

HE
CHOSE
TITANS

PART IV
GLOW

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PART IV: GLOW

PROLOGUE

Levi slumped into a couch in Erwin's office and slapped a folder onto the coffee table. Erwin didn't move; he sat at his desk reading a worn journal, his brows set in the deep pinch he wore when he was intently focused.

“Erwin.”

The man blinked and looked at him, then his face softened with recognition. “My apologies, Levi. I didn't hear you come in.”

It was only in recent months that Levi had noticed that softening expression—gentle, warm and only for him. His throat ached; he cleared it. “It's almost dinnertime. I need your signoff on the expedition paperwork.”

“This journal of Ilse Langnar's is fascinating.” Erwin's gaze shifted back to the worn journal. “I'm glad you spotted it. It's incredible that a titan could possess language skills and show genuine care for another being. It's a pity we lost a woman as brave as Ilse; to be so dedicated to the cause that she would document bizarre titan behaviour even as it was eating her ...” He shook his head as if in awe. “Her documentation changes everything.”

Realizing he wasn't going to get any traction with his paperwork discussion, Levi gave in. This discussion was more interesting, anyway. “The credit really goes to shitglasses for bolting off like the horses were on fire. Otherwise, we wouldn't have found the corpse and the titan, and I wouldn't have had the opportunity to spot the journal.”

“Then I suppose I shouldn't discipline Hange too harshly.”

“No, go ahead. That behaviour was reckless and stupid, especially for a Squad Leader, who's supposed to be setting a good example for the others.” Levi threw an arm over the back of the couch, opening his mouth to continue, but then froze.

Erwin was staring down at the book; his lips were twisted into an eerie grin.

“Erwin?”

“Do you realize what this means, Levi?”

“Judging by that creepy look, I’d say it means you just shat your pants.”

Erwin looked up, his face softening again. “This titan has intelligence. It formed a bond with a person. It implied there was a hierarchy among the titans—”

Levi’s skin crawled. “Stop.”

“Stop what?”

“Talking about this.” How many titans had he slain by now? That was okay so long as they were dumb creatures who were driven to kill by instinct. If they had intelligence, bonds and a social hierarchy, that meant he was disrupting a society. They had to be the monsters, not him.

Erwin looked taken aback, but closed the journal. He crossed the room and sat on the opposite couch, then let out a low sigh, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “At any rate, I don’t think I can continue to deny Hange and Moblit’s requests. We clearly know very little about the titans —far less than I thought.” He lowered his hand, his brows still pinched. “Perhaps this is worthy of some resources after all. Our major Wall Maria reclamation effort won’t begin for several months, and it won’t take more than an expedition or two to stock and scout the final two checkpoints. If we gather data now, we’ll have plenty of time to adapt our strategy to incorporate whatever they learn.”

“You want to let them capture a titan?”

“Yes, and within the next week or two so we have time to reorient ourselves for the next expedition briefing with the Council. There’s only one squad strong enough to help them do it without sustaining grievous losses.” Erwin leaned forward, gaze intense. “Will you accompany Hange?”

Levi sighed. “You say that like it’s a question, but I know it’s an order.”

“This isn’t a typical mission. I want to give you the opportunity to speak up if you think I’m asking too much.”

“No. I’ll do it.”

“Good. Thank you. Now, the paperwork you need signed off—”

“Here.” He held out the folder.

Erwin took it, but peered at him. “Are you feeling okay, Levi?”

His throat was still aching, and it didn’t seem to be from emotio-

nal stress alone. Maybe he would pick up some lozenges while he was in town. “Fine. Why?”

“You look a little pale.”

“I’m always pale.” Levi stood. “A few of us are going into town to buy personal supplies. You need anything?”

“No, thank you. Hange is shopping right now, too. If you happen to cross paths, please mention that I’ve approved the mission.”

“Can’t do it face to face?”

Erwin smiled. “After all those years of declining proposals, I fear it’s a little difficult to admit we should have been doing deeper titan research this entire time.”

It was tempting to tease him about his ego—Levi knew it existed, beneath all those layers of decorum and politeness. Still, he firmly believed Erwin had been making the right call all along. “You couldn’t have known there was anything this interesting about titans. We’ve only ever seen them try to eat us.”

Erwin smiled. He stood, tapping the file. “And about my next trip to the Capital ...”

“Yeah?”

“You’ll be accompanying me.”

Their gaze held.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Levi asked. They had fallen into a good routine since Christmas, but there was still the odd spark of tension here and there. If they diverged from that routine, who knew what might happen? They risked accidentally undoing all the careful control they had imposed on their relationship.

“We can’t keep putting it off.” Erwin stood tall, clasping his hands—and the file—behind his back. “Our allies in the Capital are already beginning to comment on your absence.”

“Huh.” He couldn’t imagine who would have noticed, aside from Sahlo and Nile.

“Besides, we’ve reached a good balance now. We’ll be fine. But let’s worry about capturing a titan first. Meet with Hange and me at dinner to talk about the specifics.”

It seemed like the end of the conversation, so Levi nodded and turned for the door. He still hadn’t figured out how to end conversations now that a goodbye hug or kiss wasn’t an option.

“Levi.”

He turned.

Erwin was still wearing the same intense look as before, so the words were a surprise: "Pick out a new book while you're in town. I'll reimburse you the cost."

"Yeah? What kind of book?"

"Anything you want. If you have time tonight, maybe we can read the first chapter."

"Yeah, sure." Levi turned away again.

He could feel Erwin's gaze lingering on him as he left.

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COVERS

Erwin stood in the courtyard, watching the titan capture team ride up the driveway. Two horses pulled an enormous cart draped with blankets. He counted exactly a dozen soldiers—the same number they had left with. Energy twitched through every muscle in his body. *They did it. They actually did it.*

“Erwin!” Hange yelled from across the courtyard, before the gates were even open. “Three metre class. No deaths!”

The other soldiers began to cheer. Their enthusiasm was so contagious that Erwin grinned. “Most impressive.” He clasped his hands together behind his back, waiting. His eyes trailed the soldiers, but when they fixed on Levi, his smile faded. Levi’s skin was flushed and waxy, and he hunched forward over the neck of his horse.

The team fell into line in front of him, halting the horses. They saluted. Erwin saluted back; his eyes were still on their Captain.

“Levi? Everything all right?”

“Just tired,” Levi croaked.

“Go straight to the san to get checked out.”

“I’m fine.”

The other soldiers dismounted and began to lead their horses to the stables. As Petra walked past Erwin, she said quietly, “He’s sick, but he’s being stubborn about it.”

Before he could reply, a strong hand clamped over his arm and yanked him toward the cart. “Erwin, come see!” Hange threw the corner of the blanket off the cart to reveal a massive face and oily hair.

Erwin’s chest tightened, but he kept his expression calm, leaning closer. Heat streamed off the beast’s skin; it smelled vaguely of sulphur. He stared into its eyes, and it stared back without a single flicker of

intelligence. He was disappointed. “Is this an abnormal?”

“No. Abnormals are relatively rare, and we need to focus on learning more about the regular ones first, right? Bigger impact on our missions. Isn’t it beautiful?” Hange reached out a hand as if to poke its nose.

“Squad Leader,” Moblit yelped, “it’ll chomp your arm off.”

“Yes, we must remain cautious around it,” Erwin said, having a sudden terrifying vision of a titan stampeding through the base. “Secure it as soon as possible.” They had designated a small, walled section of the courtyard as the study area; stakes, chains, nets, and ropes were waiting for their new guest.

Once Hange and the other soldiers had begun to haul their captive away, Erwin strode back to his stubborn Captain, who still sat atop his horse.

“Levi.”

“I said I’m fine.” Levi swung one leg over the saddle and dropped to the ground. His knees buckled the instant he landed, and his eyes rolled back into his head.

“Levi!” Erwin lunged and caught him. His skin glowed with almost as much heat as the titan. *Shit.* This was only the second time Levi had become ill since they had met; he had always seemed unstoppable.

Eld appeared at his side. “Is he okay?”

Erwin lifted the unconscious man to his chest, surprised, as always, by how small and dense his body was. Or had he lost weight? It was difficult to tell. He delicately cradled him. “Check his breathing.”

“Sir.” Eld held his hand over Levi’s nose, then felt the pulse at his neck. “His pulse is a bit fast. He definitely has a fever.”

“Is anyone else showing signs of illness?”

“No, sir.”

“I’ll put him under quarantine just in case. If any of the other soldiers begin to show signs of illness, please report to me immediately.”

“Sir.” Eld watched, worried, as Erwin carried Levi through the courtyard; the other soldiers turned to look as he passed.

Once they were in the hallway, Erwin murmured, “Your soldiers care so much about you, Levi. You’d better get well soon so you don’t worry them.” His voice cracked, and he was glad no one was around to hear it.

It wasn’t until Levi was safely on a bed in the san that it struck him: they weren’t supposed to touch. He clenched his jaw. *This was an*

exceptional circumstance, he told himself, but now he was becoming hyper-aware of the sensations in retrospect: his relaxed muscles, small shoulders and hips ...

“We’ll take good care of him,” the medic said. “You’re welcome to stick around, if you want.”

He wanted to wash Levi’s forehead with a cold cloth and hold his hand and read stories to him until he regained consciousness, but he needed to step away. Touch was too powerful; it would undo all the careful groundwork they had laid since their separation in the fall. “No, thank you. Please update me the instant his status changes.” With one final look at Levi, he stepped out of the room.

Erwin returned to the yard and, after reassuring the soldiers that Levi was in good hands, requested a mission report from Moblit. In the background, Hange and the other soldiers began to stake the titan to the ground.

“No mishaps?” he asked, still unable to believe it.

“None, sir. Not yet, at least.” Moblit nervously eyed Hange, who was standing a little too close to the titan, but the other soldiers seemed to have it restrained well.

“Perhaps you might like to take the afternoon off,” Erwin suggested, noting the deep shadows under his eyes. “It looks like they have everything well in hand.”

“I’ll just help them until—”

The titan lunged, its teeth snapping shut just centimetres shy of Hange’s knees. Hange cackled.

“Squad Leader, it’s too dangerous!” Moblit rushed toward the group.

The man’s going to give himself a heart attack one of these days. Maybe Erwin should pull Hange aside and have a talk about risk-taking, but he suspected it wouldn’t stick, anyway. The Squad Leader was only getting more reckless with time.

As he returned to his office, his thoughts kept pulling toward Levi. He resisted the urge to check on him, settling into his chair with a pen and paper instead. He was due at the Capital the following week to pitch their next expedition proposal, and the successful capture of a titan was going to give him an opportunity for a triumphant speech. With the right wording, he could secure extra funding for the regiment.

A knock sounded; he looked up and saw Nifa standing in the doorway. “Yes?”

“Mail delivery.” She held out a stack of letters. He wondered why she was grinning, then saw that the top one was from Lady Gunnhild, with a lipstick mark in place of her usual seal.

He let out a low, displeased sigh and accepted the bundle of letters. Though he had accompanied the Lady to several social events over the past few months, he had made it very clear that he wasn’t actually courting her. She had seemed to understand and even embrace the idea of a fake relationship; she had stopped trying to grab his rear in public, at least.

He sorted through the rest of the mail first, and then stared at the envelope, his elbows on the table, hands folded over his mouth. The lipstick mark stared back at him.

Maybe I should go check on Levi, or see how Hange’s doing with the titan.

He turned the envelope over. Something about her script was jarring. Familiar. And not because of the Lady herself. His eyes narrowed, and he reached for his letter opener.

The paper inside had no signature, and a single written line:

Smith, will be paying you a visit on Tuesday. Tell no one.

Sahlo’s handwriting. What game was the lord trying to play this time?

Regardless, “tell no one” always excluded one party, no matter who asked. This was a good excuse to go see if Levi was awake.

His bed at the san was empty, and Erwin had felt a momentary grip of panic before a medic informed him they had transferred Levi back to his bedroom. Returning to the officers’ quarters, Erwin knocked on the door, and was surprised when Petra answered it. She wore a cloth over her mouth and nose as a mask.

“Commander,” Petra said with a salute. Behind her, he could see Levi asleep in his bed. A full mug of tea and an untouched soup bowl sat on a bedside table.

Erwin found himself lost for words and, confusingly, his heart ached. He hadn’t realized it until that moment, but he thought of himself as Levi’s caretaker—his *only* caretaker.

You separated. You should only think of yourself as his Commander and his friend.

He finally found his voice. “How is he?”

“Sleeping heavily.” Petra looked back at the slumbering Captain, her eyes soft. “They still don’t know what illness he has. You’re welcome

to come in, but you should wear a cloth just in case it's contagious."

A few minutes later, he sat on a chair next to Petra, a cloth tied over the lower half of his face.

"The medics asked us to keep an eye on him in case anything changes." Petra spoke softly. "Eld's the most senior, so he volunteered, but he had a special date night planned in advance, so I took over for him."

"Seems like caring for an unconscious man would be a boring mission," Erwin said, noting that she didn't even have a book with her.

He could tell she was smiling by the lines in the corners of her eyes. "I don't mind."

Erwin studied Levi's face, slack and relaxed, his cheeks abnormally red.

"He looks so peaceful," Petra said. "It's strange to see him without a frown."

An ache gripped Erwin's heart. The expression wasn't strange at all, not to him. Not too long ago, it had been his to view whenever he wanted, almost every single night—or at least a few nights a week, by the end of it. He had taken that for granted.

He had taken *everything* about Levi for granted.

Erwin stood and began to tidy up the room, setting Levi's boots by the wall.

"You don't have to do that, sir," Petra said.

"I'm afraid I don't have the patience to sit and watch a man sleep. Anyway, if he awoke to his room in disarray, I'd be the one hearing about it." The medics had left Levi's clothes bundled on the dresser. He pulled the pants off the top of the pile and inspected them. They were perfectly white, so they probably didn't need washing yet. He folded them and set them on a shelf in the closet so Levi could decide later. He put the shirt in the hamper, then lifted the jacket, accidentally opening it upside down.

A metal object bounced on the ground.

A coin? He knelt and caught it on the second bounce. No, a ring. His breath caught. Not just any ring: Erwin's wedding ring. What was it doing here? Hadn't he left it in his desk drawer?

But no, this one was smaller. The world began to tilt as he realized the significance of it all. *Hange gave Levi his ring, and he keeps it with him.*

"Commander?"

He remembered to breathe, and the world stopped tilting, but he couldn't turn to face Petra. His face was sure to show everything. "Yes?"

"That ring ... " She paused. "I know it isn't really my business, but do you know what it is? The Captain spends a lot of time looking at it, when he thinks no one's watching."

Levi ...

Erwin counted to five as he took in a breath and let it out, then set his face to neutral. He stood and turned to face her.

"The job of Captain is demanding. It requires many sacrifices. Levi has sacrificed more than most." He rotated the ring between his finger and thumb, studying the gradient on its surface. "Not too long ago, Levi had serious thoughts of marriage, and the union was to be sealed with rings. I suppose when he realized it would conflict with his duties, he decided to keep the ring close so he could pause in quiet moments and think about what might have been."

"Oh," Petra said softly. She turned to look at Levi, her head bowing. "That's heartbreaking."

Indeed. Erwin picked up the jacket. "Do you know which pocket he keeps it in? If he tries to be discreet about it, then he probably doesn't want me to know he carries this with him."

"Looked like his left inside pocket."

Over his heart. Now that he thought about it, Erwin recalled Levi rubbing his chest, a new mannerism that had only developed since they had separated. His throat ached, and tears rimmed his eyes. He was dangerously close to breaking down.

He cleared his throat. "Given your capabilities, Petra, I think it's a better use of your time to assist Squad Leader Hange's team in getting the titan research centre set up. I'd be happy to watch the Captain for a while."

Petra looked confused by the request, but she only nodded. "Sir."

"Do you know when the medics are checking in on him next?"

"Dinnertime, unless we report any changes beforehand."

"Very well. Thank you, Petra." He tucked the ring back into the jacket pocket and hung the jacket neatly in the closet.

The door closed, and then it was just him and Levi.

Erwin found his seat by the bed, staring blankly at the unconscious man. He couldn't stop picturing Levi finding a quiet place to look at the ring, brooding about their abandoned plans. *Not abandoned*, he

corrected himself. *Delayed.*

Up until a few hours ago, he thought they had hit their stride as friends and colleagues. These waves of sadness had been few and far between. He swallowed against the fresh lump in his throat. Now it felt as if their separation had been hours ago instead of weeks.

Levi stirred. His eyelids were fluttering, and now Erwin wished he hadn't sent Petra away so soon. This wasn't a good time to converse, not when he was this vulnerable. If there was one man in this world who would see straight through him ...

"Ugh." Levi squinted against the light. "Erwin? What—"

"You're sick. Lie quietly; I'm going to get a medic."

"What—"

"I'll be right back." Erwin strode for the door and managed to get several paces into the hallway before he let out a shaky breath of relief.

A few minutes later, he returned with a medic; she began to check Levi, who seemed to be struggling to stay lucid. Erwin had planned to leave right away to compose himself, but the medic handed him a thermometer. "If you don't mind, sir. I don't have enough hands."

He reluctantly accepted it. "What type of thermometer is this?"

"Mercury."

"I mean, where does it go? Which ... orifice?"

She gave him an unimpressed look. "His mouth."

He hadn't meant it as a joke, but he gave her a polite smile and moved to stand by Levi's face. At least he didn't have to slip it into Levi's ass; even his mouth was already too intimate.

"Open your mouth, Levi. I need to take your temperature."

The narrow lips parted. Hot breath spilled over Erwin's hand as he probed the tip of the thermometer beneath the tongue that had been in Erwin's mouth so many times, had swirled around his nipple, his cock, his ass.

He's ill, you sick bastard, Erwin chided himself, and he furiously squeezed his thighs to try to coax blood away from his groin. It was mortifying to discover that he would sink this low. His libido had been in hibernation lately, and this was the worst time for it to wake up.

Now that the thermometer was snugly in place, the mercury climbed higher, higher, and Erwin's throat tightened. *Please be okay.*

When it had finally stabilized, the medic recorded a number and pulled out the thermometer. She frowned.

"Captain, according to your records, these are exactly the same

symptoms you had when you were sick five years ago. I can't find any sign of infection." She flipped a page. "Seems the medic couldn't figure it out back then, either. You ended up having different symptoms than the flu that was going around at the time."

Levi mumbled something.

"What was that?" the medic asked, bending down. Erwin leaned in closer, too, curious.

"My mother used to get fevers," Levi rasped. "So did I. Never as bad as hers."

Mother? Erwin studied Levi's face. He still seemed delirious, his eyes unfocussed.

"I see." The medic made some notes in a file. "Did she have any other symptoms? Rashes?"

His face twisted. "A rash ... maybe ... I can't— I don't—"

He sounded anguished. Erwin's hands tightened into fists.

"It's okay," said the medic, touching Levi's shoulder. She pulled out her medical bag. "Do you mind if I mix medicines into his tea? The caffeine will make the drug more potent."

It took Erwin a minute to realize she was talking to him. "By all means."

"Are you going to be sitting with him for a while? Or should I send an assistant over?"

Erwin glanced at Levi, hoping he would have the strength to ask for an assistant's help, but the grey eyes held his gaze.

"I have some paperwork to work on," Erwin said softly. "I might as well do it here. There are a few things I'd like the Captain's opinion on, anyway."

"Okay, but don't put too much on his shoulders right now. He needs to rest. I'll send someone over with some food for both of you later on." She made a few final notes. "You're welcome to leave the face mask up if it makes you comfortable, but I don't think it's contagious."

"No?"

"The signs are more typical of an inherited illness than an acquired one. After a few days of rest with a steady influx of medication, his body should return to normal. We just need to keep an eye on him to make sure there aren't any complications."

She left him with a set of written instructions, then dismissed herself with a salute.

Erwin sat in the chair beside the bed. "Are you lucid, Levi?"

“Somewhat”

“Are you feeling well enough to sit up and drink the medicine?”

Levi grunted and weakly pushed himself to a seat. Erwin adjusted the pillow behind him, then held out the tea.

“You brought me tea and soup?” Levi wheezed as he accepted the mug. “Cute.”

“Petra did.”

“Oh.”

Erwin forced a polite smile, which was probably pointless, because he was sure his eyes were empty, and the cloth was covering his nose and mouth. “I should probably take this off.” He untied the knot at the back of his head.

“Surprised it stayed on.” Levi blew on the surface of the tea to cool it. “Thought your sharp nose would’ve cut right through it.”

Erwin chuckled, setting the cloth aside. “That wasn’t the only problem. Took them a while to find a mask large enough to cover this thing.”

“Should’ve borrowed one of Mike’s. He could fit your entire nose up one nostril.” Levi sipped the tea, then grimaced. “This is awful.” His voice was gravelly, but he seemed more clear-headed already. Maybe he had just needed a few minutes to wake up properly. Erwin felt a wave of relief.

Levi drained the tea, then set the mug aside and settled back into the pillow.

It wasn’t his business, but Erwin was curious. “You mentioned your mother.”

A slim brow furrowed. “Yeah?”

“When you spoke with the medic. You said she got fevers a lot.”

Levi squinted, as if he were trying very hard to focus on something far away. “I … don’t …” He blinked, then looked away. “Anyway, you’ve got better stuff to do than sit and stare at me.”

“I don’t mind,” Erwin said gently, respecting his desire to change the subject. “Don’t feel you have to entertain me. If you want to sleep, I can work on paperwork at your desk.”

“Yeah, okay.” Levi snuggled deeper into the blankets. “My head is throbbing.”

“The tea should help soon.” Erwin paused. “You should have mentioned you were ill when you left the base. What if you had fallen unconscious during the expedition?”

“Well, I didn’t, and it went well.”

He tilted his head with reluctant agreement. “It certainly seems like it did, yes.”

Levi gave a soft snort. “You’re a bit ticked off about that, aren’t you?”

“What? Why would I—”

“All those times you said no to Hange, and we could’ve pulled it off this easily.” Levi’s eyes closed.

“Logically, it didn’t make sense to—”

“I’m just being an asshole. You don’t have to justify it to me. I trust your priorities.” His voice was fading. “Erwin?”

“Yeah?”

“You’ll be here when I wake up?” His voice was small.

Erwin’s throat tightened. “Yeah.”

One corner of Levi’s mouth lifted.

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“Erwin,” called Mike, knocking on the door.

Erwin lifted his head, then realized his temples ached from squinting at his paperwork. It had somehow gotten dark without him noticing. He lit the lamp, then, glancing at the slumbering Levi, opened the door.

Mike handed him a tray of food; a medical assistant stepped past them both and moved to Levi’s side to check on him.

“Thank you,” Erwin said, breathing in the scent of potato stew. “Is that fish?” The Survey Corps received the worst of the military’s rations, and with the food shortages impacting everyone inside the walls, that meant they had been the first to lose meat privileges. It had been months since he had eaten a meat stew he hadn’t bought from a restaurant.

“Yeah, that’s salmon. Caught a couple this afternoon during my day leave. Had the kitchen cook them up for the officers.”

“That’s very kind of you. Thank you.” Erwin gave him a sincere smile. “What’s the occasion?”

Mike shrugged. “Capturing a titan seems like a big deal.” He nodded at the bed. “How’s Levi?”

“His fever’s coming down,” the medical assistant said. “He might be a bit fatigued for a few days yet, but the medicine seems to be doing

its job.”

“Good,” Erwin said. He realized Mike’s gaze was boring through him. “What is it?”

“How are you?” There was an odd cadence to the words, as if they were code.

“Fine, thank you.” Erwin kept his eyes trained on the medical assistant, waiting until she left before he said anything further.

“All done,” she said. “I’ve left another packet of medicine—please make sure he takes it within the next hour or two. You may want to have a soldier keep an eye on him overnight in case anything changes, but I suspect he’ll be fine.”

“Thank you.” Erwin’s gaze followed her as she left the room, then, when the door closed, shifted back to Mike. “You had more to say?”

“Thought you might be interested in this.” Mike held out an envelope. Even though the base lockdown had ended at Christmas, they were still doing spot surveillance and censorship of outgoing and incoming mail. It had ended up becoming such a time sink that Erwin had been tempted to cancel it. This was the first time an officer had approached him with anything of notice.

He was surprised to see a letter signed by Petra Ral, addressed to her sister. As he read the letter, he frowned. “Ah.”

Mike glanced at the slumbering Levi, then leaned in close, his voice low. “I didn’t realize things between them were romantic.” His face was stoic as ever, but there was an edge to his voice.

“I don’t think Levi did, either.” Erwin flipped the page, reading the rest of it:

I know in my heart the ring was never meant to be shared with me, but a part of me dares to hope. We’ve, at the very least, been growing close as friends, but he’s a difficult man to read, and he speaks in circles about his feelings. I wish I could figure out how to stop this girlish fantasizing, how to simply be content to have such an amazing friend and mentor. Or maybe I wish he would tell me how he feels so I could accept it and move on. I’m here to devote my body and my heart to humanity; it’s ridiculous that one man should occupy so much space in my thoughts. It’s ridiculous that the thing that makes my heart race the fastest is imagining the two of us facing our battles together as a team, a married couple, bound by duty and love.’

He stopped reading, his chest aching. The words were too familiar. “There doesn’t seem to be anything suspicious here. Why bring this

to my attention?"

"Erwin."

"The only point of reading outgoing mail is to ensure we don't have any security leaks. This is verging on gossip."

"This is a potential threat to the stability of Levi's team," Mike said firmly. "You and I both know how crushes can cause problems on the field. Talk to him about it."

"Levi insisted she knew about us."

"Petra's strong as hell, but sensitive," Mike said. "Someone should talk to her before she gets in too deep. Levi should just tell her he's gay and be done with it."

"Maybe he's bisexual," Erwin murmured, his heart slowly sinking.

Mike chuckled. "No."

But now his thoughts were running in that direction. The duo did spend an awful lot of time together, and there had been Levi's strange question at Christmas about what sex with a woman was like. It was clear Petra's feelings for Levi weren't too different from Erwin's—was it so unthinkable that her affections might be returned?

Aloud, he said, "I'm not the only bisexual man in the world, Mike."

"No shit, but Levi's definitely gay. One night over drinks, Gelgar and I found out he thinks women have one hole between their legs."

"Inexperience doesn't mean he isn't—" Erwin stopped as the words sank in properly. "Really?"

"Just one giant slit where everything comes out. Didn't think someone with a vagina could have anal sex—thought that was a man-on-man only kind of thing."

Erwin bit the inside of his cheek; it wasn't fair to laugh at an unconscious man who had never seen a vulva up close. "That doesn't mean he isn't attracted to women, just that—"

"Why are you doing this to yourself?"

He closed his mouth and lifted his chin. Mike stared at him. Erwin stared back.

"You know he still mentions you every minute or two when you're not around, right?" Mike continued. "He hasn't ever mentioned Petra. Not once. I still don't get what game the two of you are playing, but it sounds to me like you're trying to stack the cards so you'll always lose. Knock it off." He pushed Petra's letter against Erwin's chest and

then gestured at it. “Make Levi talk to her about this before things get out of control.”

Pressure was building in Erwin’s stomach, but he knew he wasn’t mad at Mike. Not really.

The door closed.

He set the letter and stew aside. Levi’s face was peaceful, though his breaths were still rasping a bit. Contact was forbidden, but a strand of dark hair was hanging in his face, and that had to be uncomfortable. Erwin reached over and hooked it with a finger, sliding it to the side.

Levi ... He found himself reluctant to pull away. He slid his fingertip to the damp temple and then down his jawline before retracting it.

The situation wasn’t what Mike thought. If Levi was falling for Petra, it meant he wouldn’t be lonely. It meant someone might be able to repair the ache in his chest that he surely felt, too, the ache so deep that the only possible response was to either ignore it or curl up and weep. Erwin had, for the most part, been able to fill that emptiness with work—that had been part of their agreement, anyway. Had Levi done the same? He deserved a warm body to hold at night, to hug him when he had nightmares.

But Erwin was selfish. The thought of Levi sharing a bed with anyone else made his stomach churn, his vision fog red. So selfish. It wasn’t fair that Levi should be doomed to loneliness just because Erwin had petty jealousy.

It was another half hour or so before Levi woke up. True to his usual form, his eyes snapped open, and he was instantly alert. *He must be feeling better already.*

“Am I still sick?” Even his voice was sounding more like his usual self.

“Yeah, but you’re getting better. I have more medicine for you. It can wait a few minutes.”

“Are *you* sick?”

“Why, do I look ill?” Erwin curled his trembling hands and lowered them to his lap, out of sight.

“You look like you’re going to throw up.”

“I’m fine.” *Too much time focusing on ‘what ifs’ that cannot be.* Erwin stood and lit the burner under the kettle. “I’ll make you some more tea.” He quietly slipped Petra’s letter under his pile of paperwork to send later.

As Levi sipped a mug of tea, Erwin ate his stew, then relayed everything the medical assistant had told him. “I might ask your squad to watch over you while you sleep tonight, just in case.”

“Oh.”

“You don’t like that idea? I was thinking Oluo would jump at the chance. We can get a medical assistant to help you bathe, too. I’m sure you’d like to get the expedition’s grime off you.”

“Yeah, sure.” Levi’s face was twisting; he stared into the bottom of his teacup.

Erwin watched him for a moment, then sat in the chair again. “What’s bothering you?”

“It’s stupid.”

“I’m sure it isn’t.”

Levi shrugged, staring fixedly into his mug. “I don’t sleep so well lately.”

“Lately?”

“Since we … stepped back.”

Erwin felt his face sag into a frown, and he was powerless to stop it. “I see.”

“Only been sleeping a couple hours here and there, usually in my chair. I don’t do so well with beds when I’m alone. Not lately. Until today, at least.”

“I suppose it helps to be drugged,” Erwin said lightly.

“Stay with me.” Levi finally looked up at him. “You can sleep above the covers, or on a chair, if you want. I just …” He shrugged. “Bad memories lately. Bad nightmares. You were the only person who ever kept them away.”

Erwin swallowed the knot in his throat. “I suppose you do need your sleep to recover.”

“Don’t worry, I don’t need you to hold me or anything—I know that’s off limits.”

“I suppose technically, I already did, anyway.”

Levi’s eyes narrowed. “What?”

“I carried you to the san when you passed out. Then I wiped the hair off your forehead.”

“That’s cheating. I wasn’t even awake.”

“It didn’t mean anything, Levi. It was all clinical.” This was the first time he could remember outright lying to Levi, and it left his mouth feeling too dry. Maybe the wedding ring was a lie of omission,

too. He thought of Mike's words: he was always stacking the game so he would lose. He wasn't even sure what qualified as winning or losing anymore.

Levi took a long sip of tea, studying him.

Erwin finished the stew, then set the bowl aside. "I don't mind staying. I can sleep above the covers." He tried to tell himself this was a clinical decision, too, and now his mouth was even drier.

"Thanks."

He kept thinking about Petra's letter, but then he remembered there was another letter to discuss. "Sahlo sent me a strange message, disguised as a letter from Lady Gunnhild. He's coming for a visit next week."

Levi frowned. "Here?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"I don't know. The letter was so light on details that it could have been sent under his own seal without suspicion, so he must be growing paranoid. He has so many carefully balanced relationships with conflicting factions that it wouldn't surprise me if one of them fell through."

"And he needs your help to bring it all back into balance."

"That would be my guess, too. Or maybe he just wants to lie low for a bit."

"Huh." Levi drained the last of his tea. "Do you want me to debrief you on the mission?"

"Are you feeling up for it?"

"Throat's a bit scratchy, but I think it will hold up."

And so, even though Erwin had already gotten the mission debriefing from Moblit, he listened. Levi provided a different perspective, painting a much less dire picture of the actual moments of danger. That was fine; Erwin always mentally adjusted the danger of any given situation when it came out of Moblit's mouth, to account for the man's sensitivity to stress.

Levi slept a bit after that, while Erwin finished up the last of his paperwork. There wasn't much left. Now that there wasn't a rush for Wall Maria, and Sahlo wasn't working directly against him, he was remembering what it was like to sleep at night. Once he had finished, he slipped next door to get a light blanket.

When he returned, Levi was sipping his tea, an empty medicine packet beside him.

“You look like you’re feeling better,” Erwin said, feeling the weight on his shoulders lighten.

“Yeah, guess it wasn’t that serious. Think I might take a bath before bed.”

Erwin hesitated. It was a heated bath day, at least—he couldn’t imagine it would be healthy to plunge an ill body into ice water—but it would only take one moment of unconsciousness for him to slip underwater and drown. “You aren’t well enough to bathe alone.” As tempting as it was to volunteer, they were already going to be pushing several boundaries that night. “I can send for someone. Maybe Oluo?”

“Yeah, sure.”

While the bath was underway, Erwin tried his best not to picture Levi naked. He busied himself with pulling the sweat-stained sheets off Levi’s bed. A knife narrowly missed his feet and clattered to the floor. Erwin stared at it, wondering how many other mysterious objects he was going to accidentally shake out of Levi’s belongings. He set it aside, ready to slip it back under the mattress once he had made the bed again.

That wasn’t the only hidden knife; he found another tucked inside Levi’s pillowcase, carefully sheathed, and a third attached to the back of the headboard. He pulled it out and studied it, holding it with Levi’s reverse grip.

When Levi returned, Erwin was just finishing up the fresh bedding. Levi strode forward and flopped onto the bed; Erwin draped the blanket over him.

“Tired?”

“Exhausted,” Levi mumbled.

Erwin held out the sheathed knife. “You can slip that one back into your pillowcase. I wasn’t sure how to position it.”

“Oh.”

“If you were this uncomfortable in your room, you should have said something. I might have been able to find you a roommate to ease your anxiety.”

Levi rolled over and slid the knife back into place. “I told you, there’s only one roommate who makes it stop.” He rolled onto his back again, staring at the ceiling. “Guess I’m completely dependent on you.”

“I’m just next door.”

“Yeah, I know. I hear you jerking off in there.”

Heat rose to Erwin’s ears. “What?”

“But you’ve never come knocking when I’ve woken up hollering

from nightmares, so I guess the walls are only thin going one way.”

“I suppose they are,” Erwin murmured, thinking of all the times he had clawed into the mattress in the middle of the night, restraining himself from responding to Levi’s yells. “Though even if I did hear you, I probably wouldn’t know how to help you. It’s not as if I can hold you close to soothe you the way I used to.”

Levi’s mouth sagged. “No, I guess not.”

They were silent for a moment, and then Levi shifted over to make room.

Erwin lay on top of the covers and draped his own blanket over himself. His feet hung over the end of the mattress—he had never noticed that before. When they had shared this bed in the past, they had lay on their sides, spooning together. He found himself wishing it wasn’t so wide, so they would have an excuse to touch, even if through the covers.

You shouldn’t be having these types of thoughts.

“You been back to the apartment at all?” Levi asked quietly.

“No. You?”

“Only once, but I didn’t stay long. Too many memories.”

“You can sell it, if you want.” Erwin nestled deeper into his pillow. “Use the funds for anything you’d like.”

“I told you, it’s still half yours.” Levi rolled onto his side, back to him. “Besides, maybe we’ll use it again one day.”

Erwin’s chest and throat were so tight that they burned. “Is it okay if I turn off the lamp?”

“Yeah. I’m falling asleep, anyway.”

Once he had extinguished the light, Erwin rolled to face him, carefully maintaining a gap between their bodies. “Are our walls really that thin?”

“Hm?”

“You can overhear me when I—?”

There was a long pause, then Levi said, “Haven’t for a while.”

That made sense. His libido had been relatively non-existent for weeks now, and, as always, the longer he went without it, the less desire he felt. Besides, masturbation felt so hollow in comparison to being with a partner, especially when the subject of fantasies was in the next room over, completely out of his reach. The walls between them were thin, but thicker than ever at the same time.

“We need to get you laid. Break you out of this rut.” Of course

Levi would know every intimate detail about how his libido worked.

“Levi—”

“When Sahlo’s here. We’ll go out for drinks, and you can leave with someone. Maybe start grabbing each other in the alleyway. Nothing will convince him we’re no longer together quicker than—”

“Levi.” Erwin’s pulse drummed in his ears. “I’m not going to sleep with a stranger.”

“Then don’t sleep with them. But you have to do something.” He felt the bed shift. In the cracks of moonlight coming through the window shades, he could see Levi’s profile as he lay on his back—his petite, straight nose, lightly snubbed at the end. *He’s so selfless, so beautiful.*

The swell of love was so powerful that Erwin’s voice broke: “Why are you being so insistent about this?” He thought of Mike; was Levi stacking the cards against himself, too?

“Because we’re making all these sacrifices to convince Sahlo and his noble pals that we’re not together. Now we’ve got a perfect chance to really sell it to him. Why’d we make all these sacrifices if we’re going to pass up this perfect chance?”

“Lady Gunnhild and I have been staging a false relationship.”

“You don’t think he used her name to taunt you that he’s figured that out?”

Erwin thought of the lipstick seal; it had been ridiculously over the top, and it was very like Sahlo to taunt him. He gave a low sigh. Levi’s proposal made sense, and it had to be him. Sahlo only cared about Erwin’s weaknesses, not Levi’s. “Very well; I’ll stay open to the idea.”

Levi was quiet, so quiet he might have seemed like he was sleeping, but Erwin could see the faint sheen of moonlight on his eyes as he stared at the ceiling.

❧

“Erwin. Wake up.”

He opened his eyes and realized he was shivering. His breath condensed in clouds in the faint light in the room. It took him a moment to realize he wasn’t in his room, and Levi was beside him, and that wasn’t normal anymore.

“Erwin.”

“Yeah?” The word chattered between his teeth.

“The temperature dropped. Your blanket’s too thin. Get under

mine."

His mind was foggy with sleep and sluggish with cold; he crawled under the covers before he could think twice about it. The untouched sheets were so cold that he shivered harder for a minute or two, but gradually, they warmed with his body heat.

Now he was awake, and very conscious of the fact that he was in bed with Levi. The gap between them was large enough that no part of them touched, but he could feel the glow of body heat.

"Better?" Levi whispered.

"Yeah. Sorry for waking you."

"It's fine. Get some sleep."

"Goodnight."

Erwin lay on his back and closed his eyes, too aware of his own breathing. He tried to force slow, even breaths, but his lungs demanded to move faster. This was ridiculous. He was a thirty-five year old man, a Commander of an entire military regiment. The prospect of sharing a bed with another man—a man who had been his partner for a few years, not that long ago—should not be this intimidating.

Warm skin slid against the back of his hand, then was still.

Levi's hand.

He struggled to control his breaths. Was this brush of hands an accident, or an invitation? He strained his ears until they rang, listening for a hitch in Levi's breath, but he heard nothing to suggest he was still awake.

It couldn't be an accident—could it? They both knew how powerful touch was between them. It always had been. The first night they had spent together, four years ago, had started with a hand brush, too, one that had led to holding hands in the dining hall.

This hand brush could be another beginning. A rebirth. All one of them had to do was cross their little finger over the other's; the symbolism would be familiar to both of them—or did Levi even remember the secret hand holding that had officially started their relationship? His memories weren't always as clear as Erwin's.

The contact between them glowed with warmth. Neither of them moved closer, but neither pulled away.



Over the next few days, Levi's condition rapidly improved. Er-

win did much of his paperwork at the desk in Levi's bedroom to keep an eye on him. Even the medics remarked that Levi slept better when he was around.

Levi wasn't the only one benefitting from their proximity; Erwin found he worked better at his bedside, too. When they were apart, his imagination tried to craft all the medical complications that could possibly take Levi from him. Illness was more nerve-wracking than the titans; Humanity's Strongest could take down any titan in his path with competence and willpower. Illness was less predictable.

They secretly spent their nights together, too, sharing the bed with a gap between them. Erwin was beginning to think the touching hands on the first night had been a coincidence after all. *All is as it should be*, he told himself, disappointed.

When Erwin wasn't watching over Levi, he was checking in with Hange. The Squad Leader was already planning to go outside the walls with Mike's team to capture a partner for the captive titan, who Hange had named Albert. The logic behind this request was sound; Hange wanted to run experiments on two titans at once and compare their reactions. Until now, they had been operating under the assumption that all normal titans were the same, but after learning Ilse Langnar had encountered a titan that spoke, all their assumptions had been thrown into question. Their second capture mission was set to return the day before Sahlo's visit.

Sahlo's visit itself was occupying less of Erwin's consideration than it probably should. He had warned Hange, Dita, and Mike, and a guest room had been prepared. Other than that, he didn't put much thought into it. Sahlo's message had revealed nothing about his intentions, so Erwin would react to the situation as it developed.

Mike had suggested having a little fun with the lord. "Pretend you're actually expecting Lady Gunnhild, and greet his carriage with a bouquet of flowers."

"Waste of perfectly good flowers," Erwin had replied.

On the morning of Sahlo's visit, the second capture mission had returned with a new titan, who Hange named Chikachironi. Levi was back at work, though confined to desk duty, for now.

Erwin, meanwhile, was so preoccupied with planning for the next trip to Mitras that when he heard the bell tower announce an approaching carriage, the prospect of going down to the courtyard didn't cross his mind. A few minutes later, Nanaba knocked on the door.

“Sir, a noble is here to see you.” She held out a badge that bore Sahlo’s seal.

“Ah, right.” Erwin stood, blinking away the fog of paperwork. “I’ll be down in a moment.”

When he arrived, he was surprised to see the carriage door open, but no one standing outside it. Erwin stepped on the first rung and peered inside. Sahlo still sat on the bench.

“Does anyone know I’m here?” Sahlo said, hushed. So he *was* paranoid.

“I told my officers, but no one else.”

“Good. Tell anyone else I’m a visiting merchant.”

“Very well. You may want to stop handing out your seal, then.”

Erwin held out the badge; a clawed hand snatched it back and stuffed it into a pocket.

“Force of habit.”

“I see. Would you like us to station guards around your room?”

“Your guards can’t help me.”

Erwin tried to find patience and sympathy for the lord, but found neither. “You’ll be safer in my office than you are in the courtyard. Besides, I’m curious to learn what made you this nervous.”

Sahlo laughed bitterly. “You can say ‘paranoid.’ I realize how all this looks.” As he stepped out of the carriage, Erwin was surprised to see how grey his hair had become. His cheeks were hollow, his neck skinny. The hair on the back of Erwin’s neck rose. Something was very wrong.

They rounded the corner into Erwin’s office, where Levi was leaning against the couch, his arms folded over his chest, brows low. It was the first time in days that Erwin had seen him in-uniform, and while his first reaction was relief, his second was—to his shame—sadness that they no longer had an excuse to share a bed.

Sahlo stopped in the doorway and eyed Levi. “I wanted to speak with you alone, Smith.”

“You’re here to pull some sort of shit, and I want to know what,” Levi said, his voice still a bit raspy. “It’s not like a noble to dare set foot outside Wall Sina.”

“I had some concerns only your Commander could address, and they can’t wait until he arrives in Mitras next week.” Sahlo pushed past him and sat at the desk. “Please dismiss your dog, Erwin. I don’t want to catch his fleas.”

Erwin was still standing in the doorway. “No. What you say in

front of me can be said—”

“Don’t worry about it, Erwin.” Levi stood, arms still crossed over his chest. “I’ll be next door. Just say the word, and I’ll run over and beat the shit out of this asshole.”

“A pleasure as always, Captain,” Sahlo said, a humourless grin on his lips.

The door closed; Erwin felt himself deflate a little without Levi by his side. He strode to the liquor cabinet. “May I offer you a drink?”

Now that they were alone and safely enclosed in a room, Sahlo’s obnoxious personality was starting to overtake his paranoia; he scanned the room with a lip curled in disgust. “I doubt you have anything to my taste.”

Erwin scanned the labels of the bottles until he found one he had been saving for a special occasion that seemed less and less likely to happen. He could purchase a replacement after the wall reclamation effort, if needed. “I have an ice wine from Utopia District.”

“That sounds surprisingly lovely,” Sahlo said, begrudging. “May I smoke?”

“If you must.” Erwin pulled down two wine glasses, then sat in his desk chair. He poured them each a glass as Sahlo lit his cigar. The wine was sweet, almost overpowering, and Erwin closed his eyes as if savouring it. Really, he was savouring the fantasy of kneeling before Levi at sunset.

With the nights they had been spending together lately, he was even less sure where they stood with each other. The bed sharing was innocent, but that innocence was remarkable in itself. Erwin had slept in the arms of soldiers like Hange and Mike on cold nights outside the walls, limbs intertwined in positions that might seem too intimate to those who had never experienced the harshness of Survey Corps life. If he and Levi were really on platonic terms, they would have no problem sleeping pressed up against each other.

Sahlo took a sip, then stood and approached the liquor cabinet, his wine in one hand, cigar in the other. “I’m impressed, Erwin. You have good taste in alcohol. This is a decent collection.”

“Such flattery.”

“No, it’s genuine. You never fail to surprise.” Sahlo didn’t turn around as he took a long drag on the cigar; he exhaled three smoke rings before he continued. “I know we’ve been constantly positioning ourselves against each other since our first encounter, but this visit is

genuine. No mind games, no posturing. We can pick up where we left off once we meet again in the Capital, if that time ever comes.”

Erwin leaned back in his chair. “What’s the occasion?”

“I’m being stabbed in the back, made into a scapegoat to set an example.” The lord turned and gave him a sad smile. “I’ve been tolerated for decades, but the powers-that-be are panicking, and they need to squash someone to feel like they’re still in control. I’ve been sticking my neck out too far; it’s the easiest to lasso with a noose.”

Erwin waited, because Sahlo often revealed too much when he was left to ramble unhindered.

The lord paced back to the chair and sank into it. This time, when he lifted the cigar to his lips, his hand was shaking. He was silent.

Erwin leaned forward. “I’m going to need more information than that.”

“They’re coming for me.”

“Who?”

“The King. The Wallists. Maybe others.” Sahlo paused for a sip of wine. “They’ve been working carefully against me, weaving a tale of treason, paying off Rage Klein to make sure there were no holes. The last thread is in place. They’re going to come for me any day now.”

Erwin studied the lord’s face, trying to read between the lines. Sahlo’s eyes were glassy and his jaw was quivering. “Why are they targeting you?”

“Because the lords are getting antsy, and the King is afraid the nobles will become unstable, so he needs to strike fear into them. His excuse for picking me is paper-thin: I failed.” Sahlo held his gaze. “I was supposed to keep you busy.”

“Busy?”

“When I laid all the cards on the table for you a few months back, I may have kept a few close to my chest.”

No surprise there. Erwin waited.

“I allowed you to believe I was only interested in using you for my private project, but it was more complicated than that.” Sahlo took a long sip of wine before continuing. “The aristocracy has always been interested in maintaining control within the walls; it believes control brings peace. The Survey Corps, once upon a time, was a convenient way to prune down any upstarts who dreamed of heading outside the wall.

“Then, suddenly, around 844 or 845, the number of deaths plu-

mmeted. We didn't know it at the time, but that was when Keith Shadis made the one useful move of his entire career: he gave you strategic influence. Suddenly, the populace was full of hope. They genuinely began to believe life outside the walls was possible. The powers-that-be were worried this would cause an uprising.

“That idiot Lobov volunteered to take down the Survey Corps before it became too influential, and dragged me into it. Unfortunately, we got greedy and tried to interlace our plans with our own personal projects. When you took down Lobov, you made the noble house nervous, because now this rogue regiment was showing it could exert influence over the noble class. If word of that spread, there could be anarchy within the walls. Who would tolerate us growing fat off the land and filling our coffers if they believed we could be stopped?

“It fell to me to deal with you. The King had already done me favours by turning a blind eye to my ventures within the Underground; I knew I had to succeed in squashing you, or all those favours would return to bite me. If I couldn't end the Survey Corps, then I had to distract you. Suffice it to say, everything quickly became complicated.”

Erwin's eyes narrowed as he tried to take in the information. “Are you saying all the games you've been playing—all the manipulation and coercion—have been sanctioned by the King?”

“More like ‘ordered.’”

“Why? We're just the Survey Corps, the band of strange soldiers willing to feed ourselves to the titans for the pursuit of knowledge and freedom. We don't have nearly as much influence as you're hinting.”

Sahlo laughed. “Once upon a time, that might have been true. You underestimate your own influence. As far as the King is concerned, you are one of the most dangerous men within these walls.”

“If that were the case, I would have been assassinated or otherwise controlled a long time ago.”

“Otherwise controlled,” Sahlo repeated, a brow rising.

Erwin searched his gaze, trying to read it, but the lord pressed ahead before he could interpret it.

“If they killed you, they risked making you a martyr and turning the Survey Corps, and any of its supporters, against the monarchy. It's surprisingly difficult to assassinate a high-profile target without leaving a trail. But something else saved you: the fall of Wall Maria. They lost something that day, something very important to the people of this world. And I don't just mean the Wall itself: it was something that has

been kept in the royal family for generations.” Sahlo leaned forward, his voice dropping. “They expect the person who stole it to be a strategic mastermind, a person with almost unnatural charisma and sway.”

What could he be talking about? Erwin took a slow sip of wine, studying him. *An object? A book? An artifact that contains information about our world?*

“They think I have this thing they lost,” he said aloud.

“You quickly became one of the suspects. For several months, Smith, you were a wanted man, and it fell to me to pressure you, distract you, assess your weaknesses, and monitor you. This might have moved faster if I hadn’t been so set on using you to pursue my personal ambitions, but it ended up being all for nothing, anyway. You cast suspicion away from yourself when you got yourself nearly killed by those titans in 846. Showing up in the Capital half-dead was the smartest thing you could have done—there was no way the person they were looking for would have been in such rough shape from a titan attack, nor would they take so slowly to recover.”

Is this lost item something medical? Erwin wondered. *Something that aids healing and helps protect against the titans, perhaps?*

“You’ve said before the world is coming to an end,” he said aloud, fishing for more information. “Is that just your religion telling you that, or does it have something to do with what was stolen when Wall Maria fell?”

Sahlo held his gaze. “Both.”

“Care to clarify?”

“No.”

A dead end. Maybe this aspect of the conversation would open up after more alcohol. Erwin leaned back in his chair, studying him, as he changed the subject. “What does all this mean for your nutritive yeast and your plans for the Underground?”

“Science is a harsh mistress. The yeast is too slow to cultivate, and it’s too far behind schedule. The investors are panicking; they want to pull out. Everyone is losing patience with me.” Sahlo took a long swig. “I imagine they’ll use the yeast against me, too, and make up lies about what the yeast really is. They’ll make me out to be a crackpot or a terrorist.”

Erwin pondered this, wondering if it would come back to haunt the Survey Corps due to his public alliance with Sahlo. “And what does all this mean for Wall Maria?”

The lord gave a bitter laugh. “They’re panicking. When they’re finished with me, when they’ve got the nobles back in line, they’re going to make sure the populace is in line, too. That means squashing any major upheavals. And what bigger upheaval than a major military push to reclaim Wall Maria?” He shook his head. “If you want to make a move, you’d better do it quickly, before they can pull their heads out of their asses and remember you’re a threat.”

Erwin’s eyes narrowed slightly as he tried to make sense of the lord’s ramblings. *How much of this is truth and how much is paranoia?* “What’s your true motive for coming here, Lord Sahlo? Surely you aren’t lying low here—not when they know we’re associated.”

“I needed to get out from under my babysitter’s thumb so I could tell you what was going on. And I also wanted to warn you: the world within these walls is a lot more tenuously balanced than you know. The Wallists, the King—they have secrets even I don’t fully understand. I know my methods over the years have been ... shall we say, questionable, but ...” The lord’s face softened. “I’ve only ever wanted what’s best for this world. I promise you that. The choices we’re given in this world often boil down to freedom or survival. Given the choice between the two, I’ll choose survival every time. I think most humans would.” He tapped the cigar ash onto the corner of the desk. “You’re a visionary with strong ideals, Erwin. You’ve only ever wanted what’s best for this world too, I’m sure, but don’t think for one second that gives you the right to force everyone within the walls into your version of ‘freedom.’ Don’t assume you know what’s best for humanity when you only know a small part of the picture.”

Erwin took a slow sip of the drink, unfazed by the lord’s warnings. Those who had been outside the walls knew more about survival than anyone. “Freedom and survival are intertwined. We’re penned inside these walls while the titans wear us down; it needs to be the other way around if humanity has any hope of surviving.”

“It isn’t as simple as you think. But here I am, rambling on and wasting time.” Sahlo blew another smoke ring, then watched it dissipate, frowning. “I’ll be dead within the month—possibly within the week.”

“You believe they’re going to kill you?”

Sahlo’s brows dropped. “Weren’t you listening to that whole bit about the noose? Pay attention. Yes, they’re going to kill me, and soon. Panic makes people make rash decisions, even monarchs. Part of the reason I’m here is to put my affairs in order.” He pulled out an envelope

and slid it across the desk.

Erwin opened it. Inside was a copy of a will, leaving fifty percent of Sahlo's estate to Raphael Klein, twenty-five percent to the Wallists, and twenty-five percent to Erwin Smith. His brows rose.

“This—”

“Given the choice between freedom and survival, I'll choose survival every time. I tried to save the less fortunate in this world. I failed. Part of it was greed—I stretched myself too thin, tried to play too many parties.

“Don't think this means I agree with your methods. You're stubborn to a fault, you let your heart rule your head when it comes to the people closest to you, and you take stupid risks. But at this point, you're the only hope this world has. The King can't control his own people, and he loses every weapon that could help him maintain order. The Wallists are paralyzed by ritual. Rage only sees the small picture, and Dok and Pixis are too cautious. So it's up to you. Use that money for recruitment, research, and weapons. Maybe skim some off the top and get yourself something nice—god knows you deserve it.”

Erwin felt anger swelling within him. “You're trying to buy forgiveness for the constant blocks you've thrown in my path?”

Sahlo laughed. “A man like me doesn't deserve forgiveness, so he doesn't ask for it. This is simply a gift. I've spent the past five years of my life losing sleep over you. I hate you, and I admire you. If there's an afterlife, I daresay I'll be up there missing you more than anyone else I've ever interacted with. Besides.” He smiled and raised his glass. “Trying to stay one step ahead of you is the most fun I've had in years.”

Anger drained from Erwin, and he was left with a confusing hollowness. A small part of him thrived on trying to outmanoeuvre Sahlo. What would he do with himself if he didn't have this single embodiment of political obstruction? Sahlo had been the incarnation of everything he had hated about the noble class. An easy focus point. Without him, the challenges were scattered.

At any rate, he couldn't accept the funds until he knew one thing for sure.

“The Wallist who was killed in September,” he said.

“Your sister's husband.”

“Was that your doing?”

Sahlo held his gaze. “Yes.”

The anger began to resurface. “You killed an innocent man to

try to manipulate me.”

“Someone was going to die. That was always the plan. My babysitter was throwing around names that were far more valuable to you—your sister, your mother, your stepfather, Marie Dok, your ex-Squad-Leader Berit, even Levi. I gave them the name of the furthest person from you who might still seem like a plausible pressure point: your brother-in-law.” He didn’t drop his gaze. “Yes, it’s my fault he was the one who was killed. He died to spare the others. Think about it, Erwin, and you’ll understand this as an act of charity toward you. And think about how close you came to slitting my throat, and ask yourself if you, in my shoes, would have done anything differently?”

“Who is your ‘babysitter?’” Erwin asked, recalling the tall man with the wide-brimmed hat.

“I can’t tell you that.”

“He’s tied to the King.”

“I can’t tell you that, either.”

“You’re still holding back information. Even now.” Erwin held his gaze. “If you really cared about humanity’s future—if you were really protecting me—you would tell me everything.”

Sahlo gave him a sad smile. “There are some things so important that not even impending death makes them okay to say aloud. You and I both know how small we are, Erwin. How very, very small.”

That’s all I’m ever going to get out of him. Erwin took a deep breath, held it, and then released it, letting all his history with Sahlo go with it. “Well, if your suspicion is correct and they take you out, I’ll put the funds to good use.”

The lord nodded.

They were silent.

“Since you’re here,” Erwin said, “I’ll show you around the base. Have you ever seen a titan up close?”

“No,” Sahlo said, sounding hesitant.

“I’m sure Hange would love to show you the new specimen. Then, tonight, we’ll go out for dinner and drinks with some of the other soldiers.” Erwin gave a polite smile. “When was the last time you socialized without an underlying political goal?”

“Is this an offer born of pity, or ulterior motives?”

“Perhaps a bit of both.”

The lord chuckled. “It’s a pity we weren’t aligned on our goals from the start,” he said, as if to himself. “We’re both driven by a confus-

ing mix of work addiction, childhood tragedy, ego, and a desire to save humanity. In a different life, we might have been friends.”

Thinking of all they had been through, Erwin could only say, “I’m not sure you and I have the same definition of ‘friends.’”

“At the very least, we might have tolerated each other.”

Erwin studied him for a moment, then stood and walked to the cupboards. “Before I give you a tour of the facilities, how would you feel about a game of chess? It’s been a while since we played.”

Sahlo nodded, suddenly looking sombre. “One last time.”

Erwin pulled out the chess board and silently began to set up the pieces.

¤

Levi sat at his desk next door, attempting to finish his mission report, but his face kept snapping toward the wall every time he heard a voice. He couldn’t distinguish what they were saying, but the tone sounded surprisingly amicable. *What is going on in there?*

Mike poked his head through the doorway. “Hey.”

Levi used his foot to reach across to the opposite chair, kicking it out as an invitation to sit. Mike closed the door, crossed the room and dropped into it. His bangs were so long that Levi couldn’t see his eyes.

“You need a haircut again.”

Mike shrugged. “Feeling better?”

“Mostly. Still get tired easily.”

A smirk tugged at the corner of Mike’s lips. “We should spar.”

“What, you think it’d finally be an even match? Maybe it would have been a few days ago, when I was really sick.” Levi folded his arms over his chest, leaning back in his chair. “What do you want?”

“Did Erwin ever talk to you about Petra?”

Levi’s brow furrowed. “What about her?”

“She thinks you’re one step away from marrying her.”

The idea was laughable. “She knows about Erwin.”

“You keep saying that. She wrote a letter to her sister saying you were going to ask her to marry you, but duty stopped you.”

Levi scoffed. “She was just joking around.”

Mike leaned forward, all humour gone from his face. “Erwin’s starting to believe it, too.”

“Bullshit.”

“Said you might be bisexual.”

Levi let out a low sigh. “All of you need to mind your own business.”

“If you respect her, you’ll talk to her about it.”

“Fine, I’ll do it. But I’m telling you, she already knows everything, and she’s going to be insulted that I thought she had some dumb crush on me.”

They were quiet for a moment. The sound of Sahlo’s laughter next door made Levi’s blood boil.

“How’s it going over there?” Mike asked.

“No idea.” Levi leaned a little closer, ears straining to hear their conversation. “We’re taking that fuckhead out for drinks tonight.”

“We?”

“A group of us. Erwin’s using the budget to pay for it. Bring Nanaba or something. We’re going to try to get Sahlo drunk, get him talking.” Maybe it wasn’t the most elegant plan, but it was all they had short of torturing the lord. Levi kept his voice casual as he continued: “I’ll stay sober and pay attention to him, see if he reveals any secrets. But I need your help, too.”

“Yeah?”

“We need to get Erwin to hook up with a woman.”

Even behind the curtain of bangs, Levi could feel the withering gaze.

“Don’t look at me like that.” Levi shrugged it off. “The whole reason we separated in the first place was to convince assholes like Sahlo that we didn’t mean anything to each other.”

“You’re going to sit there,” Mike said, “and watch Erwin chat up someone.”

A shiver ran down Levi’s spine. “Sure. Even better if they start making out and leave together.”

Mike let out a long, slow sigh.

“What?” Levi said, defensive.

“Hange’s right: you’re both idiots.”

“Don’t judge me. You still haven’t talked to Nanaba, have you?”

Mike set his jaw. “Nanaba and I never had anything to begin with, so we don’t know what we’re missing. You and Erwin had something that worked and chose to ignore it.”

“It didn’t work. Why the hell do you think we ended it?” Levi reached for the breast pocket of his jacket, feeling the ring’s outline

through the thick cloth. “He broke down every time.”

“Every time ... ?”

“Sex. It fucking ruined him. No, not even just sex—any time he let his guard down around me, it took too long to lift it again. Besides, I’m the whole reason he caved in to Sahlo’s timeline.” Levi picked at the corner of his notebook, where the leather was peeling away. “Remember when you first found out about us, and you told me we might get under each other’s skin, fuck each other up? We should have listened. You saw how he was with Marie, with Henrik. You saw this coming.”

Mike was quiet for a moment, then he leaned closer. “Yeah, I saw how he was with Marie and Henrik. Marie’s fickle—she toyed with him, and—”

“I like Marie,” Levi said flatly.

“Hold on; I’m not done. He toyed with her, too. They were two dumb kids in love with the idea of being in love, and they thought love meant drama. It was a disaster, and a major distraction for both of them. Ending it was the best thing they could have done.” Mike shook his head. “And Henrik was clingy. In our career path, you can’t get clingy. It makes you make dumb decisions, and makes you demand things you have no right to. If Marie used drama to appeal to Erwin, then Henrik used guilt and pity.”

“So what did I use, then?” Levi asked, genuinely curious how the relationship looked to an outsider.

“You didn’t ‘use’ anything. You just respected each other. The way it should be. The two of you together were just as strong as you were alone—maybe stronger. So Erwin breaks down around you; big deal. I’ve seen how he gets when he doesn’t break down. He gets more and more detached, and then he snaps. It’s not healthy. And sure, maybe he caved to Sahlo because of you. But don’t you think that was the logical choice? Don’t you understand what you’re worth to the Survey Corps? To humanity?” Mike stood. “Every single one of us would give our lives for you, Levi. You’re that valuable. Even if Erwin wasn’t in love with you, I guarantee he would have weighed the pros and cons and still landed on the side of protecting you. Hell, he was protecting you before we ever made contact with you in the Underground.”

Levi’s heart thudded in his chest. “Our separation wasn’t just strategic.”

“I know, because I’m the same way. I get it. We’ve lost so many people; we know how much it hurts. We know we’re likely to die at

some point soon. The thought of leaving holes in the hearts of the people we care about ... It's terrifying. It's easier to put up a wall, convince ourselves it'll hurt them less when we die."

"You think we pushed each other away because we were *scared*?" Levi said, surprised.

"Wall Maria's coming. We all know most of us aren't going to make it back. The closer it came, the more it got you thinking about the end. It made you skittish. I bet it didn't help when Erwin saw his sister's husband die. I bet he got a first-hand look at what you'd be feeling if he died in front of you." Mike looked away. "Like I said, I know because I'm the same way. But I'll tell you something: it's too late. Like you said, you're too deep under each other's skin. And the way I see it, even though you think you've separated, you're only getting deeper."

"That's bullshit." Levi felt a growing urge to bop the man in the mouth. "We've been separated for *months*."

"So why have I been smelling him all over you every morning?"

Levi's heart was twisting, and his throat ached, and he wondered what would happen if he actually punched Mike in the face. "Why the fuck are you telling me this?"

Mike shrugged. "I've always been honest with you about your relationship. You're my friends."

"Well, your opinion doesn't change a damned thing. What's done is done. And besides, you know shit-all about the politics behind our choice."

Mike nodded. "I said all I needed to say." He stood. "Think about it. I'll stay out of it from now on. But if you need to talk about it—"

"I don't." Levi adjusted the papers on his desk; they seemed more interesting now than they had a few minutes ago. Anything was better than the intensity of this conversation. "We'll leave for dinner and drinks around five o'clock. Meet in Erwin's office."

Mike nodded again, then left the room.

Levi reached into his pocket and pulled out the ring. He slipped it on his finger. He had lost a bit of weight; it was even larger on him now than it had been before.

Was I afraid?

It was true that his entire logic behind the separation had been grounded in one fear: he was becoming Erwin's weakness. Was that actually true? Or just a convenient excuse? Did he see one piece of evidence for it and blow it out of proportion?

Worse yet: had it been pre-emptive? Had he decided he was Erwin's weakness to protect himself, because he assumed Erwin would one day come to the same conclusion and break his heart?

He thought of the weight of Erwin in the bed next to him, of that graze of fingertips the other night that was probably accidental, but had lingered for so long that it had become intentional.

They needed each other.

Maybe that's what really scares me. If we need each other, what happens when one of us disappears?

He lifted the ring. It was cool against his lips.

63

At quarter to five, Levi stepped into Eld's bunk to find his Special Operation Squad members playing cards.

“Shouldn't you be cleaning?”

“Captain!” They all scrambled to their feet, saluting. Levi paced along the line of them, then swabbed two fingers under a bed. He wrinkled his nose as dust flaked off his fingertips.

“I was going to ask one of you to accompany me on a special dinner, but now I don't think any of you deserve to come.”

“Petra did her cleaning, Captain,” Anton said.

Levi turned to look at them. Petra stared fixedly at the floor.

“It's true,” Gunther said, a little too quickly. “She even got her bunkmates to help her clean their bunk, and then she came here trying to get us to do our tasks, too.”

Levi knew exactly what they were trying to do, and his stomach sank, because it meant exactly what Mike had told him: Petra had feelings for him, so strong that the others knew about it. He gave a low sigh. He would have to address this himself. Tonight.

“Is this true?” he asked her. “You finished your cleaning?”

“Yes, Captain.” She saluted with a determined look, but a flush coloured her cheeks.

“Fine. Petra, come with me. The rest of you, do your damned cleaning.”

“You aren't going to check her work?” Oluo sputtered. “You're just going to take everyone's word for it?”

Levi ignored him, marching for the door. He heard pattering footsteps as Petra hurried to catch up to him.

They strode down the hallway, side-by-side, and Levi glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. “This is a professional dinner, Petra.”

She nodded. “Yes, Captain.”

“I chose you because you obeyed your orders for the day. There’s no deeper meaning to this.”

She cast him a confused look.

“There’s no deeper meaning to anything,” he clarified. “I’m your superior officer, and that’s all there is to it.”

“Of course you are, Captain.”

Tension drained from his shoulders. *Mike’s crazy.*

They entered Erwin’s office without knocking. Erwin was speaking with Sahlo at his desk; the lord warily eyed Levi as they entered. Hange and Moblit stood in the far corner. Mike, Nanaba, Lynne, and Dita sat on the couches.

Erwin’s eyes shifted to Petra and lingered a little too long. Then, he gave a polite smile. “I believe we’re ready to head out.”

They moved in a herd to the waiting carriages, which took them to a popular pub downtown. Sahlo eyed their surroundings with a curled lip; the dim lighting, dark wooden bar tables, and stools must not be up to his standards. Levi pushed past him, heading for their usual long table at the back. He scanned the room, looking for someone who might be a good fit for Erwin. *She has to be a woman, to keep suspicion off me*, he thought, although he knew deep down the gender choice wasn’t quite as selfless as he pretended.

There were so many soldiers present that the seating was tight. He found himself squished on a bench between Petra and, to his dismay, Erwin. He fought to keep space between them, but only succeeded in nuzzling up against Petra, which made her blush. Either way he moved, he was making a relationship worse.

Sahlo studied him. “You look uncomfortable, Levi.”

“Yeah, because you stink like cigars.” He sat normally and tried to ignore the broad thigh pressed against his, especially because it was flexing. He knew Erwin flexed his thighs as a trick to try to keep blood from his groin when he had an unwanted erection—something that had never worked for Levi, but Erwin swore by it.

You don’t know that’s what he’s doing this time. Maybe he’s just tense, Levi thought, but now he couldn’t shake the dizzying thought that their proximity was turning him on.

They ordered chicken pies and ale for the table, and Levi’s

mouth watered as the servers brought the food. They ate, drank, and conversed. Sahlo was surprisingly quiet, his gaze darting toward the door every time it swung open. At this rate, they weren't going to get anything useful out of him.

About an hour after the meal, a tall woman walked in; she had a youthful face, flowing blond hair, and a large chest. Levi elbowed Erwin—if they were pressed up against each other anyway, what was a little extra elbow contact?—and nodded in her direction. “How about her?”

Erwin’s lip curled. “She looks like my sister.”

“What’s going on here?” Sahlo leaned forward, showing the first sign of interest in conversation.

“I’m trying to get Erwin laid tonight,” Levi said.

Erwin gave a weary sigh and stood. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to order a bottle of whiskey.”

Sahlo leaned in, so close that Levi’s skin crawled. “I thought the Commander was engaged to Lady Gunnhild.”

Levi’s stomach dropped. “Engaged?”

“That’s what the rumours say.” The lord’s eyes bored through him. “He didn’t tell you?”

“The only thing he’s married to is his work.” Levi’s eyes narrowed. “I know what you’re trying to do.” It was working. Maybe an engagement was completely unfathomable, but now he was picturing what Erwin would have to be doing with her in public to start that kind of rumour. Were they walking around arm in arm? Hand in hand? Kissing in alleyways? On dance floors? His lip was curling.

Petra rescued him. She tapped his shoulder and then nodded at a young woman sitting alone at the bar with a book. “What about her? She’s been watching the Commander since we walked in.”

The woman in question was probably around Petra’s age, with an upturned nose, a slim build, and fiery red hair. She seemed to be doodling absently in her notebook, sneaking glances at Erwin, who was oblivious, examining whiskey labels on the other side of the bar.

Levi’s chest tightened. “Not sure she’s his type.”

“Why not? She’s cute. And she brought books to a bar, so she’s probably an intellectual.”

“So’s Hange, but that doesn’t mean Erwin—” He remembered the whole reason he had suggested this: to prove to Sahlo that he and Erwin weren’t romantically involved. He steadied his face.

Erwin returned to the table with a bottle and uncapped it, pour-

ing a generous serving for Sahlo.

“We’ve found the perfect woman for you, Commander,” Petra said, her cheeks flushed. How much ale had she had? Levi could smell it coming off her in clouds.

“Have you now?” Erwin said, half-interested, as he poured himself a glass.

Petra pointed not-so-subtly to the woman in question. “You know she’s been giving you looks since you walked in?”

“She’s awfully young,” Erwin said. “She can’t be more than sixteen.”

“She’s in her twenties, I’m sure.”

“No, I’m certain she’s too young for me.”

Levi lifted his chin. “Hey, Red,” he called.

Erwin and Petra both turned to him, surprised.

“Levi—” Erwin began.

“Red,” Levi called. “You, the girl at the bar.”

The girl looked up, brows furrowed. “Me?”

“How old are you?”

Erwin rubbed his face with his palm. “Levi—”

“Twenty-three,” she said, confused.

“Twenty-three,” he said pointedly to Erwin. “Go talk to her.”

Their gaze held for a moment, then Erwin looked at Sahlo. “I’m sure you didn’t come all the way over here to watch me flirt.”

“By all means, go ahead,” the lord said with a smile. “This *is* interesting.”

With one last look at Levi, face expressionless, Erwin stood and began to approach the bar. He leaned against it and murmured something, and they both glanced in Levi’s direction. *He’s apologizing for my rudeness.*

A dark cloud settled over Levi. He had intended to stay sober, but his fake drink—water dressed up to look like hard liquor—wasn’t quenching his anxiety.

He realized the entire table was silent, staring at Erwin. “Knock it off. You’re going to creep her out.”

“I’ve never seen the Commander flirt,” Petra said, still too drunk and honest. “He seems pretty smooth.”

He did, with his liquid hand gestures, his easy posture, his explanations about the drink as he handed it to the woman. She was leaning toward him, her cheeks pink, a genuine grin on her face. *Does she even*

know who he is? Does she know how much he has given up just so this pub and everyone in it can survive?

He could feel Mike's gaze on him, but he refused to turn to him. No way in hell he was letting Mike know he had been correct: this was a terrible idea.

It seemed he wasn't the only one uncomfortable. Hange stood. "Moblit and I need to get back to Albert and Chikachironi."

Moblit, who had been drinking heavily through the meal, let out a low groan and rested his forehead against the table. "Squad Leader, please. You need your rest."

"You go ahead, Hange," Nanaba said, patting Moblit's shoulder. "I'll make sure he gets home safely."

"Leaving so soon, Zoë?" Sahlo said, but he received a glare so sharp that even he knew to shut his mouth. Levi didn't blame him. Angry Hange was terrifying.

"Why do you antagonize everyone?" Mike demanded in his usual blunt way.

Sahlo's eyes narrowed. "I'm sorry, Squad Leader, I must have misheard you—did you just address me as if I'm one of your subordinates?"

"It must be a lonely life, poking at everyone around you until they give you any form of attention, good or bad. I can't imagine living a life where I knew everyone around me wanted to stab me in the back. Or the face." Mike coolly lifted his drink to his lips.

Levi gave a soft snort at the lord's stunned expression.

Nanaba quickly asked Moblit about the titan research, and the conversation began to wander. Levi found his eyes drifting back to Erwin, who sat next to the woman now, leaning in close.

After a moment, he realized Sahlo was studying him, his face unexpectedly soft.

"What?" he snapped.

"You don't seem happy with what's happening over there."

Levi shrugged. "He needs this. You've been shoving so much stress down his throat for so long that he needs a night of fun."

"What a loyal thing to say."

Erwin stood and held out his arm. The woman took it, tucking her book under her other arm.

Leave with her, Levi thought, his stomach twisting.

Instead, Erwin looked back at him. Their eyes held.

Is he asking for permission? Levi's heart beat in his throat. *I could end this now.* But Sahlo's eyes were on him, and more than that, there was a promise they had to uphold. He lifted his hand in a casual wave.

Erwin nodded back, and then he led the woman through the doorway. The door swung into place behind them.

Levi stared after them, empty.

"We should call it a night, too," Nanaba said. "Moblit is getting sloppy."

The man in question let out a series of high-pitched laughs, slumping against her.

"Let the others go ahead," Sahlo said, eyes fixed on Levi. "There are a few things I'd like to discuss with you alone, Captain."

"I have nothing to say to you."

"You need only listen." The lord filled a whiskey glass for each of them. Levi hadn't planned on drinking at all, but it was just as well; Sahlo was far enough ahead that Levi would be sober by comparison, even if they shared a few drinks.

Levi nodded at Mike, who was watching him, to let him know he was okay by himself.

"I can stay, too, Cap'n," Petra said, slumping against his shoulder.

"Go with the others. We'll talk tomorrow."

The others cleared out. Sahlo slid onto the bench next to Levi, sitting a little too close. He held up his glass, then drained it.

"Why are you here?" Levi demanded.

"I'm sure your Commander will tell you all about it tomorrow, once he returns from making tender love to—" Sahlo stopped, and for a moment, his expression flickered. "Ah. I really do antagonize everyone, don't I? Your big mop-haired friend is smarter than he looks."

The damage was already done. Was Erwin in the shadowed alley behind the pub right now, kissing her against the wall? Was she on her knees, delicately pulling him out of his pants? What if Erwin felt her breasts and remembered how much he liked them? What if he buried that long, sharp nose in-between her legs and breathed in and remembered how much he preferred vulvas to balls? Levi grimaced and swallowed the whiskey. It burned, but he poured himself another glass.

"I knew your mother," Sahlo said quietly.

Levi slowly turned to him, his skin crawling. "What?" he growled.

"Didn't realize she had a kid, but there's no mistaking the resem-

blance. She had your fire, too. When Klein tried to wrest control of the house from her Madame, your mother cussed him up one side and down the other, called him every crass name under the sun. He was so amused that he made a truce with your mother's Madame instead."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Levi's head was spinning, and it couldn't be from the alcohol, not so soon. He felt cracks widening in the past memories he had carefully constructed for himself, bits and pieces of them crumbling away. His chest was painfully tight. *I'm going to have a panic attack in front of this asshole.*

"Ah, maybe you were too young to remember. My mistake."

"I don't know what game you're trying to play—"

Sahlo shook his head. "No games. Only missing pieces, and a few scant days to reveal them."

Levi squinted at him. "Are you dying or something?"

"In a manner of speaking. I will be assassinated very soon."

"Oh. So what, you're just going to go back home and let it happen?"

"Where would you propose I go?" Sahlo asked, his eyes narrowing. "These walls are small."

"People disappear all the time."

Sahlo chuckled. "Your expertise is outside the wall, Captain. Mine is inside. Believe me when I say there's no way out for me."

Levi's lip curled. "So what do you want? Pity?"

"I want to clear my conscience. As much as a man like me can, anyway. It's purely selfish." Sahlo tossed back the whiskey again, then poured another. "I've given your Commander all the repentance I can afford. He'll be deciding what to do with it."

"So why are you talking to me?"

"Because your Commander is presumably buried in the bosom of a brainy redhead right now, and you're the closest thing to him." Sahlo leaned close to him, slow and exaggerated. "You terrify me, Captain. I tried to force you two apart. I tried doubt, I tried logic, I tried bluffing. But I underestimated how strong your bond is. I shouldn't have bothered trying."

"What do you mean, bluffing?" Levi said flatly. "That bit about being engaged to Lady Gunnhild?"

"Specifically, the bit a few months back, when I accused the two of you of being in love."

Levi's stomach plummetted. "What?"

“It was an educated guess, at best. I tried it in stages, feeling my way through, but it was a gamble.” Sahlo lifted the drink to his lips. “A lucky guess.”

Levi knocked the glass out of his hand; it shattered on the floor. The lord’s eyes flew open. Around them, people turned to stare.

“We’re leaving.” Levi stood. “Pay the rest of the bill.”

Sahlo’s hand shook as he pulled a stack of notes out of his pocket and laid them on the table. Once there was enough to cover the expense, Levi grabbed the man by the collar and hauled him to the door.

The instant they were outside, Levi punched Sahlo hard in the stomach. The lord doubled over with an *oof*, then fell to all fours, his hat rolling along the ground beside him.

“You fucking asshole.” Levi knelt, grabbed the lord’s grey hair, and jerked his head up so they were face-to-face. “You let us believe there was some big rumour that we were together. Evidence.”

Sahlo gasped for breath, but grinned at him. “It worked well, didn’t it?”

“Does anyone else think we’re—”

“No.”

Levi yanked harder on his hair. “Have you heard any rumours about us?”

“No. No one suspects a thing. They’ve commented on your loyalty, but never anything more than that.” Sahlo cringed. “Let go of me.”

Levi released him; the lord fell to the street and didn’t move.

“Fuck.” Levi raked a hand into his hair. If the lord had mentioned this before dinner, Erwin might not be in bed with a woman.

“I hate you, Levi,” Sahlo said from the ground. “You and your band of kids stole food from the mouths of hardworking people. I thought maybe Erwin could train you, but even last year, you killed good men and women who were just doing what they could to survive down there. You are a parasite.” He lifted his head. “But Erwin seems fond of you. Damned if I can see why. So take care of him.”

Levi bared his teeth. “I’ve been protecting him from *you*, you shitting asshole.”

“I have many regrets, Captain.” Sahlo struggled to his feet, hunching over his stomach. “Everything I did was for the sake of the Underground. Talk to Erwin. He’ll explain.”

He already had, to some degree. Levi knew about the nutritive yeast, and the food packages, and the weapons—something Erwin had

painted as a negative thing, but Levi knew how essential proper weapons were in the Underground.

With a sigh, he hoisted the lord upright and supported him, leading him back to the base. “You dying is going to make our lives so much easier. I’m glad someone else is doing it so I don’t get your blood all over me.”

“Yes,” Sahlo said, “I’d hate for my death to muss your pretty white cravat.”

❧

Not surprisingly, Erwin’s office was empty, as was his bedroom. Levi lay in his own bed, but it still smelled faintly of cologne.

With a low sigh, he grabbed a lamp and a wool blanket, pulled on warm clothes and trudged up to the one place he didn’t feel trapped: the guard tower. He lay down a blanket and sat, staring up at the stars. The air was damp and heavy, the sky clouded. He felt one raindrop, then two, then a light mist.

He had only been up there for about fifteen minutes when the trap door opened behind him. He didn’t have to turn to know who it was; only Erwin knew how to get up here.

“I can’t do it,” Levi said.

There was a pause, then Erwin settled to a seat beside him, staring out into the blackness with him. “Can’t do what?”

Levi breathed in, trying to detect perfume or other unfamiliar scents that would belong to the redhead woman.

“Levi?”

“I can’t pretend to be okay with you hooking up with other people.” He drew his knees to his chest. “Jealousy is immature as hell, but I guess I’m just immature. I know we stepped back. I know I told you to do this.” He couldn’t say the words: *I feel forgotten. Replaced.*

Erwin studied him. “You’ve seen first-hand how hard it is for me to get over people, Levi. Why would you think I would already be over you? I came up here because even holding hands—even *flirting*—with someone else overwhelmed me to the point that I had to escape everything for a while.”

“What?” Levi glanced at him. “But you left arm-in-arm—”

“I walked her home.”

“You looked back at me like you were asking permission to fuck

her.”

“What? No, I wanted to make sure you knew I was leaving. That’s all.”

“Oh.” Levi realized he was shaking. He tightened his arms around his knees, curling into himself. “This isn’t working.”

“What do you mean?” Erwin asked, but his voice wavered.

“I can’t do this halfway. It hurts too much.” Levi ran his fingertips along the wool surface of the blanket; it was scratchy. He should have brought a more comfortable blanket.

“Are you saying you want to make this separation permanent?” The words were gentle, but they sliced through Levi’s gut like steel.

“I don’t know.” He flopped onto his back in frustration. A gentle smattering of raindrops began to fall on his face; he held his forearm over his eyes, shielding them. “I don’t know what the fuck we are. I don’t even know if we need to *be* what we are. Sahlo told me tonight he was bluffing the whole time.”

“Bluffing?”

“About us being together. He made a guess based on his observations and nothing more. Nile didn’t tell him. There were no rumours. It was a fucking guess, and no one else has a clue. We’re solving a problem that doesn’t exist.” Levi felt his eyes getting damp anyway; he blinked angrily. “But you’ve been focusing so well, and the Corps has been making good progress. So maybe we’re better off this way. I just—” His voice cracked. “I just want to *be* with you.” The words left a crater in his chest, and he closed his eyes, feeling too vulnerable.

After an excruciating silence, Erwin stretched out on his back beside him, knees bent a little so he could fit within the circular wall, arms behind his head.

For a few minutes, they stared up into the sky. The rain stopped misting and disappeared.

“With Sahlo taking himself out of the picture, we will be able to push for Wall Maria soon,” Erwin said quietly. “Next week, you and I will go to Mitras for the Council meeting, but instead of our previous plans, we’ll get approval for our final checkpoint mission. I’ll send messages to Pixis and Nile tomorrow to start readying their troops. We’ll be advancing on Wall Maria within a month. Do you think you can tolerate this halfway state for just a little longer?”

“I thought we were going to die in the reclamation,” Levi said, rolling his head to look at him.

“We might.” Erwin’s face was soft in the lamplight. “But you’re Humanity’s Strongest, and I’m apparently so crafty, the King himself fears me.”

“Really?”

“So I hear. I’m starting to think we can survive this, Levi. Maybe that’s wishful thinking, but it keeps me warm at night.”

Levi rolled onto his side to face him. He slowly reached out a hand, then delicately trailed his fingers across Erwin’s forehead, sweeping the blond bangs to the side. His jaw visibly clenched.

“You got to touch me earlier.” Levi trailed down the strong jaw-line, then his hand curled away. “Only seems fair.”

Their gaze held.

“Do you want me to keep coming to your room at night?” Erwin asked. “Or is that making it harder?”

Levi felt a swell of frustration. “How the hell should I know? It makes it worse and it makes it better at the same time.”

“That’s a good way to put it,” Erwin murmured, but then his mouth stretched into a yawn. He covered his mouth, his eyes watering.

“Tired?” Levi said. “Good thing you didn’t sleep with Red after all. You would’ve fallen asleep on top of her and crushed her. That’s not comfortable, you know.”

Erwin chuckled and sat up. “Are you really going to bring this up again? That happened *once*.”

“More like once a week.”

“So, Humanity’s Strongest can’t handle a little weight on top of him.”

“Not when that weight is drooling and snoring in his ear.” Levi’s face fell. He missed how useless Erwin was after sex.

“Not too much longer now,” Erwin said gently.

“Yeah, I know.”

They stood, shook out the blanket and folded it. Erwin picked up the lantern. “I’m going to retire to my room tonight. You’re welcome to join me if you need company in order to sleep comfortably.”

“I might.” Levi paused. “Thanks.”

He still had that hollow crater in his chest. But it wasn’t quite empty, not anymore.

-33-

BURN

Levi rapped on Erwin's office door and pushed it open. Erwin sat with his elbows planted on the desk, hands folded over his mouth, staring down at something. Levi padded closer and saw a sealed envelope, a lipstick mark over its flap.

“Sahlo?”

“Most likely, under the guise of Lady Gunnhild again.” His voice was strained.

“You think he puts the lipstick on and kisses the envelope himself?” Levi tried.

Erwin didn’t move.

Levi frowned. “Why aren’t you opening it?”

“It’s been less than a week since he was here.” Erwin’s eyes shifted to him. “He was rather forthcoming about all that was coming to him, and we both ran up against walls trying to extract more. I can’t imagine he has much else to add. Besides, we’ll be seeing him tomorrow—why bother sending a message?”

“You’re talking about Sahlo. He’s probably just fucking with your head for the hell of it.” Levi folded his arms over his chest. “Bring it with you. The carriage is waiting downstairs.”

“Already?” Erwin stood and opened his jacket to slip the envelope into his inner pocket. “You haven’t even packed yet.”

“What? My bag is already in the courtyard.”

Their gaze held, Erwin’s brows pinched with an unasked question. Realizing what was confusing him, Levi shrugged and added, “I didn’t think we were going to share the trunk this time.” Sharing a trunk seemed like something a couple would do.

“I see.” Erwin reached for his pen. “Please ask the driver to wait

for just a few minutes longer. I have a couple last-minute instructions for Mike and Dita.”

“Not Hange?”

“Hange’s rather preoccupied with plans to capture another set of titans.”

“Again?”

“Mm,” Erwin said, already writing a list.

Levi left him to finish his work. He hoped Hange’s experiments were going well—he hadn’t seen much of the Squad Leader since the first capture. He had to admit, he missed Hange’s constant chatter and poor volume control during mealtimes.

The driver tipped his hat as Levi approached.

“The Commander will be a couple more minutes,” Levi said as he stepped into the carriage. He froze, then stepped back out again. Had the cabin space always been that small? How was he supposed to sit that close to Erwin for hours without things getting awkward?

“Everything all right, Levi?”

He turned to see Erwin approaching, hair glowing golden in the sunlight. Levi’s lips flattened. He settled in a corner and folded his arms over his chest.

Erwin didn’t seem to notice his discomfort; he told the driver they were ready, then sat on the bench opposite him. He pulled out a file and began to flip through paperwork.

This was how every day had been since their emotional discussion on the tower. Erwin seemed to think they had come to a resolution; Levi felt more impatient than ever. He still had feelings for Erwin, and Erwin still had feelings for him—that should have been enough, but a little spark of hope in his stomach was roaring into a flame, and it was consuming him.

The problem was that he was thinking too much. It had been Mike’s fault, laying out their reasons for separation like cards, then shredding them one at a time until only one remained. He had thought that the last lingering reason had been *fear*, but Levi had been watching Erwin carefully since then, and fear didn’t fit. When Erwin was afraid, his mask went on. He had been warm and open with Levi since their chat, inviting him into his bedroom each night, burning too many bedside candles on good books, reading himself hoarse. The other night, they had even lain awake at two in the morning, giggling over some dumb joke with half-asleep delirium that had erased the punchline

from both their minds by morning.

No, Erwin wasn't afraid. Only one explanation made sense: relief. His feelings for Levi were a distraction, and he was relieved now that they had acknowledged their tension and carefully set it aside until after Wall Maria.

Levi had known all along that he was a distraction; it had been his main reason for instigating their separation in the first place. Then, however, it had been *his* idea. It was worse when it was Erwin's.

He shifted on the bench, drawing his knees tightly to his chest.

Erwin looked up at him and gave a polite smile. "It's been a while since you've been to Mitras, Levi. Have you missed it?"

"Not one bit." Levi tried not to notice Erwin's lolling knees. The pants seemed unusually tight around the curves and dips of his thigh muscles; the fabric bunched between them, barely showing the shape of his bulge. He was surprised to find himself aching to crawl into that lap and grind against it. It was the damned carriage, too tiny to contain all the memories that had taken place there.

Erwin's smile faded, but his gaze didn't drop. "Well, it shouldn't be too taxing. I purposefully declined all social invitations; we'll only be focusing on the Council. Although I suspect Sahlo might want to speak with me."

He looked so solemn that Levi said, "Did you open the letter?"

"No."

"You think he's changed his mind about your share of the inheritance?"

Erwin pulled out the envelope. "It's possible. It's also possible this is a death notice." His fingertips drummed the paper.

Levi's lip curled. "Don't tell me you're worried about him."

"Strange, isn't it? After all the grief he put us through."

"He's been screwing us over for *four years*."

"We did our share of damage to him, too." Erwin's mouth flattened. "I got to know him quite well by the end there—too well. I know very little about any nobles who might take his place. If one of them decides they want to be our opponent rather than our ally, I'll have to start all my tactics and strategies from scratch."

"You love having a problem to solve, so you'd enjoy that," Levi said defensively, because he suspected Erwin was more worried about Sahlo's well-being than he was letting on. "Besides, we're so close to Wall Maria. The only things you have to outsmart now are titans." As he said

it, he realized how short-sighted he must sound.

But Erwin only said, "I suppose you're right." He flipped the envelope over. "May I borrow your knife?"

Levi pulled the knife out of his boot and handed it over. The blade slid easily through the paper.

Erwin scanned the letter, his frown deepening.

"What?" Levi asked.

"He's inviting me to his estate tonight. He wants to speak with me before the meeting." The blue gaze fixed on Levi. "During his visit, he mentioned there were things he was unable to tell me. I wonder if he's had time to think that through, to decide the truth of this world is more valuable to humanity's survival than whatever was stopping him from sharing it?"

"Shouldn't that make you happy?" Levi asked, noting his sombre expression.

"I suppose it should. But it makes me wonder what changed his mind—with a man like Sahlo, an act like this isn't one of sheer benevolence." Erwin folded the letter and slipped it back into his jacket. "I did try to plant seeds in his mind that if he cared about humanity, he would tell me everything he knew. What if he did some soul-searching and realized he needed to share? What if he has information that would prevent us from ever reclaiming the Wall?"

"I don't think that asshole has a soul to search," Levi muttered. When it came to Erwin, it was often difficult to tell if he was having a brilliant hunch, or if he was over-thinking things. Given that they were going to be travelling all day, there didn't seem any harm in him thinking himself into a fog, if it came to that. It could help him feel better. "Maybe you should brainstorm and come up with some possibilities so you feel ready to face him."

"I think I will. There's also the possibility that this is some sort of trap."

"Wouldn't put it past that asshole to make one last stand."

"Indeed." The blue gaze was still on him, piercing through him. "What about you, Levi?"

"What?"

"What will you do?"

Levi shrugged. "Just sit here, I guess."

"That might get boring for you. This trip is surprisingly long if you aren't ..." Erwin hesitated. "Killing time."

“Don’t make this weird.” Too late; Levi was already recalling the ways they used to kill travel time. He rubbed his forehead.

“My apologies.” Erwin was using his stiff formal speech, as if he were trying to emphasize the distance between them. “I didn’t intend to make things awkward. I am glad we can do this, Levi.”

“Do what?”

“Travel comfortably in close quarters like this. I’ve missed having you along on these trips.” Erwin’s legs lolled a little wider to either side, as if he were trying to look more casual.

“Yeah,” Levi said, trying to ignore the allure of that perfect, muscled lap.

⁂

Over the next several hours, Levi drifted in and out of sleep. Erwin had long since moved on from brainstorming and was now working on documents. Levi decided he should offer to help, but he was so drowsy that he kept falling asleep and dreaming he said the words rather than actually saying them aloud.

The carriage stopped, and he jolted awake.

Erwin looked up, a small smile on his lips. “It’s okay. Go back to sleep. We’re just at a checkpoint.”

That’s when Levi realized they had reached the gate of Ehrmich district. He subtly ran his hand over his chest, feeling for the ring in his breast pocket.

He realized Erwin’s gaze was fixed on his hand.

“What?” Levi asked.

“Everything alright, Levi?”

He thought about lying, but Erwin would see right through him. “This is Ehrmich District, isn’t it?”

“Ah,” Erwin said quietly.

Their eyes held, then Erwin closed his folder and set it aside. “You must be bored. Why don’t we read for a little bit?”

“You brought a book?” Levi asked, surprised. He hadn’t expected recreational time to be a priority during this trip. Anger began to flicker in his chest.

“Of course I did.” The thick brows peaked. “Is that unexpected?”

“A bit.” The walls of the carriage were beginning to constrict. He tried to take a deep breath. Erwin’s cologne, faint as it was, had tainted

the air throughout the tiny carriage. It assaulted his nose.

“We aren’t just colleagues on this trip, Levi. We’re still friends.” The sentence ended on the wrong tone, as if he were seeking Levi’s agreement.

Out. He had to get out. “Forget it.”

“Levi?”

“I said, forget it.” Levi pulled the stop cord.

Erwin gave a low sigh. “If you would tell me what’s wrong—”

“Nothing’s wrong. I have to take a shit.”

The carriage pulled over and Levi immediately realized his mistake: now he was in a street in Ehrmich in broad daylight. The crowd swarmed around him, couples arm-in-arm, a man tucking a flower behind a woman’s ear, a woman laughing at her friend’s joke. He ducked into the nearest store in search of a bathroom, because, if nothing else, it would give him a moment of privacy.

He sat on the cold porcelain and took several deep breaths. As much as the air stank in here, at least it didn’t smell like Erwin.

The anger faded and left him hollow. He had never felt lonelier than in that carriage: trapped in a box where they had made love dozens of times, travelling through the district that was a symbol of the commitment they had shoved aside. He was tired of pretending they didn’t care about each other. And Erwin had the nerve to try to distract him with a book?

Even after he calmed down, it took him a few minutes to drum up the courage to face that carriage again.

When he finally returned, Erwin handed him a thermos. “I took the liberty of getting you some tea.”

Levi accepted the offering and opened the cap to smell it. It was high quality tea; he took a sip. The warmth trickled down his throat and glowed in his stomach.

“May I close this?” Erwin reached for the door. “Or would that be too confining?”

“It’s fine.”

“I know, in the past, confined spaces have made you uncomfortable.” Erwin closed it, then sat back on the bench, eyes probing. “But I get the feeling that’s not what this is about.”

“Don’t pull that mindreading bullshit on me.” Levi pulled the cord, alerting the driver they were ready to start moving again.

“I know this isn’t easy.”

“Seems easy enough for you.”

A wounded look flickered across Erwin’s face, and Levi immediately felt guilty, but he was too stubborn to apologize.

When Erwin spoke again, his voice was low: “How many years have we known each other, Levi? I would expect you to know by now when I’m overcompensating.”

“Just forget it.”

Erwin slowly crossed the carriage, bracing his hand against the roof, and dropped to a seat beside him.

“What are you—” began Levi.

Erwin’s arms wrapped around him and pulled him in.

Levi stiffened, at first, then slumped against him. Erwin’s chest, beneath his cheek. Erwin’s heart, pounding against his ear. Levi slid his arms around him, too, and he was shocked by how broad his ribcage was. *Was he always this big?*

“We’re not supposed to touch,” he said aloud, and he cringed, because that was the exact opposite of what he wanted to communicate..

“I’m sorry, Levi.” Erwin pressed his cheek to the top of his head. “Let me lapse for one moment. Just one.”

Levi clawed a hand into the back of his shirt, breathing in the scent of his chest. Knowing Erwin was struggling just as much made him feel a little better.

But as nice as the hug felt, a persistent question undercut it: if they were both suffering, why were they still apart?

⁂

They arrived at the usual hotel late in the afternoon. They stepped inside, walking side-by-side. The front clerk recognized them and began to check them into their usual suite without even asking which one they wanted. Levi glanced sideways at Erwin and noticed his jaw was tight. He realized he was clenching his jaw, too. The first time they had come here together, they had already been a couple; they had been here every month or two since then, until last fall. It was strange to enter such familiar territory on such new terms. He felt as if he were riding into a scouting mission without his gear.

They reached the door. Erwin twisted the key into the lock, then paused for an audible breath.

The door swung open. Levi’s eyes drifted to the bed where they

had made love, and the carpet, and the bathtub, and the dresser. And ah, yes, even the closet, that night Levi had drunk too much eggnog at Lord Vasily's winter party.

His feet carried him to the side room. "Mind if I take this room?" Erwin nodded, jaw still tight.

Levi stepped into the side bedroom and closed the door. Safely sequestered, he began to unpack. He had never opened the closet in the side room before except to spot-check it for cleanliness. It felt wrong to hang his clothes here; they should be hanging next to Erwin's in the main room.

Once they had settled in, Levi moved to the bathroom, washing off the filth of the journey. He checked his chin in the mirror and decided he didn't need a shave until morning. His undercut was already getting a bit shaggy; he hadn't touched it in a couple weeks.

He found Erwin sitting at the table in the main room, brow furrowed as he stared down at more paperwork. Levi slung himself across the bed, wondering if he was going to end up there that night. They hadn't gone a night without sharing a bed since Levi had fallen ill, but this place had history. *Though it's not as if our rooms had no history.*

"I was thinking we could have an early dinner," Erwin said, "and then we'll talk about how we're going to approach my visit with Sahlo this evening."

"Oh?"

Erwin held up the letter. "He wants me to come alone. Given that he believes he's going to die any moment, he may be acting out of desperation, and I can't shake the feeling that this could be a trap. I'd like to have you nearby, unseen. I've been to Sahlo's estate before—I'll draw out a map and we'll figure out our strategy."

"Okay." Levi sat up. "No uniform, then?"

"No, let's change into plainclothes." Erwin folded the letter and slipped it back into its envelope. "Do you have any particular food cravings for tonight?"

"Meat," Levi said automatically.

"There's a restaurant near the courthouse that sells a lovely platter of chicken breast. It might be expensive."

"I don't care." His money was mostly accumulating in his bank account these days, forgotten. The only times he had ever gone out had been with Erwin.

They left the room a short while later, dressed in dark pants and

collared shirts. It was a warm night, and Erwin took off his suit jacket, slinging it over his shoulder. He looked unnaturally handsome, and Levi found himself proud to be walking alongside him.

They settled into the restaurant, and for a while, Levi was able to pretend everything was normal. They talked about past missions and strategy—unclassified topics, of course, in case they were overheard—and Erwin filled Levi in on some of the drama among their investment partners.

“How are things with Nile?” Levi asked when the conversation slowed.

Erwin fell silent.

“You haven’t talked to him since you tried to fuck Marie, huh?”

“Not anything outside the realm of business,” Erwin said, letting the provocative phrasing slide right over him. “He’s still understandably miffed. Though now that we know Sahlo was bluffing all along, I suppose there’s no need to pretend I was interested in Marie at all, is there?”

“Probably not.” Levi hoped they would patch things up. Nile was pathetic, but he could take a constant stream of abuse and still keep his chin up, and he had a subtle sense of humour that verged on bitterness. And Marie had a strong spirit that always left him feeling good about himself after their visits. As much as he hated to admit it, he missed them both.

Erwin was still lost in thought. “Then again, it’s probably best that Nile and I show some distance. Sahlo may have taken himself out of the picture, but there may be others who would be willing to use Nile and his family against me.”

Levi studied him, realizing, for the first time, that losing Sahlo might mean Erwin pushing away everyone around him even more than before. “Huh.”

“Not much room for friendship in this role. That’s one thing I didn’t expect when I dreamed of becoming Commander.” Erwin stared down at his meal. “Or rather, I didn’t expect it to bother me as much as it does.”

Levi nodded at the plate. “Keep eating, or it’ll go cold.”

“Mm.”

“You always forget to eat when you’re stressed.” The food was delicious; he took another mouthful himself.

Erwin poked at the food with his fork. “Levi, about what happened in the carriage—”

The chicken in Levi's mouth was suddenly too dry; he chugged a sip of water so he could reply. "Don't talk about it."

"Is that what you want?" Erwin's gaze lifted to him. "If you want to pretend it didn't happen, I'll respect your decision, but I'd like to understand why you were upset."

"You know exactly why I was upset," Levi said, and that was the end of the conversation.

G

After they returned to the hotel room, Erwin sat on the bed with his notebook. "Let's go over the plan."

On the bed? Levi glanced at the empty table and chairs. He sat on the bed next to his Commander, leaning in close, but not actually touching.

"Sahlo lives on a large manor in a sparsely populated area just east of Mitras." Erwin sketched a quick map with a stick of graphite. "A thick, vine-covered fence surrounds the yard." Somehow, his vines actually looked like vines. Levi always enjoyed watching him draw; he wished he would do it more often. Drawing probably reminded him too much of Henrik.

"How high is the fence?"

"About two metres. There's a gated driveway here." Erwin drew a long, curving path into the centre of the property. "A security guard watches the gate, and others patrol the fence. There's nothing but vast green space in-between the fence and the building, with very few hills. It's nearly impossible to reach the house undetected. If we want to ensure you're near the building, you'll have to be in the carriage with me. Unfortunately, if I'm supposed to come alone, I doubt the security guard will allow you inside."

Levi leaned a bit closer, enjoying their proximity. "What if I hide in a box or under a blanket?"

Erwin gave him a wary glance. "Given your dislike of confined spaces, I can't imagine that would be comfortable."

Levi shuddered as he considered it thoroughly—and in a carriage, no less. "Good point. What if I lie flat along the top? There are roof racks on most of the carriages around here, aren't there?"

"Your silhouette would be noticeable against the street lamps."

Levi felt a swell of frustration. "You're approaching this like

we're storming an enemy base, but this is *Sahlo*. He's weak and paranoid. He's probably hiding under his desk in a puddle of his own piss."

"Then let's just say I'm afraid of crossing paths with the people who might be out to get him." Erwin tapped the gate. "You could wait outside the complex altogether.

"I'm not leaving you alone in there."

After a pause, Erwin said, "Hm."

"Hm?"

"You could be the driver."

"That could work. It's no different than driving a cart, right?"

"Most likely," Erwin said, "but there's a catch: if, for some reason, you needed to leave the carriage to intervene, we risk losing our mode of transportation back to the city. Don't forget, these won't be Survey Corps horses. They haven't been bred to wait patiently without a rider like ours have—they need careful instructions, and are easily spooked. Besides, if there are experienced attackers there, they might abscond with an unattended carriage to cut off our escape route."

"So you'd want me to stay with the carriage."

"Unless it was an absolute emergency, yes."

"Sure." Levi swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood. "You know, after all this planning, he's just going to want to invite you in for a cup of tea and ramble on about the future of his failing yeast product."

"I hope you're right." Erwin stared blankly down at the notebook, his brows furrowed.

❧

Levi wore the closest thing he could find to a driver's uniform: a black suit and pants.

"Here." Erwin pulled a wide-brimmed hat with white trim out of his trunk.

Levi eyed it. "I don't like hats." *Especially ones that look like that.*

"It'll help disguise you."

"You just happened to have this with you?"

"I suspected we might need to do some infiltration."

Levi eyed it for another second, then slammed it onto his head. He purposefully avoided looking at the mirror as he strode to the door, knowing he wouldn't like who he saw, or the conflicting fear and heart-

ache it would make him feel.

They requisitioned a military carriage without a driver.

“Zackly’s going to wonder about that,” Levi said.

“We can explain it to him later. And Sahlo’s pursuers won’t find out until we’ve already visited the property.”

“If he actually has pursuers.”

Erwin looked grim. “I suppose we’ll see.”

He’s already decided this is a trap. Levi studied him, heart pounding in his chest. If anything threatened them, he would be ready to intervene.

The sun had already set by the time they were ready to set out. Just as well; darkness would help conceal Levi’s identity. He pulled a thick blanket over his legs as he drove, trying to give the illusion that he was taller. His size was an advantage when missions involved sneaking around, but it made him conspicuous when trying to be anonymous.

The horses easily responded to Levi’s commands, but they required frequent corrections compared to Survey Corps horses. Independence probably wasn’t valued as much within the Capital. *For both horses and people.*

He mentally traced the route Erwin had given him before they left. Unlike the Underground, Mitras was structured around a numbered grid, so it was easy to navigate. As they approached the city limits, the blocks began to lengthen; the houses grew larger, with sprawling lawns between them. Soon there were no visible homes at all, just walls of fences and hedges as long as full city blocks. Trees hung over the road, their leaves glowing orange in the lamplight. *Does some poor sap come and light all the lamps by hand each night?* Planters hung from the lamps, overflowing with blooming flowers. Levi’s nose wrinkled. *I wonder how much water they waste on this bullshit while the Underground drinks mud and sewer-water.* Sahlo had always claimed to want to help the Underground. Had he ever looked at all his own excess and felt guilty? Levi doubted it.

Sahlo’s driveway was marked with a marble slab that looked like an old, worn tombstone. Levi slowed the carriage and rode up the driveway to a tall set of gates. The hair on the back of his neck rose as a security guard approached them.

“My passenger is Commander Erwin Smith, here from the Survey Corps,” Levi said in his most respectable voice. “The Commander has an appointment with Lord Martin Sahlo for eight o’clock.”

The security guard held up a lamp. Levi bowed his head to show

deference, effectively shielding his face with the brim of his hat.

After several seconds, the security guard said, “I’m afraid Lord Sahlo requires all guests to disembark from their private carriages here.”

“What?” Levi said, voice dropping to his usual tone.

“Special orders. I do apologize for the trouble. We have a buggy on the other side of the gates that will escort the Commander up to the estate.”

“That’s bullshit. The Commander is an important man, and I’ve been entrusted with his safety.”

“What seems to be the problem, driver?”

Levi turned to see Erwin stepping out the carriage, his shoulders thrown back, chin high. He knew, intellectually, that Erwin had the ability to exude confidence and majesty in official situations, but moments like this still always made his breath catch.

The security guard must have been successfully intimidated, because he shrank into himself, stammering, “His Lordship has insisted all visitors approach his estate alone. I’m sorry, sir.”

Erwin gave the long pause he gave when he was pacing through several alternatives to make a decision. He lifted his chin a little higher, staring down his nose at the guard. “I see. Can my driver and his carriage wait here?”

“Of course.”

“Commander—” Levi began.

Erwin’s sharp gaze landed on him. “I know this is unusual, but I am fine with the arrangement. I’ll need my file out of the lockbox in the back.”

They moved to the back of the carriage. Erwin selected a random file, keeping up the pretense. Then he held out a hand and whispered, “I shouldn’t go in there unarmed. I need your knife.”

“Forget the knife. You’re not going in there at all. It has to be a trap.”

“Agreed, but someone is going to a lot of trouble to trap me. I want to know who and why.”

“Erwin—”

“Levi, your knife.” The tone made it an order.

This was already stretching on too long for a simple file retrieval from a lockbox. With a sigh, Levi pulled the knife out of his boot and handed it over.

“Wait at the end of the driveway,” Erwin whispered, “and be pre-

pared to leave in a hurry, if needed.”

“Don’t take any stupid risks,” Levi said, even though this whole thing was a stupid risk.

Erwin slipped the knife into the sleeve of his shirt and strode toward the guard. The gates opened.

Levi settled into the driver’s seat, watching as Erwin stepped into a small buggy. The guard lit a lamp on the front, then began to drive the horses. In the distance, Levi could see the manor house; its windows glowed, warm and inviting.

Maybe Sahlo really is just paranoid.

He settled deeper into the seat, eyes locked on the buggy’s lamp as it moved closer and closer to the house.

8

The buggy stopped at the front entrance, a tall set of double-doors with stained glass inlays. Erwin adjusted his sleeves, feeling the cold blade of Levi’s knife against his forearm.

The buggy doors opened. The night air somehow felt too thick. Perhaps it was his instincts, honed after years on the field of battle; everything was a little too still, a little too stiff.

“Sorry for the hassle, sir.” The guard gave him a military salute. He didn’t look old enough to be ex-military, and his posture didn’t indicate any type of injury that would have sidelined him from duty. Was Sahlo hiring plainclothes Military Police? *He really is spooked.*

Erwin clutched his random file tightly, as if it were an important document, and moved toward the door. He reached out for the bell cord, but stopped when he heard the horses moving behind him. The guard was already ignoring him, leading the buggy further down the driveway.

Taking advantage of his distraction, Erwin slipped through the door unannounced.

The architecture of Sahlo’s manor house was old-fashioned, with stone columns and patterned brickwork, and faded tapestries hung from the walls, some appearing to be older than the walls themselves. Erwin had only been in this house a few times before, and the grandeur of the building was always intimidating, but this time, he felt a sharp, cold twist in the depth of his stomach. It took him a moment to identify what was wrong: the scent of kerosene was far stronger than usual. It was

possible a wary Sahlo was keeping more lights on, but Erwin's instincts told him that wasn't the case.

For a moment, he warred with his urge to flee, but he successfully squashed it. This was an important opportunity to learn more about what he was up against.

Normally, he would take the carpeted stairway up to the next floor, where Sahlo's study was; the lord had always awaited him there. This time, he paced forward into the lower floor. He wasn't going to strand himself on the second floor until he was sure his surroundings were safe.

Just before he reached the front room, voices sounded from the upper floor; neither of them were Sahlo's. He heard more booted footsteps above him.

Erwin's teeth clenched. This was getting too risky. He quickly returned to the front doors, but paused, peering through the stained glass to ensure the way was clear.

The security guard stood on the lawn; he was speaking with a short man Erwin didn't recognize. He couldn't hear what they were saying, but their gestures were agitated.

These are not my allies. Erwin pressed his back against the wall. His options were to go through them and use the knife, or try to escape through another exit. He hurried toward the front room, remembering that beyond it lay a dining room with a low balcony.

The front room was dark, but the scent of kerosene was stronger than before. His eyes weren't yet adjusted to the dimness, and he felt his way forward, using the wall as his guide. A low side table hit his shins, and he winced. This was far more dangerous than he had anticipated. He should have listened to his instincts, to Levi's. He should have taken Sahlo's paranoia more seriously.

His eyes were adjusting now.

"The Commander?" a voice boomed, laced with a thick Underground accent. "You're sure?"

Shit.

A woman's voice spoke next, too low to hear.

The man's voice spoke again: "Well, maybe you should have taken out Lord Shitface in Trost like you were supposed to."

"I told you," the woman said, voice getting closer, "he was always surrounded by too many people."

Erwin ducked behind the couch. There was a large window be-

hind him. Maybe he could open it and slip through before he was detected. He felt for a latch, then realized the window was sealed. He would have to break it. Maybe there was something heavy nearby ...

“Fuck it,” the man drawled. “Let’s finish cleaning up this mess. We’ll flush him out like a rat.”

Light flickered, then illuminated the room. Erwin pressed against the back of the couch, controlling his breaths.

“Well?” the man said, very close. “Where the hell is he?”

“Maybe he went upstairs and found Sahlo,” the woman said.

“How the fuck would he do that, shit-for-brains? We came down the staircase.”

“Maybe he flew,” she said dryly, and the man laughed.

Erwin formulated his escape: a single punch to break the glass, a kick to make a hole big enough to escape through, and a dive through it, all before the pair realized where he was. He gritted his teeth and carefully tugged his empty sleeve over his fist.

“He’s a big guy, right?” the man said, bootsteps pacing. “Big and tall? Now where oh where would a big guy hide in this room?”

Erwin began to drive his fist toward the window, but froze mid-punch as he heard a click by his ear. Metal tapped his temple.

“Should’ve sent your little friend Levi instead, Commander,” the man’s voice said. “He could’ve fit into a vase, or scurried up the chimney like a fucking squirrel.” He blasted a laugh, as if he had amused himself with the image. “Get up.”

Erwin slowly turned his head. He recognized the man: tall, flat-brimmed hat, bearded. Sahlo’s babysitter.

“I’m not a threat to you,” Erwin said calmly.

“No shit.” The side of the muzzle tapped his temple again. “Get up.”

Erwin rose to his feet. He wondered if the unusual gun was from the collection Sahlo had been gathering for Rage Klein, or if it was military. His eyes shifted to the man’s companion, and a brow rose. He recognized her from the pub in Trost during Sahlo’s visit: the blonde Levi had pointed out to him, the one who vaguely reminded him of his sister. She eyed him, looking bored.

The tall man cocked his head at the file. “That for his lordship?”

Erwin glanced down and saw that he had, in his haste, grabbed a file containing his list of personal shopping and errands he had intended to do while in Mitras. “Yes.”

“Do you have an appointment?” The man had an unnerving grin that showed two sets of yellowed teeth.

Erwin couldn’t read him; he was either unstable or toying with him. Perhaps both. “Yes.”

The man turned to his partner. “Well, then, we should get the man to his appointment! Would be a real shame to keep his lordship waiting. He’s upstairs, in his study.”

Erwin scanned the area as they walked, looking for an escape, but the gun was still pressed against his skull. Just as well; he wasn’t sure he could fight off these two, anyway. That time in the alley, when Erwin had held a knife to Sahlo’s throat, the tall man had appeared behind him as quietly and formlessly as if he was smoke.

If Levi were here, the fight would already be over. If only there was a way to signal him ...

As they climbed the stairs, the tall man yanked the file out of Erwin’s hand and opened it. “... the hell? This some sort of code?”

The woman leaned over to take a look. “Suit measurements; no wonder you didn’t recognize them.”

“Not a code?”

“No, they’re reasonable. His, by the looks of it. And that appears to be a list of popular fiction books below it.”

In his periphery, Erwin saw the tall man giving him a confused sneer. He couldn’t think of a good excuse, so he said nothing.

The scent of kerosene was so strong on the second floor that Erwin felt dizzy. His heart beat in his throat.

“Nasty oil spill,” he said aloud. “Lord Sahlo should hire a new lamplighter.”

“Good idea,” the woman said. “We’ll add it to this important shopping list you’re giving him.”

The massive double doors at the end of the hallway were propped open. Sahlo’s chair was turned to face the window, his greying hair just barely showing over the top of the high back.

“Go ahead.” The tall man shoved Erwin into the room, training his gun on him. “Talk to him.”

Erwin paced toward the desk. Sahlo’s office had been destroyed. The drawers had been thrown open, papers littering the floor. The bookshelves were almost empty, books lying in piles at the base. He could smell the oil in here, too. *I hope they aren’t planning on setting me on fire with everything else.* He eyed the window, wondering how far the drop

on the other side was. Levi's knife wasn't much use against guns—or maybe it would be in Levi's hands, but Erwin wasn't quick enough.

"Lord Sahlo," he said, even though he knew it was futile.

No response. No movement. He gripped the back of the chair and turned it.

He had seen hundreds of dead bodies during his time in the Survey Corps, maybe even over a thousand. But they had been soldiers on the field. Sahlo had been safely sequestered in Mitras, far from the front lines. With all his political manoeuvring and machinations, he had seemed invincible. Now he stared at nothing with clouded eyes, his head lolling at an unnatural angle. His neck and chest were stained with old blood, and his skin was grey in some places, dark purple in others.

Erwin forgot about the window, forgot about Levi waiting in the carriage, even forgot about the pair standing behind him. Sahlo's face looked peaceful, but maybe it was just slack. Why was he sitting on the chair? Had he been moved here after his death, or had he sat calmly, accepting his fate?

He heard footsteps behind him. In the window's reflection, he could see the tall man and the woman standing behind him.

Erwin closed his eyes for a moment to steady himself. It was no accident he was here. He made a plausible guess:

"You were the ones who invited me here. Why? To intimidate me?"

"Oh-ho," the tall man said. "You're a quick one."

The darkness made it difficult to gauge the drop to the ground outside the window. He tried to recall past visits here. Sahlo was a fan of theatrical delivery; Erwin surely would have seen him staring dramatically across the yard, arms clasped behind his back for effect. He tried to visualize it. How far below him had the ground been then?

"Check the letter," the woman said.

It took Erwin a moment to notice the blood-stained letter on the floor next to the body. He picked it up and pulled out a document: a revised will, leaving no money to Erwin. The writing appeared to be Sahlo's, but Erwin knew how easily documents could be forged. He turned to face his attackers. "I see. You're setting me up."

"Seems to me you have a pretty strong motive to kill this asshole," the tall man said. "Seems to me he wanted to cut you out of his will. You needed those funds to get to Wall Maria, so you snapped. You've been under a lot of pressure these past few years, haven't you?"

Erwin stood tall, eyeing their guns. “I don’t have a reputation as a man who snaps.”

“Your file says different.”

Erwin’s heart beat in his throat. “My file shows impeccable performance.”

“Not your military file. Our file.” The man bared both sets of yellowed teeth again. “846. Squad Leader Mike Zacharias got his nose broken. Ringing any bells?”

Erwin used all his focus to keep his face neutral. How could the tall man possibly have known about his breakdown while Levi and Hange were missing? The Survey Corps had gone to great lengths to keep it a secret; not even Zackly knew about it. Not even Sahlo.

“Or how ‘bout the time you and your little buddy Levi went below the surface last year? Four bodies.” The tall man whistled. “That doesn’t sound like impeccable performance to me, Commander. Sounds like you’re a dangerous, unstable fellow. And the way you keep getting our spies gobbled up by titans, you’re starting to piss me off.”

Spies? What other groups would be keeping an eye on the Survey Corps? Perhaps scanning troop communications had been even more necessary than Erwin had thought.

“Are you going to kill me?” he asked calmly.

“Nah, we’re just trying to provide a little guidance so you make smart choices in the future. Here’s what comes next.” The man stepped closer. “My friends and me, we’re gonna burn this house to the ground, but leave your pal over there and his new will in good shape, good enough for the MP to trace to you if we need them to. You’re going to get the fuck out of here and ignore every secret this bloated weasel ever told you. You’re going to fall into line so this isn’t the way you die, too. No more blackmailing lords, no more stealing the King’s gold, none of that shit. Play by the rules and you won’t get hurt. Got it?”

That’s it? “You’re letting me leave?”

“Yeah, shoo. We’ve got bigger fish to fry.”

He still couldn’t tell who they worked for—were they agents of the King? Of the Wallists? Or just hired goons from Sahlo’s investors? They seemed too knowledgeable for that. If it came down to his word against theirs, he doubted he could shout louder than them.

He avoided looking at Sahlo’s body as he walked to the door. He could feel the pair’s guns trained on him; he half-expected them to shoot him in the back.

Now he could see other colleagues of theirs putting kegs in each doorway, labelled “yeast”. They glanced up at Erwin, shocked.

“Let him leave,” the man’s voice said behind him. “He’ll play nice now.”

The kegs shifted to the side to make room for Erwin to pass. He walked calmly to the exit and stepped into the yard.

C3

Levi watched the front of the house with suspicion. The buggy that had carried Erwin to the door still hadn’t returned to the gate; instead, it had travelled further up the driveway. He had thought, at first, that it was following a loop to turn around, but the light had winked out just past the house. That had been a good ten minutes ago. Maybe the guard was waiting to bring Erwin back when he was done, but why would he leave the gate unattended? None of this added up.

“Fuck it,” he muttered, and he began to guide the horses up the driveway.

He had only closed about a third of the distance when an explosion shook the air.

He barely caught a glimpse of flames licking up the side of the house; the horses began to bolt.

“Shit,” he said under his breath, trying to stay calm—the horses would sense his fear. They careened off the driveway, moving so quickly that they were outrunning the lamp. A tree whipped past them. Several other explosions sounded behind them.

The hat flew off Levi’s head. *Shit!* He pulled the horses back toward the driveway, trying to guide them in a circular motion to calm them. The city carriage had a hard time negotiating the lawn; it began to tip further, further ... It was going to tip over completely if he didn’t intervene. He pulled more firmly, desperate for control.

They reached the driveway again, and the carriage righted. Sweat trailed down Levi’s temple. His forearms ached. The horses ran back toward the gate, but at least they were moving in unison now. gingerly, he tried to slow them.

The horses responded.

They came to a stop just inside the security gate. Levi twisted until he could see the house. The entire building was in flames; the roof had already collapsed in the eastern wing.

Erwin! He hitched the horses to the gate, ignoring his orders. There was no point in having the carriage ready to go if Erwin was trapped in a burning building. His heart pounded in his throat as he sprinted up the driveway.

About halfway up the driveway, he spotted a figure running toward him, unidentifiable in the darkness. Levi darted to the side of the road and crouched down. The figure slowed, too.

“Levi?”

Relief washed over him. “Come on.”

He was fast, but Erwin’s legs were long; they ran in unison toward the gate. Erwin leapt into the driver’s seat as Levi undid the hitch. He swung into place beside Erwin. The horses began to move.

“You okay?” Levi asked.

“Yeah. You?”

“Yeah.”

“The horses are sweating,” Erwin said, slowing their pace.

“They bolted when the first explosion cooked off.” Levi paused. “I lost your hat.”

“Ah, well. Not a fan of that style, anyway.” Erwin turned the horses onto a side street and slowed them to a walk. The only light here was from their lamp; this must be a throughway for servants or delivery vehicles.

“Sahlo’s dead,” Levi said. “Isn’t he.”

Erwin was very quiet.

“If you’re going to tell me what happened, you’d better do it now, because we’re going to reach the city soon, and people are going to be able to overhear. And you smell like kerosene.”

“Do I?” Erwin grimaced. “Some of Sahlo’s friends are cleaning up his business ties. I believe they invited me to scare me. They’ve planted evidence to make it look like I killed him, and they threatened to use that against me if I don’t fall in line. Then they let me leave.”

“Fall in line how?”

“I don’t know. They seemed like they might be Military Police, but they wore no uniforms, and the leader sounded like he was from the Underground. Maybe Rage hired MP mercenaries?” Erwin’s brows were low, his gaze fixed straight ahead. “They knew things they shouldn’t have, like the fact that we acquired some of the King’s gold.”

“Sahlo probably told them.”

“They also knew I attacked Mike.” Erwin turned to look at him,

still wearing that intense gaze. “Only a handful of us knew that. They claimed to have planted a series of spies at the base.”

Levi felt winded. “Did they know about us?”

“If they did, they didn’t mention it.”

The words should have made Levi breathe easier, but Erwin’s face showed no relief.

They returned the carriage to the military yard. As they walked back toward the hotel, Erwin massaged the bridge of his nose with his fingers.

“You okay?” Levi asked again.

“I suppose there’s no point in establishing an alibi. The military records clearly show we had a carriage out around the time of the incident. I suppose I’ll have to play by the rules for a little while. I can’t shake the feeling Sahlo was shielding me more than I thought—I wonder if I’m going to become a target now that he’s gone?”

“Anyone who wants to get to you will have to go through me first.”

Erwin turned to give him a genuine smile. “Thank you, Levi.”

They returned to the hotel room. Levi pulled off his shoes and set them neatly by the wall, then sat on the bed. He watched as Erwin hovered by the door.

“What is it?”

“Sahlo was holding a doctored will that cut me out of the funds. It was excellent work. It must have been one of Leona’s—I need to speak with her to make sure. If we can’t confirm it was a forgery, then we may be setting ourselves up for trouble down the road if we take Sahlo’s inheritance.” He still hadn’t taken off his shoes.

“Now? It’s late.”

Erwin let out a low sigh. “I have to do something.”

So Sahlo’s death was bothering him more than he was letting on. In the old days, Levi could have distracted him with sex. “Maybe you should just shower off that kerosene smell and we can read in bed for a bit. It’ll be safer to head to the Underground in daylight.”

With another low sigh, Erwin nodded. He bent down to pull off his shoes. “I do feel my head is muddled at the moment. Perhaps a good night’s sleep will clear it.”

Once they had finished cleaning up for the night, they settled into the main bed in their pyjama bottoms. Erwin propped a pillow behind his head and began to read. Levi lay on his side, watching. He

never grew tired of watching the broad lips speak, the flashes of perfect white teeth behind them, the little tug down on the tip of his nose when he pronounced certain sounds.

The story itself was mediocre—a tale of half-baked political intrigue set against an aristocratic backdrop. It seemed all these types of books followed the same basic plotline: a character fought against the social norm for a while, but ultimately ended up happier when they embraced it. Levi recognized it as propaganda, but the predictability of the stories was part of the reason they were so relaxing to read. He had enough unpredictability and realistic drama in his everyday life.

After about half an hour, his eyelids were drooping. A long pause caught his attention. When he opened his eyes, Erwin was staring at him with a soft smile.

“Tired,” Levi mumbled.

“It is getting a bit late.” Erwin set the book aside. “Did you want to stay here, or return to your own room?”

“You already know the answer to that,” Levi said, but then he paused. “Unless you need space.”

“No. I think company is good for me right now.” He leaned across to extinguish the lamp.

Levi closed his eyes and rolled onto his back, trying to get comfortable again now that he was fully awake. This particular bed was always too soft. He dropped his arms to the side.

A brush of skin. Their hands were touching again. He froze.

He became aware of Erwin’s breaths, a little too long, a little too deep. The bed just barely shifted, and even though Levi couldn’t be sure, he was pretty confident those massive thighs were flexing.

Don’t, he told himself, but he was already reaching out his little finger, crossing it over Erwin’s—a small bit of contact. A harmless invitation.

He heard Erwin swallow, felt himself do the same. Why were they holding back anymore? Why were they apart, with Sahlo dead, the rumours nonexistent? He was lightheaded.

Erwin’s voice was too low: “Levi.” An admonition.

He flinched and pulled away. “Guess I was half-asleep.” He rolled onto his side, facing away, hoping his pounding heart wasn’t audible from the other side of the bed. There was a long pause, so long that he thought that was the end of it. Then he felt the bed shift.

“Levi, if they’ve been observing me closely enough that my at-

tack on Mike is documented, then there's a good chance they know about our history, too. Whoever these people are, they're dangerous. Organized. Trained."

"It doesn't matter," Levi muttered.

"What?"

"It doesn't matter how much they know. I'm your best pressure point, even if things had always been platonic between us. They know I'm your right-hand man; if I don't attend events with you, people begin to question it, right? And anyone who's figured out where I came from thinks I'm your pet project. So what does it matter if we're fucking or not?"

"You underestimate the depths these types of people would sink to," Erwin said, his tone calm and measured. "Our romance was never sanctioned by the military; it was a breach of protocol, and that could be twisted into treason. I won't see you hanging from a noose because of my—" He stopped.

"Your what?" Levi said, humiliation beginning to warp into anger. "Your mistake? Your lapse in judgement?"

"That's not what I was going to say."

"Well, it doesn't matter, anyway, because it already happened." Levi rolled onto his back again. "We were together for three and a half fucking years. Holding back now doesn't magically undo that." His voice caught, and he cursed himself for showing emotion. Erwin listened to logic, not emotion.

"I thought we came to an agreement in the tower," Erwin said, voice tight. "We weren't going to rekindle anything until after Wall Maria so we would stay focused."

"Well, maybe us being apart means you're not breaking down as much now, but—" Levi's voice caught again. "I am. Seems we traded one for the other. And you've gotta be the one using your brain more, so maybe it's not so bad if I'm the one suffering. But if you're suffering like I am, that's twice the suffering, not just a trade. So I need to know." He took a steady breath. "Have you been breaking down at all, the way you did when we were together?"

After a long pause, Erwin said, "No."

Levi's stomach dropped. "Oh." His hands clawed into the mattress. "Does that mean you're better off if we never ... " He couldn't bring himself to suggest it.

The silence was even longer this time.

“Erwin.” He hated not seeing him, hated trying to guess what the silences meant. He reached across to his bedside table and lit the lamp.

When he turned to face Erwin again, he saw him with his hand shielding his eyes, his cheeks damp.

Levi sat up. “What the hell? You’re crying?”

“A little.”

“You said you weren’t breaking down!”

Erwin wiped his face with the back of his hand. “It’s not much longer now, Levi. We’re so close to the Wall, and if we can just stay focused—”

“Bullshit.”

“—we can plan the best possible strategy and come out the other end alive, and then—”

“Bullshit! Fucking knock it off.” Levi leaned over him. “Tell me what’s really going on.”

Erwin sighed and closed his eyes. “Levi—”

“Don’t shut me out.”

Erwin’s throat bobbed, and he looked away. His voice was small: “I’m terrified.”

Levi’s breath caught. *Mike was right.* “Because you’re worried what will happen if one of us dies.”

“I’ve taken huge risks before, but I’ve never suffered major consequences until recently. Those consequences don’t land on me, where they belong, but on those around me instead.” The blue eyes locked on Levi, so cold that he shivered. “Think of all the trauma you’ve had to endure in the past year— No, it starts earlier than that, with your friends Farlan and—”

“We agreed my choices were going to be my own. I’m the one offering my own heart, and that’s my decision, not yours.”

“The odds were different back then.”

Levi’s lip curled. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It *does* matter. What they did to my sister’s husband, Levi ... What they did to Sahlo ...” Erwin’s gaze grew distant, and for the first time, Levi recognized that he had been traumatized by what he had seen in the lord’s home. Instead of concern, he felt anger.

“You’re looking for excuses. Fear’s never stopped you from anything before.”

“It’s not just that I’m afraid,” Erwin said quietly. “If we do rekindle our relationship, it needs rebuilding. I want to do that properly,

when we have the time and the focus to be each other's priority."

Levi snorted. "More bullshit. We're never going to be each other's priority."

"After Wall Maria—"

"—we'll be pushing outside the walls and dealing with whatever we find out there. We agreed from the beginning that the titans would always come first. That's how we work." He was getting angrier with each sentence, and he should probably stop, but the words kept coming. "No more excuses. You're pushing me away because our relationship is the one thing you have the ability to control right now."

"What do you mean?" Erwin asked, and there was a note of danger in his voice, but Levi didn't back down.

"You've lost Sahlo, so you lost any control you had over the interior. You're worried about Wall Maria, because no one has any control over how that's going to go, not really. Even Nile isn't willing to do you favours anymore. So you're controlling the one thing you can: you're keeping me at arm's length. The only reason we're apart right now is because you're a fucking control freak." Awful, he felt *awful*, but at the same time, it felt good to lash out.

Erwin stared at him for a moment, mouth open a crack. Then his brows dropped. He stood and strode to the closet, whipping the door open. It slammed against the wall; Levi jumped.

Erwin yanked a dress shirt off a hanger; the hanger clattered against the closet as it fell back into place. "I'm not sure what you're hoping to accomplish with this conversation, Levi, but you can't bully someone into being with you." He pulled off his pyjama pants and pulled on a pair of black pants. "And if you think belittling me is going to endear you to me—"

"Where are you going?" Levi interrupted. Realization hit him. "You aren't going to the Underground *now*. It's the middle of the fucking night."

"This is the best time to do it. I'll pose as a nobleman looking for a sex worker." He pulled on his shoes.

"You're going to get yourself killed."

"I need to know if Leona was involved in Sahlo's forgery." Erwin turned to face him, hands in his jacket pockets. "You stay here."

"Don't be stupid. You need protection."

"That didn't work so well last time."

The words punched Levi in the gut, winded him. Their gaze

held, then Erwin turned and marched for the door.

Levi's voice still wasn't working; he leapt out of bed and scrambled to the door, intercepting him before he could open it.

"Move," Erwin said, hand still on the door knob.

Levi found his voice. "You're storming off to make me feel guilty. That's manipulative as hell. I'm not going to sit around worrying about you while you smugly storm off to your death."

After a moment, Erwin released the doorknob, his face softening. "I know I'm being manipulative. But I genuinely do want to speak with Leona before we see the Council tomorrow. It's been eating away at me since I saw the modified will."

"We've never really fought like this before."

"No." Erwin looked sombre. "I can't say I'm fond of it."

"No," Levi softly agreed. "This is fucking awful."

Their eyes held.

"The real reason I don't want you to come with me is because you're too recognizable," Erwin said. "I shouldn't have brought up what happened last time. That was low."

"Well, it was true."

Erwin's jaw quivered. "Shall we continue our conversation after we've had time to calm down? Maybe we can talk about our fears and issues rationally instead of slinging insults at each other."

"Yeah."

Erwin's throat bobbed. Slowly, slowly, he bent down, until his lips pressed to Levi's forehead, warm and damp. The words, "I'm sorry," fluttered against his skin.

"Yeah, me, too."

Erwin stood upright. "I'm going to use the entrance by the market. I'll be going straight to Leona's place. I should only be gone about an hour."

"You really have to do this?"

"I have to do something."

Levi remembered the trauma in his eyes, and this time, he felt concern. "I'll be here." He stepped aside, opening the door for him. "Be safe."

Erwin held his gaze for a moment longer, then stepped into the hall.

The guard at the entrance stepped forward, burly arms crossed over his chest.

“August Adler,” Erwin said, flashing fake papers, because Sahlo had been the only person he had needed to hide that pseudonym from—as far as he knew, anyway. And if anyone already knew about August, then they probably knew all his other secrets, too.

“Damned late to be heading Underground, Mr. Adler,” said the man as he read the document.

“A man’s needs have no fixed schedule.” The words tasted of mud and left a thick film in his mouth.

The guard nodded and let him pass.

Erwin strode down the stairs, chin high. At the base of it, a group of provocatively dressed people whistled and called out to him, trying to draw his attention. He pushed through them and marched toward Leona’s house.

The lights were out, and for a moment he thought he smelled kerosene. He knocked, anticipating the worst.

A light went on in the bedroom, then travelled toward the door. He couldn’t smell kerosene at all now. He let out a slow breath, feeling his body relax.

The door slat slid open, and then he heard Leona mutter, “What in the three Walls-?”

The door swung open.

She was thinner than he remembered, and her clothes were dirty and tattered. Her smile, however, was as warm as ever.

“What are you doing here?” She glanced up and down the street.

“I wasn’t followed. May I come in?”

“Yes, of course.”

They settled in the kitchen; she brought him a cup of tea and then sat across from him with a cup of her own.

“It’s been a while,” she said. “I was beginning to think I’d never see you again.”

“Sahlo is dead.”

Her eyes widened for a moment, but then she smiled pleasantly. “That’s good news for you, isn’t it?”

“I know you were working with him, Leona.”

She shrugged. “I saw a lot of clients over the years.”

“I suppose money is more important than loyalty.”

She laughed. “Are you going to give me a lecture on moral choices, Erwin? I’ve made a living circumventing the law—something you’ve done more than your fair share of yourself. Then, at the end of the day, you go back to your guaranteed room and board while the rest of us struggle for scraps.”

He frowned. “I know what Sahlo meant to you and the other residents of the Underground. I know the work he was trying to do to keep everyone fed under the name Lord Hasek. I would have been happy to increase your payment, if money was the only issue.”

“It’s more complicated than that.” She leaned closer. “The Klein family has always dominated this segment of town. They have for generations. Independent businesses like me don’t do so well unless we ally with the Kleins. And Rage and Hasek were in each other’s pockets from the beginning, so being loyal to Rage meant being loyal to Hasek.” Her brow furrowed. “I don’t know what’s going to go on with the food situation here now that Hasek’s gone. Both his food supply and the extra money and weapons he was supposed to be bringing in are gone, and that yeast thing he was working on is a bust, too.”

“I know. I was helping him with all that.”

Her face softened. “I know.”

“I’ve been cut off from my means to help feed people, too: Sahlo originally left a quarter of his estate for me, and the Survey Corps was to use those funds to reclaim Wall Maria. Today, I saw an updated version of the will that wrote me out entirely. Were you approached by anyone to make a fake will for Sahlo?”

“Yeah. Figured his time was up when that happened.” She eyed him. “Can I ask you something, Erwin? Friend to friend.”

“Of course.”

“Is there any chance the Underground is going to see one bit of the food that floods these walls once we have Wall Maria back?”

He stirred his tea and took a long sip, considering. When he set it back down, he said, “I don’t anticipate Levi standing for anything less. He still has a soft spot for the Underground.”

She raised a brow. “Is that so?”

“He’s not well liked here, is he?”

“There were some who admired him. Others who hated him. Just like anyone else here, it depends who you talk to.”

He considered the funds they would need for the expedition, doing some quick calculations. “You don’t happen to know what amount

Sahlo is leaving behind, do you?"

"No idea. He might even be in some debt."

Erwin smirked at the idea; that would be a final 'fuck you' from beyond the grave. He wouldn't put it past him. "How does this sound? I have a sum in mind that the Survey Corps needs in order to successfully reclaim Wall Maria. I suspect it will be less than what Sahlo left to me. I know he left a large sum to Rage, which will help out his people, but there's more to the Underground than just Rage. We need to get money and food to all the people who need it."

She cocked her head. "I'm listening."

"I'd like a revised will that overwrites the one I saw today. If you restore my share to the original amounts, I'll not only quadruple your usual fee, but I'll also give you the excess funds from Sahlo—if there are any—to distribute among your neighbours as you see fit." Sahlo had told him to buy something nice for himself, after all. What did he need? He had guaranteed room and board.

Leona pulled out an envelope and slid it across the table.

He opened it. It was a notarized copy of the original will, the one Sahlo had shown him.

"Wanted to make sure you were thinking of us before I gave this to you," she said. "Your lord friend asked me to hang onto it. You'll find any more recent versions weren't notarized properly."

He raised a brow. "No?"

"The people who bought the altered version were rude as shit." Her smirk had evolved into a grin. "It was my pleasure to screw them over. If they try to use that altered will as evidence against you, just lean over it and confidently point out that the date stamp is missing a notary number, as if you would have immediately noticed it all along."

"Won't this come back to haunt you?"

She shrugged. "I make fraudulent documents. I'm nobody. They have bigger things to worry about."

"I appreciate this, and I won't forget our deal." He finished his tea, then stood.

At the door, he pulled on his boots. "Take care of yourself."

"You too, Erwin. Don't get eaten." Leona gave him a fond smile. "I've been more loyal than you might think, you know. I could have sold you out to Hasek at any point if I wanted to."

"Thank you." He bent down to give her a tight hug; he stealthily slipped a dozen folded notes into her pocket before he released her. It

wasn't much, but it would secure her a couple week's worth of meals.

❧

Levi sat up, startled.

Erwin softly closed the door. He must have thought Levi was still sleeping, because he quietly undressed in the darkness. The dim light from the cracks around the door highlighted the shape of his chest and stomach muscles. He turned to lay his clothes on the dresser, revealing the defined muscles of his back. Then he eased into the bed.

"Hey," Levi whispered. "How'd it go?"

"Go back to sleep," Erwin said gently. "I'll tell you in the morning."

"How do you know I was asleep?"

"I could tell by the cadence of your breaths when I first slipped through the door." A pause. "Such a peaceful sound."

"My breaths?"

"Yeah. I've missed that sound. I've slept better lately than I have in weeks. Months." He felt Erwin shift closer, then heard a whisper near his ear. "I have no right to ask you this, Levi, but may I hold you tonight as we sleep?"

His breath caught. "You blow up at me because I touch you with my pinky finger, and now you want to—"

"I know. It's hypocritical, and yet ..." He released a long, slow breath, one that fluttered against Levi's skin in the darkness. "I've slept pressed up against every other officer. I've slept in Mike's arms, and with my limbs entwined with Hange or Berit. It's what comrades do when we're in the field. And if I can't lie next to you like a comrade—" He paused. "No, you asked for no more bullshit. It's more than that. I miss the way you feel next to me, Levi. I miss how you feel in my arms. If nothing had ever happened between us, I could make this request without either of us thinking twice about it." His voice, still whispered, was shaking. *Did something happen with Leona that upset him?*

Levi wanted to say yes—his skin was parched, it cried out for Erwin to soak it with his body heat—but he was still smarting from their conversation earlier. "This line between us keeps getting blurrier and blurrier."

"I know."

"Every time we take a step closer, it's just going to hurt more if

we try to step back again.”

“I know.”

Levi swallowed hard. “Okay, fine. Do you want me to face you, or face away from you?”

“Turn your back to me, please.”

Levi rolled onto his side, and Erwin curled up behind him. A heavy arm draped across his ribcage and curled around his chest. Levi’s throat constricted. He had missed this so much: the warmth and the shape of Erwin’s body behind him, large and protective. He had even missed the feeling of being compressed by his grasp. These arms were the only place he could be confined in a tight space and not feel trapped.

A hum sounded in his throat before he could stop it. He snuggled back against Erwin, carefully leaving a bit of a gap in front of his pelvis, as he would do if he were lying for warmth with Mike or Eld.

“I missed this.” Erwin’s breath was hot in his ear, and Levi felt a shiver ripple through him. He felt a nose press into the back of his hair, felt a shuddering inhale. The shudder didn’t feel sexual; it felt like a restrained sob.

“You okay?” Levi whispered.

“I’ve seen countless dead bodies in my life. One more shouldn’t bother me. But what I saw tonight, Levi, I wasn’t ...” The words trailed off into another shuddering breath, an exhale this time.

“It’s okay.” He shifted his head a little, nestling back against that sharp nose, and in his fatigue, he found the courage to say: “It’s okay. I’m here.”

Their hands found each other and interlaced, and Levi pressed them against his heart.

cg

The next morning, Levi awoke feeling refreshed—and a little sticky. He had forgotten how sweaty it was to sleep pressed together, or how body hair could get so itchy when it was trapped between damp skin. He was repulsed, but delighted at the same time.

He took a lengthy bath, scrubbing his skin until it glowed. He took a little time to explore himself, because when did he ever get a chance to finger fuck himself in the bathtub at the base? It felt so good that he began to get carried away. A tiny part of him hoped Erwin would walk in on him jerking off, but by the time he had finished his bath, Er-

win was still unconscious.

“Hey,” he said, using his foot to shove Erwin’s shoulder—a bit of a stretch, but it felt good to show a little playful disdain. “It’s already eight o’clock.”

“Ugh,” Erwin said, sitting up and clutching his face.

“You can’t be hung over. You didn’t even drink last night.”

“No, I didn’t.” Erwin lowered his hand to reveal one eye open, the other in a squint. “How are you feeling this morning?”

Levi considered the ups and downs of the night before. “My head’s all screwed up.”

“Yeah.” Erwin slowly blinked his one open eye. “After the Council meeting, we should get some dinner and talk through all this.”

“Dinner? How long is this fucking meeting?”

“I expect it will last all day. We’re making a big ask, and there are a lot of consequences for the other divisions that must be carefully considered. That, and there’s the matter of Sahlo’s death.”

“Oh.” Maybe it showed how much Levi disliked the lord; he had already forgotten he was dead. “Go have a bath. The water tank is still hot from mine.”

Once Erwin had bathed and dressed, the two of them fell into place in front of the mirrors in the bathroom, shaving and fixing their hair. Once they had dressed, Erwin put on his bolo tie, then turned to Levi. “Think you can help me get this straight?” He looked almost shy.

Levi bit the inside of his cheek and reached up to make the tails even, centring the green stone over Erwin’s chest. “Bend down,” he added, and he tidied the part in the golden hair.

Then, he tied his cravat and turned to Erwin, who wordlessly adjusted it for him. His fingers lingered on the cravat several moments too long, then the blue eyes lifted.

Levi felt his throat bob. “Well? Let’s go.”

Erwin gave him a small smile.

They left the building and found their favourite tea shop. The selection was scant, but Erwin insisted on paying extra for a sweet honey pastry for Levi. They both had tea—coffee was in short supply these days—and sat on a bench in the park outside the courthouse. They quietly discussed the upcoming meeting, refreshing themselves on the expedition details.

“Most importantly,” Erwin said, “we must remember that there are officially four checkpoints left to stock, not two.”

“Right.” They had stocked the other two checkpoints so long ago that it was easy to forget.

They ran into Nile on the way into the chambers. Nile gave Erwin a stiff good morning, and a kinder one to Levi.

“How are Marie and the kids?” Erwin asked.

Nile’s lip curled at him. “Go fuck yourself.”

Erwin’s mouth circled into an “o,” and as Nile stormed off, Levi leaned in close.

“He still thinks you tried to sleep with Marie.”

“Right.” Erwin rubbed the bridge of his nose.

They settled into their seats. Zackly was already seated at the head of the table; he folded his hands in front of him. “Commander Erwin, has anyone informed you about Lord Sahlo?”

“Yes, I received word last night,” Erwin said. “It’s an unfortunate loss.”

Zackly was staring a little too intently. Levi glanced around the table and realized Pixis was doing the same.

Another Council member, a lord named Robrecht, was less subtle: “I suppose this leaves you free to march on Wall Maria. How convenient.”

“What the hell are you implying?” Levi growled.

The lord’s eyes narrowed at him. “You know very well what I’m implying, Captain.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

All eyes shifted to Erwin, who sat tall, chin high. “Believe what you want,” he continued. “Your suspicions are of no concern so long as we move quickly to fill the void Martin left behind—and it is a large void. The nutritive yeast product was behind schedule, but it was progressing, and without him at the helm—”

“Actually,” Nile said, flipping through a file, “the MP have received accusations that the yeast isn’t nutritive, but a biological weapon.”

Erwin’s brows rose. “Pardon?”

“The accusations come from an anonymous source that claims to be an insider on the project. They say the yeast was never meant to be used for consumption; it was made as a water-soluble toxin, and would wipe out an entire population. The source says Lord Sahlo planned to use it to wipe out Wall Sina and leave room for the Underground to rise.”

“What the hell?” Levi said.

Pixis started laughing.

“You think that’s funny?” Lord Robrecht cried, wringing his knotted hands.

“It’s ridiculous, your lordship,” said Pixis. “There’s absolutely no way Lord Sahlo would be involved in something so preposterous. We all know he had ties to the Underground—that was a relatively open secret—but he was one of the King’s closest confidantes.”

Levi glanced over at Erwin. The man’s jaw was tight. *Does he actually think it’s possible?*

“Erwin,” Pixis said, turning to him, “the Survey Corps became heavily involved with Sahlo’s project. Surely you can vouch for the idiocy of this accusation.”

“I ate some of the yeast product myself,” Erwin said. “It was unpleasant, but it was no weapon. Besides, if he were trying to wipe out Wall Sina for some strange reason, why would he opt for yeast instead of a more straightforward weapon?”

“So no one could point a finger at him afterwards,” the lord said, dabbing at his sweaty forehead with a handkerchief.

Erwin’s eyes shifted to him. “His supposed plan would wipe out anyone with a finger to point. No, this is posthumous slander. Someone wants to waste our time and lock up his assets.”

Levi read between the lines: *someone’s trying to delay our reclamation.*

“Regardless of this rumour,” Zackly said, “we’re going to have to have an inquest to look into the suspicious circumstances of his death. And more than that, we’re going to have to look for a new lord to replace his position on the Council.”

Minister Nick calmly raised his hand. Levi looked at him, lips pursed. He knew exactly what was coming.

“Yes, Minister Nick?” Zackly said, already sounding weary.

“Given the importance of the Wallists to the King, and given that Sahlo himself was straddling the border between the nobles and the Wallists, I believe our only reasonable course of action is to appoint the purest replacement.”

“Purest,” snorted the merchant guild leader. “That’s ridiculous. You just want one of your cronies to be appointed so you can pass more bills about your fear-mongering—”

“Mr. Weiman,” Zackly said, “Minister Nick has the floor.”

The Minister stood; he looked like a puppet being drawn up by

strings. "It's quite clear we need a more balanced representation on the Council. I'd like to appoint one of my colleagues, a holy man with the highest of morals."

"Perhaps," the lord drawled with disdain, "this is a matter best left to the King. No doubt he has his own successor in mind."

"I'll send word," Zackly said. "In the meantime, we must address a contentious issue, one that Lord Sahlo firmly opposed." He turned to Erwin. "Are you going to make a move for Wall Maria now that he is no longer blocking you? Or are you going to keep on the path the two of you have been walking together?"

Levi tensed as he turned to Erwin, watching him.

Erwin leaned forward, his face taking on his hawk-like focussed expression. "The yeast and the weapons are dead ends. The yeast, though not a biological weapon, will not come together in time to be of use to the Underground. People are starving this moment. Sahlo himself was staving off some of that with his involvement in illicit activities to funnel food to the Underground, or so my intelligence tells me. Without him buying us time, a crisis situation in the Underground is imminent."

The other Council members began to mutter. Nile was staring at his notebook, brows furrowed, but Pixis seemed to be watching Erwin intently. Levi tried to get a read on the old man, but his face was a perfect mask. *Or maybe he's just drunk.*

"As for the weapons that were originally intended for the Military Police ..." Erwin shifted his focus to Nile. "Nile, we both know guns are useless against titans. A high-powered gun would be nothing more than a good luck talisman. If that's something you think we need in order to give your soldiers' confidence, then I'll take some of the funds Sahlo left me and use them to fast track research and weapons development. However, I'd much rather funnel those funds into producing practical weapons. Squad Leader Hange Zoë has been honing our weapons based on our research on the captured titans. I propose we ignore the gun project and use the funds to produce nets, projectile spears, harnesses, and other restraint equipment. Everyone on the field will benefit. But if you tell me false confidence is more important, I'll trust your expertise."

Nile stared at him for a moment, then shrugged and looked down. "No, it's not. Scrap the guns, and go ahead with other weapons."

A hint of a smile showed in the corner of Erwin's lips. "I have been preparing a timeline for Wall Maria." He held out a roll of paper.

“May I?”

“Of course,” Zackly said.

Erwin unrolled it and placed his checkpoint markers on each of the checkpoints. He placed red ones on the last four. “I didn’t anticipate we would be able to move on this so quickly, so I haven’t yet had a chance to vet this strategy with each of you—I’d appreciate your input if I’m overlooking anything important. If we agree to this strategy, then this is how things will proceed.

“Mr. Weiman, I’ll be using a portion of Lord Sahlo’s generous posthumous donation to pay you for food supplies. I understand that food shortages are a real concern right now, so I would be prepared to pay a premium. Say, ten per cent?”

Levi watched the merchant, waiting for a reaction. Weiman had claimed before that the food shortage itself was the reason he was reluctant to support them, but knowing merchants, money had been the true barrier.

Weiman eyed him. “This isn’t just a food shortage, Commander: it’s a famine. I need a thirty per cent premium.”

“Fifteen,” Erwin said. “And we will commit to providing protection to your preferred farmers after the Wall is reclaimed. There is bound to be some instability as everyone sorts out ownership of property in Wall Maria.”

“Protection plus twenty, final offer.”

Erwin nodded. “Send the contracts to my office in Trost and I’ll get them properly signed and notarized.”

Weiman folded his arms over his chest and nodded, looking satisfied.

“Are you done shopping?” the lord asked dryly.

“This impacts all of us, Lord Robrecht,” Erwin replied. “Once we’ve reclaimed Wall Maria, we’ll be able to tackle famine—we’ll have time for a full harvest cycle.” He slid wooden markers into place around the three checkpoints equidistant from Wall Maria. “These three checkpoints will be where we make our stand. Commander Dok and Commander Pixis, any troops you provide will be fighting alongside us.

“The Survey Corps can leave as early as the end of next week to stock the final four checkpoints. I anticipate that mission taking less than two weeks. While we’re absent, the MP and Garrison should be preparing their troops for the journey. I anticipate they’ll need approximately four weeks of classroom instruction to be brought up to speed on

Survey Corps conventions, as well as the reclamation strategy.”

“What is this strategy?” the lord asked. “You never did tell us.”

“Commanders Pixis and Nile have discussed it with me before. This is a good time to talk about it in more depth.” He slid some markers into Mitras and began to push them north. “The operation will begin approximately two weeks after the Survey Corps returns from the final checkpoint mission. Once we return from that mission, we’ll bring the newest set of Trainees into the fold and give them a crash course in Survey Corps methods and techniques. Then, we’ll depart. The weakest troops will head north, where they are unlikely to encounter any titans. They’ll be escorting supplies to the top of Wall Maria, which will be transported to Shiganshina to help block the hole in the wall from above: nets, cannons, traps and debris. I anticipate that trip taking about a week. We’ll time the main body of our group to head south a few days later, so we reach the gate by Shiganshina at approximately the same time.”

As he continued to explain the strategy in detail, Levi watched the others for any sign of mistrust. They were all listening intently. As Erwin continued speaking, his confidence seemed to be growing. It was if he could hear how much his plan made sense now that he was bouncing it off other people.

Levi glowed with pride. *I chose the right man to follow.*

Once Erwin had finished introducing them to the plan, the Council paused for a vote on whether or not the mission should proceed. Every hand rose except two: Minister Nick and his Wallist colleague.

“This is preposterous,” said the Minister. “There’s no way we can tamper with the holy walls. Such a thing is utter blasphemy.”

Levi eyed him, unimpressed. “Haven’t you been listening? People are going to start dying if we don’t claim more land.”

The Minister had an unnatural glaze over his eyes. “Perhaps that is not what is meant to happen. Perhaps this famine is punishment for humanity’s hubris—”

“Knock off the bullshit,” Weiman said. “You’re cloistered away in your safe little church, so far from the titans that you probably don’t even know what they look like. The merchants in Trost are right on the boundary. All it takes is one broken gate—”

“It’s immoral,” barked the Wallist sitting next to the Minister.

Zackly pulled off his glasses and set them aside, massaging the

marks they left behind. “Minister Nick, is there anything we can do to convince you to reclaim the wall?”

“The wall is not to be tampered with.”

“Then perhaps you shouldn’t be part of this conversation.”

The Minister looked shocked. He glanced between the other faces, but no one would make eye contact with him. His eyes narrowed.

“The King will be none too pleased—”

“The King won’t have any subjects to rule pretty soon,” Levi said. “I’m sure he doesn’t want his servants and his cooks and his soldiers to die of starvation.”

The Minister looked scandalized. He stood. “He will be hearing about this.” He and his cohort left the room, the door slamming behind them.

“Does the King give a shit about the Wallists?” Levi asked.

“It’s a complicated matter,” Zackly said. “Having Wallist representation was something he insisted on. We must respect his wishes. However, the Wallists are notoriously single-minded—hardly conducive of a collaborative project like the Council.”

Levi turned to Erwin, whose eyes were narrow. *He’s trying to connect the dots, but he can’t quite see it yet.*

“It doesn’t matter,” Nile said. “The King is a reasonable man, and he knows we can’t feed our people unless we expand our territory. We should keep planning. I want to make sure his soldiers aren’t walking into a death trap for nothing.” He folded his arms over his chest. “I want to know more about how you’re actually going to rebuild the Wall, Erwin, and how we’re going to communicate this to the public.”

They spent the next couple hours diving into Nile’s question in more detail, then paused for lunch. A group of MP served them a bland stew with sweet bread and cheap tea. The room was surprisingly quiet as they ate.

Levi leaned close to Erwin, keeping his voice low. “How do you think it’s going?”

Erwin gave him a polite smile. “Everyone’s eager to move ahead with the reclamation. That’s more than I expected.”

“Your plan is good. We’re going to succeed.”

This time, his smile was genuine.

After lunch, the bulk of the Council disbanded, while the military branches stayed behind to plan: Zackly; Pixis and his aide, Anka; Nile and a female soldier Levi didn’t know; Erwin and Levi. They began

to pore over the plan in greater detail, assigning deadlines and charting a timeline. Everyone had suggestions and points to bring up, and Erwin incorporated them all. He had been so insecure about his plan in the past that he was probably relieved not to be the only one making strategic suggestions.

They broke for dinner, then pressed on.

By the time the city clock rang nine bells, Levi felt as if his eyes were crossing. Erwin had filled most of his notebook with notes, and Pixis and Nile were busy debating the number of carts they would need to assemble.

Zackly stood. “This has been incredibly productive. However, I think we need to take a break for the night and continue this at a later date.” He glanced at his notebook. “Let’s set up four or five days of strategic planning after your team returns from stocking the final checkpoint, Erwin, because you’ll have the most up-to-date information available then.

“In the meantime: Erwin, your regiment will be in charge of co-ordinating weapons development and supply acquisition. Nile and Pixis, you will be responsible for dividing your soldiers up by skill and assigning them to squads respectively—northern, defense, scouting, and firefight. Pixis, I’ll leave you to work on portable cannon requisition, carts and horses. Nile, you’ll handle the acquisition of flares, blades and gas for the travelling teams, and assist Erwin with the financial planning. I’ll speak with the King’s people to ensure we have his approval—and perhaps try to assuage the Wallists.

“And Erwin, make sure you send detailed maps and strategy to the rest of us. We need to make sure to coordinate and standardize our classroom instruction for this mission.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The Commanders saluted the Commander-in-Chief, and then they filed out the door.

Once they were out of earshot of the building, Levi turned to Erwin. “That went well.”

“Yeah?” Erwin said.

“Yeah. You were good. But I guess we’re not going out for dinner after all.”

“No. Sorry, I didn’t realize it would take so long.”

“Not your fault. That was important. Maybe drinks?” He yawned as he said it.

“Maybe.” Erwin paused. “I want to take some time to discuss our relationship, but—”

“—we already talked all fucking day,” finished Levi. “It can wait.” Besides, it might be nice to have another night of cuddling under their belts before they spoke, in case their discussion ended up being of the ‘let’s step back a bit more until after Wall Maria’ variety.

They returned to the hotel room, then took turns washing up for bed. Erwin eased into the bed, leaving space for Levi, who hovered in the bathroom doorway, uncertain.

Erwin shifted over a little more. “Would you like to read for a bit?”

“I thought you were tired.”

“I am, but my mind is racing. I could use the distraction.”

Levi nodded. They snuggled into the pillows—they had seemed too soft the night before, but now, Levi felt tension ebb from his neck and shoulders. He rolled onto his side to watch Erwin’s face. They weren’t quite touching, but that warmth under the covers was so welcoming that it felt as if they were.

Halfway through the chapter, Erwin read, “She threw open the heavy oak door, then let out a startled cry. A tall man sat on the bed, his crimson hair tumbling sensually over his broad, well-muscled shoulders. Excitement tingled through her round, ample chest, travelling heatedly to her core. ‘My beautiful lady,’ he whispered seductively, ‘you appear to be shivering. Let me warm your alabaster skin with my—’ Oh.”

“Oh?” repeated Levi.

“I think this is a sex scene.” Erwin flipped ahead a page, and his brows rose. “Yes, it is.”

“What? There wasn’t supposed to be any smut in this one.” Levi sat up and tried to reach for the book.

Erwin leaned away, flipping the page. “A long scene, apparently. It’s rather graphic.”

“What? It can’t be *that* graphic. She’s engaged to the duke, and she doesn’t even know this guy’s name.”

“He’s ‘tasting the folds of her womanhood.’ The author is overly fond of the word ‘juices.’” He flipped the page, still reading.

“Disgusting,” Levi said, but he leaned over Erwin, still trying to reach the book. “Either read it out loud or give it here.”

Erwin’s eyes twinkled at him as he held the book out of reach. “I didn’t think you’d be interested in a woman’s juices.”

“I’m not,” Levi said, but he was curious. He was on top of Erwin now, arm straining. “You’re built like a fucking ape.”

Erwin laughed, and while he was distracted, Levi snatched the book out of his grasp. He flopped back onto his side of the bed and began to read. “Oh.”

“I told you: it’s graphic.”

“What the hell? Her juices are ‘gushing forth like a fountain’—do vaginas really do that?”

“Well …” Erwin’s cheeks were dark. “The author is taking poetic license, but they can get quite wet.”

Levi turned the page. “How many women have you slept with?”

“Pardon me?” Erwin’s ears turned pink.

“How many? More than just Marie, right?”

“Yes, but I’d prefer to keep the number to myself.”

“Too many to count, huh?” Levi flipped the page. “Now her bosom is ‘heaving.’”

“It just means her breaths are heavy and—”

“I know what it means. It’s not just breasts that do it. All chests heave.” Levi read the next line. “And bounce, too.” He was starting to feel lightheaded from the inappropriate discussion.

“What?”

“With each thrust, they jiggle a little. Especially if they’re muscular like yours.” He suddenly realized how inappropriate it was to be discussing this, and how aroused he was at the same time. He closed his mouth and continued reading. “Huh.”

“What?”

He flipped to the end of the chapter. “This scene goes on forever.”

“Maybe we should skip ahead to the next chapter,” Erwin said absently, but he was squeezing his pectoral muscle with his hand. “Does my chest really bounce?”

“Yeah, a bit. Not nearly as much as your ass.”

“I see.” Erwin plucked the book out of Levi’s hands.

“I was reading that.”

“We’ll continue tomorrow. I think it’s time we both went to bed.” Erwin swung his legs over the side of the bed and walked stiffly to the bathroom, his back positioned toward Levi.

Is he going to jerk off in there? The prospect was so dizzying that Levi sank into the pillow, adjusting the waistband of his pants. He

couldn't shake the memory of Erwin's bouncing ass.

The bathroom door was closed. Levi strained his ears, listening for grunts, slapping, or anything that would indicate Erwin was touching himself. Instead, he heard running water, then splashing. *He's splashing cold water on his face.* Now he was picturing Erwin staring at himself in the mirror, water dripping off the sharp tip of his nose, trying to convince himself he wasn't all worked up. *Shit, that's hot.*

A few minutes later, Erwin exited the bathroom. The front of his pants was flat, and Levi wished he could say the same.

"We should get some sleep." Erwin slipped into the bed.

"I guess." Levi turned away from him, curling around the awkward lump in his pants. He felt a heavy arm drape around him, strong and warm, and that was only making it worse.

"Goodnight, Levi." The words rumbled against the back of his neck.

"Goodnight."

The lamp dimmed, then went out.

He closed his eyes, trying to focus on something neutral. He found himself thinking of the Council meeting, but that was even worse, because now he couldn't stop recalling how competent and composed Erwin had been. He had been in complete control the entire way through, even when he had let others think they had the floor. And that determined look on his face, that intense gaze—

Fuck it.

He slipped out from under Erwin's arm and strode to the bathroom, feeling for the door. He locked the door behind him and lit the bathroom lamp, then lowered the toilet seat, pretending he was settling in for a lengthy visit.

Instead, he pulled his pants down and leaned against the far corner of the room. He grabbed himself, swallowing back a groan. He couldn't remember the last time he had been this turned on. Probably the time he had overheard Erwin at Christmas.

He quietly began to move his hand. Heat rippled through him, along with a deep ache, a need to move faster. He fought the urge and kept it slow, because he needed to stay quiet. The slowness itself was tantalizing, and he soon felt himself sliding down the wall, too distracted to stay standing.

His muscles were tight with frustration; he pressed his free hand over his mouth, because he wasn't going to be able to hold back a moan

much longer. His ass hit the floor; being bare-bottomed on the bathroom floor should be disgusting, but he didn't care. *Keep it slow*. His entire arm was shaking with strain. *Quiet. Slow and quiet*. He began to repeat the words with each stroke, hanging onto them like a mantra, even as they started losing their meaning. A sharp groan sounded in his throat, and he clamped his hand tighter. *Quiet!*

Orgasm sneaked up on him so suddenly that he had to muffle a yelp. It felt so good, so good, his heels skidding across the floor again and again, trying to get traction, as if he were trying to push himself away from the pleasure.

His abdomen shuddered one last time, then stopped, and his hips slowly lowered back to the cold tile. Stars sparked in his vision. He was slumped against the wall now, a mess on his stomach—he hadn't even bothered to pull out a handkerchief.

He slowly unclasped his face, gasping for breath. *Fuck*.

He wanted more. He wanted to go back into the main room and climb on top of Erwin. He wanted to feel the man pushing him face-down into the mattress, riding him from behind. Scenario after scenario surfaced, each more pornographic than the last, and he was already starting to get hard again. He experimentally tried to continue, but he was too sensitive.

Just as well. This loss of control was embarrassing.

He carefully washed his hands and abdomen clean. The room smelled like sex now, and he wasn't sure how to fix that. Hopefully it would dissipate before Erwin was in here next.

He paused at the door for a moment, ashamed, before he opened it.

Erwin's breaths were heavy, as if he were asleep. Levi wasn't sure if he was relieved or disappointed that he hadn't been overheard.

He slipped back into bed. Erwin gave a small, half-asleep moan and pulled him in with one arm.

He wanted more. "Erwin," he said softly.

"Mm?"

"What the hell are we?"

He could tell by the tension in Erwin's arm that he was awake, but there was no reply.

-34-

CHANGE

Erwin read Levi's assignments aloud over breakfast. They sat at the table in the hotel room, sharing a loaf of bread with honey and a fresh pot of tea. It wasn't unusual for them to share a meal together—even since their separation, they had continued to take their lunches and dinners together, often just the two of them. But something was different. Maybe it was the way Levi looked at him with focus instead of his usual indifference. Maybe it was just the knowledge that they had spent the night just as intertwined as they had in the days when they had been lovers. The wall between them had crumbled, and now they stood on either side, trying to decide if they should cross the line where the barrier had stood.

Once Erwin finished the list, he sipped at his tea and grimaced; it was cold. Levi swallowed a mouthful of bread, then spoke.

"You're going to be okay here?"

"I'll be fine." He was staying behind in Mitras for a few days. The primary objective was to sort out Sahlo's inheritance, but he had also been summoned for questioning about his death by the MP. He wondered if the tall man's threat would come into play. Was pushing for Wall Maria now considered "out of line?"

While Erwin would still be in charge of refining their strategy for the final checkpoint mission, Levi and Mike would be handling the bulk of the planning back in Trost, sorting out squad assignments and resources. Erwin's focus would be shifting a few weeks ahead to the reclamation effort. Their timeline was tight, and he wanted to have everything ready early so he could revise it as much as possible. It would be humanity's most ambitious push to date. He wasn't going to fail.

After they finished breakfast, Levi gathered the last of his things.

They stared awkwardly at each other for a moment. A taste rose in Erwin's memory: Levi's mouth, with its sweet natural notes and strong mint overtones.

He gripped Levi's shoulder and pulled him in for a hug. This one lingered too long, but he couldn't bring himself to end it. Levi's hands smoothed slowly up and down his back.

"When I get back to Trost," Erwin said, "let's make some time to retire to the guard tower and have the talk we've been putting off."

"I already know how it'll go," Levi said quietly. "We'll agree we both want each other, but we'll decide to wait until after Wall Maria. Like always."

As Erwin bent down to breathe in the scent of the dark hair, he had the feeling their version of 'waiting' was just as ridiculous as their version of 'taking it slowly' had been at the very start of their relationship.

When the door closed behind Levi, the room felt colder, but there was no time to linger. Erwin had to hurry to attend a meeting downtown with the merchant's guild, where he would start arranging supply delivery.

That afternoon, he met with the MP for questioning about Sahlo's death, and found them completely disinterested in anything he had to say. *It seems Sahlo's tall friend didn't use any of the evidence he planted against me ... yet.* At least he wouldn't have to waste valuable time trying to prove his innocence.

The next few days passed in a steady stream of meetings and planning. He spent two full days with Pixis and Nile and their officers, making sure they were ready with the classroom material for the reclamation. He met with lawyers and accountants to claim his share of Sahlo's estate, then distributed the funds into the appropriate accounts. Some of the funds wouldn't be available for a while, but there was already more than enough money to start paying for supplies for the reclamation effort. He anticipated having a large gift to deliver to Leona in the upcoming weeks. Maybe he would even buy back his half of the apartments he had sold to Levi the previous year.

On the evening of the fourth day, he attended Sahlo's funeral.

The lord's house had been demolished after the blaze, and he had no surviving family, so the funeral was held in a memorial park in the rich end of town. Given Sahlo's temperament, Erwin wasn't surprised to see that the seats were mostly empty; less than a dozen people

were in attendance. He saw only two familiar faces: Lady Gunnhild sat in the front row, and the tall man with the flat-brimmed hat stood at the trees at the back of the park. The man tipped his hat at Erwin with a crooked grin.

Erwin stopped and stared at him. Now that he was in broad daylight, something about his face was familiar, and not just because he had been appearing by Sahlo's side so frequently. Erwin couldn't put his finger on it. Had they crossed paths in the Underground once upon a time?

Standing beside the tall man as a man with a round face. He was short, probably even shorter than Levi, and he didn't have the build of a soldier. Erwin had never seen this man at any of the galas over the years; his height would have made him stand out. A reclusive lord, perhaps? Someone close to the king?

With all these new, shadowy figures appearing lately, Erwin was beginning to get the sense that the true power within the walls had nothing to do with the Council or the military. *Sahlo was right. I have no idea how deep this goes.*

No one else from the Underground was there, not even the vendors with whom Sahlo had had open, legitimate business relationships. That seemed odd to Erwin until he remembered Sahlo had been the only lord arranging day passes up to the surface. He doubted anyone else had stepped in.

Whatever questionable moves Sahlo had made, it had done a great deal of good for the Underground. When it came time for humanity to take a step forward, they must not forget to carry the Underground with them.

A Wallist minister led the ceremony, referring to Sahlo almost exclusively as "Brother Étienne" as he rattled off a list of the lord's accomplishments with the church. With a brief prayer, he scattered his ashes, and the service ended. Erwin stood and approached the dusty lawn, all that remained of Sahlo's physical form in the world. All those years of machination, all that careful positioning and manoeuvring, and now he was dust on blades of grass. He glanced back toward the tall man, who had ended everything with a single slash of a knife, but he was gone.

If I had taken his paranoia seriously— he thought, but a hand on his shoulder stopped him. He turned to see Lady Gunnhild.

"Doing okay, Erwin? I know the two of you worked together a lot."

“I wasn’t aware the two of you did.”

She shook her head. “We didn’t, really. We dated for a time when we were young, and we always stayed on friendly terms, though I never approved of his business ethics.” She frowned. “Looks like it all came back to bite him, in the end. The MP won’t tell me who killed him, but I’m sure it was one of those gangsters he was working with.”

It was strange to picture Sahlo dating anyone; he was too selfish and self-involved. Then again, maybe people thought that about Erwin, too. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Yours, too. Pity the Wallists don’t believe in headstones. Now I don’t have anywhere to sit and tell him ‘I told you so.’” She smiled, but a tear trickled down her cheek. She dabbed it with a lace-bordered handkerchief.

Erwin was accustomed to letting his officers deal with crying people at funerals; his role required him to steel himself to public displays of emotion like this, to be a beacon of strength. He had already said he was sorry for her loss—what more was there to do? *We’re still supposed to pretend to be dating*; he thought, but he couldn’t bring himself to embrace her.

Luckily, she spoke: “I know our ... arrangement was mostly for his benefit. Do you want to continue the ruse? I know a little place that does a great spiced trout. My treat.”

The thought of anyone looking at the two of them and thinking they were *something more* made him ill. His polite smile must have said it all, because she nodded.

“I see. I’ll start rumours of our breakup. Come speak to me before you set out for Wall Maria, Commander. I’ve heard rumours Squad Leader Hange is doing experiments on live titans, and I’d be very interested in supporting such research.”

“Thank you,” he said. “Perhaps I’ll bring Hange with me next time I’m in town.”

She smiled sadly. “Take care of yourself, Erwin.” She leaned over to kiss his cheek, and then she walked away.

Erwin crouched over the ashes. This was a glimpse into his future—almost. He would have more attendees at his funeral, but most of them would be there out of obligation, and they would remember him as the Commander, not as Erwin Smith. Men like him, men like Sahlo, they didn’t make friends. Not many, anyway.

He retired to his hotel room with a bottle of wine, and ended the

night curled around Levi's pillow, trying to breath in traces of lemon scent.

B

On the fifth day after Levi's return to Trost, he stood beside Mike in the courtyard, his weight shifting from foot to foot.

Mike glanced at him.

"Shut up," Levi said. To his chagrin, it had become tradition for Mike and Hange to tease him about his obvious impatience whenever Erwin was due to arrive in a carriage, and now they didn't even need to open their mouths to do it.

Instead of speaking, Mike leaned closer, sniffing Levi's hair.

Levi punched his arm. "The hell are you doing?"

"Just trying to sniff your scent on its own one last time before I start smelling Erwin all over you."

"Knock it off." Levi sidestepped away. "You presume too much, you asshole."

Mike grinned.

Levi wished he had his confidence. Things with Erwin were strange right now. At least planning was keeping him too busy to spend time thinking about it. Together with Dita and Mike, Levi had built all the squads for the upcoming expedition, and they had a first draft ready for the reclamation effort after it, too. It was difficult to allocate spaces for the new recruits without knowing how many were going to join the regiment, but based on the previous years' numbers, they had gone with a conservative estimate of eighty.

Hange, meanwhile, had been busy with a small titan; Mike's squad had captured it just outside the wall. Levi had ventured downstairs to the lab once, but had avoided it since; Hange and Moblit had been spearing the titan's knee, testing how the titan's super-healing abilities had locked up its joints.

"For a new weapon," Hange had said, turning to Levi with such a cruel grin that he had taken a step back. He had forgotten how ruthless Hange could be in pursuit of knowledge.

The two of them hadn't crossed paths for the next several days, until breakfast the morning of Erwin's scheduled return. Hange had walked up to Mike and said, "twenty-five on kiss without sex."

"What the fuck?" Levi had said, but Hange had only winked and

walked away.

That's how Levi had found out the two of them were betting on his sex life. No wonder they had both been annoyed when Levi had told them nothing had happened in Mitras. Judging by the way Mike was sniffing him now, his fresh bet was on considerably more happening than just a kiss.

"Creep," Levi muttered, stepping even further away from him.

A carriage began to roll up the driveway. Levi folded his arms over his chest, attempting to look bored and casual. The carriage stopped, and the door opened. A large boot settled on the step, then Erwin stood tall.

Levi watched him for a flicker of joy, or any little recognition that things were different between them, but Erwin's face was hawk-like, all business.

"We have much to discuss," Erwin said, nodding at each of them in turn.

Levi wasn't sure why he had expected anything different. A little snuggling in a hotel room wasn't going to change his public face—it never had before.

As they walked to Erwin's office, Levi gave him a brief overview of the checkpoint expedition preparation.

"We should debrief with the others," Erwin said, nodding at Mike. "Can you gather them?"

Mike nodded and turned down the hallway as Levi and Erwin entered the Commander's office.

"Are you okay?" Levi asked quietly.

Erwin gave him a polite smile. "I'll give you an answer later."

"Got it." The mask would come off when he was ready. Levi flopped onto a couch and watched as Erwin examined the papers on his desk.

Once the officers arrived, they spent time going over the checkpoint expedition updates, and then Erwin updated them on his visit to Mitras and the greater plan for Wall Maria.

"Make sure you keep your schedules clear over the upcoming weeks to handle preparation," he said, "and delegate as many tasks to your Executive Officers and Team Leaders as you can. Wall Maria is of utmost importance, so we all need to be focused."

"What about capturing more titans?" Hange asked, looking a bit pouty.

“Yes, that will be critical, too.” Erwin pulled out a file and handed it over. “We have a massive influx of budget—I’m sure Levi must have told you by now that Lord Sahlo passed away and left us a large portion of his inheritance.”

They all turned to look at Levi, who sank deeper into his seat and shrugged. “Oh. Sahlo’s dead.”

Erwin looked a bit taken aback, but quickly recovered. “Yes. He was murdered last week. Long story short, the money he left to me drastically increases our available budget. We’re going to spend part of that on supplies, but the rest will go toward weapons. Hange, you mentioned you wanted to work on spring-loaded spear traps and stronger nets; I’m trusting you to pull this together as quickly as possible.”

“Of course. We’re already making good progress.” Hange took the file.

“Dita, Mike, Levi: you’ll be taking on some of Hange’s planning workload. Dita, you’ll be in charge of assessing horse fitness and acquiring any supplies we’ll need for them. Mike, you’ll be in charge of food and weapon supplies. Levi, I want you to evaluate your Special Operations Squad and make sure you have the best possible people for these missions. I anticipate your squad’s ability to float through the formation will be critical during the reclamation. As well, you and I will have final say on the personnel assignments. Pixis and Nile will be deferring to us, and I’ll need your help judging where each of their regiment’s squads should go.” Erwin lowered his chin, giving them a determined look. “Together, we will reclaim Wall Maria and ensure the survival of humanity.”

“Sir,” Dita said, saluting, and Mike nodded. Hange was too busy reading the file. Levi watched Erwin, concerned about what might be going on underneath his composure.

“Dismissed for now,” Erwin said. “Mike, Levi, and Dita, we’ll discuss the squad reassessments after dinner.”

The others filtered out of the room, but Levi hung back.

“Yes, Levi?” Erwin asked, still using his professional voice.

So he wasn’t ready to lower the mask. Levi nodded. “We’ll talk later.” With all the planning they had to do, their personal baggage could wait.

That night, Levi finished washing up for bed, then strode back to his bedroom. He paused at the door, glancing over at Erwin's room. The cracks around the door were dark; the lights were off. It wasn't like him to go to bed this early, so he probably wasn't there, but Levi slipped his key into the lock anyway and turned the handle, easing the door open. The bed was empty.

As he had suspected, the light was still on in Erwin's office. He opened the door without knocking.

Erwin's cheek lay on his desk; his hand still gripped a pen. Levi felt a swell of fondness. He hadn't seen Erwin fall asleep at his desk in months. *Dumb bastard probably loves every second of this stress.*

He retrieved two blankets and returned to Erwin's side, draping one over his shoulders. Then, he plucked the pen out of Erwin's hand, putting it carefully away. Erwin stirred and mumbled something unintelligible, then began to snore.

"You're going to have a sore neck when you wake up," Levi said, but it seemed best to let him sleep. If he woke up now, he would probably drink a bunch of tea and keep working.

Levi lay back on the couch, slinging his legs over the armrest, and pulled the second blanket over himself.

This stress what Erwin lived for, and Levi was going to be at his side every step of the way.

63

The next few days passed in a blur of paperwork and planning tasks; their time was split between the upcoming checkpoint expedition and the reclamation itself. Levi floated between the groups, helping Mike pack blades, gas and signal canisters, then helping Dita decide how many carts to requisition. The party travelling north during the reclamation would have special equipment needs in order to weather the brutal cold, so he sent Eld and Oluo up to a factory town north of Trost to speak with a specialized vendor. The last thing they needed was for the entire operation to fail due an unexpected equipment malfunction. The success of the reclamation depended on the wall supply team being in place when the bulk of the military arrived at the gate.

When he wasn't helping the other officers plan, he worked with his squad, ensuring the revised teams were operating well as units. As for his Special Operations Squad, in the end, after reviewing countless

files, he stuck with the five who had been with him for some time: Eld, Oluo, Petra, Gunther, and Anton. Though their selection should have been no surprise to any of them, they celebrated as if he had just granted them lordship.

At night, he stayed in Erwin's office, intermittently helping him with work and napping on the couch to keep him company. Aside from the lack of intimacy, it felt like the old days again. A couple times, he woke to find a jacket or a blanket draped over him, Erwin working quietly at his desk as if nothing had happened. One night, he fell asleep sitting on the couch, and awoke to find Erwin curled on his side, his large frame barely fitting on the couch, with his cheek resting on Levi's thigh. Levi nested his hand in the golden hair, then drifted back to sleep with a smile on his face.

The day before the final checkpoint mission, the base was abuzz with excitement. Everyone was aware that all their hard work until this point—all the lives lost, all their dozens of times retreading the same ground—was just one last push away from their ultimate goal.

Even Levi's muscles vibrated with energy. He brought two lunches to Erwin's desk, eager to repeat their shared lunch ritual one last time before the mission.

"It's a lovely day outside," Erwin said with a smile. "Shall we take a more casual lunch and go up to the tower?"

"Oh. Sure."

As they sneaked into the abandoned hallway and then slipped through the door, Levi tried to guess why Erwin was taking him up there. Were they finally going to have the long-overdue discussion? The timing seemed odd, given that they had to focus. *Maybe it's been eating away at him, too*, he thought, heart pounding.

They spread an old sheet across the top of the tower and sat. The sun was bright and warm; birds flitted through the air around them, and the air smelled of pollen and grass. Levi breathed in and let out a slow exhale. His muscles buzzed with anxiety.

Erwin pulled off his jacket and set it aside, then rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt. Levi tried not to stare at the muscled forearms, at the fuzz of hair across them. He wanted to feel those arms around him, wanted to see them strain as Erwin's hands tightened into the bed-sheets ...

"We're still dancing around everything," he said aloud without thinking through how out of the blue it might seem.

Luckily, Erwin must have been thinking about their relationship, too, because he nodded. “We aren’t dancing around it so much as avoiding it entirely.”

“Yeah.”

After a pause, Erwin said, “Should we address it now?”

“I guess it depends if it’s going to hurt or not. We’ve got a mission tomorrow, and we’ll have a lot of planning to do after that for Wall Maria.” Levi tore off a piece of bread and slipped it into his mouth, thoughtful. When he swallowed, he added, “Though it probably doesn’t matter. Being heartbroken didn’t distract us or slow us down before.”

“Heartbroken,” Erwin repeated softly, as if considering the word.

“You wouldn’t call it that?”

“I didn’t take the time to put words to it. It makes our separation sound that much worse.”

He looked so solemn that Levi felt the urge to retract what he had said. “Don’t get hung up on one word.”

“Well, then let me say this: I miss spending my nights with you. And not just sleeping at my desk while you sleep on a couch or a chair—it’s not the same as sharing a bed.”

That was a good place to start. “Are you planning on sleeping in your bed tonight? I could come by.”

“Perhaps. I might decide to stay up if I’m too jittery. Regardless, it would be nice to take some time to ourselves.” Erwin glanced at him. “Maybe we can read a bit more.”

“Yeah. But that last book was getting weird.” Levi remembered the feeling of Erwin beneath him as they had wrestled for the book, the way his skin had cried out for Erwin’s body heat ...

Erwin looked so solemn again that Levi wondered if he had felt the same way. “It was indeed. We’ll select another one.”

They ate, pausing between bites to discuss outstanding tasks before the next day’s mission .When they were done, Erwin didn’t make any motion to leave the tower. Instead, he tilted his head back as if soaking in the sun’s rays. Levi studied his neck: the thick throat, the strong swoop of muscles on either side, the hollow at the base. He wanted to kiss it, to nuzzle under his chin and feel the rasp of stubble against his face.

These thoughts couldn’t lead anywhere good. He leaned against the short wall instead, eyes on the horizon.

For several minutes, they were silent, enjoying the warm sun

and each other's presence.

"Levi," Erwin said quietly.

Levi felt him staring. He turned. "What?"

The words were soft, Erwin's jaw barely moving: "When did I become so afraid of my feelings for you?"

Levi blinked, his lips parting to form a response, but he didn't know what to say. "What?" he said finally.

"I caught myself admiring your ear just now." Erwin leaned forward, staring even more intently. "I tried to remember the scent of your skin here—" He tapped below his own ear, then ran a finger down his neck to his collar. "And I found myself deciding to nuzzle you there tonight while we shared a bed, and I felt a surge of fear."

Levi's breaths slid across his parted lips, drying them, but he knew there was no way to moisten them without using his tongue or biting them, and either would seem provocative in context. "You're fucking creepy."

Erwin smiled. "I am a bit, aren't I?"

"Talking about smelling my neck—don't say shit like that. We're still separated."

"I know. It just seems that the more I try to ignore these kinds of thoughts, the more prevalent they become." He paused. "In the quiet moments between planning, I turn your words over and over in my mind: *what are we?* I don't have an answer, and that terrifies me, because it should be clear."

Levi finally closed his mouth; he tried to swallow, but his mouth was dry. "Maybe it is clear," he said, voice rasping. "Maybe that's what terrifies you."

Their gaze held.

Levi sat tall and untied his cravat, letting it slide off his neck like water. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Ignoring it all isn't working, right? These kinds of thoughts are taking over, and you should be focused. So get it over with." Levi tilted his head to the side a little. "It's safer here. If you start snuffling around my neck in bed, things are going to get out of control. We both know it." He was so dizzy that this logic seemed sound.

Erwin's voice was reluctant: "We're still separated."

"Yeah, I know."

After an excruciating moment, Erwin moved slowly toward Le-

vi, as if approaching a stray cat that might spook. He sat cross-legged in front of him, their knees almost touching.

“If we cross this line—” Erwin began.

“We’ve crossed a shitload already,” Levi said. “It’s just one more.”

A broad hand reached out, the thumb grazing the skin under Levi’s ear. He took in a sharp breath; it shuddered as he let it out.

“I knew touch would be our undoing.” Erwin’s eyes were glazed, and the words were weightless, as if he wasn’t aware he was speaking. “Once I started touching you again, I couldn’t stop.”

“We haven’t undone anything yet.”

Erwin leaned forward, hovering millimetres from the skin under Levi’s ear, and breathed in, but it was the exhale that undid Levi: warm, damp and fluttering. His toes curled in his boots, his hands tightening into fists. In that moment, with Erwin’s breath hot against his ear, he would have crossed every line for him.

“You smell clean,” Erwin whispered. “You always smell clean.” The tip of his nose drifted down the length of Levi’s neck.

Levi couldn’t speak, and he knew his breaths were probably ragged, but he had lost control over them.

Erwin began to pull away, but instead of pulling away entirely, their foreheads rested gently against each other. His breath was hot on Levi’s lips, the taste familiar and enticing.

“Levi.”

His name—he loved the way Erwin said his name, breathless and rumbling all at once. He cupped the back of Erwin’s neck, felt him mirror the motion. The tips of their noses grazed each other, and warm, damp air filled the tiny space between their mouths.

“What are we doing, Levi?” The whisper skimmed Levi’s lips, and fingers tightened around the back of his neck. He wanted to lunge forward into the broad lips. He wanted to lay flat against him, to roll, to feel their weight on each other, to disappear into each other.

Instead, he slowly moved his lips forward, turning a skim into a graze, the faintest whisper of a kiss, then retracting it. His mind was alright. Every muscle tingled. Neither of them moved, but the breaths sped up between their mouths.

“Levi ...” This time, Erwin closed the gap, the graze a little longer, tentative, as if feeling his way along a wall in a dark room.

Levi was afraid to reply, afraid to say anything that might break

the spell between them. Their noses rolled together, just barely, and this kiss was firmer, but still slow, still tentative.

“We should stop,” Erwin breathed; his free hand rose to Levi’s chin, thumb tracing his lower lip, coaxing it open a crack. Their heads barely tilted, their lips melding together. This was a proper kiss, but still shy.

Then they both broke the kiss, their foreheads still pressed together. Levi closed his eyes and felt the world revolve around them.

The clock tower in town square rang once.

“You have a meeting to get to,” Erwin whispered.

“They can wait.” Levi leaned forward to kiss him again, but Erwin pulled away.

They stared at each other, still breathing hard, as their hands dropped away from each other. The breeze was cold between them, and Levi’s neck was damp and bare. He had never felt so exposed.

“There’s no going back now,” Erwin said, “is there?”

“There was never any going back.” Levi stood; his knees felt weak, but they held. “You coming?”

Erwin gave him a polite smile. “In a minute. I need a moment with my thoughts.”

Levi searched his eyes for a moment, then shrugged, overcompensating for his drumming heart. He tied his cravat in place. Even with the caress of the fabric against his neck, the only thing he could feel on his skin was Erwin’s nose.

Focus. He threw open the trap door and stepped onto the ladder.

“Levi,” Erwin said softly.

He stopped, trying to ignore the onslaught of thoughts: *he regrets this, he’s going to ask to step back again—*

“Do you still want to come by tonight?” Erwin looked insecure, almost boyish.

Levi felt a swell of relief. “Yeah, of course.”

“We should talk more about … everything.”

“Probably, yeah.”

Their eyes held for a moment longer. Then Levi climbed down the ladder, trying to focus on the upcoming meeting even though his heart was still pounding.

Squad Levi had been fundamentally unchanged for months, and was still considered the Survey Corps' most elite soldiers, but they would be critical players in the reclamation expedition, so Levi had increased the intensity of their training regimen to push his squad even harder. As he watched the soldiers spar, he was already noting a marked improvement in their conditioning, particularly the power of their snapping movements. Perhaps he would suggest similar alterations to the other Squad Leaders. They would need every advantage they could get if they were to succeed in retaking the wall.

They were just wrapping up for the day when Petra approached him. "Captain." She saluted. He wondered why she was always so formal around him; weren't they friends by now?

"What is it?" he asked, returning his gaze to Oluo, who was throwing blades at a target.

"I was wondering if you might have a moment to talk after dinner." She shifted her weight to one foot. "Maybe we could meet and go for a walk?"

"Something wrong?" he asked, hoping it was nothing embarrassing. His old squad member Sonya had once tried to talk to him about a menstrual issue, and it had been one of the most uncomfortable conversations of his life. Hange had chided him afterwards—*it's perfectly natural*—and then he had felt both uncomfortable *and* ashamed.

"Not really wrong," Petra said, and Levi let out the breath he had been holding. "It's just something I need to talk about."

He scanned her squad mates. Eld and Gunther had their backs half-turned to them, as if trying to pretend they weren't listening. Anton seemed to be studying the fabric covering a target dummy with great interest. Only Oluo was acting naturally, but he seemed angry, launching blades at the target with unusual zeal.

I see. Levi had really been hoping Petra's feelings for him were platonic, but if not, then this conversation needed to happen.

"Okay, Petra. We'll talk. I'll meet you in the yard at seven."

"Thank you, sir." She saluted again, face beet red.

Levi gave a low sigh as she walked away.

He grabbed two dinner trays and brought them to Erwin's office, where the officers would be meeting for a mission briefing. He found Dita, Mike, and Hange sitting on the couches, trays balanced on their laps. Erwin's seat was empty.

Levi set the second tray on the desk. "Where's Erwin?"

“Downtown meeting with a merchant. He’ll be back in about ten minutes,” Hange said. “What’s wrong?”

“Huh?”

“You look even more sour than usual. What’s going on?”

Levi flopped to a seat on the couch with an irritable huff. “Petra wants to talk to me after dinner.”

“Oh,” Hange said, drawing out the word. Mike chuckled. Dita looked confused.

“Knock it off,” Levi said.

“Did I miss something?” Dita asked.

Hange leaned forward, eyes gleaming. “She’s going to confess her love for him.”

“What? I thought everyone knew he was gay.”

“Apparently not. I don’t know how she can watch him all the time and somehow miss him mooning over Erwin, but—”

“Shut up,” Levi growled, already beginning to panic.

Mike stood and then knelt in front of him. Levi’s lip curled.

“The hell are you doing?”

“Helping out poor Petra,” Mike said. “You suck at communicating these things.”

“I communicate fine.”

“You’re going to put your hands on her shoulders, like this.” He put his hands on Levi’s shoulders. “You’re going to look her in the eye and say, very clearly, ‘Petra, I’m gay.’”

The other officers chuckled; Levi looked away. “Get your giant ham-hands off me.”

“Say it exactly like that.”

“I’ve already told her—”

“You’ve told her a bunch of bullshit no one could understand. You have to be upfront about it. And when you finish that conversation, you’re going to go to Erwin, and you’re going to put your hands on his shoulders, like this—”

“If you can reach them,” Hange said.

“Shut up,” Levi said.

“—and,” Mike continued, “you’re going to look him in the eye—”

“If you can—” Hange said.

“Fuck off,” Levi snapped.

“—and tell him, ‘Erwin, I’m gay.’”

Hange laughed. “He already knows that. Tell him, ‘I want to go

to your bedroom and have weird, cravat-biting sex with you.”

Levi knocked Mike’s arms away and shifted to a different cushion, trying to get away from them. “You two are fucking assholes. Dita’s probably thinking we’re all idiots.”

Dita chuckled. “Actually, Captain, it’s nice to—”

The door opened, and Erwin strode through. Dita immediately fell silent, but Hange was still snickering.

“Did I miss something funny?” Erwin asked, sitting at his desk.

Levi scowled. “Just Hange and Mike and their shitty sense of humour.”

“I see.” Erwin took a sip of his stew, then grimaced. He poked at it. “Did they run out of salt and pepper in the kitchen again?”

“At least it’s not trail rations.”

“True.” Erwin pulled out a file. “Shall we begin?”

As they went through the mission parameters for what felt like the hundredth time, Levi’s eyes drifted down to Erwin’s mouth. The kisses they had shared atop the tower felt as if they had happened in another lifetime, in a dream. He tried to picture how Erwin would react if he took Mike and Hange’s suggestion, and could only come up with a blank expression.

After dinner, he rose with the other officers, ready to leave.

“Levi,” Erwin said. “Wait.”

He stopped and turned. The door closed behind him. “What?”

“Will you still be joining me tonight?”

“I already said I would.”

“I picked out a new book. I think it’ll be more comfortable to read than the last one. I thought maybe we could do the final rounds together, then—”

“I’ve got to talk to Petra first.”

Erwin sat tall. “Oh?”

“She wants to talk about something.” He paused. “Mike and Hange think she’s going to confess she has feelings for me.”

“I see.” Erwin’s throat bobbed. Levi squinted at him. *Does he really think I might be bisexual? I thought Mike was full of shit.* “You know I’m not interested, right?”

Erwin gave his impossible-to-read polite smile. “But if you were—”

“I’m not.”

“—it would be understandable. It’s in the way she looks at you:

she cares for you a great deal. I wouldn't blame you for wanting to be with someone who wasn't afraid to get close to you."

"Did you put on your bolo tie too tight?" Mike's idea wasn't seeming so overblown now. Levi folded his arms over his chest. "Look, I like Petra a lot. Care for her, even. But I'm interested in men, period. In *one* man." The mood was so intense that he added dryly, "And maybe that bartender we had in Mitras that one time."

Erwin smiled. "Ah, yes. The sharp-tongued fellow with the moustache."

"Only if he shaved that thing, though."

"Pity—the moustache was part of his charm."

The mood had lightened so much that Levi hated to bring it down again. Their eyes held as he tried to figure out what to say.

Erwin looked down at the papers on his desk. "Petra will be waiting for you. I'm very serious: don't be afraid to—"

"Stop trying to pawn me off on her." Frustration welled within Levi. *Why the hell do you make yourself so difficult to love?* He turned on his heel and marched for the door. "I'll come find you in a bit."

As he strode through the building, the frustration drained from him, and ice began to form in his stomach. He wasn't good at emotional discussions. Erwin was the only person he had ever really been able to speak directly with about his feelings, and lately, even that was difficult.

Petra was leaning against a tree, hugging her chest. When she saw him, she stood to her full height and gave him a shy smile. "Captain. Thank you for coming."

"Yeah." He stopped in front of her. "Nice night." The sky was cloudy, but the air was warm.

"I thought we might go on a walk through the park."

"Petra—" he said, trying to find the courage to be blunt.

"Please," she said softly. "It won't take long."

They strode side-by-side through the park. The two of them had gone for many walks together, but usually on missions—Levi often scheduled their watches to coincide, because he enjoyed her company. He glanced at her and found himself wondering how simple this would be if he wasn't gay. She was cute, and they were almost the same height; he had never had a partner as short as him before. Her kind expression was likely a pleasant contrast to his perpetual scowl. She was sweet, caring, and a competent warrior.

She glanced at him with shining eyes, and in spite of himself, his

breath caught. When she looked at him, he felt wanted. Needed. When was the last time Erwin had looked at him that honestly? When had anyone? Not since Isabel—but no, she had looked at him as a girl, as a little sister. Petra was looking at him as a woman.

Petra stopped at a bench and sat, muttering to herself about how it should be a good place to talk. He sat beside her, leaving a small gap.

“Okay.” She shifted so she was half-facing him, looking him in the eye. “This is really stupid, Captain, and I’m sorry for wasting your time, but please listen. From the moment I first met you, I could tell there was something special about you.”

Levi felt his heart flutter in his throat. “Special?”

“You have this spark about you, this drive to fight for survival at all costs. I could tell immediately you were the type of man I wanted to dedicate my life to.”

“When I took you hostage?” His brows furrowed.

“Oh. Right, but—I guess after that—” Her eyes closed, and she took a shaky breath. “I love working for you. With you. I love that you’ve picked me to be on your Special Operations Squad for the most important mission humanity will ever undertake.”

“Well, you were already on my squad,” he said. “That shouldn’t have been a surprise. You’re one of the strongest soldiers in our entire regiment.”

She gave him a shy smile and looked down. “Thank you, sir. I just ... The upcoming two missions seem so final, you know? We’re on the cusp of humanity’s greatest counterattack. And it’s got me thinking a lot about what I did and didn’t do in my life. We all know the odds. We all know there’s a good chance we won’t come back. I don’t want to leave anything unsaid if ... ” She paused. “If the worst happens to one of us.”

At the words, panic seized his lungs. He couldn’t breathe. He saw Isabel’s severed head, with its staring, dead eyes ... *Big brother* ... Now he could see Petra staring at him the same way—No, he had to stop associating the two of them. They weren’t the same person. He struggled to keep the memory buried, where it belonged.

“Captain,” Petra said, and then she hesitated. Her face screwed up with resolve. “No: Levi. There’s something I need to tell you.”

He snapped back to himself. “I’m gay.”

She blinked at him. “What?”

She looked so bewildered that he wondered if she wasn’t interested in him after all. “Mike and Hange said I should tell you.”

Petra's eyes narrowed as if she were struggling to comprehend him. "You're gay. Really? I—" Her chin wobbled for a moment, and then she clapped a hand over her mouth. "Oh, shit. You're gay."

"Yeah."

"Oh, shit." She gave a distressed sound somewhere between a laugh and a sob. "Oh, shit. You're gay. I told my sister—I had all these—oh, shit."

"I thought everyone knew." He wasn't used to his orientation creating this much of a stir. "Eld knew."

"Oh, shit, of course he knew. He was trying to tell me, but I thought I was seeing all these signs ... Oh, shit." She lifted her other hand to her face, hiding behind both. "You must think I'm so stupid. Just a dumb girl with a crush on the Captain."

"Petra," he said, but he wasn't sure what was appropriate right now. Should he offer her a hug? Leave her alone?

A tear trailed down her chin, and he had his answer. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a clean handkerchief.

She accepted it, then turned away and blew her nose. The sound made him jump.

"Look, maybe I haven't been very clear with you." He shifted on the bench. "I thought you had figured out there was someone else." He paused. "Or there used to be, anyway. It's complicated."

She sniffled and dabbed at her face, then turned to face him, her eyes bloodshot. "The person who gave you the ring?"

How did she know about the ring? "Sort of."

Her eyes widened with recognition. "The Commander."

He winced. "Don't be—"

"I can't believe I didn't put two and two together until now. You talk about him nonstop."

"I don't talk about him."

"I thought you just looked up to him, but the way you two look at each other—"

"We don't look at each other."

"And when he was telling me you had once dreamed of marriage, he looked so sad." She bowed her head, and her voice wavered. "Of course. No one would be good enough for you but the Survey Corps' best."

His heart broke for her. He knew a thing or two about how she was feeling. *Fuck it.* He reached out and pulled her in for a hug. She bur-

ied her nose in his neck and clung to him, her grip tight. In spite of all her muscle, she was small and soft.

When they pulled apart, her eyes were still damp, but she gave him a kind smile. “I’m sorry, Captain. I feel like an idiot for dumping all this on you tonight.”

“It’s fine.” He paused. “You can call me Levi.”

She shook her head and looked down. “I think I should stick to Captain.”

“Okay.”

She handed back his handkerchief, then stood and saluted, a determined look on her face. “I want you to know this doesn’t change anything. I’m going to devote the rest of my life to your command. I’ll devote myself twice as hard, so you know I’m not just acting out of dumb puppy love.”

“I never thought that.”

“Well, maybe others did.” Her face softened. “Good luck with the Commander. It sounded like things were complex.”

“Yeah.”

“I hope it works out. More than anything, I want you to be happy.” Her cheeks were dark, and her jaw was wobbling again. “I’m sorry. I should go.”

He nodded. “Get some sleep before the expedition tomorrow.”

“Sir.” She saluted, then briskly walked away.

He watched her leave, then let out a low sigh and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees.

As horrible as he felt for Petra, it felt good to be wanted.

He wanted Erwin to want him the way Petra did. He wanted to recapture the spell they had found themselves under on the tower. He wanted Erwin to look at him with wonder and helplessness, to come undone.

He stood and shoved his hands in his pockets, pacing toward the base. *Just talk to him*, he told himself. *Do what Mike and Hange said. Lay it all out for him. Don’t let him push you away until you get an answer.*

He passed a young pair of soldiers frantically making out on a bench; they didn’t notice him in the dim lamplight. Any other day, he would have given them hell for breaking protocol—more to scare them into concealing themselves better in the future than out of true discipline—but instead, he glanced at their clawing hands, their frantic movements. Is that what he and Erwin had looked like, back when they

had been unafraid to give in to lust? He liked to think they had been more dignified. He felt a grasp of thick fingertips between his shoulder blades, on his ass, and he shivered.

He could see Erwin's office window from the court yard; the light was out. His pulse sped. *He's waiting for me in his bedroom.*

Once he was upstairs, he paused at the bedroom door; he could see the lit cracks of lamplight around it.

Lay it all out for him. Get an answer.

After staring for a moment, he pushed into his own bedroom instead.

He took longer than usual getting ready for bed, taking a bath first. The water was so brisk that it distracted him, and he focused on his routine. He carefully dried his hair with a towel and parted it. When there were no more reasons to delay, he pulled on a pair of pyjama bottoms and trudged to Erwin's door. He raised his fist to knock, but decided to open it instead.

Erwin sat in the bed, propped upright by a couple pillows. He looked up at Levi with a placid face.

Levi closed and locked the door, then leaned against it. He searched for his own words, but found Petra's instead. "We all know there's a good chance we won't come back, so I don't want to leave anything unsaid."

He stood there, jaw trembling, desperate for any hint of a sign. But Erwin gave none: his face was still placid.

"I see," was all he said.

Levi felt a swell of frustration. Words weren't going to get them anywhere. *Fuck it.*

He strode across the room, caught Erwin's jaw and kissed him hard. Their noses mashed together, and their teeth clashed.

A hand pressed to his chest, pushing him away.

Erwin stared at him, eyes wide and blue, hand still on his chest. Levi heard his own breaths rasping between them, as ragged and frayed as his confidence. He couldn't move, couldn't speak.

The hand on his chest slowly slid up his collarbone, then his neck, and hooked around the back of it. Their gaze still hadn't broken. Erwin's eyelids were low. He wasn't pulling away.

Levi leaned in again.

This time, Erwin's lips were soft. It caught Levi off guard, and he moaned; he heard a catching breath in response. He leaned into the kiss,

one knee on the bed. The soft lips parted beneath him, and then their tongues slid together, gently at first, but then the hand at his nape grabbed his hair, pulling him in closer. *Oh, fuck.* He could feel Erwin probing deep into his mouth, and that was when he realized six months' worth of tension was about to consume them.

Without breaking the kiss, he threw a leg over Erwin's body, grinding into his lap over the covers. The hand in his hair tightened, and he heard a low growl. The hips began to counterthrust beneath him.

This blanket is too thick. Levi pulled away to move it.

Erwin seized the opening; he caught Levi's ass with his free hand and rolled, pinning him to the bed with a deep kiss. He freed himself from the blanket and lay on top of Levi, grinding him into the bed. So good, his weight felt so good, his movements surprisingly rough. Levi clawed into his shoulder blades, writhing against him. *He wants me. He wants me ...* He wrapped his legs around Erwin's hips, arching up against him. Erwin ground hard into him, so violently that Levi was afraid they were both going to orgasm before they even had their pants off. Then Erwin was kissing his neck, his collarbone, nuzzling beneath his chin. He was sucking hard. Too hard. It hurt. It felt so good.

Then he pulled away—leaving Levi gasping and dazed—and whispered *fuck* as he tugged at Levi's waistband. He tugged the pants off Levi's hips, down his legs, then cast them onto the floor.

Closer. Levi reached for Erwin's waistband, too, but the angle was too awkward. He shoved hard to roll him onto his back and yanked the pants off, then dropped on top of him, kissing him again. Hands clamped over his ass, then they were grinding again, skin to skin, so hard that it was almost abrasive.

Levi jerked his head back to moan loudly—the assassination attempt the previous year had proven this area was soundproof, anyway, so why hide it? Erwin cried out, too, his hands tightening. Levi looked down to see Erwin staring at him. Blond hair hung in his eyes, and his abdomen was clenched so tightly that he was vibrating.

Levi wanted that energy inside him. "Fuck me," he growled.

Erwin gasped, "Okay."

Levi broke out of his grasp and reached for the bedside table, yanking open the drawer. There was still a bottle of oil here—nearly empty—as well as several toys.

"Shit," he whispered to himself, imagining Erwin using them during their separation—No, he couldn't let his head go there. He need-

ed to rush into this, or he might think his way out of it. His hand closed over the bottle and he slammed the drawer shut.

Erwin took the oil from him, giving him the look he gave his political opponents, the intense one that was almost intimidating.

Stare me down, Levi thought, meeting him head on. *Possess me*. He needed to be Erwin's. He needed Erwin to be his.

“Lie on your stomach.” The words were soft and commanding; they ran down Levi's spine and glowed deep inside him. He lay face-down.

Broad, strong hands gripped his hips. Levi felt teeth nip a little too hard at his ass, and he was about to complain, but then he felt Erwin's tongue.

“Fuck!” He grabbed the pillow and bit into it, thrusting his hips back against that aggressive tongue. He cursed again, over and over. Erwin was making long, pleased hums that vibrated through him. His tongue began to probe deeper, and then there was a drizzle of oil and a finger.

Levi had forgotten how thick Erwin's fingers were. Sweat rolled down his temple, and he tried to buck back against him to take him deeper, but a strong hand pressed into his lower back to hold him still. Erwin knew exactly where to touch him, and he felt himself steadily beginning to rise. He was just starting to worry about tipping over the edge when Erwin stopped and slowly pulled out.

“Roll over.” It was that same soft, commanding tone.

Levi clumsily rolled onto his back. Erwin was on his knees beside him, coating himself with oil. Levi's eyes drifted down his body and rested on his moving hand. He could see the swollen tip and protruding veins, and he felt himself throb. *He wants me. He wants me so badly...*

He grabbed Erwin's shoulders and pulled him down. Their lips met again, and Levi wrapped his arms and legs around him, ready to take him in. Pain shot through him; it had been a long time. He threw his head back, teeth clenched.

Erwin eased up. “Is it too—”

“Keep going.” They couldn't stop to talk; the spell might break.

“Remember to breathe.”

Levi realized he had been holding his breath. He took several breaths. “Deeper! I need you deeper.”

It was slow, at first, and then all at once. Finally, finally, after so many weeks apart, they were one.

“Fuck!” Levi clawed Erwin’s back, arching against him. *So good, so good, it’s so good.* He could feel his shape so perfectly. He had forgotten the intensity of these sensations, how intimate it felt to share this with the only man who had ever had access to the deepest parts of him.

Erwin bit into his neck and rocked into him hard. Levi cried out, high-pitched, carried away by the pleasantly burning stretch, the body weight on top of him. He raked flesh, deeper and deeper, until Erwin yelped. The movement stopped.

Levi opened his eyes, breathing hard. Erwin was looking down at him with the same expression he wore when he was looking down at a map.

“You’re getting violent,” Erwin said, and he didn’t sound like he was complaining.

Levi arched against him. “Come on. Keep going. I need it hard.”

Erwin gasped and grabbed Levi’s wrists, pinning them above his head with one hand. Levi half-heartedly tried to pull himself free, but he was too distracted to fight back.

“Should I let go?” Erwin bent down and sucked the skin of his neck, sliding it between his teeth.

“Don’t stop.”

“I know you don’t like being confined.”

Levi cried out and squirmed, desperate for him to keep moving. “Fuck. Don’t stop!”

Then Erwin was moving inside him again and sucking at the skin under his ear.

Levi writhed, feeling the body weight, the confining grip, the relentless driving hips. Every hair on his body stood on end. All he had wanted was a quick, thoughtless fuck, but this, in all its strange violence, all its strange give-and-take of power, was something deeper. It was months of shared tension and suffering. It was the evaporation of all the restraints they had strained against. The more Erwin confined him, the freer he felt.

He was soaring, too high, but so was Erwin; the mask had flaked away, thrust by thrust, to reveal a flushed face with damp skin, flared lips and clenched teeth. Blond strings of hair flopped against his face in time with the slapping skin, and the veins of his neck and arms were bulging.

“Oh shit.” Levi writhed against the bed, tossing his head back. He was getting close, but he needed friction to finish. He let out a frustrated wail, trying to tug his wrists free.

Erwin released him, and Levi grabbed himself, pumping hard with one hand. He clawed into blond hair with the other, pulling Erwin down for a deep kiss. The kiss was deep, wet and sloppy; he cried out into it, feeling himself starting to rise. His legs wrapped hard around Erwin, his hips lifting off the bed—

He came with a wail, clawing hard into Erwin's skin, writhing and shuddering. He felt Erwin drive into him with that familiar instinctive rhythm, heard his gasps rise, then felt him shudder and slam, again and again.

Then the world was still as they held each other.

After a moment, Erwin pulled out and collapsed at his side, breathing hard.

Levi's heart pounded in his throat. Was Erwin going to fall apart, the way he always had near the end? Would he look at Levi with regret, or love? He finally gathered enough courage and sat up.

Erwin's face was slack, eyes closed.

He's fucking sleeping. Typical. Levi tried to feel annoyed, but instead, he felt a swell of fondness. He found clean handkerchiefs and mopped himself up, trying not to wonder if this was going to screw up everything between them. The best course of action was probably to go back to his room and pretend this had never happened. They had an expedition tomorrow, and Erwin was clearly too tired for a relationship talk.

He grabbed his pyjama bottoms and shook them out, ready to put them on.

"Levi," rasped Erwin.

He turned. Erwin's eyes were only open a crack, but his face was gentle.

"Yeah?"

"Stay." A slow blink. "If you want."

"If I stay, we have to figure out what the hell we are."

"Or," Erwin said softly, "we can just fall asleep."

Levi held his gaze for a moment, then pulled off his pants again and folded them, setting them on the bedside table. He tugged the covers free so he could drape them over Erwin, then crawled under them on the other side of the bed.

"Probably good we blew off steam," he said quietly. "We've been all tense and weird lately."

Erwin rolled over and pulled him in. His nose nuzzled the back

of Levi's ear. "Levi."

Maybe it was the hot breath near his ear, or maybe it was the name itself: Levi shivered. "Yeah?"

"You were right when you said there was never any going back. Not for us."

"Maybe." He laced their hands together. "Go to sleep. It's a big day tomorrow."

Erwin's voice was dreamy. "I'll give you Wall Maria, Levi. I'll give you everything you deserve. We're close. We're so close."

Levi reached over to turn out the lamp, then snuggled back into his arms.

¤

Erwin awoke the next morning to find his Captain in his arms. Soft breaths fluttered across his collarbone. His heart pounded as he was suddenly wide awake. *We slept together ...*

The morning bell began to ring. Levi jolted upright, then turned to look at him. Recognition set in, and his brow furrowed.

Erwin's eyes drifted down to the purple marks across Levi's lower neck and shoulders. "I suppose we have an expedition to begin."

Levi nodded. "Yeah."

"We'll speak tonight, after we've settled in at the third check-point."

"Sure." Levi hesitated. "I don't know if I'm supposed to kiss you right now, or if we were just blowing off steam last night, or what."

Erwin knew he was playing with fire, but he leaned in and kissed Levi anyway. Levi melted into the kiss, arms wrapping around his neck.

"We should go before this gets out of control," Erwin whispered into his lips.

"Yeah."

They kissed once more, then pulled apart.

Only Mike and Moblit were in the baths when they arrived. Moblit's gaze drifted to the love bites around Levi's neck, and his eyes widened.

Mike, meanwhile, sniffed the air, and then a leer began to stretch across his face.

"Don't," Levi warned.

"Hange owes me fifty."

“Fifty?” Moblit asked.

“Yeah. Last night we went double or nothing. My bet was that they’d hook up before the expedition today.”

“This isn’t the time to discuss it. The others will be here soon.” Erwin sank into the bath, then sucked in air through his teeth as water hit his back. He had forgotten Levi had raked it up.

“Are you okay, sir?” Moblit asked.

Erwin tried to sink lower to hide the scratches, but Mike pursed his lips and grabbed his shoulder, turning him.

“Holy hell, Levi.”

“We were blowing off steam,” Levi said, a little too defensively.

Erwin cleared his throat. “We’re about to embark on the penultimate mission of humanity’s greatest conquest. Perhaps we should shift the conversation away from sex.”

“Sure,” Mike said, “but anyone who sees those scratches and love bites side-by-side is going to put two and two together.”

“Love bites?” Levi covered his neck with his hands and narrowed his eyes at Erwin. “You gave me fucking hickeys?”

“I’ll finish up here and leave before anyone else notices,” Erwin said, quickly soaping down.

When he returned to his room, he checked his back in the mirror, and he frowned. It looked like he had been rolling around shirtless in bramble like a horse on grass. A few scratches had been deep enough to draw blood, and he wondered if he was going to get bloodstains on his dress shirt. A shiver rippled through him again as he recalled how feral Levi had been, how utterly he had given up control.

Focus.

He quickly dressed, then styled his hair.

The dining hall was abuzz with the usual pre-expedition jitters. It had been so long since they’d had major losses that the majority of soldiers seemed to have forgotten the horrors that awaited them on the other side of the Wall. Their optimism was good for morale, but they needed to remember to be cautious.

Erwin stood at the front of the hall. “Your attention, please.”

Several groups quietened down, but a few others were still tittering and chatting.

“Hey,” Levi yelled from the officer’s table. “Listen up, brats.”

The room fell silent.

“Today,” boomed Erwin, “the Survey Corps will embark on the

56th expedition outside the walls. When we return to this base, the path to Wall Maria will be fully stocked with supply caches and checkpoints, and humanity will be ready to launch its counterattack. The titans have long seemed an insurmountable foe, but we are on the cusp of proving humanity is stronger. Today, we fight for our fallen comrades, who gave their lives so this expedition could be possible. Today, we fight for humanity!"

The soldiers roared and stood, saluting. He glowed as he took his seat next to Levi.

Hange leaned across the table. "I hear I owe Mike some money."

Levi let out an irritated huff. "Focus on the mission, shitgoggles."

"The Southern 104th Trainee Squad is in town for wall training while they wait for their official deployment," Dita said, changing the subject. "They'll be watching us set out."

"Is it that time of the year already?" Hange asked. "You want us to give them the usual spectacle, Erwin? Show off the Survey Corps a little as we head out?"

"No," he said, poking at his food. "It doesn't matter where they end up this year; all three branches will be supplying soldiers for the reclamation effort. I don't want anyone wasting valuable energy showing off for them. We need to conserve all our strength for the upcoming mission. Stay in formation, eyes forward."

"That's no fun," Hange muttered.

Levi leaned in close to him. "Eat something."

Erwin slid his food around the plate. He always found it difficult to eat the morning before an expedition, especially one this important.

"Sir." Nifa rushed up to him and saluted.

"What is it, Nifa?"

"A Garrison soldier just approached us with a message. Titan activity is higher than usual outside the Wall. They're doing their best to thin out their numbers with cannons, but our support squads may have their hands full."

"Thanks for the message, Nifa." He looked up at his officers. "We're going to keep the formation tight while we travel through the active area. Mike and Levi, your best teams will assist the support squads. Above all else, we must protect the supply carts."

Of all the days for the titans to be restless, it had to be the day of this expedition. He tried to hold on to optimism. *Better now than during the reclamation effort.*

8

The instant they left the walls, Erwin discovered the true gravity of the Garrison's warning. Titans swarmed the support squads by the dozen.

"Advance," he roared as the squads around him began to falter, distracted by the activity at their flanks. The titans had been relatively quiet in this area for the past year, so the bulk of his soldiers didn't remember the old days, when they had to fight their way out of the city like this every single expedition.

The city gave way to grasslands. This was normally where Erwin would deploy the Long-Range Scouting Formation, but their path was set to bring them through one more abandoned city within about an hour, and his instincts told him to wait. If titans were restless there, too, then the formation would be spreading them too thin, leaving the centre columns vulnerable.

Even the grasslands were swarming with titans; he redirected the formation to avoid several, and the support squads handled the rest.

His suspicions proved to be accurate when they began to ride through the abandoned city: it, too, was crawling with titans. Red flares began to go up not just from the flanks, but from the centre columns, too. *What the hell is going on?*

"Erwin." Levi rode up beside him, his Special Operations Squad riding in a V shape behind him. "The formation is falling apart."

The southwestern front had the most red flares. Erwin's eyes narrowed, and he pointed. "We're going to stand our ground and try to fix this."

"Really?" Levi said, dubious.

"We're not just laying a path for the reclamation effort—we're clearing it. There's no point getting supplies to our destination if the Garrison and MP troops are going to die within an hour of the wall. Go." He fired a white flare vertically, signalling to all teams to stand their ground.

"All squads," he hollered, "engage the enemy."

"Petra, Anton," Levi barked. "Come with me. Eld, Gunther, Oluo: assist the scouting squad in the western flank."

"Sir!" his squad barked, and they rode off.

"What about us, sir?" Pehr asked.

A suspicion began to crawl up the back of Erwin's throat. He scanned the horizon and found a clock tower. "Pehr, track down Mike and find out if there's a pattern to the titan movements. I'm going up to the clock tower to survey the area."

He galloped hard toward the clock tower, then launched out of his saddle, sinking a grapple as far up the tower as he could. He used several cable grapples, trying to conserve his gas, and landed on the top. He sank to a crouch on the tiled roof, scanning their surroundings. From the vantage point, he could see most of the battlefield. Though his soldiers were engaged in heavy combat, they appeared to be holding their ground well—keeping the formation tight had been the right call.

But when he looked north of the town, he saw hundreds of titans moving north.

Toward Trost.

His gaze snapped south, and he saw the same pattern.

His heart sank.

When Pehr joined him on the tower a few minutes later, he could tell by the man's pale face that his suspicions had been confirmed.

"Mike said they were heading toward Trost, didn't they?" Erwin said.

"Yes, sir."

His eyes closed as he steadied himself. The only reasonable assumption was that the titans were staging another attack on Wall Rose. Trost was in peril. If they rode at full speed and ignored the titans around them, they might be able to make it back to town in less than an hour. If his assumption was correct, could the Garrison hold off an onslaught for that long? Wall Maria had fallen even with the Survey Corps present ...

He stood tall, his eyes snapping open. "Spread a message to each of the Team Leaders: we're retreating to Trost. Tell them to expect hostiles, maybe even all the way into the city. We'll rally in the grasslands and fall into attack formation."

Pehr's eyes were round. "Sir, you don't mean—"

"Go." He fired a green flare north. Green flares went up from every part of the formation except the southwest. *That will be where Levi is.* He hopped off the edge of the building, using his gas and grapples to quickly glide down to his horse.

He began to ride southwest; two of his navigators fell in behind him. He thought about sending them away, then decided he didn't want

to be caught alone if he rounded a corner and chanced upon a titan.

I need to find him. There is no counterattack without Levi's strength. Where is he?

He burst into an alley, then slowed the horse. Levi and Petra knelt beside a corpse. Was that Anton? No wonder Levi had missed the signal flares. He felt a swell of frustration—this was why soldiers needed to wait until they had reached safety before they started mourning the lost.

“Levi,” he said.

Levi stood and turned to him, face blank.

Erwin halted his horse. “We’re retreating.”

“Retreating? What? We haven’t even reached the border of the city.” Levi’s face darkened; he was clearly still upset about Anton. “Are the soldiers dying for nothing? You’d better have a good reason to end the expedition here.”

“They’re after the town,” Erwin said. “They’re moving northwards as a group. It’s just like five years ago—something’s happening in Trost. They may have broken through the wall.”

“No,” Petra whispered.

Levi cursed. “Petra, go make sure the rest of the squad rejoins the main group. Head straight for Trost.” He gave a high-pitched whistle. His horse trotted around the corner.

“You’re the fastest soldier we have,” Erwin said to him. “Ride ahead. When you reach the gate, fire a black flare if Trost is under attack, white if not.”

Levi nodded. He mounted his horse and began to sprint north.

Erwin fired another green round north to assess the formation of his soldiers. The responses were scattered, but the volume looked about right.

Pehr rejoined him outside the city. “Every surviving team is out, sir.”

“How are the casualties looking?”

“Surprisingly few.”

“Good.” Erwin urged the horse to a gallop so they could reclaim their place at the head of the formation. As they rode through the meadows between the two cities, the formation naturally corrected itself. By the time they were nearing the wall, the entire regiment was where it should be.

Erwin kept his eyes on the horizon. Even if Trost wasn’t under

attack, they would still need to clear out all this mess. The expedition was ruined either way. That meant pushing the reclamation of Wall Maria back even further ...

In the distance, a black flare went up from the wall.

“Sina, Rose, and Maria,” he cursed under his breath, watching the black smoke dissipate. *Is it just Trost, or has Wall Rose fallen, too?* Despair pooled in his stomach, and he felt himself teetering on the edge. It would be so easy to let himself fall in ... he was so tired ...

Instead, he gritted his teeth and drew his sword, thrusting it forward. “Trost is under attack!” he roared, standing in his saddle. “We won’t let it fall! Dedicate your hearts!”

Around him, he heard blades clicking into place, then cheers and roars.

He felt a swell of pride. This would not break the Survey Corps.

Nothing would break the Survey Corps.

The town outside the gates was thick with titans, but they were all ignoring the soldiers, stampeding toward Trost. Erwin leaned forward, teeth bared, as the horses barreled toward the gate.

“All soldiers, prepare for combat!”

But when they reached the gate, a swarm of titans was writhing against it, unable to get through. Erwin halted the formation. Titans streamed past them, throwing themselves against the writhing pile.

The gate is fine after all? It’s closed? Levi was nowhere to be seen.

One thing was certain: they weren’t getting through that gate. “All teams,” he boomed, “switch to 3D movement.” He stood on his saddle and leapt, beginning the arduous task of climbing the wall. He blasted extra gas to speed the ascent, so recklessly that he almost ran out by the time he landed at the top.

Erwin stood tall, staring down at the city in shock. Around him, other soldiers began to land, and they, too, were silent.

Trost lay in ruin.

Buildings had been flattened; flames billowed from so many places that the city looked like a forest of smoke. Titans roamed the streets. Erwin felt a spike of fear as the ruins of Shiganshina flickered through his memory like a forgotten nightmare; he tasted the ash, smelled the blood ...

But no, this was different. Across from them, hundreds of soldiers stood atop Wall Rose, all in a row, unmoving.

What are they staring at? Erwin scanned the city and spotted Levi

with—was that a half-formed titan? This didn't make any sense.

Most of the regiment had landed beside him now. He thrust his sword toward the city. "All soldiers, clear out the remaining titans!"

He swooped down to Levi, carefully using his grapples to help conserve the last of his gas. As he landed, he saw an unconscious boy on the top of the titan—no, was he melded *into* the titan?

"Levi."

Levi turned to him, eyes wide and haunted. Erwin had never seen him so shaken on the battlefield. He opened his mouth to ask what was going on, but he heard boots land softly behind him. He turned to see Commander Pixis.

"Commander," Erwin said, saluting.

Pixis saluted back. "You picked one hell of a time to come back, boys."

The half-formed titan was beginning to disappear into steam. Two kids in Trainee Corps uniforms, a blond boy and a dark-haired girl, were trying to pull the boy out of the titan.

"He sealed the gate," Pixis said, nodding toward a giant boulder blocking the gate—so that was why the titans had been unable to enter.

"Who did?" Erwin asked.

"Eren Yeager." Pixis turned to Erwin, his eyes sparkling. "He has the ability to transform into a titan."

Levi stepped closer. "Are you drunk, old man?"

"Not one bit. The Colossal Titan reappeared, and just like five years ago, it kicked a hole in the outer gate. But this time, we had a titan fighting for us." Pixis pulled out a flask and uncapped it. "Eren Yeager transformed into a titan and took out more than twenty of them himself, then helped us plug the hole with a boulder."

"Holy shit," Erwin breathed, forgetting he was in polite company. He turned to stare at the unconscious boy. His body was steaming, and he had what looked like burn marks on his face.

"What are you saying?" Levi demanded.

"He's saying humanity has just discovered its greatest weapon," Erwin said, breathless, and he turned to stare at the boulder. *This boy is our answer.*

This boy is how we will seal Wall Maria.

There was no time for reflection: boulder or no, the titans still had control of Trost. Cleaning out the stragglers took until nightfall. Erwin stood atop the wall to guide his soldiers and the Garrison the best he could with signal flares.

He had hoped to see Eren Yeager's titan in action, but the boy was still unconscious, and the Military Police had taken him into custody. His fate was still to be determined; titans had always been the enemy. There was a good chance the MP would panic and try to execute him.

Erwin would do whatever it took to acquire the boy. Aside from the strength a titan could bring to their reclamation strategy, his existence opened up a whole world of questions. How did the boy turn into a titan? Were all titans controlled by people? Were there other titan-people among them, walking around undetected? Was the boy a defector who had information about their enemy? His head whirled with possibilities.

By the time darkness fell, the city was clear. Levi landed beside him, wiping steaming blood from his cheek.

“We got them?”

“Yes,” Erwin said.

Levi glanced at him. “This is fucked up.”

“Indeed.” Erwin paused. “I’m sorry about Anton.”

Levi shrugged. “You couldn’t have foreseen this.”

Before they could speak any further, Pixis’ aide Anka called out behind them: “Commander Erwin. Commander Pixis wishes to do a full debrief with you.”

“Invite him to my office for a meeting at eight o’clock, along with anyone else who should be involved in a debrief.”

“Sir.”

Anka and Pixis brought along several Garrison officers who had been involved in the day’s events; they all looked exhausted and haunted. Even the Survey Corps officers had hollowed eyes and drawn expressions. Erwin asked Dita to fetch several bottles of liquor and some fine pastries. It wasn’t much, but it was the least he could do. It wasn’t his fault the Survey Corps had been absent—in fact, if he had to guess, it hadn’t been a coincidence, either—but he still felt responsible. Things would have been a lot different with the Survey Corps present.

Fortunately, there had been no civilian losses inside the walls; unfortunately, a large number of soldiers had died. The final casualty

count was still coming in, but the losses to the Trainee Corps and the Garrison had been catastrophic.

Once they had finished exchanging information, everyone left except Levi, and Pixis, who he asked Anka to wait for him in the hall.

“Erwin,” he said, “you need to move fast.”

“Sir?” Erwin asked.

“You’re going to want to acquire the boy, right? Nile is going to panic and execute him, and the lords are going to panic and agree.”

Erwin’s heart beat in his throat; he knew Pixis was correct. “You’re saying we should leave for Mitras immediately?”

Pixis nodded. “I can try to delay some of our status reports to buy you a few days, but you need to move immediately.”

“Thank you.”

As he left the room, Erwin turned to Levi. “You’ll accompany me, of course. And Hange should be there, too.”

“Hange and Moblit have their hands full with the two new titan captives,” Levi said.

“Ah.” Erwin rubbed his eyebrow, considering. “Maybe Moblit can stay behind, then. We need Hange to examine the boy as soon as possible.”

“We’re going to have a hell of a lot of paperwork.”

“We are. Dita, Nifa, and Pehr might be good candidates to handle that.” Erwin sighed, exhausted. Not only had their mission failed, but now they had a whole new wave of politics to deal with. He had already been sleep-deprived as it was. “What time is it?”

“Almost midnight.”

“You should eat something.”

Levi studied him. “What will you do?”

“I’ll eat something, too, but I need to get a few things in order before we leave.” He paused. “Levi—”

“You don’t have to say anything.” Levi studied him. “Our mission comes first.”

I don’t deserve him. Erwin’s throat tightened. He reached out a shaky hand to trace Levi’s jaw, then withdrew it. “I’ll send for you when I have our travel arrangements ready.”

Levi nodded and slipped from the door.



After not eating much for the entire day, the cold leftover stew was surprisingly tasty. Erwin ate two entire bowls while he made frantic notes on a pad of paper. His mind was racing. He would need to do background checks on Eren Yeager and the two friends who had been with him—Berit had mentioned the three were inseparable, so they might carry important information, too. He would also need extensive background checks on every other soldier who had been in Trost, but that would take more time. It couldn't hurt to do a fresh background check on Dr. Grisha Yeager, too. Had he known his son was a titan?

The more he planned, the more unknowns he uncovered, and soon he was overwhelmed by the sheer number of tasks they would need to accomplish within the next few days. Erwin set down his pen. He needed a break, and probably some sleep.

He debated whether or not he should track down Levi. It was possible he was overwhelmed and needed space, especially with Anton's death. Death of a subordinate always hit him hard. Then again, Erwin might be able to talk him through it.

He decided to check the guard tower first. Even if Levi wasn't up there, Erwin might stay for a little while by himself and try to sort out his whirling thoughts.

He threw open the trap door. The night sky was clear and thick with stars. It was so dark that he couldn't tell for sure if Levi was sitting on the ledge or his eyes were playing tricks on him.

"Levi?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

Erwin settled into place next to him. The air smelled of smoke; a few fires still burned in the city. Even under this thick veil of darkness, it was impossible to pretend the city was unchanged.

"How are you doing?" he asked quietly.

He heard fabric shift beside him. "We're fucked, aren't we? The gate is sealed off permanently. We spent all these years—all these lives—trying to build a supply line to Wall Maria, and in just a few short minutes, it all got wiped to shit. Can we even get to the supply route from any other city?"

"Possibly," Erwin said. "But we'll need some time to scout a new departure point and figure out the best path to meet up with the old route."

"This is fucked. All this time, it was easy to pretend Wall Maria was a fluke, or a one-time thing. Of course they came for Wall Rose, too."

It was just a matter of time, wasn't it? And here we were, for five long years, naïvely thinking we had control."

"Levi."

"A boulder is all that stood between us and losing Wall Rose. A boulder and a brat who can turn into a titan." His breath shook. "Everything's over, isn't it? We've lost."

"No, Levi." Erwin smiled in the darkness. "This isn't an end, it's a beginning. Think of what it means for us to have a titan on our side, one who can tear through other titans like paper, one who can block off Wall Maria during our reclamation effort. Perhaps we will have to rebuild a portion of our supply route, but we have a new weapon in our arsenal, one more powerful than any weapon mankind has ever seen."

"Assuming it wants to fight with us," Levi said. "A *titan*, Erwin. A monster."

Erwin glanced at him; his eyes had adjusted enough now that he could make out Levi's silhouette. "I know another who believed himself to be a monster, but has turned out to be Humanity's Strongest."

Levi scoffed. "That's different."

"He's a boy. A soldier. He already worked with Pixis. He'll work with us, too."

"What makes you so sure?"

Erwin considered. "Do you remember when we spoke with Berit about the 104th Trainee Squad, and she spoke about Eren Yeager?"

"Not really."

"She said he was a solid soldier, one with great perseverance and charisma. She mentioned his two friends, too—they were with him today."

"The three of them came out of Shiganshina, right?" Levi said, catching Erwin off guard. Levi's memory always worked in strange ways, latching onto details his didn't. "Convenient that he was at the site of both attacks *and* he can turn into a titan."

"We need to question him, of course, and keep an eye on him. The potential benefits to humanity are too great to ignore." Erwin thought of his father as he added, "I'll admit I'm listening to my gut on this one. He will unlock invaluable knowledge for us, Levi."

Levi scoffed. "Listen to you, willing to bet everything on a titan brat."

"His existence gives me hope. Right now, I feel more hope for the future of humanity than I've ever felt. I think you will come around,

too, in time.”

They were silent for a while, staring at the stars together. A breeze finally broke the stillness. Levi pressed closer, shivering. Erwin glanced at him, then draped an arm around his shoulders and pulled him closer.

“I guess Wall Maria’s a ways off yet,” Levi said.

“Certainly longer than we were expecting.” Erwin nuzzled the side of his hair, breathing in the familiar scent of lemon and natural oils. “I still want us to rebuild our relationship when there’s time, when we can give it the attention it deserves. But after consideration, I think you’re right: the titans have always come first, for both of us. That’s why we work.” He closed his eyes, treasuring their proximity. “We’re already behaving as if we’re back together, anyway.”

“You mean fucking.”

Erwin felt his cheeks warm. “Not just that.”

“Well, we’ve already been rebuilding our relationship in a way, haven’t we?” Levi slid closer, nestling against his ribcage.

“Yes, I suppose we have.” Aside from some strangeness at the beginning of their separation, they had only continued to grow closer. Erwin thought of the way they led the Corps together as equals, the unspoken and unbreakable trust between them, the way they spent every possible moment together. Somehow, Levi had become more than a partner. He was Erwin’s weakness and his strength, his flesh and blood, his beating heart.

“Then say it,” Levi said. “Make it official.”

Erwin wanted to, more than anything, but first he had to make sure Levi knew what he was asking. “First, you have to understand, Levi: the appearance of Eren Yeager changes everything. We may have to resort to underhanded tactics to acquire him. We may even have to oppose the MP, the monarchy, and the noble class in ways you never imagined. There’s a good chance my neck will end up in a noose before we catch sight of Wall Maria again.”

There was a long pause. “What are you planning?”

“That boy must be ours at any cost.” Erwin found his hand; their fingers interlaced. “With any luck, the Military Police will see reason, but I know Nile: he’ll be cautious. The Wallists, too, are likely to oppose anything that gets us closer to altering the Wall. The nobles will be on edge because we came so close to losing Wall Rose, and even the King himself is sure to weigh in. There are a lot of factors to consider.”

“You’ll figure it out,” Levi said confidently.

“I hope so. When Sahlo was alive, I had a concentrated pressure point for many groups: the Wallists, the King, the Underground drug lords, and even the Council. Without him at our disposal, I’m going to have to pressure many groups at once. Fighting a war on multiple fronts is always risky. We saw it with Sahlo: a single person cannot weave a web without eventually getting tangled in the threads.” His jaw hardened. He thought of Levi, of the future they had sacrificed. He thought of Marie, of Henrik, of his father. “Eren Yeager is the culmination of every goal we’ve been driving towards since we met, the reason for everything we’ve ever lost. He is the key to saving humanity. I will stop at nothing to acquire him.” He paused. “If I anger the wrong people, they’re likely to come through you to get to me.”

“Good,” Levi said. “I’ll take them on.”

“Are you sure? You deserve—”

“Shut up. We’re not going through all this again; my answer hasn’t changed. My heart is my own to offer up. I’ll follow you. If you say we need a titan in our regiment, then we need a titan in our regiment. I trust you.”

“And I trust you,” Erwin said. “We’ll work together on this, every step of the way.”

“Of course.”

They lounged together, the heat building between them.

“So,” Levi said, “say it.”

Erwin ran his fingers along the back of Levi’s hand. “I don’t really know what to say.”

“You have fancy words for everything.”

He chuckled at the dry delivery. “Fancy words. Very well.” He kissed Levi’s temple as he began to craft phrases in his mind.

“Well?”

“Give me a moment.” He paused, then sat taller. “Levi, our world is constantly changing; during the entire six years we’ve known each other, I’ve felt as if the ground is quaking beneath me and I’m staggering to keep my balance. Everything in our lives is a constant game of reaction, of adaptation. But there’s been one constant in my life, one man’s loyalty bolstering me whenever I feared I might lose my balance.” He lay his cheek on the dark hair. “We’re stronger together than we are apart. Maybe separation was right for a while, but this world is going through the biggest changes it has ever known, and I don’t want to face

them alone. If you agree, I'm ready to try again."

Levi was quiet.

Erwin gave him a nudge. "How was that?"

Levi turned and kissed him. It was gentle and chaste, the opposite of the hungry kisses of the night before. Erwin closed his eyes and leaned into it.

The kiss broke. Their foreheads rested together, and he was surprised to discover how much he had missed this: the soft pause afterwards, when the kiss was over, but neither was willing to pull apart yet.

"Our carriage will be arriving soon," Erwin said softly. "You should get packed."

"Okay," Levi said, but he didn't move. He was shaking.

"Levi?"

"I can't stop thinking about how fucked everything is."

"We'll figure it out. It's what we do. When has anything ever gone according to plan? By tomorrow at this time, we'll have all the information we need to start looking toward Wall Maria again." Erwin kissed his forehead. "It's going to be okay, Levi. When I look to the future, I am dazzled by its brightness. If a boy can turn into a titan, then who knows what else is possible?"

"Okay, that's enough with the fancy words for now." Levi stood. "Be honest with me, Erwin. Aren't you a little scared about all this?"

Erwin smiled. "Terrified. But everything good in my life has happened because I took a chance even though I was scared. Why should this be any different?"

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An hour later, Levi settled into the carriage next to Erwin. Erwin's eyes were glowing in the lamplight, his lips curved in a soft smile. If he could foresee something amazing coming out of the day's events, then that should be good enough for Levi. Erwin's foresight had never steered them wrong.

They were silent as the carriage began to move. Levi was tempted to formally consummate their rekindled relationship, but the day's events had taken their toll on his stamina. Even Erwin looked exhausted; he was already nodding and then startling awake.

"Go to sleep." Levi locked the bed into place and stretched out.

Erwin studied him with bleary eyes. "With you, or over here?"

“We were sharing a bed even before we were officially back together, weren’t we?” Levi slid against the wall to give him some space.

“We fit better if you’re on the outside.”

“Right.” It had been too long. He was accustomed to putting memories out of his mind, not embracing them.

But when he slid into Erwin’s arms, it felt as if no time had passed at all. This was familiar. It was right. Levi settled back against him and his body hummed.

“Doing okay?” Levi asked.

“Mm.” Erwin’s arm tightened around him. “You?”

“I guess.” The day’s events were bringing back a slew of bad memories. Humanity was so fragile—where would humanity be right now, if Wall Rose had fallen? Would there be another massive reclamation push with inexperienced bait? Would Sahlo’s paranoia come true, and the people of the Underground would be massacred?

“Levi,” Erwin whispered.

“What?”

A palm tapped his chest. “I can feel your heart pounding.”

Levi closed his eyes. “I’m not as okay as I’m pretending.”

“If you need space—”

“That’s the last thing I need right now.” Levi was quiet. “I’m thinking about how we weren’t there to stop this.”

“We took down a lot of titans south of the wall,” Erwin said. “I bet we thinned the influx enough to unknowingly protect Trost.”

“I guess.” Levi glanced back at him. “Why did you ride out to find me?”

“What?”

“When we were retreating. Why did you take the trouble to find me, when you should have been leading the retreat?”

Erwin was quiet for a minute, but then he said, “You’re as strong to this regiment as an entire squad. I needed to make sure you retreated safely. You’re Humanity’s Strongest, Levi. You give the world hope.”

“Just the world?”

He heard the soft flutter of a laugh. “And me, Levi. You give me hope, more than anything in this world.”

Levi didn’t realize, until he heard the words, just how miffed he had been that Erwin had found another source of hope in Eren Yeager. “I guess humanity needs as many weapons as it can get.”

After a long moment, Erwin said quietly, “Levi, I can’t imagine

attempting to recapture Wall Maria without you, whether the boy is on our side or not."

"Stop trying to read my mind," Levi muttered, but he snuggled into Erwin's arms and gave a satisfied sigh.

He dreamed they stood on the wall, hand in hand, watching a sunrise engulf Trost in red.

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COURT

It was strange to step into the hotel room as lovers reunited—the same room where they had, only a week earlier, been so unsure about what they were. As Erwin began to unpack their trunk into the closet, he fondly watched Levi out of the corner of his eye, swabbing sections of the room with two fingers to check for cleanliness. He felt a warm glow in his chest, and realized he had missed paying attention to all of Levi's little quirks and mannerisms. He had spent six months trying to block them out.

He would have liked to spend a few hours reconnecting, but there was too much to do. First, they would swing by the Military Police barracks and try to speak with Eren Yeager. After that, they would head to the Council chambers to discuss what was to be done with the boy.

What was to be done ...

His brow furrowed. At worst, Zackly would bow to panic and order the boy's execution, and that, at least, still had some value to humanity: his remains could be analyzed. He could push for Hange to play a role in the dissection; who better to take part? The rewards of enlisting the boy in the Survey Corps, however, greatly outweighed anything he could do posthumously.

Besides, Erwin wanted to understand how Eren had kept his secret for fifteen long years, how he had transformed, and why he had waited until now to do so. He wanted to know if the Colossal and Armoured titans could be humans, too, and if they could be hiding within the walls. How else could the Colossal have appeared again, when the Survey Corps had headed south from Trost without seeing it coming? Besides, the attack had been coordinated with intelligence far surpassing any abnormal they had ever encountered.

If that were the case, there might be others within the walls with the same abilities. *Did Sahlo know any of this? Do the Wallists?*

“Room’s clean. Let me do the socks,” Levi said, kneeling in front of the drawer.

“Mm,” Erwin said, still lost in thought.

Levi began to lay the socks in the drawer, re-folding the occasional pair. “Lots to think about.”

“Indeed.” Erwin closed the closet door, then knelt behind Levi as he worked, pressing a kiss to the back of his neck.

“Hey. No more bite marks.”

“I’ll be gentle.” He tugged the cravat out of the way and pressed a soft kiss to the line down the centre of Levi’s neck. He had missed nuzzling this line. “Sorry for marking you up.”

“I didn’t stop you.” Levi glanced back at him. “How’s your back?”

“Stings a little, but it should heal fine.” He placed a gentle kiss at the base of Levi’s undercut. “I’d never seen you that wild.” He looped his arms around the small ribcage, his palms feeling the abdominal muscles through Levi’s shirt.

“You’re one to talk.” Erwin’s palms slid lower, and Levi sucked in a sharp breath. “Hey. You keep doing that, we’re not going to leave here anytime soon.”

The idea was tempting, but they didn’t have enough time. Erwin wanted to linger, to reconnect properly, to give Levi the careful attention he deserved. He pulled away.

“I didn’t really want you to stop,” Levi said. “I was just being difficult.”

“I know, but we should get going anyway.” Erwin stood, carefully adjusting his pants. “I want to speak with Eren Yeager before our meeting, if we can.”

“Okay.”

“Maybe we can pick this up again after the meeting?”

“Yeah.”

Erwin bent down and pressed a soft kiss to the narrow lips. He began to pull away, but Levi’s arms looped around his neck, pulling him in again. Their lips parted, and he felt a soft tongue.

He broke away. “Levi—”

“I know. Let’s go.”

By the time they exited the lobby and reached the street, Erwin’s breaths had finally returned to their normal cadence. Levi was following

on his right side, about half a step behind him. His mouth was in a tight line. Clearly, he was still uncomfortable about facing Eren Yeager. Erwin knew he was asking a lot: trusting a titan went against every reasonable human instinct, and Levi was a man who trusted his instincts above all else.

The front desk clerk greeted them at the Military Police headquarters, and informed them that Nile was at his desk. As they strode down the hall, Erwin cast a quick glance into the office where Sahlo had, not long ago, worked a couple days a week. The shelves were bare, the possessions already gathered for the estate sale. Erwin felt a hollow, echoing space inside him, as empty as the office. Intelligence, manipulation: all they gained a person meant nothing in the end. Everything would always be sold to the highest bidder. Would this be his office, after that long-overdue moment when all his life choices caught up to him?

He didn't think he had shown any indication of his thoughts, but Levi said bitterly, "You miss him?"

"Nothing quite that noble, I'm afraid. Just thinking about all my possessions being stripped from my office when I die."

He expected a reprimand for mentioning his own death, but Levi only said, "If you go before me, I'll clean it myself. And I'll take care of any sensitive information, too."

Maybe that's what the attack on Trost had done to them: death had become less abstract, more tangible, even for Survey Corps members. Or maybe, this time around, they had started their relationship with the pragmatic understanding about just how fragile their lives really were. What had, the first time around, been a subject of great stress between them was now something they could casually discuss.

We've grown together, Erwin thought, reaching out to give a friendly grip to Levi's shoulder. *Even while we were apart. Maybe even because of it.*

They stepped into Nile's doorway. Nile was sitting at his desk, frantically flipping through documents.

"Come in."

He didn't seem angry. Erwin hoped that meant he was finally forgiven for his apparent flirtation with Marie, but he knew Nile's grudges ran long and deep. More likely, he was just distracted.

They closed the door and sat down. Levi was uncharacteristically quiet—no comments about Nile's beard or messy office.

"The boy's still in a coma," Nile said. "We interviewed his child-

hood friends, two trainees by the name of—" He flipped open a file. "Armin Arlert and Mikasa Ackerman."

Erwin cast Levi a sidelong glance, remembering a strange reaction when Berit had mentioned Mikasa Ackerman last year, but if Levi felt anything, he didn't show it.

"They were protective of him," Nile continued, "especially the girl. The two of them seem to have a family history—her parents died about six or seven years back, so the Yeager family took her in. We know a few things for sure: first, Eren Yeager's mother was killed in the destruction of Shiganshina, and his father went missing, presumed killed in the incident."

"Dr. Grisha Yeager," Erwin said.

Nile eyed him. "You've heard of him?"

"He was a prominent doctor during the plague, and he had a reputation around Shiganshina because of it. On many occasions, he attended to our injuries at the base, and he was old friends with Keith Shadis."

Nile nodded. "He was known around here, too. Spent a lot of time treating people in the Capital. Regardless, he left the kid with a key. His friends weren't too clear about what it is, but they seemed to think it was important. The girl got decidedly upset when we confiscated it. Sounds like Pixis wants to discuss it at the meeting—he developed a rapport with Eren Yeager and got some information out of him while they were sealing the hole in Trost." His lip curled. "Says he wants all Commanders present for that discussion."

"I see," Erwin said, wondering what new piece of the puzzle awaited them.

"Anyway," Nile said, leaning back in his chair, "the trainees also say Eren Yeager had never shown signs of being a titan before the attack on Trost."

"I see," Erwin said again. "So his power manifested itself for the first time during the attack?"

"Convenient," Levi muttered.

Nile nodded. "I agree. Convenient that he'd be able to control a power like that right away, at just the right time to save himself. One of Pixis' senior soldiers, Rico Brzenska, is writing up a full report on the incident. We'll know what happened soon enough, without any bias from his childhood friends."

Erwin leaned forward across the table. "Nile, I'm curious about

your gut feeling about all this.”

Nile snorted. “Since when do you care about feelings?”

“We rely on them in the field more often than you might think.”

“Fine. I think a titan who infiltrated humanity is a danger—not just in terms of the damage he might do physically, but in terms of the way he’s polarizing people within the walls. His appearance could lead to civil unrest. He should be executed and then examined. That way, we might finally be able to learn something of use about the titans from him. It’s not like your group’s research is getting us anywhere.”

The snarky tone caught Erwin off guard; his brows rose.

Levi beat him to a response. “What was that, shitbeard?”

Nile turned to Levi, face cold. “You’re on your fourth or fifth captured titan now, and every time, Erwin comes and delivers us the same story: every titan is a bit different, and the flesh dissolves before it can be analyzed, and we need more examples to draw firm conclusions. While your research team was busy playing doctor with your test subjects, we almost lost Wall Rose.” The dark gaze shifted to Erwin. “I can’t emphasize that enough, Erwin: *we almost lost Wall Rose*. The Interior is panicking. If we let the populace believe we’re siding with a titan, there will be anarchy. Rebellion. And if we turn on our own people, these walls will do *nothing* to protect humanity from annihilation. You can pretend the titans are the greatest threat to humanity all you like, but we both know that’s not true.”

The worst part of Nile talking about the Interior was that he was correct. Tensions between the different classes were only increasing as resources dwindled, and a mass panic could easily spark a civil war.

Erwin spent the majority of his time gazing outside the walls; Nile gazed into them. It was why they worked so well in their respective posts. But gazing inside wasn’t going to protect everyone, not this time. They needed Wall Maria and the harvest lands. Starvation could easily spark a civil war, too.

He stood. “Thank you for your time, Commander. We will see you shortly at the meeting.”

Levi stood, too.

Nile looked surprised. “Well?”

“Well what?”

“What do you think we should do with this titan kid?”

“I’ll let you know when I’m sure of that myself.” Erwin nodded a farewell.

Once they were far enough down the hallway to be out of earshot, Levi said, "Well that was bullshit."

"What?"

"You know exactly what you want to do with the titan kid."

Erwin opened the door and let Levi through first. "We have to be flexible. For one thing, Nile's concerns about the Interior aren't unfounded. For another, it sounds like Commander Pixis is keeping some information up his sleeve for the meeting. But that could be a good thing. If he wants to make sure I'm present to hear this information, given that he has already built a strong relationship with the boy, there's a good chance this information is something that will help us." He led Levi down the street to one of their favourite tea shops. "We have a good chance at succeeding. We just have to play our cards right."

"We?"

"You will have a very important role to play, Levi, if everything proceeds as I expect. But first, we need to acquire Eren Yeager, and to do that, he has to consent to join us."

"He has to wake up first," Levi said.

"True."

They had lunch, chatting idly about the upcoming recruiting presentation for the new trainees.

"Do you think anyone's going to want to join after what they just experienced?" Levi asked. "They went from being pampered brats to watching their comrades get eaten in less than a day, within the safety of the walls. That's even worse than going on a first expedition. I wouldn't be surprised if half of them deserted entirely."

"Not all of the 104th were present for the attack," Erwin said. "I'm sure it will impact the southern squad, yes, but it remains to be seen if the other squads will panic. Besides, the attack might fuel their resolve. The southern squad saw their friends and their city dying in front of them. Maybe they'll feel inspired to offer up their hearts to prevent it from happening again."

"Maybe."

Levi didn't look convinced. Neither was Erwin.

As the bells rang eleven, they settled into the Council chambers. It was strange to see them so empty. Pixis and Anka were present, as well as a woman with white-blond hair and glasses. Presumably, she was Rico Brzenska.

Across from them sat Nile, accompanied by a Military Police

Captain by the name of Jakob, and a surprise—Berit. She beamed at Erwin and Levi.

“Is the Commander-in-Chief joining us?” Erwin asked as he took a seat next to Berit.

“No,” Pixis said. “He’s otherwise occupied. He’ll be doing formal sign-off on whatever we ultimately decide, but he wanted us to see if we could reach an agreement without him.”

“I see.”

“Ideally, Eren would have some hand in the decision about his own fate, but he’s still in a coma. I’ll let Rico walk us through the events in Trost, then tell you about my discussions with the boy. Berit is here to speak with us about Eren’s personality and background. Then, we’ll discuss.”

Berit bumped his shoulder. “Glad you boys are still alive and kicking.”

“You, too,” Erwin said with a smile, but before they could continue the conversation, Pixis called the room to order.

Rico stood and began to dictate the events that had transpired. Trost had fallen shortly after the Survey Corps had departed. Erwin’s eyes narrowed. *They knew about our strength and wanted us out of the picture. They waited until we were far enough out that we wouldn’t be able to swoop back in and save Trost.*

Rico continued: the military had immediately deployed all available soldiers, including the southern 104th Trainees Squad, while civilians had been evacuated. The losses had been devastating and the battle had seemed futile, until a group of the 104th had noticed a titan fighting against other titans.

“The rogue titan helped them reunite their fragmented squad,” Rico said, “and it was arguably integral in suppressing the titan attack.”

After the titan had eventually collapsed from exhaustion, Eren Yeager had erupted from the weak spot of its neck.

Was this somehow related to all titans having a weak spot in the same location? Erwin briefly considered that all titans had human drivers at the helm, but rejected the idea when he remembered Hange’s experiments. The weak spot, when sliced open, had never shown anything unusual—certainly not a human.

“Eren Yeager attracted the attention of Garrison Captain Kitts Woermann,” Rico continued, “who ordered the execution of the boy on the spot, but Eren Yeager’s friends Mikasa Ackerman and Armin Arlert

stood in the way. When the Captain ordered his soldiers to fire through them, Eren Yeager transformed himself into a half-formed titan to shield his friends from the blast. Armin Arlert was then able to talk down the Captain. At that point, Commander Pixis overheard and intervened. He devised the plan to move the boulder to plug the hole, while the rest of us supported Eren.

“At first, Eren, in his titan form, was uncontrollable and violent—so much so that he attacked his friend, Mikasa Ackerman. Shortly thereafter, he seemed to gain cognizance. He moved the boulder and successfully blocked the wall. Upon completion of this task, Eren was too exhausted to continue. Fortunately, that was when the Survey Corps returned to help clean up the remaining titans. The boy fell into a coma and was taken into custody by the Military Police. His friends were questioned, then released. And that brings you up to the present.”

“Thank you, Rico,” Pixis said, his eyes twinkling. He seemed more amused than alarmed by the situation. “While I was speaking with Eren, he filled me in on some interesting details. Namely, although Dr. Yeager went missing after the fall of Wall Maria, Eren has a vague, shattered memory of running into his father in a refugee camp. His father gave him a key to their basement in Shiganshina, then used a syringe to inject something into Eren, and then his memories end.”

The room tilted. Erwin saw a syringe descending toward his arm in the carriage, Papa’s distressed face, *“Erwin, never forget—”*

Levi’s voice jerked him back to the present: “That sounds like bullshit.” He had slumped into his chair, his arms folded over his chest.

“No,” Erwin said firmly. “There are injectable substances that can block memories.”

All eyes shifted to him.

“It makes sense that Dr. Yeager would have access to such a substance,” Erwin continued, “especially if he was giving his son important information he felt he had to hide.” His eyes shifted to Pixis. “Being able to transform into a titan is a large secret in itself, but it sounds as if there was more—what is the significance of the basement key?”

Pixis set the key on the table. “Allegedly, the basement contains important information about the titans.”

Erwin’s stomach dropped. “What sort of information?” Around the table, others began to murmur, too.

“Eren was very insistent the basement was the key to a great truth about the titans—perhaps their origin, or perhaps the reason why

they attack us."

"What truth?" Nile snorted. "They're giant, man-eating monsters and that's the end of it."

But Erwin was spiralling into himself again. *The truth about the titans. The truth about this world. I can finally know—*

A sharp kick connected with his ankle. He turned to Levi, who was looking at him with a perplexed sneer. Erwin realized he was smiling; he quickly pulled his face back to neutral, but his heart was still racing.

We have to get that key. Even if we don't succeed in getting Eren, I have to get that key.

"Berit," Nile said, "you've known the kid for three years. Do you have any insight into all this?"

"Eren Yeager is honest and driven, to a fault," she said. "And idealistic. He was constantly spouting off to the others about defeating the titans, to the point that it often created tension."

"But he *is* a titan."

"There's no indication he knew it at the time. Aside from raw idealism, he has never displayed any exceptional skills, and it was pure tenacity that landed him in fifth place in his class ranking. I should also note he kept the key around his neck every single moment of every day. He sincerely believes every word of the story he gave you, Commander Pixis."

Erwin remembered a detail from their discussion the year before. "You said he was intent on joining the Survey Corps?"

"Yes, he talked about it nonstop from the moment he set foot in the training camp."

"Oh no," Nile said, as if coming to a grim realization. "You want to recruit him. Erwin—"

"Think about it, Nile," Erwin interrupted. "If we can harness his titan power to block the hole in Wall Maria, we will save hundreds—maybe even thousands—of lives, including your own soldiers."

"He's a titan." Nile looked exasperated. "What if he's some sort of spy?"

"A spy for the titans?" Levi said, lip curling. "I know you've never seen a titan in your life, pubeface, but they're giant, dumb beasts. Your average stray cat is smarter than a titan. We've only ever encountered one who could speak, and it said maybe three words before it lost its mind again. If the brat's a spy, who the hell is he reporting to?"

“Levi.” Nile’s gaze locked onto him, pleading. “Tell me the boy’s story doesn’t sound too convenient.”

“I won’t, because it does. I think he’s full of shit, and I think he’s a monster. But if he’s useful to humanity, maybe that’s okay. We all know the old plan to reclaim Wall Maria was going to be a suicide mission. If this kid can pick up a rock and drop it at the gate, it saves us countless lives. We’re running out of time to be cautious—food stocks are getting lower, and people are getting restless. You’re always talking about civil unrest. What do you think’s going to happen when we run out of food?”

“It’s too dangerous,” Nile said.

“You’d rather we execute and dissect the most powerful weapon that has ever crossed our path?” Erwin said.

“Yes, and then learn from him. You two say we’re running out of time to be cautious, but I say things are getting so precarious, we have to be even more cautious than ever.”

“This sounds like something that won’t be resolved here after all,” Pixis said. “We’ll have to get Zackly involved.”

“How about a court-martial?” Erwin asked. “Once Eren Yeager is awake. Nile and I will prepare our cases, and Zackly can take Eren’s own testimony into consideration. Now that all our intentions are out in the open, it should be easy to provide logical arguments for both sides.” Since Eren was allegedly so keen to join the Survey Corps, Erwin suspected they would be aligned and could sway Zackly’s opinion.

“Fine,” Nile said, looking away. “If you finally want to do something by the books, then I won’t discourage you.”

“Then it’s settled,” Pixis announced. “What shall we do with the key? I recommend we give it to the one Commander who has a chance of seeing Shiganshina soonest, regardless of what happens to Yeager.”

A shiver ran down Erwin’s spine, but he managed to keep his tone neutral: “I would be honoured to hold onto it.”

Nile shrugged. “Makes sense.”

Pixis slid the key across the table. Erwin slipped it into the inner pocket of his jacket; it clinked against another metal object that had recently taken up residence there.

As they returned to the hotel, Levi scowled at Erwin. “You know I’m only entertaining all this because I trust you, right?”

“You’ve made your distrust of him very clear.” Erwin considered. “Use that to your advantage. When he awakens, be suspicious. Ask him

tough questions and be as harsh as you see fit. I don't want you to believe in this plan just because I do—I want you to find reasons to believe in it yourself. This is too important for blind trust."

"Okay," Levi said quietly.

When they reached the room, he flopped onto the bed. "Is that my role in all this?"

"Hm?" Erwin said, pulling the key out of his pocket to examine it.

"To be harsh with him. To scare him into loyalty."

"Not necessarily. From the sounds of it, he's already loyal to us to begin with. Your role will be to demonstrate to others that you can control him. There's always the possibility that he'll lose control—it happened briefly in Trost, and he could become a major threat on the field. We need to pair him with someone who can take him down if needed."

"I see." Levi eyed him. "So you want me to be his babysitter."

"In a way. You're the only one I can trust to take him on."

"Okay," Levi said. "I'll do it."

"We have to ensure we can gain custody of him first." Erwin sat at the table. "I have some preliminary work to do. Could you please deliver a message to Berit that we'd like to meet her for dinner? She should be staying at the Military Police barracks. We'll meet at that restaurant behind the barracks that sells stew."

"Maybe I'll train in their gym for a bit, too." That made sense; between the carriage ride and the meeting, Levi was probably restless.

"Then we'll all meet at the restaurant at six o'clock," Erwin said. "Send for me if Eren Yeager wakes up while you're there."

❧

Shortly after six o'clock, Levi stepped into a small restaurant that smelled of mutton and cooking onions; the room was small and dimly lit, with cloth tablecloths. Erwin and Berit sat at a table near the back with an open bottle of wine.

As he sat down, Berit gave him a smile. "Been a long time."

"Yeah," Levi said. Erwin had left him the seat that gave him a clear view of the door. He sat in it and scanned their surroundings. Everyone was dressed in finery, and even though Levi was in a collared shirt and dress pants himself, he was certain he stood out. He straight-

ened his cravat. “Am I late?”

“I’ve only just arrived myself,” Erwin said. “Would you care for a glass of wine?”

Levi nodded, flipping open the menu. “What are their best dishes?” he asked, pretending he had a refined palate like the rest of the diners.

After some discussion, the server came and took their orders. Levi took a swig of wine and subtly swished it around his mouth as he scanned the room again. He noticed Berit watching him; he swallowed.

“How’s the brat?” he asked.

“Whiny and noisy, and my kid’s annoying, too,” Berit said, and then she laughed at her own joke while Levi wrinkled his nose. “No, Silas and my child are both well, thank you, Levi. They live with me on the base now.”

“You’re still happy there?” Erwin asked. “No desire to return to the front lines?”

“That life isn’t for me anymore, Erwin. My goals are less altruistic these days.” She leaned forward. “But I can still provide you with valuable information. Off the record, of course.”

“Of course,” Erwin said quietly. “Perhaps we should save that until after the meal. If we have any eavesdroppers, we want them to hear a mundane conversation until they’ve been convinced there is nothing special going on.”

“Still thinking ten steps ahead, I see,” she said with a smile.

“You mean paranoid,” Levi said, and Erwin gave him a good-natured nudge under the table.

A large pot of mutton stew and a basket of bread arrived. As Levi ate, Erwin and Berit prattled a lot about Shadis, and what the Trainee Corps had been like pre-fall-of-Maria, and other boring memories. Levi helped himself to a third glass of wine and kept watching the door, half-expecting Nile to burst in at any moment to try to accuse them of illicitly gathering information for the court-martial.

Then Berit said something that drew his attention: “And what about the two of you? Any wedding bells in the future?”

Erwin started coughing, as if he had choked on his bread. Levi just stared at her, expression flat.

Her face fell. “Oh. Should I not have—”

“It’s fine,” Erwin wheezed. He took a swig of water, then cleared his throat a few times, wiping tears from his eyes. “My apologies; that

caught me off guard.”

An awkward silence descended on the table. Berit sat a little too tall, refilling her wine glass.

“Things were complicated for a while,” Erwin said quietly.

Levi’s body tensed as he waited to see how Erwin would describe their relationship.

“Oh no, I’m sorry,” Berit said. “Did you break up?”

Levi scanned the crowd, concerned they were talking too openly about something this private. No one seemed to be paying attention, and the ambient noise would make them difficult to overhear.

“We separated for several months,” Erwin said. “Our duties pull us in many directions, and require us to walk side-by-side as colleagues more than lovers, particularly in the public eye. During a period of particularly intense political scheming, we came to realize we had left ourselves more vulnerable than we had intended, so we took a step back. And yet ... ” His eyes locked onto Levi. “We’ve recently come to realize that being apart leaves us vulnerable, too, in different ways. It’s complicated, so we’re taking things one day at a time until we strike the right balance.”

“I understand,” Berit said. “You two have chosen a difficult path. At least your priorities are aligned. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry it’s so complicated.”

Levi’s heart was pounding in his chest as he felt himself drawn into Erwin’s gaze, but then Erwin looked away and gave a polite smile.

“Enough about us. I think it’s safe to begin speaking about information pertinent to the court-martial.”

Berit nodded and wiped the last bit of stew from her bowl with a piece of bread.

Erwin leaned close to Levi. “Any threats?”

“Seems safe. I’ll keep an eye out.”

“Okay.” Berit paused to wash down the bread with a sip of wine. “I didn’t want to mention this in the meeting, particularly when they were discussing whether or not Eren is a threat to humanity, but his passion to fight the titans is more intense than I let on. I played it off like he gives inspirational speeches here and there, but these are not just little speeches. They’re impassioned rants, verging on aggressive. He has come to blows with the other Trainees more than once, and there were a few times when Shadis considered sending him into isolation to cool down.”

"I see," Erwin said, leaning forward a little. "What sets him off?"

"Complacency among his peers, mainly," Berit said, "but he's also fiercely protective of his friends Mikasa and Armin. Those three kids have a bond unlike any I've ever seen outside the Survey Corps. They've been through hell together, and it shows. They would die to protect each other."

"I see," Erwin said again; by the way his eyes were losing focus, Levi could tell he was formulating a plan.

Berit talked a bit more about the obstacles Eren Yeager had overcome, and his family history. Then she moved on to how fervently he protected the key to his basement.

"Do you know what's in the basement?" Levi asked.

"No. Not even Eren seems to."

Levi glanced at Erwin, whose eyes were sparkling. He frowned. The idea of that basement had sparked something inside Erwin, and he couldn't yet put his finger on what it was. It seemed, to him, a ridiculous thing to put one's faith in: a basement that might or might not contain all the answers about the titans, according to a titan-boy who claimed to have conveniently lost his memories. Usually, Erwin was more logical than that.

By the time a second bottle of wine was empty, Berit had answered all their questions.

"It's late," she said, standing. "But it was good to see you. Good luck with the court-martial." They exchanged hugs.

"You won't be coming?" Erwin asked.

She shook her head with a grimace. "If they put him to death, I'll break down in front of everyone. Besides, I've given all the information I can." Her jaw set. "You guys save him, okay?"

"We'll do our best," Erwin said with a solemn nod.

Even though it was still early, the streets were nearly empty. Levi frowned. Mitras lost more and more of its lustre each time they visited. Homeless people lined the sidewalks, gaunt eyes tracking them as they passed. The Military Police tried to keep the homeless sequestered in the Underground, but many of the poorer merchant and servant families of Wall Sina were drifting to the streets. And why should they go to the Underground, when they had known sunlight all their lives? Why should anybody? Heat tossed in Levi's chest. He glanced up at Erwin, but he appeared to be lost in thought.

Once they were safely in the hotel room, Erwin finally spoke. "I

have determined what we must do at the court-martial. But first, we must speak with Eren Yeager. We need to make certain he's as idealistic and temperamental as Berit says."

"Temperamental?"

"Yes." Erwin sat on the mattress and pulled the basement key out of his pocket, studying it. Levi sat beside him.

"Make anything of it?" Erwin asked, holding it out.

"Because I can pick locks, you think I'm an expert on keys?"

"That's not how it works?"

"No. Looks like a shitty old key to me." Levi glanced up at him. "So what's this plan for the court-martial?"

"Well, it's not much of a plan unless I can verify Eren Yeager is the boy Berit claims him to be." Erwin pocketed the key again; it gave a soft clink. "In the meantime, I sent for Hange, Mike, and a few of their squad members. We need to have a strong presence at the court-martial to demonstrate that we have a united front. We'll never succeed if Nile is able to convince Zackly I'm acting on my own without any support from my regiment."

"You're overestimating Nile's brains."

Erwin smiled. "Perhaps."

"Can I ask you something?" Levi asked.

"Of course."

"Why do you already trust this kid's story?"

Erwin's smile shifted to him and warmed. "Well, I don't think 'trust' is the right word. Did I 'trust' you when I first recruited you to the Survey Corps?"

"No," Levi said. "And you shouldn't have. I was trying to kill you."

"I trusted my instincts: your skills were so invaluable to humanity that they were worth any price, even my life. That's the way I feel about Eren Yeager now: his skills are so invaluable that I have no choice but to trust that everything will work out if we recruit him. Perhaps one day, he and I will come to trust each other as well as you and I did."

"Not exactly the same way, I hope," Levi said dryly.

"Levi, he's fifteen years old." Erwin turned to him and added after a moment, "I know you're just joking, but you understand that I still consider you to be humanity's greatest hope, right?"

Levi stared blankly at him. "What?"

"Eren Yeager's skills are incredibly important, yes, and he is an important key to humanity's victory." Erwin leaned closer. "But I've seen

you on the field: you could easily fell twenty titans before collapsing, just like he did, and you don't need to be a titan to do it. Besides, the way you motivate and unite the Survey Corps—the way you're a hero to humanity—has a ripple effect that invigorates everyone around you."

Levi's cheeks were warm. He cleared his throat and looked away. "I'm just a murderer with a couple of fancy knives."

"I know you aren't comfortable with all the attention that being Humanity's Strongest brings you, but I'm worried that having some of that attention shifted to Eren Yeager might make you uncomfortable, too."

"You make me sound like I can't make up my damned mind about what I want," Levi muttered, even though it was true.

"What I'm trying to get at is this." He felt Erwin's whisper against his ear, soft and warm: "Let me show you what you mean to me."

Levi was certain his face was beet red. His hands clawed into the duvet. "Don't you have work to do?"

"I have contacts running background checks on the Yeager family; I'll be meeting with them tomorrow morning to gather our report. The boy himself isn't awake yet. We've tapped all our current resources, and I wouldn't mind time to digest what we've learned. As strange as it sounds, I think we find ourselves with a night off."

"Huh," Levi said.

Erwin reached out a curled hand, unfurling it over Levi's thigh. "I know things are still a bit awkward between us, but if you're willing ..." His fingertips grazed Levi's thigh, touch so gentle that Levi held his breath. "Just know that I don't have any expectations of you, even with what happened between us the other night. We can take things slowly, if you're more comfortable with it."

Levi snorted. "Shit has never been slow between us."

"Well, it can be this time, if you want it to be."

"And what if I don't?"

Erwin looked up at him, eyelids heavy. "I'm willing to go as far as you want." The fingertips began to ease their way up Levi's thigh.

Their eyes held, lips parted, as Erwin's hand edged higher, higher. As he reached the top of the inseam, he cupped Levi, warm and firm. Levi let out a shuddering breath. So warm, his hand was so warm ... Then the fingers curled in, and Erwin was feeling him through his pants, their eyes still holding, still heavy. Levi's pants were getting uncomfortable, but he was locked in place, that intense blue gaze trickling through

his blood like ice.

Erwin tightened his grip around him and stroked him through the fabric, and Levi gasped, his head lolling back. He felt the bed shift, felt a warm mouth press to his throat. A rumble sounded against his skin. Had Erwin's voice always been that deep? It reverberated through him, settled between his legs, burning as hot as his hand.

Then Erwin's hand lifted. Levi whimpered and thrust up after it, but then felt Erwin working at his cravat. It slid off, and a tongue slid down to his collarbone with a hot breath that made him shiver. The straps across his torso loosened and fell away. He opened his eyes and saw Erwin unbuttoning his shirt, one button at a time, following with his mouth.

He parted his legs, and, on unspoken cue, Erwin knelt between them. He reached the waistband of his pants and kissed Levi's navel, working at his belt buckle, then the buttons of his pants.

“Fuck,” Levi whispered, running a hand through Erwin’s hair. A skiff of blond hair tumbled across the broad forehead. How long had it been since he had seen him, really seen him, with his hair dishevelled? The blue eyes flicked up to him, the angle accentuating the severe planes of his face. Levi cursed again, hand curling into a fist.

Then the fabric of his pants parted, and his waistband shifted, and cool air hit him. He forced his eyes to stay open as Erwin circled his thumb and forefinger around the base of his cock, standing him upright. The too-severe gaze lingered, as if he were inspecting him.

Levi groaned. “Don’t tease me.”

“I think I will, just for a little longer.” Erwin leaned in close and breathed hot air from base to tip.

Fuck! Levi gripped his hair hard, thrusting toward him. “Erwin!”

Erwin’s mouth closed around the tip, and he felt a conflicted warmth flood his body: relaxation and tension at the same time. He tried to speak, but a wordless cry escaped instead.

Erwin pulled away and tapped his hips. “Lift your hips.”

Too distracted to question him, Levi obeyed, and he felt his pants, belts and underclothes slide down to his ankles. A palm pressed between his legs, cupped him and gently tugged. Levi heard an odd, high-pitched noise leave his mouth, but his mind was too thick with fog to feel embarrassment.

“Like this?” Erwin rumbled, tugging a bit harder. Light flashed before Levi’s closed eyelids, and he felt himself throb. Then Erwin’s

hand and mouth were stroking him in the same rhythm. His head rolled back on his shoulders, his hips rising. He was tempted to give in, but no, there was still more he wanted to do.

“Wait,” he gasped.

Erwin pulled away just in time, leaving him right on the edge. Levi’s head kept rolling as he fought to pull back. The glow finally faded enough for him to open his eyes.

Erwin was staring intently at him. “You had something else in mind?”

“Take off your clothes,” Levi whispered, because he was too clumsy to undress him himself.

Erwin stood and undressed. When his pants came off, Levi saw he wasn’t the only one on edge.

“Bring that over here.”

Erwin stepped closer, and Levi dropped to his knees on the floor to taste him. Fuck, he had missed the taste, this fullness in his mouth and throat. Erwin’s palms settled over Levi’s ears, his hips tense and just barely rocking.

Let yourself go, Levi thought, sucking harder, pulling him in deeper. He heard a low groan, felt one of the hands roughly slide into his hair.

He pulled away and stood, intending to guide him to the bed, but Erwin surprised him, lunging down for a kiss. Their tongues moved against each other, deep and aggressive. Levi grabbed the blond hair to pull him in closer, and he felt a broad hand grip his ass.

The kiss broke, both of them gasping for air. Erwin’s skin was flushed and glowing. Levi’s hands slid down to Erwin’s ass and he grabbed, pulling hard. His thumbs slid to centre, grazing the surface, making clear what he wanted.

“I see,” Erwin said, approving.

“Too far?”

Erwin kissed the tip of his nose. “I washed before dinner, just in case.”

Levi stood on his toes to steal one more kiss. When he pulled away, he said, “Bend over the end of the bed.”

Erwin complied. Levi eagerly knelt behind him. The view was even more beautiful than he remembered. He buried his face in warm, fuzzy skin, breathing in, tasting him. He felt Erwin’s deep voice rumble through him.

Come on. Curse for me. Maybe Levi had love bites on his neck, but Erwin hadn't dropped his guard last time, not fully. He wanted him rambling curse words and bucking back against him. He licked with the flat of his tongue and heard a small groan, probed and heard it rise. *Come on!* He kissed and moaned into the flesh, and Erwin echoed him, hips beginning to tilt.

Then he finally gave in: the blond head dropped, forehead to his forearms, and Erwin thrust back against Levi with a soft, "Fuck!"

The rush made Levi dizzy. He slowed, teasing him. The curses began to flow. He forced his hand between Erwin and the mattress to grab him; the hips lifted to give him better access. He could feel dampness, and he wasn't sure if Erwin was really turned on, or it was Levi's drool dripping down the length of him. Either prospect was surprisingly enticing.

"Levi." Erwin's voice was so high and soft that it was barely recognizable as his.

Levi pulled away, and he heard a sound of protest that was almost a sob.

"I just need to get lube." He strode to the trunk. There was the oil, in the side pocket where they had always kept it, as if no time had passed. As he walked back to Erwin, he considered the enormity of what they were about to do. Maybe they had shared one desperate fuck, but this was far more important than that. This was the end of months of pain and longing.

By the time he reached the bed again, he was flaccid.

Erwin had rolled onto his back, perhaps feeling a bit too exposed with his ass in the air. His face was red and splotchy, his lips swollen. Levi knelt the bed and bent down to kiss them.

When he pulled away, Erwin's hand clumsily reached out to cup his cheek. Levi turned his face into it and kissed his palm.

"This may sound odd, but I'm feeling ..." Erwin paused. "I'm not sure if 'shy' is the right word, but it's close."

Levi's chest tightened. "Are things still a bit fucked up between us?"

"To be fair, things were never fucked up between us. They were fucked up *around* us."

"Well, there's nothing around us now except a hotel room." That wasn't quite true. Their history followed them everywhere. How many ghosts of memories floated around them right now? He kissed the broad

palm again. “Look, there’s no rush. Be shy for now, if you want. Maybe you’re used to protecting yourself a bit now—we both had to for a while. It’s okay. You can be as closed off or open as you want. I’ve already seen every side of you, anyway, and you’ve seen every side of me.”

Erwin’s thumb grazed his cheekbone; his eyes were glassy. “Let’s keep going. I’m certain my shyness will pass once you’re inside me.”

“Is that how you want it?”

“I thought that’s what we agreed on.” The blush deepened. “Besides, it’s your turn.”

Levi raised a brow. “We take turns now?”

Instead of replying, Erwin withdrew his hand and rolled onto his stomach, looking expectantly at him. Levi’s breath caught. He slid a hand down Erwin’s spine and across his ass.

“You beautiful bastard,” he whispered as he felt himself getting hard again.

Erwin gave a pleased hum and lifted his hips a little. Levi uncapped the oil and drizzled it across the pads of his fingers, then nestled up against him, pressing a kiss between his shoulder blades.

Erwin’s body gave easily to his fingers, and Levi sank into him, feeling all his control sinking into that warmth with them. He barely managed to speak: “That okay?”

“Yes.” Erwin dragged the word into two syllables, the first voiced, the second a breath.

“You used toys a lot, didn’t you?”

“And my fingers.” The strain in the words suggested his eyes were squeezed shut.

Levi pressed deeper, reading the inside of his body. Erwin’s shoulders rounded; he pressed his face into the pillow.

“Did you think of me?” Levi asked, throaty.

The response was muffled by the pillow, but was clearly, “Every time.” Exactly what he wanted to hear. He slid further down the bed to press a kiss into Erwin’s tailbone, his free hand rediscovering the fine blond hairs in a band across his lower back.

Enough foreplay. He shrugged out of his unbuttoned dress shirt, hanging it on a chair. “I want to see your face.” That was important, this time.

Erwin clumsily rolled onto one elbow. “Lie down. I’ll ride you.”

And so Erwin sat above him, the lamplight framing his body in an aura as he rocked up and down. He grabbed Levi’s hands and laced

his fingers through it, guiding one palm to his chest, another down his torso. So beautiful, he was so beautiful, with that regal gaze, the rolling muscles of his abdomen. He looked like the paintings he had shown Levi in his forbidden book, a mythical human with wings and a wreath of light around his head.

“Holy Sina,” breathed Levi, who had never before had a religious thought in his life. “You are so fucking beautiful.”

Erwin slowed and bent down, arching his flexible back until his lips grazed Levi’s nose. “I love you,” he whispered.

Levi cried out, arching into him. He was so close, and Erwin was relentless, all warmth and suction, power and grace. Levi wrenched a hand free and grabbed him, and as he began to stroke, Erwin’s body jerked bolt upright, his face strained, blond hair hanging loose.

“Come for me,” Levi whispered, because he wanted to see this ethereal being reach its pinnacle state, wanted to bring him the pleasure he deserved.

“Ah—” was all Erwin managed to reply. His cheeks were red as he ground hard into Levi’s hips. A bead of sweat trailed down his temple, a spark of gold in the lamp light.

“Come on,” Levi said, sensing him holding back. “Louder.”

“Fuck!” blasted Erwin, and then he gave a hard thrust into his hand, waves rolling through every muscle in his torso. Levi felt energy surge through him so suddenly that he thought, for a moment, he would follow, too.

Erwin fell forward onto his elbows, then pulled off and rolled onto his side, breathing hard. His face was slack and soft, his eyes closed, his lips still a bit flared. Levi wondered, not for the first time, if anyone else had ever seen this side of Commander Erwin Smith, had even suspected it existed.

“Sorry,” Erwin rasped. “I need a minute.” He clumsily shoved the hair back off his forehead.

Levi rolled onto his side to study him, awed by how wrecked he looked. His finger slid down the bridge of Erwin’s nose. When he reached the thick lips, Erwin kissed it.

“Go back in.” The word vibrated his finger.

“Now? You’ll be too sensitive.”

“You do it all the time for me. Just use lots of oil.” The blond eyelashes parted, and Erwin’s gaze drifted to him, still unfocussed. “I want to feel you come inside me.”

Levi studied him and, seeing no reluctance in his eyes, decided he liked the idea. He drizzled oil along himself and gently stroked until it was a thick and even coat, his body erupting into goosebumps. He could already tell he wasn't going to be able to hang on for long.

Erwin had caught his breath; now he was staring fixedly at the stroking motion.

"You're already getting hard again," Levi said, surprised.

"Do you have any idea how beautiful you look glistening in the lamplight like that?"

Levi felt heat rise to his cheeks.

They worked together to put a pillow under Erwin's hips, and Levi lay on top of him, gently pushing his legs out of the way. He began to ease back inside, pausing. "That okay?"

"Yeah. Go deeper."

And then they were connected again.

Levi slowly began to move.

"It's okay," Erwin said, as if addressing the fears he hadn't voiced. "Harder." His arms and legs wrapped around Levi, a hand raking into the back of his hair. His grip was strong and protective. Safe.

Levi gasped. Connected, they were connected, and nothing could take that from them—not politicians, not the law, not even the titans. The world was nothing when the two of them were rocking together like this. He felt his conscious thought begin to unravel, one strand at a time, as his feral side swelled through him. He felt the glow of damp skin and body hair, licked Erwin's nipple and felt him clench tighter. Erwin was whispering words, and he couldn't hear them, but he heard their tone, as encouraging and safe as the grip that encased him.

He heard a sob leave his lips, felt his limbs begin to shake, and he drove the last few strokes hard. Erwin held him tightly, whispering him through every pulse.

Then the only sound was the blood rushing in his ears.

He took a deep breath as he came back to himself. Erwin's skin was sticky around him, and he felt the first fluttering of panic as he realized how many different fluids were coating their skin right now.

But Erwin was already unfolding, releasing him. Levi rolled onto his back, dropping a forearm over his eyes to block the lamplight.

"We can bathe together before bed, if you like," Erwin said softly, addressing his unspoken anxiety once again.

Levi nodded.

“When you’ve caught your breath.”

He nodded again, but he used his first breath to change the subject: “I love you.”

Erwin planted a soft kiss on his elbow. “Is it ...” It wasn’t like him to be so lost for words.

Levi let his arm fall to the side, squinting. Erwin sat on the bed beside him. With his hair in his face and his cheeks flushed, he looked especially boyish.

“Is it what?”

“Is it the same as before?” Erwin dragged his fingertips across Levi’s triceps. “As the last time we said it?”

“Love?”

“Yeah.”

The fingertips were getting too close to his armpit; Levi pulled away. “No. It’s different.” He couldn’t put it into words. “What about you?”

“It *is* different. Before, I was always holding a small part of myself back—considering possible outcomes, weighing our relationship against everything else.” Erwin’s hand settled on Levi’s chest, drawing slow circles in his chest hair. “Now, when you touch me, that side of me is finally silent. I feel free.”

Levi thought of how safe he felt in Erwin’s arms lately, and realized his own obsessive worries had finally been silent, too. His heart was warm and snug, as securely constrained as his body had been moments ago. Yes, this was different than it had been even a few months ago—no ache in his throat, no tightness in his chest. He cupped Erwin’s jaw and looked him solemnly in the eye.

“What does that look mean?” Erwin asked softly.

“Why do you always have to put everything into words?” countered Levi, shy.

“It’s how I make sense of the world around me.”

“Well, some things are bigger than words.”

Erwin’s throat bobbed. “I suppose they are.”

Their gaze held, and this time, Erwin’s hand closed over his, the blue eyes meeting his intensity.



The next day, Erwin worked on his notes for the court-martial

while Levi went to check on the status of Eren Yeager, who was still unconscious. *I hope he wakes up*, Levi thought, *or this will all have been a giant waste of time*.

After spending a couple hours training in the Military Police gym, he began to walk back to the hotel. He was surprised to see Erwin in plain clothes, sitting on a park bench next to a woman. They were in earnest conversation. Was this one of his contacts? Levi found a seat at another bench, waiting.

Once the woman left, Erwin approached him, holding a cloth bag. "Any luck?"

Levi shook his head. "They said he seems to be coming out of it a bit, but still hasn't woken up. Maybe this evening."

"Okay. We'll check back then. I have new information to share with you." Erwin began to walk toward the hotel again, and Levi fell into step behind him. Once they were inside, Erwin pulled out a chair at the table and sat down. Several papers lay strewn across its surface, the ink bottle still uncapped. Levi frowned and capped it, then began to tidy the papers.

Erwin didn't seem to notice; he pulled an envelope out of the cloth bag.

"An envelope?" Levi said. "I thought that bag was our lunch." His stomach was growling.

"There's lunch in here, too, but this is more important." He passed the bag to Levi, who rustled through it and pulled out a loaf of bread and some apple butter. As he began to prepare the bread, Erwin flipped through the file.

"What is it?" Levi asked.

"Eren Yeager and his friend Mikasa Ackerman had a brush with the law before Wall Maria fell." Erwin leaned back in his chair, folding his arms behind his head. "Dr. Yeager paid to have the incident struck from the records, but like our late friend Sahlo said, there is no such thing as a permanent secret."

Levi frowned at the mention of the lord. "What was their crime?" Petty theft, most likely. Child's play.

"Murder."

"Murder?"

"Three would-be kidnappers approached Mikasa Ackerman's family. Her mother was of a rare race called the 'Asian people'." He looked distracted for a moment; perhaps he was reminiscing about all the types

of people in the book he had shared at Christmas.

“And?” prodded Levi.

“I suppose they were hoping for a rare prize for the slave market or the sex trade. The clash didn’t go as the slavers were expecting. In the struggle, both parents were killed, but Eren Yeager happened to find them before the attackers could take the girl. Dr. Yeager was their family doctor and had been due for a visit, so the boy must have tracked them down somehow. He and the girl killed all three slavers, even though they were only nine years old.”

Levi snorted. “Good riddance.” He had met their kind in his day. Selling a human being as if they were a commodity was the worst crime a person could commit.

Erwin was giving him a strange look.

“What?”

“Perhaps such a thing is normal for children in the Underground,” Erwin said thoughtfully. “Above ground, it’s extremely rare for a child to take a life. This is a noteworthy aggression, and if Nile’s team is resourceful enough to find it, they may try to use it against the boy.”

“That’s not unexpected though, right? Berit already said this kid was aggressive as hell.”

“True.” Erwin made a quick note. “Perhaps this plays right into our narrative.”

“Our narrative?”

“That Eren Yeager is integral to humanity’s survival, but dangerous.” Erwin drummed his fingers on the table. “We want everyone in that courtroom to be afraid of him so they’ll be relieved by the idea of letting us take him outside the walls.”

Levi leaned back in his chair and tore off a chunk of bread. “And that I’m the only one who can handle him. Where’d you get this information, anyway?”

“My contacts. I have a few friends with access to military records who get bored easily. They are happy to exchange information for money, if they feel the information is for humanity’s benefit. Lord Hasek was part of their ring.”

“Stop talking about Sahlo,” Levi said irritably. “He’s dead.”

“I know, and there are power vacuums filling because of it, as we speak.”

He doesn’t like being unaware of what’s out there. Maybe that was why he was so suddenly fixated on Eren Yeager and the basement key: it

was all about regaining control over the world around him.

Shortly after lunch, a knock sounded at the door; it was Hange and Mike, who had travelled through the morning to reach Mitras. They would be staying at the Military Police barracks.

“You’re welcome to stay here,” Erwin said, and Levi narrowed his eyes. Hange had only caught them in the act once, years ago, and he still heard about it constantly.

“We’re fine in the barracks,” Hange said, glancing up at Mike, who was sniffing the air.

“Don’t do that,” Levi muttered, self-conscious.

“Things are going well,” Mike said with a smirk.

“Shut up. That’s fucking creepy.”

The four of them sat and sipped tea as Erwin summarized everything they knew so far. At the end of it, he handed Mike an envelope. “We’ve arranged for the two of you to question two of Eren Yeager’s childhood friends at five o’clock. Here are some questions you must cover; feel free to ask any others as you see fit. Levi and I are going to see if the boy himself is awake.”

Levi folded his arms over his chest. Hearing all the details back to back made the holes in Eren Yeager’s story seem that much larger. The kid conveniently remembered the key, but not what it was for. He remembered how to turn into a titan, but only when his life was about to end. Levi had heard many strange things in his lifetime—even stories of powers awakening even when all seemed lost. Hell, he had experienced such things for himself, and maybe his own memory wasn’t the greatest. But if this basement was so important, why had Dr. Yeager never shown it to his son? Why would he inject him with something without explaining what he was doing? It was all ridiculous.

“What’s wrong, Levi?” Erwin asked patiently.

“You know what’s wrong. Same as always. I don’t buy the brat’s story.” Levi slumped deeper in his chair.

“Maybe he doesn’t think we’re going to act in humanity’s best interest,” Hange said. “He sounds pretty passionate.”

Erwin’s gaze was probing deep into Levi; he shifted, uncomfortable. “What?”

“I know it’s natural to fear the titans,” Erwin said. “Any titan, even one that appears to be on our side. They’ve been responsible for enormous losses, and we’ve all felt them. But this boy could be the key to ending that forever. Imagine a world where humanity has enough

crops to feed future generations. Imagine the morale boost of reclaiming Wall Maria, of taking back what was lost. We have to believe he's on our side. If he is lying and untrustworthy, that means the titans are organized enough to have infiltrated our society. If that's the case, then humanity is in far worse shape than we thought."

"They probably already have," Hange said, solemn. "You've already come to the natural conclusion, too, haven't you?"

"Which conclusion?"

"That the Colossal and Armoured titans are humans who can shift into titans, too. If they came in through the wall, they could be walking among us as humans."

Levi's teeth clenched. "That's fucking grim."

"How did they know to wait until we were outside the Wall to attack?" Erwin wondered aloud. "They must be a part of the military."

The full implications suddenly hit Levi, and he sat upright. He curled his hands, feeling dampness in his palms. "You think they might be in the Survey Corps?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps another branch. It's plausible they either used forgery to work their way into the military, or went through training." Erwin paused, then stood. "This conversation can wait until we've had time to dig deeper. Right now, our biggest concern is getting Eren Yeager."

"What if he's in league with these other titans?" Levi said, wondering why the others looked so calm.

"Then we can keep an eye on him and, if necessary, take him down." Erwin's jaw was tight. "There are too many unknowns. We'll take it one step at a time. The safest thing is to watch his every move."

"Fine." Levi stood. "Erwin, let's go. I'm sick of wondering how it's going to play out."

8

When they arrived at the holding cell, the Military Police guard informed them that Eren Yeager was just waking up.

Perfect, Levi thought. *He'll be disoriented.* It was easier to get honest answers out of someone who was disoriented. There were ways to put a person in that state on purpose, but he doubted Erwin was interested in using them.

They moved to step past the guards, but one of them held out a

hand to block them. "Your permission hasn't come through."

Levi's eyes narrowed. "Permission?"

"From Commander Nile Dok."

"What? I was here this morning, and they didn't tell me we needed—"

"Levi, it's okay." Erwin's voice was as calm as his face. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small satchel. *Gold coins. He expected this.* Levi felt a simultaneous swell of admiration for his foresight, and frustration that they had to stoop to bribery.

The soldier began to count the coins. The other one looked nervous. "Don't take that! We'll get in so much shit if we're caught."

"Oh, relax, rookie. You'll get your share." The soldier stepped aside with a salute that jingled. "Commander. Captain."

Erwin walked past them and down to the end of the hallway; he settled into a chair facing the boy's cell. Levi leaned against the wall beside him, arms folding over his chest.

"First impression?" Erwin asked.

Levi wasn't sure what to think. He didn't know what he expected, but it wasn't a small boy in a stained shirt shackled to a bed. He had looked much more impressive emerging from a titan. *This dirty brat is humanity's hope?*

The boy groaned and twitched. *Nightmares.* Levi strained his ears, trying to listen for clues about what plagued his dreams. Boys and monsters had very different nightmares.

Instead, the boy jerked upright with a gasp.

"I imagine you have questions," Erwin said calmly, not even giving him a moment to breathe.

The boy stared at them, wild eyes coming into focus. Levi looked away, trying to communicate his disdain.

"Where am I?" the boy asked. He didn't sound like a monster. He sounded scared.

"You're in a dungeon," Erwin said, voice fluid. "You're currently in the custody of the Military Police. We were finally granted the right to see you a few minutes ago."

Granted the right, Levi thought with a sneer as Erwin continued to explain the situation. The boy seemed more aware now, but he still just seemed like a regular kid. Levi was surprised to discover he was disappointed.

But the passion Berit had spoken about leapt into the boy's eyes

when Erwin pulled out the basement key. The boy strained against his restraints, desperate to get it back.

Erwin's voice was so calm that it was unsettling: "The basement of the house where you were born, Dr. Yeager's house in Shiganshina District, holds the secret of the titans. Am I right?"

There was a slight strain to his voice; Levi's eyes flicked to Erwin. *What's going on in your head?* He felt the flickering onset of anxiety he had felt, years ago, when Erwin had first threatened Sahlo head-on. It was like the tension after cutting the gas on the 3DMG, the body preparing for a sudden drop.

"That's right," said the boy. "Or at least, that's what my father told me."

Levi's lip curled. "You have amnesia and your father's missing. That's a convenient story."

Erwin glanced at him. "Levi, we already reached the conclusion he has no reason to lie."

It was difficult to tell if the rebuke was sincere or part of the act, but then again, Levi didn't know if his own statement had been sincere, either. He had stepped into this room with his pulse racing, but now, the kid certainly didn't seem like a threat. He didn't look like he could transform into a beast and take out twenty titans, either.

Erwin clearly believed he was important, because he continued to speak with the boy, asking his intentions, explaining their plans to plug the hole and reclaim Wall Maria. The boy began to drip sweat, his eyes wide. Levi had seen this look enough times to know exactly what was happening: he was recalling past trauma, no doubt recalling the day Shiganshina had fallen.

This was it: his opportunity to provoke him, to try to make him aggressive. "Hey," Levi said flatly. "Answer the man, scum. What are your intentions?"

While others—even Levi, even Erwin—would be temporarily paralyzed by a flashback, the boy's teeth clenched, his body quivering. When he lifted his head, Levi's stomach dropped. He recognized the look that burned in his eyes.

Another boy who had never had a childhood, who had been forced to kill to survive at a young age. Who would kill again the instant he got a chance.

He really is a monster, and not just because he can shift into a titan.

"I want to join the Survey Corps," Eren Yeager said, voice sha-

king with anger, “and exterminate the titans.”

“Not bad,” Levi murmured, truly believing, for the first time, that they needed him on their side.

In his periphery, he saw Erwin glance at him, a look of approval on his face.

“Erwin, I’ll take responsibility for him. Tell that to the brass.” Levi strode forward and grabbed the bars. “I don’t trust him, and if he steps out of line or goes out of control, I’ll put him down. They should have no problem with this decision, because I’m the only one capable of stopping him.” He stared at the kid, not letting that fiery gaze intimidate him. “All right. Your request is accepted. Welcome to the Survey Corps.”

Hope flickered across the boy’s face.

Behind them, Erwin stood. “We will return for you when it comes time for your court-martial, Eren. We’re working hard to put together a solid case for you. Please be patient for a bit longer.”

“My key,” the boy said.

“We’ll need to hang onto that for now. Don’t worry, you’ll get it back once you are formally assigned to our regiment.” Erwin paused. “Levi.”

With one last stern look at the boy, Levi turned and followed him out the door.

Once they were back above ground, Levi said quietly, “You see in him what you saw in me. A monster who can become the perfect weapon if he can be tamed.”

“Something like that.” Erwin glanced at him. “He’s a boy before he’s a weapon, Levi. Remember that.”

But Levi knew if he was to be ready to kill Eren Yeager, he had to see him as a monster first. He had a habit of getting too close to those he protected—Isabel and Farlan’s remains flashed through his memory, and he shuddered. No, not this time. He wasn’t going to grow fond of the kid and get caught up in that “humanity’s hope” bullshit.

It seemed even Erwin was caught up in it; his step was light, his lips resting in a faint smile.

“Do you think we can convince Zackly?” Levi asked when they returned to the hotel room.

“I don’t know. My contact suggested the nobles were concerned about a potential war between Wall Rose and Wall Sina, so Nile’s argument will appeal to Zackly.” Erwin sat at the desk and made a few more notes. “We have one valuable asset: Eren’s desire to join us.”

“How does that help?” Levi asked, sitting on the bed.

“You saw his passion in there. Once we asked him about his goals, he forgot where he was and who he was speaking to.” Erwin turned to face him. “If we start to lose our case, he’s very likely to become unstable.”

Levi felt the same beginning descent of that 3DMG hover he had felt earlier. “If that happens, you want him to lose control, and then you want me to demonstrate that I can control him.”

Erwin’s gaze held his. “By any means necessary.”

Eren Yeager is a monster, Levi reminded himself, because the idea of beating up a fifteen-year-old kid made him sick. “Fuck.”

“Getting beaten is a lot better than death and dissection, and humanity needs him alive.” Erwin’s face was too taut. “We’ll have to make sure to play this card at the right time. Too soon, and no one will be convinced he is truly a threat. Too late, and he might actually shift into a titan and you would be forced to kill him.”

“I can read him.” Levi’s eyes narrowed. “I know his kind.”

If Erwin was confused, he didn’t show it. He nodded. “Thank you, Levi.”

“Don’t thank me. We don’t have a choice.” Levi lay back on the bed, letting out a long breath. “Fuck.”

“Indeed. Hopefully Zackly will see reason and it will be an easy transfer. We’ll wait to hear what Hange and Mike have to say about Eren’s friends, and update them on our plan. If Eren’s friends are as tightly knit with him as Berit says, we should probably have them at the court-martial, too.”

“Oh?”

“To remind him of what he stands to lose if he dies.”

Levi nodded. Just one more pressure point to ensure he would fight for survival. “So what happens when we get custody of him?”

“Well, he’ll join your Special Operations Squad. If you need to shuffle the squad to make sure they can control him—”

“No, this group is the best group to handle him. We’ll need to take him out of the city right away, though, in case he goes rogue.”

Erwin nodded. “There’s an old abandoned base about a half hour’s ride northeast of Trost that will make a suitable place to hold him. I’ll stay behind and work on the expedition approval process and planning; Hange can continue titan research, and Mike will coordinate the transport of all our goods from Trost to Karanes. The 104th re-

cruitment ceremony will happen soon after the court-martial—I'll return to the base with the new recruits."

Levi let out a low sigh.

The bed shifted. He turned to see Erwin stretching out beside him. "You okay?"

"No." Levi rolled halfway onto him, resting his ear on the centre of the broad chest. He could hear his heartbeat, loud and strong.

Erwin's arm settled around his shoulders, smoothing his arm. "We're on the cusp of something great. This little world of ours is beginning to change."

"Why do you trust the kid so much?" Levi asked. "Really?"

"I know what it's like to carry the burden of a father's knowledge when no one believes you. I know what it's like to have a passion to take this world back from the titans at any cost." The hand smoothing his arm slowed to a stop. "When Berit described Eren's interactions with his classmates, she might as well have been describing me. Not all my classmates appreciated my drive."

It felt like only a small part of the story, and Levi bit his lip to restrain himself from asking more questions. If he tried to ask about Erwin's father, and the book, and how it all tied into this, Erwin would just politely shut down the conversation.

Instead, he closed his eyes and focused on his heart beat.

"We should get back to work," Erwin said softly, but his arm tightened around Levi.

cg

The court-martial was set for the following afternoon.

Erwin sent Hange and Mike to retrieve Eren Yeager, knowing it would disorient the boy to see unfamiliar faces pick him up. Confusion and fear: the two things that would set him on edge. Hange was going to give him no warning about what he was about to face, and encourage him to be honest.

It was cruel to try to provoke Eren like this, Erwin knew, but this was all for the greater good. Once Eren was safely in their hands, they could begin to treat him with the respect he deserved.

Together with Levi, he settled into position in the courtroom. He hadn't been there for quite some time, probably since Dita had been sworn in as a Squad Leader. He remembered his own swearing-in here,

first as Squad Leader, then as Commander. He glanced down at Levi, wondering if he remembered the latter. Things had been so different back then.

As they settled into position, Erwin's thoughts honed in on Eren Yeager's fate. He studied Nile, who stood with a sheaf of papers. Beside him were Minister Nick, a representative from the merchant's guild, and several MP officers. Pixis stood solemnly with a group of Garrison soldiers; he caught Erwin's look and gave a single, knowing nod.

Erwin's gaze finally rested on Mikasa Ackerman, Armin Arlert, and Rico Brzenska. The two youths seemed hardened compared to typical Trainees, no doubt due to their experiences both in Shiganshina and in Trost. He felt a wave of pity. Young soldiers were a fact of life within the Walls, but they usually had at least a few years to enjoy their youth before they faced the grim reality of the titans.

"Lots of people," Levi said flatly, glancing at the public spectator section of the courthouse.

"Good." The more members of the public were present, the more uptight Nile would be about keeping the peace. "Be ready."

"Yeah." Levi folded his arms over his chest.

The doors opened, and Eren Yeager stepped through.

The courtroom fell silent.

The boy looked even smaller now than he had in the cell. He was hunched and shackled, with wide, sunken eyes.

Erwin studied Nile, who was staring at the boy, jaw tight. *He's terrified of him.*

The Military Police locked Eren into a kneel at the centre of the courtroom. Eren didn't seem afraid for himself; his gaze was lingering on his friends. *A strong bond, indeed.*

Commander-in-Chief Zackly entered the room and took a seat on a platform elevated far above the rest of them. "Well, let's begin." He explained the purpose of the court-martial, then handed the floor to the Military Police.

Nile's arguments were exactly the ones he had laid out in their initial meeting: the boy was a threat to the peace within the walls, and he was too dangerous to let live. "Therefore, after extracting as much information as we can from him, we will turn him into a martyr for the human race."

"That isn't necessary!" Minister Nick bellowed beside him. "He is a pest that circumvented the protection of the Walls through trickery.

He should be executed immediately.”

This was unexpected. The Wallists rarely weighed in on anything other than the walls themselves. Erwin’s eyes narrowed as he studied the man. Had he been coerced into speaking on behalf of someone else? Or was Eren’s appearance shaking even those with the deepest faith? For the first time in months, he wondered about his mother and sister.

“Minister Nick, quiet please,” Zackly said, looking weary. “We will now hear the proposal from the Survey Corps.”

Erwin stood tall, formally introducing himself, for the benefit of the members of the public in the viewing area. “We plan to induct Eren into the Survey Corps as a full-fledged member and use his power to take back Wall Maria. That is all.”

Zackly looked over the rim of his glasses at him. “Hm? That’s all you have to say?”

“Yes, sir. With his strength, we can recover Wall Maria. I believe our priorities are clear.”

He briefly explained their plans to leave from Karanes District now that Trost was blocked. In the background, he could see Nile’s eyes narrow. *He thinks I’m up to something.*

To his surprise, it wasn’t Nile who spoke out against him, but the representative from the merchant’s guild. It was the same tired rhetoric Erwin had heard countless times in his career: the Survey Corps was risking too much by venturing outside the Walls, and the gates should be blocked off entirely. He wasn’t going to dignify the comments with a response, but to his surprise, Levi muttered,

“You’re full of talk, pig.”

The room fell silent. The merchant’s gaze snapped to Levi.

Erwin briefly considered intervening, then decided any aggression would add to the tension in the courtroom. This was ideal. Besides, he always enjoyed Levi’s brand of honesty.

“Where’s your guarantee the titans will wait patiently while we wall up the gates?” Levi continued, his voice at once nonchalant and forceful. “When you say ‘we’, you’re talking about my friends who protect you while you get fat. You pigs take no notice of the people who can’t eat because there isn’t enough land.”

It was tempting to smirk. Erwin was so single-minded about his own goals that he sometimes forgot just how passionate Levi was about helping the downtrodden.

Minister Nick and the merchant began to bicker, so violently that Zackly had to pound on his desk to regain control of the court-room.

Levi leaned in closer. “How do you think it’s going?”

“Hard to tell,” Erwin whispered, eyes on Eren Yeager. The boy still looked so small. *Why isn’t he getting riled up?*

Next, Zackly questioned Eren Yeager directly. Stress finally began to show in the boy’s posture; he was hunched and tense, and his voice was strained. He testified that he could control his titan form, but Rico Brzenska did Erwin an enormous favour by contradicting that statement. As she explained Eren’s attack against Mikasa Ackerman, the crowd began to shift, uneasy.

Levi tensed beside him, but Erwin did not signal.

Mikasa tried to explain that Eren had actually protected her on several occasions in spite of that one loss of control, and that’s when Nile played his hidden hand.

Erwin lowered his jaw, staring intently at Nile. *Go on. Make a big deal out of this. The more afraid the crowd is, the more eager they’ll be to pawn Eren off on Levi.*

As expected, Nile described Eren and Mikasa killing three grown men when they were only nine years old as if it were a personal failing.

“Their actions are understandable,” Nile acknowledged. “It was legitimate self-defense. Yet it raises doubts as to Eren’s basic humanity.”

Erwin could practically see the boy steaming with rage. And as expected, the crowd began to panic, and shouts escalated around them.

“—a powder keg that could explode at any moment—”

“—titan took the form of a boy to infiltrate our—”

And above it all, the voice that gave Erwin exactly what he needed:

“That one, too!” The merchant pointed to Mikasa. “How do we know she’s human?”

The crowd shouted in agreement. Erwin could feel Levi coiling, like a cat about to pounce, but he still refused to give him the signal. Not yet. Not until the frenzy reached its peak.

“No!” Eren yelled.

The room froze.

“I may be a monster, but Mikasa has nothing to do with it!”

Erwin watched Nile, waiting for his reaction. Nile’s jaw was slack, his eyes bugging. *He’s still stunned. He needs to be genuinely afraid in order to*

believe Levi is saving us all.

“Erwin,” Levi whispered.

“Wait.”

Eren was ranting now, calling them cowards, his eyes glowing with the same fire they had glimpsed when he was imprisoned. His voice escalated, so feral that it was practically a howl.

Almost there ... almost there ... Nile was still blinking dumbly.

“Just shut your mouths,” Eren roared, “and invest everything in me!”

For a moment, no one moved.

And then, Nile’s eyes began to narrow. Erwin had seen this look countless times—in training, during cards, even during drinking games. This was the face Nile made when he was about to lose, when he was about to pull out his last resort.

Now. Erwin folded his arms over his chest.

Levi was off, a blur so fast Erwin could barely see him, just as Nile yelled for his soldiers to ready their weapons.

The first kick landed hard. A tooth flew out of Eren’s mouth and skittered across the floor.

For a moment, everyone was stunned, even, it seemed, Levi. Then he grabbed Eren’s hair and drove a knee into his face.

Erwin watched, face tight. This was the Levi he had seen during their fateful visit to the Underground, the weapon whose lethal force was no match for any foe: human, titan, or—it appeared—both at the same time.

A blood-stained smile floated to the surface of his memory, but he shoved it back down. The Levi before him wore a neutral face as he continued his work.

“This is just my opinion,” Levi said calmly, “but I’ve always found pain to be the most effective punishment.” He ground Eren’s face into the ground with his heel. “The lesson you need to learn right now can’t be taught with words, only with action. And you’re kneeling, which makes you easy to kick.”

The words struck Erwin’s ear wrong. These weren’t words he could ever fathom Levi saying, not willingly. They must have belonged to someone else, once upon a time. He thought of the panic attacks Levi had had over the years, the nightmares. The crunches of his attacks were sickening now; Eren was wheezing, unable to sit up on his own. Erwin’s hands, carefully hidden by his folded arms, tightened into fists.

“Levi, wait,” Nile said, blanching. “It’s dangerous. He might get mad and turn into a titan.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Levi grabbed the boy’s hair and hoisted him upright. “You’re the ones who want to dissect him, right?”

Nile trembled, his skin so pale that Erwin knew their point was clear. He unfolded his arms, signalling Levi to wrap up.

Levi stood tall, his voice strong. “This boy apparently killed twenty titans when he was in titan form, stopping only out of exhaustion. The fact that he has intelligence could make him a formidable enemy. But he’s not *my* enemy. Is he yours? All you assholes should think carefully: could you really kill him?”

Beautifully said. Erwin raised his hand. “Commander-in-Chief, I have a proposal. There are many unknown elements behind Eren’s power. Danger will always be lurking beneath the surface. Therefore, in the event you decide to release him into our control, I would pair him with Captain Levi as a failsafe. Someone as skilled as Levi would be able to deal with Eren even in a worst-case scenario.”

“I see,” Zackly said. “Can you do it, Levi?”

Levi scoffed. “If you mean killing him, that’s no problem. The problem is that there would be no half-measures.”

Erwin locked eyes with Nile from across the room. *And then you would get your dead titan to dissect.*

Nile looked away. “Wait,” he said, interrupting Zackly, who was about to make his ruling. “Erwin, first I want to ask you: what will you do about the instability in the Interior?”

“I don’t take that instability lightly,” Erwin said calmly. “I propose that to reassure the public, we take Eren Yeager outside the walls on our next expedition. There, he can prove his usefulness to humanity. We can decide his future based on those results.”

As his eyes swept the crowd, he saw visible expressions of relief, and he bit back a smile. Everything was unfolding exactly as he had hoped.

“Then it’s settled,” Zackly said. “I release Eren Yeager into the Survey Corps’ custody.”

Erwin glanced at Levi, hoping to exchange a triumphant glance, but Levi’s eyes were locked on the floor.

As they gathered in an empty office behind the courtroom, Hange knelt in front of Eren, tending to his wounds. Levi, however, slumped against the back wall, curling into himself.

Erwin gripped his shoulder; Levi flinched and didn't look up.

"I'm sorry, Levi. Thank you. We could not have won that victory without you."

There was no response. As badly as Erwin felt for him, there was no time to comfort him, not yet. These first few moments of custody were crucial. They had to cement Eren's trust.

He stood beside Hange. "Sorry about that, Eren. But you got your point across to the Commander-in-Chief and the other Council members, and that gave us the perfect chance to play the card we had up our sleeve. Believe me, it was worth the pain." He knelt to eye level and held out a hand. "You have my respect."

Eren's eyes widened. His handshake was firm.

"I look forward to working with you," Erwin said with a gentle smile.

"Sir. Likewise."

Levi dropped to a seat on the couch next to Eren, making him jump. "Tell me, Eren: do you resent me?"

"No sir," said Eren. "I know you needed to put on a show."

"Very well," Levi said, but Erwin could tell he was still shaken.

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They left Eren to one more night in his cell; it would be easier to arrange transport in the morning. Besides, Erwin wanted to wrap up a few things with Levi, Mike, and Hange before they headed back to Trost.

The three officers accompanied him to the hotel room. As they walked, Hange spoke up:

"It's okay, Levi. He heals like a titan. He'll be good as new tomorrow."

Levi didn't respond.

Mike walked close to him, as if protecting his flank.

Only Erwin did not react. He had seen Levi in crisis enough times to know that words wouldn't reach him until he decided to let them. Besides, what could he possibly say that he hadn't already? The whole thing had been Erwin's plan in the first place. Any weight on Le-

vi's shoulders right now was his doing.

Once they reached the hotel room, Levi slid a chair to the corner and sat in it. The other Squad Leaders sat at the table instead. Erwin sat on the bed, facing all three of them.

"Now that we have Eren Yeager in custody, I want to take a minute to realign our priorities."

"We're not even going to take a breath to acknowledge how great it is that we got him?" Hange asked.

"The celebration can wait a few minutes. Our timeline is going to be tight." He quickly ran through their next assignments. Levi and his squad were to push to the abandoned base. Hange would join him a few days later to begin studying Eren's powers. A few days after that, Mike would head back to Trost to start arranging transport of their supplies to Karanes, and finally, Erwin would join Mike shortly after the 104th recruitment ceremony. Within one month, they would have the new troops trained and ready to deploy from Karanes.

"A month is quick for a full-regiment mission with new troops," Mike said.

"Our first expedition will only be a quick jaunt to get the lay of the land and test our new recruits." That wasn't quite true, but it was all they needed to know for now. Erwin was still working out the details in his mind. "That's everything I wanted to discuss for now. Shall we head out for some food and drink?"

It seemed they weren't the only ones in Mitras with the same idea—the restaurants and taverns were all packed. They finally found room at the bar of a small, dark tavern on the border of the financial district. Levi took the furthest seat from the door and angled his stool so he was half-facing it. Erwin sat next to him, Mike and Hange on his other side. Erwin ordered a round of drinks for each of them. The first wave of the inheritance had come in, so Sahlo was buying.

As soon as the whiskey hit his lips, however, he realized he wasn't in the mood to drink. His mind was wound up from the trial, and he was concerned about Levi. He would probably end up in a strange, emotional mood if he got drunk.

Beside him, Levi drained his glass in one swallow, then coughed. Erwin slid his full glass over to him.

Levi looked up, face blank.

"Would getting drunk help?" Erwin asked.

Levi shrugged. "Maybe."

"Then get drunk. I'll keep an eye on you." He signalled to the bartender to bring over another glass.

The special of the night was a mushroom stew, aged enough that the flavours were strong and blended. Erwin hadn't eaten much before the trial, so he was the first to finish. Levi pushed his bowl away, too, barely touched.

"You should eat," Erwin said.

"I'll drink my dinner."

His stomach must be in knots. "Would you eat bread if I ordered you some?"

Levi shrugged. "Probably."

The bread came deep-fried and just a little bit sweet, and the four of them devoured it so quickly that Erwin had to order a second basket.

Now that their bellies were full, they were comfortable enough to talk. To everyone's surprise, it was Mike who dominated the conversation. He talked about the time he and his cousin had gotten drunk for the first time after breaking into a bottle of his uncle's homemade whiskey. Then he recalled the first time he and Nile had convinced Erwin to get drunk.

"We don't have to discuss this," Erwin said once he realized where the story was going.

"The most boring drunk *ever*," Mike said to Hange. "He spent the whole night repeating the strengths and weaknesses of Survey Corps formations, over and over. And every single time, he'd bring up the same points as if he was just discovering them."

"Interesting," Hange said, eyes sparkling. "Would you say that's what kicked off your development of the Long-Range Scouting Formation?"

"No, believe it or not, I was of sound mind when I developed that," Erwin said dryly. He waved to the bartender for another drink for Levi, who was just emptying a glass.

"He was so boring," Mike said, "we dumped him on our classmate Von and went to a different bar."

"Oh, was that the night?" Erwin took a sip of water, then smiled fondly. "He was decidedly more interested in my drunken ramblings. He kissed me under a tree behind the barracks."

Mike's brows shot up. "Von?"

"First time being drunk, first kiss from a boy. Not a bad night,

overall." The memory was hazy; he couldn't even remember the lad's face now. "What ever happened to Von?"

"Joined the Survey Corps with us and died during the first expedition."

"Right." Erwin's smile faded.

For a moment, they were silent, then Hange leaned forward. "I never hear any juicy stories about Mike. You must have some, Erwin."

"I do indeed. Let me tell you about the time Mike scaled the bell tower without gear to impress a girl, but couldn't get down again."

Hange cackled. "Like a cat?"

"Like a cat." Erwin felt a surge of boyish playfulness. "Like a big, dumb cat."

Mike shook his head. "Fine. Tell it."

As Erwin spoke, he reached his hand under the bar and, subtly, ran his knuckles across Levi's thigh. At first, there was no response, but then Levi leaned closer to him.

Within a couple hours, that subtle lean had become a full slump. Mike seemed to be spinning, too, one hand braced his head upright.

"We should get some rest," Erwin said. He gently nudged Levi. "Can you walk?"

Levi muttered something unintelligible, then flopped face-down onto the bar.

"Mike?" Erwin asked. "Can you carry Levi?"

"Spinning," Mike mumbled.

"I see. Can you at least get back to the barracks by yourself?"

"Mm."

"I'll help Mike," Hange said. "I didn't drink very much."

Erwin settled their bill, then he and Hange each assisted their drunken counterparts to the door. Mike could walk well enough, but Levi was stumbling and barely coherent.

They stopped in front of the barracks.

"Is he going to be okay?" asked Hange, looking concerned.

Erwin looked down at Levi, who was swaying against him. "I'll take care of him."

They said their goodnights, and then he began to steer his stumbling Captain toward the hotel. He heard a croaking curse.

"Doing okay, Levi?"

"No," Levi said, and he dropped to all fours and began to wretch. Erwin knelt beside him and, once he had finished, handed him a

handkerchief. Levi clumsily wiped his face.

“Disgusting,” he muttered.

“Feel any better?”

“A bit.” A pause, then, very quietly, “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Erwin said. “I told you I’d keep an eye on you. Can you walk?”

Levi shook his head.

“Let me know if you need to vomit again.” Erwin gently scooped him up and stood, carrying Levi against his chest. He was heavy, but they weren’t far from the hotel. Levi’s head lolled against his collarbone.

When they reached the hotel, the front desk staff gave him questioning looks, but Erwin only smiled politely and said, “A bit too much to drink.”

The stairs seemed endless with the limp weight in his arms, and he had to do an awkward half-kneel and shift Levi’s weight around to unlock the door to their room. Once they were inside, he set Levi gently on the bed, then placed a glass of water, a clean handkerchief, and a waste bin beside him.

“Fuck,” Levi muttered, struggling to pull off his shirt. Erwin intervened and undressed him down to his underwear, then carefully tucked him into bed. He undressed, too, and crawled into bed beside him, setting a book on the bedside table.

He had intended to read, but Levi surprised him by slumping against his shoulder. “—*bullshit*—” he growled, as if it were the middle of a conversation.

“Hm?”

“All of it. We fight and fight, and we’re still trapped.”

Erwin wasn’t sure he understood the context, exactly, but he understood frustration. “It’s going to get better. We made a huge stride toward our freedom today.”

“Those weren’t my words,” Levi murmured. “In the courtroom.”

After a long pause, Erwin found Levi’s hand under the covers. It was warm. He laced his fingers through it. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“You’ve probably pieced it together yourself, anyway.” Maybe it was Erwin’s imagination, but he sounded more sober than he had a few moments ago. That wasn’t unusual for Levi—the man often wavered in and out of sobriety, even at his drunkest. It was almost as if his enormous strength and constitution allowed him to metabolise alcohol differ-

ently than the rest of them.

He squeezed the small hand. "Your past is still a mystery to me, Levi. I don't probe into things that should stay hidden. If you wish to talk about it, I'll listen."

There was another pause, then Levi said quietly, "I remember more when I'm drunk. When I'm sober, my head gets in the way." He rolled so his cheek was on Erwin's chest. Erwin snaked an arm around him, pulling him in closer.

"When I was a kid," Levi said, his voice very clear now, "I lived with a woman in a small hut in the Underground. She worked for a man who lived in our group of buildings. She told me her job was to steal money from men who had too much. I was never sure what that meant—whenever she was working, I went to our neighbour's house. Military Police came by from time to time, but she always managed to talk them down from arresting her. When I was a bit older, I assumed she had been selling drugs and bribing the police." He paused. "Now I think she was a sex worker. She only had male clients, and I was never allowed to be home when she was working." His hand clawed into Erwin's chest, and he was silent for a moment, but then continued:

"She got sick a lot. Fevers and pain, and she'd get a rash on her face. One time, she was much worse than usual. Her arms and legs were swollen, and her skin was yellow. She forgot who I was. I ran to her boss to ask for help, but he called her dirty and said she was no good to him anymore. Our neighbour had moved away, and no one else would listen to me."

He was quiet and shivering. Erwin gently smoothed his arm, his throat tight.

"I came home," Levi said quietly. "She recognized me. She took off her shirt and put it on me, told me to think of it as a hug if she wasn't there to hug me. I lay down beside her, my mother. When I woke up, she was dead."

Erwin's heart broke at the thought of young Levi waking up next to his dead mother. He tightened his grip around him.

"I sat on the floor," Levi said, "against the wall and waited, because I knew I was going to join her soon. I was pretty close to it when he found me." A pause. "Have you heard of Kenny the Ripper?"

Erwin's brows rose. "I've heard the legend." A man who, several decades earlier, had killed dozens of military police.

"He's real. He's the one who found me."

“What?”

“Kenny. He knew the woman’s name. Said she was my aunt, and kept insisting that—I was so young and sick that I started to believe him.” Levi nuzzled closer. “He was a sick fuck, but he fed me and taught me how to fight. Sometimes he’d get me to start fights, and he’d finish them.” He began to shiver. “He was always messy. There was so much blood. I’d help him clean up, and I can still feel it on my hands ... ”

“Your hands are clean now,” Erwin said firmly, gripping one.

“Maybe.” Levi paused. “The things I said in the courtroom today ... Those were Kenny’s words. Some of it things he said to me, most of it things he said to other people while I watched. He wanted me to be a monster like him. For a few years, I was.”

“You aren’t a monster, Levi.”

“No?” Levi was shaking again. “A part of me liked beating up that brat today. It felt good to say those things to him. Powerful. Deep down, I’m no better than that asshole.”

“It’s human nature to enjoy feeling powerful,” Erwin said. “I’ve only seen you act that violently a handful of times, Levi, and every single time, the guilt has crushed you once it’s over. You aren’t a monster. You’re a man who will get his hands dirty when it’s necessary. You learned from a young age—far too young—that you have to do whatever it takes to survive in this world. Your body waits until the heat of the moment has passed to consider the morality of your actions. That doesn’t make you a monster, Levi. It makes you pragmatic. It makes you a survivor.”

After a few moments, Levi said softly, “I was still a kid when he left me. I was terrified he would come back, and terrified he wouldn’t, all at the same time. But he never came back.”

He’s been left by everyone he’s ever cared about, Erwin thought. His mother. Kenny. His early boyfriends, Matthias and Niklaus. Isabel. Farlan. His first Survey Corps team. He nuzzled the dark hair, hoping he would never be part of that list, for Levi’s sake.

“You are a survivor, Levi,” he whispered, awed.

“I’m tired,” Levi said softly.

“Then let’s sleep.” Erwin extinguished the lamp.

Levi clung to him, ear pressed firmly to the centre of his chest.

The next morning, Levi woke up with the sunrise feeling parched and smelly. He drank two glasses of water, then brushed his teeth. His eyes were bloodshot, and his nose was red; had he been crying in his sleep? His stomach dropped as he remembered the conversation from the night before. Tearing open so many layers of repression had been painful. He wished it had been healing, but instead, he felt raw. The fake memories and gaps had been easier to bear.

Cleanliness would help. He heated the bath, taking some time to clean himself. He already felt better without the stale smell of old alcohol clinging to his skin.

Erwin was just stirring when he returned to the bed. Levi crawled over to him and kissed his cheekbone.

“Mm.” Erwin opened his eyes. His voice was groggy: “Levi? How are you feeling?”

“Fine.”

“Not hungover?”

“No.” Levi sat with his back against the wall, stretching his legs across the mattress. “When does the carriage pick me up?”

“After breakfast.” Erwin snuggled closer, pressing his cheek to Levi’s thigh.

“Do we have time for sex?”

“Mm,” Erwin said again. “If we’re quick.” He moved his face to Levi’s bare lap, nuzzling him. “Are you in the mood for it?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“I need to feel close.” He was still feeling vulnerable. But more than that, Erwin’s breath was warm.

Then there was a warm mouth around him, sucking for one teasing second, and then Erwin pulled away and sat up. “Let me brush my teeth first.”

Levi was going to stop him, then decided a clean mouth would be more pleasant to kiss. “Don’t worry about cleaning anything else. I want you to fuck me.”

“Okay. I’d like that.” Erwin paused. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes. Stop asking.”

Erwin studied him for a moment longer, then nodded and stepped into the bathroom.

A few minutes later, he returned and crawled on all fours across the bed to Levi. His kiss was deep and minty, but ended too soon. Levi

was going to protest, until he realized Erwin was going for his lap again.

His mouth was warm and cool at the same time, and tingled from the mint. Levi tried to watch, but his head was tilting back against his will, and he couldn't fight it anymore. He clenched the blankets in tight fists.

Erwin pulled away and kissed the tip. "How do you want me?"

It took Levi a moment to find his voice. "Standing. Against the wall. Don't hold back."

"I see," Erwin said, sounding both surprised and pleased. Broad hands gripped his hips.

The wall was cold against Levi's back, Erwin warm against his front. He crossed his ankles against Erwin's lower back, arms looped around his shoulders. This position was impractical—it was hard to get a good rhythm going, difficult to touch himself, and he always felt as if he were on the verge of slipping. But he loved the complete reliance on Erwin to hold him aloft, to control their movements. He loved feeling the strain in Erwin's muscles, the possessiveness of his grip.

Their muscles rolled together, friction building between them. Erwin gasped, his face red, his neck cored with strain. His kiss shoved Levi's head back against the wall.

Then, abruptly, Erwin slowed down and pulled away. "Levi, I can't hold back."

"It's okay. Keep going." Levi shoved a hand between them and grabbed himself. It took him seconds to catch up.

Erwin thrusted hard, his fingertips curling into the back of Levi's thighs. "I'm coming."

"Come on."

"I'm coming. I'm—" Erwin shoved him hard into the wall, burying his moans in Levi's neck.

Levi heard himself cry out, too, and then he went under, his entire body shaking.

When he finally opened his eyes, Erwin was trembling, as if his muscles were fatigued. Levi hopped down, but his legs gave way, and he slumped against the wall.

Erwin gave him a lazy kiss. "Sorry, I should have pulled out."

"It's fine." Levi found his legs and wandered to the bedside table for a clean handkerchief.

"You're travelling. It'll be messy."

"Shut up. I feel good."

They quickly cleaned up, then Erwin collapsed back onto the bed, dropping a forearm over his eyes.

“Are you going to sleep through our last hour together?” Levi said, starting to regain his energy.

“Mm. You had something else in mind?”

“Breakfast, for a start.”

“Sure. Just give me a moment.” Erwin rolled onto his side, snuggling deeper into the pillow.

Cute. Levi watched him for a moment, then went to the bathroom to clean up. Once he had dressed, he patted the chest pocket of his jacket out of habit. His hand lingered over the ring.

It's different from before ... and yet ...

He studied Erwin’s face, peaceful with sleep. Did it still make sense to carry around the ring like this? They should probably talk about it someday. It wasn’t a token memory anymore—it was a symbol of a potential future.

The blond eyelashes parted, and Levi felt shy, as if Erwin had heard his thoughts and awoken. He reached for a topic change: “Should I give the basement key back to Eren?”

“Yeah.” Erwin’s face was still smooth and relaxed. “It’ll help build his trust in us.”

Levi found Erwin’s jacket on a hanger and reached for the inside pocket. The key was inside, but so was something else, something metallic and round.

It can't be.

He pulled it out and stared.

“What the hell?” He turned to face Erwin, pinching the ring between his forefinger and thumb. “Why do you have this?”

“Ah.” Erwin’s face was sombre. “While you were ill, I was putting away your clothes, and I accidentally discovered the ring you carry in your pocket. Over your heart. I ... liked the idea.”

“You should have told me.”

“We were separated.”

Levi’s jaw set. After a minute to consider, he pulled out a seat and set both rings on the table with a purposeful *clink*.

“Levi?”

“It’s like you said: things were never fucked up between us. They were fucked up *around* us. We both chose to carry these knowing exactly what they symbolize.”

Erwin was staring at the rings, his brow furrowed. “Are you ... giving your ring back?”

“No, just listen. Ehrmich is never going to happen. Our celebration after Wall Maria might not, either. Our plans have gone to hell, but that’s always the case. Investors change their minds. Sahlo dies. A kid turns into a *titan*, for fuck’s sake.” Levi leaned toward him. “There’s one thing that always stays the same, no matter how fucked up things get around us. Even when we tried to deny it, we meant so much to each other that we both ended up carrying these rings in our pockets. So maybe we should hold on to the one thing that won’t be fucked up, no matter what happens.”

Erwin’s eyes shifted up to him; they were glassy. “I hoped for a nicer venue.”

“Think about how much has passed between us in this hotel room. It’s as good a place as any.” Levi’s pulse drummed in his throat. “I’m not saying we have to get married right away, but maybe the promise of it will give us hope when everything else goes to hell.” He grabbed both the rings and sat beside Erwin on the bed, holding them out in his palm. “If we’re going to keep carrying these around in our pockets, then take mine. I’ll keep yours.”

“You’re proposing,” Erwin said, as if he couldn’t quite believe it.

“I’m trying to, yeah.”

Erwin’s throat bobbed. His fingers closed around the smaller ring. “I would be honoured to spend the rest of our lives side-by-side —maybe not always in body, but always in heart.”

The words caught Levi off guard; his jaw wobbled. He didn’t trust himself to speak, so he nodded.

Erwin smiled and leaned up, pressing a long, slow kiss to his lips. Levi felt a tear trickle down his cheek, and he wasn’t sure whose it was.

When they pulled away, their foreheads rested together.

“My fiancé,” Erwin whispered.

Levi grimaced. “That sounds stuffy.”

“My husband-to-be.”

Levi’s stomach flipped, and he pressed a hand to the back of Erwin’s neck to steady himself. *Husband-to-be. Husband.* It felt strange to try to apply such a normal word to their relationship.

“You’re smiling,” Erwin said softly, running a knuckle along his jaw.

“Feels right,” Levi said, and this time, the tear was definitely his.

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PREPARATIONS

Levi slumped against the carriage wall, watching Eren Yeager sleep. They were more than halfway through the journey; the boy had been sleeping since they had left Mitras. His injuries from the day before had already fully healed.

Beside Eren, Hange finally finished making notes in a notebook, then tucked it under the seat. “Looks like the healing process is exhausting. We’ll have to keep that in mind on the field.”

Levi grunted.

Hange carefully crossed to his side of the carriage and sat on the bench next to him. “You okay? You seemed pretty shaken up last night.”

He edged away from the probing brown gaze. “I’m fine.” Maybe he was still conflicted about the man he had become in the courtroom, but he had a ring in his pocket from someone who thought he was worth a shared future. That meant something.

“How do you feel about all this?” Hange asked.

“Hard to believe this kid is the key to our future.” He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, studying Eren. “Doesn’t look like much, does he?”

“It’s real, whether we believe it or not,” Hange said. “I’m more concerned about using him to his full potential.”

“Erwin’s already working on plans.”

“Well, of course. But he needs to know what Eren can do before we can be effective with him. Eren himself doesn’t even understand his powers yet.” Hange paused. “Amazing how quickly things changed, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“Feels like we might have a real shot now.”

Levi leaned back in the corner, folding his arms over his chest.

When they arrived in Trost, his squad was waiting for them in the courtyard, horses saddled and ready to go. Levi kicked the sole of Eren's boot to wake him, then hopped out of the carriage and stretched his aching legs.

"From a carriage to a horse," he muttered to Hange. "This was a stupid idea."

But Hange pushed past him, rushing toward the cordoned-off section of the base to check on the titan specimens Sawney and Bean.

"Fine. See you tomorrow." Levi turned to the carriage.

Eren stood in the doorway, shielding his eyes with his arm. Levi realized it had been several days since the boy had stood in the sunlight. His thoughts flickered to the time he, Farlan and Isabel had stepped out of the Underground.

The squad was eyeing Eren nervously, but they pulled into salutes as they approached. "Captain!"

"Thank you for choosing us for this special operation, sir," Eld said.

Levi's gaze travelled across their eager faces. "Who else would I have picked? You've always been my Special Operations Squad."

"We're just honoured, sir," Petra barked, still in salute. "You had your pick of anyone for this mission."

It wasn't like them to be so tense. Levi glanced back at Eren and found the boy hunched and sweating.

"Eren," he said.

"Yes, sir!" Eren hastily stepped forward and pulled into a salute.

"These are your new squad mates: Oluo Bozado, Petra Ral, Eld Jinn, and Gunther Schultz." To his surprise, the boy seemed to be mouthing the names along with him. *Does he already know who we are?* "You treat them with respect, and they'll do the same to you."

"Of course, sir!" The boy was so on edge that Levi leaned away from him a little. He wasn't used to the enthusiasm that came with fresh brats—it had been many years since he had been in direct contact with fresh blood.

"Welcome to the team, Eren," Petra said. Her smile was warm, but her gaze was sharp. She held out a folded Survey Corps cloak. "This one's old, but it will have to do until your new uniforms arrive. Sorry, it might be a bit big."

"That's fine. Thank you, Ms. Ral." His hands shook as he draped

it around his shoulders and fastened it.

“I assume Shadis and Berit taught you to ride a horse at their little babysitting centre?” Levi asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. We’re heading to an abandoned base. It’s isolated enough to keep you from rampaging through Trost if you lose your head.” Levi nodded at the spare horse. “Mount up. Stay at the centre of the group at all times. If you even think about making a break for it, I’ll carve you up. Got it?”

“Sir!” Eren saluted with a determined look, then mounted the horse with perfect form.

Petra turned her warm smile to Levi, and this time her gaze was soft, too. A show of support. He looked away. There was no way she would be looking at him so kindly if she had witnessed him beating the shit out of the kid at the trial.

They set out. He could tell his team wanted to ask questions, but they were either too shy or too professional. Only Oluo broke the silence, prattling on at Eren in some sort of show of machismo, until his horse had a misstep and he nearly bit his tongue off. After that, the ride was blissfully silent. That was fine by Levi. There would be plenty of time for conversation later; it would just be the six of them until Hange arrived at the base in the morning.

They arrived at the new base after an hour’s leisurely ride. Levi’s lip curled. *What a shit hole.* Vines had overgrown the walls, and the windows were so thick with dust that they looked like sheets of wood. Several of the checkpoints they had stocked outside Wall Rose had been cleaner than this dump.

There was one small blessing: the downstairs bathroom still had running water. At first, it was dark with rust and sludge, but after they flushed it out, it was good enough to use for cleaning. Levi sent his squad members to different areas of the building. This was a large area for such a small team to clean, but they had a few days to get everything in order, and this would be a good way to break in Eren. He sent the boy upstairs alone—partly to assess his cleaning style, partly to test if he was dangerous unsupervised.

To his surprise, Eren came downstairs less than an hour later, face barely marked with dust. Levi frowned. *Berit, you need to teach these brats how to clean.* He strode upstairs to double-check his work. When he swiped under a windowsill, his fingers, as he had suspected, came back

caked with dust. *Disgusting.*

He strode downstairs, ready to rub Eren's nose in every dirty patch he had missed, but he paused before he reached the bottom. He could hear Petra's voice:

“—he wouldn't be concerned with rank or the command structure?”

“Right,” Eren's voice said. “I thought he wouldn't take orders from anybody.”

Are they talking about me? Levi tilted his head, listening.

“I don't know all the details,” Petra said, “but I think he used to be a lot like that. I heard that before Captain Levi joined the Survey Corps, he was a notorious criminal in the city's Underground.”

Oh? He didn't realize any of his squad members knew anything about his past.

“I don't know what happened, exactly,” she continued, “but some people say Commander Erwin brought him into the Corps.”

“The Commander?”

None of this was any of the kid's business. Levi poked his head into the room. “Hey. Eren.”

“Yes, sir,” Eren said, jumping. Petra busily began to sweep the floor, distancing herself from them. She knew firsthand that Levi would never stand for a poor cleaning job.

“You call that clean?” Levi demanded. “Do it all again.”

“Sir.” Eren hurried into the hallway, then up the stairs.

Levi folded his arms over his chest, waiting for Petra. She was doing an admirable job of pretending she hadn't noticed him.

“Petra.”

She glanced back and smiled. “Captain.”

“Don't fill the heads of new recruits with ideas about how close I am with Erwin.”

“Sorry, sir.” Her cheeks darkened. “I suppose it's still fresh on my mind.”

“Oh.” His stomach dropped. With all that had been happening, he had forgotten she must still be hurting from their recent conversation. “There's a lot going on right now. You handling it okay?”

“Yes, sir. As well as can be expected, anyway.”

“I'm not just talking about Eren.”

“I know.” She turned to face him, her knuckles white around the broom handle. “I'm honoured you selected me for your squad, Captain.”

I intend to devote my life to following you, the way you have devoted your life to the Commander.” She caught herself. “No—you know what I mean. I believe in our cause. I believe we have a real shot at saving humanity.” Her eyes had taken on that same sharpness he had seen the first night he had fought her in the Military Police barracks.

He nodded. “You’re here because you’re one of the best soldiers the Survey Corps has, Petra. Don’t thank me. You got here on your own.”

She beamed for a moment, but then looked solemn again and nodded. “Thank you, sir.” She did a half-salute while still holding the broom, then went back to work.

They gathered at sunset to eat a stew Eld had prepared; it was only moderately better than trail rations, but it was warm, and Levi was comfortable and relaxed by the end of it. He sipped a cup of tea as the others questioned Eren about his titan powers.

None of this was new to Levi, and his mind wandered to Erwin. How was the proposal going? Was the Council being extra hard on Erwin because they had Eren in their custody, or were they pushing things through in an attempt to get him outside the Wall and out of their hair as quickly as possible?

He heard hoof beats outside; the others didn’t seem to notice. He had wondered when Hange was going to show up. There was no way the Squad Leader was going to stay away until morning with a perfectly healthy titan shifter specimen to examine.

“You’re early,” he said as the door opened.

Hange stepped into the room, eyes glowing.

At least that meant he could dump Eren on Hange for the night and get some uninterrupted sleep. He was surprisingly sore from the carriage, the horse, and cleaning. He settled into a bedroom on the top floor. The mattress was old and smelled musty, so he sat on it and leaned against the corner instead, wrapped in his bedroll. The must wouldn’t have been so bad if he had Erwin beside him, radiating heat and the faint scent of cologne.

It was ridiculous to be missing him after only one night apart; they had spent months apart in the past. Maybe it was because everything was so new again, a second honeymoon period. Or maybe he was just shaken by the events of the past few days, and that was making him clingy.

He closed his eyes and let his thoughts wander as he began to drift to sleep. He dreamed he was standing with Erwin on a bridge in

Utopia District, staring down at the moonlight that rippled across the surface of the hot springs.

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A persistent orange sunbeam across Levi's eyelids awoke him the next morning. He was surprised he had managed to sleep through the night; he must have really been worn out. He stood and stretched, then headed to the one working bathroom. It was well past time to sound reveille, but he wanted to wash in private first.

After a quick, unsatisfying combat shower with a bucket and metallic-scented water, he began knocking on doors to wake up his squad. He went to the basement last, but Eren wasn't there. Hange must have kept him up all night; he expected they were both still sitting in the dining hall, exactly where he had left them.

He was almost at the door when a voice behind him yelled, "Captain!"

He whirled and saw Moblit running toward him, face streaked with sweat.

"Where's Squad Leader Hange?" Moblit came to a halt in front of him, breathing hard.

"Probably in the dining hall. What happened?"

"It's the titan specimens. Someone killed them."

Shit. "We'll meet you in the courtyard."

They rode as a group back to Trost on empty stomachs, Hange at the helm, face streaked with tears. Levi's squad was surprisingly quiet; they all understood the gravity of the situation. The titan specimens were valuable research subjects, and slaughtering them was treason.

The titan corpses were still billowing steam when they arrived. Gunther and Eld took the horses while Hange and Moblit ran ahead. The Military Police and the Garrison had already taken over the crime scene; Hange pushed past them and dropped to a kneel in front of the dissipating skeletons, sobbing.

Levi's throat tightened. Maybe they could capture another set of titans for Hange during the upcoming expedition. The emotional display was at once embarrassing and heartbreakng, and he didn't want to watch another second of it.

"The Military Police can handle the rest of this," he said to Eren. "Let's go." But when he turned to leave, he stopped.

Erwin stood behind them, leaning in close to Petra; he was earnestly saying something in her ear. Her face was pale.

Levi's breath caught. *You're still supposed to be in Mitras.*

Erwin caught Levi's gaze and nodded a greeting; he began to march toward them, but instead of heading to Levi, he zeroed in on Eren. His hands dropped onto the boy's shoulders, and he leaned close, murmuring something to him, too.

What the hell are you up to? Levi signalled to Petra.

"Captain," Petra said, hurrying over.

"I have business to take care of," he said. "Keep an eye on Eren, and see if Hange and the MP need any help. I'll meet you back here in an hour."

In front of him, Erwin stood tall and turned to face him. Their eyes locked; whatever he wanted to discuss, it had to be done in private. Levi spun on his heel and began to walk to the gate.

Once they were at the end of the driveway, Erwin fell into step beside him.

"The apartment?" Levi said.

"Yes. Too many ears at the base. Your squad can handle Eren without you?"

"Wouldn't have left him behind otherwise. I thought you were going to be in Mitras for a while."

"The expedition planning meeting took exactly one hour."

Levi snorted; if only it could always be so easy. "They couldn't wait to get Eren outside the Wall, could they?"

"Precisely. Let's split up—take a right at the next intersection and go the long way around."

"Sure." Levi needed breakfast, anyway. He stopped at a bakery and bought a small jam bun, scarfing it down as he walked. It left his fingers sticky, and he frowned. The apartment doorknob took a second to open with his palms as he tried not to get his dirty fingers all over it.

He stepped inside, and his face settled into a grimace. He had expected to be hit by nostalgia the instant he stepped inside the room, but the chaos of it was unsettling. Although the building was still standing solidly after the attack on Trost, the thundering footsteps of titans around the building must have knocked books off the shelves. The air was thick with dust. Erwin was righting fallen objects on his desk; it looked as if one of the lamps had smashed.

Levi marched for the bathroom to wash his hands. "What do

you make of the attack on Hange's titans?"

"I know Hange wouldn't want to hear this, but it's a good sign." Erwin stepped into the doorway and leaned against it, watching him wash up. "For one thing, it makes it extremely likely that the Colossal and Armoured titans—or their sympathizers—are indeed living inside the walls. They're within our reach. For another, it means we were on track to potentially learn something valuable about titans. The attackers wanted to prevent us from knowing that something."

"Could have just been a vengeful soldier," Levi said. "Someone frustrated with what titans did to the city, or avenging a loved one." He scrubbed his fingernails.

"Possibly."

"You don't sound convinced."

"My gut tells me this is connected to the Wall attack, Eren, and his basement key. Treason is a lot to risk for petty revenge."

Levi turned off the tap and shook his hands into the basin, then reached for the towel. "Is that really your gut, or just wishful thinking?"

"We'll find out soon. The Military Police are checking the gear of all soldiers for unauthorized use."

"Hm." Levi strode to the door.

Instead of stepping aside, Erwin caught him under the chin and lunged down to kiss him. His tongue slid deep into Levi's mouth for a moment, then he pulled away.

"Shit," Levi whispered, heat flooding his face and his groin.

Erwin kissed his jaw, then his neck, arms wrapping around him. "We're going to try to lure out other titan shifters." He pressed Levi into the doorway and kissed his neck again, a bit more roughly. "We'll start by—"

"Hey, hey; stop." Levi pushed him away so they could make eye contact. "Are you seriously trying to fuck me and talk strategy at the same time?"

"Yes. I figured we were short on time."

"We've got an entire hour. I can't concentrate if you're groping me. Choose one: fuck and then talk, or talk and then fuck."

He expected Erwin to prioritize their strategy planning, so he was surprised when the reply was, "Fuck first."

Levi's breath caught. "Oh?"

Erwin began to kiss his neck, more aggressively this time. "It won't take long. I need to be inside you."

“Shit. Yeah, okay.”

They staggered toward the bed—narrowly missing a pile of fallen books—and Levi fell back onto the mattress, pulling Erwin on top of him. Erwin ground against his thigh, already rock hard.

Levi shoved a hand between them to grab him. “A single night apart, and look how hard you are, you horny bastard.”

“The hotel bed smelled like you,” Erwin said, panting. “So did the bed at the base. I swear even the carriage did. I can’t stop thinking about you.”

Levi’s head was spinning. “How do you want me?”

“Face-down. Stick your ass in the air.” Erwin tossed his jacket onto the chair, then stood to undo his pants. Levi unbuckled his pants, too, and tore off the quilt to get rid of the layer of dust. He positioned himself on the bed, hastily hiking his shirt and jacket up his back.

Then he felt a drizzle of oil, the gentle nudge of Erwin waiting for him to relax. Then slowly, slowly, Erwin worked his way into him. He was crouching over Levi, almost squatting, and the angle was deep.

Levi buried his face into the mattress and swore.

He felt a hand smooth his back. “Is that okay?”

Levi nodded, hands curling into fists in the sheets.

Then Erwin was moving inside him, over him. A hand curled into his hair. Each thrust was forceful enough to shove his face into the mattress, and he wished he could see Erwin’s face, but the roughness of it felt so good that he didn’t want to change positions. He could hear the buckles of their belts clanking, the bed creaking, and above it all, Erwin’s breaths, harsh and forceful.

A hand slid down his hip, around to his front, then wrapped around him, warm and tight. Levi cried out loudly into the mattress and began to thrust into the grip, bucking back with each thrust.

“Levi,” Erwin gasped.

Levi lifted his head just enough to say, “Harder. Grab my hips. I’ll touch myself.”

He felt fingers dig tightly into his hips, and he reached between his legs to tug at himself, trying to catch up. He could feel Erwin getting very close now, could hear it in the cadence of his gasps.

But Erwin surprised him, slowing down, letting out a low hum. “Your ass,” he murmured, running his hands over it. “Your beautiful ass. Can I ... ” He trailed off.

“Yeah,” Levi said, knowing what he was always too shy to voice.

“Yeah?” Erwin began to pick up speed again.

“Yeah. Come on me.”

“Fuck.”

“Come on, do it.” Levi counterthrust against him, skin slapping against skin.

Erwin gave a cry that was almost a wail; he pulled out as he came, and Levi was so aroused that the warm mess on his ass made his head spin. He was close, he was so close, but he was already missing the powerful thrusts behind him.

“Slap me,” he gasped.

“Your ass?”

“Yeah. Hard.”

Erwin smacked his ass once, twice, and that was enough; Levi buried his face in the mattress again, crying out as orgasm violently overtook him.

When he came back to himself, he realized Erwin was already mopping him up with a handkerchief.

“You didn’t get any on my uniform, did you?”

“I don’t think so, no.”

Levi twisted his head to eye him. “Now we have fifty-eight minutes to talk.”

Erwin chuckled, sounding a bit sheepish: “That wasn’t quite the slow, gentle lovemaking I’d been picturing.”

“We’re responsible, sticking to our schedule.”

“True. Efficiency is important.” Erwin finished cleaning him up, then gently clapped his ass to let him know he was done. His hand lingered, smoothed him. “Your ass is red.”

“You were going at it pretty hard.” Levi rolled onto his back, still out of breath; stars swam in his vision.

“Sorry.”

“I’m not complaining. You don’t lose control very often. It’s hot when you do.” He reached out and clumsily ran a hand down Erwin’s arm. He loved the way Erwin looked in his uniform without his jacket.

But he couldn’t fully enjoy the beautiful view for long, because beyond it, he could see the clutter around the room. He stood and pulled up his pants, buckling his belt. “Alright, so what’s going on with this expedition?”

Erwin ran a hand through his hair, sitting upright. “We’re going to set a trap to lure out our enemies.”

Levi began to pick up the books scattered across the floor. “Any-one else know this?”

“So far, just you and me. This is highly confidential—ultimately, only those of us who joined the Survey Corps before Wall Maria’s fall will know the truth about this plan.”

“That won’t be many people.”

“No, it won’t. But we can’t discount the possibility that any of the other soldiers are shifters who came in when the wall fell.” Erwin finished adjusting his buckles, then strode to the desk. He pulled out a topographical map and unrolled it. “As far as the Council and most of our troops know, we’ll be taking a short expedition to assess Eren’s performance on the field and update maps outside of Karanes. If we don’t encounter any other titan shifters, that will indeed be the case. If my suspicions are correct, however, and a titan shifter appears, we’ll want to lure them to this grove of giant trees.” He tapped the map.

Levi set a stack of books on the shelf and approached the desk. The grove wasn’t far from Karanes—probably less than an hour’s ride. “I see. We can easily use the gear in those. Best place to stage a battle.”

“Exactly, and I’ll enlist Hange’s help in making sure we have quick, effective weapons to trap any titan shifters who pursue us.”

“Trap? Not kill?”

“We want to take the person inside alive so we can question them.” Erwin looked up at him. “Your job will be to protect our bait.”

“Eren?”

“Yes. He seemed genuinely shocked at Sawney and Bean’s deaths when I questioned him earlier, so I don’t believe he’s in league with any other titan shifters. It is, however, reasonable to assume any titan shifters would be interested in him. They stopped the attack on Trost before destroying the inner gate when they could have easily taken it out—something caught their interest, right around the time Eren appeared.”

Levi frowned. “So you’re assuming there are shifters living within the walls, and they’re not allied with Eren, but they’ll be interested enough in him to show themselves on this particular expedition?”

“Yes.”

“Lots of assumptions.”

“I know,” Erwin said. “But think about what happens if I’m wrong: nothing of note. We complete our mission as planned, the Council is happy, and we have extra weapons on hand in case a shifter appears some other time. It costs us very little to make this gamble, but

we have lots to potentially gain.”

That was true, and Levi knew better than to underestimate Erwin’s assumptions. He thought back to traps he had set with his gang in the Underground. “Where will Eren be in the formation?”

“In the safest position,” Erwin said. “Dead centre. He may technically be bait, but we want to keep him alive at all costs.”

“Tell each team he’s in a different location,” Levi said. “That way, if we have a shifter or a mole, we’ll be able to tell which team they’re connected to based on where they look for Eren first.”

Erwin lifted his head with his brows raised, impressed. “That’s a brilliant idea.”

Levi shrugged, trying not to show the pride he was feeling. “It’s how we used to track down snitches during operations in the Underground.”

“It also buys us some time to keep your squad safe until you’re close to the forest. But if it all falls apart—”

“Protect Eren at all costs,” Levi said.

“Right.”

Erwin pulled out wooden markers, and they spent a long time discussing formation and team composition. After half an hour, Levi returned to cleaning while they spoke, taking the opportunity to stretch his legs. He had almost finished tidying when Erwin said,

“It’s been an hour now. You should get back to your squad.”

“Yeah.” Levi carefully folded a dusting rag and set it in the cleaning supplies bucket. “When are you coming to the base?”

“In a few days. I’m going to stay in Trost until at least the recruitment ceremony.”

“I’ll send a couple people to the ceremony,” Levi said. “They can escort you safely to the base.”

“That isn’t necessary.”

“I know. I’ll send people anyway.” He didn’t like leaving Erwin unprotected at a time when there was so much uncertainty in the world. “So it’ll be a few days until I see you again, huh?”

“Yeah.” Erwin approached him, face soft. For a moment, they stared at each other.

Then Levi stepped forward and wrapped his arms around him, pressing his cheek to the centre of the broad chest. “It’s harder to be apart now.”

“I know.”

“Why is that?”

“Because everything feels new again.” He felt a kiss on top of his head. “Because most people, when they’re engaged, have time to celebrate it.”

“Engaged,” Levi repeated softly, the word still unfamiliar.

“I must admit, Levi …” Erwin squeezed him tighter. “It feels good to share a secret with you again, one only the two of us know. It reminds me of the early days.”

The early days. It was strange for Levi to think about how insecure he had been back then, how upset he had been to learn about the imperfect parts of the man he now knew and loved.

He took a step back and looked up. Now, when he looked at Erwin, he didn’t see ideals or contradictions. He just saw *him*, Erwin Smith, as he truly was.

“Levi?” Erwin asked gently.

“I love you.”

Erwin smiled, and bent down for a soft kiss.

❧

Levi’s squad was silent as they rode back to the abandoned base. Hange and Moblit had stayed behind for one night, presumably to mourn. He imagined they would be cheered up considerably by speaking with Erwin about new traps for the upcoming expedition. It sounded like the influx of money they had received from Sahlo would buy some top-quality parts.

The next several days passed quickly in a flurry of cleaning, training, and supervising Hange’s experiments with Eren. There was one small incident—after a full day of unsuccessful shifting experiments, Eren reached for a fallen spoon and accidentally spawned a titan’s arm. Levi’s squad had been ready to kill him on the spot, and it had been surprisingly difficult for Levi to talk them down. Fear of titans ran deeply through each of them; even Levi had felt that instinctive spark, had only stayed his own hand by mentally repeating his orders from Erwin: *Eren must be protected at all costs*.

Luckily, he had successfully de-escalated the situation before anything got out of control. The stress was worthwhile: the incident helped Hange nail down why Eren was having difficulties transforming into a titan. It wasn’t enough to simply injure himself and wait; he need-

ed a purpose in mind in order to transform. Levi couldn't fathom how that could possibly make a difference, but it seemed to help. Over the next several days, Eren began to demonstrate control over his shifting ability.

The day after the recruitment ceremony, the new recruits arrived. There were only twenty-one, the smallest influx they had ever had. Maybe that should have been worrying, but Levi knew they were still likely to receive Garrison aid when they made an attempt on Wall Maria. The Military Police, however, were an unknown. He doubted Nile would send his soldiers to fight alongside Eren. Maybe a successful first expedition would sway him.

In spite of the trauma they must have endured during the attack on Trost, the new recruits were as noisy as any other batch, and Levi decided to leave Eren's supervision to the others and step away while they got settled. Instead, he waited by the stables, hoping to spot Erwin. Unfortunately, only Dita and a handful of his squad members had arrived with them.

"Change of plans," Dita said. "The Commander's helping Mike coordinate transport to Karanes. He doesn't expect to visit for another day or two."

A legitimate excuse, but Levi was disappointed anyway.

That night, as his squad ate dinner, Levi was surprised to see that Eren was restless. His eyes kept shifting to the table of new recruits. Levi studied him, still not quite sure what to make of the boy. Sometimes he looked like a beast hunting for meat, dangerous beyond his years; other times, he looked like any other new recruit, impatient and naïve. At any rate, he had been working hard, and he had lived day in and day out with people who would kill him if he stepped out of line. That had to be hard on his morale.

"Go eat with them."

Eren's eyes snapped to him. "Sir?"

"Your friends." Levi leaned back in his chair and took a sip of tea before he continued, "Ceiling's too low for you to transform in here, anyway. Report back to Eld immediately after the meal."

"Thank you, Captain." The boy grabbed his food and hurried across the room.

Levi leaned close to Eld. "After dinner, take him back to the classroom and go over the signal flares again. Don't let shitglasses try to steal him away for more research. All the titan powers in the world will

be worthless if he doesn't know the formation."

"Yes, Captain," Eld said. "Oluo, you can help."

Oluo let out a weary sigh. "Fine. I'll share my vast knowledge with the brat."

"Do you need company this evening, Captain?" Petra asked.

A stroll would be pleasant, but what he really needed right now was space. "No, I need you and Gunther to help Dita's team inspect the horses. Make sure the new recruits are caring for them properly." He drained the rest of his tea, then pushed back his chair.

He missed the privacy of the guard tower back in Trost. This base's spires were walled up, with only arrow slits in the walls; far too confining. He had tried to get onto the roof of a spire once, only to realize it was too steep to sit comfortably.

Instead, he wandered along the perimeter of the base. Without the lamps and lit windows of the city, the stars were as bright and clear as the crystals that studded the ceiling of the Underground. When he studied them, he felt a cold, shrinking sensation in his stomach that made him look away.

When he circled to the front of the base, he spotted a faint orange light on the road. He stopped, watching. It had to be Erwin—there was no reason for anyone else to come out to the base, and there were no major roads nearby.

Even if it wasn't Erwin, the light warranted investigation. He strode to the stables and quickly saddled up his horse.

As he drew closer to the light, it split into three. Two lanterns belonged to riders on horseback, one to a cart.

"Erwin?" he called.

"Good evening, Levi." The horses halted in front of him. Erwin and Nifa rode on horseback, and one of Dita's Team Leaders, Marlene, was driving the cart.

Erwin turned to the women. "You can go on ahead to the base. I'd like to speak with Captain Levi in private." He dismounted.

"You want to talk out here?" Levi said.

"We're close to the base, and it's a nice night. We can talk and walk the horses in."

Once the cart was far enough away, Erwin leaned down, hugging Levi with one arm, carefully holding the lantern with the other.

"Why are we out here?" Levi asked, suspicious. "You going to try to fuck me in a tree again?"

Erwin stared at him blankly for a moment.

“That night we saw Wall Maria.”

Erwin let out a deep laugh. “I’d almost forgotten about that.”

“You going senile already? That was less than a year ago.”

“Hm. I wouldn’t have rushed here if I knew you were going to be cranky.”

“You’d be cranky, too, if you were surrounded by shrieking brats all day.” Levi paused, then leaned in for another hug, this one longer. “Dita said you weren’t coming.”

“I wasn’t, but we got the transport sorted out early, so I figured I should check in.” Erwin nuzzled the top of his head. “I have a day or two free to make sure the training is going well, and to visit with my fiancé. Then I’ll head back to Trost to follow up on some merchant orders. I expect I’ll be bouncing a lot between here, Trost, Karanes, and maybe even Mitras for the next couple weeks.”

Levi had hoped he was staying longer, but at least a couple nights in the same bed was better than none. He breathed in the scent of sweat and cologne—stronger than usual—and every hair on his body stood on end. “Do we have time to fuck in a tree?”

Erwin chuckled. “I haven’t bathed in three days.”

“What?” Levi jerked away to eye him, not sure if his revulsion outweighed his desire.

“Things have been very busy. I need to clean up before we do anything. Besides, we can’t climb a tree; you don’t have any gear on.”

“So make sure I don’t fall.”

“You’d trust me to keep you secure? After two seconds of your touch, I’ll be too clumsy. Besides, it’s been a while since you were inside me, and that lines up better if we’re lying down.” Erwin kissed his forehead, then stood tall again. “I’ll come find you once all the rounds and updates are complete, and we can spend a leisurely night together.”

“After you’re clean.”

“Yes, I intend to bathe and eat as soon as I set foot in the base. How are things going with Eren?”

They padded toward the base with the horses in tow, taking their time, as Levi gave all his updates. Erwin had a few updates for him about their timeline and supplies, but he seemed to be holding something back.

“What’s in the cart?” Levi asked, taking a guess at what he might be avoiding.

“A few provisions, including some tea for you. One of the merchants was kind enough to give me a sample of a new strain that’s trendy with the noble class. Most of the supplies, however, are for Hange and Moblit: materials for the new titan traps.”

“As if shitglasses wasn’t wound up enough already,” Levi muttered.

“Yes, I think they’re both going to be extremely happy, Hange in particular. Sahlo didn’t just leave us funds; he left us connections. The supplier gave us several free upgrades when she realized where the money was coming from.”

Levi’s lip curled at the mention of the lord, but he said, “I see. And those are all your updates?”

“For now. There’s more, but I want to make sure we’re in a secure location, with four walls around us.”

“Okay.”

At the base, they handed off the horses to Marlene and Petra. Levi led Erwin to the bathroom and handed him the bucket he was using for makeshift showers. Erwin grimaced as he put his hand under the one working tap.

“It’s ice cold. Maybe I’ll wait until I’m back in Trost after all.”

Levi could tell he was teasing, but he flattened his lips anyway. “Shame to come all the way out here and not get laid.”

“I can’t tell if you’re joking or not, but I’d better not take any chances.” Erwin filled the bucket.

Once he was clean, they returned to the dining hall. Levi could tell Erwin was about to launch into introductions and updates with the other soldiers, so he sat him down with a bowl of stew first, determined to get him fed before he lost track of time. He sat protectively beside Erwin, eyeing those who looked like they might approach.

Hange was the only one who wasn’t intimidated, dropping into a chair across from them. “Hey, Erwin, I didn’t think you’d be here so soon.”

“He’s eating.”

“It’s okay, Levi,” Erwin said. “I’m sure Hange would like to hear about the materials I’ve brought.”

The dark eyes lit up. “Oh?”

“I have an inventory for you. Please let me know if we’re short on anything you need. Let’s meet first thing in the morning and go over the list.”

“Not now? I have blueprints ready.”

“I have other things I’d like to take care of tonight.”

“Ah,” Hange said slyly, drawing out the word. The dark eyes shifted between Erwin and Levi.

“Purely business, I assure you,” Erwin said. “Shall we meet here at seven in the morning and start our discussions over breakfast?”

“Sure, I’ll see you then. It’s good to have you here, sir.” Hange stood and grinned. “Maybe your Captain will be less grumpy after you have discussed business with him for a while. You did make sure the office door has a lock on it, didn’t you, Levi?”

Levi gave an irritable sigh.

Once the meal was done, they approached the table where the new 104th recruits sat. The youths grew silent as their leaders approached, eyes wide.

“Welcome to the Survey Corps,” Erwin said pleasantly. “I hope you’ve had the opportunity to settle into your quarters and familiarize yourselves with the base. You will begin training in the morning with Squad Leader Ness. I apologize for training you in a base with such old facilities—we’ll be settling you in Karanes closer to the expedition date. Eren Yeager will be attending several of your training sessions.”

Eren’s eyes lit up. “I will, sir?”

“Yes, though the bulk of your training will be conducted by Captain Levi and his squad.” His chin lifted. “If any of you have any concerns or questions, please direct them to your Squad Leader.”

“Thank you, sir,” the new recruits said, almost in unison.

And then, at last, they were able to retreat into private. Many of the offices were in too much disrepair to use, but Levi had saved the best one for Erwin, with one long table for maps and meetings, and a smaller one to use as a desk.

Erwin closed the door behind them as Levi carried a lamp to the centre of the small table.

“You’ve done a good job with this place,” Erwin said, running his fingers along the windowsill. “It’s hard to believe it went unused for so long.”

“The eastern half is still filthy. My squad will keep working on that tomorrow.” Levi pulled up a chair and sat. “So, spit it out. What weren’t you saying earlier?”

Erwin sat, too. “I’ve taken your advice and planned to have Eren’s location obscured within the formation. To further plant the seeds,

I told the 104th about the basement key during the recruitment ceremony.”

“That’s a lot of information to divulge.”

“It is. But it’s reasonable to assume anyone desperate enough to kill Sawney and Bean to keep us ignorant about titans would also be desperate to prevent us from reaching the basement. If there are other titan shifters among the 104th, we need to make sure they take our bait.”

“Hold on,” Levi said, “you think the Armoured and Colossal Titans ended up in the 104th?”

“It’s unlikely. None of the new recruits are over age seventeen, so none were older than twelve when the attack occurred. But we must assume every soldier who joined our ranks after Wall Maria’s attack is a potential threat, and the new recruits will be excited and chatty, so word will spread.” Erwin leaned forward across the desk. “This includes your squad, Levi. If any of them make a move toward Eren and his key—”

“They would have done it already,” Levi said. “Back when there were only a few of us here.”

“Maybe, unless they needed to maintain their cover. It’s unlikely any of them are threats, but we can’t safely discount them.”

“I know,” Levi said, irritated. This whole war had been a lot simpler back when the line between humans and titans had been clearcut.

They spent the next couple hours going over the strategy in detail, then talking about the best ways to roll it out to the troops. After that, they did rounds together, then, satisfied that everyone was where they should be, at last retired to the bedroom.

“There weren’t enough sleeping quarters for the new recruits,” Levi said, “so I paired up a few of the officers. You and I get this room.” He opened the door. It was a small room with a window and, most importantly, a single working lock.

“Convenient,” Erwin said, testing the locked door.

They lay their bedrolls side-by-side and Levi was about to extinguish the lamp, but Erwin caught his hand.

“Leave it on. I want to see you.”

The bedrolls were hard and awkward, but as they began to kiss, Levi forgot about his discomfort. He sank into Erwin, felt the broad legs wrap around him.

“You’re being so gentle,” Erwin whispered.

“Hm?” Levi rocked into him. “Is that strange?”

“No, it’s just ... ” Erwin slowly rocked his hips to meet him. “How

many times have we had sex now? It must be in the hundreds. And it's different every single time. It's as if there's no limit to the ways our bodies can connect, to the ways we can make each other feel. We're eternal, Levi, you and me."

Levi slowed and lifted his head to look up at him. "Are you getting sentimental?"

"Yes." Erwin held his gaze.

Levi studied him for a moment, then moved his hips in a circular motion, gently massaging his insides. Erwin's eyelids fluttered and he breathed several curses. He reached out a hand and Levi took it, fingers interlacing.

"I need it slow tonight," Levi whispered. "I want us to get lost in each other."

"Take your time." Erwin pressed a kiss into the knuckles of their joined hands. "When you move like that, I can feel the shape of you so clearly inside me. It's glorious." His eyes closed, his head tilting back, as if he were basking in a hot spring. Levi wasn't sure why the sight filled his eyes with tears; maybe he was feeling sentimental, too.

The lamp was low by the time they were done. Erwin spooned behind him, skin damp and radiating heat, and gave a low, contented rumble. Their hands found each other again. Levi reached out to extinguish the lamp.

He intended to take some time to savour the feeling of lying together, but Erwin's embrace was so cozy that he couldn't stay awake.

cg

After the slowness of their night, the flurry of activity the next morning was a shock. The day passed in a blur of planning, cleaning, and training. Levi was exhausted and yawning by the time he and Erwin met up in their shared bedroom.

"Do you need sleep?" Erwin asked, running a knuckle along his jaw.

"Are you still leaving for Trost tomorrow?"

"Yeah."

"Then screw sleep." Levi tugged his bolo tie, drawing him down for a kiss.

They stayed up so late that they overslept the next morning, and then Erwin was off to Trost.

Separation was difficult now, but looking after Eren filled Levi's days and there wasn't much time to mope. Eren was an attentive pupil, and while it was necessary for Levi to maintain professional distance—he might still have to kill him one day—he already felt himself growing fond of the kid. He hadn't had such an enthusiastic pupil since Petra. Eren wasn't very quick to pick up instruction, but he made up for it by stubbornly obsessing over details until he got them right. Levi was beginning to see what Berit had meant about Eren being a top student through tenacity alone. Isabel had been the same way, back when she had learned to use the 3DMG—

No, he couldn't keep comparing all his subordinates to Farlan and Isabel. That was a dangerous habit to get into.

One night, after what had appeared to be a particularly frustrating training session, Levi checked on Eren at lights out. He found Eren lying on his stomach on the bed, rereading notes about the formation. Levi quietly strode to the side of the bed to peer down at the notebook.

"Your writing looks like shit." It was even messier than Levi's.

"Captain!" Eren sat up, clumsily saluting. "Sorry, sir. I know it's lights out; I was just—"

"Relax." Levi leaned against the wall, folding his arms over his chest. "Lose a bit of sleep if it helps you learn the formation. I don't want your inexperience getting us killed on the battlefield. Do you have any questions?"

"No, sir. It's straight-forward; I just need to memorize it."

Levi studied him. "Are you curious about why you aren't allowed to tell anyone where we will be located in the formation?"

"No, I figure the Commander has a good reason for it, sir."

"Good. He does. Don't tell anyone, even your friends—the angry girl and the blond boy."

"Of course not, sir."

"And knock off that 'sir' crap. You don't have to use it every sentence. So long as you're calling me Captain, that's good enough. We aren't as formal here as they are in other parts of the military."

Eren nodded, face reddening. "It's a lot different on the field than it was in training."

"I know." Levi felt a wave of sympathy. "And you got thrust into an elite squad right away, so you don't even have the time to adapt to everything gradually like your friends." That had been his experience,

too. Erwin had shoved him so quickly through the ranks that it had been dizzying at times. But at least Levi had been in his mid-twenties, with years of experience leading people in combat Underground. Eren was still a kid. “Are you adjusting okay?”

“Captain?” Eren’s brows pinched.

“You went from being a regular trainee, to being an enemy of humanity, to being humanity’s hope, all within the period of a couple weeks. That’s a lot to take in.”

“It is, but …” Eren’s eyes narrowed. “I have to work hard. I have to succeed. Humanity is depending on me.” He turned to Levi, eyes crackling with energy. “We almost lost Wall Rose. We have to stop them, because that must never happen. We have to kill them all.”

The hair on the back of Levi’s neck stood on end, but he kept his gaze steady; he had to maintain the appearance that he wasn’t intimidated. “Let’s start by succeeding at this expedition. Study as late as you want, but make sure you get some sleep. Hange wants to spend tomorrow afternoon testing your regenerative abilities.” It was something to do with a new weapon—he hadn’t been interested enough to ask.

Talking about Hange reminded him that he hadn’t had a good chat with the Squad Leader since before the attack, but when he approached the lab, Hange and Moblit were engrossed in deep conversation over some blueprints. Not wanting to interrupt, Levi headed back upstairs. He was happy the two of them were getting so many opportunities to do what they loved, but if he was honest with himself, he missed Hange.

The rest of Levi’s squad was in the middle of a card game, empty bottles of ale cluttering the table. He stood in the doorway, staring down his nose at them.

“Hey. It’s lights out. Whose turn is it to watch Eren?”

“Mine, Captain.” Gunther stood and held out the cards. “You want to take my hand?”

Levi eyed his pile of chips, significantly smaller than the rest. “Looks like you’re almost out of the game. The rest of you should get some sleep, anyway.”

“Just one hand, Captain,” Petra said with a sly smile.

He nodded at the enormous pile of chips in front of her. “Hoping to clean up?”

“If I’m lucky.”

“Fine, one hand.” He sat.

One hand turned into a second, then a third. The banter flew. Levi found himself making dry quips of his own. Everything had been so grim lately; it was nice to remember the camaraderie he felt with his squad. Most squads grew close in the Survey Corps, but not like this one. This one was so small, and they had been so isolated during their scouting trip up north that he felt as if they were his family.

Levi returned to his bedroom far later than he should have. He didn't sleep well when Erwin wasn't around, anyway; the bedroll still smelled like cologne. He pulled a chair to the window instead and studied the moon, wondering if Erwin was up on the guard tower in Trost, watching the moon, thinking of Levi. It seemed unlikely he'd go up there alone, especially this late at night, but it was a nice image. The fact that Erwin could look up at any time and see this same moon from Trost made Levi feel a little less lonely. *Unless it's a cloudy night there, I guess.*

He woke up at dawn still in his chair, his chin tucked to his chest.

❧

At the end of the week, Erwin joined them for a quick overnight visit to deliver further updates. He and Levi stayed up late to share drinks with Hange and Moblit, discussing the weapons in development. The new technology sounded promising: barbed spears that used a titan's healing powers against it by burrowing deeper into its joints and flesh.

"The faster the titan heals, the quicker we lock it down," Hange said with an eerie grin. "It'll be anchored to our cannons."

"You're sure it works?" Erwin said.

"We can't be absolutely sure until we see it in action. But Eren graciously let me try a miniature barb on his arm, and it seemed to—"

"Hold on," Levi said. "You stabbed him?"

"It was his idea to try a smaller one, just on his forearm."

"You told me you were only talking to him."

"It healed right away—it didn't hurt him much."

Levi smacked the back of the ponytailed head. "He might have transformed, and if he had been feral, I wouldn't have been there to stop him. You have to be more careful with him, four-eyes."

"That's what I said." Moblit took a long drink.

"I'm sorry." Hange looked miserable. "We don't have any other

titan specimens, and we can't go into the field with a *theoretical* weapon. We need to make sure it works."

"Did you get the information you needed?" Erwin asked, authoritative.

All eyes shifted to him.

"Yes," Hange said.

"Then the risk was worth it this time, but don't do it again. Aside from the risks Levi mentioned, it's unethical to use a soldier as a lab specimen. We're putting him under enough duress as it is." He studied them each in turn. "You're probably wondering why I have you designing stationary traps for what is essentially a scouting expedition."

Hange's eyes gleamed. "I think I figured it out."

"Oh?"

"This isn't a scouting expedition at all. You're trying to use Eren to lure out the Colossal or Armoured titans. That's why you made the basement key common knowledge—you know the people who murdered poor Sawney and Bean are going to want to stop us from getting whatever is in that basement."

Not bad, four-eyes, Levi thought.

Erwin looked impressed, too. "That's exactly right. We'll be obscuring Eren's position within the formation to give us a better chance at getting to the area where the traps are set, allowing us to capture whichever shifter attacks us—I'm assuming it would be the Armoured Titan, given that the Colossal Titan doesn't seem very mobile. Do you think your traps could pierce the Armoured Titan's thick skin?"

Hange shrugged. "Good question. We can accelerate the force and run some tests on stone."

"Good. Your squad will be riding in the vanguard with Command so we can quickly set up the traps before any titan shifter guests arrive. Only a handful of trusted comrades will know about this plan, so don't share this with anyone."

"With no disrespect intended, Commander," Moblit said, "this sounds like a risky mission to undertake while the Capital is watching us so closely. And Eren seems to barely have a grasp on how to transform, let alone how to harness his powers and use them effectively."

"You're right," Levi said, "but we're short on time. They didn't finish their attack on Trost, and they might try again any day now. If they succeed in taking down Wall Rose, we're fucked."

"Eren blocked the entrance."

“With a boulder. If he can move it in, other titan shifters can move it out.”

“Perhaps it’s best that we’re being forced to take risks, anyway,” Erwin said. “Being cautious is what led to us throwing away hundreds of soldiers’ lives to build a supply pathway we can barely salvage now. With a bit less prudence, we might have been able to make a real attempt on Wall Maria before the titans had even had a chance to attack Wall Rose, and all those deaths wouldn’t have been in vain. The stakes are significantly higher than we believed. Humanity needs to take bigger risks if we’re going to gain any real ground against the titans.”

Levi gave him a sharp glance, not liking the sombre note to his tone. “It’s not as bad as all that. The Wall Maria reclamation effort was probably going to fail. We all knew that going in. Now we’ve got a real chance to reclaim it.”

“If there happens to be a boulder nearby for Eren to seal the gate with,” Moblit said dryly, and he took another swig from his bottle.

They were silent for a few minutes as they finished their drinks, then Hange stood. “If that’s everything, I’m going to make a few more tweaks to the prototype before I go to bed.”

Moblit grimaced. “You didn’t sleep last night, Squad Leader. You need to rest.”

“I will. Now that I know we have to be able to set these up quickly, I’d like to re-examine the springs. That’s all; we’ll adjust the force in the morning. You go get some rest, Moblit.”

Moblit shook his head and stood, too. “It’ll be faster if we both do it.”

They said their goodnights, and then Erwin and Levi were alone in the makeshift office.

Erwin gave Levi a sidelong glance. “Over the desk?”

“That thing’s so rickety, it’ll collapse under us. And what’s with you being so horny lately?” It was especially jarring when he had been speaking about their dead comrades a few minutes earlier.

“I suppose I’m just invigorated. Hope is a powerful aphrodisiac. Or maybe I’m still in disbelief that I’m allowed to touch you like this again.” Erwin pushed back his chair. He stood behind Levi and kissed the side of his neck, his palms roughly working down his front. “If I’m coming on too strong, I can ease up.”

“I wasn’t complaining.” Levi’s eyes fluttered closed. “Let’s try the desk. But I’d better be on top of it. I’m lighter.”

Erwin nipped at his earlobe, then pulled away. “Do you want me inside you?”

“My stomach is a little jumpy and I don’t trust it. Let’s use our mouths and hands tonight.”

“Sure.” Erwin smoothed the hair off his forehead. “I’ll lock the door.”

A half hour later, both glowing, they slipped down the hall to the bedroom. They undressed and collapsed onto the bedrolls, sweating and breathing hard. Levi curled onto his side and pressed his cheek to Erwin’s chest; the sweat and hair made the contact itchy, but he tolerated the discomfort. Beneath it all was a heartbeat, loud and strong.

“I have some more updates for you.” Erwin’s voice sounded deeper as it rumbled through his ribcage.

“Yeah?”

“First: I went to Karanes to check on the progress. Mike’s squad nearly has the old base ready. They’ve started doing daily scouting missions through the gates to gauge titan activity. The rest of you will be moving to the base three days before the mission.”

“That late?”

“We don’t want to disrupt the training sessions for the new recruits.” His arms wrapped around Levi. “And by the way, while I was in Karanes, I checked on our apartment and cleaned it up a bit.”

Levi had been so fixated on the apartments in Trost and Ehrlich that he had forgotten about Karanes. “Is it like the one in Trost?”

“Very similar, but smaller—only a small desk, no table. It has an automatic shower, but no water heater, I’m afraid.”

“That’s fine. We should meet there after this mission, if it goes well.”

“And if it doesn’t ... ” Erwin paused. “That brings me to my second update: I have formally named my successor.”

“Oh?” Levi said, surprised. Until now, the Squad Leaders had been deemed too junior to take over as Commander should the worst happen to Erwin. The Survey Corps was slated to default to Garrison command until a suitable replacement grew into the role. “Who did you name?”

“Well, obviously you have no interest in leading, and your military history disqualifies you, anyway.”

Plus, there’s no way in hell you’re going to die while I’m still breathing, Levi thought, jaw clenching.

“Mike is a good Squad Leader, but he’s too content to follow the status quo. With the ever-changing situation at present, we need a Commander who isn’t afraid to take big risks.”

Levi’s stomach flipped. “Hange?”

“Yes.”

“You want to hand command to a person who thought it was a good idea to stab a fifteen-year-old inexperienced titan shifter with something sharp to see what happened?”

“I know you think more highly of Hange than that, Levi. We’ve all seen how our techniques and survival rates have improved thanks to the innovation of Hange’s team. And yes, there are certain—” Erwin seemed to be searching for the right word. “—behavioural quirks to be wary of. That’s why I need you to promise me to rein in Hange if anything gets too wild. Moblit has an eye out, but ultimately, he’s too loyal and too easily persuaded. You aren’t afraid to be blunt to get your point across, and that’s the kind of counterbalance Hange needs.”

“Fine,” Levi said, uncomfortable about discussing a future where Erwin no longer existed.

“Only you and Zackly know of this. I’ll tell Hange once the paperwork goes through.”

“Fine.” After a small silence, Levi said, “What’s the hurry?”

“Our world has been turned upside down; we can no longer be certain about our future. It’s important to be prepared.” Erwin rubbed his back. “I know it isn’t pleasant to discuss, but it was important to me that you know the plan as soon as possible.”

It seemed like there was more to it than that, but Levi was already hollow from envisioning Erwin’s death, so he didn’t want to discuss it further. He closed his eyes and listened to the pounding heart beneath his ear.

-37-

LOSS

As their physical separation resumed and more days passed, Erwin found himself missing Levi more and more. It felt wrong to lie alone in Trost in the bed they had so often shared. It even felt wrong in Karanes, where they had yet to spend a single night together.

It wasn't just lonely at night. Planning the mission felt empty without Levi by his side to ask questions and make suggestions. Erwin had never realized how much he relied on his Captain to help guide his strategy. He made several more unplanned overnight trips back to the old base, telling himself it was important to gather input on his plans, supervise the new recruits, and check in on Hange's weapons. During their visits, he and Levi would stay up late into the night talking and making love. Even with the late nights, they slept so soundly together that he always felt rested when he left. Calmer.

When he was alone, he was filled with restless energy. Enthusiasm was a double-edged sword. The appearance of Eren Yeager and his basement key made him feel like he was a teenager again, explaining his theories to Nile over an ale, and it was difficult to channel that energy. He was close now, closer than ever before.

He tried to temper his expectations. Whatever truth was in that basement, it would, at the very least, give them answers about the titans that could give them the upper hand.

Whenever he thought of the future, he frequently found himself looking beyond the basement, and he would pause to touch the ring he carried in his breast pocket. Like Eren Yeager's key, the ring was a tangible promise of a dream that finally appeared to be within his reach. He had always assumed death was an inevitable part of his career, but maybe that was no longer the case. Maybe now he and Levi really could

retire and live a peaceful, quiet life together, the kind of idyllic existence he had always secretly wanted.

Still, death was the likelier outcome, and he made sure to prepare for it. By baiting a titan shifter, they were baiting an enemy who could potentially overpower their entire regiment. Eren had taken out twenty titans during his first transformation—it was logical to assume a trained shifter would be even more powerful. There was a good chance the losses from this expedition would be massive, and Erwin's plan put him right in the middle of the fray.

Levi had noted that, too, during their most recent visit. He had insisted on leaving Eren with his squad so he could stand by Erwin's side during the core of the operation.

"Eren is our most valuable resource," Erwin had said. "I need you protecting him."

Levi had shaken his head. "The kid's a valuable weapon, yeah, but what good is a weapon if you can't aim it? We need you alive to keep coming up with strategies. Besides, if we capture a shifter, you're going to want to cut them out alive for questioning. You need me to be there for that."

"Mike can handle that."

"You said it yourself: we don't know how powerful this thing is going to be. We don't know if there's going to be one, or two, or even more. You need your strongest soldiers standing by."

Erwin suspected this had been a careful appeal to his logic, and the true motive was more personal, but it was sound reasoning. In the end, they had compromised: Levi was to come to Erwin's side only after he had ensured Eren was safely out of reach of whatever mess their plan stirred up.

❧

Three days before the mission, Levi, Hange, Dita, and the new recruits arrived at the new base in Karanes. Erwin watched from his office window as they filed into the courtyard on horseback. Only Levi looked up, scanning the windows; when their gaze locked, they exchanged a nod. It was a small gesture, but Erwin felt lighter because of it.

That was the only private exchange they had time to make. When Levi stepped into the office a short while later, he was accompanied by all three of the other Squad Leaders. This was the first time all

the officers had been in the same room since Eren had joined the regiment, and it was imperative to have a thorough meeting to ensure everyone was on the same page.

The meeting took so long that they paused to grab their lunches from the mess hall, and by the time it was wrapping up, it was nearly dinner time. As Erwin made closing statements, he leafed through his notebook a final time, ensuring he hadn't missed a single detail.

An envelope slipped out and landed in his lap. Without missing a beat, he noted the addressee—*Rebeka Ral*—then slipped it back into his notebook. It only hit him after he dismissed his officers and took a moment to consider the letter's source: when Levi had been ill, Mike had brought Petra's letter to his attention, the one where she had alluded to her feelings for Levi. He had completely forgotten to mail it; it was weeks overdue. Did it still make sense to send it? It would probably embarrass Petra if he explained the reason it had gotten lost, and he didn't feel like making up an excuse for it. He would find Nifa immediately and correct his mistake by sending it out.

The officers filed out of the room, but Levi hung back. "Hey."

The door closed, and, certain they were alone, Erwin stepped in to give Levi a soft peck. "How are you, my fiancé?"

As he had hoped, Levi's cheeks turned pink. "Stop calling me that."

"You probably want to take some time to get settled, right? Your room is next to mine, at the end of the hallway on the second floor. It says 'Captain' on the door; you can't miss it."

"Thanks."

"Of course. I have a few tasks to take care of before we spend the night together. All squads are in training review for the rest of the night, so you're under full authority to do as you please with your squad. Nothing too strenuous; they should be resting in preparation for the expedition. Meet me in my room at lights out."

"Sure."

They exchanged another quick kiss, then parted ways.

Nifa was in the lab with Hange and Moblit. Erwin handed her the letter, along with enough money to send it overnight.

His guilt suitably assuaged, he turned to find Mike. There were still some last-minute shipments to secure.

That night, as planned, Levi knocked on his door shortly after lights out. Erwin opened it.

He found himself flat against the wall before the door had even finished closing. Levi dropped to his knees in front of him, roughly undoing his belt.

“Levi—”

“Just let me do this.” His mouth was warm. Erwin rolled his head back against the wall, slumping into it. He felt Levi’s low hum more than heard it.

“Fuck.” He politely lay his hand atop Levi’s head, but after another minute of moving suction and a swirling tongue, his fingers knotted into the dark hair.

When he was right on the edge, Levi pulled away. “You cleaned my room for me.”

Erwin felt it was appropriate to make a quip in response, but his mind was too empty, so he only gave a small moan. He had somehow managed to slide halfway down the wall, his knees bent, hips thrust forward.

“How do you want it?” Levi looked up at him, his lips damp and swollen.

Erwin stared at his mouth, transfixed, then realized he was waiting for an answer. “On the bed?”

The mouth flattened. “No, do you want me inside you, or—”

“Yeah.”

Levi pushed him onto the bed and climbed on top of him, and their mouths were on each other, and then Levi was inside him. He cried out louder than he meant, and a small hand clapped over his mouth. Those swollen lips found his nipple, and that only worsened the urge to cry out.

Then Levi slowed, and their eyes locked, and they moved gently together. Just when it seemed like Levi might go under, he stopped. They undressed each other, kissing slowly, hands tracing each new section of exposed flesh until they were bare. They fell back to the bed, under the covers this time, taking their time, rebuilding the frenzy they had started with. Levi came first, then bent down to use his mouth again until Erwin followed him.

They clung to each other afterwards. The candle by the bedside had almost completely burnt down. Erwin watched the flame flicker.

“It’s going to be dangerous, Levi.”

“Mm?”

“This mission.”

“They always are.” Levi opened one eye. “Are you getting all melancholy?”

“Yeah.” Something about post-sex vulnerability and pre-mission jitters was a bad combination for him, especially this time, when so much was at stake.

A warm hand pressed to the centre of his chest. “You’ve planned this thing to death. You’ve done all you can.”

“There are too many unknowns. This is the biggest gamble we’ve ever undertaken: we’re betting on a possibility that may not happen. We don’t know if the shifters will take the bait, or how strong they’ll be in battle. We don’t know if Hange’s new traps will subdue it. We don’t even know if Eren can transform and fight if worse comes to worse and we have a standoff.”

“Yeah, there’s a lot we don’t know. But there’s only one way to get answers, and you’ve given us a hell of a lot to work with.” Levi rolled to face Erwin and kissed his shoulder. “You always start overthinking things when there’s no more planning left to do. It’s good. It means you’ve already done all the planning you need.”

“I suppose.”

“Get some sleep.” Levi nestled closer. “Fuck, I’ve missed sleeping in a bed.”

Erwin smiled. “The bed at the apartment is more comfortable than this.”

“Are we still planning to meet there after the mission?”

“Yeah, as soon as we can slip away. I need to give you directions to get there.”

“Tomorrow.” Levi’s voice was faint. “Stop planning things and go to sleep.”

This time, Erwin decided to take his advice. He draped his arms loosely around Levi and closed his eyes.

cg

The morning of the expedition, the Survey Corps assembled in front of the gates. The townsfolk had gathered to see them off; this was a rare occasion for the populace, since most scouting expeditions had left through Trost.

Erwin sat tall, ignoring the onlookers. In his mind’s eye, he reached backwards through the formation, feeling each piece of it, a col-

lapsed umbrella that would open and spread once they were in the field. He could feel Hange beside him, Levi and Eren towards the middle of the formation, the new weapons they had stashed carefully in the carts.

He took a deep, steadyng breath. This was the most important mission the Survey Corps had ever embarked upon. They would not fail.

The gates began to open, and he tensed, focused.

Once the gate was completely open, he roared, “We will now begin the fifty-seventh expedition outside the Wall. Advance!”

Titans immediately surfaced from the remnants of the town outside the gate. The support teams leapt into action. Erwin stared straight ahead, eyes narrow, waiting for the border of the city. The instant they burst into the meadow, he threw out his arm, commanding the troops to deploy the Long-Distance Enemy Scouting Formation.

Behind him, he knew Levi would be waiting until the formation had spread out, then settling into the centre with Eren. He felt the other teams move into position, spreading out to match the map he held in his mind.

At first, the expedition proceeded like any other. The sky was clear, which was important; unexpected rain would completely neutralize their flare communications system. The terrain here was flatter than the old checkpoint routes south of Trost. Mike’s squad had carefully scouted the entire route to the forest of giant trees, ensuring there were no unexpected pitfalls or sinkholes to worry about.

After about an hour, the smattering of red flares from the right flank turned into a storm. No matter how many times Erwin redirected the formation, the red flares kept coming. *Odd.*

Then, at last, he saw what he had been waiting for: black flares. An abnormal.

Erwin’s eyes narrowed. *There you are.*

Hange’s horse fell into place beside his. “You think that’s one of them?”

“Could just be an abnormal, but that persistent cluster of red before it was unusual, wasn’t it? And we told several teams Eren was in the right vanguard.”

“It can’t be the Colossal Titan,” Hange said. “That thing could barely stand without holding onto the wall.”

“I agree. Ready to test the weapons on the Armoured Titan?”

“If we can’t break through its carapace, we’ll aim for its joints.”

Hange eyed the right flank nervously. “The flares have stopped. Do you think the shifter turned back into a human? Or ...”

Erwin didn’t want to think about the alternative, either; his teeth clenched. He fired a green flare in the direction of the forest and increased their pace.

They were nearing the entrance to the forest when the black flares began to start up again, this time moving toward the centre of the formation at great speed.

“It’s heading toward Eren,” Hange said.

The plan is working. “Keep riding.”

“It’s moving fast. Do you think Levi and Eren can outrun it?”

“Yes,” Erwin said without hesitation, but he knew all Levi’s skill meant nothing if the titan was moving faster than the horses. Sweat beaded on his temples and forehead.

They were moving so quickly that the trees suddenly erupted from the earth around them; the temperature dropped, and shade settled over them, damp and cold. The hair on the back of Erwin’s neck rose, but he did not slow.

The small clearing in the centre of the forest was where they would stage their attack: the trees would cloak their traps and allow 3D movement.

“Here,” he barked when they reached their objective. “Hange.”

“On it!”

Hange’s team quickly rolled the traps into place. Mike’s team joined them a few minutes later, settling on the tree branches, ready to provide support.

“How far back are they?” Erwin asked him.

“Judging by the flares, maybe ten minutes.” Mike rolled his neck and his shoulders. “I can’t smell anything nearby.”

“Good. Let me know the instant you do.” They had set up the bulk of the soldiers as decoys in the trees at the mouth of the forest, hoping to bait the normal titans so only their shifter would come through. The plan appeared to be working, for now.

Once everyone was in position, Erwin sank his anchors into the side of a tree trunk where he could overlook the main path, ready to signal Hange’s team. Five minutes passed, then ten. His stomach was knotted. If it came to it, if the shifter caught up to Levi’s team, he knew Levi’s squad would fight to the death to defend Eren. Surely a runner would come to notify them if that were the case ...

A sound round echoed through the forest. Levi's signal.

Erwin coiled back into the tree trunk, ready. On a branch nearby, Mike nodded to catch his attention, then held up a hand. *Five hundred metres and closing.*

The ground began to vibrate. He heard hoof beats, and screams.

His hand curled tightly around the hilt of his sword. Closer, closer ...

Levi's squad burst into view, galloping at full speed.

Then behind them, in a full sprint: a female titan. Her eyes locked onto Erwin, wide with surprise.

"Fire!" Erwin roared, slicing the air with his blade.

The cannons erupted. Harpoons speared the titan's bare skin. Erwin dropped to a thick branch and studied the beast as the traps continued to fire. She was hunched, her hands protecting her nape. She appeared to be built entirely of muscle, a perfect target for Hange's weapons. *We're lucky they sent her instead of the Armoured Titan*, he thought, but at the same time, he wondered just how many titan shifters lived within the Walls.

Levi dropped onto the branch beside him a few minutes later. "Looks like we stopped it."

"We can't let our guard down yet. I'm impressed you managed to lead it here."

"That was thanks to the rear squads, who risked their lives fighting. They bought us the time we needed."

He couldn't think about that now; any guilt or grief had to wait until he was off the battlefield. Levi seemed to be waiting for an answer, so he said absently, "Is that so?"

"Yeah. Thanks to them, we get to meet whoever's inside the neck of this thing." Levi grimaced. "I just hope they haven't pissed themselves."

Normally, the crass remark would make Erwin chuckle, but he was too intently focused on the beast in front of them. "There were no others?"

"No," Levi said. "Just her."

Then there was no point in leaving any traps loaded. *Before Levi and Mike go in, we'd better make sure she can't so much as twitch.* "Fire!" he called.

Below him, Hange's team fired the last of the trap cannons. Content the titan was secure, Erwin nodded at Levi and Mike. "Go."

The goal was simple: thanks to Eren, they knew the person inside the titan would be located in its nape. They also knew the person could regenerate lost limbs if necessary. They were unlikely to come out willingly, but they could be forcibly extracted.

When Levi and Mike tried to slice into the nape, however, the titan generated a temporary unbreakable skin over her hands, protecting her nape.

Erwin's jaw tightened. *Looks like she can overlay part of her body with a tough layer of skin.* This must be a temporary version of the same plating that covered the Armoured Titan. There was a chance that continually attacking her would wear down this ability—but no, there wasn't time to test that theory.

Can she stay in titan form indefinitely, or can we wait her out? His eyes scanned the surface of her body, looking for weaknesses they could exploit, then landed on her wrists.

There. They would blow her hands off at the wrists to expose the nape. He opened his mouth to give the order.

The beast let out a deafening roar.

What the hell? He covered his ears against the noise, but that barely protected him. He had never heard anything like it: it was a roar, a squeal, and a howl all at once, and it chilled him to his core. When it ended, his ears rang. He slowly lowered his hands, stunned.

For a second, no one moved. Levi was still standing on her head; he stomped a couple times, as if chiding her.

He's in threat range and she's desperate. I should recall him.

But before he could open his mouth, Mike yelled, “Erwin! Incoming.”

Erwin's eyes snapped to him. “Which direction?”

“All around us. Too many to count.”

He had thought the titan was desperate, but she had been in control the entire time. And now half their regiment was still waiting along the perimeter of the forest. *Shit. They'll destroy us.*

“Intercept teams,” he yelled, “prepare for combat!”

But as the first wave of titans approached, they charged past the intercept teams and went straight for the trapped titan instead.

Erwin's blood ran cold. *They're after the female titan? Why?*

One of them bit into her calf muscle, tearing flesh from bone.

Recognition flashed over him.

“All squads, commence the attack,” he roared. “Defend the fe-

male titan to the death!"

Before he had even finished his order, Levi was already in action. Around him, soldiers jumped into the fray. Erwin watched, his heart pounding in his chest. There had to be dozens of titans, consuming her flesh, consuming everything they had hoped to gain from this mission. Blood rained down on the battlefield. *We have to salvage something, anything ...*

Within less than a minute, it became clear the battle was lost. Erwin closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then opened them again.

"All teams, pull back!"

Levi snapped to the tree trunk beside him, wiping steaming blood from his face. Erwin stared down at the evaporating remains of their foe. How strong-willed their enemies must be, that they would rather face death than be taken alive.

But it was more than that: she had made the titans do this. She had controlled them with her scream. And if a titan could perform that sort of rudimentary mind control on other titans ... The pieces hadn't quite clicked together yet, but they were *there*, and he was one step closer to understanding it all.

He saw his father's animated hands, the light in his eyes—

"Hey, Erwin," Levi said.

Erwin murmured, "She got us."

There was a pause, then Levi said, "Why the hell are you smiling?"

"The enemy was prepared to give up everything. I never thought she would have the titans eat her to erase all information." Did other titans have the power of this scream, too? Did their powers only extend to mindless titans, or were there other applications?

He snapped back to himself. These were things they could wonder about later. For now, they had to get home alive. He ordered the teams to meet in formation west of the forest.

"Sir," the soldiers barked, moving out.

Erwin stood overlooking their lost prey for a moment longer, seeing, for the first time, all the bloodied remains of their soldiers scattered around it. His heart sank.

"After all my bluster in front of the Council," Levi said, "this is what happens—heavy losses, and nothing useful gained. What's going to happen to us and Eren when we stroll back through the gate?"

"Think about that after we're home. Right now, we have to con-

centrate on retreating without further casualties. At least for now.” Erwin stared at the billowing clouds of steam. They could interfere with their signal flares, blocking their visibility—

He froze.

What if she didn't actually sacrifice herself? The Colossal Titan had dissipated into steam, too, only to reappear later. If their adversary had dressed herself in 3DMG before transforming into a titan, they could have left the shell of the female titan behind to be eaten while they escaped on the gear. No one would have seen anything amidst all the steam and chaos.

“I'm going to call my squad over,” Levi said, turning to leave. “I just hope they haven't gone too far.”

“Wait, Levi. Replenish your gas and blades.”

Levi stopped. “Why? There's no time, and I have plenty.”

He was right, there was no time, and that included time to explain his logic. “That's an order.” Erwin turned to him, using his most authoritative stare. “Follow it.”

Levi held his gaze for a moment, then turned away, looking a bit miffed. “Okay, Erwin. I'll trust your judgement.”

Go. They could clear this up later. For now, they had to get back to Karanes as quickly and safely as possible. If there was a hostile out there, they needed their best soldier to be fully equipped.

Erwin descended and landed on the ground, where Hange's team was hastily loading the traps onto the carts. “We have to move. Leave the other traps behind.”

“But—” Hange began.

“There's no time. We can retrieve them later.” Erwin whistled for his horse and mounted. “Let's go.”

63

Sure enough, before they had reached the edge of the forest, another roar permeated the air. This one was deeper than the Female Titan's scream. *Eren?*

Hange, riding beside him, looked back with pinched brows. “Do you think he can take her?”

“Levi's squad is with him.”

“And do you think Levi's squad can take her?”

“If any squad can, it's his,” Erwin said firmly, his heart pounding

in his throat.

The Survey Corps—or what was left of it—assembled in a meadow about fifteen minutes west of the forest. The female titan's scream seemed to have drawn every titan in the area, at least for now, leaving the meadow empty.

With no immediate threats, they had time to recover bodies and tend to the wounded. Erwin spoke with the Squad Leaders and gathered reports, casting the occasional uneasy eye toward the forest entrance. Would Levi surface? Would Eren? Would Levi's squad kill the Female Titan before they could get any information out of her? Could they take her alive? His neck and shoulders were tight, and he couldn't stand still.

Then a familiar black horse emerged from the woods, followed by a brown one. As they drew closer, Erwin saw Levi holding an unconscious Eren, and Mikasa Ackerman beside them.

"Get a medic," he called to Mike.

"Erwin," Levi called; the horses halted in front of him. "We got him out."

"Is he hurt, or just exhausted?" Erwin asked as the medics rushed forward.

"He's unconscious. He lost his fight to the Female Titan, and she tried to abduct him in her mouth."

Erwin's throat tightened. "Did you engage her?"

"Yeah. She's disabled, but not dead."

"Good." It was the best scenario aside from taking her captive. He glanced at the forest. "Where's the rest of your team?"

"Dead." Levi dismounted, then began to sag. Erwin lunged forward and caught his arm.

"You're hurt."

"Fucked up my ankle." Levi glanced at Mikasa; the girl was kneeling beside Eren; the medics were trying to pull her out of the way. Levi's voice lowered. "The girl rushed in like an idiot. We almost lost her."

"Then you are to be commended for saving them both." Erwin began to lead him toward a large rock so he could sit down. "Let me take a look at your ankle."

"Not until I tell the recovery crew where to find the bodies." Levi's mouth twisted.

Erwin nodded and waved over Mike.

Once Mike's team had been dispatched, Levi sat down on the

rock. Erwin knelt in front of him and pulled off his boot, then the straps and sock.

“I’m sorry,” Erwin said softly. About his team. About his injury.

“Don’t do that yet,” Levi said, not looking at him. “Keep it together. We need you to get the survivors home alive.”

His ankle was red and swollen. Erwin gripped the foot and began to gently move and squeeze it, noting when Levi winced.

“Might be hairline fractures,” Erwin said.

“If we’re lucky. Could be a tear.” Levi’s face was still twisted.

“You need morphine.”

“No. Just wrap it and shove it back in the boot. I’ll deal with it when we get back to Karanes.”

Erwin tried to give him a stern look; the grey gaze didn’t duck away, and he sighed. “Levi—”

“Don’t fight me on this, Erwin. I won’t give in, and you have other shit to worry about.”

After a pause, Erwin nodded and found a roll of cloth tape. He had sustained so many injuries, had seen so many friends and colleagues do the same, that the correct tension and angles for an ankle wrapping were second nature to him. Once the wrapping was in place, he shoved the gear and boot back on. Levi stood, a bit unsteady.

“That will hold.” He hesitated, and when he spoke again, his voice was as unsteady as his stance: “Tell me what to do next.”

“Check in with the team leaders of your extended squad. Then see if Hange, Mike, or Di—” He stopped. Dita was gone. “Actually, take charge of Dita’s team leaders. They’re a bit scattered right now.”

“Yeah. Okay.” Levi shuffled toward the others.

The recovery teams were working quickly, retrieving bodies and laying them in a row. Erwin’s heart sank as he stared across the casualties. It had been years since they’d had a mission this disastrous. *And all for nothing ...*

He tried not to notice Levi kneeling beside a body, cutting a patch off a cloak. He thought of the torn patches he had once seen in Levi’s box of possessions. Was this something he always did? How had Erwin never noticed? He supposed there was always a degree of separation between them on the field, particularly when they were busy with recovery duties.

Or maybe it was something he rarely did, and this mission had hurt him just as badly as his first one, so long ago.

Keep it together. Erwin took a long, steady breath and began to circulate, gathering status updates from Team Leaders.

When they had recovered all but five bodies, he made the call to mark down the others as missing and leave. They had already lingered too long; there was no point in risking more lives to recover the others. Pehr assured him the others were irretrievable, anyway; the titans, no longer under the Female Titan's spell, had begun to wander through the forest again.

Two young soldiers, however, were not happy with this plan. One of their friends, Ivan, was among the unrecovered bodies. Erwin listened to their pleas, unmoving. This wasn't the first time he had hurt someone by leaving behind a body, and it wouldn't be the last. These two, however, were particularly persistent, one of them going so far as to call him selfish.

He didn't even need to speak up against them; Levi's voice rose behind him: "Listen to this pair of noisy brats."

"Captain Levi." The soldiers turned to him, perhaps hoping for a different decision.

"If you've confirmed his death," Levi said, "then that's enough. Dead is dead. Whether or not we have the body makes no difference."

"You can't be serious," said one of the soldiers.

Erwin turned to leave. "Ivan and the others will be marked down as 'missing.' That decision is final. Let it go."

As he began to walk away, he heard a soldier yell after him: "Don't the two of you have any human feelings at all?"

Erwin's jaw clenched, but he didn't look back. How many times had he thought the same of his own leaders in his younger days? How many friends and loved ones had he left to rot on the battlefield? To these young soldiers, he was a monster, but if they lived long enough, they, too, would see that priority must always be given to the living.

Somehow, that logic didn't make him feel any better.

He became aware, after a moment, that Levi was following him. Erwin stopped a short distance away from the others and turned.

"They think we're made of stone," he rasped, the first emotions beginning to push through his walls.

Levi studied him. "Well, we have to be."

If Erwin was stone, he was brittle; cracks had formed under the strain, and they were running through him. He could tell by Levi's taut expression he was feeling the same way.

If they, with all their years of experience, were feeling this worn down, the troops must be in terrible shape. Especially the new ones. The more he thought about the aftermath of the mission, the more disastrous it seemed.

“Levi—” He wasn’t sure what he wanted to say.

“It’s okay. Hang in there,” Levi said—after all he had lost, with his ankle destroyed, why was he the one doing the comforting? It was unfair, and it was all Erwin’s doing.

“Levi—” he tried again.

“No. Not yet.” Levi’s expression was fierce. “Later.”

Erwin swallowed hard. “We’re heading out. Ride beside me.”

“Not in formation?”

“You’re the only conscious member of your team, and you’re injured. The others will close in the gap. You can help me navigate.” He needed Levi beside him, needed to know he was there.

Maybe his reason was convincing, or maybe Levi could see him crumbling; either way, he nodded. “Okay.”

Within minutes, they set out.

The ride back to Karanes should have been uneventful, but the soldiers who had questioned him about Ivan’s body made the foolish decision to go back for it anyway—and they returned to the formation with titans on their tail.

“Idiots!” Levi dropped back to assist.

One of the soldiers paid for the mistake with his life; the rest of the regiment was only able to escape after Levi ordered them to dump bodies off the carts to lighten their loads.

Erwin was angry. *As if the mission wasn’t catastrophic enough before, now we have fewer bodies to return to families, and we’re down another soldier.* Had his order not been clear? Maybe he ‘had no human feelings,’ but there was a reason they had to choose logic over emotion on the field.

The disaster successfully navigated, Levi returned to his place beside Erwin, his face drawn.

“What a waste,” Erwin muttered.

“Don’t discipline them.”

Erwin turned to him, surprised. “They disobeyed a direct order and put everyone in danger.”

“And one of them died for it. The other will never disobey an order again.”

“We’ll have to explain to the relatives of the deceased why we

don't have those bodies."

"Tell them they were missing in action, like every other body we couldn't retrieve." Levi turned to stare straight ahead, his jaw rock-hard. "Petra was one of them."

A ball of ice sank into Erwin's stomach. He didn't know what to say, and he had the feeling anything he could say would undo both of them, anyway. He stared straight ahead, his face blank.

But that ball of ice was getting heavier as they approached Karanes. It grew heavier still as he dismounted and walked his horse down the street, the cries and shouts of the bereaved slamming into him like hail. They called his name, reached out to him, wanted to know *why*.

And what did he have to offer them? A cartful of corpses, more carts full of the injured, and barely more answers than they had started with.

ς

A mountain of paperwork would usually be enough to distract Erwin after a difficult mission, but not this time. So much had been riding on this one: Eren's future, Wall Maria, maybe even the Survey Corps itself. He managed to dash off a status report to the Capital and sent it with a heavy heart, knowing a summons would follow as soon as it was received.

The summons would not go in his favour; he knew that already. Discovering a new shifter without taking her down would make the Council even more skittish than they had been before. Once they ruled against him, Nile would push for Eren's execution and dissection, and they had no chance of preventing it. Erwin might even be tried for lying about the mission objective and casting away so many lives. They might drag Levi into it, too, since he had been on the plans from the start.

Erwin pushed back his chair. The thought of them coming after Levi, after all he had lost, was as upsetting as the thought of humanity losing Eren.

He brought a trembling hand to his chest, feeling for the ring in his pocket. It was so small in his palm; he couldn't believe this tiny ring was still too large for Levi's finger. Those fingers never felt this small when they were interlaced with his, or tracing his body. They carried more strength than their size should be able to contain, just like the man himself.

Erwin's hand wouldn't stop shaking.

He was useless in this state. It was about time he honoured their arrangement and went to their shared apartment—if Levi was even there. More likely, he would be in the san, getting his foot treated or comforting the survivors in his own brisk way. Or maybe he was fighting with himself, trying not to blame his Commander for the deaths of his squad. Levi had every right to be upset with him.

Still, Erwin needed to escape, even if just for a few hours.

He found Mike in the mess hall, nursing an ale.

“I’m going out, and I may not be back tonight. Ring the bell if you need me. I’ll hear it.”

Mike nodded, gaze distant. “Are you taking Levi with you?”

“I don’t know. If you see him, tell him I’ve gone ahead, but he’s under no obligation to follow.”

“None of this is your fault, Erwin. He knows that. We all know that.” It was hard to tell if Mike believed the words or not.

Instead of wearing his Survey Corps cloak, Erwin pulled a slate-grey cloak around his uniform and pulled the hood over his head, trying to avoid attracting the attention of passersby. He knew he deserved as many looks of disdain as they were willing to give him, but he was still cracked, still crumbling.

When he arrived at the apartment, the lamp was already lit. He could hear water running behind the closed bathroom door. Levi’s boots and clothes were scattered haphazardly on the floor.

Erwin’s stomach dropped. He quietly closed the apartment door and locked it. “Levi?”

No response.

He was torn. Did Levi need space, or support?

The stone around his neck was heavier than usual; he slipped off the bolo tie and set it on the mantle. He pulled off his jacket and straps, leaving on only his dress shirt and pants. He folded Levi’s clothes and set them on the desk, then swept up the chunks of dirt Levi’s boots had left on the floor. There was still no sound from the bathroom except running water.

With nothing left to delay him, he knocked on the door. “Levi, if you need privacy, I’ll leave.”

No response.

He quietly turned the knob.

Levi sat naked against the tile wall. Water drizzled over his head,

plastering his hair to his forehead. He was staring at the far wall with a vacant gaze and blue lips. His wounded leg was stretched out in front of him, the ankle swollen and purple.

Erwin turned off the taps and knelt beside him. The knees of his pants soaked with chilly water. "Levi," he said softly.

The grey eyes, barely pinpricks, shifted up to him.

"How long have you been here?" Erwin reached for a towel. Levi's skin was cold; Erwin draped the towel around the small shoulders and held him close.

"Everyone leaves me," Levi rasped.

"Can I move you to the bed? It'll be warmer there."

Levi didn't respond; instead, he slumped against Erwin, as if all the strength had drained from his frame.

"Here." Erwin gently lifted the small form into his arms and carried him to the bed. He sat him on the edge of the mattress. "Did the medics take a look at your foot yet?"

"They'll just try to drug me," Levi said, hollow.

"Medicine will help the pain. You don't have to suffer."

Levi looked away.

Erwin knelt to examine the wounded ankle. "May I bandage it again?"

The only reply was a faint shrug.

Seeing him in this absent state was even harder than seeing him break down. Erwin's hands shook as he pulled open drawers, looking for the first aid kit he had stashed here a couple weeks earlier. He found it and retrieved a roll of clean bandage, a syringe, and a single vial of morphine.

"Do you remember when I broke my ribs, Levi?" he asked, carefully unwinding the bandage. "You took such good care of me. Please let me do the same for you."

"You have bigger things to worry about."

"They can all wait until tomorrow." He pulled out the syringe. "What's your normal morphine dose? I can cut it in half, if you want to stay clear-headed."

Levi told him, and Erwin suspected it was too low, but he didn't want to risk second-guessing him. He carefully filled the syringe and administered it. Then he began to bandage the wounded ankle again. It seemed like it might still swell, so he tried to balance the tension to allow a bit of swelling, but still provide support. He wasn't confident in his

work, but it was the best he could do without actually bringing in a medic.

When he had finished, Levi sank onto his back, staring at the ceiling.

“Does it still hurt?”

“A bit. Could be worse.” Levi’s throat bobbed. “I’m alive.”

Erwin sat beside him on the bed, folding his legs. “I want you to know that I’m truly sorry—”

“Don’t. You made the calls that you had to. Part of me thinks I could have saved them if I had gotten there soon enough, but then again, I would have run out of supplies and died.” Levi rolled his head to look at him. “You knew she was still around. That’s why you told me to resupply.”

“It was a guess.”

“A good one. You should have told me.” His gaze shifted back to the ceiling. “But there was no time, was there?”

“No.”

“And I wasted time questioning you. If I’d gone right away—”

“No. It played out how it played out, Levi. Don’t start wondering what might have happened. The possibilities are endless.”

Levi’s eyes closed. “I saw her face as they threw her body from the cart. Petra.”

“Levi—”

“She looked like she was sleeping. I saw her sleeping face so many times on missions. Her father confronted me at the gates. He said something about her being too young to get married. I couldn’t tell him the truth, any of it … What does he think of me now? What does her family think? I couldn’t protect her.” Levi rolled onto his side and curled tightly into a ball. “Everyone I care about leaves me. My mother left me, then … *he* left me. Matthias died, and that was my fault. Klaus left me—no, I got him killed, too. Farlan and Isabel. My first team. Everyone … now Eld, and Oluo, and Gunther, and Petra.” His voice broke. “Petra …”

The words struck Erwin so hard that he felt the cracks break clean through him. Had he ever loved platonically the way Levi did? Possibly Hange, Mike, and Nile, maybe even Marie now … things were always confusing when he thought of Marie. But none of those were the way Levi loved: once Levi opened up to anyone, that person marked him deeply and permanently.

No, as awful as Erwin felt, he didn’t understand what Levi was

feeling right now, not really. Perhaps he really was made of stone, but not Levi. Levi was gold, hard and beautiful, soft and malleable.

“You know,” Levi said, voice groggy, “the only ones left are Mike, Hange, and you. And if you—”

“Don’t think about that.”

“If that had been you instead of Petra, neck snapped, staring at me with dead eyes, body flopping like useless garbage off the end of the cart ... ” His eyes were staring far into the distance now, sunken.

“It wasn’t me, Levi. I’m still here.”

“And what if it was me? What if I had died with my team?” His eyes shifted back to him. “What would you be doing right now?”

A fair question. Erwin thought back five years to the time he had attacked Mike. Was that still in his temperament? They had seen so many deaths since then that he had numbed, but then again, his bond with Levi was infinitely stronger than it had been then, too. He expected his grief would be more controlled this time, but ... Levi was his lifeblood.

“It would break me,” he said, thinking aloud. “When I imagine life without you, Levi, I feel hollow. Empty.”

“But you’d keep going,” Levi said. “Right? You’d feel pain, but humanity would still have a chance. You’d keep fighting.”

Erwin considered. Maybe he would be a shell of himself, but there were still goals to drive him forward. So long as his heart was still beating, he would stubbornly stay the course. “Yes.”

“Good.” Levi’s jaw wobbled. “I have to die before you, Erwin. It can’t be the other way around. If I have to see you the way I saw Petra, I’ll ... ” A tear spilled onto his cheek, and he shook his head. “There won’t be anything left for me. I’ll become a monster, I’ll lose myself, my purpose.”

“Levi, don’t think about it.”

“I have to die first.” His voice was rising. Erwin had never seen so much anguish on his face. “I can’t watch you die. Not you. We go together, or I go first. Don’t leave me. Not you.”

“Levi.” Erwin pulled him in and curled around him, holding him to his chest. He whispered his name over and over, soothing him. He felt a small hand claw into the front of his shirt like a child.

He wanted to promise him everything would be okay, but it was a promise he couldn’t make, especially now. The expedition had failed; he was going to have to risk even more to ensure they protected Eren and their future. It was just as Sahlo had said during their last meeting:

the neck that stuck out the furthest was the easiest to trap in a noose. If it came to it, he might have to offer himself as a sacrifice to keep humanity's hope alive.

"Levi," he whispered, "we have so much hope now. We have a titan on our side, and a key to secrets about our enemies. Don't forget that." He smoothed the back of the dark hair, still damp from the shower. "Today was only the first step in a whole new series of attacks. We have the brilliant Hange, who can turn weaknesses into weapons. We have Mike, whose nose gives us an incredible defensive advantage. We have Eren, who can transform into a titan. We have the new skills of the 104th's best fighters—nine out of ten of the southern branch's top fighters, in fact. And we have you." He breathed in the scent of the dark hair. "We have you, Levi. You are strong, and you'll embrace this pain and come out stronger. That's what you do. And if I go before you—"

Levi let out a small sob.

"—if I go before you," Erwin repeated, his grip tightening around him, "you'll take that pain deep into yourself and become even stronger than before. That is one of the things I admire most about you, Levi. You carry more pain than any man should have to bear, and you're stronger for it. Every break heals twice as strong."

"I lost the ring," Levi whispered.

"The ring?"

"It must have fallen out when I was fighting the female titan. I didn't realize it until we got back. I can't even protect a ring—"

"It's just a ring. It's okay." Erwin smoothed his back. "I'll get you another ring when we marry."

"When we marry," Levi repeated, with a sniffle. His shoulders weren't shaking anymore. Yes, that was right: engagement was supposed to help them through times like this.

"The ring was just a thing; what it represents is what's important. Tell me what you want to do once we've eradicated the titans, Levi. Once we're married."

Levi paused. "You always say we won't both survive."

"I know."

"You said we were laying the foundation for future generations to win this war."

"Things are different now. It's been a while since we let ourselves consider this, so let's indulge. What will we do after the war?"

Thinking about it did seem to calm Levi; his breaths returned to

normal, the tension leaving his muscles. “I want a teashop,” he said, nuzzling under Erwin’s chin.

“Yeah?”

“Somewhere quiet.”

“I like that idea. We’ll buy a small business with a house in the back.”

“Near a park,” Levi said. “So we can go for walks.”

“That sounds lovely. I’d like to be a schoolteacher in town.”

“I thought you wanted to go into politics.”

“No, not anymore. I’m tired of games and lies; I want to focus on truths instead.” Erwin snuggled closer. “Do you want children?”

“I don’t know. I know you do.”

“Maybe. I expect we’ll be too old by then. My students can be my surrogate children; we’ll get a dog instead.”

Levi shifted. “They track mud everywhere.”

“I thought you liked dogs. I’m sure, with all the land we reclaim, there will be enough food for people to have pets again. We could take in a stray puppy and give it a good home.”

There was a long pause. “A big one. Not one of those annoying small yappy ones.”

“A big dog it is. And every night, we’ll come home and hold each other like this, and know we’re making the most of the peace we fought so hard to achieve.”

Levi pulled back to look at him. His eyes were bloodshot, his nose red. “Sounds too good to be true.”

“Maybe.” Erwin kissed his forehead. “We need hope. We need something to hold onto, something to keep us going when everything else is crumbling. And I want you to promise me something.”

“What?”

“If I die—”

Levi’s face twisted. “Erwin—”

“—I want you to build your tea shop. Find someone to help you run it. You deserve to be happy, after all you’ve sacrificed.”

There was a long pause, and then Levi nodded. “Okay. But same to you. You be a teacher and settle down. Marry. Have kids, if you want.” He paused, then said dryly, “Name one of them Levi.”

“What if they’re all girls?”

“Who cares? Name one Levi anyway. Tell them all about me. But make me taller in your stories, and maybe a bit better with words.”

Erwin chuckled. "I refuse to change anything about you."

"Well, then I guess I better hope I don't die."

They studied each other.

"Are you hungry at all?" Erwin asked, smoothing the hair off his forehead.

"Probably. No appetite."

"Me neither, but it's late. We should eat something." Erwin sat up. "I'll go get a loaf of bread."

"No, don't. I—" Levi looked away. He didn't need to voice the next words: *I don't want to be alone.*

"How about some rations instead?"

"I'm sick of rations."

"Me, too, but I'm afraid it's all I have here." Erwin rummaged through his desk drawer. He pulled out a piece of flatbread and broke it off. "Your body needs food to help it heal."

Levi took it and reluctantly ate it.

They ate in silence. By the time they were done, Erwin felt more stable. Levi seemed calmer, too; he snuggled back against him.

"I shouldn't have gotten that whiny," Levi said gruffly. "You've lost people, too. We all have. I'm not special."

"Don't apologize. You're hurting." Erwin softly kissed the back of his neck. "And you feel it on a level I never do."

"You do," Levi said quietly. "You just don't think about it too much, because you can't."

"What do you mean?"

"That mask I've talked about before. You have to have it on, all the time." Levi shifted back against him. "That's why you have such a fucked-up look on your face whenever we come back to town. You have to keep going. You have to give everyone hope that you're leading with logic, not emotion. But I know you. I know there's more than that, deep down."

Erwin wasn't sure if it was a statement or a question. Was Levi looking for assurances that he felt sorrow over his team's death? He thought of Levi's dead team, of the others they had lost that day, and felt numb. His exterior had crumbled, and there was nothing beneath it. Even that ball of ice, that guilt, had melted.

"Do you remember that first mission I led after becoming Commander?" he said quietly.

Levi tensed. "Yeah."

“When I heard the number of dead, I reacted violently.”

“Yeah, you almost died.”

Erwin couldn’t imagine reacting the same way now. “What happened between then and now, Levi?”

“There’s more going on, deep down,” Levi said again. “You have to keep your head together on the field.”

Erwin’s jaw tightened. Maybe he was still on the field; this expedition wasn’t over until they had satisfied the Capital and Eren was formally theirs. All that mattered right now was Eren and his basement key.

Levi still seemed to be waiting for an answer, and Erwin wasn’t sure he knew what the question was. He kissed the broad forehead.

“We should get some rest.”

Levi’s brows pinched, but he only said, “Okay.”

They stripped and crawled under the covers. Erwin snuffed out the lamp and nestled against Levi’s back.

8

They clawed at him, the members of Squad Levi, the others he had killed. Their faces were contorted into titan-like expressions, heads cocked, eyes lifeless. Erwin opened his mouth to yell, but it wasn’t his own voice that sounded; it was the female titan’s scream. The dead descended upon him and began to rip his flesh from the bone.

He reached out a hand, and someone caught it. He could tell by the strength of the grip it was Levi. The hand smoothed his palm, down his forearm, pulled him in.

Then Levi was kissing him, and the deceased dissipated. Now it was just the two of them in the dark, warm beneath the blankets, skin sliding against skin. Erwin rolled half on top of him, mindful of the injured leg, and kissed him deeply. Those firm hands slid down his back and up again, palms blistering with heat. He kissed across Levi’s jaw to his ear. Levi’s head tossed back; his throat rumbled with something between a whimper and a groan.

“It’s okay,” Erwin whispered, even though he was the one who was supposed to need comforting.

“I need you,” Levi said, throat vibrating again.

He had to be awake now, but this still felt dreamlike, the unnatural heat between them, the bedsheets rippling around them like water. He buried his nose between Levi’s legs, tilted his hips up, tasted

him. Levi cried out, his voice musical, his hips undulating to the melody.

“You saved me,” Erwin murmured into him. “You’ve saved me so many times.” Levi cried out again, a perfect octave higher this time.

Erwin gently slid inside him; oil squelched softly between them, their hands feeling for each other in the dark. Their knuckles interlocked on the pillow, above Levi’s head, their mouths finding each other. Erwin tasted his moans, orange and red in the darkness, faintly sour with the taste of sleep.

They were slow, but he couldn’t hold back; he spilled into Levi in understated bursts, hazy and warm. He bent down to take Levi into his hand and throat so he could coax louder and louder moans out of him, until they became tangible, hot and liquid. He drank until Levi was quiet.

They clung together in the darkness.

“I told you,” Levi murmured, touching his face. “There’s more under the mask.”

Erwin followed his touch and discovered tears. His voice cracked: “We separated before because I needed to keep my mask on.”

“It’s okay. It’s gotta get heavy. I can hold it for you when you need a break.”

Erwin curled tightly around him as he finally let himself grieve.

6

He awoke to an empty bed. A loaf of bread sat on the desk beside a steaming teapot.

“Levi?”

Levi emerged from the bathroom. He wore his grey dress shirt and cravat with his uniform pants. Instead of his uniform jacket, he wore an oversized black suit jacket, which he had draped around his shoulders like a shawl. “I couldn’t get any coffee.”

“You’re supposed to be resting your leg.”

“I want to keep it moving.” Levi poured a mug of tea and carried it to the bed.

Erwin sat up, still a bit groggy, and accepted the mug. He blew on it to cool it. “We should get back to the base.”

“They can wait until we’ve had breakfast.”

A quiet breakfast together did sound ideal, and Levi seemed to

be in good spirits; he didn't want to interrupt that. He studied the jacket, wondering why it was so familiar. "What are you wearing?"

"I didn't feel like being in uniform right now. And ... " Levi's cheeks darkened, and he shrugged. "It smells like you."

Recognition dawned on Erwin; he had worn it to meet with the merchant's guild a couple weeks before the mission. "You took that from the closet."

"Yeah, just while I went into town. If you want, I can put it back before we leave."

Erwin studied him. "No, hang on to it." The suit was on the verge of going out of fashion, but Levi's casual way of wearing it made it work. And he liked the idea of Levi wearing something of his in public.

Besides, he remembered Levi speaking about his mother's shirt, the hug she had given him when she was ill. Wearing another's shirt was an important gesture from Levi, and he was honoured to be held in such high regard.

They sat on the bed, where they ate bread and drank tea. This apartment was so much like the one in Trost that this felt like the early days of their relationship, casually spending time together the morning after a night of lovemaking.

But there was no time to linger, and the instant they stepped outside again, Erwin felt the weight of their failed mission drop onto his shoulders.

They headed back to the base in silence. A letter was waiting on Erwin's desk, bearing Zackly's seal. His summons.

Beside him, Levi said quietly, "So what happens now?"

Erwin picked up the envelope and traced the seal with the pad of his thumb. "I expect they'll want us to turn over Eren, unless we can think of a way to spin this mission into a success." He opened the letter. The wording was curt; even Zackly, usually his ally, seemed to be angry. He dropped the letter onto the desk and took a few paces to the window.

Behind him, he heard Levi snatch up the paper. After a few seconds, he said loudly, "It's so fucking unfair."

Erwin stared out the window, not wanting to show how much he agreed. "It's okay, Levi."

"It's not. The bulk of the Survey Corps got away thanks to Eren buying us time fighting that thing. If he hadn't taken her on and distracted her, Mikasa and I couldn't have shut her down. And he can barely control himself yet—think of how powerful he'll be when he gets more

experienced. Taking him away from us now would be fucking ridiculous.”

“I know.”

He heard the letter smack against the table. “They sit in Mitras without a clue what we’re fighting. That’s the problem. If they saw what it’s like out there, they would give us anything we asked for.”

Erwin stood tall. *If they saw what it’s like out there ...* He slowly turned to face Levi. “You’re exactly right.”

Levi studied him, and slowly, the fists at his sides uncurled. “You have a plan.”

“Just a spark of an idea, but it’s a start.” He pulled out the chair and grabbed a pad of paper. “Start the other Squad Leaders on background checks of every single soldier who was told Eren would be in the right vanguard. We don’t have much time.”

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PLANS

Erwin awoke to the sensation of cloth draping around his shoulders. His cheek was pressed to the surface of his desk; he lifted it in time to see Levi walking toward the door. The lamp was low.

“Levi?” He sat up, and the black suit jacket nearly slid off his shoulders; he caught it just in time.

“Oh. You’re awake.” Levi turned to him. “You looked a bit cold.”

“Are you going to bed?”

“Yeah. It’s two in the morning.”

“Dammit.” Erwin rubbed his forehead. He must have fallen asleep around midnight. He had hoped to finish his paperwork before bed, but now it was too late to stay up longer. “Here, I’ll join you.” He doused the lamp and, in the shadowed room, draped the jacket around Levi’s shoulders where it belonged. He leaned in low and said quietly, “It looks better on you, anyway.”

The Karanes base was silent as they strode down the hallway toward Erwin’s bedroom. The hair on the back of his neck rose. The ghosts of the deceased had followed them here. He felt their weight on his shoulders, as heavy and cold as the stone walls themselves.

But when Levi lit the lamp in the bedroom, the room filled with a soft orange glow, and the ghosts faded. Now it was only the two of them again. They undressed and crawled into bed, on their sides, facing each other. Erwin reached out to gently graze the slim jawline with a knuckle. They had already had sex earlier that night, between dinner and evening rounds, but he was still craving the feeling of Levi’s skin against his. He slid closer to take Levi’s uninjured leg between his. The

inside of those small, muscular thighs always radiated so much heat.

“Any update on the background checks?” Levi asked.

Erwin shook his head. Based on where the Female Titan had appeared within the formation, they had narrowed down any potential moles to a small subset of Dita’s squad, mostly consisting of new recruits from the 104th Trainee Squad. There had been several other teams who might have come under suspicion, but the majority of them had been wiped out by the Female Titan during the mission. “My usual sources are hesitant to work with me while the Survey Corps is under such intense scrutiny, so I have to follow proper bureaucratic channels this time. I expect it will take a week or two.”

“That’s too long.”

“I know, but we don’t have any alternatives.”

Levi snorted. “I used to wonder why you resorted to blackmail and bribery.”

Erwin smiled. “A pity we don’t have the option of either now. In the meantime, I’m going to send the suspects to an isolated location. Mikasa’s strongest team can supervise them.”

“Yeah? Where are you going to send them?”

“Not sure yet. I’m meeting with a contact tomorrow to try to secure a safe house, somewhere isolated. I don’t want it to be anywhere with military connection, in case other branches are compromised. If our enemies have spies in the Corps, they probably have spies in the Garrison and MP as well.”

“That reminds me,” Levi said. “Eren’s up and moving around again today, so tomorrow we’ll head back to the abandoned base to wait until the MP escorts arrive. Nile would shit himself if he found out we’re keeping him in the city.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“I wonder if Nile—” Levi winced and grabbed at his injured leg. “Fuck.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” He rubbed it. “Just weird pains again.”

“You should be using a cane or crutch, Levi,” Erwin said, not for the first time. “Your posture is different because you’re limping, so you must be stressing other muscles and ligaments—”

“I’m not using a cane. It’s fine. I just need a few more days.”

This argument had never gotten him anywhere, so Erwin decided not to press it. “What were you saying about Nile?”

“I can’t remember. Probably something about his pathetic excuse for a beard.”

Erwin chuckled. Under the covers, he gently moved Levi’s hand aside and began to rub the painful thigh, applying a bit of pressure with a knuckle. There hadn’t been time for a proper massage that day.

“Mm,” Levi said, eyes closing.

“That okay?”

“Yeah. Hurts like hell.”

“Too much?”

“No, press harder.”

Erwin complied. “I expect to join you back at the base before the MP escorts arrive. I’ll need to relay our plan to you and Eren.”

“So you do have a plan.”

“It’s still in its infancy, but I’ll lock it down by then. The Female Titan wanted Eren. We’re going to make sure she knows our route, its timing, and the fact that he’s about to be turned over to the Military Police for execution.”

Levi pushed off his chest so he could eye him. “You’re going to bait her *inside* the Walls?”

“There’s no alternative. We’re out of time if we want to keep Eren alive.”

“The collateral damage—”

“We’re out of time,” Erwin said, more firmly. “If she’s a member of Dita’s squad, as we suspect, then Mike’s squad will contain her. If not, we can assume she’ll try to attack us in an uninhabited area between cities, because that’s where our gear will be nearly useless. The chances of collateral damage will be low.”

Levi was still eyeing him.

“Levi?”

“My best squad couldn’t take her out. Eren couldn’t take her out. I was the only one who was able to neutralize her, and my leg is fucked. If she attacks where none of you can use gear—”

“Eren didn’t have our help when he faced her then,” Erwin said. “There is plenty we can do to aid him from the ground, even if it’s as simple as distracting her with MP gunfire and impromptu trip wires.”

“If you don’t know where she might attack, you won’t even be able to set traps.”

“Like I said, it’s the beginning of a plan. There’s no telling if she would attack us at all.” Erwin paused. “But if she did, the appearance of a

titan within the Walls would certainly give weight to our case at the summons. If we can show we anticipated and trapped a titan shifter, every single Council member would understand we're the best equipped to fight this war. It would open us up to get what we truly need in terms of supplies, resources and permission. It's as you said: the Council is so far removed from the titans that they don't understand what we're up against. They feel too safe."

Levi's frown was deeper than usual.

Erwin's face softened. "We can't let them take Eren away from humanity, Levi, no matter what the cost."

"I know. I get it. I just wish they hadn't backed us into this corner."

"I agree. With any luck, we'll have more information soon, and we can refine this plan to give us a better chance of success."

Levi leaned in close, nuzzling under his chin.

8

Erwin overslept by almost an hour the next morning; Levi must have given the other squads orders not to wake him. A mug of coffee was on the desk, along with a buttered scone and a note: "You needed your rest."

Erwin smiled and lifted the mug to his lips. The drink was cold, but especially smooth and flavourful. *Did you go behind my back to order the accountants to splurge on the tea and coffee provisions—again?* He should really crack down on that behaviour, but the coffee was delicious.

Levi, Eren and a handful of other soldiers had already left for the abandoned base. Erwin began to work through his duties, too. First, he checked on Hange, who was already hard at work refining the titan traps. Next, he pulled Mike aside to talk about monitoring the suspected soldiers.

Once everything was in order, he settled into his office for more paperwork and planning.

He barely slept that night, only napping at his desk as he worked to refine his plans. He worked through several cups of the coffee Levi had brought for him.

Shortly before lunch on the second day, he received notice that the MP escorts would be arriving the next evening to escort them to Mitras. He sent a message to Levi to let him know he'd arrive at the a-

bandoned base early the next morning to help him prepare.

His plan, even after two days of revisions, wasn't looking any less risky than it had before. That's why it was a relief when, shortly after dinner that day, a knock sounded at the door.

"Come in," he said, hoping for a distraction.

A timid blond head poked through the door: Armin Arlert. "Is this a bad time, Commander?"

Erwin set down his pen. "Not at all. Please come in." It wasn't typical for new recruits to address him directly, but he could tell by the stress on the boy's face that this was urgent.

Armin stepped into the room, followed closely by Mikasa Ackerman. The two made a strange pair: Armin's head was bowed, his steps light, as if he were trying not to disturb the carpet with his footsteps. Mikasa strode with a confidence and strength that reminded him of Levi, shoulders square, chin high.

A third recruit followed them at a distance. He had a leanness about him that made him look deceptively tall, with a jaw that was already squaring with early adulthood. Erwin tried to recall the names of the 104th recruits who weren't in isolation with Mike. Jean Kirstein, graduated sixth in his class.

The three soldiers stood in a row in front of the desk and drew themselves into firm salutes.

"Armin, Mikasa, Jean," he said in greeting, and their eyes all widened a little, as if they didn't expect him to know their names. "What can I do for you?"

He expected them to ask to be transferred to the same base as Eren—a request he was happy to grant—so he was surprised when Armin replied, "We think we've figured out the identity of the Female Titan."

"I see," Erwin said, his pulse doubling. "Please, take a seat." He gestured at the empty chairs around the room, still in disarray from his meeting with Mike's squad the day before.

The three pulled up chairs. Armin began to speak, his voice shaking at first, but gaining strength as he continued.

The evidence was circumstantial at best, but there was enough of it to make a compelling argument against one of their classmates, Annie Leonhart. Erwin recognized her as the only soldier of the 104th Southern Trainee Squad top ten who had elected to join the Military Police instead of the Survey Corps.

Aside from a strong physical resemblance, the Female Titan had used Annie's distinctive combat style, knew what Eren looked like, and, according to Armin, had reacted to his use of Eren's nickname, "suicidal bastard."

"As well," Armin continued, "when we did the gear inspection after Squad Leader Hange's titan specimens were killed, Annie did not bring her own gear. The marks and dings were distinctive to the gear of one of our classmates who was killed during the attack on Trost, Marco Bott."

All three of them looked grim at the mention of the deceased's name, particularly Jean, his hands tightening into fists.

"You think she used her own gear to kill the titan specimens, then switched gear with a deceased soldier before the inspection?" Erwin asked, taking notes.

"Yes sir."

"Why didn't you report that she was using different gear at the time?"

Armin looked down, frowning. "It didn't really sink in until we started talking about the Female Titan and all the pieces started coming together."

"I see. Is anyone in your graduating class friends with Annie?" Maybe this was an easy way to find out the identities of other shifters.

The three soldiers looked at each other.

"Eren and I are probably the closest thing she has to friends," Armin said. "Especially Eren. They used to train hand-to-hand combat together a lot. And she didn't kill me on the field once she realized who I was—I guess she has a soft spot for me. That's why I think ..." He trailed off.

Jean nudged him.

"Go ahead," Erwin said.

"If you're trying to capture her, we might be able to use Eren and me to lure her in. She's stationed in Stohess, which Eren will be passing through on the way to Wall Sina. Maybe we could pretend we're trying to help Eren escape, and we need someone on the inside to get us past the Military Police checkpoints."

The spark of a plan caught flame in Erwin's mind, roared to life. "We could pretend I sanctioned your escape. Logic would dictate that we would be reluctant to hand over Eren to the Council. We could ostensibly send you and Eren on the run, under the guise that we were

buying time to dig up more evidence to sway the Council's decision." His eyes narrowed at the page as he wrote notes, considering. "You and Eren could approach Annie and say you needed help—perhaps you need her MP connections to get through the checkpoints so you could hide outside the city." This could work. Stohess was where Nile was stationed; if they captured the Female Titan right under Nile's nose, he might finally acknowledge what they were up against. "In fact, the MP will already have their soldiers patrolling while we're passing through, as part of the security surrounding Eren's transportation. It should be relatively easy to determine where she'll be patrolling in advance."

"I could approach her alone to make her more likely to agree," Armin said. "It's Eren she wants. She'd have to follow me in order to get to him. But where would we take her?"

Erwin strode to a cupboard and rummaged through the rolled-up maps until he found one of Stohess. "Though the Underground is primarily located within Wall Sina, there are a few abandoned tunnels in Stohess, and some of them go quite a long distance. If you could lure her into one of these tunnels, where she can't transform, we might be able to force her into a surrender."

The three soldiers exchanged glances again.

"Annie is smart," Mikasa said flatly. "She won't be lured in easily."

"If she refuses, then that does a great deal to confirm her identity. We would consider this plan A." Erwin unrolled the Stohess map on his desk and weighted the corners, then pulled out wooden markers. His finger traced the road between the external and internal gate, his eyes scanning for the optimal location to stage an attack. There was a tunnel entrance only a few blocks from the main route, surrounded by plenty of high buildings, and a long distance from the open park grounds that would make their gear useless. He marked the tunnel entrance with a red marker and placed smaller markers around other nearby exits, then marked a perimeter of two blocks. "If you can lure her to this area, I'll have soldiers in disguise as townsfolk, ready to intervene if she refuses to cooperate."

"She'll probably transform into a titan," Armin said, leaning closer to look at the map.

"At that point, Eren can transform and engage her. That will be our plan B." Erwin studied the map. Having only one backup plan wasn't enough. They had underestimated their foe in the forest battle; they could not do so again. Levi had been correct in noting that Eren, alone,

was unable to take out Annie.

Besides, the potential for collateral damage was going to be a problem if they were going to encourage a titan battle in the middle of the city. They wanted Wall Sina to understand the titan threat, but they wanted to avoid needless deaths, too. Their disguised soldiers would evacuate the area of civilians first, but that wasn't going to be enough.

His finger skated along a direct route toward the open park area near one of the MP barracks, close to the Wall. Halfway along this route was a narrow corridor with plenty of high buildings. "As our plan C, we will have Squad Leader Hange set up several traps in this corridor. If our plans A and B fail, we need to make sure we restrain her before she does too much damage to the city. The traps would have worked in the forest if she hadn't called the other titans to consume her; she'll find that impossible to do within Wall Sina."

"How do we know she'll go that way?" Jean said.

Armin's eyes were shining. "Because she knows all the strengths and weaknesses of military technology, so she'll aim for strategic advantage. She'll head for that park because it's open ground, where our 3DMG will be useless. That will force Eren into hand-to-hand combat again; she knows she can defeat him one-on-one."

Erwin studied the boy, impressed by his strategic acumen. *And he's still so young. I see now why Berit spoke so highly of him.*

Aloud, he said, "That's exactly right, Armin, and that's why we need to keep her isolated in 3DMG-friendly areas. We saw what she did to Eren one-on-one last time. He'll need our support, particularly as our best soldier is injured, and our second-best soldier is away on another mission."

Mikasa looked down with a sudden grimace. Perhaps she was considering her role in Levi's injury. It was important for her to learn from her mistakes, but he hoped she wasn't taking it too hard. Regret would only make her hesitate next time she was in a dire situation.

"Mikasa," he said, "Captain Levi speaks very highly of your fighting skills. In his absence, you will be our top fighter. Do what you can to disable her so Eren can take her down more easily. Take risks if you need to, but you're a valuable asset to the Survey Corps yourself, so make sure those risks are calculated."

She nodded resolutely. "Sir."

Working together with the three of them, he formalized their plan. They would present the MP escorts with a decoy disguised as Eren;

Eren, meanwhile, would ride in another cart with the Survey Corps soldiers, his identity obscured by rain gear. Once the carts were in Stohess, Armin would approach Annie. They would attempt to use the tunnel as a safe, undetectable shortcut. At that point, their plans and contingency plans would be in motion.

Jean reluctantly volunteered to dress as Eren. With a wig, he would pass reasonably well as Eren—well enough that Nile and the other MP wouldn't notice, at any rate. There might be better matches elsewhere in the Survey Corps, but they needed to make sure their decoy was someone they could trust. Since Jean hadn't been in the group of recruits who had been told Eren's location was in the right flank, and since Armin and Mikasa seemed to trust him, Erwin saw no reason to be suspicious of him.

Once this part of the plan had been locked down, Erwin looked up and saw the glassy, sunken eyes of his recruits. It was well past time for them to sleep. He thanked them, sent them to bed, and continued working, drinking more coffee. He could sleep in the carriage on the way to Stohess.

At reveille, he found Hange in the lab; it seemed Erwin wasn't alone in passing a sleepless night. After they had discussed the plans, Moblit began to pack the traps, while Hange and Nifa went to prepare the squad members to dress as civilians.

By the time they were ready, it was nearing noon. Levi and Eren would be waiting for them. Erwin pulled aside Armin, Mikasa, and Jean; they rode to the abandoned base by horseback, pushing the horses hard. They had to be sure to have Eren up to speed with the plan before the MP escorts arrived.

They left the horses with some soldiers at the stables and found Levi and Eren in the dining hall. Levi was dressed in a casual shirt that left his neck and collarbones exposed, and Erwin felt his breath catch at the sight. It caught him off guard, on occasion, how Levi could look so fragile and powerful at once, a strange mixture of petite bone structure and obvious muscle.

But there was no time to ogle. He apologized for being late, and they all sat down at the table to discuss the plan. Levi followed along with only a few questions, but Eren was more reluctant. The idea that Annie could be the Female Titan seemed to be impossible to him. His three friends worked hard to convince him to go along with the plan, but even then, Eren's expression was hollow, his eyes distant.

When the four recruits went downstairs to help Jean get into disguise, Erwin watched them leave, jaw tight. “He doesn’t believe Annie is the Female Titan.”

“Eren?” Levi set down the mission brief. “No, he doesn’t. Or at least he doesn’t want to believe it.”

“Do you think that will be a problem?”

“Yes,” Levi said flatly. “The transformation experiments he did with Hange showed he needs to have a clear goal in mind in order to transform. We had a better chance of him taking her down when he didn’t know who she was.” He folded his arms over his chest. “I’m bringing my gear.”

“No. You’re unfit for the field.”

“My leg is getting better.”

“I saw you rubbing it while we were talking. If you push your injury too far, it might not heal properly, and then you’d be out of commission permanently.”

Levi raised his chin, his gaze strong. “And if we lose Eren, everything’s over. Make me your plan D. If everything else fails, I can cut him out of his titan and pull him out of danger.”

Erwin’s eyes searched his. “You aren’t going to take no for an answer, are you?”

“No, so if you really think this is a bad idea, then you’d better order me not to do it. But we both know we need as many failsafes as possible. You’ve said before that Eren’s more important to humanity than anyone. That includes me.”

He was correct, and Erwin knew he couldn’t place his desire to protect Levi’s wellbeing above his duty to protect Eren. “Very well. Bring your gear, but you are not to deploy unless it looks like Eren is going to die or go feral. And Levi.” Erwin leaned forward, face solemn. “Let me handle Nile. He’s going to resist the plan, and he might panic and threaten me. Do not intervene. I can talk him into it.”

Levi nodded. “Okay.”

Their gaze held for a moment longer, then Levi turned and left the room. Erwin fell into step beside him. They made their way to Levi’s room, where Levi pulled off his shirt and began to button up a grey dress shirt instead.

Erwin settled against the wall and watched as Levi’s small fingers worked at the buttons, then tied the cravat into place. The cravat-tying mannerisms were distinctly Levi: the tuck, the graceful flick of his wrist

to send the ruffles cascading out the front, and a smooth with each hand to make sure it was aligned properly. He stepped forward to let Erwin do the final adjustment, a step that was always unnecessary, but appreciated. The warm scent of lemon and hair oils rose to Erwin's nose, and he subtly breathed in, savouring it.

The last touch was the jacket Levi had taken from the apartment. It hung around his shoulders like a shawl, arms dangling halfway down his thighs. He stood tall, favouring his good leg. "My gear is already downstairs."

"Then I guess you're all set. We'll have Hange's squad bring it with them, along with mine, and they can deliver them to us if necessary." Erwin quietly closed the door and stepped in close, bending down to kiss him, but the small mouth was tense. He pulled away. "Levi? What's wrong?"

Levi looked away. "This plan. It's risky. We've never been this close to losing the Survey Corps before."

"Maybe not for a while, but we've been in an ongoing struggle to prove our relevance since the Corps was first formed. It came very close to shutting down under Shadis' command, right before you joined."

"You mean right before you came up with the Long-Distance Scouting Formation and started saving lives."

Erwin smiled at the compliment. "Keith's mistake was thinking he had to be fully in control of strategy. If he had listened to his subordinates' suggestions sooner, he wouldn't have needlessly cast away so many lives or caused so much political strife. I won't make the same mistake. This operation is so precarious that we have to draw from the skills of everyone at our disposal: Eren's titan powers, Hange's traps, Armin's strategy, Mikasa's combat. We don't have a Sahlo or Lobov to blackmail, so we have to legitimately win the Council's favour using all our resources."

"I think," Levi said, "this is the first time I've missed that fucker Sahlo."

Erwin chuckled. "Well, we'll make do with what we have."

Levi pulled him down by his bolo tie for another kiss.

❧

In the minutes leading up to their escort's scheduled arrival, Levi sat in a chair in the doorway of Eren's bedroom, facing into the

room. Jean was chained to the bed, dressed in a wig. His head was down, lights dim.

“This will never work,” Jean muttered.

“It won’t if you keep talking.” Levi tipped the chair back, trying to stretch his leg. Footsteps sounded at the end of the hallway; he cocked his head to listen. Sounded like at least five people, maybe six. They were still afraid of Eren, then.

His guess was correct: Erwin approached him, followed by three MP soldiers and, most surprisingly, Nile.

Levi let all four chair legs slam to the floor. “The hell are *you* doing all the way out here, shitbeard? Did you piss off Zackly, or did Marie finally kick you out?”

Nile’s mouth flattened. “I’m here to ensure nothing goes wrong while we transport dangerous cargo.”

“Your ‘dangerous cargo’ is a fifteen-year-old kid who was responsible for helping the bulk of the Survey Corps escape the real threat to humanity.”

“Levi,” Erwin said quietly.

He scowled, but closed his mouth and held up the key to the shackles.

Once they had safely loaded Jean into the transport carriage, Levi felt himself breathe again. Nile hadn’t even batted an eye at Jean. The disguise was working.

Nile mounted his horse and circled back to them. “Remember, you’re in police custody now. Any command these officers give you holds the same weight as if it came directly from me.”

“You won’t be riding with us?” Erwin asked politely.

“I’m riding ahead to make sure the roads are clear and the police guards are all in place. We aren’t taking any chances.” Nile pointed to a small carriage near the back of the caravan. “That’s for the two of you.”

The carriage was smaller than the others, but comparable in size to the ones they usually rode to the Capital. Erwin and Levi boarded, then locked the door.

Once the carriage started moving, Levi slid closer. “Looks like they bought it.”

“Yes.”

“You think this will work?” Levi rested a cheek on a broad shoulder.

“Yes.”

Levi felt better, even though Erwin's shoulder was tense.

"Did you sleep last night?"

"No."

"Then sleep."

Erwin glanced at him, face unreadable. "I'm a bit too tense. I was hoping to unwind a bit."

"Oh?"

A hand dropped to his good knee, then began to slide up his thigh. Levi shivered.

"Not even going to wait until we're through the Trost gates, huh? Did you forget to jerk off while we were apart?"

"I was too distracted." Erwin kissed his forehead, lingering a little too long.

"Even with how horny you've been lately?" Levi reached between the broad legs and found him already hard. "You've gotta take care of this thing. It's not good for you to be pent up. Not good for your pants, either. You're gonna wear a hole through them."

Hot breath rumbled in his ear: "But you're so much better at it."

Levi shivered again. "I want to fuck you against the bench, but I can't with my leg like this."

"Next time, then." Lips closed around his earlobe, sucking for a moment, then released. "Let's just start kissing a bit and see what happens." The lips trailed down his neck. "I wonder, do you still have that sensitive spot here?"

"What sensitive—" Levi began, but then Erwin started aggressively kissing a spot along his neck muscle, and his breath caught.

"I discovered it last time. I don't remember it being here before—or maybe I somehow missed it, all these years." Erwin sucked the skin.

The sensation was so strong it was almost a tickle. Levi yelped, squirming away, but broad arms clamped around him, pulling him closer.

"Fuck!"

"I wonder what happens if I keep kissing it."

Levi tried to push his way free, but his muscles had liquefied. "Stop," he begged.

Erwin stopped. "Too much?"

It took him a minute to catch his breath. "No, it's just not fair. The only place that does that to you is your nipples, and they're buried under your uniform."

“Well, that’s not the only place.”

“Your asshole’s buried, too.” Levi closed his eyes as he felt kisses trail down his neck again. He tried to angle himself so they would cross the same sensitive area as before, but Erwin was respecting his wishes and avoiding it. The teasing was even more unbearable. “You don’t really have to stop.”

“Mm?”

“Do it again.”

“You sure?” Erwin kissed around the spot, as if contemplating.

Levi groaned. “Come on!”

“I *am* curious how all that squirming would feel while I’m inside you. Especially with the vibrations from the carriage.”

“Okay, but don’t come inside me. It’s too hot in here to sit around with wet pants.”

Erwin pulled him gently onto his lap and began to kiss his neck again, fingers working at their belts. Levi shifted, trying to get comfortable.

“You okay?”

“My fucking leg. Here.” He carefully rotated so his back was to Erwin.

“Better?”

“Yeah.” He could brace his good foot against the floor for leverage. “I won’t be able to ride you very fast, though.”

“It’s okay. We’ll be slow and gentle.” Erwin kissed below his ear, then worked his way down again. “I could kiss you like this for hours.”

Levi arched his neck into the hot breaths, and he felt every hair on his body stand on end. Too impatient to wait hours, he grabbed Erwin’s hand and pulled it between his legs.

Erwin’s breath hitched as he rubbed along the inseam. “You’re so warm.” His other hand smoothed Levi’s chest, and as his lips found the same sensitive spot as before, Levi cried out, squirming back against him. The lump beneath his ass hardened even more.

This was too much attention and not enough, all at the same time. The mouth working at Levi’s neck made him dizzy, but the firm hand in the centre of his chest held him fast, so he couldn’t pull away. The hand between his legs was slowly rubbing, just barely providing friction. He could hear the increasing harshness in Erwin’s breath over the rattle of the carriage, feel the hardening lump rutting slowly against his ass. He felt himself thrash, felt the arm around his chest tighten.

“Please,” he whimpered, not really sure what he was asking.

Erwin’s hands moved to his belt buckles, and the first skin contact made Levi cry out.

“Sorry,” Erwin said.

“What?” Levi gasped.

“You didn’t want me to get your pants wet. You’re already dripping.”

Levi looked down and saw the glistening skin of the large hand wrapped around him, and decided a little dampness was okay. He thrust into it a few times, transfixed by the sight.

“Shit, that looks hot.”

“Hm?” Erwin leaned over his shoulder. “Ah. Yes, it does. We can keep doing this for a while, if you like.”

“No, I need you inside me.” Levi shifted, pulling his pants down his hips. “Did you bring oil?”

“In the bag under the seat.”

“Okay. Pull your pants off.” As Levi bent down to retrieve the oil, he heard belt buckles behind him.

When he returned to the bench, he drizzled oil in his hand and reached for Erwin, holding eye contact. As his grip tightened, eyelids drooped over the blue eyes, shaky puffs of air sliding from the thick lips. He looked so handsome and so utterly fixated on him that Levi’s head spun. He leaned in for a moment so they could share a kiss.

Then they shifted back into position, Levi’s back to Erwin, positioned carefully over his lap. He felt hands cup his ass.

“So firm,” Erwin breathed, as if he didn’t realize he was saying the words aloud.

Levi reached between his legs to grab him. He began to lower himself around him, tolerating the pain in his leg.

The hands on his ass tightened. “Wait. You won’t be ready.”

“I’m relaxed enough. It’s fine.”

“It’s been a few days—”

“Just take it slowly.” Levi was too impatient for fingers. He slowly lowered himself, working him in and out. Erwin was so swollen that the fit was tighter than usual, and the stretch tingled.

“Fuck,” Levi whispered, drawing out the word.

He couldn’t see Erwin from this angle, but fingers curled into his hips, and he could tell by their tension that Erwin was carefully holding back. Slowly, slowly, Levi worked his way down until they were fully joi-

ned. He sat there for a moment, letting his body adjust, feeling the vibrations from the carriage jolting through them.

Erwin let out a low, agonized groan and throbbed inside him.

“Kiss me again,” Levi said, and he began to rock. Erwin found that sweet spot on his neck.

It was too much stimulation; Levi gasped for air, falling and clumsy. Erwin counterthrust below him to keep the rhythm going; the hands around his hips guided his movements. Levi closed his hands over Erwin’s, both of them clawing into his skin.

The rhythm was slow, but persistent, and so was the mouth on his neck. Sweat trailed down Levi’s temples, the tip of his nose. Even without either of them touching him, he felt himself getting closer. After several minutes, the build had plateaued, and he knew he had gone as far as he could without touch. “Erwin—”

“God, your neck,” Erwin whispered into his skin, voice cracking. His thrusts, though still slow, were getting more forceful, and he was rock hard. “Touch yourself.”

“Yeah?” Levi gasped reflexively as he grabbed himself.

“Yeah. Touch yourself for me.”

Levi clenched his teeth, head tilting back. He was already close. “I’m going to come.”

Erwin gasped, moving hard and fast.

Harder. Harder ... Too late, Levi realized he hadn’t set a rag aside. He cupped his other hand around the tip, trying to catch everything, but when he tipped over the edge, he lost control of his limbs. He fell back against Erwin, crying out and shaking.

Then he was still, and the only sounds were the rattling of the carriage and their breaths. The air was damp with sweat. Erwin was holding him tightly from behind, still hard inside him.

Levi opened his eyes. He had missed his hand almost completely, and the bulk of the mess was on the floor. “Shit.”

“Here.” Erwin reached into his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief.

Levi slowly detached himself—he was so over-stimulated that he shuddered—and wiped the oil away, then pulled up his pants.

Then he sat next to Erwin. “Your turn.”

“What do you want me to do?”

Levi unbuckled Erwin’s chest strap and began to unbutton the white dress shirt beneath it. “Just sit there.” The shirt fell open. He bent

down and smoothed the hair away, then circled his tongue around a nipple.

“Fuck.” Erwin’s chest muscles tightened.

Levi hummed a response into the sensitive flesh, then began to gently suck, flicking with his tongue. He began to stroke Erwin with his other hand. Erwin gasped and melted back against the bench, thrusting into his grip so violently that he kept throwing off Levi’s rhythm.

“Levi—”

He gave an encouraging hum.

Then he felt Erwin shove the handkerchief into place; his free hand curled around Levi’s head, pulling him hard against this chest. After several spasms, he sagged back into the seat.

Levi kissed his nipple one last time, then pulled away. He kissed the tip of Erwin’s nose.

Then he pulled out a clean handkerchief and sank to his knees, cleaning up the mess he had left on the floor. It was an unsatisfactory cleaning job, and he wished he had a bucket of soap and a scrub brush. The next person to use the carriage was going to wonder why the whole thing stank of semen.

When he returned to the bench, he found Erwin unmoving, face red-streaked and damp, blond hair plastered to his forehead. The front of his shirt and pants were still undone, and he was already going soft, lying limp against his clothed thigh. He looked so satisfied, so relaxed that Levi felt his lips curve into a smile.

My fiancé. It was the first time the words had ever felt right. He loved this vulnerable man beneath the mask, just as much as he loved the hardened, pragmatic Commander who would lead humanity to victory. *My fiancé* ...

But as he thought of their future, he heard the carriage rattle, smelled the familiar must of the hired stagecoach, remembered the MPs who rode in the caravan with them. His smile faded.

“Hey.” He sat beside Erwin. “Get dressed. We don’t know when they’ll check on us next.”

The blond eyelashes parted, and blue eyes focused on him, pupils soft. Their gaze held, and Erwin’s lips curved into a smile that echoed the one Levi had given him moments earlier. “Hello, my fiancé.”

Levi’s cheeks warmed. “None of that cheesy shit. You have to sleep properly before we get to Stohess. You’re no good to us on no sleep, and this mission is important.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Erwin groggily sat upright and cleaned himself up, then began to fix his uniform. They fixed his hair together, then locked the bed slab into place.

As they lay together, Levi felt a kiss on the back of his head.

“Thank you,” Erwin whispered.

“For what?”

“For distracting me. For always taking care of me and bringing me peace.”

“Well, you do the same for me. Now get some sleep.”

Their hands interlaced, and a moment later, he heard Erwin’s breaths behind him, steady and soft.

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Their peace ended when the carriage stopped. Levi opened his eyes, then, remembering where they were, sat upright. The checkpoint to enter Stohess. “We’re here.”

Erwin sat up, too, blinking and rubbing his eyes. “Already? Are you sure?”

Levi moved the curtain to peer out the window. He saw the Wall Rose gate and a group of MPs speaking with the driver of the carriage in front of them. “Yeah.”

The gate lifted. They sat silently as the carriage began to move again, waiting for any signs that their plan was in motion. Levi controlled his breaths: in through his nose, out through his mouth ...

They didn’t have to wait long. They were only about halfway through the city when the caravan stopped abruptly.

Levi glanced at Erwin; the thick brows were low, his jaw clenched. Through the door, they could hear shouts and, above them all, Nile barking orders.

Erwin reached for the door, but Levi stopped him. His throat was so tight that he could barely manage the words: “Be safe.”

Their gaze held for a moment, then Erwin surprised him by leaning in for a firm kiss. It wasn’t like him to drop his Commander role once he had melded into it.

Levi didn’t have time to consider it, because the door opened, and they stepped out of the carriage.

“Nile,” Erwin said, striding forward without hesitation, “deploy all your troops. We need to assume a titan has appeared.”

Nile spun to face them, his eyes wide. “Here? This is Wall Sina! There’s no way a titan could appear here.”

Levi quietly scanned their surroundings. At least a dozen MP surrounded them, guns drawn but not aimed, looking frantically at each other for support. In the distance, he could hear shouts. Was that smoke he smelled?

He pulled the jacket tighter around his shoulders, his muscles physically screaming at him to go lend support. His ankle throbbed, as if reminding him of his incapacitation. Heart sinking, he stood close to Erwin’s back, eyeing the MP around them in case one of them should panic and do something stupid.

There was more shouting behind them, this voice decidedly younger. He turned to see Jean jump out of the carriage and throw his wig to the ground. He ran up to Erwin and saluted. “Commander! I want to help.”

Erwin nodded. “Get your equipment from squad 4.”

“Sir!”

Before Jean could run off, Levi added, “I like your enthusiasm, kid, but don’t get yourself killed.”

“Sir!”

As Jean ran away, one of Hange’s squad members hurried up to them with Erwin’s 3DMG case. Erwin quickly buckled it on.

“Erwin,” Nile barked. “What the hell is this?”

I should be going out there with you. Levi curled into himself. If he had taken Erwin’s advice and used a cane, would his leg be in better shape now? Or would it be even more stiff? If only he had given Mikasa better instructions in the forest, he wouldn’t have needed to interfere ...

Erwin strode forward in full battle gear. “Everyone who can move, follow me. We’ll rendezvous with the capture teams.”

“Erwin, wait!” Nile stepped forward and lowered his gun, the barrel aimed squarely at Erwin. The other MP followed his lead, aiming their guns.

Levi tensed. He had a knife strapped to his calf, beneath his pant leg. Could he bend down, grab it, and throw it before Nile got a shot off? ... could he actually throw a knife at Nile, after having drinks with him, with his wife, meeting his kids?

He took a steady breath. Erwin had said to let him handle Nile. Maybe this could be resolved without violence.

“This is clearly treason against the crown!” Nile’s hands were

shaking, sweat dripping down his temples.

Levi could hold his blade, but not his tongue. “Nile, are your brains as thin as your beard? You’re about to make the biggest mistake of your life. You don’t even understand what’s happening here.”

Nile ignored him. “Erwin, remove your equipment!”

But Erwin only stared down the barrel, unflinching.

A flash of yellow light lit up the sky.

Levi’s breath caught. *Eren. We’re on plan B.*

For a moment, Nile stared at the sky, stunned. “What the hell is going on?”

Two MP soldiers landed in front of him, drenched with sweat. “Sir, two titans have started fighting in the city. Scores of civilians and soldiers are already wounded and killed.”

Nile’s eyes flashed, his teeth bared. “Erwin, is this all your doing? Was this your plan?” This snarl was different from his previous tone: it was a wounded snarl. Heartbroken. Levi felt a pang of sympathy. Erwin had once been Nile’s best friend, and now he was willingly destroying the city Nile had sworn to protect.

Even as someone who fully supported the plan, the thought of so many casualties made Levi’s stomach churn, too.

“I acted entirely on my own authority,” Erwin said. “I don’t intend to make any excuses.”

Nile lowered his gun and grabbed him by the collar. “You had to have known what would happen if a titan appeared in the middle of city. Why? Why did you do it?”

“For humanity’s victory,” Erwin said calmly.

“Don’t give me that bullshit! You’re a traitor. None of the higher-ups would complain if I executed you right now.” The barrel raised to his face again.

Levi’s hands tightened into fists as red began to cloud his vision.

But Erwin spoke again before the rage could take over. “If you wish. But Nile, you’ll be in charge of finishing this operation. Do not let the Female Titan escape; she is integral to humanity’s survival. Pehr is in charge of logistics; Beirer is in charge of supplies. Work with them and do whatever it takes—”

“Wait,” Nile said. “Wait, wait.” He looked as if he were about to crumble to his knees, his face white. “Do you really believe this is for humanity’s sake?”

“Yes,” Erwin said. “It is an important step forward.”

Levi watched, coiled and ready to spring.

Nile, shaking, lowered his gun. "Everyone, lower your guns. Cuff him. Deploy all troops and focus on aiding and evacuating the citizens."

Levi took a deep breath as the other MPs ran off to deploy their teams.

"Erwin," Nile said, "I'll leave your execution to the courts."

"I'll gladly undergo a trial, once everything is over." Erwin turned to Levi, his face grim. "Levi, you stay here. I know you can't stomach pointless deaths."

"Yeah," Levi muttered. "Causing them, or experiencing them." He couldn't shake the feeling that every death in Stohess was on his shoulders. *If not for this fucking ankle ...*

He watched as the soldiers cuffed Erwin. Their eyes locked and, for just a minute, the blue gaze softened. Then Nile grabbed Erwin's arm and roughly jerked him away.

He'll talk his way out of this, Levi thought. *He always does.*

But that wasn't what was worrying him. If the casualties were as high as the soldiers had implied, how would Erwin react? Would he keep the mask on out of necessity? Or would he break down completely? Levi couldn't decide which was worse.

Well, that could wait. Levi still had a potential opportunity to save lives. He quietly moved to the carriage that held his gear. If he was going to be their Plan D, he needed to be ready.

Even buckling the gear made his leg twinge, and he cursed under his breath. He gently took off Erwin's jacket and folded it, setting it in his gear case, and pulled on a Survey Corps cloak instead.

Once he was fully geared up, he sank his anchors into an overhang and launched himself onto a roof, using gas to soften the landing. He hopped between buildings, relying heavily on the gas to keep pressure off his foot. Manoeuvring through the air was difficult; his injured leg couldn't exert much force against the stirrup, so he overcompensated with his good leg, flying unevenly. He had never felt awkward on the gear before. Even in the Underground, self-taught, he had mastered it almost immediately. *So this is what Isabel went through when she was struggling to learn it.* He felt a renewed sense of appreciation for her tenacity.

As Levi approached Hange's team, he could see the traps, already deployed, but the Female Titan and the squad were absent. The buildings around it had been destroyed. Injured and dead soldiers lay in

the streets. His stomach turned. *I should have been here, I should have—*

He heard a roar as blue light flashed through the air.

He quickened his pace and burst toward the open park by the Wall. All at once, he saw Mikasa anchored to the Wall, the Female Titan on the ground, Eren's titan pinning her down with its jaws spread as if to eat Annie Leonhart inside, and Hange's squad watching helplessly from the rooftops. The blue light was coming from the two titans; the Female Titan appeared to be syphoning energy from Eren, almost as if they were fusing.

Shit! Levi launched forward without thinking. His leg twinged as he landed on the back of Eren's titan, his swords slicing into the nape.

Eren burst from the flesh, eyes rolling back into his head, his face and hands still bound to the titan by strings of sinew.

“Don’t eat our key evidence, idiot,” Levi said.

Around them, the blue glow faded.

Mikasa landed beside him. “Eren.” She looped her arms through his, struggling to pull him free. Levi sliced through the extra sinew, helping her free him; once she had him, he limped toward Hange.

“Levi! I thought you were injured.”

“I am.”

“Good thing you came when you did.” Hange gripped his arm, and the two of them turned to Annie Leonhardt.

Panic raced up Levi’s esophagus; he swallowed it down. Beside him, Hange gasped,

“She’s ... crystallized?”

A thick casing of translucent, blue-tinted stone covered Annie Leonhart’s entire body; it resembled the hard coating she had formed over her fingers earlier. Levi limped forward to examine the face of the girl who had killed his entire squad. She looked young and surprisingly vulnerable, her face visibly damp with tears.

Levi’s teeth clenched as revulsion and pity warred within him. She had shed tears in the forest of giant trees, too. *She’s just a scared child. What is she fighting for?*

He became aware of a continual clanging, and realized Jean was stabbing at the crystal with a broken sword.

“Jean.” He caught the boy’s arm. Rage was futile; the crystal was invulnerable to their blades. Jean bowed his head, quietly sobbing.

Hange ran a hand along the surface of the crystal. “Well, we got her.”

“At what cost?” Levi said. “And how are we supposed to question a crystal?”

Hange’s lips flattened. “Well, for now, we can move her below ground, where she can’t awaken and transform. My squad may be able to come up with a way to get her out of there.”

“You think you can handle all this?” Levi glanced back down the road, looking for Erwin and the MP. He would be wanting an update.

“Yeah, go ahead.” Hange turned to the others. “Moblit, Nifa, we need rope.”

Levi turned and limped toward the city.

Erwin was still in manacles; Nile and the MP escorts were staring at the steaming remains of the two titans, eyes wide.

Levi stepped past Erwin and stopped, standing protectively between him and his captors. “The plan wasn’t much of a success.”

“No,” Erwin said, “but we have enough to keep the Survey Corps in the clear, for now. Just barely.”

Levi cast him a sidelong glance. “Let’s hope so.” He could protect Erwin from dying on the battlefield, but he couldn’t protect him from the law. The word *execution* was still thundering in his mind. “You think you can convince them?”

“Yes,” Erwin said confidently. “We took the Female Titan out of the equation—who knows what she was planning to do while in Stohess? Any losses we incurred now would have been hundreds of times worse if they took down Wall Rose and Sina.”

“Okay, that’s enough.” Nile closed in on them. “Let’s go, Erwin.”

“What’s your hurry?” Levi said. “Shouldn’t your soldiers be helping us secure the traitor we captured, instead of wasting time locking down a cooperative man who has already surrendered?”

“Just five more minutes, if you please, Nile,” Erwin said quietly. “Then I promise I’ll go quietly.”

Nile gave a weary sigh. “Fine.” He turned, giving orders to his men. Several of them began to run toward the crystallized girl to assist Hange’s squad.

Erwin turned to face Levi. “We can expect an impromptu assembly shortly to figure out how to respond to my actions today. We need to make sure Hange is present to speak to the research prospects for our captured shifter.”

“What should I do?”

“You were injured and, as far as the military is concerned, had

no part in this. I'd like to keep it that way."

Levi's face softened. "Are you protecting me?"

"Yes. It's not just for selfish reasons either, Levi, it's for the greater good. Your role, for now, is to continue protecting Eren." Erwin's eyes hardened. "This move will attract our enemies' attention. There's a good chance they'll come after Eren even more aggressively than before. You're the only one I trust to keep him safe."

"I'd have a better chance without this damned ankle." Levi was afraid to ask, but he had to silence the storm in his mind. "Are they going to execute you?"

"I doubt it—I've made myself valuable, both as a Commander and as a potential scapegoat. They'll want to keep me alive. But ultimately, it won't slow the Survey Corps down much if they execute me. Eren's safety is more important than mine. I am replaceable; he is not."

Levi's lip curled. There was no one who could replace Erwin, no one who had his balance of experience, skill, and foresight. "That's bullshit. But I trust you to talk your way out of this." He looked away. "I'll watch Eren, but you'd better send word the second they release you."

"Of course." Erwin nodded at him. "Take care, Levi." It was the closest they could come to saying something more meaningful, with so many eyes on them.

"Yeah. Stay alive." Levi watched him for a moment longer, then turned, limping back toward Hange, Eren and the rest of the group.

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The main Military Police barracks in Stohess had been partially destroyed by the fight, so Levi brought Eren and his friends to one of the smaller, unused barracks instead. He informed the MP he had injured soldiers with him, intentionally omitting Eren's name. The soldiers were all too rattled to follow procedure and check identification, anyway.

They settled Eren, who was still unconscious, in a small room in the far wing of the building. Mikasa and Armin sat by his side. Jean leaned against a wall, more stoic.

Levi felt as if he were intruding. Besides, his leg was aching, and he was exhausted and worried about Erwin. The last thing he wanted to do was sit around staring at an unconscious kid while everyone around him was contemplating their mortality. He left them alone and settled

into an empty room next door.

Settling onto the window ledge, Levi stared down into the street. Townsfolk were sweeping the cobblestone and fixing broken windows. Every person he could see was too slim and poorly dressed to be nobles; more likely, they were servants of the upper class. Even when faced with disaster in their own city, the nobles couldn't be bothered to pitch in.

This was the society Levi had once craved to belong to, the one for which he had planned to kill Erwin. Knowing what he did now about the noble class, he wondered how he, Farlan and Isabel had ever expected to fit in. A life of luxury and pampering would have been boring.

The Underground, however, was too full of death and despair. A little house in a smaller city in Wall Rose would have been a nice balance: idyllic and serene.

A little house in Wall Rose ... He allowed himself to daydream for a moment. They could have a tea shop in the front, and a yard in the back. They'd get Erwin his dog—honestly, Levi wanted one, too—and grow vegetables, maybe even some flowers. After Erwin finished teaching, they would close up the shop and head to the stream to fish for their supper.

His hand rose to his chest, but then he remembered he wasn't wearing his military uniform, and he had lost the wedding ring, anyway. Instead, he caught the collar of Erwin's suit jacket and lifted it to his nose. He caught a whisper of cologne before his nose adjusted. The scent was fading with wear.

His eyes slipped closed and he folded his arms over his chest. It was wrong for Erwin to face the Council without Levi at his side. It was a nice gesture to try to protect Levi by leaving him out of it, but if word reached him that Erwin had been executed, he would fly into a rage, anyway, and end up in a noose himself.

He'll talk his way out of it. Then maybe they could have their little house in Wall Rose, even if it was just part time. Hell, at this point, he'd take a few nights at one of their apartments.

A knock sounded at the door, and he realized his chin was tucked to his chest and the sun had shifted a few hours across the sky.

“Levi?” Erwin called, voice brisk. “Are you in there?”

He's okay, he thought, followed by, *That was too fast.* The hair on his neck stood on end. “What's going on?”

Erwin strode in, followed by Hange. Their faces were white as they sat at the table.

“Well?” Levi asked, limping over to take a seat.

“Wall Rose has been breached,” Erwin said.

Levi’s stomach dropped. “What?”

“We don’t know where. Titans have appeared inside Wall Rose.

Mike’s squad and the Garrison are mobilizing to find the breach. It appears to have come from between Krolva and Trost, but we’re still waiting on word from Krolva to make sure the city wasn’t lost. They would have sent runners immediately in case of an attack, so we must assume either they were immediately and decisively wiped out, or, more likely, the Wall has been breached elsewhere.”

“That’s impossible.”

Hange said quietly, “Annie Leonhart encasing herself in crystal was impossible before today, too.”

“Shit.” Levi rolled his neck, trying to loosen it. “What’s the plan?”

“Hange’s squad will take Eren, Mikasa, and Armin southwest as an improvised squad. Their goal is to meet up with Mike’s squad and help with the wall investigation effort. You will travel with them as far as Ehrmich, then part ways to head south with Minister Nick.”

“Minister Nick?” Levi’s gaze shifted between the two of them. “What the hell do we need him for?”

“There are titans in the Walls,” Hange blurted. *Inside* the walls, Levi, encased in stone, and it seems they’re alive. The Wallists know something about them. Minister Nick ran up to me after the attacks, while you were speaking with Erwin. I tried to get information out of him, but he’s not talking. He would only mention that a bloodline is entrusted with the secret, and that’s it.”

“A bloodline—?”

Erwin cut in: “Nile gave us permission to take custody of the Minister until we can figure out what’s going on with the Wall. He needs to be kept under careful protection. The other Wallists may be willing to take decisive action to ensure he stays silent.”

“Fuck.” Levi felt a headache coming on. This was too much to deal with at once. “So I’m stuck with shitgoggles, the fresh brats, and a Wallfucker. What are you doing while all this is going on, Erwin?”

“I’ll only be a few hours behind you. I’ll be trying to convince Nile to release his soldiers into our custody to help fight the breach in Wall Maria. I’ll also be following up on the background checks into our titan shifter suspects. We can’t disregard the possibility that one of our soldiers somehow triggered this attack. This means I have to make a

quick trip up to Mitras.”

“Alone?”

“I’ll have Jean with me. He sustained a minor shoulder injury during the fight, and I want to make sure he takes an extra day to heal. Besides, he’s eager to help, and he reminds me a lot of Nile. I suspect Nile is more likely to listen to him than to me.”

Levi remembered the boy attacking Annie’s crystal in vain, and wondered if the shoulder injury had really come about in combat. “Okay. If you think that’s best.”

“It is.”

Hange stood. “I’ll go get the carriage prepared and assemble my squad. Levi, I’ll see you in the courtyard in ten minutes.”

The door closed.

Levi held Erwin’s gaze. “We’re fucked.”

“Possibly. We need to get Eren to the hole in the Wall as soon as possible so he can seal it. Armin and Mikasa need to be there for him to have a motive; they convinced him to transform in today’s battle when he wasn’t in the right mental state. If they can work together to block the hole, we might be okay.”

Levi inhaled, shaky. “That’s the second attack on Wall Rose in—”

“I know.” Erwin stood. “As long as we draw breath, we’ll keep fighting.”

“I could do with a little more time to draw those breaths, but yeah, we will.” Levi stood, too. “At least they didn’t execute you.”

“It came a little too close for comfort, but ultimately, they were able to see the value in Annie Leonhart’s capture.” Erwin reached out and cupped his cheek. “You’re shaking.”

“No, I’m not.” His stomach flipped; he felt as if he were about to vomit. He covered the large hand with his own, squeezing it for support. “Do you need me to question Minister Nick?”

“You can if you like, but be delicate. We want to convince him we’re his allies, not break him.”

“Okay.”

“Stay safe. I’ll see you in Ehrmich tonight.” Erwin bent down. His kiss was so soft that Levi could feel the plumpness of his lips, feel the breaths from his nose.

Their hands trailed as he left the room.

Erwin sat in the carriage with Jean. Across from them, Nile was slumped in a corner, arms folded over his chest. Another soldier Erwin didn't recognize sat beside Nile, back too straight, as if she were uncomfortable with being in their presence.

Beside him, Jean was staring out the window, his expression grim. Erwin knew that expression, that bitterness: the boy had lost someone, a lover or a friend, maybe a family member. He waited until Nile and the other MP were engaged in discussion over some files, then leaned a bit closer, his voice low.

“Jean.”

“Mm?” The boy looked up, blinking, as if he had been deep in thought.

“Holding up okay?”

Jean held his gaze for a moment, eyes narrowing a bit, as if sizing him up. Then he shrugged and said, “Yeah, I guess.”

“It’s okay if the answer is no. Everyone’s shaken, even those of us who didn’t have the personal connection to Leonhart that you and your classmates did. And I believe you were originally going to join the Military Police, isn’t that right? It would be only natural to question your decisions to join the Survey Corps right now.”

There was a long pause, then Jean said, “Is this a test?”

“No. But we’re in a unique position here: you are going to be privy to information and conversations that new recruits aren’t normally exposed to, and you and I haven’t had the opportunity to develop the trust and mutual respect that normally form in advance of these types of situations.” Erwin paused. “If you have any doubts about serving the Survey Corps, it isn’t too late; we do, on occasion, transfer soldiers between divisions, and I could put in a good word for you.” Petra and Oluo flashed through his mind, then Levi motionless in the shower, but he pushed the memory aside.

Jean looked at the window again, jaw tight. “It’s tempting.”

“It sounds like there’s a ‘but’ after that.”

“Well, yeah. Annie and whoever else is on her side, they took a lot from me, and if Wall Rose falls, they’ll take even more. I don’t want to fight, but I’d never forgive myself if I ran away and hid. Besides—” He paused and eyed Nile, as if making sure he wouldn’t be overheard. “We’re trying to pull them into combat now anyway, right? So it’s not like I’d be any safer inside Wall Sina.”

Erwin smiled. "True."

Jean slumped into the seat a little. "What about you, Commander?"

"Am I questioning my decision to join the Survey Corps?" Erwin asked, amused.

"No, I mean, how are you holding up?" The boy's shoulders tensed a little. "You don't have to answer that."

"No, it's okay. To be honest, I'm not really considering my emotional state, so I don't have an answer for you."

"You can just ... not think about it?"

"After nearly two decades with the Survey Corps, a person learns to compartmentalize." Maybe he could dig a bit deeper, just this once. He needed to earn Jean's trust as much as the other way around. "Naturally, I'm concerned about the state of Wall Rose, and what it means for humanity. The recent frequency of their attacks is worrying, as is Annie Leonhart's brazen grab for Eren. Our enemies are getting desperate, and we don't know what's driving them to escalate." He rubbed his breast pocket, feeling the small ring inside it. "I'm also concerned about what Captain Levi's absence will mean for our troops on the ground, and concerned about whether or not his leg will ever heal to its former state. But in spite of all that, I'm also full of hope."

Across from him, Nile had lifted his eyes to watch him.

"Hope?" Jean asked, sounding doubtful.

"We have Eren and his basement key. And with Wall Rose in danger, we'll have all three branches of the military cooperating to keep the Wall citizens safe." He tried to hold Nile's gaze, but Nile quickly looked down.

For a moment, the only sound was the rattling carriage.

"You think he's that important?" Jean asked quietly. "Eren?"

"Yes, I do. His powers make him the most important person within the Walls."

"He couldn't even fight Annie, at first." Jean's voice tightened. "Armin and I had to yell at him to get him to transform."

"Yes. And he did transform, and he helped us capture Annie. That's a valuable lesson in itself, Jean: Eren is important, but he can't succeed alone. Every single soldier within these Walls brings something unique to the battlefield, a piece of a grander puzzle. We can help Eren succeed, but only if we work together." His gaze shifted to Nile. "All of us."

Nile stared fixedly out the window, a muscle in his jaw jumping.

G

They arrived in Mitras an hour before their scheduled time to meet with Zackly, so Erwin left Jean at the barracks and strode to the nearby park. He dropped a request into the drop box: a coded request for more information about this mysterious bloodline that Minister Nick had said held the secret of the Walls. After casually circling the park to ensure he wasn't being watched, he sat at the usual bench with his legs crossed at the ankles, the symbol that he wanted to meet up.

He had expected a runner to arrange a proper meeting time—if the usual group was even interested in talking to him, after all the scrutiny the Survey Corps had been under lately. He was surprised when one of his usual contacts sat down beside him. She wore a plain skirt and a button-up shirt, and she carried a newspaper, which she opened.

“That was fast,” he murmured, not looking at her. “I expected you would still be avoiding me.”

“Your group was running too hot for us for a couple days, but government officials only care about the wall at the moment. Heard you were on your way. The records were in rough shape, but we pieced something together for you. Ask for my newspaper when I stand up.”

She stood as if to leave.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” Erwin said. “Are you finished with that paper?”

“Oh, yes I am. Take it.” She handed it to him. He accepted and dug in his pocket, continuing the charade.

“Here, let me pay you for—”

“No, no, that’s not necessary. Have a good day.” She gave him a polite smile and walked off.

He sat down with the paper and opened it. A note was taped to a page near the back. He quickly deciphered it.

Two other trainees came from AL’s hometown: Bertolt Hoover and Reiner Braun.

“Shit,” he whispered. Those were two of the trainees they had sequestered away with Mike.

He stood and folded the paper, walking briskly to find Jean. He found him waiting in the meeting room, looking bored. Unfortunately, there were too many others around to discuss what he had learned.

“Jean,” Erwin said. “Come with me.”

“Hey.” Nile was sitting at the other end of the table, arms folded tightly over his chest. “Don’t duck out now. We’re almost ready to start.”

“Very well.” He quickly scrawled a message for Mike and another for Hange, folding them. He handed them to Jean, along with a note indicating the Squad Leaders’ expected locations. “Seal these in envelopes and hire messengers to run them to Mike and Hange as urgently as possible. I’ll find you at the barracks once this meeting is over.” He had hoped to have Jean at his side for the meeting, but it was far more important that the Squad Leaders received this information.

Jean stood. “Yes, sir.”

As he left, Nile said, “What was that about?”

“You’ll know soon enough,” Erwin said with a pleasant smile.

Zackly joined them a few minutes later. “Looks like everyone’s here. Commander Pixis won’t be joining us; he’s too busy coordinating the Garrison forces out of Trost. Erwin, am I to understand that your troops will be joining them?”

“Yes, sir.”

Zackly adjusted his spectacles as he examined a piece of paper. “And you want Nile to send the MP as well.”

“Impossible,” Nile said. “The MP are needed to maintain order within the walls and facilitate the evacuation of Wall Rose. It’s already going to be a difficult job without the Garrison’s assistance. We can’t spare a single soldier.”

Erwin folded his hands in front of him on the table. “Nile, what if I told you we had identified two more titan shifters within the Walls—possibly the Colossal and Armoured Titans themselves?”

Nile stared, mouth open, as did the MP soldier beside him. Only Zackly remained motionless.

“How?” Nile asked finally.

“There are two more members of the 104th Trainee Squad whose records indicate they came from the same hometown as Annie Leonhart. These two soldiers were among our potential suspects in our search for a mole; they’re being guarded by Mike’s squad right now. They don’t know we know their secret, so we have the opportunity to capture them alive or take them down, but only if we’re prepared. Annie Leonhart on her own took our entire Corps to capture. Two shifters will be even more difficult.”

Nile’s mouth began to twist. “You’re certain it’s them?”

“Yes,” Erwin lied.

“Based on their hometown of origin.”

“We’re out of time. We have to grasp at any clues we have. Jumping on similarly tenuous clues led us to Annie Leonhart.” Erwin stared directly into his eyes and said quietly, “Will you help us?”

“It’s your decision, Nile,” Zackly said. “We’re in crisis mode, so there’s no right or wrong answer. Whatever you think is best.”

Nile glanced at him, then back at Erwin, then leaned back in his chair and folded his arms over his chest. “Fine. I’ll give you one improvised squad. That’s all we can spare. I’ll give you the soldiers who excel at 3DMG—they’ll be more use to you than they would be in the Interior.”

Erwin found he could breathe again. “Thank you.”

“We’ll sort out the roster back at the barracks.” Nile turned to Zackly. “As for the evacuation, I’ll follow the pre-existing emergency plan to the letter. If you have time to speak with the nobles who own the Underground ladders, it will help the subsurface evacuation immensely.”

“I’ll arrange it,” Zackly said with a nod. He stood. “Dismissed.”

As the room began to clear, Erwin turned to Nile. “I’m impressed you agreed so quickly.”

“You were right about the Female Titan,” Nile said gruffly. “But if you’re reckless with my men, I swear I will cut you down.”

“I will only take necessary risks. I promise you.”

“We have very different ideas about ‘necessary risks.’”

Erwin reached out to grip his shoulder. “You do what you do best, Nile, and focus on keeping the people inside the walls safe. I’ll do what I do best and hunt down the threats that are poised to eliminate us.”

Nile held his gaze. “Fine,” he said quietly. “But this doesn’t mean I trust you.”

“I know,” Erwin said.

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Levi was glad Erwin had ordered him to be gentle with Minister Nick, because travelling with him was absolutely infuriating, and Levi would have punched the man by now. When Levi and Hange had tried to get more information out of him during the carriage ride, he had

stayed perfectly silent, his face impassive. Torture was the next logical step. Levi was good at torture, but he loathed it.

Thankfully, when they reached the gates of Ehrmich, a shift finally came over the Minister's demeanour. The roads were flooded with Wall Rose refugees, faces tear-stained and panicked; perhaps it was guilt that provoked him to give them one bit of useful information.

Krista Lenz, a member of the 104th, was part of the bloodline that held the secrets of the walls. Levi had no idea how a bloodline could hold secrets, but Minister Nick had a grandiose way of speech, so maybe it was his fancy way of saying she had a book or another key.

The mystery deepened when Mikasa mentioned that Krista Lenz was always together with a member of the 104th named Ymir. Both Levi and Hange had been startled, remembering the titan who had bowed to Ilse Langnar, calling her *Ymir*.

The more information they got, the more questions they had.

But there was no time to ponder them, because Hange had to take the remaining soldiers southwest to try to intercept Mike's squad.

So, Levi settled Minister Nick into the barracks, where he would be safe from Wallist assassins and whoever else might want to silence him. The next morning, they would head to Trost.

They dined on cold stew, left over from lunch hours earlier. Levi eyed the minister for a while, trying to figure out how to casually ask the question that was on his mind.

"The Wallists who were crushed when the Female Titan destroyed the church," he began.

Minister Nick looked up at him, but said nothing.

Levi continued, "I know two women who are part of your cult. Were they among the dead? One is named Tessa, the other is her mother."

The minister's eyes lit with recognition. "Ah, from Mitras? No, Sister Tessa disappeared when her husband passed away. Her mother stayed in Mitras. Neither of them was in the Stohess church at the time of the attack."

Good. Levi didn't like either of the women, but if they had died in Stohess, Erwin would take that guilt onto his shoulders. He had enough as it was.

The minister looked so miserable, probably considering the lost lives, that Levi felt an uncomfortable wave of pity. This was someone who, in spite of his infuriating beliefs, had lost as much as the rest of

them. It was hard to equate such a broken man with the whiny thorn in their side during Council meetings.

“I’m going to assign four guards to your room,” Levi said. “Two patrolling the door, two outside the window. No one will touch you.” Technically, Levi didn’t have any authority over the MP, but they didn’t seem to know that, and he needed a break.

The minister said nothing.

“For what it’s worth,” Levi said, “we were supposed to catch the Female Titan before she got to the church. We didn’t want innocent people to die.”

“Good intentions will not be enough to save this world,” the minister said sadly, and he refused to say anything further.

cg

After ensuring the MP soldiers were in place, Levi stepped outside. The sky was streaked red, the air brisk. He wandered to a park near the wall, the one he presumed Erwin had always referred to when he spoke of the place where ‘August and Emil’ would get engaged. There was a small hill near the back of it, a smattering of trees at its peak. He traipsed through the long grasses and wildflowers, settling to a seat against one of the trees. The bark was rough against his back, and when he looked up, he saw a grey squirrel on the lowest branch, staring down at him from between the needles. It twitched.

“Hey,” Levi said quietly.

The squirrel stared for a moment longer, then skittered to higher branches. It was a ridiculous thought, but it reminded him of Isabel, with its combination of curiosity, hyperactivity, and self-preservation.

Thinking of Isabel led him to Petra. She wouldn’t be a squirrel; she’d be something more graceful, but also fearsome when it needed to be. Maybe a cat.

He let out a low sigh. He missed his entire team, but he missed her the most. Part of it was certainly guilt: things had still been awkward between them when she had died. If they’d had a few months after their conversation in the park, any lingering feelings would have settled, and they could have resumed being close friends. She had downplayed her feelings as a silly crush, but he knew better than that. He knew true friendship when he saw it, and it was rare.

Thoughts of true friendship drove his hand automatically to his breast pocket, but he stopped when he remembered the ring had been lost. *When is that reflex going to stop?*

Now he was missing Erwin, the ache larger and emptier than Isabel and Petra put together. Logically, that made no sense: he could see Erwin any time he wanted. He would, in fact, likely see him within the next several hours.

Levi had never been the type to cling to others in times of uncertainty; if anything, he was more likely to push them away. Somehow, the exact opposite was true with Erwin. Somehow, the rougher things became, the more he wanted—needed—to be at his side.

The sky was darker now, and a chilly breeze made him shiver. He stood and nestled deep into Erwin's jacket, flipping the collar up around his jaw like a bird ruffling its feathers. The city stretched before him. Yellow lamplight glowed in the windows and radiated from the buggies travelling through the streets; he could just barely make out their silhouettes against the brickwork of buildings, black-blue in the fading light.

For a moment, he felt calm. Maybe it was wrong to feel peace when humanity was in peril, but it was a welcome break.

When he returned to the base, he was surprised to see Jean waiting for him outside the barracks entrance.

“That was fast.”

Jean shrugged. “I guess everyone realized this is no time for politics.”

“Still. Those assholes *always* have time for politics. Did you get MP soldiers?”

“Yeah, a whole squad of them. The Commanders hand-picked them, and messengers are rallying them right now. They’ll meet us in Trost tomorrow morning, together with whatever additional Garrison soldiers Commander Pixis managed to gather.”

“Good. I’m guessing Erwin went to talk to Minister Nick?”

“Yeah, and he was looking for you, too.”

Levi pulled the jacket tighter around himself. “What orders did he give you?”

“I don’t really have any,” Jean said. “The Commander was in a hurry. There’s some new information he has to discuss with you.”

They strode through the barracks to Minister Nick’s room. Levi peered inside and saw Erwin speaking quietly with the Minister. The

guards outside the door saluted as he approached, but he ignored them.

“Take that room,” he said to Jean, pointing to a room two doors down. “Get some rest. Erwin and I will be sharing the room in-between. We’ll call for you if we need you.”

As Levi stepped into the room, Erwin turned his head slightly, as if acknowledging him in his periphery, but his eyes remained focused on Minister Nick.

“I can’t tell you that,” the minister was saying, his voice frayed.

“I suspected as much. Please eat the dinner we provided. The guards will be keeping watch.” Erwin gave his polite smile, then stood.

Levi followed him to the door. “I have updates.”

“So do I. Do you want to go to the apartment to discuss them?”

Levi hesitated. The apartment in Ehrmich was too big of a symbol for a short visit. “It’s getting late. We don’t have much time.”

He swore Erwin’s eyes twinkled at him. “You think we’d get distracted?”

“I *know* we’d get distracted.”

“Then let’s go for a walk through the training grounds. Fewer ears than in the barracks.”

The grounds behind the barracks were smaller than the ones in Trost, but still had ample trees and cover. The moon was full, and Levi’s eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness.

“This should be private enough.” Erwin sat on a bench near one of the wooden training titans.

Levi sat beside him. “Why do the MP bother training against titans like this if they never see them?”

“Some of them might, tomorrow.”

“Huh. I guess so.”

Erwin slid closer to him, finding his hand on the surface of the bench. His voice was soft: “We suspect the Armoured and Colossal titans are with the group Mike was watching.”

“Oh?”

“Our background checks showed two 104th trainees originating from the same town as Annie Leonhart.”

“That’s not a lot to go on.”

“No.” Erwin’s hand squeezed tighter. “We’re out of options.”

“I know. It gets worse.” Levi looked around and, confident they were alone, leaned against Erwin’s shoulder. “Armin thinks the Walls are made from titans standing side-by-side, bonded by the rock substance

the Female Titan formed.”

“Really,” Erwin said, as if deep in thought.

“The Wallists probably know this. Hange thinks Eren could plug the hole in Wall Rose if he can harden like the Female Titan did.” Levi nuzzled closer. “Minister Nick gave us the name of a descendent of the special bloodline. One of the 104th soldiers: Krista Lenz.”

“Interesting. She’s with Mike’s squad now, isn’t she?”

“Yeah. We don’t know what’s so special about her yet.”

“I’ll put my contacts on it.” Erwin paused. “It can’t be a coincidence that all these people ended up in the same Trainee branch.”

“Seems unlikely. You think the shifters were looking for Krista?”

“And possibly Eren as well.” Erwin let out a low sigh.

“Everything is changing so quickly, huh,” Levi said.

“Indeed.”

The wind blew through the trees. It sounded like rushing water. Levi closed his eyes as goosebumps rose on his skin everywhere except the side that was in contact with Erwin’s arm. “I asked Minister Nick about your mother and sister.”

The arm muscles tensed. “Oh?”

“They weren’t in Stohess during the battle.”

There was a pause so long that Levi lifted his head to look at him. Erwin stared straight ahead, his face stony in the moonlight.

“He said your sister left the Wallists after her husband died. Maybe she’ll talk.”

Erwin blinked as if coming back to himself, then shook his head. “If they let her leave willingly, she doesn’t have any secrets worth protecting. My mother, on the other hand ... ”

“You going to try talking to her?”

“I’m quite certain I’m dead to her, after what Sahlo’s friends did to my brother-in-law. That event might have shaken her enough to make her willing to talk to others, however. I wonder if my contacts could arrange a meeting with her. I’ll suggest it to them.”

After a long pause, Levi decided it was better to change the subject. “No news on Wall Rose?”

“No.”

“Me neither. We would have heard by now if they had found the hole, right?”

Erwin nodded. “One of the parties would have sent a runner. Maybe it got dark before they were successful.”

Neither of them said the next line, but Levi knew they were both thinking it: *or there was no one left alive to send.*

“What next?” he murmured.

“You’ll come with us to Trost early in the morning. You’ll be staying there to keep an eye on Minister Nick, and doing what you can to help Nile and Pixis evacuate Wall Rose.”

Levi’s throat tightened. *And you’ll head into the fray without my protection.* “You think the Colossal and Armoured Titans wiped out Mike’s squad?”

“I don’t know,” Erwin said. “I sent a message to Hange’s squad asking them to treat the shifters as if their identities were still a secret. As long as they want to protect that secret, they’ll be out of play.”

But if they don’t care about protecting their secret, you’ll be riding out to face them head-on. He turned to look at Erwin, jaw clenching. Erwin turned, too, meeting his gaze.

Levi grabbed his chin and pulled him in, catching him in a hard kiss. Maybe Erwin was afraid, too, because his arms wrapped around Levi, pulling their chests flush. The kiss transitioned into a series of soft kisses, cool air hitting damp lips between them. Levi pushed deeper, slid his tongue into Erwin’s mouth, felt the familiar ridges on the roof of his mouth, the smooth surface of his teeth.

Erwin caught his shoulder and gently pushed him away. His breaths were harsh against Levi’s mouth and nose. “If we’re going to do this, we should go somewhere private.”

Don’t go. Send them to fight without you. Levi bit the inside of his cheek. “We’re sharing a room next to Minister Nick. We’ll just have to be quiet. You don’t have anything else to say about strategy?”

Erwin shook his head. “I won’t know what we’re running into tomorrow until we get there, and you already have your assignment.” He pressed his palm to Levi’s cheek, face solemn. “I can’t remember the last time I went into battle without you by my side.”

Don’t go. Levi closed his eyes. “Let’s go back to the room.”

They walked briskly to the barracks and nodded at the guards outside Minister Nick’s door. Levi was glad to see they were awake, sober and alert; he had expected less of them. They looked young. Probably too young to have settled into the lazy ways of the more senior MP.

“Here.” He opened the door of the next room, letting Erwin through. “Two beds, so we can bunk together.”

He stepped through, then found himself flat against the wall, Erwin leaning into him as the door closed. Broad hands were in his hair, and his mouth was warm and open, and his thigh was firmly pressing between Levi's legs—

“Stop,” whimpered a feeble voice from the back of the room.

They froze.

Jean stood by the window, hunched, a hand covering his eyes.

Levi's head slumped back against the wall. “Shit.”

“I'm sorry,” Jean said, unmoving. “I had a question and thought I'd wait for you to get back—I didn't mean to—”

“It's fine,” Erwin said calmly, stepping aside and standing tall. “What was your question?”

“I don't remember!”

“Shit.” Levi folded his arms over his chest. “You okay, kid?”

Jean finally lowered his hands. His face was red. “Yeah. I mean, I won't say anything to anyone. I just ... didn't expect ...”

“We should have used more discretion,” Erwin said.

“Yeah,” Levi said, turning to give him a pointed look. This wasn't their base. They were lucky it had only been Jean.

“That being said ...” Erwin strode to the desk and pulled out a chair, indicating for Jean to do the same. “While we're all here, the three of us should take a minute to go over the plan for tomorrow.”

The boy still looked uncomfortable, but he sat. Levi sauntered over to the bed and sat on it, arms still folded over his chest. Somehow, this felt less catastrophic than it had the time Hange and Berit had walked in on them. For one thing, the position had been less compromising. For another, he was surprised to discover that with all that was going on, he didn't give a shit anymore who knew about them. Was the Council really going to try them for misconduct when everything was going to hell?

Erwin spoke at length to Jean, revealing more information than Levi expected, including the potential hint that a bloodline within the Walls carried a secret about the titans. At first, he Erwin thought had just taken a shine to the boy and was grooming him for a Squad Leader role one day, but then he realized what was going on: Jean was going to be the only Survey Corps member riding with Erwin to the front lines, because the others were already on the field. *He's making sure Jean knows everything in case he falls on the way there.*

Levi's stomach heaved. He curled tighter into himself.

By the time the discussion ended, Jean looked to be at ease again. On top of relaying necessary information, the conversation had been a successful distraction.

"That's all," Erwin said. "Go get some rest. We'll be leaving for Trost well before dawn. I'll send someone to wake you."

Jean nodded and stood. He looked between the two of them, a hint of a grimace returning. "Look—"

"It's fine," Erwin said. "We trust you to keep our secret. Our relationship is strictly on a need-to-know basis among trusted comrades who understand our romantic entanglement has no impact on our decisions on the field. That has been the case for several years, and we've never had a complaint. Since you've seen us interact on a professional level more often than the other new recruits, I trust you understand that as well."

"Sir."

"Good. Dismissed."

Jean gave a formal salute, then quickly stepped from the room. The door swung closed, and Erwin locked it.

"Lesson learned," Levi said dryly. "Check the room first next time before you start dry humping me."

"Getting caught in the act twice in four years isn't a bad track record, is it? Particularly considering how little privacy our living quarters afford us."

"We're just lucky it was Jean."

"I suppose." Erwin sat on the bed beside him. "Oddly, I don't find myself caring too much about who discovers us anymore."

"Neither do I, but there might be some Council members who would hold it against you. We don't need you getting tangled in red tape when you should be free to focus on humanity." Levi glanced at the dying lamp. "We have to be up in a few hours."

"Yeah." Erwin's hand slid onto his thigh. "Maybe something quick?" His hand settled between Levi's legs, gently squeezing through the fabric.

Levi's eyes closed, his breath shuddering between parted lips. "What did you have in mind?"

"Well, I was enjoying kissing you. Maybe we could use our hands on each other so we can kiss some more?"

"Okay. But fully naked." He wanted to study Erwin's body. His stomach was still churning.

In spite of their goal to be quick, they undressed slowly, smoothing the fabric away with gentle palms. They curled under the blankets, facing each other, lips and legs interlocking. The angle made it difficult to effectively touch each other, but the contact was enough to keep things moving forward, until Levi couldn't resist anymore: he ducked under the covers and pulled Erwin into his mouth to finish him off. Erwin's cries were silent, both of them aware of the thin walls between them and their neighbours, but his hand tightened into Levi's hair.

When Levi surfaced again, Erwin gave him a deep kiss, then slid under the covers this time, returning the favour. Levi clenched his teeth, lips flared, arching deep into the warm mouth; it was hard to hold back his groans, but he managed to vent them as harsh breaths instead.

Even once they were finished, Erwin kept kissing him, kept running his hands over his entire body.

Don't stop, Levi thought, even as his eyelids were drooping closed. *Don't go* ...

They fell asleep facing each other, still intertwined, their foreheads pressed together on the pillow.

-39-

LOVE

When the wake-up knock sounded at the door, it was still dark outside.

Levi stood first, hoping, by some miracle, his leg had healed enough for him to follow his Commander into battle. It was moving a bit better than the day before, but too weak. He swallowed against the lump in his throat and dressed, pulling Erwin's black jacket around his shoulders.

They sat with Jean and Minister Nick at the breakfast table, along with the bulk of the improvised squad of MP who would be joining them. Levi expected things to be strained with Jean, but he was acting the same as ever—standoffish, but polite enough. The minister was acting the same as ever, too; he sat staring down at his food, barely eating, his expression morose.

At the end of the meal, the MP Squad Leader, a man named Steinhart, sat across from them.

“Commander, Captain,” he said, not saluting. “Commander Nile told us we’d be meeting up with the Garrison in Trost to help clear titans from Wall Rose.”

“Something like that,” Erwin said. “Do you have transport?”

“Yeah, the wagons are stocked and the horses are saddled and ready to leave.”

“Good. Levi and Minister Nick, you can ride in one of the wagons.” Erwin stood. “We should head out immediately.”

“I’ll escort the minister to the wagon,” Jean said.

“Thank you, but Levi can do that.”

“I know. I figured you and the Captain might like one last chance to confer before we set out.” Jean didn’t look at them. “In case there was

any last-minute secret strategy to discuss, or something.”

Levi nodded. “Yeah, I do have one last thing to discuss. We’ll be down in a minute.”

“Thank you, Jean,” Erwin said.

They stepped into the hallway, then back into the room they had used the night before. Erwin closed the door behind them.

“That was kind of him, giving us a moment to say goodbye.”

Levi’s stomach dropped. “Yeah. I just wish we knew what you were going up against.”

“We’ll know soon. Let’s pretend it’s a standard battle, and this is a standard goodbye.”

Their gaze held.

Erwin slowly reached out and smoothed the hair off Levi’s forehead. His eyes were glassy. “Will you be okay on your own in Trost?”

“Will *I* be okay? Fuck, Erwin.” Levi slumped forward to burrow into Erwin’s chest. The Commander’s pendant was cold against Levi’s cheek. He reached up to stroke it with his thumb. He felt a hand comb the back of his hair, and wished that the moment wouldn’t end.

But he could hear the horses in the yard outside, and there was a broken wall to address, and titan shifters on Mike’s squad. He pulled away and straightened the bolo tie, adjusting the strings so they were even.

Erwin’s hands closed over either side of his jaw. His kiss was firm, warm, and open, and Levi inhaled the taste of his breath.

Then they pulled apart. The blue eyes glazed over, the jaw hardening; even the lines of Erwin’s nose and cheeks seemed more severe than a moment earlier, more commanding. Levi felt his face shifting, too, as they became Commander and Captain once again.

They opened the door and stepped into the hallway, side-by-side.

The sky was just beginning to lighten with the impending dawn. Dew clung to the moss between the cobblestones. Levi shivered. He gingerly climbed into the wagon across from Minister Nick, who was wrapped in a thin blanket. Jean stood beside the wagon, looking around as if unsure what to do.

“Jean,” Levi said, “go tell the MP to give you a horse, under my authority.”

“Captain.” Jean hurried away.

Within a few minutes, he heard Erwin’s voice from the front,

strong and clear, calling for them to fall into travelling formation.

Levi snuggled deeper into the jacket, breathing the faint scent of him.

G

The troops arrived at Trost just as the sky was shifting from orange to blue. They bypassed the base and headed straight for the wall instead. Levi squinted; he could see two figures standing atop it. The bulk of the Garrison soldiers were at the base of the wall, stacking crates into wagons and setting up lifts.

The formation halted. At its head, Levi saw a single figure jet up the wall, golden hair glinting in the morning sun. *Erwin*.

There were no signs of any titans. Good. Wall Rose was not yet overrun, at least. That meant Erwin would be dragging the MP to the hole itself, wherever that was. Maybe even beyond it, if the titans were still in the process of breaking through.

Around him, the troops began to dismount and eat rations or drink water. Levi reached for a water canister himself, but stopped when someone yelled his name. He turned.

One of the MP—a low-ranking member who had no business addressing him without his title—yelled, “Hey, Captain! We’re all ready for battle. Where’s our prey?”

Levi turned to eye him. “Were you hoping for titans in Trost? Sorry to disappoint you. You’d have plenty of chances to see them outside the walls; how about you join us and help us fight them?”

Another soldier cleared his throat. “Well, you know, it’s busy inside the wall, too.”

Levi snorted. *Cowards*. These were going to be the soldiers having Erwin’s back?

A Survey Corps soldier ran in before the conversation could continue. “The advance party is back! Someone tell Commander Pixis!”

“Shit,” Levi muttered, because the sweaty strain on the soldier’s face didn’t bode well. He reached into a sack beside him and pulled out his signal flare gun, loading a white round.

A column of white smoke rose into the air, and almost immediately, Erwin descended from the wall. He landed on the ground in front of the wagon with grace that seemed out of place for such a large man. Pixis and Anka followed closely behind.

The messenger soldier sank to his knees, gasping for air. The others gathered around him. Levi cast a glance at Minister Nick and, gauging he wasn't going anywhere, eased onto the ground to join the circle.

As the soldier fought to catch his breath, he told them there was no discernable hole in the wall; the search parties starting from Krolva and Trost had met in the middle without spotting a breach. Worse yet, when they met up with Hange and a group of the 104th from Mike's squad, they had made a terrible discovery.

"Three of the soldiers were titans!" The messenger was shaking now.

"Including Eren Yeager?" Erwin asked.

"No."

Three others? Levi glanced at his Commander, but the stony face gave him nothing.

Jean's face, however, showed plenty as he stepped forward. "What are you saying? There were still three titans on that team? Who?"

Erwin held out a hand. "Jean, wait." He turned back to the soldier. "Once they were discovered, what happened?"

"The Survey Corps engaged the Colossal and Armoured Titans," said the soldier. "By the time we joined the battle, it was over."

Now Levi stepped forward, chest tight. "What do you mean, 'over'?"

"They defeated Eren Yeager and kidnapped him and another of the 104th, the other titan. They fled outside the wall." The soldier bowed his head. "Most of the team was incapacitated, and there were no lifts. We couldn't pursue them."

Levi's jaw tightened. *Those bastards have Eren. If they escape with him, it's all over.* His gaze shifted to Erwin.

Erwin's face was still neutral. "How soon can we get the lifts operational?" he asked Pixis.

"Ten, fifteen minutes." Pixis uncapped a flask and took a swig.

"Then we'll prepare ourselves to set out." Erwin stood tall. "Good soldiers of the Survey Corps and the MP, we have a new objective: to chase down and retrieve Eren Yeager at all costs. Without him, the Walls have no future."

"What?" Steinhardt strode toward him. "We were only supposed to come and help clear titans from Wall Rose, not go outside it."

"No, you were supposed to help us clear threats. If the Colossal

and Armoured Titans escape with Eren, we will be powerless to stop further attacks. He is humanity's last hope."

Steinhardt looked at Pixis helplessly. "Commander—"

"The way I understand it," Pixis said, words slurring, "Your Commander gave Erwin full authority over your squad. And maybe there's no hole this time, but if they're allowed to retreat and regroup, they will attack again, maybe even in bigger numbers. When that happens, the combined strength of all our forces won't be able to protect the people within these walls, especially if Eren isn't there to help us."

Steinhardt stared at him for a moment longer, then looked away. "Shit."

"Prepare for departure," Erwin said. "Equip yourself with signal flares and extra blades. Bring only the small, quick carts. We climb the wall in fifteen minutes and head west to rendezvous with the survivors."

As the others began to scatter, Erwin knelt in front of the messenger soldier and held out a water flask. Levi moved closer so he could listen in.

"How many survivors?" Erwin asked.

The soldier took a long swig of water. When he was finished, he wiped his mouth and spoke, his voice steadier than before. "Squad Leader Hange is alive, but badly injured. I'd say at least a dozen senior Survey Corps are alive but injured, too. Most of the 104th who were present are alive. They holed up for the night in an area called Castle Utgard with Mike's Squad, but ..."

Levi's stomach twisted. "But?"

"Squad Leader Mike and all his senior soldiers were killed by titans."

"What?" Levi whispered.

Erwin's facial muscles were visibly tight. "Thank you, soldier. Go get some rest." He clapped the man on the soldier, then stood. Instead of turning to Levi, he paced several steps away, raking a hand into his hair.

Levi stood, too, and limped to Erwin's side. "You okay?"

Erwin's voice cracked: "I just need a minute."

There was so much chaos around them that Levi decided it was okay to risk a quick, supportive grip to the man's bicep. To his surprise, Erwin covered his hand and squeezed. For a moment, they stood there together, the strength of the grip the only sign of their grief.

Then Erwin released Levi's hand and turned to face him, his face steady again. "This is a far more dangerous mission than we antici-

pated, Levi. If I don't—”

“Stop. We've said it all before. I know what to do. Hange's next in line, your will is in order, and all your belongings go to me. I'll protect Eren to the death.” Not that he could do that in his current state, anyway. “Go. The longer you wait, the harder it'll be to find them.”

Erwin nodded, and Levi nodded back, and that was the only goodbye they could afford in public.

He watched as Erwin sat atop his horse on the lift, back straight, head high. He watched as the Garrison helped them pack up the lifts behind them, ready to transport them to the rendezvous point.

He watched as they rode off atop the wall, as that golden hair turned into a spec and disappeared, Levi's sun setting behind the horizon.

❧

Anka helped Levi settle Minister Nick into the Trost Garrison base with guards.

“You might want to consider putting him under police protective custody instead,” she said. “The Garrison and the Survey Corps aren't really equipped to protect him from other members of his sect, especially with everything else going on right now.”

It sounded like a good idea, so Levi sent a message to Nile requesting full-time protection.

He stopped for lunch on his way back to the Survey Corps base, and stared absently at his plate.

Mike, with his dumb hair in his face, and his smug smirk, and his stupid habit of sniffing everything. He had been the strongest in the Corps after Levi, and his nose had saved them countless times. He was also the first soldier who had really made an effort to become buddies with Levi, maybe because they had recognized each other's strength early on. Levi had trusted Mike even before he had fully dropped his suspicions of Erwin.

Now he was just another body.

Levi drew in a shuddering breath. He had no appetite, but he forced himself to eat some bread and some hard-boiled eggs.

Not just Mike. Nanaba, with her quiet-yet-pleasant disposition, gone.

Hange was injured—he didn't know how badly, but if it must be

bad. Otherwise, Hange would be gleefully barrelling after those four shifters.

And now Erwin was riding into the field with a bunch of inexperienced soldiers, facing down at least two shifters. And Levi was here, limping and alone.

Thankfully, he wasn't alone for long. When he returned to the base, some of the injured Survey Corps soldiers had returned and were stabling their horses. He walked up to Moblit, who had his arm in a sling and was awkwardly trying to brush his horse.

"Hey Scribbles," Levi said. "Glad you made it. Get one of the others to help you with that. You should be resting."

"Captain." Moblit gave him a tired smile.

"Where's your boss?"

"In the san."

Hange was lying on a bed, face covered with superficial burns. Levi pulled out a chair beside the bed and sat.

"You dead yet, shitgoggles?"

Hange began to chuckle, then winced. "Don't make me smile; it hurts."

"What happened to you?"

"The Colossal titan gives off a lot of heat." The dark eyes opened. "Can't see a damned thing without my glasses."

"Want me to get them?"

"No, my face is too sore. You look better as a formless blob, anyway." Hange gave a wheeze that was probably supposed to be a laugh.

"Did you run into Erwin?" Levi asked, shifting forward until his elbows rested on his knees.

"Yeah, hard to miss each other on top of the Wall. Impressed you guys managed to drag the MP away from their cushy stations. Gave Erwin some ideas about where to pursue Bertolt and Reiner."

"The messenger said there were three shifters."

"Yeah. They took the other one with them. A girl named Ymir—the one who's friends with Krista Lenz." Hange turned to give him a pointed look.

"Huh."

"Everything suddenly got a lot more complicated, didn't it? No idea what it's all about. We'll figure it out if Erwin retrieves her and Er-en."

"When," Levi corrected.

“Depends how quickly they can track them down. The shifters will be too exhausted to transform right away, so he has a good shot if he gets to them quickly.” Hange’s eyes slipped closed.

Levi rose to his feet. “You should rest.”

“Yeah, not much else to do until I heal a bit.” A pause. “Mike’s dead.”

Levi swallowed hard and looked away. “I know.”

“And Nanaba, Lynne … his whole team.”

“Yeah, I know.” He reached out, intending to squeeze Hange’s shoulder, then hesitated, realizing it was probably burnt and sore. “You made it back alive,” he said instead, “so don’t waste it. Rest so you can get back on the field as soon as possible.”

The brown eyes fixed on him. “Same thing to you.”

❧

There was no point in worrying about Erwin, so Levi distracted himself by gathering status updates from the injured soldiers, then compiling them into a report. He left the report on Erwin’s desk. It would save him some time when he returned.

Once that was done, Levi rode to the Garrison base to find Anka so they could discuss the evacuation of Wall Rose. While the evacuation itself was nearly complete, the Garrison and MP were already starting to encounter civil unrest.

“Once Commander Erwin returns, we’ll likely enlist the help of the Survey Corps to maintain peace within Wall Sina,” she said. “Supplies are limited, and the Sina elite are concerned about the Rose refugees starting riots once supplies start to run low. If tensions rise too high, it could escalate into civil war.”

“We’ll kill ourselves before the titans get a chance to, at this rate,” Levi muttered, annoyed that the people Erwin kept putting himself on the line to save weren’t interested in saving themselves.

Late that afternoon, he returned to the san. He found Hange sitting up, frantically writing notes in a book.

“Looks like you’re feeling better,” he said, sitting on the edge of the bed.

“I’m just a little scalded. Some of the others were injured far worse.” Hange looked up at him with what he had come to recognize as a mid-brainstorm squint. “I got to see the Colossal and Armoured Titans

in detail.”

“Tell me everything.”

Hange’s eyes lit up. “Really?”

“It’s important for me to know what we’re up against.” That, and he needed a distraction.

And so, in true Hange fashion, he heard every single detail about how Reiner and Bertolt had tried to convince Eren to leave with them, how Mikasa had attacked them and failed to kill them. Eren had fought well against Reiner, but Bertolt had surprised them all and turned the tides.

“Two against one,” Levi said. “Poor kid didn’t stand a chance.”

“The 104th that had been with Mike’s squad was unarmed, too, so he barely had any support from the soldiers. It was a mess.” Hange looked down at the notebook. “At that point, I lost consciousness, because Bertolt released a suffocating blast of steam and heat. He’s slow and immobile, but his exothermic nature makes him nearly invincible—we can’t get close enough to land a blow on him. We need to develop some sort of projectile weapon if we want a chance to take him down. I’ll have to adjust our trap cannons into something more portable, somehow.”

Levi grimaced and turned to look out the window. Nearly invincible. *Erwin* ...

“Hey.” He felt a hand close over his. When he turned, Hange’s face was gentle. “If Erwin caught up to them before they had recovered, they wouldn’t be able to transform. They’d be easy to take down as humans.”

“Don’t look at me like that,” he muttered, embarrassed by pity, but he didn’t pull his hand away. “About Mike ...”

“Yeah?”

He couldn’t say it, but Hange seemed to understand what he was asking.

“I don’t know. He fell before we were able to reach his group. It seems his squad tried to defend the unarmed 104th in the abandoned ruins of Castle Utgard. Mike took on a group of nine titans to give them time to escape. One of them was an abnormal—a giant, hairy, beast-like titan that attacked the others at the castle later.”

“Eight and an abnormal? Alone?” Levi’s mouth twisted. “What the fuck was he thinking?”

“I doubt he expected to survive it,” Hange said, voice low. “He

probably aimed to buy them time, nothing more. The situation must have been dire for him to put himself on the line like that.”

Levi tried to control his breath, but it shuddered. “Fuck.” He tightened his grip around Hange’s hand.

“It’s getting late,” Hange said gently. “Why don’t we go get some dinner?”

“Squad Leader,” Moblit scolded from the next bed over; a medic was changing the bandages on his arm. “You shouldn’t be getting up.”

“Oh, I’m fine. Want to come eat?”

“Thank you, Squad Leader, but I think I should rest.”

“Okay. If you need anything, we’ll be in the mess hall.” Hange released Levi’s hand and stood, a bit unsteady, then began to walk toward the exit. Levi followed, still limping.

The two of them remained in the hall long after the meal ended, reminiscing about good times with Mike, Nanaba, and the other soldiers who had died. Levi ordered a bottle of Mike’s favourite ale—a pale brew that left a bitter coating on his tongue—but switched to something darker afterwards. Hange, still on morphine, drank only tea.

Shortly after lights out, they heard a commotion coming from the hallway. Levi stood up so quickly that he knocked over an empty bottle; he caught it before it rolled off the table.

In the distance, he heard a frantic voice: “Where’s Captain Levi?”

Ignoring the pain in his leg, he leapt to his feet, ran to the door and threw it open. “I’m here. What is it?”

Pehr stood in the hallway, caked with sweat, grime, and blood. “It’s the Commander, sir. He’s gravely injured.”

The floor began to tilt. Levi caught himself with one hand against the wall. Pehr said something about an arm, and the hospital, and then Hange was standing beside him asking questions, but he couldn’t hear them or the responses.

Pehr strode down the hallway, Hange following. Levi’s feet felt as if they were sinking in heavy mud as he tried to follow. Blood rushed in his ears. *He’s gravely injured ... gravely ...*

They passed Eren, Mikasa, Armin and Jean; Eren said something to him, but Levi only stared as he moved past, still stumbling through mud.

A carriage waited for them in the courtyard. He sat next to Hange. Pehr was still talking, and Hange, at least, seemed to be able to comprehend it all. Levi’s hands knotted between his knees as he stared at the

carriage floor.

Erwin was in surgery when they arrived at the hospital. The nurse brought them to a window overlooking the operating room.

Levi stepped up to the window, shaking. Erwin lay on a bed, his eyes half-open, only whites showing. His skin was grey, and his chest was moving with the shallow breaths of a dying man. A doctor stood in front of his right arm. He stepped away for a moment to reach for a tool, and Levi saw the red meat of muscle, the white of bone.

Fuck! He slumped against the wall and vomited, his ears ringing. He squeezed his eyes shut, but still saw white against red against grey, heard rasping breaths ... A hand reached for him—Hange—but he knocked it away and staggered to the door.

He didn't stop until he was outside the hospital. He slumped against a tree, slid to a seat. He scrubbed the backs of his hands, over and over, unthinking, unfeeling.

That was how Hange found him some time later. He didn't look up.

"Have you been here the entire hour?" Hange sat down next to him. "It's cold out here."

Levi pulled Erwin's jacket tighter around his shoulders.

"They were able to properly amputate his arm," Hange said quietly, "but he's lost a lot of blood, and the wound was open for so long that they're worried about infection."

"Shut up," Levi said, voice high-pitched. "I don't want to hear it."

"He's in a private room now, if you want to ... say a few words to him."

"I said, shut up!" Levi stood, his head spinning. He began to limp toward the street.

"Levi, where are you going?"

"I have to file his reports."

"That can wait."

But it couldn't wait. They needed to send the casualty list, and Zackly needed to know what had happened on the field. They had discussed this many times before. Levi had to fulfill Erwin's duties while he was incapacitated.

He had only gone about a block when a carriage pulled up beside him and stopped. The door opened, and Hange held out a hand to help him in. Levi stared at the hand for a moment, his eyes prickling with tears.

“I’ll help you,” Hange said. “There’s a lot to do.”

Levi accepted the hand and climbed into the carriage.

B

He didn’t sleep at all that night. When he closed his eyes he saw grey, red, and white.

The returning soldiers all seemed too upset to sleep, anyway, so he and Hange spent the night collecting statements. Moblit and Nifa joined them on the couches in Erwin’s office, helping record the different accounts of what had happened.

The room smelled like his cologne.

When Levi interviewed Jean, the boy was giving him concerned looks that irritated him. Surprisingly, he got the same thing from Mikasa, especially as she told him about the moment Erwin had lost his arm.

“He was beside me one moment,” she said, “commanding us to charge. Then his horse had no rider. I looked back, and—” She paused, watching him with that infuriating concerned look.

“What?” he demanded.

Hange jumped in: “And then what happened?”

“The Commander was hanging from the mouth of a titan, its teeth around his upper arm. But all he did was point his sword at Eren and command us to advance. He told us Eren was right there ...”

Levi was surprised to feel a swell of rage. *You selfless bastard! What the hell were you doing? Where the hell is your concern for your own life?* “So you obeyed.”

She seemed taken aback. He had let too much anger show in his voice. “Yes, of course, sir. A few people stayed behind to take down the titan.”

“No one saw the titan coming for him?”

“No. The battlefield was in chaos.”

I should have been there. I would have seen it coming. I could have— Levi scratched the back of his hand. It was beginning to bleed.

Hange eyed him, then said, “Then what happened?”

Mikasa continued her account of the battlefield, and Levi retreated into his thoughts, letting Hange take charge. *Hanging from the mouth of a titan ...* He felt the urge to vomit again, but swallowed it back.

He snapped back to himself when Mikasa talked about the mo-

ment they had freed Eren.

“—and then Commander Erwin appeared, using his 3DMG one-handed. He slashed the belt across Bertolt’s chest and cut Eren free.”

Maybe Levi should have felt proud, but it only made him even angrier. *You shouldn’t have had to do that. You shouldn’t have had to do any of this! What the fuck were you thinking?* Tears pricked the corners of his eyes, and he swiped at them, furious.

They finished the last of the interviews in time for breakfast. During the meal, he somehow found his voice.

“Attention, all soldiers,” he announced. “The Survey Corps will report to Commander Pixis this afternoon to help with the peace-keeping efforts in the Centre. Get a few hours of sleep before you start. It might be a long night.”

But he was unable to take his own advice, and he rode ahead to meet Commander Pixis so they could begin discussing the strategy for preventing unrest before the other soldiers arrived.

At about eight o’clock that evening, he heard his name. His head snapped up; he had fallen asleep at the table. Commander Pixis, Hange, and Anka were all watching him with more of that annoying concern.

“What?” he snapped.

“You should get some rest, Captain,” Anka said.

“I’m fine. Keep going.”

“Levi,” Hange said quietly.

“Fine.” He stood. “But the civilians aren’t going to sit around and wait for us to nap.”

“We have the night shift keeping an eye on things,” Pixis said calmly. “Go get some rest.”

Levi was so tired that the brickwork of the walls seemed to trail after him as he walked down the hallway. He opted to walk back to the base, relishing the crisp night air against his skin. The biting coolness was the only thing he had felt all day.

The road brought him past the hospital. He slowed and turned toward it. *Grey, shallow breaths, the same as my aunt—no, my mother. They’ll get louder, then start rattling, and then there won’t be any more, and you’ll miss the rattling, but it won’t start again, it won’t start—*

A nurse was sweeping the front driveway. She gave him a kind smile. “Do you need assistance, sir?”

“Friend of mine’s in there,” he managed, his tongue too dry to form a full sentence.

“Ah. I’m afraid visiting hours are over for the night. You should try again tomorrow.”

“Commander Erwin.”

“Oh.” She stopped sweeping, her hands knotting around the broom handle. “You’re Captain Levi, aren’t you?”

“Is he ...” He didn’t know what he wanted to ask.

“He’s still in a coma.” Now even this woman, a nurse who had never met him in her life, was giving him that same concerned look as everyone else. “We make visiting exceptions all the time for high-ranking officers, if you’d like to go see him.”

He drew a deep breath; it shook as he exhaled. “I’ll be back soon.”

The entire walk back to the base, he warred with himself. If he began mourning now, he wouldn’t be able to stop. But the thought of Erwin dying alone was even harder to bear. He had been asleep when his mother had passed. No one should have to die while their loved one slept peacefully without them.

Hange was waiting for him in Erwin’s office, holding two mugs of tea. Wordlessly, he accepted one. Hange took the other and perched on the arm of the couch across from him.

“Go see him,” Hange said softly. “I’ll take care of the duties around here.”

Levi stared at the tea leaves at the bottom of his mug. The tea was too weak; it should be so thick that he could barely see the bottom. The leaves began to blur, and he cursed his weakness. There was no time to cry.

“Levi, it’s real whether you see him or not. And if he dies, you’re going to regret not saying goodbye.”

His hand began to tremble; tea splashed perilously close to the brim of the mug. He took a long sip. When he had drained the mug, he set it on the table. “We know Bertolt and Reiner are after Eren, so we have to isolate Eren. The soldiers who witnessed the battle said he was able to somehow control other titans on the battlefield when he was put into a state of absolute desperation. We need to make sure he has access to that desperation in case he needs to defend himself. If we surround him with his friends from the 104th, he’ll feel their safety is at stake. They’ll make up my new squad.”

“I know a safe house we can take him to,” Hange said. “My team can protect them. You stay in Trost, for now, and help Pixis coordinate

the rest of the Survey Corps to help maintain civil order.”

Levi nodded, lost in thought. “What do I say to him?”

“*Pixis*?”

“*Erwin*.”

“Tell him you love him.” Hange held his gaze. “Tell him to fight. We need him. We need both of you, together.”

8

He brought a small bag with him to the hospital and identified himself at reception. The nurse led him to Erwin’s room.

Levi hovered in the doorway. Erwin lay motionless in the bed, the blanket pulled up to his chin. Though he was still too pale, his skin was warmer than before. His hair hung in his face, and his lips were dry and cracked.

“He still hasn’t woken up,” the nurse said, “but he’s doing very well otherwise. We’re keeping him hydrated the best we can, and keeping his wound clean. We’re hopeful he’ll wake up within the next few days.”

Levi swallowed hard and stepped into the room. The nurse closed the door to give him some privacy.

He still smelled like Erwin, even in this state. Levi swallowed. His mother had smelled like death long before she had drawn her final breaths.

There were other signs of life, too. The smattering of blond stubble across his jaw. The even rise and fall of his chest.

Levi slowly pulled up a chair and eased to a seat. His heart pounded in his throat. “You look like shit.”

He hoped his voice would spark some miraculous recovery, but the eyelids stayed closed and unmoving. At least they weren’t half-open anymore.

This is stupid. He can’t even hear me. Levi stared at the blanket covering the injured arm—or what should have been his arm. He could see a lump where the shoulder was, and then nothing, the blanket flush against the mattress. His pulse drummed in his ears as he reached for the blanket and threw the corner back.

What had once been his arm was now a bandaged stump, maybe ten or fifteen centimetres long. Levi felt bile rise in his throat again. He had seen other soldiers lose limbs before, but never like this, never a

limb that had held him, stroked him, teased him.

“Shit, Erwin,” he whispered. “What the hell did you do to yourself?”

He gently pulled the blanket back into place.

“I brought you a couple shirts.” He pulled them out of the bag. “One of them is your undershirt—better than that tacky hospital gown they’ve got you in. The other is one of mine.” It was a grey collared shirt, one he had worn recently. He folded it and set it on the table. “It’s too small for you, but it smells like me. I thought I might—” His voice cracked. “If you were awake, I’d drape it around your shoulders or something, but you’re not. You’re still in a fucking coma. Shit.”

The numbness and anger were beginning to flake away. He closed his eyes, but a tear spilled out anyway. “I should have been there.” He slowly leaned forward until his forehead pressed against the bed. “I should have ...” He was too far gone now to hold back. Tears began to pour from his eyes and nose, his body shaking.

If Erwin had been awake, he would have placed a gentle hand on Levi’s head, stroking his undercut to soothe him. But he wasn’t awake, and that gentle hand was gone.

❧

The nurses were kind enough to let Levi sleep in the chair next to Erwin’s bed. He awoke at dawn and was embarrassed to discover that his face was caked with salt and dried mucous. He must have been blubbering in his sleep.

He scrubbed his face in the basin. Before he left, he smoothed the hair off Erwin’s forehead and pressed a kiss to his cheek. Again, he hoped for a miraculous recovery, a timely flutter of eyelashes or a faint groan, but there was nothing.

He left the nurses with instructions to find him immediately if Erwin’s condition changed.

When he arrived at Pixis’ office, the Commander took one look at him, then held out a bottle of whiskey.

“Sir,” Anka said sternly, “it’s eight in the morning.”

Levi would have liked a glass or two, but the last thing he needed to do was drunkenly blubber in front of the Garrison officers. Instead, he sat at the desk, ready to help coordinate the day’s operations.

As expected, the populace was cluing in that there weren’t e-

nough resources to support them all within Wall Sina, and petty crimes were increasing. “There are mutterings, and we aren’t having much luck quashing them,” Pixis said. “We don’t have long before they start banding together to rebel against the nobles.”

“We have to let them go back to their homes,” Levi said.

“Not yet. We have to be absolutely certain there’s no hole in Wall Rose. Bertolt and Reiner escaped—there’s always the chance they’ve tried to break the Wall down while we’re busy licking our wounds.”

They worked together throughout the day to deploy troops to troublesome areas, then discussed scouting routes to ensure the wall was intact.

That night, Levi returned to Erwin’s side. There was no improvement, but no worsening, either. He spent a little time updating Erwin on what had happened during the day, but mostly he just sat, watching him. Now that a flush had returned to his cheeks, it was easy to pretend he was just sleeping.

Levi slept in the bedside chair again that night, and the night after it, until a week had passed and a nurse rushed into a meeting Levi was having with Pixis.

Erwin was finally showing signs of waking.

¤

For a long time, no dreams reached Erwin, no words. He was vaguely aware time was passing; he could hear it pounding like a drum. Slowly, slowly, the drum grew louder, clearer, taking on two distinct, alternating thumps. His heartbeat. Other sounds joined it: the whistling sound of air. The burble of stomach acids. Eventually, he became conscious enough to recognize a thought: *I’m alive.*

The drumbeat of his heart continued, the sequence of breaths, and other thoughts began to surface. The thoughts were fragmented, so he assembled them, one shard at a time. *I am Erwin Smith. My father is dead. I love Levi. I am the Commander of the Survey Corps. We saved Eren Yeager. Then he saved us.*

He heard himself groan, felt himself move, the movement as disconnected from his body as that first thought had been.

“He doesn’t look awake.” That voice: Levi. The drumbeat increased. He turned his head toward the voice, just a fraction of a centimetre, and heard, more clearly now, “Oh, shit.”

“Keep talking to him.” Hange’s voice. “I’ll go get Pixis and Connie.”

Pixis? Through the fog in his mind, Erwin was able to grasp this wasn’t usual. Something big must be happening. His eyes and mouth felt as if they were full of sand. He struggled to open both.

Blinding light hit his pupils. It took a moment to settle into blurs, but the blur next to him was familiar: dark hair, round face, long neck.

“Le—” The second syllable caught in his throat, and he couldn’t free it.

“Hey. About time you woke up.” Levi’s voice was clear now, but it wobbled.

Erwin reached for him, and wondered why Levi wasn’t taking his hand. He realized three other people were in the room with them, dressed in the white. “Water,” he rasped.

“Here, let’s sit him up,” a woman said with a tone of authority. “Don’t let him drink too much right away. We have to rehydrate him slowly.”

Erwin was too weak to hold his own weight; several hands hoisted him upright and placed a pillow behind his back. His vision was gradually clearing, as was his mind. Now he saw Levi watching him with pinched brows. *Why does he look so worried? Am I injured that badly?*

A nurse handed him a glass and a straw, instructing him to take small sips. He tasted it. It was salty and sour at the same time, and his lip curled involuntarily, but he was still tempted to pour the whole glass down his raw throat.

“How’s your pain?” the nurse asked.

He paused to consider each part of his body; they still seemed to be floating around him, just out of reach.

As he looked down, he saw the bandaged stump that had once been his right arm.

Oh.

All at once, he was grounded in the hot breath of the titan, the blinding pain of his own steel as he had cut himself free, the nausea and fog that had swallowed him whole during the ride home.

His arm throbbed now, but he wasn’t sure how much of that was memory and how much was reality. He split the difference. “Arm’s a bit sore.”

“I think you’re about due for a morphine dose.”

He thought about resisting, but this wasn't a cracked rib. He could still feel his elbow crushing between the enormous titan teeth, still feel searing heat on his hand and forearm.

"Pulse is rising," said the nurse to his left, who had two fingers in his neck.

The doctor immediately called out a dose of morphine that sounded too high, but as the drug flooded his veins, he found he was still relatively clear-headed. The pain was still present, but it didn't bother him as much.

After a few more minutes of prodding, they left the room. Erwin took another sip of the drink and watched Levi. Levi was wearing a black suit jacket. Was it the one Erwin had given him? The fit seemed a bit too proper. If he was dressed up, he must have been in important meetings.

There was a long silence, then Levi stood and retrieved a shirt from the bedside table. He gently pulled Erwin forward far enough so he could drape the shirt around his shoulders. The fabric smelled like lemon shampoo, and Erwin suddenly found his mouth dry, but not from dehydration this time. Their gaze held, and Levi's lips parted, as if he were about to say something.

The door opened, and Pixis stepped into the room, followed closely by Anka. "Erwin. It's good to see you awake. We weren't sure if you'd pull through." He took a seat on the couch beside the bed; Anka leaned against the wall.

"How long was I out?" Erwin asked, hating how feeble his voice sounded.

"A week, and an eventful one, at that."

He did his best to sit tall. "Tell me everything."

"Can you focus? We're about to throw a lot at you."

Erwin considered. His mind was still sluggish, but if their situation was as dire as it seemed, he couldn't afford to allow himself recovery time. He would keep up as best he could. "Please."

And so Pixis spoke of the evacuation of Wall Rose, and the subsequent tensions that had arisen when food supplies had begun to run low. Fearing a revolt, they had decided to call Wall Rose intact and send its citizens back to their homes.

"Everyone got an unsettling first-hand reminder," Pixis said. "If Wall Rose really falls, they'll have one week of respite before people begin killing each other."

“I’m sorry, Erwin,” Levi said. “I know you’ve only just recovered enough to talk to us, but I understand if you’d rather go back to sleep than hear what we have to say.” He was posed casually, slouched in the chair, but the uncharacteristic politeness of the words showed how tense he was beneath it. If only they had had a few moments alone before Pixis had arrived; there was a lot to say that had to be said alone.

Erwin held his gaze. “No, I’m tired of sleeping. Please continue.”

Levi opened his mouth as if to speak, but then his gaze drifted. “It’s too bad about your arm.”

Just a few minutes alone ... Erwin looked at his arm, too, and gave him a gentle smile, trying to put him at ease. “How many hundreds of soldiers do you think I’ve sent out to be eaten by titans? One arm isn’t nearly enough to make up for that. I hope I’ll be able to pay back the rest when I end up in hell one day.”

Pixis chuckled. “Sounds good—mind if I come visit when we both make it down there?”

“What’s the matter, old man?” Levi said. “Giving up? Maybe you need another drink.”

“Aye, it’s the perfect time for a drink. Sadly, this one’s taken it all away from me. She says she won’t change my diapers like a good mother should.”

From her position against the wall, Anka smirked, completely unruffled by Pixis’ nonsense.

Erwin chuckled; it came out as a wheeze. “She’s too good to you. You have an excellent aide by your side.”

A knock sounded at the door.

“It’s Hange,” Levi said. “Come in.”

“Good to see you awake, sir.” Hange was accompanied by one of the new recruits, a small boy with a shaved head. They saluted, and the boy introduced himself as Connie Springer.

Together, the two of them relayed information from Ragako village, Connie’s hometown. The townspeople had disappeared during the breach; the town had only been occupied by titans when Connie had arrived. The curious thing was the titan at his parents’ house: it had spoken to him, welcoming him home, and its face looked suspiciously like his mother.

Erwin’s pulse rose. For a moment, the room was silent, and he wondered if they were all thinking what he was thinking. But it was impossible ... wasn’t it?

“So you’re saying the titans are actually humans?” he asked aloud.

“We don’t have any solid proof that all titans are this way,” Hange said, “but if they are, I have a hunch about what’s really in their weak spot.”

As Hange explained the theory—the human brain and spinal column being approximately the same size as the weak spot—Erwin’s mind began to drift.

He had seen Annie Leonhart, a human in titan form, control other titans with her scream. He had seen Eren Yeager do the same on the battlefield.

If all titans were once humans, that meant definitive proof that humans could control other humans using a form of mind control.

He saw his father sitting across from him, animated gestures, explaining his seemingly impossible theories that memories could be altered, human minds could be controlled—

“The hell are you smiling about?”

Erwin blinked and turned. Levi’s eyes were wide, his lip curled in a sneer.

Right. If titans were humans, we’ve killed them, even tortured them for experiments. Maybe his head was still foggier than he thought. He pulled back his smile. “It’s nothing.”

“You’re creeping me out,” Levi muttered.

Erwin remembered his schoolmates reacting the same way to his ramblings about his father’s theories. “Fair enough. I’ve been told the same thing since I was just a child.”

Levi, always perceptive, said, “Is that the real reason you joined the Survey Corps?”

Their gaze held. This was getting dangerously close to revealing his father’s theories, and Erwin couldn’t burden Levi with that knowledge. He tried to lighten the mood: “Go easy on me, Levi. My arm was eaten. I’m physically and emotionally exhausted. Don’t you have any pity for me?”

“Heh.” Levi smirked, looking down. “Well, you *are* pitiful.”

Erwin chuckled to himself, but then realized the others were looking confused. *Focus. You can visit with Levi when this discussion ends.*

Returning to business, he inquired about Krista Lenz and Eren, and learned they were being kept in isolation with Levi’s new squad, a team made up of the 104th recruits.

“Your arm was eaten,” Levi said. “You’re physically and emotionally exhausted. I pitied you, so I went ahead and made some decisions. That includes the new members of my squad. What Eren needs is to be pushed into total desperation.”

That was a fair assessment. Desperation seemed to be when Eren performed best; they had seen that both in Stohess, and in the fight against the Colossal and Armoured titans.

For now, they decided, Levi’s squad would lay low with some of Hange’s best squad members, working with Eren to try to teach him how to harden the way Annie Leonhart had. Perhaps they might be able to determine the specifics of his ability to control other titans, as well—that skill would be invaluable.

The Garrison would continue to monitor the wall; they would inform the Survey Corps if they were required to help maintain order or deal with a breach.

“Unfortunately,” Pixis said, “you’ll have to face the Council once you are well enough, Erwin. They’re going to want your full account of the operation so they can be assured all those Survey Corps, Garrison, and Military Police soldiers didn’t die in vain.”

Erwin frowned. Recently, it felt like he spent more time defending the Survey Corps than actually leading it. He missed the days when they were largely left to their own devices, or when Sahlo could help them pull strings to avoid much scrutiny. “I see.”

“We should let you rest. This is a lot for you to take in so soon after waking from a coma.” Pixis stood. “The Garrison can handle everything from here. You focus on getting well and sorting out everything with the Council.”

“Connie,” Hange said, “you go ahead to the base and help Moblit load the supplies. I need to speak with Erwin and Levi privately.”

Connie nodded and saluted, then followed Pixis and Anka outside the door.

Hange sat on the couch. “How are you feeling?”

“Disoriented.” Erwin’s gaze shifted to Levi. Levi was hunched forward elbows on his knees, watching him.

Hange’s voice lowered. “I thought you two might like a bit of time to yourselves. I can stand guard outside the door, make sure no one comes in unannounced.”

“Yes,” Erwin said. “That would be helpful. Thank you.”

“Just send Levi to the door when you’re done talking.” Hange

stood and gave a small smile. "I'm glad you pulled through. You're tough as hell, Commander."

Erwin smiled back.

The door closed, and then they were alone.

"It sounds like you did well while I was unconscious," Erwin said quietly. "Thank you, Levi."

Levi shrugged. "Had to keep myself busy." He looked down. "You're okay, right?"

"I'm sorry if I seem detached. I'm still a bit groggy." Erwin shifted, trying to get more comfortable. After being in bed for so long, he felt a dull ache in his joints even through the morphine. "Hopefully I recover quickly so I can speak with the Council as soon as possible. We need to see if they're truly on our side."

"On our side?"

"There has been mounting evidence that the Council and royalty only care about preserving themselves, not humanity. I've long held theories that they would go to great lengths to manipulate humanity for their own sakes, and some of what has come to pass in the past week illustrates just how corrupt they truly are." He leaned forward, staring intently at Levi. "We now know humanity would destroy itself within a week, maybe two if Wall Rose fell. We know the Armoured and Colossal Titans are out there, ready to attack again at any moment. We need to be sure the government has humanity's best interests at heart when times are dire."

Levi's face was blank. "And what if they don't?"

"We might have to circumvent them, or perhaps even replace them. There are a few pieces of the puzzle that we still need to find—we need to determine the true nature of Historia Reiss's background, and we have to see how the Council will react to all the events of the past week—"

"Whoa, hold on." Levi sat sharply upright. "Replace them?"

"Hopefully it won't come to that."

"How much morphine did they give you? You're considering overthrowing the government?"

"If it's what it takes to push forward to Wall Maria, we may need to." Erwin held his gaze. "If you choose to walk away before it comes to that, Levi, I won't hold it against you."

"You know I'm not going to walk away. But maybe you should sleep on this a bit before you decide to do anything rash. You just woke

up from a fucking coma.”

“Yes, and while I was out of the equation, everything operated smoothly without me. That clearly shows how expendable I am.” Erwin lifted his chin. “I’ll do what I can to protect you and the rest of the Survey Corps, but there’s no time left to play it safe anymore.”

“We’ve been playing it safe until now?” Levi was looking at him the same way he had earlier, when he had questioned him about smiling. “Look, just consider it a bit before you make a decision, okay? If you decide this is what you want to do, I’m with you. I’ve got your back no matter what. You know that.” His mouth twisted, and his eyes drifted to Erwin’s arm. “At least, I’ll do what I can.”

Ah, so he felt guilty. Erwin studied him. “You can’t blame yourself for anything that happens while we’re apart. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, well, I should have been by your side. I would have cut that fucking titan down before it touched you.” Levi looked away. “Fuck, you were so close to dying. And now you’re talking about treason—”

“We both knew the gambles were going to get bigger as the stakes rose.”

“I know. It’s just not fucking fair.” Levi’s head bowed. “You’re wounded. You should be retiring, not walking right back into the middle of this clusterfuck. After all you’ve done for this ungrateful fucking society, you deserve to get married, settle down, start a family.”

Erwin wanted to smooth his hair back, but Levi was sitting on the same side as his missing arm. He leaned forward so he could reach out with his good arm instead. “Levi.”

Levi looked up, grey eyes bloodshot.

“Marry me.”

“You really *are* groggy. We’re already engaged.”

“I know. Marry me now.”

“Huh?”

“We can’t really have a legal ceremony, anyway, not while we’re Commander and Captain. Why don’t we ask Hange to officiate for us?” Erwin lay his hand palm-up on the covers. “It wouldn’t be official, but it would be real to us, and that’s all that matters. Now that Mike is gone ... ” His voice hitched before he could stop it. “And now that your leg is injured ... now that I’ve stared death in the face ... I see how fragile we are. You’re right; none of this is fair, and I’m tired of facing that with dutiful obligation. Let’s take at least one thing for ourselves from this ungrateful fucking world.”

After a long silence, Levi said, "Yeah."

Erwin's heart began to pound. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Let's do it. Fuck everything else." Levi grabbed his hand, squeezing it tightly. "I'll go get Hange."

It took a few minutes of explaining to get Hange to understand what they were trying to do.

"It won't be legally binding," Hange said.

"No shit. It doesn't matter." Levi stood beside the head of the bed, arms uncharacteristically relaxed at his sides. "We can't get a legally binding marriage, anyway, at least not without breaking military codes or doing a hell of a lot of paperwork."

"Okay." Hange smiled, cheeks flushing a little. "Well. I don't know what to say. Give me a second to figure something out."

"Should I stand?" Erwin asked.

"No," Levi said, a bit too sharply. "You need to take it easy."

"I should be facing you, at least."

"Here, then: swing your legs over the edge of the bed."

"Okay, I think I've got something," Hange said. "Hold hands."

Erwin sat with his legs over the side of the bed, facing Levi; the bed was at the right height for them to see eye-to-eye. He held out his left hand. Small, strong hands closed around it, and electricity ran down his spine.

Their eyes locked.

Erwin studied the broad forehead, the narrow brows, the dark creases that made the grey of Levi's eyes glow like ice in contrast. The delicate mouth, the upturned nose, the cheeks that had a surprising youthful roundness to them. He felt a swell of love so strong that it made his hand tremble; he gripped Levi hard and felt him do the same, their eyes searching each other.

This was real. Wall Rose, Wall Maria, the titan shifters, any of his father's theories, those were all artificially constructed problems, things most likely created in the minds of humans. They could be dismantled by the minds of humans, too. But this surge of love for Levi was rooted in pure instinct, a connection beyond comprehension.

Hange stood tall beside them. "We are here today to join Erwin Smith and Levi in marriage. I am honoured to be here as their officiant and witness." Hange's voice trembled. "In the years I've known these men, they have displayed that though they hold the ranks of Commander and Captain, they are each other's equals both on and off the battle-

field, through an unspoken covenant of trust, mutual respect, and shared experience. In roles steeped with stress and darkness, they have found light in each other, and it shines so strongly that those of us closest to them can see its glow. It brings hope to all of us.”

A lump was forming in Erwin’s throat. He turned to Hange and saw tears welling in the dark eyes, and he felt another swell of love, seeing in Hange not just a subordinate, but a true friend. The three of them had come through so much together. *And Mike, too.* Maybe Mike was watching them from the afterlife, offering his silent approval.

“Would you like to say some vows to each other?” Hange asked.

“I would,” Levi said so quickly that Erwin’s heart skipped.

“Then go ahead.”

Levi’s hands shifted their grip, almost a fidget, but his stare was piercing. “Erwin, when we met, I was a dumb street punk who couldn’t see past my next big score. I was so fucking bitter that I was prepared to kill you just because I was convinced you were looking down your nose at me. But you weren’t. You knew what I was about, you knew my goals, and you still fought to bring me into the Survey Corps. You showed me how big the world is outside these walls, and the value of fighting for a cause bigger than myself. You gave me the choice to follow you. I—” His voice cracked. “I owe you everything. So I pledge my life to you. My life is yours. It always has been.”

Erwin’s jaw trembled. “Your life is your own, Levi.”

“Okay, yeah, it is, and I make my own choices. I always have. But I’ve never once regretted following you. I need you to know that. I … ” Levi’s jaw was shaking, his grip tight. “I will follow you anywhere.”

“And I’ll do the same.” Erwin fought to find the words. “When we met, you were a man who had built a life from nothing, protecting those around him with a fierce loyalty I dreamed would one day serve humanity. I was prepared for you to hate me if it meant leveraging your skills—I never dreamed you would willingly give that precious gift of your loyalty and trust not just to humanity, but to me as well.

“You showed me that pushing for humanity’s goals didn’t require me to give up my human nature. I had been growing more and more detached, but you were stronger than me, strong enough to be vulnerable, to form bonds, to care about the people around you. You taught me that it’s okay to love. Even now, you allow me to show vulnerability, and you never see me as weaker for it.” He swallowed against the lump in his throat. “I owe *you* everything, Levi. You protect me from

the world around me, but also from myself. You follow me with confidence even when I put both of us in peril. My life is yours as much as yours is mine. We don't lead or follow: we walk side-by-side."

A tear spilled onto Levi's cheek and ran down his jaw. "Shit."

"Well," Hange said, voice soft and shaking. "Do you, Levi, take Erwin to be your husband?"

"Yeah," Levi rasped, "I do."

"Do you, Erwin, take Levi to be your husband?"

"I do." He blinked and felt a loose tear of his own.

"Then to all those present, you're now married. You may kiss."

They leaned in, and Levi's mouth was soft beneath the roughness of Erwin's chapped lips. Levi's breath tasted like mint. *Mine must taste horrible*, he thought, but Levi didn't pull away. They kissed a second time, even softer.

When they broke apart, Levi looked at him with a gentle one-sided smile, a dimple in his cheek. Erwin smiled back.

"I'll give you some privacy in a moment," Hange said. "Just let me—" Erwin felt an arm wrap around him.

"Ugh," Levi said, who had received the other arm. "Get off us."

"Sorry." Hange squeezed them—delicately avoiding Erwin's injury—then stood, eyes still glassy. "I hope I did okay."

"Yes, that was perfect." Erwin smiled. "Thank you."

"Okay, good. I'll be outside the door if you need me." Hange smiled at them both, then stepped away. The door closed.

Levi leaned forward again and stole another quick kiss.

"My breath must be terrible," Erwin said.

"It's not bad." Levi gripped either side of his head, leaning in until their foreheads touched. "So we're married?"

"Yeah." Erwin felt that sweep of electricity down his spine again. "You're my husband."

"Husband. Sounds weird."

"Yeah."

"Feels ..." Levi gave an audible swallow. "Feels right."

"Yeah." Erwin reached up to smooth the slim jaw with his palm. "Are we going to consummate the marriage?"

"Aren't you still kind of fucked up?"

Erwin chuckled. "You might have to be gentle. And quick—I'm not sure how long Hange can delay the nurses from checking on me."

"I have to be gentle?" Levi asked. "You want me inside you?"

“Yeah. Unless you’d rather ride me. I don’t think I have the stamina or strength to set the pace for us tonight.”

“I see. You’re clean enough for that?”

“Probably. I haven’t eaten in a week, and the nurses have been bathing me. I probably need a shave, though.”

Levi ran his fingernails down Erwin’s jaw. “I don’t mind the beard.”

“Alright. Then take off my shirt.”

Levi pulled the collared shirt aside and draped it on the chair, then began to pull Erwin’s shirt up from the bottom. “Lift your arms—” He caught himself, his brows pinching. “Arm.”

“It’s okay. I still have to lift both.” His right arm felt oddly light, oddly unconstrained as he lifted it. The shirt slid over his head.

Levi sucked in a harsh breath, hand smoothing the skin in a manner that was more soothing than sensual. Erwin looked down and saw purple bruising spilling from the bandage, staining his shoulder and chest.

“Does it hurt?” Levi asked softly.

“A bit. The morphine helps.”

“Did it hurt when it happened?”

“Yes,” Erwin said, “but I got an incredible rush of adrenaline, and by the time that wore off, I was going into shock. I didn’t have time to really register the pain.”

“I should have—”

“Don’t.”

Levi, looking younger and more fragile than he ever had, was chewing his lip. Erwin ran his thumb across it, coaxing it out, then replaced his thumb with his lips. He began to untie the cravat. Levi’s hands rose to help him. Together, they pulled off his shirt and jacket, then undid his pants and pulled them down. Levi was already hard; Erwin gripped and began to slowly pump.

“Shit.” Levi’s head rolled back on his shoulders.

“Good?”

“Yeah. Not bad for left-handed.”

“I’m ambidextrous.”

Levi lifted his head. “Really?”

“Yeah. I used to practice writing and drawing with both hands as a kid. Right was always a little better, but not much.”

“You really were a weird kid, weren’t you?”

Erwin smiled. "You have no idea."

Levi kissed him, then reached beneath the waistband of his underwear to grip him, too. His hand was warm, and Erwin gasped and thrust into it.

"Spread your legs," Levi said, tapping the inside of his knees. Erwin complied, and Levi stepped in so close that their moving hands were almost touching.

"I think the bed's a good height for me to fuck you like this."

"Yeah?"

"Might just need to put a pillow under your ass." Levi grabbed a spare pillow from the head of the bed. Together, they worked to position Erwin's hips over the pillow, his legs hanging over the edge of the bed, his back against the mattress.

"Fuck," Levi whispered as he spread his legs a little wider, his fingertips gently caressing the exposed flesh. "Fuck, Erwin, look at you." His fingers drifted lower, then paused. "We don't have any oil."

"There has to be something here somewhere."

Levi began to rummage through cupboards. After a few minutes of reading labels, he pulled out a bottle. "Lubricant for suppositories and pessaries?"

Erwin smiled. "That should work."

"Double-check the label. I don't want to accidentally grab something medicated."

Once they were certain they had the right substance, they opened the cap. The oil smelled the same as what they usually used, but it was far thicker. Levi easily slid a finger into him.

"Fuck," Erwin breathed.

"That okay?"

"Yeah, it's good. Am I clean enough?"

"Yeah, you're fine."

Levi gently stroked with his finger, and the sensations began to build and build. Erwin tossed his head back, his lower body glowing with heat. He expected the motion to stop, but Levi must have been enjoying himself, because he kept going.

"Still okay?" Levi asked after a few minutes.

"Feels good." Erwin slowly thrust at empty air, his eyes closed, as the warmth continued to build. "Keep that up and I'm going to come."

"Oh?" The word rumbled, and suddenly the finger felt even nicer.

“Yeah. Feels so good.” His hand clawed into the bedsheets, his head rolling to the side. His voice rose: “Levi—”

“Shh, not so loud.” The finger withdrew, and then he felt Levi press against him, hard and damp. The next words were a whisper: “I wonder if I can make you come with just my dick?”

“Fuck.” Erwin pushed himself up on his elbow to see better. Levi was using one hand to guide himself inside, gaze fixated on their union, lips parted. *He likes what he sees—he’s so hot, so beautiful—*

Levi slid inside, and Erwin bore down reflexively, his head tossing back again.

“Oh god, fucking—”

“Shh.”

A hand clamped over his mouth—at an awkward angle, but still effective. Erwin whimpered against it. That stretch was glorious; it was making him feel full, making him feel whole again.

“Fuck, Erwin,” Levi whispered, inching deeper. His finger curled into Erwin’s mouth, and Erwin wrapped his tongue around it, sucking. Levi gasped and worked in deeper, deeper. Then he slid past the spot he had been working at before, and Erwin’s back arched.

“Does that feel as good as my finger did?”

Erwin let a moan slide around the finger in his mouth, fighting to keep his volume down.

“I wish I could hear you yell.” Levi’s voice was hitching, his thrusts quivering, as if he were fighting to hold back himself. He retracted his hand so he could grip both hips instead. “I love it when you’re loud.”

Between the bed and the pillow, the angle was perfectly aligned. Erwin felt himself detaching from his body. “Levi—”

“Come on.” The thrusts picked up their pace, but were still measured, still careful.

Erwin barely restrained a cry as he tried to counterthrust, but he was too weak, and Levi’s hands were holding him still. “I’m going to—Levi—”

“Come on.” This time, the whisper was almost a growl.

Erwin cracked open his eyes and saw Levi standing above him, every muscle in his arms and chest flexed, face hard, teeth clenched.

“Fuck!” He bore down with all his strength, and just as he had tipped past the point of no return, Levi grabbed him and stroked to help him along. Warmth rippled through his entire body, his skin tingling,

his face numb from stretching into a silent scream. He was floating, he was flying. His body shuddered in violent waves.

Then he lay still, breathing hard. The last few pulses made him shiver.

“Need me to pull out?” Levi whispered.

Erwin shook his head. Between the thick oil and the pain meds, he wasn’t feeling his usual post-orgasm discomfort; all he could feel was how hard Levi was. “You’re close. Keep going.”

Levi let out a gasp that was almost a croak and hunched forward, burying his face in the damp flesh of Erwin’s abdomen, arms forcing under his lower back to wrap around him. He began to pick up speed and pushed the last strokes so hard that his back rounded with each thrust.

Erwin reached down to clumsily stroke the dark hair, still too winded to do much more. It must have been enough, because Levi cried out and emptied into him, quivering.

Then he lay there, ragged breaths hot against Erwin’s stomach.

After a moment, Levi stood and pulled out. He found some clean towels in the cupboard and began to wipe his face with one, tossing the other to Erwin.

“This isn’t going to be enough,” Erwin said. “Any more towels?”

“You came so much.”

“Mm. So did you.”

“Your nurses are going to have some questions next time they give you a sponge bath,” Levi said dryly.

“Then I suppose I’ll just have to bathe myself.” Erwin gave him a grin. “Make sure you wipe your face well.”

“Shut up.”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were trying to bury it in my mess.”

“Shut up.” Levi tossed the dirty towel at him. Erwin caught it and chuckled.

“Is this our first fight as a married couple?” He looked around and, seeing a laundry hamper in the corner, tossed the used rags.

“Hopefully the first of many.” Levi paused, suddenly solemn.

Erwin felt his mood drop, too, as he realized they were about to part ways again. Facing the Council felt even more dangerous than facing a possible breach in Wall Rose. Their eyes held, but for the first time, he didn’t have any words to offer. What could he possibly say? They had

said them all so many times.

Levi's throat bobbed, and he reached for the cravat on the table. "Here." He folded it and held it out with both hands.

"What's this for?" Erwin asked, accepting it.

"My shirt's too small for you, too obvious, but I want you to have something of mine." Levi's lip curled into something approaching a smirk. "You don't have to wear it. You can just smell it and jerk off when you're in the Capital missing me."

Erwin chuckled and accepted it. "Thank you. I'll be sure to keep it safe until I can return it to you."

"Well, keep yourself safe, too. You just lost a fucking arm." The smirk faded. "But do what you have to do."

"And you do the same. If we lose contact, you may have to use your own judgement for a while." Erwin leaned forward. "You've been a key part of every strategy I've come up with for the past four years. Don't forget that. Trust your instincts; they'll keep you safe. And trust me to do the same, no matter what happens."

Levi's jaw quivered a little. "Okay."

"Protect Eren and Historia above all else. They're humanity's best chance."

"Okay."

"I'll ..." Maybe there was more to say after all. Erwin forced himself to hold eye contact, suddenly shy. They were open with each other, but it was still hard to show vulnerability sometimes. "We're married now, Levi. They can't take that away from us, no matter what happens next. That bond will stretch between us no matter how far apart we are. Remember: I'm always with you."

"Fuck," Levi muttered, and a tear trickled down his cheek. "I love you, Erwin."

"I love you, too."

They carefully dressed. Erwin adjusted Levi's collar and finger-combed his hair, then smoothed his thumb along a crease in the narrow brows. They met in a slow, silent kiss. Then Levi strode for the door. He paused, his hand on the handle, and turned back one last time.

Warmth swelled in Erwin's chest. It seemed to him they were thinking the same thing in that moment: *Until we meet again, my husband.* He smiled.

Levi's cheek dimpled, then he turned and walked through the door.

-40-

EPILOGUE

From the moment Levi next laid eyes on his husband, he knew something in him had broken.

It wasn't the physical wounds, though those were obvious and jarring, one eye swollen half-shut, chin black with bruises. It was the weight in his voice, his shoulders, the corners of his mouth.

"I think we need to ask your opinion, Commander," Levi said aloud, using the formal title he had never used in a military setting. *You're still in charge. You're still the one I choose to follow. You are valued.*

Erwin's lips curved into a smile, but his eyes were distant.



Levi found himself reluctant to leave Erwin's side during the battle against Rod Reiss. It wasn't right for a man so recently injured to be right back in the thick of battle.

Erwin must have felt the same, because he stood a little too close, leaned in a little too far when they spoke. When he handed back Levi's cravat—an exchange that should have held great emotional importance—their fingers brushed, and that was it. Others were watching, and the titan was too immediate a threat to share a proper moment.

Without time to say anything personal, they were left with only formal discussion to convey their concern for each other.

"The cannons on the wall have a much better angle, and they didn't do shit," Levi said. "What's going on?" *Did those MP assholes hurt you so much that you're too exhausted to think of a better strategy? Or is this really the best we can do?*

"Look, this is without a doubt the best fighting force we could muster," Erwin said. *I'm in my right mind. Trust me.*

"The Survey Corps' strategy here is nothing more than a gamble, anyway," Levi said. "Just like everything you come up with." *You're putting yourself in danger again. You need to stay off the front lines; you're risking too much.*

But Erwin sent him to his position, and all he could do was give him one last glance before leaving him unprotected yet again.

Gamble or not, the plan worked. Historia Reiss took down the monster that had been her father, rightfully earning her crown in the eyes of the public. That night, the Olvud military let them stay in the Garrison barracks for a celebration. They served the Survey Corps all their best provisions, including fish stew and ice wine for the officers. Levi stood by Erwin's wounded arm the entire night, ready to catch the falling pieces if he crumbled. Erwin hid behind politeness, giving firm handshakes and smiles that must have seemed genuine to everyone else.

When they were on their third glass of wine, the cracks finally began to show: Erwin's voice hitched mid-sentence.

"I still have to give you my full report, Erwin," Levi cut in. "We should retire for the night."

"Aw, come on, Captain," one of the soldiers said. "There's still plenty more wine—"

"No, the Captain is right. We have much to do, and we'll need to be well-rested." Erwin tipped his head. "Thank you for your hospitality."

They strode to the room that had been set aside for them, Erwin's strides so long and fast that Levi struggled to keep up. Erwin paced around the desk to the chair, and sat.

Levi watched him for a moment, then locked the door. Slowly, he circled toward the desk, trying to gauge the stiffness of the spine, the flex of the knuckles. Seeing too much tension in both, he hung back against the wall. Finally, he could ask the question that had been eating away at them since their reunion. "What the hell did they do to you?"

"It doesn't matter." Erwin's arm hung limp in his lap, his chin bowed.

"You shouldn't have had to give this much." Frustration rose in Levi's throat so violently that it almost choked him. "You do so much for those fuckers while they hide deep in the Walls, and this is how they repay you?"

A sharp blue gaze lifted to him. "What about you, Levi?"

“What about me?”

“How many people did you have to kill because of my selfish plans?”

His stomach dropped. “Don’t worry about that. I’m fine.”

“I turned you into an enemy of the people, forced you to murder—”

“I’m fine,” Levi growled. “But look at *you*, Erwin. What the fuck did they do to you?”

The gaze flicked down, sheltered beneath blond eyelashes. “I lost the ring.”

“What?”

“The ring I was carrying. They found it. They—” Erwin looked away. “They wanted to know who it belonged to, and they threatened to find out ...” He trailed off.

Levi swallowed hard. He approached the desk slowly, afraid sudden movements would startle Erwin in his vulnerable state. “Well, you didn’t tell them a thing, because they didn’t come after me.” He didn’t bother mentioning the MP’s threat about hanging Erwin first. That wouldn’t help anything.

Erwin’s throat bobbed.

“They did all this to you, and you stayed strong. You overthrew the government and saved the wall from Rod Reiss’ bloated titan. So fuck them.” Levi leaned against the desk, within reach of him now. “The ring doesn’t mean shit. It’s just a ring. You’re still my husband.”

The word hung between them for a moment, then Erwin slowly reached out his arm, gripped Levi’s waist, and pulled him in. Levi held the blond head close, felt the sharp nose press against his abdomen.

For several minutes, they stayed like that, unmoving except for Levi’s hand slowly stroking the soft blond undercut.

“New hairstyle,” he said, searching for conversation.

Erwin finally lifted his head; his face was blank. “Yeah.”

“Shows off your forehead.”

“It was time for a change.”

“Hm. Maybe I should change my hairstyle, too.”

Erwin brushed the hair off Levi’s brow. “If you’d like, but I’m rather fond of this one. You’re a constant amidst all this change.”

Levi’s cheeks warmed. “It’s late, and we’re both exhausted. We should get ready for bed.”

He slowly undressed Erwin. A dark bruise blossomed across his

breastbone, another over his kidney. They'd had the decency to leave his wounded arm alone, at least—that was healing well—but one of his testicles was swollen and bruised. Levi's breath hitched when he saw it, his vision clouding red.

“It's okay, Levi,” Erwin said softly.

“Those fucking barbarians!”

“It's okay. I didn't say what they wanted to hear, so they applied more pressure. I could have stopped them at any time with the right words, but I chose not to.”

“You're apologizing for them? Fuck, Erwin—”

“It's okay. The plan worked. That's all that matters right now.”

Levi thought of Hange's threat to do the very same thing to their prisoner during the rebellion, and his stomach heaved. *Would we have followed through if he hadn't cracked? We're better than them, aren't we?*

They were silent as Levi cleaned Erwin's wounded arm and dressed it, then tended to a couple gashes on his back that looked suspiciously as if they were caused by a whip or flail. All things considered, they had gone much easier on him than they could have, especially compared to what they had done to Minister Nick. He wondered if Nile had intervened on Erwin's behalf—he wouldn't have the power to stop the questioning altogether, but he might have been able to convince his captors to show some restraint. *He should have stopped it entirely. This is an unacceptable way to treat a Commander. To treat anyone.*

When the wounds were wrapped and he had administered a small dose of morphine, he said, “Would you like to debrief now, or wait until morning?”

Erwin's gaze had lifted to meet his again. “I haven't slept properly in days.”

“Yeah. Okay.” Levi strode to the bed; he fluffed the pillows and pulled back the covers, inspecting the sheets for stains or hairs. Satisfied they were clean, he began to undress.

Once they were both in bed, he reached for the lamp, but Erwin caught his arm. When Levi turned, he felt a mouth envelop his, warm with the breath he wasn't sure he would ever taste again. He leaned into it, a tear trailing down his cheek.

A hand ran down his chest, his abdomen. He broke the kiss.

“Hey, you don't have to—”

“Please,” Erwin said, and he shifted down, beginning to follow his hand with an open mouth.

“You sure you’re up for this?”

“Please, Levi.” Kisses trailed down his abdomen. Erwin yanked down the front of his pants.

His mouth was pleasant and warm, but when Levi closed his eyes, all he saw was that swollen testicle and the suspicious marks on the broad back. After a few minutes, he gently pushed Erwin’s head away.

“It feels good,” he said helplessly, “I just—”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not you. My body’s just not—”

“I know. It’s okay, Levi.” Erwin kissed a line back up his abdomen, but stopped at his chest, nuzzling against it.

Levi raked a hand in his hair and held him close.

cg

When Levi awoke the next morning, he spent several minutes studying Erwin’s face. The bruising already looked better, but the furrow in his brows, even in his sleep, made Levi’s chest ache. He had previously failed to protect Erwin’s arm, then his entire body, and, it seemed, his mind as well.

Well, there was one way he could protect him now: by finding out what had happened to Kenny and his cronies. He enlisted the help of a handful of soldiers and rode toward the chapel where they had first encountered Rod Reiss.

Kenny had always seemed invincible, so it was a surprise to find a dying man.

Levi returned to Erwin’s temporary office carrying a small leather case, a symbol of the respect from Kenny he had craved as a child.

Erwin looked up; the furrow was hidden behind his daytime mask. “Are you all right, Levi?”

Levi sat down across from him. “I screwed up.”

“Oh?”

“I put my own interests above humanity’s. I found Kenny, and he was dying. I should have asked him about the Reiss family or the coordinate, but I asked him about my childhood instead.”

Erwin’s focus softened with understanding. Somehow, that soft gaze was even more concerning than the blank one. “I see. Did you find out what you needed to know?”

“Some of it. He was my uncle, on my mother’s side. He left be-

cause he didn't think he could be a good father figure." He paused, considering all the trauma Kenny had left him with. "I guess he was right."

"I see."

"Anyway." Levi shrugged. "I guess I have a family name after all."

"Ackerman?"

"Yeah. Guess that's why it was so familiar when Berit said it—someone must've called him that around me at some point, or something."

"Does that mean you're related to Mikasa?" Erwin asked.

"I guess."

"Physical prowess must run in the family."

"I guess," Levi said again. He pulled out the leather case and set it on the desk. "He left me this. It's one of Rod Reiss' titan serums."

Erwin was silent for a moment, then he pulled the case closer and opened it. "This will turn anyone who receives it into a mindless titan?"

"That's the theory. And then they can eat a titan shifter to gain its powers."

"Incredible. We could use it to gain the power of the Colossal, Armoured, or Beast Titan."

"Yeah."

Erwin's eyes were alight. "It seems your father figure has given you a legacy as well, one that could shape the future of humanity."

The reverence in his tone made anger rise in the back of Levi's throat, hot and sharp. "Don't read too much into it." He stood.

Erwin's brows rose. "You're leaving? I thought we could do our full debrief over a meal."

Levi swallowed back his anger. His shitty childhood wasn't Erwin's fault. "Okay."

They accepted food trays from the kitchen staff, and the day's dinner, unlike the night before, was an unappetizing mix of grey vegetables in a globby paste. Levi settled next to Erwin's desk and poked at the mixture a few times with his fork, then set it aside and poured another cup of tea.

The debrief was mostly one-sided. Erwin was, understandably, quiet about the time he had spent in police custody. More surprising was that he was quiet about the moment the monarchy was overthrown. His silence suggested to Levi that he shouldn't pry. When Erwin was ready to talk about it, the mask would drop. It always did, eventually.

They briefly parted ways while Erwin made plans for their return to Trost; Levi worked with Hange on the personnel reports.

He returned to Erwin's bedroom that night. When he entered, Erwin was curled tightly on his side.

"Hey."

Erwin rolled over and smiled. "I didn't hear you come in."

Levi glided to the bed and sank into it. Their eyes held. Erwin lifted his hand; Levi pressed a kiss into its palm, then another, then the inside of his wrist.

He let Erwin set the pace, conscious of his wounds; Erwin was soft with him, all smooth palms and slow movements, until Levi cried his name into the hollow between his collarbones.

He awoke three times that night to Erwin sitting bolt upright, shouting for his father. Every time, Levi held him, whispering assurances until he fell back to sleep.

The next morning, Erwin smiled and politely invited Levi to breakfast as if the nightmares hadn't happened at all.

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The days turned into weeks. Erwin's external wounds healed, but the internal ones worsened, and no one seemed to notice but Levi. Aside from the nightmares, the wounds made themselves known in sad, distant gazes when he thought no one was looking.

"You okay?" Levi asked, on more than one occasion.

The reply was always the same: Erwin would blink, smile and change the subject to the progress on their upcoming mission. Eventually, Levi stopped asking. They were making good progress toward their goals, and their nights were, physically at least, as warm and loving as they had ever been. Maybe Erwin's behaviour was exactly what he needed to recover from the horrors he had survived.

But it wasn't what Levi needed. The more time passed, the more the knot in his stomach tightened. He began to notice the uncharacteristic immediacy of all Erwin's plans: everything was focused on this mission, as if there were no future beyond it. He knew Erwin was no longer fit for the field, and he knew Erwin knew that as well. Gradually, he began to admit to himself that Erwin wasn't expecting to survive.

During their final Officer's meeting, two nights before the mission to Shiganshina, he found himself unable to hold his tongue.

Humanity needs you alive. He tried to reason with him, using the missing arm as an excuse, but the mask went up in defense.

Frustrated, Levi tried to threaten him—softening it with humour, of course, because when could he ever truly threaten the man he loved?

Erwin laughed so heartily that, for a moment, Levi thought he had finally broken through. But then the sharp face hardened again.

“I must be there for the moment we find out the truth about this world.”

Levi squinted. He couldn’t tell anymore if this was a mask, or if he had accidentally peeled down too many layers and reached a core he had never seen before. Even after all these years, even after all they had been through, he still didn’t know Erwin Smith, not really.

“It’s that important to you?” he demanded, stepping forward. “More than your legs? More than humanity’s future?”

“Yeah,” Erwin said, his voice gentle, but his face stern.

Their gaze held, and this was it: the perfect time for the hypothetical they had talked about all those years ago.

You said once that if I had been Marie, if I had asked you to leave everything behind for a life with me, you probably would have agreed.

But even though Levi was desperate, even though there might never be another opportunity for them, the words caught in his throat. He told himself it was because humanity needed Erwin more than he did; he couldn’t risk taking away Erwin when they were on the cusp of such an important mission.

The truth was, deep down, he was too afraid the answer would be no.

“Fine,” he said. “Erwin, I’ll trust your judgement.”

He slammed the door behind him.

His fists tightened as he strode to the dining hall. *Fucking asshole and his fucking death wish! Doesn’t he understand how important he is to humanity?*

He could hear a commotion from the closed double doors ahead of him—what the hell were the soldiers doing in there? All he wanted right now was a mug of ale and some peace and quiet.

He threw the door open in time to see Jean and Eren beating each other.

Fucking children. He strode forward. A punch to the gut, a kick to the chest; it felt good to vent his anger. “All of you, you’re being too

rowdy. Go to bed.”

He strode to the keg and poured a large mug of ale. Hange came up beside him.

“Everything okay?”

“Fine,” he said.

“It looked like you were going to have an important talk with Erwin. Did something happen?”

“No,” he lied. He drained his mug, then poured another. “Why did you let these brats beat the shit out of each other? We have a mission in two days; they could have injured themselves. We don’t need any more dead weight on the field.”

“Ah,” Hange said, as if he had just revealed some great truth.

“Don’t do that.” He drained the mug again, then poured a third. “Keep a better eye on these shits.”

“You’re worried about him.”

“Of course I’m worried. This whole time, Erwin’s talked about one of us dying at Wall Maria.” He hadn’t meant to reveal that much, but he wasn’t in control of his words. “Now he’s flying into battle one-armed. I’m supposed to be okay with that?”

“He’ll be on top of the Wall for most of the battle, if all goes according to plan.”

“Nothing ever goes according to plan.” He was dancing around what was really bothering him, and he could tell Hange knew: those brown eyes were probing a little too deeply. He turned away. “No more fighting among the soldiers, all right? I’m going for a walk.”

He originally planned to go to the roof by the stables—the guard tower was too heavy with memories right now—but as he was leaving the barracks, he overheard Armin’s voice. Something in it made him pause: hope. It was a welcome change from all the grim discussions that were routine these days.

He sidled up to the wall and peered around it. Eren, Mikasa and Armin sat together, the two boys speaking excitedly about the ocean. Armin’s blue eyes were alight with youthful optimism that reminded him of Erwin when he had shared his father’s book at Christmas. That seemed so long ago now, even though it had only been half a year. Nostalgia bloomed within him, warm and tingling.

He studied the trio. Mikasa’s casual disinterest reminded him of himself, those nights when he, Farlan and Isabel had sat by a campfire, looking up at the glowing rocks speckling the Underground cavern. He

had been content to observe his friends talk excitedly, happy to just *be*. When was the last time he had found that kind of serenity? Was it that trip to the hot springs in Utopia district? That felt like a lifetime ago.

His spirits weren't the only ones lifting. Even Eren, who also had a broken air about him these days, seemed to be coming alive as Armin spoke.

I used to be able to pull Erwin back from his sadness like that.

And suddenly, in the face of this youthful optimism, Levi understood: they were old and weary, he and Erwin. They had lived abnormal lives, seen too many abnormal things. It had worn at them both, bit by bit.

He looked down at his hands, the wrinkles around the knuckles. The texture of the skin was more leathery than it had been a few years ago, sunken in around the bones. He thought of the white hairs he saw in the mirror each morning, now so prevalent along his scalp that he didn't bother to pluck them anymore.

His shoulders stooped with sudden weight. He struggled to his feet and made his way to Erwin's office. As he had suspected, the cracks around the door glowed with light.

He pushed into the room and stood in the doorway.

Erwin looked up. He was beginning to show his age, too, his cheekbones more prominent, the creases around his eyes more pronounced, especially in the lamplight. He held a glass of amber liquid; his hand wasn't as worn as Levi's, but these days, it had a tendency to shake when he thought no one was looking.

In front of Erwin was his father's book, open to a page in the middle.

"You shouldn't be reading that with the door unlocked," Levi said, nodding at it.

Their gaze held, then Erwin slowly sat upright. "Would you care to join me for a drink?"

Levi shrugged. He locked the door and settled into the chair across the desk from him.

Erwin poured him a glass and slid it across the table, not making eye contact. For a moment, neither of them spoke; they busied themselves with sipping the liquor. It had a strong, leathery taste that warmed Levi's throat. He felt the knot in it begin to loosen.

"All I could think the whole time," Erwin said abruptly, "was that I had subjected my father to the same torture. Maybe worse, because he

wasn't a high-ranking military officer. And I—" His voice cracked, and he stared into his drink. "I wonder how long he stayed strong for."

Levi studied him. The lines on the sharp face were deeper now, especially in the corners of his mouth. He was afraid to speak in case he derailed the sudden outburst of honesty, but he couldn't let Erwin blame himself for something he had done as a young child. "You aren't responsible for what anyone did to him."

"Yes, I am." Erwin's throat bobbed. "You don't understand, Levi. If I'd had the sense to keep my mouth shut about his dreams, I wouldn't have been overheard, and they wouldn't have taken him away. My mother always blamed me; she was right." His voice trailed off. He took another long sip of the liquor.

Levi waited, not wanting to push him.

"I forgot about everything else, in those moments," Erwin rasped after a moment. "The Survey Corps, the titans—even you, Levi. Even you. I could only think about my father, about how he had felt every bit of what I was going through, how he had known it was my fault the entire time. I don't ... I don't know how I managed to keep from telling them everything. I just kept repeating the same phrases, over and over. I didn't know what the words meant anymore." His head ducked, and he shielded his face with his hand, but not before Levi saw his face twist into a grimace. "I wonder, Levi: did he hate me for it? Did he regret telling his idiot son—"

"Hey," Levi said. "Stop."

"All I've ever aspired to is to be *good*—a good son, a good Commander, a good husband. But I'm so tired, Levi. I'm so—"

"Stop." He gripped the broad wrist, trying to ground him. "Delay the mission. You need to heal."

"There's no time to heal. Besides, I don't know if I can. I ..." Erwin took a deep breath, his shoulders shuddering. "I'm sorry. I drank too much."

He was sober, and they both knew it, but Levi let him have his dignity. "You shouldn't get drunk on liquor this expensive. It's a waste." He withdrew his hand and picked up the book, leafing through it. Maybe he could spread some of the hope he had just experienced. "I overheard Armin talking to Eren about the ocean."

Erwin's head lifted. "Oh?"

"Not sure how he knows about it, but it seems you're not the only one set on learning more about this world." He turned the page and

saw giant ships not unlike the ones that ran the waterways within the walls, but at least five times larger. “I bet the ocean is huge. Look how big these ships are.” He randomly flipped to the centre of the book, and found the page Erwin had shown him at Christmas, with the diverse group of people. “You still think they’re out there somewhere?”

“I do,” Erwin said.

“I bet they have those answers you seek, huh?”

He had pushed too hard; Erwin gave him a polite smile.

So that’s how it’s going to be. Levi closed the book. “I hope the answers are worth it.”

The smile faded. “You’re still angry.”

“Yeah.”

They drank in silence for a few minutes, and Levi searched for a conversation topic that didn’t remind him of their argument. It was no use; everything always brought him back to Erwin and his sudden shortsightedness. Maybe they needed to address it head-on instead. He cleared his throat and leaned forward. “This reminds me of the first time we drank together.”

“Hm?” Erwin looked up, puzzled.

“You know, the night I got promoted to Squad Leader, when we interviewed four-eyes. Tension we don’t want to acknowledge, awkward silences.”

To his surprise, Erwin chuckled. “I suppose you’re right. That was when I told you about Marie and Henrik, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“You tried to guess details about my background.”

“I was mostly wrong.”

Erwin chuckled again, but then his smile slowly faded. “The past month has been difficult.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry, Levi. I’ve said it from the beginning: I’m not an easy person to love. I don’t ...” His voice was soft. “I don’t blame you if you’re wondering if it was worth it.”

Their gaze locked. Levi drained his glass, then stood and padded around the desk. His hands slid across Erwin’s temples as he drew him in, pulling the man’s ear to the centre of his chest. He held him close.

After a moment, Erwin’s arm wrapped around his waist. “Are you?”

“What? Wondering if it’s worth it?”

“Yeah. Do you regret—”

“No.”

“I can hear your heartbeat. It sounds strong. Like you.” Erwin nuzzled against his chest. “Levi.”

“Yeah?”

“I know you don’t believe in an afterlife, but if we get to the other side and discover there is one, promise me we’ll find each other.”

With a wounded husband going into battle, Levi found he could almost convince himself there was an afterlife. “Okay. We’ll find each other.”

“I know I deserve hell,” Erwin whispered. “But maybe whatever afterlife we find will be peaceful instead. Maybe we can just ... forget all this.”

Levi clutched him tighter against his chest.

¤

Erwin lay back on the bed, his naked body lit by striped moonlight from the curtains. His hand lingered on Levi’s chin, thumb on his lower lip.

For a moment, Levi watched him, then their lips found each other, their bodies sliding together. They rolled across the bed once, twice. Under Levi’s touch, goosebumps rippled across Erwin’s back; he traced down the spine to the soft hair at the base. Erwin suddenly curled around him, clutching him so tightly that Levi’s breath escaped in a sharp cry.

“Please,” Erwin whispered, breath hot in his ear, “I want you inside me.”

Levi shivered. He rolled Erwin onto his back again, studying that striped moonlight, perfect straight edges against the curves of his collarbone, chest and ribs. All those years, he had seen this body as perfect and ethereal, but now it seemed too human, just flesh and bone that could be torn apart with a single titan bite.

But that was freeing, in a way. Here, they were just two men, bodies sliding together as millions of lovers had done before them, expressing the only thing worth saving in this ungrateful world. No military roles. No legacies. No dreams. Just two imperfect, fragile men.

He slid into him, and Erwin arched, his erection throbbing against Levi’s abdomen, hands clawing the sheets. The knot in Levi’s

throat tightened again.

“I love you,” he whispered.

The words must have thrust deep into Erwin; he tossed his head back and cried out.

They stretched out their lovemaking as long as possible, changing positions, pausing for slow kisses, until they were too impatient to delay any longer. Levi felt them rise together, and their moans were probably loud enough to be overheard, but what did that matter now?

“Levi!” Erwin’s voice was frantic. Levi wrapped around him, fingernails clawing into skin. They shuddered against each other as the waves drowned them both.

The world came back to them too quickly. Weight was settling on Levi’s shoulders again, and he wanted none of it. He clung to the freedom they had in each other and found in it the courage he had lacked before.

“Erwin,” he whispered, “run away with me.”

But Erwin’s eyes were closed, his breaths deep and even, and he looked so peaceful, for the first time in weeks, that Levi didn’t have the heart to wake him.

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