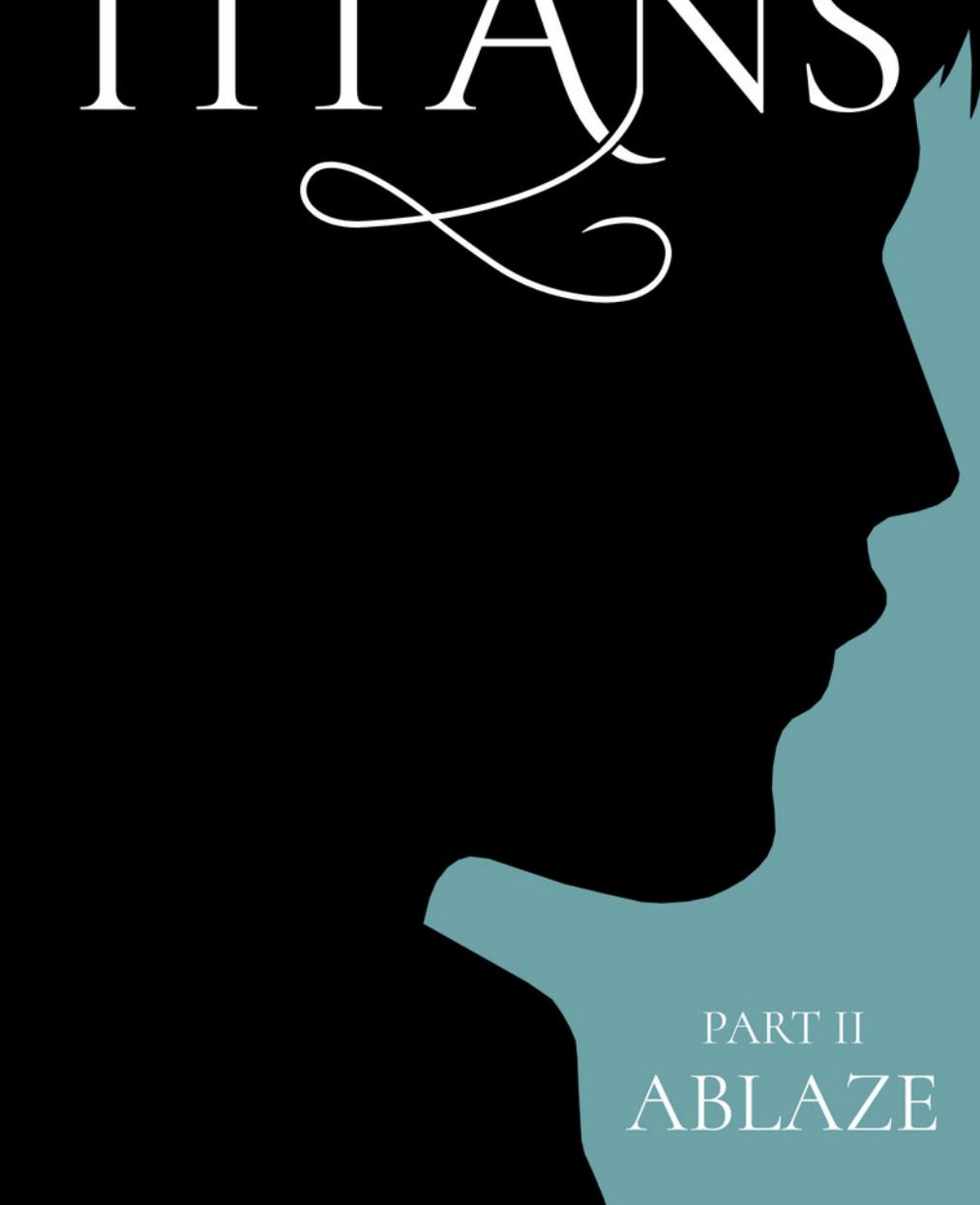


HE  
CHOSE  
TITANS



PART II  
ABLAZE



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# HE CHOSE TITANS

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❧ masksarehot ❧



# PART II: ABLAZE



# PROLOGUE

“Wake up,” Erwin said. “We’ve reached Trost.”

Levi sat up so quickly that the stack of paperwork began to slide off his lap. He clamped onto it before it could fall to the floor. “What the hell? When did I fall asleep?”

“About an hour ago. I suppose the paperwork did get rather tedious.” Erwin stacked his own pile of papers on the bench beside him, then slipped the stack neatly into his file.

The carriage must have rolled over a rock, because a bump rattled the cabin, and Levi nearly lost his papers again. He frowned and carefully aligned the edges. “You should have woken me up. That was the last hour we had before everything went back to normal.”

“You looked so relaxed that I didn’t want to wake you.”

They exchanged a long look.

“Levi,” Erwin said quietly, “this trip was ...” He couldn’t find the word. “I feel like we’ve been away for years, not a few days.”

“Yeah.” Levi looked down. “How the hell are we going to pretend nothing’s going on between us?”

“Well, I suppose we handle it by showing half the truth: that we’ve formed a strong bond, and we’ve become close friends.”

“Close friends?” Levi’s brow furrowed.

The concept seemed obvious to Erwin, and Levi’s surprise made him wonder if he had been presuming too much. “I’d say we’re forming a strong friendship, wouldn’t you? Last night, we spent hours talking about nothing, and that wasn’t the first time. Besides ...” He braced himself, fighting against the instinct to duck his eyes. “You already know me better than anyone alive.”

“I do?”

“Of course you do.”

“What about Nile or Marie?”

“Nile thinks he knows me, but his image of me is outdated, and

based on several incorrect assumptions. And Marie ... ” Erwin paused. “She knows my emotions, but she never understood my passion to free humanity. You don’t just understand it; you share it.”

The grey eyes, a little too wide, searched his, and Erwin felt his throat tighten.

“Here.” He sat upright and dropped his arms to either side, inviting him to come closer.

Levi studied him for a moment, then shifted across the cabin to the bench on Erwin’s side. Erwin closed his hands over the narrow hips and pulled him onto his lap.

“Hey, what—” Levi began, but Erwin cut him off with a kiss. There was only a moment’s hesitation, then Levi leaned into it, wrapping his arms around him.

When the kiss broke, their foreheads rested together. Erwin’s thumb ran across his bottom lip. “I suppose friends don’t kiss like that.”

“Mm.” Levi stole another kiss. “Two days?”

“Two days. Until Tuesday night, we are colleagues, friends, and nothing more.” He smoothed the dark hair, buried his nose in it, breathed in. “I don’t know how I’m going to sleep without you. I should have scheduled an overnight ride home so I could have held you one last time.”

“It’s just a couple nights,” Levi said dismissively, but he buried his face in Erwin’s neck.

His form was small and warm, and Erwin instinctively curled around him.

## -15-

# ADJUSTMENT

Levi stepped out of the carriage and stretched an arm above his head. He wasn't sure what time it was, but the sky was already dark, stars just beginning to appear. He took a deep breath. The scent of Trost was already more familiar than the scent of the Capital. He was returning home.

He glanced over at Erwin, who had defaulted to his Commander armour: guarded smile, neutral face, rigid stance. He already missed seeing the true Erwin that hid beneath his role. Though, maybe he looked the same, shifting back into Levi the Squad Leader instead of Levi the friend and lover.

"I may hold an informal Officer's gathering tonight," Erwin said. "I'll send for you if I do."

"Okay." Levi squinted as two silhouettes appeared in the doorway overlooking the courtyard. The larger silhouette had to be Mike—it was as tall as the door frame—and the other one appeared to be bouncing. That must be Hange. "Not a moment's peace."

"Levi," Erwin said quietly, "thank you."

"For what?"

"For everything." For a moment, the mask dropped, and his eyes were soft again. "We'll pick up again in a couple days."

"Welcome back," Hange yelled, bouncing closer. "We're here to help with your luggage."

"Thank you, both. It'll be much lighter this time around; we unloaded some cargo while we were away." Erwin stepped toward the back of the carriage. "Incidentally, Hange, we should take a moment tomorrow to discuss your ideas for weapons development. I may have secured some funding."

Hange's eyes lit up. "Sir."

Levi and Mike began to pull the trunk out of the carriage; without the lockbox of gold, it was, indeed, considerably lighter than before.

"How's the nose?" Levi asked, noticing his face was still wrapped with bandages.

"Can't smell a damned thing." Mike raised a brow. "Looks like you took a blow or two yourself. Wasn't Erwin, was it?"

For one stomach-twisting moment, Levi misunderstood what he meant by 'blow', but then he remembered his own wounded nose. "No, I got in a scrap. Long story." He wasn't sure how much of his mission was meant to be common knowledge.

Leaving Hange to help Erwin, the two men began to haul the trunk up the stairs, then lugged it down the hallway. Their immense height difference made their task so awkward that Mike silently plucked the trunk out of Levi's hands and carried it alone. Levi would have protested, but he was sore from being cramped in a hot carriage all day.

"Have a good time?" Mike asked.

"Not really. And I heard more than I wanted about your trainee days."

Mike snorted, the sound strangled by his bandages. "Yeah?"

"Yeah, Erwin's a chatty drunk." Levi glanced up at him. "Things got a bit personal. Heard he had a bit of a thing for you, back when you were kids." Though he said the words casually, his heart pounded in his chest. It seemed impossible that Erwin's brain could ever fail him. This would be a good test of whether or not his childhood memories could possibly be flawed.

"Oh." Mike shrugged. "I forgot about that. Yeah, he was a naive little thing back then. I had to be his first rejection. Felt like shit. Hope he's not still sore about it."

"No, he's fine." Levi let out a silent breath of relief. *If Erwin remembered that correctly, he's probably remembering everything else correctly as well. I can still trust his mind.*

Mike deposited the trunk in Levi's room. "Want help unpacking?"

Levi thought of the bottle of lubricant, of all the soiled handkerchiefs. "I've got it. Thanks."

"Suit yourself. Drinks later?"

"Sure."

Then he was alone. He began to pull his belongings out of the trunk, leaving Erwin's untouched; he would drop the trunk off in his room later. He was almost finished when he heard a knock at the door. His pulse rose. Erwin? "Come in."

Hange stepped into the room. "So?"

He sighed. "What do you want?"

The door closed, and Hange approached, eyes a little too wide behind the oval lenses. "Did you dance with him?"

"Of course not." The memory of dancing on the rooftop under the setting sun was so overwhelming that he turned away. He fixedly pulled his soap out of the chest, setting it in his toiletries pail.

The hair on the back of his neck was crawling. He lifted his head, then jumped. Hange's face was inches from his.

"Your ears are pink."

"Your hair is greasy," he retorted. "Have you bathed at all since we got back from the expedition?"

They stared at each other, then Hange grinned and pulled away. "Welcome back."

"Uh, thanks." Levi felt as if he had just been scrutinized and then judged.

"Erwin has invited us all to his office for drinks. Sort of an informal mission debrief."

"In a minute. I need to unpack."

"It can wait. Come on." Hange grabbed his arm and dragged him toward the door.

"Oh shit, put your arm down. You really need a bath." Levi snatched his hand away. Truthfully, the scent of body odour didn't bother him as much as other smells—in some contexts, it was even pleasant, so long as it wasn't his own—but he needed an excuse to be annoyed.

They arrived at Erwin's office to find him seated behind the desk. Berit was perched uncomfortably on a wooden chair in front of him.

"Mike will join us shortly," Erwin said as he slid bottles of ale across the desk.

"I'm surprised you can still drink after how hard you hit the bottle in the Capital," Levi said. "And how hard it hit back."

Erwin's lips flattened. "I'll be fine, thank you, Levi."

"Speaking of hitting ..." Berit tapped her nose. "What happened there?"

Levi shrugged. "Got in a scrap."

"The Commander got drunk, and you got in a scrap? So really, the two of you were just partying while the rest of us were hard at work back here?" Her arms folded over her chest.

Levi's eyes narrowed. "I just did eight hours of paperwork in a stuffy buggy while your pasty ass was here playing house—"

"It's okay, Levi." Erwin was wearing his guarded smile, the one he pasted on to put others at ease. "There's more to it than that, I assure you, Berit. We'll discuss everything when Mike gets here."

"I'm here." Mike stepped into the room, closing the door behind him, and flopped onto a chair. He was so enormous that Levi cringed, expecting the chair to break, but it held.

"Good," Erwin said. "Then let's get started. We'll do a formal Officer's meeting tomorrow, but our activities in the Capital have cemented our focus, so I wanted to meet with you tonight and give you a quick overview first."

As they passed around the ale, Erwin sat tall in his desk, his voice taking on a deep, confident tone that made shivers ripple down Levi's spine. He spoke of building relationships with the Military Police and the Garrison, as well as several key investors.

"Of special note, thanks to some leg work by Levi, we've built a strong business relationship with one of the lords. He has agreed to fund our weapons research with sliding donations based on the results of our upcoming expeditions. I expect these donations to be large enough that we will be able to formally start a weapons research division, headed up by Hange."

Hange's hands clasped together. "Really?"

"There's an old storage room next to the dungeon cells downstairs. You can clean that up and use it as your research base, on one condition." He leaned forward across the desk to emphasize his words: "You will not use any materials that could endanger the lives of anyone in this base. If you wish to build new explosive devices, for example, you must take that research offsite."

Hange gave a delighted whoop and stood to deliver a thumping salute. "Sir! I'll make the Corps proud."

Levi took a sip of ale, glad Erwin had added the stipulation about dangerous materials. Otherwise, Hange's reckless enthusiasm was bound to kill them all.

"I look forward to your results." Erwin turned to address all of

them. “As I mentioned, we’ll be having a formal meeting tomorrow to kick off our new squad selection. I trust each of you has given some thought as to what type of squad you want to lead?”

“Research,” Hange said. “And support.”

“Defense,” Berit said.

“Offense.” Mike tapped his bandaged nose. “With some tracking and scouting once this thing heals.”

Everyone focused on Levi, who shrugged. He hadn’t really given it much thought. “Speed and strength.” He hoped it was a good answer.

Erwin nodded. “You and Mike could form our right and left arms. I believe a combination of offense and scouting would suit your leadership style well.”

*I have a leadership style?* Levi idly swirled the ale in his bottle.

“It looks as if we’ll have a wide spread of skills,” Erwin said with a kind smile. “That makes my job easier, and should make squad selection easier as well. Tomorrow, we’ll discuss your initial squad selections and begin interviewing the remaining candidates. I expect the interview and squad assignment process to last until the end of next week.”

“During this time, I’ll be putting together a proposal for our next expedition. This will be a large-scale operation; we’ll be sweeping through the old military silos, gathering supplies, while also scouting for a permanent base outside Wall Rose. After we’ve recovered everything we can from the silos, our overall mission will shift to securing that permanent base, while also building caches of supplies leading to Wall Maria. All of this will culminate in a wall reclamation effort three to five years in the future.”

There was a long silence. Levi’s skin erupted into goosebumps. *We can do this. We can take back Wall Maria. With this man leading us, we can do anything.*

“Commander,” Hange said. “That silo we found was almost empty. Why would we try to track down any others?”

“I have secured access to the itemized list of contents for all silos within Wall Maria. We’ll be prioritizing silos based on what they contain. I promise you, Hange, I will weigh the benefits of each silo against the risks required to reach it. As an extra precaution, we’ll be performing a small-scale scouting mission in advance of the expedition, so we know roughly what to expect in terms of titan traffic.”

“Scouting missions?” Hange’s eyes lit up. “I volunteer my squad. We can use the opportunity to research—”

“You don’t even know who will be in your squad yet, four-eyes,” Levi said. “And your squad will be a support squad, anyway. It should be me or Mike.”

Erwin’s eyes locked onto him, and Levi saw a brief flicker of fear before the face returned to neutral. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves; there’s no need to volunteer just yet. We’ll discuss the details of the scouting mission once I have the itemized list of contents, and once the squads have been formed.”

Levi stared at him, mind spinning around that flicker. *Is he afraid to put me in danger?* Certainly he had misinterpreted the look. Erwin had only agreed to move forward with a relationship on the principle that it wouldn’t interfere with their work.

“So,” Erwin said, “Now you know our objectives for the next few years. This may shift as necessary, of course, but we must always be moving toward the reclamation of Wall Maria. That is our next major goal.

“That’s everything I wanted to cover tonight, but you’re welcome to stay here and drink for a while, if you like. My time with Levi in the Capital showed me how little I know about each of you, except maybe Mike. If we are to proceed forward as a team, we need to become well-acquainted. I think it will be valuable to spend time drinking and talking together like this on a regular basis.”

Levi winced, feeling awkward on his behalf. “Did you just formally invite us to casual hang-outs?”

Mike shifted on the chair. “If we’re going to spend time hanging out here, you’re going to need to get a couple couches or something.”

“That’s a good idea,” Erwin said.

“Okay.” Berit leaned forward. “If we’re being all buddy-buddy, can I ask what happened to Levi’s nose? Because I’m really curious.”

“Yeah, I’d like to know, too,” Hange said.

Levi glanced at Erwin, not sure how much he was supposed to reveal.

Erwin sat tall. “Levi was on a reconnaissance mission somewhere off-bounds to the public. A member of the Military Police found him and tried to take him down before she realized who he was.”

“She landed a blow on you?” Mike asked, impressed. “I can barely touch you when we’re sparring, let alone when you’re fighting for your life.”

Levi shrugged. “She had gear on, and I didn’t. And I was drunk.”

"Her fighting skills were so impressive that we recruited her," Erwin said. "In fact, three members of the MP will be joining us within the next year. But enough about that—Berit and Mike, I'm curious to hear about what we missed while we were gone. How did everything go here? Did the new recruits behave?"

As Berit spoke, Levi's eyes drifted back to Erwin. His bottle was nearly full, his spine rigid. *Was he always this stiff and formal?* It was so unlike the man he had come to know in the Capital. Erwin had several conflicting sides: the ruthless strategist, the formal leader, the relaxed conversational partner, the intense lover. It was going to take time to reconcile all four into one. And yet, he already found himself loving and admiring each of them for a different reason.

"Levi's smiling," Hange interrupted, shocked.

Levi pulled his face into neutral, but not before every eye in the room locked onto him.

Berit squinted. "That wasn't a smile."

"Sure it was. Or as close as he gets. You know, both of you have been acting strangely since you got back. Levi keeps blushing, and Erwin keeps getting this little twinkle in his eye."

"Hange," Erwin said. "You're interrupting your colleague's update."

"Hange's right." Mike folded his arms over his chest. "You offered to have drinks with us. You don't normally socialize without at least five minutes of convincing first."

Erwin's throat bobbed. Levi watched him, mouth dry, palms sweating. He could almost see the wheels turning in Erwin's head, but they weren't turning fast enough.

"You got laid," Mike said. "Both of you. Right?"

"What?" Levi said.

"That's not—" Erwin began, but Mike interrupted him.

"Brothel visit? Or did you just pull the Commander card and woo a couple women back to the hotel?"

"This isn't appropriate." Irritation darkened Erwin's expression.

"If my nose wasn't busted up, I'd figure out the answer in a second."

"How?" Hange asked.

"Brothels have a very distinct smell of—"

"Shut up," Levi snapped. "It's none of your business. Fucking hell." Hange's eyes locked on him; he felt as if his body were slowly be-

ing turned inside out. *Shit. We're going to be found out on our first night back.*

Berit drained her bottle, then stood. "Look, this is intriguing, it really is. Mike's said more in the past five minutes than he did the entire time you were away, and I've never seen Levi make so many facial expressions. But I barely slept while you two were gone, and I'm exhausted, and I really don't want to know anything about my commanding officer's love life, so if it's all the same, I'm going to go pass out." She saluted. "Excuse me, Commander."

"Goodnight." Erwin nodded at her. "And my apologies. I let this conversation get out of control." He still looked as if he were struggling to regain his composure, a nervous crease showing beside one eyebrow.

The door closed behind her.

"You assholes scared her away," Levi muttered.

Mike shrugged, returning to his ale.

"At least you had a good time in the Capital," Hange said diplomatically.

"For the most part. The gala itself was enjoyable." Erwin's fingers drummed the top of his desk. "For me, anyway. I'm not sure Levi was thrilled, particularly when I met up with old friends. We ended up reminiscing for far longer than I should have, and I'm sure the old tales got tiresome."

"Shit!" Mike leaned forward so quickly that his chair creaked. "Marie was there."

Levi's gaze snapped to him. There was an accusatory tone to the words that made his hackles rise.

"Mike—" Erwin began.

"No, it all makes sense now." Mike cast him a disappointed look. "They're *married*, Erwin. With a kid."

"You're getting the wrong idea."

"Who's Marie?" Hange asked.

"A woman we knew as trainees." Mike shook his head. "Nile and Erwin both fell for her, and she kept dating both of them. It was constant drama."

"This isn't something we—" Erwin began, but Mike was still going.

"Then we came out here and she moved to the Capital to settle down with Nile, but every time Erwin went to the Capital on business, he'd hook up with her all over again."

"Mike, that's enough."

Levi's eyes narrowed. *Every time?*

"Thought you'd be decent enough to knock it off once they married and had a kid," Mike said.

Hange took a sip of ale, eyes darting between the three men.

For several seconds, the only sound was the tapping of Erwin's fingers on the desk. Then, he leaned back in his chair, his arms folding over his chest. "Very well; I'll address your concerns, and then we will drop this topic. First of all, you are exaggerating. Our love triangle, such as it was, wasn't nearly as sordid as you make it sound. Marie genuinely loved us both, and no party of our triangle wanted to hurt any others, so yes, some secrets came up, but they were well-intentioned. Secondly, no, I did not sleep with her during this visit, nor have I since they wed. And thirdly, it wasn't 'constant drama.' There was even a period of nearly a year where she and I were exclusive."

"You weren't exclusive." Mike tapped his nose. "This thing doesn't lie."

Erwin's mouth twisted. "I see."

Levi almost felt badly for him, but he was still upset about this new version of events. After the conversation at the gala, he had understood their relationship as one indiscretion, not a chain of them. To his dismay, he could feel his respect for Erwin beginning to bleed away, drop by drop. He had a few strong moral codes, and one of them was that infidelity was betrayal, and betrayal was filth that could never be washed from a relationship.

Maybe he should have let it slide, but he was beginning to fixate on that infidelity; it was burrowing into him, expanding, and the question spilled over: "I thought you and Marie only slept together *once* after she settled down with Nile?"

"This isn't an appropriate venue for this discussion." Erwin shifted in his seat. "I've humoured the topic long enough."

"No, this is important. Were you screwing around behind Henrik's back? Or was it after he died, and you were just betraying your best friend instead? Is that what you do to the people who trust you? Smile politely at them, then go stick your dick in their wives?" *And then lie to me about it? How many half-truths have you told me?*

"Wait, who's Henrik?" Hange's gaze was still drifting between the three of them, but the question went ignored.

Erwin rubbed his temples. "Any poor decisions I made as a youth have no impact on my ability to command the Survey Corps, so

we will not discuss them in this office. You two have probably convinced Hange I'm some irresponsible, sex-crazed maniac, which couldn't be further from the truth."

Hange took another sip of ale. "It's okay. This is interesting."

"No, it's not okay, and this is bullshit." Levi drained his bottle, then stood. "I'm going to bed."

"Levi," Mike said, "calm down. I was just giving him a hard time."

"Yeah, well you can fuck right off. All of you." Levi turned on his heel and marched from the room.

Too angry to return to his room, he kept walking. He ended up near the stables, and he decided some self-imposed isolation on the rooftop might be what he needed. He hadn't had a moment alone since they had left for the Capital, and he was starting to feel panned in.

He climbed to the stable roof and jumped carelessly across the dangerous gap to the higher perch, too upset to be cautious. He settled on the tile and let his knees loll in his elbows, fixing his gaze on the stars.

He couldn't pinpoint exactly why he was so angry, and that made him even angrier. This was the same useless emotion that had gripped him when Erwin, Nile and Marie had been reminiscing about their past. It wasn't jealousy. Jealousy would have been easier to dismiss—he knew Erwin's past wasn't a threat to whatever they shared now. No, this was a deep disappointment, an incongruity between his ideals and reality.

Logically, he knew everyone made relationship mistakes, especially when they were younger. When he looked back on his own past, he could point to countless examples of immature bullshit. There was the one relationship where he had tried to control his partner by emotionally manipulating him, constantly bullying him into staying together. In another relationship, he had swindled large sums of money from his partner under false pretenses. A lump of shame built in his throat, so large that he coughed to clear it. He shouldn't blame Erwin for sanitizing the truth in his version of events. If Levi had been asked about his past relationships, he might have tried to make himself sound less despicable, too.

Footfall sounded on the stable roof. He peered down, and was surprised to see not Erwin, but Hange.

"Leave me alone," he muttered.

"That's what people say when they need someone the most."

"It's also what people say when they want you to *leave them the*

*fuck alone.”*

“Now, now, don’t be like that.” Hange jumped the gap, wobbling the landing. “Wow! That was close.”

He was impressed with the strong jump—even Erwin, with his height advantage and powerful legs, had been unable to land it cleanly—but only said, “If you fall, I’m not cleaning up your bloody, meaty mess.”

Hange dropped to a seat beside him. “Want to talk about it?”

“No, I don’t want to talk about it. That’s why I told you to leave me the fuck alone.” Levi rested his chin on his forearms, drawing his legs closer to his body.

“Then I’ll have to guess. You idolize the ground he walks on, so it breaks your heart to hear about his imperfections, right? Makes you start second-guessing him?”

His muscles tensed. He didn’t reply.

Hange’s legs stretched out beside him. “You’ve got to relax your expectations, Levi. We’ve all done stupid things because of love. It doesn’t make him any less admirable. He’s a great man.”

“I know that,” he muttered. “While we were at the Capital, I got to see him outpace every noble and military officer we bumped into. He’s a fucking genius.” Deciding it wasn’t giving away too much, he added, “We talked a lot while we were there, and I guess he figured out how much I admire him, because he kept reminding me he’s human and he makes mistakes.”

“But you can’t see him that way, right? Because you dedicated your life to following him, and if he’s anything less than perfect, then it reflects poorly on you for trusting him?”

Levi glanced over. Hange’s face was subdued, almost kind.

“Maybe,” he said, his defenses dropping.

“Following Commander Erwin is a wise decision,” Hange said solemnly. “Believe me, I know several geniuses, and Erwin could easily outpace them all. Even brilliant people make the wrong call sometimes—he did last week with the perimeter layout around the silo—but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t trust them. Especially if the mistake was ages ago.”

Levi was quiet. He focused on the moon. It was barely visible, masked by wispy clouds; their edges glowed, illuminated by its brilliance.

“Look.” Hange leaned in. “There’s nothing more frustrating than

having your professional skills brought into question because of mistakes you made in your personal life. Don't do that to him, okay?"

He studied the bespectacled face. "It sounds like there's a story behind that."

"It'll have to wait for another time." Hange's head cocked toward the stable. "Looks like someone else wants to talk to you."

He peered over the edge and saw Erwin standing on the stable roof. Even in the dim moonlight, Levi could tell he was wearing his soft face.

"Shit," he muttered, because he was beginning to feel like a child coming down from a tantrum.

"It'll be okay." Hange's voice was almost too soft to hear. "You'll work this out. You two need each other more than you realize."

"We what?"

"You complement each other well. And even if you're too stubborn to get romantically involved, you could both use a friend. Work past this, okay?"

"Levi," Erwin said from below, his voice echoing throughout the courtyard. "When you have a moment, I'd like to talk to you."

Levi sighed and his eyes narrowed at Hange. "If anyone —*anyone*—hears even a hint of what we just discussed, I will break your glasses. While you're still wearing them."

Hange smiled. "Go talk to him."

Saying 'thanks' was too difficult, so he added, "And go back to being crazy and weird. It's creepy when you're nice."

He turned, jumped down to the stable roof and rolled the landing, then rose to his feet in front of Erwin. For a moment, they stared at each other.

"Care to join me for a walk?" Erwin asked.

"Isn't that going to make people suspicious?"

"I think ignoring you after your outburst would be even more suspicious."

Levi's ears burned with shame. *They must all think I'm so fucking childish.*

They climbed down to the stable, then fell into step side-by-side, strolling along the perimeter of the base. The city was so quiet that Levi could hear wind whistling through the tree branches. It was hard to stay angry in such a peaceful setting.

"What's on your mind?" Erwin asked.

Levi shrugged.

“You can tell me. I won’t judge.”

“Fine. These stories I keep hearing are so different from the man I know and respect, and it’s hard to figure them out.”

“Well, I’m not the same man I was ten years ago. We all must make mistakes and learn from them in order to grow.” Erwin rested a hand on his shoulder as they walked. “I’ll keep saying this as often as you need to hear it: if this relationship is going to work, you have to see me as a man, not as an ideal. There are going to be parts of my past that bother you, and parts of my present and future as well.”

“I know. I just wasn’t expecting Mike to say all that shit. It put me on edge.”

“He was out of line, especially now that I’m his commanding officer. I told him as much once you left, and he’ll be acting more professionally in a group setting from now on.” Erwin glanced at him. “But there’s more to it than that, isn’t there?”

“Yeah.”

Their wandering footsteps brought them to a pathway that cut through the park behind the base. Erwin sat on a low bench along the pathway, then cocked his head beside him. Levi slumped to a seat.

“I’m sorry you had to hear unflattering things about me, Levi. I mentioned that I’m not an easy person to be with—I meant that. I’m not good with relationships. I get caught up in my work and push my partner to the side. I withdraw and become cold when I’m under stress. I’m oblivious to my partner’s needs, especially when my work requires my full attention. And yes, sometimes I make selfish decisions.”

“But I’ve never been unfaithful to my partner. You already knew I left Marie to chase after my personal goals. What you may not know is that I tried to do the same to Henrik; in fact, we broke up a good five or six times during the course of our relationship. Sometimes when that happened, I did run back to Marie. I pretended I didn’t know she was with Nile, but I knew, deep down, and I betrayed him anyway.” He paused. “I’m no ideal.”

Levi turned to study him. The moonlight barely illuminated his profile, accentuating the slight hook to his long nose, the sharp tip. He looked strong and beautiful. “Loyalty is important to me.”

“I know. I can tell that by the way you’re so loyal to those close to you, and I feel lucky to count myself among them. I won’t ever betray that trust. I promise.”

“I know. I don’t feel threatened, just—” The emotions fell into place as he voiced them. “Look, everything is happening so quickly. Maybe I’m panicking a little after seeing how close they all came to guessing everything back there. There’s a lot on the line if we’re found out, or if we screw this up and end up unable to get along, and I know it’s going to be painful sometimes to pretend there’s nothing going on between us.”

Erwin’s voice softened: “When you consider my flaws, a part of you wonders if I’m worth the risk and the sacrifices?”

Levi winced. This was too much conflict, too much drama. He pulled away from the conversation for a moment, focusing on their surroundings instead. A bat fluttered between the trees in front of them. In the distance, he could hear the clattering of a horse and carriage. The wind ruffled his cravat, but he was so on edge that the uneven pull on his neck was magnified and irritating. Everything was. He took in a breath and held it.

A hand closed over his.

Levi glanced down at their joined hands resting on the bench between them. “Someone will see.”

“It’s too dark.” Erwin paused, and uncertainty crept into his voice. “Unless you want me to let go.”

“It’s fine.”

The breeze was chilly, and their joined grip burned in comparison. *He’s doing that thing again, where his hand glows when it touches my skin.*

“Levi.” Erwin’s voice was so soft and deep that Levi swore he could feel it vibrate through his body. “I’m going to tell you every sordid detail about my past—at least, everything that’s safe to share. I want to cover every upsetting comment you might ever hear from Mike, Nile, or Marie, so that you hear it from me first. Most of all, I want you to see all my flaws so you can decide if I’m worth the risk and the sacrifices, before it’s too late to turn back.”

*It’s already too late,* Levi thought, staring at their hands, both grey-blue in the dim moonlight. “Why would you do that?”

“Because I’ve hurt you twice in as many days, and I don’t want that to continue. We’ll deal with it all now. I need you to understand the man I was, the man I am. If you don’t like what you hear, then I want you to walk away.”

Levi’s eyes snapped to him, his chest so tight that he couldn’t

breathe. Erwin's face was gentle, but his jaw was quivering.

“You know I'm not going to walk away, Erwin.”

“Please. Hear me out.”

“Okay.”

Erwin's chin tilted up, his eyes fixing on the stars. “I'll begin by addressing the conversation we were having with Mike. You know Marie was my first mutual love. I fell hard. We dated informally at first, each of us seeing other people on the side, but as time passed, things grew more serious—at least, I thought they were. Mike's revelation tonight has shed new light on that.” A muscle in his jaw jumped. “Without thinking to ask Marie's opinion, I automatically assumed she and I were exclusive. I used to do that sometimes, back in my emotional youth; I would get a convenient idea in my head, and it would become my reality regardless of whether or not it was actually true.”

“Is that why Nile's so convinced you're delusional?”

“Maybe. He knows the young, idealistic version of me, the one who hadn't yet fully embraced logic over emotion. But I'm getting off topic before I've even begun.” Erwin's voice strengthened again. “After Marie and I parted ways, Henrik came into the picture. He had been trying to win my heart for a couple years, and ...”

He paused. The length of the pause suggested something unpleasant was about to follow, and Levi braced himself.

“I took advantage of his feelings for me. During my first year here, a bunch of us were drinking in town, and I had been kissing a handsome civilian all night, but he left before things could escalate. I was stumbling drunk and painfully aroused, so I turned to Henrik. He thought I was finally returning his advances, and I let him believe it. The next day, I rejected him all over again—until a few months later, when I was yet again drunk and desperate.” His face twisted. “I used him, Levi. For months. I strung him along so that I'd have someone to fuck if I got lonely.”

“You fell in love eventually,” Levi said, hoping to pardon him.

“Yes, but even when we formally became a couple, we weren't equals. I loved my career first and Henrik second, but he saw me as his top priority. He fought tooth and nail to keep me happy, to pull me closer when I was too caught up in my work. My emotional needs were always met, and his often went neglected.” Erwin's eyes drifted up to the sky. “He deserved so much more energy than I was willing to give, but I was his first relationship, so he didn't know any better. And then he

threw his life away for me, so he never will.”

“But you loved him, right?” The way Erwin had spoken about Henrik, he had imagined a deep, healthy relationship.

“I did.” Erwin’s eyes closed, his face still tilted upwards. “That only makes my mistreatment of him that much worse.”

*So that’s why he feels so guilty about his death, after all these years,* Levi thought. *His grief and regret weren’t just about the death itself, but about the relationship as a whole.* His grip tightened around Erwin’s hand, and Erwin looked down at it with widening eyes, as if surprised to remember they were clasped. He tightened his grip, too, and continued.

“When he died, I took it poorly. I was too sick with guilt to eat, and I became delirious. They had to force-feed me broth in the san. Shadis came to visit me there—it was the first time we talked in depth. He told me I was too young and talented to throw my life away over a friend’s death, and he’d take me to the Capital to sit in on a meeting with the Commander-in-Chief if I’d just eat a bowl of soup on my own. My ambitions proved more powerful than my emotions, and I ate, so he kept his word.” He shook his head. “And on my first night of leave during that visit to the Capital—”

“You slept with Marie.”

“In spite of what Mike thinks, that’s the last time anything happened between us.” Erwin glanced at him. “Then they got married, right before Jasper was born. I was invited to the wedding, but I didn’t go.” His jaw tightened. “It was a reminder of everything I had sacrificed to join the Survey Corps. I rarely regret my sacrifices now, but at the time, I resented Nile. So that’s another strike against my character, I suppose.”

Levi shrugged. “I wouldn’t have gone, either. Especially if you were still in love with her.”

Erwin gave him a small smile, then sat upright. “So now you know the unpleasant history of my love life, such as it is. There is a smattering—less than a smattering, really—of one-night stands sprinkled in there, but nothing else of note. I suppose I should tell you about my unpleasant professional history as well, particularly my shadier methods of gathering information.”

“I already know that you use blackmail,” Levi said. “I don’t really care.”

Erwin studied him for a moment, then said, “You know I have an extensive network of contacts.”

“Seems like it, yeah.”

“I’ve worked hard to build them in person, sometimes at great potential risk to myself. Many of them are members of the nobles, government and military. Others are ... less legitimate.”

That was a surprise. “How much less?”

“I’m not opposed to tapping into gang networks if I have to.” Erwin traced the back of his knuckle. “That’s how I found out about you.”

Levi’s eyes snapped to him. “What?”

“One of my contacts mentioned you during idle conversation: the strongest man he had ever met, who flew around on the 3DMG like a soldier. My curiosity was piqued. One day, when I was doing a routine trip to the Underground to meet with one of my contacts, I happened to see you, and I was impressed. The next day, I put in a proposal to capture and recruit you.”

“Wait.” Levi couldn’t figure out why Erwin was recounting the old familiar events as if they were a character flaw. “Was this before or after you knew Lobov was going to hire me?”

“I already knew he would, but he had no idea.”

“What?”

“I wasn’t just reacting to Lobov’s moves. I played both sides. I used my contacts to subtly bring your skills to Lobov’s attention, to plant a seed that you would be the perfect assassin. I had to make sure you were the one he hired; I couldn’t leave it up to chance, or he might have tried to hire someone else.” Erwin held his gaze. “And then I intentionally provoked him. Shadis gave me an opening, and I took it. Lobov was becoming problematic, and I knew pressuring him would make him consider assassinating me, so he’d turn to you. Two birds with one stone: you would join the Corps, and I would have the opportunity to track Lobov and take him down.”

“What the fuck?” Levi jerked his hand free. “Are you saying it’s your fault that asshole approached us in the first place?” His ribcage felt as if it were being squeezed. He had always partly blamed Lobov for the deaths of his friends—mostly himself, but partly Lobov. Did that mean that blame lay with Erwin instead?

Erwin studied his own palm, stroking it with his thumb, as if tracing the old wound from their physical altercation. “Here is yet another of my flaws: I didn’t see you as a person back then. I saw you as a resource, one that humanity needed in order to win its war.” His eyes

lifted. "And you saw me not as a person, but as a target. You wanted me dead. Things have changed since then, for both of us."

Even though he had a point, Levi's hands tightened into fists. "Okay, fine; keep going. What else do you have to tell me?" He thought back to his discussion with Hange in the tree, to the rumours of Erwin's brutality. "I've heard you've used torture to get information. Maybe even murder."

"No. The stakes haven't been that high. Not yet. But you should know I will go to any length for the sake of humanity. I would give my life, or anyone else's. I'll even take lives, if I have to." His face was hard, full of resolve, and Levi's stomach dropped. *He has no idea.*

"You don't want to murder anyone, Erwin. Stick to manipulating humans and slaughtering titans."

"In some cases, murder may be the only viable option."

"No, listen. Human deaths are not something you ever recover from." He shifted, pulling one knee close to his chest. "It doesn't matter who they are, or how much you hate them: you'll never forget the look on their face right when they realize they're going to die. Ever. You'll see every single face every time you close your eyes." A shiver ran through his body.

Erwin glanced at him. "We don't have to continue along this line of thought."

It was too late. Levi was already seeing greying skin, pools of blood, so much blood. Washing the floor, washing the inside of the carriage, washing that fucking psycho's clothes, scrubbing blood out of everything, always, and it never came out easily, it stained everything.

"Sometimes people look terrified." Levi's voice dropped in pitch. "They get this look of panic that spikes right through your stomach, this raw fear that everyone instinctively understands. Others have a look of hatred. That one's easiest to move past, because it's a look of power, so it's like they die with dignity. Others are almost peaceful. Accepting. That's tough to see, because they're accepting something *you're* about to do, as if they're better than you, on a more evolved level. But the worst—" He drew the other knee up to his chest to join the first. "The worst is when a person gives you the look of despair. A look so strong that you can hear their anguish in your mind: *Why?* That's the look that haunts you, because there's no good answer, not for most of them" Darkness was sifting into his vision, his muscles tensing, as expressions of the deceased scrolled through his memory. So much blood ... He

scratched the back of his hand, shrinking into himself.

“Levi.” Erwin’s voice was tentative. “How many people have you killed?”

“Does it only count if I’m holding the knife? Or does it count if I’m watching and I don’t do anything to stop it?”

A pause. “It doesn’t count unless you’re holding the knife. Especially if you were too young to know how to react.”

“I wasn’t too young,” Levi said. “I knew how to end it, end it all, but it meant I would have had to hold the knife, and I would have had to see one of those four looks on his face.” He felt as if the wind were kicking up around them, whistling in his ears. “Was I too scared? Was I afraid of what he’d do to me if I wasn’t strong enough to finish him? Or was I just lazy? Was it more convenient to keep doing what we were doing, so I wouldn’t have to separate myself from it and question the morality of it?”

“Were you mercenaries?” Erwin’s tone was so cautious that Levi’s imagination, already overactive with the faces of the dead, painted an image of a foot pressing into ice, trying to apply weight to it without making it crack.

“Mercenaries? Maybe. I don’t know anymore. My memory isn’t very good. Maybe I blocked a lot of it out. It’s hazy. I don’t know.” His breaths were coming too quickly. The crack was spreading, deepening ...

He felt a strong arm across his back, then Erwin pulled him in, embracing him.

“Someone will see.” Levi’s voice was thin.

“It’s okay. I’d do the same if we were just friends.” Erwin pulled him tightly against his chest.

*Why the hell was I panicking about the morality of his sex life?* Levi pressed close to his chest, listening for that strong heartbeat. *Why does a monster like me think he has the right to judge?* When he had first joined the Survey Corps, he had dreamed about the moment he would end this heartbeat; he had stared at the face he now loved, wondering which of those four expressions it would wear. Fantasizing about it.

*Fuck.* The imagery in his mind was so vivid that he shrank into the embrace. How could he have thought these things and delighted in them?

“I’m flawed, Erwin,” he said quietly. “I’m beyond flawed. My past is shit-stained and I’m uneducated, and rude, and violent, and constantly sour. Maybe you should be the one asking if I’m worth the

sacrifices *you're* making.”

“It's okay. I know you, Levi, and the more of you I uncover, the harder I fall.” Erwin's chin rested on top of his head. “I love all of you, the good and the bad.”

Ice water flooded Levi's veins, shocking him into the present. *Love*. His body felt as if it were floating, his mouth parched, his hands clawing into the back of Erwin's jacket. “What did you say?”

The pause was a little too long and unnatural.

“I love you, Levi.”

Levi pulled away to look up at him. Erwin held his gaze, a muscle jumping in his jaw.

“Why?” was the only word Levi could find.

“Because of everything you just said. You're brave and driven, in spite of all you've endured. Your street smarts and sharp wit more than make up for any education you think you lack. Your rudeness is amusing, and maybe even a little arousing. Your physical strength and violence make you potent in the field, and your happiness shows in subtle ways I'm learning to read. On top of that, you're kinder than you pretend, and you genuinely care about everyone around you.” A shy smile wobbled across his lips. “And you already know how I feel about your looks and your skills in the bedroom. I've fallen harder than I ever meant to, harder than I ever have before.”

Levi could only stare. In his mind, the last lingering power imbalance between the two of them began to dissipate. *He loves me. He knows what I am, and he loves me anyway.* He stared at that wobbling smile, seeing not humanity's hope, not his Commander, but a man, a man who was somehow socially awkward in spite of his brilliant diplomacy; a man who was sometimes a little too self-involved, a little too obsessive; a man who acted with decorum and restraint, but rutted like a dog in heat whenever he was horny; a man who blurted out morbid thoughts at inappropriate times, who fell asleep after sex, who sometimes used cologne to stretch his baths a day longer than he should, who couldn't handle his drink nearly as well as he thought. The more Levi thought about it, the more he understood what Erwin had been trying to say. *I already know your flaws, Erwin, even better than you do, and I adore them.*

His silence must have sent the wrong message, because Erwin's gaze dropped.

“I apologize. I shouldn't have said the words so soon, especially when you were upset.”

“It’s fine.” Levi tried to swallow, but his mouth was still too dry. “I’m just trying to wrap my head around what we are now.” *Say it back*, his mind screamed at him, but the moment had passed, and now it felt forced.

“It’s all going to be a bit of an adjustment,” Erwin said. “Our relationship has changed so dramatically since we first met, especially over the last week. Take some time to decide if this is what you want.”

“What?” Levi’s lip curled. “Of course it’s what I want, dumbass.”

Erwin’s eyes searched his. “Even after everything I told you?”

“It’s like you said: I know you, flaws and all, and—” Now he did have the perfect opportunity to say it back, but his throat caught.

When he finally dared to look up, Erwin was smiling as if he had heard the unspoken words; he stood, holding out a hand. “If you’re feeling better, we should probably get back to the base.”

“Yeah.” Levi accepted his hand and rose to his feet. He glanced around and, seeing no one in sight, climbed onto the bench. It was low enough that he was only a few centimetres taller than Erwin.

Erwin looked quizzically up at him.

“No one’s around, and we just had our first fight.” Levi gripped the back of his neck and pulled him in, pressing a kiss to his lips. Erwin hummed and stepped closer, their bodies flush. When the kiss ended, their gaze held.

“I wouldn’t really call this a fight,” Erwin said. “And if it was, it was technically at least our second.”

“I can’t wait until we’re past all this early relationship bullshit. When we have a routine and there’s none of this insecurity or second-guessing or anything.”

“It’ll come, in time.” Erwin snuggled against his neck, arms wrapping around him. Levi rested his cheek against his forehead.

“I wish I was this tall.” He closed his eyes, envisioning himself enveloping Erwin in a strong, protective embrace.

“As I’ve said, I find your height attractive.” Erwin kissed his neck. “We should get back to the base, because your body heat is alluring, and we promised ourselves we’d wait two days before we did any of this. All risks and suspicions aside, I’m still too chafed to take that back.”

“Maybe if you stopped dry-humping everything all the time ...”

Even in the moonlight, Erwin’s cheeks were noticeably dark. “Am I really that bad?”

“Bad? No, it’s fucking hot.” Levi pressed his lips to one of Erwin’s

brows; it tickled his lips. “It’s like you can’t control yourself around me.” Blood was rushing between his legs just thinking about it.

Erwin shivered. “We have to stop talking about this.” He stepped away, and Levi immediately felt too cold in his absence. He hopped down to the ground, falling into place beside him.

They returned to the base in a silence so comfortable that Levi’s heart glowed. He glanced up and saw a placid expression on Erwin’s face. They’d have to take walks together more often; he didn’t expect to feel so light after such a heavy discussion. *The heavy subjects are lighter when we share them between us.*

As they rounded the corner to the bunks, they could see Mike at the far end of the hallway—he was leaning against Levi’s door, arms folded over his chest.

“You know,” Levi whispered, “as soon as his nose heals, our secret is out.”

“Indeed. We’ll have to tell him before then.”

“Tonight?”

Erwin shook his head. “Let’s take some time to figure out how we’ll word it. We can trust him to keep our secret, but he may take issue with our relationship—particularly since he’s still healing from my ugly behaviour when you were missing.”

As they approached, Mike pulled away from the door, his arms dropping to his sides.

“I’ll let you two talk,” Erwin said. “Goodnight, Levi. Mike.”

“Wait,” Levi said. “The trunk is still in my room.”

“It’s okay. I’ll unpack tomorrow.” With a smile, Erwin stepped into his room, then closed the door behind him.

For a moment, Mike and Levi eyed each other.

“Look,” Mike said, “I’m sorry I upset you.”

“It’s fine.” Levi searched for a believable excuse for his anger. “I’m just pissy. I haven’t taken a shit in three days, so my asshole is all jammed up.”

Mike leaned forward, hair falling into his eyes; his voice was low. “Just tell me this: did Erwin sleep with Marie?”

“None of your business, but no.”

“Good.” Mike glanced at Erwin’s door. “If you two just found some random women, that’s fine—”

“How the hell do you not know that I’m gay, after all this time?”

“Oh.” Mike stood tall. “Okay, then: if you two just found some

random *people*, that's fine, but romance fucks with his head a bit."

"Romance fucks with everyone's head." Levi turned to face his door, ready to open it. "Goodnight, Mike."

Mike seemed surprised to be pushed aside mid-conversation, but he only nodded and said, "Goodnight."

Levi hoped the exhausting day would make it easy for him to fall asleep, but even after he had gone through the paces of his nighttime routine and crawled into bed, he tossed and turned. *Romance fucks with my head, too.* He couldn't stop replaying bits of his conversation with Erwin in his mind, sometimes with apprehension, sometimes with joy. Beneath it all, his darker memories were skirting the perimeter of his consciousness, and he fought to keep them at bay, focusing instead on the memory of that quivering jaw. *I know you. I love you, Levi.*

His bed felt too empty, too cold. Several times, he nearly gave up in favour of joining Erwin in his bed, but he set his jaw and pushed through. He had promised two days, and he wasn't about to break that promise.

Finally, too exhausted to feel embarrassed, he settled on a compromise. He slid out of bed and opened the trunk, then pulled out the dress shirt Erwin had worn under his suit at the gala. It smelled of his cologne, his natural scent, and a bit of alcohol. Sensations flooded Levi's mind: the feeling of Erwin's bare chest under his palm, the flushed ecstasy of his face when he came, the undulations of his hips when he ground into Levi's thigh.

He crawled back into bed and lay on his side, hugging the shirt close. His body finally began to relax. He tried not to let that worry him; he wasn't dependent, he was indulging.

He could indulge a little more, if he chose. He had a two-day wait ahead of him, after all, and orgasm might help him sleep. He dropped a hand between his legs, burying his face in the fabric, letting Erwin's scent fill his nose and mouth. He finished a minute later, so hard that his spine curved and he let out a small yelp.

Now the whole situation felt ridiculous—*how would he react if he knew you were huffing his scent and pawing at yourself?* —but Levi was relaxed and glowing. He gave his stomach a few sloppy swipes with a handkerchief, too exhausted to do more. He knew he should go to the bath to wash his hands, but his eyelids were already heavy.

He curled up on his side, hugging the shirt tightly against his chest, and his eyes finally closed.

**-16-****DEPRIVATION**

Erwin awoke before dawn. His bed was cold, his underwear was tight, and drool coated his chin. He wiped his face and sat up. *What a miserable contrast to the last few mornings.*

The first thing he needed to do was take care of the bulge between his legs. Ever since his romantic life with Levi had heated up, his libido, normally a low smoulder, had erupted into flames, and the next two days were going to be unbearable if he didn't give himself release. Unfortunately, his full bladder was sure to be distracting. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and waited; the hallways were usually quiet before reveille, but he didn't want to chance on anyone in this worked up state. Once his body had calmed down, he gathered his toiletries and pulled on a pair of pants.

He pushed open the bathroom door, and his breath caught. Levi was leaning close to the mirror, shaving his jaw, a towel wrapped around his waist. Erwin's underwear began to feel too tight again.

“Morning, Levi.” He kept his tone casual.

Levi's eyes shifted to him. “Morning. Sleep okay?”

“Not quite as well as I did in the Capital.”

“Yeah, me neither.” Levi's eyes shifted back to the mirror. “We're alone, by the way.”

“Good. Then I can do this.” Erwin strode forward and pressed a kiss into the top of Levi's head.

“Hey, watch it. I've got a razor here.” In spite of the words, Levi's cheeks flushed.

Erwin stepped into a stall and closed the door. “Your hair's dry. Not bathing this morning?”

“Don't talk to me while you're taking a shit.”

“I’m not.”

“Shit, piss, whatever, it’s still nasty.” He heard the razor swish through water. “It’s a heated bath day. I’ll join in at the regular time.”

Erwin waited until he had left the stall to reply. “You know they’re putting automatic showers into the Military Police barracks? They’ll be heated, and they won’t even require a hand pump.”

Levi grimaced, then patted his face dry. “Maybe I should put in a transfer. Would be nicer than stewing in everyone else’s juices any time I want a hot bath.”

The door swung open, and Mike stepped through. He bobbed his head at them and then stepped into the stall.

“Looks like everyone’s up early today.” Erwin leaned close to the mirror and began to lather shaving cream on his face and neck. In his periphery, he could see Levi watching him; he subtly tilted his neck to expose his throat, then flexed his neck and chest muscles, hoping to give Levi a flattering view. He could feel tension curling between their bodies like smoke.

“Gym, Levi?” Mike’s voice came from the stall.

“Now you’re talking to me from the toilet, too?” Levi shook his head. “It’s basic manners: if your asshole is open, your mouth is closed.”

Erwin mouthed, *Even in bed?*

Levi, unimpressed, flattened his lips at him.

“Can’t sleep.” Mike emerged from the stall and began to wash his hands. “Want to spar a bit before breakfast?”

“Yeah, sure. Could use some action before we’re stuck in meetings all day.”

“How about you, Erwin?”

Erwin hesitated. He normally preferred to exercise in the evening, when the other soldiers were drinking or playing cards, and he could have the gym to himself. The idea of watching Levi in action, however, was tempting. Besides, who knew how busy he’d be that night, working on the proposal?

“I have been feeling a bit soft after indulging so much in Mitras,” he said, rubbing his stomach. “Maybe I’ll come and lift some weights.”

“Just weights?” Levi looked disappointed. “Now that I know you can fight hand-to-hand, I want to spar with you.”

“I doubt I would provide much of a challenge.” Erwin smiled. “We’ll see how I feel. I’ll meet you two down there.”

Once he had shaved and changed, he descended the stone stairs

that led to the gym. He paused at the bottom of the stairs, watching from the doorway. Mike and Levi didn't seem to notice him; they were locked in combat in the roped-off fighting ring near the back of the room. They wore thick gloves, padded helmets, chest pads, and pads on their shins and forearms, but Erwin doubted any of that did much good. Most of their attacks whiffed, and they redirected a few, but the ones that hit were loud enough that they echoed through the room.

The gym was a sparse room that had once been a spare weapons warehouse, back when the much larger Garrison force had inhabited the barracks. Aside from the makeshift fighting ring, it consisted of a few benches, some barbells and weights, a punching bag, and a few sets of dumbbells. Most soldiers seemed to prefer training in the yard, using their 3DMG or jogging. While stamina, speed and 3DMG handling were important, Erwin had always been careful to set aside time to train the basics: weights and hand-to-hand combat. Equilibrium inside the walls was bound to shift eventually, and when that happened and chaos arose, Erwin would be prepared to defend himself.

He settled on a weight bench, intending to start his workout, but found himself taking a few more minutes to watch the pair spar. This wasn't the first time the three of them had been in the gym at the same time, but the details had never been this important before.

Mike's fighting style hadn't evolved much since they were young: graceless, but powerful. He had a bad habit of telegraphing his moves before he followed through, but his strength was so overpowering that his unpredictability seldom mattered. Most soldiers had similar fighting styles with gear and without; Mike was an exception. With gear on, he became efficient, lethal and graceful, his skill second only to Levi.

Levi.

Erwin's gaze locked onto him. He had faced Levi's combat style a couple times before, and he hadn't stood a chance against it. Levi's strength on its own would have posed a challenge, but it was his inhuman speed that elevated him to an impossible opponent. He sifted out of the way of punches like sand on the wind, the muscles of his bare chest and abdomen contracting in ripples. Even against Mike, the fight was one-sided. Mike couldn't land a clean hit on him.

Erwin's heart had begun to beat too quickly. He pulled his eyes away from Levi and began to load weights onto the barbell. He had a simple routine, three to four times a week: bench press, squats, bent-

over rows and deadlifts, followed by a variety of abdominal exercises and pull-ups. Some days, when he had more time, he spent more time working the small muscles of his arms, shoulders, back and chest. He naturally tended toward a lanky upper body, his muscles concentrated below the waist; the 3DMG didn't help that, with its demands on the core and legs. It took concerted effort to keep his upper body filled out.

He was halfway through his third set of bench presses when Levi leaned over him, face damp and flushed. The grey eyes were alight with such interest that Erwin felt a surge of strength. He finished the set cleanly and set the bar back into place, breathing hard.

“Not bad.” Levi inspected the weights. “Was that your first set?”

“Third.”

“Third? You should go heavier. I bet you can press twenty kilos more than this, easily.”

Erwin sat up, wiping his damp neck with a towel. “Maybe. Or maybe that would trap me under the bar.”

“That’s why you shouldn’t lift alone. You need someone to spot you.” Levi glanced back at Mike, who was leaning against the wall by the fighting ring, nursing a water flask. “Why don’t we lift together next time?”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I’d like to spot you.” Eyes still on Mike, Levi lowered his volume: “I like seeing you straining and sweaty.”

Erwin was glad his face was already red. “Next time, then.”

“Hey, Erwin.” Mike set his flask down. “You’re up next.”

“I wasn’t planning on sparring.”

“I want a rematch from the other night.”

“Some other time.” Erwin stood and lowered the barbell to the floor, beginning to load it with weights for his deadlifts.

“Hm,” Levi said.

“Hm what?”

“Now that I know you can fight, I want to see you in action.” Levi folded his arms over his bare chest, looking down his nose at him. “You weren’t much of a challenge last time we faced off.”

*He’s just trying to provoke you,* Erwin thought, but it was working.

“I can see I won’t get any peace until I go through with this.” He strode toward Mike. “Levi, give me your pads. I’ll take on Mike first.”

“Mine are all sweaty, and they’ll be too small on you, anyway. Here.” Levi dug through the equipment bin and pulled out a fresh set.

He began to help Erwin strap them on—an unnecessary gesture, but appreciated, especially because their hands accidentally brushed against each other several times. Erwin subtly breathed in, enjoying the scent of the warmth radiating from Levi's skin.

Once he was fully outfitted, he stepped into the ring, squaring off with Mike. He held his fists high and relaxed into stance. Mike's eyes were partially hidden beneath a fringe of dark blond hair, but Erwin used them as an anchor anyway, taking in his whole form at once.

He took a deep breath, tapping into a side of himself he hadn't used for many years. After his father's death, his mother had insisted on hiring a self-defense instructor for her children; they had trained several times a week right until Erwin had left for the military. The constant practice had been necessary; Erwin had been a slow pupil. For one thing, his sister was naturally the more bloodthirsty of the two of them, while he had considered physical conflict brutish. For another, he had a natural tendency to overthink his moves instead of trusting his instincts, making him slow to react. It had taken years of constant repetition to hone his skills and sharpen his speed. He had hated it at the time, but now he had no doubt the classes had prepared him for a successful career in the military.

"All right," he said. "Let's go."

Mike snapped out a few jabs, testing him, and Erwin's jaw set. He had noticed earlier that Mike's old tells had faded since the last time they had sparred. Training with Levi was paying off. *That's going to make this matchup more difficult.*

A hook barrelled toward Erwin's head. He sidestepped, delivering a soft punch to Mike's ribs as a rebuke. "Not to the face."

"Fine." Mike circled him, eyes narrow, jaw set. Erwin kept pace, watching, waiting for an opening.

Then Mike stepped forward for a punch, leaving a small patch of his flank unguarded. Erwin ducked under his fist and drove for the opening, but before he could connect, Mike knocked his arm away.

"I've been sparring with Levi, you know. I'm used to short-people tricks."

"Short," Erwin scoffed.

Their back and forth continued, each blocking the other's punches. Erwin felt lighter with each move, as if the contact between them was jarring loose years of grief and responsibility. The banter, the knowing smirks, the mindless violence: he was young again, cocky and

spry. He dodged two punches and a kick, spinning to Mike's back, and gave a low laugh.

Mike whipped around to face him, eyes narrow. "Stop holding back."

"I'm not holding back," Erwin lied. "I'm out of practice."

"Bullshit. Where are your kicks?"

"I'm an old man, Mike. My hips don't flex the way they used to."

Truthfully, he was saving his legs, waiting until his opponent was fatigued enough to start falling back on his old tells. The wait shouldn't be too much longer; he was already beginning to telegraph his hooks, twitching his shoulder back for a brief instant before driving forward. A few more minutes, and every move would play across his face before his body had even initiated it.

Erwin stared down his prey. *Once that happens, you're mine.* Fire beat through his heart, his limbs tingling.

"Don't wear yourselves out," Levi said. "I want a turn, too."

His voice was such a powerful distraction that Erwin momentarily dropped his focus. He snapped back to himself in time to see Mike's shin driving for his flank.

*Shit!* He instinctively dropped, and the shin grazed the top of his head. He used his momentum to sweep out Mike's support leg. Mike gave an undignified yelp and plummeted to the floor.

"You're down," Erwin said. "Your turn, Levi."

"That wasn't a proper fight," Mike said, sitting up. "You were toying with me."

"We had a proper fight recently enough that I'm not ready to re-live it." Erwin's pulse was audible in his ears, his lungs burning. He stood and held out a hand. "Maybe I'll be more aggressive when my guilt fades. Or maybe you should have applied more pressure to force me to fight back."

Mike grumbled, but accepted his hand and rose to his feet. He leaned against the wall and drank from his flask.

"You need a minute?" Levi climbed into the ring.

"Just one." Erwin studied him. Their height difference was going to drastically impact the balance of the fight. While his reach would be a clear advantage at a distance, Levi would have the advantage in close quarters. *With his speed, it's going to be hard to keep him in my optimal range.*

"You're trying to size me up, right?"

"Yes."

“It won’t help.” Levi shrugged. “You can’t win this kind of fight with strategy. Thinking just slows you down.”

Erwin smiled. “So I’ve heard.”

“Ready?”

“Yes.”

The word had barely left his lips when Levi was barrelling at him, so fast that his body was a blur. Erwin instinctively threw out a forearm, blocking a punch before he had fully registered what was happening. Levi’s free hand drilled toward him, and Erwin’s other arm snapped out to block that one, too.

For a moment, they stared at each other, their arms locked and straining, and he swore Levi smirked at him.

The contact broke. Levi ducked, and somehow he was already at Erwin’s flank, driving a foot towards his shin. Erwin lifted his leg just in time to avoid it, trying to carry his motion forward to smack the back of the moving knee, but his foot found air. Levi’s fist popped into his ribs with so much force that Erwin staggered, clutching his side. *He’s too fast. I can’t read him.*

Levi stood in front of him, chin angled so that he was looking down his nose at him in spite of his stature. “You were the best in your class?”

Erwin grinned. “Told you I wouldn’t be much of a challenge.” Pride was tinting his vision red, but he blinked it back, refusing to let it take control. *Every fighter has weaknesses. Find his.*

He stood tall, lifting his arms into position. “Keep going.”

“If you’re sure.”

Levi drove forward again, this time stopping short and snapping out a heel at gut-height. Erwin sidestepped it—right into Levi’s backhand, which connected with the padding over his ear.

“Your ear would be ringing now.” Levi’s eyes twinkled. “You would stagger back, stunned and defenseless, and I’d drop you.”

Erwin’s teeth clenched; he caught Levi’s arm and twisted, trying to force him to the ground, but Levi was short enough that he was able to spin out from under him to relieve the pressure on his arm. He reclaimed his arm, then his elbow swung at Erwin’s gut.

Time slowed.

*He always does multiple moves in a row, Erwin thought. Don’t be distracted by his main movement. Be looking for the follow-up as you dodge.* As he stepped back out of the elbow’s way, he scanned Levi’s other limbs.

There; Levi's heel was lifting. *He's going to kick. His elbow is still extended.*

Erwin shifted out of his reach, then swung his back leg under the elbow, aiming for Levi's unprotected flank.

The kick connected.

Levi staggered back a step, then looked up, eyes wide. Taking advantage of his shock, Erwin followed up with a roundhouse kick, smacking the side of his arm.

Levi bared his teeth, brows dropping.

If Erwin had been able to keep him at that distance, he might have been able to press his advantage, but Levi was too fast. He closed the gap between them, throwing out a barrage of blows. Erwin frantically deflected them all, the bones of his forearm aching from the jarring force. A surprise punch caught him under the jaw.

*I can't read him when he's this close. I need to get him out of range.* He thrust his palms at Levi's shoulders, intending to shove him back. One connected, but Levi caught the other one with both hands.

The world flipped, then Erwin lay on his back, his breath coming in short blasts. He tried to sit up, but Levi sat on top of him.

"You're down."

*Not yet.* Erwin rolled, trying to manoeuvre himself into a position of superiority. Levi caught his arms and used Erwin's momentum against him, rolling him too far. When they settled, Levi was straddling Erwin's hips, leaning forward, his fist at Erwin's trachea.

"Try that again, blondie," Levi dared. His face and chest were flushed, his breaths ragged, sweat plastering his dark body hair to his chest and abdomen. A bead of sweat trailed off the end of his nose, landing on Erwin's chin.

*Oh fuck, that's hot.* Testosterone swam through Erwin's blood. He wanted to grab Levi by the hair and pull him down, kiss him, bite him, drive against that muscled, clothed ass centred so perfectly over his groin. He wanted to wrestle with him, try to overpower each other, rolling over and over, until the friction between them pulled one of them under.

His eyes searched Levi's; Levi closed his mouth and swallowed hard.

"Well," Mike said, his tone so awkward that Erwin wondered if their sexual tension was obvious. "What next?"

Levi rose to his feet, his knees creaking. Erwin quickly rolled onto his front, pretending he was trying to catch his breath. The thin

shorts were too revealing. He closed his eyes and tried to think of the least appealing imagery he could imagine—*Nile fucking Marie, Nile fucking Levi, Levi fucking Sahlo*.

He felt a foot nudge his flank, then Mike spoke: “Levi, I think you broke him.”

“I’m fine.” Erwin reached for his towel and sat up, subtly dropping the towel over his lap. He raked a hand through his hair, avoiding looking at Levi in case he got flustered all over again. “But I should probably head upstairs. The bath should be heated by now, and I have a few things to do before our meeting this morning.”

“We should do this again sometime,” Levi said, and even the slight ragged sound to his voice made Erwin’s pulse rise.

“Indeed.” Not sure what else to say, and still trying to avoid eye contact, Erwin marched from the gym.

He returned to his room, locked the door behind him, then whipped off his shorts. It took him seconds to harden again, and he lay on his back on the bed, fist tight and tugging hard, fixated on that tense moment after the fight. His back began to arch, and he felt a cry building in his throat. He clapped his free hand over his mouth in case the sound was about to escape.

A knock sounded at the door.

Erwin froze, and for a moment, the only sound was his shuddering breaths.

“Hey Erwin, you in there?” Levi said, his voice so warm and liquid that Erwin felt it drizzle over his skin.

*Don’t*, he told himself, but he was already striding across the room. He opened the door, grabbed Levi by the wrist and yanked him into the room, closing and locking the door behind him.

Levi stared. “You’re naked.”

Erwin grabbed his hair and kissed him hard, the force of it knocking him against the wall. He kissed a line down the slender neck, using his teeth, then across to his armpit, and he breathed in.

“What the hell?” Levi tried to pull away, but his hair was caught in Erwin’s fist. “Get your face out of my armpit.”

“But you smell so good.” Erwin released his hair and kissed the underside of his arm, then down his flank, his groin aching. Levi’s sweat didn’t smell like sweat; it smelled like thick forest, rippling muscles, and flushed, panting faces.

“I’m disgusting,” Levi protested. “And you said we had to wait at

least two—”

“I know what I said.” Erwin kissed down the salty, damp trail of hair of his abdomen, pulling down his waistband. He breathed hot air along Levi’s length, then looked up, giving him a chance to back out.

He could tell by the pinched brows that Levi was torn. “Does it stink?”

“No.”

“Fine, if you really want to, go ahead and—” His voice ended in a gasp as Erwin’s mouth closed over him.

He tasted stronger than usual, and Erwin sucked hard, relishing the uncensored flavour. *So good, you taste and smell so good.* He used his hand alongside his mouth, taking him hard and fast, driven by the momentum of their fight. His other hand wrapped around himself again, stroking hard.

“Oh fuck,” Levi gasped, beginning to counter-thrust.

Erwin glanced up and saw Levi watching with slit eyes, his hair stringy with sweat, his red face streaked with drying salt. *This man, so powerful, so beautiful.* He tried to cry out, but the sound was muffled deep in his throat.

“Oh shit,” Levi breathed, his head lolling back to rest against the wall. “I’m going toOh shit.”

Erwin swallowed, savouring the taste and the warmth. He hung on long enough to carry Levi through, then let himself fall. The climax itself was small in comparison to the intensity of the buildup, more like a hiccup than an orgasm. He would have been disappointed, but then he looked up and saw wonder on Levi’s face, and somehow, that was enough to satisfy him.

He gave one last stroke and swirl of his tongue to make sure Levi was dry, then tucked him back into his shorts and stood.

“You wanted something?”

Levi’s eyes were wide. “What?”

“You knocked on my door.”

The eyes fluttered closed. “Yeah. Bath. Heading to the bath.”

“Let me just grab my towel.” He opened a drawer to pull one out, then wrapped it around his waist. When he turned around again, Levi was still flat against the wall. “You okay?” he asked, a little smug.

Levi raked a hand through his hair; it fell in his face again. “Were you rubbing one out when I knocked or something?”

“Yes.”

“After how hard you were at the gym, I had the feeling you might be.”

“And yet,” Erwin said, “you still knocked.”

Levi shook his head. “Two days. Pathetic. We can’t even make it through one.”

“This doesn’t count. There was no foreplay, no cuddling, no sharing a bed together afterwards. Besides, the whole thing barely lasted a minute—there was no risk that we would have been caught.”

“Sounds to me like you’re changing the rules of the game.” Levi caught the back of his neck, pulling him down for a slow, gentle kiss. When they pulled apart, his face twisted. “Oh hell, is that what I taste like right now? That’s disgusting.”

One last spasm rippled between Erwin’s legs. “I like it.” To cover up his sudden shyness, he cleared his throat. “We should bathe now if we want time for breakfast before the meeting.”

As they walked side by side down the hallway, Levi glanced up at him. “You fight well.”

“I could barely touch you.”

“You landed two hits on me. It took Mike several sessions to get that far. We should spar together more. We’d probably learn a thing or two from each other.”

“Even now that you know what it does to me?”

“Not just you.” Levi looked straight ahead, his face blank. “We’ll just have to make sure to shoot out a load or two first so we don’t start going at each other in front of Mike.”

“Shoot out a load,” Erwin repeated, amused.

They stepped into the bath and found Mike sitting near the back, away from the new recruits. He waved them over.

As they approached, Erwin’s gaze fixed on his bandages. *If he had his sense of smell back, he’d smell Levi and me all over each other.* He still wasn’t sure how Mike was going to react; he had a habit of being protective when it came to Erwin’s personal life. He had never liked Marie, and he had been watchful of Henrik, always taking Erwin’s side when the two had a fight. Levi and Mike had been developing a good friendship—was that going to be impacted? *We’re going to have to talk with him soon.*

They slipped into the water next to Mike and sat. Levi immediately began to soap himself, but Erwin took a minute to lean back, letting the warm water soothe his muscles.

“I still want a proper rematch,” Mike said.

“You’ll get one. Just give my aching bones a day or two to heal.” Erwin let his head loll back against the edge of the bath. “Are both of you ready for the interviews?” He noticed Levi staring at his throat, his hands frozen in place mid-scrub. He was becoming aware that Levi found his neck and throat attractive; he stretched his head a little to accentuate it.

“I don’t like the idea of interviewing people without being able to smell them,” Mike said.

“What does smelling them tell you, anyway?” Levi asked, resuming his scrubbing.

“Their character. People’s scents change depending on what they’re thinking and feeling.”

Levi raised a brow at him. “Yeah? What did your nose tell you about me?”

“That you would make a strong enemy, but a stronger ally.”

Levi looked unconvinced. “What about Erwin?”

“That he’s worth following.”

“I’m glad you feel that way,” Erwin said. “I’m sorry again about your nose. When you remove the bandage, has the swelling gone down enough for you to at least get some scent off the soldiers you’re interviewing?”

Mike shrugged, not looking him in the eye. Erwin felt a pang of regret. Of all the places to attack, why had he gone for the nose?

“Well, give it a try,” he said. “If it doesn’t work, then we’ll leave your squad open to shuffling. You can sniff them out later.”

“You’re going to creep them out,” Levi muttered, shaking his head. “The two of you are like damned dogs.”

Erwin’s cheeks burned, recalling the delicious scent of Levi’s sweat; he glanced at Mike, who looked confused.

They washed, carefully not looking each other in the eye, as was typical during group baths. Erwin allowed himself a few seconds to take in Levi’s shoulders and upper back, enjoying the way the water made his skin glisten, but he looked away before he could become too obvious.

Spending the morning in Levi’s company was so enjoyable that he tried to drag out the bath as long as possible, but eventually, he ran out of body parts to wash. His heart ached as he tore himself away. There were tasks yet to complete before the recruiting started up. Besides, it wasn’t like him to spend so much time socializing, and Mike

was bound to grow suspicious.

He took his breakfast alone in his office, double-checking candidate files to ensure they were stacked in alphabetical order. While he had been in the Capital, Berit had personally pulled the files and compiled the roster, and his quick spot-check showed that she had done an excellent job.

The Squad Leaders arrived shortly before nine o'clock, and Erwin was surprised by the way his stomach flipped when he saw Levi, even though they had only been separated for a short time. He nodded cordially at him, and Levi nodded back, face stoic.

Once everyone was seated, Erwin greeted them. "Hange, would you mind keeping notes on the roster?" The task seemed most befitting someone with a research background.

"Sir." Hange accepted the stack of papers.

"Mike, how's your nose?" he asked, noting he had taken off the bandages.

"Still can't smell a damned thing," Mike said.

"Hopefully that will change by the time we're finalizing the squads. All right, everyone, let's start by having the four of you call out the soldiers you would like to hand-pick for your squads. If there are any disputes, we can talk through them. Then, we can begin calling in the remaining candidates for interviews."

"I want Nanaba and Henning," Mike said. "And that new recruit Lynne seems strong—I'd still like to interview her first."

"My squad is pretty good the way it is," Berit said, the only one of the four who was an experienced Squad Leader. "There are a few who I think might fit better on other squads. Moblit would make an excellent researcher, Hange, and Dita might suit you, too. There are five or six soldiers who are better suited to a scouting team, as well." As she began to rattle off names, Hange furiously scribbled notes on the roster.

"Give me Eld and Gunther," Levi said. "And I want those three new recruits Erwin's bringing across from the MP."

"Ral and Bozado will go to you when they eventually transfer," Erwin said, "but the third will go to Mike." If Sahlo was going to plant a spy, then he wanted that person far away from Levi. Even if they managed to keep their relationship a secret, someone watching them closely might notice suspicious glances or telling conversations. Besides, Mike was difficult to read, and his nose helped him excel at tracking spy movements.

“Oh, I guess that just leaves me.” Hange stared at the notebook, deep in thought. “There’s a new recruit, Nifa, who has training as a lawyer’s aid. I think she might be helpful with the administration side of research.”

“We should interview her regardless,” Erwin said. “I may have use for her in an administrative setting as well, if you are willing to share her.” He would have to keep one ear on the interviews in case any other administrative folks turned up. They might be able to help him streamline the paperwork required of the senior officers.

Once they had sorted out the names, the interviews began. They pulled in the soldiers one at a time, asking them questions. At first, the four Squad Leaders were a bit lost, so Erwin did most of the talking. Once they were on their third interview, however, Berit seemed to have caught on. By the fifth, even Levi was asking a few questions—not always in the most polite manner, but it was something.

Content that the four had everything under control, Erwin turned his attention to the expedition proposal. It was going to be difficult to build it without knowing where, exactly, the silos were, but he would build the backbone the best he could until Sahlo came through with the specifics. The two week timeline he had given himself for the proposal was going to be tight, so he wanted to get as much of a head start as he could. He needed to start getting results while Sahlo was still intimidated; time and distance had a way of dulling fear.

They broke for lunch, the five of them sitting at a table in the dining hall, comparing notes and thoughts. Erwin sat next to Levi, their thighs nearly touching, and he couldn’t help remembering their secret hand-hold—it seemed so long ago now. He used his peripheral vision to watch Levi, sliding his foot closer until their boots pressed together. He felt a small nudge in return; taboo magnified the tiny hint of affection. Shivers ran down his spine.

The interviews continued until dinner, and this time, their meal break was less energetic. Hange kept shaking out the hand that had been taking notes, as if it were cramping. Mike and Berit seemed to be passing the same yawn back and forth, and Levi’s eyes were dull. Though Erwin would have liked to push for a couple hours after dinner, he decided they had put in enough work for one day. He shouldn’t push them too hard. Once they had eaten, he dismissed them.

He had no such restraint when it came to his own limits, however, and he settled at his desk, intent on working as long as his en-

ergy held out. He had, after all, already visited the gym, and there would be no romance with Levi, so he might as well use his momentum. Any hours spent now could be reclaimed the next night, when he and Levi would come to the end of their two-day pact.

He didn't realize he had fallen asleep until his name startled him awake.

He sat up, his breath coming in a snort. The lamp was low, nearly out of oil. Levi sat across from him, one leg crossed over the other, dressed only in pyjama bottoms and slippers.

“Did you fall asleep at your desk again?”

“I suppose I did.” Erwin sat up and smoothed the paper in front of him, setting his pen aside. “What time is it?”

“Three. You do this a lot?”

“Reasonably often.” He tilted his head, studying Levi. There were dark circles under his eyes. “What are you doing up so late? Can't sleep?”

Levi shrugged. “Bad dreams again. Went for a walk to calm down, saw your light was still on.”

“Do you need me to be there with you?”

He raised a brow. “I thought we were waiting until tomorrow night.”

“We are, but your well-being is more important than that.” Erwin watched him, trying to gauge his response. He was certain Levi would refuse his invitation, but his inflection and posture would indicate whether or not the refusal was sincere.

“Nah, I'll be fine. I'd probably just attack you again, anyway.” His face twisted.

“Levi—”

“No, we're not going to talk about that. I just—” Levi shrugged, looking away. “I appreciate your concern. I'm fine.” The words were jagged, as if he was forcing them out, but they seemed sincere.

Erwin nodded. “If you're certain. Let me know if I can do anything to help.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Levi's arms folded over his chest, so tightly that his muscles flexed. “You still haven't unpacked your clothes out of the trunk.”

“Ah, sorry, I had forgotten all about it.”

“Well, come get it soon. It's stinking up my room with your smell.” Was that a blush showing on the pale cheeks? It was hard to tell in

the dim light.

Erwin stood and circled the desk. "Come here," he said gently.

Levi gave an irritable sigh, but stood. "I told you, I'm fine."

"I know you are. I just want to give you a hug. As a friend." He wrapped his arms around him, shocked again by how small he was. As Erwin drew him in, he caught a whiff of his own cologne on Levi's hair. *Is he using my scent to calm himself somehow? Maybe my old clothes, or my cologne bottle?* He wasn't certain if he was interpreting that correctly or not, and asking would probably just humiliate him, but it gave him an idea.

"Here." He stepped away and pulled off his jacket. "Sleep in this. It smells like me, so it'll be like I'm there holding you."

Levi's cheeks darkened. "What is it with you and smell?"

Erwin ignored him, draping the jacket around his shoulders. "You can return it to me in the morning, but no hurry. I have plenty of spares."

"Sentiment," Levi muttered, but his face softened. "You should get some sleep, too."

"In a little bit." He crouched down to kiss Levi's forehead. "Until tomorrow night, Levi."

Levi looked up at him, his pupils large and soft in the dim light. Erwin stepped away, feeling loneliness preemptively tighten around his heart. Clearing his throat, he circled back to his chair and eased into it.

By the time he looked up again, Levi was gone. He set his jaw and continued his work, determined not to be distracted by his emotions.

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Erwin awoke to a knock at his office door. Sunlight streamed through the windows; he had slept through reveille. At least he had made headway before passing out again; he was well on track to meeting his deadline.

"Sir?" a light voice called.

"Come in." He stood and stretched his head. His neck was aching; he must have slept with his head pressed to the desk at an odd angle. Long nights were getting considerably more difficult as he aged. *Next time, I'll put on a pot of coffee.*

Nanaba stepped into the room, holding a stack of envelopes.

“Mail, sir.”

“Just leave it on the desk. Thank you, Nanaba.”

The door had barely closed when it swung open again. Levi marched into the room, using two hands to carry a mug on a saucer, Erwin’s jacket tucked under his arm. “I thought I told you to go to bed, idiot.”

“Good morning, Levi.”

“Here.” Levi whipped the jacket at him.

Erwin caught it one-handed, then lifted it to his nose and breathed in. “It smells like you,” he said, partly to tease him.

“Shut up.” Levi looked away, his cheeks red.

“Did it help?”

“I don’t know. Probably.” Levi set down the mug. Coffee. He slumped into a chair. “Mike’s bringing you breakfast in a few minutes.”

Erwin put on his jacket, then began to sort through his mail. “What time is it?” Several envelopes had arrived from potential investors he had spoken with during the gala. He set them in a separate pile on his desk.

“Ten to eight.” Levi leaned forward and adjusted the pile of envelopes, squaring their edges.

“I see. I really overslept.” Erwin’s voice faded as he came upon an envelope addressed in familiar script. His brows lowered. “Dammit.”

“What?”

“My sister sent mail here. She’s getting bolder.” He reached for his letter opener to slit the end of the envelope. He skimmed the letter, skipping over the guilt trips and religious rhetoric. “She wants to meet me at my apartment tomorrow at five o’clock. If I’m not there, she’s going to come find me here.” He let out a low sigh. He had gone to great lengths to ensure that his home life and his professional life never intersected, and she was threatening to end his fifteen year streak of success.

“Stubborn little shit, isn’t she?”

“Family trait.” Erwin folded the letter, setting it back on the desk. “I suppose I’ve let this go on long enough. I’ll make time to meet with her.”

“I’ll come.”

Erwin raised a brow. “This is a private family matter, Levi. There is no need.”

“She seems desperate. You have no idea what the hell she’s like

anymore, or what those Wall fuckers might ask her to do.” Levi shrugged, but Erwin saw genuine worry ripple across his features. “I’d rest better knowing you had backup if this was all some sort of trap.”

“Well, if it would put you at ease, it might be nice to have company.” The concern was touching, and more than that, his logic was sound. For all he knew, the Wallists might have brainwashed his sister into becoming an assassin. She had always been passionate and volatile, so she would be easy to control—and as Commander of the Survey Corps, he was a direct threat to their ideals.

The final envelope was large and thick, marked with Sahlo’s seal. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. “I suppose now we’ll see if my gamble paid off.”

“Oh?” Levi leaned forward.

Erwin held up the envelope, tapping the seal with his fingertip. “Our friend Sahlo replied earlier than expected. It certainly feels thick enough to contain the information I requested.”

“Morning,” Berit said from the doorway. She settled into a chair. “No couches yet?”

“I’m working on it,” Erwin replied, distracted. He felt Levi’s eyes on him as he slit the wax, then pulled out the thick bundle of papers.

The first several pages were an itemized list of silos by coordinates, and he felt a wave of relief. “He came through. Thanks again for your help, Levi. This will shape the course of the Survey Corps in the months to come.”

Levi’s body relaxed, and he slumped into the chair again. “Glad that shit-for-brains was good for something.”

Mike stepped into the room, Hange on his heels. He set a bowl of porridge on the desk.

Erwin greeted and thanked them without looking up. He flipped through the pages, skimming the contents. Several silos held food supplies and weapons, far more than he had expected. They would be able to build a good dozen caches with these supplies alone. There were sizable tax caches here, too, and a quick mental calculation showed there’d be more than enough to support Hange’s weapons research.

He flipped to the last page, and his good mood faded. He let out a low, humourless chuckle.

“What are you laughing about?” Levi asked, leaning closer.

Erwin handed him the paper so he could read it for himself:

*My Dear Commander Erwin,*

*It's with the greatest of excitement that I join you on this business venture to aid the Survey Corps with future expeditions and weapons research. With you at the helm, I'm sure the public's long-unfulfilled expectations will at long last be realized, and you won't fritter away their tax revenues the way past Commanders have. I am delighted to supplement their hard-earned money with funds from my own pocket.*

*As we discussed, I have enclosed the fully itemized list of silos. I'm sure the food and alcohol stores, in particular, will help keep your soldiers fat and happy in the manner to which they're accustomed.*

*I was so excited about our arrangement that I couldn't contain myself! I pulled some strings and arranged the preliminary expedition presentation for Friday at noon. I understand this gives you a narrow timeframe for the preparations, but I'm confident a man of your brilliance won't let us down.*

*I'm a man with many connections, Commander Erwin, and I'm sure you'll come to appreciate, in time, how important it is to have me as an ally.*

*Eagerly and with great hope,*

*[Sahlo's seal]*

Levi squinted at the words. Erwin could tell he was struggling with the flowing script, but he didn't dare insult him by offering to help.

"Wait," Levi said. "It's Wednesday today, and the meeting is Friday? So you have to travel back to the Capital overnight tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"What?" Hange said, and he remembered the other Squad Leaders were present. "But you were going to take the next two weeks to work on the proposal."

"And that was already going to be a stretch. I'm afraid our new ally has made things very, very difficult for me." Erwin rubbed the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "I ask that the four of you conduct the interviews somewhere else today, as I'll need a quiet environment to finish off this proposal. Berit and Mike, would you be so kind as to arrange transport to Mitras for tomorrow night at ten o'clock? And perhaps one of you could fetch me a pot of coffee. Hange, I'll need to meet with that young woman who has legal training, the one we interviewed yesterday."

"Nifa, sir?"

"Nifa, yes. I'll need her feedback on my proposal a few hours before I leave, to give me time to edit it in the carriage. Could you ask

her to come by my office tomorrow at five o' clock?"

"Erwin." Levi tapped the folder letter from his sister demanding a five o'clock appointment.

"Of course." Erwin's pulse sped. "Tell Nifa three o'clock, please, Hange."

"Sir."

Then they all left, and he was alone with Levi and could drop his calm façade. He raked his hands into his hair. "Shit."

"That damned asshole." Levi's face was tight. "He's screwing with you on purpose, isn't he? Can't you just push back your meeting with the brass by a week or two?"

"Not without losing face, something I can't afford to do this early in my appointment as Commander. The King's people are difficult to book time with, and to get me in so quickly, Sahlo must have talked up this expedition. He's trying to knock me down by building me up too much, knowing that reality will never live up to their inflated expectations. If I lose credibility with them, then my word will mean nothing, and my threats will lose all power. He'll be free, and I'll be disgraced." He shook his head. "Levi, I'm afraid I may have bitten off more than I can chew with this one."

"No, you'll handle him. You just have to figure out his pressure points, and you will." Levi folded his arms over his chest. "Besides, you probably would have been disappointed if he hadn't put up a fight, right? I bet you're secretly getting a thrill out of this, you twisted bastard."

Erwin couldn't help chuckling. "Perhaps."

There was a pause. "Look, I know we were supposed to spend the night together, but we can just take a few minutes to get off together if it'll give you more time on your proposal."

Erwin's smile faded. "I'm sorry, Levi. If I'm leaving tomorrow night, we may not have that night together until after I get back."

Levi shrugged, but his voice was small: "How long will you be there?"

"I imagine it will be a quick trip." Erwin gripped his shoulder. "Come find me after dinner and see how I'm doing. Maybe everything will fall into place faster than I expect. For now, only concern yourself with the interviews."

"Okay." Levi's brows pinched.

"Everything will be fine," Erwin said, but his chest tightened.

“Okay.” With one last worried look at him, Levi turned and left the room.

## B

Thankfully, the outline Erwin had prepared the night before made his work flow smoothly. The most time-consuming part was cross-referencing the silo contents with the map locations to plan a route; there were too many moving parts to keep track of in his head. He took a few minutes to cut scraps of paper and stick notes to the map, then spent an hour shuffling a wooden figure along the board, trying to figure out the safest, most efficient route.

At lunchtime, Hange came into the room bearing a bowl of stew, a large chunk of bread, and a fresh pot of coffee. “Mike said you’d forget to eat if we didn’t feed you.”

Erwin smiled. “He knows me well. Thank you, Hange. Any word from Nifa?”

“She looked nervous, but she’ll be happy to look over your proposal whenever you send for her. I can help out, too, if you like. I’ve read a lot of that sort of thing.”

“Actually, if you have a moment, I’d like your opinion now. I’m trying to plan our expedition route.” He slid the wooden figure from silo to silo. “Since you’ll all have new squads, and many of the recruits are still green, the first few days will be spent practicing travelling in formation, so we’ll stick to these known low-traffic routes. Here—” He pointed to a building marked on the map. “—is an abandoned checkpoint we can use as a base of operations. If we manage to hold it, we can radiate out to two silos a day from there, regrouping each night.” He traced lines on the map. “Any thoughts?”

Hange leaned forward, brow furrowed. “Without any scouting intelligence, it’s hard to say.”

“I know. There will be some flexibility once we have that information, but I need to propose an overall strategy for now. What do you think? Is two per day too aggressive?”

Hange tapped the northeast segment of his route. “I’m concerned about this area here. The hills are going to wreak havoc with our carriages, and they’ll also force our formation to tighten.”

“True. That being said, look at the treasure trove of weapons that those two silos hold. There’s an old checkpoint between them. Maybe

split it into one per day, travel more cautiously through that region, and stay at that checkpoint overnight?"

"Sounds better than hitting both on one day. How many days is this expedition going to take?"

"Somewhere between eight and fourteen, depending how long it takes the squads to adjust to the formation."

"Okay." Hange glanced up. "When?"

There seemed to be a hidden motive behind the question, and he could already guess what it was. "I anticipate sending the scouting team out in two weeks, then launching the expedition two weeks after that. And no, I don't believe you'll have time before then to prepare new weapons to bring with us. Besides, we have enough new variables to work with; adding more would only put the mission at risk."

Hange's face fell. "I have an idea for a little weapon that—"

"Not this time," he said kindly. "The funds are only going to start coming in once we've retrieved the silos' contents, and we'll want to test weapons on smaller-scale missions. Think longer term."

"Sir," Hange said, looking disappointed.

He smiled and reached across to squeeze Hange's shoulder. "You don't have to keep calling me 'sir' now that you're a Squad Leader—just 'Erwin' will be fine. Thanks for the lunch and the feedback. I'll send for you and Nifa tomorrow. You're dismissed."

Confident now that he was on the right track, he began to flesh out the proposal. Route diagrams and charts were his favourite aspects of documentation, so he saved them for later, when he was bound to be too exhausted to concentrate. Instead, he worked on getting the financial aspects out of the way.

The first step was to halve each of the silo's tax contents, as he had promised Sahlo. His strategy had a potential loose end here: if Sahlo felt like it, he could easily turn around and have Erwin tried for falsifying the numbers. The kickback and threats would hopefully be enough to keep him quiet, but just in case, Erwin planned to make another stop while he was in the Capital. One of his contacts did excellent document forgeries, and would easily be able to alter Sahlo's itemized list to match Erwin's falsified numbers, making it look as if the fake numbers were Sahlo's idea all along.

By the time the dinner bell rang, he had finished the financial planning and moved onto the specifics of the strategy. In an effort to stave off fatigue, he had consumed so much caffeine that he didn't have

an appetite, and his hands were shaking. He had been up and down at least once an hour to use the toilet, his kidneys aching from the strain. His mind, at least, was alert, in spite of his fractured sleep the night before.

The four Squad Leaders entered his office a few minutes after the bell, all carrying trays of food.

“Erwin?” Berit said. “Do you have time for a quick debrief?”

His mind was racing so fast that he felt as if it were pushing on the underside of his skull; he didn’t want to be interrupted. He knew, however, that he needed to devote some of his energy to his officers. Gone were the days when Shadis had shielded and isolated him while he was planning.

He forced himself to put down his pen. “I have a few minutes. Come in.”

They filed in and settled into chairs with their trays.

Levi set a fifth tray in front of him. “How’s it going?” Their eyes held, and Erwin could see the unasked question there: *are we going to have time to be together tonight?* He hoped so; he had been carefully washing himself clean after each of his bathroom visits, just in case.

“Things are shaping up quite well.” Erwin leaned back in his chair. “I believe I should be able to make the deadline with time to spare.”

Levi’s face softened. “Good.”

As they ate, the Squad Leaders updated Erwin on their interview progress. As he had suspected, it was still too early to have any real progress, but it sounded as if the four of them were amicably slotting soldiers into the correct squads with almost no bickering. They worked well together.

He found himself enjoying their company, but there was still work to be done. He dismissed them the instant his bowl was empty.

Levi lingered, waiting until the door closed behind the others, then approached the desk. “Well?”

“Come by at ten o’clock,” Erwin said. “I should be able to take a short break then.”

Levi picked up a stick of graphite and adjusted it so it was square to the edge of the desk, not looking him in the eye. “You going to want me to fuck you?” he asked quietly.

The words made a shiver run down Erwin’s spine, but he said, “I’m not sure actual sex is a good idea; between the stress and the coffee,

I don't quite trust my stomach right now. But I have another idea." He reached across the desk to trace the back of his hand. "How about we go up to the old guard tower—the one where we had lunch before—and use our mouths on each other under the stars?"

Levi looked up. "You mean, sucking each other off at the same time?"

"It might take a bit of manoeuvring. If we lie on our sides and I curl forward, we can probably make it work. We'll bring up a few blankets to lie on." He traced circles around a knotted knuckle. "If it doesn't work, that's fine, but it would be nice to give it a try."

A shiver visibly ran through Levi's body. "I'll come back at ten."

Erwin stood and leaned forward across the desk, skimming Levi's lips with his own. "I look forward to it."

And so he was crestfallen when, at nine thirty, he realized he had made a basic calculation error that meant he would have to redo a third of his proposal. When ten o'clock came, he was frantically rewriting a financial segment, a fresh pot of coffee at his side. His frustration must have shown on his face, because Levi stopped short in the doorway.

"What happened?"

Erwin shoved a hand through his hair, barely looking up. "For some reason, I was under the impression that twelve plus fourteen was twenty-five, and that mistake carried through every single one of my calculations."

Levi closed the door, then sauntered forward and leaned against the desk. "That was a dumb mistake. How much more time do you need?"

"Three, four hours?"

"From one mistake?"

"A critical one, I'm afraid, and the more I track it down, the more everything else unravels. This entire proposal is so hastily constructed that it didn't hold up to my scrutiny, and I'm so tired that I'm seeing double." He looked up and, seeing the disappointment on Levi's face, gave a low sigh. "I'm sorry, Levi."

"We could just do something quick. If we jerk each other off, it'll only take a few minutes."

"I don't think that's a good idea. You know how sleepy I get after orgasm." Erwin carefully corrected a number. "Believe me, I'm aching to spend time with you, but at this rate, I won't have time until one or two in the morning, at the earliest."

“Then I’ll come back in a few hours.”

Erwin hesitated, wanting more than anything to agree. “You shouldn’t wait up for me.”

“I won’t. In the Underground, you learn to sleep for short, specific chunks of time, so I can get some sleep and still get here in time.” Levi arched a brow. “Besides, you’ll need stress relief. You’re going to give yourself a heart attack if you keep pushing forward this hard all the time.”

Erwin poured a fresh cup of coffee. “I don’t mind. A part of me enjoys the pressure.”

“That’s the problem, and that’s exactly why I’m going to make sure you take a break.” Levi stood to his full height, shoulders thrown back. “I’ll be back in a few hours.”

❧

True to his word, Levi returned at two o’clock, dressed in his pyjama bottoms and slippers. Erwin was beginning to feel edgy, the caffeine and lack of sleep taking their toll on him. He had corrected the errors and finished a large portion of the full work, but it wasn’t enough—he was on a roll; he needed to keep going; he couldn’t let Sah-lo win ...

“Hey.” Levi closed the door behind him. “Take a break.”

Erwin’s jaw clenched. “I don’t have time.” Realizing he had snapped the words, he sighed and leaned back in his chair. “I’m sorry, Levi, I really, truly am, but we’re going to have to postpone. Even if I had the time, I’m far too stressed for my body to respond. I promise I’ll make this up to you tomorrow night.” He wasn’t sure how he’d stay awake then, but he’d find a way.

“You need a break,” Levi said flatly. He sat across from him. “Look at you, all wound up on stress and coffee. I can see your teeth vibrating from here. Your asshole’s probably puckered shut. You aren’t going to be able to shit for a week if you don’t take a moment to relax it.”

In spite of his best efforts to control his emotions, an exasperated sigh slid from Erwin’s lips. “Please, go back to bed and let me finish. Tomorrow we can—”

“I’m horny now,” Levi’s tone was demanding, but hurt flickered in his eyes.

*I’m shutting him out exactly the way I used to shut out Henrik,* Erwin

thought, and he was so exhausted and furious with himself that he lashed out:

“Then masturbate. This proposal is more important than —” He caught himself, too late.

Levi flinched as if he had been kicked. “More important than me.”

Erwin’s stomach twisted. “I didn’t mean that.”

“No, I get it. Fine, have it your way.” Slumping even further in his chair, Levi reached a hand down the front of his pants.

Erwin stared. “What are you doing?”

“Following orders.” Levi pulled himself out of his pants. “My Commander told me to masturbate.”

“You can’t do that here. If someone comes in—”

“What, someone’s going to break down your door at two in the morning? You keep doing the important things and let me worry about this.” He began to stroke himself, and gave an exaggerated sigh. “Fuck, that feels good.”

*He’s being childish and passive-aggressive, and I’m not going to play his game.* Erwin’s jaw tightened and he looked back down at his work. He tried to focus on the document, but he was too on edge, and the rhythmic sound of sliding skin was a constant reminder of what was going on in front of him. In spite of himself, blood began to pool between his legs, and he felt a flush rising to his cheeks.

Levi let out a low groan. “Good suggestion. I haven’t even come yet, and I’m feeling better already.”

Erwin calmly flipped a page, not looking up. “Is masturbation how you usually resolve conflict?”

“I think it might be from now on. Look how fucking hard I am.”

“I don’t have time to look.” Erwin double-checked the labels on a diagram. “Almost done?”

“No, I’m having too much fun. Think I’m going to draw this out.”

There was a strained rasp to his voice, and Erwin couldn’t tell if he was still angry, or if his anger had been drowned by hormones. Against his better judgement, he looked up. Levi leaned casually back in the chair, legs splayed, showcasing himself. When he noticed Erwin watching, he paused to touch the tip, a string of moisture following his finger as he pulled away.

Erwin swallowed hard. “If someone comes through that door—”

“They’ll see my back and won’t have a clue what’s going on.” Levi’s eyes narrowed at him. “Why the hell are you looking at me like that? Do I seem more important now that my dick’s out?”

The ache between his legs was becoming unbearable. “Maybe I do need a break.”

“You should have thought of that before you decided to be an asshole.” Levi’s head rolled back along the chair, his hips thrusting slowly into his hand. A low, pleased hum sounded in his throat.

“Fuck,” Erwin whispered before he could stop himself. His aching groin drowned his pride. Beneath his desk, he unbuckled his lower harnesses and opened the fly of his pants. The first blast of chilly air made him shiver. It felt so wrong, baring himself here, in this room that was only meant for business.

Levi eyed him, his lips parted, cheeks dark. “You jerking yourself under there?”

“Perhaps,” Erwin said, the word catching in his throat.

“You clean enough to suck?”

The idea was so scandalous that his eyes fluttered closed, and he could only manage a throaty “Yeah.”

Levi circled the desk. “Don’t think this means I forgive you.” He knelt between Erwin’s legs. “You’re already hard.”

“I like watching you play with yourself.” Erwin tried to stroke Levi’s jaw, but he was so jittery that the movement was clumsy. His eyes darted to the door. He was surprised to find himself wishing that someone would walk in on them like this, with his partner shielded carefully from view.

Levi looked up at him, a brow raised. “What was that throb for?”

“I’m nervous about being interrupted.”

“You sure nervous is the right word?” Levi ran his tongue along him, and Erwin shuddered, caught off guard by the heat of his mouth. “Because I’m getting the feeling you like the risk, you pervert.” He ran his tongue along the length again, from a different angle this time. “Just think what it’d be like if someone walked in. You’d have to act like nothing was going on, but I’m still angry, so I’d make it as difficult for you as I could.”

Erwin’s breaths were coming in harsh blasts. “Show me how you’d make it difficult for me.”

“Only if you show me how you’d act if someone else was here.”

The fantasy was so taboo that heat flooded Erwin’s body, as if he

were already on the edge of climax. “Okay.”

Levi took him all the way into his throat, his tongue tracing patterns as he went. Erwin’s instincts told him to arch and cry out, but he sat perfectly still, his face stoic. The forced repression was tantalizing in ways he had never expected, his body extra sensitive now that he knew he wasn’t allowed to react. *Oh fuck.* He glanced down, and Levi made eye contact, still holding him deep in his mouth.

Erwin tried to suppress a cry; it escaped as a whimper.

Levi slid him out of his mouth. “That would have given you away. You’re terrible at this.”

“Maybe you’re just too good at that.”

“Try harder.” He paused to run his tongue around the head. “You might need to do this for real one day.”

“Oh fuck,” Erwin gasped, dizzied by the thought. He planted his elbows on the desk and folded his hands against his mouth, trying to stay calm. He felt a hand wrap around him, felt Levi suck harder and begin to stroke him, and his breath escaped in a hiss. He buried his face in his hands, breathing hard.

Levi, too busy to speak, gave a disapproving hum.

“I can’t,” Erwin whispered. “I can’t fake it. Shit.” His hands raked into his hair. If someone walked in on them now, it would all be over, everything he had worked so hard to achieve. His body began to shake, a combination of nerves, caffeine, and over-stimulation.

It didn’t matter how stealthy he was anymore, anyway; Levi was attacking him so zealously that each stroke was loud and wet. Erwin pushed the chair back so he could watch him. Levi’s eyes were wild, hair hanging in his face. His other hand worked between his own legs, so hard that the movement was audible.

Erwin couldn’t hold back anymore. He bucked forward into Levi’s mouth, fighting to hold back his cries; he was mostly successful, but a single squeak escaped. When the last pulse faded and he opened his eyes again, stars swam in his vision, and he realized he had been holding his breath.

Levi pulled away, his nose wrinkling. “You taste like coffee.”

Erwin was too relaxed to feel insulted. He slid off the chair and dropped to his knees on the floor in front of Levi, leaning forward for a kiss. He could taste himself, unpleasantly bitter, but more important than that was the gentleness of Levi’s mouth, a warm contrast to their cold interactions a few minutes prior.

Levi gasped and pulled away, his breaths catching. Erwin stared at the clenching chest and arm muscles, as awed by Levi's athletic motions as he had been at the gym the previous morning. *He's close.*

"Shit." Levi's eyes closed, head tilting back.

"Let me help." Erwin bent onto all fours and placed his mouth above Levi's hand, sucking the tip. He felt a hand claw into his hair, and heard gasps as they began to pick up speed, moving in unison.

Then Levi breathed his name, and Erwin tasted him. He lingered for a few moments longer than necessary, gently tracing him with his tongue. He felt safe and cozy here, tucked carefully away behind the desk, hidden from potential prying eyes.

When he pulled away, they held each other's gaze.

"I did need a break," Erwin said, still angry with himself. "Levi, I didn't mean you were unimportant. I'm under a lot of stress right now, and—"

"I know. I was a dick, too. It's fine." Levi caught his jaw, drawing him in for a kiss.

They both fixed their clothes and stood. Once everything was in order, Levi leaned forward to pull him into an embrace, but Erwin stopped him.

"We're in full view of the door now."

"Yeah, but I locked it when I came in."

Erwin blinked. "You what?"

"Wait." Levi's head tilted. "You really thought someone might walk in on us, and you went along with it? That wasn't just role-play?"

Heat crept across Erwin's cheeks.

"Holy shit, you really are a pervert." Levi folded his arms over his chest. "I'm not stupid. There's no way I'm going to start jerking off in your office unless the door's locked. I don't want to do anything to fuck this up."

"I got carried away."

"Well, good thing one of us had some sense. You going to get some sleep now?"

"No, not yet. I'm running low on time." Erwin glanced down at the proposal, his vision blurring, and let out a low sigh.

"You need company to help you stay awake?"

"I can't ask you to stay up for me."

Levi shrugged. "You aren't. I'm offering. I should go over the new recruit roster, anyway, so I can prepare for tomorrow's interviews

in advance. Everyone else already did, and it's getting harder to fake it as we go." He reached up and straightened Erwin's collars, then adjusted his bolo tie. "Just give me a minute to get some tea."

"Sounds good." Touched by his attentiveness, Erwin couldn't resist a final kiss before they got down to work. He tilted Levi's jaw up with two fingers, closing his mouth over the slim lips.

*Even if this isn't as time-sensitive as the proposal, he thought, it's every bit as important. Maybe even more so.* He could already tell that Levi was going to help keep him grounded. Balanced. *But only if I let him.* His eyes were growing heavy, so he let them close. *And his body is warm, and small, and smells like lemons.*

Levi broke the kiss and nudged him. "Hey. Are you falling asleep up there?"

"No." Erwin pulled away, blinking. "But I think I'll grab another cup of coffee, just in case."

"I'll make some extra tea. Couldn't hurt for you to drink both." Levi began to walk for the door.

"Levi, wait."

He paused and half-turned, waiting.

"I'll do my best to never shut you out. But if I do, I ... " He looked down, so exhausted that he couldn't find the right words. "I told you before that you might have to be aggressive to get through to me, and I appreciate that you did so tonight. Don't ever hold that back." His throat tightened. "I want to give you the love you deserve, and you must never settle for anything less."

Levi eyed him for a moment longer, then nodded.

"I'm rambling." Erwin rubbed his forehead.

"Yeah, but I get it." Levi turned to face him. "But don't always assume you're the only one in the wrong; I was a dick about the whole jerking off thing. I know you're paranoid about treating me like shit because you feel guilty about what went on with Henrik, but you treat me better than you think. And if you don't, I'll call you on it. That's how we've always worked, even before we hooked up—hell, even before we could tolerate being around each other—so stop overthinking it. We're fine."

"Okay." Erwin smiled. "Thank you."

"And stop thanking me all the time. I'm here for myself, you know. It's not like I'm doing you a favour." Levi began to move to the door. "I'll be back with some tea and my paperwork."

Erwin felt a swell of fondness. If only he could take Levi to his bed and hold him close, drifting off to sleep together ... He blinked, trying not to let the warm, tempting drowsiness overcome him. *The sooner you finish this proposal, the sooner you can make that a reality.*

Settling into his chair, he continued his work.

**-17-****ANGLES**

“Morning! How’s the proposal looking?” Hange asked, stepping into Erwin’s office.

Erwin held a finger to his lips; he pointed at the chair across from him.

Hange tiptoed forward to look, then grinned. Levi lay sideways across the chair, cradled by its armrests like an infant being held by its mother. The roster still lay on his chest, and he was softly snoring.

“He fell asleep about an hour before reveille,” Erwin whispered. “I didn’t have the heart to wake him.”

“He even looks grumpy in his sleep. I wonder if he’s having grumpy little dreams.” Hange’s eyes lit up. “Can I play a prank on him?”

“What kind of prank, exactly?”

“If I clap really loudly behind his head—”

“That sounds like a good way to get punched in the throat. Let him sleep.” Erwin motioned to an empty chair, keeping his voice to a whisper. “The first draft of the proposal is complete. If you and Nifa have a little time to give me feedback, I’d be grateful.” He carefully straightened the stack of papers, his hands trembling.

“We’ll handle it, sir,” Hange said, eyes locked on his hands. “You should get some sleep.”

“I think my heart is pumping pure coffee at this point. Besides, we have to continue the squad selection interviews.”

“Or instead,” Hange said, raising a finger, “we could postpone the interviews by a day so I could dedicate all my time to your revisions, and you could get some sleep to get your head on straight. It looks like Levi could use some sleep, too. He seems a bit sleep-deprived lately.”

Erwin thought of the nightmares, the late-night talks, the phys-

ical exertion in the bedroom. “Very well. Tell Mike and Berit they have the day to work on personal training, or perhaps observe the new recruits in the training grounds. I’ll meet you back here around three o’clock.”

Hange was already flipping through the proposal. “Better make it two. I see a lot of spelling mistakes already.”

His temples throbbed, and he swallowed back a wave of defensiveness, forcing humility in its place. “Given the speed with which it was written, I expect you’ll find the occasional rambling off topic and logical flaws as well. Thank you, Hange.” He stood and studied Levi.

“He seems pretty dead to the world.” Hange nudged Levi with a fingertip. He stirred, but didn’t open his eyes. “You could probably carry him.”

Erwin couldn’t tell if the light tone was due to hope or mischief. His gaze slid to Hange’s face. *Is that an ‘I want you to be a couple’ expression, or ‘I know exactly what’s going on here’?*

He knelt down and shook Levi’s shoulder. “Levi.”

His eyelids parted. “What time is it?” he asked, his voice groggy.

“About half an hour past reveille. Thank you for your company. You have the day off to recuperate.”

Levi blinked, slowly swinging his legs around so his feet touched the floor. “Did you finish your proposal?”

“Yes. Hange will be scouring it with Nifa so they can give me some feedback.”

“Already on it,” Hange said, making a note on the page.

“Come on, I’ll walk you to your room.” Erwin rose to his feet.

Levi yawned and stretched, then stood. “I don’t need anymore sleep.”

“I want you to rest, Levi. That’s an order. You’ve been pushing almost as hard as I have, and I need you fresh for your squad selection.” He gripped his shoulder and began to steer him toward the door.

“Goodnight, Levi,” Hange called in a sing-song tone, as if talking to an infant.

“Shut up, shitglasses,” Levi muttered, not even looking back.

As the pair stepped into the hallway, Levi rubbed his eyes. “Why did you let me fall asleep? I told you I was going to stay up with you.”

“And you did, right up until the end, and that allowed me to stay focused. Thank you.” They stepped into Levi’s room; Erwin closed the door behind them.

“Closing the door?” Levi said. “Are you planning to throw me against the wall again? Because as hot as that is, my dick is still sleeping.”

“I’m just here to drop you off.” Now that Erwin was away from his desk, fatigue was starting to settle over him, so heavy that he slumped against the wall. The bed looked so soft, so inviting.

“I can’t tell which of your eyes is the black eye anymore, they’re so dark,” Levi said, following his gaze. “You need to sleep, too.”

“I suppose I should return to my own room in case I oversleep my appointment and Hange comes looking for me.” He found himself unwilling to sleep alone. “Unless you’re confident you can wake us up before two.”

“I can, but is it a good idea to sleep together?”

Erwin stifled a yawn. Maybe it was the fatigue dulling his logic, but he didn’t really care anymore if it was a good idea or not. “Your door has a lock.” The words reminded him of their secret encounter in his office the night before, and his cheeks warmed. Levi’s cheeks darkened, too, but he turned and locked the door without a word.

They crawled under the covers, Erwin spooning behind Levi. He ran a hand down Levi’s abdomen, enjoying the softness of his body hair, the grooves of his stomach muscles. He ran his fingers over the waistband of the pyjama bottoms. “You should take these off.”

“I told you, I’m too tired for sex.”

“I won’t try anything. I just want to feel the warmth of your bare skin against mine.” He buried his nose in the line that ran vertically down the back of Levi’s neck muscles; he had seen this anatomical feature on others from time to time, but never this closely. He could feel the velvety hair of Levi’s undercut rubbing against his brows and forehead. “How is it that a man so hard and tightly built feels so soft?”

Levi turned his head, as if trying to look back at him. “If I take off my pants, will you shut up and let me sleep?”

Erwin gave a soft chuckle. “I make no promises.”

“Ah well, they’re too warm, anyway.” Levi reached under the covers and pulled off his pants, folded them, and set them on the side table. Erwin did the same, then spooned behind him again. This time Levi’s skin, soft and surprisingly cool, pressed against his. Erwin let out a contented hum.

“You’re glowing like a damned cook stove.” Levi inched back against him.

“Must be from all the coffee.” His body was responding to the

naked warmth pressed against him, but his eyes had slipped closed, and he found himself unable to open them again. He pressed his palm to the centre of Levi's chest, and he felt a hand close over his, fingers interlacing.

"Okay, maybe this is nicer without all that fabric between us," Levi said.

Erwin tried to respond, but in spite of all the caffeine, he was fading. He let himself fall back into darkness, warm and content.

⁂

Levi awoke to the sound of the lunch bell. Erwin's embrace, which had been warm and silky before, was hot and damp with sweat. He winced and extracted himself from the strong grasp, then sat up.

"Levi?" Erwin mumbled, squinting up at him.

Levi smoothed the blond hair back from his forehead. "You've still got an hour or two. Go back to sleep."

Erwin blinked. "You'll wake me up?"

"Yeah." He traced a line down the sharp nose. By the time he reached the tip, Erwin was asleep again.

For several minutes, Levi watched him, memorizing small details: the tiny flare of his upper lip, the slight puff of jowl above his jaw line, the gradient between the dark blond of his undercut and the pale blond top. Was the top naturally sun-bleached, or did he use something to help it along? At first, the idea seemed too vain, but then he remembered the way Erwin was fussing over his eyebrows before the gala. *Can't say I blame him. If I were that pretty, I'd probably fuss over my appearance, too.*

His eyes traced lower, finding a small scar under Erwin's jaw, another across his collarbone. Scars were an occupational hazard, and Levi had never really paid attention to Erwin's. Part of it was willful ignorance: he knew better than anyone that some scars had deep emotional components, so they shouldn't be acknowledged.

He would have loved to lift the covers and study every part of Erwin's body in detail, but his stomach was growling. Reluctantly, he tore himself away and pulled on his uniform. He paused by the door to look back at Erwin, his heart singing. *I'm getting so fucking sentimental.*

Berit was in line at the mess hall, holding two trays. He fell into place behind her, taking two trays as well.

“For the Commander?” she asked, nodding at his second tray.

“Yeah.”

“How’s he doing?”

Levi shrugged. “Dead to the world, hopefully.”

“Hange’s still looking through the proposal. Asked me to grab an extra lunch and come back to give my opinion on a few paragraphs.” Berit accepted two bowls of stew, then reached for some bread. “Apparently, it’s looking pretty good, all things considered.”

*I wonder if “all things considered” will be enough,* Levi wondered, but he didn’t reply.

“So, what did you two do to get that Lord on our side, exactly?” Berit asked. “I read the letter. He seemed kind of bitter.”

“Erwin is very convincing.”

“Convincing enough that this new alliance won’t backfire?”

Levi’s eyes narrowed. “If you’re trying to hint that Erwin isn’t trustworthy, Bershit, I’m the wrong person to talk to.”

“Bershit?” she repeated. “Come on, Levi, you can do better than that. And of course I trust him. I just worry that he might be pushing too hard, too soon. You know how ambitious he is. You saw how stressed he was yesterday; that’s not sustainable. If he cracks or burns out, we all go under.”

Levi studied her. “Why the hell are you telling me this?”

“Because someone needs to tell him that the proposal is too aggressive. Four weeks is too soon for an expedition with all-new squads, especially such a major expedition. We need at least six weeks to train for an expedition of this size, maybe even eight.” She leaned closer. “Look, I see the way you two interact. You have a good rapport. Of any of us, you have the best chance of getting through to him about this. Hange would leave on an expedition tomorrow if given the chance, so that’s no help. Mike’s too passive, so he’s just going to default to Erwin’s judgement. But I’ve seen you openly question him before, and I’ve seen him take your words into account.”

“Do it yourself.” Realizing they were holding up the line, Levi gathered two lunches, then stepped to the side. “He’s made it clear he wants anyone to question him if they think he’s making a poor decision.”

“Yeah, he’d probably listen to me, but this is too important for ‘probably.’” Berit’s eyes searched his. “Please. For the good of the Corps, at least mention it to him.”

Levi knew Erwin had considered all angles. If they were setting out at four weeks, there was a good reason for it. Still, he had insisted that all concerns be brought directly to him, and Berit usually had reliable instincts. *How would he want me to approach this?*

“Fine, I’ll mention it,” he said. “But you’re just wasting my time. He has a good reason. We just can’t see it yet.”

Berit smiled. “Thank you, Levi.”

Without replying, he turned and marched from the hall.

Making sure the hallway was empty, he brought both trays to his bedroom. Erwin hadn’t moved, so Levi set his tray on the bedside table, then settled into a chair and ate. After that, he took a chilly bath, then spent some time tidying up his room.

When the town clock struck one o’clock, he stopped his work. Erwin had shifted onto his other side, facing away from him. Levi couldn’t resist crawling into bed behind him, forcing an arm underneath him so he could wrap his arms around him.

Erwin shifted back against him. “Is it time?”

“You’ve got an hour.”

“I should start preparing for my trip tonight.” He gave a long, low sigh. “... and my meeting with my sister.”

Levi pressed closer against his back, gently biting his ear. “If you want, I can go alone and tell her to screw off.”

“No, I need to stop putting it off.” Erwin pulled his ear free; Levi leaned even closer, biting it again. “Feeling a bit frisky, Levi?”

“Frisky? You make me sound like an animal.”

“You’re the one gnawing on me.” Erwin rolled to face him, a hint of a smile on his lips. “Don’t worry; I’ve set aside some personal time for the two of us a bit later this evening. Would you like to hear my schedule?”

“Your pillow talk gets sexier every day.” Levi kissed down his nose, then grasped the tip between his teeth.

Erwin pulled away, pressing a hand to his chest to hold him at a distance. “First, I’ll get ready—”

“And eat lunch. Might be a bit cold.” Levi motioned to the tray on the side table, and Erwin smiled.

“Thank you for that. Once I’m finished preparing and eating, I’ll meet with Hange and Nifa to go over the proposal. I’ll work on revisions until nearly five o’clock; at that point, you and I will head to my private residence to meet with my sister. After we’ve dealt with her, you and I

will stay there to share in some private time before I return here to finish any last-minute revisions.”

Levi felt his body stir. “Have you planned out that private time in detail, too?”

“I have some ideas. We didn’t get our climactic night together after abstaining—well, somewhat abstaining—for those two days, so I’d like to do something special for you.” Erwin leaned forward for a kiss; Levi bit his bottom lip.

“Like what?” he asked, their mouths still touching.

“You’ll see. If you’re going to keep chewing on me, I can think of one activity that will definitely be off the table.” Erwin tilted his head and slowly bit lengthwise along Levi’s lips.

“I’ll be good.” Levi slid lower, closing his teeth over the strong chin, then pulled away as he remembered: “Berit thinks four weeks is too soon for the expedition.”

Erwin gently pushed him away to look at him. “What was that?”

“Berit. She thinks it’s too soon with new squads. I told her you had a good reason. Do you?”

“Of course. Think about how we handled Sahlo; I’m counting on his fear to hold him at bay until we start lining his pockets. What do you think will happen if he has time to sit around thinking about the deal I’ve offered him? We need to get moving while we still hold the power balance, and four weeks is the absolute earliest we can get our squads mobilized.” He paused. “At any rate, we’ll be spending the first part of the expedition training the new squads to follow formation, so it’s not as if they’ll head into dangerous territory untrained. Is that enough information?”

“Yeah, I’ll tell Berit not to worry.”

“Thank you. And please tell her she’s welcome to raise these concerns with me directly.” Erwin kissed his forehead, then lingered; Levi felt a long intake of breath across his skin. “I suppose I should start getting ready for my trip. The Capital won’t be the same without you.”

“It’s just a day or two,” Levi said, embarrassed by how anxious he was about their upcoming separation. “I’ll be here when you get back.”

“And I’m glad for it.” Erwin pulled away and sat up. “Why don’t I meet you at four-thirty in my office? Bring your gear, but don’t bother putting it on yet. You have the day to do whatever you’d like until then. I recommend taking some time to scout some of the potential squad members—the new recruits will be training in the yard today.”

“Sure.” Levi slid out of bed and straightened his uniform. “Send for me if you need anything.”

They exchanged a long kiss, and then Levi turned to leave, his cheeks glowing.

A few minutes later, he settled into a seat in the yard next to Mike and Berit. She raised a brow at him. “Well?”

“I stand by Erwin’s decision. You have a problem with it, talk to him.”

“His logic is sound?”

“Yes.”

Mike shot them a quizzical look, but Levi didn’t bother to explain. Instead, he focused on the new recruits as they ran through their training exercises. Berit was carefully taking notes, and even Mike jotted a couple words here and there, but Levi committed the names to memory.

Watching the new recruits ended up passing the time far more quickly than he expected. When he finally remembered to look up at the clock tower, he saw that he only had fifteen minutes until his meeting with Erwin. He cursed and hurried to his room to retrieve his gear case.

When he arrived at Erwin’s office, Erwin was focused on a document, flanked by Hange and a teenage girl with wide eyes. The three of them looked up as he approached.

“How’s it going?” Levi fell into a chair, casually crossing his legs.

“It should be workable.” Erwin didn’t sound convinced.

“It’s fine. You’ve just been looking at it too long,” Hange said. “Another hour to polish the last few issues, and it’ll be indistinguishable from one you spent two weeks on.”

“I hope you’re correct.” Erwin stood. “Is it time for our meeting with the investors, Levi?”

The description surprised him, but he didn’t miss a beat: “Yeah. Don’t want to keep those assholes waiting.”

“Certainly not. Let me stop by my room to get my coat. Thank you both for your help.” Erwin nodded a goodbye to Hange and Nifa, then strode to the door. Levi fell into step behind him.

Erwin pulled his gear case out from under his bed, then dressed in a long, dark coat, the Survey Corps logo on its breast and shoulders. He paused in front of his mirror, dampening two fingers and running them along his eyebrows.

Reminded of his vanity, Levi said, "Your hair—" He cut himself off.

"Yes?" Erwin pulled away from the mirror, then they left his room.

"It's so much blonder on top."

Erwin cleared his throat. At first, it seemed like he wasn't going to answer, but once they were outside the base, he said quietly, "I comb bleach into it every now and then, and I suppose the sun has the most effect on the top layer."

"Really? You bleach your hair?"

"I was very blond as a youth. Everyone around me constantly commented how I took after my father, and how I had such beautiful pale hair. I suppose I absorbed that into my personal identity. It darkened as I got older, so I tried to maintain it."

"Maybe I should do the same," Levi said dryly.

"It would probably go orange." Erwin glanced at him. "Besides, you have such lovely hair. I've never seen hair that dark. It always reflects the light."

The compliment caught Levi off guard, and his cheeks glowed. "Yeah, yours isn't bad, either."

As they approached the apartment, Levi began to scan their surroundings in case Erwin's sister's pleas were setting up an ambush. "I don't see anything suspicious."

"No, but then, we're early." Erwin glanced around, then moved to the door and pulled out a key. "Once we're inside," he said quietly, "put on your gear. I want you observing the door from a high vantage point, in case she brings anyone with her. Once she enters, drop down and join us."

"Okay."

The door creaked open, letting a small strip of light into the dark room. Once they were both inside, Erwin closed the door and sparked the lamp to life.

A grey cloaked figure sat on the bed.

"Shit!" Levi pulled out a knife and dove at the figure; it blocked his knife-hand. His weapon clattered to the floor. Undeterred, he grabbed the figure in a choke hold.

"Release me," a woman's voice said from under the hood. She struggled, her movements clearly practiced, but Levi was stronger.

Erwin stepped forward. Backlit by the dim lamp, he seemed to

loom over them, but in spite of his intimidating appearance, his voice was frail: "Helena?"

"Release me!"

"Levi," Erwin said quietly. An order.

"She broke in," he replied, but he released her and stepped back.

The woman stood tall in the centre of the room, lowering her hood with a slow, dignified movement. Erwin turned up the lamp at the same time, and the combined effect was intimidating, as if her visage were lighting up the room.

Eyes locked on her, Levi backed toward his knife and crouched to pick it up. She was tall, nearly as tall as her brother, broad-shouldered and busty. Her pale blond hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail. Her face was like Erwin's, but rounder, more feminine; the sharp nose was shorter, the cheekbones softer, the brows thin. Her eyes were every bit as intense, and they were fixated on her brother.

For a moment, her expression wavered. "Holy Sina, you look so much like Papa."

"I thought you didn't remember him." Erwin's voice was so unnaturally calm that Levi knew he was hiding his true emotions. His head tilted, almost imperceptibly. "Or have memories started returning, the way they did for me? Is that why you're so desperate to talk to me?"

She blinked, and then her eyes narrowed. She nodded in Levi's direction without actually looking at him. "Why did you bring a body-guard? I told you to come alone."

"And I told you never to contact me here, and look how that turned out."

Levi felt as if hundreds of insect feet were crawling across his skin. He shrank back against the desk, regretting his offer to attend such a personal meeting.

As if sensing his discomfort, Erwin turned to him. "Levi, allow me to introduce my younger sister, Helena Smith."

"No." Her icy eyes fixed on Levi. "That's not my name, not anymore. I'm Tessa Kohl, and you, little man, have no place in this conversation."

His brows dropped, and he opened his mouth to reply, but Erwin spoke first:

"Anything you have to say to me will be heard by this man as well. That's non-negotiable."

Tessa-not-Helena's eyes held Levi's for a moment longer, then

she looked away. "Fine." She sat on the bed again. "I'm getting married. Mama wants you there."

Erwin's brows rose. "That's what was so urgent?"

"Maybe you didn't have the decency to invite me to your wedding, Erwin, but I'm more gracious than you. You're invited. Bring your wife."

"Wife?" Levi repeated, his eyes shifting to Erwin. For a moment, his stomach quivered, but then he saw the furrowed line above Erwin's brow. *He's just as confused as I am.*

Tessa's eyes darted between them, the same furrowed line appearing on her forehead. "When you were in Mitras, the room was registered to you and an L Smith."

After a long silence, a smile spread across Erwin's lips. "I see what happened. Levi has no surname, so the concierge must have recorded our names as 'L & E Smith.'" He cast an amused look at Levi. "Should we start picking out china patterns?"

The woman's eyes narrowed. "Don't mock me."

"I'm not married, Helena—"

"Tessa."

"—and I doubt you really want me at your wedding, so I'll save you the stress and the expense. I won't attend. If that's all you came for, you have your answer." He stood and reached for the doorknob, as if preparing to let her out.

Her arms folded over her chest, and she stared him down.

Levi felt anger rise within him, hot and prickly. *He wasn't kidding when he said she was stubborn.* He wondered how they would react if he grabbed her by the scruff of the collar and threw her out the door.

"Was there something else?" Erwin said, sounding exasperated.

"It's not all I came for, and you know it." She gave an uneasy glance at Levi, then leaned closer to her brother, her voice lowering. "I came here to warn you. Right now, you're poised to be the biggest threat to the sanctity of these walls, and it's attracting attention. Your repeated attempts to break free from this holy sanctuary are pissing off the wrong people. We can keep you safe; you just have to come back to us."

"If I'm pissing off the wrong people from your perspective, then that only reinforces to me that I'm on the right path."

Her eyes glistened. "You don't understand what you're dealing with."

"So help me understand. Explain it to me."

She looked down. "I can't. If you come back to us, maybe I can. Trust me, Erwin. Your Survey Corps can't save you from yourself. Only we can."

They were silent. Levi's heart beat in his throat as he tried to make sense of the conversation.

Erwin's hand gripped the doorknob. "I'm glad to hear you've changed your name again, Tessa Kohl, and I hope Ma did as well, because it severs my last link to you both. For your sake and for mine, it's best if the world thinks I have no family. I will never change my path, and even if I did, it certainly wouldn't be to ally with the Wallists. You have no brother. I have no sister." He opened the door. "Do not contact me again."

Their eyes held, then she stood. Once she reached the door, she paused.

"The main reason I came is because Mama still loves you." She stared straight ahead. "She cries for you every night. I told her you had become too cold to care, that your manic ambition had crushed every drop of love from your heart, but she refused to acknowledge what you had become."

Rage welled within Levi, and he couldn't stay silent anymore. "You selfish little shit! I've seen this man work himself half to death out of love for humanity. The only reason he stopped caring about you—"

"Levi," Erwin warned, but anger was rushing out of him like water from a tap.

"—is because his love for humanity is so fucking huge that he's sacrificed *everything he is* so that he can fight for our freedom. You and your ilk huddle inside your little churches, doing your best to ensure we stay trapped and starving, protecting your own interests. So you popped out of the same vagina, you shared a few chess games as kids—who cares? People like Erwin think bigger than that. His love is on such an enormous scale that self-absorbed little Wallfuckers can't possibly comprehend it." His body was shaking.

Tessa's eyes shifted to him, ice blue. "You don't know a thing about me, little man, and it's clear you don't know a thing about my brother. I pity you."

Levi bared his teeth. "If I ever—*ever*—see you near him again—"

"Don't worry about it," she said. "The next time I see him, he'll be in a coffin thanks to his own actions." For a moment, her mask cracked, and the look she gave her brother was one of anguish.

She turned away and strode through the door without looking back.

Erwin closed it behind her, then slumped, his forehead pressed against the wood.

Levi was still trembling. “That arrogant shit head! How dare she—”

“Levi.” Erwin pulled away from the door, his face still impassive. “It ended the way it needed to end. We aren’t going to discuss it any further.”

His eyes were so distant that Levi’s heart twisted. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine.”

“I said we weren’t going to discuss it.” There was that tone again, the one he had used when Levi had teased him for his religious curse a few days back—and there was that same feeling, that cold hollow in his chest, the one that had resonated when Nile had warned him of Erwin’s selfishness, when Tessa had said those words: *too cold to care*.

His jaw quivered. *Do I actually know this man? Will I ever?*

After a moment, Erwin’s face softened, and he gave a smile. “Are you hungry? I have an activity in mind that might take some time, but if you need to eat first ...” He trailed off, and the smile faded. “If you’re still interested in that sort of thing, after all you just witnessed.”

Though Levi’s chest was still hollow, he forced himself to step forward and wrap his arms around Erwin. After a moment, Erwin hugged him back, his too-tight grip more honest than his expression or his words.

“I can’t breathe,” Levi complained.

“I’m sorry. You’re so protective of me, Levi, and I’m not sure I deserve it.”

“We weren’t going to talk about it.” The ice between them was melting, and Levi nuzzled his cheek in the gap between the broad chest muscles. “What’s this activity you have in mind?”

“It’s a surprise. I just need a couple minutes in the bathroom to prepare.” Erwin pulled back; he lightly traced Levi’s cheekbone with his fingertips, the movement coming to a rest on his bottom lip. “Levi—”

“It’s fine.” He kissed the fingers. “We’ll take your mind off everything. Go do whatever you need to do.”

While Erwin was in the bathroom, Levi began to wander around

the room, exploring. The wardrobe was full of Erwin's old clothes; mostly collared shirts, a couple suits, and a few casual outfits. The majority of the clothing would fit Levi well, and he fingered a green hooded shirt, wondering if Erwin would let him take some of this. *Or would Mike recognize it from their training days?*

The bookshelves behind the desk were alphabetized by category, aside from a few books that had been pulled out and set aside. A thin layer of dust coated the shelves, and Levi looked around for a dusting rag. He found a feather duster in the corner of the wardrobe. It wasn't his preferred cleaning method, as it seemed to kick up the dust rather than actually wipe it away, but he gave the bookshelves a quick dusting anyway. Once that was done, he began to dust and tidy the desk.

The bathroom door opened. Levi looked up, and the feather duster began to slip from his fingers. He fumbled it a few times before it fell to the floor.

"Everything all right, Levi?" Erwin stood in the bathroom doorway, naked except for his 3DMG harnesses and gear, his boots and his Commander's pendant. The harnesses fit a bit looser without his clothing underneath them, straining with the weight of his gear.

Levi opened his mouth to speak, but his mouth was too dry, and all that would come out was a squeak. He closed his mouth.

"Too much?" Erwin said, his face glowing pink. "I know you said you liked imagining me in this outfit, so I thought I'd try it out for you."

Levi's heart thudded in his ears. "No, it's— I—" He was floundering. No other words would come.

Erwin stepped into the room and closed the bathroom door. "I know you didn't picture the gear, but I had an idea. You can say no, if you aren't interested. Our weight and height difference makes it impossible for you to take me standing up, but if we use the gear ..." He triggered the gear, slamming the anchors at diagonals into a wooden crossbeam of the ceiling. Slowly, he retracted the wires, until he was hanging from the ceiling as if on a swing. "We can adjust it so the height is perfect for you to stay on your feet."

Levi began to tremble.

"Is it too strange?" Erwin's face was deep red now, almost purple.

Still unable to speak, Levi shook his head. His eyes trailed Erwin's body, its perfect lines accented by the gear straps. *So beautiful. So fucking beautiful.* He shrank against the bookshelf.

Erwin's voice softened: "Why don't you come over here?"

Levi's hands balled into fists. He slowly crossed the room, then stood in front of the suspended man, staring at him. "I don't— I've forgotten what to do."

"Start with a kiss." Erwin leaned forward, the movement setting his body into a light swing. He lifted one of Levi's hands, placing it alongside his jaw, then waited.

Forcing himself past his shyness, Levi leaned forward. Their lips skimmed. He pulled back and stared at the placid gaze, the drooping eyelids. *This beautiful man*, he thought, leaning forward again. *He's doing this for me. All for me.* He groaned into another kiss, pressing more firmly this time.

Slowly, tentatively, Erwin's arms brushed the side of his body, then wrapped around him, pulling him in. Their kiss deepened, low moans passing between them. Levi's fingers skated down Erwin's back, feeling the leather harness, bare skin, the fuzz of his ass. It was unbelievable, months of fantasy come to life. The kiss broke as he rested his forehead against Erwin's, breathing in.

"This can't be real," he whispered, unaware the words were forming until they had already slipped from his mouth.

"This is real, just like the heat that's glowing between our bodies." Erwin laid his hands on either side of Levi's face. "Like that beautiful, tortured expression on your face. Like the fabric of your pants straining and twitching, before I've even touched you. This is real, and it's all for you, Levi. Whatever you want from me is yours."

"Fuck, look at you." Levi pulled away to look him up and down, lightheaded. "Holy shit, Erwin, *look at you.*" He lunged forward, kissing him so hard that he felt teeth dig into his lips. All four limbs wrapped around him this time, and he could feel the weightlessness of Erwin's body, the twisting counter-motion of each movement. He ran his fingers down Erwin's back, feeling the subtly shifting core muscles that held him upright. His hand slid down to the tailbone, then lower.

He tore his mouth away. "Lube?"

"Inner jacket pocket." Erwin was breathing hard.

Levi pushed away, leaving his Commander gently swinging, as he hurried to the bathroom. The jacket hung on the back of the door. His hands were so clumsy that it took several tries to unzip the inside pocket. At last, his fingers curled around the small bottle. He took a deep breath, then stepped toward the door.

Erwin's eyes met his. His arms were raised above his head, grip-

ping the wires in a casual pose. Levi studied the muscled arms, his gaze tracing the triceps into his armpit, across his chest, down his abdomen.

“You’re already hard,” he said, trying to sound casual.

“Because I’m enjoying how you’re reacting to this so far.”

Levi set the lubricant on the floor next to Erwin, then walked over to the far wall. He pulled off his jacket and laid it neatly on the dresser. His hands rose to his throat, and he began to untie his cravat —he didn’t put much thought into it, at first, but then he noticed Erwin watching him. He slowly slid the cravat off his neck, letting his head loll a little. Erwin’s lips parted a crack.

Levi slowly unbuckled his 3DMG, not bothering to disassemble it properly, and let the harnesses slide off his shoulders and hips. He set the entire apparatus neatly against the wall, his boots beside it, then turned his back and began to unbutton his shirt. When he lifted his half-buttoned shirt over his head, purposefully showcasing his back muscles, he heard a sharp intake of breath behind him. He looked back over his shoulder.

Erwin was still slowly swinging on the wires, arms over his head, but now his knuckles were white. His head was tilted, and he looked down his nose at Levi, as if scrutinizing him; it might have been insulting if he hadn’t worn such an awed expression.

*Fuck, that’s hot.* Somehow, he was managing to look seductive and seduced all at once. Levi studied him for several seconds, committing the image to memory.

Remembering himself, he removed his pants and everything beneath them in one movement. He dropped them sloppily on the dresser, too impatient to fold them.

Then, he marched up to Erwin, caught his face with both hands, and pulled him in for a kiss.

Once again, he found himself torn between violence and tenderness. A part of him wanted to take Erwin hard, but the other wanted to linger, to let his body communicate the words he was still too shy to say. After the aggression of their encounter in Erwin’s office the night before, he was leaning more towards being gentle. He began to kiss along Erwin’s neck, connecting each kiss with his tongue, and he heard a low hum in response.

Erwin’s hand fell between their bodies, wrapping around both of them and slowly pumping. The heat, the intimacy, and the motion were overwhelming, and Levi took a shuddering breath. It felt amazing, but

he had something else in mind.

“Your ass is clean?”

“Of course.” Erwin bent forward and gently nipped at his lower lip.

“Good.” Levi eased Erwin’s hand aside and began to kiss a line down his chest, then across his hip. The bulk of the 3DMG got in his way, so he paused his attention to walk around to his back. He had planned to kneel down behind him, but he paused.

“If you’re strapped in, then I can do this.” He grabbed the straps on the back of Erwin’s thighs and lifted his ass to face level.

Erwin gave a surprised gasp as his front end tipped. His palms slapped against the floor, supporting his upper body.

“You okay?” Levi hoisted a thigh over each shoulder.

The only response was a whispered, “Shit.”

Levi buried his face between the round muscles, taking a deep breath. The idea of doing this act creeped him out if he thought about it too much, but that first breath always changed his mind. There was a powerful concentration of pheromones here that tapped into a deep, animal side of himself, filling him with desire, leaving no room for hesitation. His hands curled into the muscled flesh, pulling it apart, his face pressing deeper.

At the first touch of his tongue, Erwin cried out, a powerful contraction waving through his muscles. Levi grunted and pushed closer. *That’s it. Be loud for me.*

For several minutes, he let his ears guide him, listening for the little gasps and moans leaving Erwin’s lips. When he began to hear whispered curses, he knew it was time to press deeper with his tongue. He leaned into it, feeling Erwin begin to writhe, but the suspension gave him no traction. Levi easily held him in place.

The realization dawned on Levi out of nowhere, his eyes snapping open: *he can’t see my face from this position.*

He remembered Erwin’s breakdown in this room, not too long ago. Was he better off interrupting their momentum to suggest they change position? Or should he wait until Erwin spoke up? It wasn’t as if they had seen each other’s faces the night before, when Levi had been under the desk. *Maybe he doesn’t need to anymore?*

Erwin groaned and bucked up against his face, and Levi’s eyes fluttered closed. He pulled back far enough to say,

“Say my name.”

He meant it as a way to check in on Erwin, to make sure he wasn't confused, or falling into past memories, but when his strangled name left Erwin's lips, Levi's head spun.

"Again," he said, for selfish reasons this time.

"Oh fuck," Erwin gasped, his voice rising in pitch. "Levi."

He had heard his name thousands upon thousands of times in his life, and it had never sounded as good as it did in that moment. He buried his face into the warm flesh, probing aggressively with his tongue, swept away by the sound. *The way he said my name, oh fuck. He's dressed only in his gear and his ass is in my face and he's crying my name.*

"Fuck!" Levi tore his face away and squatted down, fumbling for the lubricant. *I need to be inside him.* His hand closed over the bottle.

He pulled Erwin's thighs off his shoulders, setting him upright. He coated two fingers with the liquid, then traced the same circle his tongue had been making moments earlier. Stepping in close, he began to kiss the back of Erwin's neck.

"Go in," Erwin breathed.

Levi slid one finger inside him, and he felt a shudder ripple through the broad back. *He's sensitive today.* His free arm wrapped around Erwin's waist, holding him in place.

Erwin's hips tilted back. "Another."

Levi complied, then pressed deeper. He knew he had found the right spot when Erwin's entire body went rigid, and he breathed, "Motherfucking Sina." This time, he didn't seem to notice the religious curse, and Levi didn't dare bring attention to it.

After a few minutes of teasing, Erwin seemed to have lost the ability to speak altogether, and Levi was confident he was ready. He pulled away and found a handkerchief from the drawer, using it to wipe his fingers. For good measure, he dumped some lubricant into his palm and began to coat himself with it, circling around to Erwin's front. Erwin's face was red, his eyes opened a crack, his mouth slack and panting. Levi leaned in to press a kiss to the tip of his nose.

"Put your knees on my shoulders."

Erwin complied, his movements sluggish. Levi helped him into place, gauging the angle.

"Lengthen the wires by about two, three centimetres."

Erwin nodded, adjusting the gear. Once their heights were aligned, Levi began to press into him.

He was almost to the hilt, when Erwin suddenly cried out. His

head tossed back, his spine arching. On reflex, Levi's hand snapped out and caught him by the strap across his chest, saving him from pitching right back into the floor.

“Erwin?”

“The angle,” Erwin gasped.

“You mean this angle?” Levi slowly pulled out again, then pushed in, and received another cry in response. “Does that feel good?”

“Yes, it—” Erwin covered his face with his hands as Levi gave another slow thrust. “Fuck!”

Every hair on Levi's body stood on end, his skin burning. He ached to push harder, but these reactions were worth milking. He moved so slowly that he ached, relishing the cry near the end of each stroke.

“Faster.” Erwin's voice was strained.

“No, I think I'm going to keep it slow.” Still holding him upright with one hand, Levi ran the other one down Erwin's body, carefully skirting any areas that might get him closer to release. His temples were tight, his ears ringing, as he struggled against his urge to pick up speed.

Erwin groaned, his hand reaching between his legs, but Levi knocked it away.

“I'm close.” The tone was desperate, almost begging.

“I can see that.” Levi slowed his thrusts even more. “Look at me, Erwin.”

“I can't.”

“I want to see your face.”

“I can't, I—” The word was swallowed by a groan, his back arching even more.

Levi gripped the bolo tie, tugging on it. “Lift your head and I'll go faster.”

With a deep, shuddering groan, Erwin lifted his head. His brows formed a peak, his lips flared in an ‘O’, and his eyes were unfocused.

“Holy shit,” Levi whispered, and he found himself thrusting faster.

“Oh fuck.” Erwin reached for his groin again, but Levi, once again, knocked his hand away.

“Levi, please, I need to come.” For all his size and muscle, he seemed small, helpless, and Levi felt his eyes roll toward the back of his head. He grunted, fighting to stay in control. *Look how vulnerable he'll be for you. Look how much he trusts you, loves you.*

“Levi!” Erwin began to counter-thrust against the air, his head

tilting back again. “Oh shit, I’m going to come.”

Levi’s eyes flew open. “Really?”

“Shit!” Erwin’s body went rigid, his knees squeezing Levi’s neck, his chest and abdomen tightening. A shudder rippled through him, his cries escalating, and for the first time, Levi watched his body orgasm unhindered, no hand or mouth in the way. The sight was so beautiful that the moment it ended, Levi fell forward, pressing his mouth to the damp flesh of Erwin’s abdomen.

“Oh fuck, Erwin.” He wasn’t close to orgasm yet, but he felt a shiver ripple through him anyway, a single sympathy wave.

For a moment, they were still. Levi experimentally gave another thrust, and this time, the shudder that rippled through Erwin wasn’t a pleasant one.

“Too sensitive?” Levi kissed a nipple.

“Shit.” Erwin lifted his head, running a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry, I didn’t think I could orgasm without being touched.”

“You’re apologizing? That was hot as hell. Fuck.”

“But you didn’t come.” Erwin ran a knuckle along his jaw.

“There are other ways to get me off. You could fuck me with your fingers.”

Erwin looked up at him, eyes wide, and Levi didn’t blame him. The words surprised him, too. *Where did that come from?* He had cleaned himself carefully just in case, but he hadn’t expected to want to act on it.

“Look,” he said, shrugging it off, “you just made yourself completely vulnerable to me and let me do something I’ve always wanted to do, so I’ll do the same to you. That’s all there is to it.” His mind was spinning around the idea: *Erwin’s fingers inside me, his gaze on me, teasing me, waiting. Why does that idea seem so hot right now?*

But then again, a lot of things were hot right now that shouldn’t be, like the mess on their abdomens, the sweat trailing down Erwin’s temple. He felt as if he were drunk, all his inhibitions stripped away. Hell, it wasn’t even bothering him that his pants were crumpled on the dresser. He pulled out.

“Where do you want to do this?” Erwin asked.

“On the bed.”

“Then I should disengage.” Erwin pressed his feet to the ground and stood, then retracted the gear anchors. The instant he was no longer supported, his legs buckled.

“Easy there.” Levi caught him and held him up.

“Bit weak in the knees.”

Was that just post-orgasm weakness, or a result of pushing too hard on the proposal? Levi felt a flicker of worry, and tried to cover it: “Guess I fucked you too hard.”

“Just hard enough, I’d say.” Erwin pulled away, still a bit unsteady, and removed the gear, leaving his harnesses on. He bent down to pick up the bottle, then paused on his way up to kiss Levi’s forehead. “Let’s move to the bed.”

For a few minutes, they sat on the edge of the mattress, kissing each other’s mouths and necks. Levi wondered if it was obvious that he was stalling. He found himself wishing Erwin would be more aggressive; otherwise, this might never happen.

Finally, his patience wore out. He nipped at Erwin’s earlobe. “Are we going to do this, or what?”

Erwin pulled back to study him. “Tell me what you need, Levi.”

“I need to not make any decisions.”

After a moment, Erwin said, “Lie on your back.”

He obeyed. Erwin settled between his legs; he ran a hand down the side of Levi’s face, then trailed it down his neck, then his arm. He gripped the wrist and moved it, pressing Levi’s hand and groin together, then wrapped the fingers into place.

“We overwhelmed you with too much stimulation last time, so let’s keep this simple,” he said. “I want you to touch yourself slowly. Let me know if you need me to slow down or stop.” He kissed his navel, then pulled back to douse his finger in oil.

Now that Levi knew what to expect, the first touch wasn’t as jarring as it had been the first couple times. He spread his legs further apart to make it easier on Erwin, pulling his knees a bit closer to his chest. This would probably be easiest if he was on all fours, but he wasn’t ready to expose himself so brazenly just yet. Still, the mattress was soft and saggy, and he could tell the angle was awkward.

“Here.” He grabbed a pillow and put it under his ass, tilting his hips up. He had only been thinking about making access easier for Erwin, but now he realized, too late, that the movement had put him on display. Erwin’s gaze drifted to his finger and held, and Levi’s face burned.

“Is it okay?” he asked, worried that something unsightly might be holding Erwin’s attention.

“Yes. More than okay.” Erwin’s finger traced a circle; his other

hand slid down Levi's hamstrings, then cupped his ass. His face was relaxed, the corners of his lips curled in a tiny hint of a smile. "How is it so far?"

"Not bad." Levi closed his eyes, focusing on the sensation. "Kind of tickles a bit." He idly began to tug at himself, just enough to keep himself hard.

"Shall I try going in?"

He shrugged. "Yeah."

His muscles relaxed more easily this time, at first, but then Levi began to panic. *Is it easier because we stretched my asshole? What if we keep doing this regularly? Am I going to start shitting myself all the time?* He knew the thoughts were ridiculous—he'd been doing this with partners for half his life, and they'd never had any problems like that—but his own body was different. It needed to be pristine, untouched, clean. His eyes flew open. "Erwin—"

The finger had already frozen in place; his tension must have been obvious. Placid blue eyes focused on him. "Need me to stop?"

"Just wait a moment." Levi took several deep breaths. He tried to focus on whatever had driven him to request this in the first place, and found himself remembering how excited Erwin had been after their last attempt. "Why do you like doing this?" he asked, latching onto the idea.

Erwin kissed his thigh. "The intimacy of it. I love knowing that you're letting me into an area of your body that's been relatively unexplored. And I must confess I love the sensations—the tightness, the warmth." His voice was gentle, almost soothing, and Levi felt his panic begin to fade.

"Does it turn you on?"

Instead of answering right away, Erwin shifted his position, showing that he was semi-erect. "You know how slowly I recover, and look at me. If I hadn't just come as hard as I did ... "

Levi stared, head spinning. "Okay, keep going."

Erwin continued kissing his thigh, slowly pressing deeper. Levi held his gaze, focusing on the thought: *this is turning him on, it's turning him on ...*

Lightning shot through his groin and the inside of his cock, and he gasped.

"There?" Erwin asked.

Levi nodded, holding his breath. It already felt so much different than last time.

“Breathe,” Erwin reminded him, his voice still gentle. “Would you like me to try a few things so we can see what you like?”

Remembering to take slow breaths, Levi nodded again.

“First, I’m going to try different amounts of pressure. Your body will probably tell me what you like, but don’t be afraid to be vocal about it.”

“Okay.” Levi lay back, giving himself a few more strokes as he waited to feel something different. At first, he was getting that strange full-bladder-like sensation from before, but then there was the lightning sensation again, and it grew into a beautiful ache, almost a hunger. “Oh, shit.”

“Like that?”

“Yeah. Fuck.” He gave himself a few more strokes, letting his head roll along the pillow.

“You like heavy pressure. I suspected as much. Does it feel good?”

“Yeah, it’s not bad.” He looked down at Erwin, whose jaw was rigid, his eyes sharp and focused. *He’s so into it.*

“I’d like to try out some different motions with my finger next.”

“Sure.”

The stimulation began to vary, and Levi felt himself begin to melt under the fiery gaze and the careful attention. His head sagged back to the pillow, and he felt a groan catch in his throat. He held it back, still a bit shy. To his surprise, he was beginning to miss the stretching sensation that had been present up until a minute or two ago.

“Everything okay?” Erwin asked.

“Yeah, why?”

“You’re awfully quiet up there.”

Levi lifted his head to look at him. Erwin’s cheeks were red, his eyelids heavy. “It feels pretty good.” *I want more*, he thought, but his mouth wouldn’t form the words.

“Keep going?”

“Yeah.”

Erwin kissed a line along his thigh again, his free hand smoothing Levi’s abdomen. “I love that you’re letting me do this. I love reaching into you like this, being inside you, a part of you.”

Levi could relate—he enjoyed doing the same thing for the same reasons. His body was starting to ache for another finger, and he cloaked it in a safe thought: *I love that moment when he begs me for more, so*

*I bet he'll love it if I do the same.*

“I need—” He was certain his face must be beet red. “Give me another finger.”

Erwin’s brows peaked. He pulled out and added more oil, then began to gently ease his way in again.

This time, Levi felt that stretch, that glorious stretch, and he couldn’t hold back a groan. “Fuck!”

“Still okay?” Erwin asked, arousal gravelling his voice, and Levi felt a shiver run through his body. *He's so fucking turned on by this, he's so fucking into it ...* He forced himself to lift his head again.

“Are you hard, Erwin?”

“Yeah.” Even his gaze was hard, staring at him with the piercing intensity he wore when he was close to orgasm. He pushed the fingers to the same depth as before.

Levi’s head fell back with a moan. His skin was sensitive and tingling, his muscles glowing. “Shit.” *I want more*, he realized, and the thought shocked him.

“Don’t forget about this.” Erwin gripped his wrist and moved it in a jerking motion.

Levi’s breath came in blasts as he followed Erwin’s lead, moving his hand. Pressure was already beginning to build inside him; he let out a cry to vent it, but it built again immediately after, worse than before. He forced his eyes open a crack so he could see the fixation on Erwin’s face.

“Shit! Erwin—”

“Come on.” The fingers pressed harder, almost crossing the border into pain, and Levi felt his limbs tense as he began to crest.

He had heard of full-body orgasms, had given many to others, but had never experienced one for himself until now. The pleasure rippled through his limbs and digits, then back to centre, his stomach muscles contracting in waves that lifted his upper body off the bed. He was vaguely aware that he was yelling, but he couldn’t hear it over the blood rushing in his ears. When it finally began to ebb, he forced his eyes open and, seeing the awe on Erwin’s face, found he still had a few contractions left.

Then it was over, and every muscle slackened at once. He fell back to the mattress, breathing hard.

“Levi,” Erwin breathed, and he began to frantically kiss Levi’s thigh, his knee, his abdomen.

Levi's eyes cracked open as he watched Erwin work his way up his body, and then the frantic mouth was mashing into his, the angle hurting his bruised nose, but he barely felt the pain. Erwin rolled him onto his side so they were facing each other, limbs wrapping around each other, tongues sliding together.

Then Erwin pulled away, breathing hard. Mussed blond hair hung in his face, his cheeks and lips were rosy, and his eyes were glassy.

“You aren’t going to start crying, are you?” Levi asked.

Erwin laughed—not his usual reserved chuckle, but an honest, uncensored laugh. “Levi, you’re smiling.”

“I’m not,” he retorted, but he could feel that he was.

Erwin’s thumb ran across his lower lip. “I’ve never seen you smile like this.”

“Yeah, well I’ve never heard you laugh like that. I guess that’s what happens when we fuck each other’s brains out.” Levi ran a hand down Erwin’s chest. The hair was damp, and he vaguely wondered if it was sweat or other bodily fluids.

“So, it was better this time around?”

“You don’t have to interview me every time we mess around, you know. It’s creepy. Like you’ve got some Levi-fucking strategy you’re fine-tuning.”

“Maybe I am.” Erwin kissed his forehead. “We’re going to miss dinner if we don’t get back to the base soon. I can show you how to use my shower—I’m sure you’re anxious to get cleaned up.”

“Thanks.” Levi was surprised to discover that he wasn’t. He glanced at the crumpled clothes he had left on the dresser, but felt only mild annoyance, not his usual need to straighten them. The discarded feather duster was still bothering him, however, lying out of place on the floor. The dust was probably settling back into place on the bookshelves, too. He shivered. “One of these days, I’m going to clean this place for you.”

“If you like. Maybe we could do some sort of paperwork-for-cleaning labour trade.” Erwin pulled him in for one last kiss, then stood. “Come on, we should get moving.”

63

After a hastily eaten dinner, even hastier packing, and some careful revisions, Erwin was ready to leave for the Capital.

As the city clock tower rang ten o'clock, he knocked on Levi's door under the guise of seeking help with his luggage. Levi yanked him into the room and closed the door. They shared a long, deep kiss; Erwin slowly rubbed Levi's biceps, memorizing the way he tasted and felt.

Then Levi leaned against his chest, wrapping his arms around him. "You going to jerk off a lot while you're gone?"

Erwin chuckled and kissed the top of his head. "I'm not sure I'll have the time or the privacy. If I do, I'll certainly be recalling the way you looked writhing on the bed this afternoon." His throat tightened. "I'm going to miss you, Levi."

"Shut up. It's only a couple days." Levi's arms tightened around him. "Don't let Sahlo push you around."

"I'll do what I can." He paused. "I'm afraid the driver is waiting for me, and our schedule is tight."

"Fine." Levi pulled away. "Where's your luggage?"

They loaded the carriage, and, with other eyes on them, exchanged a formal nod.

"Good luck with the squad selections," Erwin said stiffly.

Levi shrugged. "See you in a few days."

Their gaze held for a moment longer, then Erwin stepped into the carriage and closed the door.

Though the long carriage ride would have been more entertaining with Levi present, he still managed to make it productive: first, he was putting finishing touches on his proposal, then he was practicing his presentation, and finally, he slept. His body was still catching up on all the sleep he had missed; he didn't awaken until the carriage came to a full stop in front of the military barracks.

"We were a bit delayed in Stohess, sir," the driver said. "I'm afraid you don't have much time to spare before your appointment."

Erwin thanked him, but his stomach twisted. He hastily dropped off his luggage in the spare room he was borrowing, then took a minute to check his appearance in the mirror. Grabbing his files, he hurried to the door.

When he arrived at the parliament building, he was surprised to find Lord Sahlo waiting for him in the lobby.

"Commander Erwin," the lord said, the words accompanied by a surprisingly warm expression. They shook hands. "How was your trip?"

"Unexpectedly rushed."

"What an oddly specific response." Sahlo gave him a smug grin.

“As agreed, I am fully prepared to back your proposal today. I trust you were able to put something together, and you won’t make both of us look like asses?”

“That remains to be seen. The timeframe was significantly shorter than usual.”

“Then I suppose today will either make or break our business relationship.” He clapped a hand to Erwin’s shoulder. “I want you to join me for drinks once this meeting is over. We have much to discuss.”

*He’s trying to show me that he’s the one in control here.* The more interactions they shared, the less confident Erwin became. He had to find a way to tip the balance back in his favour. “I’ll see if I can make time in my schedule.”

“I’d recommend that you do.” Sahlo nodded at him. “Follow me. Everyone’s waiting on you.”

*Did he just stall me to try to make it look as if I were running late?* Erwin frowned.

As he entered the meeting room, he saluted Commander-in-Chief Zackly, who nodded at him. Four other lords were seated at the table, two of them new faces. One was presumably Lobov’s new replacement, and the other was a middle-aged man with round features and dark hair. Erwin made a note to follow up with his contacts about these two later. He didn’t like facing unknown entities.

Aloud, he said, “Thank you, all, for agreeing to meet with me on such short notice.”

“Lord Sahlo was insistent that this expedition would change the future of the Survey Corps.” Zackly raised a brow. Erwin had worked with him enough times to understand what that expression meant: Zackly understood that Sahlo was trying to pressure him. Erwin felt himself relax. Having an ally in the meeting would be helpful.

“Indeed, sir, what I’m presenting to you today is the first phase of the new direction of the Survey Corps.” He set two copies of his proposal in the centre of the table, then began to unfold maps and visual aids. “With Lord Sahlo’s help, we’ve obtained a list of abandoned silos outside Wall Rose filled with medical supplies, food rations, weapons and ammunition. The expedition I’m proposing today has a single goal: we will recover as many of these supplies as we can. For some time, we’ve wanted to build supply bunkers leading out to Wall Maria for a future reclamation effort, but there was always the fear of draining the limited resources located within Wall Rose and Wall Sina. If

we repurpose the contents of these silos, as I'm going to propose today, we will be able to make great headway with very little impact to the citizens within the walls."

The Lords stared blankly at him, but Zackly raised a brow. "Oh?" Erwin smiled. "Why don't I walk you through it?"

## B

The presentation went surprisingly smoothly. They broke for lunch, during which the lords gossiped at length about nobles Erwin did not know. After lunch, Erwin fielded their questions, most of them from Zackly. He closed out the meeting with a promise to further humanity's cause and a resounding salute.

As the other lords departed, Zackly pulled him aside. "A bit sloppier than your usual proposals, Erwin, but still a fine job."

"I'm afraid some enthusiastic parties pushed this forward more quickly than I anticipated, sir."

Zackly leaned closer. "I figured as much. Don't worry, it was solid. I don't want to promise anything yet, but I'm confident we'll be able to push this through. Come by my office tomorrow afternoon and we'll discuss. I have a few more questions to consider when it comes to the actual execution of your plan."

Erwin nodded and saluted.

Sahlo was waiting for him in the lobby again. His smile was too broad, his eyes still dead and even. "I must say, I'm a little disappointed with the quality of your proposal, but you seem to have fooled the rest of those assholes. May I treat you to dinner? I have a location in mind that might suit your temperament."

He was still exuding arrogance. Erwin began to regret leaving Levi behind; a good threat might scare him back into place. Maybe dinner would present him with a subtle way to regain control.

Sahlo led him to a carriage, but Erwin shook his head. "We're walking."

"It's quite far."

"I'm sure I can handle it." He wasn't about to get into a carriage and leave himself open to be taken to a random location.

"Have it your way." Sahlo shrugged; they began to walk. "You don't trust me, do you? You're reading this all wrong, Commander. I've taken a genuine interest in you, and I've come to realize it's in my best

interest if you succeed.”

Erwin glanced at him. “I see you’re wearing a new hat.”

The lord grimaced. “Your guard dog did a number on the old one—what’s his name again? The thug from the Underground.”

“Levi.”

“Levi, that’s it. He’s loyal, I’ll give him that. What does it take to turn a ruffian into a loyal dog in such a short period of time? Surely not blackmail—it’s not as if a criminal values his reputation.”

“I showed him the bigger world outside the walls,” Erwin said, “and I treated him with respect.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it. Someone who has been kicked around his whole life will respond well to being treated like a human being.” He refused to let his face betray even the slightest hint of emotion, even though his heart warmed. It was strange to think about how different their relationship had been back then.

“Hm.” Sahlo was silent for a few minutes, then said, “Here we are.”

Erwin stepped into the restaurant, surveying the room. The restaurant was surprisingly quiet, and he quickly realized why: a chess board sat in the centre of each table.

“I overheard Commander Shadis speaking with Commander Pixis a couple years back, saying you were quite the chess player. Everyone was already talking about you then, saying you were going to be a Commander yourself one day.” Sahlo slid into a table and wiped his damp brow, out of breath from the walk. “Care to indulge me in a game?”

Erwin sat at the table, eyes fixed on the board. *He wants to size me up, determine how threatening my strategic skills are.* Should he play for real and intimidate Sahlo, but potentially reveal information about how he operated? Or should he play sloppily and lull him into a false sense of security?

A server approached the table and set a box between them. “Lord Sahlo. Commander. What would you like?”

“Two glasses of red,” Sahlo said, “and two chicken pies.” He opened the box to reveal chess pieces, then began to arrange them on the chess board. “They say you can learn more from a single game of chess with a man than you can in an entire week’s worth of conversation. I thought this would be a good way to get acquainted with each

other, Smith—may I call you Smith?”

“I’d prefer Commander or Erwin.”

“Odd name, that. Smith. Your file says you spent some time in the City growing up, and yet no family named Smith has ever lived within the inner walls.” Still bent over the pieces, Sahlo peered up at him from under the rim of his hat. “Almost. Records do indicate a family named Smith appearing briefly, only to disappear into the Wall Church, never to be seen again. I’m well-acquainted with many high-ranking Wallists, and not a single one of them knew you had any ties to them at all. More than that, the name Smith is so common in the outer walls that it’s impossible to trace. You’re a man without a past, Erwin Smith. Does Commander-in-Chief Zackly know about the mystery that surrounds you?”

“I believe my years of loyal service speak more loudly for me than my humble roots ever could.” Though recalling his sister’s visit still made his chest ache, he silently thanked her and his mother for changing their names once they had formally entered the church. Perhaps all those years of his mother’s paranoia had been more practical than he had assumed.

“Black or white?” The Lord motioned to the pieces. The first test: did he want the first move?

“White,” Erwin said, deciding to present himself as a man who seized every advantage. His goal would be to intimidate Sahlo while underrepresenting his own strategic prowess at the same time.

Sahlo turned the board. “Your move.”

Erwin moved a pawn. “What about you, Lord Sahlo? Mitras, born and raised?”

“Ah, Smith, my history is well known. I’d rather talk about you some more.” The wine arrived; he took a long sip of one glass, sliding the other across the table. “I know you and Nile go way back, but I get the feeling he has conflicted feelings about you. His words to describe your personality weren’t exactly flattering.”

“It’s still your move.”

“Ah, right.” Sahlo slid a pawn two squares forward. “How were you able to command the loyalty of Levi within less than a year, but not Nile after more than a decade? Couldn’t you show him a bigger world and treat him with respect?”

“Nile has no interest in a bigger world. More than that: we were in love with the same woman long ago, and he never learned how to

drop a grudge. It's a pity, as we were quite close, once." He took a sip of wine, then slid another pawn forward.

"Ah, so you're a ladies' man."

"A bit, at the time. No time for such things any more."

Sahlo held his gaze. "You know that transfer you requested, of three soldiers? Nile wants to make the third one an informant. He's convinced we need to keep an eye on you."

Erwin's blood ran cold. The whole point of the transfer had been to give them an opportunity to spoon-feed information back to Sahlo. *Does he know that's what I was doing, or is he just trying to win my trust by backstabbing Nile?* "That's unfortunate."

"I think I talked him out of it, but I'd keep an eye on those transfers, if I were you."

The lord's chatter began to fade as the chess game proceeded. Erwin played recklessly, sacrificing pawns and both his bishops to push his advantage. He could tell Sahlo was playing sloppily as well. They ate their food and started second glasses of wine, each turn slowing down as the game progressed.

Erwin had just offered up his second rook, when Sahlo cursed and picked up the board, dumping the pieces on the table. Erwin jumped.

"Stop jerking me around!" the lord growled. There was that temper Erwin had seen when he and Levi had first threatened him: Sahlo's face was red, his teeth bared.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you're throwing the game on purpose. I don't have time for bullshit." The Lord leaned across the table. "Do you know why I'm supporting you, Smith? It's not because your little show intimidated me. I know people who could end you and everything you've ever held dear, all in the blink of an eye. They can twist a knife into your weak spots and leave you broken and ruined."

Erwin held his face neutral, not even blinking. *You don't know anything about me, and you have no way of finding out, so how will you find my weak spots?*

For a brief instant, his mind replayed the dream he'd had of a titan-sized Sahlo killing Levi, its face morphing into his own: *you play a dangerous game, boy ...*

He shoved it aside. Nightmares had no place in this strategic setting.

“No, I’m not afraid of you and your ragtag regiment of eager titan feed,” Sahlo continued. “The reason I’m going along with your little show is because I see in you a ruthlessness, a desire to go to great lengths to get exactly what you want. I also see a brilliant manipulator. You were absolutely right when you said our alliance could benefit each other, and I have big plans for both of us, but only if I can be sure you really are the genius everyone says. So stop holding back, and fucking show me how you play!”

Erwin studied him. “Only if you do the same.”

Their gaze held, then Sahlo smiled. “You’re sharp, boy. I’ll give you that. Very well. I won’t hold back, either.”

From the opening moves of their new game, Erwin saw a change come over his opponent: his spine straightened, his jaw set, and the fake smile left his lips. There was a startling subtlety to the lord’s strategy, a tendency to lay traps like a hunter carefully laying a snare. In spite of himself, Erwin felt his respect for Sahlo begin to grow. He had greatly underestimated his intelligence.

Still, like fighting titans, like sparring, every opponent had a weakness, and Erwin excelled at finding them. Soon, Sahlo’s became apparent: he showed a strange tendency to favour the right side of the board, using it for his traps whenever the pieces allowed it, and overlooking similar opportunities on the left. The board layout didn’t allow Erwin to take advantage of that knowledge yet, but when it did, he would be ready to strike.

As they began their fourth glasses of wine, a crowd began to gather. Lord Sahlo was well known among the locals, and Erwin supposed his own strategic prowess must be becoming well known by now. He was completely immune to spectacle, but Sahlo seemed to be considering the crowd’s expressions before he made each move. This, too, provided useful information. *Public opinion matters to him. If I want to pressure him in the future, I need to threaten his reputation with the people.*

As they entered the endgame, Erwin’s body was glowing from the wine, but his mind was sharp. An opportunity began to form: Sahlo was trying to lure him into a checkmate; if Erwin had identified his play correctly, then in a few more moves, Sahlo would leave his own king exposed.

He was noticing another pattern: Sahlo always took down strong pieces if given the opportunity, even if it was risky. *If I use my queen as bait, I can convince him to open up on the left, and then I can take him.*

He slid a bishop into position, waiting. *Two moves until he checks me.*

Next, he positioned his knight. *One.*

“Check,” Sahlo said, smirking. As was Erwin’s design, the rook holding his king in check was also perfectly positioned to take the queen. The crowd murmured, impressed.

Erwin raked a hand through his hair, faking stress. He took a long sip of wine, then stepped his king out of the way.

Two more moves, and Sahlo could have taken him down, but, as predicted, he went straight for the queen instead, leaving a hole in his defenses.

Erwin advanced with his bishop. “Check.”

Sweat ran down Sahlo’s temple. His only option was to move his king to the right or the left. Erwin held his breath, waiting. Sahlo would go to the right and then attempt to trap him with his bishop. He always favoured the right. The crowd was murmuring, and Sahlo’s gaze darted to them, then back to the board.

The king shifted right.

Erwin moved his knight. “Checkmate.”

The crowd began to clap, and Sahlo’s crestfallen look told Erwin everything he needed to know: the lord had truly been playing to win. *I got a perfect read on him, and he knows it.*

The power balance was once again in his favour.

“Damn.” Sahlo flicked his king onto its side. “I see the rumours about you weren’t an exaggeration.” For the first time all day, he looked uncomfortable. He held out his hand. “I look forward to working with you, Smith.”

“Commander,” Erwin corrected, shaking his hand.

## -18-

# DOORS

“Excited?” Hange asked.

Levi shrugged. “Not really.”

“No? You’re dancing in place.”

Realizing he was shifting his weight from one leg to the other, Levi frowned and stood tall, folding his arms over his chest. “I just want to know if the proposal went through or not. The blond bastard has kept us waiting long enough.” Erwin’s one-or-two-day trip to the Capital had turned into five. A message on the second day had stated he was spending time meeting with investors, but Levi didn’t believe that was the only delay. Was Sahlo giving him a hard time? Was the proposal encountering difficulties?

The carriage pulled into the yard and stopped. Hange greeted the driver, then rounded the back to start unloading the baggage, but Levi waited.

The door swung open, and his breath caught as Erwin stepped through it.

“Good morning, Levi,” he said, the morning sun illuminating the border of his hair like a halo.

Levi scrutinized his face and found no hint of emotion, just his default polite, empty smile. “Been awhile.”

“Yes, sorry for the delay—I hope my absence didn’t hinder your work. Let’s assemble the Squad Leaders after I’ve finished my breakfast.” He squeezed a shoulder as he walked past, the movement so gentle that it was almost a caress, and Levi’s blood stirred.

The three of them hauled several bags upstairs.

“Didn’t you leave with a single bag?” Levi asked.

“Some of our investors were kind enough to give us supplies for the upcoming mission as gifts of good faith: dried meat, tea, coffee, blankets.” They set the baggage against a wall in Erwin’s office, and Erwin smiled. “Ah, I see the new couches arrived intact. Good. Hange, please tell Berit and Mike that we’ll have an officer’s meeting here in approximately twenty minutes. Levi, I’d like you to accompany me to breakfast. I have some information I want to run past you.”

“Sir. I’ll leave you two to talk.” Hange saluted and left the room, giving a wink to Levi before the door closed.

Levi’s cheeks burned. He folded his arms over his chest again, staring up at Erwin. He wanted to jump up and wrap all four limbs around the taller man, kissing his lips, chin and neck, but that empty smile was making him hesitate.

“Well?” he said. “You’re gone five fucking days and I don’t even get a kiss?”

“My apologies, Levi,” Erwin said, the fake smile finally relaxing. “I’m desperately pent up. I don’t trust myself to kiss you right now without getting carried away, and we have other duties to attend to first.”

“Maybe a hug?” Levi asked, not wanting to admit how badly he needed contact.

“If it’s brief.”

They met in a chaste embrace, only their upper bodies making contact.

Erwin buried his face in the top of Levi’s hair. “It’s good to see you, Levi.”

“Yeah. Good to see you, too.” Hearing his name leave those thick, shapely lips made Levi’s heart pound. He pressed his cheek to his chest, and found a heartbeat racing so fast that it rivalled his own. *I guess I’m not the only one who’s feeling sentimental.*

“It feels as if it’s been longer than five days.” Erwin dropped his arms and stepped back, and this time, there was kindness in his smile. “The world doesn’t stop when we’re apart, but it certainly feels lonelier.”

“That’s a good way to put it.”

Erwin straightened a strand of Levi’s hair into place, his knuckle tracing down his cheek before pulling away. “Shall we head to breakfast?”

The mess hall was empty save for a cluster of stragglers talking animatedly over empty plates. Erwin helped himself to some oatmeal and Levi poured a cup of tea. They settled at a small table near the back

of the room, out of earshot of the other soldiers.

Levi nursed the tea, his third cup that morning. “Did the proposal go through?”

“Yes, yesterday morning. Zackly was on board from the start, and Sahlo, to his credit, was pushing hard on the other representatives. There were a couple unknowns—two new Council members—who took some extra convincing. Sahlo offered to lean heavily on them if needed, but I decided to book extra meetings with them instead, to walk them through their concerns. That seemed to do the trick.” Erwin’s jaw muscle tightened. “I don’t want Sahlo doing us too many favours.”

Levi studied the tensing jaw line. “Did something happen with that asshole?”

“Yes.” Erwin paused to eat a spoonful of oatmeal, then continued. “Traditionally, I keep my political schemes to myself, but because you’re you, Levi, I’m going to keep you apprised of all my dealings. Anything I tell you is to remain between the two of us.” He looked up, the blue eyes kind. “When you’re eventually standing beside me as my Captain, I want us to be peers more often than we’re superior-subordinate. You have a sharp eye for reading people, and strong short-term tactical instincts. I sometimes think too long-term and lose perspective on the immediate future, so I can benefit from your perspective. You also have an intimate knowledge of the Underground culture, while my understanding of it is only cursory. That’s why I need your opinion on a few things I learned about Sahlo.”

Levi’s brows rose at the unexpected compliments. He had never thought of himself as a tactical person; if anything, he saw himself as a weapon to be aimed. “Okay, go ahead.”

Erwin spoke about the meeting in detail, then a chess game at a cafe. “I was confident I had regained the upper hand. The next night, however, I was supposed to meet him at his office to detail future fund delivery. When I arrived at his office, he was accompanied by two escorts. One for him, one for me. A peace offering.”

“Escorts,” Levi repeated, his stomach dropping as his mind immediately went to the worst-case scenario. *Not wanting to offend his new business partner, he—*

“Levi.” Erwin leaned closer, his voice lowering. “You know I consider us to be exclusive, right? We haven’t spoken about it formally, but I have no desire to be with anyone else—particularly someone who has been bought and traded as if they were a commodity.”

“Of course I know that.”

“You looked a little worried.”

“Why the hell would I be worried?” Levi asked, his brows dropping. “Keep going. What happened?”

“I politely declined, of course. I can’t figure out his angle. Perhaps she was going to physically harm me, or he was setting up future blackmail material, or he was otherwise trying to test me. My concern is the latter—perhaps he was trying to dig up information on the current state of my sex life, or my sexual preferences, or—”

“Or he’s just a pervert who wanted to suck up to you after you defeated him at chess, and you’re overthinking the whole thing.”

“Ah.” Erwin smiled. “I suppose that’s possible. Regardless, I noticed a symbol tattooed on the women’s ankles, one I’ve seen around the Underground: a diamond shape split into two triangles, a dot in the centre of the top one.”

“Rage,” Levi said. “All his affiliates get that tattoo.”

“Rage?”

“Rage Klein, one of the Underground kingpins of the sex trade and black market goods.”

“I see.” Erwin paused. “I assume Rage is a nickname.”

“Never thought to ask. Beat him up one time, got the shit kicked out of me by his henchmen another, and that’s all I know about him.” Levi studied Erwin’s face, trying to guess where the discussion was leading. “Are you thinking he has ties to Sahlo?”

“Maybe. Maybe he just wants me to think he does. Or maybe it’s just a coincidence that he hired those particular women.” Erwin rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I’ve been trying so hard to think like him over the past few days that I don’t know which way is up anymore. Regardless, I’m interested to investigate this a bit to see if there are any ties—the more information I have about him, the easier it will be to keep him in check in the future.”

“And you want me to investigate it?” guessed Levi, his heart pounding in his throat. He hadn’t been back to the Underground since he had joined the Survey Corps, and now that he was a high-profile soldier, he certainly wouldn’t be well-received.

“I’m not sure that will be necessary. I re-established connection with an old contact in the Underground, and I’m thinking of asking her to pursue this lead for me.” He side-eyed Levi, a faint smirk on his lips. “Her name is Leona Reid, and she asked me to pass along a hello. App-

arently you two go way back?"

"Shit," Levi muttered, knowing exactly what was coming next.

"She said you owe her a substantial amount of money."

"Of course she did. Did she mention that it was her stupid son's fault I borrowed it in the first place?"

Erwin's eyes twinkled. "The same son you used to date?"

Levi shook his head, lips flattening. "That was years ago."

"Apparently he's married with two adopted kids now, doing well for himself in the factories. She thought you might like to know."

"Yeah, great. Maybe she should ask *him* for money." Levi shook his head. "Why the hell is she one of your contacts? Do you fake a lot of documents?"

"I do."

The answer surprised him. "Like what?"

"Mostly receipts or invoices." Erwin paused, stirring his oatmeal, then added quietly, "My identification papers."

Levi took a long sip of tea, then set the cup on the table. "You don't have your original papers?"

"No, my mother destroyed them when we took the name Smith. Once I ran away from home, I needed identification to join the military, so I wandered into the Underground in my best suit, carrying a large sum of money, and started asking around." Erwin shook his head. "I was so sheltered, so naïve."

"No kidding. How long did it take before you got mugged?"

"About ten minutes. A group of kids took all the money I had on me. I—" Erwin looked away. "I must have been visibly upset—"

"You were crying."

Erwin cleared his throat. "I was visibly upset, and Leona happened to see me and take pity on me. She always said I reminded her of her son, something I find interesting now, given your history with him."

"Yeah, so maybe I have a type."

"Then I'm fortunate I match it. At any rate, her help all those years ago started a working relationship that has continued to this day." He paused. "What's your take on her, Levi? Is she trustworthy?"

"Yeah, she's good."

"Glad to hear it. At some point, I should walk you through all my Underground contacts and get your opinion on their reliability. At any rate, I'm thinking of getting her to trace Sahlo's movements around this Rage fellow. Not too soon, of course. We can't discard the possibility

that Sahlo is trying to bait me so he can track *my* contacts.”

He sounded fatigued. The black eye from his fight with Mike was almost unnoticeable now, but both his eyes were shadowed and sunken.

“You didn’t get enough sleep while you were gone, did you?” Levi asked quietly.

“No, I probably didn’t.”

“Why are you so worried about him? He’s just one lord. Isn’t there a whole panel of them approving expeditions?”

Erwin lifted another spoonful of oatmeal to his lips, taking the time to chew it before continuing. “Remember Lobov? He was just one man, and a less crafty one than Sahlo, but he still managed to erode Survey Corps support. Sahlo has more connections and greater intelligence; if left unchecked, he could spell the end of our entire regiment. I have to control him now, before he manages to gain control of the entire government while our backs are turned.”

His voice was so gravelly that Levi wished he could reach over and grip his hand. “You wanted my take on all this, right? I think you need to take a week to get your head on straight. You’ve been trying so hard to think like him, from every angle, that you’re getting paranoid. So maybe he’s smarter than you expected—he’s still not smarter than you. Don’t think too much and end up overestimating him. You’ll tie yourself in knots.”

Erwin smiled. “I suppose you’re right. I’ll take some time to let all this simmer in the back of my mind. I just have one last question for you: say Sahlo was involved with Rage Klein. What sort of dealings might that mean?”

Levi shrugged. “He might just be a regular solicitor of the sex workers, but it’s possible he could be using his shipping business to ship Rage’s goods. Drugs would be a good guess—when I was running drugs, most of the clients were nobles, so I wouldn’t be surprised if Sahlo had his hands in them. Rage hates my guts, but I know a few people close to him who might be able to look into it from the dealing end.” He noticed Erwin was staring at him. “What?”

“I didn’t realize you were involved in the drug trade.”

“Oh. Shit.” Levi’s stomach dropped; that was a detail about his past he hadn’t ever wanted to reveal. “Look, I was young and alone. I needed money fast, and my options were drugs or selling my body, and I was more than happy to give away my body for free, so that only left

one option. I broke away as soon as I could afford it.”

Erwin was looking at him with something close to pity, and Levi’s jaw clenched. This was exactly why he hadn’t ever wanted to bring it up. He didn’t want to think of the look he’d see on that face if he revealed he had, for a short while, been in the habit of sampling his own merchandise. Or maybe Erwin already knew. It didn’t take a genius to guess that a kid on the streets looking to forget his past might spend a few months dabbling in self-medication before he came to his senses.

He shrugged it off. “The point is, you can use my contacts, too, if you need to.”

The pitying look faded. “Thank you, Levi. We don’t need to follow up on this just yet, but it’s good to know there are options for the future.”

“Yeah.” Levi frowned, lost in his memories. There had been one other option available to him when he had first struck out on his own in the Underground: mercenary work. He would have been good at it, but it was also exactly what he was running from. No, he had wanted to escape his past, smothering it beneath every bit of pleasure he could cram into each day. Looking back now, it had been a dark period of his life, but maybe all that misbehaviour had kept him alive—maybe it had helped him through his worst days, giving him moment-to-moment reprieve until his feet found the ground again. He was glad he had come out of it sober, disease-free, and relatively unscathed.

“Levi?”

He looked up. The blue eyes were still boring through him.

“I’m glad we met when we did,” Levi said. “I was in a dark place for a few years there.”

“I sometimes wonder,” Erwin said quietly, “what would have happened if I had met you earlier, if you had entered the military at the usual age. Would it have saved you any pain? Or was that pain necessary in order to hone you into the man you are today?”

*Isabel and Farlan would still be alive*, Levi thought, but he shoved the thought aside. “There’s no point second-guessing it. You’re over-thinking things again. What happened, happened, and things turned out okay.” Under the table, his booted foot found Erwin’s.

“I suppose it did.”

Levi’s voice lowered: “And by the way, of course we’re exclusive, you idiot.”

Erwin’s boot slid against his. “I didn’t want to presume.”

"You think I let just anyone do the kind of stuff you do to me?"

"Well, last time we tried to define what we were, you seemed a bit hesitant," Erwin said.

"Only because the word 'boyfriend' is too childish, 'lover' is too dramatic, and 'partner' is too businesslike." Levi's cheeks darkened.

Erwin leaned in, a mischievous grin on his face. "How about soul mates?"

Levi's nose wrinkled. "No."

"Sweethearts?"

"Erwin—"

"Passionate life mates?"

"Knock it off." Levi kicked his ankle. "We're just *us*. We don't need a word for it. It's not like we need to define it for anyone, anyway."

"I suppose you're right." Erwin's smile softened, his look so loving that Levi couldn't hold his gaze.

"Knock that off, too. You're going to give us away, looking at me like a fucking sap." Levi nodded his nose at him, pretending his heart wasn't pounding in his chest. "Finish your damned oatmeal."

While Erwin ate, Levi filled him in on the squad recruitment progress. Most of the recruits had been successfully assigned to squads, with only a few stragglers remaining. Mike still wanted a chance to sniff out each of the recruits once his nose healed. "I have no idea how we're going to convince them to let him do it, but he's insisting, so there's still a little shuffling that might go on."

The next step was going to be working with Erwin to break the new squads into teams and assign them to part of the overall formation. "You're back just in time. We should be ready to start that tomorrow."

"Good." Erwin scraped the bowl with his spoon, gathering the last bit of oatmeal, then lifted it to his lips. Once he had swallowed, he said, "It's about time for our debrief. Shall we return to my office?"

As they stood, Levi watched him. There was that cold expression again. It was still strange to him, the way Erwin switched between business and pleasure, as if there were two men living within the same body. *When we win this war, will he be able to turn off that serious side, or will it always be there?*

The other Squad Leaders were waiting for them when they arrived. The three new couches had been arranged to form a square with Erwin's desk. Hange and Berit shared one, and Mike's enormous frame was slung over the second. Levi sank onto the third, folding his arms

over his chest.

Erwin pulled several papers out of his bags, then settled to a seat at his desk. “Thank you, all, for your patience during my absence. The good news is that the expedition has been approved. The bad is that we have only four weeks to prepare our new squads. I’ll be working with you over the next few days to solidify our formation. In the meantime, I want to bring your attention to our route.” He handed a stack of papers to Levi, who took one and passed it down. “Keep in mind that this is only a draft; our scouting party will come back with information about terrain and titan activity, at which point I’ll be revisiting the route. They’ll also be scouting out the two abandoned checkpoints we’ll be using as bases.”

Erwin leaned forward, folding his hands on the desk as he continued. “Because there’s a lot of ground to cover, I want to send out two Squad Leaders and have them each part ways during the day to check out the silos, then rendezvous back at the checkpoints each night. I expect it will take you about a week to cover the entire route, so speed is of utmost importance. Because of this, I’ll ask each of you to take only two teams with you—enough to have backup if you encounter strife, but small enough to be mobile.”

Levi ran a hand through his hair, his body tensing. It was going to be difficult to scout with all-new squads, but he was ready for the challenge. He recalled how dull and slow the titans were, the ones he had seen from his vantage point on the tower last time around; they were just dumb, giant meat-sacks.

“Hange,” Erwin said, “I know you’ve been wanting an excuse to start making observations, and your squad’s defensive capabilities will be useful at the checkpoints. I want you to lead one of the scouting teams.”

Hange sat upright, visibly vibrating. “Sir!”

Mike and Levi exchanged a look. *We’re the two scouting teams*, Levi thought, his brow furrowing. *Erwin, what are you doing?*

“As for the other team,” Erwin said, “Berit, I want you to bring your most skilled fighters.”

Silence settled over the room, so thick it was almost suffocating.

Levi was the first to find his breath. “Berit?”

Erwin’s eyes fixed on him. “You have a question, Levi?”

The gaze was powerful; Levi set his jaw, refusing to be intimidated. “Mike and I are your scouting squads.”

“Mike is at a disadvantage until his nose heals, and your squad is still new. Berit’s squad has, more or less, been intact since before you even joined the Survey Corps. She knows her soldiers’ strengths and weaknesses better than anyone in this room, so she’s in the best position to build suitable teams for this mission.”

“Erwin.” Berit’s face was pale, her eyes wide. “I’m a defensive squad. I’ve always been a defensive squad. If Mike’s not an option, then send Levi.”

“Levi hasn’t completed a single mission with a squad at his command.”

“Neither has Hange. Besides, you know he’s got good battle instincts.”

Erwin eyed her, then the rest of them, one at a time. “Any other thoughts?”

Mike shrugged. “I’ll trust your decision.”

“I won’t,” Levi said. “Not this time. I should be doing this mission, Erwin, and you know it.”

The icy gaze shifted to him, and Levi saw a familiar flicker of fear. He tried to remember where he had seen it before, then his eyes narrowed: Erwin had looked at him this way when they were first talking about their squad types. Was he trying to protect Levi? Hadn’t the whole point of their relationship been that it wouldn’t interfere with their fight against the titans? Anger began to rise in his chest. *The whole reason I trust you is that you don’t make stupid decisions like this.*

“I want Levi with me,” Hange said. “I’d want Berit with me on a full expedition, definitely, but if we’re scouting, we don’t need support; we need speed and offense. Especially if we get penned in at the check-point.”

“Exactly.” Berit folded her arms over her chest, leaning back into the couch. “You of all people should know this makes sense, Erwin. Didn’t you start out on a scouting squad?”

Erwin stared at Levi again, and Levi steeled himself, refusing to duck his eyes. *Listen to us, you asshole.*

“Very well. Your reasons are sound.” Erwin looked down and tapped his stack of papers against the desk to align them. “Hange and Levi will lead the scouting teams. Once the squad selections have been finalized, I’ll touch base with the two of you with more details about what your tasks will entail. With that out of the way, shall we finish off the squad interviews? I understand you’re nearly through the list of

candidates.”

As they began the interviews, Levi folded his arms tightly over his chest, seething. Erwin wouldn’t look him in the eye, even when they broke for lunch, even when Levi tried to get his attention. By the time they wrapped up the last interviews, the dinner bell was about to ring, and Levi was fuming.

The other Squad Leaders stood.

“You going to come to dinner, sir?” Hange asked.

Erwin became busy with aligning a stack of papers again. “I’m afraid my time in the Capital has shifted my appetites to a much later dinner time. I have some paperwork to take care of, anyway.”

“Levi?”

“In a minute. Go ahead without me.”

He waited until the others had left, then marched to the door and locked it for privacy. When he returned, he slammed his palms on the desk. “What the hell is going on with you?”

Erwin slid the papers inside a file. “We’ll discuss it later.”

“No, we’ll discuss it now.”

A thick brow rose as Erwin’s gaze finally met his own. “Watch your tone, Levi. You’re speaking to a commanding officer.”

“No, I’m speaking to *you*, Erwin Smith—the man, not the Commander. First you make a shitty-ass decision, and now you won’t even look me in the eye?”

There was a long pause, then Erwin said softly, “I’m embarrassed.”

The answer was so unexpected that Levi pulled back. “Embarrassed?”

“I made you swear up and down that a relationship between us wouldn’t interfere with our goals, and I’m the one who screwed that up, only a couple weeks in.” His eyes searched Levi’s. “I’m a Commander now—I can’t put everything at risk for love the way I did when I was young and foolish. I thought my reasoning was sound, that I was keeping you out of harm’s way for the good of humanity, but it’s clear, in retrospect, that my bias was twisting my logic. That cannot happen. Ever.”

A lump was forming in Levi’s throat; he swallowed it and marched over to Erwin’s side of the desk so he could loom over him. “Well, when you screw up, don’t take it out on me. You promised you’d try not to shut me out.”

Erwin stood and drew him into an embrace.

Levi's eyes closed and he sank against Erwin's chest, holding him tightly. "Asshole."

"I'm sorry." A hand slowly rubbed up and down Levi's back, soothing him. "I know you're capable, but after what happened on the last mission, I'm more worried than I'd like to admit. Promise me you'll come back safely."

"You think I'm going to die on a shitty little scouting mission? When I go, it's going to be in a blaze of glory, not—" He stopped when he felt a lump forming in the front of Erwin's pants. "Really, Erwin? When I'm talking about my death?"

Erwin cleared his throat. "It's from our proximity, not your words. Like I said, I'm desperately pent up."

Levi's body began to stir. He'd been thinking about their reunion for days, planning to push his own comfort levels to give Erwin a 'welcome home' surprise. Still, feeling that lump pressing against his belly, he found himself too impatient. He needed something quick and familiar. The new, complex stuff could wait a few hours.

"Is your ass clean?" he asked.

"Should be, though I certainly wouldn't recommend using your mouth. If you want me to go bathe to be sure—"

"No, fuck it. Your room or mine?" He gripped Erwin's collars and drew him down for a long kiss. A groan slid between them, and he felt teeth gently close over his tongue.

Erwin tore his mouth away. "You locked the door, right?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"There's lubricant in the top left-hand drawer." Erwin bent in for another kiss, then whispered, "Take me over the desk."

He didn't need to ask twice. Levi rotated Erwin to face the desk, then pressed a hand to his back, shoving him face-down. He began to unhook Erwin's harnesses, then paused to find the lubricant. "When did you put this here?"

"After you went down on me, I couldn't stop thinking about having sex here." Erwin's voice was soft and ragged. "Don't bother with fingers first. Go right in."

"Yeah?" Levi pulled down Erwin's pants to mid-thigh, revealing his broad, muscular ass. He bit his lip and ran his hands over the fuzzy skin.

"Be rough with me, if you want. I'm still embarrassed from be-

fore." Erwin's voice took on a shy tone: "Maybe I need to be punished a little."

Levi felt the urge to groan, but he stifled himself, glancing up at the locked door across the room. There would be people wandering down the hallway at this time of day. That lock wouldn't do them any good if the noises they made could be heard on the other side.

He pulled himself out of his pants and coated himself with a thick layer of lubricant, then gently began to lean into Erwin.

"Fuck." Erwin's shoulders and neck rounding over the top of the desk.

"You okay?"

"Yes. Keep going. Be rougher, if you want."

"Shit," Levi rasped, working his way deeper. Once he was all the way in, his teeth clenched. He couldn't vent his arousal vocally, so he lightly clapped Erwin's ass to show his appreciation.

Erwin groaned. "Yes. Harder."

"My dick, or my hand?"

"Both."

"What, you want me to spank you?"

Erwin tightened around him, then paused, as if considering. "It would seem that I do."

"I can't spank you in your office in the middle of the day, dumbass. Someone's going to hear us." Levi began to thrust quickly, but kept the movements shallow and noiseless.

"Fuck," Erwin said, the word more of a whimper than a whisper.

"Be quiet."

"I can't, not when you're—" A groan interrupted the sentence, this one decidedly loud.

"Shit." Levi untied his cravat and looped it around the front of Erwin's face to cover his mouth, gripping either end to hold it taut. "There, bite down on that. If this doesn't work, we're going to have to stop, so you'd better shut up." He began to thrust again.

Erwin's groans were softer this time, the fabric of the cravat catching most of the noise. It was getting harder and harder to keep his movements shallow, but Levi kept his focus. If he started going deeper, the slapping sounds would echo around the room, and who knew how easily sound would carry through the door? One of them had to keep his wits about him.

Erwin gave a muffled cry, his head dropping again, straining the

cravat tight in Levi's hands. Levi grunted, struggling to maintain control. *Keep it shallow, keep it shallow ...*

Across the room, the doorknob began to twist.

Levi stared dumbly at it, not comprehending what he was seeing. *It's locked. I locked it.*

The door swung open, and Berit and Hange stepped into the doorway.

Levi's eyes locked onto them. Stunned, he dropped the ends of the cravat.

Erwin's head snapped up. Both ends of the cravat fell to the table, the middle part still held between his teeth.

"I knew it!" Hange yelled, just as Berit clapped her hand to her mouth and shrieked.

"Fucking knock first," Levi snapped.

"Oh, fuck. Oh, fuck." Berit grabbed Hange, who had begun to laugh, and stepped back into the hallway.

The door closed behind them.

"Shit." Levi pulled free, fumbling to pull up his pants. "Shit!"

Erwin tore the cravat from his teeth and stood, dressing himself as well. "I thought you locked the door."

"I did." Levi strode across the room and opened the door, testing the lock. The knob twisted, but the deadbolt didn't move. "Your fucking lock is broken." He slammed the door.

"You didn't double-check it when you locked it?"

"No, I didn't double-check it, and don't pin this on me. A lock should fucking work!"

"Well." Erwin sank into his chair, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "At least we were mostly clothed and standing on this side of the desk. Do you think they might be convinced we were doing something else?"

"I was fucking riding you like you were a horse and my cravat was the bridle. I don't think they're going to mistake that for anything else."

"Shit."

"Yeah." Levi began to pace. "Now what do we do?"

"The only thing we can do." Erwin sat straighter in his chair. "This was bound to come up eventually. Let's face it head-on. Go find the two of them, and Mike as well, for a brief meeting here."

"What? Why do I have to do it?"

"Because." Erwin's cheeks darkened. "They just saw me gagged

by your cravat, and I'm sure my bare rear was visible from the door. At least you were in a less compromising position. I'll do the talking when everyone's here."

Levi sighed. "Fine."

He stormed into the hallway and found Hange and Berit huddled in Berit's office. As he approached, Hange started laughing again.

"Shut up, shitglasses," Levi said. "Both of you, meeting in Erwin's office. Now."

Without waiting for them to respond, he turned on his heel. Mike was in the cafeteria, eating a bowl of stew.

"Erwin needs to see you in his office," Levi said.

"Now? I'm still eating."

"Now. Bring it with you."

When he returned to the office, Erwin was leaning against his desk, arms folded defensively over his chest. The cravat and lubricant were nowhere to be seen. Berit sat on the couch, staring fixedly at the floor; Hange sat next to her, gripping the woman's shoulder as if showing support.

Mike stepped into the room carrying his stew.

"Close the door behind you," Erwin said.

"Don't bother trying to lock it." Levi settled against the desk beside Erwin. Erwin cast him a sidelong glance, but said nothing.

Once Mike was seated, Erwin stood tall, his face solemn.

"Thank you, all, for coming. I've asked you here because of an unexpected situation. Two of you are here because you were exposed to something first hand; the other, because you'll become aware of it soon. We had hoped to discuss this on our own terms, but our own careless behaviour has forced us into full disclosure earlier than we would have liked." He paused.

*Stop dragging this out, Levi thought. You're just making things worse.* Berit was turning purple, presumably from embarrassment.

"We join the Survey Corps with a goal in our minds and in our hearts," Erwin said. "Sometimes, however, the human heart can breed other feelings, feelings that might drown out logic when—"

"Just get it over with," Levi said. He turned to the group. "We're fucking."

Berit buried her face in her hands, but Hange only smirked. Mike's expression didn't change.

Erwin cleared his throat. "What Levi is trying to say is that feel-

ings have blossomed between us, and what you saw was us expressing—”

“Please stop. We get it.” Berit finally lifted her head. “Is it even legal for a Commander to fuck one of his subordinates?”

“Well,” Hange said with twinkling eyes, “technically, Levi was the one doing the fucking, right? The Commander himself seemed to be in the receptive position, some sort of gag—”

“Stop.” Berit rocked in her seat. “I’m trying to forget that image.” She suddenly stopped rocking, looking down at the couch cushion beside her. “Please tell me you haven’t done it on the new couches.”

“Are you kidding?” Levi said. “Do you know how hard it is to get semen out of upholstery?”

Berit let out a loud, pained groan and covered her face again, and Erwin dropped a hand on Levi’s shoulder.

“Perhaps you should stop talking for now, Levi.”

Levi shut his mouth and let his gaze trail across the three officers instead. Only Mike seemed to be quiet so far; his hair was hanging in his face, his arms folded over his chest. His meal sat on a side table, forgotten.

“I know we’re asking a lot of you by requesting your silence on this matter,” Erwin said. “You’re correct, Berit: while not outright illegal, this relationship could be considered a conflict of interest, and neither of us is interested in having our feelings put under scrutiny by the courts, especially at this early stage. Furthermore, I have certain political opponents to juggle, and I have no desire to have Levi used against me. If that were to happen, we would all suffer the consequences.” He stood tall and reached for Levi’s hand, as if they were standing united. “You have my word that our relationship won’t interfere with either of our duties. Over time, I hope to prove that to you through our actions.”

The three were silent. Levi felt Erwin’s palm sweating, but when he looked up, Erwin’s face was as cool as if he were discussing expedition strategy.

“Do you have any questions or thoughts?” Erwin asked. “Hange?”

“I do. Why was Levi the one penetrating? Given your size difference, wouldn’t it be more efficient if—”

“That’s none of your damned business,” Levi growled, face hot.

Erwin squeezed his hand to silence him. “The way we choose to express our feelings is not up for discussion.”

“Okay, then I just want to say I’m happy for you.” Hange’s face suddenly became solemn. “We live with heavy burdens. You most of all,

Commander. People shouldn't have to live every moment in misery, focused on their duties, no matter what sort of strife they face—it's a miserable way to live. I'm glad you've found a bit of happiness in this mess. I've got research to keep me happy. Berit has her boyfriend in town. Mike has ... ” A pause. “Smelling things? I don't know what Mike has. But you two always seemed pretty lonely and serious, so I think it's good you found each other. And Levi's a lot less grumpy when he's getting laid, so that's a perk for the rest of us.”

Levi's face burned. “For fuck's sakes—”

“Thank you, Hange. We appreciate your acceptance.” Erwin's gaze shifted. “Berit?”

“Oh, fuck.” Berit shrugged and shifted uncomfortably on the couch, not looking at them. “I just need time to get my head around this. The image is burnt into my brain. Just ... please don't have sex on the couches, okay?”

Levi eyed the couches. The more she spoke about it, the better the idea seemed. *Those cushions have a good bounce to them. Maybe we could cover them in some sort of plastic to keep them clean.*

Erwin studied her. “For what it's worth, I'm truly sorry you saw what you did. I hope time will erase the image from your memory. Are you comfortable keeping our secret?”

“Of course. Just be careful, all right?” Her eyes finally lifted. “I've known you for a few years now, Erwin, and I know your ambitions will always take priority, even if this gets messy. I don't know Levi quite as well, but he seems the same way. The thing is, not everyone here knows you two, especially the newer recruits, and if they'd been the ones walking in on you, they could have run straight to the brass with tales of you shirking your responsibilities. We can't afford to lose either of you over something that stupid.”

“Yes,” Erwin said quietly. “That's very true.”

“And ... ” She looked down again. “That whole thing about this upcoming scouting mission—I want you to think good and hard about it, Erwin. If you chose me, at first, because you honestly thought I was a better fit, then that's fine, but if you were just trying to protect Levi, then ... ” she paused. “That can't happen again. I'm not going to die so that you can keep your fuck buddy safe.”

“I know.” Erwin's face was grim. “Anything more to say?”

“No.”

Levi's arm was getting tired from the awkward angle required to

hold Erwin's hand, and the sweaty palms were starting to bother him. He retracted his hand, wiping it on his pants, and looked up at Erwin. *Are we almost done here?*

Erwin gripped the edge of the desk, his stance relaxing even more, almost awkwardly so, as if he were trying too hard to seem casual. "How about you, Mike?"

Mike stared at them through a curtain of hair. He shrugged.

Erwin tensed. Levi watched him in his periphery, wondering what was silently passing between them.

"Very well," Erwin said finally. "Hange and Berit, you're dismissed."

"Levi, too," Mike said. "I want to talk to you alone."

There was a tension in his voice that Levi had never heard before, an unexpected hardness in his eyes. "You okay?"

"Don't worry, I'll keep your secret." The hair-cloaked eyes shifted to him. "We'll talk later."

"Okay." Levi glanced at Erwin. His jaw was clenched, eyes hard.

He left the room confused, his stomach churning.

cg

The door clicked shut.

Erwin sank to a seat on the couch across from Mike. "I had a feeling you might be upset."

Mike leaned forward, elbows on his thighs, his hands falling loosely between his knees. "Been trying to decide how I'd react when you finally came clean."

"You knew?"

"Ever since Levi didn't return from the mission. That's why I kept an eye on you that night, and good thing, too. After Henrik, I expected sulking, not a suicidal rescue attempt." Mike rubbed the bridge of his nose, grimacing. "Thought it was one-sided until I found out Levi was gay, then everything fell into place. Would have figured it out soon enough, anyway. You two couldn't be more obvious if you tried."

Erwin's stomach dropped; he had thought they were doing a good job of being discreet. "We seemed obvious because you know us so well?"

"No, because you're being idiots." Mike shook his head. "We've known each other a long time, Erwin, so I'm going to be blunt. I have

three things to say to you. One: be careful with Levi.”

The words were a surprise, given that Mike had always sided with him in previous relationships. “Why does everyone think he’s so delicate?” Erwin asked, irritated, remembering Marie: *you’re going to break him.*

“I don’t think he’s delicate. But you’re under his skin, and he’s under yours, and that could screw both of you up if things go wrong. I’m going to tell him the same thing. Be careful.”

“Very well. What’s your second point?”

“Be honest: is Levi next in line as Captain because of his skills, or because of all this?”

“Ah.” Erwin sat straighter, trying not to let his surprise show on his face. Mike had never seemed all that interested in his position on the military ladder. “That’s independent from my feelings for him, I assure you. You’re being kind enough to be blunt with me, so I’ll show you the same courtesy. Levi has shown leadership capabilities since before he even agreed to join the Survey Corps. He’s a natural leader and he has good instincts. You’re one of our strongest soldiers, Mike, and your instincts are good, too; you should have been promoted to Squad Leader much sooner than you were. Given a few more years of experience, you’ll evolve into a fine leader. I can already envision a future where the two of you are my right and left hand men. In the near future, however, Levi’s the stronger candidate for the role of Captain. You still have some leadership skills to learn.” He paused, waiting to see how Mike would react.

Mike grimaced, but he said, “Fair enough. I’m not really interested in being a Captain, anyway. I just needed to know.”

Erwin studied him, trying to get a read on him. “And your third thought?”

“Don’t throw everything away for this. I’ve seen you put yourself and others at risk for him already, and I bet I’m going to start seeing the opposite, too, if you two aren’t careful.” Mike’s eyes bored through him. “Humanity needs you to stay focused. I followed you because you use your head, always, no matter what happens. Or that’s what I thought. Marie didn’t manage to sway you, but Henrik was a distraction. Don’t let Levi be the same.”

Erwin’s mouth twisted. “I promise you, I can separate my heart and my head.”

“Can you?” Mike asked quietly.

The blood drained from Erwin's face. Those words, those two little words, spoke to all the insecurities he had earlier that day, when he had realized he was putting Berit's squad at risk just to keep Levi safe. And even after that realization, even after he had thought everything was under control, he had let himself get caught in a compromising position like a horny recruit.

All it would have taken was anyone else—anyone except his officers—walking through that door, and everything would be over. His dreams, his goals, his ambitions. He had come so close to throwing it all away.

“I’m aware of my own shortcomings in that area now. I swear to you, Mike, it won’t happen again.” The words felt like a lie.

Mike nodded, looking convinced. Fear bubbled in Erwin’s stomach. *Is that true? Do my goals still come first?* During the gala, he had come to realize that he wouldn’t have been able to leave Levi behind the way he had left Marie. Did that mean all his goals were disposable so long as he was in love with Levi?

*What am I doing? How can I pretend I would sacrifice anything for the sake of humanity, when I already know that’s no longer true?*

“That’s everything.” Mike’s voice startled him back to himself. “I’m going to go find Levi.”

“Go easy on him.”

“Sure. Just going to tell him what I told you.”

The two men rose to their feet and stood tall. Though Erwin was still shaken, he kept his face placid, biting back the doubts that threatened to rise to his lips: *I didn’t mean for this to happen. I lost control. I don’t know any more if I can separate my heart and my head.* Instead, he said, “Do you believe I’m capable of successfully balancing love with my goals?”

Mike’s head cocked a little, as if he were instinctively moving to get a better scent on him, even though his nose wasn’t working properly. “If you say you can do it, then I believe you.”

Erwin forced a smile and gave his arm a friendly clap. “Thanks, Mike. If you have any other concerns, please don’t hesitate to talk to me about them.”

Mike nodded, then left the office.

Once the door had closed behind him, Erwin sank to a seat at his desk, clutching at his throbbing temples. His doubts were snowballing. Stupid, all of this was stupid. Fifteen years of good service, and in the past few weeks, he had risked everything in a series of asinine

decisions. Staging a drunken rescue attempt, sneaking around the base for stolen kisses, dancing on gala rooftops, sex in his office—had he really thought none of it was going to catch up with him? Had his foresight really been so blinded?

He sat at his desk and pulled out the bottom drawer. His graveyard. The framed picture Henrik had drawn for him sat on top. Now, when he picked it up, he didn't remember Henrik—all he could think about was that first personal conversation he and Levi had shared over drinks. Levi wasn't just overpowering old dreams; he was overpowering old memories, too.

He shifted the frame aside. Below it was a handkerchief, monogrammed with an "E." He lifted it to his nose and breathed in. Marie's perfume was still detectable, albeit faint. Below that was an assortment of trinkets: a copy of the letter formally informing him of his promotion to Squad Leader. A coaster from the last time the 86th Trainees Squad had gone out for drinks before they left to their separate branches. The ring of a fellow graduate who had died during an early expedition, with no surviving family. In fact, there were several bits of jewellery here; he had carried each of them on several missions after their owners fell. Now he couldn't even remember who some of them had belonged to. Some had been friends. A few had even briefly been lovers, but he couldn't even remember which trinkets had been theirs. What had been so important in that moment was only useless junk to him now.

*Is this Levi's future? Will he eventually be a cravat or a small wooden dog stuffed in this drawer, a new lover's memories gradually overpowering my memories of our time together?*

He shifted the surface contents aside to reveal an old, worn book at the bottom of the drawer. His throat tightened as he opened the front cover, tracing the words elegantly written in ink.

*Or has Levi marked me deeply enough that I will always remember the timbre of his voice, the light in his eyes, long after the passage of time should have dulled my memories? There's no question that he'll die for humanity, at my hand. Will the knowledge that I killed him haunt every waking moment for the rest of my life? Will it shape every decision I make from that day forward? Can I afford to let my life be shaped by yet another ghost?*

He released the cover as if it had burned him, letting it fall closed, but he didn't even need to read the inked words to hear them in his mind. 'Erwin, may you never stop dreaming, and may your quest for

knowledge always drive you forward. Love forever, Papa.'

A sharp breath left his lips. He leaned back and rubbed his face with his hand, closing the drawer with his foot.

*What the fuck am I doing?*

He grabbed a bottle of ale from the cold stores, then made his way to the abandoned part of the base and stepped through the hidden door with the false lock—at least this broken lock was useful for privacy, he thought bitterly. He found his way to the ladder and climbed to the hatch, then stepped onto the old guard tower. The sun had already dipped below the horizon, the western clouds a brilliant orange. The colour reminded him of the rooftop dance he had shared with Levi under the sunset. *We could have easily been caught there, too. What is it about him that makes me ready to throw everything away for him?*

As he sipped the ale and looked out over the city, he struggled to realign his priorities. Anything they shared together was fleeting light in a field of darkness; he was deluding himself if he tried to assign it any more importance than that. Love didn't matter, not in the grand scheme of things. All that mattered in this world were the titans, along with everything—everyone—that stood in his way.

The two of them were meaningless, he and Levi. Disposable. It was foolish to get so attached when both of them were sure to die.

It seemed unlikely the titans would ever be able to touch Levi, unless he got caught off guard by a teammate's blunder as he had during their last expedition. Would it be Erwin's political gambles sending both of them to the hangman's noose for treason? Would it be Wallist extremists, the one his sister had warned—no, he wasn't ready to think about his reunion with her yet. He was dealing with enough as it was.

He closed his eyes, but now he only saw his new recurring nightmare, the one where he, titan-sized, devoured Levi. *That's how it will end. There's no way around it. Why are you risking everything for a soldier you're going to consume?*

By the time he had finished his ale, the orange had faded from the evening sky and the temperature was beginning to drop. He set the bottle to the side and gathered his legs close to his body.

The hatch creaked behind him; he turned his head to see Levi step on to the roof. Erwin's pulse raced at the sight of him, and he silently cursed his own weakness.

"There you are," Levi said. "Couldn't figure out where you disappeared—" He stopped mid-sentence. "Are you crying?"

Erwin turned to look across the city again, blinking a few times.

Levi's voice softened. "Look, it's not a big deal." He settled to a seat next to him, staring across the city as well. "They'll keep our secret, and now we don't have to feel like we're hiding from everyone all the time. They can even help us have some privacy now and then." He pressed a finger to the tip of the empty bottle, idly tilting it. "Besides, it's not like anyone expects you to stay celibate."

"What we were discussing earlier," Erwin said. "About how I can't afford to put everything at risk for love now that I'm a Commander ... "

The bottle froze in place. "Yeah?"

"Even after that discussion, I risked it all again for a quick thrill." His head dropped. "I've lost all perspective. I don't have any logic around you, Levi. No control. I have to be in control, above all else—it's my greatest strength, one I'll need to utilize if we are to defeat the titans."

After a few beats, Levi's hand curled around the bottle. He lifted it to his nose, his inhale creating a slight whistle across the mouth of the bottle.

"I'm sober," Erwin said quietly.

Levi set the bottle on his other side, then gathered his knees, mirroring Erwin's posture. His head tilted back, gaze fixing on the sky above them. "So. What do you want?"

"I don't know, and that terrifies me, because I know what I *should* want. I see now that I can't trust myself the way I thought. I should want clarity. I should want focus. I should be pushing away all distractions. All that happened today ... " His voice faded. "It can't happen. The titans must come first. Always. I cannot let anything stand in my way, even my own emotions. I'm disposable. You're disposable. Why do I keep losing sight of that? Why do I keep taking risks to be with you, when we're supposed to be focusing all our energy on saving humanity from extinction?"

Levi was still for so long that Erwin's mind began to drift. He felt the heat curling off Levi's body; his own flesh burst into goosebumps in response. The night air was surprisingly chilly —or maybe he was just more vulnerable than usual right now, more sensitive.

Finally, Levi spoke, his voice dull: "Stop dancing around it."

"Around what?"

"Are you breaking up with me or not?"

The words were a surprise, but at the same time, they made per-

fect sense. Erwin began to shiver.

“If that’s where you’re going with this, then just do it. I get it, and I’ll still be loyal to your command,” Levi said. “I just need to know before I get even more attached.”

Marie’s voice echoed in Erwin’s mind: *you always choose titans, in the end*. He wrapped his hands more tightly around himself, drawing his legs closer to his body. “I know what my answer needs to be, so why can’t I bring myself to say it?”

After a few minutes, Levi’s palms pushed into the floor, and he stood. “I never intended to be a burden.” There was no bitterness in his words, only sadness, and Erwin’s heart twisted.

The hatch closed behind him.

Darkness crept across the city. Erwin’s hand wrapped around the cold pendant at his throat as he shivered alone on his perch.

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Late that night, he tossed and turned, the bed too hot with the blankets, too cold without. His mind wouldn’t stop churning. He had gotten up twice already, once to jot down ideas about how to deal with the new Council members, another to record a weapon idea to discuss with Hange. Burying his mind in strategy was the only respite from the confusing emotions that swirled within him. Levi’s last words echoed in his mind, their sad tone haunting him.

Footsteps sounded down the hallway, a faint glow of light appearing under the door crack. The sound stopped outside his door, the glow stilling.

Erwin sat up, ears strained.

The knob turned, and then Levi stood in the door frame, dark circles under his eyes, dressed in only his pyjama bottoms. Their gaze held.

Hope, sadness, relief, and worry swelled within Erwin like silt stirred by river currents, flooded through him. “Levi,” he said, the word cracking.

The narrow mouth twisted. “I can’t sleep.”

“Neither can I.”

“It’s your fucking fault, you know.”

“I know.”

“All of it.”

“I know.”

After a moment, Levi closed the door behind him, then locked it and double-checked the door. He paced toward the bed, setting the candle on the desk as he moved past it, not breaking his stride until he reached the bed. He stared down his nose, his expression neutral.

Erwin shifted over, leaving room for him on the bed. An offer. His heart beat in his throat as he waited.

The silver gaze bored through him.

Erwin lay on his side and placed his hand palm-up on the middle of the bed. “Please, Levi. Just for a few minutes. I want to explain what I’m feeling—rationally, this time.”

Levi eyed it for a moment, then climbed under the covers. He lay on his side staring at the open hand.

“I’m sorry,” Erwin whispered. “You aren’t a burden.”

Emotion rippled across Levi’s face, almost too quickly to see—tensing lips, a crease between the brows. His hand reached out, curled with hesitation, then finally lay atop Erwin’s. Heat swirled between their palms, and Erwin couldn’t tell which of them was trembling. Maybe both.

“Did you figure out what you want?” Levi whispered.

“I want to rid this world of titans. I want to ferret out all humanity’s enemies and destroy them so that future generations can be free. And I want you at my side.” Erwin swallowed hard, intertwining his fingers with Levi’s. “I must offer up our hearts, everyone’s, but today I realized I can’t offer yours. I’m not strong enough, Levi. I don’t want to see you die, knowing it was my fault. I don’t want you to become a half-forgotten trinket in a box, a fading memory.” His thumb drifted across Levi’s knuckle. “But that’s my dilemma, because I can’t afford to compromise my goals the way I have been. How can I uphold my role as Commander of the Survey Corps if love is going to make me this selfish?”

“Then don’t offer up my heart. Let me do it instead.”

Their gaze locked. “What do you mean?”

Levi shrugged. “Look, you asked me to think about my leadership style. The way I lead is by instinct: I look around me and make snap decisions. That’s how I worked in the Underground, and it’s how I’ve worked since I joined the Survey Corps.” His fingers curled around Erwin’s. “This morning, you said that as your Captain, I’ll stand beside you as your peer, right? So put the burden of life or death on me. Let

me decide how and when to risk myself. I'll still follow your orders—I always will—but let me operate independently within the greater plan. Let me move around the battlefield and make my own decisions about when to risk myself and my team, according to my instincts.”

“You want me to give you your own autonomy on the battlefield?”

“Yes. That way, if I die, it'll be because I made a bad judgement call, not because you gave the order. You won't have to carry the guilt. Besides, we both know I'm more useful if I'm allowed to break away and follow my instincts. It's been that way from the very first time I took down a titan. I'm not cut out to blindly follow orders all the time.”

Erwin studied their joined hands, considering. He had already been aware that their ranks would be different from the usual positions of Commander and Captain. Levi excelled with minimal supervision; his initiative was one of his greatest strengths on the battlefield. They had the potential to be a formidable team: with his strategic acuity and foresight, and Levi's instincts and battle skills, they could complement each other's weaknesses and become greater than the sum of their parts.

More than that, the words were showing that finally, after so much struggle, Levi finally understood that they were equal, just two men, two dreamers with freedom in their hearts.

*Maybe we can make this work.*

“When we return from this expedition,” Erwin said, “we'll discuss what your role as Captain will entail. I like the idea of you acting with greater freedom than the role would usually allow.” His grip tightened. “We can lead the Corps together, side by side. Your heart is yours to offer.”

“Good, then that's one less thing for you to worry about. And we're also going to calm the fuck down, all right?” Levi shifted closer. “No lovey-dovey shit in public, no sex unless we're sure we're behind locked doors, no dumb strategic decisions.” His face fell. “If you want to stay together, I mean.”

“I told you, Levi, I want you at my side.” Erwin's throat ached. “If you'll still have me.”

“I'm here, aren't I?” Levi said softly.

Erwin leaned closer, intending to kiss those narrow lips, but stopped. Did he have the right to kiss him, after all the hurt he had caused?

But Levi was already inching closer, his eyes on Erwin's mouth.

Together, they closed the gap. The kiss was brief and soft, once, twice.

“I’m sorry, Levi.” Erwin shifted halfway onto him, flattening him against the bed, and kissed him again. For shutting him out, for not being strong enough, for breaking his own oath to separate his heart and his head: “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine.” Levi’s hands slid across the back of his neck, gently drawing him closer.

Erwin’s body still ached from the interruption before, but these kisses were too important to rush, soft and apologetic, thick with emotion. He savoured Levi’s taste—mint on the surface, rosemary and yeast on his breath below that, and that deeper taste that was uniquely Levi, the one that made his heart pound in his temples. *How could I have considered giving this up?* He heard himself gasp, heard Levi echo it, and he shifted more of his weight onto the small body. His head tilted to the side, the tip of his tongue skimming Levi’s lips, then deeper, deeper. Levi arched beneath him, a rumble sounding in his throat.

Starting to get caught up in the moment, Erwin shifted again, crouching over Levi on all fours. Their kisses slowed, then broke apart.

Levi reached up to grip Erwin’s neck, a thumb running across his throat. “I want you.”

“The door is locked for sure this time, right?”

“Yeah. I checked it.”

“Then I’m yours.” Erwin bent down to drag his tongue along the underside of his jaw.

“No, I mean *I want you*.” Levi wrapped his legs around Erwin’s waist and drew him in, centering him between his legs.

Slowly, Erwin pulled away from his neck to look down at him, certain he was misunderstanding.

“Don’t make me put it into words.” Levi’s cheeks were dark. “Fuck me” is too raunchy, and ‘make love to me’ is too corny.”

It was difficult to breathe. Erwin forced air in, and it shuddered on the way out. “Are you sure? There’s no pressure—”

“I know that. But we’re going to work together side-by-side, right? So maybe I should trust that you won’t hurt me. Besides, I’m going away on a dangerous scouting mission, and if I do decide my heart needs offering, I don’t want my last regrets to be about how I should have tried taking it up the ass from you.” His gaze had drifted to the side as he spoke, showing his underlying discomfort in spite of his confident

tone. "Maybe I'll like it. Maybe I won't. Only one way to find out."

Erwin cupped the narrow jaw. "Levi. Look at me. Is this something you truly want? Or are you offering out of obligation?"

"Look, maybe I'm a bit nervous, but ..." The slim brows were pinched, his breath coming in small, quick puffs. "I want to try it."

Erwin's breath escaped in another shudder. He bent down for a series of kisses, speaking between them: "I'll be gentle. So gentle, Levi. I promise."

"I know."

He slid his palm down Levi's bare stomach, feeling the soft line of hair down its centre. As his palm slid over the fly of Levi's pants, Levi closed his eyes and thrust up into it. "Shit. I guess we have to be quiet, huh?"

"Yes, it really wouldn't do for Mike to overhear us. We've put him through enough today." Erwin smoothed down to the inseam, then back up again, feeling the bulge harden. "I haven't taken over the Commander's room yet—it's against an outside wall, so it would give us some privacy. Maybe I'll rearrange the Officer's bedrooms, put you right next to me, so we have a buffer around us when you spend the night with me."

"One of these days, I'm going to teach you proper pillow talk." Levi squirmed as the hand slid beneath the waistband. "Oh fuck, your hand is burning hot."

Erwin leaned in to kiss him again, slowly stroking him. He kissed down the narrow neck, across his collarbone, down to a nipple. Even though he knew Levi wasn't responsive there, he lingered for a minute, enjoying the feeling of it on his tongue, between his lips. *He likes heavy pressure*, he thought, and he pinched it experimentally between his teeth. He heard a strangled gasp above him, felt a throb in his grip. *Maybe I've just been too gentle with him.*

As he worked his way down one side of Levi's abdomen, kissing and nipping the skin, Levi began to squirm again. Erwin pulled down his waistband, closing his mouth over him. The harder he sucked, the more Levi's back arched, so he kept the suction strong. It felt so good to bring him pleasure after bringing him so much misery earlier that day; he poured all his effort into his actions as an apology. As he began to move up and down, he saw Levi's hands curl into the blanket.

He slowed, taking a moment to lick the tip. "I wish I could hear you moan." He wondered if it was too late to spirit him away to his apar-

tment in town.

Levi looked up, his cheeks dark, eyelids low. “No, this is better. I’m going to be self-conscious enough as it is, so I’d probably be too shy to be loud, anyway.”

Erwin couldn’t understand censoring one’s moans—he had never been good at censoring himself—but he respected that everyone’s comfort levels were different. “Then I’m glad you won’t feel pressured to be noisy for me.” He pulled the pants further down and began to drag his tongue lower, lower ...

“Hey.” Levi caught his hair. “Not there.”

He never would have dared show it, but Erwin felt his stomach sink. *Don’t push him. This is all new territory for him.*

“My apologies,” he said sincerely, kissing a line back up to the tip. He ran his tongue in a circle and breathed in, tasting him. Then, he pulled away and stood. “One moment.”

“Where are you going?” Levi asked, a brow creasing.

“There’s lubricant in my bag.” His personal belongings were leaning against the wall; he had brought the bag here from his office before going to bed, but had been too upset to unpack. He knelt down and began to rustle through it.

“You brought it with you? I thought it was in your desk.”

“I bought a second bottle while I was away.”

“Yeah? Did you use it?”

Erwin turned to look over his shoulder; Levi lay on his back, his hand slowly stroking between his legs. “You really like the idea of me touching myself when you aren’t around, don’t you, Levi?”

“Maybe. Did you use it?”

“Yes, twice. I was planning on another session between those two times, but Sahlo’s leer around his hired women was too off-putting.” Erwin’s hand closed over the bottle. Between Levi’s interest in the topic and the scene that had played out between them in the office before he left, he was starting to get an idea.

He pulled the chair away from his desk and set it facing the bed.

“What are you doing?”

“Here.” Erwin tossed him the bottle.

Levi caught it one-handed. “Erwin?”

“I’m going to touch myself for you. While I’m doing it, I want you to do whatever you need in order to get yourself relaxed and ready for me.” He studied Levi’s face, hoping his suggestion would be agree-

able.

“Shit. Yeah. Okay.” Levi slid off his pants and tossed them on the floor, then knelt on the bed. He poured oil onto his hands, one hand dropping to his front, the other to his back.

Erwin sat in the chair. Holding eye contact, he slid his palms down his chest, his abdomen, then between his legs. He slouched down to get comfortable. At first, he felt self-conscious, but then he heard a sharp intake of breath from the bed. Encouraged, he grabbed himself through the fabric of his pants, letting his head roll along the back of the chair. He thrust into his hands a few times. It felt good to be watched like this, better than he had expected. *It's like I'm offering myself to him as an apology.*

Levi's back was arched and stiff, his hand still working behind his back. His other hand lazily stroked his front, the slick oil glinting in the candlelight.

Their eyes locked again, and Erwin pulled his pants off his hips, exposing himself. Levi's stare was so narrow and strong that Erwin felt self-consciousness trickle over him like ice water. Why was that so arousing? The intensity between them reminded him of sparring, as if their locked arms were straining against each other again, wrestling for control. He rolled his head to the side to expose his neck, letting his lips part a crack, and began to tug at himself.

On the bed in front of him, Levi was biting his lip, his abdominal muscles twitching. Erwin bit the inside of his cheek to stifle a groan, more turned on by the sight than he had expected. *In a few minutes, I'm going to be inside that beautiful body.* He shuddered, his muscles tightening.

“Fuck,” he mouthed, not trusting himself to keep his voice down if he tried to whisper.

Levi's head was beginning to tilt back, his bottom lip white from the force of his teeth. Heat surged through Erwin's body, catching him off guard. *Fuck!* His hand froze and his eyes squeezed shut. For a moment, he thought he might tip over the edge, but after a few deep breaths, the danger faded.

“Don't tell me you're going to come already,” Levi whispered, the words laboured.

“I need to touch you.” Erwin pulled off his pants and slung them over the arm of the chair, then stood. He leaned on the mattress on one knee, lowering himself to Levi's level and drawing him in. Their bare

chests pressed together. Levi's skin was so warm and fuzzy that Erwin shifted against him, enjoying the sensation of their chests rubbing together.

He reached behind Levi and gripped his wrist, coaxing him to pull out, replacing the finger with his own. He found him surprisingly relaxed. Levi's breath caught.

"Let's use a bit more oil than that," Erwin whispered in his ear. He pulled back to find the bottle of oil, then generously slicked two fingers. This time, he used both, pressing gently into him. "Is that okay?"

"Fuck," Levi whispered. "It feels so much better when you do it." His body was slack. Erwin felt hands claw into his back, as if Levi were trying to hold himself upright.

"How are you feeling?" he whispered, kissing his neck. "We can keep doing this for a while, if you want. Or would you like to try something else?"

"Yeah."

Erwin kissed his neck again, then stood. He passed a handkerchief to Levi, certain he'd appreciate the opportunity to wipe his hands. He did the same, then set the soiled handkerchiefs aside.

His heart pounded as he returned to the bed. Levi lay on his back, watching him.

*It's really going to happen.* Erwin crouched over top of him, smoothing dark hair off the creased forehead.

"Don't make a big deal out of this," Levi whispered. "Just do it."

"Okay." Erwin cupped the underside of Levi's thighs and pushed them toward the bed, tilting his hips up. He would have liked to thrust a few times along the surface first, teasing him, but it sounded like Levi wouldn't appreciate the delay. Maybe another time.

Instead, he gripped himself and began to enter.

Levi's brows knotted together.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Keep going."

Erwin slowly worked his way deeper, gently rocking. His teeth clenched, his mind reeling: *I'm inside him.* He was about halfway in now; he struggled to hold back a groan.

"Shit!" Levi grabbed Erwin's biceps, his grip so strong that Erwin froze.

"Do you want me to slow down?"

"No. I don't know." Levi's eyes were barely open, his brows for-

ming a peak. "It's too much, Erwin. It's too much."

"Do you want me to stop?" Erwin asked, alarmed.

"No. No, it's good, it's just ... It's too much. I don't know how to ..." His voice trailed off and his grip tightened.

Erwin smoothed a hand along the wrinkled forehead. He couldn't understand what he was trying to say, but his discomfort was clear. "It's okay, Levi." He slowly began to pull out.

"Wait, I didn't mean—"

"It's okay. Here, sit up. We're going to switch positions." Erwin helped him sit up, then lay on his back instead. "Straddle me," he said, guiding Levi by the hips. "I'm sorry, I should have thought of this from the start. You're in control. Take it as slowly as you need."

The creased brow began to relax. Levi leaned down for a kiss; Erwin caught his jaw, tongue slipping deep into his mouth. When Levi pulled away, he looked more like himself again, less frightened. He gripped Erwin and centred himself, then began to work his way onto him.

Erwin let out a long breath, running his palms across the small, flexing chest. He had spent so many late nights imagining this moment, more than he would admit to himself, but his imagination hadn't been able to touch what he saw before him now: Levi's jaw barely cocked to the side with determination, his pupils large, lips parted to show clenched teeth. *Oh fuck, Levi.* Erwin ran a thumb to the hollow between Levi's collarbones, then up his trachea, up his chin, along that narrow bottom lip.

Levi barely seemed to notice; he stared at nothing, still working up and down, pushing a little further with each motion. The need to stay silent was increasingly frustrating. Erwin wanted to listen for those little noises he had become familiar with so he could tell if Levi was enjoying himself or not. His face didn't give any clues.

Then Levi surprised him: a soft grunt left his lips as he pushed down hard on the last few centimetres, taking him all the way in.

Erwin tensed, feeling muscle tighten around him. He gripped the narrow hips, fingers curling into the flesh.

"You feel that, Levi?" he whispered, delirious. "I'm inside you. Oh fuck, I'm inside you." He thrust up tighter against him, holding back a cry, venting it as a shuddering breath instead.

Levi ground into him, his breath harsh. "Holy fucking shit."

"Still doing okay?" Erwin asked, sweat beading on his temple

from self-restraint.

“Look at you.” Levi’s breaths were coming too quickly. “Look how much you’re enjoying this. Oh shit, I can actually reach your mouth when we do it like this.” He bent forward so they could share a long kiss. His hips began to tilt to different angles with each thrust. Erwin could tell he was trying to figure out what felt best for him.

They fell into rhythm, taking it slowly at first. Their mouths pressed together, sometimes kissing, sometimes exchanging soft breaths and grunts in place of the moans and cries they’d usually use to communicate.

After a few minutes, Levi slowed and rested on one elbow. His face was red, sweat beading on his temples and upper lip. “I’m so clumsy and shitty at this.”

“Clumsy?” Erwin whispered, surprised. He flexed a few times, pulsing inside him. “Can’t you feel what you’re doing to me?”

Levi’s breath caught, and his eyes fluttered closed. “Yeah. Yeah, I can. This is just ... different. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“You’re doing fine.” Erwin gripped his hand and drew it in, delivering a slow kiss to his knuckles. “Would it make you more comfortable if I took charge again?”

“Yeah.”

“Lie on your side facing away from me.”

His brow furrowing a bit, Levi uncoupled from him and lay on his side. Erwin spooned up behind him. One hand clamped around Levi’s chest; the other gripped his upper thigh, moving it forward to bend the leg at an angle.

“The good thing about this position,” he breathed into Levi’s ear, “is that I get to grope you from behind while I’m fucking you.” He squeezed a pectoral muscle with his hand, thumb circling around the nipple. His other hand reached between them, guiding himself in. Levi gasped and bore down on him, taking him all the way in again.

Erwin let out a soft groan. He hadn’t expected that much enthusiasm. “You’re so warm.”

Levi gasped again, melting back against him. “Grab me.”

Erwin reached down to grip him, and Levi’s hand closed over his. They began to stroke him together in time with their thrusts.

“How’s that?” Erwin nuzzled the back of his ear.

“Good.” Levi’s whisper was staccato, as if he were having trouble forming words. “Harder.”

Erwin grunted and began moving with more force. He kissed along Levi's neck and upper back.

"Oh shit, you're so fucking hard," Levi whispered. His head began to roll back, his spine arching. Erwin caught him under the chin with his free hand, holding his head in place, and kissed the corner of his jaw, then down his neck, pinching the skin with his teeth.

"Erwin—" the word melted into a humming sound that rose in pitch.

"Stay quiet," Erwin whispered gently, even though the sound was making him glow. He wasn't going to last long, not at this rate. He closed his mouth over the ridge of muscle between Levi's shoulder and neck, trying to muffle the cries that were building beneath the surface. He could feel that Levi was getting closer, too, the muscles of his torso beginning to twitch and jerk.

"Faster," Levi gasped.

Erwin squeezed his eyes shut, his body tightening. "I can't. I'll lose control."

"Good." Levi's head barely turned, one eye fixing on him. "Fuck me hard."

Erwin didn't realize, until he heard those words, just how badly he needed them. A moan caught in his throat, and heat flooded his body. He began to move faster, harder.

Levi pushed Erwin's hand away from his groin, taking over. Erwin gripped his hip instead. His other hand grabbed Levi's jaw, palm resting on his throat, elbow on his chest, forcing the small body down on him over and over to counter each thrust.

"Come on, Erwin," Levi breathed. "Lose control."

Erwin's vision blurred. His world had narrowed to those words and the feeling of Levi's body sliding against his, tight around him. *Stay quiet*, he reminded himself, even though he couldn't remember why. He pressed down on Levi's hip, shoving him into the mattress, and then leaned on him, half-mounting him.

Levi blasted a voiceless cry into the pillow. "I'm going to come."

Erwin buried his face in the back of the slender neck and moved faster, gasping for air.

"Ah, fuck!" Levi whispered. His body stiffened, then began to shudder, his limbs vibrating at the crest of each wave.

The rhythmic clenching was too much for Erwin. He curled protectively around him and drove the last few strokes hard. A rush en-

gulfed his groin and mind, a high so powerful that electricity danced across his skin and his mind glowed white.

When the last pulse faded, he was left with limp muscles, sweaty skin and an overwhelming desire to sleep. The silence was a stark contrast to the harsh breaths and chaos a moment before. His ears rang.

He was just beginning to succumb to the warm haze when Levi nudged him with his shoulder.

“If you’re going to fall asleep, at least roll off me first, or you’ll suffocate me.”

“Sorry.” Erwin rolled onto his back, eyes still closed.

Levi leaned over him, presumably retrieving the handkerchief. “Fuck, what a mess. Is there a trick to cleaning this up?”

“Yeah.” Erwin’s lips curved into a smile. “Don’t let me come inside you.”

“Helpful.” There was a long pause, then his voice jolted Erwin awake again: “You know, that ... wasn’t bad.”

It was a struggle, but Erwin managed to crack one eye open. Levi was sitting beside him. His cheeks were dark, mussed hair hanging in his face. He looked surprisingly shy.

“Yeah?”

Levi shrugged. “Once we figured out how to make it work, anyway. Do you know how fucking hot it is when you lose control like that? It’s almost like ...” He stared fixedly at the handkerchief, folding it into quarters. “It’s almost like, if you feel about someone the way I feel about you, you end up wanting to do stuff they enjoy, because the way they react makes it the hottest thing ever to you, even if you never would have thought of doing it if they hadn’t wanted it.”

*Just say you love me,* Erwin thought, but he understood his hesitation, especially after all the uncertainty of the day. That was his fault. Guilt trickled over him, ice cold.

Levi stood. He tugged the covers out from beneath Erwin and draped them over him, then pressed his lips to his forehead. “Get some sleep.”

“Wait.” Erwin caught his arm. “Stay.”

“I thought we were going to try to be more careful?” In spite of the words, Levi didn’t pull away.

“It’s fine.” Erwin’s thumb caressed the flushed skin. “We know the door is locked this time. There’s no risk. Stay.” The other officers would cover for them if they accidentally slept in. They had allies now

—at least that benefit had come out of this mess of a day.

After a long pause, Levi crawled under the covers. “I made a giant wet spot on top of the blanket.”

“Here.” Erwin clumsily moved closer to centre, taking the spot himself—he couldn’t feel it through the thick blanket, anyway. He spooned up behind Levi. Now that they were cuddling instead of having sex, it felt like a completely different position, a different dynamic. Safe. Cozy.

His eyes began to close, but he struggled to stay awake for a few more seconds. There was one more thing that needed to be said.

“Levi,” he whispered, groggy. “I still don’t know if I’m making the right decision, but I want you to understand: I may have doubted whether or not we should be together, but I never once, not for one single moment, doubted that I love you.”

He tried to stay awake for the response, but sleep was relentless, and warm, and welcoming. Levi was silent for so long that he finally gave in.

As he was just drifting off, he heard the whispered words he was waiting for, though he couldn’t tell if they were real or imagined:

“I love you, too.”

## -19-

# CONVERSATIONS

“Knock it off,” Levi said, directing Erwin’s roving hand away from his bare bottom. “I have to get going.”

“We could probably sneak in one more round, if we’re quick.” Erwin’s kisses began to trail from his neck to his ear.

“You going to be able to get it up this soon?” A hot tongue ran along the inside border of Levi’s ear, and he shivered.

“Probably not.” Erwin’s voice was a low rumble in his ear. “But my tongue and fingers work just fine.” His hand trailed down to Levi’s tailbone.

“I told you, nothing in my ass. I’m going to be sitting on a horse for a fucking week.” Levi pulled away and sat up. “Why are you so clingy all of a sudden? Don’t trust me to stay alive?”

Erwin looked up at him, his features settling into flat lines. The solemn expression contrasted with his flushed face and mussed hair, which was sticking out in all directions. Levi shook his head and combed it back into place with his fingers.

“Don’t look so serious. When I get back, you can play with my ass all you want, okay? Maybe I’ll even try taking your dick again.”

Erwin’s brows perked, but he only said, “You might be saddle sore.”

“Then you’ll just have to be gentle.” Levi bent down and kissed his lips.

“I’ll do my best.” Erwin pulled him back in for another kiss, this one longer. When he pulled away, he tucked a strand of hair behind Levi’s ear; it promptly fell in his face again. “Maybe I’ll even arrange for overnight leave for both of us, so we can go to my apartment. I want to

hear you moan for me.”

“Sure,” Levi said, and although his heart raced at the idea, discomfort tightened his throat. Letting Erwin ride him had been a pleasant enough experience—hell, by the end there, it had felt pretty fucking amazing—but a part of him was still self-conscious about what he was supposed to do during the act. Clench his muscles? Counter-thrust? Swirl his hips? Until he figured that out, he would be too distracted to moan. Maybe these were questions he should be asking Erwin, but he didn’t want to draw attention to his own deficiencies.

*I need to relax about this stuff.* He thought of Erwin needing more wine during their first time together, and suddenly understood. He smoothed a thumb along a thick blond eyebrow. *I never would have thought it when we first met, but we really are a lot alike.*

“Levi?”

He traced a line to the sharp cheekbone, crossing over the faint, barely visible lines that were beginning to form in the corner of the blue eyes. “Make sure you bring wine. I’m going to need a drink or six after spending a week with Hange.”

The lines crinkled. “Of course. We’ll have an evening of wine and romance. And since you’re likely to be stiff and sore, I’ll massage you. Everywhere. Outside ...” He leaned up to brush another kiss against Levi’s lips. “And inside.” His hand tightened around Levi’s ass.

“Stop it. I have to get going. I’m not going to fit into my pants if you keep pawing at me.” Levi batted his arm away and stood. “Comb your hair before you go out there. You look like you’ve just been fucked.”

“Are you giving me orders?” Erwin swung his legs over the side of the bed and began to straighten his hair. “To think that a few minutes ago, you were speaking so nicely to me. Pleading, even.”

“Shut up,” Levi said, trying to pretend he wasn’t amused. He wiped himself off with a damp cloth, then pulled on his uniform and his gear.

Once they were both fully dressed, Erwin handed him a comb and bent down. “Would you mind?”

“Sure.” Levi parted his hair—most of it had naturally settled into the part already, anyway—and carefully combed it. “So if you bleach your hair, why don’t you have any roots?”

“I wouldn’t say I *bleach* it, per se. I just comb a bit of bleach through it once in a while, to help it lighten naturally in the sun.”

“I see,” Levi said, even though he didn’t really understand the distinction. He combed the last few strands into place. “There. Your hair’s getting a bit long.”

“Yeah, it’s about a week from becoming unmanageable. I’ve been too busy to see my barber. I’ll go sometime before you return.” Erwin stood tall, and now that he was perfectly coiffed, the faint flush on his cheeks was the only indication he’d been biting his pillow a few minutes earlier. “Oh, I almost forgot.” He reached inside his jacket and pulled out a small envelope. “Read that sometime tonight. Make sure no one else sees it.”

“Okay.” Levi tucked it into his inside jacket pocket, wondering if it was orders for the mission or something more personal.

Erwin pressed a hand to either side of Levi’s face and bent down for a kiss that left both of them gasping for air when he finally pulled away.

“Be careful,” he said softly.

“Stop acting like I’m never coming back. I’ll see you in a week.” Levi’s voice cracked around a lump in his throat. *It’s not going to be this difficult every time we’re separated, is it? We’re going to be spending a lot of time apart when he’s in the Capital or I’m on patrol, so we’d better get used to it.*

Steeling himself, he picked up his gear case, turned and marched for the door, Erwin on his heels.

When they arrived in the courtyard, their teams were already settling into formation: four teams of five people each. Two carts near the back of the formation carried their supplies.

“There you are.” Hange dismounted and hurried over. “I wanted to send a search party out to find you, but I was worried about what they might stumble across.”

Levi’s face settled into a scowl.

Behind him, Erwin cleared his throat. “Our delay was my fault. Levi and I were going over some last minute orders. Do you have everything you need?”

“Yes, everything’s ready. Thank you, Commander.” Hange turned to Levi. “Eld saddled your horse and restocked your saddle bags. We should head out now if we want to reach the checkpoint by mid-afternoon.”

“Please be careful, both of you,” Erwin said. “While your data will be valuable to the upcoming expedition, your lives—and the lives of your teammates—will be infinitely more so. Do not take any unnec-

essary risks. Be sure to protect your mental wellbeing as well—the two of you recently went through such an ordeal that you may be more vulnerable than you think. If you feel uncomfortable at any point, pull back.”

“Stop worrying.” Levi folded his arms. “We’ll be fine.”

“My apologies if I’m being a bit too thorough. What happened last time was a bit of an ordeal for me, as well.” Erwin reached out to grip each of their shoulders. “Good luck.”

Guilt flickered in Levi’s stomach. He hadn’t spent much time thinking about how traumatizing his supposed death had been for Erwin. No wonder he was being so weird and clingy. Levi reached up to awkwardly clap his shoulder. “We’ll be fine.”

Erwin held his gaze for a moment longer, then turned and walked away, back straight and stiff.

Hange leaned close. “Last minute orders, eh? Who was giving the orders to whom, I wonder?”

“Shut up.”

“I meant that as a double entendre.”

“I know what you meant, you pervert.” Levi tore his gaze from Erwin’s departing back and began to move into position.

“Levi, wait.” A hand closed over his shoulder.

He sighed and turned, ready to snap, *What?* Hange’s pale face stopped him.

“What he said about being emotionally vulnerable ...” The goggled eyes darted to the left, then the right, as if ascertaining they wouldn’t be overheard.

“Oh.” Levi’s irritation waned. “You okay?”

“I think so, but I’m a little shakier than usual. And I have this heavy feeling in my chest and stomach.”

“Huh. You seemed fine after we got back. I didn’t think it was bothering you.”

Hange’s gaze dropped. “I was so grateful to be alive that it didn’t really bother me, at first. But the more I think about it—”

“Don’t think about it. You’ll be fine. You’re going to see your first titan, go bat-shit, and forget anything bad ever happened.”

“I suppose.”

“You okay?” he asked again, fishing for a different answer this time.

“I think so. Yeah.” Hange looked up, a spark of excitement finally

showing in the dark eyes. “Yeah, let’s do this.”

The scouting party rode to the wall in tight formation. A small crowd had gathered in the streets for their sendoff— surprising, given that this was such a small mission. Berit’s team stood atop the wall; the Squad Leader fired a green flare as the formation approached, signalling that the titans had been cleared from the area around the gates.

“Give the speech,” Levi said. “I’m no good at that stuff.”

“Oh.” Hange turned to face their teams, voice gaining strength. “We chose you for this mission because you’re the cream of the crop. Your strength, skill and speed will be integral to this mission, and the information we bring back will be integral to the success of the upcoming expedition. The reclamation of Wall Maria begins with its first step, here, today. Prepare to advance!”

The team hollered, raising their swords. Levi gave Hange a nod of respect. *Not as good as Erwin, but not bad.*

The gates opened.

As they crossed under the shadow of the wall and into the sunlight on the other side, Levi took a deep breath, letting the crisp air fill his lungs. In one short year, nature had reclaimed these lands: no garbage, no body odour, no sewage, nothing but the taste of a wild, free land.

Berit’s team had done an excellent job of clearing out the titans, leaving the road empty. They rode in a huddle until the road widened, then they spread into an inverted V formation, its apex at the back. The carts rode at the centre back of the V, a small defensive team riding behind it. The remaining teams stretched out in groups of three, forming the right and left flanks.

Levi rode in front of the carts with Eld and a new recruit named Sonja. In Erwin’s absence, it was his job to direct the formation using signal flares. His head already ached as he tried to consider everyone working together at once; he was accustomed to considering only a small, immediate team. *And there are only twenty of us. How the hell does Erwin keep track of the entire regiment at once?*

Even though it was late spring, the weather was still abnormally cool. The breeze sent a chill through Levi, raising goosebumps on his neck. If it was this bad when the sun was up, it was going to be even colder at night. At this rate, the entire scouting party was going to have to huddle together for warmth while they slept; the decrepit checkpoints were sure to be even draughtier than their headquarters in Trost.

If Erwin had been along on the mission, huddling together would have been welcome, but Levi didn't relish the idea of sleeping against someone who was practically a stranger. His nose wrinkled. It'd be even worse after a few days, once everyone became sweaty and stale.

His mind lingered on the much more pleasant notion of being pressed up against Erwin. After their near break-up, something had changed in Erwin. They no longer sneaked little risky affectionate gestures in public, but once the bedroom door was closed—and locked—Erwin was all over him. It was as if their fight had broken through his last defensive wall. They had shared the same bed nearly every night that week.

Levi's body glowed as he reviewed his memories from that morning: the beautiful contours of Erwin's muscular ass jarring and rippling in front of him, the slew of curses Erwin had pressed deep into his pillow, the way his entire body had seized with orgasm.

"Squad Leader," Eld called, pointing to the west. Red flares had gone up from the right flank. Titans.

"Thanks." *Focus, you idiot.* The terrain was hilly enough that Levi couldn't get a look at the titans they had spotted, but his number one priority was avoiding combat where possible. He fired a green flare to redirect the formation away from the threat. Green flares rippled through the formation on either side of him as the teams confirmed his directions, and he felt a wave of satisfaction. It felt as if he had his fingers in every piece of the formation, turning it in the direction he wanted to go. That depth of control was so like Erwin. He wondered how the regiment had managed to function before Erwin had devised the formation. Each mission must have been chaotic. Catastrophic.

As they continued the push toward their first meeting spot, Levi stayed alert, scanning the horizon. Other than a few red flares here and there, the ride was quiet. Three hours in, one of Hange's squad members rode over to him:

"The clearing up ahead, sir."

Levi nodded and fired a white flare, signalling for the formation to begin to pull in. They'd take half an hour in the clearing to rest the horses and stretch their legs.

While Hange directed a few scouts to surveillance positions around the perimeter of the clearing, Levi turned to Eld and Sonja.

"You two, ride to the top of that hill before you take your rest." He pointed south. "The valley below it was called out on the map. Could

be high-traffic.”

“Sir,” they said in unison.

Levi dismounted. He was just hooking up his horse’s feedbag when Hange approached.

“Titans are quiet today.”

“Yeah,” he said without looking up from his task. He was about to hear an explanation whether he faked interest or not, so he wouldn’t bother putting in the effort.

“I wonder if it’s because it’s been so cloudy lately?” Hange stepped closer and patted his horse affectionately on the neck. “I still think weather is connected to titan activity. Everyone seems to think it’s only sunlight, but we’ve encountered titans early in the morning before, and some seemed more active than others. Besides, those three I killed alone during the last expedition were so sluggish—maybe heat is involved, too? Given that their temperatures run so hot—”

“Three?” Levi interrupted. “I thought it was five.”

“Oh.” Hange’s stance shifted back and forth. “Three, five, who can remember?”

He turned back to his horse. “Look, I don’t give a shit about kill counts, but keep your story straight if you want to have any sort of credibility with your squad.”

“Well … ” A pause. “Ever do that thing where you blurt out something that isn’t true, but it’d take too long to explain why you lied, and you don’t even know why you did it, so you have to commit to the lie? And it makes you feel like shit every time it comes up again?”

“If you thought before you spoke, that wouldn’t happen.” He finished hooking up the feed bag, then rubbed his horse’s nose. “You wanted something?”

“Oh, right.” Hange pulled out a small bag and held it out. “I have a task for you sometime during this mission, whenever it’s reasonably safe. I want you to use one of these when you’re in close quarters with a titan. Let me know how it reacts, in as much detail as you can. If you can do it more than once, that would be even better.”

He rifled through the bag and pulled out a shell. It was shaped like a flare, but its casing was metal. “What is it?”

“A little something from the lab.”

“A new weapon? Did Erwin okay this?”

“Well … ” Hange shifted again. “He told me not to bring any *new* weapons, but this is something the MPs already use, just in a new sett-

ing. It's a stronger type of sound round than the ones we use—it makes a loud noise at a frequency that stuns—”

“No,” Levi said, pushing the bag away.

“Fine. I should be able to get enough data by myself.”

“You're not going to use them, either. We're supposed to be scouting, not running experiments.”

Hange's jaw set. “If this works—if it stuns them the way it would stun a person—we'll have an effective way to safely escape close-range encounters.”

“And if it doesn't, you're going to deafen your teammates and attract the attention of every titan in the area.”

“Give me *some* credit. I'll only test it out in low-risk settings.”

“You know what I think, shitgoggles?” Levi folded his arms over his chest. “I think you're emotionally vulnerable after what happened on the last expedition, so now you're hell-bent on proving that you aren't afraid of titans, that you have what it takes to head up the research team. Relax. You don't have to do all that right away. This is just a scouting mission—all we have to do is get back alive with information about the route and it'll be a success. Go have a snack, take a shit in the trees, and then focus on the mission.”

There was a long pause as the Squad Leader's brows slowly lowered over the goggles. “I know you're going to be Captain one day, Levi, but you don't outrank me yet. I'll do what I think is best for the Corps.” With a curt nod, Hange walked away.

Levi watched, his jaw tight. *That could have gone better.*

“Sir,” Eld said, riding up to him. “Lots of titans to the south.”

“How many? Are they close together or spread out?”

“At least fifteen, maybe twenty. They're spread out, and there doesn't seem to be an easy route through them.”

“Shit.” Levi turned. “Hey, Hange, get back here. Bring your map.”

The two Squad Leaders spread the map on the ground and crouched around it, along with Eld, Sonja, and Hange's new assistant, a man by the name of Moblit. Sonja began to mark Xs on the map with graphite, replicating the titan layout to the best of her memory.

“Don't forget the two here.” Eld tapped a blank spot—the one space where Levi had thought they had room to manoeuvre.

“Shit,” Levi said again.

“What if we go east first and avoid the meadow?” Moblit slid a finger to a gorge.

“No visibility,” Hange said. “We’d be sitting ducks in there — unless we have spotting teams running along the crest on either side of it, but then *they’d* be the sitting ducks. And the mountains to the west are too steep to navigate at full speed; we’d have to walk the horses, and who knows if the carts can handle the terrain? Straight through the meadow is the only realistic option.”

“Realistic,” Levi repeated, staring at all those graphite Xs.

For several minutes, they were silent. He closed his eyes and tried to tap into old strategic knowledge he hadn’t used in years. When outnumbered by great odds on the streets—or before that—what would he have done? *Probably pull the targets onto me and give the others time to escape.*

His eyes opened. “We need a decoy team. Small enough to move quickly, but large enough to keep the titans contained if we need to engage. Maybe two people? If I take Eld to this location—” He tapped the densest area of the map. “I can use one of your sound rounds, four-eyes. It’ll draw the titans in.”

Hange’s face paled. “You two can’t fight that many titans at once.”

“You believe the rounds will stun them, right? One round to stun the nearest titans and draw the others in. Another round to stun the remainder after they’ve gathered around us. You lead everyone else through the empty space we’ve created. Meanwhile, Eld and I slip away through the stunned titans. If it gets messy, we work together to hold the titans’ attention while the rest of you escape.”

“Levi.” Hange sat back, frowning. “Erwin said not to take any unnecessary risks.”

“He also said not to try out any new weapons.”

“It’s too dangerous. I don’t know if the rounds will stun them or not. That’s why I wanted to try a round on a single titan, separate from a group. If it doesn’t work and you get swarmed, you’ll be on flat ground. The two of you wouldn’t stand a chance. I’m not even sure our entire group could handle that many.”

“Fine. Give me a better plan. We have to get through somehow. If we stay here and try to wait them out, they might swarm us here, and these trees are too low to give us an advantage. We’d be fucked.”

Their gaze held, then Hange looked back at the map, brow furrowed with concentration.

“Well?” Levi asked, hoping there was some plan he hadn’t considered.

“Shit,” Hange muttered.

“We can do it,” Eld said softly. “We just have to run the horses as hard as we can. If we get overwhelmed, we could head for the trees here and switch to 3DMG.” He pointed to a cluster of trees to the south. “Yeah, they’re short trees, so it’s not much better than being on the ground, but it’s better than nothing.”

Levi turned to look at him, impressed. He hadn’t expected any strategic thinking out of the quiet man, at least not so soon. Eld’s intellectual scores as a trainee had been fairly strong, but he was young, only a year out of training. Most people his age didn’t have the life experience necessary to think on a large scale. *I did, but my story’s not normal.*

“Okay, we’ll do it,” Hange said reluctantly. “But if you get stuck and head for the trees, fire off a red flare. We’ll have a team circle toward the trees to assist.” Turning to Moblit, the Squad Leader added, “Are you getting all this, Moblit?”

“Yes, Squad Leader.” The assistant frantically scrawled notes in a book.

“Good. Erwin’s going to need every detail so he can think about how we’re going to get an entire army through this bottleneck. But for now—” Hange thrust the bag of sound rounds at Levi. “Take them all. You might need them.”

Levi stood and turned to Eld, face grim. “You sure you’re up for this, Eld?”

Eld nodded. “I’m the best equestrian on the squad, sir. I won’t let you down.”

“Good man.” Levi made a mental note to buy him a drink after the mission was over.

He let Hange announce their plans to the team, taking a moment to himself to eat and drink. His hand trembled as he recapped his water flask, and he frowned. *Pull yourself together.*

Fifteen minutes later, he and Eld approached the apex of the hill on horseback. Half the spare sound rounds were in his saddlebag, half in Eld’s.

They crested the hill. The meadow opened up below them, full of flowers, bathed in sunlight, and crawling with titans. The hair on the back of Levi’s neck stood on end. He took calm, steady breaths, and his focus narrowed to the titans and Eld and nothing else. He took in the titans’ positions and movements, plotting the safest route to their target

location.

“Follow me.”

The horses burst into the meadow at a full gallop. Levi entered his battle state of mind, thinking not in words, but in movements and observations. A titan ahead of them looked up. Its arm had barely started moving toward them, but Levi had already reacted; his horse darted out of reach. The hoof beats of Eld’s horse kept pace behind him. The titan’s hand whiffed them both, kicking up a breeze that ruffled Levi’s cape.

Two wandering titans closed a gap ahead of him. Levi abruptly changed course, and now his pulse was racing in time with the hoof beats. Slow, steady breaths. There was no time to worry, no time to think. Instinct would carry him through.

Fifty metres to the target location. Forty. He guided them in a speedy semi-circle around a particularly interested titan, confusing it, before getting back on track. Thirty. Twenty. He loosed his flare gun, raising it high in the air; he covered one ear with his shoulder, the other with his spare hand.

“Cover your ears!” He pulled the trigger.

Even with his ears covered, the sound round was so loud that he felt it boom in his chest.

His world tilted.

*The box of pomegrenades began to fall toward the earth. Levi spun on his heel and tried to run, but not quickly enough. A flash. The explosion knocked him into the air; he twisted and landed hard. Red flares fired in every direction above him. Pain rocked his head, his vision blurring, his lungs refusing to suck in air, darkness closing in—*

“Squad Leader,” Eld cried.

Levi blinked. “Shit!” Of all the times to finally remember the explosion during the last mission ... He forced himself into the present.

The two titans nearest them were stunned and shaking, but two others were unaffected—and all around them, others were converging on the source of the noise, some charging from halfway across the meadow.

*It’s working. We’re opening up a route for the others.*

Levi’s hands tightened into the reins, his knuckles white. There were too many titans closing in. Even if the next sound round managed to stun half of them, he and Eld would still have far too many to deal with by themselves. The contingency plan to lure them to the tree line

and request aid from Hange's group was still an option, but now he could see the trees for himself, and they were only three or four metres tall. That was barely better than flat ground—maybe even worse, if small titans were hiding among them. Besides, the trunks were too thin to support their weight, so the trees couldn't even function as grapple points.

*The best option is for everyone to run. There's no need to risk the entire group just to save me. I'll hold the titans off as long as I can, then slip through the fray to meet up with the others.*

He set his jaw and clicked a blade into place.

“Sir?” Eld called.

Levi led them out of the line of a charging titan, then dropped back to ride beside him. “Once we pull the rest of them in, I'm going to drop a few titans to carve an opening for you. Take it. Lead my horse to safety and put in just enough distance to stay out of danger. When I fire a third sound round, bring her back toward me, but stay out of the fray. If it's too messy, bring her back to the group and don't look back. I'll find you later.”

Eld's eyes widened. “Squad Leader—”

“Don't argue. This is the best way to keep the group safe. Get ready to cover your ears.” He stood on the saddle, his muscles straining to keep him balanced, as he prepared to engage his gear. The approaching titans were almost in range. Just a few more seconds ...

He covered his ears and fired another sound round, then leapt from his horse, sinking an anchor into a stunned titan's shoulder.

One, two, three titans dropped. He sank his anchor into the head of a fourth and, mid-arc, scanned his surroundings. Hange's group was crossing the meadow without any resistance. Eld was already threading his way through to the outside of the pack of titans, using the openings Levi was giving him.

Levi hacked the flesh out of the fourth titan's weak spot, breathing heavily. Bouncing between moving titans gave him no rest, and his muscles, accustomed to working in shorter bursts, were already aching. He gritted his teeth and landed on a titan's head to catch his bearings. He was still in the thick of the pack; titans surrounded him three or four deep in every direction.

He cursed under his breath and leapt in time to avoid a swatting hand, sinking his anchor into another shoulder. His blades sank into a fifth nape.

The cut was sloppy. Blood spattered across his face, steaming as it dissolved, and for a moment, his vision was obscured.

His grapple missed its next target, and he began to plummet.

“Shi—” The ground slammed into him, knocking his breath from his lungs. He rolled, barely avoiding a stampeding foot.

“Fuck!” He leapt to his feet and sliced deep into the achilles tendon of the titan that had nearly stepped on him. As it fell, he bolted forward, not bothering to finish it off; he had to get higher. The writhing mass of bodies above him obscured any obvious grapple points. His eyes ticked between them.

An enormous hand plunged toward him. Levi braced himself in stance, slicing the fingers off as they tried to curl around his body.

A red flare shot into the sky.

Then he heard a yell, saw Eld descending onto the titan in front of him. The titan’s eyes rolled into its head as it began to fall. Eld swooped toward the next titan, but a hand batted him mid-air. He cried out, barely recovering in time to land safely on a stunned titan’s head.

Grateful for the opening, Levi sank his grapples into the nearest target, snapping his body up to its shoulder level. His blades carved the side of its neck, and he twisted, directing the cut into its weak spot.

In the corner of his eye, he could see Eld frozen in place, still standing on the titan’s head.

“Eld,” Levi hollered. Eld’s face was slack, his eyes wide. *He’s panicking.*

Behind them, he heard puffs of gas canisters.

Sonja and Gunther burst into his periphery, working together to fell a titan next to him. Several titans turned their attention to the duo.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Levi propelled himself to Eld. His eyes were vacant.

“Snap out of it, idiot.” Levi wrapped an arm around his waist. He propelled them both through the opening Sonja and Gunther had made for them, then landed outside the fray, shoving Eld toward his horse. Eld stared dumbly at it for a second.

“Move,” Levi barked. Behind him, he could hear their rescuers dropping a second titan. He mounted his own horse. “Sonja, Gunther! Get out of there.”

The two landed and mounted, steam trailing from their clothes; they began to ride hard toward the rest of the group. Levi turned toward Eld and saw him struggling to pull himself into the saddle.

Two titans began to break away from the confused group and charge toward them.

Levi gritted his teeth. He was so exhausted that he didn't trust himself to take them both out without a struggle. They had to outrun them. "Eld!" he roared with as much authority as could muster.

Eld jumped. He glanced at Levi, recognition coming over his face, then put one foot in the stirrup and pulled himself up. They began to gallop—just in time. The titans broke into a sprint behind them.

"Oh fuck," he heard Eld yell. "Oh fuck, oh fuck—"

"Shut up and ride!" Levi leaned close to his horse's neck. "Come on, girl," he murmured, more grateful than ever for the speed and strength of Survey Corps horses.

By the time they had caught up with the rest of the group, the two titans were falling behind.

"Levi," Hange called.

"Keep going," he yelled, scanning the group to assess their situation. The horses pulling the carts were flecked with sweat. Fully laden, there was no way they could outrun titans even if they were fresh, and they were nearing exhaustion. The gap between them and the titans was beginning to narrow again.

"Shit," he said, deliberately dropping to the back of the pack.

Hange turned to look at him, eyes so wide he could see the whites even through the goggles. "Levi!"

"Go!" He pulled a sound round out of his saddlebag and loaded the gun. He couldn't remember if these two titans had been stunned or resisted it before, but there weren't many options left. Once the gun was loaded, he slowed his horse, waiting until the titans were a little closer, a little closer ...

The ground shook with the footsteps of the approaching titans.

*Now!*

Levi's horse darted east. The titans began to follow him.

"That's right, you ugly bastards," he muttered. "Come get me." He narrowed his eyes, leading them away from the group. The throng of titans they had left behind was out of sight now; he hoped they were out of earshot, too.

Covering his ears, he fired.

One titan stopped, stunned, but the other kept running.

At least one was better than two. He clenched his teeth and sank a grapple into the titan's forehead. As he arced toward the titan's back,

the enormous eyes locked onto him.

A hand snapped up and grabbed one of his wires.

*Shit!* Levi immediately released the other wire and pulled into a spin, attacking the inside of the titan's elbow to sever its muscles. The arm fell limp; the hand released the wire. With a yell, Levi used a burst of gas to propel himself up to the shoulder and around the neck, spinning and cutting as he moved. A chunk of flesh flew from the titan's nape, and the beast began to sink to the ground, steaming. Levi burst from the steam and sprinted toward his horse.

As they galloped back to the group, sweat ran down Levi's forehead and into his eyes. He wiped it with the back of his hand, then grimaced as he smeared the steaming remains of titan blood across his face. Even though he knew they'd dissolve soon enough, he pulled out a handkerchief and began to mop his forehead.

He glanced behind them. There were no more pursuers. One corner of his mouth curled into a smirk.

When he caught up with the group, Hange turned briefly to look at him, then looked away, face pale. Eld was still riding near the back, sobbing unabashedly into the back of his hand.

Levi rode up next to him. "Eld. Good job."

His eyes squeezed shut and he curled tighter into his hand. Levi's heart sank. *He hasn't been here long. I shouldn't have asked him to risk himself like this so soon.*

"It's okay," he said. "We made it."

"I panicked." Eld's words were barely understandable through his sobs. "I'm so sorry, Squad Leader. I let everyone down."

"We made it," Levi repeated. "It's okay." He wasn't really sure what else to say. On one hand, it was important that Eld chastise himself for freezing up—that could have put the entire team at risk. On the other, who wouldn't freeze up when surrounded by more than a dozen man-eating giants? Even Levi had panicked.

He turned to Sonja and Gunther and found them staring straight ahead, faces ashen. "You two did well, too. Thanks."

They nodded, but seemed too shaken to speak.

Once they had made it through the meadow, the valley opened up before them, no titans in sight. A small, abandoned village lay in ruin on the horizon to the southwest. Their checkpoint would be about an hour south of there, an old Garrison patrol outpost. Today would be spent securing it and preparing it for use by the expedition two weeks

from now. Tomorrow, they'd begin fanning out to scout the silos.

They spread back into formation and only encountered two solo titans on the way to their destination; they were easily avoided without conflict. By the time they arrived at the gates of the checkpoint, the entire group was still intact. Levi felt a swell of pride. *Not a single death—not bad for two new Squad Leaders.*

Hange dismounted and examined the gates. "It's locked, and we don't have a key. I guess we can climb over and break it open."

"Let me take a look." Levi rummaged through his saddlebag for the lockpicking tools Erwin had given him. The lock was rusted, so it took some brute force, but after a few minutes, it gave way. The gates creaked open.

The checkpoint was a mess: half of it had crumbled, and vines and overgrowth had nearly consumed the other half. As the scouting party walked their horses toward the stables, Levi's nose wrinkled.

"What a fucking mess. We need to fix up this place before we do anything else."

"We have other priorities," Hange said.

"Look at these walls. You want titans climbing up the vines? My teams are going to start cleaning before we do anything else."

"No, your teams are going to patrol the area to make sure we're really secure." Hange's jaw jutted.

*What are you so pissy about, four-eyes?* "Okay, then your teams are going to clean—"

"—are going to examine this place for structural integrity, and you and I are going to talk."

Levi blinked, surprised by the tension in the other's voice. "I guess the cleaning can wait."

Once the teams had been sent on their tasks, Levi leaned against a tree near the wall, folding his arms over his chest. Hange approached, shoulders hunched and tense, fists clenched.

"Why are you so pissed?" Levi asked. "Did you accidentally shit yourself during the ride?"

"What the fuck were you doing back there?"

The harsh tone was so unexpected that his arms tightened around his chest and he curled into himself. "What?"

"When you were fighting the titans. You weren't supposed to engage them. The plan was to run to the woods if you needed help."

"Did you see those trees? They would have been worse than flat

ground; it would have endangered the entire group. Besides, I sent Eld to safety, so I was only risking myself.”

Hange spoke through clenched teeth: “How do you think the Commander would have taken it if I had to tell him you died because you went charging headfirst into a herd of titans, on flat ground, with no backup? *After* he warned us not to take unnecessary risks?”

He had never seen Hange so angry. Guilt twisted his stomach, but his brows dropped. “Don’t use Erwin to try to manipulate me, shitgoggles. It wasn’t ‘unnecessary.’ How else were we going to get through? The situation changed, so I made a call. And I tested your fucking sound rounds—don’t you want to know how that went?”

Hange turned away, but not before Levi noticed the dark eyes filling with tears. His stomach knotted, and he let out an irritated sigh.

“Now you’re crying? What the fuck, Hange; what’s this really about? I figured you’d want me to charge in to test your shitty sound rounds. Hell, I thought you’d be the first one to charge in there with me.”

“I froze,” Hange said, voice cracking.

“What?”

“When you deviated from the plan. I had no idea what to do. I froze. How can I lead a squad if I can’t even react to one little situation change? We have to be flexible or everyone could die.” Hange’s voice faded: “Erwin was right. I’m still emotionally compromised from what happened last mission. I shouldn’t be out here, Levi, not yet.”

He stared, not sure how to respond. “You sent Sonja and Gunther to assist us, and that was exactly the right thing to do.”

“No, they left on their own. Even they knew how to act in an emergency. I just sat there.” Slowly, Hange sank to a crouch. “It’s like the last mission, after the explosion, when I froze up and went for the trees instead of the silo. It turned out okay, but only by fluke. I have lives riding on me now—I need to make better decisions on the fly.”

Feeling guilty, Levi remembered chastising Hange for that particular decision during the last expedition. He hadn’t meant to sow the seeds of self-doubt.

He knelt down and grabbed the ponytailed head, tilting it until they looked each other in the eyes.

“How long have you been in the Survey Corps, Hange?”

A pause. “Two, three years?”

“And you were in research before that, right?”

“Yeah.”

He lightly smacked the back of Hange's head. "Then stop thinking you should know how to react on the field. It takes years to train your instincts, and it's not like you can prepare for it by studying. I've been fighting for my life since before you were born. So you froze up; big deal. We all do, sometimes. Learn from it and move on. We've got to survive a week out here, and your team needs a leader, not a shitty, snivelling whiner."

"I see." Hange slowly stood. "Thanks, Levi."

"Sure." He stood, too. "And I don't care what you say; this place is getting cleaned top to bottom before the day ends, or we'll all die of lung rot in the night."

"We don't have cleaning supplies."

"I brought plenty."

"Oh. Then I guess we can do some cleaning after all." Hange began to follow him to the carts. "Let's meet up tonight after dinner, all right? Just you and me. I want to go over Erwin's orders one last time."

*Erwin's orders.* Levi suddenly remembered the envelope stowed in his inside jacket pocket. Curiosity almost spurred him to find a quiet area straight away, but Erwin had specifically said to open it that night. Instead, he vowed to throw himself into his work so the day would pass quickly.

And so, the teams worked to secure and clean the checkpoint. By evening, Levi was exhausted, but the checkpoint was clean enough to meet his standards, and the area was secure. While they ate their evening rations, he and Hange announced the next day's tasks to the team. They were to avoid engaging titans wherever possible, instead noting down their positions and travel patterns. There was more to discuss, but several of the team members were yawning, some falling asleep in place. The Squad Leaders dismissed them, giving them permission to settle in for the night.

"Levi and I will take the first watch." Hange's head cocked at Levi. "Come on."

He wanted nothing more than to read Erwin's letter and then fall asleep, but he thought of Hange's near-breakdown earlier that day and decided an hour or two of company would be tolerable.

They climbed up to the guard tower. This was one area they hadn't cleaned, and Levi wrinkled his nose as his hands closed over dusty ladder rungs. They snuffed the torches and sat side by side at the top of the tower. Hange pulled out a bottle.

“You really think it’s a good idea to drink while we’re on watch?” Levi asked.

“A few swigs will be fine. It’s been a long day.” Hange took a few swallows, then handed it over.

Levi sniffed the drink, then, finding the scent pleasant, pulled the sleeve out from under his jacket to carefully wipe the mouth of the bottle. The liquor was some sort of brandy, and he found himself reluctant to pull the bottle away.

“Hey, not so much.” Hange grabbed it out of his hands and capped it again.

Carefully straightening his sleeves, Levi said, “You feeling any better about earlier?”

“Yeah. You were right; I need to learn from it and move on. Put it behind me. I’m starting to get excited about this whole thing again. Observing titans without engaging them is going to be interesting.” Slim fingertips drummed the neck of the bottle. “How are you doing? Missing Erwin?”

He ignored the sidelong glance and knowing grin. “How dependent do you think I am? It’s been less than a day.”

“Not at all. You can miss someone without being dependent. It’s not like you’re freezing up out here or neglecting your duties or anything.” Hange looked thoughtful for a moment, then said, “It was when you were at the Capital, right?”

“What was?”

“When you hooked up.”

Levi’s eyes narrowed. “None of your business.”

“Oh, come on.” Hange gave him a smile. “You miss him, right? It might help to talk about him.”

“You’re just being nosey.”

“Of course I am. I’m a sucker for romance.”

“Really?” Levi raised a brow. “I thought you said you weren’t interested in romance.”

“In others, it’s intriguing.” Hange’s face softened. “I said I’m not interested in romance for myself. Not anymore.”

The words were pronounced like the beginning of a conversation. Levi’s stomach was glowing, and he was lonelier than he had expected, so maybe this was a good time to have a deep talk. Their discussions back in the tree had been pretty interesting, after all, and Hange had talked to him after he had stormed out of the officer’s meet-

ing not that long ago. It was his turn to listen. He quickly scanned the horizon, ensuring there were no titans approaching, then settled back against the wall.

“You must want to talk about something important,” he said. “You look like you’re holding in a fart.”

“Feels like it.” Hange’s lips curved into a sad smile. “Do you remember me telling you that a person’s professional skills shouldn’t be questioned because of mistakes they made in their personal life?”

“Yeah. What was that about?”

Hange glanced at him. “You sure you want to know? It’s a long story.”

“Then pass me the bottle first.” Levi snatched it and took another swig. Once he had swallowed, he handed it back. “Okay, go ahead.”

“Before I joined the military, I was working in a weapons research facility in Karanese District. Faked my university credentials and lied about my age; I was good enough in interviews that no one caught on.” Hange swirled the bottle, then took another sip. “I started work as an entry-level lab assistant, but my depth of knowledge and my enthusiasm caught my boss’s attention. He made me his personal assistant. He was a scientist and entrepreneur, tall, young, charismatic, quick smile. I was smitten.”

Levi tried to imagine the Squad Leader smitten with anything except titans. “Did you get all hyper and weird around him?”

“Yeah, and I kept tripping over my words and getting flustered. I guess he must have found that endearing, because we started sleeping together a couple months after my promotion.” There was that sad smile again. “I thought it was love. Maybe it was, I don’t know. We spent most of our time talking about new prototypes. He had an idea for an explosive cannon shell that made two explosions—the first one localized, the second one scattered. Sort of smaller bombs nested inside a large shell. He thought they’d be good to clear out titans that had congregated around the gates, as focusing on one at a time was ineffective. It was a tricky concept to nail down, because the inner bombs had to scatter in the initial explosion, but not actually explode for another second, so the casing had to heat to a very specific temperature range before the inner explosive material could ignite. We tried a few alloys—”

“I don’t care,” Levi said.

“Right.” Hange’s cheeks darkened. “Anyway, my boss was a good

entrepreneur, but he was a sloppy scientist. My calculations showed that the initial blast was going to be far larger than he anticipated. There was a seam in the protective material around the inner bombs that meant they would explode with the initial blast, making it catastrophic in size. It could have been easy to fix—we just needed to rework the design and the seam a bit—but he got offended when I brought it up. Berated me in front of the team and belittled my research. I was so young and inexperienced that I took every word to heart. He loved me, so why would he get so angry unless I was truly in the wrong?” The smile faded. “The thing about science is that it doesn’t matter what your ego tells you; the numbers don’t lie. We tested the prototype the next day, and my calculations had been correct. Some of my teammates were crushed beneath the rubble, others were caught in the fire. The media and the investors questioned my boss for gross negligence.”

The silence was so long that Levi shifted, folding his arms over his chest. “That’s not where the story ends, is it?”

“No.” Hange was staring at the stone floor, fingers tracing a seam between blocks. “Their investigation uncovered my calculations, so attention shifted to me: I was responsible for the written proof that we knew about the explosion risk in advance. Somehow, when they focused on me, they uncovered our affair. Turned out my boss was married with two kids. The media started questioning what kind of person would sleep with their married boss, and started digging into my past. Suddenly they were threatening to question everything I didn’t want to discuss, from my university credentials to my gender. They were painting me as untrustworthy, saying I had no morals and had willfully helped my boss bury my calculations.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. But where I saw the potential end of my career, my boss saw an opportunity. He pinned the entire incident on me and my inexperience: I was just some naive kid who had made a series of blunders. He fired me and I was stripped of my credentials. The investors and media were satisfied, and they backed off.” Hange’s fingers curled into a fist. “To this day, I don’t know if he was so quick to use me as a scapegoat because he was trying to protect himself, or because he wanted to quickly put an end to their investigation to save me from further scrutiny.”

Levi stayed silent, but he could guess which of the options had been foremost in the man’s mind.

“Whatever his motivations,” Hange said, “I couldn’t get a job in research after that. I changed my name and joined the military because I had nowhere left to go.”

*Do any of us use our real names? The Survey Corps really is a refuge for broken freaks.* “It’s shitty as hell that all that happened to you.”

Hange half-laughed, half-snorted. “Yes. Yes, Levi, it really was shitty as hell. And by that point I was six or seven years older than most trainees, so training was shitty as hell, too. I suppose it was worth it, because now I’m here, and Erwin’s going to finally let me do research. But I’m done with love, after that mess. And like I said, I’ll never, ever judge anyone professionally based on their love life. Not after what happened to me.”

“One shitty boyfriend and you’re giving up on love?”

Hange shrugged. “For now. I have too much else on my mind.”

“You can just turn it on and off like that?” Levi asked, surprised. “Don’t you ever want anyone?”

“I get dumb little crushes now and then, but they don’t impact me that much. They’re fun to entertain, and that’s about it.”

“Yeah?” Now they were verging on gossip, but Levi was relaxed and enjoying the conversation. “Like who?”

Hange’s cheeks darkened. “Oh, I don’t know. You remember that tall redhead who was in Berit’s squad? Darren, I think it was. I had quite a crush on him for a while.”

“Hm, your taste isn’t bad,” Levi said, remembering the broad shoulders and muscular ass.

“I like tall men, but he wasn’t very bright. We wouldn’t have had anything to talk about. If I can’t hold a conversation with someone, they don’t hold my interest.”

“You’re too picky. It’s not as if there’s much time to talk when you’re horizontal.” He glanced over, suddenly curious. “Wait, tall and smart is your type? Like Erwin?”

“Mm. I had a bit of a thing for him back when he was first working on the long-range scouting formation. That man’s a damn genius.” Hange smirked. “Of course, if I’d known that one day, an angry little man was going to stuff a cravat in his mouth and fuck him over his desk, I wouldn’t have wasted my energy.”

With a displeased sigh, Levi rubbed his forehead.

Hange chuckled and took another sip of liquor. “The looks on your faces.”

They were silent for a few minutes, eyeing the horizon. Still no sign of any titans. Levi worked up his courage to ask a question that had been on his mind.

“Look, shitgoggles, not that your opinion matters, but when all that happened, that comment you made about assuming that I’d be taking it from Erwin, not the other way around—”

Hange turned to him. “Yeah?”

“Was it because you expected me to be submissive to him? Does he seem like he’d be more dominant than me?”

“What?” Hange’s brow wrinkled. “No. It’s because he’s so much taller than you. It just seems like everything would line up better that way. What does position have to do with submission and domination?”

Levi shrugged. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.” Hange leaned closer. “I hope you’re not suggesting that the one sticking a penis into someone is automatically the dominant one.”

Levi leaned away, annoyed by the other’s stare. “Well ...”

“What would that say about heterosexual relationships, Levi?”

“It’s not the same. Assholes are dirty, and letting a guy shove something into it requires a lot of trust, because if he gets shit on his dick—”

“Ugh, stop.” Hange’s nose wrinkled. “First of all, I don’t care who’s doing it, sex is messy and bodies do weird things you can’t control, so don’t use that as an excuse. I don’t know if you’ve ever seen a vagina up close, but they have their own quirks that can be nerve-wracking at times. Second of all, trusting someone is a hell of a lot different than being dominated by them.”

“Trust is a form of submission,” he said flatly. “You’re leaving yourself completely vulnerable to the other person. They could screw you over, if they wanted.”

“No, trust is an act of equality. Besides, sex itself requires a lot of trust, with naked bodies, and genitals doing weird things, and fluids flying everywhere. Love requires trust, too. So does everything we do out there on the field. Even the two of us talking about this is a form of trust, and I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t say you’re submitting to me by sharing your thoughts so openly.”

Levi’s head was spinning. He must have had more to drink than he thought; talking about himself this honestly wasn’t something he was comfortable doing with anyone but Erwin. “I’m done with this discuss-

ion.”

“Oh.” Hange sat upright. “Did I pry too much? I get carried away sometimes.”

“No shit.” He stood. “Finish up the watch on your own, all right?”

“Oh,” Hange said again, looking so sad that Levi hesitated. *I'm being an asshole.*

“Look, I went through a lot today, so I'm pissy. I just need some rest. We'll talk again tomorrow night, okay? I bet you won't be able to shut up about all the titans you're going to see.” He roughly patted the top of the Squad Leader's head as he walked past. “Trade off with one of the others soon and get some sleep.”

Hange gave him a feeble smile. “Okay. ‘Night.”

He nodded and lit a torch, then began to climb down to the base.

The whole conversation had been strange. He'd never given much thought to his definition of trust or submission, or the differentiation between the two. He had kept his trust in others closely guarded his whole life, starting from the very first days he could remember. His aunt had been such an unreliable caretaker that he had never trusted her, not completely, and when she was gone and he had fallen under the wing of others, trust had been the last thing on his mind. Farlan and Isabel had been the first people he had openly trusted, and even then, it had been with reservations. If he had become something of a leader to them, it was only because they mistook his self-reliance for authority.

He found his way to an abandoned room with a working lock. He set the torch in a bracket and slid to a seat by the door, pulling the letter out of his jacket. A faint aroma of Erwin's cologne hit his nostrils. He lifted the paper to his nose and closed his eyes, breathing in.

*Fuck, it smells so good.* His body, numb as it was after the long day, began to stir.

Erwin. Now there was a man Levi trusted more than anyone he had met in his life. Erwin thought it was a considerate, careful type of trust, and maybe that was how it came across, but Levi knew better than that. Deep down, in the core of his being, he trusted Erwin with his life. Wherever Erwin went, he would follow. Any questions Levi threw back at him were a layer of reassurance that they were aligned, habit more than actual hesitation.

Given that enormous amount of trust, he wasn't sure why he was still a bit self-conscious about his abilities when they switched up their

sex life. It wasn't as if Erwin was going to judge him or betray him, and he had seemed responsive to Levi's efforts.

*Maybe I'm trying too hard to be submissive—to put his pleasure over mine—and it's screwing me up. Hange's right; it's just a position. Submission has nothing to do with it.*

He felt a wave of satisfaction, as if he'd just had an epiphany. He had been overcomplicating everything by trying to force himself into a pigeonhole that only existed in his head. Next time Erwin rode him, Levi was going to approach it like any other sex act. He'd do what felt good and let himself be carried away by their shared emotions instead of trying to figure out what he was 'supposed' to do. If that meant squirming and moaning, so be it. If that meant bossing Erwin around, then he'd do that, too. Now that he thought about it, he'd done a bit of that last time, anyway. *Even when I think I'm supposed to be submissive, I suck at it*, he thought wryly.

His pants were getting so uncomfortably tight that he paused to adjust himself. This line of thought was only going to fog his head even more, and he wanted to be alert to take in Erwin's message.

He breathed in the cologne as he opened the envelope, unfolded the letter, and began to read. Erwin had printed the text instead of using his usual flowing script, and Levi was both grateful and insulted. His breath caught as he clued in to what he was reading: a description of seven different ways Erwin was going to be masturbating during his absence, one for each night.

"Holy shit." He was tempted to read them all at once, but decided it would be best to savour one per night.

*Night one, I'll be face-down in my pillow, mimicking the position you were riding me in just this morning.*

"So that's why you insisted on that position, you kinky bastard," Levi murmured as he unbuckled his pants.

*I'll stick my ass high in the air, but without you behind me, I'm sure to feel empty. I'll slick two fingers with oil and then sink them into myself, all the way down to the knuckle.*

"Oh shit," Levi whispered, frantically moving his hand.

❧

Erwin tried his best to bottle the moans that were building inside him, but a few escaped as he came hard into his hand. He froze,

wondering if the pillow had muffled the noise. As embarrassing as it would be to have sex with Levi overheard by Mike, it would be even worse to be overheard when Levi was out of town.

He rolled onto his side, breathing hard, and reached for a handkerchief. Once he had cleaned up, he shoved the oil and the list of seven positions safely inside the drawer. Orgasm was never as good alone as when Levi was with him, but knowing they were linked by the letter had made it more intense than usual. He rolled onto his back and closed his eyes, wondering if Levi had sequestered himself off from the group to touch himself, too.

The bed was too cold. He and Levi had been sharing a bed so often that he was already growing accustomed to having that warm, small form beside him. He rolled onto his side and drew a spare pillow against his chest, wrapping his arms around it. He buried his face in the top of it, pretending he was keeping the real Levi safe.

*Of course he's safe. It'll take more than a few wandering titans to fell Humanity's Strongest.*

His sleep was fitful, and he awoke at reveille with a throbbing headache and scratchy eyes. He sparred with Mike in the gym, ate and cleaned up, then settled into a full day of paperwork. There were formations to draft in detail, investors to contact, supplies to order and budgets to finalize.

He tore himself away from his desk shortly before midnight. He was so exhausted that he was tempted to go straight to sleep, but he felt as if the paper he had handed Levi was a binding contract. Levi was out there risking his life while Erwin was sitting at his desk pushing papers; this was the least he could offer him. Besides, he could probably use the stress release. He lay face-down on a pillow, preparing to act out his promise.

The days began to blur. Erwin sent messages, he received messages. Paperwork. Time in the gym. Long hours staring at maps and shifting around pieces. The only distinctions between the days were the contractual promises each night—welcome distractions, but too short. By the fifth day, he felt as if his mind were pacing in circles. He hadn't set foot outside since Levi and Hange's departure. Maybe some time practicing in the sunshine would give him a mental break.

Gearing up and working through the obstacle courses in the yard would likely take too long—and besides, he didn't want to have to shower afterwards—so he settled on target practice. The yard was emp-

ty; the new soldiers were in special classroom sessions all day, so several of the older soldiers had taken a day of leave.

After a few throw attempts, Erwin swung his arm a few times to loosen it up, then pulled the knives free from the target. The early afternoon sun was warmer than he had expected; he had already taken off his jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt, but he was beginning to wish he had worn his gym gear instead. He hadn't expected throwing a few knives to be so physically demanding.

"Mind if I join you?" someone asked behind him. He turned to see Berit approaching, dressed in civilian garb.

"I thought you were on leave today," he said, moving back into throwing range.

"I was. Came back early." She settled into place beside him.

"Everything okay?"

She shrugged as if to dismiss the question. "What about you? Thought you'd be working on the expedition planning."

"Needed a break, so I decided to work on my aim. It's always been the weakest part of my offense, and seeing people like you and Levi take out titan eyes has been inspiring me to improve." He threw the three knives again, then frowned as they sank into the outer ring of the target. "Though I don't seem to be improving much."

"Your upper torso is too stiff when you throw. It's screwing up your aim." Berit retrieved the knives, then fell into stance beside him. "Watch my torso." She threw a knife; it landed in the centre of the target. "Watch my hand follow through." She threw the second, then the third, and they landed neatly around the first one. "You shouldn't rely on knives alone, though—it gets more complicated when you get the gear hilt in there, because you have to time the release right."

"I thought I'd focus on the aim first, then the release technique once I had this nailed down." Erwin tried again, and this time, two of his knives were marginally closer to the centre.

"You're still too stiff."

Erwin frowned, retrieving the knives. "Maybe I'll take a break for a bit." He sat on a stone block to the side and watched Berit practice, trying to study her form for the details she had pointed out before. Instead, his gaze was drawn to her furrowed brow. Berit's youthful face always looked happy, even at neutral, so he knew something big must be troubling her.

She glanced over. He must have been wearing a similar express-

ion, because she asked, “Worried about Levi?”

Erwin looked around and, seeing they were still alone, said, “Levi is more than capable of taking care of himself. That being said, I have so much experience with loss that it has become expected. A part of me is prepared to lose him during his mission, and it’s making me anxious.”

“You’re lucky, you know.” Her knife landed hilt-deep. “Maybe it’s stressful, but at least you’ve both chosen the same goals, the same lifestyle. You’d never question each other about why you do what you do, and you get to be together all the time between missions.” The last knife split the leather cover of the target.

She was dancing around something; maybe this was another good opportunity to take Shadis’ advice and get to know his troops better. “Did something happen during your leave today?”

Berit sighed and dropped to a seat on a stone block beside him. “Silas asked me to marry him.”

“Ah. And I’m guessing by your demeanour that you turned him down?”

“No, but I didn’t say yes, either.” She pulled a single ponytail over her shoulder, fiddling with her hair tie. “His proposal was conditional: he asked me to leave the military.”

Erwin raised a brow, but before he could speak, she pressed ahead:

“That came out wrong. It’s not like he’s trying to control me. He knows I need to have a career to feel fulfilled, and he’s supportive; he’s celebrated each of my military achievements with me. The thing is, he wants to start a family, and he wants kids that know their mother. And I think he’s sick of waiting for each expedition to return, wondering if I’ll be coming back alive.”

Erwin felt a wave of sympathy. He’d had a similar conversation with Marie a decade and a half earlier. “And what do you want, Berit?”

“I don’t know. I believe in our cause, and I believe we’re going to change the world. But a part of me just wants a little house in the country, where I can run a cute little shop and be surrounded by three or four cherub-faced kids.” She threw the ponytail over her shoulder. “Can I be honest, Erwin?”

“Of course.”

“A couple months ago, I would have turned him down and kept doing what I’m doing, but Anke’s death is really messing with my head.

We were supposed to be old grumpy ladies together, and now her future is gone, just like that." Tentatively, she added, "Does it bother you?"

"What?"

"Her death. You two knew each other from the very beginning."

Erwin's mouth flattened into a straight line as he thought of the way Anke's arms had slipped from his grasp, of how quickly he had obeyed her order to let her die. "Not as much as it should. It seems all this exposure to death has been numbing me."

"You're lucky," Berit said bitterly.

"Lucky? Shadis said that sort of thing was my biggest weakness."

"No, it's a strength. Remember how he used to break down at the end of expeditions? It was so hard on morale, and didn't do anything to give the investors confidence in us. Anyway, the point is, I'm not sure what to do about Silas. I really love him, but ..." She glanced up. "I'm sorry, you're my Commander, not my counsellor. I shouldn't be telling you all this."

"It's fine. Part of my role is to be your mentor, after all." He was flattered that she was opening up. Their relationship had always been polite, but distant. Maybe seeing him with Levi had helped her realize he was more than just a stoic figurehead, that he was a man with feelings and failings, just like everyone else. He decided to meet her halfway.

"Berit, do you remember Mike talking about Captain Nile's wife, Marie?"

"Well, I left before that discussion, but Hange filled me in later. The one who's a drama queen, right?"

"That wasn't really fair of him to imply," he said, shifting to try to find a more comfortable position on the hard stone. "Mike is protective of me, so he blamed Marie for a lot of failings that were actually mine. Regardless, when I graduated from training, she gave me an ultimatum much like the one Silas gave you. Like you, I was torn, but in my case, my goal won out. That goal had been the most important thing in the world to me since I was a young boy. She simply couldn't compete."

Berit was quiet for a moment, then said, "Do you regret it?"

"I did from time to time, particularly when she married Nile. Until then, I'd clung to the delusion that I could have both my goals and her love; I'd help humanity win the war and return to her, and we could build our lives together in a new, better world. In the end, however, our goals were simply too different, and our individual goals were more im-

portant to us than each other. She needed a family. I needed the Survey Corps. Over time, my love for her has faded from a roaring fire to a tiny spark, but the motivation that fuels me burns hotter than that fire ever did.” He turned to her. “You have to consider your motivations, Berit. You have to weigh your contradicting goals and decide which ones will still burn brightly as the decades pass.”

“I want to free humanity. More than anything. But I’m not sure I can sacrifice everything for that to happen. I’m not like you, or Levi, or Hange. My passion doesn’t consume me like you three.”

“Then consider this: is there a compromise? Do you need to be on the front lines to be happy? If not, maybe you could transfer to work with Shadis in the Training Corps. That way, you could still feel as if you were contributing to the war, but you’d be safe from the titans.”

“Huh,” she said, her eyes lighting up. “I didn’t even consider that. Thanks, Erwin. I’ll give it some thought.”

He nodded.

“You know … ” She shrugged. “All this is giving me perspective. If I were in love with someone who shared all my goals and my passion, and I was going to be spending the rest of my life next to that person anyway, I’d marry him in a second. Even if we had to keep the marriage a secret. There would be absolutely nothing to compromise, because our futures would overlap perfectly, so I would want to take advantage of that.”

His brows rose. “Are you implying that I should marry Levi?”

“I’m saying I sure would if I were in your shoes.”

Why was his stomach flipping, his heart beating faster? Why was he picturing Levi in a suit, their hands joined, matching rings on their fingers? “It’s a little early to think about that type of commitment. We’ve been together less than a month. And does he really strike you as the type to want to marry?”

“Sure he does; I see the way he looks at you. I’m not saying you have to do it now, but maybe it’s something to consider down the road.” She shrugged again. “We could have a little party, just the officers.”

“I suppose this means you’ve come to terms with Levi and I being together,” he said, deflecting the topic.

“I never had a problem with that. I think it’s kind of cute, the two of you saving the world together. I just didn’t want to see you biting down on a gag while he stuffed your ass.” Her face wrinkled as a shudder rippled through her. “Fuck, I’m never going to get that image out of my

mind."

Erwin cleared his throat. "The locksmith will be in tomorrow to fix the lock."

"Good."

"Just in case, you might want to knock first next time."

"That one's on Hange. By the way, I am dead serious about keeping those couches clean. I don't want my ass anywhere near your ball sweat."

Erwin laughed. He had never realized the innocent-looking woman could be so crass—he had the urge to get her and Levi drunk together and let them banter.

"Good luck in deciding which answer you'll give Silas. I just ask that if you plan to leave, you give me plenty of notice."

"Of course. Thanks, Erwin."

He smiled, then stood. "Would you mind going over my technique one more time? I'd like to get at least one bull's-eye before I get back to my paperwork."

"Sure. Get ready to throw. I'll move you through it."

Erwin allowed Berit to pose his back and arm, his mind distant. When he had joined the Survey Corps, he had always assumed he was permanently giving up any chance of marriage. It wouldn't be fair to his spouse that he could die at any moment.

But, like Berit had said, Levi understood. Erwin couldn't imagine how Levi would react to his death, but he doubted their marital status would affect its impact. Given how he, himself, had reacted to Levi's supposed death, it seemed their bond was strong enough that even a platonic relationship would hurt them.

*It's still too soon, but maybe one day, we could consider it.*

His heart began to pound.

"Yeah, keep your back nice and relaxed, like that," Berit said, bringing him back to himself. "You were overthinking it before. Let yourself flow; do what comes naturally."

*A valuable lesson for many facets of my life,* Erwin thought.

"Try throwing now."

He stepped forward and whipped the knives. The first was off-centre; he narrowed his eyes at the target, trying to adjust his aim. The second was even worse. "I think I'm over-correcting at the end of the arc."

"Stop thinking. Trust your body, like you're on the gear, or spar-

ring. It's an immovable target; you don't have to outsmart it."

He chuckled. Very well. If he had been doing better while his mind was wandering, then he would let it wander.

With a long, slow breath, he thought of Levi in a suit, their hands joined, each wearing a ring, pledging to unite their lives into one. *Perhaps our lives are already one, anyway. Perhaps it would just be a formal recognition of everything we already know.*

He stepped forward and threw.

The knife sank hilt-deep into the centre of the target.

"That's more like it," Berit said with a grin. He smiled. But now his mind was firmly on another path.

"How long were you and Silas together before he proposed?"

"Six years. It was a long time to be together without discussing marriage, if you ask me. What about you and Marie?"

He considered. "Difficult to say, given that it was a tumultuous relationship, but the serious part of it was nearly a year. In our case, at least, it was much too soon to consider marriage. Everything was too new, and we had too many hesitations."

"Three years seems like good middle ground." Berit pulled the knives out of the target. "Long enough to know each other, short enough that neither person is wondering what the hell the hold-up is."

"I agree." His cheeks were warm. Three years—maybe three and a half to be safe. That would bring them to the summer of 849. He selected a date in his mind: August thirty-first. If he and Levi made it that far, if everything between them was still healthy and loving, then Erwin would bring up the topic of marriage.

"Invite me if you get married." She held out the knives, palm flat.

"Of course," he said, accepting them. "At this rate, you'd make up a third of our guest list."

"If we're all still alive by then." Her mouth twisted, and she fell silent, but the thought continued in Erwin's mind: *if you can keep us alive.*

He felt the first pangs of anxiety about the upcoming mission. No Shadis, no Anke; every success would belong solely to him, and so would every failure. He could minimize death, but never eliminate it. *Any one of us could go. Berit, Mike, Hange. Levi ...*

"You okay?" asked Berit.

"I should get back to work. There's still so much to do." He could think about weddings later; his temples were throbbing.

“Yeah, maybe I’ll do some work, too.”

“You’re on leave.”

“You’re the last person who should lecture me about working too hard,” she said with a smirk.

He chuckled. “A fair point. Would you care to practice some more tomorrow? Mike’s keeping me distracted in the mornings at the gym, but I’ll need an evening break as well.”

“Sure, I don’t mind. By the time Levi and the others get back, you’ll have perfect aim.”

As he walked across the yard, he tried to rein in his racing mind. He’d have dinner, then work for a few hours, then take some time to relax in that fifth pose he had described to Levi. Two more days of this, and then, if everything went according to plan, Levi would be safely back inside the wall.

Stopping at the entrance, he turned to give the wall one last look. He hoped everything was going smoothly. He hated not knowing what was going on out there.

## -20-

# CONNECTION

“Where’s Hange?” Levi asked as he stormed through the checkpoint’s main entrance, dripping mud and sweat.

“Upstairs with Nifa getting stitches,” Moblit said.

Levi pushed past him and began to climb the stairs. *Sounds like your day went about as well as ours.*

“Sir,” Moblit called, “I don’t know if it’s a good idea for you to interrupt them.”

Levi ignored him. He owed Hange an awkward interruption.

The rooms upstairs were dark, save for one, cracks of light showing around a closed door. He turned the knob. Hange sat facing away from him, naked from the waist up. Nifa was tending to a nasty-looking gash on the Squad Leader’s mid-back.

Levi stepped into the room and cleared his throat. Nifa looked up at him and shrieked.

“Hm?” Hange turned around with a squint, and then gave a laugh. “Calm down, Nifa. It’s just Levi.”

“Squad Leader, you’re topless!” Nifa frantically tried to drape her patient with a green cloak.

“Oh, relax. I don’t have anything he’s interested in.”

“My eyeballs are too packed with mud to see anything, anyway.” Levi closed the door and draped himself over an old wooden bench in the corner.

“Looks like your mission was a success today, too,” Hange said.

“This rain is a real pile of shit. No signal flares, and the horses stagger around like drunks slipping in their own vomit. We found a couple new sinkholes to mark down on the map.” He grimaced. “I’ve got mud in my ears and my ass crack, and no bath in sight until we get

home.”

“Everyone alive?”

“Yeah, but it was too close. You?”

“Same.” Hange took a swig from a bottle. “We found a sinkhole, too, more than a metre deep. Lots of split trees and wood in there. My wound isn’t too bad, but a couple of the others got cut up pretty badly. Jakob has a nasty gash on his thigh, and his horse took a bad tumble. Dita’s out at the stable right now assessing the horse’s injuries, and Jakob’s resting.”

“Shit.” Levi flopped dramatically against the bench, too tired to care that he was dropping bits of mud all over it. “Did you make any progress, at least?”

“No, same as yester— Fuck!”

“Sorry, Squad Leader.” Nifa winced. “The flesh is starting to swell.”

“It’s okay. Do what you have to do.” Hange lifted the bottle again, draining the rest of its contents. “I’m going to be drunk as hell in about ten or fifteen minutes, Levi, so I hope you don’t mind taking point on the plans tonight. Needed something to cut through the pain. This wound went down to the rib.”

His lips flattened. He would love to be drunk right about now, too. The rain had started two days ago, and here they were, day seven, and they hadn’t even finished scouting the silos around the main checkpoint, let alone the two silos attached to the second checkpoint further south. “I don’t know what the hell to do, Hange. We have at least two days’ worth of scouting left out here, probably more if we want to get that second checkpoint prepared for the expedition.”

“Well, we can’t stay out here forever. We need to give ourselves—and the horses—time to rest before the expedition, and Erwin needs time to process the observations we’ve collected.”

Levi sighed. He knew Hange was correct, but where was the balance point between ensuring they had enough information and ensuring they got home early enough to be useful? “Maybe Berit would have been the better choice for this mission after all. I don’t have the experience to know where we should draw the line.”

“Yeah, me neith—” The word ended in a yelp.

“Sorry, that’s the last one.” Nifa held out a shirt. “Do you need anything else, Squad Leader?”

“No, thank you, Nifa.” Hange pulled on the shirt and slumped

forward, tilting the empty bottle as if trying to swallow more liquid.

“You already finished it,” Levi said, closing his eyes. “I know you can’t see without your glasses, but I didn’t think you were stupid, too.”

“Hm. Where are my glasses?”

“How the hell should I know?” He should probably open his eyes to help look, but he was too exhausted. “Maybe I’ll just sleep here tonight.”

“You’ll freeze.”

“I’m cocooned in mud. It’ll keep me warm.” He couldn’t shake the feeling there was one more thing he needed to do before he succumbed to sleep. His eyes flew open as he remembered: *Erwin’s letter*. He rummaged through his rain gear. The paper was soaked, mud-stained and completely illegible. “Shit.” He lifted it to his nose, but he couldn’t smell anything but mud. “Shit!”

“Oh,” Hange said, drawing out the word. “Love letter from your boyfriend?”

“None of your business, two-eyes.”

“Ah, because I’m not wearing my glasses. Clever.” Hange dropped to all fours and began to feel around. “Where did she put the damned things?”

Levi gingerly tried to peel apart the sheets of paper, but they were so fragile that they began to tear. “Dammit. I was saving the last bit to read tonight.”

“Not like you could masturbate with that much mud in your underwear, anyway.”

His stomach dropped. “What?”

“I assume that’s why you keep ducking away by yourself every night, all secretive. Don’t worry, no one else noticed, and I won’t judge.” Hange patted along the side table. “It’s good for people to stay on top of that sort of thing during missions. Keeps the aggression manageable, keeps you focused. On that note, if you and Erwin need time to yourselves during the upcoming expedition, I can act as a guard outside the room.”

A shudder rippled down Levi’s spine. “Don’t tell people stuff like that, you pervert. It’s creepy as hell.”

“Part of weapons management is making sure all our resources are working at optimal capacity, machine or human. A-ha!” Hange’s hands closed over a pair of goggles on the side table. Once they were on, however, the Squad Leader frowned. “Everything’s still blurry.”

“Because you’re drunk, idiot.”

“I suppose I am.” Hange dropped onto the bench beside him. “So, what’s next, Captain?”

He grimaced. “Not Captain yet.” He would be one day, however, so he should probably try and think longer-term. What would Erwin do if he were here? Probably start by assessing their current resources. “So, we’re scheduled to return to the base tomorrow. We have at least a day’s worth of work left at this checkpoint, another at the second checkpoint, and a third if we want to prepare that checkpoint for the expedition. We’ve got a total of nineteen soldiers ...” He trailed off and gave Hange a sidelong glance. The Squad Leader was staring at the floor, face ashen. “That’s a good survival rate for this type of mission.”

Hange gave him a forced smile. “I know.”

The death hadn’t been Hange’s fault—from the sounds of it, an abnormal had ambushed them from the tree line, and the rain had hindered their ability to take it down. Still, Hange was taking it harder than Levi had expected. The night it had happened, he had heard sobs coming from the other side of a closed door. He had hovered in the hallway, not sure what to say, before finally deciding to move on, but now he wished he had said something, anything. The memory had been tearing him up ever since. Maybe Hange was annoying, but they were comrades, and the bond between them was quickly developing into friendship. They were supposed to have each other’s backs out here.

“Look, shitglasses, you know it’s not your fault, right?” He awkwardly nudged Hange’s elbow. “It’s surprising we haven’t lost anyone else yet.”

“I guess.” Hange looked down again, pressing ahead with the planning: “While we’re tallying resources, I ran a couple more tests on those sound rounds.”

“And?”

“And they only seem to stun maybe one in five titans, at most—not nearly the numbers I theorized. That’s such a small benefit compared to the enormous risk of attracting the attention of additional titans. The only practical application seems to be to make a large group of titans converge, like what you did last week, and that’s not something we encounter often.” Hange sighed. “How am I supposed to develop weapons for an enemy we know so little about? If I had one in the lab I could experiment on—”

“You going to bring one home with you like a lost puppy, and

ask Erwin if you can keep it?"

Hange didn't reply.

He slumped deeper into the bench, trying to focus on planning again. "I guess we should figure out our food and water supplies tomorrow and use that to help us decide what to do."

"At least the rain barrels will be full, so we'll have a supply of water. I don't know, Levi, I think the weather is going to make our decisions for us from now on." Hange sagged against him and gave an exaggerated yawn. "We have to wait out the storm. No point throwing our resources out there when we aren't going to get anything out of it."

Feeling crowded, Levi tried to edge away, but he was pinned against the edge of the bench. Besides, the air was cold, and his usual complaint about being close to Hange—the body odour of someone who had no clue about proper hygiene —didn't matter when his sinuses were packed full of mud.

"I hope Erwin doesn't lose it when we don't return tomorrow," he said, thinking of the worry on his face when they had departed.

"He's a big boy. He can handle it."

"I guess." He hoped so, given the reaction last time they had gone missing. Erwin's stress levels weren't his only concern—what would happen if they returned without adequate scouting data, and the expedition had to be postponed or, worse, cancelled? He almost wished he didn't know about Erwin's dealings with Sahlo and their urgency to bring him results. *What a fucking mess. Every bit of this is stressful as hell.*

Half-asleep, he murmured, "What do you think it's like to live in a world without all this stress?"

"Who knows? Boring, probably."

Levi yawned. *Might be nice for a little while*, he thought, but then he wondered what the hell a person did if they weren't fighting to stay alive. He could picture himself having lots of sex with Erwin, eating three square meals a day, and ... what else? He had often dreamed of a coddled lifestyle when he was younger, but now he couldn't fathom it. Keeping occupied kept him going, kept him from questioning all the misery he had encountered in his life. Erwin was the same. Hell, they all were.

*At least we aren't in it alone.* He thought of Erwin, of Hange, of Mike.

His eyes closed, and he found them too heavy to re-open.

The sound of ringing bells startled Erwin awake: reveille. Day eight of the scouting mission. If everything went well, Levi and the others would return that day.

He sprang out of bed and grabbed his toiletries, heading to the men's bath. Mike had invited him to work out that morning, but Erwin had deliberately declined, intending to save all his energy for the bedroom. He sank into the heated bath water, taking a moment to let it caress his body before he began to wash. A few other soldiers trickled in, saluting as they saw him, and he nodded back. At some point soon, he was going to have to tell people not to bother saluting unless it was a formal situation. Given how recently he had become Commander, however, he didn't mind revelling in it a bit.

Mike slipped into the water beside him and nodded his greeting. "You were using red ink recently, right?"

"Don't tell me you can smell colours now," Erwin said with a smile.

"No, but that would sure be helpful. I can smell the vermillion in the ink."

"I'm glad your nose is finally recovering." Erwin dunked his head under the water, then surfaced and began to lather his hair. "The saline rinses are helping?"

"Seem to be."

His voice lowered: "Then I suppose after tonight, your nose is going to give you more insight into my personal life than you ever wanted. My apologies in advance."

Mike shrugged. "I'm used to it. You two aren't the only ones hooking up around here."

Erwin didn't doubt it. The Survey Corps soldiers had always formed strong bonds due to the intense pressure of their situation, and he had often noticed instances of those bonds bubbling over into sexual escapades. He didn't mind, so long as his soldiers were staying focused. If anything, sex probably helped morale.

After his bath, he met with Mike and Berit over breakfast, locking down training plans for the day. Then, returning to his office, he finished an expense report, sealed it, and addressed it to the last on his list of investors.

And that was it: the last bit of pre-expedition work he could fin-

ish without the scouting data from Hange and Levi. Any tweaks he could do now would just have to be re-done once he had that data, so this was a good point to take a break. Given how hard he had been working over the past few weeks, he would take the morning to drop off his report at the messenger service by hand. While he was downtown, he could purchase some supplies for Levi's return and get his apartment ready for their romantic evening. A contractor had installed a hot water tank for him a couple days ago, a surprise for Levi; a post-mission hot shower would surely be appreciated.

He pulled on his rain cloak and stepped outside. The rain had been coming down nonstop for three or four days now. Were Hange and Levi encountering it, too, or if they were far enough south to avoid it? Aside from rain neutralizing signal flares, it could cause other problems. One was that there were several patches of land that had limestone bedrock, which gave the surface a tendency to form sinkholes during flooding. Erwin had only encountered this issue once, back when he had been a new recruit, and it had been devastating to their expedition.

He frowned. Even if they had avoided it, these rain storms could still drift south before the expedition. Perhaps he had more work to do, after all: a contingency plan for heavy rainfall. He would start it that afternoon.

After he had dropped off the envelope with the messenger service, he stepped into the general store. A downside to being the Commander was that he was recognizable, and purchasing erotic supplies was certain to start gossip. He debated how to approach it, then remembered Levi's words: no one expected him to be celibate.

He approached the merchant at the back of the store, the one who had sold him lockpicking tools.

“Commander Erwin,” the merchant said, nodding. “We have some new coffee beans that might be of interest to you. They’re supposed to be reserved for the noble class only, but I pulled a few strings for our more discerning customers such as yourself.”

“Thank you. I’ll take a look.” Erwin leaned closer. “On that note, I’m looking for a few other items I wish to purchase discreetly.”

“Oh? Weapons?”

“No, I’m looking for a particular type of massage oil, one that has mild warming properties. Also, I wonder if you have any fine sweets in reserve.”

“Ah, I see.” The merchant grinned. “Looking to impress a special woman, Commander?”

“Perhaps. I trust you to keep this quiet,” Erwin said, going along with the mistaken assumption. The more romantic distance there was between him and Levi in the eyes of the public, the better.

“I have a few things in stock that might interest you. What about a nice gift for the lady—maybe some jewellery? Or is she more the type to appreciate a fine cigar?”

Erwin smiled. “Cigars might go over better than jewellery, but I’m not certain. Fine alcohol, however, is sure to be appreciated.”

“Well, then, I have some high-quality ice wine that might be of interest to you, direct from Utopia district.”

After some discussion, Erwin bought two bottles of ice wine, a tin of salt water taffy, a tin of beef jerky, some scented candles and a bottle of massage oil steeped with a hint of hot pepper to ease aching muscles.

Once he had reached his apartment, he began to set up the room. He set out the wine, two wine glasses and the food. The candles and massage oil went on the bedside table, along with a small stack of clean handkerchiefs. After a moment of reflection, he changed the bed sheets; he would take the dirty ones back to the base to sneak into his laundry.

He stepped back to survey the room, his heart already beating too fast. In the letter he had given Levi, he had finished off the seventh day with a detailed description of his plans for their reunion, as well as a somewhat embarrassing confession of the depth of his love for him. He still wasn’t sure if the last part would make Levi blush, or roll his eyes, or both, but he no longer felt the need to censor his feelings—to either Levi, or himself.

Checking the bathroom, he was pleased to see the water heater had been set up exactly as he had specified. The tank held a large reservoir of water; he had been assured it was enough to last a good fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes of warm water, streaming down Levi’s naked body. With a smile, he set out his fluffiest towel, but his lips fell into a frown when he saw mildew on the walls. All this effort was going to be wasted if he didn’t take care of that before Levi saw it.

Well, he had some time to kill.

He pulled off his jacket, rolled up his sleeves and began to clean the bathroom. Once it was sparkling, his attention shifted to the main

room. He straightened his books, tidied his desk, and gave everything a good dusting and sweep. By the time the entire apartment was clean, he was so flushed and sweaty that he decided to test out the water heater.

Even after he had heated the water, showered and changed back into his uniform, the gate bells hadn't sounded.

*Maybe I missed them while I was showering*, he thought, but when he arrived back at the base, the scouting party hadn't returned. His ears strained for the sound of bells throughout the afternoon, then into the evening.

"It's the rain," Mike said.

"I'm sure they're fine," Berit said. "Just delayed."

Erwin knew they were probably right. Scouting missions often ran on a different schedule than planned; they relied on titan movements and weather, two things outside of human control.

Still, he couldn't rein in his growing concern. The scouting information was integral to the success of the expedition, which was integral to the continued existence of the Survey Corps.

And on top of all that, there was Levi.

He slept fitfully that night, hugging a pillow close. *Tomorrow night at this time, I'll be holding the real thing instead.*

But another day passed, and the scouting teams didn't return.

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Levi hugged his knees tightly to his chest, shivering. "This is bullshit."

"We just have to wait it out," Hange said beside him.

"I'm sick of waiting."

"Well, we can't scout, and we can't return to the base. Until this weather clears up, we just have to be patient."

"Food rations are running low," said Nifa, who was pressed against Hange's other side. "Even with reduced rations like this, we'll be out in two days."

"More like one and a half," Moblit added from the far side of their huddled circle. "We'll need to divert some of the grains to the horses."

A growling stomach sounded among them—it didn't matter whose; they all felt it. Even Levi, thanks to his time above ground, had grown accustomed to three square meals a day. Sure, Survey Corps food

always tasted of yeast preservative, and the quality sometimes left much to be desired, but at least his stomach was always full. He was accustomed to being dry, too. The checkpoint's ceiling was leaking nonstop now, and they were all damp and freezing.

"Well." Hange gave a thin smile. "At least we won't die of dehydration. Maybe we can catch some frogs for food. I don't think there's enough dry wood to get a fire going, but we can eat them raw if we get hungry enough." There was forced optimism in Hange's voice, and Levi both appreciated and hated it.

"I'm not eating raw frogs."

"I'll have his share," Eld murmured, making Levi wonder if his stomach had been the one growling.

With a low sigh, he scratched his arms. Mud still caked his skin, pasty in some places, cemented in others. He was certain fungi and parasites were swimming across his skin beneath it. Maybe he could bathe in one of the rain barrels.

"Since we're all together," Hange said, "Levi and I have been talking about what to do next. Our number one priority right now is to get back alive."

"Squad Leader, what about our mission?" Moblit asked.

Levi's jaw clenched. As much as he hated to leave a job unfinished, they had few options. It wasn't just the lack of supplies—the weather was putting everyone on edge. Morale was low. Even Hange appeared to be having a hard time putting on a cheery face. For a group of soldiers who had dedicated their lives to freeing humanity, sitting in hostile territory twiddling their thumbs was the worst kind of imprisonment.

"Commander Erwin will manage with whatever information we can provide," Hange said, glancing at Levi. "I'm sure he's already cluing in that something went wrong, and he's working on contingency plans."

*I hope that's what he's doing,* Levi thought.

"The rain's a bit lighter tonight," said Eld, who had been on watch earlier that evening. "Maybe it will finally let up tomorrow and we can go home."

Levi didn't want to get his hopes up.

But when they awoke the next morning, the rain had finally stopped.

For the first time in days, Levi began to feel optimistic, but the feeling was short-lived. The ground, unsurprisingly, was waterlogged,

and while the road was rarely subject to the sinkholes that plagued the land to the south, the mud was too slippery to run the horses at maximum speed. Levi was certain the left and right flanks would be encountering even more difficult terrain away from the road, so he kept their pace slow.

Thankfully, there were few titans around; he only had to redirect the formation twice during the first half of their journey. *Maybe they hate the rain as much as we do.*

As they began to approach the choke point that had given them so much trouble on the first day of the mission, Levi turned to Eld. “You up for scouting ahead?”

“Sir,” Eld said, eyes narrowing with determination. Since his breakdown on the first day, he had been going out of his way to prove that he had a solid head on his shoulders.

“Good.” Levi turned to Sonja. “You, too. Don’t engage unless you have to.”

“Sir!” The two soldiers pulled away from the group.

Levi fired a green flare toward the meadow, then, a moment later, a white flare to tell everyone to pull in for the choke point.

Eld and Sonja returned just as the formation’s flanks were closing in.

“Sir,” Eld said, “Same situation as before, but this time, the titans are concentrated on the eastern side of the meadow.”

Levi turned to Hange, approaching on his left. “You hear that?”

“Yeah.” Hange pulled alongside them. “Think we could get the whole group past them before they notice, then outrun them?”

“Maybe,” Sonja said. “Depends how fast they are. Didn’t seem to be any abnormals, but it’s sometimes hard to tell.”

Levi looked back over the group. The carts were empty, and the horses pulling them were fatigued. Their other horses were running on very little food, so they were likely stressed and exhausted, too. One injured horse, in particular, was of concern; it was holding up now, but would it hold up if they sprinted? He frowned. “I don’t think the horses are going to be able to sprint. Not while we have to lug those things around.”

Hange glanced back at them, then at Levi again. “How replaceable are those carts?”

“Probably more replaceable than our teams and the horses.”

The two Squad Leaders’ eyes locked for a moment longer, and

then, in silent agreement, Hange turned to the group. “Prepare to halt! We’re going to leave the carts behind.”

They came to a stop on the road, flanked by scrawny three-metre trees. It was dangerous to stay here for long; they hurriedly freed the horses from the carts and pushed the carts off the road. Eld and Dita took charge of handling the spare horses.

“We are going to evade the enemy,” Levi announced. “Do not engage unless necessary. Move out!”

They burst onto the meadow at full speed. The titans were ambling around the far side of the meadow. At first, it seemed like they might not notice the scouting party, but then a few looked up. They began to stupidly lumber in the direction of the scouting party.

“Shit.” Levi leaned forward, willing his horse to sprint as fast as it could.

“Hey Levi, they seem slow,” Hange was barely audible over the hoofbeats and the air racing past his ears. “Do you think the weather is affecting—”

“Save it and run, shitgoggles.”

Minutes later, they reached the far end of the meadow, the titans safely out of range behind them. They crested the hill to the meeting place they had used on the first day of the mission.

“We’ve attracted too much attention to rest here,” Hange called.

He nodded. “Pull out your map. Find us a good resting point about twenty minutes away.” He turned back to the group. “Prepare to deploy the formation. We’ll be resting soon, but not yet.”

He took a slow, deep breath. His muscles ached and his head was buzzing with stress, but in a few short hours, they’d finally be home.

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“—and so,” Erwin continued, his voice gravely, “if we split our supplies into eight smaller carts instead of four large ones, we’ll reduce the chances of getting stuck in any residual mud in the event that the rain has saturated the ground to the south. It’ll also be easier on the horses, as they may tire easily due to fighting for traction on muddy ground. Of course, this means we’ll need to change the formation slightly, so I’ve drawn up a new map.” As he unrolled it, he looked up for the first time since he had started the meeting. Mike and Berit were staring at him with solemn faces. “Is something wrong?”

“Did you sleep last night?” Berit asked.

Erwin gave an irritated sigh and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “If we could please focus on the task at hand—”

“You’re skirting the obvious, Commander: there isn’t going to be a mission if Levi and Hange don’t return. We can’t head out with only two squad leaders.”

“We did expeditions with two squad leaders all the time back in the ‘30s,” Erwin said, looking to Mike for backup.

Instead, Mike shrugged. “Those were small, simple expeditions.”

Erwin closed his eyes to steady himself. His patience was frayed; he had been awake all night—and most of the night before that—preparing contingency plans. Now that they were on day ten of the scouting mission, he had to accept that something had gone horribly wrong. Without the scouting data, and two squad leaders short, they’d have to severely scale back the mission.

He wished there was another option, but it was already too late to push the expedition out to a later date, because several investors had already forwarded their funds, and he had used them to buy supplies. The initial timeline had been too tight to be more fiscally cautious. And so, he had backed himself into a corner. This expedition—or some form of it—had to happen, no matter how many people they had, no matter how little scouting data he received.

No matter how much his heart ached.

He had letters all ready to send, explaining their undesirable situation to the investors and members of parliament along with adjusted returns on their investments. They sat neatly in the top drawer of his desk, waiting, but he couldn’t bring himself to send them. Not yet. Time was running out, however; they could only afford to wait another day, two at most, before they had to switch to the contingency plans.

“Erwin,” Mike said.

“We won’t be running the same mission if we’re reduced to only two squad leaders,” Erwin said, opening his eyes. “I’ve prepared a series of contingency plans for a smaller mission, if need be. If the scouting party doesn’t return by tomorrow evening, we’ll switch to the new plans.”

“Can we review them?” Berit asked. “The three of us, together?”

His brows rose. No one had ever questioned his strategy before. “Of course, but if you’re only asking because you think Levi’s absence is clouding my judgement, you’re mistaken.”

They were silent, and he felt their gazes scrutinizing him. He let out a low sigh, seeing his recent behaviour through their eyes: attacking Mike, making poor Squad Leader selections for the scouting mission, getting caught having sex in his office. “I suppose my behaviour over the past few weeks isn’t exactly confidence-inspiring, is it?”

“It’s not that we don’t trust you,” Berit said, glancing sideways at Mike for confirmation, and the gesture tore at Erwin’s heart; it meant the two of them had been discussing this behind his back. “We both think you’re brilliant, and we’re prepared to put our lives on the line to follow your lead. We’re just a little wary. Your relationship is still new, so you’re a bit emotionally compromised, maybe more than you think. Add in the fact that we both think you’re pushing too yourself too hard right now ...”

Erwin glanced at Mike. “Both of you?”

Mike looked away.

“I see.” Erwin forced a polite smile, carefully masking his wounds. “Of course I’m worried about Levi, Hange, and the others, but I assure you, I’m well aware of the importance of this expedition. Every decision I’m making is from a place of logic, not emotion. If it will put your minds at ease, then yes, let’s go over the contingency plans together.” He pulled out a map and unrolled it.

By the time they had reviewed the entire plan, both Squad Leaders seemed confident that he was of sound mind. Fatigue was catching up with him, however, blurring his vision and making his joints ache.

“Maybe I’ll go take a short nap,” he relented.

“I think that’s a good idea,” Berit said. “We’ll come wake you up if we receive any news from the scouting party.” She hesitated. “Sorry for doubting you before, sir. It looks like you have everything under control after all.”

“You are always welcome to question my judgement. I appreciate that both of you are watching out for the good of the Corps.” He smiled kindly at both of them, but his insides felt cold. Empty. The more they spoke about contingency plans, the more he began to accept that Levi might not return.

With a yawn, he excused himself. He bathed first, since he hadn’t for a few days, then returned to his bedroom. Once he settled into bed, his burning eyes refused to close.

In all his years envisioning his future, he had never imagined the Commander role would be nearly this stressful. He had always ass-

umed his role as Shadis' strategist was a close approximation to the real thing, but this pressure was a hundred times worse. At this rate, he was going to burn himself out before his career even got off the ground.

He had played his cards against Sahlo too soon. He saw that now. He should have kept his suspicions under wraps for at least a year or two while he figured out the Lord's pressure points. This hastily-constructed expedition was too ambitious, too big of a gamble, especially for a new Commander with three new Squad Leaders at the helm.

He tried not to let himself focus on Levi's absence—this was so much bigger than their relationship, and he had to keep objective for the sake of the Corps—but it was a persistent undercurrent, eroding the ground, destabilizing his footing. He was afraid of how he would react if Levi didn't return, and he hoped he could stave off his emotions until he had the time to grieve. *His heart was his to give*, he told himself, remembering their agreement. Maybe he would manage to keep his head together if he focused on that. Above all else, the Survey Corps depended on him to keep looking forward until the expedition was complete.

And right now, the Corps depended on him to get some sleep so he could make clear-headed decisions.

He held his eyes closed, even though his eyelids felt as if they were scratching his corneas. He began to count backwards from one hundred, not allowing his mind to drift to plans, or to Levi, or to anything else.

Slowly, gradually, sleep overcame him.

He awoke several hours later to tolling bells and jubilant shouts from the hallway.

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Levi ignored the stares of the townsfolk they passed, his eyes on the road. His throat was tight. Their journey was finally over. Each step forward, each toll of the bell, brought him closer to home.

"I'm going to sink into the bath and never leave," Hange said beside him. If even Hange was talking about needing a bath, the mud situation was dire indeed.

The base seemed to glow in the sunlight, the survey corps banner waving proudly on the flagpole in the courtyard. The gates parted to reveal a crowd of soldiers. Standing at the very front was Erwin, flanked by Berit and Mike. Together, the officers saluted.

Erwin and Levi locked eyes. Erwin's hair was mussed, dark circles under his eyes, but when he smiled, Levi felt a glow blossom deep in his stomach, filling his chest, his limbs. *What a sight for sore eyes.* He wished he could run up and wrap his arms around him, but that would have to wait.

Instead, he halted the group. The gates closed behind them. "Eld, take our horses. Hange, let's go debrief." He dismounted, and shuddered as he felt chunks of mud slide down the inside of his clothes. Sweat from the ride had mingled with the fine layer of dirt all over his body, destabilizing sections that had been cemented to his skin. He felt the urge to wretch, but swallowed it back.

"We're back," Hange called, somehow vibrating with energy beside him.

"So I see." Erwin stepped forward. "A few days later than scheduled—you had us a bit worried, but I'm glad to see you made it back in one piece."

"Most of us." The bounce faded from Hange's step.

"We're down one man, and we had to abandon the carts," Levi said. They came to a stop in front of Erwin. "And we let you down. We didn't get all the data you wanted."

"Oh?" A troubled look crossed Erwin's features, but he composed himself again. "Given that so many of you made it back, and that you have any data at all, you definitely didn't let me down. Judging by all the mud, it looks like the weather was less than cooperative."

"Yeah, you could say that."

"Well." Erwin's face softened. "I'm glad most of you made it back safely. You all look exhausted—why don't we take the night to get everyone fed, cleaned up and tended to? In the morning, we'll use your data to modify our expedition plans. The baths are already heated today, and you're welcome to pull out one keg of ale for the scouting team."

"Sir," Hange said, giving a weary smile. "Thank you."

"But first: Levi, I have some special plans to discuss with you. Why don't you take a night of leave with me and we will discuss, away from prying ears?"

"It's just us, Erwin," Berit said. "You don't have to make a business excuse; go have fun. We'll cover for you."

Erwin cleared his throat. Levi felt himself blush, though he was certain it wasn't visible under the layers of dried mud.

“I’ll walk you to your room, Levi, and explain everything to you on the way,” Erwin said, as if choosing to ignore Berit. “The rest of you: if there’s an emergency while we’re out, ring the guard tower bell. We’ll be able to hear it from our location.”

Together, they walked side-by-side into the base.

“You’re going to need to bring a change of clothes,” Erwin said, not looking down at him. “And whatever toiletries you use when you bathe.”

Levi glanced at him, but his face was unreadable. “Okay.”

They stepped into his bedroom, and Erwin closed and locked the door behind them. Then, he dropped to his knees and buried his face in Levi’s chest, wrapping his arms tightly around him.

“Oof,” Levi said involuntarily as he struggled to maintain his balance. “Wait until I’m clean, idiot. I’m covered in dirt.”

“You smell good.” Erwin buried his nose in Levi’s armpit.

“Don’t put your nose there. I haven’t bathed in ten days—”

“You smell alive.” Erwin’s fingertips curled between his shoulder blades.

“Of course I do. I’m alive, aren’t I?” Levi buried his face in the blond hair and breathed in. He smelled soap and, faintly, cologne. His eyelids fluttered. He had missed that scent.

Erwin kissed the centre of Levi’s chest, then began to kiss his way down the front of his shirt, audibly breathing in as he moved. His fingers fumbled at the button on his pants.

“Hey.” Levi grabbed his wrist. “I told you, I haven’t bathed in ten days.”

“I don’t care.”

“It’s not like I’ve been at the gym for an hour—there’s so much dirt on me that it cemented my dick to my underwear. You go down there, you’re going to get a mouthful of pissy mud.”

Erwin froze. “I see. Well, I have a place where you can wash up. A heated shower.” He looked up; his nose was streaked with dirt.

For a long moment, their eyes held, and Levi felt a lump growing in his throat. Trying to push past it, he brushed the dirt off the sharp nose. “A heated shower,” he repeated, his voice breaking.

“Remember that romantic night I talked about before you left? I’ve arranged a little something. Nothing too extravagant.” Erwin’s jaw quivered for a moment, but then he stood and caught Levi’s chin. He kissed the underside of his jaw, then his ear. “I need to show you how

happy I am that you're safe."

"I just cleaned your nose. You're going to get it all covered in dirt again if you keep snuffling at me like that," Levi said, but he couldn't bring himself to pull away. "You're sure you don't want to talk about the mission data at all?"

"It can wait until morning. Everyone needs rest so we can approach it with a clear head, especially given your complications. So, the night is ours. Why don't you gather your things and meet me by the front gate?"

"Okay."

Erwin pulled back and ran a thumb along Levi's lower lip. His face was so soft and vulnerable that he looked frightened. Boyish. "I'm glad you're back."

Levi swallowed hard. "Yeah, me too."

"You won't let me kiss you until you've brushed your teeth, will you?"

"Not a chance."

"That's probably a good thing." One corner of Erwin's mouth lifted, his eyes gentle. "Once I start kissing you, I'm not going to want to stop."

Non-stop kisses sounded good to Levi. Really good. Hell, he would have settled for a hug—a long, warm, tight hug. The sooner they left, the sooner they could be together, showing their affection any way they wanted. He turned away. "I'll get my stuff together."

"Then I'll see you shortly." Erwin excused himself from the room.

Levi shoved a clean change of clothes into a bag, then gathered his other supplies as quickly as he could. He took a moment in the bathroom to splash his face with water, certain the mud would draw unwanted attention from the general public. His nose wrinkled as he examined his face in the mirror. He hated the way he looked with facial hair. Most of it clustered around his mouth and chin, and the rest was sparse, giving it a patchy appearance. His undercut was getting long and shaggy, too. Maybe he would set aside some time tomorrow to shave it.

When he arrived at the gate, Erwin was waiting for him, wearing his professional face.

Levi scratched at his facial hair. "I don't know what's itchier, the mud or this bullshit."

"I've never seen you with a beard."

"Not much of a beard." Levi fell into step beside him. "Can't wait to shave it off."

Erwin's voice lowered: "I'd like to shave it for you, if you'd let me."

Levi looked up. Erwin was staring straight ahead, his expression calm, but there was a faint flush on his cheeks. "Is shaving a thing for you?"

"Perhaps. More of a tender thing than a sexual thing."

Levi tried to picture it, then felt a wave of panic. "I'm not so good with blades on my neck, but maybe I could let you shave the face part of it."

"I'd like that." Erwin smiled at him, looking a little bashful. Levi felt a little bashful himself. Ten days apart was a long time, especially when their relationship was still relatively new.

"Where are we going?" he asked, trying to cover his shyness.

"My apartment. I had a hot water tank installed into the shower. It's still a hand-pump, though, and I thought your arms might be tired after holding the reins for so long ..." Erwin trailed off. His face was red.

"What are you saying?"

"I could pump the water for you, if you're comfortable having me in the room with you. I've already bathed today, so I'd mostly be watching."

"Oh." Levi looked down, his cheeks hot. "Sure."

"I'm being demanding right now, aren't I? You're probably exhausted, and I'm making all these requests."

"It's fine." He shrugged. "After having to make so many decisions on the field, it's nice to have someone else take charge."

"Well, then I have one more to make." Erwin leaned in close, his voice still quiet enough to keep the conversation private. "You recover so quickly that I was thinking we might want to vent a little energy for you first. Since I'm going to be riding you a bit later, why don't you ride me first, right after your shower? Then we could take a little break and give you time to bounce back."

"Yeah?" Levi said, a spark running down his torso and into his groin.

Erwin gripped his shoulder and leaned close to his ear, his voice dropping to a whisper: "Take me hard and fast. There will be time for lovemaking later tonight, when I'm leading. I want you to be merciless with me, Levi."

“Fuck,” Levi whispered, his knees suddenly so wobbly that he grabbed Erwin’s sleeve to keep himself upright.

“You okay?” His voice was cheeky, but his entire face was red.

“Yeah,” Levi said, but he couldn’t stop thinking about what awaited him.

As they stepped into the apartment a few minutes later, he glanced up, remembering that he should thank him for the letter. “You know, you made me come six times during the mission.”

“Only six?” Erwin asked, pulling off his boots and setting them by the door.

“The letter got ruined before the seventh day. Fucking rain.” Levi pulled off his cloak, then winced as dried mud scattered all over the floor. “You cleaned up in here, didn’t you? And I’m messing it all up.”

“It’s fine. Did you get to read the seventh part of the letter?”

“No, and I’m pissed off about it.” He set his boots next to Erwin’s. They looked like kid’s boots in comparison.

“That section was a preview of what I’m going to do to you tonight. I suppose this means it’ll all be a surprise.” Erwin stepped into the bathroom and knelt, presumably to light the water tank.

Levi glanced around at the snacks, the wine glasses, the massage oil, the candles. Every bit of the room was spotless; he ran a finger along the top of the wardrobe and was impressed when it came back clean. “You did all this for me?”

“Of course. I thought it might make the night a bit more special.” Erwin stood up and brushed his hands together. “The water should only take about fifteen minutes to heat up.”

“I’ll brush my teeth now, then,” Levi said, stepping into the room. The shower was against the far wall, no walls, the tile floor sinking a little at its centre to allow it to drain. A chair sat next to it. That must be where Erwin planned to sit as he pumped the shower.

Once his mouth was clean, Levi returned to Erwin and grabbed his bolo tie, finally pulling him down for a kiss. Erwin hummed and gripped either side of his face, his lips parting for him. It felt so good to feel those soft lips, that warm tongue. Levi felt a wave of emotion he didn’t realize he had been holding back.

When they broke apart, Erwin traced his jaw with a knuckle. “I’ve never seen that expression before. What does it mean?”

Levi swallowed hard and shrugged. “It means I missed you. A lot.”

“Yeah?” Erwin gently kissed him again. “I missed you, too. More than I care to admit.”

“Were you worried when we came back late?”

“Of course, but I tried not to let my emotions run away on me. I know how quickly circumstances can change out there.” He gripped Levi’s shoulders. “I have confidence in your abilities, and I know your heart is yours to offer; any risks you took were risks you deemed absolutely necessary. I trust you to keep yourself safe.”

Levi glowed from the praise, but at the same time, he wondered if he was worthy. “I took some pretty big risks out there. Hange was pissed.”

Worry flickered across Erwin’s face, but he gave a polite smile and said, “You made it back in one piece, and your instincts are good. I’m sure your risks were worthwhile.” He pressed a soft kiss to Levi’s forehead. “Would you like a drink while we wait for the water to heat?”

They settled at the small table in the corner. Erwin opened the food containers and poured them each a glass of wine. The first sip was tainted by the toothpaste, but soon Levi’s palate adapted. It was sweeter than any wine he had ever tasted, and smoother.

“What is this?”

“Ice wine,” Erwin said. “This particular variety of grape is said to be a potent aphrodisiac, though I suspect those effects are really due to the wine’s high alcohol content.”

Levi drained his glass and held it out for seconds.

“You might want to go a bit easy on it.”

“I know my limits.” He needed to be a bit drunk if he was going to properly loosen up his inhibitions later, anyway. He reached for a strip of beef jerky and took a nibble. “Holy shit. Is this real beef?” Meat was growing increasingly scarce in the months since Wall Maria’s fall, and actual beef even scarcer. Cows were an inefficient form of livestock now that grain supplies were dwindling, aside from old dairy cows.

“It is. I thought you might like something special to eat after being stuck with rations for so long.”

“This is so fucking thoughtful.” Levi began to feel uncomfortable. “You went to all this effort, and I didn’t do anything for you.”

“You came back. That’s all I care about.” Erwin said the words casually, but when he took a sip of wine, his glass was shaking. Levi found his stocking foot under the table, lightly stroking it with his toe, and Erwin smiled.

The gauge on the water tank began to whistle.

“I’ll make sure the temperature is good,” Erwin said, draining his wine and then standing.

As soon as he was out of sight, Levi grabbed a handful of taffy, eagerly peeling the paper off the candies and popping them in his mouth. They had been his favourite sweet as a kid, something he had indulged in as a rare treat if he had a few spare coins. Later, he had used them to bribe Isabel into doing household chores. *Did I ever tell Erwin that? Or is this just a lucky guess?*

Once he had eaten his handful, he drained his second glass, then carefully folded the papers together so it looked as if he had only had a few candies instead of such an undignified number. Then, ready to shower, he joined Erwin in the bathroom.

“It’s ready for you.” Erwin sat in the chair beside the shower pump, still fully clothed.

“Aren’t you going to get sprayed there?” Levi began to unbutton his shirt. Chunks of dirt fell to the floor, and his skin crawled.

“I might catch a bit of spray, but nothing catastrophic.”

Levi didn’t bother folding his clothes; he dropped them in a pile by the door. They were so full of grime that there was no point trying to fold them neatly. He looked down at his naked body and grimaced. Disgusting. Dirt streaked his skin, sometimes plastered in chunks, and the scent was overpowering, like rancid onions. “Oh fuck, start the water.”

The first trickle of warm water was so delicious that he groaned. As it picked up pressure, he let it run over his naked body, washing the mud away. Remembering Erwin, he turned and saw him working the shower pump, his eyes narrow and focused. Levi followed Erwin’s gaze down to his abdomen and saw dirty water trailing down it in streaks. *I guess he finds that hot.* Feeling both self-conscious and aroused at once, he ran his palms down his body, exaggerating the flex of his muscles as he moved. Erwin’s mouth cracked open.

“Like what you see?” Levi asked. The words made him feel ridiculous, but they seemed to be appreciated: Erwin adjusted the front of his pants, gaze lifting to meet his.

“Very much.”

“You going to jerk off while you watch?”

A pained look rippled across the sharp features. “I don’t bounce back as easily as you do, and I have other plans for my dick tonight.”

*Has he ever said the words 'my dick' around me before?* Levi couldn't remember. The words sounded so dirty coming out of Erwin's mouth, and he was getting uncomfortably hard. He hurriedly poured soap onto a scrub brush and began to scrub himself down. It took a lot of work, particularly around the toenails, and his hair was so greasy that he had to wash it three times, but finally, he was clean, his skin tingling and glowing red.

The hot water was starting to run out, but he still had an important area left to wash. Holding eye contact with Erwin, he gently worked a finger inside himself, cleaning as best he could. *I bet there's even mud in here*, he thought, grimacing.

Erwin appeared to be holding his breath, the muscles of his upper body taut. "Getting yourself ready for me?"

"Yeah." It didn't feel like anything special, but he wanted to put on a show, so he groaned a little. "It's been so long that I'm all fucking tight."

Erwin didn't respond, but his throat bobbed.

Satisfied that he was clean, Levi pulled his finger free and washed it thoroughly. He gave his body one last pass with the soap, then rinsed off. "But you want me to take you hard first, right? So take off your clothes and go stand by that mirror." He cocked his nose at the full-length mirror bolted to the far wall, next to the sink.

Erwin's throat bobbed again. He released the shower pump and stood, beginning to undress as he walked. Levi dried himself off, then snuffed the flames under the water heater. He walked slowly toward Erwin, eyes trailing his naked form: broad shoulders, narrow torso and arms, large thighs. The outline of his muscles showed through the skin on every surface of his body. *He gets more beautiful every time I look at him.*

As they stepped together, their lips met. Levi felt himself groan, and heard Erwin echo it. Palms slid over skin, tongue against tongue. He felt the smooth skin of Erwin's neck, then the slight calluses where the gear rubbed his collarbone, then lower, to soft hair.

Erwin gasped and broke the kiss, whispering, "Your hand feels so good on my chest."

"Yeah?" Levi rubbed both palms across it, thumbs finding his nipples. Erwin gave a sound that was half-hum, half-groan; he closed his mouth over the ridge of Levi's ear. Encouraged, Levi touched a nipple with his tongue, but Erwin pulled away.

"Don't get me too worked up. I need to last through this."

“I don’t want to be the only one enjoying myself,” Levi said, self-conscious.

“Believe me, you won’t be.” Erwin nuzzled his ear. “The entire time you were gone, I dreamed of the sound of you coming.” His finger-tips traced a line down Levi’s abdomen.

“Yeah?”

“There’s no more beautiful sound in the world.” His fingers wrapped around Levi, one at a time, then squeezed. “Later, I’m going to coax that sound from you, slowly. But for now, I want to hear you race toward it. I want to hear you fuck me until you yell.”

*Shit.* Levi swallowed hard. “When did your mouth get so filthy?”

“I’ve always been filthy, haven’t I? Or maybe it’s because I spent ten days imagining how our reunion would play out.” Erwin began to stroke him. “How do you want me?”

“Press your hands against the wall and stick out your ass for me.” Levi reached for a bottle of lubricant on the shelf above the sink.

Erwin complied, facing the mirror. Levi slathered himself with oil, then kissed down Erwin’s spine.

“Lower your hips a bit,” he said, pushing the broad ass lower.

“Like that?”

“Yeah.” Levi slid into place behind him and pushed into him a tiny bit, waiting to make sure he was relaxed. “Oh fuck, I’ve missed this.”

“So have I.”

“Yeah? You like when I do this to you?”

Erwin held his gaze through the mirror. “I love everything we do together.”

Levi’s pulse raced and his cheeks warmed. He broke eye contact, looking down at Erwin’s lower back muscles instead. His fingers traced the lines as he pushed a little deeper. Erwin’s face contorted.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” Erwin’s eyes fluttered shut. “Deeper.”

Once Levi had worked himself all the way in, he felt his control begin to slip. He was used to getting off at least once a day, often twice, and the past few days of abstinence had caught up with him. More than that, the twisted expressions and gasps Erwin was making were so erotic that he felt his eyes roll toward the back of his head. Getting carried away, he lightly clapped Erwin’s ass with his hand.

Blue eyes locked onto him through the mirror. “Harder.”

Levi grunted and repeated the motion, harder this time. “Like

that?"

"Harder." Erwin's eyes opened a crack. "I told you, Levi: be merciless with me."

"Oh *shit*." Levi smacked his ass, and the resulting cry made his vision cloud. He curled his hands into Erwin's hips and began to slam into him. Erwin's legs were bent at an awkward angle, the strain on his muscles making them shake; the vibration rippled through Levi. It was too much stimulation; he couldn't hold off.

"Fuck!" He threw his arms around Erwin's waist, clinging to him, as his entire body seized. His orgasm lasted several pulses longer than normal, the last ones making him shudder. Lightheaded, he pulled out and sank to his knees.

Erwin knelt beside him and wrapped his arms around him, softly kissing the top of his head. Levi slumped against him.

"Think that will take the edge off?" Erwin asked, a hint of cheek in his voice.

"Fuck," Levi panted. "I think I blew three loads' worth of come into your ass."

Erwin gave a laugh that was somewhere between amusement and shock. "I think that's the crassest thing anyone has ever said to me."

"Not thinking so clearly right now." Levi nuzzled under his chin. It felt good to be held by him, both of their skin glowing and damp. His mind was fuzzy, his body relaxed.

"We'll probably be more comfortable on the bed," Erwin said quietly. "But first, we should clean ourselves up a bit. You should wash yourself off, and I apparently have three loads of ..." He trailed off. "I can't even say it. You really outdid yourself with that one, Levi."

"You bring out the best in me."

Erwin kissed his temple. "I almost forgot—I bet you'd like to get rid of that beard."

They quickly cleaned up in the shower, then Levi lathered and shaved his neck only, saving his facial hair. Once he was ready, he sat in the chair. Erwin knelt in front of him and applied the cream, his brows pinched with concentration. "How high do you want your sideburns?"

Levi shrugged. "I'm going to shave my undercut tomorrow, so it doesn't really matter."

He wasn't sure how he'd feel about someone bringing a blade to his face, but he felt only the tiniest flicker of panic. Erwin lifted his chin with two fingers and began to shave, his movements precise and gentle.

“You’ve done this before,” Levi said.

“Careful—your face moves when you talk. I don’t want to nick you.” Erwin studied his chin, delicately sliding the blade across it. “And no, this is my first time shaving someone else. I’ve always wanted to, though. I love the trust involved, and the chance to really study and feel each contour of your face. It’s intimate.” He paused and bent forward to kiss the tip of Levi’s nose, then continued.

It *was* intimate, Levi decided, and surprisingly comfortable.

“There.” Erwin pulled away, tracing the newly-shaven jaw with his fingertip.

“Wait.” Levi’s heart beat in his throat. “Do me a favour and try something?”

“Anything.”

“Shave my neck.”

Erwin’s head cocked a little. “You already—”

“Just a bit. Just mimic it. Right over my throat.” Levi’s hands balled into fists, his palms sweaty.

“Okay.” The confidence drained from his face, but his hands were still steady as he lathered a tiny bit of cream at Levi’s throat, then began to slide the blade along the skin. He paused, his eyes locking onto Levi, as if checking with him that everything was okay.

Levi realized he was holding his breath. His heart raced, his palms sweating, but he wasn’t panicking or flashing back to old nightmares. A few years ago, even a dinner knife pointing in his direction on a table would have sent him into a panic.

“Levi?” Erwin asked quietly, lowering the blade.

He wanted to explain just how much the gesture had meant, but the words wouldn’t form. All he could manage was, “I trust you, Erwin.”

Erwin must have understood the hidden depth to the words, because he reached out to squeeze Levi’s hand, looking him squarely in the eyes. “I know. And I trust you, too.”

Levi swallowed hard, drawn into the gentle gaze. *Trust is an act of equality*, said Hange’s voice in his mind, and staring into that gaze, he agreed.

Erwin lifted their joined hands and kissed a knuckle. “What next? Shall we sit on the bed and enjoy some wine?”

“Yes.” Levi’s voice was more breathless than he had intended, and he blushed.

“Here.” Erwin pulled a couple of bathrobes out of the closet. The

smaller was worn and soft, and it smelled like his cologne.

They settled on the bed in their robes. Erwin refilled their glasses and began to catch him up on some of the events he had missed while he had been away, including Berit's proposal from her boyfriend.

"You think she's going to say yes?" Levi asked, wondering who they would promote to replace her.

"I'm not sure. She seemed more open to the idea once I suggested she move to Shadis' division instead. It was an interesting discussion, in many ways." He fell silent, and a smile crept across his lips.

"What?" Levi asked.

"Hm?"

"What's that dumb look for?"

"Ah, sorry." Erwin paused. "I suppose a part of me hopes she'll accept and invite us. I have a soft spot for weddings."

"Yeah?" Levi felt there was more to it than that. He thought of Marie, and Jasper, and felt a wave of sympathy for him. "I bet you would have been a good family man."

Erwin glanced at him. "A man with my career goals has no business having a family."

"I mean if circumstances were different. You're so damned considerate and smart, you'd be perfect at it, just like anything you do."

"That's quite the compliment, Levi. You know I don't regret how anything turned out, don't you? I'm very lucky. I've fallen in love with someone who shares my goals, my passion. Our futures overlap perfectly: the two of us saving the world together. Maybe it will end us early, and maybe it's stressful, but at least it's not lonely."

"I bet we'd get bored if we didn't have all this stress hanging over our head, anyway."

"You're probably right." Erwin leaned closer. "Still, if we make it through this, I want you to understand: the only person I want to grow old with is you."

The words hit Levi hard; he slowly set his glass down, his chest glowing. *I want to grow old with you, too. I hope we have the chance.* There was a strange melancholy in his throat now, blending with that glow, filling him.

"Levi?" A thick brow furrowed. "Is something wrong?"

He lunged at Erwin, wrapping his arms around him, and buried his face in the thick collarbone. A moment later, he felt an arm settle around him, a cheek resting on top of his head.

Maybe it was the wine, maybe the strength of their embrace, that provoked Levi to say the words: "I love you."

Erwin's embrace tightened, his voice cracking: "I love you, too."

A white-hot rush flooded Levi's body. He clung to Erwin, and Erwin clung to him, and for several minutes, neither of them moved.

Gradually, slowly, their grip loosened and they pulled apart. The blue eyes held Levi's, filled with such adoration that a flush rose to his cheeks. He settled to a seat again, retrieving his wine glass. He could feel the blue eyes on him, but he couldn't bring himself to look. How did a person transition to normal conversation after something that intense?

"Are you hungry?" Erwin asked awkwardly. "I hoped the wine and treats would tide us over until we got some actual dinner, but—"

"I'll have a bit more." Levi grabbed the jar of jerky; they each took a strip and began to eat. He was becoming aware that he wasn't the only one feeling awkward. Deciding they'd be more comfortable if they were touching, he slid over until their thighs pressed together. Erwin's thigh looked massive next to his, even covered in the housecoat. *I always forget how fucking huge he is.*

"I'm feeling a bit shy," Erwin murmured. "That's strange, isn't it? We've been together for a few weeks now, and I've known you a year and a half."

Levi shrugged. "It makes sense. We've been apart for ten days."

"We were having sex a few minutes ago."

"It's easier to fuck than talk."

"I suppose, in some ways." Erwin looked thoughtful. "Also, part of my shyness is that I'm trying to figure out a good segue to let you know how hard I am."

Levi barely managed to swallow the wine; he coughed. "What?" He reached over and opened Erwin's robe. "Holy shit."

"This wine *is* supposedly an aphrodisiac."

"That, and you haven't actually come yet." Levi knelt on the floor in front of him, careful not to spill his glass, and gently ran his tongue around the head. He heard Erwin's breath catch.

"Levi ..."

"Want me to stop?" He sealed his lips around him and sucked gently. This time, Erwin gave a low moan.

"Levi, wait. I have other plans."

"You keep saying that, but I don't see you following through."

Erwin's jaw set; he caught Levi under the armpits and lifted him

as if he were a child.

“What the hell?” Levi demanded, but then broad lips closed over his mouth, and his indignation faded. A tongue slid between his lips.

Then Erwin pulled away, leaving his face feeling chilled by contrast. “Finish your wine, then disrobe and lie on your back. I promised to massage every bit of your body, and I intend to follow through.”

“Okay,” Levi managed, breathless. He drained the rest of his wine in one swallow. When he lowered the glass, he saw the other’s head shake. “What?”

“I didn’t quite mean to finish it all in one gulp, but I suppose it works.” Erwin finished the last mouthful of his wine, then set the glass aside. “I’m going to use massage oil. I thought you might be uncomfortable with the sensation of oil buildup on your skin, so I’d be happy to wipe it away as we go if the sensation bothers you.”

*There you go, being considerate again.* Levi stood and let the robe slide off his shoulders, then stepped out of it. He folded it neatly in half and draped it over the back of a chair.

“Here.” Erwin pulled back the top cover, revealing a clean sheet. Levi settled back onto it, hands curling into fists at his sides.

Erwin turned down the lamp and lit the candles. He straddled Levi’s legs, still wearing his bathrobe. The front of the robe was loose at the top, exposing a large triangle of his muscular chest. His underside was bare, resting against Levi’s thighs, radiating warmth.

“So tense.” Erwin trailed his fingertips along Levi’s forearm, then lifted the clenched fist. He kissed a knuckle, then uncurled a finger, pulling it into his mouth. Goosebumps erupted along Levi’s arm. That mouth was so beautiful, with its faintly snub upper lip and plump, soft flesh. It was a good thing, he reflected, that they’d gotten him off before this; his body was already stirring.

“Hm.” Erwin pulled the finger from his mouth. “I shouldn’t get too carried away. We haven’t even started the massage yet, and I’m already trying to seduce you.” He pulled Levi’s arm straight and lifted a bottle of oil, pouring a small stream along the inside of the forearm. The goosebumps made Levi’s skin so sensitive that a pleasant shiver rippled through his arm and down his torso, landing between his legs.

“The oil’s going to feel warm in a moment.” Erwin barely voiced the words. “Don’t be alarmed.” He smoothed a broad hand along the skin, rubbing in the oil. He used plenty of pressure, just the way Levi liked it. The surface of his skin began to tingle, and he sucked in a

breath of air, surprised.

“Does it feel good?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it really does.” The thumb slid along his skin, working firm circles along the muscles. The pain and tension from holding the reins began to slide away.

Erwin’s lids were low, the pupils barely visible beneath the fringe of dark blond eyelashes. His face was relaxed, his lips slightly parted. It was a look of adoration, expressing an emotion that Levi felt, too, kindling in his belly and chest.

Once his arms and shoulders were done, oil trickled across his collarbone, then the strong grip began to work across his chest muscles, lingering. And lingering.

“I didn’t realize you liked my chest this much,” Levi said after a few minutes.

Erwin smiled. “Well, there’s a lot of tension here. I have to be sure I get every last bit of it.” His thumbs slid across the nipples, which tingled from the massage oil, and Levi gave a sharp gasp. “I do like your chest, and I don’t think I’ve spent enough time showing that until now. One of my favourite things about your pectorals is the way they flex when you’re inside me. Earlier tonight, I could see them in the mirror, contracting with each thrust.”

“Yeah?”

“Flexing in conjunction with these shoulders. Such a beautiful sight.” Erwin rubbed his shoulders again.

“You already massaged those.”

“I’m backtracking, aren’t I?” Broad palms slid down to Levi’s abdomen. “I suppose I should press ahead, or I’m never going to finish this massage.”

Levi finally gave in and closed his eyes, letting relaxation settle over him like a warm blanket. “Take your time.”

The massage gradually travelled down his abdomen and across to his hips. As tension slipped away from the rest of his body, it began to build between his legs instead. When Erwin crossed over a particularly sensitive spot inside the hip bones, Levi gasped.

“Hm, I see.” Erwin’s thumbs slowly circled. “Like that?”

“Fuck.” Levi had always known his hips were sensitive, but not like this. His groin began to throb, and he gasped again, his back arching.

“I wish I could grab you right now,” Erwin said, “but this oil

would probably burn. That being said, you are making a bit of a mess. Maybe I can clean that up for you.”

Hot lips closed around him. Levi’s eyes flew open, and his gaze locked with Erwin’s as Erwin slowly took him a few centimetres into his mouth, his tongue swirling.

“Fuck!” Levi tried to thrust further into his mouth, but Erwin broke contact.

“I’m getting carried away again.” His gaze was even. “The plan was to relax you, but I’m getting you worked up instead. Perhaps we should leave your hips alone for now.”

Levi gave a choked cry. “Screw your plans.”

“No, I think I’ll stick with them. Don’t worry, you’ll enjoy yourself. Just try to be patient.”

Levi swore he saw a twinkle of mischief in the blue eyes. *That bastard is enjoying torturing me. This is payback for the time I fucked him in the harness, isn’t it?*

Erwin slid to the end of the bed, by his feet; his robe shifted as he moved, revealing that he was every bit as hard as Levi. *Well, at least I’m not the only one in agony.*

“I imagine you aren’t interested in your feet getting any sort of attention, right?” Erwin asked. “Licking or sucking or anything like that?”

The idea jarred Levi out of his haze. “Disgusting. I barely even like anyone touching them. Don’t tell me you have a thing for feet?” Getting used to someone fucking his ass was one thing; letting someone do weird things to his feet was another. So far as he was concerned, feet were ugly, utilitarian body parts, covered in germs and prone to odour.

“No, I’m not particularly fond of them, either. But as far as feet go, yours are lovely. They’re so—” He cut himself off and glanced up.

“Say small, and I’ll plant one of them between your legs.”

Erwin chuckled. “They’re so perfectly proportional to your height.” He ran his hands along the tops of Levi’s feet, to his ankles, then around to the back of his calves. A groan slid from Levi’s lips. He often forgot how much stress his calves held during riding and manoeuvring.

“Your legs are so strong.” Erwin’s voice was a soft rumble. The front of his robe was tenting.

Levi swallowed hard. “You like them, don’t you?”

“I do.” The grip travelled up to his thighs, then back down, feeling more like a grope than a proper massage. “You’re dripping, Levi. Looks like I’m going to have to clean you up again.”

“You, too,” Levi said, nodding between Erwin’s legs, where a damp patch was forming on the fabric. Erwin looked down, his brows rising.

“I see. That’s unusual for me.”

“Guess you must be really turned on,” Levi said, trying to keep his tone cool even though his head was spinning. *So hot, so fucking hot.* “Why don’t you bring that up here and let me take care of it?”

Erwin applied more pressure as he rubbed up and down his legs, eyes following his hands. “Hm.”

“That’s not an answer.”

The hands smoothed up and then down once more before he got his answer: “Okay, just for a minute or two.” Erwin stood and moved to kneel on the bed beside Levi, who carefully separated the flaps of the bathrobe.

“Look how hard you are.” Levi’s fingertips fluttered along him, and he heard a sharp intake of breath in response.

“Roll onto your side a bit,” Erwin said, stretching out on his side, too, but facing the other way. “Maybe we can both do this at the same time.”

It took some manoeuvring, but they managed to align themselves. Levi took Erwin into his mouth—just the tip, just so he could clean him off with his tongue—and shuddered as he felt Erwin do the same. He grabbed Erwin’s hip and felt the muscles flex in rhythmic pulses, as if he were about to thrust but then restraining himself. That alone would have been enough to make Levi throb, but he had Erwin’s mouth to contend with, too: persistently lapping, too faint to bring him closer to orgasm, but strong enough that he ached to press deeper.

Even stronger than the physical sensations was the sense of connection. He could flick his tongue and hear Erwin moan in response, and that same moan, in turn, would vibrate him. *As if our bodies are joined. As if we’re feeling the same things at the same time.* He took Erwin deep into his mouth, desperate to be even closer, to feel what he felt.

“Wait,” Erwin said, tearing himself away. His hip muscles were rock-hard.

“Mm?” hummed Levi, plunging him into his throat.

“Levi!” A strong hand entangled in his hair and yanked his head back.

He looked down at Erwin, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “Too much?”

"I don't—" Erwin's eyes were closed, his hair in his face. He seemed to be struggling for breath. "I don't know how I'm going to hold back once I'm inside you."

Levi felt a shiver of anticipation, augmented by the tingling sensation from the massage oil. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm okay." Erwin took a long breath, then slowly let it out. His eyes opened. "I wasn't expecting that to be so intense."

Levi knew exactly what he meant, but he set his jaw. "Well, pull yourself together. You've got plans to execute, remember?"

Erwin chuckled and sat up. "That I do. Let me wipe the oil off so you can lie on your stomach. I'll do your back next."

They worked together to wipe the oil off Levi's body, and then he lay on his stomach. Erwin began to work his upper back, silent.

"You okay?" Levi asked after a few minutes. "You were so chatty before."

"Mm. I didn't expect all this to be so taxing on my self-control." Warm palms slid along Levi's shoulder blades, leaving tingling skin in their wake. "I wonder if I'll ever be able to dote on you without getting painfully aroused? Will time dull this overwhelming chemistry between us?" The palms slid down to the base of his spine.

"Who knows?" Levi closed his eyes. His muscles were feeling loose and rubbery, and his mind was the same, no doubt partly thanks to the wine. He felt the bed shift, then Erwin sat near his ankles, running his hands along Levi's calves and hamstrings. "Why'd you skip my ass? It has muscles, too."

"Indeed it does." Erwin leaned forward to kiss a cheek. "But I don't want to use this oil near such a sensitive area, in case it burns. If you want me to switch over to the lubricant now, I can give it some attention."

"Maybe just a bit longer on my lower back first."

A few minutes later, Erwin wiped the oil with a towel, then stood. His voice was gentle: "I'm going to go wash my hands and get the lubricant. Help yourself to some more wine or food, if you wish."

Levi rolled onto his side to look at him. "Step closer for a second."

When Erwin complied, Levi parted the front of his robe and leaned closer, pulling him into his mouth again. Erwin gasped a series of barely-formed curses, his eyes fluttering closed.

"There." Levi kissed the tip, then lay back on the bed. "Don't take

too long.”

Erwin stared down at him for a moment, his eyes glazed, then turned and walked to the bathroom.

While he was waiting, Levi sat up and helped himself to half a glass of wine, another strip of jerky, and a few sweets. His movements were clumsy, but he didn’t feel drunk, just comfortable and happy.

When Erwin stepped into the room again, he had left his robe behind, leaving him naked. He seemed to have regained his composure: his face was neutral, his stance relaxed.

Levi lay on his stomach again. The bed shifted behind him, then oil drizzled across his ass. Erwin gripped the muscles, and as he began to massage him, Levi released a long groan into the pillow.

“Feel good?” Erwin’s voice caught.

“Yeah.” Levi was beginning to get that novel sensation he had experienced the last couple times they had done this, that empty feeling inside him that needed filling. Previously, he had greeted it with some apprehension, but this time, he was relaxed enough to embrace it. It was just a position, after all. The connection between them was so strong that he wanted to express it any way he could. For the first time, he said the words without forcing them: “I want you inside me.”

“I see,” Erwin said, distracted, as if he were disconnected from the words leaving his mouth. His hands were tightening, the pressure increasing. His thumb slid across the top of Levi’s tailbone, setting off a shiver that ran through his spine. “My hands? My tongue? Or something else?”

“Not your tongue.”

“I see. Can I put it nearby? Say, here?” The thumb ran along his tailbone again, and the skin there was so sensitive that Levi couldn’t stop himself from imagining how a hot breath would feel against it.

“Okay.”

He felt a finger slide between the muscles, then deeper. He gasped, his hips arching back against the force.

“You’re eager,” Erwin said, surprised. He kissed the base of Levi’s spine, then his tongue slid along the top of his tailbone. A sensation that was half-tickle, half pleasure exploded from the contact, travelling through Levi’s body in tiny, strand-like shivers. He barely managed to squelch a moan as it left his throat.

“No one will hear you but me,” Erwin murmured into the flesh, his finger slipping deeper. “Don’t censor yourself.” He began to stroke

deep inside him, coaxing stronger and stronger sensations out of him.

“Shit!” Levi’s hips arched off the bed as he pushed back, not caring anymore about decorum, or cleanliness, or anything except those growing sensations. Erwin’s tongue stroked his tailbone, alternating between tense, pointy strokes and flat, soft strokes, and he felt another cry building in his throat. This time, he let it sound. Erwin moaned in response. His free arm slid under Levi’s abdomen, lifting it off the bed to draw him in closer to his mouth. His finger was relentless, and Levi gasped. He wanted more fingers, as many as Erwin could give him; he wanted his mouth down lower to replace his finger. He wanted every sensation, every experience, every possible way they could express their love.

A few minutes later, Erwin’s embrace began to tighten, his finger moving with more and more pressure. His kisses trailed across Levi’s ass, and his teeth pressed gently into the flesh. Levi cried out, his hands curling into the pillow.

“Fuck me.”

“Yeah?” Erwin ran his tongue over the area he had just bitten. “You sure? I can keep going like this for a bit.”

Levi bucked back against him, too delirious to phrase a full response. “Please.”

Erwin hummed and kissed him one last time, then pulled out. He rolled Levi onto his back, then paused to wipe his hands on a handkerchief. Levi watched, breathing hard. His mind was tingling almost as much as his skin.

Erwin set aside the handkerchief and reached for the lubricant, but Levi blocked his hand.

“Let me do that.”

Erwin nodded, and moved to the bed, kneeling between his legs. Levi pooled the oil in his palm and began to stroke him, their eyes locking. Erwin looked so beautiful in the candlelight, his face pinched with desire, his body tense, his chest rising and falling with audible breaths. Levi wanted to compliment him, but he couldn’t find the words, so he whispered his name instead. He felt a throb in response.

Satisfied that Erwin was coated, he released him, using the last bit of oil on himself.

Erwin bent down to kiss his forehead, then reached under Levi’s lower back, tilting his hips to line up the angle. Levi guided him inside and then pushed against him, taking him all the way in. They groaned

in unison, their bodies pulsing together, holding in place while they adjusted.

Erwin was the first to recover. "Ready?" he whispered.

*So fucking considerate.* Levi looked up at him, at the golden hair glowing in the candlelight, at the large, soft pupils, and felt a swell of love so strong that his throat tightened again. "Yes."

Erwin's hands closed around either side of Levi's face, their noses almost touching, as he began to move. He quickly found the best angle, and Levi cried out, his head tossing back. He wrapped his limbs tightly around Erwin's torso.

"Levi." Erwin bent in and kissed his neck, under his ear, his jaw. His breaths were hot and loud, synchronized with his movements. So slow, so gentle, but such force at the end of each stroke, as if he were barely keeping himself contained.

"Fuck," Levi whimpered. It felt so good, as if Erwin knew exactly how to read his body, exactly how to interact with it.

For a moment, Levi was distracted, trying to figure out what he should be doing to contribute, but then he remembered that he was supposed to be letting his body guide him instead of overthinking everything. He closed his eyes and felt the rhythm of the thrusts, letting himself slip into something akin to his battle state of mind. No thought, no strategy, just the movement of Erwin's body, the building sensations in his own. He began to rock his hips, counter-thrusting.

"Levi," Erwin gasped.

He opened his eyes a crack. "Does that feel good?"

"Yeah."

Levi raked a hand into the back of the golden hair, drawing him closer. Their bodies slid together, friction building between their chests. He groaned and moved side-to-side a little, accentuating the sensation of hair sliding against hair.

Erwin gave a soft cry, hips angling deeper, and now he was hitting the right spot on his way in and out. Levi felt himself begin to drift, clinging to the strong body to anchor himself, completely unaware of anything outside the two of them. *This is so much more than just sex*, he thought, feeling that bond, that connection, beginning to form again. *This is trust. This is love.*

"Levi, you feel so good, so good ..." The grip on either side of his head tightened, fingers raking into his hair. Deep inside him, he could feel Erwin getting harder, larger, massaging him just as firmly and lov-

ingly as his hands had massaged his body minutes ago.

Levi raked his back, arching against him with each thrust.

“Oh fuck,” Erwin gasped. Their foreheads pressed together and their lips met once, twice. “I’m getting close. I want to come with you.”

Grunting, Levi forced his hand between them and began to touch himself. Their breath mingled between their open mouths, their eyes holding until a surge of energy forced Levi’s closed. “Oh fuck, Erwin, I’m close.”

“It’s okay. It’s okay. So am I.” Erwin kissed his nose, his brow, his forehead, as he began to thrust harder.

“Erwin …” Levi tilted his hips, finding the best angle. “Fuck!” He could feel every twitch, every pulse, every rush, all of it travelling between them, belonging to both of them.

A trembling hand raked deep into his hair, their lips barely skimming. “Oh god, fuck, Levi, I’m going to come, I’m going to come—” The words rose in pitch, blending together.

Levi yelled through clenched teeth, his grip speeding up, his hips rocking so hard that his muscles ached. He tried to say Erwin’s name again, but his lips were flared and he couldn’t move them.

Then Erwin cried his name and gave a final thrust. His energy rippled through Levi, filled him with white light that glowed brighter and brighter until it overwhelmed him. They clung to each other, their bodies contracting together, their yells melding into one, as the pleasure they had built together moved through them in waves.

Slowly, Levi’s body relaxed into the mattress, the fog lifting from his mind. The last few twitches were just leaving him—or maybe they were Erwin’s twitches rippling through him.

An unsteady hand stroked his forehead, and he opened his eyes. Erwin had propped himself on one elbow to look down at him, eyes glassy. A lump began to form in Levi’s throat. His hand closed over Erwin’s; their fingers wove together. For a moment, neither spoke.

Then Erwin smiled and began to roll off him. “I have clean handkerchiefs, and if you want to use the shower again—”

“Wait.” Levi caught his wrist.

Erwin paused, looking back at him.

“Just … a few more minutes.” The desire to stay close to that warm body was, surprisingly, stronger than the desire to mop up.

Erwin looked surprised, too, but he only nodded. He settled back into bed. Levi rolled onto his side and rested his cheek on the

muscular chest. The heart beat beneath his ear was strong and fast. He closed his eyes.

“Everything okay?” Erwin whispered after a moment.

“That was … ” He couldn’t find the right word. “That was important.”

There was a pause, then Erwin said softly, “Yes, it was.”

After a moment, Levi felt the covers settle gently around his shoulders, and a hand gently stroked the hair off his forehead.

“I’m so glad you came back,” Erwin whispered, the words hitching.

A tear leaked from the corner of Levi’s eye. He snuggled closer, burying it safely in Erwin’s chest.

**-21-****SMOKE**

“Advance!” Erwin yelled.

With a roar, the Survey Corps rushed through the open gate. The expedition had begun.

Blood surged through Erwin’s arteries, his skin tingling, electrified by the energy of two hundred troops moving together under his command. After so many years of working and planning, this was his chance to prove himself—to Sahlo, to the townsfolk, to the Corps, to himself. The late nights, the stress, the political manoeuvring would all be worth it when they returned with enough supplies to carve a path to Wall Maria and enough funds to bolster their research branch.

Even though Berit’s team had worked hard to clear the titans from the city on the other side of the wall, more titans approached, curious about the ruckus. Erwin kept his gaze fixed straight ahead, trusting the support teams to do their job. An anguished cry sounded behind him, and he was certain that had been their first casualty, but he didn’t look back. If he mourned every death along the way, he wouldn’t stay focused on their objective. He could mourn once the mission was complete.

Still, he glanced at Levi to make sure he was still riding at his side. As requested, Levi had been given complete autonomy over his role in the mission. His squad, overall, was subject to the same plans as everyone else, but Levi had assembled a strike team of five soldiers who would travel with him through the formation as needed: Eld, Sonja, Gunther, Nadya and Anton. They rode behind Levi in a V-formation.

Levi glanced at Erwin. “Think the support teams need backup?”

“Your call. I’d wait for a signal flare.”

As if on cue, a red flare went up near the back of the formation.

“Let’s go,” Levi said to his team, and with shouts of “Squad Leader, sir!” the five of them pulled away from the group. Erwin kept his gaze forward and fired a green flare, letting the regiment know to continue their advance.

As they pulled away from the city, the ground before them opened up into a green meadow. Erwin thrust out his right hand. “Deploy Long-Distance Enemy Scouting Formation!”

A bark of acknowledgement sounded behind him. The hoof beats began to fan out. Erwin fell back to ride behind Berit’s team. Half her squad rode in the vanguard, the other half in the rear, protecting the carts. Mike and Levi’s squads formed the right and left flanks, and Hange’s teams were scattered throughout the formation to support and observe.

Erwin kept their pace to a slow trot. While the ground here had mostly dried out since the rainstorms, there was no telling if that was the case further south. The ride was uneventful save for a persistent group of titans hounding them to the east. Erwin had to redirect the formation several times. He wondered how many lives they were losing. That was Mike’s area, so with any luck, he had smelled the titans before anyone had been forced to engage.

A rider approached from Hange’s group: Nifa. “Sir,” she called. “We’re approaching the designated rest spot. Mike smells titans ahead, clustered. It’s likely that the choke point we struggled with during the scouting mission is heavily populated again.”

“Thank you, Nifa,” Erwin said. “Any losses?”

“Not from our group, sir. Mike’s nose has been most helpful.”

Erwin let out a breath. He fired a white flare into the sky to pull in the formation.

While they stopped in the clearing for a break, Mike and Nanaba scouted ahead, gathering information about the titan population in the choke point. Erwin spoke briefly with a couple team leaders, then took a break himself, pulling a small bag of food out of his saddle bag.

“Hey Erwin.”

He turned to see Levi approaching him, a ration bar in one hand, a water canister in another.

“Levi.” He nodded. “Something to report?”

They fell into step beside each other, pacing idly away from the group.

“We followed the red flares,” Levi said. “We helped Berit’s team

at first, then travelled across to support Mike.”

“Good.” Erwin stopped, staring at the hill that stood between them and the titans. “Mike smells a group in the meadow ahead, much like what you and Hange encountered during your scouting mission. We need to take them out, or at least thin their numbers; this choke point is going to be critical in other scouting missions and expeditions. How many titans can your strike team take on?”

“If they’re clustered, I can take four easily, five in a crunch. The others, maybe three or four.” Levi’s eyes narrowed, gaze distant, as if he were planning. “Send Mike in with another strike team. We could pincer them.”

“Setting up a pincer will take too long; your primary objective is to keep the titans off the rest of the group. Even if you can’t drop them all, herd them away from the group and keep them cornered.”

“Okay.” Levi took a swig of water, then wiped his mouth. “We’ll look at the layout Mike gives us and figure out our approach.” He bit into a bar of rations, then grimaced and washed it down with more water. “Little pucks of dried shit.”

“Here.” Erwin pulled a couple pieces of wrapped taffy out of his jacket pocket, pressing them secretly into Levi’s hand.

Levi stared at them. “You brought these for me?”

“I figured you’d be sick of rations—your scouting mission was so recent.” Erwin gave him a formal nod. “Call me over when you and Mike are finalizing your plans. I’ll start relaying formation instructions to the rest of the group.” He turned away, looking for Berit and Hange.

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Thirty minutes later, Levi stood by his horse with Mike and thirteen other soldiers: his strike team, Mike’s five best soldiers, and three of Berit’s strongest defenders.

Levi stuffed the last piece of taffy in his mouth, chewed, then swallowed and turned to face Mike. “Okay, *now* I’m ready.”

Mike sniffed. “Taffy?” He raised a brow. “Special ration privileges?”

“Shut up.” Levi mounted, then circled his horse to face the other soldiers. “Everyone ready?”

“Sir,” they rang out in chorus.

He turned to look at Erwin, who sat atop his horse near the front

of the formation, ready to charge through the meadow two minutes after the strike team had deployed. Erwin's gaze was dispassionate and steady, but Levi was beginning to understand Erwin: the colder he looked, the more emotion he was repressing. Lifting a hand, Levi waved, letting him know they were ready. The return wave was stiff.

"Guess we're good," he said, turning back to Mike, who nodded. Levi was starting to understand him better, too; instead of becoming cold, Mike became quiet.

"Okay." Levi shifted his grip on the reins, his palms sweaty. "Let's go."

They filed through the trees and into the meadow, then moved into formation. Most of the titans were once again clustered on the eastern side of the meadow. Levi recognized several of the same titans he had seen during the scouting mission. *Guess they'll hang around if we don't kill them.* As they approached the group, a few of the beasts looked up, their faces twisted and grotesque. Levi's eyes narrowed.

"Ready 3DMG and wait for my command."

Around him, he heard blades clicking in place. He clicked his into place, too, and climbed onto the saddle, crouching low on the horse's back. *A bit closer ... a bit closer ...*

"Now." He fired a grapple into the back of the nearest titan and reeled himself in, cutting a chunk out of its flesh. Using his momentum to pull into a spin, he took out two titans beside it, zigzagging between them. Around him, he could hear the movements of his teammates, the thudding steps of the titans, and the whistle of grapple points slicing through the air.

Then a scream.

He turned to see Nanaba caught in a titan's grasp, eyes wide with panic. He aimed his gear, intending to slice off its fingers to free her. Mike got there first, slicing the tendons in its wrist. Its hand opened.

Not wasting time making sure she was safe—Mike had her now—Levi turned back to his task. He anchored on another titan's back and went for its nape. Four. Red was clouding his vision, but he blinked it back. He had to stay present, had to keep his teammate's positions and safety in mind. Five. Adrenaline fuelled him; he was getting stronger, not weaker. He growled and dove for a sixth.

"Sir!" Eld's voice, to his right. He turned. Sonja was clinging to the hair of a six metre as it tried to shake her off; her leg, severed at the knee, trailed blood down its face. Eld and Gunther were frantically try-

ing to land a grapple on it, but it was thrashing too much.

“Fuck.” Levi redirected from his sixth target. He blasted the gas to propel himself high into the air, instantly assessing the situation. Sonja was swinging in front of the titan’s eyes as it thrashed, so he couldn’t throw his blades to blind it without potentially impaling her.

“Sonja, let go! Eld, Gunther: catch her.” He began to dive toward the titan’s eyes.

Sonja released the titan’s hair and began to fall. Below her, Eld and Gunther prepared to intercept.

The titan stopped thrashing and dove forward, mouth opening wide.

There was a scream cut short by a loud, wet crunch, then Sonja’s severed arm was flying through the air.

Levi roared and gouged out the titan’s eyes. It staggered backwards; he leapt away and sank a grapple into its shoulder, then swung around. His blades cut deep into its nape.

It fell to the ground, its mouth lolling open. Sonja’s remains rolled out, covered with a slick layer of slime. Her eyes were wide and blank.

*Not again!* The redness was closing in on Levi’s vision now, and he wrestled it back. No, he couldn’t give into his rage. He had to get everyone else out alive.

“Gunther!” Eld yelled.

Levi’s eyes snapped to the sound. Gunther stood on the ground staring at Sonya’s remains, his skin pale.

“You idiot, *move!*” Levi propelled himself forward to take out a titan closing in on the shocked soldier. Eld downed another beside him by cutting out its ankles; Levi swooped in to finish it off.

One last titan toppled in his periphery. Then it was over.

The survivors stared at one another, drenched in steaming blood, as the remains around them began to dissolve.

Mike walked up to Levi, wiping blood off his cheek. The shake of his head told the whole story.

“Who?” Levi asked.

“Jan.”

“Shit,” Levi said. “Sonja.”

“Shit.”

They stared at the steaming titan remains for a moment longer, silent. On the far side of the meadow, the last of the Survey Corps for-

mation passed through.

Levi strode forward and grabbed Sonja's remains by the wrist, dragging her toward the horse. Wordlessly, Mike did the same for Jan.

"Everyone saddle up," Levi said. "We defeated this group, but no telling how many more are out there." He slung Sonja's body over her horse, tying it in place by her harnesses. "Eld, lead her horse."

"Sir." Eld's face was pale, but his jaw was tight. Determined. He had already come so far since their last mission.

They rode toward the rest of the group, pushing hard to reclaim their positions.

"Stay back by the carts for now," Levi said to his strike team. He rode ahead to catch up with Erwin.

Erwin's eyes stayed fixed on the horizon as he approached. "Impressive work. We got everyone through safely, and that particular cluster won't be bothering us again."

"Sonja and Jan are dead."

Erwin finally looked at him. "I see." It was his cold, professional gaze, and Levi longed for a spark of sympathy, just a spark —anything to let him know he wasn't alone.

"I gave the order that got Sonja killed." Levi felt his composure begin to crack.

Erwin studied him for a moment longer, then looked forward again. "Is your focus compromised?"

"Of course not."

"Then we'll discuss it later. Dismissed, Squad Leader."

"Sir," Levi said, because if Erwin was going to be distant and formal, then he'd get it right back.

He dropped back to ride with his squad, his stomach churning.

❧

Erwin felt a wave of relief as they closed in on the checkpoint. His composure was at its limits. The ride past the meadow had been harrowing, with constant redirections that had added an hour to their journey. Still, the formation had done its job; despite the many sightings, they hadn't clashed with any other titans.

The checkpoint was as decrepit as Hange and Levi had said, but the wall around it was solid. As the troops cared for the horses and began to patrol the area, Erwin brought his officers to an old room with

a large table and a few intact chairs. The first task was to update their roster. He began to flip through the roster, marking off names. Four casualties: two from Berit's squad, one from Mike's, and one from Levi's. The three of them looked grim, their eyes downcast.

“Considering how much strife we faced today, these losses are far fewer than I anticipated,” Erwin said. “All four of you did well out there. Mike and Levi, I know I originally said I wanted you to begin your daily scouting operations today, but I think it’s more valuable for you to rest. The information from last week’s scouting mission should be sufficient for the first two silos. The scouting operations will become more important later, as we approach the silos we didn’t scout in advance.”

As his gaze drifted between them, he saw Levi’s face twisting. *He’s upset about Sonja.* Erwin’s heart ached for him. He knew how sensitive Levi was to death.

Now wasn’t the time to console him, however. He rolled out the map and began to walk them through instructions for the next day.

Once the orders were clear, the officers gathered the troops in the large common room downstairs. Erwin began to brief everyone on the next day’s objectives while they ate, then handed the floor to Berit, who assigned watch duties and patrols.

As she finished speaking, he wove his way over to Levi, who was leaning against the back corner of the room, staring absently at the floor.

Erwin leaned against the wall beside him. “You aren’t eating?”

Levi shrugged, not looking up. “In a bit.”

“Would you care to accompany me for a walk? I want to discuss a few things with you.”

“I can’t do this right now.”

Erwin stood tall, clasping his hands behind his back. “Do ‘this?’”

“Hear a bullshit speech about how it was for the greater good, and everyone here is prepared to offer their beating hearts for humanity.” Levi’s mouth twisted. “Not yet.”

Taken aback, Erwin tried to study him, but Levi refused to lift his head.

“Very well. When you want to talk, come find me.” He reached out to squeeze Levi’s shoulder. “Don’t be too hard on yourself.”

The only response he got was a shrug.

Stomach sinking, Erwin left him alone. He brought his rations to

the makeshift office, settling onto a stone bench. Afternoon bled into evening as he logged the day's events and expenses, then adjusted the formation to fill the gaps left behind by the deceased. Once all that was done, he pored over the next day's mission, memorizing every detail. The more information he held in his mind, the less time he'd waste consulting notes and maps. Every second counted on the field.

An hour after nightfall, a knock sounded on the door. He lifted his head and saw Levi standing in the doorframe.

“Come in.”

Levi stepped into the room and closed the door. He was still staring at the floor, dark circles under his eyes.

“You should be resting,” Erwin said.

A shrug. “Can’t sleep.”

“Would you like to go for a walk?”

Another shrug. “Okay.”

They fell into step as they left the base, pacing along the perimeter of the wall. The sky was clear, the stars bright. It reminded Erwin of the night they had sat on the rooftop together, before the last expedition.

Levi folded his arms over his chest. “She followed my orders and died, right in front of me.”

“Here.” Erwin pointed to a wooden bench, damp, mossy and rotting. Levi’s nose wrinkled, his disgust apparently overwhelming his grief.

“I’m not sitting on that.”

Erwin unbuttoned his cloak and slung it across the bench. “Better?”

“You’re getting it dirty for nothing,” Levi said, but he sat.

Erwin sat next to him, close enough to feel his body heat. Feeling relaxed for the first time since they had left the gates, he leaned forward, elbows on his thighs, hands hanging loosely between them. “Autonomy is a double-edged sword, Levi. It leaves us free to make mistakes. You have to keep in mind that you made the best decision you could with the knowledge you had at the time.”

“I know.” Levi leaned forward, too, mirroring his posture. “I’ve tried to live my life by that code: we never know how things are going to turn out, so we have to make the best decisions we can and look back on them without regrets.” His head bowed. “But I’ve never been good with death.”

If they were in private, Erwin would have drawn him in for a hug, but there were other soldiers on patrol. “It gets easier.”

Levi looked up at him, his eyes wide. “Easier? If someone dies because of me, I don’t want my grief to get *easier*.”

“I meant that it gets easier to keep pushing forward, to ignore it and stay focused on how their sacrifices will aid humanity as a whole.”

“I know what you meant, but if someone around me dies, I should feel it. I deserve to feel it. Besides, pushing everything down just sounds like a recipe to have it build up and explode out at the wrong time.”

Erwin fell silent.

After a few minutes, Levi stood. “I’m going to bed.”

“You’re a good man, Levi.”

“What?”

Erwin looked up at him and let his mask drop, let all his insecurity and vulnerability show on his face. “I don’t know how you keep moving forward while you’re feeling so much. I can only keep going if I shut down my emotions entirely, bury them in goals.” He swallowed hard. “I’m not very emotionally accessible out here. I’m sorry.”

Levi’s face softened. “I know you feel death more than you pretend. Do what you need to do, okay?” He glanced around them, then reached out and ran his hand along Erwin’s jaw. Erwin caught it and turned his face into it to kiss his palm. The skin smelled like leather.

Their hands trailed as they stepped apart.

He watched Levi walk away, and his heart pounded in his throat. He thought of Anke, of the four he had lost that day, of Henrik, of his father. After so many years focusing on repressing his emotions, he had mastered the skill. He was so disconnected now, so into his expedition state of mind, that he felt nothing. He stared up at the stars, feeling a deep connection to the empty spaces between them.

Eventually, he began to shiver so hard that his teeth were chattering. He stood and shook out his cloak.

The troops were lined up in the sleeping area, bedrolls pressed tightly together for warmth. Levi was already asleep, curled up against Hange’s back. Mike was on his other side, but he moved over to make room when Erwin approached.

“Thanks.” Erwin wedged his bedroll between them and wormed into place, pulling the thin blanket over his body. It was too short; his feet poked out at the end. He rolled onto his side and shifted closer to

Levi.

Levi stirred and edged back against him. He was so warm that Erwin slipped an arm under Levi's blanket, pulling him in close.

"Mm," Levi murmured.

"Still awake?" Erwin whispered, but the only reply was soft snoring. He tightened his arm. The world began to shrink until it was just him, Levi, and the warm promise of sleep.

❧

They arose at dawn the next morning. Erwin addressed the Squad and Team Leaders over breakfast, ensuring they were up to date on the day's mission information. He called out the likely titan movements as recorded by Levi and Hange, as well as past data on the area.

Levi seemed to be back to his usual self, if maybe a bit quieter than usual. Then again, things had changed so much since their last expedition that Erwin was no longer sure what was normal for Levi when he was on the field. Everyone wore a mask out here, and everyone's demeanour changed.

He pulled Levi aside as everyone was saddling up the horses. "How are you doing today, Levi?"

He shrugged. "Fine."

Erwin held his gaze for a moment longer, hating the way their interactions had changed since they had left the wall. Their barriers might be necessary, but so was the bond between them. *We can use it to our advantage; we should be helping and supporting each other out here.* A little hand hold and innocent night-time cuddling weren't enough.

He leaned closer. "Come find me tonight. I need to speak with you privately."

Levi's face softened. "Okay."

Erwin squeezed his muscular shoulder, then turned away.

They set out a short while later. The titans were more active in this area than they had been on the first leg of the trip. The front lines saw no strife, but red and black flares frequently went up from the flanks, no matter which way he redirected. When several went up in a row, he knew the flanks must be engaging. Runners brought him details after each encounter. By the time they were approaching the silo, there had been two casualties.

This silo was located on the fringes of an abandoned town. Berit's squad was to dismount here and travel through the town by 3DMG, ensuring there were no titans hiding among the buildings. Wherever humans had been clustered, titans often remained, as if driven by some distant memory that the spot had, once upon a time, been a source of food.

The remaining squads formed a perimeter around the silo. Given the proximity to town, Erwin expected this silo to be empty, raided by fleeing citizens. He was pleasantly surprised to see that the military locks had held fast. Once the area was secure, he waved Levi over. Levi expertly opened the lock, then stood beside him as the teams began to recover the supplies.

“If I see anyone carrying live round boxes stacked on top of each other,” Levi said, “I am going to kick them in the face.”

“Might want to wait until after they’ve set the rounds down,” Erwin said.

“Ah, so you did bring your sense of humour with you. I thought you’d left it at home.”

“I try to keep it buried, but it has a way of surfacing when you’re around.”

Levi shook his head. “You know people died back there, right?”

“I do.” The smirk faded from his lips. “I am grateful for their sacrifice.”

“There was an abnormal. Took out two people before my team dropped it.” Levi folded his arms over his chest, watching the steady stream of goods leaving the silo. “Eld and Gunther took it down together. They’re really getting their shit together.”

“I’m sure your competence inspires them.”

Levi glanced up at him. “Maybe.”

They continued to supervise the recovery. Every minute or two, Erwin would look up at Mike, who was standing watch atop the tower. Mike shook his head each time, confirming that there were no titans in the area.

“I hope they’re all this easy,” Levi said.

“That would certainly be nice.”

As the stream of soldiers ended, Hange and Nifa approached, paper in hand.

“Sir,” Nifa said. “There were six extra coin boxes and two additional gas canisters.”

“Thank you, Nifa. Good work.” He turned to Hange. “Make sure the goods are secured. Levi, tell Berit to gather everyone keeping watch in the village. We’ll head out for the second silo in fifteen minutes.”

As he returned to his horse, he tried not to be overly confident. They were ahead of schedule now, but who knew what would happen by the time they reached the second silo?

At least they had found more coin than expected. Lining the pockets of both the King and Sahlo would increase their trust in him. He hoped the other silos would be this bountiful.

The trip to the second silo was hampered by mud, but otherwise uneventful. This door was rusted shut, and they ended up damaging two gas canisters when they knocked it down. Still, the rest of the goods were in decent shape, and as they headed back to the base, Erwin was optimistic. This was a strong start to the expedition.

Once they returned, Mike and Levi’s strike teams took a short break, then headed out to scout the next day’s silos. They returned a few hours later with updated information. Erwin adjusted the plans, then met with the officers, who relayed the information to their teams.

As it began to get dark outside, Levi entered Erwin’s office, letting out a loud yawn. “You wanted to see me?”

“Close the door,” Erwin said, standing.

“It doesn’t lock.” The door shut. “Not that that ever stopped us before.”

Erwin circled the table and strode across the room.

Levi looked up as he approached, mouth flat. “Don’t try anything. I’m dirty as hell.”

“I just want to hug you.” Erwin pulled him in close, pressing a kiss into the top of the dark hair. It was already greasy and strong with Levi’s natural scent. A low rumble sounded in his throat before he could stop himself.

“Hey.” Levi pushed back, eyes narrowing up at him. “Don’t get carried away.”

“Not at all?” Erwin asked, surprised. “We’re going to be celibate for the entire expedition?”

“Do you know how disgusting and dirty our assholes are getting out here? We’re going to get dick infections if we try anything.”

“Dick infections,” Erwin repeated, amused. “There are other options besides sex, you realize.”

“Didn’t you smell how disgusting I was when I showered after

the scouting mission? I don't care what's involved: I'm going to stink." Levi shrugged. "We'll just take care of things ourselves and fuck like rabbits when we get back home."

"I was hoping for something a bit more intimate."

Levi flopped into a chair and leaned back, tipping it back on two legs. "What did you and Henrik used to do?"

"What?" Erwin asked, surprised.

"On long expeditions. Could help us figure out how to handle this."

It had been many years since he had even considered it, and it took him a few seconds to recall. Ah yes, there it was: frantic groping in alcoves while Mike stood guard. "We decided to risk the dick infections."

Levi's nose wrinkled. "Disgusting."

"How about this?" Erwin paced around the chair to Levi's back and pressed both hands onto his shoulders, bending down to murmur into his ear. "You kneel on the floor and touch yourself. I'll sit behind you and bury my face in your hair. That way, I'll be too busy enjoying the sun-baked, wind-swept scent of your hair to smell anything you might be self-conscious about." He breathed in, relishing the scent.

The shoulders stiffened beneath his hands. "What about you?"

"I could rut against your ass."

"Sounds like a good way to get rug burn."

"I'll be careful." Remembering the unlocked door, Erwin pulled away. "We'll need a private place—know of one that would work?"

Levi stood. "There's a room down the hall that has a working lock. Follow me."

They slipped into the hallway, then sneaked down to a room at the end. Levi locked the door. Erwin pressed him against it, then tried to find his mouth in the dark. His lips landed several centimetres too high; before he could correct himself, Levi's hand pressed to his chest to stop him.

"I haven't brushed my teeth since we left."

Erwin felt a wave of frustration. "Levi, I don't mind."

"Well I do, so knock it off."

Swallowing back his frustration, Erwin sat, pulling Levi down into his lap. He buried his face in the slim neck, his hips rocking.

"Shit," Levi breathed. His arms snaked around Erwin's shoulders. "I didn't realize how horny I was."

Erwin was too busy kissing the salty skin of his neck to reply. He

felt a moan building in his throat, but didn't let it sound. As isolated as this dark room might seem, there was an entire regiment of soldiers downstairs who could wander upstairs at any moment.

"Here," Levi whispered, pushing away. There was a shuffling noise in the darkness, then he added, "Sit behind me."

Erwin slid into place behind him, his thighs on either side of the small body. He slipped a hand beneath Levi's jacket and grabbed his chest, feeling the muscle through the dress shirt. The harness was in the way, and he was tempted to unbuckle it, but that was a slippery slope.

"Touch yourself," he whispered.

He heard a zipper, then Levi's body began to jerk with quick, rhythmic motion. The room was so quiet that Erwin could hear soft puffs of breath, the sound of moving skin.

Erwin began to grind against Levi's ass. He buried his face in the dark hair and gripped his chest. A glow began to build in his abdomen.

It quickly became apparent that chafing was, indeed, going to be a problem. He kissed the back of Levi's head and then leaned back, pulling himself out of his pants. As he began to touch himself, his breath escaped in a long shudder.

Levi grunted, squirming back against him. "I'm already close."

"Good. Don't hold back."

"Fuck. Feels good when you grab my chest like that."

Erwin groped his chest with one hand, the other moving faster. "Like that?"

"Yeah. Fuck." Levi's body was tightening. "Shit, just a second. Where's my handkerchief?" The sounds and body movements suggested he was rummaging through his clothes. "Okay, found it."

Erwin's teeth clenched as he felt himself getting close. "Can I use it when you're done?"

"I guess. You're in charge of washing it, then. I'm not carrying around our dirty cum rag."

"Keep saying romantic things like that, and I might go off right now."

"Fucking hilarious." Levi began to hunch forward, his chest rock-hard. "Oh, shit. I'm close. I'm close—"

Erwin tried to reply, but he grunted instead. He buried his mouth in Levi's hair, trying to muffle himself.

"Shit. I'm going to—" Levi doubled over, his body tensing. A few seconds later, he relaxed. His chest muscles twitched sporadically a-

against Erwin's palm. "Fuck."

"I wish I could have seen your face," Erwin whispered, closing his eyes. "Where's the handkerchief?"

"Here."

A folded cloth slid against the hand gripping Levi's chest. Erwin grabbed the cloth and pulled away, biting his lip as he emptied into it.

"Shit," he gasped when he finally remembered to breathe.

"Kind of anticlimactic?" Levi leaned back against him.

Erwin took a long breath, then set the rag aside and awkwardly fastened his pants. "A bit impersonal. At least it's not as lonely as masturbating alone. When we get back to Trost, we can make love for hours."

"I'm going to eat you out until you forget your own name."

"I look forward to it." As pleasing as the mental image was, what he missed most was the strong sense of connection between them. He knew the emotional distance was largely his fault. "Thank you for this, Levi. I apologize if I've been a bit distant."

"No, I get it. You have a lot to think about when you're out here." Levi snuggled back against him.

"You're certainly agreeable right now."

"Well, I just came." Levi paused. "But I'm also tired as fuck, and we've been gone from the others a long time."

"Yeah, we should head to bed." Erwin gave him one last tight hug, then stood.

Once they had tidied themselves up and retrieved the handkerchief, they parted ways. Erwin went over one last set of plans, then went downstairs, sandwiching himself carefully between a snoring Mike and a slumbering Levi. Within seconds of his eyes closing, he, too, drifted to sleep.

### 63

The days began to pass, blending into a rhythm: wake, relay the day's mission over breakfast, head out, silo one, silo two, discuss the aftermath and casualties. Then Mike and Levi's strike teams would head out to scout the next day's silos, reporting back with details. Erwin would modify the mission, meet with his officers, eat dinner, plan some more, and then sleep.

Every second night, he would pull Levi aside for more impersonal, take-the-edge-off time, but he found himself missing him a

little more each time, not less. He missed Levi's kiss more than anything, and began to dream of secreting him away for a few hours so they could make out like a couple of teenagers. Still, they had other priorities.

The mission, at least, was proceeding well. Within ten days, they had successfully retrieved the contents of every silo near the first checkpoint. One had apparently been raided during the evacuation to Wall Rose, and another didn't contain half the contents on the roster, but the others had been bountiful. Now it was time to proceed to the second checkpoint further south, where the two remaining silos held enormous caches. Their supplies would make up more than half of their total haul; they were critical to the success of this mission, as well as to the plans to reclaim Wall Maria down the road.

And so, he felt his optimism waning when Levi and Mike returned on the tenth evening with bad news about the route to the second checkpoint.

"The area's still waterlogged." Levi handed him a piece of paper. "Eld and Nanaba recorded all the sinkholes."

"Still," Erwin murmured, studying the paper. "That's unfortunate."

"Yeah. And the checkpoint is a crumbling piece of shit. The wall around it is intact, but that's about it. We'll be sleeping in rubble."

"I see." Erwin frowned. "How dangerous is the gorge between here and the checkpoint?"

"It's a death trap. We're lucky we had this guy," Levi said, nodding up at Mike. "He kept us informed about the surrounding titans. The gorge is too deep to give visibility, and too steep to travel easily between the ledge and the depths. Any teams riding above to scout will be stuck on their own up there."

The situation was exactly as Hange had suggested a couple weeks ago, when he had first been drafting up the mission. Erwin's brow furrowed. "I see. How long did it take you to pass through?"

"About thirty minutes," Mike said.

Erwin doubled that in his mind to account for the carts: an hour. That was a long time to be in territory that had no easy escape route. "What are your gut feelings on this one? Can we do it?"

Mike shrugged. "We've been through worse."

"Yeah, getting to the checkpoint won't be so bad," Levi said. "Not sure about what's after it, though."

Erwin drummed his fingers on the paper, weighing the pros and the cons. If their current loss rate held steady—one percent of their forces per day—they'd lose an additional four percent: one day to travel to the checkpoint and secure it, one day for each of the silos, then one day to return back to the first checkpoint.

Then again, they had already lost ten percent, so an extra four was acceptable given the enormous caches awaiting them. They were already well under his projected casualties for this point in the mission. Besides, if they came back for the caches later, who knew how many lives they'd spend getting to this point again? Doing it all in one expedition was the best way to minimize casualties in the long run.

His eyes wandered across the scouting team members who were brushing down the horses, and he wondered how many of their young lives he was about to forfeit.

“Thanks for the information,” he said aloud. “I’m going to take a couple hours to process this. We’ll have an officer’s meeting first thing in the morning to discuss our next steps. You’re dismissed.”

Mike nodded and turned away, but Levi glanced around, then stepped closer.

“Anything else to discuss with me tonight?”

Erwin gave him a kind smile. “Not tonight, I’m afraid. This is a lot of information to process, so I need to stay focused.”

“Okay. Maybe tomorrow night, then?” Levi half-turned away, surveying the soldiers around them, as if making sure no one would overhear. His voice was low: “There’s a patch of wild mint in the garden behind the next checkpoint. If we chew it, it might be almost as good as toothpaste.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I need to fucking kiss you. I’m sick of just jerking off together like we’re two strangers at a strip club.”

Erwin’s brows rose. “I’m not sure what kind of strip clubs they have in the Underground, but that’s not what people usually—”

“Look, you know what I mean.” His shoulders rounded; he looked small. “I need more. I know we’re supposed to stay focused, and death is all around us, so maybe I’m being selfish, but—”

“Levi.” Erwin squeezed his shoulder, letting his professional facade drop. “I know exactly what you mean. I miss you.”

Levi looked up at him, face softening. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” His throat was tightening. He gave one more squeeze,

then withdrew his hand. “We’ll revisit this tomorrow night. Depending how this push goes, we might not be in the mood.”

“Or we might need a distraction even more than we do now.”

Erwin looked across the soldiers again, and his jaw tightened.

Foregoing his usual group meeting over dinner, Erwin stayed in his makeshift office until the oil burned low, sliding wooden markers across the map. He was hopeful there was another way to the checkpoint and silos that wouldn’t take him through the dangerous gorge, but the terrain made his decisions for him: the only way around the gorge was a route that would take the formation a good ten hours out of the way. Not only was that a gruelling distance for both the horses and their riders, but the territory was un-scouted. Known danger was always safer than a complete unknown.

He awoke at dawn with his cheek pressed to the map, a crick in his neck, and no confidence in his plan.

Before breakfast, he summoned the officers. They gathered around the table, faces worn and grim, which wasn’t all that surprising. At this point in a lengthy expedition, it was common for fatigue and despair to set in.

“Today,” he said, “we’re going to leave the recovered goods here and head south to the second checkpoint with only our food, water and medical supplies. Two remaining silos there hold a bounty of goods, almost the same amount as what we’ve already salvaged. We’ll hit those silos one day at a time, which means five short days from now, we will be home. At that point, I will be heading to the Capital with Levi to report on our success, and the rest of you will be entitled to several days off to recuperate.”

A wave of relief washed over them; he could see their stances relaxing and frowns lessening, even Levi’s. Having an end goal to push to was always better for morale than an indefinite task.

“Our biggest challenge today will be this gorge.” He traced his finger along the map. “It will take us about an hour to pass through. Much of it is too steep for the horses to climb up or down, and dangerous for 3DMG use, so we should treat this as a route with three separate tracks: the eastern cliff, the western cliff, and the central track inside the gorge itself. The cliffs have too many narrow segments for the carts, so we’ll have to take them down the centre. This leaves them blind to titan ambushes from above, so we’ll need interference groups on the eastern and western tracks. I recognize this is less than ideal, but there is

no easy defensive solution. Here is my proposal.”

Four pairs of eyes locked onto him, waiting expectantly.

Erwin traced the paths with his finger. “Berit and Hange, you will ride with the carts down the centre of the gorge. I want half your teams in the vanguard, half in the rearguard. Your task, above all else, is to protect the carts and the supplies they carry.

“Mike, you’ll be riding along the eastern cliff, Levi, along the western. Your teams will be spotting and eliminating any titan threats before they can ambush the carts. You may be required to switch to 3DMG and aid Berit and Hange as needed. I don’t think I need to tell you how difficult the gear is to use in rocky terrain, so be careful.

“As for me, I’ll be riding alongside Mike. His nose will warn us of impending danger, and I can use that information to direct the group. Our options will be limited to speed, since we have no choice of direction, and I may at any time signal for us to break into a full run. Our objective is to get as many people and supplies to the checkpoint as we can, so our tactic will be to focus on fleeing, rather than engaging, where possible.”

There was a long silence.

“I don’t like the idea of you being that exposed,” Levi said. “You should be with the carts.” His brow was furrowed, a tiny twitch in his lips.

Erwin held his gaze. “I need to have the best vantage point possible, so I need to be on high ground.”

“I’ll make sure he’s safe,” Mike said quietly.

The Squad Leaders stared at each other for a few seconds, then Levi nodded. “Okay.”

“Any other concerns?” Erwin asked. When he was met with a long silence, he stood tall, clasping his hands behind his back. “Please relay these details to your teams during breakfast. We’ll be using the morning to safely stow the goods we rescued from the silos, and then we’ll be departing at noon. Dismissed.”

As three Squad Leaders filed from the room, Levi stayed behind. Hange, the last one out, glanced back at them and then softly closed the door.

“I’m sorry, Levi,” Erwin said. “I don’t like leaving your squad so exposed, but I need your skills. You’ll be protecting all of us.”

Levi surprised him; he closed the distance between them and pressed his cheek against Erwin’s chest. “You didn’t come to bed last

night.”

“I fell asleep here.” Erwin hugged him tightly, wishing they had time to hold each other for a few minutes, but they had other tasks. He released him. “We’ll talk tonight. You need to relay the plans to your team, and I need to think of contingency plans for this leg of the journey.”

“Yeah, okay.” Levi stepped back, his face solemn. “Make sure you eat something. If you pass out from hunger, we’re all fucked.”

“I’ll eat. I promise.” Maybe he’d even chew a few coffee beans to help him stay alert—he had smuggled a small pouch of them in his saddlebag.

“Good. Don’t forget, we have plans tonight.” Levi caught his bolo tie and pulled him down, pressing a kiss to his cheekbone. It was such an unexpectedly gentle move that Erwin’s throat tightened.

Then, without looking back, Levi left the room.

Erwin’s hands curled into fists as he returned to the map. There would be time to acknowledge the butterflies in his stomach later. For now, he had work to do.

8

They set out shortly before noon, travelling in formation for as long as the landscape would allow. It felt good to be riding alongside Mike like the olden days, when he had been a Team Leader on Erwin’s squad. No words passed between the old friends, but Erwin felt a bond nonetheless. They read each other well on the battlefield, instinctively following each other’s cues.

The cliffs of the gorge rose ahead of them, and Erwin stared. “Gorge” was an understatement—canyon would have been more appropriate. Even when Wall Maria had stood, this area had been largely uninhabited due to the harsh terrain, so this was his first time seeing it face-to-face. For a moment, he felt intimidated. *This isn’t a place for humans.*

Remembering himself, he looked across the faces of his troops and saw trepidation on their faces. He sat tall.

“Shelter and rest awaits us on the other side! Deploy the special formation.” He thrust his right arm out, showing as much confidence as he could muster.

A note of understanding rang out from the troops as they split

into three. To the west, Erwin could see Levi leading his team to the cliff, knuckles white on the reins. Levi looked up at him, and they exchanged a nod. *Stay safe.*

The eastern ledge overlooking the gorge was narrower than Erwin had anticipated; in places, it was only safe to ride through two at a time. He cocked his head at Mike, who nodded and fell into place beside him, the two of them taking the lead. Below them, Erwin could see the defensive teams and the carts, and in his periphery, he saw Levi's squad. The terrain on the western side gave Levi's team a wider gap, and he was grateful. The more manoeuvring room the team had, the less precarious their positions if anything went wrong.

"Halfway," Mike said after a while, pointing at an old gnarled tree growing out the cliff face. He must have mentally used that as a route marker when he was scouting.

Erwin glanced across the group, feeling uneasy. Perhaps it made sense that there were no titans in this area, given that there had never been any settlements—there were no remnants of humans to attract hungry titans. Not that anyone was certain what attracted them in the first place. Fresh corpses didn't draw their attention, and neither did animals of any kind. *It's almost as if they can smell our souls.*

"Erwin," Mike said, his voice urgent.

Erwin's eyes locked onto him. "Which direction?"

"West. Lots, coming our way."

His breath caught. He looked across the gap at Levi, then cursed. There were trees lining the western side of the cliff; he didn't have a clear line of sight. The cliffs were too far apart and too steep to send a messenger over by 3DMG.

Setting his jaw, he clicked a green flare into his gun and aimed it forward, along the route of the gorge. *If he sees me signal, he'll know something's amiss.*

The coloured smoke hissed through the air. Berit fired an answering round from below.

Moments later, a green round went out from Levi's position behind the wall of trees.

Breathing hard, Erwin increased their pace. "You think we can get soldiers over there if he needs help?"

Mike's jaw slid out at an angle, as if he were considering it. "It's a dangerous shot down to the carts, and another from the carts to the cliff line, and then we'd be sitting ducks over there without horses. We might

lose more people than we save."

Erwin held his gaze for a moment, then turned back toward Levi. The wall of trees had ended, so they had a clear line of sight again. The Squad Leader held out both his arms in an exaggerated shrug as if to say, *what's going on?*

Erwin clicked a blade into place and motioned past Levi, to the west. Levi nodded and turned to face his squad, presumably to relay the message.

"He's capable," Mike said.

"He is," Erwin agreed, but his heart was thudding in his chest.

❧

Levi clicked a black round into his flare gun, just in case they encountered an abnormal. His squad could hold the line against a sizable group of normal, predictable titans, but one or two abnormals could change everything. He didn't see an easy way for anyone to come to their aid, but at least they could warn the others if their line fell. They had to protect the carts and the bulk of the Survey Corps at all costs.

The hills along their western flank flattened into open land, and that's when Levi first saw the approaching titans. There were nine of them, all between three- and seven-metre class, charging toward them. They were too widely spaced for Levi to ricochet between them. His throat tightened. *That's a fucking army.*

"Shit," Gunther whimpered.

*What the fuck do we do?* Levi glanced across the gorge at Erwin, whose face, even from this distance, was visibly pale. He saw a glint of metal as Erwin waved forward: *run*.

"We're going to try to outrun them." Levi turned to address the group. "Go, as fast as you can. Strike team, with me; we'll form the rear flank. We'll engage, if we have to. All other teams: keep pace with the group, and stand your ground if they get past us. If you see a white flare, that means your primary directive is to abandon your horses, drop down to the carts and get the fuck out." If it came down to it, the strike team could buy them time. Their priority right now was to save as many lives as possible, even if that meant sacrificing a small subset of his squad so the majority could flee.

"Shit!" Gunther whimpered again, and Levi silently echoed the sentiment.

He thrust out his arm. “Go!”

The rest of the teams burst past him, opening into a gallop. Levi and his strike team fell to the rear. In his periphery, he saw Erwin and the carts speed up.

“Sir,” Eld called, his voice wobbling. “They’re too spaced out. If we engage one, the others will surround us.”

“We don’t need to kill them, just neutralize them: go for eyes, knees, ankles, anything that will slow them down. Pick them off one at a time. Work in pairs. Eld and Gunther, Nadya and Anton. I’ll take out as many as I can alone.” His throat ached. *We needed Sonja here—* No, that thought could wait for another time.

The titans were closing in. Levi’s breaths came in short blasts, his conscious thought fading to the background, instinct taking over ...

He veered toward the titans, swords drawn.

The first pair of soldiers rode to the closest titan, the second pair to the second closest. Levi went for the third. His anchor slammed into its forehead and he leapt off the horse, using a burst of gas to propel himself around to the titan’s back. The anchor released, and he pulled into a spin as he dropped, carving out its weak spot. It was a sloppy cut, and the angle dulled his blades.

The next titan was too far away to hit with his grapple, and there weren’t any objects in the environment he could use for height advantage. Well, his blades were dull, anyway. He mounted and ran toward it, then, when he was close enough, flung the dull blades at it. They stabbed deep into its eyes; it howled and dropped to a seat on the ground, clawing at its face.

Eld and Gunther began to ride toward it as if to finish it off, but Levi yelled, “It’s out of the fight! Get the next one.” They nodded and rode for the fifth. Nadya and Anton burst past them, riding for the sixth.

Levi charged toward the seventh, but then his stomach dropped.

More titans were approaching from the rear—six of them, between three- and ten-metre class. At least one of them was moving at a higher speed than usual, barrelling toward them.

*A fucking abnormal.*

He fired the black round into the air.

Erwin’s answer came a moment later: a green round, aimed forward. *He wants us to run.*

Levi gritted his teeth. He fired a white round, signalling for the rest of the teams to drop down to the carts. *Save yourselves.*

“Hold the line,” he yelled to his strike team. “Give them time to get away.”

The seventh and eighth titans dropped, and Levi felled the ninth, finishing off this swarm. The abnormal was still closing the ground between them, but the second swarm was far enough back to outrun. He wiped a smear of steaming blood from his forehead, filled with revulsion. *I might be able to take them all, if they stay clustered ...*

But those weren’t his orders.

The carts and the group were far ahead of them now. Most of his squad had, as ordered, used their gear to drop down to the carts. This was a good time to run.

“Strike team, take the horses,” he yelled, pointing his blade south. His strike team began to whistle, and the horses fell into a herd behind them. Levi brought up the rear, constantly looking over his shoulder.

The gap between them and the swarm of titans began to widen, but that one abnormal was still gaining on them.

*I guess it’s up to me.*

Levi clicked fresh blades into place and fell back from the group.

“Squad Leader!” Nadya’s voice was almost lost among the stampeding hoof beats. He glanced her way and saw the four soldiers staring at him with wide eyes.

“Keep running,” he called. “If this one gets past me, take it out. Protect the group at all costs.” If this abnormal decided to jump down to the centre of the gorge, it would cause horrendous destruction before anyone had time to drop it.

He could feel the reverberations of its footsteps, closer, closer—

The abnormal lunged at him.

He leapt from the saddle, expended a large burst of gas and pulled into a spin, razing up the beast’s arm. An enormous hand slammed at him; Levi dodged just in time, leaping high into the air. His grapple sank into the nape of the titan’s neck.

*You aren’t so tough.*

His blades sliced the flesh; the titan sank to the ground.

He lifted his head and, through the steam, saw the advancing horde. Now that his battle instincts were fully awakened, there was the red fog of the bloodthirst, the one that told him he could take on this entire swarm. He knew he could do it: he was too fast for them, too smart. He could ricochet from one to the other until they were nothing

more than a pile of steaming, bloody remains. The idea made his muscles burn, his heart sing.

*Those aren't my orders!* It physically hurt to turn away. Breathing hard, he mounted his horse.

*We don't have to run. I can take them out,* the red fog said.

He stared straight ahead, at the team he had been tasked with keeping alive. His eyes drifted across the carts, where the rest of his squad was safely huddled, and finally, across to Erwin, far in the vanguard, his golden hair glowing in the sunlight.

*If I throw my life into danger, he might risk these lives to try to save me,* Levi thought. *Or, worse yet, he'll do nothing, and then spend the rest of his life blaming himself.*

He couldn't do that to the man he loved.

He leaned forward, resolute, as the red fog dissipated. If Erwin wanted them to run, then they'd run.

As they pulled away from the titans, the gorge began to flatten. On the horizon, Levi could see the walls of the checkpoint.

Erwin only slowed them when they were about to close in on the walls. Levi stared back at the way they'd come.

The land was quiet. *We lost them.*

They began to file through the gates: first the carts, then the horses. The soldiers who had fled began to mill between the horses, reuniting with their mounts.

"You showed good judgement back there, Levi," Erwin's voice said behind him. "Having the majority of the team drop down to the carts may very well have saved their lives, and your strike team kept the titans occupied so that they didn't consider venturing down the cliffs toward the carts. Good work."

Levi turned. Erwin was flanked by Mike, both of them grim-faced. "Are they still following us?"

"Not that Mike can tell." Erwin glanced at the Squad Leader as he mentioned him. "But I'm going to have him loop back before he begins this afternoon's scouting mission, just to double-check that they're no longer a threat. You're going to stay here. Your team has already seen enough action for one day, and we'll be tackling one silo a day out here, so we don't need both of you to scout."

"Okay." Normally, he would have protested, but his muscles were starting to realize just how much energy he had expended. Going into his battle trance was always so draining. "I can organize a cleaning

crew instead.”

Erwin looked as if he were about to stop him, but then caught himself. “Might as well.” He gripped Levi’s shoulder, and that grip was so tight that it conveyed everything his face didn’t: fear, relief, concern.

Levi held his gaze. “We’ll talk more tonight, after dinner?”

Erwin nodded, then turned and walked away.

❧

Mike returned late in the afternoon with unpleasant news: the land between their new base and the first silo was laden with sinkholes. “Road washed out in a couple places, too.” He handed Erwin a map.

The furniture was so battered that they’d had to make a make-shift table out of a door and two benches. Erwin gingerly unrolled the map, hoping the table would hold. Mike’s team had clearly marked all the sinkholes they had come across. Erwin’s brow furrowed; there was very little room to manoeuvre if they needed to avoid titans. This was going to take a lot of careful planning.

Not trusting his own judgement alone, he pulled aside Hange, who seemed to be relieved to abandon Levi’s cleaning tasks. By dinner-time, the two of them had locked down a route.

He spent dinner relaying the plan to the officers, then finished off a bit more paperwork. By the time Levi arrived in his office—or rather, the crumbling remains of a room where they had set up the door-table—night had already fallen.

Levi began to set his lamp on the rickety table, then appeared to think better of it, holding it instead. “This whole place is a shitpile. You have time to take a break?”

Erwin stood tall and stretched his neck, which ached from hours of hunching over the table. “I’m not sure where we’ll find any privacy.” Large chunks of the checkpoint were missing, as if titans had smashed through it. The only remaining door was now functioning as his table.

“I saw a place. This way.” Levi cocked his head toward the doorway.

They stepped into the hallway, where they were greeted by Hange. The Squad Leader’s face was surprisingly gentle.

“Our guard,” Levi said.

“Hange?” Erwin felt a blush creep up his face, and he hoped the yellow lamplight would hide it. “You don’t have to—”

“It’s fine.” Hange smiled. “I told Levi I’d help protect some private time for the two of you.”

“And you promised you weren’t going to listen or sneak a peek,” Levi said sternly.

Hange’s nose wrinkled. “Are you kidding? I’ve already seen more than I ever wanted.”

Erwin’s cheeks burned. “This is highly unusual.”

“Oh, relax. It’s just sex.” Hange paused. “Sir.”

His skin crawled, but he looked down at Levi, and decided the awkwardness would be worth it.

They walked down a long hallway, its corners lined with cobwebs. At the very end was a large room, scant remains of a stone wall jutting from its centre.

“I figure we can sit behind there,” Levi said, motioning at the stone remains.

“It’s not too dirty in here for you?”

“We’re already fucking filthy, and I’ve got other priorities right now.”

“Well,” Hange said, “I’ll go wait at the end of the hall and make sure no one sneaks up this way. Just don’t be too loud—the sound will probably carry.”

Erwin shifted on his feet, uncomfortable. “This is well beyond your duties as a Squad Leader.”

“Consider it a favour. A kindness, as a friend. Besides, Levi’s much more bearable when he’s getting laid.” Hange quickly turned and marched down the hallway.

Still feeling awkward, Erwin turned to face Levi, who was setting the lamp behind the stone rubble.

“Even if someone gets past shitgoggles somehow, this wall should shield us. Maybe we should turn off the lamp just in case?”

“No, I want to see your face.” Erwin circled the rubble and sat, his knees creaking. He leaned back against the wall. A moment later, Levi sat beside him. He held out his hand, revealing several small green leaves.

“Take them.”

Erwin grabbed them and began to chew. The mint taste was strong, cutting through the thick layer of grime inside his mouth. He used his tongue to scrub his teeth with the leaves, trying to clean it as much as possible. Beside him, he could see Levi doing the same with his

own mouthful.

After a few minutes, he was convinced that his mouth was in kissable condition. He swallowed it, hoping the mint would settle his stomach as well. The constant stress had tied it in knots.

Levi swallowed, too.

For a moment, they sat side by side, the room silent except for their breaths. Erwin reached over to cover Levi's hand, which lay beside him on the ground. Their fingers intertwined.

"I miss you," he said quietly.

Levi turned to him, his irises glittering in the lamplight. The strong lights and shadows showcased the curve of his cheeks, the sharpness of his jaw. Erwin's breath caught. *Even this deep into an expedition, he's still so beautiful.*

"So?" Levi said, and Erwin could tell he was shy.

Summoning all his bravery, Erwin leaned down to kiss the narrow lips.

It was a foreign sensation at first, their lips chapped and rough, but then Levi's lips parted for him, and there was that familiar damp warmth, those slightly crooked teeth. Levi's breath was still strong even with the mint, but not unpleasant; the taste made Erwin's groin stir. He heard a small moan slide through his nose before he could catch it.

He pulled away, gasping for air, but Levi lunged forward and closed the gap again. These kisses were shallower, softer. A tongue soothed his dry lips, then finally probed deeper. It felt so good to kiss like this, knowing they weren't going to be able to have sex—the denial made it even more arousing. Erwin felt as if he were a lovestruck boy, existing in a time when kissing was the ultimate form of expressing love, of experimentation.

Levi pulled back and rested his forehead against Erwin's. "What are you doing to me?"

"Hm?" Erwin rolled his head forward to kiss the tip of the pointy nose.

"I'm sitting in filth, our faces are chapped to shit, and we're just kissing, but it feels ..." Levi breathed in, his eyes fluttering closed.

"It feels good?" Erwin nipped at the tip of his nose this time.

"So fucking good." Their lips met again once, twice. "I could kiss you all night."

Erwin ran the pads of his fingers along the narrow jaw. "Then don't stop." He lifted Levi onto his lap and bent forward to kiss him

again.

Gradually, as their kisses progressed, the innocence began to fall away. Levi shifted in his lap, and Erwin's hips rocked, just once, and soon they fell into a rhythm. Friction built between them, almost painful, as their hands became claws. Their kisses deepened, tongues rubbing together, teeth digging in.

Levi tore his mouth away and whispered frantically, "I need to come."

"Touch yourself." Erwin kissed his jaw, his neck.

"That's not enough." Levi's hand twisted into the bolo tie and pushed Erwin away. For a moment, the frenzy paused. Their gaze held, their chests heaving with breaths.

"Levi?" Erwin asked gently.

"It's not enough. I need more." The narrow brows pinched. "But the smell ..."

"Here." Erwin pulled off his jacket and laid it across their laps.

"What are you—?"

"We can be closer without exposing ourselves to any unpleasant scents." Erwin fumbled beneath his jacket to undo Levi's belts and fly, pulling him out of his pants. With his other hand, he did the same to himself.

"Fuck," Levi whispered, shifting his position until they touched, the jacket still covering them both. His skin was burning hot, and so soft; Erwin threw his head back, choking back a groan. His hand wrapped around both of them and began to stroke.

Levi cursed again, closing his fingers over Erwin's, the two hands moving in unison beneath the jacket. Their eyes locked, and for the first time since they had set out on the expedition, Erwin felt that strong connection he had been craving. He bent forward to kiss Levi, his hand speeding up. Normally, the awkward contact wouldn't be enough to bring him to orgasm—not easily, anyway—but that shared connection was pushing him forward.

Levi threw his head back; his eyelids began to flutter, his lips flared. "Your jacket ... We're going to fuck it up. I'm already wet."

Liquid trailed down Erwin's knuckles, and he felt himself begin to fall. "Levi," he whispered. "Levi, I can't—"

"Shit, I'm going to come." Levi tossed the jacket aside, using his hand to tilt their aim.

As the first pulse rippled through Erwin, he fought to keep his

eyes open a crack. They came together against the stone wall, and the sight was so arousing that he couldn't hold back a moan. He could feel Levi pulse against him in their joined hands, and could hear Levi's breath escape in a silent scream.

Then everything was still.

Slowly, he regained control over his body and his breaths. His eyes closed, his head slumping forward. A moment later, he felt Levi's forehead rest against his.

"What a mess," Levi muttered. "We got some on your pants."

"It's okay."

"And the wall looks like—"

Erwin didn't want to hear whatever crass comparison was certain to come. He grabbed Levi's cravat and pulled him in, delivering a chain of gentle kisses to his lips.

"Mm." Levi pulled back. "Trying to shut me up?"

"Maybe at first. Now I can't stop." He tilted his head for a few more pecks, then leaned into a firm final kiss. "I want nothing more than to curl up with you and kiss you all night."

"But?"

"But we should clean up and get some rest. Tomorrow's mission is sure to be difficult."

"I guess." Levi ran a finger down Erwin's nose, his expression sad. Erwin felt melancholy swell in the pit of his stomach. *If only we lived in a world where we didn't have to prioritize humanity's happiness over our own.*

"Come on," he said, standing.

By the time they were dressed, Erwin could feel his professional demeanour falling back into place. He stood in front of Levi, not sure what to say.

"Stay safe tomorrow," he said finally.

"Yeah, you too." Levi's face was impassive, the earlier sadness buried. It was difficult to stay vulnerable out here.

With one final kiss, they stepped out of the room.

Hange was waiting at the end of the hall. A brow rose as they approached. "Well, aren't you two rosy-cheeked. Get what you needed?"

Levi delivered a friendly punch to Hange's bicep as he walked past. "Mind your own business, four-eyes."

"Thank you for your assistance, Hange," Erwin said, awkward. The idea of using someone to keep watch was a lot more ludicrous now

that he wasn't pent up.

"Don't worry about it. Now you'll focus better tomorrow, so we'll all benefit." Hange smiled. "And I may have a couple favours to call in later."

"Then let's hope the next couple days are a success so we can fund them," Erwin said. "Let's get some sleep."

cg

They set out for the first of the new silos early in the morning.

Not trusting himself to remember every sinkhole, Erwin commandeered one of Berit's defenders, a man named Gerard, to ride beside him with the map. Gerard was an excellent navigator, giving him plenty of advance notice whenever they were getting near any sinkholes Mike's team had noted. Erwin redirected the formation, wending around potentially unstable ground. They arrived at the silo intact.

As the formation pulled in, Erwin directed the teams to form a perimeter around the silo. He stood at the southernmost point of the perimeter, observing. The air was unnaturally still, and the hair on the back of his neck stood on end. He watched Levi pick the lock, then begin to direct teams to unload the supplies. *He's really showing his leadership capabilities this expedition*, he thought, feeling a swell of pride. Soldiers began to stream out carrying boxes upon boxes of supplies.

"Erwin," Mike barked a few minutes later, halting his horse in front of him.

His stomach dropped. "Where?"

"West, a ways out. Can't tell how many there are."

"Are they closing in?"

"Slowly." Mike stared at the silo, frowning. "We should still have time to get all the supplies out."

Erwin waved over Gerard and examined the map. Even if they had time to load the carts, they'd have to push immediately east to try to avoid the titans. That took them into territory that hadn't been scouted yet. He set his jaw. Staying the course could mean losing soldiers to titans; changing course could mean getting bogged down in a sinkhole.

"There are a lot of them." Mike sniffed the air. "More coming from the northeast."

"Shit." Erwin turned to face the group and barked, "Hange, Berit, Levi."

They all looked at him for a moment, eyes wide, and then began to jog over. He used the few seconds he was waiting to race through scenarios in his mind, calculating likely outcomes.

“Titans?” Levi asked, standing in front of him.

“Northeast and west, closing in. Lots of them.”

“How do they know we’re here?” Hange asked.

“That’s not important right now. Here’s what we’re going to do.”

Erwin dismounted and held out the map. The others huddled around him. “The instant the supplies are secured, we’re going to start running at high speed along the route we used to come here. If the titans begin to intercept, we’ll have to engage. We can’t circumnavigate them here, not with so many unknown sinkholes waiting for us.”

Four pairs of eyes locked onto him, showing a mixture of fear and determination.

He held each of their gazes in turn, Levi’s the longest. “I don’t need to tell you how dangerous this might be. If it all goes to hell, our top priority is to get those goods back to our camp. The value of these supplies cannot be underestimated; this will be the key to getting us to Wall Maria for our reclamation effort. You are, of course, to try to minimize casualties as much as possible. Understood?”

“Sir,” the others said.

“Good. Let’s get the carts loaded as quickly and safely as possible. Brief your team leaders on the new plan while we’re waiting. I’ll fire a red flare if our departure becomes even more urgent.” He stood and saluted them. “Good luck, officers.”

They hurried away, except for Mike, who sniffed the air a few times.

“If you have any further information, Mike, please let me know,” Erwin said, preparing to dismiss him.

Mike turned to him, fear showing on his normally stoic face, and Erwin’s stomach had already dropped before the words were uttered: “Even more coming.”

“Where?”

“Wandering in from the south. They don’t seem to have noticed us yet, but they might get wind of us soon. And the western group is going to be within sight at any second.”

*Shit.* Erwin glanced at the horizon, then back at the silo. The cart teams were strapping in the last supplies. The other Squad Leaders were still speaking with their Team Leaders. *We’re running out of time. If we get*

*surrounded, we're finished.*

"All teams," he roared, "prepare to return to base!"

By the time everyone had mounted, the titans were already visible on the horizon.

Erwin gritted his teeth and fired a green flare north, toward the checkpoint. As they began to pull away from the silo, the teams settled into close-range formation. Berit rode next to him, barking orders at her team.

Erwin glanced over at Mike, who pointed northeast. *They're getting close, too.*

"Gerard," he called to their navigator, "keep an eye on the map. We have to avoid sinkholes at all costs."

"Sir," Gerard replied.

Erwin glanced back toward the approaching titans. The smaller carts, even fully-laden, would be able to keep out of range of the titans under normal conditions, but the slippery terrain was sure to become a problem. His head whirled. *Should we abandon the supplies?* It would be a big blow to his plans to reclaim Wall Maria, but those supplies wouldn't help one bit if there was no regiment to use them.

Just as Mike had foreseen, a cluster of titans appeared to the northeast. Red flares began to go up from the eastern vanguard and the rearguard, indicating that the titans were closing in.

"They're going to pincer us," Berit said, panic in her voice.

"Gerard," Erwin called, "if we deviate west—"

"No good, sir. Sinkholes everywhere."

He cursed under his breath. There was no avoiding it; even if they abandoned the carts now, they were still going to have to fight. "Nearest tall trees?"

"Northeast."

Right by the group closing in. Erwin glanced back across the formation, knuckles white on the reins.

A black flare went up from the centre of the formation.

*What?* Erwin stared at it as the smoke began to drift. How was that possible? Was it an abnormal, or a different type of emergency?

"Berit," he barked. "Send a team."

"Sir!"

He clicked a green round into place and fired to the northeast.

"Commander," Gerard said, "we can't go northeast! The titans—"

"We can't win this battle on flat ground." He clenched his jaw,

refusing to allow himself to second-guess his decision. Fight here on flat ground, get to advantageous ground by the northeast titans, or deviate west and sink everyone into sinkholes: those were his options.

Berit's runner came galloping up beside him. "Commander! The black flare went up because four carts are stuck in a sinkhole. The rearguard is defending while they try to free them."

"Shit," Berit yelled.

"Impossible." Gerard frantically scoured the map. "We just travelled over the same patch of land ourselves, and it wasn't marked—"

"The carts are heavy with supplies." Erwin's eyes ticked back across the formation. "They must have been just heavy enough to disrupt the stability." Red flares were going up from the rear and the western flanks now. The trees were still too far away to reach, and he couldn't just abandon the back half of the formation. He closed his eyes and drew a deep breath.

"Erwin?" Berit asked, voice wavering.

His eyes opened and he fired a green round back toward the carts. "All teams, form a perimeter around the stuck carts. We must defend them until they can move again."

"Sir!" Green flares burst into the air around him, and runners streamed back through the ranks to relay the message to the rearguard.

Erwin circled his horse, then galloped toward the centre of the formation. Red flares were going up from the east, closer and closer, and the ground was beginning to shake with approaching footsteps.

"Behind you!" Berit hollered.

Erwin turned to see a titan lunging at him.

He yelled and cracked the reins; the horse burst forward. The titan lunged past him and swallowed the soldier behind him. Two of Berit's squadmates anchored onto its shoulders, taking it down. But now other titans were surrounding them. Too many.

"All soldiers, engage," Erwin roared, clicking his blades into place. More red flares were going up in the rear. His heart pounded in his throat.

A soldier took out a titan's knees, and it fell to the ground. Erwin sank his grapple into its nape and sliced deep into the flesh. Another lunged down at him; he anchored to its hip and swung high into the air, then barreled toward its weak spot. Blood spattered his face, and he wiped it away.

"Your left," Berit yelled behind him.

Not wasting time looking, Erwin blasted the gas to propel himself forward. Teeth snapped behind him, so close that the breeze blew him sideways, knocking him off kilter. The titan's shoulder bashed into him.

He plummeted toward the ground.

Instinctively, he pulled into a ball. He landed hard on his shoulder and rolled. Pain shot through his torso. Stunned, he lay on his back, wheezing for air.

*Get up.* He struggled to his feet, blinking the spots from his vision so he could reorient himself.

Titans had surrounded them, grabbing soldiers, biting their bodies in half. Severed limbs and bodies littered the ground, red mist, screams ... Steam fogged the air. Erwin's head spun. *This isn't real. This is a nightmare.*

Berit stood in front of him, stance wide, swords brandished. A six-metre titan faced her, its head tilted. Studying them.

*An abnormal.* Erwin reached for his flare gun, but the blow had knocked it off his belt. He spotted it several metres to his right. The bag of smoke flares lay beside it, rounds littering the ground. He took a step toward it, then yelped and sank to one knee as pain squeezed his torso. The landing must have damaged his ribs.

"Commander, stay back!" Berit barked the names of two nearby soldiers, and the three of them began a coordinated takedown on the abnormal titan. Berit threw her blades at its eyes, and the other two moved in to disable its legs.

The ground shook. Another titan was approaching from Erwin's left. He gritted his teeth and stood tall, forcing himself to push through the pain in his ribs. He aimed his grapple at the titan's head.

The gear wouldn't fire.

He looked down and cursed. The impact of his fall had crushed the grapple and gas mechanism on one side.

"Erwin," Berit yelped. "Help!"

He looked up to see the woman skip along the ground like a stone across water; she gave a burst of gas to regain control and landed on her feet, skidding to a stop beside him. The abnormal was squeezing the life out of one of her soldiers, and the third soldier was nowhere to be seen. Blades jutted out of the abnormal's bloody eye sockets, but it was still advancing on them, leering.

"My gear's broken," Erwin wheezed. "Take out its legs. I'll signal

for help." He barrelled toward the flare gun, clutching his ribs. The pain was so intense that darkness blossomed through his vision. *Keep going. Keep going. We need backup.*

He heard a scream. Berit flopped along the ground beside him, landing in a heap. He couldn't tell if she was unconscious or dead. *Keep going. Keep going.* He was so close to the flare gun, so close ...

Enormous fingers wrapped around him and lifted him into the air.

Time slowed.

The fingers began to tighten around him. Erwin roared. With a surge of adrenaline, he sliced off the beast's index finger, pulling one arm and a blade free from its grip.

*Three more.* He tried to hack the next finger. The titan's remaining fingers squeezed his torso in response. Cracks reverberated through his chest, pain spiking through him. *Shit!*

Then he was held up to the titan's face, with its perverse leer and steaming eye sockets. It tilted its head, as if trying to study him even though it was still blinded.

Erwin's brows dropped.

*No.*

He thought of his father, of the enthusiastic light in the blue eyes, the passion that would creep into his soft voice.

He thought of the humans trapped inside the walls, of the freedom out here and beyond, the land that was rightfully theirs, the land that had been stolen from them.

He thought of Mike, of Nile, of Marie and Jasper. Hange, Berit, and Levi.

Levi.

*No! Not yet.*

He howled and twisted his upper body, ignoring the agony, zeroing in on the discarded flares on the ground.

*Not yet!*

The black flare cartridge lay on the ground, the same distance away from him as the bull's-eye in the training grounds back in Trost. He had one free blade. One shot.

*Just like you practiced. Don't overthink it. Distract yourself.* Pain seared through his chest and shoulder as he raised his blade in the air.

He focused on Levi: the way their fingers interlaced, large and small, fitting together so perfectly that they might have been created for

each other. He thought of the tenderness that showed in the silver-blue eyes, reserved only for Erwin. The smooth voice, somehow liquid and warm even when it was at its harshest, stringing together crass phrases with word mastery that would make a poet jealous.

His heart glowed. He threw the blade.

It twisted through the air once, twice, and sliced the round in half. Black smoke burst from it in a cloud that began to dissipate as it rose into the air.

*Please see it ...*

Stars began to dot Erwin's vision.

*Levi.*

¤

Another titan fell beneath Levi's blade—his eighth? Tenth? He had lost track. Around him, Gunther, Eld, and Anton were carving through their foes, but he couldn't see Nadya.

He landed on his feet, looking around. All the titans were engaged with pairs or trios of Mike's soldiers. Mike nodded at him

“We've got this. Go.”

“Move out,” Levi called to his team. He mounted and led the three soldiers deeper into the battlefield. Now that he had time to survey the damage, his stomach churned. The titans had torn through the eastern flank. Remains were scattered everywhere, titan steam casting a low fog over the land.

Once they emerged from the steam cloud, his eyes ticked across the battlefield, looking to see where they'd be most useful. He frowned. *Where wouldn't we be useful?* Three carts were still mired, and the soldiers who had been struggling to free them were engaging with titans instead. Titan steam was going up from the south and the north, wafting on the wind. His blood ran cold as he stared at the north. There were no signal flares going up, and in a bloodbath like this, that usually meant there was no one left to pull the trigger.

*Erwin and Berit are over there.*

“Orders, sir?” Eld called.

His eyes narrowed. “North.”

As they began to gallop toward the frontlines, Levi's eyes scoured the horizon for signs of life, for golden hair. The carnage was even worse here than it had been by the carts, and he cursed.

A puff of black smoke went off in the distance—not in a tall column, but in a burst, so low that he almost missed it. *What the hell?*

“Follow me,” he yelled to his team.

They galloped toward the front at top speed, and that’s when Levi saw a titan lifting Erwin toward its mouth, Berit unconscious at its feet.

His stomach dropped. “Get Berit,” he called to the others, and he barrelled toward Erwin. *Go faster, you fucking horse, go faster!*

The titan’s hand was almost at its mouth now, its jaw was widening ...

The instant Levi was within range, he stood in the saddle. His grapple sank into the titan’s temple. It turned to look at him with steaming eye sockets.

*Fuck you!* Levi launched into the air and pulled into a spin, driving at its weak spot. The titan tried to bat him away with its free hand, but without its vision, it was swinging blindly.

Levi’s blades sank into its flesh.

The titan dropped to its knees, its arm lolling to the side. Erwin rolled out of its fist, flopping to the ground. He tried to push himself up on one arm, then sank flat.

“Erwin.” Levi landed beside him, eyes scanning their surroundings.

“My ribs,” Erwin gasped. His breath was coming in wheezes, his skin pale.

“Where’s your horse?” Levi couldn’t see it. *We’ll have to share mine.*

“Squad Leader,” Gunther yelled, pointing. Four more titans were running toward them.

“Get Berit out of here.” Levi gripped Erwin’s shoulder. “Get up.”

Erwin struggled to one knee. He yelled and hunched over.

“You fucking asshole, *get up*.” Levi grabbed his arm and jerked him to both feet.

“Fuck!” Erwin fell against him, and Levi grunted, bracing himself against his weight.

“Move.” He began to pull him toward the horse, already wondering how he was going to get the half-conscious man onto it. Levi might be humanity’s strongest, but ninety kilos of dead weight was going to be difficult to manoeuvre.

“Squad Leader,” Eld called. He had Berit slung across the saddle

in front of him.

“She alive?”

“Yeah.”

“Get out of here. I’ll find you.”

“Levi,” Erwin said, his voice strained. “I’m … fading.” He stumbled.

*We don’t have time.* “This is going to hurt.” Levi grabbed Erwin under his armpits and began to drag him toward the horse. Erwin yelled, and the sound stabbed deep into Levi’s heart, but he ignored it. *Better pain than death.*

“When we get to the horse,” Levi said, “you’re going to use all your strength to get into that saddle. I don’t give a shit how much it hurts. Got it?”

There was no reply; the gasps were beginning to rattle in a way that made Levi’s stomach twist.

When they reached the horse, however, Erwin bore his own weight, as if tapping into one last reserve of strength. He climbed into the saddle with a noise that was half-scream, half-roar. Shaky, Levi climbed into the saddle in front of him.

“Hold on tight.”

The horse began to gallop.

Erwin leaned against his back; his head was increasingly heavy on Levi’s shoulder.

“Come on, you asshole, stay with me.” Levi glanced back, and his stomach dropped. A three-metre titan was on their tail. Normally, his horse could outrun it, but with Erwin’s added weight, he wasn’t so sure.

“I have to take care of this.” He nudged Erwin’s head with his shoulder. “You need to control the horse.”

“Break my finger,” Erwin mumbled.

“What?”

Erwin’s left hand thrust into his field of vision. “The small finger. Do it.”

“What the fuck?” Levi turned his head to stare. Erwin’s lids were low and fluttering.

“Passing out. Need pain … shock me awake.”

Levi panicked. “You’re passing out because you have too much pain, you fucking moron!”

“Squad Leader,” Erwin rasped. “That’s an order.”

“Fuck.” Levi grabbed the hand he had held tenderly so many

times, then gripped the bone of his little finger. *Even on a guy this large, it's so small. So fragile.*

He closed his eyes.

The bone snapped with a sickening crunch that reverberated through his hands, his arms. Erwin's yell was so pained and animalistic that Levi's stomach heaved, tears flooding his eyes. "Erwin, you fucking asshole!"

"That helps." Erwin's thumb pressed into the break to prod it, his hand withdrawing. "Thanks. Go."

Levi swallowed bile and shifted to pass him the reins. He leapt from the horse and launched his grapple mid-air, anchoring to the titan's shoulder. Exhaustion was setting in, and it took two passes to hit the right angle.

The titan fell.

He stood in front of the remains, breathing hard, as Erwin circled the horse to retrieve him.

"Doing okay?" Levi asked, climbing into the saddle. The other titans were still pursuing them, but they were falling behind.

"Levi." Erwin leaned against his back. "Order the retreat. We're done. Find Gerard. He knows the sinkholes."

"Fuck." Levi fired a green flare north, toward the checkpoint. A smattering of green flares responded.

As they rode, Levi looked down at the arms wrapped around his waist. Erwin was still prodding that broken finger, more and more aggressively.

"Still with me, Erwin?"

"I—" Erwin coughed, and when he spoke again, his voice was a heavy wheeze. "Sorry, Levi. Getting blood ... on your cape."

"Blood?" Levi glanced back, alarmed. "Where's it coming from?"

"My ... mouth ... "

The arms around his waist went slack as Erwin slumped against him.

## -22-

### SEDATE

“Erwin,” said a voice, very far away—Levi?

“Erwin.” No, this voice went further back, years back ...

*Papa?*

“Wake up, daydreamer.”

His eyes opened.

His father sat at the head of the dinner table, a kind smile on his face as he carved the roast.

“Papa?” Erwin asked, aware that seeing his father was a special occasion, but unable to remember why. *Is this real?* He looked down and ran his fingers across the familiar red-and-white checked pattern of the tablecloth, feeling the ridges where the colours met. Helena sat across from him, no more than four or five years old, and Mama sat at the end of the table. His mother’s cheeks were rosy, a smile on her face; she looked out of place. When he thought of Mama, he thought of frown lines, thin wrists.

“The door, Erwin,” Papa said. “Could you please answer it?”

“Oh! Sorry.” He swung his legs over the side of the chair and hopped down.

As he was walking to the door, he heard Mama say fondly, “Our little dreamer. Head always in the clouds.”

The door swung open.

A group of blurred figures stood on the front porch. At first, Erwin thought he had debris in his eye that was blocking out the visitors, but no matter how many times he blinked, he couldn’t clear it. He squinted hard, and felt a great strain in his head, like stretching elastic. For a brief moment, he saw a black hat with a white band, but then the strain in his head snapped back into place and the blur took

over again.

“We’re here for your father,” said a voice he couldn’t quite discern, as if the sound had been blurred out, too.

The world tilted.

Then he saw Mama and Helena climbing into one carriage, and he stood in front of another, its steps looming before him. Behind him, he could hear Papa pleading, “Leave my family out of this!”

“Move it, kid,” said a gruff voice, and he felt a gun barrel press between his shoulder blades.

He climbed the stairs and slumped onto a bench, tears dripping down his face. Papa sat next to him, face white, but he gave a gentle smile and hugged Erwin close. “It’s going to be okay, son.”

“We’re going to ask you a few questions,” said a blur-voice as three shapeless figures settled across from them.

“I’ll answer everything you ask, but please, let my son leave. He has nothing to do with this.”

“You sure about that? Your brat’s been spreading your secrets. He’s the whole reason we’re here.”

Papa’s eyes darted to Erwin, and for a brief moment, those gentle blue eyes showed fear. Surprise.

Betrayal.

*Erwin*, a voice said, very far away. *Erwin, snap out of it!* Pain seared through his side, then vanished.

“Let my father go,” Erwin pleaded, his voice shaking. “If I’m the reason you’re here, then ask me your questions instead. Papa is very important. People rely on him.” Tears streamed down his cheeks.

“People rely on us, too, you know,” one of the figures said.

“Stop wasting your time talking to him,” another said. “Just knock him out.”

“Erwin,” Papa said, “sit quietly.” The panic in his voice made Erwin’s heart rate double.

“Yeah, kid,” said a figure, “settle down, or we’ll have to give you medicine that will make you sleep. You wouldn’t want that, would you?” A hand held up a syringe.

“No!” Erwin screamed, his hands balling into fists. “Where are you taking us? What are you going to do to Papa, and Mama, and Helena? Let us go!”

*He’s too worked up. We have to sedate him.* A woman’s voice?

The figures lunged. Erwin screamed and thrashed. Someone was

pinning him down, and people were shouting. The syringe descended toward his arm.

“Papa!”

One of the blurred figures was pinning his father against the corner. “Please,” Papa yelled, struggling. “Please don’t hurt my son!”

The syringe was almost in Erwin’s arm.

Everything went silent—the struggle, his breaths, the shouts, the rattle of the carriage—except Papa’s voice, which rang out in his mind with perfect clarity:

“Erwin, listen to me: no matter what they do to you, never forget—”

*Papa!*

His eyes flew open.

Strength surged through him. He was powerful now, more powerful than he had been a moment ago. He knocked the syringe away and shoved back the bodies that tried to pin him down. Pain suffocated him so violently that his vision blackened. Voices called his name, and more figures reached for him. He thrashed.

Strong hands closed over either side of his face.

“Erwin,” a voice said, smooth and warm, and the blurred figure that leaned over him was somehow comforting. “Stop fighting us. You’re hurting yourself.”

He stared up at the blur, desperately trying to suck air into his burning lungs.

A syringe descended toward his arm again, and he flinched.

“He doesn’t trust you,” the smooth voice said. “Let me do it.”

The hands withdrew from his face. The instant the liquid hit his veins, Erwin felt his body begin to relax. The pain was still excruciating, but now he could identify notes of it instead of being deafened by its cacophony.

His eyes fluttered closed, and he finally identified the smooth voice. “Le ... vi ...”

“Stop talking,” Levi said. “You need rest. I’ll be here.”

“I forgot ...” murmured Erwin.

“Forgot what?”

His lips moved, voiceless: *What Papa told me to remember*. Warm darkness was spinning around him, soaking into him, tempting him with the promise of no pain. He relaxed into it, knowing that Levi was watching over him.

## 8

Levi bowed over Erwin's unconscious form, still holding the empty syringe.

Mike's hand closed over his shoulder. "You okay?"

It was such a stupid question that Levi didn't bother giving him an answer. Instead, he watched the medics bind Erwin's wrists to the stretcher railings. "You don't have to do that."

"Yes we do," one of them said. "His ribs are broken. He could kill himself if he panics and flails like that again. Besides, if the three of you hadn't been here, we wouldn't have been able to hold him down."

"Fine." He stared down at Erwin's face. Erwin's expression was fully relaxed now, but his skin was still slick with tears. The cracked lips were tinged blue.

*What were you seeing? Why were you so upset?* Levi's throat tightened, but he cleared it. There wasn't time to mope. With Erwin out, it was his duty as unofficial second-in-command to take control of the mission. He turned to Mike and Hange, who were both ashen-faced and solemn.

"Let's go."

"Where?" Hange asked, voice cracking.

"To find Berit." He let his eyes trail across the sea of injured soldiers. The main room of the second checkpoint had been converted into a makeshift sanatorium, the wounded lined up on bedrolls. Most of the surviving soldiers were wounded. Even Mike had a nasty gash on his forearm.

Berit lay on a bedroll at the far end of the room, her arm in a splint and a bandage around her forehead. She pushed herself onto her elbow as they approached.

"What was that about?" she asked. "Is he okay?"

"Bit of a nightmare," Hange said with a forced lighthearted tone.

"Fucking idiot is going to kill himself." Levi sat on the floor. "How are you feeling?"

"I got off lucky. Broken arm, a concussion. Not a big one." She smiled. "I hear you saved my life, Levi. That was sweet of you."

He shrugged. "Figure your fiancé would be pissed if we brought you home in a body bag."

"Silas proposed?" Hange asked.

Berit's eyes narrowed. "Great. Last time I tell Erwin anything private."

"Oh." He hadn't realized it had been told in confidence. "Look, we have bigger things to worry about. With Erwin down, the four of us need to figure out what the hell to do next. We should start by counting—"

"Tomorrow. We need to rest." Hange reached for his shoulder.

He jerked away. "If we don't take command—"

"Levi. We'll figure it out in the morning."

For the first time, he noticed the dark circles under Hange's eyes. He glanced at Mike and saw his mouth drooping.

"Fine," he muttered. He had been hoping to keep himself distracted from Erwin's condition, from all the soldiers he had lost. He turned to Mike. "At least let me stitch your arm."

Fifteen stitches later, Levi had run out of distractions. It was still too early to sleep. Giving in, he returned to Erwin's side. A medic named Nate was squeezing liquid between the unconscious man's lips with an eyedropper.

Levi leaned against the wall and folded his arms over his chest. "He going to be okay?"

"Hard to say. The biggest concern is internal bleeding and whatever's going on with his lung. We'll be keeping him sedated so he doesn't move around and make things worse, at least until we diagnose the problems." Nate's face wrinkled with a kind smile. "But the Commander's a tough one, Levi. I've seen him bounce back from a lot over the years."

Levi recalled the way Erwin had mounted the horse with broken ribs, then had stayed focused on the mission right up until the moment he had passed out. *A tough one, indeed.* His eyes drifted down to the splinted little finger, purple and swollen, and guilt twisted his stomach.

The blond eyelashes fluttered. Erwin's head tossed and he murmured a string of nonsense syllables.

"Is he feverish?" Levi asked.

"No, just high as a kite. He's probably in a better place than we are right now."

Levi stepped closer and leaned over Erwin's face. "You'd better not die on us, you asshole."

The eyelashes fluttered again, then parted, just a crack. "Levi?"

"You should be resting," Levi said, his heart pounding.

“Everything hurts.” Erwin’s pupils were pinpricks, and his eyes kept drifting to the side, then ticking back to Levi. “I’m spinning.”

Nate approached Erwin’s other side to check his pulse. “We might need to give him more sedatives to keep him under. You were the only one he trusted with it before—would you be willing to do it again?”

“Sure.” Levi couldn’t tear his eyes away from the wounded Commander. He wanted to crawl onto the stretcher next to him and smooth the hair back from his forehead. Instead, he settled for a platonic grip to the shoulder. “Erwin, I’m going to give you something to knock you out.”

“No.” Erwin tugged against the wrist bindings. “Our strategy ... I have to ...”

“You need to sleep so you can get better.” Levi accepted the syringe from Nate. “You’re not going to fight it this time, all right?”

“Taking care of me,” Erwin mumbled. “And saved my life. So good to me.”

“It’s nothing.” Levi administered the drug. The instant it hit his bloodstream, Erwin’s face slackened and his eyes closed.

“Levi?” His voice was barely audible. “One day, I’m going to ...”

“Yeah?”

“I’m going to marry you.”

Levi stepped back. “What the fuck?”

Nate chuckled. “As I said, high as a kite. People always say the damnedest things when they’re sedated.”

Levi’s head reeled as he stared at Erwin. Erwin was out cold now, his breaths slow and rattling. *You bastard, why would you say something like that? We’re in public, and you’re half dead.*

He barely kept himself together as he stormed through the checkpoint. The guard towers were all unstable, so he settled on the next highest point: the top of the stable roof. His throat ached as if he had to sob or scream, but at the same time, he was numb. *‘One day, I’m going to marry you?’ Fuck. Those could be your last words, asshole.*

He buried his face in his knees. In his mind’s eye, he felt that finger snap between his hands, heard the howl as Erwin mounted the horse, saw tears running down the gaunt face as he deliriously fought against the medics ...

*Don’t you dare fucking die. Not after all that.*

He heard approaching boot steps, but didn’t look up. One person sat on his left, another on his right. He knew without looking that it

was Mike and Hange.

“You okay?” Hange asked quietly.

Levi didn’t answer. He knew they had lost people, too, but he was too hollow to offer any support.

Hange leaned a cheek on his shoulder and Mike edged closer to his side.

They sat there until the sun went down, huddled together for warmth, comforting each other without exchanging a word.

¤

Levi jerked upright, blinking.

Pink light flooded through the gaping holes in the roof. For one blissful moment, he forgot where he was, but then it all came rushing back. After many sleepless hours of pacing and wandering through the checkpoint, he had fallen asleep in a cold stone corner next to Erwin’s stretcher. One of the medics had apparently draped a blanket over him during the night. The gesture was kind, but he couldn’t feel any gratitude.

He stood, stretching his aching neck. The medics were moving among the wounded, giving them water and medication. Erwin was unconscious, his skin still pale and sunken. Making sure no one was looking, Levi slicked the damp blond bangs off his forehead, combing them neatly into place.

One of the new recruits came over a few minutes later. She gave him a polite smile. “Squad Leader. I’m guessing you want a report on the Commander’s status?”

He nodded, not trusting his voice.

She examined a piece of paper, her brow furrowed. “We thought a lung might be punctured, at first, but it seems more likely to be a contusion, which should be a better scenario. Four ribs are fractured, at least one of those in several places. He’s a bit dehydrated, but we’re making sure to ease off the sedative at regular intervals so he can surface enough to drink some water.”

“I see.” Levi’s hands tightened into fists at his sides. “Is he going to make it?”

“Still hard to say. He doesn’t seem to be bleeding anymore, at least, but we need to get him back to town as soon as possible. That lung is a big risk for complications; worst case, we’d have to put in a tube to

drain fluids. Can't do that out here without risking infection. Besides, our morphine supplies are running low, and it's very important that we keep his pain controlled so he breathes properly." She set the paper aside and began to take Erwin's pulse. "He's not the only one in rough shape. We aren't equipped to deal with this many injuries, especially because we lost most of our medical staff on the field."

"I see." *We have to get back to Trost as soon as possible.*

Hange and Mike were asleep on the floor in the next room. He nudged them with his foot. "Wake up. We have work to do."

First, they began the arduous task of checking the survivors against their squad rosters. Levi was happy to find Gunther, Eld and Anton alive, but Nadya hadn't returned. His heart sank. *I barely even said two words to her. I don't even know when she died.*

He tried not to think of Isabel and Farlan, he tried so hard, but every time he lost people, he thought of them. Time had dulled the guilt, but not the empty space they had left behind. He wondered what they'd think of him now, temporarily leading the Survey Corps, in love with the man he had sworn to kill. If they had any sense, they'd be furious with him for throwing away their lives to try to kill Erwin in the first place. Knowing them, however, they would just be happy he had found someone. He blinked until his vision cleared. *Maybe I'll check in on Farlan's sister at the care facility next time I'm in the Capital. Maybe seeing her again will make me feel like Farlan's still with me.*

He took a deep breath. *Focus.*

The rest of his squad had fared even worse than the strike team. By the time he reconvened with Mike and Hange, his hands were shaking. They found a quiet spot away from the group.

"Thirteen survivors from my squad, eight of them wounded," Levi said. His voice trembled against his will, as if his body were reacting to the emotions he was still too numb to acknowledge.

"Eighteen survivors in mine, twelve of them wounded," Hange said. "Three in Berit's, all of them wounded."

"Eleven," Mike said. "Eight wounded."

"Plus the five officers, three of us wounded, so I guess that means fifty survivors in total, thirty-four of them wounded." Hange's head bowed.

"Shit," Levi whispered. "What did we set out with? About two hundred?"

"Yeah, one hundred and ninety-eight."

Mike raked his hand into his hair and turned, pacing away from them. Levi stared at the names of the casualties on his roster. For several minutes, none of them spoke.

Levi took a long breath, then let it out slowly, trying to steady himself. “How many carts did we end up recovering from that last silo?”

“All but four,” Hange said. “Three still in the mud, and we had to dump some supplies from the fourth to carry the wounded. I asked the team to dump the tax chests first—they’re the only thing that won’t be ruined by the elements, so we can retrieve them on our next expedition.”

“What?” Levi’s eyes locked onto the Squad Leader. “You dumped all the money?”

“Yeah?”

“You moron.” Levi stepped forward and smacked the ponytailed head. “That money was the most important part.”

Hange looked up, eyes wide. “It’s just money.”

“That wasn’t just money.” *If we don’t pay Sahlo off, he might turn the entire Council against us. Trying to control him was the whole reason we did this stupid mission so soon.* Frustrated, Levi reached out to smack Hange’s head again.

A strong hand caught his arm. He looked back to see Mike frowning at him.

“Knock it off, Levi. We had to leave people, money or supplies. Hange made the right call.”

Levi withdrew his hand, glancing at Hange. The goggled eyes were downcast, and he could tell they were filling with tears. *Shit.* He looked away. “Mike, do you think we could recover the money with a small team?”

Mike held up his wounded arm. “Four fingers are numb; can’t close my fist all the way. I’d be useless on the gear.”

“How about you, four eyes?”

“It’s not worth it, Levi.” Hange’s voice cracked. “We have sixteen able-bodied soldiers, and they’re all exhausted. Besides, we have to get back to Trost as soon as possible. Several of the wounded need proper medical care, not just first aid. That includes Erwin.”

Levi knew they were right: they had to leave the money behind. *Erwin won’t like this, but it might save his life.* “How the hell are we going to get back through the gorge with so few people, and so many injured?”

“Run and hope we’re lucky,” Hange said.

Mike nodded his agreement. “I’ll inform the medics that we want to head out. We need to figure out how to transport everyone.”

After an hour of preparation, they were ready to set out. Mike and Levi took the lead, guiding the formation based on Mike’s nose. Behind them, the carts rode in the centre of the formation; a couple were heavily laden with supplies, and the others carried any wounded soldiers who were unable to ride. Because of the enormous losses, the horses outnumbered the riders by more than four to one. Several soldiers were riding with four or five horses in tow. Levi glanced back at them, uneasy. No matter how obedient Survey Corps horses were, he couldn’t shake the feeling he was going to be stampeded at any moment.

The gorge appeared in front of them. Mike sniffed the air, then pointed to the western cliff, where Levi’s squad had encountered the titans before.

“Shit,” Levi said. “How many?”

“Half a dozen?”

Gritting his teeth, Levi picked up speed, hoping the wounded in the carts could handle a faster pace over the bumpy terrain.

They were about halfway through the gorge when a shadow fell over them. Levi looked up at the cliff.

A titan was falling toward them.

On reflex, he jerked the reins. His horse stopped so suddenly that it reared. The titan landed on its feet in front of them; the ground shook from the impact, dust billowing into Levi’s face.

The titan had barely lifted its head when Mike burst out of his saddle. His grapple slammed into the rock wall behind the titan. He swung his blades for the neck, but veered off course with a sharp yell.

*His injured arm.* Levi anchored high on the cliff wall, but as he swung toward the titan, the rock began to crumble. The grapple gave out. He dropped hard onto his feet, and he half-stumbled, half-ran forward as he fought to control the landing. Before his balance failed him entirely, he managed to find an anchor spot on the beast’s head. He propelled himself high into the air.

His blades spattered titan blood across his face and chest. The titan fell, steam billowing from its corpse.

“Fuck.” He dropped to the ground. One ankle smarted, so he shifted his weight to the other leg. “You okay?” Mike was still lying in a heap on the titan’s far side.

“Yeah. Forgot my hand was screwed.” Mike sat up, rubbing his

head. “You’re limping.”

“ Fucked up my ankle a bit.” Levi shook out his leg, hoping it was just a mild strain. “Do you smell more of them up there?”

“Yeah.”

“Then let’s get moving before another suicidal piece of shit throws itself down here.” Levi limped back to his horse, wiping the steaming remains off his face.

The rest of the formation had stopped, and the soldiers stared at them with wide eyes. Levi mounted and thrust out his right arm. “Move out!”

Thankfully, they travelled through the rest of the gorge without any encounters, and on the other side, Mike’s nose allowed them to redirect the group away from harm. They rode through the first checkpoint’s gates around noon.

Levi felt a wave of relief, but it was premature—they weren’t home yet—so he shoved it aside. He turned to the group. “Take a break, but leave your horses saddled. Mike and Hange, come here.”

The group began to murmur with confusion.

“Take a break?” Hange repeated, dismounting. “Aren’t we stopping here for the night?”

“It’s only another four hours or so to Trost.” Levi dismounted, too, and tested his injured leg. It felt a bit bruised, but he could stand on it just fine. “If we take a few minutes to load up the supplies we left here before, then we can be home before nightfall.”

Mike and Hange exchanged a look, considering.

“It makes sense,” Hange said reluctantly, “but what about the impact of fatigue on morale?”

Levi shook his head. “Look around you, shitgoggles. Morale can’t get any fucking lower.”

“I’ll check with the medics first,” Mike said. “In case anyone can’t survive a second push so soon.”

“Okay. Hange, make sure Berit agrees with our plan. I’ll see if Erwin’s awake.”

He strode toward the medical carts, checking a couple different ones before he found Erwin. His eyes were closed and his skin was still pale, but his lips had more colour than before. That seemed like a good sign. Levi glanced around and, seeing that everyone around him was preoccupied or unconscious, took a moment to trace the bridge of Erwin’s nose. He tapped the sharp tip. “Hang in there a bit longer. We’re

almost home."

Swallowing the lump in his throat, he turned away, looking for the others.

Thankfully, Berit and the medics all agreed that pushing for Trost was the best course of action, so they didn't have to waste any time discussing their options. The only delay was the time it took to load the supplies they had recovered from the first checkpoint's silos. It took some shuffling to find room for everything, with so many wounded soldiers requiring cart space, but Hange took control and showed a surprising aptitude for organization.

Within an hour, they were ready to leave. They set out in the same formation they had used in the gorge, preparing to outrun every potential threat.

The first major landmark was the meadow where they had fought the large cluster of titans on the first day of the mission. Levi felt a pang of guilt, remembering Sonja's death. So many had died under his command since then, and as much as he wanted to mourn each of them equally, his grief about Sonja was still disproportionately high.

*But she didn't die in vain.* The meadow was completely empty, and he thanked Erwin's foresight. If they hadn't taken out the titans then, this would have been the Survey Corps' last stand. There was no way this fatigued, battered group could hold their own in such a massive fight.

They rode on, Mike leading the group by scent.

"Protect that nose of yours." Levi fired a green flare to direct the group away from a threat on the horizon. "It's a fucking gift."

Mike smirked at him. "Tell your boyfriend not to punch it anymore."

"I still can't picture him attacking you."

"Yeah, can't say I expected it. Bet it surprised him, too." Mike glanced at Levi. "How is he?"

"They're keeping him under so he doesn't hurt himself even worse. Four cracked ribs, something wrong with a lung."

"That it? He'll be fine. But there's one thing you might not know about Erwin."

"Yeah?"

"He's a terrible patient. Too stubborn, too driven. He's going to be hell-bent on pushing himself too soon."

"Huh." Levi was not surprised.

"You're going to want to look after him while he heals, right? Be prepared to pick your battles. You won't be able to win them all." Mike sniffed, then frowned. "There's a titan to the northwest."

Levi nodded and fired a green flare northeast.

Even though he redirected their course several times, they still managed to reach Wall Rose before sunset. Levi didn't bother to give the traditional welcome home speech. He fired a white round into the air, alerting the Garrison that they had returned. The sound of ringing bells filled the air.

The gate opened, and the scent of Trost filled his nose: garbage, horse manure, dust. He felt clashing waves of relief and disgust.

A crowd began to assemble on either side of the road through town. Levi dismounted and held his head high, leading the group forward. Shocked murmurs filled the air, and he could feel eyes boring through him. He knew how it must look: nearly two-hundred soldiers had left, and now, barely more than a dozen were able to walk.

"Where's Commander Erwin?" yelled a man in the crowd.

"Injured," Levi said.

"Where's my son Reg?"

"My daughter Nadya—I don't see her!"

"Is Franco dead?"

"What knowledge did you bring back? Were the lives you lost worth it?"

Shapes began to close in around Levi, looming over him. He couldn't breathe. His mouth twisted and his hands tightened into fists as he fought the urge to start punching and kicking. *Ignore them. You're almost home. Just a little further ...*

"Looks like Commander Erwin was just as foolhardy as every asshole that came before him," one man said.

Levi's gaze snapped to the man and he opened his mouth.

Hands tightened over his shoulders, warning him to stop. Hange's voice rang out beside him, loud and clear: "The Commander will be happy to address you about the goals and results of this mission as soon as he can. For now, it's important that we get the brave wounded some medical attention. We appreciate your understanding and your patience, and we, of course, share your grief for those who were lost. We will contact their families as soon as possible."

"What are you doing?" Levi growled, red still fogging the fringes of his vision.

“Saving you from yourself.” Hange pushed him toward the base. “Let Erwin sort out the public relations when he’s well enough.”

As they filed through the front gates of the base, many of the soldiers, overcome by emotion, began to weep. Levi stared dully at the rooftop near the stable, wondering if Erwin would ever again be able to make the leap to their perch. His eyes drifted up to the guard tower, the site of romantic lunches and their near-breakup, and so many conflicting emotions competed for his attention that he felt nothing.

While Hange helped the medical team deal with the wounded, Levi and Mike coordinated the supply storage. They’d take a proper inventory later; for now, their top priority was to get everything stowed away so the soldiers could take some leave.

When they were just finishing up, one of the medics jogged up to them. “Commander Erwin is starting to come out of his sedation. Do you want us to let him awaken fully so you can update him on the situation?”

Levi’s pulse drummed in his ears. “How clear-headed is he going to be?” He couldn’t take another off-handed comment about marriage.

“He’ll be groggy, but lucid.”

“I see.” He turned to Mike, and they exchanged a long look. Mike shrugged.

“Okay.” Levi turned back to her. “We’ll be up in a few minutes. Make sure Hange and Berit are there, too.”

The san was packed full when they arrived. A couple doctors from the village were already helping the medics treat the worst patients. Levi scanned the room, but couldn’t see Erwin.

“Over here,” Nate said, waving from a doorway. They found Erwin in an adjoining private room, a doctor by his side. Berit sat in a wheelchair in the corner, Hange standing behind her.

Levi strode up to the bed and leaned over it. Erwin’s eyelids were fluttering, and his hands were bound to the bed railings at his sides.

“He doesn’t need to be tied down.”

“Levi,” Nate said. “Remember what happened the last time he woke up. His ribs are fragile right now—if he panics, he could seriously injure himself.”

Erwin’s head rolled along the pillow, and he mumbled a few unintelligible syllables.

“He responded to your voice last time, Levi,” Nate said. “Try tal-

king to him.”

There was a lot he wanted to say, but not in front of so many people. He cleared his throat. “Hey, blondie. Wake up.”

“Mm?” Erwin’s eyes opened a crack. “Levi? What— Ah, fuck!” His eyes screwed shut and he curled off the bed, tugging at the bonds, as if he were reflexively trying to grip his wounds.

“He needs morphine,” the doctor said, checking his pulse. He signalled to Nate, who began to fill a syringe. “Make sure you keep on top of his pain. The more pain he’s in, the more tense he’ll be. That will make his intercostal muscles pull on the injured ribs, making them hurt even more. It’s a vicious cycle, one we have to interrupt. Pain is going to prevent him from breathing deeply, which could lead to lung—”

“No drugs,” Erwin wheezed as he tugged at the bonds again. “I’m fine.”

“That’s not what your pulse says. You must refrain from moving around. You’re in a fragile state right now.”

“That’s why you’re bound, you idiot,” Levi said.

“I need … to be clear-headed …”

Levi’s numbness was finally beginning to fall away, and the first emotion to surface was irritation. He snatched the meds from Nate, then squirted half the syringe’s contents back into the vial. “You want to stay sober, fine, but you need something. You’re taking half now, half after we’re done talking.”

“Levi, I don’t want—”

“Shut up and let us help you.” He swabbed Erwin’s arm with alcohol. Erwin cooperated, allowing him to inject the medication. Within seconds, he relaxed back into the bed.

“Better, right?” Levi said.

“Yeah.”

“Good.” He began to untie the wrist straps.

“Levi—” Nate began.

“He doesn’t need them.” He pulled the straps free and let them fall to the floor.

Erwin blinked. “Where are we?”

“Back at the base,” Hange’s voice said behind Levi, and he jumped. He had forgotten the others were there.

“It’s good to see you awake,” Berit said. “I don’t know if you remember, but we got swarmed at the first silo of the second checkpoint. Levi’s team saved our lives.”

The blue eyes shifted to him. “Is this true?”

“I guess.” Levi tried to look away, but his gaze landed on the splinted little finger. His stomach flipped, and he found himself wishing the numbness would take hold again.

“Ah, yes. I remember now.” There were unnatural pauses between Erwin’s words, as if he were struggling to catch his breath. “Thank you, Levi. And I’m glad you’re okay, Berit. You saved my life, too.”

“Did my best, sir,” she replied.

“The rest of the mission, after I fell. How was it?”

Levi couldn’t bring himself to look at him; he kept staring at the broken finger. For several seconds, no one spoke.

“Your faces,” Erwin said quietly. “It was that bad?”

“We lost four carts’ worth of supplies from the first silo, sir,” Hange said, voice catching.

“Lost?”

“Three are still stuck in the mud. We had to dump a fourth to make room for the injured. We considered a recovery mission to retrieve those supplies, but we were too short on able-bodied soldiers. We all agreed that returning to base was the best option.”

“I see.”

There was a long pause, as if Erwin were working up the courage to ask the next question. Levi folded his arms tightly over his chest, bracing himself for it. He didn’t have to look back to know the other Squad Leaders were doing the same thing.

“How many?” Erwin asked, the words barely voiced.

Mike was the first to speak. “Seventy-five percent.”

Erwin jerked as if someone had slapped him. “Seventy-five percent ... survived?”

Several seconds passed. Levi hunched tighter.

“Mike,” Erwin said, his voice urgent. “Survived?”

“No.”

Erwin’s breaths wheezed louder, faster, faster ...

Concerned, Levi looked up. Erwin’s face was pale, almost green, and his body began to heave.

“Sedative,” the doctor barked.

Erwin rolled to the side and retched.

Chaos erupted. The medics converged, yelling orders, and the Squad Leaders stepped forward, and at the centre of it all, Levi stared at Erwin’s rolling shoulders, feeling each heave spike through him with

white-hot dread. Liquid began to seep across the blanket, tinged pink.

“Get out of here,” he heard himself growl, and the words made so much sense that he whirled to face the officers. “Get out!”

They gaped at him, wide-eyed, then hurried from the room. Levi shut the door behind them and slumped against it, staring at the medical team. They rolled Erwin onto his back. His chin was slick with blood and vomit, and his breath was still coming in loud, terrible gasps.

But it was his eyes that hurt the most: they locked onto Levi, wide and terrified, not one ounce of confidence in them. Levi could have handled tears, or anger, but he couldn’t handle that complete lack of Erwin, that utter helplessness; it pinned him against the door.

The doctor yanked down the sheet. Bruises bloomed across Erwin’s flank and chest, a mixture of black, red and yellow. It was worse than Levi imagined, so much worse. *I should have been there. I should have been by his side; this never would have happened.* The doctor’s fingers slid along Erwin’s ribs, examining them. Erwin yelled through clenched teeth, and the sound spiked through Levi’s chest.

Nate whirled to face Levi, his brows low. “You shouldn’t have given him such stressful news when he was so frail.”

“How the fuck was I supposed to know he’d lose his shit?” Levi’s knuckles ached from clawing at the door. “Maybe if you were doing your fucking job—”

“Both of you, be quiet. You aren’t helping.” The doctor pried open Erwin’s eyelids to examine his eyes. “Give him the rest of the morphine. I can’t tell if he worsened his lung injury or he’s just hyperventilating.”

Wordlessly, Nate handed Levi a syringe. Levi stepped forward to administer it.

“Le—” Erwin rasped between breaths, the whites of his eyes showing all the way around the irises.

*I should have protected you.* Levi depressed the plunger, then passed back the syringe. He gripped the first four digits of the wounded man’s hand, carefully avoiding the broken one. Erwin clung to him. His breaths began to slow as the morphine took hold.

“That’s better.” The doctor pressed a tube to Erwin’s chest, listening through the other end. The other medics prepared more medication in the background, murmuring amongst themselves. Levi ignored them, focusing on the junction of their hands. Sweat was building between them, but he didn’t let go. Erwin’s grip was beginning

to slacken.

“He’s a lucky man.” The doctor pulled away. “This doesn’t seem to have made anything worse, at least for now. But it cannot happen again.”

Levi let out a relieved breath. He tried to release Erwin’s hand, but as he began to pull away, the hand reached for him again.

“Okay,” Levi whispered. “I’m here.” Their fingers intertwined.

“Should we strap him to the bed again?” Nate asked.

“Hard to say.” The doctor wrote some notes on a piece of paper. “That movement and spasming was dangerous, no question, but if he had vomited on his back, he could have choked. Might be best to leave him loose. Keep him on morphine and anti-nauseants so this doesn’t happen again. Your top priority is to keep him calm and breathing properly, so his pain *must* be controlled. Sedatives might be a big help right now, too.” He nodded. “I’m going to go attend to the other patients for a bit, but call me if his condition changes.”

He left the room.

Levi ran his thumb across Erwin’s knuckles, then realized Nate was staring. He didn’t bother pulling away. That would just draw even more attention to it, make him look as if he were feeling guilty.

The elderly medic cleared his throat and dismissed the others, then, once they were alone, stepped in close to Levi.

“You have a calming effect on him, something he needs right now. If you’re comfortable staying while I clean him up and administer the rest of these meds, it would be a big help.”

“I’ll clean him up,” Levi said. “Alone. He’s more comfortable with me giving him meds, anyway.” He stared down at their entwined fingers. “I’m the one who stressed him out like this in the first place.”

Nate was quiet for a moment, but then he nodded. “When he’s ready, give him the two syringes on the counter. We’ll be in the next room, so call for assistance immediately if you need it. I’ll make sure you have some privacy.” He gripped Levi’s shoulder, then left the room.

For a moment, the only sound was the rasp of Erwin’s breaths, slower now than they had been a few minutes ago. Levi smoothed stringy blond hair back from his forehead. Their eyes held.

“Seventy-five,” Erwin said, and his body seized as if he were retching one last time.

“Stop thinking about it. You’re going to work yourself up again.” Levi retracted his hand and slowly walked around the bed, sizing up the

situation. Most of the mess had gone over the edge of the bed, but the blanket and pillowcase both had damp spots. "I'll be right back."

He slipped through the door and spoke to one of the medics. A few minutes later, he returned to Erwin's side with clean bedding and several washcloths.

The blue eyes followed him as he stripped the blanket, tossing it into the corner. He draped a fresh blanket over Erwin's battered body.

"This might hurt," he said, sliding a hand under Erwin's head. He eased out the pillow and gently lowered his head to the sheet, hoping the change in angle wouldn't put too much stress on his ribs. The scent of vomit and the visible tinge of red made Levi's stomach lurch, but he forced it back. He eased a clean pillow under Erwin's head.

"That means it was sixty-five percent," Erwin rasped. "At that one silo. And the supplies ... We lost four carts ... "

"Stop thinking about it." Levi wiped the floor, trying to erase the scent from the room, the stains from his mind. Maybe he couldn't control how quickly Erwin recovered, but he could make his room clean and sterile. That was better than nothing. He shoved the soiled bedding outside the door.

Next, he scrubbed his hands in the basin, then soaked a cloth. He began to dab the mess from Erwin's mouth and chin.

"Shouldn't see me like this," Erwin whispered. His lids were low now, his face slack.

"This is what we do. One of us bleeds, the other washes it away." It wasn't so long ago that their situations had been reversed, when Erwin had cleaned the blood off his face after the botched mission into the Military Police headquarters.

"I'm filthy. You hate filth."

He scrubbed a stubborn spot at the corner of Erwin's mouth. "You could be caked head to toe in your own shit and piss and I'd still want to help you clean up." Once the last of the mess was gone, he tossed the cloth into the sink. His thumb slid across a thick eyebrow, smoothing it into place. "I know you don't want drugs, but I have to give you a bit more."

"No. Pain means I'm alive." Erwin's eyes closed. "Others aren't so lucky."

"So that's what this is all about. You want to punish yourself for their deaths, don't you?" Levi stood up to wash his hands again. "Well, fuck that. You should be trying to get well so you can make their deaths

mean something. Pain isn't going to help you heal."

After a pause, Erwin said, "Orders first. Then meds."

Levi dried his hands, then returned to his side. "Okay. What are your orders?"

"I need a written report: supplies. Casualties. Arrange a carriage to Mitras. Tonight."

"Tonight?" Levi studied him, trying to determine if the morphine was clouding his judgement. "You can't travel like this. You're going to be laid out for days."

"No. Need to head off rumours. The Council ..." Erwin winced, shifting. "Can't appeal with results, so sympathy might help. This can't wait. Could undermine the whole mission."

Levi remembered what Mike had said: *be prepared to pick your battles*. He could easily overrule Erwin and have the medics keep him sedated until he was well enough to travel, but that could shatter Erwin's trust in him. Maybe he could appeal to him with a compromise instead.

"How about this? Let the medics observe you for a full day and see how you're doing. If you're okay to travel, we'll go *tomorrow* night. Not tonight."

"Levi—"

"One day won't make a difference to the pigs at the Capital, but it could be a big difference for you. If you're still stable tomorrow, the medics will be more likely to let you go, and so will the other officers." He looked down. "And I'm going to be the one taking care of you when we go, so I'd like to know you aren't going to die on me mid-trip."

Erwin studied him for a moment, then gave a small nod. "Okay."

"Is that it for the orders? Can I give you your meds?"

"Yeah." A small smile tugged at his lips. "Thank you, Levi. I won't forget this."

Levi bent down to kiss his forehead, then administered the medication. Moments later, Erwin was out. Levi stayed with him for a few more minutes, his head bowed, trying to find the strength to walk away.

8

The medics and the doctor were initially opposed to letting Erwin travel so soon, but after a lot of discussion, they agreed to allow it if there were no complications overnight. Levi had proven he had suit-

able first-aid skills, and the Capital had a better hospital than Trost. If worse came to worse, medical aid wasn't far away.

By the next afternoon, Erwin was already showing signs of improvement. He still ran out of breath easily, but he could string together several words without stopping, and his pain levels were tolerable so long as the medics kept on top of his medication. They had transferred him from the bed to a wheelchair that had the ability to recline. Sitting and sleeping in a reclining position was easier on his ribs than being upright or lying flat.

That evening, Nate rolled him out to a carriage where Levi was waiting. The Squad Leader helped lift the chair into the cabin, securing it to a bench. Erwin gingerly reclined, finding the most comfortable angle. He could hear Levi and Nate outside the carriage discussing the medication schedule, as well as a list of warning signs that would mean Erwin's condition was worsening. Once they were done, Nate poked his head in.

"I still think you're pushing too hard, Commander. If you would only reconsider ..."

"I'll seek help if I need it," Erwin said. "I assure you, this is what's best for the Corps."

"Very well. Don't forget to do your deep breathing exercises. They'll keep your lungs clear." Nate saluted. "Safe travels, sir."

Levi climbed into the carriage and shut the door. He slumped on the bench facing Erwin, arms folding over his chest. "He's right, you know."

"Not you, too, Levi? This was your suggestion."

"Well, maybe I'm second-guessing it. You can't even stand."

"I don't need to stand." The carriage rattled as it began to move over the cobblestone, and he winced.

"Already?" Levi reached under the seat and pulled out a black medical bag.

"What are you doing?" Erwin asked.

"What I was ordered to do: keeping your pain level down while we travel." Levi pulled out a vial and a syringe.

The world tilted.

*Carriage ... vial ... syringe ... Erwin's chest tightened. Papa ... blurred figures ... don't forget ... don't forget ...*

"Erwin?"

He realized he was breathing hard, his hands trembling. "Can't I

have pills instead?" he asked, trying to keep his tone light.

Levi looked down at the syringe, then carefully set it back inside the bag. "Don't tell me you're afraid of needles."

"Guess I am."

After a pause, Levi said, "The day you were injured, you fought back when we tried to give you sedative. Took four of us to hold you down."

*So that wasn't a dream.* Erwin bowed his head. "My apologies for the fuss."

"I know you said there are things you can't tell me, so don't answer if you don't want to. I'm just curious." Levi leaned forward. "You were screaming for your father. Those dreams you've mentioned, the ones Nile thinks are delusions—did this have something to do with them?"

Erwin's throat tightened. "Perhaps."

Levi's gaze was steady. "You still won't tell me what they are, will you?"

"I won't. It's too dangerous. I'm sorry." Memories were floating through Erwin's mind, perfectly clear, down to the red-checked table-cloth. Nothing that real could be a delusion, could it? The only things out of place were those blurred figures and voices.

"Levi, I'm curious. Ever have vivid memories with parts cut out? Faces? Voices?" He wanted to say more, but his injuries made it difficult to say too many sentences at a time.

Levi shrugged. "Yeah."

"No, I ..." Erwin paused to catch his breath. "Not forgotten parts, or fuzzy details, but *holes*. Crystal clear memories, but bits are blurred. And when you focus, try to unblur it, it hurts. Like your brain's pulling in two."

Levi gave him a puzzled look. "Yeah, I knew that was what you meant."

"You don't think it's odd?"

"That's just how memories work. Details disappear."

Erwin thought of the vague parts of Levi's history: his unclear age, his uncertainty about whether or not he had been a mercenary, his confusion about what had happened with his aunt. *He has even more holes than I do.* "Your last name ..."

His eyes narrowed. "What about it?"

"Do you remember it?"

“Of course I do.” Levi hesitated. “Maybe. Look, I don’t want to talk about this stuff right now. You need to relax. The drugs are fucking with your head or something; you’re all over the place.”

“I suppose.”

“And I have to give you this dose now. Close your eyes and think about something else.”

Erwin obeyed. He felt Levi lift the short sleeve of his shirt. A few seconds later, the drug flooded his veins. His body relaxed. It was the same experience with every fresh dose: he never realized just how bad the pain had become until the meds dulled it again.

“You can open your eyes,” Levi said. “If the drugs make you sick, let me know. I bought some ginger candies in town yesterday. They’ll help your stomach. You’ll probably get constipated, too, so I have some herbs for that.”

Erwin smiled. “You’re so good to me, Levi.”

Levi clicked one of the door flaps into place to form a bed parallel to the wheelchair, then sat on it, facing him. “You said something like that earlier, when you were really fucked up on the drugs.” He looked as if he wanted to say more, but then his mouth flattened.

“I appreciate your attentiveness.” Erwin reached out to run a hand along his jaw, but froze when he saw the splinted, purple finger. “Oh.” He held it up, examining it from both sides. “I asked you to do this, right?” He had been so full of adrenaline by that point that his memories were disjointed, and the drug haze certainly wasn’t helping him sort out his thoughts.

“Yeah.” Levi slumped forward, staring at the floor. His voice was barely audible over the rattle of the carriage. “Said you needed a shot of pain to keep you conscious.”

The sudden change of mood was surprising, and Erwin reached out again, hoping to console him. “It helped. Thank you.”

Without looking up, Levi caught his hand and gently set it back by his side. “Don’t move around so much. You’re going to hurt yourself.”

“Levi?”

He slumped deeper, his hair falling into his eyes.

“Levi.” Erwin studied him. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s just … It’s so hard to see you like this. Wheezing every word, drugged up, in a chair. I should have—” Levi’s breath shuddered. “I thought I was too late, that I’d have to watch that fucking monster eat

you, right in front of me.”

Erwin’s eyes closed as his heavily medicated mind painted images to match the words. He heard the crunching sound of Henrik’s bones between the titan’s teeth, heard his scream, saw the blood-soaked hand reaching for him ... His throat tightened.

“Levi, I never want to hurt you like that.”

There was a pause, then Levi gave a soft, disgusted snort. “You were about to die, and you’re worried about how *I* felt?”

Erwin opened his eyes. “You’ll have to mourn my death, one day. It shouldn’t be a scarring one. I’ll try to make it easy on you.”

“What?” Levi finally lifted his head; his eyes were wide.

Erwin wanted to stop, but the drugs had a firm hold over his mind, and he couldn’t hold back the words spilling out of his mouth. “When I die, I’ll visit you in a dream. To say goodbye. Papa did that for me; told me he loved me. It helped with closure. I’ll stop to visit you before I enter hell.”

Levi looked uncomfortable, as if he wasn’t sure whether or not to engage in the conversation. Finally, he said, “Didn’t think you’d be the type to believe in spirits and hell.”

Erwin rolled his head to look at the window. In the crack between the curtains, he could see the moon, high in the sky.

“It doesn’t matter if it’s real,” he said softly. Whether the visit from his father had been real or not, it had been what Erwin had needed. Even if it was just his imagination, it had been so real that it had felt like a proper goodbye, one he hadn’t gotten in the waking world. He liked to think of his father visiting each of the family members for a farewell, then dissipating into whatever afterlife awaited them. The thought was comforting.

“Look,” Levi said, “stop thinking and get some sleep. You’re getting weird.”

Erwin barely heard him. The moon began to blur. No, comfort wasn’t the real reason he wanted to believe in an afterlife. Not if he were honest with himself.

“Levi,” he said quietly, “there has to be something else after this life. There is nothing here that can adequately punish me.”

“Erwin—”

“I just sacrificed one hundred and fifty lives. That’s only the beginning. There’ll be countless more before I’m done; it’s the only way we can fight the titans. Sheer numbers. I’ll destroy so many families. To

them, I'll be the monster who consumes their loved ones." He swallowed a growing lump in his throat. "An eternity of suffering must await me after I die. It's my only fitting end. Anything else would be unfair."

He heard the makeshift bed creak as Levi sat upright. "Erwin, what the hell?"

"The families of the bereaved, when you returned—what were their faces? I selfishly left you to face them. I alone should have faced their anger. Their grief. That's my responsibility. You were just following orders."

Levi stared at him for a minute, mouth agape, then his face twisted. He stood.

"Levi?" Erwin asked, coming back to himself.

Levi ignored him. Bracing an arm against the ceiling, he moved toward the medicine bag sitting on the bench. He threw the bag under the bench, so hard that it thudded against the carriage floor.

Erwin jumped.

Levi's shoulders sagged, his back still turned. "I didn't save your life to listen to you talk about how much you hate yourself, you asshole."

"You're angry."

"No shit."

"With me?"

"No, I'm just *angry*." Levi half-turned to face him, his brows pinched. "It's not fucking fair, Erwin. You've sacrificed so much for humanity, and what do you get? A titan crushing you half to death, and people cursing you, and whining politicians trying to shut you down, and on top of it all, you're beating yourself up. I can protect you from the titans—maybe, when I'm in the right place—but I can't protect you from the people or the politicians. I don't know how to say the right thing or convince them to leave you alone. And—" He took a shuddering breath. "And I can't protect you from yourself. Not even when I'm sitting right next to you. You're so deep inside your own fucking head, I can't reach you."

Erwin's heart sank. "Levi, come here."

"Why? So you can talk more about dying, and how you deserve to suffer?"

"No. Please come here. It's hard to speak loudly."

Levi eyed him for a moment, then moved closer. He dropped to a seat on the makeshift bed and leaned in. "What?"

"I'm sorry, Levi." Erwin reached out, laying his palm against the

slender neck. The muscles tensed, at first, but as his thumb stroked the fuzz of the undercut, the muscles began to relax. “You do get through to me. You protect me from myself all the time. You make me take breaks and sleep when I’m working too hard. You talk me into taking meds. You bring me back to reality when I get on morbid tangents.” He was losing his breath again, but he rasped the words anyway: “I need you.”

The crease between Levi’s brows faded. Slowly, he leaned forward, until their foreheads rested against each other. “Don’t talk about dying anymore, you asshole. I can’t take it. I ...” His voice shrank. “Don’t leave me.”

Erwin breathed in. He could smell mint, and lemon shampoo. “I’m not going to die yet. I have too much left to do.”

He heard Levi swallow, and then his head tilted until they met in a kiss. Their lips were still chapped from the expedition, but the pressure was so gentle that Erwin’s heart began to race. They kept the kisses shallow and slow, mouths open, breathing each other’s breath.

Then Levi pulled away. His pupils were large and soft in the dim lamplight. It was hard to tell if his eyes were damp, or if that was just a trick of the lighting.

“You okay?” Erwin asked quietly.

“I guess. You?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you need to sleep.” Levi pressed one more kiss to his lips. “If you need anything in the night, I’ll be right here by your side.”

Erwin smiled. “And I’ll be by yours.”

Levi’s throat bobbed. He gripped the blanket that sat across Erwin’s lap and lifted it, tucking it in around his shoulders. Then he lay down, the makeshift bed creaking as he settled into place.

*Side-by-side, Erwin thought, his eyes closing. Both of us exactly where we belong.*

He reached out a hand, and Levi accepted it, their fingers intertwining.

❧

Early the next morning, Levi wheeled Erwin into their hotel room. Though their room was on the bottom floor this time around, it was an identical layout to the one they had stayed in during their last visit. It was strange to look back on that time, when sex was only some

distant future possibility and they hadn't yet admitted they were in love. So much had changed in a few short weeks.

Levi pushed Erwin up to a table in the corner of the room and set his file folder in front of him, then began to unpack. "How's your pain level?"

"It doesn't matter. I have to be completely clear-headed so I can focus."

"You won't be able to focus or talk properly if you're in too much pain." Levi shoved Erwin's clothes into a drawer. "I could give you a small dose—a half, or a quarter."

"Quarter would be good. Thank you."

Levi paused to get the dose ready, then administered it. Erwin was still wearing a short-sleeved shirt and, under the blanket, loose-fitting pants. Levi frowned. "We have to figure out how to clean you and get you into your uniform." They might be able to lower him into the bath without putting too much strain on his ribs, but pulling him out of it was going to be an ordeal, so a proper bath was out of the question. "Think you can kneel without too much trouble?"

"Don't worry about it, Levi. We'll just comb my hair."

"The sponge baths they gave you in the san weren't enough." Levi wasn't sure how to tell him he stank without being blunt. He lit the flames under the water heater, then began to hang their extra uniforms in the closet.

"Levi," Erwin said quietly.

"What?" He turned.

Erwin was staring evenly at him, his expression guarded. "About last night, in the carriage ... The kinds of things I was saying ..."

"It's okay. You were drugged up."

"Still, I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"Erwin." Levi put his hands on his shoulders. "Save your breath for the brass. You don't have to explain yourself to me. It's fine."

Erwin gave him a gentle smile in response. "Thank you, Levi."

"Sure. Let's get you cleaned up."

Once the water was warm, he gently eased Erwin out of the chair. Undressing him was a three-part process: undress the lower body, help him kneel in the bathtub, then pull off the shirt. Raising his arms made Erwin cry out, and Levi's throat tightened. The bruising had spread even further than before, and was deep blue and black. He could see two distinct bands, shadows of the pressure from two titan fingers.

*You poor bastard. No wonder you're in so much pain.*

"I didn't realize it was that bad." Erwin studied himself in the mirror.

"Fuck." Levi's gaze travelled lower; a hip was badly bruised. "Is your hip hurt, too?"

"Feels like it." Sweat was beading on Erwin's temples.

"You okay?"

"A bit uncomfortable."

"Let's make this quick." Setting his jaw, Levi crouched beside the tub and gently poured a bucket of water over him. Even running water across the bruises was enough to make Erwin wince. *You poor, poor bastard.*

Carefully avoiding the bruises, he wiped Erwin's skin with a soapy washcloth. There was so much grime on him that the washcloth turned brown; he had to rinse it several times. The sponge baths clearly hadn't been thorough, but then again, there had been an overwhelming number of patients.

Washing Erwin's intimate areas felt perverse at a time when he was so badly injured. *It's just like any other part of the body*, Levi told himself over and over, washing his ass with the cloth. By the time he had finished the back and was ready to start washing the front, Erwin was hard.

"Sorry," Erwin said quietly.

"It's fine." Levi hesitated, looking up. "Did you want me to—?"

"No, thank you. Can't handle heavy breathing or tensing muscles. Pain's a bit distracting, anyway." Erwin's cheeks were pink, his face solemn. "I'm sorry. I can wash it."

"No, don't strain yourself. It's fine." Levi lathered his hands and pulled down the foreskin, carefully washing him clean. He worked his way down to the base, then washed between his thick thighs. Though he kept mentally repeating the phrase like a mantra—*it's just like any other part of his body*—by the time the task was done, Levi's pants were tight, and he silently cursed himself. As much as his body might want attention, he wasn't in the mood. He pressed a palm into his groin, trying to shift it into a comfortable position.

"I'll make this up to you," Erwin said. "All of this. I'll take you far away. Just the two of us, a romantic getaway."

Levi gave a soft snort. "When would we ever have time for that?"

"In the winter. During the holidays." Erwin's gaze lifted to meet

his, solemn. "I know it's a long wait, but I won't forget. We'll make love day and night."

A pleasant shiver ran down Levi's spine, but he only said, "One thing at a time. Let's get you through this meeting first."

He lathered the blond hair and carefully massaged the scalp. After rinsing away the suds, he patted him dry with a towel.

With the bath done, he helped Erwin over to the toilet, then left the room so he could use it in private, only returning once he heard a flush. By the time Erwin's hands were washed and his teeth were clean, Erwin was beginning to sway on his feet.

"I need to sit down."

"What about your stubble?"

"Leave it. Shows that I'm fresh off the field."

"Okay." Levi led him to the bed and helped him to a seat. "Take a quick break, then we'll dress you."

Fifteen minutes later, Erwin sat in his chair in uniform. His hair was neatly parted and combed, his eyebrows smoothed. Levi pulled the bolo tie over his head and tightened it, then folded the collars into place.

"There."

"Good as it'll get?" Erwin examined himself in the mirror, poking at the hollows in his cheeks. He pulled down the skin under his eye and frowned. "My eyes are sunken. Bloodshot."

"That's from the morphine." Levi stepped back, folding his arms over his chest. "You're ready to face those bastards." His shoulders sagged just thinking about it. He had been so focused on getting the expedition home, then looking after Erwin, that he hadn't stopped to think about what this meeting would entail: asshole politicians trying to find a reason to shut them down while Erwin did his best to hold everything together. His emotions were so frayed that he wasn't sure how he was going to tolerate it.

His exhaustion must have been noticeable, because Erwin said, "Levi, I'll be fine once I'm seated. I know you hate meetings. Why don't you go wander instead? Take an hour to yourself."

"Don't trust me to talk to the bigwigs?"

"Of course I do—in fact, your brand of blunt honesty is often what they need to hear. But you've been through a lot and you've done so much. You deserve a break."

"Thanks. That works well, actually." Levi shrugged. "I thought I should check in on Farlan's sister while I'm here. Find out where my

money goes every month.”

The kind gaze settled on him for so long that Levi knew Erwin was reading more into the words, but all he said was, “You’ve lost a lot.”

“Everyone has.” Levi handed him the papers from the desk. *But I didn’t lose you.* He bent down and kissed the tip of his nose. “Don’t let those assholes push you around.”

One corner of Erwin’s mouth lifted. “You know I won’t.”

“I know.” *You’ll have them eating out of your hand.*

The cobblestone road was bumpy beneath the wheels of the chair, and even though Levi took it slowly, he was sure the jarring ride couldn’t be very comfortable for Erwin. As they approached the courthouse, he stared at the stone steps, wondering how the hell they were going to get the chair to the top of it.

The door opened, and Nile Dok stepped out. He waved at them and began to jog down the stairs.

“What’s Captain Shitbeard doing here?” Levi muttered.

Before Erwin could answer, Nile came to a stop in front of them. He looked down his nose at them, but he looked sad. “Always knew this job was going to kill you one day, Erwin.”

Levi’s blood boiled. “The hell are you doing here, asshole?”

Erwin jumped in before the Captain could respond. “Thankfully, I’m not dead yet. I’d be gone for sure, but Levi intervened.” His expression was probably supposed to be a polite smile, but it twisted into a grimace.

Nile winced. “You look like hell. Zackly asked me to lead you around to the alley entrance to avoid the stairs.”

“How kind of him. Levi, I should be good now, if you want to leave. See you in an hour?”

“Sure. Don’t let this Council lapdog drop you down the stairs.”

Nile’s brows rose. “Nice to see you, too, Levi.” He began to push the chair toward the side of the building.

Levi watched until they disappeared around the corner, his jaw tight. *Good luck.*

8

Erwin shifted in the chair, trying to find a comfortable position. He was beginning to regret taking such a small dose of morphine; the pain was going to be distracting.

“So your future Captain doesn’t have the stones for a little political discussion,” Nile said.

“Levi’s good at seeing through bullshit. I’d like him by my side. But the past few days have been hard. Thought I’d spare him the stress.”

“You got fucked up really badly, didn’t you? Listen to you, gasping for air every few words.” His tone was snide, but that wasn’t surprising. Nile had never been good at showing concern, and it always came out sounding rude. *Being Nile’s friend might have been what prepared me to understand Levi so well.*

The chair stopped; they were between buildings now, nothing but brick walls on either side. Nile moved to the side of the chair and knelt down to Erwin’s level. His voice was low.

“I hear you’re getting mixed up with Sahlo.” He looked up and down the alley before he continued. “Be careful. You can’t trust that snake. He’s already pressuring me to plant a spy among those three transfers I’m giving you in January.”

That was interesting, given that Sahlo had Nile said was the one wanting a spy. “Is that so?”

“Yeah. I’ve gotta keep the peace with him, so I’m going to do it.” Nile’s gaze bored through him. “Oluo Bozado. Kid’s a good soldier—bit of a prat, but good. Don’t hold this against him. I told him some bullshit about being selected for a mentor review process, a special honour, all that, so he has no clue what he’s actually doing. He and I will be sending letters back and forth on a regular basis. Monitor his responses to me and you’ll know exactly what he’s passing on to us.”

“I see. Thank you.”

“You didn’t hear any of this from me.” Nile stood and continued pushing the chair along the path. “Don’t know why the hell I’m putting my neck on the line for you.”

“You’re a good friend.”

“I guess.” Nile paused. They rounded the corner to the back of the building. “Oh, I almost forgot. Marie got a big shipment of booze from her parents. Wanted me to invite you and Levi over for drinks tonight.”

“I won’t be drinking, but I’d enjoy a visit,” Erwin said, his heart beating a little faster. “Not sure about Levi. I’ll ask him.”

Nile frowned. “He doesn’t like me much, does he?”

“He doesn’t trust easily, and even when he does, he has a blunt way of expressing himself. It’s nothing personal.”

“Well, he’s welcome, too, if he wants. Come by any time after seven.” Nile opened the door and wheeled Erwin through; he pushed him up to the head of the table and then settled along the side, next to Commander-in-Chief Zackly.

Zackly adjusted his glasses. “When I heard you were injured, Erwin, I didn’t realize it was this bad. If I’d known, I would have recommended you take a few days to recover.”

“I appreciate your concern, sir. I hope you’ll excuse my laboured speech. This really couldn’t wait.” He had been so intent on getting here that he hadn’t stopped to consider if his frequent pauses for breath would dampen his charisma. As he looked around the table, he was pleased to see expressions of pity and concern. Even Sahlo looked upset. Good. If they pitied him, they’d pay attention.

“We’re just waiting on Lord Fromm,” Zackly said.

“Sir.” Erwin opened his folder, double-checking that his papers were in order. His mouth was dry from all the medication; he should have thought to bring a water flask.

Fromm appeared a few minutes later, taking his seat across from Sahlo. Zackly gave a brief introduction, and then Erwin had the floor. He sat as straight as his body would allow.

“As you’ve no doubt heard, the expedition ran into complications.” He did his best to speak naturally, carefully regulating his limited breath. “In the weeks leading up to the expedition, torrential downpour blanketed the southern districts of Wall Maria. This destabilized large swaths of terrain. We managed to retrieve supplies from almost all the targets, but while returning to the checkpoint from the penultimate silo, we encountered an unexpected sinkhole. Three of our carts were mired in mud, just as several wandering groups of titans surrounded us. I’m going to walk you through the numbers so you can understand the full impact of these events, as well as what was recovered and what we learned.”

He paused as if for effect, subtly catching his breath. His head was spinning, and his ribs ached. Now he really regretted not taking more morphine.

His eyes trailed across their grim faces, Sahlo’s last. The lord looked outright worried, and Erwin felt a wave of confidence as he realized how well he had positioned himself. *He talked me up in order to push this expedition through faster. He thought he was screwing me over, but it backfired, because now his reputation is at stake as much as mine.* Their

alliance was doing exactly what it was supposed to do: Sahlo wouldn't dare throw Erwin to the wolves while their two reputations were so closely intertwined. His most outspoken opponent had been successfully silenced.

Feeling a burst of energy, Erwin began to discuss the supplies they had recovered and how they would be utilized in the Wall Maria reclamation efforts. He carefully avoided any mention of the tax chests they had left behind. Better that they didn't know. He would cover the missing money from his own personal accounts. The trust of the people in this room was much more valuable.

Next, he discussed the number of survivors. A murmur rose around the table.

"The numbers are painful to say aloud," he said, talking over the noise. The room settled into silence again, and he continued: "After the low casualties in the previous mission, I had thought we were finally in a position to nearly eliminate the loss of life in Survey Corps expeditions. It is clear, in retrospect, that I was overconfident. Pin it on rookie optimism: my projected deaths for this mission were far too low.

"We can, however, learn a great deal from this. The losses were a scant 1-2% per day right until the last day, which means our approach is, on the whole, working. What undid us was underestimating the threat posed by mud and sinkholes. Now we know the threats these pose, and we'll pay closer attention to the weather in the future.

"At the end of the day, this mission was a huge step forward for the Survey Corps, and for humanity as a whole. We learned to account for the weather to improve our survival rates, and we gained a bounty of supplies. We are now in a good position to start laying a route to Wall Maria."

"And how do you intend to do that?" Fromm asked, raising a bushy brow. "You only have fifty people, most of them injured. You look like you'll take months to recover, yourself."

Sahlo leaned forward, folding his knotted fingers on the table. "This was always a multi-year plan, Fromm. I explained this back when we approved this expedition: we can't get to Wall Maria in one attempt. It's not a task, it's a process."

"We are still on track to take back Wall Maria within three years," Erwin said, grateful for the lord's support. "In the short term, our approach will be two-pronged: familiarize ourselves with the route and build our numbers. Smaller scouting missions will explore the planned

recovery route, seeking the best places to lay our supplies. We will also stage a small reclamation mission to gather the supplies we missed from that last silo. Squad Leaders Levi and Mike Zacharias are our two strongest soldiers, and their best subordinates are alive and well. They'll do a fine job of laying the framework for future expeditions.

“While this is happening, I'll be working to recruit new, talented soldiers to bolster our numbers. Ex-Commander Shadis and I have a good rapport, so I know he'll be happy to work with us to raise our profile with the trainees. In the meantime, our leaner rosters will mean less overhead, something I'm sure the taxpayers will appreciate. Perhaps we can re-allocate a portion of the funds we save toward a proper recruitment campaign.

“As well, as you may have heard, the general public is quite taken with Squad Leader Levi. They've begun to call him 'Humanity's Strongest,' and they've romanticized the rumours of his journey from criminal to high-ranking soldier. I intend to make use of his growing celebrity to encourage private investors to donate, perhaps through endorsements or appearances. We need better weapons if we are to retake the wall. Private investment allows us to fund that without putting a burden on you or the taxpayers. I'm sure you'd agree this is the best approach for everyone involved.”

He paused to assess the mood of the room. The lords were nodding along. Erwin had expected a backlash from the number of deaths, but at the end of the day, all they cared about was their money. By addressing that concern, he had made them completely forget that three quarters of his soldiers had died.

Revulsion was building in his throat, but he swallowed it back. He could lament their lack of morals later. For now, he had to ensure that everyone in the room was on the Survey Corps' side.

⁂

Levi glanced around the care facility. It was a square stone building with no windows. *More like a prison than a home.* He frowned and double-checked the sign, making sure this was the right place.

Stepping through the door, he approached the front desk. “I'm here to see Kristin Church.”

The clerk gave him a warm smile. “Sorry, sir, we weren't expecting any more visitors for our patients today. All visitors need to

register in advance.”

“How the hell was I supposed to know that? I’m not from around here. My family sends her fees by mail.” Levi’s skin crawled; he wished Erwin was here to sweet talk his way in.

The clerk looked taken aback. “I see. Are you family?”

“Her brother,” he lied.

“Then I think we can make an exception. I’m sure she’ll be happy to see you.” The clerk stood and began to flip through a filing cabinet against the back wall. “My apologies, Mr. Church. I’m new here, so I’m not too familiar with our clients yet. Let me look up her room number for you. Let’s see.” She pulled out a file and began to leaf through it. “Ah, yes, Kristin has been a client of ours for a few years now—oh.”

“What?”

“Ah. I—” She cleared her throat. “Excuse me for a moment.” Clutching the file to her chest, she darted into a back room.

Levi could hear frantic whispering, and his stomach dropped. He already knew what had happened before the clerk returned with a nurse in tow.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Church, but Kristin—” began the nurse.

“When?” he demanded.

“Four months ago. Pneumonia.” The woman’s face was gentle. “We tried to alert you that she was ill, but the military informed us that Farlan Church passed away more than a year ago, and we had no other contact names.”

Levi’s stomach twisted until it ached. “And you just kept taking my fucking money every month?”

“Well, we didn’t know where it was truly coming from, and it was benefiting many other patients. Might you be interested in continuing to support us in her memory?”

Without saying a word, Levi turned and marched out the door.

His eyes stung, and his throat was tight. Maybe should have asked about the location of her grave, laid a flower on it for Farlan’s sake, but what did it matter? They were both dead, and Erwin was half dead, and one day, Levi would die, too. They were all dying: the majority of his squad, his team before that, Isabel and Farlan, and Klaus and Matthias and every damned person he had ever cared about. His vision was blurring, and he had the overwhelming urge to beat the crap out of something.

He stopped.

A vent lay below his feet. The inside was too dark to see, but he knew where it led. He could smell the stench of the Underground wafting up on damp, warm air. Sewage. Despair. It was familiar and revolting all at once.

He stared. What would have happened if Erwin had died on the field, if he hadn't gotten there in time? Would he be standing at the top of a staircase now, preparing to descend into the life he had once known? He had originally stayed in the military purely for him: he had seen Erwin as a mentor figure, of sorts, someone to learn from. Was that still the only reason he was there? Was Erwin the tiny thread connecting him to the Survey Corps, or was there more than that now? He began to shiver as he thought of Mike, of Hange.

Were all his ties just people? That wasn't enough. Lives were frail. *I want to make sure all these deaths mean something.* That was the answer he had given Erwin when he had asked why Levi stayed, but everyone died, especially in the Survey Corps. It didn't matter what happened after they were gone. Dead was dead.

He slowly crouched over the drain, staring between the rungs. *I'm sorry, Farlan. I thought I was taking care of her.*

Far below, in the darkness, he saw a light. He squinted. A boy and a girl were walking hand in hand, carrying a lantern. He couldn't hear what they were saying, but she bumped him good-naturedly with her shoulder, and the boy ruffled her hair in response.

He closed his eyes as memories came pouring back. He had always looked back on his time in the Underground with bitterness, but it hadn't been all bad. There had also been a sense of community, a sense of belonging. The people there were trapped both by the titans and by a corrupt system, and yet they still managed to find meaning in their miserable lives.

*That* was what kept him in the Survey Corps, and would have kept him there if everyone he loved had died. He wanted all of humanity to taste the freedom he had briefly tasted outside Wall Maria, terrible and beautiful, vast and empty, limitless with possibility. Everyone deserved that opportunity, even the people living beneath his feet in the world he had left behind. Hell, many of them deserved it even more than the people living cushy lives above the surface.

It wasn't just about making deaths mean something; it was about making every *life* mean something, too. At some point, he had stopped valuing just his own life and started valuing everyone else's instead. *I*

*guess Erwin's been rubbing off on me more than I realized.*

When he closed his eyes, the pattern of the vent briefly glowed on his eyelids. He took several long breaths, watching it fade.

The meeting was still in session when he arrived back at the courthouse. He slipped through the doorway and took a seat in a chair along the side of the room.

Erwin sat at the head of the table, his chin high. His voice was gravelly and he had to pause for breath every few words, but his audience still seemed to be paying attention. Levi felt a swell of pride. *Even half-dead, you have more life in you than anyone else in this room.*

The hair on the back of his neck stood on end as Levi became aware that someone was staring at him. He shifted his gaze and met the eyes of Lord Sahlo. The lord looked away, his jaw quivering. Rage swelled in Levi's throat. This was the man who had pushed Erwin to work himself nonstop, who had forced them to rush the expedition. If only they had had more time ...

"All right," Zackly said. "I think we should adjourn here. Thank you for taking the time to come in even under such grave circumstances, Erwin."

"We'll look forward to your proposal on recruiting and investors," Sahlo added. "Only after you've recovered, of course; please take your time. Though while you're here, I have some suggestions about how to approach the latter—if you're okay to stay behind a few minutes, that is."

"Of course," Erwin said.

The men began to file from the room. Levi watched them leave, his lip curling into a sneer. Every single one of them was a rich old man. *Maybe if the Council contained a single person who didn't have limitless food and money, they'd get their priorities straight, and the poorer classes wouldn't be in such terrible shape.*

Nile brought up the rear, signalling for the soldiers standing guard in the corners to follow him. The door closed behind him, leaving the three of them alone.

"Levi," Erwin said, looking at him for the first time since he had entered. "You're welcome to join this discussion, too."

The losses he had experienced were snowballing together, and Levi found he couldn't contain his rage. "Good, because I have words for this pig." He walked up to the table and dropped into a chair. "I hope you listened carefully to the part about casualties, because every single

one of them is your fault.”

The lord flinched. “What?”

“Levi,” Erwin warned, but his rage was overflowing.

“Their blood’s on your hands. You were so eager to get your greasy paws on whatever funds we could bring back that you pushed the expedition ahead too fast. If we’d been better prepared—”

“Levi,” Erwin said evenly, “Lord Sahlo controls neither the titans nor the weather. He’s not to blame for our losses.”

Sahlo didn’t seem to hear him. He leaned forward, eyeing Levi. “You don’t trust me, do you?”

“No shit.”

“Funny, that. Your boss over there knows everything about me, and he seems to trust me just fine. I’m an open book, and he’s read every page. But you ... ” Sahlo folded his hands on the table. “Both of you, boss and guard dog, men without real names, without pasts. I’ve been trying to learn everything I can about you, and I’ve come up against some surprising walls. So why have you decided that *I’m* the untrustworthy one here?”

“Walls aren’t surprising,” Erwin said. “The Underground isn’t known for its record-keeping.”

“True.” Sahlo’s gaze shifted to him. “Though you certainly didn’t come from the Underground, Commander. You don’t have that malnourished, weedy look about you. Humanity’s Strongest over here trusts you anyway, even though he doesn’t know a thing about you. I’d just like a little of that benefit of the doubt myself.”

Levi’s blood boiled, but this wasn’t the time to lose his temper. He had complicated everything enough already by speaking out. He bit the inside of his cheek.

“Lord Sahlo,” Erwin said, “The past is long over. Let’s look to the future instead. You have some ideas for investors?”

“Yes.” The lord relaxed back into his chair, straightening his hat. “I’m not sure I agree with your idea of using your dog as a showpiece. He’s a bit on the rabid side, wouldn’t you say?”

*Fuck you*, Levi thought, but there was nothing he could say without proving the lord’s point, so he said nothing.

“What do you suggest?” Erwin asked.

“That I find you some sponsors. I have an extensive network of contacts through my shipping and receiving company, and I’d be happy to start spreading tales of your people’s heroism and your particular

drive and intelligence.” He leaned back in his chair. “For a price.”

“A price?”

“You’re giving me half of your monetary findings going forward, right? And you want me to kick eighty percent of that back to the Survey Corps. I’d like to hang on to a bit more. So how about this? For every sponsor I find, you’ll let me keep a full percent more.” The lord smiled. “We would, of course, agree on a baseline monetary value that a qualifying sponsor would be worth, in order to make sure that you were ending up with more money than you would have gotten from my one percent. I want this to benefit both of us.”

“I’ll consider it,” Erwin said. “We’ll assess our finances and, if we agree to move ahead with it, we’ll submit a suggested baseline to you with your fund shipment.” He pulled a folded piece of paper out of his file and slid it over to the lord. “This is the value of the shipment. We recovered funds from all but one silo, so it’s a bit low, but close to what was expected. When we eventually recover that last silo, we’ll ship the remainder to you.”

Levi cast Erwin a sharp glance. *We’re missing the funds from two silos, not one.*

“A tidy little amount. Glad your people didn’t die for nothing.” Sahlo folded the paper and slipped it into his front pocket. “I’ll make my eighty percent donation to you as soon as the funds arrive.” He nodded. “Good day, Commander.” He glanced at Levi and gave a little sneer.

The door closed behind him.

Levi rocked his chair back on two legs. “You didn’t tell them we dumped a bunch of the tax chests?”

Erwin’s gaze settled on him, cold and businesslike. “No, I had enough bad news for them as it was. I’ll supplement the amount, for now—a loan I can pay back to myself once we recover those chests.”

“So how are you going to keep him on our side when we stop doing expeditions that involve money?”

“I have some ideas,” Erwin said, still staring at him.

Levi lowered the chair legs to the ground. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You know Sahlo didn’t have anything to do with the expedition’s failure, don’t you?”

Levi shrugged. “If he hadn’t been an asshole and rushed you, the ground would have dried, and we might have outrun those last titans.”

“If we start down that path, wondering ‘what if,’ we can find a

way to blame anyone. As distasteful as it may be, Sahlo is our ally, and we have to treat him as such.”

“Well, I don’t trust him, and I don’t care if he knows it.”

“He knows it.” Erwin looked thoughtful. “It’s interesting that he was trying to test your trust in me. I’m not sure what his angle was.”

“His angle was that he’s a jackass.” Levi stood. He gripped the wheelchair handles and began to roll him toward the back door.

After a moment, Erwin said, “How’s your friend?”

“Dead.” Levi opened the door and backed through it, pulling the chair with him. “No more monthly fees, at least. If you need help with money, I’m going to have a lot more now.”

“I’m sorry,” Erwin said quietly. “Can I do anything?”

Levi’s stomach was twisting. “Maybe buy me a few drinks tonight. I don’t want to be sober right now.” He didn’t know quite what he was feeling, but he knew it could be drowned with enough alcohol.

“Nile and Marie invited us for drinks tonight after dinner, if you’re interested. Marie’s parents sent alcohol from the bar; they need help getting rid of it.”

“I thought Nile hated you.”

He heard a smile in Erwin’s voice: “I told you, we have a complicated history.”

“Fine, let’s do it. Now stop talking. You already pushed too hard today. You’re wheezing so much that it’s painful to listen to you.”

“It had to be done.”

“Well, sounds like it went well, at least. I don’t know how you do it, but I’m sure as hell glad you’re on my side.”

They emerged from the side path and rounded the front of the building. One of the soldiers patrolling outside the courthouse perked up and began to hurry toward them. Levi glanced up and, recognizing her face, slowed to a stop. *Not now.*

“What is it?” Erwin asked.

“Our new recruit.” Levi watched as Petra skidded to a stop in front of them.

“Commander Erwin.” Petra saluted. “Squad Leader Levi. Sirs.”

“At ease,” Erwin said. “What’s your name, soldier?”

“Petra Ral, sir. I was hoping to run into you.” Her eyes were shining, her cheeks pink. “I’ve received word that I’ll be transferred to your division in January. I’m honoured to have received your invitation. I’m excited to show the Survey Corps what I can do.”

Her enthusiasm made Levi's throat tighten. *That's the same expression Isabel was wearing when Farlan first introduced me to her. They're about the same age, too.*

"Word is that your combat and teamwork skills are exceptional," Erwin said. "I had the pleasure of working with your uncle when I was a new recruit. I expect you'll be every bit as useful to our mission as he was."

She smiled and gave a determined nod. "I won't let you down, sir."

"Good. We'll see you in a few months." He gingerly formed a partial salute, one fist on his chest. She saluted back.

As they moved away, Erwin said, "She's taken quite a shining to you, Levi."

"What?" Levi asked, distracted. *I can't lead her into battle. I can't throw her life away the way I threw away Isabel's.* He felt his mood begin to teeter toward despair again, and he gritted his teeth, annoyed that his emotions were so fragile.

"Those shy little glances, that blush—"

Levi's mouth twisted. "I thought I told you to stop talking." He paused. "Do you think she looks like Isabel?"

After a pause, Erwin said, "It didn't occur to me."

"Maybe it's just her mannerisms."

"I'm afraid I didn't know Isabel that well. Is this going to be a problem?"

"No," Levi said, hoping it wasn't. He couldn't afford to associate his guilt with one of his soldiers. He might get overprotective.

When they returned to the hotel, Levi helped Erwin take off his shirts, then gave him a proper dose of morphine. Erwin's eyes fluttered shut.

"I'm sorry, Levi. I need to sleep."

"It's fine. It'll help you heal. I think I need a nap myself." Levi wheeled him to the side of the bed, then undressed and crawled under the covers.

"I wish I could crawl in next to you," Erwin said. "Make love to you. Show my gratitude."

"There'll be time for that later." Levi wondered how far away 'later' would be. With the extent of his injuries, it was going to be a long time before they could have sex with any degree of energy. Even the gentlest lovemaking was out of the question until he was through the

worst of it. He couldn't even imagine sharing a bed with him right now —one wrong move in the night, and he might smack Erwin's injuries and aggravate them.

Thinking about that recovery time made him feel lonely. He reached out a hand and closed it over Erwin's. Their fingers interlocked, and he felt a little better.

Moments later, he heard slow, rasping breaths coming from the chair, but sleep didn't find him so easily. He lay staring at the ceiling, his mind pacing circles around Isabel, and Farlan, and the sneer on Sahlo's face.

❧

That evening, they stopped at the hotel bar for a quick dinner, then headed to the Dok household. Erwin, properly medicated now, seemed to be floating on a cloud of chemical happiness. He told idle stories about nothing, pointing out facts about street lamps and cobblestone. Levi normally would have enjoyed the chatter—it wasn't often that he saw Erwin so relaxed —but he was still too distracted by his unstable emotions.

They approached a two-story house with flowers in the window-sills. The door was adorned with a metal knocker with the name *Dok* spelled in curly letters. Below it hung a plaque depicting three characters holding hands: a man, a woman and a baby.

“Nauseating.” Levi's lips flattened as he looked at Erwin. “*This* is the life you used to regret giving up?”

“Well, not exactly,” Erwin said, deadpan. “The letters would have spelled ‘Smith.’”

“Maybe we should get one of these for your bedroom door. Pretend we’re a family, give you a taste of what you could have had.”

“Smith-hyphen-question mark, with a plaque showing two men stabbing a titan?”

“Brings a tear to my eye.” Wondering what sort of domestic hell he was about to enter, Levi used the knocker.

A few moments later, the door opened, and a small child looked up at them. Levi stared into the all-too-familiar blue eyes. “Holy shit.”

The child ran back into the house. “Mom,” he yelled, dragging out the word into several syllables. “They’re here!”

Levi's stare shifted to Erwin. There was no question about it: the

eyes were identical.

“He’s Nile’s child,” Erwin whispered firmly.

“I didn’t say a word.”

The door opened wide and Marie stepped through, the child hiding behind her skirt. “Erwin, Levi! Welcome.” She bent down to kiss Erwin’s cheek, then stepped back to look at him, pity in her eyes. “You poor thing.”

“It’s nothing,” Erwin said with dismissive machismo that made bile rise in Levi’s throat.

“And Levi.” Marie surprised him by throwing her arms around him, hugging him tightly. “Nile tells me you saved Erwin’s life. I’m so glad he has someone taking such good care of him. Thank you for coming.”

Levi wanted to be annoyed, but her hug was warm and soft, and he found himself relaxing into it. He had needed a hug more than he wanted to admit. “I hear there’s liquor.”

“Lots of it.” Marie pulled away, dark eyes sparkling. “You two come in and get settled in the living room while I prep a few things in the kitchen. Nile will be down in a second—he just has to run Jasper down the street to his aunt’s, and then he’ll join us.”

Levi looked around as they stepped into the house. The room was large, but simple, with wooden floors and white walls. The furniture was all matching and stylish, and if it weren’t for a small wooden duck near one wall, he wouldn’t have thought any children lived here at all. He subtly ran a finger along a shelf. Clean.

Nile came down the stairs wearing a dress shirt and a vest that matched his pants. He nodded briskly at them and, after a few standard pleasantries, departed with Jasper.

Levi’s skin crawled. *Is that what this evening is going to be? Strained politeness?* He hoped the drinks were coming soon.

“Levi,” Erwin asked quietly, “I wondered if you might help me onto the couch? I’d rather spend my evening out of the chair.”

Levi’s brows pinched. “You shouldn’t be moving around.”

“I know. I’ll stay there the entire evening. Been in this chair for so long that my ass is starting to flatten.”

“We wouldn’t want that.” Giving in, Levi leaned over him and reached out his arms. “You lead.”

Getting him out of the chair took a few tries—he seemed to be stiffer and in more pain than he had been that morning. Once they got

him upright, Levi gently lowered him to the couch.

“How’s that?”

Erwin sank into the couch, gaze trailing across the room. “My ass is grateful to you.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.”

Erwin smiled, but it seemed forced.

“Need more morphine?” Levi asked, even though he suspected what bothered him wasn’t physical.

“No. Thank you.”

Leaning closer, Levi lowered his voice. “Is it hard for you to be here?”

“A little.” A pause; Erwin’s eyes fixed on him. “I don’t regret anything. You know that.”

“Yeah, I know.” Levi tucked away a stray strand of blond hair. “But I know you want a life like this, deep down. Wish I could give it to you.”

Erwin raised a brow. “You’d be bored stiff.”

“Maybe. Wouldn’t know until I tried it.” If he were honest, it wasn’t all that different from the life he had built for himself in the Underground, once upon a time. Sharing a military base with two-hundred other soldiers wasn’t the same as having a private home. *Well, I guess that’s only fifty other soldiers now.*

“Levi,” Marie said, poking her head out of the kitchen.

He jerked away from Erwin’s forehead. “What?”

“Could I get a hand in the kitchen for a moment, please?”

“What the hell? You put your houseguests to work?”

She put her hands on her hips. “Well, ‘houseguests’ would show some manners, so you’re disqualified. Get your ass in here.” She turned back to the kitchen, calling over her shoulder, “And I saw you inspecting my dusting job, you asshole.”

Levi glanced at Erwin for support and found him grinning. “Shut up.”

As he was just stepping into the kitchen, he heard the front door open. He glanced back and saw Nile take a seat across from Erwin. *At least I don’t have to make small talk with shitbeard.*

“Here.” Marie slid a jar across the counter. “That thing’s sealed so tightly it’ll take Humanity’s Strongest to open it.”

As Levi twisted the lid, his eyes wandered across the counter. Bottles and bottles of alcohol lined the wall, some in bizarre shapes and

tints.

She followed his gaze. “Yeah, we need help with all that. My parents own a bar, and they’re always sending us odds and ends. We don’t entertain much since Jasper came along, so it’s building up, and we need to clear it out as soon as possible.”

“I’ll do my part,” Levi said.

“Yeah, I bet you’ve had a rough week.” Marie pulled four glasses down from a cupboard. “Puts things in perspective when I think I’m having a tough day, you know? Just thinking about what you guys go through.”

The jar lid popped as he broke the seal. He turned to her, and found her staring into the bottom of the glasses, her face distant.

“What?” he asked.

“Is Erwin okay?”

He slid the open jar to the side, then leaned back against the counter, arms folding over his chest. “He’s fine.”

She looked up at him, genuine worry on her face. “He doesn’t look fine.”

“He just led his first mission as Commander and three-quarters of his regiment was wiped out. He’s got four broken ribs and a lung injury. What did you expect him to look like?”

“That’s just it. I’d expect him to be broken down, or sad. He just looks ... blank.”

*Perceptive.* Levi was still determined to be aloof around her, but she was slowly getting under his skin. “We deal with it in different ways.”

“I guess.” She tilted the open jar over the glasses, filling the bottoms with a light layer of syrup. “Erwin’s on morphine?”

“Yeah.”

“Then I’ll make his without alcohol. You want a double, or would that be too strong?”

“I’ll drink it straight from the bottle.”

She smirked at him. “A man after my own heart, but let’s start with cocktails before we get to the heavy drinking.” Selecting a couple bottles from her collection, she began to add more liquid to each of the drinks. “I’m glad he has you, you know. I can tell a lot of emotion passes between the two of you. If he’s pretending to be blank, he needs someone who can see through that and give him the support he needs.”

Levi shrugged. “I guess.” The liqueur smelled of citrus, one of his favourite scents.

“I see the way he looks at you.” Her smile was sad. “Never saw him look at anyone like that before.”

He shrugged again, but deep down, he felt a spark of pride.

She measured out shots of gin. “Does he still apologize after sex?”

Levi tensed. “What the hell?”

“Oh, relax. Who would I tell? Nile still wants to believe Erwin’s straight as a rod, and the nobility here doesn’t give a shit about what some military wife has to say.” Marie leaned closer, raising a brow. “How about the inappropriately intense pillow talk? I bet he still does that. ‘Now that we’ve both come, let me tell you exactly how humanity’s going to go extinct one day.’ And then he just fucks off to sleep and leaves you wide awake and stressed out.”

A little snort left Levi’s nose before he could stop it. He cleared his throat, trying to cover the sound.

“Thought so.” Marie winked, then handed him a glass. “What do you think? Enough syrup?”

He took a sip. The gin was finer than he was used to, and it blended with the citrus flavours to make a smooth, slightly sweet drink. “Not bad.”

“Good.” She grabbed two of the drinks, then nodded at the last one on the counter. “That’s Erwin’s.”

They returned to the living room and found Nile and Erwin deep in conversation about a noble Levi had never heard of. He settled into place next to Erwin and handed him his glass.

Marie sat by Nile and nudged him. He smiled and accepted his drink. Levi had never seen him smile so warmly before. *Maybe that asshole does have a nice side.*

“Well, since we’re all here,” Nile said, “Marie and I have an announcement: we’re moving back to Stohess. Commander Williams is retiring at the end of the year, so they’ll be promoting me to take his place.”

“Congratulations,” Erwin said, smiling. “I can think of no one better for the job.”

Levi studied Nile, trying to decide if this was a good or a bad thing for the Survey Corps. Nile did have a rapport with Erwin, if a bit of a rocky one, so they might get extra access to police information with him as Commander. On the other hand, his alliance with Sahlo made him untrustworthy.

“Drink up, all of you,” Marie said. “We have a ton of alcohol to get rid of before we move.”

“Too bad we can’t play the old drinking games anymore,” Nile said with a grin. “Mike, Erwin, and I would have been able to clear out that entire shelf in one night, back in the day.”

“Really?” Levi glanced at Erwin. From what he had seen, Erwin didn’t have a high tolerance.

“I was usually under the table when those two were barely getting started,” Erwin said, smiling. “Even Anke could out-drink me.”

Levi studied Nile. “You’re telling me this scraggly-haired idiot can hold his liquor?”

Nile snorted. “Ha! You’re one to talk. You’re what, forty kilos soaking wet? I bet you’d be down by your third drink.”

“You’d be plucking vomit chunks out of that shitty excuse for a beard before I even felt a buzz.”

“Is that so?” Nile swished the drink in his glass, as if considering. “Care to test that theory?”

Erwin glanced at Marie. “Should we stop this before it gets out of control?”

She shrugged. “There’s an awful lot of liquor to get through. Besides, Levi’s had one hell of a week, and Nile deserves to celebrate. Might be good for them to cut loose a bit. You two can always stay the night if things get too rowdy.”

“Hear that, Nile? You have your drinking game.” Levi had been responsible and controlled ever since Erwin had first fallen unconscious, and he was surprised by how much he was looking forward to abandoning it all for a little while.

“I’ve never seen you plastered,” Erwin said, sounding intrigued.

“That’s because I don’t get ‘plastered.’” Levi drained the rest of his glass and slammed it down on the table, welcoming what was about to come.

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As the night progressed, Levi and Nile began to get louder, their discussions more animated. The bravado between them escalated into a card game at the table, though they seemed to be spending the majority of the time arguing about the rules. Erwin smiled to himself as he watched from the couch. He enjoyed seeing this new side of Levi. It re-

minded him of the days when responsibility had been a vague future possibility, when getting drunk and laid were the top priorities of his classmates. He wondered if Levi had ever gone through that phase. Something told him Levi had passed straight from his toddler years right into adulthood. Childhood was a luxury that impoverished citizens couldn't afford.

Marie returned from the kitchen with more drinks. She set two of them on the table, then settled on the couch across from Erwin. "Haven't seen Nile like this for a long time."

"I've never seen Levi this drunk." Erwin watched his exaggerated gestures, finding them endearing. "He suffers so much. Never takes time to enjoy himself like this."

"I'm sure he takes time to enjoy himself when he's with you. Just in a different way."

He glanced at her. She was cupping her drink with both hands, staring into the bottom of it, but when she noticed him looking at her, she smiled.

"I'm happy for you, Erwin."

The statement seemed ridiculous: his ribs were throbbing, as was his little finger, and his heart was heavy with the burden of the expedition's losses. "Really?"

"I mean, I'm happy that you found Levi. The two of you have something special." Her face softened. "I used to worry that you'd just keep chasing your goals, isolated and alone, getting crazier and more miserable until you died. I'm glad you found someone to accompany you."

"No, no, just listen," Nile said loudly from the table. "I don't mean, I don't mean to be disrespectful. But people shit from there. I'm just saying, doesn't it smell?"

"Maybe *yours* does." Levi's speech was heavier than usual with the brash, growling accent of the Underground. "Most people wash. Try that sometime. Especially if your ass hair is as scraggly as your facial hair. Bet that holds the stink."

Nile looked around, then leaned forward. His whisper was almost as loud as his yell. "You and Erwin ... ?"

"What?"

"You actually do that?"

"That's private, shitfuck. Shut up and play your hand."

Marie shook her head and took a sip of her drink. "I guess Nile's

getting a bit of sex education.”

“I doubt he’ll remember it, anyway,” Erwin said. “Sounds like Levi’s winning this competition.”

“Maybe.” Marie winced as the men’s voices began to rise in volume again. “If they get any more obnoxious, I’d say we’re the ones losing. Fuck, they’re loud.”

He chuckled and stretched his back a little, trying to get more comfortable. Pain shot through his torso. He winced.

“Painkillers wearing off?” she asked.

At the words, Levi rotated to face them. “Holy shit, Erwin, s’been hours. You should’ve said something, you stupid, stubborn asshole.”

“We’ve only been here three hours,” Erwin said. “I don’t think you can use a syringe right now, Levi. You can’t even blink properly.”

“I’ve used them in worse.” Levi stood, then swayed, clutching the back of the chair to keep his balance. “Fuck.”

“Ha!” Nile said, jumping to his feet. “What’s the matter, can’t handle— Oh shit.” He tipped sideways, then slowly, slowly sank to the floor. “Marie …” he whimpered, rolling onto his back.

“Oh god.” Marie marched over to him. “Serves you right for taunting him.”

“Sick of cards, anyway.” Levi staggered over to Erwin and sank onto the couch. “Where’s the meds?”

“In the bag beside the couch.”

“Got it.” Levi slumped onto his side and began to slap his hand over the edge of the couch, searching for the bag.

Across from them, Marie helped Nile to the couch and lowered him onto it. Nile began to laugh wildly at nothing. She rolled her eyes. “Last time he was this drunk was right after you, Mike, and Anke left.”

“Oh?” Erwin said, surprised.

“He was feeling guilty about deciding to join the MP and leaving the rest of you to the Survey Corps. Tried to find solace in the bottom of a bottle.”

“*You* were feeling guilty,” Nile slurred, flopping against her shoulder.

She patted his thigh. “Of course, dear. Now close your eyes and try to sleep this off.”

“But Levi’s two drinks ahead.”

“And I’m still sober.” Levi sat upright, swaying, and began to fumble through the medicine bag.

“I can do that.” Erwin reached over to take the bag from him. He could already envision a vial of morphine smashing on the hardwood floor.

Levi coached him through filling the syringe, then took it from him. The slender brows pinched with concentration, and for a moment, his hand was perfectly steady.

*Even when he's drunk out of his mind, he can still perfectly control his body with a bit of focus*, Erwin thought, impressed.

“Done.” Levi handed him the empty syringe. Erwin capped it and tucked it into the pocket with the others.

Across from them, Nile, still slumped against Marie’s side, began to snore.

“Looks like you win, Levi.” She stood and lowered Nile to the couch. “I’ll be right back. I’m going to get everyone some water.”

“Bring more gin,” Levi said.

Once she was out of the room, Erwin squeezed Levi’s knee. “I’m a bit jealous I’m not drunk with you. Might be fun to be drunken idiots together.”

His eyes narrowed. “You’re the idiot. I’m not drunk. Just sleepy.”

“You can lay your head on my lap if you like.”

“Okay. Just for a minute.” Levi stretched out on his back, gently laying his head in Erwin’s lap. His eyes fluttered closed. “I want to drink more. It still hurts.”

“What hurts?”

“Death.”

Erwin smoothed a strand of hair off the high forehead. “I’m so sorry, Levi.”

“Not your fault.” Levi’s voice was fading. “Erwin?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad you didn’t die. I love you.”

Erwin’s heart glowed, so strongly he thought it might combust. “I love you, too.”

Eyes still closed, Levi’s lips stretched into a warm smile, a full one that showed his teeth and dimpled his left cheek. Erwin’s breath caught. He cupped his face, wishing he could hold that smile in place forever.

“Huh.”

He looked up and saw Marie grinning at them from across the room. “Huh?”

She set a couple glasses of water on the coffee table, then sat down next to her husband. “That was unexpectedly adorable.”

Erwin looked down. Levi’s smile was already gone; his breaths were even. “He’s a lot sweeter than his brash demeanour would suggest.”

“Well, that too, but I meant you.” Her eyes took on a wistful sheen. “You always hated that word.”

“What word?”

“Love. You flat-out refused to say it, and you’d get angry if I tried to say it to you.”

“Did I?” he asked, surprised.

“Of course. I made some rather angsty journal entries about it, and the ridiculous ways you’d try to work around it: I care for you, I trust you, I carry you in my heart, all sorts of bullshit. I even got one letter from you that spelled it l-u-v, as if that were something different.”

He honestly couldn’t remember any of it. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. We were just dumb kids. I created my fair share of drama, too.” She ran her hand through Nile’s hair. “But everything worked out for the best, right? We’ve each got our grumpy, drunken idiots, and you’re leading humanity’s hope, and I’m finally going to get out of this fucking city.”

“You don’t like Mitras?” When they were younger, she had always wanted a fancy house in the Capital.

She shook her head. “I have no friends here. It’s just me, Nile and Jasper. Everyone knows we’re only here because of Nile’s position, and they’re snooty assholes about it.” She twisted a strand of dark hair around her finger, looking thoughtful. “I don’t want my children growing up like these people.”

“Children?” Erwin repeated, sensing it was more than a hypothetical.

She patted her stomach and gave him a shy smile. “You aren’t the only sober one tonight. We only just found out. It’s a lot of change all at once, but I’m excited. And you should have seen Nile—he actually started crying. I think he’s more excited about this than his promotion.”

“Ah. Congratulations.” He hesitated, the morphine lowering his inhibitions. “Marie, about Jasper—”

“Don’t.”

“I can help pay for his education, maybe send some—”

“Erwin, don’t.” She held his gaze. “There’s more to that situation than you know. Besides, you and I, we were a long time ago. None of it

matters anymore.”

“I suppose not.” He looked down at Levi, studying his peaceful features. “Sometimes I think about how simple things were back then. The worries that seemed so large then are insignificant now.”

“Do you miss the old days?”

“Sometimes.” He traced Levi’s eyebrow with his fingertips. Levi gave a small moan, shifting a little. “Sometimes, I wish I could hide back there, when I wasn’t sending person after person to their deaths, when I didn’t understand how precarious humanity’s survival really is. I wish I could bring Levi back with me, and all of us could hang out in the bar and laugh about trivial things together.”

His jaw tightened. *But I have responsibilities now, and I can’t afford to shirk them. People are counting on me.*

There was so much left to do, so many steps to take, each one monumentally larger than the last. First, he had to recover, then get more soldiers and sponsors, then recover the last of the supplies, then, finally, push to Wall Maria. Even then, even if they somehow managed to reclaim the wall, there was the larger goal of pushing beyond the walls. And every single one of those steps would mean more lives lost under his command, more chances that he, Levi and everyone else would die.

His hand began to tremble, and he anchored it in Levi’s hair, but the panic that had begun to bloom was already spreading through his body.

“Marie,” he whispered, “I pulled this man away from a sheltered life in the Underground, and now he’s walking by my side, following me into the depths of hell. I’m terrified the flames that drive me are going to consume him. I have constant nightmares that I turn into a titan and swallow him whole.” He ran out of breath, gasping for air.

“Wow. Calm down. I just wondered if you missed telling stupid jokes in the bar.” Marie stood and circled the coffee table. She crouched to his eye level, so close that he could smell her perfume. “That big brain of yours always was so dramatic.”

He stared blankly at her, still fighting for his breath.

“Erwin.” She cupped his cheek, her face solemn. “Don’t live so far in the future that you forget to live in the present.”

He considered her words, his breaths slowing.

“You’re welcome to stay as long as you need to while Levi sobers up.” She returned to the other couch to shake Nile awake. “Stay until

morning, if you like.”

“Thank you, Marie,” he said solemnly. “I appreciate your company and your hospitality.”

“Of course. Goodnight.” She smiled and hoisted Nile to his feet. Nile’s blink was uneven, and he didn’t seem to know where he was. “Come on,” she said, carefully leading her shuffling husband toward the stairs.

Erwin looked down at Levi, stroking his brow. Levi stirred and gave a small moan.

“You awake?” Erwin asked.

“Huh?”

“Think you can walk?”

“Should be,” Levi said, and then he began to snore.

Settling in, Erwin leaned his head back against the couch. It wasn’t quite as easy on his ribs as the wheelchair, but he had missed being this close together. One night of discomfort would be worth it.

He rested a hand on Levi’s chest, savouring the warmth of the contact. He really did spend too much time with his head in the future. Levi helped him value the present, too.

*You protect me from myself.*

The road ahead was long, and increasingly difficult, but they were together, and they were alive.

Here, in the present, that was enough.

## -23-

# PRESENT

“I can’t believe this is the last time the five of us will be hanging out like this,” Berit said.

“You’re welcome to come back and visit whenever you like.” Erwin drained the last of the whiskey and then slid four full glasses across the coffee table. The Squad Leaders each took one.

Berit sipped the amber liquid. “Never thought I’d make it out alive.”

The others were silent.

Erwin leaned back into the cushions, his stomach and mind glowing. He and Levi sat on one couch, while Berit, Hange and Mike sat on the other. The lamps were low, and even though it was still afternoon, it was already dark outside. Through the window, he could see large snowflakes, glowing orange from the lights in the yard. Nostalgia kindled in his stomach, faint, but warm. No matter how old he got, this time of year always had him reflecting on the past, good and bad.

Alcohol was good for drowning that. He stood.

“What are you doing?” Levi asked.

“We need another bottle.” Erwin squeezed his shoulder, then walked over to the cabinet in the corner.

“Sit down. I’ll get it for you.”

“Levi, I’m fine.” In spite of the assurance, he could feel Levi’s eyes trailing him. Erwin’s recovery from his injuries had been a slow process, complicated by constant re-injury that had probably, in retrospect, been his own fault. Still, it had been nearly a full month since he had last discarded the final artifact of his injuries: his cane. Though he still tired easily, he had been training in the yard and the gym nearly

every day, working hard to get his strength back. He was determined to be ready for the field by the time the ground thawed in the spring.

Levi didn't seem quite so optimistic. In the long months of his recovery, Levi had been keeping a watchful eye over him, making sure he got enough sleep, did his physiotherapy exercises, and didn't push himself too hard. For the most part, the concern was endearing. Sometimes, however, it was overbearing, and Erwin had stopped telling him about the occasional twinges or aches he got on his wounded side—though he had a feeling Levi could tell when he was hiding them, anyway.

As he reached for the top shelf, he felt one of those twinges, a sharp pain as if someone had punched him in the side. He breathed calmly through it, retrieving the liquor bottle. The doctors had suggested the one badly fractured rib hadn't healed properly and probably never would. He hoped they were wrong. An unexpected twinge on the battlefield could cost him his life.

He returned with a bottle of brandy. "My apologies, everyone, I'm out of whiskey."

"Anything is good," Mike said, pink-cheeked after consuming the majority of the previous two bottles.

In the background, the clock struck five.

"Shit," Levi said. "The carriage will be here in half an hour."

"Already?" Erwin settled next to him and poured himself a small glass.

"So now that it's just the five of us," Hange said, "can you tell us where you're actually going?" The cover story had been that the duo was heading to the Capital, where they would go their separate ways to visit family and friends for the holidays.

Levi scoffed and poured himself a full glass. "Good luck. He won't even tell *me*."

"Somewhere far away," Erwin said, "where no one will recognize us." He leaned close to Levi and nuzzled his ear, whispering only loudly enough for him to hear: "We'll be able to do absolutely anything we want with no consequences. I can fuck you against a tree, or behind a building, or on a park bench, without fear of ruining our reputations."

A shiver ran through Levi's body. "What the fuck, Erwin?"

"What'd he just say?" Hange asked. "Mike?"

Mike snorted. "I can't smell words."

Berit's nose wrinkled. "I don't think it was meant for our ears."

Levi downed half his glass as if it were a shot. “He said he’s a creepy old man who’s abducting me to who-the-fuckknows-where, and he’s going to act out and get us both arrested.”

“Mike knows where we’re going,” Erwin said, “in case of emergency. Trust me; the journey will be worth it.” He kissed Levi’s earlobe, then his neck, then tried to pull him onto his lap. Levi frowned and pushed him away.

“It’s like you have seventeen goddamned arms, you pervert.”

“I might have had a little too much to drink,” Erwin admitted.

“Okay, ease off, lovebirds,” Berit said. “If you get in the habit of groping each other during officer meetings, you’re just going to scare off whoever replaces me.”

“We have to get everything ready to load onto the carriage, anyway.” Erwin finished his drink, then stood. “The three of you are welcome to stay here as long as you like. Help yourselves to any of the alcohol in the cabinet. And Berit.” He knelt in front of the seated woman, bringing himself to her eye level. “It’s been a pleasure to work with you. I know you and Shadis will work wonders with the upcoming generations of trainees.”

She nodded and shook his hand. “The wedding invitation will be on your desk when you return. I hope you can attend.”

“I’d be honoured.”

The group exchanged their seasonal greetings, and then Erwin and Levi stepped into the hallway.

“You’re like a fucking centipede when you drink,” Levi muttered. “Crawling all over me with too many limbs.”

“Are you complaining or bragging?”

“Bit of both.”

“I see.” They arrived at the door to Erwin’s room. He pulled Levi through and shut it behind them, then bent down to give him a long, slow kiss. When he pulled away, Levi’s lids were low, a faint flush on his cheeks.

Erwin ran his thumb along the moist lower lip. “I thought maybe you were complaining so much because I was teasing you without following through.”

“Shit,” Levi breathed. He caught the Commander’s pendant and pulled him down for another kiss. “We don’t have time.” Their foreheads rolled against each other.

“And I probably drank too much to be useful.” Erwin closed his

teeth over the lower lip and gently tugged, then let it fall away. “If you can hold off until the carriage, I’ll take care of you.”

“Sure, that works.” Levi released the bolo tie and stepped back.

“Not complaining about my roving hands anymore, are you?”

“They’re not so bad in private.” There was a twinkle in his eyes, an almost-smirk on his lips. He turned and left the room.

Erwin took a slow breath, then turned to gather the last of his things. He slipped a small bottle of oil and a handkerchief into his jacket pocket, just in case he needed them during the ride.

He enlisted the help of two young soldiers in the hallway, who were more than happy to carry their Commander’s trunk while he slowly worked his way down the stairs to the courtyard. He kept his head high and his stance natural, but his body was still remembering how to move without the help of a cane, and he ran out of breath by the bottom. Trying not to be discouraged—he’d get his fitness back eventually—he stepped outside.

Snow dusted the ground, and at the centre of the courtyard stood Levi. Erwin stopped in his tracks, struck by Levi’s strange beauty. Snowflakes landed on the long, dark eyelashes, and puffs of air from his nose and lips floated around him like smoke.

Levi folded his arms over his chest. “Ribs bothering you again?”

“No, just distracted.” Remembering himself, Erwin helped him load the trunk into the luggage compartment.

The inside of the carriage was chilly, and Erwin turned on both lamps. Levi settled onto a bench next to him, and they shared a large fleece blanket.

“First stop is the Capital,” Erwin said. “This driver thinks we’ll be going our separate ways there, but we’ll switch to a private transport company after that. I used fake identification, so we’ll be untraceable.”

Levi snuggled closer to his torso, nudging his way under Erwin’s arm. “You went to a lot of effort, setting all this up.”

“I promised you a romantic trip.” He buried his face in the dark hair, breathing in. “This is probably the only time we’ll have an opportunity to do something like this. Everything lined up perfectly. Everyone knows I’m still recovering, so a trip out of the city will seem natural for stress-reduction reasons. The recruiting initiatives are all in full swing, but it’s too early to gauge the results, so there isn’t any real work I can do at home, which means I can travel without guilt. Most of the investors are distracted by Christmas, and the ground’s frozen so solidly

that we can't scout. Nothing is critical in terms of political manoeuvring, and the titans have been quiet. There will never be a better time to get away." He closed his eyes. "I want to have at least one memory like this, one I can treasure in dark moments: the two of us pretending, just for a week, that we're normal people with normal lives."

"You're getting morbid again."

"I know." Erwin kissed the part in his hair. "I'm already dreading it ending."

"It hasn't even started. Don't miss the whole thing because you're too busy worrying about it being over." Levi turned to face him, his expression solemn. "Every day we're there, that day is all that matters, okay? No looking ahead, no working. Think you can do that?"

"I'll do my best." Erwin thought of the paperwork he had sneaked into the trunk. *I've forgotten how to relax*, he thought, followed by, *did I ever know how?*

Levi straddled his lap and pulled the blanket over his shoulders. Their gaze held, so intense that Erwin felt a shiver run down his spine. The snowflakes had melted, leaving tiny water droplets on Levi's eyelashes and hair that sparkled in the lamplight.

Levi searched his eyes. "You're really fucking beautiful, you know that?"

Erwin smiled. "I was just thinking the same about you."

Their lips met. Levi shifted closer, their abdomens pressing together. Erwin ran his hands down his back, feeling the gear straps, the thin fabric of the dress shirt, the shifting muscles beneath it. One palm ran down Levi's spine, then lower.

The kiss broke. "I believe I promised you something more than this, Levi." He patted his ass. "Why don't you sit facing the other way?" He had originally hoped to use his mouth, but the carriage was rattling more than usual over the frozen ground, and he didn't want to think about what would happen if they hit a frozen pothole. Hands were safer.

Levi turned his back and sat, then adjusted the blanket over them. Erwin pulled the oil out of his jacket pocket. He kissed the back of Levi's neck, then began to suck the skin, pinching it with his teeth.

Levi's head tilted, giving him better access. "You're going to leave marks."

"It doesn't matter. Not where we're going." Erwin ran his tongue to Levi's jaw, then ear, then traced the groove down the back of his neck. His teeth pinched the skin again, and Levi ground back against him.

“I love it when you squirm.” Erwin groped his chest with his free hand, then worked his way down to the belt buckle. His mouth kept working at Levi’s neck, and now he could hear soft pants and moans. He finished unbuckling the belt and reached under the waistband. The first contact of skin to skin was so warm that they both let out a small groan.

“Here.” Levi undid his fly and pulled himself out of his pants.

Erwin slicked one hand, then set the bottle aside. He wrapped the hand around Levi, one finger at a time. The other hand nestled between Levi’s legs. His fingers traced the soft, wrinkled flesh, enjoying the texture of the hair there. *He’s more swollen than usual. It must have been a couple days.*

“Erwin,” Levi gasped.

Enjoying his impatience, Erwin began to stroke with maddening slowness.

“What are you doing?” Levi tried to thrust harder into his hands.

“I suppose I’m still in a teasing mood.” Erwin slowed his movement even more. “We have a long trip ahead of us, so there’s no need to rush.”

Levi gave a noise that was almost a whimper. “I was too busy packing for the trip to jerk off this morning.”

“That’s not my fault. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure you get off. Eventually.”

“Sadistic bastard.” Levi squirmed back against him. “I want it hard.”

Erwin’s tongue traced the border of his ear. “I’ll give it to you hard when we get to our destination. Maybe I’ll warm you up with my fingers, then fuck you against the wall.”

Levi gasped and tried to thrust into his hand. Erwin moved with him, making sure he didn’t get any extra friction. He bit his earlobe, his hand still:

“Or maybe I’ll ask you to pin me to the bed and take me hard.”

“Erwin, move your fucking hand.”

He obeyed, still moving slowly. “I want you so deep inside me that I can taste you when you come.”

“Fuck!” Levi writhed against him.

Liquid dripped down Erwin’s knuckles. “Shit,” he whispered, unable to restrain himself. “Getting close already?”

“I would be, if you’d go faster.” Levi’s body was starting to tense. Erwin pulled away, and Levi let out a loud groan.

“For fuck’s sakes, Erwin—”

“I just need to reposition myself. Stand up for a second.” He slid out from underneath Levi and sat him on the bench, then moved the blanket aside so he could kneel between his legs. His hands found their former positions and he began to move again, faster this time.

Levi looked down his nose at him, mouth open, cheeks flushed. Erwin had intended to keep his mouth safely away from the delicate area until the last minute, but that look and the trailing liquid were too much for him. He leaned forward to suck the tip, and he immediately regretted not doing it sooner.

“Fuck!” Levi’s hand raked into Erwin’s hair as he slouched down the bench, trying to encourage him to go deeper. “Fuck, I’m going to—” He cried out and his back arched, his head tossing back. Erwin pulled him into his throat and swallowed, relishing every pulse.

Then Levi sagged against the carriage wall. Erwin swirled his tongue gently around him a few times, then tucked everything back into his clothes and did up his pants. Once every button and belt was in place, he nuzzled the inseam, breathing in. Something about the scent of fabric and laundry soap mixed with Levi’s natural scent was soothing to him.

“Are you sniffing my crotch again?” Levi asked, his voice gravelly.

“My nose was cold, and this cloth is nice and warm.”

He felt a hand stroke his hair, clumsy. “Come up here. I’ll warm it up.”

“One more minute.” Erwin nuzzled his inseam, hands roving from his knees to his hips and then back again. Content, he shifted back to the bench. Levi huddled against him, wrapping the blanket around them again.

“Fucking tease.” Levi kissed the tip of his nose. His lips were warm and smelled of alcohol.

“I’ll be more cooperative during our next encounter.” Erwin raised a brow. “Or perhaps I’ll tie you to a chair and be even less cooperative.”

Levi nipped his nose. “Power-tripping asshole.”

“Only on special occasions.”

“You’re the only person I’d let get away with it.” Levi’s arms settled around him, the dark head resting against Erwin’s chest. Erwin tried to shift to get more comfortable, but his injuries were aching from the

hard seat. He had been too busy to notice before.

“Would it be all right if we lay down now?” he asked.

“Getting tired?”

“A little. It might be warmer, too.”

Levi pulled away, but if he guessed Erwin’s real motivations, he said nothing. They worked together to lock the bed into place, and then lay down, spooning together, their hands interlocking.

Levi pulled Erwin’s hand to his mouth and began to kiss the knuckles one at a time.

“You’re affectionate tonight,” Erwin said, closing his eyes so he could focus on the sensation.

“Well, I just came, so I’m feeling cuddly. And we haven’t had a chance to relax like this for a while, with all the scouting and meetings with investors and everything.”

“I suppose that’s true. That reminds me: we’ll be stopping in Stohess on the way back. There’s a New Year’s gala I want you to attend. Many prestigious potential investors will be there, and I’d like to show off Humanity’s Strongest to win their favour.”

Levi gave a disgusted scoff. “Do I have to say anything?”

“No, just stand there and look pretty. Maybe perform an arm wrestle or two to put on a bit of a show.”

“Fine. Nile and Marie going to be there?”

“I expect they’ll be busy with the new baby.” Erwin closed his eyes. “Might be nice to visit them while we’re in the area.”

Levi made another disgusted noise. “Last time I was hung over for two fucking days.”

“If only there had been some way to prevent that from happening, such as *not* challenging Nile to a drinking contest.”

Levi shook his head. “Asshole.”

“Too cheeky?”

“Nah, I like when you’re a brat. Means you’re relaxed.” Levi awkwardly rolled to face him while staying close enough to avoid falling off the edge of the narrow bed. “When are you going to tell me where we’re going?”

“Now’s as good a time as any.” Erwin kissed the wrinkle between the slender brows. “We’re going to Utopia district, in the north. A resort in a small hot spring town. We’ll be in a cabin with our own private bath filled with piped-in hot spring water, a fireplace, and a wide bed stuffed with goose down. There’s a fine restaurant where we can dine, a ball-

room for dancing, and a snow-filled park lit with festive lights for the season.”

“Holy shit.” The wrinkle deepened. “How much did you spend on this?”

“Only what I could afford.”

“For your birthday, I bought you a sweet cake,” Levi muttered.

“And I enjoyed it very much. This isn’t just a birthday trip. It’s also Christmas, and a celebration of my recovery.” Their foreheads rested together. “It’s also an excuse to make love to you every way I can think of without being distracted by work. I’m looking forward to walking around hand-in-hand with you, like a couple who has nothing to hide. We’ll need to use pseudonyms, of course, but everything else will be honest and open.”

Levi was quiet for a moment. “I’d say ‘thank you,’ but that sounds kind of shitty and small compared to all this.”

Erwin paused for a yawn so strong that his eyes watered. “There are other ways you can thank me.”

“Yeah, I have some ideas.” A pause. “You really want to fuck me against a tree?”

“The idea is nice, but it’ll probably be too cold.” His eyelids were heavy. “I just like the idea that we *could* do it and not worry about scandal.”

“It’s still illegal if civilians have sex in public, you know.” Levi edged closer, snuggling under his chin. His breaths were soft and warm against Erwin’s collarbone.

“Hm,” Erwin said, unable to manage anything further.

There was a pause, then he felt a kiss on his throat. “Get some sleep. We’ll talk more in the morning.”

He smiled, and then he was drifting, drifting ...

⁂

“I don’t think you understand, Commander, exactly how deep I go.”

Erwin lifted his head. He sat at a table opposite Sahlo, a chessboard between them. *How did I—?*

Sahlo pushed forward two pawns, and Erwin vaguely understood that he was cheating, but he couldn’t recall the proper rules.

“Past, present, future,” Sahlo said. “We control them all. You un-

derstand that you know nothing, so you're smarter than most, but you don't know just how deep that nothingness goes. You are empty. We can drain you and fill you back up again in an instant."

The lord thrust all his pieces forward with both hands, steam-rolling over Erwin's pawns, his knights, his rooks. The bishops fell last. The queen and king teetered, but stayed upright.

"Enough," Erwin said, his blood boiling. "I refuse to play with you if you're going to cheat."

"Ah, but Erwin, you know as well as anyone: only those who play outside the rules have a chance at winning the game." The lord looked up, a sickening grin smeared across his lips. "A king is so weak on his own, don't you think? He's only as strong as the pieces around him. The only way to undo him is to defeat those pieces, one by one." He reached forward, flicking over the queen. "We'll save Levi for last. We'll make him watch as we strip you down to nothing. He'll *know* he's your downfall, and his last thoughts will be about how he let you down."

Rage flooded Erwin's heart, so strong that he no longer cared about positioning, or long-term strategy, or even the law. He drew his sword, lunged forward and swung the blade at Sahlo's throat.

Just before it made contact, Sahlo's face flickered, then became Levi, but it was too late to stop the blow's momentum, too late, too late  
...

The blade clattered to the ground. Erwin sank to his knees, Levi's blood dripping from his hands.

"He will be your downfall," Sahlo's voice boomed, "and you will be his."

Levi's eyes widened, his face losing colour, his lips mouthing Erwin's name—

63

Erwin sat up, breathing hard.

Levi sat on the bench against the back of the carriage. The curtain was open, the moonlight colouring his skin a deathlike shade of blue. Their gaze held for a moment, then Levi turned to look out the window again. "You okay?"

Erwin raked his hands through his hair and hunched forward. The night air was chilly against his damp skin. "Shit."

"Same here," Levi said quietly. "Was it the one where you turn

into a titan and eat me?"

"No. A new one. I tried to strike down Sahlo and slit your throat instead." He squeezed his eyes shut. "I've made you too important to me. What if he—"

"Don't. It's just the dream fucking with your head." Levi nodded at the bench next to him. "Sometimes helps to get out of bed, leave the memory of it behind for a bit."

Erwin brought the blanket as he settled into place beside him and looked out the window. The moon was bright, the arc of stars almost as clear as it would be if they were outside the walls. "Beautiful night."

"Yeah." Levi shifted closer to him; he was shaking.

"Dreaming about the old days?" Erwin draped the blanket around both of them, even though he was certain the shaking had nothing to do with the temperature.

"I guess. Farlan and Isabel." His voice was quiet. "This time, when I attacked you, I didn't hesitate. Felt the blade slice through your neck." He rested his cheek on Erwin's shoulder. "The terrifying thing about it is that it almost actually happened."

"You were never going to kill me."

"I guess." Levi shook his head. "Look at us. First night away on a romantic vacation, and we dream about killing each other. What a couple of sad, morbid fuckers."

They sat quietly against each other, and gradually, Levi's trembling faded. Erwin traced patterns along the silhouetted tree tops they passed, feeling the bumps in the road, the warmth of Levi's body against his. The nightmare's grip on his stomach relaxed, then vanished.

"We're going to need fake names," he said, clinging to a cheerier topic.

"Yeah?"

"I was thinking I might go with Helmut Adler."

"Helmut." Levi pulled away to look at him. "You don't look like a Helmut."

"What would you suggest?"

Levi shrugged. "I'm no good at names. Something strong. August. Bruno. Osmar."

"I like August. August Adler. Sounds poetic." Erwin ran a hand down Levi's cravat, tidying it. "And who is August's date for the week?"

Another shrug. "I use Farlan Church."

“Well, it might be best to use something no one could ever trace back to you. The military records all show a pre-existing relationship between—” Erwin stopped, suddenly curious. “You use his name?”

“If I need to give a fake name, yeah. I told you, I’m no good at names.”

In all their conversations over the past several months, Erwin had never pried into Levi’s past life with his friends. Levi had given little anecdotes here and there, but he had never really indicated how the three friends had come to live and work together.

Levi held his gaze. “You’re wondering if I ever fucked Farlan, aren’t you?”

“It’s none of my business. He does seem to be your type.”

“Yeah. Blond, hot, and straight as an arrow.” Levi’s face softened. “We don’t always get what we want, but sometimes it’s better that way. Would have made a shitty couple, but we made great friends, and by the end, he was like a brother. Close to what happened with you and Mike, I guess.”

“I see.”

They were quiet for a moment, then Erwin said softly, “What about Emil?”

“Emil?”

“Your name. Almost the same letters as ‘Levi’, and I believe it means ‘rival,’ which is a nice nod to our beginnings. Emil ... Jahnke?”

“Emil Jahnke and August Adler.” Levi’s lips flattened. “I’m not going to remember that.”

“Boyfriends from southern Wall Rose.” Erwin draped an arm across his shoulders. “August is a teacher, and Emil runs a successful bodyguard company. They met in a bar two years ago and fell in love. One thing led to another, until recently, they bought a house. They’ve embarked on this trip to celebrate the beginning of their shared life together.”

“You’ve thought this through.”

“I have.” Erwin studied the moon, his mind drifting. “They have their whole lives ahead of them. To them, the titans are very far away, someone else’s problem. The two of them are so in love, so full of hope.”

Levi glanced up, then settled back against him again. “No one will ever believe we’re that sheltered. Everything about us says we’re soldiers.”

“True. And the world needs us to be soldiers.” Erwin’s throat

tightened. "We don't always get what we want, right?"

Levi pulled the blanket up to his neck and didn't reply.

❧

They arrived in the Capital just as the sun was rising. After a large breakfast at a cafe, they changed into casual clothes, then separately made their way to the docks. As August and Emil, they each paid the fare to travel by boat to Utopia District, then boarded at different times. Erwin's dealings in the Capital, thus far, were minor enough that it would have to be a large coincidence to run into anyone who might recognize him, but he didn't want to take any chances while they were within the city limits. Once he became better-known, a trip like this was going to be impossible, but for now, anonymity should be easy to find.

An hour after departure, he found Levi, as agreed, near the ship's prow. Levi was leaning against the railing, looking over the edge. Erwin leaned up next to him and saw that the narrow mouth was twisting.

"Bad memories?" he asked.

"Memories?" Levi glanced at him. "You think I ever went on a boat in the Underground?"

Erwin shrugged. "It sounds as if you travelled a fair bit above ground."

"Not by boat." He grimaced. "I don't trust them."

"Can't swim?"

"I swim fine. Won't help me if I'm trapped in this thing while it runs aground and then sinks."

Erwin smiled. "It's a straight stretch from here to Utopia district. I'm sure the captain can navigate just fine." He draped an arm around Levi's shoulders.

Levi ducked away, looking around them. "What the hell?"

"We're August and Emil now, remember? We can show our affection in public."

"Well, August can wait until we aren't trapped on a floating coffin with nobles from the Capital."

"I see." Erwin pulled away, propping his elbows on the railing. "Then I'm guessing Emil isn't interested in that blow job in the supply closet I was about to offer him?"

"In the supply closet?"

“Thought all those cleaning supplies might put you in the mood to get a bit ... dirty.”

Levi eyed him. “You aren’t going to make terrible jokes the entire week, are you? Because I’ll jump overboard right now.”

“So cruel.”

“You bring it upon yourself.” Levi shifted closer to him, mimicking his pose on the railing. “Is there anything to do on this boat to pass the time?”

“I brought paperwork.”

“No.”

“Well ...” Erwin glanced at him. “I brought a book. Maybe we could find a quiet spot and I could read to you.”

Levi’s nose wrinkled. “Let me guess: some stuffy old Commander’s war diaries? Sahlo’s latest shipping manifest?”

“No, this is a work of fiction, a serial that ran in a Mitras paper. It’s about a thief who falls in love with an officer of the Garrison and eventually joins him.” He smiled. “It reminded me of us, so I thought it might be entertaining, if a bit ridiculous.”

“Huh.” Levi studied him. “I guess listening to you speak for a couple hours wouldn’t be so bad.”

The statement made Erwin’s heart race a little faster: *he likes the sound of my voice*. It was a silly thing to get excited about, but even after a few months together, there were still new compliments to give and receive.

They found a quiet room below deck and settled into a corner. As Erwin began to read aloud, Levi laid his head in his lap, watching his face intently.

The story, though poorly written, was entertaining enough to pass the time. Between it, a few meal breaks and a short nap, the trip passed more quickly than either of them expected. They disembarked in Utopia District late in the evening. The air was chilly, the snow on the ground nearly up to Levi’s knees. Erwin opened his trunk and handed Levi an old winter jacket from his youth. It was a bit short in the sleeves and the collars were unfashionable, but Levi put it on without complaint. They hired a cab and rode toward the resort.

Levi’s nose wrinkled. “The fuck is that smell?”

“Hot springs.” Erwin smiled. “I’ve heard people liken it to the scent of titans, so I thought you’d be right at home.”

“Titans? Fuck, no. Smells like rotten eggs.” Levi covered his nose.

“Are we going to be breathing this in the whole time?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll get used to it.”

The road up to the resort was decorated with hanging lanterns of different colours. Levi stared at them, his mouth slightly agape, as he apparently forgot about the offensive scent.

The same coloured lanterns lit the path to their cabin from the main office, and a holly wreath hung on the door. The inside smelled of pine and sulphur. Erwin lit the lamp by the door, revealing a wide bed, a raised hot spring tub, a fireplace, and a full suite of wooden furniture. Levi stared at it all, then hurried into the bathroom.

“There’s a heated shower in here.” He poked his head through the door, his eyes wide. “No hand-pump.”

“Why don’t you take a few minutes to try it out?” Erwin bent down to light the fireplace. “But don’t take too long. There’s a little something I’d like to take care of before dinner.”

After a few tries, the log caught. He left only one log on, for now. In the background, he could hear running water. After taking a minute to align their things against the wall and tidy their jackets, he knocked on the bathroom door.

To his disappointment, the shower was hidden by a wooden stall. “There enough room in there for two?”

“Keep out,” Levi said. “I’m washing my ass.”

Well, Erwin had been planning to test out the hot spring tub after dinner, anyway, so he’d get clean then. He washed his face, brushed his teeth and added a few dabs of cologne to his skin.

The water stopped, the stall opened, and Levi’s arm reached out, fumbling blindly for a towel. Erwin smiled and handed him one. The arm and towel snapped back into the stall.

“How long until dinner?” Levi asked.

“We have time to do something quick now, if you’d like.” Erwin leaned against the wall and folded his arms over his chest. “I thought we might soak in the tub after dinner. My ability to perform is more fragile than yours, and the hot water might be enough to disrupt it, so I thought I might top now, and later, when I’m likely to be soft, you can—”

“Stop planning it.” The shower door opened, and Levi stepped through. The towel was draped around his waist, his hair dishevelled and damp. “You want me, just take me. Be spontaneous.”

*Very well, then.* Erwin began to close the distance between them,

but Levi took a step back.

“Not until I’ve brushed my teeth.”

“Are you clear on the definition of ‘spontaneous?’”

Levi threw his towel at him. “I’ll be ready in a minute.”

“I’ll be waiting.” Erwin hung the towel on the rack, then stepped into the main room.

A few minutes later, Levi finally left the bathroom. Erwin strode up to him and caught his jaw, tilting it up for a forceful kiss.

When he pulled away, Levi’s eyelashes were fluttering. “Shit,” he breathed.

Erwin hummed and grabbed the slender wrists as he leaned down, using his tongue this time. Mouths still joined, he pushed Levi several steps back and pinned his wrists against the wall. He gently pressed his thigh between Levi’s legs.

Levi turned his head a little, breaking the kiss. “Get undressed.”

Erwin hummed again, stooping down to bury his face in Levi’s neck. “You’re in no position to give me orders.” His hands tightened around Levi’s wrists.

The wrists twisted, and suddenly Erwin was holding air. He looked down at Levi, surprised. The narrow fingers were already unbuttoning his shirt.

“You think it’s that easy to hold me? I’m not letting you pull that teasing shit two times in a row.” Levi kissed a line down the centre of his chest.

“Not too low. I haven’t showered yet.”

“Maybe I’ll tease the hell out of *you* this time.” Levi kissed his belt buckle, then pressed his mouth over the fabric below it. Warm air flooded through the cloth, and Erwin shuddered.

“I want you,” he said, his voice cracking.

Levi held his gaze for a moment, then shook his head. “Okay, screw teasing.” He began to undo the buttons and belt. They worked together to strip his lower half, but before Levi could get his shirt off, Erwin caught him under the thighs and lifted him, pressing him against the wall.

Levi’s limbs wrapped around him. “Your injury—”

“I’m fine.” Erwin kissed him hard, trying to ignore his body’s limitations. His ribs were burning. He had hoped to take him against the wall, but it was becoming clear that wasn’t an option yet. He thrust his hips, rubbing himself against Levi’s underside, enjoying the warmth of

the skin contact. "Shit," he gasped.

Levi bit his ear. "You going to dry hump me or actually fuck me?"

Erwin grunted in response, his legs beginning to shake from the strain. *Guess I'm not quite as recovered as I thought.* He pulled away from the wall and staggered toward the bed, then dropped Levi onto the mattress and fell on top of him.

Levi wheezed, "You're heavy."

Erwin ignored him, but did take a moment to lift his weight onto one elbow as he kissed Levi's jaw, his chin, his throat. He paused between his legs to take him deep into his throat, and Levi gave a shocked cry. As he pulled away, Levi thrust toward his mouth as if trying to follow it.

"Roll onto your front," Erwin said, running a finger down his thigh. "I want to take you from behind. I'll be right back."

He retrieved a bottle of oil and a clean handkerchief from a side pocket of his trunk. When he returned, Levi was lying on his front, and his ass was so round and pert that Erwin forgot what he was doing. The oil and handkerchief dropped noisily to the side table as he knelt on the bed. He spread Levi's legs to either side and knelt between them, grabbing his ass, feeling the soft, fuzzy skin. His hands ran up to his lower back, then down to his hamstrings, and now Erwin's eyes were threatening to roll back into his head. His groin ached.

Levi shifted his hips, as if putting himself on display.

"You are so beautiful," Erwin heard himself say. He bent down to kiss the spine, then the dimples on either side, then moved lower, to the tailbone. He gently tickled it with his tongue in the way Levi liked—or perhaps "tolerated" was a better word for it.

He lifted his head and saw Levi burying his face into the pillow, clutching it with clawed hands.

"Feel good?" he asked, never certain.

"Lower," Levi said, voice muffled by the pillow.

Erwin's heart skipped a beat. *He can't mean what I think he means.* He buried his face down low, licking the seam between his balls.

"No, higher."

Erwin pulled away. "What?"

Levi twisted to look at him. "Put your mouth on my asshole."

"Ah." Erwin's mouth was dry.

"Just for a bit." A flush coloured the pale cheeks. "Look, this is a

special occasion, and I know I'm clean enough for it. Don't make a big deal out of it." Levi relaxed face-first into the pillow again.

Breathing hard, Erwin nuzzled below his tailbone. He breathed in, inhaling the pheromones. A shiver rippled through his body, and he felt himself harden until he ached. His breath left his mouth in a slew of curses.

He started with his tongue flat, gently lapping. Levi's spine arched toward the bed, his hips lifting into the air.

"You okay?" murmured Erwin.

Levi said something unintelligible into the pillow.

Erwin reached up and grabbed the pillow, tugging it aside. "Don't muffle yourself. I need to figure out what you like." He buried his face into the damp flesh again, tonguing gently. "Be loud."

"Fuck," Levi gasped.

"Feel good?"

"Yeah. Better than I ..." The words faded into a series of groans.

Erwin began to use more force, tracing circles. If he were honest with himself, he had wanted to do this ever since he had first seen this ass in the Survey Corps uniform. He couldn't think of any act more intimate or requiring more trust. He hummed, and Levi bucked into his mouth, his moans rising in pitch. Erwin shoved his arm beneath the tilting hips, pulling him tightly against his mouth. *He's getting hard. Doing this is making him hard.* His head spun.

"Fuck me," Levi gasped.

Instead, he probed a bit deeper, and the sound that left Levi was almost a wail. Goosebumps erupted across Erwin's skin, all over his body. He would have loved to linger, but he had already teased Levi enough on the first leg of their trip. Besides, he was getting desperate.

He pulled away and drizzled oil over both of them, then gently began to work his way inside.

Levi's shoulders rounded, his forehead pressed against the mattress. "Your mouth made me so sensitive."

"Yeah?" Erwin slowed down, gently easing himself in and out. "You feel that?"

"Yeah. It's so good." Levi's knuckles were white as he grabbed at the sheets.

Erwin bent down and bit the back of his neck. "You want it slow like this?"

"Harder."

He pressed the rest of the way in, holding in place. He dragged his tongue along Levi's neck to his ear. "Can you give me the order?"

Levi half-turned toward him, his gaze steady. "Erwin, give it to me hard."

Glowing, restless energy rippled through Erwin's body and settled between his legs. Lifting himself on his elbows, he began to move.

Levi cried out and buried his face in the mattress again, his shoulders tight. Erwin kissed a shoulder blade, then bit the skin. "Like this?" he asked, knowing he was still being too gentle.

"Harder."

The word rippled through him like fire, setting every nerve alight. He pushed himself onto his hands, increasing the pace. Below him, he could see those beautiful back muscles rippling as Levi's hips counter-thrust against him.

Erwin placed a hand on his lower back and pushed.

"Oh fuck," Levi gasped.

Now he could feel those rippling muscles pushing back against his hand. Erwin grunted and leaned hard, pressing Levi into the bed. Levi sucked in a loud breath and arched his back; Erwin placed his other hand between his shoulder blades.

"That's it," Levi gasped. "Pin me to the bed. Fuck me hard."

A series of curses began to slip from Erwin's lips. He changed the angle to use gravity to his advantage, driving into him as hard as he could, hands pushing him down with the full brunt of every thrust.

"Fuck," Levi said, over and over. His hands clawed at the mattress. Erwin fell on top of him and gripped those clawed hands, his mouth by Levi's ear, pace unrelenting.

"There," Levi said.

"Here?" Erwin kept the angle steady.

The small body tensed. "What the fuck ... oh fuck ..." He began to tighten around Erwin, his back flexing.

"Come on." Sweat beaded on Erwin's temple, and he wasn't quite there yet, but he needed Levi to come, he needed it so badly that he ached. He used every bit of strength he had, moving hard and fast, and he swore he could feel the build up as if it were his own.

"Erwin, I'm— Fuck!" Levi writhed so hard that he almost threw Erwin off him.

"Levi ..." Erwin pressed his open mouth against the long neck,

breathing in, trying to taste his orgasm.

Then the body beneath him relaxed, and everything was still. Erwin rested his forehead against Levi's neck, giving him a minute. The room seemed too calm now, too quiet.

Levi stirred, and when he spoke, his voice was groggy: "Did you come?"

"Not yet. Can I come on your back?" He realized, too late, that the mess was likely to be unappealing. "Unless you'd rather—"

"Do it."

Erwin felt a wave of anticipation as he pulled out and grabbed himself. He groped Levi's ass with his free hand, his eyes tracing the beautiful lines and curves. He was further along than he thought, and his orgasm surprised him. He cursed and grunted through clenched teeth. With Levi disoriented and facing away from him, it felt lonelier than he would have liked— still satisfying, but a bit anticlimactic after all the buildup. With the last spasm, he sat back on his heels, his head bowed.

"Feel good?" Levi asked.

"Yeah."

"I like it better when I can see you."

Erwin smiled. "Me, too." Black spots swam in his vision, and he had an overwhelming urge to lie down. He reached for the handkerchief and swabbed away the mess, then gave in. He collapsed on top of Levi, breathing hard.

"Hey. You're heavy, remember?" Levi nudged his shoulder, effortlessly rolling Erwin onto his back.

*I always forget how strong he is.* Draping his forearm over his eyes, Erwin gasped for breath. "Levi, the things you do to me ... "

"You were the one doing things. I was just lying there." The bed shifted.

"You weren't just lying there." He opened his eyes and saw Levi leaning over him, studying him. With a smile, Erwin tucked a strand of dark hair off the high forehead. "I'll never stop being amazed by how well we work together. You bring out sides of me that I didn't know existed."

"Yeah, tell me about it." Levi caught his hand and lifted it to his mouth, kissing a knuckle. "Never thought someone eating my ass would feel that good."

"Yeah? It was all right?"

“Yeah. Now I get why you make those stupid noises when I do it to you.” Levi kissed another knuckle. “Let’s try it again sometime.”

“Of course.”

They lay there for another moment, and Erwin’s eyes were just drifting closed when someone’s stomach growled. He couldn’t tell who, but it didn’t matter. He forced himself to sit up. “We should eat. The restaurant is only open for another hour.”

They dressed and bundled up, then set out. The temperature had dropped, and the air was crisp and tasted of smoke. Breaths left their lips in clouds as their footsteps crunched in the snow.

“Sure is pretty.” Erwin looked up at the trees. The snow that rested on the needled branches glowed blue in the moonlight.

“Yeah. Cold as fuck, though.” Levi’s shoulders were rounded, his arms folded tightly over his chest.

Erwin draped an arm over him and drew him closer as they walked. Another couple walked up the path toward them, and Levi’s shoulders tensed, but the couple only exchanged a pleasant nod with them and kept walking.

“Like I said,” Erwin murmured, “we’re completely anonymous up here.”

“Weird.”

“A bit.” Erwin kissed the top of his hooded head. “Nice, though.”

“Yeah.”

They stepped into the dining hall, kicking the snow off their boots in the front entrance. The restaurant decor combined the same rustic charm and elegance as their room, and the lighting was pleasantly dim. A host came over to greet them, then led them to a table. Erwin scanned the room for familiar faces out of habit and, finding none, rested his hand on Levi’s lower back.

They ordered a half-bottle of fine white wine and a fish platter to share. It was an increasingly rare experience, eating food that wasn’t heavily laced with preservative yeast, and Erwin found the flavours subtle and pleasant. Levi seemed to feel the same way; he was quiet during the meal, voraciously eating everything set in front of him. They enjoyed a mug of tea after the meal, and Erwin studied Levi.

“I’ve always wondered why you hold your mugs that way.”

Levi looked down at his hand, which held the mug from the top with clawed fingers. He shrugged. “Handle broke off a cup once. Been paranoid about it ever since.”

“I see,” Erwin said, sensing there was more to the story, but not wanting to push him. He mimicked the hand position himself, then tried to drink. Tea dribbled down his chin.

Levi shook his head and leaned forward to dab his chin with the napkin. “It’s not as easy as I make it look.”

“Apparently not.”

Dessert was ice cream, something Erwin hadn’t had since he was a child. Levi poked it with a spoon, suspicious.

“My mother used to make this whenever it snowed.” Erwin took a spoonful, then closed his eyes, feeling the sweet mouthful melt on his tongue. He swallowed. “Never this good, though. They must have access to real cream up here.”

Levi tried a bite, and his eyes widened. “Damn.”

“Good?”

“I’m not going to be able to go back to rations after this week ends.”

*It’ll be hard to go back to a lot of things after the week ends,* Erwin thought as he reached across the table to hold Levi’s hand.

When they left the restaurant, the sky had clouded over, and large, fluffy snowflakes drifted from the sky. Erwin stood on the front step and stared at the lanterns hanging from the trees, the moon glowing behind the clouds. His breath froze. *This is the most picturesque setting I’ve ever seen.*

“You hear that?” Levi asked.

He listened and heard the wind gently blowing through the pine trees. It sounded like rushing water. “It’s so peaceful and quiet.”

“I mean the singing.” Levi pointed to their right, past several cabins. “Somewhere down there.”

“I see.” Erwin strained his ears, but couldn’t hear it. He offered an elbow to Levi. “It’s a beautiful night, and we have our own private hot spring to heat us up again once we get back to the room. Want to go exploring?”

Levi studied him for a moment, then took his arm. “Sure.”

They followed a path of lanterns down to a small amphitheatre, where a choir, dressed in red cloaks with white fur trim, sang to a crowd. The strains of *O Tannenbaum* rang out in harmony. Erwin and Levi approached from the back.

“Almost forgot it was Christmas,” Erwin murmured. The holiday wasn’t all that important to him anymore. The military didn’t waste

money on decorations or celebrations, opting instead to give mandatory time off. Even before that, his mother had banned Christmas celebrations after his father had died; it had been his father's favourite time of year. Erwin's chest ached just thinking about it.

He looked down and saw Levi craning his neck, trying to see through the crowd. Erwin leaned close.

“Want me to lift you onto my shoulders so you can see?”

He received a glare in response. “Try it, and you’re fucking dead.”

The song ended, and the crowd applauded.

“Want to keep walking for a bit?” Erwin asked.

“As long as you don’t offer to put me on your shoulders.” Levi fell into step beside him.

They wandered further along the path and came upon a small, round bridge over a stream. They stopped at its apex and Levi leaned against the railing, staring into the water. Steam curled off it, and the rock banks were bare.

“Must be fed by the hot springs.” Levi folded his arms on the railing.

“Looks like it.” Erwin settled closer to him, unable to stop staring at Levi long enough to look at the water. Snowflakes were catching in the dark eyelashes again, and the usual crease between his brows was smooth.

Levi looked up at him. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

In the background, the faint strains of the choir began to sound. They echoed against the rock walls, giving them an ethereal quality. Erwin’s throat tightened as memories of the past combined with the present beauty of the setting. He bent down to give Levi a small, soft kiss. His damp lips felt the cold breeze when he pulled away.

“You okay?” Levi asked. “You look like you’re going to cry.”

“It’s just the breeze making my eyes water.” He leaned on his elbows, looking down at the steam. “Do you celebrate Christmas, Levi? Or did you always celebrate your birthday instead?”

Levi scoffed. “Didn’t celebrate anything.”

“No?” Erwin asked, but Levi’s face was tight. *He doesn’t want to talk about it.* Trying to redirect the conversation from the potential reminder of an unpleasant past, Erwin looked around, then leaned closer. “We didn’t, either, after my father died. He was really big on Christmas. One year, he told me Christmas was originally a religious

holiday in the old world. It celebrated the birth of a major prophet. Your birthday would have been quite auspicious, I think.”

Levi looked up. “Yeah?”

“He said the songs we sing are mostly from the old religion, though the candles we light come from a different religion, and the lanterns are from yet another. It’s almost as if the people who first moved to the walls sought to include elements of various—” He glanced down at Levi, sensing disinterest. “Sorry, I’m rambling. Talking about the outside world is forbidden, anyway.”

“Lots of things we do are forbidden.” Levi stared blankly ahead. “This stuff means a lot to you, right?”

“It meant a lot to my father. That’s enough reason for me to think about it and keep it alive.” Erwin stepped back and gave him a kind smile. “Perhaps we should return to the room?”

“Sure.”

They fell into step, and Erwin reached for Levi’s hand. Their mittens were so thick that the grip was clumsy, and he suspected Levi’s arm was at an awkward angle due to their height difference, but his heart pounded, anyway. *Just a normal couple.*

Further down the path, they came upon a young pair engaged in a snowball fight. The woman threw a barrage of snowballs as she charged at her partner. He staggered backwards, but grabbed her as he went down. They fell, laughing, into the snow, completely oblivious to their audience.

Erwin chuckled to himself, but then saw Levi cringe. “Too cute for you?”

“A bit.”

Once they were definitely out of earshot, Erwin said, “How do you think Emil would react if August tried to throw snowballs at him?”

“It wouldn’t be pretty. Emil doesn’t have a good sense of humour about getting wet and cold.” Levi looked up at him, a hint of a smirk on his lips. “Besides, you wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“No? I’ve been practicing my aim.”

“Yeah, but you’re weak as hell. You’ve been doing nothing for six months.”

Erwin felt as if he had been punched in the gut. “I think I’ve been doing okay, all things considered.”

“Oh.” Levi grimaced. “No, I meant, you were hobbling everywhere on a cane up until a few weeks ago, while I’ve been out scouting

and working out this whole time.”

*That's not all that much kinder*, Erwin thought, but he took a deep breath. Levi had been at his side every step of the way; he understood how hard Erwin had been working to get well, even if he wasn't phrasing it properly. The only reason Erwin was taking so much offense was because the words had aligned with that little voice, deep down, that constantly told him he wasn't working hard enough.

He swallowed back his pride, and said, “Well, snowballs are different than fighting on the battlefield, anyway. It's an art I was forced to learn to defend myself—you never had an overly aggressive kid sister.” He bent down to scoop the snow.

“Isabel doesn't count?” Levi folded his arms over his chest. “Don't embarrass yourself, Erwin.”

“August,” he corrected. He packed the snowball as small as he could, then tucked it in his elbow, building a second one. “The key to a good snowball—”

Something hit his ass.

He whirled to see Levi leaning against a tree, arms folded over his chest. “What?”

Erwin nodded at the hollow in the snow in front of Levi, clearly manmade and appropriately sized for a snowball. “Might want to hide the evidence next time.” He tossed one of his snowballs.

Levi, in one motion, caught and threw it. Snow exploded across Erwin's chest, so hard that he took a step backwards.

“Holy shit,” he said, brushing snow off his jacket.

“I told you, it wouldn't be pretty.” A corner of Levi's mouth twitched.

Erwin cocked a brow. “I'll have to adapt my tactics.” Keeping an eye on him, he bent down and began to hastily form more snowballs, stashing several of them in his pockets.

“Tactics in a fucking snowball fight. You have to suck the fun out of everything, don't you?” Levi dropped to his knees and began to scoop up snow.

Less than a minute later, they were ducking behind trees, snowballs flying back and forth. Erwin's hood fell back, his hair hanging in his face, as he tried to simultaneously dodge and throw. There was snow on his chest, his arms, and one thigh, while Levi was still bone dry. Erwin kept a careful eye on his opponent's supply, planning to overwhelm him when he ran out of ammunition.

Levi tossed the last of his stash; Erwin just barely managed to dodge it.

“Shit,” Levi said as he reached for a snowball and found none.

“This is where tactics become important.” Erwin began to pull snowballs out of his pockets, lobbing them at Levi, who grunted and flipped out of the way, then swept low, gathering an armful of snow. He launched forward.

“Shit, wait!” Erwin threw a barrage of snowballs to try to defend himself as Levi, somehow dodging every single one, closed the distance. Then there was an armful of snow in Erwin’s face, and he was taking several steps backwards, sputtering and laughing.

“How are those tactics working for you now?” Levi asked, a grin in his voice.

More snow flew into Erwin’s face. His hands clamped on his attacker’s arms, but Levi ducked, and the world flipped. Erwin landed on his back in the snow, and he felt Levi’s full weight land on top of him.

And then he heard a noise he had never heard before: an understated, subtle snickering.

*He’s laughing!* Frantically, Erwin wiped the snow out of his eyes so he could see.

Finally, after so many months, he saw that honest smile he had only seen once before, the red cheeks dimpled on one side, the grey eyes sparkling.

Erwin’s chest heaved, his eyes flooding with tears. He caught the back of Levi’s head and pulled him in for a kiss. He got only teeth at first, but then Levi gave a surprised hum and his face relaxed. Their kiss was long and slow, and Erwin gently rolled them until he lay on top, body weight pressing Levi into the snow.

When he pulled away, Levi’s smile was gone, and Erwin regretted making it disappear.

“Sorry,” he said.

Levi reached up and clumsily moved damp hair off his forehead with his mitt. “Fucking weirdo, getting all misty-eyed over a snowball fight.”

Erwin swallowed the lump in his throat. “I very rarely see you smile.”

“What? I smile all the time.”

“And I’ve never, ever heard you laugh.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Levi’s eyes twinkled a-

gain. "Maybe you need your hearing checked, old man."

"Old man? I'm not the one who obsessively plucks his grey hairs."

"I don't— How did—?" Levi's eyes narrowed. "Well, you just can't see yours because you're blond."

Erwin chuckled and gave him a slow kiss, then stood and helped him up. "For what it's worth, I take your smiles and laughter as a great compliment. It means a lot to me that you show me these secret sides of yourself."

"Well, you do the same." Levi brushed himself off. "You think anyone back at the base would believe me if I told them you started a snowball fight? That's how we work, right? We give each other all of ourselves. Even the parts we usually hide from everyone else."

"I suppose we do." Erwin grabbed his mitt, and they fell into step together again.

Once they stepped into their cabin and took off their jackets and boots, Erwin knelt by the tub. The bottom of the tub was lined with six blue glass compartments, about knee-high, that served as windows to the bottom of the water. A large candle sat inside each of the compartments. When he lit them, the flames and glass made the water appear to glow blue. He stared at it for a moment, enchanted.

"They thought of everything, didn't they?" Levi said from the fireplace, where he was starting a fire.

"It certainly adds to the ambience. Amazing what the human mind can come up with when it's not preoccupied with titan fighting, isn't it?"

They undressed and sank into the tub, sitting on the bench. The water was warm and made Erwin feel buoyant, almost weightless. He looked over at Levi and smiled at the blue lighting on his body.

"You look like a spirit." He draped his arms along the back of the tub, one of them positioned behind Levi's neck.

"We need one of these at the base." Levi's head lolled back against Erwin's arm, his eyes closing. "I don't know how I'm going to go back."

They sat in silence for several minutes. Erwin reflected on the words. He had meant for this vacation to give them good memories to carry with them, no matter how rough their futures became. Instead, he was exposing them to a world they could never have—what if this only made them bitter?

“Hey, Erwin?” Levi said quietly.

“Yeah?”

“Tell me more about these people we’re pretending to be.”

“August and Emil?” He paused. “Well, they’re both career-focussed, probably to a fault—August, in particular. Part of the reason they came on this getaway was to put that aside and focus on each other, something that sometimes escapes them back home, especially when they’re busy. It’s not for lack of love—they’re just both very driven.”

“Sounds familiar.” Levi looked as if he might be falling asleep; his face was completely relaxed. “You said they met in a bar?”

“Yeah, August was celebrating the end of a difficult semester at school, and Emil was celebrating the expansion of his bodyguard business. Emil saw August drinking alone, and immediately recognized his type—how did you describe it? Blond, hot, and possibly straight as an arrow.”

“Nine times out of ten, they’re straight,” Levi said with a hint of bitterness.

“Well, this time, Emil hit that one in ten. Bought August a drink, and they ended up chatting all night about nothing. They left the bar together at closing time, went back to August’s place.”

Levi opened his eyes. “They fucked on the first date?”

“Sure.”

“You wouldn’t even let me touch you on our first day together.”

Erwin slid closer. Their thighs touched, the skin slippery and unnaturally soft from the hot spring minerals. “Well, August never saw an ex-lover eaten by titans, so he doesn’t have any sort of trauma to consider. I figure he’s more like my younger self.”

Levi’s brows rose. “You used to fuck on the first date?”

“Ah.” Erwin’s cheeks darkened, and he hoped it could pass as flushing from the heat of the water. “I didn’t have the patience for any of society’s courtship rules, so if it felt right, and my partner was willing, there was no point in restraining myself. If that’s moving too fast for Emil, August would have respected—”

“No, Emil would be fine with it. As long as he got to top, at least for the first little while.”

“That works.” Erwin slid deeper into the water, letting it hit his collarbone. “It was supposed to be a one-night thing, but August got attached. He awkwardly invited Emil to stay until morning. After they shared a nice discussion over brunch, they realized they were falling in

love."

"Cute." Levi rested his hand on Erwin's thigh, gently stroking it under the water. "I like thinking we could attract each other's attention even if we hadn't been in the Survey Corps."

"Of course we could. If you had bought me a drink in a bar, I would have taken notice."

Levi hesitated. "So what does their future look like?"

"Well, they have a nice romantic getaway here," Erwin said, trying to picture how things would play out if they were their alter egos. "They return to their new home and adapt to living together. It's a bit strange, at first—August forgets to clean up after himself, and Emil is a neat freak."

"I bet August pulls dozens of books off the shelf at a time and leaves them in little disorganized piles on the floor, then just walks away. And at night, he falls asleep at his desk and gets drool all over everything."

Erwin cleared his throat, choosing to ignore the too-familiar criticisms. "They continue to grow closer, while also finding career successes as individuals. When their relationship is three and a half years in, August takes Emil on another romantic getaway." His heart pounded in his throat as he pictured it in his mind. "They take a day hike up a hill, because he knows Emil will love the view. And at the top, as the sun goes down over the horizon, he gets down on one knee."

"Oh?" Levi said, his eyelids low, but something about his body was too precisely relaxed, as if he were covering underlying tension. Perhaps it was his breaths, steady and even.

Erwin held his gaze. "He's not sure how Emil will react, or if he's even interested in taking this step together, but they've been together for long enough that he's pretty confident things will be okay no matter how Emil responds. And so, as the sun sets on the three-and-a-half year mark since that first night at the bar, August asks Emil to marry him."

Levi took a few more measured breaths, watching him. "Emil would probably say yes."

Adrenaline rushed through Erwin's body, and he took a steady, practiced breath of his own. "Yeah?"

"Sure. I mean, three and a half years—that's practically married. Long enough to know if it's a good fit, at least."

"I agree." Erwin smiled, confident now that his three-and-a-half year plan was the right one. His hand closed over Levi's. "They have a

small wedding, just their closest family and friends, then spend a month travelling as newlyweds. Then they settle into their home, where they have their whole lives ahead of them. Maybe they'll adopt children together, or maybe their careers will be enough to keep them fulfilled. They'll hear news stories about the reclamation of Wall Maria—maybe, if we're all lucky, about the triumph of the human race against the titans. Their biggest stresses will be petty arguments, or bill payments, or trouble at work.

“And when they’re wrinkled and grey, when their minds start to go and their bodies are failing, they’ll be each other’s comfort and support. Their love will grow stronger, year after year.” His throat tightened. He glanced at Levi, trying to envision him as an old man. He would look good with white hair, he decided, and his features were so fine that they would age well.

*A sight neither of us is likely to live to see.*

“I envy them,” Erwin added softly. “August and Emil. They won’t even realize how lucky they are.”

After a moment, Levi’s fingers interlocked with his. “You said once that if I had been Marie, if I had asked you to leave everything behind for a life with me, you probably would have agreed.”

The lump in Erwin’s throat grew, constricting his airflow. He took in a shuddering breath. “I did.”

“We could become them,” Levi said, not looking him in the eye. “We could disappear and never return to base, say ‘fuck you’ to humanity and live for ourselves instead.”

Erwin was dizzy, lightheaded, spinning. *Ask me.* But even as he thought it, the weight of his responsibilities was already grounding him. “It would mean living every day with the knowledge that we had left our duties and our comrades behind.”

Levi nodded slowly, as if distracted. “I don’t think I could live with that.”

“No. Neither could I.”

“What a couple of sad, morbid fuckers,” Levi muttered.

With a sad smile, Erwin said, “We’re fighting to give future Augusts and Emils a chance at all this.”

“Those little shits had better appreciate it. The hell we go through for them. The things we give up.”

Erwin’s grip tightened on his hand. “At least we aren’t alone.”

“Yeah, that’s something.” Levi looked at him, his eyes sad. “I

want to make love to you.”

The phrasing was so surprising that Erwin’s brows rose. “Okay. Just give me a minute to clean up.”

A few minutes later, he lay on his back on the bed, a pillow under his hips, as Levi gently worked himself into him. Already, Erwin could feel that the hot water had, as predicted, sapped away his ability to perform, but without the pressure of worrying about his own orgasm, he was free to focus all of his attention on Levi. His face was strained and flushed, and when he pushed all the way in, his nose briefly wrinkled, perfectly timed with his moan.

Erwin whispered Levi’s name, running the heel of his palm across the fuzzy chest.

“Oh god,” Levi whispered, his eyes closing. “Oh fuck, Erwin.” He hunched over Erwin’s abdomen, his head dropping, as he slowly rocked. Warmth began to build deep inside Erwin, and he groaned, his toes curling.

Levi’s head tossed back, his face pained. “I wish I could kiss you.”

Not trusting his spine’s flexibility in the wake of his injuries, Erwin smoothed a hand across Levi’s face instead. Levi gasped and kissed it, then took a finger into his mouth, gently circling it with his tongue. A long, low groan sounded in Erwin’s throat.

For several minutes, their bodies rocked together, Levi kissing and licking his fingers. Erwin ran his free hand across every space of the pale skin he could see, exploring him, memorizing his texture. The skin was still soft from the hot spring, still warm.

“Fuck.” The finger fell from Levi’s mouth. “You feel so good. I never want to stop. I never ...” His eyelids fluttered and he pushed in a little harder, holding for a beat. Erwin could feel him pulse inside him, and he gasped.

“Even slow like this, it feels so good.” Levi bent down and kissed Erwin’s breastbone. His strokes were still slow, but harder now, almost violent at the end. “You’re so warm ...” His voice rose into a moan.

Whispering his name, Erwin wrapped his legs around Levi’s torso. He wanted to memorize every facial expression Levi was making, every perfect sound.

“I want to be closer, I need ...” Levi kissed across to his nipple, then began to circle it with his tongue. His strokes were still slow and firm, and Erwin began to feel a familiar warmth building inside him, even though he wasn’t hard.

“You feel so good,” he whispered, barely able to form coherent thoughts.

Levi moaned. “Oh fuck, Erwin, I need you.” He sucked hard at the nipple, and Erwin threw his head back.

“I’m here. I’m yours.”

Levi clung tightly to him, breathing the words over and over: *I need you. I need you.*

“It’s okay. I’m here.” Erwin leaned back, feeling Levi’s torso rocking between his legs. He ran his hands along the flexing arms, then combed fingers through the dark hair. *So good. You feel so good.* Pleasure was still building inside him, washing over him, lapping at every inch of his skin, as warm and soft as the spring water. His body began to twitch, and he was withdrawing into himself. He wanted to call Levi’s name, but he couldn’t move his lips; they were numb, engulfed by that growing warmth. He was vibrating, energy burning him at every point of contact, building deep inside.

He heard himself yell as the pressure erupted, and he heard Levi echo the sound. They clung to each other, their bodies quaking, their cries fuelling each other, answering each other.

The instant the last pulses faded, Levi crawled up his body, ignoring the mess between them, and kissed him hard. Erwin could barely coordinate his lips to kiss him back. Every muscle in his body was relaxed and tingling.

Levi pulled away, resting his forehead on Erwin’s. “I wish ...” He swallowed hard and didn’t continue. There was no need. They were both thinking it, and what was the point in wishing for things they could never have?

Erwin closed a hand over his cheek and lifted his chin, staring solemnly into his eyes. “We’re here, Levi, for six more days. Don’t miss the whole thing worrying about it being over, remember?”

Levi paused, then nodded. “Yeah.”

Erwin kissed his forehead, then gripped his shoulders and gently rolled him to the side. He passed over a handkerchief, then quickly used another to clean himself. “I’ll be back in a moment. I just have to get something.”

Levi sat up, mopping himself. “What are you getting?”

“It must be after midnight by now, right?” Erwin stood. In spite of the fire, the room was chilly, and goosebumps rose across his skin as he bent in front of the chest. “It’s your birthday, and I have something

for you.” He had intended to save it for breakfast, but after such an emotional connection, the timing felt right. He tucked the gift in his palm, then returned to the bed. “Hold out your hands.”

A brow furrowed, Levi obeyed. Erwin dropped a set of keys into his outstretched palms.

“Keys?” Levi asked.

“A formality.” Erwin spread them in Levi’s palm and tapped one key at a time. “Apartments. Trost—you’re familiar with this one already. Karanese. Ehrmich. Shiganshina—that one’s useless now, but one day, it’ll be useful again.”

“How fucking rich are you?” Levi asked, staring at the keys..

“I tied up much of my father’s inheritance in real estate long ago.” He considered Shiganshina and added, “Some were better investments than others.”

“So you’re giving me permission to use all these?”

“More than that. They’re ours.”

Levi’s gaze lifted to meet his. “Ours?”

“Well, I can’t put your name on the deeds without raising suspicions, of course, but effectively, they’re half yours. You’ll have full access to them whenever you like. I’ll never sell them without consulting with you first, and you’d be entitled to half the sale value. As well, I’ve formally made you my next of kin, so if something happens to me, the deeds will all transfer to you.” Erwin’s cheeks were burning, so he looked down. “I guess this is the closest I can come to asking you to move in with me, given that we’ve lived together since before we fell in love. It’s more symbolic than anything, a sign that I consider you more important than just a typical relationship.” The gesture had seemed grander in his mind, and the dumbfounded stare from Levi was making him second-guess himself. “I’m sorry; this was supposed to be romantic.”

“It is.” Levi swallowed hard, his fingers curling around the keys. “This is really fucking nice of you, Erwin. But it’s lopsided.”

“Lopsided?”

“I have nothing to offer you.”

Erwin frowned. He gripped both of the slender hands, the keys pressed between their palms. “Levi, think about all that has happened this year. Because of you, we were able to retrieve the contents of the first silo, which began the whole silo reclamation process. Because of you, I learned that I could trust Nile, and now that he’s Commander, we

can possibly ally with the Military Police in ways we never could before. You were the one to get Sahlo's name in the first place, and you keep him on his toes if he gets too cocky around me. You've sacrificed your future to stand by my side, to fight for the causes we believe in. And more than that ... " He pressed Levi's empty palm to his chest. "You're the reason this is still beating. You rescued me, then nursed me back to health when I was at death's door. You stood by my side as I recovered." He swallowed hard. "In return, I've thrown a few properties at you and asked you to continue risking your life at my command. You're right; it is lopsided. But not in the way you think."

Levi's mouth twisted. "You're too fucking sentimental," he muttered, and he looked down, but not before Erwin saw glassy eyes.

"Happy Birthday, Levi."

The keys fell to the bed sheets as Levi wrapped his arms around him, burrowing beneath his chin.

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