that library.

He's got the same cool haircut, petite build, and cherubic face, unperturbed by both puberty and the world around him. The same slate grey eyes, currently narrowed in concentration at a culinary textbook.

It was a decade ago Erwin last saw that boy.

The spiker did things Erwin hadn't even seen other players do before. He'd use the opposing blockers to his advantage, making them touch the ball out of court, or cross the net, or come close enough for him to feint the ball right over their heads.

That boy was playing chess with his body and his mind, Erwin realised.

He's the reason Erwin loves volleyball to this day. So he thinks it is a shame that Levi Ackerman sits in front of him, entirely uninterested in joining their university's team, seeming less passionate about the sport than Erwin was before meeting him.

tldr: Erwin learns to build relationships

Notes

Hello! This is crossposted from AO3, so additional tags, a/ns and official summaries will be added when the site returns.

This is also part 2 of a series called *Aces*, and I strongly recommend you read the first part first - I'm not sure how well this works as a standalone oneshot. Enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes

Erwin recognises him as soon as he sets eyes on him in that library.

He's got the same cool haircut, petite build, and cherubic face, unperturbed by both puberty and the world around him. The same slate grey eyes, currently narrowed in concentration at a culinary textbook.

It was a decade ago Erwin last saw that boy, partially obscured by the net that separated them, though from a distance, it was clear he didn't even reach the bottom of it at his height.

Erwin had only been playing volleyball for six months or so. It wasn't the first sport he'd been forced into. When he was ten, his father was called into school; the teacher expressed concerns about Erwin's lack of social circle and general unpopularity. He was a know-it-all, bossy in groups, and too blunt when it came to pointing out others' mistakes.

No one liked Erwin, but he didn't mind. But the teacher did, as well as his father. There was no book club - an oversight, really - and PE was Erwin's weakest subject, as he was wholly uninterested in the games they called lessons. So, it was decided that he would, at the very least, join a local sports club. Both to improve his teamwork and get outside for once, as his father put it.

He failed to get along with his teammates in football, basketball and hockey, and all for the same reason: too bossy. Kept telling everyone where to stand, even though he was no good at the sports anyway. One coach said he'd make a great captain if only he could grasp the positions of those around him.

In retrospect, he was never going to thrive there. The fields were too big, and everyone was everywhere. Even if he sat in goal all game, he still couldn't see them all at once.

Volleyball, at least, gave him a chance to do what he was good at. The other sports required too much running, and he was always conscious of his size, not wanting to hurt anyone. Plus, he was much better at thinking while standing still. And fortunately, nobody at the volleyball club liked the responsibility nor accuracy that came with setting.

While it still took him time to get used to, he was much more adept at the fingertip skills required of setters. His height advantage felt most useful here than other sports, too. And there were lots more rules limiting everyone's play styles, so Erwin knew exactly what he and everyone else could do in their positions.

The main thing left to get a grasp of was his teammates' abilities and behaviour on the court. That took more time than Erwin liked. He wasn't in charge, after all, and spent most of training working on his own skills, listening to the coach for any useful information on the other players. Who he didn't like, honestly. They all whined when they practised defending, and rushed to spike the ball whenever it was on their side of the court. But Erwin tolerated them, and hoped this was the last sporting club in the area he'd have to fumble in before his father gave up.

The few players in the local league that caught Erwin's interest were either other setters or taller players, muscular even in their youths. They were all better than him - Erwin wasn't particularly skilled at all - but their teammates often let them down, or they lacked good defence.

His team barely made it to the regionals for Erwin's first season, and he now treasures that stroke of luck. He hadn't been trying too hard in their matches, and at times went out of his way to toss difficult balls at his teammates to show his father, often watching from the stands, that this forced participation was fruitless. He didn't need to get along with anyone. But despite their team not being good, their opponents were worse, and so they moved up a league to play even more games that year, to Erwin's disdain.

That first regional match changed his life.

He'd internally scoffed at the tiny boy's presence on the front line. Foolish, he now knows. It was *regionals* - someone as physically disadvantaged as *him* managing to make it through the local season practically guaranteed he was talented.

And talented he was. He seemed to be everywhere at once. When Erwin's teammates served, the boy was first to receive. When they spiked, he jumped high enough to be fully level with them, blocking them with ease. And when he spiked, Erwin could only watch the setter's clumsy toss to the side of the court and stare idly as the dark-haired boy darted towards it from the other end, spiking it with suck power that the whooshing air bristled leg hairs Erwin didn't know he had until just then.

The spiker did things Erwin hadn't even *seen* other players do before. He'd use the opposing blockers to his advantage, making them touch the ball out of court, or cross the net, or come close enough for him to feint the ball right over their heads. What was most astonishing was his air time - it seemed he gave himself plenty to think about how he wanted to proceed with his spikes and where to place his hands. He even positioned his body differently to add impact to his spikes' power.

Erwin's father couldn't attend the regional match, and with the way the first set had come and gone in a blink, his team was destined to lose. There were no external motivators for playing. Erwin decided he had a single goal for the rest of his time on court: stop just one of that boy's attacks.

He did so quite easily. The boy picked holes in Erwin's team's defence - which Erwin often did himself - so it wasn't too difficult to direct his teammates into positions that limited the boy's options, leaving Erwin to stop his advances personally.

What was annoying was that he could never stop him twice. With the exact same setup, the boy did something else, and then something else. Every single time one of his plays was foiled, he'd become so unpredictable that it couldn't be foiled again. It was like he could read Erwin's mind and do the exact opposite of what the blonde expected of him.

And that was Erwin's problem. He didn't care about being physically bested, even boy a boy with a frame like that. But he was being mentally challenged in that game, and losing horrendously. Losing on *strategy.*

Chess was one of the few games he liked playing. A mind sport, operating on strategy and outwitting your opponent. The pieces were limited in their own unique ways, and could only do so much on their own. But when combined, it produced a seemingly endless number of strategies and play styles.

That boy was playing chess with his body *and* his mind, Erwin realised.

He would've quite liked to invite the boy to play a round, and intended to speak to him after the match. However, the boy's volleyball play style seemed mostly intuitive, and he broke the rules often; most commonly for multiple touches in a rally. It happened enough that he got sent off-court during the last set, and he sulked so much that he didn't even join the lineup at the end.

Erwin's team lost, obviously. But he noticed that without the boy's presence, the opposing team was suddenly a lot shakier. All the holes filled by that raven darting about became exposed, and Erwin's team racked up a few extra points in the process.

His father usually rewarded him with a trip to the library whenever he won a match during the local season. Though they'd lost, Erwin begged for an exception on account of the fact that they'd been kicked out the league. He wanted to pick up a book on volleyball, and put names to the moves that boy pulled on him.

Volleyball ended up having so much more strategy than he thought.

Never in his life had Erwin loathed losing a sports match. It made him wonder what he could've learnt from observing the other regionals teams if he'd gotten to play against them. The setter was crucial in so many different plays. He could be like the director of an orchestra. If he got good enough, he'd get onto a better team, have better players, and then it would truly be worth learning about them, so that they could play at the highest efficiency in these strategic matches.

But Erwin never put his knowledge to the test how he wanted to, because he never played against that boy again. Erwin's father died suddenly before secondary school, and he was quickly thrown into the system. He quickly learnt he needed to charm his way into foster parents' hearts to be able to go to matches again. He had no one left to play chess against, after all.

It was strange, throwing his full effort into sports despite hating it so strongly throughout primary school. Perhaps because his father had encouraged it so much. Perhaps because he had nothing else of his old life left. Perhaps because, though he didn't know it then, he hooked onto interests so much stronger than others did. He hit puberty a little early, so he had the physical advantage to carry his team to victory at first, and used the extra time to develop his mental skills as a setter.

Erwin wished he remembered the team that boy belonged to, and whether they ever made it to regionals again, or even nationals. Because Erwin got into both before sixth form, yet didn't see the little raven once, and he knows a boy that talented would have never quit. He loved volleyball so vehemently, and it showed in how he played.

He's the reason Erwin loves volleyball to this day. So he thinks it is a shame that Levi Ackerman sits in front of him, entirely uninterested in joining their university's team, seeming less passionate about the sport than Erwin was before meeting him.

"I don't play. You're weirdly obsessed with making me join your shitty club."

"You *could* play," Erwin argues. "And you would be a perfect fit. We'd shine with a player like you."

"You don't even know me. Stop being creepy and pick on someone in your own year."

There's no one left in Erwin's year; he knows this for a fact. All the new players he's managed to pick up are first years, some that he remembers playing against in secondary school and sixth form. His memory for players is immaculate now - he made it so after forgetting Levi's team. Never again would he lose sight of someone so invaluable. Especially not now.

Sticking to the sport resulted in him meeting brilliant players like Miche: someone who understands and trusts him to make the right calls. He'll be a real athlete, someday. Erwin loves volleyball, but knows it will not be his career. Ultimately, it is the analysis of people that has captured his professional interests, and there are much more suitable fields to apply his mental skills to. Though he's not above using it to recruit and train players. There's a decent bit of talent in the university, and Erwin's managed to influence the players' mindsets and training enough to help the diamonds in the rough shine bright, dazzling the competition.

He and Miche have had many conversations on how to progress their team further, and working with someone who might have a career in something Erwin adores so much is a pleasure. Though even Miche is doubtful when Erwin starts off by throwing Levi his usual quick sets.

"I thought you wanted this one."

"He can make it," Erwin responds.

He knows what Levi is capable of, despite the latter claiming not to play volleyball much anymore. It's still nonsensical that someone so skilled quit, but so did Erwin, for a little while, though not of his own volition. He wonders if something similar happened to Levi that stopped him playing competitively. Though, if it had, it still doesn't explain why he's so disinterested, and only shows up to begin with to get Erwin to stop asking him to join.

But Erwin remembers the look in that little boy's eyes. He's seen it in his own, photographs taken during matches capturing the combination of crazed passion and focus. No chance that anyone who loved playing volleyball that much would stop caring for it altogether - especially if given the chance to play in a much better team. This is where Levi can shine, Erwin knows. It's a chance he can't afford to waste.

As predicted, Levi does take interest in Erwin's quick sets, and sees it as a challenge that Erwin expects so much of him despite hearing that he hasn't played in years. He's obviously a hard worker, yet Erwin is still surprised with the pace at which Levi's skills catch up with the

others'. It makes him wonder how good Levi was in primary; how many hours he put in that he can pluck the muscle memory out of his brain with ease.

This, too, is a fascinating development. Erwin dreamed of getting to play against Levi again for years, and to beat him this time. He never imagined they'd be teammates. And this is what it takes for him to understand the appeal of a team-based sport.

Honestly, it's a little embarrassing that he couldn't see before meeting Levi just how similar to chess it really is. Pieces of varying abilities that can be utilised when combined to overcome the collective abilities of your opponents; how disadvantaged you are if not using them to their full potential; that you can end up losing those pieces altogether. Playing against someone with multiple queens is a pain, but possessing several of your own is ideal for securing victories.

Getting Levi to integrate in the team, however, is a separate battle. He's a walking contradiction, in many ways: reserved, yet snaps and bites out insults whenever he pleases; disengaged, but puts his full effort into something if he wishes; smaller than everyone else, then seems to take up the whole court with his presence.

Erwin could sit and watch him for hours, and would love to pick his mind, dissect his thinking. Alas, what limited read he does have on Levi gives him the feeling that if he tells the first year his Bachelor's is in psychology, he'll run away and never return. And Erwin won't lose him again. This is his one and only chance to build the team he's always wanted. He'll be damned if a few personality clashes try to get in the way.

Well. More than a *few.*

The trouble with building his dream team is that such a lofty idea is only realistically achieved with savants. Those he's sourced happen to have great physical talent, but more to be desired from their social skills. Erwin recognises he is no exception - with all he's learnt from his studies, there's only so much he can be bothered to incorporate into his manner of speech. In some ways, he's the worst of them, not nearly as physically capable as the rest of the team.

But his intelligence carries him, and he's more stubborn than anyone else he's ever met. He's been at odds with both Hange and Miche multiple times as a result, so he quickly gets used to the duality of verbal berating and silent tantrums from Levi.

Even before Levi first walked into the gymnasium, Erwin guessed he and Hange would be at odds. When he knew he'd convinced Levi to stay, he asked Hange to lay off the new recruit in advance. Many people take issue with their loud, invasive and unpredictable behaviour, but where most keep it to themselves or under their breaths, Levi's the sort to be loudly disapproving and take matters into his own hands. Erwin plays a careful game in how he assigns the team training activities, aiming to keep the vocal sparring to a minimum.

He doesn't predict the first physical altercation to be between Levi and Miche. Levi survived the initial assault from Miche's nose, which Erwin wrongly assumed would be the biggest hurdle. Perhaps he should have paid more attention.

He never learns what sets them off, but by the time he looks over, Coach Shadis is wrestling their fists from one another's shirts and yelling in that booming voice Erwin hasn't heard since receiving the intimidating start-of-year introduction the man performed to scare off casuals when he first joined.

It ends up being a pain to convince Shadis not to ban Levi on the spot. He's lucky Miche agrees - albeit reluctantly - that the shorter man is necessary to achieve the career milestone of making it to nationals that Miche desperately needs, and aids Erwin in persuading Coach to keep him.

Levi continues to be at odds with the regular lineup throughout his first month. He and Miche bare their teeth at one another like stray dogs; he and Hange *bark* at one another like stray dogs; he sets the timid Nanaba and even more timid Moblit on edge; he frustrates the majority of their more hotheaded teammates, Gelgar not least of all. That his skill grants him a slot on the regular lineup appears to frustrate everyone further.

Half the time, he doesn't even seem to be doing it on purpose. Rather, he's so incompatible with so much of their crew on a surface level that Erwin can't help but be impressed, to some extent.

Mostly, though, he just gets irritated. Levi only intentionally tries to get on his and Miche's nerves. Erwin doesn't feel close to understanding why, and there's only so long he can go pairing him up with Hange or Onyankopon before they genuinely start losing their tempers with him.

That leaves himself as the remaining option, which isn't so bad. Erwin's vision of an insanely quick minus-tempo set requires lots of one-on-one training, so it makes sense that they train together. Though it means he isn't able to monitor the other first years' progress, having to leave it to Shadis. As the setter, and a psych student, *and* someone lacking certain facts of social etiquette, Erwin would prefer having as much information on his teammates' physical and mental capabilities as possible.

Worse yet, he's pulled *nothing* out of his new spiker. His studies help him glean vague ideas on how Levi might think based on his mannerisms and play style, but Erwin really thought that after a month, he'd have at least something on what Levi likes about volleyball, how he learnt to play like that, why he stopped, *anything.* It's maybe hypocritical, since Erwin doesn't enjoy talking about his past much either, but volleyball should be an easy topic for them to get into.

Levi does not care. He tells Erwin to mind his own business, and only talks about what they practice in the moment, peppering in superficial insults where he can. He even claims not to watch the local televised matches, so Erwin can't connect with him on that either.

And when Erwin laments his frustrations to Miche, his friend simply laughs, claiming that Erwin is just as poor a conversationalist, and everyone else has simply learnt to accept it. So there's hope, at least, that they'll the same with Levi in time.

But getting used to the aloofness isn't what Erwin wants. He *knows* that Levi's past experience will be useful to the team. Even irrelevant recollections from his childhood might

give Erwin as hint as to how to interact with the first-year without him retreating behind his defence mechanisms. But there's no chance of getting that information by asking outright - he's tried - and he's woefully unequipped to find a subtler alternative.

Perhaps his father had a point in there being value in learning how to make friends after all.

Now that he thinks about it, having that sort of information about *everybody* would help him formulate their team dynamics. Erwin's mostly been relying on the bonds he's observed between everyone else to create lineups, and hasn't needed to think too deeply about setting to players since meeting Miche.

Though he does now more about Miche than anyone else that the moment. They are considered friends, despite not forming their bond the way most people seem to, and rather assimilating by association and mutual acknowledgement of their otherness. Compared to others, Erwin finds Miche easy to understand, despite his stranger habits. As long as Erwin's clear with his words, doesn't stand too close, keeps his hygiene in check, and talks about volleyball - which he's always done anyway - socialising with him is not difficult.

Perhaps he can adjust his strategy for every individual he meets. See what preferences align, what he can adapt to, and then he might be able to converse with them long enough to gain an understanding of how their minds work. It will be a challenge - especially with a group that does nothing by the books - but he's nothing if not determined. Though it may be by chance, he's already succeeded with Miche.

Then, when he finally deepens the bonds between his teammates and himself, when they are friends, he'll be able to drive them all to success. Erwin's in a great position to conduct his experiment. They already have the united goal of winning volleyball matches. His team is much better than the ones he's had before, and he's made enough personal progress that he's started internally referring to them as his teammates rather than just the other players he happens to coexist with.

More often than not, he finds himself *excited* to see them at practice. To witness them thrive and grow in the sport they all enjoy gives him a feeling he can't explain. And he should probably use the opportunity to make friends with like-minded people sooner rather than later, to maximise the quality of their time spent together; starting with Levi.

And he can try and convince himself it's only for the sake of good volleyball, and not because what he's got in front of him seems so much better than being alone all his life. But perhaps, just like sports all those years ago, he's starting to change his mind.

There are always exceptions to rules. Maybe workarounds. And Erwin's not one to ignore an unorthodox strategy to get what he wants, is he?

End Notes

Thanks for reading! Erwin's a tough one to write a POV of, because I think his internal dialogue would be pretty boring. I think I succeeded lol, but hopefully it's at least slightly engaging. I might come back to this one later as I think how I write the final two parts of the series might impact this one eventually.

Please leave kudos, a comment or both if you enjoyed! Thanks :)

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