



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

BOOK TWO



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*in these*

F A L L E N   L E A V E S

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..& BOOK II: PEACE &..

# TIMELINE

## (UPDATED FOR BOOK II)

- 
- 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
- MARLEY STRIKES PEACE DEAL WITH PARADIS
- EREN YEAGER ENTERS THE PATHS; MEMORY WIPE
- 860 ERWIN SMITH IS REVIVED
- COLOSSAL AND ARMOURED TITANS DISAPPEAR
- ERWIN, LEVI, AND MIKASA ENTER THE PATHS
- LEVI AND MIKASA RETURN TO THE YEAR 850 -----

# ❖ Seventeen ❖

## CONNECTIONS NEW AND OLD

THE REMAINDER of the Survey Corps rides into Trost along a road lined with citizens. Silence travels with them like a wave, falling across the crowd as the nine survivors come into view.

This isn't the first time the Survey Corps has been greeted by shock and grief. It's familiar enough that Levi can pretend he isn't bothered by the weeping faces. At least Erwin's last view of Trost was all these people cheering them on.

Flegel Reeves is the only one who dares approach; he runs up to Hange. "Where are the rest of them?"

Hange halts their horse and looks solemnly at him. "Dead."

"Moblit? The Commander? All the new recruits?"

"We are your survivors," Hange says quietly. "We have pushed the enemy out of Shiganshina, and we have obtained valuable intelligence. Their sacrifices were not in vain."

Flegel steps aside, crestfallen. Hange rides past him with their head held high. Levi recognizes that posture. Erwin used it to overcompensate when he was on the verge of crumbling.

They arrive at the base. The stablehands look confused as only nine horses arrive, but don't ask any questions. Levi takes a moment to rub his horse's neck, wondering if she carries trauma with her, too, or if she doesn't understand what happened. Surely the noises of the battle would linger in the memories of a bright animal.

“Don’t you worry, lady,” he murmurs. “You’ll be doing light military duties in the interior soon enough, and most of your days will be spent grazing and frolicking with your friends.”

Hange assembles the soldiers in the hallway, closing the door behind them. “I recognize that you’ve just been through hell, soldiers,” Hange says. “Please take tonight to dine well and rest. I’ll have the mess hall prepare some fine meat and drinks. Tomorrow, you may take a day of leave. We’ll be travelling to Mitras the day after that to present our report to the military higher-ups. As there are only nine of us, we will all be attending.

“Until we have given our report, the details of what happened in Shiganshina are confidential. Do not say a word of it to anyone. Offenders will be court martialed. Dismissed.”

“Sir,” the soldiers reply, saluting.

“Mikasa,” Levi says.

“Captain.” She approaches.

“I need to speak with you about our next moves,” he says quietly. “Come to Erwin’s office after dinner.”

She nods.

He turns to Hange next, but they are already striding down the hall. He hurries to catch up with them. “Hey—”

Hange whirls. “No, Levi, I can’t talk to you right now, after how they looked at me out there. I am *furious* that you put me in this position.”

“My decision wasn’t about you,” Levi says defensively.

“It’s sure as hell about me now. I’m barely holding it together, so please give me time to calm down.” Their fists are clenched.

“I have to talk to you about—”

“Fuck off, Levi!” Hange snarls.

The words bowl into him so hard that he takes a step back. He holds their gaze, then looks away and folds his arms over his chest. “Fine.”

Hange pinches the bridge of their nose. “Look, that was— Just give me some space, okay?”

“Fine.” He turns and marches toward Erwin’s office instead.

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AS HE STEPS THROUGH Erwin’s door, the emotions from last time crash down on him. Heartbreak, anger, emptiness. Back then, he had started tearing open drawers and cupboards, realizing how many personal letters and trinkets he was going to have to sort through. He didn’t even know the meaning behind half the trinkets: a commemorative plate from some lord’s birthday here, a broken necklace there, a pin that just said “flowers” on it. Erwin had a life for thirty years before they met.

Last time, he sat on the floor staring at that stupid “flowers” pin and wallowing in his misery: in the end, he didn’t really know Erwin Smith at all.

Now he knows it isn’t true. Erwin was always the man he thought he was; their time together in the year 860 confirmed that. Having separate lives before they met doesn’t weaken the strength of their bond.

But the old emotions keep playing out in the background all the same.

“Okay,” he mutters with resignation. Until he and Mikasa can bump this timeline far enough away from the old one, he’s going to have to go through it all again, whether he wants to or not. Might as well power through it.

Even though he knows—well, he’s almost certain—Erwin will be back here soon, he should probably start packing everything away to keep up appearances. Cleaning always helps steady his nerves, anyway. He strides over to Erwin’s desk and pops open the bottom drawer, then pulls out a bottle of whiskey and a glass. He’s not going through this sober.

He is nearly finished packing up the first bookshelf when Mikasa knocks and enters. “Captain?”

“How many times do I have to tell you to call me Levi?”

He reads the spine of a book and a four-leaf clover falls out, carefully pressed between two layers of wax paper. Is Erwin someone who believes in superstitions? He tucks the clover back into the book and sets it on top of the pile, then stands.

“I didn’t see you at dinner,” she says, eyeing the half-empty whiskey bottle on the desk. “Liquid lunch?”

Levi shrugs. “Take a seat.” He pulls a second glass out of the desk, then sits in Erwin’s chair. His legs dangle, but at least the desk blocks them from her view. “I don’t have any cigars, so this will have to do.”

Mikasa sits warily opposite him. “I’m fifteen. Technically.”

“You have enough life experience for this.” He pours her a glass, then refills his own. He holds it up. “To reliving the worst fucking day of our lives.”

“The worst so far,” she corrects. He smirks.

“True.” He downs his whiskey in one swallow. Mikasa takes a tentative sip, then coughs.

“I have no taste for this yet.”

“Well, work on that,” he says with an air of authority.

“You’re a horrible influence.”

“Says the woman who had me smoking shit-cigars. Twice.” He pours himself another glass. “Do you know how hard it’s going to be to watch all those fucking bureaucrats act so sad about Erwin dying? Fuck. And I’m going to have to go through the whole funeral again, see all their names carved into the memorial stones, knowing we’ll just have to tear them down anyway once we make our agreement with Marley.”

“Do we really have to do the memory wipe again?” Mikasa takes another sip. “This burns.”

“That’s why I slam it back. And I don’t know.” He pauses. “Armin and Hange will need to weigh in on our plans. It also depends on how Marley will approach us. Do we do the ritual after they speak with us? Or before that, now that we know what needs to be done?” He sighs and runs his finger around the mouth of the glass. “Hange is pissed off at me.”

“No kidding.” Mikasa’s brows drop. “So am I, you know.”

“I know. But I couldn’t just ... ” Levi frowns as the words elude him. Maybe he should have eaten something before drinking. “It’s gonna work.”

Mikasa gives a snort and then drains the rest of her glass, holding it out for more.

“There you go.” He tops it up.

“Slurring your words a bit there, Levi. How full was this bottle when you got to it?”

He ignores her. “Why don’t you forget about all this for a day and spend tomorrow living it up with your pals?”

“Living it up with my pals?” she repeats, incredulous.

“Whatever. Things are going to go to shit soon. Well, to more shit. To shittier.” None of those sound quite right.

Mikasa’s mouth twists and she looks down. “My ‘pals’ are fifteen. I’m twenty-five—inside, at least. They’re kids. I still love them, it’s just ... They’re immature, you know? Like I was. And I can’t even kiss Eren goodbye; that would be creepy.” She grabs her forehead with sudden realization. “Historia will only be fifteen, too. Shit. And it’s not like I can date a twenty-five-year-old to find someone my own age, because my body is fifteen.”

“We have bigger problems than your love life.”

She glares. “Yes, because of *yours*. Anyway, I’m just trying not to think of the worst stuff for a bit, okay?” She stares as he drains his glass again. “You’re drinking too much. You’re going to get sick.”

“This is how an Ackerman drinks.” He slams his glass down. “Need to get a buzz going.” Honestly, he just wants to get drunk out of his head tonight. Maybe coast through the next several days. “You know, we’ve never really talked until recently.”

She points at herself. “Fifteen.”

“Even at twenty-five. We worked directly together for ten fucking years.” He studies her. “I don’t even know a thing about your life before the Survey Corps. You grew up with Eren?”

She nestles a little deeper into her scarf. “You know all

this. You were at his court case. My parents were murdered and he burst into the room and saved me by stabbing them.”

“Ah. Right.” He doesn’t remember much from the court case. He had been too focused on waiting for Erwin’s signal to show his physical dominance over Eren. Levi had been the one to suggest that plan. Erwin never suggested violence, but he never turned down Levi’s offer of it, either.

“Ever wonder how we’re related?” she asks. “You and me.”

He shrugs. “Do you know?”

“Well, my grandfather is the one who left the Underground and brought my father with him. Maybe we’re second cousins, or first cousins once-removed or something?”

“Cousins, then.”

“Sure, cousins.” She leans back in her chair. “So what about you? What’s your story? Rumour is the Commander pulled you up from the Underground.”

“Yeah.” He swirls his drink and holds it up to the lamp, enjoying the way the liquid glows amber. “Never knew who my father—” He stops himself. That’s not true anymore. “His name was Dren, and he died when I was a baby.” He wonders if Dren is short for something, or what his surname was. “My mother died when I was still a kid. Probably about the same age you were when your parents died, actually. My uncle took me in.”

“Kenny Ackerman,” she says, and he remembers he already told quite a few people about his time with Kenny.

“Yeah. He taught me how to fend for myself and then fucked off to whatever he did after that. Historia said he was close with her uncle Uri, so I guess he was above ground.” He has often wondered if Uri was his Erwin.

Mikasa finishes her drink and pours another, spilling a little. “Then what?”

“Had to survive. I was still pretty young. Started stealing and doing odd jobs, hiring myself out as a mercenary. Got a reputation. Built my own little gang.” He’s making such broad gestures that the liquid sloshes in his cup, which reminds him it’s

there. He takes a deep swig and doesn't even feel the burn. "We got greedy. We stole some hot 3DMG equipment from a local gang. We thought we were unstoppable." He snorts. "That lasted all of fifteen minutes. We were too flashy and the MP got wind of us, and I guess that's how Erwin heard about us. He wanted my skills."

Levi wonders, not for the first time, what would have happened if they had never stolen the 3DMG. Would he still be in the Underground, operating crime rings to survive? Would he have become one of those mob bosses he had hated so much as a child? A mass murderer like Kenny?

"Anyway, we got wind of his plan. A lord wanted us to take care of him and confiscate something Erwin was using as blackmail. Promised us a life on the surface if we succeeded. I don't know why he bothered getting involved with us. Should have just poisoned him instead. Would have been less complicated." He drained his glass again. "Erwin managed to capture us."

"The Commander captured *you*?" Mikasa asks, eyes wide.

"He's no slouch on the 3DMG, you know. Or he wasn't, before he lost his arm. And we were pretty evenly matched. It could have been a draw, but Mike and a couple others captured Furlan and Isabel, so I gave in. Erwin offered to wipe our crimes from the record if we came to work for him." He pauses. "Of course, I had to get captured. For the lord. I could have killed him if I really wanted to." He tells himself that, but truthfully, he had been unprepared for Erwin's skill with the blades and 3DMG. It was a completely different type of fighting than a knife fight.

"So then you tried to kill the Commander?"

"He thought he was so much better than us, or so I thought. Turns out he just wanted our skills, nothing more. Even outsmarted that lord and made up the blackmail material just to get him to hire us. Because he's Erwin." Levi's eyes lose focus. "He's brilliant like that. He's always ahead of everyone. I don't

know how he does it, if it's just guesses and luck ... ” He trails off, thinking of the expression Erwin wears when he's devising a plan, that determined look that somehow terrifies him and makes his groin tingle at the same time.

“So how did you go from wanting to kill him to *sacrificing the future of humanity* for him?” Mikasa asks pointedly.

“Okay, ease up with that guilt trip shit. So I had a few conversations with him, and he was very ... Erwin. His determination was inspiring. And then ... ” He closes his eyes. “Isabel and Furlan died on an expedition. I destroyed the titan that killed them. Erwin was impressed that I had taken the titan down alone.”

“I bet you didn’t just take it down.” Her voice is a little slurred now. She waves at him for a refill. “You probably turned it into ground meat.”

He struggles to land the whiskey in her glass. “Yeah, pretty much. Anyway, I was blaming myself for my friends’ deaths, and he told me not to regret the decisions I had made. No one knows what the future will bring—we have to follow our instincts and work with the information we have.”

“Like you did with the serum.”

He holds out his hand in acknowledgement, spilling his glass in the process. “Like I did with the serum. Anyway, I took a swing at him, but I was confused and didn’t swing hard. He caught the blade with his hand.”

“He what?”

Levi nods. “Yeah. Just fucking reached out and grabbed it. Had a scar on his palm until he lost that arm. And he stood there with his blood running down my blade, and the sun peeking through the clouds right behind his hair and making it glow like a golden fucking halo, and he told me he needed my help to fight the titans. How was I supposed to react to that?”

“You felt a surge of power,” she says.

He nods again. “Right. It’s like what Kenny said: I knew

exactly what I needed to do. Erwin saw something I couldn't see. I wanted to follow him. Help him achieve it."

"I see." She pauses. "I didn't know all that."

"I haven't really told anyone about it except Hange. Well, I guess not Hange, yet." He clutches his forehead. "Ugh. Hange isn't Hange anymore."

"Historia, too," Mikasa says mournfully. "She knew me better than anyone, even Eren. I was ..." she clears her throat. "I was even thinking of talking to her and Iris. Together. I was getting some ... hints."

"Oh," he says, surprised she took his advice.

"Or something. I don't know, what do I know about love? But now that's all gone, and she's just a fifteen-year-old girl who has become a queen out of necessity, and I'm a woman stuck in a girl's body who's going to watch Eren die again." She looks miserable.

He reaches over the desk and claps a heavy hand on her shoulder. "Hey. Hey. We're writing a new future here. Who knows what will happen? We have so many possibilities." He pauses. "Unless Marley fucks us over."

Mikasa slumps in her chair. "Yeah."

They drink silently for a while. Levi's cheeks feel warm and the room is lightly spinning. He leans back and turns his head, subtly breathing in the leather of the chair. It smells like Erwin's hair.

"Levi," Mikasa says quietly, "Why does Armin have to eat Eren?"

He tears his nose away from Erwin's scent and tries to focus. "I think it's because Ymir will listen to the Founding Titan only. Right? Why, what are you thinking?"

"I was able to tag along with you and the Commander even though I wasn't technically part of the path Eren was trying to reach. Maybe Eren and Armin could go together."

He leans forward, intrigued. "Oh?"

She nods. "Think about it: Armin is brilliant and con-

vincing, but lacks self-confidence and resolve. Eren has both of those. Too much of those.” She pours herself a new drink, to the brim. “If Eren is there with the Founding Titan, shouldn’t that be enough for Ymir to listen to both of them? Besides … ” Her eyes are glassy, and he realizes she’s on the brink of tears. “If the two of them are there, and ending the paths means they are trapped in some sort of eternal purgatory, at least they would have each other.” Her tears spill over.

“Oh.” Levi clumsily circles the desk and drops into the seat beside her, patting her shoulder.

She throws her arms over him, sobbing.

“Congratulations,” he says, patting her back. “You managed to get drunk.”

“Yeah,” she sobs. “I hate this.”

“Oh. I shouldn’t have—”

“No, not the alcohol. *This*.” She pulls back and wipes her face, looking at him with bloodshot eyes. “Why does it always have to be us? I just want to grow old with Eren, and Armin can be our neighbour, and we can live in a little cabin in the mountains—”

“That sounds amazing,” Levi says dramatically.

“But instead, we have to do this fate of the world bullshit.”

“Right? The *fuck*.”

“It’s not my fault I was born an Ackerman.”

“Exactly. I didn’t even know. I didn’t even know I was an Ackerman.” Levi pours himself another glass, spilling half of it.

“Fuck this fate bullshit.” Mikasa leans back in her chair and sighs. “What do you think would happen if we just grabbed the people we love and ran?”

“Ran where?”

“Anywhere. Fuck Paradis.” Her mouth twists. “No, I don’t actually think that.”

“I do. But we can’t.”

“Nope,” she agrees.

They’re silent for a couple minutes. Then Levi becomes

conscious of an electric tingle. It starts in his arms and works into his spine, then up to the base of his neck.

He sits upright. “Is this ...”

“Hmm?” Mikasa asks in a way that suggests she was trying for something more eloquent.

Yellow light glows in his vision, then settles. “I think—I think I feel my path with Erwin. I think it’s reconnecting.” He turns to her. “I feel him. *I feel him, Mikasa.*”

“You’re drunk.”

“No. I mean, yeah, but that’s not it. It’s him. He made it here!” He throws his head back and laughs.

Mikasa leans away. “Did you just laugh?”

“He’s here. It worked.” Levi stands with a holler of triumph, then loses his balance and topples backwards, bringing his chair to the floor with him.

Mikasa cackles.

The door slams open and Hange steps in. “What in the world is all the noise?” Their gaze drifts to Levi on the floor, then Mikasa laughing on the chair, then the nearly empty bottle of whiskey. “Are you fucking serious, Levi?”

“Erwin’s alive!” Levi yells, shoving his empty glass in the air.

“For fuck’s sakes.” Hange storms over to them. “Mikasa, can you stand?”

She stands, but she’s slumped and wobbling. “Yeah.”

Hange hauls her completely upright. “Go back to your room. But be discreet about it. We’ll discuss this tomorrow.”

Mikasa stumbles from the room and the door slams behind her.

Hange kicks Levi’s side. “Get up.”

With great effort, he draws himself to a sitting position. “Am I in trouble, Commander?”

“I can’t believe you got a fifteen-year-old drunk. What the hell is wrong with you?” Hange drops to a seat on the other chair. “I knew you were going to lose it if Erwin ever died, but this?”

“Mikasa is twenty-five,” Levi says. “We travelled here from the future. And Erwin isn’t dead, he’s a titan—I felt his electricity. And we’re going to send Armin into the paths after he eats Eren and save all the Eldians.”

“What the hell are you—” Hange pauses and holds their hands out as if trying to calm down. After several deep breaths, they say, “We’ll discuss this in the morning. If I don’t throw you in a cell first.” They hold out a hand. “On your feet.”

Levi leans heavily against Hange, struggling to land each foot on the floor; it seems to be dodging away from him. “We’re best friends in the future, Hange.”

“Can’t imagine why.” Hange guides him to his sleeping quarters, then opens the door. They pull off his jacket and boots, then push him onto his bed. He lays there, watching the ceiling spin, until he hears the clink of glass beside him. Hange is setting a jug of water and a cup on the nightstand.

They perch on the edge of the bed. “Levi, look. I know you must be feeling like— Hell, I *know* what you’re feeling. I lost Moblit.”

“I watched Erwin die three times. Three fucking times, Hange.”

“Did you now,” Hange says.

“I love him.”

Hange gives a deep sigh. “I know. Look, what I’m trying to say is, I promise we’ll talk soon. I’m just preoccupied with other things right now. Erwin left big shoes to fill.”

Levi laughs. “His boots would be huge on you.”

“This is exactly the shit I don’t need right now,” Hange says. “You need to pull yourself together. Those kids are all counting on us to guide them through this.”

“Okay,” he says somberly. “But I need something, too.”

“What?”

“Tomorrow, talk to me and Mikasa about the future.”

Hange shakes their head and stands. “Get some sleep.”

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IN THE MESS HALL the next morning, Levi sees Mikasa with one temple pressed to the table, looking like death. *Sorry, kid.*

After salted bread and a lot of water, he's feeling pretty good—so good that he almost forgets he has to plan his eulogy for Erwin's funeral. Last time, he read a few stilted sentences about his career, then stalked off the stage. This time, he wants to do it properly.

He looks for Hange, but they are nowhere to be found. He finally finds them in their office. Moblit's desk is untouched in the corner, an old tea mug resting by a sketch pad, still half-full of tea. He stares at it.

“Feeling better this morning?” Hange asks without a single drop of sympathy.

“Could be worse.”

Hange raises their eyebrow at him. “What do you want?”

He looks at the stack of documents on the desk in front of them. Death notices. It used to take Erwin hours to work through them after expeditions, and Hange has almost an entire regiment to deal with.

“I wanted to talk to you, remember? We need Mikasa and Historia there, too. Probably Armin, as well.”

Hange looks back down at the paperwork as if dismissing him. “Historia is stationed in Mitras, remember? We’ll be heading there soon to arrange the mass funeral and the graves. I just have to get through this paperwork first.”

He looks at them with pity. They have to do this bullshit when they should be mourning. “Give me some. I’ll help.”

Hange looks surprised. “This is specifically for the Commander to—”

“Erwin used to let me help. Separate out a pile for me. I’ll grab us some tea.” He heads to the mess hall and returns with a kettle and two cups. Though Hange doesn’t look up, a small pile

is waiting for him on the edge of the desk, as well as a pen and ink. He pulls up a chair and begins to work.

They work in silence save for the flip of papers and scratching pens. After about an hour, Levi realizes Hange's pen isn't moving. He looks at the paper under their hand.

*MOBLIT BERNER.*

He wordlessly takes that sheet onto his pile and replaces it with Erwin's.

“Easier this way,” he murmurs.

Hange nods. “Did Erwin have any next of kin?”

“Just me.”

“I see.” Hange pushes their glasses up onto their forehead, rubbing their eye. “I’m getting a headache. How about a tea break?”

He nods and pours them each a cup.

Hange accepts the mug and leans back in their chair. “So. I want to know what you want to discuss with me, Mikasa, Armin, and Historia. That seems like a random assortment of people.”

“It’s too much to explain now.”

“I won’t be able to secure a meeting with Her Royal Highness without any information, especially when she’ll be busy managing the public’s perception of the military after we lost so many people.”

He knows Hange is bluffing, but he leans into it. “Mikasa and I are from the year 860.”

Hange looks at him blankly. “Right. From the future. Levi, have you lost your mind?”

“It’s true.” He considers. “I said we were best friends in that timeline, right? I know everything about you.”

“Is that so?” They peer at him. “Like what?”

“Your first partner was a boy from your mathematics class in university. You have a degree in physical sciences, but left academia when your younger brother joined the military, because you wanted to look out for him. He died during the

plague, so you decided to carry on his dream of joining the Survey Corps, where you were intrigued by the way titans defied all scientific logic. You enlisted Moblit to help you perform secret research on the titans. As soon as Erwin was promoted to your Squad Leader, he discovered what you two were up to, and by the time I joined the Survey Corps, he had started allowing you to do small experiments.”

Hange’s face is pale. “I probably told you all that.”

“But you didn’t, and you know it. Not yet, anyway.” He leans forward. “And yesterday evening, you went to Moblit’s room to pack up his possessions for his family—his parents and younger sister—and you discovered a knife under his pillow, and you wondered if you really knew him at all, and what he was so afraid of.”

“How did—”

“You also found all the bottles he stashed around his room, and you’re remembering all the times you smelled alcohol on his breath—”

“Enough.” Hange’s eye narrows. “Maybe to you, these are just facts, but I lost him yesterday.”

“Oh.” He pauses. “Sorry.”

Hange sighs and slumps a little in their chair. “So this is your second time through this, then.”

“Does that mean you believe me?”

“I don’t know. I’ll entertain the idea. Those details were a little too specific.”

That’s fair; he would have a hard time swallowing everything he was saying, too. “This is Mikasa’s second time through it, too. We travelled here together.”

“At least that explains why you were drinking with her.” They shake their head. “That was reckless. If anyone but me had found you two, what do you think they would have thought?”

“Family reunion?” Levi shrugs. “Eren sent us back through the paths. Erwin, too, but he didn’t have a body to return to, so he’s coming back when Marley turns him into a titan.”

“When … what?” Hange massages the bridge of their nose. “And why does this involve Historia?”

“She’s the one who used the ritual to send us into the paths.”

“The paths, as in—”

“The dimension Ymir Fritz built to connect all Eldians, and the source of titan powers.”

“Okay.” Hange holds up a hand to silence him. “I get why you want everyone in a room at the same time to explain all this.” They pause. “You’re saying all that myth around the founder Ymir is true?”

“Yes.” Levi can understand their skepticism; he hadn’t believed it at first, either.

“And you travelled back in time.” Hange drums their fingers on the surface of the desk, considering. “Why? Did something go terribly wrong?”

“Yeah.”

“Was it … my mistake?” They won’t meet his gaze.

“No,” he says gently. “You did well with the information we had at the time. It was Eren—he went into the paths to try to fix everything, and only figured out what needed to be done when it was too late to do it. He sent us back to …” He hesitates.

“To what?”

“To change the timeline to allow us to end the titan curse.” He does not want to see Hange’s reaction if they discover he was supposed to revive Erwin instead of Armin. That anger is still simmering beneath the surface; he can feel it.

“What changes are you supposed to make?” Hange asks.

Levi shrugs it off. “I’d rather go into those details when everyone is there.”

Hange studies him for a minute, then pulls out a sheet of paper and addresses it to Historia. “I’ll set something up. But I really hope you aren’t having some sort of grief-induced delusion.”

“So do I,” Levi mutters. “And … I have one more request.”

Hange's mouth flattens. "You're pushing it, Levi."

"I know, but this is all important. In order to move as quickly as possible, we can't punish Mikasa and Eren for what they did back there."

Hange gapes at him. "What? They blatantly disobeyed you. Mikasa attacked you with intent to kill."

"She's already been through enough. And Eren isn't going to learn anything if he's locked away to stew on all the new information he has from his father. If anything, he's going to need our guidance to process it all."

"You're asking me to cover up their actions."

"Yeah, I am."

"You're asking me to sacrifice my integrity."

Levi pauses to consider. "No, I'm asking you to use your integrity to do the right thing. We can punish them later internally, if you want. Just give them a week or two first, okay?"

Hange stands. "Fine. But only because you're being so weirdly polite today." They walk to the door.

"Leaving?" Levi asks, glancing at the unfinished stack of papers.

"I just need to take a walk and process all this." Hange points a finger at him. "You are going to answer more questions later. And I still haven't gotten over the way you let Erwin die."

"I know."

"I want to get over it. I don't like being angry with you, you know." Hange lets out a weary sigh. "You say you've been through this before. So how long does it take me to forgive you?"

"You know," Levi says quietly, "I don't think you ever really do."

Hange stares at him for a moment longer, then turns and leaves the room.

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ALL NINE OF THE surviving soldiers travel to Mitras together. The cart is significantly less comfortable than the carriages Levi used to ride in with Erwin, and he grumbles to himself as all the bumps in the road rattle his tailbone. He should have ridden on his own, but the soldiers are all quiet and sombre, and he doesn't want to leave Hange to manage their moods alone.

They stop for a break in Ehrmich and Levi buys some fine tea for himself, and some bread, cheese, and pastries for the others. Sasha, at least, seems to appreciate this gesture—the girl has always had a love of good food. The others pick at their meals. Armin is staring absently into the distance. He has barely moved since they left Trost.

Levi carefully shifts across the cart to sit by him. “You should eat something, Armin. Being the Colossal Titan has got to be burning up your energy.”

Armin looks at him with haunted eyes. “Everyone in this meeting is going to be looking at me, wondering why I deserve to live instead of Commander Erwin. And they’ll be right.”

“No. If anyone gives you attitude, you redirect them to me.” Levi grabs a roll and hands it to him. “Eat that. I have a meeting planned with you later today to talk about our next steps. There’s a very good reason I chose you to receive the serum, and Hange and I will tell you all about it.” He claps a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “You have a big task ahead of you, but don’t think you have to fill Erwin’s shoes.” He suddenly recalls talking about Erwin’s shoes to Hange in a drunken stupor, and cringes.

Armin nods, but he’s back to staring into space again.

Levi looks around at the others. Hange is focusing intently on a notebook, where they have prepared their report for the military brass. Mikasa is sitting between Sasha and Eren, giving food to both of them. Jean is shooting concerned looks at Armin. Connie and Floch are playing a game of cards, but neither seems to be enjoying it.

He wonders what happened to the rest of them after the memory wipe. At one point, he heard word that Jean was climbing the ranks as an MP, but he never heard about Sasha, Connie, or Floch ever again. Maybe they spent those ten years living quiet lives with their families.

He's going to give them all a choice, this time, to see if they want to hide from the memory wipe with Hange, now that they know it will work. He wonders how many of them will choose to remember.

They arrive at the palace in Mitras, where they are greeted by Historia and Nile.

*Shit.* Levi tries to scout an escape route, but Nile is standing directly in their path. The soldiers file off the cart; Levi waits until last.

Nile rushes up to him and grabs his collar. “Where is he?”

“Nile—” Historia begins, but Levi waves her off.

“We sent a message ahead,” he says. “You already know.”

“No.” Nile shakes his head vehemently. “He’s not dead, right? It was just a mistake. Just a clerical error.”

Levi stares him directly in the eye, wordless.

Tears spill over, and Nile bows his head. “How?”

“He was fatally wounded during the final charge.” Levi’s throat is tight. This is all new. Last time, he shoved Nile away from him and stormed inside. This time is different; they became friends in the years after Erwin’s death. *Those extra years made me soft.*

“I was with him when he passed,” Levi adds quietly, certain that will be a small comfort. “He wasn’t alone.” He pulls out a clean handkerchief and hands it to him.

“That fucking idiot,” Nile says, wiping his face. “The way he kept gambling his life for his stupid dream. His luck finally ran out.”

“Maybe,” Levi says, thinking that a resurrection is pretty damned lucky. “Now we have the information we need to carry

on his dream for him. So pull yourself together. We have work to do."

"I don't know what I'm going to tell Marie and the kids."

"Tell them the truth," Levi says. "Erwin Smith died a hero." He pats Nile on the back, then begins to walk toward the palace.

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**BEFORE THEY ENTER** the military meeting, Levi stops the queen. There's one thing he needs to know for sure, and she's the only one who can confirm it for him.

"Hey, Historia. I need you to do something for me." He cocks his head at the other side of the hallway.

She follows him. "What is it, Captain?" It's so strange to hear the lack of confidence in her voice. Mikasa isn't the only one who lost a decade of friendship with her.

Levi pushes up his sleeve. "Grab my arm."

She looks at his arm, confused, and then up at him. "What?"

"I know it's a strange request. I'll explain later. Do it."

She warily reaches out and places her palm against his skin.

Electricity crackles through Levi's arm and fills his soul with yellow light. He feels energy pulling him south, in the direction of Shiganshina. It has to be him. What else could it be?

Levi closes his eyes. *Hang in there just a bit longer, Erwin.*

"Thank you," he says to a confused-looking Historia, and then he strides into the meeting hall with purpose.

He will find Erwin, and he will save him.

# ❧ Eighteen ❧

## SOUTHERN DAWN

LEVI SPENDS MOST of the meeting with his arms folded tightly over his chest, watching the way the higher-ups pretend to mourn the man they pushed to his death and the hundreds of soldiers they sent after him.

Maybe that's a bit dramatic, especially after witnessing Nile's grief earlier, but it's how he thought of it last time. He wants to lean into that anger to vent some of the anger he's feeling at the world.

Hange gives a full report of casualties and their discoveries while Zackly takes notes.

“Is Shiganshina secure now, Commander?” he asks.

Hange shakes their head. “No, sir, but Erwin and the others did not die in vain. Eren Yeager sealed the wall. We also have a clear idea of the total titan population and their distribution en route to Shiganshina. Furthermore, we have information about the true nature of titans, and the people who created them. I request more time to research Grisha Yeager’s journals so we can use that information as we strategize our next steps.”

“Granted,” Zackly says. “Let’s take the next three weeks to gather intelligence and then reconvene. Now, there is one more matter we must address: Erwin’s death, and the details of how it occurred.” Hange must look distressed, because he adds gently, “It’s a formality to gather the details when a Commander dies in battle.”

Levi glances at Hange, wondering what they will say. *Listen to what I told you, Hange. Don't implicate Eren and Mikasa the way you did last time.*

“Commander Erwin was injured during the final charge against the Beast Titan.” Hange turns to give Levi a pointed look. “I was not present at the time. The Captain here can give you the details.”

So they’re leaving it up to him to tell the half-truths. That’s fair.

“There were only a handful of us still standing,” he says, “and the Beast Titan was using crushed rocks as projectiles. We were all about to die. Erwin made one last gamble to try to take down the Beast Titan: he led the recruits in a suicide charge, acting as bait, and using the signal guns as cover to keep them alive for as long as possible. My role was to take advantage of their sacrifice to ambush the Beast Titan.”

“And Erwin was struck during the charge?” Zackly asks.

“Yeah. New recruit Floch is the only survivor of the charge. He found Erwin still alive and tried to save him using first aid, but his injuries were too severe.” *Please don’t make me go into detail. I don’t want to relive it yet again.*

Zackly peers down the end of his nose at him. “Were you able to take down the Beast Titan, Captain?”

“No.” Levi looks away. “The Cart Titan—who we believe is another shifter—appeared just as I was about to deliver the finishing blow.”

“I see.” Zackly folds his hands in front of his mouth, tapping his fingers against his knuckles. “And Armin was severely wounded attacking the shifters, so you used the injection to transform him into a titan, whereupon he ate the Colossal Titan.”

“That’s correct,” Hange says. “We had almost secured the Armoured Titan as well, but the Cart Titan got him, too. They were coordinated in their efforts.”

Zackly nods, taking a few more notes.

“We need a funeral,” Levi says. “For the fallen.”

“Of course.” Zackly looks up, face kind. “And I assume as his right-hand man, you will want to do something special to commemorate Erwin’s passing?”

Levi’s blood boils. “That shouldn’t even be a question.” This is the timeline leading him again, and he finds he wants to let this play out a second time. “He was a hero. You should all be tripping over yourselves to give him a ceremony.”

“Levi,” Hange says in warning.

“No, fuck it, I’m going to say what’s on my mind. I’m sick of these three assholes looking at us as if they understand, when they sat safely within the walls every single time Erwin went through hell for humanity. They act all sad that he’s gone, but they didn’t give a shit when he was still alive.” Levi stands. “Nile, you let Erwin get beaten by the Internal MP, almost to death. It broke him. And you, old man,” he says to Pixis, “you let him believe he was a selfish asshole who didn’t care about the lives of anyone inside the walls—were you too drunk to notice all the times he built his strategies around saving lives?”

“Levi,” Hange snaps.

“Captain, that is quite enough,” Zackly says, voice deep. “We understand this outburst is coming from a place of pain, but—”

“You’re the worst of them all,” Levi says. “Using his revolution as an excuse to imprison the nobles and force-feed them shit. He was trying to bring freedom to the people, not allow you to play out your sick fantasies.”

Zackly’s brows drop. “Captain, I remind you that Erwin is not here to protect you from discipline anymore. I suggest you stop talking before I am forced to take action.”

“I’m done, anyway.” Levi marches for the door.

He hears Hange bark, “Levi!” as the door closes behind him.

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MAYBE IT WASN'T the right move, but it felt good to tell those assholes off again. *I'd do it a third time if I could*, he thinks, followed by, *fuck, I hope we don't have to do all this a third time*. He stretches out on the guest room bed, staring at the ceiling.

A knock sounds at the door.

“Fuck off,” he says.

“At least talk to me with some respect,” Hange calls. “I’m your Commander now.”

“Fuck off, sir.”

Hange swings the door open and slams it closed behind them as they storm into the room. “I thought you said this was your second time through this.”

“It is.”

“Then what the hell is all this drama? Shouldn’t you be able to control yourself now that you know what’s coming?”

Levi is betrayed by a sudden tightness in his throat and flood of tears. He rolls away from Hange to hide his face.

“You ever have a fucked-up nightmare that haunts you for days afterwards?” he asks. “And every time you remember it, you’re overwhelmed by the horror and intensity as if it’s happening for the first time, even though you know it shouldn’t bother you anymore? That’s what it’s like, living through these old memories.”

He hears Hange’s bootsteps move closer, then feels the bed shift. He’s surprised to feel a gentle hand on his shoulder. The gesture of kindness undoes him and his tears spill over.

“Shit,” he mutters. He forgot how weepy he was in the months following Erwin’s death.

“Here.” There’s a rustle, then Hange dangles something in front of him. A handkerchief.

“Why are you being nice to me?” Levi mutters, his consonants blunted by congestion. “I’m being a dick.”

“I told you: I don’t like being mad at you. We’ve always had each other’s back even when we didn’t agree, you know? You’re the only friend I have left.” Hange pats his shoulder.

“Besides, this isn’t the first time you’ve cussed out the superiors. I imagine the only reason you never stormed off the other times is because your desire to stand by Erwin’s side was greater than your urge to flee.”

Levi wipes his face with the handkerchief and quietly blows his nose, trying to regain control over himself. When he’s certain his tears are stable, he sits up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed.

Hange pats him on the back. “You say we’re best friends in the future?”

“Yeah. We’ve lived together for about a decade.”

“Really?”

He nods. “We split our time between Mitras and our home for the first few years, until I retired. We fixed up the cabin together and made it our home. You have a laboratory in the basement, and I have a training room upstairs. We share the kitchen and the living area.”

“And we get along?”

“Most of the time.” Levi pauses to consider. “We grate on each other, sometimes, but who doesn’t? We have an unspoken routine and we move seamlessly through it without getting in each other’s way. There’s an ease to it that I’ve never experienced anywhere else. A feeling of safety.”

Hange is quiet for a while, then says softly, “That sounds amazing.”

Levi thinks of that cozy little cabin, and how he and Hange were preparing to welcome Erwin into their home, too. Levi would give anything to be out walking his trap route with Erwin right now, then come inside, face tingling with the cold, where all three of them would have lunch together.

If he wants a chance at that future, he can’t sit here sulking. As tempting as it is to succumb to the emotions of the past, there is work to be done.

“We need to talk with the others.”

Hange nods. “When?”

“As soon as possible.”

“Okay. Why don’t you go down to the kitchen and get something to eat? I’ll find Armin, Mikasa, and Historia.”

“Let’s meet in the meeting room by the throne room,” Levi says. “Thanks, Hange.”

They pat his shoulder one last time, then stand.

Once they leave, he rolls onto his side again. He closes his eyes. “Erwin, what do we do? Do we do the ritual before Marley arrives? Or do we follow the timeline for a bit longer and let them come to us first?”

There is, of course, no reply. He rubs the part of his arm where Historia touched him, but the tingle is quiet.

For a moment, he’s tempted to drift off to sleep. Maybe he will find himself in the paths dimension and see Erwin there. And if not, at least he would just get some rest ...

Another knock sounds at the door. He flinches. “What?”

This time, it’s Mikasa. “Everyone’s waiting in the meeting room.” She pushes open the door and strides over to him. “Are you okay?”

“Not really. You?”

“No,” she says. “I don’t know if I can do any of this.”

He hoists himself to his feet. “I told Hange some of what’s going on. They’ve got our back.”

“Really? Even after the way you lost it in the meeting?”

He retrieves his long jacket from the chair and pulls it on. “I was following the timeline.”

“I don’t remember you being quite that rude last time.”

She studies him. “You’re not starting to fall apart, are you?”

He scoffs. “I’ve been in pieces for a while now.” He finishes buttoning the coat and takes a deep breath. He’s not looking forward to Armin’s reaction when they explain the plan to him. “Okay, let’s get this over with.”

When they enter the meeting room, Armin looks up at them with wide eyes that shine with innocence, and maybe even

importance, as if he's excited to be included in a top-secret planning meeting. *Sorry, kid.*

Historia looks distracted, and he realizes she recently read the letter from Ymir. Every single one of them is mourning something right now. He and Mikasa are about to take away any time they would have had to grieve. *Sorry, all of you.*

"Take a seat," Hange says, all business. They even have a paper and pen ready for taking notes; that was usually Moblit's job, before. Levi stares at that pen and paper as he sits down.

It's hard to believe that they were last seated at this table only a couple days ago—well, ten years from now, more accurately. Levi's sense of time has been thrown into chaos.

"What we are about to discuss does not leave this room," Hange says. "Even our close allies are not to hear a word of this until I say it's okay. Do you all understand?"

Everyone nods.

"Good." Hange turns to Levi and Mikasa. "I don't even know where to start, so go ahead."

Levi realizes the fatal flaw in their plan: he and Mikasa are the worst people to explain the logic of the paths to everyone. He looks at her, but she sits back in her seat and pretends not to notice his unspoken request for help. Fine.

"Mikasa and I are here from the year 860," he says. "We were sent back here to correct some flaws in the timeline so we can save Paradis. Erwin was sent back, too, but he's currently a mindless titan in Shiganshina."

The blank looks are about what he expected.

"You mean you travelled through time?" Historia asks slowly.

"Yes. Through the paths that connect Eldians. They cross a single point, outside of time. Possibly across different realities." He gestures at Hange to pass him the paper and pen; he draws the branching timelines that Eren and Erwin drew in the sand in the paths. "The Founder Ymir built this system of connected

paths, and she controls it all. In our timeline, Eren travelled into that dimension and became her.”

Together, he and Mikasa explain how Eren learned Ymir’s abilities and then took over her role. They explain Erwin’s resurrection, and the way they entered the paths through the ritual.

At first, everyone looks confused, and Levi thinks, *we’re screwed. There’s no way we can explain this properly.*

But then something seems to click for Hange, and they start guiding the discussion with questions, giving them room to elaborate.

When they finish explaining, Hange suggests they all take a tea break to let it sink in before they discuss the next steps. They still haven’t discussed the changes they need to make to this timeline, and this is the part Levi is dreading.

While they munch on some pastries, Armin asks, “So you’re here because Eren’s attempts at fixing the timeline came to a dead end.”

“Yes,” Levi says.

“That means you need to make some changes to give him a chance to fix it now, right? What are the changes? Or are they already done?”

Levi loses his appetite again; he sets down his pastry and takes a long sip of tea.

Hange jumps on his hesitation: “What are the changes, Levi?”

Mikasa casts an unimpressed look at Levi before she speaks: “We had two changes to make. The first was to save Commander Erwin instead of Armin.”

“What?” Armin asks faintly.

“But—” Historia begins, then stops.

Hange turns to Levi, brow raised. “I see.”

Mikasa does not ease up: “Eren needed someone to do a task that will require a certain ruthlessness. He believed the

Commander was the only one capable of doing it. But Levi made the same choice and injected Armin again.”

“What?” Armin asks, sweat rolling down his temples. “Why me?”

Hange holds up a hand to silence him. “We can get into that discussion later. Mikasa, what was Erwin supposed to do once he had the Colossal Titan?”

Mikasa looks down, and Levi senses she won’t be able to say it, so he says, “Erwin was supposed to eat Eren and then travel into the paths and start all the wall titans walking. The Rumbling.”

The silence is so heavy that Levi slumps in his seat, folding his arms over his chest. He expected emotional outbursts. Silence is almost worse.

At last, Armin speaks up, his voice breaking: “So now I need to eat Eren? And trample the world?” His eyes fill with tears.

“Not necessarily,” Levi says. “That was what Eren requested, yes, but there is another way. Ymir is the one with the ability to undo the titan curse. If you can find a way to convince her to do that, no one has to die.” He glances at Mikasa. “And we think you and Eren could both travel to the paths realm if you held hands with Historia during the ritual. It’s better to have both of you there. You’re good at strategy and connecting with people. Eren is stubborn and managed to get through to Ymir before. Between the two of you, you can convince her. And if not, then you two can get her to start the Rumbling.”

Historia asks softly, “Won’t the Rumbling trample most of the world?”

“That’s right. Eren thought it would mean the deaths of about eighty percent of the world’s population.”

“That’s a big price to pay for our survival.”

“Agreed,” Levi says. “That’s why we need to try something else first. And there’s more you should all know. If we do nothing, Marley will be arriving in approximately eight weeks’ time to strike up a bargain of peace with us, for one hundred

years. Part of that requirement is that we perform a memory wipe so the populace goes back to believing there is no one outside the walls.” With Mikasa’s help, he summarizes all the terms of the agreement, and how Eren accidentally broke it ten years into it.

“So,” Hange says, pushing their glasses onto their forehead and rubbing the bridge of their nose. “We have three options before us. First option, Armin and Eren go into the paths through this ritual and try to convince Ymir to undo everything. Second option, they convince her to start the Rumbling instead. Third option, we do nothing and buy one hundred years of peace again.”

Mikasa shakes her head. “That’s not an option. We saw how fragile that peace was. And it will mean Eren dies in the ritual all over again, and Armin gets handed over to Marley and eaten. If they’re going to ...” Her throat bobs. “If they aren’t going to make it, shouldn’t it be for a better chance at freedom?”

A silence falls over the room.

“Did you say Eren dies in the ritual?” Armin asks quietly.

Levi glances at Mikasa. Shit. They didn’t mention that in their abridged retelling of their situation.

“Yes,” Levi says flatly. “Mikasa and I were protected by our bloodline, and Historia as well. But if you and Eren do the ritual, your physical bodies will probably die, and you will most likely have no way to return.”

Armin’s jaw trembles. “So we’re trapped in the paths forever? And what happens if Ymir undoes everything—does the paths realm disappear, too? Will we be trapped forever in nothingness? Or do we just cease to exist?”

“We don’t know.”

Armin clutches his head with his hands as his tears spill over. Levi feels a pang of guilt. Erwin volunteered to do this, so what right did Levi have to push it on Armin?

“This is how we see it playing out,” Levi continues, pushing past his guilt. “Historia, Armin, and Eren perform the

ritual. If you are successful in convincing her, all titan powers will disappear from this world. Marley will suspect we did something. We know it takes them four days to mobilize their forces and reach us—possibly a couple extra days if their forces are stretched across multiple fronts.”

Hange blanches. “You said they’re so technologically advanced that we have no chance to defend ourselves against them, right?”

Levi nods. “We will need to negotiate with them. And this time, we’ll have Erwin.”

The room is silent.

“Hopefully,” Mikasa mutters.

“Erwin is currently a mindless titan in Shiganshina,” Levi says confidently. “I can sense him through the path that connects us. When Ymir undoes the titans, he will turn back into a human. He is from the year 860, too. He will have inside information. Together with him, Hange can figure out how to negotiate with Marley.” There are a lot of unknowns and assumptions in this plan, and he waits tensely for someone to poke holes in it.

Armin is the first to speak up: “We can hold the Rumbling over their head.”

“How?” Levi replies.

“They won’t know Eren is dead. They’ll only know the other Titans are gone.” Armin lifts his head, eyes glowing with that look Erwin gets when he is piecing together a brilliant strategy. “We present it as if we are seeking trade because we’re choosing to open up to the outside world, but remind them we can unleash the wall titans at any time. We just have to make sure Ymir leaves them standing.”

The others exchange glances.

“What if they see through our bluff?” Hange asks.

“Well,” Armin says, “they might, but look how afraid they were of the Rumbling. They sent spies to infiltrate us to get the Founding Titan back, rather than staging a direct attack.”

“So we claim we have erased everything except a link to

the wall titans,” Hange says slowly, drumming their fingers on the table. “We’ll need to think this through more, but it’s a start. They’re going to want proof.” They start scribbling furiously.

For a moment, they’re all quiet, each lost in their own thoughts.

“There’s one more option,” Hange says without looking up, “Historia has royal blood. If we transform her into a titan and have her eat Eren, she’ll have complete control over the Founding Titan.”

“What?” Historia says softly.

Mikasa leaps in: “She’s not going to do that.”

“I know,” Hange says. “I wouldn’t ask it of you, Historia. Even if you suggested it, we don’t have any serum left. Furthermore, the data we have collected so far suggests you would be bound to the First King’s Will anyway. You would just be resetting everything back to where it was before the breech on Wall Maria. I just wanted to make sure we’re covering all options.”

“Then here’s option five,” Levi says. “We attack Marley head-on and they destroy us.”

“See? We’ve already eliminated two options. Doesn’t that feel good?” Hange writes something down and strikes it through. “Levi, Mikasa, I’m going to have a host of questions for you tomorrow, after a night to think this through. We need to know exactly what we’re working with, and what Marley’s forces look like.”

Levi nods. “Before you dismiss us, we have two questions. The first is, do we perform the memory wipe?”

“I don’t see a reason to do it, unless we decide we’re going to do exactly what we did last time and make a bargain of peace.”

“Well,” Armin says quietly, “it would help us keep the population calm if we manipulated their memories. The revolution and the latest expedition have caused a lot of chaos in the public.”

Everyone turns to stare at him. He looks around the room and grimaces.

“No, just thinking aloud.”

“Then stop that line of thought,” Hange says brusquely. “We would just be perpetuating the Interior MP’s actions if we tried to control the population for our own convenience. Isn’t that exactly what we’ve been trying to stop this whole time?”

*That’s how Erwin would react, too.* Levi turns to Armin. “We’ll deal with the population. Your mission is to go with Eren into the paths and convince Ymir to dismantle it all. Will you do it?”

The boy is trembling, but his expression hardens and he nods. “Yes. I will.”

“Good.”

“Hange,” Mikasa says, “I know you said this wasn’t to leave this room, but I’d like Armin and I to explain everything to Eren. He’ll react better if it’s coming from us.”

Levi knows her well enough to recognize the heartache she’s covering with her flat tone. “I think that’s a good idea.”

“Okay, just make sure he knows it’s confidential.” Hange stands. “We have a lot more planning to do, but there’s a lot to take in already. Let’s take the night to absorb everything. We’ll meet back here after breakfast tomorrow.”

The team files out of the room. Hange falls into step beside Levi.

“You know,” they say quietly, “I think I understand now why you chose Armin instead of Erwin.”

“Oh?”

“Now I see what Armin and Eren are going to face, and then the diplomatic work we’re going to have to do afterward. It’s a bit of a gamble to bank on Erwin returning to us, but if that happens, then I think your choice was the right one.”

Ten years of tension melts from Levi’s body. “Thank you,” is all he says.

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LEVI HAS JUST finished changing into his military-issued pyjamas—he misses the softness of his flannel set—when Mikasa knocks at the door.

“Coming by this late? I don’t have any alcohol or cigars,” he says dryly, leaning against the door jamb.

She grimaces. “Just need to talk.”

He opens the door and lets her in. She leans against the table, and he sits across from her on the bed. “How did it go?”

Mikasa fingers her scarf. “He’ll do it. They’re both reading up on Ymir right now to see if they can figure out a plan.”

“Good.”

“I suppose this is where the timeline starts to diverge.”

“Good,” Levi says again. “I’m getting sick of reliving those old emotions, and trying to decide when to take control and when to not.”

They’re quiet for a moment, then Mikasa slouches a little, curling into herself.

“Are you okay?” he asks, even though he knows what the answer will be.

“No. But I’ll do what needs to be done.” Mikasa looks up at him. “Captain, what happens to us when the titan curse is undone? We get our strength from the paths, don’t we?”

“I suppose we will lose some of our strength, then.” He lets out a low sigh. “I’m not sure I mind.”

Their gaze holds, and he sees that same weariness in her eyes that he feels in his bones.

“Are we going to re-start the Queen’s Guard regiment?” she asks.

“Maybe.” He pauses. “It depends how things go with Marley, and what Erwin wants to do.”

She hesitates.

“Don’t say it,” he mutters.

“We don’t know if the Commander—”

“We do know,” he insists. “I feel him out there. He’s a mindless titan right now, and we’re going to get him back. I’ll feed Zeke Yeager to him if I have to.”

“You don’t think that will bring Marley down on us?” she says dryly.

He shrugs. “Then let’s hope your friends succeed in their mission and it doesn’t come to that.”

He’s not going to lose Erwin again, no matter the cost.

If it comes to it, he will burn down the entire world to get him back.

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EREN JOINS THEM the next morning, eyes glowing with resolve. It’s exactly the same expression he wore when they discussed his plan in the last timeline. Looking at those eyes, Levi acknowledges Mikasa was right: Armin needs this determination by his side.

After they go through the plan and confirm Eren and Armin are both committed, Hange sends for the other members of the Survey Corps. Sasha, Connie, Jean, and Floch file into the room and take seats.

Without mentioning anything about the paths and time travel, Hange briefly summarizes the plan. Levi doesn’t blame them for keeping the details a secret; Jean can be trusted, and probably Sasha and Connie, but he still isn’t sure about Floch. He suspects something broke in that kid during the final charge at Shiganshina.

Hange groups their names on the chalkboard. “Group A, Levi squad: you’ll take carts and supplies down to Shiganshina. We estimate there are a couple hundred titans in the area, and if they all turn back into humans, we’re going to need a massive transportation effort. Levi, I’ll leave the logistics to you.”

Levi nods. “Got it.”

“Group B, the ritual squad: Historia will travel with Armin

and Eren to perform their mission. Once that is underway, Historia will ride back to join me—Group C—here in Mitras to continue explaining our strategy to the brass.”

“Shouldn’t we do that first?” Jean asks.

Hange smirks. “You’re new to dealing with the military, so I’ll give you some advice: it’s better to ask for forgiveness than permission if you want to get anything done.”

“Besides,” Historia adds, “you are all acting on my authority. If they have any problems, they will have to take it up with me.” Now *there’s* a spark of 860 Historia.

“Group A and B will travel tonight under cover of darkness,” Hange continues. “Historia and I will go now to speak with the guards at the gate and send a message down to Trost, so you won’t encounter any resistance.” They nod at the group. “Dismissed, for now. We’ll meet back here at sunset.”

“My squad, stay behind.” Levi walks up to the chalkboard, but then he pauses. “Except Mikasa. You spend some time speaking with Armin and Eren to go over their mission with them a few more times. Bring them back here by sunset.”

Her eyes well with tears. “Thank you,” she says, her voice overflowing with gratitude. He nods.

Then he begins to work through the logistics of their operation; arranging all the supplies and transportation in one afternoon is going to be a challenge, especially when they aren’t physically in Trost yet. Together with the squad, Levi lists all the supplies they’ll need. Using carts will speed up their return once they have collected everyone, but the carts are also going to slow down their travel time and confine them to flat areas. They’ll need to set up a camp for at least one night—possibly longer, if it takes a while to round up all the ex-titans in the area. That means food, water, clothing, and camping gear. Spending the night outdoors in October will get chilly.

He categorizes the supplies and delegates each category to a soldier. “We need the vendors to assemble the supplies near the gates in Trost. I’m going to see if Flegel Reeves will help us coor-

dinate everything.” It’s going to be a tough sell, especially because he’ll have to do it by messenger, but if there’s anyone who still wants to maintain their hope in the Survey Corps, it’s Flegel.

Floch raises his hand. “What if this ritual Eren and Armin are doing doesn’t make the titans turn back into humans?”

“Then we become a scouting mission. We travel ahead to the ocean to see where Marley might dock their warships.” Levi turns back to the chalkboard. “Once we are confident we have collected everyone from Shiganshina, we’re going to move them to Trost. Then we’re going to need the assistance of the Garrison to comb the rest of the island for stragglers. Hange and Historia will be preparing Pixis for this as part of their discussions.” He draws a map of the walls. “Sasha and Floch will ride ahead to Krolva District to engage with the Garrison troops there, and Jean and Connie to Karanes. Mikasa will accompany me, Erwin, Hange, and Historia to Mitras to continue the next phase of the strategy.”

He can feel their eyes boring through the back of his head, and he realizes his mistake. He sighs and turns to face them.

“Oh yeah, and one of the mindless titans in Shiganshina is Erwin.”

Floch is the first to recover. “How?” he sputters. “We watched him die.”

“It’s a long story, and classified.” It’s probably not, but he really doesn’t want to get into it.

“The Commander … is alive?” Jean asks.

“Yes, I just told you. Everyone understand our mission?”

“Does that mean he will be taking over as Commander of the Survey Corps again?” Sasha asks. “What about Commander Hange?”

Levi folds his arms over his chest. “I don’t know. Any questions that aren’t about Erwin?”

They stare at him like a school of feeding fish. He sighs.

“You have your assignments. We don’t have much time to pull this together. Go.”

“Sir,” they say, saluting.

..❀❀..

AT SUNSET, THE TEAMS gather one last time. Most of them know Armin and Eren’s mission is dangerous, but they don’t know that this is almost certainly the last time they’ll see them. *Maybe it’s better that way.*

Levi nods at Armin and Eren. “Our future is in your hands. Do everything you can. The fewer people die, the better.”

They salute, determined. They’re good kids. He watches Mikasa give them tearful hugs.

They need to get going. Levi nods at Hange in a silent goodbye. “Okay squad, move out.”

As they leave the castle grounds, Mikasa stares back, tears on her cheeks. Levi lets her mourn for a few minutes, then says gently, “Mikasa, eyes front.”

“Captain,” she says, face tightening with determination.

..❀❀..

THEY RIDE SOUTH to Trost by horseback, then stop at the base to finish packing their supplies and eat a quick meal.

When they head out again, four long carts are fully loaded and waiting for them by the gates. Levi gives Flegel’s team a hefty tip and assigns Sasha, Connie, Floch, and Jean to each of the carts. He and Mikasa will ride on horseback, ready to deploy if needed.

The guards wordlessly open the gate for them, as easily as if they are walking through a garden gate for an evening stroll. Levi wonders how Hange got them to cooperate without alerting Pixis. He suspects some sort of bribe was involved.

They continue due south, heading for Shiganshina first. The further they ride, the more Levi's arm tingles where Historia grabbed it. He feels as if he could take out fifteen titans by himself. Fortunately, all the titans must be asleep, because they don't encounter any. They don't find any people, either. Levi wishes they would chance upon someone, *anyone*, to know if Armin and Eren have succeeded in their mission.

Mikasa suddenly gives a sharp cry and clutches her chest. Her horse rears; she circles it and halts, facing the walls. Levi does the same and stops beside her.

“The ritual?” he asks.

“Mikasa?” Jean calls, halting his cart. “Are you okay?”

She is shaking, her head bowed so her hair hides her face. “I'm okay,” she says in Guard Captain Mikasa's voice. “Onward.”

Levi feels the urge to comfort her, but what could he possibly say? What's more, he doesn't want to confront the idea that the two of them are gone. Instead, he considers their strategy. Mikasa has just lost her bond with Eren again, which means she is weaker than before. That means he needs to be the first one to enter battle.

*Please don't let us encounter any titans.*

Fortunately, they don't, and they are just approaching Shiganshina as the sun rises over the horizon. Levi guides them to a basin large enough for all their gear and a few hundred people. It will be a good area to shelter that night.

“Leave the carts here for now,” he says. “We need to scout ahead.”

His bond with Erwin is burning hot now. *He's close. I can feel him.*

..❀..

**THE TITAN HAULS** itself free from the rubble of the house. Its knees steam from the scrape of the earth, its mouth filling with topsoil. It is weak, so weak, but it must fulfill its one need at

IN THESE FALLEN LEAVES

all costs, the one thought on its mind from the moment it was created.

Its dream.

Its giant fingertips stab into the earth as it drags itself due north.

# ❧ Nineteen ❧

## A LOVE STORY

*—If it comes to it, I will burn down the entire world to serve him. Isn't that the whole reason I exist?*

*-year* ☺-

ARMIN AND EREN land hard on the sand. Armin slowly pushes himself upright, wincing at the pain that echoes through his body.

“This must be the paths,” Eren says beside him, voice filled with awe.

Armin looks up at the streams of light winnowing through the sky, and he suddenly feels so small. “Each of those is an Eldian life.”

“And that must be the Coordinate.” Eren points at a glowing pillar in the distance.

With a nod of determination, Armin says, “Let’s go.”

As they walk, he tries not to wonder if their physical bodies are dead, but the thought haunts him all the same. The Captain and Mikasa had strongly inferred the ritual would kill them. Here, he can still feel pain and breathe. Would that be the case if he were dead?

“Is that her?” Eren asks. Armin lifts his eyes to the Coordinate, and sees the silhouette of a figure heading toward them. As it approaches, its shape crystallizes. It’s running.

It isn't the founder Ymir.

It's Eren.

"Armin? Eren?" the boy says as he rushes up to them. "Well, I guess that works. We don't have long. The timeline is in the process of correcting itself. Soon I will disappear and Ymir will reappear."

"You're ... me?" Eren asks, shocked.

Armin understands he must be confused, but if they don't have much time, they can be shocked later. "What do we have to do to convince Ymir to undo this place?"

"I don't know," the other Eren admits.

"The First King's Will stops Ymir and all Founding Titans, right? Why does she bind herself to his will like that?"

"I asked her that, but didn't get an answer. She doesn't speak." He's starting to visibly flicker. "Maybe you can find out. But the Rumbling *will* free everyone in Paradis. I've seen it work."

"How can we see Ymir's memories?" Armin asks, dodging the idea of performing the Rumbling.

"They exist in the Coordinate. She can teach you how to find other memories. Paths don't just connect to the Coordinate; they also intertwine and intersect with each other. And some people are connected by direct paths, like shifters to their titans, and Ackermans to the people they choose to follow."

Armin mentally scrambles for the best questions to ask in their remaining time. "You took over Ymir's role? How?"

"Don't do it." He's transparent now, and fading faster. "She must stay in control. We don't have the capacity to understand her psyche, even if we can master her actions. She must be the one to change fate. Good luck to you both."

He flickers again, then fades from view.

..❀❀..

THOUGH THEY DON'T notice her yet, a girl rises from the dune behind them, sand rolling off her body like water.

..&..

EREN STARES AT THE empty space his paths self left behind, eyes wide, mouth hanging open. "That was ... me?"

"I think that was the last remnant of the timeline Mikasa and the Captain came from. Come on." Armin grabs his hand and pulls him toward the Coordinate. "Maybe we can learn something about Ymir in here."

Eren nods, regaining control of himself. "I should probably be the one to do it, right? Since I am the Founding Titan."

"Yes, I think so." Armin adds hesitantly, "But if it seems unsafe, please stop."

Eren shoves his hand into the stream of paths. He freezes in place and his eyes roll back into his head.

Is that supposed to happen? Is he in any danger? Can they die here? Armin is frozen with indecision.

The hair on the back of his neck prickles. He turns. A young girl stands behind him, clothed in a tattered dress, bangs covering her eyes.

"Ymir?" he asks softly.

She doesn't reply.

"Can you show us what we seek? We want to know more about you."

She studies him for a moment longer, then timidly walks up to him and reaches for Eren's hand, then Armin's.

Sparks overwhelm his vision. Then he sees a girl falling, and a glowing worm-like creature attaching itself to her spine.

He sees the titan Ymir, and the king who took her as his queen.

He sees Ymir, a woman now, diving in front of the king. A spear pierces her chest. As she lays on the ground, she looks up at

him, silently begging for him to care. His words are a second spear: “Ymir, my slave.”

Slowly, Armin’s vision returns. Tears stream from Ymir’s eyes.

“You loved him,” Armin says aloud. Her emotions are still vibrating through his body. “You still do.”

She stares at them both for a moment, then turns and begins to shape bodies in the sand, ignoring them.

Eren moves to stand beside him. “Is that how she makes titans?”

“It looks like it. You learned to do all that last time?”

“I guess we had as much time as we needed for me to learn.” Eren turns to face him. “So, what do we do now?”

Armin lowers his voice: “She does all this because she was in love with King Fritz. This place is a safe haven for her, and she continues to shape Eldia in his vision. But he was awful to her.”

“Yeah,” Eren agrees, eyes narrowing. “I saw how he treated her as his slave even when she was his wife.”

“So maybe that’s the key to getting her to break this cycle. Maybe we have to get her to realize he’s not worth following.”

“How do we do that?” Eren asks.

“Maybe we use the paths to show her great leaders,” Armin says, unsure. “Commander Erwin?”

“Maybe Historia, too? She even has royal blood, so it might help her see how a member of the royal family should behave.”

“Okay,” Armin says, nodding. “Our paths intertwine with each of them. She can reach them through us. And if it doesn’t work, I guess we have as much time as we need to figure out something else.”

..&..

Ymir watches the two of them in her periphery, mouth pressed into a flat line. She already knows her beloved wasn’t

worth following. His leadership abilities were not the draw. These boys will never understand.

“Ymir,” Armin says. “We would like to speak with you.”

She ignores him, continuing to shape a titan. This is a beast titan shaped like a lizard, and she’s having a hard time balancing the size of the head with the size of its body.

“Ymir,” Eren says. “We want to discuss something.”

His voice freezes the blood in her veins. She turns to face them and sees the boy’s eyes glowing like turquoise flame.

“We understand now why you uphold the First King’s will,” Armin says gently. “It’s because you love him.”

She tries not to reveal any emotion, but her jaw quivers.

Eren says, “He wasn’t worthy, Ymir. He used you, and you gave your life for him. After that, he fed your organs to your daughters so he could keep taking advantage of the titan shifters. Eldians have suffered for generations because he used your powers for his wars.”

She shakes her head to deny his statements.

Armin says, “We can show you some great leaders in our lives. People worth following. Please reach into our paths and look for them and see for yourself.”

She shakes her head, more vehemently. But as she turns back to her titan, she sees what she’s creating. Power. War. Destruction.

Surely she isn’t just his weapon. Surely she is more than his slave. She closes her eyes. He loved her, in his own way, just as she loved him in hers.

Still, their words have planted a seed of doubt.

Very well. She will look into the paths that intertwine theirs, as they request. But what she seeks will not be examples of leadership.

—*Show me what it means for someone to be worthy.*

..••..

*-year 844: Shiganshina-*

ERWIN PUSHED INTO Shadis' office. "Where is Levi?"

"Erwin. I thought you were in your planning meeting."

The Commander looked down at his paperwork as if brushing him off. "Levi is in a cell downstairs."

"Keith." Refusing to be dismissed, Erwin strode to the front of his desk. "Why?"

Shadis snorted and shook his head. "Look, I told you to keep a close eye on him. He beat up three of my soldiers the day before an expedition. During lunchtime, of all places, so the entire regiment witnessed it. The discipline for this kind of offense is clearly laid out in our code of conduct." He signed his name at the bottom of a page and flipped it over.

*He beat up three soldiers?* Erwin thought, followed by, *I'm sure they had it coming.* He hoped so, anyway. He still didn't have a feel for how stable Levi was; the man was still adjusting to above-ground culture. Aloud, he said, "Isn't imprisonment harsh for a first offense? Besides, this isn't the first brawl we've seen in the mess hall."

"No, but it's the first with a dangerous weapon like Levi."

Though the description was dehumanizing, Erwin kept his expression neutral. "If you see him as a weapon, then you should understand that we need him in tomorrow's expedition. We'll be pushing into new territory. We need every advantage we have at our disposal if we wish to reach our targets."

At this point, it was clear Shadis was stubbornly keeping his eyes on his work to avoid eye contact. "Rules are rules, Erwin. I'm tired of bending them for your project. Look at it this way: we're keeping him in mint condition for the next expedition."

"Keith—"

The sharp eyes bored through him. "My decision is final, Erwin. Dismissed."

Erwin set his jaw and saluted, then turned on his heel and marched from the room.

It wasn't difficult to find Levi's cell—Shadis had posted two guards directly outside it. Presumably, he was afraid Levi would escape. Erwin's first reaction was to be disgusted that Shadis would assume a person from the Underground was adept at picking locks. His second reaction was to admit it was probably one of Levi's skills.

He took a deep breath to steady himself. It wasn't like him to get this riled up. Something about the idea of Levi being caged made rage burn deep in his abdomen. It was a small enough flame that he could keep it under control, but he noticed it all the same.

Erwin greeted the guards and then nodded back down the hallway. "Keith gave me permission to question him in private. You're dismissed."

"Sir," they replied, saluting.

Once he was certain they were gone, Erwin strode up to the cell.

Levi lay on his side on the stone floor, curled in a foetal position. His wrists were in manacles. The fire in Erwin's abdomen grew stronger. Why was everyone so afraid of him?

Sleeping, Levi didn't look dangerous. His face was placid, his narrow brows relaxed. His mouth still had a bit of a natural frown to it, a slight snub to the upper lip—

No, this line of thinking wasn't productive. Before it could continue, he called his name.

Levi stirred and then lifted his head. "Oh. Erwin." He shifted to a sitting position, bound hands in his lap.

Erwin crouched down to eye level. "Why do they have you caged like this?"

A shrug. "I gave them some trouble."

"Doing what?"

"We were arguing, and one of those assholes called me a 'son of a whore.' So I educated them on why that phrase is offensive."

"With your fists?"

“And my feet.”

Erwin carefully held his mouth neutral. “Who said those words to you?”

Another shrug. “I’m not a snitch.”

“No, you aren’t, but it would save me some time if you told me. Others witnessed this altercation. I can ask around.”

Levi sighed, acquiescing. “Simeon.”

“Noted. I’ll have a discussion with Simeon about his comportment.”

“Once he regains consciousness,” Levi added quietly, and Erwin swore he saw the corner of his mouth lift.

“You need to control yourself next time.” Erwin pulled a key out of his pocket and unlocked the door, then stepped into the cell. “We’re breaking protocol by keeping you in my squad, and the higher-ups still see you as an ‘experiment.’ We need to earn their trust.”

“I don’t care about their trust,” Levi said.

“Maybe not, but I do.”

An expression flickered across Levi’s face; was that shame? Erwin knelt beside him and searched the key ring for a small key. It fit neatly into the manacles.

Levi rubbed his bare wrists. “So if we have to earn their trust, why are you setting me free?”

“Because we are certainly going to encounter abnormal titans tomorrow, and you’re the only one I trust to take them down. Your presence on the battlefield directly translates to lives saved. You’re worth any political fallout.” Erwin studied him. “Besides, I think the other soldiers harass you because they’re afraid of you. The more expeditions you attend, the more they will see you as a legitimate member of the regiment.”

“They’re afraid of me, huh?” Levi’s eyes locked with his. “But you aren’t.”

“No.”

“Even after I tried to kill you.”

Erwin did not drop his gaze. “You are dangerous in a fight,

yes. You turn to violence because it was the solution to most of the struggles you faced in the Underground. The Underground and a battlefield are a lot alike, in that respect. But I also sense you have a deeply ingrained code of honour. I don't fear you, Levi. I trust your decisions will be guided by that code."

Maybe it was his imagination, but Levi seemed to be looking at him with ... awe? Trust? He wasn't adept at reading his facial expressions yet.

"Come with me to my office," Erwin said, standing. "I'll have the kitchen send up food and we can discuss your role in tomorrow's expedition, since you were unable to attend the briefing." He paused. "And I presume you would like some tea?" Levi's strange way of holding tea cups had drawn his attention on more than one occasion.

Levi shrugged casually, but his face softened. "Sure."

Erwin began to walk down the hall, Levi falling into step behind him.

*—Look at how much respect they have for each other. The one who leads trusts the one who follows.*

..&..

**-year 845: the ferry between Shiganshina and Trost-**

"HEY," LEVI ASKED Mike. "Where's Erwin?"

Mike was apparently preoccupied with distributing military rations to the refugee families; it took Levi repeating himself twice before he received a shrug in response.

Well, Erwin shouldn't be too difficult to spot in a crowd. Levi moved carefully through the exhausted, weeping people, scanning for the Wings of Freedom or golden hair. After a complete circuit of the deck, he still hadn't found him.

*Don't tell me he went back to Shiganshina?* Panic swelled in his chest for a moment, but then he looked up and saw the thick

wooden beams at the top of the ship, around the guide wires. Those could easily support a grown man. He sank his anchors into a beam and landed softly on the top of it.

There was Erwin, stretched out on his back on the beam, his forearm over his eyes. His body was shaking as if wracked with sobs—mercifully, the sound of the gears above them was drowning out any sounds he might be making.

*I shouldn't be here.* In spite of Levi's instincts to flee, he felt compelled to offer support. He paced carefully along the beam to drop to a seat beside him.

“Hey. Erwin.”

Erwin jerked as if startled, but then wiped his eyes and sat up with a forced smile. “The wind up here is so strong that it brings tears to one's eyes.”

“Don't do that,” Levi held out a handkerchief. “It's fine.”

“Please don't tell anyone,” Erwin said quietly, accepting the handkerchief. “I'm supposed to be the anchor, the stoic one, the ruthless one. The squad can't take any more hits to their morale.”

“Well, it would take someone inhuman to stay stoic about all this.” Levi stared at the pillars of smoke and dust in the distance. “I only lived in Shiganshina for about a year, and that's tough enough. You've been there for, what, a couple decades?”

“More or less.”

“That has to hurt.”

Erwin gave a shuddering sigh. “I know we did what we could, but I keep thinking of all those nameless people I saw day-to-day and wondering if they made it out. There were twin sisters who used to walk past the market every single day at noon—did you ever notice them? Rain or shine, the entire time I lived in Shiganshina, they were always there. I wonder if they made it out. Or the fellow who whistled fancy songs at the fish market.” Erwin's fingertips tapped agitated patterns along the border of the handkerchief.

“It was the Garrison's job to protect the people,” Levi said.

“Maybe it wasn’t our job, but it was our duty, and we fled before we ensured the area was clear.”

Levi stared at him. “We all would have died.”

“I know.” Erwin closed his eyes. “I know, Levi. And with Keith out of range, I had to make a decision for us based on logic, not emotion. I did my job. I just wonder if I did my duty as well.”

Until then, Levi had wondered how Erwin stayed so calm when people around him died. *Was it a mask all along?* He had a sense that not many people in the world knew this side of Erwin Smith. Something about that made him want to protect him even more.

“What would help you right now?” Levi asked. “Do you need space? Or do you want me to sit here with you?”

“I could use the company, if you don’t mind.” Erwin turned to watch the riverbank as they drifted past. “You know, Levi, somehow I feel I can be honest with you and you won’t hold it against me. Thank you.”

Levi wrapped the words around himself like a blanket.

*—They communicate with each other, and do not judge each other for their emotions. They are not afraid to be honest or speak their needs.*

*Is this what love should be?*

..••

**-year 846: Mitras-**

AS PIXIS POURED each of them another glass, Erwin eyed the liquid. This homemade cognac was stronger than any alcohol he had ever tasted, even the fermented slurry Mike had made in secret during their training days with sugar and old fruit. A strong buzz had already loosened his tongue and dulled his intellect. Even Levi was flushed, his usual high tolerance no

match for this drink. Pixis was still holding strong, but his words were beginning to bleed into each other, too.

Levi stood. “I have to take a piss,” he announced, and he stumbled a little as he left the hotel room.

“You can use my toilet,” Erwin called after him, but the door was already shut. Ah, well, his room was just next door. He wouldn’t be long.

He realized Pixis was staring at him, an eyebrow raised.

“Commander?” Erwin asked.

Pixis chuckled to himself and took a sip, then said, “The way you watched him leave the room—I hope you control that expression better when you’re sober.”

Erwin’s cheeks were flaming. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, don’t play dumb, boy. It’s fine. You wouldn’t be the first Commander to sleep with their subordinate. No one will care so long as you two are discreet.”

The heat spread to Erwin’s forehead, ears, and neck. “Pardon?”

“Oh.” Pixis peered at him. “I was so certain, judging by that look in your eye. Well, even more important than you learn to control your face, then. You’ve granted Levi a lot of favours over the past couple years, and while everyone thinks it’s due to his skills and strength—”

“It is.”

“—you don’t want them to start interpreting things differently.” Pixis took another sip, then shrugged. “Or if he’s worth the risk, then make sure you’re going for it.”

Erwin was caught so off-guard that he forgot they were peers now and said, “Sir?”

“Just that there’s no point getting taken down by pining glances alone. What’s that old saying, either shit or get off the pot?” He leaned his head back and laughed at Erwin’s grimace.

Levi stepped back into the room. “What’s so funny, old man?”

Erwin took a long sip to try to disguise his embarrassment. But then he looked at Levi and allowed himself to see his tight frame and narrow waist, his long eyelashes and shining hair, the bow-shaped lips ...

And Levi was more than his looks. Somehow, over the past two years, he had become Erwin's confidante and his closest friend. That made him even more alluring, but also meant there was more at stake. He couldn't risk all that and their careers just for a bit of lust.

Could he?

Or was he lying to himself, and it wasn't just 'a bit of lust' at all?

"What?" Levi asked, irritated, and Erwin realized he had been staring. Eager for a distraction, he held up his glass and took a deep swig.

*—Look how he desires the one who admires him. Look how complete that desire is, not just a physical craving or a longing to take advantage of his strength.*

..••

*-year 847: Trost-*

LEVI DRAINED HIS bottle and stacked it neatly in the corner, then returned to his cards. He and Mike were the only ones still in the round. Levi had already lost his jacket, harness, and cravat. It was nearing midnight on Christmas Eve, and the room was chilly. He couldn't afford to lose more clothing.

"Two Pair," Levi said, laying out a hand of two aces and two queens. The chair tilted a little beneath him; he clutched the table to steady himself. He noticed Erwin looking at him with a strange look in his eyes. "What?"

Before he could get an answer, Mike smirked and laid down his cards: Three of a Kind.

Everyone hollered; Hange and Moblit drummed their hands on the table, and Nanaba and Mike high-fived.

Levi sighed, his head lolling back in defeat. “Fine. What do I take off next?”

“Shirt,” Erwin said, a little too quickly. Levi curled his lips at him.

“Pervert. What about my boots?”

“Shirt!” Hange began to chant. “Shirt! Shirt!” The others joined in, laughing.

“Fuck you all,” Levi muttered as he unbuttoned his shirt and folded it, then set it on top of his jacket.

“Hey Muscles, stop hiding behind the table and show us the six pack,” Hange yelled, then laughed so hard they fell backwards off their stool.

“Squad Leader,” Moblit admonished. “Be careful!” He tried to pull them up, but Hange’s arm had all the structural integrity of melted cheese.

Levi wrapped his arms around himself. “It’s fucking freezing in here.”

Nanaba waggled her eyebrows. “I’m sure the Commander can keep you warm.”

“What?” Levi asked, confused, while Hange laughed even harder from their spot on the floor.

Erwin cleared his throat, then slid his stool closer and put his arm around Levi’s shoulders. “Better?”

“Ooh,” Nanaba cooed.

“Wait!” Hange cried, sitting up. “What am I missing?”

Levi batted Erwin’s arm away. “You stink of booze.”

“So do you.”

Hange roared, “We all do! To stinking of booze!”

The others raised their bottles and drank to the sentiment. Instead, Levi glanced at Erwin, who was still looking at him with that strange expression. *I’ve never seen him this drunk ...*

*I think?* There had been that one night the previous year with Pixis' homemade wine, but that was mostly a black hole in his memory.

“Ugh.” Nanaba clutched her head. “I drank way too much.”

Mike rushed to help her and knocked over his bottle in the process. It landed on Levi’s neatly folded shirt. “Oh. Sorry, Levi.”

For a moment, Levi froze as the beer spilled over his shirt in waves. *Shit!* He tried to grab the bottle before it emptied, but the floor pitched and he almost fell out of his chair. “My fucking shirt,” he muttered.

“Guess you’ll just have to keep it off,” Hange yelled.

“Okay, Squad Leader,” Moblit said wearily. “It’s time to get off the floor.”

“I want the couch.”

Moblit helped them to the couch against the far wall and sat beside them. Hange stretched out along it, their head in Moblit’s lap. His cheeks turned pink.

“Why do they get the couch?” Nanaba complained. She and Mike turned to look at the comfortable chairs at Erwin’s desk, then looked at each other.

“Wait—” Levi started, but the pair scrambled drunkenly toward them. Levi sighed. “Not even a comfortable seat the night before my own fucking birthday.” He watched as Nanaba and Mike slid the chairs close together and began to speak in low whispers. *Everyone’s pairing off.* He turned to Erwin, suddenly feeling awkward.

Clearing his throat, Erwin said, “Guess the party’s winding down.”

“Guess so.”

He leaned closer, voice quiet: “Unless you want some of my good whiskey. It’s your birthday, after all.”

“Yes,” Levi said gratefully.

“You must be cold. Here.” Erwin began to take off his jacket, but Levi stopped him.

“The whiskey will keep me warm.” Truthfully, the cold wasn’t as bad as he had let on. Even more truthfully, he was enjoying the surreptitious glances Erwin was throwing at his chest and abdomen when he thought he wouldn’t be caught looking.

Erwin sneaked around Nanaba and Mike—who were so deeply engaged in their quiet conversation that they didn’t seem to be aware of anyone else in the world, anyway—and pulled a bottle of whiskey and two glasses out of the drawer.

They settled against the wall, leaning against two pillows. Erwin poured them each a large glass, then held one up for a toast.

“Happy Birthday, my dear Captain.”

“My dear Captain?”

“I’m trying to sound fancy,” Erwin explained. “For the fancy whiskey.”

Levi studied him. “You’re acting fucking weird.”

Erwin chuckled. “I’m very drunk.”

“Well, then I’ll drink until it sounds fancy.” Levi drained the glass in one swallow.

Erwin stared at him. “That’s sipping whiskey, Levi.”

He shrugged and held out his glass for another. Erwin sighed and shook his head, refilling it.

Several glasses later, Mike and Nanaba slipped from the room, and Hange and Moblit were both snoring on the couch. Levi watched them and wondered how Erwin would react if he laid his head in his lap. How nice that would be ... He turned to look at Erwin, and found him with that strange expression again.

“You’re looking at me again.”

Erwin finished his glass and set it aside. “So I am.”

Levi stared into his eyes for a long time, something he had rarely been brave enough to do until then. “Your eyes are like the sky.”

“Are you trying to be fancy now?”

“I think so. Is it working?”

“Depends what your goal is,” Erwin said softly.

The air shifted between them, thick and hot. Erwin’s expression was very clear now: longing. Their gaze held for so long that the tension became awkward.

“We’re drunk,” Erwin said, with careful lightheartedness.

“Yep.”

He shifted his body so he was facing Levi. “Lowered inhibitions.”

“Yep.” Levi turned to face him, shifting onto his knees.

Erwin reached over and placed his hands on Levi’s shoulders. They slid down his arms, his elbow, and rested on his hips. He stared at them as if surprised they were there.

“I don’t know what I ... We should probably ... ” He trailed off.

“Probably what, Erwin?” Levi asked.

Erwin’s throat bobbed. “All I want right now—”

“Yes?”

His eyes locked onto him, pierced through him. “—is to kiss you.”

“Oh?” was all Levi managed.

“Can I kiss you?”

Levi lunged forward and engulfed his lips with his. He had meant to give him a soft kiss, not a sloppy wet one, but the alcohol had sapped his coordination. It must have sapped Erwin’s, too, because he fell backwards, and Levi landed on top of him in a way that made them both wheeze.

Levi lifted his head. “I meant to kiss you better than that.”

Erwin laughed. “Here.” He rolled Levi onto his back and kissed him. Levi’s lips parted and he gripped Erwin’s head, trying to pull him deeper into his mouth.

Instead, Erwin kissed his chin, his jaw, his throat. Levi let out a strangled cry and wrapped his limbs around Erwin. He lost the ability to think; there was nothing except the immediacy of his lips and tongue and teeth.

Erwin pulled back to look at him, hand on Levi’s cheek.

Levi rocked his hips beneath him and began to undo the buttons of Erwin's shirt.

"Impatient?" Erwin asked.

"I want to feel you against me." The shirt fell open, and when Erwin leaned down again, the contact of his skin and hair and warmth burned. Levi gasped and arched up against him, legs wrapping around his hips.

"Levi," Erwin whispered, as if his name itself was the highest praise he could offer. His name, *his name*, this wasn't just Erwin being drunk and horny, this was for *him*.

But the alcohol was becoming a problem. Every time Levi closed his eyes, sleep tugged at him, trying to pull him under. *Shit. Wake up.* He wished there was a way to get sober, fast. *Why did we drink so much?* His arm twitched as sleep almost overtook him again.

"Shit," he muttered.

Erwin pulled back to look at him. "Levi?"

"I think ... I'm too drunk to do this," Levi said mournfully.

"I probably am, too." Erwin brushed the hair off his forehead with a gentle caress. "Let's get some sleep. Maybe ... we can continue this someday. When we're sober."

"Yeah," Levi mumbled, curling onto his side.

He felt Erwin's heavy arm around him, body pushing up behind him, and the memory of the night fell into the black hole of sleep.

*—Look how one reacts when the other sets a boundary. Look how there is no guilt, no pressure, no shame.*

*When were you ever allowed to set a boundary? When did he ever let you make a choice that inconvenienced him?*

*Or any choice at all?*

..❀..

*-year 848: Mitras-*

AS THEY LEFT THE meeting, Erwin rubbed his forehead. That had not gone well. The lords had practically interrogated him about his plans, dangling their coin in front of him, before yet again yanking their purses away. Zackly had been no better—apparently, the Garrison needed to clean their cannons and that was eating up the contingency budget. Erwin proposed they could cut that budget in half by focusing on the cannons in the southern half of the wall, where the majority of the titans would be, but Zackly had only stared at him as if the idea were madness.

“So,” Levi said, “that was awful.”

Erwin gave a grim chuckle. “Not one of our better meetings.”

“I collected a souvenir for our troubles.” Levi opened his coat to reveal a bottle of fine wine.

“Levi, where did you get that?”

“Lord Dietrich was beaking off about this and that, so I helped myself to some of his shopping bags.”

“He’ll notice it’s gone.”

“If he does, he won’t ask for it back. He’s afraid of me.” Levi’s face was neutral, but his eyes sparkled with mischief.

“Well, if we’re going to steal wine like we’re teenagers, then let’s drink it in an appropriate location.” Erwin nodded at the MP building. “There’s a nice view from up there; it’s where the new MP recruits like to go drink when they think they’re being sneaky.”

Levi nodded. “Lead the way.”

They sneaked past Nile’s office. Erwin led him up several flights of stairs and out onto the roof.

“Careful,” he said. “It’s a bit mossy up here.”

“It’s fine, it’s flat enough.” Levi sat on the roof and stared across the city. Sunset was just beginning, a tinge of red on the horizon.

“Quite the view, isn’t it?” Erwin said. “Wait until the stars come out.”

“Are we staying out here for that long?”

Erwin shrugged. “Depends.”

“On?”

“Whether or not I decide to start complaining about how stingy they were back there.”

Levi gave him an approving nod. “They’re assholes, too. Lord Bader called me by the wrong name.”

Erwin looked at him, surprised. “He did?”

“Yeah, ‘Eli.’ Like he had no idea who I was. I bet he did it on purpose to be an ass.” Levi pulled the cork out of the bottle with his teeth, then held it out. “Hope he doesn’t mind if Eli and Alvin drink his wine.”

“Alvin,” Erwin scoffed. He took the bottle and lifted it to his nose, then grimaced. “It’s spiced.”

“You don’t like spiced wine?”

“It’s fine. I was just hoping for something smoother.” Erwin took a sip, then handed the bottle back.

“I’ll be sure to pilfer something more to your taste next time,” Levi said dryly. He eyed the bottle. “You didn’t backwash, did you?”

“Levi, I’m thirty-five years old; I can drink without backwashing.”

Levi took a sip himself, then grimaced. “That’s terrible.”

“See?”

“Maybe I grabbed vinegar by mistake. Dammit, I did him a favour by taking this.”

The sunset spread across the sky, the clouds glowing pink. Erwin glanced at Levi and saw him staring at the sight with awe. He loved seeing that expression, which overcame his face on the occasions when the sky was especially stunning: unusual weather events, comets, sunrises and sunsets. Even though he had been above ground for a few years now, some things never seemed to get old.

Levi turned to glance at him. Erwin expected him to call him out for staring, but instead, their eyes held. Erwin felt as if Levi were reaching deep inside him with that gaze, soothing the worries left by his political struggles.

Through some unspoken accord, they turned to face the sky again, watching as the red streaked across the sky, then retracted, then was swallowed by the horizon.

“Do you want to go back inside?” Erwin asked.

Levi shrugged, leaning back on his hands. “Is it bringing you peace being out here?”

“What do you mean?”

“After the way the meeting went. Is this helping you?”

Erwin smiled. “It is.”

“Then let’s stay out here a bit longer.” Levi glanced at him, then away again, before he added, “Up here, none of those assholes matter.”

*Nothing matters except us,* Erwin thought, and his heart pounded in his throat.

*—Just being there for each other is enough. They support each other, lift each other’s spirits. Is that how love should be?*

*Were you ever once supported when it didn’t benefit him?*

..❀..

**-year 849: Stohess-**

LEVI FOLLOWED ERWIN as they approached the graveyard. Erwin made this trip each year; this was the first year he had asked Levi to accompany him. He wasn’t sure what being present would accomplish, exactly, but if Erwin needed support, he would get it.

Erwin stopped in front of a gravestone, paused for a moment, then knelt down on one knee and laid the flowers at the base of the stone.

“Your father?” Levi asked, standing behind him.

Erwin nodded. He was still staring at the stone.

After a long silence, Levi started shifting his weight from foot to foot. “Why did you bring me this time? You never have before.”

“I suppose we’re close enough now that it doesn’t feel strange to have you here with me. But if you wish to step away—”

“No, it’s fine.”

Erwin bowed his head and closed his eyes for a moment, then lifted his head again. “He would have liked you, I think.”

“Oh?” Levi asked, not sure what to make of the comment.

“The way you fight for humanity. The way you fight for the truth and for freedom.” He glanced at him. “The way you protect me.”

Levi’s throat tightened and he looked away. “I’m your Captain. It’s my duty.”

“So you say.” Erwin stood and reached into his pocket to pull out a candle. “Thank you for accompanying me, Levi. It feels a little less depressing with you here. I would always be happy to accompany you to your parents’ graves, if you ever need support.”

“Well, I have no idea if the man who fathered me is alive or not. And my mother died in the Underground, so she has no grave.”

“No?” Erwin asked, looking at him with surprise.

“The ground is too hard in most places, and what’s not hard is needed for buildings. Mass cremations only. I didn’t get to keep her ashes or anything.” Levi shrugged. “It’s not like I had the money to give her a proper service or burial, anyway.” His throat tightened a little. He had always marvelled at the way the surface dwellers cared for their dead. Would he have been able to heal faster from her death if he could have visited a stone with her name on it?

Erwin was studying him, and Levi realized his face was

twisted into a miserable expression. *Shit.* He carefully shifted it back into its expressionless default.

“Levi,” Erwin said softly, “I may be completely out of line here, but would you like to give her a little memorial? Here?”

“What? How?”

He held up the candle. “I have this. We could light it. Perhaps arrange a little site at the base of a tree.” He pointed at a beech in the corner of the cemetery, its leaves yellow. “Maybe over there. You could say a few words, or just think them to yourself if that’s too awkward.”

Levi was surprised by how much he liked the idea. Even though he missed his mother every day, he had never really taken the time to slow down and mourn her. “But her body won’t be there.”

“It doesn’t really matter, does it?” Erwin said. “We’ve left a lot of bodies on the field because it wasn’t safe to recover them. We still gave the soldiers a memorial all the same.”

Levi didn’t trust his voice, so he nodded.

They paced their way to the tree in the corner. Along the way, Levi saw a small, smooth rock in the grass. He picked it up and pulled out his pocket knife. When they reached the tree, he took a moment to carve a name into the surface of the rock.

“Kuchel,” Erwin said from behind him. “A lovely name.”

“She was a lovely woman.” Levi cleared the rotting leaves from the grass and set the stone neatly against the tree trunk. “She was a sex worker in the Underground. She was always looking for a way to bring us to the surface, but her bosses were assholes and stole more money than she could save. Eventually, she got sick. I don’t know if it was the plague or an illness from one of her customers, but it doesn’t matter. We had no way to get medicine.” It was why he had always taken pity on local youths trying to get medicine for their sick mothers, so many times after that. There seemed to be a lot of them.

“I keep thinking,” Levi continued, “if I hadn’t been born, would she have been able to get out of there sooner? Maybe if

she didn't have a kid to feed, she would have been a mercenary or a gang leader. Maybe she would have saved up enough money for one person to come to the surface and she would have escaped."

"Levi," Erwin said softly, "it's my understanding that a lot of the 'orphans' in the Underground were abandoned by parents who could no longer care for them. I can only imagine the reason she cared for you until the end was because you were the light of her life and worth any sacrifice. So please don't think of yourself as a burden to her."

Levi's eyes welled up with tears. "Do you remember your mother, Erwin?"

"No. She died when I was small, in a horse riding accident. I was too young to remember her. Sometimes I think I see little pictures of her in my mind—her smile, her eyes—but I might just be confabulating based on everything my father told me about her." He stepped closer to stand beside Levi. "She was a teacher, like my father, until she got pregnant with me and decided to take a few years off to raise me. My father loved her very much, and it hurt him when she was gone. And a few years later, he followed her."

For a moment, they were silent. The wind rustled through the leaves above them; a few detached and drifted down, glowing golden in the sunlight.

"You know," Levi said, "I always thought people above ground had it easy, surrounded by sunshine, wealth, and food. But you lost just as much as I did."

"Well, maybe. But it led me to where I am, so I can't complain about it too much."

"Sure you can," Levi said, and Erwin chuckled.

"Here, why don't you use these?" Erwin held out the candle and a matchbook. "Maybe there is an afterlife out there somewhere, and your mother is drinking starlight tea with my parents."

"Starlight tea?"

“It sounded better in my head. I’m not too knowledgeable about what a good afterlife is supposed to be like.”

Levi shook his head. “Me neither. Do they eat sunbeams and float on clouds?”

“Something like that, I’m sure.”

“I would love it if my mother got to bask in sunlight for eternity.” Levi lit the candle and set it beside the stone. He knelt in the grass and closed his eyes, picturing his mother: her dark hair, her soft smile, her warm hugs.

In that moment, he felt a connection with her, even though her remains weren’t physically there. Maybe that was how it worked. Maybe just thinking about her was enough.

The next time he lost someone he loved, he would remember the power of a simple stone marker in the grass.

*—This tenderness they extend to each other in their vulnerable moments, this care ... They don’t even have to make an effort. It just naturally arises between them.*

*If you had been mourning, would he have cared? Would he have even noticed?*

..••

### **-year 850: Trost-**

“CAPTAIN!” THE MAN yelled. “It’s Commander Erwin! He’s hurt.”

Levi bolted to his feet. “Where?”

“The hospital.” As Levi sprinted by, the man turned to yell after him, “Room 102.”

Levi dodged soldiers in the hallway, ignoring the ones who tried to get his attention. He ignored the military hospital receptionist, too, and barged into the room.

Several doctors and nurses were crowded around the bed, blocking the patient from view.

“Hey! Is that Erwin?”

“Keep him back,” barked a doctor, and Levi felt arms loop through his elbows.

“Get your hands off me.” Levi jerked himself free and pushed to the foot of Erwin’s bed. The man’s face was white, his eyelids open and eyes rolled back. His jaw hung slack. He looked dead. Blood was staining the bed beside a severed arm, bright red. Levi heard a strangled sob and realized it was coming from his own throat.

Four soldiers tackled him this time, and in his shocked state, they managed to drag them back. Then he felt a needle in his arm.

“You sons of—” The calming agent hit him and he sagged back into their arms. They set out a chair for him, neatly out of the way, and placed him into it.

“He’s bleeding out!” yelled a doctor. “We need to cauterize—”

“On it,” called another doctor, moving in with some sort of surgical instrument.

“Erwin,” Levi mumbled, head sagging back against the chair.

But he did not close his eyes and he did not sleep.

When they finally all pulled away, the sedative was just starting to wear off. One of the nurses approached Levi and patted his shoulder.

“He’s stable.”

Levi struggled to form the words: “Will he make it?”

“We don’t know, but we’re hopeful. He’s strong.”

“And stubborn.” Levi tried to sit up. “Ugh, when does this shit wear off?”

“Give it a couple hours.” She gave him a sympathetic look. “Unless you want more.”

“No.”

The room emptied, and soon, Levi found he could stand

without the world spinning. He dragged his chair over to the side of the bed with the wounded arm.

“Hey Erwin, can you hear me?” He paused. “I should have been there. This wouldn’t have happened.”

Erwin’s eyelids fluttered, as if he were regaining consciousness. Levi sighed.

“You stubborn bastard, are you going to rip yourself out of unconsciousness just to tell me it’s not my fault? Just let me vent, okay? You keep resting.” He leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “It felt wrong to stay behind. When you head straight into danger without me like that ... It felt like someone ripped my heart out of my chest and sent it on that mission without me. So don’t leave me here again, okay? If I’m wounded, you can just strap me into a saddle so I don’t fall off or something. I have to be there.”

He reached out for the mattress and rested his hand on it, covering the space where Erwin’s hand would have been. “Get some rest, okay? I’ll be here when you wake up.” *I love you*, he added in his mind, and the words surprised him.

But then again, maybe they didn’t.

*—Levi’s devotion is endless, like mine.  
But his loved one is worthy.  
Mine is not.*

..&..

**-year** ∞-

**—RESPECT. COMMUNICATION. DESIRE. Boundaries. Support. Care. Devotion.**

Ymir runs her fingers through the paths, feeling them hum. Mikasa Ackerman and Eren Yeager. Levi Ackerman and Erwin Smith. The girl called Ymir and Historia Reiss. The love they share touches on all seven of those aspects.

*—And he only ever showed you desire: for your powers, for your body. You thought that was enough.*

She combs her fingers through the paths that intertwine with these six. Hange Zoë, with their understated but loyal love for Moblit Berner. Levi and Hange, with their platonic love so strong that it crosses timelines and realities. Armin and Eren, standing before her and ready to die together, each being brave for the other's sake.

So many types of love, and the King gave her none of them.

*—So why am I hanging on to a love that never was, and never will be? Is it just because I'm afraid of anything else? Is this all so I can feel safe?*

The bond with the parasite along her spine begins to flicker.

She turns to Eren and Armin, tears streaming down her face. Slowly her body shifts, and she becomes the woman she was at her death.

This place has served her well. She built it with the mindset of a child; she didn't know any better. But it isn't fair to trap all of Eldia in this cycle just because she is afraid to grow past this. It's time.

“You alone can decide to cut ties with the king,” Armin says.

Eren nods fervently. “You can be the one to choose. You’re no slave. You’re no god. You’re just a person. You don’t need to serve anyone.”

“You could leave the wall titans frozen and standing, if you feel obligated to leave some protection for Paradis. But release the rest. End the titan curse. It’s time for the Eldians to become the same as any other citizen of the world.”

She turns to look at the Coordinate, at all the people she has connected, their lives converging on a single point. The people of Eldia gave her all the love she craved. They were her family. They deserve to be loved by her in return.

—*It's time*, she says to the power deep within her. *Let them live the way other humans do. Leave this place.*

She feels it acquiesce. Maybe it, too, has outgrown the need for this strange codependence they share.

The ground begins to quake.

“That’s it!” Eren encourages. “Bring this place down!”

She turns to the boys and reaches out her hands. They each take one.

“Thank you,” she speaks directly into their minds.

Before they can reply, she casts their souls into the paths. They will be born as twin brothers in a time of peace; it is the best she has time to offer them in the seconds before the paths begin to disappear. She hopes they will be happy together.

As the world around her crumbles, Ymir closes her eyes and fills her heart with the love she has always deserved.

..&..

### **-year 850: Shiganshina-**

LEVI MOVES QUICKLY toward the city, not sure what he'll find. Mikasa moves beside him.

“Fall back,” he hisses. “You’re weaker now.”

“I’m still stronger than any of the others.”

“We can hear you,” Connie mutters behind them.

Levi stops at the last hill overlooking the city gate. The others cluster behind him.

“I don’t see any titans,” he murmurs. “Or humans.”

A thunderclap jolts through him, forcing all the air out of his lungs and burning his heart. He gasps and hunches, grabbing his chest.

“Captain!” Jean yells.

Levi manages to lift his head. Even though the sky is blue and cloudless, lightning is striking dozens of sites around Shiganshina, maybe hundreds.

“Shit,” Levi wheezes. Is that a good sign? The pain in his chest tells him it’s not.

Then the lightning clears and everything is silent.

“Shifters?” Connie asks, but Sasha shakes her head.

“The ground isn’t vibrating.”

Levi finds he can stand again. He turns to Mikasa. “Did you feel that, too?”

She nods. “Not as strongly as you, I think, but yes.”

Their gazes hold. Levi experimentally grips his hand into a fist. It’s still tight, but not nearly as tight as before. He pulls out his blade and finds it’s heavier than he remembers.

“Either Erwin died,” he murmurs to her, “or the paths have been destroyed.” Before Mikasa can react, he turns to the others. “Be ready to climb the wall to safety if there are any titans around. Follow me.”

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ERWIN’S FACE IS PRESSED to the earth; he spits out dirt and sits up. Why is he naked, on the ground, outside? He doesn’t feel hungover.

The buildings around him come into focus. Shiganshina.

He nearly loses his balance beneath the wave of memories: the year 860, the paths, the return in titan form. Shouldn’t he be right near the others? Or is he still recovering after becoming a shifter?

He looks down at his hands and knees. His knees are scuffed and bleeding. He runs a finger over them and pieces of gravel fall out. No steam.

*So I’m not a shifter, then.*

Now he’s really confused.

Erwin stands and turns. The wall behind him is smashed open, so it takes him a moment to place the building: his old place. Well, at least he can scavenge for supplies. He circles to a sturdier area of the house and gingerly opens the door.

Inside a wardrobe, he finds a few outfits. The clothes are covered in dust, but they fit. He shakes out a white dress shirt and pulls it on, then some underwear, socks, and a pair of tan slacks. The bathroom is still accessible and looks stable enough, so he raids the drawers for bandages and alcohol to clean the scuffs on his knees. He also finds several old military rations, a pen knife, a few coins, an old canteen, muscle pain salve, and a half-used bottle of lubricant. He'll be able to find a use for all of that eventually; he pockets everything.

As he dresses his knees, he thinks of Levi. If he's not here, the Survey Corps must have returned north to Trost.

Suddenly, a new memory floats to the surface: Levi kissing him before the charge against the Beast Titan.

So much for not altering the timeline; he's not the Colossal Titan, *and* they kissed before he died? He hopes Levi had a good reason for all of this. *Is he okay? Did something go wrong?*

“Hello?” a voice calls from outside.

Erwin pulls on a pair of worn shoes and steps out. A naked woman runs up to him, covering her body with her arms.

“Help,” she cries. “Where are we?” Her accent reminds Erwin of the way his grandmother used to speak: it’s old-fashioned and carefully refined.

“We’re in Shiganshina. Here, I have some clothing you can use.” He steps back into the house and pulls out a sweater, a belt, and a pair of shorts. “It’s the best I can do, I’m afraid.”

She gratefully accepts it; he turns around to give her privacy.

“I don’t have any shoes that will fit you,” he adds, “but we might be able to find some in the ruins. There are bound to be more provisions in the houses that are still standing.”

“Thank you. I’m dressed now.” She has the sweater cinched at her waist with the belt; it’s so long on her that it looks like a dress. “Where did you say we are?”

“Shiganshina,” he repeats.

“Where is that?” she asks politely.

He stares at her for a moment, confused, and then more voices begin to sound from the ruins around them.

..••

LEVI VAULTS ONTO a rooftop and scans the area. It's quiet and empty.

Mikasa lands beside him. "Maybe Zeke took all the titans with him?"

"No, all that lightning was striking something." Levi narrows his focus onto Erwin's house, several blocks away. His heart leaps. Even from this distance, he can tell the roof has been smashed from the inside.

"Spread out," he calls. "Fire green flares for humans, red flares for titans, white flares if you need assistance."

"Captain—" Mikasa says, but he is beyond reason now. He begins to run along the rooftop, sprinting for Erwin's resting place.

"Go!" he calls to the others as he leaps for the next roof. He doesn't have the power he's accustomed to, and his jump falls short; he has to use a burst of gas to land safely.

He flies from rooftop to rooftop, not bothering to conserve gas. He still sees no titans in his periphery, and no signals, either.

There. Someone from his squad has fired a green flare to the west: they found a survivor. He bares his teeth and increases speed as hope surges through him.

He drops down beside Erwin's house on the eastern side, where he found him last time. He's confused to see this wall is intact. *Was he not heading for the basement this time?*

He circles the house and finds the smashed wall to the north, the drag marks.

North. Toward Trost.

"Holy shit," he whispers, and then his voice crescendos: "Erwin. Hey, Erwin! Where are you?"

He hears it, faintly: “Levi?”

“Shit!” Levi sprints toward the voice. Erwin comes around the corner of the next building, and a grin spreads across his face.

Levi launches himself at Erwin and knocks him back to the grass; they roll. Lips are on his mouth, and he feels Erwin’s teeth, his tongue, his breath, *his breath*. He’s alive and he’s human.

Erwin pulls back and smooths the hair off Levi’s forehead. He raises a brow. “You changed a few things in the timeline.”

“Yeah.” Levi’s fingers rake into the blond hair, pulling him down for another kiss before he adds, “I worried I changed too much and you wouldn’t make it here.”

“I’m here.”

“You’re here. Fuck, I missed you.” Levi kisses him again, hard.

Then Erwin sits up and helps Levi to a seat, too. “You kissed me before the final charge.”

Levi’s face warms. “It seemed appropriate.”

“I think it was.” Erwin cups his jaw, caressing his cheek with his thumb. “Is it still the year 850?”

“Yes.”

“Then I suppose,” he says, “we have ten extra years together this time around.”

Levi hadn’t thought of it this way before, and he is soaring.

They still have several nearly impossible tasks ahead of them, but here, with Erwin’s hand glowing against his jaw, anything seems possible.

“I should mention, I’m not alone,” Erwin says. “There are a few people I need to introduce you to.”

Levi looks up. Green smoke streaks across the sky like paths, each of them an Eldian life. “Looks like my squad has a few people to introduce us to, too.”

# ❧ Twenty ❧

## BREATHS IN THE DARKNESS

DOZENS OF SURVIVORS ARE milling about the old town square. Most speak in the strange accent that reminds Erwin of his late grandmother; his working theory is that they are Eldians who were sent here by Marley decades ago. He'll speak with a few of them later to verify that theory, but for now, it's more important that everyone has clothing and supplies.

Now that they have swept the city for survivors, the Survey Corps soldiers have gathered in the far corner of the square, talking quietly amongst themselves. As they see Erwin approaching, their eyes widen—except for Mikasa, who gives him a smile.

Jean is the next to recover. “Commander!” He pulls into a salute. Sasha and Connie follow. The other soldier is still staring. Erwin recognizes him as the one who was questioning him during the plan for the final charge.

“We watched you die,” the soldier sputters.

Levi steps up to Erwin and says quietly, “That’s Floch.” Ah. According to Hange’s journal, the one who prolonged his life after the final charge.

Erwin clasps his hands behind his back, standing tall. “It’s understandable that you have questions. I don’t know how much Commander Hange and Captain Levi have explained to you, but further explanation will have to wait. Our top priority right now is to get these people clothed and fed. I assure you, we will give you more information when we can.”

Mikasa salutes and says, “It’s good to have you back, Commander.”

“It’s good to be back.” He smiles at her, then turns to address his Captain. “Levi, I have some thoughts about how we should proceed with the survivors. However, I know this is your operation ...”

“Take it.” Levi looks nervously over his shoulder at the crowd. Erwin had guessed as much; Levi has always been more comfortable leading smaller groups.

“Here,” Levi adds, reaching into his pocket. He pulls out the bolo tie. Erwin’s hand closes over it, gripping Levi’s hand at the same time.

“Thank you.”

Levi nods. “Tell us our next move, Commander.”

The bolo tie fits neatly around the collar of his dress shirt. Erwin forgot how easy it was to put it on with two good arms; he takes a moment to mentally thank Eren, or Ymir, or whoever gave him this body. He’ll have to debrief with Levi and Mikasa later to find out how everything played out.

He strides to the centre of the square and steps up onto a small foundation that used to house several market stalls. Levi stands beside him, and the other soldiers fall into place behind them.

Erwin draws his voice from his diaphragm, the words echoing through the remains of the square: “Attention, everyone.”

The chatter dies down, and dozens of eyes fix on him. Erwin feels a rush from their attention. As much as he was enjoying his quiet life in the year 860, he missed this.

“My name is Erwin Smith,” he booms. “You’re probably confused about where you are and how you got here. We will do our best to answer your questions, in time. Here is what I can tell you for now: you are Eldians who were turned into titans by Marley and left to wander here, on the island of Paradis. You are

human again thanks to the founder Ymir, who released all Eldians from the titan curse.”

His gaze trails across the crowd. Most of them are clothed in scraps or blankets, and very few have shoes. There must be about two-hundred-and-fifty of them altogether. Has Levi arranged transport for this many people?

He speaks his thoughts aloud: “Those of us who stand in uniform before you are the Survey Corps, a branch of the Paradis military. We have brought camping supplies and rations, and we will continue to sweep the buildings to find clothing and footwear for everyone. We are currently in the ruins of the city of Shiganshina; we will arrange transport to bring you north to Trost. There, we will meet with you individually to determine if you wish to stay on Paradis, return to Marley, or head elsewhere. This will take time, so we will provide the shelter you need in the meantime.” If there aren’t enough supplies, he will need to send a message to Hange for assistance.

He continues, “Many of you have been titans for a very long time, so what I’m about to say next might be a shock: it is currently the year 850.”

There are a few cries and nervous murmurs in the crowd, and he feels for them. It was disorienting enough waking up in 860. Some of these people have been titans for decades.

“I know you must have many questions, but for now, please focus on nourishing yourselves and getting rest for the journey to Trost. Eventually, we may have questions for you, as well, to learn more about ourselves and our history, but that can wait.” He smiles kindly. “It may not be ideal circumstances, but welcome to Paradis. We will do our best to make you feel at home.”

He steps down from his platform, and turns to the soldiers.

“Floch, Jean,” he says, “head back to the camp to set up tents. Bring some of the stronger-looking survivors with you to help. Mikasa, continue scavenging the ruins for supplies. We

need footwear and clothing. If you find any tinned foods, please gather them as well. Sasha, Connie, begin distributing military rations and water, and take a headcount while you're at it. Levi, come with me."

He strides toward one of the houses and steps inside.

"This is more people than I expected," Levi murmurs as he steps through after him.

Erwin nods. "There didn't seem to be this many titans here during the final battle. Maybe they started wandering in when the Beast Titan screamed."

Levi's mouth twists at the mention of the Beast Titan, but he only says, "So, what are we doing?"

"I figured we could scavenge for supplies while you catch me up on the situation. How many people did you plan for when you were arranging supplies and carts?"

"Up to two hundred."

"I see. So there isn't enough cart space to bring everyone back at once."

"No. Even two hundred might have been a strain on the horses. We'll need help." Levi pulls open a closet and rifles through it with a look of concentration. Erwin watches him fondly. If they renovate the cabin again, he's going to see this look a lot. Levi will surely be particular about the little details. He wonders if Hange will join them again.

"Well?" Levi asked. "Are you going to help, or ask questions, or are you just going to stare slack-jawed at me?"

Erwin blinks. "Right." He steps into the kitchen and opens the cupboards. "You really want a dog?"

"What?" Levi calls.

"A dog. Aren't they messy?"

"I lived with Hange. A dog can't be any messier than them." Levi steps into the kitchen with a pair of jackets slung over his arm and begins to check other cupboards, digging through pots and pans for anything useful. "That can't be all you want me to report."

“No, it was just a warm-up question before the harder ones.” Erwin begins to dig through some drawers. It all looks useless. “How much does Hange know?”

“I told them most of it. Not sure I explained it well. Historia knows about the same. The others are still in the dark.” Levi gives a low sigh. “We left Hange behind, you know.”

“I know,” Erwin says gently. “But I’m sure they’ll want to know all about the Hange of the year 860. Maybe this is an opportunity to build an even stronger friendship.”

Levi’s throat bobs, and he looks like he wants to say something for a moment, but instead, he moves to another cupboard and pulls down a can. “Armin didn’t end up eating Eren. We sent them both into the paths. Mikasa’s idea, and we agreed they would be better off together.”

“So they’re both gone, then.”

“Yeah. But they broke the curse and left the walls standing.” Levi pulls down another can. “I hope they both died when the paths ended.”

The statement shocks Erwin at first, but then he thinks of the alternative: an eternity in nothingness. No, he hopes they are both resting, too. He takes a steadying breath before his thoughts can venture too far down that road. “We’ll make sure the world knows they are heroes. Is there anything else I need to know?”

“I think you can fill in the rest of the blanks.” Levi considers. “I cussed out the brass.”

“I could have filled in that blank,” Erwin says with a smile.

Mikasa rounds the corner. “He also got drunk on your good whiskey.”

Levi frowns. “You drank it, too.”

“Under order of my commanding officer.” Mikasa draws herself upright and salutes Erwin. “Several of the survivors are complaining of hunger. I’d like to help Sasha and Connie distribute the rations, if that’s okay with you. Then we could show the people to their tents and continue scavenging.”

“Yes, go ahead.”

“We’re short on tents, so we’re doubling up.” Mikasa clears her throat and looks away. “I assume you two will share one.”

“Yes,” they say in unison. Erwin glances at Levi, thinking about being alone with him in a small, confined space, clinging to each other for warmth ... He has been so focussed on organizing the survivors that he forgot what awaits them once they are alone.

But that can wait. He draws a deep breath.

“Once we have the camp set up and the survivors clothed and fed,” he says, “we’ll need to start scanning the surrounding area for others before night sets in. How many horses do we have?”

Levi answers, “Ten. Mikasa and I were the only ones who rode solo. The rest drove the carts. Our plan was to bring everyone back to Trost and then engage the Garrison to help sweep the island. Hange is explaining the plan to Pixis and Zackly right now.”

Erwin considers. “We need to send a messenger to get the Garrison involved sooner and provide more transport. Jean would be the fastest rider, correct?”

“Yes,” Mikasa says, stepping back into the conversation. “But he’s also a good leader, and we’ll need him on the field if we end up splitting up to sweep the surroundings. Floch is the least integrated into the team, and he’s decent on a horse.”

The last time Erwin was with Mikasa on the field, she was new to the military. He is impressed by her professionalism and foresight now. He won’t need to over-explain things to a soldier who was previously Historia’s Captain. “Understood. Tell Floch to deliver a message to the Trost Garrison and to Hange. Note the number of civilians we have found, our cart space, our central camp location, and which supplies we are missing. They’ll be able to handle the rest.”

“Sir,” Mikasa says with a salute, and then she slips from the room.

“She’s good,” Erwin says to Levi. “I’m impressed with how well she’s keeping it together, all things considered.”

“What did you expect? I’m the one who trained her.”

“Ah yes, I should have recognized that in her professionalism and deference to authority.”

“Hey.”

Erwin smirks and pulls open another set of drawers. “I suppose we’ll have to figure out a new structure for the military, given that we have just ten surviving soldiers, two of whom are Commanders and two of whom have Captain experience.”

“I’m more concerned about how we’re going to handle Marley.” Levi glances at him. “Any ideas yet?”

“I haven’t thought that far ahead,” Erwin says lightly.

“Bullshit. You’re always thinking ahead.”

He is: vague plans are already starting to fit together in his mind. He’ll need to plan different approaches depending on whether Marley sends an Eldian contingent, or Marleyan, or both. He gives a low sigh.

“What’s that sigh about?” Levi slams a cupboard. “I found three cans total. Not sure what’s in them.”

Dodging the question about the sigh, Erwin inspects the cans. They don’t appear to be dented or leaky. “I supposed we’ll find out. Most likely fruit of some sort.”

Levi is studying him. “I had forgotten how different you are on the field.”

“Oh?”

“Your face gets sharper and your voice gets hard.”

Erwin turns to him, face softening. “I know you were hoping I wouldn’t fall back into this role.”

“Well.” Levi steps closer and slides his fingertips up the centre of Erwin’s chest. “I knew what I was getting into.” He taps the green gem of the bolo tie. “We’ll figure something out.”

Erwin bends down and kisses the top of his head. “How about this: once we finish handling whatever crisis awaits us with

Marley, we'll take some time away together to talk about our future."

"Our future," Levi repeats, and Erwin's cheeks warm.

"If that was too forward—"

"No, just liking the fact that we have a future." Levi taps the gem once more, then steps back and cocks his head at the stairwell. "I'm going to check the cellar."

Erwin nods. "I'll start checking the next house."

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BY THE END OF the day, every civilian is dressed in clothing and has footwear. The tents are set up in a ring around the perimeter of the basin. A bonfire glows at the centre, and makeshift seats surround it: logs, slabs of wood, rocks. The soldiers and a few volunteers have amassed enough food to last for three or four days, which should buy them time until reinforcements arrive.

Mikasa oversees the distribution of food supplies. Erwin and Levi take a seat on a log next to the other soldiers, gratefully accepting some flatbread and dried fruit. The sun is beginning to set. It's a clear night, and the temperature is dropping quickly.

"Your tent is just over there, Commander, Captain," Jean says, gesturing at a tent near the fire.

Erwin is grateful for the warm location of the tent, but wishes they were tucked a little closer to the back of the basin for privacy. Still, he thanks them. They're all looking at them expectantly, probably waiting for them to reveal how Erwin is alive, but this isn't the place. Too many ears.

Once they have eaten, Levi stands and stretches. "I don't know how you're all still awake; we've been up since yesterday morning. Mikasa, can you arrange a watch schedule?"

She nods. "Sir."

He turns to Erwin. "You're probably tired, too," he says pointedly.

He isn't, but he drains the rest of his water canteen, then stands. "Goodnight, everyone. Rest well."

The soldiers reply with a chorus of goodnights.

Levi opens the tent flap to let Erwin inside; he takes off his boots and leaves them neatly tucked inside the entrance, then crawls in. The tent is just high enough that Erwin can kneel without his head brushing the top. These tents are thick canvas; they won't have to worry about their shadows being projected against the walls. Sound, however, will be a problem. They can hear the others' conversation and the crackle of the fire as clearly as if they are still seated on the log.

Levi ties the tent flap closed. The crack between the fabric glows orange, but Erwin can't see anything else. He reaches out a hand and finds Levi's shoulder.

Levi presses up against him, arms snaking around him. Erwin cups the back of his head and holds him to his collarbone.

"I missed you," Levi whispers, his arms tightening.

Erwin bends down a little so his mouth is by Levi's ear. "You must be exhausted."

In response, Levi's hands slide firmly down his back and grab his ass. Erwin sucks in a sharp breath.

"I see."

Levi presses flat against him. "We'll have to be quiet."

"Yeah." Erwin thinks of the way Levi rambles during sex and wonders if silence is possible.

Hands grip the front of his shirt; Levi is leaning back onto the blankets, pulling Erwin on top of him. Their lips meet for a soft, quiet kiss, then disconnect with almost no sound.

Erwin lowers his weight onto him and presses his cheek against Levi's, so his mouth is by Levi's ear, Levi's mouth by his. "How do you want me?"

The reply is warm and breathy in his ear: "I want you inside me."

"Yeah?" Erwin reaches into his pockets and empties them to the side, feeling for the bottle of lubricant he found earlier.

“Fuck me,” Levi breathes, “until you come.”

Erwin squeezes his eyes shut as a shiver ripples through him, fighting his natural drive to voice his pleasure. He sits up and fumbles silently in the dark for Levi’s buckle; when he finds it, he unfastens the hip and thigh sections of the gear, then pulls his pants off. Even this close to the fire, the air is a bit chilly, so he leaves Levi’s upper half clothed.

He feels Levi grip his shirt and bends down to give him another quiet kiss. Before the kiss can disconnect, Levi shoves his hand between them and reaches into Erwin’s pants to grab him. His hand is warm and tight, and Erwin rips his lips away to gasp. The noise of it seems to echo through the tent, and he freezes, but the conversation is still continuing outside as if they made no noise at all.

“Careful,” Levi whispers, and even without a voice behind his words, Erwin can tell he is smirking.

The hand slowly begins to stroke him. Erwin clenches his teeth and slides in and out of his grip until he can’t stand the constraints of his pants any longer. He quietly unfastens them and pulls them down to his knees, then bends down to Levi’s ear again.

“Put this on me,” he whispers, pressing the lubricant into his hand. Levi accepts it and the cap makes the slightest *pop* as he opens it. Then his hand is slick and strong around Erwin’s cock, and he bites hard into his lip to keep himself still. His body cries out for him to thrust into that wet grip, but the last thing they need is for the others to hear a rhythmic squishing noise.

*Shit.* This is a terrible idea. There’s no way he’s going to be able to keep silent.

Levi’s hand pulls away for a minute, then there’s a light *pop* of the bottle closing again. This time, when Levi grips him, he guides him forward until he’s pressing against him.

Slowly, achingly slowly, Erwin slides in. Levi’s body jerks and he clenches around him.

Erwin yanks out and breathes an apology. He forgot that in this timeline, they haven't done this yet.

"It's okay. It didn't hurt, I just needed a second to adjust." Levi pushes onto him again, and Erwin lets him control the pace this time. He is warm compared to the brisk night air, so warm that Erwin's eyelids flutter closed and he has to bite his lip to silence himself again. Levi takes him all the way in, grinding down at the base, and Erwin is certain his teeth are going to draw blood from his internal war. He lays down on Levi again, cheek to cheek, mouths to ears. He wants to hear every breath.

Erwin draws most of the way out, then eases back in, and their bodies rise to meet each other at the end of the stroke. In the darkness, forced to keep this agonizing pace, Erwin's sense of touch is so heightened that he can feel every detail of Levi as he slides into him. This time, when he reaches the hilt, Levi clenches around him, and every muscle in Erwin's body tenses.

"Shit," he breathes into Levi's ear. Levi's cheek shifts against his; his head is tilting back. Erwin draws back and slides in again, and Levi's fingertips claw into his shoulder blades with silent desperation.

Something about this self-denial, the way they both have to fight against their urges, is making Erwin's head spin. This awareness of each breath, this slowness, this exaggeration of every little touch, it's all so intimate. He feels himself throb.

Levi pants into his ear, "You're so hard."

Those words, the heat of his breath ... Erwin pulls out a little too quickly, and the lubricant makes a squishing sound. His breath hitches; he pushes back in, eyes rolling back from the effort of restraining himself.

Levi's arms and legs wrap around him, hips angling to draw him in deeper.

"Fuck," Erwin breathes into his ear, teeth clenched. "Fuck, fuck." How is he supposed to stay in control? The urge to thrust hard burns through him, so hot that it takes every ounce of his

self-discipline to draw out slowly again. Sweat drips off the tip of his nose. “Levi,” he pants. “I can’t hold back, I can’t do this.”

Instead of coming to his rescue, Levi catches his earlobe between his teeth and sucks gently at it, which doesn’t help one bit. Neither does the way he drives down more firmly against Erwin, revealing that he’s barely in control, too.

“What would you do to me?” Levi mouths in his ear. “If we could be loud?”

Erwin’s eyes squeeze shut. “I’d flip you over. I’d use my mouth and fingers on you until you begged me to be inside you.”

“And then?” Levi’s breaths are catching.

“And then—” Erwin’s body is still begging him to move faster, and he trembles with the effort of keeping his thrusts smooth. “I’d grab your hips—”

“Yeah?”

The heat of restraint is rising to Erwin’s head. He’s delirious, he’s drunk. “—and I’d ram into you—”

“Say you would fuck me,” Levi breathes.

“I’d fuck you,” Erwin whispers, muscles shaking. “Levi, I’d fuck you so hard.”

Levi’s head tosses back, his fingertips bruising Erwin’s shoulders, legs so tight around Erwin’s hips that he can barely move.

*Slowly, Erwin thinks with the last vestiges of his control, Gently. Slowly, gently ...*

His body holds him on the edge for so long that he thinks this torturous light friction won’t be enough. He breathes Levi’s name into his ear, over and over, a whispered mantra to control his volume and pace. As he finally begins to tip over the edge, the mantra falls apart. His shaking arms give way and he wraps himself around Levi as his body unleashes a wave of euphoria that washes up his spine and into his head, and he drowns in it.

Somehow, he manages to hold everything back except the faintest grunt.

He comes back to himself with Levi planting silent kisses

on his cheek, his ear, his hair. His limbs are tingling and warm, his muscles spent. He takes his weight onto his elbows again.

“You’re so hot,” Levi breathes. “That was so hot, that was ... I could feel everything—” His words disappear into a ragged breath and he grinds down against Erwin.

Erwin pulls out and slides down Levi’s body, careful not to rustle their clothing or the blankets. Levi’s cock is so hard that Erwin has to force it away from his abdomen; he pulls it into his mouth and tastes salt and musk.

Levi shoves his hands into Erwin’s hair, nails scraping his scalp. Erwin sucks hard and moves fast, careful not to break the suction. After just a few strokes, Levi thrusts hard into his throat and his euphoria, too, comes in waves that Erwin gratefully swallows.

The hands in Erwin’s hair fall limply to his sides. Erwin would give anything to see the look on Levi’s face, but he makes do with gently releasing him and giving him a final kiss. A limp hand slides across his face, lingering on his lips. Erwin laces his fingers through it and rests his cheek on Levi’s lower abdomen. For a moment, they lay there, their breaths slowing.

Goosebumps are beginning to rise on Levi’s skin, and Erwin reluctantly sits up. They take a minute to clean themselves, then climb under the blankets. Erwin lays on his back and Levi snuggles up against him, hand on the centre of his chest.

Levi whispers, “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“So am I.” Erwin smiles and leans his cheek against the top of Levi’s head. “Sleep well, Levi.”

The words have barely left his mouth when Levi’s breaths grow loud and even. Erwin holds him and waits for his turn to come, but his body seems to be well-rested already.

Outside, Mikasa, Jean, Connie, and Sasha are still awake, speaking quietly. Erwin listens to them, enjoying the idle prattle of junior soldiers. He sometimes misses the simplicity of those days.

After a while, there is a lull in the conversation. Then Jean says, “So, Mikasa, how *did* the Commander come back to life?”

Erwin waits to hear her response.

“Why do you think I know anything about that?”

“You don’t think I’ve noticed how you’ve been acting strangely around the Commander and the Captain? Something is going on with you three.”

There’s a long pause, then she says, “I may have more information than you do, yes. You’ll be debriefed in due time.”

“Fine,” Jean sighs.

“Speaking of the two of them—” Connie says, and then stops.

“Out with it,” Jean says. “You’ve been sitting there with a twisted expression all night.”

There’s a silence so long that Erwin wonders if they’re speaking in whispers, but then Sasha speaks up:

“Come on, Connie, what’s going on?”

“I can’t,” Connie replies. “They’re right there.”

“They went to bed ages ago.”

“Fine. I ... saw something.” Connie’s voice is so quiet that Erwin has to strain his ears to hear.

“Spit it out,” Jean says.

“I’m trying, okay? I was ... near them when the Captain found him.”

*Ah*, thinks Erwin.

“And?”

“The Captain *kissed him*.”

There’s a long silence.

Sasha says, “Like, he was giving first aid?”

“Or on the cheek?” Jean asks.

“Like on the mouth, knocked him over, hands all over each other.”

Well, Erwin isn’t going to fall asleep anytime soon, anyway; he might as well do some damage control. He carefully

detaches himself from Levi and tucks the blanket around him, then pulls on his pants and boots.

As he steps out of the tent, four sets of eyes snap to him. He runs his fingers through his hair to smooth it into place, and takes a seat on the log next to Mikasa and Sasha.

“Can’t sleep?” he asks casually.

The others are staring at him—except Mikasa, who bites her lips and looks away, as if hiding a laugh.

He continues, “You know, sound travels quite well through the wall of a tent.”

The others are carefully looking away from him now; Jean and Sasha at the fire, Connie at the ground.

“I imagine you have a lot of questions about the current situation.” He gives them a kind smile. “Once I have clarified our situation with Hange and Levi, we will be filling you in on the details. It’s a rather complex story.” He pauses. “But that’s not all you have questions about, is it?”

“Commander,” Connie blurts, not meeting his gaze. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have been gossiping, sir.”

Erwin chuckles. “No, it’s fine, Connie. I would have questions, too, in your shoes.” He pauses. “The four of you have experienced true hell on this island. You’ve watched your comrades die. You’ve charged headlong into battle against intelligent shifters and against humans. You’re the handful of survivors from the most brutal war we’ve ever experienced in recent memory.” He scans each of their faces. “All this is to say, I trust you. And I think you all understand a depressing truth about this world, better than most new recruits would: any of us could die at any time.”

They’re all watching him now, surely wondering where he is going with this. He shifts, leaning forward onto his knees and clasping his hands, then continues:

“I joined the Survey Corps when I was about your age. My introduction to the world outside the walls was much less brutal than what you went through, but even so, the losses of so many

friends scarred me. I vowed never to let myself grow attached to someone. What was the point of love if it was only going to end in heartache?”

He gives a soft smile and glances at the tent.

“But we are human before we are soldiers, aren’t we? And when humans go through difficult times together, when they’re the only ones who see each other day in and day out, when they literally rely on each other to stay alive, bonds form. There are different kinds of bonds, different kinds of love, but all are meaningful. I know the four of you understand that.”

Jean swallows hard and looks away. Sasha and Connie are still watching him intently, but they seem to be following along.

Erwin says, “What you saw, Connie, was two men who denied their bond for years, until death made them realize the truth: it doesn’t matter if you acknowledge the bonds that form or try to pretend they don’t exist. They still happen, and they still hurt to lose. So maybe we should be embracing them while we have them. And I apologize, because I know it’s strange when you discover two of your superiors are romantically involved. And yet ... ” He smiles to himself. “The world is a cruel place. We need to seize love where we find it, whether that is friendship, or relationships, or even just fleeting connections. So I hope once the awkwardness of this discovery passes, you will be comfortable with it. Because I don’t intend to let go.”

After a long pause, Mikasa says, “Are you two going to go public?”

“I’ll have to discuss that with Levi; I don’t want to make the decision without him. Our entire military structure is a bit up in the air at the moment, so maybe it won’t even end up being a problem, professionally.”

There is a long pause, then Jean says, “I won’t tell anyone until you say it’s okay, Commander.”

“Me neither,” says Sasha, and Connie nods to show his agreement.

Mikasa, with her advantage of age, says, “I think it’s cute.”

“Cute?” That’s the first time the word has ever been applied to Erwin. “How so?”

“Well, the Captain is so dour and grumpy, but when he’s around you, his eyes light up and he can’t stop looking at you. It’s quite sweet. I think I even saw him smiling earlier.”

The others are staring at her as if she has lost her mind; they don’t know she has a much longer relationship with Levi than they do. It must be difficult for her to pretend to be a girl after all she has seen and experienced.

“Thank you, Mikasa. I’m glad I can bring some joy to his life.” He sits upright. “But enough of this old man waxing romantic. You four must be exhausted. Would you like me to take the first watch? I’m feeling well-rested.”

“Thank you, sir,” they say, and Connie offers to be woken up for the next watch. He still looks a little guilty. Erwin hopes he won’t beat himself up too much for gossiping.

“Mikasa,” Erwin adds, “would you accompany me for a walk around the perimeter before you retire? There is something I’d like to discuss with you.”

“Sir.” She stands.

They climb to the top of the hills encircling the camp. Once they are out of earshot, Mikasa speaks, voice low, “Are you planning to take charge as Commander again?”

“I don’t know.” Erwin paces along the ridge with his arms clasped behind his back, scanning the dark fields around them. There won’t be many threats to stand guard over, but there may be stragglers who will see the smoke from the fire and come to them in the night. “I suppose we will need to discuss that with Hange and Historia.”

“I think Hange would give up leadership in a heartbeat, if given the chance.”

“Well, we’ll have to discuss a few options to find the best one for humanity. I may serve better as an advisor than a leader.” He glances at her. “How are you holding up?”

She gives a soft, bitter laugh. “Not well.”

“That’s understandable. Well, you are doing an admirable job of hiding it.” He pauses. “It’s terrible that you have had to sacrifice so much for—”

“Don’t,” she says hoarsely. “Please.”

He nods. “Understood.”

After a few more paces, he says, “Now that the paths are undone, I’m assuming you and Levi don’t have the strength of your bloodline anymore.”

She holds her hand in front of her face, clenching it a few times. “Just regular human strength now.” She casts him a wry smile. “Well, maybe better than a regular human.”

He releases a soft puff of air through his nose. “I don’t doubt it.” He stops and turns to her. “Mikasa, before we discuss the next steps with the others, I wanted to run something past you. It’s possible the Survey Corps will end and we’ll restart the Queen’s Guard, or perhaps the military will reorganize entirely. But regardless of what happens next, with your experience, maturity, and skills, I would like to nominate you for a Captain role, like Levi.”

Her eyes widen. “Commander?”

“You have proven yourself integral to this entire operation. And what’s more, you carry ten years of wisdom and experience that the others do not. It’s clear you are no longer just a new soldier.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He nods.

They fall into step again. She stares at the ground for a few more paces, then says, “Do you think Levi will stay in the military?”

“I don’t know,” he says honestly. “He was eager to leave it, before. Either way, I think the military will need my services for a bit longer.” He pauses. “I really want to help him and Hange rebuild their cabin.”

She gives him a sympathetic look. “The three of you must

be so tired. Grief is exhausting, and you've all lost so much over the years."

He smiles sadly. "Well, we're all tired, aren't we?"

"Yes." She turns her face skyward, her pace slowing. "But we don't have time to be tired. Marley will come."

This brings him to the other reason he brought her out here: "I wondered if you had any thoughts about what we should be doing next. You were present for many of the discussions with Marley, in the other timeline. Do you agree they'll arrive in a few days?"

"Possibly." She folds her arms over her chest, her pace still slow. "Part of the reason Marley was desperate for our gas reserves was because they were fighting on a few different fronts, and their opponents had developed anti-titan technology."

"So it will likely take them a few days to withdraw from the fighting, if they wish to bring their full force down on us."

"Yes. What's more, the loss of titans may not be as big of an issue for them as we think, since they were already losing effectiveness."

"Interesting," Erwin murmurs, turning this information over and over in his mind. "If Marley is reducing their reliance on the titans, that would put the Eldians there at risk. They're only really kept around for that purpose, isn't that right?"

"As far as we can tell." Mikasa glances at him. "Are you thinking the Marley Eldians could be allies?"

"Possibly. I'm not sure what to do with all this information yet." He needs some space to think.

As if following his train of thought, Mikasa says, "I think you should delegate the survivor rescue operation to me tomorrow, and go with Levi to the ocean."

*The ocean.* Erwin recalls the way Hange wrote about it in their journal: the scent of salt and seaweed on the wind, the crashing waves, the little shells cast off by sea creatures. Reading their description made his heart ache with a nostalgia for a place

he had never been. Aloud, he says, “If I step away from the rescue effort, it will only be to plan how we will handle Marley.”

“Well, I do my best thinking when surrounded by peace; don’t you? If I’m in control of the rescue effort, that’s one less thing to occupy your thoughts. You think I’m ready to be a Captain, right?”

“True.”

“So offload this to me and use all your brainpower to focus on Marley. Besides, visiting the ocean will give you some context as to how they will arrive.”

He considers. “How far is the ride from here to the shore?”

“With two horses, you could get there and back in a day, no problem. I could lend you my horse.”

“I may take you up on that. Thank you for the suggestion, Mikasa. Let’s speak with Levi tomorrow and see what he says.” He clears his throat. “They are heroes, you know. Eren and Armin.”

Mikasa’s swallow is audible. “I know.”

“We’ll make sure they go down in history as such.”

“I know,” she says more softly.

They complete their circuit. “Why don’t you go get some sleep?” Erwin suggests. “We’ll discuss our next steps once you and Levi are well-rested.”

She gives him a shy but sincere smile, then walks to the tent she’s sharing with Sasha. Erwin feels a swell of pride. He can’t believe how well she is holding herself together, despite all she has lost. An Ackerman’s strength is not purely physical.

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AT SUNRISE THE next morning, Mikasa, Jean, and Erwin meet off to the side while Connie and Sasha get started with the food ration distribution.

Erwin entrusts Jean with a brief overview of their situation. Jean stares at Erwin and Mikasa with disbelief.

“You’re from the year 860?” he asks, sounding faint.

“That’s right.”

“Eren sent you here? Another Eren, in the paths? And he and Armin are *dead*?” He glances at Mikasa, brow furrowed with concern.

“That’s right.” Erwin grips his shoulder. “I know it’s a lot to take in, and you’ll have time to process it and mourn once all these people are safe. However, we need to take action. Now that the titan shifters have lost their connection, Marley is going to come looking for answers, and their technological capabilities far exceed ours. It is imperative that I work with Levi and Hange to come up with a strategy to deal with them. Because of that, I am entrusting the rescue effort to Mikasa. She will be leaning heavily on you to help carry out this operation, and I want you to respect her as if she is your Captain.”

Jean looks pale, but he only nods. “Of course, sir.”

Levi crawls out of the tent, hair sticking out in all directions. “Hey, Erwin!” he calls. “Why didn’t you wake me?”

Erwin gives him a quick nod of acknowledgement, then says to Jean and Mikasa, “I suggest you start by doing an assessment of the remaining supplies to see how many days we could potentially wait here for the Garrison. Most of the titans seem to have found their way to Shiganshina, but there could be more survivors showing up, so take that into account.”

“Sir,” they say.

Erwin strides over to Levi. “Good morning.”

“What the hell? The sun is already up.” Levi stretches and yawns.

“You were sleeping so soundly, I didn’t want to wake you.” Erwin raises a brow, recalling how quickly he went through his rations the night before, too. “You didn’t sleep or eat enough when I was gone, did you?”

Levi shrugs. “No.”

“I would have hoped you were less dependent on me than that, Levi.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. I never sleep or eat properly.” He yawns again and stretches, then looks around the survivors. “So, what’s the plan?”

“You and I are going to head to the ocean.”

“The ocean?” Levi’s brow furrows. “Won’t that waste too much time?”

“I’ve left Mikasa in charge. Most of the work I need to do is in my head, and I’ve always strategized best when I could bounce ideas off you. Besides, it might help me to visualize how Marley will engage us from the ocean.”

“You sure you aren’t just trying to get me alone?” Levi asks dryly.

Erwin chuckles, then clears his throat. “That reminds me: the soldiers are aware that you and I are together.”

“Oh,” Levi says, and his nose wrinkles. “Shit. They overheard us last night?”

Erwin shivers a little as he feels echoes from the night before, but he quickly pulls himself together. “No, Connie saw you kiss me when we were reunited. I have secured their secrecy, but you and I are going to have to discuss whether or not we want to go public.”

Levi grabs a package of flatbread and sits on a log. Erwin does the same, sitting beside him. When Levi rips off a piece and starts chewing, Erwin continues:

“There are a few things about our future that are uncertain right now.”

Levi swallows. “Yeah.” He turns to him. “I’m tired of hiding how I feel about you. Besides, everyone thought we were together, anyway, and it didn’t cause any problems.” He looks steadily at him. “But it’s up to you. I don’t care too much about what my role in the military is, so long as I can work with you. I can do that as a mercenary or an advisor if they force me to

retire for conflict of interest or whatever. You have more on the line.”

Erwin smiles. “I want everyone to know.”

“Yeah?” Levi says casually, but his eyes are shining.

“I want to live with you and hold your hand and kiss you in public with the same freedom we had in the year 860.” He smooths hair off Levi’s forehead. “Maybe we don’t have a literal path linking us anymore, but when I look to the future, I see our lives intertwined.”

“Me too.”

“Yeah?” Erwin whispers, heart glowing.

Levi gives him a small smile, then leans over and kisses him in full view of everyone.

# ❖ Twenty-One ❖

## OCEAN

ONCE THEY HAVE eaten breakfast and packed supplies for a daytrip, Erwin and Levi head southwest. They ride at an easy pace, side-by-side so they can converse.

“You’ve been to the ocean before?” Erwin asks.

Levi nods. “Yeah, once.”

“What’s it like?”

“Big. Salty. You’ll see for yourself.” Levi glances at him. “Shouldn’t you be thinking about Marley instead of the ocean?”

“I’m doing both at the same time; they’ll come by ocean, won’t they?”

“Yeah, unless they fly in their airships.”

“Ah. Right.” Erwin ponders for a moment. “What’s your feeling about their timeline and approach? Mikasa thinks they are spread across too many fronts right now to regroup and attack us immediately.”

“They’ll probably send a convoy first. That’s what they did last time.”

“Who did they send?”

“The Beast Titan, the Cart Titan, a general named Magath, and a handful of other Marleyans.”

“Not Reiner Braun?”

“No. I never saw him again.”

“Since the circumstances are different, I wonder if they’ll send the same convoy, or if they’ll send the former shifters?” He’s not sure yet if it would be a benefit or disadvantage to have Rei-

ner there. The soldier had always seemed to have an intense relationship with the other soldiers. “What can you tell me about Zeke Yeager?”

“Nothing,” Levi mutters. When Erwin turns to look at him, he clarifies, “I don’t want to talk about that shitstain.”

“I know,” Erwin says gently. “Any observations you have would be helpful. I need to understand his character.”

“Not sure what information I could give you. Hange spent more time talking to him one-on-one. I avoided him.”

“Because you promised me you would kill him, but you couldn’t touch him without causing a diplomatic incident, I assume.”

“Yeah.” Levi’s eyes narrow at the horizon. “And because he killed you. Well, he did the fatal damage. We all know I—” His mouth twists. “I made my choice. And I don’t regret it, especially now. But he’s still the symbol of everything that happened.”

Erwin sees that loose thread of Levi still blaming himself for his death, but decides this isn’t the time to pull it. Instead, he asks, “Did he strike you as aggressive and driven, like Eren?”

“No, he seemed a little more meek, but arrogant. I got the impression he looked at us the way someone might look at an insect before stepping on it.”

*How does an insect negotiate with a man?* Erwin wonders. “That could be a problem. If they don’t see us as human, it’s going to be hard to approach them diplomatically.”

“They don’t. They see us as devils. Even back in Marley, the Eldians are treated like shit.”

That matches what Erwin read in Grisha Yeager’s journals. And yet, they saw hesitation in Bertolt and Reiner. Maybe Zeke Yeager was the same. Maybe there was still a way to reach out to them as humans.

“How much time did he have left as the Beast Titan?” he asks.

Levi shakes his head. “I didn’t want to know. I have no idea if he was dead or alive in 860.”

“No?” Erwin asks, surprised. “I thought you would have celebrated his passing.”

Levi sniffs dismissively. “If he died, it meant I failed your last order. Can’t kill a dead man.”

For several seconds, the only sound is the hoofbeats of the horses. Erwin casts an eye in his direction. Levi’s head is low, hair in his face.

“Levi,” he says gently, “You know you were more than one promise to me, don’t you?”

“Yeah. But it was the first time I ever failed you. You went peacefully to your death because you trusted me to finish the mission. And I didn’t.”

Erwin studies him for a moment longer. He has always seen them as equals. Maybe Levi hasn’t. “You are more than someone who executes my orders, Levi. Once it became clear a diplomatic angle was needed, you did exactly as I would have ordered and let him live.”

“I know, I know.” Levi’s head is still low. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

“Okay.” He reminds himself that Levi has just re-lived a traumatic time. Erwin knows first hand: healing doesn’t follow logic, and it doesn’t follow a consistent timeline. He won’t push it.

The sun is higher in the sky and the air around them is unseasonably warm. They pause to remove their riding cloaks and water the horses. Levi shields his eyes and looks up at the sky.

“This is the furthest South you’ve ever been, huh?”

“I think so,” Erwin says. “If not, we must be getting close. We didn’t start making good progress into titan territory until after Wall Maria fell.”

“You mean, until after you became Commander and the Survey Corps became effective.”

“I didn’t say that,” Erwin says, but he smiles. He crouches down to look at the flora: the blades of grass are thicker than

within the walls, and there are more mosses and fern-like plants. The soil is more humid between his fingertips. “Is it much warmer by the ocean?”

“A bit, yeah, and more humid. Stronger wind, though.”

“How is the water?”

“Not like a bath or anything, but it’s warm enough to swim in.”

Erwin looks up at him. “Can you swim, Levi?”

“Of course.” He sounds a bit insulted.

“I didn’t think there were many places to swim in the Underground.”

“Miche taught me, in the river. Said it was a skill I might need one day.” Levi shrugs. “It wasn’t so hard.”

Erwin smiles to himself. Of course not—mastering any physical skill must be a breeze for someone like Levi.

“I’m not such a bad swimmer myself,” Erwin says. “We used to spend a few weeks each summer at a lake near my hometown, before my father passed away.” Nostalgia kindles in his chest, happiness and a deep ache at the same time. Maybe when things quiet down, he can bring Levi to the lake. Or will it seem oddly small now that he’s an adult? Everything seems to shrink as he gets older. Even his father’s gravestone seems so much smaller now than it did when he was a boy, back when it loomed in front of him.

He turns to look at Levi. *He is the one thing that seems larger and more impressive the longer I know him.*

“What does that look mean?” Levi asks.

Erwin stands up and kisses him chastely, then pulls away with a smile. “We should keep moving.”

They mount the horses, and Erwin falls deep into thought about Marley again. They have gas to offer Marley; is there anything else? Land? Fresh water? Food?

After a while, Levi says, “Nile will be happy to see you return.”

“I’m sure he will.” After a pause, Erwin adds, “The Doks will remember me this time.”

“Yeah. Everyone will.”

“That means they’ll remember the ones who fell, too.”

Levi gives a little smile. “Yeah, they will.” The smile fades. “If we can do something about Marley.”

“I’m still working on that. My main focus right now is what we can offer them, and what we can do to convince them to take us seriously as trade partners.” Erwin pauses. “Any ideas?”

“Well, you notice Ymir left the walls standing? That was Armin’s idea, to give Marley the impression we still have control over them.”

“I see.” Threatening them with the Rumbling does not sit well with Erwin, but if Marley is a nation focussed entirely on war and destruction, maybe they’ll have to prove they can stand toe-to-toe with them. “We’ll need to speak with the Wall Church about why they were so eager to cover that titan that was exposed when Annie Leonhart—” Realization dawns on him. “We still have her in captivity.”

“Yeah, we do.”

“I assume last time you went through all this, you returned her to Marley when you surrendered Armin?”

“Yeah. But I think they only cared because she was a shifter.”

“I see.” Erwin files this information away for later. Annie won’t hold any value as a bargaining chip, then, but they might be able to question her to learn more about Marley’s motivations and weaknesses.

“At any rate,” he continues, “the Wallists were nervous about sunlight hitting that exposed wall titan. It’s probably safe to assume they, like other titans, are animated by sunlight.”

“Are they still animated if the paths no longer exist?” Levi asks. “Or are the titans just gone and we have big gaps in the walls now?”

“We’ll have to check. If they’re still there and still moving,

then we theoretically have a way to threaten the Rumbling.” He frowns.

“Doesn’t look like you like that idea,” Levi says.

“I don’t. Not only are there too many unknowns to make it a reliable option, but it also positions us to perpetuate this cycle of war and violence. They’ll build better weapons and bigger bombs to target our walls, and then we’ll have nothing left.” He glances at Levi. “Was there anything else we were offering them aside from gas?”

Levi shakes his head. “Staying out of their hair, I guess.”

“Maybe that’s an idea. Maybe we could offer to take in some of the Eldian people who wish to migrate. We have more than enough land to sustain our population now. And it sounds as if Eldian living conditions in Marley are pretty bleak, so it might not be hard to get people to settle here.”

“If they can get past us being devils.”

“True. And anyway, this idea still positions us as a problem to keep hidden out of sight.” Erwin gives a low sigh. “We need to be respected if the other nations are going to leave us in peace. We can prove we’re no longer a threat, but doesn’t that just open us up to a technologically advanced country coming in to conquer us?” His thoughts are going in circles.

Levi doesn’t answer.

They ride silently, and Erwin leaves his subconscious to untangle the threads of their problem in the background for a while, choosing to actively focus on the warmth of the sunshine and Levi’s presence.

At one point, Levi clears his throat. “Guess I won’t have to clean out your office this time.”

It’s an odd thing to say out of nowhere, and Erwin glances at him, trying to guess what is on his mind. “Sounds like you and Mikasa already got started on cleaning out my good whiskey.”

He expects a chuckle or a retort, but Levi just shrugs.

Erwin’s brow furrows. “Something on your mind?”

“There’s something I never asked you before,” Levi says,

staring straight ahead. “Last time, when I cleaned your office, I found a lot of stationery addressed to me.”

It takes Erwin a moment to place what he’s talking about. “Ah.”

Levi still won’t meet his eye. “Did you ever finish a letter? I thought maybe I missed it.”

“No. I set them down and took a long walk instead. I couldn’t find the right words, and I thought the wrong ones would be more harmful than silence.” He smiles sadly at Levi. “I wrote them after our … disagreement about me going to the battle in Shiganshina. I knew you were correct, that I was unlikely to return alive.”

“Stubborn bastard,” Levi mutters. “So what were you trying to say?”

“I still don’t know, exactly.” He turns his head to look up at the clouds, fluffy and broad against the blue sky. “I wanted to tell you that I loved you, that I had always hoped we would be able to retire together once the truth of this world was known, but that probably wasn’t going to happen after all. I had in mind that it would be a confession and an apology in one.” He closes his eyes. “But at the same time, I didn’t want to apologize. I stubbornly wondered why I felt the need, when I had spent my entire life propelling myself toward this goal.”

“And you only knew me for six years,” Levi murmurs.

Erwin shakes his head. “Do not underestimate how much those six years meant to me, Levi. But in the end, I couldn’t write the letter, because there was nothing I could possibly say. I knew what I was going to do, I knew what it would likely mean, and I knew the result would hurt you. Besides—” He pauses. “Apologizing for choosing my dream would mean that I was unequally choosing it over all else. I didn’t want to do that.”

“Oh?” Levi says with no hint of emotion in his voice.

“It closed a door I wanted to keep open. I wanted to choose my dream *and* I wanted to choose you *and* I wanted to choose humanity’s best interest. For the longest time, all three

aligned. This was the first time they didn't. You had aligned yourself firmly with humanity's best interest. I couldn't apologize to you, Levi. That would mean committing myself to going down a different path. Or admitting it to myself at all."

After a long pause, Levi says, "Could I have convinced you to stay behind? If I had kept pestering you that night?"

Erwin doesn't answer.

"You gave up on your dream after just a few words from me," Levi persists. "And in this timeline, when I kissed you, you seemed to forget about it altogether, even in your dying moments. It barely took any persuading."

Erwin draws in a deep breath before he replies. "Watching the enemy tear through our soldiers was when my dedication to my dream started to seem childish, when I was barely clinging to it out of habit. So I ran to you, Levi. I was so tired. You offered me the chance to rest as a hero. A hero who was loved, in spite of all the missteps he took beforehand. I wanted that. I wanted to be the man you thought I was."

"I knew who you were, Erwin."

*Maybe*, Erwin thinks.

He wants to be that man for Levi now, that hero who will bring peace to Paradis.

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AFTER A LAST rest stop, the ride continues in silence. Levi glances occasionally at Erwin. His face is sharp, his gaze far beyond the horizon. Gazing at something Levi can't see. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

The air becomes heavy with moisture and the sun beats down on them from above. Levi wipes the sweat from his face, only to feel more seep from his pores. Disgusting. He didn't dare set foot in the unknown waters of the ocean last time they visited, but right now, he longs to soak in the water. He pulls off his jacket and rolls up the sleeves of his shirt.

They crest a hill, and suddenly the ocean stretches before them. Levi turns to Erwin and sees the same blue in his wide eyes. The broad mouth hangs slightly open, the thick brows slightly pinched. It's rare to see Erwin genuinely in awe of something—aside from when they're having sex, anyway—and Levi takes a moment to relish in it.

"Come on. The horses will be happy grazing here for a while." Levi dismounts.

Once the horses are settled and they have all their necessary gear—a blanket to sit on, some military rations, and their water canteens—they walk toward the shore. The grass gives way to a sandy bank, and they half-step, half-slip down it. The sand at the bottom is pebbly at first, but gets softer as it moves toward the ocean, where it glistens in the sunlight.

Erwin pulls off his shoes and jacket, leaving them neatly against the sand bank. He rolls up the blanket and their rations and tucks them under his arm. Then he looks down at his feet and curls his toes into the sand. "It's warm."

Levi pulls off his boots and leaves them, too. The sand is surprisingly soft against his feet. "It is." Last time, he had been so busy trying not to compare the sea to Erwin's eyes—and trying to stop Hange from killing himself by handling every object on the beach—that he hadn't taken the time to enjoy it.

Erwin pads closer to the water, exploring, and Levi follows.

"The sound of the waves; it's so soothing."

Levi feels his shoulders relax, his jaw unclench. "Yeah."

They step closer and the water flows in, laps at their toes, then washes the sand out from under them as it recedes, seeming to draw them toward the ocean.

"Those waves are powerful," Erwin says. "Even here, where they have almost died out. They must be incredibly powerful further out. If Marley can navigate this, their ships must be robust."

“Yeah, they’re made of metal. They can hold hundreds of people.”

“I see.” Erwin stares across the ocean. His earlier awe seems to give way to determination. “They really do outclass us.”

“Yeah, we wouldn’t stand a chance against them.”

“A show of force is not going to go far.” His expression softens, then he turns to Levi and smiles. “Would you care to accompany me for a walk? I’d like to explore the shoreline.”

They fall into step, side-by-side. After a moment, Erwin holds out a hand, and Levi takes it. His stomach flutters once at the contact, and again when he realizes he can have this contact whenever he wants.

“So, we’re really going to let the world know about us when we get back,” he says.

Erwin raises a brow at him, inquisitive. “Second thoughts?”

“No. Just wondering if Nile will shit himself.”

Erwin chuckles. “He already knows I care about you, Levi, and I think he has long suspected you care about me.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I’ve known Nile for a long time. I can’t hide much from him.”

“I still want to make him shit himself. Let’s be gross and cute in front of him.” Levi bats his eyelashes at him. “My dear ... snookums.”

“Snookums?” Erwin gives a deep, loud laugh.

“What, you don’t like your new nickname?”

“I think I’d expect you to call me ‘my dear shithead’ before ‘snookums.’”

Levi gives a little smirk. “Fine then, I’ll bring out ‘my dear shithead’ next time we’re fucking.”

“Please don’t. I’ll laugh myself flaccid.”

“Eh, it would be worth it. The sex has been good until now. We’re overdue for a bad fuck.”

Erwin chuckles. “Impossible.”

They follow the shore around a bend, and stop. The sand stretches in front of them all the way to the horizon. Erwin's brow is pinched again.

"It's sure something, huh?" Levi says.

Erwin squeezes his hand and releases it, crouching down to inspect the sand. "I had a lot of dreams about what was beyond our walls, but this is incredible. It feels as if we're back in the paths all over again." He runs a finger through the sand. It's damp enough that he can write in it. He scrawls his name.

Levi crouches down beside him and poises his finger beneath it.

"If you draw a dick," Erwin warns with good humour.

Levi scoffs. "I'm not a dumb kid." Although now that he hears the idea, it's tempting. Instead, he draws a little heart.

Erwin turns to him, brows raised. "I think that's the most unexpected thing you could have drawn."

"What? I can be cute." He writes *Levi* below it. The two of them stare at their handiwork.

"I'm glad no one else is here to see this," Erwin says.

"Hange would never let us hear the end of it."

"They'd think we lost our minds."

"Well, maybe we have."

They look at each other, still kneeling. A small gust of wind blows Erwin's hair into his face, and he's so beautiful that Levi's breath catches.

Erwin suddenly grins. "You know what we would do if we had really lost our minds?"

"What?"

"Ever been skinny dipping?"

"The hell is that?"

"Swimming nude."

Levi stands, looking at the ocean. "Sounds like a good way to end up with a tiny fish swimming up your dick."

Erwin stands and sets down their supplies, then starts unbuttoning his shirt. Levi stares.

“You’re going to do it?”

“Sure. Why not? No one’s around to see.”

“It’s probably freezing.”

“That sounds good right about now. This humidity is getting to me.” Erwin pulls off his shirt and sets it on top of the blanket. He starts to unbuckle his pants.

Levi folds his arms over his chest. “I’m not going in there naked.”

“That’s fine. You stay there and watch me have fun.” Erwin pulls off his pants and then his underwear. The shadows shade every muscle of his body under the strong sun, his hair glowing golden. Levi looks him up and down and feels his pants tighten.

Erwin gives him a boyish grin, then turns and walks to the ocean. He places a foot in the water. “It’s warm.”

“At the shore, anyway.” There’s no way the ocean is warm in October. Levi begins to unbutton his shirt.

Erwin glances over his shoulder at him, still wearing the same grin. “Change your mind?”

“No. Just taking off my shirt.” The humidity is indeed oppressive. Levi sets out the blanket. He folds his shirt and Erwin’s shirt and stacks them neatly in the corner.

Erwin is knee-deep now. A particularly big wave slides into him, and his balance falters. As he recovers and steps deeper, he lets out a small cry.

“Fish up your dick?” Levi calls.

Erwin turns to face him. “It’s just a little cooler out here than I was expecting.”

“Watch the waves—” Levi starts, but it’s too late. One of them catches Erwin from behind. He launches forward with an undignified wide-eyed expression; the wave crashes over him. When the water recedes, he’s on all fours, his hair plastered across his forehead and eyes. He sputters.

Levi feels laughter bubble up from his stomach, and he tries to hold it back, but it surges through him. The sight of Erwin Smith, Commander of the Survey Corps, with his hair in

his face and his dick bobbing gently on the waves and water running down his proud nose ... it's too much.

A second later, Erwin starts laughing, too. He stands and wades to the shore, flipping the hair back off his face. "I suppose I shouldn't turn my back on the waves, then."

Levi has to hold his aching stomach. "The look on your face."

"You'd look surprised, too, if the ocean gave you an unexpected enema."

The phrasing knocks Levi off guard, and he sinks to his knees, laughing so hard that tears run down his cheeks. "Shit," he says, struggling to regain control of himself.

Erwin stands in front of him with his arms folded, but he's grinning. "I always wondered if anything would make you laugh like that. I guess it's me making an ass of myself."

"Shit," Levi says again, and he pulls off his pants and underwear, too. Erwin raises a brow.

"You're joining me?"

"Apparently you need supervision."

"If you say so," Erwin says, reaching out a hand. "I think you're just hoping for a free enema."

They wade into the water, hand-in-hand. By the time they reach Levi's chest height, they've adapted to the temperature; it's chilly, but comfortably so. Levi floats on his back and the world mutes as water fills his ears. The sky is almost cloudless now, and deep blue.

Erwin is floating on his back beside him, still holding his hand. He says something, but his words are muffled by the water in Levi's ears.

"What was that?" Levi lifts his head above the water.

"It's so buoyant. I don't normally float."

"Oh. Yeah. All the salt in it, I guess." He lowers himself so his feet touch the rocky sand beneath them. Erwin does the same. His expression is serious.

“What?” Levi asks, shoving a hand through his dark hair to slick it back.

“Just thinking how fortunate we are to be here.” Erwin leans forward and kisses him. Their bodies press together, skin sliding against skin. The salt adds a slick texture to the water, and Levi feels blood rush between his legs. He sways a little side-to-side to really feel the texture of skin-on-skin, and Erwin must like it, too, because he lets out a soft groan.

Levi reaches between them and stands on his toes. His hand closes around their cocks and he begins to tug. Erwin slides his hands up and down Levi’s sides, their eye contact holding. Both of them get harder in Levi’s grip.

“We can’t have sex in the water, can we?” he asks.

“Probably not a good idea.” Erwin’s eyelids are low. “I brought the lubricant.”

Levi lets a puff of air through his nose. “Of course you did.” He strokes harder, and Erwin’s eyes flutter closed. “Then let’s go back to the shore. You want me to fuck you this time?”

“Yes,” Erwin breathes.

They share a long kiss, then leave the water. Sand clings to their wet feet as they walk toward the blanket, and Levi frowns.

“All this sand is going to be a problem.”

Erwin points to the top of the bank. “It looks grassy up there.”

They leave everything except the blanket and lubricant on the shore, then hurry up the embankment. Erwin spreads the blanket and they carefully wipe the wet sand off their feet on the grass.

“Better not be any bugs up here.” Levi sits on the blanket.

Erwin sits next to him and leans into him, kisses deep and urgent. Levi gasps for breath when he pulls away.

“You’re already this horny?”

“You have no idea how good you look with water dripping down your body. And the way it felt when you stroked us

together ... ” Erwin kisses his neck, his collarbone, his shoulder. “I taste salt all over your skin.”

Levi lies down on his side. Erwin’s kisses move along his ribcage, his waist, then down to his navel.

“Hey.” Levi pats the blanket next to him. “Swing your hips up here.”

Erwin catches on immediately and stretches out beside him, and Levi buries his face between Erwin’s thighs. But before he can kiss higher, he gasps as he feels a hot mouth wrap around him. Erwin hums his pleasure at the reaction, and Levi throbs at the vibration of his voice.

“Fuck.” Levi intended to tease him a little bit, but now he needs to catch up. He grips Erwin by the base and positions himself to take him deep into his throat. Erwin helps him by rounding his back so they align better.

And then they are connected, each reading the other’s body with their mouths, fueling each other. Levi clutches Erwin’s ass hard, pulling him in deeper, nestling his nose in the curls. He feels Erwin throb in his mouth, feels himself echo the throb in Erwin’s, which pulls a groan out of both of them.

He slides a finger to Erwin’s tailbone and traces lower. Erwin jerks his head back, breaking the suction.

“Sensitive today,” Levi says.

Erwin lifts his head to look him in the eye. He says solemnly, “I need you, Levi.”

For a moment, Levi can’t find his voice, and his next words come out as a command: “Get on your stomach.”

Erwin rolls onto his stomach, and Levi rustles through the supplies until he finds the lubricant. He slides a finger inside and subtly feels around, still learning his way around Erwin’s anatomy. He feels what he seeks beneath his finger and Erwin bucks back against him with a sound that’s almost a growl.

“Very sensitive,” Levi says, pleased. He pulls out, and this time, another finger joins the first.

“Another one,” Erwin says, voice strained.

“I see.” Levi slides in three fingers and wonders if he could fit his whole hand inside. Some day, he’ll try, but right now, he’s aching to be inside him in another way. He slowly pulls out.

Erwin makes a frustrated groan and thrusts back against the air. Levi claps his hands on his ass.

“So horny,” Levi says approvingly.

Erwin rests his forehead on his folded arms, ass still in the air. “You feel so good.”

Levi rubs himself against him, then starts to slide in. Erwin lets out a stifled grunt.

“Louder,” Levi says. “No one will hear us out here.”

He pushes deeper, and Erwin lets out a loud cry that rockets through Levi and makes him ache. Erwin’s hips start pushing back against him, trying to rush their pace, and it’s hard to get a consistent rhythm going.

“Okay, let’s try this a different way.” Levi pulls out and rolls onto his back. “You ride me.”

He expects Erwin to flip around to face him, but instead he swings a leg over Levi, ass facing him. He begins to ride, twisting and grinding. Levi gasps and lifts his head to watch, his hands on Erwin’s hips. His ass is so round, the muscles clenching and releasing and bouncing. It’s too much; Levi’s head tosses back, beyond his control, breaking his line of sight.

Erwin pauses for a second, grinding down on him. “You too, Levi,” he says over his shoulder. “I want to hear you.”

“Fuck,” Levi says, and Erwin moves up and down with a stroke that coaxes a long moan out of him. “You feel so good.”

“How does it look?”

“Amazing. Your ass is fucking amazing.” Levi manages to pull his neck out its arch and looks up again. “And the way you move it—Fuck, Erwin.”

Erwin sways a little with each stroke, arching his lower back to stick it out more. “You’re getting so hard.”

Levi hears a low, throaty sound from deep within himself,

and he doesn't censor it as it rises to the surface. He grabs Erwin's ass hard enough to bruise.

Erwin grinds down again, then slowly pulls up and lets Levi fall back to his stomach, wet with lubricant.

"Don't stop," Levi gasps, desperate.

"I want to see your face when you come." Erwin turns to face him and takes Levi in again. His eyes flash with determination, and Levi feels as if he is being dissected by that gaze. It's as if Erwin is analyzing him for the perfect strategy to conquer him.

A slew of curses leave Levi's lips. He feels Erwin's hands slide up to his chest, lightly pinching his nipples.

"Shit!" Levi's back arches.

"Levi, look at me."

With a pained cry, he wrenches his head up and looks into Erwin's eyes. They're hard and fierce and his movements are picking up speed. His cock is rock-hard, slapping against his abdomen, trailing a string of precum.

"Oh fuck," Levi gasps as his body starts to rise. "Erwin—"

"Not yet." He's riding with so much force that Levi can hear loud slaps.

"I can't stop it. I can't stop." Levi clenches his teeth, desperately hanging on.

"You are so beautiful when you're about to come," Erwin gasps, and Levi can tell by the rise in pitch that he is close, too. "I want to fuck you all day. I want to hold you on the edge for hours and hours."

"No," Levi whimpers in protest and Erwin gives a soft laugh and bends down to press their lips together. Levi kisses him hungrily, all tongue and teeth, trying to plunge as deeply as he can into both ends. His hand shoves between them to find Erwin's cock and he starts pumping.

Erwin rips his mouth away, breaths noisy and hitching. "I'm going to come."

“Me too.” Levi strokes hard, trying to hang on to his coordination long enough to bring Erwin with him.

They cry out together, moans mingling in the space between their mouths.

When the last spasm leaves him, Levi opens his eyes. Erwin’s head is bowed above him, fluffy hair covering his eyes, mouth wide and gasping.

*So beautiful.* He pulls Erwin down and crushes him in a breathless kiss.

After a moment, they roll apart and lay on their backs, spread out and drying in the sun, joined at the hands. Levi’s limbs tingle. He is dozing in and out of consciousness, and he can tell by Erwin’s breaths that he’s doing the same.

“Erwin?” he manages to say.

“Mm?”

Levi rolls his head to look at him. “I love you.”

Erwin turns his head to give him a soft smile. “I love you, too.”

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THEY CREST THE hills of the campsite just as the sun is setting. Mikasa rushes up to them and signals for Floch and Jean to take the horses.

“Floch is back,” Levi observes.

“Yes,” Mikasa says. “Hange sent word: the Garrison is sending more carts tomorrow. They’re also going to start sweeping Paradis for other survivors.” She turns to Erwin. “Hange wants you to head to Mitras immediately to start planning how to deal with Marley. Did your time away help?”

He nods, glancing at Levi. “We bounced a lot of ideas off each other.” He hadn’t meant it as a euphemism, but Levi seems to blush anyway. Or maybe that’s just sunburn.

“Glad to hear it. I’m sending Sasha and Connie back with the first cartload of refugees. I know you’re probably tired after

your journey today, but it might be a good idea to join them—if I may humbly suggest it, sirs.” She salutes. Clearly, she’s still accustomed to being in charge of a regiment.

Erwin smiles. “Yes, that sounds like the right move. Are you comfortable staying in charge here?”

“Yes, sir. Not much to do but wait. There don’t seem to be any threats around. The people are confused, but calm.”

“Good. Hopefully there aren’t any panics. Send Floch to Trost immediately if you suspect you will need backup from the Garrison.” Erwin claps a hand to her shoulder. “Thank you, Mikasa. You did well.”

She nods. “Don’t mention it, sir.”

“You’re going to have to get used to calling me Erwin once you are promoted.”

“Don’t bother,” Levi says. “I still got ‘Captain’ even after all the time we worked together.”

Mikasa turns to him, eyes twinkling with mischief. “Maybe I just don’t like you.”

Once again, Erwin marvels that none of them ever suspected the two were related. He chuckles and cocks his head for Levi to follow him.

“Mouthy kid,” Levi mutters.

“You’re proud of her.”

“Yeah, maybe. She’s grown up a lot.” Levi glances back at the ruins of Shiganshina. “Anything else we need to do there before we head back?”

“Maybe one last sweep of the old headquarters.” Erwin knows some of the soldiers did a sweep for rations, but there might be old equipment or paperwork that could be valuable. Still, to him, going back there feels like disturbing a grave.

Levi must sense his uneasiness, because he says, “Ask Mikasa and team to do a last sweep of your office and Shadis’ office and call it a day. I don’t expect there’s anything here of value, and you’re more useful in Mitras right now.”

“You’re probably right.” Erwin takes a deep breath and turns his back on the city, descending into the camp.

They pack their supplies, leaving the tent and blankets—the ones that are clean enough to be reused, anyway—for Mikasa to repurpose if more survivors show up. Erwin scans the survivors who will stay behind. He says to Mikasa,

“Do you need me to announce that you’re in charge or anything like that?”

She shakes her head. “I think everyone is aware of what’s going on. They really are quite well-behaved.”

Erwin nods. He helps Levi into Sasha’s cart and follows behind him; they sit in the corner at the front, where he can keep an eye on the route ahead of them. The cart is packed tightly with survivors. He wants to ask them questions and fill in the many blanks left in Grisha Yeager’s journal, but that will have to wait. They are tired and confused.

Levi leans against his shoulder and drapes a blanket over both of them.

Erwin kisses the top of his head. “How are you feeling?”

“Mixed feelings.” Levi snuggles deeper against him.

“Concerned about Marley?”

“Yeah. And I watched you die three times, you know. I only processed it once and I haven’t had a chance to process the other two.”

“I’m here now.”

“I know. But I saw the look on your face as you passed, all three times. When I close my eyes ... ” He trails off and nuzzles against his neck. “Don’t leave me again, Erwin. If things go poorly with Marley, follow the advice you gave Hange in 860.”

Take his loved ones and run. Could Erwin do that? He reaches for the small hand and laces their fingers together. “Levi, I want to hear about the future you want, if all goes well with Marley.”

“I told you that when you were sitting on that crate.”

“Yes, I know the broad strokes, but I’m still learning what

your goals are outside of being a soldier. Are you the kind of man who wants marriage, a family?”

He swears he can hear Levi’s throat bob even over the creaking carriage wheels. “I don’t know about kids. I like taking kids under my wing, but I think I’m better suited to be a Captain than a father.”

“And ... ” Erwin’s voice softens. “Marriage?”

Levi pauses. “Never really thought about it. Seems like unnecessary paperwork to me. What could be stronger than the bond we already have?”

Erwin thinks of the way their destinies were intertwined and can’t disagree.

Levi lifts his head to look at him. “But it’s something you’ve always wanted, right? Marriage? A family?”

Erwin shrugs. “I like the idea of helping raise other children as a mentor figure more than having my own. Some of the Survey Corps soldiers feel like my own kids already, in a way.”

“Yeah.” Levi’s face twists, no doubt thinking about Eren and Armin. Erwin is not allowing himself to think about them just yet.

“And as for marriage, yes, I like the idea eventually. I am a Commander, after all. Paperwork is the majority of my job. It has some significance to me.”

He hears a puff of air leave Levi’s nose. “Figures.”

“But it’s not a deal breaker for me. I want you to know that. And there are a lot of steps between here and there, anyway.”

“Yeah. Like the rest of the world knowing we’re together.” Levi pauses. “Do you think this is the right time to go public? With everything going on, we have to make sure everyone trusts you. If they start suspecting you treated me with favouritism—”

“Trust begins with either honesty or a very convincing lie. I’m not going to lie about my feelings for you any more. To

IN THESE FALLEN LEAVES

them, to you, to myself, to anyone. So that just leaves honesty.” Erwin squeezes his hand. “It will be fine.”

Levi squeezes it back. “Okay.”

Erwin turns to look at the sky. In the darkness, a sea of stars spreads above them, as beautiful as the paths, but these ones aren’t just illusion.

# ❖ Twenty-Two ❖

## SECOND CHANCES

THE BELLS RING eleven o'clock as the carriage enters Mitras. Sunlight glows through the cloth curtains.

It has been a lengthy journey. Once the cart of survivors reached Trost, Erwin and Levi took a few minutes to refill their canteens and rations, then confirmed with the Garrison that the search for survivors was underway. The refugee camps, with their long tarp covers and old donated blankets, were reminiscent of the ones used in 845 after the fall of Wall Maria. Erwin briefly faltered under the weight of traumatic memories. He was silent as they boarded the carriage.

“You okay?” Levi said, and Erwin smiled politely.

“Just tired.”

Levi surely knew it was a lie, but he left it alone.

And now he's snoring peacefully, head in Erwin's lap, laying on the carriage bench with his knees bent. Erwin tried to get some sleep himself, but he doesn't have Levi's gift for sleeping in awkward positions. Not that he would have been able to successfully lay on the bench, anyway. Even Levi's compact body barely fits.

The carriage stops, and the driver raps on the cab to say, “Royal Palace.”

Erwin nudges Levi, who sits bolt upright, eyes wild. His gaze softens as he recognizes his surroundings. “We're there?”

“Yes.”

“Did you get any sleep?”

“A few naps here and there,” he lies.

Levi rubs his neck as if loosening tense muscles. “I should have stayed awake to keep you company.”

“No, I’m glad you’re well-rested.” Besides, it was pleasant to watch him sleep, his fine features relaxed in the glow of the lamp. He looks so young here, in the year 850. Erwin smiles. “I’ll just keep up a steady diet of tea to keep me awake.”

“Then I’ll show my support by drinking tea all day, too.”

“Your incredible sacrifice is appreciated.” Erwin gives him a quick kiss on the cheek, then opens the carriage doors. As he steps down, he flexes his neck a few times and hears it pop and crackle. He hopes that crick won’t turn into a headache. It’s going to be difficult enough to focus as it is.

The breeze is brisk and carries the scent of fireplace smoke and wet leaves. Erwin takes a deep breath; even though he was only there a few days, the scent is now inextricably intertwined with memories of the cabin in 860.

Mitras still has that coat of grime that Historia later scrubbed off, paint chipped and peeling, moss growing between roof tiles, grit spackling walls. Judging by the curl to Levi’s lip, he’s thinking the same thing.

Still, Erwin feels a jolt of excitement. This time around, he gets to be involved in cleaning up Mitras, implementing Historia’s programs, and building the cozy cabin.

An MP soldier greets them with an enormous, practised smile and an invitation to eat lunch with the Queen.

Erwin looks down at the musty clothes he took from Shiganshina, stiff in places from salt water, dust-stained from salvaging. He rubs his face and finds it, too, is gritty with salt and dirt. “I think perhaps a shower and clean clothes are a necessity before I meet with the Queen.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll show you to the showers and go find you some clean uniforms.” She eyes Erwin’s old shoes. “And boots.” She notes down their sizes.

*I suppose there is an excess supply of Survey Corps uniforms*

*available now*, Erwin thinks, but decides the thought is too depressing to voice. Levi's pinched expression suggests he's thinking the same thing, anyway.

The soldier leads them to the shared showers by the training gym. Erwin peels off his clothes. Beside him, Levi does the same, shuddering as dirt hits the ground in chunks.

Erwin's head lolls back as he lets warm water run over his skin. It feels like months since he has been clean. He washes away the sensations of dragging his titan form over the soil, his mouth filling with earth ... He catches water in his mouth and swishes and spits.

The abrasions on his knees sting a bit as the salty grime rinses over them, but not nearly as badly as they had in the ocean. They would probably be healing even better if he hadn't ignored them to get down on all fours in front of Levi—No, he can't recall that in a public shower room lest it become physically obvious.

He aggressively rubs water on his face, then slicks the water off his skin and turns to look at Levi. Levi's gaze is carefully fixed on the floor in front of him.

“You know—” Erwin begins, and his tone must sound flirty, because Levi says,

“Don’t.”

“There’s no need to be shy. You *have* seen my naked body before.”

“Yeah, but now I look at you and think of all the things I’ve done to that naked body, and the things I want to do next.”

Erwin cocks a brow. “Oh? Like what?”

“Don’t,” Levi says again, more firmly.

*Fair enough.* Making a note to touch on that again later, Erwin rinses the last of the suds off his body. The military-issue towels are like sandpaper compared to the plush towels at Levi and Hange’s cabin and in Historia’s guest room; he gently blots himself dry, then wraps the towel around his waist to inspect himself in the mirror. He parts his hair the best he can with his

little finger, and slicks it into place with water. It's not going to stay put—his hair is stubborn that way—but it will have to do until he can get some hair products. He has some stubble and his teeth feel a bit grimy. He does his best to scrub his teeth with a finger and water.

Levi stands beside him now, towel around his waist, too. He runs his hand through his damp hair once, and it falls neatly into his usual style. Erwin has often envied how easily his hair behaves. Maybe he, too, should embrace a wilder style.

A different soldier brings them clean Survey Corps uniforms with generic white linen shirts, a pair of boots for Erwin, and long jackets. Levi studies his cravat for a moment, then must decide it needs washing, because he neatly folds it and stacks their old clothes together.

"We can probably use Historia's laundry service," Erwin says.

Levi's nose wrinkles. "Or burn these." But he still wraps them in his towel and brings them along as they walk to the dining room. He leaves them in a pile outside the door for later.

Erwin lifts up his hand to knock, then hesitates. It strikes him that this won't be the same Hange and Historia he knew. Like his first time seeing Mitras in 860, there was a difference between logically knowing something has changed and actually experiencing it.

A hand grips his shoulder. He turns to see Levi give him a nod. He can read it in his expression: *I'm right here.*

Emboldened, Erwin knocks.

The door flings open and Hange launches at Erwin. Their arms wrap around him.

"You're alive," they say. "You're back! I can't believe it."

Levi scoffs. "I told you he was."

"Yeah, but I didn't think it was possible." Hange pulls away to study Erwin. "How do you feel? Let me take a look at you—"

"He's not your specimen," Levi says firmly.

"Fine, we can talk about your experience later. I'm just

glad you're back." Hange looks up at him with glassy eyes. "I hear the titans are gone."

Erwin smiles. "Yes, somehow, Armin and Eren managed to use their sacrifice to convince Ymir to end the curse. Thank you for trusting Levi and Mikasa. We wouldn't be here without your assistance." He pauses. "Although I suppose we're going to have to find you a new area of expertise—"

"—weapons or food science," they say.

"—and we'll need to discuss who will be Commander—"

"You."

Erwin glances at Levi, who looks away. So much for not getting dragged back into the middle of everything. Or will Levi be okay with it now that they have ten extra years this time around? They need to spend some time discussing their relationship, once this crisis ends.

Historia's eyes light up as he enters the room, and she stands and salutes him. He smiles.

"Please, I should be bowing to you, Queen Historia."

"Well, I haven't defeated death. You have apparently done so twice."

"Three times," Levi corrects.

"It was Eren who saved me," Erwin says. "I would not be here if he hadn't mastered the powers of a god in the old timeline."

Hange gives a low, humourless laugh. "This is not a conversation I ever expected when I signed up for the Survey Corps." Then, a sigh. "Eren and Armin sacrificed a lot for us."

"They did, and that deserves celebration. But we aren't quite out of the woods yet."

"You're right, but let's eat before we talk about that."

They settle around the table and enjoy an enormous meal, with soup and fish and roasted corn and root vegetables. Erwin finds he is famished; after days of flatbread, everything is flavourful and richly textured. Levi seems to be famished, too. Though he maintains his graceful manners, he refills his plate

three times. Dessert is rhubarb cobbler with syrup, followed by a robust spiced tea that leaves Erwin's stomach glowing. At his request, the kitchen staff brings up a second teapot.

“So,” Hange says, leaning their chair back on its hind legs. “Based on all the ex-titans you found, the titans seemed to have clustered around Shiganshina.”

Erwin nods. “We theorize they heard the Beast Titan’s yell, but didn’t arrive onsite until after our battle. They must have dispersed again by the time Levi rode to Shiganshina in the year 860.”

“Hopefully that was a slow dispersal, but it should be okay either way. The Garrison is performing a tight sweep; if there is anyone left on the island, they’ll find them.”

“Good. It was unseasonably warm in Shiganshina while we were there, but the temperature could drop at any moment.”

Hange pulls out a notebook and a stick of graphite. “I want to hear every detail about what you saw and experienced.”

Levi scoffs. “Why? The titans are gone. We have bigger problems.”

“Surely we have time to do a quick summary,” Erwin says pleasantly. He recounts everything they saw, as concisely as he can. In spite of Levi’s initial hesitation, he chips in a few details. Hange has a few questions, but seems to be aware of most of it. Mikasa and Floch did well with the messages they delivered.

“I’m going to recommend Mikasa for a promotion to Captain,” Erwin continues. “She carries with her the experience and maturity of one already. Before that can happen, we will need to discuss what the military and government structure will look like. The Survey Corps is no longer necessary for its primary purpose, and our numbers are few. Once we have started our talks with Marley, we will need to have a longer conversation involving the other Commanders and Zackly.”

Hange nods. “And I would like to hear more about the structure in the time you come from. Maybe we can take some shortcuts to arrive where you left off.”

Before they switch to discussing Marley's impending arrival, Erwin needs two more pieces of information. "Where is Annie Leonhart?" In his periphery, he sees a muscle in Levi's jaw twitch.

"Imprisoned," Hange says, easily rolling with the topic change. "Her crystal dissolved—that was how I was certain Armin and Eren had succeeded. She tried to escape, but she was captured by a member of the MP who had been guarding her."

"Is she offering any information about Marley, or does she at least seem open to any bargains?"

"No. I even tried to offer her immunity."

Historia adds in, "I tried talking to her, too, but she wouldn't even speak to me."

Levi says, "I could try talking to her." Erwin studies him and can't get a read on his expression. Is he hoping for revenge, or merely offering his services? Erwin is not opposed to leaving Levi to his own devices, but there must be other options. He recalls how the Female Titan seemed desperate to flee south once they cornered her, even though her path took her through a densely populated area. She might have been panicking, but it seems more likely that she was trying to go home to Marley.

"I think," he says slowly, "we should dangle Marley's arrival in front of her. We tell her we will allow her to go into their custody if she cooperates with us."

Hange looks up from their notes. "Assuming she wants to go back to Marley. Any privileges enjoyed by Warriors were due to their ability to become shifters. Would her life in Marley even be the same now that she's an ordinary Eldian?"

"The uncertainty of that will surely be better than standing trial here for her crimes." Erwin takes a long breath and lets it out slowly, his eyes unfocussing until the teacup doubles in his vision. The best option will be to start with mild pressure and then escalate if necessary. They'll let her believe Marley is already here, and she will be executed for her crimes if she remains. A soldier who flees when they're cornered will certainly

want to flee from the possibility of dangling from a noose. And if that doesn't work ... He glances at Levi, who meets his gaze, eyes hard.

"I will address Annie Leonhart this evening," Erwin says. "Levi, you'll come with me. We won't bank on getting anything useful out of her; there are logistics we can work out without her. Do we want to have a strong force present to meet Marley in Trost, or escorts to bring them here? Or do we need to assume they'll come directly here by airship? Will they even announce their presence, or send scouts ahead?"

"Or," Hange says quietly, "will they plant scouts among the ex-titan survivors milling about Shiganshina?"

Erwin's stomach drops. "They would be taken into Trost with no questions asked. Then they could slip away unnoticed and we would have no idea they were here."

"How could they possibly plan to do that?" Levi asks. "They're across the ocean. They have no idea about our rescue effort."

"That's correct. But they will know there were titans roaming the island who are now, presumably, human. Even if there were just a scattered handful of ex-titans, it would still be an opportune time to show up at the gates and claim to be one. And if they make a plan based on that, and chance upon our rescue operations in the process—"

"—we'll escort them into Trost without any hassle," Historia murmurs. "Dammit."

"Anything that might make them stand out—accent, strange mannerisms—is easily explained away if they pose as ex-titans from another era." Erwin lifts his head and zeroes in on Levi. "Send an urgent message to Mikasa and another to Pixis warning that we have to be alert for Marley infiltrators."

Levi nods. "Do they need to question all the survivors?"

"There are too many, and starting to question people would alert any Marleyans that we were suspicious. Just a list of names and a brief physical description will be enough. It will

make it easy to tell if anyone slips away from the pack. Also, they will need to station reliable guards at all camps.”

With another nod, Levi slips from the room.

Erwin rubs his forehead. “Thank you, Hange. I wish I had thought of that earlier.”

They wave it off. “Marley hasn’t had time to arrive yet. We would have spotted any aircraft, and from speaking with Mikasa, the ships take at least four days.”

“Then let’s hope my oversight didn’t cost us.” Erwin drums his fingers on the table. “I need one more piece of information: is the exposed wall titan in Stohess moving?”

“Good question. I’ll check it late tonight. We don’t want to expose it to sunlight.”

“No,” Erwin agrees. “Did Mikasa tell you anything else about Marley that I might have forgotten to ask?”

“No. How about you, Historia?”

The queen shakes her head. “But from what I understand, Captain Levi will know everything she knows.”

The lack of sleep is starting to catch up with Erwin, and he quietly yawns behind his hand. He drains his cup of tea, even though the caffeine doesn’t seem to be helping much. “I think the next step is to contact Zackly’s staff about setting up a meeting for tomorrow, and then I’ll pay a visit to Annie Leonhart.”

“I have a few errands to attend to, but then I’ll speak with Pixis to get updates about the rescue efforts,” Hange says, standing. “While you’re at MP headquarters, make sure you stop in to say hi to Nile. He was a little emotional when he heard you were still alive.”

Erwin smiles. “Thank you, Hange. For everything.” He turns to Historia. “There is another situation we need to discuss: once it is publicly known that Marley has approached us, there may be civil unrest. You have won the hearts of the public, Historia. We may need you as a figurehead to unite any dissenting voices that arise.”

She takes a long breath, but nods. “I’ll do my best.”

“In 860, Levi and Mikasa helped you build a lot of social programs that won public favour. There are also new jobs that can be created if we open up trade with the rest of the world, which is something people like to hear. I believe you are in a good position to continue to charm the public.” He sees her shrinking in her chair, and says gently, “And we will be here to support you every step of the way.”

She gives him a shaky smile. “Thank you.” She didn’t call him by name yet, but she didn’t say “Commander” or “sir,” either. It’s a start.

“Here,” Hange says, pulling folded papers out of their pocket. “I grabbed meeting request forms already. Assumed you would need them.”

“Thank you.” Erwin looks for the stationery wardrobe in the corner, then realizes it’s not there yet. “Do you have something I can write with, too?”

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**WHEN LEVI RETURNS**, Erwin is about halfway through the paperwork. Levi sips on tea as Erwin finishes up the forms. Then, they set out for the military base.

Four bells. Nile should be just finishing up for the day before heading home to his family.

Erwin’s mind briefly wanders to the idea of Nile going home to Marie and their children. When they were still boys in the Trainee Corps, Erwin entertained a brief crush on Marie. The life Nile chose always seemed like a symbol of the life Erwin could have had, the one he let go to pursue his dream. Now he wonders if that was ever the life he wanted, or if it was just what he thought he was *supposed* to want. All of it—a wife, kids, even the way he pictured himself becoming a schoolteacher—were word-for-word his father’s life. Was that really the life Erwin had

given up, or just him trying to re-light his father's candle after extinguishing it?

He looks down at Levi, matching him pace-for-pace by his side. It took practice to match their footsteps like this, with their different stride lengths, but now it's so natural that Erwin keeps this pace even when Levi isn't around. This life might have a lot more pain than the one he used to envision for himself, but he is glad it is his.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Levi asks awkwardly.

"Just thinking about how we should approach Annie Leonhart," Erwin fibs.

"The way we always do these things, right? You play your role, I'll play mine. That's not why you're looking at me—I know you have a distaste for violence."

"No," Erwin admits. He promised to be more open with his feelings, after all. "For one thing, I don't have as much of a distaste for violence as I may have let on in the past. But also, my mind was drifting to the choices I have made in my life, and I was realizing how happy I am that it all led me here. With you."

"Corny." But Levi's cheeks are pink.

Erwin asks softly, "When should we tell everyone we're together?"

The pink deepens. "Probably better to focus on Marley first."

"Of course. But it isn't a long conversation. Zackly might have us fill out some paperwork swearing our personal relationship won't take priority." He wants to get it over with right away, so he can hold Levi's hand in public. After walking these streets hand-in-hand in 860, it's excruciating to go back to keeping a professional distance.

"And after we deal with Marley," Levi begins, but he stops. Erwin understands the unspoken words: *what comes next?*

"I know you wanted us to retire and live a peaceful life. You didn't want me to get pulled back into everything like this."

Levi shrugs and says nothing.

“Well, after this is all settled, you, Hange, and I are going to sit and talk about what our future looks like.” He intentionally includes Hange, because he knows how much they mean to Levi, how intertwined their lives were in the other timeline. And if he’s honest, he can’t imagine life without Hange in it. It would certainly be a lot more dull and quiet.

“A meeting about our future? Not everything has to be so formal all the time,” Levi says, but he still looks pleased.

They enter the building and drop off the meeting request paperwork, then walk down the hallway to Nile’s office. He is bent over some paperwork himself, brow furrowed with concentration.

Levi rests against the door frame, arms folded over his chest; Erwin takes a couple steps into the room and pauses.

Nile looks up. His eyes widen. Slowly, as if he’s afraid too much movement will destroy the mirage in front of him, he sets down his pen. He circles the desk, his pace increasing as he reaches Erwin. He embraces him in a tight hug.

“You fucking asshole! You scared the shit out of us.”

Erwin smiles. “You know how stubborn I am, Nile. You should have known I wouldn’t go to my death without a fight. Have you been briefed on what happened?”

“No.” Nile pulls away to look at him. “Don’t grin at me like that. I have half a mind to punch you in the face. We were all grieving. Marie and the kids will be so delighted when I tell them—” He pauses. “Would you like to come to dinner? I’m sure they’d love to see you.”

Erwin longs to see them, too. Now, at last, he has a chance to be an honorary uncle to the children, the way he always wanted. “We can’t tonight, I’m afraid. But soon. It has been too long.”

“Hold on,” Nile says. “Why did you say ‘we’ in that tone?”

It happened so naturally that Erwin didn’t even realize he was doing it. “I assumed you would invite everyone present.”

“No, that’s not how you said it. That was clearly a different ‘we.’”

Well, the news is going to be out soon, anyway. Erwin turns to Levi to silently ask his permission. “I’m going to have a meeting with Zackly very soon, but ...”

“Wait,” Levi says, “step to the side so I can get a line of sight on his face when he shits himself.”

Nile’s lips flatten, and then he says, “You’re going to tell me you two are in a relationship.”

Erwin deflates. “Ah.”

Behind him, Levi says, “I’ve told you before: everyone already thought we were together.”

“About time you’re going public with it.” Nile grins at Levi and says, probably to annoy him, “Now we can go for double dates.”

“Pass.”

“We’ll think about it,” Erwin corrects. “Your discretion is appreciated until we make it known to the public. But planning a date is not why we’re here. We need to question Annie Leonhart.”

Nile’s face hardens with suspicion. “What? Why?”

“It’s too long to explain now. You’ll be brought up to date tomorrow alongside Zackly and Pixis. In the meantime, we need to find out all she knows about Marley.” *Trust me*, he thinks, letting it show on his face. He knows he’s pushing it. He has been leveraging Nile’s trust in him for years, and Nile has surely caught on to his manipulation by now.

Finally, Nile looks away. “Fine. Not like I could stop you, anyway. But don’t hurt her or I’ll make you personally responsible for the paperwork.”

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A PILE OF BLANKETS sits in the corner of Annie Leonhart’s cell, unmoving. The guards salute Erwin and Levi.

“She’s gone?” Levi asks.

“No, she’s there, sir. Under the blankets.”

Erwin studies the pile. Perhaps she was accustomed to the compression of the crystal and the blankets are approximating that security. “Leave us,” He says kindly to the guards. “We’ll fetch you when we’re done.”

The blankets stir, and he can make out two large eyes in the shadows. He takes a seat outside the bars. Levi stands beside him.

“Commander,” Annie says without any hint of respect.

“We’ve convinced Ymir to end the titan curse,” Erwin says flatly. “Titan shifters no longer exist. Your people from Marley have arrived here with questions, Zeke Yeager among them. Meanwhile, the Paradis military is planning to put you on trial soon, and we both know a noose is your only future here.” He eyes her steadily. “If you answer some questions for us, I will convince the military to release you into the custody of your people instead.”

She scoffs. “They won’t take me. I’m useless to them now.”

“Still, I imagine you want nothing more than to go home. You were just a child when you were recruited. Do you have a family waiting for your return in Marley? Surely there is someone in this world who would mourn your death if you stayed.”

He can’t see much in the shadows, but he can clearly make out the middle finger she slips from the blankets and extends in his direction. An amused puff of air slips from his nose and he leans forward, elbows on his knees.

“Very well. I see you will not be swayed by reason.” He affects his most severe neutral expression, letting his eyes bore through her. “You see Captain Levi standing beside me, don’t you? Did you know that during your rampage, you killed his entire squad?”

Her eyes flick to Levi and back again.

“The Captain is gifted at convincing people to answer my questions when they don’t want to talk. I’m sure you remember

how badly he hurt you when you were a titan. And now your shifter healing power is gone, Annie. You can't encase yourself in crystal to protect yourself, either. If I need to, I will turn my back and let Levi ask you questions instead. But I'd much rather talk this through with you myself."

There's a long pause, then she heaves a sigh and her eyes drop. "Look, I'm not going to give you anything useful, anyway. I left Marley years ago, and you said it yourself: I was just a child. They trained me and gave me missions and that's it."

"Who trained you?" Erwin asks.

"In the military? Commander Magath. A Marleyan."

"Zeke Yeager trained with you?"

"Before me. He's our general." She shrugs. "I really don't know much more."

"If Marley was to come to us right now, how would they arrive?"

Her eyes narrow. "You said they were here."

Erwin lets the words hang in the air for a moment. Then he stands and walks up to the bars. He kneels down on one knee to lower his gaze to her level. "I give you my word that when they arrive, you will be released into their custody, *if* you answer this question."

"You just lied to me about them being here. Why should I trust anything else you say?"

"I don't have a convincing answer for you, except that you don't have any choice in the matter if you want to avoid the fate Paradis has in store for you." He gives her a polite smile. "I am your last chance at freedom, and I think you know that."

Annie returns his stare for so long that Erwin begins to wonder if she will ever reply. Then she says, "They will either send a small party on foot through Shiganshina to Trost, or they will bring the entire army and bomb the hell out of the island. There is no in-between. And it all depends how much they fear you."

Erwin considers. Bombing seems like a risky option, giv-

en that Marley needs their gas reserves and won't have a map of natural vents. The only reason they would risk destroying everything is if they feared Paradis more than they needed their resources. Given they know the titans are gone, that seems impossible.

A small party on foot. He can work with that.

“Would they try to infiltrate us from the inside, like they did with you, Reiner, and Bertolt? Or would they send an envoy instead?”

“Who knows?” Annie shrugs. “I was just a kid. I know more about the politics of Paradis than I do about Marley.”

“I understand.” Erwin holds her gaze. “Thank you, Annie. I gave you my word, and I will keep it. If you think of any other information you wish to share, let the guards know. Every bit of it will help the case for your release into Marley’s custody.” He stands and nods to her, then strides away.

Once they have notified the guards of their departure, Levi says quietly, “You eased up on her near the end.”

“She knows more than she’s letting on, but I don’t think it’s much. What we did get is useful.” Erwin glances at him. “If you think you should question her for more information—”

“No. When I defeated her in the forest, her titan form was crying, like a scared little kid. I think I’d break her before I got anything useful out of her.” Levi is still staring at him, and this time it’s Erwin’s turn to ask:

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I forgot how quietly terrifying you can be. I thought she was going to piss herself.”

Erwin smiles. “Is it a bad thing? Me being terrifying?”

“No,” Levi says with a smirk. “I actually kind of like it. Just glad you’re on my side.”

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BACK AT THE PALACE, a soldier leads them to their rooms: the same adjoining guest rooms they had in 860.

“Do they always give us this pair of rooms because no one is ever sure if we need one bed or two?” Erwin asks, amused. The rooms are almost the same as he remembers, but there are significantly fewer pillows on the beds, and the wardrobe is empty. He sighs, closing the wardrobe door. “We wasted all that time shopping.”

“Yeah. We should have just locked ourselves in here and had sex instead.” Levi begins to put away their laundry, which is now free of grime and salt.

“I don’t think I was physically capable of more sex than we had.” Erwin turns to him, thinking how nice it would be to have sex now, but the discussion with Annie started some wheels turning in his mind. “I was thinking of doing some brainstorming. Would you mind sitting with me and Hange and telling us everything you remember about Marley? I think your information, together with what we learned from Annie Leonhart, will give us a good body of information to sleep on.”

Levi nods. “Sure. I’ll go find Hange.”

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THEY TAKE THEIR supper in the meeting room, with Hange noting down everything Levi remembers about Marley, while Erwin listens, his mind hard at work. The three of them conclude Marley’s likeliest approach is south by boat, then horseback through Shiganshina to Trost, the same approach they took in the previous timeline. If Pixis agrees with their plan, the Garrison will have an entire battalion in Trost in plainclothes, ready to attack if Marley is hostile. The Military Police will stay on alert in Mitras and its neighbouring communities in case their guess is incorrect about their method of transport.

Erwin and Levi will meet the Marleyans in Trost, and

escort them to Mitras, where it will be the most convenient location to speak with the military officers and Historia. They'll ride personally with the leader of the envoy so Erwin can try to get a read on them in close quarters.

"We should prepare our fastest soldiers as scouts, and have them patrol the road between Shiganshina and Trost." Erwin draws out a map and the three of them spend some time marking soldier placements and tallying equipment. The Marleyans have better guns and bombs, but most of them aren't accustomed to fighting against the 3DMG, so Paradis still has a chance in combat.

They also mark down evacuation areas in Trost, in case there is an outbreak of violence. Erwin is not eager to repeat all the civilian casualties they caused in Stohess. Though, he reflects, they had multiple backup plans there, too, and Annie blew threw every single one of them.

As evening turns to night, Levi heads down to the training room to blow off some steam, and Hange and Erwin make a final inventory list to present to Zackly, Pixis, and Nile.

Now, at least, they have a plan for when Marley arrives. Beyond that is still a mystery, and will likely remain one until they get there.

"Do you think," Erwin says, "that we have anything to offer Marley? Enough to keep ourselves alive?"

Hange shrugs. "Aside from the gas, we have weapons they are unfamiliar with, and a lot of arable land."

"I hope that will be enough." He rolls up the map, then stands. "Let's meet again over breakfast and go over our request one last time before the meeting."

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ERWIN FINDS LEVI in his room, dressed only in his under-wear, doing pushups.

“How do you still have energy?” Erwin says lightly.

“It’s been a tense few days.”

“It has.” Erwin’s jaw splits with an enormous yawn that brings tears to his eyes.

Levi holds at the top of a pushup and looks up at him. “You going to sleep right away?”

“Unfortunately, I might have to.” He sets his boots by the door and begins to undress.

“That’s fine.” Levi works through a few extra push ups, no doubt venting pent-up energy.

They climb into bed, and Levi extinguishes the lamp. Erwin curls up behind him and breathes in the scent of his skin, lightly glowing with sweat. It’s so soft and warm that he starts kissing along the ridge between his shoulder and neck.

“Hey,” Levi says. “I thought you were tired.”

“I am, but you feel good.” His hand snakes around Levi and starts to slide down his abdomen. “You know, I may be tired, but I could still get you off before we go to sleep.”

“Oh?” Levi’s voice is a low growl, almost a purr.

Erwin slips his hand beneath the waistband and wraps his fingers around him. “If you like.”

Levi twitches and grows in his grip, and a pleased sound vibrates his throat. “That feels good.”

“You’re already so hard.”

“Yeah. You know all the right places to touch me.” Levi presses back against him. “You’re good at jerking off.”

Erwin chuckles. “Thanks. I think.”

“Did you jerk yourself off a lot?” Levi continues. “When we weren’t together? Did you grab yourself like this?”

“Now and then.” His libido had really ebbed and flowed during his Survey Corps days.

“Did you look at dirty images?” Levi’s words are punctuated by harsh breaths. “Or did you just imagine things?”

“Usually, I thought about you. But then I felt guilty about it, so I constructed an imaginary man who always ended up look-

ing like you anyway.” He kisses Levi’s shoulder. “Thinking of you always made me come so hard.”

Levi gives a sharp, pleased breath. “I always thought of you. And I didn’t feel guilty about it.”

“Good. What did you imagine us doing?” Erwin feels pre-cum trail down his knuckles.

“So many things. Everything.” There’s a pause, presumably because he’s recalling all the things he used to picture; he’s rock-hard against Erwin’s palm. “Hey, Erwin?”

“Yeah?” There’s such a long pause that he prods, “Levi? Was there something you wanted me to do right now?”

The response is at once shy and strained with arousal: “Can I ride your chest?”

Erwin’s heart leaps. “Yes.” He rolls onto his back and re-lights the lamp, leaving it dim.

Levi straddles his ribcage and presses his cock into the cleft between Erwin’s chest muscles. “Holy shit.” His voice is a low growl, his eyes glinting. He presses his hand down on his cock to compress himself against Erwin’s skin as he thrusts. The hardness and heat and sight of him is starting to make Erwin regret saying he was too tired.

Levi looks down his nose at him, face hard with concentration, and Erwin’s breath catches. This is an act of worship, an act of love, but something about that hard expression is appealing to fantasies of his own. *Use me ...*

Levi slows down, studying him. “Hmm.”

“Yes?”

“You’re getting turned on.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Your cheeks are turning red, and your mouth is hanging open like I’m a glass of cheap wine that you’re about to drain in one swallow.”

Erwin looks him solemnly in the eye. “I *will* drain you in one swallow, if you let me.”

“Oh?” Levi’s lids are heavy, and, encouraged, Erwin adds,

“Use me, Levi.”

“You sure?”

“Use my mouth. Use it like you don’t give a shit about me.” He wonders if it’s too far, but he sees a twinkle in Levi’s eye. For a moment, they hold each other’s gaze, silently checking in.

Levi bends to give him a deep kiss. “Push me away if I’m too rough.” He slides forward, rakes his hand into Erwin’s hair, and yanks.

Then Erwin feels him fill his mouth, deep and hard. The grey eyes glint like steel, and he gives a muffled moan; the hand in his hair tightens. Levi’s mouth is twitching into a little sneer with each thrust, the way it does when he’s really turned on. *Use me*, Erwin thinks. *Use me, use me*.

One thrust is a little too deep, triggering his gag reflex, and tears spring to his eyes. He gently pushes on Levi’s hip. Reading his meaning, Levi eases up, settling back into rhythm.

“Better?”

Erwin softly strokes his hip in confirmation. The motion seems to ripple through Levi, and his head tosses back.

“Do that again.”

Erwin complies, and it earns him a low moan.

“Shit, you’re going to make me come already. Fuck!” Levi thrusts in that hard, persistent rhythm that shows he’s about to orgasm.

Erwin grabs his ass, pulling him deeper, ignoring his gag reflex this time. Levi cries out between clenched teeth, and gives a few final, hard thrusts. Erwin swallows every drop of him, and keeps sucking hard until Levi twitches and the hands in his hair fall away.

Levi pulls out and looks down at him, face glowing red, gasping for breath. His eyes are filled with so much adoration that it’s hard to believe how icy that stare was a moment ago. He traces the ridge of Erwin’s nose with a feather-light touch. Erwin catches his hand and presses a soft kiss into the palm.

Levi rolls off him and climbs under the covers. “You drive me crazy,” he murmurs. “You feel so good. Everything you do.”

Erwin is so dizzy with hormones that he can’t hide a proud grin. “I’d say you were doing most of the work.”

“Your mouth … ” Levi raises a hand as if to emphasize a point, but then it falls limply by his side, and he says only, “Fuck.” He rolls his head to look at him. “What about you? Still too tired?”

Erwin adjusts his erection, his underwear taut. It’s tempting to ask for a little attention, but a yawn splits his mouth and they both chuckle softly at the timely response.

“Tomorrow, then,” Levi promises. He rolls onto his side and kisses his shoulder. “Anything you want. Anything. I am yours.”

“You just gave me what I wanted.”

A soft snort. “So something else, then. You never have an idea without a half-dozen backups.”

“Well, all I want right now is to feel your hand on my chest and your body pressed alongside mine.”

Levi yawns now, too, and snuggles tightly against him. His hand presses flat to Erwin’s chest, and Erwin covers it with his own and smiles.

“Goodnight, Levi.”

“Goodnight.”

A moment later, they are both asleep.

# ❖ Twenty-Three ❖

## HAZY INTENTIONS

AS ERWIN AND HANGE present their strategies for the arrival of Marley, Levi scans the room. The meeting hall is empty aside from Nile, Pixis, and Zackly, seated at the front; they are not providing any suggestions, or even critiquing the plan being laid out before them. Levi's lip curls. *They're just as lost as we are. They're happy to let us have all the responsibility.*

At least they have Erwin. Levi can't imagine following a diplomatic plan from someone like Nile.

"What we need from all of you," Erwin continues, "is an assessment of all the potential resources we could bring to the table in a trade agreement. If you have any contacts who could help out, that would speed up negotiations."

Nile says, "Assuming they don't want to outright murder us all."

"Yes."

Pixis shifts in his seat. He looks half-asleep, or maybe drunk. "I know some people who work in resource management. They may have some ideas."

"Good," Erwin says. "Vague ideas are all we need for now, and we can get into the details later. Our goal for this first contact is simply to buy time. Essentially, we want to demonstrate enough potential for usefulness that they will show us some mercy."

Silence settles over the group, so heavy that Levi shifts

from foot to foot, trying to shake off its weight. He wishes they were near a wall so he could blend into it.

They're interrupted by a Garrison messenger from Stohess, who salutes.

"Commanders," he says, "We have checked the exposed wall titan as requested. It is still there, but it has hardened into the same stone material as the walls themselves."

"Thank you, Morris," Hange says. "It's no longer moving at all?"

"No, sir."

"Did you try exposing it to sunlight?"

"Yes, sir. Nothing changed. It's fully petrified."

After the messenger has been dismissed, Erwin turns to the higher ups. "If the titan had still been alive and moving, we might have been able to threaten the Marleyans with the Rumbling. Doing so now would require an easily disprovable bluff. This, at least, confirms the diplomatic path is our best option." He lays out a map and traces his finger from Shiganshina to Trost as he continues to explain their strategies.

The only time any real objections arise is when Hange says that Erwin and Levi will escort the envoy from Trost to Mitras.

"Levi?" Nile says. "You're sending *Levi* on a diplomatic mission? Isn't that poor judgement?"

"Hey Nile," Levi calls, "why should we trust *your* judgement, when you walk around with that scraggly little beard and think it looks good?"

"My 'scraggly little beard' won't suddenly flip out and ram a knife into my throat."

"Of course not. That thing has never seen a blade in its life."

"Levi," Erwin says quietly, and Levi catches the words implied in his tone: *you aren't helping*.

Zackly clears his throat. "This is a good demonstration as to why it might be a poor idea."

*Says the man who tortured nobles for fun.* Levi opens his mouth; Erwin glances at him, and he swallows back his words.

“I understand your hesitation,” Erwin says to the others. “Levi is not afraid to voice his mind. However, remember that he would have destroyed the Beast Titan if not for the intervention of the Cart Titan. The Marleyan military is surely aware of this. He will be an intimidating presence.”

“Besides,” Levi says, “if you think I’m leaving Erwin alone with them without any protection—”

Zackly raises a hand to stop him. “Points taken. Very well. But Levi, we expect you to control that mouth of yours when Erwin is in the finer points of negotiation.” He turns to the others. “I think we have all the information we need. This mission is approved.”

After the meeting, Erwin turns to Levi. His expression is a combination of resolution and happiness. Levi studies him, trying to guess what’s going on in his mind.

“That went well,” Levi says.

“It did.” Erwin turns to Hange and grips their shoulder. “Thank you for your help with all of this. Levi and I need to prepare to leave. Can you handle sending messengers ahead of us to Trost to relay our plan?”

Hange nods. “Will I see you before you head out?”

“I don’t expect so.”

“Then this is goodbye, for now.” Hange grabs them both in a tight hug.

“Knock it off,” Levi mutters, but he leans into it.

“Both of you be careful. We don’t know what we’re up against.”

Erwin pulls away and smiles gently at them. “You too, Hange. We’ll send word as soon as we have contact.”

Zackly passes by them, and Erwin’s gaze follows him. “Sir,” he calls. “May we have a word with you?”

He stops and turns. “About the mission?”

“About something of a personal nature.”

Hange slips away, and Levi watches them go, longing to get out of this uncomfortable conversation, too.

With a kind smile, Zackly says, “You were just on your way out, weren’t you?”

“Yes, but this won’t take long.”

“Very well.” He cocks his head at the doors and they step back into the meeting room. Levi looks out the window. It’s sunny outside, but cold and stuffy inside. He wants to feel that sunlight against his skin. At least it’s warm in this patch of sunlight coming through the glass.

Zackly closes the curtains and sits down. “What can I do for you, Erwin? Levi?”

Standing upright, Erwin draws in a deep breath, and lets it out. *He’s nervous.* Levi steps closer in support.

“Sir, I wanted to speak to you about starting a relationship that could be considered a conflict of interest.”

The old man’s eyes slide over them both. “I see.”

“There is a lot up in the air that we will need to solve after we settle this situation with Marley. The new military structure may mean there is no longer a perceived power differential—”

“Power differential,” Levi scoffs.

“A perceived one, not an actual one.”

“Erwin.” Zackly leans forward on the table. “You are both legends to the general public, not just military officers. I think the last thing that would cross people’s minds is your military ranks.” He pauses. “I’m assuming you are talking about Levi, of course.”

“Well, yes.” Are his cheeks turning pink? Levi quietly reaches out and laces his fingers through Erwin’s for support. Erwin turns to him with a soft expression.

“We will need to be careful how we message it, of course, so please be discreet until I give you the go-ahead. But I think the public will see this as endearing news. You have nothing to worry about. Although the messaging will depend on one more thing.” He pauses. “Is it serious?”

“Sir?”

“Are you two just having a bit of fun, or is this more serious?”

Erwin studies Levi, face soft. Levi’s heart pounds in his throat.

“It’s serious,” Erwin says quietly.

Levi’s hand tightens around his.

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AFTER PACKING A quick lunch and supplies, the two of them board a carriage. Unlike the one that brought them here, this one has bare windows.

“Hmm,” Levi says as he takes a seat.

“What is it?” Erwin asks, sitting across from him.

“No curtains.”

Erwin’s eyes sparkle at him. “You were hoping for more privacy?”

“Well, you didn’t get off last night. We want you to keep a clear head for the mission, right? So we need to make sure you’re not pent up.”

Erwin turns to look out the window. “It seems the carriage is high enough that anyone passing by would only see my head.”

He’s correct; a carriage passes by them and Levi can only see the passengers’ faces and hats. “Interesting.”

“Indeed.”

“Do you think you can keep your face emotionless?” The question sounds stupid as soon as it leaves Levi’s lips. When he chooses to be, Erwin Smith is made of stone.

“Of course I can. What do you have in mind?”

“I want to suck you off.”

Erwin’s throat bobs and his words are a bit breathless: “I’d like that.”

“So long as the carriage doesn’t go over any big potholes.”

“The road was pretty smooth on the way here.”

“It was.”

Their gazes lock. Levi slides off the seat and crouches between Erwin’s legs. Erwin is still holding his gaze, face neutral, desire only showing in the slight heaviness to his eyelids.

“Think anyone can see me here?” Levi places a hand on Erwin’s boot and slides up his shin, his knee, his thigh, coming to a rest on the bulge between his legs. When he sees the broad lips part, he makes a *tsk* of disapproval. “Can’t let this show on your face, remember?” He knows Erwin doesn’t need reminding. He’s also becoming aware, more and more, that Erwin gets turned on by risk. Levi is going to remind him as often as he can that the public might see them.

Levi unbuckles the harness over Erwin’s waist and parts the skirt, then slowly undoes the fly of his pants. “You probably shouldn’t say anything, either,” he continues. “Or cry out. Who knows what the driver can hear.”

“How are you going to know if I’m enjoying myself if I can’t show my emotions or say a word?”

Levi pulls Erwin out of his pants and grips it at the base; his cock stands tall. “I think I’ll have some idea.” He bends forward and drags his tongue along its length, drawing a slow circle at the top. He rolls his eyes upwards and sees Erwin staring down at him.

“Shouldn’t you be looking somewhere else? People are going to wonder why you’re staring between your legs.”

“People will just think I’m reading a book,” Erwin says, voice already a bit strangled.

“Must be a very interesting book.” Levi draws another line with his tongue, then at the top, lowers his mouth over the tip, careful not to make any contact. He breathes out hot air, letting it wash over him.

Erwin’s breath hitches. “Tease.”

“Seems like you like it.” Levi lowers his mouth again, still not touching him, and lets him briefly hit the back of his throat. He pulls away as Erwin thrusts up toward him.

“Fuck,” Erwin whispers. His face is already starting to flush, his eyebrows pinching.

“Hey, watch your face,” Levi murmurs, and he starts at the base again for another slow lick. Erwin throbs in his grip.

“Are you trying to torture me?” Erwin says, in good humour, but with an edge of desperation.

“I wasn’t, but it’s kind of fun.”

Erwin presses a finger beneath Levi’s chin and lifts it, making eye contact. “If you want me to stay expressionless and silent, you’re going to have to be more predictable than this.”

Levi smirks up at him. “Are you saying Erwin Smith, the man who manipulated countless nobles to his advantage, who overthrew the government on a bluff, isn’t capable of keeping his famous poker face when I tease him?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.” Erwin throbs in his hand again. “Do you see what you do to me, Levi? Look how hard I am. I’m going to lose all self-control.”

Levi’s pants are getting tight; he adjusts himself. “Okay, fine. I can be predictable. But it will be boring.”

“Levi,” Erwin says, no jest left in his tone, “you are never boring.”

Their eyes lock for a moment longer, then Levi lowers his mouth again. He wraps his tongue and lips around him, and below his mouth, grips him with his hand. He sucks and strokes in a steady rhythm.

Erwin sags back against the seat, his shoulders relaxing. His face is carefully controlled now, but his hands are curled so tightly into the bench that his knuckles are white. Levi tastes precum, and he can tell by how hard he is that he’s already close.

He hums and moves faster, his hands and mouth stroking hard, revelling in the sensation of his thickness sliding against his tongue and into his throat. Erwin lets out a shuddering, controlled breath, his hips slowly tilting to push deeper, and Levi knows what that means before the whisper even leaves Erwin’s lips:

“I’m going to come.”

Levi strokes hard and watches closely, curious to see how well Erwin hides his orgasm. He isn't exactly quiet in bed.

He does an admirable job this time. His face is hard, jaw and face clenched, and the only sound that escapes is a shaky breath through his nose. Something about that restraint washes over Levi, pulls him under, and for a moment, he wonders if he's going to come, too.

Then it's over.

Levi carefully tucks Erwin back into his pants and tries to redo the buttons, but he's still too hard. Deciding to give it a minute, he takes the bench beside him instead.

"That should take the edge off for you until tonight."

Erwin takes a shuddering breath. "It just made me want you more." He turns to look at him, eyes still unfocussed.

"I wanted to take the edge *off*, not sharpen it." Levi feels a throb between his legs.

"I could take you on the floor."

"There isn't enough space."

"I'd have to contort a bit, but we could make it work." Erwin turns and takes one of the blankets off the luggage shelf, and throws it on the floor of the carriage, roughly spreading it out.

"You won't fit down there," Levi says, hoping his pessimism is wrong.

"I will if I do this." He lays on his back, head and shoulders propped up against the foot of one bench, calves resting on the other. Levi could ride him without showing himself out the window, if he was sure to angle his body as horizontally as possible. *It won't be comfortable for Erwin*, he thinks, but he's already aching for him.

Erwin reaches between his legs and lightly grips himself, making eye contact. He's getting hard again.

"Fuck it." Levi pulls off one boot and one leg of his pants and underwear, tossing them to the side. He straddles Erwin on

the floor, hunching to stay low. “Don’t you need more time to recover?”

“No. I’m ready. I want you.” Erwin’s hands grip his ass. “Check my left pocket.”

Levi does so and finds the little vial of lubricant. He stares at it. “You know, all those years, I had no idea how fucking horny you are.”

“It’s a recent development.” Erwin holds out his hand and Levi pours some lubricant into it; Erwin slathers it on. Then he pulls out a handkerchief and hands it to Levi. “If you need a place to come.”

“You’ve planned ahead.”

“From the moment we first rode in a carriage together.”

Levi makes a noise of approval and lowers himself onto Erwin, and they both gasp.

“Shit,” Erwin whispers, grabbing his hips.

Levi tries to reply, but he’s worried it will be too loud, so he begins to move instead, careful to direct his momentum toward the bench instead of straight up. Even with the strange angle, it feels so good.

“Can I touch you?” Erwin offers his slicked hand, and when Levi nods, he wraps it around him. Now Levi is driving deeper onto Erwin’s cock when he pushes back, and into his tight hand when he pushes forward. He gasps for air, pushing back and forward, the pleasure building relentlessly.

“Shit,” Levi whispers, his eyes squeezing shut.

“Faster,” Erwin says in a quiet, conversational tone. “Harder. I want to feel you come around me.”

*Fuck.* Levi moves faster, and hears a slapping sound; he changes his angle and intensity to keep quiet. A whimper escapes before he can stop it.

“Shh,” Erwin says lightly, counterthrusting.

“Erwin,” he gasps. “I can’t be quiet. I’m going to yell, I’m going to—” He rests his forehead against the edge of the seat, mouth hanging open. Into his hand, onto his cock. *Fuck.*

A hand gently touches his mouth. At first, he expects Erwin to muffle him with his palm, but instead, he feels two fingers slide onto his tongue.

“Suck on them,” Erwin breathes.

And now Levi has him in his ass, in his mouth, and he’s fucking into his hand, and it’s too much all at once. Everything is Erwin, every thrust, every breath. He takes the fingers deep in his throat, feels Erwin curl them so he’s pressing down hard. *It’s too much, it’s too much—*

He cries out, the sound stifled by Erwin’s fingers, and barely has the presence of mind to bury himself into the handkerchief. He comes so hard that stars spark in front of his closed eyes. The last pulse fades and his limbs tingle.

Erwin slowly removes his hands and slides them along Levi’s sides, as if soothing him.

“Fuck,” Levi whispers, and he disconnects and moves to the side. He still sees stars when his eyelids part, and for a second, his stomach drops: *the paths?* Then he remembers himself and blinks to clear them.

He reaches out to grip Erwin, intending to get him off, too, but he’s clumsy.

“Here,” Erwin says softly, and he closes his hand over Levi’s, guiding his strokes. They move together, Erwin guiding their pace, and then the thick brows pinch. He throws his head back, jaw split with a silent scream, as he, too, comes into the handkerchief.

They stay like that for several minutes, both dazed and catching their breath. Then Erwin winces and sits up, pulling up his pants.

“You’re going to feel that in your neck,” Levi observes, shoving his bare leg back into his clothing.

“It was worth it.” Erwin smooths his uniform back into place, then slips casually onto the seat, his face controlled again. Levi finishes adjusting himself and joins him. They study each other for a minute.

“Every time we do this,” Erwin says quietly, “I end up wanting you more. How is that possible?”

“Well, it has to settle down eventually. People talk about the honeymoon phase, right?”

“I’m not in any hurry.” Erwin rests his hand on the bench between them, and Levi takes it. “I’m rather enjoying this.”

Levi’s heart pounds and he squeezes his hand. “Yeah. Me, too.”

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AT THE SURVEY CORPS base in Trost, they find Mikasa waiting for them in Erwin’s office.

“Sirs,” she says, standing.

“You’re back,” Erwin says. “I hope you weren’t waiting here long.”

She shakes her head. “Saw the carriage drive up.”

“Are all the survivors already in Trost?”

“Yes. The Garrison did a good job of getting carts out to us.”

“Good. Are they finding any stragglers outside Shiganshina?” Erwin takes a seat at his desk, and motions for Mikasa to sit opposite. Levi leans against the window behind Erwin, arms folded over his chest.

Mikasa says, “A few, here and there, but most of the titans seem to have been concentrated in Shiganshina.”

*So Zeke’s scream must have drawn them in after all.* Levi wonders about the scream’s range. Maybe they’ll get lucky and they will find every survivor before they all catch hypothermia.

Aloud, he says, “Did you get my message about deploying scouts along the road?”

She nods. “We had enough Garrison soldiers to stagger them at intervals along the road within sight of the previous signal flare, so we can relay the news quickly. If Marley arrives at Shiganshina, we will know within minutes.”

Maybe the Garrison isn't super useful in terms of fighting skill, but their numbers are handy. "Good," Levi says.

Mikasa turns to Erwin. "Sir—"

"Erwin," he corrects.

"Erwin," she says, a bit awkwardly, "what is the plan from here? Where should I go next?"

While Erwin fills her in on all the details of their plan, Levi's mind drifts. He glances over his shoulder, out the window. Some of the camps are visible from here, seas of tarps creating makeshift shelters for the ex-titans.

When there's a lull in the conversation, he asks, "No sign of infiltrators among the people we've recovered?"

"No, Captain. No one has gone missing, no one asking strange questions, nothing like that. If Marleyans are undercover, they are *deep* undercover. It seems more likely they aren't here yet."

Knowing the crossing time by ship, he has to agree. The likeliest arrival is tomorrow or later.

"Mikasa," Erwin says, "I would like you to leave for Mitas when we're finished here. We need your strength to protect Historia and Hange, in case Marley catches us off guard and tries to attack from the skies. It seems unlikely, but we can't rule it out." He eyes her, face grim. "If they bomb from the air, take Historia and Hange to the Underground. We need your experience and muscle, Hange's expertise, and Historia's leadership qualities protected at all costs. Beyond them, use your judgement as to who will need protecting."

She nods. "Understood."

After a few more precisions, Erwin dismisses her, and then turns to Levi. "Shall we retrieve something to eat from the mess hall, and eat here?"

"Yes," Levi says, throat aching. During the ten long years of his absence, he recalled these suppers fondly, where they had the office to themselves and talked strategy, or chatted, or simply ate in silence together.

Once they have settled in with their food, he's surprised by how much it feels as if no time has passed. "This is strange."

"You mean, how it still feels like a routine?" Erwin tilts his head with intrigue. "Even for you, after so many years?"

"Weird, right? You'd think all that time without you would have overwritten the patterns I only followed for a few years. And yet ..." He looks down at his plate of food. The fish is grey and there are only two kinds of root vegetables. "Though I miss Hange's cooking." He frowns. "They won't know how to cook yet, anyway."

"Did they pick it up quickly?"

"Fuck, no. Some of our first meals were almost inedible." The Survey Corps soldiers all took turns helping in the kitchen, so Hange and Levi could handle basic flatbreads and stews, but seasoning was unheard of in the military, and the ingredients they had experience with were limited. They both had several cooking disasters in the early days.

Erwin is studying him, face soft. "Levi, where would you like to sleep tonight?"

"Can we sleep in the same room?"

"I think so. Everyone here knows we're in a relationship."

"In a relationship," Levi mutters. "So formal. Say something else, like partners."

"Partners," Erwin agrees. "Very well: everyone here knows we're partners. My bedroom is larger than yours, and the bed is quite comfortable."

"Okay. Then let's sleep there."

They finish up their meal and deposit the plates in the kitchen. They're just heading back up to their office when Jean runs into them, out of breath.

"Commander," he gasps, saluting. "Captain. We received flare signals. The Marleyans have landed."

"Already?" Levi glances out the window. The evening light is just beginning to redden and dim. "Do you think they're going to travel through the night?"

“We may have to wait for a scout to report in to know for sure.” Erwin is staring at nothing, as if deep in thought. He’s no doubt trying to imagine what he would do, in their situation. “They arrived so quickly that they must have burned extra fuel to get here. We must assume they intend to arrive here as quickly as possible.”

“So much for sleeping tonight,” Levi mutters.

Erwin draws in a long breath, then lets it out. “Jean. Levi and I are heading for the gates. Mikasa has gone to Mitras. Please take charge of the remaining soldiers here. Your key objective is to communicate with the Garrison and help them maintain peace among the camps.”

“Sir.”

Levi adds, “Thank you for tracking us down so quickly.”

Jean nods and salutes them both.

Levi watches him leave and gives a low sigh. “I’ll go gear up.”

Erwin nods. “I’ll meet you by the front entrance.”

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AT THE GATE, THEY sit side-by-side against the wall. Levi draws his knees up to his chest and sleeps lightly, head leaning back against the stone, covered in a military blanket. In the gaps between his dozes, he notices Erwin has curled up on his side, wrapped tightly in his blanket. The grass can’t be comfortable, but at least he’s getting some sleep.

“Commander! Captain!” comes a cry. “The Marleyans are approaching.”

Levi jumps to his feet, instantly alert. Erwin stirs a little, then stands and stretches. He stares grimly at the gate. “Here we go. Remember everything we discussed.”

Levi is desperate for some sort of contact as reassurance, but all he can get away with is a light squeeze of his arm.

The gate opens. Two Marleyans stride through the gates, clad in matching beige military jackets. Levi bristles.

Zeke Yeager and Reiner Braun.

Reiner leans close to Zeke and whispers something, and Zeke strides up to Erwin. Erwin draws himself to his full height, his face all angles, sharp enough to draw blood.

Levi steps in closer, and Zeke's eyes flick nervously to him, then back to Erwin. *He's afraid of me. Good.*

"Reiner tells me you are Commander Erwin Smith," Zeke says.

Erwin eyes him coolly. "And you must be Zeke Yeager, the Beast Titan. Or is that formerly the Beast Titan, now?" He shifts his gaze. "Welcome back, Reiner."

Reiner's gaze drops to the side and he doesn't reply.

With a polite, joyless smile, Erwin says, "Before we begin any conversation, I must know what your intentions are."

Zeke looks surprised. "Right to business, eh? We want to find out how you did it. To discuss what happens next. And most of all, to thank you."

Even Erwin looks thrown off; his expression blunts for just a fraction of a second. "To thank us," he repeats, regaining his composure.

"Surely, Commander, you do not think we have enjoyed the oppression that comes with being an Eldian?" Zeke leans a little closer. "And how did *you* do it, Commander? The last time Reiner saw you, you were dead."

A pause, then Erwin says, "Perhaps we should return to the military base and discuss this over some tea. I can offer you some food as well."

"I see," Zeke says. "Before we walk into your base, I must lob your question back to you: what are *your* intentions?"

"To find out why you're here," Erwin says. "To discuss what happens next. And, I suppose—" his gaze shifts to Reiner. "To thank you."

Reiner looks confused.

Levi's blood boils, and he can't hold himself back. "We are not thanking these assholes for anything. The way they slaughtered so many of us like livestock."

"Ah yes," Zeke says with a sigh. "That was regrettable."

"Regrettable!" Levi's hand reaches for his hilt; red fogs his vision.

"Levi," Erwin says softly.

Taking a deep breath, Levi stands down, but he stares at Zeke with every drop of his hatred, letting him imagine how badly Levi would hurt him if he could.

Erwin turns back to the Marleyans. "The two of you are responsible for the deaths of countless Paridisians, in a war we didn't realize we were engaged in. Please understand that the mistrust runs deeply amongst us. Any small debt of gratitude I owe to Reiner is grossly outweighed by the blood you two spilled."

"Well then," Zeke says, "we had better start talking so we can understand one another better. Lead the way."

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JEAN'S EYES NARROW when he sees Reiner, but at a calm glance from Erwin, he draws his face into neutral and accompanies them to Erwin's office.

"Jean," Erwin says kindly, "please have the soldiers bring some food and tea, and a couple couches. Then you may retire until we send for you."

"You won't have any guards posted?" Zeke asks, as if amused. "You're showing a great deal of trust already."

Erwin smiles humourlessly. "I believe you've already met Captain Levi. No guards are needed."

"Ah," Zeke says, turning to Levi, "but the Ackerman strength is tied to titan strength, is it not? You are no longer the monster you once were."

"You sure about that? Step closer and find out." Levi revels

in the discomfort that flashes through Zeke's eyes. He connects a blade from his quiver and begins to polish it.

Sasha and Jean bring up some couches, and the two of them eye Reiner, who refuses to look at them. Connie brings them food and beverages.

“Please have a seat,” Erwin says, pointing to one of the couches. He sits in the other, facing their two guests.

Levi sits next to him. The other three eat in silence, the air thick with tension. Though he isn't very hungry, Levi sets the blade on his lap, still drawn, and helps himself to a bun and a cup of tea.

“We can offer you quarters for sleeping tonight,” Erwin says. “Tomorrow, we will transport you to Mitras, where you can speak with our military higher-ups and our queen.”

Zeke leans forward over his knees. “How did you do it? At least give me a hint.” He looks genuinely curious. Levi doesn't like it; it's much easier for him to think of Zeke as a complete monster with no redeeming qualities.

Erwin gives him one word: “Ymir.”

Zeke's brow furrows. “You spoke with The Founder?”

“Not me; it was your half-brother, Eren Yeager, and Armin Arlert, our Colossal Titan.”

At the mention of the Colossal Titan, Reiner sits ramrod straight, but he says nothing.

Erwin continues, “The curse is completely broken. Even the mindless titans that have been roaming the island for decades have returned to their human forms.” He turns to Reiner. “And we have Annie Leonhart. Her crystal dissolved when the curse was lifted.”

“Crystal,” Reiner murmurs, as if to himself, and for some reason, he looks relieved.

“We would be happy to return her to you,” Erwin continues. “She is of no value to us.”

For a moment, Zeke looks a bit like a beast studying his prey. “The walls are still standing.”

“They are.”

“Surely they would have dissolved, like Annie’s crystal.”

“One would think,” Erwin agrees. “I suspect Eren and Armin convinced Ymir to leave them standing as physical protection.”

For a moment, Zeke looks uneasy. “The wall titans didn’t turn human in there, did they? They’re not just milling around in a hollow base?”

“No. The titans are still there, but they have turned to stone.”

“I see.”

The two men stare at each other. Levi begins polishing his blade again. Sometimes, Erwin’s political banter is intriguing, but neither of them is really saying anything useful.

Zeke’s face is earnest. “And you, Commander? How did you come back from death?”

“Favour of the gods. I’ve answered several questions, and now it’s your turn. Why are you here?”

“I told you—”

“No. Why are you here, without anyone else from Marley? Just two Eldians? I would have expected Commander Magath, at least, to join you.” At the name, both Zeke and Reiner look surprised. Levi feels a wave of smugness. *You can’t outsmart Erwin.*

“I see two possibilities,” Erwin continues. “One, you have a larger contingent on the way, and you are just a scouting party.” He pauses. “But it would make more sense to send scouts we wouldn’t recognize, under the guise of being ex-titans. So I think you’re here because Marley doesn’t know about the titan curse ending. You need answers before you have to face them.”

Levi watches Erwin out of the corner of his eye. *Is he guessing? Is this another gamble?*

A bead of perspiration trails down Zeke’s temple, and then he smiles. “Reiner warned me you were quick. Yes, Erwin,

you are correct. We haven't told Marley that we can't shift. Care to guess why, since you're so good at reading us?"

"I suspect you'll just agree with anything I say and adopt it as your cover story."

Zeke shrugs his shoulders and leans back into the couch. "Truthfully, I was curious to see what your mind would come up with. Well, there's only one logical deduction, anyway, so I might as well tell you. If Marley only kept us alive because they could make use of our shifter powers, what use will they have for us now?"

"Our families," Reiner says, his voice hoarse. "I'll pay for my crimes, but my family deserves to live. They did nothing wrong except be born Eldian."

There is a long, awkward silence. Levi is annoyed to feel a spark of pity for the two mass-murderers who sit in front of him.

"What I don't understand," Erwin says finally, "is how you are hiding it from them, when you are at war."

"Magath withdrew all the shifters. He is the only one outside of us who knows. He's covering for us with some sort of Eldian plague or other such nonsense. It won't fool the Marleyans for long."

"So that's why you sped over here." Erwin eyes him. "You need information or protection. And suddenly our island of devils is starting to look like a good option."

Zeke draws in a long breath and lets it out slowly, but doesn't reply.

The two men lock gazes for a moment longer, then Erwin stands and smiles. "Well, we'll have a few hours in the carriage tomorrow to discuss this further."

"Tomorrow?"

"We all need some rest to be at our best. We'll escort you to your quarters. Guards will be posted throughout the night, of course, so don't try to leave."

"So we're prisoners," Reiner says.

Erwin glances at Levi and says, “It’s for your protection as much as ours.”

Levi loudly sheaths his blade. “I won’t touch them,” he says, but he glares at Zeke until the man turns away.

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ONCE THE MARLEYANS are in their quarters and guards are posted, Levi joins Erwin in his room. He crawls under the covers and nuzzles up against his broad back. It’s strange to be here, in this room where he has been many times, always as a guest, always as an interloper. So many times, he has looked at this bed and longed to be in it. There were nights when he slept in this room, yes, but always in a chair in the corner.

“How are you, Levi?” Erwin’s voice rumbles through his back.

“I don’t trust him.”

“No, neither do I.”

“Sure seemed like you were telling him a lot.”

Erwin grabs Levi’s hand and places it over the centre of his chest. Levi can feel his heartbeat. “Good. That was the impression I was hoping to give. If they think we’re forthcoming with information, they’re more likely to trust us. But you’ll notice I gave them incomplete truths and little hints.”

Levi yawns. “Tell them whatever you think is best. I trust you.”

“And I trust you, Levi. Use your intuition tomorrow when we’re in the carriage with them. You are good at reading people, and also good at putting them on edge.” A pause. “If you feel it’s necessary to get aggressive, I may act otherwise, to cement their trust. But do what your instincts tell you. You’ll have my silent approval.”

“Mm.” It’s a routine they have done many times before. Levi strokes the hair on Erwin’s chest. “My instincts are telling me to kill Zeke Yeager.”

“I know they are.”

“He killed you, you know. And countless—”

“I know, Levi. If we want to avoid a war that we can’t win, we may need to cooperate with them.” Now it’s Erwin’s turn to yawn. He nestles back against Levi. “I didn’t expect the Marleyan Eldians to be in such a precarious position. This may make it easier to gain some allies in the outside world.”

Levi kisses the nape of Erwin’s neck; the fuzz of his undercut is soft against his nose. A moment later, he feels him twitch, his breathing deep.

“Get some rest,” he whispers, and he, too, lets himself fall asleep.

# ❧ Twenty-Four ☙

## TENUOUS ALLIES

ERWIN'S EYELIDS PART. The room is warm with the glow of the sunrise. He has his arms around Levi; he nestles into the dark hair and breathes in. Weren't they the other way around when they fell asleep? They must have been cuddling in their sleep. He likes the idea of them unconsciously reaching for each other.

Levi stirs and gives a small moan. He has always been a light sleeper, so it's surprising that he sleeps so deeply now. Maybe he just needed a bed and Erwin's arms to feel safe enough to succumb. Erwin likes the idea of that, too.

"Good morning." He kisses the back of the long neck, then along to his shoulder, but then quickly pulls away.

Levi glances back at him over his shoulder. "Why are you stopping?"

"Believe me, I don't want to, but we have work to do."

With a dramatic sigh, Levi says, "Right. The Marleyans."

"The Marleyans. Or should we be calling them the Eldians?"

"How about 'those fucking murderers.'"

"Maybe only in private." Erwin pauses and kisses his shoulder again and breathes deeply. He gives in to the heady scent for an indulgent moment and grinds against him. "You smell so good."

"Are you always this hard when you wake up?"

“Not like this, no. But it isn’t every day that I wake up with Levi Ackerman in my bed.”

“It is now.”

A smile spreads across Erwin’s lips, but he pulls himself away. “We need to go check on our guests.”

“Guests,” Levi mutters.

Erwin says in his best impression of Levi’s smooth voice, “Those fucking murderers.”

“Was that supposed to be me?”

“I’ll keep working on it.” Erwin stands and throws open the closet to find a clean shirt and pants.

“You have other things to work on.” Levi sits up and adjusts himself before he stands. “Any new ideas come to you overnight?”

“No. Not enough information yet.” Erwin buttons his shirt, marvelling at how easy it is with two working hands. It’s going to take a while to readapt to having full use over his arms again.

They take their breakfast in Erwin’s office, mostly in silence, just like the old days before a new expedition. Erwin is deep in thought about how to approach their guests. He can’t get a read on Zeke; he seems to be trying too hard to exude a flighty air. Erwin needs to dig beneath the surface, and he has exactly one carriage ride to do so.

Soon, it’s time to board the carriage. Zeke and Reiner are still dressed in their Marleyan military uniforms. They’re each carrying a small backpack filled with supplies.

“Good morning, Erwin, Levi,” Zeke says brightly. Reiner still won’t look them in the eye.

Erwin nods a greeting. “Good morning. I trust you are well rested?”

“Well rested and ready to talk.” Zeke is inhaling smoke from a small tube; he extinguishes it by crushing it into the cobblestones with his foot. As he approaches, the scent of pungent smoke brings tears to Erwin’s eyes.

“It’s called a cigarette,” Levi says quietly, perhaps noting his confusion. “Marleyans have access to a plant called tobacco. It’s addictive and smells like shit.”

Zeke must still have beast-like hearing, because he says, “But it calms you down and looks great.”

“Do you have horses?” Erwin asks.

“Yes, but we left them at an abandoned farm outside the wall. They’ll be content until we return.” Zeke cocks his head at the carriage. “After you, Levi. I don’t want to turn my back to you.”

“You’re smarter than I thought.” Levi boards the carriage, his gear rattling. Erwin loads his gear into the luggage compartment, not bothering to wear it. He has a knife stashed in his boot, in case things get ugly, but he sees no reason for an attack to take place in a carriage. If the Marleyans wanted to murder them, they would do so in a place where they could immediately flee, not a moving carriage.

As they depart from Trost, Zeke sits with his arms folded, staring at Erwin as if sizing him up. Erwin stares back, and in his periphery, he sees Levi doing the same. Reiner, meanwhile, stares fixedly out the window.

“So,” Zeke says. “We have a lot of information to share with each other. Or do you still believe we’re Marleyan spies?”

“If you are, you’re very convincing.” Erwin shifts his gaze to Reiner. “Though we know at least one of you is a talented actor.”

Reiner visibly flinches, but doesn’t turn from the window.

With a humourless smile, Zeke says, “Yes, it’s easy to get children to lie if you raise them to believe your operation is the most important thing in the world. Children are malleable, after all. I’m sure Paradis knows that. Otherwise you wouldn’t have your own military made up of them.”

Erwin says nothing. As he has grown older and the new recruits have seemed younger and younger, he has come to question the morality of twelve-year-olds joining the military.

On one hand, youthful agility and adaptability is key to mastering the gear. On the other hand, he still doesn't know how much of his personality is actually him, and how much is what the military drilled into him.

Levi's words float to the surface: *You've grown up in the military, which spits at you and slams you down until you become who they want.*

In the past, it was easy to dismiss the fact that children were dedicating their hearts, as the lives of everyone on Paradis were directly threatened by the titans. Is that still necessary, now that they have no titans to fight against? When they restructure the military, this is something they will need to take into account.

He says none of this aloud, and does not allow his expression to crack.

Zeke sighs. "Look. If we want to make any kind of progress here, we're going to have to lower our guards. You don't trust us—I understand that. We don't trust you, either. You know what *isn't* going to help that trust?"

"Sitting here trading glares, barbs, and vague statements."

"Exactly."

"Then let's start with a bartering system: information for information." Erwin leans back on the bench, adopting a more casual pose, though he keeps his face severe. "We have the advantage, given that Levi could kill you both and no one from Marley would ever know. So I'll give you a valuable piece of information first: any intelligence Reiner and Bertolt gathered from Paradis is outdated. In the time since they fled from us, we have overthrown the government, crowned a new ruler, and ended the titan curse. Everything you know about Paradis is obsolete."

"That is good to know." Zeke adjusts his glasses. "I don't suppose you're willing to elaborate on any of that?"

"In time. Information for information."

Zeke gives him a small smile. "Very well. Here is a piece of

information for you: the titans were an important part of the military for many years, but they were on the verge of being outclassed. The rest of the world has developed weapons capable of injuring titan shifters, and they are making new weapon innovations all the time. But you must know that, given that you were able to hurt us and take down Bertolt, even with your comparatively primitive technology.”

Erwin nods, though he makes a note of the word primitive. *He is still underestimating our capabilities.*

Zeke continues: “Because of the increasing threat against shifters, there were already whispers about the Eldians in Marley being in danger. I was working on a plan to end the titan curse. And that, Erwin, is why I said I wish to thank you. Your solution of simply snuffing out the titan powers without harming the Eldians was elegant. It doesn’t solve everything, but it’s a start. As much as we don’t trust each other, we need to work together to figure out the rest of it.”

“Yes, that is my hope as well.” Erwin absorbs this information. “What was your plan?”

“Your turn,” Zeke replies.

Erwin doesn’t protest. “You asked how I came back from the dead.” Erwin turns to Reiner. “When you injected my dead body with the serum, my soul had not yet finished its return to the paths. Eren pushed my soul back into my body and the serum you had injected made me transform into a titan. And then Levi injected me with Eren’s spinal fluid, which caught Eren’s notice, and I received a human body. It was a special favour. I am the only person who was ever healed this way.” There doesn’t seem to be any harm in revealing this information. With the paths and the titans gone, it’s not as if the Marleyans can replicate it. Let them think he has been touched by the gods.

Zeke narrows his eyes with concentration. “Eren was in the paths.”

“Yes.”

“And he ...” Now the man’s gaze passes through Erwin, fo-

cussed somewhere beyond him. “No, that doesn’t make sense. I need more information.”

“Your turn.”

“If you keep dropping tiny hints of information like this, it will take days to get the full story.”

Erwin smiles. “It’s a long carriage ride. Please: continue.”

Zeke sighs. “Very well. You don’t know much about the outside world, do you?”

It doesn’t seem wise to admit to the extent of their ignorance. “There is always more to learn.”

“Then I can tell you this: there are many countries around the world, with all kinds of landscapes and all kinds of people. Paradis is a drop of water in a bucket. The only reason you have been left to your own devices for so long is everyone’s fear of the Wall Titans walking.”

Erwin’s heart pounds in his throat, but he keeps his face neutral. “Our wish is to open up to the outside world and form trade partnerships and alliances.”

“That may be tricky.” Zeke stretches out his legs and folds his arms behind his head. “Marley thinks of you as devils, and they have colonized many countries, sowing their beliefs around the world. One of those beliefs is that Paradis is Marley’s penal colony, nothing more. It will take a great deal of effort to get other countries to recognize you as a sovereign nation, let alone trust you.”

Erwin does not like the hint of smugness on his face, nor this jarring reveal about how the outside world perceives Paradis. The task that lies ahead of them may be more monumental than he thought. *He’s trying to unbalance me.* His jaw tightens.

“Thank you for that information,” he says. “My turn now?”

“Yes.”

“Your brother is dead.”

The smugness disappears, and Zeke stares at him, eyes wide behind the thick lenses. The other two turn to stare at him, too.

“How?” Zeke asks, and there is something akin to regret in his voice. “Did it happen when he went into the paths?”

“Yes,” Erwin says. “The ritual to enter the paths destroys any human body, aside from the Ackermans and those of royal blood. Eren and Armin gave their lives to travel into the paths to speak with Ymir. There, they convinced her to end the curse. We don’t know how. But evidently, it worked.”

He sees Zeke pondering this information, sees him trying to fill in all the gaps between the sentences. Finally, he says, “You aren’t forthcoming with details.”

“There is a lot of ground to cover. If we get bogged down in details, we’ll need several carriage rides to cover everything.”

Zeke’s gaze shifts to Levi. “Our lives are in your hands right now. You might as well tell us everything.”

“We’ll get there. It’s your turn to give some information, so I want to know: what types of resources does Marley trade with other countries? I know gas is highly desired, and likely metals as well. What else?”

After a brief show of surprise, Zeke effects a casual expression. “Food is a big one. The urban centres of Marley are heavily industrialized, and a lot of former farming communities have moved into weapons development instead, to make a better living.”

“I see. Are weapons traded with other countries?”

“Mostly just ammunition or metals. Marley keeps their weapons technology close to their chest. That’s why weapons development is so lucrative.” Zeke pauses for a moment. “You’re looking for ways Paradis could present itself as a valuable trade partner, aren’t you?”

Erwin sees no point in lying. “Yes.”

Zeke cocks his head dismissively. “They won’t trade with you if they don’t trust you.”

“We are well aware of that.”

After a moment, Zeke smiles. “This information trade is turning into a discussion. I’ve lost track of whose turn it was.”

“Let’s pause this discussion for a bit. I think we both need time to consider what we’ve learned so far.” Erwin shifts his gaze to Levi, who is still glaring intently at Zeke.

“Levi,” he says softly.

When he turns, Erwin leans to whispers in his ear, quietly enough that they won’t be overheard: “Are your instincts telling you we can trust them?”

Levi’s mouth twists, but he gives a subtle nod.

Erwin wants to linger here, by his ear, but he isn’t ready to reveal their relationship just yet. If negotiations get ugly, the two of them could easily be used as a pressure point for each other.

Though, he acknowledges, Zeke has already seen Levi break down over *someone*. He has to have pieced together that it was Erwin.

He pulls out a notebook and begins to jot down notes, and for a while, the only sound is the scratch of his graphite.

Zeke interrupts the silence. “So. Levi.”

The response is a steely grey glare.

Zeke motions between Levi and Erwin. “What’s the story here? Is this the man? The one to whom you swore that you’d kill me?”

Levi doesn’t reply, just continues to glare.

“You remember what I’m talking about, don’t you? All that yelling you were doing back on the battlefield. ‘I swore to him.’” He turns to Erwin. “Am I the one who killed you?”

“Yes.”

“Ah.” Zeke turns to address Levi again. “Your anger makes sense.”

“It’s not just about Erwin,” Levi growls. “You killed dozens of good people in that battle.”

“And you took down a dozen of my titans. War is messy. You would have been smarter to surrender.” Zeke pats his breast pocket, and pulls out a small carton. “Mind if I smoke in here?”

Erwin says, “And what would have happened to us if we

had surrendered? I can't imagine a nation that keeps Eldians prisoner and exploits them would have treated us kindly."

"No," Zeke agrees. "But I might have." He taps the carton against his palm, then opens it and pulls out a cigarette.

Levi's blade is in his face so quickly that even Erwin doesn't see it coming. It hovers centimetres away from the cigarette. "Do not light that in here."

Zeke looks unimpressed, but his hand trembles a bit as he lowers the cigarette. "Very well. Is there somewhere we can stop for a break?"

Erwin turns to the window to orient himself; they're just outside a mid-sized town called Dalry. "Yes. There's a park next to a bakery. We could buy something for lunch."

Levi's lip curls and he sheaths his blade. "You're going to buy them pastries?"

"Yes, I am. We're going to have to find some common ground if we wish for our factions to survive. That won't happen on empty stomachs." Erwin pulls the bell cord to alert the driver about the change in plans.

A few minutes later, they pull up to a small town square with a fountain and food stalls. Beyond the fountain sprawls a lightly wooded park, where children appear to be playing hide-and-seek. Erwin and Levi lead Zeke and Reiner to a stall selling sweetbreads.

"Commander," Zeke says around the unlit cigarette in his mouth; he pulls it out with two fingers so he can be understood. "I wonder if you might accompany me for a walk while I smoke? There are some things I wish to discuss with you in private."

Levi's voice is so dangerous that even Erwin's stomach jumps: *"What?"*

"One moment please." Erwin steps to the side.

Levi follows, but does not take his eyes off Zeke, and his hand is poised to grip his blade. "He's leading you into a trap."

"I have a knife on me, and you know I'm competent in hand-to-hand combat. Besides ..." Erwin's voice drops in vol-

ume. “He’s nervous around you. I may be able to gain his trust if we step away.”

Levi finally turns away from his quarry to give Erwin an unimpressed look. “Fine. But let him know I will hunt him to the ends of the earth if he so much as bruises you.”

“I think he already knows.” Erwin reaches out and smooths the hair off Levi’s forehead, caressing his jawline before withdrawing. “And now he definitely knows.”

“Oh,” Levi says. He pauses. “Was that wise? He could use me as a pressure point against you.”

“I suppose we’ll find out. Keep an eye on Reiner.”

“What the hell am I supposed to do with Reiner? Last time I was one-on-one with him, I stuck a sword into his neck.”

Erwin smiles. “Then I suggest you don’t pick up where you left off.”

“I forgot how infuriating you are when you’re being mysterious,” Levi mutters, but he stalks back to the group. “Reiner, with me.”

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ZEKE AND ERWIN stroll past the fountain and toward the park. Zeke finishes his pastry, wipes the crumbs from his beard, and then lights his cigarette. He takes a long drag and gives a contented sigh. “I don’t suppose you have coffee on this island yet?”

“Coffee?”

“Damn.” Zeke takes another drag. “So. That was interesting.”

“What was?”

“You and Levi. Touching his face. I figured there must be something more there than—” Zeke gestures with his cigarette as if searching for the word.

“Camaraderie?”

“Yes.” Zeke casts a glance at him. “It explains a lot about his loyalty.”

Erwin shakes his head. “Levi does not have to be involved with someone in order to be so fiercely loyal. I suspect you would have seen the same rage on his face had I been any other soldier.”

“I doubt that very much. Message received, Commander. I wasn’t planning on hurting you, but now I’ll go out of my way not to.”

“Glad to hear it.”

The dirt path has given way to cobblestone, and they pass the occasional bench set back amongst the trees. Zeke veers off the path and sits. Erwin stands facing him, arms loosely by his sides: not intimidating, but not relaxed, either.

Zeke says, “Levi’s hatred for me may be just the tool we need to convince Marley to trust the Eldians.”

“What do you mean?”

“Have a seat.” Zeke knocks ash off the end of his cigarette. Once Erwin is seated beside him, he says softly, “The only chance we have of the Marleyans—and other nations—treating Eldians like humans is to demonstrate that we no longer have the titan powers. We can explain it all we want, but they’re always going to believe we’re hiding our powers for some nefarious purpose.”

The trees in front of Erwin blur out of focus, oranges and yellows, as he considers the words. “You want to make it unmistakably clear that the titan powers no longer exist.”

“Yes.”

Erwin considers. A shifter was hard to kill; a normal human was not. And what shifter was of greater renown than Zeke Yeager, the Beast Titan, the Warchief of Marley? “Your execution would prove, unequivocally, that Eldians can no longer shift.”

“You *are* quick.” Though he sounds impressed, Zeke’s voice shakes a bit. “I am the most valuable shifter Marley has ever had.”

“Because your royal blood allows you to do things a Beast Titan should not, theoretically, be capable of doing, correct? And because you could eat the Founding Titan and control it.”

“Precisely. Additionally, the Marleyan army has seen me heal from severe injuries. They know how tough I am to kill. If they witness Levi executing me for war crimes, it will be undeniable that the titan powers are gone.”

Erwin is silent as he processes this information. At last, he says, “You’re talking calmly about your death.”

Zeke’s voice is very soft. “All I have ever wanted, since I was a small child, was to end this cycle of war, and free Eldians from this misery. I have always known I was destined to play a major role in saving us all. This wasn’t how I planned to do it, but if the only role left is the martyr, then so be it.”

At first, Erwin is suspicious that this could all be an elaborate trap, but then he turns and looks Zeke in the eye. He recognizes what he sees there, and he knows it can’t be faked. Zeke is sitting on his own crate in the midst of battle as his dream slips from his grasp.

“How would you propose we go about this?” Erwin asks.

“You, Levi, and your delegates would join Reiner and me in our return to Marley. We have a small ship that won’t hold many people, but it’s speedy and will bring us back to Liberio quickly. There, we will introduce you to General Magath, who can get us an audience with our government and other countries’ ambassadors. You will announce that you wish to open up Paradis to trade—you can do that however you please—and explain that the titan curse has ended. And then you will execute me for war crimes.”

“Wouldn’t that just spark a war? You’re their hero.”

Zeke pauses to fill his lungs with smoke; he exhales slowly, then flicks ash on the ground. “That’s just the thing. You will have unearthed solid proof that I was conspiring against Marley.”

“Solid proof, meaning you were, in actual fact, conspiring against Marley,” Erwin says carefully.

“Not exactly. I was planning to end the Eldian line, but that specific detail won’t matter. Marley will see that as a direct attack on them anyway.”

“And you have hard proof?”

“Yes. Documents of meetings, letters, written notes. I have some on the ship we used to travel here, and others stashed away in my bedroom for Marleyan police to ‘find’ once the accusations are made.”

Erwin takes a moment to consider this. It could work, but it’s complicated. There’s a way to tie it all together into a neat, believable bundle. “Accusing you of conspiring against Marley leaves too many loose ends, too much room for doubt. We’ll tell them you succeeded in damaging Marley by ending the titan curse.”

Zeke turns to him, eyes wide. “Pardon?”

“It’s a small adjustment to what you have proposed, but it will make your execution and our presence more believable.” Erwin eyes him. “During your research, you chanced upon a way to end the titan curse. What could hurt Marley more than instantly losing their titan army? You attempted it, and you were successful. They’ll believe that, because you are, in your words, the most powerful titan shifter they have ever seen.”

“The ritual to end the curse spat you out on Paradis. We were furious to lose our defensive abilities, and apprehended you. Now we must look to trade to survive, and we have resources that would greatly benefit Marley and its allies. We would also offer to take in any Eldians who wished to leave Marley—they are of no use to the Marleyan military anymore, after all. And as a show of good faith, we will execute the man who betrayed both Marley and Paradis.”

Zeke is quiet for a couple minutes. Erwin waits.

“You want to claim I am the one who ended the titan curse?” Zeke says finally.

“Yes. Wouldn’t they think they were capable?”

Zeke knocks more ashes on the ground. “If I had managed to get a hold of the Founding Titan, I would have been. Reclaiming it was the entire point of our missions to Paradis.”

“Then we say you succeeded. You hid it from them, and spoke with the founder Ymir. It all ties together neatly. They’ll be happy to execute you for treason, and once that happens, they’ll confirm that the titan curse has ended, because we will kill you without touching your nape.” Erwin studies the scattered ashes on the ground. “You do understand what we’re planning here, don’t you? That you will die for this plan to succeed?”

“I had an inkling,” Zeke says dryly, but then his face becomes solemn. “Yes. To be frank, Erwin, I don’t see any better future for me in Marley. I have become synonymous with the titan shifters: the Boy Wonder. This would have landed on my head one way or another. Might as well make use of it.”

They’re both silent. Zeke finishes his cigarette and crushes it under his heel.

“Why Levi?” Erwin asks finally.

“Everyone knows about the Ackerman who almost killed me. He is a legend in Marley, and feared. Showing he is on their side could only help the cause.” He gives a small sigh. “Besides, I figured he would be amenable to being my executioner.”

Erwin wonders if that’s really the case. It’s one thing for Levi to kill an enemy in the heat of battle, and another to strike down a helpless opponent.

Zeke stands. “We can talk about it in more detail when we get to your capital. Give it some thought and ask me your questions and we’ll come up with a solid plan.”

They wordlessly return to the town square. Levi strides up to Erwin, and his eyes are full of concern.

“You okay?”

“Do I look that shaken?” Erwin asks softly.

“What did he say?”

“I’ll tell you when I’ve had a chance to reflect on it.” Since

there's no point in hiding anymore, Erwin kisses his forehead. "Let's go."

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**FOR THE REST OF** the trip, Levi keeps a sharp eye on Erwin. Something that happened during his walk has sent him into a writing frenzy. If they were back at the Survey Corps headquarters, Levi would be bringing him a pot of tea and forcing him to take breaks to eat. Here, he feels useless.

Across from them, Zeke and Reiner are both dozing against the walls of the carriage. They really must have come here in a hurry. Everything about their story adds up, and that's irritating. Levi's weakness has always been that he is too quick to empathize with people. Erwin has always told him it's a strength, but it makes him prone to weakness in moments he needs to be strong. He can't allow himself to empathize with these two murderers.

They're nearing Mitras when Erwin seems to snap out of his flow. His posture relaxes, and he lifts his head. He turns a page and quickly writes something, then moves it into Levi's line of sight.

**Z & I CREATED A PLAN. I HAVE A BACKUP PLAN IN CASE HE BETRAYS.**

"Is that so," Levi says.

Erwin writes more, then extends the book again.

**WE'LL DISCUSS. YOU HAVE A KEY ROLE; NEED TO ENSURE YOU AGREE.**

Levi's stomach does a somersault, and he turns to look at Erwin, suspicious. "Why?"

"Later," Erwin says quietly.

Levi sighs. He must look grumpy, because Erwin writes one last thing and holds it out for him with a boyish grin.

I LOVE YOU ♥

“You’re embarrassing.” Levi ducks his head to hide his smile.

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AT THE ROYAL palace, they are greeted by Historia, Hange, Mikasa, and a large contingent of MP; Levi counts at least two dozen sol.

Zeke says, “Quite the welcome.”

But all eyes are on Reiner, who is rigidly facing straight ahead, jaw tight. Levi recognizes that expression. It’s the same one Erwin wore so many times when they returned from expeditions.

*Stop empathizing with him.*

Historia’s face is stern and hard, a flicker of the queen she will grow into. “Welcome to Mitras. I am Queen Historia Reiss. We have much to discuss.”

Zeke dips his head in respect. “I am Zeke Yeager. I believe we have ancestors in common.”

“So I hear.” Historia draws her spine straight. With her royal robes and crown, she cuts an impressive figure, in spite of her size. “I hope we can find a way to work together, cousin.” Doubt is evident in her voice.

“Your Commander Erwin and I have already been discussing some ideas. We look forward to sharing them with you.”

Historia addresses all four of them. “Commander-in-Chief Zackly, Commander Paxis, and Commander Nile are all waiting in the meeting room. We will have guards posted at every exit.”

“Of course,” Zeke says. “Lead the way.”

As they begin to walk, Erwin strides up to Hange, pulls them aside, and says something quietly. Hange nods.

Then Erwin falls into pace next to Levi and says, “Come with me.”

They step into one of the side rooms and Erwin closes the door.

Levi folds his arms over his chest. “Don’t tell me you’re horny again.”

“No.” Erwin considers. “Well, yes, but that’s not what this is about. I need to warn you about the plan Zeke and I discussed.”

“Warn me?”

“How would you feel about killing Zeke Yeager?”

Flame floods Levi’s arteries, his veins, his soul, and it crackles in his voice: “When?”

“Our plan is to go to Marley and execute him in front of delegates from several countries. Do you feel comfortable killing a defenseless, submitting man in front of an audience?”

Not all of Levi’s kills have been in the heat of battle, but none have been in front of an audience. “Is it necessary?”

“Yes. To prove to the world that titans no longer exist.” Erwin pauses. “And if he tries to betray us during the execution, I need you to kill him on the spot.” He places a hand on Levi’s shoulder. “This is different from other requests I have made of you. If you aren’t comfortable with it—”

“I’ll do it.” His heart pounds and he’s dizzy.

It doesn’t matter that Erwin is back from the dead, that the path they shared no longer exists, that Erwin has verbally released him from his vow. After ten long years, the vow has grown into an obsession. He’ll complete it at any cost.

“Levi?” Erwin asks, a note of concern in his voice.

But Levi just nods. “I said I’ll do it. Let’s go; they’re waiting for us.”

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AT THE MEETING, Erwin does most of the talking, Zeke standing beside him. Levi sits behind them, eyes trained on Zeke.

*I will kill this man.*

It's a little more difficult to think about it while looking directly at a cooperative, living, breathing man.

The announcement that they will execute Zeke sends murmurs rippling through the group. Reiner stands, his hands trembling. "It should be me. The people of Paradis have a strong case against me—"

"Reiner," Zeke says with a sad smile. "We both know I am revered in Marley. The Boy Wonder, the Warchief, the one who can control the Founder. It has to be me."

The commanders and Historia all seem to be in agreement—Levi suspects they, once again, do not want to take responsibility for the future of Paradis—and the conversation shifts to trade.

At this point, Pixis leaves to gather several local experts. Flegel Reeves enters the chambers on behalf of the local merchants, and he's soon joined by a mining executive from the north, and ... Levi stares. Lord Alec Farrington, face brimming with youth. When he sees Erwin standing in the middle of the room, his eyes widen and his ears turn pink.

Levi sighs. *Great. I have to deal with his stupid crush all over again.* He marches up to Erwin, who is just turning to take a seat himself.

"What is it, Levi?"

"When should I go get Annie Leonhart?"

Erwin studies him for a moment, then turns to look at the new arrivals, and the corner of his mouth quirks.

Levi says between clenched teeth, "Don't say a word."

"I wouldn't dream of it. Why don't you go find Annie and bring her here? We have Mikasa with us if we need any of those particular insights you two have."

Levi gives him a look that says *thank you*, then walks from the room so briskly that his cape flows behind him.

Fucking Alec. He should never have taken him up on that drink. Was he really just kissing Levi in the hopes of getting an aftertaste of Erwin? The idea hurts his feelings more than he cares to admit.

When he arrives at Annie's cell, he dismisses the guards and kicks the bars of the cell. "Time to get up."

The pile of blankets stirs. "Is it time for my hanging already?"

"No. Your people are here." Levi unlocks the door and swings it open. He doesn't bother to bind her wrists. She already knows what he is capable of.

Her voice is considerably softer this time: "Who came for me?"

"Zeke and Reiner." He realizes she has no clue that Bertolt is dead, that Armin ate him, and now Armin is dead. Well, he'll let the Marleyans explain that to her. "Sounds like we're all making a trip to Marley."

Her face lights up, and he recalls seeing her weep after their battle. *She really is just a scared kid beneath it all.*

He wishes he could shake the image of his old squad. He tells himself that she was following her mission when she massacred them all.

And that's when he finally acknowledges how angry he is that their survival depends on sucking up to the country that tried to exterminate them, that killed so many of his fellow soldiers. He swallows that anger, buries it deep in the pit of his stomach for later.

"Come on," he says to Annie, no hint of anger in his voice.

He expects a tearful reunion, but she only nods at Zeke and Reiner and slides into a seat beside them. Levi returns to sit by Erwin, who pushes his notes across the table for him. Levi reads them to catch up.

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THE PLANNING LASTS late into the night, and they break as the clock rings ten bells, planning to continue the next morning. Erwin yawns as he and Levi walk to their guest room.

“Are you going to keep working?” Levi asks.

Erwin smiles, but his eyes are heavy with fatigue. “I might need to take my mind off it all for a little while.”

“Go lay down. I’ll get us something to eat.” Supporting Erwin had been Zeke’s job today. Levi needs to do something to prove his usefulness.

He returns a short while later with some berry muffins and a pitcher of strawberry-scented water. Erwin doesn’t seem to hear him enter. He’s sitting on the side of the bed, head bowed. His jacket is crumpled against the wall as if thrown there.

Levi’s heart pounds in his throat and he sets the tray on the table. “Erwin?”

The hunched form doesn’t move, and Erwin’s voice is weary. “Why does it always fall on us, Levi?”

Padding across the room, Levi says gently, “It looked like you were enjoying yourself today ...”

“I was. I wasn’t. To have all of them staring at me for the solution, completely unwilling to take any of my responsibility for themselves ... just me and the man who represents everything we’ve been fighting against for a hundred years, trying to stitch together some sort of agreement and make it hold the weight of our entire people.” He sighs and falls back to the bed, dropping his forearm over his eyes. “I’m sorry, Levi. You shouldn’t see me like this.”

“Yes, I should.” Levi sits cross-legged on the bed beside him. “I wish I could help you.”

The forearm lifts and Erwin looks at him, face gentle. “You are.”

“Really? Zeke is more useful than I am right now. Fucking

*Alec* is more useful than I am.” He pauses. “Even now, you’re trying to vent, I’m making it about me.”

“You know what keeps me going right now, Levi?”

“What?”

Erwin reaches up to run his fingertips across Levi’s lower lip.

“Sex?” Levi asks.

Erwin chuckles. “More specifically, our future together. I saw us in the paths, an old couple in love, strolling through the snow. I want that future.”

“Didn’t we end that timeline?”

“The vision wasn’t from that timeline. There was no future there, no possible way for us to age. I have to believe it was from this one, a fragment collected by the paths before they crumbled. And we can’t get there without laying the groundwork for it.” Erwin smiles sadly. “It’s not just about our future—it’s about all Eldians—but I’m a selfish man, Levi. Ours is the only one I care about right now. And I will give as much of myself as I need to in order to make it happen.”

“Don’t give too much of yourself,” Levi says, and he stretches out beside him and lays his ear on Erwin’s chest. “You need to be there, too.”

His heartbeat is loud and strong. Three times, this heart stopped in front of him. Three times, it was resurrected. There are other people he wants to protect, but at this moment, he, too, feels selfish.

*I will give everything in order to keep this heart beating.*

“How are you holding up, Levi?” Erwin asks, stroking his back.

A ball of anger is still burning just out of consciousness, and Levi finds he wants to ignore it for a bit longer.

“I want you,” he whispers. *Forever.*

The hand on his back slides down to his ass and grips it.



ERWIN GENTLY UNDRESSES him and lays him back down on the bed, hands sliding down Levi's jaw, his neck, his chest, his sides.

*Were his hands always this smooth? Or were they calloused and rough like mine, and they regenerated cleanly?* Levi arches as Erwin's mouth follows the path laid out by his hands, tongue sliding hot and wet across his skin.

Erwin's voice is choked: "You are so beautiful, Levi." He kisses the hollow of his throat. "The curves and lines of your body, so beautifully constructed, so strong and graceful."

His tongue circles a nipple. Levi gasps and arches, and an arm slides under the small of his back. The tongue slides down his abdomen, tracing the grid of his muscles.

"Humanity's Strongest," Erwin murmurs into his skin.

"Not anymore."

"No, I'm certain you still are." The tongue circles his navel. "Your strength was always more than just the path between us, more than just the bond with your ancestors." He stands and unbuttons his shirt, then shrugs out of it. Levi props himself on his elbows to watch and finds he doesn't mind the clothing pooling on the floor instead of neatly folded on a chair.

Erwin unclothes his lower half; he's already semi-erect, bobbing and twitching. Levi stares and his hips tilt subconsciously toward him.

Before he can find any words, Erwin returns to the bed and crouches above him. He swirls his tongue around Levi's finger, traces the muscles along his arm, nuzzles his armpit. He retraces his earlier trail down Levi's front and skirts around his cock, moving down his legs instead. He presses a kiss into Levi's instep and then back up again, hands sliding up his legs.

"So beautiful. Every bit of you is so beautiful. I want to taste all of you at once." He's fully hard now, and so is Levi.

"Kiss me," Levi says.

They kiss, tongues deep, passing pleased hums between

their mouths. Erwin lowers himself onto Levi, almost his full weight, and his skin is so warm and soft and fuzzy that Levi shifts a little, side-to-side, letting the sensations soak across his entire body.

Then the kiss finally breaks, and Erwin pulls back to look at him, stroking the hair off his forehead. There's a question in his eyes.

Levi says, "I want you inside me."

"Yeah?"

"I need you."

Erwin kneels upright to slick himself with lubricant, and then he slides into Levi. For a moment, he doesn't move, just stays there inside Levi, pulsing.

*Come on*, Levi tries to say, but it comes out as a high-pitched moan, almost a whine. He's embarrassed at first, but when he opens his eyes, he sees Erwin looking down at him with wonder.

"So beautiful," Erwin breathes, and he doesn't seem aware that he's speaking. He slides partway out, then back in, pressing firmly into him at the end of the stroke.

"Fuck," Levi whimpers.

"Do you feel how hard I am, Levi?" He pulses again.

"Fuck. Shit." Levi wraps his arms and legs around him, fingertips digging into his flesh. "You're so deep."

Erwin leans down to kiss his neck, then whispers in his ear, "I love you."

"Keep going," Levi gasps.

His breath is hot in Levi's ear. "Do you feel how hard you make me?" He finally begins to thrust, a slow and gentle rhythm that contrasts with how rigid he is—his cock, his muscles. "Do you feel how much I want you, my love? I want to lose myself inside you."

*My love.* Levi's heart sings. "I love you," he breathes.

Erwin's tongue traces the shape of his ear, flooding it with warm air, and Levi's fingertips claw into the flesh of his back.

Their rhythm picks up speed, a soft slap sounding with each thrust.

Words puff into his ear: “I have to slow down. I’m going to come already.”

Levi soothes the skin of his back with his palms. “Then come.”

“I don’t want to leave you behind.”

“Don’t stop. We’ll take care of me next.”

Erwin pulls back to look at him, his face soft, eyes feverish. “I’ll be back for you, Levi. I’ll always come back for you.”

Levi’s breath catches in his throat. He grabs Erwin’s neck and pulls him down for a kiss before either of them can acknowledge the tears in his eyes.

Then Erwin cries out into his mouth and spills into him. Levi feels Erwin’s muscles soften and his body sags as the strength leaves him, but this time it’s okay, because he’ll always, always come back.

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LONG AFTER LEVI has a climax of his own, long after Erwin’s breaths slow, Levi is staring at the window-shaped patch of light on the ceiling.

That ball of anger won’t let him sleep.

The town bells ring two and his jaw sets. He stands, pulls on his pants, shirt, and boots, not bothering to tuck everything in. On his way out, he grabs the knife from Erwin’s boot and holds it behind his back.

The guards standing outside Zeke’s room salute him as he approaches.

“Come back in ten minutes,” Levi says. They exchange a confused glance, but salute and leave.

He throws open the door and his shadow falls into the room, framed by a door-shaped rectangle.

Zeke sits upright in the bed. “What?” he mutters, fumbling for his glasses on the bedside table.

Levi kicks the door shut, plunging the room into darkness. “You think Marley will believe we captured you against your will if you’re completely unharmed, you piece of shit?”

“Shit!” Something clinks against glass, and then the lamp sparks to life. Zeke’s eyes are wide behind his glasses. “Oh shit, you’re real.” He scrambles out of the bed and backs toward the window.

“You’re leading us into a trap,” Levi says, spinning the knife idly in his hand as he presses his advance. “You’re saying what you think Erwin wants to hear. Once we’re in Marley, you’re going to turn on us.”

“No, I swear!” Zeke looks genuinely terrified, and the ball in Levi’s abdomen pulses. *What right does a monster have to fear for his life?*

He kneels beside the shaking man and grabs a fistful of hair. Zeke tries to knock the blade from Levi’s hand. He’s fast, but Levi is faster. The knife presses against his neck.

“Levi,” Zeke stammers. “You *monster*, I am being honest with Erwin, and honest with you.” His breaths are harsh.

“Convince me.”

“How?” Zeke looks up at him, incredulous. He tries to push Levi’s arm away, but Levi knees him in the stomach. His breath escapes with a wheeze.

“Your plan is fine as it is,” Levi says smoothly. “But I think dumping your carcass on the steps of your barracks in Liberio would achieve the same thing as a public execution.”

“I swear to you.” Zeke’s eyes close, his nostrils flaring. “I swear on the death of my brother, on Reiner’s life, on *my own* life, on anything you want. You think I want to die? I was supposed to be the one speaking with Ymir to save us all, not two devil children of Paradis.” He spits the last few words.

“Those devil children had names,” Levi growls.

“I know that! I was trying to *save* one of them. But this is

the only thing the Boy Wonder can do now. I'll claim their victory and die a martyr."

"You aren't fucking with us."

"No!" The fight seems to leave Zeke's body in a low sigh. He leans his head back against the wall. "I'm so tired of all this, Levi. If I can rest and stop the war and live up to my legacy all at once, then let me have that. And if that means dying here instead of Liberio, then just stop drawing it out and do it." His eyelids part, and he looks up with haunted eyes.

Levi's chest seizes with recognition. With pity. He withdraws the knife and his knuckles connect with Zeke's nose.

Zeke shrieks and doubles over, clutching his face. Blood streams between his fingers.

Levi stands. "Marley won't believe us if you're unharmed," he says again, and he turns and marches from the room.

# ❖ Twenty-Five ❖

## ACROSS THE SEA

ERWIN WAKES UP before Levi. Usually, when he sits up, Levi awakens, but this morning, he doesn't even move. Erwin takes a shower and is just getting dressed when finally Levi stirs, sitting up in bed and stretching.

“Good morning.” Erwin strides over to him and kisses his brow.

“Morning.” Levi blinks. His hair is swooping heavily to the left and right. *He looks like a sleepy cat.* Erwin smiles.

“Late night?” he asks.

“Couldn't sleep,” Levi mumbles.

“I'm sorry to hear that. I'm going to go get some breakfast. Would you like me to bring some up? Then you can sleep a little longer.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Erwin kisses the top of his head, then walks to the door to pull on his boots. He frowns. “Levi.”

“Yeah?”

His heart pounds in his throat. “Any idea why my knife is in the wrong boot?”

“Is it? Must have sprouted legs.”

Erwin's stomach drops. He slowly turns to face him. “Levi.”

Levi shrugs and falls back down to the bed. “Had to make sure Zeke wasn't bullshitting us.”

“Did you hurt him?”

“Not really. Just a broken nose.”

“Levi.” Erwin closes his eyes for a moment to steady himself. “We need him.”

The reply has a defensive edge: “I know. I didn’t kill him.”

“It’s not enough to keep him alive; we need him to trust us. He’s going to be the one delivering us to Marley, and he will be key to getting us in front of the ambassadors of many nations. If he starts to mistrust us, it puts all of Paradis at risk.”

“Believe me,” Levi says, “he won’t dare betray us now. Besides, do you really think Marley would believe we captured him if he didn’t have a scratch on him?”

That’s a good point, but Erwin finds he’s irritated, anyway. Or maybe he’s irritated that he didn’t think of that detail himself. “You should have checked with me first.”

“You were sleeping. What’s the problem? He’s fine.”

Erwin’s jaw sets. He pulls the knife and its sheath free and drops it loudly to the table; the hilt clatters. He jams his feet into the boots. His tone is cold, but polite: “Now I need to find Zeke before I have my breakfast. You should get your own food. I won’t have time to bring any back.”

Levi sits up. “You’re angry.”

“The existence of Paradis is dangling by a thread, and Zeke Yeager is holding the other end of it. Have you not seen how hard I have been working to—” Erwin interrupts himself and draws a deep breath. He shouldn’t say another word until he is fed and fully awake. “I need to make sure this doesn’t change anything. I’ll see you in the meeting hall.”

He strides to the door and lets it close hard behind him.

*Dammit, Levi.* He rubs his temples as he marches toward Zeke’s room. They have always led the Survey Corps in perfect, wordless coordination, so he took for granted that it would still be the case, even if Levi has been away from the Survey Corps for a decade. He has to remember that Levi’s judgement is compromised by Zeke.

He has to remember he, himself, is the reason behind it.

The MPs at Zeke's door nod at him and step aside to give him room to knock.

"Who is it?" comes a shaky voice from inside.

"Erwin." There's a long pause, so he adds, "I'm alone."

"Come in."

Zeke is huddled in the corner of the room; the window is open a crack beside him. Several cigarette butts sit on a plate on the floor. His nose is swollen and purple, his eyes black and puffy. "Missing those titan healing abilities right about now," he says casually, the consonants blunted.

Erwin crouches to examine his injury. "It isn't crooked, at least."

"I cracked it back into place. But I can't wear my glasses."

Zeke sighs, his breath heavy with the scent of smoke. "At least he was kind enough not to hit them directly. Could have bent the frames."

"I want to make sure you understand: Levi acted of his own volition." Erwin holds out his hand to pull Zeke to his feet. "I am quite serious about maintaining the peace between us until the very end."

"I figured. Although his actions serve you well, don't they? He scared me shitless and got complete honesty in return. So now you know you can trust me, because I became a frightened little child. I almost pissed myself."

"Levi can be quite intimidating. And I must admit, he was correct about one thing: it needs to appear that we captured you against your will. This injury will help."

"I suppose," Zeke says, "I'll have to plead for my life during our little execution skit, too."

"Possibly." Erwin wonders if Levi will be able to kill a man pleading for his life. Is his code of honour still in play when it comes to Zeke? "There's a royal physician on site who can tape your nose and splint it so you can wear your glasses. He'll have some pain medication, too."

“Good. Morphine will mellow me out around that monster.” Zeke shivers.

After a visit to the physician, the broken nose is neatly taped, and a small splint allows Zeke to wear his glasses without much pain. The purpling of his eye sockets is especially striking against the white tape, and irritation kindles in Erwin’s chest all over again. Now everyone is going to notice the injury, and everyone is going to worry Levi is unhinged.

In the kitchen, they find Hange eating alone.

“Morning!” Hange calls cheerily, but then they stare at Zeke. “Ouch. Levi?”

“Yes,” Erwin says flatly.

His tone must say it all: “Not your idea, then.”

Erwin doesn’t acknowledge the statement. “Would you mind bringing Levi some food? He’s in our room.”

Hange nods. “Sure. In fact, I’ll go eat with him.” They must be anxious to hear more details.

Zeke struggles to chew—the swelling is no doubt affecting his mouth as well—so Erwin asks the kitchen staff to blend some fruits, oatmeal, and yogurt into a smooth paste. That combination sustained him all those times he had facial injuries after expeditions.

“I thought he was just a nightmare, at first,” Zeke mutters as he holds up his spoon and watches the paste ooze off it. “Do you know how often I have nightmares about your violent boyfriend?”

Excitement jolts through Erwin, and now he’s irritated with himself. It shouldn’t turn him on to think about how intimidating Levi can be.

But now his mind is running away on him. He pictures Levi showing up to Zeke’s room with a knife. Did he yell at him, or did he use that quiet, deadly nonchalance that is somehow even more frightening? Did he hold the knife to Zeke’s neck and threaten him, or walk directly up to him and punch his nose? Did he wake him up first?

Aloud, he says, “We should head to the chamber. The meetings will begin shortly.”

“I can’t taste this, anyway, and the texture is revolting.” Zeke pushes the bowl away. “Lead on.”

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LEVI IS ALREADY in the meeting chamber; Erwin sits in the seat next to him. A part of him wants to hang on to his anger, but with his stomach full and Zeke confirmed to still be on their side, he has little reason for it.

After a tense moment, Levi says, “Look—”

“It’s fine,” Erwin says softly.

“Is it? Or are you just being polite or passive-aggressive or something?”

Erwin turns to him and, seeing the fear in his eyes, casts aside his pride. “I wish you would have checked in with someone else—anyone else—before acting. But I will concede that you were correct: we need to give the appearance that he was captured unwillingly. The injury will help that. And Zeke still seems willing to cooperate with us.”

“I should have controlled my anger.” Levi’s eyes drop. “Every time I look at them, I think about how the four of them took so much from us.”

“I know.”

“I hate that we have to play along with them.”

Erwin leans closer, the next words for his ears alone: “So do I. Just for a little bit longer.” He slides his hand across the bench and subtly presses his little finger against Levi’s thigh.

“We’re okay?” Levi asks, his voice very small. Erwin thinks of all the people who have left Levi throughout his life—thinks how many times he, himself, has left Levi—and realizes how badly he needs reassurance.

Zackly calls for the meeting to begin.

“We will *always* be okay,” Erwin whispers quickly. He gives Levi’s thigh a squeeze, then withdraws his hand and sits at attention.

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THE DISCUSSION IS mostly about the specifics of the trade agreements that Erwin will propose to the ambassadors in Marley. Zeke has some feedback, and even Reiner and Annie pitch in now and then with helpful comments. By early afternoon, they have a full, thorough proposal drafted.

They will leave for Marley the next morning: the Marleyans, Erwin, Levi, Hange, Mikasa, and Historia. Erwin was in favour of Historia staying behind, but she looked at him with the same determination he saw when they were fighting her father, and he immediately relented. Besides, the queen’s visit would be a good show of diplomatic faith.

They spend the rest of the day preparing for their voyage. They load up a cart with provisions for the ship, gather their gear and enough weapons in case things get confrontational, and purchase suits and hats to blend in with Marleyan fashion.

Erwin stays up late into the night working with Hange and Pixis on the wording of their proposals. By the time he returns to the bedroom, Levi is already asleep. After their irritation with each other that morning, he had been hoping for a chance to talk, but it’s important that Levi gets his rest. He is tired, too.

Erwin undresses and crawls into bed behind him.

“Morning?” Levi mumbles, half asleep.

“No, it’s very late. Go back to sleep,” he says softly.

Levi gives a little noise somewhere between a grunt and a moan and nestles back against him. Erwin drapes his arm around him and has just enough time to appreciate how comfortable he is before he falls into a dreamless sleep.

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EARLY THE NEXT morning, they set off with a cart full of supplies and a small contingent of Garrison soldiers, who will be camping along the beach with the horses for their return. At the beach, Zeke and Reiner ready a rowboat; it will take a few trips to get all the supplies and passengers across. The ship is visible in the distance, and it's much larger than Erwin imagined. It has at least three decks and is long enough for a Colossal Titan to stand on it with ample room to spare. *Didn't Zeke say this was a small ship? How large are their warships?*

He turns to Hange and Levi to mention this to them, but the words disappear when he sees Hange's face, alight with wonder. "This is your first time seeing the ocean, isn't it?"

Hange's voice is faint: "It's enormous. I thought it would be like a meadow, but it's like the sky."

"It is." Erwin stands beside them, staring across the endless expanse of blue. "It's strange to think that we'll travel for nearly four days before we see land again."

The ship smells of salt water and old wood; it pitches lazily from side to side. The bunks are divided between two cabins on the second deck. Erwin peers into one. There are no windows, so it's pitch black.

"Here," Levi says, pushing past him. He pulls a small pebble from his pocket and the room illuminates. The bunks are tiny. Erwin isn't sure he'll be able to fit in one alone, let alone share it with Levi.

Now that he stops to consider it, they won't have any privacy at all for the next four days. It's going to feel like an eternity.

Apparently, Levi is thinking the same thing: "How are we supposed to fuck in here?"

"Please don't," Hange says lightly behind them, and they jump. Hange doesn't seem to notice; they barge past them and run to a bed. "I call top bunk!" They sling their backpack toward

the upper bunk, but it's a clumsy throw. The bag bounces off the side of the mattress and lands on the deck with a thunk.

“Dammit,” Hange mutters. “I have glass goggles in there.”

Erwin turns to Levi. “Would you rather share a bunk, or be neighbours on the same level?”

“Share one, I guess. I’m not sharing one with Hange. They fart in their sleep.”

Hange looks up. “I do not.”

“I lived with you for ten years, remember?”

“That’s not fair. I don’t have any ammunition against you.”

“You know me well enough already, you just aren’t creative enough to insult me.”

Hange tosses the bag onto the mattress; it lands cleanly this time, and they smirk. “Maybe I’m just more polite than you.”

Levi swipes two fingers across one of the bed frames. He grimaces. “Disgusting. I’m throwing a tarp over this and sleeping on top of it.”

“I doubt you’ll find a clean tarp. Anyway, it’s just for a few days.” Erwin sits on the bottom bunk and pulls his notebook out of his backpack. He needs to memorize his speeches before their appearance in front of the Marleyans. Everything he says needs to sound confident, convincing, and unrehearsed.

Mikasa and Historia enter the room a few minutes later. Historia’s nose wrinkles. “Well, I suppose I shouldn’t have expected anything fancy.”

“You’ve gotten too accustomed to royal life,” Mikasa says. “This isn’t much worse than the military barracks.” She pulls out a light stone, too, and sets it beside Levi’s, and now the room is brightly lit. She steps toward one of the free bunks. “Historia, do you prefer top or bottom?” Her cheeks turn red, and she mumbles, “... bunks.”

Historia doesn’t seem to notice. “Bottom, please. I thrash a bit in my sleep and I’m worried I’ll fall off the top.”

The ship's warning bell rings, and the five Paridisians exchange looks.

"I suppose we're leaving," Erwin says. "Shall we go above deck?"

"Yes!" Hange races for the door.

They cluster along the railing, facing Paradis.

Levi leans in close to Erwin. "Where are Zeke, Reiner, and Annie?"

"Plotting their course with the ship's crew, I imagine. They'll likely be striking a balance between speed and gas expenditure."

"You think that's all they're up to?"

Erwin turns to him. "What are your instincts telling you?"

"That you're right. But I also think it's stupid to make assumptions."

"Do you feel like doing some intelligence gathering, once we have bade farewell to our island?" Erwin drapes an arm around him. "It will be poetic to see Paradis disappear below the horizon as we voyage into the unknown."

Levi silently leans against him.

The ship raises anchor. The gas propulsion fizzes in the glassy water of the ship's wake. Erwin stares down at it, fascinated by the way the bottom of the sea quickly drops out from under them. Soon, there is only blackness.

Hange speaks up from his other side: "How far down do you think it goes?"

"I wouldn't want to find out." Erwin sees a grey fin crest the wake. "Did you see that?"

"What?" Hange asks.

"The fin."

"There!" Historia calls, pointing. Several fins crest, further back, as if gigantic fish are playing in the wake of the ship.

A cry sounds overhead. Erwin looks up and sees gulls swooping toward land. Until now, he has been thinking of the

ocean as a large body of water and nothing more, but it's teeming with life, even more than the streams and rivers on Paradis.

He turns to Levi, and finds that even though there is wonder in his eyes, he is watching Erwin. "What is it, Levi?"

"I like seeing you like this."

"Like what?"

Levi shrugs and turns away, a small smile on his lips. "Like the boy you must have been when you were younger."

He does feel that way—out here, there are no politics, no titans, no fate of the world. Just him, a handful of people, the ocean air, the unknowable depths below. This is the freedom they always sought beyond the walls.

As they coast away from land, Paradis wavers on the horizon like heat waves, then is swallowed entirely. The ocean is starting to get rougher and the ship, even as large as it is, is pitching back and forth. Hange steps away from the railing and laughs as they stagger. Soon, the rest of them are trying to walk, too. Mikasa and Levi have no trouble balancing, but the rest are stumbling around as if they have had too much to drink. They cling to the handrails as they teeter down the stairs to their bunks.

Levi slips away to do some intelligence gathering, while Erwin sits down with his notebook again.

As he's reading, he feels a sickly heat building in his stomach. He can feel the ship rocking around him, and his stomach seems to lurch with it.

"Is the sea getting rougher?"

Hange looks at him blankly. "A bit. You okay?"

"Yes, just unaccustomed to the motion." He shrugs it off and keeps working.

Levi returns about fifteen minutes later and sits beside him on the bed. "Nothing to worry about."

"No?"

"You were right. They were charting their route. Any discussion about the plan indicated they are still on board."

“Good.”

Levi peers at him. “Are you okay?”

Erwin wipes cold sweat from his brow. “I’m fine. What do you think about this wording here?” He passes Levi the notebook and they work on the speech together.

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**ABOUT AN HOUR** later, Erwin realizes he’s in trouble. The heat in his abdomen is climbing up his throat, and his mouth is watering. He stands and staggers over to the garbage bucket by the door.

“Erwin?” Levi asks.

Erwin kneels in front of the bucket. A moment later, he’s emptying the contents of his stomach.

“Shit,” Levi mutters. “Okay everyone, clear out. Give the man some privacy.”

Erwin heaves. “Dammit.”

Hange pats his back on the way out the door, and then they are alone.

Levi offers him a handkerchief and strokes his back. When Erwin feels as if he’s back in control, he lifts his head and wipes his face. A thin layer of sweat clings to his entire body, and a rancid taste clings to his mouth.

“Are you sick?” Levi asks, concern furrowing his brow.

Erwin mumbles, “I get motion sick.”

“What? But you travel in the carriage all the time. You even read and write in there with no trouble.”

“That motion is straight ahead. It’s side-to-side or spinning motion that—” The boat pitches and Erwin groans and lowers his head again. He gags a few times, but thankfully, nothing comes up.

Levi can’t seem to grasp it. “But you use the 3DMG.”

“Only in direct, straight lines. Never spinning.” Erwin’s shoulders rise and fall with ragged breaths. “Ask Nile what

happened back in our training days when—” He is interrupted by another heave. “I’m sorry, Levi. You shouldn’t have to—”

“It’s fine.” Levi sits down, back against the wall. “Does this mean you’re going to be like this the whole trip?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never—Oh shit.” He makes a gagging noise, then curses and strikes the floor with the heel of his palm as frustration surges through him. “I don’t have time for this!” He has to execute these speeches flawlessly if Paradis is to have a chance at survival.

“I’ll go see if there’s some sort of medicine for you,” Levi says quietly. “Just don’t stress out about it, okay? We’ll figure it all out. We always do. I’ll be back.”

Erwin waits. When his heaves are dry, he crawls back to his bed, dragging the bucket with him. *This is utterly humiliating.* He lays on his back and closes his eyes. The cabin is still rocking. He feels as if he has spent the night drinking with Pixis. *Except this hangover will last for four days.*

Levi returns a few minutes later. “One of the Marleyans is going to bring you some medicine soon.”

“Thank you,” Erwin says.

“Do you want me to stay with you?”

Erwin shakes his head. “I’d like to be alone.” He knows Levi would never judge him for being ill, but he would like to keep some of his dignity, all the same.

“Okay. I’ll come check on you in a while. Maybe try to have a nap or something.”

A knock sounds some time later, jolting Erwin awake. To his disappointment, he feels just as awful as he did earlier. He mumbles for the person to enter.

Reiner steps into the cabin holding a teacup. “Commander.”

“Come in.” Erwin tries to sit up, and his stomach lurches; he quickly returns to the pillow. It’s poor form to be this helpless in front of the enemy.

Though, this is the enemy who helped resurrect him.

“Why did you do it?” he mumbles, too sick to explain what he means.

Reiner misunderstands. “I get seasick sometimes, too, and this helps a lot.” He looks down into the cup. “It’s an old family recipe: a mixture of herbs, a few drops of oil, and a little splash of brandy. It will help the nausea and coat your mouth to make it taste better. You might feel a little lightheaded and giddy, though.”

Lightheaded and giddy is better than retching over a bucket. Erwin forces himself to sit up. His head rocks with nausea, but he manages to drain the contents of the cup and keep it down. The liquid has a variety of earthy, floral, acrid, spicy, and sweet flavours that all clash with one other, but it’s drinkable.

Reiner hovers for a moment, looking uncertain. Erwin holds out the teacup.

“Thank you.”

“I—” Reiner looks away. The words pour out of him: “I didn’t enjoy what I had to do. It damaged me, doing what we did to Paradis. I was never the same and I don’t think I ever will be. It’s what I deserve, but I just wanted you to know I’m not a monster.”

He has likely been bottling that up for a long time. “No one truly is a monster. Even those who commit atrocities. It doesn’t make their actions forgivable.”

Reiner shrugs, uncomfortable. “I always respected you, you know.”

“I know,” Erwin says. “That’s why you tried to bring me back with the serum. Although for the record, I would never have come willingly to your side.”

“I know. I think I always knew that.” He clears his throat. “I’ll bring you more of this tea every six hours or so. It should keep you going until we get to Marley. You may want to spend more time on the top deck, too. It’s much better when you can

keep your eye on the horizon. Helps your brain understand that you're moving."

For a moment, he is a boy again, learning the 3DMG in the Training Corps. *Keep your eye on your target, Erwin*, his trainer had said, patting his back as he coughed. *It will help your body understand its motion.*

"Thank you," he says.

Reiner nods, then leaves the room. Erwin wonders how badly it must damage a person to infiltrate an enemy land at age twelve, knowing they will die by age twenty-five. It was hard enough going on his first expedition at age fifteen. It was the speed of the deaths that had jarred him the most: one moment a soldier was beside him, and the next, they were gone. Until that moment, he had envisioned valiant battles, soldier and titan struggling to tilt the fight in their favour in a romantic clash of right versus wrong. The reality was that death came in a single bite.

*I was never the same, either, and I don't know if I can be.* The thought surprises him. He thinks of Levi's wonder: *the boy you must have been when you were younger.* The boy he sacrificed for his dream, just another body on the endless pile.

But lately, he has felt that boy in the paths, in the sea. In Levi.

He drifts to sleep and dreams of an endless sea of military boots marching in unison.

When he awakens, he feels well enough to stand. He makes his way up the stairs and collapses against the wall of a cabin, then slides down to a seat. The ocean is clearly visible between the bars of the railing, endless in all directions. The moon is bright and white on its surface, stippled with waves that he can hear lapping against the hull. The breeze slides across his face like silk. He is warm and his limbs tingle. His mind is rambling, and he closes his eyes and lets it wander where it pleases.

One phrase repeats over and over in his head, forward and backward, loudly and softly: *the boy you must have been ...*

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LEVI CHECKS THE bunk and, seeing Erwin isn't there, quickly exchanges the bucket for a clean one, then makes his way to the meal deck. Erwin isn't there, either.

"Has anyone seen Erwin?" he asks the others, who are eating their evening meal.

Reiner raises a hand. "I told him to go onto the top deck. Here, I'll show you a shortcut through the back stairs."

When they arrive on the upper deck, they find Erwin leaning against the wall of the Captain's quarters, staring across the water. He turns to Levi and gives him a strange grin. In the bright moonlight, Levi can see his eyes are hollowed out and bloodshot, his lids low.

"Uh-oh," Reiner mutters.

Levi turns. "What did you do to him?"

"Tea for seasickness, but I think I made it a little too strong."

"What do you mean?"

Reiner rubs the back of his head, embarrassed. "Some of the herbs can be a bit inebriating. I'll make a weaker batch for the next dose. He'll be out of it for a few hours."

Maybe that's not such a bad thing; he does seem to be feeling better. Levi kneels beside Erwin. "Hey, you okay?"

"Yeah." Erwin turns to him and stares without focus. "Do you think ... " He trails off. When nothing follows, Levi looks up at Reiner, eyes narrow.

"He'll be fine," Reiner insists. "It will just take some time to pass through his system. I'll get you a blanket. He won't be going far."

Levi sits next to Erwin, who turns to him.

"Levi."

“Yeah?”

“Do you think ... ” Erwin’s brows furrow. “Marine means ocean, right? Do you think the name Marley comes from ‘marine?’”

Levi stares at him.

“Marley,” Erwin says, drawing out the consonants. “Mar-ley. Mar-ine.”

“Maybe you should stop talking now.”

Reiner brings them a blanket and two plates of food. Erwin meticulously pulls apart chunks of bread and dips them in the salty sauce that’s supposed to go with the meat.

“This,” he says, “is the best bread I’ve ever tasted.”

“It’s pretty good, I guess.” Levi glances at him. “Feeling more like yourself yet?”

“No. I feel stupid. And relaxed.”

“You aren’t normally either of those things.”

Erwin laughs until he wheezes.

“Okay, easy there. It wasn’t that funny.” Levi grips his shoulder. “Maybe you should try to sleep this off.” He helps him to his feet.

Erwin sags against him. “Ah.”

“Can’t you walk?”

“Forget how they work.”

“How what work?”

“Feet.” Erwin starts snickering again.

“Fucking hell,” Levi mutters. Now he just wants to get Erwin into the cabin before anyone else sees him like this. “Come on, one step at a time.”

The way Erwin is moving gives Levi the mental image of butter sliding around a hot frying pan, and when they at last make it to the cabin, he melts into the mattress.

Levi sits beside him and leafs through his notebook. “You’re not going to be able to work on this right now, are you,” he states.

Erwin’s eyes are already closed. Because he’s half hanging

over the edge of the mattress, there is a sliver of space behind his back.

*I have to keep an eye on him*, Levi tells himself as he wedges himself between Erwin and the wall. He wraps a tight arm around his chest to keep him on the mattress, and pulls the blanket over both of them.

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ERWIN AWAKENS TO the sound of his own gagging. *Shit!* He leans over the side of the bed and finds the bucket. The motion sends him tumbling over the edge of the bed and he lands with a thump.

He feels Levi's hand on his back, and he can hear Historia, Hange, and Mikasa making sleepy comments, but he can't hear them. The nausea is so intense that his ears are ringing.

"I'll go get Reiner," Levi says.

"Wait," Erwin manages around harsh breaths. He tries to keep everything down long enough to say, "I need a clear head for my work." It was nice to get a break from being nauseated, but he remembers how his thoughts moved in odd, uncontrollable circles with the medicine in his system.

"You're not getting any work done like this, either." Levi slips through the door.

Reiner is blinking, half-awake. He presents the teacup, and Erwin holds up a hand to reject it.

"I made it weaker," Reiner says.

"But it will still intoxicate me?"

"Well, yes, a bit."

"Then, no."

Reiner gives a low sigh. "Listen, Commander, seasickness usually lasts around three days. If you're sensitive, it could be longer. And it's going to be worse today than it was yesterday."

Erwin closes his eyes and lets out a long sigh. "I have to practice my speeches."

Historia chimes in: “I’ll do it. I’ll memorize your speeches, and deliver them.”

He lifts his gaze to look at her. She’s sitting upright on her mattress, her jaw set with determination.

“I should be the one doing it, anyway,” she says firmly. “I’m the Queen of Paradis. It makes sense for me to be the figurehead of this mission. The rest of you can coach me.”

Erwin doesn’t know how to reply.

“We know she’s capable,” Levi says quietly. “You’ve seen the woman she will grow into.”

And suddenly it strikes Erwin that all the people before him—Hange, Mikasa, Historia, Levi—grew into who they were in 860 without a single hint of help from him. He died, and they kept going, and they did an amazing job of it until their world was thrown into chaos from the paths.

Weariness drags at his bones. He has put all this pressure on himself, acting as if he, alone, can save Paradis, when these four have already done it once without him. He has lost sleep, bickered with Levi, started to hate himself again. Now he’s about to put himself through seasickness hell—for what, exactly? So he can hold tightly onto being the one in control? Is that even what he wants anymore?

What was that Levi said to him in the tea shop in 860, when he had first suggested becoming Historia’s advisor? *You have a chance to start over, and you’re charging right back into battle.*

At the end of the day, he is like Zeke: arrogantly taking on the role of ‘martyr’ because he thinks he is the only one who is capable of the job. Or maybe because everyone else thinks he is the only one capable, but that is simply untrue. Their future selves are proof of that.

*But who am I, if not their Commander?*

That question, not long ago, might have driven him to despair. Now, he feels a flicker, and he doesn’t know what emotion it is yet, but he wants to chase after it until he does. It reminds him of the person he was becoming in the little cabin in

the woods. It reminds him of the boy inside him, who looks at the world with wonder and hope.

He scans the room. Beside Historia, Mikasa watches him, face even. Hange nods with encouragement when they make eye contact. And finally, the face that matters most is looking at him with unbridled hope. *Levi* ...

“Well, Erwin?” Historia asks. “What do you think?” In her expression, he sees the woman proudly showing him around the castle in 860, showcasing her community projects.

They don’t have to die to entrust their memories to the living, he realizes with bittersweet clarity. They can pass those memories down to the next generation and then step back.

“Historia,” he says, “it will be an honour to coach you.”

He reaches for the teacup.

# ❖ Twenty-Six ❖

## LEVI'S VOW

THE SHIP REACHES the shores of Marley late at night on the third day. The passengers all change into their new suits and hats. Zeke, Reiner, and Annie pull their hats low to avoid recognition.

Before they disembark, Zeke says, “The goal for now is to look inconspicuous. You will all follow me to a safe house nearby, where we can spend the night undetected. One of my allies will send word to Magath that we have arrived. He will meet us in the morning so we can put our plans into motion.”

It’s so late that the docks are quiet; only one other ship is docked, offloading barrels of goods. In the darkness, Levi can’t see any scenery other than a few tall, rectangular buildings, but the smell is already different from Paradis: smoke, gas, and iron.

Erwin stumbles a bit beside him. Levi catches his elbow. “You okay?”

“Happy to be back on land, but my legs haven’t quite gotten the message yet.” He rubs his forehead. “Still a bit foggy from the tea, too.”

“I’m glad to be off that ship. Looking forward to some privacy.” Levi hears the strain in his own voice. The lack of sex is driving him batty, and he’s starting to get cranky with the people around them. He almost stooped to touching himself in the ship bathroom just to blow off some steam, but the grime on the counter damped his libido before he could get started.

They fall back from the group for privacy, and Erwin leans down to say, “I have never felt this pent up in my life.”

Levi almost laughs. “Me neither.”

“Even that lamp post over there is looking like it would be fun to rut against.”

The lamp post in question does have some alluring curves and lines to it, and its overall shape is rather phallic. Levi averts his gaze. “I figured you would be too sick or drugged up to be interested in sex.”

Erwin clears his throat. “The tea has a side effect of enhancing blood flow to the entire body.”

Levi’s brows shoot up under the brim of his hat. “You’re walking around with a boner under there? Is that the real reason you’re walking funny?”

“I wasn’t ‘walking around with a boner,’ exactly, but then I saw you in that suit.”

Levi glances around. They’re well out of earshot, but he growls it in a low voice anyway: “You should push me against a wall and fuck me.”

After a long pause, Erwin says, “Here?”

“Yes. Any alley will do. I want you to crush me into the wall. I don’t care who hears me yelling.”

“Levi.” Erwin’s voice is so taut that it sounds as if it’s about to snap.

“I bet I’ll come in seconds. And I want you to keep pushing me past it, keep fucking me until I’m a twitching and drooling mess.”

Erwin’s steps falter and he almost stumbles. “You’re making this worse for me. Have some pity.”

“And then when you’ve finally had enough, I want to flip you around and shove my entire hand up your ass.”

Erwin barks a shocked laugh.

It’s not every day he can throw Erwin off guard; Levi says coyly, “What, you don’t like the idea?”

“The indelicate phrasing was a surprise.”

They stare at each other for a moment, and the gleam in Erwin's eye makes Levi wonder if he really will pull him into a dark alleyway.

"Hey, lovebirds," Hange calls, waving at them. "Hurry up!"

They hold each other's gaze for a moment longer, then turn to catch up with the group.

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**ZEKE LEADS THEM** down a side street and climbs down a set of stairs to a plain wooden door along a brick wall. He knocks a pattern. Whoever is inside answers, and Zeke responds again. The door opens and they file inside with their luggage.

Levi stares at the man who greets them. He is stunning, with a beautiful face and a pleasant frame. A little ashamed of his attraction, Levi turns to look at Erwin, and finds him staring at the man a little too intently, too.

"Greetings," the man says, spreading his arms in a grand gesture of welcome. "It's a pleasure to see you here. My name is Onyankopon, and I am a friend of Zeke's."

Erwin steps forward and offers his hand. "Erwin Smith, Commander of the Survey Corps in Paradis." The handshake lasts too long.

"Are you going to shake his hand all day, or are you going to introduce the rest of us?" Levi asks dryly.

"Right. My apologies, I must be tired from the voyage." Erwin gives a charming smile and releases Onyankopon's hand. He introduces each of them in turn.

"We have a few bedrooms available for you to spend the night," Zeke says. He turns to Onyankopon. "I'll need to send a message to Magath about our arrival." He slips him a piece of paper. Onyankopon reads it, then nods and steps out the door.

There are only four bedrooms, and they have a brief discussion about who sleeps where. Levi's heart beats in his

throat. He needs a room alone with Erwin, but he doesn't want his desperation to show.

Luckily, Hange has their backs. "And Erwin and Levi will need a room together."

"If you think that makes sense," Erwin says humbly.

"The way you two keep looking at each other? No one wants to get in the middle of that."

*Maybe 'has our backs' wasn't the right sentiment*, Levi reflects.

Their room is at the end of the hall upstairs. Though it's small, it feels like a palace after the cramped bunks on the ship.

There's no lock, so Levi piles their bags against the door so they won't have any unwelcome visitors. "Am I just way too horny right now, or was Onyankopon—"

"Stunning? Yeah. Although I'm sure being horny just compounds the attraction."

Levi remembers the lamp post and has to agree.

"Besides ... " Erwin trails a hand across Levi's shoulders. "There is the most beautiful man I have ever seen standing in front of me right now." He leans forward to whisper in his ear, "And I want him."

"You mean me, right?" Levi deadpans, and Erwin laughs. His hands travel down to Levi's ass, rubbing in firm circles.

"I don't know if I want to be inside this beautiful ass, or if I want you inside me."

"So let's do one and then the other." Levi turns to face him.

He has barely turned around when Erwin catches his shoulders and pushes him into the wall, his mouth covering Levi's. His tongue is deep and tastes of mint and lavender. Fire courses through Levi's veins, smoulders between his legs. He leaps up and wraps his legs around Erwin, who catches a thigh with one hand to help him balance in place.

Erwin breaks the kiss and whispers. "We'll have to be quiet." He slowly rubs his nose along the length of Levi's and back down again.

“Shit,” Levi complains under his breath. “Why are our reunions always with a group?”

“It’s inconvenient, isn’t it?” Erwin kisses along his brow. “I want to make you yell. Whatever hotel we end up at tomorrow night, we’re getting a room far, far away from everyone we know.”

With a flicker of regret, Levi drops his feet to the floor. “Slamming me against the wall isn’t going to be quiet.” He ducks out of Erwin’s grasp and kicks his boots off. “I assume you have lubricant with you.”

“Of course. It’s in my bag.”

They undress in a hurry, and Erwin turns off the light and lights a candle while Levi crawls onto the bed. Erwin sidles up behind him, kissing his neck, then gently pushes him face-down against the mattress.

“Use your full weight,” Levi whispers. “Flatten me.” He feels Erwin slide into him, feels him lower his weight. The mattress is firm and the pressure from below and above make Levi’s eyes roll skyward. He pulls the pillow closer and bites it.

Erwin rocks gently, and the angle is so perfect that Levi cries out into the pillow.

A hand brushes hair off Levi’s ear, and hot breath whispers, “Shhh.”

Levi whines a complaint, but bites harder into the pillow.

Erwin rocks again, pushing hard, and Levi feels so full that he sees stars in his vision. He manages to keep his moan down to a whimper this time.

Erwin’s tongue traces the border of his ear, then he whispers, “I’m sorry, Levi, I’m going to last about ten more seconds. I don’t think I’ve been this hard in my life. You feel so good.”

Levi bucks his hips up against him, trying to pull him in deeper, and he hears a whispered curse in response. There are a few strong, even thrusts, then Erwin drives into him and holds his breath through his orgasm. It would be much more satisfying

with a yell, but the ragged breaths afterwards are satisfying in their own way, and Levi bites harder into the pillow.

He can tell Erwin has come back to himself when he finally breathes, “Fuck.”

Levi lifts his mouth from the damp pillow. “Needed that?”

“Yes. Holy shit.” Erwin kisses his ear, still flattening him with his weight. “I’ll bounce back in a few minutes. Did you want to keep going like this, or something else? I believe I was promised an entire hand up my ass.”

“There’s no way you would stay quiet through that.”

“Good point. What do you want?”

“I want to fuck you.”

Another kiss to Levi’s ear, then Erwin lifts his weight. His kiss is still a bit uncoordinated, and he clumsily rolls Levi onto his back and reaches for the lubricant. For a tense moment, Levi thinks he will lose it in Erwin’s slick grip, but he manages to hang on, breathing hard through clenched teeth.

They roll over, so Erwin is laying back against the bed. Levi pushes Erwin’s knees toward his ears. As he eases into him, he sees stars again, and he has to fight to hang on.

“Feels good?” Erwin whispers, reaching up to cup his face.

It takes all his effort to wrench his eyes open a crack. “I’m going to come in about three thrusts.”

Erwin smirks, pleased. “Then make them good ones.”

He’s so warm, and even though it has been a few days, he easily swallows Levi to the hilt; Levi pauses there, controlling his breaths. He smooths his palms on Erwin’s stomach. His abdominal muscles are rigid. *Fuck, that’s not helping.*

One thrust, and he thinks he’s about to crest, but the second brings him even higher, and the third, even higher. Holding back his yell is such a strain that a tear spills onto his cheek. He makes a pleading gasp as the fourth thrust takes him to dizzying heights, and yet still no release.

Erwin traces a finger on his lower lip: an offering. Levi

grabs his wrist and jams two fingers deep into his throat, sucking with such abandon that his teeth dig into Erwin's knuckles.

A few thrusts later, his orgasm begins, but where it's usually a sharp spike and drop, it arcs instead, pulling him gently higher and over, trailing off at the end. He erupts over and over and is gone for so long that he forgets where he is, forgets *who* he is.

Erwin's arms wrap around him, and Levi realizes he has collapsed onto his chest. He can't control his limbs well enough to move, so he stays there, listening to the heartbeat beneath his ear, enjoying the smooth hand stroking his back.

"You are magnificent," Erwin breathes, and Levi gives an intoxicated smile.

Eventually, he has the coordination to roll off him, and they lay side-by-side. Erwin hoists himself upright to clean up. Levi still can't move. Maybe he'll just sleep in the mess. But Erwin comes to his rescue and helps him mop up.

Afterwards, they intertwine on the bed. The mattress is soft, warm, and so much longer than the bunks they squeezed onto on the ship.

"Levi?"

"Yes?"

Erwin pulls away to look at him, his face soft in the candlelight. "I've been doing a lot of thinking over the past few days, and I wish to share something with you."

This sounds serious, and Levi tenses. "Oh?"

"When we have resolved this crisis and return to Paradis, I intend to start working on an exit plan for my role as Commander. I want to start training others to take over my responsibilities so I can fully retire in about two years."

Levi's heart leaps, but he remains cautious. "Are you sure? I know it's been hard for you to step away. You're good at your job."

"Being good at something isn't a reason to keep doing it. Neither is continuing on in the military just because it's what I've

always done. Stepping back into this role is pulling me back under, to a place I never want to go again." Softer, he adds, "Besides, I have a new dream now." He reaches for Levi's hand and squeezes it.

"Oh?" Levi says, throat tight.

"And anyway, Historia is already taking great strides to grow into the Queen we knew. Mikasa carries the wisdom of someone in her mid-twenties. Hange is no longer restricted to titan cures or weapon research; their future is full of endless possibilities. All three of them will quickly outgrow what I can teach them."

Levi is afraid he'll start weeping if he speaks, so he says nothing. That brings them to eight years until they reach 860 again, eight entire extra years of building the life they want together.

Erwin hesitates. "If you agree, of course. I know you spent time with the military in the previous timeline—"

"Only because I had nothing better to do."

"Two years will be enough time to set up the new military structure, coach Historia and Mikasa, and tie up any loose ends. It'll also be enough time to prepare for our lives after the military, whether that's fixing up a cabin, or getting a dog, or whatever we wish." Erwin gives a boyish smile. "What do you think?"

Levi is too choked up to speak, so he leans forward and kisses him instead.

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THE CANDLE BURNS down, and Erwin falls into a deep sleep. Levi sits up and plays with the blond hair for a moment, then pulls on his pants and the nearest shirt, which happens to be Erwin's. It smells like him, and he lifts the collar to his nose and breathes deeply as he slips from the room.

Once he is downstairs in the kitchen, he pours a glass of water and grabs an apple from a basket on the counter.

“Can’t sleep?”

The hair on Levi’s neck stands on end. He turns and sees Zeke sitting at the table. There is a glass and a half-empty bottle of whiskey beside him.

Zeke answers his own question, slurring a little: “Me neither. My last night alive, and I’m spending it drunk. What a beautiful celebration of life.”

Levi’s jaw tightens.

Zeke pushes the bottle forward. “Drink?”

“No.”

“Come on, I’m letting you kill me tomorrow. Indulge me.”

Levi sits. He lifts the bottle and pours it into his mouth, careful not to touch the rim.

“Attaboy. Ready for the big day?”

Levi says nothing.

“You have to make sure not to strike anywhere near my nape. There has to be no doubt that I am human; if you cut the nape, they may think I was actually a shifter and that’s how you killed me. I’m thinking ear to ear.” Zeke gestures across his throat with his thumb. “Or maybe disembowelment, although that will hurt more. You’ve butchered people before, haven’t you, Levi? What do you prefer?”

The whiskey suddenly burns as if it might come back up. Levi closes his eyes until the feeling passes, then says, “You seem cheery for a piece of shit with less than a full day left to live. You have a death wish?”

“I don’t. But I don’t particularly want to keep living, either.” Zeke takes another swig. “My whole life, I was raised to think I was special, I was powerful, I was going to change the world. Now, don’t get me wrong: I’m glad the titan curse is over. But what’s left for me now?”

*Everyone is drunk on something*, Levi thinks. It appears Zeke is drunk on being the saviour of Eldia. *And whiskey*.

“You understand my burden, don’t you, Levi? I was the greatest weapon of Marley; you were the greatest weapon of Paradis. You are in a unique position to understand my perspective. It’s all we’ve ever known, and now that is gone.”

“Just because that was your focus for so long, it doesn’t mean it’s all you can do with your life,” Levi says, half to himself.

“But that’s easier said than done, isn’t it? Tell me: if you didn’t have Erwin to live for, what would you do?”

Levi shifts in his seat, uncomfortable that this murderer can see right through him. He thinks about the decade when he drifted through life, where he withdrew from everyone except Hange and Historia.

“I would survive,” he says, because he knows it’s true.

“An interesting choice of words: survive, not *live*. There’s a difference, isn’t there? And what if you were in that state, simply surviving, and you learned your death would mean a better life for everyone you cared about?”

Levi looks away.

“Exactly,” Zeke says. “And that, dear rival, is why I am going to my death tomorrow: for the sake of those I care about. I’m afraid I’ll have to kick and scream a bit to be convincing, and it won’t be entirely fake. I’m counting on you to finish the job.” He lifts the glass to his lips, and his hand shakes.

Levi lashes out against the pity welling within him. “You killed so many of my friends. You killed Erwin *twice*.”

Zeke’s hand pauses. “Twice,” he repeats, intrigued.

*Shit.* Levi says nothing. He reaches for the bottle again.

“Twice. Is that how you knew my name, when you attacked me on the battlefield?” Zeke sets down the glass and leans forward. He has the boyish light in his eyes Erwin gets sometimes, and it’s so unnerving that Levi takes a long swig. He wipes his mouth.

“You heard me wrong.”

“You found some way to travel through the paths, didn’t you? Does it involve this ritual you were all talking about?”

Levi stares him down.

“Oh, come on,” Zeke says. “I’m going to die tomorrow, and the paths are gone. What harm could I possibly do with this information?”

After warring with himself for a moment, Levi sighs. “Eren mastered Ymir’s powers. He found a way to send us back to create a new timeline to fix some mistakes that threatened to tear apart the paths, possibly the world, in the old timeline. That’s all I’m going to say.”

“That is absolutely fascinating. I wish I could have seen the paths before they were destroyed.” Now he has a dreamlike expression that’s making him look like Hange.

Levi stands, teeth clenched. “I’m going to bed.”

“See you in the morning for the big day.” Zeke pauses, and his face sobered. “I know I’m in no position to make requests, but ... please, make it quick.”

After staring at him for a moment longer, Levi turns and climbs the stairs.

He sits on the edge of the bed and closes his eyes. He recalls rocks shredding soldiers, sees Erwin bleeding out on the roof. He pictures his sword halfway through Zeke’s skull and tries to conjure the rage he felt then—or even the rage he felt a few days ago, when he broke Zeke’s nose. But even that, too, had ended in pity ...

When the sun rises, he has not slept at all.

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A MAN IS STANDING in the kitchen the next morning. He introduces himself as General Theo Magath. He looks like Shadis, so much so that Levi’s exhausted mind keeps muddling the two.

Magath has efficiently prepared for their arrival; Levi suspects he must have started moving on the plan before Zeke and Reiner even left for Paradis. The evidence of Zeke’s betrayal

has already been placed on the desk of the judge presiding over the court martial, and Magath delivered the additional materials from the ship to him this morning. Zeke will be arrested and held in a cell while they deliberate. Magath assures them they already have more than enough information to sentence him to death; Eldian traitors are not given the benefit of the doubt in Marley.

A dinner with several countries' delegates will take place that evening, where Paradis will have the opportunity to present their trade proposals and extend an open invitation to the execution.

"Following the dinner," Magath says bluntly, "the execution will take place."

The execution will take place.

There, Levi will drive his sword through the gut of a panicking man and watch him plead for his life while the light fades from his eyes. Levi glances at Zeke and sees the man staring at nothing, his face sunken around the purple bloom of his broken nose.

*I will fulfill my vow and slaughter this monster. At last, I'll give meaning to all those who gave their lives.*

Erwin turns to glance at him, and that's when Levi realizes he's trembling. He curls his hands into fists on his lap.

Once Magath has finished speaking, silence blankets the room.

After a long moment, he adds quietly, "Zeke, we could still—"

Zeke holds up a hand to stop him. "I am prepared to make this sacrifice. We all have our part to play." He turns to look at Levi, and Levi's blood runs cold.

They return to their rooms to gather their luggage.

Erwin says softly, "Levi."

"What?"

Erwin walks up to him and places a hand on his shoulder,

face so gentle that Levi is afraid he'll unravel. "Are you still okay with this plan?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" He jerks his shoulder away. "So many soldiers gave their lives so I could kill him. I've waited ten entire years for this."

"A lot has changed in that time—even in these last couple weeks. I don't hold you to that vow anymore."

"I know. Let me do this."

And yet, he's so tired.

*Just because that was your focus for so long, it doesn't mean it's all you can do ...*

..J.Q..

ONYANKOPON SEEKS JUST as polite and kind as ever when he returns to the safe house, and Levi wonders if he knows what's in store for Zeke. Aren't they supposedly friends? Maybe he knows and is trying to pretend it won't happen. Just in case, Levi makes no mention of the upcoming execution, and he notices the others avoid talking about it as well.

Onyankopon leads them to a hotel near the military complex. They pause to sort out their rooms and drop off their luggage, and then he takes them on a tour of Liberio. Levi has the impression this is a sales pitch of sorts, an encouragement to share their best resources with Marley in spite of their history.

Liberio is a beautiful city, in a man-made sort of way, with striking brick buildings and flower baskets hanging from lamp posts. Mechanical carriages called automobiles putter along the streets, and Hange spends a good fifteen minutes peppering Onyankopon with questions about them. To his credit, he doesn't seem to lose patience with them.

Levi drifts through it all as if in a dream. He can see Erwin's concerned glances, but ignores them. He just has to get through today, and this will all be done, and they can start planning the next phase of their life.

They stop at a stand to buy some ice cream, a delicious sweet substance that melts in Levi's mouth, and it successfully distracts him from the upcoming execution for a few minutes. Erwin's face is alight, his eyes shining; he buys a second cone in a different flavour, this one green. He offers Levi a lick of it, and it tastes buttery and nutty.

They stop at a photo stand, where Mikasa and Historia have their image captured to be printed on paper—one a serious pose, another with their tongues out and eyes crossed. That is, Mikasa attempts to cross her eyes, but seems incapable of it. Historia tries to coach her and fails miserably. There is plenty of laughter, but not from Levi.

Or from Erwin. He is watching Levi with a concerned furrow to his brow.

An arm loops around Levi's neck, and he's so startled that he almost flips his attacker. Then Hange's voice says, too loudly for their proximity, "And now let's get a photograph of the Survey Corps officers!"

"No," Levi says.

"Aw, come on. It will be fun." Hange drags him toward the backdrop.

The lights are too bright. Levi squints. "Why do they need so many lights? It's daytime."

Hange keeps their arm around him, and Erwin stands behind them, a hand on each of their shoulders. Levi folds his arms over his chest.

The photographer asks, "Do you want a smiling one, or serious poses?"

"Smiling!" Hange says, and Levi lets out a tired sigh.

The photographer drapes a cloth over his head. "Okay, look over here, and don't move until I tell you to stop." A pause. "Little fellow in the front, I'm going to need a smile."

Levi burns with anger. "No."

"Don't mind Levi," Hange says. "This is as smiley as he gets."

The photographer counts, and Levi glares at the camera the entire time. When the posing is complete, the photographer collects their payment and hands them a chit they can use to collect the finished photo the next day. Hange pockets it, delighted.

Onyankopon leads them to a shopping district next. Levi lags behind.

Hange falls back, too, and bumps his shoulder. “What’s wrong? I thought you would be ecstatic about getting a chance to kill—”

“Did Erwin put you up to this?”

Hange looks genuinely confused. “No. I just noticed your sour expression was extra acidic today. What’s going on?”

He spent many years confiding in Hange, and that’s a difficult habit to break, even if that wasn’t *this* Hange. “Why am I so reluctant? I carried Erwin’s last order with me for ten years. It was branded across my chest; I felt it every time I breathed. Now that I finally have the opportunity, why am I dreading it?”

“Well,” Hange says, “maybe I don’t know you as well yet as I did in 860, but I know you pretty well, so I have a guess. It was probably never about the order itself. It was because Erwin gave you the order. And now he’s here, alive and well. That order is not your last link to him anymore, you know?” Hange shrugs and adds, “Besides, you’ve changed a lot in that time. As someone who saw you immediately before and after, the difference is marked.”

“How so?”

“You’re more measured. You think of the bigger picture. You take more initiative, instead of just waiting for orders. And you seem more in touch with your emotions.”

“I don’t know about that last part.”

“You are. It’s as if some of your barriers fell away in that decade.” Hange squeezes his shoulder. “Maybe the Levi who was so desperate to kill him doesn’t exist anymore, and you’re just hanging on to it out of habit.”

He lets out a low breath. “I’m so tired, Hange.”

“I know,” they say. “I am starting to feel that same way already. I can’t imagine what ten more years of this would do to a person.”

“I just have to kill him, and then we can all rest.”

“Maybe,” Hange says. “Or maybe someone else could do it for you.”

Erwin’s voice rings in his mind, from the battle of Shiganshina: *You’re the only one I can trust to destroy the Beast Titan.*

An aching fatigue settles deep in Levi’s bones.

..♪♪..

THEY RETURN TO their hotel rooms to dress for dinner. Erwin adjusts Levi’s cravat and gives him a soft kiss.

“Levi,” he says gently, and that’s all it takes for the walls to crumble.

“I talked to Zeke. Last night.”

“Ah. He didn’t try to manipulate you, did he?”

Levi fiddles with the belted scabbard for his blade; it fits differently from their usual gear scabbards, and he’s too distracted to figure it out. “No, he didn’t. He’s just ...” He trails off, not sure how to put it.

“He’s not the monster you were expecting?” Erwin helps him place the scabbard.

“Yeah.”

Erwin sits on the end of the bed and looks up at him. “We saw them as monsters; they saw us as devils. Neither is accurate. We may seem that way to those who don’t know us, but we are all just humans.”

Levi’s hands are shaking again. “We sacrificed all those lives so I could kill him.”

“We did, but in the heat of battle. We are fighting a different war now.” He reaches up and smooths Levi’s cheek. “Any one of us can do it. It doesn’t have to be you.”

“That’s what Hange said. But it should be me. I don’t want anyone else dirtying their hands with this.” Levi looks down at his hands to emphasize his point, and finds they are no longer shaking.

He stands, clinging to the idea: *I won’t let anyone else do this.* “Let’s get this over with.”

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THE DINNER TAKES place in a formal hall with long tables and tacky jewelled chandeliers. Levi stares at the ornate rugs on the wall and the intricate paintings on the roof. This dining hall makes Historia’s castle look like a run-down home from the Underground.

The five Paridisians tour the room, shaking hands, meeting well over a dozen delegates. Erwin and Historia take turns talking up Paradis, its resources, and its desire to join the rest of the world as a trading partner. Most of their conversation partners look impressed with their pitches.

*Maybe they didn’t expect “devils” to be so eloquent.* For the first time that day, Levi feels a flicker of hope. This can work. The last step is to convince the world the shifters are truly gone.

Dinner is served: a variety of breads and vegetables and a rich noodle soup, then a platter of strange shellfish, followed by a rich and spicy dish the server calls a ‘tofu curry.’ Levi likes the way the tofu squishes between his teeth, and the spice tingles his lips and leaves a pleasant feeling in his belly. Historia struggles with the curry, her face turning bright red as she coughs. Mikasa subtly eats her dish.

Dessert is a honey cake served alongside a tiny teacup filled with a dark substance that doesn’t look like tea. Levi sniffs it.

“Coffee,” the server says.

The drink is more bitter than tea, and Levi thinks to himself that it smells better than it tastes. He finishes it to be

polite, but wishes for a cup of tea instead. Erwin, meanwhile, asks for a refill, and Hange drinks several cups.

As the dessert plates are cleared away, Magath stands. “Thank you for joining us for this welcome dinner for our new friends from Paradis. As you have seen, they are eager to open up trade to the world and prove they are trustworthy and reliable. They have also brought with them the gift of justice. Your majesty Queen Historia, please join me so we may explain.”

Historia stands and strides toward him. Mikasa shadows her, ever-vigilant.

“People of the world,” Historia says, her voice strong and clear. “We know your understanding of Paradis has long been one of fear. You know us as monsters, as murderers. The reason we have come here is to announce the dawn of a new era. The titan curse has been broken.”

A series of gasps ripples through the tables. Levi turns to look at Erwin; he is watching Historia with shining eyes.

“This, of course, is a double-edged sword,” Historia continues. “It means you need not fear us any longer, for we are the same as any human. But it also means Marley no longer has a titan military with which to defend itself.”

“You may be asking yourself how this came to pass. The one who broke this curse is the Warchief Zeke Yeager, your Beast Titan.”

More gasps and murmurs. Historia waits until the room is silent to continue.

“He used Marley for his own gain, to gather the power he needed to contact the founder Ymir and end the curse. This action was not sanctioned by the Marleyan military, and it effectively stripped Paradis of our ability to defend ourselves against the world.”

“And this is good timing, for I had recently taken control of the throne in Paradis, and my mandate is to open up our borders and forge allyships within the greater world. This is an opportunity for Paradis to become a beacon of peace and

support for your lands. We have ample farmland on which to grow food for your nations. We have plenty of land space and will welcome your people with open arms, should they choose to live abroad. Our island is built on the world's largest natural gas repository, and we are excited at the prospect of sharing this valuable resource with you.

"We understand that it will take some time to rebuild your trust. We will work hard to earn it through rebate programs, tariff agreements, and, of course, the passage of time." She turns to Magath. "And now, there is the matter of Zeke Yeager."

"Yes." Magath stands tall, his arms clasped behind his back. "Warchief Zeke Yeager has been found guilty of plotting to destroy Marley. Judge Lowen delivered his guilty verdict this morning based on mountains of evidence. There were no noble intentions behind Yeager's actions; his sole goal was to sabotage the Marleyan military."

"What's more," Historia adds, "Paradis has found him guilty of war crimes. He was responsible for the slaughter of thousands upon thousands of civilians in cold blood."

Magath's voice cracks, and he says sadly, "I was fond of Zeke. This betrayal breaks my heart, and I'm sure it breaks some of yours as well. He was our Boy Wonder; we thought he would lead us all to glory. But it is very clear that he must be put to death for crimes of this severity." His throat bobs. "This is also an opportunity for all of us to witness, for ourselves, that the titan era is over. Our friends from Paradis have offered to commit the execution in a way that leaves no doubt. They will spare the nape area of the neck, the only weakness in shifters. If Zeke Yeager dies before us, we will know he is just a man."

A voice calls, "And what if he shifts into a titan and kills us all?"

"He won't make it that far," Erwin says, rising to his feet. "We have with us Levi and Mikasa Ackerman, the two strongest soldiers on Paradis, and they are under strict orders to control

Yeager. If he makes a wrong move, they will destroy him on the spot."

Levi grits his teeth. They are so confident Zeke can't shift that they didn't bother putting on their gear; like Levi, Mikasa is wearing a single belt scabbard with her blade. For a moment, he wonders if Zeke has managed to win their trust too soon, but then he remembers the pitiful, drunken wreck from last night. His instincts say that was real, and he's rarely wrong.

"The execution will take place in the great hall shortly," Historia announces. "I understand an execution is distasteful to watch. However, we recommend that at least one delegate from each of your countries attends, to confirm what we already know: the age of titans has ended."

The two of them thank the delegates and return to their seats. The table is suddenly a roar of conversation and questions.

Erwin grips Levi's shoulder, and he doesn't need to speak the words aloud: *it's time*.

Levi nods and stands, his hand tight on the hilt of his blade.

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**THE GREAT HALL** is an enormous auditorium, and within it, there is already a sizable audience. Spotlights illuminate the stage as if they will be putting on a play, and Levi's stomach twists.

"This way," Magath says, voice cracking. The five Paradisians fall into line behind him and file toward the stage. They pass Onyankopon, who catches Levi's eye, then looks away with a pained expression. *Well, if he didn't know before, he does now.*

Onstage, they stand in a row. The spotlight is so bright that Levi can't see the audience anymore, but he can hear the hum of their chatter.

A judge walks onstage, followed by two uniformed men dragging someone behind them. It's Zeke. He is bound at the

wrists and ankles by chains, and he is thrashing and pulling against the restraints. His eyes lock on Magath.

“Theo,” he bellows. “Help me!”

Levi’s stomach drops at the fear in his voice.

The uniformed men toss Zeke into the centre of the stage and hoist him onto his feet. His eyes are wide and his body shakes. “Please,” he gasps, as if someone is squeezing the word out of him. He looks at Levi with wild eyes, and Levi looks away.

The judge steps forward and yells for silence. He reads from his notes: “Zeke Yeager, the legal systems of both Marley and Paradis have found you guilty of treason and war crimes. The punishment is immediate death, to be administered under Marleyan law by the delegates from Paradis. Will the designated executioner please step forward?”

Levi inhales deeply, exhales, then steps forward, drawing his blade. Zeke looks at him with terror in his eyes. He whimpers something that Levi can’t quite catch, but part of it sounds like “Ksaver.”

“When you are ready,” the judge announces, and steps back.

Levi pushes Zeke to his knees and looms over him.

“Please, Levi.” His desperation is too real to be fake. Panic constricts Levi’s chest.

“I’m going to enjoy this, you monkey piece of shit,” he growls, trying to convince himself. His hands are shaking.

Zeke doubles over, sobbing.

The blade rattles. Levi can’t bring himself to swing it. He starts to spiral into himself, acid rising in his throat.

*I’m failing. I’m failing ...*

A hand clamps his shoulder.

Levi turns. Erwin stands behind him. His face is hard, the ruthless Commander of the Survey Corps, the man who would send a dozen soldiers to their deaths if it meant a necessary strategic advantage.

Levi's eyes flood with tears. "Why can't I do it?" he rasps. "I'm failing you."

The mask stays up, but Erwin's voice is kind. "No, Levi. To be held back by compassion is not failure. You've sacrificed so much for us to come this far. Let me be the one who takes the last step."

"You shouldn't have to dirty your hands with this."

Erwin smiles sadly. "What's one more corpse on the pile?" He holds out his hand.

Levi trembles and passes him the blade.

Erwin grabs Zeke by the hair, dragging him back onto his knees. "For all the lives you have taken," he announces, his voice echoing through the hall. "For all the chaos you have sown in your homeland and in mine."

His stroke is strong. It strikes Zeke's waist in the same place where a rock once struck him, then cleaves the man in half. Blood sprays onto Erwin, onto Levi, onto the stage.

As the audience gasps, Erwin kneels in the growing puddle of blood. "Your sacrifice will save us all," he says quietly to Zeke. "Thank you."

Then Zeke Yeager is no more.

# ❖ Twenty-Seven ❖

## DREAMS OF A PEACEFUL FUTURE

ERWIN'S SUIT is spattered with Zeke Yeager's blood; it drips off the end of the blade. He rises to his feet to face the audience, but the spotlights blind him. The audience's uproar echoes around him, and he can't tell if it's celebration, horror, or a combination of the two.

Two medics, provided by delegates from other nations, check Zeke's pulse. They nod.

Magath's voice booms, "Zeke Yeager is dead." He grabs Erwin's hand and holds it over his head. "The titan curse is ended. People of the world, we call on you to re-examine your long-held beliefs about Eldians. May Zeke Yeager's crimes result in an opportunity for peace."

Now the roars are hitting Erwin like waves in an ocean. He feels so weightless that he wonders if they'll knock him down. The enormity of what he has done begins to trickle through him, setting every hair on end.

*Levi.* He turns, but the space where he stood is empty.

Historia appears by his side, and he stares dumbly at her. She cocks her head at the audience. "This is our chance to secure some contracts."

He looks down at his suit, the sword, the bloodstains. "I ..."

Hange steps forward. "Erwin isn't going to win any favours looking like that. I'll have your back, Historia, but you're more than capable of handling this even without me. You've been doing a great job so far."

"Did you see where Levi went?" Erwin asks.

“He slipped out the back door a few minutes ago. Go ahead. We have this under control.”

Erwin nods.

He must look terrifying, walking through town with a bloodied blade and a blood-stained suit. Shadows in the alleys provide ample cover, but there’s no way to avoid walking through the brightly lit lobby of the hotel. He pulls his hat down low and marches through it with purpose, hoping everyone present is the type to mind their own business.

No one stops him.

Inside the hotel room, the bathroom door is ajar, and he can hear water running within. He knocks on the door; it swings open.

Levi is standing naked, bent over the bathtub, frantically scrubbing at his wet clothing with a washcloth. The suit is a medium grey-blue that will never hide the stains. Erwin kneels beside him.

“We’ll get you a new suit,” he says softly.

Levi turns to him with wild eyes. “Why am I like this?”

“Like what?”

“This!” Levi gestures to himself, to the suit. “I’ve killed so many people, so why—? I can’t breathe. I can’t—” His breath comes in short gasps.

Erwin tries to reach for him, but Levi jerks away, staring, and he remembers he is drenched in blood. With a nod, Erwin strips down and dumps his stained clothing in the water. He grabs a cloth and begins to clean Levi’s blade.

The motion seems to calm Levi. For a few minutes, he watches, then he stands. He wipes his face, which leaves a smear of blood on his cheek.

Erwin finishes polishing the blade and sets it on the ground. He stands, too. “We need to shower.”

They wash each other until the water runs clear, and even then, Levi continues to scrub himself until his skin is red. Eventually, Erwin reaches out to still his hands.

“You’re clean, Levi.”

Levi grips Erwin by the wrists and turns his hands over to examine his palms. “You dirtied these hands for me.”

“I did what was necessary.”

“The person you had to be in there—”

“I would do it again, Levi.” He detaches from the other’s grip. “Let’s not discuss it.”

They dress in clean clothes, and Erwin finds he’s too agitated to stay in the confined space of the room. “I wish to go for a walk. Care to join me?”

Levi nods. He seems calmer now that the blood is no longer visible.

They wander along the street. The air is still warm, but has the faintest scent of autumn to it. A light breeze washes over Erwin and he imagines it cleansing him of his sins.

A nearby café is open and has a pleasant outdoor seating area lit with a string of lights. It looks warm and cozy, just what Erwin’s spirit needs right now.

“Perhaps some tea?” he suggests, and Levi nods.

They sit outside. Levi peruses the menu with great focus; he selects a tea Erwin has never heard of before. Jasmine. It smells floral. Levi makes a pleased face when he tries it.

Erwin orders another cup of coffee, hoping it will soothe his nerves. It tastes delicious. They share a chocolate cake, which has a rich, satisfying flavour. Levi claims to have no appetite, but he still manages a few bites.

They order a new round of drinks, then they hear a strained voice behind them,

“Erwin. Levi.”

They turn to see Onyankopon. They have come to know the man as having a proud stance, his shoulders thrown back; now, he is hunched, and his eyes are just as haunted as Levi’s were.

“Needed a pick-me-up,” he murmurs, and they nod their agreement.

“Would you care to join us?” Erwin asks.

“Only if I’m not intruding.”

“It’s fine,” Levi says.

Onyankopon pulls up a chair and orders a hot chocolate and a croissant. Erwin isn’t sure what either of those is, but when they arrive, they smell delicious

“I’m surprised to see you two here.” Onyankopon takes a sip of the whipped cream topping his drink. “I expected you to continue working the crowd.”

“We needed to step away,” Erwin says. “The intensity was more than we anticipated. We came here to help us calm down.”

Onyankopon laughs softly and points at the coffee. “That’s not going to help you calm down.”

“No?”

“Coffee contains far more caffeine than tea.”

Erwin looks at the delicious drink. “Ah.”

Levi says, “We must look like dumb fucks to you.”

“On the contrary, it’s refreshing. I enjoy seeing all of you discover so many things for the first time. Your innocent joy is a bright light during dark times.” His face falls, and he is silent.

“I’m sorry,” Erwin says. “I know you and Zeke were close.”

“I don’t know if I’d say ‘close,’ exactly. But I trusted him and followed him. I knew he was working against the government, just not all the specifics. I didn’t know he had killed so many civilians in Paradis.” His eyes lift, glassy, and he says softly, “Is that accusation true, or was that just part of the show?”

“He was directly responsible for a few hundred deaths. The operations to retrieve the Founding Titan killed thousands overall; I can only assume he was the one driving those operations.”

Onyankopon lets out a long sigh, then shakes his head. “I am sorry to hear that.”

They pause to drink more of their drinks. A cool breeze wafts along the street, contrasting with the hot drinks.

“What will you do now?” Erwin asks.

“I’m not sure.” Onyankopon stares absently into the distance. “I’m a pilot, but technology of all sorts fascinates me. I’ve enjoyed speaking with Hange about the technology you have on Paradis. I’m thinking of taking the initiative to become a technology consultant. I may be able to help set up Paradis’ infrastructure to facilitate your new trade agreements.”

“We could use your help.” Erwin shifts his gaze to Levi. “We have someone in Paradis who would be a good choice to help with our infrastructure.”

Levi’s mouth twists. “Alec. I guess he technically has the right experience, huh?”

No matter that he has that experience in the other timeline; if he was successful once, he will be successful again. Erwin says, “If you feel like voyaging to Paradis any time soon, we would be happy to introduce you.”

“That may be a good plan.” Onyankopon traces the curve of the mug handle, looking thoughtful.

Levi says, “What do you think will happen to the rest of the Eldians here?”

“I don’t know. Trust will take a long time to build. I suspect Marley will be reluctant to change the current system after so many years.”

“Our borders are open to all Eldians who wish to start fresh,” Erwin says.

Onyankopon nods. “I’ll make sure Magath knows to suggest this. He has greater influence on the government than any of us.” He drains the rest of his drink and stands. “It has been a pleasure speaking with you, but I should get started with Zeke’s estate. And there are a few people I need to notify of his death.”

Erwin tries to feel a pang of guilt, but he feels nothing. “Best of luck.”

“Thank you. By the way, I’ll take care of your bill, so please enjoy any food and drink you like.” Onyankopon bids them both goodnight, then steps away.

Levi watches him leave. “He’s taking it pretty well.”

“I think his composure is practiced.”

“A mask?”

“Yeah. It was generous of him to visit with us. I expected him to feel animosity toward us, me in particular.”

“Well, Zeke was on board with the plan. It’s hard to feel animosity about something he agreed to.” Levi closes his eyes and gives a long, heavy sigh.

“Are you okay?”

“Now that the plan is complete, everything is hitting at once. I’m going to need a few months to process everything that’s happened since I first found your titan in Shiganshina.”

“It’s been a lot,” Erwin agrees.

“It has. At least it was all worthwhile. We saved your life. We kept everyone’s memories. And now we are in position for lasting peace, not just a fragile deal.” And yet, he still looks sad.

“Levi,” Erwin says softly.

“I’m sorry, I just ...” The grey eyes dip.

A server comes by to collect their empty plates, then tops up their drinks. When she leaves, Levi is still staring at the table, lost in thought.

“Did it scare you,” Erwin asks, “what I did to Zeke?”

Levi looks up, eyes wide. “No.” He pauses. “Maybe surprised me. It’s the first time I’ve seen you kill a man.” Before Erwin can interject, he adds, “*Directly* kill a man.”

“I suppose it is.”

There’s hesitation in his voice: “Was it your first time?”

“No,” Erwin says, keeping his gaze steady.

After a long pause, Levi gives a humourless laugh. “Am I ever going to know you? You have layers and layers to you, and every time I think I’ve peeled back them all ... How many?”

“Three.” Erwin has never discussed this with anyone. It will be good to do it now, while his emotions are still numbed by shock. “Two were before we met. I accused the wrong noble of the wrong crime. Six assassins jumped Miche and me in a dark alley.”

“Six? That isn’t a fair fight.”

“Not really, but they still underestimated us. One of them had Miche on the ground and was about to stab him. I snapped his neck.”

Levi’s eyes widen. “What?”

“I didn’t even think.” Erwin looks down at his hands. “He was too focussed on his knife. I stood behind him, clamped my hands, and twisted. I’ll never forget the sound. He fell, and Miche and I stared at each other in shock.”

Levi is staring at him with a mixture of horror and intrigue, as if he’s a stranger spinning a yarn at a tavern. “Then what happened?”

“I don’t recall; adrenaline took over. When the dust settled, Miche was pulling me off one of them. I had injured him too badly; he died in front of us. Miche had killed another, and the others ran away.” He takes a sip of coffee before continuing. “We were lucky that Nile was on patrol that night. I convinced him to frame it as a gang fight. Miche and I both had lacerations and bruises, but we were able to hide them. Either that, or Keith noticed and turned a blind eye.”

“Shit,” Levi says.

Erwin nods. “Indeed. Not one of the happier moments of my past. But it must have bolstered my reputation; no other opponents bothered with assassins.” He pauses. “Aside from Lobov sending you.”

“Assassin,” Levi murmurs to himself, as if the word doesn’t fit. “That asshole sent me after you, knowing you had snapped a man’s neck with your bare hands?”

“Clearly he was confident in your abilities.”

“Or I was expendable. Okay, so that’s two kills. What about the third?”

“Zeke.”

“Oh.” Levi stares at him, horrified. “You mean to tell me your first cold-blooded kill was Zeke, and the other two were in self defense?”

“I wouldn’t call it cold-blooded. He was the one who planned it.”

“Seemed like he was trying to un-plan it, in the end.”

“Besides.” Erwin grips the mug; his knuckles turn white. “My motives were not completely altruistic. I’ll peel back another layer for you, Levi: I have a vengeful side. I watched Zeke reduce the entire Survey Corps to pulp and dust, save for nine people, who were left deeply scarred by their losses. And I felt his rocks rip through me twice. A part of me wanted to hurt him.”

A weight descends on them both as he mentions the topic they have both been dancing around.

Levi finally asks, “Did it hurt?”

“Yes,” Erwin says gently. “I knew I would not survive.”

“You could have, if I had chosen differently.”

“Well, that point is moot, because I survived anyway.”

Erwin reaches across the table to lay his hand on Levi’s. “You know what my last conscious thoughts were, both times?”

“What?”

“The smoke cleared just enough for me to see you striking one of the titans near Zeke. And my last thought was, ‘*I entrust the meaning of my life to you.*’ I fell in complete and total peace.”

Levi draws in a shaky breath and bites his lower lip, his eyes glassy.

“You did so well, Levi. Look how far we have come.”

Erwin stares solemnly at him. “We have a new chance, thanks to you.”

“A lot of others made sacrifices for this, too. I should check in on Mikasa.”

“Yes. And I wish to speak with Historia and see how she’s feeling about everything.”

“You’re proud of her, aren’t you?”

Erwin smiles. “I am. I don’t suppose I have any right to be.”

“I think you do. Those kids look up to you more than you realize.”

“And to you as well.”

“I guess,” Levi says, shrugging off the praise.

They finish their drinks and begin the walk back to the hotel, hand-in-hand. The numbness is starting to wear off now, and Erwin tries to swallow back the growing knot in his throat.

“What is it?” Levi asks.

“How long will it take to get his face out of my head?”

Levi pauses, then says, “You won’t.”

That’s grim. But Zeke’s face isn’t the worst of it. “Levi, I spoke earlier of my lust for vengeance. I felt a hunger, a violent one. Part of me celebrated when I felt the blade strike his flesh.” He can’t look at Levi’s face in case he sees judgement there. “It was the same when I was fighting off those assassins, all those years ago.”

“Don’t give that too much thought,” Levi says calmly. “It’s just the adrenaline rush. It’s not really *you*.”

“What do you mean?”

“In moments of life-versus-death, people become animals. Fight or flight. The surge of energy that comes with it can be intense, almost addictive.” He glances at Erwin. “Knowing how much you love risk, it makes sense that you would interpret that rush as a positive sensation. I feel the same thing every time, and I remember every single one of their faces.” He shrugs it off. “We do what we have to do in order to survive.”

Erwin asks softly, “How old were you? The first time?”

“Thirteen.” Levi’s face twists, and Erwin thinks about all the trauma they each had to shoulder from a young age.

They enter the hotel in silence. Their room is in a tower over a pool area that is closed late at night. Erwin paid extra for this room, thinking it would allow them to be as loud as they liked. He didn’t expect the evening’s events to be so traumatic. *But of course they would be. You were just thinking with your dick.*

Levi removes his shoes, then pads to the bed. He nods at a paper bag sitting on Erwin's suitcase. "Did you buy something today?"

"Oh." Erwin's face burns; this is not an appropriate time for the gift. "Yes. I sneaked away when we were all out shopping and picked up a little something we can use. But it can wait." He should have stashed it inside his luggage.

"Now I'm curious." Levi moves toward it. "Jewellery?"

"No, it's from an adult shop." Erwin clears his throat, embarrassed.

Levi opens the bag and draws out a metal tear-shaped object. A sparkling green gem is nested in its flared base.

"A butt plug?" He glances at Erwin. "What if Hange had asked what was in the bag?"

"I would have lied. Anyway, I thought ..." Erwin shrugs. "We both enjoy—" He manages to stop himself before the phrase *anal stimulation* comes tumbling out of his mouth. "This is not great timing for this conversation."

"Hmm." Levi tests its weight. "Good craftsmanship."

"That's what I thought."

"What else is in here?" Levi rustles through the bag and pulls out a jar. "Extra thick lubricant?"

Erwin's ears burn. "The lubricant we have is good, but it dissolves quickly, so if we were ever to do something that took a lot of time ... "

Levi looks at him, clearly confused.

Erwin sighs. "At the beach, when you had your fingers inside me. That was ... new. I liked it."

"New? You've never been fingered before?"

"Yes, but one or two fingers, that's it. Most of my encounters were casual enough that foreplay didn't get very intimate or experimental."

"Huh." Levi looks back down at the plug and the bottle, rolling them in his hands. "Then how about we shove this thing inside me, and I finger you?"

Erwin blinks. “Are you in the right headspace?”

“Getting lost inside you sounds like a nice distraction. You?”

“I could use a distraction, too. And I had so many cups of coffee that I probably won’t be sleeping for a while, anyway.”

Levi steps up to him and wraps his arms around him, leaning in for a hug. “Then let’s set everything up.”

They take some time to prepare for a long night. Levi lays a towel on the sheets and clips his nails short, then files them until they’re blunt. Erwin sets out candles for some soft lighting, and takes a moment to reassure himself that he’s clean. He studies himself in the bathroom mirror. *Tell him what you want. Just tell him.*

He strips down and gives himself an extra wash, and then there is nothing to do to stall anymore. Time to face his shyness.

He steps out of the bathroom fully naked. Levi is wearing only his underwear; he’s folding some washcloths on the nightstand. His eyes lift to meet Erwin’s, then trail down his body with such a strong look of desire that Erwin begins to harden.

They close the gap and meet in a deep kiss. Levi’s hands grip his chest, thumbs circling his nipples.

When they pull away, Erwin says, “I must admit, I’m curious.”

“About what?”

“You mentioned your entire hand … shoving it … ” He blushes, and curses himself for being so awkward. “I feel like a virgin all over again.”

Levi runs his hands down Erwin’s abdomen and back up. “You want to see how far we can stretch you.”

“Yes.”

“So I get to be the experienced lover who guides you through your first time getting fisted?” The grey eyes sparkle.

“There is no one else in the world I would trust with this.”

Their gazes hold, then Levi grips Erwin’s hand and pulls him to the bed.

They kiss deeply, and something has changed from the night before; Levi is all softness and patience. After they have spent some time kissing, Levi pulls away to look at him.

“Lie on your back,” he says softly.

Erwin lays down, and Levi slides a pillow and a towel under his hips to tilt them.

“Is that comfortable?”

Erwin chuckles at his concerned expression. “I’m not delicate, Levi.”

“I know. If this is going to work, you need to be relaxed.”

“I don’t know if I know how to relax.”

“I’ll help you with that. But first ... ” Levi reaches for the toy and the lubricant. “Are you putting this in me, or am I doing it myself?”

“Let me do it.”

Levi swings his ass around, and Erwin runs his thumb down the crack, taking a moment to enjoy the view. Then he slathers lubricant on the toy and gently works it inside. He stops when Levi gives a sharp cry.

“Levi?”

“It’s cold!”

“I should have warmed it up for you first. Do you need me to start over?”

“No, no, it’s still nice.” Levi shifts his hips back and forth a little as if getting comfortable.

He looks so beautiful with the green jewel. Erwin presses on it. Levi cries out and his back arches.

“Fuck!”

Erwin shifts up to run his tongue in a circle around the gem, and Levi bucks back against him.

“Fuck, I’m so sensitive. It hits just the right ... Fuck!”

“You okay?” Erwin asks, a bit proud that his purchase is being received so well.

“Yes. Yes, I am very, very good. Shit.”

Erwin presses his thumb into the base again. “It’s driving me crazy thinking of that hard metal inside you, thick and unyielding.” He shifts his hips, driving into the air. “I should have bought two.”

“Why; are you jealous?”

“Yes.” A bead of precum drips onto Erwin’s abdomen. “I want to be that toy. And I want one myself. I want to feel how full and hard it is inside me.”

Levi turns to face him; his cock is rigid and so beautiful that Erwin is tempted to abandon their plan and take him into his mouth instead.

But before he can, Levi slides his palms along the inside of Erwin’s thighs, settling between them. He drags his tongue up Erwin’s length, then takes him into his mouth.

Erwin’s head rolls back. The small mouth is so gentle that it’s torturous. He thinks about that hard, unyielding metal inside Levi, and suddenly feels a gap inside him, a craving.

“I need you,” he gasps. “Inside me.”

Levi slowly circles a finger, not pressing in just yet. The craving is an ache now.

“Please,” Erwin rasps.

“One finger?”

“More.”

Levi coats two fingers with lubricant. He gently eases them inside. Erwin is ready for this; he takes him all the way to the knuckles. It feels good, but he is still aching for more.

But Levi takes his time, sliding in and out, stretching, massaging. He looks up at Erwin, his lips parted.

“More,” Erwin begs.

Levi eases his fingers out and adds a third. The stretch is a little stronger now, but still comfortable. When the fingers slide against his prostate, Erwin cries out and angles his hips to thrust against the pressure.

“Already desperate enough that you’re fucking yourself on my fingers?” Levi’s voice is almost a purr, and Erwin’s eyes

roll upwards, eyelids fluttering. “Does that mean you want another one?”

“Your whole hand. Your whole *arm*. All of you.” The words are pouring from his mouth and he can’t stop them.

Levi gives a low, soft chuckle. “Let’s start with another finger.” He pulls out and applies more lubricant, and then slides against the entrance, fingers dripping wet. Now Erwin sees why he has the towel; he feels the lubricant dripping down his tailbone.

This time, the stretch verges on pain, and he clenches.

“Relax,” Levi says gently, pulling back. “Open yourself up to me.”

The phrase makes Erwin think of a flower unfurling. He controls his breaths and tries to relax his muscles. Levi presses into him just a centimetre or so, working in gentle circles.

“Am I moving too fast? Should I go back to three?”

“No, this feels ...” Erwin feels the pain easing into pleasure. “This feels incredible.”

Levi pushes a little deeper, and the burning stretch is back; Erwin jerks. But then he pictures himself as a book, Levi opening it, fingers gliding across the pages.

“More. I need more.”

“Don’t get greedy. We need to take this slowly and gently.” Levi lightly twists his hand, and Erwin shudders. “Did that hurt?”

“A little bit.”

“Then we’ll stay like this for now.” Levi kisses the inside of his thigh. “Are you starting to get a sense for what motions you like?”

Erwin can’t find an answer.

“I can push in and out, like this.” Levi withdraws his hand a tiny bit, then pushes in again, and Erwin lets out a shuddering moan. “Or I can move like this.” He gently moves his hand in circles, the pressure rolling around inside him. “Or I can massage like this.” His fingertips find Erwin’s prostate, and he gently massages it.

Erwin throws his head back and yells. He tries to close his mouth, but he can't move.

"I see. You can come from this, can't you?" Levi presses a bit more firmly.

A slew of curses leave Erwin's mouth in a strained, high-pitched tone.

"I don't think I want you to come just yet. You'll get too sensitive. Though it's tempting, when you sound like that." His hand stops moving. Erwin gasps and pushes against it, trying to keep the stimulation going.

"Does it still hurt?"

"No," Erwin breathes. "No, it feels so good, it all feels so good. I need more, I need—" He cries out again as Levi presses deeper.

"That's my whole hand except my thumb."

"Fuck!"

"The thumb will be the most difficult part." Levi's hand is perfectly still. With the break from the constant stimulation, Erwin is able to lift his head. Levi is harder than he has ever seen him, glistening.

"You like doing this to me, Levi?"

"I think I could come just from listening to you. The sounds you make ..." Levi's eyes search his. "Do you still want my whole hand? We could stop at four fingers for tonight if it will be too much."

The stretch is satisfying now, and this could be enough, but Erwin is feeling the urge to push himself. "Keep going."

Levi gently eases his hand out and crawls up Erwin's body to kiss him. Erwin reaches around and presses against the gem, trying to roll the plug in small circles; Levi cries out into his mouth. So much warm liquid spills onto Erwin's stomach that he thinks, at first, Levi is coming, but it's dangling in clear threads.

"Still sensitive," Erwin observes.

"Shit," Levi pants. "Stop, stop. I don't want to come yet."

Erwin withdraws his hand. They exchange another kiss, then Levi moves back between his legs. He coats his entire hand with lubricant. Erwin watches, suddenly aware of the chill in the room; he shivers.

“Still okay?” Levi asks.

“Yes.”

“Here’s how this will work. I’m going to tuck my hand like this.” Levi touches all five fingertips together. “My hand is going to get progressively bigger until we get past my knuckles, so we’ll take it very slowly. It will get more comfortable once we get to my wrist. If it starts to hurt too much, you tell me to stop. Intensity is normal. Pain isn’t.”

Erwin is hung up on the words, *once we get to my wrist*. He feels that empty hunger inside him again.

At first, it’s not much different than four fingers. But then the stretch sends alarms ringing through his body, and he feels a burst of adrenaline.

“Wait,” he gasps.

Levi doesn’t move. Erwin can’t stop gasping. He has never felt anything like this, and he can’t tell if he likes it or not.

“Want me to stop?”

“No.”

“Then breathe,” Levi murmurs. “Slowly in and out, deep from your belly, like you’re doing stretching exercises.”

Erwin takes in a shuddering breath, and all those years of physical training kick in. He draws long, slow breaths, willing his muscles to relax. Soon, the urgency subsides, and he’s left with an enjoyable stretch.

“How is that?” Levi murmurs.

“Nice. So nice.” Erwin’s breaths are loud. “Deeper.”

“We’ll get there.” Levi shifts the pressure a tiny bit, and bolts of electricity shoot up Erwin’s body.

“Fuck!”

“Keep breathing. It’s okay. We can back off any time you want.”

Erwin forces his eyes open. He sees Levi watching him intently, arm unmoving. Levi is hard and dripping, and Erwin subconsciously opens wider for him.

“Ready?”

Erwin nods.

The hand slips a little deeper, and Erwin controls his breaths. That stretch, it’s so good; he’s convinced he’s going to come any minute.

He feels Levi’s knuckles press against the entrance.

“This part might get difficult,” Levi says quietly. “We’ll take it very, very slowly. I need to know exactly how you’re feeling, so keep talking through it, okay?”

“Okay.”

Levi drizzles extra lubricant around his hand, then pushes a tiny bit forward. Erwin gasps.

“Tell me what you’re feeling.”

He tries to find the words. “It’s a wall, it’s too tight, it feels so good.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Yes. No. I—”

“Breathe,” Levi whispers.

Their gazes lock. They breathe in unison, deep, steady breaths, and every inch of Erwin’s skin begins to glow and tingle. “I’m relaxing. I can take more.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. More.”

Levi presses deeper, and Erwin’s yell is almost a roar. “Fuck!”

“Too much?”

“Don’t stop, don’t—” Erwin yells again. The waves are pleasure, then pain, and back again, and it’s so intense that his head tosses on the pillow. “Levi! Fuck.”

“Breathe.”

His breaths are staccato, and he can’t bring them under

control. For a moment, he panics. *Let go*, he tells himself. *Trust Levi*.

“Erwin,” Levi says, a note of concern in his voice. “Do you want me to pull out?”

“No! No, I just—” It’s so difficult to form words. He can’t describe what he’s feeling. It’s as if Levi is not just entering him, he’s fusing with him, becoming him. The waves of pain are easing up now, and it’s a strange, succumbing pleasure. It’s a rush of freedom.

“When you’re ready.” Levi is not moving a muscle, carefully protecting him from any new sensations. “One more push should do it.”

Erwin is starting to feel a giddy high. “Deeper.”

Levi pushes, and there’s a ring of pain, but then he slides inside. This time, Erwin *does* roar, arching his back, driving down. He’s never felt anything like this. Levi is him, he is Levi, he is so full and so *complete*.

“Levi,” he gasps, and tears spring to his eyes, spill onto his cheeks.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m okay, I’m okay, holy shit.” He pushes down, feels him deeper, and hears a wailing sound leave his mouth.

“I feel your pulse.” Levi has wonder in his voice. “I feel you, Erwin.”

“Shit. Shit!” Erwin drops his forearm over his eyes, head tossed back.

“Look at me,” Levi says, and it’s a struggle, but Erwin manages to lift his head to look at him. Tears are still dripping down his cheeks, and he sees Levi’s eyes watering, too.

“You are so beautiful,” Levi rasps.

“Fuck me with your hand,” Erwin begs.

Levi moves his hand gently in and out, and it’s too much, it’s too much ... Erwin has no control over the sounds leaving his mouth now. His throat is raw from the noises he’s uttering.

Levi’s voice surprises him. “I’m going to come.”

“Yeah?” Erwin fights his compulsion to arch his neck and lifts his head to watch.

Levi isn’t touching himself, but he’s rocking back against his heels; he must be driving the plug into himself. He stares at him with a frantic expression, then his eyes close and his mouth hangs open and he gives a high-pitched wail. Erwin has never heard a sound like it—it spears through his heart, his groin. A tremble quakes through Levi, through his arm, into Erwin.

Then Levi’s head and shoulders slump, his breaths ragged. “Fuck. I didn’t know I could come without touching my dick.” His eyes are glassy, his face flushed. “Fuck.” He rises onto his knees a little and uses his free hand to ease out the plug. It lands on the floor with a thump. He doesn’t seem to notice; he gently moves the hand that’s inside Erwin. “You’re so warm around my hand. You’re so fucking warm.”

“You’re in so deep,” Erwin breathes.

“The sounds you’re making, *fuck*.”

“You’re part of me, I feel you …”

Levi says softly, “Do you want to try to come?”

“I don’t know if I can.” It’s so intense, *too* intense, and yet ...  
“Yes.”

Then Levi’s mouth is around him, and he’s hardening, he’s burning, he’s losing himself. He has no awareness anymore, there’s just the stretching movement of Levi’s hand and the heat of his mouth.

Pleasure is burning through him like a rush of morphine; he’s utterly disconnected from his body. He is vaguely aware that his limbs are spasming and he feels sound leaving his throat, but he can’t hear anything except the ringing strain of his jaw muscles.

All at once, the rush peaks. His body lets go, and he spasms against the bed.

And then he’s sobbing.

He feels Levi disconnect from him; Erwin curls on his side in a fetal position.

“Hey.” Levi curls up behind him, kissing the back of his neck “Erwin.”

“Fuck,” is the only word Erwin’s lips can form, and then he starts laughing through his tears.

Levi wraps an arm around him, holding him tightly.

“I’ve never felt anything like that.” Erwin swabs at his eyes. “Why am I crying?”

“It’s okay. I am, too. That was intense. But incredible.” Levi snuggles up behind him. “We were so connected.”

“It was like we fused.”

“Fuck paths—the real bond between us is your asshole.”

Erwin laughs so hard that tears spill down his cheeks again. He is utterly, completely smitten with this man and his crass expressions of affection.

After a few minutes, the tears finally stop. Now he feels a tingle throughout his body, and a heavy urge to curl up in a blanket and fall asleep. He snuggles back against Levi.

The whisper in his ear surprises him. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I just had a deep spiritual experience. Like I am utterly changed.” Erwin turns his head toward him. “Like you reached inside me and awoke a part of myself I didn’t know I had.”

Levi smiles, his face more peaceful than Erwin has ever seen. He kisses the tip of Erwin’s nose. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

..&..

ERWIN SQUINTS AGAINST the light streaming in through the sheer curtains. He’s sweaty, sticky, and tangled in the sheets. Levi is absent, and he can hear the shower running.

Erwin throws off the sheets and sits up, then winces and falls back to the bed, feeling the consequences of the night’s

activities. A spark of pleasure ripples through him as he basks in the memory.

The shower stops. A minute later, Levi enters the room, hair wet, a towel around his waist.

“Why the stupid smile?”

Erwin doesn’t bother wiping it off his face. “You know the answer to that question.”

“I do.” Levi smirks. “How are you this morning?”

“Utterly wrecked and very sticky.”

Levi’s gaze trails down his body. “Not so utterly wrecked.”

Looking down at his surprisingly solid morning erection, Erwin says, “I suppose not.”

“We don’t have anywhere we need to be, right?”

“No, not immediately.”

“Good. Would be a shame to waste that.” Levi drops the towel and climbs onto the bed.

..&..

IT’S NEARING NOON when they are finally dressed and presentable. Erwin is surprised Hange or Historia didn’t send for them. Maybe they’re giving them some space after the execution.

The execution.

The whites of Zeke’s eyes, rolling like a panicked horse’s—

*Stop.* He reaches for Levi’s hand and squeezes it. Levi squeezes back, his face grim. It seems leaving their room was a return to reality for both of them.

There is a message waiting for them at the front desk:

*“If you’re not too busy for lunch, come by Swan’s Pub at noon.*  
*-Hange”* An address is scrawled beneath it.

“Looks like we made it out of bed just in time,” Erwin says.

Levi’s eyes twinkle at him. “You okay to walk?”

“A bit wobbly, a bit sore, but I think I can disguise it. You?”

“Yeah, I’ll manage.”

They start wandering in the direction of the pub, but stop

when they pass a pet-and-livestock store. Erwin peers in the window. The window displays a large padded animal bed, and inside the bed are six kittens climbing over each other. One in the middle is sleeping, and its little pink mouth opens in protest as one of its siblings climbs on its head.

“Cute,” Levi says. “Do you like cats?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been around one long enough to find out. They look soft.” Erwin turns to him and smiles. “You still want to get a dog?”

“Once we’re settled in a place, yes.”

“What kind?”

Levi shrugs. “If this is like the old timeline, the Underground has a lot of stray dogs that haven’t been brought to the surface yet. Might be nice to rescue a young stray mutt, see what it grows into.”

“I like that idea. What would we name it?”

“Dog,” Levi says dryly.

“Creative. How about Spot?”

“What if it doesn’t have spots?”

Erwin pauses, then says, “What about Hera?”

“After your horse?”

“She was a good horse.”

“Okay,” Levi says. “We’ll adopt a stray dog and name her Hera.” He looks at the kittens and adds, “Maybe a cat, too. These little fuckers are adorable.”

“If you like, you can name the kitten ‘Dog.’” Erwin chuckles at his own joke.

“Funny guy,” Levi mutters, but he’s smiling, too.

They watch the kittens for a few more minutes, then continue on their walk until they reach Swan’s. The three Paradisians are seated inside, along with Onyankopon.

“There you are,” Hange greets as they walk over to the table. “Hope you took care of whatever business was keeping you holed up in your room this morning.”

“Yeah, a few times.” Levi drops to a seat next to them.

“Yuck,” Hange says, light-hearted.

Erwin takes the chair opposite him. “I’m sorry we disappeared last night. The whole event was rather traumatic. We needed some time to collect ourselves.” He nods at Onyankopon. “Thanks for the company.”

Onyankopon smiles and nods back. His sunken eyes suggest he didn’t get much sleep after the café, and Erwin feels a pang of pity for him.

“Last night went very well after you left,” Hange says. “Historia enraptured everyone we spoke with. We have preliminary trade contracts in writing with Marley and Hizuru, and a few other nations expressed verbal interest.”

“It helped that Mikasa’s mother is a descendent of Hizuru,” Historia says, smiling across the table at her. “Turns out Mikasa is practically Hizuru royalty.”

Mikasa’s cheeks flush. “It’s not like that,” she mumbles.

“Besides,” the queen says, “the proof that titans are gone convinced a lot of delegates to trust us.” She turns to Erwin. “Thank you for doing that. I know it can’t have been easy.”

“I did what I had to.” Erwin holds her gaze. “You really stepped up and showed the world that the Queen of Paradis is a competent and capable ruler beyond her years.”

The others around the table nod and express their agreement. Historia’s blushes and looks down with a smile. “I had good mentors.” She turns to Mikasa and adds, “And the support of good friends.”

Now it’s Mikasa’s turn to blush.

They chat idly as the food arrives. Everyone seems to be feeling a bit lighter today, even Onyankopon. It’s difficult to feel the gravity of the night’s events with bright sunshine streaming through the windows, brunch foods piled high with whipped cream, and fruits in every colour of the rainbow.

After breakfast, the six of them stroll to the photography booth to pick up their photos. Erwin, Hange, and Levi crowd around to look at theirs. Erwin is wearing a genuine smile, and

Hange looks exuberant; Levi is hunched in on himself with a deep frown.

“I ruined the picture,” Levi says, voice full of regret.

“I think the photographer just captured your true essence.” Hange elbows him.

“No, this won’t do.” Levi hands the photo to Mikasa, then takes Hange and Erwin by the elbow. “Let’s get one of all three of us smiling.”

“You can smile?” Hange asks playfully.

“You’ve never seen it. I only smile when I’m around people who don’t annoy me.”

They pose again, and Erwin looks forward to seeing the final photograph. Judging by the stunned look on Historia and Mikasa’s faces, Levi must have flashed one of his rare, charming grins.

The group makes another stop for ice cream—Erwin fears he’s already addicted—and walks to the park. They settle on the ledge of a fountain to chat and eat.

*This can be our future,* Erwin thinks, his heart glowing. *Citizens of Paradis and other countries intermingling, idle afternoons, new cuisines, and new friends.*

Levi leans close. “I’m going to take Mikasa for a walk. I need to check in with her.”

Erwin glances at the girl and sees a distant look on her face. “Of course.”

“If you find yourself passing by that store you shopped at yesterday, you might want to pick up more stuff.”

“Oh?”

Levi shrugs. “Seemed to be a quality product. Could be fun to buy others.”

“Yeah, it could.”

Levi kisses his cheek, then hops down from the ledge and walks over to Mikasa.

Hange slides in to fill the gap. “Things seem to be going well.”

“They are indeed.” Erwin smiles at them. “Once the dust has settled and we return to Paradis, Levi and I would like to talk to you about our future, and yours, and how they intersect.”

“Of course.” Hange studies him. “Are you planning to keep your position as Commander?”

“Yes, but both Levi and I will retire in two years. Until then, we will help restructure the military and coach the next generation of leaders.” He watches Levi and Mikasa walk down the path side-by-side in the distance. “What do you foresee in your future, Hange?”

“I don’t think I’m ready to retire just yet. Coming here has really opened up my eyes to the technological advances we could bring to Paradis. I love the idea of creating instead of defending or attacking, you know?”

“I do.”

“Onyankopon and I are already talking about taking the lead for each of our respective nations. And of course I’ll talk to this lord you mentioned to him.”

Erwin smirks. “Lord Alec.”

“What’s with the grin?”

“Ask Levi someday.”

Hange raises their brow. “Interesting.”

“At any rate,” Erwin continues, “I’m sure Levi told you about his living arrangement in the other timeline. We intend to re-purchase and fix up the same cabin, if it’s available, or a similar building if it’s not. Do you think you would join us?”

Hange taps a finger on their chin in contemplation. “How does Levi feel about that?”

“He’ll never admit it, but he misses the closeness you two had. That being said, we all know this timeline is completely different, and you are under no obligation to be the same as you were.”

“If you two are building a life together, I don’t think it’s right for me to be a third wheel.” They frown. “But I would miss you guys.”

“What if we could build another building on the same property?” He suggests. “We could be neighbours.”

Their face brightens. “That could work. You two would have your privacy and room to build your marriage.”

“Marriage,” Erwin repeats, surprised.

“Come on, we all know that’s where this is leading. And I would have my space to live however I want without Levi breathing down my neck. But we could still be close. What do you think?”

“That would mean the world to me,” Erwin says honestly, and Hange beams and throws their arms around him.

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**LEVI LEADS MIKASA** to a bench overlooking a duck pond. She sits next to him, and they watch small children throw birdseed at the ducks.

Mikasa pulls out a cigar and holds it out.

“You’re addicted,” he says.

“I can count the number of cigars I’ve had on one hand, dear cousin.”

“You’re fifteen years old.”

She scoffs and cuts the end off the cigar, then lights it. The scent is still disgusting, but he’s starting to find it comforting, too. That may be because he’s starting to associate it with these kinds of conversations with her.

“How are you doing?” he asks.

“I don’t know. I’m torn.” Mikasa studies the burning end of the cigar. “I’m hopeful about the future now. I believe in my heart we have secured a lasting peace for Paradis, and that makes everything worthwhile. But losing Eren and Armin all over again is opening old wounds.”

“I understand. It was hard to see those kids again and then lose them. It must have been infinitely harder for you.”

“Yes,” she says quietly. “But it’s not all bad. I got to spend a little more time with them, and I treasured every second of it. It was almost healing, in a way.” She shakes her head and pauses for a puff of the cigar. “Like I said, I’m torn. I can’t decide if I feel better or worse this time. Maybe both at once.”

“I’m sorry,” he says sincerely.

She looks up at him with tears in her eyes, then looks away. “Don’t talk that kindly to me, sappy old man. It’s unnerving.”

“I must be getting soft,” he says, thinking of Zeke. He doesn’t want to follow that thought, so he changes the subject. “How are things with Historia?”

She frowns. “The maturity gap is too great even if the physical age isn’t. I’m content to be friends. I’m planning to introduce her to Iris a little sooner, this time. They’re the same age, so it’s not strange. I suppose there’s no guarantee they’ll still hit it off, though. We’ve diverted quite a lot from the timeline.”

Levi has a feeling the friendship between the two will change into something else as Historia ages, but he only says, “Friendship is important.”

“It is.” Mikasa turns to him. “I think that’s something we both learned through this ordeal.”

He shrugs. “Yeah.”

“How are you doing?”

“I’ll get by.”

For a long time, they’re quiet, watching the kids and the ducks. Mikasa’s brows are pinched, and he wonders if she’s thinking of Eren and Armin. One of the kids charges at the ducks screaming. In retaliation, one of the ducks chases after the kid until he cries. *That kid’s Eren. Or maybe that duck is.* He tosses the two scenarios around in his mind and finds them both amusing.

A group of people are setting up a scene on the other side of the pond, and as it takes shape, Levi realizes it’s a wedding altar. He thinks about his mother and Dren, about Erwin’s

widower father, and contemplates how lucky he is to have the chance to grow old with Erwin.

He reaches for the cigar. “Okay, give me a puff.”

She passes it over and nods in the direction of the altar. “You seem to be fixating on that scene over there.”

He shrugs it off, but she doesn’t drop it: “Historia and I can provide the music for your wedding.”

“Who says I’m getting married?”

“Oh, come on. I give you a year. Two, tops.”

Levi tilts his head back, breathes out the smoke and closes his eyes, feeling a warm buzz. He can’t tell if it’s from the cigar or her statement.

“Maybe,” he says.

The sun is warm against his skin, and he smiles.

# ❧ Twenty-Eight ❧

## A STORY TOLD ANEW

*-year 850, one month later-*

AS THEY APPROACH THE village, Levi sits uncomfortably straight, muscles rigid. He remembers making this same trip with Hange, both of them heartbroken and too shy to admit aloud how much they needed each other. The Trost Headquarters held too many ghosts for them both.

He's beginning to realize: this village is where his ghosts live now.

"It looks like a lovely little town," Hange remarks sincerely as the carriage rolls through the village. Levi eyes the general store they both visited thousands of times before, where every person knew them by name.

"You okay?" Erwin murmurs, smoothing a hand up and down Levi's spine.

He wants to reply, *I don't know if this is a good idea*, but the three of them have come all the way out here specifically for him. They might as well see the cabin after going to all this trouble; maybe it will feel like home. He watches the farms pass by the window, naming their neighbours in his mind. He knows everything about each of them. Is he supposed to pretend he doesn't? Or should he tell them the truth? Surely these salt-of-the-earth farmers won't be interested in tales of time travel.

The carriage driver pulls up to the end of the driveway.

The gate is closed, marked with a weathered for sale sign hanging from one nail. Levi pushes the gate open—it catches on the snow and takes a few hard shoves—and follows the path to the cabin. Behind him, he hears the crunching boots of Erwin and Hange.

And there is the cabin, just as he remembers it. It still has good bones, with a sturdy roof and walls, but the door is hanging off one hinge, and the windows are broken. The boards are weathered. All the work they put into building the smoke pit, the workbench, everything, is all gone.

Levi isn't sure what he expected, but he knows he has no right to feel this disappointed. Or this exhausted. The thought of redoing all that work feels like too much at his age. *But I'm the same age*, he reminds himself, even though it doesn't feel accurate.

Hange wanders to a window and peers inside. "This place has a lot of potential. I see why we picked it."

Levi follows them, staring all the way up at the roof, which will need reshingling. *Three floors. Why would Erwin and I need three floors?* It made sense when he was sharing space with Hange and needed his own space.

He folds his arms over his chest and looks toward the forest. They would have to knock down trees to clear space for another cabin for Hange.

Erwin must pick up on his hesitation. "I know this was the right choice for both of you in the other timeline; does it still make sense for our planned arrangement?"

"We would have to build another structure for me," Hange says. "Would mean tearing out a bunch of trees."

Levi gives a long, low sigh. "This was a waste of time."

"It was?"

"Renovations, cutting down trees and ripping out stumps, and building a new cabin. It's too much. Plus we're far away from Mitras—we were fine making the trip in the other timeline, but we were also both running away from reality and trying to fill

our days with as much *stuff* as possible so we didn't have to think. It's different, this time. We know so much more, and we have Erwin." Levi folds his arms over his chest, eyeing the cabin. "Besides, I'm the only one here with ten years of memories in this place."

"We can build new ones," Hange says.

"Yeah, we can. But I'm always going to be comparing, and no one else will. Erwin, maybe, but you only had a few days here. None of our neighbours will remember us. No one in town. I'm done living with people who don't share my memories. I don't want to walk on eggshells around everyone ever again."

Erwin steps closer and drapes an arm across his shoulders. "If you need a fresh start, I am on board."

Hange steps to Levi's other side and wraps an arm around his waist. "Closer to Mitras would be convenient. An empty lot would be ideal; then we can determine the layout of our cabins ourselves."

Levi stares mournfully at the cabin, feeling as if he's saying goodbye to an old friend. "I need a moment before we head back."

"Need company?" Erwin asks.

"Yeah."

Hange cocks their head at the carriage. "I'm going to go wait inside."

Levi takes Erwin's hand and leads him to the tree near the ghost of a stone. He kicks snow off the ground and runs his fingers over the brown, frozen leaves beneath.

"This is where the memorial stone was?" Erwin's voice is soft.

Levi nods. "I don't need it this time. You're here." He stands and stares at the woods, then turns to the cabin. "And I don't need to hide here anymore."

Erwin steps in behind him and wraps his arms around Levi's shoulders and chest, planting a kiss into his hair. Levi grips his forearm. His throat is tight.

“Levi, I’m sorry. I should have guessed that returning here might be painful for you.”

“It’s more bittersweet than painful.” He leans back into the strong grip.

“Do you want to spend more time looking around? Maybe revisit your old hunting route?”

Levi shakes his head. “I’m ready to leave. Let’s build something new together.”

They climb back into the carriage and sit across from Hange, who gives Levi a gentle smile.

“Let’s go back to Mitras,” they say. “I bet Pixis knows some property agents who can help us find the perfect place to build.”

Levi watches the village disappear over the horizon, perhaps the last time he’ll ever see it. He feels a strange mix of melancholy and peace. *Home is only home if I share it with these two.*

As if sensing the words, Erwin squeezes his hand.

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PIXIS DOES INDEED know some property agents, and after a few less-than-perfect tours, they finally find their dream property. Like the land where the old cabin sat, the property is a patch of grassland set against the edge of a forest. It’s a two-hour ride by horseback from Mitras—three by carriage—and surrounded by farmland. The village infrastructure already in place means they have access to running water and a sewer.

The three of them work with an architect to design the pair of cabins. Hange requests a laboratory space and two bedrooms. Erwin and Levi ensure they have space for a small training gym and a library. Levi insists on extra bookshelf space so Erwin has no excuse to leave his books stacked on the ground. They all agree to a shed between them to store garden equipment and tools.

By the time the designs are finalized, it’s nearly December. They will need to wait until the ground defrosts to

break first ground. They're so busy restructuring the military and setting up the trade infrastructure that the wait turns out to be a good thing. Levi can't imagine managing all that and an active construction project at the same time.

In the meantime, they split their time between Historia's guest room and the Trost Survey Corps headquarters. The work days often bleed into evening and beyond, but they have a two-year timeline in mind, and at the end of the day, Levi gets to fall into bed with Erwin.

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ONE MID-DECEMBER NIGHT in Mitras, Levi and Erwin are reading side-by-side. Erwin is deep in some musty old book about politics, and Levi is reading a romance novel Historia recommended.

Erwin sets his book aside and rolls to face him.

“It’s just getting to a good part,” Levi complains.

“It’s almost your birthday.”

“I guess.”

Erwin grips his hand and kisses his knuckles. “I want to get you something nice.”

The book can wait. Levi sets it on the side table, then meets his gaze. “A dog.”

The thick brows rise. “I thought we were waiting until the cabin was ready?”

“Yeah, that was the plan. But there’s plenty of room for one at the HQ in Trost, and here, we’re right next to the training grounds and the park. On days when you and the others are talking about technology infrastructure or trade agreements, I don’t have a lot to contribute. I’m only good with military strategy, and even then, I’m going to get lost more and more as your work becomes more bureaucratic. Trust me, I’ve been through this before: my strengths won’t help you.”

Erwin looks concerned. “Is two years too long? Should we revisit our retirement plans?”

That won’t work; they need those two years to pay the construction costs for the cabin and stash away money for retirement. They’ve discussed picking up contract work here and there to keep some cash flow, but Erwin wants to ensure they are secure enough that the contracts will be by choice, not by necessity.

“Two years still works,” Levi says, “but I’m going to need something to keep me occupied. I can’t split rocks at the cabin like I did last time around.”

“Won’t Historia’s side projects keep you occupied?”

“Yeah, but they aren’t full-time jobs.” Levi and Mikasa witnessed all the hiccups and failures of Historia’s ventures last time around; they can avoid those from the get-go this time. “I’ll spend a lot of time training. Could do that with a dog.”

Erwin smiles and then kisses the tip of his nose. “Okay. Let’s get a dog.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. You said you wanted to rescue one from the Underground, right?”

Levi nods. “Should be stray dogs hanging around the mining camps.”

“Mining camps?”

“For the light crystals.”

“Ah. Of course.” Erwin studies him. “Are you saying you want to go directly into the Underground to find one there?”

“Yes.”

“I imagine there are animal rescue organizations who have some above ground already.”

“I know. But I want to go right to the source.”

There’s a long silence, and Levi can hear the unspoken question, but he decides not to answer it. He can’t really explain why he wants to visit the Underground so badly. The ghosts of his past have been haunting him ever since he saw his father in

the paths. Maybe he wants to look at the place he grew up with fresh eyes. Maybe he feels close enough with Erwin that he wants to show him where he came from.

Erwin brushes the hair off his forehead and kisses it. “Okay. Let’s go this weekend.”

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LEVI CHOOSES SATURDAY morning for their mission. The timing is no accident; Onyankopon is in town to discuss the infrastructure projects, and he has invited them for drinks that evening. As much as Levi likes Onyankopon, his presence means Lord Alec will be there, and he’ll introduce himself to Levi, and Levi will have to shake his hand and pretend he doesn’t have complicated feelings about him. Erwin will just have to go for drinks alone while Levi cares for their new dog.

“I imagine we should wear casual clothes?” Erwin asks, sliding hangers across the bar in the closet.

“Do you own any?” Levi is selecting a few knives to ensure they’re adequately armed. The Underground is mostly empty except for the miners, but it’s also an ideal location for shady transactions away from prying eyes. They don’t want to be caught off guard if they chance upon a business deal.

Erwin pulls out a grey long-sleeved T-shirt. “This should do.” He pulls it on, and it hugs his chest muscles far too tightly. “I think it shrank in the wash.”

Levi’s ears glow with heat. “Oh.”

Erwin reaches to pull it off.

“Wait, wait, stop.” Levi glides across the room and grabs his chest with both hands.

“You like how that looks?” Erwin asks, sounding amused.

“Holy shit, you look so hot.” Levi smooths his hands up to Erwin’s shoulders, then back down to his chest.

“Do that much longer, and we aren’t going to make it to the Underground today after all.”

“You’re going for drinks tonight. If we wait until then, you might be too drunk.”

“I’ll make sure I’m not.” Erwin gently removes Levi’s hands, holding them by the wrists, but then pauses. His thumbs slide against Levi’s pulse points. The tension between them thickens.

“We could be fast,” Erwin says, voice low.

“Yes,” Levi breathes. “Don’t hold back.”

“Right here?”

As much as he wants Erwin inside him, he isn’t sure he’s clean enough for that, so he says, “Bend me over the table and fuck my thighs.”

Erwin’s breath catches; he kisses Levi hard, then whispers, “I’ll be right back.”

He returns a moment later with lubricant—Levi is starting to wonder just how many bottles he has on hand—and a small stand-up mirror.

“What’s the mirror for?” Levi asks.

“Thought you could use it to look at my chest.” He looks sheepish. “I shouldn’t have assumed you would want to.”

“You assumed right. Give me the mirror.” Levi drops his pants and bends over the table. He angles the mirror and sees Erwin approach him from behind, feels broad hands smooth his ass. Then he hears the sound of Erwin slicking himself, then feels him press between Levi’s thighs.

Levi crosses his legs, and Erwin gasps. “So tight.”

“Too tight?”

“No, it’s good. It’s so good.” He begins to thrust.

At first, Levi watches his chest, enjoying the way the fabric accentuates the planes and curves of his pectoral muscles. Then he angles the mirror up to see Erwin’s face. He’s so beautiful like this, his Commander mask half on, his face hard with determination.

“Harder,” Levi chokes.

Their gazes lock through the mirror. “Touch yourself,” Erwin says, as if it’s a command on the field. “Fuck your hand.”

Levi hastily shoves his hand between his body and the table. The table is creaking beneath them, and Erwin’s eyes roll upwards and close, his head tilting back.

“Come on,” Levi says, squeezing his thigh muscles together. He hears a throaty groan and then Erwin spills onto Levi’s thighs, groin, and shirt. *So messy*, Levi thinks, and for some reason, that’s what pulls him over the edge. He uncrosses his legs and wails as he, too, is overcome.

Then the room fills with silence. Levi takes several deep breaths and is a bit disgusted to find he has drooled on the table.

“So this shirt isn’t a good selection for our mission, then,” Erwin deadpans, out of breath.

“We’d probably scare the dogs away.”

“I’ll dress in something frumpy.” Erwin steps away and pulls the shirt over his head. Levi lazily watches the show in the mirror.

“Pass that shirt over here. I’ll wear it.”

“Oh?”

“Our cum is all over this one.” Levi tries to stand upright, and his legs wobble.

If he’s honest with himself, he loves the idea of wearing a shirt Erwin wore during sex. It will be like announcing their secret to the world in a way no one will ever understand.

They clean up and then once again get changed. Erwin’s shirt is loose on Levi, but comfortable, and smells faintly of Erwin’s hair products. He throws a jacket overtop of it and pulls on pants and boots, then tucks a few knives away for safety. Once they’re ready to go, Erwin stops him by the doorway for a long kiss. When he pulls away, his face is soft again, the mask completely down.

“Let’s go get a dog.”

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THEY TRAVEL TO the nearest entrance and begin to descend the staircase to the Underground. The dank air and putrid scents close in around Levi, and he isn't sure how much is real and how much is memory.

The last time he was down here was shortly after Erwin died. He was emotionally closed off, so it was an opportune time to hunt through every corner of the Underground for orphaned children without really being present. Now his head is clear, and the memories in the paths have freshly opened some old wounds.

He reaches behind him; a strong hand closes over his and squeezes.

They emerge near Levi's old neighbourhood—not the one from his days with Farlan and Isabel, but from before Kenny found him. He glances in the direction of the cluster of hovels that served as a brothel. He has not been back since the day Kenny found him.

“This way,” he says, heading toward them.

The hovels are at the end of a cul-de-sac, and he stops and stares. They're still standing, but in rough shape; the paint has peeled off, the doors are cracked, the roofs of several have caved in.

Levi stops by a rusted metal hoop attached to a post. It's so much shorter than he remembers; it's about shoulder height. Memories rise in his mind's eye of throwing rocks through the hoop with other children, one of the games they played while their mothers worked.

One time, a sympathetic client gifted them a ball, and they took such careful care of it, patching any holes with bits of tar and gum. Eventually, when the ball was too wrecked to use, they went back to using rocks. Looking back on it now, it seems like it should have been depressing, but at the time, they had been having fun. A smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. He wonders where those kids are now. He doesn't remember their

names, but he hopes they're above ground now and living good lives.

He strides forward to the door to his childhood home. A single faded word is painted on the wood: *Olympia*. He hasn't thought of that name in a long time. The memories strike through him like lightning: someone he only remembers as "the bad man" yelling at his mother, spittle foaming in the corners of his mouth.

"That's not your name," he wailed at his mother when the bad man left, because that was apparently the most offensive part of the tirade to his young brain.

She held him close and said, "Levi, my dear, names have power. I don't tell any of these men my real name, and so they hold no power over me."

He didn't understand at the time, but he thinks he does now. Ackerman. Humanity's Strongest. Commander, Captain. People's expectations of a person change based on what they call them.

He glances back at Erwin, who is looking around, expressionless. When he notices Levi looking at him, he says, "Is this where you grew up?"

"Yeah." Levi pushes open the door.

This hovel, too, is smaller than he remembers. The bed is barely large enough for a person. There's one tiny adjoining room, which they used for hygiene. It was effectively a hole in the ground, a pile of rags, and a bucket of water. His job had been to replenish the water; he did so several times a day.

"This is where I was born," he says, "where my father and mother died, and where Kenny found me."

"Your father?" Erwin asks, and Levi realizes they haven't ever discussed him.

"I saw him in the paths. He died when I was a baby." Levi runs his fingers along the wall; the stucco crumbles beneath his touch. "My mother called him Dren. I don't know anything else

about him.” It stinks of earth and mould here, and even as it makes his nose wrinkle, he feels nostalgia glow in his chest.

“It wasn’t so bad,” he concludes. “Life was a struggle and I know my mother sacrificed everything for me, more than she should have had to. But there were happy moments here, too. She loved me.” He sniffles a little and wipes his eyes. “She would have liked you.”

“I hope so.” Erwin squeezes his shoulder. “I bet she would be proud of you.”

That’s probably true; he has never considered it before. He is above ground, in love, working to bring peace to the world. He turns and pulls Erwin down for a long, deep kiss. When it breaks, he hovers close, feeling Erwin’s breath against his lips.

“We have the chance they didn’t,” he says. “My parents. Your parents.”

“I suppose we do.” Erwin kisses him again. “And we fought tooth and nail to have that chance.”

“Yeah.” Levi cups his cheek—a quick, silent thanks for accompanying him here—then steps back. “There’s a mining camp nearby. Let’s go.”

It takes them a few tries to find someone who can answer their question. She is a tall, broad woman with a long red braid trailing down her back. At first, she doesn’t hear them; she’s too busy tending to a cookfire and a tin of vegetables.

“Excuse me,” Erwin says again, and this time, she gives them a warm smile and listens to their request.

“Oh yeah,” she says, her voice booming, “there was a dog who comes by every day. I call her Missus. She was pregnant for a while, and then not, so I assume she had the pups. They would be a couple weeks old by now if they lived. I followed her yesterday to try to find them in case they needed help, but they weren’t in the place where she sleeps.”

“You mean she abandoned them?” Levi asks.

“Looks that way. Either that or they didn’t make it.”

They're probably dead by now, unless she abandoned them recently."

Erwin says, "Could you point us in the right direction to try to find them?"

"It isn't far. I'll show you." The woman stands. "Hope you find them. That dog is a real sweetheart, so I bet her pups would be, too. I'm hoping to bring her above ground when my contract ends here." She grins. "Four more months and I can buy a house for my Ma."

Levi likes this loud, big-hearted woman. "Lead the way," he says.

The woman leads them to an alley, and Erwin thanks her and slips her some coins for her troubles. The alley is surrounded by crumbling buildings and piles of stone and wood. They listen, but don't hear anything. Levi knocks on a few piles of debris to try to get the animals' attention.

When he knocks on a pile of wood, he hears a tiny cry.

"Here."

Together, they lift several of the boards to reveal a small nest of rags, straw, and woodchips.

Six tiny animals are huddled together, a mixture of black and white and grey fur. Levi hesitates. They aren't moving. He isn't ready to have his heart broken.

Erwin reaches for them. "They're warm." He gently lifts one and checks its breath, its pulse. It barely moves, but lets out a little yip. "We need to get these to a veterinarian."

Levi nods and enters one of the crumbling buildings to look for fabric. He pulls a curtain off a road. Together, they fashion it into a sling and loop it around Erwin's shoulder. They gently place five of the puppies into it.

But Levi keeps one pup for himself. It's tinier than the others and isn't moving at all, though he can feel its faint breaths puffing against the back of his hand. It's smaller than the others. Its fur is black and white, with a few tan markings.

"This one needs extra body heat." He lifts it and notices

one of its back legs is badly injured. It's not actively bleeding, but looks severely infected.

Levi slips the pup inside his shirt—refusing to consider the fleas and parasites the pup no doubt carries—and cradles it through the fabric with one hand. The pup finally moves, rooting a little toward his chest. His heart swells so much that he feels a burst of rage; he wants to lash out at everything in life that led to this adorable little creature suffering.

Erwin looks at Levi with fondness in his eyes.

“What?”

“Looks like you’ve made your choice.”

“It’s half-dead. Let’s get them to a vet.”

As they return to the surface, Levi’s thoughts are with the tiny animal fighting for its life. It’s burning hot against his chest—is it feverish? Or are puppies usually this warm?

The veterinarian’s office isn’t far from the entrance they came through. The veterinarian nods with recognition as they arrive; she has cared for their horses on multiple occasions and has always treated them well. “Commander, Captain. I didn’t see you on the appointment register.”

“We wondered if you might be able to take some emergency patients.” Erwin gently lifts a puppy out of the sling.

The vet gently accepts the creature and cuddles it to her chest. “Hey there, little one.” She looks up. “They’re all this young and malnourished?”

“Yes. Abandoned by their mother; we don’t know for how long. We’re hoping you can help them thrive.” He places the next four puppies on the counter. Levi stands back, protectively cuddling the puppy under his shirt.

“Levi,” Erwin says gently.

With a sigh, Levi pulls out the small pup and places it next to the others. He can’t find words for the paternal care he feels for this tiny creature, so he says, “I think it’s the runt.”

“I’d say so.” The vet gently rolls the puppy onto its back and listens to its chest with a stethoscope, then examines the

injured leg. “I’m afraid I may need to amputate this leg. She’s in rough shape and has a tough fight ahead of her.”

“Her name is Hera. And she will fight.”

“I don’t doubt it. Looks like a border collie mix. They’re feisty.” The vet smiles kindly at him. “I know a woman who runs an organization that rescues orphaned pups. I’ll bring these little ones over there right away and we’ll see about feeding them, keeping them warm, and treating any parasites or infections.”

Erwin says softly, “What are their chances?”

“It could go either way, at this point. Puppies this young are fragile, and they’re in pretty rough shape. But my contact is very good.” The vet gently strokes two of the puppies behind the ears. “You may need to leave them for a few weeks while they grow stronger. I know my contact would be happy to allow you to visit so you can bond.”

Erwin leaves their contact information and instructions for the rescue organization to contact them with any updates. Levi gently scratches Hera’s back before they leave.

As they walk back to the palace, Levi says, “I don’t know what I expected. Of course any dogs from the Underground are going to be malnourished and on the brink of death.” He gives a low sigh. “I wish I wasn’t so quick to attach to things.”

Erwin lays his arm across Levi’s shoulders. “Sometimes our greatest strengths are also our weaknesses. I don’t think ‘caring too much’ is a bad weakness to have.”

“I already love that dog.”

“I know.” Erwin smiles. “I was quite fond of the merle grey and white one. I wonder if we should consider two dogs.”

“Two is fine. Maybe not six.”

“Definitely not six.”

Levi is quiet for a minute, then says softly, “I guess we should get cleaned up for drinks.”

Erwin looks down at him in surprise. “You’re coming?”

It’s partly that Levi is emotionally raw and doesn’t want to

be alone, and partly that he wants to distract himself so he's not thinking about that damned dog.

Besides, his path is going to cross a lot more with Alec in this timeline than it ever did in the last one, so he should make an effort to be less awkward around him.

Once they are changed, they head down to the lounge. It's the same lounge where Levi and Erwin almost kissed in 860, and Levi looks around, remembering his surprise at how hot that flame burned between them. It's been a few months now and it still hasn't extinguished. He thinks of the tight grey shirt and wonders if their sex drive is going to be interfering with their plans until the day they die. *That doesn't sound so bad, actually.*

"Hasn't changed much," Erwin observes. Levi shakes his head.

"They replaced the upholstery in 854, but otherwise, same layout."

Erwin grins at him. "Last time we were here ... "

"Yeah." Levi mirrors his grin. "That was fun."

"Indeed. It's strange to picture a time when we weren't yet physical. Seems like years ago, but like just yesterday at the same time."

"Technically, it was years from now."

"I suppose that's true."

Across the room, Levi sees Hange waving at them as if flagging down a carriage. Subtle. "Let's get over there before they accidentally smack Onyankopon on the head."

The two of them are seated with Alec at a small table near the back of the room.

"Hi Hange," Erwin says, and he turns to Onyankopon. "Nice to see you again." Finally, he turns to Alec, and smiles. "Welcome, Lord Alec. We look forward to working with you."

Alec's enthusiastic expression is so wholesome that Levi is starting to feel guilty about his petty grudge. "Commander Erwin. Captain Levi. I am so honoured to be included in this im-

portant project.” He shifts a little in his seat as if containing his giddiness, but his voice is calm: “I have long admired you both.”

*Both?* That’s news to Levi. Maybe everything he assumed about Alec is wrong.

They sit. Erwin orders a whiskey, Levi an ale. Onyankopon and Hange pick up a conversation about building a dock, which will be mandatory if they are to have a trade economy. Alec is listening to them at first, but then smiles at Erwin and Levi.

“The technological talk is interesting, but I’m more interested in pipe laying. For gas.” A flush is creeping up his neck.

Erwin gives a charming smile and folds his hands on the table, leaning forward. “How is it that a lord came to know about gas transportation?”

Alec’s chest puffs a little. “My family fortune started in plumbing. My great-grandfather was commissioned by the King to build a series of water pipes in Mitras.”

As he rambles, Levi’s gaze drifts to the black scarf knotted loosely around the man’s neck. At first glance, it could be an accessory, but it doesn’t match the rest of his outfit. *He’s mourning his half-sister.*

Yes, Levi decides, he has judged Alec wrong. The lord before him is still a bit arrogant, but enthusiastic and competent. Leaving him alone on the mezzanine likely led to him lashing out at Levi every way he could, just as Levi had sniped back at him. *That’s a lot of unnecessary drama considering we didn’t even get laid.*

Now that he has loosened his grip on the grudge, he finds it endearing that Alec is so bashful around Erwin. And why shouldn’t the lord be? Erwin is one of the most powerful men within the walls, a living legend. Levi feels a swell of pride. *Everyone wants Erwin, and he has chosen me.*

The drinks continue to flow, and they share some appetizers. Onyankopon is polite, but Levi can tell he isn’t impressed with the fare.

Levi says, “Maybe opening trade will get some better food flowing through our lounges.”

Onyankopon chuckles. “I won’t judge. Your access to spices and different cooking techniques is limited here. But yes, there is a world of flavour that you’ll discover.”

Levi thinks of the tea and curry they had in Marley and wonders what other discoveries await them.

At one point, Alec leans forward, his eyes bright. “So tell me, Commander, how did you come to be alive again after everyone believed you were dead?”

Erwin says, “Amnesia.”

“Ah. Knocked on the head?”

“Yes.” Erwin looks uncomfortable.

“Everyone loves a good amnesia story, right?” Levi mutters, and Erwin glances at him. “What? Don’t get his hopes up. He’s wondering if his sister is still out there.”

He thought he said it just for Erwin’s ears, but all four of them are staring at him. *Shit.* The alcohol must have affected his volume control.

“You can’t have known that,” Alec asks, his face pale. “Could you? I’ve never mentioned her to anyone here.”

Erwin glances between Hange and Levi. “I have a feeling this is going to keep happening if we don’t elaborate on a few things.”

Hange says, “It’s not as if they can do anything with the information, anyway.”

It doesn’t seem wise to spread their story around, but what right does Levi have to say that? He’s the one who can’t ever keep his dumb mouth shut.

Erwin draws himself upright, his eyes twinkling. “Would you gentlemen like to hear a story? You can choose whether or not you believe it. Parts of it are rather fantastical.”

Alec dabs his lips with a napkin, then says, “Absolutely.”

Onyankopon says, “Is this about how Levi knew Zeke Yeager’s name the first time they met?”

“He told you that?” Levi says, surprised.

“Yes,” Erwin says, clearly enjoying being the centre of attention. “Our story begins with Levi in the year 860.”

His tale is a mixture of truth and fabrication; Levi notes he places Zeke in the paths in this new timeline instead of Eren and Armin, to give authenticity to Zeke’s execution. He also carefully leaves out any of the personal memories they experienced in the paths.

Onyankopon and Alec are enraptured.

“Incredible,” Onyankopon breathes. “Did you know me in the year 860?”

“No,” Levi says. “We met two of Zeke’s other associates instead, Yelena and Pieck.”

“Ah, that makes sense. Pieck was the Cart Titan. Yelena is ... a bit odd, but she was devoted to Zeke’s cause. She’s still working with me in Marley.”

Alec’s eyes are shining. “And me? Did you know me?”

“You were the one who warned us of the impending attack.” Erwin turns to Levi and says, “You already knew Levi before that.”

“We met *once*,” Levi says pointedly.

Alec coolly sips his drink then says, “I take it by your expression that it wasn’t a pleasant meeting.”

Hange comes to his rescue with a well-timed quip: “Don’t take it personally, that’s just Levi’s face.”

“I see,” Alec says with a smirk, and he says, “I don’t know if I fully believe your tale, Commander, but you spin a hell of a good yarn.” He pauses. “So that means ...”

“No chance of other unexpected survivors,” Levi says quietly. “I’m sorry.”

He sighs, but shrugs a little. “I know. Thank you.”

Levi nods and orders them another round of drinks.

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THEY LEAVE THE lounge after midnight, both a bit drunk, arm in arm.

“You didn’t have to tell them all that,” Levi says.

“About the paths? I trust them. Besides, it will be nice not to censor ourselves around them.” Erwin stumbles a little, then corrects his stride. “Good to see you getting along with Alec.”

Levi shrugs. “Yeah.”

Back at the palace, they undress and climb into bed. Levi stares at the ceiling, noticing it has a slight rocking motion, like they’re back on a ship. He thinks about the puppies and wonders if they are going to make it through the night. Everything else is falling into place. *Please let them be alright.*

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THEY RECEIVE A message from the rescue organization two days later, inviting them to come visit.

Levi flips the paper over. “It doesn’t say if they’re okay.”

“I’m sure they would have told us,” Erwin says, pulling on his boots.

But Levi’s heart is still pounding as they pull up to the front door.

The puppies are thriving; they’re squirming together in a large padded basket.

“You can handle them,” the volunteer says kindly. “Just be very, very careful; they’re still fragile.”

While Erwin speaks with the volunteer, Levi kneels down and gently picks up Hera. Her eyes open, and he swears she looks into his soul. His breath catches. He holds her carefully against his chest. She’s warm and soft. Her back leg has been amputated, and there are no more signs of infection.

The volunteer smiles at them. “You found them just in time. The first night was a bit rough, but they’re fully hydrated and doing well. I’d recommend you leave them with us for a few

more weeks so they can benefit from our surrogate dog's care. Am I to assume you won't adopt all six?"

Erwin gently scratches the back of the merle he had talked about before. "We definitely want these two. The others will need homes. Is that something we can arrange through you?"

The volunteer nods and begins to explain their adoption process. Levi stares down at the sweet, small creature in his arms, and thinks he would lay down his life for this pup and her tiny paws. With a hint of amusement, he wonders if this is how his mother felt when she looked down at him. *I probably wasn't this cute.*

When they eventually leave the puppies behind, Erwin says to Levi, "I am going to name her Athena."

"The merle?"

He nods. "One of my father's illegal books was about mythology, and spoke of an ancient pantheon. Hera was the queen of the gods, a symbol of womanhood and fertility. I thought it was a powerful name for a horse. It would make sense to name the other puppy from the same pantheon, and when I looked into the pup's eyes, I swore I saw wisdom there. Athena was the goddess of wisdom."

"Very grand names for dogs," Levi says.

Erwin smiles. "Hera and Athena Ackerman-Smith."

Levi laughs. "That's never going to fit on a dog tag."

"Well, maybe we can drop the surname, but it will be there in our hearts."

The clock rings eleven bells, and Erwin turns to him. "Shall we get some lunch? And then I'm going to meet Onyan-kopon and Hange to talk about the railroad. I would appreciate you and Mikasa being there to tell us what you remember."

"Of course."

As they walk to the palace, Levi breathes deeply. The air smells of snow and chimney smoke; it's crisp and clean. The name repeats in his mind, over and over:

*Ackerman-Smith.*

IN THESE FALLEN LEAVES

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Erwin asks as if amused, and Levi discovers he is wearing a smile. For once, he doesn’t feel the need to hide it.

“I guess I’m just happy,” he realizes, and his heart sings.

# ❧ Twenty-Nine ❧

## TEA AT SUNRISE

*-year 852, September-*

ERWIN AWAKENS TO paws on his chest and a tongue on his face. He sputters and gently pushes away a bouncing, fluffy creature.

Not discouraged, Athena sits at the end of the bed, tongue lolling. The windows glow orange; is it already sunrise?

“I’m up, I’m up,” he says good-naturedly. When he sits up, he sees Hera seated patiently by the door. “All right, you two, where’s Levi?” He jams his feet into his slippers and stretches.

The dogs jump over each other as he plods to the kitchen. Usually, by now, Levi has taken them for a walk and started the kettle for their morning tea ritual. Instead, Levi is hunched over his suitcase by the doorway, checking the buckles in a methodical rhythm.

Erwin watches for a moment, then says, “Levi?”

Levi looks up at him, his eyes lined with purple smudges. “Is it morning already?”

Erwin scoops food into bowls for the dogs, and they descend upon them as if they haven’t been fed in years. “Slow down, girls, you’ll cough it right back up.” He comes to a kneel beside Levi. “You okay?”

“Fine. It’s just a big day.”

It is: their official retirement, and the public announcement of the new military structure. It’s odd, however, that Levi is so nervous. “Are you ready?”

“Yeah.” Levi stands and stretches. “Tea?”

“I’d love some.”

They take their tea cups onto the front porch and settle side-by-side in the thatched loveseat, leaving the door open for the dogs to join them when they’re ready. Across the yard, Hange’s cabin is dark. They left for Mitras yesterday.

Erwin closes his eyes and breathes in the earthy, piney scent of the forest. He and Levi have only been able to spend a few days a week here since they built the cabins; now they will be able to stay here for weeks or months at a time. Or, if they want, they can travel the world. Onyankopon is well-travelled and has offered to help them coordinate dog-friendly trips—though Erwin will have to ensure he is well-stocked with Reiner’s magic anti-nauseant. Ship travel has not gotten any easier with time.

He must look deep in thought, because Levi throws his own question back at him: “*Are you ready?*”

Erwin nods and drapes his arm around Levi’s shoulders. “I can’t wait to spend every single day playing with the dogs, gardening, reading, and making love to you.”

“Making love every single day?”

“Yes.”

“Even when we’re in our eighties?”

“Yes.” Erwin leans over and kisses his ear. “Imagine how good we’ll be at sex with another forty years of practice.”

“Hmm. Hopefully biology is on our side and that will be possible.”

The dogs stampede outside and sit expectantly in front of them. Levi sighs. “Girls, I’m not even finished my tea.”

Their front paws dance and they look up with shining eyes. High-pitched whines sound in their throats.

Levi scowls. “So poorly behaved. Fine.” He sets his tea on a side table and grabs a large, ratty ball from under the loveseat. He throws it into the forest, and the dogs bolt after it. Hera may only have three legs, but she easily keeps up with her sister, and they tussle over the ball in the brush.

“We’ve spoiled them,” Levi mutters, but he’s smiling. He

smiles so often these days that it's difficult to remember a time when it was a rare sight.

Athena is triumphant; she trots back to them with the ball in her mouth, Hera on her tail. Levi grabs it, then grimaces. "Yuck, you slobbered all over it."

"That thing is about to fall apart, anyway. Let's pick up some new toys while we're in Mitras."

"Yeah, and we should get them some new gear for winter." Levi leans forward to address the dogs: "You girls outgrew your winter sweaters. Well, you did, Athena. Hera, you might still fit yours."

Hera barks with impatience.

"Okay, okay." Levi throws the ball past Hange's cabin this time, then draws his knees up to his chest. "So, you're happy?"

At first, Erwin thinks he's talking to the dogs, then realizes he's waiting for a response. "Of course I'm happy. Levi, are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah. Just reflecting on things a lot lately."

*Fair enough.* That's only natural, with their lives about to change so drastically.

The dogs return; they each have their teeth sunken into opposite sides of the ball. Erwin starts laughing.

"Well, they're good at sharing," Levi concedes. "Fine, I'll take back my earlier comments. You're good girls."

They drop the ball to the ground. Athena sneezes. This time, Levi reaches out a foot and kicks the ball. The dogs fly after it.

Erwin sips his tea. "Do you mind taking them over to Larana and Ed's while I finish packing? The carriage will arrive at about eight o'clock." Normally, they bring the dogs with them to Mitras, but this visit will include ceremonies and lots of paperwork, so the dogs will be happier spending a few nights with the neighbours. Hera and Athena adore the neighbours' dog, a big sheepdog named Jeff, who mostly stands and looks mystified as the border collies race in circles around him.

“Sure. I’ll run them a bit and then bring them over.” After a pause, Levi adds, deadpan, “Don’t forget lube.”

Erwin gives him an unimpressed look. “One of these trips, I’m going to leave it behind, and you’ll regret teasing me about having it all the time, just wait.”

Levi shrugs. “We’d figure something out. I’d go down to the kitchen and ask for a brick of butter.”

Erwin almost spits out his tea. “Butter?”

“It’s greasy, isn’t it? And everything tastes better with butter.”

“A whole brick?”

“A whole brick. Just the right shape to shove up your—”

“Stop, stop.” Erwin gestures at the dogs, who have returned once more. They sit panting side-by-side, watching them with their innocent eyes—Hera’s deep brown, Athena’s blue and yellow. “We have an audience.”

“What do they understand about sex? They’re spayed.”

“I don’t think you understand much about sex, either, if you think you’re getting a brick of butter up there.” Erwin drains the rest of his tea. “You know, back when you told me about waking me every sunrise for tea, this was not the kind of conversation I expected to share.”

Levi kisses his shoulder. “Thought you knew me better than that.” He stands, and the dogs, sensing a new activity, immediately begin to dance. “Okay, girls, let’s gather your things. You’re going to visit Auntie Larana and Uncle Ed for a few days.”

“Wait, give me kisses.” Erwin sets his teacup aside so he can kneel down. The dogs run up to them, and he whispers that they’re good girls and gives them some scratches as they lick his cheeks. Then Levi whistles and the dogs race back to him.

Erwin sits for a moment longer, marvelling at the contentment he feels on the cusp of leaving his old life behind. After all the sacrifices they’ve made, after all they have suffered, they finally have a chance to enjoy the peace they have worked so hard to secure.

It's not as if the weight of their past has disappeared. Each of them wakes up now and then with nightmares, and some moments bring back memories with a devastating rush of terror. As time goes on, the good moments outweigh the bad more and more.

It's the first time he has ever felt his future is fully his to control.

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For once, they don't have much to focus on in the carriage—Erwin has his speeches memorized, and Levi will probably just chip in a few words. Erwin draws the curtains and slides closer to Levi.

Levi surprises him by crawling onto his lap, kissing his neck, his jaw. He pulls back to look Erwin in the eye, both hands on his cheeks. The admiration in the grey eyes is so strong that Erwin's throat tightens. He runs his thumb across Levi's lower lip, studying him. A few silver strands hang in his face, the promise of the salt-and-pepper that will take over in a few years. His expression is so soft, so gentle, a side of Levi that few ever see. Erwin can't believe this beautiful man has chosen him for the life they're building together.

"I'm too exhausted for what I really want to do to you right now," Levi says.

Erwin smiles. "There will be time for that later, and in more comfortable locations. You need sleep."

"Yeah." Levi kisses him again. "I'm feeling clingy."

Erwin slides his thumbs across the dark creases under his eyes. "Do you want to talk about what's bothering you?"

"No, I just want to cling."

"I can help with that." Erwin gently pushes him off his lap and leans back against the wall of the carriage, one leg bent on the bench, the other foot on the floor. Levi sits between his legs, back pressing into Erwin's upper body. Though his legs are

shorter than Erwin's, he still has to bend his knees to fit on the bench.

"Comfortable?" Erwin asks.

"Yeah. You?"

"Yeah." Erwin grabs a blanket from the back shelf and drapes it over them, then holds Levi in his arms. He's warm and solid.

"Whatever's bothering you," he says softly, "it will be okay."

Levi's only reply is the deep breaths of sleep.

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ERWIN MUST FALL asleep, too, because he blinks, and suddenly the carriage has stopped. He shakes Levi awake and they stretch, rubbing their eyes.

Mikasa waits for them inside the entrance of the military headquarters. She salutes them. "Historia is already in the chamber. Hange is just finishing the briefing with Jean, Floch, Connie, and Sasha. They'll all be along shortly."

"Good." Erwin smiles kindly at her. "Are you ready?"

She nods. "Sir."

The formality suggests she, too, is nervous. All the soldiers in the Survey Corps have gotten used to referring to him as Erwin, though Levi still gets *Captain* thrown at him a lot.

As they stride down the hall, Erwin sees Mikasa flash something small at Levi. He doesn't have to see it to know what it is. He doesn't understand how Levi can stand the stink of cigars, but it has become something of a quarterly ritual between them, their special Ackerman secret. Levi must know Erwin knows about it, but neither has mentioned it. Erwin is just glad the two of them are getting along so well.

Erwin salutes Zackly, Pixis, and Nile as they step into the conference chamber. Several others are seated in the wings of the room; he recognizes them as accountants and lawyers who

handle the behind-the-scenes paperwork and budget of the military. Ignoring them, he strides up to Historia, who is dressed in her crown and a gown of flowing blue gauze. The bodice and borders of the skirt are embroidered with swirling branches and bluebirds. Kneeling before her, he has the feeling of looking up on a sunny day.

Levi, never one for formality, gives her a nod and remains standing.

Historia holds out her hand, and Erwin kisses her knuckles. “Your Majesty.”

“Rise, Commander,” she says, and when he stands, he sees she’s wearing a broad smile. “Erwin, Levi, it’s good to see you. Please, be seated.”

The door opens, and the others file in, greeting Historia as they arrive. Once everyone is seated, Zackly calls Erwin to the front of the room.

“We have reviewed your proposals, and we accept them. Your retirement will take place at the ceremony tonight. In the meantime, why don’t you present the new military structure, so everyone present can assure our understanding is correct?”

Erwin nods. Hange carries stacks of presentation cards to the wooden easel beside him.

Presenting the first card, Erwin says, “The Survey Corps has served its purpose, and with its end comes the opportunity to restructure our military.

“On-the-ground management of citizen safety will be handled exclusively by the Garrison, as well as deployment of emergency procedures during natural disasters, and guarding the perimeter of the island. The Military Police, meanwhile, will continue to uphold our laws and run our justice system.” He taps the Wings of Freedom with his pointer. “The biggest difference will be the reappropriation of the Survey Corps into the Queen’s Guard, a new branch of the military dedicated to protecting Queen Historia, and executing her Council’s humanitarian

mandates. They will also be involved in diplomatic missions as the Council requests.”

He presents the next card. “Because there are only eight remaining members of the Survey Corps, we will be reabsorbed into the system in different ways.

“First, Captain Levi and I will be retiring, although we will remain available as advisors on a contract basis.” He turns to address the witnesses on the sidelines. “If any of you believe you need our services, please don’t hesitate to reach out to us through Queen Historia’s Council.

“Former Commander Hange Zoë will join the Queen’s Council as the Minister of Technology. Their scientific research and collaboration with other nations will continue to guide Paradis into the future until we are in lockstep with other countries around the world.

“Captain Mikasa Ackerman will head up the Queen’s Guard as Commander.”

There are murmurs at this, and Mikasa’s eyes widen. Erwin glances at Hange, who looks sheepish. Apparently, they forgot to tell Mikasa what her new title would be. He turns to Mikasa, saying the next words for her benefit as much as the audience’s.

“Though Mikasa is young, she has shown judgement and maturity far beyond her years. What’s more, she has demonstrated the ability to weather great sacrifice for the sake of the greater good. With the guidance of our queen and her Council, Mikasa will thrive as the Queen’s Guard Commander.

“Jean Kirstein will step into a Squad Leader role underneath her. He has demonstrated strong tactical and leadership potential, and will bring wisdom and experience to his role.

“Sasha Blouse and Connie Springer will, at their requests, be transferred to the Garrison base at Trost, where they will be trained to take on leadership roles within three years. And finally, Floch Forster’s application to the Military Police has been

accepted due to his heroics at the Battle of Shiganshina. We thank all three of you for your service and wish you the best in your new roles.”

Zackly hands a box to a soldier, who brings it to Erwin. “We will now transfer the role of Commander, in front of our existing commanders, our legal advisors, and other witnesses present. Mikasa Ackerman, please rise and approach Commander Erwin.”

She does, looking a bit nervous, but she salutes. Erwin opens the box and pulls out a bolo tie, its stone white.

“The Wings of Freedom have become the Wings of Peace,” he says. “It is my honour to pass the role of Commander to you.”

She pulls off her scarf with trembling hands, and he lowers the bolo around her head.

“Commander Mikasa Ackerman,” he says, “the spiritual fifteenth Commander of the Survey Corps, and the first Commander of the Queen’s Guard, we salute you.”

He salutes, and Hange behind him, and he hears chairs shifting as everyone in the room stands and salutes. Mikasa’s eyes glisten and she bows her head in thanks.

Once she is seated again, the presentation gives way to paperwork. Erwin and Levi sign several sheets of paper under the strict eyes of the military lawyers.

And then, it’s done. They will all meet in the ballroom that afternoon for the formal ceremony.

Levi walks up to Erwin and grabs his bolo tie, pulling him down for a kiss. “I’m going to go talk to Mikasa. She looks a little freaked out. Maybe we’ll train for a bit, blow off some steam.”

“Good idea. Mind if I buy a few things for the dogs in town? I’ll bring Hange.”

“Yeah, sure. Get some of those dog cookies shaped like ham hocks, if they have them. Hera loves those.”

“Of course.” He kisses Levi again. “I’m sure I’ll see you back in our room before the ceremony.”

“Yeah. See you then.” Levi steps away, fingertips trailing his arm.

Erwin watches him leave, then turns to find Hange. They’re talking with Pixis, something about the new railroad system plans. He waits until the conversation has ended, then steps up to them.

“Minister of Technology Hange,” he says good-naturedly. “I wondered if you might want to go for a trip into town?”

Hange grins. “Spoiling Hera and Athena again?”

“Of course.”

“Good. I’ll do the same. Let me get my wallet.” Hange may not technically live with Hera and Athena, but the dogs definitely view them as a member of the pack, and the feeling is mutual.

As they stroll along the street, Hange says, “I’m sorry about Mikasa. She knew about her new role, but it slipped my mind to tell her about her new title.”

“It’s fine. She handled it with grace.” He clears his throat. “I’m a bit worried about Levi, though. He seems to be shaken up about something. Has he spoken to you at all?”

Hange is unusually dismissive: “I’m sure he’s fine.”

“I hope I’m not pushing him onto a path he doesn’t actually want.”

“Don’t get in your head about this. Trust me, he wants this. He’ll be back to himself soon. He’s probably just nervous about all the change.”

After a moment, Erwin says quietly, “It’s probably not a good time to drop a big life decision on him, then, is it?”

Hange stares. “Like what?” When he doesn’t reply, they reiterate, “Like *what*, Erwin?”

He smiles. “Let’s discuss it another time.”

“No, what did that mean? Are you thinking of proposing? You don’t get to hint at a thing like that and let it go! We’re discussing it now.”

“We’re almost at the shop.” Erwin picks up speed, smiling to himself.

Their favourite pet shop is a little more pricey—and, if Erwin is honest with himself, pretentious—than a typical feed store. It carries fancy baked treats, expensive cuts of meat, and fashionable clothing for all manner of critters with four legs.

With its upscale nature, he's surprised to see a young boy with a dirt-smudged face standing next to a box of kittens at the back of the store.

"Kittens!" Hange cries and kneels down beside the box.

The shop owner appears at the counter. "Commander Erwin. A pleasure to see you."

"Hi, Elisabet. Do you have any of the ham hock cookies in stock?"

"Just came out of the oven. Give them another five minutes to cool." Elisabet smiles at him, which is not unusual—she's always smiling. It must be nice to watch people spoil their beloved animals.

Erwin leans on the counter. "I see you're carrying live animals now."

"Oh, that's my nephew. Not really on-brand for the shop, but my brother called in a favour and I couldn't say no without causing family drama. Any interest in a kitten?"

"I doubt Levi would like me bringing home a kitten without talking to him. Besides, we have business in the city for a few days."

Elisabet's eyes sparkle conspiratorially. "I could keep one or two kittens for you until you're ready to leave."

Hange looks up from their spot on the floor. "You should get a kitten so I can visit it and then go back to my cat-free home." Turning back to the kittens, they add, "Guess who's allergic to your tiny paws and your tiny fur and your tiny ears?"

Erwin steps closer to peer in the box. "Hera and Athena would terrorize a kitten." He smiles at the young boy. "Hello."

The boy looks up at him with wide eyes. "My cat was making howling noises and then she went away and when she came back she got fat and now there are baby cats. A baby cat is

called a kitten. A mama cat is called a queen. I have three cats at home. Papa said I can't have any more cats, so I have to try to give them to new people. Would you like a kitten? They looked like little slimy rats when they came out of my queen cat's bum, but now they are fluffy and cute."

Erwin is a bit dizzy after the flurry of words, punctuated by mispronounced R's and L's. "How old are they?"

"I don't know. Guess how old I am?"

"Six," he replies, even though the child is clearly younger.

The child's chest puffs up. "Four and a half. My name is Gregor. What's yours?"

"Erwin," he replies.

Gregor seems to have spent all his words in the earlier ramble; now he stares at Erwin until he feels uncomfortable. So, Erwin turns his gaze to the kittens instead. They're mewing and tackling each other; they're tiny and look so soft. His heart melts.

"Aren't they cute?" Hange says.

Erwin draws in a long breath. "I can't just bring a cat home." Several of them are tabbies, but one is a tortoiseshell who seems especially aggressive. He chuckles as it pounces on another, pinning it to the blanket. "I bet that one could stand up to the dogs."

Elisabet has come up behind them; she says, "Torties are notoriously feisty."

"We do love our feisty animals." Erwin looks at the boy. "May I pick one up?"

Gregor is too occupied to reply, trying to pick a rock out of the sole of his shoe.

Erwin reaches in and lifts the kitten. It's surprisingly warm and light for its size in a way that reminds him of titan limbs. He holds it to his chest the way they used to hold Hera and Athena when they were puppies. The kitten immediately climbs up onto his shoulder, its tiny pinprick claws stabbing him through his shirt.

"She likes you," Elisabet says.

The kitten swipes at his head, then he hears a chewing noise. “Is she eating my hair?”

“Yes.”

Erwin melts. He gently removes the kitten, and she crawls onto his shoulder again.

“Reminds me of Levi,” Hange says dryly. “Disobedient, no fear, and clings to you.”

Erwin pulls the kitten away again, and this time, she is purring. He knows he has no chance. He turns to Gregor. “How much are you charging?”

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LEVI SEEMS TO be able to read it on his face the second Erwin steps into the guest room that afternoon. “What did you do?”

“How do you feel about kittens?”

“You didn’t.”

“I did. Elisabet is keeping her until we go home.” Erwin smiles, sheepish. “I should have asked you.”

“Yes, you should have.” Levi pulls his shirt off over his head, likely in a half-hearted attempt to rid himself of the scent of cigar smoke. “A kitten? The dogs will eat it.”

“This one seems like she will stand up for herself. You should see her, Levi. She’s adorable.”

Levi glances at him, then shakes his head, but the corner of his mouth lifts. “You’re such a softie. Pathetic.”

Erwin knows he has given in. “You can call her Dog, if you like.”

“Careful, I might.”

“Or we could go with Artemis, goddess of the hunt.”

“You’re going to saddle a tiny kitten with *Artemis*? ”

“How about Nyx, goddess of night?”

Levi sighs. “We’re going to have a complete pantheon, at

this rate. Fine, Nyx." He cocks his head at the bathroom. "I'm going to shower."

"Want me to join you?"

"Yes, but that might not be a good idea if we want to get ready in time. I still have to shave, and you wanted to trim your undercut."

"True." Erwin studies Levi's nude upper body. "You just look so good with your shirt off that it's hard to resist being near you."

"You like this look? Maybe I'll go to the ceremony like this." Levi steps into the bathroom and inspects himself in the mirror. "I could put on my cravat to make it formal."

"You could put a suit jacket on and nothing underneath." Erwin chuckles at the idea at first, but then he pictures it, and decides it's an appealing image.

As Levi steps into the shower, Erwin stands in front of the sink and begins to apply shaving foam to his face and neck. By the time Levi finishes his shower, Erwin is just just finishing his shave. Levi wordlessly helps him tidy up his undercut, and then it's his turn to shower.

They style their hair and dress in suits, and then they're ready to go. Erwin slips on his good shoes. He picks up the bolo tie, then hesitates.

"Should I even be wearing this anymore?"

Levi shrugs, tying his cravat. "It's a retirement party for your military service. It would be fitting to wear it."

Erwin studies the bolo tie, realizing he might never wear it again after this. The stone has been around his neck for seven years, its weight sometimes comforting, sometimes terrifying. It has become a part of him. He thinks of all the times Levi has grabbed it to pull him down for a kiss, or all the times Erwin tightened it into place before an important meeting or expedition.

And suddenly it hits him: after tonight, he will *no longer be a Commander.*

He sits on the end of the bed, still staring at the stone. “Shit.”

Levi is instantly beside him. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s fine, it’s just hitting me.” His fingers curl around the stone and he says, “I know I’m ready, it’s not that, it’s just ... This is really the end of my career, isn’t it? I’m not going to be a Commander anymore, just Erwin Smith.”

“I think it’s normal to feel strange about it. You’ve been in the military for what, twenty-eight years? It’s going to take you a while to figure out who you are when you’re not a Commander. Just like it took me a while to figure out who I am above ground.”

For the first time, Erwin understands how big of a change it was for Levi to leave the Underground, and he feels a pang of guilt. “Well, you figured it out fast.”

“Yeah. And you will, too.” Levi takes his hand and kisses it. “I’ll be right by your side. That’s not going to change.”

“It will change a little bit. I won’t have any authority over you anymore.”

“You never did.”

“No, I didn’t.” Erwin smiles and kisses Levi’s forehead. “Okay. Let’s go retire.”

“You’re ready?”

“Yeah. You?”

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

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The announcer calls out their names as they descend the staircase to the ballroom: “Commander Erwin Smith and Captain Levi Ackerman.”

The crowd turns to watch them descend, arm-in-arm, and Erwin sees many smiles. Levi was right: the two of them being seen in public as a couple didn’t change the way the public viewed them at all. Most of their former business contacts were just confused that they were announcing it; they had all assumed

it was already true. Sometimes, Erwin thinks it has humanized them both and helped their reputation.

He scans the room. He sees Hange chatting with Onyan-kopon and a tall, blonde woman he doesn't recognize. He's surprised Alec isn't with them, but then finds him chatting nearby with Flegel Reeves.

In the centre of the room are several of the new Marley-an-Eldian diplomats, some of them ex-titans, some of them recent immigrants from Marley. While Eldians in Marley still have a fight for equal rights ahead of them, their formal segregation has ended and there are government programs in place to welcome them into Marleyan society. Social change takes time, and several members of Marley's new government seem committed to righting the wrongs of the past. Erwin hopes that commitment continues.

The floor space is crowded. While their retirement is the big event of this ceremony, there are other soldiers being honoured today for their service anniversaries or promotions, and the Council is due to announce the initiation of the trans-island railway project. Erwin will also present the new military structure.

Otherwise, it will be a night of good food, music, dancing, and drinks.

Hange runs up to them. "Did you tell him about the cat?"

"Yes, he did," Levi says. "Did you put him up to it?"

Hange nudges him. "Oh, don't be grumpy. You wanted a cat anyway."

They make their way to the food tables and Erwin marvels at the spread; the cuisine in Paradis has exploded with flavours from around the world. Levi heads straight for some small, fried, triangular-shaped dough packages, but Erwin has his eye on the bacon-wrapped scallops.

"What is that?" Hange asks Levi. He has taken a bite of the little package, revealing a yellowish potato-like substance.

He swallows. “It’s called a samosa, and it’s the best thing I’ve ever tasted.” He holds it out to Erwin, who takes a bite. It’s savoury, salty, and spicy, with flavours that travel across his entire mouth in a wave.

“That is amazing. Here, try a scallop.”

Levi doesn’t eat much—he claims to have no appetite. Hange and Erwin, on the other hand, eat their way across the entire table. By the end, Erwin isn’t sure how he’s going to give a speech, let alone dance. He wants a nap.

The ceremony begins, and Historia gives her welcome address. Then Zackly takes the stage and begins to name soldiers who are receiving medals.

Historia and Mikasa come to stand by them.

“How are you feeling?” Historia whispers, and Erwin wonders how many times he’s going to have to answer that question. He feels slightly differently every time it’s asked. Right now, he’s feeling the rush of anticipation he feels before going in front of an audience.

“And finally,” Zackly says, “we offer posthumous medals of valour to Eren Yeager and Armin Arlert. The bravery they showed in the battle to save Paradis will never be forgotten. May they rest in peace.”

Mikasa bursts into tears.

Historia quickly pulls her in for a hug, which doesn’t offer her much dignity since Historia is so short. Hange quickly steps in, too, and pulls both of them in.

Erwin glances at Levi and sees his eyes are glassy. *Zackly should have warned us this was coming. We could have braced ourselves.* He puts an arm around Levi for support, but that doesn’t last long, because Zackly says,

“And now Commander Erwin Smith will present you with the new military structure.”

And so, Erwin goes through the same presentation as earlier, making sure to orate with more enthusiasm than in the military meeting. The crowd cheers as he announces Mikasa as

the Commander of the new Queen's Guard branch—thankfully, she has already composed herself before all eyes land on her.

"Thank you, Erwin," Zackly says. "And as many of you know, we have two very famous members of the military retiring tonight. Levi, would you please come join us?"

The crowd ripples to let Levi through. He stands beside Erwin, rigid.

Zackly says, "Commander Erwin Smith and Captain Levi Ackerman have been at the helm of every major step we have taken toward the peace we are enjoying today. It is after a great deal of sacrifice, struggle, and difficult decisions that they stand before you, ready to begin their well-earned retirement. They will take a moment to say a few words."

Erwin scans the crowd. Everyone is silent, watching, and the energy is strangely positive. He feels admired. A hero. This is so different from the last time he and Levi were on a stage together, when they were to execute Zeke Yeager. He feels a flash of the terror he felt seeing Levi's struggle, and the revulsion he felt at Zeke's blood on his hands. He looks down at his palms. The blood is invisible to everyone now; most days, he has forgotten it's there.

All at once, his planned speech changes.

"My name is Erwin Smith," he says. "Many of you know me as Commander Erwin, the man who led your sons and daughters into the mouths of the titans in order to secure freedom for the citizens within the walls. Some of you admire the legend of the Commander who pressed our advance further south than we have ever gone. Some of you loathe me for the sacrifices of your children, your siblings, your parents. As I prepare to remove the mantle of Commander and become just Erwin Smith, I want to tell you a bit about him.

"Like many children of Paradis, I lost my parents and ended up in the military at the age of twelve. At first, the idea of pushing into the unknown and discovering the truth of this world was what drove me. I was naïve, and though the realities of

loss, grief, and blood soon made their impression on me, I held onto this naïve dream through every step of my military career. This dream was what allowed me to develop strategies to keep our soldiers alive, such as the Long-Range Scouting Formation. It was what drove me to rise through the ranks and push deeper into enemy territory. It was what kept me going when I lost friends, soldiers under my command, and said goodbye to my beloved home of Shiganshina.

“Today, we see that dream was not so naïve, as it’s becoming our reality. Paradis is standing shoulder-to-shoulder with other nations, forging our new path on the world stage. The titans are a memory that will soon fade into myth. But I know many of you carry wounds in your hearts that will never heal. I am sorry. Please know each and every soldier fought valiantly. Each life was integral to the steps we have taken today. My tactics would have been nothing without the brave soldiers who were ready to offer up their hearts for knowledge and for humanity. Many of them had dreams of their own, and it was through the alignment of our dreams that we were able to achieve a better life for all of us.

“And so, it is with mixed emotions that I hand over command to the next generation of leaders. May they never face the types of decisions we faced during our time of war. May they champion hope, unity, and freedom to guide us all into a new era of peace. Thank you for your support. Thank you for your sacrifices.”

Levi is watching him, his eyes misty. He steps forward. “I’m not good at speeches like Erwin. But that’s what made us work well together: each of us is good at the stuff the other sucks at.

“You call me things like *Humanity’s Strongest*, but everything I am is because of this man who stands beside me. I was a dumb kid surviving in the Underground, and he pulled me above ground and gave me a purpose. It’s not just me he saved—the Survey Corps was made up of the weirdos and freaks who

didn't fit anywhere else. Erwin didn't see us that way. He saw the Wings of Freedom in each of us." He turns to Erwin. "Anyone standing here loathing you is an idiot. We are only here today because of what you saw in each of us. Every soldier who sacrificed their life did it trusting that you would lead their family and friends to better times. And you did. So don't be so modest. You *are* a hero."

Erwin swallows a lump in his throat as the crowd roars.

"Levi," he whispers.

Levi gives him a small smile, reaches over, and squeezes his hand.

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THEY RETURN TO the crowd with shiny new golden badges pinned to their chest, shaped like the Wings of Freedom. Levi traces the shape of the pin on Erwin's chest, then reaches up to cup his jaw.

"Still feeling a bit clingy?" Erwin asks gently. It's not like Levi to be so affectionate in a crowd.

"I just want you to know that I will always admire you, and always follow you." Levi's face is soft. "Thinking about where we've come from and how we got here is making me nostalgic."

Erwin smiles. Before he can reply, Hange runs up and gathers them both in a hug.

"I'm going to miss you guys."

Erwin chuckles. "We'll still see each other more days than not."

"Yeah, but it used to be that every single moment of our lives was enmeshed." Hange pulls back, tears in their eye. "It's really the end of an era."

"It is. But you are positioned for greatness, Hange. I can't wait to see how you lead our island into the future." He bends down to kiss their forehead.

Levi says gruffly, “You know, you’re a lot happier now than you were in year 852 in the last timeline.”

Hange’s eye shines. “Really?”

“Yeah. It’s annoying. You’re so perky and noisy.”

Hange pulls him in for a hug, their cheeks squishing together, and Levi sighs.

“Get off me.”

Hange grins, squishing him tighter. “Maybe I’m happier because I’m living apart from you and don’t have to see your grumpy mug every single morning.”

“That must be it.” A smile breaks through his grumpy expression, and he hugs them back.

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MUSICIANS TAKE THE stage, and the main floor clears for dancing. Levi catches Erwin’s hand and leads him onto the floor.

They’re more practised now than their first dance together, easily shifting between who leads and who follows. They glide across the floor, weaving between other dancers. At the end of their third song, Erwin dips Levi low and holds him there, their mouths so close that his lips are damp from the humidity of Levi’s breath.

They may be publicly a couple, but they haven’t kissed in front of a crowd, not really. But as the music swells, and Levi’s eyelids droop, Erwin is drawn in. He kisses Levi hard and deep, and Levi breaks the grip to wrap his arms around Erwin’s neck.

When they finally stand again, the next song has already started, and they’re both breathless.

The music is slow now, and they sway, gazes holding.

“Erwin, I want you to know, I will always follow you,” Levi says with surprising fierceness. “You will always be my Commander, even if you don’t have the title anymore.”

Everything about Levi’s behaviour is getting increasingly odder, but Erwin swallows back his worry to meet his intensity.

“And you will always be my Captain, subordinate in name only. You were the heart of the Survey Corps. And I think, in a way, you were my heart, too.”

Levi presses his hand to the centre of Erwin’s chest, staring up at him.

“Levi?”

“I want you.”

Erwin’s breaths freeze. “Oh?”

“Let me show you my loyalty.”

This is new, and heat floods Erwin’s ears and between his legs. He grips Levi by the hand and looks around, then draws him toward the staircase.

Lips locked, they stumble through the curtain of the secret room on the mezzanine. Levi starts to lead him toward the trap door, but instead, Erwin pulls him toward the table at the back of the room.

“What if someone comes in?” Levi says, voice barely audible over the music and the noise of the crowd.

“We might lose our jobs,” Erwin deadpans. He pulls Levi in close and says into his ear. “Are you comfortable here?”

“Yes. Fuck, yes.”

“Am I reading the mood right? You want me to take charge?”

He feels a shiver ripple through Levi. “Yes. Be rough with me. I’m clean and I’m ready.”

It’s getting increasingly harder to focus; Erwin kisses Levi’s ear and says, “Tell me to stop or slow down if I do or say something you don’t like, okay?” When Levi nods, Erwin pulls back and says, “Take off your jacket. Then pull your pants down, and bend over the table.”

In the time they have been together, he has gotten more information about that night when Levi mistook another man for him on this table, so long ago. He knows it was the power and dominance that caught Levi’s fascination. If that man is what Levi needs right now, then Erwin can be him.

He pulls a bottle out of his pocket and uncaps it. Levi looks over his shoulder.

“You brought lube to a *military ceremony*?”

“Were you expecting me to use spit?”

Levi’s nose wrinkles and he turns back to his original position.

Erwin presses one finger roughly into him, the other hand pressing down on his lower back to lock him in place. Levi cries out.

Erwin leans over him, saying into his ear, “Quiet, Levi. That’s an order.”

He wasn’t sure how those words would be received—an educated guess, at best—but Levi lets out a soft moan and is quiet.

More confident now, Erwin finds his prostate, and Levi cries out again.

“I thought I gave you an order, Captain.”

“Shit,” Levi whimpers. “Shit, *shit*.”

The curses flood Erwin’s veins with fire. He has always been a fan of gentle, passionate lovemaking, but seeing Levi so aroused is fuelling him. He massages harder, intentionally over-stimulating him, and bends to say into his ear, “Disobey me again and I’m going to gag you with your cravat.”

The words stutter out of Levi’s mouth, begging: “Fuck me.”

“I will. When I’m ready.” He wishes it were brighter so he could see Levi more clearly, but he doesn’t want to risk lighting up the curtains with a light stone. If they’re caught like this, at least the person coming through the curtain won’t be able to see who they are under the cover of darkness.

He withdraws his finger and grabs Levi by the hips, pulling him further over the edge of the table so he can reach around and stroke him. Levi cries out again.

Erwin stops. He walks around to the side of the table, crouching to Levi’s eye level. In the darkness, he can see the glint

of saliva dripping from his mouth. *Holy shit, he's so turned on already?*

"Take off your cravat," Erwin says.

Levi unties it with trembling hands and holds it out.

Erwin leans close to his ear and says softly, "Knock the table three times if you need me to stop."

Levi's response is almost a growl. "Fuck me like I'm your puppet. Use me hard until you come."

For a moment, Erwin is lightheaded, and it takes a few breaths to steady himself. Once he has regained his composure, he ties the cravat around Levi's mouth, thinking it's a pity he won't hear any more filthy talk.

But there will be time for that again, now that they're retired. They can spend entire days making slow love by candlelight, or edging each other into torturous ecstasy, or slowly massaging each other's bodies. He feels a rush of fear and excitement. This is a new unknown to explore, and they're heading into it together.

He gives Levi's ass a light spank—though it would suit the mood, this isn't the place for loud ones—and then pushes into him, a little bit faster than usual. Levi's cry is muffled by the cravat, and Erwin grits his teeth, barely holding back noises of his own. *I should have gagged myself, too.*

Though he knows he's supposed to be using Levi for his own pleasure, he angles his thrusts in a way that will drive Levi crazy. Sure enough, the man starts to writhe on the table, his muffled whimpers high-pitched.

Erwin's fingertips curl hard into the flesh of his hips. "I told you to be quiet, Captain."

Levi pushes his upper body up on his hands and twists to look up at Erwin, and in the dim light, Erwin can see the white of the cravat. *Fuck!* Erwin's supposed to be the one denying Levi, but he can't kiss him, can't see his face clearly, can't even lower his own Commander mask. He is bound, too, and he loves it.

He presses a hand between Levi's shoulder blades and

roughly forces him back to the table, picking up the pace and force of his thrusts. He's feverish, and he hears filth pouring from his mouth he never imagined he would say: "Do you like it when I pound into you like this? Feel how hard I am. Your ass is so hungry for my cock; you're taking me in so deep ... "

He's not going to last long at this pace. Maybe he's supposed to be the only one in charge, but Levi is thrusting back against him, an equal participant, and isn't that the way it always is between them?

Too late, Erwin discovers he has passed a point of no return. He shoves the back of Levi's shirt up, exposing his back, and pulls out to come on his ass.

As the last pulse leaves him, he realizes his mistake: they're in the dark, so he can't see if he splashed on their clothing. He pulls out a handkerchief to wipe Levi's skin. Afterwards, his fingertips skate across his back, exploring, and he hopes he managed to clean everything. *I should have finished in his mouth.*

Well, no need to repeat the mistake twice. "Stand up."

Levi stands. Erwin kneels between his legs and shoves him deep into his throat.

Levi gasps; the cravat must have slipped down. He's hard and twitching. "I'm going to come."

*That was fast.* Erwin pulls back to speak. "Ask me for permission."

"Let me come."

"Let me come, what?" Erwin asks, looking for the word *please*, and he's not ready for the word he hears instead:

"Commander," Levi gasps.

*Shit!* He closes his eyes. "Call me Commander again."

"Commander ... "

"Tell me my mouth feels good."

"Your mouth feels good, it feels so good, I need to be in your mouth." A shiver ripples through Levi's body. "Commander, *please.*"

Now there is a phrase Erwin has never heard him say before. He drives Levi into his throat and moves fast and hard until he tastes him. Levi's hands claw into his hair—apparently he has forgotten the power dynamics they were playing with, but Erwin loves the feeling of fingernails against his scalp, so he doesn't complain.

The last pulse comes and Erwin is about to swallow it, when Levi drops to his level and shoves his tongue into Erwin's mouth. This is new, too, and the idea that squeamish, cleanly Levi was craving the filth of this kiss makes Erwin's eyes roll into his head.

And that's how it is between them. Side-by-side for eight years, but still constantly surprising each other. Erwin feels a rush of love so strong that he breaks the kiss to pull Levi's head tightly to his chest.

For several minutes, they hold each other, catching their breaths.

“Shit,” Levi pants, approving.

“Shit,” Erwin agrees.

“But we fucked up. We can't go back out there now.”

“No?”

“I just messed up your hair, you jerked off all over my back, my cravat is soaked with drool, that handkerchief is full of come. I can only imagine how dazed our expressions are. Everyone's going to know.”

Erwin pulls away to run his fingers through Levi's hair. “The rest of the night is just dancing and socializing, anyway. Maybe we should sneak back to our room.”

“You sure? Retirement is a bigger deal for you than for me. And I've been through this before.”

“Levi,” Erwin says solemnly, “I can't think of a better way to celebrate my retirement than spending the night in bed with you.”

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SEVERAL HOURS LATER, Erwin feels someone shaking him awake. He forces one eye open. Levi is standing beside the bed, dressed only in one of Erwin's dress shirts; it's far too big for him.

"I fell asleep?" Erwin says, sitting up, and when he looks down, he sees love bites on his inner thighs. He shivers at the memory of Levi getting especially rough with his mouth during their second encounter.

"We both did. It's almost sunrise."

Erwin lets out a low groan. "You're going to make me get up at sunrise here, too?"

"Yes."

"Have some pity, Levi. It's my first day of retirement."

"Stop complaining. You can go back to bed after our tea." Levi pulls on his pants. "I'm going to get a teapot. Meet me on the balcony outside the conference room on the second floor."

Erwin lets out a weary sigh, but says, "Okay." He knows ritual is important to Levi, and probably doubly so on the morning of everything changing.

He drags on clothes and shoves a hand through his hair, but it falls back onto his forehead. *Ah, well.* He folds up the sleeves to the elbows and straightens the collar, trying to make his sexed-out form look a little more presentable. Then he slips on his shoes.

He sees why Levi chose this balcony; it faces east, and has a view across the city of Mitras to the hills in the distance. Two padded chairs are waiting here, on either side of a small table. *Is this someone else's sunrise spot? Or did Levi plan this?*

He walks up to the balcony and folds his arms on the railing, staring across the seat of the kingdom, and feels his freedom more acutely than ever before.

The balcony door opens behind him, and he glances back over his shoulder. Levi sets a tray on the small table and comes

to stand beside him. Erwin reaches over to pull him close. The first glow of orange appears on the horizon.

“Any regrets?” Levi asks.

“None. You?”

“No.” Levi’s face is soft as he stares at the sunrise. “This is everything I want.”

“Yeah,” Erwin says. “Me, too.”

Levi turns to him, that strangely soft expression still on his face. “Mind pouring us some tea?”

*Is his voice shaking?* Erwin stares at him.

All at once, the pieces start to fall into place.

Levi’s sleepless night before they arrived, his strange behaviour, his desperation to let Erwin know he will still follow him. Hange’s evasiveness when he brought up Levi being troubled by something. Levi pulling him up to this beautiful spot for tea, when they easily could have taken it downstairs.

Erwin’s throat tightens.

Slowly, he paces toward the tray, and stares down at the teapot. And there it is, at the base of the spout: a silver ring. He delicately pulls the ring off the spout and holds it. It’s his size.

“Levi ...” He turns around.

Levi is down on one knee. The orange rays of the sunrise light the sky behind him. He is glowing and beautiful. He is a god.

“I mean it,” Levi says, voice smooth and strong. “This is everything I want, every day, forever. Erwin Smith, will you marry me?”

Erwin has to clear his throat to reply: “Yes.” He sinks to his knees and pulls Levi into a kiss as his eyes flood with tears.

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“LET ME SEE it,” Hange says, grabbing Erwin’s hand. “You were right, Levi. It fits perfectly.”

Historia claps her hands together, dancing a little in her seat. “Its strength and simple design is so fitting. I’m so happy for you two.”

Erwin smiles and takes the seat next to Hange. “Levi tells me it’s made of the same material as the titan blades. Incidentally, thanks for helping him forge it, Hange.”

“Of course. It just means I have to be in the wedding party.” They elbow him. “Have you picked a date?”

“Hange,” Levi says flatly, “we’ve been engaged for less than an hour.” He loads up his plate with pancakes.

“I know. I’m just excited.”

Across the table, Mikasa says, “If you need an officiant, Historia could marry you.”

“I could?” the queen asks, eyes wide.

“Yeah. It’s part of your legal authority. Zackly could, too, but ...” She makes a face.

Erwin says, “If you’re up for it, Historia, we can think of no one better suited for the job.” He turns back to Hange. “And Hange, of course you’ll be in the wedding party; I can’t imagine it without you. If you would do me the honour, I would like you to walk me down the aisle.”

Their face flushes with excitement, eye glittering, and for the first time in a long time, they look like the Hange who used to rant about titans for hours at a time. “Really?”

“Of course.”

Levi swallows a bite of pancake and nods at Mikasa. “You, too. Walk with me.”

“Sure,” Mikasa says.

As the others chat amongst themselves, Erwin turns to Levi. “I didn’t think you were very invested in the idea of getting married.”

Levi’s cheeks rouge and he shrugs. “I know you like the formal paperwork of it all. And it won’t be so bad to have all our friends around us for a big party. I think we’ve earned it.”

Erwin leans over to kiss his temple. “We have. You know, I was planning to propose, too.”

“I had a feeling. I wanted to do it before you did, to make sure you knew I wasn’t feeling pressured into it. It had to be my idea. But I also wanted it to be a surprise.”

“I’m impressed Hange managed to keep it a secret.”

Hange pipes in, “I am, too.”

Onyankopon opens the door, carrying a pot of coffee. “I thought you all might enjoy some proper caffeine.”

The room fills with chatter. Erwin looks down at his ring and the chatter fades into the background. A smile on his face, he turns to study Levi’s profile: sharp chin, swooping nose, round cheeks. Levi must notice, because he turns to him, unimpressed.

“Erwin.”

“Yeah?” Erwin asks, expecting to be called out for staring.

“I still can’t believe you bought us a fucking *kitten*.”

Erwin laughs as Levi leans over to kiss his cheek.

# ❧ Thirty ❧

## OUR SOULS ENTWINE

*-year 853, August-*

LEVI IDLY RUFFLES the fur around Hera's neck. She's spilling across his lap, exhausted from hours of running obstacles in the forest. On the other end of the couch, Athena lies on Erwin. Hange sits between them, Nyx curled up on their lap. Through the front window, Levi sees the arch and altar they have set up in the yard. The arch is made of woven pine branches and cones they gathered from the forest; it took Erwin and Levi three weeks to assemble.

First thing in the morning, Mikasa and Historia will arrive to help set up. After that, their guests will begin to arrive.

And then, he and Erwin will be married.

Leading up to this moment, Levi wasn't sure how he would feel the night before. The possibility of getting married one day didn't cross his mind until he met Erwin; he always thought he would be eager to get it over with, or nervous. Instead, he feels a steady warmth inside him, the comfortable glow of a fire. After everything they've been through, committing to each other in front of an audience will be easy.

Hange drains their wine. "I should probably go get some sleep, but I don't want to disturb Dog-cat." To Levi's chagrin, they took the joke about calling Nyx 'Dog' a little too seriously. Hange idly scratches Nyx's head. The cat's head jerks up with a rolling meow. She looks back at Hange, unimpressed at being petted

without invitation, then jumps down and shakes her back foot at the humans to underscore her irritation.

“Well,” Hange says, “that problem solved itself. Now I just have to find the energy to stand.”

For a moment, the only sound is Nyx loudly lapping water and Athena’s soft snoring.

“We should probably get some sleep, too,” Erwin says.

“You still want to sleep at my place tonight?” Hange asks. Erwin has a strange superstition that a couple shouldn’t share a bed the night before their wedding.

“If you don’t mind.”

“Of course not. I’ll leave the door unlocked. Extra towels are waiting for you on the guest room bed.”

They say their goodnights, then Hange steps through the door. With some difficulty, Erwin and Levi manage to coax the dogs to leave their laps. The dogs plod to the large dog bed in the corner of the living room, where they curl up again.

Erwin and Levi stand facing each other, then Erwin leans in for a hug.

“The next time I see you, we’ll be approaching the altar.”

“Unless I sneak into your bedroom tonight.”

“Don’t you dare.” Erwin cups his cheeks and gives him a long kiss. “Goodnight, love.”

The door shuts behind him, and the house feels empty. Not *empty*, Levi corrects himself, looking at the dogs and Nyx, who is worming her way between them. Still, he feels Erwin’s absence. They haven’t spent a single night apart in such a long time that the bed will feel too large and empty without him.

He finishes his glass of wine, says goodnight to the animals—the only acknowledgement he receives is one twitch of Nyx’s ear—and climbs upstairs to the bedroom. His suit is hanging on the door, pressed and ready for the morning. It’s dark charcoal, three pieces, with a black shirt and charcoal tie. Erwin’s suit is the same style, but pale grey, almost white, with a white shirt and pale grey tie.

The ring boxes sit on the dresser. They opted for matching bands of white gold. There's a secret embedded on the inside of the band: a small chip of light stone. This stone specifically came from the ceiling of Levi's old neighbourhood, where he often sat staring up, dreaming of life on the surface. It resembles a glowing star, like the ones he and Erwin used to stare up at together on expeditions before they knew they loved each other. The glow also symbolizes the light of their paths, merging into one. And all symbolism aside, the glow looks pretty.

Sitting next to the boxes are the pouches to be attached to the dogs' collars. Against the advice of everyone they have spoken to, they decided the dogs will be the ring bearers. They both know the result is likely to be a bit chaotic, but that, too, is symbolic: their relationship was forged in times of chaos.

Levi strips down to his underwear and falls backwards on the bed, folding his arms behind his head. The mid-summer sun is still bright outside, and he doesn't feel particularly tired.

*Levi Ackerman-Smith.*

In his lifetime, he has gone from a single name to two, and now to three. He rolls the names around in his mind. *Levi Ackerman-Smith, Erwin Ackerman-Smith.*

They thought about each keeping their original name first and adding the other, or both taking one of their names, or even creating a new surname altogether. Erwin threw around the portmanteau *Smackerman* often enough that Levi threatened to call the whole thing off if he joked about it one more time. Eventually, they decided this combination sounded the most natural.

*Levi Ackerman-Smith.*

He closes his eyes, picturing speaking to his younger self, the little punk who wanted to murder Erwin. *One day, you will take his name in marriage. Also, he's a demon in the sack, so hop on his dick.*

He blinks and rolls onto his side. The pillow smells like

Erwin. He smiles and closes his eyes again, and this time, he doesn't open them until morning.

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ERWIN FLIPS THROUGH his notes, trying yet again to commit his vows to memory. He closes his eyes and mouths the words over and over, twisting the engagement ring on his finger.

*Erwin Ackerman-Smith.*

It's strange to change the name that has been with him through so much: his childhood, his father's death, and his time in the military. Team Leader Erwin Smith, Squad Leader Erwin Smith, Commander Erwin Smith.

He must admit, to be tied to such a grand name as *Ackerman* is an honour. It's strange to think that Levi came from such humble beginnings, yet his name is the one that carries more weight. Erwin considered dumping *Smith* from his name entirely, a clear divide between his lives, but he's not quite ready to give up that link to his father.

What he can't say is whether or not that name meant anything to his father in the first place. Erwin doesn't know much about his family history—of course he wouldn't, because no one in Paradis does, but he knows even less than most. They were only close with his mother's parents; his father refused to talk about his origins at all. Erwin wonders if the man's patience and kindness were overcompensation for the support he was deprived of growing up.

*Smith* might not even be the true family name. One of the old books in his father's study had a nameplate written in childish handwriting: *Kasimir Schmidt*. Erwin found it too late to ask about it. Should he have been Erwin Schmidt?

*Erwin Ackerman-Smith.*

He has already been practising his new signature. Levi doesn't know; he would probably tease him about being too obsessed with bureaucracy. Maybe he's right, but something

about having their relationship formally documented is important to Erwin. Maybe it still doesn't feel real until he has tangible proof registered in a government office somewhere. Or maybe after signing so many death notices over the years, he wants to sign his own happiness.

He spins the ring on his finger again and walks to the window. The cabin is dark; Levi must be asleep already.

Erwin should sleep, too.

He studies his reflection in the glass. "Erwin Ackerman-Smith," he says aloud, and the syllables lilt like music in his ears.

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LEVI SITS UPRIGHT as voices sound outside. He throws the window open and shoves his head through it. The sun is shining, the birds are singing, and five teenagers are standing in his driveway: Historia, Mikasa, Jean, Sasha, and Connie. Levi fights the urge to smile at the sight of them.

"Hey, brats," he yells, "keep it down!"

They all look up, and four of them look nervous. Mikasa just rolls her eyes.

"We have the chairs," she yells, pointing down the driveway. Craning his neck, Levi sees a large cart laden with supplies near the gate.

"So set them up," he says.

"How do you want them set up? Two sections?"

"Hange has a seating chart."

Historia calls up, "Levi, yell for me when you're dressed. I'm going to help you with your makeup and hair."

"What's wrong with my normal hair and my normal face?"

Historia puts her hands on her hips like she's disappointed in a child who just asked a bad question. He sighs.

"Fine."

He showers, then pats powdered deodorant on his under-

arms. He shaves, finishing it off with the aftershave Erwin likes. With a pair of scissors, he trims his body hair, keeping it tidy and even.

The suit is tailor-made and hugs his body. He examines himself in the mirror. The jacket accentuates his shoulders and tapers down to his narrow waist. It's flattering, and he gives himself a little approving smirk in the mirror.

He pokes his head out the window. "Hey! Historia!"

"Coming," she yells from somewhere near the altar. A moment later, she bursts through the door. "Wow, Levi, that suit really shows off your shape."

He's not used to compliments about his appearance from anyone except Erwin. His instinct is to lob it back at her. "Yeah, you look good, too." She's wearing her royal cape and crown, and a simple-yet-elegant silver dress.

She pats her head. "Not too good, I hope. I don't want to overshadow you on your big day. Is there somewhere we can sit that has natural light?" She holds up a large bag as if it means something.

"What's in the bag?"

"Makeup."

He drops onto a chair in the kitchen. "Is this necessary?"

"Give it a chance. If you don't like it, you can wash it all off. But I think you'll be pleasantly surprised." She opens a can of a pale, putty-like substance and starts applying it to his hair. "This will hold your hair back, but will give it a natural-looking finish at the same time." She parts his hair, then combs it flat. "We'll pull a couple little pieces forward to soften your look. There, that should do it." She holds out a mirror so he can inspect it himself. His hair is parted in its usual off-centre part, slicked back in two sections, although she's right that the hair product isn't noticeable. He looks tidy.

"Huh," he says, approving.

"Now a bit of makeup. Don't worry, I'll make it look natural, too." Historia taps foundation over a small acne scar on

his chin, then along the knife scar over his eyebrow, and finally across the sun damage on his cheekbones and nose. “How do you feel about eyeliner?”

“Fine, I guess.” Isabel used to put makeup on him for her amusement, and he often liked the result. He feels a pang. Historia is a lot more even-keeled, but her mix of exuberance and hidden stubbornness sometimes reminds him of Isabel.

“Close your eyes,” she says, and he feels eyeliner glide across his lids. “I’ll do your brows, too.”

“What’s wrong with my eyebrows?”

“Levi,” she says, scolding, “none of this is about what’s wrong with you. It’s about putting on a costume for a fancy day. Making you *you*, but even more *you*.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“You’ll see what I mean. Hold still.” She combs his eyebrows—he doesn’t know how she can find anything to comb, his eyebrows being so thin—and then feathers them with a pencil. “There. Take a look.”

Levi looks in the mirror. She’s right: the makeup is natural; he’s an especially polished version of himself. Between the makeup and the hair, he looks nice. Pretty, even. One corner of his mouth lifts in a smile. “Not bad.” Unaccustomed to being pretty, he steps back and does a little spin for Historia. “Does it look okay?”

She smiles. “Beautiful. You look ready to get married.”

The words almost knock him over. “Holy shit.” He looks at himself in the mirror again. “Holy shit.” Excitement kindles in his stomach. Erwin is going to see this polished version of himself, and then *marry* him.

Historia winks. “The guests should arrive soon; we’ll get them settled. Mikasa will let you know when it’s time to walk. I’m going to go see how Erwin is getting on.”

*Levi Ackerman-Smith*, he thinks, studying himself in the mirror, and he can’t stop smiling.

..❀..

ERWIN CURSES AS the tie ends up the wrong length yet again. His hands have apparently chosen today, of all days, to betray him.

“Erwin?” Historia calls.

“In here. Can you help me out?”

She appears around the corner, and he stares. She is stunning and grown-up and queenly all at once.

Then she gives him a playful look, and the queenly air is gone. “Did the mighty Commander Erwin forget how to tie a tie?”

“My mind is elsewhere.” He takes a seat. She sets her bag beside him and grabs the tie. “Have you seen Levi yet?” he adds.

“I have. He’s excited.”

“Really?” Erwin is having a difficult time picturing it.

“Well, by Levi’s standards. He even smiled.” She tightens the tie into place; he tucks it into his suit.

“Thank you.”

“Did you want some makeup? I just finished doing Levi’s.”

When he agrees, she pulls out a few tubes of foundation. “Let’s see, you have warmer undertones than Levi does. This one should do.” She studies his face, then begins to apply it. “You have good bone structure. I won’t have to do much.”

It’s the oddest compliment he has ever received, and he doesn’t know how to respond.

Next, she inspects his eyebrows. “They’re in good shape.”

“I groom them,” he admits. “You don’t want to see how bushy they would be if I didn’t.”

“You do a good job. I don’t think they need any touching up.” Historia taps her fingers to her lips, considering. “May I give you some smudged eyeshadow? It will be very subtle, but it will make your eyes pop. And maybe just a hint of colour on your lips.”

“Go ahead.”

She finishes her work. “What do you think?”

He accepts the mirror from her and studies his reflection. He looks about ten years younger, and his eyes are piercing. The only word he can find is, “Wow.”

“Not bad, right?” Historia steps in behind him and grins. “You both clean up nicely. Now, wait here until Hange comes for you.”

He watches her leave and draws a shaky breath.

*I'm about to marry Levi Ackerman.*

He almost laughs. The thought is so strange; he had no idea how much his life was about to change when he first clapped eyes on a talented criminal in the Underground.

He pulls out his vows again. At least he has time to practice.

..❀❀..

LEVI ISN'T GOOD at waiting. He sits on the couch and tries to read, but his eyes skim the same page several times before he gives up. Outside, he hears a carriage approach, and the loud, exaggerated noises of friends greeting each other. Their first guests must have arrived.

His heart pounds. They will have a reasonably large audience, and he wonders if that was a mistake.

Mikasa knocks and steps into the room. She stops. “Huh, Historia did a good job. You don't look like a cave troll.”

“Yeah, and you look like you brushed your hair.” Truthfully, she looks stunning. She's wearing a dark red dress with black embroidery around the skirt; Hange will be wearing the same, but Mikasa's is sleeveless with a high neck, while Hange will wear a matching suit jacket. “Historia did your makeup, too?”

“Yeah.” She stares at his knee, and he realizes it's bouncing.

He stills his leg. “How's everything looking out there?”

“Sasha and Connie went into town to check on the reception hall. The dogs are already threatening to knock over the decor, so Hange took them into the forest to try to wear them out a bit. Jean is serving the early guests some wine, and they’re socializing.”

“Who’s here so far?”

“Just Nile and Marie Dok, Lord Alec, and Onyankopon. Ceremony starts in about an hour.”

“An hour.” Levi’s leg bounces again. “You assholes should have let me sleep longer. What the hell am I supposed to do for an hour?”

She pulls out a small brown object, thinner than a cigar. “Cigarillo. Won’t take as long as a cigar.”

“Erwin isn’t going to kiss me if I smell like that.”

“So brush your teeth.”

“That won’t do it. But I’ll come outside with you if you want to smoke it.”

She shrugs. “At least I won’t have to deal with your drool all over the end.”

He ignores the barb and leads her to the back porch, where he won’t accidentally see Erwin before their big moment. She lights up the cigarillo and sits beside him on the porch steps. Levi leans back on his palms. It’s going to be a sunny day; the sky is already blue.

“Nice day for a wedding,” she says.

“Yeah.”

“Looking forward to it?”

Maybe it’s Levi’s imagination, but he detects a hint of melancholy in her voice. “Yeah, I am. What about you? Are you happy?”

Mikasa shrugs. “This is your day.”

“Don’t dodge the question.” He needs a distraction, anyway.

She blows a ring of smoke. “I found Iris.”

“Oh?”

“She’s just finishing up her medical degree. She’s twenty, a bit older than I thought. I’m torn about whether I should ask her to join Historia’s council now, or let it play out naturally again.” She examines her fingernails, which are shiny with pale nail polish. “I still like her.”

“Historia?”

“Yeah. And I’m getting signals. It’s confusing.”

“She’s eighteen now,” Levi says.

Mikasa scowls. “And I’m twenty-eight. I’m starting to feel old and jaded.”

“Old,” he scoffs.

They stop talking as footsteps approach. “Hello?” Onyankopon’s voice calls.

“Hey,” Levi greets.

Onyankopon rounds the corner, followed by Lord Alec. When they see Levi, they stop, their mouths open.

“Wow, Levi.” Onyankopon looks him up and down. “You look amazing.”

“I’ll say,” Alec says. “Erwin Smith is a lucky man.”

Levi’s cheeks burn. How many more compliments is he going to have to endure? “Thanks.”

Mikasa fishes through her pocket and pulls out two more cigarillos. “Want one?”

“Oh, I’ve heard about these!” Alec rushes forward to accept it. “Thank you. Are these cannabis or opium?”

“Uh … tobacco.”

“Oh. Well, that will do, too.”

Onyankopon smiles at Mikasa. “Did you get those in Marley?”

“Yes. Want one?” She holds out the other one; he politely refuses and comes to sit by Levi. Alec sits with his legs folded beneath him on the grass. Levi never would have expected a lord to sit on the grass in a nice suit, but Alec is always full of surprises.

“So, today’s the big day,” Alec says, struggling to use the lighter. Onyankopon reaches over to rescue him.

“No shit,” Levi says. “That’s why you’re here. Or at least that’s why *he’s* here.” He points at Onyankopon, who shrugs.

“I have had so many dealings with Alec that it made sense for him to be my guest.” He pauses. “Unless ... Wasn’t there some history with you two? Was this a mistake?”

“Water under the bridge,” Levi says.

Alec points at him with his cigarillo hand. “For you, maybe. I still have no clue what happened. Did we sleep together?”

Levi sighs and looks away.

“We did?” Alec gives him a slow and happy blink that reminds him of Nyx’s face when he scratches her under her chin. “Lucky me.”

“No, we just made out.”

“Hm. That’s disappointing.”

*So he was attracted to me after all?* Levi knows he needs to let this go, but his ego spurs him to say, “Are you flirting with me?”

“Just a bit, but don’t take it too seriously. I wouldn’t dare make an actual pass at you. I don’t hit on married men.” He pauses. “Without their consent, anyway. If you and your husband-to-be are ever looking for a third—”

“No.”

Alec shrugs. “Worth a try.”

Onyankopon clears his throat and, mercifully, changes the topic. “Have you decided on a location for a honeymoon?”

Levi shakes his head. He picks a blade of grass and begins to peel it. “Hange is taking the dogs into town tonight so we can have the cabin to ourselves for a few days. We’ll take a longer trip later, but right now, we’re just looking forward to bringing in the garden harvest and preparing for winter.”

“Well, don’t forget to send a message to me when you decide. I can get you some good deals.” Onyankopon stretches out his legs. “Especially if it’s the home country of one of our

diplomat friends. Several of them owe me a few favours.” He glances at Mikasa. “Still interested in visiting Hizuru, Mikasa?”

“Yes, eventually. I might wait a few more years.” She rolls the cigarillo between her fingertips. “A lot of Historia’s initiatives are just starting to get off the ground, and I want to see them through.” It sounds like an excuse. Levi will have to ask her about that some other time.

The four of them chat idly for a while. Levi works his way through several blades of grass, knotting them gently into chains. He’s trying not to think too much about what comes next in case he gets nervous again, but it’s always there in the back of his mind, in the bounce of his knee.

..&..

“COME IN,” ERWIN says, fussing with his hair in the mirror.

Nile and Marie greet him with boisterous congratulations and big hugs.

“Looking good,” Marie says, elbowing him.

“I hope so.” Erwin frowns and fidgets more with his hair. “Were you two nervous before your wedding?”

“Yes,” Nile says, just as Marie says, “No.” They look at each other.

“Really?” Marie asks, unimpressed, and Nile shrinks.

“I think it’s normal. Isn’t it?”

“I hope so, because I’m nervous.” Erwin turns to smile politely at them. “I think the waiting is what’s killing me.”

“Enjoy it,” Marie says. “You’re going to blink and the night will be over.”

He arches a brow. “Hopefully not the whole night.”

She laughs. “Oh, honey, you’re not seriously expecting sex after—”

“Marie,” Nile warns under his breath.

“Oh come on, it’s just Erwin. We can tell him.” She grins. “A wedding is exhausting. Nile fell asleep before we could—how should I say this—consummate the marriage.”

Nile claps a hand to his face.

“Don’t be embarrassed, dear. I was tired, too. And we drank way too much.”

Erwin bites the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling at the humiliation on Nile’s face. “So the key is, don’t drink.”

“The key is to adjust your expectations. You have the rest of your lives to do whatever you want.” Marie glances out the window, then stands on tiptoes to kiss Nile’s cheek. “Looks like the guests are arriving. I’ll go get us a seat.” She winks at Erwin. “Good luck!”

The door closes behind her. Nile stands awkwardly for a moment while Erwin preens himself.

Nile clears his throat. “I’m glad you got the life you wanted.”

Erwin looks at him in the mirror. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I know what you gave up for your career and your dreams. I’m glad you get a chance to experience some of it. And you and Levi ... ” He looks uncomfortable for a moment, then says, “There was always something more there. So I’m glad it worked out.”

Erwin turns to him and draws him in for a three-pat hug, the only kind Nile has ever tolerated. “Thank you, Nile. I’m glad, too.”

Hange bursts through the door. “Erwin! The guests are all here and everyone is ready to go.” They glance at Nile. “Commander, you should take a seat.”

Once Nile has left, Hange stands in front of Erwin and carefully pins a boutonnière to his lapel. “I still think you should have worn flower crowns.”

He smiles. “If you find some for the reception, we’ll wear them then.”

“I’ll hold you to that. Ready?”

“Yes,” he says, butterflies in his stomach.

“Let’s go.” Hange holds out their elbow, and Erwin accepts it.

They step outside the house.

The yard looks stunning. The chairs are arranged around a central aisle. A deep red carpet leads to the altar, where Historia stands, beaming at him. Clay vases of pine boughs line either side of the aisle, and pine sprigs are tied to the back of each chair with red ribbons.

Off to the side is a cellist, waiting for her cue.

Historia clears her throat. “Please rise for the arrival of the grooms.”

The cello begins to play.

Erwin draws a deep breath and slowly lets it out. He and Hange walk to the altar, each step in slow rhythm with the music. A muscle in his lips is jumping and he feels energy flood his body the way it always did before giving a speech to a crowd.

Once they reach Historia, Hange gives him a long hug.

“I’m so happy for you two,” they whisper.

“Thank you, Hange,” he whispers back.

They step to the side. Erwin turns to face the end of the aisle.

And there is Levi.

Erwin is accustomed to Levi’s beauty being rough and wild; now he is polished and regal. His hair, his suit, his glowing skin. Erwin is dizzy, and he realizes he has forgotten to breathe.

..&..

LEVI CLINGS TO Mikasa’s arm, fixated on the man waiting for him under the arch. Erwin looks elegant in his suit, his eyes glowing. He can’t believe this gorgeous man is going to pledge his life to Levi in front of all these witnesses.

*I thought I lost him forever, and here we are.*

He sees Erwin tear up, and now he’s tearing up, too.

They reach the end of the aisle, and Mikasa hugs him. “Happy for you, cousin.”

“You stink like smoke,” he whispers back, and she gives him an unimpressed look, but he sees the smirk beneath it.

Then Levi turns.

Erwin is even more impressive up close, the contrast of sharp lines against smooth, the blaze of his irises. He holds out his hands and Levi accepts them. As their skin makes contact, he suddenly feels as if he’s in the paths, memories tumbling down on him all at once: a chase in the Underground, a hand gripping a sword, two men side-by-side, a rooftop choice. And now they’re here, *he’s* here.

“You look gorgeous,” Erwin whispers, and Levi finds he can’t speak around the knot in his throat.

Historia calls out, “Please be seated,” and she begins to welcome the guests.

Erwin’s upper lip is trembling; Levi gives in and lets his hands tremble, too, to let him know he’s not alone. He sees Erwin’s throat bob.

“Before you declare your vows,” Historia is saying, “I wish to confirm your intention to marry. Erwin Smith, do you come here freely to give your hand in marriage to Levi Ackerman?”

“I do,” Erwin says, voice gravelly.

“Do you, Levi Ackerman, come here freely to give your hand in marriage to Erwin Smith?”

Levi finds his voice to say, “I do.”

“The grooms have prepared their vows, which they will now recite. Erwin, you may go first.”

For a moment, Erwin looks stunned, and then he gives a small laugh. “I practised these vows so many times ... ”

“You forgot them?” Levi asks, shocked.

“I forgot them. So I’ll speak from the heart instead.” Erwin’s voice gains strength as he speaks: “When I first saw you in the Underground, I had no idea the profound impact you were about to make on my life. From the very beginning, you ground-

ed me and kept me human, even as my career challenged me to cast my humanity aside. Your charisma and your devotion to humanity inspired me when I hit my lowest moments; you continue to inspire me now in this beautiful peace we get to enjoy together. And I think—I hope—I have inspired you in return. The sum of us is greater than each of us alone.

“I will never forget the sacrifices you have made to get us to this point, and I’ll never stop admiring how strong you have been through everything. I love you, Levi.”

Levi’s jaw quivers. “I love you, too.”

Historia says quietly, “Your turn, Levi.”

He clears his throat. “I’m not the only one who made sacrifices along the way to get here, Erwin. I watched you pour every bit of yourself into humanity’s future. I watched you risk everything time and time again, all for the sake of a cause greater than both of us. You did inspire me. And more than that, you trusted me. You took a boy from the Underground and offered him a hand in humanity’s future. And now you’re offering me the rest of your life.” His grip tightens. “I will treasure every single day we have together, every single *heartbeat*. Our destinies are intertwined. We share the same path. We always have.”

Tears spill over onto Erwin’s cheeks, and he whispers, “That was beautiful.”

“Don’t cry,” Levi says. “You’re going to start me up, too, and I have eyeliner on.”

The guests chuckle, and he suddenly remembers they’re there.

Historia stands tall. “Now it’s time for the rings.”

Jean urges Athena and Hera into the aisle as Erwin and Levi crouch down to greet them. The novelty of the guests is too distracting; the dogs immediately begin trying to play with the guests in the back row. Another polite laugh ripples through the crowd.

*Focus, girls.* Levi sticks two fingers in his mouth and whistles.

Chaos breaks loose.

The dogs bolt toward him, knocking over every single vase of pine boughs. Guests on the aisle jump out of their chairs to dodge shattering pottery. Athena smashes into the arch, and it wobbles; Erwin lunges for it and holds it upright.

The dogs run circles around each other, then bolt for the forest.

“No! Stay. Stay!” Levi yells, sprinting after them. He manages to grab Hera by the collar; the force of her movement drags him to a seat on the grass. Athena keeps running.

Hera enthusiastically licks Levi’s face.

“Hey! No. My makeup.” He rises to his feet and yells, “Athena, get back here!”

“Athena, come,” Erwin booms in his Commander voice. Instantly, both dogs stop and trot over to him.

The guests are in an uproar of laughter and excitement, and the dogs seem to know they’re the root cause, because they sit facing their audience, smiling and panting like they’re receiving a standing ovation.

Levi wants to be annoyed, but laughter bursts from his mouth. He doubles over, laughing so hard he can’t move. Erwin hurries over—he’s laughing, too—and grabs Levi’s hand to help him back to the altar.

“Fuck,” Levi wheezes. “What the fuck were we expecting?”

“I think we’re addicted to chaos.”

“No shit. Who needs kids when you have border collies?” Levi bends down to address the dogs, wiping tears from his eyes. “You assholes are going through another round of obedience training.” He pets them affectionately.

It takes a few minutes, but they manage to quell their laughter and retrieve the rings from the pouches on the dogs’ collars. Their guests settle down, too, though a few have to move their chairs away from shattered pottery pieces.

“Well,” Historia says, “that’s certainly not the first time you two have faced plans that went awry.”

Erwin chuckles. Athena sits beside him and slumps heavily against his leg. Hera lies down beside Levi.

“Let us continue,” Historia announces. “These rings are the symbol of the love that unites your hearts. Erwin, please take Levi’s right hand and repeat after me.”

Levi holds out his hand. Erwin takes it, ring poised at the end of his finger.

“I, Erwin Smith, give you, Levi Ackerman, this ring,” Historia says.

“I, Erwin Smith, give you, Levi Ackerman, this ring.” His voice catches.

“As a symbol of my commitment to love, honour, and respect you forever.”

“As a symbol of my commitment to love, honour, and respect you.” Erwin slides the ring on Levi’s finger, holds his hand, grip firm. The blue of his eyes is crackling like flame. “Forever.”

“Your turn, Levi,” Historia says, and the gentleness of her voice almost undoes him. “I, Levi Ackerman, give you, Erwin Smith, this ring.”

“I, Levi Ackerman, give you, Erwin Smith, this ring.”

“As a symbol of my commitment to love, honour, and respect you forever.”

“As a symbol of my commitment to love, honour, and respect you forever.” His voice cracks. He slides the ring onto Erwin’s finger and adds softly enough for just the two of them, “I will always find you, Erwin.”

“And I will always come back to you,” is the whispered reply.

Historia unrolls a scroll on the altar, and the cello plays a gentle melody as the wedding party signs the marriage paperwork.

“That ring looks good on you,” Erwin says softly as they wait for Mikasa and Hange to sign as witnesses.

“Yeah, glad Hera didn’t drop it in the woods or eat it. Wouldn’t look as nice if we had to dig it out of her shit.”

Erwin laughs.

“That’s disgusting,” Hange whispers, apparently overhearing.

They settle back in front of the arch, clasping each other’s hands.

“Erwin and Levi,” Historia announces, “in the name of the throne of Paradis, I am proud to declare you husband and husband. You may now kiss.”

Erwin dips him back, and their lips meet. Levi wraps his arms around Erwin’s neck, kissing him hard, and the guests clap. The kiss lasts several beats too long to be polite, and they both gasp for air when it ends.

“Beloved guests,” Historia announces, “I am pleased to present, for the first time, Mr. and Mr. Ackerman-Smith!”

The guests stand and applaud, and Levi is surprised to see the joy on everyone’s faces. Is Nile crying?

They walk down the aisle hand-in-hand and step into their cabin, followed by their wedding party and the dogs. The door closes behind them.

“Do they really deserve their steaks after that mess?” Levi asks.

“Of course they do. They’re good girls.” Erwin pulls two strips out of the icebox, and the dogs bark and race in circles.

“See, this is why they never listen to us—Oof!” Levi flinches as Hange gathers him in a tight hug.

“You’re married!” they yell.

“No shit. Get off me, you’re going to wrinkle my jacket.” Levi breaks their grip and steps back.

Mikasa is more subdued than Hange. Levi wonders if she’s thinking of Eren. Or maybe Historia. He feels a swell of pity for her, and knows she needs a distraction. “Hey, Mikasa, do you mind heading out to see if everything is going smoothly with the reception setup?”

“Sure.” She’s out the door so quickly that Hange barely has time to yell after her,

“Be back at two for the photographer!”

“And Hange,” Erwin adds, “why don’t you come with us to greet the guests? You can stand at the end of the line and inform them about how to find the reception hall.”

“How to find it,” Levi scoffs. The town has all of three public buildings.

They stand outside and the guests file past, shaking hands and giving hugs. Levi hates this sort of small talk, but luckily, Erwin is gregarious enough for the both of them.

And then it’s over, and they have a minute to breathe.

“The photographer will be here soon,” Hange says. “Let’s get you two something to eat.”

They head into Hange’s cabin; they set out a plate of bread, cheese, grapes, and pecans. Levi hasn’t eaten yet today, and he’s starving.

Hange pours all three of them some cranberry juice. “So what time do you figure you’re going to want to come back here for your wedding night?”

“I don’t think we want to stay too late,” Erwin says.

“Eight o’clock?” Levi suggests. As he eyes the perfect man in his perfect suit, he wonders if he’ll be able to wait that long.

“Okay,” Hange says. “I’ll come drop you off then and pick up the dogs.”

“You’re sure you’re still okay with that?” Erwin asks.

“Of course. I love those girls.” They start laughing. “The way they took off during the ceremony!”

And suddenly the three of them are laughing again.

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MIKASA RETURNS JUST in time for the photographer’s arrival. He takes some group photos, then a few of just the grooms.

Remembering how dour he has looked in photos in the past, Levi does his best to put on an authentic smile, even though his cheeks still ache from laughing so hard earlier.

Then, somehow, it is already four o'clock. Hange whisks them to the hall. This is normally the local drinking spot, but it's unrecognizable. The pine bough accents on the rafters make the rustic wooden beams look classy. The stained tables are covered with white tablecloths and adorned with pinecone centrepieces and elegant candles. Levi looks around in awe as they take their seats at the head table.

"Beloved guests," Historia says, "I know we're eager to get to the food, but first, the wedding party would like to say a few words to the grooms."

Hange steps up to the podium, beaming. "I am so honoured to stand beside my two dearest friends in the world to celebrate their wedding. Many of you know the hell we went through together, and I don't know if I could have made it through without their support. I can think of no happier result than the two of them falling in love and finding peace." Their grin takes on a wicked curl. "But I'm not here to talk about struggles. I'm here to tell embarrassing stories."

"What?" Levi says, leaden.

"You all want the real dirt on these two, right?"

The guests cheer and clap.

"First, let's talk about Erwin. You may be wondering what dirt I could possibly have on the squeaky-clean former Commander. It may surprise you to learn he was a bit of a player as a hot little twenty-two-year-old."

"Shit," Erwin mutters, and Levi glances at him, curious.

"So here I am, an innocent fifteen-year-old on their first day with the Survey Corps, trying to figure out where to turn in my shiny new paperwork. All I know is the name of my Team Leader, Erwin Smith, but I can't find him anywhere. Eventually, I find an office labelled *Team Leaders*, and I'm so happy I finally found the right place. I knock. No one replies; I can hear voices inside."

Erwin is so red he's almost purple, and now Levi is really intrigued.

“So innocent little fifteen-year-old Hange opens the door, and sees Team Leader Erwin sitting on a chair, and Team Leader Jakob butt-ass naked bouncing up and down on his lap moaning his name.”

A laugh ripples through the guests as Erwin’s forehead thunks against the table.

“Seriously, Erwin?” Nile yells.

“You slept with Jakob?” Levi asks, more surprised by that than the story itself.

Hange continues, “Jakob is so busy that he hasn’t noticed me enter, but Erwin’s eyes lock with mine and he *panics*. He tries to stand up and explain, and Jakob falls off his lap and lands on his ankle wrong and it snaps, and he starts yelling in pain.”

“I slept with Jakob, too,” Levi whispers.

“Really?” Erwin says, turning to look at him.

“Yeah. A few times.”

“Huh.”

“I don’t know what to do,” Hange continues, “and I still have to hand in my paperwork, so I start crying. Commander Shadis comes in a few minutes later to find Erwin with his pants down trying to administer first aid to a naked Jakob, while I’m standing beside them sobbing. I just know that Erwin is going to get into deep shit, and he’s going to think it’s all my fault for barging in on them.”

“He was pretty good in bed,” Levi murmurs.

Erwin rubs his eyebrow; his face is still red. “Well, he was enthusiastic, at least.”

“Yeah. That’s a good way to put it.”

Hange says, “So I’m thinking I’ve already blown my chances in the military on day one. I want to prove my loyalty to my Team Leader. So I yell at Shadis, ‘it’s my fault, sir! I’m the one who did it!’ And the three of them just stare at me as if I blurred something in another language.”

“When were you sleeping with Jakob?” Erwin whispers.

“Last time was the night before Wall Maria was breached,” Levi replies.

“Huh. Same here.”

“What? That same night? So one of us got the other’s sloppy seconds?”

“Shadis,” Hange declares, “suddenly looks a hundred years old and declares all three of us are going to be punished.”

Erwin’s nose wrinkles. “I hate that term. ‘Sloppy seconds.’”

“No, seriously, though, was his ass full of your come when I fucked him?”

“Couldn’t have been. I didn’t actually come inside anyone until you.”

This is the most surprising news yet; Levi’s eyes widen. “Really?”

Hange grins at the crowd. “And that’s how I got to know Erwin: cleaning the bathrooms every night together for two full months. He didn’t hold a grudge against me at all. In fact, he seemed genuinely interested in hearing me prattle on about titans. Erwin grew into a fine Squad Leader, and then a fine Commander, and I was happy to count him among my closest friends the entire time.”

Levi leans close to Erwin. “I was your first?”

“Yeah. It didn’t occur to me to pull out. I should have thought to ask.”

“No, it felt right.”

Their hands lace together under the table.

The guests have calmed down now, and Hange says, “Now let’s talk about Levi. When I was assigned to his dorm, he was still new to the Corps and doing his best not to make any friends except Erwin.”

Levi whispers, “So I was there for your first fisting, and first time coming inside someone—any other firsts?”

“First marriage.”

“But not proposal.”

Erwin's eyes wander to Nile and Marie's table. "First proposal I didn't reject."

Maybe it's petty, but Levi feels a swell of triumph.

"So," Hange says, "Young Levi is uptight about keeping our dorm floor clean, and complains about us tracking in mud. He's getting to be a real pain in the ass about it. So we decide to mess with him. We use my old boots and a mixture of putty and brown paint. While Levi's sleeping, we quietly dip the boots in the mixture and make a set of footprints leading up to his bunk."

Levi suddenly snaps to attention. "Wait. That was *you*?"

"Then we all crawl into bed and pretend to be asleep. When Levi wakes up, he starts muttering that we're a bunch of animals. And of course, he goes to get a mop and a bucket."

"Assholes," Levi mutters.

"I don't think I've heard this story," Erwin says.

"Because it's humiliating."

"At least your pants are on."

Hange says, "We think he'll figure out the gag right away, but he just keeps scrubbing and muttering, scrubbing and muttering. Finally, he snaps the mop handle in half and throws it, then storms out. We think he's figured it out. But he comes back with a new mop and keeps trying. I have my eyes cracked so I can watch him, and he's *angry*. I'm starting to worry we pushed him too far and he's going to snap and kill us all. But then he just mutters and leaves the room."

"We spring into action. Moblit goes to keep watch while the rest of us use paint thinner to get rid of the footprints, thinking he'll return and start to question everything when they've mysteriously disappeared. But we're idiots and we don't think to open a window. We start to get incredibly high off the fumes. We manage to stumble out the door and make our way to the mess hall, where we do our best to pretend we're not accidentally high. Levi comes to the mess hall a while later, and he's pale and in a daze. I guess the fumes dissipated quickly

enough that he didn't notice we used paint thinner. And that's how we made Levi question his reality."

"Assholes," Levi mutters as the guests laugh.

"I have lots more," Hange says, "but they both look red enough for now, so my job here is done. I just want to say that I love you both. You're like brothers to me. You two getting married is something I always secretly hoped would happen, and for a time, I thought that chance was gone forever." They're getting choked up now, and despite his annoyance at their story, Levi feels his eyes getting misty.

"Beloved guests, please raise your glasses," Hange calls. "To Erwin Ackerman-Smith and Levi Ackerman-Smith. May they live long, happy, healthy lives together."

The guests cheer and glasses clink. Levi leans against Erwin and feels his arm drape across his shoulders.

"We shouldn't have let Hange speak," Levi murmurs.

Erwin nods. "Let's start collecting embarrassing anecdotes in case they get married one day."

"That's going to be one hell of a long speech."

Mikasa takes the podium next. Levi notices Historia take a seat behind a harp in the corner. *Oh?*

"I'm not good with words," Mikasa says. "So I'm going to sing them instead." She closes her eyes as Historia begins to play a familiar tune.

Levi sees his own recognition mirrored on Erwin's face. *The song she sang at the gala.*

But as the song unfolds, the lyrics are new.

*'A brave man stands, grey eyes aglow,  
Beneath the budding leaves,  
Here, he's weathered ice and snow,  
And ashen memories.*

*A path of stars, an arid land,*

*A mighty price to pay,  
Yet in this barren stretch of sand,  
Not once did his heart stray.*

*“One by one, the memories fall,  
The paths begin to fade;  
A second chance inside these walls,  
The future here we made.*

*“Our island — oceans we will cross,  
Our people — honouring the lost,  
Our sacrifices — worth the cost,*

*“The tree of hope takes root,  
Its blossoms bearing fruit;  
Where peace and friendship thrive,  
Two men entwine their lives.”*

The music fades, and the guests clap. Mikasa strides over to Levi and gives him a big hug, and he leans into it.

“Love you, cousin,” she whispers. Then she pulls away and her eyes narrow. “Don’t tell a *soul* I said that.”

He smiles and wipes his eyes. “Okay, if you don’t tell anyone you made me cry.”

“Can’t promise that. There are too many witnesses.” Mikasa kisses his forehead, then turns to Erwin to hug him, too.

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THE MEAL IS DELICIOUS—a simple stew packed with flavour, the best bread Levi has ever tasted, and an array of roasted vegetables that taste as if they were plucked from the garden two minutes before roasting. Neither Levi nor Erwin was interested in a wedding cake, so they have fruit tarts instead, with thick,

bready dough and lightly sweetened berries. The bubbly wine begins to flow, and though Levi planned to keep his intake light, the alcohol is sneaking up on him. He even laughs when Hange procures a pair of flower crowns and pins them to their hair.

The band begins to play, and Levi finds everyone wants a chance to dance with the grooms. He's having a lot of fun, more than he ever expected. But he's also starting to get worn out. All of this socializing is exhausting.

Luckily, Erwin seems to read it on his face, because he cuts in on Marie and Levi. "Excuse me, Marie," he says good-naturedly. "I need to speak with my husband."

*My husband.* Levi glows.

Erwin leans close to his ear. "Should we start our good-byes? It's almost time to retire."

"Please," Levi says gratefully, pulling off his flower crown.

It takes a while to give everyone the requisite thank yous and hugs. At last, they escape the hall and step into the cool evening air. The music mutes as the door closes behind them.

"Wow," Erwin says.

"Yeah."

Hange pulls up in the carriage, and Erwin holds out his arm.

"After you, Mr. Ackerman-Smith."

"You're going to be saying that all the time now, aren't you?"

"Probably. I do like the sound of it."

Levi smiles. He does, too.

They sit on the bench and Erwin pulls him in close. "I think that went well."

"It did."

"I'm a bit more drunk and ate a bit more rich food than I intended."

"Yeah," Levi agrees. "I don't trust my asshole right now."

Erwin laughs and kisses his ear. "Not quite how I would have phrased it, but that's what I was driving at, too. I'm sure we

can work around it.” He nuzzles Levi’s ear. “I was thinking I could give you a full-body massage. I have some nice massage oil we haven’t tried yet.”

Levi suddenly realizes just how much tension he has been carrying in his shoulders and back. “Yeah, I like that idea.”

“I’m going to worship every centimetre of your body.” Erwin nibbles his earlobe.

“I like that idea, too.”

They pull up to the cabin and help Hange wrangle the dogs. The cat is absent—likely sleeping in a corner somewhere—but she doesn’t tend to burst into the bedroom at inopportune times the way the dogs do, so they leave her be.

Hange gives them hugs and whispers congratulations, and then, at last, they are alone.

They’re both sweaty from the events of the day, and agree to freshen up. Erwin takes a quick shower first, stating his intention to set up the bedroom while Levi has his turn.

Levi washes himself carefully, aware that Erwin lingering on his body for so long means he’ll be paying attention to every little detail. He dries off his hair and dresses in his suit again, then heads to the bedroom.

Erwin has set several candles around the room, and two glasses of sparkling wine wait by the bedside. The jacket and vest of his suit are hanging neatly on the chair; he has his dress shirt sleeves rolled up, his tie loose. It’s surely intentional; Levi has voiced his appreciation of this look several times in the past.

Even though they have been intimate more days than not over the past three years, Levi finds he’s suddenly shy. Based on Erwin’s quietness, he’s feeling the same way.

“Where do we start?” Levi asks.

“I suppose you need to remove some clothes.”

So Levi takes off his jacket and vest and hangs them on the chair, then pulls his tie off over his head. He unbuttons his shirt as Erwin moves in to kiss him. Erwin’s palms are warm against his chest, his shoulders, his arms as he smooths the shirt

off Levi's body. The palms slide down his back, and Levi arches at the electricity of his touch.

Wordlessly, they remove his pants and socks, leaving only the new underwear Levi bought for this occasion. Erwin's hands slide down his hips and stop. He pulls back to study him.

“Oh?” he whispers. “That’s new.”

“Seemed appropriate for the occasion.”

“Let me look at you.” Erwin steps back and his gaze pours over Levi like warm syrup. The underwear in question is a pair of small black lacy briefs, cut high around the ass cheeks. The sides are made up of three sets of eyelets, a black ribbon woven through them. Levi thought he paid entirely too much for this piece, given how little fabric it actually contains, but the look on Erwin’s face makes him decide the price was worth it.

“You are so beautiful,” Erwin whispers, and he looks up to meet Levi’s eyes, his face full of wonder. “*My husband.*”

“Your husband. Come here.” Levi draws him in for a kiss, then begins to unbutton Erwin’s shirt. When he gets to his pants, he discovers a surprise, too.

“You aren’t wearing underwear?”

“That’s right.”

“The entire time?”

“That’s right.”

Levi’s head spins. Why is that so hot? He thinks of Erwin reading his vows in front of everyone, nothing covering him except the layer of the suit pants. “Oh,” he manages to say.

Erwin surprises him by scooping him up under the knees, carrying him bridal-style to the bed and lowering him to the mattress. He crawls up beside him and they kiss.

“Leave these on,” He says, smoothing Levi’s hip. “I’ll get the massage oil.”

The oil warms against his skin and smells like coconut. Levi lays face-down and feels strong hands massage into his upper back.

“I’m going to take my time,” Erwin says softly. “I want to treasure every muscle in your body.”

Levi lets out a pleased hum as Erwin passes over a knot in his shoulder blade. “You can press harder. Make it hurt.”

His fingertips dig deeper, and pain spikes through Levi. He lets out a moan. Almost nothing in this world feels as good as a tense muscle releasing.

The candles burn down a notch as Erwin slowly works down Levi’s back, his ass, his legs, then rolls him over to massage his front. Levi is high from the contact, each spike of pain followed by a euphoric release that’s almost sexual. He is straining against his underwear and getting increasingly desperate for Erwin’s hands to reach between his legs, but the wait is part of the pleasure, so he is patient.

Erwin finishes massaging his inner thighs, then slides his hands up to hook around the waistband of Levi’s underwear. As he rolls it down Levi’s thighs, a strand of liquid follows, until the fabric frees him and his cock snaps upright.

“You’re so hard,” Erwin whispers, awed.

“So are you.”

“After getting to touch you like that, how could I not be?” Erwin crawls over him and lowers himself until his cock presses lengthwise against Levi’s. He gently thrusts. Levi can tell by the tremble in his shoulders that he’s barely restraining himself. The friction is building, and the sight of them rubbing together, it’s all starting to build ...

“Wait,” Levi begs, his head dropping back. “I don’t want to come yet.”

Erwin rolls to the side and stretches out on the bed beside him. “We don’t have to stop when you come,” he says softly. “We can kiss and touch until you can get hard again, over and over, all night.”

“I know.” Levi takes a steady breath and rolls to face him. “I know. Just, not yet. Let me take a moment to focus on

you first.” He reaches between Erwin’s legs and begins to stroke him.

They kiss, and Erwin gasps into his mouth, hips shifting. Levi strokes slowly, rubbing the slick pad of his thumb along the sensitive spot where his foreskin meets the head, just the way he likes.

“Levi,” Erwin whispers, then again as he leans in for another kiss. “I’m close,” he breathes into Levi’s mouth.

“Want to try to come together?”

“Yes.” Erwin reaches for him, and they stroke in the same rhythm.

“Erwin,” Levi gasps, desperately hanging on. “I can’t hold back, I can’t—”

“I’m almost there.” He’s thrusting into Levi’s grip now.

“I can’t, I can’t, I’m going to—” Levi yells loudly as his world burns white; he shoves himself hard into Erwin’s hand. He feels Erwin mirror the motion, feels warm wetness on his abdomen, his hand, his wrist.

Their cries subside, and Levi takes a shuddering breath and opens his eyes. Erwin’s eyes are glazed, his mouth open and panting, his cheeks red. *So beautiful, so beautiful ...*

Levi holds eye contact as he lifts his hand to his mouth and runs his tongue along it. Erwin visibly shivers, then leans forward to kiss him.

They lay together in the hazy glow of the candlelight as their breaths and pulses slow. Erwin smooths the hair off Levi’s forehead.

“So, Levi Ackerman-Smith,” he says, “what now?”

The blood flow hasn’t quite returned to Levi’s brain. “What do *you* want?”

Erwin runs his fingertips along Levi’s collarbone. “I want to drink some of that sparkling wine, and when we’ve recovered, I want to squeeze your cock between my thighs until you come.”

Levi’s pulse picks up again. “Okay. Then I get to suck you off.”

“I like the sound of that.” Erwin’s eyes find his. “I want to make love to you all night, and all day tomorrow.”

“We’ll need to eat.”

“I have food prepared in the kitchen. If we can’t tear ourselves apart, we’ll eat it off each other’s bodies.”

“And sleep.”

“We can nap between orgasms.”

“Hm,” Levi says, approving. He trails his finger down Erwin’s throat. “You have a lot of faith in our stamina.”

“Let’s see how far we can push it.” Erwin catches his hand and lifts it to kiss the ring. “You know, I just remembered my vows. The ones I planned to recite during the ceremony. Shall I recite them now?”

“A bit late for that, isn’t it?”

“I don’t need to say it in front of an audience to mean it.”

“Okay. Go ahead.”

He laces his fingers through Levi’s, draws a deep breath, then begins. “As a boy, I believed in fairytales: a magical prince would sweep me off my feet at a royal ball, and we’d run away into the night to watch the stars. We would go on adventures together, save the world together. The power of our love would overcome any obstacle we came up against.

“As I grew older and faced the reality of the titans, I stopped believing. By the time you met me, Levi, there was no magic left in the world for me.

“But that began to change. There were small moments, at first. Your expression of wonder at the first snowfall. Sitting beside you and staring into the flames of a campfire. Watching you dispatch titans with grace and skill. Slowly, magic crept back into my life, and as we overcame larger and larger obstacles together, as we saved the world together, I realized magic does exist.

“Levi Ackerman, you are my fairytale. You are my prince, and I will spend every single day making sure you know it. Thank you for every moment of magic you have brought into my life.”

IN THESE FALLEN LEAVES

A tear spills onto Levi's cheek. "That's the corniest shit I've ever heard," he says, and he leans in and kisses him hard.

# ❧ Thirty-One ❧

## A TIME OF PEACE

*-year 860, October-*

THE SECOND ERWIN and Levi drop the leashes, Hera and Athena bolt to Historia, who laughs and crouches down to meet them. She looks remarkably well for a woman who gave birth to twins just a month ago.

“How are you doing, my sweet girls?” Historia lifts her head. “And how are you gentlemen? I’m excited for you to meet our boys.” Her smile is as strong as ever, but there are circles around her eyes that weren’t there before. Caring for two newborns must be difficult, even with three mothers.

“Congratulations.” Erwin strides into the courtyard and draws Historia in for a hug. Over her head, across the courtyard, he sees lights strung between trees, and he can just barely hear the strains of conversation. Hange’s voice rises above the others, though at this distance, he can’t make out what they’re saying.

Historia hugs Levi next. “We certainly have our hands full. Come on, some of the others are already here. You can leave the dogs off their leashes, by the way. This area is well contained.”

“Behave,” Levi says sternly as he unclips their leashes. Erwin takes his husband’s hand, and they approach the lights, the dogs heeling obediently. That obedience disappears the instant they see Hange; the dogs go flying toward them.

“My babies!” Hange cries, kneeling down to accept their kisses. “Yes, yes, I missed you darlings, too.”

“It’s been three hours,” Levi mutters, stepping into the cobblestone square. The trees and lights form a natural fence around the area; Erwin imagines this space must be enchanting at night, with the lights shining on the leaves in all their colourful autumn splendour. Historia has set up a long table here, laden with a variety of drinks and teacakes.

He nods and greets Jean, Connie, and Sasha, who are already seated. Mikasa and Iris sit at the end of the table; each of them holds a tiny baby swaddled in colourful knitted blankets.

“Everyone’s here,” Mikasa says softly, glancing at Iris, then at Historia. “Are we ready?”

The other women nod, then Historia stands.

“Thank you all for coming to meet the newest members of our family. We would like to introduce the newest members of our family: Eren and Armin.”

The silence is heavy. Erwin’s eyes trail the others, and he sees everyone is on the verge of tears.

“A beautiful tribute,” he says to Historia, his voice catching.

“We thought so, too.”

The others seem to find their voices and express their approval, but Erwin isn’t listening. He’s watching the small bundle in Mikasa’s arms.

She must notice, because she says, “Would you like to hold him?” She pulls back a blanket to reveal a tiny infant with dark hair.

“If you’re comfortable with it.”

“Of course. This is Eren. Eren, meet Uncle Erwin.” She gently passes him the infant. The tiny bundle is so much lighter than he expected, and he feels a rush of paternal warmth.

“He’s so tiny.”

Levi walks up to peer at the baby, then folds his arms over his chest. “I have to admit, a baby looks good on you.” There’s a hint of concern in his voice.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to catch baby fever or anything. He is awfully cute, though. Would you like to hold him?”

A panicked look crosses Levi’s face, but then he looks curious. “Maybe. I don’t know how, though.”

“I’ll help,” Mikasa says, standing. She moves his arms into the correct position. “Make sure you support his head. He can’t hold it up on his own yet.”

Erwin gently passes over the baby, and Levi accepts him, cradling him with perfect form. His eyes widen. “Oh.”

“Eren,” Mikasa says, “meet your cousin, Levi.”

Levi looks stunned. “He weighs less than Nyx. And he’s so warm.”

Something flickers in Erwin’s chest at the sight of Levi tenderly cradling the infant. They are in complete agreement that they’ll never have children, and even if they did magically change their minds, they’re not as young as they used to be. Still, he indulges in a brief fantasy of what their lives would be like if they had a child of their own.

“This isn’t so bad,” Levi says softly. “Look, he’s smiling.”

“Uh-oh. Smiles are bad news.” Mikasa reaches out. “Hand him back.”

She’s too late. A surprisingly adult-sounding fart trumpets from the bundle, and a putrid scent fills the air.

“What the fuck!” Levi shoves the baby back at Mikasa, gagging.

Erwin’s fantasy fizzles. “You okay?”

“That is foul.” For a moment, Levi looks as if he’s going to be sick. “I’m not holding that thing again.”

“Don’t mind Cousin Levi,” Mikasa says sweetly to the baby. “He’s a delicate fellow.”

“Delicate,” Levi mutters.

“Here,” Iris says, holding out the other infant. “He has a brand new diaper and he’s already burped.”

Erwin steps in and accepts the offering. “This is Armin?”

“Yes.”

This infant strongly resembles Historia. Erwin can't resist poking a pudgy cheek; Armin slowly wriggles like a sleeping kitten.

After a few minutes of watching the tiny child, he passes him back to Iris. "Congratulations on your little princes."

Mikasa and Iris exchange looks. "Actually," Mikasa says, "we aren't sure they will be princes."

"No?" Erwin turns to Historia. "Are you abdicating?"

The queen smiles. "I'm thinking of ending the royal line and leaving governance of Paradis to an elected council. Most of our allies in other nations gave up monarchies long ago." She steps forward to take baby Eren from Mikasa and cuddles him. "I've been feeling less and less comfortable with my birthright as time has passed—I only became queen because it was necessary, and it's always felt a bit like I was playing dress-up. Ymir told me to live the life I wanted, and I still kept going along with others' wishes. Besides, does the Reiss line even mean anything special in a world without titans?"

"You've done a great deal of good for Paradis," Erwin says.

"I have enjoyed some of it. But when I saw these little faces, so innocent and full of potential, my priorities changed. I don't want them stuck in royal roles just because they happen to be my flesh and blood. Besides, why should these two children be raised in a castle when so many other children have no one?"

"That's very noble of you," he says, taking a seat next to Levi. "Do you have a timeline in mind?"

"I was hoping to hire you for another contract so we could discuss in detail."

He nods. "I would be delighted. But let's arrange that some other time. This weekend is for you and your new family."

Hange wants to hold the babies next, and the others crowd around. While everyone is distracted, Levi leans close to murmur, "And I thought dog farts were nasty."

Erwin chuckles. "You were a baby once, too, Levi."

"Yeah, and if I made smells like that, my mother should

have left me out on the doorstep with the rest of the garbage. That smell, in that tiny house? Gross.”

“Well, I for one am glad she put up with your infant flatulence.” He kisses Levi’s temple, amused as always by his grumpiness.

Historia pours some tea for Levi and coffee for Erwin, and they enjoy teacakes and catch up with Jean, Sasha, and Connie. They see Jean quite regularly, when they visit Mitras for Erwin’s contracts, but Sasha and Connie are Squad Leaders for the Garrison in Trost, so they don’t come north very often. Erwin is impressed by how both of them have matured.

The guests of honour don’t last very long at the get-together—the infants start crying and the mothers decide they need some quiet time. Historia suggests that the others keep chatting; she’ll have the kitchen staff deliver dinner for them. Erwin wonders how non-royal parents deal with newborns without a kitchen staff. Yet another reason he’s grateful for the way his life unfolded.

Once they have finished eating and visiting, Erwin stands. It’s time for their next activity of the day. “Hange, are you still okay to take the dogs?”

“Of course,” they say.

“What?” Levi asks. “We’ll just be in the room next door, so why—”

“I made plans for us for tonight,” Erwin says.

“Plans?”

“You’ll see.” He turns to their friends. “Goodnight, everyone. See you at breakfast.” Historia has planned a few short get-togethers over the weekend, so they’ll have plenty of other opportunities to visit.

They say their goodnights and then give the dogs good-bye cuddles. Leaving the castle at last, they begin to walk down the street, hand-in-hand. The sun is just beginning to set.

Erwin says softly, “Did you know today is the exact date

we left the other timeline?” He glances fondly at Levi’s salt-and-pepper hair, exactly as he remembers it.

“I guess it is.” Levi considers. “So starting tomorrow—”

“—every moment is brand new. I thought we should celebrate by welcoming the new day in a special way.”

“Like what?”

“Well, I got us that hotel room over the pool with no neighbours, where we won’t be overheard.” Erwin pauses for a heavy beat, then says, “I want to worship your body.”

“Oh. Meaning what, exactly?”

“We’ll discuss it in private.” Erwin nods at the front door worker as they enter the hotel.

The front desk agent recognizes them. “Mr. Ackerman-Smith,” she says to Erwin, “your luggage has been delivered to your room as requested.”

“Luggage?” Levi says. “Are we staying here all weekend?”

“Tonight, at least.” Erwin accepts the room key and signs the register.

“Enjoy your stay,” the agent beams.

“We most certainly will,” Erwin says with a smile.

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AS THEY CLIMB the staircase to their room, Levi glances nervously at Erwin. Is it his imagination, or does he look smug?

“Should I be nervous?”

“Possibly.”

Is he joking? “That doesn’t help.”

Erwin smirks. *Yes, definitely smug.*

They step into the room, and Levi shuts the door. “Okay, spill it.”

“I want to worship you late into the night.”

“You said that already.”

Erwin places his hands on Levi’s shoulders and looks him

solemnly in the eye. “If you are willing, I want to tie you to the bed and pleasure you.”

Levi’s heart pounds in his throat. “Oh?”

“I want to bring you to the cusp of orgasm and keep you there, over and over, until you beg me to stop.”

They’ve toyed around with edging before, but never with this much premeditation, and certainly never with that stupid smug look on Erwin’s face. “You’ve planned this in detail, huh?”

“Yes.”

Levi nods at the suitcase. “You probably have lube, restraints, and toys all ready to go in there.”

“Yes, yes, and yes.”

The idea of Erwin slowly planning Levi’s pleasure, packing each item with purpose, is somehow arousing in itself. “Did you get hard when you were thinking about doing this?”

“Yes.”

“Did you jerk off to the idea?”

Erwin smiles. “If you keep asking questions, we’ll never get started.”

“All right. Show me what you’ve got.” Levi starts to unbutton his jacket, but Erwin shakes his head and beckons him forward.

“Your job for the rest of the night is to sit there and enjoy.” He unties the cravat and then begins to unbutton Levi’s shirt for him.

“Sounds boring,” Levi says, knowing the words will be taken as a challenge.

“I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised.” Erwin pulls off the shirt and slings it over the table, then bends in to kiss him. Without waiting for a reply, he takes Levi’s middle finger into his mouth and slides it in deep, sucking it on the way out.

Levi hears an *oh* escape his mouth. He pushes his finger back in and Erwin wraps it in his tongue, then undoes the fly of his pants.

Gradually, kissing and teasing, they both undress comp-

letely. Erwin pulls their naked bodies flush, swaying a little side to side. He's already hard.

Levi clasps his hands behind Erwin's neck and subtly grinds against him. "You aren't going to last."

A thick brow arches. "What do you mean?"

"Look how hard you are already, and it's only going to get worse when you hear the sounds I'm going to be making. You can come without being touched, and you get off on denial."

"I do not," Erwin says, looking offended.

"Of course you do. You're going to spontaneously come before I even start begging."

"We'll see about that." He pauses. "You're feisty today."

"I'm always feisty."

Erwin's face softens. "If it's because this is pushing too far outside your comfort zone—"

"No, I'm just in a bratty mood." Levi's hands snake around to Erwin's ass, grabbing it. "Something about you being completely in charge makes me want to wrestle for control."

"Is that so?" Erwin opens the suitcase and pulls out four leather straps. "I don't think I'd stand a chance against Humanity's Strongest without a little help. Lay down."

"Yes, sir," Levi says with no respect whatsoever.

"Give me your wrist."

"Are you going to be this bossy all night?" Levi extends his arm. Erwin tightens the strap around his wrist and lashes it to a bedpost, and Levi can't help but stare. "That was fast. You've done this before."

"Did we finally find something sexual you've never done, but I have?" Erwin tightens a strap around Levi's ankle.

"Yeah. What took you so long to try it?"

"We don't have bedposts, and neither does the guest room in Mitras." Erwin anchors the strap to the bedpost at the foot of the bed, then bends down to kiss the sole of Levi's foot.

"Hm. Maybe we should change that."

"Let's wait to make a decision." He's working on the other

ankle now. “No point changing the furniture for something that ‘sounds boring’ until we know you like it.”

Levi studies him. “I bet you’d like being restrained like this, wouldn’t you? That first time I tied your hands behind your back, you came before I even touched you.”

Erwin smiles fondly. “That’s not quite how I remember it, but that was a good night nonetheless. Wrist.”

Levi holds out his free arm. “What if I have to scratch my nose?”

“If you’re thinking about your nose, then I’m not doing my job.” Erwin stops to admire his handiwork.

“Look how hard you are,” Levi chides. “You get off on seeing me all bound and helpless like this.”

“No, I get off on how much *you* get off on it.” To prove his point, Erwin leans over and blows a cool blast of air up the length of Levi’s cock, which twitches involuntarily.

Levi shivers, then stretches lazily against the restraints. His bravado is starting to fade; this is turning him on far more than he anticipated.

Erwin pulls out a container. “I’m going to use a lot of oil. I hope you don’t mind things getting a little messy.”

“You can coat me in whatever mess you like.”

For a moment, their eyes lock; time freezes. Levi senses the power balance has tipped in his favour, so he presses his advantage:

“By the end of this, I want to be dripping in your cum.”

Erwin stares for a moment longer, then clears his throat and begins to slather the oil over Levi’s body. “Perhaps that can be arranged.”

“I bet that oil would feel nice on your cock. I bet you’d come in seconds if you stroked yourself. Or you could shove it in my mouth and fuck my face. Coconut oil tastes good, right?”

Erwin curses softly under his breath, evidently liking the idea. “I’m supposed to be the one in control here, Levi.”

“Then take control.”

Erwin stares at him for a moment, then says, “Very well,” and wraps his slick hand around Levi’s cock. He begins to jerk him hard, with no foreplay or slow lead-up.

Levi is in trouble. “Shit!” He strains against the restraints, teeth clenched. “Erwin—”

“I could make you come right now,” Erwin says, voice low. “I could pull you right over the edge. I know just how to touch you.”

Levi grunts against the rising waves. *Oh fuck*, he’s close already, so close. Erwin knows him so well; he is hitting just the right speed, the right angle, the right tightness. He hears himself wail.

Erwin pulls away.

“Fuck!” Levi thrusts against the air, trying to follow his hand. “Fucking *dammit*, Erwin.”

“Is that the kind of control you wanted me to take?”

Levi hisses between his teeth as the wave slowly eases away. “Shit.”

Erwin rubs his hands along Levi’s thighs, tender and slow. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” The haze slowly lifts. “Shit.”

“Before we begin—”

“We haven’t begun?”

“Before we begin,” Erwin repeats, “We should set some ground rules. A red, white, green flare system.”

Levi’s hormone-dazed brain can’t make sense of that. “What?”

“I’m going to keep checking in with you; when I do, tell me how you’re feeling. Green means keep going. White means you’re getting a bit overwhelmed and need me to slow down. Red means stop. Of course, you can ask me to stop at any point. Don’t wait for me to check in.”

Levi stares at him. “You planned this like I’m a fucking expedition. Is this what your big brain is working on these days?”

How we can pleasure each other?” He pauses, realizing he doesn’t actually have a problem with that.

“Let’s give it a test.” Erwin lifts up his old bolo tie.

Levi’s brow wrinkles. “It’s green. So you’re telling me—”

“No, I mean I’m going to tighten this around your cock and balls like a cockring.”

“Oh.” Levi considers. “Light green.”

“Light green?”

“Mix of green and white.”

At this, Erwin looks confused. “I’m not sure what to do with that.”

“Yeah, me neither. How about we ditch the flares and stick with ‘yes’ and ‘no?’”

Erwin looks a little disappointed, but says, “Cock ring: yes or no?”

“Yes.”

As it cinches into place, Levi lets out a soft groan. He’s still so sensitive that even this gentle manipulation feels like it could make him come. “I don’t know how you think you’re going to get any edging in before I blow my load.”

“I have some ideas. It will be fun to experiment, right?” Erwin rubs oil on Levi’s chest and abdomen, hands firm, skin gliding against skin. He slides down to his thighs.

Levi wants to continue the banter, but those hands are moving inwards, and his mouth is beginning to fall open.

“Does this feel good?” Erwin asks softly.

He no longer has the focus to be feisty. “So good.” The hands slide up to his balls, and he groans at their touch, impossibly slow and gentle.

Then Erwin grips his balls with one hand, shaft with the other, and begins to stroke him. Levi tenses and pulls against the restraints.

“That expression,” Erwin murmurs. “I wish I could get a photograph of it.”

Levi can’t reply.

“You’re so hard.”

“Shit, I’m going to—” Levi’s sentence ends with a frustrated yell as Erwin releases him again. “Fuck!”

Erwin gently kisses the stone of the bolo tie. “Not yet, love.”

“Fuck!” Levi feels sweat trail down his temples. He’s so close, he’s so *close*, even a breeze could knock him off the ledge. He would do anything Erwin asked to get off right now, absolutely anything.

Slowly, the urgency fades. He takes a deep and shuddering breath.

Erwin kisses his hip. “Still green?”

“What?”

“The flares. You’re okay to keep going?”

“Right. Green. Fuck, I thought you’d give me some foreplay, not take me to the edge right away.”

“Didn’t want things to get boring.” Now Erwin massages his abdomen, chest, shoulders. Levi sinks back into the bed, eyelids low. Riding so close to the edge has his skin more sensitive than usual. Every touch leaves a delicious burn in its wake.

Erwin’s hand presses up his throat, grabs his chin; his mouth covers Levi’s, and they kiss. Levi thrusts his tongue deep into Erwin’s mouth. The kiss breaks, and their gaze holds.

Slowly, Erwin’s hands slide down, down, around ...

This time, he strokes with a feather-light touch, so gentle that Levi can barely get any friction. He cries out and tries to counter-thrust, but Erwin matches his movements, eyes slicing through him as if analyzing him. Levi moans, frustrated.

The slow, gentle stimulation seems to go on forever, and then at last, at long last, he’s rising, he’s rising, he’s so close ...

Just as he’s about to come, Erwin removes his hand.

“Fuck!” Levi curls in on himself as much as he can, the straps digging into his wrists. “You fucking sadist; what the fuck!”

“Is that a white? Red?”

“Green, green, it’s fucking green, *fuck!*” Levi’s head rolls on his shoulders.

Erwin slides down his body and licks his nipple, his hand smoothing the inside of his thigh. He touches the tip of Levi’s cock, and his finger comes away trailing a strand of precum. Levi tries to thrust against his finger, desperate for any contact, *anything*, but Erwin won’t even give him that.

He has barely caught his breath when Erwin slowly trails his tongue down, then along the length of him, then takes him into his mouth. Levi is rising again. There’s a rush in his head, a disconnect from his body. He hears himself wailing. He’s teetering on the edge again, he’s about to tip over—

Erwin pulls back.

“Fuck you, you fucking asshole!” Levi hears himself yell, and he quickly adds, “Green. Green ...”

“You can endure so much,” Erwin says with admiration, and his hand is moving again. Levi thrashes against the restraints.

“I’m coming. I’m coming, I’m coming—”

But he isn’t, he can’t, and he gasps for breath. His heart is pounding in his throat, his ears. He *aches*.

“What do you want?” he begs. “What do you want, I’ll give it to you, I’ll give you anything, let me come, let me come!”

“I want this,” Erwin rumbles. “You’re giving me exactly what I want.”

“Let me come ... Let me come ...”

“Still green?” He swears there’s amusement in his tone.

“Yes, you smug bastard, green—” He loses the ability to speak as Erwin encircles him with two fingers and strokes him with a feather-light touch. Now there are no words, just his muscles thrashing, feral sounds slipping from his mouth. This time, when Erwin withdraws, Levi feels a tear slip down his cheek, *it’s so good, it’s so good ...*

“So good,” he whimpers aloud.

"You're so beautiful." Erwin trails a finger up and down the length of his throbbing erection. "You may be right, Levi. I think I do get off on denial."

After a moment, Levi has the presence to answer him: "What?"

"I'm more turned on than I planned." Erwin stands, and Levi swears it's the hardest he's ever seen him. *Who's really in control here, Erwin?* he thinks smugly, even though he's certain the answer is no-one.

"Touch yourself," Levi demands. "Come all over me."

Erwin's brows raise. "Oh?"

"Drown me in your come."

There's a shuddering breath that Erwin surely meant to hide, and then he climbs onto the bed again to straddle Levi's face. He gently lowers himself until his balls graze Levi's mouth.

Without a word, Levi runs his tongue in a figure-eight, and he's still so wound up that the intoxicating scent makes his eyelids flutter. He pulls one ball into his mouth and sucks gently, then the other side. He can hear the urgency and dampness of Erwin's strokes above him.

"Levi," Erwin gasps, and there's so much adoration in his tone that Levi's pulse races.

"Come in my mouth," he whispers into Erwin's flesh.

Erwin gasps and moves, driving himself into Levi's mouth. Levi's eyes roll back as he tastes the first wave. *It's so good, it's so good.* He wants this release for himself.

Erwin pulses one last time as he withdraws, spilling on Levi's mouth and chin. He looks down with a tender look, wiping the drops away with his thumb. For a moment, he just watches Levi, thumb pressed firmly against his chin.

Levi shifts a little, thrusting at the air. "My turn."

"When I'm ready." Erwin pauses. "Green?"

"Green."

But instead of moving, he presses a finger into Levi's mouth, firmly against his tongue. Levi closes his mouth around

it, sucking hard. Erwin watches carefully, moving his finger in and out.

How does even a finger in his mouth feel this good? Or is it that expression of careful scrutiny, the knowledge that the man he loves is so fixated on his pleasure? Levi groans around the finger, and Erwin slides in a second.

“Still good?”

Levi can’t reply around the fingers, so he hums a little *uh-huh*.

“Your mouth is so hot and wet.” Erwin’s lids are low. “How do you do it, Levi? How do you make me feel so good just by sucking my fingers like this? Even right after I’ve come?”

Answering isn’t an option, so Levi decides to lean forward instead to take the fingers into his throat.

*Fuck*, Erwin mouths absently, as if he doesn’t realize his lips are moving. He lunges down and kisses Levi deeply without removing his fingers, and Levi lets out a muffled cry. He feels liquid trail down his cheek and knows he’s drooling, but if Erwin doesn’t mind it, then neither does he.

Erwin sits up again and reaches his free hand behind himself. Levi feels fingers wrap around his cock, and it’s such a relief to be touched. He thrusts up into it, and this time Erwin lets him ride his palm. Levi wonders wildly if this is it, if he’s finally going to be allowed to come.

“Are you close?” Erwin murmurs, even though he must know the answer.

Levi nods and hums and sucks hard, his muscles tense. He feels the glow building in every limb—

Both hands pull away.

“Erwin!” Levi wails; he falls just short of the peak and comes tumbling down. He lands hard against the bed, panting.

“We aren’t done yet,” Erwin whispers, bending forward to kiss the tip of his nose. He repositions himself at the foot of the bed, between Levi’s legs, and begins to stroke him again.

Now he seems to know the perfect rhythm to bring Levi

to the edge and let him fall back, ebb, and flow, like waves lapping on sand. Levi is floating on a cloud of euphoria, saliva trailing from the corner of his mouth, his skin chafing from straining against the restraints. Time falls away, even the sensation of the bed falls away. Nothing exists but that ebb and flow and his growing desperation.

Time must be passing, because Erwin is hard again. Levi doesn't have the coordination to do much except stick out his tongue; Erwin rests the head of his cock against it and strokes himself, eyes locked firmly on Levi's until the very end, when his head tosses back and he comes into Levi's mouth.

A hand fists into Levi's hair and Erwin kisses him deeply, hands running across his chest. "Still okay?"

Levi has trouble finding his voice, so he nods.

"I have an idea." Erwin kisses his forehead, then the bed shifts. He returns a moment later with a toy they picked up last time they were in Marley; it's a dildo with a flared base made with a soft material that almost feels like skin. "What if I slip this inside you?"

Levi moans a little and stretches; even the gentle pull of his muscles is amplified by hormones and feels glorious. "Yeah."

He feels the dildo press against him, then it slides into place. The stimulation is too overpowering, and he arches and cries out.

"Levi?"

It takes him a moment to remember the colour code. "White!"

"White?"

"White. Just ... " His tongue is clumsy. He can't tell if it feels good or if it feels like he's going to piss the bed.

"Do you need me to take it out?"

"No, just wait." The sensations are settling, and he takes several breaths, welcoming them. His body slowly relaxes, and the urgency in his core becomes a glow that burns hotter and hotter.

Erwin kisses his inner thigh. “Are you getting to the limit of what you can tolerate? We’ve been at this for an hour, and I don’t want to push you too hard the first time.”

*An hour?* No wonder he’s so overstimulated.

“Levi?”

He manages to shape his lips to say: “Green.”

He hears Erwin suck in a shuddering breath, and then a hand wraps gently around him again.

“Please,” Levi rasps.

Erwin lays alongside him, one hand stroking his cock, the other his brow. “Your stamina is so incredible.”

The dildo and the stimulation are too much. Levi cries out, “I’m going to—”

Erwin pulls his hand away and kisses Levi’s jaw, his neck. “So incredible. You are amazing, Levi.”

“I can’t. I can’t hold back.”

The hand begins to move again.

“Erwin!”

“Ten seconds,” Erwin murmurs into his neck, his hand moving faster. “Hold on for ten more seconds, then come for me.”

Levi’s entire body tenses. He can’t hold off, he can’t, he can’t. “Erwin—”

“Just a few more seconds. I know you can do it.”

Levi’s voice loses all structure, crumbling into a hoarse yell.

“Come for me, Levi,” Erwin says, and Levi explodes. He has never felt pleasure like this; his head rings, his entire body spasms, and he feels himself release pulse after pulse. For a moment, it seems as if it will never end, as if it had no beginning, as if it’s all he has ever known.

He feels the pull of the straps first, then the softness of the bed, then kisses against his throat. He hears himself yelling, feels the last waves leave his body.

Then his limbs are heavy, so heavy, and he falls into the bed.

He opens his eyes; his vision is blurry, as if he's drunk. Erwin is leaning over him. Levi blinks a few times to bring him into focus.

"I came on your face?"

"Levi," Erwin says with a small, awed smile, "you came on *everything*."

"Fuck." Levi's head lolls back.

"I underestimated your stamina." He feels one of the wrist restraints loosen; Erwin must be untying the straps. "I think self-control was harder for me than for you."

"I didn't really have a choice."

Erwin chuckles. "I suppose not. But you could have stopped it at any moment."

"I know. I didn't want to." Levi pauses. "Sorry for swearing at you and calling you an asshole."

"Well, maybe I was being a bit of an asshole." The bed shifts, and he feels a restraint on his ankle loosen. "This must be getting uncomfortable." Erwin's hand smooths around the base of the dildo.

"A bit."

"Here." Erwin slowly eases it out, and Levi is surprised to discover he has one little pulse left. The other ankle restraint loosens, and finally the last wrist restraint.

Levi pulls his limbs in and rolls onto his side. The skin of his wrists is lightly abraded.

"Sorry," Erwin says, placing a kiss inside his wrist. "We should get padded restraints if we want to do this again."

"It's fine." A part of Levi likes the idea of wearing these markings for a few days.

Everything on the bed is damp and sticky, and his skin feels the same, so even though his instincts are telling him to fall asleep, he forces himself to sit up. When he tries to stand, his legs almost give out under him; Erwin helps him catch his balance.

“I’d better shower,” he mumbles.

“Need help?”

“Should be okay.”

He showers in a fog. When he returns, Erwin has completely changed all the bedding. A glass of water waits for him on the bedside table. He takes a long swig and then falls into the fresh sheets.

Erwin sits beside him and squeezes his shoulder. “I’ll go shower, too. You go ahead and get some sleep.”

“That was amazing,” Levi says. His lids are heavy, so he closes them. “I had no idea you had that in you.”

“I like that we can still surprise each other.”

“Me, too.” Levi pauses. “We’re getting bedposts at home.”

He hears a chuckle, feels a soft kiss on his temple, and then he falls into a deep sleep.

# ❖ Epilogue ❖

## THE TREE OF HOPE

*-year 870, December-*

ERWIN SITS UP, then groans and lays back down. Levi rolls over to kiss his cheek. “Morning.” “Morning.” Erwin closes his eyes. “I can’t move.” Chuckling, Levi leans in for a long, slow kiss. “Did I wreck you?”

“You wrecked me.”

“I’d apologize, but I’m not sorry.” Levi stands, stretches, and then winces as he rolls his neck; he rubs it. “You’ll have to walk it off.”

Erwin drapes an arm over his eyes. “Go on without me.”

Levi tosses a pillow at him. “You once led an army after your *entire arm* was bitten off. Get out of bed.”

With great effort, Erwin heaves himself upright and limps to the bathroom. He examines his face in the mirror and decides he can go one more day without shaving.

Levi appears beside him and wraps his arms around him, kissing his ribs. Erwin smiles.

“You’re affectionate this morning.”

“I’m always affectionate.”

“Shall we take breakfast at the hotel, or go into town?”

Levi holds his gaze through the mirror. “Let’s go into town. I don’t want judgy hotel guests staring at us.”

“Why would they judge?”

“You don’t realize how loud you were last night.” Levi makes a noise that’s almost a purr and nuzzles closer. It tickles; Erwin jerks away.

“Don’t start that again. We have a schedule.”

“Fine.” Levi releases him. “I’ll go check our supplies.”

Once they’re ready, they pull on their jackets, toques, and mittens, heading out into the snow.

It’s a beautiful day outside; the sky is clear and sunny. Erwin turns to Levi. The strands of white hair look like the snow, sparkling in the sunlight.

“What?” Levi says, with a hint of a smile.

“You’re beautiful.”

“Now who’s affectionate?”

They find a café and sit near the window. Erwin can’t tear his eyes away from his husband, who is staring out at the village with his eyes aglow. When Erwin offered to take him anywhere for his birthday, he expected somewhere tropical, but he should have guessed otherwise. Levi loves the winter.

The country of Lumima is known for its year-round snow and hot springs, and most of all, its stunning auroras. They are about to engage in an overnight snowshoeing trip. Their destination is a camp on a ridge almost twenty kilometres away, renowned for its view of the lights. They’re both still in excellent physical shape, but this would have been a challenge even back in their military days. They did a practice run back home and it went well, so Erwin thinks—hopes—they are ready.

They chat comfortably through their breakfast, and Levi orders extra tea to pour into his thermos. Despite taking their time, they finish breakfast well ahead of schedule.

“How’s your ass?” Levi asks.

“Still sore, but I’ll manage. How about your neck?”

“Same.” Levi rolls it again. “We have a bit of time to kill. What do you want to do?” He pauses. “Not sex.”

“Not sex. Maybe a short walking trail?” Erwin pulls a map out of his pocket and finds their location, then lifts his hand to

point. "There's a tiny one kilometre loop in that direction. It's supposed to have a nice view of the lake."

"Okay, let's go. It can be our warm-up before the trek."

The trail has not been cleared, and the work of wading through knee-deep snow combined with the strength of the mid-morning sun is too much for Erwin. He pulls off his toque and mittens to try to cool down. Levi does the same.

With no clear path on the ground, they follow red ribbon markers on the tree boughs.

"We'll have to be careful on the snowshoeing trail as we head beyond the tree line," Erwin says. "There won't be any trees to mark the trail like this."

"They'll probably use cairns instead." Levi pauses and turns to a wide open field of white. "Is that big boring patch of snow the lake?"

"I think so."

"What a stunning view," Levi says dryly, and Erwin laughs.

"It's probably nicer when there's no snow."

"I thought they had snow year-round."

"Well, it probably thaws a bit in the summer. Anyway, let's just turn around. We need to conserve our energy, anyway." He reaches for Levi's hand, and their fingers lace together.

They're halfway back to their starting point when something catches Erwin's eye. He stops and stares.

It's two beech trees inosculated, entwining into a single trunk that reaches for the sky.

"Ah," Erwin says softly. "I wondered when I'd chance upon this."

"What's wrong?" Levi asks.

Erwin turns, trying to face the phantom he knows will be watching from another timeline. "Keep hope. 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 talking to?"

“Oh, seeing these trees just made me recall an old memory.”

“Don’t tell me you’re going senile already,” Levi grumbles.

Erwin chuckles and begins to walk again, casting a wink in the direction of his younger self.

Levi is quiet for a moment, as if processing, then stops. “Wait.” He turns around. “Wasn’t that—”

“The memory I saw in the paths. Yes.” Erwin considers. “Though at the time, I thought we were in our seventies.”

“Our *seventies*?” Levi snorts. “Little shit. I’m not even sixty!”

“Indeed.”

“Must be because of my hair.”

“Your beautiful hair.” Erwin bends forward to plant a kiss into the top of it. It smells of smoke, winter, floral shampoo, and sweat: an intoxicating combination. “Anyway, the vision I saw that day was correct. Trusting you to do the right thing led to everything working out.” Erwin closes his eyes, holding Levi close. “I can’t think of any better timeline for us than this one.”

Levi doesn’t reply, just hugs him tightly.

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LATE THAT NIGHT, as they set up their camp, they are treated to the beauty of the northern aurora: reds, greens, blues, purples, dancing in streams above them. Erwin’s throat is tight; when he looks at Levi, he recognizes the look of wonder on his face.

“Looks a lot like the paths, doesn’t it?”

Levi’s eyes scan the sky. “It feels like such a short time ago, but it’s been twenty years. And yet it feels like another lifetime ago.”

“Technically, it was another lifetime.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Levi is quiet for a moment, and then he says, “Do you think these lights are made of souls, like the paths?”

“Some of the people of Lumima believe so.”

“I like that idea.” He smiles. “I bet our souls danced in the night sky together before we were even born.”

This is not a comment Erwin would have ever expected from him. “I thought you didn’t like the idea of destiny and fate.”

“Well,” Levi says softly, “destiny led us here, didn’t it?”

“I suppose it did.” He feels as if his soul is dancing among the lights now, glowing green and blue and red, intertwining with Levi’s, two lifetimes becoming one. He feels joy. He feels peace.

“I love you, Levi.” He says it like a vow.

Levi reaches over to take Erwin’s mittenend hand between his own and says, sincerely, “I love you, too.”

END.

..❀❀..

*Thank you for reading. xo*

..❀❀..



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