

HE
CHOSE
TITANS



PART III
CONSUME

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PART III: CONSUME

PROLOGUE

Levi and Erwin returned to Trost in late December 846. For the next several months, the Survey Corps continued its focus on recruiting and finding investors. Levi's celebrity status was a great help to both, and though it made him uncomfortable to hold the spotlight, he knew it was for the good of the Corps. He arm wrestled, he demonstrated titan takedowns to trainees, he punched through cinder blocks, all while Erwin told tales of his amazing feats on the battlefield. Because they weren't leaving the walls, there was almost no negative publicity to counteract their efforts, and as a result, the Survey Corps began to flourish. By early summer, their roster was high enough to resume expeditions, and Erwin had recovered enough to lead them.

As time passed, Erwin's goal of taking back Wall Maria within three to five years began to seem plausible. Under his leadership, they aggressively pushed ahead with several smaller expeditions a year instead of just one or two large ones. They carved a path toward the wall, laying supplies and securing checkpoints. It was slow work, and costly: actively attempting to clear checkpoints meant engaging the titans head-on rather than avoiding them. Casualty rates were high. Fortunately, Levi's strike squad fared well, but other teams began to weaken. By the end of the autumn of 847, they were desperately in need of more soldiers.

That winter, Erwin intensified the recruiting drive yet again, enlisting the help of Shadis and Berit to raise the Corps' profile with Trainees. Once spring arrived, they headed out with their numbers bolstered, and the annual cycle began again: perform a song and dance for investors, lay supplies, recruit more trainees to fill the empty spaces left behind. The months began to blur together, and so did the names and faces of the young soldiers around them.

The steady loss of soldiers wasn't the only change in the Survey Corps. Less noticeable to the masses, but more noticeable to Levi, was

the impact on officer morale. As the expeditions passed and the number of casualties increased, Mike became more quiet and withdrawn. He still socialized with the other officers, but rarely contributed to the conversation aside from the occasional shrug or grunt. It wasn't in Levi's nature to know how to draw someone out of their shell, but he was beginning to miss Mike's stories. Training with him these days was more like punching a piece of equipment than a friend.

Hange, meanwhile, dove headfirst into research, spending odd hours working on new weapons and poring over titan behaviour documentation. While the Corps' knowledge and traps were improving at a rapid rate, Levi found himself missing the quiet, personal conversations he had once shared with Hange. The two of them still had their moments, but Hange was growing increasingly eccentric. It seemed most conversations these days led to a boring lecture about titan physiology.

Levi, on the other hand, didn't feel he was changing much. His personality had been forged in times of stress long before he had joined the Corps, so extra stress didn't affect him. His role, however, demanded more of his time and attention than ever before. The troops had begun to call him Captain as he took on the honourary role of Erwin's right hand man, and his duties had accumulated accordingly. He worked almost as hard as Erwin himself these days.

And Erwin ...

Every time the townsfolk confronted him after expeditions, every time a politician or investor questioned his intentions, the Commander's mask hardened a little more. Each time it hardened, it took a little longer to come off again. His calm expression and polite, restrained smile were the only expressions he ever wore when anyone other than Levi was in the room. The tone of his voice had always been measured, but now it was careful, polite, and emotionless.

Still, even when the mask was up, Erwin and Levi were inseparable. Ultimately, it was Erwin's vision guiding the Survey Corps, but the two of them stood side-by-side at the helm. Erwin took the lead on finances and long-term planning, while Levi took on many of the day-to-day issues involving the soldiers. The strength of their joint leadership was invaluable, as was their ability to read each other on the battlefield.

This shared drive was a double-edged sword. It was too easy to lose themselves in their work, too easy to forget they were Erwin and Levi, not just Commander and Captain. Once they were in private, they were still the same lovestruck men who had wrestled in the snow in

Utopia District, but it was getting increasingly difficult to find private time. Even on the nights they made love, it was increasingly common for one of them to awaken to a cold, lonely bed while the other sat at the desk by lamplight.

By the end of year 848, they had begun carefully scheduling three nights a week together, from midnight until reveille. It seemed to be the only way to ensure they kept their romance strong—and, as a bonus, it forced them to get a decent amount of sleep a few nights a week. Maybe it wasn't as spontaneous as they would have liked, but there didn't seem to be any other solution for now. They had always known their duties took priority over their relationship. Until humanity was free, they were not.

Still, a part of Levi missed the early days of their relationship, when the reclamation of Wall Maria had seemed impossibly far away. It had been easier back then to fool themselves into thinking they had time to lounge around together.

And so, he was relieved when one warm spring night in 849, Erwin spoke up from his side of the bed: "We should go away together."

Levi rolled over to face him. "Yeah?"

"A few months from now. Let's set aside a week, make some excuse, and forget all this for a while." Erwin laid a hand along Levi's jaw, tracing his lower lip with his thumb. "I want one last chance to enjoy ourselves before the final push to reclaim Wall Maria."

"You think we're going to die in the push."

"It's likely at least one of us will." Erwin's gaze was so sad, so painful, that Levi found himself wishing for his emotionless mask to go up instead.

"We're not going to die." He kissed Erwin's thumb. "But sure, I'll go away with you."

"Maybe the end of the summer. Between expeditions, so it won't impact our schedule."

"Sounds good." Levi slid across the mattress to seal the agreement with a kiss.

But urgent tasks stole time from them night after night, week after week, and when they finally had a moment to lift their heads, summer was already ending.

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WARNING

September 849

“Captain.”

Levi looked up from his desk to see Eld and Petra standing in the doorway of his office. His eyes drifted to a stack of papers in Petra’s hand. She had mentioned something about paperwork during lunch; he hadn’t paid much attention. “Okay, grab a seat.”

The soldiers nodded and pulled up chairs across from him. Petra slid the papers across the top of the desk.

Levi was so fatigued that the numbers blurred together. He flipped through a few pages, frowning. “What am I looking at?”

“Salary guidelines and my pay stubs, Captain.” Petra politely smiled, her gaze ducking away from his. She had been doing that a lot lately, and he was beginning to wonder if he had offended her without realizing it.

“And?”

Eld sighed, folding his arms over his chest. “She’s being underpaid. She doesn’t want to say anything because she’s stubborn.”

“No, because I don’t want to seem like the only reason I’m here is to get paid.” Her eyes narrowed at him. “I don’t want to cause a fuss—”

“Your family needs the money.”

“Both of you, shut up.” Levi was running on two hours of sleep, and his head throbbed. It was aggravating enough that heavy rainfall had been drumming at the windows all day; their rising voices weren’t helping his headache. “Petra, why aren’t we paying you enough?”

Her cheeks darkened. “I think it’s something to do with my transfer, Captain. The accountants probably don’t realize I was in the military for more than a year before I came here, so I’m still getting rookie pay.”

Erwin's not going to like this. Levi leaned back in his chair. One of their major investment sources had just dried up—something to do with squabbles over a will—and Petra's back pay would add up to a sizable amount. He took a long sip of tea, then set down his mug. “Is Oluo having the same problem?”

Her mouth twisted as if she had eaten something unpleasant. “I haven’t asked.”

“Well, he’s meeting with Erwin next door. We’ll ask when they’re done.” Levi rocked his chair forward, setting all four legs on the ground, and pulled out a ledger. “Let’s figure out what we owe you while we’re waiting.” He wasn’t great with words, but he was good with numbers.

The three of them were only a few minutes into the task when a knock sounded at the door.

“What?” Levi called.

The door opened, and Oluo walked in, smoothing the ridiculous copycat cravat he had recently started wearing. “Captain, I can’t find Commander Erwin anywhere.”

Levi tried to blink the clerical fog from his mind. “He’s not in his office?”

“No.” Oluo ran a hand through his curly hair, his face tightening with an arrogant expression. “We had a meeting for five o’clock on the dot, and I’ve been waiting twenty minutes. I can’t write my monthly report to Commander Nile without him, but I can’t wait around all day for him. My time is valuable.”

Oluo was one hell of a soldier and he had a good heart, but he had the unique ability to annoy everyone who came near him. Levi felt his skin begin to crawl with irritation at the arrogant tone. “Did you check the research lab?”

“Of course.”

“The mess hall? The bathroom? Maybe he’s taking a really long shit.”

“Checked. Not there. He’s not in the gym, either.”

Levi glanced at the window. The rain was coming down so hard that it sounded like hail. His mouth flattened. *Ah.* Rainstorms like this did strange things to Erwin’s mood. “I know where he is. Talk to Eld and Petra about this clerical problem while I’m gone. Figure out if it affects you, too.”

“Captain, maybe we’d be better off summarizing it for him in a letter when we’re done,” Petra said.

“A clerical problem? I’m sure you could both benefit from my experience.” Oluo pulled up a chair. “After all, the Captain and the Commander entrust me with direct communication with Commander Nile, and—”

Levi stepped out of his office, closed the door behind him, and shook his head.

He strode through the hallway, ignoring the soldiers who greeted him along the way. Making sure no eyes were on him, he ducked down the hallway to the unused portion of the building, then made his way to the guard tower door. The broken lock here still gave the illusion that the door was sealed off. Levi had suggested installing an actual lock—they made use of the tower often enough that someone was bound to discover their secret sooner or later—but Erwin had muttered some excuse about a new lock only drawing attention to it. Levi suspected he was just too cheap.

The door closed behind him, immersing him in darkness. He paced his way to the ladder by memory and began to climb.

He opened the trap door to the guard tower, and was immediately bombarded by raindrops so large and warm that they felt slimy. Erwin was perched against the small wall lining the top of the tower, his back to the trap door. He seemed to be staring across the city, though the fog was so thick that Levi couldn’t even see the rooftops of the buildings around them.

He let the trap door fall closed. Though Erwin didn’t turn around, his posture straightened a little at the sound. His hair was dripping and his jacket was dark with moisture.

“You’re soaking wet.” Levi padded closer, then leaned against the wall beside him.

Erwin’s voice was quiet: “When it rains like this, the city smells like the land outside Wall Maria.”

“You think so? Still smells like garbage and piss to me.” Levi noticed Erwin was clutching an envelope to his chest. “Is this a normal rainy day suck, or is that bad news?”

Erwin looked blankly down at the letter, as if he had forgotten about it. “It’s from Helena.”

“Your sister?” Levi swabbed raindrops off his face. “I thought I told her to stay away from you.”

“This is the first I’ve heard from her since our meeting a few years back.” His face hardened. “She wants to meet tomorrow at an a-

partment in a small town in Wall Rose.”

The jumping muscle in his jaw wasn’t enough information—was he angry? Worried? Levi edged closer to him. “You going?”

“I’d be travelling through the town on the way to Mitras, anyway. The timing is more than a little coincidental.” A pause. “I can’t figure out what spurred her to reach out to me after such a final visit last time. My imagination is not being kind to me.”

Levi didn’t hesitate: “I’m coming with you.” The original plan had been for him to stay behind and train some of the newer recruits, but Mike could handle that alone. He wasn’t about to let Erwin go into family drama unprotected, particularly when Tessa—or Helena, or whatever her name was—had said Erwin would be in a coffin the next time they met.

The blue gaze fixed on him for a moment. Levi held it, unyielding. At last, Erwin gave him a polite smile. Levi hated that smile; it was worse than a frown. It meant Erwin was suffering and he wanted to do it alone. *Self-sacrificing asshole.*

“We’ll leave at eight thirty tomorrow morning,” Erwin said. “Unfortunately, that means we won’t be spending tonight together as planned—you’ll need to sort out the training in your absence, and I have a bit of extra paperwork to do.”

“You can make it up to me while we’re in Mitras.” Levi stood. “Come inside. You’re getting drenched, and Oluo’s been waiting twenty minutes for—” He stopped as he saw Erwin’s face fall. “What now?”

“Oluo’s report,” Erwin said. “It’s September already, isn’t it?”

“Yeah?”

“We had planned to go away together.”

“It can wait,” Levi said with a shrug, trying not to show his disappointment. “We’ve been busy.” Busy was an understatement. First there had been the expedition at the end of July, then Erwin had been in the Capital alone for nearly two weeks. After one frantic night together, Levi had left on a three week scouting mission. Last night’s reunion had been cut short by their work on the reports for Erwin’s upcoming trip. Just thinking about it all, he felt loneliness pit in his stomach, cold and hollow. *There’s never any time.*

“I’m sorry, Levi,” Erwin said quietly. “It was really important to me that we go away this August—it’s been my plan for a long time. I’m disappointed that I let it slip by.”

Levi sighed. He pressed a cheek to Erwin’s chest and snaked his

arms around him. The cloth was damp. Beneath it, he could hear Erwin's heartbeat, strong and fast.

"Look," he said. "Stop looking for things to feel bad about. We were *both* busy, not just you. Besides, we've got enough stress already." He closed his eyes, feeling raindrops seep through his hair and trickle down his scalp.

Erwin's arms wrapped around him, his embrace tight. "After our next expedition, let's go away. For real, this time. How does a few days in Ehrmich sound? We can use the excuse that we're inspecting the empty Survey Corps base, but stay in our apartment."

"I've never been to Ehrmich," Levi said.

"It's not quite as fancy as the last time we went away, but there are some scenic places to visit. There's ... " Erwin hesitated. "There's a small hill overlooking the city, and I think you'd like the view. Maybe we can go for a hike together."

Levi's breath caught. He recalled August and Emil and their trip up the hill, their celebration of three-and-a-half years since they had first started dating. He had replayed that conversation in his head countless times over the past three years, wondering if Erwin would follow through.

Nuzzling against the broad chest, he said, "Sure, let's go on that hike."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I bet I'll like what I see when the sun sets."

Beneath his ear, Erwin's heart began to beat faster.

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That night, Levi met Mike in the mess hall for some ale. They took a small table together, and Mike listened quietly while Levi covered all the training instructions. Once he was done, there was still a half-full bottle for each of them to get through. For several minutes, the only sound was the occasional sip of ale and then the thunk of glass on wood. This was the most awkward silence between them yet, and Levi couldn't take it anymore.

"Hey, you okay?"

Mike shrugged. "Why?"

"You're quiet."

Mike looked down, the dark blond fringe covering his eyes. He

absently peeled at his bottle label.

“Couldn’t shut you up, once,” Levi continued. “Always had a story to tell.”

“Most of the people in those stories are dead now.”

“Huh.” Levi took a long swallow of ale. “Guess it wears on a person.”

“Yeah. Start wondering who will be next. Maybe someone you care about more than you should.” Mike drained the rest of his bottle.

“Oh.” Levi watched him, wondering who he meant. His first instinct was Hange, but that seemed unlikely given that Mike was scent-oriented and Hange seemed to have given up on voluntarily bathing. *Nanaba? Lynne? ... Gelgar?* Usually he had a good sense of who was fucking whom around the base, but he hadn’t noticed anything unusual about Mike lately, even when they had been on the field together. Maybe he had just been too absorbed with his work to notice.

“Maybe I’ll feel chattier when we win back Wall Maria,” Mike said. “Except the closer we get, the further away it feels.”

“It won’t be much longer now. Six more months, tops.” Levi drained the rest of the bottle. “This is depressing. Want to go spar?”

“Now?”

“I know it’s late, but I’m heading to the Capital tomorrow, and fuck knows when I’ll be back.”

Mike appeared to be considering the offer. He stood. “Should we invite Erwin?”

“I’ll ask, but I doubt he’ll have time. I’ll check with four-eyes, too.” Hange was a bit weaker in a fight than the rest of them, but seemed to take strange delight in taking stupid risks in the fray. Their first sparring session had ended with Hange cackling on the ground with broken goggles and a nosebleed. Levi had sincerely feared for the Squad Leader’s state of mind.

His first stop was Erwin’s office. Not bothering to knock, he opened the door.

Two sets of eyes looked up at him; Petra was sitting at his desk. *Right, she was going to talk to him about the pay issue.*

Levi slumped against the doorframe. “Mike and I are sparring for a bit. You have time, Erwin?”

Erwin’s brows cocked. “It’s nine o’clock at night.”

“Didn’t think so.”

“I have time, Captain,” Petra said quickly.

Levi eyed her. “Think you can keep up?”

Defiance sparked in her eyes for just a moment before it was overcome by her usual pleasant expression. “I think I did pretty well last time we sparred.”

“You mean that time I was drunk off my ass and you had your gear?” He turned away. “Sure, try it, if you want. And Erwin, don’t forget to sleep tonight. You’re no good to us if you’re dead on your feet at the Capital.”

Hange’s office was empty, so Levi went downstairs to the laboratory. Hange was stabbing a large, barbed hook into a thick canvas, and Moblit was taking notes.

“Hey, shtglasses,” Levi said, cocking his nose at the Squad Leader. “Take a break and come spar with Mike and me.”

Hange knelt down to peer at the canvas. “If we perfect this design, Erwin’s going to hire a contact to make a bunch of these out of the same material as our blades.”

Levi sighed and turned to Moblit. “How about you, Scribbles?”

“Not tonight, Captain. Sorry.” Moblit knelt beside his Squad Leader, sketching.

It wasn’t quite the turnout Levi had hoped for, but at least Petra’s presence would add some variety to their routine. She was stretching her legs in the gym when Levi arrived. She was dressed in simple black workout gear, her hair pulled back in a half-ponytail. As he approached, she hopped to her feet and saluted. He waved her down.

“You’re jumpy today.”

“Sorry, Captain.” She was staring fixedly at his bare chest, as if avoiding his gaze. He wondered if it had been a mistake to wear his gym gear. His squad wasn’t accustomed to seeing him out of uniform; this might be breaking his illusion of leadership. Or maybe her discomfort had nothing to do with him at all.

“Someone piss you off or something?” he asked. “Erwin? Oluo?”

“No. I mean, Oluo’s annoying, but I’m fine.” She grimaced and added under her breath, “Really, really annoying.”

“Oh?” he asked, even though he knew.

She sighed. “You must have noticed he’s been dressing like you and trying to talk like you, Captain. And he’s always bragging about how you and Commander Erwin entrust him with important reports to the Capital.”

“He does all that because he’s insecure. See through that, and it

won't bother you as much. He'll grow out of it one day, anyway." Levi swung his arms, trying to loosen them up. His back was stiff from sitting at his desk all day. "You don't have to like each other, but don't let interpersonal shit affect your opinion of him on the battlefield. You two work well together, and I don't want you losing that." He stepped into the ring. "Now let's see what you've got while we're waiting for Mike."

"Okay, Captain." She stood opposite him, bouncing on the balls of her feet. Light flared in her eyes, that same defiance he frequently saw on the battlefield. Petra had a deep aggressive streak beneath that gracious exterior, and he was interested to see how she would use it in a sparring match.

His eyes trailed down her body as he sized her up. Her height was going to prove interesting—he was accustomed to fighting opponents who were taller than him. However, she was too upright, too tense. She must be overthinking the positions of her limbs. Erwin had a tendency to do that, too.

She stepped forward with a punch that would have been strong enough to catch most opponents, but Levi easily sidestepped, then spun around her follow-up punch. He tapped the back of her head.

"Hey!" She whirled to face him. "Don't just dodge around me. Fight me—"

He dove in low and caught her by the collar and the waistband, hoisted her over his head, and gently dropped her onto her back on the mat. She landed with an *oof*. He stood over her, staring down his nose.

"You're trying to press the offense by beating my speed, but you can't," he said. "You've gotten too used to big, slow targets. The way you fought me as Sofi Lalonde was by anticipating a human's movements and instinctively reacting to everything I did. Don't lose that."

She stared up at him, eyes wide. "You remembered my fake name."

He shrugged. It wasn't often that someone kicked the shit out of him. "Get up."

After a few more minutes, Petra seemed to warm up, her attacks posing a mild challenge now. She was definitely one of the better soldiers he had fought hand-to-hand—she used her petite height to her advantage, and she was quick to capitalize on every opening he offered.

Mike arrived a few minutes later with Lynne and Gelgar in tow. Levi stepped aside, letting Mike and Petra spar for a few minutes. She fared far better against Mike; he kept getting caught off guard by her ag-

gressive counterattacks. He finally dropped her, and she moved to step out of the ring.

“Not yet,” Levi said. “Lynne, fight her.”

Petra’s brows rose, but Levi only folded his arms over his chest. He needed to keep his squad at the top of their game, and a person’s weaknesses were clearest when they got tired and sloppy. He would be doing the girl a disservice if he didn’t have any improvements to suggest.

Lynne was fast on the gear in the field, but slow at hand-to-hand. Petra had the upper hand from the beginning and easily won the match. She also revealed the weakness Levi had been seeking.

“Petra, come here,” he said once the match was over. He grabbed her shoulders and set her in stance away from the others. “Throw a right punch.” He stood beside her and placed a single finger against her right hip bone.

“Um, Captain,” she said.

“I’m making a point. Throw a right, then hold your stance with your punch extended.”

She did so, her hips twisting.

“Look how far forward my finger is,” he said. “Now throw a left and do the same.” He moved to her other side, placing a finger on her left hip. This time, her hip only moved a couple centimetres. “Look where my finger is.”

“Oh. I’m not twisting my hips enough on that side, am I?”

“No, and it’s cutting your power in half. When I get back from the Capital, I’m going to test this again, so work on it. We’ll be doing gear training, too, and I want you to show me right and left strikes. Maybe you’re doing the same thing in the air, and that’s why your left strike is so weak.” His nose wrinkled as he noticed the acrid smell coming off her. “But wash your workout clothes first.”

“Oh!” She stepped away, clapping a hand over her mouth. “Do I stink?”

He hesitated at the horror on her face. *This is probably one of those situations where I should have kept my mouth shut.* “Well, you just fought three fights in a row. Anyone would stink after that.”

“Oh,” she said again, her face crimson. “Sorry, Captain. Thank you for taking the time to train me. I’ll go wash up.” She whirled on her heel and marched to the door.

As the door closed, Mike stepped up to Levi’s side. “You’re an

asshole.”

“What?”

“She’s tripping over herself to impress her Captain, and you didn’t say one nice thing about her fighting, then told her she stank.” Mike’s arms folded over his chest. “She smelled fine, by the way. Maybe you just don’t like the way women smell.”

“She’s a soldier. She can take it,” Levi said, but he found himself thinking Mike was right. *Why am I so hard on her?* Even as he was thinking it, he knew the answer: because she reminded him so much of Isabel. He wanted to make sure that this time, he trained her right. He wanted her to be able to defend herself against any threat that came her way.

He let out a low sigh. *Petra isn’t Isabel. She’s survived dozens of fights already. You can’t change the past, so let it go.*

“Come on.” Mike clapped a hand on his shoulder and cocked his head toward the ring.

Levi nodded and fell into step beside him.

He spent the next hour sparring and, when he wasn’t in the ring, carefully studying the others. Every soldier had a unique fighting style, and there were things he could learn from each of them—new moves, or habits to avoid. By the time he sank into the cold bath upstairs, his muscles ached and his mind was alight.

He poked his head into Erwin’s office around eleven o’clock. “Hey.”

Erwin looked up from a stack of paperwork, his eyes glazed. “Come in.”

Levi shut the door, then dropped onto the couch. “Have time to take a break?”

“Not really, but I have a contract to read through, so I could get away from my desk and sit with you for a bit.”

“Sure.”

Erwin tucked a stack of papers under his arm and gripped a tea mug, then sat on the couch next to Levi. He held out the mug. Levi accepted it and took a sip: black tea with a hint of brandy.

“You’re drinking?”

“Only a little. Not sure I can get through this bullshit without it.” Erwin leaned over to kiss Levi’s cheek, then paused. “You bathed already.”

“Were you hoping my hair was wet because it was dripping with sweat, you pervert?”

“Probably a good thing it’s not. I don’t think I could withstand the allure of your sweat right now.” Erwin gave a soft, breathy kiss to his jaw.

Levi pulled away. “The door’s unlocked.”

“Ah. Then I’ll be good.” Erwin took the cup back, grabbing it with a distinctively clawed hand the way Levi did. He had started doing that at some point over the last couple years, and Levi couldn’t tell if it was intentional or accidental. He didn’t want to ask for fear that pointing it out would embarrass him and make him stop. There was something flattering about him copying Levi’s movements. Levi had probably picked up some of Erwin’s habits without realizing it, too.

“How was sparring with Petra?”

“She isn’t bad. Mike said I was being an asshole to her, though.”

“I can’t imagine.” Erwin smiled. “Our workload has grown so much that I’m thinking it’s time to finally start training a fourth Squad Leader. Is Petra a good candidate?”

Levi considered. “She’s got the right demeanour for it, but she’s still too green. Always trying to impress her superiors instead of thinking for herself. Eld’s a better fit, but needs a bit more time. Maybe give him another year.”

“Anyone else leap to mind? Maybe someone from Mike or Hange’s squads?” Erwin took another sip of his drink, then held it out again. Levi accepted it. The alcohol was stronger nearer the bottom.

“Probably Nanaba and Dita.” He yawned so hard that tears welled in his eyes. Sparring had taken it out of him more than he had realized.

“Okay. I’ll get Hange and Mike’s opinions on all this, too. Maybe we can time this to have a fourth Squad Leader in place for the wall reclamation effort.” Erwin held out a hand to take back the drink. Levi drained the rest of it, then placed the empty mug in his hand.

Erwin stared into the bottom of the mug. “I was hoping you’d save me a little bit.”

“There was too much liquor at the bottom. You can’t read your contract if you get drunk.” Levi leaned against his shoulder, his eyelids heavy.

“Always looking out for me.”

“Mm.” It was suddenly too much effort to form words.

“Are you falling asleep? Don’t tell me the liquor hit you that quickly.”

“Shut up,” Levi mumbled, too tired to explain that he was tired from sparring.

He felt a soft kiss press into the top of his hair, and then he began to drift. He didn’t realize he had fallen asleep until Erwin’s voice woke him up:

“Levi.”

“Hm?” He opened his eyes and immediately noticed his neck was stiff. He sat up, rolling his head to stretch it. “Did I fall asleep?”

Erwin smiled. “For about an hour. Snoring and everything.”

“Holy shit.” He was embarrassed to see a damp spot on Erwin’s shoulder; he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Didn’t realize I was so tired. Maybe I should go to bed.” He paused. “Am I sleeping in my bed tonight, or yours?”

“Probably yours, though I wish I could join you. I have some more work to do before we leave.” Erwin smoothed the bangs from Levi’s forehead and pressed a kiss into the centre of it. He smelled of sweat, cologne, spiced tea, brandy, and, faintly, coffee.

Levi breathed in the scent, tasting it. *Maybe you just don’t like the way women smell*, Mike had said, but it was more than that, because Levi didn’t like the way men smelled, either. All his previous lovers stank. Not Erwin. No matter how strong his smell, it still made Levi glow—especially now, when he was pent up. One night of frantic sex wasn’t nearly enough release after such a long scouting mission.

“We’ll have time for sex in the Capital, right?” he murmured.

Erwin pulled away to look him in the eye, face solemn. “Every single night.”

“Good.”

They exchanged a shallow kiss, both too paranoid about the door to relax into it.

“See you at eight thirty in the courtyard.” Erwin strode over to his desk and began to arrange stacks of paper. “Come in plainclothes; we don’t want to be in uniform when we meet my sister. Bring at least one more set of plainclothes in addition to your uniforms, as well as a suit. We’ll be doing more than just speaking in front of the Council during this trip.”

“Sure. Goodnight, Erwin.”

“Goodnight, Levi.”

Without looking back, Levi left the office. He shuffled to his room, removed his boots and collapsed on the bed.

8

Morning came too soon.

Levi usually awoke an hour before reveille, but this time he woke up with the bells, the room already orange with the light from the sunrise. He dragged himself to the bathroom to clean up, annoyed that he didn't have his usual peace and quiet. At least it was a heated bath day; he soaked for longer than necessary, his muscles sore from sparring. He had a lengthy breakfast and three cups of tea, keeping an eye out for Erwin, but he didn't appear.

Once he had finished packing the last of his things, he carried the trunk next door to Erwin's bedroom. Shortly after Berit had left the Survey Corps, Erwin had shuffled the room arrangements, carefully placing their rooms side by side against the wall of the building. When they were in Erwin's room, they had a one room buffer, and it was only Mike on the other side. Below them was the furnace room. Now the only occasion to muffle themselves was during expeditions, though of course they couldn't outright yell unless they were in their apartment in town. Levi sometimes wondered what the apartment neighbours must think went on in there.

He knocked on Erwin's door, but there was no response. Levi frowned. He knew what that meant.

Leaving the trunk in the hallway, he strode to Erwin's office and threw open the door. "You didn't sleep."

Erwin looked up from his desk, surprise on his face. "Is it morning already?"

"Didn't you hear reveille?"

"I suppose I was distracted." His eyes were sunken, the skin around them dark. "What time is it?"

"Eight."

"I see." Erwin raked a hand through his hair. "I haven't even started packing."

"The hell's the hold up?" Levi strode across the room and perched on the corner of the desk, looking down at the document. The printed text across the top read, *Application for Military Promotion*. Had Erwin chosen a new Squad Leader already? It wasn't like him to make any personnel changes without running them past Levi first. "Who's getting promoted?"

Erwin smiled. "You."

"Me?"

"September marks your fifth anniversary with the Survey Corps, which means you're formally eligible to hold the rank of Captain. We've been referring to you by that rank for long enough—it's about time you got the proper pay and military recognition for it."

"Huh," Levi said. "Can we afford that?"

"We'll make it work. It's important that every soldier receives fair compensation for their duties." Erwin stood and began to gather his papers. "I'm afraid my work is scattered around my office. It'll take me a few minutes to get everything in order."

"Get everything you need here, then go get cleaned up," Levi said. "I'll pack your trunk."

Erwin gave him a nod that conveyed gratitude. "Thank you, Levi. I'll see you in the courtyard in fifteen minutes."

"Make sure you eat something," Levi said as he left the room, because he knew Erwin would forget without a reminder. For someone who commanded an entire branch of the military, he was surprisingly terrible at taking care of his own needs.

As was typical after a series of long work nights, the floor of Erwin's room was littered with books and clothes. He always made the effort to tidy up before Levi spent the night, but this was a more spontaneous visit. Levi wrinkled his nose and began to deposit the clothes into the laundry hamper. He paused to lift one of the dress shirts to his face, breathing in the collar: Erwin's cologne, soap, and shampoo. His heart began to pound. *I wonder if he's going to be too tired to fuck in the carriage?*

Perhaps it was his pent-up libido that guided him as he packed two bottles of lubricant, a small toy, and that little pair of black under-wear that tended to ride a little too far up Erwin's ass. Once that was taken care of, he turned to the necessities: a spare uniform, a few sets of plainclothes, a suit, and then all his toiletries.

Lastly, he grabbed the book from Erwin's nightstand, being careful to keep the bookmark in place. On rare occasions when they had spare time, he enjoyed snuggling up together as Erwin read. Maybe they would have a quiet moment to themselves at the hotel.

With one last scan of the room, he shut the trunk and hauled it downstairs.

He found Erwin in the courtyard speaking with the driver. Once

they had confirmed their route and their things were safely stowed, the two men settled into the carriage, facing each other. Erwin's eyes were cold. *His mask is on*, Levi thought. Given that they were about to face his sister, that made sense.

"Levi?" He must have been staring.

With a shrug, Levi looked down. "Can't read you when you're wearing that dumb expression."

"Ah. Am I doing it again?"

"Yeah, but I get it. You've got a lot on your mind."

"No, I apologize. I don't mean to seem cold." Erwin crossed the cabin and sat beside Levi. "I'm trying to figure out what my sister could possibly want. My mind is racing with possibilities, all of them dismal. Truth be told, part of the reason I stayed up all night was because I was afraid of the ways my mind might taunt me if I didn't keep it occupied." He shifted closer, a hand settling on Levi's knee. "Even when I recognize that my mind is giving me irrational possibilities, I can't seem to block them out. Particularly when I'm tired."

That hand on Levi's knee was breaking the ice between them. It always seemed to be that way lately: the walls between their business and personal sides crumbled when they touched. Levi ran his fingertips in slow circles over the back of Erwin's hand, feeling the faint, sparse blond hair, and the familiar lines of the tendons beneath it. "You think she's in some kind of trouble."

"Maybe. Or maybe my mother is dead. Or—" The word ended too abruptly, and then there was silence.

"You need sleep. You get paranoid when you're tired."

"I know."

When Levi finally dared to look up, he was relieved to see vulnerability on Erwin's face. He reached up to trace the jaw, faintly stubbled blond. "Lay your head in my lap. I'll watch over you."

"But what about you?" Erwin's voice had finally softened. "You must still need to vent some energy after your mission. I'm sure the other night wasn't enough."

"I'm that predictable?" Levi said, hoping his desperation wasn't showing on his face.

"Well ..." The hand on his knee tightened as Erwin leaned down to press a soft kiss below his jaw. "You aren't the only one who needs it." The cold tip of his nose nuzzled Levi's ear.

A shiver ran down Levi's spine, but he knew there were more

important things at the moment than their dicks. The upcoming meeting might require some delicate manoeuvring, so Erwin needed to be alert. His groin ached in protest as he forced out the words: "Later. You're going to be useless if you don't get any sleep."

"Very well. We'll take good care of you tonight." Erwin kissed his ear, then pulled away.

Levi drew in a shaky breath. He settled in the corner, and Erwin laid his head in his lap, stretching out across the makeshift bed. The blue eyes were still open, staring at nothing. Levi slid his palm across them, encouraging the eyelids to close. "Stop thinking."

The eyelashes parted again. "I'm too wound up."

"Focus on my hand." Levi began to comb his fingers through the blond hair, moving slowly, scratching the scalp.

"Mm. That feels good."

"Close your eyes. I'll be here when you wake up."

Gradually, Erwin's expression relaxed, his breaths loud and even.

Levi stilled his hand, watching him. They had been together for long enough that it was easy to forget how handsome Erwin was, and he liked to study his sleeping face once in a while to remind himself. The brows had seemed abnormally thick and severe when they had first met, but now Levi couldn't picture him without them. A few hairs there were white, and in his undercut, too. Faint lines were barely visible in the corners of his eyes; they had developed so gradually that Levi couldn't remember when they had first appeared. Otherwise, he still looked young for a man in his mid-thirties, a surprise given the stress of their lifestyle. Part of that, no doubt, was due to the perfectly impassive face he wore during most of his waking hours.

Warmth swelled in his chest. *This man loves me.* That fact still seemed impossible when he weighed himself against Erwin's beauty, intelligence, and drive. He wondered if it would ever stop feeling surreal.

He shook his head at his train of thought. *If I'm feeling this sappy, that probably means I need sleep, too.* He leaned back against the corner of the carriage and closed his eyes, content.

A knock startled him awake. He sat up, feeling as if only seconds had passed. The carriage had stopped moving, and Erwin was still asleep in his lap. At some point during their slumber, their hands had intertwined over his chest. A corner of Levi's mouth lifted. *Cute.*

“Commander?” the driver called from the other side of the door.
“Captain?”

“Are we there?” Levi asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay, just a second.” Levi nudged Erwin’s head with his thigh to wake him up. A wave of discomfort shot through his leg, and he cringed. *My leg’s asleep.*

“Just a bit longer,” Erwin mumbled, eyes still closed.

“Get up. Your fat head is crushing my leg.” He struggled out from underneath him and stood. Painful tingles travelled through his heavy leg. “Dammit.” He stomped the floor a few times, trying to get blood flowing properly through it.

Erwin slid upright, limbs and neck limp. “I don’t suppose you’d be willing to do this meeting without me?”

“Think for a second about how that would go and then ask me again.”

Erwin paused. “I’ll be out in a moment.”

Levi opened the door and hobbled down the stairs.

“Address is just around the corner, sir,” the driver said, tipping her hat. “I’ll stay here, as requested. It’ll just look like I’m resupplying.” She motioned at the buildings, and he realized she had stopped outside a general store.

“Good thinking.” Levi straightened his outfit: black pants, a dusty blue long-sleeved shirt and black boots. He was so accustomed to wearing the Survey Corps uniform that he always felt a little insecure without the 3DMG harness, as if he would float away or slowly expand without it holding him together. He opened the trunk in the luggage compartment and, making sure he wasn’t seen, he tucked an extra knife into his boot, then a small hook blade up one sleeve. With any luck, he wouldn’t need them, but he didn’t trust the Wallists.

Erwin stepped out of the carriage, his face grim. “We have a bit of time before we need to be in place. Let’s find something to eat.”

They found a small cafe across from their destination where they could use the bathroom, then have a small snack and a hot beverage. Levi kept his eyes trained across the street, watching for any hints of an ambush. It certainly didn’t look like an ideal trap location. The building was a square apartment block, the tiles on the roof nearly invisible under moss. Four children were playing in front of it, throwing a small ball back and forth, hurrying to the side whenever they needed

to let carts or horses pass. He glanced at Erwin and saw Erwin watching them, his brows pinched, his mouth flat. It was an expression of regret. With Erwin, that could mean several different things. *Maybe he's thinking of his own childhood, of the innocence he's lost. Or maybe he's thinking about the children he'll never have.* He slid his boot forward to press against Erwin's under the table.

Erwin's face flickered, then settled into neutral as he turned to Levi. "Unless they set up hours ago, it doesn't look like an ambush."

"No."

"Still, if we're in danger, do not hesitate. You have my permission to take whatever measures you see fit." Erwin's gaze hardened. "Our safety is your number one priority. I'm trusting your instincts above all else, and I will back any action you take. Understood?"

"Okay, Erwin," Levi said, his stomach twisting.

Erwin stood, setting a stack of coins on the table. "Let's head over."

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As they approached the apartment, Erwin kept his face neutral, taking slow, steady breaths. His fist was heavy as he raised it to knock once, twice.

The door swung open to reveal his sister. She glanced quickly around him, then stepped aside. "Hurry."

Levi stepped in first, and Erwin followed. The door closed behind them, and Helena lit the lamp.

A figure sat on the bed in front of them, hunched. A hood blocked out most of its face.

Erwin's breath caught and he took a step closer. The figure stood to her full height, lifting her chin. Her features were sunken, her skin wrinkled, but beneath all that, her face was so familiar that Erwin instantly felt as if he were a child again. His heart pounded in his throat.

"Mama, you shouldn't be standing," Helena said, rushing to the woman's side and helping her to a seat on the bed.

Levi stepped closer, his voice quiet. "No signs of an ambush."

"Thank you, Levi." Erwin couldn't stop staring at his mother. He had been pre-pubescent when he had left home, but he remembered her being tall, with broad shoulders and a quick temper. Had she always been so tiny? She was barely Levi's height.

“Sit down, Erwin,” Helena said. “Your little bodyguard can wait outside.”

“He stays.” Instead of sitting, Erwin moved forward, stopping at the foot of the bed. He stared down at his mother. Sometimes, late at night, when his mind spiralled out of control, he fantasized about what he would say to her if he ever saw her again. Their parting argument had faded in his memory, but the wounds it had left had never fully healed. For the first time he wondered if he had marked her in the same way. The world was a lot less black-and-white now than it had been at fourteen, and he was sure he must have said things to her that had been unfair.

“Bend down so I can see you.” It was Mama’s voice but not, frayed at the edges, ground away. He studied her for a moment longer, then sank to one knee. Her eyes searched his, and he was surprised by how defeated she looked. Once, the spark in her eyes had been stronger than Papa’s, stronger than Helena’s. *What have the Wallists done to you?*

She reached out for his face. “You look so much like your father,” she whispered, and pain shot through his chest. He redirected her hand and stood.

“Why did you ask to see me?”

“Sit,” Helena said again, more forcefully this time.

“Very well.” Erwin pulled out two chairs from the side table, offering one to Levi, who dropped into his chair and sat with his legs crossed, eyes trained on the women. Erwin sat next to him, his mind racing.

“Mama insisted on warning you,” Helena said, taking one of her mother’s hands into her own.

“Warning me?”

“She’s been frail lately, so this trip isn’t easy on her.”

“Stop fussing. I’m fine.” Their mother snatched her hand away. “Just give me a moment. I haven’t seen my son in twenty damned years.”

Erwin’s jaw clenched. “We’re on a tight schedule. What are you warning me about?”

“I said, just give me a moment!” There was that fire he remembered, and suddenly he was fourteen again, and she was shouting at him: *... your fault he’s dead ...* Tears had streamed down his cheeks, a string of ugly words sliding from his lips as he had shoved the last of his belongings into a bag: *... cowardly woman, hiding away while humanity suffers ...*

His jaw was quivering, so he clenched it. “Our carriage is waiting outside.”

“We’re putting ourselves at great risk by coming here,” Helena growled, “so you will show some respect to your mother.”

“It’s about a member of the Council,” his mother said. “A brother of the Faith.”

Minister Nick, Erwin thought. The minister was the Wallist appointee to the Council; he had replaced Lord Fromm about a year ago. The sudden injection of religion into politics was unprecedented, and even Commander-in-Chief Zackly had been unable to explain it. Erwin had tried to find common ground with the new appointee, but had only been met with Wallist rhetoric: the walls were sacred; the Survey Corps was committing blasphemy by travelling outside them; repairing Wall Maria would be akin to defiling a sacred goddess. The minister’s presence was increasingly problematic, and Erwin hadn’t yet figured out how to deal with him.

He opened his mouth to speak, but Levi beat him to it: “You mean Minister Nick?”

“No,” she said. “Brother Étienne.”

Levi’s brow furrowed. “Who the hell—?”

“It’s a pseudonym,” Erwin said, remembering that Helena went by Tessa now. His own background checks on Minister Nick suggested it wasn’t his real name, either.

“Many of our parishioners choose new names to give themselves a sense of rebirth,” said his mother. “You know Brother Étienne better as Lord Martin Sahlo.”

Erwin let out a low sigh. *Shit.*

Levi turned to him. “What the hell? Sahlo’s a Wallfucker?”

The woman’s eyes shifted to Levi for a moment, a brow rising, before she looked at her son again. “Étienne only began attending weekly a year ago, but he has quickly become an important member of the Church. He recently made arrangements to support Minister Nick in representing the Faith’s interests on the Council.”

Erwin held her gaze, his mind trying to connect this new information to what he understood about Sahlo. None of the pieces fit together. “I see.”

“I—” His mother looked down. “I overheard a conversation that wasn’t meant for my ears. Étienne was speaking with one of our higher-ups about an alliance with you. He said it was breaking down,

that you were becoming a problem. They were discussing the best ways to deal with you.”

Erwin closed his eyes. He hadn’t noticed any indication that Sahlo was unhappy with their arrangement. Granted, their last several expeditions hadn’t yielded much coin, but there were still plenty of kickbacks coming to him from investor referrals. Perhaps allying with the Wallists would somehow net Sahlo more money than the Survey Corps alliance could possibly provide.

There was another possibility, one that would be harder to deal with: perhaps Sahlo wasn’t motivated by money, like Erwin had assumed. Perhaps he saw their relationship as a real-life chess game, one he was determined to win.

“Keep talking, old woman,” Levi said, leaning forward on his knees. “What did they decide?”

“Old woman?” Helena growled.

“Tessa, it’s fine.” His mother leaned forward. “The higher-up suggested a dangerous expedition to wipe out the Survey Corps entirely, but Étienne said your survival rates were too high now for that to be a viable possibility. They discussed blackmail, but Étienne said he was unable to find anything on you. By the time the meeting ended, they were discussing hiring ...” She swallowed hard, lifting her chin and sitting tall.

“Hiring what?” demanded Levi.

“An assassin,” Erwin said quietly. *How did this situation get out of control without me noticing any warning signs?*

Levi glanced at him. “Another lord tried to hire an assassin to take you out once. It didn’t go so well for him.”

That was because he had pulled all the strings in the background. This time, it was unexpected. Sahlo had often indicated he knew every detail about what had happened with Lobov—Erwin wouldn’t be able to pull the same tricks twice.

Helena rubbed her mother’s back. “Mama hasn’t slept a wink since this conversation happened,” she said, her voice the softest Erwin had heard since they were children. “It’s unthinkable that a brother of the Faith would consider something so foul, and I firmly believe they will opt to use political manoeuvring instead. But Mama insisted that you needed to be warned.”

“The Church is made up of humans,” her mother said. “Humans are susceptible to greed and violence.”

Erwin leaned forward, mirroring Levi's pose. "You both must leave the Wall Church."

In response, he received twin sets of blank blue stares.

"If they trace my past to you," he said, "you'll be in danger."

"Why would we leave?" Helena said. "Both of our husbands are with the church, and I'm expecting."

Erwin blinked, surprised by the jealousy that gripped his lungs. "Congratulations," he said stiffly.

"Thank you," she replied, equally stiff. "So no, we aren't going to leave."

"Come back with us," blurted his mother.

This was the part of the meeting Erwin had been dreading. He stood and turned to Levi. "I think we have all the information we need."

Levi nodded. "Let's get the fuck out of here."

"If you join us, you'll no longer be a threat to the Church's interests." Her voice was getting more desperate. "And you can help us fix whatever corruption is making our members think it's reasonable to hire assassins. Your political acumen—"

"—will be used to serve humanity, not to serve people who think giant stone walls are more valuable than human life." He gripped the doorknob.

"Erwin."

He turned to look back at her one last time, and immediately regretted it. Tears streaked down her hollow cheeks, her brows pinched—

"—Erwin, Erwin, Erwin—" She cradles Helena to her chest as they are forced onto the second carriage, reaching out for Papa—

His head bowed.

"Erwin?" Levi asked, his tone uncertain.

"Wait for me in the carriage." He stepped away from the door. "Helena, leave."

"That isn't my name anymore," she snapped, "and you're crazy if you think I'm going to leave you alone with—"

"Tessa," Mama said, wiping her tears. "Step outside for a moment, please."

Helena cast Erwin a furious glance, then followed Levi out the door, shutting it behind her.

Then it was just the two of them, mother and son. Erwin clasped his hands behind his back so the trembling wouldn't show. She stood, too, a bit unsteady, but she threw her shoulders back and drew herself to

her full height.

For a moment, they were silent.

“I’ve wanted this moment for twenty years,” Mama said softly, “yet I still have no idea what to say to you. I only know I’ll regret it forever if I say nothing.”

He kept his face emotionless, as if he were staring down a political opponent.

Then she stepped forward and fell against his chest, her arms wrapping around him. She still wore the same perfume he remembered, and a flood of related, forgotten scents rose in his memory: plump cinnamon rolls baking in the oven, the lilac water she used to mist their bedding, the hot scent of baking rocks on their driveway in the summertime. He stood stiffly, arms at his sides.

“It wasn’t your fault,” she said. “You were just a boy. I’m so sorry.”

He tensed. “Of course it was my fault.”

“Erwin.” She pulled away to look at him. “Your father took a stupid risk and paid the price. I’m sorry you got caught in the middle of it, but you were too young to know any better. You’ve always been so good at trusting reason over emotion, but this is one instance where you were never able to do that, and I blame myself for letting you shoulder the blame for so many years. It wasn’t your fault. Put aside your guilt and think about it logically, and I’m sure you’ll agree.”

He stared at her. The facts were clear: he had been directly responsible, and so he had to continue on the path his father had started. This wasn’t guilt; it was logic.

But what if I’m not being logical? Would I trust a boy younger than Jasper with knowledge about the outside world? If that was traced back to me, would I blame him, or myself?

His head spun. No, it was his fault. It *had* to be his fault. Every choice he had made in his career had been made with the goal of carrying on his father’s legacy. He was too far along this path to second-guess it.

“Help me set things right,” he said, shifting the topic. “I know nothing about your faith, and it’s taking a strong hold in political circles. If you could tell me anything—”

Her face hardened. “I have told you all I can safely say.”

“Then this meeting is over,” he said, even though he wanted her to hug him again, to reminisce about Papa, to tell him she loved him. “Please take care.”

“One last thing.” A sad smile appeared on her lips. “The man you brought with you. Levi, right?”

He eyed her. “What about him?”

“You look at him exactly the way your father used to look at me.”

His heart began to race, his palms sweaty. *Impossible. We've been careful not to show anything, and she was only around us for a few minutes ...*

“I'm glad you've found a new family. Tell him to watch over you.” Her smile faded. “But be sure to watch over him, too. Your name wasn't the only one Étienne mentioned.”

❧

Levi said nothing to Tessa, or Helena, or whatever her name was, as he left the room. He was too uncomfortable. How strange it had been to see Erwin's mannerisms on the two women, to hear the similar cadences of their voices.

More than that: this was just one more time that Erwin had faced unimaginable stress, and Levi had been unable to help him.

Maybe he wasn't good with family drama, but he was good at securing an area. He did a quick perimeter of the block, looking for any signs that the women had been followed. Sahlo was clearly more dangerous than either of them had expected, and he wouldn't put it past the lord to track anyone leaving the Church's walls. Fortunately, he didn't see anything suspicious.

Erwin's sister glared at him when he returned. “You think I'm stupid enough to hold a dangerous meeting without making sure we were alone, little man?”

“I'm supposed to trust a Wallfucker with no military training?”

“You idiots have no idea what you're playing around with.” Her eyes narrowed. “If you continue on your path, my child may not grow up with the holy protection of the walls.”

“If you think your walls are going to keep this world safe, then you're the idiot.” Not wanting to waste any further breath on her, he strode away.

The driver greeted him at the carriage. He nodded and slumped to a seat inside, his heart beating so loudly that he could hear it in his ears.

There was an easy solution to these new political developments: he could kill Sahlo. Levi was the only soldier skilled enough to make it

look like a random crime or an accident. The idea was so distasteful that his stomach churned, but he would do it if it would help the Survey Corps.

A few minutes later, the carriage door opened, and Erwin stepped inside. His eyes locked with Levi for just a moment, empty, and then he dropped onto the bench beside him.

“You okay?” Levi asked.

Erwin gave him a tiny smile, but then leaned forward onto his knees, his hands raking into his hair.

After a moment, Levi reached up and pulled the cord, signalling the driver to start driving. He placed a hand on the curved back, rubbing slow circles.

“I don’t know what the hell just happened,” Erwin said.

“Let me kill him.”

There was a pause, then Erwin lifted his head to look at him. “Sahlo?”

“Yeah. I’ll make sure it won’t be traced back to us.” Levi forced himself to keep his gaze steady, even though his stomach was still twisting with revulsion.

Erwin’s face softened. “I won’t ask you to do that, Levi. For one thing, you abhor death. For another, there are dozens of other Sahlo-like lords waiting in the wings, and we don’t know a thing about them. As complicated as this situation has become, at least we know our foe.”

“Those replacements probably aren’t connected to gangs and Wallists like Sahlo.”

“True. Still, I’d rather try to regain control before we do something extreme. He’s a valuable asset when we’re on the same side.” Erwin’s voice was heavy with fatigue. “But I’m afraid I’ve made you a target as well.”

“What?”

“My mother overheard Sahlo mention you by name as a potential target, too.”

“Well, that’s not a surprise. We already knew he hated me.” Levi watched him, concerned by his defeated posture and tone. “That was a lot to take in back there. How are you feeling?”

“I don’t know.” Erwin gave a low sigh and sat upright. “My thoughts are racing and cluttered.”

Levi studied him for a moment. He reached under the bench and reached into Erwin’s bag, pulling out a notebook and a package of

graphite sticks. "You need this."

Erwin accepted them, face blank. "I don't understand."

"Sort out your thoughts. You're no good to the Survey Corps if you're wrapped up in your head trying to untangle personal bullshit."

"I thought we might spend some intimate time together."

"Are you in the mood for it?" Levi folded his arms over his chest. "Or are you going to be lost in your head the whole time, trying to figure out this mess?"

Erwin gave him a little smile. "Sometimes, Levi, I think you know me better than I know myself."

"Sure, and it's the same the other way around." He nodded at the paper. "Start sorting. We'll fuck later."

Erwin bent down to give him a long, slow kiss, then began to write on the paper.

At first, Levi watched over his shoulder. The page began to fill up with scribbled names, half-scrawled thoughts, flow charts and overlapping circles. He was slow at first, gathering speed, skipping between topics so quickly that Levi couldn't follow his chain of thought. Erwin filled one page, then a second, then began to map out elements of both on a third. His brow furrowed, his lips mouthing words without saying them. Sometimes he would take in a little gasp of air, as if a flash of inspiration had hit.

During situations like this, Levi always became conscious of just how deep Erwin's genius ran. His intellect was apparent in his strategies and in everyday conversation, but then, it was carefully filtered and presented in a way that his audience could follow along. When Erwin laid his consciousness bare like this, it became apparent that he could think along multiple tangents at the same time, easily weaving them together.

Once upon a time, this feeling of awe had made Levi feel like less of a person next to Erwin, less evolved. Now, however, he often saw that same awe on Erwin's face when he observed Levi's physical prowess on expeditions, in the training yards, at the gym. Perhaps that was why they worked so well together: they admired each other's expertise without feeling threatened by it. It was a balance, a mutual respect, that Levi had never shared with anyone else.

After about half an hour, Levi's mind was fatigued from trying to follow Erwin's thought process, and his awe had worn thin. He stretched out on his back on the makeshift bed perpendicular to Erwin's bench, folding his arms over his chest. "I'm going to take a nap."

Erwin slid closer so the side of his leg rested against Levi's shoulder. He bent down to kiss Levi's forehead, then went back to his brainstorming.

Levi closed his eyes, letting his mind wander.

He wondered how it felt to be reunited with one's family after so long. He tried to picture his mother. He had a vague impression of her face, but not his father's. In fact, he couldn't even recall his father's name. So many of his memories from his childhood were fuzzy, and he had never been clear on the proper timeline. He wasn't like Erwin—he didn't have a flawless memory for names, places and dates. Was the aunt he remembered actually a blood relative? Had his father even been a part of his life? How old had he been when his mother died?

The approaching sleep began to paint images in his mind. At first, they were lovely images of his aunt, but they began to twist. The carriage walls began to close in as a cruel smile formed before him, blood dripping down a knife ...

He sat up with a gasp. A warm hand smoothed his hair.

"You okay, Levi?"

He blinked and turned to see Erwin reaching out to him. The notebook was halfway filled now, and the graphite stick had been worn to a nub.

"How long was I out?" Levi stretched his shoulders and neck.

"About two hours."

"Fuck, I have to stop passing out like that." Sleep deprivation was wreaking havoc with his normal sleep patterns. "How's your head?"

"I think I'm about ready to take a break and have something to eat." Erwin made one last note, then looked up again. "Would you be interested in hearing my conclusions?"

"Sure."

Erwin pulled out a bag of provisions: a loaf of sliced bread, a tin of yeast spread and twin thermoses of coffee and tea. The tea was luke-warm, but still pleasant, and the bread comfortably filled Levi's stomach. He hadn't realized he was so hungry. Daytime carriage trips always threw off his internal clock.

Once they had finished the last of the food, they sat side-by-side, legs touching, as Erwin began to flip through the pages of his notebook.

"Here's what we know. First, Sahlo is a member of the Wallist church under the name Brother Étienne. He joined recently, at a time

when the Wallists are gaining a larger foothold within the Council and the government. This suggests it's a strategic alliance, not actually a religious choice.

“Second, he feels our alliance is breaking down, and he wants me out of the picture. He’s still getting sizable kickbacks from the investors he refers to me, and I’ve been bolstering that a bit with funds of my own, so nothing is actually ‘breaking down.’ I suspect something big is about to change on his end, and the benefits of our alliance will no longer outweigh the drawbacks.

“The likeliest explanation is that he’s on the cusp of some sort of deal that’s more valuable than our alliance. He’s worried I’ll trace it back to him and expose him. It’s likely connected to the Wallists in some way. I’ve been largely in control of our relationship from the beginning, aside from a few concessions here and there. I suspect he’s been trying to figure out a way to gain the upper hand, and he thought he would have it before this deal came together, but he hasn’t been successful. I’m sure he’s realized by now that I’ve had contacts keeping an eye on him. It wouldn’t take much effort for me to increase the pressure and sniff out everything. He needs to take me out before everything is finalized.”

“So,” Levi said, “what is this deal?”

Erwin smiled. “That’s the missing piece of the puzzle. Why would a Lord with gang contacts need to get involved with a church? The most likely scenario to me is a mutually beneficial arrangement involving drugs and money laundering: Sahlo’s shipping companies act as a drug courier for Rage Klein, and the Wallists keep Sahlo’s money clean through investments in the church. Perhaps drugs are even a key component of Wallist rituals—it would explain why so many of them have that sedated look about their eyes. This is all conjecture, at this point.

“However, my mother gave us an excellent clue that may help us track down more information. We’ve long known that Sahlo has had dealings with the kingpin you identified as Rage Klein, but we’ve never been able to connect the two. I have a hunch the name Étienne will get us a bit further.”

“So what, you head down to the Underground and start asking around?”

Erwin’s smile twisted a little, and he looked away.

“Erwin,” Levi said, suspicious. “That was a joke.”

“My contacts haven’t had any luck penetrating Rage’s network in three years. Most of them are too afraid to get close; their lives are dir-

ectly impacted if they make an enemy of him. Those of us who live on the surface don't have to worry about retribution." He stared fixedly at a page that had the heading *Underground*. "I thought while I was in the area, I would pay a visit and see what I can learn. It would ..." He trailed off.

"Erwin," Levi said again.

"It would be helpful to have someone along who understood what we were looking for." Erwin was still staring at the page. "Someone who had been in direct contact with him before."

Levi's heart beat in his throat. He slumped against the back of the seat. "That was years ago."

"It's still the best lead we have. I know returning to the *Underground* is a potential risk for you—we'll both be armed with full 3DMG. I wouldn't ask if I didn't fear Sahlo's plans for both of us. If he gets out of control, it's not just our lives in danger; the entire Survey Corps could be in jeopardy. He holds too much sway on the Council." A pause. "I'm sorry to ask this of you, Levi."

"Shit," Levi muttered.

"If you accept, we'd head down tonight—"

"Of course I accept."

Erwin finally looked at him. "Yeah?"

"I trust your judgement." Levi folded his arms tightly across his chest. "If this is important enough to risk our safety, then yeah, I'll come help you track him down."

"Thank you. I'm sorry that—"

"Stop apologizing. What's the plan?"

Erwin closed the notebook and set it aside. "We'll be checking into the hotel around six o'clock this evening, so we have an hour or two to eat and get settled before we head below the surface. I don't expect us to get all this sorted tonight, but I'd like to exhaust at least a few of our leads. I don't face Sahlo until tomorrow, and I'd like to have some information in my back pocket so I can position myself accordingly."

"Do you think he'll make a move this soon?" Levi asked.

"If he's considering assassination, he must be desperate. He's going to try to lean on me to judge the immediacy of my threat. We need to appear docile, make our threat a lower priority to him." Erwin gave him a polite smile. "I'm afraid you may see me submit to him more than I'd like, and you may have to tone down your usual show of aggression around him."

“Do what you have to do. I’ll behave.”

“Not too much. We don’t want to tip him off that we’re suspicious of him.” Erwin let out a low sigh and rubbed his temples. “It figures these new complications would arise when we’re so close to reclaiming Wall Maria.”

“Maybe that’s why he’s repositioning himself,” Levi said, thinking aloud. “Territory’s about to expand. He wants to make sure he gets a big piece of it.”

Erwin’s eyes widened. “Could all this be about territory?”

“Sure. I bet the Underground is full of refugees who were land-owners before Wall Maria fell.”

“Interesting.” Erwin shook his head. “Now I have even more to think about. Thank you for your perspective, Levi.”

Levi shrugged. “Politicians and gang leaders aren’t all that much different when it comes to turf wars. One’s more subtle than the other, I guess.”

“True.” Erwin’s brow furrowed, and he hesitated. “There’s something else I should tell you.”

“Oh?” He seemed so uncomfortable that Levi shifted closer.

“My mother guessed there was something going on between us. She might be a security leak.”

Levi’s stomach dropped. “How? We barely even looked at each other.”

“It was enough. It seems I’ve inherited some of my father’s facial expressions.” Erwin’s voice became quiet: “I’m sorry, Levi.”

“Is she a risk?”

“I don’t think so, but I can’t be sure.” Erwin’s gaze was growing distant again. “Twenty years, Levi. It was suddenly as if no time had passed at all. I don’t— I can’t wrap my head around it. What am I supposed to feel?”

“Feel whatever you need to feel.”

“I need to feel nothing. I needed to be able to walk out of there without looking back. I have to abandon my family so they can’t be used against me, but my emotions betrayed me.” Erwin’s eyes closed. “I’m not strong enough.”

The words turned Levi’s blood to ice. “Knock it off. You’re always worried you’ve lost your humanity, right? So you care about your family. That’s pretty human. Take this as evidence that you still have your humanity and stop beating yourself up about it.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Erwin said softly, his eyes still closed. “This is all so much to take in.”

He’s withdrawing into himself again now that he doesn’t have something to distract him. Levi frowned. He swung a leg over Erwin’s lap, straddling him, and clamped a hand over either side of his face.

“Erwin, you’re fucking exhausted.” He traced the sharp cheekbones with his thumbs. “You need to get some more sleep before we get to the Capital, especially if we’re going to the Underground.”

“No, I—” Erwin looked up at him, face sombre. “I need to unwind a bit first.”

“Oh?” Levi asked.

Erwin’s eyes searched his. “I need to spend a few minutes focusing on the one thing in this life I’m sure of.”

The words were flattering, but Levi said, “You sure that’s a good idea right now?”

Hands clamped onto his hips, glowing with heat. Erwin’s gaze was fixed on his lips now, and he was leaning forward. “Please.” Their lips brushed. “I need you.”

This probably isn’t the best time for this, given how vulnerable he is right now, Levi thought, but Erwin’s mouth was warm and wet, and Levi felt himself drawn into the kiss. Their heads tilted, their lips parting, their tongues grazing. He groaned into Erwin’s mouth. Their surroundings disappeared. No family, no Sahlo, no church, just each other’s warmth.

The kiss broke and their foreheads rested together. “I need you.” Erwin pulled him down into his lap.

I need you, too, Levi thought, giving in. He slid his palms along the back of Erwin’s neck, down to his shoulder blades, their torsos pressing together. “Let me fuck you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Levi pressed his mouth to Erwin’s neck and sucked gently so he wouldn’t leave a mark. “I have plans for you to fuck me later tonight, at the hotel. But I want to be inside you right now.”

In response, Erwin lifted him off his lap and pulled out a bag from under the seat. He withdrew a bottle of lubricant from a side pocket.

Levi felt a resurgence of the desperation that had been building all day. He knelt between Erwin’s legs and unbuttoned his fly. He pulled the pants and underwear off his hips, then pulled off one boot, but he

was in too much of a rush to pull off the other. Instead, he left Erwin's pants and underwear hanging off one booted leg.

Barely even pausing, Levi grabbed him and leaned in to lick him from base to tip. Erwin let out a long, pleased breath and leaned his head back against the seat.

Fuck, that's hot. Levi's pants were suddenly too binding. It had been a few weeks since he had last done this, and he missed it. He gave one more long lick, then kissed the tip.

"Remind me to suck you off for hours tonight."

A corner of Erwin's lips lifted. "Didn't you say you had plans for me to ride you tonight?"

"It's going to be a long night." He slicked a finger and began to ease it in.

"Fuck," Erwin breathed. Levi watched his face for the subtle changes that showed his pleasure: wrinkles formed in the corners of his closed eyes and at the bridge of his nose, his mouth stretched a little wider. Erwin's body was already relaxed. This type of preparation wasn't really required anymore—they made love so often that their bodies naturally opened up for each other—but this foreplay was such a pleasure that Levi could never resist. He slid in a second finger, watching Erwin's face for the deepening wrinkles, the faint flush forming on his cheeks. The broad lips parted:

"More."

"You're greedy today." Levi brushed a third finger against him.

"I need—" The words ended with a gasp as Levi pushed ahead with the third finger. "Fuck!"

"Too much?"

"No, it's good. It's good." Erwin's eyelashes parted a crack. "I'll take everything you want to give me."

"Oh really?" It was tempting to keep going—sometimes, when Erwin was this responsive, Levi could make him orgasm with his fingers alone. Still, he was aching to be inside him, and Erwin would be too sensitive for that if he came beforehand.

Levi kissed the inside of Erwin's thigh, then withdrew. He hastily pulled down his pants, then reached for the lubricant, but Erwin's hand closed over it first.

"I'll put that on."

Levi nodded, bracing himself against the roof of the carriage. The road here was bumpy, the vibrations rattling his teeth. Erwin's slick

hand closed around him, squeezing in all the right places, stroking hard. The last remnants of Levi's control instantly dissolved; he bit the inside of his cheek, trying to keep himself together, but a wail slid from his mouth anyway. He lunged forward, kissing Erwin so hard that his head smacked back against the carriage wall. Erwin caught his cravat and held him in close, head twisting so they could kiss deeper.

Fuck. Levi's eyes closed, feeling the carriage's vibrations ripple through his body. He grabbed Erwin under the knees and tugged. Erwin shifted into place, his calves resting on Levi's shoulders. The best thing about sex in the carriage was that the benches were exactly the right height for Levi to keep kissing him while he was inside him—it took a bit of contortion on Erwin's part, and Levi had to dig into the floor hard with his toes, but it was worth it.

As he began to work his way inside, Erwin gasped and curled tightly around him, chin hooking over Levi's shoulder. Levi ran his tongue around the border of Erwin's ear, working in deeper.

“*Fuck,*” Erwin said, but there was an unusual lack of conviction to the word, as if he were saying it because it was expected. His arms and chin were still curled around Levi's body, grip so tight that it was hard to breathe.

“Erwin?” The word came out as a gasp. “You okay?”

“Don't stop.” The words were strange, too. Shaking. Maybe it was just from the road—it was especially bumpy here. Levi gripped the back of the seat with one hand to keep his balance, and the other gripped the back of Erwin's head. He pushed in all the way, and Erwin gave a loud cry, clawing into his back.

“Shit.” Levi began to rock slowly, even though he was desperate to speed up. “Oh shit, I'm not going to last long.” He pushed back, trying to disentangle himself from Erwin's grasp so they could share a kiss.

He froze. Erwin's eyes were damp.

“Shit,” Levi said, alarmed. “Am I hurting you?”

“I'm fine.”

“You look like you're about to cry.”

“No, it feels good. It feels so good.” Erwin's mouth found his again, whispering into his lips: “Don't stop.”

“Are you sure?” *Am I imagining things?*

“Levi, please; I need you.” Erwin began to rock his hips, gyrating against him. The carriage went over a bump, accidentally forcing Levi deeper, and they both gasped.

“Shit.” Levi began to thrust again. His open mouth barely grazed Erwin’s lips, tasting a string of whispered curses.

“Come on,” Erwin rasped. “I need it hard.” His hands raked up Levi’s back, beneath his shirt, as their pace increased. Levi dug the balls of his feet into the carriage floor for traction, leaning hard into that gasping mouth, kissing with so much force that his teeth dug into the inside of his lips. He felt a trickle of liquid where their cheeks pressed together—a tear? He tried to pull away, but Erwin held him firmly in place, counter thrusting against him.

Then Erwin moaned into his mouth, one hand dropping between his legs and frantically moving. He was tightening in pulses now. *He’s close*, Levi thought, and the realization rippled through his body and down his spine. He could already anticipate that twisting face, those quaking limbs, that strained look on his face ...

He tore his mouth away. “Fuck!” He stared at the straining fabric over Erwin’s chest, at the moving hand, and it was too much. He drove into him and buried his face in those flexing chest muscles, coming so hard that he yelled.

Erwin’s arm slowed, and a hand smoothed Levi’s hair. It took several seconds for the rush to subside. At last, his body stopped twisting as his muscles relaxed.

“Fuck, Erwin,” he whispered, not yet able to lift his head. The fabric by his mouth was damp. *Did I slobber all over him?* “Sorry, give me a second.”

“Take your time.” The hand kept gently smoothing the back of his head, and he could hear the thudding heartbeat in Erwin’s rib cage. *He was so close. I shouldn’t keep him waiting.*

Dizzy, he pulled out and dropped to his knees, shifting Erwin’s thighs onto his shoulders. His hands smoothed Erwin’s knees as he looked up at him. “Come in my mouth.”

Erwin watched him for a second. Then his mouth closed and his throat bobbed. His hand began to move again. Levi moved into position, just barely sucking the tip, three fingers slipping into him. Their eyes locked, and Levi felt himself begin to rise with Erwin, soaring on those flared lips, those pinched brows. Erwin let out a rising moan, then another, his head beginning to tilt back, eyes closing. He seemed completely oblivious to everything around him now, focused only on the approaching peak.

He’s so beautiful. Levi slid a hand up Erwin’s abdomen, under his

shirt, feeling the flexing muscles. His hand moved faster, his tongue swirling circles, all of it timed to the movements of Erwin's hand, to his harsh breaths.

"Levi," Erwin gasped. "I'm— Fuck!" He hunched forward, thrusting deep into Levi's mouth.

Levi swallowed, swearing he could feel Erwin's energy flowing into his body. His groin twitched as if his own orgasm hadn't truly ended until now, as if it still had a few spasms left. The last pulse subsided a few seconds later. He swirled his tongue one last time, then pulled away.

Erwin was still hunched forward, his head hanging low, his body heaving with harsh breaths. Giving him a minute or two to come down, Levi pulled a handkerchief out of the bag and gave himself a few careful wipes. He fastened his pants into place and pulled his boots over his pant legs, then ran a hand through his hair. Once he had finished cleaning up, he was surprised to see that Erwin still hadn't moved.

That's not good. "Erwin?"

There was no response. A tear dripped off the sharp tip of his nose.

"Shit." Levi's stomach dropped. He pulled out a clean handkerchief and sat beside him. "You said you were okay, you idiot."

There was a long pause. At last, Erwin spoke, his voice shaking: "There's a fair bit of stress in my life at the moment."

"No shit." Levi held out the handkerchief. "Look, it's okay. Cry if you need to."

"Crying won't help a thing." Erwin accepted the cloth and dabbed at his eyes, then finally lifted his head. He stared straight ahead, face grim. "I'm sorry, Levi. The sex was good—this isn't anything to do with that."

"I know. It's okay." Sometimes, relaxation prompted them to drop walls that needed to stay up; this wasn't the first time one of them had broken down. He wrapped an arm across Erwin's back and drew him closer. "You don't have to hide yourself from me."

"I know." Erwin rested his cheek against the top of Levi's head.

"You'll figure all this out. You always do."

"I hope you're right." Erwin reached for his hand.

And if not, I'll take care of Sahlo myself, Levi thought. Erwin was a political mastermind, but the Underground played by a different set of rules, ones where logic rarely came into play. They might have to get

their hands dirty in ways Erwin had never experienced.

Their fingers intertwined, and Levi's throat tightened.

If it comes to it, Erwin, I'll gladly let them drench my hands with blood before I see a single drop of it land on you.

-25-

UNDERGROUND

“We’ll eat in the bar downstairs,” Erwin said as he hung his suit in the closet of their hotel room. “Then we’ll come back here and change before we head to the Underground.”

“How are we getting below the surface without being noticed?” Levi called from the bathroom, where he was setting out their toiletries.

“I still have the identification we used as August and Emil, and we have permission through a dummy lord, ‘Lord Hasek.’”

“A dummy lord?”

Erwin continued to pull items out of the trunk and hang them in the closet. “Several years ago, one of my contacts set up a fake lord to circumnavigate aristocratic permission on minor issues. It’s an ingenious system. ‘Lord Hasek’ is a recluse who lives at an unknown address, but his lineage is strong enough that he qualifies to authorize requests at the lowest clearance levels, basic stuff that would never attract much suspicion—” The words died on his lips as he lifted a pair of pants out of the trunk, revealing a small pair of black underwear beneath them. He stared at them. “I thought I threw these out?”

“I can’t believe they hung these in the bathroom where they can soak in the farts of every single guest.” Levi marched into the main room, carrying two hotel-issued bathrobes.

“Levi.”

“What?”

Erwin stretched the underwear between his hands.

“Oh.”

“I threw these out. They were uncomfortable.”

Levi pushed past him and began to hang the robes in the closet.

“Waste of perfectly good clothing.”

“I’m not sure they qualify as clothing; they ride up too quickly to be useful.”

“Can’t be that bad.”

“They’re more intimate with the inside of my backside than you are.” Erwin set them aside, then paused again as he saw two bottles of lubricant and a butt plug. He raised a brow. “What, exactly, are these plans you have for me tonight?”

“We’ll talk about it later.” Levi smoothed the second bathrobe into place, then began to adjust the clothes Erwin had hung up, as if they weren’t tidy enough to meet his standards. “So August and Emil have permission from Lord Haber—”

“Hasek.”

“—Hasek. I guess we aren’t going in uniform.”

“No. The last thing we want is word getting back to Sahlo that two Survey Corps soldiers were sniffing around.” Erwin set the two bottles of lubricant in the side table drawer, right next to the bottle he had brought. *At least we won’t be short on lube*, he thought. “I’m still debating whether or not we should bring our gear as I had originally planned. On one hand, it might be integral for self-defense and mobility if we need to make a quick escape. On the other hand, we’re going to attract unwanted attention if we wear it.” Civilian use of 3DMG was illegal, and the Military Police regularly patrolled the Underground.

“It won’t matter. Even if we dress down, you’re going to stand out.”

“Me?”

“You’re two metres tall and a hundred fucking kilos.”

Erwin’s lips flattened. “No, I’m not. Besides, I thought you’d be the recognizable one, given your reputation.”

“I blended in with a crowd more than you think. Only a handful of people really got to know my face, and most of them have died off since then.” Levi scooped the last batch of socks out of the chest, then nudged the lid closed with his foot. He knelt in front of the bottom drawer of the dresser, but instead of opening it, he was still, his head bowed.

“Levi?”

A pause. “Going down there is just going to screw everything up even worse.”

“We’ll be fine if we play it smart. We just need a solid lead or two

—from that point, I can send in undercover soldiers to dig deeper.” Erwin hoisted the chest across the room and tucked it neatly into the corner. “We don’t have time to be cautious. If we lose control over Sahlo, the plans to reclaim Wall Maria could be delayed or even halted completely. If that happens, all of humanity will suffer.”

Levi dumped the socks on the floor beside him, then yanked open the bottom drawer and began to fill it. “Ever think maybe Sahlo’s using this assassination thing to bait you into doing something reckless?”

“Of course. That possibility takes up a full two pages in my brainstorming notes. Ultimately, I concluded he couldn’t have known about my mother overhearing his conversation, or that she’s even my mother. The benefits outweigh the risks.”

Levi didn’t reply, but he softly began to curse to himself. At first, Erwin couldn’t see what he was doing, so he stepped a few paces forward. Levi was carefully arranging the folded pairs of socks, trying to align them with the edge of the drawer and each other in a perfect grid. Even for him, this was a new level of obsession with order.

Erwin sat on the edge of the bed, his chest hollow. “You’re upset about returning to the Underground.”

“No, I’m upset that you don’t know how to fold your socks.”

He blinked. “What?”

“Why do you always fold your socks into these fucking balls? It makes them bouncy. They spring up when I try to pack them together. No wonder your room’s always such a mess, if you can’t fold two shitty socks together.” Levi was hunched over the drawer now, his movements jerky.

“It would help if I understood what, exactly, is upsetting you about returning,” Erwin said patiently.

“Stop telling me what I’m feeling. I’m upset about your shitty socks, not your shitty plan.”

And there it is. Erwin stood, his hands tightening into fists at his sides. “When you’re ready to set aside the laundry-related insults and speak rationally about this, I’ll be in the bar downstairs.”

Levi let out a low, weary sigh, but didn’t reply.

Without further word, Erwin stepped into the hallway and closed the door behind him. He shoved his hands into his pockets.

Shitty plan. The words had cut deeper than they should have. Erwin had known from the beginning that asking Levi to return to the Underground was an unpleasant request. He had devoted three entire

pages to Levi's reaction in his brainstorming notes, weighing the pros and cons. There was no way around it: Levi had intimate knowledge about the workings of the Underground, and since he no longer lived there, Rage held no power over him. There was no one else Erwin could—or would—trust with this mission. He had expected resistance, but he had hoped they could talk through it together.

Levi's barriers went up so quickly, at the most unpredictable times. Every time those walls went up and Levi refused to share a part of himself, Erwin felt an icy hand grip his stomach: their trust in each other wasn't as complete as he liked to think. Parts of Levi were inaccessible to him.

Or maybe it was more selfish than that. Maybe Erwin relied so heavily on information that it upset him when anyone tried to withhold it. Maybe the problem wasn't Levi at all; maybe it was Erwin's overwhelming need to be in control. He had always known there were going to be secrets between them, after all. It was difficult to know when he actually had reason to be concerned about the strength of their relationship, and when he was just being a control freak.

He settled into a booth and ordered their drinks. The server brought him a mug of apple cider, a cup of tea for Levi, and a menu. He had just finished perusing the meal list when Levi sank onto the bench across from him.

“You shouldn't be drinking right before a mission.”

“It's non-alcoholic.” Erwin closed the menu and slid it across the tabletop.

Levi held his gaze for a moment, expression unreadable, then picked up the menu and began to read through it. After a long silence, he said, “I shouldn't have said your plan was shitty.”

“Well, I did try to tell you what you were feeling. You're right. I shouldn't have assumed you were upset about tonight's plans.”

Levi's gaze darted up to him for a moment, then back down to the menu. “We both know I am.”

The server took their orders, and then for a moment, they were silent.

“I can go alone, if you'd prefer,” Erwin said.

“You need me there.” Levi stared into the bottom of his tea mug, swirling it. “You don't know what you're dealing with. You convince people to your side with money and charm, but Rage's cronies have money, and they're immune to charm. There's only one way to get them to

talk."

"Levi," Erwin said quietly, "I'm not going to ask you to hurt anyone. Tonight is all about trying to find a direction we can use for further investigation in the future."

Levi lifted the mug to his lips and took a swallow, then set it down. "I mean longer term. We both know where this path leads if we want to take down Sahlo fast. I have skills you don't—skills no one else in the Survey Corps has. You're going to need those skills before this is done. But ..." His mouth twisted. "When I use them, you're going to see a side of me you've never seen before."

Erwin was certain he *had* seen that side of him, but he only said, "A man of your skill doesn't happen by accident. I have no delusions about how you gained your skills or the kinds of opponents you faced in the past."

"Just ..." Levi looked away, his brow furrowing. "Don't lose respect for me if the old me comes out."

Was that what this was about? He had expected Levi's anxiety to be rooted in fear, not shame. "I already respected the old you. That's why I recruited you." Erwin leaned forward. "Above ground or beneath it, the same rules always apply: I trust your judgement, and I will have your back no matter what decisions you make. You have good instincts."

Levi's eyes lifted to meet his, expressionless.

Their food arrived a minute or two later, and as they began to eat, Erwin quietly began to walk through their plan. Their first stop was going to be at the home of his most trusted Underground contact.

"Leona Reid?" Levi's nose wrinkled. "Why her?"

"Our working relationship goes back almost two decades. I trust her as much as I trust any of our soldiers."

"She's just going to ask me to repay the money her dumbass son made me borrow from her."

Ah, yes, the same son Levi had briefly dated. Erwin hesitated. "Levi, if you need help repaying an old debt—"

"I don't need help. It's barely any money at all. It's the principle of it." Levi stabbed a carrot with his fork.

Unsure of where to take the conversation from there, Erwin kept speaking. "She's been keeping an eye out for Sahlo, and she's in a good position to have heard of Brother Étienne. Even if she doesn't have a solid update for us, she might know where we could begin our search. Now, let's talk about how we'll get into the staircase in the first place, and

how we'll get back above ground if anything goes wrong."

By the end of the meal, Levi seemed more relaxed. They returned to their room and changed into their least impressive plain-clothes. They re-packed their gear into smaller, unmarked cases. It really wasn't good for the gear to rattle around loose in an unpadded case, but the usual cases were bulky and easily identifiable. Levi had suggested bringing the gear with them and stashing the cases in a secret location in case they needed a quick escape. They had so much practice by now that they could put on the straps and gear in less than a minute. It would have been better to wear it, but the attention they would attract —both from the Underground denizens and from the Military Police—wasn't worth the slight time savings.

"Should I slick back my hair?" Erwin asked, examining himself in the mirror.

"No one slicks back their hair in the Underground. Who can afford hair wax? Bend down." Levi mussed Erwin's hair, letting it fall across his forehead. He frowned and shook his head. "It's no use. Your hair is too fucking golden and clean. You're not going to pass as one of them."

"Then maybe my cover story needs adjusting." Erwin smoothed his hair back into place. "I'm from the surface, and I've enlisted your help to navigate the Underground."

"Not far from the truth." Levi examined his own face in the mirror. "Do I really look like I could still be from there?"

Erwin turned Levi to face him, then ran a thumb across his jaw. His skin had always been pale compared to other members of the Survey Corps, but there was a faint flush to his cheeks now, and the creases around his eyes were red instead of black. "No, you look too healthy."

The flush darkened, but Levi only said, "It'll be dim enough that no one will notice."

They carefully divided up a stack of money, hiding the notes and small coin bags in various pockets and their boots. There was a good chance they would have to grease several palms that night, and also a good chance that muggers might try to relieve them of some money.

Erwin neatly set his bolo tie on the dresser next to Levi's folded cravat, something he always did with great care whenever they removed their signature accessories. When his father came home after classes, he had always hung his hat on a hook right next to Mama's scarf, an unin-

tentional but significant symbol of their domestic bliss.

“Shall we?” he said.

“One last thing,” Levi said. “Bend down.”

Erwin obeyed, expecting Levi to fix his hair again. Instead, their lips met in a soft, innocent kiss. When they pulled apart, Levi’s face was solemn.

“Levi,” Erwin said gently, “it’s going to be okay.”

The slim brows found their usual furrow. “I guess.”

They left the hotel and walked down the street. They were rarely out of uniform these days, but whenever they were, Erwin was amazed by their perfect anonymity. While in uniform, passersby always stared at them, brows rising with recognition. In plainclothes, no one so much as glanced at them.

“We become invisible when we take off the uniforms,” he murmured. “Maybe that’ll work in our favour in the Underground, too.”

“I wouldn’t count on it.” Levi stopped walking and nodded down an alleyway. “This one, right?”

They stepped into the alleyway and rounded a corner to find a burly guard standing outside a doorway. The guard’s lip curled. “Get the fuck out of here. Door’s closed.”

“My name is August,” Erwin said, stepping forward. “I have an arrangement with Lord Hasek.”

“You’re late.” The guard folded his arms over his chest. “Identification and inspection fee.”

Erwin pulled out his fake papers and a small bag of coins. The guard barely looked at the paper, taking a moment to count the coins instead. Then, wordlessly, he stepped aside. Erwin moved onto the staircase and began to descend; his footsteps echoed in the stone tunnel, alone. He stopped and turned back. Levi was hovering in the doorway, his face unreadable.

“Emil?” Erwin asked. “You coming?”

“Yeah, just …” Levi wrapped his arms around his ribcage and began to descend. “It already smells like shit.”

The door slammed closed behind him, and he jumped, glancing uneasily back.

Erwin’s stomach twisted with guilt. “Levi, if there was any other way—”

“Stop fucking apologizing. I said I would do it, so I’m doing it.” Levi pushed past him, his expression dark.

As they descended the lengthy staircase, Erwin surveyed the city. Once upon a time, the cavernous city of the Underground had been planned as humanity's stronghold, a place no titans could ever possibly reach. That plan had quickly dissipated when it became apparent that lack of sunlight would cause complications like rickets and an inability to grow most food. The high, massive ceiling was set with small, glowing crystals that almost looked like stars.

That was where the beauty ended. From this height, it looked like an ancient, ruined city, its buildings crumbling and decrepit. Only a few patches of the city were lit with lamps, glowing orange amidst a sea of darkness. The air was thick and tasted of mould and methane.

As they neared the street level, the scent of sewage became overpowering. A throng of scrawny people with sunken eyes and bowed legs crowded the stair entrance, pleading for passage to the surface world. Some held out crying children, as if begging Erwin or Levi to adopt them. Levi's pace slowed, his face stony. Erwin couldn't imagine what the scene was doing to him. Levi had never mentioned his survivor's guilt, but it showed plainly on his face—to Erwin, at least—whenever they spoke of impoverished citizens in the walls, or when they passed beggars on the street. Above all else, Levi was a man who abhorred the death of innocents. Protecting them was what fueled him.

Now they were wandering right into the city Levi had left behind for the military, where he was fed three meals a day and received a comfortable salary. For the first time, Erwin began to understand how big this request had been. *I'm so sorry, Levi.*

They stepped into one of the major streets, moving toward Leona's house. Intoxicated, emaciated men and women littered the streets, cast aside. Sickly-looking sex workers hung out on street corners with tattered clothes. A few gaunt eyes followed them, but not many. For the most part, people here seemed too involved with their own problems to care about strangers. Erwin began to feel very aware of his height, his build, his health. How had he never noticed before? Seeing the familiar scene through Levi's eyes, he could see why so many people were desperate to get to the surface. *Any plans for the future of humanity must include the people of the Underground as well.*

They arrived at a small, square, two-story home. The paint on the outside was cracking and caked with dust, but Leona had carefully lined the walkway with rows of polished brown glass and stone tiles. Erwin glanced down at Levi to check if he was ready. The grey eyes would

not meet his.

He knocked. A peephole slot opened in the door, and wrinkled, dark eyes appeared on the other side. They widened.

“Erwin?” The door swung open and he found himself wrapped in tight, wiry arms.

“Nice to see you again, Leona,” he said, tactfully edging her back through the door. There were no eyes on them yet, but he didn’t want to risk lingering.

“It’s been awhile. I was starting to worry you had defected to one of my competitors.” She pulled back to look at him. It had only been about a year since their last meeting, but she looked as if she had aged ten: her hair was grey and stringy, her cheeks gaunt.

“You know I would never take my business elsewhere, Leona,” he said pleasantly. “Please forgive the spontaneous visit. Things have been busy, but this was so important that we had to speak with you immediately.”

“We?” She peered around him, and her eyes narrowed. “Ah. You have a rat clinging to your coattails.”

“I don’t have your money, hag,” Levi said.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Humanity’s Strongest. Still a rude little asshole, I see.”

Shit. Erwin gave each of them a polite smile. “Perhaps we should step inside before we discuss this further?”

“Of course.” Leona stepped aside, leaving room for them to enter. “You keep strange company, Erwin. This one’s probably robbed you blind more times than you can—”

“I trust Levi with my life, and he has proven time and time again that he is worthy of that trust. Whatever quarrels you two might have had in the past, I hope you can set them aside for this meeting. There are far larger things at stake.”

Levi pushed past him and set his gear case on the kitchen floor, then dropped into a chair at the table. “Fine with me if the old woman’s fine with it.”

“Fine.” Leona’s gaze was still trained on him. “Please have a seat. I’ll get you both some tea.”

“Speaking of which, please allow me to give you a bonus.” Erwin set his gear case down and sat next to Levi. He slid a packet of fine tea across the table. “I can’t count the number of times our fake identification has come in handy over the past few years, and it came in handy

again tonight.”

She lifted it to her nose and breathed in, then smiled. “Excellent quality. Thank you. Shall I brew us a pot?”

“No, don’t waste it on us. The military gets access to it more often than we deserve.”

“Then at least let me offer you the next best tea I have. I already have a pot ready.” She began to putter around the kitchen, but her movements were odd. It took Erwin a moment to realize she was easing drawers open, using both hands on the cupboards and gently setting down mugs: she was silencing her movements. Now that he thought about it, her tone was unusually soft whenever she spoke to them.

He opened his mouth, but Levi, always on the same wavelength, beat him to it:

“Who else is here?”

She glanced at him with a brow cocked. “I see you’re as observant as ever, kid.”

“Who else?” Levi asked in his quiet, demanding tone, the one that suggested a knife might come out a few seconds later.

“Not that it’s your business, but I have a family member sleeping upstairs.”

Levi slumped deeper into the chair. “It’s Francis, isn’t it?”

Erwin’s jaw tightened. Francis must be the name of Leona’s son. *First my past comes back to haunt me, and now Levi’s. Hell of a day.* He was beginning to wish for a bottle of brandy instead of a mug of tea.

“We can’t have anyone knowing we’re here,” he said aloud.

“Francis won’t be joining us,” Leona said. “But he isn’t the type to spill secrets, anyway.”

Erwin glanced at Levi, who raised one shoulder in a shrug as if reluctantly agreeing.

Their host set mismatched teacups and saucers in front of them. “Poor kid’s a little out of sorts. Lost his job on the surface and his partner took the kids. But you aren’t here to chit-chat.” She sat across from them with a mug of her own, then breathed across the tea’s surface to cool it. “You want an update on Lord Sahlo, right? I’m afraid I don’t have much to tell you. He’s been selling food to one of the local grocery shops, but that’s all above board. Can’t trace any links to Rage or any other gang.”

“I see,” Erwin said, disappointed. “We recently learned he’s been using the alias Brother Étienne in dealings with the Wallists. Does that

ring a bell?”

“Nah, we don’t get many Wallists down here, at least not openly. The Walls don’t mean much to us down here; titans aren’t exactly our biggest threat. The Étienne lead is a good one, though. I’ll keep an ear out.”

“I see.” Erwin took a long sip of tea. Beside him, Levi was tense, as if he knew what was about to come up. “Unfortunately, we’re running out of time. Sahlo is about to make a big move, one we have to be ready to counteract. If we aren’t having luck tracing Sahlo to Rage, then we’re going to have to try it the other way around.” He held the woman’s gaze. “Where can I find Rage Klein?”

She blinked. “Excuse me?”

“I want to know where to find Rage. Local haunts, headquarters, anything of that nature.”

“Holy shit. You have no idea what you’re asking, Erwin.” Leona tried to stare him down, but he refused to flinch. Her eyes shifted to Levi instead. “You’ve gotta talk your boss out of this.”

Levi gave another one-shouldered shrug. “There’s a lot at stake.”

“But going directly to Rage? That’s crazy.”

“Leona,” Erwin said, “I’m aware of the risks of taking on the leader of an Underground crime syndicate. I’m not about to confront him or put myself at risk—I just need to prove his link to Sahlo.” He leaned forward. “This is what stands between us and the reclamation of Wall Maria. Everyone is suffering because of the lack of farmland, the Underground most of all. How many people have to die because we’re all too afraid to take risks? I’m not about to sacrifice humanity’s well-being because a lord and a gang leader are holding us hostage.”

After a long pause, the woman’s gaze dropped. “I don’t know where to find him, but I know someone who might. Excuse me for a moment.” She stood.

As she left the room, Erwin turned to Levi, who took a long sip of tea, then said, “Francis probably fell in with his old gang of merry idiots. Most important thing to know is where your rival gang operates so you don’t step on their turf. He’ll know where Rage’s hangouts are.”

“Can we trust him?”

“He hates Rage more than he hates me. We’ll be fine.”

Erwin hesitated. He was curious about the falling out between them, but it wasn’t really his business. “Anything I should know about Francis before our discussion?”

“He’s a fucking moron.”

“Anything more helpful than that?”

A roar sounded from upstairs, followed by a shout of, “I’ll kill him!” Footsteps stamped down the stairs.

“He’s violent and impulsive.” Levi rose to his feet. “Stand back.”

Erwin brought his tea with him as he moved to stand by the stove, out of the way. Seconds later, a man barrelled into the room, the stench of alcohol blossoming through the air.

Levi quietly sidestepped the charging man, grabbed an arm and twisted. The man flipped and landed hard on his back. There was a pause, then the room filled with drunken sobs.

Leona hovered in the doorway, her arms folded over her chest. “He’s not adapting so well to his life changes.”

The sobbing sound was so pathetic that Erwin couldn’t resist stepping closer for a look. Francis looked at once brawny and scrawny, an odd patchwork of a broad frame and jutting bones. He had blond hair, and a long nose and face.

Levi loomed over the sobbing man, lip curled. “Fucking hell, *shut up*.”

Francis smeared his nose on his sleeve and sat up. “You’ve come to gloat, haven’t you?” he slurred. “And you still owe my mother money, you stinking little trash pile, and you stole all my shit.”

Levi stepped across Francis and grabbed his collar, lifting him until their noses almost touched. “You ever tell her what the money was for?”

The bloodshot eyes flew open. “No!”

“Hey, Leona,” Levi said without looking away. “Your useless ass of a son made me borrow money because—”

“Stop!” Francis clumsily tried to smack Levi’s arms away and failed. “What do you want?”

“First, you’re not going to tell anyone we were here. Second, you’re going to tell me a few of Rage’s main hideouts.”

Francis’ shoulders sagged. “Fine.”

While they were speaking, Erwin stepped closer to Leona. The woman’s gaze was distant, her mouth sagging. He rested a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. She didn’t look up, but she stepped closer.

“It’s tough right now,” she said quietly. “Food supplies are low. Any rationing you see on the surface hits us twofold.”

“That’s why we need to reclaim the wall as soon as possible. We

need more land for crops.”

“Rage is a scumbag, but he controls a substantial portion of the trade down here. And, by the looks of it, your friend Sahlo provides a source of food.” The woman looked up at him. “Careful what you root out, Erwin. If Sahlo is a major part of our trade, removing him could have massive repercussions for my people. Wall Maria isn’t good to us if half the Underground starves before you get there.”

Even after all his planning, the thought hadn’t crossed his mind. “That’s good advice. Thank you.” All the more reason they needed to figure out a way to control Sahlo instead of violently removing him.

Levi released Francis’ collars; the man slumped to the floor.

“Here.” Levi tossed a sack of coins at Leona. “That should cover the loan and then some.” He grabbed his gear case and turned to Erwin, waiting.

Erwin nodded. “I’m sure we’ll see you again soon, Leona. Take care.” He gripped her shoulder one last time, and she gave him a weak smile.

As they stepped onto the street, Levi gave a low sigh. “Fucking Francis.”

“Did he have useful information?”

“Yeah, I know where to start.” Levi nodded west, and they began to walk.

Erwin’s curiosity outweighed his tact. “Why *did* you borrow the money?”

“To bribe the MP that were about to arrest him. He told me they caught him stealing food, made me promise not to tell his mother.” His brows lowered. “Truth came out later: he’d been arrested for trying to buy sex off a woman on the street corner, who happened to be an undercover MP. Turns out all the other money he’d been borrowing from me was to pay for sex on the side. So I robbed him to get my money back.”

Erwin hesitated, not sure what to say. “That must have been—”

“Don’t. It was a long time ago.” Levi glanced up at him. “He mentioned a strip club not far from here, run by some of Rage’s people. It’s not far from a place where we can stash our gear. Seems like a safe place to start, ask around a bit.”

“Sounds like a good plan.”

“How do you want to approach this?”

“We shouldn’t let on that we’re travelling together. We’re more

easily spotted as a duo. I'll play the part of a somewhat clueless investor from the surface looking to engage in business with Rage. But Levi, I want you to take the lead on this mission."

"Yeah?" Levi's eyes were constantly scanning the area around them, inspecting everyone they passed.

"You're intimately acquainted with the local customs. I'll defer to your judgement."

"Okay, then you aren't an investor. You're a messenger for an interested party. You'll get further that way. Act scared; back down easily. I'll take the more aggressive approach." Levi took a sharp left beneath a crumbling archway. "If one of us leaves with anyone, the other will get on the gear and tail them—not too close to be noticed, but not too far away. An alleyway discussion can turn into a kidnapping in an instant. Rubbing the bridge of my nose means we're in potential danger and need to back out quietly. Rubbing the back of my neck means we need to flee immediately at any cost."

"Understood." Erwin felt a swell of pride. The government officials, Sahlo especially, seemed to write off Levi as merely his pawn, but his strategic skills and intelligence were not to be underestimated.

They came to a series of conjoined, blocky homes. Levi slowed as he approached one of the staircases. His face was grim.

Why does this look familiar? Erwin thought. Then he remembered standing next to a bound Levi and his friends at the base of the stairs while Mike and Seth gathered the trio's worldly possessions. "Your old home?"

"It's close to the club."

"No one lives here now?"

"Doubt it. The whole place was ready to collapse even back then." Levi opened the door. The hinge's creaking stiffness suggested it had been unused for a very long time.

They stepped into the home, and Erwin's gaze travelled around the room. The home was empty—people must have looted the furniture. Several long cracks ran through the ceiling, forming an enormous hole over the living room.

Levi stalked over to a closet door. His movements were too stiff, too controlled.

"You okay?" Erwin asked.

"Fine." Levi threw open the door, then hesitated. His fingers trailed down a long, tattered brown scarf. "Fuck," he whispered.

“Isabel’s?”

“No. Farlan’s. It was his mother’s.” His throat bobbed, and then he added quietly, “That whole line is dead now. So is almost everyone I knew down here.”

“Levi—”

“It’s fine.” Levi bent down and slid aside a large panel in the side wall of the closet, revealing a large cubby. He shoved their gear cases in. The panel fell back into place, its seams invisible. “Let’s go.”

As they walked down the street, Erwin watched him out of the corner of his eye. Levi’s walk was different, with a confident bounce in each step, almost a swagger. His face was hard, his brows angry instead of just annoyed. *He looks like the criminal I made a deal with five years ago.*

Erwin had two very different reactions to that shift. It was ideal for their mission, and a small part of him did get a thrill out of picturing Levi’s old life: freedom from laws, freedom from society’s rules. That being said, it was likely a defensive reaction, a mask to cover emotional pain, and he hated the idea of Levi suffering.

It’s your fault, his conscience said, and it was correct, but he would deal with that later. They had a mission to complete.

A block and a half away, they came upon a small, rundown building with a garishly dressed woman standing outside, flanked by two bodyguards. Levi glanced at the door, then led Erwin around a corner and stopped.

“Wait here.”

Erwin leaned against the cold stone wall, folding his arms over his chest as he waited for Levi to return. As before, the passersby didn’t pay him any heed. His invisibility was at once liberating and unnerving. He could always tell when he was in danger when titans or politicians were around, but the people of the Underground weren’t giving him any recognizable cues. If one of them were to attack, he wouldn’t see it coming.

Levi returned a few minutes later. “I didn’t recognize anyone in there, and no one recognized me. You’ll work the brown-haired dancer on centre stage.”

Erwin’s brows rose. “What?”

“Work her. Talk to her, buy a few lap dances, build a rapport and ask questions.”

“Lap dances?”

Levi shrugged. “She’s your type, so it shouldn’t be hard to fake

interest. She's young, so she probably idolizes Rage and wants to be helpful. Your investment angle might work. Pour on your charm and maybe enjoy a dance or two for yourself. Just don't kiss her or pull out your dick or any shit like that."

"Pull out—?" Erwin blinked. "Levi—"

"I'll work the bartender. Give me a head start and remember the signals." Then he disappeared around the corner again.

I'm so far out of my element. Erwin leaned back against the stone wall and began to slowly count to a hundred. How was he supposed to attract the attention of a woman who had countless men drooling over her every night? He had been a decent flirt back in the day, but that was a long time ago.

A few minutes later, the bouncers eyed him as he approached, but the woman standing between them smiled. Makeup caked her face, cracking and flaking near the corners of her eyes and mouth.

"Welcome, hon! We'll need to collect an entrance fee before you can enter."

Had Levi been asked to pay a fee, too, or had Erwin been selectively targeted? *Maybe I do stand out here more than I think.* He tipped a couple extra coins just to ensure her bodyguards wouldn't cause him any trouble. He could probably take them, even alone and without his gear, but a fight would draw unwanted attention.

He stepped into the club, and it took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dim light. The front of the room was lined with three round stages, a pole in the centre of each. A woman danced on each pole, each of them in a different stage of removing their lacy clothing. Two other women sat behind the stages, playing a song on string instruments that were badly in need of tuning. Patrons sat in front of the stages in rows, slack-jawed. A bar lined the back of the room; he could see Levi chatting with the bartender.

The woman on the centre stage was petite, with a curvy figure barely hidden beneath a lace robe. She gracefully paced around the pole, slipping the lace off one shoulder as she moved.

Erwin sat, then shifted against the hard chair to find a comfortable position. Watching a dancer as a Commander was a very different experience than it had been as a new recruit. He found himself admiring the flexing muscles in her upper back as she delicately spun her body out from the pole, parallel to the ground. *She has good balance. I wonder how naturally she'd take to the 3DMG?*

The dancer landed gracefully on the stage, paced around the pole, then stood tall. The robe slid off her shoulders and down her body like water. Now Erwin could see her jutting ribs and collarbones, her hollow abdomen. *Everyone is malnourished down here*, he thought, trying not to focus on the pleasing curves of her frame. How wrong was it that he was even noticing those curves when that same body told the story of someone who was starving? He found himself watching Levi out of the corner of his eye instead. The bartender was leaning close on one elbow, a grin on his face. Was Levi flirting with him? What would that even look like?

A man approached the centre stage with a gold coin in his teeth. The dancer grinned and dropped to all fours, crawling across the stage toward him. Erwin was no stranger to strip clubs—in his training days, he and several classmates had sneaked into their share of them—but what had once seemed titillating now seemed grotesque. *He's making her beg like a dog*. She used her hands to press her petite breasts to either side of his face, as if collecting the coin, and the man rubbed his face in her cleavage. Now that she was near the front of the stage, he could see she was young, maybe eighteen. At that age, she should be finding herself, falling in love, breathing fresh air on the surface.

But who was he to judge the scenario? He had thrown women three years her junior into the mouths of titans—was that really a better fate? So far as a dancer and soldier knew, each of them was using their body to claim whatever freedom they could in this cage of a world, but really, they were both performing for a man who was using them for his own goals.

The worst part was, in spite of the grotesqueness of the display, in spite of his conflict, his body was responding.

He bowed his head and clenched his thigh muscles, trying to keep blood from pooling between his legs. His little moral puzzles could wait until later. He had a mission to execute.

When he lifted his head, the dancer had left the stage. He sagged forward onto his elbows, wishing he had more information about how a person arranged to chat privately with a dancer. Was it as simple as finding her and waving cash in her face?

He didn't have to put much effort into his plan—a moment later, a hand rested on his shoulder. "You look like you could use a drink, handsome."

He turned to see the girl from the stage, this time wearing a tight

cropped shirt, a tiny skirt, and high boots. Her inner forearm bore a familiar symbol: two triangles forming a diamond, a dot in its top half. *Rage Klein. He has her marked like livestock.* Anger swelled in his throat, but if there was one thing Erwin excelled at, it was hiding his emotions.

He coolly turned to face the front again. “I’ll have your darkest beer.”

“Beer? I would’ve expected wine or brandy, with the way you’re dressed.”

He eyed her, barely turning his head. “And how am I dressed?”

“Fancy.” She stiffly bent down, as if trying to mimic a pose she had been taught. Her breasts fell forward, barely restrained by the shirt’s low neckline.

Erwin cursed the goosebumps rising along his arms. He wasn’t in the mood for biology to betray him, not now. *Dammit, Levi. I shouldn’t be the one doing this.* He refused to let his gaze drop from her eyes.

“Fancy?”

“Yeah. Far too fancy for this crowd.”

“If that’s your way of offering a private dance, then I’d be delighted to accept.” He let a hint of warmth show on his face. “Name your price.”

A flush rose to her cheeks, all her previous poise gone. “Ah. I’m supposed to be serving drinks right now, and your beer—”

“I’m not here for the alcohol.” He opened his jacket to flash one of the coin pouches at her. “I’ll compensate you better than anyone else here ever could.” Dirty, he felt *dirty*.

She glanced at the stage, then back at him. “One of the girls might cover for me. Hold on.” Her Underground way of speech was thicker now, words clipped, consonants trilling. Levi had spoken that way when he had first arrived at the Survey Corps headquarters—when he had spoken at all. Now he tended to enunciate more clearly, but the trill still came out from time to time, especially when he was drunk or angry.

“I’ll be waiting.” Erwin allowed himself a sidelong glance at Levi, who was leaning forward on his barstool, still engaged in conversation with the bartender. *I wish you were about to dance for me instead.*

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Out of the corner of his eye, Levi saw the dancer Erwin was supposed to be engaging. She stepped behind a curtain and disappear-

ed. Fortunately, the bartender excused himself to help another customer, affording Levi a quick look in Erwin's direction. Their eyes locked, then Erwin turned away without giving a warning signal. Good.

A moment later, the bartender returned to top up his drink. "I must say, you seem more interested in the customers than the ladies."

Levi shrugged. "So do you."

The bartender grinned, showing teeth that were surprisingly white for a resident of the Underground. "They're paying me to be here. What's your excuse?"

Levi took a sip of the liquor, then grimaced, fighting back a shudder. Drinking with Erwin so often had refined his palate, and Underground liquor went down like a mouthful of nails. "I'm looking for information. Heard this is the place to get it."

"Yeah, we get all kinds here, and the girls do hear their share of strange tales. I've heard a few myself."

"I see." Exactly as he had hoped. Leaning forward, Levi set his drink aside. "Any stories you'd share for the right price?"

The bartender leaned forward on his elbows, mirroring his posture. His eyes trailed down Levi's chin to his chest, then back up again. "Are we talking cash, or other forms of payment?"

"I don't fuck strangers."

The bartender smirked. "A romantic." He held out his hand. "Thiemo."

"Emil." Levi stared at his hand. "I don't shake hands, either."

The bartender's smirk broadened into a genuine smile. "Well then, what *do* you do, Emil?"

"I pay." Levi pulled two coins out of his pocket and slid them across the bar. "For the drink. There's more where that came from if you have information to sell. No bullshit."

Thiemo pocketed the coins, then stood tall and began to wipe the surface of the bar. "Depends what it's about."

"I've been hired by a lord on the surface, Lord Hasek." He paused, second-guessing himself. Was it Hasek or Haber? He kept getting the name mixed up.

"Yeah, I've heard of Hasek," said the bartender, and Levi felt a wave of relief. "His name shows up on shipping labels now and then. Don't think he's ever been down here, though."

"No, but he's looking to expand. Thing is, there's another business owner who's controlling a lot of his potential market down here."

Hasek wants me to do a little research, find out more about the guy's dealings down here."

"Give me a name," Thiemo said.

"Étienne."

"Ah. That Wallist fuck. Yeah, I've run into him a couple times. I don't know much, but I'll tell you what I can."

Levi discreetly slid three more coins across the bar. "The more you say, the more I'll give you."

"Sounds good to me." Thiemo's grin stretched across his face.

8

"This way," said the dancer, closing a cold, damp grip around Erwin's wrist. She led him to the curtain at the back of the room. He glanced briefly at Levi to let him know he was okay, but Levi was too deep in conversation with the bartender to notice him. Hopefully he was getting somewhere.

The girl led him through the curtain and into a dimly lit hallway, then took a sharp left into a small booth lit by a single lamp mounted in the corner. She pushed Erwin to a seat on a padded bench, closed the door, then stood in front of him. Her jaw was trembling, and his heart broke for her. He wondered if there was a way they could just sit and talk without making her suspicious.

A hand trailed up his chest and neck as she stared down at him. "You're a lot better looking than most of the people I've danced for, Handsome."

He had frequently been called handsome throughout his life, and he never understood it. His nose was beaky, and his eyes always looked empty and severe—not to mention his god-awful eyebrows. People were easily distracted by his hair and his height.

It perplexed him, but that didn't stop him from using it to his advantage. He gave a charming smile. "You flatter me. I wasn't the one drawing every eye in the room. I'm honoured you agreed to share that beauty privately with me."

She beamed. "So." Her hands gripped his shoulders. "How much contact do you want? I won't charge too much because you're so handsome."

The question surprised him. "Contact?"

"Yeah, I can do more than dance. I can add on a hand job for an

extra ten, a blow job for—”

“I’d prefer to watch you dance.”

“Okay, but you might change your mind by the end of it,” she said with a wink.

Is this secretly a brothel in addition to a strip club? He felt a twinge of familiarity, some thread he should pull, but he couldn’t quite formulate the thought. The dancer had already begun gyrating her hips, her thumbs hooking into the waistband of her tiny skirt. His mind was sluggish, and he silently cursed Levi. *I should have been the one flirting with the employee who’s staying fully-clothed.*

Thinking about Levi only made matters worse. The girl spun away from him and bent down, waggling her barely-clothed ass toward his face, and now he was conflating the two in his mind. First he was picturing Levi in her place, and then he was recalling Levi’s ass grinding against his face: the scent, the taste, the sound of Levi moaning for him. The comparison between the two—the man he loved and a woman he barely knew—was making him increasingly uncomfortable. *This is so hollow, so pointless.*

“What’s your name?” he asked, trying to keep himself on task.

She paused to look back. “Hyacinth.”

“Hyacinth?” he repeated, thinking it a strange name.

She stood and pulled her shirt over her head in a manner that was probably supposed to be seductive, but came across stiff and rehearsed. “They wanted me to choose a flower name, and all the good ones were taken already.”

“I see,” he said absently. He let his gaze linger on the gang tattoo in her inner forearm. There was something he was supposed to be focusing on, some familiar thought that was just out of reach, but now her breasts were jiggling toward his face. He reflexively pulled away.

She stopped and looked down at him, eyes wide. “You don’t like my tits?”

“They’re lovely,” he said honestly. “I don’t mean to offend. This is just ... new for me.”

“Oh.” Her jaw quivered. “I could give you blowjob, if it’ll help you relax. Half price.”

He couldn’t tear his eyes from that quivering jaw. This charade had gone too far; now they were both uncomfortable. He gave her a soft smile. “Actually, I’d like to just sit and talk for a few minutes, if that’s alright with you. I’ll pay you for your time.”

Her brows pinched. “What?”

“I’m enjoying your company, but I don’t want to force you to do anything untoward.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Oh. You’re one of *those*.”

“One of what?”

“The surface dwellers of marrying age who think they can save me from this ‘untoward’ job by whisking me away to safety where we can live happily ever after.” Her voice rose. “You probably think I’m trapped here, right? Maybe made some bad life choices, and you can rescue me and show me a better life?”

“I didn’t assume any of that,” Erwin said politely, even though he had. “You seemed a little nervous and uncomfortable.”

“Of course I did! I’m new at this. I want to do a good job. Doesn’t mean I’m some quaking little girl who needs a fucking rescue.” Her jaw was quivering again, and this time, he was certain it was from anger. “I’m here by choice. I make more here than I would at any other job in town, enough to feed my entire family, and all I have to do is suck a dick or two a night. I’m not going to let some blond asshole take me away from that so we can ride off on his high horse together.”

“I sincerely apologize,” he said. “I think perhaps I was projecting some of my own reservations onto you.”

Her arms folded over her chest; she didn’t seem ready to let it go yet. “You surface dwellers don’t know shit about life down here.”

“We really don’t.” He wanted to tell her that he was trying, that he was fighting to make life better for everyone, but that suddenly seemed arrogant. Would life really improve for people down here if they reclaimed Wall Maria? Sure, there would be more food, but the classist segregation of the Underground residents had been in place long before the wall had ever fallen. How much would it benefit them, really?

Well, he could question his assumptions about Underground life later. For now, he had a mission to complete. His eyes drifted back to her tattoo, and now that his senses were clear again, he realized what had felt so familiar. The very first link between Sahlo and Rage had been the sex worker Sahlo had tried to offer him early in their relationship, one with the tattoo on her ankle. If this girl was a sex worker, too, she might be aware of the business that supplied Sahlo with his escorts.

“I’m sorry, Hyacinth,” he said. “I didn’t mean to be rude. Truth be told, I came here looking for more than a dance before I was pleasantly distracted by your beauty.”

“Oh?” she said, staring down her nose at him.

“I represent a rather wealthy lord on the surface. He requires an escort for an upcoming gala, and he heard a rumour that some of the sex workers around here are willing to provide escort services to the surface for a good price.”

“Yeah, of course?” she said, confused, as if it were blindingly obvious.

“The problem is, he wrote down the name of a specific business for me, but I lost the paper. I’m not sure this is the location he asked me to visit.”

“Sure it is. We’re the only ones in town with the passes.”

“The passes?”

“Yeah, the day passes to the surface. My boss gets ‘em through some lord in town.”

“I see,” Erwin said. “Your boss has good business sense, making sure this business is the only one that can provide your special escort service.”

“Yeah. It’s the reason we all want to work here. Surface dwellers pay out the nose for their dates.” She leaned closer. “Now you see why I don’t need to be rescued by you. First time I land an escort night, I’ll make more money in a few hours than you do in a month.”

“I don’t doubt it. I apologize again, and wish you luck.” He gave her a bag of gold. “Who do I contact about setting up a date? I’ll be sure to put in a good word for you as his first choice.”

“Oh!” She seemed delighted. “Your lord should go through HDB Shipping in Mitras.”

His jaw clenched at the familiar name: Sahlo’s dummy company, the one he used to receive his cut of recovered funds from Survey Corps expeditions. “And what if I’m ready to talk to someone down here tonight?”

“Talk to our bartender, Thiemo. He’s my boss’s right-hand man.”

Erwin’s stomach dropped. *The one Levi’s speaking to?*

They had to abort the mission, *now*. They had gotten in way too deep, and it might already be too late to prevent Sahlo from hearing about this visit.

We only meant to scout the perimeter, but we jumped straight into the titan’s mouth instead.

“Say, Emil,” Thiemo said with a brilliant smile. “Since we’re friends now, I’ll let you in on a secret: I have a meeting with some of Étienne’s men in a few minutes.” He finished polishing a glass and set it under the bar. “Maybe you should tail me, do a bit of observing. You’ll probably figure out everything you need to know pretty quickly.”

Convenient, Levi thought. Thiemo had done nothing but talk vaguely around Étienne for the past ten minutes. His reluctance to divulge information suggested he was hiding a lot—too much. This ‘meeting’ was obviously a trap.

Unfortunately, Levi had no reasonable excuse to bow out. Thiemo was offering him the exact information Levi had been asking about. If he didn’t follow through, he’d be outright admitting his cover story had been a lie.

“Yeah?” was all he said aloud.

“Yeah, he wants to talk to my boss. Anyone who tries to go to my boss goes through me first.” Metal glinted in his sleeve as he finished tucking a knife into it.

Levi studied the man’s thick neck muscles and broad shoulders. *He isn’t just a bartender. He’s one of Rage’s main goons.*

At least if they went onto the street, there wouldn’t be an entire strip club’s worth of patrons jumping into a brawl.

“Sure. I’ll come.” Levi slid the last few coins across the bar, then hopped down from the stool. He mimed a twisting stretch, looking for Erwin. He found him standing near one of the side stages, arms folded tightly over his chest. Their eyes met.

Erwin rubbed the bridge of his nose: the signal they were in danger.

Agreed, Levi thought, rubbing his as well. He hoped Erwin was good at tailing people. Stealthily following a human was far different from stealthily following a titan.

Thiemo lit a small lantern as he led Levi into the back alley. Levi’s gaze swept back and forth as they walked, anticipating the trap. He hoped Erwin had taken the time to retrieve his gear. Thiemo was likely going to lead him along a twisting path, making it difficult to follow on foot. The gear might attract unwanted attention, but it would help Erwin track them down.

“Let me know when we get close to the meeting spot,” he said aloud. “I’ll fall back.”

“Yeah,” Thiemo said, looking straight ahead. If Levi had missed every other indication that this was a trap, the casual mannerisms would have been a dead giveaway. A man bringing a spy to a meet up would be paranoid about being spotted.

Levi gritted his teeth. *Coming to this club was a fucking terrible idea.* He should have known that idiot Francis would send them right into danger. It certainly wasn’t intentional—no, Francis wasn’t smart enough to be malicious—but the man had always had the worst luck.

It was difficult to guess their destination. They were heading south, to an older area of the city that had been thoroughly controlled by Rage during Levi’s time here, and probably still was. Levi had only been through here a few times in passing. This meant there was no chance he would be recognized, at least, but he didn’t have any knowledge about the area to use to his advantage.

A light scuff sounded behind him. He casually turned to look back, but the alley was empty. He hoped it was Erwin, but it didn’t sound right. Erwin walked on his heels and moved with a stiff upper body, which added weight to his gait; he sank even lower to the ground when he was in a combat-ready stance, so the scuff would have been extra heavy. This scuff had been light, as if made by someone who walked on the balls of their feet. *Must be Thiemo’s backup.*

As they crossed an intersection, Levi saw a shadowed movement in his periphery, then another on the other side. They were converging on him. His eyes darted to the path ahead of them. The alley was opening into a wider road, but the buildings here were even more worn than they had been around the club. This area wasn’t maintained; it must be lightly populated. *They’re going to lure me into the open and surround me.*

“We getting close?”

“I’ll let you know when to hide,” Thiemo said as he turned to him, his smile too broad.

8

As Erwin marched toward Levi’s old home, he carefully studied his surroundings, making a mental map of the area. He hadn’t been close enough to hear what Levi and Thiemo had been discussing, but he knew Levi would have fought his way out if he were under direct duress. Their departure must have been more amicable. The bartender must have offered to show him something, and Levi couldn’t drop his ruse

without arousing suspicion.

So, where was the bartender taking him? To a hideout? To Sahlo? The longer Erwin took to retrieve the gear, the harder it would be to find out.

The ceiling shook as he closed the door, debris crumbling into the room. It was difficult to imagine Levi living in a place where he had to dust every time the door closed.

There was a lot about Levi's life down here that was difficult to imagine.

Erwin hastily pulled on his gear, then tugged each strap to double-check the buckles. He struggled to grip both the gear handles and the gear cases at the same time, then gave up. There was no way he was going to be able to operate the gear and bring Levi's case to him at the same time. He would have to find Levi and bring him here instead.

He eased the front door open, then frowned. Several people were milling around the streets. He closed the door and returned to the living room, looking up at the hole in the ceiling. The second floor above him had a crumbling roof, as well, but it wasn't large enough for a person to fit through. Well, the rooftop was the safest way to avoid being identified—he would be noticed, but he would be high up enough that no one could see his face.

He set his jaw, anchored to the crumbling roof, and slingshotted himself toward the hole with a burst of gas. His chin tucked to his chest, arms crossed over his head, as he slammed into the roof. Wood, clay and straw fell around him, his forearms numb from the impact—

—and then he was surrounded by air and a cloud of dust. He flipped forward and landed softly on his feet on the rooftop, brushing dust from his face and hair. The roof was cracking in all directions from the exit hole, so he didn't linger. A taller building across the street would give him a better vantage point. He anchored into it and arced over the street, avoiding looking down in case anyone was watching him.

From the top of the taller building, he had a good view of the city. It sprawled in every direction, boxy and orange in the lamplight, darkness covering large swaths of it. Which way had they taken Levi? It had to be away from the main road. Several blocks north, east, and west of the club were well lit. His eyes narrowed as he began to move south, using the gear to travel from rooftop to rooftop. Darkness settled around him, and he moved a bit slower, giving his eyes time to adjust. Soon he found what he was looking for: the glow of a lantern on the

walls, a lone light amidst the darkness. He moved in closer and perched on the end of a building, looking down. The streets here were deserted, the buildings even more decrepit than they had been a few blocks ago.

Another glow in his periphery caught his attention. He hunched close to the edge of the roof and peered down. Two men were moving through an alley, their lamp so low it was almost out. A rifle was strapped to each of their backs, but they didn't move like Military Police: they were too cautious, constantly looking back over their shoulders.

Now that Erwin's eyes were adjusting to the darkness, he could see other faint glows like this one, converging on that steady source of light. *They're surrounding him.*

He quietly sprinted across the roof to the far side, then circled around to Levi. He heard Levi's voice before he saw him:

“Stop jerking me around, Thiemo.”

Given how softly Levi normally spoke, the loud tone must be an act to try to attract Erwin's attention, a trail of breadcrumbs to lead him in closer.

The bright light stopped moving. “Hey, I'm doing you a favour here,” said a voice that must belong to Thiemo.

Erwin shot an anchor into the side of the building next to them and arced high into the air, dropping noiselessly onto the top. When he peered down, he saw Levi standing with his arms folded over his chest, the bartender holding up the lantern to his face.

“I don't have time for you to lead me in circles,” Levi said, his voice abnormally loud again.

He's stalling here. Why? Erwin paced to the far side of the building and saw a large, open courtyard ahead of them. His brows lowered as he understood: the perfect environment to surround someone. He could still see those faint lights moving in around them; he counted half a dozen. *Why are there so many of them? Do they know who he is?*

“Look, Emil.” Thiemo's tone was probably meant to be friendly, but it had a harsh edge. “This meeting involves some of my boss's key contacts, and I just met you, so I've gotta be roundabout to protect my interests. You think I'm going to lead you straight there and jeopardize the security of our operations just because you have a cute little ass?”

Erwin frowned.

Levi threw his hands in the air. “Do I look like I know where the fuck I am? Fuck! It took me three goddamned days just to find your shit-hole bar in the first place.”

The small lights had all stopped within a block of them. Levi's chin was raised. He must have noticed they were surrounded. He used that stance on the field, too, taking in his environment through his periphery.

Erwin crouched, his fingers resting on the triggers of his gear handles, ready to move. There was still a chance to keep this conversation going a bit longer, to make the bartender accidentally reveal more information before he helped Levi escape.

“Say, Emil,” Thiemo said, “what was the name of the lord who hired you to gather this information about Étienne, again?”

Levi's face blanked.

Lord Hasek, Erwin thought. They had been over this during their preparations. *Come on, Levi: Lord Hasek*.

“Lord Haber,” Levi said.

The lights around them moved in, and Thiemo drew a knife, but Erwin was already swooping toward them. Levi pulled the knife out of his boot in time to block Thiemo's swipe; he kicked Thiemo in the stomach, knocking him back.

Erwin landed beside him and knelt. “Hop on.” The approaching attackers were bracing themselves in stance, aiming their rifles.

Levi hopped onto his back, and Erwin propelled them both over the attackers with a burst of gas. One of the guns went off near them, the bullet's impact so close it showered them with dust.

“Shit,” Levi said in his ear, his arms and legs tightening around him. “We got way too fucking close to Rage.”

“And to Sahlo.” Erwin's voice strained as he tried to pilot both of them from rooftop to rooftop. Levi was small, but surprisingly heavy, and Erwin's gear wasn't calibrated to handle their combined weight.

“That meathead bartender is Rage's muscle,” Levi said.

“Yeah, his right-hand man, apparently.”

“The club must be one of Rage's main bases of operations. I bet the basement is a drug house. Maybe they use the business to launder money.”

“Loosen your grip on my chest a bit,” Erwin wheezed as he navigated toward Levi's old home.

“Do you know how fucking terrifying it is to be moving around on 3DMG without being strapped in?” Levi said, but his grip loosened slightly.

The street was empty. Erwin landed harder than he intended on

the front doorstep; his knees twinged, and he cursed under his breath.

“Hard landing,” Levi said, dropping off his back.

“I’m fine. Hurry.” In retrospect, using Levi’s old home as their base had been unwise. If they had really stumbled deep into Sahlo and Rage’s network, the last thing they wanted was for Levi to be recognized. The familiar setting might be a dead giveaway if they were seen here.

They stepped through the door and Erwin gently closed it until it was just touching, watching the street through the crack. Behind him, he heard the familiar sounds of Levi putting on his gear.

“How was the lap dance?” Levi asked.

“Sahlo hires his escorts out of that club, and his shipping company is a conduit for lords to do the same.”

“Really? Shit. We’re the luckiest and unluckiest bastards ever, stumbling on that all at once. Get anything else out of her?”

Erwin glanced back at him. “I was distracted. We should have switched roles.”

Levi tugged each of his harness straps in turn, then began to strap on the blade boxes. “I’m not good at faking interest in women. She would’ve seen right through me.”

“I’m not sure I did any better.” Erwin turned back to the door, then gritted his teeth. A group of gun-wielding men and women wandered along the street, clearly looking for them. “We need to move. Leave the cases. We’ll come back for them later.”

Behind him, the closet door closed. “Let’s go.”

Erwin softly shut the front door, then turned and pointed to the roof. Levi nodded and shot for the hole without so much as a last glance around his old home.

They landed on the rooftop and used the gear to sneak several rooftops down, trying to make sure their enemies on the street wouldn’t spot them. Once they had put a decent distance between them, Levi swung out over the street, Erwin following closely behind. Shouts sounded from the street, and a rifle fired, but they were already well out of range. They darted around a corner into a side street, dodging laundry lines and crumbling roofs.

Levi glanced back, and his eyes widened. He dove deeper into the alley with a burst of speed. Erwin checked over his shoulder and saw four figures on 3DMG in the distance. *Shit.* They must have accidentally passed over a Military Police patrol; use of the gear by civilians was prohibited. His jaw set. Even the most novice soldiers in the Survey Corps

could out-manoeuvre the average MP. He swooped after Levi. Together, they zigzagged along alleys, sticking low to the ground.

After several blocks, Levi swung above the tops of the buildings and dropped onto a roof. Erwin landed beside him.

“I think we lost them,” Levi said, shoving a hand through his hair. “What a fucking mess. Let’s get the gear cases and go.”

“The cases are disposable. We’ll leave them.” Erwin scanned the area. In their haste to escape the MP, they had ventured deep into an unlit area of the city. “Is this where you were before?”

“Not quite.” Levi was staring at the ceiling far above them as if studying the glowing crystals. It took Erwin a moment to realize he was trying to catch his bearings.

“Do you know where we are?”

“It’s dark and I wasn’t in this area very much,” Levi said. “I’m going to scout. Stay here.”

“It’s a bad idea for us to separate.”

“With MP crawling around? They capture me and identify me, we pretend I double-crossed you and came back to Underground life. Keeps you out of trouble.” Levi eyed him. “Lay low.”

“Levi—”

“You wanted me to take the lead on this mission, right? Don’t let them see you.” He jumped over the edge of the building and, with a burst of gas, was gone.

Erwin flattened against the roof of the building. *A fucking mess, indeed.* He saw now why Levi and Leona had both been opposed to his plan. He had grown too accustomed to the politics of the surface, where lazy lords wove thick webs of bureaucracy and self-interest that changed very little when he plucked at single threads. Down here, people’s desperation made them wildly unpredictable. He had expected tangled webs and had found dry tinder instead; the tiniest spark of interest could start a roaring flame.

A murmur from the alley caught his attention. He peered over the ledge of the roof. Two people armed with rifles strode down the alley, lamp low. They were idly chatting, barely glancing around them. Erwin recognized the woman as the one who had gotten a shot on them before. He strained to hear their conversation.

“—long gone. Fucking Thiemo, thinks he can—” The words that followed were unintelligible from this distance. He crawled further forward to watch them. The woman sat on a box against the wall, the man

standing beside her.

“You know what?” said the woman loudly. “Fuck him. We have a date to finish.” She stood and grabbed the man’s collar, then shoved him back against the wall, her mouth covering his. Erwin couldn’t hear what the man replied, but the woman’s giggle was unmistakably flirty. The light dimmed, then went out, cloaking them completely in shadow.

Levi isn’t going to see them. Erwin stood. He had to draw them out before Levi returned.

⁂

Levi’s eyes narrowed as he spotted faint, glowing lights in the neighbouring blocks. Had their escape from the MP landed them right back in Thiemo’s lap?

At least he recognized a few familiar landmarks here. Unfortunately, they were a full kilometre and a half from the nearest staircase. Avoiding both Thiemo’s goons and the MP was going to be tricky. Their best bet was likely to open the gear into a full-out sprint across the city.

He swooped back toward Erwin and was surprised to see his silhouette on top of the roof. Why was he there? Levi had asked him to stay low.

The hair on the back of his neck stood on end. He latched onto the side of a building and hung there for a moment, scanning for danger.

The rock wall beside his head exploded.

Shit! He dove forward, already in motion before he had fully processed what had happened. A gunshot, from below. In the dim light, he could just barely see motion on the ground.

He thrust himself upwards, trying to blast himself onto the roof for cover.

There was another gunshot, and a *ting* by his side. His body jerked to the right, and then he was spinning. The gas canister—they had hit the gas canister. He opened up the right canister to try to counterbalance the escaping gas from the left, but he had already pulled into too tight of a spin. It was too dark, too fast, to know which way was up. He fired his grapples in opposite directions, desperate to anchor himself. One grapple found only air. The other latched onto something solid, and then he was careening toward a wall.

He slammed into the side of a building, then dropped a full

story to the ground, landing so hard that spots blackened his vision. His lungs were empty and burning; he tried to suck in air, but they wouldn't work. The escaping gas forced him flat against the ground, and he was too stunned to push back against it.

Fuck!

Booted feet landed in front of him. Levi struggled to lift his head. Erwin stood guard, back to him, a blade drawn on either side.

“Get up,” he said to Levi without looking back.

Levi gasped as air finally found its way into his lungs. The gas fizzled, and then the tank was finally empty. He forced himself to sit up.

Erwin strode forward, and now Levi could see two of Thiemo's goons frantically reloading their guns in the dim light. Erwin knocked each of the weapons away with the flat of his blades.

“Fuck you,” the woman roared as she lunged at Erwin, drawing a long knife out of her belt. Erwin caught it with his blade and redirected in an arc. The woman spun around and dropped, disoriented; the knife clattered to the broken stone road.

The man immediately threw his hands into the air. “Don't hurt me. I don't get paid enough for this shit.”

Levi rose to his feet, still a bit shaky. The woman was crawling along the ground to try to get to the knife. He kicked it away and drew his blade, its tip hovering centimetres from her face. “Try it.”

She looked up at him, eyes wide.

He kept his gaze trained on her, but used his peripheral vision to look for glowing light or movement. There, from the north. It took a moment for him to remember Erwin's fake name through his dizziness. “August.”

Erwin didn't look back. “Which direction?”

“North. A block or two away.”

“Your gear—”

“Screwed.”

“Very well.” Erwin leaned close to the surrendering man, his voice deep: “Do not attempt to follow us. I will not show you this mercy a second time.” He backed away, blade still trained on him. Levi kept pace with him. Once they were a short distance away, they turned and began to sprint down the alley.

As they ran, Levi glanced at Erwin, impressed. “That was menacing.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah, not bad. You should pull that shit on Sahlo when—” A shrill, three note whistle sounded behind him, followed by shouts, and Levi’s teeth clenched. *We should have knocked out the woman.*

Two men stepped into the alley in front of them. Levi grabbed Erwin’s wrist to jerk him around the corner, but a bullet flew between them and slammed into the wall. He felt Erwin stumble, heard him sputter.

The dust blinded him. Levi yanked harder, forcing Erwin to keep running. He glanced back as they ran. Tears streamed down Erwin’s face, and his face was so caked with dust that it was unrecognizable.

“Can you see?” Levi asked, voice low.

“Barely.” Erwin’s eyelids fluttered, his eyes still streaming. “Grit in both.”

“Useless,” Levi muttered as he led him around another corner, trying to lose their pursuers. “Shitgoggles would’ve been more useful than—” He cut himself short as a man stepped into the alley in front of them. The man’s rifle rose, its barrel pointed squarely at them. “Up! We need to go up.”

He had barely finished the sentence when he felt Erwin’s arms tighten around him. They burst into the air.

“Over here!” their attacker yelled, apparently electing not to take his shot.

They landed on the roof. Levi fell to his knees, gasping for air. Getting winded earlier had really taken it out of him, and Erwin’s grip had been protectively tight.

Erwin knelt, rubbing at his eyes with the heel of his palm. “Are you breathing okay?”

“Yeah,” Levi wheezed. “Can you see?”

“Yeah. How far is the nearest staircase?”

“At least a kilometre that way.” Levi pointed.

“Blindly fleeing isn’t working. We need a plan.”

Below them, people were shouting at each other, but they couldn’t seem to figure out a way to get to the rooftop. That was one advantage of the Underground’s boxy, shoddy workmanship.

Erwin tapped his gas tank. “If I carry you, think we can outrun them and make it to the stairs on three-quarters of a tank?”

“How should I know?” Movement in Levi’s periphery caught his attention. Thiemo’s men were repositioning themselves across the street, almost invisible in the shadows. *I wish I knew this area as well as*

they did.

“We need to get up high,” Erwin said. “Get a good vantage point, figure out a safe pathway to the staircases.”

Levi’s eyes snapped to a tall building a block north, an old ruined church with high spires. “There.”

“Might be too high for both of us on one gear.”

“I’ll blast my good tank. It’ll veer us left, but should give us a boost. If we can’t get up there, drop me and go.”

“Levi—”

“I’ll be fine. If we separate, try to lure them after you, give me time to escape. I’ll meet you at the foot of the staircase.”

Erwin gripped Levi’s shoulder and pressed a palm to his jaw. Their gaze held.

Then Erwin turned and hurried toward the back of the building, away from all the voices. Levi followed behind. They easily jumped to the next building without using the gear.

“They’re heading north!” yelled a voice from their right. Now Levi could see the rifleman lined up along the roof of the building next to them.

“Get on,” Erwin said, barely slowing as they ran toward the next building. His anchors slammed into the side of the church. Levi jumped onto his back, and they burst into the air.

Levi engaged his gas tank, but their ascent was still sluggish. At this speed, they were an easy target for the rifles.

“Open it up,” Erwin said.

“I did. It’s not ...” Levi reached behind him, then cursed. The bullet that had hit his left tank had also damaged the hose of his right; there was no way for the gas to get to the propulsion mechanism. “My gear is dead.”

In the silence that followed, he could hear the gear creak as it tried to reel them both in.

He gritted his teeth. “See you at the staircase.”

“What?” Erwin said. “Levi—”

Levi released Erwin’s torso and began to plummet toward the rooftop below. He pulled into a tuck, landed on his shoulder and rolled.

Gunshots sounded, far over his head. *I hope you got the speed you needed to escape that, Erwin.* He landed on his feet near the edge of the roof and grabbed the edge, lowering his body over it. It was nearly a storey and a half drop to the ground, and he tucked the landing, easily

rolling this drop, too.

Once he had found his feet on the ground, he slumped against the side of the building. His instincts told him to pant for breath, but he held it instead, listening.

A figure zipped over top of him—good. Erwin hadn't been hit. Light flashed around the corner ahead of him, twice. More gunfire.

Levi bit the inside of his cheek. Originally, he had planned to slip away while Erwin distracted them, but what if they got lucky and hit him? He slipped forward and peered around the corner.

Three men stood with their backs to him. Two were reloading; the third had his gun trained on the sky.

Shouts sounded further down the street: "North, north!"

The man aimed at the sky, waiting. "You're mine this time, you bastard."

Levi began to creep toward his back, his boots noiseless on the ground.

"Incoming!" yelled his friend just as Erwin's silhouette swooped through the sky.

Levi lunged. His elbow connected between the shooter's shoulder blades. The shot went wild, and the shooter dropped to all fours.

Two pairs of stunned eyes snapped to Levi. His fists snapped out, one, two, and caught them each in the nose. For good measure, he kicked them hard between the legs, dropping them.

"Shit," wheezed the shooter. Levi grabbed him by the hair and hoisted him up to face level.

"You Thiemo's men?" Levi drew a blade from his boot, pressing the flat of it to the man's trachea.

"Who are you people?" his captive asked, panicky.

The question surprised him. "What?"

"Who are you? Why does he have so many of us out here? Did Anderson send you?"

The name was unfamiliar, but it was clear from the context that it was the name of a rival gang leader. "Yeah, Anderson sent me. Get up." He hoisted the man to his feet and began to walk him toward the alley. Having a human shield would be useful.

Though, now that he had a minute to consider it, he wasn't sure a human shield would be useful against bullets strong enough to penetrate the 3DMG gas canisters. That was advanced technology, far more advanced than anything Levi had ever seen, above ground or below it.

More gunshots sounded from the street ahead of them. Levi edged back against the wall, thrusting his human shield in front of him. “How many of you are there?”

“I don’t know. Lots. Thiemo called in the big guns. I just want to go home and sleep.”

“Then you better make sure no one sees or hears us.” None of this made sense. Why would the bartender send up such a large alarm?

His eyes narrowed. *He knows who we are.* There was no other explanation, no reason two men could ever draw a small army and high-tech ammunition.

Had the bartender recognized him from his days in the Underground? Or had Sahlo told him to be on alert for two men matching their description?

This had to end here. Taking him prisoner wasn’t an option; they’d never get him back up the staircases. He had to be silenced.

A familiar warmth began to glow in his abdomen.

“Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit,” his hostage whimpered as they approached the corner. Levi made up his mind: a noisy human shield was worse than none at all. He brought his fist down on the man’s head, knocking him unconscious. He stepped over the fallen man and peered around the corner. Several of Thiemo’s men had congregated here, and at the centre of it stood Thiemo himself.

Levi took a silent breath and tried to edge forward to get a better view, then realized a woman was standing right beside him, leaning against the wall.

Their eyes locked, and for a stunned moment, she stared down at him.

“Hey—” she began to yell, but Levi drove a fist into her gut, knocking her hard into the wall. Running footsteps approached from his left; he back flipped out of the way, then slashed with his knife. His attacker howled, clutching a bleeding arm.

The warmth in his abdomen began to expand, crackling as it flooded his veins.

“Kill him,” Thiemo yelled as the attackers began to swarm. “Take the blond one alive.”

Levi spun, slashed, dodged and kicked, easily fending off every attack they threw at him.

This is what you’re meant to do.

He slashed a man across the chest and then grabbed him by the

throat, slamming him toward the ground.

It's in your blood. This is your purpose.

He threw a woman over his shoulder, knocking down two more people behind them. The hair on the back of his neck rose; he spun and ducked just in time to avoid a gunshot to the back of the head. The blast had barely sounded when he grabbed the gun and spun it, cracking the butt down on the head of his attacker. He twisted, clubbing another attacker's temple, then cast the damaged gun aside.

Now he could see Erwin on the other side of the fray—when had he landed?—trying to wrestle a gun out of Thiemo's hands.

Electricity crackled through Levi's veins, his vision, coloured it red.

You are a weapon, Levi. Silence him.

He barrelled through the fray and charged at Thiemo. The bartender's eyes widened and he tried to aim the gun, but Erwin knocked his elbow. The gun clattered to the side.

Levi jumped at the bartender, slamming him to the ground. He grabbed the man's hair in one hand and slashed with the other. A strange peace flooded his body, bright white and glowing, at the familiar feeling of steel ripping through human flesh. How many people had he killed in his lifetime, truly? Not just one. It couldn't be just one, not with how familiar this was. His memory began to clear, condensation fading from a mirror, showing the true monster in his reflection.

Thiemo smiled. *Fuck you, Levi*, he mouthed as the blood began to spray from his neck.

Someone might have read his lips. Their secret had to be protected. Levi whipped his head to the side, lips curled, and launched at the nearest attacker. The knife tore through flesh, through cartilage. Power surged through him. He turned, hunched, seeking his next target. *I'll silence them all.*

Instead, he saw Erwin. His Commander stood tall as he stared at him, his face perfectly blank beneath layers of dust and grime. Too blank.

The crackle in Levi's ears faded, and there was only silence. The other attackers were backing off, faces pale, eyes wide. He felt a trickle down his face, his chin; he looked down and saw dark spray on his shirt. Blood. So much blood.

Then there were shouts, and four soldiers in uniform dropped from the sky, surrounding him. They pointed their guns, shouting com-

mands he didn't understand. He blinked and looked at Erwin, who was being handcuffed by two soldiers. A few gang members were being put in handcuffs as well.

The knife fell from Levi's hand. Rough hands bound his wrists behind him, and then he found himself on his knees beside Erwin.

"We will only speak to Commander Nile Dok," Erwin was saying, over and over.

"Shut up!" a soldier said, booting Erwin in the gut. The blow was so pitiful that Erwin didn't even flinch. "The only person you're talking to is a fucking jail guard, you thug *scum*."

"I have money," Erwin said with authority. "Lots of it. My inside jacket pocket, my back pants pocket, and my boot. It's all yours. Take us directly to Commander Nile Dok and tell no one else."

The soldiers glanced at each other, then eagerly began to pull money out of Erwin's clothes. Erwin stared straight ahead, his chin held high.

Blood dripped off the tip of Levi's nose. His stomach heaved.

-26-**TRUST**

A roar sounded from the next alley over: "Kill him! Take the blond one alive."

Erwin's jaw set. *They've spotted Levi.* He opened up the gas tanks, rocketing toward the source of the voice.

The alley opened up beneath him. At least a dozen people surrounded Levi, but he was holding his ground, so swift that he was able to hold them all off at once. A few lay wounded in the fringes.

In the shadows, outside the fray, metal glinted. It took Erwin a moment to recognize a rifle barrel. The bartender was taking aim at Levi.

Erwin plummeted, crossing the flats of his blades in front of him just before impact. Thiemo turned to him, eyes wide, and tried to take a shot. The blade flats connected with his chest. A bullet whizzed past Erwin's ear as the two of them slammed to the ground.

They rolled, over and over, and when they stopped, Erwin held the upper ground, but he froze. A metal barrel was pressed to the underside of his chin. At first he thought it was the rifle, but it lay on the ground, barely out of arm's reach. *He was carrying a pistol.*

"Drop your weapons," Thiemo said.

Sweat beaded on Erwin's temples as he tried to think his way free. In the background, he could hear Levi grunting and yelling the way he did during intense sparring sessions. He cast his blades to the ground, hoping the clatter would attract Levi's attention.

"Holster the hilts, then stand," Thiemo said.

Erwin obeyed, the two of them rising to their feet in unison.

"Good boy." Thiemo leered. "Or should I call you 'Command-

der?"

Erwin held his gaze, expression flat. "You have me confused with someone else."

"No, I most certainly don't, and I know someone who's going to be very interested in speaking with you."

In the background, the sounds of the scuffle had slowed.

Levi's the last man standing. An assumption, maybe, but he saw no other possible outcome to the skirmish he had witnessed earlier. That meant he had backup if he tried a risky move.

He stomped on Thiemo's foot and, while he was distracted, jerked his chin clear of the gun barrel. He knocked the pistol out of Thiemo's hand; it skittered along the ground, far out of reach. The bartender lunged for the fallen rifle instead. Before he could steady his aim, Erwin grabbed the gun with both hands, attempting to twist it out of his grasp.

For a moment, they were in a deadlock, both wrestling for the weapon. Racing footsteps sounded behind them, so quick and light that they could only belong to Levi.

My gamble paid off.

Erwin released the rifle and stepped back.

As expected, Thiemo took aim at Levi instead. Now his attention was split, and Erwin took the opportunity to ram his elbow. The gun clattered to the ground.

A small, muscular mass launched at the bartender, grabbing a fistful of hair.

Erwin expected Levi to threaten him, or maybe stun him.

Instead, metal glinted in the lamplight. Blood sprayed from Thiemo's neck. Levi hunched over him, crimson staining his face, his shirt, his grin.

His twisted grin.

Erwin's stomach plummeted in a drop so steep that he thought his knees would buckle beneath him. There were those rare dimples, the ones Erwin had only ever seen a handful of times, spattered with the blood of the man he had just killed.

Levi launched at a nearby woman. The blade slashed again. Before her body had even hit the ground, Levi whirled, seeking a new target.

Their eyes locked.

Am I next? The thought surfaced before Erwin could stop it. Fear

rose in his throat, flooded his mouth, acidic and bitter at the same time.

No attack followed. The dimples faded first, then the curve of the narrow lips, and then it was just Levi, staring dumbly at him, blood dripping off his hair, his nose, his chin.

“Don’t move!” a woman’s voice yelled.

Erwin’s gaze snapped up. Half a dozen Military Police soldiers swooped toward them. The gunfire must have drawn them in. His mind raced. There was no physical escape left, but there might be a political one. He raised his hands in the air and dropped to his knees.

“We surrender,” he said loudly, hoping Levi was in a state to understand language. “But you must take us directly to Commander Nile Dok.”

“Shut up.” One of the soldiers roughly cuffed Erwin’s hands behind his back.

Erwin’s eyes twitched to Levi, who was still on his feet and staring at him, stunned, dripping blood. The knife lay on the ground beside him, glinting red in the lantern light.

“Sir,” one soldier said to another, “three dead, ten injured, a few more injured the next block over.”

“We will only speak to Commander Nile Dok,” Erwin said, because if he kept repeating himself, eventually someone would have to acknowledge him.

The soldiers pushed Levi down to his knees. His head was bowed, his shoulders slumped.

“—to Commander Nile Dok,” Erwin finished for the fifth or sixth time.

“Shut up!” A soldier swung a leg toward him in a clumsy kick. Erwin tensed his abdominal muscles in time and barely felt the connection. He patiently waited through the insults that followed, staring his attacker down. The MP’s had a universal weakness, one that was easy to exploit.

“I have money,” he said clearly. “Lots of it.”

Now he had their attention.

As the police descended on him, Erwin stared past them, not daring to look to the side, because he couldn’t bear to see Levi’s slumped, bloodied form.

As the soldiers marched them up the stairs to the surface, Erwin mentally rehearsed what he would say to Nile.

The timing was fortunate. Nile usually operated out of the MP base in Stohess so he could be with his family, but he was in town for the next day's expedition approval meeting. The Military Police and the Garrison had recently become heavily involved in expedition planning. When it came time to reclaim Wall Maria, every soldier in all three divisions would be fighting side by side.

Nile was bound to be upset about the incident. He and Levi had come to operate on good—if not overly polite—terms, but the relationship was fragile enough that an event of this magnitude could shake it. They would have to fall back on Nile's fundamental trust in Erwin to get out of this. Even though Levi had technically been in charge of the Underground mission, Erwin would take full responsibility for everything that had happened. He was the one who had set the events in motion. He was the one who had brought Levi into such a dangerous setting in the first place. Levi's hand had held the knife, but it had been forced.

He had two priorities. The first was to make sure they didn't receive punishment for what had transpired. Both he and Levi were too valuable to humanity's future, particularly Levi.

The second was making sure Sahlo didn't suspect them. Levi had taken care of at least one attacker who could have identified them, but there was no telling how many others present had been aware of their identities.

When it came down to it, Erwin had a feeling Sahlo would know exactly who had been responsible even without any intel.

At the top of the staircase, the MPs shoved them into the back of a carriage. Levi slumped into the corner shivering, even though it was an unusually warm night.

“He’s going into shock.” Erwin had seen it enough times to know the symptoms.

“I told you to shut up,” a soldier said.

“He may be injured. You should check him for injuries and treat his shock.” Erwin eyed the soldier. “If you let him die, you’re going to have to go through an inquest.”

“Who’s going to care? He’s a fucking murderer.”

“That doesn’t matter. He’s still a citizen of the kingdom, and as such, he’s entitled to a fair trial.” He didn’t drop his gaze, didn’t blink.

“You saw the mess down there. This is no minor incident. If this is processed through the proper channels, there will be recognition in it for you. Maybe even a medal. It’s in everyone’s best interest if he lives: his, mine, yours.”

No one said anything further, but one of the soldiers draped a blanket around Levi’s shoulders, while another began to examine him for injuries. Erwin bowed his head, confident Levi was being cared for, and went back to planning his conversation.

The carriage halted several minutes later. Erwin listened, apprehensive. He had given the soldiers access to an inordinate amount of cash, so it seemed likely they would uphold their word, but there was always the possibility these soldiers were more corrupt than most. Thankfully, the carriage door opened to reveal the Military Police headquarters. The soldiers marched them up to Nile’s office and handcuffed them each to a chair at his desk. Two soldiers stood behind them, presumably ready to shoot if they tried to escape.

“Thank you for honouring our agreement,” Erwin said.

“Don’t think we did this for you,” the woman said behind him. “The amount of money on you, and that much firepower against you—you’re a big fish, aren’t you? Best to get the Commander involved, make sure you get special attention. Then we’ll get special attention for bringing you in. But thanks for the cash.”

Erwin didn’t reply. He glanced over at Levi; he was still hunched, the blanket still draped around his shoulders. He was shaking a little now, but not as violently as before. His hair was hanging in his blood-drenched face. He was unrecognizable. *I wonder if I am, too.* His eyes were still gritty when he blinked, and his clothes were coated in dust.

The door burst open, and Nile strode into the office, a file tucked under his arm. His face was twisted into an unpleasant grimace, his hair stuck out to the side, and his jacket was crooked, as if he had pulled on his uniform in a hurry. As he slid behind his desk, his eyes narrowed at the captured pair.

“I don’t know what the hell you assholes want, but—” He stopped as recognition set in. “Oh, you have got to be kidding me.”

“Good evening, Nile,” Erwin said.

Nile let out a long, weary sigh, and then sat back in his chair. “Peter, Lena, can you give us some privacy?”

“But sir—” one of the soldiers said.

“That was an order,” Nile said. “You’re dismissed.”

Erwin heard the thump of saluting fists behind him, then marching boots. He glanced at Levi again, but he hadn't moved. *Is he aware, or lost deep in his mind?*

The door closed. Nile stared at them a moment longer, fingers drumming on the desktop. "Erwin, what the fuck are you doing here?"

"Your soldiers filled you in on the situation?"

A flush was slowly creeping up Nile's neck, the tendons strained. "Please tell me you didn't start a gang war in the Underground, then bribe your way into my office in the middle of the night."

"Gang war" is hyperbole." Erwin sat tall, matching his cold stare with one of his own. "Our operation was compromised, so we acted in self-defense when we were swarmed by gang associates. I needed to speak with you directly because of the sensitive nature of—"

"What operation? We didn't authorize an operation to the Underground." The flush was creeping up Nile's jaw line to his cheeks. "The Underground is our jurisdiction, not yours. You had no right to overstep the authority of the MP and the Council—"

"You are in a unique position to understand what I need to say."

They eyed each other for a moment, then Nile's gaze shifted to Levi. "Is he the one who did the killing?"

Levi hunched tighter into himself.

Erwin tasted that bitter, acidic fear again, but only said, "He was acting under my authority."

"Four people are dead."

Levi looked up, the first sign of awareness he had shown since they had returned to the surface. "Four?" His voice cracked.

Nile pulled a piece of paper out of the file, reading it. "Two victims had their throats slashed—the soldiers who arrested you witnessed that part. One blunt trauma, died at the scene. One broken neck. A dozen other injuries of various severity levels, all expected to survive. All were associates of major crime lord Raphael 'Rage' Klein." He tossed the paper onto the desk. "We've been working for years—years, you assholes—to foster gang equilibrium in the Underground, and in one night of 'self defense,' you have completely undone everything. People are going to be rushing in to fill the power gaps left behind by these four people. And you requested to talk to me because, what, you thought I'd sweep this under the rug for you?"

Levi bowed his head, trembling.

Erwin leaned forward until the cuffs strained his wrists. "Nile, we

are two to three expeditions away from taking back Wall Maria. We received inside information that a member of the Council is going to take drastic measures against the Survey Corps before that can happen. We needed to root him out, pluck him like a weed, and to do that, we needed to get closer to his illicit activities in the Underground. Unfortunately, we stumbled a little too close, and after a series of catastrophic failures, we ended up being surrounded." He glanced at Levi, steeling himself against that stricken, blood-stained expression, those shaking shoulders. "If Levi had not acted as he did, we wouldn't have made it out alive. That means others would have been required to step up to lead the Wall reclamation effort." He eyed Nile. "Most likely, it would have fallen to you and Commander Pixis. While I don't doubt either of your capabilities, you don't have the field experience the job requires. It's true that our actions tonight may have caused short-term chaos, and I apologize deeply for the inconvenience we caused. These actions were necessary to protect humanity's future."

Nile let out another long sigh and leaned back in his chair. "So that's your argument? Illegally sneaking Underground and murdering people was in humanity's best interest?"

Erwin held his gaze, unflinching.

Nile shook his head, looking defeated. "I have no idea what to do here."

"Have soldiers escort Levi to the showers," Erwin said. "Let him clean himself up while I take you through everything, step-by-step." Sitting around in his victim's blood had to be Levi's version of hell, and listening to Erwin recount their evening wouldn't help, either. "I'll gladly face down a hearing and proper legal proceedings at the end of our discussion, if you feel it's warranted. But first, I need you to listen."

"Fine. But if Levi tries to slit the throats of my soldiers—"

"He won't," Erwin said, more vehemently than he had intended.

Nile eyed them each for a moment longer, then stood and grabbed a pad of paper and a stick of graphite on his way to the door.

Is he going to write a warning message to Sahlo? Erwin thought, but that didn't seem likely. Nile and Sahlo weren't playing on the same team. Each month, Oluo gave his carefully censored updates; Nile pretended they were genuine to appease Sahlo, and Sahlo pretended they were genuine to appease Nile. Those dual charades had played out for nearly three years now. So far, each man seemed unaware that the other was telling Erwin not to trust him. No, it was more likely that Nile was

going to get his senior officers involved.

He turned to Levi, who seemed to have withdrawn into himself again. Perhaps being a bit detached right now was nicer than facing reality. *Rest well, Levi. I'll get us out of this.*

When Nile returned, he was followed by four soldiers. They uncuffed Levi from his chair and dragged him to his feet. He didn't protest or struggle as he was led away. Erwin craned his neck to watch him leave, his throat tight.

The door closed.

Nile dropped to a seat across from him, still staring at the door. "You can take a man out of the Underground, but you can't take the Underground out of a man." His dark eyes shifted to Erwin. "Let me guess: he snapped, and you're trying to take the blame because you care about him?" He cocked his head, as if trying to get a better read. "Or because you need him as a weapon? Or both? I can never tell what your priorities are."

Erwin studied him. "Nile, this is all tied to Lord Sahlo."

Nile jerked upright as if he had been slapped. "Then I don't want to know."

"We managed to trace him to—"

"Erwin!" Nile's brows dropped. "Listen to me carefully: I don't want to know. Sahlo's a devious fucker, and whatever you've found out will probably get you killed. Leave me out of it."

"Do you truly believe ignorance will protect you? He's prepared to assassinate me to get his way. It's more likely that he'll try to control me first, and that means everyone around me is at risk."

"I told you not to get involved with him," Nile muttered, shuffling a stack of papers on his desk.

"You've been involved with him, too, haven't you?"

"I'm not worried. Unlike you, I've been working hard to stay on his good side."

This called for desperate measures. Erwin leaned closer. "What happens if Sahlo digs into my past and finds out I was close to Marie?"

Nile snorted. "You think your friendships as a teenager are going to matter to him?"

"He was at the gala three years ago when I danced with Marie. He's seen me refuse every other woman he's offered me since, and he's commented before that I seem like a man hung up on a past love." That wasn't quite true, but he needed Nile on his side. "It would be easy for

him to get the wrong idea. Think about it, Nile: is there anything about your family that could make Sahlo think Marie is important to me?”

Nile’s eyes locked onto him. Erwin knew exactly what he was thinking: *Jasper*.

“You,” Nile growled. He strode around the desk and jerked Erwin’s chair to the side so they were facing each other. His hands clamped onto the arm rests as he lunged in, their noses almost touching. “You selfish asshole! If that fucker comes after my family, I am going to personally string a noose around your neck!”

Erwin didn’t flinch. “This is why we had no choice but to fight back. Sahlo holds a major sway over the Council, and he single handedly has the power to delay the push to Wall Maria. We need to stop him at all costs. This isn’t just our problem: what do you think will happen to our society if we start running out of food because of the lack of land? That is why Levi and I went Underground; it wasn’t just to save everyone we’ve ever cared about. Humanity’s future is at stake. I didn’t put your family at risk, Nile: I made a gamble to try to save it, and everyone else within these walls.”

Nile’s eyes narrowed, and when he spoke, his voice was quiet and cold. “You can try to convince me your actions were for the greater good, but four people are dead, and you may have turned a powerful lord against me and my family. When you calculate the consequences of your actions, you never, ever, *ever* stop to think how it will impact the people you claim to care about.”

Erwin held his gaze. “There was no other choice.”

A knock sounded at the door.

“It’s out of my hands now, anyway,” Nile said, and he marched across the room.

Every muscle in Erwin’s body tensed. *Did he invite Sahlo after all?*

Instead, Commander-in-Chief Zackly strode through the door. The elderly man was wearing a long coat over pyjama bottoms.

“Sir,” Nile said, saluting. “Once again, I apologize for interrupting you at such a late hour, but these are unusual circumstances.”

“So I see.” Zackly adjusted his glasses. “Erwin,” he greeted.

“Sir.” Erwin reflexively moved to salute, but his hands jerked at the cuffs instead.

“I hardly think the cuffs are necessary, Nile.” Zackly pulled up a chair and sat at the end of the desk, picking up the file. As he read through it, Nile unlocked Erwin’s hands.

Rubbing his wrists, Erwin said, "Sir, if I might explain—"

Zackly held up a hand to stop him, still reading. When he had finished, he looked up, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Where is Levi?"

"Cleaning up, under supervision," Nile said. "He was drenched in blood."

"I don't doubt it, after all this." Zackly turned. "Very well, Erwin, you may speak. What happened?"

"Sir." He had been trying to decide how to approach this; every approach was risky. He decided to jump in with both feet. "You'll remember the work I did to take down Lobov when he was diverting funds from the Survey Corps. Tonight, I took a similar risk to try to track down a man whose greed is poised to halt the Wall reclamation effort."

Nile rubbed his face and let out a low sigh.

"Continue," Zackly said, impassive.

"Because the offending person is a Council member, I was unable to seek approval for this mission through the usual channels. I operated of my own accord, without permission. Levi was acting under my authority. We attempted to find evidence of gang connections, and ended up stumbling too close to the heart of the illicit operations. A group of gang members swarmed us. We fought our way out. It was never our intention to cause unrest in the Underground, nor to take lives."

"I see." Zackly stood. "Nile, why don't you go get some sleep? This might take awhile. I can process them in my office."

"Sir." Nile saluted again, giving Erwin an uneasy glance.

"Erwin, come with me."

As they fell into step together in the hallway, Erwin studied Zackly. Though he had a good read on almost everyone he met, Zackly was a mystery. He seemed logical, fair, and so expressionless that he must have learned a long time ago not to show his hand. Or maybe he simply didn't hold one.

They stepped into the Commander-in-Chief's office; Zackly strode to a cabinet on the wall. "Drink?"

"No, thank you."

Zackly poured himself an amber drink from a dark glass bottle, then sat at his desk, gesturing for Erwin to do the same.

"Commander Erwin Smith," he said, drawing out the words. "Keith had his eye on you from the moment you first set foot in the Sur-

vey Corps headquarters. When you were first promoted to Squad Leader, he said he wasn't sure if you were going to save the world or stab him in his sleep. Clearly it turned out to be the former, but you do have a bit of a stab to you, too, don't you?"

"Sir?" Erwin said, sitting straighter.

"That was brilliant work with Lobov. I don't think I ever told you, but your airtight evidence was all that was needed in his trial. Your ability to get results is part of the reason the King entrusts you with the Survey Corps, and we all expect great things from you." Zackly took a sip of his drink, then held out an envelope. "And so I was surprised to receive this document earlier this week, and even more surprised to see you sitting in Nile's office coated in dust and cuffed to a chair. I'm assuming your opponent is Lord Martin Sahlo?"

The envelope was marked with Sahlo's seal. Erwin opened it. Inside, Sahlo had documented the monetary amounts retrieved from each silo, alongside the substantially lower amounts the Survey Corps had reported returning to the government. Every number was accurate: all their subterfuge, laid out in perfect detail. *He's taking big risks. I could easily reveal that the funds were directed to his shipping company.*

Thankfully, Erwin had anticipated this possibility. Leona had provided him with forged documents that painted a picture of innocence.

He handed the envelope back to Zackly. "I have official records that show this is all fabrication."

"I expect you do. I decided not to act on these reports of his, yet, and I'll delay it as long as I can. Sahlo chose poorly when he tried to get to you through me. He's been giving everyone grief lately—Nile, Pixis, even me, to some extent." Zackly leaned back in his chair. "Unfortunately, he's also been gaining influence with the King, which means we can't stand up to him. Not through normal channels, at least. As Commander-in-Chief, it's my job to respect the King's wishes above all else. That's why tonight's events put me in an unfortunate position: I must favour those who are favoured by the King."

"I understand, sir."

"Your actions were reckless." Zackly tucked the paper into an envelope, then slid it into a drawer. "Dead bodies in the Underground are easy enough to sweep under the rug, but they're still deaths."

"We had to move quickly. I received top-secret intelligence that Sahlo is planning to get rid of Levi and me at any cost. We believe he

will start trying to undermine me, then escalate as the situation warrants, going as far as assassination. I don't think I need to explain to you how detrimental this would be to the future of humanity. We have plenty of leaders capable of leading the charge, but we'd lose too much time as they got caught up with the plans, the checkpoint locations, and even the strategies we use on the field. Knowing all this, I made a gamble that we would be able to get close to Sahlo if we poked around the Underground. The problem was, complications arose when we were too successful and landed ourselves in the heart of it instead of the fringes."

Zackly stared mildly at him. "And did you obtain any concrete evidence of Sahlo's wrongdoings?"

Erwin hesitated. "Nothing we can present in court, unfortunately."

A pause. "What if you had a bit more time?"

"Sir?"

"You say we're less than six months away from reclaiming Wall Maria, correct? I am willing to delay my ruling on tonight's incident if you can prove to me that Sahlo is a genuine obstacle. I'm assuming you need to wrap all this up before we reclaim the Wall, anyway, correct? So, I'm going to ask Nile to keep this quiet and focus his efforts on retaining balance Underground instead of following through with charges. I'll wrap up Levi's manslaughter charges with the pardon I gave him when he first joined the Survey Corps. But Erwin." Zackly leaned closer. "If it turns out all this was unnecessary—if your claims that Sahlo is going to try to block the expedition or take action against you end up being false or exaggerated—we *will* revisit this in six months. At that time, I will hold you accountable for everything that happened tonight."

"That seems more than fair, sir. Thank you." Six months would be plenty of time to flush Sahlo out, especially if tonight's actions spurred the lord into action. *In the long run, tonight's incident could work in our favour.*

"Good." Zackly opened another file. "And by the way, I received the application you sent earlier today for Levi's promotion. This probably isn't the best time to discuss it, but we will revisit it before you leave for Trost. I need a little time to figure out how tonight's actions will impact it, if at all."

Erwin nodded, wishing he hadn't sent over the application the second they had arrived. This was the worst time for Zackly to be considering a promotion. "Thank you, sir."

“Levi should be cleaned up by now.” Zackly stood. “I’ll send both of you home. Nile and I will figure out a way to cover up this story without causing too much chaos in the Underground. We may ask you to supply a small team of soldiers for a week or two if the unrest gets out of hand.”

That was fair; they had been the ones to cause the mess, after all. Erwin stood and saluted.

“I hope we won’t have to revisit this in six months,” Zackly said.

“I won’t let you down, sir.” They had leads now. Sahlo wasn’t going to stand a chance.

Levi was waiting for them in the hallway, leaning against the wall, two soldiers standing on either side. He was dressed in a baggy white undershirt and military issue white pants that were too long for him. His hair was damp and his skin was clean. A nasty looking gash on his upper arm had been stitched with dark thread.

“Here,” one of the soldiers said, handing Erwin a small bag. He opened it. Bloody clothing.

“Peter, escort them to a carriage, then come back and speak with me here. You other three, come into my office,” Zackly said.

“Sir,” Peter said nervously.

“They won’t hurt you.”

Erwin reached out to grip Levi’s shoulder, then stopped when he realized his hand was caked with dust and sweat. “Let’s go,” he said instead.

Levi didn’t look up at him, but pulled away from the wall and fell into step behind him.

The carriage ride was uncomfortably quiet. Levi’s head was still bowed; he was compulsively scrubbing the back of one hand with his other thumb, as if trying to rub away grime that was no longer there. It was a subtle move, one that wouldn’t have attracted anyone else’s attention, but Erwin knew it held deep importance.

“Levi,” he said quietly.

The scrubbing stopped. “How many people have I killed?”

“What do you mean?”

Levi finally made eye contact with him. His expression was flat. “Before tonight. When you planned to recruit me, what did my file say? How many?”

Erwin leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, holding his gaze. “It’s impossible to know how much was factual. We burned that

part of your file when we recruited you, anyway.”

“Erwin,” Levi said, his voice deepening. “How many?”

He thought about lowering the number, but decided to be honest. “Fifteen, but like I said, there was no evidence for any of it. You had enough of a reputation already to make for a convenient scapegoat.”

Levi’s throat bobbed, and he started scrubbing his hand again. “I’m not the man I thought I was. I never have been.”

“Levi,” Erwin said quietly, “this doesn’t change anything.”

He waited for a response, but silence swelled between them.

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When they arrived at the hotel, the front desk staff gave Erwin strange looks. He caught a glimpse of himself in one of the mirrored panels on the wall and realized why. His face and hair were coated with dust and grime. No wonder Nile hadn’t recognized them right away.

When they arrived at their room, Erwin stepped into the bathroom to light the water heater, warming it for his bath. Levi pushed past him and began to pour water into the washbasin, scrubbing his hands.

Erwin stood and watched him scrub at his pristine hands, using his nails, digging so deeply that he left angry red marks. “Levi.”

He bowed his head, his teeth clenched and bared. “Leave.”

“Levi, stop.” Erwin rested a hand on his shoulder.

He whirled to face him, his eyes flaring. “Fuck off!”

Erwin jerked away. Slowly, he turned and left the room. He focused on pulling off his clothes without spilling dust all over the carpet. In the background, he could hear the sound of running water and scrubbing. He took slow breaths as thoughts warred in his mind:

I have to help him, warred with, I need to give him space.

Maybe this is what he needs to calm himself, versus, dwelling will only make it worse.

He sank to a seat on a chair, burying his face in his hands, trying to find his footing, but it was like scrabbling up a gravel slope. His reality when he had woken up that morning had completely vanished beneath him. Sahlo planned to kill him, and Levi had killed four people, and every single bit of it was Erwin’s fault. How had he been so arrogant to think he could face down a lord with endless resources? Why did he ever think he, Erwin Smith—one man—could single-handedly bring down a corrupt system that had been in place for a hundred years, as

solid and immovable as the walls themselves?

At the end of the day, he was just a dumb little kid with a dream, destroying the lives of everyone around him because of a single glimmer of hope he imagined he saw in the distance. No one was safe. His mother, his father, his sister. Levi. Nile and Marie. Maybe even that danger he had spoken with—would Sahlo and Rage try to wring information out of her? Everything he touched crumbled.

He took a deep breath. *We're almost at Wall Maria. This will all be for a good cause soon.*

But then what? Why was he treating that like an end goal? It wasn't the end. It was only a step back to the place where they had started.

The sound of the water boiler was drowning out the running water now, and Erwin forced himself to stand. He hoped the running water had stopped, but Levi was still hunched over the basin, still scrubbing. His hands were red and raw.

Erwin stepped up to him, deciding it was time to risk another outburst. "Levi, stop. The blood is gone."

"It's not gone," Levi said, his voice thin and stretched. "It's never gone."

Maybe this required a different approach. "You can't take back what already happened. Your hands are dirty. Accept it. Embrace it." Erwin crouched beside the basin, trying to see his face. "If you hadn't fought them off, we would have captured and tortured, or worse. Your instincts saved us. That blood is there because of me, because of your commitment to humanity. I am grateful."

There was no response, but the scrubbing had stopped. Erwin reached out and turned off the faucet.

"I have a suggestion for you," he said. "There's cash in the right pocket of my uniform jacket. Take a bundle of it downstairs to the bar and purchase a package of their nighttime tea, then bring it back up here and prepare us each a cup. I promise I won't make you talk about anything you don't want to discuss, but I do need to debrief you on my discussion with Zackly." Maybe it would have been better to wait until the next morning, but he knew Levi. The best thing for him was to have his time occupied with distractions.

Levi shoved a hand through his hair, then turned and left the room.

Erwin filled the bath, then quickly scrubbed the dust from his

skin and hair. The bath water quickly turned muddy, and he drained and refilled it. His eyes were still gritty from the gravel that had lodged there earlier. He tried to run them under the water tap, but they were still irritated.

Finally, he was clean. He stood in front of the mirror and parted his hair, then examined his face. His eyes were red and glassy. His cheeks and chin had faint abrasions that looked almost like a flush, or maybe tiny red freckles. His lips flattened. He'd need to prepare a good excuse for his appearance in case Sahlo probed him about it.

He strode to the closet and pulled out one of the bathrobes; it was soft against his skin. Levi sat at the table, preparing two mugs of tea. He glanced up at Erwin, then looked down again, his expression blank.

Erwin dimmed the lamps. He sat across from him and set a candle between them, lighting it. This was a routine he often used on trips to Mitras alone. Focusing on a dancing flame and sipping soothing tea was an important ritual to unwind at the end of a stressful day.

"Thank you for getting this tea, Levi. It contains calming herbs. In the past, it's helped me sort out my thoughts when my mind is racing. I thought we could both benefit from it."

Levi took a sip, then made a face. "It tastes like rotten moss."

The tone was a bit softer than usual, but at least it was close to his usual snide mannerisms. Erwin took it as a good sign.

They sipped at the tea in silence, both watching the small flame between them. Erwin felt the stress begin to ebb from his muscles, his breaths slowing. Across from him, Levi's shoulders seemed to be relaxing. He was busy figuring out how to start the conversation, when Levi's voice surprised him:

"My hands are dirtier than you think, and the cause isn't as noble as you think, either." His tone was soft and measured.

Erwin studied him. The flame flickered in Levi's eyes; he seemed to be staring through it. His face was smooth, all its usual furrows flattened.

"How so?" he said softly.

"I took down Thiemo because he needed to be silenced, yeah, but then I kept going." Levi's throat bobbed. "You remember me telling you about the four looks you see on someone's face right when you kill them? Well, his face was accepting. He didn't give a shit that he was about to die. I can deal with that. But the woman beside him, she gave me that *why* look, that look of despair. She was like Isabel, or Farlan,

brought into gang life by circumstance, by loyalty. And the only reason I have for killing her is because it felt good.”

Erwin lifted his tea to his lips; it was a struggle to swallow around the lump in his throat.

“I don’t even know who the other two deaths were,” Levi continued. “I changed the lives of their friends and family forever tonight, and I can’t even remember their faces.” He stared down at his hands. “You say I acted in the best interests of humanity. You think their families would agree?”

“There are casualties in any war.”

“You don’t get it.” Levi’s hands curled, his brow furrowing. “Every death you cause is by deliberation. You weigh the pros and cons and choose to sacrifice when it’s unavoidable. I just *react*. I turn into a wild animal and slash at everyone and everything around me until I feel safe. And I fucking enjoy it. This isn’t about war. This is about me being a monster.” His voice was still calm, a stark contrast to his words.

Erwin thought of that bloodied smile. He swirled his tea, staring at the pattern of the leaves in the bottom of the cup. “I was the one who put you in that position.”

“No. You gave me multiple chances to back out. Then you told me to take the lead on the mission, so I put myself—”

“I asked you knowing you would feel obligated to accept, and you made every decision based on the larger framework of my strategy. Do not shoulder the blame alone, Levi.”

“It doesn’t bother you, does it? That I just killed four people?”
The tone was almost accusatory.

“I’m concerned for your wellbeing.”

“But you don’t care that they’re dead.”

The question struck him as odd. Why should he care for people he had never met, who had died attacking them? He certainly felt grief for his own lost soldiers—when it was appropriate, when he allowed himself to feel it—but their attackers were people who had willingly taken up weapons against them. Maybe it was his fault the battle had begun, but they had been free to leave the battlefield at any time. Soldiers facing the titans didn’t have that luxury.

There was a long silence between them.

“Zackly and Nile are going to cover up what happened,” Erwin said. “Zackly wasn’t surprised to find out who was involved. Sahlo had already been in contact with him, trying to expose the funds I’ve been

‘embezzling’ from expeditions.”

Levi grimaced. “Shit.”

“I have doctored documents to fend off Sahlo’s accusations, but it shows just how desperate he’s becoming, for whatever reason. Zackly has given us six months to prove Sahlo is involved in activities that conflict with humanity’s goals.”

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll be tried for what happened today.”

Levi’s eyes narrowed. “He’s going to try you for the crimes I committed?”

“For the crimes you committed *on my behalf*, and only if we can’t provide conclusive evidence. I’m confident we’ll be successful.”

Levi shook his head. “You’ve been doing this for three years without any luck.”

“Tonight was the first time I really committed to going after him, and we found some solid leads.”

“There’s an easier, more permanent way to stop him, you know.” His hands, red and cracking, began to tremble.

Bile rose in Erwin’s throat at the thought of asking Levi to kill for him. “I told you, that’s not an option. I can take him down through political channels. Trust me.”

Levi’s eyes closed.

“Levi?”

“Fine.” He drained the rest of his tea in one swallow, then stood. “I’m going to bed.”

With effort, Erwin managed to keep his voice steady: “Do you want company, or do you need some space?”

Levi’s face twisted and he looked away. “Maybe a bit of space.”

Erwin nodded, not allowing his expression to change. “Please let me know if you need anything.”

Their gaze held for a moment longer, then Levi turned and walked down the hallway to the second bedroom. The door closed behind him.

Erwin’s head bowed, his eyes closed.

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He stayed awake for another two hours, poring over the brain-storming notes he had made earlier and adding annotations. There were

so many gaps in logic, so many connections he couldn't yet see. The biggest question was also the most troublesome: why was Sahlo positioning himself to eliminate Erwin now, when they were so close to reclaiming the wall? Levi had theorized Sahlo was interested in land ownership, but the land within Wall Maria was useless if the wall remained unclaimed. It was possible he was trying to stall the reclamation effort to buy more time to gain property, but that seemed far too roundabout.

And what of the high-powered weapons that were used against them Underground? Was that Sahlo's doing? Or simply another reason it was good to have Rage as an ally? And how did the Wall Cult fit into all this?

He rubbed at the bridge of his nose and pulled out the side table drawer, intending to set the book inside it. The three bottles of lube and the toy rolled to the front of the drawer. He stared, his throat tight. *I wonder what Levi had planned for tonight?*

He wanted more than anything to crawl into Levi's bed and hold him close, but Levi had specifically said he needed space. His wishes must be respected. Instead, he turned out the lamp and reached for a spare pillow, wrapping his arms around it, burying his face in the top of it. He should have had a second cup of tea; he was still awake enough for the day's stresses to crowd his mind.

He hugged the pillow tightly and rolled over, restless. His eyes, adjusting to the dark, detected a faint light coming down the hallway from Levi's room.

Maybe he should check on him.

He slid out of the bed and began to pad quietly toward the room. He knocked softly.

“Levi?”

A long pause, then: “Come in.”

He eased the door open.

The bed was used, but empty. Levi sat in the corner of the room, knees drawn to his chest, a dim lamp at his side.

“Levi?”

“Corners are safer,” Levi said quietly. “Don’t have to worry about your back.”

“I could guard your back for you, if you’d rather lie in bed. Or I could just sit with you for a while.” He paused. “Or if you still need space, I’ll leave.”

“Stay.” Levi looked down. “I know I’m shutting you out.”

“It’s okay.” Erwin sat cross-legged on the floor in front of him. “Are you angry with me?”

“A bit. Part of me’s angry you took us down there after I told you it was a bad idea.” His face twisted. “And part of me’s angry you stopped me, because I’m a fucking monster who enjoys hurting people.”

Erwin slowly reached out for one of Levi’s hands, giving him plenty of time to react. When he didn’t flinch, Erwin closed his hand over it, then slowly lifted it to his face. His thumb ran across the knuckles, feeling the rough skin.

“Would a monster feel such regret for his actions?” He nuzzled those rough knuckles, ran them along his cheek, closing his eyes. “I’m sorry, Levi. The lives we lead encourage us to tap into aspects of ourselves we may not like. We’re both going to do reprehensible things before this war ends. We’re going to make snap decisions that seem like mistakes in retrospect.” He brought the knuckles back to his lips, softly kissing them, breathing in. “You are welcome to be angry with me. Be angry with yourself, too, if you must. Just understand that no matter how things play out, I’ll trust and support the decisions you make. I will always have your back.”

Levi’s eyelids were low, his lips parted. “Yeah?”

“Of course. I told you, Levi: what happened tonight doesn’t change a thing, not for you and me.”

Levi’s hand opened, cupping his jaw. “I love you.”

Relief flooded through Erwin, warm and glowing. He hadn’t realized just how worried he was that this would come between them. He reached for Levi’s shoulders and pulled him in for a hug. Levi slumped against him, nestling under his jaw.

“I love you, too,” Erwin whispered into the dark hair.

“Will you come to bed with me?” Levi asked into his neck.

“Of course.”

They crawled into the bed and turned out the lamp. This bed was a bit smaller than the one in the main room, but still larger than their beds back at the base in Trost, so it didn’t feel confining. Erwin spooned up behind Levi, draping an arm around him. Levi hugged it close to his chest and inched back against him. His body radiated heat.

“God, I’ve missed holding you,” Erwin breathed, the religious curse escaping by mistake. He wished he could shake off the last of the Wallist influence from his life. Still, that same link to the Wallists might

end up saving his life, if his mother's information about Sahlo proved to be true.

"When we're lying like this," Levi said, "all that other stuff seems a long way away."

Erwin closed his eyes, wanting to agree, but his mind was still racing.

❧

A knock sounded.

Erwin opened his eyes, groggy. Levi was still asleep beside him. Daylight seeped in through the blinds. *We slept in.* At least the Council meeting wasn't until that afternoon; they still had plenty of time to prepare.

He eased out of bed, pulled on a shirt and checked to make sure the bed in the main room looked slept in as well, just in case their visitor was someone who couldn't know about their relationship. Another knock sounded before he had reached the door.

He opened it.

Berit stood in the hallway, and he smiled.

"Berit," he greeted, giving her the warmest hug he could manage around her round belly. "I wasn't expecting to speak with you until after the meeting."

"I get tired pretty easily these days," Berit said. "Thought it might be better to meet with you this morning instead, just in case I need an evening nap." She hesitated, her eyes drifting to his hair. "Late night?"

He ran a hand through it, feeling it sticking in every direction. "Indeed. Could you please give me one moment?" He closed the door and turned back to Levi, who was sitting up in bed in the other room, groggy. "Are you okay to do the upcoming graduate review right now?"

"Yeah, just give me a minute." Levi slid out of bed, grabbed his uniform and headed to the bathroom. He seemed to be operating as usual. Erwin hoped that would last.

He invited Berit in and slid a padded arm chair to the table for her. She leaned back into it with an *oof*.

"The kid's active this morning," she said, rubbing her stomach.

"I see," Erwin said.

"Want to feel?"

He had a feeling the sensation of an unborn child's movement would only remind him of the life he had given up long ago, so he smiled politely. "Perhaps not this time, but thank you."

"Suit yourself."

"You seem happy," he said, genuine.

"It's pretty amazing, knowing there's a future person growing inside there. Sure, it's not all fun, but overall, I'm surprised by how much I like being pregnant." She poured herself a glass of water from the jug. "You know, if you two ever decide you want a kid and you need someone to carry it, get in touch."

Erwin blinked. They had become reasonably close friends in the time since she had left the Survey Corps—really, ever since she had jumped in front of a titan for him—but this was a lot to offer, even for a good friend. "That's extremely generous of you, but I doubt we will ever be in a position to start a family." For a delirious moment, he pictured Levi holding a baby he had fathered, with matching snub noses and scowls.

Berit took a long sip, then gestured at the bathroom door. "You propose yet?" she asked quietly.

He gave a polite smile, masking his twisting heart. "I've been busy."

"You're always busy."

"Busier than usual."

She flattened her lips. "So all that going on and on over the past three years about how August 849 was going to be the month—"

"The false confidence of a younger, more naïve me, I suppose." He glanced at the closed door, listening to make sure the bath water was still running, then leaned closer. "We're planning a getaway after the next expedition. I've hinted at engagement; he seems receptive. I was planning to buy a ring while I was here, but circumstances changed and Levi ended up joining me, so it will have to wait. Hange will be joining me for the post-expedition debriefing, so we'll select something for him then. I've already picked the setting: a hill overlooking Ehrmich, at sunset."

"That sounds lovely." Berit pointed a finger at him. "Remember to invite me."

"We will," he said, smiling. "The guest list will be small, and we'll have to use pseudonyms, but it should be fun nonetheless." He tried to picture Levi standing across from him as they were joined in marriage.

Would he blush? Smile?

Blood-stained dimples flashed through his mind, and his stomach dropped.

“May I ask you for advice, Berit?”

Her head tilted, as if she could sense it was important. “Of course.”

Now he had her permission, but he wasn’t entirely sure what he wanted to ask. “Did Silas ever do something that showed you a side of him you didn’t know existed? Something that made you question how well you really knew him?”

“Is this about Levi?”

Erwin glanced back at the bathroom door and, confirming the faucet was still running, leaned forward. “I thought I understood him, but there are parts of his past so dark that I can’t even begin to fathom what he’s been through. Sometimes, very rarely, those show through, mainly in his reactions to stress. He refuses to talk about it. I don’t know how to help him.”

She studied him. “Ever think maybe it’s not your place to help him?”

That threw him off. “What?”

“Look, not all problems can be talked through. Whatever ghosts are in his past—and given that it’s Levi, I bet it’s a shitload—he’s handling them himself in the ways that work for him. If he needs help, he’ll let you know. If you try to fix him, help him, or whatever you tell yourself it is, you risk completely dismantling his own coping mechanisms.”

“When I think of the suffering he must have endured—”

“You think he wants to see you as a victim? Look, I don’t know how you two operate, what passes between you in private. Just don’t get so caught up in solving his puzzle that you forget he’s a person with feelings.”

He smiled. “I should hire you to be my personal therapist.”

“There isn’t enough time or money in the world for that job.” She smiled too, and leaned back in her chair. “He almost done in there? This baby is stepping on my bladder.”

“He’s taking a bit longer than usual.” Erwin wondered if he had gotten caught in another hand-washing cycle. He was torn between giving him space and barging in.

He didn’t have to debate for long. A minute later, the sound of running water ceased. Levi emerged shortly after that. His hands were

red again, but he was fully dressed, hair combed, chin shaved. He strode into the room and nodded. "Berit."

"Levi." Her eyes held on his hands for a moment, but then she looked up and smiled. "Excuse me for one moment." She stood and half-jogged, half-waddled toward the bathroom.

Erwin pulled out a chair for Levi. "How are you?"

Levi shrugged and sank into the chair. He usually had a tendency to slouch or set himself in uncomfortable-looking poses when he sat, but this time he sat upright, both feet flat on the floor. "It doesn't seem real."

"Maybe that's for the best." Erwin hesitated, then rested a hand on Levi's knee. "Is there anything I can do to help you?"

Levi's hand lay atop his. Their fingers intertwined. "Keep me busy. Take my mind off it."

"Of course."

The bathroom door opened, and Berit returned. "Ugh, you two are so lovey-dovey," she muttered, nodding at their joined hands, but she was smiling. "This won't take long." She eased back into her chair and pulled a stack of files out of her satchel: upcoming graduates for the Southern Trainee Corps. "You talk to any of the other branches yet?"

"You're the first," Erwin said.

"Well, we're also going to be the best. We've got eleven candidates for you instead of the normal ten. The southern 104th is an exceptionally strong group. Good thing, because the north, west and east branches have been a disappointment. Shadis has been spending a lot of time travelling between the weaker three, trying to figure out how to turn them into soldiers."

"So, is your group actually strong?" Levi said. "Or do they just seem that way compared to the others?"

"I'll answer that question with our top candidate." Berit set a file on the table. "Mikasa Ackerman."

Levi's grip suddenly tightened. Erwin turned to him. The grey eyes were wide, his face pale.

"Levi?" Berit asked. "Do you know her?"

"That name ..." Levi trailed off and clutched at his forehead with his free hand.

"A family from the Underground?" Erwin asked, surprised by the strength of his reaction.

"She's from Shiganshina," Berit said.

“Maybe that’s where I know it.” Levi lowered his hand and grimaced. “Doesn’t matter. Keep going.”

“Okay.” Berit looked a little uncertain. She tapped the file. “Mikasa has perfect speed, strength and stamina. She took to the gear like a natural. Strongest trainee the military has seen in years. With a bit more training, she could be at Mike’s level.”

“I see,” Erwin said, impressed.

“Only thing is, she’s bound at the hip to another trainee, her adoptive brother, but the good news is he’s hell bent on joining the Survey Corps. Seems likely you’ll get both of them.”

“Interesting,” Erwin said, watching Levi, but his earlier confusion seemed to have faded. “This other trainee, her adoptive brother—is he any good?”

“He’s a solid candidate, very likely to end up in the top ten. Like I said, the two of them came out of Shiganshina, so they’re familiar with strife.” She opened another file. “Eren Yeager.”

This time, Erwin was the one who recognized the name. “Any relation to Doctor Grisha Yeager?”

“Yeah, his son. You know Grisha?”

“I did. He was a close friend of Shadis.”

Berit cocked a brow. “Really? Keith hasn’t said anything about it.”

“Dr. Yeager apparently died in the attack on Shiganshina. It’s possible Shadis isn’t comfortable speaking about him anymore.” Erwin traced a fading scar on his inner forearm. “He stitched up a few of my battle wounds over the years, and he was integral in treating that illness that swept through Shiganshina awhile back. Good man with a good heart.”

“His son’s got a good heart, too. Stubborn as hell—that’s the main reason he’s doing so well, just pure perseverance, no real innate skill. Seems to have a lot of sway over his classmates as well, lots of charisma. He’d be a solid addition to the Corps. He and Mikasa will likely come with a third.” She presented the next folder. “Armin Arlert, their friend from Shiganshina. Kid can barely lift a feather without exhausting himself, so he probably won’t make the top ten, but he’s exceptionally bright. He found six flaws in our strategic training manual, and also proposed improvements to the flow of traffic in the mess hall that helped it run more smoothly. Keep an eye on him, Erwin, because you might be able to do what Shadis did with you: mentor him and pull him up through the ranks as a strategic advisor.”

"I see," Erwin said, making notes. "An interesting group indeed."
 "We're just getting started."

As they continued to go through the more notable trainees, Erwin made notes, glancing occasionally at Levi. The skin contact between their hands was damp. Eventually, Levi pulled away and wiped his palms on his pants. His face seemed calm.

They were just wrapping up when Berit let out a surprised cry, then chuckled and cupped her stomach. "Dammit, child: relax!"

Levi's lip curled. "You can feel it moving?"

"Yeah. Want to feel?" She leaned back. "Put your hand here."

Levi looked both intrigued and repulsed. He reached out a tentative hand, then pressed it against her stomach. A few seconds later, he said quietly, "Holy shit."

Tears sprang to Erwin's eyes without warning. *Where the hell did that come from?* The grit had probably scratched his corneas, made his eyes inclined to water.

"Excuse me." He strode to the bathroom, pulling out a handkerchief as if he were about to blow his nose. Instead, he closed the door and stared at his own reflection, blinking until his eyes cleared.

Even though the door was closed, he heard Berit say to Levi, "You probably think pregnancy is nasty, don't you?"

Levi's voice was so soft that Erwin stepped closer to the door to hear it. "It's creepy as hell. Breasts getting bigger and gushing milk, little parasites growing and pushing your belly out until they get big enough drop out of your vagina and become a shitting, vomiting, screaming brat. But ..." He paused. "People like Erwin and me, death follows us wherever we go. It's our specialty. And here you are, making a whole new person out of a bit of cum."

Was that wonder in his voice? Erwin dabbed at his eyes.

"Poetic," Berit said wryly. When she spoke next, her voice was so soft that Erwin almost couldn't hear her: "You ever want kids?"

"Nah, not the way things are now." There was that surprisingly gentle tone to Levi's voice, the one that made him sound like a different person. "Maybe if things were different."

"Yeah?"

"Erwin doesn't mention it often, but I can tell he wants a family more than anything. I'd adjust. He'd be a good father." A pause. "But it doesn't matter, anyway. Things are what they are. This shitty world expects things from us. No time for brats."

Erwin cleared his throat and strode back into the room. He gave them a polite smile. “My apologies for my absence. Unless you have anything else to add, Berit, I think we’ll have to close off this meeting now. There are still a few things Levi and I need to prepare before our meeting with the Council.”

“Of course.” She stood and gave each of them a hug. She held Erwin for a beat too long and whispered in his ear, “Tell me how it goes.” It took him a minute to realize she meant his planned marriage proposal. He had already shifted back to his business mindset. *This shitty world expects things from us, indeed.*

As soon as the door closed behind her, an awkward silence descended over the room. Erwin turned to face Levi; the Captain’s eyes were downcast, his arms folded over his chest.

“You said you wanted me to take your mind off things,” Erwin said.

“Yeah,” Levi said, gaze sliding up to him. “Please.”

“Would a massage help?”

“I was thinking …” The weight shifted between his feet. “I had some shit planned for last night, and …” He shrugged. “If you aren’t too afraid of me.”

“Levi, I’m not afraid of you.”

“It’s just, this shit requires a lot of trust, and—”

Erwin gripped his shoulders and stooped to his level. “Then it will be an opportunity to demonstrate how much I trust you.” Taking a blind shot, he added, “Maybe it will be an opportunity for you to learn to trust yourself again, too.”

Levi’s brows pinched. “I don’t like it when you try to read my mind.”

“And I’ve been doing that a lot lately. I’m sorry.” He hesitated. “Was I wrong?”

“No.” Levi’s brows lowered. “This is awkward. Kiss me.”

Erwin understood—he felt that same shyness, that same hesitation to be the one to initiate, that always took hold when they had an argument or other intense situation. But this time, given all Levi had been through, given that it was Erwin’s fault, he pushed through his hesitation with so much zeal that he lunged, his mouth closing over Levi’s.

Their tongues touched, then slid together, both of them forcing sparks in hopes they would catch. It didn’t take long for the forced effort to melt beneath the heat of their mouths. Erwin’s eyelids fluttered, one

hand raking into Levi's hair, the other sliding down his back to grab his ass.

Levi surprised him by jumping up and wrapping his legs around him, and Erwin caught him with both hands, grunting a little against his weight. Levi's kiss was deep and so wet that liquid dribbled between their chins. It wasn't like him to be so messy, and the thought of him getting so carried away made Erwin's eyes roll toward the back of his head. He staggered toward the bed, falling onto it, Levi beneath him, the impact making Levi's teeth dig into his tongue.

They pulled apart, breathing hard. Levi wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, but didn't seem fazed by the drool. His eyelids were heavy, his hair in his face, his entire face flushed. The grey eyes shifted between his.

"Look at you," Levi breathed.

"Look at me?" Erwin replied, sweeping dark hair off the broad forehead. "Look at *you*, your expression so raw and hungry." He ran a finger along a narrow brow. "You're so beautiful."

The flush darkened. "Stop being sappy. Kiss me a bit more, then we'll do my thing."

"Okay." Erwin replaced his finger with his lips, kissing a narrow brow, then the other. He took a moment to kiss Levi's cheek, intentionally centering it over the spot where a dimple would rarely form, re-claiming it. For a moment, he thought he tasted iron, but then he realized it was just his imagination.

He pulled the shirt collar out of the way and kissed down to Levi's jaw, then his neck. His scent was stronger in a hollow above his collarbone, and Erwin nestled there, gently sucking the skin.

"Oh shit," Levi whispered, twisting beneath him, legs tightening around his waist. Erwin was tempted to grind against him, but he held back, savouring the restraint. He unbuttoned the top button of Levi's shirt and dragged his tongue along the collarbone beneath it. The little cry he received in response was too much for him, and his hips began to rock.

"Shit." Levi grabbed his hair. "Slow down. I have plans."

Erwin pulled away. "Then tell me what to do next."

"Is your ass clean?"

Erwin's brows rose. "I thought I was going to be inside you."

"You are, but I have plans first."

"It should be. I can go freshen up, if you'd prefer."

“Yeah, be quick. Come back naked.”

When Erwin returned to the bed, he found Levi, shirt sleeves rolled up to expose his forearms, top collar buttons undone, fastening gear harness straps to the headboard. Erwin must have looked apprehensive, because Levi stopped.

“I was planning on strapping you to the bed, blindfolding you, getting you all worked up and then turning you loose on me,” he said, that earlier awkwardness creeping back into his voice. “But if that’s too intense after last night ... I know you like to be able to look me in the eye when things get stressful.”

Erwin strode across the room and grabbed Levi’s wrist, deceptively slender, pressing a trail of kisses down the inside of his forearm. “You hate rolling up your shirts like this.” Something about the tightness of the rolled-up part being ‘imbalanced’ compared to the loose sleeve above it—Erwin hadn’t really understood, but it had seemed important.

“Yeah, well.” Levi shrugged. “I know you like the way it looks. Does this mean you’re okay with this?”

“Of course.” Erwin rotated Levi’s arm and kissed from elbow to the back of his hand, admiring the cords of his muscles. *A perfect weapon of a man*, he thought, but this time, the familiar thought made him pause, made an unpleasant shiver run down his spine. Maybe there were some lingering issues to work through after all.

“Okay, knock it off.” Levi jerked his arm free. “I have to finish setting this up.”

“I don’t believe I authorized the harnesses to be used this way, Captain,” Erwin quipped, stretching out on the bed.

“Every fucking time,” Levi muttered. He glanced down at him. “I had to use your harness.” The words were heavier than they should be.

“Yeah?”

“Mine is still in that bag they gave us.” His mouth twisted.

Probably bloodstained. Erwin gave him a pleasant smile. “It was getting close to time to replace them, anyway. We’ll order you a new set when we get back to the base.”

Levi nodded, then finished setting up the straps. He opened the drawer and pulled out the toy and a bottle of lubrication.

Erwin’s brows rose. “We’re using the toy?”

“Yeah.”

“You know it sets me off too quickly.”

“So maybe it’s time we work on your stamina.”

Erwin’s lips flattened. “My stamina is fine.” He reached for the toy, idly examining it. It had been a recent purchase, one made during a drunken wander back to base after he had indulged in too much blackberry wine with a client in the seedier side of Trost. Toys had never been part of his routine with past lovers—he had even been shy about blindfolds and straps until Levi had introduced them—but his drunken self had bought it as a present for Levi. He had been too ambitious about the size of it, and Levi had flat-out refused to use it. They had made a few more purchases since, but secretly, this one had always been Erwin’s favourite; when coupled with Levi’s mouth, he was overwhelmed with bliss in seconds. He was usually too shy to ask for it, and sometimes even too shy to accept when it was offered, but Levi had always been able to read him well.

“Here.” Levi tossed those infernal black underwear at him. “Put these on.”

Erwin grimaced. “Really?”

“That’s purely for me. Just for a few minutes.”

Well, he could sacrifice a little bit, since Levi was going to so much effort to make this special. He pulled them on, and the majority of the fabric immediately slid between his cheeks. The front was too tight, even though he was mostly flaccid.

Levi looked up, and his face slackened. “Fuck.” He paced toward Erwin, circling him. “Fuck.” He stood behind him and began to grope.

Erwin had never been a fan of skimpy underwear. He was more interested in formal wear or nudity: extremely elegant, or natural. Levi, however, had always been a fan of strappy wear. “I still don’t understand the appeal.”

“You’ve never seen yourself from the back.” Levi dropped to his knees and buried his face in Erwin’s ass, groping at his hamstrings. “Holy shit,” he murmured, muffled.

His zeal was arousing and that was making the underwear even less comfortable, but somehow more tolerable at the same time. Besides, it was nice to see him distracted. He deserved a bit of an escape.

The worship went on a bit longer than Erwin would have liked; he waited patiently. At last, Levi pulled away, giving a few last massages.

“Okay. You can take them off.”

Erwin glanced back, noting the peak in the front of Levi’s pants. Maybe he should drag this out a bit longer. “Take them off for me.”

Levi reached for the underwear, but Erwin stopped him.

“With your teeth.”

“Ah,” Levi said, high pitched. He knelt and tried to grip the band with his teeth, then cursed. “It’s too tight.”

“Then just erase the lines when I pull them off.” Erwin peeled them off, letting them fall between his feet, and stepped out of them. Levi slowly dragged his tongue along the red stripe the waistband left behind, making eye contact the entire time. Erwin shuddered, feeling body heat and warm breath, teasing.

Then, Levi stood. He said, breathless: “Lie down on your back.”

Erwin lay back on the bed. Levi had pulled the top blanket off, and the sheets were soft. He dutifully put his arms above his head, and Levi strapped them to the headboard. He retrieved his cravat from the dresser, where it had stayed, neatly folded, next to Erwin’s bolo tie from the night before. “Lift your head a bit.” He tied the cravat around Erwin’s eyes as a blindfold, then carefully centred the pillow beneath his head. “That good?”

“Yeah.” With his vision blocked, he was becoming acutely aware of the draught in the room, raising goosebumps on his skin. He could hear Levi’s breaths, already harsh. “You like how this looks?”

“Yeah. So fucking hot.”

A tongue circled Erwin’s nipple, and he cried out, caught off guard. “Shit.”

Then the bed shifted, and Levi’s breath was hot in his ear. “You can’t move, you can’t see, you can’t predict where I’m going to touch you. How does that make you feel, control freak?”

Now Erwin couldn’t hear anything but his own panting breaths. He was surprised by how little it was taking to put him on edge. Was it some residual fear of Levi that was making this so exhilarating?

“Too over the top?” Levi asked.

“No, it’s fine. I’m just thinking too much.”

“Stop thinking.” Levi ran his hands down Erwin’s flanks. The warmth made him shiver. “Focus on what I’m doing.”

“Kiss me first.”

A soft, small mouth pressed against his lips, and a lump suddenly formed in his throat. He chased the kiss as it pulled away; Levi indulged him with a few more soft pecks.

Then those kisses trailed down to a nipple again, hands roving across his chest and abdomen, so many competing sensations that Er-

win couldn't keep track. He tilted his head back and felt a hand on his throat—a brief flash of blood, a brief spike of fear, but then there was just warmth. A tongue dragged down the side of his abdomen, across a hip to a thigh, two hands on his chest. He was constantly off guard, constantly unable to predict Levi's next move. Even his awareness of time dissipated. It might have been five minutes later, might have been fifteen, when he felt Levi pull away entirely. The bed shifted, and then he was alone.

Erwin let out a whimper, giving a slow thrust at empty air, straining against the arm restraints.

"Just a sec," Levi said, his voice low. He heard clothes hitting the ground.

Then Levi lay on top of him, skin to skin, so warm that they both gasped. Erwin tugged at the restraints, reflexively wanting to clutch that warm body against him. But Levi was already sliding down his body, and then his mouth was warm and sucking hard, and Erwin thrust into it.

Levi jerked away. "Careful."

"Sorry." Erwin thrust at empty air. "It feels good."

"It's fine. Just don't choke me." A firm hand pressed against his pelvis, pinning him into the bed, and there was that mouth again. Erwin yanked on the restraints and struggled to thrust again, but the hand was too strong.

"You're already this far along?" Levi said, lapping at the tip a few times.

"It feels good," Erwin said again, unable to form a new thought.

"This is why I wanted to do it last night, a couple hours after we got you off." There was a long silence, too long, and Erwin felt concern drown out his pleasure.

"Levi," he said quietly. "Stop thinking."

"Couple of sad fuckers," Levi said. "Letting other shit drag us down when we're lying here like this."

"Kiss me again," Erwin said.

This time, it was Levi who lingered, the kisses surprisingly chaste considering the positions they were in. Their foreheads rested together.

"Okay?" Erwin said.

"Yeah." Levi kissed the tip of his nose. "Okay." He slid down to the end of the bed again. This time, his kisses trailed the inside of Er-

win's thigh, then back up. Erwin felt a dragging tongue, and he tried to thrust into the warm mouth at the end of it, but Levi pulled away, kissing his hips instead.

The teasing continued, impossible to predict, and Erwin felt his lips move, but he had no idea what he was saying. Levi paced it out just enough to barely keep him hard, paying attention to the rest of his body as well, the intimacy of it overwhelming. It was as if Levi was everywhere, touching every part of him.

"You're dripping," Levi said, awe in his voice. His tongue swirled around the head, and Erwin let out a loud, long cry. "I haven't even put anything inside you yet."

"Feels good," Erwin gasped, thoughts even less coherent than before.

"Then maybe it's time for this." Levi grabbed his thighs and lifted, repositioning him, and Erwin found himself with his knees by his ears, his ass high in the air. He grunted, surprised.

"Your back okay?"

It was awkward, but not a strain. "Yeah."

"Your back is so flexible." A tongue ran across his ass. "I bet you could suck your own dick."

Erwin felt his ears glow. "I don't know about that."

"You ever try it?"

"I'd rather you do it," he said evasively.

"There's other stuff I want to use my mouth on first." Levi spread him and slid his tongue along Erwin's tailbone. The position and blindfold were disorienting. *I'm completely at his mercy.* He groaned Levi's name.

Levi hummed his approval and dragged his tongue further. "Want me to suck your balls?"

He got stuck between moaning and agreeing and ended up making a noise that sounded vaguely like, *uh-huh*. He wanted that tongue everywhere, that warm breath, that purring voice.

Then Levi was sucking and running his tongue in circles, and Erwin's hands clawed into the straps that bound him to the bedposts. His hands began to go numb and cold, but he couldn't stop himself from pulling against the restraints. His back began to arch; Levi pressed a hand against his lower back to keep his ass high in the air.

After several minutes, Levi pulled away, running one hand where his mouth had been. "Do you have any idea how fucking amazing

you look right now?"

Erwin tried to reply, but only managed a choked moan.

"Doing okay?"

Another moan, but he managed to make this one rise at the end to show his willingness.

"You'll tell me if you're not?"

He nodded.

Then those hands were running down his front, his back. A damp tongue slid deep between his legs, pressing deeper, the blood rushing to his head, to his dick. His limbs tingled. He could hear Levi groaning, curses smothered by wet skin, and somehow it made him feel an even stronger connection, knowing this one act was bringing them both so much pleasure.

"Oh, fuck," Levi said, using both hands to pull him apart, to bury his face in deep. Erwin bucked up against him. Liquid was trailing from his stomach to his chest, and he couldn't tell if it was him, or Levi's saliva, or both. Liquid trickled down his tailbone, too, definitely from Levi's mouth. He loved it when Levi got too carried away to care about being tidy.

"Fuck," Levi said again, pulling away, clapping his ass.

Then Erwin's back was slowly being rolled against the bed as Levi lowered him to lie flat. After being contorted for so long, he felt as if he were being lowered through the bed instead. Floating.

A kiss to his mouth surprised him. He felt a palm press to his jaw. "Still doing okay?"

Erwin's lips were clumsy. "Yeah," he managed.

One last kiss, then Levi's weight lifted off him entirely.

Erwin took a deep, shaky breath, letting his body relax. His hands and forearms ached from gripping the restraints so tightly. His feet were tingling. He could hear the sound of a cap being unscrewed.

"It seems unfair," he said, his voice cracking.

"What does?" Levi asked.

"All this focus on me."

Warm breath by his ear surprised him. "I need to show you how important you are. I need to worship you like a fucking god." A tongue ran around the border of his ear, and Erwin shivered.

"But what about you?"

"I'm fine. Here." A hand cupped the top of his head and gently turned it, and then damp flesh was rubbing against his lips. "Feel how

hard you make me?”

Erwin groaned and stretched out his tongue, trying to taste him. Levi finally complied, leaning into his mouth, and oh fuck, he felt so good, so hard and warm. Erwin strained his neck to lean closer to take him in deeper.

“Wait,” Levi gasped, pulling away. “You can do what you want to me when I free you, but I’m not done with you yet.”

“I’m getting impatient.” Erwin’s hips shifted.

“That’s the whole point.”

He felt the mattress shift, then the drizzle of oils. Levi eased a finger into him, kissing the inside of his thighs.

Erwin realized he had been holding his breath; it came out in a whispered *Fuck*.

The bed shifted, and, unexpectedly, a tongue grazed his nipple. He arched into it, crying out. He had no way to prepare for any of this, no way to anticipate it, and he couldn’t decide if the loss of control was still enjoyable, or becoming terrifying.

“Wait.”

Levi pulled away. “Getting too intense?”

“A bit.” His pulse was racing, his palms sweaty. At the same time, he was so aroused that it almost hurt. “I can’t decide.”

“Here.” Levi untied the cravat around his face. The light was bright. Erwin squinted, waiting for his eyes to adjust.

Their gaze held. Levi’s lips were parted, his face so flushed that his neck was blotchy. His eyelids were low and seductive. He hunched over Erwin’s torso, visibly aroused, chest heaving.

“Oh shit,” Erwin breathed, closing his eyes again.

“You okay to keep going?” Levi asked, hesitant.

“Yeah. Keep going.” He sank back to the mattress, adjusting his head against the pillow so he could watch what was happening to his body.

Levi settled between his legs again, using two fingers this time, holding careful eye contact as he did. “I think I can fit the plug in. Unless you want to hold off a bit.” His eyes seemed to be glazing over; they were firmly focused on his fingers.

A shiver rippled down Erwin’s spine in anticipation of the unmoving, unyielding stretch he would feel. “Up to you.”

Levi pulled out, but kept staring, pushing his legs apart. He slowly bit into his bottom lip, tilting Erwin’s hips up.

“Levi?”

“I really want to fuck you.” The grey eyes darted up to him, timid. “I didn’t plan on it, but I really, really want to fuck you.”

Yes, that would fulfill that craving for a stretching sensation. “Then fuck me.”

“Just a few thrusts. Just a few.” Levi poured oil into his palm and stroked himself with it, then guided himself in.

Erwin felt the urge to throw his head back, but fought it, eyes trained on Levi instead. Levi reached the hilt and his eyes closed, a cry sounding in his throat. He hunched over Erwin’s abdomen, holding still.

So beautiful. “Levi,” Erwin said, soothing, at the same time gently squeezing to try to drive him over the edge.

“Just a few thrusts,” Levi gasped, slowly rocking in and out. He let out a strangled yell.

He’s rock hard. Erwin counterthrust, feeling himself being carried away by the constant rhythm.

“Oh, fuck.” Levi threw his head back, his mouth open, lips flared. “I want to take you faster.”

“Go faster,” Erwin said. “Fuck me hard.”

Another strangled cry, and then Levi was slamming into him, so deep that Erwin’s toes curled. He wanted to grab his ass, feel it flexing with each thrust, but the restraints were unyielding.

“Oh, fuck. I have to stop. I have to ...” Levi slowed, his head bowed, hands tightening into Erwin’s hips. “Fuck.” He pulled out, giving a yell between clenched teeth.

Then the only sound was the two of them panting hard. Erwin strained against his restraints, wishing he could cup Levi’s chin. “I need to touch you.”

“Okay. Okay, just give me a second.” Levi smoothed his thighs, then reached for the toy and the lubricant. “I want you to feel like I’m still inside you.”

Erwin closed his eyes, his head tilting back. The toy was a little cold, but he was so eager that he bore down anyway.

Levi’s breath caught. “Holy shit, you took that quickly.”

Erwin tried to reply, but only gasped.

“How does it feel?”

“Good; it feels good.” The toy was the perfect shape to stimulate his prostate. He shifted his hips, and warmth shot through him. He wasn’t going to last long, not at this rate.

Levi unbound his wrists.

The second he was free, Erwin lunged, pulling him down for a kiss, rubbing a hand through his hair, the other down his chest. Then he rolled, pressing Levi into the bed. He crouched above him on all fours, moving slowly so he didn't get too much stimulation from the toy, but it made him shiver anyway.

“Roll onto your stomach.”

Levi pulled him down for one last kiss, then complied. Erwin grabbed his ass with both hands, pulling apart, burying his face in. The skin was warm here, and heavy with Levi's scent. When he licked it, Levi cried out above him, the two of them as closely intertwined as if he were an instrument and Erwin was plucking strings to make him sing.

“Oh god,” he rumbled into the flesh. How long had they been at this now—half an hour? An hour? His groin was so hard that it ached, and the toy was subtly massaging him. “Oh fuck, Levi, I need you.” He licked up to his tailbone, then back down again, lightheaded, drunk.

Levi didn't reply—he seemed to be drunk himself, his groans muffled. Was he biting the sheets?

After a few more licks, Erwin pulled away, reaching for the oil. “Lie on your back.”

Levi rolled onto his back, his eyes glazed. Erwin bent down to taste his panting breath as he slathered oil on them both, then eased into him.

Levi yelled, arms and legs curling around him, burrowing beneath his chin. Fingernails dug into Erwin's back, and the toy was hard in his ass, and Levi was tight and tense around him in every way possible.

Levi threw his head back, nails raking down his shoulder blades. His neck was so long, so graceful. Erwin bit the pale skin, sucking hard, too carried away to remember that they were never supposed to leave marks.

“Fuck.” Levi raked a hand into his scalp, curled fingers through his hair, pulling. His head tilted back, his hips rising to meet him, thrust for thrust. “You feel so good inside me.”

The words rose to Erwin's brain like smoke, fogged his senses. Dizzy, he moved faster, teeth pinching the skin beneath Levi's earlobe.

“Fuck!” Levi squirmed, his fingertips painful. “You're so hard. Is it because of the butt plug? Does it feel like I'm inside you?”

“Yeah.” The toy perfectly captured his memory, sending it thrus-

ting through Erwin with each movement, fitting so well that it stayed perfectly in place.

“Is it like there’s two of me, one to fuck you, one to be fucked?”

The image was so powerful that Erwin rested his forehead against Levi’s, momentarily paralyzed. He whispered every curse he could think of, all three walls, every filthy word he’d ever heard, even ones he’d never said before. His wrists still tingled with the afterglow from the bonds, and his back stung from scratches, and there was that echo of Levi inside him, and the real man beneath him, around him—

“Keep going,” Levi said, more of a whimper than a demand.

Remembering himself, he started moving again, and they gasped in unison. Their lips met, hands roughly moving across each other’s bodies, mirroring each other’s expressions, each other’s cries.

Levi tore his mouth away, hands on Erwin’s jaw to get his attention. “I want to touch myself, but I’m already close.”

That glow building deep inside him wouldn’t hold out forever, even if he took it slowly, which he was getting too worked up to do. “Come for me, Levi.”

Levi wedged a hand between them to touch himself, and Erwin rose onto his hands, watching. So beautiful, he was so beautiful, with the dark hair on his chest and stomach, those flexing chest muscles. His abdomen was clenching and jerking, his lips flared, his eyes only opened a crack. Erwin felt a swell of love so warm that sweat beaded on his forehead, his upper lip, the back of his neck. Tears welled in his eyes.

“Erwin,” Levi gasped, saying his name every few breaths, his arm moving so fast that his body was vibrating. That sight and the warmth and the toy were too much, but Erwin forced himself to hold off, wanting to watch this beautiful man go under.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck—” Levi yelled, his head tossing back, his body arching. Then he shuddered in waves, his face at once pained and relaxed.

Erwin grunted and slammed the last few thrusts before he, too, gave in. He fell onto Levi, clutched him, curled around him, as everything around him disappeared in the rush.

It ended too abruptly, leaving him disoriented. He tried to release a breath, but it came out as a soft sob.

“Erwin?”

Not again. He couldn’t pull away, frozen in place by his sudden plunging mood. Here, in the afterglow, everything was honest. This was

the last moment before everything changed, before he faced down Sahlo as an enemy instead of an ally. He would do it. He always did it. But he was so tired, and it seemed disproportionately unfair that this man beneath him, this beautiful man he loved, was stuck traumatizing himself killing people instead of living a normal life. *And I keep him by my side by promising these fleeting bits of pleasure, these increasingly small escapes.*

This is all my doing. All of it. Everything that has happened to Levi since we met. Everything Sahlo will do in retribution. Everything that happens to my family, my friends. To humanity.

I swallow everything whole.

“Hey. Erwin.” Levi nudged him with his shoulder.

He pulled away, not bothering to hide his dismay, because Levi would see right through him, anyway. At least here, when it was just the two of them, he could drop his mask.

“I love you,” he said, his voice cracking. “I’m sorry.”

Levi ran a finger beneath one of his eyes, then the other. “I knew it’d be too intense.”

“No, it was perfect.” Erwin lunged down to kiss him. The toy was uncomfortable now, but he would bear it for another minute. “You’re perfect,” he said between kisses. “I’m so sorry, Levi.”

“Stop apologizing.” Levi looked concerned, but only said, “Let’s take a few minutes to rest before we get ready for the meeting.”

They quietly cleaned up, then Erwin eased onto his back on the bed. Levi lay on his side, snuggling against him, arm draped across his chest, legs intertwining.

“Is it what I did?” Levi asked.

“Hm?”

“Last night. What you’re upset about.”

In a sense, but not in the way he thought. “I’m concerned about your wellbeing, but it’s more than that.”

“So you’re upset about facing Sahlo?” A pause. “Or your family? What a shitty trip this has been.”

Erwin inched closer to him. “We’ve had an alliance with Sahlo for so long, and our actions last night have irreparably impacted that. Things are going to change, and until our meeting this afternoon, I have no idea what to expect. I don’t know if I’m adequately prepared to handle it.”

“This has all fucked with your head a bit, hasn’t it?” Levi kissed his nipple, then rested his cheek against it. “Stop worrying. You’ll figure

out what to do.”

“I suppose.”

“Look, that whole thing we just did, you wanted to show me you trusted me, right? Well, I was also demonstrating how much I trust you.” Levi looked up at him. “I trust you, Erwin. And whatever shitty things we have to do to protect you—to protect the Survey Corps—I’ll do them without question. Don’t worry about me. You’ve got bigger things to worry about. Just remember you won’t be alone. You’ve got me, and Hange and Mike and the rest, and even Zackly’s on your side. You’ll figure it out. You always do.”

Erwin smiled, trying to force his mask back into place, but it was heavy. So heavy.

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LOYALTIES

Before he tied on his cravat, Levi lifted to his nose and breathed in, mouth open. The fabric tasted of Erwin's cologne. His eyes fluttered closed. Now, all day, he would be reminded of the intimacy they had just shared, of it blindfolding Erwin while Levi pleasured him.

"Everything okay?" Erwin asked, adjusting his bolo tie in the mirror beside him.

"Fine." Levi's eyelids parted. He tied the cravat around his neck, then frowned. He leaned closer.

"You left marks. I can't cover this one."

Erwin finished adjusting his pendant, then turned to him. "Where?"

Levi pointed to a darkening oval beneath his ear. "It's not even subtle."

Erwin crouched down, lower, lower, to stop at Levi's shoulder. "It's fine. It's tucked away, so it's not really noticeable unless you're at this level and really looking for it."

"Are you making a height joke?"

"No, I'm being serious. Our meeting is with a lot of tall people, so the angle—" Levi's face must have been darkening, because Erwin stopped himself. "Let's get there a bit early and get you seated ahead of everyone, just to be sure. I'll sit on this side to screen you a bit."

Levi let out a low sigh.

"My apologies." Erwin softly kissed the mark, as if to heal it. "I was in a bit of a frenzy."

A shiver rippled down Levi's spine at a rush of memories, but he only said, "Be more careful next time."

They stopped downstairs at the hotel restaurant, ordering familiar favourites, and didn't speak much as they ate. Erwin was lost in thought, and Levi knew better than to distract him on the cusp of such an important meeting.

Besides, he was too fatigued to think of a topic he wanted to discuss. Every potential topic was exhausting: what had happened in the Underground, the upcoming meeting, the upcoming expedition, the wall reclamation effort. Even thinking about the post-expedition trip to Ehrmich was exhausting, because of how much hard work lay between now and then.

Even Erwin looked exhausted, his eyes sunken. His cheeks, nose and forehead were lightly abraded from the debris the night before. Worn.

This job is wearing him out. The thought surfaced out of nowhere, and Levi felt a ripple of panic in his stomach. He looked down, forcing his hand to lift the tea to his lips without shaking. He was disappointed by his own nerves. The night before was really screwing with his head; it wasn't like him to be jittery.

When Erwin finally looked at him, his face was flat, and his eyes were blank. "Ready?"

The emotionless expression gave Levi confidence; at least one of them was in control of himself. "I guess."

"Follow my lead." Erwin gripped his shoulder, then stood.

They walked side-by-side to the Council chambers. As they began to climb the steps, Levi's jaw clenched. A figure in a grey suit and matching hat paced back and forth at the top of the stairs.

Sahlo.

Erwin slowed to a stop.

"Want me to scare him, or back off?" Levi asked quietly.

"That's a good question." Erwin's face was grim. "I still believe we'll get further if we try to cooperate. I'll signal if we need to push him harder."

As if he had suddenly become aware of their presence, the lord stopped pacing. He turned to face them, his hands clasping behind his back.

Erwin tucked his folder tightly under his arm and began to walk toward the lord with such resolution that Levi had to hurry to catch up.

"Commander Smith," Sahlo greeted, a grotesque smile plastered across his face. "I was hoping to have a moment to speak with you." His

eyes darted toward Levi. “In private.”

“My Captain knows all my business,” Erwin said, a sentiment he had expressed dozens of times since the alliance had first begun. Levi felt a swell of pride. *The bastard’s still afraid of me.*

The lord looked uneasily at him, then his brows dropped and he grabbed Erwin by the arm. “This way.” He pulled him around the corner of the building, glancing around them as they went. Levi followed, scanning the environment for an ambush, ready to pull the knife from his boot if needed.

When they stopped, Sahlo’s face was hard, and his eyes bored through Erwin. “You two have been very, very busy.”

Erwin held his gaze. “Indeed we have. The wall reclamation is a tangible goal, one that inspires us to push forward at all costs. Food supplies are dwindling, and humanity relies on us, even at the expense of ourselves.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Sahlo growled, “and you know it.”

“I’m not sure what you’re saying.” Erwin did not flinch. “Regardless, my statement still stands.”

Sahlo’s eyes narrowed. He reached into his jacket, and Levi tensed, prepared to intercept a weapon, but the lord only pulled out a small book marked with his seal. He handed it to Erwin.

“You may be familiar with a company called HDB Shipping.”

Their conduit company, the one Sahlo used to collect all the gold they had recovered from silo expeditions. “What about it?” Levi asked, forgetting to let Erwin lead.

The lord grinned at him. “I regret to announce the company’s demise. The headquarters burnt to the ground early this morning. No one was hurt, but the company’s records have been destroyed. Such a dreadful tragedy. Yet somehow, this particular record seems to have survived.”

Erwin eyed him, then opened the book. Levi stepped closer, his mind racing. *If he’s wiped the conduit company clean, what does that mean for our evidence? Does that cut off any of the leads we made last night?*

He reached for the corner of the book, gently tilting it so he could read it alongside Erwin. His lip curled. Inserted into the first page was a contract between the Survey Corps and HDB Shipping saying the company would store Corps funds, absolutely no questions asked, in exchange for a small monthly fee. The signature at the bottom was unmistakably Erwin’s.

“This is a good quality forgery,” Erwin said, voice as flat as his expression.

“Isn’t it? I bet even Levi’s questioning whether or not you signed this yourself.” Sahlo clapped a hand to Erwin’s arm. “Keep reading.”

Erwin turned the page. Levi stared at the columns of numbers and dates, not sure what he was looking at.

“A ledger?” he said aloud.

“Well done, Levi. It’s a ledger detailing all the illegally acquired money the Survey Corps stored with HDB Shipping over the past three and a half years.” Sahlo rocked back on his heels, his hands clasped behind his back. “Zackly already has a document detailing every bit of the King’s money you stole from each silo. You’ll find the numbers in this little ledger exactly correspond to the amounts in Zackly’s document. Once he has both of them, he’ll have all the evidence he needs to prove you’ve been stealing from His Majesty.”

“This is bullshit,” Levi growled. “You’re setting it up like we acted alone. You were the one stealing all the silo gold in the first place. We’re the ones who started returning half to the King, and filling your pockets at the same time.”

“That’s not what the evidence says,” Sahlo said, his face the picture of mock innocence. “This one little ledger, my dear fellows, has the power to completely destroy your reputations and your careers. Keep it, as a constant reminder. I have another copy in a safe location in case I need it. And don’t bother trying to oppose it with forgeries of your own. If it’s your word against mine, yours won’t hold.”

Erwin finally looked up, his face calm. “There’s no need to apply this much pressure. Our alliance has evolved far beyond our shaky beginnings, and we have begun to see eye to eye. If you’re unhappy with our terms, I’m happy to renegotiate your payouts.”

“Do I seem like a man who needs money?”

“Apparently not, if you’re burning your shitty companies to the ground to cover evidence,” Levi said.

“Are you implying that HDB Shipping was my company?” The lord’s eyes twinkled. “The official municipal records have the company registered to one Lord Hasek. Have you met the man? I doubt it. He’s quite reclusive.”

Hasek. The fake lord they had used to grant them access to the Underground. Levi’s eyes darted to Erwin. Erwin’s face was still calm, but his hand at his side tightened, almost imperceptibly.

“I get the impression we share a few contacts,” Sahlo said. He leaned closer to Erwin, his face suddenly menacing. “You have no idea how deep my connections go, Smith. I advise you to stop playing your little games and fall into line. You may be unusually clever for your age, but I was navigating political mazes before you were even a glint in your daddy’s eye. You cannot win against me.”

Erwin’s face was still calm. “I am not trying to beat you in some imaginary chess game. I’m trying to secure a future for the human race.”

“Then your best option is to fall into line.” Sahlo’s face lightened into a smile again. “And speaking of which, I have a new proposal for the upcoming expedition. I’ll be presenting it in a few minutes, and I trust you’ll give it your full attention.” He clapped his shoulder again. “I look forward to your cooperation.”

He sauntered away.

Erwin’s jaw clenched as he stared after him.

“Well?” Levi said quietly. “What now?”

“He’s calmer than I expected.” Erwin slipped the ledger into his inside jacket pocket. “It makes sense that he would have had contingency plans ready to go. It’s unfortunate, however, that he’s also familiar with the dummy lord Hasek. I was under the impression none of the government officials were aware of it. I should let my contacts know it’s been compromised.”

Levi hesitated, glancing around to make sure they were alone. “That’s a damned good forgery, and Leona is the best around.

“I have a good read on Leona. I don’t think she was lying to me when she was giving me updates about Sahlo, or when we were questioning her about Etienne.” His jaw set. “Unless ...”

“What?”

“Unless he uses a different name.” He closed his eyes. “If he knew Hasek was a dummy lord run by a network, he would also know it was easy to appropriate the name for his own use, one difficult to trace because it was in use by so many people. What if Underground, he operates as Lord Hasek? Thiemo was familiar with the name, familiar enough to quiz you on it.”

“Leona would’ve told you if she’d forged documents with your signature.” Levi paused. “Wouldn’t she?”

“Tell me, Levi, what’s more valuable to an Underground business: friendships or money? Particularly in times when resources are fast disappearing? It’s very possible Leona works with him. She vaguely

tried to warn me away from pursuing Sahlo, said he might be more tied in with the local economy than I can see.” Erwin rubbed the bridge of his nose, grinning. “He is *devious*. I underestimated his resourcefulness.”

The grin was so unnerving that Levi looked away. “So what now?”

“We listen to his new proposal and hope it doesn’t contravene our goals. We need to humour him. He’s overconfident; if we lull him into a false sense of security, he’s bound to slip up.” There was an uncharacteristic lack of confidence in Erwin’s voice.

“Fine,” Levi said, unconvinced.

When they entered the conference room, Sahlo was already seated. He nodded at them in greeting, as if he hadn’t just tried to squash them under his thumb. “Commander. Levi.”

Erwin greeted him as they sat down, but Levi turned away, dropping to a seat. The Wallist Minister Nick sat across from him, staring at them.

“What?” Levi said.

“I’ve heard rumours your expeditions have been closing in on the Wall,” the Minister said.

Levi folded his arms over his chest and stared him down, not responding. The last thing he was in the mood for was a religious debate.

“My dear Commander,” Sahlo said, leaning closer, “what happened to your face? It’s all scuffed up.”

“Training accident.” Erwin separated his papers into a few stacks.

“Is that so? I didn’t see an incident report.”

“A minor one, caused by my own clumsiness, with no outcome but a few minor abrasions. Rather embarrassing, truth be told.” Erwin lifted his head, his gaze cold. “Besides, I didn’t see the need to add more paperwork to our already overburdened bureaucratic system. I think you’d agree the Survey Corps has more important things to worry about than one man’s pride.”

Their gazes held.

Before the lord could reply, Commander Pixis entered the room, followed by his assistant, Anka. The name had thrown off Levi when they had first met—he had immediately thought of their once-Commander Anke.

The old days of the Survey Corps seemed a lifetime ago. It was strange to think of Erwin as an underling, and even stranger to think about how he had reacted with drunken, emotional violence the time

Hange and Levi hadn't returned from their mission. Levi glanced at his Commander, wondering how he'd react now if something similar happened. It would still tear Erwin up inside, no question, but no one around him would see him so much as flinch. Something about that made Levi feel lonely.

It was strange to think about how distant he and Hange had been back then, too, sitting back-to-back in that tree branch, struggling for conversation. And Mike had been the one who could talk for hours. Now it was the other way around. He was grateful for Hange—though he would never admit it aloud—but he missed Mike.

All of them had changed so much in a short space of time. Now he was standing beside Erwin, making decisions on a large scale, weighing groups of lives against others, leading entire scouting missions. A few years in the Survey Corps was a lifetime.

Anka was watching him, and he realized he had been staring at her, lost in thought. He turned away, grimacing.

His eyes landed on Nile, stepping through the door. Nile's eyes narrowed at Erwin, and he didn't even look at Levi. Levi slumped deeper into his chair and pretended not to be offended by the snub. *Short-sighted asshole doesn't have a clue what we're fighting against.*

The final two Council lords entered, followed by the crown accountant, the adjudicator, and a couple other people Levi didn't recognize. Zackly sat last. His eyes fixed on Levi, curious behind thick lenses, and Levi looked away.

Once everyone was seated, the meeting began. After some brief discussion about municipal taxes, Erwin had the floor.

"The Survey Corps has finalized the proposal for our next two expeditions." Erwin unrolled a map in the centre of the table. "These expeditions will install the last of the supply caches we have been laying en route to Wall Maria. With your permission, we'd like to conduct the first expedition in two weeks' time, and the next a month later, before the ground freezes. This will allow us to plan the wall reclamation effort over the winter, integrate new recruits in the spring, and launch the reclamation in late March of next year."

A murmur rose among the others, but Erwin didn't react. He placed markers on the map. "I see a few new faces in this room, so for your benefit, I'll summarize what we've already accomplished. These markers represent caches we've stationed along the planned reclamation route from Trost to Shiganshina. These caches include gas tanks, water,

preserved food, blades, and medical supplies to support a mobile force made up of the Survey Corps, Garrison and Military Police. Commanders Pixis and Dok will, of course, be providing us with insight and resources as we finalize our plans to combine the strength of our three regiments. This fight is for all of humanity's benefit, and all of humanity's soldiers will have a part to play.

We have four remaining caches to lay to finish the route. We also, while we're in the region, need to run scouting teams to Shiganshina in order to determine the full extent of the damage and get a feel for the lay of the land. Right now, a big hindrance in our planning has been that no one knows exactly what state Shiganshina is in after the attacks. Even those of us who stayed until all civilians had been cleared didn't have time to take note of our surroundings.

"In addition to pushing closer to Shiganshina and laying caches, we've been running smaller scouting missions to survey the area along the route, exterminating titans and studying their movement patterns. Our goal has been to wipe out any titans we encounter along the route to allow as little strife as possible during the final push.

"And so, with your permission and support, the next two expeditions will see us install the final four caches and end the pre-reclamation phase of this effort, allowing us to formally move into reclamation planning." He set green markers in place in the remaining four cache locations.

Levi focused on those green markers, surprised by how close the final one was to Shiganshina. He had seen the maps in Erwin's office so often that he had stopped paying attention to them. He hadn't realized just how much progress they had made.

Erwin passed out papers. "I've drafted our proposed budget, casualty estimates, and supply requests. For the most part, this is a standard expedition, but we're running low on yeast and food supplies for these last four caches. I'm hopeful the Merchant's Guild will be flexible enough to provide these supplies up front, in exchange for full repayment —plus interest—once we're fully established back in Shiganshina."

The room was silent as everyone present stared at the paper, even though, knowing Erwin's love of preparation, this wasn't the first time they were seeing these numbers. In the silence, Levi could hear his heartbeat in his ears.

Finally, Sahlo slapped his paper to the table and slid it a few centimetres away. "There are political implications that need to be discuss-

ed before we proceed any further with the reclamation effort.”

“What the hell?” Levi said. No one else moved, their eyes still firmly fixed on their papers, save for Erwin, whose spine straightened.

“Political implications?” Erwin asked calmly.

“Our good Minister Nick has questions about how we’re going to repopulate Wall Maria without altering the walls.” Sahlo motioned to the man. “And I’m sure in this time of food shortages, the Merchant’s Guild is unwilling to release precious resources on a promise.”

Erwin’s gaze drifted across the men in question, then back to Sahlo. “What are you proposing?”

“A few things.” Sahlo stood and reached into Erwin’s pile of cache markers, encroaching so heavily on his personal space that Levi’s teeth clenched. The lord dropped a red marker on the western side of the map, about a day’s ride from Klorva District. “We all remember and applaud the work your group did a couple years back, recovering the King’s gold from silos in the south. There are two silos west of Klorva that functioned as tax storage for the entire western side of Wall Maria. Your group should use this upcoming expedition to recover this substantial amount of gold. As a token of his gratitude, and for the good of humanity, I’m certain the King would be willing to donate a portion of this to your cause. This influx of gold would allow you to buy the food supplies you require at a fair price instead of leeching off the common man.”

Levi opened his mouth to let him know exactly what he thought of the idea, but Erwin was too quick with his rebuttal:

“The ground often freezes in late October or early November, which makes travel difficult. If we use this expedition to chase gold, we won’t have time to finalize the cache supply route before winter sets in. Furthermore, we won’t have the scouting data from Shiganshina that would allow us to plan over the course of the winter. Our entire reclamation effort will be offset by several months.”

“Maybe that’s not such a bad thing,” one of the other lords said. “We only get one shot at reclaiming the wall. The more time we spend planning for it, the better prepared we’ll be.”

“Normally I would agree,” Erwin said, “but our food supplies are dwindling—”

“And you want us to give those precious supplies away for free.” A member of the Merchant’s Guild stood up, his face red. “You want us to take money out of our pockets, food out of the mouths of the public.

I don't think so, pal."

Levi's eyes narrowed. "Watch your tone, asshole."

The man's eyes twitched to him. "What did you call me, you little shit?"

"An asshole. You don't give a damn about the public unless they're handing you cash."

"Order," the adjudicator called. "Lord Sahlo, you still have the floor."

"Thank you." Sahlo pulled out a piece of paper and handed it to Erwin. "Since the turnaround time is short, I did some of the proposal planning on your behalf. Here are the financial estimates from the silo, as well as my estimated casualties based on your casualty reports from the past silos. Do these numbers look correct to you?"

Erwin frowned. "A leading question. The numbers are reasonable, but the proposal itself—"

"A moment, please. I believe I still have the floor." Sahlo stood and passed out papers to everyone at the table except Levi. He handed Erwin the final copy. "Here are my suggested revisions to the schedule: claim these silo funds now, work with the King to determine a donation amount. I'll use my influence to encourage him to be generous. In the spring, you will lay out those last caches, Commander, incorporating the new recruits when they arrive. With your scouting data, we can plan the reclamation over the course of the summer, then launch the full scale effort in September. That gives us a full year to finalize the strategy, and to work with Minister Nick to make sure our Wallist friends are happy with the plan. I have more to say, but I'll give you a moment to digest."

The table was silent, waiting. Levi craned his neck to see the paper Erwin held in his hands. To his credit, the paper was perfectly still; Levi was so angry that his own hands were shaking. *How's he staying so cool?* he wondered, not for the first time, but then he saw that Erwin's knuckles were white.

Commander Pixis spoke from his place at the table: "The Survey Corps base in Klorva has been unused for decades, and it's too small to house the regiment at its current size. Furthermore, relocating the entire regiment for a single mission is a logistical nightmare."

"Could the Klorva Garrison base temporarily house the Survey Corps?" Zackly asked.

"We aren't suitably supplied. The only missions that make sense for the Survey Corps, as it currently stands, are ones that leave from

their base in Trost.”

At least someone here has some common sense, Levi thought.

Sahlo leaned forward to measure distances on the map, bumping Erwin’s shoulder as he did so. “Perhaps I was too hasty in thinking you’d have to leave from Klorva. The silos are far enough south that leaving from Trost wouldn’t put the troops in titan territory for much longer than leaving from Klorva.”

“That’s not my only concern about your proposal, Lord Sahlo.” Pixis’ gaze shifted to Erwin and Levi. “You’re asking the Survey Corps to split their attention, at a time when humanity is on the brink of reclaiming one of our biggest losses. I’d rather Commander Erwin and Captain Levi stay focused on the overall mission so they can fully immerse themselves in planning the greatest battle we’ll know in our lifetimes. That’s far more important than going after a bit of gold.”

“Not just a bit,” Sahlo said, holding up a finger. “A necessary amount. I’d like to present the second part of my proposal: an investment that will save lives.”

What the hell is he talking about? Levi slumped deeper into his chair.

Sahlo stood, his hands clasping behind his back. “The Military Police are far more accustomed to using rifles than swords, but rifle bullets are ineffective against titans. My contacts and research team—with His Majesty’s blessing, of course—have built guns with bullets capable of piercing a titan’s skin.”

Across the table, Nile nodded. “I like the sound of that.”

Levi’s eyes slowly widened. *High-powered weaponry.* He thought of the damage to his gas canister the night before. *Is Sahlo also supplying Rage’s men?* He glanced at Erwin, trying to guess if he had made the same connection, but as always, Erwin was inscrutable.

“The bullets,” Sahlo continued, “are made of a similar alloy to the blades we already use, so they’ll be easy to work into production lines, but they’re expensive to produce, and they’ll take time to prepare. I’ll be fronting the majority of the cost myself, and His Majesty has graciously agreed to invest fifty per cent of the reclaimed silo funds, which will make up the difference.”

“So, there you have it. This mission to the silos will get the Survey Corps the money it needs to pay for food supplies, it’ll make sure Nile’s soldiers are properly equipped to deal with unfamiliar combat, and it will push the wall reclamation effort back a few months, which al-

lows more time for planning. I believe there is no downside.”

“As the regiment that has spent the most time in direct contact with the titans, we are better equipped than anyone to know how to combat them,” Erwin said, finally setting the paper down. “Squad Leader Hange has been working on new anti-titan weapons. We’ll be back in Mitras after this expedition to speak with investors about mass production. I assure you, the MP and the Garrison will all be well-equipped with the best of our technology.”

“So you don’t want the MP to have state-of-the-art guns?” Sahlo asked. “You’d push for this suicide mission a few months earlier, at the expense of MP lives?”

The room fell silent.

“Suicide mission is not the right phrase,” Erwin said, lowering his chin. Levi couldn’t see his face now—it was square with Sahlo—but he could picture its expression. From a top angle, Erwin’s features looked even sharper than they did from the front: all brows, angled eyes and hawk-like nose.

Sahlo shrank away a little, but his voice was still confident when he spoke: “I don’t think ‘suicide mission’ is much of a stretch. Let’s be honest here, Erwin: you can plan all you want, but the casualties are going to be horrific. We saw what happened last time the Survey Corps undertook a mission to reclaim the wall. We all know you were the one in charge of the strategy that time, too—Shadis couldn’t stomach it. He never embraced senseless death the way you did.”

Levi’s stomach dropped. He wanted to stand up for his Commander, to curse Sahlo to his face, but all he could see was his team lying before him, civilians and soldiers blending together in a sea of blood and white bones and twisted faces. That had been his second major expedition—not counting routine scouting missions—and it had been his first as a Team Leader. Death after death, lives slipping through his fingers as the civilians around him panicked. He hated Erwin so much when they returned. *I hated that I had chosen to trust him. I expected his usual cold, empty stare, but I yelled at him anyway. And then he held me, and he was so warm and gentle—*

“That was not a reclamation effort,” Erwin said, his tone deep. “That was a civilian sacrifice to keep our numbers down within the walls. A cull. You are well aware of that, Lord Sahlo: you spearheaded the approval of that mission. Those of us in the field heard every single civilian’s death scream; you only saw the improved mouth-to-food ratio

on paper once it was over.”

Muttering broke out among the table as Sahlo’s brows lowered. The adjudicator called for order again, then returned the floor back to Erwin.

“This time will be different,” Erwin said, his voice so confident, so authoritative that Levi’s heart began to pound. “This time, we have a fully trained force, we understand more about the titans than ever before, and we’ve prepared a proper line of supply caches. This is no suicide mission, Lord Sahlo. We have been preparing for four long years, and now we are on the cusp of humanity’s greatest victory. We will not fail.”

“Noble sentiment, Commander, but why the rush? Why not take a couple more months to make sure we’re properly prepared?”

A murmur of agreement sounded around the table, and Levi’s blood boiled.

Erwin was so unmoving that he might as well have been carved from ice. “We must reclaim the wall before the spring to allow time for a full harvest cycle before winter. Our food supplies are dangerously low, and Wall Maria’s fields will be critical to the survival of humanity. If we follow your adjusted timeline, we’ll be reclaiming the Wall too late to plant crops for the fall harvest season. Think of it: a bounty of wheat, corn, rice, all delayed until the spring. The winter of 850 is going to be a winter of famine, misery and death if we rely on our current food production.”

“Leave that to us,” one of the merchants said. “We can ration the food supplies.”

“By jacking up prices, right?” Levi muttered. “Feed the rich, let the poor starve? That’s not fucking rationing.”

“You little shitstain—” began the merchant.

“Wait, I’m not done.” Levi rocked his chair back. “Every single person in this room has always had enough food to eat, so you don’t give a shit about people who don’t. I get it. But what do you think’s going to happen if you keep getting fatter while more and more people starve? You think they’re going to pay their entire week’s wages for your rotten scraps? One day, they’re going to come to their senses and butcher you smug assholes instead.”

The merchant and a couple of the lords began to yell.

The adjudicator called for order again, looking thoroughly annoyed. “Captain Levi, if you are unable to control your tongue, you will

be ejected from this meeting.”

“I’m done here, anyway.” Levi stood and strode for the door. He let it slam behind him and stepped into the courtyard.

Fucking Sahlo. Fucking merchant pigs. He picked up a rock and whipped it at a nearby tree, feeling a course of energy as it cracked against the bark. The energy surge reminded him of the night before, and his stomach heaved. Thiemo’s taunting face. That woman’s stunned expression. And who were the other two? He began to shiver, feeling a breeze even though there was none.

Nile came out of the building about ten minutes later, a scowl carved deep in his face. He stood in front of Levi, hands on his hips.

“I know Erwin was covering for you last night.”

“Fuck off, shitbeard.” Levi turned away. “There are bigger things to worry about.”

“Believe me, the last thing I want to do is be seen talking to you right now, but Erwin asked me to tell you he’ll be a few more minutes. He’s talking to Zackly.” Nile glanced around, then stepped closer, and crouched to Levi’s level. “Maybe you can get through to him.”

“Zackly?”

“Erwin.” Nile glanced around again, and when he spoke again, his voice was soft. “Tell him to back off Sahlo.”

Levi eyed him. “Why?”

“Because he’s not just an upstart Squad Leader with nothing to lose; he’s a Commander who holds humanity’s fate in his hands. None of us can afford for Sahlo to break him.” Nile’s face was worried, almost sad. “Just look after him, okay?”

“He can handle Sahlo,” Levi muttered, turning his back.

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Erwin’s jaw tightened as he watched the last of the attendees leave the meeting room. That had been one of his least successful meetings since he had first joined the Survey Corps. His words might as well have been raindrops for all the good they had done him; Sahlo had brought river rapids.

Zackly was the last to stand. “Well. Shall we?”

“Sir.”

They stepped into a side meeting room. Zackly settled to a seat at the table and held out a hand for Erwin to do the same, but Erwin was

too worked up. Instead, he closed the door and turned to face him, fists tight.

“Sir, surely you can see Sahlo was using stall tactics.”

Zackly adjusted his glasses. “Ostensibly, his proposal was fine. I agree with you that time is short, and I wish the room had come to agree on your timeline. I also don’t doubt he’s trying to position himself against you. However, he’s being careful to make himself look reasonable. Without evidence of intentional opposition, any claims or protests you bring up now will just make it look as if you’re throwing a tantrum because the Council didn’t like your idea.”

Erwin’s jaw clenched, but he knew Zackly was correct. He nodded, dour. The meeting had been out of his control from the moment Sahlo had opened his mouth. In the end, he had agreed to the lord’s proposal, but his mind was already racing, thinking of ways out of it.

“Please.” Zackly gestured to a chair again.

Erwin sat. “Sir.”

“How are you?” The words were heavy with importance.

“As well as can be expected, given all that transpired over the past twenty-four hours.”

“And Levi?”

“Shaken, but recovering. He’ll bounce back.”

“I’m sure he will.” Zackly pulled out a file. “I promised you I’d set aside some time today to speak with you about his promotion. After some serious thought, I’ve decided not to hold Levi’s actions last night against him. It was a case of self defense, and as you said, you were his commanding officer at the time. Our six month deadline for you to provide definitive proof about Sahlo still stands, so it might impact you, in the long run, but it won’t impact his promotion.”

“Thank you, sir,” Erwin said, grateful.

“I know we talked about a five year service requirement for the rank of Captain, but Levi is a special case, and it turns out there’s another mandatory requirement.”

Erwin had wondered if this would come up. “He didn’t attend the Trainee Corps.”

“Precisely. The Captain rank requires five years of service *after* successful completion of training.” Zackly folded his hands on the table. “There is an option to waive the Trainee Corps requirement for the Captain rank at the ten year service level, but that’s still another five

years out. And it hardly seems wise to send Levi through three years of training, particularly when we're so close to reclaiming the wall."

"I see," Erwin said, disappointed. "I was hoping to promote him to a level that indicated his importance to the Survey Corps."

"There is another option." Zackly handed him a piece of paper: a list of unfamiliar military rankings, written in an old-fashioned hand. "In the early days after we settled these walls, before the Survey Corps even existed, the Garrison used an independent ranking system. It was later phased out to align them with the Military Police ranks. These old ranks, while no longer in use, still technically exist. You may find the rank Leader of the Soldiers interesting."

Erwin skimmed until he found it: a high-ranking officer in charge of making personnel and training decisions, as well as directly assisting their commanding officer. "This is close to Levi's actual job description."

"Unlike the formal Captain rank, it's only one pay grade above his current salary cap, so it isn't quite the monetary compensation he might be expecting. Furthermore, it exists outside the current chain of command, which may cause some headaches for you when you're determining seniority. However, it's the best I can do until his tenth anniversary. We've already bent several regulations for him, so I'm a little uncomfortable bending yet another, but he is a powerful symbol of hope. In advance of our upcoming mission, we will do what we can to use him to raise morale."

"I understand, sir. Thank you for your generosity." Erwin studied the paper, considering. "The soldiers and the public have already taken to calling him Captain, based solely on the importance of his role to the Survey Corps. Would you be okay with us continuing to use that title, even though it's a bit inaccurate?"

"That would probably be best, to avoid confusion. You may present Captain Levi with his promotion at your earliest convenience." Zackly stood.

"Thank you, sir." Erwin stood, too, shaking his hand. He slipped Levi's promotion into his file.

He found his newly appointed Leader of the Soldiers leaning against a tree by the walkway, arms folded, a scowl on his face. Erwin stopped an arm's length away from him, not sure how to open the conversation.

Levi's eyes shifted up to him, the rest of him unmoving. "Did

you cave?"

"I did what was necessary." Erwin pulled out a piece of paper and held it out. "Zackly approved your promotion, though not quite in the way we expected."

As they walked back to the hotel, he explained the new role. Levi only nodded and accepted the paper, folding it and putting it in his pocket.

The instant the door of their room closed behind them, Erwin locked it, then began to walk the perimeter of the room. He checked the closets, closed the window shades, and even peered under the beds.

"What are you so damned paranoid about?" Levi asked, pulling his boots off. "You're tracking dirt everywhere."

"Sahlo's pulling out all the stops. I need to make sure what I'm about to tell you isn't overheard." He grabbed Levi's wrist and pulled him to a seat on the bed, then sat beside him. "We aren't going to the silos."

Levi's brows rose. "What?"

"We'll document the plans for Sahlo's expedition and submit the details to the Council, while simultaneously proceeding with our own plans to set up caches. Once we're outside the walls, Sahlo has no idea what we're doing. We can make this work to our advantage." He bent forward for his notebook, which sat on the table, still open to a page he had been scribbling in that morning. He opened it to a clean page.

"Of course," he continued, "the cache mission is higher risk than the silo mission he's proposing. We're certainly going to have a higher casualty rate than he expects. That might end up working to our advantage—those deaths will help us discredit him. We can pin them on Sahlo's proposal, explain that forays into unpatrolled territory are always a risk. The Council will be less likely to let him derail us in the future."

"Erwin."

He looked up. "Yes?"

Levi's lip curled. "You're going to use the deaths of our soldiers as a political tool?"

"If deaths are inevitable, we might as well make sure they're not in vain. Their help on the battlefield *and* against Sahlo means they're doubly useful to humanity's cause."

"You think their families are going to feel the same way?"

"I think they'd like to know their loved ones' deaths have as

much value to humanity as possible. We'll still be trying to conserve every life we can, Levi. I'm not proposing we actively try to lose troops."

Levi was still staring at him, so Erwin looked at his notebook instead, jotting down notes.

"Obviously, word can't get back to Sahlo that we betrayed him," he continued. "We'll bring a small subset of the regiment with us, soldiers we know can be trusted. A smaller group will travel faster, anyway, and the scouting aspects of the mission are more important than the caches themselves at this point, especially since we won't have all the food stores we need. We can head to Wall Maria without those last four caches; we absolutely cannot do it without knowing what we're up against in Shiganshina."

"After the mission, we'll use Oluo to feed false information back to Sahlo. We'll also need to provide the King with the monetary equivalent of the silo funds, to make it look as if he succeeded." He paused, scratching down a few more notes. Slowly, he became aware that Levi was very quiet, very still.

"Everything okay, Levi?"

Levi shrugged. "You're making that dumb expression again."

Erwin glanced up at the mirror on the dresser, and he was surprised by how cold his face looked. *When did my eyes start looking so dead and soulless?* "I suppose I'm just focussed."

"You sure you haven't lost your mind? Giving Sahlo lip service and then running your own expedition anyway sounds like a huge fucking risk."

Erwin's gaze shifted back to him. Levi was hunched over, his arms tight around his chest.

"Levi, you saw how dire things have become in the Underground, and that's only going to get worse unless we can recapture farmland. We can afford to delay a little bit, but not to the extent Sahlo has proposed." He leaned closer, his voice softening. "The Underground will be hit hardest. You were absolutely right when you suggested rations were class-based. Lords like Sahlo aren't afraid of food shortages, because they can afford the expensive rations. The military isn't afraid of food shortages, because we'll always be cared for more than average citizens. It's up to people like you and me to stand up for impoverished families who will be left with nothing."

Levi looked away. "So say your plan works, and we can trick Sahlo and lay the caches with a small team. Where are you going to get

the money we're supposed to be finding in the silo?"

Erwin's graphite scratched at the paper as he made some quick calculations, and his heart sank.

"It's a substantial amount. I've been gradually funnelling more and more of my liquid assets into the Survey Corps, and I'm afraid my savings have dwindled. If I empty my accounts, I can cover a great deal of it, but we're still short. Unless ... " He trailed off.

Levi wouldn't look at him. "Say it."

"I told you I'd never sell any of our apartments without asking your permission. I'd like to request that we sell one."

Levi's throat bobbed. "Which one?"

"Shiganshina is out of the question for obvious reasons, and we use Trost often enough—for business and for pleasure—that it doesn't make sense to sell it. That leaves Karanese or Ehrmich." He hesitated. "Karanese has seen something of a fish stock shortage in the past couple years, and it will take time to replenish. Denizens have been panicking and selling, which has devalued—"

"You want to sell Ehrmich," Levi said dully.

Erwin lifted his chin, fighting to keep his voice steady. "I know what that place represents. I know we intended to visit it after the expedition. I also know housing there is in high demand, so we could easily get the amount we need." He paused to subtly catch his breath. "I'm sorry, Levi. I can't think of any other way to raise funds on short notice. We can still visit the city after the expedition is over; we'll just have to find a hotel."

Levi stood. "I have to think about this. I'm going for a walk."

"I understand." Erwin considered for a moment, knowing his escapes sometimes lasted several hours. "We've also been invited to a dinner party at the home of one of our investment partners. I know it's a lot to ask ... "

"You want me to perform."

"In uniform, please. A couple arm-wrestles, maybe a heroic story about killing titans. I'll meet you there at about seven o'clock." He scribbled down an address and tore out the page, holding it out. Levi folded it and put it in his pocket without looking up.

"Levi," Erwin said quietly. "I'm sorry."

"I know." The grey eyes finally lifted. "Do what you need to do. I'll see you at seven."

Erwin nodded. He reached out and caught the small hand, lift-

ing it to his lips, pressing a kiss into the knuckles.

Usually, their hands would trail, but this time, Levi retracted his hand, turned and left.

He has a lot to process. Erwin turned back to his work, trying not to let the distance bother him, but his stomach was hollow.

8

Levi shoved his hands in his pockets and strode down the street, ignoring the attention he was drawing. All those people staring and calling his name thought Captain Levi lived a life of heroism and freedom; they didn't see how much strain he was under, his temples constantly tight, his ears always ringing.

He knew they had no choice but to follow the plan Erwin had outlined. Erwin always examined things from every angle. If he said it was the best plan, then it was the best plan, no matter how risky it sounded.

No matter what they had to give up.

Still, the decision to sell Ehrmich had been just one more reminder that their lives were totally outside their control. Captain Levi and Commander Erwin, weapons of freedom, a means to an end. Nothing about them as individuals actually mattered—their health, their sleep, their money, their property, their love, their desires. The only thing that mattered was humanity's survival.

As far as being a weapon went, being a weapon of humanity wasn't the worst option. But he couldn't shake the feeling that Levi and Erwin were on the cusp of disappearing entirely, only Captain and Commander remaining. It wasn't just Ehrmich. What was going to happen to their three shared nights a week now that they were planning two expeditions, one real, one fake? Was this their life now, until Wall Maria was reclaimed? Double the workload just to tiptoe around some greedy, power-tripping lord?

Stopping at a tea shop, he bought a pot of tea and, ignoring the barista's fawning, settled into a corner. Several catalogues and almanacs were in disarray on the shelves nearby. He stood them all upright, alphabetized them, then selected a clothing catalogue to flip through. Cravats were still high fashion, as were spats. He snorted softly to himself. Spats: the ultimate sign of the screwed-up priorities of the upper class. Who had money to waste on flaps of cloth to cover shoes?

The laundry bills alone would feed an Underground family.

He idly flipped through the pages, blowing on his tea to cool it. The illustrated men were all handsome, like Erwin: tall, broad shoulders, golden hair. One particularly elegant grey suit caught his eye, and it didn't take much imagination to turn the illustration into Erwin. He found himself picturing Erwin wearing the suit, saying his vows, their hands joined. At some point, Levi's throat had started to ache with longing whenever he thought about marriage. Was it on Erwin's mind anymore, with everything else he had to consider? Was it even something they should be wasting time thinking about? His fingers ran across the picture as he thought of their August and Emil alter-egos, of the potential they could never realize.

They had effectively killed August and Emil the night before, anyway; they would never be able to use those identities again, not after what had happened Underground. Maybe that was for the best. Maybe pretending their personal lives had any meaning was only going to make everything hurt more as they diverged further and further from normal lives.

A small child wandered up to the table, eyes wide and long-lashed. "Excuse me, Mister. Are you Captain Levi?"

Levi's lip curled. "Go away, kid."

The brown eyes shone. "They say you're as strong as a thousand men!"

Where the fuck are your parents? Levi scanned the room and found them talking to the barista, oblivious. He gave a low sigh. "Go away, brat. I'm busy."

The kid stared at him, shocked, then scampered away. Levi's nose wrinkled. *Why did I ever dream about settling down, anyway? I hate kids.*

He took a swig of tea, trying to wash away the lump in his throat.

Thankfully, no one else approached him. He stayed in the shop through two pots of tea, a biscuit and some sort of sweet, fruity flat-bread. He flipped through every single catalogue and book on the shelf, but his thoughts kept drifting from the page. It was nice here. Peaceful. It might be nice to run a tea shop. Customers might get annoying, but the quiet aura would be a pleasant change from the constant chaos of military life.

In spite of the food and drink, his stomach soon began to growl. It was likely time to head to the dinner party. He slammed the catalogue

shut, filed it away and stood.

The sun was low in the sky, and the tower clock in the centre of town read six-thirty. Maybe if he got this out of the way, Erwin would let him leave early enough to head to the MP headquarters and train in their gym for a bit. He needed to kick the shit out of a punching bag for a while.

He wandered slowly and arrived at the front gates just as the seventh bell rang. A guard checked his name from a list and opened the gates, and he walked up a long driveway to a two-story mansion large enough to house his entire squad. The parlour inside was even more packed with gaudy finery than their hotel lobby, and his nose wrinkled. He had a soft spot for fine decor, but this was just flat-out tackiness.

The nobles around him were so dolled up with makeup, fur, and jewellery that they blended in with their surroundings. They stood in small circles, the women laughing like hens, the men giving deep chuckles, always in a synchronized rhythm.

Levi's skin crawled. He scoured the room for Erwin. His height and golden hair usually made him easy to spot, but he was nowhere to be seen.

"Ah, Captain Levi," a voice said behind him, sing-song with false joy. "So glad you could come."

He turned to see a woman he recognized from other upper class parties, but he couldn't remember her name. "Yeah, I'm here."

"I'm so glad." She stopped in front of him. Heavy gems hung from her ears; the lobes were stretching. "Where is your Commander? I was hoping to speak to both of you. I was very impressed by the weapon designs he sent me. Very humane."

Levi stared at her, then remembered the weighted nets Hange had been working on to restrain titans on the field. *Humane?* Just how removed from the front lines was this woman that she thought titans deserved humane treatment?

The woman laughed, looking a little nervous. "You don't say much, do you, Captain?"

"Not when it's shitty small talk."

Her smile was even more phoney now, and he remembered he was supposed to be impressing potential investors. What was he supposed to do, arm wrestle her? *Dammit, Erwin, where the hell are you?*

"Look," he said, "you're wasting your time talking to me. I'm useless at this shit. Wait for Erwin to get his ass over here."

“I … see.” The fake smile was rapidly fading.

“Lady Gunnhild,” said a boisterous voice behind him, and he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned, and his jaw clenched. Lord Sahlo stood behind him, dressed in garish finery, an even less genuine smile plastered across his lips. “Please excuse Captain Levi. His skills on the field are unparalleled, but his mastery of the tongue is somewhat lacking due to his unrefined upbringing.”

“Get your hand off me,” Levi growled.

The Lady gave a relieved smile. “I thought perhaps I had offended him.”

“He is a bit cantankerous. It’s nothing you did, I assure you.” Sahlo smiled at Levi as if they were old friends. “The average Survey Corps soldier is rough around the edges out of necessity, to brave the wild world outside our walls. You’ll find Commander Erwin to be the brains out of their leadership duo. Were we on the field instead, it’d be this fellow here impressing you with his moves.”

Levi glanced around the room. *Erwin, where the fuck are you?*

“If you’ll excuse us, milady,” Sahlo said, “I have urgent business to attend to with Captain Levi. Perhaps a dance later?”

“Of course, milord. Dinner will be served shortly—I hope you enjoy it.” She gave an uneasy glance at Levi, then turned.

Sahlo leaned in close. “Come with me.”

“I have nothing to say to you, shit face,” Levi said.

“Ah, but I have things to say to you.”

“Wait until Erwin gets here.”

“These words are for your ears only.” Sahlo gripped his shoulder, harder this time. “There’s a lovely veranda where we won’t be overheard.”

“So your goons can jump me? I don’t think so.”

The lord gave an exasperated sigh. “Fine, then let’s at least move out of sight.”

As they moved toward a small side room, Levi used his periphery, carefully monitoring his surroundings.

“It’s a smoking room,” Sahlo said, as if for Levi’s benefit. He pulled the door shut and sat on a red padded chair. “I have a spare cigar, if you’d—”

“What the hell do you want?” Levi growled.

Sahlo jumped a little, but then smiled and leaned forward onto his knees, gesturing at the seat across from him. “Please.”

Wary, Levi sat.

“I have some concerns about your Commander. I needed to pry you two apart long enough to speak with you about it.” The lord pulled a cigar out of his pocket and gestured to it. “Do you mind if I-?”

“Light that thing and I’ll put it out in your eye.”

“Such hostility. But I know there’s a clever man underneath all that anger. You survived to adulthood in the Underground, something many people don’t get the chance to do.” Sahlo’s face was so uncharacteristically soft that it made the hair on the back of Levi’s neck stand on end.

The lord tucked the cigar back into his pocket, continuing to speak. “I know you care about what goes on down there more than most of the people around here. Your Commander sees the Underground in practical terms—contacts to be used, soldiers, such as yourself, to be snatched away from their lives. But it’s more than that to you, isn’t it? That place still lives in your heart.”

“Stop telling me what I feel,” Levi said. “What do you want?”

“I want you to think about where your loyalties lie.” Sahlo’s gaze was almost as hard and piercing as Erwin’s. “I know your knee-jerk reaction is going to be to swear at me and storm off, but think about it, Levi. Really think about it. Take a few days, if you need to.” He leaned closer. “Erwin’s pretending the harvests from Wall Maria will be equally distributed among the people, but you and I both know that’s not the case. How often were you starving below the surface, back when there were plenty of crops to go around?”

Levi’s stomach twisted with memories he couldn’t quite piece together, sharp pains, weakness and delirium. His brow furrowed. “What’s your point? Stop talking your way around it and just shit it out.”

“There are other solutions, ones that take more time to implement, ones that put food directly into the mouths of Underground denizens. You’ve seen pieces of the puzzle, but not the whole masterpiece it creates. I would like to share my plans with you, one day, but for now, I will just say this: I am poised to set up something beautiful for the people who desperately need my help, and your Commander is going to yank the rug out from under me just for the sake of his own glory.”

“Ha!” Levi had the overwhelming urge to spit in his face. “If you think Erwin’s after glory—”

“You haven’t noticed his possessiveness about being the one to come up with the reclamation plan?” Sahlo’s lip curled in a sneer. “Tell

me, Levi: has he actually told you how the reclamation will play out? Are you confident he has a plan? Or is he being so headstrong about his timeline because he *needs* to be the one to develop the plan, and he doesn't want to give anyone else time to beat him to the punch?" He leaned forward. "Do you truly believe his accelerated timeline is for humanity's benefit?"

"This is bullshit. I've heard enough." Levi stood and began to move to the door. His hand had just closed over the handle when he heard his name. He turned back. The lord was staring at him with stormy eyes.

"Think about this carefully." Sahlo's voice was leaden. "Speak with me at any time if you come to your senses, because I have a role for you in my plans. But be warned: Erwin isn't the only one who will go to any length for the causes he believes in." He stood. "I will go through anything, and any one, to get him to cooperate—and I'll start with his lover."

Levi felt the words squeeze the air from his lungs, but he forced himself to breathe normally. "You think he has a lover? Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Levi, *really*," Sahlo chided, as if the truth were blindingly obvious.

"I don't know what information you think you have about him, but it's wrong. That guy doesn't care about anyone or anything except his work."

The lord leaned forward, squinting intently at him, then smiled. "I see."

"Fucking weirdo." Levi marched back into the main room, hoping his performance had been convincing.

Does he know? Was that a bluff? His head swam as he stepped into the hall. His fingertips rose to his neck, to the love bite he hadn't been able to conceal. *No, this couldn't have given me away. It could be from anyone* ...

The crowd was so loud that his ears hurt, and the strings screeched, and Sahlo's words echoed in his mind. *Erwin, you bastard, where are you?* He wove his way through the crowd, ignoring the people who tried to engage him in conversation. After two full circuits of the room, he finally accepted that Erwin wasn't there. *Now what do I do?*

He was saved by Lady Gunnhild, who gave a short welcome speech, then led them all to a long dinner table in the next room. A lit

chandelier hung overhead, but the room was otherwise far more sparsely decorated than the parlour. Levi found his name on a place card next to Erwin's. He flopped to a seat and watched the crowd trickle in, hoping to catch sight of blond hair neatly parted at the side, but the trickle ended and the seat beside him was still empty. His stomach dropped. *He got caught up in his planning. I'm going to be here alone all night.* Would it be too noticeable if he left now?

“Captain Levi,” greeted a voice to his right. He turned to see Anka Rheinberger, an empty chair on her other side. Levi nodded at it.

“Where’s the old man?”

“Back at the hotel.”

“Huh. Drunk?”

She hesitated. “What about Commander Erwin?”

“Fucked off somewhere and left me here to make shitty small talk with rich assholes.”

“Oh.”

She looked so unimpressed that Levi struggled for more conversation. “He’s probably planning Sahlo’s expedition.”

“I see.” She turned to face him, eyes narrow with concentration. “How do you feel about the delayed reclamation effort?”

He shrugged. “People are going to die.”

“You don’t think holding off and allowing more planning time will ultimately save more lives?”

“No.” He leaned back in his chair. “What’s a few more months going to do? The MP and the northern three branches of the Garrison are completely unprepared to face titans, and a few months won’t change that. I don’t give a shit how fancy Sahlo’s weapon ideas are: the biggest weapon the titans have is fear. A panicking soldier is going to misfire a rifle all the same if it’s got fancy bullets or not.”

“Hm.” She smiled. “You’re smarter than I expected. Commander Pixis and I came to the same conclusions.”

Levi glanced down the table at Sahlo, who was engaged in obnoxious conversation with their hostess. “So if the Survey Corps and the Garrison agree this expedition is bullshit, why don’t we speak up?”

Anka leaned closer, voice low. “Politics. Sahlo is highly favoured by the King right now, and we have to tiptoe around him because of it.”

“Why’s he so favoured?”

“He’s been positioning himself well. Rumour is the King is hoping to drop another Lord from the Council and put a second Wallist

representative in his place. We think Sahlo's been trying to make himself more valuable than the other Lords, just in case it comes to that. He's protecting his position."

Levi frowned. *And I bet that's why he's sucking up to the Wallists. Covering all his bases. This fucker has his fingers everywhere to make sure he can grab on to something in case he starts to fall.*

"If the Survey Corps stands up to him, will the Garrison stand with us?" he asked.

"I don't know." She turned to smile at a server, who poured a glass of wine for her, then began to do the same for Levi. Levi waited until the man had moved away to continue speaking.

"You don't know? What the hell does that mean?"

"Commander Paxis is a man of logic. Provide him with a concrete, reasonable alternative, and he might take it. It's not as simple as just speaking up against Sahlo. We saw how that went in the meeting. Your group has a lot of ideals, but we need substance."

Levi was tempted to tell her that Erwin was working to expose Sahlo's misdeeds to Zackly, but decided it wasn't his place to say anything. Paxis and Anka seemed decent enough, but Erwin was the one who controlled when they played their cards. *And he could be doing that right now if he had bothered to show up.*

They sat in awkward silence for a few minutes, until the first course saved them. As the meal progressed—needlessly wasteful and full of rich food—Levi set small servings aside on Erwin's plate. At the end of the meal, he dumped them into a cloth napkin and tied the tops of it.

"I don't think you're supposed to do that, Captain," Anka said politely.

"They can afford to lose a scrap of cloth, and this food would just rot in an alley or some lord's gullet." He grabbed half a loaf of bread from the table and tucked it under his elbow. "I'm leaving."

"Before cocktail hour?"

"I don't want to be around these assholes when they're drunk." He nodded at her, then turned and wove through the crowd. A couple lords tried to speak with him, but he ignored them.

Maybe it was his imagination, but he could feel Sahlo's eyes on him as he left, boring through the back of his head.

8

Levi opened the door to the hotel room.

As expected, Erwin was hunched over the desk, writing furiously. A large pot of coffee sat beside him, and his mug was half-full. His jacket hung on the back of the chair, the top couple buttons of his shirt undone, and his bolo tie sat on the desk beside him. The lamp was far too low. *He hasn't even noticed it got dark.*

Levi lit the lamp by the door and dropped the bag of food on the dresser. Erwin looked up, squinting.

“Levi? Is it time to—” He glanced around him, and his eyes landed on the clock. “Ten? Is that right? But I—” He shoved a hand through his hair, blinking.

Levi kicked the door shut, making a satisfying slam. “You’re an asshole. I had to socialize with those fuckers alone.”

“Shit. I am so sorry, Levi. I lost track of time.” Erwin stood and strode across the room as if to give him a hug.

Levi shoved the food bag into Erwin’s chest before he could close the distance. “You didn’t eat, either, did you?”

Erwin paused. He set the packet on the table and untied it. “Levi, did you steal food and a napkin from Lady Gunnhild?”

“No one was using it.”

Erwin’s jaw tightened. “I should have been there.”

“Yeah, you should have.” Levi locked the door, set his boots by it, then flopped back onto the bed. He folded his arms behind his head, glaring at the ceiling. “I had to talk to Sahlo without you.”

There was a long pause. “What did he say?” Erwin asked, tension in his voice.

“He wanted to convince me to betray you. Said he’s weaving some masterpiece of puzzle pieces, one that’ll help humanity, and you’re too focussed on personal glory to see it.”

The next pause was so long that Levi lifted his head. Erwin was perched at the end of his chair, back hunched, staring absently down at the food.

“Erwin?”

He didn’t move. “What else?”

“He thinks you don’t have a plan for Wall Maria, but you’re pushing ahead because you don’t want to give anyone else time to think of a plan before you do. He also ...” Levi hesitated. “He said you weren’t the only person who would go to any length for what they believe in. Said he’d go through anyone to get to you, and he’d start with your lov-

er.”

Erwin’s head snapped up to him. “My lover?”

“Yeah.”

Erwin’s spine straightened, his gaze boring through Levi. “And what did you say in response?”

“I told him he was crazy if he thinks you care about anything but your work. And he just stared at me really hard and then said, ‘I see.’ So I called him a creep and left.”

Erwin stared at him for another moment, then gave a whispered *shit* and stood. He strode to the window and opened the curtain a crack, peering through it.

“He might have been bluffing,” Levi said. “Or he might have had someone else in mind.”

“It doesn’t matter. He’s actively trying to find my emotional weaknesses.”

He was still peering out the window. Levi rolled onto his side, eyes trailing down his back. “There’s more. I talked to Anka. Pixis likes your timeline better, but Sahlo’s got his lips firmly planted on the King’s ass, so they can’t touch him unless you give them a solid, logical alternative. There’s talk of removing another lord and putting a second Wallist on the Council, so it looks like he’s covering his ass there, too.”

“I see.” Erwin finally pulled away from the window. “Thank you for relaying all this.”

His polite smile made Levi’s stomach sink. “Stop thinking for a bit and eat your food. I didn’t steal that shit so it could rot on your desk.”

As Erwin ate, Levi filled the kettle, then lit the burner beneath it. He was still furious that Erwin hadn’t shown up at the dinner, but at least he had managed to get some useful information out of Sahlo and Anka. That was better than nothing.

Once the water was boiling, he steeped a cup of tea, then pulled up a chair next to the desk. His eyes wandered across the papers scattered around the desk. The notebook was open to its last few pages now, and several maps and books were open and carefully marked. Levi tried to put his anger aside. Erwin had a lot to think about right now; forgetting a dinner party was better than forgetting a key part of an expedition.

“You should let Hange, Mike and me plan the silo expedition,” he said, thinking aloud.

Erwin looked up. “Oh?”

“It’s just for show, so it doesn’t have to be too well thought-out, right? Just good enough to fool the Council. The three of us can vomit out something based on our past silo recovery strategies. Save your brain for the real expedition we’ll be doing instead.” He paused. “Besides, you’ll kill yourself if you try to plan two full expeditions in two weeks.”

Erwin glanced at his notes, as if debating. “It is difficult to split my concentration between the two, but I can’t ask you to sacrifice your time for my political play.”

“Shut up. You can.” Levi’s grip tightened on the mug. “Don’t be a control freak about this. Let us do it.”

After a beat, Erwin gave him a smile, this one more genuine than the one he had been wearing a moment ago. “I could use the help. Thank you.”

“Don’t smile at me like that. I’m still pissed off at you.” Levi turned away, sipping his tea.

Erwin’s hand closed over the mug. He tugged it out of Levi’s grasp, setting it aside.

“What the hell?” Levi said, but a hand closed over either side of his jaw, and then a broad, warm forehead pressed against his.

“I’m sorry, Levi.” The whispered words were hot against Levi’s lips, and he felt shivers run down his spine.

Damn him. “Suck up all you want. I’m still angry.”

“How can I make it up to you?” There was that soft tone, that low growl, that always made blood rush between Levi’s legs.

He folded his arms over his chest and looked away. “I don’t know.”

“Can I try something anyway? Or are you too angry?” Erwin knelt on the floor and pushed Levi’s thighs apart. His fingers settled on Levi’s belt buckle, and he looked up, as if asking for permission.

Levi’s breath caught. He shrugged. “Aren’t you too busy?”

“Levi.”

“Fine, go ahead.”

Erwin bent forward to press his mouth to Levi’s pants, breathing out. Hot air flooded through the fabric.

“Shit,” Levi whispered.

Erwin looked up at him, using that severe angle that was so intimidating and arousing, that sharp facial structure, those eerie, piercing eyes. Levi felt himself shrink back against the chair, lightheaded.

Then those large hands were unbuckling the belts, then lifting the brown uniform skirt, then pulling the pants off Levi's hips. He felt Erwin's tongue, flat and soft, running circles around one of his testicles. He wanted to stay angry, but it felt so good that a low groan sounded in his throat. Now he could feel that sharp nose pressing underneath his balls, tongue sliding back, then forward again.

Levi's mouth was hanging open, and he couldn't find the strength to close it. He slid forward and tilted his hips up, trying to move into the warm mouth. Erwin looked up at him again, holding eye contact as he licked all the way up to the tip. Levi cried out. This was happening so quickly that he didn't have time to think. The last of his anger fell away.

"Leader of the Soldiers," Erwin murmured, and a rough palm slid under Levi's shirt and up his abdomen. "My second in command. Do you know how important you are to me? To the Survey Corps?" He paused to lap at the underside with just the right pressure.

The idea of being second in command was unusually appealing. Maybe it was the look on Erwin's face, that domineering, possessive look that made their political enemies melt beneath him. Levi grabbed the bolo tie from the desk and lowered it over Erwin's head. The blue eyes flickered with surprise, but then settled back into their intense stare.

"My Commander," Levi said, feeling equally embarrassed and aroused by the words.

Erwin let out a soft, fluttering breath as if composing himself, then bent forward, and his mouth was warm and wet. Levi cried out, thrusting into it, and he felt strong hands clamp onto his hips. He forced his eyes open a crack, taking in that intimidating expression, and oh fuck, Erwin wasn't looking away, he wasn't letting his gaze drop ...

Then those thick lips plunged down again, and Levi was deep in his throat. *Oh, fuck.* His head fell back, his eyes closed. The swirling tongue, the heat, the suction ... He gripped a fistful of golden hair in each hand, pulling hard, and he felt Erwin grunt around him. Strong fingers wrapped around the base and began to move, and the friction was overwhelming.

It wouldn't take Levi long to come like this, but his body was greedy. "Inside me," he gasped.

Erwin pulled away, and the room's air was cold on the damp flesh. "Yeah?" He kissed the inside of Levi's thigh.

He was too impatient for sex. "Your fingers."

Erwin gave him another kiss, then stood; the front of his pants was tenting. He pulled a bottle of oil out of the drawer and thoroughly slicked his fingers, then knelt in front of Levi again.

He's so turned on, Levi thought, dizzy. He reached out a foot and rubbed it between Erwin's legs, feeling the rigid shape beneath the fabric.

Erwin cursed under his breath, his thighs closing around Levi's foot. For a moment, it looked like he might be distracted, but then he gave that determined look again and bent forward. Levi felt two fingers slide into him, agonizingly slowly; he groaned and pushed down on them, trying to speed them up.

“Like this?”

“Fuck,” Levi whimpered, and then the warm hand and mouth were around him again, lightly scraping him with teeth, soothing with tongue.

His climax built so quickly that he barely had time to prepare. He curled around Erwin, arms and torso and legs contracting, feeling it ripple through him from the tips of his toes and fingers.

As the last pulses faded, he fell back against the chair, limp, breathing hard. He felt a last lick and then cold air, felt the fingers withdraw from his body. His eyelids were heavy, but he managed to part them a crack. Erwin was still staring up at him with that strong look.

Levi suddenly realized why it appealed to him so much. *His mask is still up. Every time we've had sex lately, it's dropped, and he's been upset.* He wanted to keep this going, wanted Erwin to enjoy himself.

“Fuck my face,” he whispered.

Erwin's eyes widened. “What?”

“Come on, stand up.” Levi fumbled at Erwin's belt with clumsy fingers, until Erwin reached down to help him. Together, they pulled his pants down.

“Look at you.” Levi reached out to touch him.

“That's what happens when you yell like that.”

I was yelling? Levi slumped so his mouth was at groin level. “Go at me hard.”

Erwin looked down at him, and the sharp angle reminded Levi of when they had first met, when he had mistakenly thought there had been a power imbalance between them. His heart pounded.

“Levi ...”

“Use me,” Levi said, an embarrassing whimper in his voice again.

Hesitating a bit, Erwin eased forward into his mouth. Levi gripped him by the wrists, guiding Erwin's hands to the top of his head. Then he reached for Erwin's ass, pulling him in, instructing him to thrust.

It didn't take long for Erwin to give in and start thrusting hard. Levi groaned his encouragement, pulling him in with his hands, their eyes locked. Soon the hands in his hair were tight, and that gaze was piercing through him.

He's strong. So strong. Levi's head spun. He reached up one hand to touch the Commander's pendant, his fingers wrapping around it. His gag reflex, dull as it was, was bringing tears to his eyes, and he loved it, he loved feeling Erwin's power, his desperation. *Sahlo doesn't know what the fuck he's up against. This man knows exactly what he's doing. He knows exactly what he wants, and he'll do anything to take it.*

"You feel so good," Erwin gasped, head falling back, "I'm going to come."

Levi closed his eyes and moved against him, pulling him over the edge. He heard the cries, felt the strength of each pulse, the quaking muscles beneath his hands, the tug on his hair so tight that it hurt ... *So strong, so strong ...*

It was over too soon. Erwin released him, then staggered back to sit on the bed.

Levi wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, sniffling a little, an aftereffect of the gag reflex. He felt lighter than he had in months. Once he had cleaned up, he lifted his head.

Erwin sat on the bed, his head still bowed, and a cold weight settled over Levi's shoulders. *Shit.*

"Erwin," he said quietly.

Erwin looked up and forced a smile. "I'm okay."

The words were unconvincing. It slowly dawned on Levi what he was looking at. Erwin needed to keep his mask up to withstand stress; sex made him drop it. That had been okay before, when Wall Maria was still a long way out, when the mask had been a useful accessory. These days, it was a necessity.

Levi's throat tightened. He stood and pulled his pants up, buckling them again, then sat beside him on the bed. For a moment, they were silent.

"I'm sorry again that I wasn't there for you tonight," Erwin said.

Levi blinked, then remembered the dinner. "I forgot about that

already.”

“Then what’s on your mind?”

He couldn’t figure out how to express the full extent of it, so he voiced the most immediate portion: “If you’re busy with one proposal, and me and the others are busy with another, that’s not going to leave much time for those three nights a week we spend together.”

“I suppose not,” Erwin said quietly.

How much work would he have gotten done tonight if I hadn’t interrupted him? Levi reached out for the Commander’s pendant, feeling its weight in his palm.

“Two nights a week?” he said aloud. “Mondays and Thursdays. Just quick, like tonight, nothing that’s going to distract us for too long.”

“That’s a good idea. I suppose it’s just for a couple weeks. We won’t have time for much more.” Erwin turned to Levi, his eyes glassy. “I promise I’ll make this up to you in Ehrmich.”

Ehrmich. Levi’s brows rose as an idea occurred to him. “Hey, Erwin.”

“Yeah?”

“The money you need to fake the silo expedition—if I bought out your half of the Ehrmich apartment, would that be enough?”

There was a long pause. “I can’t let you use your money that way, Levi.”

“So you’re the only one allowed to personally invest in the Survey Corps? What else am I going to spend money on?” Levi ran his thumb around the border of the pendant, not looking him in the eye. “I’ve been saving up for awhile, and I just got a promotion. Let me buy Ehrmich. If that’s not enough, I’ll buy Karanese, too. You’ll still have access to them. Nothing changes except the name on the deed.”

Erwin swallowed hard. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

Erwin pulled him in, hugging him tightly. “Thank you, Levi. We’ll finalize the paperwork when we get back to Trost.”

Levi closed his eyes and snuggled closer, hand curling around the pendant. Maybe this was just a temporary solution, but he couldn’t bear the idea of selling their future to a stranger.

He still wasn’t sure he should be clinging to that future, but he couldn’t bring himself to let go. Not yet.

-28-

WALLS

“What about Pehr?” Mike asked.

Erwin’s chest rumbled with a hum of consideration.

“He’s busy enough with logistics.” Levi snuggled back against the rumble. Erwin had his legs stretched across the couch, and Levi sat between them, leaning back against his chest. Erwin’s arms encircled him, holding the file on Levi’s lap where they could both read it.

“Pehr’s been training Johanna.” Mike stretched his long legs across the couch opposite them. He lifted a piece of notepaper, studying it—or at least, he seemed to be. His fringe was so long that it was difficult to tell where he was looking. “She’s ready for straight-forward missions like this one. Transition her to logistics and promote Pehr to Squad Leader.”

“I still think Nanaba’s a better choice.” Erwin’s words puffed the top of Levi’s hair, warm and gentle. “I’d rather have two people on logistics in case one of them falls during the push.”

Mike shook his head. “Nanaba’s too reliant on superiors; she doesn’t have enough initiative. If not Pehr, then Dita or Eld.”

A knock sounded at the door. Levi turned to look at Mike, waiting for him to sniff out the knocker’s identity.

“It’s Hange and Moblit,” Mike said.

Good. Then Levi didn’t have to detach himself from Erwin. “You’re late,” he called. “Come in.”

The door slammed open, and Hange rushed into the room. Moblit followed close behind, closing and locking the door behind them.

Hange’s voice boomed through the room: “Erwin, please reconsider. The new weaponry will enable us to—”

“No,” Erwin said.

“Please, just listen.”

“I’ve listened enough times. The answer is still no.”

Moblit flopped onto a chair next to Mike, who leaned in close, sniffing. “Breakfast drinks?”

“It’s only breakfast if you sleep first,” Moblit said dully.

“At least let me take Mike’s place tomorrow.” Hange’s voice was getting louder. “I have a theory about the—”

“Hange, I forbid it.” Erwin shifted, indicating he wanted to get up. Levi grumbled, reluctantly moving to the end of the couch. The air felt chilly without Erwin’s body heat, even though sunlight streamed in through the window.

Erwin stood and stretched, then paced over to his desk. Hange followed like a dog seeking food scraps.

“Erwin, you keep putting it off, keep putting it off … We’re only going to be able to reclaim Wall Maria if we understand our enemy.”

“We understand enough. Capturing a titan is too dangerous at this point in time. We need every available soldier for our reclamation effort.” Erwin selected a file and turned to face the distraught Squad Leader. “Once we move beyond the reclamation effort and focus on exterminating the titans, your research will become invaluable. We’ll revisit this then.” He held out the file. “This is your assignment while the rest of us are gone. When we get back, you and I will head to Mitras to speak with investors. At that time, you will *not* mention capturing a titan; you will only mention the projects you’re working on right now. We will not have this discussion again. Understood?”

Hange made no move to take the file. “Erwin—”

“Hey, shitgoggles,” Levi said. “He said no. Take the damned file.”

Moblit let out a low groan, raking his hands into his hair. “Please, Squad Leader.”

Hange glanced at Levi, then Moblit, then back at Erwin, then snatched the file out of his hands. “Sir.”

“Thank you.” Erwin clasped his hands behind his back, addressing the entire group. “I have to head into town to finalize some financial arrangements. Levi, Mike, make sure your teams are all ready to leave in the morning. And Levi …” He hesitated.

His hesitation said everything. “Yeah, got it,” Levi said.

Erwin held his gaze for a moment longer, impassive, then left the room.

Levi leaned back into the couch with a low sigh. *Got it.* It was Thursday night, one of their two scheduled nights to spend together that week, but they were both in desperate need of sleep and focus. Once the day's preparations were complete, Levi would retire to his own room, take care of his own needs and go to bed. If he were honest with himself, he was so exhausted that the idea of a night of rest was appealing. He doubted his body would let him do anything else, anyway. Just this past Monday, he and Erwin had fallen asleep half-naked, too tired to continue their foreplay.

Maybe there wasn't much room for physical intimacy right now, but they had spent nearly every waking moment together over the past two weeks. With neither of them sleeping more than two or three hours a night, that was a lot of moments.

Besides, their sacrifices had paid off. The fake silo expedition plans were on the way to the Council records room. They had built a strong team of forty of the Survey Corps' most trustworthy soldiers to carry out the real plans, which were locked down and ready to execute. They had assembled the necessary funds to fake a silo gold haul, thanks to Levi's purchase of the apartments in Ehrmich and Karanese. Erwin even had carriage weight limit calculations ready to explain why the coins were loose instead of in official royal lockboxes.

It was all worth it, and soon, they would have their reward. A week or two on the expedition, then a few days apart while Erwin was in the Capital, and then they'd be together in Ehrmich, where they could forget themselves for a little while.

Or find ourselves again. Levi was no longer sure which was accurate.

Hange dropped to a seat next to him and gave a little moan, flopping dramatically against his shoulder.

"What the hell? Get off me." He pushed against dead weight, then winced as a pungent scent hit his nostrils, like frying onions and garlic. It wasn't necessarily unpleasant, just invasive. "Holy shit, you stink. When's the last time you bathed?"

"A few days ago."

"No, a week yesterday," Moblit said, weary.

"Disgusting." Levi shoved again.

"Fine, I'll bathe before I sleep tonight." Hange sat up. "What's wrong with Erwin? You two have a fight?"

"What?"

“He’s been so uptight since you two got back from the Capital. More than usual.”

Levi glanced at Moblit before he answered. Moblit had only been let in on their secret relationship a couple months ago, and it still felt strange to discuss it in front of him. “Maybe he’s just pissed off that you keep bringing up your own shitty project ideas when he’s got enough to worry—”

“Not enough sex,” Mike interrupted from the couch.

“Ah,” Hange said, as if it explained everything.

“Fuck off, Mike,” Levi said with a swell of defensiveness. “You don’t say two fucking words this whole time, and *now* you have something to say?”

Hange stood and leaned into Mike’s face, as if inspecting his nose. “Can you smell when they’ve had sex?”

Moblit looked frantically at the door. “Squad Leader, we should really be cleaning up the lab.”

“He can’t smell anything over your armpits, stinkgoggles.” Levi stood. “I’m going to check on the stables. Mike, go make sure the gear checks are going well. Moblit, make sure your dumbass Squad Leader takes a bath.”

He left the room without looking back. The Squad Leaders needed to mind their own fucking business and stop hassling Erwin with stupid shit like capturing titans. The only thing that mattered right now was Wall Maria.

In the stables, Dita’s team was assessing equipment and packing the carts. Several carts were empty. Because they hadn’t been successful in convincing the merchants to give them food supplies in advance, they would have to remove food supplies from the nearest two established checkpoints, carry them all the way through the supply route, and transfer them to the two new ones at the end of it. It was easy to get to the nearest two checkpoints—they had travelled past them dozens of times over the past three years—so they would be the easiest checkpoints to restock once the merchants finally came through. *If they ever do.*

While their primary goal was to stock two of the remaining four checkpoints, they would be holding at the furthest point for a few days for their secondary goal: scouting. Levi, Mike, and a small strike squad would be venturing toward Shiganshina. This mission’s furthest checkpoint would bring them within a half hour’s ride of the walled city.

Ideally, they would find a way to get into Shiganshina and assess the state of the city, but Erwin believed there would be too many roving titans to safely advance that far. They would do their best; any information they could bring back would be invaluable. Erwin had said it himself during the Council meeting: Shiganshina, at this point, was an unknown. Until they had scouting information, finalizing their plan of attack would be gambling on hunches.

Gambling on hunches is Erwin's specialty, anyway.

Levi returned to his room, intending to do a little tidying before dinner, but he recalled Hange and Mike's discussion. The stress and fatigue of the past two weeks had hurt his libido, and it really had been a few days since he had gotten off. It wasn't like they would have much time alone during the mission, either, other than a few awkward, impersonal minutes of mutual masturbation here and there.

He locked his bedroom door, then sat on the end of his bed and unbuckled his uniform. Usually, it took him less than a minute to take care of himself, but his body wouldn't cooperate. He tried flipping his grip, tried his other hand, and even tried coating himself with oil. Still soft.

With a frustrated groan, he fell back to the bed. If he couldn't jerk off, then maybe he could at least get a nap in before dinner.

⁂

Erwin accepted the flat paper parcel. "Did you get everything I requested?"

The woman shook her head. "Everything's locked up tight. This is the best I could do without arousing suspicion."

"I see. Thank you." He tucked the parcel under his arm. With a quick glance around the park to make sure they weren't watched, he added, "Hasek has been compromised."

Her brows rose. "By whom?"

"Sahlo. I suspect Leona may be working with him as well."

The woman closed her eyes for a few seconds, taking a deep breath. When she opened them again, she gave him a humourless smile and said, "I see. We'll be in touch." She stood and turned, leaving him alone on the bench.

Erwin waited a few more minutes, subtly scanning the park. Finding no one suspicious, he stood.

Once he was inside his apartment, he locked the door and lit the desk lamp. He pulled a wooden grid out of the top drawer: a cipher. He slipped a knife under the paper flap of the parcel and slit it open, pulling out an envelope. The envelope's surface displayed a passphrase in code, an official seal that the messenger had come from his information network. He quickly confirmed the phrase, even though he had seen the same woman several times before. With Sahlo acting in unpredictable ways, he couldn't be too careful.

He opened the envelope and pulled out a file. Receipts, documents, contracts. Several of the receipts would be helpful: they showed purchases for Sahlo's estate, billed to HDB Shipping. A document showed the silo Sahlo had sent them after was, indeed, an actual silo. Maybe Erwin was getting paranoid, but he had genuinely wondered if Sahlo had made up the silo to try to test his loyalty to the Council.

Another document was unexpected: transcription and minutes of a meeting between Sahlo and Lobov during the days when Erwin had been pressuring Lobov. One line leapt out, spoken by Sahlo: "Tolerate him, for now. He will be useful to us."

Useful. How could an up-and-coming Survey Corps Squad Leader be of use to a lord? Surely it wasn't just about collecting coins from silos—was it?

Whatever Sahlo had meant, it was becoming clear he had kept his eye on Erwin for a long time. How much of their conflict had been accidental, and how much had been by Sahlo's design? And for what purpose?

Erwin flipped the page, considering, when he stopped. Folded in half, tucked between two sheets of paper, was a small certificate. The paper was yellow with age.

DUPLICATE

RECORD OF BIRTH

MARTIN JACQUES SAHLO

BORN ON THE 10TH OF JANUARY, 801 IN MITRAS.

FATHER: LORD JACQUES ALAIN SAHLO

MOTHER:

Erwin flipped over the page, examining the back. The signature

and stamps on the back looked legitimate; the document was complete.

Who is your mother, Sahlo? He studied the empty space where the mother's name should be. A scandal, perhaps? Maybe Sahlo's father had accidentally impregnated a rival noble's daughter or wife. He grimaced. This felt like a valuable key, but he had no idea where to find the door it opened.

The rest of the documents made feeble links between Sahlo and HDB Shipping, but nothing concrete. Erwin slipped the file carefully into his desk drawer. He'd let it simmer in the back of his mind while they were on the expedition. There were more pressing concerns.

Deep in thought, he wandered back to base. When he arrived, he began a circuit: stables, store rooms, gear check, office. Everything was proceeding exactly as he had requested. A corner of his lips lifted. Maybe he hadn't figured out what to do about Sahlo, but at least he had the mission under perfect control.

He asked a soldier to check his gear, then finished off a stack of paperwork. At this rate, he might even get a full night's sleep. It was nearing dinner time, and he decided to give himself a proper dinner break. If Levi wasn't too busy, they could sneak up to the guard tower and have a few minutes of peace together.

Levi wasn't in his office, and there was no response when Erwin knocked on his bedroom door. He was about to leave, when he paused. Loud, rasping sounds were coming from inside the bedroom. He pulled out his key ring and quietly unlocked the door, stepping into the room.

He smiled.

Levi lay on his back at the end of the bed, a hand tucked down the front of unbuttoned pants. His face was slack, and he was snoring.

Though it was tempting, Erwin had learned in the early months of their relationship that a kiss to the forehead was a terrible way to awaken Levi. On occasion, Levi awoke by jumping to his feet, ready to fight. Erwin's teeth were still rattling from the crack of their skulls, three years later. Instead, he knelt beside the bed and stroked the dark hair back from the broad forehead. Levi barely stirred.

He's so exhausted. He's going to miss his last hot meal before the expedition. Erwin ran a finger down the petite nose to the gentle snub at the end. "Levi."

"Mm," Levi said.

"It's time for dinner."

"Mm?" The dark eyelashes parted, then narrowed into a squint.

“Dinner? I thought I was only out for a minute.” He looked down at the hand down his pants. “Oh. Shit.”

“Not a bad sight to walk in on.”

“Don’t bother getting worked up. Couldn’t even get it up.”

Erwin hesitated. “Yeah, I know that feeling.”

Levi withdrew his hand and sat up, buttoning his pants. “I hope we bounce back in Ehrmich.”

With all the short-term planning, Erwin had lost sight of what lay beyond the expedition. His chest fluttered. “We will. We’re just exhausted.”

“Yeah. What are you doing here, anyway? I thought we weren’t going to have time together.”

“This is business related; I have some information to discuss with you. Thought we might take our dinners to either the guard tower or the park.”

“Tower,” Levi said. “Then I can sit close to you again.”

Erwin smiled. “I’d like that.”

They retrieved their dinners and settled on top of the tower. Now Erwin was thinking about Ehrmich and all the trip would entail —one overdue activity in particular.

He’d wait until their second afternoon. They’d both be wearing semi-formal wear in anticipation of a fine dinner later that night. Erwin would suggest a mid-afternoon snack to hold them over. Levi would love a particular tea shop near the centre of town; they had the best selection of tea outside of Mitras, and a large bakery as well. After they had eaten and drunk their fill, they’d take a walk up the hill at the centre of a quiet park near the edge of the city limits. They’d find a private spot to watch the sunset. As the sun went down, both of them bathed in orange light, Erwin would get down on one knee and offer a ring.

A ring.

He idly reached for Levi’s hand and held it out, feeling each of the knuckles in turn.

Levi’s lip curled. “What are you doing?”

“These hands do so much for me. For humanity. I feel like I haven’t shown my appreciation for them lately.” He subtly pressed their palms together. Levi had large hands for his height, but they were still small compared to Erwin’s. *His ring finger is narrower than my little finger.* He stored the information away, hoping it would help him find the right ring size when he and Hange went to Mitras after the expedition. “Your

hands are so delicate.”

“Yeah, well your fingers are like sausages,” Levi muttered, retracting his hand.

“I seem to recall you praising their thickness late one night, not too long ago.” The memory made his pulse rise. Maybe his libido wasn’t as dead as he thought. “I love you, Levi.”

A slim brow furrowed. “Where did that come from?”

“Do I need a reason to say it?”

Levi studied him for a moment longer, then leaned in to kiss the underside of his jaw. “Shut up and eat. I bet you forgot to eat lunch, didn’t you?”

After a moment’s consideration, Erwin said, “I suppose I did.”

Levi flicked his forehead.

“Ouch.”

“I keep telling you, you have to eat. Coffee’s not enough to keep your brain working properly.”

He had a point, and the lack of food probably wasn’t helping his fatigue levels, either. Erwin took a bite of bread.

Once they had cleaned their plates, Erwin leaned back against the short wall, and Levi snuggled against him, between his legs, positioned just as he had been on the couch earlier. He was warm, and his muscled frame was at once firm and soft. Erwin’s eyes closed. When he breathed in, he smelled lemon soap, and above it, chimney smoke.

“It’s starting to smell like fall.”

After a pause, Levi said, “You think we’ll get everything ready and scouted before winter?”

“Of course. We just need the Council to approve one more mission after this, when we’ll secure those last two checkpoints, and then we have all winter to plan. You and Mike may need to spend some extra time at the furthest checkpoint, depending how dangerous it is when we arrive. If it’s safe enough to do extensive scouting, I’d like you to stay a couple weeks into October, depending how the weather holds out. That should give us enough data to plan throughout the winter.” *If Sahlo and his friends don’t prevent all this.* Erwin frowned, nuzzling into the top of Levi’s head. “I wanted to speak to you about information I received about Sahlo. Something is puzzling me.”

“Yeah?”

“My contact delivered some moderately useful information—receipts, mostly—that included a duplicate of Sahlo’s birth certificate.

His mother's name was left blank. I thought she might be from a rival noble family, perhaps, or a commoner, but public records showed the family was struggling financially until our lord friend, at a surprisingly young age, lifted the company out of the gutter. Their reputation couldn't have gotten any lower, so it wouldn't have mattered if Sahlo's father married down, or even if they were unwed."

Levi spoke, voice quiet: "Maybe he married further down than you're thinking."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe Sahlo's mother was a sex worker, Underground. Maybe his father fell in love, tried to give her a better life."

There was a strange note in Levi's voice, but Erwin was whisked away on a wave of inspiration before he could pinpoint it. He thought of the girl Hyacinth in the Underground: *You're one of those. The surface dwellers of marrying age who think they can save me.*

"His father fell in love with a sex worker in the Underground," Erwin said, mind racing. "He brought her to the surface. That's why Sahlo is so obsessed with the Underground, why he's the only lord who gives day passes to Rage Klein's sex workers, why he claims to have some master plan in place to aid the people there. Maybe his mother was employed by the Klein family, and he owes a familial debt of gratitude, or he's leveraging past connections." This opened up so many possibilities he had never considered.

Levi pulled away and turned to look at him. "Hey, Erwin." There was that strange note again.

"Yes?"

"Is there a chance Sahlo might actually be helping the Underground with whatever he's doing?"

Erwin's brows rose.

"Look," Levi said, "I think he's a selfish asshole. I don't trust him. But even when there were three solid walls, the Underground was starving. Is that going to be any different this time around?"

"It's difficult to guess."

"No, it's not: the surface-dwellers are going to pack even more food on their plates, and the Underground won't see a crumb. What if Sahlo figured out a way to get food to the people who really need it? What if we fuck that up by trying to stop him?"

Erwin watched him for a moment, then looked away. He gently detached himself from Levi and rose to his feet.

Levi's brows pinched. "You're leaving?"

"I promise you one thing, Levi: if we don't collect Wall Maria's harvest before the winter of 850, we *will* run out of food, and the Underground will be first to starve. I don't know what solution Sahlo thinks he's found, but it's useless if there isn't any food to distribute."

"Don't get pissy. I said I don't trust him."

Their gaze held, then Erwin opened the hatch. "Don't let him get in your head."

"What the hell? He's not in my head."

Erwin began to climb down the ladder, his brows heavy.

❧

It took until nightfall for Erwin's mood to relax again, and when the tension finally drained from his body, he felt empty. The bed was cold, and his conscience was heavy. Maybe it hadn't been an outright fight, or even an argument, but he hated to leave their interaction on such a sour note—and all because his ego was bruised. He was better than that.

He didn't bother to knock as he unlocked Levi's door. He heard the bed shift, suddenly, as if the Captain were sitting bolt upright.

"Levi," Erwin said, voice low.

The bedside lamp flickered to life. Levi squinted at him, hair ruffled. "I thought you were pissed off at me."

"Can I come in?"

"You're already in."

Erwin locked the door, then sat on the side of the bed opposite Levi, half-turning to face him. "I was rude," he began as an apology.

"No shit." Levi folded his arms over his chest.

"I've been with the Survey Corps for a good seventeen years now, and every single one of those years, through every single decision, I've always had a clear line of sight on my next goal. The decisions haven't always been easy, and sometimes they've come with great sacrifice, but at least they were always clear. Obstacles did little to deter me. But the older I get, the more I realize things aren't quite as black-and-white as I always believed." He folded his hands in his lap, looking down. "I accused you of letting Sahlo get into your head. I was projecting. He's gotten into mine."

After a moment, Levi slid over. "Get in bed, or you'll freeze."

Erwin gratefully slid under the covers. This bed was already warmer than the one he had left behind.

Levi rolled onto his side to study him. “Keep talking.”

“My thoughts on Sahlo have been pragmatic, maybe even inhuman: Wall Maria must come first, at any cost. Even if Sahlo has a plan to save the Underground, that will mean nothing if we don’t expand our arable land. Our priorities are clear: we have to push past him and reclaim the wall. We must be prepared to sacrifice our most vulnerable citizens if we are to save humanity.” He rolled onto his side, too, facing Levi. “But I think of Leona, and I think of you and your past, and I think of the dancer who proudly makes a living in the worst possible conditions. What kind of monster would be willing to sacrifice people like that—the people who have borne the worst brunt of humanity’s struggle? Your question was valid: Sahlo may indeed be the only person with a working plan to save the people of the Underground, and we may indeed disrupt it by pushing back against him.” He nestled his cheek into the pillow, smelling lemon soap. “I didn’t like your question because I don’t like the answer I would give you.”

After a pause, Levi reached out a hand and covered his. Their fingers interlaced. “I’m too close to this.”

“Because you lived in the Underground.”

“Yeah. You’ve asked me before if I have holes in my memory, things blurred out.” Levi’s brow furrowed. “There are lots of years like that, and what I do remember doesn’t always fit together in ways that make sense. I’m not good at remembering things from before. Sometimes I get little flashes—faces, or words, or even just feelings. When we went back Underground last time, I felt a lot of them, things I hadn’t felt in a long time. When Sahlo talked to me, I felt even more. And I felt some on the tower today, too. When they happen, I stop thinking properly. I feel like a little kid again, stupid and scared. So I act on instinct.”

“I trust your instincts.”

“Well, I trust your logic more.” Levi slid their joined hands to his mouth and kissed one of Erwin’s knuckles. “My instincts from back then are all about one person surviving; it’s selfish. You have to think about *everyone* surviving. I still want to know Sahlo’s plan. And if it’s just some dumb fucking way for him to exploit people for a profit, I want to kill him. But maybe that’s me being scared. So do what you want. I’ve got your back.”

I want to kill him. Erwin closed his eyes; the lamp lit his eyelids red. Red, dripping down Levi's nose, his mouth, his chin. Was the solution really that simple? Were they close enough to Wall Maria that they could kill Sahlo, and no one would have time to fill the power gap he left behind?

"It may come to that yet." His eyes opened. "I'd rather he die by a hangman's noose than by your hand. It's more complicated than simply removing him."

"Then I won't question you again." Levi kissed his knuckle again. "I just needed to know you've considered the Underground."

"I'm sorry. I overreacted." Erwin inched closer, kissing one of Levi's knuckles. "I've neglected you all week, and then I lashed out at you because I was frustrated with Sahlo."

"It's okay."

"It's not okay." He didn't care how busy they got, or how much stress he was under; he must never hurt the man he loved.

Levi leaned closer and kissed the tip of his nose. Their gaze held, then Levi aimed lower, pressing a soft, closed-mouth kiss into his lips. Then there was a second kiss, then a third, and then their lips parted. Erwin let out a soft, fluttering breath, his eyes closing.

Levi shifted closer, fingertips trailing down Erwin's chin, his throat, his chest. The kiss broke, and their gaze held as Levi's fingers traced a line down his abdomen to the front of his pants.

"Should we stop?" Levi whispered.

Erwin barely shook his head, carried away by the feather-light touch. His pants were already tight. *It's been too long.* He ran his palm down the front of Levi's body and felt him stir. Their mouths met again, then Levi rolled on top of him, their lips still joined.

He's so warm. Erwin ran a hand down his spine, hips gently rocking. Levi kissed across to his ear, then whispered:

"How far do you want to take this?"

"Keep going. I'm clean."

Levi's throat bobbed, and then he bent down for another kiss.

They made love slowly, arching against each other, gaze holding in the dim lamplight. Erwin wrapped his legs around Levi's waist, feeling Levi's back muscles rolling beneath his calves with each thrust. His Captain was so beautiful, his chest and shoulders flexing in waves, his eyes narrow with focus. Erwin reached out to cup his cheek and slid a thumb between the thin lips; Levi ran his tongue along it, the closest

gesture to a kiss they could share from this angle.

Then an oil-slicked hand tightened around him, moving in the same rhythm as their bodies, and Erwin closed his eyes, tilted his head back, felt Levi's slow waves tug at him inside and out, stronger, stronger

...

He heard Levi cry out as he did, felt him ripple through him as they went under together.

His eyelids parted—it felt like seconds later, but the lamp was low. Levi was asleep on his shoulder, a soiled rag in his limp hand. *He didn't even finish cleaning us up before he fell asleep.*

Erwin swallowed hard and pressed a kiss into his forehead, breathing in. *I'm so lucky to have you.*

He thought of the push to the Wall, and all that needed to be done before then, and all that was likely to come after it. His heart ached.

“I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you, too,” Levi mumbled in his sleep.

cg

Early the next morning, they assembled before the gate: Erwin in front, Levi on his right, Mike on his left. A few townspeople gathered on either side of the road, but not many. The public was more interested in the major expeditions, especially the grisly remains at the end of one.

The gate rose, and Erwin shifted higher in the saddle, breathing in the sweet scent of greenery. His stomach dropped with anticipation as he felt every soldier around him hold their breath, waiting for his command.

“Advance!” he roared.

Immediately outside the gate, a curious titan began to run toward them. Levi dispatched Petra, Gunter, and Eld. When another appeared, Levi grimaced and went after it himself, barking orders at his remaining teammates.

Erwin kept his gaze forward, but his heart swelled with pride. *Leader of the soldiers.*

Once they were free of the settlement by the walls, a clear path lay before them. They had swept through this area so many times that the titan population, at least for now, had dwindled.

They halted in the courtyard of the first checkpoint to fill their carts with the food supplies the merchants had refused to give them. Once the carts were ready, the troops rested and ate lunch while Erwin met with Pehr and Johanna to discuss their pace. They had a lot of ground to cover before they arrived at their destination, and the danger would only increase as they moved deeper. Shiganshina was the source of all titans inside Wall Maria, and Erwin had every reason to believe they had kept pouring through the hole since the fall, like water through a leak.

That evening, they arrived at the second checkpoint without any losses, having successfully evaded every titan they spotted. Once all necessary plans for the next day had been verified and the troops had eaten, Erwin pulled Levi away to the one room with a lock, chewing a mouthful of mint as they walked.

The instant the door closed, he pushed Levi against it, mouth covering his.

When he pulled away, he felt Levi's hand stroke his chest. "Did you bring a lamp?"

"No," Erwin said.

"It's too dark. I want to watch you jerk off."

"Tomorrow night. This will have to do for now." Erwin bent down to kiss him again.

Expedition lovemaking was always so impersonal, frantically grabbing at themselves under cloaks, spattering crumbling walls. There were so many complicating factors: numbness from the saddle, trying to avoid arousing suspicion, and, at times like this, lack of proper lighting. And yet, Erwin always found his sex drive came to him in a rush when they were outside Wall Rose. Part of it was certainly due to the complete absence of political stress. There was a wild freedom here. And part of it was seeing Levi in his natural state. Everything about him—his speed, his observational skills, his instincts—was perfectly suited to being in the field. Even his sweat was natural; it reminded Erwin of the scent of sand on a hot day. He bent forward in the darkness to taste the dried sweat on Levi's neck, landing just below his ear.

"Hey," Levi said, pulling away. "I'm filthy."

"You smell so good," Erwin whispered, barely aware his lips were moving. "Fuck!" His breath hitched and he threw the cloak to the side so he didn't soil it. The last few pulses were fading when he heard Levi give a grunt between clenched teeth.

Both satisfied, they readjusted their uniforms, but Erwin was reluctant to leave. He pulled Levi in and wrapped his arms around him.

“Clingy,” Levi said.

“A bit.” They hadn’t focused enough on each other over the past couple weeks; he wanted to make up for it now. Erwin kissed the top of his head, swaying a little from side to side. They would have to make time to dance in Ehrmich. It had been months since they had last danced together—Erwin had danced with several soldiers in turn during the Survey Corps Christmas celebration, so they had sneaked one public dance then, and another, in private, behind a closed door, the music muffled. Had that really been nine months ago? *Time is slipping through our fingers so quickly.* He curled tighter around Levi. The next several months were bound to slip by, too, in late nights and frantic, scheduled sex.

“You okay?” Levi asked.

“Let’s make a point of visiting a dance hall when we’re in Ehrmich. If we’re in plainclothes and the lamps are dim, we can blend in with the crowd.”

“Sure.” After a pause, Levi added, “I guess we won’t be August and Emil this time.”

Erwin’s jaw tensed as he realized their aliases were no longer usable. He would have to go back to Leona for a new set. *If I can still trust Leona.*

“We’ll think of new aliases,” he said aloud. “Any requests?”

“I liked the old ones.”

Erwin paused. “So did I. I’m sorry, Levi.”

“Not your fault.”

Generous of him, considering it was. Erwin closed his eyes. “Let’s go back to the others.”

They shared a final kiss, then returned to the main room and lay down next to Mike. It was too warm to have the excuse to cuddle—none of the other soldiers were—so Erwin rolled to face Levi instead. Levi did the same. Minty breath and body heat filled the air between them, and even though they weren’t touching, it felt like an embrace.

Erwin closed his eyes, savouring it. Maybe he was being a bit clingy, but he didn’t want a single moment together to slip by. Too many already had.



In spite of Erwin's determination to treasure their stolen moments, the days began to bleed together. They travelled an average of two checkpoints a day, aiming to keep the troops and the horses well-rested. Because their numbers were small, they focused on evading titans rather than clearing them out.

Even with their streamlined, manoeuvrable formation, the titans were a bigger problem as they progressed, as did the number of casualties. They had left with forty; by the time they arrived at the most distantly stocked checkpoint, they had thirty-two. One of those lost was the mission's sole field medic.

"We can use each of these deaths against Sahlo," Erwin told Levi, trying to keep his spirits high, but Levi's gaze was as hollow as Erwin's chest. Political games meant nothing out here, with the screams of the dead still echoing in his ears.

They stayed at the last stocked checkpoint for an extra day, tallying and preparing supplies for the push to the first of the two new checkpoints. Mike and Levi took small scouting teams ahead, surveying two possible routes to their next target. Mike's team narrowly evaded a swarm of titans, but Levi's found a safe path, albeit one heavily laden with bramble.

That night, the three officers—along with team leaders Pehr, Eld, and Nanaba—spent several hours discussing their next moves. Erwin unrolled a map at the centre of the table in a makeshift meeting room, marking their two goals with red markers. The first had once been a merchant's warehouse; it wasn't as defensible as a military base, but its fences and silos made it an ideal location to store supplies. The second was an old Garrison outpost, and it was likely to be in rough shape, as it hadn't been used for several decades.

"We need two days at the first checkpoint," Levi said, tapping the map at the centre of the table. "One to repair, clean it and stock it; the other for Mike and me to scout ahead to the next one."

"An afternoon of scouting should be sufficient," said Pehr.

Mike shook his head. "This area is already crawling with titans. It'll get worse as we get closer to the Wall."

Erwin rubbed his chin, studying the red markers. Though they had four checkpoints left to set up—two this expedition, two during the next one—the last three were equidistant from Wall Maria; the Wall was where the military would be making its stand, so the Wall was where the

bulk of the supplies needed to be. That meant this mission was going to bring them within an hour of the Wall. The second new checkpoint was bound to be swimming beneath a tide of titans.

“We’ll take two days at the first target,” he said aloud.

“Our water supplies—” Pehr began.

A whimper sounded from the corner of the room, and they fell silent.

Nanaba leaned against the wall, clutching her stomach.

“Everything okay, Nanaba?” Erwin asked.

“Sorry.” She wiped a damp strand of blond hair off her forehead, still hunched. “Monthly cramps. Bad timing.”

Erwin’s eyes shifted to Mike, whose nostrils were twitching. When his lips flattened, Erwin knew she was lying. “Nanaba, do you need medical attention?”

“No, I’m fine. Just caught me off guard.” She nodded at the map. “Please keep going, Pehr.”

By the end of the meeting, they had agreed on a timeline and the next day’s strategy. Erwin dismissed them and moved to talk to Nanaba, but she ducked out of the room before he could catch her attention.

“Mike,” he said instead.

The Squad Leader came over to him. “No idea.”

“Keep an eye on her. If she seems to get worse, she needs to see a—” Erwin trailed off, remembering their only medic was dead. “Ah.”

“Levi has some skill.”

“He’s good with first aid, but I’m not sure he can help with a diagnosis if there’s a serious problem.” In addition to a mastery of stitching wounds that had surely come from the independence one developed in the Underground, Levi had, on many occasions, displayed a surprising knowledge about administering morphine. Or perhaps not so surprising, given his history. Erwin did his best not to think about that—not because it bothered him, but because it bothered Levi.

“Should I isolate her?” Mike asked.

It seemed unlikely she would have developed a contagious stomach bug alone, given they had all been travelling together for more than a week. “Not unless you think it’s necessary.”

“Okay.” Mike nodded, then left the room. Erwin rolled up the map, setting it neatly back in its case, then followed.

Levi was waiting for him in the hallway, arms folded over his

chest.

“Captain,” Erwin said lightly as they fell into step together.

“Put me on path clearing tomorrow.”

“I’d rather have you taking out titans than bushes. We need our strongest soldiers protecting us until we’ve carved through the rough patch and we’re mobile again.”

“That bramble is thick as hell. The faster we get through, the less time we’re vulnerable. We need my speed to carve the path.” Levi led him around a corner. “I’ll be on alert for smoke flares if I’m needed to help the patrol teams.”

“Very well,” Erwin said, convinced. “Johanna’s been complaining that she misses being on the front lines, anyway. You can trade places with her.” He slowed to a halt. “How are you feeling?” he added, the words heavy with subtext.

Levi reached out to straighten the Commander’s pendant. “Tired. Sore. Think I’ll head to bed after I check on my horse.”

“Understandable. I’m tired, too.” Erwin’s fatigue hit him as he said the words, his eyelids heavy. The faces of the dead soldiers began to float through his mind, a constant nuisance during missions with heavy losses. Normally, he was able to shove them aside until an appropriate time to mourn, but he found himself too tired to keep them at bay. “What was the name of the boy who died today?”

“The kid with the freckles? Oswald.”

“Oswald.” Erwin leaned on one shoulder against the wall, losing focus. “He must have been, what, fifteen? Sixteen? I rode past him as he died.”

Levi’s fingers curled around the pendant. “Don’t do this right now.”

“He was bleeding out and terrified, but he still used the last of his strength to salute me.” A muscle in his jaw began to jump. “He gave his life for me, and died saluting me. I meant everything to him, and he meant nothing to me. I didn’t know his name. I don’t even recall seeing him before.”

“Erwin,” Levi growled. “Stop.”

The world shifted back into focus, and he saw Levi watching him with pinched brows.

“Look,” Levi said, “just because you can’t feel sadness right now doesn’t mean you should try to feel guilt.”

The problem was that he didn’t know what he was feeling—too

much and nothing, all at once. At least feeling guilt would give him focus.

He forced a smile. "My apologies, Levi. I should check in on Nanaba."

"You don't have to give me that fake smile."

"Goodnight, Levi." He bent forward to kiss his forehead, breathing in. He wished he could curl around him, envelope him, inhale his scent from every surface of his body. His throat tightened, and he finally realized what he was feeling: fragile. He quickly left the room, not making eye contact, because seeing pity or concern in Levi's eyes was certain to make him crumble.

He found Nanaba in the common sleeping area, curled into a ball on her bedroll. He knelt in front of her.

"Are you going to be okay to ride with us tomorrow?" he asked, his voice low.

She nodded. "Just a little sore."

"Please report to Mike immediately if your situation changes." When he stood, his knees creaked. "Get some sleep."

"Yes, Commander."

"That goes for all of you." He turned to the other soldiers, who were playing cards and taking drinks out of flasks he pretended not to see. "Lights out. Tomorrow morning, we will begin exploring new territory—territory humanity hasn't traversed in nearly five long years."

As the soldiers around him murmured and began to douse lamps, Erwin rolled out his bedroll against the far wall, ready to take his own advice. Every joint in his body was aching, and his eyelids were heavy. He tried not to see that soldier saluting, but it replayed over and over in his mind, a waking nightmare. *Oswald. I don't even know if he was on Mike or Levi's squad.*

He was just drifting to sleep when he heard boot steps. He rolled over, blinking. Levi was setting up a bedroll beside him with one hand, holding a small candle with the other. Their eyes held.

"Bit cold tonight," Levi murmured, smoothing out the bedroll. "You stink less than the rest of these brats."

"It is a bit chilly."

He snuffed the candle, then Erwin heard him stretching out along the bedroll. Reaching into the darkness, he found Levi's shoulder. He pulled him in tightly, hugging him against his body.

"Erwin," Levi breathed, too softly for anyone to hear.

“Please, just for a minute.” It was dark. No one would see them. He breathed in the scent at the top of his head, smoothing the slender back. He needed to hold someone living, feel his weight, his heft. “Just for a minute.”

Levi’s hands tightened into claws on his back.

B

Nanaba was so pale the next morning that Erwin ordered her to ride beside him. He was beginning to reconsider the possibility of a stomach flu—she kept disappearing from the group while they were preparing to ride out, then returning several minutes later smelling of alcohol. *She’s probably using it as mouthwash after she vomits.*

As they filtered through the gates, Levi rode up beside him. “We’ve got about two hours until we get to the bramble. Easy ride until that point.”

“Let’s hope the titans Mike encountered didn’t wander west.” Erwin carefully clipped his flare gun to his belt while the other soldiers assembled.

Luck was on their side. The ride was as easy as Levi had said, the road still clearly marked from when it had been a major trade route before the fall. The flat landscape and cloudy day gave them far better visibility than Erwin was accustomed to having, and while they spotted several groups of titans, they had enough advanced warning to easily avoid them.

Around two hours in, just as Levi had said, the greenery around them began to change. Blackberry bushes, unhindered by frequent horses and carts, had reclaimed the landscape in a thick carpet. While the rest of the formation split into groups, Erwin rode as far as the thorns would allow, then dismounted.

“Didn’t realize it was blackberry bushes,” he said. Most of them were taller than he was.

Levi dismounted beside him. “I’m not good with plants.”

“We used to have them in our yard when I was a kid.” Erwin felt that strange elastic snap in his mind that sometimes happened when he was remembering his childhood. He saw Helena plucking berries and dropping them into a pail, then saw Papa feeding Mama a blackberry, and he saw a pie, and a red checked tablecloth ... *Never forget ...*

He blinked and turned to the cart drivers and Nanaba. “Black-

berry bushes are quick to spread. We need to clear at least a metre on either side of the road if we want this path to last us until the reclamation effort."

The order was met with a few mutters and groans, but the soldiers dismounted and pulled their blades.

"We should just burn it," a young soldier said.

Levi smacked the back of his head. "You feel how dry it is, brat? Hear that grass crunch under your feet? You try to light this, you're going to set this whole field on fire and roast us alive."

Nanaba still looked so queasy that Erwin stationed her on her horse and gave her his signal flares. They needed at least one person up high enough to view the field around them. He fell in beside Levi, hacking at the thorns. True to his word, Levi was faster than any of them, spinning and cutting his way through the bramble. Erwin allowed himself a glance his way every few minutes, admiring Levi's skill.

Even with the morning chill and cloudy sky, the work was grueling. By the time they were fifteen minutes in, Erwin's shoulders and back ached. Sweat trailed down his temples and beaded on his upper lip.

"Commander," Nanaba said after approximately thirty minutes. He looked back, and she pointed east. "Red flares, closing in."

Erwin turned. "Levi."

"On it." Levi sheathed his blades and mounted his horse, riding east.

The other soldiers stared at Erwin, eyes round.

"Keep working," he said, doing the same. "The sooner we get through here, the less attention we'll attract."

Levi returned several minutes later, his cape and hair still steaming. "Four," he said as he dismounted. "Three-to-five metre. We got them all. No casualties. No others approaching."

Erwin nodded, grateful.

It took nearly an hour, but finally, the path was clear. They cautiously moved the carts through, pausing to carve through any lingering branches. Once they had cleared the other side, Erwin nodded at Nanaba.

"Fire a green flare south."

Green smoke shot into the air, and around them, its echoes.



They pulled up to the checkpoint mid-afternoon. The fence was badly damaged, so much so that Erwin recruited a group of soldiers to help him with repairs while Mike and Levi did their preliminary scouting.

Levi's eyes were unusually bright when they returned from their afternoon scouting, even though the news was bad: the path to the next checkpoint was crawling with titans. The officers spent several hours discussing plans for the next day's scouting and checkpoint repairs, then Erwin dismissed the officers for their evening downtime.

Levi waited until the others had left, then moved in close. "We're so close to Shiganshina."

Erwin was hunched over a map on the table; he traced the route over and over with his fingertip, trying to commit the features of the landscape to memory. "We are indeed. I suppose that's why you spotted so many titans on your scouting mission."

"You led us here."

Erwin looked up, brows rising. Levi's eyes were still alight, and this time, Erwin realized they were alight for him.

"I didn't get here alone."

"I was right to follow you." Levi stepped closer. "I knew you'd be the one to lead us to freedom."

"Levi?"

He stood on his toes and looped a hand around Erwin's neck, tugging him down for a kiss. Erwin closed his eyes and relaxed into it, marvelling for the thousandth time that a man so brutal on the field could kiss so gently.

Their lips broke apart, but Levi didn't pull away.

"I love you." His whisper was breezy against Erwin's damp lips.

The door slammed open.

They jumped apart, but it was only Mike in the doorway. "Erwin."

Erwin stood tall. "Everything okay?"

Mike shook his head and stepped into the room. Nanaba leaned heavily against his side, clutching her abdomen. Her face was red and streaked with tears.

Shit. "Bring her here." Erwin rolled up the map and set it aside. "Levi, you're the closest thing we have to a medic."

"Fuck." Levi dug through the cart of supplies in the corner and pulled out a medical kit.

Mike lifted Nanaba and set her on the table, wincing as she cried out.

“Take off her shirt,” Levi said, digging through the kit. “We need to see what’s going on.”

Mike’s face turned crimson.

“I’ll do it,” Erwin said as he gently tugged the woman’s arms away from her body. He pulled off her jacket, trying not to jar her too much. “Lay back.”

She tried, then yelped, curling forward again.

“Mike,” Erwin said quietly.

The Squad Leader’s jaw clenched. He held out a massive hand. “Squeeze it. Hard as you need to.”

Nanaba looked up at him, sniffling, then wrapped her hand around his, her knuckles white.

“Now lay back,” Erwin said, and she grunted through clenched teeth, forcing herself back to the table. She was squeezing Mike’s hand so tightly that his fingertips were turning purple, but he didn’t make a sound.

Erwin lifted her shirt, pulling it up to the bottom of her breasts. A gash split her abdomen, marked by black thread and fringed by red skin so inflamed that it was shiny.

“Shit,” Levi said. “What the hell happened?”

“We—” Nanaba began, but a hiccupping sob cut her off.

“Gelgar accidentally caught her with his blade on the second day, during a coordinated takedown,” Mike said, barely audible. “She didn’t want him to get in trouble, so she stitched it herself. She was using liquor to try to keep it clean.”

Levi leaned closer, grimacing. “Not a bad stitch job. But it’s infected. Look at those red streaks.”

Now Erwin saw them, crawling a few millimetres across her skin, toward her heart. Treating a spreading infection was difficult enough in a hospital, let alone on the field without a proper medic. His heart sank.

“This is why it’s imperative to report every injury—even if it seems like it’s under control, and even if another soldier might get disciplined for it.” His eyes lifted to Mike. “I assume you smelled the infection?”

Mike nodded. “It’s faint.”

“It’s barely spread,” Levi said. “Can’t tell how deep it goes, but

you caught it early. Probably hurts like hell, though." He pulled out a syringe and a vial. "How much do you weigh, blondie?"

"Sixty," Nanaba gasped.

"Start low," Erwin said as Levi began to fill the syringe. "You can always increase later."

"Yeah." Levi injected the medicine into her shoulder. Nanaba's hand began to relax, slowly slipping out of Mike's grasp. He gently lowered her hand to the table, but didn't let go.

"Still with us?" Levi asked.

"Yeah," Nanaba said, lips barely moving.

Levi looked up at Erwin and Mike. "I say we give her a bit more sedative, then rip out the stitches and see what's going on in there. We'll have to cut out the infected parts and cauterize them."

Mike's eyes snapped open. "What?"

"We don't need to cauterize," Erwin said. "A burn wound has a good chance of getting infected, too. We need to clean the wound and get her to a hospital when we return." *If she hangs on that long.* It would be at least a week until they were back in Trost, likely longer.

"The infection's barely started spreading," Levi said. "We go aggressive, while we have the chance to get it all, or we lose her."

"What's going on?" Nanaba mumbled, eyelids drooping.

Mike's hand tightened around hers.

Erwin closed his eyes, considering. Nanaba had been with the Survey Corps even longer than Levi; she had excellent precision and adaptability. They couldn't afford to lose her. He set his jaw and nodded. "I trust your assessment, Levi. Mike?"

The Squad Leader cursed softly under his breath, but nodded as well. He pulled a chair over and sat, still holding Nanaba's hand. "We're going to cut out the infection," he said softly.

Her head rolled toward him, her eyes ticking oddly, as if she were fighting to focus. "Cut?"

"It's going to hurt. But it might save your life."

She closed her eyes. "More drugs."

"Already working on it," Levi said, carefully filling a syringe.

"I'll start heating a blade," Erwin said quietly. "Levi, are you comfortable handling the incisions?"

"No, but I'll do it."

They began their preparations, their faces grim.

8

Twenty minutes later, Nanaba was unconscious and cloaked in sweat; a mishmash of burn scars and stitches formed a thick band down the front of her stomach. Levi carefully dressed the wound—there was no one else Erwin trusted more than him to keep a wound clean. Mike stood by the bed, arms folded tightly over his chest.

“She’s going to be in a fuck load of pain when she wakes up,” Levi said. “We should keep her on heavy sedatives for a few days, for her own good. Maybe if we’re lucky she won’t remember any of this.”

Mike’s face twisted, and then he turned and strode from the room. Erwin watched him leave, uncertain if he should follow.

Levi finished covering the wound, then pulled away, his lips pressed in a straight line. “I hope we got all the infection out.”

“So do I. Are you okay?”

Levi shrugged. “You should ask Mike.” He pulled Nanaba’s shirt back down over her abdomen. “He was crying when she screamed.”

“He was?” Erwin had been too distracted by the scream, and then by explaining the situation to a worried Pehr, who had poked his head into the room.

“He’s really fucked up about this.” Levi looked up at him. “You think they’re screwing?”

“Mike and Nanaba?”

“Yeah. They’re always together.”

“It could be a close platonic friendship. I suppose it’s none of our business.” Erwin looked at the door.

“Go ahead,” Levi said. “I’ll keep an eye on her.”

Erwin kissed the top of Levi’s head. “You did a good job tonight.”

“A medic would have done better. I make up shit as I go along.”

And that’s exactly why you’re such a successful second in command. With one last shoulder squeeze, Erwin turned away.

He found Mike leaning against the wooden fence outside, staring up at the sky. Mike’s shaggy head half-turned to acknowledge his approach. Erwin leaned against the fence beside him. Without the lights of the city, there were thousands upon thousands of stars visible in the night sky. Their weight, as always, compressed him into a cold, tiny entity. *We are so small ...*

“All those times we smelled our comrades’ flesh burning on the pyre,” Mike said. “Wasn’t pleasant to smell her flesh burning tonight. I’m

not ready to smell that.”

Henrik’s corpse flashed through Erwin’s memory, but it was more distant than it used to be, as if he were staring at a picture in a book instead of his own memory. He had seen so many corpses since then, lost so many good soldiers. *And I lit the fires that burned them.*

“I’m staying with her,” Mike said. “Until you guys come back through. She’s too weak to bring with us to the next checkpoint.”

“We need you on the field. You’re the best warning system we have for approaching titans.” Erwin shifted his stance. “Assign someone to stay here with her if you must, but you’re coming with us.”

“Fine,” Mike said, not looking at him. “Rhee twisted an ankle, so it’s best to keep her off her feet, anyway. I’ll ask her to stay.”

“That sounds wise. I’ll have Levi show her how to care for the wound.”

A long silence followed.

“Most of us won’t live through the reclamation, will we?” Mike said quietly. “You, Nanaba, Levi. Hange and Moblit. Lynne, Gelgar, and Dita. How many of you am I going to smell on the funeral pyre before this is over?”

Erwin thought about giving a comforting answer, but Mike had a good nose for bullshit. “As many of us as it takes. This will be the defining battle of our generation—of all humanity.”

Mike aimed a puff of air at his bangs, blowing them out of his eyes. “All this stuff I’ve been putting off until after the reclamation ... Starting to realize it’s not a milestone; it’s a hard stop. After surviving all these years, I can’t wrap my head around the idea we might not.”

“You and Nanaba ... ” Erwin said.

Mike shrugged. “She can drop a titan unassisted, and she smells like fruit even when her stomach’s full of pus. But if most of us are going to die in six months, what’s the point?”

Erwin’s stomach dropped out beneath him at the unexpected words. *What’s the point?* He saw a wedding ring on a blue, slender finger. *Am I fooling myself by dreaming of a future?* “Maybe the point is clinging to any bit of happiness you can seize for yourself,” he said, trying to talk through it.

“Yeah, easy for you to say. You’re different. You stay focused no matter how much strain you’re under. There’s too much stuff I’m not feeling, and if I let myself feel anything at all, I’ll start feeling it all at once and break down.” Mike shook his head. “No point seizing anything

for myself if it's going to make me useless."

"Then I suppose I'm lucky I'm so cold and unfeeling," Erwin said to himself, and there was that fragility again. He stood tall. "I'm going back inside. You?"

"I need a few minutes."

"Sure." Erwin squeezed his arm. Mike gripped his hand in gratitude.

As Erwin walked back to the building, he tried not to focus on Mike's words, but they were still rolling in his stomach like a ball of ice. *You stay focused no matter how much strain you're under ...*

Levi was still sitting next to Nanaba, his face sunken. He looked up as Erwin entered. "You look like shit."

"You're looking a bit rough yourself." Erwin stepped closer. "Doing okay?"

Levi shrugged. "How's Mike?"

"Needs some space."

"I think ..." Levi's jaw set as he stared at the unconscious woman. "I think I do, too."

"Of course." Erwin nodded at him. "I'll watch over her."

"Thanks." Levi strode over to him and stood on his toes, kissing the underside of Erwin's jaw. "What about you?"

"Me?"

"Are you okay?"

He forced a smile, but couldn't bring himself to speak.

Levi lowered himself to flat feet again. "I'll come find you when I've had a minute. I'm thinking ..." His throat bobbed. "I'm thinking it might be a bit cold again tonight."

"I'll do my best to keep you warm. But before you leave ..." Erwin bent down and straightened Levi's cravat; it had shifted off-centre during the medical procedure. Once it was tidy, he pulled away.

Levi reached for the cravat, stroking it gently with his fingertips, as if appreciating Erwin's handiwork. "I'll come find you," he said, voice cracking, and then he stepped out of the room.

Erwin sat in a chair beside Nanaba, checking her pulse. Her eyelids fluttered.

"Mike?" she breathed.

"He'll be back soon," Erwin said gently.

"Commander." A tear trailed down her cheek. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. Are you in pain? Do you need more morphine?"

“No. I’m just tired.”

“Then go back to sleep. Your body needs to heal.” A sound at the door surprised him. He looked up and saw Mike in the door frame. Mike shifted his weight to his other foot, brow furrowed.

“Someone’s here to see you,” Erwin said.

Nanaba’s head rolled to the side, and a corner of her lips lifted. “Squad Leader.”

Erwin stepped out, gripping Mike’s shoulder as he passed.

⁂

In spite of Levi’s promise to find him, an hour passed with no word. Erwin occupied himself with one last set of rounds, checking on the soldiers on watch. Levi was nowhere to be seen, but he did chance upon Gelgar sitting in a corner of the hallway, tightly hugging his upper body.

Erwin strode over and knelt in front of him.

“Sir,” Gelgar said.

Erwin kept his tone firm. “If you ever accidentally injure a fellow soldier, it is your duty to report it to your Squad Leader. Any disciplinary consequences are minor compared to the consequences of an infected wound. A clean cut could have been easily treated by a medic on the day it happened, and this situation could have been prevented—it was foolish of you two to try to hide it.”

Gelgar’s face paled. “Is she okay?”

“We’re doing everything we can. We’ll speak more about this when we return to Trost. For now, focus on your mission. Stay aware of your surroundings at all times. Understood?”

Gelgar nodded.

“Good.” Erwin gripped his shoulder, then stood. “Have you seen Captain Levi?”

“He was in the stables earlier, Commander.”

That’s odd. He would have expected Levi to head to high ground.

But Levi wasn’t in the stables when he arrived, and more worrying, his horse was gone.

“Said he needed a moment,” said the stable guard.

“He left the checkpoint?”

“Said he wasn’t going far.”

Erwin’s jaw clenched. He strode to the fence.

A lantern was bobbing toward him from the road. He squinted, barely making out a horse and rider.

“Levi?”

“Yeah?” Levi dismounted, approaching the gate on foot.

“You left the base without permission?”

“I didn’t go far. Besides, it’s night time. The titans are all sleeping, or whatever the fuck they do.” Levi stopped on the other side of the gate. “Came back to find you. There’s something I want to show you.”

“There might be nocturnal abnormals.”

“There weren’t.” Levi cocked his head. “Come on. This is strategically significant.”

Erwin held his gaze.

“Trust me,” Levi said, turning back toward his horse. “I wouldn’t put both of us at risk if I didn’t think it was worth it.”

After a moment to weigh the options, Erwin decided to trust him. “We’ll be back shortly,” he said to the guard at the stable. “Mike is in charge until we’re back.”

Levi mounted, and Erwin climbed into the saddle behind him. The horse began to trot toward a grove of giant trees.

“You realize if we both die, the Survey Corps will be left leaderless,” Erwin said.

“We’re almost there.”

“Already?”

“I told you, it wasn’t far.” Levi paused, then added, “I needed to get away from there. Cutting into human flesh doesn’t sit well with me.”

“I know,” Erwin said quietly.

The horse halted at the base of a tree, and Levi extinguished the lantern. The moon was almost full, and Erwin’s eyes quickly adjusted. The moonlight lit the tree branches in flat greys.

“Take it slowly. Not much depth perception when it’s this dark.” Levi shot his grapple into the air, latching onto a branch, and began to ascend.

Erwin followed. “Tell me what this is about.”

“A clear view of our goals.” Levi stopped on a thick branch near the top of the tree.

Erwin landed beside him and lifted his head.

“Holy Sina,” he whispered.

From this height, lit by the moon, he could see Wall Maria stretching across the horizon. He wanted to speak; his throat was too tight.

His knees were weak. He sank his grapples into the branch above them to steady himself.

“Wall fucking Maria.” Levi glanced over at him. “It’s something, huh?”

“Yeah,” Erwin said, still breathless. “It’s something.” He had taken this wall for granted for so many years; now, it was stunning. They had come so far since it fell, and here it was, at long last, within riding distance. “Levi, we’re so close.”

“Thought the view might give you some insight when we’re route planning.” Levi sat on the branch. “And some hope. It’s been a hell of a fight to get this far, and you’ve been down lately.”

Erwin sat down next to him, still struggling for words. “The last time we saw this, we were fleeing. The world was falling apart.”

Levi was very quiet.

“You probably don’t remember.” Erwin leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “You were delirious with fever.”

“I remember.” Levi’s voice was small, almost timid. “I remember everything. Haven’t thought about it in a long time.”

“Neither have I.” Erwin’s eyes traced the wall as the screams of the dying, muted and dim for so many years, rose clearly in his mind.

CB

March 845
Shiganshina

Erwin landed on the roof of the Survey Corps base, breathing hard. Steam and sweat rolled down his face. His squad members spun and ricocheted between the approaching titans, defending the wall around the base, but they were badly outnumbered.

“Erwin.”

He turned to see Mike standing on the next rooftop over, holding open a hatch. With a nod, Erwin blasted to the hatch and dropped down. He landed on his feet and broke into a full stride down the hallway. Mike fell into step beside him.

“I’ll grab the files,” Erwin said. “Go to the infirmary. Gather the medical staff and the ill. Escort them to a passenger ship.” He gave Mike a sharp gaze. “If it comes down to it, Levi is your top priority.” Levi was more important to their cause than any single soldier, even Mike—he

was as strong as an entire squad.

Mike nodded. He fell back, taking a corner toward the infirmary.

Erwin set his jaw as he marched into Shadis' office. He yanked open drawers. Sharp focus during catastrophe was usually his strength, but his mind wasn't accustomed to a catastrophe this extreme. He was shaky, too shaky to remember Shadis' instructions, and his vision was too blurred to read the files properly. He began to throw every file he could find into a box.

Olga burst into the room. "Sir, we can't hold them off much longer."

He tossed a box at her. "Empty Anke's files."

"Sir."

The top left drawer of Shadis' desk was locked. Erwin braced his foot against the desk top and drove a blade into the crack above the drawer, twisting and yanking hard until it opened. A single folder lay inside; he set it atop the others, lifted the box and hurried into his office. Henrik's framed drawings—and a couple of his own—lined a shelf, but the box was nearly full. He grabbed his favourite, tucking it into the inner pocket of his jacket. He tucked a book from his father in the other side, then stashed a few handfuls of mementos into his pockets.

"Erwin."

He looked up to see Mike in the doorway. "Do you have a status report?"

"Garrison must have evacuated the infirmary already. All except one." Mike cocked his head for him to follow.

Erwin lifted the box, an involuntary grunt escaping against its weight, then strode after him.

He found Levi in his assigned bunk, dressed in a plain white shirt and his pants, shakily fastening the buckles of his 3DMG.

"Levi," he said.

Levi looked up. His eyes were sunken and fogged with the same fever that had gripped him all week, the one that had prevented him—and a handful of other soldiers—from coming on the expedition. His skin was waxy with sweat, his cheeks as red as if they had been slapped.

"Remove your gear. You're in no condition to fight," Erwin said, even though, deep down, he was impressed by his resolve. "Mike will carry you to safety."

"Like hell he will," Levi growled, squinting at the buckles as he continued his work. "People are dying out there."

“We’d prefer to keep you off the casualty list.”

“I’d rather die than hide away.” Levi looked up at him. “Let me help.”

Their gaze held. On the other side of the window, Erwin heard the rumble of collapsing buildings, and above that, screams. *This may be our last stand, anyway.*

“Report to Captain Anke in the south-western quadrant,” he said. “Mike, go with him. I’ll join you as soon as I deliver the Commander’s files to the docks.”

“Wait,” Levi said, opening a drawer. He pulled out a small bundle, wrapped it into his cravat and shoved it into the box.

Erwin was going to say there was no room for personal possessions, but then he remembered the trinkets stuffed in his pockets. He nodded. “Good luck, soldiers.”

The town was in chaos below him as he leapt from building to building. Civilians screamed at him, begging for help as he flew overhead, swarms of titans closing in on them. He set his jaw and kept moving. He had his mission, and the box was too cumbersome to fight with. There were too many titans for him to handle alone, anyway.

By the time he made it to the docks, he was hollow, the screams of the dying echoing between his ears. Civilians flooded the docks, desperate to get on board, but the boat was already full. As it began to set sail, people screamed and launched themselves at it, trying to grab onto the hull. The Garrison forces struggled to hold them back.

Erwin passed the box to a senior-looking Garrison soldier, giving her strict orders to make sure it found its way to Shadis.

“Do you need help here?” he asked.

The soldier shook her head. “We’re not doing much good here, anyway. You’re better off clearing civilians from the city.”

“We’ll take down as many titans as we can and buy your troops time to finish the evacuation.” Erwin gave her a stiff salute, and she echoed it.

This time, without the box in his arms, he was free to help the civilians he had passed over before, but now they were only blood splatters on cobblestone. Their screams still rang in his ears.

He found a smattering of Survey Corps soldiers in the south-western quadrant of the city, attempting to form a defensive blockade against the onslaught of titans pouring through the hole in the wall. Levi and Mike were on the front lines, zigzagging between titans, working in

tandem without sharing a word. In spite of the chaos, Erwin felt a wave of hope. *The titans are strong, but we're coordinated.*

We have Levi.

The thought came out of nowhere, and struck him as unusual, but there was no time to examine it. Anke and Berit stood on the apex of a building, hunched back-to-back, surveying the city. He propelled himself toward them.

“Erwin. How’s the rest of the city looking?” Anke wheezed, out of breath.

“A bloodbath. The Garrison is coordinating the escape effort the best they can. We’re doing the right thing by trying to stem the flow of titans into the city.” He strode closer, giving Berit a nod. “How’s the knee holding out?”

“Not great,” Berit said, flexing her leg a few times. “But I’ll live.”

“Where’s Keith?” Anke asked.

Erwin hesitated. “He gave me orders to retrieve files, then disappeared. I assumed he told you where he was going.”

“Huh. I thought he told you. Probably some top-secret Commander protocol?”

“Most likely.”

She stood tall, still breathing hard. “Okay, I think I’m ready to get back out there. Ber?”

Berit nodded. “I’ve got your back, Captain.”

“Erwin, stick with your squad. They’re bound to get tired soon. Pull back to the boat if it gets too messy. We need you to come out of this alive.”

He nodded and leapt toward his squad members.

Below him, Levi spun, taking out a titan’s nape with startling speed. For a moment post-kill, he hovered, his eyes locking with Erwin’s. His gaze was lucid now, more lucid than it had been in days, even though his skin was still waxy. Steam billowed behind him, ruffling his cloak and hair.

He’s a weapon, Erwin thought, awe flooding his body. Even violently ill, he has perfect control in battle.

Levi’s eyes twitched to the gate, and Erwin saw four three-metre titans push through the hole, one after the other. In his periphery, Mike began to move.

The three of them dove in unison. Mike took the titan on the right, Erwin the one next to it, and Levi the two to the left. The titans fell

into a steaming pile of remains, and two 5-metres entered behind them. They were lined up so perfectly side-by-side that Erwin swooped down low behind them, taking out all four Achilles tendons in one pass. As they fell, Levi and Mike descended on the napes.

As the battle continued, Mike pulled away to rest on a rooftop, and then it was just Erwin and Levi. Even Levi was flagging, breathing in loud, harsh gasps that Erwin heard whenever they passed near each other. As if by silent agreement, they began to work together on titans instead of taking them on solo.

One particularly troublesome six-metre broke free from the pack and began to charge toward the city.

An abnormal, Erwin thought, but by the time he had registered it, Levi was already barreling after it. He was about to land on its nape, when the titan spun. It swung at Levi; the palm connected. Levi fell to the ground and rolled.

Levi! Erwin plummeted toward him, grabbing the back of his harness. He propelled upwards, just in time; the titan's hand slammed the ground where Levi had been moments earlier.

They landed on the rooftop next to Mike. Erwin set Levi down and knelt beside him, struggling to catch his breath.

“Shit,” Levi said, rolling face-down. His body was shaking. “Shit!”

“Are you hurt?”

“Nothing broken, but I’m going to— Oh, fuck.” He wretched.

Mike dropped to a knee beside him, placing a hand on the back of the slender neck. He looked up at Erwin. “His fever’s rising again.”

“I don’t care.” Levi wiped his mouth and rolled onto his back. “I’ll get back out there. Just give me a sec.”

Erwin studied him for a moment, then turned to stare at the steady stream of titans pouring through the gates. The other Survey Corps members had already pulled back—the ones who had survived, at least. Half-eaten corpses littered the ground.

“The city is lost,” he said solemnly. “Pull back to the—”

A crack of thunder interrupted him, so deafening that it rumbled through his chest. His head snapped in the direction of the noise: the docks. An unnatural yellow column of lightning crackled in the air, then dissipated. The rumble ended a moment later.

The three of them stared silently at the empty space where the lightning had been. Erwin would have thought he had imagined it, if not for the glowing blue afterimage in his vision.

“What the hell was that?” Levi muttered.

“Can you move?” Erwin asked.

Levi struggled to sit upright. “Yeah.”

“Mike, follow Levi and make sure he’s okay. Levi, follow me.”

Erwin took a running leap off the end of the roof, slammed his anchors into the next building, and then slingshotted down the alley.

He already knew what they’d find. When the gate to Shiganshina had been breached, he had heard two deafening cracks; one was the gate blowing apart, but the other was unknown. This mysterious lightning bolt would explain the other sound.

The enormous titan must have appeared at the entrance to Wall Maria.

If Wall Maria has been breached, humanity will starve.

He opened up the gas, jetting ahead at full speed. Below them, half-eaten victims screamed for help.

“Keep moving,” he called to the others, even though he knew these screams would join the chorus that still echoed through his mind.

“We have to help them,” Levi yelled, voice cracking.

“They’re bleeding out. We can’t do anything for them.” If his guess was correct, they’d have far more victims waiting for them at the docks, ones they could actually defend.

His worst fears were confirmed when they reached the wall. Dust billowed from the gaping hole that had once been a gate. On the other side, amid the crowd still trying to board the boat, stood a titan unlike any Erwin had ever seen. It was at least fifteen metres tall, and covered with a hard, rock-like substance.

Armour, he thought. *It has a suit of armour.* This was beyond his worst nightmares, beyond anything he could have possibly conceived.

The boat pulled away from the shore. Titans streamed through the hole in the gate, stampeding into the panicking crowds. Anke, Berit and the others frantically fought to hold the titans back from the crowd.

“Protect the civilians!” Erwin roared as he, Mike and Levi dove in to join the battle.

We just have to hold out until the next boat arrives, he thought as he racked up kill after kill alongside his fellow soldiers. *Just one more boat. The next boat can hold the majority of the crowd.*

But by the time the next boat appeared on the horizon, most of the crowd was already dead.

The volunteers from the Garrison and the Survey Corps were self-selected. No one ordered them to stay behind, but no one ordered them not to, either. It was an unconscious agreement, a handful of sacrifices so the remaining civilians and soldiers could get away on the final boat. They had all dedicated their hearts to humanity above their own needs. They all knew who among them must live, and who among them could be spared.

There was one exception: Levi. As Anke, Berit and Mike began to fall back to the boat, Levi glared and dove deeper into the fray. Erwin hesitated, watching him.

“Erwin,” Anke yelled. “Fall back!”

He knew he was needed, but so was Levi.

“Levi,” he called, chasing after him. “Retreat.”

But Levi ignored him, giving a roar as he delivered a ragged cut to a titan’s weak spot.

“Levi.” Erwin perched on a stone lip above the destroyed gate. “That was an order.”

“The lives of my comrades are worth more than your orders.” Levi settled on the lip beside him, eyes fiery with anger and fever. “Go save yourself. I’m not a coward. I’m not going to run away while others die for me.”

“Do you think these people are dying so our strongest soldier can feed himself to the titans? You have so much more to do. I promise you, you will save far more lives in the future by staying alive than you would have by offering yourself in a sacrifice today.”

“So many have died,” Levi growled.

The boat’s whistle sounded; it was about to depart.

“You can’t undo their deaths, but you can stay alive to give them meaning. Every soldier who died for us to reach this point has given you a gift. Do not throw it away.” Erwin leapt off the lip and began to move toward the boat.

He glanced back a moment later and was relieved to see Levi following him.

Moments after they landed, the boat began to travel down its track. Erwin strode to the stern and leaned against the railing, watching. The brave volunteers deserved to be remembered. He studied their faces, trying to commit them to memory. *I bet Henrik would have stayed*

behind, if he were still alive. Would I have let him?

The image that rose in his mind wasn't Henrik, but Levi. How would he feel, standing here, watching Levi's feverish form tire as he fought? How would he feel seeing the last, failed cut that meant his energy had given out, the titans closing in around him? His heart ached: it would be such a waste for the Survey Corps, for humanity. That man, that one single man, had so much left to do. This wasn't yet his time.

Anke leaned against the railing beside him. "This is it, isn't it?"

He glanced at her, not sure how to respond.

"They coordinated an attack," she said. "They're intelligent. We're screwed. The only reason we've held out so long is they were stupid. What's to stop them from doing the same to Rose and Sina? And how are we going to feed everyone without all Wall Maria's agriculture?"

"Maybe we lost enough people today that food won't be an issue."

She grimaced. "That's fucked up, Erwin."

"It's our best-case scenario. If there's not enough food to go around, we're either going to see riots and civil war, or a massive sacrifice of the population. I hope that our population shrank enough that we won't see either of those come to pass."

"Fuck," Anke breathed, shaking her head. "This is so fucked up. How do we play this? We have to keep morale up."

"No sign of Keith?"

"No, found out he was sent ahead on an earlier boat, probably headed for Mitras. We should expect it will just be us for a few days."

Erwin's jaw clenched. "I think perhaps the best thing, for now, is to let everyone mourn the way they need to. Once we reach Trost, there won't be time to grieve." All the fleeing citizens would need food, shelter, and medical attention; the Survey Corps would be needed to help with that. He dropped a hand onto her shoulder, squeezing hard. "We will keep fighting, Anke. This isn't the end. Just a setback."

She nodded, looking unconvinced, but her tone was genuine: "Thanks."

The sight of their comrades meeting their heroic end was becoming too much to bear. He saluted them, then saluted Captain Anke, then walked away.

He found Levi and Mike huddled near the prow, a blanket around Levi's shoulders. Mike was saying something to him, speaking close and low. At least the two of them seemed to have formed a bond

during this ordeal. Levi had been something of a loner since his friends had died, eating alone, barely speaking to anyone. It was important that he start making connections.

Erwin waited for what appeared to be a break in the conversation, then sat down on Levi's other side. Heat radiated unnaturally off his small body.

"I'm sorry I couldn't let you stay, Levi." He leaned his head back against the metal wall.

"They're all dying." Levi's Underground accent was heavier than usual.

"We wouldn't have saved this many lives without your help. For what it's worth, I have a great deal of respect for the strength and courage you showed today."

Levi side-eyed him for a moment, then shrugged. "Well, you were pretty fucking strong. I didn't know you could fight like that—" An unpleasant expression crossed his face, as if he were swallowing something bitter, before he finished the sentence: "Squad Leader."

The unexpected show of respect felt like a verbal salute, and Erwin's chest swelled, but he only said, "Erwin' is fine."

Levi shrugged again. "You saved my life. When the titan hit me. I guess I should thank you."

"You would have done the same for me." He phrased it dismissively, but his stomach knotted as he waited for the response.

Levi hesitated for a long while, as if considering, then said quietly, "Yeah, I would have." He seemed surprised by the words.

Erwin smiled. "I'm glad you're coming to trust your fellow soldiers."

"Well, you seem to know what you're doing. Zacharius isn't bad, either." Levi glanced over at the other man, who appeared to have fallen asleep.

"You showed great initiative and teamwork today, Levi. I know you've only worked one expedition and a few scouting missions so far, but I want you to be a Team Leader during our next mission."

Levi looked surprised for a moment, but only said, "Are there even gonna be more missions now, after all the shit that happened today?"

"There will always be more missions." Erwin's hands tightened into fists. "As long as we have survivors, the Survey Corps will never stop fighting, down to the last soldier."

“Huh.” Judging by the light in Levi’s eyes, he was impressed. Or maybe that was just the fever.

They sat quietly as the boat continued down the track, the sounds of chaos disappearing behind them. Now Erwin could only hear the lingering memories of screams; they were so loud that he almost wished for the real noise to block them out.

He pulled his knees to his chest and subtly placed a hand on his breast pocket, feeling the one drawing of Henrik’s he had managed to save. He thought of lazy days between expeditions and training, lounging on the back lawn in the sunshine, drawing together. Henrik’s beautiful drawings had always put him to shame, but Henrik had always found something to praise about Erwin’s artwork. That had been Henrik, through and through: finding the best in every situation. *I wonder what he’d find in this one?*

“Hey,” Levi said, annoyed.

Erwin opened his eyes and saw that Mike had passed out on Levi’s shoulder.

“Just give him a hard shove,” Erwin said. “He’s a heavy sleeper.”

Levi shoved, and Mike slumped against the wall outcropping on his other side. “How the hell can he sleep right now?”

“Soldiers find sleep whenever we can. There will be much to do when we reach Wall Rose. You should get some sleep, too. Especially because you’re ill.”

“I’m fine.” The haze had taken over his eyes again.

“You look like you’re getting worse.”

“Maybe. I think I’m going to puke and shit myself at the same time, and the whole boat is spinning. But there are bigger problems.” Levi was quiet for a moment. He inhaled as if to speak, then closed his mouth again.

“Something on your mind?” Erwin asked.

“It’s just …” Levi shifted to sit cross-legged, leaning forward on his knees. “How the hell do you stay so calm? How do you stop caring about all those people who died back there?”

“You mean in general, or me, personally?”

“You, Erwin Smith. You didn’t care when Isabel and Farlan and Flagon died. You didn’t give a shit about all those civilians dying around us back there. I don’t …” His head bowed. “I don’t want to care anymore. Tell me how you stop feeling. Is it something I can learn?”

The screams of the dying grew louder in Erwin’s mind. He

thought of Levi's tears when his friends had fallen. He thought of Henrik, the terror on his face as giant teeth closed around him, the clawed hand reaching out of the funeral pyre: *Erwin!* He gripped the frame through his jacket, his knuckles white.

"Over time, you learn to build walls around your emotions, walls with a door you only unlock when it's safe to do so. Some days the walls are thicker than others. Some days you accidentally pack them too full, and they burst. It's a difficult balance to learn, when to feel and vent, when to stash feelings away for later."

The frame was hard in his hand, even through the fabric of his jacket. Unbending. Unyielding. He envied it, envied Henrik for finding rest before this tragedy. Henrik never had to feel these strained walls, worn thin, ready to burst.

"I feel everything, Levi," he said, no longer in control of what he was saying. "At night, when I'm drifting to sleep, I see the staring, dead eyes of every soldier we've ever lost, your friends among them."

Levi turned to him, eyes narrow. "You didn't give a shit when they died."

"I needed you to see me as unyielding while you were completely vulnerable. I needed to make sure you attacked me then, so you wouldn't attack me later. It was a power play, Levi." He held that gaze, noticing, for the first time, the cold, silver-blue sheen in his irises, like moonlight and shadow. "Duty must come before emotion if we are to defeat the titans, always. I live my life by that code. But I feel everything, no matter how well I pretend I don't."

Levi was still staring, and now Erwin was imagining milk clouding those moonlit eyes, the skin turning grey, the lips dried and shrivelling. The thought closed around his heart with so much pressure that he thought it would buckle. *Humanity needs him*, he thought, but beneath that was a voice that would not be drowned out, one he wasn't ready to acknowledge: *and so do—*

He stood, eager to get away from the intrusive thought. "Get some sleep, Levi. There will be a lot of work to do, and we need you to be healthy."

"Yeah, I'll try," Levi said, and there was softness to his voice that hadn't been there before.

Their eyes locked, holding several moments too long, and then Erwin turned away.

September 849 (present day)

“Everything changed,” Levi said softly.

Erwin blinked at the words, looking sideways. Levi slid closer, reaching for his hand.

“We’re going to get it back.” Erwin’s eyes narrowed at that glowing goal in the distance. “We’re so close.”

“The base is going to need a lot of cleaning and repairs, after all those years. Wonder if the rest of my stuff’s still there?”

“It may be several more years before we attempt to take back Shiganshina and the other outcrop districts, if we ever do. Our main goal, for now, is to reclaim the main body of Wall Maria.” He hadn’t considered reclaiming the old base. Most of the soldiers who had shared the space with them were dead now ...

“You brought something with you when we left that day,” he said, trying to keep the conversation light. “Something wrapped in your cravat.”

“That wooden dog carving my friend gave me a long time ago.” Levi shrugged. “Didn’t have much else to my name, anyway.”

“I see.” The phantom screams were getting louder, and his walls were thin and so close to bursting that they were throbbing. Here was the goal, right in front of them, and the only thing between it and them was his reclamation plan.

Levi frowned at him. “What is it? You look like you have to take a shit.”

The walls burst. “Sahlo’s right.”

“What?”

“About me. When he told you I don’t have a plan for Wall Maria, but I want to be the one to think of it.”

Levi’s eyes and mouth were round. “But you have a plan.” There was an implied, *don’t you?* at the end.

Erwin’s throat was so tight that his voice was hoarse. “I do, but it’s horrifying. It sacrifices far too many lives. I’ve tried for months—years—to think of a better plan, and I hoped by the time we reached the Wall, everything would fall into place, but it hasn’t. And no one’s questioning me except Sahlo; they all assume I’ve got a meaningful strategy ready. They all trust me. We have one shot at this before all our

efforts are wasted, and the closer we get to the deadline, the more I realize we aren't ready. And yet, if we don't push forward, thousands will starve." He had hoped venting this would make him feel better, but he felt even worse.

Levi was quiet.

Erwin pulled his hand away and sat on the branch, staring at the Wall, grey in the moonlight, the colour of the dead. "Imagine it, Levi: all three regiments hurtling forward on a plan I don't believe in myself. Imagine them failing, our one shot slipping through our fingers. All those soldiers I've fed to the titans, sacrificed for nothing. And yet I'm too cowardly to ask the other Commanders for their feedback, not just yet. It isn't hubris, like Sahlo thinks, or at least not *only* hubris. Mainly, it's fear. If I present it to them and they have no suggestions—if it truly is our best plan—it means humanity's chances are just that grim." He shook his head. "I've lost hope."

After a moment, Levi said quietly, "Tell me your plan."

"Levi—"

"I'm not as smart as Pixis or Zackly. If I don't have suggestions, it doesn't mean there's no better alternative. But I can let you know if it's as bad as you think. Maybe Sahlo just got under your skin, made you second-guess yourself."

Erwin's chest was tight, but he pushed through it. If there was one thing he could count on from Levi, it was keeping him honest.

"The main body of the three regiments will travel along the road we're on now." He used his hands to illustrate the movements, drawing a map in the air. "Meanwhile, a small party will use the elevator in the northernmost district to transport cart after cart of sand and rubble to the tracks atop the wall, as well as defensive cannons. This party will face the harsh winds and exposure of the top of the wall to move the carts and cannons more than a thousand kilometres to Shiganshina. The Colossal Titan is, to date, the only one that can reach the top of the wall, so the casualty rate should be low.

"These two groups will meet at the hole in the gate. While the majority of the soldiers battle titans to keep them clear of the wall, the party atop it will drop the debris in front of the hole, effectively burying it and blocking it from approaching titans. We don't know if they can tunnel through it, but it's certain to at least slow them down, and may convince them to go after decoy soldiers instead of the repair party.

"All this will buy time for a repair party on the near side of the

hole to build a proper gate. It will have to be built in stages to make it as effective as possible, as quickly as possible—a metal mesh, at first, to temporarily keep the titans out while it can be reinforced with stone and more metal.

“The loss of life is going to come from defending the gate during this repair process. The longer we can keep the titans away from the gate, the more time we’ll have to build a solid blockade. Once the gate is repaired, it becomes a matter of exterminating all the living titans trapped within Wall Maria so that it can once again be occupied. That is sure to take its toll on our numbers as well.”

He paused to gauge Levi’s reaction; his face was expressionless.

“It’s the best plan I’ve been able to come up with,” he finished.

“It’s not bad,” Levi said. “We all know a lot of people are going to have to die. At least you’ve thought of a way to put up a temporary blockade until we can get the more permanent one in there.” He paused. “You want the rubble party to go north, but we’ve never scouted north of Utopia District.”

“No. Utopia District hasn’t even seen a titan in recent memory, so I don’t expect that party to counter anything hostile, save for the weather. But ... ” Erwin grimaced. “I’ve been pondering this for several days now: a scouting mission up north may have to be my next assignment for you, after we’ve finished stocking these remaining checkpoints. There will be winter conditions, so a small party will be best, as you won’t be able to travel fast. It’ll be low risk so long as you’re prepared for winter conditions, but it will take time.”

Levi paused. “Before or after Ehrmich?”

“After. Winter begins early in the north and runs late, so timing won’t matter so much; it will be difficult no matter when you go.” He leaned forward. “Once our current mission is complete and we return to Trost, I’ll head to the Capital with Hange to arrange the final checkpoint mission and meet with weapons investors. Then you and I will head to Ehrmich for a few days, then return to Trost to finalize plans for the year’s final expedition.”

“A few days?” Levi said, brows pinching. “I thought we were going to try for a week.”

“If we take more than a few days, I fear we’ll be risking frost on the ground for the next mission.” Erwin lifted his hand and kissed a knuckle. “I promise we won’t spend any time on work while we’re there: you’ll have my undivided attention, and I’ll have yours.”

After a pause, Levi said, “Understood. Keep going.”

“We finalize our plans for the last expedition of the year, then leave in mid-October. During that mission, we set up the final two checkpoints, then return to Trost. From that point, you would take your scouting team north for a few weeks as we discussed, returning in time for Christmas.”

“I thought you wanted scouting data from Shiganshina before the winter,” Levi said quietly.

“I did, but seeing the titan population in this area has me second-guessing the risks versus the rewards. A traditional scouting formation would be vulnerable, given the large titan population. If the weather permits, I can send Mike down here with a small, mobile team—his nose can alert him of approaching titans and, hopefully, keep everyone safe. His nose would be useless in the north, where titans aren’t the main threat, so it makes more sense to send you north, and him south.” Erwin paused. “Besides, with so many titans streaming in through the walls, titan movement patterns around here aren’t going to help us as much as I originally thought. Gather what information you can over the next several days—it will be sufficient to give us a general idea about the state of this area.”

“Okay,” Levi said. His legs swung, heels kicking the branch. “So I’m going to be gone for a month or two, huh?”

“Possibly. During that time, I’ll be in the Capital finalizing plans with Zackly, Paxis and Nile, anyway. I suspect ...” His voice wavered. “I suspect we won’t see much of each other for a while.”

When Levi finally spoke again, he was quiet: “Maybe that’s a good thing.”

Erwin’s blood ran cold. “What?”

“Look ...” Levi pulled his hand away and drew his knees to his chest. “All those times we’ve talked about you having walls, or a mask, or whatever you want to call it ... We both know it’s an important part of being Commander, to block out your emotions and focus. Humanity needs you to hold it together. And lately ...”

Erwin turned to look at him. Levi was hunched into a ball, very small. “Lately?”

“When you’re with me, you fall apart.”

“What?” Erwin asked again, too shocked for eloquence.

“When we have sex, or even when we talk honestly, you break down. We can’t ... you can’t do that. Especially not right now.” Levi

shrugged. "So maybe it's good that I won't be around to distract you."

"You have it backwards," Erwin said, his stomach hollow. "You keep me from falling apart. You let me vent. You remind me I'm human." He paused. "Have you lost confidence in my leadership abilities?"

"Don't be stupid. Of course not. It's just, you have so little time, and I keep selfishly taking up more than my share. How long does it take you to collect yourself after I make you fall apart?"

Reality sank in Erwin's stomach, cold and heavy. Every time he lowered his barriers lately, they were a little heavier, a little harder to fit back into place. He studied Levi's face, blue in the moonlight, long lashes, pinched brows.

"I need you," he said, voice cracking.

Levi turned to study him. "Do you actually? Or do you just *want* to need me?"

"Levi ..." Erwin leaned forward until their foreheads pressed together.

"It's like you said: duty must come before emotion if we are to defeat the titans. Always." A tear trickled down Levi's cheek.

"Not always. I was miserable then. Lonely. It's like Shadis told me: I was losing my grip on my humanity. If I had continued on that path, I would have burnt out long ago." Erwin rested a hand on the back of Levi's neck. "There's something very important you give me, Levi. Something you've given me since the very beginning: hope. Even when I feel hope slipping away, you remind me that we have a fighting chance. Look where we are right now, why you brought me here." He closed his eyes. "You inspire me. You ground me, keep me human."

It should have been a confession that left him feeling warm, but that ball of ice was still cold in his stomach. Levi gripped the back of his neck and gave a small sniffle, his grip so tight that Erwin knew he was feeling the same way.

I need you. He lunged forward, mashing their lips together, chasing after even a spark of warmth.

Levi jerked away, pressing a hand to his chest to stop him. "At least let me chew some mint first."

"I don't care." Erwin shifted on the branch, half-facing him, and pulled Levi in under his chin. Wiry arms wrapped around him, so tightly that it was difficult to breathe.

"I need you," he whispered into the dark hair. It smelled like smoke and the outdoors and sweat. "I want you. Here."

“Fuck,” Levi whispered, sounding like he agreed. “But you’ll get shit all over your dick and get it infected.”

“I’m sure you’re fine, but I’ll clean up carefully. I’ll even use some of my water ration to rinse off.” He closed his eyes, breathing in his warmth. “Please, Levi. I want to show you I won’t fall apart. I want to be close to you here, with our freedom in clear view.”

Levi kissed the tip of Erwin’s nose. “How do you want me?”

“Stand up.”

They stood. Erwin turned Levi to face the tree trunk. “Make sure you have an anchor.” The branch seemed sturdy, but it was best to be safe—this would be a humiliating way for either of them to die.

Levi sank his anchors into the trunk. Erwin stood behind him and adjusted his anchors, too, so the wires weren’t in the way. He unhooked Levi’s lower straps from his belt, ensuring his upper body was still safely in the harness, and pulled Levi’s pants down.

Levi shivered. “Cold out here without pants on.”

Erwin rubbed his palms over the bare skin. “That better?”

“A bit. Does it stink?”

“No, you smell good.” The scent of his sweat was strong. Erwin reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a bottle of lubricant, slathering it onto two fingers. He leaned forward, kissing the back of Levi’s head, as he smoothed the fingers down from the tailbone.

“Doing okay?” he asked, noticing tension in Levi’s body. He kissed a line across his nape.

“You feel any mess there?”

“No, you feel soft and warm.” Erwin leaned against him, rutting slightly against one side of Levi’s ass.

“You’re that hard already?”

“I want you.”

Levi shivered. “I want you, too.”

Erwin gently pushed with one fingertip, and he heard himself groan as Levi began to swallow him. “Fuck.”

“Stay quiet. Is it okay?”

“Yeah, it’s good. It’s so good.” Erwin was already aching. He kissed the back of Levi’s head. “I need you, Levi. My right-hand man. My Captain.”

“You’re embarrassing,” Levi said gruffly. He pushed back against him, taking his finger the rest of the way in. “Oh, shit.”

“Good?”

“Yeah. So good.”

Erwin bent down to kiss the side of Levi’s neck at the same time. He tasted salty, and musky, and like earth. “Oh god, you’re so warm.”

Levi let out a half-gasp, half-moan, his hands pressing flat against the tree at shoulder width, bracing himself. “I’m ready. Go in.”

Erwin pulled out and undid the front of his pants, stroking himself with oil. He slowly guided himself in, and Levi gasped, and then they were one. Erwin paused at the hilt, pulsating, and a ripple ran through Levi and into him.

“Fuck,” Levi breathed.

Erwin was grateful for the wires, because he was dizzy. He reached around to grip Levi with his clean hand.

Levi tensed. “Shit!”

“Not so loud.” Erwin bit his ear, then whispered into it, “Thrust into my hand.”

Levi gasped and began to move, and Erwin timed his thrusts to meet him, pushing in deep. He could feel the connection between them in every movement: he would twitch, and Levi’s muscles would throb around him, then Levi would twitch in his hand. They were working perfectly as one, as connected as they had been the day Wall Maria had fallen, communicating without exchanging a word.

A cry rose in his throat, and he bit hard into the back of Levi’s jacket collar, muffling himself. Levi was panting in the same rhythm, the air forced out of him with each thrust.

“Shit,” Levi gasped. “Erwin, I’m— Fuck!” He bucked back against him, his body shuddering. Erwin carried him through it, then slowed, pausing to catch his breath.

“Fuck.” Levi turned his head so he could see Erwin from the corner of his eye. “You close?”

“Yeah.”

“Keep going.”

Erwin’s brows rose. “Won’t that be uncomfortable?”

“It’s fine. Keep going. Just don’t come inside me.” Levi reached back between his legs and gently gripped Erwin’s testicles. A shock of pleasure jolted through him. He began to move again, fighting to keep his movements gentle, knowing Levi would be sensitive so soon after coming.

“Harder,” Levi said, tugging. The sensation was too intense, and Erwin suddenly found himself barreling toward the end.

“Oh, *shit*.” He batted Levi’s hand away and frantically pulled out, aiming off the branch. A foot slipped; he felt a strong hand clamp into his shoulder, holding him upright while his world disappeared beneath a surge of warmth.

When his muscles finally stopped twitching, he took a deep breath and opened his eyes.

“That really flew,” Levi said, helping him stand. “We should’ve both gone off the branch, seen whose went further.”

Erwin’s cheeks burned. “I wasn’t sure what to do with it.”

“No, that was better than having come drip out my ass with no bath in sight. Kind of hot in a creepy way, too, seeing it glint in the moonlight like that. I just hope you missed my horse.”

Erwin tried to smile, but his face was leaden. He slowly sank to a crouch, eyes locked on Wall Maria. The ball of ice was still in his stomach, and post-orgasm fatigue made it harder to ignore. He heard the phantom screams from the victims of Shiganshina, from Nanaba. He thought of their colleagues on the funeral pyre, the fires he had lit with his strategies and sacrifices—

“Shit,” Levi muttered, sitting beside him. “I told you it fucks you up when we do this.”

Erwin glanced at him and saw his eyes milky in the moonlight, skin stained grey like death.

“Don’t worry, Levi. I’m fine,” he said aloud, the taste of burning flesh thick on his tongue.

-29-

ENDGAME

Levi draped an arm around Erwin's ribcage and moved in closer, nuzzling between the broad shoulder blades. He closed his eyes, savouring Erwin's early-morning scent: an aura of faded cologne, a hint of soap, a strong layer of sweat and sex, and, beneath it all, his natural musk. Blood rushed between Levi's legs, and he shifted.

Maybe we have time for something quick. Even as he thought it, his body throbbed in protest. The combination of a soft bed, the post-expedition energy, and the knowledge they would soon be separated had fanned the flames between them, and the night had passed in a blur of arching backs and muffled groans.

A shiver rippled through him; he shifted closer.

"Mm." Erwin pressed back against him. "Just give me a few more minutes." The gravel in his voice made Levi shiver again.

"You have a carriage to catch." He pulled away to run his fingertips down Erwin's spine, feeling the soft hair that thickened, culminating in a blond layer across his ass.

"Mm." Erwin shifted again, goosebumps rising across his back. "Did you want something, Levi?"

Levi dragged his tongue across the pebbled skin from shoulder blade to shoulder blade. "My ass is fucked out, but my dick might still be working."

"Such poetry." Erwin twisted and rolled until he lay halfway on top of him. Their gaze held. His hands stroked down either side of Levi's face. "Levi."

"Yeah?"

A thick finger slid down the bridge of his nose. "You have such a

delicate nose."

Levi's eyes narrowed. "Why are you being so sentimental? Did you hit the headboard one too many times?"

Erwin smiled and traced his cheekbones with his thumbs, leaning in for a gentle kiss. Warmth surged through Levi, and the body weight reminded him of Erwin riding him earlier that morning, abdomen and thighs clenching in the dimming candlelight. A pleasant memory, but his groin throbbed, and not in a good way.

He let out a low groan and pulled away. "I think my dick's fucked out, too. I could give you a blow job."

Erwin nipped at his bottom lip, and then pulled back. "Temping, but I fear my drive has outpaced my body."

"Then I guess we'll just have to wait until Ehrmich. Don't take too long in the Capital."

"I'll be back as soon as I can." Erwin gave him a long, deep kiss, then rolled out of bed. He ran a hand through his hair; it still stuck in all directions. "While I'm gone, I want you to start talking to merchants about the food supplies we need for the final two silos. You'll find a file on your desk that has a full list. I need price estimates." He retrieved his underwear from the bedside table and pulled it on. "You might want to consider sending Nana—" He cut himself off. "Petra or Eld."

Levi tried not to think about Nanaba, in bed in the san. "Why?"

Erwin bent down to pick up his pants, crumpled in the far corner; he shook them out, then pulled them on. "Well, Mike would startle our potential vendors by sniffing them. And there's a chance you might come across as too abrasive. They're going to be skittish about providing supplies during a time of food shortage. We have to be careful not to offend them."

"Hey," Levi said, offended. "I can talk to merchant pigs just fine."

"That phrasing doesn't exactly give me a lot of confidence." Erwin strode over to his shirt, crumpled on top of the dresser.

Levi held out a hand. "Toss that here."

"My shirt? Why?"

"You don't need to wear that to walk to the baths. The armpits are getting disgusting and yellow—I'll wash it for you, bleach the shit out of it." The truth was he liked sleeping in Erwin's shirts while he was away; they made for large, cozy sleeping shirts, and they smelled like him.

Erwin's smirk showed he saw right through him. He tossed the

shirt.

Levi caught it one-handed, ears burning. “Shut up.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

They made their way to the baths, conversing, for the sake of the other soldiers, as if they had just happened to bump into each other in the hallway. They chatted strategy with Mike while they bathed in the warm water, then stood in front of the mirrors, towels wrapped around their waists, and lathered their chins with shaving cream. Levi began to shave.

Erwin, however, rested his razor on the sink.

Levi glanced over. Erwin seemed to be locked in the gaze of his own reflection, his jaw visibly tight.

So there’s the fallout. Levi had been watching for it since their return. Fifteen deaths out of forty soldiers, and Nanaba was still at risk of being a sixteenth while her wound and burns healed. The night had been such a frenzy of sex, foreplay, cuddling, and sleep that there hadn’t been room for Erwin to have his usual post-orgasm break down.

“Hey.”

Erwin glanced sideways at him, then back at the mirror. His razor hand rose slowly to his face, as if it were heavy.

Levi’s chest ached. “Pin all this on Sahlo,” he said, more fiercely than he intended.

Erwin leaned forward, shaving his upper lip, but didn’t respond. His silence was even more painful; it was as if he were too exhausted to bother with platitudes. Levi’s hands balled into fists.

“Fuck it. I’m coming with you.”

“No, I need you here.” Erwin rinsed the blade in the sink. “It’s vital that Hange comes with me to secure investors for our reclamation weaponry. Besides, I’m counting on you to make sure we secure the supplies for the next mission, and, even more importantly, to ensure morale stays high.” He leaned in close and said quietly, “I expect Mike to be largely compromised until Nanaba is on her feet again. You may end up shouldering a lot of his duties in addition to your own.”

“Fine.”

If Erwin noticed his frustration, he ignored it, shaving in silence.

They returned to their rooms to change into clean uniforms, then Erwin stepped into Levi’s room. They shared the large mirror over the dresser, styling their hair and their neckpieces. Once they were finished, Levi, caught up in their daily routine, began to stride for the

door, but a strong hand caught his arm.

“This is our last moment in private before I leave. I’ll be heading straight to the carriage from breakfast.”

Levi turned. Erwin’s face was rock hard, but his eyes were sad.

“You okay?” Levi stepped in closer.

“My mind keeps circling back to the conversation we had the night we saw Wall Maria for the first time.” Erwin fixed on Levi’s cravat as he adjusted its ruffles.

So it hadn’t just been Levi’s imagination: something had shifted between them that night, an unidentifiable change in their dynamic. He still couldn’t figure out if it had left them closer, or more distant, or both at the same time. Even last night, there had been an undercurrent of melancholy to their lovemaking. Maybe it was the reminder that the reclamation was becoming a reality, and, as Erwin so frequently pointed out, they were both unlikely to survive. Or maybe it was the reminder of what they had been to each other when the Wall had fallen, of how thoroughly they had gotten under each other’s skin since then.

Levi gripped Erwin’s hand and lifted it to his lips, kissing a knuckle. “We’ll figure it out when we’re in Ehrmich. Focus on Sahlo and keeping shitty four eyes under control. I’ll be here when you get back.”

One corner of Erwin’s mouth lifted into a smile—a sad one, but at least more genuine than his default polite smile. “I suppose the two of them will keep me occupied. Especially Sahlo.”

“Yeah.” *He needs me. I should be going with him.* Levi reached into his boot. “Take my knife.”

Erwin’s brows furrowed. “That’s not necessary.”

“Yes, it is.” Levi held out the knife. “Hold it with a reverse grip, the way I hold my blade, but with your thumb on top of the hilt. More speed and control that way. Make a sideways punching motion, like a hook. Aim here.” With his free hand, he tapped his own throat, ignoring the panic that always arose when he thought of his throat being slit.

“What do you think is going to happen while I’m away?” Erwin asked, his tone gentle.

“If Sahlo’s getting desperate, he might try something drastic.”

Erwin gripped the blade and threw an experimental slice at the air. His technique was perfect. *Of course he knows how to use a knife,* Levi thought, feeling stupid.

But Erwin didn’t call him out for being over-protective. Instead, he stored the knife in his boot, caught Levi’s chin, and lifted it. Levi

stood on his toes to meet him halfway for a slow kiss.

“Thank you, Levi.”

“It’s fine.”

They fell into step in the hallway, Levi following slightly behind.

“I’ve left a few personnel notes on your desk for your review,” Erwin said. “I feel the recent expedition gave us some headway on selecting a new Squad Leader.”

“Dita?”

“Yes. He’s still a bit junior, but seeing Pehr on the field reminded me about how busy the logistics team will be as we approach the Wall. We may be able to start training Dita now, then assign him the 104th recruits that join us in the spring.” Erwin nodded at a few saluting soldiers they passed in the hall. “While I’m away, I want you and Mike to delegate some responsibilities to Dita and record how he handles them. I’ve left more information in my notes.”

“Sure.”

They grabbed trays of food and settled at their usual table. Hange and Moblit were already seated. Moblit’s eyes were sunken, and he barely looked up to greet them—unusual for him, given that he was usually respectful of his superior officers, perhaps, in part, to counter-balance his Squad Leader’s usual lack of respect.

Hange, on the other hand, stood and saluted.

“All packed and ready, Commander.”

“You brought formal wear for the gala tonight?” Erwin asked.

“Sir.”

“Sit down and knock off all the formal crap,” Levi said. “You’re fucking annoying.” He hated the pretentious, wasteful galas at the Capital, but he hated not being at Erwin’s side at them even more. They were a duo, winning the approval of potential sponsors, fighting for the Survey Corps cause. Sometimes Nile and Marie would be there, which meant a lot of drinking and a chance to sling insults at Nile faster than he could defend himself. It was *wrong* for Erwin to attend a gala without Levi by his side.

“Aw.” Hange crouched to Levi’s level. “Grumpy because you aren’t coming with us? Don’t worry, little fellow. I’ll take good care of him for you.”

He reached out, grabbed the auburn ponytail and yanked. “Call me ‘little’ again.”

“Levi,” Erwin said firmly. He gave Hange his polite smile. “I’ve

made a list of the nobles we should be sure to speak with at the gala tonight. I'll brief you in the carriage." He paused and glanced at Moblit, as if taking in the sunken eyes. "Though I imagine you'll want to sleep a bit during the journey, too. No sleep again last night?"

"Breakthrough with the new metal alloys," Moblit mumbled.

"I'll make sure Scribbles takes some time off while you're away," Levi said. Hange seemed to thrive on curiosity alone, but normal humans needed at least a couple hours of sleep to recharge. Poor Moblit had been run ragged for months. Hange was like Erwin: when either of them got caught up in an idea, they drove forward with it at any cost. The difference was that Hange was too oblivious to notice how it impacted everyone else involved, while Erwin noticed it and shouldered it with the rest of his guilt. During the last few days of their mission, Erwin had described to him a ball of ice heavy in his stomach, a dread about what was to come. Levi's anxiety burned hotter and was higher in his chest, almost at his throat.

He slid his boot under the table to rest against Erwin's. *This might be our last physical contact before he leaves.*

They finished their breakfasts, and then Erwin briefly addressed the soldiers, stating that Levi was in charge during his absence. A few minutes of moving luggage to the carriage, and then they stood before each other.

Levi was surprised to feel loneliest here. The man he loved was still right in front of him, but they both wore their professional faces, so there was no possibility to say anything meaningful, even with their eyes. *We should have a code phrase we say at times like this, something that means 'I love you,' that no one else will know.*

Erwin reached out to grip his shoulder. "Take care of the base while I'm gone, Captain. I'm counting on you."

"Yeah. Good luck with those smug bastards at the Capital."

Erwin nodded, turned and joined Hange in the carriage. Levi watched until the carriage disappeared down the road.

❧

It wasn't until Erwin stepped into the carriage that he realized he and Hange had never spent much time alone together. He sat on one bench, Hange on the other, and the bespectacled gaze was so probing that Erwin found the hair on the back of his neck rising.

He fell back on mission briefing, going over their potential investors in detail while Hange followed along in a file. That took less than an hour.

The carriage rattled as it hit a patch of rough road.

Erwin smiled. "You must be tired."

"Not really," Hange said.

"You're welcome to sleep, if you wish."

"I might in a bit."

"I see."

There was that probing gaze again. Erwin had often been told his stare was unsettling, and for the first time in his life, he understood what it meant to be on the other side of it.

He found himself remembering Shadis' advice the day he had retired. He slid out a bag from under the bench and pulled out two bottles, tossing one to Hange.

The Squad Leader caught it and looked quizzically at it. "Ale?"

"Have we ever shared a drink together, just the two of us? We've finished the professional discussions I had planned for this journey, and you aren't interested in sleep yet, so maybe it's time I get to know you a little better." He uncorked his bottle and held it up. "To your health."

"And yours," Hange replied automatically, echoing the gesture. They each took a swig.

"So, tell me about yourself," Erwin said.

"You already know most of it."

"I do?"

"Yeah. Remember that time when I was first promoted, when I tried to blackmail you, but you had even more dirt on me and put me in my place?" Hange snorted and took another swig. "I've been much more cautious about who I try to blackmail since then."

He had forgotten about that. Strange to think that Hange had been aggressively pushing the boundaries of Survey Corps research for so long. "Well, I know your history, but that's not the same as knowing a person. For example, clearly you're driven by curiosity and a thirst for knowledge."

"True. And you are, too." Hange leaned forward. "And that's why I don't understand why you won't let me capture a titan."

He let out a low sigh.

"Think of all we could learn! We don't even know why some of them stop moving at night, why they're feather-light, why the weak spot

is what kills—”

“Hange.” His words were tight: “You are not to discuss this.”

“Fine.” Hange slumped against the bench again. “Let’s talk about you and Levi.”

“My intention was to talk about you.”

“I don’t want to talk about me. Let’s talk about something nice.”

“All right.” He had been meaning to bring this up, anyway. He cleared his throat and leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “About Levi: I have a mission I’d like your assistance with, if you’re interested. A personal one, tomorrow morning, in advance of the Council meeting. This is top secret. No one can know about it, not even Levi.”

“Oh?”

“Shortly after we return to Trost, Levi and I will depart for Ehrmich District for a few days. While we’re there, I’m going to propose marriage.”

Hange sat upright, dark eyes sparkling. “Holy hell!”

“I’d like to present him with a ring. It’s an old tradition—maybe even a bit old-fashioned … ” He hesitated. “Do you think Levi would wear a ring?”

“If you asked him to? Yes. He’d even stop wearing the cravat if you asked.” Hange’s head tilted. “Would you wear a matching one?”

“After we were wed, yes.” He paused. “Although I suppose that would look rather suspicious, wouldn’t it? I’ve been so caught up in the idea of proposing that I may have overlooked that detail.” It appeared his logic was still as hampered as ever when it came to Levi.

“Get ones for Mike and me, too,” Hange said. “Slightly different ones, if you want. Call them Officer’s Rings and no one will question them.”

His chest fluttered. “You’d wear a ring just to give Levi and me the opportunity to follow an outdated tradition?”

“Of course. I’m sure Mike would, too. But … ” Hange trailed off.

“Something on your mind?”

“It’s none of my business, sir, but I was under the impression you and Levi weren’t doing so well. You’ve both been so glum lately.”

He raised a brow. “That’s none of your concern.”

“I know I’m overstepping my bounds. You don’t have to respond. It’s just that I like Levi, and I like you, and trying to engage in a discussion with Levi about his emotions is impossible unless we’re stranded somewhere.” Hange’s eyes were still probing. “We had some

drinks a couple nights before you left on the last expedition, and he was worried he was distracting you. Said he makes you fall apart.”

Erwin felt a little sliver of pain, deep in his chest. Levi had spoken about that with Hange before him? “We spoke about that at length during the expedition.” *And we didn’t come to a conclusion about what to do about it.* The ball of ice slowly rotated in his stomach, a reminder that it had never really gone away since their discussion.

He forced a smile. “Levi gives me hope, Hange. He allows me to give myself permission to feel grief and worry.” And yet, he hesitated to say they were *fine*. Why was he hesitating? He looked up at Hange, saw the compassion in the brown eyes, and looked down. “It’s possible his concerns aren’t unfounded. During our last expedition, we were near Wall Maria. The moment it was within view, all sorts of memories came rushing back. Remembering the pain I suffered during those times, it all felt ... pale. Ultimately, back then, the burden was on Shadis. The pain and loss I feel every single day now is so much deeper than that, so much more profound. It’s snowballing in my stomach, cold and heavy. And the closer we get to Maria, the closer we are to the moment when I’m going to have to gamble the lives of every soldier in the entire military.

“I know I must not second-guess my intentions or my goals. I know everyone and everything is expendable if it will benefit humanity. My resolve is solid, but beneath it, I’m eroding. The cracks Levi sees in my composure aren’t his fault, though his protective nature won’t allow him to see otherwise. They simply can’t be helped. I regret that he has shouldered my emotional issues and blamed himself for them for so long.”

Hange’s face was solemn. “Have you told him all this?”

“We’ve discussed it in bits and pieces.” Erwin frowned, leaning back into the corner. It seemed alcohol had the same effect on him as sex: his defenses were down. Now, when he looked to the future, he could only see doubts.

“Are you letting him help you?” Hange asked.

He took another swallow of ale before he answered. “What do you mean?”

“We all know your burden is heavy. Are you letting him carry part of it?”

“He shoulders my burden without my permission. If I had my way, I’d keep it off him entirely.”

“The weight of it would squash you.” Hange’s head tilted. “I observe people a lot, and I think I have a decent read on you, Commander. You have a need to hold all information tightly to your chest, and that’s fine for us, because we trust you, but all those strategies and fears and political squabbles must be getting pretty hard to carry by yourself.”

For the first time, he stared at Hange and saw a friend instead of a Squad Leader. The usual mad air was gone completely. He had always wondered how Levi tolerated Hange’s presence, given their opposite personalities. Now he understood. Hange was sincere, and Levi valued sincerity.

“I am grateful for Levi’s strength by my side,” he said firmly. “So long as he and I have strength, neither of us will collapse.”

Hange nodded, looking satisfied. “Good. But don’t forget the rest of us can take a little weight, too.”

Now that he took a moment to consider it, he *had* forgotten. After Henrik had died, Mike had stepped in as his right-hand man on the field, his stoic nature allowing him to shoulder Erwin’s plans and frustrations without flinching. Once Erwin had started focusing on leadership, he had gradually pushed Mike to the side, too caught up in his plans to nurture a friendship. Only Levi had managed to coax him to open up again.

Mike and Hange were leaders too. Why did he feel the need to hold things so tightly to his chest, really? Was it because he was protecting them, or because he didn’t trust them? Levi’s voice rose in his mind: *control freak*.

He drained the rest of his ale, then said, “I think perhaps I should get some sleep.”

Hange nodded. “Yeah, I’m tired, too.”

They clicked the door panels into place, each taking a makeshift bed. Erwin lay on his back and stared at the ceiling, thinking of Levi, and he found he still had more to say.

“Am I fooling myself by considering marriage?” he murmured. “Would that secret only add more pressure onto our already overburdened shoulders?”

There was no response. He turned his head and saw Hange’s eyes were closed, glasses off, breaths even. *Good*, he thought, but at the same time, he felt lonely. Why did he have to suddenly realize how many friendships he had pushed away in his lifetime? He had been perfectly content before their conversation. Levi was his dearest friend

and his confidante, and that was all a man in his position needed. Plus, he had Nile and Marie, even if their friendship had awkward dynamics at times. And Berit, though they saw each other maybe twice a year.

Could he still count Mike among his friends? Their strained conversation after Nanaba had been wounded had been their first real one-on-one conversation in years. Mike had never been much of a talker, anyway—Levi, Anke, and Nanaba were the only people Erwin had ever seen him converse with in any depth. *At least he still has Levi and Nanaba to support him.*

Hange's point had been valid: he was supposed to trust his officers. They were supposed to help him shoulder the weight of the Survey Corps goals.

He studied Hange's sleeping form. *Tomorrow, I'll tell you all about Sahlo. Maybe there's an angle I'm not seeing.*

He reached up to dim the lamp.

¤

Erwin awoke as the carriage stopped outside their usual hotel in Mitras. Hange sat bolt upright mid-snore.

“Morning,” he said. “We’re there.”

“It feels like I just fell asleep a second ago.” Hange yawned and stretched.

They settled into their usual hotel room. It was always strange to be here without Levi. Every piece of furniture in the room was attached to countless memories, some pleasant, some less so.

Less than twenty-four hours apart, and he was already missing Levi. How would they handle the upcoming one-to-two month separation while they planned and scouted for the reclamation effort?

“If I bathe now,” Hange said, “will my hair be dry by the time we go to the gala?”

“Most likely. We have a few hours. You might find it easier to style damp, anyway.”

“Okay, then I’m going to bathe. Don’t come in.” Hange strode to the bathroom.

When it was finally Erwin’s turn to use the bath, he took his time, letting the warm water soothe the aches and pains that always came after a long carriage ride. He dried off and dressed in a dark suit over a white dress shirt, his bolo tie centred neatly under its collar. He

combed oil into his hair and parted it, then combed it back off his forehead.

Hange emerged from the other room in a flattering, form-fitting suit with a slightly outdated ruffled collar. The Squad Leader's auburn hair was twisted neatly into a knot at the top, a few tendrils hanging loose.

“Is this okay?”

Erwin was torn between ‘handsome’ and ‘beautiful’ and decided neither accurately captured his sentiment. “You look capable and professional. If I were an investor, I’d be interested in hearing your ideas.”

“Good.”

They stopped at the hotel restaurant for an early dinner. Hange ate with a surprising display of table manners, a far cry from the usual enthusiasm and speed during mealtime back at the base. *I suppose there's no rush to get back to research here.*

“Did you and Levi ever dance at the galas you went to?” Hange asked.

Erwin scanned the restaurant to make sure they wouldn’t be overheard. “Occasionally. Never more than a dance, and we do our best to act like it’s a formality.” He set down his utensils and leaned forward. “I’d like to share a dance or two with you tonight, if you’re okay with it. It’ll help sell the idea that I dance with all my subordinates.”

“How flattering,” Hange said dryly, and then, after a pause: “I’m not much of a dancer.”

“We’ll wait until the dance floor is full, so you won’t have to feel self-conscious. There’s one lord in particular I’m trying to manoeuvre around, and he’ll be paying close attention to me, so it’s important he sees that all my subordinates get equal attention.”

“Lord Sahlo, right? The one who’s been pressuring you in the Council meetings.”

“Yes. A man with unclear motives and many names.” Erwin swirled his glass of wine, then took a sip. “Levi and I have been working to dig up information on him so we can pressure him back. We’ve determined he’s tied to an Underground gang using the name Lord Hasek, and the Wallists under the name Brother Étienne.”

Hange’s wineglass froze mid-sip, then slowly lowered. “Étienne?”

“You know the name?”

“Well, could be a different Étienne. He was a primary investor in our weapons research when I was working in the lab, a good friend of

my boss.”

Erwin’s brows rose. “Sahlo does have an interest in weapons research. What did he look like?”

“I last saw him ten years ago. He was in his late thirties or so. About my height, dark hair, handsome face in kind of an unusual, striking way—hooded eyes, high cheekbones, broad lips. Always looked like he was smirking, but he had a quick temper. Oh, and he wore a flat-brimmed hat.”

“I see.” There was no question he was the same man. “Do you know much about the investment arrangement between him and your boss?”

“No. I didn’t pay attention to the financial aspects of the project.” Hange’s eyes were distant.

Erwin understood talking about the past might be difficult, but this could be a new thread to pursue. “What was your boss’s name?”

“Othmar Eklund.”

He stored the name away for use later. “Would Sahlo recognize you if he saw you?”

“Probably. I was at Othmar’s side through most of the project, and I don’t look much different than I did then.” Hange’s eyes lowered. “He would know me by my birth name, though.”

“Zoë Kerr.”

“Yes. Though he might recognize my current name if he was interested in weapons research long enough to know my mother. She was pretty famous.”

Erwin swirled his wine again, considering the conversation. Sahlo knew Hange was attending the gala. If he was getting desperate enough to pressure Erwin—and it seemed he was—then he might be preparing to sabotage their efforts to attract investors. If he was involved with Hange’s old research facility, he would know about the explosion Hange had caused.

“If anyone asks,” he said aloud, “we may have to address the accident.”

Hange’s eyes snapped up to him. “I don’t want to discuss it. That was years ago.”

“It isn’t difficult to imagine Sahlo spreading information about the accident to try to dissuade potential investors from working with us. Even if he hasn’t, the information is public. Any potential investors may have done their own research ahead of time.” He didn’t let his gaze drop.

“Be prepared.”

Hange’s face drooped. “I joined the military to get a fresh start.”

“I know, Hange. Politics has a way of dredging up parts of ourselves we don’t wish to address. Look at tonight as one more hoop to jump through. Once we have reclaimed Wall Maria, everything else will be forgotten.”

The rest of the meal continued in silence.

As they approached the ballroom, however, a bounce found its way back to Hange’s step. “Look at all the dresses!”

Erwin had to increase his pace to keep up. “I didn’t take you for a fan of fashion.”

“Not fashion, exactly, but they’re so aesthetically pleasing—all different colours and shapes. Like flowers.”

“You like flowers?”

“I do. My grandmother gave me an old microscope for my fifth birthday. I spent hours and hours cutting open different flowers and plants and studying their cellular structures. They were so beautiful, just like these dresses. Look at all the colours and layers!”

Erwin raised a brow. “You’re not thinking about dissecting all these people, are you?”

“Come on!” Hange caught his arm and yanked him forward.

They stepped into the ballroom, and Hange abruptly stopped, eyes wide. Erwin used the pause to scan the room. Sahlo stood in the corner, speaking with a noblewoman he had seen at other galas. Their eyes locked. Sahlo tipped his hat; Erwin pretended not to see him.

Near the centre of the room, Nile wore his formal uniform, speaking stiffly with Pixis. Marie wasn’t by his side, and though Erwin hadn’t expected her, he was a little disappointed.

“Go ahead and explore,” he said to Hange. “I’ll get us some wine.”

“Yeah,” Hange breathed without looking at him, wandering into the crowd.

He selected a glass of wine for each of them, then began to pace around the room, locating the targets for their investment pitch. There were six. One was Lady Gunnhild, laughing with another Lady by the dance floor. She had a soft spot for him, so he’d butter her up by asking her to dance once the alcohol was flowing, then bring her back to speak with Hange.

The next two were a husband and wife team; they kept separate finances, but often went in on business ventures together. The husband

was a tinkerer who was sure to enjoy talking specifics with Hange while Erwin spoke finance with the wife.

Hange came up beside him, startling him. “Is that my wine?”

“Indeed. You like red, right?” He held out the glass.

“Thanks.” Hange grabbed it and downed the entire glass.

Erwin raised a brow. “Are you all right?”

“A little overwhelmed.” The dark eyes darted around the room.

“I bet some of these people have servants who sleep in better quarters than I did when I was growing up.”

“You’re the weapons expert in this room. It doesn’t matter where they sleep; they’re going to recognize the passion and wisdom in your voice the moment you start speaking.”

Hange’s cheeks darkened. “Sir.”

So we’re back to ‘sir’ again. There was no point in starting their pitch if Hange was this uncomfortable. The dance floor was already filling up. “We talked about sharing a dance. Why don’t we do that now, give our potential investors time to drink a bit?”

Hange set the empty wine glass on a small table behind them. “Might as well.”

He drained his glass and set it aside, too, then held out a hand. Hange took it, grip surprisingly strong. Together, they walked onto the dance floor. He put one hand on the narrow waist; their other hands clasped.

They moved across the floor in perfect unison, Hange easily keeping up to his steps. Experimentally, he spun Hange out, then back, and Hange laughed with delight. He was surprised to hear himself chuckle as well. This wasn’t the deep tension and gravity he felt with Levi, but something light, fun, and flowing.

“I thought you couldn’t dance,” he said, grinning.

“I just sort of assumed.” Hange’s smile was broad enough to show both sets of teeth. “Do that spin again.”

He did as asked, and this time, there was a small stumble; he smoothly caught Hange’s waist and turned the stumble into a dip, and Hange gave a boisterous laugh.

He was dizzy. This was the first time in years that he had simply had *fun* with a friend, with no expectations upon him, no deeper meaning. It reminded him of his years in the Trainee Squad, drunkenly waltzing around the bar with Nile or Anke or Mike, playful banter set to song.

Hange accidentally stomped on his foot, and he had been so lost in thought that he yelped. That set Hange off in a series of loud, snorting laughs, and the snorts were so undignified that Erwin found himself laughing as well. The nobles dancing tamely around them cast them puzzled looks, which somehow made the whole situation even funnier. *Humanity's Hope, the Wings of Freedom, and we can't even make it through one song with decorum.*

"Damn," Hange gasped, fighting against another wave of laughter. "This is awful. No one's going to support us now. We look drunk."

"We were doing well for a minute there." Erwin stepped back and gave an exaggerated bow, then held out an elbow. "Perhaps another glass of wine to help us catch up to our apparent drunkenness, my dear Squad Leader?"

"An excellent idea, Commander." Hange looped an arm through his.

They retired to the fringes of the crowd, settling near a pillar with fresh glasses of wine.

"I hope you and Levi dance better than that," Hange said, speaking loudly enough for his ears only.

"We move easily as one."

"I remember you dancing at the Christmas party. Very graceful, nice to watch. It's a pity you couldn't dance more without making people suspicious."

"A pity indeed." The conversation was making him miss Levi. Seeking a change of conversation, he gestured toward their first target, preparing to explain their strategy.

Before he could speak, a hand tapped Hange's shoulder. "May I interrupt you for a dance?"

Hange froze.

Erwin slowly turned. The man who stood behind them was tall, with grey hair and a sharp nose. "I don't believe we've met."

Hange turned, chin high. "This is Othmar Eklund, my former supervisor at the research—"

"Zoë. Please." The man called Othmar held out a hand. "We have a lot to talk about."

The expression on Hange's face was unusually vulnerable. Slowly, their hands reached for each other, as if they were in a trance, as if Erwin wasn't there at all. They drifted toward the dance floor together.

Erwin's eyes narrowed. Whatever tension was between them, it

was a clear distraction. *This wasn't an accident.*

He looked around the room. As he had suspected, Sahlo was watching him intently from across the room. Their gaze held. The lord cocked his head toward the staircase.

Erwin set his jaw and began to move through the crowd. He was almost out the other end when a hand caught his arm.

He turned and saw Lady Gunnhild. She wore heavy makeup and an autumn-inspired headpiece, and an orange, green, and brown dress that displayed a little more cleavage than appropriate. He did his best not to look at it.

“Commander Erwin.” She curtsied. “Would you care to dance?”

He gave her a warm smile. “I would like nothing more, Lady Gunnhild, but I need to have a brief meeting with Lord Sahlo first. May I find you a bit later this evening? We have much to discuss.”

“Indeed we do.” She smiled broadly at him. “Very well. Find me when you’re free to dance.”

He nodded and was about to turn away, but he paused. He could see Hange and Othmar on the dance floor, so deep in conversation that they were barely moving. He couldn’t make out what they were saying, but Hange looked upset.

Should I step in?

“Commander.”

The call came from above him. He looked up and saw Sahlo on the balcony overlooking the dance floor, a lit cigar between his lips. The lord tipped his hat in greeting.

Erwin’s hands tightened as he climbed the staircase.

“Good evening,” Sahlo said, moving over as if to make room along the railing. “It’s so strange to see you without your little dog at your side.”

“You brought Othmar Eklund here.” Erwin strode forward, stopping a few centimetres closer than was socially appropriate. “Why?”

“That’s what I like about you, Commander: always to the point.” Sahlo leaned on the railing and blew smoke rings; they floated over the dance floor, growing and dissipating. “Your Squad Leader looks miserable. I must say, I was expecting their reunion to be happier, even after all the drama that passed between them.” He raised a brow at Erwin. “You did know they were once in a relationship, didn’t you?”

Even if he hadn’t known before, it was clear now. “You brought him here to derail our discussions with investors.”

“You think I’m that conniving, Erwin? Maybe I’m just a romantic at heart. Zoë Kerr, the child of Hange Lise, a prodigy so bright that no one noticed the fake university credentials, so dazzled were they by natural talent. Of course Othmar fell in love. He was a sucker for intelligence. It’s a pity he was such a coward, pinned everything on Zoë after the accident. And it’s a pity Zoë so eagerly took the blame. I wonder where the two of them would be now, if that unfortunate situation had never happened?”

“Hange doesn’t use that name anymore.”

“Ah, that’s right. With all these fake names flying around, it’s difficult to keep track.” Sahlo’s gaze shifted to him. “It’s amazing how weak love makes us, isn’t it? Such a liability. We can plan and plan all we want, devote ourselves to logic in everything we do, but that tie to another human being burns so brightly that it casts shadows on everything else.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Erwin said. “I gave up on love years ago, for the exact reasons you describe. I suppose you and I both came to the same conclusions about love when we were young.”

“How interesting. That’s the first time you’ve ever drawn a favourable comparison between us. Are we finally, after all these years, becoming friends?” Sahlo mashed the tip of his cigar into the railing, snuffing it out. “Or are you trying to liken the two of us to decrease my suspicions, to cover your own vulnerability?”

“I have no vulnerability.”

“Of course not. I’m sorry if I implied otherwise. Erwin Smith, the man carved from stone.” Sahlo stuck the cigar into the breast pocket of his suit, as if saving it for later. “You’re right, of course. You and I have greater goals, so we must eschew love. If we were to give in—if we were to let our base animal urges overpower our common sense—our enemies could easily use our vulnerability against us. We might try to protect ourselves and those we love, but there is no such thing as a permanent secret. They all leak, given time. And then ... ” He gestured at the dance floor, where Hange was pushing through the crowd, visibly distressed. “Worlds collide, and all our carefully laid plans crumble.”

Erwin’s heart beat in his throat. He pulled away from the balcony. “Excuse me.”

“Oh? Is that a soft spot I see, Erwin?”

“My subordinate has been emotionally compromised.”

“I suggest you listen a bit longer. You’re busy, so I’ll be brief.”

Sahlo stepped closer, and even though he was the shorter of the two, he seemed to be looming. “You and I are going to meet in my office tomorrow to talk about the plans for the next few Survey Corps expeditions. I have some ideas I’d like you to take into consideration.”

“We took your last assignment.” It was a struggle for Erwin to keep his voice and face calm. “Our timeline doesn’t allow any more delays. What’s more, your misguided mission lost us more than a third of the soldiers we had on the field. I think the Council will agree it would be reckless to bow to any more of your demands.”

“Ah, yes, that’s right: you embraced the idea, exactly as written, and you brought back every single scrap of the King’s money.” Sahlo’s lip curled. “Accurate to the amount we told you, right down to the last gold piece.”

Erwin’s collar was too tight, the bolo tie too heavy. “Is that unexpected?”

“It seems my advisors were looking at an old ledger when they were calculating the funds stored in that silo.”

“Is that so?”

“That particular silo was mostly emptied during the evacuation of Wall Maria. The old records we were looking at in the Council meeting were off by a factor of thousands. Fortunately, I have a copy of the updated amount stored in a safe place.” Sahlo took a step closer, his breath hot and reeking of gin. “It’s curious that you brought back the exact amount we told you the first time, Smith. It’s almost as if you disregarded the Council’s decision and ran your own mission instead, then faked your visit to the silo. But I must be wrong, right?” His smile faded, his voice deepening: “That would be treason.”

Erwin didn’t flinch. “I’m not sure what you’re hoping to accomplish with this bluff—”

“No, not a bluff; I set you up. Don’t feel too bad. I took advantage of your sense of urgency, made sure you wouldn’t have time to pick apart the details and uncover my lie. It was underhanded, but I assure you, my intentions are noble.”

You want to delay the Wall reclamation, and you dare call your intentions ‘noble?’ Erwin felt a flash of blinding rage. It would be so easy to grab him by his collar and pitch him backwards over the balcony, an unfortunate accident due to too many drinks.

“We’re out of time,” he said aloud. “I refuse to sacrifice thousands to your ‘noble intentions.’”

“You sound frustrated, Erwin. And here I was beginning to wonder if you ever felt any stress.” The lord straightened the brim of his hat and gave a broad smile. “I fully agree: we are out of time. Meet with me tomorrow morning. Eleven o’clock, my office in the Military Police barracks. No more dancing around, no more lies, no more secrets: I’ll tell you everything, and you’ll tell me everything, and we’ll resolve our differences once and for all. Come alone.” He pushed past Erwin, walking toward the stairs. “And good luck with Zoë. There’s a lesson in all this: we can change our names as often as we like, but our past will always, *always* catch up with us.”

Erwin watched him descend, his head spinning. He couldn’t shake a single thought: *he knows everything*.

Movement on the other balcony caught his attention. He glanced over in time to see Hange slip behind the curtained wall, likely to use the same exit Levi had, once upon a time, used to escape gala chaos. He drew a deep breath.

He found Hange sitting on the rooftop, legs dangling over the edge, a crumpled handkerchief in one hand, glasses in the other.

Erwin sat, leaving a comfortable gap between them. “Need company?”

Hange sniffled and looked down. “This is incredibly unprofessional. I shouldn’t be crying.”

“It’s fine. This isn’t the first time a subordinate has fled to the safety of the rooftop, and I quite like it up here myself.” Erwin held out a clean handkerchief. “Miras is confining, with its rules and roles. I much prefer the freedom of the Survey Corps, where we can show all our emotions and still respect one another.”

Hange took the handkerchief and blew hard, then sniffled again. “I came here on a mission. We have investors to woo, so let’s get back down there.”

“They can wait a few more minutes. They’ll be easier to ‘woo’ after a few drinks, anyway.” He leaned back on his palms, enjoying the gentle breeze on his neck. “I spoke with your old friend Étienne.”

“Sahlo?” Hange’s nose wrinkled. “Let me guess: he brought Othmar to screw with my head before we could get any traction with investors.”

He often forgot how quick Hange was, in spite of the Squad Leader’s tendency to zany, scatterbrained ramblings. *Maybe that’s a mask of sorts, too.* “That was more or less his plan, yes. I also feel like he was using

you to prove a point.”

“What point?”

“That the past always catches up with us.”

“Oh.” Hange studied him. “Does he have information on you?”

“He might. We’re meeting tomorrow morning to lay all the cards on the table.” He held the strong gaze. “You’re steering the conversation away from yourself again.”

Hange shrugged, idly fidgeting with the glasses frame. “What is there to say? Levi told you all about Othmar, anyway.”

“He didn’t.”

A pause. “I figured you two told each other everything.”

“We share a great deal, but only what’s relevant to our goals. He must have assumed your past with Othmar wouldn’t have any impact on your future.”

“Ha! I guess he was wrong.” Hange put the glasses back in place and set the handkerchief aside. “You know about the accident at the old research facility, and that I was blamed—it was Othmar’s fault. He pinned it on me, and I managed to convince myself it was to protect me, but now I’m older and wiser and realize that wasn’t the case. I confronted him about it while we were dancing tonight. He tried to tell me I was just being emotional—acted like a patronizing asshole—and suddenly I knew the truth.” Hange laughed bitterly. “I was so naïve. I threw away my career for him.”

“You made the best decision you could with the experience you had at the time. You had every reason to expect that a man of science, a man who claimed to love you, would value the truth over his own skin.” Erwin watched the reddening clouds on the horizon, remembering the rooftop dance he had shared with Levi, and he felt a swell of optimism. “Besides, it led you to the Survey Corps, and for that, I am grateful. You’re leading a research team, exploring beasts that no human has ever understood. You have the opportunity to apply and observe the effects of every weapon you develop, then iterate on the spot. I can’t see you being in a more fitting role.”

“True. And I do love it. I guess ... ” Hange hesitated. “I guess I just didn’t realize how lonely our work was until I saw him again. It’s just a handful of us holding fast while everyone around us dies. I bury myself in my research because that’s consistent, but I only feel like the officers really know me. Hell, I didn’t even bother to learn the names of my newest squad members, because I expected most of them to die right

away."

Erwin thought of the boy who had died saluting him during the expedition. "We're under so much strain that we have to distance ourselves from our humanity in order to hold ourselves together."

"Yeah, and those of us who survive are always changing. Everything about us is so ... abnormal. When I saw Othmar again, he was still the same, just a normal man, and it made me realize just how naïve *he* is, just how much I've grown." Hange's hands tightened into fists, voice rising. "And he had the nerve to treat me like the same kid, dizzy with love, fresh out of school. His opinion shouldn't matter—he has no clue what we go through. I hate how much this bothers me."

Erwin leaned forward to stare down at the people walking on the street below them. The words rang true: not one of them understood what the Survey Corps went through to protect humanity. Maybe that was what infuriated him so much about men like Sahlo, making important decisions when they didn't understand what they were truly up against.

"There are people in this world who want to force people into labels," Hange said, voice quieter. "They try to categorize us to fit their narrow understanding of the world. Othmar doesn't see me as a person: he sees *Zoë*, and that name is packed with all sorts of assumptions. Labels never really sat well with me. I want people to look past the labels and see *me*."

Erwin struggled to understand. On one hand, he had worked hard to cultivate a personality that others could categorize. He had studied all the labels that held weight in society, carefully understanding the assumptions people would make about him. There were things that others seemed to hold as important—like gender, or attractiveness, or birthplace. He couldn't understand why any of those should have any bearing on a person's worth, but he was happy to take advantage of others' assumptions.

As a teenager, he had thought his refusal to put stock in these assumptions made him superior to people who still grappled with categorizing their fellow humans. Maybe all it had really done was blind him to the suffering of people who didn't fit society's labels themselves.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Hange looked up. "For what?"

"You've been through a lot to get to where you are, and you've stuck true to yourself in a world that tries to force you into roles that

don't fit. I want you to know that I value you—*Hange*. If I deny your requests, it's not because I undervalue the importance of your opinion. It's because I have to constantly weigh the pros and cons of everything the Survey Corps does, and other tasks must take priority right now."

Hange launched at him, and he found himself caught in a hug so tight that his breath wheezed. He wasn't sure how to react, so he settled for an awkward back pat.

"Okay, I'm feeling better." Hange pulled away and shoved the soiled handkerchief into his hand. "Let's get some investors."

❧

In spite of Sahlo's best efforts, Hange returned to the dance floor collected and professional. Othmar was nowhere to be seen—and, curiously enough, neither was Sahlo.

Was he only here for me? Erwin smirked. He's taking every step he can think of to try to intimidate me.

His first stop was Lady Gunnhild, who had already indulged in too many drinks. She whisked Erwin onto the dance floor and her hands were so grabby that Erwin was reminded of his training days, fending off drunken advances of other teenage boys. It was exhausting.

Still, Lady Gunnhild was a shrewd business woman, and when the dance was over, she paid studious attention to Hange's pitch. As she asked more questions, Hange seemed to gain confidence, a spark showing in the dark eyes.

"You are clearly a brilliant person," the Lady said, gripping Hange's shoulder. "But I must do my due diligence and ask: I heard a rumour about an accident in your old research firm."

Hange paled, but Erwin smiled and stepped in. "Our laboratory has a flawless track record since Hange founded it four years ago. Whatever happened in the past, it has given Hange the perspective and the wisdom to ensure we have stringent safety standards. Even the top weapons laboratories here in Mitras have had small fires and accidents within the past four years; the Survey Corps record is perfect." He began to rattle off a list of their accomplishments.

By the time the Lady left, he was certain they had secured an investment.

"That was slick," Hange said.

"I told her the truth."

“The truth she wanted to hear.”

“That’s the key: knowing which truth is most important to each investor.” He eyed the husband-and-wife team across the room. “Incidentally, I want you to enthrall Lord Boris there with the minutiae of your most recent weapon. I’ll speak with Lady Ida about the fiscal aspects.”

By the end of the night, they had successfully spoken with all six investors. It was difficult to gauge their success, but Erwin felt optimistic.

They returned to the hotel after midnight, both of them so tipsy that they had to lean on each other’s shoulders going upstairs. Hange collapsed face-down on the bed in the main room.

“Can I have this one?”

“Yes.” The bedroom in the side room was smaller, but it had a door and a lock. Erwin was hoping for a little private time to entertain warm, fuzzy memories about the first gala he had attended with Levi. But first, he was parched. He sat at the table and poured himself a glass of water.

“Hey Erwin.” Hange’s voice was muffled by the quilt.

“Yes?”

Hange rolled over, glasses crooked. “Tell me more about why you love Levi.”

“You already asked this.”

“You were sober then. I want more details. I bet you’re missing him, and I’m a sucker for romance.”

He smiled softly to himself and looked down at his glass, swirling it as if it were wine. “Well, it’s true that I miss him.” Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to talk about love for a moment. “His skill was the first attraction. From the moment I laid eyes on him, I saw dexterity, speed and strength unlike anything I had ever seen. I told myself it was purely clinical admiration, but I felt it in my heart, not my brain. The next attraction was his resolve.”

Hange rose up on one elbow and snorted. “You mean his stubbornness.”

“Call it what you will; I admire tenacity. His ability to quickly size up the situation was attractive as well. I saw in him a potential partner, a perfect complement to my skill set.”

“You’re talking about him like his Commander.”

“I *am* his Commander.”

“So talk about him like his fiancé-to-be.” Hange squinted at him.

“Do you actually think he’s good looking?”

“Of course.”

“Really?” Hange sat up. “He always looks like he just smelled something bad.”

Erwin gave a soft chuckle, lost in the mental image. “When his nose wrinkles, his lip curls up on the left side. And he’s the only man I know who can smile with his eyes while the rest of his face is scowling.” He traced the rim of his glass with his fingertip. “I gravitate toward people with a grumpy personality. Grumpy people tend to see the world as it really is, and you always know where you stand with them. Besides, his sharp tongue showcases his intelligence, and his crassness is amusing.” He paused. “But there’s softness beneath all that. He’s rough around the edges, but he’s also one of the kindest, most generous people I have ever met.” He thought of Levi buying the apartment in Ehrmich just to keep their symbol of hope alive. He thought of the way he always fixed Erwin’s hair and preened his clothes, the way he gently trailed his slim fingers down Erwin’s body with utter admiration: *look at you*.

But it wasn’t only their interactions that made him so endearing. Levi’s face was also so distraught, so vulnerable at every funeral pyre, and his hugs were always strong and lengthy afterwards. Levi truly cared for the troops, even the ones he didn’t know by name, even the ones who hadn’t been in his squad.

His throat was tight. “You spoke earlier about the human tendency to categorize. People look at Levi and see a violent criminal with crass speech, but he’s so much more complex than that, so multi-faceted. His passion for the well-being of the people around him burns deeper than anyone I have ever met. I’ve survived this long by hiding my vulnerable side, but Levi embraces his and shows it to anyone who treats him with respect. That makes me want to protect him, but at the same time, it makes him the strongest man I’ve ever met. He is fearlessly himself in every situation.”

Hange was watching him with soft eyes. “And here I thought you were going to talk about sex.”

He chuckled. “That’s private.”

“I’m not really that nosy, anyway. I’ve already seen all I need to know.”

“Are you referring to the incident from three years ago? Perhaps it’s time to let that go.”

“Oh, I let it go ages ago. I bugged Levi about it at every oppor-

tunity I could get, and it got old. But I never bugged you about it, and we're friends now, right? So I can resurrect it all over again."

"I'm still the one who holds the fate of your future research in the palm of my hand, so you may want to reconsider," he said dryly.

"Ah, fair enough."

They were silent. The alcohol and the thought of Levi were deep in his head now, and he felt his groin stirring. He finished off his glass of water, and then stood. "Thank you for your help tonight, Hange. Get some sleep. We'll have an early breakfast, and then peruse the jewellery shops before I have to head out to visit Sahlo." He needed something to look forward to before he faced down the lord.

"Night, Erwin," Hange mumbled, eyes already closed.

"Goodnight."

Maybe he should spend some time preparing to face Sahlo, but he could only think about Levi. *A little stress relief might put me in a better frame of mind.*

He locked himself in the bedroom and pulled off his suit jacket, neatly hanging it in the closet. He rolled up his sleeves to avoid mussing them, found a clean handkerchief, then undid his pants and sat on the end of the bed.

He tried to think ahead to what he would do with Levi in Ehrmich, but the fantasy was too complex, and he was too drunk to be creative. Instead, he latched onto a memory from a few weeks ago, before they had become bogged down in expedition planning. They had spent the night drinking with Mike, and Levi had been subtly groping Erwin's thigh under the table all evening until Erwin had given in and dragged him away to their Trost apartment. He recalled the taste of Levi's neck, the way the muscles had strained, the sensation of his throat cartilage under Erwin's tongue, while Levi hardened and groaned beneath him.

He paused to roll onto his stomach, burying his face in the pillow. He couldn't stop recalling the sensation of Levi's throat under his tongue, the way it had vibrated with his groan. Levi's most vulnerable area, the one he clutched when he woke up with nightmares, the one that still made him tense when Erwin shaved it—to hear and feel him react with such pleasure ...

Erwin bit the pillow and came hard into the handkerchief, every inch of his skin tingling.

He stayed frozen like that for another minute, too relaxed to

bother moving, but then his neck began to ache. He released the pillow and rolled onto his back, hands lolling to the side.

When they were apart, it was the little details he missed most, those memories so specific—so *Levi*—that they were tangible. When they got to Ehrmich, he was going to linger on that beautiful throat and rediscover that rumbling groan.

But his barriers were down, and the memory was fading from his grasp. Now all he could see was Sahlo's crooked smile:

It's amazing how weak love makes us, isn't it?

¤

He awoke at dawn drenched in the sweat of an old nightmare: Sahlo, and titans, and Levi disappearing between his teeth.

He hated how deeply Sahlo had wormed his way into his confidence. At least things were about to come to a head. Maybe, one way or another, this feud between them could finally be resolved.

Hange was already getting dressed when he stepped into the main room.

“You call his name in your sleep,” Hange said, pulling on a worn set of uniform boots.

“Levi? Only when I’m having nightmares, I hope.” His jaw tightened. *There is no such thing as a permanent secret.*

Hange paused, watching him. “Are you okay?”

He was going to brush it off, but remembered their discussion in the carriage about sharing burdens. “I’m about to try to blackmail someone without knowing what information he has on me. He’s been building up to this, just as I have, for more than three years. He’s crafty.”

“Then maybe blackmail isn’t the best option. Remember that lesson you taught me about blackmail, all those years ago? Don’t try to blackmail someone whose information outweighs your own. Maybe you’ll have to compromise instead.”

He grimaced. “There’s no room for compromise. We’re short on time.”

“So is everyone.”

“True.” Sahlo did seem like he was getting desperate.

He pulled on a set of black pants and a plain green shirt with a straight collar. He left his hair loose, as much as it bothered him to venture outside without groomed hair. It was better if none of the jewellers

recognized him.

Hange was dressed in dull browns, hair loose and wavy. It was strange to step outside in casual clothes like this. Even when they went out drinking in groups, everyone wore their uniforms. The only person he ever went out with in casual dress was Levi.

They stopped to buy coffee and bread, then toured the shopping district. The shops were just opening, so the streets were empty.

They pretended to be brother and sister, looking together to find a ring for a new sister-in-law. The more distance they could put between Erwin and Levi, the better. It quickly became apparent the shops wanted to sell him ornate rings with gaudy gemstones.

“She likes simple jewellery,” Erwin explained at one promising-looking shop. “Thick, plain bands, no stones. I’m hoping to wear a matching one.”

“Ah, how romantic!” The jeweller reached for his hand and inspected his fingers, then pulled out sizing bands for him to try on. “What size is the lady?”

“About one size smaller than my smallest finger.”

“I see.” The jeweller took a few measurements, and then rustled beneath the counter. “The plain styles you describe tend to be preferred by gentlemen with large hands like yourself, but they aren’t very popular with ladies. However, we have some children’s sizes that might fit the lady in question.”

Hange snickered.

“It’s common for men in the military to get matching bands to give to their children,” the jeweller explained. “Let me show you some of those sets.”

Together, they examined a tray of rings.

“How about this?” Hange asked, holding out a pair of plain metal bands, silver in colour, with a horizontal gradient from dark to light. The gradient instantly reminded Erwin of the sky, and he smiled.

Levi was always meant to fly.

He tried on the larger band. It fit perfectly on the ring finger of his left hand.

“The smaller one is approximately the right size for the lady,” the jeweller said helpfully.

His heart beat in his throat as he pictured kneeling before Levi, looking up at him, slipping this ring onto his finger.

“These are the ones.” He turned to Hange. “Should we purchase

two more for you and your ... friend?" He was too dizzy to think of a good code name for Mike.

"We can get those later. They don't have to match exactly; the important thing is that all four of us wear rings." The Squad Leader was grinning. "I think your future fiancé is going to like this."

Erwin paid and then they stepped into the street.

Hange gave a shriek and launched at him, hugging him tightly.

"Oof," Erwin said good-naturedly, trying to extract himself from the vice-like grip.

"I'm so happy for you." Hange looked up, eyes rimmed with tears. "You two have danced around it for so long, and you've faced so much misery together, and—"

"Perhaps it's unwise to draw this much attention to us." He managed to free his hands and pushed against the Squad Leader's shoulders. "Would you like to hang on to the rings?" He was bound to forget they were in his pocket and inadvertently ruin the surprise when Levi dragged him into private upon their return.

"I'd be honoured." Hange solemnly accepted the bag.

His head was spinning. "Now I just have to work on what I'm going to say when I propose."

"Keep it simple. He doesn't need a speech."

"I suppose he doesn't." Words didn't even need to seem to pass between them to express how they felt. He smiled to himself. May he would just kneel as the sun set behind him, and hold out the ring, and let Levi read between the lines.

"Who are you going to invite?" Hange asked.

Erwin glanced around them and, satisfied they weren't attracting any attention, said, "You, of course. Mike. Moblit and Nanaba both know now, and I trust them both, so they'd be welcome as well. Berit and Silas. Commander Nile and his wife, Marie. Probably no children—it will need to stay a secret, after all, and—" He hesitated, refusing to let his demons surface as he added, "Children aren't always good with secrets."

"Sounds like a good crowd."

"I think so, yes." He considered. "I should probably extend the invitation to my mother, but I'm not sure she would accept."

Hange's eyes were wide. "I didn't realize you had a living family."

"A rarity these days, isn't it? She probably wouldn't be interested in attending. We had a falling out when I was very young." She would probably want it to be a formal church wedding, anyway, and the nature

of their work relationship was such that they couldn't have a real wedding. He cleared his throat. "At any rate, there's no point planning this far ahead. I still don't know for sure he'll say yes, and with the reclamation coming up, we may die before we get the chance."

Hange's face fell. "That's a depressing thought."

"It's my job to consider depressing angles."

They returned to the room and took turns getting cleaned up, then changed into their uniforms. Erwin carefully groomed his hair and his brows, then leaned in close to check for ear hair or stray nose hairs. Satisfied that he looked immaculate, he stood tall. "I want you waiting in the hallway while I speak with Sahlo. I don't expect a skirmish to break out, but if it does, I want you to be ready to come to my aid. Do not attract the attention of the MP unless I tell you to sound an alarm."

"Levi would be better at this," Hange said.

"Levi's not here. I've fought hand-to-hand with you before. You're stronger than you think, and you take a punch with better humour than anyone I've ever met. Sahlo is untrained. The risks are small." Even as he said it, he patted his boot to ensure Levi's knife was in place.

He looked in the mirror one last time, took a deep breath, and then set his face to neutral.

The Military Police headquarters was almost empty—Saturday mornings were always quiet. Erwin held his chin high as he strode down the hall to Sahlo's office. He gave Hange's shoulder a squeeze.

"Wait for me here," he said quietly and, without waiting for a response, he knocked on the door.

"Come in."

He stepped into the office and closed the door behind him.

Sahlo sat at his desk, hands folded in front of him, the brim of his hat masking his face in shadow. He motioned at the chair across from him.

Erwin sat.

"Tea?" Sahlo topped up his own mug with a teapot.

"No, thank you." Erwin quietly took in the room. No one standing nearby, no weapons. He felt his spine relax slightly.

"You've come a long way to be here," Sahlo said. "How long is the ride from Trost to Mitras, exactly? About ten hours?"

"You'll forgive me for having no interest in small talk."

"Of course. There's a lot to get through, and we're on a tight

timeline. You know why you're here." Sahlo poured amber liquid from a flask into his tea, and then paused to take a sip. He leaned back in his chair. "I'm done trying to manage you. It's exhausting. Ever since you and your Captain pulled your little stunt in the Underground, I've had investors to placate, broken trust to repair."

"Our stunt?"

"Stop it." Sahlo's eyes narrowed. "I know you and Levi were in the Underground. I know Zackly did some hand-waving bullshit to cover for you—damned if I can figure out why. Maybe he's protecting you, or maybe he's blackmailing you into some bizarre sexual favours, who knows? You used fake identification crafted by Leona Reid, waltzed into Rage Klein's territory, asked around about me, and started a gang fight. And then your fucking dog killed four people—people who had families, and friends, and roles within Underground society. These are very serious actions, Smith, and they put me in a very, very awkward position."

The hair on the back of Erwin's neck rose, but he stayed silent, hoping Sahlo's apparently chatty mood would lead him to reveal new information.

"The trouble began when you recruited that asshole Levi, of all people." Sahlo took another sip of tea. "He's a petty criminal. I know people around us see *everyone* Underground as petty criminals, but that's ignorance. The denizens of the Underground are people who have developed their own economy and pecking order, and the majority of them are hardworking folks making the best living they can in deplorable circumstances.

"But a few of them are selfish scum, like your dear Levi. He took in orphans—a nice idea in theory, but he trained them to steal and brainwashed them to his entitled way of life. The brats took food out of the mouths of families, far more than their share." He gave a low sigh. "And then you entered the picture, and Lobov went behind my back and hired that good-for-nothing thug."

Erwin tried, and failed, to guess where the conversation was headed.

Sahlo chuckled. "Ah. You look confused. I'm rambling, aren't I? I haven't had much sleep lately."

"I'm surprised a lord knows so much about Underground society," Erwin said. "Do you feel a connection to the Underground because of your mother?"

Their gaze held. Erwin held his face steady; if he revealed it was a desperate guess, he would be handing all his power to Sahlo.

“Interesting,” the lord said, looking genuinely impressed. “You’ve gotten further than any other opponent I’ve ever faced. I promised to lay everything on the table. We’ve locked horns for several years now, but we were always moving in a similar direction. Now we’re reaching a point of direct opposition, and neither can proceed without the other’s cooperation. One of us must take the lead and the other must fall into line.”

“And you think you should take the lead.”

“Of course I do. You’re pushing ahead with this bullheaded, misguided reclamation effort, and you’re so charismatic that you’re developing a strong following among the other Council members. And you’re refusing to bow to pressure, so you leave me with two options: either convince you of my viewpoint, or apply all the pressure I can. The latter might break you, so I’d like to try the former first.”

“There is nothing you can say that can convince me to delay the reclamation effort,” Erwin said flatly. “I know my priorities.”

Sahlo smirked. “But do you truly understand mine? You seem to think I’m desperate for money—that’s what most of our agreements have revolved around until now. I don’t need your money, Smith. You must have caught on to that by now. Money is a perk, and I enjoy luxury, but I’m more concerned with protecting humanity’s most downtrodden.”

Fury rose in Erwin’s throat, but he kept his voice calm: “Your past actions speak differently. I sat in on Council meetings where you pushed for the slaughter of 250,000 refugees after Wall Maria fell. You specifically exempted the noble class from the death lottery. How can you claim to be protecting the poorer classes when you specifically targeted them for your sacrifice?”

Sahlo’s face twisted. “Do you think the Council—most of them who are nobles themselves—would have accepted the lottery idea if they risked losing their lives? I had to appeal to their cowardice to ensure they accepted my idea. Specifically targeting the refugees was the only reasonable option. The initial plans were far more horrific. You and I both know that sometimes we have to set aside smaller moral quibbles to address the larger ones.” He opened a drawer and pulled out a file.

Erwin accepted it and began to skim.

“I had a feeling you’d bring this up, you see,” Sahlo said. “The file

contains the original plan to exterminate the entire Underground population. You weren't privy to this initial stage of planning—only Commander-in-Chief Zackly represented the military in the initial meetings. The MP's First Brigade was to commit this atrocious act. You've heard of them?"

"Only in passing." Erwin flipped the page, still skimming.

"It would have been a slaughter, as if they were animals. Some were even pushing for their meat to be used to feed the starving." Sahlo was clearly agitated, his voice rising. "They said it so carelessly; they didn't view them as people. They were going to hide it from the populace to prevent a panic. At least the lottery and the expedition gave some semblance of meaning to the lives we culled. That's why I fought tooth and nail for it. I convinced the Council that the Underground residents would be too feeble to launch an attack of this magnitude. The refugees, meanwhile, were viewed as interlopers, but they were strong, hardy stock, farmers and manual labourers. They had a better chance of succeeding."

Erwin closed the file and set it on the desk. He would check its veracity with Zackly later. "From where I'm sitting, you look like a man who tore apart families and sacrificed a quarter million lives, then blamed the losses on the Survey Corps."

"Be reasonable, Smith. You're a smart man. You must have seen that there wasn't enough food for every living mouth once Wall Maria fell—you certainly harp on food shortages when you're in Council meetings.

"As for blaming the Survey Corps, you made the most convenient scapegoat. Can you imagine the chaos that would have ensued if people had blamed the government instead?"

He wasn't wrong, but Erwin's blood still boiled. "You've been outspoken about the Survey Corps being a waste of taxpayer money."

"In its current state, it is. Like I said, you made for a convenient scapegoat."

"The Survey Corps is our only hope to reclaim Wall Maria."

"Wall Maria is lost." Sahlo pulled out a cigar and lit it. "You and I both know the chances of reclamation success are slim. Besides, the Wallists have gained such a strong following that repairing the wall is going to cause massive public upheaval. For the sake of preserving life and stability, humanity would be better off developing sustainable food growth while maintaining Wall Rose as our outer wall."

Erwin's jaw was tight; he loosened it, focusing on keeping his expression neutral. "We've seen how easily the titans can break through gates. We still don't know what caused the Colossal and Armoured titans to appear, or when they might appear again. If they make an attack on Wall Rose, we won't have the infrastructure to support our surviving population."

"So you would sacrifice the entire military in an attempt at reclaiming Wall Maria as a sort of temporary buffer? How many thousands of lives do you expect to throw away? Tell me how that's different from what I did. At least you'll lighten the burden on taxpayers and mouths to feed, I suppose, but the survivors will be left without any military at all."

Erwin's confidence, usually a solid coat, was beginning to flake away. "I have a plan, one we'll spend the winter refining, one that will minimize casualties. The timeline is tight, and the more you push back against it, the tighter it becomes. It begins at tonight's Council meeting, when we'll approve the expedition to stock the four remaining checkpoints—"

"Less than that," Sahlo said. "You already restocked at least one checkpoint during your little deviation from my proposed expedition, correct? Knowing your ambition and efficiency, it was probably two."

Erwin held his gaze, refusing to respond.

"Remember the purpose of this meeting, Smith: all cards on the table."

"Forgive me if I'm not eager to show my cards. You haven't exactly shown any that leave you vulnerable."

"True." Sahlo took a moment to light his cigar, and then leaned back in his chair, blowing a smoke ring in the air. "You've learned something about my mother—or you think you have, anyway. I'd be happy to confirm your information."

Erwin wished he'd had more time to prepare. He charged ahead with Levi's suggestion: "Your mother was a sex worker in the Underground. Your father fell in love and brought her to the surface, but even though he tried to keep her origin a secret, everyone knows every other noble's business in Mitras, and rumors began to fly. His investors began to drift away, and the company began losing money. By the time you were orphaned, the company was bankrupt."

"Love is a distraction," Sahlo said, as it to himself.

And how did you get from there to here? Erwin suddenly remem-

bered his own desperation as a teenager, when he had run to the Underground for paperwork and support. If Sahlo had blood ties to the Underground, he would have been likely to do the same.

“Desperate to keep the family business afloat, you began to make business deals with the only people who would respect you: your mother’s people. That’s when you began a working relationship with Rage Klein. Maybe he knew your mother from her days as a sex worker, or maybe you just sought out the strongest ally who wouldn’t care that the Sahlo line’s reputation was tainted. You maintained your relationship with Rage even as you built new relationships with nobles and, over time, repaired your family’s name.”

Sahlo was studying him with cocked brows, one corner of his mouth curled. “You’ve been doing your homework.”

“I have documentation that proves your business alliance with Rage Klein.”

“Impressive.” The lord didn’t look even remotely concerned. “Is that all you’ve learned?”

Was this the best time to try to blackmail him? Erwin couldn’t shake the feeling that the lord was holding back something. He decided to continue with the business aspect of Sahlo’s history and keep his information about the Wallist Brother Étienne in his back pocket.

“You’ve co-opted the name Lord Hasek, using it to continue your shadier business practices. HDB Shipping was one such company. You used it as bait—you intended for me to trace it back to you from the very beginning, when you used Nile Dok to send us to that first silo. You’ve had your eye on me for a very long time, since the days when you and Lobov were allies.” Erwin leaned forward in his chair. “You seem to think I’ll be useful to you. I’m assuming it’s because you had confidence in my strategic abilities and thought you could manipulate me into stealing tax gold from the remaining silos—in which case, you were ten per cent correct. Yet I can’t honestly believe that you’d keep playing a game with me for nearly five years without a larger goal in mind.”

“I had hoped you would have put that part together by now.” Sahlo knocked the ashes off his cigar, and then inhaled, swishing the smoke in his mouth. “I told you, I don’t need your money.”

“But the Underground does.”

Sahlo’s lips curved into a smile. “Now you’re catching on.”

Erwin paced back through their conversation, and the pieces be-

gan to fit together. *We'd be better off looking at sustainable food growth ...*

He sat tall, staring the lord squarely in the eye. "You have a plan. One that allows you to sustainably create food for the Underground population, but it's expensive, so you need funding. Originally, you partnered with Lobov, as he was known to have a vast family fortune, but you quickly realized the two of you alone didn't have enough liquid assets to subsidize your ambitious project. In 844, Lobov moved forward on a plan to cancel the Survey Corps expeditions and funnel the resulting excess funds into the Military Police budget; the MP is so corrupt that syphoning money from their budget is as easy as greasing a few palms."

Sahlo blew a smoke ring. "Our mistake was failing to notice how much power Shadis had given you within the Survey Corps. Shadis would have rolled over to avoid conflict, but you were too driven, too passionate, and you blindsided us. Your dogged pursuit of Lobov distracted him, and that's when he fell victim to your little ploy to recruit Levi. He was too paranoid to listen to my warnings, but I managed to distance myself from him in time to avoid getting snared in your net."

Connections were forming in Erwin's mind, little strands of light strung between points, growing brighter and stronger. "With that option lost and your business partner in jail, your backup plan was to coax the Survey Corps into silo reclamations, intending to syphon the money to your venture through HDB Shipping. I assume you thought I would be easier to control."

"Passionate idiots are always the easiest to manipulate," Sahlo said. "Unfortunately, it quickly became apparent you weren't an idiot. To control you, I would have to set up a game, one you felt like you were winning." His nose wrinkled and he took a sip of his tea. "I didn't expect you to play so well."

So you needed to play another angle at the same time. Erwin remembered the 3DMG-piercing bullets they had encountered in the Underground. He stared the lord down. "You couldn't get the upper hand on me, and the money you were getting from the Survey Corps still wasn't enough to fund your venture, so you turned to Rage Klein. He proposed a deal: he would help fund you, and in return, you would supply him with illicit high-technology weapons—at a nice profit margin for yourself."

"A narrow profit margin," Sahlo said, holding up a finger, "in ad-

dition to a contract: his gang would buy and distribute all food I channelled to the Underground.”

Erwin closed his mouth, trying to figure out where this new puzzle piece fit. He remembered Leona mentioning that Sahlo had a connection to food distribution in the Underground.

“I’ll help you out,” Sahlo said. “I am, for all intents and purposes, Lord Hasek.”

The puzzle pieces still weren’t fitting together. Erwin felt a hot swell of frustration. *He’s still in control of this conversation, in spite of everything I’ve pieced together.*

“All nobles get plentiful food rations,” Sahlo continued. “It’s a dirty little secret known only to the noble class. Thanks to a few well-timed false records and some helpful Underground connections, I created Lord Hasek as a dummy lord to collect extra food rations. As a youth, I smuggled these excess rations to the Underground, where Rage—well, his father, Raphael Sr.—would buy them off me for a pittance. You’re correct, my mother had been an employee of the Klein family, and Raphael Sr. threatened to publicly confirm my impure pedigree if I didn’t cooperate with his demands.” Sahlo’s face flickered with sadness, then twisted back into its default smirk. “But he had unwittingly given me an escape. I planned to disappear into the Lord Hasek name, if required. Reinvent myself. But when Raphael Sr. died and Rage took over, he treated me like a peer, and we became business partners. Since I no longer needed to disappear, the Lord Hasek name transitioned to more widespread use among my associates.”

“I’m certain the Council would frown upon one of their own having long-standing dealings with an Underground drug kingpin.”

Sahlo’s nose wrinkled. “Ah, yes, the drugs. I stayed away from that side of things. Too messy. Rage has his dealings, I have mine.”

“You’re supplying him with weapons. You can’t possibly think those have nothing to do with the drug trade.”

“They’re for self-defense,” Sahlo said, his brows low. “Food is disappearing, and the noble class is getting frightened. We are only one more crisis away from those assholes suggesting an Underground slaughter, eating their meat like they’re livestock. I’ll be damned if—” He seemed to catch himself. He sat tall, silent.

“This sustainable food source you’ve been working on over the past several years,” Erwin said. “You think it will prevent a food crisis?”

When Sahlo replied, his voice was calmer than it had been a

moment ago. “Thanks to the funds provided by people such as you and Rage, my team has zeroed in on a nutritive yeast that grows quickly, provides most major nutrients, and doesn’t require much in the way of space or energy to create. It’s derived from the preservative yeast your Survey Corps uses every day. It looks like feces and tastes like bile, but it can provide the bulk of a population’s diet. We just need six more months to start mass production.” He stared intently at Erwin. “We are on the cusp of eradicating the current hunger crisis.”

“At a profit.”

“A small one. I need to make a living.”

“And what role do you need me to play?”

Sahlo smiled. “Astute. I need you to delay the reclamation effort until the fall of 850. As I said, we’re only one crisis away from a cull. The mass death of the military would surely count as such a crisis.”

“You’re doing a good job of delaying it on your own.”

“You underestimate your own charisma.” Sahlo took a last drag from the cigar, and then snuffed it. “Zackly and Pixis trust you completely, and Dok has stars in his eyes whenever he talks about you. Minister Nick thinks you’re a godless heathen, but that’s no surprise, and I’m not about to underestimate your ability to appease him.” He folded his hands on the desk. “I’m tired of wrestling for power with you, Smith. We’ve seen before that we make a good team when we cooperate.”

Erwin studied him. “Your solution relies too heavily on the status quo. We need as many walls between us and the titans as possible. We need space. The Underground denizens need sunlight.”

“And your solution relies too heavily on the delusion that it’s possible to reclaim Wall Maria.”

Their gaze held.

“I can delay the checkpoint stocks,” Erwin said. “But I cannot allow another harvest season to slip by before Wall Maria is safely under our control.”

“I refuse to accept your half-assed compromise.” Sahlo’s voice tightened. “We’re running out of time. If your reclamation effort fails, the government *will* turn on the Underground to keep the peace. It may even be worse than that—who’s to say they’ll stop there? What’s more, the special weapons won’t be ready in time for your proposed date, and both the MP and Rage have need of them before you move on Wall Maria. I’ve made this very clear, Smith: I need you to agree to my dates.”

Erwin stood. “Your yeast product sounds promising. The Survey Corps would be happy to endorse it once the Wall is under our control.”

Sahlo stood, slamming his palms into the desk. “You have no clue what you’re doing, Smith.”

Erwin strode toward the door. The lord’s voice spoke behind him, softer:

“But that’s not the name I should call you, is it?”

He halted, stomach dropping. “You may call me Commander.”

“Before you go, Commander, I want to tell you a story. I think we have just enough time.”

Erwin turned.

Sahlo’s face was stony, his gaze sharp. He had never looked more dangerous. “This is a story about a young boy whose father is taken away by the Military Police.”

The ground began to tilt beneath Erwin.

Sahlo wasn’t blinking. “The boy is taken, too, and he isn’t supposed to remember it, but somehow, he does. After his father dies, the boy’s mother gives a fake name to the boy and his sister, a common one no one would ever question. They disappear for a while, and then the boy surfaces in the military. He’s a bright kid, top of his class. Everyone recognizes his talent, saying he’s going to be Commander-in-Chief one day. But he surprises everyone and snubs the Military Police, choosing the Survey Corps instead.”

Erwin marched to the desk, looming over the lord. “Enough.”

“Don’t interrupt. It’s rude.” Sahlo’s eyes narrowed. “Every soldier knows the Survey Corps’ role: to aggressively face down the titans. The boy is different. Almost immediately, he begins presenting strategies to try to evade titans, in pursuit of—what, exactly? Pushing deeper into titan territory, to what end? A few people begin to get nervous, including his Commander. At first, the boy’s strategies are amateurish and clumsy, but soon he begins to make sense, and eventually, his Commander decides to trust him. Now the boy has everyone’s attention, and not all of it is good. Even the Wallists are aware of him. Even the King.”

Erwin searched the lord’s eyes, trying to read him. *Just how deep are Sahlo’s connections?*

“Nothing deters the boy. Even when society paints him as a villain, even when countless people die beneath his command, he doesn’t slow. And now those interested parties are even more concerned. What are the boy’s goals? How far will he go to achieve them?”

He is an unknown. He must be reined in. He blindly charges forward, unaware of how tenuous his survival really is. It's only friends on the inside who keep him going, friends who insist he can be *controlled*. But even that is a challenge, because the boy lives by his own moral code, and he stubbornly sticks to it to the exclusion of all logic."

Shivers ran down Erwin's spine. This was too much new information all at once. Sahlo was overloading him on purpose. *He wants to throw me off balance, force me into decisions while I'm reeling.*

"Are you implying you're trying to protect me?" he said aloud.

"I'm implying it's mutually beneficial if we renegotiate the terms of our alliance." Sahlo's hands folded on the table again, the knuckles white. "This world is far, far, *far* more complex than either you or your papa dreamed. Until now, you have been tolerated. Keep pushing forward, and that will change. I'm not your friend, but I'm the closest thing to it."

While Erwin's gut instinct was to view Sahlo with suspicion, he remembered the conversation his mother had overheard at the Wallist compound. She had assumed it had been Étienne pushing for Erwin's assassination, but what if she had mixed up the parties involved? What if Sahlo had actually been trying to convince another Wallist to take a different approach? What if he was tiptoeing around them for his own reasons?

Erwin felt an unexpected wave of fatigue. He was tired of dancing around Sahlo, and the Wallists, and their investors, and the Council. Why couldn't everyone see they were all fighting the same war? *The entire system is steeped in corruption.* There was only one way he was going to get anywhere: the system needed to be dismantled. Then Wallists and lords like Sahlo and even the King himself would be unable to stand in humanity's way.

"You're wasting your energy and your time; I refuse to budge." Erwin stood tall. "Our priorities are clear: Wall Maria must be reclaimed as soon as possible."

"I don't think you understand," Sahlo growled.

"I understand perfectly: you're caught in a web, strung up between Rage Klein, the Wallists, the Council, and maybe even the King. You've wrapped yourself in so many threads that you can no longer move, and you need me to help free you."

"You would condemn the people of the Underground to a mass culling?"

“A theory based on your paranoia.”

“But what if I’m right? How would you feel if everyone in the Underground was executed?” Sahlo’s chin lifted. “How would *Levi* feel?”

Their eyes held.

Running boot steps sounded in the hallway outside. Erwin turned to face the door, his blood running cold. He heard frantic murmurs. One of the voices was Hange

“Ah, just in time,” Sahlo said. “I wasn’t able to stop it from happening, but I was able to reduce its severity. That’s what you need me for, Smith: I’m the only one on the inside who’s willing to be reasonable.” He stood and tipped his hat. “I want you to think long and hard about the boy in my story. Consider that I showed you all my cards today, and I would only be comfortable doing that if I held all your cards in my hand. If you won’t listen to reason, maybe you’ll listen to fear.”

A knock sounded at the door, followed by Hange’s frantic voice: “Commander!”

“You should get the door,” Sahlo said. “It sounds important.”

-30-

FRAY

Levi watched as Erwin and Hange's carriage disappeared down the road, leaving for the Capital. He already felt lonely. It was going to be a long few days until they returned.

At least there was plenty to keep him busy in their absence. His first task, before he even looked at his assignments from Erwin, was to find Mike. He strode straight to the san and, as expected, found the Squad Leader at Nanaba's bedside. Nanaba was sitting upright, eating a bowl of runny oatmeal.

Levi dropped to a seat beside Mike and peered at Nanaba. "How are you feeling, blondie?"

She gave a polite smile. "Recovery's slow but steady, Captain."

"She's able to sit up without too much pain," Mike said, not looking at him. "That's something." He hadn't made eye contact since the night they had performed their impromptu procedure on the woman, and Levi couldn't tell if it was just a normal post-trauma reaction, or if Mike was genuinely upset with how Levi had decided to treat the wound. Nanaba was alive, recovering, and infection-free. That had to count for something.

Besides, it wasn't as if Levi had made the decision to cauterize on a whim. Farlan had suffered burns on his torso when he was young, and even as an adult, the scars had given him a lot of grief. Choosing to inflict the same type of wounds on a colleague was something he would never do by choice; it had been their only option. He hoped Mike was able to see that.

"Erwin's gone. He left us assignments." Levi paused, noting the purple circles under the shaggy bangs. "We'll start tomorrow. Maybe get

some sleep.”

Mike nodded, hair flopping in his face.

“And a haircut,” Levi added.

Mike grunted, noncommittal.

“You should get some rest too, Nanaba.” Barely an hour into holding down the base, and Levi had already asked Moblit, Mike, and Nanaba to rest. Maybe that would be his leadership style while Erwin was away: making sure everybody got some fucking sleep.

He stood to leave, then squinted. Was that Petra in the bed in the corner? She grinned sheepishly at him and waved her free hand; the other was in the process of being wrapped by a medic.

His brows furrowed. “What the hell did you do?”

“I was a bit overzealous during sparring, Captain. Bruised my first two knuckles pretty badly.”

“Hm. Up against Oluo, were you?” Only two things made Petra fight hard enough to bruise: a titan and Oluo. Levi thought of his cracked nose, once upon a time, and realized he might count as a third.

“Sorry, Captain,” Petra said. “He made a comment about fighting for my hand in marriage.”

“I’m surprised he’s not in here, too.”

“I think he’s too embarrassed.” Petra grinned. “I got him pretty hard.”

Levi found himself unable to muster sympathy. He had a high tolerance for banter between soldiers, but not when it was outright disrespectful. “Next time, you tell him to come talk to me.”

“There you go,” said the medic, finishing the wrapping. “You’ll be good as new in a few days. Don’t punch anything else in the meantime.”

“Thank you.” Petra hopped down from the bed. Even at her full height, she was shorter than Levi—a novelty around the base. She saluted him. “Captain, I was wondering if you needed any help while Commander Erwin was away.”

“Why would I need help?”

“Well … ” Her voice dropped and she leaned closer. “Squad Leader Mike looks like he’s not in the right frame of mind to help out right now. Maybe you could use an assistant until he’s feeling better?”

His mouth was already moving into position to deliver a ‘no’, but he glanced at Mike. Mike’s head was bowed; he still hadn’t moved from Nanaba’s side.

Besides, he still felt badly about being rude to Petra during their last sparring session. He owed her a bit of kindness, and she seemed eager to help.

“Fine. But you’re still going to be expected to do your normal training on top of it. Well, everything you can do with that messed-up hand.”

Petra smiled and saluted. “Thank you, Captain! Where shall I start?”

“Erwin left a list of tasks for me on my desk, but I haven’t read them yet. Come on.”

They proceeded to his office. Levi lit the boiler and pulled out two teacups, while Petra reached for the list on his desk.

Panic flared in his chest. Erwin might have left “special” instructions for Levi on that list. He lunged forward and snatched it out of her hand, scanning it.

“Oh,” Petra said. “I—”

“It’s fine.” Satisfied that there was nothing lewd or confidential, he handed it back. “Go ahead.”

Petra blinked at him a few times, then continued reading. Her confused look faded into disappointment. “Half of these are cleaning tasks.”

Levi began to spoon tea leaves into the metal filter. “He knows I’ll spend most of the time making everyone clean up the base no matter what his orders say, so he wants to pretend he’s the one who gave the orders. Erwin’s a control freak like that.”

“The rest of these are admin tasks.” She was still frowning.

“What did you think I’d be doing while he was gone?”

“I don’t know. Strategy planning? Something more exciting than admin work.”

“Strategy is Erwin’s department. Besides, the Wall reclamation is less than six months away. The most important thing we can do right now is spend our time training to make sure we’re in our best possible shape for it.”

They began by sorting the soldiers into cleaning teams, focusing on each soldier’s cleaning strengths. By the time daily training exercises were about to begin, the afternoon’s cleaning was all planned, too.

As the soldiers gathered in the yard for their morning training, Levi read out their afternoon cleaning team assignments, Petra at his side. A chorus of mutters and groans arose from the crowd, and Petra

narrowed her eyes at the offenders. The mutters stopped. Levi nodded at her, impressed. He was never certain if it was her fierceness that inspired fear in others, or if her usual sweetness made her displeasure that much more obvious, but when Petra glared, people took it to heart.

Next, they broke into their training teams. Levi's squad was scheduled to train 3DMG in the yard, while Mike's squad would train calisthenics and hand-to-hand, and Hange's squad had target practice. Levi appointed Dita as the temporary leader of Mike's squad, then asked Petra to lead the target practice.

Petra's eyes widened. "Me? Shouldn't Eld or someone else be doing that instead?"

"Eld isn't my assistant today. It's easy. Just make them line up behind the targets and go through several different types of throws. Make sure you get in some training, too. I've seen you miss easy throws during the last couple scouting missions."

Petra's face fell, and Levi felt a twist of guilt. He had to remember Petra was extremely sensitive to his criticisms; he also had to stop being so hard on her. *Being hard on her won't change what happened to Isabel.*

He leaned closer. "Besides, no one in Mike's squad can touch you hand-to-hand. They're already shaken up enough about Mike and Nanaba. Don't need you disheartening them any more by beating the shit out of them."

He wasn't sure she believed him, but she smiled anyway and lifted her wounded hand. "I don't think that would be a problem today."

"I still wouldn't bet against you." He turned and signalled for his squad to follow him.

They moved into the park behind the base; he sent teams into the trees to set up dummy targets. He glanced at one of the benches on the path, struck by how much he missed Erwin. They often paced these pathways at night, usually discussing work topics, but sometimes just stealing kisses behind trees or, if they were feeling really brave, on benches. Now that he thought about it, it had been a long time since they had done any kissing here at all.

After Wall Maria. So much will go back to normal after Wall Maria. That was the strength of their relationship: it was flexible to work around their goals, like water finding its way through rocks.

He looked away from the benches, trying to ignore the ache in his chest.

They trained until lunch, then rotated stations after lunch. As the younger recruits went to a classroom session to brush up on formations, the remaining soldiers assembled in their cleaning teams. His squad tackled the laboratory—with Hange out and Moblit sleeping, this was their one chance to do it without protest. They carefully skirted suspicious looking casings, beakers, and powders, tidying up the rest of the mess. Cobwebs had built in the corners, and Levi swore he could smell Hange's armpits through the entire room. He tried to be angry, but he just felt lonely. With Hange and Erwin away and Mike out of commission, he was short on friends.

At least Petra was available to keep him company. After dinner, he brought her into his office and assigned her the dullest paperwork he had, hoping to take advantage of her keenness before she fully realized how boring the work was. She settled on a chair on one side of his desk, and he settled on the other.

By midnight, they were both glassy-eyed and yawning. If Erwin had been present, Levi would have put on the kettle and prepared for a long night of work together, but he found his eyelids drooping. It was as if being around Erwin gave him the energy to push past his body's limitations. He stood and set his paperwork aside. “I’m fucking wiped.”

Petra smiled brightly at him. “Perhaps it’s a good time to turn in. Thank you, Captain. This was fun.”

“Fun?” He wrinkled his nose. “Filling out expense forms?”

“I felt useful.”

He tapped his papers against the desktop to even the edges. “You’re always useful. You’ve got more assists than anyone else in the Corps. Be proud of that, kiddo.” He froze the instant the far-too-familiar nickname left his lips. There he was, equating her to Isabel again.

Petra was quiet.

He shrugged off his embarrassment. “Get some sleep. There’s more work tomorrow if you want to help out again.”

“Thank you, Captain.” She saluted, then left the room.

He lifted his gaze to watch her leave. What was it about her that made him miss Isabel so much? Both Erwin and Hange had told him they didn’t see the resemblance when he had expressed the comparison, but neither of them had known Isabel like he had. Maybe it was the way Petra looked up to him with stars in her eyes, just like Isabel had. *Big brother...*

Isabel had never understood just how much he had needed *her*.

Her goofiness and optimism had been sunshine in the dreary Underground. She had been genuinely funny, sometimes by accident, sometimes on purpose. He couldn't count how many times she had clowned around to make them laugh, and then Farlan would start up with his stupid, snorting guffaw. Levi had never been able to maintain a straight face with the two of them around.

“Fuck.” He raked a hand through his hair, trying to claw his way out of this sinkhole, but he was only sinking deeper. Now he was remembering the two of them teaming up against him, trying to make him smile. Their last Christmas together, 843, they had dragged a filthy tree into the house, so scraggly it was barely a branch. He had lectured them on muddying up his floors, and they had responded by wrapping him in the garland meant for the tree, laughing at his growling protests. And that horrible “feast”: stolen military supplies, thick with the taste of yeast that had been so foreign back then.

But then after dinner, they had surprised Levi with a birthday gift: a small bag of sweets, a salt water taffy placed carefully at the top. That night, he had held it to his chest, a tear rolling down his cheek, feeling loved and appreciated in a way he didn’t know how to reciprocate.

The door opened.

His head snapped up.

Petra stepped into the room, then jumped. “Oh, sorry, Captain, I thought you left right behind me. I left my jacket on the chair.”

He didn’t trust his voice, so he nodded and sat stiffly, waiting for her to grab the jacket and leave. As she approached, however, her face dropped.

“Captain.” She hesitated. “Are you okay?”

He was exhausted. “Ever have those nights where things from the past come back to haunt you for no fucking reason?”

Her eyes widened. “Maybe? I think about fallen comrades—”

“No, I mean … family.” Why was he saying this? *She’s not Isabel. You can’t be this open with her.*

“Oh.” She shrugged. “I’m lucky; my family life is pretty good. I mean, Mom and Dad would rather I dropped out of the military to get married—”

“I thought your mother was dead.”

She stared blankly at him.

“Sofi Lalonde,” he said. “When I first met you. You said your

mother died when you were young.”

“Oh. That was just part of the cover story I made up.” She hesitated. “You remembered that detail?”

He wasn’t sure why that particular detail had been so important to him. The inside of his head was stretching, twisting. *I wish I could remember—*

“Are you remembering your family?” she asked.

“No.” He paused. “Your family wants you to leave the military?”

“Well, they want me to go back to the Military Police, meet a nice man and give them grandkids.” She snorted. “I’d rather not, though. Get married. Not yet. I mean, my husband would have to understand military life. And most of the men here are taken … or they’re Oluo.”

He wasn’t sure why she had volunteered so much information, but the company was giving him something to focus on other than the weird twisting in his head. “Military relationships are hard.” He thought of Berit. He thought of Erwin. “Lots of extra stress.”

There was a long pause, then she said, a bit timidly, “It sounds like you’re speaking from experience?”

He tried to think like Erwin: he sidestepped the question. “The stress of it doesn’t seem to stop people. So many new recruits fucking in supply closets and classrooms like animals, leaving gobs in the corners, staining their uniforms.”

Her nose wrinkled. “That’s disgusting.”

“Yeah.”

“I guess people get lonely, and they cling to each other to feel a bit less lonely.”

“Yeah.” He thought of Erwin again. Now the twisting was in his chest as well as his head.

He realized Petra was staring at him. Was he showing too much emotion? He drew his face into neutral.

“I bet it’s worth the stress, though,” Petra said, eyes shining. “If you find the right person.”

Sunshine and optimism.

“Yeah, probably.” He thought of Ehrmich, of the sunset on the hill. “Don’t write it off just yet.”

“What?”

“Love. Getting married. These things can sneak up on you out here.” He pictured Erwin on one knee, proposing a future they would probably never live to see. “One day, you’ll look at someone you’ve seen

day after day, and you'll realize everything's different. Yeah, you've seen them on the battlefield at their worst, covered in blood and worn down, and you thought you knew them better than anyone else in the world. But then this one day, you'll be listening to them speaking, and you'll realize you're anticipating their mannerisms and the cadence of their speech. And maybe you already trusted them, and maybe you already would have fought to the death to protect them anyway, but somehow you feel an even deeper bond than that. You don't know how it happened, but they're just suddenly *important*."

He still wasn't sure when, exactly, the shift had happened. Even when Wall Maria had fallen, when he had first seen Erwin as human, there had still been a divide between them. Somehow, by the time Erwin put his arms around him for the first time, that divide had already closed.

Petra was looking down, a small smile on her lips. "I think I know what you mean."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. There ... might be someone special to me."

"Huh." Maybe opening up this much wasn't so bad, if it was going to make her feel a little better about her own situation. "Well then, as your Captain, I say go ahead. Have fun. But beware of military fraternization rules. I don't want one of my best soldiers getting suspended just because she's horn—" He quickly reconsidered his phrasing. "Just don't get caught."

Her cheeks were bright red, but she was smiling. *That should make up for all the times I've made her feel like shit lately.*

"Get some sleep." He stood. "You're going to help me with more paperwork tomorrow."

"Thank you, Captain." She pulled on her jacket and saluted, then left.

He carried the lamp to his room, locking the door behind him. The shirt he had taken from Erwin that morning was folded in his closet. He lifted the collar to his face and breathed in. Memories rose to his mind of the night before, when they had taken the shirt off together in-between long kisses. He stripped to his underwear, then pulled it over his head; it came almost to his knees, the sleeves hanging to his fingertips. The fabric was worn and soft.

He slid into bed and curled on his side, his eyes heavy.

In Levi's dreams, Sahlo was holding his knife, using it to slash Erwin's neck, backhanded, from ear to ear.

Levi's eyes snapped open. The sound of Erwin's gurgling breath was still echoing in his mind, and so he wasn't certain, at first, if the noise from the window was real.

The silhouette, however, was undeniably real. It stood outside his window, carefully balanced on the ledge, backlit by faint lamplight from below. There was the sound again: metal sliding between window panes. The silhouette was trying to open the window latch with a file or a knife.

It can't be a random thief. No one would break into a military base. It must be an assassin.

Levi's heart beat in his throat. If he rushed in now, he could knock the intruder out the window, but the fall would kill them. No chance for interrogation.

He reached for the knife on his bedside table, then remembered he had sent it off with Erwin. He quickly ticked through his room in his mind, mapping escape routes and makeshift weapons.

Another sliding sound. So the intruder was inexperienced; an expert assassin would have opened the window on the first try.

This fight's already over. He had superior skill, knowledge of his room's layout, and the element of surprise. All he had to do was wait.

And wait.

He was just starting to get bored when the window swung open, noiseless. *So you took the time to oil the hinges—maybe you aren't a complete idiot.*

The intruder rushed toward him.

Levi waited until the shadow was right beside him, then barrelled into it at stomach-height and rammed it against the corner of the desk. A deep voice yelled and hands groped at him, trying to fight back, but he was already spinning, throwing the intruder over his head.

A thud. The intruder lay on the floor, stunned.

Levi grabbed a letter opener from the desk and lunged at the fallen intruder, but he paused.

Light appeared in the cracks around the door.

Shit—

He shielded his eyes, but the door swung open before he was

ready, and the light blinded him.

“Help,” the intruder wheezed.

He brought friends, Levi thought, already barrelling toward the door. After a couple blind stabs, the letter opener landed in soft flesh; he dove to the side and rolled toward the corner. There was a broom there he could use as a staff. He scrabbled at empty air. His roll had come up short. He crawled forward, his eyes still slowly adjusting to the brightness.

The hair on the back of his neck moved.

He ducked to the side and felt a sting of metal glance his cheek. His hand closed over the broom handle; he rolled and lifted it in time to block a heavy blow from a sword. His attacker struggled; Levi shoved, and the figure tumbled backwards.

A smash. The lamp. A puddle of oil caught fire.

“Mike,” Levi roared, wondering why the hell he hadn’t come running yet. He stepped back from the blaze, his eyes finally adjusted enough to see his attackers.

He froze.

The three attackers slunk toward him, ignoring the blaze quickly building behind them. Two men—blond and black-haired—and a girl with fiery red hair in pigtails. *Sunshine and optimism*.

“What the fuck is this?” he growled, holding his broom in front of him.

They looked uncertain. Young. One of them had a gun like the ones Rage’s group had used against them in the Underground. Another held military swords, and the girl held a knife.

“Mike!” he yelled, louder this time. He knew Mike was a heavy sleeper, but to sleep through the smell of a blaze, too?

He’s in the san with Nanaba, he realized, his stomach sinking. And since Erwin had gone to such great lengths to make sure they were in an isolated section of the base, no one was going to hear his cries for assistance.

The trio was still inching forward, their hands shaking.

Levi sank squarely into his stance. “You know I only need to question one of you, right?”

The trio exchanged glances.

“You.” He nodded at the dark-haired boy. “Your bones are the smallest. I’ll crack each of them, one by one, until you talk. And if you don’t, your neck is last, and then—” He nodded at the redhead. “I’ll start

with your bones next." His stomach was in knots. "That's if you come out of this alive."

The girl barked, "Now!"

The three converged.

Levi kicked the blond away and blocked the other boy's swords, ducking and twisting to avoid the slash of the knife. He threw out his leg and swept out four legs. The blond had recovered and darted forward. Levi slammed the end of the broom handle into his gut. The boy dropped. Levi stomped on his shin for good measure; the bone snapped, and the boy howled.

Now all three of them were on the ground, and the fire was licking across the last of the oil. He couldn't tell yet if the floor was going to catch, but if it did, the whole building could be at risk. He ran for the bed and yanked off the quilt with his free hand, dropping it over the flames to snuff them.

The girl was trying to stand; he swung the broom against her head. She fell, unconscious.

The dark-haired boy rose to his feet. He looked even less certain now than before, but he charged.

Levi spun the broom as he sidestepped, slamming the handle down on the bones of the boy's forearm so hard that the broom handle snapped. The boy yelped and dropped his swords.

Levi grabbed him by the hair and drove a jagged point of the broken handle against his throat, stopping just shy of breaking the skin. "Talk," he growled.

The boy spat at him.

Levi grabbed the boy's hand and twisted. The wrist cracked, and the boy screamed.

"Shut up. Who sent you?"

"I can't—"

Levi stomped his toes, trying to ignore the swell of satisfaction as he felt bones break beneath his weight. "The human body only has so many bones, kid, and yours are all brittle."

"Fuck!" The boy dropped to the ground, grabbing his foot. "You fucking psycho!"

"Is he worth protecting?" Levi asked, squatting beside him. "Or just paying well?"

"Hasek," whimpered the boy. "We were sent by Lord Hasek."

Even though it was no surprise, Levi's eyes narrowed.

He strode over to the quilt, gingerly lifting it to make sure the flames were out. Then he moved to the door.

“You so much as move from that spot, and I’ll make sure you never move again.”

The boy’s only response was a soft sob; he was still preoccupied with his foot.

Levi strode down the hallway, giving shrill whistles as he strode toward the other quarters, trying to attract the attention of anyone who might be in earshot.

A small figure came running toward him, carrying a candle.

“Captain? Are you bleeding?”

“Petra?” He looked down and saw blood spatters across Erwin’s shirt. *Fuck.* “You patrolling?”

She came to a halt in front of him, still dressed in her uniform. “Yeah, I couldn’t sleep.”

“You missed a spot.” He pointed at his room. “Go get Mike and tell him he’s helping me question three assassins. We’ll need to move them to the cells downstairs.”

Her eyes widened. “Captain, are you okay?”

“Erwin’s gone for one single day, and his politics explode in my face.” He whirled on his heel and strode toward the room. “I’ll see if I can get more information out of them by the time you return with Mike.”

cg

Petra was eager—a little too eager—to help with the questioning, but Levi sent her to organize emergency patrols of the yard instead. There were some tasks only suited to a veteran soldier.

Instead, Mike guarded the cell door while Levi questioned their captives. It didn’t take much more pressure to get them to talk. They were just dumb kids from the Underground, desperate for a job.

“He said he liked the look of us,” the blond said.

Because you look like me, Farlan and Isabel. Levi tried not to let it get to him, but he was exhausted. He walked away, leaving them to Mike. “Maybe get them some morphine, if you’re feeling generous. I’ll send out a runner to the Garrison, and another to Erwin.” The Garrison could transfer the prisoners to the Military Police for processing. He would report it as a break-and-enter gone wrong, not an assassination attempt.

The courts would go easier on them that way.

He wrote out his report and sent Eld to the Capital to deliver it to Erwin. He sent Gunther to the Garrison. He asked Oluo, Nifa and Gelgar to clean his room—there was ash, oil, and blood to deal with. Likely he would have to redo their work later, but he was too exhausted to deal with it himself right now.

Once all that was taken care of, he dropped to a seat at his desk, staring at nothing.

Sahlo's voice rose in his mind: *I will go through anything, and anyone, to get him to cooperate—and I'll start with his lover.*

His jaw clenched. Erwin was strong enough to withstand this type of pressure, wasn't he?

I can't be his weakness. Not now, when we're so close to reclaiming the Wall.

Petra poked her head in his doorway. "Sir?"

"What?"

"Are you okay?"

He shrugged, annoyed by her persistence. "What do you think?"

"I could make you a cup of tea. You're probably a bit shaken."

He paused. If the alternative was considering the detriments of Erwin being in love with him, he could use the distraction. "Yeah, okay."

She smiled and closed the door, then lit the hot plate beneath his kettle. "That shirt looks a little big on you."

He felt his cheeks flush; he looked away. "They mixed up my laundry once. It was comfortable. Too bad it's fucked now; bloodstains never come out." *Off fabric ... of hands.*

He thought of the murders he had committed in the Underground. Was Sahlo going to find a way to use that against Erwin, too? Or was he using other tactics? No matter how often Erwin pretended he would go to any lengths to achieve his goals, he had too many pressure points: Levi, his family, the Doks, even Berit.

And I'm the biggest weakness of all.

The conversation they had started in the tree overlooking Wall Maria had never been addressed, not properly. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. If Erwin returned and he had stood up to Sahlo's pressure tactics, then everything was fine. But if he returned and Levi had been his weakness, they would have to revisit the treetop conversation. And this time, they would finish it, one way or another.

"Fuck," he muttered.

“Here,” Petra said.

He opened his eyes to see a mug of tea. It was a bit weak for his liking, but he appreciated the gesture. She took a mug of her own and sat beside him.

“How are you holding up?”

Levi gave a low sigh. “I wish Erwin was coming back sooner. We need to talk about how this changes everything around here—base defense plans and all that.” *And us.*

Petra smiled. “You think very highly of the Commander, don’t you? You mention him a lot when he’s not around.”

“I do?” That was something Hange had pointed out, too, before he and Erwin had even kissed for the first time. “Well, he’s my direct superior, so it makes sense. I bet you end up talking about me a lot when I’m not around, just because you’re referring to my orders.”

Her cheeks darkened and she stared into her teacup. “Maybe a bit.”

In moments like this, he wondered if there was some truth to Erwin’s constant assertions that Petra had developed a crush on him. She was sweet and gentle with everyone—well, almost everyone—so it was difficult to tell, but her expression now was unusually bashful. *I should probably do something to discourage that.*

Before he could think of what to say, Petra spoke: “There are some ... rumours about you and the Commander.”

“Rumours,” he repeated, chest tightening. *Is that how Sahlo found out?*

“About how you joined the Survey Corps. It’s none of my business. I can tell you two are very close, that’s all.”

His eyes narrowed at Petra as he assessed her expression. “What do these rumours say?”

“That Commander Erwin brought you into the Corps.”

“That’s it? That’s not a very juicy rumour.”

“Well ... ” She hesitated, and he held his breath. “They say you’re from the Underground. That you were a violent criminal.”

He released his breath. “I see. What do you think?”

“I don’t know.” She shrugged a little. “I met you when you were breaking into the MP headquarters, and you seemed to know what you were doing. But you were probably just following Commander Erwin’s orders, so it doesn’t necessarily mean you were an experienced criminal.”

He decided not to confirm it one way or another. “Well, it’s true that I’m here because of Erwin, but I’ll let you figure out the rest of it yourself.”

“I see.”

She already looked like she knew more than she was letting on. He suddenly realized how tired he was of secrecy. There was a kind face right in front of him who could help support him while Erwin, Hange, and Mike were out of reach.

“You’re right,” he said quietly. “We’re very close. I hate that he’s in the Capital right now and I’m not at his side to protect him. When he gets the message about what happened tonight, I’m not going to be there to talk him through it. Sometimes he overthinks things like this. I guess that’s why I keep mentioning him. We rely on each other a lot.”

Petra’s face was soft. “At least Squad Leader Hange is there with him.”

“I guess.” Hange was a decent conversationalist, but Levi knew Erwin inside and out. “Look, just keep this conversation between the two of us, okay? There are people who would try to get to him through me, or the other way around, if they knew how important we were to each other.”

“Oh. Is that what happened tonight?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I won’t tell a soul,” she said solemnly. “You know I’m good at keeping secrets. I never did tell anyone about what happened at the MP HQ when we first met.”

“I suppose you didn’t,” he said, relieved that she understood.

⁂

A knock sounded at the door, followed by Hange’s frantic voice: “Commander!”

“You should get the door,” Sahlo said. “It sounds important.”

Erwin clenched his jaw as he strode to the door. He threw it open.

Hange grabbed him by the collars. “Erwin! Levi’s been attacked.’ His stomach dropped. “What’s his status?”

“The Captain’s fine, sir.” Eld appeared on his left, saluting. He was out of breath. “Three assassins: two men, one woman. I have a full report.” He pulled out an envelope.

Erwin pushed Hange's hands off his collars and grabbed the envelope.

Three assassins. Dumb kids from the Underground. 'Lord Hasek' sent them. Didn't take much pressure to get them to talk. Garrison will collect them soon. They'll detain them until we give the release order in case we need them to speak in court.

He picked them because they looked like me, Farlan, and Isabel. He's fucking with our heads. Watch your back, Erwin.

-Levi

Pressure began to build deep inside Erwin; he swallowed hard, fighting to suppress it. He whirled and stormed into Sahlo's office. The lord was leaning back in his chair, a half-smirk on his face.

“You’re getting reckless,” Erwin said, tone leaden.

“Reckless? Ha!” Sahlo leaned forward, slamming the chair’s front legs to the floor. “I’m showing restraint. My cohorts wanted to kill him, slit his throat from ear to ear. I managed to convince them to scare him a little instead, maybe remind him where he came from. I told you, Erwin: I’m the closest thing you have to a friend right now.”

Eld came to a halt on Erwin’s left, Hange on his right. *No*, Erwin thought, *I have many more friends than you think.*

“You just confessed to your involvement in front of three witnesses,” he said aloud.

“Do they know?” Sahlo asked.

Erwin didn’t respond, certain he was about to be baited, but the lord pressed ahead without waiting for an answer:

“Do they know you and Captain Levi are in a romantic relationship?”

Eld’s eyes snapped to him. Hange stood very still.

Erwin ignored his dread, forcing a raised brow instead. “A romantic relationship? One of your informants must have a twisted sense of humour.”

“Don’t play dumb, Smith. Here’s what’s going to happen: you’re going to cooperate, or I’m going to break you.” Something flickered across the lord’s face: was that pity? It disappeared before Erwin could identify it.

The pressure inside him was bubbling to the surface, and he wasn’t sure he could keep it back much longer. He held Sahlo’s gaze for another moment, then turned and strode for the door. “I don’t have time for your mind games. Hange, Eld: we’re leaving.”

“How much do your goals mean to you?” the lord called. “How much are you willing to sacrifice?”

“There is no personal cost too great,” Erwin said without looking back. “I will see you at the Council meeting, Lord Sahlo.”

They were silent as they marched down the hallway. Erwin glanced back; Eld looked away.

“Eld,” he said. “About—”

“I won’t tell anyone, sir.” Eld wouldn’t look him in the eye.

“Good. It won’t help our political situation if we spread baseless rumours. Come with us to our hotel room; you can sleep while Hange and I attend the Council meeting. I’ll leave you a written message you can take to Captain Levi when you’ve rested.” The poor lad must be exhausted.

He wanted to ask how Levi was doing, but Eld already seemed shaken by the prospect that they might be romantically involved. He didn’t want to compound his anxieties.

Luckily, Hange jumped in: “Is Levi okay?”

“Yes, Squad Leader, though he seemed a bit unsettled by the questioning he and Squad Leader Mike performed on the prisoners. I asked Petra to keep an eye on him.”

Erwin was shaken by the sudden memory of blood dripping down Levi’s nose and chin. How must he be feeling now, having to tap into that side of himself—and against prisoners who looked like his friends, no less?

This whole situation was starting to look like every nightmare he’d had since the beginning of their relationship: he had led Levi straight into the maws of a titan, bitten him clean in half. How had Sahlo found out? They had been careful to cover their tracks. They always went to their apartment at separate times, taking different routes and checking for people tailing them. They were careful to have legitimate business reasons for every trip they ever took—except that one trip to Utopia district, but they had used fake identification *and* Erwin had taken care to keep their names off any waybills and room names.

The leak had to be a person. Leona was an obvious option, although he had never mentioned a romantic relationship, so she would have been guessing. Nile was another obvious option. He trusted Nile, in theory, but there was always the option Nile would crack under duress to protect his family.

Still, that seemed unlikely. Either Sahlo was bluffing, or a Survey

Corps soldier was spying and reporting back to him.

“We need to implement emergency security measures at the base,” he said aloud. “If Sahlo is this desperate to get to me, there’s no telling what he’ll do. I’ll do what I can to get him ousted from the Council, but in the meantime, we’re going to have to make some adjustments.”

“Adjustments?” Hange repeated.

“All leave from the base must now be approved on a case-by-case basis by a Squad Leader, Captain Levi, or me—even day trips into town. As well, all correspondence must be screened.”

“What? We can’t start treating our own like prisoners.”

“Three assassins successfully broke into an officer’s bedroom and attempted to kill him—this is a grave situation. This won’t be permanent. We’ll drop the extra security after Sahlo has been neutralized, or after the Wall is reclaimed. In the meantime, however, we must protect our goals, and that means protecting our people.” He stopped at the stairway that led to the main entrance. “I’ll take it upon myself to explain this to the soldiers. I’m sure everyone will understand.”

“They’ll understand, sir,” Eld said. “Everyone is focused on reclaiming the Wall, and we’re ready to sacrifice anything necessary to reach it.”

Hange looked less certain, but there was no time to address any concerns.

“You two go back to the hotel,” Erwin said. “I have to speak with Zackly.” Maybe he had time to fact-check some of Sahlo’s claims before the Council meeting.

The Commander-in-Chief was still wearing his coat and scarf when Erwin knocked on his door.

“I need to speak with you urgently,” Erwin said with a salute.

“Oh?” Zackly pulled off his glasses, wiping condensation off them. “It can’t wait until the meeting?”

“No, sir. This update is for your ears only.”

“Very well. Come in.”

Erwin sat at the broad desk, waiting patiently while the Commander-in-Chief hung up his jacket and scarf.

“I assume this is about Lord Sahlo?” Zackly asked as he settled into his chair.

“Indeed. There was a security breech at the Survey Corps base in Trost: an assassination attempt on Captain Levi. Lord Sahlo admitted

to being involved—to me and two other witnesses.” He explained the entire conversation in detail, leaving out the accusation of a love affair.

“It sounds like you’re building a sizable body of evidence,” Zackly said. “With the witness accounts, this might be enough to convict him of obstruction of military procedure, if it goes to trial. The problem is this: Lord Sahlo has access to the best lawyers within the Walls.”

Erwin set his jaw. “He’ll work with them to delay the trial long enough to delay the reclamation schedule I’ve set out, so he’ll get what he wants, anyway.”

Zackly nodded. “And he’ll drag your name—and the entire Survey Corps—through the mud. You’ve done an admirable job of saving your regiment from complete dissolution; I don’t expect it to hold together if you’re out of the picture. I’m sorry, Erwin. I acknowledge Sahlo is a problem, but I can’t allow you to pursue this.”

“I see.”

“On a happier note, I’m now convinced that you and Levi were right to go to the Underground to try to figure out this rat’s motives. I’ll be waiving all charges. You no longer need to focus on getting me conclusive proof of his attempts to delay the expedition: I can see that for myself.” Zackly’s face was kind. “You have enough to worry about already. I’m sorry the law can’t help you this time, but I expect you’ll figure out a way to keep him at bay so your Wall Maria plans can proceed.”

Is he acknowledging I'll take extreme actions against Sahlo? Erwin subtly scratched the inside of his boot, feeling the hilt of Levi’s knife. They were up against a wall.

Violence was one way out.

It wouldn’t be a permanent solution, of course. Sahlo clearly had powerful friends, and eliminating him wouldn’t end the threat. It might, however, delay it long enough to buy them the time they needed.

Levi would want to be the one to do it, but Erwin couldn’t allow that to happen. He thought of Levi sitting in the corner of the hotel room, shaking, hands raw. No, he had already asked too much of Levi, pushed him too deeply into parts of himself he had worked hard to bury.

His last hope was to sway the Council to his favour, to use that charisma Sahlo feared. If he succeeded at that, maybe nothing more extreme would be necessary. But if that failed ...

There is no personal cost too great.

There was that pressure again: a restless energy, building in his limbs.

“Is that all, Erwin?” Zackly asked.

Erwin was about to stand and salute, but he paused. “Sir, I have a question. Off the record. In my conversations with Lord Sahlo, we spoke of the last failed reclamation effort. He claimed the reason he pushed so hard for that plan was to block the original plan, one that involved slaughtering the residents of the Underground.”

“Ah. You want to know if such a plan existed.” Zackly lowered his chin, eyeing him over the frame of his glasses. “It did. There was a great deal of worry that the Colossal and Armoured titans would return to knock out Wall Rose. If that happened, the survivors were to be evacuated to the Underground, using it for its original intended purpose: a safe haven from the titans. Priority was to be given to the most valued members of society. That meant taking out its weakest citizens. The nobles argued that the weakest might as well be expended right away, while humanity was still shaken by the fall of Wall Maria, before the Underground could form a resistance and block them out of the shelter.”

Erwin’s stomach churned. “Sahlo mentioned a plan to use the people of the Underground as meat.”

Zackly stared at him, brows high, eyes and mouth round, before he recovered into a neutral expression again. “That sounds like paranoid ramblings. I’ll admit the nobles often have their own self-serving motives and contingency plans, but they aren’t monsters. If they were cannibals, they’d be no better than the titans.”

“You may be right. He may be paranoid. However, I’d be more inclined to cooperate with him if I found he was speaking the truth. Is this something you have the authority to look into?”

Zackly squinted at him. “You’re asking me for a favour?”

“Yes.”

“After all I’ve done recently for you and your Captain—unusual promotions, covering murder?”

“Yes, sir.” Erwin held his gaze. “I wouldn’t normally commit such a brash disregard of our chain of command, but these are extenuating circumstances. Humanity’s future depends on it.”

“I do have access to restricted records. I’ll see what I can do. If what you say were true ...” Zackly grimaced, leaning back in his chair.

“Let’s hope Sahlo is just trying to manipulate me.” Erwin stood

and saluted.

❧

When he returned to the hotel room, Eld had passed out on the bed; Hange strode up to Erwin. “Are you okay?”

He stared blankly for a moment.

“I thought you might be concerned about Levi.”

“Levi is capable of taking care of himself,” Erwin said. He glanced at Eld. “Did he believe Sahlo?”

“About you and Levi? Yeah. He’s wrestling with it. I think a lot of the soldiers see you two as unfeeling gods. Shock to them to find out you’re driven by base needs like the rest of them.”

“Is he a security risk?”

“No. Eld’s as loyal as they come.” Hange hesitated. “How did Sahlo find out?”

“The same way he found all the other information about me, I imagine.” In spite of Sahlo’s insistence that he was laying everything on the table, he had revealed very little about how much information he held. It wasn’t just Levi: Nile and Marie might be in danger. Jasper. Leona. And what about his mother and sister? Levi being threatened was bad enough, but how many people was Sahlo willing to go through to get him to change his mind?

The restless pressure was still building inside him, and he knew nothing good could come if it erupted. He took a steady breath and tried to vent it with honesty:

“I’m having second thoughts about my plan.”

Hange blinked at him. “Really?”

He glanced at Eld again, then decided he wanted to ensure the conversation was private. He cocked his head at the other room; Hange followed him, shutting the door behind him.

“His arguments were compelling,” Erwin admitted. “I still don’t agree with him, but I’m starting to wonder if pushing back against him gains us the advantage I thought. Besides, if he figured out Levi and I are in love, there’s no telling what else he’s figured out, too. He’s already admitted it’s convenient for him if the Survey Corps is out of the way—what if he’s prepared to dismantle the entire regiment?”

“What would Levi do right now?” Hange asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You always go straight to Levi when you’re upset. He’s not here, but I am. So what would he do to help you?” After a pause, Hange’s nose wrinkled. “Don’t say sex.”

He considered. “He would encourage me to talk through it and listen carefully, asking questions now and then. Maybe make a crass joke or two, insult me a bit until I smiled.”

“Okay, then.” Hange strode to the table and pulled out a chair for him. “Sit down, shitbrows.”

“Shitbrows?”

“I’m trying to think like Levi. How about I make us tea and hold the mug like I don’t know what a handle is? Then I’ll act tough and distant while secretly hanging on to every word you say.”

Erwin chuckled and sat. “Is that really how you see Levi?”

“Absolutely.”

Once the tea was ready, he talked through his entire conversation with Sahlo, adding in his thoughts and observations. Hange listened, nodding along. When he finished, silence filled the room. He didn’t feel any better.

“Usually,” he said quietly, “this type of thinking aloud helps me arrive at an obvious solution, but I’m just as confused as before.”

“I see.” Hange’s glasses clinked onto the table as the Squad Leader massaged the red marks they left behind. “Maybe I’m not asking enough questions.”

“No, you’re a good listener. This happens to be a problem with no obvious solution.” He slumped a little and rolled his head back against the chair, letting out a low sigh. He closed his eyes. “What if I’m stubbornly pressing ahead with the wrong plan? Sahlo’s a bully, but his points are valid. If he’s correct about the potential fate of the Underground—and Zackly is looking into that, so we should know soon enough—then what right do I have to sacrifice everyone around me for a worse plan?”

“May I ask you a question?” Hange asked.

His eyes opened. “Of course.”

“Why do you want to stick to your timeline?”

“To get to Wall Maria early enough to ensure we can grow crops before winter.”

“There’ve been plenty of missed harvest seasons until now. Food supplies have been dwindling since the day the Wall fell. What makes it so urgent this time?” Hange studied him with that too-intense gaze, even

more piercing without the glass shield. “Is this really about food?”

He looked down into his empty mug, considering. Yes, there was more; he had simply latched onto the most concrete, most convenient excuse.

“We’re so close to reclaiming the Wall,” he said. “So close. Once that’s reclaimed, the Survey Corps will be free to once again seek answers about this world. We’ve spent half a decade and hundreds of lives just to get back to where we started. I’m losing patience.”

He swore Hange’s eyes twinkled. “There’s the spirit of the Survey Corps. That’s why we follow your command. And do you think Sahlo’s timeline would increase our chances of successfully recapturing the Wall?”

He was still processing all the information Sahlo had given him, so it took him a minute to answer. “Marginally, but not as much as he claims. He’s pretending his weapons will give the MP a great advantage against the titans, but we all know that’s ridiculous; there’s no way to take down a titan with a gun, no matter how powerful it is. He’s also pretending his yeast supplement will save the world from starvation, but it’s shortsighted. There’s no telling how a population’s health will fare on yeast alone, and if he controls the only supply of it, we’ll end up in a similar situation with class-based access to food—maybe different classes than before, but still not universal. Besides ...” He held Hange’s gaze. “What kind of life is it, eating yeast, waiting for the day the Colossal and Armoured titans return to take Wall Rose? We can’t hunker down and resign ourselves to merely surviving—not while there’s still hope of reclaiming Wall Maria. We deserve to be free.”

Hange smiled, gesturing at him with an open palm. “There you go—that’s your new counter-argument. That’s what will get those stuffy Council members to listen.”

“Maybe.”

“The Survey Corps believes in you because we know you can look at two impossible situations and commit to one, then make it possible.”

He said nothing, his jaw tight. Phrased that way, it sounded more like gambling than strategy. Were his new doubts the whispers of reason, or had Sahlo successfully compromised his logic?

I need to make a decision.

His heart was racing, his jaw was tight, and Levi’s knife was hard against his leg, burning with his body heat.

G

When Erwin and Hange arrived at the Council chambers for their meeting, Commander-in-Chief Zackly was waiting outside. He cocked his head at Erwin, signalling for him to step aside.

“Save me a seat across from Sahlo,” Erwin said to Hange, who nodded and gave him a concerned look before stepping through the door.

“I looked into what you asked,” Zackly said. His face was pale, his eyes distant.

“Thank you, sir. What did you find?” Erwin asked, even though his expression already gave it away.

“Lord Sahlo was speaking the truth.”

Erwin’s stomach sank. “If you hadn’t heard about it until now, it can’t have gotten very far.”

“No, only a few were pushing for it, and it was only ever meant as a contingency plan if the food stocks ran low, but ...” Zackly shook his head. “I don’t know what to make of this.”

Neither did Erwin. He had known there were selfish, devious men in control of the walled lands, but cannibalizing downtrodden citizens went far beyond that. He had spent so many years carefully working within the framework of their government and military to achieve his goals. That framework was rotten to its core, far more than he could have ever imagined. *Maybe that framework needs to come down.*

He took a deep breath to steady himself. One thing at a time. Wall Maria always came first.

When he stepped into the chamber, Sahlo eyed him. Erwin sat across from him, eyeing him back. Maybe it was his imagination, but the lord looked tired: his eye sockets were bruised, his mouth heavy.

The meeting opened with details about promotions in the Military Police—Erwin only half-listened. At last, it was time to discuss Survey Corps business. He stood.

“As you’re all aware, last time we met, the Survey Corps put our planned mission on hold to address a silo recovery mission put forth by Lord Sahlo.” He stared down at the lord. “While the money retrieved during the mission is sure to be put to good use, the cost was too high: we lost fifteen good soldiers, and a sixteenth is badly injured. These are unacceptable losses for a supply fetching mission, especially when we

are nearing a critical point for our Wall Maria reclamation effort.” He unrolled a map, marking the remaining four checkpoints in red, pretending they hadn’t already stocked two of them.

“If we are to reclaim the Wall before the harvest season, we need to stock these checkpoints by the end of the year. With winter approaching, we need to move quickly. I have outlined a proposal for an expedition commencing two weeks from today. On this expedition, the Survey Corps will stock these last four checkpoints. This brings us back into line with the timeline I’ve consistently been driving toward for the past few years.” He stood tall. “There can be no more distractions, no more delays, and no more unnecessary losses. We are so close to achieving a major victory for humanity.”

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this,” Sahlo said, shaking his head. “Didn’t we all come to an understanding that you’re pressing ahead too quickly?”

“Lord Sahlo,” Zackly said, “Commander Erwin has the floor.”

Erwin placed a green marker at the hole in the wall. “This is the goal: Wall Maria. We must reach it before another harvest opportunity is lost, before the Colossal and Armoured titans have the opportunity to return and take Wall Rose. We’ll be approaching the Merchant’s Guild shortly with a large order, thanks in part to the funds reclaimed during the silo expedition. As well, I’d like to start presenting and formalizing the wall reclamation plans with—”

Sahlo stood and slammed his palms on the table. “Enough! This is bullshit.”

He’s panicking, Erwin thought, eyes narrowing. *Hone in on his weakness.* An opponent swinging this wildly always left an opening.

“Lord Sahlo.” Zackly rapped the table for order. “You are speaking out of turn.”

“I’m not going to sit here quietly while you feed us your lies,” Sahlo growled, eyes still locked on Erwin. “You are a bull-headed traitor to the crown, and it’s clear you’re more interested in personal glory than what’s best for humanity.” He turned to Zackly. “Commander-in-Chief, I have evidence that Commander Erwin Smith has committed an act of treason.”

And suddenly, Erwin had his opening. His hand curled into a fist at his side as he rehearsed the wording in his mind.

The room was tittering; Zackly slammed his palm on the table again. “These are very serious accusations, Lord Sahlo, and I question

why you'd bring them up now, of all times."

"Commander-in-Chief, if I may," Erwin said, standing tall. "Lord Sahlo speaks the truth, and I can explain."

The room began to murmur again; in his periphery, he could see Hange staring at him with wide eyes.

"Please go ahead," Zackly said.

"Lord Sahlo is about to present you with evidence that I falsified the results of the last expedition." Erwin lifted his chin. "It's true: the gold was a lie. We arrived at the silo to find it empty, presumably emptied during the evacuation from Wall Maria. Sahlo's original numbers were incorrect, no doubt old numbers from before the Fall.

"You've already heard about the devastating personnel losses we've endured, and you know my reasons for wanting to reach Wall Maria as quickly as possible. Bearing all this in mind, when faced with an unexpectedly empty silo, I had to make a snap decision: either return with nothing, or lie about our findings.

"I could foresee what would happen if I returned empty-handed. There would be accusations of stealing the gold for ourselves, or perhaps even disregarding the mission objectives entirely. The investigation would stretch several months. Trust in the Survey Corps would be shaken, and the reclamation effort would surely be delayed.

"Or, I could fake the correct amount to avoid wasting the time of the courts and the Council, and ensure the reclamation effort proceeded on schedule. The officers pitched in our own personal funds to fake our findings—I have the receipts if you wish to confirm they all came from our own donations. It did hurt our personal budgets, but maintaining the Council's trust in the Survey Corps is more valuable to our goals, at this point, than money." He bowed his head. "And so, under immense pressure, I made the decision that would lead to the least amount of conflict, all with the goal of reclaiming Wall Maria as quickly as possible.

"Lord Sahlo, meanwhile, chanced upon a more recent inventory, which proves I falsified our mission results. I understand this falsification is treason, and I am willing to submit to a trial, should you see it necessary. Given, however, that we lost time and resources chasing after outdated documentation in the first place, I hope you'll delay your judgement until after the reclamation. Humanity can't afford any more lost time."

Sahlo was still staring at him, open-mouthed. Then, slowly, his lips stretched into a grin. He began to laugh.

Erwin stared him down. Now the lord had no footing if he tried to claim they had deviated from the mission. The only people who could prove what happened outside the walls were the Survey Corps soldiers—and now Erwin had an airtight reason that they had found gold in an empty silo. *You should have thought twice before you showed me all your cards.*

Sahlo was cackling now, tears streaming down his face. The other Council members stared at him with furrowed brows.

“Lord Sahlo?” Zackly asked. “Are you all right?”

The lord dabbed at his eyes with a handkerchief. “Well-played, Smith. Well-played. I should have seen that coming.”

“Perhaps you should step outside to collect yourself,” Zackly said.

“Yes, yes, I think I shall.” Sahlo glanced at Erwin again, then convulsed with another round of laughter. “I don’t fucking believe this.”

The door slammed behind him, and an awkward silence descended over the room.

“Please be seated, Erwin,” Zackly said. “Since Lord Sahlo is the most outspoken opponent to your timeline, we’ll wait until he returns to continue this conversation.”

“Lord Sahlo speaks with the voice of reason,” Minister Nick said. “Commander Erwin flat-out lied to us, and only brought it up when he was caught. Who knows what else he’s hiding from us? How can we trust anything that comes out of his mouth?”

“We’ll discuss this matter later,” Zackly said firmly. “For now, let’s examine the Garrison budget.”

Erwin slowly sank to a seat. An elbow nudged his side; he turned to see Hange smirk at him. He nodded. This had played out better than he hoped. Now everyone would think Sahlo was unhinged; Erwin’s arguments looked better by default. He busied himself with taking notes during the Garrison budgetary discussion, noting discussion points he might approach Commander Pixis with later.

About an hour later, the door swung open. Two Military Police officers ran into the room.

“Commander! We need you at a crime scene immediately.”

Nile frowned and stood. “Have you two lost your minds? I’m in the middle of a Council meeting.”

“Not you, sir.” The soldier pointed. “Commander Erwin.”

Erwin’s stomach dropped.

Now what? He hadn't expected Sahlo to be in the right frame of mind to take any actions against him.

He stood. "Please excuse me." He turned to Hange. "Take notes while I'm gone."

"I'm coming, too," Nile said.

They strode through the street side-by-side, following the anxious soldiers.

"Sahlo?" Nile asked quietly.

"Most likely. He attacked Levi last night. He's been threatening to escalate, and I just outmanoeuvred him." Erwin scanned the street, trying to figure out where they were going. They weren't heading to the hotel, so Eld was safe. They weren't heading Underground, so it couldn't be Leona.

"I told you not to get mixed up with him," Nile said, weary.

"He left me with no choice." Erwin paused. "Your family could be at risk."

"I'm in his good graces."

"If Sahlo dug into my past—"

Nile glared at him. "Erwin. I'm in his good graces."

The crowd was getting thicker here. The Commanders fell into single file, pushing their way through.

A church. They were approaching a church. Erwin's heart sank. *No. Please, no ...*

He forced his way to the front of the crowd.

Helena knelt on the front steps of the church. She rocked back and forth and sobbing, arms wrapped tightly around a man. His head lolled back, showcasing a deep slash from ear to ear. Blood stained his ashen skin, his grey robes, and Helena—her chest, her arms, her hair. Silver glinted on her ring finger. The corpse wore a matching band. Erwin stared at it. *A wedding ring on a blue, slender finger.*

Behind Helena sat Mama, rubbing the woman's back, her gaze absent.

She's been there before.

"Commander!" an MP yelled, jogging up to him. She handed him a bloodstained envelope. "A man ran up to him, slit his throat in broad daylight, but he got away. Left this with the body."

Erwin accepted the envelope with shaky hands. The back read simply, *Erwin*, and the inside said, *There is no such thing as a permanent secret.*

Pressure was rising in Erwin's blood again, making his ears ring. Here were two women, his flesh and blood, who had both lost the men they loved because of him, because of his pursuit of a dream that was probably a delusion.

Nile stepped in close, voice low. "Is that your mother and sister?"

He pushed forward.

"Erwin, wait—"

No, he wasn't going to stand by, not when he was the one responsible for their suffering. He knelt in front of them.

"Helena."

The woman looked up at him, eyes bloodshot and streaming, and he found he wasn't sure what to say.

She launched at him. "You fucking asshole!"

He slammed back to the cobblestone, knocking his head. He threw up his forearms just in time to block a punch.

"You selfish motherfucker," she screamed. "He's fucking *dead*. We warned you, you asshole. You killed him!" Her punches slammed again and again into his forearms, but he didn't fight back.

I deserve this.

I killed them both.

And Levi ...

That was worst of all: he couldn't even stay focused on Helena's pain. How would he feel if he cradled Levi in his arms, killed by Erwin's selfish goals? Or how would Levi feel, cradling his body? *I could die at any moment ... Helena had no idea this was coming. She woke up this morning with a husband, and now she's alone.*

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Nile and another soldier hauled Helena off him. "It's okay."

She whirled on him. "It's not fucking okay!"

Erwin lay flat on his back, slowly lowering his arms to his sides. The sky was clear, the clouds large and fluffy. The cobblestone felt like roof tiles on his back, cold and hard. Now he could feel Helena beside him, both of them giggling, knowing Mama and Papa would send them to bed with no dinner if they knew they were on the roof. Helena would look at this cloud and see a pony. She always saw ponies. He wondered if she liked horses as an adult. She had never been afraid of horses like he had. She had never been afraid of anything except being alone.

"Hey." Nile knelt beside him. "You okay? You hit your head pretty hard."

He sat up. His gaze fixed on Mama. She stood beside the body, gripping its shoulder, as if she could shake him awake. Her eyes met his. She didn't say the words, but he heard them, anyway. *You killed him.*

It wasn't the first time her eyes had said it.

"Make them disappear," he said to Nile. "Tell them to leave the church and start a new life." He rose to his feet, his arms throbbing from Helena's punches. The pain was the only thing he felt. No, there was also that pressure, that buzzing, that restless energy. He spun, searching the crowd for the man he knew he would find.

There.

Sahlo stood at the entrance of an alleyway, hat low, eyes shadowed. Beside him stood a tall, lanky man with a brimmed hat and a dark trench coat.

"I'll be back at the meeting in a while," Erwin said to Nile, and then he slipped through the crowd. Each footstep echoed through him. He was hollow. Cold. He was made of metal.

Once he was deep in the thick of the crowd, shielded on all sides, he paused to reach into his boot. He slipped Levi's knife into his sleeve.

He stopped beside Sahlo, gripping his shoulder. "Follow."

"Gutsy," the tall man said. "Want me to fix this problem, too, your lordship?" His voice was heavy with an Underground accent, and every word sounded sarcastic. *Rage Klein?* Erwin thought, but that couldn't be right. This man wore the black hat and white band common to nobility. This must be someone connected to the King.

"I can handle it," Sahlo said. "Leave us."

"You're fucking kidding," the tall man said.

"Do not follow."

"Fine. Your funeral." The tall man stepped away.

The second he was out of sight, Erwin's fingers clawed into Sahlo's shoulder. He pulled him deep into an alleyway and shoved him against the wall.

Sahlo gasped as the blow knocked the hat off his head, but then he glared. "Told you I'd break you."

The pressure burst.

Erwin snapped his sleeve, and Levi's knife slid into his palm. One hand grabbed the lord's hair, jerking his head back. The other pressed the blade against the lord's neck.

Sahlo gasped and closed his eyes, inching back against the wall.

His nostrils flared. "Wait!"

"I could end this right here," Erwin said flatly.

"It won't stop if you kill me." Sahlo's voice squeaked.

"It would even the playing field."

"Just fucking listen! A plan is already in motion. We'll pick off those you care about, one by one. The assassins have already been hired and scheduled. I'm the only one who can cancel the orders."

Erwin's eyes narrowed. He was seeing red now. *One quick slit and this ends.*

"Your mother and sister are next," Sahlo said. "Then Nile's family. Then each of your Squad Leaders, one at a time. We can make them look like accidents and random crimes. We're saving Levi for last."

Erwin's jaw twitched.

Sahlo held his gaze. "You think we don't have the skills to take him on, but you have no idea what kind of firepower we have at our disposal. We'll sit him in front of you and make you choose between him and your plans. And if you're still this fucking stupid and stubborn, you'll get to watch as the life drains from him. You'll see the betrayal on his face as he realizes the man he trusted, the man he loved above all else, gave him up over some petty political squabbles."

Erwin released the lord's hair and punched him in the stomach so hard that Sahlo doubled over and collapsed. He looked up, eyes wide, as he gasped for air and squirmed. He looked like a dying fish.

Erwin paused.

He thought of Levi scrubbing invisible blood, shaking in the corner. He recalled his words: *you never forget their faces.*

If he did this now, so close to a crowd, he would be found out and arrested. Zackly couldn't cover a crime of this magnitude. And then, with Sahlo dead and Erwin hanged, neither of their plans would come to fruition. Humanity was doomed to starve.

He squatted beside Sahlo, but kept the knife at his side this time. "What do you want?"

"Your support in the Council meeting," Sahlo wheezed.

"No, it's more than that. What do you want?"

Sahlo's face and neck were beet red. "I want you to help support and distribute our product. I want you to use the Survey Corps to protect the people of the Underground. I want you to stop trying to tamper with the Walls. I want you to obey the King and the Holy Walls instead of looking to defy them." His eyes were wild. "The end is coming. The

world within these walls will soon turn into a living hell, and the only people who can stop it are the King and his supporters. You and your cult of freedom-seeking heathens are shifting the Council's attention in the wrong direction."

The words were so unexpected and bizarre that Erwin paused. "What do you mean, 'the end is coming'?"

"Six months," Sahlo said. "Just give us an extra six months."

Erwin took a deep breath. *I need to do what I think is right.*

But he was no longer sure what was right. How could he trust himself, when red was clouding his vision? And what was this coming end—religious paranoia? Or did the Wallists and the King truly know something the rest of them didn't? Was that why Helena and Mama had been so insistent he back off?

Am I making plans on incomplete information?

He pulled away and slid the knife back into his boot.

"Good choice," Sahlo said, nodding behind him. Erwin turned to see the tall man standing in the entrance to the alleyway, holding a long, curved knife.

"This is your big political opponent?" the tall man said. "What a dumb sack of shit. Didn't even take you somewhere remote."

"The Commander's had a rough day. He wasn't thinking straight for a moment, but he came to his senses." Sahlo stood and brushed off his hat, then put it on, carefully straightening the brim. "Council returns to session soon, Erwin. I look forward to your full support."

Erwin said nothing as he watched them leave.

¤

They sat in the Council session fifteen minutes later. Erwin's skin was damp with sweat and his head throbbed. Hange gave him a concerned look, but he kept his gaze forward, his chin high.

"Erwin," Zackly said. "Nile tells me there was a violent crime at the church that may have been difficult to witness. If you wish to delay your—"

"No." Erwin stood, his limbs heavy. He thought of Helena's wails, of the rings in Hange's pocket. He thought of a dying Levi staring at him with betrayal in his eyes, the way Papa had.

What does he mean, 'the end is coming'?

"Lord Sahlo and I have discussed it in depth," he said clearly,

“and the only reasonable option is to push the reclamation effort back six months to meet his timeline.”

The room burst into chatters, and Sahlo gave him a broad smile. Erwin sank back to his seat, his jaw tight.

❧

When they returned to the hotel that night, Eld had already left for his return journey. Erwin began to pack the trunk as well.

“Erwin,” Hange said.

“We have to get back to the base as soon as possible. We can sleep in the carriage.” He paused. “We’re going to make a slight detour to Stohess.” He had to warn Marie that she could be in danger. Maybe he had deterred Sahlo for now, but he didn’t trust the lord to stay back, especially because he couldn’t shake the feeling Sahlo was caught in a web of his own. The tall man didn’t seem like his friend or hired goon. Someone—the Wallists, or the King, or Rage Klein—was applying enough pressure for Sahlo to crack.

Who is our real enemy?

Besides, there was still the possibility that Nile had been the one to inform Sahlo that Erwin and Levi were a couple. If so, there was one surefire way to put a stop to that: tell Marie that he and Levi had broken up.

“Erwin,” Hange said, more forcefully this time. “Why did you change the plan?”

He pulled his shirts off the hangers and neatly folded them. “His arguments became sufficiently persuasive.”

“What about Wall Maria? The harvest season?”

“I’m no longer convinced my solution is what’s best for humanity.”

“Erwin—”

“It doesn’t matter. My decision is made.” He folded the last of his socks into balls, because no matter how much Levi complained about his sock-folding style, habit was easiest. “There’s still room to be flexible. If we uncover evidence that shows my original plan was best, we can stock the last two checkpoints early in the spring and move on my original timeline.” He closed his eyes. He was so sick of thinking about timelines, and Wall Maria, and Sahlo. Maybe that had been why he had been so tempted to slit Sahlo’s throat: it was an easy way out. Trial, death

by hanging.

“You look tired,” Hange said quietly.

“I am.”

“Will getting back to the base tonight help?”

“Yes.” He wasn’t sure. What would happen the next time his mask dropped? Would he be able to lift it again?

I’m so, so tired.

Hange wordlessly began to pack, too.

8

They arrived at the Dok house at half past eight—Erwin asked the driver to park the carriage around the corner, and they walked, ensuring no one was following them. The lights were still on inside. Erwin drew a deep breath.

“Why are we stopping here?” Hange asked.

“Because I need to repair all the holes in my armour.” There was the Dok family doorknocker, the one Levi always made snide comments about. He lifted it and let it fall.

Jasper answered the door. As he grew, his hair was darkening, his chin leaning out. *Maybe he really is Nile’s flesh and blood.*

“Commander Erwin!” The boy’s eyes lit up, and he saluted.

“At ease,” Erwin said, standing with his hands clasped behind his back. “I’m here to speak with your mother.”

“Mom,” Jasper yelled, turning into the house.

Marie came running, her little one in her hand, her hair tied in a rag. She smiled. “Erwin? What a nice surprise! Is Levi with you?”

He didn’t return her smile. “I need to speak with you.”

“Oh, I …” She glanced around. “I’m just putting the kids to bed.”

“Squad Leader Hange can do that for you.”

“I can what?” Hange said.

“That would be lovely.” Marie shoved the toddler into Hange’s chest. “They each get one bedtime story before lights out. Maybe two, if they’re good. They’re all washed up, so they just need to change into their pyjamas. Jasper knows their routine.”

Hange stared down at the kid. “I—”

“Thank you, Hange.” Erwin pulled off his boots.

“Bedroom’s upstairs,” Marie said.

Hange stared at them for another moment, then sighed. “Okay,

kids, come follow the absolute stranger upstairs.”

Erwin sat on the couch, and Marie sat opposite him.

“Well?” she said.

He waited until he heard the bedroom door close upstairs, then leaned forward. “You may be in danger.”

“What?” she asked, leaden.

“Sahlo’s making a power play against me. He has vowed to kill everyone from my past, one at a time. I think I’ve appeased him for now, but—”

“The same Sahlo that Nile kept telling you not to get mixed up with?”

He gritted his teeth. “We don’t have time to point fingers.”

Her hands balled into fists. “What the fuck did you do to piss him off?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does matter. Were you pushing after your fucking delusions again? Did you piss off the wrong people chasing after baseless dreams?”

His silence must have incriminated him, because she swore and shook her head.

“Okay, you know what? Fuck you. Get out of my house.”

“Marie—”

“I’ve been an idiot to keep you in my life. You do nothing but hurt me and the ones I love.”

The words hit too close to home. Helena’s sobs, Mama’s cold glare. What expression would Levi wear, when he saw him again? Was he worn and hurt, too?

“I do hurt everyone,” he said, trying to make his tone convincingly sad. “Levi and I have ended our relationship.”

To his surprise, she looked upset. “What? Why?”

He searched for the most plausible excuse: “Because I need to stay focused. He had been concerned lately that he was a weakness I couldn’t afford to have, that he coaxed a vulnerability out of me that needed to stay hidden.” His stomach began to sink. “Once Sahlo used him as a pressure point, I saw that Levi was right: he is a weakness.”

Would I have caved in to Sahlo if I weren’t so vulnerable when it comes to Levi?

“I have to be alone,” he continued, trying to ignore the thought. “I can’t afford to embrace my weaknesses. Not now. And I never know when I might die—it’s not fair to him.” Why were all these excuses feel-

ing so truthful? He thought of the rings in Hange's pocket. The ball of ice rolled around his stomach, prickly and cold.

Marie's brows slowly lowered. "Erwin, please tell me you didn't come here because you thought you could get a pity fuck."

He blinked. She was misunderstanding. Should he run with it? Seeming like he was propositioning Marie was a surefire way to let Nile know Levi was no longer in the picture, but it would effectively terminate their friendship.

His hesitation must have seemed like an answer, because she stood.

"I can't fucking believe you. Is that what I am to you? Someone you can run to for sex every time to you break up with someone? Where's your respect for me? For Levi? For *Nile*?"

"I wasn't thinking," he said.

"Clearly not. Yeah, maybe things are always going to be a bit weird between us, but we made our choices long ago. I have two kids now, and a third on the way, and you *dare* to—" Her eyes flashed. "Get the fuck out of my house!"

"Please, Marie," he said, standing. "Go somewhere safe. Move, if you have to—"

"Get out!" She stood, hands in tight fists.

He pulled on his boots and strode to the carriage.

When Hange entered the carriage a few minutes later, he was slumped forward over his thighs, his hands raked into his hair.

"That was awkward," Hange said, clearly unimpressed. The carriage door slammed.

"I've been selfish," he said without looking up.

The bell cord rang as Hange alerted the driver to start moving. "If this is about asking me to watch the kids—"

"That, too, I suppose. I meant with Levi." He drew a deep breath and held it. Those excuses he had given Marie—hadn't Levi just said the same things to him in the treetop overlooking Wall Maria?

He selfishly clung to Levi when it put his plans at risk, when it put their happiness at risk. He couldn't shake the image of Helena cradling her dead husband, the matching rings on their fingers.

"I saw him as a weapon," he murmured, "as a new toy, so I dragged out from the Underground and manipulated him into trusting me. Then I encouraged the sparks between us, playing a ridiculous game of 'let's take it slowly' and then moving too fast, toying with his emotions.

And now he's shouldering guilt for the relationship I did nothing to prevent, pointing out—rightfully so—that it's a weakness I cannot afford. And in return, I got him attacked by a lord playing mind games with him. I bring him endless stress and misery, and that's only going to amplify if I die."

Hange said, very quietly, "You need to have this conversation with Levi, not me."

"I already know what he's going to say. He's loyal to my strategy above his own emotions. When he finds out I caved in to Sahlo, he's going to blame himself." Erwin pulled a bag from under the seat and began to dig through it.

"What are you looking for?"

"Alcohol."

"You might not want to be drunk or hungover when you're talking with Levi about all this."

He frowned and leaned back against the bench. "You'll need to watch yourself as well, Hange. Your name was on the list Sahlo used to threaten me."

Hange swallowed hard. "Oh. But you agreed to his terms."

"Sahlo is being pulled in different directions; he lashed out because he was desperate." He thought of the tall man with the noble's hat. "He's being watched. There's something much larger at play, and we're only scratching the surface. Our situation could change at any moment. We'll monitor communication and external visits, and set up patrols around the base. We must be vigilant."

He thought about sending a message to Leona, but she was savvy—she had already been concerned about his involvement with Sahlo. She would keep herself safe. They should definitely warn Berit and Shadis. Being attached to the Trainee Corps probably gave them some shelter—the training program was geared toward churning out new MP recruits, after all, and the King valued the MP above all other regiments. Still, it didn't hurt to be careful.

His mind kept circling back to Levi. He let out a long, deep sigh.

Hange gave him a pitying look. "Sleep might help."

Sleep probably would help, but he was lonely, cold, and frightened. He didn't like fear. He could usually control it with planning and logic. Maybe he could spend time re-planning the Wall reclamation ...

There was Levi again, standing beside him on the tree branch overlooking Wall Maria, offering him hope just as it was slipping away.

That was what he needed right now: the man who brought him balance. The man who helped him expose and understand his emotions when his instincts told him to bury them. He needed him.

Do you really? Levi rasped. Or do you just want to need me?

The ball of ice had risen to his throat, and it was stuck there, like he was on the verge of crying, but couldn't quite vent it. Maybe it showed on his face, because Hange shifted over to his bench and sat beside him. A wiry arm slid across his shoulders.

He slumped and laid his cheek on Hange's shoulder, grateful for the contact.

¤

"What did Erwin say?" Levi demanded as he strode up to Eld in the dining hall.

Eld was still breathless, downing a glass of water. He nodded a greeting. "Sorry to wake you before reveille."

"It's okay. This is important."

"He approved of how you're handling everything. There's more, but—" He turned to Gunther, who had been on watch when he had ridden in. "We need to talk in private."

"Got it." Gunther stood.

"Hey Gunther," Levi said. "At reveille, go tell Dita he's running the training exercises today. His choice." He hadn't slept much since the attack the night before last, and he had no interest in running mundane exercises himself. The soldier saluted and closed the door, and then it was just Levi and Eld in the dining hall.

Eld leaned forward. "Sahlo knows about ... you."

"About me?"

"About you and the Commander. Your ... relationship." He looked so uncomfortable that Levi immediately caught on.

"Oh. You're going to keep that a secret, right?"

"Of course. It's just unexpected."

Unexpected was good; it meant they had been successfully keeping it a secret from the majority of people, at least. Not the person who mattered, though. He frowned. "Did he say when he and Hange were coming back?"

"No, but it didn't sound like they were staying much longer. The Commander was eager to get back here to address safety issues. He'll be

putting the base into lockdown.”

Levi grimaced. This was all so fucked up. He needed to punch something. “Take the day off,” he said to Eld, standing.

He stayed in the gym past reveille, working a punching bag from every angle. By the time he had finished, his heart was racing and he had glowing red spots on the first two knuckles of each hand and the tops of his feet.

It was a heated bath day, so he waited until the other soldiers were in training, then sank into the bath by himself. His ass had barely touched the seat when the door swung open.

“Hey,” he called. “You’re supposed to be in training. Go see Dita in the yard.”

Erwin stepped into view.

Levi’s breath caught. Their gaze held.

“You’re back early.”

Erwin nodded, his face grim. “I came back as soon as I could. I’m glad you’re okay.”

Levi sank deeper into the water, letting it skim his chin. “Shitty couple days, huh?”

“Indeed. Do you have time to debrief?” His voice was gravelly.

“Yeah. Just give me a minute to finish cleaning up.”

Erwin nodded again. “I’ll be in my office.”

There was that anxious heat in Levi’s throat again, the taste of acid. He quickly scrubbed himself down and brushed his teeth, then changed into his uniform.

He paused outside Erwin’s office, took a deep breath, and then opened the door.

Erwin sat on the couch, hunched, his hands clasped and hanging loosely between his knees. He tilted his head as if to acknowledge Levi, but didn’t look at him. Levi locked the door and dropped onto the opposite couch, crossing his legs.

“I have a lot to tell you about.”

“As do I.” Erwin lifted his head; his eyes were sunken. “When I heard about the attack against you, I refused to let it sway me from our plans.”

“Good,” Levi said, feeling a wave of relief. *I’m not his weakness.*

“He applied more pressure: he had someone murder Helena’s husband, leaving a note addressed to me with the body.”

“Holy shit.”

Erwin pulled the knife out of his boot and handed it over. “I dragged him into an alley, threw him against the wall, and held this to his throat.”

“Holy shit.” Levi’s jaw clenched. *I should have been there.* “Did you kill him?”

“No.” A pause. “I gave up, Levi. We’re adjusting to his timeline.”

“What?”

“He backed me into a corner. He found all my weak spots, twisted a knife into each of them.” Erwin’s gaze dropped. “I don’t even know anymore if my timeline is the one we should follow. He made a compelling argument, and genuinely has some altruistic motives—when I explain it to you in detail, you’ll understand my confusion. I have to yield to him, for now.”

Levi stared at him, open-mouthed. “After all that? You’re rolling over?”

Erwin’s hands interlaced, the knuckles white; he stared down at them. “Wall Maria must be our priority. Without Sahlo’s support, we’ll be wasting valuable time and energy defending ourselves against his attacks. If he knows everything about me, he has the power to ruin me, to knock me out of my position before my plans can be realized. He’s connected to the Wallists, to the King, to Rage Klein, to the Military Police. Meanwhile, we’re a fringe group of oddballs pushing against common sense, charging headfirst into titan territory, ready to dedicate our hearts to dreams that may not even be attainable.”

They were silent. Footsteps passed outside the door, and two soldiers chatted and laughed together before the sounds faded again. Levi cast a glance at the door, wishing he was so ignorant to their burdens. He wished he knew what to say to lighten Erwin’s.

“You should go take a good long dump,” he tried, because tasteless humour often cheered him up. “You’ll feel lighter.”

Erwin breathed a single beat of a chuckle through his nose, and that was it. Levi felt a swell of helplessness.

“I’ve never seen you like this.”

“I’ve never seen our situation with such clarity,” Erwin said.

“Let me kill him.”

Erwin shook his head. “No. He’s the only one who can cancel his own assassination plans—he claims to have hired killers to take out everyone from my past, one by one, until ...” He trailed off.

Levi leaned forward. “Until what?”

Nothing followed.

“Eld told me he knows about us,” Levi said. “He threatened to use me against you, didn’t he? Torture me or something in front of you. That sick fuck! I’ll tear his throat out with my teeth. I’ll carve up his weak spot like the motherfucking titan he is.”

Erwin was so still and quiet that Levi wondered if he was holding his breath. His silence was understandable. They both knew what this meant.

“I’m a burden,” Levi said, so Erwin didn’t have to say the words. “I’m a weakness you can’t afford.”

“No, you’re Humanity’s Strongest. Your strength on the battlefield is humanity’s greatest asset—”

“He’s using me to fuck with your head.”

“—and you bring hope to humanity, something they desperately—”

“Erwin. Stop.”

“It’s not just you—”

“Erwin—”

“—it’s my mother, my sister, Marie and—”

“Shut up for a second and listen!” Levi flopped back against the couch. “This is everything we talked about during the last expedition. I’m not going to be your weakness, not when you have so much to think about. We swore when this started our work would take priority over us, or we’d have to take a step back.”

Erwin looked up, his eyes so glassy that Levi began to shake.

“Levi—” Erwin began, using the same voice he used when he was trying to pitch a difficult expedition to the Council.

“Look me in the eye,” Levi interrupted, “and tell me Sahlo’s threats against me didn’t impact your decision. Tell me I’m not a weakness.”

Their gaze held, and nothing followed. He had never seen a man so large look so small.

Levi felt small, too. Insignificant. There was so much at stake. What was his happiness when they were on the cusp of embarking on humanity’s most ambitious move against the titans?

He stood and strode over to the liquor cabinet, throwing open the doors.

“It’s not even noon,” Erwin said.

“If we’re going to do this, I’m not staying sober. Which whiskey’s

the best?"

A pause. "The silver label."

Levi stood on his tiptoes to pull it down from the shelf, then pulled down two glasses. He dropped onto the couch next to Erwin—he smelled so good, so warm—and poured them each a generous glass.

They were silent for the first several sips. Levi closed his eyes, feeling their body heat mingle in the gap between them.

"So," he said. "What happens next?"

"I'd still like to send you north," Erwin said, because of course he would default to talking about strategy instead of facing difficult truths about their relationship. "Since there won't be another expedition until the spring, you can leave as soon as you're ready. Take a small team. We'll put in an order for your supplies tomorrow morning. Meanwhile, I'll head to the Capital to work on the revised reclamation plans." He paused. "Like I said, I have a lot to tell you—I know all the details of Sahlo's plans, or at least what he's shared with me—but let's wait until tomorrow. There's ..." He hesitated. "There's already a lot to think about."

"Yeah, there is." Levi imagined a hill in Ehrmich, a blazing sunset, Erwin on one knee. He swallowed, squeezing his eyes shut. *Damned whiskey, making my eyes water.*

"You should date around while you're in the Capital," he said aloud. "Women. Make a scene about it. No one will be able to use me to bait you if they think you're a straight man playing the field."

Erwin stared at him as if he had been smacked. "I can't do that."

"You don't have to fuck them or anything." Levi's eyes were still tearing up, and squeezing them shut was doing nothing, so he blinked a few times. "Just take them on the town, maybe kiss them a little—"

"Levi, I'm not going to kiss anyone." Erwin hesitated. "Is this ... "

"Spit it out."

"Are we ending this?"

Levi turned to make eye contact, but Erwin was staring fixedly at the opposite couch. "I was thinking more like a step back." Even as he said the words, he wasn't sure what they meant.

"I see." Erwin nodded. "You and I ... I'm not sure we could ever end, anyway. Not really."

Levi's chest ached. No, they couldn't. They were too intertwined. Erwin coursed through his arteries, fuelled him with drive and purpose. "We both need to focus on Wall Maria, and you need to focus on Sahlo.

Until that mission is complete, we need to knock off all the relationship shit.”

“Okay.” Erwin’s voice cracked. “What are our ground rules?”

“You have to over-plan everything, don’t you?”

“No sex, no kissing, no cuddling each other?”

“Yeah. Nothing that makes either of us break down. Nothing that makes us a target.”

“No touching.” Erwin glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. “Even before we were together, every little touch haunted me.”

“Yeah. Same.” Levi sniffled again, blinking rapidly to clear his eyes. “I guess we won’t spend any more nights cuddling and reading together, huh?”

“No. We hadn’t done that for awhile, anyway.”

“I guess not.”

“Haven’t done much of anything for awhile,” Erwin said, almost to himself.

Levi’s face fell. “We were already stepping back a bit from each other, weren’t we?”

Erwin’s shoulders suddenly heaved; he buried his face in his free hand.

“Shit,” Levi said. “Sorry.”

“No; I’m sorry, Levi. You deserve—”

“Don’t.”

“—so much better than I could ever offer—”

“Knock it off!” Levi elbowed him hard in the side. “This is hard enough without you getting all caught up in self-loathing.”

Erwin wiped his eyes with the back of his hand; the bloodshot whites made his irises glow blue. “I haven’t given you anything worth waiting for.”

“Let me decide that for myself. You agreed to let me choose when and where to offer up my own heart, right? That applies to this, too.” He wanted to pull out a handkerchief and dab at those glowing eyes, but wasn’t sure if their ‘no touching’ policy had already begun.

They were silent as they drained their glasses. Levi topped them up again, the bottle shaking.

“The night after everyone’s celebrating our reclamation of Wall Maria,” he said, “we’ll find a moment to sneak away, okay? And we’ll talk. Maybe we’ll decide to be together again; maybe we won’t.”

“If we do,” Erwin said, “I’d still like to take you to Ehrmich.” He

took a long sip, then added softly, “How many times now has that trip been delayed?”

“We’ll stay in the apartment. The apartments are still half yours, you know. Even the ones I bought.”

“You don’t have to—”

“This doesn’t change that,” Levi said firmly. “We’re still ...” He couldn’t think of the right word. “Close.”

“Captain and Commander,” Erwin said.

“Yeah.”

“Partners.”

“Yeah.”

They were silent, enjoying their drinks in a comfortable silence. Levi’s emotions had mellowed—or maybe he was just numb. This decision made sense. It was what was best for them, for humanity.

When the glasses were empty again, he moved to refill them.

“Wait,” Erwin said, holding out a hand to stop him. “Are we going to make love one last time?”

“One last time?” Levi eyed him. “You’re still convinced we’re going to die before Wall Maria is ours again, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

And all at once, grief flooded Levi’s body. *I won’t get to fall asleep next to him for months—maybe ever. I won’t get to have sex with him for months—maybe ever.* His jaw trembled, but he shrugged it off. If he fell apart now, so would Erwin.

“Okay, sure, let’s fuck one last time. Something for the living person to remember if you’re right.”

Erwin fixed his glowing eyes on him for a moment, then nodded. “Leave for the apartment now. I’ll follow, ten minutes behind, to avoid raising suspicions.”

“You want to go all the way into town for this?”

“I don’t want to hold anything back.”

Levi reached out and cupped his jaw; Erwin’s hand closed over it, grip too tight. They slowly leaned toward each other, hesitant, as if this was one of their first kisses, not, potentially, one of their last.

He’s soft. Levi leaned into it, eyes closing, and a tear trailed down his cheek. *And warm.*

They pulled away, eyes locked. Levi wanted to speak, but his throat was too tight. He stood and walked to the door.

He closed it behind him. His legs were too heavy; he couldn’t

walk. *He wants me to go ten minutes ahead so we can't be tracked. Go.*

As he was just stepping away, he heard a soft sob from inside the office, and he realized the ten minute head start had nothing to do with safety.

❧

The apartment was in a mild state of disarray—Erwin had been the last to use it, and he had left little piles of books, some open, all around the room. Levi frowned and set about tidying it all, distracting himself.

When Erwin stepped inside a few minutes later, the tip of his nose was red and his eyes were puffy, but dry. He closed the door and stood by it, hunched.

“Don’t make this weird,” Levi said, even though he was apprehensive, too. “Come here.”

They quickly warmed as they closed the gap, meeting with hands on cheeks, on shoulders; lips pressed together, spreading, tongues grazing. *Savour this*, Levi thought, and his eyes flooded with tears again. He stubbornly shut them. If he started crying, he was going to get snot everywhere, and he could think of nothing less romantic.

Erwin pulled away and buried his mouth in the top of Levi’s hair. “Shower with me.”

Levi caught his arm and pulled him toward the bathroom.

They undressed each other slowly, palms smoothing each bit of exposed flesh. Erwin’s forearms were bruised and swollen.

“My sister,” he said softly.

Levi ran his fingertips in swirls across the bruises. “You know it’s not your fault, right?”

Erwin’s throat bobbed.

“None of this is your fault.” Levi bent forward to kiss the bruises, but Erwin caught his jaw instead, lifting it into a kiss.

They didn’t bother waiting for the water to finish heating; they took turns, one working the water pump while the other washed. Levi was already clean, but he soaped himself for Erwin anyway, relishing Erwin’s heavily-lidded eyes and parted lips. They met again once they were both clean, naked, and shivering, damp bodies sliding together as they kissed. Levi’s hands clawed into Erwin’s back, desperately pulling him as close as he could.

The kisses faded. As the last of the water—finally warm now—drizzled over them, they held each other in a tight hug.

“Let me clean you up,” Levi said, because the thought of no longer grooming Erwin in the mornings was almost as bad as the thought of never having sex.

They brought a chair into the bathroom, and Levi lathered cream onto Erwin’s face. The shave took twice as long as usual as Levi took the opportunity to really study Erwin’s face, to memorize all the details he had taken for granted: the sneer line ever so slightly deeper by one nostril than the other; the sprinkling of white hairs in his eyebrows, and one in his eyelashes; the tiny, dark mole at the crest of his left cheekbone; the faint scars on his chin, his temple, the bridge of his nose. Their eyes locked. Those blue eyes, so eerie and piercing, so intense even when the rest of his face was gentle.

He finished shaving Erwin’s face and neck, then walked around to clean up the hair on the back of his neck, leaving his undercut with a crisp line. Once that was done, he rinsed the blade and set it in its case, then combed Erwin’s hair into place. He applied a small amount of styling product to keep it neat, just the way Erwin liked. Sure, it was just going to get messed up again right away, but it was an important part of the routine.

He finished by gently combing the thick eyebrows, then kissed the skin between them, lingering.

“My turn,” Erwin said quietly.

They traded places. Levi watched Erwin as he shaved his jaw and neck, then took the comb and tidied Levi’s hair. It didn’t take nearly as long—Levi’s beard had never been as full as Erwin’s, and his hair was easier to style.

When Erwin was finished, he kissed Levi between the brows, too, mirroring the earlier gesture as if this were some sort of ritual.

In a way, Levi reflected, it was.

They moved to the main room. Erwin set a bottle of oil and two clean handkerchiefs by the bed. Levi dimmed the lamps.

They slid under the covers and began to kiss, legs intertwining. Erwin was giving little moans and grunts, rutting against Levi’s thigh, already hard.

Levi felt nothing. Even the kisses, which had been so warm and soft before, felt mechanical. It was as if he were kissing the back of his hand.

After a minute, Erwin pulled back to look at him. “Levi?”

“I’m fine.” His eyes were watering again.

Erwin wordlessly drew him in, resting his chin on top of Levi’s head.

Levi nuzzled against his collarbone. “Stress is getting to me.”

“I understand. We can just lie here.”

“No.” Levi placed a hand in the centre of his chest, pushing away to look at him. “I want to get it up and fuck you. If not, you can fuck me instead.”

Erwin kissed his brow. “Okay.” He kissed his jaw, the underside of his chin, his throat, his collarbone. Levi shifted, closing his eyes, trying to feel anything but ticklish.

Then Erwin’s mouth was around him, and he was warm, and sucking just the way he liked, but nothing was happening. Levi gripped the sheets and threw his head back, trying to feel something.

One last time ... We were already stepping back ... I’m not going to be your weakness ...

“Dammit!” He threw his forearm over his eyes and swallowed against the lump in his throat, again and again, trying to stop it from rising.

Erwin pulled away. “Levi.”

“Don’t stop.” His voice caught. “Dammit, I can’t—”

“Levi.” Erwin shifted to lie beside him. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay. This is our last chance to do this, and I’m fucking it up.” He had never felt so humiliated. He wanted to run to the bathroom and lock the door behind him.

Erwin kissed the forearm that covered his eyes. “Tell me what you want.”

Levi wanted them to start the night’s conversation over. He wanted them to agree their relationship took priority, and Wall Maria and Sahlo were a waste of time, and humanity could go fuck itself.

He took a shuddering breath. “I don’t know.”

The bed moved, and then he heard furniture shifting. He lifted his forearm, cursing the tears that spilled along either side of his cheeks. Erwin sat in a chair facing him, palms resting on his bare thighs.

“What are you doing?”

“Giving you control.” Erwin’s gaze was gentle. “We don’t have a lot of control over anything right now, but I can at least give you some. You tell me what you need, and I’ll do it. If you want to watch me play

with myself, that's fine. If you want me to join you in bed, or hold you, or leave, that's all fine, too."

This was the kind of consideration Levi was going to miss. He still wasn't sure he was interested in sex, but Erwin was so eager to make him feel comfortable. *I should at least play along a bit.*

"Touch your balls."

"Like this?" Erwin started stroking them with his fingertips.

"Yeah. Lift your dick out of the way so I can see. And tug them a bit."

Erwin complied, sliding further down the chair. His gaze was firmly locked on Levi, his lips parting.

Levi could feel the damp spots still lingering on his flesh from Erwin's kisses; they tingled in the room's draught, suddenly not tickling him so much anymore. "Feel good?" he asked.

"Yeah. Especially with you looking at me like that."

Levi felt a faint glow between his legs, the first sparks of a flame. "Start jerking yourself off a bit."

Erwin obeyed. His chest was starting to rise and fall now with heavy breaths.

—*the last time I'll see this until*— Levi cut the thought off in his mind, focused on the long fingers stroking, with that characteristic twist at the tip he loved to watch so much, loved to feel on himself.

"Feel good?" he asked, not caring that he was being repetitive.

"Yeah."

"Looks good, too." He was still flaccid, but he was starting to feel like that wouldn't be the case for long. He shifted, leaning forward for a better look.

After a few minutes, Erwin's head was beginning to loll back, exposing his beautiful throat. His lids were heavy, his eyes losing focus.

"Stop for a second," Levi said.

It seemed to take Erwin great effort to stop; briefly, ever so briefly, his nose wrinkled and his lip curled, a flicker of strain.

Levi stood. He opened a drawer and pulled out a small, clean toy and a bottle of oil, then tossed them at Erwin, who deftly caught them. "Show me how you're going to fuck yourself when I'm not around."

Their gaze held, and for a dizzying second, Levi was certain they were both going to fall apart, but then Erwin's eyes narrowed, and he nodded. Instead of opening the oil, he brought the toy to his mouth and dragged it across his tongue.

“Oh shit,” Levi whispered, transfixed.

Erwin ran his tongue around the tip, then took it deep into his throat.

Levi heard a squeak escape from his mouth. He sat at the edge of the bed.

Erwin slowly withdrew the toy, then coated it with oil. He pressed the pad of one foot into the chair, half-squatting on it, and slowly lowered himself onto the toy. His face contorted; his eyes squeezed shut.

“Oh fuck.” Levi wanted to be that toy so badly. His body finally began to respond.

Erwin’s eyelids parted, and he stared at Levi, through him. He began to move up and down, his hand moving in the same rhythm.

Levi sucked in a harsh breath. He stood and padded around to Erwin’s back, sliding a palm along his exposed throat. Erwin leaned into his hand, writhing a little in his chair.

“Oh fuck,” Levi whispered again, bending down to drag his lips across Erwin’s forehead. One hand stayed at his throat; the other slid down his chest to his abdomen, feeling the muscles tense and relax as he gyrated.

Savour this, Levi thought, but he was quickly getting feverish. He circled to Erwin’s front and knelt between his legs.

Erwin cried out and thrust into his throat.

Fuck. Levi pulled out the toy and used his fingers instead. *Fuck.* He was hard now, aching. He wanted to be inside Erwin, but he didn’t want this to end.

“Levi, please ...”

“Fuck!” Levi withdrew and frantically oiled himself while they repositioned themselves onto the bed. He pushed into him. They cried out together as he worked all the way in. He gasped and fell forward, mouth on Erwin’s nipple, one hand finding his and lacing through it, the other forcing under his lower back. Neither of them was in control now. Levi pushed hard into him and Erwin ground down against him with each thrust as they tried to merge into one.

Don’t let this end ... please don’t let this end ...

Water trickled down Levi’s cheek, and he tasted salt, and he wanted to hang on, but it was so hard to keep his movements slow. His body was betraying him; he was already rising.

Not yet. I’m not ready. Not yet ...

Erwin’s cries were louder, his hand frantically working between

them, his back arching.

“Wait,” Levi gasped into his nipple.

“I’m so close.”

“I know.”

“Please, Levi. I’m so close ...”

“I know. So am I. So am I.” He couldn’t slow down; he thrust harder and deeper, angling himself the way Erwin liked. “Fuck!”

Erwin’s head tossed, blond hair scattered and stuck to his damp forehead. “I can’t—”

“I know.”

“I’m going to come.”

“I know. Come on.” Levi ran his tongue in rough circles around Erwin’s nipple.

“Levi!” Erwin arched against him, and his body began to shudder, clenching around him. Levi squeezed his eyes shut.

I don’t want this to end. I don’t want—

His orgasm tore violently through him, wildfire on dry grass, and he shook so hard that he clung to Erwin, as if he might throw himself off the bed if he didn’t anchor himself. So good, it felt *so good*—

The last time we’ll share this.

He heard himself sob. The last ripple left him, but he kept his eyes closed, desperate to delay the end.

Erwin relaxed into the bed, breathing hard. A heavy hand settled into Levi’s hair.

He’s going to fall apart, Levi thought. *He always falls apart*. He needed to pull himself together so he could be there for him.

But when he lifted his head, Erwin gave him a polite smile. It wobbled a bit, then stuck.

Levi loved and hated that smile. This was the Erwin Smith humanity needed, the one who would save them all from the titans. *He doesn’t have to take his mask off ever again.*

And so, even though his heart was aching, he leaned forward and pressed a kiss to the tip of the sharp nose.

“Commander,” he said, his voice cracking.

“Captain.” Erwin trailed his knuckles along Levi’s jaw. “Thank you. For everything.”

“Don’t thank me. It’s weird.”

Erwin smiled and kissed the tip of his nose, too.

They dressed in silence, then exchanged a final kiss at the door.

This one felt more like a formality than a proper kiss. Levi wasn't going to be able to hold his emotions in check much longer. Erwin's mask seemed to be getting stronger, but his was cracking.

"You go first," he said. "I'll follow ten minutes behind."

"Levi—"

"For safety." He straightened Erwin's bolo tie and his collars, his jaw already quivering. "Go. I'll follow."

8

Erwin settled in his office, intending to bury himself in work, but he was too empty. He sipped more whiskey and stared at the expense reports until the numbers swam.

Hange's entrance was a welcome relief. The door closed, then the Squad Leader saluted. "Good afternoon, Commander."

"Afternoon."

"How did your talk with Levi go?"

Erwin stiffened his spine, threw his shoulders back. "We decided to put our relationship on hold."

"On hold? What does that mean?"

"It means we are operating in a purely professional capacity until after the reclamation effort, at which point we'll re-evaluate our goals and desires." It was easier than he expected to keep his face expressionless. Emotional exhaustion had its benefits.

Hange squinted at him, as if trying to read him, but there was nothing to read. He was hollow.

"So what do we do with these?" Hange strode forward and set two rings on the desk.

He picked up the larger of the two, trying to recall the excitement he had felt while selecting them. Emotional exhaustion had its detriments, too; excitement was inaccessible to him. He suspected the gravity of this moment would hit him later, and so hard that it might ruin him.

"Take them." He set the ring down. "Sell them, if you want."

Hange's face fell. "But after Wall Maria—"

"We won't both survive Wall Maria," he said flatly. "Even if we do, there's a good chance the trauma of the losses we'll endure will change us. A lot could happen between now and then, and there's no time to consider it until we're there."

It looked as if Hange was about to cry. “A few hours ago, you were shaking in my arms about this.”

“Levi and I came to the most logical conclusion, and we did it together. Thanks to him, I’ve regained my focus.” A lie. The numbers still swam when he looked at them.

Hange’s brows dropped. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

He blinked. “Pardon?”

“You two miserable assholes work so well together, and you’re so deeply in love, and now you’re shoving each other away because you think it will make you *stronger*? That’s not logic; it’s fear. You’re both scared.”

His mouth hung open for a moment before he responded. “I would think you’d be in a good position to understand the complications that can arise when mixing business and pleasure, given your history.”

“You were mixing them just fine,” Hange said, voice rising. “Sahlo would have used him against you if you weren’t romantically involved, anyway. And yeah, maybe you break down a bit around each other, but that’s healthy. The shit we see every day is more than anyone can handle alone. And you’re both closing off the only emotional outlet you have?”

“Hange, you are way over the line.” Every muscle in his body was tight and painful.

Hange snapped up the smaller ring, leaving the large one. “Keep that one. Study it. Think about what you’re giving up.”

“Leave,” he ordered.

Hange stormed out, slamming the door.

At least anger wasn’t emptiness. He was angry with Hange—*how dare you judge our decision*. He was angry with Levi for initiating the separation in the first place, which was odd, because it had been a mutual decision. He was furious with Sahlo for putting him in this position at all.

And above it all, on a level so intense it exhausted him to try to quantify it, he was furious with himself. He had allowed Levi to get caught up in his politics, and had put him in danger. Had those assassins succeeded, Levi’s blood would be on his hands.

He snatched up the ring and held it up, tempted to throw it across the room. It was just one more reminder of the life he might never have, all by his own choosing.

Humanity needs me.

A pang rippled through him. It took a moment for him to recognize it as sorrow—not in its usual combination with guilt, but pure, raw sorrow.

He refused to acknowledge it. He didn't have time to fall apart. The whole purpose of this arrangement was to keep him together, after all. He needed to honour his agreement with Levi and close off this part of his life, at least for now.

He opened the bottom drawer of his desk, the one that contained all his mementos. Henrik's picture frame was still on top; he lifted it and sifted others aside, setting the ring carefully on top of the book from his father. The two men who had marked him more deeply than any other.

I'm sorry, Levi. I love you.

He slid the drawer closed and waited for that wave of peace he had felt when he had first laid Henrik's picture frame to rest, but the sorrow refused to fade.

¤

It seemed every single area of the base was tied with memories—offices, bedrooms, the gym, the grounds, the dining hall, even the san. Levi ended up settling in the dining hall once the lunch rush had ended. It was large, empty and cold, just like him. He poured another glass of ale, hoping the glow in his stomach would fill him.

Shortly after the clock struck two in the afternoon, the door opened, and Hange stepped in, brows pinched. "I just talked to Erwin."

"I need to be alone."

"Are you sure?"

He glanced at Hange's worried face, and decided he might be lonely enough for company after all. He slid a bottle across the table. Hange sat and took a sip.

"How's Erwin doing?" Levi asked. "Polite smiles and evasive answers?"

It took Hange a long time to reply. "Yes."

He snorted. "Figures."

They were quiet for about half the bottle, and then Levi found he couldn't keep containing his question. "When you were in the Capital ..."

“Yeah?”

“Did Erwin seem like he was already distancing himself from me? He seemed ...” He thought of that polite smile. “He adapted quickly. I thought maybe he had been starting to let go of me already, before he even got back.”

Hange studied him. “Is this important to you?”

“Yeah. I brought up the idea of separating so he didn’t have to, but now I’m rethinking every single word and second-guessing its meaning.”

“Because it’s easier to be paranoid than sad?”

His brow furrowed. “Don’t fucking analyze me.”

“Easier to be angry, too,” Hange said.

Levi huffed and tilted the bottle to his lips.

Hange was quiet for a moment, fingers fidgeting.

“Shit it out,” Levi said.

“You don’t need to be paranoid. Erwin probably wouldn’t want me to give you this, but ...” Hange pulled out a small, metal object and slid it across the table. “There’s your proof he wasn’t distancing himself from you beforehand.”

Levi picked it up, examining it. A ring. The gradient on the metal was pleasing; it reminded him of sky on a clear day. “What is this?”

Hange’s jaw quivered for a moment before a kind smile took over. “He said this was an old tradition, one from the time before the Walls: matching wedding rings. He was going to use this to propose to you in Ehrmich.”

His chest ached so suddenly and violently that he thought, at first, he had somehow cracked a rib. He blinked against the sting in his eyes. *So that’s why he’s been so preoccupied with my fingers lately.* He tried it on each of his fingers; it was too large for any of them.

“That sausage-fingered bastard can’t even get a normal human-sized ring.” He swabbed his eye with the back of his hand. “What the fuck did he expect me to do with this—wear it as a bracelet? Fuck!” His hand curled around it, mashing it painfully into his palm.

Hange tried to drape an arm across his shoulders, but he jerked away. “Get off me.”

“I’m trying to support you.”

“You want to support me, then leave me the fuck alone,” he said, but that wasn’t what he wanted, not really. His eyes were tearing up again, and he slumped forward. “Fuck!”

This time, when Hange draped an arm across his shoulders, he didn't pull away.

8

Late that afternoon, Levi stepped into his room and closed the door.

The ring was still in his pocket, hot and glowing with body heat. Is this how warm it would have been when Erwin pulled it out of his pocket, too? Fiery, like the sunset.

He flopped backwards onto his bed, holding up the ring to examine it. He was too drunk to focus; there were two of them in his vision. No matter how hard he struggled, he couldn't unite them into one. Fine, then: he would make his vows to both of them.

He closed his eyes. *No matter what our future brings, Erwin, I will follow you.*

He slipped the ring into the inside breast pocket of his uniform jacket so it would always rest next to his heart.

-31-

HOME

Chatter arose from the end of the hallway.

Erwin lifted his head, heart pounding. The base was empty except for Hange and Mike, who were sitting in his office with him, closing out the year's reports. The chatter could only mean one thing: Levi and his squad had returned from their scouting mission to the north.

Sure enough, Levi strode through the door. "Hey," he greeted them, as if he had only been away for a few hours.

Erwin held his breath, studying Levi for the first time in two long months. The dark hair was longer and shaggy, his undercut was growing in, and his beard was thicker than Erwin had ever seen it. His expression was neutral, but his eyes were locked on Erwin's, and holding, and Erwin found he couldn't look away.

Gradually, he became aware that Mike and Hange were watching them, waiting for their reaction.

He stood tall, clasping his hands behind his back. "Welcome back."

"Yeah," Levi said. "Thanks."

"Nice beard," Hange offered.

"Yeah, yeah, I know; I look like shit." Levi strode through the room and perched on the couch's armrest. "Do you know how cold metal gets up there? Got fucking frostbite just trying to hold the razor."

"It's a good look," Mike said.

"Of course you'd think so, Scruffy." Levi's face softened. "How's Nanaba?"

"Pulled through fine. She's visiting her family for the holiday."

“And you weren’t invited? What, you sniff around her too much and scare her off?”

Mike chuckled. “I have other plans.”

Erwin had been watching them, trying to find a good spot to join in the banter, and now that there was a natural pause, he couldn’t figure out a way to contribute. “How did the mission go?” he asked instead. “Any casualties?”

“None. We updated the maps, too.” Levi rolled his head, his neck cracking. “Found a passage clear through to Wall Maria, wide enough to transport carriages—if they can handle the weather, that is. Barely any titans up there. We only needed to take down two the entire mission, and only saw maybe three or four. I have more to report, but that’s the gist of it.” He scratched his bristly jaw.

I wonder if his beard is wiry or soft? Erwin thought, which was the last question that should be coming to mind. He curled one hand into a fist, digging his fingernails into his palm. “Thank you for leading this mission, Levi. We should debrief as soon as possible.”

“Let’s do it now.” Levi bounced his legs, then stood. “But let’s go for a walk. Been on the horse all day—need to loosen up my legs.”

“Of course.” He realized Mike and Hange were watching them again; his nails dug deeper into his palms.

“Excuse me,” a voice said. “Captain, do you have a minute?”

The four officers turned to see Petra Ral standing in the doorway, her hands behind her back.

“Yeah, sure.” Levi winced a little as he rose to his feet, his knees creaking.

Hange leaned close to Erwin. “Ask him to join us.”

“That might complicate our situation even more,” Erwin said quietly, even though he wanted to.

“He doesn’t have anywhere else to go.”

“He could spend the holidays with me,” Mike said.

Hange glared. “You’ve been excited about getting one-on-one time with your cousin for weeks. Besides, the last thing Levi’s going to want to do right now is ice fishing. More cold weather, and fish guts everywhere? He’d spend the whole time complaining.”

“Very well,” Erwin said stiffly. “I’ll ask him during our debrief.” They were going to have to get over their awkwardness sooner or later; it might as well be during a holiday.

The three officers fell silent, watching the exchange at the door-

way. Petra was stammering something to Levi, her cheeks bright red. She held a small package behind her back.

“Happy Birthday, Captain!” She thrust the package at him, looking down.

Levi’s brows rose as he accepted it. “You didn’t have to—”

“I know. You don’t have to open it now. I just ... Thank you for everything you ... ” She was looking everywhere except at him—at the floor, at the gift, at the hallway—and then she looked up at the door frame. Her eyes widened. “Oh!”

Erwin squinted. “Is that mistletoe in my office doorway?” he asked Hange.

“This is going to be good,” Hange whispered. Mike nodded, folding his arms over his chest and leaning back against the desk.

Levi, oblivious to the chatting officers, followed Petra’s gaze. “What? It’s just a Christmas decoration.”

“It’s mistletoe.” Petra’s cheeks were redder than her hair.

“You’re supposed to kiss,” Hange called. “It’s tradition.”

Levi’s nose wrinkled. “What kind of stupid tradition is that?”

“It’s not mandatory,” Erwin said.

“Don’t worry, Captain.” Oluo stepped into view in the hallway. “I’m here to help if you need a stand-in.”

“Uh ... I should ... Happy Birthday, Captain.” Petra covered her face and ducked out of the doorway, disappearing down the hallway.

“Petra, wait.” Oluo jogged after her.

Levi stared after them, mouth hanging open, and then shook his head. “Frostbitten brains, all of them.” He paced back toward them, but stopped when he saw Hange and Mike snickering. “What?”

“You are so damned oblivious,” Hange said. “The poor girl’s head over heels for you.”

“Petra? No, we talked a while ago. She knows how much Erwin means to—” Levi winced. “*Meant* to me. Why the hell do you have mistletoe in your doorway, anyway, Erwin? Were you trying to kiss all your soldiers while I was gone?”

“This is the first time I’ve noticed it. Someone must have sneaked it up there while I wasn’t looking.” Erwin cast a sidelong glance at Hange, who grinned and shrugged.

“I thought it was festive. So what’s in the package?”

The package had been meticulously wrapped with silver paper. Levi carefully opened a flap and slid out the contents. “Tea.” He smelled

it. "Good tea."

"You're welcome to make a pot before we debrief, if you like." Erwin paused to reflect, then added, "Or get cleaned up, if you wish. You're probably eager to shave." *Soft or wiry? Which is it?*

"Nah, let's do this now so I can relax later." Levi cocked his head at the doorway.

They fell into step as easily as they always did, as if they hadn't set aside their relationship, as if they hadn't been hundreds of kilometers apart for weeks.

Levi glanced around as they walked. "Where is everyone? This place is dead."

"We lifted the base lockdown for the Christmas season. We haven't identified any leaks, but there hasn't been any new information released to the soldiers, either, so the benefits to morale outweigh the risks. The last few soldiers—like Mike—are in the process of leaving now; everyone has taken advantage of their leave except Hange and me. You're welcome to stay here with us, if you wish. We'll be having a small Christmas celebration tonight and tomorrow morning, but otherwise, we'll mostly be focused on work."

Levi studied him. "You sure it won't complicate things if I stay?"

"I wondered the same thing." Erwin kept his gaze carefully focused in front of them. "We'll need to redefine how we interact with each other sooner or later, anyway. Might as well start now."

"I guess."

They stepped outside and began to stroll to the park behind the base. The trees were mostly bare, save for the few evergreens scattered amongst them. The ground was covered in dead leaves and the occasional skiff of snow.

"I'm a little disappointed," Erwin said. "I love lots of snow at Christmas."

"I'm sick of snow," Levi said.

"I imagine. You'll be glad to know it's been unseasonably warm lately. If this trend continues, we'll be able to start our expeditions again as early as January." They passed a bench, and he paused, noticing a slight limp in the other's gait. "Did you want to sit for a bit, or keep walking?"

"Let's keep moving. Need to work out the aches."

This was comfortable; it felt like any other walk through the park. Erwin felt the weight of the past several weeks begin to lift. *We're*

going to be okay.

“It’s good to be back,” Levi said, voice soft. “I don’t like being in charge for so long without checking in with you.”

“You should have more confidence in your leadership abilities. It sounds like you did well.”

“Wasn’t exactly hard. We even finished a bit ahead of schedule, so we routed through Stohess on the way back.”

“Oh?” Erwin said.

Levi was quiet for several paces, then said, “Didn’t feel up for going through Ehrmich.” He rubbed his breast pocket, deep in thought.

Erwin subtly drew in a breath, releasing it slowly, as he fought to keep his mind from wandering in that direction. In the daytime, he could usually keep himself focused. Night time was a different story.

“Stopped in to visit Nile and Marie,” Levi said pointedly.

“Ah.”

“When I said you should try to date around a little, I didn’t mean you should try to fuck your ex.”

“Marie misunderstood my intentions—that was before you left. I was hoping to make her think you and I had separated, in case Nile was saying more than he should to Sahlo, but she took it the wrong way. I did nothing to convince her otherwise. It was the most convenient way to convince the Doks we were no longer together.”

“You might have overplayed it a bit. They fed me drinks and ranted at me for a good three, four hours. They’re moving, by the way. Eastern district of Wall Rose. Marie’s pregnant.”

“I see,” Erwin said.

“She wants to settle there long term, open a bar once the kids are old enough to go to school. I guess her parents are retiring and moving in with them.”

“I see,” Erwin said again.

“She got a bit weird about my beard.” Levi scratched it. “Kept asking to touch it.”

“She really likes facial hair.”

“Well, she doesn’t have to be so creepy about it. Is that why Nile tries so hard to grow his face pubes?”

Erwin chuckled. “How would poor Nile feel if he knew you were always talking about his beard that way behind his back?”

Levi snorted. “I say it to his face, too.”

“Are you planning to keep yours?”

“Fuck, no.”

Erwin spent a few seconds trying to find a platonic way to ask him to describe the beard’s texture before he realized there was, of course, none. He bit the inside of his cheek, his hands clasping together behind his back.

They rounded a corner and took the left fork in the path, the one that circled the training grounds instead of leading to town.

“Sahlo giving you any trouble?” Levi asked, and without even looking at him, Erwin could tell his nose was wrinkled.

“Not really. I must admit, he is a shrewd business partner. Now that we’re working to the same timeline and focusing on the same initiatives, we’ve approached several meetings as allies, and we have the ability to read each other and play the room. I suppose our years-long rivalry, in a way, trained us to read each other well.”

“Rivalry is a mild way to put it,” Levi muttered. “After all he—”

“I know. But we’ve been backed into a corner, so we might as well put a positive spin on it.” Erwin didn’t mention the waves of panic he felt late at night, when he was too tired to hold back the knowledge that he was cooperating with a man who was responsible for so much suffering in the lives of people around him.

“He’s also doing a lot to help out with our weapons research,” he continued. “Thanks to the investor support he’s garnering, Hange and Moblit have developed new nets that should be able to restrain titans. After we test them in the field and make any necessary adjustments, we can use them during the Wall reclamation. They’ll make a far more practical solution to temporarily block the gates while we repair them —easier to control than gravel and debris, and a substantially lighter load for the wall top carts.”

Levi glanced at him, then looked away. “I bet four-eyes actually invented them to capture titans.”

“Indeed.” Erwin grimaced. “That desire is only intensifying, and Moblit’s starting to harp on it, too. I’ve decided to grant them permission after the Wall has been reclaimed, but I haven’t told them yet.”

“They’d just say it wasn’t soon enough, anyway.”

“Exactly. I’d rather give in to them afterwards and let them think it was their idea.”

Levi cocked his head at a nearby bench. “Legs aren’t loosening up as much as I hoped. Need to rest for a bit.”

“Of course.”

Levi sat, and Erwin settled beside him. A breeze rustled the trees around them and raised goosebumps on the back of Erwin's neck. Dead leaves swirled on the ground, then settled again.

"So, Sahlo's playing nice," Levi said. "Have you figured him out yet? Before I left, you said he was spouting off Wallfucker dogma."

"He has so many conflicting potential motivations that I can't pin him down. It doesn't help that we've only been talking short-term strategy." Erwin paused. "He changes the topic whenever I try to bring up Wall Maria. It's almost as if he's stalling."

"Stalling? For what?"

"Still trying to work that out."

"You sound frustrated."

"I am."

After a long pause, Levi stretched out his legs, crossing them at the ankles. "Does he still seem like he genuinely wants to help the Underground?"

"Yes. He's walked me through the process of supplying food to the people there—it is helping feed the hungry, but it's not enough. Unfortunately, the yeast supplement has encountered a few setbacks. He's hired a handful of new scientists to try to figure out how to cultivate it more quickly."

Levi rubbed his thighs. "Huh. So is he still a threat?"

"For now, no. He's cooperating. We'll see if that continues as we get closer to the reclamation."

The unasked question hung between them: *Is it still necessary for us to be apart?* It certainly seemed less pressing, with Sahlo under control, but that could change any moment. Another Sahlo could easily be waiting in the wings. Erwin breathed in. The air still smelled like winter: chimney smoke, and wet leaves.

"I took your advice."

Levi eyed him. "Yeah?"

"Tried to act like a single straight man around town." He wasn't sure why he felt the need to confess this. "I took Lady Gunnhild out for dinner."

"Huh," Levi said, unmoving. "She's been after you for years."

"Indeed, and she has a large sphere of social influence, and a penchant for gossip. Strategically, it made sense."

"Did you fuck her?"

"Of course not."

Levi's shoulders relaxed. "I bet you'd disappoint her anyway—it's been so long since you've had a woman in bed, you'd probably get confused and go for her asshole."

For a moment, Erwin stared at him, stunned. Then, he started laughing. He had missed that combination of deadpan delivery and inappropriate humour. Levi's eyes twinkled at him before he turned away.

"We shouldn't be speaking about her this way," Erwin said, feeling guilty for laughing at her expense. "She's a lovely woman."

"Terrible taste in men, though."

"Yes, just awful." Erwin paused. "Something similar happened with Marie, when she and I were together after Henrik died."

Levi's lip curled. "What, you went for her asshole?"

"No, but I got confused. I was too used to being with Henrik. I forgot to pull out." He had never told anyone that before, and it was wholly inappropriate to share it here, given his history with Levi. He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have told you that."

"It's fine. We're close, right?"

The words hung between them, then Erwin said, "Of course."

Levi opened his mouth, but hesitated. Erwin waited, expecting more questions: *did you kiss Lady Gunnhild? Do you have any feelings for her? What are our ground rules for dating other people?*

Instead, Levi said, "What's it like?"

"What's what like?"

"Sex with a woman."

Fear gripped Erwin's stomach as he thought of Petra standing beneath the mistletoe. He studied Levi in his periphery and found he was unable to read him. "Why do you—"

"No, never mind."

"If you want, I can talk about—"

"No, I don't really care." Levi shrugged it off. "Just making conversation."

Erwin felt the need to make a joke to lighten the tension between them. "Well, at the very least, I feel I should correct at least one of your misconceptions: some women actually like it when you 'go for the asshole.'"

Levi snorted, then stood. "Let's keep walking. I want to tell you about the expedition."

As they continued to pace along the path, Levi spoke about the weather conditions, the terrain, and the geographical features along the

route. He had an immaculate memory for his surroundings, something Erwin found himself admiring each time it became apparent. He described the titans they encountered, all of them abnormals.

“Made me think our titan problem would be less of a problem if we moved humanity to the northern territories.”

“They’d probably follow us north,” Erwin said. “They like to go where the population is most dense.”

“Ah, true.” Levi paused. “It’s beautiful up there, in a weird, frozen way. Lights in the sky every night, everything muffled by snow. The cold is shitty, but I get why people still live up there.”

Erwin thought back to the time they had spent at the hot springs in Utopia District, three years ago, and his throat ached.

They crossed the yard in silence, then walked back to Erwin’s office. Levi eyed the sprig of mistletoe in the doorway, then quickly stepped through it. “Shitglasses is really into the holiday this year, huh?”

“I think Hange’s convinced the holiday spirit will magically convince us to reunite,” Erwin said—maybe it was too honest, but he was getting tired of dancing around everything that had happened between them.

Levi leaned against the corner of his desk, folding his arms over his chest. “Hange’s still not taking it well, huh?”

“No.”

“How about you?”

“I’ve been keeping myself too busy to consider it,” Erwin said, easing to a seat on the couch.

“Wish I could have done the same. Spent a lot of time staring at the northern lights late at night, trying to make sense of it all.” Levi paused. “It’s weird now, isn’t it? Feels like we should be rushing into town for a long night of sex.”

Their gaze held, then Erwin looked down. His stomach was still knotted.

“I shouldn’t have said that,” Levi said.

“It’s fine. I don’t want us to start censoring ourselves around each other.” Erwin swallowed the lump in his throat. “What we have—what we *had* doesn’t just lie dormant just because we’re willing it to sink below the surface.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“It will take time. We’re in this together,” Erwin said, even though the words didn’t make sense for a relationship that was ‘on hold’.

“Partners,” Levi muttered, as if to himself.

Their gaze held again.

Levi slumped deeper against the desk, arms tightening around his chest. “So, let’s immerse ourselves in the magic of the season. What are we doing first?”

“Once our debriefing has wrapped up, Hange and I are heading into town to buy groceries, a tree and more decorations. You’re welcome to join us.”

“Sentimental bullshit,” Levi muttered, standing. “Fine, but I need to clean up first.”

“We’ll meet you back here when you’re done,” Erwin said, and at last, he felt the first real spark of the season’s magic. It wasn’t the holidays without Levi by his side.

❧

Levi closed the door to his bedroom and slumped down it to a seat. He stared fixedly at his hands, picking at his fingernails to clean them, even though he was about to clean up in the bath, anyway. The Doks had kindly offered him access to their shower, and he had taken full advantage of it, but two months of travel was going to take more than a single shower to wash away.

When he was honest, it wasn’t the grime that was bothering him, anyway.

Partners.

He had forgotten how subtle Erwin’s cologne was, how it wafted from his body when he leaned in close—did he realize he leaned down to Levi when they spoke? It could have seemed pedantic, but it was just considerate. That was the way they operated: unconsciously drawn in to each other, the world narrowing to just the two of them.

“Fuck it,” he muttered, unbuttoning his pants. If he was already filthy, he might as well embrace his filth.

He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the door, moving his hand hard and fast. The expedition had been severely lacking personal time—a detriment of travelling with such a small team in an outdoor environment. Between the constant cold and the confused thoughts about where he stood with Erwin, he hadn’t had much of a libido, anyway.

But that look in Erwin’s eyes—there was still the same gentleness

there that he only showed to Levi, only in private. As much as Levi hated himself for it, he was glowing with hope.

After Wall Maria. It will all go back to normal after Wall Maria.

His wounds were still too fresh to keep thinking of Erwin, so he tried to blank his mind instead, trusting his body to get where it needed to go. His mind betrayed him; he saw Erwin bent over in front of him, felt the fuzz coating the thick, round muscles, remembered the taste of the skin between them.

“Fuck,” he grunted between clenched teeth. He barely pulled out his handkerchief in time to catch the mess.

Now he felt cold and ashamed.

He scrubbed himself twice in the bath: once to remove the filth of the expedition, the second to try to cleanse himself of shame. He shaved off his beard and his undercut, then trimmed his hair and—making sure no one was around to see—his nose hair.

His uniforms were badly in need of washing, including his cravat, so he dressed in black pants and a green hooded shirt over a white dress shirt instead. Before he threw his uniform jacket into the laundry hamper, he reached into the inner pocket to pull out the ring. He slipped it into the breast pocket of his dress shirt, safely hidden beneath the top layer.

Once his boots were on, he strode to Erwin’s office. Erwin wasn’t around, but Hange lay on the couch, wrapped in a long maroon jacket and a thick white scarf.

“You know it’s not that cold out, four-eyes,” Levi said, draping himself across the opposite couch.

“I get cold easily.” Hange sat up. “You’re underdressed.”

“All my winter clothes are filthy.”

“You look thin. Did you eat enough up there?”

He grunted. “Lost my appetite for trail rations.”

“Here.” Hange unwrapped the scarf, then threw it at him. He caught it with one hand.

“I don’t need this.”

“It’s for my benefit, not yours. You look awful without something covering that weird long neck.”

“Shut up,” he muttered, but he sat up and looped it around his neck. It was warm and smelled surprisingly clean. “You actually bathed before you put this on?”

“It’s a special occasion.”

“Because I’m back?”

Hange grinned. “That ranks third. First is because it’s Christmas.”

“And second?” he asked, certain he was about to be teased, but curious anyway.

“I’m planning to buy new ink while I’m downtown.”

His lips flattened. “That ranks above me coming back alive?”

“*Red* ink, Levi.”

“Are you two bickering already?” Erwin said good-naturedly from the door.

Levi turned, and his breath caught.

Erwin wore a long black coat, double-breasted, with a dark blue scarf that matched the outer ring of his irises. His black pants were neatly tailored, making his legs look long and deceptively slender. His hair glowed above it all, golden, clean, and crisply parted.

Levi rose to his feet. He had forgotten how handsome Erwin was. How could he have forgotten? His mouth was dry. He had spent two months trying to convince himself he was okay with their separation, but now it felt like mere minutes.

Erwin was staring at him, too, his jaw tight.

“Fun,” Hange said, a bit too cheerfully. “This is going to be fun.” A hand clapped into Levi’s back so hard that he almost stumbled. “Come on, Commander, Captain! Trost awaits us.”

Then Hange stepped through the door, and it was just Erwin, Levi, and their awkwardness.

Erwin stood tall. “You look …” He paused. “Refreshed.”

“Yeah. Feels good to be clean.” Emotions were warring inside Levi, and to his surprise, anger seemed to be winning. Maybe he was still exhausted from scouting for so long—or maybe it was the time of year. If he looked back a few years, he saw himself having a snowball fight with Erwin. If he looked before that, he saw Isabel and Farlan decorating him like he was a tree. *How much of my own happiness do I have to give up for humanity?*

“Hey,” Hange yelled from the hallway. “Are you two coming?”

They walked three abreast through the streets. In spite of the food shortages, Trost was heavily in holiday mode: lanterns hung in every window, and shop windows were decorated with ribbons and ornaments. A group of carollers stood in the town square. As they passed, Erwin hummed along, his hum so deep that Levi could feel it rum-

bling in his chest.

“I didn’t know you could carry a tune,” Hange said.

Erwin smiled. “I’m passable, at best.”

Have I ever heard him sing? What else don’t I know about him? Levi’s mood soured even more.

Their first stop was a bakery, where Erwin bought a fresh loaf of bread and a pie for dessert. They bought a goose at the grocery store, as well as squash and potatoes. Hange spent a small fortune on spices for mulled wine.

Finally, they picked out a tree and decorations. While Erwin and Hange discussed their purchase, Levi cast a look toward the back of the store, where he and Erwin had—on separate occasions, of course—purchased erotic oils and toys. He wondered if Erwin still kept oils in the same hidden locations as before. He wondered if he ever used the toys they had bought together, like he had during their last night as a couple. His pulse raced.

The three of them worked together to carry the tree and their shopping bags back to the base. Hange was chatting excitedly about holidays back home, and Erwin was smiling and laughing. Levi felt empty. Lonely. *This was a bad idea.*

They leaned the tree against the wall in the dining hall.

“We’ll bring down one of the couches and light the fireplace.” Erwin gestured to the fireplace in the corner. “Then we can spend some time decorating the tree.”

“Seems like a lot of hassle for just one night,” Levi said.

“Okay, shorty.” Hange clapped his back. “If you’re set on being grumpy, Erwin and I will do the fun tasks out here. You start getting the food ready.”

“Fine.” He luggered the groceries to the kitchen.

There was something calming and satisfying about food preparation, akin to cleaning. Order from chaos. Within an hour, he had the goose cleaned and cooking, the potato pancakes ready to fry, and the vegetables cut and ready to steam. He didn’t know how to mull the wine, but he wasn’t sure he wanted to interrupt Hange to ask. There was singing coming from inside the dining hall. It was embarrassing.

Bracing himself, he stepped out of the kitchen.

Erwin and Hange were singing carols together and draping ribbons and garland around the tree. A small fire burned in the fireplace in the corner of the dining hall. The pair had set up a carpet, one of Er-

win's office couches and a side table to make a cozy little celebration area. Lanterns and greenery decorated the walls, and nine candles had been set on the ledge above the fireplace.

The scene was so reminiscent of his last Christmas with Isabel and Farlan that Levi leaned against the wall, his knees suddenly weak. It was a bittersweet feeling—he missed them, but his heart was warm with love for Erwin and Hange.

“Levi,” Hange called. “Get over here.”

He wasn’t ready to immerse himself in festivities just yet. “I have the goose in the oven.”

“I’ll go check on it in a sec. I wanted to mull some wine, anyway.” Hange poured a glass of amber liquid, finishing off a bottle. “Want some brandy?”

So they were drunk; that explained the singing and the flushed cheeks. “Sure.”

Erwin was fixedly adjusting an ornament, back to him.

“What do you think?” Hange asked, gesturing at the decorations.

Levi shrugged. “It looks like you fed a bunch of Christmas ornaments to a titan and it threw up.”

“So damned grumpy,” Hange said. “Here, I know what will cheer you up. Hold still.” Hange shoved a drink into his hand, then began to lower a giant festive bow toward his head.

“Don’t you—” Levi began, ducking away, but he had to be careful not to spill his drink, and it slowed him down.

Hange clipped the bow into his hair. “There. I think it looks better on you than on the tree. Erwin?”

Erwin turned around, and then chuckled. “Very festive.”

Decorating me like I’m a damned tree ... Levi’s throat was tight. He wanted to throw the bow to the ground and storm out, but he couldn’t bear to ruin their fun. Instead, he sat down and delicately set the bow aside. “You’re both idiots.”

“Still grumpy.” Hange drained a glass, then began to stride toward the kitchen. “He’s your problem now, Commander. I’m going to take my turn in the kitchen.”

Erwin finished adjusting the ornament, then stepped back to admire it. “Are you okay, Levi?”

“Not really.” Levi took a large swig of brandy. He stared into the fire, enjoying its crackle. His life had revolved around campfires lately; he figured he would have a hard time sleeping without one.

Erwin glanced back at him, then retrieved his own glass from the mantle. He sat on the far side of the couch. “It *is* strange, isn’t it?” he said quietly.

“What?”

“Figuring out how to remove the romance from our relationship. Where the lines are.” Erwin’s eyes were fixed on him. “It’ll be fine in capacities where we’re operating as Commander and Captain—we’ve always done a good job of keeping our relationship out of professional settings, anyway. But in settings like this, it’s difficult not to default to romance.” He paused to shake his head, then lifted the drink to his lips.

“We just have to break the ice a bit,” Levi said. “We’ll figure it out.” He wondered if he would ever be able to see Erwin sitting on a couch without wanting to crawl onto his lap and kiss him. His skin was soft in the light from the fire, his eyes glowing. “It would help if you took worse care of yourself, you know.”

Erwin’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“You’re too damned handsome. Get a shitty haircut, let your unibrow grow in—”

“I don’t have a unibrow.”

“—grow a scraggly goatee like Nile’s. Maybe get Mike to give you a black eye or two.”

The corner of Erwin’s mouth lifted. “A black eye never deterred you before.”

“Good point. Maybe just start following Hange’s bathing routine instead.”

“You might be overwhelmed by the manliness of my musk.”

Levi gave a soft snort. “Okay, fine, bathe all you want. But the only way this is going to work is if you make yourself repulsive to me, so get working on that.”

“Alright, but you have to agree to do the same.” Erwin leaned forward, peering at him. “Hmm.”

“What are you doing?”

“Figuring out how you could change to be repulsive to me.”

“What if I shave right here?” Levi said, drawing a circle around the top of his head.

Erwin squinted, as if considering. “No, that would be fine.”

“Broke my nose a couple times so it was crooked?”

“Then you’d look rugged.”

“How about if I got really, really fat?”

Erwin shrugged. “Then I’d be thinking about how pleasant and soft your hugs would be.”

“I’m out of ideas,” Levi said. “So I guess we’re fucked, then.”

“Thoroughly, thoroughly fucked.” Erwin took a long sip of his drink. “Discussing how much we’re attracted to each other probably isn’t helping anything.”

“The whole point of this was to make us a little less important to each other. Make it so we weren’t each other’s weakness.”

“I know.”

Their gaze held, and Levi’s stomach began to sink. *It doesn’t matter what we do. We’re already too important to each other.*

Thoroughly, thoroughly fucked.

❧

They ate their feast slowly, treasuring the fresh flavours. After so many weeks of trail rations, Levi enjoyed the textures the most: the crispy, oily potatoes in the pancakes, the crunch of the beans, the meaty texture of the goose, the fluffiness of the bread. After dinner, they sat on the couch—Hange in the middle, snuggling with both of them—and drank mulled wine until their bellies glowed. Erwin and Hange spoke of their favourite winter memories, and Levi joined in, reluctantly at first.

His voice strengthened as he recalled the winter they had found a dirty patch of snow in the Underground, fallen from one of the air vents to the surface. Isabel had insisted on making snowmen, and Farlan and Levi had gotten caught up in her excitement. They used broken glass for the faces and dirty rags for hair. Levi’s had been the ugliest—a little lump of muddy snow—and he had been teased mercilessly for it.

When he finished talking, he realized his eyes were watering. Hange and Erwin were watching him, faces solemn.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he said, wiping his eyes.

“It’s okay to be sad,” Hange said. “They were your family.”

Erwin nodded. “I suppose there are all sorts of families in this broken world of ours. The strongest ones, for us three, seem to be the ones we’ve chosen.”

“Sentiment,” Levi mumbled, but his voice cracked.

Hange snuggled closer to him, head on his shoulder, elbow through his. He hesitated, then nuzzled his cheek against the top of the auburn hair. *Family.* Mike was part of this family, too. And maybe his

squad. Hell, there wasn't one soldier in the Survey Corps he wouldn't trust with his life. Maybe the new recruits, when they arrived, but once their numbers thinned and their skills were honed, they, too, would join this strange family.

He stared at Erwin over the top of Hange's head. They were so alike. Levi had taken abandoned souls into his gang; Erwin took all the outcasts and freaks into the Survey Corps.

They ate the pie later that night, then sat on the couch some more and complained about how full their stomachs were, until Erwin steered the conversation back to fond reminiscing.

Around nine o'clock, Hange stood. "This has been a lovely day, but I'm exhausted. Goodnight." After a hug for each of them, the Squad Leader stepped out the door, leaving them alone.

Levi was torn. On one hand, he was fatigued from his trip and the alcohol, and things were still a bit awkward with Erwin. On the other, he was, as always, reluctant to leave Erwin's presence.

"Don't feel obligated to stay," Erwin said, stretching out his legs. "You must be tired."

With a shrug, Levi said, "I'm not sure I can sleep yet."

Erwin's head rolled along the top of the couch, eyes locking onto him. "Thank you for sharing your story about the snowmen. For all the years we've known each other, I don't know a lot about your time in the Underground."

"Not much worth sharing."

"Would you mind talking a bit about what the holidays were like?"

Levi studied him. "You aren't going to use what I tell you to analyse me, are you?"

"No. I'm just curious."

"Okay." Levi slumped deeper into the couch, tucking his legs beside him. He took another sip of mulled wine. "Holidays were like everything else there: disgusting and cheap. There was a kid down the street who made the best alcohol, and he had a sweet spot for Isabel, so he'd give us a few bottles. Isabel and Farlan would scrape together whatever decorations they could find. We'd stay up all night drinking—kind of like this, really. Isabel would start singing; she had a voice like a songbird, a bit too shrill, but strong and clear." His stomach was glowing. "The holidays were never important to me, but they were important to them, so I tried to help them make it special." He blinked.

“I’m sorry they’re gone,” Erwin said solemnly. “I truly am.”

“Stop apologizing for that. They made their own decisions. I asked them to stay behind, and they wouldn’t. You can’t ...” He cleared his tightening throat. “You can’t control what other people choose to do with their lives, even when they’re being stupid. They weren’t my subordinates. I couldn’t order them to stay.”

They were silent.

“This is depressing,” Levi said. “Change the subject.”

“Your accent,” Erwin said.

“Huh?”

“It gets stronger when you talk about them.” Erwin squinted. “Or maybe when you’re drunk.”

“I don’t have an accent, and I’m not drunk, and *that’s* all you have to say when I’m pouring my heart out?”

“You asked for a topic change.” Erwin blinked. “Also, I may be a bit inebriated.” He pronounced the word so slowly that it almost sounded like it had too many syllables.

“Fucking lightweight.” Levi tried to look down at his drink, and his vision blurred for a moment too long before it focused again. “Okay, you tell me about your family so I can accuse *you* of having some imaginary accent. What were the holidays like?”

Erwin’s face softened. “Papa loved this time of year.”

Levi’s heart skipped a beat. Erwin rarely spoke about his father, but when he did, it was with great reverence—or calling his name in feverish dreams. “Oh?”

“He used to come home from the schoolhouse with pink cheeks and a big smile, bringing small packages of candy, or decorations, or themed jewellery for Mama. She used to scold him for spending too much money, but I think she loved it. At night, we would gather around the fireplace and Mama would play the violin while Papa sang along, all sorts of strange carols and songs. Or sometimes the four of us would paint lanterns together.” He smiled, his focus distant. “Christmas Eve, Helena and I would sneak out of bed and whisper into the wee hours of the morning, wondering what presents we’d get. I’m sure our parents must have heard us, but they never interrupted us.”

“Did you get lots of presents?” Levi asked, unable to fathom the concept.

“Usually one present each. We were comfortable, but not rich. One year ...” His eyes glistened. “Our last Christmas together, Papa gave

me a second present, in private. It was a piece of the old world, forbidden. No one alive knows it exists. I could be tried for treason simply for owning it.” Erwin drained the rest of his glass, then sat up. “I could show it to you. But you can’t breathe a word of it to anyone.”

Levi studied him, fascinated by the enthusiasm in the blue eyes. He couldn’t decide if it was boyish or terrifying—maybe both at the same time.

“Okay,” he said, intrigued. “Show me.”

Erwin stood, swaying. “I’ll be right back.”

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Erwin trailed his palm along the wall as he walked to his office from the bathroom. He hadn’t been this drunk in years. He hadn’t even really noticed it until he had stood in a bathroom stall, the walls warping around him. It felt good to let go like this without worrying about how it might appear to the other soldiers.

He lit the lamp—after the third try—and sank to his knees by the bottom drawer of his desk. He set Henrik’s drawing to the side.

The unused wedding ring sat neatly on top of his father’s gift.

His stomach sank. He had spent so much time in the Capital lately that he hadn’t seen this ring for weeks, and with all the distractions of work, he hadn’t given the ring much thought. He picked it up and, using all his focus, clumsily slid it onto his finger. It felt comfortable. Secure.

What would this night of celebration be like if they weren’t in the military? Maybe he’d be living with Levi in a little house of their own, dancing in front of a tree and singing—did Levi even sing?—while their little ones clapped and cheered. Two children, a boy and a girl. They could adopt them from the Underground, give them a chance at more than patches of dirty mud-snow.

“Stop this,” he muttered, pulling off the ring. He had to stay vigilant. His relationship with Levi was in a vulnerable state right now, and if he was drunk with wine, nostalgia, and hope, he might cause irreparable damage.

He pulled out the book, then carefully set the ring back in the drawer.

When he returned to the dining hall, Levi was sitting on the floor at the base of the couch, head leaning back against the cushion.

“Did you fall off the couch?” Erwin asked, leaning against the doorframe.

“No, I *slid* off.” Levi squinted at him with one eye, the other closed. “Watch it.”

“Watch what?”

Levi nodded up. “No kissing.”

Erwin looked above him and saw a sprig of mistletoe that hadn’t been there a few hours ago.

“Hange,” he muttered, squatting in front of Levi instead. “Need me to help you up?”

Levi was still squinting. “Not supposed to touch.”

“Right.”

“I’ll get up myself. Get us more wine.” Levi held out his glass, his hand swaying.

Erwin set his book on the armrest of the couch and filled each of their glasses while Levi struggled back onto the cushion.

“What took you so long, anyway?” Levi asked. “Get lost?”

“I called for a navigator to guide me, but no one’s around.” Erwin handed him the glass. “You should have some water, too. You’re going to be sick tomorrow.”

“Who cares? Best I’ve felt in months. And I’m finally fucking warm. No fucking ice and fucking snow.” Levi took a long swig. “Let’s see this book.”

Erwin eyed the burgundy liquid wobbling perilously near the top of the glass. “Let’s wait until we’ve finished these drinks.”

“You don’t look as enthusiastic as before.” Was that disappointment in his voice?

Erwin thought of the ring. “I suppose I had a sobering moment of realization.”

“Screw that. Tell me more about your family.” Levi leaned forward and pulled the side table around to the front so he could use it as a footrest, crossing his legs at the ankles. “Grandparents? Aunts or uncles?”

“No. I believe I’ve mentioned my stepfather before—he came into my life after Papa died, but I don’t even know if Mama is still with him.” He closed his eyes, because thinking about his mother reminded him of Helena’s sobs. “Papa didn’t talk about his family much. I got the feeling he fell out with them long before I was born. Mama was an only child, and her parents died shortly after she and Papa were married.” He smiled to himself. “Ah, but listen to me. I should start referring to them

like an adult instead of ‘Mama’ and ‘Papa.’”

“It’s fine.” Levi looked down, his face drawn.

“You had an aunt,” Erwin said gently. “Right?”

“Maybe.” Levi drained his glass and set it on the floor, then curled into himself, arms tight around his chest. “Up north, when it was quiet, I spent a lot of time remembering—*trying* to remember. Is my aunt really my aunt? What about the man who took me in, or the gang? I can’t trust any of it.” His frown deepened. “I saw lots of fucked-up stuff down there, I know I did, but I blocked most of it out. If I can’t trust my memories, how do I know who I am? I didn’t even know I was such a monster until we went Underground and the knife was so familiar ...”

Erwin was torn. He didn’t want this path to end Levi’s good mood, but then again, what if this was the outlet he needed?

I never gave him time to dig into this in any depth, he realized, recognizing his instincts to curl protectively around Levi and distract him. He wasn’t sure anymore if it was better to ignore trauma or try to work through it. Neither option ever seemed to help.

“Shit.” Levi rubbed his temples with one hand. “One drink too many—tipped me over into being a miserable bastard. Screw my past.”

“Are you sure you don’t need to discuss this more?”

“Yeah. Let’s see your book.”

Erwin set his glass on the table, too, and picked up the book. He slid across the cushions to sit next to Levi, not quite touching him, but close.

“This is my last tangible memento of my father.”

“Looks old as hell.”

“It is. We don’t know how old; there’s a date in the front, but it uses a different date system.” Erwin smoothed a hand across the leather surface. The edges were worn smooth. He opened the front cover and prepared to turn the page.

“Wait,” Levi said. “Let me read the inscription.”

Erwin’s heart pounded in his chest. This wasn’t something he ever intended to share with anyone, even his Captain.

“*Erwin*,” Levi read, squinting. “*May you never stop dreaming, and may your quest for knowledge always drive you forward. Love forever, Papa.*”

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

“Your writing looks like his,” Levi said.

“Does it?” Why did that make his heart swell with pride?

“I think ...” Levi paused. “This sums you up perfectly. You’re

living your life exactly the way he asked you to.”

Erwin’s eyes flooded; he blinked back tears. “You think so?”

“Yeah. Your mother and sister gave you shit all the time for it, but he would have been proud.”

I wonder if Papa would have liked Levi? Erwin wondered, even though that wasn’t relevant anymore. He probably would have admired Levi’s loyalty.

Papa had always valued loyalty.

His gut twisted. He took a deep breath and turned the page.

Levi shifted closer, so close that Erwin had to pull his thigh away so they wouldn’t touch. “What’s this?”

“A map of the world.” Erwin drew his fingertips around the borders of the landmasses. “Those are continents—land, like where we are now. And around them is the ocean, salt water filled with enormous fish and strange plant life.”

“Salt water,” Levi repeated, sounding confused.

“Exactly what it sounds like; it’s not normal water like we have in our rivers and lakes.

“This world is bigger than we can imagine; even Wall Maria would be less than the size of a gold coin on this map.” Erwin turned the page. He had read this so many times that he knew exactly what would be on each page. “These are volcanoes—molten rock pours out of the tops of mountains, spewing ash into the sky. And here are deserts: sand that stretches as far as the eye can see, with harsh winds and temperatures. These are rainforests: hot, humid forests densely packed together, housing insects and animals so strange, we could only ever dream about them.”

He paused to glance at Levi, making sure he wasn’t boring him, but Levi’s eyes were wide and shining as he leaned in. Erwin smiled. He had waited almost thirty years to share this book with someone; he hadn’t realized just how badly he wanted to talk about it.

The next chapter illustrated different birds, insects, and animals from around the world. Some were familiar, but many were strange.

“I like to think these creatures are still out there somewhere,” Erwin said. “The titans never pay any attention to animals, so to them, their worlds are the same as ever, except without any humans.”

“Maybe they like it better that way,” Levi said, words slurring. “No one cooking them for Christmas dinner.”

“That might be.” Erwin turned the pages, eager to reach his fav-

ourite chapter. “But this is what really fascinates me.” He slid the book closer to Levi, showing him a two-page spread. A variety of humans stood together, illustrated with a wide range of traditional garb. Some had striking features, unlike anyone he had ever seen.

“Who are all these people?” Levi asked, sounding surprisingly enthralled.

“Long ago, before the walls, humanity was made up of all kinds of people of diverse sizes, shapes, skin colours, and cultures.” Erwin ran his fingertips across the page. “Aren’t they beautiful? Look at how varied their garb is. They spoke all kinds of languages, had all kinds of traditions and life outlooks that have been lost to time.” His throat ached with the strange, sad nostalgia that gripped him whenever he stared at this page. “What happened to us, Levi? How did all these cultures and people disappear, leaving us with only a tiny subset of the diversity of human life? Were there wars based on culture that extinguished all these lights?” He swallowed hard, bracing himself to say what he had never said to anyone: “Or are they still out there somewhere?”

Levi’s gaze shifted to him. “You think there are people outside the walls?”

“Look how big the world is. Look how many people inhabited it.” His head spun, and he was sure it wasn’t just from the drink. “They must be out there, somewhere. Imagine what they can tell us about this world we barely know. Imagine what they can tell us about where we came from, how we found our way into these walls.”

He turned the page, revealing masterpieces: stone pyramids, and large buildings with multiple columns, and shrines covered in thousands of small statues, and palaces with unfathomably large gold bulbs on towers. “Look at what humanity can create when it works together.”

“Is this what your dreams are about?” Levi asked. “Finding these people?”

Erwin hesitated, realizing he wasn’t willing to disclose the more dangerous aspects of it. “Partly. There’s more, but this isn’t the time to discuss it.”

He could feel Levi’s eyes on him. He turned, and saw that the eyes were shining. “What does that look mean?”

“I forgot how much I like you,” Levi said.

Erwin’s stomach dropped. “Levi, we came to an agreement.”

“No, I mean how much I just ... like you.” A shrug. “We were always too busy working or trying to jam our dicks into each other to

talk like this.”

“I suppose that’s true.” Early in their relationship, they had spent a lot of time talking about things other than work, and doing non-work activities—like reading together—that had allowed them to simply enjoy each other’s presence. As the years had slipped by, everything had fallen to the wayside except work or sex. Levi had always been more than a lover; he was his best friend, and it hurt to realize they had inadvertently pushed that aside.

“But should we even be trying to maintain a friendship right now, anyway?” he wondered aloud. “Or should we have a purely professional relationship? Do we even have time to be anything but colleagues?”

Levi winced and flopped back against the couch. “Who knows?”

There was a long pause. Erwin stared at the fire; it was smouldering, and needed another log to keep burning. He still felt warm, with Levi beside him and his father’s book in his lap, but he could feel melancholy creeping up the back of his throat.

He carefully closed the book and stood.

“Leaving?” Levi said.

“I feel my mood starting to turn—I’d hate to spoil such a lovely day. Better if I sleep through it.”

Levi gave a long sigh and stood, wobbling. “Yeah, same.”

Erwin blew out the candles, then attended to the fireplace, exaggerating his movements to try to overcompensate for his clumsiness.

Levi staggered toward the door, then caught himself on the doorframe, doubling over. “Holy fuck.”

“Tipsy?”

“Drunk off my ass.”

Erwin carefully approached him. “Need help?”

“You’re not s’posed to touch me.”

“I can make an exception,” he said, reaching for Levi’s elbow with his free hand, but he paused when he realized Levi was staring fixedly above them.

“What?” Erwin followed his gaze to the mistletoe, and his breath caught.

“Dumb tradition anyway,” Levi muttered. “Bad hygiene.”

Erwin studied him. His face was soft and smooth in the dying light of the fire. His lips were moist, and he was so small, so perfectly small. He wanted to run his thumb across that pouty bottom lip, grip his

chin, pull him in. Levi's eyelids were drooping, eyes fixed on Erwin's lips. Was it his imagination, or were they leaning in to each other? He could feel the heat of Levi's breath—kissing that mouth would be so soft, so warm ...

Stop.

He thought of Helena sobbing over her husband's body, thought of Levi's skin stained corpse-blue in the moonlight during their last expedition together.

He had to tear the words from himself, raw and painful: "Levi, we can't."

Levi broke eye contact, looking not away, like he usually did, but down at the floor.

Erwin stepped into the hall. The air here was cold, and his chest hurt from saying those awful words. He forced himself to breathe.

"Remember our promise to each other," he said. "We'll revisit everything after Wall Maria."

"Why bother saying that?" Levi said. "We're going to die in the reclamation effort anyway, right?" He pushed past him, began to walk away, one hand on the wall for support.

"Levi, I know this isn't easy."

Levi stopped, but didn't turn to face him. "I'm just drunk."

"It'll take time."

"I know." A pause. "Thanks for sharing your book with me."

"Of course. Goodnight, Levi."

Levi glanced back at him over his shoulder, face unreadable, then continued to shuffle away.

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Erwin carefully set his father's book back in the drawer and then placed the ring on top of it. Closing the drawer felt like betraying them both, and he wasn't sure why.

He paced toward his room. Maybe he shouldn't be fuelling his feelings for Levi, but he couldn't stop thinking about the moment under the mistletoe. How good would that kiss have felt, after two months of believing they might never kiss again? There was no one around to catch them except Hange—they could have kissed frantically in the doorway, falling together on the couch, having loud, drunken sex in front of the fire.

His footsteps slowed as he neared the end of the corridor. He had to move past Levi's bedroom before he reached his own. He still had the key to his room. He could slip into the room, crawl into his bed. They were both drunk; surely that gave them some leeway.

Stop this. He clenched his jaw and kept moving.

He lit a lamp, locked his bedroom door and strode to the drawer, pulling out a thick plug and some oil. This toy always reminded him of the time they had made love after the incident in the Underground, when Levi had blindfolded him and bound him to the bed. He adjusted the front of his pants, his body already anticipating what he was about to do. *I guess all that wine won't slow me down.*

He tossed his clothes on the dresser, then crawled into bed, shivering a little. Masturbation was normally something he did quickly and quietly—mostly out of time constraints, and a bit out of the belief that a man his age should show some decorum—but he had drunk away his usual inhibitions. After all the tension he had experienced with Levi, he owed himself some extra attention.

He carefully lined up a few pillows lengthwise and lay face down on top of them, like he used to do when he was younger. What had been titillating as a youth was a poor approximation now that he knew what a real human felt like beneath him, but at least it would be something different than usual.

He carefully oiled up the toy, but his body wasn't so eager, and he winced. Apparently he wasn't used to this type of stimulation anymore. It was a strange thing to think, but he felt as if he were letting Levi down, especially after the focus on toys during their last time together. *He likes thinking about me touching myself. He's probably picturing me doing this kind of thing. He'd be disappointed.*

He closed his eyes and awkwardly reached behind himself, skating his fingertips across skin, trying to approximate Levi's tongue. There were so many memories to focus on that he didn't know which one to pick, but he found himself in a hypothetical instead: what if Levi walked through the door right now and saw this? What if he made some crass, insulting comment and stepped forward, pulling Erwin's hand aside, using his mouth instead?

“Fuck,” he whispered into the pillow, because the liquor made it easier to get lost in his imagination. He pictured Levi's hands pulling him apart, nose and tongue sliding along damp flesh, humming and purring into the skin.

After a few more minutes, the plug slipped neatly into place. Erwin gasped. He grabbed himself and buried his body in the pillows, rocking his hips into his hand, imagining he was on top of Levi instead.

Oh, fuck. He grabbed the pillow near his face with his free hand, pretending he was gripping Levi's hair, because what did he care how embarrassing he was acting? He was drunk, and he was alone, and there was no one to judge him. He pictured the expressions Levi would be making if he was fucking him like this. Nails would be raking into his back, a soft voice whispering into his ear, *does it feel like there are two of me right now?*

Orgasm was already sneaking up on him, but no, he was going to relish this. He kept his pace slow and bit into the pillow, muffling a groan.

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Levi lay on his back on the bed. He pressed a forearm over his eyes, trying to stop the room from spinning. Even his emotions were spinning—with all that was going on, how was he supposed to feel?

A rhythmic creaking sound caught his attention.

Levi lifted his head, then immediately regretted it; the room tilted. He lay it back down, straining his ears. That was definitely a creaking bed. It must be coming from Erwin's room. Did Erwin have someone in there with him? That seemed extremely unlikely. The only person around was Hange, and there was nothing between them. Maybe he was just doing sit-ups or something.

Levi slid down to the floor, intending to crawl to the wall to listen better, but the room was spinning too much. Instead, he rolled onto his side on the floor, pressing his ear to it.

The creaks almost sounded like the long, slow strokes Erwin did when he was really turned on, but trying to pace himself. He thought of how much Erwin enjoyed rubbing against things. *Does he have a sex doll in there or something? Or is he just giving himself rug burn on the sheets?*

It had to be wishful thinking, but he was getting hard just thinking about it. He rolled onto his back, uncomfortable. Was this an invasion of privacy? It wasn't his fault if Erwin didn't know how to control himself, was it?

He heard a muffled moan that was decidedly Erwin's, and his moral quandary disappeared beneath a flood of hormones.

This is wrong. He pulled himself out of his pants and held his breath, ears straining to listen. *This is fucked up, you piece of shit. Don't fucking eavesdrop on him.*

But now he was listening to that rhythm and picturing Erwin grinding against the bed, face flushed and red, neck tendons strained, his ass muscles rolling and clenching with each thrust.

Oh, fuck. Levi tugged hard and fast, his eyes closed. He heard another stifled moan. *Listen to you, you beautiful horny bastard.* Was he always this frantic when he jerked off alone, or had he lost all control? Had the tension between them driven him to desperation?

The bed was creaking faster now, faster, and he recognized this pace. It was the same whether Erwin was in his throat, taking, or giving, whether they were making love or fucking. These last few seconds were completely out of his control, an instinctive rhythm as reliable as a ticking clock. His head would be tilting back, his lips stretching into an “O”, his brows pinching and twitching—

The creaks suddenly slowed, loud and violent.

He's coming. He's coming ... Levi gasped and squeezed his eyes shut as he came hard.

Then there was mess everywhere, but he could only lie back against the ground again. His head was spinning, and everything was foggy. He closed his eyes, willing the spinning to stop.

❧

When Levi opened his eyes again, his room was bright. Far, far too bright. He sat up, clutching at his head; he swore he could feel his brain rattling around. His tongue was dry and swollen, and his front was sticky. *Did I actually overhear Erwin jerking off last night? Or did I just dream it and I got sick all over myself?* Maybe it was both.

He half-heartedly mopped himself with a handkerchief and pulled on comfortable clothes, because he didn't have the energy to bathe or put on his uniform just yet.

When he arrived downstairs, he found Erwin slumped on the table beside a plate of toast.

“Hey.” Levi slid into the seat across from him. “Hung over?”

Erwin lifted his head, his hair hanging in his face. His skin was pale, his eyes bloodshot. “Yeah,” he croaked.

Levi squinted at him, still not sure if he had dreamed everything

that had happened. "You know, the walls between our rooms are thinner than I thought."

Erwin held his gaze. "What makes you say that?"

Levi ignored the question and reached for a piece of toast. "Are you going to take today off? Or are you such a workaholic that you'll work with a hangover on Christmas?"

"You already know the answer to that."

"Yeah, I guess I do." Levi bit off a piece of bread, then swallowed before he continued. "Mind if I swing by your office for a while? I'd like to talk a bit more about the personnel plans for Wall Maria, especially because we have the next wave of new brats joining us in the spring."

"Of course." Erwin paused, then bent to the side. He set a bag on the tabletop.

"What's that?"

"I wasn't sure if it was appropriate to buy you a birthday gift or not, but I've been holding onto this for a while. Thought you might enjoy it." Erwin slid the bag toward him. "Happy Birthday, Levi."

"You don't have to—"

"I know. It's fine. It's partially for me, too."

Levi looked at him quizzically, then reached into the bag. A book: *The Secret Soldier*.

"What's this?" he asked, pulling it out.

"The bookseller assured me it's an action-packed tale of a Garrison soldier who leads a double life. What you said last night really resonated with me. I genuinely like you, and I'm sorry I didn't do more to show it. We were so busy being colleagues and lovers that, somewhere along the way, we forgot to be friends. I thought we could make time to read together now and then, maybe go up to the guard tower like we used to. We wouldn't cuddle, of course, but the distraction from work could do us both some good." Erwin sat tall. "Maybe we can't be romantically involved anymore, but I'm not willing to sacrifice our friendship to Sahlo."

Levi's throat was tightening. He cleared it and nodded. "Neither am I. But you've got it wrong, Erwin. We were always friends."

Erwin smiled.

Levi cleared his throat again, embarrassed. "So, now what?"

"Well, no one's coming back from leave until tomorrow. Let's set aside some off-duty time again tonight. It might be a bit too cold for the guard tower, but I was thinking we could keep the couch down here to-

night, maybe read a chapter or two once our work is done.”

“Sure.”

Erwin stood and clutched his forehead, wincing. “Damn this hangover. I know it’s not a scheduled day, but I’m going to heat the baths. Take advantage of that, if you wish.”

Levi nodded. “I will.”

As Erwin was leaving, he stopped in the doorway and looked up, his face suddenly sombre. He pulled down the mistletoe and examined it in his hands. “I’ll tell Hange to stop leaving these everywhere.”

Levi leaned back, trying to look casual. “Now it looks like you’re holding it over your crotch. I don’t think friends kiss each other’s dicks, blondie.”

Erwin gave him a surprised look for a moment, then looked down. He gave a soft chuckle. “Well, that’s disappointing.”

“Dumb tradition, anyway.”

“Yeah.” He looked thoughtful. “I sometimes wonder why we value traditions so much. Perhaps it’s because life is change. Traditions serve as anchors; people cling to what’s familiar so they feel like they still have some control—but in reality, these traditions are just hollow rituals, little bits of false hope that do nothing to prevent the changes we so fear.”

“You’re getting weird again,” Levi said. “I’m too hung over for this.”

Erwin chuckled. “So am I.” He turned the sprig over a few times in his hands, then looked up. “Come by my office any time. I’ll be there.”

“You still going to be rambling about anchors and plants?”

“Probably not.”

“Okay. I’ll come by once I get cleaned up.” Levi found he was looking forward to getting back to work. It would be nice to get back to routine.

Or in this case, he reflected, to start defining a new one.

Their gaze held for a beat too long, and then Erwin nodded a farewell and walked away, the mistletoe clenched tightly in his hand.

TO BE CONCLUDED IN PART IV: GLOW

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- Part II: Ablaze
- Part III: Consume
- Part IV: Glow

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