



*in these*  
F A L L E N  
L E A V E S

BOOK ONE



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*in these*

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*—H.*



..& BOOK I: HOPE &..

## TIMELINE

- 
- 844 LEVI JOINS THE SURVEY CORPS
- 845 FALL OF WALL MARIA
  - ERWIN SMITH BECOMES COMMANDER
- 850 EREN YEAGER JOINS THE SURVEY CORPS
  - REVOLUTION & HISTORIA REISS CORONATION
  - BATTLE FOR SHIGANSHINA
  - ERWIN SMITH DIES
  - HANGE ZOË BECOMES COMMANDER
- 860 *IN THESE FALLEN LEAVES* CHAPTER I
  -

# ❖ One ❖

## ECHOES OF THE PAST

LEAVES COAT ERWIN's memorial stone, blood red and rotting. Levi claws at them, wincing as the cold soaks into his fingers. This is the tenth autumn, the tenth time he's struggled to keep decay away from the monument. He hates autumn.

The scent of smoke fills the air. He turns to see it curling from the chimney; the kitchen windows glow orange with the sunset. He didn't realize he's been out so long. Hange is probably waiting on the meat.

He picks up the rabbit. His knees creak as he stands.

"I should clean this thing and get inside." He always feels a bit ridiculous when he talks to the stone, but he feels hollow if he doesn't. "See you tomorrow."

He skins and cleans the rabbit. A spray of blood spatters his cheek; he curses his sloppiness and swallows back an onslaught of memories. If he starts recalling them, he'll never get this done, and Hange's probably getting hungry. He finishes cleaning the carcass and buries the remains in the pit.

Hange is sitting at the table reading an anatomy book. The cutting board is filled with neatly chopped leeks, carrots, and cabbage. A pot of stock bubbles on the stove. "You're late."

"Snare was empty," he lies. He pulls out another cutting board, then begins to scrub his hands in the sink.

Hange steps forward to prepare the meat. "There's a letter for you. I got one too."

He turns to see a red envelope on the counter, pressed with a wax seal. His stomach drops. "Who died?"

“It’s nothing like that. She wants the four of us to meet up for a quiet celebration of the anniversary of the end of the war.”

“What’s the point?” He opens the letter and scans it, then drops it on the counter when he sees the date: October 14th. “No.”

“What,” Hange says, “you’re going to sit here and talk to a stone instead?”

It’s a fundamental difference between the two of them: Hange deals with loss by pushing it aside and pursuing new goals. Levi’s goals died ten years ago.

“If I don’t celebrate his birthday, no one will,” he says.

Hange stares at him, lips pursed.

“I know,” he says pre-emptively.

“You can still remember him in Mitras.”

“I know.”

“They can remember him with us.”

That argument makes him pause. Historia and Mikasa have known loss, too; the four of them understand it better than anyone.

Besides, Historia has access to the best wines. He could take a bottle to the rooftop of the MP Headquarters and relive that night, years ago, when he and Erwin slipped away to discuss political strategy. Levi can’t remember what the discussion was about, but he remembers the comfortable silence as they watched the sunset together.

“Fine.”

“Bring something nice to wear,” Hange says. “There’s a ball on the fifteenth.”

“Fine.” He knows exactly which suit he’ll bring.

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LEVI FALLS ASLEEP in the carriage to Mitras, and when he wakes up, the bolo tie has left its impression in his palm. He doesn’t remember pulling it out of his pocket; he tucks it away.

He can tell, by Hange's worried expression, that he was having nightmares again, but neither of them mentions it.

Historia waits for them in the throne room, Mikasa standing solemnly at her side. When the queen sees them, she smiles and runs forward to give Hange a hug. Even though she's in her mid-twenties, Historia is still tiny, her large eyes deceptively youthful. There is power in her stance and her speech, however, so much so that Levi often forgets just how small she is until she hugs him. Her hug lasts several beats too long, and he stiffens and tries to pull away.

Hange has a hug for Mikasa, too, but Levi only gives her a knowing glance and a nod. They've been at a polite impasse since the war ended. She reminds him of Erwin's death; he reminds her of Eren's.

The four of them sit in the queen's dining room, a large room with tapestries on the wall. The chairs are padded and have too many cushions. Levi sets a couple on the floor before he sits down.

The royal staff brings them each a plate of beef stew and a glass of fine wine. No one speaks until the staff leaves the room.

"Thank you for coming," Historia says. "It means a lot to me that we can get together like this—ten years is an important anniversary."

Levi turns his gaze to her. "It's Erwin's birthday today."

"Oh, is it?" Without missing a beat, Historia gives him a kind smile and raises her glass. "The four of us know how much Commander Erwin contributed to the war. There's no question humanity would still be dying to the titans if not for his efforts. It's because of him peace found the walls. So, it's fitting that we toast him on what would have been his birthday. To Commander Erwin."

The others repeat the phrase as they lift their glasses, but only Hange is enthusiastic. Mikasa is staring at her plate, a blank expression on her face. Levi swallows back a surge of anger. They make a strange family, the four of them, and it's important they

stay together. They're all they have left of the war.

Even though it's a memorial dinner, no one is willing to talk about their memories. Hange fills the silence by talking about their ongoing research to create a titan cure from shifter spinal fluid. Levi glances at Mikasa; her knuckles are white as she violently cuts her meat into smaller and smaller pieces.

"The dispersion system worked with the water tests, but it's still a small-scale prototype." Hange pulls out a notepad and makes a quick sketch, then passes it to Historia. "It should scale up nicely to the size we need. Then we just need to find a way to cluster titans into large groups—we may need to use soldiers as bait."

Historia smiles. "That's good progress on the dispersion system. But how is the actual cure itself coming?"

The light in Hange's eye dulls. "We have a limited supply of spinal fluid, so I need to be absolutely certain before I start testing—"

"It's okay," the queen says. "I understand."

But Mikasa shoves back her chair and storms to the window. She looks through it, as if she's making sure they aren't being overheard. Levi can see her fist trembling.

Well, if she's going to start getting dramatic, then he needs to leave. He pushes his chair away, too, and grabs one of the wine bottles. "I have to be somewhere."

"I see," Historia says. "Before you go, I'd like to invite you to a royal ball tomorrow night, in celebration of the harvest. It's formal attire, so I'd be happy to pay for a suit if—"

"I have a suit."

"Okay. Breakfast is at nine tomorrow."

He nods and leaves the room, tightly gripping the neck of the bottle.

It's a short walk to the MP Headquarters. The air is brisk; it cuts through him almost as deeply as the innocent laughter and smiles of the people he passes on the street. He finds himself cursing every single one of them.

The soldiers at Headquarters salute and greet him with “Guard Captain.” He nods back and pushes past them. He pauses as the hallway brings him past the office of Commander Nile Dok. The light is on. Even though it hurts every time, the desire to connect with any part of Erwin’s past makes him poke his head in.

“Working late, shitbeard?”

Nile looks up from the desk. His hair is greying, his face lined with wrinkles that deepen when he smiles. He has been smiling a lot more frequently over the past decade than he ever did during the war. “Did you bring that to share? I could use a drink.”

Levi looks down at the wine bottle. “No, I only share wine with friends.”

“So, you’re drinking alone?”

It’s meant to be lighthearted banter, but it still stings. Levi slumps against the doorframe. “How are Marie and the kids?”

“Good. Luke got into medical school.”

“That’s a start—at least one of your kids won’t end up a paperwork grunt like you.”

Nile snorts. “Well, Henrietta’s talking about joining the Garrison, but Erwin’s asking a lot of questions about the MP these days.”

Levi’s stomach knots. “Maybe he’ll be a Commander one day, like his old man.”

The Commander puffs up, but downplays his pride: “Maybe, maybe not. He’s still a kid; his mind changes every day. He wanted to be a firefighter a couple months back. Marie wasn’t too fond of that idea.”

“But she’s fine with the MP? She thinks the military is safer than firefighting?”

“Not as if any of us will ever see real combat.” Nile leans back in his chair, clasping his hands behind his head in a stretch. “You in town for a few days?”

“I guess so. Her Majesty is dragging me to a stupid ball to-

morrow night.”

“About time you actually spend some time doing your job. You can’t really be a Guard Captain if you don’t guard her now and then,” Nile says dryly. “Oh, right: *retirement*. Explain to me again why a mid-forties Guard Captain can afford to retire, but the Commander of the Military Police can’t?”

Levi’s fist tightens. He would trade all the money for the man who left it to him. “Maybe because I didn’t spawn three brats.”

Nile gives a laugh so deep and loud that Levi swears he feels the floorboards vibrate beneath his feet. “Well, if you’re still in town the night after tomorrow, come by for dinner. Marie and the kids would love to see you.”

“Maybe.”

“Bring some of that wine if you do. It looks expensive.”

Levi looks at the bottle. “I told you, I only drink wine with friends.”

They exchange nods and goodnights, then Levi steps away. He feels like he’s stepping away from a campfire; the cold air settles in his bones again.

He ducks through a side door and climbs the ladder to the roof. The breeze is even colder up here than it had been on the street. He pulls his jacket tightly around himself.

Once the bottle is open, he closes his eyes, trying to picture Erwin beside him. His memories are fading as time passes, so he takes the time to paint him from top to bottom: his hair, his eyebrows, his eyes ... The voice is harder. He still remembers the words—the important ones, anyway—but his own internal voice has overwritten Erwin’s. He gets flashes of it now and then, mostly when he’s not actively trying to recall it.

He takes a swig of wine and pulls the bolo tie out of his pocket. He brings it to his nose; the string still has a faint whiff of Erwin’s cologne. Or maybe he’s just imagining it.

“This is supposed to be getting easier,” he says to the bolo tie. He pours a small amount of wine onto the rooftop in his

honour, then takes another swig. His thumb traces the gold border around the rim of the green stone; he can barely see it in the dark, but he can feel it.

“I hope you’re resting well. Maybe I’ll see you again one day. Maybe soon.”

He’s silent until he finishes the bottle, and even though he’s shivering, he stays up there for a while longer, staring across the seat of the kingdom that has already forgotten the man responsible for saving it.

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HE AWAKENS EARLY the next morning in the guest room. His mouth is dry and tastes like old alcohol. He washes the taste away with another glass. The day after Erwin’s birthday is always the hardest: the dawn of yet another year without him.

He makes his way to the dining hall and asks the servants to bring him crêpes, eggs, and spiced apple juice. While Historia has been clear that all her citizens deserve fair treatment, she hasn’t actively turned away a life of luxury, either. He hears she frequently brings in children off the street to feed them fancy dinners, so at least she’s not hogging the extravagance to herself the way the previous aristocrats did.

He’s halfway through the crêpes when Historia walks in, dressed in a white dress shirt, a quilted skirt, and a scarf the colour of the sky. She gives him a sad smile. “Did you sleep well?”

He shrugs. “Bed had too many pillows. It was like sleeping on a damned cloud.”

“One of the orphanages has the children making pillows for craft time, and they gave some to me during their last visit.”

“Oh.” That lifts his mood a bit. “Cute.”

“I thought so, too, so treat those pillows with care.” She sits, leaving only one chair between them along the enormous oak table. “I didn’t realize it was the Commander’s birthday yesterday. I’m sorry to have asked you here on such an important

date.”

He glances at the doorway, but she holds up a hand as if to reassure him. “It’s okay. I dismissed the guards so we can talk honestly.”

The idea of having a deep, personal chat makes his skin crawl. He carefully trims his egg, making a game of it, trying to get as close to the yolk as he can without breaking it.

“Levi,” Historia says, not as a queen to a guard, not as a soldier to her captain, but peer to peer. “I’ve started seeing someone.”

He tenses, already guessing where the conversation is going. “Oh?”

“A member of the Council. She thinks I’m taking it slowly because of our roles. She doesn’t know the whole truth about Ymir; I don’t know her well enough to trust her with any of that. It’s … lonely, in a way.” Historia’s eyes are glassy. “I miss her, Levi. Every day. That’s never going to change. But we must choose our own happiness. It isn’t a betrayal to the past if we shift our eyes to the future, especially when it’s been so long.”

Levi looks down. “Our situations aren’t the same.”

“I know, believe me. I spend almost every waking moment with Mikasa—I know how deeply your bloodline’s hurt runs, on a level I’ll never understand. But please don’t think Ackermans are the only ones changed by loss.” She leans closer. “I’m not saying you have to find someone, but maybe it’s time to start finding your own purpose in life again instead of just waiting for the days to pass. I think Ymir would be annoyed at me for putting my life on hold for so long to mourn her. Don’t you think Erwin would want you to start healing?”

“He doesn’t want anything. He’s dead.” The yolk has bled across his plate and soaked the crêpes, and his stomach is suddenly sour. He pushes the plate away and leans back in his chair, folding his arms over his chest. “Cut the bullshit, Historia. Why all this talk about moving on? Are you trying to set me up with someone?”

Her eyes duck away, and he has his answer.

“I’m not interested.”

“He just asked for an introduction at the ball tonight. He’s quite taken with you.”

He stands. “I’m going to the training yard.”

“Levi.” She catches his wrist. The contact buzzes his skin. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to push. I only want what’s best for you—we all do.”

The skin contact is so uncomfortable that he yanks his arm away. He gives her a long, displeased look. “I know what’s best for me.” *And he’s gone.*

As he strides to the hallway, he can still feel his skin vibrating from her touch.

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“THAT’S THE SUIT you brought?” Hange says. “The sleeves are too long.”

“I told you, I like the style. They don’t make them like this anymore.” He smooths the lapels of the black jacket, studying himself in the mirror. He doesn’t wear his cravat much anymore, and now it feels too tight around his neck. His hair is silver, his eyes bordered by thick lines. He has aged twenty years in ten. He frowns. “Historia’s trying to set me up with someone.”

“Yeah, she told me. Another admirer—it’s amazing how many nobles like their men short and surly.” Hange turns to him. “Does this look okay?”

Levi studies the suit, carefully fitted to Hange’s narrow waist. Their bright auburn hair falls to their shoulders in curls, and he thinks he sees a hint of makeup behind the glasses. One eye is covered with a black eyepatch.

“Did you dye your hair? Who are you trying to impress?”

Hange’s cheeks darken. “No one. I just wanted to cover the greys.”

“Bullshit.” Everyone’s moving on except him. He steps

forward and lifts the eyepatch to reveal the scarred eye, its pupil grey. “You haven’t worn an eyepatch in at least five years. Don’t start now just because you’re trying to impress some random asshole.”

Hange sighs, then leans forward, forward, until their foreheads touch. “I know I keep telling you we need to move on, but this anniversary is hard. A part of me wishes I could forget it all.”

“Regretting your choice?”

“No,” Hange says, so quickly that it’s almost a snap. “It’s just ... hard.”

He closes his eyes, feeling the stability of their forehead against his. “I know.” They can support each other. They’re family now.

They walk to the ballroom with their arms linked at the elbows. Historia is immediately noticeable on the dance floor, spinning in a white dress that floats around her form like wisps of cloud. The woman she’s dancing with is dressed in red. They look like two roses in bloom.

As they descend the staircase, Levi glances at the mezzanine, at a familiar spot along the curtains. He begins to think of Erwin, but he’s distracted when the spot where Historia grabbed his wrist earlier begins to buzz again. He opens and closes his fist until it settles.

“Everything okay?” Hange asks.

“Fine.” He locates the bar and steers them through the crowd. They both settle beside the bar with wine glasses in hand. Hange quickly knocks back the drink, then squeezes Levi’s shoulder and strides toward the dance floor.

He’s about two-thirds through his glass when a deep voice to his left asks, “May I buy your next drink?”

He doesn’t look over. “I can afford my own.”

A pause, then the voice says, “I think you misunderstand my intentions.”

He turns. The voice belongs to a tall man with slicked

blond hair and a sharp nose. His eyes are bright green, framed by what appears to be thirty-odd years of life experience. His chest is narrower than Erwin's, and his lips seem to smirk even at neutral, but there are enough similarities that Levi's heart leaps.

He's not about to show his enthusiasm. "So, what are your intentions?"

"I'm trying to flirt with you." The man chuckles. "It would appear I'm not doing a very good job."

"No, you're not. Did Historia put you up to this?"

The man's brows lift, presumably at his informal speech. "I did speak with Her Majesty earlier, yes, but she suggested I was wasting my time. I figured there was no harm in trying; a man can always use a fresh drink and some conversation even if he has no interest in pursuing anything more."

There's an honest, uncomplicated air about him that stands out amidst the usual confusion and unanswered questions of Levi's love life. "Who are you?"

"Lord Alec Farrington," the man says. "And you, of course, are the famed Guard Captain Levi Ackerman."

"Is that why you're flirting? Because you're a lord, and you crave the status that comes with sticking your dick in a celebrity?"

The lord's brows raise again. "She warned me you were rude."

"Answer my question."

The lord holds his gaze. "Originally, yes, your celebrity was a draw, as were your good looks, but now that I see how feisty you are, I'm thinking you'd be a lot of fun in bed." He takes a sip of his drink, then adds, "If you aren't similarly curious about me, I can try a bit harder to pique your interest. I'll buy you another drink and then impress you on the dance floor."

Levi can't remember the last time he was actively courted. His groin is pulled one way, his stomach another. His mind drifts back to the curtains on the mezzanine; he longs to recapture that memory. "Brandy, this time."

They wander toward the fringes of the dance floor, drinks in hand. Levi watches the lord out of the corner of his vision. He moves with a swaggering arrogance that destroys the resemblance to Erwin, but that arrogance is compelling at the same time.

He expects them to head straight onto the dance floor, but Alec settles against a pillar instead. “That jacket’s a bit big on you, Guard Captain. A lover’s, perhaps?”

“No one you’d know.”

“I might.” The lord scans the crowd, an arrogant crease settling by his nose. “It’s about fifteen years out of fashion—the lapels are all wrong, you see. The length suggests it belonged to someone about my height. You’re still wearing it, so he must be dead; if you broke up with him, you would have returned it or destroyed it, and if you stole it, you wouldn’t wear it in public.” His eyes shift to Levi. “Commander Erwin Smith.”

The floor tilts. “How—”

“Am I wrong?”

Levi’s jaw tightens. “Who are you?”

“Exactly who I said. My father was a lapdog to King Reiss. Don’t worry, I always supported the Survey Corps.” He smiles. “I always looked up to you. Humanity’s Strongest. I didn’t realize you and the Commander were lovers.”

“We weren’t.” The tightness has spread to Levi’s throat, and his voice cracks as he says, “Tell me everything you remember about Erwin.”

The lord raises a brow, as if waiting for an explanation, but Levi can’t bring himself to offer one. “Everything,” he repeats, hating the desperation in his voice.

And so Alec speaks about the times he saw the Commander in Mitras, about news stories he read. He doesn’t know much, but it’s something, and Levi stares through the bottom of his brandy glass as he listens.

*We will entrust our memories to the living.*

Three drinks later, they make their way to the dance floor.

Alec's cheeks are flushed, and through the haze of the alcohol, Levi thinks he looks like Erwin—not *Commander* Erwin, but the man he saw during those rare, delirious late nights when they would drink over paperwork and laugh about nothing. He grabs Alec's scarf and pulls him down for a kiss, and his cologne almost smells like Erwin's, and maybe this is what Erwin's mouth would have felt like.

They kiss through one dance, then a second. He drags Alec to the mezzanine.

“Here,” Levi says, lifting the curtain.

They slip through it into the alcove. It's a small storage room that must have been forgotten long ago; there's nothing in it but a table, barely visible in the dim light that bleeds through the curtain.

Levi's breath catches. Fifteen years ago, during his first official trip to Mitras, he stealthily trailed Erwin to this alcove and peered inside. Fifteen years ago, he saw two shadowy figures, saw Erwin pressing his lover into the table with a firm hand on his lower back, heard their soft gasps. It was the first and last time he ever saw Erwin drop his decorum and give in to base instinct. He still wonders if he dreamed it; the memory is such a sharp contrast with the Erwin he knew. That hasn't stopped him from revisiting that moment every time he sets foot in the ballroom.

He bends over the table and doesn't look back. “Fuck me here.”

He closes his eyes. It's Erwin behind him, pulling down his pants, caressing his ass. He can almost hear his voice—his ears strain until they ring.

*Levi.*

That was too clear to be fantasy. His eyes fly open.

“Just give me a moment to undo my belt,” Alec says, far in the background, but his voice is drowned by rushing wind and Erwin's voice:

*Levi, help me!*

Levi's arm is burning, and his head spins. He stands and

staggers backwards, breathing hard.

Alec is frozen beside him, his hands still on his belt buckle. “What’s wrong?”

“I have to go.”

“Was it something I said?” All arrogance is gone from his tone; he almost sounds hurt.

“No.” Levi knows he should offer an explanation, but the walls of the alcove are reverberating with Erwin’s voice and he needs to get out. He pulls up his pants and hurries to the curtain.

He pushes through the crowds and finds his way to a balcony. At first, he thinks it’s unoccupied, but as he leans on the railing to catch his breath, he sees the orange glow of a cigar in the shadows near the wall. He’s too raw to have company, but he doesn’t trust his legs to hold up if he tries to leave.

After a moment, the glow lowers and a woman’s silhouette paces toward him. As it steps into a patch of light, he recognizes Mikasa. He relaxes—you—then tenses again—you ...

“You’re smoking cigars now?” he says.

“Not normally. Needed something a bit stronger tonight. Alcohol doesn’t do much for me; you’re probably the same.” She settles on the railing next to him. That’s surprising. Usually, she goes out of her way to avoid him. “I have another one, if you want it.”

“No, it’ll make me feel worse. Give me a drag of yours.”

She holds it out. He takes a mouthful of smoke and swishes it around. It tastes like burning leather, like a pyre. He spits it out. “Disgusting.”

“Why are you upset?”

He eyes her. “I’m surprised to see you showing concern.”

She frowns. “Please understand, Captain: you *chose* to let go of the Commander. I didn’t have any say with Eren.”

Are they finally going to talk about this? The only way to repair their relationship is to be honest, so he says, “Erwin had already decided it was his time to go. I kept trying to hold on, but I was being selfish. I chose what was best for him, not what was

best for me.” He pauses. “Apparently it still fucks me up.” The Commander’s voice from the alcove is still echoing in his mind, but it seems less real now. Likely, it was just a combination of nerves and alcohol. Sex hasn’t been high on his priority list in a long time.

Mikasa takes another puff of the cigar, then slowly releases the smoke. “Hange and Historia don’t understand what we’re going through.”

“No, they don’t.” They never really determined why their bloodline draws such strength from loyalty, but there is no denying the power of it. He wonders sometimes about Kenny. Did he feel this bond with someone, too? He seemed to be talking about a specific person on his deathbed, the person who was drunk on *something*, but it’s difficult to imagine Kenny loving anyone.

Maybe they need to stop being stubborn and acknowledge their similarities. Trying to avoid it hasn’t helped their mutual resentment. “Look, it’s shitty what happened to Eren. But he was like Erwin: he made his choice and gave himself to his cause until it destroyed him. There’s only so long you can protect someone from himself.” It hurts to openly acknowledge Erwin’s self-destruction. It hurts to admit he gave too much of himself. Levi knows, deep down, he could have stopped it. “But if we had intervened,” he says, thinking aloud, “humanity might not have found this time of peace.”

There’s a long silence, then Mikasa says, “Sometimes I wish I had said ‘screw humanity’ and fought for him instead.”

The same thought comes to him often in the middle of the night.

“It’s easier to protect Historia,” Mikasa continues. “She actually listens to my opinions.”

“Isn’t it easier to protect her if you’re at her side instead of hiding on a balcony?” He remembers the red and white dresses. “Or are you upset about the company she’s keeping tonight?”

Mikasa frowns. “It’s not like that.”

“No, I get it. You need to be the most important person in the world to her. Doesn’t have to be romantic.” He sees couples laughing and kissing in the courtyard below them, and his heart twists, so his gaze rises to the moon instead. It’s the colour of Erwin’s skin the day they left him behind. His head is spinning—maybe from the alcohol, maybe the cigar. “Glad you’ve found someone else to protect, at least. How did you manage to move on?”

Mikasa lets out a low, hollow laugh that reminds him how much she has aged since the war. “I didn’t.”

“So ten long years on, we’re both sad sacks out on a balcony at a fancy party because we lost the people we swore to protect.”

“Maybe.” She pauses. “I’m out here because everything in there is artificial, but the stars and the moon, at least, are the same ones that were in the sky when I was a little girl.”

He looks at her and feels paternal warmth kindling in his stomach for the first time since they fought on the rooftop in Shiganshina.

“No one told me the party moved to the balcony,” a voice says behind them. A heavy arm drops on Levi’s shoulder as Hange pushes into the gap between them.

He tries to pull away. “Are you drunk?”

“Yep.” Hange lets out a loud, contented sigh, leaning heavily on him. “You two look miserable. Is this supposed to be a royal party or a pity party?”

Levi bristles. “Aren’t you supposed to be flirting?”

After a long pause, Hange says, “Didn’t work out.”

He recognizes the defeat in their voice. Maybe ten years is too soon for non-Ackermans, too.

The three of them are silent as a breeze settles over them, and Hange is so warm that Levi leans closer.

“So, Levi,” Hange says, “tell us about the jacket.”

He stiffens. “What?”

“It’s Erwin’s, isn’t it? I remember you wearing it back

when we were all soldiers. I bet it's a cute story. We pathetic remnants could use a cute story."

He's still glowing from the alcohol and the cigar, and all this thinking about Erwin has made him nostalgic. "It's not really that cute. The night after my squad died, I was in his office and I fell asleep in a chair. When I woke up, the jacket was on my shoulders and he was gone. It was comfortable, so I kept it. That's it." He doesn't mention the faint, pleased smile Erwin gave him the next morning when he was still wearing it.

It's still strange to picture the Commander pausing to put the jacket on his shoulders. Erwin was never an overtly affectionate man. Notes of affection would creep into his voice when they spoke, but that was the extent of it. Those hints between them had been enough at the time, but as Levi recalls them now, it's easy to think he imagined them. The jacket is the only thing that keeps him from believing he read too much into their relationship. The jacket is proof Erwin cared about him.

Maybe, he reflects, that does make it a cute story, but he has already opened up too much tonight.

Girlish laughter sounds from the balcony adjacent to them. He turns to see Historia and her dance partner leaning against the railing. They're chuckling over some shared joke, arms interlocked, swaying together as if they're still dancing.

"Look at them," Hange murmurs behind him. "Look how their worlds have shrunk to only each other. You're lucky, Levi. I know it hurts now, but I'm glad you had that once."

Levi turns. "What?"

"You and Erwin. I wish I'd been brave enough to embrace my feelings like that, while I had the chance."

His stomach drops. "You think Erwin and I were a couple?"

Hange's eye widens, and there's a long silence before Mikasa says, "You weren't?"

Both are staring at him, and he's angry. All those times he told himself making a move would jeopardize Erwin's career ...

He pushes away from the railing and strides to the doorway.

“Levi,” Hange calls. “Wait.”

“I’m going to bed.” He slams the balcony door behind him.

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THE VOICE COMES to him again in his sleep. *Levi!*

He opens his eyes. The battered city of Shiganshina fades in around him as if a fog is lifting. He stands before the house where he left Erwin’s side one final time.

*Levi, help me.*

He turns and sees Erwin’s grateful smile, the one he wore during their final goodbye—but no, it’s stretching. It warps and grows to his ears, beyond. Sinew wraps around his arms, his legs.

Then a titan stands before him, proud nose and sharp blue eyes, and that final smile parts to release a blast of sulphurous air.

“Help ... me ... Le ... vi ... ”

Levi startles awake. He’s alone in the darkness, and his arm is burning.

# ❧ TWO ❧

## BEFORE THE SUNRISE

*-year 844: beyond the wall-*

LEVI EYED THE watch captain and stepped closer to the campfire.

“The hell are you doing, recruit?” the watch captain barked. “Keep patrolling.”

“Give me a second. I can’t feel my fingers.”

The soldier looked as if he had been smacked in the face by a stray branch. “Are you seriously disobeying my orders while being disciplined for insubordination?”

“Go easy on him, Gerelt,” a voice said behind them. “He’s still too new to understand proper protocol.”

They turned to see Erwin walking through the grass toward them.

“Squad Leader.” Gerelt scrambled to his feet and saluted. “There’s no room for confusion. He’s supposed to be patrolling the fence as punishment—”

“I heard, but there are no titans in the vicinity, and I need to speak with him. Why don’t you go inside for a few minutes and get warm, then resume your patrol?” Erwin gave the man a polite smile. “Call for us if you need our swords.”

Gerelt nodded. “Sir.”

Levi watched him walk away, then scoffed and sat on a log close to the fire. “Asshole wouldn’t even give me a cloak.”

“No, I imagine not.” Erwin settled onto the log, too, leav-

ing a respectable gap between them. “I hear you disobeyed a retreat order.”

“Yeah, to kill three titans, one an abnormal. They would have wiped out my team if I hadn’t.”

Erwin pulled a flask out of his cloak and held it out.

Levi studied it for a moment, then gingerly curled his fingers around it and drew it to his nose to sniff it.

“It isn’t poisoned,” Erwin said, with a hint of amusement that made Levi’s blood boil.

“I know that. You assholes need me alive.” It smelled of alcohol and fruit. “Apple cider?”

“Pear. It’s probably lukewarm by now, but it should still taste pleasant. My Squad Leader brought me a drink when I was punished for disobeying bad orders, once upon a time. I thought it appropriate to continue the tradition.”

The drink was sweet, and warm enough that he felt heat deep in his chest. “Can’t picture you disobeying orders.” He realized, even as he said the words, that Erwin was exactly the type of man to disobey a bad order. Hell, he was the type of man to disobey a bad order and somehow convince his superior the disobedience had been their idea in the first place.

“My situation was almost the same as yours. The Commander ordered a retreat, but I saw a titan bearing down on my Squad Leader. I broke rank and saved his life.” Erwin stared into the fire, his face relaxed in a manner Levi had never seen before. “The military only works because everyone respects the chain of command. That is vital. But a rare handful of soldiers have the life experience and instinct necessary to make their own decisions.” His eyes focused on Levi, who felt a chill run through him again. “You’re one of those soldiers, Levi. That’s why I recruited you. Your instincts are a gift. I always want you to trust them, even if others don’t understand your actions.”

“Will I end up doing shitty night watches every time?” Levi said.

“Not once I’m Commander.”

Maybe it was his unwavering certainty that this would come to pass, or maybe just the drink, but Levi's chest glowed. "You should be Commander now."

After a pause, Erwin turned to him. "What makes you say that?"

"Anything the Survey Corps has ever done correctly has been your idea." Levi took another swig, and the glow prompted him to add, "Besides, it's what my instincts tell me."

Erwin studied him for a moment longer, then turned to look at the fire with a gentle smile. Levi stared at the smile and wondered if it was an illusion of the flickering light, or if Erwin Smith really was capable of softness.

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### *-year 860-*

"I'M SORRY," HANGE says again. "I didn't mean to upset you. I didn't know."

The campfire fades into lamplight, and the carriage's rattle rises around Levi. *Your instincts are a gift.* He remembers Erwin's voice so clearly now ...

"Levi, please talk to me." Hange crosses the carriage to sit by him.

It's the first time they have come out of their shell all morning, so he should acknowledge them, but he would rather slip deep into his memories. He's still raw from last night's conversation. He closes his eyes and wraps Erwin's jacket tighter around himself.

Hange is terrible at taking a hint; they lean closer. "You were always together, and he left everything to you. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have assumed."

"I don't want to talk about this," he says, hoping a scrap of conversation will silence them again.

"It's just ... I wanted at least one of us to have found some

glimmer of happiness in all we went through.”

The unexpected quietness in their voice prompts him to open his eyes. His sympathy wars with his foul mood for a moment, and then he says, “We did find something close to happiness. You enjoyed your research so much that you forgot to bathe for days on end. I found purpose in being Erwin’s right hand.”

“That’s not what I meant by happiness.”

“I *was* happy.” He stares at the lamp again, feeling the glow of Erwin’s smile. “Content, anyway. I thought Erwin was, too, until he started to show what was happening under the surface.”

“After the revolution.” They’ve talked about this before.

“I couldn’t protect him from the sadness eating away at him. I didn’t notice until he was wrapped too tightly in his own head. So, if you—” He jabs Hange’s thigh, “—have sadness eating away at you, don’t hide it from me.”

“I’m fine.”

“Yeah? You didn’t say goodbye to Historia or Mikasa. I didn’t even get to finish my breakfast tea.” There’s no response, so he adds, “It was good tea.”

Hange leans their head against his shoulder and is quiet for a while, which could mean thoughtfulness or sleep. He’s beginning to think it’s the latter when their voice says softly, “Did you ever want anything different from him?”

He feels a tempting swell of defensiveness, but being an asshole isn’t going to help Hange. He’s not going to ignore a dear friend’s sadness, never again. “I was content with what we had.”

“Do you think he wanted more?” There’s a hint of desperation to Hange’s voice that he can’t quite read.

“He wanted something. Don’t know what. Did I ever tell you about the book of stationery I found after he died?” He knows for a fact he has never mentioned it to anyone, but he needs to pretend this is a casual conversation, or he’ll retreat from it.

“No,” Hange says. “What was it?”

“It was in his desk drawer, fancy paper with gold foil along the borders. He’d used up most of it—all that was left were unfinished letters. Most had spelling mistakes or ink blotches. I guess he was too meticulous to send imperfect letters to investors.”

“He did have good attention to detail,” Hange says, then adds, almost absently: “They both did.”

So, that’s the desperation he was picking up on: they want to talk about Moblit. He should shift the conversation toward him, but his story has momentum, and it’s already spilling out of him. “I flipped through the pages and found a letter dated two days before the Shiganshina reclamation. All it said was *Dear Levi, I wish to explain to you*. I turned the page, and there was another: *My Dearest Levi*, and that’s it. Next page, *Dear Levi, after all we’ve been through together, I feel I owe you my honesty, and perhaps it’s unfair to burden you with*. And another, and another. All end abruptly before he got to the point.” There are eight in total, and he can quote them verbatim. He pulls the jacket tighter around his shoulders. “I thought maybe there was a finished version waiting somewhere. I yanked open the desk drawers, checked for false bottoms, checked under the desk. I shook out every book in those bookcases. Nothing. I hoped he’d included it with his will, but he hadn’t. Seems he never finished it.”

“What do you think he was trying to tell you?”

“I don’t know. We had an argument that night, so maybe it was an apology. Or maybe it had something to do with his dream. Whatever it was, he clearly wanted to speak to me on a personal level, but, in the end, decided he couldn’t. I thought ...” His throat catches. “I thought we were closer than that.”

“It was hard—we were all keeping our distance from each other a bit. We had to.” After a moment, Hange adds, “I didn’t even know Moblit had a sister. I found out the day I read his will. How could that be? We saw each other day in and day out for years, and I didn’t know the most basic things about him.”

Levi realizes he doesn’t know if Erwin had any siblings,

either. He assumes it was just father and son. Hell, the only reason Erwin knew about Levi's mother was because it was pertinent information when Kenny died. It wasn't as if either of them was withholding any information; it just never came up.

The letter was different. Whatever Erwin wanted to say, he actively chose to silence himself.

"It seems so foreign now," Hange continues. "Feeling like we had to protect ourselves like that. But at the same time, I don't think I ever shook the habit."

"Yeah." This is still a difficult discussion after so long sharing a house, a garden, meals, late night conversations. Maybe it's not too late to correct that. Other than Erwin, he has never known friendship like Hange's. "What happened with the person you were trying to impress last night?"

A soft puff of air leaves Hange's nose. "I realized we had nothing in common. He asked what I do for work, and I faltered and couldn't figure out how to recover. He wouldn't have the faintest idea what I'm talking about, and there's no way to explain it to him without revealing everything we've sworn to keep buried. That was when I realized I have nothing of note outside my work. In the eyes of most of the population, my day-to-day life doesn't exist."

"I thought maybe you missed Moblit."

Hange is quiet for several beats, then says, "And you?"

"Me?"

"I saw you kissing a handsome fellow on the dance floor, but you were with Mikasa a few minutes later."

Levi shrugs it off, but he feels a pang of regret for ditching Alec so suddenly. The pang dulls as he recalls the clarity of Erwin's voice in the alcove, in the dream. "Hey, Hange?"

"Yeah?"

"Erwin was definitely dead when we left him, right?"

"What?" Hange pulls back to give him a concerned look. "Levi, what kind of question—"

"I know. Don't worry, I know," he says, but he's not sure he

does.

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OVER THE NEXT several days, he buries himself in routine: clear leaves off Erwin's memorial stone, hunt, garden, visit the stone again, rest by the fire, sleep.

Speaking to the memorial is uncomfortable now. The titan dreams haven't stopped, and Erwin would be concerned about him putting too much stock in them. If there's anyone who understands the risks of getting too caught up in an obsessive line of thought, it's Erwin.

Levi *is* caught up in it, though. Every night, he sits by the fireplace with Hange, staring through a book instead of reading it. Erwin is a titan. Erwin is a titan, and he's calling for help through dreams.

One week after their return, he awakens to frost on the rotting leaves. A window is closing; soon there will be snow on the ground, and travel to Shiganshina will be difficult—if not impossible—until spring.

The urgency pushes his dreams into the daytime, and they blur with his waking hours. He checks the snares and smells the sulphurous scent of titans. He separates flesh from meat and sees Erwin's corpse.

One night, he splits a pumpkin and sees Erwin's titan grin splitting his face.

He grips the edge of the counter and tips forward over the pumpkin, squeezing his eyes shut. Why now? Why is he losing it now, so long after everything happened? He built a life for himself, found routine.

A hand grips his shoulder, and he hears Hange calling his name.

He doesn't dare turn around; he knows his face will show distress. "Dizzy. I must be coming down with something."

"You yelled Erwin's name."

He pushes himself upright. Strings of pumpkin innards hang from his hands, and his stomach lurches. “Fuck.”

After a long pause, Hange says, “Come sit down.”

They lead him to the living room and sit him in front of the fire, then return a minute later with a damp cloth and a glass of water. Levi gratefully cleans the pumpkin off his hands, then accepts the water. It’s cool against his throat; the knot there loosens.

Hange kneels on one knee in front of him, meeting his gaze with no judgement. “This anniversary is difficult.”

“It’s not just that.” Even though there’s only kindness on their face, he turns away. “Historia grabbed my arm, and since then, I’ve had visions and dreams of Erwin turning into a titan, begging me to help him.”

“What?”

He forces the words out: “Could Erwin be a titan?”

“He was dead, Levi.” Hange’s voice is gentle. “He had no pulse, no breath. His body was already cooling when we left him.”

“Eren was able to use the Coordinate a final time by holding hands with Historia. What if her touch triggered something in me, too? What if it connected me to him?”

“That seems unlikely. Eren and Historia’s actions were amplified by the Reiss family caverns.”

This is the grounding he needs. Logic and facts will keep him from getting lost in his dreams. He takes a long breath.

“Although ...” Hange’s brow furrows.

He deflates. “Although what?”

“We know there’s a special bond between Ackermans and the person they choose to protect—what if it functions in a similar way to the Eldian bond? If so, it’s possible Historia could augment that connection.”

“Stop.” He doesn’t need hope.

Hange squints for a moment, as if deep in thought, and then their face lights up. “Miche.”

“What?”

“I have to check my notes to be sure.” Hange jumps to their feet and strides to the staircase.

Levi tentatively follows. He hasn’t been downstairs in years. As he steps through the door at the bottom, he’s relieved to see Hange’s living quarters are neater than he feared. The books on the coffee tables and the desk are all neatly stacked. The bed is made. Through the open door at the end of the room, he can see Hange’s laboratory. There’s so much lab equipment that it looks disorganized to his untrained eye, but everything else is categorized and labelled on shelves and in drawers.

Hange hunches over the desk, flipping through a notebook. They stop and stab their finger into a page. “There. Castle Utgard. The 104th reported seeing titans that looked like Miche and his squad.”

Levi circles toward them, leaving a respectable distance between himself and a suspicious red-orange liquid in one of the test tubes. “Maybe the Beast Titan transformed Miche into a titan. No one was there when he died, so we don’t know what happened.”

“That’s what I always thought, but there were others—Nanaba, Gelgar—people who were seen being eaten. Moblit had a pet theory we never gave much thought, one he used to explain what happened to Connie’s village.” Hange’s eye scans the page as they speak. “We, as a society, always burn the dead within seventy-two hours; we’ve all accepted it as disease prevention, which makes sense. But what if it’s a holdover from before a previous memory wipe, something to protect us if the titans break through like they did in Trost?”

Levi isn’t following. “Get to the point.”

“Moblit’s theory was that titan infection was a disease that could be spread through a titan’s bite. After death, the disease would make the corpse’s cells expand in an exothermic reaction, not unlike yeast.”

“The serum comes from spinal fluid—”

“We know *shifter* abilities come from ingesting spinal fluid. I still haven’t been able to confirm the titan serums themselves are spinal fluid, and even if they are, that doesn’t rule out communicable disease as another mode of transmission. It could even explain the differences in behaviours we saw in different titan specimens.” Hange’s eye seems to be twinkling. “Maybe he was right, and I’ve been going about this all wrong. Maybe we need to be looking for some sort of antiviral compound? Or antifungal?” They flip through the pages, skimming the words.

“Miche’s squad died and appeared right away, not seventy-two hours later.”

Hange doesn’t look up. “Maybe the speed of transformation might depend on the site of the bite, or on how long the immune system can fight it before death occurs?”

“And Erwin died from the rocks the bestial titan was throwing at him, not being eaten—” Levi stops. “His arm.”

Hange turns to him as if remembering he is in the room, face softening. “This is all just wild conjecture. I’m grasping at straws. There was no indication Erwin was turning into a titan when we left him.”

But Levi spins on his heel and marches upstairs. Behind him, Hange calls his name. He passes through the shared floor, heading upstairs to his section of the house. There’s a closet at the end of the hall, one he hasn’t looked inside for a long time.

He throws the doors open. Two 3D manoeuvre gear apparati hang from hooks: his and Erwin’s. He was supposed to return both to the military, but procrastinated. No one will remember he has them, anyway.

He pulls down his gear and checks the gas; still full. He still has blades, too. He begins to buckle the straps over his pants, pulls off his jacket, then buckles the chest straps over his dress shirt. Even after all this time, his fingers move cleanly through the routine.

“Levi,” Hange says behind him. “What are you doing?”

“If he’s out there, I’ll find him. If not, I’ll find his corpse, and I’ll know I’m losing it.”

“You’re going back to Shiganshina? There are still titans outside Wall Rose—”

“Marley isn’t attacking anymore, so they’re randomly wandering, not coordinated. I can avoid them.” He clicks the blade scabbards into place. “Ymir told Eren being a mindless titan was a living nightmare, right? If Erwin’s a titan, then I didn’t save him—I sent him to an even worse hell. I can’t leave him there.” He inspects the blade handles and, finding them in satisfactory condition, turns to face Hange. “I need a canister of the serum we extracted from Eren.”

“What?” Hange’s face was pale, but now it’s turning red, brow slowly lowering. “We have a limited supply.”

“I know. I only need one.”

“You’re going to inject him with it?”

“I’m going to make him eat it.”

“We don’t know what it will do. Eren died without passing on his power, so it went to a random Eldian child. For all we know, his spinal fluid is no more useful than water.”

“If he’s a titan, and the fluid doesn’t turn him into a shifter, then I’ll kill him.” He tries to push past them to get to his bedroom, but Hange grips his shoulders.

“Levi. Think about this. You haven’t been combat-ready in years. You said yourself you’re physically weaker after Erwin died. Besides, you have no way to get over the Wall—”

“I’ll climb it with the 3DMG.”

“The Garrison will kill you on sight. You don’t have a horse on the other side, and if Marley finds out one of us has left the walls, they’ll consider it a breach of our agreement.” Hange’s eye is rimmed with tears. “Please, Levi, you have to think with your head and not your heart. I was just thinking aloud—you’re chasing after a dream.”

If he dies chasing a dream, it will be a fitting end.

Still, it’s true he hasn’t thought this through. If his visions

are true, then he has one chance to save Erwin. He must do everything possible to make sure his mission is successful. "Fine."

That night, he writes a letter to Historia and rides into town to hire a messenger.

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THE NEXT AFTERNOON, as he and Hange are tending to the garden, they see a white horse gallop up the path. Levi leans on the handle of his spade and watches Mikasa arrive. She's dressed in riding clothes, a narrow cap perched on her ponytailed head. She dismounts and they exchange nods of greeting; she hands him an envelope and a leather sack.

Hange takes Mikasa inside for a meal and some tea. Levi studies the envelope for a long time before he opens it. After basic pleasantries, Historia writes:

I UNDERSTAND YOUR REQUEST. IF I WERE IN YOUR SITUATION, I'D WANT TO KNOW FOR CERTAIN, AND NOTHING WOULD STOP ME. THE COMMANDER HIMSELF TURNED A GENEROUS BLIND EYE TO ME WHEN I INSISTED ON PUTTING MYSELF—THE LAST OF MY BLOODLINE—AT RISK IN THE FIGHT AGAINST MY FATHER. IN HIS HONOUR, I WILL GRANT YOU THIS FAVOUR, BUT UNOFFICIALLY. SURRENDER THIS LETTER TO MIKASA AFTER YOU HAVE READ IT.

GO BY NIGHTFALL AND PRESENT THE ENCLOSED SEAL AND ORDERS TO A GUARD NAMED BYERS. SHE IS LOYAL AND WILL BE DISCREET. IF YOU SURVIVE YOUR EXPEDITION AND RETURN, DO SO ONLY WHEN SHE IS ON SHIFT SO SHE CAN LET YOU BACK IN.

IF MARLEY FINDS OUT, I WILL CLAIM YOU FORGED THE SEAL, AND YOU WILL BE EXECUTED TO PROVE WE'RE UPHOLDING OUR AGREEMENT. BE CAREFUL, LEVI.

—HRH HISTORIA

He opens the sack to find a wax seal impressed on a violet ribbon, and a large light crystal from the Underground caverns.

As he enters the house, he sees Mikasa and Hange seated on the couch with tea, conversing like old friends.

He hands the letter to Mikasa. “I’m leaving tonight.”

Hange’s face falls. “Levi—”

“She gave me permission.”

“What?” Hange turns to Mikasa, as if seeking confirmation that the whole thing is ridiculous.

Mikasa studies her tea. “She seems to feel personally responsible for the visions in the first place.”

“They aren’t visions,” Hange says, voice rising. “They’re dreams and wishful thinking. You can’t rely on emotions over logic, Levi. That’s why you let him die in the first place.”

It’s a low blow, but not low enough to dissuade him. Levi strides upstairs and pulls on his gear. He throws a blanket into the sack, then returns to the kitchen to add some dried fruit and half a loaf of bread. As he fills his water canister, he hears the floorboards creak behind him.

“Please, Levi.” Hange’s voice is small, smaller than he has ever heard it.

He turns, and their eyes lock. “I’ve been waiting ten years to heal,” he says. “It’s not getting better. I need to do this.”

“I can’t lose you, too.”

The words sit in his stomach like ice. “I don’t plan on dying out there. I just need to see his remains for myself, one last time.”

Mikasa steps forward and gently places a hand on Hange’s shoulder, and Levi is struck by the role reversal from the rooftop ten years ago.

Hange must recognize it, too, because their head drops in defeat. “Tell me you loved him.”

He has rarely allowed himself to think the words, let alone

say them, but he doesn't hesitate. "Yeah."

"Tell me you'd find happiness with him if you had a second chance."

His throat constricts at the idea, and he can't find words. It's so much more complicated than a yes or no answer, but he can only manage a nod.

"Mikasa," Hange says, unmoving, "as Eren's living heir, do you consent to a portion of the remaining spinal fluid being used, should the need arise? This will be an ideal opportunity to test whether it can be used as a cure."

"How many vials do you have left?" Mikasa asks.

"Seven."

Mikasa looks at Levi, gaze piercing through him as cold and hard as a blade. "I believe we owe you one, Captain."

Hange presses the vial into Levi's palm. "If this works, we may be able to save the other remaining mindless titans."

His fingers coil around the vial. *Another serum ...* He shoves the thought aside. His only objective now is to find Erwin.

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HE AND HANGE exchange no words, just a hug that's a bit too tight and too long to be comfortable.

Levi rides to the gate without looking back. A Garrison soldier is sleeping in a chair.

"Hey," Levi says, halting the horse.

The guard doesn't move; a low snore slips from her mouth.

Levi dismounts and kicks the bottom of her boot. "Hey."

The guard blinks and sits up, rubbing her eyes. "What?" Her breath reeks of alcohol.

"Are you Byers?"

"Yeah."

Her lack of vigilance is understandable, but frustrating at the same time. He shoves the orders and royal seal at her. She

spits, then stands up—wobbly—and unrolls the scroll. As she reads, her eyes snap to him. “Guard Captain Levi.”

He interrupts her before her hands can move: “Don’t salute. No one can know I’m here.”

“What kind of order is this? No one’s been outside for more than a hundred years.”

His eyes narrow. “I can handle it. Are you on shift again tomorrow night?”

“Yes.”

“If I’m coming back at all, I’ll find you then.”

She studies him for a moment, then shakes her head, relenting. She signals to two other soldiers, and they begin to lower the elevator. She rides with him to the top of the wall. The breeze is strong up here, sweet with decaying leaves and grass. He feels a strum in his heart, a single note of a tune he had almost forgotten. He’s breathless when he speaks:

“Send them out of sight and lower me.”

“Sir.”

He expects another strum as the horse steps onto the soil outside Wall Rose, but instead, focus washes over him and pulls his spine straight. It’s been so long since he’s had a mission, a *purpose*. He retrieves the light crystal from his backpack to illuminate the overgrown path.

As the horse begins to trot, he finally allows himself to consider his ridiculous quest. He’s going to travel all the way to Shiganshina and, once he gets there, he’s going to willingly look at Erwin’s remains. He still gets constant, painful mental flashes of his body; how will he react when he sees an actual skeleton?

But his instincts are pulling him forward, and he will always follow his instincts. If Erwin were riding beside him, his eyes would soften the way they only did for Levi, and he’d tell him to trust himself.

He sees no titans during his journey, not even sleeping ones. Perhaps Eren turned them away with the Coordinate—they still don’t know how many of their goals he accomplished before

the ritual overwhelmed him. Or perhaps Marley called them back as part of the agreement. Whatever the case, it's astonishing how short this journey is when he's travelling alone. It's still the middle of the night when he reaches Wall Maria.

He pauses before the gate. Right around here is where Erwin prepared his strategy, where they had their final conversation as Erwin sat on a crate.

Levi is grateful for the darkness.

He dismounts and hitches the horse to a tree. The stench of sulphur hits his nose; he whirls and draws his blades.

A titan sprawls before him, eyes closed. He inches forward and holds out the light. It's sleeping. He doesn't recognize its face, but he feels a surge of energy anyway. There are still titans here after all.

He climbs through the rubble around the gate and steps into Shiganshina. In the moonlight, he sees vaguely humanoid figures slumped against buildings. More titans. He shines the light at them as he passes, hoping—and dreading—that he'll see one recognizable as Erwin, but none are familiar.

The street brings him to the building where they left Erwin. He shines the light to the upper floor.

The roof is missing; the top floor has crumbled.

His breath catches. Is this real? It doesn't feel real. He kicks open the door and takes the steps three at a time. He's running so fast that he almost doesn't see the drop ahead of him; he stops just in time to avoid plummeting through a gaping hole in the floor. The room where they left Erwin is missing. All the debris looks as if it has been blown outwards.

“Fuck.” His voice echoes off the walls. This is real. He sinks to a kneel, and the crumbled stone is painful and cold against his knees. He drags his fingertips through the rubble, feeling its sharpness. This is *real*.

But if Erwin was a titan, where did he go? If Levi can find him before the sun rises, he can easily administer the serum before the titans awaken.

He closes his eyes and fights to calm his breaths. *Your instincts are a gift. I always want you to trust them, even if others don't understand.*

Then it's Hange's voice that rises in his memory: *purpose appears to be linked to the titan form. Eren needs a purpose to transform. Connie's mother was able to communicate with him because her purpose was to welcome him home. Dinah Fritz was able to track down Grisha Yeager after saying she would find him.*

He opens his eyes and turns toward the neighbourhood where Eren Yeager once lived.

In the east, the sky begins to glow orange.

# ❧ Three ❧

## THE BEAST WITH THE GOLDEN HAIR

LEVI SPRINTS TOWARD the remains of the Yeager home. Dawn will bring the titans upon him, and with no support team to refill his gas, he must travel by ground to conserve his supply.

Although his stride is confident, hesitations swarm his mind. He's come this far on pure stubbornness, without really considering the implications of his quest. What if Erwin is alive? Another serum. Another choice.

The world back then was not one worth staying in, but things have changed. They have the truth now—well, some of them do—and they have secured temporary peace. He and Hange are content enough, or at least, they aren't struggling for survival, which is more than they ever had before. Surely Erwin could find something here the old world couldn't give him.

He rounds the corner to the Yeager home, and freezes.

A giant form blocks his path. The stench of sulphur fills his nostrils, and the hair on the back of his neck rises.

The titan doesn't move. They awaken at different paces, and there's enough light in the sky to stir the early risers, so he must be cautious. One soft foot at a time, Levi circles to the titan's head. Its face is pressed against the road, but Levi can see a dark blond undercut behind its ear, the hair above it matted and pale.

Levi's breaths are too loud, and he struggles to control them. This can't be him. Erwin's titan form would be like he was in life: imposing stature, broad shoulders, piercing gaze. This titan is a three-metre class with a jutting spine and rib cage. It's

curled on the road like a stray cat.

Levi sets his jaw. He needs to see its face. He can't use the serum unless he's certain it's him. A quick scan assures him that no other titans are within earshot, so he clears his throat. It takes two tries to find his voice:

“Hey. Titan.”

The titan doesn't move.

“Erwin.”

Nothing.

“Shit,” he mutters. He's going to have to wait until it wakes up. The nearest building has a chimney made of roughly hewn bricks; he is able to scale them without using any gas. He sits and his fingers curl into the bricks for reassurance. They're cold and firm and feel just as bricks should.

Ten minutes pass. Twenty. All sorts of emotions are knotting in his stomach, and he can't identify any of them. In the surrounding streets, other titans have begun to move, lumbering aimlessly between the buildings. They don't seem to notice him. He keeps them in his periphery, maintaining awareness, but his gaze stays fixed on the beast with the golden hair.

An hour passes. The last of his patience dissipates; he climbs down to the earth and stands in front of the titan. When it doesn't move, he kicks its arm.

“Hey, Erwin. Wake up.”

He has just enough time to register thick eyebrows, a sharp nose, and a hot blast of air as he leaps back. Teeth snap over the space where he stood. The titan's chin drops back to the ground with a reverberating thud. Then it lays there.

Levi stands coiled, blades drawn, his breaths heaving his entire frame. The titan stares at him with Erwin's eyes, and he tastes bile in the back of his throat.

“Why aren't you attacking me?” The words take on a frantic edge as he adds, “Do you recognize me?”

It stares at him dumbly. Levi looks beyond it and sees, for the first time, the drag marks in the dirt road behind it. He

relaxes out of his stance and sheathes his blades.

“You can’t walk, can you? You can barely move. Those limbs are too spindly.” Levi’s stomach drops. “Shit.” He didn’t just doom Erwin to a decade as a titan—he doomed him to a decade of starvation for an all-consuming goal he is incapable of reaching.

“You’re trying to get to the basement, aren’t you?”

He hoped for a spark of recognition, but its eyes are empty. Anger rises in his chest. How dare this beast look at him with Erwin’s eyes; how dare Erwin cheat the laws of death when Levi was only trying to—

He takes a deep breath.

Use the serum, or carve the nape. Those are his choices now. But even as he thinks it, he knows there’s no choice. It’s one thing to let a dying Erwin slip away, but another thing to murder him.

He pulls the vial of Eren’s spinal fluid out of his pack, and positions his fingers and thumb on the cap, ready to twist it open.

“Erwin, I’m going to try something. I don’t know if it will work, but it might make you human again.” He can’t stop his voice from catching on the words. “Don’t eat me.”

Maybe the titan is exhausted from its earlier advance, or maybe there was a spark of recognition after all; whatever the reason, its mouth lolls open as Levi steps closer.

With each step, Levi feels hope flood his muscles, warm and tingling. He stands straighter, his strides firm. This will work. It has to.

*Now!* He shoves his hand into its maw and twists open the cap. The massive teeth slam shut; Levi barely withdraws his hand in time. He uses a burst of gas to jet back to safety.

The titan stares at him, teeth clenched. Levi stares back, heart pounding.

It swallows, and yellow lightning splits the sky.

Levi hears himself holler. The steam is so hot that his eyes

flood with tears; he shields his face and pushes forward anyway.

*Did it work? Did it work?*

The steam begins to thin. A human-sized skeleton lays on the ground, organs blossoming in its abdomen, muscle fibres wrapping around the frame.

Levi kneels beside the healing figure and holds his breath as its heart begins to beat.

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IT TAKES ALMOST an hour for Erwin's body to regenerate, and the steam coming off him is unbearably hot. Levi sits on the rooftop again, attempting to keep watch, but the titans aren't paying them any attention, so his eyes keep drifting back to him.

His memories have warped Erwin's features over the years; the nose and cheekbones are even more severe than he remembered, the brows somehow too thick, yet tidy at the same time. His arms are both intact, as if the physical trials of the last few months of his life never happened at all. His skin, a bit worn but barely wrinkled, looks younger than Levi remembers. It could be because of the serum's healing powers, but it might be because thirty-eight seems younger now than it did ten years ago. His hands curl into the bricks again.

When the steam finally dissipates, Levi returns to Erwin's side and lays his fingers on the man's throat. His pulse is strong and even.

“Erwin. You awake?”

No response. A knot forms in Levi's throat. He was a titan for a long time, and this isn't the same as biting a shifter's spine. *What if the serum is restoring his body, but not his mind?*

He shoves his doubts aside. Steam puffs out of Erwin's nose with each breath, so he's clearly still healing. The most important thing now is to get him to safety.

His body is cool enough to carry. Levi wraps his cloak around Erwin and, with some difficulty, straps him to his back.

He tries not to think of Floch carrying the dying Commander, but old wounds are wide open now, and a tear trails down his cheek. He shoves the back of his hand across his eyes.

*You can break down later. Get him home first.*

The path back to his horse is clear. As he rides, sweat trickles down his back, and his cheeks are flushed from the unnatural heat behind him. The reins shake in his hands. He finds himself wishing they could come across an aggressive titan so he could carve it up and vent some of the confused energy that's rattling around inside him.

But the ride is uneventful, and he reaches the wall just as the sun is setting. The elevator is waiting for him. Drunk as she was, Byers must have remembered. He guides the horse onto it and pulls the bell cord.

Byers is waiting alone at the top of the elevator. She holds up a torch. "What the hell?"

Levi dismounts, and drops to one knee under Erwin's weight. Sweat drips off the tip of his nose. "You will not mention this to anyone."

"You found a guy out there?"

With a grunt, Levi pushes himself to his feet. "Yeah, I did. Do you have any spare uniforms I could put him in?"

"Not for a fellow that big. I can give you a cloak to go around his waist at least." Byers paces around them, holding up a torch. "Why is he naked? I don't understand—"

"You don't have to understand, you just have to keep your mouth shut." He hoists Erwin higher up his back, trying to get more comfortable; it doesn't work. "Can I trust you, Byers?"

"Of course. I gave you my word. Queen's orders, anyway." Byers peers at Erwin's face, and Levi halfheartedly waits for her to recognize him, but her expression doesn't change. "There others like him out there?"

"No," Levi says. "Nothing out there but titans."

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HE ARRIVES HOME shortly before midnight. Through the frame of the kitchen window, he sees Hange and Mikasa at the table, sipping tea over a burning candle. He pauses after dismounting and watches them for a moment. They don't realize how much everything is about to change.

He hitches the horse to the post, then opens the door.

Their eyes snap up. Levi can't look at them, because he'll fall apart if he sees their expressions. Instead, he cuts the straps and gently lowers Erwin to the floor, adjusting the cloaks on his body for modesty.

Hange shrieks and rushes forward, dropping to their knees by Erwin's head. "It worked? He's alive?" Their fingers seek Erwin's pulse, trembling.

"Maybe. Hasn't woken up yet. He's burning hot, so I think he's still healing."

Hange's other hand finds Levi's and squeezes. "I can't believe it worked. I can't believe he's here." A pause. "Are you okay?"

The words will undo him if he acknowledges them; Levi swallows a lump and shifts his gaze to Mikasa. She's standing at the table, face half-buried in her scarf.

He understands what it's like to see the death of a loved one give another a person a chance at life. "Mikasa—"

She cuts him off. "I see you left your horse at the post. I'll groom and stable her for you on my way out of town."

He nods, and even though he knows she doesn't want kindness, he is grateful enough to offer some. "We have room for you to stay the night."

"No, I've stayed long enough."

Hange looks up, eye glassy. "Thank you, Mikasa."

She nods, then pulls on her jacket. The door closes softly behind her.

Levi kneels beside Hange. Together, they stare at Erwin's face.

"He looks so young," Hange says softly. Their hand

smooths the blond hair off his forehead. “I can’t believe it worked.”

“Maybe it didn’t.”

Hange turns to him and smiles. “Still, doesn’t it feel nice to finally have something to hope for again?”

Levi swallows hard. “I should get him upstairs.”

He cradles Erwin in his arms—a bit awkwardly, given their size difference—and climbs the stairs sideways, careful not to jostle him or hit his head against the wall. He lays the man in the bed and pulls off his cloak, then drapes the covers over him. *Last time I did all this—* No, he still can’t think about that, even with a breathing Erwin before him.

He settles into a chair beside the bed, starting to rediscover the familiar aches of riding hard over wild land. Hange slips a thermometer under Erwin’s tongue and pulls out a stethoscope.

“We already know he’s too warm,” Levi says.

“I’m getting a baseline. We can check his temperature in the morning and see if it’s coming down.” Hange moves the thermometer around his chest. “His lungs are clear. Pulse is fast, but otherwise normal.” They turn to Levi. “You’re going to sleep here tonight, aren’t you?”

Levi shrugs, even though they both know the answer is yes.

“Yell for me if anything changes. Or if you just need company.” Hange pulls a blanket off the foot of the bed and drapes it around him, then pauses. “If you’d be more comfortable on the floor, I have an old bedroll.”

“The chair is fine.” He’s already struggling to keep his eyes open, anyway. There’s still that knot of emotions in his stomach to work through, but he’s not ready to untangle that yet.

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FOR THE FIRST time in months, there are no nightmares,

no dreams at all. He awakens to the sight of sunlight spilling across Erwin's face and body, lighting his hair a fiery gold.

Levi stares at him for a moment, then reaches out a hand and rests it on Erwin's forehead. His skin is cooler than before, but still unnaturally warm.

That's the only change in his condition that day. Levi doesn't leave Erwin's side except to wash his hands before he eats the tea and food Hange kindly brings him. This situation reminds him of every other time Erwin was injured, but this time, there's no doctor to give him a prognosis, just Hange checking vital signs. At least infection isn't a concern, and it appears dehydration isn't, either.

He falls asleep in the chair late that night, and awakens the next morning to see nothing has changed. His hope begins to waver.

Hange steps into the room that afternoon and lays folded clothing on the bed. "It's not his style, but they should fit."

Levi runs his fingers across the wool sweater. It's plain, but the same colour as Erwin's eyes. "You went into town?"

"No, just to the outpost to get some supplies and food."

"We needed food," Levi says, realizing that he hasn't been holding up his end of their unspoken living arrangement. "I should go hunting." The thought of leaving Erwin's side makes his head throb.

Hange checks Erwin's temperature. Their lips purse. "Normal."

"Does that mean he's done healing?" Levi leans forward. There's no movement behind the man's eyelids, no change in his breathing pattern. His heart sinks. "I brought back a shell."

Hange places their hands on his shoulders. "You need to get out of the house."

The proximity is too much for him, and he knocks a hand away. "You just want meat."

"If that was it, I would have hunted some myself. You haven't eaten well or had a good sleep in too long. At least get

some fresh air to clear your head.” Hange squeezes his shoulder, then leaves the room.

It really has been too long since he left the chair. Levi stands up to stretch; his knees creak, and his back twinges. On top of his aches, he feels grimy, and his hair is oily and stringy. He could use a shower and a shave.

He lays his hand on Erwin’s forehead, checking his temperature, then finds himself reluctant to pull away. “You know, it’s getting pretty boring watching you sleep.”

There’s no indication the man heard him, and tears well up in Levi’s eyes. He bows his head.

“You can’t keep coming back from the dead but further away from me each time.” He closes his eyes. “I can’t do this again, Erwin.”

He feels a flicker of shame, and opens his eyes. “Look, don’t listen to me; I’m just pitying myself. Just wake up, okay?”

As he steps out of the room, the bond with Erwin is almost physical—he swears he can feel it straining and stretching between them. He forgot about the strength of this bond, this constant and instinctive awareness of where Erwin is in relation to him at all times.

The air outside is brisk and smells of smoke. Wet leaves slide beneath his boots, and his breath is visible in puffs that remind him of the steam curling off Erwin’s body. He half-heartedly begins to set a trap. Maybe tomorrow he’ll hunt a deer and they can have venison until Erwin is well, if he ever—

His teeth clench and he jerks the rope so hard that the trap fails. Cursing under his breath, he unties it and starts over.

His trap-setting circuit brings him past the memorial stone. He pauses, wondering if it would be even more ridiculous than usual to speak to the stone now that Erwin is upstairs.

“I helped you,” he says finally. “I listened to those stupid dreams. So wake up.”

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*THE SCREAM SLICED through him, flooding his veins with something hot and molten and urgent. A sea of stars spread before him, and a familiar voice spoke:*

*“It worked! Commander—”*

*But then he is tumbling, stretching, and his mouth fills with earth, and he needs to move forward, he needs to move forward—*

Erwin's eyelids part. He blinks, adjusting to the light.

What is this place? He registers the details without thinking the words: a small room with wooden walls and polished brass torch fixtures by the door. A dark wooden wardrobe, a side table, a padded red chair, and the bed where he lies. The curtains are drawn; yellow light peeks through the crack between them.

He doesn't know where he is, but he has to get there—but he doesn't know where *there* is, either. He tries to push himself to a seat and discovers that his right arm won't move. But that's expected, isn't it? Why is that expected? He looks down at it, and it takes a minute for his eyes to focus. There's something not right about this arm, something foreign.

A pile of clothing sits on the side table. He reaches out his good arm to examine the clothing; it's as unfamiliar as the room. He pulls the blue sweater over his head. It's soft and warm. The pants are a dull brown and look too big, but they're comfortable, too.

He struggles to his feet to fasten the pants, and finds his hips and knees won't cooperate. After wobbling on his legs for a moment, he manages to find his balance and finishes dressing. He staggers to the wardrobe.

The clothes inside are significantly smaller than the ones he's wearing, except for one suit jacket. He runs his fingers over the black fabric, and a name rises through the fog.

“Levi.”

Words begin to form in his consciousness. Levi, his loyal Captain. This isn't what Levi's room looks like, is it? He presses through the haze in his mind, searching for memories. No, the

room was older than this, part of a larger—a base. The Survey Corps.

*Commander.*

That's right. "Commander Erwin Smith," he murmurs. He can wiggle the fingers of his right arm now, but not much more. Didn't a titan eat this, or was that some sort of dream?

Levi will know. Levi will help him. He moves to the door—his gait has loosened into a limp now rather than a stagger. There are two more rooms on this floor: a bathroom, and what appears to be a small gym or training room. Levi is in neither. Erwin proceeds down the stairs, gripping the dark handrail to keep his balance.

The scent of cooking vegetables greets his nose, and he's suddenly aware of a hunger, but it's not the all-consuming hunger he's been feeling for some indeterminate time before this. He almost turns to the kitchen, but something is pulling him outside, and he's so accustomed to following his instincts that he keeps going. A pair of boots in the entrance are about his size, and he pulls them on.

The sky is yellow with late afternoon light, and the cool air seeps through his sweater and bites his skin. Even the forest is unfamiliar, and there are no other buildings in sight, just a dirt road that extends over a hill in the distance. In spite of it being unknown, it's pleasant, and he pauses for a moment to breathe, grounding himself in the scent of chimney smoke and cold earth.

When he rounds the corner of the house, he sees a small clearing with a fire pit containing a small fire, and a work table covered with knives. Beyond it, beneath a large oak tree, a man stands with his back to him.

Erwin stops. The shape is Levi, he's certain, but his shoulders are stooped and his frame, somehow, looks smaller than he remembers. Erwin's heart feels brittle; he can't quite remember why.

He takes a step forward, soundless in the damp leaves.

Levi's spine straightens, but he doesn't turn. Somehow, he has sensed Erwin's presence.

Erwin moves closer, slowly, and stops behind him, close enough to reach out and grip his shoulders. Levi still hasn't turned, but at this proximity, Erwin can see the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. His eyes drift down Levi's body to his feet, and he sees that he's standing in front of a small stone marker.

"Levi." His voice is clumsy.

The shoulders rise with a breath, then release. Slowly, Levi turns.

He's older; Erwin notices right away. There are creases in the corners of his face where there weren't before, and sun damage freckles his cheeks and forehead. His hair is so heavily peppered with white strands that it has taken on the colour of stone.

His eyes show it the most. They're somehow glassy and dull, vulnerable and harder. Erwin's breath catches. It suits him and it's heartbreakingly all at once.

Their gaze holds. Levi reaches a hand toward him, but hesitates, and it curls away. He closes his mouth and his throat bobs.

"Erwin?"

But before either of them can say another word, the ground tilts. Erwin lands roughly on all fours. This is so familiar, the scent of earth, the unresponsive limbs ...

A hand grips his shoulder. He manages to lift his head and sees Levi kneeling beside him.

"You should be resting." There's an unusual softness in his tone, and Erwin feels its warmth soak through him.

"Can you stand?" Levi adds.

He struggles to rise, then falls to one knee. "No."

"Here." This time, Levi grips his arm and hoists him to his feet. "Lean on me. You're still recovering."

"From an injury?" But as Erwin asks, his eyes land on the

memorial stone, on the name carved there. He reads it twice, three times, and his knees buckle. “Why is my name—”

“Hey.” Levi holds him upright. “You’re okay. We’ll explain everything to you.”

“That’s a memorial stone, isn’t it? Why—”

“You’re okay,” Levi says, harder. “Trust me.” His grip is so firm that it’s digging into his ribcage.

Their eyes lock again. Maybe it’s Erwin’s imagination, but there’s a light in the grey eyes that wasn’t there a moment ago.

“I trust you,” Erwin says.

Levi breaks eye contact, but not before Erwin sees his expression soften. “Let’s get you inside.”

# ∞ Four ∞

## THREADS AND SEAMS

LEVI WRAPS HIS arm tightly around Erwin's ribcage, and he swears he can feel the beating heart of the man he thought he lost. Erwin's body still radiates too much heat, but he is alive and they are walking in unison once again. *Well, staggering in unison.*

He isn't sure how he keeps the frayed edges of his voice together as he says, "We're almost there."

Erwin doesn't reply; every bit of his energy seems to be going into placing his footsteps. They approach the house and Levi braces Erwin's weight against his shoulder, awkwardly leaning forward to open the door.

The light inside glows orange, mirroring the warmth that has overcome his body. "Easy," he murmurs to Erwin as he guides him over the threshold.

"Levi?" Hange's voice sounds from the kitchen, moving closer. "Did you get—" A bespectacled face pops around the corner, then their mouth drops open.

Erwin pronounces the name as if he has solved a difficult equation: "Hange."

Hange launches at Erwin. He staggers under their hug, and Levi strains to hold up the weight of two people.

"Knock it off," Levi grunts. "He can barely stand."

But Hange doesn't seem to hear; their arms are tight around the man's waist. "Erwin. You're back." They pull back to cup his jaw. "I can't believe it. Let me take a look at you." They tug at his lower eyelid, peering into his eyes. "That's good; your pupils are evenly sized—"

“Stop it,” Levi mutters. “Give him a few minutes before you start dissecting him.”

“It’s okay,” Erwin says softly, and the deep voice rumbles through Levi’s body so fiercely that it takes him a moment to find his voice again:

“You need to sit down. Four-eyes, help me get his boots off.” The nickname hasn’t left his mouth since Erwin died, and he freezes, but Hange just laughs it off and taps their eyepatch.

“Just Two-eyes now, remember?”

He knows exactly why he’s regressing: Erwin’s presence is weaving together the two ends of their separation like a thread and pulling it taut, folding the past decade out of view. It doesn’t seem real, here, straddling that seam, that Erwin was ever gone. It doesn’t seem real that he’s back.

The two of them guide Erwin to the living room couch. Hange lights the fireplace, while Levi pulls a thick blanket of grey wool out of the chest in the corner. He drapes it over Erwin’s frame, so much broader and longer than he remembers. The impression wasn’t the same when he was prone and hidden by a quilt. Erwin Smith is a statue of a man.

That statue looks around, evidently taking everything in with that quiet but piercing way of his, and Levi follows his gaze. This room has always been Levi’s favourite part of the house; it showcases the years of cooperation between him and Hange. In the early days, the two of them distracted themselves from their grief by hammering the dark wood onto the walls. Later, they scoured the shops and markets in town for rustic furniture in earthen tones. Bookshelves line the back wall; some shelves contain Hange’s textbooks, and others hold small pottery treasures the two of them have acquired in Mitras. Historia developed a pottery habit while exploring activities for her orphans.

The proudest feature in this room is the fireplace. The stones came from the riverbed near Shiganshina; one of the nobles had a stash of materials left over from before Wall Maria

fell. The two of them spent their second summer here splitting rocks, sometimes chatting about new gardening or hunting techniques they had picked up from the locals, but mostly enjoying the silence and sunshine together.

There's a houseplant in the corner that almost died many times in the early days, but now stands taller than Levi. Several small potted herbs line a shelf, positioned to catch the sunlight from the window. The scent of mixed spices mingles with wood, old books, and the fire. It's the first time Levi has ever lived somewhere with a comfortable smell—the Underground stank of shit, the barracks of stale sweat and old leather. It's home.

The fire catches, and he shifts the kindling and logs to coax it to grow. His hands are trembling so badly that he has to use two hands on the poker.

Erwin's voice sounds behind him: "I've never been here before, have I? Or have I just forgotten?"

"No," Levi confirms. "This is your first time."

Hange adds hesitantly, "How much has Levi told you?"

"Nothing." Levi sets the poker back in its stand, the vibrating metal ringing out his nervousness to the room. Behind him, Hange has settled on the armchair, so he takes his place on the couch next to Erwin.

He knows his posture is stiff, but he can't relax. It has been several minutes since Erwin woke up, and he still hasn't asked how he came to be unconscious, or demanded a status update. An Erwin not immediately wanting to know about their situation is an Erwin who knows something is seriously wrong, who isn't ready to confront it yet.

For a moment, the three of them are silent, watching the flames lick along the wood.

Hange stands. "I was in the middle of preparing dinner. You two have a lot to talk about." They give Levi a knowing look, then disappear into the kitchen. Levi appreciates the space, but he isn't sure what to do with it.

Neither, apparently, is Erwin. "Nice place you two have

here."

It's such a strange and polite phrase. Levi finds his voice again. "Hange found a cheap dump, and we fixed it up together. Close to Mitras, but quiet."

"I never saw you as the type to want to live away from the city."

"I wasn't." Levi studies the square designs on the wool blanket on Erwin's lap. Historia's orphans knit it for them as a gift, and it's a mishmash of different patterns and quality. The orphans were the only comfortable company for the four of them during that first year. Everyone else was unnatural around them, eyebrows pinched as if they were trying to solve a puzzle.

Erwin has that same expression now, too. Levi wants to help him fill in the gaps, but he's frozen. He has imagined so many variations of this conversation that he can't decide where to start.

He lands on, "How do you feel?"

"I don't know. I can't seem to catch my bearings." Erwin pauses. "And I'm a bit warm."

"You're probably still healing inside," calls Hange's voice from the kitchen. "We can't see the steam, but it's likely still there."

"Steam," Erwin repeats, slowly, as if turning the word over and over in his mind.

Levi falls back on protocol. "I need to give you a status update."

"Perhaps that should wait. Why don't you show me around while I get my bearings?" Erwin pushes himself to his feet, too eager, as if running from the conversation.

"Whoa, whoa—" Levi immediately leaps upright, reaching for him.

"It's all right, Levi. I'm feeling more sturdy now." He takes a tentative step, and his balance really does look better.

"Hold on," Hange calls from the kitchen. "I'll join you." They bound into the room and take Erwin by the elbow. Levi is

about to protest that the man needs to rest, but they are already moving.

They approach the narrow staircase to the basement. Levi walks closely behind Erwin, keeping a sharp eye on him in case his balance fails.

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**ERWIN BARELY DUCKS** his head in time as they climb down the stairs; the roof is low. His mind is already jumbled and loud enough without accidentally knocking his head into the ceiling. *Is that what this is? Am I concussed?*

The doorway at the bottom of the staircase opens into a laboratory, with a long table that's surprisingly organized, contrary to what his foggy brain recalls of Hange. Maybe they were always too rushed and busy to tidy up. Maybe there is time now.

*Why would there be time? Are the titans gone? What is this place?*

He steps forward, stooped. The bookshelves here look like the ones in the living room, but these are filled with hand-written notebooks. The majority of them are military-issued; this must be titan research. That, at least, is familiar.

One notebook is open at the end of the table, next to a series of beakers. A syringe lies next to them. He leans over the syringe, trying to recall what was so important—

“Spinal fluid,” Hange says.

“Eren’s,” Levi adds, and then they’re both silent.

Eren—that’s right, the boy who could turn into a titan. The key to humanity’s hope ... the key ...

Memories flood his mind, and he gasps for air like he’s drowning. The basement. The boy who could turn into a titan, the coup, the final battle for Shiganshina, and a barrage of rocks.

A silence blankets the room. He leans against the table, bringing himself back under control.

For a moment, he debates which question to ask. “Is he alive?”

Levi’s face twists, and he gives an almost imperceptible shake of his head.

“During Shiganshina?” Since Levi won’t meet his gaze, Erwin shifts to Hange, but finds them looking fixedly at the table.

Well, if they aren’t ready to talk, he won’t force them. He forces a gentle smile to his lips. “I know these memories must be difficult to revisit. We can discuss this later, if you prefer.”

“I imagine some things will make themselves known before then,” Hange says. “It’s difficult for us to escape our past, even here.”

Levi’s gaze is still low, and Erwin can’t read his expression.

Instead, seeking a distraction for all of them, Erwin steps around the table. He was never a good student of chemistry, so the contents of the test tubes are lost on him. The syringe resting on the notebook looks identical to the one they recovered from Kenny Ackerman. He has read Hange’s research notes before, but they were always neatly organized and carefully diagrammed —this hand is messier, the images crude. This is how he discovers Moblit is gone.

“How many?” he asks softly, his stomach sinking into a pit.

“How many what?”

“How many soldiers died in Shiganshina?”

Hange’s face is pale; Levi slumps against the wall.

“Like you said, we’ll discuss it later.” Hange gently reaches across the table and closes the notebook.

The adjoining room is a bedroom, with a large bed and surprisingly luxurious bedding.

“Historia thought the castle bedding was too soft and frilly, so she gave it to us,” Hange says.

Us. Erwin shifts his gaze between the two of them as it dawns on him that they are living here, together, alone. *Ah.* He should feel happy for them, the dearest people on the planet to him.

“There’s a small bathroom there,” Hange says, pointing to a closed door. “Otherwise, that’s pretty much everything down-stairs. Shall we show you the upstairs?”

Levi is still curled tightly into himself against the wall, and Erwin glances at him with concern.

“You go first,” Levi says, nodding at the stairs. “I’ll follow in case you fall.”

Their eyes lock.

“Come on,” Hange calls, already on the next floor.

In spite of Erwin’s earlier confidence about his recovery, his breath flags as he climbs the stairs, and he is reassured by Levi’s presence behind him. He leans against the kitchen table for support and looks around. The kitchen is surprisingly spacious, with glowing lights that don’t appear to be candles or oil. He walks up to one to examine it, and a memory floats to the surface. “The Underground crystals.”

“Yes. Brighter than lamps, so it’s easier to see what I’m doing.” Hange taps the cheekbone below their good eye. “I don’t see as well as I used to. But—” They pop open the oven door. “I can see this meat needs basting. One moment.”

“You’re cooking?” Erwin says with surprise, and he reflects that he has not yet recovered his politeness. Luckily, Hange doesn’t take offense.

“I enjoy it. I’m not so much a fan of hunting, so Levi tends to do that.”

“You’re a better cook than me,” Levi says. “I can only do stews or roast fish.”

“Well, cooking and baking are just science, at their base. And hunting is carving titans, at its base. I guess we didn’t change all that much.” The oven door closes. “Done. Let’s continue the tour.”

Erwin has already seen the living room, but he spots one item he didn’t notice before. The mantle holds an empty picture frame. He walks up to it. It’s broken.

Hange steps in beside him, voice low. “There was a

picture in there, a lovely piece of art. I drank too much a few years ago, and ripped it out and threw it in the fire. And then it was gone, and I can never get it back. The frame is all I have left."

He understands now that Moblit died a long time ago. The pit in his stomach is churning and hot. "I'm sorry."

"Don't feel too badly for me—it was my own dumb fault." He can't tell if they mean the frame or Moblit's passing. "Levi, let's show him upstairs."

This set of stairs is more difficult; he reaches for the handrail to haul himself along—at least, he tries to, but his right arm refuses to move. He stops and stares down at the limp arm for a moment. Wasn't this arm missing? A suspicion is forming deep within him.

"Erwin?" Hange asks gently.

He gathers his strength and continues up the stairs.

At the top, he finds himself near the doorway of the room he woke up in. It's the only other bed in the house, and the room is so starkly furnished that it can't possibly be lived in. It confirms what he already suspected, and he swallows a lump in his throat. He mentally runs through a few congratulations for the couple, trying to find a version that won't reveal his selfish emotions.

The last room is the gym-like room he saw earlier. What catches his eyes this time is Levi's cloak and 8DMG gear, hanging on the wall. Without thinking, he reaches out to touch the cloak. It's dirty.

"We have to tell him," Hange says firmly to Levi. "We can't keep dancing around everything."

"I know." Levi's voice is quiet. When Erwin turns to him, their gazes lock again. Erwin has seen him sad before, but not like this. He looks hollow, as if his insides are caving in and he's barely holding his outer shell together.

They return to the living room and settle on the couch, Hange on the chair. The fire is crackling now, radiating comfortable heat. Erwin settles against a cushion, positioning

himself so he can see both of them. His right arm still won't move on its own, so he places it comfortably on his lap.

For a long time, no one speaks, so he breaks the silence.

"Thank you for showing me around your home. I'm very happy for the two of you."

"Thank you," says Hange, but Levi sits forward, eyes narrow.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm happy that, through everything you've been through, you've been able to find happiness together," he says, trying with every ounce of his soul to believe the words he's saying.

Hange barks out a laugh, and Levi looks as if he has tasted something sour.

"We aren't together," Hange says, still chuckling. "Not like that, at least."

"Disgusting," Levi mutters, and Hange shoots him a playfully unimpressed look.

"Well," Erwin says, his heart suddenly lighter, "I'm glad you have each other, all the same. I can't imagine things have been easy. Maybe this is a good time to talk about what happened."

"Yes." Hange appears to be fishing for words, but Levi takes a deep breath and opens his mouth.

"You were dead," he blurts.

"Levi, ease him into it," Hange scolds, but the words have already sunk into him.

*You were dead.*

The stone marker beneath the trees, their age difference, the holes in his memory.

*You were dead.*

He smells the earth, feels it fill his mouth, burns with the overwhelming need to crawl, to reach the basement. His right arm is aflame.

He manages to get a breath of air. "Tell me everything."

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**-year 850: Mitras-**

LEVI SAT ON the stairs outside the Military Police headquarters, watching the leaves detach from the trees and float to the cobblestone—red, orange, yellow, brown. *Everything dies. Everything falls.* His formal jacket was too tight; maybe he had gained weight now that they were no longer doing expeditions. He doubted that would last long. He had barely eaten since these stupid negotiations had begun.

“Levi.” Hange’s voice. He turned and saw them standing in the doorway of one of the side chambers.

With a grumble, he heaved himself to his feet and approached.

“Be civil,” hissed Hange as he passed.

But the second he saw the man known as Zeke Yeager, there was no hope for composure. Levi strode up to the table and kicked its leg; everyone around him jumped. A wobbling glass toppled over and began to roll across the table.

“I still don’t believe we’re going to trust this piece of shit,” he spat.

The glass fell to the ground and shattered. Zeke recoiled at the noise, but then recovered and gave a bright grin. “Captain Levi. How kind of you to finally join us.”

“I should cut you down right here. No one could stop me.”

“Levi,” Hange warned, voice an octave lower than usual. They gestured at a tall woman seated next to Zeke. She had blonde hair in a jarring blunt cut.

“Yelena,” Hange introduced. “And this is Pieck.” Pieck was a small girl with dark hair on Zeke’s other side; she eyed him warily.

Levi’s vision clouded red, but a clear voice saying his name behind him caught his attention. He turned to see Historia in her full regalia. Her smile was sad, as if sympathetic to his

situation, and that was almost worse than Hange's fake indifference.

"Please, Captain, have a seat," the queen said. "We've found a way to end the conflict with no bloodshed. Isn't that what the Commander would have wanted?"

The words, carefully weaponized, stabbed directly through his heart, but he only said, "Erwin would have wanted the people to know the truth," then sat.

Eren, Armin, and Mikasa were seated further down the table, along with Zackly, Pixis, and Nile. None of the Paradisians were making eye contact with him. Hange settled into a seat beside Levi and gave his thigh a peeved jab beneath the table.

"Thank you for choosing civility, Levi," Zeke said pointedly. "We thought it was important for you to be here for the final decision. To catch you up, Marley has reviewed your terms, and we accept the following conditions: in exchange for the safe return of Annie Leonhardt and unlimited access to the natural gas deposits under your island, we will grant you the full protection of Marley for 100 years, at which point our nations can meet again to re-negotiate. There is, however, one additional term on which we will not budge." He leaned forward with a grin, an ape baring its teeth. "All shifters must be turned over to Marley by the end of this month."

"What?" Levi turned to look at the young trio across the table. Eren was sitting tall, jaw jutting with resolution. So. He agreed to this plan. Armin hunched in his seat. Mikasa sat between them, carved in stone. It appeared she, like Levi, was restraining her instincts with every bit of her soul.

"If," continued Zeke, "the shifters do not agree to swear loyalty to Marley, they will be forcibly stripped of their titans. Furthermore, in the case where a titan is lost by Marley and reborn to a newborn within the walls of Paradis, you will hand over that infant as soon as they are identified. Yelena will be visiting your island every month to gather gas supplies from the new pipelines and collect a status report. If we suspect you are

attempting to conceal titan shifters, we will consider the whole deal void and obliterate you.”

“This sounds more like a series of threats than a negotiation,” Levi muttered.

“Finally,” Zeke added, as if he didn’t hear him, “your people are not to leave the walls. No more Survey Corps, no more talk of moving beyond Wall Rose. We can’t have them forming a rebellion against us.”

“People will always want to break free,” Levi said, incredulous.

Eren’s voice was heavy: “We’re going to erase their memories.”

Levi turned to him, certain he had misheard. The boy’s eyes burned, no hint of fear in them.

“Aren’t you the one always spouting off about freedom?” Levi said.

Historia spoke up: “When Eren touched my hand at the coronation last month, it activated the Founding Titan’s powers. He doesn’t need to be of royal blood to use the Coordinate. He just has to be touching my hand.”

“We’ve talked it over, Captain,” Armin said quietly. “There is no way the citizens of Paradis will agree to relinquish all titan powers now that they know about the threats beyond the walls. Erasing their memories is the only way to ensure peace and stability within the walls.”

Levi struggled to put his rush of anger into words. “This wasn’t what we agreed—”

“You didn’t agree to anything,” Zeke said, that infuriating smile still smeared across his lips. “Those of us who actually attended this meeting did, while you sulked outside.”

Pixis cleared his throat before Levi could lash out. “We’ve agreed it’s easier to keep our population under control if they don’t know humanity has ever made it outside the walls. We can only affect people of Eldian blood—many of the nobles will be unaffected. The Marley delegates also assure us anyone with

Ackerman blood will not be affected.”

Levi stared. “You’re going to undo everything we achieved during the revolution. What about all the soldiers who died?” *What about Erwin? What about Miche, and Petra, and all the rest?* Levi’s voice dropped: “It’s our memories that give their lives meaning.”

“It’s our survival that will give them meaning,” Pixis countered. “And we have to keep the peace if we wish to survive.”

“We’ve talked it over,” said Armin, glancing at the others. “We can’t stand against Marley. The damage done when Wall Maria fell was perpetrated by three children; the damage during the battle for Shiganshina was perpetrated by four shifters and a handful of mindless titans. Imagine the damage a full army could do.”

Historia piped in, “If we perform the ritual in the crystal caverns, the environment will augment the ritual. We can reach everyone within the walls.”

Levi turned to Mikasa. “You’re okay with all this?”

Her gaze dropped, her face ashen, and she did not answer.

Levi stood and walked around the table to Zeke, doing his best to loom over him; the Marleyan leaned back in his chair to eye him.

“If for one single second,” Levi intoned, “I start to believe that you’re manipulating us into neutering ourselves so you can stroll in here and raze our lands, I will rip off each of your limbs one at a time and feed them to you, for as long as they keep regenerating.”

“I don’t doubt it.” Zeke’s face, for the first time, looked earnest. “It may not seem this way to you, Captain Levi, but I want to end this conflict as badly as you do.”

Levi turned and stormed from the room.

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HE WAS THREE ales deep at the neighbourhood pub when

Hange, Eren, Armin, and Mikasa found him. He briefly wondered how they had tracked him down, then realized Hange had often accompanied him and Erwin here when they travelled to Mitras for meetings.

“Give us a minute,” Hange said firmly to the bartender as they slid a small bundle of money across the counter. The bartender nodded and left, leaving the pub empty; there weren’t any other customers this early in the day.

Mikasa began to patrol the room anyway, her head snapping to the windows she passed. The others crowded around him like flies, and he fought the urge to swat them away.

“There’s more to our plan, Captain,” Eren said, and he suddenly seemed taller and older than a moment ago. “I’m going to set us all free from the titan curse.”

This was more like it. “Oh?”

“When I touched Historia’s hand, I saw them stretch before me: all the paths of every Eldian who ever existed.” He leaned forward, eyes glittering. “I’m going to reach through them and find the goddess Ymir. And when I find her, I’m going to find out why the Eldians started turning into titans, and fix it.”

Levi only understood about half of that, but when he glanced at the others, they all looked convinced, so they must have already discussed this in detail. “You think that’s possible?”

There was no doubt or hesitation: “I will do it.”

“If it doesn’t work,” Hange said, “we still secure peace with Marley on their terms.”

“Their deal is terrible.”

“Yes, it is.” Hange lifted their glasses and rubbed the bridge of their nose. “But you’re right, it’s more like a series of threats than a compromise. What choice do we have? They could destroy us in the blink of an eye. That’s why we have to try Eren’s plan.”

“So you’re going to try this instead of erasing everyone’s memories,” Levi said, barely managing to keep the hope from his voice.

The others exchanged glances, their faces grim, and he knew his hope was in vain. His throat tightened. “Why?”

“We have no choice,” Hange said gently. “If Eren doesn’t succeed in reaching the founder, then we have to fall back on Marley’s terms—all of them—or we won’t have that backup plan. So he has to go through with the memory wipe before he tries anything risky.”

Levi rubbed his thumb along the condensation on his mug and watched drops gather and run down the glass. He didn’t trust himself to speak.

“All right, Survey Corps,” Hange said, turning to the others. “You all go get some rest. We’ll continue this conversation tomorrow.”

There was a chorus of “sirs” and goodnights behind them. Levi didn’t look up; he waited until the last footsteps had left and the door swung shut.

“This plan—” he started bitterly, but Hange cut him off.

“I know.”

“They’ll forget Erwin and Moblit and—”

“I *know*, Levi. But we had to make a choice between dying with our principles or keeping the walled citizens alive.”

“You’ll forget everything, too.” Levi’s voice cracked.

Hange plopped down on the stool next to him. “No. I won’t.”

He turned. “What?”

“When we first learned memory wipes were possible, Moblit and I started documenting notes in case it happened: who I am, where I live, interactions with the people around me. But I need your help.” Hange’s gaze was sharp. “The crystalline materials underground seem to augment the Founding Titan’s powers, based on the research we uncovered from the Reiss compound. As far as I can guess, the shape of the crystal caverns underneath the walls focus everything inwards. The ritual will be like shining a light into a bowl of mirrors. Theoretically, someone outside the walls wouldn’t be affected—it would make

sense that this was how the Eldians outside Marley escaped the memory wipe that kept us under control for so long. It's got to be limited by range, somehow. I could float in a boat off the coast until the ritual is done."

"You're just guessing this will work."

"If it doesn't, I'll have a note telling me who I am and where I'm going, and the notes will help get me back up to speed."

Levi drummed his fingers on the mug. "And you want me to escort you outside the walls."

"No, you need to be with Eren and Historia as security, in case someone tries to interrupt them or influence the ritual. But I want you to meet me at a pick-up point at the wall at midnight. I'll have a map in hand, in case my memories are affected, so I will be there for certain."

"Unless a titan eats you."

"I'll have my gear. Muscle memory will get me through even if I forget who I am."

Levi looked away. "Go north. Almost no titans there. I'll find you."

"I know you will." Hange bowed their head. "I tried to think of a way we could preserve their memories, Levi. I really did. They're too intertwined with the history we need to erase."

He knew that was correct, but he only shook his head and drained his ale.

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THE FIRST SIGN the ritual was going wrong was the jagged yellow lightning sparking across the ceiling.

Eren and Historia's faces were rigid, their eyes closed. Wind whipped their robes and hair like flags in a storm. Every hair on Levi's body stood on end as lightning struck the ground on the other side of the cavern. *Is it supposed to do that?* he wanted to ask, but Historia had given them strict instructions not to

interfere. It would be too dangerous.

Beside Levi, Mikasa was coiled; he could see the tension in her closed fists.

Something began to tug at his mind. Thoughts, unbidden, tried to force their way in. He knew he was resistant to the memory wipe, but he didn't expect this intensity. The wind began to howl in his ears and he fell to one knee as, for a moment, he saw two different realities.

Mikasa's yell snapped him back to the correct one. "Eren!" Her voice was strained, as if she, too, were fighting against the power of the ritual.

A bolt of lightning slammed into the floor just metres away, and Eren let out an inhuman roar. Fissures split through his skin, glowing yellow, burning brighter. The wind began to scream.

Mikasa lunged forward. Levi's hand clamped around her wrist, and he struggled to hold her back.

"Let me go!" she snarled.

Light blinded them, and then everything was still.

Historia stood alone in the centre of the cavern, eyes staring at nothing. Her hair and her robes fell back into place.

Mikasa slipped out of Levi's stunned grasp, and sprinted. "Eren," she sobbed, over and over, falling to her knees in the empty space where he had stood.

His ashes settled around her like snow.

..❀❀..

**-year 860-**

**THERE IS A LONG** silence. Levi feels Erwin's eyes on him, and he can't meet his gaze. He can't bear to know what emotion that look holds.

Instead, his agitation drives him to his feet, and he looks for an excuse to flee. “I need to do the rounds.”

“Levi, it’s almost time to eat—” Hange says, but he strides from the room, grabs his coat, and jams his feet into his boots.

He doesn’t slow until he reaches the edge of the forest. The trees before him grasp at the moon like fingers, desperate to grab anything, anything, like Erwin that day on the crate ...

Reliving the death and birth of their world in one conversation is too much to bear. This is the world he decided Erwin should leave, even though it was within his power to save him. This is the world Erwin’s name was erased from, while Levi stood by and did nothing. This is the world Levi dragged him back into, to rediscover all the ways humanity had let him down since his death.

And while Erwin sits there, recovering from an experimental treatment, trying to make sense of this new world, Levi has the audacity to be happy that he is back.

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ERWIN STARES AT THE doorway where Levi left a moment earlier.

Hange clears their throat. “He’s spent a long time grappling with the choices he made. We all have.”

He isn’t sure he wants to know, but he sees no choice. “How did I become a titan shifter?”

Hange’s head jerks up. “What?”

“That’s what happened, isn’t it? I was dead, but now I’m a living human, and you said something about steam, so it follows that I must be a shifter.”

“We don’t know if you’re a shifter.” Hange moves to sit on the couch next to him. “You were a mindless titan, but the treatment Levi gave you was a modification of Eren’s spinal fluid. I think I neutralized the ability to make you a shifter, but it’s hard to tell. Titans happen at the intersection of science and magic,

and I can only approach it from what I can observe.”

“So I’m a grand experiment,” Erwin says dryly, and Hange smiles.

“The grandest the world has ever seen.” Their smile fades. “You were fatally wounded in the final charge at the battle for Shiganshina, Erwin. Armin was fatally wounded in a showdown with the Colossal Titan. Levi had to choose.”

“He chose Armin,” Erwin assumed, not sure how that made him feel.

“He chose you. He couldn’t follow through.” Hange launched into a story about an altercation on the rooftop, and Levi’s choice. As they spoke, Erwin’s heart grew heavy. He knew the syringe would be a burden, but he hadn’t realized just how heavy that burden would be.

“His choice went against every instinct in his body,” Hange finished. “He wanted nothing more than to continue walking by your side. This was an act of selflessness. An act of love.”

Love. Erwin feels a brief glow in his chest and reflexively smothers it. “I see. But you watched me die, and yet I’m here.” A sea of stars flickers across his memory, and he feels like he’s grasping at a forgotten dream.

“Yes. We don’t know how you transformed. Maybe dead people can become titans, or maybe you were in a deep coma. Either way, you became a titan, and eventually, you called for him.”

“Called for him?”

“We’ve learned more about the Ackerman bloodline,” Hange says. “There’s a special path that connects them with one person they choose to be worthy, a single person to whom they will devote their lives. For Mikasa, that was Eren.” They look him in the eye. “For Levi, that was you. Somehow, you became a titan. Somehow, you reached through that path to him, and he heard you.”

Erwin stares at the flames, finding himself too oversaturated to process this information. “I’m afraid I can’t wrap my

head around this.”

Hange stands and pats his shoulder. “We’re throwing a lot at you. It probably would have been better to introduce all of this to you slowly. Anyway, we should eat. Do you mind telling Levi that dinner is ready? He’s probably at your memorial stone.”

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JUST AS HANGE said, the man is sitting by the grave marker, cast in grayscale in the moonlight.

As he approaches, Levi says, “I don’t know why I’m bothering talking to it. You’re right here.”

“Hange told me what happened with the titan serum.” Erwin sits on the other side of the grave marker.

Levi glances at him. “You seem calm for someone who just found out I let you die, then let the world forget about you.”

After a moment, Erwin says, “I have a lot to process.” He turns to the grave marker. “It’s well cared for.”

Levi shrugs.

“How long has it been?”

“Ten years,” Levi says softly.

“Ten years,” Erwin repeats. He traces his own name with his finger. “You have borne so much on your shoulders. It must be exhausting.”

He hears a hitch in Levi’s breath, but there’s no reply. He tries to lift his other hand to pat the man’s shoulder, but the arm won’t move, and pain ripples through it. He gasps and doubles over.

Levi turns to him. “Your arm?”

“I think it’s nerve pain.”

“Maybe it’s taking longer to heal because you lost that arm.”

Erwin’s mind taunts him: *Useless soldier*. He suddenly remembers the fight he and Levi had before they left for Shiganshina a final time, and grimaces. That was one of their

final discussions before they left and everything fell apart. If he had known, he would have—*No, you would have done nothing. You already knew you probably weren't coming back. You made no attempt to smooth things over, and now Levi has carried that argument with him ever since.*

“I’m sorry, Levi,” he says softly.

Levi studies him. “For what?”

His resolve hasn’t returned to baseline yet, and everything pours out. “For putting such a burden on you. For throwing myself into harm’s way when I knew it would hurt you. For forcing you to order my death.” He can’t stop. “For forcing you up from the Underground, and the deaths of your friends. For convincing you to dedicate your life to the Survey Corps with hollow words of hope and determination, when I wasn’t sure I believed them myself.” He finally manages to stem the flow and closes his mouth, even as his mind continues listing all his offenses.

Levi’s face is very soft now, or maybe it’s a trick of the moonlight. After a long pause, he reaches forward and takes Erwin’s dead arm by the wrist. “Can you move it?”

Erwin wishes he could feel that touch against him. He concentrates and manages to barely twitch his thumb. “Not sure what caused this.” It feels like the titan is actively biting his arm, but he doesn’t want to say that.

Levi must read it on his face. “Does pressure help, or make it worse?” He rubs the heel of his hand hard against the muscles. The nerves flare in pain, and Erwin sucks in air through his teeth. When Levi releases him, the pain is a little better.

“It helps.”

Levi’s voice is quiet. “It might just need more time, but I’ll speak with Hange to see if massage could help, and how I should do it—I’ll help if I can.”

“Thank you, Levi.”

Levi winces at the words and turns away, and Erwin isn’t sure what he said wrong. The ten year chasm gapes between

them. Once upon a time, they could almost read each other's thoughts.

"We should eat," he offers. "We have a lot on our minds. Maybe we need time to process everything before we decide if we should pick up where we left off."

Levi gives him an odd look. "Where we left off," he repeats.

Erwin decides it's arrogant of him to assume Levi's feelings are unchanged. He rubs his forehead. "I'm sorry. My mind must still be recovering; I'm not expressing my thoughts well. Shall we head inside?"

Levi is still looking at him strangely, but he stands. Erwin wonders if this awkward conversation has widened the chasm.

But as they walk back to the house, they fall into step together, reading each other's movements as easily as if the ten year gap never happened at all.

# ❖ Five ❖

## THINGS UNSPOKEN

THAT NIGHT, ERWIN and Levi once again sit together on the couch in front of the fire. Hange has gone to bed, although Erwin suspects they are frantically noting down observations; he felt their focus on him throughout their evening meal.

In his good hand, he holds a glass of brandy, and his stomach glows—and, truthfully, his head a bit, too, though he can't tell if it's the brandy, or the lingering confusion from his healing body, or just Levi's presence. The couch is made for three people, and they're both leaning against the ends, tactfully positioned so their feet don't touch. It's something they have always done out of habit, one of the many steps of their unspoken dance.

Levi has just finished telling a story about Hange accidentally exploding several test tubes in their lab, and Erwin chuckles, looking down into his brandy and swirling it.

“I don't think you were familiar with Hange's equipment budget when we were in the Survey Corps,” Erwin says. The words clang in his head like an alarm, the idea of using the past tense for the Survey Corps still hitting him strangely, but he pushes past it.

“Let me guess,” Levi says. “They sent Moblit to tell you each time an experiment blew up in their face.”

Erwin chuckles again. “Yes, I think Hange was intimidated by me when it came to equipment expenses, because I was rather cross with them once about the budget, so after that, it was always Moblit. His face was always beet red from the strain of his

internal debate: should he save his reputation by dissociating himself from Hange, or take the fall to protect them?"

"He protected them."

"Every time. But I knew he wasn't the one overheating beakers." Erwin hesitates.

Levi doesn't even need to hear the question; he answers: "When the Colossal Titan released that bomb of energy, Hange and Moblit were airborn. Moblit pushed Hange into a well." He takes a long swallow of his drink, then adds, quietly, "Their eyes locked as he vapourized."

Erwin sits with this knowledge for a moment, and it's heavy in his stomach. Finally, he says, "You all lost so much."

"We would have lost a lot more without your sacrifice." Levi's voice is gruff, and he empties his glass, then reaches for the bottle and refills it. His brow is furrowed, his gaze distant, and he opens his mouth, then closes it again and takes another sip.

Erwin has a guess what this might be about, but he needs a few minutes to steel himself before he has a conversation about their relationship. He may have made some wrong assumptions when he thought that after all this time, he and Levi were still on the same page.

He clears his throat. "You and Hange answered a lot of my questions about the state of the world, but I'm curious about what, specifically, was in Grisha Yeager's basement."

"Three journals," Levi says. "About Grisha Yeager's time on Marley. We learned a lot from those three little books. Hange still has them, if you'd like to read them."

Erwin's pulse races at the prospect. "I would. Although I suppose I already know." He smiles, a puff of air leaving his nose. "My father was right."

"He was." Levi stands and jabs at a log with the poker. The motion is more aggressive than necessary. Erwin watches him for a moment, hesitating.

"I spent too many lives getting us that knowledge."

"No, you didn't. I meant what I said." Levi looks up at him,

jaw taut. “Everything that got us to the basement happened because of you. If we hadn’t learned what we did, Marley would have razed us. We wouldn’t have stood a chance.”

“You don’t regret any of it?”

“No.” He pokes the log a couple more times, then hangs the poker in the rack. Flopping back onto the couch, he picks up his drink again. “The population is living well within the two walls. There is peace. Maybe we’re not free, but that’s better than dead. The Survey Corps isn’t needed anymore, and that’s a good thing.” He pauses for a sip. “I don’t know if we did the right thing. I thought it was a mistake, at the time. But even in hindsight, I still don’t see what we could have done any better. We didn’t have a choice.”

Then the silence hangs between them until Erwin at last pulls the thread: “Something else is troubling you.”

Levi stares at the fire, and it’s difficult to read his face in profile, but he looks almost sad. “When we were outside tonight, you said …” A beat. “You said something about us picking up where we left off.”

“I did.”

“What did you mean by that?”

The question puzzles Erwin. “I meant that you’ve been living in a world where I was dead for a long time, and I imagine my return has been disorienting. And I have an overwhelming amount of new information to process. We should give ourselves time to adapt—”

“No.” Levi’s eyes meet his now, and they’re sharp with that emotion Erwin can’t read—he decides it’s not quite sadness, but something else. “Where did we leave off?”

“Well.” Erwin isn’t sure what part he means, so he lays it all on the table. “There has always been that unspoken something between us, that dancing around each other because of our roles. But when we had our last discussion in Shiganshina …” His throat tightens as he recalls the way Levi’s words stripped him to his core and filled him with determination, all pretense between

them falling away. “We brought that something to the surface.” He notices Levi’s brow is furrowed, and adds, less certain, “Unless I imagined it.”

“Unspoken something,” Levi says, voice tight.

They stare at each other for a moment, and Erwin feels, not for the first time that day, they are speaking two different languages. He wishes his brain would finish healing so he could keep up with the conversation.

Levi looks distraught. “Are you saying— Unbelievable. An *unspoken something*?”

Erwin isn’t sure how to respond, but Levi continues:

“The whole point of us was that we could speak. I could show up at your bedroom at midnight with a pot of tea, and you’d set the table and listen to me rant about the new recruits. You could tell me your shadier political dealings, knowing I wouldn’t let it slip to a soul. And you’re telling me there are things you didn’t say? I said everything, Erwin. We could speak everything.” He shoves a hand through his hair.

“That isn’t quite true though, is it?”

Levi’s gaze snaps to him, a rabbit in a trap. And here they are again, eyes locked, unspeaking, that nameless something passing between them. He sees the shift in Levi’s face, from shock, to realization, and finally to deep grief.

“I thought you knew,” Erwin says softly, his heart pounding in his throat. “There was never a good time to voice everything, not with the titans beating down our gates, but I thought you knew what I wasn’t saying.”

“You’re saying—” Levi’s voice is broken glass, sharp and shattered at the same time. “You know I’m not good at reading between the lines. You should have said something.”

Erwin gives a gentle scoff. “When?”

“Before you *died*.”

The phrase hangs between them for a moment, then Levi’s lip curls a little and he turns back to the fire. Erwin is left feeling like he needs to apologize, and he’s not sure he under-

stands why.

“I think we need to take some time before we discuss this,” he says finally. “You’ve lived through years of grief. I’ve lost time. The floor has dropped out from under both of us.”

Levi stands, changing topic, his usual escape when conversations get too intense. “It’s late, and I’m planning to go out hunting tomorrow.” He pauses, then adds softly, “You should come with me. If it’s not too distasteful for you.”

“Of course.” Erwin admits to himself that he always got a tiny thrill from watching Levi hunt—titans, at least, but it’s the same principle. “I assume I’ll sleep on the couch tonight.”

“It’s too small for you.” Levi cocks his head up the stairs. “Take the bed.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll pull a chair into the room.” He says this matter-of-factly, as if there was never any question they’d be sleeping in the same room.

They head upstairs. Erwin strips down to his underwear and climbs under the covers. The sheets are almost unbearably cool at first, but they warm quickly, until only the tip of his nose is still cold. He glances at Levi, who is setting up a thick wool blanket and a chair.

“Will you be warm enough?” Erwin asks.

“I’ll be fine.” Levi settles into the chair and wraps the blanket around himself like a cowl and cape. He reaches over to put a hollow cover over a chip of glowing rock, and the room goes dark. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Levi.” The words are barely out when Erwin feels himself slipping to sleep.

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ERWIN FLOATS TOWARD the ceiling. Above him, the wooden beams swirl and dissolve to reveal a sea of stars. He feels calmness flood his body, warm and welcoming, like slipping into

a hot bath.

Still drifting upwards, he idly rolls to look down one last time.

Below him, a blond man and a dark-haired woman step into the room. They stop beside a corpse, one Erwin's spirit feels a pull towards. The body is draped in a green cloak, flowers in a vase by its side.

"Reiner," says the woman, "here's another one."

The man—Reiner—lifts the shawl, and Erwin recognizes the corpse's face.

So, apparently, does Reiner. "Commander Erwin." He sounds disappointed.

"That was the Commander you told us about?"

"Yeah. Brilliant man. Looks like Zeke took him out with a rock." A sigh. "What a waste."

A voice spikes through Erwin, a thunderclap: *Commander!* For a moment, everything glows white and his ears ring. It takes a moment for the scene to swim back into focus.

Reiner pulls out a syringe.

"You'll waste it," the dark-haired woman says. "He's dead."

"If there's even a chance, we should try. Maybe Ymir will take pity on him and send him back. Anyway, Zeke can make more." He pushes up the body's sleeve and injects it.

Nothing happens.

"Well," Reiner says, disappointed. "It was worth a try. We could have used him on our side."

"Pretty sure the angry little Ackerman would have sliced us to ribbons if we had tried to bring him to our side, anyway." The woman tilts her head. "Let's go. The boat is due to arrive any minute, and we clearly aren't going to find any survivors."

"I suppose you're right." Reiner watches the woman leave the room. He turns back to the corpse. "For what it's worth, Commander, you were a worthy opponent."

Then he is gone. Erwin rolls back up to the sea of stars. He feels nothing except a sense of returning home.

*Commander!* the voice says. *There you are.*

The stars drop away, and Erwin liquifies, draining like water in a basin, pouring back into his body.

Then he is hot, too hot, and his limbs are ballooning—

..•••

ERWIN SITS UP, his rapid breaths condensing into clouds in front of him. The voice is echoing in his head: *Commander, Commander ...*

Was that a memory, or just a dream? He repeats the scene to himself over and over, locking it carefully in his conscious mind so he can discuss it with Levi and Hange later.

Once he's sure the scene won't fade, he turns to the window. The moon is bright, casting a grey glow into the room. Levi's room. He turns and sees Levi sitting beside him, shivering so hard that Erwin is amazed he hasn't shaken himself awake.

Slipping quietly out of bed, Erwin pulls on his sweater, then takes the top blanket off the bed and settles it gently over Levi. The man stirs a little, then snuggles deeper into it and is still. His breaths are soft and even.

A fond smile settles across Erwin's lips. If there was one thing that hasn't changed in their time apart, it is Levi's inability to gauge proper warmth for sleep—probably a side effect of sleeping on the street in the Underground, when he had to sleep with whatever he had available at the time. How many times has Erwin covered him? Usually, he would use Levi's cloak, a subtle enough gesture that Levi would assume he had just wrapped it around himself. One time, they didn't have their cloaks handy, so Erwin used his dress jacket instead. Levi wore it for weeks afterwards. It was an intimate gesture, but the two of them never said a word about it.

He lets out a long breath. Unspoken, as always. Maybe he should have made an effort to speak his feelings. If the military brass hadn't complained about him bringing Levi into the

military, promoting him to an imaginary position, and treating him as his only confidante and right-hand man, then what was an intimate relationship on top of that? Surely everyone would have turned a blind eye.

If he's honest with himself, he has always known that, deep down. Deep down, he was simply afraid of caring for people. Over and over, he told himself his goals could only be attained if he had no attachments.

*And how did that work out for you?* he thinks wryly. It wasn't just Levi. Against his will, he formed attachments to Hange, to Miche, and there was his growing attachment to Armin and Historia.

But above all, there was Levi.

His fears seem petty now that he stares at the moonlit face of a man who has spent years grieving him, the entire time unaware that he had been loved.

A shiver runs through him, and he slips back under the covers. The sweater isn't quite as warm as the blanket he gave Levi, but he is comfortable enough to fall asleep. He takes one last look at Levi, cuddled deep within the blankets, then closes his eyes.

As he's just drifting to sleep, he hears the voice one final time: *Commander* ...

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LEVI AWAKENS THE next morning to find an extra blanket draped over him. He stares at it for a moment, then his eyes trail over to Erwin, fast asleep in a sweater he wasn't wearing last night. His throat tightens.

He stands and tentatively lays the back of his hand on Erwin's forehead. His skin feels normal. Maybe his internal healing has stopped.

This close, his eyelashes are long and dark blond, and Levi stares at them, wondering how he never noticed before how

beautiful they were. *You didn't let yourself look this closely.*

He drifts back to their conversation the night before. Was he the only person in the world who hadn't realized Erwin Smith reciprocated his feelings? That was what Erwin was trying to say, wasn't it? His hand trails from the tall forehead down a sharp cheekbone, then withdraws. Well, regardless, he agrees that they need a few days to sort themselves out. It took Levi and Hange several months to adapt to their post-mindwipe world, and they had known it was coming. Erwin is going to need time to come to terms with the shock of everything.

*And maybe when he's ready ...*

A shiver runs through his body in a way he hasn't felt in years. He wishes he could linger beside the bed all morning, but he's always restless in the morning, and his legs are itching to walk his normal trap route.

Downstairs, Hange is rereading their notes, a mug of tea beside them. "Morning," they say without looking up.

"Morning. Didn't sleep?"

"Not much." Hange lifts their head. "Is he up?"

"Not yet. His skin feels like it's a normal temperature now."

Hange raises an eyebrow, and Levi scoffs.

"Shut up."

"I didn't say anything," they protest.

"I checked his forehead. I slept in a chair." He pours a mug of tea, then grabs a slice of bread and sits.

"You should tell him how you feel, you know." Hange looks thoughtful. "Especially because we don't know if he is trapped by the thirteen-year curse or not."

Levi's bread freezes halfway to his mouth. "What? He's not a shifter."

"We don't know that for sure. I'll run some experiments with him later. Let's give ourselves some space before we answer that question." Hange slaps the book shut and drains the mug, then stands. "The air smells like snow. I'm going to town."

Levi has lost his appetite. *Experiments*. He sets the bread down, recalling the gruelling experiments they ran on Eren back when they were first testing the limits of his powers.

“Going to buy groceries,” Hange continues. “I’ll buy Erwin some more clothes, to tide him over until we can get to the Capital. Then I’ll start gathering firewood. You were planning to go hunting today, right? It would be a good time to get some bigger game to store for winter.”

“Right,” Levi says absently. Erwin would have healed faster if he were a shifter, wouldn’t he? Levi has been assuming some strange paths science had reverted him back to his human form. They don’t really understand how titans work, after all.

“I’ll see if they have any dress shirts.” Hange grabs their bag and heads to the door. “I know that’s more his style than sweaters.”

“I don’t think he’ll mind,” Levi says absently. He eyes the kitchen counter.

“See you this afternoon.” Hange steps out the door.

When it closes, Levi walks over to a drawer and pulls it open. It’s crowded with random kitchen utensils and household tools; he has tried to keep this drawer organized, but Hange keeps dumping random crap into it. His fingers close over a folding knife. He slips it into his pocket.

Once he’s outside, he takes a deep breath. The air smells of frozen earth, decaying leaves, and chimney smoke. He lets it fill his lungs and breathes it out in a cloud. The sky is just starting to warm with the promise of a sunrise.

The traps are mostly empty, so it will be a good day to go out hunting. He wonders if Erwin will actually enjoy it, or if he will find it distasteful. Levi did, too, at first—killing has always left a bad taste in his mouth, humans or animals, even when necessary. Maybe it scares him that he could be like Kenny at his core: a butcher who loves cutting flesh.

At any rate, he is looking forward to a chance to spend the day together. He usually likes solitude, but Erwin is someone

who would be welcome company. The only other person who might be tolerable is Mikasa—he considered inviting her along many times, but knew she would refuse. If he had to guess, she still thinks she could have saved Eren if she had broken free from Levi's grasp that night. She might not be wrong.

He has always felt a kinship with the woman, maybe because they understand each other on a level no one else can. Erwin knows him best, Hange knows him most recently, but Mikasa's soul walks the same path as his. They've never really spoken about their shared heritage, and as someone who was supposed to be her Captain and her mentor, it's one thing he wishes had played out differently, but there was never any time.

Never any time. He hears Erwin's light scoff again: *When?*

No, there was plenty of time for the discussion with Mikasa, and plenty of time for him to voice his feelings to Erwin as well. They may have been humanity's bravest soldiers, but they were all cowards when it came to relationships.

The traps are all empty, so he decides to fish instead. The stream is still running, but in a few weeks, it will freeze. Its banks are already lined with frost and, in a few shadows, ice. Hange is correct: they don't have long until the first snow. *Maybe even tonight.*

Levi pulls out a fishing line and kicks around the mud by the shore, trying to unearth some worms, but the mud is partially frozen. He gives up and tries without any bait, sitting on a stump his ass has worn smooth over time. As he waits for a nibble on the line, his mind circles back to the discussion about the mindwipe ritual. He has thought of Erwin's last day on earth again and again, but has spent significantly less time thinking about Eren and Historia. What was Eren trying to do that overwhelmed him so quickly? He successfully erased memories, that much was certain, but his plan to speak with the founder Ymir—whatever that meant—clearly didn't work.

Historia can't remember much about the ritual; she describes it as something like a trance.

“We erased the knowledge of the outside world from the minds of the Walled Citizens,” she said a few years ago, when the two of them were sharing a late night with too much ice wine, back when he was still putting up the façade of being her Guard Captain. “Then we saw the silhouette of a small girl, and Eren knocked me out of the realm. I assume that was ... ” She trailed off before saying Ymir, the name still too raw then. “I don’t understand what he was trying to do, or what went wrong.”

The whole scenario is too difficult for Levi to wrap his head around—a world made of stars, an endless desert, a small girl building sand castles nearby. He tends to believe it was a hallucination manifested by the ritual itself. But in a world where titans exist and memories can be erased, he supposes none of that is outside the realm of possibility.

He amasses a large stock of fish. They’ll eat three for supper, then store the rest in cans for winter.

The sun is up now, the frost around him glittering. Levi takes a deep breath of air again, listening to the stream, studying the crystal blue sky. This is all so much more beautiful when he knows Erwin is waiting for him back home.

Erwin is awake when he returns, standing in the yard with a blanket across his shoulders. Levi strides toward him, raising a brow.

“You have a jacket, you know.”

Erwin’s face is distant. “I had a sudden urge to go outside, but it’s strange—now I can’t remember where I wanted to go.”

Levi feels the blood drain from his face as he recalls the titan, face pressed to the ground, crawling desperately towards the basement. “It might take more time to shake the titan’s thought patterns.”

Erwin blinks, and turns to him. “They injected me with serum.”

“Who?”

“The Marleyans. They injected me and brought me back. I had a dream last night that seemed more like a memory.”

Levi's stomach frosts through, and he steps closer. "You were dead when we left. We put you to rest." Goosebumps rise on his arms, hair on the back of his neck, as he remembers the man's dead weight in his arms, the cold skin, the sunken eyelids and the mouth that kept lolling open as if the jaw were detached.

"I was dead, but I saw ... a sea of stars. Someone recognized me." Erwin pauses, considering. "Reiner. Reiner Braun recognized me. And someone was calling for me, but the voice was disembodied. It struck through me like lightning."

So much for Historia's endless starry sky being fiction. Levi thinks of the way he had heard Erwin's voice calling for help when he was a titan. "Was it my voice?"

"No. I couldn't put a voice to the words, but they called me 'Commander.'" His voice is more solid now, his gaze more present. "Maybe it was Reiner's thoughts."

"Maybe. But he's dead."

Erwin's brows rise. "He is? Did we kill him in the final battle?"

"No, he—" Levi stops himself. They haven't told Erwin about the thirteen year time limit on shifters. But he won't do that until they know for sure if he is a shifter or not. "There's still a lot more information we haven't given you, but I should take care of this fish, then we should go on the hunt while it's still light out." He pauses. "If you still want to come."

Gripping his limp elbow, Erwin nods. "I'm not sure how useful I'll be, but I would appreciate the walk and the opportunity to clear my head."

On the way back to the house, Levi stops to pluck several sprigs of dill and the last few onions, then leaves the fish in the food net hanging near the front door. It's cold enough that the fish will stay fresh until Hange gets home, but warm enough that they won't freeze solid by the time they get back. Normally he'd handle cleaning them, but he's eager to leave.

Erwin is still holding his elbow when Levi returns downstairs a few minutes later, fully dressed for the outdoors. Levi is

just finishing up a note for Hange; he looks up and frowns.

“Is your arm still giving you trouble?”

“I can move my fingers a little more this morning, and the pain and numbness have improved a bit.” Erwin drives his thumb along the muscle. “I think the massage helped.”

“Here.” Levi sits on the couch and nods at the seat beside him. Erwin sits, and Levi reaches for his arm and pulls it into his lap, rolling up the sleeve.

The forearm is long and heavy with muscle, speckled with graceful blond hairs. His hands are broad, the fingers long. The skin of his hand has a few sparse freckles; it’s smooth and soft near the wrist and inner elbow. For a moment, Levi sits unmoving, his pulse drumming in his throat. Erwin’s breaths are filling the air between them, washing across Levi’s hair and face, warm and smelling of mint.

Levi takes a deep breath to steady himself. He traces a line on the skin, over a length of muscle. “Along here?”

“No, here,” Erwin rumbles, and instead of simply pointing, he gently grasps Levi’s wrist and guides his hand to the correct spot. Levi clenches his jaw, keeping his breaths slow and quiet. He chances a look up, and Erwin is leaning forward. His irises crackle like broken ice, and he feels the shards stabbing through him.

“What?” Levi says irritably, because he’s unable to articulate anything kinder.

Erwin gives a soft smile and looks down. Kicking himself for his tone, Levi begins to massage the forearm instead.

He could do it, right now. He could lean forward and kiss Erwin. He feels how the tension is building between them, stronger and stronger the longer they touch; now that he realizes Erwin might be interested in him, he can read the signs everywhere. He swallows and is embarrassed to hear the sound of his own throat; could Erwin hear it, too?

Erwin sucks in his breath at a tender point, and Levi says, “Breathe through it.” He tells himself the same thing. *Breathe*

*through this, evenly and quietly.*

He finishes his massage, then retreats to his side of the couch. “Is that any better?”

Erwin grabs his bad arm for examination, and just barely manages to flex the tips of his fingers. “Definitely better. Thank you. I tried to do it myself, but your fingers are much stronger than mine.”

The compliment saps the last of Levi’s composure and he launches to his feet. “We should get moving. There’s a clearing where deer tend to gather this time of year, and we’re going to run out of daylight if we take too long.”

But Erwin’s smile has faded, and he’s staring at the hand raised in front of his face. “This hand ...” he says, as if to himself.

Levi’s stomach drops. The pose is a mirror image of that last day in Shiganshina, that discussion on a wooden crate. This is the moment he has been dreading, when the shock wears away.

“I always thought this arm was waiting for me in hell, but somehow, I have it back.” Erwin barely clenches the fingertips again. “Did anyone else come back?”

“What?”

“From death. Was it just me?”

This discussion is not going to lead anywhere good. Levi feels a swell of panic as he recalls how deeply depressed Erwin was in the weeks before Shiganshina. “Look,” he says. “I’m not going to give you that answer if you’re just going to use it to torture yourself with questions about your worth.”

Erwin’s eyes widen. “I wasn’t planning to—”

“No. Knock it off. You have some shit to work through, I get it. But this time I’m not going to sit and watch you bully yourself into deeper and deeper depression. I know that from your perspective, Shiganshina was in the recent past. I don’t expect you to bounce back and be happy as you cope with all the changes it took us years to get used to. But take it slowly, all right? Don’t leap right to hating yourself.” Levi feels uncomfortable

about how serious the conversation is getting, so he adds, “Besides, as far as the world is concerned, you never existed. So in a way, you’re dead. Isn’t that good enough?”

That earns him a chuckle. Erwin has laughed more in the past day here than he had in the last year in the Survey Corps. The mood lifts.

“You’ve gained some wisdom over the years,” Erwin says, the thank you implied.

“I was always wise. You just never listened to me.” This earns Levi another chuckle, and he finds himself smiling.

They pack a lunch, water, and essential hunting gear into backpacks, and Levi grabs his bow and arrows.

“Not a gun?” Erwin asks. “Do the MP still limit who can own one?”

“No, but I don’t trust them to make a gun that won’t blow up in my face.” Levi straps a sheathed knife to his belt. “I actually wanted to use the 3DMG, but it’s too specific to fighting titans and ended up being more hassle than it was worth. No need to get vertical to take down a deer.”

They walk along the trail through the woods, then follow the stream south. He can hear Erwin’s footfalls behind him, thumping the half-frozen ground, and he feels calmness settle over him. This is as it should be.

The air is still, and the running water from the stream is just barely audible. Squirrels rustle along the branches above them, occasionally chittering. In the distance, crows caw to each other. He has not felt peace like this in a long time.

“Is this what you have been up to?” Erwin asks, voice quiet, although a branch over them shakes anyway as a squirrel bolts along its length. “Upkeep the home, gather food?”

“Now, mostly, yeah. I served as the Captain of the Queen’s Guard for the first several years. It kept me busy, but it was too hard to be surrounded by people who had forgotten everything.” Levi lifts a branch, holding it out of the way for Erwin. “I retired. Sometimes I go back into the city to train new recruits, but it gets

more repetitive each year, and I don't really need the money."

"Ah, yes. I imagine retirement came with a pension."

"Yeah, and I had a surprisingly large inheritance waiting for me when you died." He glances back at Erwin. "I should give you what I have left."

Erwin waves it off. "We can figure that out later, once we've decided what my living situation will be."

Levi stops and turns to him. "What living situation? You're staying with us, aren't you?"

"You don't have a bed."

"So we'll buy another one," Levi says irritably, then continues walking. A moment later, Erwin follows.

They're both silent for a long time, and the terrain gets steeper, the leaves more slippery where frost has melted. They pause at the crest of a hill to drink some water and warm in the sunshine.

"You see that valley between those two hills, southeast?" Levi points, and Erwin stands beside him to locate it. "Just on the other side is the clearing we're heading to."

"It's further than I expected."

Levi glances at him. "Are you getting tired?"

Erwin shakes his head. "My physical condition seems about the same as it was before, my arm aside. Walking won't be a problem."

"Good." Levi starts walking again. "There are closer hunting spots, but this one is on a deer trail, so it ends up being a faster trip than waiting around all day somewhere closer." Besides, he enjoys the walk, and there's always plenty of lumber around to build a makeshift sled. Sometimes he feels the need to push himself physically so he can maintain his fitness.

"So," Erwin says, picking up the conversation again, "what has Hange been doing all this time?"

"Government research."

"Weapons?"

"Not much need for weapons, because as far as everyone

knows, we've been in a time of peace for more than a hundred years," Levi says. "She's trying to use Eren's spinal fluid to reverse the titan curse."

"I see. You used a derivative of that fluid to revive me. Doesn't that make me a shifter?"

"Well, there can only be nine shifters in the world at any given time. Don't ask me why, it's part of that whole weird magic around titans." Levi stops for a moment, assessing the best path, then moves along a rocky ridge. "If you took the place of one of them, and that one suddenly died for no reason, we'd have Marley knocking down our gate. They can get here within hours. They have machines that fly."

Erwin is quiet for a long time, surely wondering how a machine flies. Levi spent a long time pondering that at first, too.

They stop for lunch about twenty minutes from the clearing, sitting side-by-side on a fallen log. They've packed bread, cheese, pickled asparagus, apples, and a thermos of tea. Erwin closes his eyes briefly when he eats the asparagus, as if savouring it.

"Military rations were terribly unimaginative, weren't they? I haven't had asparagus since I was a boy." Erwin pauses. "I suppose that was a long time ago now."

"I guess I'm older than you now," Levi realizes.

Erwin smiles. "The years I was a titan don't count?"

"Well, you don't look forty-eight." Levi studies him. "I think you actually came out of that titan younger than before."

Erwin's eyes wrinkle at the corners, but the lines are softer than he remembers. "Maybe it's just that the rest of you are older, so I look young in comparison."

Levi runs a hand through his greying hair, suddenly self-conscious. "I must look different to you."

"A bit, but you wear it well. The grey of your hair matches your eyes."

Their eyes lock, then Erwin looks down, smiling. Maybe it's Levi's imagination, but the sharp cheeks are a bit pink. He

feels his face warm, too.

He recalls past conversations like this, private lunches and teas. There were warm faces and sparkling eyes, now that he thinks about it. Maybe even flirting.

There was always an undercurrent of seriousness, the gravity of their situation weighing down their discussions. He studies Erwin, seeing the calmness of his expression, and for the first time, feels good about his decision to bring him back. The timing wasn't right before, when he had injected Armin. Maybe they needed to take care of the stressful world situation in the background before he could be truly happy. He just needs to be sure of one thing.

Erwin glances up at him. "What's on your mind?"

"Do you resent me?" The words pop out before he realizes they're forming.

"For what?"

"For not bringing you back the day of the battle, failing to kill the Beast Titan, and bringing you back now." Levi shrugs off his own distress about the decisions he has made. "I saw how free you were when I gave you permission to die."

Erwin takes a sip of tea, slowly, as if considering. "I don't know how I feel yet, about any of it. This is all new and there has been so much new information—there's a lot to consider and sort through. But in this moment, Levi, I am very glad to be sitting here having lunch with you."

Levi's heart glows and he takes a sip of his tea, too. It tastes warm and floral and sweet.

## ❖ Six ❖

### AMIDST THE SNOW

THEY'RE JUST FINISHING up lunch when the first snowflake falls.

Erwin turns to look up at the sky; while they were eating, the clouds moved in, and now the sky is white. He turns to Levi and sees him frowning up at the sky.

"Those blew in quickly," Erwin says. "Should we head back?"

Levi shakes his head. "We're only a few minutes away from the clearing. There's something I want to check before we head back." He stands as he drains the last of his tea, then packs it into his bag and slings it over his shoulders. "Come on."

The snow begins to drift down in large flakes, and Erwin thinks back to all the times they trekked through the snow together. Expeditions were always cancelled during inclement weather, so they would usually stay indoors doing training or paperwork, but occasionally, they would find an excuse to go for a walk in the storm. Sometimes it was to buy supplies; other times, it was just to have coded discussions about their next political manoeuvres. Erwin always enjoyed those walks, when the streets were almost empty and the world shrank to the two of them. The grime and noise of the city was always covered and muted by a sea of white. He watches Levi's back for a moment and wonders if that's part of the appeal of living in the forest: no human mess.

His thoughts are interrupted when his boot slips on a slick rock. He slides and grabs a nearby branch to regain his balance.

Levi glances back over his shoulder. “I went to a lot of trouble to bring you back, so you’d better not break your neck.”

Erwin chuckles. “I’m doing my best. It seems my dexterity is still recovering.”

“Seems like you’re back to normal to me.” A faint smirk plays across Levi’s lips, then he turns and continues.

It’s only a minute or two later that they stop at the edge of the treeline. A clearing stretches before them, long brown grasses drooping under the weight of the accumulating snow.

“Where do we wait?” asks Erwin softly, in case there are deer nearby.

Levi looks around, expression flat. “This trail is mainly used in the spring and summer. We won’t see any deer here today.”

“No? Then what are we doing here?”

Levi digs around in his pocket and pulls out a folding knife. He holds it in front of him, an offering. “We’re going to find out if you’re a titan shifter.”

For a moment, their gazes hold. The wind rushes above them, sounding like running water and a wolf’s howl. Levi’s hair lifts around the edges of his toque and then settles again.

“Look,” Levi begins, the arm with the knife stretching further, “if you don’t do it now, Hange is going to run gruelling experiments on you like they did on Eren. And there’s a big clearing, so you won’t cause any damage if it takes you a minute to learn to control it.”

Erwin takes the knife by the handle, their mittens brushing. “Eren could only transform when he focused on a clear goal, if I remember correctly.”

Levi looks away. “You had a clear goal when you were a titan, didn’t you? Tap into that.”

The taste of earth, the scent of sulphur, the basement, the basement ... Erwin lets out a long breath. Yes, that mindset is getting fainter with each passing hour, but it’s still there. He turns and strides toward the clearing.

But he hears footsteps behind him. He stops, not looking back. “You have to wait here.”

“I’m not leaving you to do this alone,” Levi says.

Erwin turns. “If you’re beside me, the only goal I’ll have will be not hurting you, so I won’t transform.”

Levi’s mouth twists, and he turns away. “Fine.”

Erwin waits until he retreats to the treeline, then turns and continues walking.

*The basement.* He remembers that drive in his titan form, that all-consuming hunger and frustration. It wells within him, so hot that he wonders if he’s about to transform without wounding himself at all.

At the centre of the clearing, he stops and turns. Levi stands at the edge of the forest, far enough away that he isn’t hiding the expression on his face. He looks distraught.

*If I’m a shifter, Erwin realizes, he knows Marley will come for me.*

No, this is the type of thinking that will distract him. If there’s one thing he’s good at, it’s denying his reality to focus on a goal. He finds he can slowly lift the palm of his bad arm into view and hold it there. He pulls off the mitten, pops open the knife, closes his eyes, and slashes across the palm.

Pain jolts through him.

*The basement.*

He sees his father, smells the musty book they looked at together, hears his voice: *there are people beyond the walls, Erwin. There is a world out there to explore. I don’t know why we are trapped here, but the answer is being carefully controlled by the rulers of the walls.*

He sees the basement key and feels its weight in his palm. He sits on the crate in Shiganshina and lays himself bare to Levi.

*It’s so close. Levi, I can almost touch it.*

He is deep inside himself now, face-to-face with his clearest goal, and finds Erwin Smith looking back at him: just a man.

Slowly, he becomes aware of the wind howling around him, the snowflakes landing in his brows and eyelashes, the blood running down his fingers. His eyelids part and he sinks to his knees. The blood is so red against the white sheet of snow that it almost glows. There's more of it than he intended.

Crunching footsteps speed toward him, and then Levi is kneeling in front of him, reaching for his wrist. "You idiot, why did you cut so deep?" His voice cracks, then he lunges at Erwin so fast that he almost knocks him over. His head tucks under Erwin's chin, hands curling into the front of his jacket.

Erwin is so surprised that it takes him a moment to react, and then his good arm wraps around Levi and holds him.

"I had a scar here, before I lost this arm," Erwin says softly. "I was rather fond of it." He can still feel the trickling blood, and he adds, "I'm not a shifter."

"You're not. You'd be healing by now." Levi pulls back and wipes his eyes with the back of his mitten, and Erwin wonders if those are tears, but then Levi is bending over to dig through his bag.

"I suppose you're relieved Marley won't come for me."

"That, and shifters only live thirteen years. Then they die." Levi tosses his mittens into the bag. He pulls out several strips of fabric and presses one into the cut.

Between the unexpected hug and this new information, Erwin is reeling. Or maybe that's from blood loss. Levi lifts the cloth to examine the slash, then grimaces.

"I'm going to have to stitch this."

"Do you have any anaesthetic?"

"A little whiskey," Levi says apologetically, pulling out a flask. "It tastes terrible, so I keep it around for cleaning, but it's drinkable."

The whiskey burns going down. Erwin sucks air through his teeth, then nods. "Do it."

Levi grips his hand to steady it, needle poised to pierce flesh.

But instead of the poke of the needle, a deep, burning shock runs between them.

“What the—” Levi begins.

The world splits, and stars erupt across the sky. Erwin feels sand beneath him, soft and warm.

Then, as quickly as the stars appeared, they are gone. The two of them are sitting in the clearing once more, snowflakes whirling around them.

“What the fuck was that?” Levi jerks away, his hand red with blood. He frantically searches around them. “Did you see that, too?”

“I did. Not for the first time.”

“Was that the paths?”

“I think so. It’s what I saw when I was first transforming into a titan.”

Levi swallows hard. Tentatively, he reaches out again and grips Erwin’s hand. Nothing happens.

“I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I.”

After a moment, Levi looks down at the wound again. “Well, we still need to get this stitched up.”

The distraction takes Erwin’s mind off the pain of the needle, at least. He stares fixedly ahead, brows low, jaw tight. *Is someone trying to reach us? Ymir? Or another Eldian reaching through paths?* A strange tightness pulls at his forehead. He takes another swig of the whiskey.

“Almost done,” Levi says. He ties the thread, then scrubs the blood from his hands with snow. Erwin pours some whiskey over the wound, teeth clenched at the burning, and then Levi gently bandages it. When he’s done, he pulls the mitten back over the hand, but doesn’t let go. Their faces are centimetres apart, and those grey eyes are searching Erwin’s.

“What is it, Levi?”

“Your cheeks are so rosy.” He looks mortified the moment the words are out, and quickly stands. “We need to get back

before the storm gets worse.”

Erwin’s hand is still throbbing. “Mind if I hang onto the flask?”

“Sure. Just don’t get so drunk that you can’t walk.”

They make their way through the forest. Erwin’s mind is still on that fractured sky, that eruption of stars. He didn’t hear voices this time, and yet ... “It felt like someone was trying to reach me. Or us, I suppose.”

“Maybe.” Levi hangs back a moment so they can walk side-by-side. “Maybe bringing you back did something fucked up to our path.”

“So if I had been a shifter, I would have only had thirteen years?” Erwin glances at him. “They’re all dead, then.”

“Armin and Reiner. The Beast Titan, the Cart Titan, and Annie Leonhart.” A pause. “I broke my vow to you. I didn’t kill the Beast Titan. I assume he’s dead, though.”

Erwin gives him a kind smile. “The situation changed and you adapted. I could not have asked for anything else, Levi. If you had killed him, he wouldn’t have been around to broker peace between our lands.”

“I know, but I really wanted to slice him open.” Levi grits his teeth in a way that makes Erwin think he’s downplaying just how badly he wanted to butcher the beast.

They are silent as they climb to the top of the hill; the snow is a few centimetres deep now, and a bit slushy, so they have to focus on the placement of their feet to maintain their traction. Once they descend back into the forest, the ground is clear, and they can speak again.

“What of the other Survey Corps survivors?” Erwin asks. “Armin went with the Marleyans willingly?”

Levi nods. “Mikasa was not happy about that, but he managed to convince her.”

“And Mikasa?”

“She took my place as the Captain of the Queen’s Guard and spends each day with Historia. And Historia is well-loved as

a Queen and heads up a council that has replaced much of the previous government. Jean went back to his hometown. Connie and Sasha went to hers. And Floche disappeared when we started talks with the Marleyans, so who knows where he is.”

“Floche?”

“The only survivor of the final charge. He’s the one who brought you to me.” Levi starts walking faster, pulling ahead, and Erwin realizes this is still a sore subject.

“And the others?”

“There were no others.”

Erwin’s pace slows to a stop. He stares absently at the ground as he counts names in his head. “Nine survivors.”

Levi stops, too, and turns to him. “It would have been zero without your plan.”

*What if we had taken more time to prepare the final battle? What if we had sent scouts ahead and brought back intelligence so we could have been more strategic in our approach?* Erwin’s throat is too tight, and he tries to force it open with a sharp breath.

“Hey.” Levi is suddenly beside him, a hand on his shoulder.

“We could have—”

Levi cuts him off by squeezing hard. “Don’t do that to yourself. Trust me, I spent years asking myself those questions, but the past is done and we can’t change it.”

“I told them they would live on through their memories, and no one remembers them.”

“I know. But the decision to erase everyone’s memories is on the survivors, not you.”

It doesn’t make Erwin feel like any less of a conman for promising their legacy to them. Wasn’t that always his way, saying exactly what people needed to hear in order to carry out his wishes? Even Levi, looking up at him with an earnest face, hand lovingly squeezing his shoulder, has fallen victim to this same manipulation over and over again. *Narcissist*, Erwin chides himself. *Psychopath*.

Levi must read it on his face. “I knew this was coming.”

“What was coming?” Erwin repeats, voice neutral.

“Whatever self-hatred you have rattling around that big brain of yours. You’re going to try to think your way through it so much that it’s going to get stuck in there, like trying to pull a cart from mud and sinking it in deeper instead. You just have to find a way to stop yourself from thinking about it.”

The wind is starting to pick up, even here in the shelter of the trees, and Erwin looks around. “Perhaps we should discuss this later. The storm seems to be setting in.”

Levi eyes him suspiciously for a moment, then finally drops his hand from his shoulder and turns. “Fine.”

The way he says it makes Erwin think this won’t be the last he hears of it.

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**THE SNOW IS UP** to their ankles by the time they return to the house. They stomp the snow off their boots and brush off their clothes, then step inside. The house is warm; Levi feels his cheeks and nose tingle as they start to defrost. What he really wants now is a nice warm bath and a glass of cider.

Hange appears from downstairs. “You’re back. Any luck? It sounds pretty nasty out there.”

Levi hangs his jacket in the front closet. “Erwin’s not a shifter.”

“What?” Hange sees Erwin’s bandaged hand and grabs it. “You tried without me?”

“The occasion presented itself,” Erwin says, as if it came up organically. “We were—”

“Wait!” Hange holds out a hand. “Don’t tell me yet! I want to write down every detail. But first, you two need to warm up. I’ll put the kettle on, and we can discuss it over tea.”

Hange hurries out of the room. Levi and Erwin are left staring at each other. Erwin looks boyish with his flushed nose

and cheeks and his hair hanging in his face.

“We’ll do a real hunt another time,” Levi says. He doesn’t see any turmoil on Erwin’s face now, but he’s still concerned. “How … are you?”

“I think …” Erwin’s gaze lifts, staring at nothing, as if he’s considering. “I think it will take some time to forgive myself. But you’re right, we can’t change the past, and I need to learn to accept what has happened.”

“As long as you try. That’s all we can do.” Levi pauses, then bolsters his courage and reaches up to brush the hair off Erwin’s forehead. The skin there is glowing and damp from the walk, and his heart pounds in his throat. “We need to buy you some hair gel tomorrow.”

“Your hand is so cold.” Erwin reaches up to grip it, his fingers wrapping around one at a time, fiercely hot. “Did you give me the better mittens?”

“Maybe.” Levi barely manages the word.

“Well, I’ll buy some of my own.” He lowers their joined hands between them, to his chest, and holds it tightly. Their eyes are still locked, and Levi is frozen in place. He feels Erwin’s heartbeat under their joined hands, and it’s fast and strong. Or maybe that’s his own pulse thrumming in his fingertips.

“Is that a little better?” Erwin asks, voice low.

“I—” is all Levi can manage. *Is he flirting with me?* This is all too much, from sixteen years without his touch, to all this contact within a day. He stares up at Erwin and finds he has lost the ability to form words. He manages a nod.

Too late, he realizes that means this contact will end. Erwin gently releases his hand, and Levi flexes it a few times, feeling it tingle.

“No paths that time,” Erwin says, as if a test was his goal all along. Is that shyness on his face? Before Levi can fully interpret the expression, Erwin turns. “Come on. Let’s see if Hange has any theories about what we saw.”

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AFTER THEY'VE EATEN, Erwin lights the fire and settles on the couch. As soon as the discussion ended, Levi mumbled something about checking the traps and slipped back outside. Maybe it's good to have a few moments apart—there is a strange chemistry between them, and it's spiralling out of control. He's starting to appreciate just how much the stress of their Survey Corps life dulled his libido.

Besides, he has reading to do. While Hange didn't have any immediate theories on the paths they saw, they have graciously supplied him with research material—not just Grisha Yeager's notes, but also Hange's meticulous notes, prepared in case they lost their memory. He worried it would pry too much into their privacy, but Hange only gave a sad smile and said, "There is nothing in there that I wouldn't tell you anyway."

He believes it. He has always had an excellent rapport with Hange—at least, when Hange wasn't quite literally blowing up his budget. They spent many late nights discussing titan science, and while their relationship was more formal than his and Levi's, he felt a strong kinship with Hange all the same. He's glad the two of them had each other.

He is able to skim through Grisha Yeager's notes, as most of it repeats what Hange and Levi have already told him. Marley's blend of mythology and science is difficult for him to wrap his head around; he always operated under the assumption that titans were grounded in the observable world around them. Though, he supposes, some of their characteristics, such as their astonishingly light weight, didn't make physical sense.

His father never would have imagined the depth and complexity of the history of titans. He was a practical man who, like Erwin, excelled at drawing connections between facts. The idea of paths requires imagination and some suspension of disbelief.

But suspend it he must, because he can't deny that reality,

his experience with death and rebirth, or the connection he saw when Levi touched his bloodied hand. His brain feels as if it is physically stretching to accommodate all this information. He decides to move onto Hange's journal for something more familiar and grounded.

The fact that it's familiar is what makes Hange's journal harder to read. The first section is a factual summary of the walled lands—*Paradis*, he corrects himself—plus all their missions and titan research. Reading all the Survey Corps activities and losses in such a condensed format is dredging up that internal voice again, that one that calls him a conman.

Erwin sets the book on his lap and closes his eyes, leaning into the feeling for a moment. Those stares he always felt on him, the ghosts of past soldiers judging him, feel even worse now that he knows about the connections between Eldians. Was that really them, watching and judging from beyond the grave? How would they feel now that their sacrifices and names have been erased?

His stomach is in knots, and he feels a heavy tiredness in his limbs and chest.

A cart stuck in mud.

He takes a deep breath and forces himself to continue. The last part of this section is about the final battle. Moblit's death is written in several different line weights and inks, as if Hange took several attempts to finish it. It was as Levi said: when Hange woke up in the old well, the world was in flames and their eye was gone.

“And so,” wrote Hange, “was Moblit.”

The page ends there, even though there's half a page left. He turns the page and sees a small sketch glued to the paper: a drawing of Moblit and Hange standing side by side. The tears suggest this was part of a bigger picture, probably, based on the scenery, of tests on Sawney and Bean—something he realizes is conspicuously absent from the notes, save for some of the data they collected. On the next page is scrawled simply, “They were

human." The rest of this page, too, is empty.

The next page is labelled, "The Titan Serum," and Erwin closes the book. He doesn't have the strength to read about his own death yet.

Instead, he returns Grisha Yeager's books to Hange's desk; Hange is nowhere to be seen, and he wonders if they slipped out when he wasn't looking. Levi still isn't back, either. Maybe he'll take a moment to clean himself.

He enters the bathroom and pulls open the shower curtain, and smiles. He should have known that Levi would go to great trouble to get running water. He turns the tap labelled "hot" and warm water smelling lightly of sulphur comes through it, just like at the hotels in Mitras. It soothes him, a little, to think of Levi treating himself to an indulgence like this.

He undresses and steps into the shower, raising the nozzle to his height. It takes a little adjustment to figure out how to shower with one numb arm, which is somehow different from having no arm there at all, but he adapts.

Once he's clean, he braces his hand against the wall and lets the water run down his hair and back, as if it can wash away his sins.

Nine soldiers survived, only eight of them soldiers he knew by name. The loss hurts more than he would like to admit, particularly of Armin and Eren. Armin should never have had to offer himself as a sacrifice to Marley, and Eren had always been more than just a tool for the Survey Corps. They were both just children...

In a way, he had been correct: Eren and Historia really had been the key to learning the mysteries of the outside world and ensuring the security of the walled citizens.

But at what cost?

He shuts off the taps and finds a towel, barely large enough to wrap around his waist. The bedroom closet has been stocked with pants and dress shirts in his size, and he makes a mental note to thank Hange. Ten years ago, the fashion had been

neutral colours, but the shirts are in deep blues, purples, and greens. He selects a dark blue shirt and takes a few minutes to put it on. There is no hair gel available, so he pushes his hair off his forehead the best that he can with water. It has a tendency to flop into his forehead, and he hates the feeling of loose hair on his face. He has always wondered how Levi can stand it.

He inspects himself, thinking that he needs a shave soon. Other than that, the colour of the shirt seems to suit him. His cheeks are still a bit red from wind burn, and his hair is loose, but not untidy.

*Stop being vain.* He turns and heads downstairs. He's just reaching the bottom when the door swings open and Levi steps in, carrying two large sacks.

He locks on to Erwin's face. "That expression ... What's wrong?"

Erwin smiles politely. "Just processing a lot right now. Can I help you with that?"

"I doubt it." Levi sets the sacks gently on the ground and pulls a large clay pot out of one of them. "Mrs. Svenson sold us some soup for dinner." He pulls out a bottle. "And Mr. Svenson sold us some soft apple cider."

Erwin begins to heat the soup on the stove while Levi puts away various other sundries he acquired from their neighbour. They set aside a bowl for Hange, then sit together at the table. As they eat, they fall into a familiar silence, and suddenly the problems of the world don't seem quite so pressing.

"Like old times," Levi says quietly, as if sharing his thoughts. His expression is a strange yearning, as if contemplating time lost.

*Ten years, for him. Longer than we ever spent together in the first place.* "I hope my presence isn't opening old wounds."

Levi gives a soft snort. "Our wounds don't ever close."

Erwin thinks of his father, of the mountain of corpses, and says, "No, I suppose they don't."

Levi finishes off his soup and stands, carrying his dish to

the sink.

“I can clear the table,” says Erwin.

“Your arm—”

“I did everything with one arm before. Besides, I have to start helping around here if I’m going to stay for a little while.” He lets the words hang in the air, watching Levi’s reaction.

“All right, then I’m going to do some chores. I might be a bit late, so go ahead to bed.”

“Where should I sleep?”

Levi gives him an odd look. “Same place as last night.”

“But what about you? It’s even colder tonight.”

“I’ll figure it out.”

The door slams open, and Hange blows into the room, glasses fogged and hair full of snowflakes. “It’s blustery out there!”

“Where were you?” Levi asks.

“I went to check the couriers. Turns out we have an invitation from Historia to come to Mitras tomorrow. She and Mikasa are doing some sort of performance.” They hold out a scroll.

“Performance?” Erwin asks, while Levi snatches the scroll from their hand to read it.

Hange shrugs. “Probably one of their hobbies. They’ve been working on a lot of them—I can never keep track.”

“The roads will be a mess tomorrow,” Levi mutters, setting down the scroll.

“So we’ll walk to town and hire a driver. They’ll have that route cleared by the time we get there.”

Erwin is suddenly aware of how exhausted he is, and he stands. “I think I had better rest up if we’ll be travelling tomorrow.” They exchange goodnights, and he leaves the two of them to plan.

Once he lays down, however, he finds his head is racing too fast to let him rest. He adjusts the pillow and reaches for Hange’s journal. Flipping past the section about the titan serum, he continues reading. By the time Levi comes upstairs, the

candle has burnt halfway down, and he is on the last couple pages.

“You’re still up,” Levi says, opening the wardrobe door. He pulls out flannel pyjamas. “Do you need another blanket?”

“No, I think I’m all right.”

“We have to get you some flannel pyjamas, too. It gets damned cold here in the winter.” Levi turns away and pulls off his shirt. His back is just as scarred as Erwin remembers, but he’s glad to see there are no new ones. His shape is almost the same, maybe a bit stockier, but “stockier” for Levi is still slender. Levi pulls off his pants next, and his shape is nice there, too, but Erwin looks away, just as he did every day they were changing in each other’s presence as soldiers.

Once Levi is dressed, he wraps himself in a blanket and slumps on the chair next to him.

“Will it keep you up if I read a little while longer?” Erwin asks.

“No, go ahead.”

He feels safe here, in the warm bed, with Levi beside him. He flips backwards to the titan serum pages, ready to read about his own death.

As the words progress, his stomach sinks. He reads of Floche saving him because they needed a “devil”—well, at least one soldier had seen him for who he really was. He reads of Eren and Mikasa physically attacking Levi to try to save Armin. That hurts, too, although he understands their loyalty to their friend.

Hange has left several notes here as reminders, presumably preserving their relationship with Levi should their memory be erased:

LEVI WON’T SPEAK WITH MUCH ABOUT HIS REASONING, BUT HE’S SAID ENOUGH THAT I CAN READ BETWEEN THE LINES. HE MAY OPEN UP MORE TO YOU IN THE FUTURE—BE CAREFUL HOW YOU TREAD, HANGE. HE FEELS THINGS MORE THAN HE LETS ON, AND HE’S

EASILY WOUNDED.

WHAT HAPPENED IS THIS: LEVI WAS ABOUT TO INJECT THE SERUM INTO ERWIN'S ARM, WHEN ERWIN UNCONSCIOUSLY KNOCKED HIS HAND AWAY AND RASPED A PHRASE AS IF HE WERE SPEAKING WITH HIS FATHER. AND LEVI THOUGHT OF FLOCHE SAYING WE NEEDED TO TURN ERWIN INTO A DEVIL, AND OF KENNY SAYING EVERYONE WAS A SLAVE TO SOMETHING, AND OF THE PEACE ON ERWIN'S FACE WHEN LEVI TOLD HIM TO GIVE UP ON HIS DREAM. AND HE COULDN'T BEAR TO TAKE THAT PEACE AWAY FROM HIM, TO DRAG HIM RIGHT BACK INTO THE HELL HE HAD FINALLY ESCAPED.

IT WAS AN ACT OF LOVE. LEVI'S HEART WAS ALWAYS WITH ERWIN. EVEN WHEN WE WERE SEPARATED FOR MISSIONS, EVEN WHEN ERWIN WAS PUTTING HIMSELF ON THE LINE AT THE MILITARY TRIAL, LEVI TRUSTED HIM AND LOVED HIM AND, QUITE FRANKLY, MENTIONED HIS NAME SO FREQUENTLY THAT IT DROVE ME BATTY. THEY WALKED IN STEP, EVEN WHEN THEY WERE APART. BUT IN THE WEEKS LEADING UP TO THE BATTLE, LEVI HAD BEEN SEEING THOSE STEPS FALTER, HAD TRIED TO MATCH ERWIN'S PACE, BUT IN THE END, THE WEIGHT OF ERWIN'S GRIEF AND HIS GUILT WERE TOO HEAVY AND HE COULD WALK NO FURTHER.

WITH ONE CONVERSATION, LEVI TOOK THAT UNBEARABLE WEIGHT ONTO HIMSELF.

AND WITH US ABOUT TO ERASE ALL MEMORIES, THAT GRIEF AND THAT GUILT ARE GOING TO BE WEIGHING ON LEVI ALONE. YOU, MIKASA AND HISTORIA ARE THE ONLY PEOPLE HE WILL BE ABLE TO SHARE IT WITH, AND I DOUBT HE WILL TALK MUCH ABOUT IT. ON THOSE RARE OCCASIONS WHEN HE DOES, PLEASE LISTEN.

AND EVEN WHEN HE SEEMS CRANKY, BE GENTLE WITH HIM.

HE OFFERED UP HIS HEART FOR ERWIN ON THAT ROOFTOP, TORE IT CLEAN IN HALF, AND NONE OF US WILL EVER TRULY UNDERSTAND HOW DEEP HIS HURT MUST BE.

Erwin swallows hard and blinks his watering eyes. He turns to look at Levi with new appreciation.

Levi is already sleeping. He looks younger with his face relaxed; he always did. His brow is furrowed so consistently when he's awake that it's easy to forget it's not really a wrinkle.

Erwin feels sleep starting to pull him under, but he doesn't want to break his vision of Levi, not yet. He wants to understand the pain, grief, and loneliness he went through. He wants to understand him like he once did, when they walked side-by-side even at a distance. He wants to understand why a man so selfless and loyal chose to attach to *him*.

A yawn splits his jaw and brings tears to his eyes, and he knows he can't stay awake any longer. He reaches over to snuff the candle, then falls back to the pillow.

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LEVI SHIVERS HIMSELF awake, and realizes the blanket has slipped to the ground. He frowns and bends to pick it up, accidentally scuffing the chair against the floor.

Erwin sits bolt upright, silhouetted against the window. “What—”

“It’s just me. Go back to sleep.” His words vibrate between his teeth, and Erwin must hear it, because he says,

“You’ll freeze on that chair.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’ll freeze,” Erwin says, more firmly. He shifts over, leaving space on the mattress. “I’ll face away from you if that’s what’s making the idea of it awkward for you.”

Levi weighs his options for a moment and, feeling a bit

ashamed by how happy he is, slips under the covers. The mattress is warm from Erwin's body heat. He already feels his blood warming; he hastily rolls on his side to face away from him, too.

He wants to turn around and embrace him, so badly that he aches. But not like this, not in the heat of the moment. After dreaming of it for sixteen years, he wants to do everything right.

"Levi," Erwin says, voice groggy, as if he's half asleep.

"Hm?"

"You don't need to buy another bed. We can share this one."

*Maybe a bigger one, so we have more room.* Levi feels Erwin's back just barely touching his, and glows. *Or maybe not.*

Within moments, they are both asleep.

# ❖ Seven ❖

## THE PATHS THAT LED US HERE

A SEA OF STARS stretches above Erwin, sand warm beneath his body, but he barely notices any of it, because Levi is standing over him, completely nude. Starlight glints in the greys of his hair and his eyes. The lines of his muscles curve from chest to abdomen to groin like a violin, and his form vibrates like its strings. He is ethereal and impossibly beautiful.

Erwin reaches for him. Levi's skin is warm, smooth, and comforting. Touching him gives the same sensation as drinking a mug of tea.

"Levi," he whispers, and he bends forward to plant a kiss to the shimmering skin of his chest. He tastes of maple and starlight.

"Erwin." The name gusts over him, warm and sweet.

Erwin kisses lower, and feels hands comb into his hair from above. Lower, slowly, slowly, then at last, he takes Levi into his mouth. Erwin smooths back the skin with his lips and swirls his tongue around him, sucking gently. When he looks up, he sees Levi has tossed his head back, mouth open.

So impossibly beautiful.

Erwin takes him deep into his throat, then pulls back, seeking the rhythm to Levi's song. When the hands in his hair tighten, he knows he has found it. The stars above them grow brighter and brighter, until they're surrounded by a field of white. Levi is rigid and twitching in his mouth, his breath coming in sharp gasps that match Erwin's movements.

"Erwin, I'm going to—"

White light rushes into Erwin's mouth and floods his body, and then he, too, is drowning.

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ERWIN SITS UP, breathing hard.

The bedroom is dark, and through the window, he can see the first glimpses of sunrise on the horizon. No sand. No stars. Just Levi asleep beside him, politely huddled to the edge of the bed.

Erwin surreptitiously lowers his hand, checking himself. To his relief, his clothes are dry. That would have been awkward to explain.

He closes his eyes and flexes his thigh muscles a few times to try to redirect the blood flow. *One night in the same bed, and you're suddenly a teenager again*, he chides himself. He tries to forget the feeling of Levi in his mouth. This proves to be difficult to do when the room smells like Levi and his body heat is glowing against him.

Giving up, he slips out of bed and pulls on his clothes from the day before. With one last look back at Levi, he softly moves from the room.

The cool air in the hallway calms him, and he takes a few slow breaths. Now he just feels embarrassed. Lusting over Levi like this is disrespectful. Hell, he doesn't even know if Levi is interested in sex—there were never any rumours of his involvement with anyone during his entire six years with the Survey Corps, and Erwin never saw anyone entering or leaving his room at odd hours. But then he thinks of his own lengthy dry spell, and wonders if stress and exhaustion just killed everyone's drive.

As he climbs downstairs, he experimentally lifts his right hand to the hand rail. It's still clumsy and sore, but it seems to be regaining more and more motion as time passes. His spirits lift.

He lights the fire, then sits on the couch and unwraps the

bandage from his hand. The slash doesn't look infected, but it will take some time to heal. At least he can be doubly certain he's not a shifter, or it would have healed overnight.

His body still hasn't quite calmed down from the dream, so, looking for a distraction, he picks up a newspaper resting on a side table. It's dated in the year 860, and for a moment, the world tilts around him. He takes a deep breath to steady himself. He's going to have to get used to those strange moments when he's reminded of how much time he missed.

Flipping through the pages, he sees not much has changed in the press. Most of the stories are about crops and upcoming events for the holiday season.

An article on the last page mentions Military Police Chief Nile Dok, and it's as if someone reached into Erwin's chest and squeezed the air out of his lungs. His oldest living friend has continued on with his life, completely unaware Erwin ever existed. Their children must be so old by now. Erwin had always hoped to be a surrogate uncle to them, once the Survey Corps accomplished its goals.

But now he's mourning ten lost years when he has been gifted with a future to live. So many soldiers under him lost their entire futures and, thanks to the memory wipe, their pasts as well. How can he mourn ten years when they have none? His jaw tightens. *Selfish.*

"Can't sleep?"

Levi's voice pulls him from his self-loathing. He turns to see Levi standing at the base of the stairs, still wearing his flannel pyjamas, hair sticking out at odd angles.

Erwin's dream flashes through his mind; he hastily shoves it back before blood can rush between his legs again. Instead, he smiles. "Sleep well?"

"Better than I have in years." Levi stretches his arms above his head in an endearing way as he pads across the room; the bottom of his shirt lifts just enough to show a glimpse of his abdomen, and Erwin remembers how it felt under his lips in his

dream. *Stop it.*

Levi drops onto the couch. “At least, I was sleeping well, until the path between us told me you were sulking.”

“You saw the paths again?” Erwin asks, wondering, briefly, if they had shared the dream. Then it sinks in that the comment was a joke, but it’s too late: Levi gives him an unimpressed look.

“I was right about the sulking, though, wasn’t I?”

Erwin holds out the newspaper and taps Nile’s name. “They won’t remember me at all, will they?”

“No.” Levi accepts the newspaper and stares absently at it. “Their youngest is named after you, you know.”

“Oh?”

Levi nods. “He was born right when we were negotiating with Marley. They named him the day we learned of the memory wipe. Nile wanted to carry on your legacy even if none of them would realize it.”

The text is blurred; Erwin quietly takes the newspaper from Levi and sets it on the side table.

“You touched a lot of people,” Levi says gruffly. “Your absence was strongly missed. Even after the memory wipe, some of the ex-nobles remember you fondly.”

*That’s right, the nobles are non-Eldians who can’t have their memories erased.* Erwin takes a subtle swab at his eyes. “I doubt many of the nobles remember me fondly, after all the ways I pressured them for information.”

Levi’s face suddenly twists. He looks as if he’s about to say something, but stops himself.

“What is it, Levi?”

“Do you remember the first time you took me to a gala at the capital?” There’s something hesitant in his words.

“Yes, I do.” It was the first time he had seen Levi in a suit; the sight had left him speechless and lightheaded.

After a long pause, Levi says, “I think I walked in on you pressuring a noble for information.” When Erwin stares at him blankly, he adds, “Behind the curtains on the mezzanine.”

“Ah.” So he had seen that, then. With a pang of guilt, Erwin thinks of how many negotiations happened in that hidden room. “I should have told you where I was going, but our rapport was still fragile. And then in future negotiations ... ” He hesitates. “I should have included you, Levi, but I didn’t want you to have to witness—”

“Witness—?” Levi’s eyes widen. “No, no, I don’t—I didn’t want to be included in any of that shit. I just ... It left a lasting impression on me. Showed me that there was a human beneath all that Commander stuff.” He is quiet for a moment, then looks away. “Forget it, I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

*We’re speaking two different languages again,* Erwin thinks, trying to piece together what the conversation is really about.

“So tell me,” Levi says, before he has time to connect any dots, “is it just Nile that’s keeping you awake? Because he isn’t worth it.”

Erwin smiles and opens his mouth, but Levi cuts him off.

“No, none of that polite smile bullshit. You don’t have to hide stuff from me, Erwin. There’s nothing you could say that could shake me.”

The smile fades. “Very well. You mentioned a cart stuck in mud.”

“Yeah?”

“Truthfully, I’m in the mud again.” Erwin closes his eyes and leans against the back of the couch. “I was always too busy to spend much time with my thoughts. Every waking moment, from the time my father passed until the final charge in Shiganshina, was dedicated to my dream. Strategy was my way of blocking those thoughts—keeping the cart moving forward, if you will. But now I have nothing to occupy my time in the same way.” He swallows a lump in his throat. “How does a soldier learn to live in a peaceful world?”

He feels the cushions move. When he opens his eyes, Levi has shifted closer to him. “Well, I don’t think I have that fully figured out yet.”

“What did you do, at first?”

Levi waves it off. “It’s not the same. I had a more gradual transition. I was still in the Survey Corps, then I was still in the military, and then I retired when I was ready. But ... ” Levi shrugs a little. “At first, I was angry. I smashed so many training dummies in fits of rage that Historia had to take me aside to tell me to cool down. Then anger became too exhausting, and I was just left with sadness. I cried.”

Erwin feels his throat tighten. The thought of Levi openly weeping—beautiful strong stoic Levi—breaks his heart. “You wept?”

“Yeah. A lot.”

“For ... ” He doesn’t want to assume.

Levi lifts his chin; his throat bobs, then he says, “For a lot of things, but mostly, for you.”

Erwin’s eyes flood and he can’t hold it back any longer; the thought of Levi weeping is too much. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Levi says.

Erwin grabs his shoulder and pulls him in. Levi doesn’t hesitate—his arms wrap around Erwin and hold him tightly.

They cling to each other, the fire crackling and warm beside them. Erwin turns to bury his nose in Levi’s hair. It smells clean and of fire smoke at the same time. He feels safe here, so he speaks honestly:

“I struggle with self-loathing.”

“I know,” Levi rumbles into his collarbone.

“So even when I know, reasonably, why I made decisions I did, and how they’re justified, there’s a second internal voice that finds a way to cast my actions in the worst light possible. And I can’t tell anymore if it’s lying to me, or if the truth is somewhere between the two voices.” He pulls back and holds Levi by the shoulder so he can look him in the eye. “I manipulated you into friendship with me, Levi. I saw you as an asset to acquire and I orchestrated a situation to make you need to stay in the Survey Corps.”

Levi has that unimpressed look again. “No, you didn’t.”  
“I conned you.”

“How stupid do you think I am? I grew up in the Underground. No one can con me.” Levi’s face softens. “I knew you were playing games, but there was more beneath that. You believed what you were saying about saving humanity. Look, you act like all that ever mattered to you was proving your father right, but you’ve got a big enough brain to hold more than one goal at the same time, you know.” He leans closer. “None of us were selflessly giving ourselves for the cause, Erwin. We all had our own goals. Hange wanted to learn more about titans. Eren wanted to be free, not just free humanity. Mikasa wanted to protect Eren. Armin wanted to see the ocean. And I—” His voice hitches. “I wanted to protect you. And when you came to the point where you had to choose humanity or your dream, you chose humanity. I didn’t.” He pauses, as if considering. “Twice. Once when I gave Armin the serum. Again when I left the walls to find your titan.”

That inner voice is saying terrible things now, and Erwin finds the strength to say it aloud. “I wasn’t worth the cost of all of humanity.”

“Well,” Levi says, “to me, you were. And I would make the same decisions again. So tell that shitty internal voice of yours to shut the hell up.”

He says this so intently that Erwin can’t help it; he laughs, harder than he has in a long time. “If you ever want to come out of retirement, Levi, you should become a therapist.”

The corner of Levi’s lips twitch, almost a smile, but then his expression becomes sombre. “Erwin, you’re going to go through a lot of mixed emotions for a while. Just keep talking to me, okay? Don’t shut me out.”

The *again* is implied. “That’s fair. I’ll do my best. But you have to do the same.”

Levi scoffs and turns back to the fire. “I have a decade’s worth of extra baggage. It’s not a fair exchange.” But Erwin can

tell he's being tongue-in-cheek. "How's your arm? Still sore?"

"Yes," Erwin replies, even though he's recovering well.

Levi shifts so close that their thighs are touching, then reaches for Erwin's arm and begins to work his thumb along it. "Feels less tense than before."

"It's definitely improving. I can almost close my fist now."

For a moment, neither of them speaks. It seems as good a time as any to change the topic. Erwin says, "I read Hange's notes about the titan serum." He gently leans closer, so their shoulders touch. "I should thank you for making the decision you did."

The hand on his arm momentarily stops, and Levi's face twists.

"Levi, we aren't shutting each other out, remember?" Erwin says gently.

The hand starts working at his arm again. "Okay, here it is: I thought I was putting you to rest and carrying on your legacy, but I just made you suffer as a titan. Then I failed at killing the Beast Titan, and again at protecting your memory."

They're silent for a moment, then Levi adds, "Like I said, I have ten extra years of baggage. You aren't the only one whose thoughts get stuck in the mud."

He finishes the massage, then gently turns Erwin's wrist so his palm is face-up. He unwraps the bandage and studies the wound. "At least it didn't heal overnight." He glances sideways. "You aren't a shifter, I mean. I'll get you a fresh bandage."

Erwin is reluctant for their contact to end, but nods. Levi stands, leaving Erwin feeling colder in his absence.

Levi is just finishing wrapping the new bandage when Hange comes up from the basement. "Good morning!" they call.

Levi grits his teeth. "They are inhumanly perky in the morning," he says under his breath, and louder: "I'll get some oats boiling."

"Thanks." Hange slides onto the couch, far too close into Erwin's personal space. "How are you feeling?" The statement feels like an exam question.

Erwin, barely fazed by their intensity, fills them in on his healing arm, the wound on his hand, and a sanitized version of his state of mind.

“I feel fully like myself again.” He pauses. “Thank you for letting me read your journal. You did an excellent job of documenting the details.”

Hange looks pleased, but shrugs it off. “I’m glad someone got use out of those notes. I didn’t end up losing much.” They shift their glasses onto their forehead and rub their eye.

“Long night?” Erwin guesses.

With a nod, Hange says, “Now that we know the spinal fluid derivative worked on you, I need to create some sort of dispersal system.” They start to walk through all the steps they’ve taken with the spinal fluid tests, as if he’s still their Commander. It still feels natural now, but at some point, they’re going to have to realize he’s a civilian now. At some point, he’s going to have to realize it, too.

“I thought we didn’t have the technology to collect spinal fluid,” Erwin says finally.

“We didn’t. Levi kept the syringe he used on Armin. I was able to reverse engineer the container. The plan was always to try to use it to find a cure for the wandering titans on the island.”

“Couldn’t that have been part of the negotiations with Zeke Yeager?”

“No,” Levi says, entering the room, “because that asshole didn’t know how to transform people back into their right minds, either. There’s oatmeal and tea if this one is done interrogating you.”

“He gets upset if anyone mentions Zeke Yeager,” Hange explains, and Levi turns back to the kitchen and mutters something unintelligible under his breath.

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THE THREE OF THEM eating together transports Levi back

in time. It feels like any moment now, Moblit, Miche, and Nanaba will sit down to join them. The only thing missing is the undercurrent of stress they were always trying to forget, and he does not miss that.

These types of flashbacks are second nature now; he has had the time to mourn and accept what was lost. He glances at Erwin, wondering if he's ready to go to Mitras. They will certainly run into people he knows, who don't know him back.

"We'll walk to the nearest village—there's a carriage service we can hire there," Hange is saying. "Normally we would go to the town stables and fetch our horses, but a carriage will be warmer."

"Historia let us keep our horses," Levi adds; he had always been fond of his. He misses caring for it each day, but they aren't set up with a stable.

Erwin opens his mouth to say something, then stops. No doubt he was about to ask about his horse, then remembered the final charge. This is going to keep happening for a while, Levi thinks sadly: those small realizations that things are different than they used to be, jabbing at him like pins.

After breakfast, they head upstairs to change. As Levi wraps the cravat around his neck, he sees Erwin smiling fondly at him. "What?"

"It's nice to see your fashion tastes haven't changed." Erwin steps closer and adjusts the cravat, then smooths it, his cheeks darkening.

Heat rises to Levi's cheeks, too. "Historia tells me I'm old-fashioned and out of style now."

"I doubt that. You always had an eye for style."

Levi shrugs. "Lost interest in it. Fashion doesn't matter out here."

"Well, we were already planning to spend some money on a wardrobe for me, right? Perhaps we should spend some money updating your wardrobe, too."

He likes the idea. He also likes Erwin touching his chest,

but then frowns when he remembers the other arm. “Maybe we should see a doctor about that arm of yours, too.”

“And tell them what?”

“Nerve damage? Crushed in an accident? We’ll think of something.” Emboldened, Levi grabs the limp hand and lifts it, running a finger across the bandage. “Might be harder to explain this.”

“True.” Erwin’s voice is doing that low rumble again, and goosebumps erupt across Levi’s body. “But maybe they have a salve that can help it heal.”

“Maybe.” Levi lowers the hand again, and looks up at him. “We should head out soon. The earlier we get there, the more time we have to get settled before Historia drags us into a stuffy dinner.” Truthfully, he doesn’t mind the stuffy dinners so much, but complaining about it has become a ritual.

Erwin’s fond look has turned to sadness, and Levi’s jaw tightens. “What now?”

“Just thinking about the way I reacted to your cravat. I keep looking for the ways you’re the same as the Levi I knew, but that’s not really fair to you, is it? We’ve been apart a long time.”

Levi snorts. “I’ve stagnated, Erwin. I’m the same person I was back then.”

Erwin’s hand raises to brush a strand of greyed hair out of Levi’s face. “You have changed, even if you don’t see it. You’re wiser and more confident—I especially saw it yesterday, when we were out hunting. You’re true to yourself in a way that you weren’t when you were younger.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Levi asks, not sure he understands.

“No, not at all. You’ve evolved, and I’m still the man I was when I died. What if the reality of this new future sends me spiralling into myself again? That conversation we had this morning—”

Levi cuts him off. “It’s like you said: I’m more confident in myself. I’ll pull you out of it.”

“That shouldn’t be your responsibility.”

With a snort, Levi says, “You’ve been a soldier so long that you have no idea how friendship works, do you? The five of us—you, me, Hange, Historia, Mikasa—are carrying a burden that we’ve freed the rest of the world from. The way we get through it is by leaning on each other. It’s all fresh to you, so of course you’ll need help. And you’ll help me when I need it. That’s how it works.” He steps closer. “But you have to be willing to be kinder to yourself. That’s where my self-confidence comes from. It’s how all of us survived this pain. You need to learn to treat yourself with the same patience you would give me, or anyone else.”

Erwin shakes his head. “I don’t know how to do that.”

“That’s because you grew up in the military, which spits at you and slams you down until you become who they want.”

That earns him a smile. “I hope that’s not your impression of my leadership.”

“Of course not. You were different. You met us where we were rather than shaping us to your ideal, and fit all our skills together instead of forcing us into roles. But everything else about the military system is about ego and breaking people down.” Levi turns and gestures to the window. “It’s not like that, out here. We move at our own pace. Our focus is on staying alive, day-to-day. Anything above that is a bonus.”

Hange bursts into the door. “Ready to go?” They pause, and Levi swears their eye sparkles. “I see.”

That’s when he realizes he and Erwin are standing a little too close together. He steps away, irritated by Hange’s premature celebration and the interruption. “Fine. Let’s go,” he mutters, pushing past them.

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ONCE THEY’RE ALL packed, they walk down the road single file, silently taking turns breaking the path, just as they did on snowy days in the military long ago. Erwin takes in the stunning

landscapes they pass: snowy fields, small farm yards, rolling hills. This region seems to specialize in poultry and root vegetables, based on the brightly painted signboards at each farm.

“Is there enough food to sustain everyone now?” he asks.

Ahead of him, Hange nods. “When the Marleyans set up the pipelines, a few of them were kind enough to share some of their agricultural advances. We’ve got a new crop cycling system that makes better use of the seasons and the soil, and some deeper knowledge about fertilization.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” He realizes that while he has information about what happened beyond the walls, and with the Survey Corps, he still knows almost nothing about life within the walls in this new world. He should really have more information if he wants to blend in. “Is life better for the average citizen?” he asks.

“I’d say so,” Hange says, sounding a bit defensive.

For a moment, the only sound is their boots crunching through the icy crust of the snow. Erwin remembers his father, the light in his eyes when he talks about the world outside the wall. “Someone will figure it out, at some point. It only takes one person to ask the right question.”

Levi makes a *tsk* sound behind him. “We know that.”

“We’ll just have to deal with them one case at a time,” Hange says.

Levi’s voice is disgusted. “I’m guessing we’ll buy them off with land and wealth the way we did with the nobles.”

“We’ll think of something.” Hange sounds irritated now.

Erwin frowns. The revolution overturned the noble class, but then they were paid off again after the memory wipe? “So everything is back to the way it was, for the average citizen. Everything we did has been reset except for Historia being on the throne. Is that correct?”

“No. We don’t have destruction knocking down our door.”

*That’s for future generations to deal with*, Erwin thinks, but he has the good sense not to say it aloud.

Hange must read it in his silence, anyway, because they whirl. “You weren’t there.”

Erwin and Levi stop, too.

“You were dead,” Hange snaps, pointing a finger. “You shouldn’t have been. Levi should have chosen you, but he didn’t. Then you—” They point at Levi. “—after having the gall to choose Erwin’s death over what was best for humanity, you stormed out of the strategy meetings before we even had a flicker of an idea of what to do. You made a huge fucking mess and then left me to clean it up. Me and a handful of kids.”

Levi’s scoff sounds like an unspoken, *not this again*.

“No, you don’t get to sit there and scoff. Marley left us with no options: we had to either make one last stand against their military and get obliterated, or make a bargain to put it off as long as possible. So we agreed to their terms, and tried one last gamble in Eren. It didn’t work. Tell me now, both of you: what would you have done?”

There is a long silence. Guilt drips down the back of Erwin’s throat like ice water, pooling in his chest.

“You’re right,” he says finally. “I wasn’t there. I chose you as Commander for a reason, and it was to be Commander Hange Zoë, not another me. I can’t judge the choices you made, because you were under pressure I could never understand.”

“My transition to Commander was simple. Shadis gave me leeway to practice my strategies before I had command, and my goals were exactly the same as the twelve commanders before me: go beyond the walls and eradicate the titans, while keeping as many people alive as possible. You had no status quo to fall back on, Hange. You had to forge your own path, with no support. I’m sorry for my questions.” He reaches out to squeeze their shoulder and says honestly, “You have given peace to everyone within the walls. Temporary or not, that is a great gift.”

A tear spills from Hange’s eye. “You shouldn’t have died. You should have been the one navigating Marley’s deal.”

“And what if I had been there? I might have fallen back on

what I knew, and made a desperate last gamble in a fight we stood no chance of winning.”

“You wouldn’t have done that,” Levi mutters.

Hange shakes their head. “You would have figured something out. You would have at least negotiated better terms for us.”

He appreciates their confidence, but knows it’s misplaced. Before he can figure out how to voice that, he notices snowflakes gently drifting from the sky. “We should keep moving before the snow gets worse. Lead the way, Hange. We’ll follow.”

Hange studies him for a moment, and he can tell they’re still wounded. But they nod and turn. “This way.”

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**THE THREE OF THEM** arrive at the town just as the snow is starting to cloud their visibility. Levi is leading now, and he is relieved to see the street has been cleared. The walk seems to take three times as much energy in snow. He steps onto the cobblestone and relishes the stability.

“Are we in the town?” Erwin asks, and Levi looks at it through the man’s eyes. A small cluster of houses line the town’s sole street. At the end of it is a single store that sells hardware, groceries, farm equipment, and handles the post.

“‘Town’ might be a generous term,” Levi admits.

“Well, it has charm. I presume we’re going to that store at the end of the block?”

Hange pipes up, “It’s the only one around.” They seem to have let go of some of their earlier anger, but Levi still feels heavy, as he does every time they bring it up. He knows he made a selfish decision, but it’s not as if he can go back in time and change it. He would just make the same decision again, anyway.

While Hange is talking to the owner about hiring a cab, Levi winds through the aisles. The musty, earthy smell of the store is nostalgic; he remembers the first few days he came out

here with Hange, when they were first looking for a place to live. He was bitter then, about the choices humanity had made, and he was still in the first few months of mourning Erwin, so his head wasn't in a good place. It's surreal, now, to feel that nostalgic sadness, while simultaneously feeling the excitement of his reunion with Erwin, but he accepts that both can exist at once. He has gotten accustomed to living two opposing sides of himself, especially with the secrets about the world he carries.

He sees Erwin moving clothes along a rather sad clothing rack, and strides over to him. "Don't buy clothing here."

"You don't think that poorly of my fashion sense, do you?" Erwin pulls a jacket off the rack, and grimaces; it's painted in a camouflage pattern and has a white, slightly misshapen military police logo on the back.

"Nile's hunting outfit," Levi suggests.

Erwin chuckles. "I don't think this logo is up to military code." He pauses. "I bet a lot of folks out here dream of their kids getting into the military. The Military Police is a cushy job and it pays well. Or did the military restructure?"

Levi shrugs. "Not much. Still three branches, and the other two are the same as before. The Survey Corps logo was reappropriated as the Queen's Guard logo. Historia's inner circle. They protect the castle, but also focus on her humanitarian missions. She says the wings of freedom are angel wings now."

"Humanitarian missions?"

"To ensure no one goes hungry, or to help people escape dangerous situations." Levi had the honour of acting as her bodyguard as the queen negotiated with dangerous people in all sorts of circumstances: illegal brothels, drug rings, street gangs. They could have used Erwin's silver tongue a few times, but they managed okay.

"The queen commands the branch?" Erwin asks, because of course the first place his mind would go is military structure. Levi frowns.

"Sort of. The official story is that it's too small to have an

actual commander. I think all of us felt as if you were leading it, in spirit.”

Erwin stops shifting through the clothes and turns to him, brows pinched. “Oh?”

“Your name came up in our discussions almost every day. It seemed that every time we had a big decision to make or a deal to negotiate, we asked ourselves how you would’ve approached it.”

Erwin hangs the ugly jacket back on the rack and looks deep in thought. “That’s a lot of confidence in me.”

“It was mostly Levi bringing you up,” Hange says behind them. “He can’t go thirty seconds without saying your name.”

Levi folds his arms over his chest. “Did you hire a carriage?”

“Yeah, they had a fare cancel at the last minute, so they’ll be here in a few minutes.” Hange nods at the rack of clothes. “Better wrap up your purchases of these stylish clothes.”

“I think I’ll save my budget for the capital,” Erwin says with a smile, and turns to leave.

As they follow, Levi leans in close to Hange. “You okay, two-eyes?”

“Yeah,” Hange says quietly. “The problem is, my failure to measure up was always hypothetical. Now it’s not.”

He stares at Erwin’s back ahead of them; if the man can hear them, he isn’t showing any indication. Just in case, he drops his voice even lower. “You heard what he said. He chose you to be *you*, not him. Don’t compare yourself. You did what you had to do.”

Hange is quiet. The three of them step through the door and wait by the side of the road for the carriage.

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IT’S NOT A VERY long ride to Mitras. Hange falls asleep almost as soon as the carriage starts moving, and Erwin and Levi pass the journey in silence, staring out the windows. Erwin feels

the tension thick between them; he catches Levi studying him a few times.

“I’ll be fine,” Erwin says finally.

Levi shrugs. “I know. Just … the first time after the memory wipe is weird.”

When they step out of the carriage, Erwin immediately recognizes what he meant. The bustling crowd moves past him without looking, as if he’s nobody—and he supposes that now, that’s accurate. A man without a past.

“Captain,” a few people say to Levi with a nod, and then they give Erwin a quizzical look. His ears start to ring and his vision blurs.

Levi grips his arm and the world steadies again. He takes a deep breath.

“Come on,” Levi says. “You didn’t forget your way around, did you?”

As they make their way to the royal palace, Erwin thinks of the last time he was there, watching Historia’s coronation. He was proud of her, in that moment, and if he were honest, a little inspired by her insistence that the people of the walls deserved a true hero as a leader. He’s curious to see how she has grown.

The Military Police officers stationed at the palace gates are unfamiliar. They look as if they’re in their mid-twenties, so they were fresh graduates when he was last here. There have been ten new graduating classes since he left; he wonders what peacetime has done for military enrollment rates, which spiked after Wall Maria fell.

*You aren’t a commander anymore,* he reminds himself.

“It’s going to take me a long time to detach,” he says aloud, because he promised Levi he would be more open with him. “I’m analyzing everything and filing it away as if I might need information later.”

Levi grips his shoulder in solidarity, a move he never would have made ten years ago, or even a few days ago. Erwin smiles to himself.

At the doors, Levi nods at the guards. One nods back. The other lowers her rifle to block their path.

“Captain Levi, Section Commander Hange. Is your guest authorized?” she asks, pointing her thumb at Erwin. “Military only, except during visiting hours.”

“He’s an old friend of ours,” Hange says, “and of Queen Historia’s.”

The guard squints at Erwin.

“We still outrank you,” Levi growls.

“Let them in,” commands a strong voice. Erwin turns.

Mikasa is an imposing figure. She’s taller than he remembers, with broad shoulders, a solid stance, and a long black cloak that flaps in the wind like wings. Her red scarf billows from her neck like a banner.

The guards noticeably shrink as they salute. “Yes, Captain Mikasa.”

Erwin can’t help but recall Hange’s description of the serum fight, when Mikasa launched herself at Levi and held a blade to his throat. He understands, logically, her reasoning. He knows that Mikasa backed down once Hange spoke with her. *I will not judge a child for wanting her best friend to live, he tells himself.* Though it’s hard to look at this statue of a woman and think of her as a child.

They enter a chamber near the entrance, clearly set up for meetings with outsiders. A dozen ornately carved wooden chairs surround a long table. Tapestries hang from the walls, presumably to dampen any sound. The chandelier is studded with crystals and shines like the sun.

Mikasa closes the door once they are all inside the room. Only then does she acknowledge him. “Commander Erwin.” There’s more emotion in her voice than her face shows.

“Captain Mikasa.” He smiles. “I understand it has been quite some time since we last spoke.”

“Yes, sir.”

He shakes his head. “Please. I’m a civilian now. It will be

less suspicious if you refer to me as Erwin.”

Mikasa’s eyes dart awkwardly to the side, and she drops onto a chair. Erwin wonders how no one ever guessed she and Levi were related. Between their headstrong natures, their strength, and their mannerisms, they are so alike. With their hair almost the same length, even the physical resemblance is striking.

“Levi and Hange have filled me in on the sacrifice Eren made to save our people.” Erwin draws himself straight. “I am honoured that you allowed them to use one of the vials of Eren’s spinal fluid on me.”

Mikasa’s composure finally seems to break; she swallows hard, her eyes glassy. “Did you get his titan?”

“No, it appears I did not.” His fingers curl a little around his bandaged hand.

Hange says brightly, “This might be a cure.”

Mikasa gives a nod so small that it’s barely perceptible. But then the door opens behind them, and she leaps to her feet. The others turn.

Queen Historia strides into the room. She is still petite, but holds her head high and walks with confidence; she reminds Erwin of Levi, the way she takes up more space than nature allotted. Her face is leaner around the cheekbones and harder about the eyes than when she was younger. She stands before him and stares up at him, her expression regal.

“Your Majesty,” he says respectfully, sinking to one knee.

She launches at him with a hug. The two of them were never particularly close, and it catches him off guard.

“Commander.” She pulls back and smiles. “You look exactly the same. Amazing. It’s so good to see you.”

“Erwin,” he corrects gently.

“Oh! You got your arm back.” She turns to Levi and Hange. “Is he a shifter?”

“No,” Hange says.

Historia turns back to Erwin, her eyes sparkling. “A cure,

then.”

“Potentially.”

“I think that counts as excellent news.” She gives him a radiant smile. “Erwin,” she says, as if trying the name on, “I’d like to show you around the palace and the city. We have quite a few initiatives that could really benefit from your—”

“Whoa, whoa, hold up.” Levi pushes between them and looms over Historia, looking more like an older brother to his sister than a subject to his queen. “He’s still recovering, and a lot has changed since he died, so give him a little time to get his bearings.”

“Well,” Erwin says charitably, “I do think a tour of your projects would be a great way to get my bearings.”

Historia’s eyes light up. She turns to the others. “Hange, why don’t you debrief Mikasa on the status of your research? Levi—”

“I’m going with Erwin,” Levi says flatly.

“You can if you wish, but the new recruits have officially joined the Queen’s Guard, and you’re always so good at giving the welcoming speech.”

Erwin turns to Levi, eyebrow raised. “Something inspirational, I presume?”

“No. I tell them to leave if they wouldn’t die for the queen.”

Erwin thinks he might enjoy watching that speech, but it’s important to orient himself here. He rests a hand on Levi’s shoulder. “You go ahead. We’ll reconvene soon.” He tries to communicate with a squeeze: *I’ll be fine.*

“Dinner in the great hall at seven,” Historia announces as she leads Erwin from the room. “Casual dress. Don’t be late!”

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THE QUEEN AND HER former Commander walk through the castle. Erwin has only been in this wing a few times, for

special events—and one revolution—but he notices the expensive decor has mostly been stripped from the walls. All that remains are portraits of past kings and queens. He's surprised to see a portrait of Rod Reiss hanging prominently on the wall.

Historia catches his glance as they pass. "The people don't really remember King Rod Reiss, but what they do remember is positive. He ruled for a short while after the death of his brother, Uri, then tragically passed away from an illness, and I was forced to step up at a young age." She looks sombre. "His intentions were good. I've come to terms with that: sometimes intentions can be good and the resulting actions can be selfish and terrible. And sometimes intentions can be selfish, but the resulting actions can be good. A person's character is far more complex than I believed when I was younger."

The words bring Erwin a bit of peace about his own selfish dreams. It's remarkable how different this woman is from the small girl whose voice shook as she stood up to him in the battle against her father. He has no right to feel pride, but he does anyway. Erwin, himself, had almost no hand in her growth, but Levi certainly did.

They continue down a long hallway, and come upon a large double door. As they open it, the first thing that catches Erwin's eye is an oil portrait of a girl with brown hair and freckles, her eyes sharp, but her smile kind. The perimeter of the room is neatly bordered with rack upon rack of children's clothes, toys, and in the corner, a few brightly-painted wooden slides. The centre of the room is open and lined with soft mats. The room feels lively and welcoming.

"Lady Ymir's Children's Program." Historia is staring at the portrait, expression distant. "She always said she didn't want to see anyone hated for who they were. At first, we used this for the children rescued from the Underground, as well as any other impoverished or orphaned children. As the years have passed, however, the number of orphaned children within the walls has shrunk, so we have shifted toward being more of a drop-in

community centre. A lot of our original orphans work here now.”

Erwin studies the slides in the corner, paint lovingly worn from use, and feels a pang of how things could have been. “When I was a boy, all orphans went to random homes, then were shipped off to the military as soon as they turned twelve. I’m sure a place like this offered some stability to children who were cycling between houses and felt like they had no home.”

Historia is looking at him as if seeing him for the first time, and he wonders if she has guessed that he was one of those orphans. “Well,” she says, “a lot do end up in the military still. It’s no longer the only place for people to secure food and shelter, but many are still drawn to the profession.”

“And I suppose a military presence is needed in case Marley reneges on their agreement.”

She shakes her head, solemn. “No, I don’t think you understand the strength of Marley’s military force. They have giant metal ships that fly through the sky, called airplanes. They have bombs that could take out all of Paradis in one explosion. They have thousands upon thousands of soldiers, and allies all over the world.” She clears her throat. “Which brings me to the project I need help with. Sometime during your stay, I would like to bring you into the war room and brief you on our current position, in case you have any feedback or insight.”

“You have a war room?” Erwin considers for a moment. “I suppose you have a close circle who is aware of the situation.”

Historia nods. “The memory wipe had no effect on the nobles or on many of our orphans, who were from families that were originally shoved into the Underground because they weren’t of Eldian blood and could not be controlled. I have cultivated a small circle of people I trust to discuss how we will react in ninety years, when the truce ends. An even smaller circle—Hange, Mikasa, Levi, and now you—knows the truth about this world. That inner circle is involved in the project to try to cure titans, as well as continued weapons research. We can talk more about your role in the coming days.” She hesitates. “If you want

to be involved.”

Does he? Now that he has achieved his father’s dream, does he still want to dedicate his life to the titans? He thinks of the bone-crushing fatigue that set in before the final mission and wonders if it’s still within him, hidden beneath all the curiosity about this new world.

He hasn’t replied; she smiles as if she understands. “There’s something else I want to show you. Levi thought it might be your favourite room.”

The room in question has a nearly identical set of double doors, but when she pushes them open, he sees row upon row of bookshelves, floor to ceiling, all tightly packed with books. He steps into the room and takes a slow spin to confirm that, yes, every space in this room contains books.

“A public library,” Historia says proudly. “This was Hange’s suggestion. The reading material features a wide range of topics, some educational, some less so.” She points at an adjoining balcony. “There’s a door over there that opens to the public, and we are almost always busy. The head librarian is already scouting out new locations for an expansion.”

Erwin walks along a bookshelf labelled “fiction,” his fingertips trailing the spines. “They’re all new.”

Historia nods and steps closer, voice low enough so only he can hear. “One of our Marley contacts taught us technology to print books more easily, so our publishing houses are accepting more manuscripts, which are in turn filling this library. Not all of it is high quality, but I think it’s important for us to develop our culture, which was so suppressed by the previous rulers. Ink, however, has become a bit of a luxury item lately—one of the local publishing firms is experimenting with new options, like vegetable inks, or animal by-products.”

He idly reads the titles of the spines. “Are you concerned that some of these books will theorize about what’s outside the walls?”

“Not at all. We don’t ban such talk. That was Hange’s idea;

they pointed out that curiosity is sparked by the forbidden. Plenty of these books speculate, in the same way that a book might tell fantasy tales or speculate about life among the stars.”

Erwin picks out a book titled, *The Other Side of the Wall*, and reads the back cover: “*A young woman is carried over the wall by a tornado, and deposited in a strange and terrifying world. She is rescued by a humanoid lizard, and the two begin a passionate romance*—Ah, I see.” He flips through the pages and confirms: yes, it’s smut.

“That one isn’t as good as the sequel, *The Underside of the Wall*,” Historia says. “That one has her swept into the Underground by a flash flood, where she meets a humanoid rat who is the king of the sewers.”

He studies her for a minute, trying to get a read on her sense of humour, but she only smiles and cocks her head. “Let’s go out to the street next.”

As they walk through the town, Historia points out key landmarks. It looks almost identical to the Mitras Erwin remembers, but everything is cleaner and brighter. The people walking around don’t have the same worried hunch they used to; those who catch their eyes do a little nodding bow at Historia, and some give Erwin puzzled looks, as if they’re wondering about the identity of this man walking with their queen.

“Unless there’s some hidden underbelly I haven’t seen yet, the name ‘Paradis’ seems fairly apt at the moment,” he says.

Historia lets out a low sigh. “Not quite. There are still wealth imbalances. I’m still the ruler simply because of my bloodline. And most of all, we have pushed our greatest challenges onto the shoulders of future generations. I’m hoping that by the time I am ready to leave this world, we’ll have a proper, functioning government in place, a solution for dealing with the outside world, and programs to assist people who need it. It’s a lot of work and I’ve discovered that people get uneasy if I move too quickly, so we’re making small moves. But it’s a start.”

After a tour of a local schoolhouse, an explanation of the

Underground glowing rock mines, and a demonstration of a printing press, Historia leads him back to the castle. Once they are back in the sitting room, Erwin says in a low voice,

“Do you ever regret the choices that were made?”

She doesn’t need to ask for clarification. She gives a nod to the guards in the corners of the room; they leave and close the doors behind them.

“How could I not?” Her voice catches, and for the first time, her eyes are sad. “I was sitting across the table from the people who killed Ymir, and they were telling me that, as part of our bargain, they would do the same to Armin and Eren to ensure the peace of the survivors.” She takes a seat and hovers at the edge of it, knuckles white on the cushion. “It hurt. It was also our only choice to protect the citizens of Paradis and buy ourselves time to think of another way.” After a pause, she adds, “Did Levi and Hange tell you about the ritual?”

He nods.

“The hardest part was feeling Eren slip away. I tried to hang on, but ...” She closes her eyes.

“The ritual was too much for him?” Erwin finishes softly.

Historia’s eyes open and lock onto him. “No. He was in control. We were standing in a desert with a river of stars above us, and he released my hands. He was too strong—I couldn’t—” A tear trails down her cheek.

Erwin sits down beside her. “I’m sorry for bringing up bad memories.”

“No, it’s okay.” She pulls out a handkerchief and dabs at her eyes. “He looked so determined that I thought he had succeeded at his plan and that was part of it. But we’re still here, and so are the titans. Something happened to him in that place, and without the founding titan, we can’t recreate the ritual to find out what.”

“The desert and the stars.” Erwin studies her. “I’ve seen them, too.”

Her gaze snaps up to him. “Levi gave you some of Eren’s

spinal fluid. Do you think ... ” She trails off hopefully, then turns to face him, folding her legs underneath her. “Give me your hands. Maybe you just need to touch me, like Eren did.”

He holds out his hands. She takes them gingerly, avoiding his bandage. After several long, awkward moments, he says, “It was instantaneous at Levi’s touch before.”

“Well.” Historia returns his hands to his lap and leans back. “Then I suppose the two of you need to touch some more to try to trigger it.” She says it innocently, but he feels heat rise to his cheeks, anyway.

“If we see it again,” he promises, “we will try to find out what happened to Eren.”

“Thank you. Perhaps we can have Hange set up some experiments in the future to see if we can trigger it on purpose.” She stands. “It has been a pleasure talking with you as a peer, Erwin. I felt like I had come to know you better through Levi constantly talking about you, and I’m delighted that I get to continue learning more.”

*Constantly talking about you.* Erwin’s heart glows.

Historia heads for the door. “I’ll show you to your bedroom. You are welcome to relax there until we meet for dinner. If you need anything, just speak to one of the guards in the hallway. I’ll put Levi in the adjoining room in case you find the time to try triggering the paths again.” She gives him a cheeky wink.

He recalls the paths he saw in his dream last night, and Levi’s body glowing with light, and thinks that touching him will not be a difficult task.

# ❖ Eight ❖

## TEA AND MEMORIES

LEVI RETURNS TO his room. The new recruits this year were sloppy; he had a good time telling them to clean up and scaring them a bit. But he doesn't like being this far from Erwin, not now, when he's being exposed to the post-mindwipe world for the first time. To kill time until the evening meal, he begins to unpack his bag, hanging up the few clothes he brought. He's going to need something fancier for the gala tomorrow night—he'll take Erwin shopping in the morning.

He doesn't realize the closet door has a spring on it, and when he releases it, its slam echoes through the room.

“Levi?” Erwin’s voice calls from the other side of the door between their rooms. Levi unlocks it and hears Erwin doing the same on his side. The doors swing open, and now they’re standing facing each other. Levi nods and returns to unpacking, pretending he isn’t dizzy from Erwin’s fond smile of greeting.

“Come in.” He folds a pair of pants and sets them on a shelf in the closet. “How was the tour?”

“It was a lot to take in,” Erwin says. “I can’t believe how much the quality of life has improved for everyone. Is it like this everywhere?”

Levi folds a pair of underwear and places it on a separate shelf. “Not yet, just some of the major cities. Historia’s team is working on spreading it around.”

“I see. That’s admirable.” Erwin sits on a chair at a little circular table near the wall. “How was your meeting with the new recruits?”

“Bunch of little shits this year. Historia’s guards are going to have their work cut out for them.” He finishes folding his clothes and stores the bag neatly next to his good shoes, then closes the door. “We have a little time until supper. We’re too far from the shopping district to have time to go there, but there’s a small clothing store nearby that might have some things, and a tea shop beside it.”

Erwin nods. “I’ll get my coat.”

They step onto the street a few minutes later, and Levi leads him to a small shop down the street. The inside contains mostly hand-knit items, displayed neatly on racks. There isn’t much in Erwin’s size, but they’re able to find him some warmer mittens and a matching toque.

“Do you remember when we stopped here during your first trip to the city after joining the Survey Corps?” Erwin asks, examining the sweaters.

“Not really,” Levi says, surprised. He doesn’t remember much from that trip aside from the scene on the mezzanine. He thinks for a moment, and a faint memory surfaces. “We were doing a supply run with Miche?”

“Yes, exactly. We had some time to kill before the gala, so the three of us were wandering. Miche needed some winter clothes, just like me now, so we stopped here. He tried on a furry cap with ear flaps. And you stood there, looking all the way up at him, and told him very seriously and scornfully that he looked like a ‘big-ass sheepdog.’” Erwin chuckles at the memory. “I had tears from the effort of holding back my laughter.”

“That sounds like me,” Levi says with a hint of a smile. “What was Miche’s reaction?”

“He leaned in close and sniffed your hair, and that upset you.”

“Didn’t have much of a sense of humour then, did I?”

“Well, you were still getting to know us.” Erwin pauses. “I’m glad you came to trust us, eventually. I brought you into the Survey Corps for your strength, but didn’t realize how important

your friendship would be.”

Heat creeps across Levi’s cheeks. “Well,” he says, and shrugs, and that’s all he can manage to say. He turns. “If you’re done here, let’s go to the tea shop.”

At the tea shop next door, Erwin finds a table, while Levi goes to the counter to select their tea. For a while, the world shrinks to the two of them taking occasional sips, enjoying the silence and each other’s company. Snow is starting to drift outside the window again. Levi watches it fall, feeling the glow of the tea in his stomach. He can’t remember the last time he felt this relaxed. He glances at Erwin and sees him looking out the window, too.

“Do you remember the first time it started snowing, that first winter?” Levi asks.

Erwin turns to him, his face relaxed. “No, I’m sad to say I don’t.”

“Makes sense, it would have been any other day for you, but for me, it was brand new. We were in Shiganshina, just stepping outside after meeting with a contact for—something. I can’t remember. You were wearing your long coat, but I was just in my suit. It was ...” Levi’s eyes close, recalling the details. “It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, all white and powdery and covering the dirt and filth. All the snow I had ever seen from the Underground was under the vents to the surface, more grit and mud than snow.”

“That sounds like a lovely moment,” Erwin says quietly.

Levi’s eyes open and fix on him. “I turned to look at you, wanting to see how you were reacting to the beauty around us, and you were looking at me with this warm fondness on your face. Our relationship had mostly been cold and professional until then, so it stood out. And when you realized I had caught you looking at me, you didn’t act startled or embarrassed. You only offered me your scarf.”

“Did you take it?”

He hadn’t. He laid awake that night, trying to puzzle out

why he wanted to so badly, and that was when he had come to the realization: *I'm falling in love with Erwin Smith.*

Aloud, he says, “I should have.” He turns to look at the window again. The snow is falling heavier now, the flakes huge and fluffy.

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THE TEA SHOP starts to fill with other patrons having an early supper; they don’t have much longer before they have to head back for a meal of their own.

Erwin is debating whether or not to bring up the subject, but eventually decides he should be open: “Historia wants me to give her strategic advice.”

Levi’s eyes snap to him. “What?”

Judging that no one will overhear, Erwin says quietly, “She wants to bring me into the war room to see if I can offer any help on the current situation.”

After a long stare, Levi looks down at his mug. “You’re still getting your bearings.”

“True, but maybe I could offer some fresh perspective, since I’m so removed from the situation.”

Levi’s brows are low. “You have a chance to start over, and you’re charging right back into battle.”

“I need something to occupy my mind. I can’t sit still and enjoy a simple life.”

With a snort, Levi says, “You can’t enjoy a complicated one, either. You wanted to die, Erwin. That’s where the military leads you.” He’s not angry, but he’s definitely annoyed, and Erwin feels a swell of defensiveness.

Keeping his tone level, he replies, “Historia believes Eren let go on purpose once they reached the paths. You and I have a special connection to the paths. If we can leverage that, we might be able to provide information that could alter the current strategy—” Erwin stops when he sees a muscle jumping in Levi’s jaw.

Letting out a defeated sigh, he bows his head. “What would you have me do, Levi?”

Levi is quiet for a long time, staring into his tea. Finally, he opens his mouth, but Erwin can barely hear the words. One of the teakettles is making an irritating whistling sound that’s drowning out everything else. Erwin glances at the kitchen, trying to pinpoint the sound.

“Are you okay?” Levi asks, and the sound momentarily dampens, then picks up again.

“Yeah, it’s just—” Erwin cranes his neck. “Do you hear that?” The whistling is piercing his brain.

“Erwin?” Levi reaches out and covers his hand.

The world flashes white, then drops out from under him.

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**SAND PRESSES AGAINST** the soles of Erwin’s feet. He gasps and stumbles, feeling as if he’s moving through water. Levi rises to his feet beside him. Together, they stare up at the clusters of stars and the waves of light.

“This again?” Levi breathes.

*This is our chance.* “Look for any signs of what happened to Eren,” Erwin orders.

“What?”

“Trust me.” Erwin slowly spins in a circle to take in every angle.

Something splashes beneath his feet. He looks down and sees the sand shimmering like an oil slick. An image is floating to its surface.

“Erwin?” Levi asks.

The sand begins to pull him down.

“Erwin!” Levi grabs his hand, but their grip slips and he falls through.

Now they’re sitting on a rooftop of the old military barracks, the sun just beginning to set. Levi, dressed in full uniform,

carries two mugs of tea. He passes one to Erwin and sits beside him, then smooths back his hood to reveal pitch-black hair, not one single strand of grey.

*Why is this familiar? Where am I?*

“Erwin?” Levi asks, concerned. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

He must look confused. He relaxes his face, but finds he has no control over his vocal cords. “Thank you for the tea,” his voice says.

“So.” Levi stretches his legs along the tiles, folding them at the ankle. “You wanted to talk about this Yeager kid.”

“We need him.”

Levi glances at him sharply. “What?”

“Think about it, Levi. Think what we could accomplish with a boy who can turn into a titan. He can give us insight into titan behaviour. He will be a powerful weapon against them.” He takes a long sip of tea, then adds, “And then there’s the matter of this key to the basement.”

Erwin can taste the tea, feel the wind on his skin. It doesn’t feel like a memory; it feels as if he’s actually here, living this moment again.

Levi is quiet for a moment, then says, “What do you think is down there?”

“Answers about this world.” Erwin feels the old thought float across his mind: *How much should I tell him?* His past self settles on part of the truth. “It isn’t enough to just cut down titans and reclaim the wall, Levi. We don’t understand what they are, where they come from. We don’t know why we’re trapped within these walls, and the government goes out of its way to prevent us from knowing. We can’t win this war if we don’t understand our enemy.”

“So what,” Levi says, “you think this basement will have an instruction manual about the titans?”

Erwin chuckles. “Maybe nothing that literal, but if Grisha Yeager went to great lengths to hide it from the government,

there must be a piece of the puzzle there.” He pauses. “We’ve been looking at this all wrong. If Eren Yeager can shift into a titan, then maybe others can, too. Maybe some of the especially intelligent abnormals aren’t just abnormals.”

Levi’s gaze snaps to him. “You think the Colossal and Armoured titans were people, too?”

Erwin feels pride swell within him at the speed with which Levi caught on. “Yes, exactly. And if that’s the case, then we have been fighting the wrong war this whole time.” He turns to Levi. “We need him, Levi, and we need the answers he can bring us.”

As the sun dips below the horizon, the sky begins to glow red.

“Okay, Erwin,” Levi says softly. “But I want to meet him first.”

And the whistle begins to sound in his ears again.

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**ERWIN SLAMS BACK** into his body. The patrons around them are chatting as if nothing happened, as if no time passed at all. He almost thinks he’s losing his mind, but he looks at Levi and sees his face is ashen.

“What the hell is happening?” Levi asks, voice shaking.

“Did you see the rooftop as well?”

“What? No, we were in the desert, and then back here. What rooftop?”

*Maybe I can show him.* Erwin reaches out and touches his hand again. Nothing happens.

“I lived a past memory as if I were there,” he murmurs. “I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I.” Levi takes a long sip of tea, his hand shaking, then asks, “What did you mean, ‘signs of what happened to Eren?’”

“Historia asked me to look the next time we ended up

there. I don't know what they would look like, exactly." He frowns. Maybe Eren arrived there and stepped in a sandy puddle of his own and is trapped in past memories. Or maybe he succeeded at whatever he was trying to do, and is reaching out to them. With all they know now about paths and titans, there are countless possibilities.

"We need to discuss this with the others," he says firmly. Hange knows titan science better than any of them, Historia has previously connected with the paths, and Mikasa knows Eren better than anyone. Between the five of them, they may be able to pinpoint what is happening.

"I guess." Levi sighs. "They're just going to do experiments on us."

"Well, maybe that will get us some answers." Pointedly, Erwin adds, "This is why I believe I need to help Historia. There's something happening to us that we don't understand, Levi. It may impact her plans for the future of Paradis."

There's no reply.

They finish their tea in silence, then leave the tea shop together.

"You don't think these are shared hallucinations, do you?" Levi asks.

"I don't think so. The desert matches the description of what Historia saw during the ritual with Eren." Still, he has his doubts. That dream of Levi in the paths dimension certainly wasn't a memory, and it felt real. For a moment, the contents of that dream distract him.

His attention is recaptured by Levi saying, "Maybe I fell and hit my head in Shiganshina when I went to find you, and now I'm hallucinating all this as my dying body is getting eaten alive by a titan."

Erwin smiles, always entertained by his macabre humour. "Maybe it happened before that, and I'm still on the battlefield, bleeding out."

"Well, maybe I successfully killed you back when we first

met instead of you grabbing my sword,” Levi says dryly.

Erwin laughs. “A hallucination would explain why I was able to stop your strike with my hand.” He runs his thumb across the bandage.

After a moment, Levi says, “I held back.”

“I know.” Erwin smiles down at him. “Thank you.”

They approach the palace, and Levi nods at the guards. This time, they’re let in with no hassle. They follow the hallway to their rooms.

“This path thing between us.” Levi says, stopping at his door. “I think it started then.”

“When you took a swing at me?”

Levi nods. “I felt something.”

“Oh?”

“A connection. A pull.” Levi shrugs. “Anyway, I’ll see you at the meeting place for dinner.” He steps through the door before Erwin can ask him to elaborate.

But he thinks he knows what Levi meant, because he felt it, too.

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**LEVI SHUTS THE** dividing door to allow them some privacy to get changed. It was never an issue to change in front of one another before—hell, they used to shower naked in front of each other all the time—but now that there’s tension in the air, these things feel taboo.

He lays back on the bed and closes his eyes. And then there’s this oddness with the paths, and Historia trying to foist her political bullshit on them. When he first rescued Erwin, he pictured bringing him back to the cabin, where they could live quiet lives together until the end of their days. *I should have known it wouldn’t be that easy.*

Taking a deep breath, he sits up.

A warm shower calms him, and then he makes a little

extra effort, taking time to shave, cleanly part his hair, and put on a collared shirt. The bags under his eyes are heavy, as always, and he frowns and rubs them, which just makes them look baggier. *That's as good as it's going to get, I guess.*

He makes his way to the dining hall; it's a large room with several chandeliers and a long table, intricate paintings along the domed ceiling. He spent many political dinners there at Historia's side, back when he was her Guard Captain, leaning back in his chairs and staring up at the paintings out of boredom. Most of the figures in them were naked men, at least.

Hange, Erwin, and Mikasa are already seated at the table. They're only using a third of it, presumably to be able to have a conversation without yelling. Erwin smiles at him; Levi takes the seat beside him. Their chairs are almost touching, and he wonders if someone set them up this way. He doesn't move away. Hange and Mikasa are seated across from them. He notices an extra place setting next to Historia's seat at the head of the table.

“Who's joining us?”

Mikasa makes a displeased face, and Levi guesses it is the woman in red from the last gala.

Sure enough, when Historia enters a few minutes later, the woman from the gala is on her arm. They're both in casual wear: long linen skirts, long-sleeved shirts, and vests. The woman's skirt has embroidered flowers in several bright colours all over it, and Levi guesses she's responsible for much of the embroidery on Historia's pillows.

“I'm so glad you could join us,” Historia says, and she gestures at the woman. “I'd like to introduce my girlfriend, Iris.” She pulls out a chair.

Iris gives a shy smile and accepts the seat. “It's a pleasure to formally meet you all.”

They exchange introductions. She stares a little too long at Erwin, and he wonders if it's because she knows who he is, or if it's just that the last time she saw Levi, he was getting too cozy with Alec on the dance floor.

Once they're seated, wine is poured, and the food starts arriving at the table. There's roasted squash and carrots and asparagus, and a main dish of roasted goose. Everything is seasoned perfectly, and Levi eats his fill. For dessert, the chefs have prepared an apple pie with maple glaze. Levi has two pieces.

The food is so good that the conversation is light during the meal, aside from little comments about how delicious it is, or small talk with each other and the wait staff. Once they've finished, the staff serve them apricot wine, and conversation begins to flow.

Erwin leans close to Levi and says in a low voice. "I don't think this is the right time to bring up the paths."

Levi nods. Iris seems like a perfectly nice woman, but she isn't part of the inner circle. They don't know what she knows, and if she can be trusted. Mikasa keeps looking at her with a sour expression, but that could just be Mikasa being Mikasa.

"So," Hange is saying to Iris, "how did you two meet?"

Iris and Historia look at each other for a moment, then Iris smiles. "Well, I knew her as our Queen, of course, but not personally. When I graduated from medical school, I started working part-time as a doctor with Historia's orphaned children. It was only meant to be a temporary situation, but it felt so good to be helping children who had no one. I ended up signing on as the full-time doctor on staff. That's how I met Historia, and I was shocked by her passion and her down-to-earth nature. She's not at all what I expected of royalty. Over the past few years, I've seen the way life within the walls has been evolving. I admired her vision and her drive." She looks at Historia and blushes. "I was planning to request a date with her, but wasn't sure how that worked when it was with a queen. Luckily, she asked me first."

Historia leans over and kisses her cheek. "I'm sorry it took me so long."

"It's okay," Iris says, gripping her hand on top of the table. "You were grieving Ymir. These things take time."

“Oh, so she told you about Ymir?” Hange asks bluntly.

Historia gives them a pointed look, as if trying to communicate that she’s not stupid. “Of course I did, Hange. She was my first love, and she is the reason I am the person I am today. I’m never going to be silent about her.”

“I understood a bit of her pain,” Iris says helpfully. “My aunt passed away in a sudden accident as well. It’s not the same as a partner, of course, but she was like a sister, and I understand that grief is a complex process, especially when it involves something so sudden. There’s nothing that can prepare you for that.” She smiles. “But I’m curious, Guard Captain Levi, about your guest tonight. I don’t think we’ve ever met.”

Levi’s blood pressure rises. *Shit, we don’t have a cover story.*

As he should have guessed, Erwin is prepared. “We’re longtime friends. We grew up in the same town and were in the military together, and we were both in the Queen’s Guard for a time. We lost touch when I grew weary of city life and retired early from the military.” He turns to Levi and smiles. “We had a chance meeting here a little while ago and reconnected, and it was as if no time had passed.”

Historia jumps in, “I thought it would be nice to invite him. Mikasa and I know Erwin from way back, too. He was wise and acted as an advisor to me before and during my coronation. It’s been a very long time.”

Levi lets out a slow, quiet breath as Iris seems to accept this without question.

The conversation shifts to Hange talking about their time in the military, in the vaguest terms possible, and Levi glances at Erwin.

Erwin appears to be focusing on the conversation, but he gives a little smile of acknowledgement and gently lays his hand on the seat of his chair. They’re sitting close enough and his hand is large enough that it’s resting across the gap between their chairs. The proximity is clearly intentional.

Levi’s heart pounds. *I always refused to tell him how I felt in*

*case everything changed, and it's changing already. We can't even sit normally beside each other anymore.*

But maybe he doesn't mind that.

Everyone's eyes are on Hange. With the buzz of the wine and the satisfaction of the food, Levi feels a surge of bravery. He lays his hand on his own chair, a hair's breadth away from Erwin's.

Now Erwin is saying something about the library, and Levi can't follow. The room has shrunk to their two hands, to that gap of air that's quickly heating up between them. Everyone is laughing now, and Levi forces out a small chuckle to seem like he's paying attention, but it catches in his throat. In his periphery, he sees Erwin watching him.

Levi turns to meet his gaze; when their eyes lock, Erwin gives the flicker of a shy, one-sided smile. It's gone so quickly that Levi can't tell if he imagined it. He's never seen that expression before.

Skin slides against his hand. He looks down, and sees that Erwin has bridged the gap to brush against him. Levi swallows hard and turns his hand over, palm upright. An invitation. The pads of Erwin's fingers stroke the length of his, not quite lacing between them yet, testing the contact. He's still talking to the group as if nothing is happening. How can he concentrate?

Now Historia is talking, and everyone is looking away from them again. Levi weaves his fingers between Erwin's and pulls their palms flush. Erwin's thumb runs along his knuckles. His hand is massive, the fingers long and thick, the skin warm and soft. Levi wants them to stroke his entire body. He wants them in his mouth, trailing down his chest, wrapped around him, deep inside him—

Panic surges in his chest and he stands, breaking the contact. "Excuse me." He glances at Erwin, who has almost managed a perfect mask, but one brow is furrowed. *Shit.*

He heads to the washroom and subtly adjusts himself into the waistband of his pants, then splashes cold water on his face.

*Shit, shit, shit. Calm down.*

All he can think about is the warmth and the girth of those fingers, and he aches for them. He has never felt a surge like this, never wanted anyone so badly. After so many years of keeping himself carefully controlled ...

“Levi?” Hange barges into the washroom, and he jumps.

“What do you want?” He pats his face dry with a towel, and examines himself in the mirror. The bags under his eyes are even darker in the overhead lighting. He looks old and ghoulish.

“You looked like you were about to vomit.” Hange inspects the bathroom counter and, finding it clean, hops up to sit on it. “Thought I should check on you. You okay?”

“I’m fine.” He hesitates. “What about Erwin?”

“He’s fine, just seems a bit confused. What the hell happened?”

Levi sighs and turns, slumping back against the wall. “I’ve wanted this for years, so you think I’d be able to hold his fucking hand without losing my mind.”

Hange starts laughing.

“It’s not funny.”

“I’m sorry. I wondered what was going on under the table over there. I thought maybe you were groping each other. Hand holding!” Hange wipes their eye and seems to regain their composure, then bursts out laughing again. “He holds your hand and you run from the room? Holy shit, Levi. You’re so awkward.”

Levi folds his arms over his chest and looks away. “What do I do now?”

“You *relax*. No one else noticed. Just sit down, grab his hand, and get on with your life. Maybe ask him to go for a walk or a drink and then act like a normal human being. Supper is winding down, anyway.” Hange claps his shoulder. “Time to hold his hand. Go get him, champ. Maybe you’ll even work up the courage to give him a peck on the cheek.”

Levi’s lip curls. “Fuck you.” But he feels better.

They return to the dining room; he stares anywhere but

at Erwin as he sits down. The conversation continues, and Erwin makes no move to get closer to him. *Shit.*

Finally, Historia announces that it's getting late and they should retire. Everyone stands.

"Erwin," Levi says. The man is just finishing his glass of wine, his throat bobbing. *Even his throat is beautiful.*

"Yes, Levi?" He has his polite mask up.

"Let's go for a walk or get a drink or something." Levi looks away. "I'm not tired yet."

"Neither am I." Erwin studies his empty glass. "Is there somewhere around here we can get a drink, but it isn't too loud to talk?"

The last thing Levi trusts himself to do right now is talk, but he could use a stiffer drink.

They say their goodnights and stop at their rooms for jackets and boots. Levi stares at his scarf, then decides his cravat will be warm enough. Erwin seemed fond of it, after all.

Erwin is waiting in the hallway; they walk together. Neither of them seems to have anything to say.

When they're about halfway to the lounge, Levi clenches his teeth. *Fuck it.* He loops his arm through Erwin's elbow. Erwin looks down, his mask finally dropping to reveal surprise. Then he reaches over a mitten hand and lays it gently on Levi's arm. They walk down the street like a proper couple out on a date. Levi hates that his breath shows in clouds, because it's coming in fast puffs, but he's not going to back down this time. Maybe it will take awhile to undo years of restraint, but he'll power through it.

The lounge is under a government building, its wooden sign bordered by twin lanterns. They descend the staircase and the scent of mild incense and strong alcohol greets them. It takes a moment for their eyes to adjust. The lounge is a large sitting room with a bar, couches, divans, and padded chairs set up around plants and coffee tables. The walls are dark and the lighting mainly comes from the fireplace and candles, casting a

warm glow and dancing shadows around the room. A few people, well-dressed, are sitting and chatting. Levi recognizes several soldiers from the Military Police; this is a frequent hangout of theirs due to its proximity to the main branch.

They knock the snow off their boots and remove their winter clothes to hang them on the coat racks. Erwin stops by the bar to order them each a scotch, and they settle on a small divan beside a large bushy plant, with a coffee table in front of it for their drinks. They are sitting so close that their legs are touching, because there's no use pretending now after that dinner.

Levi's cheeks and nose are tingling as they warm up from the cold. He takes a deep sip of his scotch.

"Levi," Erwin says hesitantly. "If I offended you—"

"You didn't." Levi takes another swig for courage, then sets the drink on the table. He turns to Erwin, preparing to say more, but their eyes lock and his mouth goes dry.

Casually, Erwin angles himself toward him, draping his arm across the back of the divan—not quite on Levi's shoulders, but close.

Levi feels panic welling again, and he decides to come clean. "I'm not good at this. Any of this."

Erwin's smile is gentle. "I promise you, there is no pressure."

But there is, and it's coming from deep inside him; the ache is so strong. He needs to be closer.

Well, they've already hugged a few times, so would a cuddle really be so strange? He leans forward, slowly, stretching himself along Erwin's torso, his ear resting on the broad collarbone. Heavy arms settle around him, and he closes his eyes, listening to the racing heartbeat. *It's racing for me.*

"Levi," Erwin whispers into his hair, barely audible above the din of the crowd. One of his hands slides down Levi's spine, resting on his lower back, pulling him closer. The contact is like flames through the fabric, burning his skin. They stay there, still, and Levi closes his eyes. This is no longer in the same league as a

hug. He wants so badly to throw one leg over Erwin and straddle his lap. Those thighs would be so massive underneath him ...

There's no going back from this. Every dirty thought he has diligently blocked for years is surfacing at once.

He slowly nuzzles the broad neck, breathing hot air onto his skin. Erwin's breath hitches and his hand tightens on Levi's lower back, pulling him closer still, and now he really will have to straddle him if he wants to get any closer.

*Kiss him.*

Levi's hands fist into the front of Erwin's shirt as he tries to summon the courage.

*Kiss him!*

He pulls away just far enough to see Erwin's face. Erwin's gaze lowers to his mouth, then back up to his eyes. *He wants to kiss you, too.*

That blue, so blue that it's somehow visible in this dim orange light, is devouring him. Erwin is looking at him with the same intensity he used to wear on the battlefield. Levi has never been the subject of that determined stare before, and he is frozen in place.

Erwin moves closer, their faces almost touching. They breathe on each other's lips, the air moist and warm in the gap between them.

After so many years of anticipation, Levi wants to rest in this moment, to hold onto how it feels to be this close to kissing Erwin Smith.

A voice booms behind them: "Captain Levi and Lord Alec, *really* now!"

Levi whirls to his feet, crouched and ready to fight. A man stands there, wearing a Military Police uniform and a taunting grin, but it fades as he sees Erwin clearly. "Ah, I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else."

"Mateo," Levi growls, "get lost."

"You can't be making out with your latest boy-toy here, Guard Captain," the soldier says.

“Since when? People make out here all the time. I saw a couple dry-fucking on this divan a few weeks ago.”

“Well,” concedes the man, then more firmly: “Well, they weren’t closely associated with Her Majesty. She would want you to uphold a certain decorum.”

“Then take it up with her directly.” Levi drops back to a seat. “Now go away, or I’ll break your elbows.”

The man eyes them both, says, “Keep it proper. We have important guests here for the gala, and we need to make a good impression,” then scurries off.

“Friend of yours?” Erwin asks dryly.

The interruption has thoroughly extinguished the flame between them. Levi sighs and picks up his drink, wishing he could travel back to that moment. “Fucking Mateo. That asshole has been a thorn in my side for years. He never understood why I got promoted ahead of him, and he kept making childish plays to make me look incompetent.”

“Well, he was informative.” Erwin drapes his arm across the back of the divan again, a playful smirk on his lips. “Sir Alec?”

“Shit.” Levi’s mouth is dry again, for a different reason this time. “He’s a noble.” A bit meekly, he adds, “So he didn’t have his memory erased. Which meant he remembered who you were.”

The answer seems to surprise Erwin. “Oh?”

“I was lonely, and he mentioned you, and because he was tall and blond, if I squinted just right, I could pretend he was you.” He realizes, too late, that he has just openly admitted to planning to fuck someone while pretending he was Erwin. *We’re crossing all kinds of boundaries tonight.* Well, no point holding back now. “We talked about you. He told me everything he remembered, and it had been so long since I had heard someone outside our circle reminisce about you ...” His face feels too hot, and he adds, too quickly, “It didn’t go anywhere. I panicked before we even got our clothes off, and left without saying why, and that was that.”

“Levi,” Erwin says softly, “it’s okay. I was gone for a long

time. It makes sense that you would be attracted to people during that time.” He pauses. “Unless you’re asexual, of course. I shouldn’t presume—”

“No, it’s just that I was single-minded.” The candle on the coffee table is burning hot, and the flame is dancing. Levi watches it for a minute. “Truthfully, I haven’t hooked up with anyone since my first year in the Survey Corps.”

“Oh?”

“It had just been a few one-night stands here and there to blow off steam anyway, nothing serious, and I lost interest.” In spite of all that has happened tonight, he can’t bring himself to be more direct than, “I only wanted one person.”

Erwin takes a sip of his drink, then shifts, turning to face him again. “That would be about when my last few trysts were, too. Once Wall Maria fell, it seemed there was no time, and ...” He pauses. “I was fixated on one person as well.”

“I wonder if we slept with the same people,” Levi says dryly.

“I doubt it. Mostly women on my part. You’re gay, right?” It’s said so casually and weightlessly, but it rocks Levi to his core. Maybe because it’s the first time Erwin has openly acknowledged his love life, his sex life. *He’s noticed it. He’s thought about it.* Another boundary, gone.

“Yeah,” he says aloud. “You’re bisexual?”

Erwin nods and sips his drink again. The alcohol seems to be catching up to him, loosening his tongue. “Truthfully, I’m most interested in men, but straight women outnumber all the other combinations of genders and sexualities who might be interested in me. It didn’t really matter, anyway, because I didn’t let myself show emotions to anyone. I imagine I was rather detached and boring in bed.”

Levi thinks of the scene he witnessed on the mezzanine years ago, of the powerful thrusts, and thinks to himself that it could never be boring to be on the receiving end of that. The ice clatters a little in his drink, and he lifts it to his lips again, trying

to steady himself.

Erwin says softly, “It’s funny, we spent so much of our lives side-by-side, and none of this ever came up.” He pauses. “No, we both know why it never came up, don’t we?”

Levi’s mouth twists. Knowing what he knows now, would he keep his distance, if he had a chance to do it all over again? Would he seduce Erwin early on, knowing they only had a good six years together before Erwin’s death? Did it hurt any less that they had never so much as kissed before he died?

How he had wanted to, when Erwin sat on that crate in Shiganshina. He should have stood up and lunged forward and kissed him with all the ferocity and depth of his vow.

Maybe he should make up for it now. But Mateo is still in the corner, glaring at them, and it’s really putting a damper on the mood.

He sighs, acknowledging that the moment has passed. Maybe there will be another at the gala. “I’m starting to get tired.”

“Yes, it’s getting late. Maybe we can pick up this conversation again tomorrow.” Erwin drains the rest of his glass and stands. “I’ll walk you back to your room.”

They soon arrive in front of Levi’s room. It’s weird to think that Erwin will be next door, instead of in the same bed. Should he invite him in? Or is that too intimate now after their near-kiss? Levi grits his teeth, hating the uncertainty of it all.

“Well.” He grips the doorknob. “Goodnight.”

Erwin gives him a soft smile. “Goodnight, Levi.”

Levi is just turning the knob when he feels a hand catch his shoulder.

“Wait, Levi.”

He turns and sees that Erwin’s brows are high, his face soft.

“I want to tell you everything, Levi.” There’s a hitch in his voice. “You said I should speak to you instead of assuming there is an unspoken something. I don’t want to leave anything unsaid anymore. I don’t want us to keep dancing around it.”

Levi panics. “You’re drunk.”

“No.”

He scrambles for another excuse. “Once we say it, we can’t go back. What if things get weird?” *Weirder*, he adds in his head.

Erwin is quiet for a moment, then gives a low sigh. “I understand. We can talk another time. Besides, it has been a long day, and we should really rest.”

*Shit! You’re fucking it up again!*

Erwin leans forward and presses a kiss to the top of his head, then whispers there, “Goodnight, Levi.”

*Kiss him!*

As he pulls away, Levi grabs him by the collar and lunges onto his toes, kissing him hard.

There’s a surprised hum, then, without missing a beat, Erwin cups the back of his head, and their lips melt into a warm kiss that burns through Levi’s entire body like a flame through dry grass, his reservations turning to ash. Their lips part, tongues gently brushing.

Levi sinks back to flat feet to break the kiss. They study each other, lips parted and damp, breathing hard. He fumbles at the doorknob, then steps through the doorway, pulling Erwin in by the hand. There are the chairs at the table, but he can’t bear to be that far away from him. Instead, he sits on the end of the bed and pulls Erwin to a seat next to him. They kiss again, tongues still polite, so why does it feel so deeply sexual?

They break apart, foreheads resting together.

“You wanted to talk,” Levi says, barely able to find his voice. “So talk.”

He feels Erwin give a small nod, then take a deep breath, as if he, too, is fighting against years and years of suppressing his feelings.

“I care for you, Levi. I’m attracted to you. I always have been, it just took some time to recognize what was happening. By the time I admitted it to myself, our relationship was too important to jeopardize. And then my father’s dream ... ” He pauses,

then finishes, “I couldn’t let myself get close to anyone, so I was too afraid to speak openly about how I felt.”

Levi tries to find words to acknowledge his own feelings, but all that comes out is, “Kiss me again.”

Erwin kisses him, harder this time, and now the lengths of their tongues slide together. Levi lets out a moan that should be embarrassing, but feels right. *He tastes so good, he feels so good.* A hand rakes through his hair, grip strong, movements frenzied. Their kiss ends and their cheeks slide together as Erwin dips lower to kiss Levi’s neck.

“Fuck,” Levi whispers, tilting his head and leaning into the kiss. He’s lost control of his hands—one is grabbing at Erwin’s chest, the other smoothing his neck.

They tilt together, sinking back to the bed. Erwin climbs onto his elbows and knees over him, kissing beneath his jaw. Their mouths meet again.

Then Erwin slows the kiss and pulls away. His hair is hanging in his face, his skin glowing, his lips wet and slightly parted. Levi runs a thumb across his lower lip. *Fuck, he’s beautiful.*

“Levi?” His voice is a low, deep rumble.

“Yeah?”

“I think the scotch is starting to hit me.” Erwin bends down and kisses Levi’s throat. “I want to linger like this all night, but I also want a clear head so I can enjoy it properly.”

Now that they’ve paused, Levi realizes he’s starting to get a little intoxicated, too, and on top of that, he’s exhausted. Was it really only this morning that they left home? He gives in. “Yeah, we should probably get some rest.”

Erwin kisses the tip of his nose, a gesture Levi finds uncharacteristic and endearing.

“Should we share a bed tonight?” Erwin asks. “Or is that too much now?” The unspoken question, *how quickly or slowly should we take this?* is on Levi’s mind, too.

“It’s fine. I’ll probably pass out pretty quickly, anyway.”

They change into their pyjamas, and select Levi’s bed,

since it's a bit wider. Levi covers the light crystal. Erwin spoons behind him, his arm draping around Levi. He isn't completely flush against him, and Levi can't help wondering if it's a polite gap because he's still a bit hard. Levi certainly is, but fatigue is quickly countering that.

"This should feel strange," he says aloud. "Shouldn't it?"

"Mm," Erwin agrees sleepily. "It doesn't, though."

"Not really, no." It's strange that it doesn't feel strange. Levi snuggles deeper into the mattress, secure under Erwin's arm and the warmth of the heavy quilt. "I've always been attracted to you too, you know."

Erwin kisses the back of his head and nuzzles to a rest there, and Levi drifts off to sleep with a soft smile on his lips.

# ❖ Nine ❖

## ASHES ON THE WIND

ERWIN AWAKENS EARLY the next morning to find Levi in his arms. Is this real? He breathes in the scent of his hair, the faint scent of incense and alcohol, and memories stir from the night before. He feels giddy. Boyish. He plants a soft kiss into the back of Levi's hair—that's allowed now—then slips out of bed to look out the window. It's already sunny outside; he guesses that it is about eight o'clock.

“Morning,” Levi says behind him, voice groggy.

“Good morning.” Erwin turns to him with a smile. “We slept in a bit.”

“Whatever. We have time.” Levi nestles deeper into the covers, and he looks so cozy that Erwin slips back into bed. Levi immediately rolls to face him and snuggles under his chin. He never imagined this stoic, awkward man would be so physically affectionate. He likes it.

“I suppose we do have time now, don't we? There's no war pressing on us—”

Levi sighs. “I meant time to get shopping done before the gala.”

“Well, my point stands.” Erwin kisses the top of the dark hair. “It's freeing. No urgent emergencies, no chain of command to violate.” He wraps his arm around Levi. “I could kiss you at the gala tonight, in front of all those people, and everyone would just see us as the retired Guard Captain and his new younger lover.”

“Younger!” Levi snorts, and it's the first time Erwin has heard him laugh since they were in the Survey Corps.

“What was it your friend called me last night? A ‘boy toy?’ Captain Levi and his boy toy, Erwin Smith.”

“Knock it off,” Levi says, but he is still wearing a hint of a smile as he sits up and stretches. The back of his pyjama shirt is as deeply creased as if it has been ironed at bad angles, and his hair is flat on the pillow side and sticking out on the other. He’s so rumpled that a word surfaces in Erwin’s mind, one he has never before considered for Levi: *adorable*.

Levi says, “First we’ll need to stop at the bank to get some funds for your new wardrobe. There’s a new tea shop near there that has good pastries, and if we need to, we can kill some time there until the shops open.” He pauses. “We should get some sort of salve for your arm, too. How is it feeling?”

Sitting up, too, Erwin lays his arm on the covers. He can make a fist now, but it’s still weak, and pain shoots through his forearm with each movement. The pain must show on his face, because it earns him a look of concern.

“Here.” Levi is about to touch his arm, then hesitates. Erwin thinks of the jarring way they dropped into the paths dimension, and understands his hesitation.

But then Levi makes contact, and nothing happens. He takes the arm onto his lap and pushes up the sleeve, and then begins to massage. Even though it’s not so uncomfortable to touch like this now that they’ve kissed, something about the pressure and the smooth motions makes Erwin’s breaths ragged, and he has to focus to keep them even. If a simple touch is this powerful, he isn’t sure he’ll stay conscious if they are more intimate.

When Levi is done, he lifts Erwin’s hand to his lips to press a kiss to a knuckle. His voice is soft: “Any better?”

They’ve rarely been this physically close for this long, and Erwin takes a moment to study Levi’s face. His lower lip is narrow, but has a plump curve to it all the same, a natural pout. Erwin runs his fingertip along it. There’s still pain shooting through his arm, but he won’t let that stop him. He can feel

warm air puffing against his fingers. “I seem to be regaining some sensation,” he murmurs, tracing the top lip now.

“Is that so,” Levi says, and his lips part. The tip of his tongue gently swirls around the very tip of Erwin’s finger.

Erwin’s breath hitches. “Yes, I think so. But maybe you should keep testing it.”

“What do you suggest?” Levi asks, his lids low. Here’s another word he never thought would apply to Levi: *seductive*.

They hold each other’s gaze for a moment, and then Levi slowly eases his mouth around Erwin’s finger, and it’s so wet and hot and he can feel that gentle suction, that tongue gently wrapping around him. He presses his finger a little deeper, and Levi leans forward and takes him right to the knuckle.

Erwin burns. He wants Levi kneeling in front of him, undoing his pants, wrapping him in his mouth just like this. He wants Levi to look up with this same determined pleasure, as if there is nothing he wants more than to please him with his mouth.

Levi pulls back and takes in a second finger as well, working them in and out of his mouth with so much enthusiasm that Erwin wonders for a moment if it’s possible to orgasm from getting your fingers sucked.

He tears his fingers free and replaces them with his mouth. Levi immediately swings a leg over him and sits in his lap.

When Levi excused himself from their dinner last night, Erwin had assumed he would be shy and want to ease into things. That shyness is gone. Levi is sitting against his erection; he arches so their bodies press together, and Erwin can feel how hard he is, too. *Fuck!*

It isn’t enough; he wants to be closer. He runs his hand down Levi’s back and up under his shirt, feeling the soft fuzz of his lower back.

Levi reaches back and moves his hand lower, beneath the waistbands, and closes Erwin’s hand over one bare cheek of his

ass.

The kiss breaks as Erwin gasps, “Fuck,” and curls tightly around Levi. He’s trying not to start thrusting, but the desire is so great that he presses up into him as hard as he can.

“Hey,” Levi wheezes, and that’s when Erwin realizes he’s holding him too aggressively. He uncurls and pulls back enough to look at him.

“I got a bit carried away,” he says, mentally chastising himself for his lack of control.

“It’s fine.” Levi bends in and kisses him again, gentler this time, then adds, “I just don’t want cum in my pyjamas, and I reek of stale alcohol, so I don’t want to take them off, either.”

Erwin’s brain gets caught on the word *cum*. His hand curls into the blanket. “Ah,” is the only thing resembling a word he can find.

“I suppose we should start our day, anyway,” Levi says. “We want to make sure we have enough time to get everything you need and get ready. Hange usually likes to meet at the lounge outside the ballroom before these kinds of events, for a drink.” He dismounts Erwin’s lap and rolls over, standing up to stretch. The fabric of his pants is still tented, and Erwin stares, his pulse rushing in his ears.

Levi peers at him. “You okay?”

Erwin rubs his forehead, trying to ground himself again. “I’m afraid I get a bit stupid when I’m turned on.”

Levi wears a pleased little smirk and comes closer, giving him a slow kiss again. Then he stands up and gently shoves Erwin toward the partition door. “Go back to your room. I’m going to have a shower, and we’ll never get out of here unless there’s a wall between us.”

As Erwin closes the door behind him, he pushes down his erection, willing it to soften. But he keeps seeing the look on Levi’s face with two fingers in his mouth, working up and down. The image haunts him as he undresses, gathers his fresh clothes, and brushes his teeth. By the time he’s ready to turn on the

shower, he's still rock hard.

*Looks like I have to deal with this.* His right hand is still too clumsy and sore, so he uses his left, recalling the feeling of Levi's ass beneath that hand. He wants to bend him over and lick it, wants to discover the sounds Levi would make. Is he sensitive enough to come from his ass alone, or would Erwin need to reach around and stroke him at the same time? Oh fuck, the thought of Levi's orgasm, he would be so beautiful with his cheeks flushed and his mouth open—

Erwin comes so hard that stars dance behind his eyelids. He massages out the last spasm and sinks forward, forehead pressing to the bathroom counter. Sweat drips off the tip of his nose and joins the mess on the floor.

His nose wrinkles. He really does get stupid when he's aroused; he should have at least used a towel.

Once he feels strong enough to lift his head, he looks in the mirror, and he is greeted by an expression he has not seen in many years: hair hanging in his face, skin flushed and glowing, mouth open and gasping for air. *He wrecked you this much by sucking your fingers? You're in over your head.*

He basks in the afterglow for another minute, then pulls down a towel and begins to clean up. And here comes the shame. Isn't he violating Levi's privacy by picturing him so intimately? At the very least, isn't it rude?

*You're a mess*, he scolds himself. Stuck in the mud again.

He steps into the shower and his mind is already conjuring images of Levi in the shower, water running down his tightly muscled body ... He frowns and turns the water temperature to ice cold.

One brisk shower later, he has pulled himself together. He dresses and styles his hair, then stands tall. He looks like a Commander again. Polished. In control.

He knocks.

The door opens, and Levi won't look at him directly. "Come in. Just finishing up my hair." His evasiveness is odd, and

Erwin wonders if he gave into temptation, too. He doesn't allow himself to dwell on the thought.

Either way, the heat between them has calmed by the time they stroll from the castle, and they relax back into the familiar ease of their friendship. Erwin starts to list an inventory of all the basic clothing he'll need, and Levi helps him calculate the budget, as the cost of living has changed since he last went shopping.

"And of course the suit for tonight," Levi adds. "I'm going to buy one, too."

"I know a good place for that, if it's still there. We should head there first after breakfast."

They proceed to the bank, where Levi withdraws enough for a month's supplies for the cabin, then enough for their shopping list. Only Levi could get away with carrying large wads of cash with no worries, Erwin thinks. Any mugger who would dare attack him would quickly regret it.

They stop in at the tea shop for pastries and tea, and plan their shopping route as they eat. While the atmosphere is relaxed, Erwin is aware of a pull between them that wasn't there before. There's physical promise between them now, not just emotional promise. There are odd moments when their eyes catch and then dart away. But otherwise, it is a pleasant breakfast.

The tailor's shop Erwin had in mind is still there, run by his son now. He selects a charcoal suit for Erwin with a white shirt and a black tie, and it needs to be taken in around his midsection and let out at the cuffs, so he stands on a stool and patiently waits for the tailor to take his measurements and pin some adjustments. Levi sits slumped on a chair, watching him with the scrutinizing expression he always wore when he was analysing a group of titans, and Erwin feels oddly as if he's on display, like a dancer or a statue. The idea makes his spine tingle, and he has to look away.

The tailor brings out a dark grey suit for Levi, with a matching tie and a pale grey shirt. Levi shakes his head at the tie.

“I have a neck piece already.” The suit fits him snugly around the hips and shoulders, draping gracefully over the rest of his body.

The tailor smiles. “There. I knew that would flow nicely on you.”

Levi pats his ass, looking a bit self-conscious. He turns to Erwin. “It’s tighter than what I’m used to.”

“It’s the current fashion,” the tailor says.

“The colour brings out your eyes,” Erwin adds, and he swears Levi blushes.

They pay and agree to come back to collect Erwin’s altered suit at four o’clock, then continue on their mission. Erwin finds a good deal on some leather shoes. A men’s clothing shop down the street is having a sale. By lunch time, they have so many bags that they agree to head back to the castle to drop them off, then go for a meal.

Erwin pauses in his room to uncap a newly purchased container of his favourite hair gel and apply it, then meets Levi in the hallway. Levi eyes his hair and gives him a nod of approval.

“Ready for lunch?”

“Lead the way,” Erwin replies, and as they begin to walk, he drapes an arm across Levi’s shoulders. A moment later, he feels Levi’s arm across his lower back, and they easily fall into step together.

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THEY’RE JUST LEAVING the castle grounds when Levi hears a voice behind them:

“Levi! Just the man I’m looking for.”

*Shit.* Levi’s heart sinks. He slowly detaches himself and turns. In his periphery, he sees Erwin’s fists clench.

Nile Dok is running toward them. He stops short in front of them, breathing hard.

“Take a minute to catch your breath,” Levi says dryly.

“That was quite the run for an MP.”

“Such a funny guy.” Nile glances at Erwin, and Levi waits for a spark of recognition, but there’s none. He doesn’t know if he’s relieved or disappointed.

Nile’s attention shifts back to Levi. “I’m glad I caught you. I won’t be at the gala tonight, and Her Majesty said you would be around. How would you like to come out of retirement?”

Levi’s mouth flattens.

“I’m serious,” Nile says, interpreting his reluctance as disbelief. “Keith Shadis is retiring. We need someone else to scare the hell out of new recruits, and you’re the most abrasive asshole I know. You’re my first pick.”

“What?” Levi’s lip curls. “Working with disgusting brats? No, thanks.”

“Let me finish. We’d provide you with a stipend to buy a second house in Trost, and the salary is comfortable.”

“I don’t need money.”

“You would only work a total of four months a year. The other eight months would be handled by your team. It’s mostly introductions and exams, as well as training demonstrations. I’d leave the specifics in your hands.”

Levi does not reply.

Nile looks deflated by his lack of enthusiasm. “Well, give it some thought. I’ll pass the details to Her Majesty so you can read the job description.” He glances at Erwin, and says amicably, “I don’t think we’ve met. Strange, I didn’t think Levi had any friends.” He holds out a hand. “Military Police Commander Nile Dok.”

Erwin stands tall, his mask fully up, and shakes his hand. “Erwin Smith.”

Levi studies Nile, looking again for a glimmer of recognition. There’s a surprised look for a second, and Levi panics —*the memory wipe will be undone; how will we handle him*—but he only says, “That’s my youngest son’s name.”

There’s a brief unsteadiness in Erwin’s stance, so small

that Levi isn't sure if he imagined it, but the words that follow are perfectly composed: "You have good taste in names."

Nile chuckles. "I can't take credit. He's named after ... " His brows narrow, then shakes his head. "I never remember this. Someone my wife knew?"

Erwin's carefully cultivated expression begins to fall apart.

"We need to go," Levi says, gripping Erwin's elbow.

"Yes, well. Think about my offer. Have fun at the gala."

Nile nods at them. "Nice to meet you, Erwin."

"Now." Levi steers him away.

Once they're deep in the crowd, he finally looks up. Erwin's face is pale and he's staring at nothing.

"You all right?"

Erwin stops walking, voice far away. "He doesn't know me."

People mill past, some giving the duo dirty looks for blocking the flow. Glaring at them, Levi takes the man by the elbow and guides him to the side of the road.

"Hey," he says gently. "Talk to me."

Erwin seems uncharacteristically lost for words. "I knew it, I just didn't *know* it. He didn't even ... "

When he trails off, Levi sighs. "The first time is hard." It took him a couple years to mention Erwin outside of conversations with Hange and Historia. So long as he didn't mention it, he could believe people still remembered him. Hange had been the first to bring him up, and when Nile and Pixis didn't react to the name, Levi felt his heart break all over again.

Erwin is blinking as if waking from a deep sleep. "What happened to the military cemetery?"

Levi's stomach plummets.

"Levi?"

"Don't do this to yourself."

But Erwin is already pulling away, striding down the street with purpose. Levi stares helplessly after him for a moment,

then hurries to catch up.

The cemetery was near the edge of town. The snow is starting to fall again, and it's soft, which turns the fifteen minute walk into twenty as they maintain their balance on the cobblestones. Levi stays close to Erwin's side, keeping a watchful eye on him. Erwin has his Commander mask up, his brows sharp and jaw tight. They both know what he will find. They both know he needs to see it for himself.

Erwin stops at the edge of the cemetery. A field of snow stretches before them, flat and empty.

“Where is the fence?” he asks, voice gravelly.

“Gone.”

“The cenotaph?”

“Destroyed.”

Erwin's chin lifts a little, his stance unnaturally proper. “The gravestones, too.”

“Yes. Destroyed.”

“The bodies?”

Levi can't bring himself to answer. Erwin turns to him, face hard.

“The bodies, Levi.”

“Exhumed. Cremated.”

For a minute, there's no reaction, then Erwin slowly sinks to his knees in the snow. The wind is picking up; snowflakes blow around him like ash in an updraft, his jacket and scarf lifting, then settling.

Levi stands helplessly behind him, not sure if he needs space or support. Finally, he gently speaks his name.

Fiery eyes fix on him, hooded by heavy brows. “The living were supposed to carry on their memories, but instead, they desecrated their graves. They dug them up and let them *burn*. “

Guilt twists at Levi's throat. Maybe he's saying *they* rather than accusing Levi directly, but he helped. There was no choice but to build funeral pyres and hastily cremate them along with

the caskets and wooden grave markers. There wasn't enough time before the ritual to exhume and move the remains to discreet locations.

Together, the last survivors of the Survey Corps scattered the ashes over the edge of Wall Rose and watched them catch on the breeze and fade into oblivion, knowing it was the last time anyone would honour their sacrifices. Even now, Levi chokes up when he recalls it. They watched them all die a second time.

“I’m sorry,” is all he can say now. “We didn’t have time to do anything else.”

A tear trails down Erwin’s cheek; he turns back to the field. “I told them their loved ones would remember them, Levi. You could have left them here. You could have come up with a cover story.”

“There were too many bodies.” Levi decides he’ll deal with cold knees; he kneels beside Erwin. “We only had a couple days to prepare. We thought about calling them plague victims, but the graves were all clearly military and marked with dates. And we couldn’t leave the graves unmarked, because the remains would eventually be uncovered, dressed in their military uniforms. This was the best we could do.”

“I want to ask how you could let this happen.” Erwin bows his head. “But no, that isn’t fair. *We* let this happen, the first thirteen commanders of the Survey Corps. We dug too deeply into the outside world, tied the fates of every soldier too closely to the memories that had to be erased. Our actions sealed their fates.” He pauses. “Especially me. I pushed us harder than anyone. I personally led countless soldiers to their deaths.”

“That’s not—”

“Stop, Levi. I know I did. And all so we could return to the way things were before the Survey Corps ever existed.” He gives a bitter, humourless laugh. “Their deaths were for absolutely nothing.”

“They bought us time—” Levi begins, but Erwin cuts him off again.

“If you had asked these soldiers if they would dedicate their hearts so that we could undo everything they fought for, do you think they would have offered them so willingly?”

“We had no choice,” Levi says, more vehemently. “Marley was going to raze us to the ground. We accomplished a truce, and it’s the best we could do. Your brain can do a lot, but it can’t get us out of an impossible situation. You need to accept that.” He faces the field of snow, and squints against the sparkling glare of sunlight. It’s mocking them with its beauty.

“I know, Erwin,” he continues. “It’s shit, staring at this blank field where memories should be. But what’s done is done. We can’t change the past. We have to live with it and move on.”

There’s no reply. They kneel side-by-side for several more minutes, then Levi begins to shiver. He says quietly, “We’re going to freeze out here. Let’s get some lunch and then find some salve for your arm.”

“I just need another moment,” Erwin says hoarsely. “Please, Levi. I need to feel this.”

Levi nods and grips his shoulder to let him know he doesn’t have to feel it alone.

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**WHEN ERWIN FINALLY** stands, his knees are wet and cold. It is far less than the discomfort he is owed for all those lives he wasted. In his periphery, he sees Levi rise to his feet. Always by his side, through everything.

Levi breaks the silence first: “Soup?”

Erwin nods.

He’s still lost in thought as they walk. While he is grateful to Levi for bringing him back to life, he could have saved any of the other wandering mindless titans. The other titans surely certainly carry far fewer sins. At least when the original serum was being debated, their arguments were around Erwin’s usefulness to humanity. Now he’s just here reaping the benefits

of a peaceful life, while others who laid down their lives are doomed to wander.

Levi glances up at him. “Stop thinking that.”

“Thinking what?”

“You’re thinking some bullshit about yourself, aren’t you? I can read it in your miserable expression.”

There’s no hiding anything from him. “I wouldn’t call it bullshit.”

Levi’s pace speeds up, like it often does when he’s angry. “I didn’t risk everything to save you from the prison of being a titan, just so you could imprison yourself in your head instead. You’ll feel better with warm soup in your belly. Just ... don’t think until then, okay?”

Erwin takes his advice and focuses on the shops they pass by and the squeaking crunch of fresh snow under his boots.

The soup diner is a lovely little log-cabin-style restaurant, with rustic wooden tables and a large fireplace by the counter. Levi drops his toque and mittens onto a small table by the window. “You sit down. I’ll order.”

“You won’t know what I want.”

“Carrot-ginger soup with a glass of hot apple cider?”

“Ah. Yes, that sounds lovely.”

While Levi orders their food, Erwin stares out the window, at all the passersby blissfully unaware of all those who died for them, of how close they are to death right now. All it would take is the Marleyan government deciding they don’t want to honour their agreement anymore, and they could wipe out the entire island.

*I have to help Historia.* He knows it’s a sore spot for Levi, but there has to be something he can do. Especially with their connection to the paths. He wishes he knew how to trigger them. The memory he saw on the rooftop was especially intriguing. Perhaps other memories might be available to them, ones that contain hints or information they have forgotten. Maybe the key to saving their future lies in the past.

And then there is that voice he keeps hearing: *Commander*. Eren, Armin, Reiner, Bertholdt, Ymir? He supposes it could even be Annie, or even Zeke. Or a past soldier who died as a titan. The longer he thinks about it, the longer the potential list gets. He needs to hear it again to pinpoint it.

Of course, he dreamed an intimate moment with Levi in the paths that most definitely had no basis in reality, so he supposes he could have dreamed the word “Commander,” too. It’s so difficult to disentangle reality from dream when everything there feels dreamlike.

Levi returns and sets a tray in front of him. The soup is bright orange with a milky swirl, and the cider is served in a clay mug that looks homemade. Erwin blows on a spoonful of soup to cool it, then tastes it. It’s sweet, sour, and spicy all at once, and he already feels calmer. Levi appears to have ordered a pea soup and, predictably, some tea.

They’re about halfway through their soup when Erwin broaches the subject: “I think you should take Nile up on his offer.”

“No,” Levi says flatly. “I want nothing more to do with the military. I was only ever there because of you, and then I only stayed with Historia because she was helping people. I’m done.”

“Well, would you consider it if I became part of the military again?”

Levi stares at him and slowly sets down his spoon. “*What?*”

“I plan to offer my services to Historia on a more permanent basis. I thought perhaps we could work side-by-side again. We both know this truce is fragile. It’s largely my choices that led us here. Don’t I owe it to the people we lost—”

“Will you stop that?” Levi growls, more venom in his voice than Erwin has heard since the incident that scarred his hand so long ago. “You don’t owe anyone a fucking thing.”

Erwin draws himself upright, spine straight. “I can’t sit by, knowing all those lives were for nothing.”

“You gave up *everything* for humanity. Your father, your

dreams of raising a family, your arm—”

“We have a potential in our connection to the paths.”

“—your self-worth, your fucking *life*.”

“Yes. And none of that repays my debts to humanity.”

A tear trickles down Levi's cheek and he looks down at his soup, miserable. “What do you owe *me*, Erwin? What will you be taking from me if you leave again?”

Erwin stares at him, heart slowly breaking. And as he starts to mentally tally everything the man has given up, he realizes no living soul, not one, has lost more under his command than Levi Ackerman.

The clock tower chimes two in the background, its bells muted by the falling snow. Levi takes a deep breath. When he speaks, his voice is steadier.

“That wasn't fair. You don't owe me anything.” He wipes his cheek with the back of his hand.

“I do,” Erwin says softly.

“No, it's not like this is some sort of a transaction. I followed you consciously and made every single choice for myself.” Levi lets out a shaky breath, and his gaze rises again, grey irises glowing against the glassy red. “I didn't mean it.”

“Well,” Erwin acknowledges, “I need to stop taking your support for granted. I'm not your commanding officer anymore, and whatever is blossoming between us must happen as equals.” He reaches across the table to grasp Levi's hand and brings it to his lips, giving it a soft kiss. “Can we find a compromise? Perhaps I could take a look at Historia's war room while we're here, and then she could occasionally contact me for advice. But the bulk of my life would be disconnected from the military, with you and Hange.”

Levi still looks miserable, but he nods.

“We still don't know what's going on with the paths,” Erwin continues. “I'd like to at least see that through. There is a strange urgency to it. I can't help but think it could have a bearing on humanity's future.”

"I'm so sick of carrying the weight of humanity on our shoulders," Levi mutters.

Erwin stands and walks around the table to kneel beside him, not caring if the other patrons notice. He tilts Levi's chin with his fingers, and gives him a slow, soft kiss, then looks earnestly into his eyes. "We'll carry that weight together, with the others. But here is my promise to you alone, Levi: I will not leave you. I owe you my life, and it is yours."

"You don't owe me anything," Levi says, but he bends forward and kisses him again.

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LEVI FEELS LIGHTER by the time they set out again. *Maybe we needed to vent all that.*

He knows it's Erwin's nature to want to solve the unsolvable; hell, it's one of the things he loves about him. It's selfish to try to keep Erwin away. Hange had said it would take him time to disconnect from his old role, after all.

*What if he never does?* Levi considers for a moment, then realizes it doesn't matter. If Erwin heads back into the line of fire, Levi will be there by his side.

But all the same, he hopes the quiet life he can offer him is enough.

They visit several shops to finish building Erwin's wardrobe—mostly collared shirts in a variety of blues and earthen tones—and Levi buys some for himself as well, in mostly greys and blacks. The fashion now is more tightly tailored than the shirts he already owns, with top layers of vests or hooded cloaks. He wrinkles his nose at the vests; those were in fashion twenty years ago, and it reminds him of his dumbass younger self. He adds some cloaks to his purchases, since he has always enjoyed the anonymity of a cowl.

When the tower bell rings four, they return to the suit shop and Erwin tries on his suit again. Levi's breath catches. The

suit is perfectly tailored to his body, showcasing his broad shoulders, narrow waste, square hips, muscled thighs ... Levi lets out a slow, shuddering breath. *He's so fucking handsome.* Their eyes catch, and Levi is mesmerized. He is going to show up to the gala tonight with this man on his arm. He feels a rush of excitement that's almost embarrassing.

Erwin seems to have shed his earlier misery. Maybe he's looking forward to the gala, too. "Well, Levi? What do you think?"

"Oh shut up, you know you're handsome."

Erwin steps off the stool and gives him a kiss on the top of the head. "You have such a way with words."

"Shut up," Levi says again, but he can't keep a smirk off his face.

They make one last stop at a pharmacy. The owner listens to Erwin's description of his nerve pain, then disappears to the back room to compound a salve. Levi hears the grinding of a mortar and pestle, and turns to Erwin to speak, but finds him near the back of the shop looking at a shelf.

"Need something else?" Levi starts to ask, but his voice catches when he sees what Erwin is looking at: a shelf labelled *personal lubricants*.

Erwin clears his throat. "I don't want to assume anything, but if you ever foresee us needing this, I imagine the combination hardware store-supply store-post office in town doesn't carry anything like this."

"No, probably not."

Erwin's voice is quiet: "I suppose we need to have some conversations, don't we?"

"About?" Levi asks, mouth dry.

"How fast or slowly we are going to take this. Preferences."

"Preferences?"

Erwin clears this throat. "I am a fan of both options, myself."

It takes Levi a moment to process what 'both options' is

supposed to refer to. While he's not averse to switching things up either, he has never envisioned himself topping Erwin. After a moment to consider, he finds he is intrigued by the idea. "Yeah, me too."

After a short hesitation, Erwin says, "Is this talk too brazen? I know we're still in the early stages of our relationship."

He looks bashful. Erwin Smith, *shy*. Levi can't resist saying, "So it's a relationship now, is it?"

Erwin stares, and Levi lets an amused blast of air through his nose.

"I'm just being a brat. It's fine. We're two adult men in our forties; we're allowed to talk about sex." To underscore his point, he nods at one of the scents. "Let's see what 'Sensual' smells like."

Erwin visibly relaxes. "I see; you're a 'Sensual' man." He lifts the tester jar to his nose. "Yes, that's pleasant."

"You sound surprised. Which one did you expect me to select?"

He receives a smirk in response. "Probably 'Frenzied passion.'"

This flirting is making Levi dizzy and warm, like he has drunk too much wine. "Well that one isn't off the table, either. Frenzied is good, sometimes." He breathes in *Sensual*. It smells subtly of honeysuckle. "Yeah, this one is good."

Erwin hesitates. "Should we ..."

Levi plucks a jar off the shelf and strides to the counter, pretending he is not terrified at this physical proof they are going to have sex sometime very soon.

The familiar panic from the night before is beginning to grip him again. What if they have held off this long and discover they have no chemistry? Their moment this morning suggests they are a good match, but what if the sex itself is terrible? Especially because they've both been abstinent for a decade and a half. *Do I even remember what I'm doing? Will I freak out and run from the room again?*

The pharmacist returns with the salve and rings up Levi's

purchases. The two bottles vibrate together in the shopping bag, echoing his tremble, and he takes a shaky breath. *Calm down. It's just sex.* He looks across the room at the man he has long carried a torch for, and closes his eyes. *Just sex with Erwin.*

He needs to find that brave part of himself that straddled Erwin this morning.

They walk side-by-side, wordless. They're about halfway back to the castle when Erwin says, "Levi, I want to reiterate that there's absolutely no pressure. Obviously, I'm still figuring out where I fit into your world, and I'm not in the most stable headspace because of it. We can take things as slowly as you like."

Levi takes a moment to gather his thoughts. "Look. I'm nervous. It's been a long, long time, and I'm worried I've forgotten how everything works. But ..." He glances around. The street is too busy for him to finish this thought: *I will give you anything you want from me.*

He'll have to tell him later, when the right moment arises.

They enter Erwin's room to put their bags away.

"It's almost five o'clock," Erwin says. "I suppose we need to use the remaining time to get ready."

Levi nods. "The first one ready will knock on the partition door?"

"Yes, that works."

They stand facing each other, and Levi wonders if this creeping shyness is affecting Erwin, too.

But then Erwin's face hardens with his battlefield look again, and he steps forward and catches Levi's chin, giving him a firm, deep kiss. The shyness immediately melts and Levi leans into him.

In the distance, the clock rings five bells. Erwin pulls away.

"We really need to get ready." He sounds regretful.

With an irritated grunt, Levi steps back. "Fine. But kiss me like this again after the gala."

"I will. I promise." Erwin smooths Levi's cravat, then they separate to get ready.

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ERWIN KNOCKS ON HIS door at about half past six. His hair is neatly styled with gel, and the dark cloth of the suit makes the gold glow in contrast. Levi stares up at him, dumbfounded.

Then he sees Erwin's throat bob, and realizes they're both wearing the same expression. They've seen each other dressed up nicely before, but their walls are down now. They are finally *seeing* each other.

“May I escort you to the ballroom, Guard Captain?” Erwin asks extravagantly, holding out his arm.

“What the hell was that?”

“Look, I've forgotten how to flirt. Just humour me.”

Levi chuckles and links his arm through Erwin's, and they walk together to the lounge area.

The tables are mostly full, guests standing around and chatting with drinks in hand. They find Hange and Iris at a table near the back. Hange waves them over.

Levi almost doesn't recognize them. Hange has chosen a plum dress and complementary makeup. Their hair is clean and in an elegant updo; he always forgets how red it is when it's freshly washed. It has been a long, long time since he has seen them dressed up so smartly. Evidently Erwin's return is lifting everyone's spirits.

His gaze shifts to Iris. She is wearing a deep green gown with gold highlights, and her hair is in a complicated woven, braided hairstyle. The gold hairpins glow against her dark hair.

“Good evening,” Erwin says, bowing. “I didn't expect to see you here, Iris.”

She smiles. “Hello again, Erwin and Levi. Historia and Mikasa are warming up for their performance, so Hange invited me to join them for drinks.”

“Performance?” Erwin says, and Levi has the same question.

“Yes, but of course you wouldn’t be aware; my apologies,” Iris says. “Historia has dedicated the past several years to harp practice, and Mikasa has taken up singing. They play together often.”

Levi blinks. How did he not know this? Has he been so self-involved since Erwin died that he hasn’t once asked them about their hobbies?

Hange must catch his puzzled look, because they say, “Historia invited us to their performance last year, Levi.” Then, pointedly, “You didn’t attend.”

“Oh,” he says.

“Well,” Erwin says graciously, “we’re looking forward to the performance.” He looks at the grandfather clock in the corner. “It looks like we have some time, so why don’t I go get us some drinks?”

“I’ll walk you to the bar,” Iris says, “if you’ll excuse me, Hange. I see someone I need to say hello to.”

Then it’s just Levi and Hange at the table.

Hange grins. “So?”

“So what?”

“Things seem to be going well.”

Levi shrugs. “Yeah.”

“Is he going to live with us?” When there’s no reply, Hange frowns. “Just because he’s back in your life doesn’t mean you can revert to only opening up to him, you know.”

Levi sees their hurt expression, and his stomach twists. “We’ve been ignoring you,” he realizes.

“A bit. It’s okay, I expected it, to some extent, especially at first.” Hange shrugs it off, but he can tell they’re a bit wounded.

Levi glances across the room. Erwin is standing at the bar, chatting with the bartender as if they’re old friends. He feels proud that this charming man is here with him. “We kissed.”

He can tell Hange is bottling up their excitement; a small squeak escapes, and then, calmer: “Oh?”

“It’s still a bit complicated. Nile came up to me with a job,

and Erwin wanted the two of us to jump right back in.” He lets out a low sigh. “I hope I can be enough for him.”

Hange’s smile is kind. “It’ll take him time to adapt.”

“I know.”

There’s a long pause, filled with discomfort, until Hange finally blurts, “If you two want to get a house together, I understand.”

“What the hell? It’s too early to talk like that. Besides ...” Levi shrugs. “You and I live well together.”

“Yeah. We do.” Hange ruffles his hair.

“Hey.” Levi tries to smooth it back into place. “Knock it off. It took forever to get it to lay flat.”

“Oh, relax. You’ve already seduced your partner.”

He turns back to the bar. Erwin is heading back, drinks in hand; he sees Levi watching him, and his face fills with soft admiration.

“See?” Hange leans close. “I’ve never seen that expression on him.”

Neither has Levi. His pulse races.

Erwin returns and sets their drinks on the table. When he sets the whiskey in front of Levi, he bends down, lips by his ear. “You look stunning in that suit, Levi.”

The hot breath in his ear is a new sensation, and Levi suddenly realizes this is *all* new, all these areas of each other’s body they have yet to explore. A pleasant shiver runs down his spine.

A bell rings from the entrance to the ballroom. A member of the Queen’s Guard stands there, dressed in his formal uniform: long coat with the Wings of Freedom on the breast, green cape. “Attention, honoured guests,” he calls. “The ballroom doors will open in ten minutes.”

“Bottoms up,” Hange says, and they drain the full glass of wine.

“We can bring our liquor into the ballroom with us, you know,” Levi mutters.

Iris rushes back to the table. “Are you ready?” She’s practically vibrating with excitement.

“These two need to finish their drinks. I’ll come with you, Iris,” Hange says, winking at Levi.

And then they’re alone again. Erwin holds out his glass.

“To new beginnings,” he says softly. “Free from pressure, free from protocol.”

Levi thinks of the hidden mezzanine inside that ballroom and feels a surge of bravery. “To us,” he replies, and their glasses clink.

Erwin leans over and kisses him.

# ❖ Ten ❖

## A SECRET AND A SONG

AS THEY DESCEND the staircase into the ballroom, the greeter calls out, “Guard Captain Levi Ackerman and Guest.” Levi would never have expected to be the important one of their duo. He’s not sure how to feel.

Neither, apparently, is Erwin; a muscle in his jaw tightens, but when he catches Levi looking at him, he gives him a little smile to communicate that he’s okay.

Levi has always been reluctant to attend this type of event, but the ballroom seems brighter and more colourful with Erwin on his arm. Guests dressed in fancy gowns and suits cluster near the bars, with a few guests milling around what will be the dance floor. The heavy violet curtains of the stage are closed, and stage hands are still tweaking the lighting.

Levi’s eyes drift up to the mezzanine.

Erwin leans down. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Your grip got a little tighter.”

Levi loosens his grip and swallows the rest of his whiskey. “I could use another drink.”

Erwin plucks the empty glass from his hand. “More whiskey?”

“Something lighter. I don’t want to get drunk.” The last thing he needs tonight is whiskey dick.

“Agreed. Perhaps some wine.” Erwin gives him a smile and then heads for the bar.

Levi hovers back, happy to keep his distance from the

throng crowding the bar. He watches as Erwin catches the attention of a bartender with his charming smile. As with before, he chats comfortably with her as she pours them two small glasses of white wine. At this rate, Erwin is going to make more friends in two days than Levi has made in a decade.

Now she's twirling a strand of hair around a finger, and she leans closer to say something in his ear. He laughs. A moment later, he collects the drinks and makes his way back to Levi.

"Did she offer to fuck you?" Levi asks dryly.

Erwin hands him a wine glass. "Why? You aren't jealous, are you?"

Levi scoffs. "No. That polite and flirty man they see is just a mask, anyway. I know who you really are."

"Oh? And who am I, really?"

"A man who takes sixteen years to make a move."

Erwin laughs, then bends down to kiss his cheek. He lingers near his ear. "But I haven't even made my move yet."

"No, you haven't. I'm doing all the heavy lifting here."

"Well, I'm just too polite to be pushy."

"Polite. I see."

They walk toward the standing tables near the wall. Levi looks for Hange and sees them animatedly talking with one of the scientists from a nearby lab. He'll leave them be.

They set their drinks down and stand close to each other; Erwin drapes an arm around him and pulls him closer still.

"Is that your move?" Levi asks. "A hug?"

"No. My move is giving great head."

Levi almost chokes on his drink. He looks up and sees a mischievous smirk. "What?"

"Maybe I'm joking." Erwin takes a sip of his wine as he looks around the room, casual. "Maybe I'm not."

Who is this man, flirting with bartenders, being affectionate in public, making blunt overtures? "Are you drunk already?"

Erwin laughs again. “No, just energized. This is the first gala I’ve been to with no politics, no need to play my cards right. It’s just me and the most handsome man in the walls, and all the time in the world.”

“Disgusting,” Levi mutters, but he feels his face heating. He grabs Erwin by the tie and pulls him down for a kiss. His skin smells of wine and aftershave. When they break apart, Erwin runs his thumb across Levi’s chin. Enchanted, Levi feels the need to flirt back.

“I give great head, too,” he blurts, and he immediately curses his awkwardness.

Erwin smirks but, to his credit, doesn’t laugh at him. “That doesn’t surprise me. The way you were working my fingers earlier … I don’t know if I’m going to survive that tongue anywhere else on my body.”

This is really going to happen. They’re talking about sex, they’re admitting to getting turned on, and they have lubricant waiting for them in the bedroom. Adrenaline floods Levi’s body and he is torn between fleeing the room and jumping Erwin right here in front of everyone. His body decides to do neither and freezes in place instead.

He’s saved by the curtains opening. A hush trickles through the crowd, until the room is completely silent save for the occasional clinking of glasses and the odd cough.

A man—likely a noble, judging by the garish gems embedded into his suit—steps to centre stage.

“Greetings, citizens of Mitras and distinguished visitors,” he calls, his strong voice carrying through the hall as if he’s singing the words. “Her Royal Highness will be performing for us in approximately one hour. In the meantime, please enjoy the beverages and the hors d’oeuvres. As you may know, the goal of tonight’s gala is to raise funds for a new community centre in Utopia District, which is sorely lacking in indoor activities during the harsh winter. If at any point during the evening you are inspired to give, please flag down any server or guard wearing a

snowflake brooch on their lapel. To open our musical acts, I present the Utopia children's orchestra and choir."

The stage fills with a bunch of children in white garb, most of them porting a variety of instruments.

Levi watches Erwin out of the corner of his eye, and casually rests his hand on his lower back. Maybe he's no good at flirting with words, but he can flirt with his body.

The orchestra begins to play a winter carol.

"They're quite good," Erwin says, and he leans against the table so Levi's hand drifts lower, to the very base of his lower back. Levi's breath catches. He gives Erwin's back a subtle caress with his thumb.

Erwin says, "Will you be dancing with me when the dance floor opens?"

"Of course."

"I don't think I've ever seen you dance."

"Well, we couldn't dance together before. Imagine the rumours." Levi's hand drifts a little lower, resting on the upper swell of his ass.

"I imagine you move to the rhythm naturally," Erwin says. "Your instincts and ability to synchronize with your surroundings were always an asset on the field."

"You have good instincts, too."

"With strategy, maybe. Not with movement." Erwin leans back a little into his hand. "I took several dance classes, once it became apparent I was going to need to rub shoulders with the nobles. I'm afraid I learned to dance through study and practice to overcome my lack of instincts, and I'm still a bit stiff on the dance floor."

"Lessons, huh? Was this before or after I joined the Survey Corps?"

"You're lucky: before. Otherwise, I might have given you the order to accompany me."

Levi gives a *tsk*. "Once we got our hands on each other, who knows what would have happened next?" He gives a subtle

squeeze.

Erwin turns to him, lids low. “And where is it going to lead us now?”

Heart pounding in his throat, Levi says, “We have an hour until they go onstage.”

“So we do.” Erwin follows his gaze up to the mezzanine. “Ah. I see.”

Levi tosses back the rest of his drink and grabs Erwin’s hand, leading him to a staircase tucked from view at the back of the room. Erwin leaves his half-finished glass on a random table they pass by.

They wordlessly climb the stairs, side-by-side. Levi re-treads their conversation, wondering if he came across as too pushy, or not pushy enough. Or just plain awkward. *“I give good head, too”? Fuck.*

At the top of the stairs, they walk along the balcony and around the corner to access the hidden room. Levi glances around to make sure no one can see them, then opens the curtain to let Erwin in. He steps in after him and pulls out the small light stone he keeps on his keychain.

His heartbeat drums in his ears as he makes his way toward the table at the back of the room. But when he turns, Erwin is striding for the far wall.

“Erwin?”

“It’s over here.” Erwin bends down and feels the carpet, then finds a split and reaches under it. He pulls. A trap door yawns before them, revealing a set of stone stairs.

“What the hell?” Levi says.

Erwin’s head tilts a little, as if he’s processing. “This isn’t what you meant?”

“I was thinking … ” He gestures toward the table.

Erwin’s brows furrow with confusion.

“You and the lord, on the table.” Embarrassment begins to creep across Levi’s skin, hot and prickly.

“Levi,” Erwin says quietly, “What exactly did you see?”

*He's going to make me say it. "You had him bent over the table—" He stops at Erwin's shocked expression. "Look, I didn't mean to violate your privacy, I just saw you slip in here and my curiosity got the better of me, so a few minutes later—"*

He cuts himself off as Erwin begins to laugh.

"Levi, that wasn't me."

The words don't make sense. "I saw you."

"You probably saw me take a lord to this secret chamber, then another couple happened to sneak in and use the table. It wouldn't be the first time someone has sneaked in here."

"It wasn't you?" Everything Levi knows is distorting out of shape, and he reels.

Erwin's smile is gentle. "I'm not proud of everything I've done in the name of extracting information, Levi, but I have never done it through sex. Like I said earlier, I get stupid when I'm turned on. I probably would have given away Survey Corps secrets instead."

"Oh," Levi says faintly.

After a few awkward seconds, Erwin says, "Are you saying that you spent sixteen entire years thinking about me having sex with a noble on this table?"

Levi wants to fall through the floor.

Erwin has a smirk on his lips; he paces around Levi, trailing his hand across his shoulders. "Was that the moment you started having feelings for me?"

Levi bats his hand away. "Knock it off. You're being creepy."

Erwin circles to his other side and leans close to his ear. "The idea is intriguing. And a lot less risky now that it's not going to ruin our careers."

He wants to re-enact the scene anyway, so badly. But their first time together isn't going to be without lubrication on a table where Erwin didn't actually fuck a guy.

There are other options, however. "Well, now I want to see what's in this secret room of yours."

They descend the staircase. The room is small and rectangular, with a long table and several chairs. It looks like any other meeting room. Levi feels a wave of disappointment. He waves his keychain stone around, looking for anything suspicious in the corners.

“That’s it? Why were you acting so shady about this?”

“Well,” Erwin says, closing the door and locking it with a deadbolt, “this is a secret room that was used by the nobles for less-than-legal dealings. In fact, it probably still is.” He points at several vents in the ceiling. “These vents lead out over the street instead of the castle duct system, so there’s no chance of being overheard. It’s quite safe in terms of dangerous conversations. But at the same time, it’s risky to come here, because it’s not a commonly known room. It would be easy for someone to ask to meet me here, then close the trap door behind me and hide it. It could be weeks before anyone found me. I didn’t think you would approve of that risk.”

“No, I wouldn’t.” *It has to be more than that.* Levi sets the pebble in the centre of the table, casting dim light throughout the room. “What did you do in here, exactly?”

Erwin clears his throat. “I negotiated with lords and merchants.”

“You realize that still sounds sexual.”

Erwin smiles. “Well, a few did flirt with me, and I may have let them think they had a chance. But my specialty was blackmail. People are eager to give you information to take down their rivals. The easiest scenario was when I could play both sides and use them against each other.”

“Hmm.” Levi inspects the table and, finding it free from dust, sits on it. “I already knew about that.”

“Yes, but you don’t know the extent of it.” Erwin sits beside him. “When I didn’t have information, I had to guess. Educated guesses, mind you, but guesses all the same. I was making some wild accusations against some very powerful people, and a wrong guess could have provoked immediate repercussions. I’m

not proud of how frequently I gambled with my safety in this room.”

He does, in fact, sound proud. Levi purses his lips at him.

“What is it?” Erwin asks.

“You enjoyed it, didn’t you?”

Erwin doesn’t answer, just stares at the wall with a little smile on his face, as if he’s recalling it.

“I worked so hard to keep you safe on the battlefield,” Levi mutters. “And then you were in here getting sick thrills out of gambling your life for scraps of information.”

“And *this* is the main reason I didn’t tell you.”

“No wonder you knew exactly which strings to pull to take down the government. You had dirt on everyone.” Levi glances sideways at him. “Were you ever in immediate danger here?”

Erwin clears his throat. “I would prefer not to answer that.”

“Fuck. While I was in Mitras with you?”

“I wasn’t about to risk you by dragging you into it, Levi.”

Levi’s teeth clench as he imagines Erwin being threatened by nobles while he naively waited for him back at their hotel, thinking his Commander was just in a boring meeting with the Council. “I should have been at your side. I would have torn them a new asshole if they had touched you.”

“And *that* is the other reason I didn’t want to tell you.” Erwin leans closer until their arms touch. “I apologize. I trusted you with everything else; I should have trusted you with this, too.”

Levi considers. “Well, it’s probably better that I didn’t know.” He can easily see himself screwing up a delicate negotiation by applying a sword to someone’s throat. “But I would have preferred to be there to protect you.”

“I know.”

Levi leans a little more, until his head rests on Erwin’s shoulder.

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FOR SEVERAL MINUTES, Erwin is lost in thought. He recalls one deal here that went sour, when he confronted an Underground merchant with sensitive information; a fight broke out and he left the room with sore ribs and bruised knuckles. Yes, that particular instance would have been much easier with Levi there.

But they're both here now, and there's no danger anymore.

"So, Levi," he says softly, burying his face into the top of the dark hair. "We have some time, and a locked room to ourselves, built so that no one will overhear us." He still wants to be polite, but their flirting has gotten so blatant that he thinks they're on the same page. He hopes he's correct.

"There you go again, all talk and no action. Am I going to have to make a move first again?" Levi asks, sliding off the table and landing on his feet. Before there is time to reply, he steps between Erwin's legs. The table is low enough that their faces are almost the same height; their mouths meet in a kiss.

Hands smooth Erwin's chest and shoulders, and heat spreads through his body. He rakes his fingers into the back of Levi's hair and deepens the kiss. He can feel Levi unbuttoning his jacket, then pulling it off, then pulling away to toss it on the table.

Erwin whispers his name, and their lips meet again. Levi's hands move with purpose now, tugging his tie to loosen it, then unbuttoning his collar. His mouth moves to Erwin's jaw, then his ear.

*Fuck.* Erwin tenses as a shiver runs through him. Levi's breath is hot and loud. He feels gentle teeth on his earlobe, a soft tongue, and he realizes a deep, pleased sound is escaping his lips.

Levi hums in response and then kisses down his neck. His fingers work their way down the buttons, one at a time, his mouth trailing behind, leaving hot breath against the exposed skin. He reaches the last button and the shirt falls open. His

palms slide across Erwin's chest, his abdomen, and they're so warm and soft.

It strikes Erwin that he has always longed for Levi to look at him this way, with lust written plainly on his face. They've seen each other topless many times before: group showers, swimming in the river with the other officers, even during training sessions on stifling hot days. That was always through professional eyes. Somehow, even though he's still wearing a loosened tie and most of his shirt, Erwin feels more exposed than ever before under his gaze. His pants are suddenly too tight.

"Shit," Levi breathes. His hands rest on the belt buckle, and he pulls back to look up, a question in his eyes.

Erwin gives a small nod.

The belt comes undone, and Levi kneels in front of him. His mouth presses against the fly of his pants, breathing hot air that floods through the fabric.

"Levi ..." Erwin's head lolls back, and he slides closer to the edge of the table, until he's more leaning than sitting.

Another flood of warm air. He aches. "Levi ..." he says again, pleading this time.

The pants come undone and a blast of chilly air hits him, and he is suddenly aware of just how cold this room is in the winter. But Levi's hand slides along the length of him, radiating heat.

"Holy fuck, Erwin." The hand slides back down, and this time Levi's tongue slides up the shaft to the tip, and then his mouth is hovering around the head, teasing him with warm air and no contact.

Erwin's toes curl in his shoes, his hands gripping the edge of the table. Every instinct within him is screaming to thrust into that warm mouth. "Levi" seems to be the only word he can find anymore, and this time, he forces it out between clenched teeth.

"Hmm?" Levi drags his tongue back down and sucks one of his balls instead.

Fighting to keep his eyes open, Erwin sees Levi watching

him with that same hungry expression from earlier, when that mouth was around his finger. Erwin reaches down to cup his face, stroking his cheek with his thumb. The romantic part of him thinks, *he's so beautiful*. The sexual part of him can only think about fucking that mouth.

Levi's blink is slow and seductive as he moves to the other side, sucking a little harder now. Erwin loses the battle to keep eye contact and his head rolls onto his shoulder, hips tilting upwards, driving at nothing. "Levi, I ... "

Levi pulls away, nuzzling the shaft with his nose. "You what?"

"Your mouth."

Levi gives a low, pleased chuckle, the first Erwin has ever heard from him, and then there's heat and wetness and that tongue swirling just as it did around his finger. A wave washes through Erwin and he fights to hold on. *Not yet*. It's tugging at his limbs, stretching him in all directions, and he clenches his jaw. *Not yet!*

Levi works up and down, taking him a little deeper each time, warm liquid trickling down the length of him. It feels so good, he's floating, he's being carried away.

Then Levi pushes to the hilt, and Erwin is deep in his throat, and he hears himself cry out. He clamps a hand over his mouth, trying to muffle himself.

Levi withdraws. He gently pulls the hand away. Erwin looks at him with surprise, and their eyes hold.

"No one will hear us here, right?" Levi says. "It's sound-proof?"

"Yes," Erwin pants.

"Then be loud." Levi lunges toward him and their lips meet. Erwin tastes the small mouth, drops his hand to the man's neck, feels how narrow and graceful it is. He doesn't understand how a man this small can take him in so deep.

Then Levi pulls away and kneels once more, taking him right to the base again. His eyes water from the strain, and

concern interrupts Erwin's pleasure. He smooths grey hair off the man's forehead.

"Levi," he says gently. "Don't hurt yourself."

Levi shakes his head, easing him out to say, slowly and clearly, "I want all of you inside me."

Erwin isn't sure if he thinks the word or says it aloud: *Fuck!* Levi grips him with both hands, sucking the tip, and begins to move faster. There is no chance of self-control now. Erwin thinks he is reaching the peak and calls out, but then it eases up, and then he's rising again, further this time, and falls back again. Levi is reading him like they're on the battlefield, wordlessly coordinating their movements. Erwin is falling apart, his hips thrusting into that warm mouth, his hands raking into Levi's hair. His weak hand still hurts, but he barely feels the pain; his entire body tingles with building energy.

"Levi—" he gasps, and Levi gives an encouraging hum.

Euphoria erupts throughout Erwin's body, flooding every muscle, every vein, and he's so high that he doesn't know if he'll ever return to himself. Somewhere far below him, he feels Levi drinking the pleasure from his quivering body.

He does return, slowly. There's one last spasm, and then he breathes again. The strength drains from all his muscles at once and he slumps back against the table, gasping for air.

Levi pulls back, and he looks undone, too, his hair and eyes wild, his cheeks flushed. "Erwin," he says, a desperate note to his voice.

Erwin pulls himself together, shoving the loose hair back off his forehead as he rises to his feet. He hauls Levi to his feet, too, and meets him in a long kiss. His hand slides down to the bulge in Levi's pants, rubbing him through the fabric. Levi cries out into his mouth.

"Sit down," Erwin rasps, clumsily turning their bodies so Levi is against the table now. He aches to take this slowly and explore Levi's body, but that isn't what Levi needs right now. There will be time for exploration later.

Instead, he kneels in front of Levi and undoes his pants, pulling him out. And he stares for a moment, because this can't be the same cock he has seen in shower rooms. He wonders how it would feel to take him into his mouth when he is soft, feeling him swell and grow to this length, gradually filling his mouth and throat ...

Hands comb into his hair from above. "Please," Levi says, his voice higher-pitched than usual.

Erwin bends closer and kisses the tip, then smooths back the foreskin with his lips. He swirls his tongue around the head, sucking gently. When he looks up, he sees Levi has tossed his head back, mouth open.

*So impossibly beautiful.*

The familiarity of the thought sounds through him like a bell.

But he's too enraptured to consider it. He takes Levi deep into his throat, then pulls back, trying to find the rhythm he likes best. When the hands in his hair tighten, he knows he has found it.

Now he can't ignore the familiarity. *I've been here before?*

Stars spread above them for an instant. He blinks, and they're gone, but now he remembers.

Levi is rigid and twitching in his mouth, his breath coming in sharp gasps that match their movements. Erwin does not hold back, pushing him hard and fast to give him release.

"Erwin, I'm going to—"

He swallows burst after burst of maple and starlight.

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THEY LIE SIDE-BY-SIDE on the table, both partially dressed, breathing hard, hair mussed.

"Fuck," Levi pronounces when he can find his voice again. "We're idiots for not doing that sooner."

Erwin smiles and rolls over to give him a slow, lazy kiss.

When he pulls away, Levi adds, "You weren't joking about

how you make your move.”

“Neither were you. But next time, I’ll take my time a little more, do it slowly. It seemed like you needed something a little faster.”

“You read me well.”

“Of course. We know each other.” Erwin kisses his jaw, his neck, then pauses there, pulling the skin between his teeth.

“Hey,” Levi scolds, moving away. “Don’t start that or we’ll never get out of here.”

“That wouldn’t be a bad way to spend a night.” But he stops, caressing Levi’s cheek instead. “How much of our hour do you think we used?”

“About two minutes getting into this room, two more minutes on you, fifteen seconds on me,” Levi replies dryly, and Erwin laughs. But then his face becomes serious, and Levi’s stomach drops.

“What?”

“This may sound strange, but I think I foresaw this in the paths.”

“Foresaw what?” Levi rolls to face him, propping himself up on an elbow. He wants to word it crassly to break the tension, but something in Erwin’s face stops him, so he says, “Us being intimate like this?”

Erwin’s gaze is fixed on his cravat, and he reaches across to smooth it. Levi’s skin hums beneath the fabric.

“Yes. I had a dream that felt real, and the words we said and the sensations of you in my mouth ...”

“You dreamed about sucking me off,” Levi repeats, and he is glad the small light doesn’t give them much visual detail, because his face is warm again.

“It’s a little more complicated than that, but essentially, yes.” Erwin rolls onto his back, his arms behind his head. “The last time we both experienced the paths, I sank into a memory from the past and lived it. And in the dream I’m talking about, I lived a moment that ended up being our future. The one from

the past felt intentional, like I was sent there, but the one from the future felt organic, like an accidental glimpse of something ahead.”

“So, what does that mean?” Levi asks.

Erwin shakes his head. “I don’t know. It’s as if time isn’t flowing in a linear manner in whatever paths are connecting us; there’s a chaotic and random nature to it. I need to think about this some more to see if I can wrap my head around it. Maybe we can discuss with Hange and Historia tomorrow.”

They’re quiet for a moment, then Erwin sits up and begins to fasten his buttons.

“Here.” Levi helps him, settling the tie back into place while Erwin smooths Levi’s hair. It doesn’t take them long to regain their former elegance.

“As good as new,” Erwin says brightly.

“As long as no one smells our breath,” Levi deadpans, and as he hoped, Erwin laughs.

“Drinks will take care of that. And then I believe we were going to dance?”

They pause by the doorway for one last lingering kiss. When they pull away, Erwin is looking at him so softly that Levi’s head spins.

After they pause for a drink, they head onto the dance floor. Erwin was correct when he said he was technically a good dancer, but not a creative one. Levi takes the lead, and discovers that Erwin’s technicality makes him an excellent partner; they spin through the crowd, and Levi feels as if he’s wearing the 3DMG, racing through treetops, his heart pounding.

“We dance well together.” Erwin smiles as he gazes fondly down at Levi. “I feel like I’m a prince in the stories my father used to read to me as a child.”

Levi raises a brow. “Stories? I would have thought you’d be studying history textbooks.”

“I had quite the imagination before I committed myself to using it constructively. In fact, the long-range scouting for-

mation was inspired by a story I read in a children's book when I was young."

"Oh?" Levi asks.

"In the story, a young boy is lost, and follows a light in the distance that seems to be illuminating his path home. It moves further away as he approaches, always guiding him in the right direction from its place on the horizon. The idea of nonverbal communication over distance stuck with me."

"And then you thought of the smoke signal guns?"

"Not right away. Quite frankly, I was puzzled by how to implement a signal system for a while. My first idea was to use fireworks to mimic the light in the story, but of course, the noise would only draw in titans, so it wasn't practical. Then I saw the Garrison set off a flare to alert their colleagues on the ground, and the pieces came together: we could use special signal guns that boosted our smoke flares high enough to be seen from a great distance. All I had to do was work out the colour coding and place a few special orders to test it out."

Even after all this time, Levi reflects, there are new things they can learn about one another. He feels a swell of gratitude for the second chance to really know Erwin.

When it's nearly time for the performance, they move to the edge of the dance floor, where Iris happily greets them. She introduces them to a man she's been talking with, a fellow councillor who also acts as a volunteer accountant with Historia's charities, and suddenly they've been pulled into a conversation that bores Levi. He has never understood how Erwin can find something interesting in any conversation that comes his way. He asked, once, how Erwin managed to fake it; the response had been that it was never fake: "You can always learn something from a master of their field." But, accounting?

It's a relief when the master of ceremonies calls out from the stage again. The children step out of the spotlights to the back of the stage, and two stage hands roll a harp to the front. Musicians filter into the back row to join the children, carrying

stringed instruments and a flute. The crowd applauds with great enthusiasm.

“Let’s move closer,” Hange says, appearing out of nowhere and grabbing Levi’s hand. He lets himself be pulled along, grabbing Erwin’s hand, in turn.

The three of them find standing room close to the front. Hange has subtly guided them to stand behind a group of children so Levi can see the stage, and he’s grateful, both for the unspoken gesture, and that it was unspoken. Iris waves at them as she passes, then moves to stand at the very front, directly beneath the harp.

“Distinguished Guests,” the announcer calls, “Please welcome Her Majesty Queen Historia and Guard Captain Mikasa!”

The crowd cheers and claps.

Historia and Mikasa step onto the stage. Mikasa is wearing a flattering white suit, and in place of her usual tattered scarf, she wears a red silk shawl. Historia wears a small tiara and a simple white dress, fur lining the collar. Around her neck is a glittering red beaded necklace. Both of them are wearing blue gemstone brooches shaped like snowflakes.

Historia settles into place at the harp, and Mikasa steps forward and clasps her hands together in front of her chest. Her eyes close, and she takes a deep breath.

The hall is silent.

Notes sound from the harp in a minor key, swirling and rising in gentle arpeggios. The notes slow, then pause.

Mikasa begins to sing.

*My love, your eyes were once aglow,  
Beneath the budding leaves,  
But now the season’s ice and snow,  
Have reached the autumn trees.*

Her voice is rich and plaintive; it fills the hall and swells,

as strong and damaging as any strike she has ever delivered in battle. Levi's throat tightens. The strings and flute in the background begin to play softly to accompany the harp.

*The wintry winds flow through the land  
To all life, they bring death,  
And you, my love, flow through my hand,  
The ash of your final breath.*

Mikasa clutches a hand to her breast as Historia's melody grows more complex, a bass counter-melody joining the arpeggios. The choir in the background begins to sing soft, long notes in key.

*One by one, the dead leaves fall,  
To rest on nameless graves,  
Again, again, your name, I call,  
But from this world you fade.*

The music blends together and rises, lifting up Mikasa's voice, and Levi swallows hard.

*A hero — nameless, long forgot,  
An army — countless wars un-fought,  
Our sacrifices — all for naught,*

The music falls away except for the soft harp and Mikasa holding the high note. Then she pauses for a moment, letting the silence fill the room. When she sings the last verse, her voice is soft and slow:

*And as the last leaf falls,  
Your name dies in these walls,  
But winds will not erase,  
My mem'ries of your face.*

Historia lifts the harp melody into its final notes, then drops her hands.

The hall erupts. Mikasa looks at Historia and they share a genuine smile and hug, then they bow.

The announcer tells the audience there will be a thirty minute break before the next song, and a spread of hors d'oeuvres is available in the east end of the hall. The crowd begins to mill in that direction.

“Come on,” Hange says, yelling to be heard. “Let’s get some food!”

Erwin gives Levi a slow squeeze on the shoulder; his face is gentle, but his eyes look a little misty. *These losses are all new to him. That must have felt like a funeral dirge.*

He wants to say something, but Erwin is already turning to follow Hange. Levi is about to join them when a voice sounds behind him:

“Beautiful, but a bit brazen with the lyrics, I thought.”

He turns. Lord Alec Farrington stands behind him, head turned slightly away, as if snubbing him. It’s funny, now, how little he actually resembles Erwin aside from the height and the hair; his features are too soft, nose too snub, eyes too rounded.

Levi folds his arms over his chest. “What do you want?”

“A rather chilly reception from the man who’s telling everyone we’re sleeping together.”

“What?” Rage flares in Levi’s stomach. “I’m not telling anyone anything.”

“Oh, relax, I know. There’s no way you’d be bragging after the way you ran out on me.” He looks hurt, and Levi feels a pang of guilt.

“Look—”

“I said, *relax*. I’m over it. I’m actually here to see if you can get an urgent message to the Queen. She hasn’t been easy to contact these past few days.” He arches an eyebrow, looking down his nose at Levi. “And I must confess, while I’m here, I wouldn’t

mind a peek at the man who's starting all these rumours. Someone else who looks like your old love, perhaps? Did you unearth a tall blond somewhere in your farm village, maybe scrub the dirt and cowshit off him?"

Levi scoffs and turns, but Alec catches his shoulder.

"No, please wait," the lord says, all bravado suddenly gone. "I shouldn't snipe at you like that; this is more important than my ego. I really do have something urgent to tell Historia, and I know you two are close. Can you summon her?"

"She'll probably come onto the dance floor. Talk to her then."

"I shouldn't be seen speaking with her." Now he looks nervous.

"Levi, are you coming?" Erwin's voice calls over the crowd. Levi turns and sees him standing near the stage.

"So that's the man," Alec says, stepping alongside Levi. "I must admit, you did a good job finding a lookalike." But then the colour drains from his face. "Wait."

*Shit.*

"Wait," Alec says again, more softly, and he starts drifting in Erwin's direction as if entranced.

"Alec, don't—" Levi tries to catch his arm, but too late: he misses. He hurries after him.

Erwin watches the two of them approach, bewildered. Alec stops in front of him; his face is pale.

"Commander Erwin," he says quietly.

"No—" Levi begins, but Erwin puts a hand on his shoulder to let him know it's all right.

Instead, Erwin holds out a hand. "I don't believe we've met."

Alec takes his hand and instead of shaking it, kisses it. "Lord Alec Farrington. Why ... how are you here?"

"Lord Alec. I see." Erwin casts an amused glance at Levi, who looks away. "While we aren't actively hiding my return, we aren't drawing attention to it, either. I would appreciate your

discretion. I managed to stay hidden for years after I staged my death, and I'd prefer to keep anonymous for a bit longer."

"Hidden?" The lord seems to be regaining control over himself; his expression sharpens. "But that's not what happened, is it?"

"The circumstances are more complicated, but I don't believe you need to know more than the gist—"

"No," Alec says, and he leans forward. "There was no 'staged death.' You're back from the dead. How? Are there others?"

Hange, apparently eavesdropping, steps into the conversation. "We'll pay you to keep this quiet."

The lord shoots them a fox-like grin. "Yes, Commander Hange, you will. But don't patronize me. First he—" He jerks a thumb at Levi. "—is eating up the Commander's memory one second and then gets all panicky the next, and now the Commander walks in here, not a single day over forty, saying he abandoned the career he spent his whole life building? I'm sorry, but that's ridiculous."

They're silent for a moment, then Erwin says, "I see you're too savvy for a false story about burnout and desertion. Let's negotiate. We will pay you enough that you can spread a counter-rumour about me among the nobles—"

"Yes, yes, we'll work those details out later," the lord says, waving it away. "What interests me now is the truth of what happened to you. And in exchange, I have information that will interest you. Urgent information." He leans close and says in his ear: "About Marley."

"Hey, not so close." Levi grabs Alec's arm and jerks him a step back.

Hange folds their arms over their chest. "If you have that information, you need to bring it to your queen."

Alec sighs. "That's what I was *trying* to do." His eyes fix on Erwin. "But I'm more curious than I am loyal. Besides, Commander, if your reputation is accurate, you will go to any

length to get this information.” He gives a charming smile and winks. “It’s just that good.”

“Hey,” Levi says sharply.

Erwin’s face is hard, his eyes unreadable. He studies Alec for a minute, then holds out a hand to shake the lord’s. “Information for information.”

“What?” Levi intones, but then Erwin holds his gaze. There is strength in that look; this is a calculated move. *What is his angle? What does he see that I don’t?*

Hange sighs, not even bothering to argue. “I’ll get the others. We can’t have this conversation without them.”

# ❖ Eleven ❖

## WHERE PAST AND PRESENT INTERSECT

HISTORIA AND MIKASA usher Erwin, Levi, and Hange to the meeting chambers nearest the throne room. The lord is expected to join them soon; nervous about being seen with them, he announced he would arrive in ten minutes and disappeared from the ballroom.

Erwin looks around the room as they step into it. The last time he was in here, he was helping Historia practice her posture and movements for her coronation. The composed woman beside him is nothing like the skittish but eager girl of that time, though she still radiates the same bright energy beneath her composure. He is glad to have her at the helm for whatever news the lord has of Marley.

Hange offers each of them some appetizers they snagged from the gala. Only Mikasa has any appetite; the rest stand around, waiting awkwardly for Historia to sit first as etiquette dictates, but she approaches Erwin instead.

“You said this was something to do with Marley?”

He nods. “I don’t have any guesses yet, only that it won’t be good news.” There isn’t enough information yet to read anything more between the lines.

“And you’re okay with revealing your identity to him?”

“I see no reason to keep it a secret, so long as we have a reasonable and consistent cover story. The nobles who would remember me were going to learn about my reappearance eventually.” But that doesn’t mean they need to know the full truth.

Hange turns to Levi, and, in a transparently awkward attempt at lightening the mood, says, “So, did you and Lord Alec first bond over your mutual lust for Erwin?”

“Fuck off,” Levi growls.

“At least he knows how to flirt without running from the room. That hand kiss was smooth.”

“I said, fuck off.”

Erwin realizes Historia and Mikasa are staring. Casually, he drapes his arms around Levi’s shoulder and kisses the top of his head.

Historia clasps her hands together, delighted. “You kissed him! You’re together!” Even Mikasa gives them a little smile.

“Levi, you don’t have to worry,” Hange says. “Smooth and sophisticated people aren’t Erwin’s type.”

“I wasn’t worried.” Levi steps away and flops back against the wall, arms folded over his chest. “You’re an asshole.”

Just then, the door opens.

“Speaking of assholes,” Levi mutters.

Lord Alec slips through the door and quickly shuts it behind him. “There. I don’t think I was followed.” He locks it, then bows at Historia. “Your Majesty. You are a difficult woman to reach these days.”

She dips her head regally at him. “Alec, it’s good to see you. Sorry for my absence—I’ve been busy preparing for the gala. My friends tell me you have an urgent message for me. Please, be seated.”

She sits at the head of the table, and Mikasa immediately sits on her right. Alec takes a seat on her other side, folding his hands on the table.

Erwin scrutinizes the lord. He sees a vague resemblance to himself, but Alec is handsome in an aristocratic sort of way, with a boyish face and an expression that sits somewhere between smug and friendly. *A face that Levi kissed, danced with, started to become intimate with, however far that went before it stopped.*

He closes his eyes for a moment, disappointed in himself. Jealousy is a useless emotion, and more than that, one he has no right to in this situation. Besides, there are larger things at stake here. If the lord is watching his back so carefully, his news must be important.

Balanced once again, Erwin continues to study the lord, this time trying to get a read on him. *He looks composed, but it's carefully practised.*

"As agreed upon by Commander Erwin," Alec says, giving him a shy little smile, "we will be exchanging information today. He has information I want; I have information you want. I trust what I share won't leave this room. In exchange, I won't breathe a word about what I learn here."

Hange takes the chair next to him, face wary. "You said it was about Marley."

Alec sits up straight, but Erwin notes a slight tremble in his body, as if he's bouncing his knee a little beneath the table. "I believe I'm owed some information before I reciprocate."

Beside Erwin, Levi flops back against the wall again, arms still folded over his chest. "Cut the drama. We don't have all night."

"Levi," Erwin says under his breath, placing a hand on his shoulder to steady him. Then he strides forward to sit directly opposite the lord. The lord's jaw is tight; yes, he is definitely nervous. Erwin mirrors his posture, sitting up straight, hands folded.

"This is how this will work, Alec," he says pleasantly. "The five of us have dedicated our lives to upholding the safety of the citizens within these walls. Any information we give you could potentially violate that safety." He gives a polite smile. "You can, of course, understand why we need to verify that your information is worth the risk."

"Or exists at all," Levi mutters.

Alec scoffs. "You were a lot nicer to me before I bought you that drink, Captain."

“No, I wasn’t.”

Historia coughs, perhaps to cover a laugh. They all turn to her, and she clears her throat and pulls herself upright into a queenly posture.

“Alec,” she says, voice sweet, “Perhaps the others would trust you more if you told them what work, exactly, you do for me.”

“Very well,” Alec says. “Her Majesty has charged me with the upkeep of the natural gas pipelines beneath the walls. I act as a liaison for the Marley crew and arrange for them to stealthily enter through the walls for quarterly inspections. Aside from coordinating their transport, I oversee all resource delivery to Marley from Paradis. It is a delicate balance, ensuring all links of the supply chain remain ignorant about where their work comes from, or where it goes.”

“That sounds like a broad range of tasks for one person,” Erwin says.

“Well, there are other nobles who help me and know bits and pieces of their roles, but I am the one who holds all the information. And because we have the same Marleyans coming in four times a year, I’ve built a rapport with a few. They’re chatty now, and they tell me things I’m not supposed to know.”

As they have been speaking, the smugness has gradually drained from his expression, and his fingers, still intertwined, are drumming together.

Erwin keeps his voice steady as he makes his first guess of the evening, not at all a difficult one: “They told you about something that threatens our safety.”

“Yes,” the lord says quietly.

Historia stands up, brows dropping. “And you weren’t going to tell me unless we told you about Erwin? Why are you playing games with something like this, Alec? Please don’t tell me you’re just bitter about Levi and trying to lash out.”

Levi scoffs.

Alec shrinks in his seat. “Your Majesty, I was going to tell

you anyway. But they didn't need to know that." His gaze shifts back to Erwin. "I needed the bluff to leverage some information to sate my own curiosity. Besides, if there is ever a man who can save this island, it's this hero, resurrected. Maybe ... " He falters and looks down. "Maybe if I understand what's going on, I can help."

Levi storms up to the table and slams his palms onto it. Alec jumps.

"You can help by *telling us what you know.* "

Alec eyes him. "Now tell me again, your Majesty, who here is lashing out?"

"Levi, calm down." Hange massages the bridge of their nose. "You're right, but calm down." They turn to the lord. "Besides, how do we know you won't just turn around and sell our information to your Marleyan contacts?"

Alec looks insulted. "Commander Hange, the Queen can attest: when I was given the opportunity to be involved, I stepped up and *chose* to work directly with Marley, knowing that being the first point of contact puts me at great personal danger. Who do you think will be the first to be tortured, or fed to titans, or questioned if Marley gets wind of anything amiss within the walls? Who do you think shoulders the blame if I accidentally let our secret slip to any of my workers, violating the pact with Marley?" He sits taller, voice rising. "People like me, who remember everything, have to work just as hard as you every single day to make sure we aren't contradicting the new narrative or bringing up memories that have been erased." He stares hard at Hange. "The safety of Paradis rests on my shoulders, too. You can trust me."

Erwin notes the way his nervous twitches faded as he was speaking. That and the conviction of his words have him convinced. "I believe you."

Alec visibly relaxes and smiles at him.

"And because we trust each other now, here is my information." Erwin eyes him steadily. "As you have guessed, I

did not die in Shiganshina, nor did I desert the military, although that is the cover story we wish to perpetuate. Instead, the Marleyans turned me into a titan to neutralize me.”

The room is deathly quiet. Alec is watching him, enraptured, and the others are frozen, no doubt worried they’ll give away his lie if they move.

“You may know that Commander Hange has been working on a cure for titans,” Erwin continues, nodding their way.

“I did not,” Alec says.

“Well, then here is a new piece of information for you: the research has been underway since my last battle. To test a cure requires a titan ...”

Alec nods, following the path laid out for him. “Levi left the walls and tested it on you.”

“Several formulations,” Hange pipes in, easily falling into step with the half-truth. “Of course, he had to start with a control of saline water. Some of the syringes had components of spinal fluid taken from Eren Yeager. Others were herbal compounds, or mixtures of both.”

“And one of them worked,” Alec breathes, eyes shining. He turns to Levi. “You acted as if he were gone forever.”

“I didn’t think a cure could work,” Levi says, and Erwin can tell he is speaking the truth. For the first time, he wonders how many doubts and second-guesses must have flooded Levi’s mind when he decided to inject him with the fluid.

Alec digests this information for a few seconds before saying, “So you have a cure.” The drumming fingers are back, and they are practically vibrating now.

It dawns on Erwin: the only logical reason he would be so desperate to gain this information. “You lost someone important to you in that battle, a member of the Survey Corps. And you’re wondering if they became a titan, too.”

The lord looks shocked, then his face softens. “Am I that transparent? Yes, my half-sister. Her father was Eldian, so she was not immune to becoming a titan the way I am.”

“She wasn’t among the bodies retrieved, then.”

He shakes his head. “Missing in action. Because you successfully returned from that battle, I thought maybe ...”

The room is silent.

Levi pulls out a chair and sits next to Erwin. He is markedly less aggressive now, almost sympathetic. “What is her name?”

“Hilde. Hilde Kincaid.”

“She was in my squad,” Hange murmurs.

The ex-soldiers do not speak. They all know what that means.

Levi breaks the silence. “Look, Alec, we don’t know who among the missing were actually turned into titans. We lost a lot of soldiers whose bodies couldn’t be recovered. There’s a very good chance she’s gone.”

“I know.” Alec lets out a low sigh. “There’s no point in me hoping, anyway, because there is no way you could scale up production of a cure and deploy it within a week.”

“Within a week?” Hange repeats.

The pieces click together, and Erwin says, “Marley is about to stage an attack.”

Alec’s throat bobs. “They think we reneged on our agreement.”

Historia stands up, eyes wide. “That’s impossible. How?”

“They think we’re stealing shifters.”

Erwin’s heart pounds. *Eren’s spinal fluid.* “Have they lost the Attack Titan or the Founding Titan?” Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Levi’s face blanch.

“No, both were immediately reborn in Marley when Eren Yeager died, and they’ve retained control since. They lost the Colossal Titan first, about a year ago.”

The room is still. Erwin is the first to recover. “They think we’re hiding it.”

Alec nods. “All this time, there has been no sign of an infant with the Colossal Titan in Marley. An infant in possession

of the titan would be too warm to the touch, or exceptionally sweaty, or heal from injuries with remarkable speed. At the six month mark, when no citizens had reported any suspicious signs, they started going door-to-door. They've swept all of Marley. No trace of the child."

The others exchange glances, but Erwin keeps his eyes trained on the lord. "So by process of elimination, they assume it's on this island."

"Yes. They were planning a diplomatic approach to handle it, because one shifter might have been understandably overlooked, an honest mistake. But then last month, the Armoured Titan disappeared." He holds Erwin's gaze. "And when I say that, I mean the Colossal Titan was killed in battle, but the Armoured Titan literally disappeared."

"Disappeared," Historia repeats.

"The warrior who wielded it vanished without a trace."

"Kidnapped?"

"No one entered or left the room, no sign of blood or steam that indicated a transformation, nothing. It was as if he simply ceased to exist." The lord makes a bursting gesture with his fingers, as if the man popped out of existence.

Erwin clenches his jaw, trying to assemble this piece of information together with all the knowledge about titans he has recently acquired from Grisha Yeager's notes. *This doesn't make sense.*

"Shit." Hange shifts their glasses to their head to rub the bridge of their nose. "They're going to bring war to our doorstep."

"What would make them stop their attack?" Erwin asks. "Presenting them with the shifters?"

Alec shakes his head. "I don't know, but I'm not sure that would be enough. My source seemed to think the current Marleyan government would be happy to have an excuse to raze us and take our natural gas deposits by force. Their general's term ended years ago, you see, and the influence he left in his wake is

eroding. He was the one who pushed for Paradis to maintain some freedom rather than being outright terminated.” He leans back in his chair. “And I’m afraid, Commander, that is absolutely all the information I have.”

Historia sinks back to her seat. “The information you have provided is much appreciated. If there is anything else you think of, please contact me immediately. And have your messengers stay in close contact: we may need your help to navigate some of the politics of this situation, since you know your contact best.”

“Yes, of course.” Alec looks around the room. “I truly hope you have a plan of action.”

“We will think of something,” Erwin says firmly. “Improvising on short notice is what we have always done best.”

“I am glad you are here, Commander Erwin. If you need any assistance, or anything at all, please do not hesitate to reach out to me. Here is my card with the easiest ways to contact me.” He slides a small white card across the table.

Levi snatches it and tosses it back at him. “Historia knows how to find you.”

Alec gives him an amused little smirk, tucks the card back into his billfold, then starts to stand, but stops. “One last thing, Commander. You mentioned spreading a rumour about your return. Am I to assume you wanted to go with the desertion angle?”

“It would be the simplest explanation,” Erwin says. “Particularly if they believe it took this long for me to show my face to the other survivors.”

Alec shakes his head. “We lords are a dramatic lot. If you want a rumour that will stick, you need to make it juicier.”

“What would you recommend?”

Alec’s green eyes sparkle. “Amnesia. Everyone loves a good amnesia story. You had a head wound during the battle and the other soldiers thought you were dead. When you awoke from a coma, you wandered in a daze to Trost. Recently, a near-death experience with a serious fever shook your memories loose, and

you went to reunite with your old friends.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Levi mutters.

“Trust me, they’ll eat it right up. And if anyone finds the details outrageous, they’ll just assume it has been embellished with the retelling. Send a message to me when you wish to start spreading it.” He pauses. “And if you learn anything about Hilde—”

“We’ll alert you immediately,” Hange says.

“Thank you. Commander, distinguished guests, it has been an honour.” The lord bows at Historia and leaves the room; the lock clicks behind him.

He, at least, seemed unburdened after passing his secret onto them. The air in his wake is noticeably heavier than before the meeting. Erwin turns the information over and over in his mind, trying to find a way through. *There has to be something we can do.*

Hange is the first to speak: “We have to find the missing shifters. It’s our most reasonable shot at surviving this.”

“How do we test it? By turning them into titans?” Levi asks. “Doesn’t a shifter need a purpose to transform? How does a baby have a purpose other than shitting and feeding?”

Hange shakes their head. “If you hadn’t been so busy throwing foul looks at Lord Alec, you would have heard him say that the infants will have traits that resemble the missing titans, or unusual healing abilities. The parents would surely notice something unusual.” They hesitate before adding, “Or we could administer a small injury and see if it heals.”

“Injure a baby?” Historia says. “Are you kidding me?”

“Something small, like a paper cut.” Hange turns to her. “Don’t you see, Historia? We have one week until Marley flattens us. What’s more ...” They hesitate again.

“What?” Levi demands.

“Having a shifter would give us access to more vials of spinal cord serum.”

Levi, Historia, and Mikasa immediately start voicing their

horror. Erwin lets the cacophony wash over him without reacting, still trying to sort through possibilities in his mind.

“Do you realize how many titans are still out there?” Hange yells over their protests, gesturing around them. “We used a whole vial reviving Erwin, and it still took him *days* to properly recover. We have to assume it’s one person per vial. We can experiment to see if it takes less, maybe through a vapour system, but I guarantee we are going to need more serum than we currently have—even if it’s just to store some for our descendants who will face the end of this truce.”

“If we make it that far,” Levi mutters. He turns to Erwin. “You’re awfully quiet.”

Erwin decides to work through the information aloud: “So your suggestion, Hange, is to find the missing infants by testing all babies of the appropriate age within the next few days, then harvest some spinal cord fluid from them before handing them over to Marley?”

Hange takes his statement as an objection. “I don’t like this, any more than I liked learning my titan subjects were once humans. It’s disgusting to perform scientific tests on a baby and then hand them over to the enemy to eat. I know. So we’re going to have to make a choice: what’s more important to us? Two babies, or the future of this entire island?”

“Slow down,” Mikasa says, irritable. “We don’t even know if your cure will work on other titans. And besides, I don’t trust that lord. He could have been lying.”

“No,” Erwin says firmly. “I got a good read on him. He, at least, believes his information is correct. I’m sure we have other sources who could corroborate it.” He glances at Historia, who nods.

“I’ll follow up on that immediately.”

“Fine.” Levi rocks his chair back. “So say we try to find these shifter babies and don’t succeed—and we won’t, because there’s no way we can test every infant within the walls in one week without people getting suspicious. What do we do then?”

Just sit here and die? We don't have the military strength to defend ourselves."

Erwin takes a deep breath and lets out a long, slow sigh.

Levi's gaze snaps to him. "What does that sigh mean?" He sounds suspicious, as if he's already guessed an idea is coming their way, one he won't like.

"There is another option." Erwin lifts his chin, shoulders square. "In Grisha Yeager's notes, he mentioned the shifters all connecting in the paths through a central Coordinate. The mythology also suggests the founder Ymir may be found there. We could enter the paths and, perhaps, ask her to help us find the missing shifters."

"No," Levi says.

"We have a special connection, Levi and I. We've had several occasions where we have found ourselves in the realm of the paths for a purpose we don't understand. Perhaps this is why."

"We don't even know how to trigger it," Levi says flatly.

"You're right. It's random and chaotic. We've never managed to stay there for more than a minute or two, and never of our own volition. If we want to be in control, if we want to stay long enough to find the Coordinate, we will need help. Someone who has the ability to augment connections to the paths." He fixes his gaze on Historia.

The others stare as it sinks in, then Mikasa stands so quickly that she knocks over her chair. "No!"

Levi's voice is quiet: "I first heard Erwin calling to me after Historia touched me. The place where she touched my arm burned and I heard his voice."

Historia looks at her hands, eyes wide.

Erwin nods. "Historia, if we can augment our connection using the ritual you and Eren used to perform the mindwipe—"

"No!" Mikasa says again. Her eyes are damp. "That ritual killed Eren, and he had the strength of multiple shifters. There's no way you can survive it."

“Mikasa is right,” Hange says, voice deep and commanding. “We can’t risk losing the two of you. If we try to find the shifters and it doesn’t work, then we’re going to need to make a stand against Marley. We need both your talents on the battlefield if we want any chance of surviving their onslaught.”

“Fuck!” Levi yells.

Erwin turns to him; he looks so small, shrunken in his chair, shoulders trembling. “Levi?”

“Fuck! Now we either have to risk our lives in a ritual, or jump right back into an impossible war? Fuck. *Fuck!*” Levi knocks back his chair and storms for the door.

“Levi,” Hange says firmly. “We don’t have time for theatrics. You can’t run away from this.”

He pauses, one hand on the doorknob, and says without looking back, “I’m not running away. I’m just tired, Hange. I’m so fucking tired.” Then he steps through the door.

The door slowly closes behind him, and Erwin is torn between running after him or giving him space. The ache in his heart wins out, and he excuses himself. But the hallway is empty.

*Where would he go? Back to the gala? Our rooms? A walk?* If they were in the military barracks, he would know exactly where to find him: on the rooftop over the mess hall. There are too many possibilities now; he’ll have to wait for Levi to return on his own.

He sits down again, trying not to exhibit the concern he feels swirling in the pit of his stomach. The others are solemn.

“This is all new information,” he says, polite. “We need time to process it, and most of us have been drinking, so we aren’t at our best. Let’s spend the rest of the night enjoying the gala, and we can tackle it with urgency tomorrow morning.”

As the others voice their agreement and filter from the room, he stays in his seat. He takes off his jacket and drapes it on the chair beside him, then rolls up his sleeves and loosens his tie. Hange stops at the door.

“Erwin?”

“Levi will return when he’s calmer. I might as well start to think through some of this while I’m waiting.”

“Thought that might be the case.” Hange walks to the wall, where there’s a large armoire. They pull a few supplies out, then set them on the table for him: a pad of paper, a bottle of ink, and a pen. “You’ll need these. Good luck. But don’t forget to have some fun tonight, too. This is a night for making memories.” They pat his shoulder. “Seeing you and Levi happy together is healing a deep, damaged part of me. Please take some time to yourselves before we fall back into our old roles, okay? You’ve both earned it.”

He feels a sudden surge of affection, and now that they’re housemates rather than military officers, he can express it. He stands and pulls them into a warm hug. “Thank you, Hange.”

Hange nestles against him like a small child after a nightmare. Their voice is barely audible: “I thought we were past all this.”

“I know.” He pulls away and gives them a kind smile. “Seems there’s never any rest for the secret saviours of humanity. But we’ll figure something out.”

“I’m glad you’re back for this. I don’t know how I could have handled this without you.”

“Well, I can’t handle it without you, either. And we need the others, too: each of us brings a particular strength to our strategy. Together, we’ll come up with something. We’ve been in worse situations before, after all.” He studies them with concern. Levi isn’t the only one who seems tired. The two of them have made their peace with a quiet life in the forest, far from the battlefield, and now that is going up in smoke.

“Relax and get some rest,” he says firmly. “We’ll discuss this in the morning.” He hesitates, then adds, “Do you know where Levi might have gone? I’m worried about him.”

“I don’t know, but he’ll be back. He gets overwhelmed easily since Shiganshina, but he’ll stabilize once he’s blown off some steam. I’ll send him your way if I run into him.” They smile

sadly at him, then they give him a quick goodnight peck on the cheek and leave the room.

Erwin sits and begins to write.

..&..

LEVI SCREAMS A BATTLECRY and kicks a sandbag. It explodes into glittering sand. *Ashes*. He yells and kicks behind him, bursting open a straw target. *Guts*. *Blood*. His breath comes in sobbing gasps as he struggles to stay standing beneath forty-five years of the world's weight.

“Save some for the rest of us.” Mikasa steps into the room. He draws himself upright, breathing hard, but doesn’t reply.

“Historia is going to lecture you about the training dummy budget again, you know.”

“Let her.” He swipes his eyes with the back of his hand, and then, with a hiss between clenched teeth, brutally elbows the head off another target.

Mikasa walks over to him, heels clicking. She hikes up her dress and jumps into a spin. Her foot strikes the body of the same target and it explodes into straw.

“Not very professional behaviour for a member of the Queen’s Guard,” Levi says.

Mikasa shrugs. “Neither is this.” She holds out a cigar.

“One sec.” He aims a low kick at the wooden post that held the training dummy. It splinters against the wall.

They sit side-by-side on a weightlifting bench. Mikasa lights her cigar and passes it to him; he swirls the smoke in his mouth and breathes it out, then grimaces.

“That’s still disgusting.”

She shrugs. “I don’t mind it.”

“It’s like smoking a log of shit.”

“You can smoke a log of shit if you want. I’ll stick to the cigar.” She takes a puff and blows a ring.

“Second time I’ve seen you with one of those. You smoke now?”

She shakes her head. “Just when I’m stressed.” She bows her head. “Captain—”

“Levi.”

“Levi.” She takes a deep breath, and lets it out slowly. “You can’t do the ritual.”

“Because I’m an Ackerman?”

“No, not that. I think that’s what will get you through it okay. You and I were within range of Eren and Historia when the ritual was underway. I think our blood protects us.” She is fidgeting with the cigar more than smoking it. “But Commander Erwin is not an Ackerman. I’m worried about what will happen if you survive and he doesn’t.”

The possibility makes Levi’s heart twist so violently that he loses his breath for a moment. He tries to speak, but can’t find his voice.

Mikasa takes another puff of the cigar, then says, “It’s partly because I’ve been there, and wouldn’t wish it on anyone. But also, it’s for the benefit of the citizens of Paradis. The moment the Commander went down, you changed.”

“Of course I changed,” he says tersely.

“I don’t just mean grief. You felt it, too, didn’t you? A weakness. It was as if your connection to whatever gives us power was severed.”

He wrinkles his nose. “Put that thing out. It stinks.”

“The same thing happened to me when Eren vanished.”

“It’s probably rotting your lungs.”

“All the strength I had been building for years, gone.”

For a moment, neither of them speaks.

“You still seem strong to me,” he says, eyeing the dummy they destroyed together.

“I recently found someone else worth devoting my life to, and with that bond, my strength returned. It took a very long time. I hid my weakness until then. Technique can easily make

up for power in a time of peace.” She shakes her head. “You won’t move on. You won’t ever let yourself. And if Marley comes, you and I are Paradis’ only realistic chance at taking down any shifters they bring with them.”

Levi takes a long breath and slowly releases it. His earlier anger is fading, and now he feels exhausted. Broken. “We both know Paradis doesn’t stand a chance against Marley, whether I’m there or not. I know you’re still upset about what happened to Eren—”

“Upset,” she cuts in icily. “Captain, Eren disintegrated and his remains rained down on me.” Her eyes flash. “We may have both felt the same hurt from loss, but you do not understand my trauma. I’m trying to stop you from living through the same thing.”

He leans forward to rest his elbows on his knees, staring at a spot on the floor, but not really seeing it.

“It’s not just about the Ackerman powers,” she admits. “I know we don’t always see eye-to-eye, but we’re family. I know you better than you think, because we’re so alike. I’ve seen how much you suffered when he was gone, and how you’ve come alive since he returned. Losing him again would destroy you.”

She isn’t wrong, and he hates thinking about it. He waves over the cigar, and she lets him have another puff.

“So,” he says, handing it back. “You and Historia? Or is it still ‘not like that’?”

Mikasa looks surprised, then looks down, blushing. “I just want to see her happy. Iris is lovely.”

“Iris and Historia both seem fond of you, too. Maybe if you’re less possessive—”

She snorts and eyes him. “Less possessive? You’re telling *me* this? You were about to slit that lord’s throat right in front of us.”

“That’s different. He was being a fuckhead.” He doesn’t add that he was lashing out at him out of guilt. Maybe Alec is a noble and a bit snobby, maybe he is too flirty with Erwin, but he

hadn't known the mess he was stepping into when he bought Levi a drink. Misery follows him like bad cologne, sticking to his skin, polluting all those who get too close.

They're quiet for a while, then Mikasa stands. "I've said my piece. I know you and the Commander are going to make your own choice anyway. He was still in the meeting room starting some strategy planning when I left, so I'm sure he has plans coming together."

"Maybe he's finding another way through this," Levi says, feeling a flicker of hope.

"Let's hope so. But you'll never find out if you keep hiding down here, destroying government property. Goodnight, Captain."

He doesn't want to return to the meeting room, because then they're going to have to discuss their strategy, and that makes this all real. But he rises to his feet anyway. He can't put it off forever.

Humanity's fate is, yet again, going to rest on their shoulders.

Rage wells within him, and he howls and splits one more sandbag.

"Fine," he mutters. "Fucking *fine!*"

He storms up the stairs. But before he returns to the meeting room, he has a stop to make. If they're going to be forced into their old roles, then they're going to do it the way they've always done.

..&..

ERWIN IS ABOUT thirty minutes into his notes when a knock sounds at the door. His heart races as he opens it.

Levi stands on the other side, holding a tea kettle, two teacups, and some scones. "Figured you might need some caffeine and food."

Erwin stares at him, touched. "Thank you."

Levi shrugs and moves into the room, setting them on the table. The first two knuckles on the back of each hand are red, and a light sprinkling of sand coats his sleeves and pants.

*So he went to a training room,* Erwin thinks.

He also smells faintly of smoke, and Erwin can't figure out how that could happen in a training room. He doesn't ask. Instead, he says, "If you want, we can leave this behind for the night and go back to the gala."

Levi shakes his head. "It's still early. If you're on a roll, you should get it all down on paper." He pours them each a cup of tea, then sits beside him. "Like old times."

"Like old times," Erwin repeats softly, then rests a hand on his shoulder. "I know you didn't want me to get pulled back into this, Levi."

"Well, it's not just you," he says gruffly. "I'm here, too. And I have something for you. This needs to come off first." His hands work at Erwin's tie, loosening it and slipping it over his head.

"Oh?"

Levi pulls something from his pocket, and lowers it over Erwin's head, tightening it into place.

His old Commander's pendant.

Erwin touches the bolo tie; the gold border is more worn than he remembers, the engraved patterns rubbed smooth. "Levi, where did you get this?"

"I took it from you when you ... On that rooftop. Carried it around with me almost every day since you left." Levi traces the border of the stone with his fingertips. "When you came back, I didn't want to give it back to you. It was a weight around your neck by the end." His eyes lift to meet Erwin's. "But I want you to know that you're still my Commander. I will follow you."

Tears well in Erwin's eyes. He leans forward to give Levi a soft kiss, then smiles fondly. "But Levi, you weren't following me. You were walking by my side. So that's how we'll do this." He reaches over and strokes the cravat. "Commander and Captain."

Levi smiles a little, then clears his throat and turns to the

papers. “What do you have so far?”

Erwin spreads out the papers for him to see, even though it’s mostly a mess of flowcharts and semi-decipherable shorthand. “I’m exploring strategies to identify the titan shifters before Marley arrives. The biggest complication is finding a way to test every single infant among a populace who believes we’re in a time of peace.” He taps one note that says simply, *Plague?* “The best idea I have so far is to institute some sort of ‘medical test’ where we’re taking skin samples. Maybe testing for a strain of tuberculosis? But I can’t imagine rolling that out to every family within the walls on the timeline we’re working with, especially without creating a panic.”

“Maybe we tell them the truth,” Levi says. “They’re going to realize what’s going on when Marley charges through the wall, anyway.”

“Normally, I would agree with you, but the only way we’re going to successfully stand united against Marley is if the populace doesn’t suspect we’ve been hiding things from them. Learning that they have been deceived for so long will set off a revolt and splinter the walled citizens into factions. Then we’ll be so busy infighting that Marley will barely need to lift a sword to annihilate us.” Erwin sighs and rubs an eyebrow. “And that’s the other problem: the population is untrained. The Survey Corps is dead, and the Garrison is naïve. Everything they learned about titans and warfare after the fall of Wall Maria was wiped clean by the ritual.”

“It will be a slaughter,” Levi murmurs.

Erwin nods. “And unfortunately, even if we had a fully competent military, there is not enough time to plan a proper counterattack. We could take a risk and surrender, but from what Lord Alec said, I would assume they would either exterminate us, turn us into titans, or put us in detainment. If we confront Marley directly, I don’t foresee any outcome where we get to continue living normal lives.” He taps his pen against the paper a bit too aggressively, leaving a few ink splatters on the page.

After a long pause, Levi says, “We shouldn’t have done it.”  
“The memory wipe?”

Levi nods. “At least if everyone had their memories—”

“—the agreement with Marley would have been void before it began.” Erwin shakes his head. “It may be making our lives more difficult now, yes, but there was no choice at the time. They’ve had us cornered from day one.”

They comb through the notes together, drinking the tea. It reminds Erwin so much of the old days that, at one point, he is surprised to look over at Levi and see him dressed in his suit, not his uniform.

*That’s right. The gala.* He finishes his tea, then gathers the papers. “I feel like this is one of those situations where sleeping on a problem could bring us closer to a solution.”

Levi frowns. “Maybe. But it looks like there’s only one choice. We need Hange and Mikasa to look for the shifters, while you and I go with Historia to perform the ritual and try to find them from the paths. It’s our best chance.”

“I agree.”

Levi sighs. He looks utterly exhausted.

Erwin reaches over to run his fingers along his jaw, raising his face so their eyes meet. “Let’s put this aside for tonight. We were having a lovely evening before all this, and we aren’t going to make any further progress tonight, anyway.” He leans forward and kisses Levi’s nose, then stands. “Would you rather go back to the gala, or return to our rooms to spend more time together? Or is this all too much, and you just need to sleep?”

Levi stands, too, and studies him, then leans forward on his toes. His kiss is deep and passionate, and flame reignites between them. When Levi pulls away, he asks, “Have you recovered from before? Do you think you can come again?”

“Yes,” Erwin breathes. “You?”

“Yeah. And I took some time before the gala to make sure I was clean.” Levi traces his fingers down Erwin’s lips, his chin, his throat. “If we only have one week left—”

“No, don’t think like that. We have all the time in the world. We’ll make sure of that. But regardless ... ” Erwin bends forward to kiss his neck, and rumbles, “I want you, Levi.”

Levi’s breaths are harsh. “I’m yours. Anything you want, it’s yours.”

The words snap the restraints of Erwin’s self-control; he grabs Levi by the collar to walk him backwards with a kiss, pressing him flat against the wall. Their tongues meet, breath hot as they taste each other. Levi hops up and wraps his arms and legs around Erwin, who leans into him, pressing him hard against the wall. Even though it’s only been a couple hours since the mezzanine, he is already hard and aching. He rocks his hips, and Levi tears back from the kiss and gasps, clawing into his back.

Erwin presses his forehead against the wall, lips by Levi’s ear. “I want all of you, Levi.”

“Then take it.” Levi matches his rhythm, counter-thrusting against him.

The friction is building between them, tempting and hot, and for a moment, Erwin wants to let this moment carry them away until they come in their clothes, or maybe reach down Levi’s pants and bring him release.

But no, he wants to take his time. He wants to explore Levi by candlelight, taste every part of him, bring him to a level of ecstasy he has never felt before. He wants to physically express all the words he isn’t composed enough to say: that even though things seem dire, Erwin will be by his side, and they will get through it together.

Their love has overcome death. What obstacle could possibly stop them now?

He finds the willpower to stop moving, and his voice is tight: “Not here.” They meet in a hard kiss again, then Erwin pulls away, letting Levi drop to his feet. He takes Levi by the hand and pulls him to the door.

On the way out of the room, he grabs the stack of his

papers and shoves them under his arm. Tomorrow morning, they'll have all his attention again.

But tonight, there is only Levi.

# ❖ Twelve ❖

## WHAT MAY BE LOST

THEY MOVE THROUGH the hallways, hand-in-hand. Levi is trying not to think too far ahead to Marley's attack, but Erwin's hand fits his so perfectly, and he just wants this life, just wants the two of them giddily slipping away together forever. Panic rises in his throat; he redirects the adrenaline by shoving Erwin against a wall and sucking the skin of his neck. Their joined hands press hard into the stone wall. Erwin lets out a small moan and grabs Levi's hip with his other hand, pulling their bodies flush. The papers flutter to the floor.

“Shit,” Levi breathes, successfully distracted.

“We can’t do this here.” Erwin slides down the wall a little so their faces align. They kiss. “Even if everyone’s at the gala ...”

“No, you’re right.” Levi kisses him again, then pulls away.

Erwin stays against the wall and closes his eyes, taking a deep breath as if trying to steady himself. Then he bends down to grab his papers—some fold in his haste—and he shoves them under his arm. He reaches for Levi’s hand and begins to pull him down the hallway again.

They reach the door to Levi’s room, and Levi isn’t sure who initiates it, but Erwin falls back against the door as Levi kisses his chin, his jaw. He fumbles with the lock and, when the door opens, walks Erwin backwards into the room. He gently hooks a foot behind Erwin’s ankle to set him off balance, lowering him to the floor, climbing on top of him.

Erwin looks up at him, surprised, but then kicks the door closed and tosses his papers to the side. Hands clamp Levi’s ass,

the strong one squeezing hard, the weaker one barely at all.

Levi grinds down hard and delights in the way Erwin's head tosses back.

"Wait," Erwin says with great effort. "Wait, wait." He rolls them over and holds himself up on his elbows over Levi, smoothing the grey hair from his forehead. "We did hard and fast already. This time, it's going to be slow."

A shiver runs down Levi's spine. He's lost in the ice of his eyes, drawn into them. "You can try. I don't think you can hold back."

"No?" Erwin bends and kisses slowly, so slowly, along his jaw. "I've been holding back for six years—sixteen, really. What's a bit longer?"

Levi arches his neck, feeling the warm tongue sliding down his throat. "You wanted to fuck me back when I was first recruited?"

"Yeah," Erwin says, and then he begins to suck at his skin..

He gasps. "When we were here, that first time?"

There's a sharp tug at his neck, and he's sure that will leave a mark. "Yeah. But if I'm really honest with myself, before that, too."

"When?" The heat and suction feel so good that he writhes.

The seal breaks again, and Erwin soothes the skin with his tongue before he speaks. "Right after we first brought you to the Survey Corps."

"What?"

"Yeah. I wanted our lust to overpower us. I wanted you to drag me into a corner so we could hate-fuck. I refused to admit it to myself, but the images kept haunting me."

A shuddering moan escapes Levi's throat. "Shit."

"I wanted you to push me to the floor, take me from behind and hold a knife to my throat." Erwin pauses and pulls back, face soft in spite of the filth leaving his mouth. "And I wanted the sex to be so good that you would lose yourself in me and

crave it again. I wanted you to be addicted to me, and I to you.”

Levi stares up at him, stunned. What leaves his mouth is, “I don’t know if I could reach your throat from behind.”

Erwin laughs, a deep rumble. He rises to his feet, and Levi immediately misses his weight. He accepts an extended hand and stands, too.

“I have been attracted to you for a very, very long time, Levi.” He eases the suit jacket off Levi’s shoulders.

Levi shrugs out of it and lets it fall to the floor. Normally, he would hang it up immediately, but he finds he doesn’t care if it creases. He pulls Erwin’s bolo tie loose. “We left the room so fast we forgot your jacket.” He pauses to look at him, tight pants, sleeves rolled up, hair hanging slightly in his face, piercing eyes. “Fuck,” he whispers.

Then Erwin bends down to kiss below his ear, loosening the cravat. “Your neck is so long and strong and graceful.” His mouth is rough again, just below the collar, and when it elicits a moan, he adds, “And sensitive.”

It is, it truly is, and Levi feels himself begin to melt under the heat of his mouth. He closes his eyes and clutches at Erwin’s head, not sure if he wants to push it away or pull it closer. He feels the collar button come loose, then the others, then the shirt slips to the floor. Erwin drags his mouth across Levi’s collarbone and then pulls back to look at him.

“Levi,” he whispers, as if he is awed by a beautiful painting. His hand slides over the grey chest hair and squeezes. The heat of his palm burns; it feels so good. Levi grabs Erwin’s injured hand and lifts it to the other side of his chest, closing his hand over it to help his grip. Their eyes lock for a moment, and then they kiss again.

Levi reaches over to unbutton Erwin’s shirt now, too, and Erwin breaks the kiss to shrug out of it. For the first time, they hold each other, chest-to-chest, skin-to-skin.

It’s just a hug; it has no right to feel this charged. Erwin’s skin sears his, and the electricity between them is so intense that

Levi looks up to see if they're in the paths again. But no, they are still in the castle, the electricity completely their own.

“You feel so good,” Erwin whispers, hands roving down his back. “Your skin is so soft.”

Hugging him feels like slipping into a tub of water, his body heat washing away the stress and worry from earlier. Levi buries his face in Erwin’s chest, feeling the tickle of blond hair, the swell of muscle on either side. Erwin is so long and lean that Levi always forgets just how thick he is with muscle. His hands rove lower to his abdomen, feeling the dips and curves of his stomach, then lower. The suit pants are so tight that he winces in sympathy.

“That has to be uncomfortable,” he says into Erwin’s chest, rubbing a hand over the straining fabric. “Here.” He unbuckles the pants and unbuttons them, then pulls the pants down to his knees. Erwin steps back and pulls them off together with his socks, and now he’s only in his underwear. He’s half-erect, the shape of him clearly visible through the shorts.

Levi traces the shape with his fingertips, sees it get a little stiffer, hears the sharp intake of breath. He hurries out of his pants and socks, too, and they hold each other again. But the more clothes come off, the shyer he’s finding himself. He presses his ear to Erwin’s chest, listening to his heartbeat. It’s racing.

“Erwin?”

“Hm?” He strokes the back of Levi’s hair.

“What if I don’t live up to all those years of attraction?”

Erwin holds him at arm’s length, a soft smile on his lips. “Levi, don’t you feel it?” He runs his hand along Levi’s arm. “Every touch between us glows. It’s true that this probably won’t be the best sex we ever have together. We’ll learn from each other as we go. But for now, we get to explore each other for the first time. There’s no way that can be anything except spectacular.”

To seal his words, he bends forward and gives him a deep kiss, and Levi thinks, not for the first time, that he would die for

this man and his molten silver tongue.

Erwin steps away and trails his hand along Levi's jaw. "This lighting is rather bright. I have some candles in my room, if you like."

"Okay."

As he steps through the adjoining door, Levi retrieves the jar of lubricant and sets it on the bedside table, then adds a few hand towels for cleanup. Erwin returns and places three eight-hour candles on the dresser. After sparking them to life, he covers the light crystal. The room dims, warm and orange.

Erwin turns. In the light, his body is cast in brass, his hair a halo of flame.

Levi swallows hard. He sits on the bed, leaving room beside him.

Erwin slowly pulls his underwear over his hips and then steps out of it. He stands tall as Levi's gaze drifts head to toe and back up again.

"Fuck," Levi whispers, every hair on his body standing on end as he realizes this statue of a man is going to be inside him.

Erwin steps forward, crouches before him, and looks up, gaze strong and determined. His fingers hook over Levi's waistband, and Levi lifts his hips to allow him to take them off.

Then Erwin bends forward and takes his cock into his mouth, into his throat, and does not move. Levi cries out and weakly tries to thrust, but Erwin's hand holds his hips down. He sucks slowly and gently all the way up to the tip, then releases him. Levi isn't sure if he's shivering from the cold air of the room hitting him, or from Erwin's enraptured gaze.

Erwin circles his fingers around the base to hold him upright and takes him in again, and Levi feels himself throb. His hot mouth holds in place yet again, and Levi hears himself moan.

"Please," he begs.

Another slow withdrawal, his suction hard. Erwin touches the tip and a strand of liquid follows his finger. He runs the finger

down the length of his cock.

“So beautiful,” he whispers.

“Shit,” Levi breathes.

Erwin climbs onto the bed and kisses him, gently guiding him back to the bed. Then he lowers himself on top of Levi, broad chest against his own, muscled stomach against his erection.

“Fuck,” Levi says into Erwin’s lips, shifting a little under his weight to enjoy the pressure and the sensation of skin against skin.

The kiss ends, and Erwin’s lids are low and seductive, eyes searching his. “You said it had been a while?”

A while is an understatement. “Yeah.”

“Then let’s take this slowly. Why don’t you get on all fours?” Erwin sits up to give him room.

Levi quickly obeys, pulling himself onto his hands and knees. He dips his hips a little, sticking up his ass. He hears Erwin suck in a breath of air and then hands are grabbing his ass, a bit roughly, as if he’s trying to restrain himself and failing. *He’s starting to lose his head.* Levi subtly grinds back into his grip.

“Shit,” Erwin whispers, bending forward and hugging him around the hips, kissing his lower back. Levi bucks a little against him; Erwin curses again and kisses downward, gently nipping the skin.

Then the bed creaks as Erwin pulls away. He walks around the bed, trailing his hand along Levi’s ass for as long as possible. He plucks the jar from the bedside table.

Levi’s eyes fix between his legs. “Bring that over here.”

Erwin steps forward, holding out the lubricant.

“Not that.” Levi shifts his balance so he can grab Erwin’s erection, gently urging him closer. He pulls it deep into his mouth, feeling it fill him, feeling his body’s rush of panic as it swells in his throat, which somehow only adds to the thrill. Tears spring to his eyes from the strain, but he’s too greedy to pull back. He looks up and sees Erwin staring at him with his mouth

open, as if drinking in the sight. Levi begins to stroke him with his mouth, and Erwin's eyelids flutter closed.

The silent protests from Levi's throat are getting too strong now, and, not wanting to gag, he gives in and slides him back out.

Erwin's trembling fingertips touch Levi's throat, his chin, his lips. "Levi, you are incredible."

"Yeah?" he replies, basking in the praise.

"The way you work me in your mouth. I've never felt anything like it." Erwin bends down and kisses him, then moves back to his original spot on the bed, behind him. A finger slides between the cheeks of his ass. "I want to taste you."

"Do it."

Then Levi feels warm air against his skin. Erwin's tongue slides slowly, achingly slowly, all the way down to the tip of his cock, then back up to his tailbone. Levi gasps. He buries his face in the sheets, pushing back against Erwin's hot breath.

Erwin's tongue is more focused now, still flat, moving in slow circles. Pleasure ripples out from it, floods Levi's body. Erwin spirals out and back in again, making the same little sounds he makes when they're kissing, and the physical sensations and the intimacy of it and the knowledge that Erwin is getting turned on by it are all rising to Levi's head. He is feverish, he is losing himself. He bites into the sheets, yelling into them, thrusting his hips back.

Now Erwin's tongue is firm and pointy, probing. Levi's eyes roll back into his head. *Fuck*. He tries to reach back to touch Erwin's face, desperate for contact, but the angle is wrong. He lifts his head from the sheets and wipes the saliva from his chin. "Flip me over."

Erwin complies, and Levi rolls onto his back, holding his hips high in the air; Erwin pushes Levi's knees down by his ears and buries his face again. Levi grabs his hair, guiding him in and out. His cock is already leaking down his abdomen and chest, and he has lost control of his voice. He hears himself rambling a

combination of curses and desperate orders and Erwin's name.

"Deeper," he hears himself beg. "All the way in."

Erwin pulls back, hair wild, cheeks flushed, eyes glazed. He lowers Levi's hips to the bed, reaches for the jar and fumbles with it for a moment, then manages to get the cap off. Levi rests flat against the bed, watching without moving. His limbs are already tingling too much to react properly.

Then Erwin draws gentle circles with a slippery finger. He traces his tongue along the sensitive skin of his perineum.

Levi's head tosses back, his hands fist the sheets. "Fuck! Deeper."

Then he feels that first stretch, bigger and deeper and firmer than a tongue, and his world shrinks to just that thick finger. Erwin gently works into him, movements small. It's torturous and Levi loses patience; he drives down onto it, taking him to the knuckle.

"I see," Erwin says, sounding surprised, but pleased. He takes Levi's cock into his mouth again, sucking the tip, his finger working carefully around to find his prostate.

Levi hears words leaving his mouth again, but he doesn't care, he only cares about that flicker of heat building in his limbs and mind, that desire to plunge in all the way even though it's too soon. But he can't hold back, and he cries out, thrusting deep into Erwin's mouth.

Pleasure ripples through his body, but it's not the peak yet. It's drawing out and Erwin is keeping him riding on the cusp. He tries to thrust, but Erwin matches his movements so he can't get any friction, and *how is he doing this*, surely any second now he'll spill over. He cries out, frustrated, but not wanting it to end at the same time.

It feels like hours later when Erwin gently removes his mouth and his finger, kissing up his body. Levi falls back to the mattress—at some point, his body curled around Erwin's head—and sweat drips down his temples. Erwin tries to kiss him, and Levi's mouth won't work properly to kiss him back.

“You’re so fucking hot,” Erwin breathes. It’s a decidedly un-Erwin-like comment, and Levi feels a small swell of triumph. He’s not the only one coming utterly undone.

He manages to coordinate his lips enough to say, “I just need a minute. Before we continue.” Still panting, he rolls his head so he can see the candles, trying to get a sense of time. They have burned down one notch. Fifteen minutes? He can’t decide if it should be longer or shorter than that.

Erwin runs his hands gently down Levi’s abdomen, hips, thighs. “Everything okay?”

Levi lets out a lazy laugh and stretches a little. “If I had known how good you are at eating ass ...”

“It didn’t come up naturally in our conversations.” Erwin slides his hands from Levi’s hips, curving to his inner knees. “The definition here is so deep.”

“Sartorius muscle,” Levi says automatically.

Erwin’s hands pause and he looks up, as if seeing him for the first time. “You know anatomy?”

“Don’t look at me like that. I’m not stupid.”

“Of course you aren’t. You’re one of the brightest people I know.” Erwin looks down at his thighs again, running his hands up and down them with a bit more pressure. “You didn’t undergo all the training we had as cadets, so I assumed you wouldn’t have had the opportunity to learn anatomy the way we did.”

“I read the books myself. I’ve always taught myself what I needed to know.” Levi’s head rolls back as the hands on his thighs tighten. “Your hands are so warm.”

The hands slide down his shins next, then one leg lifts and Levi feels a kiss pressed to the inside of his ankle. “I wish the right hand was working a bit better. Felt a bit clumsy using my left.”

“Are you kidding? It was fucking amazing.” Heat is starting to build again. “Erwin ...”

The hands smooth back up his legs. “Ready to keep going?”

Levi summons all his composure to lift his head and look Erwin squarely in the eye. “I want you inside me.”

A shiver ripples through Erwin’s body. He grabs the little jar again and kneels between Levi’s legs.

“Let me.” Levi reaches out a hand, and Erwin pours the liquid into it. Levi spreads it along the length of Erwin’s cock, then grips it and starts to slowly stroke him. Erwin’s eyes close and his breaths grow ragged.

“Come on.” Levi gently pulls, guiding him closer.

Erwin grips the base and starts to slide in. Levi bears down on him, feels the stretch.

“Fuck,” he whispers.

Erwin’s eyes flick up to meet his. “Still okay?”

Levi nods. “Keep going.”

He pushes a little deeper, working so gently, and it suddenly strikes Levi: *He’s inside me. He’s inside me. We’re having sex.* He feels a rush of euphoria. “Erwin ...”

Erwin pauses and looks up.

He can’t find the right words to express the wonder he’s feeling, the way his world has so drastically shifted, so he says, “You’re fucking me.”

Erwin gives a soft laugh and bends forward to give him a kiss, then pulls back so their noses are grazing. “Almost.”

“Go deeper.”

Erwin obliges, easing in a little further. Levi cries out and pushes against him, hands clawing his back. “Deeper. Come on.”

A kiss presses to the tip of his nose. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I don’t care. I don’t care.” Levi bears down on him, taking a little more. Then all at once, his body relaxes and Erwin slides all the way inside.

They cry out in unison, pausing, lingering in the first moment of their complete union. Erwin kisses him again, not moving yet, but Levi can feel him pulsating.

“Shit.” Levi coils his legs around him. “You’re fucking me.”

Erwin seems to have lost his ability to speak. He slowly thrusts, and they both cry out again.

Then Erwin pushes himself up onto his hands—for now, at least, he seems to be forgetting the pain in his bad arm—and begins to rock into him. Levi looks up at him: hair in his face, brows pinched, eyes glowing, lips parted. At this angle, his chest swells beautifully between his arms, the blond hair glowing in the candlelight.

“Shit.” Levi reaches his hands up to trace those flexing pectorals, across to his shoulder muscles, down his arms, back up. *He’s perfect, he’s so perfect, and he’s inside me.*

Erwin pauses and sits back on his heels, lifting Levi’s hips to adjust the angle. When he starts moving again, a wave floods Levi and he starts to get carried away again. He tilts his hips so Erwin massages him in just the right way, and it’s so good, it’s so good.

Erwin slows his movements, his expression pained. “Levi, I wanted to take this slowly, but I ...”

“Do it hard.”

“I’m not going to last.”

“I don’t care. We’ll do it again. We’ll do it all night.” He reaches out for Erwin. “Take me hard.”

Erwin reaches out, too, their fingers entwining. He brings them to his mouth for a kiss, then lowers Levi’s hand to his cock. “Touch yourself.”

Levi complies. And Erwin begins to drive into him harder, his jaw tightening, eyes flashing with determination. *He’s close.* Levi tugs at himself, feeling himself rising, too.

Erwin cries out and his eyes squeeze shut, and his face is so perfectly vulnerable and pained and full of joy. Levi holds on long enough to watch him until his face slackens, and then he lets himself give in.

“Fuck!” He arches, his head tossing back, as the orgasm vibrates every part of his body.

Then he’s slowly sinking back into the bed, and Erwin

pulls out, climbing over him, softly kissing his eyelids and brows, whispering his name.

They cling to each other as the candle burns down another notch.

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“LEVI.”

HE OPENS HIS eyes to see Erwin hovering over him.

“Did I fall asleep?”

“I think we both did. Not for very long.” Erwin hands him a damp cloth. “I thought you might like to get cleaned up.”

“Thanks.” Levi wipes himself, still clumsy.

“I’ll be right back.” Erwin walks to the bathroom and comes back with two glasses of water. Levi sits up and they both drink. The water is crisp and cool, and he immediately feels refreshed.

Then they’re done drinking, and they hold each other’s gaze. Things feel the same as they always did between them, that comfort and closeness in each other’s presence, and yet they’re both naked, the salt of each other’s sweat on their skin.

Erwin reaches over and slides the hair off Levi’s forehead. “Are you hungry?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll go find us something to eat.” He cups Levi’s cheek, then stands.

“Looking like that? Everyone’s going to know what we’re doing in here.”

“Anyone with ears will know what we’re doing in here,” Erwin replies, but he stops by the mirror to check his reflection. He pushes back his hair, grinning. “Ah. Yeah, that’s going to attract attention.”

“Especially with that dumb I-just-got-laid grin,” Levi says with a swell of fondness. “I’ll go.” He retrieves a hooded shirt and a pair of pants from his closet. He dresses and smooths his hair

back under the hood. “How does that look?”

“Like someone who might or might not have just gotten laid.”

“Good enough. I’ll be back.”

He steps into the hallway and immediately realizes his knees are wobbly. Well, hopefully anyone who notices will just think he’s drunk from the gala. He makes his way to the kitchen and speaks with the staff to order a plate of breads, cheeses, fruits, and nuts. He tucks a bottle of wine under his arm for good measure.

As he’s returning to his door, he hears footsteps down the hall. He turns and sees Hange walking back to their bedroom a few doors down.

For a moment, they stare at each other, and Levi realizes Hange is the one other person in this world with the power to read everything on his face, and he’s conspicuously fucked out and holding a meal and wine for two.

But to their credit, Hange just grins and gives him a thumbs up, then steps into their room.

When Levi enters, he sees that Erwin has combed his hair and put on his dress shirt and underwear. He greets Levi with a smile.

“Welcome back,” he says, boyish.

“Here.” Levi sets the food and drink down on the small table by the wall.

They sit and eat. With all the excitement of the evening, Levi hadn’t realized how hungry he was. His senses are all heightened by the afterglow, and everything he eats tastes stronger and sweeter.

Erwin says, “This might be the best meal I’ve ever eaten.”

Levi nods. “Fucking amazing.”

“How are you feeling?”

Levi takes a moment to consider how he is, and suddenly remembers the looming threats. He pushes them aside before the panic can spin out of control. “Like I want to do it again.”

“Have you recovered?”

Levi nods.

“I should have known you would have good stamina. I need a bit longer, but maybe I can do something for you while we’re waiting.” Erwin walks around the table and stands behind Levi; he bends down to kiss his neck, arms wrapping around Levi’s chest. He’s so sensitive that it’s almost too much to handle, and he squirms a little.

Erwin rumbles against his ear, “Does that tickle?”

“A bit.”

“Maybe harder pressure, then.” Erwin helps him take off his shirt, then begins to massage his shoulders, the kisses on his skin a little rougher. Levi feels any lingering tension leave his body.

“Is that good?”

“Yeah.” One hand is stronger than the other, but the skin contact of the weaker one is still nice. Levi’s head drops forward.

“Here.” Erwin holds out a hand to pull him to his feet, then unbuckles his pants.

They shed their clothes and sit cross-legged on the bed, Levi in front, Erwin sitting at his back to massage his shoulder blades.

“I can’t count the number of times I’ve admired this back,” Erwin murmurs. “The muscles, the shape, the divots.”

“The scars,” Levi adds.

“We all have scars.” Erwin traces one with his finger. “I’m indirectly responsible for a lot of these.” His voice is soft.

Levi shrugs. “I would have gotten a hell of a lot more if I’d stayed in the Underground.”

Erwin’s hands work lower, and he pauses to lovingly trace the dimples at Levi’s lower back. “How are you feeling?”

“Relaxed.”

“Good.” Erwin kisses his shoulder, then slides his hands lower. “Would you like—”

“Yes.” Levi reaches for the jar and holds it behind him.

Then a thick finger is inside him again, and Erwin's left hand snakes around his front to grip him, slick with lubricant. Levi leans back against him, tilting his head back, melting into him. He lies motionless, softly vocal, and lets the building warmth carry him along.

Eventually, Erwin pulls him up onto his lap, and now Levi can feel that he's starting to get hard again. He slowly falls forward onto his knees, and Erwin, following his intent, removes his finger and then slips inside him again.

And then Levi leans forward and presses his palms into the bed, shifting a little to line up their angles. Erwin's hands slide up his back, then down to grip his hips.

They work together, thrusting and counter-thrusting. Levi hears a sharp breath as Erwin uses his thumbs to spread his ass.

“Do you like how that looks?” Levi asks.

“Fuck, Levi. Fuck.” It's so unlike Erwin to curse this much. Levi tilts his hips, and now it's his turn to swear, because he's still sensitive from earlier.

This is different from last time. Before, he was frantic and awed; now, Levi feels hungry, almost aggressive. He drives his hips back, and Erwin eagerly answers. The smacking sound of skin against skin drives Levi's pulse and his breaths, all of him in rhythm together like a drumbeat.

Erwin rests one hand on the back of Levi's head, politely waiting for an invitation.

“Grab my hair,” gasps Levi.

Erwin's fingers weave into his hair, and then he pulls hard. Levi cries out.

“Harder.”

“Fuck.” Erwin yanks his head back and leans forward, and their height difference is so great that he can run his other hand across Levi's mouth. Levi takes two fingers into his mouth, sucking so hard that he's almost biting, and for a moment, Erwin's rhythm completely falls apart

“Shit.” Erwin rips his hand away and presses it into Levi’s lower back, planting one foot by Levi’s knee so he can get more power. His thrusts are hitting him just right, and Levi frantically lifts a hand to give himself a few strokes. He yells and comes hard.

Erwin slows, but Levi shakes his head, still working through the last pulses. “Keep going.” He can feel the hesitation behind him, so he adds, “Come on. I can take it. Keep going.” He falls forward onto one arm and reaches the other between his legs to grip Erwin’s balls.

“Fuck!” Erwin says in a strangled and desperate tone Levi has never heard from him before. He drives into him hard, and Levi thinks it’s a pity that he’s face down and can’t see the determined expression that is surely on Erwin’s face.

“Levi—”

“Come on.”

Then he feels Erwin drive into him one last time, body quivering with strain, and hears the glorious sounds of pleasure leaving his mouth.

Then Erwin collapses forward and kisses Levi’s shoulder. His face is damp and warm.

They slowly pull apart and sink to the bed. Erwin rolls onto his back, eyes closed, still breathing hard. Levi looks at the mess on the blanket and frowns.

“We’re sleeping in your bed tonight.”

Erwin drops an arm over his eyes. “We didn’t plan that very well, did we?”

“Planning ahead is your job, not mine.” Levi carefully avoids the wet spots and lays next to Erwin. He idly circles a nipple, feeling the hair there. It’s somehow coarse and soft at the same time.

Erwin lifts the arm from his eyes and gives Levi a smile.

“There’s that dumb smile again,” Levi says, but he climbs onto him to kiss it. They kiss again, slow and gentle.

“I was just thinking about how we should have done this

years ago,” Erwin says. “But then I’m thinking about how many productive late nights would have turned into this.”

“We would never have achieved everything we did,” Levi says. “The world would have fallen apart.”

For a moment, they’re quiet as their reality begins to sink in again.

Erwin sits up. “How about a glass of wine?”

“Yeah.”

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AFTER THEY WORK through the bottle, they are both ready for another round. Levi rides on top this time, and the admiration and wonder he sees in Erwin’s face is almost as overwhelming as their physical connection. They opt to sleep in Levi’s bed after all, both too tired and shaky to walk to the other room. Erwin spoons up behind Levi, both of them still naked under several layers of blankets.

Levi wakes up just as the sky outside the window is starting to glow with the sunrise. Erwin’s breaths are loud and even. Levi curls back into him, but as comfortable and exhausted as he is, his eyes won’t stay closed anymore. There are too many uncertainties, and even the certainties are steeped in newness. Restlessness stirs through his blood.

Eventually he decides he might as well get up and put out the candles, which have almost burnt to their bases. He delicately detaches himself from Erwin, but pauses to study his sleeping face. He looks soft, with his messy hair and relaxed features. Levi feels a swell of love so strong that his throat tightens. He reaches out a finger to trace Erwin’s nose; the man murmurs a little in his sleep and nestles deeper into the pillow.

He would stay watching him for awhile, but the castle walls provide terrible insulation, and cold air is seeping into his skin. Levi stands and takes a folded throw blanket off the chair; it’s just the right size to function as a makeshift cloak. He drapes

it around his head and shoulders and clasps it in front of him.

He blows out the candles one at a time. The first and second extinguish cleanly under his breath, streaming trails of waxy smoke from the wicks.

When he blows out the third, it glows brighter instead. Levi stares.

The flame grows larger and larger, brilliant white, and light leaks from the top of it like a trail of smoke.

“What—?” Levi takes a step back and his bare feet press against sand. The walls of the castle crumble to dust, and stars and sand dunes erupt around him. In the distance, he sees a glowing white light shaped like an enormous tree. Its branches stream above it like auroras.

Levi clutches the blanket tighter. “Shit.”

“Captain!”

Levi’s blood freezes. *It can’t be.* He turns slowly, afraid that the familiar voice is just his imagination.

It’s not.

Eren Yeager stands behind him.

He appears to be the same age as when they performed the ritual, though his hair is longer. He still wears the Survey Corps uniform he wore that day, aside from his jacket. His eyes, however, look different. Levi can’t quite put words to it. The Eren he knew was angry and stubborn; these eyes belong to a boy who is cracking under too much weight.

He is so relieved that he wants to step forward and hug the boy—or maybe punch him—but he’s only wearing the blanket and he doesn’t trust it to stay up. Instead, he says, “You’re alive?”

“I … don’t know. I need to speak with you and Commander Erwin. Urgently. Paradis needs us.” The sound of his voice is fading in and out. He suddenly cries out and clutches his head, dropping to one knee. “I can’t—”

“Hey.” Levi steps forward, reaching out, but his hand passes through Eren’s shoulder.

The boy gasps, “Meet me here. I’ll find you.” He begins to shimmer, like he is a reflection on a lake that isn’t completely still. “We need more time to talk. Historia can help. The ritual.” He lets out a sharp yell as if in pain. “I’m sorry, that’s all I can—”

The sand drops out from under Levi, and he lands on his feet in the castle. Three candles are streaming smoke in front of him.

His first thought is relief: *He’s alive.*

His second thought is dread: *The ritual.*

He lets the blanket slide from his shoulders and slowly pads back to the bed. He kneels beside it, staring at Erwin’s peaceful face. Mikasa’s voice rises in his memory: *I think our blood protects us. But Commander Erwin is not an Ackerman.*

Fear grips his stomach, his throat, and a tear spills onto his cheek. “Shit.” He reaches out a shaky hand, holding it in front of Erwin’s nose and mouth, feeling the warmth of his breath. It wasn’t so long ago that those breaths faded and he was alone.

A sob escapes his mouth before he can stop it. He clamps a hand over his mouth, but it’s too late: Erwin’s eyes spring open.

“Levi?”

It’s all too much. He’s exhausted and sensitive, and now he knows just how good a peaceful life with Erwin could be. A few more tears spill onto his cheeks; he crawls into the bed and sniffles.

Erwin does not question or judge him, only wraps his arms around him, pulling him close. Even smelling of sweat and sex, his aroma is calming. Levi snuggles under his chin and feels his shivering body begin to warm.

“Levi,” Erwin says gently, “Did something happen?”

“The paths again. Eren Yeager was there.”

“Eren? He’s alive?”

“I think so. He was in the paths. He says he needs to talk to us about the future of Paradis.”

“I see,” is all Erwin says, which means he’s going to need time to consider every implication of this information.

Levi closes his eyes, and it takes him a few minutes to gain the courage to say the words: “We have to do the ritual.”

“I know,” Erwin says softly.

It’s even harder to get the next words out: “I can’t lose you again.”

After a very long pause, Erwin says, even more softly, “I know.”

They cling to each other as the sun’s first rays appear through the window, tinting the sky blood red.

# ❧ Thirteen ❧

## ALL THAT IS YOURS

A POUNDING AT THE door awakens them the next morning. The world spins and Erwin's head splits. He groans and sits up, clutching his forehead.

"What?" Levi calls out at the door, and Erwin groans again as the sound ricochets through his skull.

Hange's voice comes through the door: "Thought you two lovebirds might want to grab some breakfast before we talk strategy."

Erwin flops back to the pillow, covering his eyes with his arm.

"We'll be out in a minute," Levi calls. He prods Erwin's shoulder. "Hey. We have to get up."

"I am sore everywhere," Erwin says dramatically.

"Well, pull yourself together, because we have to have a conversation with Hange about what I saw last night."

Erwin lifts his arm a crack to peek at him, a brow raised.

"Not that, you pervert." Levi scowls and throws a hand towel at him. "The fuck is wrong with you? Go wash up."

The running water in his sink is too loud. Erwin turns it to a trickle and assesses the damage in the mirror. He is never going to get his hair to lie straight; he makes a half-hearted attempt with water, but the strands are too loud against his scalp and he gives up. His eyes are red and underlined by large, deep bags, and he somehow still has a stupid grin on his face in spite of how terrible he feels. A few love bites dot his neck. No hiding those.

He splashes cool water on his face, then pulls on his

softest sweater and a clean pair of pants. Returning to Levi's room, he retrieves the stack of crumpled notes from the floor.

Levi looks him up and down and grimaces.

"That bad?" Erwin asks.

"I didn't realize we wrecked you this badly. Was it the wine?"

"I think it was a little of everything."

"Well, you'd better be able to function today. We're not going to let Paradis fall just because we got horny." Levi pulls on his hoodie, his collared shirt poking out smartly at the neck. His hair is ruffled beyond taming, too, but he, at least, looks well-rested, and the cravat hides the worst of the love bites.

They step into the hallway; Hange is sitting cross-legged on the floor, reading a book. They jump up. "Good morning!" Then they stop and stare. "Holy hell, Erwin."

"Not so loud, please," he murmurs.

Hange turns to Levi. "Whatever you did to him, he'd better still be able to function today."

"Yeah, yeah."

"I really need you both to speak more quietly, please," Erwin says.

Hange takes mercy on him and, instead of the common dining area, leads them to the table where they ate with Historia on their first night in Mitras. Erwin slumps into a chair; Hange pats his back sympathetically and ushers Levi from the room. The two of them return with tea, orange juice, bread, and scrambled eggs.

Hange serves him a plate with extra salt on the eggs, and shoves a glass of orange juice in his direction.

"Have more water when you're done all this," Hange says. "You look dehydrated."

Levi pours himself a cup of tea. "Too much fluid loss."

Erwin chokes on his juice and starts coughing.

Hange sighs. "If you two are going to be gross, I'm moving out of the cabin."

All three of them fall silent as they realize an imminent war stands between them and their return to cabin life. The rest of the meal continues in silence.

Erwin feels—physically, at least—better by the time he has finished eating. Levi pours him a cup of tea, and the acidity is a little harsh on his stomach, but the warmth is comforting.

“Feeling better?” Hange asks.

“Much. Thank you, both.”

“I didn’t think you were that drunk,” Levi says.

“I wasn’t.” It wasn’t just the alcohol, but he doesn’t want to say that in front of Hange. Muscles are sore that he forgot he had. He suddenly flashes back to images from the night before: Levi’s mouth on his cock, Levi’s ass swallowing him, Levi’s face when Erwin was eating him out ... A little shiver runs down his spine, but he ignores it. Right now, in this company, the most important part of last night wasn’t the sex.

He turns to Hange and draws himself upright in his chair, returning to his professional air. “We have new information about the paths.”

“Oh?” They stop stirring their tea and lean forward, chin on one hand.

“I went there again last night,” Levi says. “Eren was there.”

“Eren?” Hange’s eye widens. “You saw him? He’s okay?”

Levi nods. “I spoke with him.”

“He didn’t die.” Their voice is full of wonder.

“I don’t think so. He says he needs to speak with Erwin and I about the fate of Paradis.” He takes a sip of tea, then adds, “It was difficult for him to contact me, but if we use Historia’s ritual, we can stay there longer.”

Hange looks thoughtful. “This is good news for our predicament, isn’t it? Maybe he can help us figure out what’s happening to the missing shifters.”

“Or maybe,” Erwin says absently, “he’s the one responsible for them disappearing.”

They turn to look at him.

“What are you thinking?” Levi asks.

Erwin smiles politely and turns back to his tea. “Still putting together possibilities. You said his original intent was to end the shifter curse, right? Perhaps he is in the process of that. Or perhaps he pulled the shifters back to Paradis to give us a fighting chance against Marley. The Colossal and the Armoured Titans are a formidable force together.”

“Pulled them back how, exactly?” Hange asks. “By working with the founder Ymir?”

“Perhaps. It’s been so long that they may have formed an alliance. It’s hard to know what is possible and what isn’t in the paths, given that any information we have is steeped in mythology. I’m just thinking aloud. Please, continue.”

Hange looks thoughtful, tapping their spoon against the mug. “So. You have to participate in the ritual, then.”

Levi makes a noise of displeasure and sinks into his seat, arms folded over his chest.

“Although,” they continue, “we still don’t know if it will work without the First King’s titan, even though you have a proven connection to the paths.”

Erwin says, “Technically, the First King serum runs through my veins, even if I’m not a shifter myself. Maybe that will be the key to the ritual working.”

“Or maybe,” Levi says bitterly, “the ritual is going to tear that serum out of you and rip you to shreds in the process.”

The three of them are silent.

Then, Hange pushes their glasses up onto their forehead, massaging their brow. “I hate this. Nothing about the titans obeys the laws of science. Moblit and I were studying our specimens so carefully, thinking we could observe them and experiment on them and that would be enough to understand them. But the existence of paths throws all that into question.” They sigh. “I am the most knowledgeable person about titans within these walls, and I have absolutely zero idea if this ritual will work, and what Eren is doing in the paths, and why the two of you keep seeing

them.”

Erwin reaches a hand across the table to cover theirs. “No one expects you to know everything, Hange.”

They jerk their hand away, brows low. “It doesn’t matter what people expect, Erwin. The two of you could *die*, and I don’t know how to make sure you stay alive. What good is all those years of study if everyone I love is going to die, all because I didn’t understand what the Colossal Titan was capable of, or anything about the paths, or anything else I’m supposed to know? Titan expert, my ass!” They snort. “A lot of good that has done me.”

Erwin isn’t sure what to say. *‘We are all about to die under Marley’s boot anyway, so we have to try’* doesn’t seem like a particularly comforting thought, even though it’s what keeps him moving forward.

He doesn’t need to speak; Levi walks around the table and takes the chair next to Hange. “Hey,” he says softly. “We’re going to do the ritual successfully. We’re going into the paths to fix this mess. And then we’re going to tell you everything we saw there, and you will officially become the paths expert—not just in Paradis, but in the entire world.” He lowers the glasses back onto Hange’s nose, then places a hand on top of their head. “And if we die, you’ll survive. You’re tough. And you won’t be alone. We’ll make sure to haunt you to remind you to wash your ass once in a while.”

A tear trickles down Hange’s cheek, but they laugh and say wryly, “You’re one to talk. You smell awful. Were you two rolling in titan vomit last night?” Then they wrap their arms around Levi in a hug.

“Okay,” Hange continues a moment later, reenergized. “Levi, I want you to tell me everything you saw last night, in full detail.”

As Levi speaks, Erwin half-listens, rereading his notes, working through questions of his own.

Was it Eren who was calling *Commander* in his previous

visions of the paths? For now, he has to assume it was, unless someone else from Paradis is in the paths with him. Was Eren the one who sent him back into his body when he first died? That makes less sense.

His best guess is that Eren has a tenuous alliance with someone else in charge, likely the mythical founder Ymir. That doesn't explain why he needs Erwin and Levi there in order to determine the future of Paradis. What could they possibly offer someone who has access to the powers of a god?

He has always wanted to know the truth about the titans, but this goes far beyond his father's theories, even further beyond anything Erwin himself ever dreamed of. Hange isn't the only one feeling as if their supposed expertise is lacking.

All he and Levi can do is go see it for themselves and try to learn while they're there. *The Survey Corps way*.

He catches Levi watching him, and realizes he's grinning at nothing. He pulls his face into neutral. "When are we meeting Historia and Mikasa?"

"Whenever we're ready. We can probably head to the meeting room now." Hange pauses. "What do we tell Mikasa about Eren?"

"She's going to flip the fuck out," Levi says. "But we have to tell her."

Erwin clears his throat. "That being said, this could be what alleviates some of her reluctance about us performing the ritual. Though, she may want to participate in it herself."

"No," Hange says firmly. "We can't potentially lose both Ackermans. We still need to fall back on the idea of fighting Marley if this ritual doesn't work."

Erwin turns to them. "Do you honestly think—and consider this clearly, detached from emotion and hope—that Paradis stands a chance in battle against Marley? Even with Levi and Mikasa on our side?"

Hange falls silent for a long time, then leans forward, forehead clunking against the table. "Fuck paths, fuck Marley,

fuck everything.”

“Fuck everything,” Levi agrees.

“Indeed.” Erwin stands. “We should head to the meeting room. Historia and Mikasa may have valuable insight to contribute.”

Hange lets out a loud huff, then stands, adjusting their glasses back into place. “I’ll go get them. Meet you two there.” They pause. “Don’t get distracted and take too long, though.”

When the door closes, Levi approaches Erwin and wraps him in a hug, ear resting against his chest.

“How are you feeling?” Levi asks.

“Not too bad. My arm is rather painful—I think I pushed it too hard last night. The salve should help.” He kisses the top of Levi’s head. “Also, let’s just say my body is not accustomed to such vigorous repetitive exercise.”

Levi snorts. “Yeah. I can barely walk.” He lifts his chin, looking up at him. “Good thing you’re a switch or my asshole would never survive a second night.”

Erwin laughs. “You speak the words of a poet.”

“Hmm. You’re one to talk.” Levi’s eyelids are low. “The filth you were spewing last night.”

Erwin feels his cheeks warm. “I wasn’t the only one. I never pictured you being so chatty during sex.” When Levi looks a bit embarrassed, he clarifies, “That’s meant to be a compliment. You saw what it did to me. You make me lose my mind.” His pants are getting uncomfortable just thinking about it.

Levi rests his ear on his chest again. “This ritual ...”

“I have to believe Eren wouldn’t suggest it if he thought it would kill us.”

Levi’s voice is quiet: “You didn’t see how eager he was to end your life to save Armin.”

That line of thought still hurts. Perhaps a part of Erwin had become fond of the boy. Perhaps he had even been starting to think of him and Armin and Mikasa as more than just soldiers. He has always had paternal tendencies. Levi must feel the same

way, seeing that he was the one who really took them under his wing.

“Well,” he says aloud, “there’s only one way we’re going to find out.”

They carry the dishes down to the kitchen and refill the teapot, bringing extra mugs to the meeting room for the others. The other three are already sitting at the table when they arrive.

Historia holds out Erwin’s jacket with a little smirk. “Must have left in a hurry last night,” she says coyly, and her eyes drift to his neck, no doubt eyeing the obvious marks.

He accepts the jacket and folds it over his arm. “Levi and I had some urgent things to discuss.”

Her sparkling eyes say, *I bet you did*, but she only politely dips her head at him.

Levi pours each person a mug of tea, then sits beside Erwin. Their hands connect under the table, naturally, as if they have always held hands during meetings.

“I’d like to open the discussion, if I may,” Historia says. “Two of my intelligence officers have independently verified that Marley is gearing up to attack. However, their information on the timing is different than what Alec was told. They believe the attack will happen in four days.”

An icy chill descends upon the room.

Erwin breaks the silence: “Any word on the size of their forces?”

“Yes. The Marleyans are not currently fighting on any fronts, so they have access to all their resources. They will be sending the seven remaining shifters and the full force of their military: planes, bombs, ships, and every foot soldier available.”

“We don’t stand a chance,” Mikasa mutters.

*She’s right. Returning the missing shifters won’t be enough.* If they are bringing a force like that to an undefended island, their only goal can possibly be extermination.

“Erwin,” Historia says, turning to him. “Did you come up with any alternate strategies?”

He taps his stack of notes. “I have worked through every angle I can think of, with all the information we have. Even the best idea I came up with is not likely to save us from war, not if they’re bringing that much force. We only have one realistic choice ahead of us.”

“The ritual,” Historia says softly.

“And we have an additional good reason to proceed with it. Levi saw the paths again last night, where he was told the two of us have to return there through Historia’s ritual. The reason for it apparently concerns the future of Paradis.” He watches Mikasa now, gauging her reaction. “The person who told him this was Eren Yeager.”

Mikasa sits bolt upright, as still as stone except for the tears flooding her eyes.

Historia is wide-eyed, too, but more animated: “What? You saw Eren? He didn’t die?”

Levi relays the conversation in detail. Mikasa does not move a muscle throughout it all. Erwin watches her. *She’s going to ask to come with us.* He’s much more amenable to the idea now that they know the size of Marley’s force. One Ackerman won’t be of any use here.

When Levi finishes, Historia turns to Mikasa. “Are you all right?”

Mikasa stares at her, dazed. “I’m going with them.”

“What?”

“The ritual. I’m doing it, too.” Her eyes narrow with determination.

“What?” Historia jumps up and grabs her by the shoulders. “If this ritual kills you—”

“It won’t. It didn’t last time. I’m strong.” Mikasa stands, looming over her. “If Eren has been trapped in the paths this entire time, I need to free him.”

Levi leans closer to Erwin and says softly to him, “You’re all right with this?”

“I don’t think we have a choice. Would she be able to stop

you if your situations were reversed?"

Levi lets out a low sigh and says, louder, "If she disrupts the ritual by being there—"

"I won't," Mikasa cuts in. Her eyes flash at him. "If you are connected to the Commander, then I am connected to Eren. That connection might be useful."

They turn to look at Hange, who throws up their hands. "I don't like this. Too many confounding variables."

"With all due respect, Hange." Mikasa turns to them, her jaw tight, her shoulders square. "Nothing is going to stop me from participating."

"I figured as much. Just making my opinion known." Hange slumps in their chair, arms folded over their chest.

"So," Historia says softly, "when? Tonight?"

Erwin considers. "I don't see that we have much choice. If the attack is so soon, we need to take advantage of any time we have." He looks at Levi. "Those of us participating in the ritual should use the rest of the day to take care of any unfinished business."

Levi looks down, shrinking into his chair.

"We'll meet at the stables when the bells ring four," Historia says. "Wear warm riding clothes. We'll go to the entrance to the caves and I'll show the three of you how the ritual works." She puts a hand on Mikasa's shoulder. "Are you sure—" but she cuts herself off at Mikasa's sad, steady gaze. "Okay," she finishes softly. The two of them make their exit.

Before Erwin and Levi can leave, Hange walks over to them. "You two are probably going to disappear into your room for most of the day, aren't you?"

Erwin looks at Levi, who still won't meet his gaze. "I think at the very least, we have some things to discuss." He knows Levi doesn't sulk this visibly unless he has something on his mind.

"Well, I won't be coming with you for the ritual, so ..." Hange gives him a big hug, then turns to Levi and does the same. "Come back safely. Please. I don't want to lose you guys."

“You stay safe, too, Hange,” Erwin says, placing a hand on their shoulder. “If we don’t come back—”

“I know. Take over the reins of—”

“No.” Erwin stares steadily at them, his voice low. “Save yourself. There will be no hope left here. Take anyone you want to save and start another life across the ocean.”

Hange’s mouth drops. “I can’t abandon my duties.”

Levi is staring at him open-mouthed, too.

“I’m giving you an order,” Erwin says firmly. “You can choose to respect it or not—I’m technically a civilian now, and you’re the fourteenth Commander. But Hange, if something happens to the four of us participating in the ritual, you will hold the most complete and accurate memory of this world. You alone can keep the true history of Paradis alive.” He withdraws his hand and stands tall. “It’s that or fight a hopeless war alongside untrained soldiers who don’t even know you were once a respected Commander. The choice is yours.”

The tears in Hange’s eye spill over. They give him another hug, then leave the room.

“You gave Hange the option to flee without guilt,” Levi says softly.

He nods. “I expect they’ll stay and fight. But if they feel compelled to flee, now it’s my fault, not theirs. They will be a good soldier obeying orders.” His gaze shifts to Levi. “But we don’t want to put them in that position in the first place. We need to succeed in our mission.”

“We don’t even know our mission.”

“We know the first step of it, at least.” Erwin turns to face Levi, brushing a strand of grey hair off his forehead. “Is there anything you need to take care of today?”

Levi shakes his head. “My life isn’t very complicated. Hange is my next of kin, if it gets that far. I don’t feel the need to say goodbye to anyone like Nile—it would just get complicated, trying to come up with an excuse about why I needed to say farewell.”

“Then I suppose it’s just you and me.”

Levi winces and looks away. “I don’t want to do this. I don’t want to treat this like some unfinished business we’re wrapping up. We’ve just started, and now we have to prepare to lose each other again?”

So that’s why he looked so miserable.

“Then,” Erwin says, “what if we treat this like any other day? We could pick up where we left off last night.”

Levi finally looks up at him. “Are you saying, ‘let’s fuck?’”

“Yes,” Erwin says, deciding there’s no time to dance around it.

“You’re sure? You were in rough shape this morning.”

“I’ll manage.”

Levi visibly shivers. “Okay. Then let’s go back to the room.”

When they reach the room, Levi asks, “Should we shower together?”

Erwin shakes his head. “I need to clean myself properly and that would be best with some privacy.” There is really no sexy way to clean out one’s ass, and he would prefer to keep the mystery about that process.

“Oh.” Levi looks away. “Okay. Come back here when you’re done.”

Erwin thinks about that dejected *Oh* as he locks himself in his bathroom to prepare himself.

He thinks about what Levi looks like with suds running down his body, about how often he wished he could reach over and touch him in the communal showers.

And when the prep takes less time than he expected, he sets his jaw and steps out of the shower, grabbing a towel.

..&..

LEVI STANDS IN THE shower, feeling the warm water run down his back. He’s trying hard not to think of what might happen that night, but when he closes his eyes, he sees Eren’s

skin cracking with light, hears Mikasa's anguished scream, feels her straining against him to try to throw herself into danger ...

“Levi?”

He turns and sees Erwin. Moisture beads on the man's skin and semi-soaked hair. He's holding a towel around his waist.

“I wondered if I might join you after all,” Erwin says. “I finished what I wanted to do in private.”

Levi's heart begins to pound. He throws open the glass door.

The shower stall isn't very large, just big enough for both of them to stand side-by-side. Levi pulls him closer, then gives a quiet moan at the sensation of hot, slippery skin. He runs his hands down Erwin's chest and abdomen, delighting in the way the golden body hair swirls against his skin in the water. He doesn't want to risk standing on his toes in the slippery shower, so instead of kissing him, he bends forward to take Erwin's nipple in his mouth. He hears a pleased noise deep in his throat above him, and he looks up.

“You like having your nipples sucked?”

“Apparently.” Erwin runs his thumb along Levi's bottom lip. “Apparently I like anything you do to me with your mouth. Let's get ourselves soaped down before we get carried away with anything else.”

Erwin grabs a washcloth and the soap first. He swirls it along Levi's shoulders, his back, his chest, his abdomen, moving in slow, sensuous circles that feel as relaxing and erotic as the massage last night. Then he moves down to his ass and his legs, spending a lot of time massaging soap into his quads and calves.

“I think they're clean,” Levi says dryly.

“Just making sure.” Erwin runs a hand up the inside of Levi's thigh.

“Didn't realize you were a leg man.”

“I think anyone lucky enough to soap these legs would become a leg man, if they weren't already.” Erwin soaps between Levi's legs, up to his ass, then finally approaches his cock, which,

after all the gentle touching, is almost fully erect. Erwin soaps up a hand and steps closer, pressing his naked body against Levi's side. He begins to stroke him.

"You're so hard," Erwin murmurs, and he uses the slippery soap to twist his hand with each stroke.

"Shit," Levi gasps. The hot water and the slide of the soap are bringing him close to the edge already.

Erwin must be able to tell he's close, because he says, "Do you want me to stop?"

"No. ... Yes. Yes, stop." He's so hard that he aches, and he usually bounces back quickly after coming, but after the frequency of their activities the night before, he isn't confident that he'll be able to rebound well this time. "I want to wash you."

Soaping Erwin's body is a joy. He has seen him in the shower so many times and watched the glistening muscles out of the corner of his eye, wishing he could slide his hands along them. He lingers on every part of his body, leaving his groin and ass for last. Then he takes great joy in soaping Erwin's cock, feeling it get hard in his grip, the slickness of the soap—there's something about the sensation that drives him wild.

But there's somewhere else he wants to explore right now. He kisses the centre of Erwin's chest, then lingers on each nipple for a moment. Then he grips his hip, encouraging him to turn around. Erwin places his hands on the wall of the shower, and maybe it's Levi's imagination, but he's arching his back a little to make his ass stick out.

Levi kneels down behind him, grabbing him and gently pulling him apart. He may never have considered topping Erwin in the strictest sense of the word, but he has thought about this ass countless times. It's large and muscular, the skin soft, with the faintest coating of hair. It's substantial and it's strong and he feels a possessive urge to make it his.

He bends forward to kiss the base of Erwin's spine: a question. Erwin tilts his hips, inviting Levi to drift lower.

When he does, he sputters a little as the angle makes the

shower water run down his face. Erwin wordlessly reaches up to adjust the shower head so the water runs down Levi's back instead, then places his palm against the wall again, back in the moment.

Levi nuzzles in deep, feeling the squeeze of muscle on either side of his face, and presses firmly with a flat tongue. Erwin's muscles start to relax. Levi grabs his hips and pulls him in harder. He can't breathe, he can't see, there is only Erwin's ass and the noises of pleasure coming out of his mouth somewhere above him. He swirls his tongue and hears the delightful sound of Erwin cursing.

He pulls back for breath and then goes in with a pointed tongue this time, deeper, and he hears Erwin's hands loudly slide down the glass. *He's sensitive*, Levi thinks, euphoria fogging his mind, and he wonders if that sensitivity transfers to sex.

He brings up a finger to join his tongue, letting himself drool a little to make sure it's slick. He cautiously slides it in, and when he finds the spot he's looking for, Erwin lets out a loud cry and pushes back against him.

"Levi," Erwin gasps. "Fuck me."

The shock of this phrase coming out of Erwin Smith's mouth temporarily stuns him. "With no lube?"

"In the bed. I need you."

"Shit," Levi whispers, overwhelmed by the power of his words.

They towel off, doing poor jobs of actually drying themselves, too busy kissing and hurrying to the bed. Erwin falls back on the mattress, still hard and trickling precum, water droplets glistening across his chest and abdomen from the shower.

Levi takes a moment to commit the sight to his memory, then grabs the jar and quickly slathers lubricant on two fingers. He climbs onto the mattress and lies beside Erwin, who cups his cheek. They kiss, and then Levi inches down far enough to be able to slide his fingers inside him.

"More," Erwin gasps.

“Another finger?”

“Yeah.”

So Levi slips in a third finger, and Erwin grinds down on them, moving his hips in circles. Levi is mesmerised by the motion of his abdominal muscles, his heaving chest.

Erwin looks up at him with intense, heavily lidded eyes: “I need you, Levi. Fuck me.”

*Shit!* Those phrases again. Levi’s head spins. He quickly strokes himself with lubricant and then eases himself in.

Once he’s fully inside, time seems to temporarily slow. Erwin is warm and pulling him deeper and he’s lost inside him, and as they make eye contact, he’s lost there, too, spiralling down into the centre of him. Levi slowly begins to rock into him. This body, Erwin’s body, sexual and intimate, shifting with pleasure beneath him. These eyes, Erwin’s eyes, his dearest friend, the one person in the world he trusts without question. This is the man he loves.

Erwin reaches out a hand. Levi reaches out his, too, and their fingers entwine. And he wonders if Erwin is coming to the same realization, finding the words, admitting them to himself. He wishes he were just a bit taller so he could bend forward and kiss him, but he expresses the tenderness of a kiss with his thrusts instead, trying to convey how happy he is to be inside him, how much he loves him, how he wants to be a part of him forever.

Gasps and cries are beginning to fall from their mouths, and Erwin’s head falls back to the bed. Levi drops his hand, pulls Erwin’s knees over his shoulders, and grips his thighs. He is so huge, swells of muscle over large bones, broad jaw and mouth.

“You feel so good,” Erwin says, eyes fluttering closed. “You feel so right. We fit so perfectly, every way we connect.”

The words ignite the possessiveness that Levi felt earlier, and he embraces it: “Because I am yours and you are mine.”

“I’m yours. Levi, I’m yours.” Erwin’s back arches, and he starts to ramble: “Anything you want, forever, it’s yours. I’ll give

you everything, I'll do anything you ask, just don't stop, don't ever—" He cries out. And even though neither of them are touching him, a first pulse spills onto his stomach.

"Holy fuck." Levi pulls out and bends to take him into his mouth to catch the next pulse, and the next. When the absence of Erwin's yells finally rings in Levi's ears, he slowly releases him and sits up, wiping his chin.

Erwin is staring in his direction, eyes out of focus. He reaches out a hand. "Levi ... "

Levi takes his hand and kisses it. Erwin tugs his arm, urging him to lie alongside him, and their mouths find each other. Erwin reaches between them and grips Levi, applying just the right pressure, stroking at just the right pace. Levi feels himself begin to coil deep inside himself.

"Erwin, I'm going to—"

Erwin lunges forward and kisses him. And then Levi cries out into his mouth, spilling between them.

They lie together, unmoving, as their breaths slow.

Levi finally opens his eyes and finds Erwin watching him. He remembers how possessive he felt earlier, and feels a little embarrassed.

"I got a bit clingy," he says as an apology.

"Don't apologize." Erwin searches his gaze. "It was hot in the heat of the moment."

"Well, I want you to know that I don't own you. One of the reasons I love you is that you're *yours*, without apology. You are completely in control of who you are, and nothing gets in your way."

Erwin swallows hard, his eyes glassy. "You are the same, Levi. And it is one of the reasons I love you: you have an intrinsic moral code and will not hesitate to follow it. And maybe that's why I grew to trust you enough to give you my heart. I always know where I stand with you. You are the only person—really, the only thing at all—that's safe in this world."

The words are making Levi flush, so he shrugs them off.

“Well, you mostly know where you stand with me. I could be more vocal about how I feel.”

“And I am the same. We spent so many years burying our emotions for the sake of duty.” Erwin gently presses their foreheads together. “After we stop this war, you and I are going to live out the rest of our days saying all we could never say, doing everything we could never do. I am yours, Levi, in every way that matters.”

Levi closes his eyes, enjoying the taste of his breath and the body heat glowing between them.

It’s only a few minutes later that he realizes they’ve both just said the words *I love you*.

# ❖ Fourteen ❖

## MOMENTS IN CRYSTAL AND SAND

ASIDE FROM A QUICK break to fetch lunch from the kitchen, Erwin and Levi spend the rest of their time in bed. First Erwin rides on top, Levi looking up at him with awe, then Levi takes him from behind, rougher, hand gripping under his chin, simulating that hate-sex Erwin talked about the night before. And when they're too tired to move, they lie side-by-side, gripping their cocks together with joined hands, stroking themselves as one.

By the time three bells sound in the tower, Levi is completely exhausted. He sprawls across Erwin's chest, breathing the scent of his sweat. He can't believe he used to hassle Erwin about washing away this smell after expeditions. It's the most alluring scent in the world.

With a low, contented sigh, Erwin combs Levi's hair with his fingertips. "I don't think I have anything left in me."

"Same. I don't know how either of us is supposed to ride a horse now," Levi quips, and Erwin chuckles.

"Well, I suppose we should shower again. And I need another layer of that salve."

"It helped?"

"I think so. I kept forgetting about it. That's a good sign, isn't it?" Erwin lifts his hand and flexes it a few times.

Levi laces his fingers through his hand and draws it to his lips, giving a knuckle a kiss. "I want to stay here."

"In this bed?"

"Yes. Both of us naked and exhausted like this." Levi kisses

another knuckle. “Let Mikasa go talk to Eren. What can we do that she can’t?”

“Interact with the paths without a ritual, for one.”

With a long, weary sigh, Levi releases him and swings his legs over the side of the bed. He immediately feels Erwin’s hand on his shoulder blades, trailing down his spine.

“Hey.”

“You don’t realize how beautiful this back is. I’m powerless.”

Levi wrinkles his nose. “You’re terrible at flirting. Must have skirted by on your good looks.”

Erwin laughs and sits up behind him, kissing the nape of his neck. “Being Keith’s right-hand man helped, too. And later, letting slip that I was the one who brought *the* famous Levi into the Survey Corps—”

Levi turns to shoot him a glare. “You did not use my name to help you sleep with other people.”

“Of course not.”

“Good.” Levi stands and stretches; his spine cracks. “We should probably shower separately. And then ...” His mood falls. It was easy to forget what lay ahead when he was under the spell of hormones and pheromones.

The hand on his back now is less aggressive, more sympathetic. “It will be okay, Levi.”

“You don’t know that.”

“You’re right. But look at all we have overcome together.”

Levi’s throat tightens. “Shower with me,” he says, turning around.

“We can’t keep our hands off each other.”

“I don’t care.” Levi grabs him by the hands and pulls him to his feet. He doesn’t know how to express his vulnerability, so he just puts it bluntly: “I don’t want to be alone.”

Erwin nods and follows him to the shower.

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AS PLANNED, WHEN the city clock rings four, they meet Historia and Mikasa. Four horses are saddled and ready to go. Levi is grateful that Historia didn't send for his usual horse. He can't bear the idea of her getting caught up in the ritual if something should go wrong.

The saddle is uncomfortable and his muscles are so drained that he isn't sure he'll be able to make it all the way to the cavern. Beside him, Erwin's riding stance is different from usual, and Levi can't help but feel triumphant.

"Looks like you've forgotten how to ride a horse, Commander."

Erwin looks at him with a straight face. "It has been a very long time."

"I bet."

Erwin's eyes drift down Levi's body and back up, and though he doesn't say a word, his body language communicates, *What's your excuse?*

Levi smirks.

If they can keep flirting like this, he won't think about what lies ahead. But his mind goes blank. He's never been good at flirting.

They reach the far end of the caverns, where a small section still stands, braced by what remains of Eren Yeager's crystalline titan form. Before the mind wipe, Jean, Connie, and Sasha had been tasked with removing enough chunks to make it look like a natural formation, in case anyone stumbled upon the cave. Levi realizes just how terrible that must have been for them, erasing the boy who they knew they would soon forget.

They leave the horses happily grazing in an overgrown grass pasture by the entrance, then cautiously work their way down the unstable rubble. The sky is dark by the time they reach the bottom, but the caverns are illuminated by the glow of the crystalline rock around them.

Historia strides to the centre of the cavern to a circle

drawn in a white powder that looks like salt—if Levi remembers correctly, it's a powder of the same crystalline substance as the cavern. The area where Eren stood last time is scuffed out of shape from Mikasa frantically scooping up his ashes afterwards. Mikasa looks away. Historia quietly reshapes the circle.

“So,” she says as she works, “The four of us will need to stand within this circle and join hands. I should probably be touching Erwin and Levi, since you are the ones who have been summoned to the paths before. Mikasa can stand between you.”

“What do we need to do?” Erwin asks.

“Just stand there silently and focus on keeping your mind calm. I’ll be drawing everyone’s energy to reach out to my family’s connection to the paths.” She finishes fixing the circle and then turns to Mikasa. “Please—”

“No,” Mikasa says firmly, as if continuing an argument they were already having.

“I know. I had to try.” Historia steps forward and wraps her arms around the woman’s waist. “Be safe, Mikasa.”

Mikasa’s cheeks turn red, but she kisses the top of Historia’s head.

Levi turns to Erwin, and their eyes lock. Slowly, Erwin bends down to deliver a soft kiss to Levi’s lips. Levi wonders how he can be so calm, then notices the tremble in his hand as he pulls away.

They four of them stand inside the circle. Levi keeps his gaze fixed on Erwin, ready to intervene the second anything should go wrong.

He knows Historia has begun when he feels a sharp tingle, like when she touched his arm before, but stronger and more painful. He feels as if she’s draining something from him by force. Wind gusts between them, violently kicking up his clothing and hair.

Across from him, Erwin’s teeth are bared, as if he’s feeling the same discomfort. Their eyes hold.

Jagged yellow lightning sparks above them.

Panic rushes into Levi's body. *It's happening again. Is this supposed to be part of it?* He feels Mikasa's hand clench around his.

Whispers begin to tug at his mind, and he recognizes them as memories.

*That's an order, Levi. Follow it.*

*Dedicate your hearts!*

*Levi, thank you.*

The wind is howling now, and a bolt of lightning slams into the floor between them. Another cracks above them.

Panic lights up Erwin's eyes, and a yellow crack of light splits his cheek.

"No," Levi whispers.

Another crack splits Erwin's chest and shoulder, then his neck, then his leg.

"Erwin!" Levi yells, but his voice is lost in the wind, and Mikasa and Historia are gripping him with the strength of a thousand titans. "Let go of me!"

The fissures crack through those eyes, those panicked blue eyes, the ones that look at him so lovingly, and the irises glow golden. They begin to roll back into his head.

Then, all is silent, and he only hears Erwin's voice, spoken directly into his mind: "It's okay, Levi."

Erwin's body bursts into blinding light.

"No!" Levi screams, and he staggers forward.

The stone beneath his feet melts, and he's falling. He lands roughly on his shoulder in the sand. He scrambles to his feet.

"Erwin," he yells. "Erwin!" He scrambles to the top of the sand dune. The pillar of light is in the distance, and he doesn't see Mikasa, or Erwin, or Eren.

Levi sinks to his knees in the sand, then drops to his hands, breaths shaking.

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ERWIN RUSHES UPWARDS through the beam of yellow light.

Scenes flash in and out of his view, some his memories, some impossible.

A scene of his father dancing around a crib with his mother, her stomach heavy with child.

Erwin congratulating Nile and Marie on their marriage, and apologizing, but he has to leave early.

His father being hauled from the house by the MP, telling him to stay strong, *I love you*.

Erwin standing by Levi in a strange world with box-like buildings, both dressed in black. Titan shifter marks line Erwin's face.

Levi and Erwin in a hot spring together, cuddling close, wistful expressions on their faces.

Now Erwin is lifting up a small child with golden hair, and the child reaches for his face, a woman smiling in the background.

He watches in horror as Eren Yeager is led away by the MP, set for execution: *we failed*.

His body hanging from a noose in Mitras.

Levi lying by a river, face studded with shrapnel, covered in blood-

The visions shatter. He bursts upwards through the sand, rolls along the dune, and then he's lying on the floor of a carriage.

He blinks.

A young MP officer is leaning over him, his face showing concern. "You all right?"

Another MP next to him elbows him. "Don't talk to the prisoner." He hauls Erwin back onto the seat.

*A memory.* This one, at least, is his own. He has one arm cuffed to his pants in a feeble attempt to remind him that he is restrained. It clicks into place: he has just been arrested during the revolution.

Is he in the paths? Did he land in another of those memory puddles? He sits calmly and lets the memory play out. His

own thoughts from the memory play through his mind:

*Even if this ends with my neck in a noose, Levi and Hange are already moving on their missions. This revolution cannot be stopped now.*

The carriage comes to a halt. The door swings open, and Nile stands on the other side. “I’ll take him.”

“Sir, you don’t have to—”

“That’s an order.”

The MP officers in the carriage look at each other, but then shrug and salute.

Nile grabs Erwin roughly by the arm. Once they’re out of earshot, he says, “What the *hell* do you think you’re doing?”

“What must be done.”

“Don’t give me that mysterious crap.” Nile takes him into the building and they turn down an empty hallway. He sighs and stops.

“Look, you idiot.” He looks up and down the hallway to make sure they’re alone. “I have no jurisdiction over the people who are going to handle you, and they are brutally violent. Here’s what’s about to happen: I’m going to hand you over to them, and they are going to beat you within an inch of your life.”

“I understand,” Erwin says calmly. *Like they did to my father.*

Nile looks panicked. “I don’t think you do. You won’t survive this, not when you’re still recovering from a titan eating your whole damned arm off. You have a couple options. One is to tell them what they want to hear, which will probably end with your execution.” He looks around one more time, then adds quietly, “The other is to overpower me right now and escape.”

Erwin studies him. “Nile, I’m not going to put your career at risk.”

“We both know that half-assed handcuff job can’t really hold you. Everyone would buy it. You’ve always been the stronger soldier, and your enemies are selling the narrative that you’re sneaky. I’ll say I had a soft spot for you because we’re old friends, and you used that to your advantage. Please, Erwin.” His

throat bobs. “I’ve seen what people look like after they’re done with them.”

Erwin eyes him for another moment, then begins to walk down the hallway again. “It’s this way, isn’t it?”

Nile sighs, then hurries to catch up with him. “You fucking idiot,” he growls. “You goddamned fucking *moron*. Does Levi know you’re about to throw your life away?”

“Yes.”

“Bullshit. He’d have slit my throat by now.” He looks warily at the windows. “He’s not going to slit my throat, is he?”

Erwin smiles to himself. Levi trusts him to scheme his way out of this mess.

And he will.

The men waiting for them have a tray of implements ready: pliers, hammers, tweezers, and some syringes. The embedded cuffs in the wall are open and waiting for him. Erwin holds out his wrist and Nile unlocks the cuffs.

Their eyes hold.

“I hope you’re happy with your choices,” Nile mutters and he turns away.

Erwin calmly walks over to the wall and raises his arm to the wall cuffs, waiting to be restrained.

The men look at him, frowning.

“A cocky one,” one says as he fastens the cuff to the wall.

“Then let’s skip right to the fun stuff,” the other says, bringing a suspiciously green syringe to Erwin’s arm, stabbing him through the fabric.

His veins turn to flame and he roars.

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ERWIN FALLS INTO the sand on all fours, gasping for air like he has just swum up from the bottom of a lake. His stomach heaves, but he swallows it back. *It’s not real. It’s over.*

He shakily pushes himself to his feet.

The paths realm feels more solid now than it ever has before, as if he is actually here instead of dreaming it. *The ritual worked.* He bends to run his fingers through the sand. It sticks to his hand like snow to a mitten, sparkling in the starlight. Brushing it off, he looks around.

Ahead of him is the glowing pillar in the distance, where all the beams of light converge. If the myths are true, that is where Ymir will be. It's also the most likely place to find Levi and Eren.

As he walks along the dunes, he sees more of the little glowing puddles in the sand. He pauses by one to inspect it. A memory skates across its surface, but not his: Levi is standing on a field, drenched in blood.

Erwin squats down so he can see it clearly.

*“Wait!” Levi yells. “I swore to him that I’d kill you no matter what.”*

*The titans converge, and Levi has barely any blades. His face twists, rage and sorrow on his face.*

*“I swore to him!” he screams as he launches at the nearest titan.*

Erwin abruptly pulls away. He knows what this must be, but it is not his to see.

If Levi's memories are here, then it follows that he must be nearby. He climbs to the top of a dune for a better vantage point.

He sees a small form on all fours, shoulders shaking.

“Levi?”

The shuddering stops.

“Levi,” he calls again, hurrying toward him.

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LEVI FREEZES WHEN he hears Erwin's voice. He sits up and turns, not trusting his ears.

It's him. Erwin runs toward him, skidding a little down the sand dune. Levi's throat tightens.

“Levi,” Erwin says, stopping in front of him. “You made it safely.”

Levi clasps his arms; he’s solid. He’s real.

“I thought you died,” he breathes, and he buries his face in Erwin’s chest.

“I thought I was dying, too.”

“I thought I lost you again.”

“It’s okay. I’m here.”

Levi grabs his collar and kisses him hard.

When they pull apart, they both turn to the glowing pillar in the distance. Levi looks up at Erwin and sees that he wears a sharp expression, focussed on their goal.

“Have you seen Mikasa or Eren?”

Levi shakes his head. “I don’t know if she made it here.”

“We’ll find out.” Erwin points to the pillar. “That’s where we need to go. But watch where you step. There are memories in odd places around here.”

“Like the one that pulled you down that one time?” Levi walks up to one, shimmering on the sand like a heat wave. He bends over it. A picture surfaces: Erwin, standing in the hallway of the base with a medic.

The puddle is growing. He takes a step back. “What—”

The image expands and swallows them both.

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ERWIN STRIDES UP to the medic. “How is he?”

“You can go in and see him,” the medic says, and she shakes her head. “Maybe you can talk some damned sense into him.”

Erwin bows his head, takes a deep breath, then sets his jaw and opens the door.

Levi sits on the bed, staring at the wall. His leg is stretched out on the bed and freshly bandaged.

Hovering in the doorway, Erwin says, “Levi.”

The grey eyes lift to meet his, and his mouth twists. “They won’t let me try to stand. They say I can’t go back on the field for weeks.”

“I’m sure it won’t be that long. You recover quickly.”

“She’s still out there, and I’m useless.”

“You aren’t useless. You still have a role to play.” Erwin strides into the room, letting the door close behind him. “More importantly: how are you feeling?”

With a shrug, Levi says, “They drugged me up pretty good. I don’t feel much.”

They’re quiet for awhile, then Erwin says, “Your squad—”

“—knew what they were getting into,” is the reply, but his face twists again.

“I’m sorry,” Erwin says softly.

Levi looks surprised by the apology. His voice is barely audible: “Was it worth it?” When Erwin doesn’t reply, he adds, “The Female Titan got away. I broke my ankle. Eren almost got himself killed. And we lost so many good people, and damaged the morale of the survivors.”

Erwin sits gently on the bed, careful not to disturb his leg. “We learned a lot from this mission. But no, Levi, I can’t say for certain it was worth it. I did not anticipate so much sacrifice for so little gain.” He rubs his forehead. “And I’m afraid she has put us in a position where we will need to sacrifice even more to ferret out her identity.”

“You have a plan?” Levi asks.

“The beginnings of one. I’m still trying to figure out the details.” The biggest details are how to limit the loss of human life. The expedition has shaken his confidence; he has never lost so many troops in one battle. And if she’s within the walls, as he suspects, then even civilians will be at risk. He lets out a low sigh. “Levi, with all that is happening, I may end up becoming the greatest villain within these walls.”

Levi studies him for a long time, then shakes his head. “Maybe I’m an idiot for it. But I’ll be by your side. Even if I can’t

do much with this leg.”

“I’ll be glad to have you there.” Erwin looks away. “You probably aren’t comfortable here, but they’ll want you to be monitored while you’re on morphine. I could sign you out into my care.”

“You have bigger things to worry about.”

“I thought that tonight, after the losses you suffered ...” Erwin’s voice is soft. “You might not want to be alone. Though I understand if you hold me responsible—”

“I don’t. But don’t waste time thinking about me right now. You have a strategy to plan. I’ll be fine.”

Erwin nods and stands. “If you need anything, don’t hesitate to send for me. Goodnight, Levi.”

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THE SAND DUNES swirl back into place, and Levi staggers back. “Did you see that, too?”

“Yes.”

Levi pauses. “Were you trying to get me into your bed? Was this one of those moments where you thought we were dancing around something, and I had no clue?”

Erwin clears his throat. “Well ... Yes. But you were freshly mourning, and I didn’t take your rejection personally. Not everyone wants intimacy when they’re mourning.”

“For fuck’s sakes,” Levi mutters. He stands. “Is that what the paths wanted us to risk our lives for with this stupid ritual? They’re going to show us all the times I accidentally cockblocked you?”

“I think that was just a random memory. I experienced something similar when I arrived,” Erwin says with a smile. “But perhaps we should prepare for a few more of the ‘cockblock’ variety.”

“How many, exactly?”

“A few. Come on.” Erwin takes his hand. “We need to find

Eren.”

They move forward through the sand, and Levi eyes the memories they pass. His capture in the Underground—he gives that one a wide berth. The party they threw for Erwin when he became the new Commander. That is a fond memory, but he doesn’t want to see Mike, Moblit, and the others. It will hurt too much.

He stops at another one. “I don’t remember this one.”

“What is it?” Erwin asks, standing beside him, and the memory expands and consumes them.

..❀❀..

LEVI, ERWIN, AND Pixis sit at the table of the hotel room. Four empty wine bottles lay haphazardly scattered across the table, and Pixis is draining the last of an amber liquid from his cup. Erwin and Levi have red, flushed faces, and they’re both laughing loudly—even Levi.

“Well, it’s getting late,” Pixis says, voice heavily slurred. He stands and sways, bracing himself against the wall for support. “Thank you for your hospitality, gentlemen.”

Erwin stands to get his coat, but stumbles and falls against the wall. Levi laughs again.

“Drink lots of water,” Pixis advises them as the door closes.

“Holy fuck,” Levi says, too loudly. He clutches his head, then topples back onto the bed. “I am so drunk.”

Erwin’s back slides down the wall as he sinks to the floor. “The world is spinning. Trying to throw me off.”

“I didn’t think I could get drunk,” Levi continues. “I thought I could drink and drink and drink and nothing would happen, but I am *drunk*. Pixis is a goddamned dick with his homemade booze from hell. The fuck was in that?”

“Okay, okay, I think I’m feeling a little more clear-headed now,” Erwin says, and he stands and stumbles to the bed. He rolls

onto his back beside Levi. “Nope. Still spinning.”

Levi laughs again.

“You know what,” Erwin says, rolling on his side to face him. “You know what, Levi? Why shouldn’t we be drunk? We should do this again. We should just get absolutely smashed like this again. We’ve earned this. We deserve this.”

“I didn’t think I could *get* drunk.”

Erwin closes his eyes and begins to warble a familiar military drinking song: “*I lost my lad beyond the walls—*”

“It’s ‘lass,’” Levi mumbles.

“*He’s gone so far, my heart is sick—*”

“She.”

Erwin belts, “*I miss the way he licked my balls, and how he sucked my di-i-i-ick.*”

Levi clumsily rolls onto his side to look at him, too. “That’s not ... that’s not how it goes. You’re doing the words wrong.”

“It’s a dumb song, anyway.”

“Then don’t sing it.”

“But it’s *tradition.*” The word has too many syllables for Erwin’s drunk mouth to handle, and he stumbles over it. He clutches his head. “Spinning. How strong was that ...”

They’re quiet for a moment. Erwin studies him, face soft.

“What?” Levi demands.

“Levi, why haven’t we ever.”

“Ever what? Gotten drunk? I didn’t think I could *get* drunk.”

“Why haven’t we ever ...” Erwin trails off again.

Levi squints at him, trying to understand.

Erwin tries to reach over and touch his lips, but he’s so uncoordinated that he smacks his nose instead.

“Ow,” Levi says.

“Wait, wait, I can do this.” Erwin focuses hard and drags his fingertips across Levi’s bottom lip. “That.”

“That what?”

“Why haven’t we ever *that*?”

“Kissed?”

“All of it. Everything. We’re soldiers, but we’re just men, too.”

Levi moves his face closer, peering at him. “You tryin’ to fuck me, Erwin?”

Erwin moves closer, too. “What if I was?”

“Try it and find out.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.”

They stare for a moment longer, then slowly close the gap with a sloppy, drunken kiss. The kiss quickly turns aggressive. Erwin rolls Levi onto his back and climbs on top of him, grinding hard, their kiss still unbroken. Levi’s legs wrap around him, hands clawing into his back.

After a minute or two, Erwin breaks the kiss. “Too drunk, I can’t ... ” he mumbles, followed by a phrase that’s completely unintelligible.

“It’s okay. Just kiss me. Here.”

Levi rolls the two of them over so that he’s lying on top now, but then he suddenly sits bolt upright and grabs his mouth with both hands.

“Levi?”

Levi pitches over the side of the bed and army-crawls for the garbage can. He barely makes it in time to wretch into the container. “Oh fuck,” he gasps, followed by more gagging.

Several minutes later, when his stomach is finally calm, he manages to find his way back to the top of the bed—no thanks to the floor, which is rocking beneath him—and sees that Erwin is motionless.

“Hey. Erwin?”

No reply. He rolls Erwin onto his side to make sure he won’t choke in the night, then sinks back to the floor, where he falls asleep.

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AS THE MEMORY fades, Erwin and Levi stare.

“What was *that*?” Levi demands.

Erwin’s brows pinch in contemplation. “Let’s see. That most likely would have been in 846, when we were meeting Pixis to talk about partitioning the wall defense budget allocation. I remember him bringing his homemade wine. I think it was wine. Cognac?”

“I remember being sick as hell the next morning,” Levi mutters. “Ackerman blood didn’t help me much there.”

Erwin nods. “I couldn’t keep anything down for the entire day.” He turns to Levi. “Did you remember … that particular memory?”

Levi shakes his head. “Did it really happen?”

“It looks plausible enough.”

“For fuck’s sakes, this thing really *is* going to show us all the ways we cockblocked ourselves. You’d think it would be showing us how to stop the *impending war*. “Levi’s mind races. It wasn’t often that he got drunk, but it happened a few times over the years. “So we’ve actually kissed before? Do you think we ever actually had sex?”

“I like to think one of us would have remembered the next day,” Erwin says. “That, and the chances of us being drunk enough to forget but still physically capable are pretty slim. Although … there was that one Christmas party in 847 that got a little wild.”

Levi considers. “I woke up with some bite marks on my neck.”

“Oh?”

“I thought they must be bug bites or something.” He looks up at Erwin. “I hope that was you and not some random soldier.”

“I woke up next to you that morning,” Erwin says quietly.

“What?”

“On the floor of my office. You were spooning back

against me; you had no shirt, and mine was unbuttoned. I carried you back to your room and left you in your bed with a glass of water beside you.”

“And you never told me?”

Erwin clears his throat. “I thought you might be embarrassed. You aren’t really the type to get black-out drunk, and you aren’t normally physically affectionate. I didn’t remember what happened the night before, and you didn’t say anything the next morning, so I assumed it was either completely innocent or something you wanted to forget. Besides, we weren’t the only ones sleeping in the room, so I thought maybe we were playing a strip card game or something.” He pauses. “At least, that was what I told myself, but I don’t think I believed it.”

“No wonder everyone thought we were together,” Levi mutters. “We could have had a relationship that entire time and it wouldn’t have made any difference except for actually having sex.” They begin to walk, hand-in-hand, toward the glowing pillar in the distance.

“Well, a relationship is more than just sex, so maybe they were right, in a sense.” Erwin squeezes his hand. “Come on. There may be other memories along the way that will provide us with information to prevent the attack.”

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THE MEMORIES GET thicker as they move toward the glowing tree. They aren’t just laying in the sand now; they drift past them in the air, battering them like wind. Levi can’t see Erwin anymore, he just knows he’s there by the grip on his hand.

The memories are scrambled out of order. Here is the first time they shared dinner together, then the time he helped Hange capture Sawney and Bean, then the night Isabel gave him a leather necklace she had woven from scraps, then a flicker of Erwin laughing with the sun in his hair. Levi struggles to find his footing against the onslaught, sand slipping beneath him.

And then, he falls.

The sand shifts into a room, and he recognizes the home where he spent the first several years of his life.

Levi's throat tightens when he sees his mother sitting beside him. She gives him a big smile, beautiful and warm. "Good morning, sleepyhead! How is my little man this morning?"

He tries to say her name, but the squeal of a baby comes out of his mouth instead.

The door opens, and a man steps into the room. He's short, with a lean and muscled body. His face is kind, with a lopsided smile and silver eyes. The peppered greys in his hair form the same pattern that Levi has now.

"Kuchel," he says, kissing Levi's mother. He turns to Levi and ruffles his hair. "Look at how thick it's coming in."

"He cut two teeth, too."

"Two teeth! Incredible. Levi, you're doing such a good job of growing up. Soon you'll be big and strong." He holds up a bag. "Provisions. Enough for mama and baby for a week."

Her face falls. "Dren."

"I can't stay, Kuchel."

"Why not?"

He sighs. "I didn't get the surface passes. I'm so sorry, love. It was an MP sting." He sits on the bed on Levi's other side, putting his arms around them both. "Now I'm wanted above ground, too. I barely escaped. And Garrett's looking for me in every corner of the Underground. I'm stuck. And as long as I'm on the run from them, they'll come for you and Levi. I'm sorry, Kuchel. The best thing I can do for you both is disappear for a while."

"We'll disappear with you," she says firmly.

"No. You know I love this little guy, but he's a baby. He's going to cry and scream." He reaches over Levi to stroke her hair. "We'll figure something out, after things cool off. We'll find our better life yet."

Someone pounds at the door, and his hand freezes.

“Shit,” Kuchel whispers. “Were you followed?”

“I didn’t think … Shit.” He stands and draws a knife. “Take Levi and barricade yourselves in the closet.

“But—”

“Go!”

The door slams open and three men barge in.

Levi starts to cry.

“A fucking baby?” one of them says, surprised. “Garrett didn’t say anything about a fucking baby.”

“Stay away from them!” Dren lunges at the closest man and manages to carve a deep gash in his side, but one of the others easily overpowers him and holds him up by his shirt collar.

“Okay, shorty, you have fifteen seconds to give us the money, or all three of you are dead,” the man holding him roars.

“Even the fucking baby?” says the first man.

Kuchel places Levi on the bed, facing the wall. “Mommy will be right back,” she whispers in his ear.

Chaos sounds behind him, and Levi starts wailing again. There are thumps and crashes, and he hears his mother yell with rage, and the men yelling back.

At last, he hears her stomp outside the door. “Yeah, you’d better run, you fucker!” Tell your boss to come collect your friends’ bodies before they stink up the place!” She spits.

The door slams.

“Kuchel … ” a weak voice says. “I’m sorry.”

“Dren. It’s okay. Stay with me.”

She repeats his name, louder and louder, and her sobs become wails—

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A HAND GRABS LEVI and jerks him forward. He stumbles.

Mikasa stands in front of him. The air is calm, and he

realizes they're standing in the sand dunes in the paths again.

“You made it.” She hesitates. “Where’s the Commander? It looked like he ... didn’t make it.”

“No, he’s here. Somewhere. I lost him back there.” He turns, but the storm of memories has vanished. “Oh.”

“I thought maybe ... because you’re crying ... ”

Levi touches his hand to his face. He wipes away the tears. “This place is fucking with my mind.”

“Mine, too,” she says grimly. “Any sign of Eren?”

He shakes his head. “Erwin thinks he’ll be at that glowing tree thing in the distance.” He does a slow spin around and, not seeing Erwin, decides heading for the glowing pillar is the best way to reunite with him.

They fall into step. Levi looks around, unsettled.

“You okay?” she asks.

He’s shaken enough to be vulnerable with her. “You know when you’re with them, and then they aren’t there anymore, it’s like ... ” He can’t quite describe it.

“A hollowness,” she says softly.

He nods.

As they walk, he sees scattered memories in the sand, and he frowns. “These memories aren’t all from within us, are they?”

“What do you mean?”

“Some are from when I was a baby, or when I was too drunk to have actually remembered.”

She looks surprised. “You managed to get that drunk?”

He ignores the question. “I think this place is a collection of moments from our lives. Not just memories.” He thinks of the kind face of the father he didn’t know he had, the sobs of his mother. He recognized the power in her voice; she attached to his father the way he attached to Erwin, the way Mikasa attached to Eren. She raised him while carrying that grief in her heart. He feels a renewed sense of respect for her.

They’re close to the glowing pillar when Mikasa suddenly says, “I don’t know what I’m going to say to him.” She shoves a

hand through her hair. “What did you say to the Commander when you first found him?”

“Just his name,” Levi says softly. “That’s all you need to say. The rest will be understood.”

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ONE MOMENT, LEVI is holding his hand, and the next, he has disappeared. Erwin looks around. “Levi?” The hairs on the back of his neck rise. Apparently the rules of time and space don’t apply here.

He turns to look for the pillar where the paths conjoin, and stops. In its place is a tall beech tree—no, it’s two trees inosculated, starting from two different trunks that twist and combine into one.

This must be another memory. He takes a breath to steady himself and lets it play out.

Two men are approaching from the distance, trekking through deep snow. One is his father, walking with a shorter man—

He hears laughter. No, that’s not his father’s laugh.

It’s his own.

The pair walks closer. Levi’s hair is snow-white, Erwin’s is grey. Smile-lines are etched deeply in their faces, although Levi, of course, also has a deep wrinkle between his brows. Their hands are joined, and even though they look to be in their seventies or so, their posture and movements are still strong.

As they approach, the older Erwin stops and looks at the tree. “Ah. I wondered when I’d chance upon this.”

“What’s wrong?” Levi asks.

Erwin holds his breath as the older Erwin turns to him, looking just slightly in the wrong direction, as if not really seeing him. “Keep hope,” he says. “Trust Levi to do the right thing. It will all work out in the end.”

Levi wrinkles his nose at him. “What? Who are you talk-

ing to?"

"Oh, seeing these trees just made me recall an old memory."

"Don't tell me you're going senile already," Levi grumbles.

Older Erwin chuckles. They fall back into step, and older Erwin gives a slightly off-kilter wink as he passes.

Erwin stares after them as they disappear and the sand dunes fade back into view. Hope kindles in his chest, warm and strong.

He doesn't have time to contemplate what he just witnessed, because the conjunction of the paths is just a few metres ahead of him. He can see a figure in front of it, silhouetted against the white. A young man.

Mikasa's voice yells from his right, "Eren!"

He turns, and Mikasa and Levi fade in from out of nowhere, moving toward the pillar.

All four of them meet at the same time. Mikasa jumps onto Eren and wraps her arms around him, crying.

Levi wraps his arms around Erwin's waist. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Yeah. This place is rough." He frowns. "Too many unhappy moments."

"Agreed. Although some pleasant ones, too."

Levi looks up at him, confused, but Erwin only smiles. Together, they turn to face Eren.

Just as Levi described, he looks almost the same, except for his eyes. Erwin immediately sees what he meant. Those eyes look ancient.

And in that gaze, he realizes Eren Yeager didn't just meet the founder Ymir.

Somehow, he has become her.

# ❖ Fifteen ❖

## A TAPESTRY UNRAVELLING

*-year 850-*

THE ELECTRICITY OF THE ritual pulsed through Eren's body like a titan transformation, but instead of gaining matter from the paths, he was being torn into confetti and tossed to the heavens. The last thing he heard was Mikasa's scream.

He shot upward through a sea of scrambled voices and visions—too many to understand, from too many different lives—then burst through the surface and rolled. Spitting out sand, he pushed himself upright and patted his body. He was whole again.

He looked around. Though he had never been here before, the streaked sky and endless dunes were familiar. When he had first touched Historia's hand, the barrage of images had laid out his entire destiny, and the paths were among them: an endless sea of Eldian lives, all converging in one pre-destined past, present, and future.

A future he was going to change.

“Ymir,” he called, because in his visions, the founder had been here: a little girl building sandcastles, lost in a purgatory of her own creation.

There was no noise to indicate anyone approaching, but the hair on the back of his neck prickled. He turned. There she was, a girl no more than ten years old, her eyes hidden by thick bangs, dressed in ragged clothing. He took a deep breath to steady a surge of protective anger (*how dare a girl this young be*

*confined here, how dare she be forced to—*) and knelt so he could look her in the eye.

“Ymir. Hello.”

She stood motionless for a moment longer, then walked past him and began to shape a mound of sand.

Eren turned to follow her. “I’m here on behalf of Queen Historia Reiss of the royal bloodline. You can feel her will through me, can’t you? I carry the Founding Titan, and together, we have a request for you. We need to rewrite the memories of all the Eldians within Paradis so they don’t remember life outside the walls, or titan shifters, or the Survey Corps.”

He wanted to swallow back the words to fill the hollow they left in his stomach. But no, Armin and Hange had insisted the mind wipe was non-negotiable. If Eren’s mission here failed, then Hange would need to obey Marley’s bargain, and that meant the citizens of Paradis had to be naïve to the outside world.

Ymir finished shaping an arm in the sand, then finally seemed to acknowledge him. Though he couldn’t see her eyes, he felt her peering at him. Then, she reached out her hand as an invitation. He pressed his palm to hers.

That shock! It was far more invasive than when Historia had touched him during the ritual. He felt Ymir in his skin, in his veins, reading his wishes, dissecting him to find his connection to the royal family and the Founding Titan. She was turning him inside out, he was going to die there—

It stopped. Eren gasped and fell to his knees.

Ymir, unconcerned, knelt and began to draw shapes in the sand. Lights flashed along the paths above them like shooting stars.

Eren watched them, mouth open. “Those paths are the connection between all Eldians, right? The source of titan powers? How do they work?”

She didn’t reply.

“Can you stop the war? End the titan curse?”

She paused to glance in his direction, and he could feel the answer surface deep within him. “You can’t, can you? Your powers have limits. You’re a prisoner of the curse, too. But ... didn’t you create this place?”

As she kept sculpting and the lights kept flashing, Eren tried again: “Do you get to change anything at all about these paths, or are you stuck following something predetermined?”

She wiped her cheek with the back of her hand, then turned to him again. She moved her wrists together as if bound by manacles.

“Everything is already determined,” he said, understanding. “Past, present, future.”

She nodded.

“By you?”

There was no reply.

Eren clenched his jaw. There had to be a way to break through. The terrible future he foresaw could not—must not—come to pass. He thought of all those entrusting him to save their world: Armin, Mikasa, Historia, Jean, Connie, Sasha, the Captain, Hange ... Stubbornness flared in his heart.

“Teach me how to do this.”

She didn’t look at him, but her hands stopped working, as though she were listening.

He knelt beside her. “Teach me, Ymir. I’ll be your student. When I’ve mastered everything you know, you can leave. Pass your burden to me and I will continue your work.” He put a hand on her shoulder. “Aren’t you tired?”

A tear rolled down her cheek. Slowly, she reached out and pressed her fingertips to his forehead.

And then he saw her life of servitude, the source of all living matter that had bonded to her spine, the king whose will she followed without question.

Eren closed his eyes, letting the rush of information seep into his mind. *This is why none of the Founding Titans have been able to disobey the First King’s will. It’s Ymir who created this place, and she*

*will always be loyal to him.*

He was different. He had the determination to break free from that will. But first, he needed to master her powers.

Ymir cocked her head at him, as if asking if he was still up for the task.

He nodded. “Teach me.”

She traced a spiral shape in the sand, then looked up at him. He echoed her movements. Above them, the paths began to light up twice as quickly.

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EREN SOON LEARNED that time flowed differently within the paths realm than it did back in the physical plane. He was grateful to have near-unlimited time, because Ymir’s craft did not come naturally to him.

Once the memory wipe was done, she showed him how to craft titan parts out of sand to send to shifters. The memory wipe had only needed simple geometric shapes, and he had been able to follow them well enough, but the titan forms were complex. There was a looseness and a precision to them all at once that he could not wrap his head around. His first several attempts were blobs that she would flatten and rebuild.

Whenever he failed at yet another construction, he would grapple with self-doubt. Here he was in a world outside of time, being mentored by a god with unlimited patience, and he still couldn’t master the skills he needed. Then the self-doubt would spiral into frustration. Even Ymir’s immense power didn’t matter. Past, present, future were all outside his control. His mother would still die, Wall Maria would still fall, Armin would still become the Colossal Titan ...

... and Eren would still set the wall titans loose in the Rumbling.

The only thing that gave him hope was that the Eren he had seen in his visions had been an older version of himself, and

he didn't seem to be ageing here. So long as he was here, that horrific future was not happening. He had nothing to lose by continuing to try.

And so he pushed through his frustrations and kept practising.

It must have been thousands of attempts before Ymir finally inspected his work and nodded. Eren felt a swell of pride. With more practice, he was able to keep pace with her.

One time, he recognized the titan they were sculpting.

"Is this my father's titan? Grisha Yeager?"

She nodded.

He furrowed his brow, trying to make this new information fit in with his understanding of this strange realm. "So the timeline as we know it in our homeworld isn't a straight line here?"

She nodded again.

He felt as if someone had reached into his head and stretched his brain. Trying to disrupt the future was going to be difficult when he couldn't even grasp the idea of where the future was.

Still, he pushed forward.

Once he had fully mastered titan construction, she began to teach him how to read the memories of different Eldians. He soon discovered he had access to an entire catalogue of people's thoughts from every point in history, but unlike Ymir, he had no control over which person he picked. There were millions of Eldians throughout history, each of them having millions of thoughts, all tangled together like matted hair. How was Ymir able to keep them all straight in her mind?

Maybe he would understand once he inherited her full powers.

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EVENTUALLY, WHAT FELT like thousands of years later, he had mastered all her skills. He could detect an incoming titan

transformation, build the correct titan, and send it to the correct place. He could alter memories and create new ones in their place. He could feel dying Eldians coming to rest in the paths, and new ones being born.

“I’m ready,” he said confidently.

Ymir studied him as if deciding.

“Let the source of all living matter bind to me, Ymir. I have mastered everything I can do without it. I will continue your role as the caretaker of this realm and you will be reborn. Let me take your burden.”

The idea of being alone here terrified him, but this was the only way forward.

Finally, she nodded and gave him a shy hug. Then she pressed her hand to his forehead.

He blacked out.

When he came to, Ymir stood over him, watching him. For once, he could see her eyes, and she was smiling.

“Did you do it?” he asked.

She nodded.

He stood. As he looked at the paths, they weren’t a jumble of strings anymore; they were a harp, and he knew exactly which strings to pluck to play a melody. He grinned with triumph. *I can do this. I can fix this.*

“Are you ready to be free?” he asked her.

She nodded and held up a hand as a farewell.

He bent down to dig his fingers into the sand. Now that he could read the paths, he understood the flow of the timeline. He sent her back to a time and place of peace. She deserved to be born into a quiet existence.

As he watched her spark disappear along the paths, the coldest loneliness he had ever felt sank deep into the pit of his stomach. It was so quiet that he swore he could hear the paths buzzing, even though they were silent.

“Okay,” he said aloud, just to hear something. “Let’s get to work.”

The first thing he did was test if he could reach into Ymir's path and prevent the source of all living matter from fusing to her in the first place, but the source itself did not allow that. No surprise.

He tried to take titan powers from a shifter, but that was not allowed, either. Once a shifter had its power, it was locked into the thirteen year curse.

This was not going to be so simple as inheriting Ymir's power and willing the curse away, then. Well, he had nothing but time to try to figure something out.

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**BETWEEN THE DUTIES** Eren had taken on from Ymir, he began to study the way Eldian souls passed through the paths. When an Eldian died, their path was severed from their body and slowly ascended to be reabsorbed by the others. Eren found it conceptually easiest to think of this path as the person's 'soul.'

New souls, similarly, were created from the path's energy, their paths springing from the glowing pillar as if it were sprouting a new branch.

He began to understand the flow of the energy transfer; he could feel it by moving his hand through sand like he was sculling through water. If he pushed just right, he could redirect the energy—not entirely, not enough to derail the cycle between a dead soul and a new one, not enough to effect any real change, but it felt like a small victory against destiny all the same.

And now that he could feel that energy flow, he began to recognize it elsewhere. Sculpting a titan out of sand drew energy in. Delivering it along the paths pushed the energy out. Everything about Eldians came down to that simple energy push and pull.

And so he began to push harder against it, trying to redirect where the titan shifters went when they were inherited, or push back against souls returning to the paths. It was exhausting

work and, for a long time, he gained no traction.

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HOPE FINALLY CAME in the form of an unusual approaching soul. There was a strange thrum to it that reminded him of a call to transform into a titan, but wasn't quite right. Eren idly dragged his fingers through the sand to read it.

He froze as it came into focus.

*Commander?*

It was Erwin Smith, dying after the serum went to Armin. Eren closed his eyes, reading the Commander's path. During his ascent, a Marleyan serum had been injected, but too late to transform him. That was unusual, but it wasn't the source of the strange thrum.

He found it several years down the timeline: an injection using Eren's spinal fluid.

*That's right. Hange extracted several vials before we performed the ritual.* Those vials were the only part of Eren that remained on the physical plane, and as the serum swam through the Commander's blood, it called out to Eren as if desperate to reunite with him.

Eren didn't understand what the Eldians were trying to achieve by injecting the Commander; the Attack Titan and the Founding Titan already existed in Marley, so there was not even a remote possibility that it would make him a shifter. Eren also didn't understand how a dead man could receive another serum several years after his death.

Unless this would be where Eren first changed the course of fate.

He drove his hands into the sand to catch the Commander's energy. That thrum felt like a little weakness in the flow of the paths, a little push in Eren's favour. This was it. This would be his first time successfully breaking the rules of this place.

*Return to your body, he commanded in his mind.*

The energy pushed back. It always did, but that little thrum along his path was giving Eren an advantage. Sweat began to erupt on his forehead; he pushed harder. The Commander's soul was not ascending, but not descending. *Progress. Come on!* He began to slide backwards from the pushback. He dug his feet into the sand, too, channelling every drop of his energy into that soul.

*Return to your body.*

*Return to your body.*

*Return to your body, Commander!*

He screamed and dug deep into his rage, thrusting all his frustration at that soul. How dare the world force them to choose between his dearest friend and this man who had saved his life countless times. How dare this man throw himself into the line of fire and end up injured in the first place. How dare Eren be left here alone with no chance to alter fate. *Fight it!*

The energy gave way so suddenly that he tumbled forward. He lay on his stomach on the sand, breathing hard, as the Commander's energy drifted back to his body. Eren swiftly crafted a titan and sent it after him.

The titan was a bit sloppy, but it was enough: the Commander's wounds healed as he transformed. His path reattached to his body and grew into his future.

Erwin Smith was alive.

Eren cackled. "It worked! Commander, it worked. I beat death. I can change fate!" He rolled onto his back and laughed until tears streamed down his cheeks.

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FINDING THE COMMANDER gave Eren a reference point for the year 850, and now the flow of time through the paths shifted into sharp focus. There was Reiner's Armoured Titan in the same year. There was his father transferring his titan to Eren in 845. This new understanding gave him a new constant to play with in his quest to alter his destiny.

He had regained his sense of purpose, too. If that little thrum had allowed him to reverse death, maybe there were other weaknesses in the fabric of the paths that could be exploited.

He soon found one that occurred whenever a shifter, unexpectedly killed, was transferring to a newborn. There was a small gap when the path disconnected from the shifter and attached to the infant. It was here that Eren made his first major alteration: he took a Warhammer Titan from one infant and pushed it onto another newborn infant who had arrived too early to survive. The second infant began to steam in his mothers arms, and then let out a loud, healthy cry.

Eren fell to his knees and roared with triumph. He had changed fate again. And in the process, he had given thirteen years of life to an infant who would have had none—that was, presuming no one ate the child to gain its powers. He refused to follow its path to find out.

So, he had proven he could push a new shifter power through space. But what about through time? Could he even send all the shifters to one specific year? That could be a way to end the lines of succession and thus the titan curse, couldn't it?

He found a Colossal Titan in the year 859, who had been killed unexpectedly in battle. Instead of a contemporary newborn, he pushed with all his strength and redirected it to an Eldian newborn in the year 500.

It worked. It shouldn't have worked, but it did, and now there were ten shifters in the year 500, and eight in 859.

Eren raised his fists, ready to punch the air with triumph.

But immediate consequences began to ripple through the paths.

A new war in the old Eldian empire.

A battle to the death of Colossals, a line of succession with nowhere to go.

The seams of logic around the shifters began to split, leaving unravelling threads in the tapestry of time and space.

Yellow lightning crashed above Eren, and several paths snapped and fell like strands of brittle hair.

One of the snapped paths was a Warhammer Titan in the year 324, and it disappeared, breaking its line of succession, too. More lightning crashed. More paths fell.

For a moment, Eren thought he had successfully managed to undo the existence of titans. *At last!*

But as more and more paths fell away, the chain reaction began to eat through Eldian lives like a flame through paper. Civilians. Children.

“Stop!” Eren grabbed onto the unravelling threads of the paths, trying desperately to weave them back together.

An Attack Titan in 672 vanished.

An entire village in 224.

An Armoured Titan in 860.

A bloodline in 762 and beyond.

Eren yelled against the strain of holding the paths together. He found the missing Warhammer Titan shifter and sent it to the next in line, correcting that timeline. A moment later, he managed to do the same with the Attack Titan.

But the Armoured Titan from 860 was gone. Just, gone. It had no successor. None of the shifters did after the year 860. As Eren frantically combed through the paths, he realized with horror that a majority of Eldian paths ended that same year, most of them residents of Marley.

The Rumbling. It had to be.

He confirmed it in the paths: that was the year the wall titans would awaken.

He roared with frustration. All this effort, all this work, and the Rumbling would still happen. He had only successfully delayed it by *five measly years*—and he had started to tear apart the paths in the process. If he continued on this quest, he would kill every Eldian and completely reshape the history of the world. Or would that, too, crumble? Was the time and space of this place interwoven with the fabric of reality?

Fate closed in on Eren, strangled the breath from his body. He fell to his knees, sobbing. “What do you want from me?” he choked. He looked up at the fragile fates of all Eldians to ever exist. “Is the Rumbling how I will save the people of Paradis? Is that the only way?”

The paths, of course, had no answer. He stared at them, hatred boiling in his heart. They had taken so much from him. From everyone.

“You win.” He shoved himself to his feet and wiped his eyes. “If my only use is to be the monster that destroys the world, then I’ll play my role.” At least eighty percent dead was better than one hundred.

*Awaken!* Eren stabbed his hands into the paths of the wall titans.

A jolt threw him backwards; he landed in a heap in the sand. He stared for a moment, dazed, then tried again.

Another jolt.

And that was when he realized his fatal mistake. When he had accepted Ymir’s role, he had done so with the explicit intention to carry on her burden, to build on the foundations upon which this place had been created.

He had bound himself to the First King’s will.

He laughed and sobbed and yelled. So it was all useless, everything he had done. This timeline was full of contradictions and would, in all likelihood, implode under the weight of its own faulty logic. The Rumbling both would and would not happen in the year 860, and everything would unravel.

Eren rolled onto his back and stared up at the paths.

*You were the one who made this world, Ymir. You were the one who bound the source of all living matter to the First King’s will. Does that mean you are the only one who can break us free?*

More paths fell away. Eren closed his eyes. He was in over his head. He wished for Armin’s insight. Maybe he could find a way to bring Armin here, to coax him to perform the ritual with Historia. So long as the paths were still standing, there was a

chance to set things right.

He reached up for the paths, combing for Armin, but stopped when he came across a familiar thrum instead.

*The Commander. The Commander and the Captain.*

Eren sat upright. The two of them had years of experience making ruthless decisions in impossible situations. Their paths were intertwined; he could reach both of them at once.

There was no time to second-guess his decision. Setting his jaw, he jammed his hands into the sand.

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**-year 860-**

“IT TOOK A FEW tries,” Eren concludes, “But then I was finally able to reach you.”

Levi has been sitting cross-legged on the sand with the others, listening to Eren’s story. Eren seems to have forgotten how to talk to people; half of what he’s saying isn’t making any sense. To Levi’s surprise, Erwin is nodding along frequently, as if Eren is describing his breakfast instead of ‘holding together the loose threads of fate.’

Levi looks at Mikasa to see how she’s taking all this. She raises a brow at him and tilts her head at Eren in an implied, *are you getting this?* He gives a subtle shake of his head.

“So,” Erwin says, “you’ve been the one reaching out to us, then.”

“Yes,” Eren replies. “You and Captain Levi, because your paths are connected—and because I need you both. It took several tries. It turns out that reaching Eldians on the physical plane is a difficult task when it isn’t ordered by a member of the royal family.”

*Who is this boy?* Levi thinks. The way he’s speaking isn’t anything like the Eren he remembers. Then again, this is an Eren

who has been performing the work of a god for countless years. That would make anyone a little strange.

“What do you need us to do?” Levi asks, searching for something concrete amidst all this abstraction.

“You’ve noticed the memories around here,” Eren says.

“Hard to miss them.”

“I suppose that’s true; the chaos within the paths is creating plenty of fragments. Have you noticed there are two types? Some are like stage plays, moments from Eldian lives that are records of history. Others are moments Eldians can actually step into and relive.”

Erwin considers. “Yes. The first time I encountered a memory, back before the ritual, I felt myself fully reliving a moment with Levi on the rooftop. And there was another that played out as I arrived here, too, a moment after my arrest. The other memories have been more like watching a play.”

Eren’s eyes light up. “Did you feel as if your mannerisms and words were following a track, like a cart on a rail?”

Levi and Mikasa both look blankly at him, but Erwin nods. “Yes.”

Eren leans closer. “Did it feel as if you could bump it off the rail? Diverge from the path?”

“No,” Erwin says, but then he pauses. “Although, when the memory on the rooftop began, I was making a shocked facial expression, and Levi seemed a bit confused by it at the time.”

“Good. What about you, Mikasa? Captain?”

Levi recalls the moments with his mother and father. Now that he thinks about it, that really was different from the other memories he saw here—it felt so real. He wasn’t just recalling his parents’ embrace; he was experiencing it again. “Yes, I had one of those, too. I didn’t try to change anything, though.”

“Same here,” Mikasa says.

Eren’s eyes are so alive they’re practically glowing. “When you felt yourself in those moments, you were *actually there*. Eldian bodies are special: we all carry the paths within us. Think

of it as your ‘soul.’ Your soul is still connected to your body back on the physical plane, and because you are here, outside of time, your soul can connect to your body at different points of your existence back on Paradis.”

Erwin says, “You intend to connect us with a past moment in our lives, to relive the past and ‘push the cart off the rail’ to avoid where we are now?”

“Exactly.” Eren gestures around him. “This whole system of paths was created by Ymir, and based on my failure to destroy it, I don’t think anyone but her can dismantle it. She’s the only one who can break her loyalty to the First King. But having experienced that will, it is unbreakable. That leaves only one option.”

“The wall titans,” Erwin says.

Eren nods. “The Rumbling.”

Levi’s lip curls. “How does killing eighty percent of the world’s population end the titan curse?”

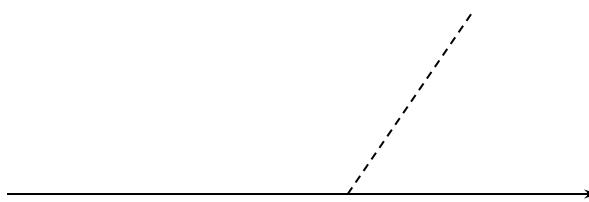
“It doesn’t. But it guarantees the Eldians will be left alone.” Eren sighs again and traces idle circles in the sand. “I tried so hard to avoid that future, but it’s inescapable. I can’t go against the First King. I also can’t leave the paths now, partly because I took on Ymir’s role, and partly because my body was destroyed when I travelled here, which severed my connection to it. I need someone else to help me.” He looks at Mikasa as he adds, “My path is closed. The only way to go forward from here is to go back.”

Erwin’s gaze is distant, as if he’s deep in thought. “Have you thought about what you would do differently if you could go back?”

“Yes, but it’s not simple.” Eren traces a straight line in the sand. “This is how the three of you perceive time. Past, present, future. All of those times happen more or less simultaneously in the paths, so all your future actions are predestined along this line.”

Erwin nods, following. Levi thinks he's following, too, but he mostly just wants to know what they have to do next so they can finish and go back to their lives.

Eren draws a second line at a sharp angle.



"This is what I tried to do. By changing when the shifters existed, I tried to radically break away from the timeline and contradict the curse. It didn't work. The changes I tried were too big, and had too many side effects. Think of the timeline like paper. If you give it a couple shallow creases, it will still lay mostly flat, just slightly changed. If you bend it too much or with too much force, it will never lay flat again, and may even rip."

He draws two small bumps off the first line.



"This is what we need to do. Two small creases that bring us to where the titan curse is broken." He taps the end of the timeline.

"You know what those changes are?" Erwin asks.

Eren nods. "I'm just guessing, but I know the paths pretty well by now, so it's an informed guess. The first change will be done by Captain Levi."

All eyes shift to Levi, and his skin crawls. "Me?"

"Yes. I found a memory you can step into. You can follow the memory until it's time to make the first small change."

“And what change am I supposed to make?”

“You need to give Commander Erwin the titan serum.”

“What?” Levi says, tone leaden.

“And then he will eat me.”

“What?” Levi and Mikasa demand, almost in one voice.

“For this plan to succeed, the Commander needs to be the one controlling the Founding Titan, not me.” Eren taps the second bump in the timeline. “And then it will be Commander Erwin who enters the paths realm to speak to Ymir. You have the skills necessary to convince Ymir to start the Rumbling.”

The three of them are silent, shocked, except Erwin, whose face is carefully neutral.

“You want me to inherit the Founding Titan so I can work with Ymir to free the wall titans,” he says.

“Yes ... sir.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Levi says. “You want Erwin to eat you, interact with a god, and then *murder* eighty per cent of the world?”

Mikasa grips the sides of her head, curling into herself. “No,” she protests.

Erwin’s eyes are sharp. “Eren, you said that in your vision, you were the one to start the Rumbling.”

Eren sighs and looks down. “The man I saw in the vision is not *me*, Commander. He was older, hardened, ready to burn down everything to save the people he cared about. That’s not me, and I don’t see how I could ever become that way.”

“It was you,” Erwin says. “If you let the timeline play out, you will become that man.”

“But what if I don’t?” Eren asks, looking for the first time like the boy who had first joined the Survey Corps. “I’ve mastered the powers of a god, and I’m still unable to stop the titan curse.” He looks at Mikasa, and his words sound like an apology: “Every single time I’ve tried to take a stand, I haven’t been strong enough. I’ve failed every step of the way from the moment I first saw the Colossal Titan all those years ago, and even my successes

have been quickly followed by horrible consequences.”

“That’s not true,” Mikasa says quietly.

“It is. Commander, you have made a career out of making difficult decisions, sacrificing the lives of some for the greater good. You are the only man I know who could actively make a decision like this. You are the only person who has shown complete dedication to the good of humanity.”

“You say you have failures,” Erwin says. “I have always seen a boy who gets up and keeps fighting after every failure.”

Eren laughs. “So I’m stubborn. How does that help? This isn’t a problem I can barge through, Commander. This is a problem that requires foresight and strategy that I don’t have.” He gestures up at the paths. “I tried to be patient and strategic, and I failed. If you could feel how fragile the paths are right now, you would understand that there is no continuing along this timeline. Paths are fractured and moments are falling where they aren’t supposed to be, and the whole thing will come down at any minute.”

“And what happens to Erwin after the Rumbling?” Levi demands. “Is he stuck here for eternity, building sand sculptures? Or does this whole place come down and he disappears with it?”

“I don’t know,” Eren admits. “Something will happen during the Rumbling to end the titan power. I can’t see what, exactly, because this timeline is too broken to look that far ahead. It’s possible this place will fade from existence. It’s possible it will still exist, but will be cut off from all other worlds for eternity.”

Levi glances at Erwin, who is still expressionless. “You can’t be considering this,” he says, almost pleading.

“You can’t,” Mikasa echoes.

Eren turns to Mikasa and puts a hand on her shoulder. “Mikasa, I am dead either way, whether I am eaten or end up here. Shouldn’t my abilities go to someone with a greater chance of carrying them through?”

“We need to talk with Hange and Historia,” Levi says, desperate to get Erwin as far from this conversation as possible.

“You said time moves differently here, right? So we still have four days until Marley attacks. Maybe there’s another way.”

Eren looks at him sadly. “You and Mikasa have bodies to go back to, Captain ...”

Levi’s heart clenches. He recalls Erwin’s skin, rendered and consumed by glowing yellow light. “No.”

“The Commander—”

“Stop!”

“—does not.”

Levi can’t breathe. He looks at Erwin, who is staring at nothing.

“I’m dead,” Erwin says, as if processing the words. He turns to Eren, face still blank. “I died during the ritual.”

“Yes,” Eren says quietly. “And like me, your path has been severed from all its connections to your body, so I can’t send you back with the Captain. But the moment your body transforms into a mindless titan, I will be crafting you a titan out of sand and your soul will connect with it. Then I can send your soul back, because you will have a body to return to.”

Levi barely hears him. He stares at Erwin, whose chin is held high, jaw tight.

*I watched him die again.* Levi thinks of the cabin with Hange, the new wardrobe in the hotel, the way Erwin looked in that suit—*that man is dead? He won’t be there if we return?*

He moves by instinct. His heel connects with Eren’s chest, knocking him backwards.

Mikasa jumps between them, teeth bared. “Captain, stand down.”

“You brought us here, you piece of shit,” Levi hisses around her. “You had him sacrifice his life for your own goals. *Again.*”

“I didn’t know the ritual would kill him,” Eren says. “I’m sorry. But if Marley attacked Paradis, none of you were going to survive, anyway. And if this timeline crumbles, none of you will have ever existed. There was no choice.”

“Captain,” Mikasa warns. “Back off.”

Levi dodges around her and swings at him again, and Mikasa is about to connect with his jaw, but a hand catches Levi’s wrist and pulls him back out of harm’s way. He turns to see Erwin standing behind him.

“Eren, Mikasa,” he says politely, “Levi and I need a moment to discuss.” He pulls Levi away before anyone can say another word.

Erwin leads him over a sand dune and down the other side, where they will have some privacy. Levi drops to a seat and curls into a ball, shaking.

“Levi,” Erwin says gently.

“You’re dead.”

Erwin drapes an arm around him and holds him close. “I’m here. Feel the weight of my arm?”

He can barely feel it. He’s too deep within himself, spiralling. “I’ve watched you die twice. Twice, Erwin. I saw the life leave your body both times, saw the look on your face—”

“Levi,” Erwin says firmly. “We’ve been backed into a corner. One way or another, we aren’t going back to the way things were.”

Levi turns to look at him. “You think you could do it? Kill that many people? Your whole career was built around keeping people alive. And your dream was to learn about the rest of the world, not destroy it.”

Erwin laughs darkly. “You give me too much credit, Levi. My career was built on the backs of the dead.”

“Fine, yes, a lot of soldiers died under your command, but you did everything possible to ensure their survival where you could. And even then, with all the warnings you gave and preventative measures you took, your guilt consumed you.”

With a low sigh, Erwin says, “This is far bigger than us, Levi.”

“I just … ” Levi bows his head and lets out a shaky sigh. “I just want to grow old with you in a little cabin in the woods.

That's all I want. And Hange can tinker in the basement as long as they're happy living with us, and maybe we can get a dog and some cats and ride horses, and you can do some consulting work with Historia, and we can have a little garden where I grow different types of tea."

Erwin nuzzles into his hair. "These past few days of reunion have meant so much. Look how much we have opened up to each other. Look how close we are allowing ourselves to become. If we travel back to 850 and I inherit the Colossal Titan, we'll have some more time together then, too."

"We've sacrificed so much. Isn't it enough? Why is it always up to us to sacrifice for the greater good?" Levi clutches at his head. "Why can't Eren do it? He's the one who started this whole mess."

"He has sacrificed a lot too, Levi, and he has pushed himself beyond his own limits. Even that wasn't enough—it's normal for him to be questioning whether he could do what needs to be done. Maybe that burden needs to pass to someone else to save us all."

His breath is warm in Levi's hair. He feels so alive here. How can he possibly be dead?

"We'll still have our memories, right?" Levi says softly. "We'll still be the same people we are now?"

"Of course we will. We're essentially travelling back in time and reliving those moments. I certainly knew who I was when I was reliving the memory of us on the rooftop."

Levi remembered who he was when he was reliving the moment with his parents, too. At least that's comforting. They won't be starting over from their old relationship again.

Erwin squeezes his shoulder. "Look at the paths, Levi."

They stare up at the sky together. The paths dance above them, streaks and stars. Watching them leaves Levi feeling insignificant and hollow.

"Just think," Erwin murmurs, "one of those is just for us. It has been there since these paths were created, waiting for us to

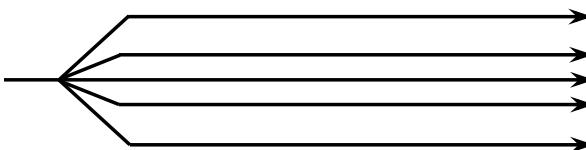
find each other.”

Levi curls into himself. “I told you before, I don’t like the idea of destiny.” Especially if their destiny is forcing them into this.

After a moment, Erwin says softly, “I don’t think Eren is correct that there is one fixed timeline.”

Levi doesn’t want to acknowledge the hope that sparks in his chest. “Oh?” he says with forced disinterest.

“When I ... ” Erwin pauses, letting the word *died* go unsaid. “As I travelled here during the ritual, I saw a flood of moments. Some made sense, in our world. Others were impossible: ones where I died in the gallows or Eren died at the hands of the MP. They felt no different from the ones I actually experienced, which makes me think they were all equally valid.” He bends forward and draws a line in the sand, then several others branching off of it.



“I believe the paths connect us not just through our timeline, but other timelines as well.”

Levi gives a low sigh and rubs his brow. He misses the days when strategies were simply, ‘kill this titan.’ “What are you getting at?”

“Maybe there are alternatives to the visions that Eren saw. If this source of all living matter can manipulate the fabric of reality, maybe it can reach into other realities as well. Maybe there’s a clue elsewhere, a way we can end all of this. But to know if that were possible ... ”

Levi sighs. “... you’d have to come here and speak to Ymir.” He closes his eyes. “And then you end the curse and stay here, cut off from all time, for eternity.”

“Perhaps.”

“And if that didn’t work, you’d have to let the Wall titans loose.”

“Perhaps,” Erwin adds, more quietly. “But that would be a last resort. Do we really have the right to destroy the rest of the world just so a few of us may live? Eren has been fighting ever since Wall Maria fell—probably his entire life. It’s what he knows best. Even the way he approached Ymir was with the goal of gaining her power for himself so he could attack the problem. The answer may lie in diplomacy instead of power and strife. I have to believe there are other ways to approach this than mass murder.”

“Diplomacy,” Levi mutters, thinking of the hidden room in the ballroom. “Don’t tell me you’re excited about the idea of going toe-to-toe with a god.”

Erwin chuckles. “Truthfully, I think this is a situation that requires compassion more than games. Ymir made her own prison and she will need support to find her way out of it.”

*Well, if there is anyone who knows what it’s like to make their own prison, it’s him.* Levi snuggles closer to him. “Erwin, you’re going to have to order me to do this, because I refuse to subject you to any of this mess.”

“Even if refusing to do anything completely unravels the fabric of our world?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m not your commanding officer anymore.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’ll follow any order you give me.”

Erwin pauses, then says, “I saw a moment from our future.”

“Here?”

“Yes. You and I, when we were much older. The older me said I should trust in your decision, and it will all turn out okay.” He kisses the top of Levi’s head. “So no, Levi, I am not going to order you to do anything. I’m sorry to do this to you again, but I’m going to trust your judgement and allow you to decide for

yourself. But I think you already know we have no options.”

Levi swallows hard. “I don’t want to lose you.”

Erwin rubs his shoulder. “I know. But we don’t know what will happen. Injecting me instead of Armin is a bigger change than Eren is suggesting. It’s bound to have consequences we can’t foresee. Maybe an entirely different future awaits us.”

“Maybe a worse one.”

Erwin gives him a wry smile. “I’ve died twice, Levi. How much worse can it get?”

“That’s not funny.”

After a few minutes, Levi sniffs, swabbing at his eyes. “Good thing we fucked so many times before we got here. Otherwise I’d be jumping you right now, and that would be awkward.”

“Yes, the others would probably overhear any sounds we made.”

“I meant sand in our asses, but that, too.” Levi leans on Erwin’s shoulder. “I can’t believe I’m in a different dimension created by a god, and my asshole is still sore.”

Erwin gives a deep, hearty laugh. “I suppose that will be one advantage of being a shifter: fast healing.”

“I bet you’ll be nice and warm inside, too.”

“Opens the door for a bit more dangerous bedroom play.”

Levi scoffs. “Of course that’s where your mind would go.”

They’re silent for a few minutes, staring up at the paths together.

“So,” Levi says finally, “We’re doing this?”

“I think so. What alternative is there?”

He doesn’t want to consider the alternatives. “Fine.”

Erwin stands and holds out a hand. Levi accepts it, hauling himself to his feet.

As they walk back to the others, Levi stares at the paths, hating them with every fibre of his being.

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THOUGH HE WEARS A mask of bravery for Levi's sake, Erwin's mind swims with doubts as they return. Eren's confidence in his abilities is not warranted; his strengths aren't going to help him here. He can't outsmart a god or a timeline. He can't take a risky gamble, because they need to be cautious not to stray too far from the timeline's previous events.

He's not even sure he can show Ymir empathy in any useful way. He thinks of Levi comforting Hange in the meeting room, when Erwin couldn't think of what to say. He has diplomatic finesse, but genuine connection is a struggle.

*Trust Levi to do the right thing. It will work out in the end.* He believes in that future he saw.

“Ready?” Eren asks.

“As ready as we can be.”

“I’m coming with you, Captain,” Mikasa says.

“Oh?” Levi asks.

She nods. “I have to be there, too. There’s no way I would let anyone eat Eren unless I knew what was going on.” She looks at the boy, eyes welling up with tears. “I still don’t know if I can—”

“You can,” Eren says firmly, placing his hands on her shoulders. “This is how we fight, Mikasa. You can do this.” Then he turns and digs his fingers into the sand.

“Mikasa, Captain: I’m sending you back to a moment shortly before the decision. I want to give you time to adapt to the timeline’s flow and learn how you can interact with it. Remember to let the timeline carry you as much as possible. Only two major changes: the Commander gets the injection, and then he starts the Rumbling.”

Levi looks up at Erwin, and cups his face with a gentle hand. Erwin covers it with his own. And though he does not let Levi see it, his heart, too, is screaming at him that this is unfair; that they deserve that little cabin in the woods, that they have already sacrificed too much.

Maybe Levi sees it anyway, because his hand tightens.

“See you on the other side, Erwin.”

They kiss.

Eren twists the sand, and yellow lightning splits the air, taking the shape of a portal. “Go now,” he says, voice strained with effort.

Levi’s hand trails Erwin’s as he steps back. Together, he and Mikasa step into the portal and turn to make eye contact with the loved ones they are leaving behind.

There is a high-pitched noise, the familiar whistle of a kettle. Erwin can’t hear anything over it, but he reads three words on Levi’s lips: *I love you*.

His throat tightens. He mouths back, *I love you, too*.

The portal vanishes, and the air is still.

“Your turn, Commander,” Eren says, and another streak of yellow splits the air. “You’ll be in limbo for a bit while I shape your titan, but it shouldn’t feel like any time at all to you. I’ll try to do a better job with your arm this time so it heals properly.”

Erwin flexes the fingers on his bad arm as it strikes him: “You were the one who gave me a human body.”

Eren nods. “Yes. I don’t have much experience with human bodies, so it wasn’t perfect.”

“Thank you. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry that I will have to eat you.”

Maybe it’s a trick of the light, but Eren suddenly looks hundreds of years old. “I’ve lived an eternity here, Commander. I’ve done everything I can except become the monster I saw in my visions. It’s time for someone else to try.”

Erwin nods and grips his shoulder.

He steps into the portal. There’s a pull, and that whistling sound, and then everything glows white.

# ❖ Sixteen ❖

## LEVI'S CHOICE

AS THE PATHS start to flicker and the portal begins to close, Levi reads the words on Erwin's lips: *I love you, too.*

He almost charges out of the portal. Maybe they can live together in the paths and ignore all this responsibility for a while. Maybe—

The sand drops out from under them.

Levi opens his mouth to yell, but he can't hear anything over that incessant whistling noise. They're in freefall down a tunnel of yellow light. Mikasa clings to Levi's hand; he grips it tightly, but then something rips her away.

“Mika—” He doesn't get the chance to finish her name; he is a bolt of raw energy. Is this what Erwin felt when his body disintegrated during the ritual? Is Levi's body coming apart now, too?

But then he feels that *thrum* Eren described, that pull between himself and his body. The energy begins to reshape, ready to fill its vessel.

He slams into himself. His ears ring. For a moment, he's too stunned to see.

The first thing he hears is the boom of rocks hitting a wall. Slowly, the scene around him condenses into focus.

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**-year 850: Shiganshina-**

DIRECTLY IN FRONT of Levi, Erwin sits on a wooden crate. His hand is raised and held in front of his face.

Levi's heart pounds. *Not here. Not right in the middle of this conversation ...*

"But Levi," Erwin says, as if continuing a thought.  
*I can't do this again.*

"Can you see them? All our comrades? Our comrades are watching us." Erwin's voice is low. "They want to know what we will do with the hearts they dedicated to our cause. Because they may be gone, but their fight isn't over."

Levi has gone over this scene again and again in the years since, but he's surprised by how time has dulled the details. He doesn't remember Erwin looking quite this sad and broken. Or maybe it's just that he has grown accustomed to the Erwin of 860, the one who laughs, flirts, and dances.

Living this scene a second time would be more bearable if he didn't have his original thoughts playing in the background. He feels the same heartbreak and guilt as if they are fresh. Back then, he had known Erwin was suffering, but not the depth of it. Back then, he was thinking he really should have broken his legs to keep him away from the mission.

Erwin murmurs, "Is it all nothing more than my own childish delusion?" His eyes lift, and he looks like a boy asking for forgiveness.

Levi kneels down. As Eren described, the words spill from his mouth without effort, the timeline travelling on a rail.

"You've fought well. We've only come this far thanks to you. I'm making the choice." He lifts his head to make eye contact. "Give up on your dreams and die. Lead the recruits straight into hell. I'll take down the Beast Titan."

He watches the gradient of Erwin's expressions—shocked to touched to grateful—then hears the words he has heard over and over every waking moment since, "Levi, thank you."

At the time, this entire conversation felt like they had broken through their professional boundaries to a new level of closeness. Now, it doesn't feel like enough. Erwin cares for him—Levi knows that now. Hell, they had already kissed at least once by this point, drunk on Pixis' homemade liquor.

If he follows where the timeline is leading him, he will stand up and reach out a hand to help Erwin to his feet. That's what he should do next. He's not supposed to change anything major until the moment of injection.

But Levi thinks of how gentle Erwin's smile is in the year 860, how warmly they speak with each other now. Besides, isn't he supposed to be getting a feel for how to alter the flow of the timeline?

"Look," he says, and he finds he can push back against the timeline without too much difficulty. "I know you're used to me being emotionally constipated, but I've been working on that, and there are things I'm ready to say to you. So I can't let you go without one more promise." Still kneeling, he takes Erwin's hand and laces his fingers through it. "No matter what happens out there, no matter where you end up: I will find you. I will bring you back. I'm by your side, always."

"Levi." Erwin's throat bobs. "You're only by my side because I—"

"No," Levi says fiercely, grip tightening. "Don't start that crap about how you tricked me or whatever you're going to say. I chose to follow you."

"You chose to follow a lie. I'm not who you think I am."

"Bullshit. I have always known who you are. So you have your own goals; who cares? We all do." Levi cups his free hand to the broad jaw, and surprise reappears in those beautiful eyes. "I know you, Erwin. And you know me."

Another explosion of rocks sounds from the battlefield.

Erwin reaches out their joined hands and runs his finger along Levi's lip, his face full of something Levi can't read. Wonder? Longing?

Then he leans in and kisses Levi. This is the shy kiss of a man acknowledging his love for the first time. The second one is deeper, and it's warm and soft. Levi melts into it.

When they break apart, Erwin's smile is sad. "I wish we had more time."

"We do," Levi says firmly. "If we play this right. And I'll build you a little cabin and we'll get a dog and we'll drink tea on the balcony every sunrise."

Erwin gives a soft laugh. "You're going to drag me out of the house at sunrise?"

"Yes. Every morning. And you'll be damned well grateful you're living to see another one." Levi stands tall, using their joined hands to help Erwin up and then adjusting his grip so it's more comfortable at this angle. "But none of that is happening if we get flattened by rocks because we're too busy talking." He points at the titans. "They're lined up in a row. I can jump from titan to titan to catch that shithead off guard while the rest of you distract him."

Erwin looks surprised again, then nods. "I was thinking the same thing."

They wordlessly fall into step, moving toward the recruits. Erwin doesn't let go of his hand until they are almost in front of the others, so neither does Levi.

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AS THE TIMELINE carries him through the mission briefing, Levi considers his next steps. He wonders, at first, if he can get away with killing Zeke Yeager this time. They don't need his shifter power; Erwin will eat Bertolt.

Erwin will eat Bertolt. The words clang in his mind like discordant bells. And then Erwin will eat Eren. What will the guilt of those choices do to him?

He stays silent as Erwin makes his speech about the dead finding meaning through the living. It's a stirring speech, one of

his best, but Levi carries with him the depressing knowledge that every single one of these recruits will be forgotten. Even if they succeed in getting Erwin to Ymir, they're still going to need to perform the memory wipe as insurance against Marley.

*Not like our agreement with them did us much good last time.*

Erwin roars, "So we will die here and entrust the meaning of our lives to the next generation. That is the sole way we can rebel against this cruel world!"

The recruits still look terrified, but they salute.

"You heard him," Levi calls. "Saddle up. Now."

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ERWIN WATCHES THE recruits mount their horses, mourning the losses to come. He turns to Levi. For a moment, those grey eyes search his.

It strikes Erwin that he hasn't thought of the basement since he spoke with Levi. *When I'm with him, I'm the man he thinks I am.* Maybe even the man he really is—or, at least, the man he wants to be. But right now, he needs to be the man who will lead his troops in a suicide charge. There is no choice.

He reaches to smooth the hair off Levi's forehead, then bends to kiss the sweat-stained skin.

"Goodbye, Levi," he says softly.

Levi's voice is hoarse. "Remember my promise. I will find you and I will save you."

Erwin knows it's impossible that Levi can save him now, but it gives him hope all the same. He mounts his horse and pulls out his flare gun.

"Advance!" he roars.

Erwin has made reckless charges on the battlefield many times before. The lack of concern for his own life is one of the attributes that makes him a brave soldier.

But now, suddenly, he has someone to live for. Someone who has been in front of him all along—they just never let them-

selves acknowledge it until now.

Levi, who has been by his side through the fall of the wall, countless risky battle plans, and a revolution.

Levi, who has always known him better than anyone. Better than himself.

Levi, whose kiss tasted like salt and honey.

Here, facing his own death, Erwin longs for that cabin with the dog, and the sunrises with cups of tea. He wants to know what it's like to wake up next to Levi, to fall asleep in a bed with him, to spend a frantic, sleepless night with him. If he survives this, he will gratefully wake up at dawn every single day, just to spend it by his side.

Ahead of them, the Beast Titan is winding up for another throw.

“Now!” Erwin yells. The recruits fire their flares to obscure their movements. He taps deep into his fear, his passion, his love, to yell with every emotion he knows: “My soldiers, rage! My soldiers, scream! My soldiers, fight!”

A sharp pain slices through his side, and his horse pitches beneath him. Stars spark in his vision.

*Oh. Already.*

As he and his horse begin to fall together, he lifts his gaze to the horizon.

The smoke clears just enough that he can see Levi. He's carving the nape of a titan near the Beast. He's going to succeed, and he's going to survive this battle.

*Levi, I entrust the meaning of my life to you.*

Erwin hits the ground with a smile on his face.

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**LEVI SPINS THROUGH** the nape of the last mindless titan in the perimeter. As it falls, he runs along its shoulder and leaps through its steam.

And there he is: the Beast Titan. *Found you.*

Even though he burns with rage, he lets the timeline carry him through his attacks.

“You looked like you were really enjoying yourself,” he yells as he slices through the Beast’s flesh with almost no effort. “Well, don’t let me put a damper on your fun!”

He cuts the man free and shoves the tip of his blade into his mouth.

“Zeke Yeager,” he growls. “You piece of shit.”

The man’s shocked expression has a different nuance to it than last time, and Levi realizes he isn’t supposed to know his name yet. *Let the timeline carry you. Don’t fuck this up.*

“You can’t transform again while you’re busy healing. Isn’t that right?” He shoves the sword through Zeke’s eye socket. “Hey. Answer me. Don’t you have any manners?”

His old thoughts play out before him, wondering if Erwin is still alive. Now he knows that hope wasn’t misplaced. Somewhere on the battlefield, Erwin is currently bleeding out and Floch is strapping him to his back.

Thinking about Erwin distracts him a second time, and he is genuinely surprised by the reappearance of the Cart Titan.

*Shit!* He barely dodges out of the way as its teeth snap shut.

As the Cart Titan bolts with the mangled body in its mouth, Levi can hear Zeke yelling at him and calling the titans to charge. Power crackles deep within Levi. He knows now that his bond with Erwin is what gives him this strength.

He drops his dull blades and clicks in the last ones. The titans advance on him, but he feels no fear.

“I swore to him that I’d kill you no matter what.”

They’re almost upon him. Rage floods his body, electric yellow, the depth of which he has never felt before or since.

“I swore to him!” His anchor stabs into a titan.

There are no memories from last time, and no new ones, just the red of his vision and the slip of metal through flesh. He slices the nape of one titan, then another. His blades are dulling

by the third. When he gets to the fourth, the blades make a sloppy cut that sends him off course. He accidentally smashes hard into the fifth titan's hand; its fingernail lacerates his forehead. He drops low and takes out both achilles tendons. It falls and he lands on the back of its neck. The stumps of his blades stab deep into the nape and twist.

Levi sprints for the wall. There is the Cart Titan in the distance, circling south. He picks up speed, steaming with titan blood and wheezing from exertion.

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**LEVI SPENDS HIS** last burst of gas controlling his descent down to Eren on the rooftop.

The rooftop. In the depth of his rage, he forgot what awaited him.

The gas gives out right before the end of his drop; he skids to a stop next to Eren.

“Captain!” Eren says.

“That was the last bit of gas I had,” Levi gasps. “I’m going after that piece of shit. Give me all your gas and blades. Hurry.”

“Right.” Eren removes his equipment.

Levi’s eyes lift to the charred body behind Eren, and he feels a pang of grief. Last time, Armin received the Colossal Titan, then had to give himself up to Marley just a few weeks later. This time, he won’t even live that long. The kid has talent for his age—it’s too bad there is only one serum.

Eren hands him some gas, and he is just screwing in the canister when Armin’s broken form gives a cough. Levi closes his eyes. *Here we go.*

“He’s still alive!” Eren rushes over to him. “Yes! Come on, Armin. You can do it. Take a deep breath.”

*I can’t go through this again.* Levi takes a deep breath of his own. *I can’t ...*

“Captain!” Mikasa says behind him, and he’s glad to hear

her voice. He turns. She's clutching her head, looking distraught, but when her eyes lock with his, her expression flickers with determination. It's enough for him to know the Mikasa of 860 made it here safely. He nods in acknowledgement.

Well, at least he won't be suffering through this alone. When they get back to the base, he'll take her to a pub and teach her how many drinks it takes to get an Ackerman drunk. They'll need it.

"Captain," Eren yells. "Hurry, give me the injection."

In Levi's memory, he's torn, deciding whether or not Erwin could possibly still be alive. At the time, he knew that syringe was Erwin's last lifeline. At the time, he knew giving it up meant admitting Erwin was dead. *You know how this turns out*, he reminds himself, but he can't silence the pain of the original memory.

"We need to turn Armin into a titan and have him eat Bertolt," Eren yells. "Quick, give me the injection."

Levi sighs. "All right."

Behind him, Mikasa fires a flare.

Slowly, Levi extends his hand with the syringe case, dragging it out for as long as possible. The timeline has changed a little bit, here and there, and he needs to make sure Floch interrupts them before Eren reaches the serum.

Just before the serum exchanges hands, a voice gasps behind them:

"Captain Levi. I finally caught up to you."

The relief that washes over Levi quickly evaporates at the horror of seeing Erwin's condition. The first time, he had been so relieved to see Erwin alive that he hadn't really registered the extent of his injuries. Now he sees the man he loves strapped precariously to the back of a teenager, bandages bulging with blood and organs.

Levi barely listens to Floch describing the injuries. Now that he knows what to expect, he's going to notice every single detail he was too shocked to notice last time. It's too much. He

clutches the box to his chest.

All this, for what? Erwin will be forced to eat Eren and then face a fate that will either bind him to eternity or turn him into the worst monster the world has ever known.

*Erwin, you deserve so much better than what's about to happen.*

“Captain?” Eren says.

Levi gently unstraps Erwin from Floch’s back and lays him on the rooftop. He strokes Erwin’s lips, his cheek, and feels the weak breaths against his hand.

“He’s still alive,” he says softly, then he stands. “We’re giving this injection to Erwin.”

Eren stands, too, and does his best to loom over Levi. Why does he have to make this so difficult? Levi fights to keep himself calm, to let the timeline take him, but he really wants to take his anger out on this brat in front of him.

“You just said you’d use it on Armin,” Eren says.

“The situation has changed.” Levi bumps off the track a bit, just enough to feel like he has some control over this conversation. “Erwin will save humanity.”

Behind him, Levi hears Mikasa draw her blades.

“You can attack me if you like,” he says over his shoulder, completely off script now. “You won’t change my mind. We’re talking about Erwin Smith, the Commander of the Survey Corps. I won’t let him die. Now get out of my way. There’s no time.”

Eren grabs the box and tries to pull it away; Levi holds tight.

“Eren,” Levi says, “look past your own feelings.”

“My feelings?” Eren’s eyes well up with tears. “Why did you hesitate before handing the syringe over?”

“I was considering the possibility that Erwin was alive.”

“I don’t see how you could have predicted that Floch would bring the dying Commander here.”

Levi gives a low sigh. He had been so obvious that even Eren, of all people, had noticed he was in love with Erwin. The two of them really could have had a relationship the entire time

without any repercussions. He wonders if it's too late to get memory-dropped into the year 844. Maybe things would change so much that he wouldn't be standing on this blasted rooftop again.

"You're right," he says aloud. "It was wishful thinking. And now he's here, so it doesn't matter. He outranks all of us. Move."

Eren still doesn't release his grip on the case, and fury wells within Levi. *You're the one who sent me here. You're the reason Mikasa and I are going through this again.* He channels all his anger into a punch.

Eren flies across the roof, further than last time.

Mikasa charges and knocks Levi back so hard against the rooftop that he's winded; he doesn't remember the blow being that hard. Her blade skims his throat and she leans close to his face.

"Do it," she whispers.

"I have to follow the timeline," he wheezes.

"We're far enough along. Overpower me and give him the injection before he dies."

"Fine." Levi shoves her shoulder; while she's off balance, he plants his foot in her stomach and shoves. She staggers backwards in a convincing charade.

Eren, still sprawled out from the punch, lifts his head. "If we don't have Armin, we can't win. Hasn't that always been true?"

As he lists his perception of all the times Armin saved humanity, bitterness rises in Levi's throat. Erwin would have easily thought of the boulder to block the hole in Trost, if they had been present instead of out on an expedition. As for their route to Shiganshina, Hange and Erwin had already planned to travel at night, but Erwin insisted they give Armin credit for it. "He has potential, but lacks confidence," he said. "We need to let him lead, build him up." And once they arrived in Shiganshina, Armin only found Reiner in the wall because Erwin had delegated the task of searching the wall to him.

And here is Eren, rattling all these things off as if only

Armin could have done them. It's so like him to think a team effort is a one-hero job. He has always believed he, alone, was going to save the world. That was how that idiot ended up almost tearing apart the paths in the first place.

And that line of thinking was why he asked Erwin to be the hero this time around. Levi grits his teeth. *The fate of humanity isn't for one person to carry alone.*

He looks down at Erwin and swallows hard.

Eren is still yelling: "It's not me or the Commander who's going to save humanity. It's Armin. Isn't that right, Mikasa?"

Floch opens his mouth to interject.

"No." Levi jumps in; if he has to hear Floch rant about how Erwin was a devil, he is going to cut his throat open. Instead, he turns to Mikasa. "You know it, don't you? Deep down. Saving humanity isn't a job for one person. It takes a team, and that team needs a leader who will help them reach their potential together. Armin is a great talent, but he's not a leader yet. We have a lot of talented people who can do what he does. We don't have anyone who can do Erwin's job."

A tear trails down Mikasa's face. "Captain."

He knows she, too, is feeling twice the pain, the memories and the present. *Hang in there, kid.*

"The dead will live on in our memories," he says aloud, looking into her eyes. "Protecting our emotions won't save humanity. You know what needs to be done, Mikasa."

She shakily sheathes her blades. "I do."

"Mikasa," Eren says, voice breaking.

She shakes her head. "I ... can't do it, Eren. We both know Armin isn't the right choice. He wouldn't even want to be brought back in place of the Commander. You would be dooming him to a life of doubt and feelings of inferiority."

Eren screams. He hauls himself to his feet, ready to launch himself at Levi.

Someone skids onto the roof and knocks into him.

"Hange," Levi cries, and his heart unexpectedly breaks.

They left Hange behind.

In this future they are rewriting, Levi didn't build a life with Hange. The two of them didn't lower all their barriers to each other, build a fireplace together, shape logs into a house together. Hange doesn't know how to cook their amazing rabbit stew and doesn't know that their favourite ale comes from a little farm near Trost. They haven't spent blizzards huddling by the fire and drinking tea while the wind howls outside.

He knows there was no choice. Hange would have died during the ritual, and then would not have had a body to come back to, so they would have been lost anyway. But he feels a deep grief all the same.

*Hange ...*

"Captain," Mikasa urges, and he realizes he is running out of time.

Eren yells, straining against Hange. "Armin!"

"Eren," Hange says. "We still need Erwin. The Survey Corps has nearly been wiped out. If the Commander dies, too, humanity will lose its symbol. We can't allow the flames of hope to be extinguished within the walls."

"Armin will bring us all hope," Eren says. "He already has!"

"Armin is an incredible talent. But we need Erwin's experience and leadership." They sigh. "I have people I wish I could bring back, too. Hundreds of them. Ever since I joined the Survey Corps, every day has brought a new farewell. But, you understand, don't you? Everyone you meet will be parted from you one day. I know it's difficult to accept. It's hard to stay sane, living like that. It hurts. It hurts. But even so, we need to move forward."

Levi knows now that they're talking about Moblit. *Who will talk you through those long nights when the grief is too much to bear, Hange? Will you still want to live with Erwin and me?*

"Captain," Eren calls. "Have you heard of the ocean?"

"Enough!" Levi knows he's modifying the timeline even more, but he can't stomach any more of this. He stands and

grabs Bertolt by the collar. “Troops, clear the area. Erwin will turn into a titan and eat Bertolt.”

The others clear out, dragging Eren with them as he wails. Mikasa is last. She gives Levi a tear-rimmed look and a nod.

“Hang in there,” he says quietly.

He drags Bertolt across the shingles. Hell, he even feels badly for Bertolt now that he knows what Marley is like, despite all the death and destruction he brought to Paradis. He was just an oppressed kid dragged into a war by a hateful nation. Betraying Marley would have meant dooming his family to suffer. What choice did he have?

Erwin was just an idealistic kid once, too, forced onto his track by someone else: an orphan due to a lapse in his father’s judgement, thrown into the military because he had nowhere else to go. He excelled there, because that’s what Erwin always does, no matter the cost. He intertwined his guilt about his father’s death with his career and gradually shed every other aspect of himself.

Except for the times he felt safe enough to let himself shine through: his twisted sense of humour and his addiction to danger; his awkward charm that had been carefully polished into a weapon for political gain; his genuine desire to keep his people alive. At some point, he had begun to show that side to Levi. After his resurrection, he was finally free to show it to everyone.

And now he is going to dive right back in and build up all that armour again.

In the paths, Erwin had been reluctant to order Levi to do this. Was that only because he was listening to that future memory of himself, the one that told him to trust Levi’s decision? Or some other reason? Was he hoping Levi would stop this? He had to have known that Levi would hesitate to throw him back into the pressure. That had been the topic of several arguments, after all.

Levi kneels beside Erwin. “Come on,” he tells himself aloud. “This is what you came here to do. Stop looking for excuses

and do your duty.”

He rolls up Erwin’s sleeve and brings the syringe in close. He takes a slow breath, waiting for Erwin’s arm to swing upward, just like last time.

But this time, it reaches up toward the sky.

“Erwin?” Levi asks, the shock of his past and future selves colliding.

The words are hoarse: “Levi … the sunrise …”

Levi’s heart breaks so viscerally that it shoves the air from his throat in a sob. *Fuck*. He sets the syringe down and gathers Erwin in his arms, rocking a little. *Fuck, fuck*.

Just that short exchange between them had been enough to overpower Erwin’s dream. Was he really that eager to leave his obsession behind? Had he been that close to the edge the whole time?

Levi looks back at Armin, and Erwin’s words echo in his mind: *this is a situation that requires compassion*.

There’s no doubt that Erwin is a skilled leader; he inspires groups with speeches and strategy. But he has always struggled to connect one-on-one. Sometimes he even shuts Levi out.

Armin is boyishly open and soft-spoken. His strategy and leadership skills are still developing, but he hasn’t hardened himself against connecting with others, not yet.

He’s no Erwin, but … maybe he doesn’t need to be. The fate of humanity is not a one-person job.

Levi kisses the forehead of the dying man he loves.

“I’m sorry, Erwin,” he whispers. “I promise, I will find you and bring you back again. Rest for a bit and leave this step to us.”

He gently lays him down and picks up the syringe, marching toward Armin. As he depresses the plunger, he says, “Sorry, kid. You’ve got one hell of a task in front of you.” He finishes the injection and removes the needle. “Don’t make me regret this.”

He turns and lifts Erwin into his arms, running along the roof. He hears electricity crackle behind him as the air glows

yellow.

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LEVI SITS WITH HANGE and Floch on the rooftop, watching the life leave Erwin's body for a third time.

He can feel their silent judgement. He's sure Mikasa is tossing the same judgement his way from her vantage point.

He hopes he made the correct decision. Eren was planning to send Erwin down with his titan body—that will still happen when Marley injects Erwin, won't it? Levi wonders at what point the timeline starts correcting itself. It should be after this point. They technically haven't made any changes that would prevent Eren from being in the paths yet. Erwin should be fine to get to the mindless titan stage again ... shouldn't he?

His head hurts again and he does his best not to second-guess himself.

“Captain,” Floch says, “why?”

Levi lets out a low sigh. “Can’t we just let him go? I know you think he was the devil who ordered you and your friends to die. You don’t know the man he was before we all forced him into that role.” He runs a knuckle along Erwin’s jaw. “All he wanted was to learn more about the titans and the outside world. But we needed a ruthless leader, and he was the only one capable of stepping into that role. He did it because we asked it of him. And we were going to call him right back for more. So I think it’s time we let him rest.”

He smooths the hair off Erwin’s forehead.

*Will Armin eat Eren? Can Mikasa and I convince him to do that? Or are we going to need a completely new plan now?*

He takes a deep breath and clings to the future Erwin saw.

Erwin’s skin is already cooling, and his chest is no longer rising and falling.

Levi leans over the body. “I’m going to find you and save you, no matter what it takes. I love you.”

“I’m sorry, Levi,” Hange says softly, and he realizes he has lost his Hange and jeopardized his Erwin on the same day. He feels too much, so much that he’s numb.

He lifts the lifeless body in his arms and rises to his feet.

“Where are you going?” Hange asks.

“I’m bringing him home.”

Hange nods. “I’ll come with you.”

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THEY BRING THE body to Erwin’s old house in Shigan-shina. Levi has only been here a few times before; the two of them didn’t become an inseparable duo until after the fall of Wall Maria. Levi wonders now if Erwin, like him, underwent a radical priority shift in the face of that tragedy. Maybe that was why they gradually began to open up to each other: two lonely men, too closed off to trust any of their fellow soldiers, finding some mutual understanding.

Hange exits the room and returns a few minutes later with a vase and some flowers. Levi arranges the body on the bed. He gently removes Erwin’s cloak and bolo tie, then drapes the cloak over him and pockets the pendant.

Last time, this felt as if he, too, were dying. This time, it still hurts, but he knows Marley is coming to inject him. That’s already a step in the right direction.

When the body is arranged to his liking, he steps back.

Hange rests a hand on his shoulder. “I know what he meant to you.”

“He meant a lot to you, too.” Levi knows that now, after all the personal discussions they shared in the cabin. He reaches over and puts his arm around Hange, resting his head on their shoulder: an old habit. Hange tenses, then relaxes into the affection, resting their head on his.

“You’re probably thinking I made the wrong decision,” he says.

“I sure fucking am,” Hange says flatly. “Erwin entrusted you to make the *right* decision, not the one that worked best for you. But we will discuss that later.”

“Yeah. There’s more behind this than you know. A lot more. I have things to explain to you, and I’m going to need your insight on some big decisions ahead.” He won’t hold anything back. If there’s anyone who will believe what he and Mikasa saw in the paths, it will be Hange. “But first, we have a new Colossal Titan to speak with and a basement to explore. And then we need to get the survivors back home safely.”

Hange pauses. “Levi, are you okay?”

He almost laughs. “No.”

“I mean … You aren’t yourself. I could understand if you were in denial, but you seem …” They trail off.

“Seem what?” he challenges. *Older. Detached. Like I know a secret you don’t.*

Hange sighs. “It’s nothing. Just don’t lose touch with reality on me, okay? I’m going to go see if Armin is awake yet.”

Levi waits until they close the door, then turns to Erwin. “I have a plan,” he says softly. “It’s still in progress, but it’s coming together, and you will have a role to play. And if it doesn’t work, I’ll come into the paths and bully Ymir into fixing your death myself.” He pauses. “You could have done it. It’s not that I thought you couldn’t. But so can Armin, and I’d rather put him at risk than you. I’m just that selfish.” He gives a low sigh. “I’ll see you again, Erwin. Hopefully soon.”

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ARMIN IS STILL unconscious when Levi returns to the others atop the wall. Before he can say anything, Mikasa marches toward him. “Captain, we need to talk.”

Hange frowns. “Mikasa, you are already in violation of—”

Levi waves them off. “It’s okay. This is a continuation of a conversation I started earlier.” He cocks his head at Mikasa and

they begin to walk along the wall. Once they've put enough distance between them and the others, Mikasa whirls on him.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Using my judgement.”

“Bullshit,” she spits. “You’re putting the entire future of Paradis at risk because you were too much of a coward to ask the Commander to take on the responsibility to save it—a responsibility he had already agreed to beforehand. What happened to ‘protecting our emotions won’t save humanity?’”

“Look,” he says. “Armin can do it. His greatest gift is his ability to connect with others.”

“And he cracks under pressure.” Mikasa sighs, rubbing the bridge of her nose. “Listen, I love Armin and I know he’s brilliant. A selfish part of me is happy that I’ll get more time with him. But you and I both know that fifteen-year-old Armin Arlert is a hell of a lot less self-confident than Erwin Smith. He can’t go up against a god.”

“Stop protecting him,” Levi says. “He can handle it.”

“Stop protecting him?” Mikasa gives a wry laugh. “That is such a hypocritical thing to say. You had one task to ensure the safety of Paradis, and it was sticking that syringe in the Commander’s arm. That’s all you had to do. And then I would watch him eat Eren. I would watch Armin die without the serum. And I was prepared to do all of that. You couldn’t even—”

“Okay, okay,” he mutters. “Keep your voice down. And fix your body language. They’re going to notice you’re acting like a twenty-five-year-old Guard Captain instead of a fifteen-year-old girl.”

“Stop deflecting. You know I’m right.”

He sighs, weary. “Of course I do.”

“You fucked up everything.”

“Maybe. But it will still work. Do you really think it’s up to one person to save humanity? Did it really have to be Armin or Erwin?”

She stops, taken aback. “What do you mean?”

“What do you think is going to happen if Armin succeeds in ending the titan curse, and all nine shifters suddenly disappear? Do you think Marley is going to come talk to us and strike a deal like last time? Or are they going to try to steamroll us with their military strength?”

Mikasa hesitates. “Commander Hange will—”

“Hange did what they could last time, yes. That time, Marley was secure in the fact that cooperation would give them all nine titans. Without any titans, their military strength is going to be based solely on their weapons, which means our gas deposits are suddenly even more precious to them. You think they need us alive for that?” Levi looks down at the town, to the house where Erwin rests. “There is only one man in Paradis who could possibly navigate that kind of political situation. And he can’t do that if he’s trapped in the paths bargaining with a god.”

Mikasa shakes her head. “Eren said we were supposed to start the Rumbling.”

“You know that’s ludicrous, right? Killing eighty percent of the world just so we can live?” Levi leans closer, voice urgent. “Armin has the skills to reach Ymir and get her to end the titan curse. And then Erwin and Hange will use their skills to negotiate with Marley. We need all of them in order to secure the future of Paradis.”

She looks wary. “This is not what we agreed on.”

“You’re right. It’s not. Armin can trigger the Rumbling if there are no other options. I’m sick and tired of people dying.”

She rubs the bridge of her nose. “Okay, but we’re going to discuss this with Armin and Hange and get their feedback. If they think you’re being an idiot—”

“Then I’ll stand down. But they won’t.”

They hear their names from the distance; Hange waves at them. Maybe Armin is waking up.

Mikasa looks sadly at Levi. “You know there’s no guarantee that the Commander will turn back into a human now, right? Eren is sending him down with a titan body, but then he won’t be

in the paths anymore to craft him a human one."

"Time flows differently there, so we don't know that for sure. Besides, once Ymir fixes everything, the titans will all change back to humans, right?" Levi turns and strides back toward the group, trying to ignore the anxiety twisting his stomach.

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**-year ???: Shiganshina-**

ERWIN COMES BACK to himself in freefall down a path of yellow light. He is raw energy taking shape.

*Trust Levi to do the right thing. It will all work out in the end.*

Even as he's thinking the words, they are stretching out, losing meaning. His mind narrows to a single goal as his energy swells into a grotesque shape.

He slams into a body, and his ears ring.

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**TO BE CONTINUED IN BOOK II**



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- Part I: Ignite
- Part II: Ablaze
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- Part IV: Glow

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