<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Mature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings, Graphic Depictions Of Violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>Gen, F/M, M/M, F/F, Multi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Shingeki no Kyojin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Marco Bott/Jean Kirstein, Levi/Eren Yeager, Armin Arlert/Annie Leonhart, Hannah/Franz, Krista Lenz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Ensemble, Minor Characters, major characters, Original Characters, ...every character I can possibly think of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>AU, Reincarnation, Modern/Futuristic, some gore, past deaths of...everyone, Dazz being a badass, Dark!Marco, Mystery, meme fill, Titan War, Multiple POV's, Implied Drug Abuse</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**To You 2,000 Years From Now**

by without_mission

**Summary**

From the Kink Meme Prompt: It is 2000 years later. Despite the fact that humanity had not yet reclaimed Wall Maria, technology has progressed. Sky scrapers soared far above Wall Rose, electricity exists and so forth. Wall Maria is still as beautiful and titan filled as ever.

Reincarnated!character(s) hasn't forgotten about their vow to kill all titans/reclaim Wall Maria/find their lover/see the ocean.

So they join the army again. Whether or not anybody else remembers their previous life is up to Anon.

...I couldn't pick one person, so I went with...everyone.

**Notes**

Disclaimer: I don't own SNK/Attack on Titan :P

Decided to put this here since it was getting too long over at the kink meme and I didn't know how long I could go before I got in trouble lol Hope you guys enjoy!!
This was the end.

For all their bravado, and hopes of coming out victorious...they lost.

Eren supposed the only good thing to come out of this tragedy was the amount of damage they’d done to the titans. The proof was right there in the form of Reiner and Berthodt being surrounded by their kin as they uselessly held onto the crystalized Annie, unable to do a thing as they were torn to shreds just like the human’s they so slyly befriended.

He has no strength anymore. The shock of Mikasa and Armin’s deaths immobilizing him.

He’d been ripped out of his titan body, not by the hand of Levi, who was already lost in the battle, but by a leathery dark hand with the thick digits of an ape.

The beast titan lazily held him up to his face, beady eyes twinkling with curiosity. Eren’s vision was fading. Some dregs of cognition informing him that the beast was speaking to him.

"Such a strange creature you are," its guttural voice vibrated through Eren's body sickeningly, "your death will be our victory."

The hand squeezed his incredibly fragile body, the monster taking care to give him a painfully slow death. Blood trickled out of Eren’s mouth as he tried to keep his eyes open enough to glare at the simian face.

Die?

He didn’t want to die.

Not until he finished off every single titan from this earth.

Until humanity reclaimed its freedom.

He will fight for a thousand years if he has to.

A thousand years and more...

2836

City of Jinae

When he opened his eyes it was like he woke up from the longest sleep he ever had. One where nothingness surrounded him until this very moment. He could still clearly remember the inquiring eyes of the ape titan, its humid breath gusting over him like a wet blanket.

For a wild second he thought he escaped death once again. Lying in his room and bandaged up, but
okay now because his titan abilities were so terribly convenient. He half expected Mikasa and Armin sitting beside him, only to remember they died right in front of him.

The loss of his family caused a little hiccup to pass his lips and his eyes to water. He glared at his set of brightly colored building blocks; warring with the grief and fury inside him. If only he’d been –

Building blocks?

Sniffling, Eren wiped his eyes and stopped short again, staring at his arm which should not have been his arm. It was pale, soft and chubby, little stubby fingers pulled into a tiny fist. Looking down at himself, he realized he was dressed in strange pastel green clothes that were so soft they felt like clouds. He was sitting in the middle of a sunlit room, the floor smooth and lined with glossy wood. He was inside a colorful fence, other childish toys littering the miniature prison.

Was he still asleep?

He tried to stand up, using all four limbs to help him, but his leg muscles were too weak and inexperienced; he tumbled down every time. In the end he settled for crawling to the edge of the fence.

Outside his prison he could see a white leather sofa, across from it a box with bright moving pictures. He stared at it in fascination, clutching the smooth fence unconsciously as his eyes soaked in the moving figures of people laughing and dancing, dressed in the strangest attire.

What was this magic box?

“Eren?”

His eyes widened.

That voice.

Hesitantly, he turned to the source. A woman was approaching him, a warm smile on her heartbreakingly familiar face. She was just as he remembered her, if a little oddly dressed. Her thick black hair was held loosely in a ponytail that curled over her shoulder. Her voice like a lullaby pulled out of tragic memories.

His eyes watered and he started sniffling again. Cooing soothingly, his mother kneeled down and gathered his tiny body in her broad, warm arms. He clutched at the front of her shirt, burying his face in the crook of her neck as silent tears flowed from his eyes.

She still smelled the same.

Maybe he was dead after all.

As she turned around to take him further into the living room, Eren was given a perfect view of the window. Outside there were towering structures of glass and metal. People jumping and swinging around in what looked like 3D maneuver gear. His crying stopped, he was too busy being captivated to shed a tear, but it only lasted for a few seconds.

Beyond the glittering towers, and the spectacle of people, he could see the thick shadow of a wall blocking the horizon. It spanned beyond what the window could show and cast an imposing shadow
over the city. It was the only thing besides his mother that was familiar to him.

He started crying again. Bitterly, and with an untamed anger that hadn’t left him since the day his home fell.

…

2841

City of Karanese

His name was Armin Arlert and Ms. Becke was starting to seriously consider bumping him up a few grades.

He was a small frail looking thing, and if one looked too quickly, he could easily be mistaken for a girl. This was proven true on his first few days at school. She found it oddly mature of him not to have minded, but that wasn’t what made him stand out like a sore thumb.

He loved to read.

More specifically, he wasn’t an avid reader of the books in the classroom. The boy liked to read history. In the past, Ms. Becke had a few students waltz in with thick chapter books more suited to fifth graders, half of them rarely understood what they were reading. Armin, however, brought in texts of history and science. At first Mr. Becke thought he was just trying to make himself look smart and gently encouraged him to read some of the simpler books, or at least let her read to him if he was having any trouble with the big words such texts were notorious for.

He stared at her with his unnervingly wise eyes. She almost squirmed under his intense gaze, hoping she hadn’t insulted him somehow. Children could be so sensitive when their intellect was questioned. She was beginning to think she overstepped her boundaries when he finally spoke up.

“That’s okay, I understand it just fine,” he gave her such a tender tiny smile that she almost believed him. As if to further prove his point, Armin gingerly flicked though the thin pages, his clumsy fingers taking great care not to rip them. “I want to know everything about the war,” he said softly, pointing to the picture of a set of maneuver gear from eighty years ago, “If we’re winning or losing,” he looked up at her again, his round childish face pulled somber. “Ms. Becke, if you had the chance to start over your life would you try harder to fix your regrets?” The young woman blinked in quiet bafflement, Armin gazed back at the photograph of the scouting legion crest, fingering the design with a fondness she’d never seen in anyone before. “I don’t want to slow everyone down…”

The preschool teacher stared at the little boy, completely numb as he went on to ramble about what he’d been reading. It was incredible! To the point of disturbing! A boy his age reading and understanding books at such a high level, his thoughts rearing toward the philosophical. She was sure that if he took his IQ test now, that he’d prove to be a natural born genius.

Of course, being a genius meant garnering unwanted attention, which was what Ms. Becke realized just now. And it was why she was in the principal’s office with Mr. and Mrs. Arlert discussing not their son’s intellect, but his violent behavior towards his classmates.

Personally, Ms. Becke considered it self-defense.

The first time it happened had been at recess. There were three of them, surrounding Armin outside
in the playground. Children were either playing or eating their lunches. In Armin’s case, he was clutching his lunch bag close to him as he stared resolutely at the three bigger kids.

Ms. Becke remembered the boy explaining that his parents took him out shopping for it. They wanted him to have the coolest lunch box in the class, but he hated showing off so he begged them for one of the simpler selections. It was blue with a smiling sun zip. Rather simple on the outside, and with a refrigerating system on the inside. It had two sections and a slot for a bottled beverage. It also came with its own eating utensils.

It was literally the plainest thing he could find. Ms. Becke found it an amusing story.

That day was the first time he took it to school and already the would-be bullies were crowding on him. Not standing for this, the teacher made her way to the little group, a stern lecture in mind when suddenly the oddest thing happened.

The tallest boy lunged forward and instead of cowering, Armin reacted. Switching his lunch under one arm, he swung his free one out to shock his attacker by pushing his face to the side, twisted sideways to avoid the outstretched hands and hooked his foot on the other boy’s ankle.

There was a few seconds of an awkward struggle between two six year olds, but in the end with the instigator’s shock and confusion, and Armin obviously knowing what he was doing, the blond came out standing, stumbling past the frozen friends of his ‘bully’.

There was a collective gasp and awe of the children watching the short lived fight. Sparkling eyes directed toward him. Before their exclamations of how awesome he was could sink in, Ms. Becke finally reached him, her arms crossed and unable to hide the shock from her face.

Visibly shrinking under her gaze, Armin and the hurt boy limped beside her all the way to the principal’s office. Even though he won, his body was clearly not used to combat. Wherever he learned that move, he hadn’t put it to practice until now.

That had been the first time. Over the course of the next few weeks, other big kids went after Armin in a self-righteous mission to bring him down a peg or two. Each time, Armin retaliated with growing creativity, quickly learning what his body was capable of. Ms. Becke tried her best to stop the fights, but in the end it was clear that the boy would not back down. Not when his rational words couldn’t go through to his instigators.

Mrs. Arlert sighed at her recap, clasping her hands on her lap. “I guess you won’t believe me if I say Armin’s a gentle boy,” she said wryly, eyes haggard.

“We’re concerned for his safety,” the principal said not unkindly, “he’s gathered a lot of unwanted attention, and while we won’t tolerate bullying in this school, we’re also concerned about his methods of handling the problem.”

“He’s just defending himself,” Mr. Arlert argued indignantly. “Armin’s a smart kid – too smart, if those kids insist on gangi up on him what else is he supposed to do?”

“We have a proposition,” Ms. Becke offered, both parents turned to her warily. “First, we’d like him to skip to the fifth grade – I’ve tested him out through several courses, he has flawless knowledge on all subjects almost to the point where I think he should just go to high school,” at their unsurprised yet pleased faces, she knew they were aware of this as well. “Once he’s moved to his new class, he’ll be in a different section of the building, far from his bullies. Security there is much tighter if
fights occur – which they rarely do. I believe he’ll be much safer there, and he’ll be able to exercise his brain more instead of breezing through in my class.”

Mr. and Mrs. Arlert looked to each other thoughtfully. It wasn’t a bad idea per se, but fifth graders towered over their little son. At his size they were like an army of titans. How on earth was he going to defend himself if they ever did start to pick on him?

“Mr. Kuchler will keep an eye on him,” the principal assured them, “he’s already been informed of Armin’s predicament and will make sure his stay in his class goes smoothly.” The man and woman thought some more, still unsure.

“By the way,” Ms. Becke couldn’t help but ask, “how did Armin learn to defend himself so well?”

Mr. Arlert shrugged with a lopsided smile that never reached his eyes. Blue eyes that matched his son’s. “We know about as much as you do. We’re pacifists, we never took him to any self-defense school, or let him watch those fighting shows. It’s crazy isn’t it?” he glanced at his wife who sighed tiredly with a nod, “It’s almost like he’s a soldier, the way he fights.”

2843

City of Stohess

Just a few more years.

A few more years and she would be ready.

She sat with her classmates off the side of the mat, watching their instructor test out his student’s abilities. This was a completely different world, and yet the basics of hand to hand combat still had that core loyal to martial tactics thousands of years ago. It was relieving in a sense. She understood the technique like the back of her hand, now she needed to learn the influences of newer generations.

As her classmate fumbled and fell on a new move done by the instructor she listened intently to his explanation and form, her brain memorizing the movements like a sponge.

She also tried not to cry because her instructor was someone very dear to her, even if he didn’t remember her.

She was eight years old right now, her body too weak to take on the abuse it had gone through when she was a teenager. Yet she was determined to become stronger. Start right now so that she could pass the limit she’d been in at the age of fifteen. She had to.

For him.

It took her months of convincing her parents to let her into the dojo. They wanted her to take dance classes, art schools, anything that could encourage creativity. They were befuddled with her desire to learn how to fight. Even more so by her resolute and unwavering belief that she needed it. She couldn’t explain to them why. This world was easy to assign medical attention at the first sign of mental instability, something she didn’t need right now.

Finally, her parents caved in after watching her go through a few exercises in their yard, using some
of the light weights her mother had stashed in her room.

However, if she was going to take karate lessons, she would have to agree to their desire for her to take dancing lessons.

“Ackerman,” the instructor called.

Silently standing up, Mikasa quietly stepped up to the mat, passing her classmate as he stumbled by, rubbing his side and cursing under his breath.

Hannes arched a brow of interest as the little girl stood before him and took an offensive stance. She seemed neither confident nor unsure, a perfect poker face and a story in her eyes that spoke of years beyond her own.

By the time he got her pinned, he realized he broke into a sweat. The girl had better control of her body than most children her age. Perfectly reading his moves and applying everything he taught her up to this moment with the ease of a veteran. She even used old style moves he hadn’t seen since his childhood in the dojo. If she had been a few years older, he could say they would be evenly matched – she may even overpower him.

Accepting her defeat, the poker face never left Mikasa. Simply bowing and sitting back down, allowing the next student to go up.

2847

City of Trost

Trost had gone through a dramatic change since he last saw it, he almost didn’t recognize it. Then again, that was an awkward thing to feel since technically he grew up in this city for twelve years now.

His memory was as clear as looking out a window. He remembered the bakeries and tailor shops that lined the market streets. The intricate patterns to the balconies of wealthy homes. He remembered the beaten down path he took to go to school with his friends. His home…the neighbors…even the cats that raided their garbage.

He remembered the day his home fell at the hands of titans.

The bodies. The blood.

The self-disgust of using his comrades’ lives to save his own.

He remembered him. Lying in a half-eaten heap. Alone for who knew how long. No glorious death. Hidden in the shadows of the nightmares of war until he’d be found later after decay had started to eat away at his once strong and sturdy body.

Now that Trost was a district of metal and glass meshed with tokens of the past, Jean still didn’t have the stomach to revisit his friend’s grave. Unfortunately, he couldn’t explain that to his teacher. As a method of molding the minds of his easily bored class, Mr. Proulx chose to hold up a field trip to some of the iconic areas of city that dealt with the current subject he was teaching, the Battle of
Trost; one of the first victories humanity had against the titans.

Today they were in Section Eight, the area tucked near the corner of Trost. It was named this because its original name had been lost in history, and it made organizing historical locations easier – such as Section One being the preserved permanently sealed front gate that led to Wall Rose. This particular section held significance to history not only because of the complete wipe out of the soldiers defending the area.

But because most of these soldiers were kids.

Mr. Proulx stood before a building that had been a pastry shop with quiet admiration, his passion for history showing clear through in his smile and sharp eyes. At the back of the class Jean shuffled in discomfort, unable to help darting his eyes around the all too familiar street with a mix of irritation and sadness.

As with all historical sites, Section Eight had never really moved forward into modernization. It had been kept perfectly preserved as it had been two thousand years ago when it was just another unimportant street. The only thing added was electricity and small signs by each building explaining its significance and original purpose.

His eyes landed at a shop he found Marco at. Then quickly looked away with the image burned in his eyes.

“During the Battle for Trost it’s said that the army came up with a plan to seal the gate broken by the Colossal Titan,” Mr. Proulx started his lesson, “supposedly there’d been a soldier who could change into a titan at will – a Shifter. His goal was to take one of the boulders knocked out of the wall, and place it at the hole. Simple enough, except a problem occurred and the mission almost failed.”

Jean’s scowl deepened and his fists clenched at his sides. He envied his older classmates as they gave their teacher half an ear. They didn’t understand the horrors of that day. All they needed to worry about was remembering a few poignant tidbits from the lecture, stick it on an essay, and hope it was enough to give them a passing grade. He couldn’t remember ever being so lazy at their age.

Jean quickly erased that train of thought, it made him feel old.

Which in a way he was, but he wasn’t about to admit it in front of a bunch of kids who technically were four years older than him.

“How in an effort to distract the titans from attacking the Shifter,” Mr. Proulx went on obliviously, “soldiers sacrificed themselves to distract them and buy more time. Two thousand years ago, this area was a tomb for those soldiers. To put more salt on the wound, after the hole was sealed, and the titans defeated, the soldiers in this area weren’t found until days later with no one to tell their story – most were hardly recognizable to be given a name.”

Stuffing his hands in his pockets, Jean wandered away from the group, his legs taking him to the spot he found his friend at. As he stared at the clean and empty building, he thought back again to the sight of Marco’s corpse. He always found it strange the position he found him in. Lying there as if enjoying the sun. When Armin revealed that Annie stole Marco’s gear, he immediately assumed she had something to do with his death.

But why position him like that? Why not just take the gear and leave the body as is?
That had to mean Annie felt some kind of remorse…

Whatever. That was a long time ago, and it tired Jean to think about the blonde’s role in Marco’s final moments. Why should he even bother thinking about it when right now, Marco was still alive.

It was surprisingly easy to adapt to this world’s technology. Advancements made communication much faster and easier to handle. With the invention of space travel and satellites, Jean could have a conversation with anyone within the walls at the touch of a button. His friends pushed him to set up a profile on the network everyone was currently hooked on – Log In. Its popularity was based on its interactive features like games, photo and video albums, and options for businesses. Jean was admittedly hooked on a currently popular game called Squad 37 which involved a group of soldiers fighting zombies.

More importantly, Log In helped him find a few familiar faces.

Faces he didn’t friend request because he was terrified they wouldn’t remember him.

The first person he looked up had been Marco Bodt, and after five minutes of his heart hammering in his chest, he found him on page three. His profile picture was of him catching the camera aimed at him and sticking his tongue out happily at it. He looked exactly as Jean remembered back when they started out at the training camps.

Though he never had the nerve to friend him, Jean always looked him up, just to see his status, or at least the status the public was allowed to see. Marco’s profile was set to private, but Jean was able to read anything he felt like posting on his bulletin. The last he checked it had been ‘Goin to Dauper for some hiking! WOOOT!’

It helped ease his grief to know that Marco was the same cheerful person he’d always known. Mina and Thomas were the next people he looked up, their school uniforms enough to tell him they were still in Trost, and they were in separate boarding schools.

“Wasn’t this place haunted?” one of his classmates spoke up with morbid curiosity.

“Yeah, my gramps said he used to hear moans and noises and stuff,” another pitched in, scratching his nose. Jean turned back to the class with interest.

Mr. Proulx nodded. “There have been cases of ghost sightings in the Sections. Even clairvoyants confirmed their presence, but things started to quiet down a few years ago. I’d say twelve or thirteen? Give or take? I guess you could say their spirits moved on.”

“Or someone just got bored of pranking people,” someone muttered to their friend.

2850

The Town of Ragako

His village had gone through a dramatic change last he remembered. It was unrecognizable. Gone were the wooden houses and stables, smooth and solid structures taking their place. The dirt roads were done over by cement streets and tar, electricity lighting up the town and electronics providing entertainment. The farms were located outside, and when he took a field trip there, he was faced with wide expanse of crops and cattle organized with yellow tags. Everything seemed so well put together.
it was like people were no longer needed to do the hard labor.

Riding his bicycle through the busy streets of the shopping district, he watched as passerby landed or took off in much sleeker versions of 3D maneuver gear. Gone were the gas tanks and bruising harnesses. The cables were now controlled by an electrical system, the newest version going digital to program destinations and GPS. The gear was lightweight and hooked around the waist like a belt, the ropes stored in an impossibly small compartment. There was an emergency impact installed around the belt, igniting when it sensed obstruction approaching. Connie had seen it in action a few times. New technology – or rather a glowing film of tiny little lights called Smart Cushion would burst out from the belt in the area the person was in danger of hurting, it would form into a shield and literally cushion the impact like a pillow.

Because of all these modifications, people were now using the gear as a means of travel when cars were too slow or expensive for them. Connie thought the town would be pockmarked with holes from overuse of hooks, but as he’d seen countless times, the buildings and skyscrapers were all made of a strange material that re-fixed itself like a rapid healing wound. Something to do with this new Smart technology again.

Connie was fifteen right now. He needed to wait one more year before he could work for a maneuver license. He was very bitter about this and had to settle for a bicycle to travel until then.

He stopped in front of a red light amongst other citizens in maneuver gear and those few in cars. There were laws to help organize the horde of people in the gear, the traffic light was a way to keep crashes from occurring. He would always find it funny to watch a bunch of overweight people flying around like a flock of birds. Funny and disturbing.

A small huff left his mouth. He missed using his gear. It was nothing like the comfortable version right now, but the old one gave him a rush of danger and excitement. The bruises on his body from the straps a steady reminder of his hard earned skills, and the twin blades at his sides a reminder of his duties as a soldier.

A bitter smile pulled at his lips. He always thought, after fighting so hard – even dying for the greater good – that in the end humanity could take down the walls and breathe fresh air again. He never thought he’d come back so many years later only to find that the titans were still holding them prisoner. And despite the advancements that resulted in the world today, it seemed that the people had given up and chose to live the easy life. Rather, their hopes of a better life was now bent on the possible colonization of Mars.

As much as Connie wished to use the new maneuver gear, he also felt like his role as a soldier had been cheapened the way ordinary citizens treated their gear. Sometimes he felt insulted. Is this what he fought so hard for? It was like his death meant nothing.

The ugly truth was that it did mean nothing.

If this was a second chance for him to live a normal peaceful life, he didn’t want it. Not if those walls were still there to block out the sun. As soon as he came to this conclusion, which had been pretty early in this new life, he forced himself to soak up everything his schools had to offer, using his free time to strengthen his body back to the top shape it had been.

He felt a little bad for his parents. It was unimaginably good to live with them again without the fear of losing them to whatever the ape titan had done, but as good as life was, Connie wouldn't let himself get deterred and as a result his parents worried.
The fruits of his efforts resulted in skipping two grades, yet despite his playful personality which admittedly came out less than he'd like to admit, it was difficult for him to make friends. No one really understood his need to learn, nor his strict diet and exercise schedule. He would seem cool at first, then standoffish the next.

Honestly, Connie didn't know how to fit in to this laid back society. He used to consider himself pretty adaptable. He supposed that was the consequence of remembering his life as a soldier.

Oh well.

One more year until he was up in the air again.

Three more until he could start his official training.

...

2851

City of Chlorba

There was a saying around the walls, ‘if you can make it in Chlorba, you can make it anywhere.’ It meant that Chlorba was a city of opportunity. Many musicians and artists came from here and displayed pride of their origins. The city was beautiful with its skyscrapers, fine dining and colorful citizens.

It was also one of the toughest cities for anyone to get their big break.

Living here, he could only think of how much he missed the old district. This wasn’t his hometown per se, but all of the other districts had gone through similar changes and he was forced to adapt and pine over things long passed.

The first thing he did as soon as he was old enough to go to a library that wasn’t purposefully stocked with children’s books, was go to the history section and find out anything that happened in the mid 800’s. At the age of ten, this caught the eye of a watchful librarian, who continued observing this little blond boy with growing curiosity.

There were books on the beginning of the walls, but then it skipped to the 900’s when reform was taking over. It was baffling at first, and when he asked the librarian, foreboding.

“850 to 950?” she said lightly, “that would be the Wiped era dear. There’s no historical account of that time.”

Visits to other libraries turned up the same. Eventually he had to throw in the towel and try to move on. It should have been easy considering how much he regretted joining the military. He went to school like everyone else. Had friends like everyone else. And led a normal life like everyone else.

Then he got his maneuver gear license, which hadn't been very hard since it was less physically demanding, and he passed his test with flying colors. He remembered his instructor asking if he was acrobat from the circus, it was an oddly wonderful compliment. The rush of flying through the air brought back memories. Good memories, not the ones where he was scared shitless and cowering in a corner. Good memories like sitting in the mess hall with his comrades, saying stupid shit that got eye rolls from his companions, but smiles because it was so like him to say something like that and it was okay because they were used to it by now.
He remembers being strapped to a sled one bitter winter, two girls pulling him along in the snow and arguing over how to get him to the medics.

Looking at the walls while up in the air brought back the heart stopping fear of humanoid monsters invading wall territory. Seeing his friends die. The instinct to survive being the only thing driving him to fight. It was all still clear in his head. Including the way he died after finally joining the safety of the stationary guard.

Not even the obituaries could be found and it left Dazz with a nasty taste in his mouth.

Eren Jaeger was more important than him and yet his obituary was never found. Just the legend of Trost that had become a bed time story. No one seemed to care that their savior – the only idiot who stuck his neck out for humanity – had been a real person with flaws and unmet goals.

‘What am I doing?’

It was with this indignant anger that Dazz gave up trying to forget. The next thing he knew he was up every morning at the crack of dawn taking jogs and fixing himself a workout regimen.

He needed to be ready in two years.

This wasn’t for glory anymore, that ship passed.
The accident occurred two years ago just a few blocks down the street. A public transportation bus with twenty three occupants, all students headed for Jinae District University save for one who was a teacher. Twelve died on impact when the bus was flipped over, eight were in critical condition, and two lucky ones sitting at the back suffered minor concussions.

While most of the victims were eighteen and older, there was one who was just barely sixteen. According to identification, he was a freshman at the university, a driven student who took extra courses in high school in order to get early enrollment at the university to major in history. His story made a few waves in local news due to being an orphan. No one knew what happened to his parents, the information had been kept private, but little tidbits still came out such as declaring independent citizenship at such a young age and wisely using the money his parents left him. Stories like that always caught the public’s attention. Within weeks, however, it was soon forgotten and he was back in anonymity.

He was sitting two seats from the front of the bus and was amongst the twelve that were instantly killed. No one made the connection from him to the prodigy orphan boy from the articles. Investigations on the nature of the accident concluded that it was premeditated, unfortunately the culprit was never found.

Grisha Jaeger hated when reporters wrote their articles before getting the full facts.

Jinae was well known for its medical advancements within the walls, and therefore produced some of the most highly sought after med graduates. Its hospitals had the latest tech in all areas surrounding specialties even for animals, its reputation only building higher the moment Dr. Jaeger was hired for a project involving tissue regeneration.

Today he was doing his regular check up with the twelve victims assigned to him.

His project was comprised of an elite team of specialists, their work located in the back end of Jinae’s newest Trauma Clinic. It had been built specifically for his project, but since the board didn’t want the public to start hoping for something that most likely would be a failure, they kept it under wraps and let Dr. Jaeger do what he needed to do while the clinic ran as a regular trauma center.

On his way down to the first person on his clipboard he bumped into his assistant, an intern by the name of Adler and one of the first successful patients from the project.

“Good morning Dr. Jaeger,” he greeted politely, falling into step with the older man.

“Morning Adler,” he nodded back, “how are your legs doing?”

“Still good,” he smiled, heartily patting his right thigh, “did my exercises, checked for muscle abnormalities, everything’s running smoothly, sir.”

“Good,” Dr. Jaeger nodded again, and because he was a paranoid man, “we’ll go through another
checkup around two. Are you doing anything right now?”

“Nope, just got in.”

The bespectacled man unclipped his board and shuffled through the papers, settling on two, he handed them to Adler, “can you check on patients eight and eleven? They’re due for an x-ray, they’ve been complaining of discomfort though I suspect it’s another case of phantom pains. I’ll be checking on patient three.”

As the young man accepted the papers his cheerfulness vaporized with a flinch. A common reaction at the mention of the third patient. “Ah…I see…”

Dr. Jaeger eyed him carefully, then turned his eyes back down the bright hallways, passing nurses and patients in wheelchairs. “Have you seen him recently?”

“I fed him dinner last night,” was the mumbled reply.

Amused, he arched a brow at Adler, “what did he do this time?”

The intern squirmed and looked away. “He just…stared at me. Like he wanted to eat me.”

They reached the fork in the hallway, more windows lining the walls now that they were at the back of the clinic, a soft voice sensing their ID’s clipped on their lab coats and welcoming them. Adler flushed in embarrassment, regretting his words.

“All the more reason to pay him a visit,” Dr. Jaeger said, turning to the left hall.

“Dr. Jaeger,” Adler called out before he could stop himself. The man turned to face him expectantly and the intern bit the side of his lip uncertainly, “Half of his frontal lobe was taken…even though it’s regenerated, do you think it may still have done mental damage? Not trauma, but…psychological. He’s just so…will he ever lead a normal life? It’s not just me that’s spooked. Everyone’s saying the same thing…”

Dr. Jaeger paused to consider this. The other eleven patients had shown a so far positive recovery from his work. No dramatic personality changes occurred save for some PTSD and anger. Patient three, though, was proving otherwise.

“We’ll have to wait and see,” was all Grisha could say. The two parted ways, and he continued on four more doors before reaching his destination.

Patient three was lying on his bed, surrounded in machinery reading his vitals and keeping him stable. His arms and legs were strapped to the raised bars of his bed. He was in the middle of waking up, so when he saw Dr. Jaeger entered the room he gave him a pleasant smile, his right eye glinting red in the dusky shadows of the room. He wasn’t fond of sunlight.

“Good morning Dr. Jaeger,” he said politely, voice soft and kind, reaching the warmth of his chocolate brown eyes.

Upon first sight people would think patient three was a nice young boy, very smart – or rather wise for his age, and someone whom they could hold an easy conversation. It’d only take a few more visits before they’d realize how wrong that impression was, and every time Dr. Jaeger was greeted so pleasantly, he had to keep reminding himself that the boy was not okay.
He was a very…disturbed person.

Three weeks ago he broke a nurse’s arm, and another’s leg. Right after destroying their mental stability.

Dr. Jaeger had to keep remembering this. He couldn’t be fooled.

“Good morning Marco.”

2853

Wall Maria

“Well shit.”

Erwin grimaced, privately agreeing with Levi’s remark. This was another expedition gone wrong. The plan – as it had been for the past two thousand fucking years – had been to seal the hole at the other end of Wall Maria. They tried underground tunnels, bombing the titans to distract them, using camouflage – even attempting to build a wall within to pressure the titans to back off. Nothing worked and too many soldiers were sacrificed for their failures.

No wonder the Survey Corps were unpopular. People despised them even more once space travel was invented. Right now the whole kingdom was putting their money on one day colonizing Mars – a titan free planet with great potential for human life. The more the space station reported of successful crops and the continued construction of the first village, the less people volunteered to join the Corps.

They were now considered a suicide army of no benefit to humankind.

And they were right.

Centuries had breezed by and they couldn't even fix a damn hole in the wall.

Erwin stared at a titan giving chase to a group of soldiers who got too close. Levi made quick work of it, but it still wasn’t enough for them to advance another few more miles. There were too many losses, the cargo would be useless without hands to get it moving, and frankly these titans were just too intelligent.

As much as humanity advanced in technology, the giant monsters were developing intelligence. And they were quite cunning in applying it. The shits.

“Retreat!” Erwin roared over the chaos, activating his suit and letting it lift him into the air. Several soldiers followed the move, most getting out of reach of the massive fleshy hands. As they made their formation of retreat, the commander was struck with a sense of foreboding.

The titans were tensing up. Their attention to their human meals were halfhearted, and before Erwin could really understand, he heard the thunderous footsteps of another titan approaching. An abberant by the sound of it. And a big one.
It was too late to flee. Just as Erwin made to shout more orders, the titan charged in, blond hair whipping in the wind and skinless body showing off taut curvy muscles of its female shape.

Distantly, the commander wondered if fate was doing Dot Pixis a favor.

The female titan skidded to the side, her leg swinging forward in a powerful kick, knocking another titan to the ground. Not stopping to admire her work, she floored another titan with a punch.

Erwin stared with wide dumbstruck eyes.

He was sure that somewhere in the mob Hanji was creaming her pants.

In his earpiece all Levi had to offer was another, “well shit.”

2853

“You have the potential to be an exceptional student, Sasha, what’s holding you back?”

Her high school career was finally over. It felt like she’d been playing yoyo for eighteen years. Enjoying her new life as best she could, while at the same time feeling awful for it when people were running off to kill themselves for the good of humanity. Sometimes she cried herself to sleep when she thought about it too much. Then she’d get hungry and have herself a midnight snack pitying herself.

“You can still make the deadline for the community college. Maybe after a few months you’ll figure out what to do.”

Dauper had become a tourist spot for skiing in the winter and hiking in the spring. Her village turned town was well known for its girl and boy scouts, she herself having been one. It was nice to know that while its hunting culture wasn’t the same as it used to be, there were still ghosts of it within these little organizations. Her parents had been proud when she won first place three years in a row on the annual archery competition.

“We’re always looking for more talent. You’re an amazing gymnast, I’d like to offer you a full scholarship to our school.”

Everyone was horrified when she announced her decision to join the military. In the last few months they did everything they could think of to change her mind. They cried, begged, gave her the cold shoulder – a friend even presented her an hour long PowerPoint on the military’s fatality rate and uselessness. It wasn’t like she was stupid – even though she admittedly acted like it more than not – she knew how bad a state the military was in. That’s what made her want to join even more. She remembered the pain of losing friends, being terrified and wishing she’d never been a soldier.

She remembered dying.

“As your advisor I’d like to…give you some input. You’re grades, while not astounding, are above average. You’re an eager learner yet you don’t seem to make the effort to try harder – it just comes easy to you. You’ve been in five sports teams, and helped them win championships. You’re an all-around model student so why not make use of it? There’s so many doors open to you, I seriously
It hurt. Dying.

It wasn’t even a quick death. The titan who grabbed her wanted to play with his food first. Her throat grew sore from all the screaming as huge fingers delicately tore her limb from limb. Connie tried to save her. The last thing she saw was his tears and her name on his lips just before another titan bit him in half.

“At least get in the top ten and join the military police! Please!”

The first thing she did when she was old enough for a bicycle was ride all the way to Ragako. She’d gotten a few yards past the welcome sign before she got cold feet and she went back home. She’d rather face a titan than Connie looking at her blankly and asking ‘who are you?’

She couldn’t run away now. The new uniform, or rather training clothes, consisted of green camouflage pants, light brown thermal shirt, and matching hat. It held none of the straps she was used to. When she reported in for the first time to pick it up, she’d been told that this was the ‘casual’ uniform, the battle one being much more different and too much of a hassle to walk around in without knowing the full details of how it even worked. That would come in later when introductions were over.

They were gathered up in the field. It was sort of like the original, except the grass was tended to, the buildings and cabins were grimmer and grey, sporting flags of the crossed blades for the trainee squad. Of course things were modernized, but it still felt like home which should have soothed her if she wasn’t so nervous.

Two things were making her break into a sweat.

One: as her eyes darted around, she recognized every single face from the old 104th squad. Connie was a few rows up front, waiting with everyone else for their instructor to show up.

Two: as a nostalgic gift to herself, and because she was hungry, she nicked a baked potato from the kitchens and it was currently steaming up her front breast pocket.

As if to add to her nerves, the instructor finally walked up to the group, his deep shadowed eyes dissecting each and every trainee. In an instant everyone became alert and stood at attention. This… kind of threw the man off. Sasha almost laughed. The man hadn’t changed a bit. He was still bald, still old, and still scary.

“Morning chickenshits!” he shouted, quickly recovering as he clasped his tanned hands behind his back. “I am Keith Shadis, and I will be your instructor throughout your three years of hell here. I am not your mommy or your daddy, you will refer to me as ‘sir’ and you had damn well like it. Got it!?”

“Yes sir!” everyone cried out.

“Good!” he narrowed his eyes. The new recruits stared back unflinchingly, their stances too organized to be considered novice. It was almost like they were already soldiers and it irked Keith to know that he wouldn’t need to do the ‘rite of passage’. At least not yet. “From now on you will not be considered people! You are titan food!”

“Yes sir!”
“I will drag you through the dirt until you cry and beg for your mommy! You will come out a soldier and even then there’s no guarantee you’ll come out of this war alive!”

No one broke down, no one made a nervous twitch. They all had a grim set of determination in their eyes, and while it was starting to piss Keith off, he was admittedly impressed. But first impressions could always be deceiving, and right now that short stop at his right was started to look at little queasy.

Gotcha.

In truth, Connie was feeling antsy, but for an entirely different reason. He recognized everyone in the squad, and he nearly broke down when he saw Sasha. Standing there in front of Shadis, he kept wondering more and more if maybe he wasn’t the only one who remembered his previous life.

Why else would everyone – every single graduate of the 104th – rejoin the military?

“Who the hell are you, boy!?” Keith towered over him.

Only one way to find out. Swallowing and visibly shaking with anticipation and taking a leap of faith, Connie lifted his left fist and thumped it against his chest, “Connie Springer, sir! From the town of Ragako in Wall Rose’s southern district!”

No one said a word, not even as Keith made fun of his flubbed ancient salute and then giving him a tongue lashing of the proper way they should have had ingrained in their heads before lining up. Everyone was in too much a shock to say anything. Hearts racing, and hopes rising.

But…Maybe it was a coincidence. Connie was never bright. The old salute was a dead giveaway, but…but…

The silence was broken by someone shuffling through their front pocket, whipping out a squashed potato, and taking a large bite. The smell of cheese and meat wafting away from her. Even Keith froze in his castigation to stare at the girl stubbornly eating her food as fat tears rolled down her cheeks.

He made a beeline for her and got all up in her face. “Oi.” His tall imposing figure was enough to make anyone quake, “the fuck are you doing? Who are you?”

Swallowing down a painful lump of food, Sasha grasped the potato in her right hand and pressed it against her chest. “Sasha Braus, sir! From the town of Dauper! Wall Rose’s southern district!”

As Keith stared at the potato in her hand, she spied Connie watching her over his shoulder, his face twisted it up in an effort not to cry.

Through her own tears, she threw him a hard toothy grin, bits of mashed up potato dribbling off her chin.
Keith Shadis's initial first impression was shattered right after Sasha’s tearful introduction. One by one the other trainees looked at each other, some already breaking down at the faintest sign of recognition. As expected, Keith wasn’t prepared for a whole fucking squad to fall apart all at once. It called for another psych evaluation. And some tea to soothe his headache.

Counselors had been familiar with cases of new cadets fearing their mortality, having personal issues that hadn’t been caught on the first evaluation, etc. The 2104th squad, though, showed an exemplary mindset of a soldier. Some like Eren Jaeger even spoke with a respect and self-assuredness of a veteran. They passed their subtle examinations, basically informing them without really saying that they’d been preparing themselves for the military ever since they were little and they were in no way traumatized for it.

The one exception was Marco Bodt, who was overall pleasant company, and would have passed their interview if they hadn’t had the nagging sense of doubt. The blame was put on Dr. Jaeger’s report. Marco was a victim of the garish Jinae bus accident three years ago, and presumed dead until Dr. Jaeger miraculously brought him and eleven others back with their missing limbs intact. His success in the tissue regeneration project was leaked somehow, and now war vets and others missing an arm or leg were clamoring to get in on his project – which hadn’t even finished properly.

From Dr. Jaeger’s notes, Marco was suffering issues before the accident, most likely due to stress from taking on so much academic responsibility at such a young age. The accident only made things worse. He couldn’t complete his associates program for history so he was officially removed from Jinae University. He spent the rest of his time at the trauma clinic getting his body back in shape.

And he sent a few people to the hospital.

Because of this, Marco was determined unfit to lead a normal life until years of counseling gave him the closure he needed. The only option he had apart from living his days in a clinic was to join the military and try his luck with the titans. The notes said he was mentally unstable, but obviously not enough to compromise a squad. Nothing was said on what his guardians thought of this.

It wasn’t uncommon for criminals to be sent to the army – and then moved directly to the scouting legion where death was eminent. It made for more space and safety in the walls, and enforced the prevention of anyone considering the life of crime. The most common death penalty was releasing the criminal into Wall Maria.

Doing the psych eval on Marco was mere formality. Crazy or not, his life was sentenced to the military.

By the end of the day, everyone was allowed to go to dinner and get some sleep for the coming day. They finally got their chance to reunite with friends.

First thing’s first though, Sasha smacked Connie upside the head, “why didn’t you visit me you shit!?”
“Why didn’t you visit me!??” he yelled back, rubbing his sore spot.

“I didn’t know if you remembered me!”

“Well I didn’t either!”

Both huffed, their comrades watching with fondness and a knot in their throats. “I looked you up on Log In,” Connie finally said. Then sniffled.

Slowly, the rest of the cafeteria came to life, old friends hugging and crying as if they hadn’t seen each other in years which was true, but even more painfully good because at one point or another they’d seen the person standing before them die and to have them back in one piece was indescribable. Like waking up from a nightmare.

Mikasa had one person on her mind, and she was finally making her way to him. She’d been trying all day, but because of the evaluations she couldn’t get the chance. It didn’t help that her interview was the longest, her counselor under the belief that her stoniness was a result of child abuse. So dinner time was the best time.

He was stumbling through a group of people running up to greet him and asking questions, all of which he tried to answer while trying to break away. The shock of blond hair by his side alerted her of Armin’s presence and her perfectly maintained poker face started breaking into a smile.

“I’ll explain everything that happened soon!” Eren harped, wrenching his arm from Nack, who snickered at his exasperation. Stumbling a few feet, he straightened up and came face to face with Mikasa who all of the sudden couldn’t find the words to speak. Eren had changed so much. His hair was slightly longer and he went through another growth spurt. She feared she wouldn’t recognize him, but that disgruntled mug was still the same, his bright green eyes alight with life and valor. “Mikasa! Finally!” He pulled her into a bear hug, the uniform hiding strong arms that startled her.

Tears welling up, she hugged him back. The loneliness of growing up without him and Armin wiping away at his familiar earthy aroma. He used to feel so fragile in her arms when they were little, and now it felt like the opposite. He’d been working hard to get in this shape. She was proud of him. “I’m sorry,” she said into his shoulder. Eren tensed up briefly and silently buried his head in the crook of her neck. A few seconds later she felt a wetness seeping into her shirt, his shoulders shaking.

Opening her eyes she saw Armin watching them with a gentle smile. She reached out to him and he took her hand, releasing his own tears he was no longer able to hold back as she wrenched him in to hug him as well.

They stood there for a few moments until Eren felt composed enough to pull back, roughly wiping his eyes. He tugged at the red scarf around his neck. A red scarf Mikasa hadn’t noticed in her burst of emotion until now. He pulled it off and wrapped it around her neck.

It wasn’t the slightly rough wool Mikasa had grown to love, the material was softer and had a faint plaid pattern. It was darker, too.

“It’s not the same,” Eren agreed, reading her face, “I went through fifty stores for something close, and I’m crap at knitting. I didn’t even know if you’d remember me, but I bought it anyway because,” he shrugged, “you never know.”
Mikasa fingered the material and smiled again. Original or not, it was from Eren. “My parents are alive, and I love them,” she said softly, recalling the grief she’d been giving them with the many dojo’s she joined. “I was able to know them a little longer this time...but you’ll always be my family, Eren. Armin,” she turned to him, “you’re my family, too.”

He nodded, all the self-composure he worked so hard to acquire destroyed by seeing his best friends again. He was back to the weak little boy under the shield of Mikasa and Eren, it was too much for him to tell them how happy he was.

“I guess it’s time we catch up,” he managed to say.

Returning the hugs of people he thought he’d never see again, Jean spotted Marco by the door, slipping out before anyone noticed. Of all people, it was him he wanted to see the most. There had been Eren, who he exchanged a nod with, much to everyone’s shock. At least, those who didn’t know of their history past graduation. Jean liked to think that they still had some enmity, but the fire had dimmed to a comfortable flame. It was a tough truce to acquire, then again in light of not knowing when a titan was going to kill them, finding common ground hadn’t been as hard as they thought.

Right now though, Eren wasn’t on Jean’s mind, Marco was.

Apologetically excusing himself, Jean rushed out into the night of the camp. Readjusting to the dramatic change in light, he found Marco leaning against the wall, his face blank and his left hand clutching his right arm.

Jean approached him cautiously. Three years since he last saw him and Marco filled out more than at fifteen. He was a bit taller, maybe a few inches, and he looked more mature with his baby fat melting away. If he didn’t look so glum, he would still be the Marco Jean remembered. “I thought you died again,” wasn’t the first thing he wanted to say, but it slipped out anyway.

Marco didn’t seem bothered. “I did.”

He wanted to hug him so badly. Feel him in some way to know he was real, but everything about Marco’s posture screamed ‘stay away’. He didn’t know what to say.

“I died twice. First in Trost, then in Jinae,” his lips pulled into a humorless smile, “funny they happen to be our hometowns.” Jean remained silent as Marco looked at his right hand, “it sucks. Every time I die and come back it feels like a part of me keeps chipping away.” His right eye flickered red for a second, like a laser. Jean blinked, wondering if he imagined it. “The nurses at the clinic say that I’m a psychopath or something.”

“That’s nuts,” Jean said flatly, and Marco laughed halfheartedly. “Marco you’re the same person I knew when we were kids. You died again, you’re bound to have some issues.”

Finally, the freckled boy looked at him, sad and bitter, “so how was the military police? At least you had Annie, Bertholdt and Reiner to keep you company – what’s wrong?”

Jean shook his head, grimacing as old memories floated up. “We don’t talk about those three,” at Marco’s inquiring look he let out a huff, “I didn’t see them here so I guess it’s safe to say they
haven’t come back. They were shifters.”

“Shifters?” Marco’s eyes widened marginally, “like Eren? I’ve been studying our time period, the only reason I went into JDU was because I could do some more digging. Most of our history was wiped out,” Jean nodded, having come across this problem in the past as well, his classes basically repeated theories that eventually gained enough following to be considered fact. It was the reason why Trost’s history was filled with gaps, the only well-known legend being the shifter titan who sealed the gate. Most theorists weren’t even convinced it was a shifter, but rather an aberrant with a unique personality. “There was mention of other shifters, but not their names. So that was them?” Jean nodded darkly. “They broke the wall…” a strange look passed him, but left quickly enough that Jean didn’t notice.

“Yeah and…I didn’t join the police,” his cheeks started to redden, “after I found you I…I couldn’t do it. I joined the scouting legion.”

Marco stared at him. “How long did you last?”

Jean shrugged sheepishly. “Two years?” he rubbed the back of his neck. “I know this sounds sappy as shit, but I couldn’t go to the police knowing that my friends might die. I needed to do something – anything to help out.” He jolted when Marco reached out and took his hand.

“What’s going on?” he thought, a shiver of dread running up his spine. Then Marco’s comment slowly sunk in and he realized…fuck…

Mikasa?

He hadn’t even thought about her until now.

For a frightening second he thought Marco was going to kiss him, but he turned his head the last second and pulled him into a hug. Jean could hardly breathe, a mix of fear and something weird boiling in the pit of his gut.

And Marco smiled knowingly, holding Jean tightly against him.

Possessively.
Somewhere far from the human kingdom, deep in the forests where a clustered titan colony resided, the Ape Titan turned away from teaching a group clumsily working on building a house.

There was a change in the air, and he didn’t like it.
The Maneuver X

Isra

The next day the 2104th squad were moved to the infirmary for a physical. They had gone through this a year before getting accepted to determine whether they were physically capable for battle. Today the purpose was to take crucial notes on how they took care of themselves within that year and if there were any changes in body type and state of physique. It was mandatory for all trainees so they could get the best adjustments to their battle uniforms.

The nurses and instructors were not expecting such an impressive squad right off the bat.

First on the list to worry about was Armin Arlert. He had recently gone through a growth spurt and was near six feet tall. His hair had grown to just above his shoulders, some of it pulled back in a tail. The style coupled with his big blue eyes and soft complexion made him look like a girl, and the examiner almost sent him to the girls group if he hadn’t taken off his shirt and stepped up to the scale.

His profile hadn’t lied when it said he’d been in several sports teams in his school career. There was also a side note of being a member of the Karanese public boxing gym. The result of his efforts stood before everyone in all its muscular glory.

"Jeez Armin, now I can't make fun of you anymore," Millius remarked in amusement as someone behind him catcalled and another whistled.

Ignoring the light teasing with a roll of his eyes, Armin retrieved his shirt and let Marco pass.

There was little note of Marco Bodt’s past before the accident. All that was written was some activity in track, and a hobby in hiking, but three years in the hospital was due to take a toll on his body. The last physical said he had promise; they didn’t expect much when they called the freckled young man up to the scale.

There was not a single ounce of fat on his body. Not even a scar.

Eren Jaeger, Jean Kirchstein, Connie springer, even the scaredy cat looking Dazz were all in top shape.

When the physicals were over, and examiners met up, they discovered that the girls were just as fit. Some couldn’t stop talking about how well defined Mikasa Ackerman’s muscles were. They were described as so hard you could grind cheese on them. When Keith was given the reports, his earlier interest from day one was sparked once more.

Where the hell did these kids come from?

...
introductions and lectures were made. Already they were chatting and bundled in their little cliques when he got there. They definitely wasted no time in making friends. Distantly he wondered if they were acquainted at one point in their childhoods.

Their boisterousness was quickly snuffed out upon seeing him. Good. At least they respected him.

“Today you’ll be learning the basics of Flight Maneuver and how best to use it against titans. Afterwards we’re taking a little trip to the woods for your first lesson,” he kept this last bit ambiguous, but the squad was unabashed. Some even smiled. If they thought he was taking them out camping and singing around a fire roasting marshmallows, he couldn’t wait to see their looks of terror when they’d see he had different plans. Gesturing to the small woman beside him he said, “This is Rico Brzenska, leader of the first division elite force and an expert on the new Maneuver X. I’d pay attention if I were you unless you wanna break your necks in the next few weeks.”

Seeing how attentive the squad became, he stepped back to allow the short woman to come forward on the stage. Her glasses glinted in the lights, sizing up the quiet audience. Seemingly satisfied, she stood behind the lone podium off to the side and activated the large screen that had been lowered behind her. Instantly the massive sheet brightened and pulled up the crest of the training division.

“First a brief history,” she said in a calm and clear voice, the unseen mic on the podium picking it up and carrying out into the auditorium. The lights dimmed and the screen was viewed more clearly. “The first gear titled 3D Maneuver Gear consisted of harnesses and cables controlled by gas tanks and fans. At the users will and capabilities, this allowed for a somewhat free, but limited movement in the air,” she pulled up a drawing of the basic design, and a photograph of a preserved set. “Accompanying this were special metal sheaths that were hung at the waist containing spare blades for quick exchange when the pair being used was spent. At the time this material was the best and only method in engaging titans.”

More drawings of a soldier using the 3DMG, blades out and in the middle of cutting off the weak point of a titan. Clicking the mouse button attached to the podium, the picture changed to an oil painting of a young blond man holding one of the first versions of the blade.

“Credit for the invention to such a revolutionary weapon goes to Angel Altonen, a blacksmith during the early days of the walls. Since then it has been improved for smoother movement. In order to have full control, soldiers would need to go through three years of grueling training such as gymnastics, and mountain climbing. Old reports found gave figures of the mortality rate in just the training segment. Fifteen percent perished every year. Survival and completion of training resulted in some of the most robust soldiers not seen to this day. Unfortunately, this made no difference against the titans and though humanity had a chance to fight back, the death toll was too high to feel any victory.”

In the audience Eren’s eyes sharpened. The day Trost was attacked had been a great disillusionment. Just minutes before, he’d been enjoying the day with Sasha and the others, performing their duties to the cannons and feeling confident that this time humanity would fight back.

All that training, watching everyone grow and go beyond their limits, had all been snuffed out in an instant.

Not this time. He spared a furtive glance to his left where a few seats down Mina and Thomas were sitting. Their eyes were hard, teeth clenched and feeling Eren’s bitterness tenfold. They died before they had a chance to fight back. They weren’t going to let that happen again.

“The Great Wipe happened around a hundred years later, precious information lost to history,” Rico
continued, clicking the next image, “it would be until twenty years later when further advancements were made and the industrial age began.”

Eren was all ears again, watching with hungry eyes as a newer version of the 3D maneuver gear was presented.

With each decade and technological boom, the uniform became less and less bulky until finally, with the invention of Smart Tech, only one set of blades could be used without falling apart.

“Twenty years ago Dot Pixis led the creation of Sky Industries, the company responsible for the new Maneuver X. In the past no matter how many changes were made to the uniform, it still wasn’t enough to make up for one major weak point – the cables.” A picture popped up of soldiers getting tangled or being caught by titans by their cables. “As you can see, while they provide us the ability to move around in the air while being harnessed to an end point, this also allowed titans to grab them and use them against us.”

Another photograph displayed a black body suit with flat plates covering weak points. The suit was surprisingly sleek looking despite the added layers when compared to the first uniform, it held no gas tanks, or belt for cable storage, and looked a lot like those battle suits seen in futuristic war video games, except less bulky.

“This is the current Maneuver X,” Rico explained. The squad collectively leaned forward with interest. “There is a huge difference between the maneuver gear used by citizens, and the maneuver gear used by soldiers. The most obvious being the appearance. While citizens use a belt, soldiers used a full body suit as seen here. It’s made with Smart Tech, meaning that while the suit can be damaged with enough power, the particles would come back together like little magnets and ‘re-fix’ itself.”

A few people murmured in awe. For all their research, or rather those who bothered to look, they couldn’t find anything on the current battle gear. Not even photographs of the military suited up. The police and stationary guard were always in their own standard issued suits, and the scouting legion were careful not to reveal their gear when in public. As comfortable as life in the walls had become, the paranoia of the scouting legion was still as strong as ever.

“Thanks to Sky Industries, the suit was equipped for self-defense and combat.” A video played the suit in action, “For instance, the gloves have a compartment at the wrist that releases a holographic blade much like a beam. It deals real physical damage and is much stronger than the traditional swords. The blades are used as a last minute resource when engaging a titan, combat is usually done at long distance through the use of sniper rifles – we’ll go a little more into that later on.”

The holographic blade was activated by a forced flick of the wrist, releasing a long semi see-through blade that glowed blue. Seeing the soldier in action, the squad decided it wasn’t much different than using the twin blades. A close-up showed the hand in a fist while controlling the hologram. That meant more control in using the weapon and less risk of hurting anyone around them when the blade was initially activated.

“The suit is also heat proof. Should a soldier get swallowed whole, the cooling system would prevent them from boiling alive, thus giving them enough time to break out of the stomach. Conversely, in cold climates the suit would activate a dry heating system.” More videos demonstrated this. “The helmet – which should be kept on at all times – supplies clean oxygen in thin or thick atmospheres, and has several applications. Communications are located on the ears and mouth piece, obeying whether a soldier wants to have a private or group conversation. This communication works like a
cell phone, so no matter the distance, you can still receive and give information – even from HQ. The plastic cover where the whole face is shielded works like a computer screen that reads basic data on surroundings such as the distance to the safest area, the height and combat level of a titan or person, chances of survival, and a helpful list of options in how to fight a titan.”

As she explained, a video demo of the inside of the helmet showed small text filtering through certain spots on the screen. In the middle there was a target lock system, the words were dark enough to read, but light enough to not cause visual obstruction.

“A recent upgrade involves the use of crystals similar to the material the walls are made of,” the camera backed up to the full body suit, “They have been carved into nano screens so that movement in the suit is still flexible. When activated on voice command, the screens will flicker to life and imitate the surroundings so that it appears as if the soldier were in perfect camouflage. This is the most effective way in bypassing titans and giving a sneak attack.”

Footage of a soldier in the woods said “Camouflage activate,” and the suit shimmered briefly, melting into the scenery as if the soldier had never been there. There was a subtle outline, but that was it. A few seats down from Eren Connie choked. He could imagine all the pranks he and Sasha would do once they got their hands on a suit.

“The crystal screens also come with an additional advantage.” The video was back to its CG demo. A titan was attempting to bite down on a soldier, instead breaking its teeth for its vain efforts. “Since the material is made of the same crystal rock found in the walls, the suit is also bulletproof, hardening at the threat of impact – or when a titan tries to take a bite.” Rico clicked on a final video, “Another advantage to the suit are the small engines located on the shoulder blades and the feet allowing the ability of flight. This has rendered the traditional cables obsolete.”

The suit was turned to its back to show long lines just under the shoulder blades. A close up of it showed the engine in action. It wasn’t made of small rockets or fans, it was two strips of glowing, rapidly moving little dots. The same was on the ankles, except they seemed to actually have a special type of rocket.

“The engine on the back is an adaptation of the space program’s anti-gravity machine,” Rico elaborated. “It has three sets: Off, Medium, and Zero Gravity. Zero gravity allows us to float while the rockets at the bottom control direction and speed giving the impression of flight. Medium helps control the speed of landing.”

“The helmet works in a manual and automatic mode,” Rico answered promptly, adjusting her glasses. “For now it’s best to master the suit on automatic. By your senior year, I believe it’s safe to start using manual. By then you’ll have created your own fighting methods and can program them into the helmet.” The classes murmured again with excitement. “I don’t recommend this method,
though. Very few have mastered the suit enough to manually go against titans. On automatic, your lives are in much safer hands.”

“And how many people use manual?” Eren asked curiously.

Rico looked off thoughtfully, “last I heard, that would be Commander Erwin Smith, Hanji Zoe, Mike Zacharias and…Corporal Levi – I always forget his last name…” she mumbled towards then end, personally irritated by this.

At the mention of the corporal’s name Eren swallowed thickly.

2854

Keith wasn’t sure what to think. Only a year had passed training the new squad and already they were doing better than any class before them.

His first clue that these truly weren’t ordinary kids was the trip to the woods. Working the maneuver gear called for one important thing – to not fear heights. The woods provided a series of exercises that would help in getting rid of this starting from climbing trees to get used to both labor and heights, to bungee jumping. In hindsight, to an adventurer these lessons would seem like a playground, but in the past Keith had seen huge scary looking kids cry for their mommy. He was ready for at least Dazz to start pissing his pants, but he was just as cool and collected as his comrades.

Sasha Braus had too much fun, so he figured either she was batshit crazy, or she didn’t realize how dangerous the lessons were if something even miniscule went wrong.

Maybe it was a fluke. He started them on gymnastics next. Then rock climbing, track, and wrestling. There were varying levels of expertise, but no one trailed behind. Christa’s small stature was predicted to be in last place, but she had definitely held her own, and she refused to hold anyone back. She wasn’t as strong as the other trainees, so her talent resided in support.

Today they were in the maneuver center for a run through with the simulations again. The purpose was to get used to battling titans on the move and master formations and attack methods. At the start, cadets had to get used to moving around in the Manuever X, so titans weren’t introduced until then.

It took them a month. The normal time, for once. Keith had finally been able to see them struggle and become frustrated with the complexities of the suit, uttering complaints of the visuals and how they felt claustrophobic.

He forgot to mention to them that if anyone was claustrophobic, they should probably just walk away now. Oops.

No one did, and with time, they figured out ways to understand the controls and specific body movements. They worked on speed next, then pulling tricks and practicing formations. Sometimes, on break, Keith would pass the simulation room and see them back in there, relentlessly going at it.

Their dedication was astounding. His courses were hard enough, they should have been resting their
bodies, but they kept practicing, that fire he saw the first day never dimming even if they battered themselves up. They were *monsters.*

“They’re good,” Keith turned to Nile Dawk. The chief of military police had heard of the 2104th and stopped by out of curiosity. The two men were in the observation deck, watching Armin’s group demolish ten low class titan simulations using strategic tactics and sneak attacks of their leader’s invention. “They’re just in their second year, you said?”

The instructor grunted in confirmation. “I’ve never had a class so dedicated before.”

“It’s impressive,” Nile agreed, crossing his arms, “Any stand outs? That blond kid’s got a good head on his shoulders.”

“Armin Arlert,” Keith nodded, “he was a shock,” he sensed Nile turn to him with interest. “His profile prior to joining seemed too good to be true. Member of the Karanese boxing club since the age of fourteen – got his license at sixteen. Skipped a few grades when he started school, and acquired a degree in political science. Minored in history,” his lips twitched amusedly, “they’re all history buffs, actually. Half of them skipped grades, and already got degrees.”

Nile hummed, “so we’ve got a bunch of nerds here.”

Keith nodded again. “It’s like they couldn’t wait to grow up.”

The simulation ended and Armin’s group landed smoothly and left the simulation floor, letting Mikasa’s group pass. Keith looked at the timer over the observation window. Five minutes and thirty-three seconds. Armin’s squad broke their record with their self-titled Spider Web formation.

“And this one?” Nile asked.

“Mikasa Ackerman,” Keith provided. The same simulations started and the squad kicked into action. “I’d say she’s the monster of monsters.”

“Sina...” Nile gasped quietly, watching as the slender girl whipped around titans with break neck speed, her teammates following a few seconds behind. They spun around the slow simulations like a train, felling the titans with precise cuts.

“She has complete control of the Maneuver X, and has so far kept on top of her academic studies,” Keith commented, “if she keeps it up, she’s definitely shoe a in for the top ten.”

“Any clue on what branch she’d like to join?”

Keith snorted, “last I heard, she said wherever Eren goes, she goes. Arlert said the same.”

“Eren?”

“Hang on,” he smirked, waiting for Mikasa’s group to finish. Once all simulations were vaporized, the team of eight landed and left the room. In spite of going through the run so quickly, they showed no sign of exhaustion. The next team came in, and Keith pointed down to the ringleader just as he slipped on his helmet. “That’s him, Eren Jaeger.”

“Jaeger?” Nile started, “as in Grisha Jaeger? I didn’t know he had a son.”
“It’s not common knowledge,” Keith shrugged, “and it wasn’t like he was keeping it secret either. The kid never made much noise to the public. From what Grisha tells me, he’s a model student, smart, considerate – bit of a momma’s boy.” Nile snorted. “Broke her heart when he enlisted.”

“That doesn’t look like a momma’s boy to me,” Nile said faintly, watching as Eren tore through the simulations with raw unadulterated violence.

“Yeah,” Keith agreed. Eren liked to strike point blank from the start. He wasn’t cleaver like Armin, or coolheaded like Mikasa, and yet though his style was predictable, he fought too fast and too powerfully for his opponent to counter. Having watched him grow over the course of the year, it wasn’t wrong to think there were two people in the young man’s head. The friendly scholar, and the wild animal. “He passed his psych eval, so I wouldn’t worry about him going ballistic any time soon.”

“Ah, right. That’s what I came here for,” Keith frowned. Nile had a troubled look on his face. “We were reviewing the 2104th members – you have an unauthorized trainee. He hasn’t even passed his psych eval.”

The instructors frown deepened. “I was told he had no other place to go. His parents even signed his release forms for the clinic.”

Nile grimaced. “His parents are dead. For six years now.”

A pause of silence fell as Keith let that information sink in. “What the hell…”

The chief of police turned back to Eren’s team annihilating the simulations, “Our investigators just found out. It’s been kept from the news and obituaries, but it’s true. They’re buried in Jinae’s private cemetery. Apparently they died protecting the kid from a mugger. Trauma was big enough to screw him up for life.”

Keith wasn’t sure what to say, the papers that came with Marco had signatures not only from his parents, but from his doctors, and a government seal signed by Dot Pixis himself. “So now you want to take him back?”

“I’m not sure yet. Pixis never saw the authorization request, he believes all those papers you got were fakes – ”

“Grisha Jaeger handed them to me personally,” his mind was thinking rapidly. He remembered his friend and the boy coming to him and explaining the situation. Marco wasn’t a criminal – yet. Grisha thought it safer to move him to the military so he’d have something to punch, and Marco readily agreed. If the parents were dead and Pixis didn’t sign anything, then something big was happening right under his nose.

“I see,” Nile murmured, “in any case, I’ll see him next. Just keep an eye on Bodt, we don’t know what we’re dealing with. Do you know what branch he wants join? We can’t have him in the police, that’s a given.”

That was an easy question to answer. “Scouting legion,” Keith replied, watching Marco’s group enter the simulation room.

“Is that him?”
“Yes.”

Nile fell silent and watched as the team flew up in the air. The leader was marked with a red arm band so it would be easier for examiners to see the person’s ability to work with a group. Marco was admittedly a good team player. He was instructing his group and they listened. If they came into trouble, he was usually the first to help them out. Nile was impressed, and confused. Marco seemed like a perfectly good example of what a soldier should be.

Keith wanted to laugh if the other man hadn’t told him such disturbing news. “Yeah, I don’t get it either,” he said instead.

Jinae

He saw her sitting in the living room, staring, but not watching the television. On her lap she held a photo album. Hanging his coat, Grisha sat down beside her to take a look. There were pictures of Eren in his early teens. One was of his birthday which they celebrated at a family restaurant. He remembered spilling wine on his pants. Another picture showed Eren a year later when they went to Dauper for some camping, grinning at the camera with his plate of smoked steak and his mouth covered in grease.

The house was so quiet without him.

“Eren, what are you cooking!?”

“Dinner!”

Grisha looked at the television and realized it wasn’t a random show, but a home video of Carla taping their son attempting to cook. He was fifteen there, and in the middle of a growth spurt.

“I just…found these when I was cleaning,” Carla cut through the silence, her voice barely a whisper. She wasn’t and hadn’t been crying, but he knew she was close. He took her hand. “He told me he was joining the military police. But I think he only said that to shut me up.”

The doctor remained quiet. Carla was too sharp in catching his lies.

“He’s going out there isn’t he?”

“Carla – ”

“Grisha,” her voice sounded strange. Her warm eyes striking through him in that way that demanded answers. “Remember when he was little and had so many nightmares he had to go through therapy?” Grisha nodded, it was a problem he was unable to cure with his expertise. They had to go to a specialist and he would always feel guilty about that. Like he failed Eren. “When I’d wake him up he’d hold me…he’d hold me and say he wouldn’t let them kill me again.”

“The therapist said he got those nightmares from all the history books he read. He’s always been interested in the titan war, and it got to him,” it was an easy answer, and it flew out of his mouth before he could stop.
Carla squeezed his hand. “Yes, but sometimes, when I’d wake him up, he’d talk in his sleep. Say names like Mikasa and Armin… and Levi – he said that name a lot.” She let go of him to grab a paper lying on her other side. Wordlessly, Grisha accepted it.

It was a letter from Eren. Such correspondence was rare and bordering illegal with all the tree preservation laws going around. Trainees had recently been allowed to use computers on their time off. Carla had been talking with their son through Log In and Unity, a video chat program. Grisha had likewise spoken to him though this medium when time allowed him.

It was a short letter, done in Eren’s hurried scrawl explaining the day’s events and his time with friends. Nothing strange to worry about.

“I didn’t realize it until now. Eren talks about them so much that I just thought of them as family,” Carla spoke again, fiddling nervously with her hands. “But before he enlisted Eren never met with Mikasa or Armin – he never even had them friended on Log In – I know! I checked!” She paused to swallow as her panic grew, “and even before he started to use the computer, he would mention those names in passing. I spoke with his pre-school teachers at the time and there was no kid with those names. The only way he could have known them is if he went to Karanese or Stohess, but the most we’ve ever done is go to Dauper!”

“Carla – ”

“Grisha!” she wrenched his hands from her arms in his attempt to calm her. “What the hell is going on!? Am I crazy? How can Eren know people he’s never met before!”

“I don’t know!” Grisha snapped. “I’ve been trying to figure that out for years!”

Carla instantly silenced, paling. Her husband ran a trembling hand through his hair. This was not how he wanted to tell her. He’d been hoping he’d never have to tell her. Eren had been such a good son. Always attentive and cheerful, taking care of Carla whenever she exhausted herself, understanding Grisha’s absence and duty as a doctor. He was so mature for his age. Like they were his children and he was their parent.

“I need to tell you something,” Grisha finally said. “You’re not going to like it, but I need you to listen carefully.” He took a deep breath, “after that you can either stay with me, or leave.” At his wife’s silence, he fought back his nerves and continued. “It’s about the project I’ve been working on…”
Their final year was here. It felt like their summer vacation was ending. In a few months graduation would officially disband them and they’d be off to the branches of their choosing. The thought was sobering. Two years of being together again felt much too short now. They could feel the gloomy atmosphere drape over the cafeteria when dinner came around.

There were rumors flying around that Keith had no idea who would be the top ten yet. The numbers were close, and everyone passed their pre-exams flawlessly. The fact that it made the choice hard for him filled them with pride in how much farther they got since their first time training.

Their bonds were much tighter, too.

“Stationary guard then, Dazz?” Eren asked, curiosity sparking him as he watched him swivel his soup with a spoon.

“Yeah,” the trainee nodded. “But it’s not because I’m afraid.”

“I didn’t say you were,” and Eren believed him. Dazz had shown the most improvement out of everyone. He stopped hiding behind people like he used to. Since the start he displayed initiative and trust. He wasn’t a leader, but if he believed in himself just a bit more, he could be.

“It’s about the Great Wipe,” Dazz stared into his soup, “I want to know what happened to our history, and I think I’ll be able to find the answer in Sina.”

Eren blinked a few times. “Wait…then why’d you come here? Why not become a historian?”

“Historians don’t have much access to things as soldiers; especially in Utopia.” Those catching his words stopped and turned to him. “Weird, right? Visiting soldiers from outside the police get free pass. They have a bit more access to secure records than regular citizens. If I find any information regarding our era, it might even help us in the war. Why else would it be wiped out?”

Eren was stunned. He’d been curious about their history going in the dark, but he hadn’t thought about it as much as he probably should have. “Dazz…”

He fiddled with his spoon again, smiling sadly, “When I woke up in this time I thought I could live normally with my family. I’d leave the military behind me and at least try to forget that titans dominated the world…” he shook his head. “Then I went through the history books because who wouldn’t, right? Anyone would want to know what happened to the world after they died. Except I barely found anything for a hundred years – not even my obituary. That’s when I heard there are special records kept secure in Wall Sina, but regular citizens need permission from the government to get in. As a soldier it’s a lot easier, so that’s why I came back,” he shrugged sheepishly, “and I guess I really couldn’t leave it behind…it felt cowardly to try, and I was sick of feeling that way.”
“How did you die?” Both turned to Christa, her big blue eyes locked on the other trainee. “If you don’t mind telling,” she added quickly. “Me and the others,” she gestured to herself and Eren’s group, “were killed in a titan ambush. You were safe inside the walls, you must know what happened after our deaths.”

Dazz’s eyes widened and he looked at Eren, Mikasa, and Armin each. “I was killed. The news of Commander Erwin’s army being completely wiped out reached us about a week after, and…” he squirmed as the rest of the table now paid attention with morbid fascination. No one liked to talk about their deaths, most were done in at Trost, the others in the scouting legion, their deaths were respectfully not asked about. It was like a taboo. However, there was the assumption that those who went into the stationary guard at least survived for the most part. “The night I found out, I was in shock and I went out to grieve for a bit,” he blushed, “then I saw someone in a hooded cloak walking around suspiciously. I don’t know why, but I followed them and the next second the guy’s punched clear through my gut with his bare hand.”

A few people winced. “You gotta be kidding,” someone said.

Dazz sat up indignantly, “I swear it happened. He was so strong and fast…” he deflated, “I didn’t have time to realize it happened before I was on the ground…I don’t even know if my body was found.”

Armin leaned closer, thick brows knitted, “did you get a good look at his face?”

“Um…” Dazz scrunched his face thinking hard, “he was young – teenager. I couldn’t tell in the dark, but I think he was tanned. Roundish face – kind of like a beefed up version of Connie and Reiner’s loved child or something. And his eyes…they were cruel black eyes. Like I was just a fly he was squashing.”

At the mention of Reiner, the table fell silent. Dazz hesitantly went back to eating.

“I hope you find out that happened to our history,” Eren finally said, the table nodding earnestly. Shyly, Dazz nodded as well.

Jinae

The trauma clinic was in the middle of construction for expansion. Most patients were sent off to other hospitals, but those who couldn’t be moved stayed. Carla had been in the clinic a few times to visit her husband. She’d always admired his dedication to healing the sick and understood when he couldn’t be home for long periods of time, so she took initiative to visit him instead. Today was different.

The receptionist recognized her and let her pass without a visiting tag. One of the luxuries of being married to Jinae’s top doctor. She headed straight for the back, bypassing security cameras and sensors that also recognized her, and returning the smiles and greetings of nurses on the way. Reaching the fork in the hallway, she took the right and stepped into the first door of a cross between a lab and surgery room. Grisha was there along with his assistant Adler in a patient’s smock, and Dot Pixis – incredibly out of place in his military uniform, and fully enjoying it.
“Mrs. Jaeger, how are you?” the older man greeted, taking her hand and kissing a knuckle.

“Good. Hello,” she stammered, not expecting such an old and cheesy gesture.

“Wonderful,” Pixis smiled and walked her closer to the other two men, “now that we’re all here, we can begin.”

Grisha shifted uncomfortably. Taking her place beside him, Carla took his hand and squeezed. There were shadows under his eyes, and worry wrinkles on his forehead pulled tighter from recent events. The investigation was supposed to be private, but the military police were known for their slack mouths when a good enough offer popped up. Now the media had gone crazy labelling her husband a mad scientist and Marco Bodt his little monster. The subject of the boys parents were put on display – theories swimming around the internet describing in detail of Marco or Grisha setting up the crime themselves.

Carla had been harassed by reporters since the news was leaked, forcing her to let Nile station his officers at her home. Grisha was under higher security, not from people attempting to kill him on purpose, but from people begging to bring back their loved ones. He tried to explain that he couldn’t which was never pleasing to a mourner and only served to increase the villainous image they painted of him. He hadn’t had a wink of sleep in days.

Marco came out of it scott free due to unofficial visitors being banned from setting foot anywhere near training camp property.

Today, some light would hopefully be shed regarding Grisha’s work that could help him avoid arrest.

“Are you sure you want to watch this?” he asked.

“She came all the way here, didn’t she?” Pixis grinned. The doctor sighed and lifted a remote he’d been holding, directing it to the white board on the wall. It acted as a giant tablet. Good for digitally jotting down notes, and playing videos without the messiness of smudging or the screen getting scratched.

“The best result of the project is also the goriest,” Grisha warned. Carla glared determinedly at the black video screen. “It was a painful process for the patient. There was no avoiding it.” His wife nodded, and after hesitating too long, Grisha pressed play.

Carla stood rigid as she watched an overhead filming of a corpse on a surgery table. His right side from his head to his waist had been torn off, revealing a garishly explicit view of his organs and bones. The rest of his brain was halfway out of the remainder of his skull, and his half-closed eye stared chillingly back at her.

There was an array of urgency occurring around the body. She recognized Grisha’s voice, but couldn’t understand anything but the dead boy lying there like a frog being dissected. The many hands in the video worked quickly in attaching an oxygen mask over the torn blue mouth, and sticking tubes all over the exposed side. It was a lot of manhandling, and shouting that Carla could feel herself recoil in sympathy for the boy.

A minute later she saw Grisha’s hands setting up a syringe and carefully injecting its contents into the jugular, then again into the exposed brain.
Seconds ticked by in tense silence and suddenly, the one eye fluttered wide with life, a black pupil dilating then shrinking in panic, the halved mouth parting for wheezing gulps of air. His body shuddered uncontrollably as he tried to look around with his one tearful eye.

There were several cries and gasps of alarm.

“Where…where…am I?” he rasped, his words slurred by the state of his mouth and the mask further muffling it.

“Stay calm, we’re here to help you,” Grisha said firmly, his hands shaking.

The revived boy let out a trembling breath, blinking tears, “D-don’t…don’t wanna…die…please…h-help…”

“Dr. Jaeger!” an unnamed assistant exclaimed, her hands hovering over the brain. It was so slow Carla couldn’t catch it at first, but little by little it looked like it was inflating. “It’s working!”

“The skull, doctor!” someone else yelled.

The patient’s whimpering were rising to frightened cries. He kept begging to be helped, not realizing that the people around him were doing their best to do so.

Grisha swore uncharacteristically, fumbling over a different crueler syringe in the shape of a gun and aiming it at the boy’s head. “This is going to hurt, stay with us, Marco.”

“Huh – ARRRGH!” the boy arched off the steel bed, writhing in agony. The other surgeons’ arms flew over him as he continued thrashing about, his screams and whimpers piercing the room. Grisha’s voice could barely be heard in failed attempts to calm him.

Ten painful minutes passed by in which Marco’s missing half began to rebuild itself. There was so much steam pouring off of him it was getting hard to get a clear visual in the video. What could be seen briefly were glimpses of bones, then muscles. The sickening squelch of blood and body fluids making Carla nauseous.

She hadn’t realized her hand had flown up to tightly cover her mouth. Beside her Pixis remained quiet, watching the whole process of the video with sober eyes, not a sign of discomfort on his face.

Eventually, Marco’s cries died out as he lost consciousness, the steam evaporating to reveal his fully restored right side. The last thing repairing itself was his missing eye. Visibly shaken, Grisha did a check for any more damage, the video ending when he seemed satisfied and stepped back.

The room held a heavy silence interrupted only by the buzz of the lights on the ceiling. Carla was thankful to not have eaten anything before hand, the nausea was killing her. She faced her husband, not quite sure what to say. What he did was a miracle. The state of that boy was hopeless, he had to have died on impact, there was no going around it with half your body torn off. No one would be able to believe it unless they saw it with their own eyes. And those screams…

No, it wasn’t a miracle.

It was wrong.

So wrong.
“And how long was he dead?” Pixis broke the silence.

Grisha swallowed, quaking under the eyes of the official. “Ten hours. He was the third patient to receive treatment.”

“And would it be too forward of me to ask if you were somehow involved in that accident?”

The doctor flared angrily, Adler turning red as well. “Of course not!”

Pixis hummed, crossing his arms thoughtfully. “According to your account he was a failed subject. As a result you both agreed to send him to the military.”

“I didn’t want to,” Grisha corrected, “I wanted to help him, but he insisted.”

“Getting a signature from me would have taken too long. Apparently,” Pixis said derisively, earning a guilty nod from the doctor. “Any particular reason why he wanted to join so quickly?”

Grisha shook his head, “He wouldn’t tell me. I was responsible for bringing him back to relive whatever had been haunting him. I owed him.”

“Did he tell you that?” the old man quirked an eyebrow. Grisha fidgeted uncomfortably. “So you can bring back the dead – screwed one who may or may not be clinically insane, and you faked my signature. You’ve got a lot going against you, Dr. Jaeger. What else have you got to throw at me?”

Someone cleared their throat.

They all looked at Adler, who let out a long nervous breath. “If I show you, Dr. Jaeger’s won’t go to jail, right?” he asked Pixis.

“I’m afraid Nile would say otherwise, but this is under my jurisdiction so he can suck it,” the old man said cheerfully.

Nodding, Adler sat down on the surgery table. Carla’s eyes wandered to his bare legs. They had the defined muscles of an athlete. She’d seen him in the gym a few times in her visits, the treadmill being his favored choice. From the few conversations she had with him, she found that he was very loyal to Grisha and admired his work in the tissue regeneration project. He was the only person with the cards in his hands to prove to her and Pixis that Grisha wasn’t a nutjob. Or at least a mad scientist for the sake of being a mad scientist.

Adler picked up one of the surgical blades on the side tray, and stabbed himself in the thigh.

Graduation

It felt surreal for the day to finally come. The last graduation, their group had notably less members because of Trost. Frankly, they were starting to fear another repeat the closer the day came, and were increasingly wary of each other’s safety. The senior officers were suffering cavities from all the hugs
the 2104th’ gave. They grew accustomed to the quirky squad. They may have been tightly knit and bubbly, but they were also more than capable soldiers. Who else could brag about graduating from a training squad with no losses? They weren’t cocky about it either which was always a plus.

And now three years with these bizarre kids were over.

They were all gathered in formal gray and navy blue uniform out in the field in which they first met. Tall and proud as the ceremony commenced and the chief went through his speech. The whole arrangement was rather like a high school graduation, except much more somber. Even the guests watching by the sidelines were respectfully quiet. With a twitch of his eye, Keith spotted Grisha and Carla Jaeger amongst the crowd. He never really found out what the whole mess surrounding his friend and Marco had been about. In the end Pixis let the boy stay, but nothing was explained to Keith and he knew the old man was probably rolling around backstage laughing at his cluelessness.

Honestly. Pixis could be a charismatic and respected leader when he wanted to be. But he was such a troll…

Special awards were handed out, he gave his own speech, and finally the disbandment was announced with the firing of rifles and applause from the audience.

It was now time for the branches to shamelessly advertise themselves.

Slipping off of the makeshift stage used only for such occasions, Keith headed towards the group of officials dead bored of waiting so long behind the thick burgundy curtains. There were a lot of awards handed out this year.

Amongst the group, Dot Pixis grinned at him, stepping up on stage when his name was announced. Kitts Verman was supposed to do this himself, but three years of shitty delivery, and sharp criticism from Rico ended up in him giving up and handing the job to Pixis. It wasn’t that Kitts was an awful speaker all around. It was that he was awful when the situation wasn’t life threatening. Then again, even if it were, he still looked like a barking madman. Ignoring the muffled speech that echoed over the field, Keith eyed the two remaining officials.

Nile was off to the side with his posse ignoring Erwin and his group. Things hadn’t changed between them and Keith couldn’t help comparing them to three year olds.

“Who wants to bet we’ll get less than five this year?” Erd spoke up, his voice light. Behind him Auruo clucked his tongue and Gunter rolled his eyes.

“I say three,” Levi said flatly, earning a mixed hum of protest and agreement.

So the entire special ops squad was here. Keith looked them all over curiously. Hanji was smiling to herself and fiddling with her tablet, and Mike was standing as stoic as ever, probably subtly smelling the air for titans or something.

Normally every year Erwin would come with one other person. It saved their branch the embarrassment of coming in a group only to go back to their headquarters with a pathetic number of graduates.

The scouting legion had always been unpopular from the start. Losses were too great, they had shitty accommodations, and they barely made any leeway in the war. The military police, however, resided in the safest place within the walls and enjoyed the luxuries that came with the territory. With their
recent support of the space program, people were putting their faith on them than on the legion. Every year the top ten would join the police branch leaving the rest to the stationary guard. Occasionally four or five suicidal kids would choose the third branch.

What was even more pitiful was that the single digit amount of recruits was something for the legion to celebrate about. Their numbers were the smallest of the branches, after all.

Well. Even smaller. After coming back from a failed mission, Erwin’s army had shrunk from two hundred and eighty to two hundred. They were in desperate need of new blood. Serious recruits. Not the useless criminals thrown their way.

“You all came?” Keith asked, a little dumbstruck.

Hanji tore her eyes from her beloved tablet to grin conspiratorially at him, “we were curious.”

“He,” he accepted this. His reports on the 2104th had drawn attention from the higher ups. Visits eventually became a thing in the past three years. At one point he wouldn’t have been surprised if the King snuck in under disguise. However, he never received a visit from anyone in the legion. They had more pressing matters to attend to than ogle at a bunch of kids.

“Try not to get too disappointed when they run off for the stationary guard,” Levi told Hanji, who pouted his way and mumbled ‘party pooper’ under her breath. Keith smartly stopped himself from saying Levi himself was here too – with his whole damn squad.

“They wanted to see the graduation,” Erwin said, nodding towards four people joining them. One was a buff muscle machine, and the other was a giant freaking tower. Two girls stood by them, a blonde and a freckled brunette. They were eerily quiet and kept their eyes toward the stage where Dot Pixis was coming to a close on his speech.

They looked to be the same age as his graduates, yet they were in the earthy casual uniform with the trademark scouting legion cloaks. The outdated fashion statement had been part of the original uniform back in the early days, and was eventually dropped due to cumbersomeness and because it just wasn’t cool anymore. Forty years ago plus a senile commander, and the cloak was back, but as a casual wear not meant for combat. It made the branch stick out, and sometimes made them the butt of jokes, but the tradition stuck.

“Who are they?” Keith asked, referring to the four people.

“As far as we can tell. Friends,” Hanji said mysteriously, her glasses glinting in the sun. “Found them in Wall Maria.”

Keith choked. “Wha - !?”

Before she could answer – or continue tossing him riddles – Dot Pixis rejoined them, calling out to Nile who nodded and stepped on stage.

They waited in silence as he delivered his well-worn speech on the benefits of the military police. It had been recently sugar coated with the partnership of the space program, making the choice much more enticing for the top ten graduates. The ‘Honor of serving the King’ deal was now nothing more than something to boast about even though it wasn’t all that glorious. Two thousand years and laziness led the monarchy into becoming nothing more than figure heads. The real rulers were the military and government. Saying you served the King was like saying you worked housecleaning for
Still. The police got high pay, access to the most restricted areas, and a screaming fan base. Plus, nothing ever really happened in Sina, easy living was certain.

“Who are the top ten?” Keith looked at the unnamed freckled girl oddly. The top ten had been announced at the beginning of the awards, did she miss that? At the stares from the other three, he figured they must have.

“By order, Mikasa Ackerman, Eren Jaeger, Marco Bodt, Armin Arlert, Jean Kirchstein, Sasha Braus, Connie Springer, Christa Lenz, Mina Carolina, and Thomas Wagner,” he paused to watch their reactions. Certain names seemed to strike them, but they said nothing, so he also added, “however, since the class has been so exceptional, the choice was made based on charisma and leadership.” Even then the choice was hard, he kept to himself.

A funny expression crossed the freckled girl, melting into a soft smile that made her look completely different from the intensity of before. Whatever he said, it pleased her immensely.

“You’re up,” Nile startled Keith from behind. Stepping away from his group, Erwin made his way on to the stage. The young four crept closer to get a better look at the graduates. Hanji and the others fell silent, no longer joking around as Erwin started his speech.

Over on the other side veteran legion members straightened up a little more at the sight of their commander addressing them. They knew he was the current commander, reports of his failed missions and body count made him notorious. The public had been trying for years to get him off the position. Every time Eren came across such articles, he’d take his anger out on the simulations in the maneuver center. He hated that Erwin’s name was dragged through the mud, and hated it even more when Levi’s name joined it on occasion.

He was no longer Humanity’s Strongest. Levi didn’t even get a title. That’s how little people thought of him, and it pissed Eren off even more.

Erwin was as serious as he remembered. Thankfully, with all limbs intact. Blunt, and to the point. These speeches were meant to inspire the graduates to enlist, not push them away, but Eren liked that Erwin was honest. It would pick out the bravest recruits willing to sacrifice themselves, not the cowards looking for a bit of fame.

“I would first like to congratulate all of you for graduating on a zero percent fatality count. It means you are a unique brand of soldiers, and you have my admiration for that. We are the smallest branch in the military – currently a two hundred head count compared to the thousands that join the stationary guard” Erwin’s voice rang out, “each year our numbers fall by thirty to forty percent. It doesn’t matter if you’re fresh out of training or a veteran, it is likely that you will be a part of that death toll.”

Eren almost laughed. Compared to the sixty percent in the early years, thirty percent was a lot better.

“We have been fighting for two thousand years, and have made little to no advancement. That is the dark truth of this drawn out war, and will continue to be. The only thing I can promise is that though you will die, you will not go down fighting for nothing. This world had been led by humans. We were born to survive on this land, not become the food of creatures that eat us just for the slaughter. Our numbers are small, yet for two thousand years, we still live. That is not the nature of a prey. We are not cattle. When you die out there beyond the walls, it will be for the pride of humanity. For
something worth more than the luxuries of life. For the children in these walls to have a future and one day see Sina, Rose, and Maria go down for the freedom we all deserve. That's what it means to bear the crest of the Scouting Legion.” He never took his eyes off the graduates, not looking at his notes – because he didn’t have any – rather speaking from the heart. “Our current mission is to seal the hole in Wall Maria. Once that is accomplished, the titans in the area will be trapped and will take over a decade to completely kill off. This mission has been in effect since the day of the colossal titan. However, we have recently received new allies that will help in the recapture of Wall Maria. Casualties are still anticipated, but the titans will feel the blow as well.”

Eren glanced at Mikasa and Armin, both equally confused as him. Allies?

“The scouting legion is a rigorous branch and demands for those willing to put down their lives for the greater good. We will not judge you for valuing your life, and choosing a different branch. For those who stay despite the odds, you have my sincerest respect. That is all.”

This concluded the speech and a scattered applause. Nile and Pixis stepped on the stage and a computerized voice echoed from the speakers. “Graduates can now choose their branch, you are no longer trainees.”

There were three sections at this point. The military police was off to the left side at the back where a soldier was waiting patiently, holding a stack of papers. On the opposite side there were three soldiers representing the stationary guard. Since recruits for the scouting legion was so small, graduates would just remain where they were.

A few rows up front, Dazz and four others shuffled through the crowd, earning pats on the shoulders and murmured ‘good luck’s. He caught eyes with Eren who nodded back, silently wishing him luck on his personal mission. When the five reached to the waiting stationary guard, they were received with blank looks. Then raised brows. Then wide eyes and slackened jaws.

A long beat of silence followed in which no one else budged and the air was suffocating.

The audience started to whisper in disbelief. People started flashing cameras. Erwin stood there, for once, frozen in shock. On either side of him Dot Pixis was laughing to himself, and Nile looked like he swallowed something disagreeable.

Back stage even the veteran scouting legion were dumbstruck into silence. They crept closer to the stage as if they couldn’t believe their eyes. From the corner of his eye Levi could see Petra covering her mouth in emotion.

Someone in the audience wailed.

Hesitantly, an officer in charge of the speakers activated the computer voice again. “Graduates can now choose their branch, you are no longer trainees.”

No one moved.

Erwin’s hands, which were clasped by behind him, fell limply to his sides. Could it really be…?

In unison, the graduates placed their right fists to their chests, the crunching sound of their straightened feet cutting the silence like a thunderclap. The ancient salute barely anyone was familiar with anymore mystified their audience, and together they shouted at the top of their lungs, “We hand our lives to the Scouting Legion!”
Keith rolled his eyes and shook his head. They obviously rehearsed that. Really, it wasn’t like this class was going to let all that practice go to waste…
Isra

Eren entered the mess hall where everyone was gathered for lunch following the ceremony. Instead of the pleasant murmur of proud parents it was bursting with argument. A few feet away he saw Connie’s mother strangling him, as if she could get the answer to shake out like a busted vending machine. On the other end Mina was arguing furiously with her hysterical parents. Further off it looked like Marco was acting as a mediator between Jean and his parents. To no avail, it was easy to see how the Horseface got his stubborn streak.

“Eren!”

Crap.

Before he could turn around he was enveloped by his mother’s arms so tightly he could swear he was turning blue from lack of circulation. When she finally pulled away he got a good look at her face. Her make-up, while supposedly water proof, was slightly smudged from being rubbed harshly. She rarely wore the stuff, and she would have looked very pretty with her yellow summer dress and cardigan. His earlier spirits fell in guilt. There was no way he forgot about telling her that he’d join the police just so he could enlist in the military - he’d been waiting for this moment ever since he made the stupid promise. He tensed up in preparation for a smart slap.

His mother continued holding him by the shoulders, but no spurt of anger was felt. She just looked really sad, and that was probably much worse. His gaze drifted to his father, not as visibly upset as his mother, but his eyes showing everything. Exhaustion. Sadness. Age. Half of that was the media’s fault, but Eren knew he held responsibility, too.

Three years away from his parents with only the internet and letters to keep them connected reestablished Eren’s old independency when he, Mikasa, and Armin had no one but each other to rely on. It wasn’t that he forgot his parents were alive now. It was just…he was still getting used to being a ‘son’.

He tried so hard to be better this time around. Make sure his mother was happy, and his father didn’t stress. Disappointing them like this felt like all that effort was a lie. And it wasn’t! Every day he’d wake up feeling that twinge of happiness in his chest knowing his parents were safe at home.

They loved him and wanted him safe, and that was an oddly hard concept for him to wrap his brain around.

“I’m sorry,” he squeaked, throat suddenly tight.

Carla hugged him again, a hand cradling the back of his head close.

Nearby, Mikasa was being held between her parents, both equally upset as the Jaegers. They didn’t know what to say, at times it was difficult to talk to their daughter who was always so cool and collected. They’d watched her work for the strength she earned before enlisting, they knew how strong she was in both body and spirit. Convincing her to back out of the scouting legion would be a waste of breath.
First of the class meant nothing to them. She was their daughter. They were terrified.

“Please come back alive,” Mr. Ackerman blurted out in a burst of emotion.

All they got as an answer was Mikasa’s arms tightening around them.

In a corner Armin sat with his parents and grandfather, the four quiet and staring at their untouched plates. He couldn’t tell if they were disappointed or if the news didn’t sink in yet. They weren’t the type of people who’d been mingling with the army. They were peaceful and gentle, their interests lying in literature and myths of the world beyond the walls.

They were out of their element in this rule by rule atmosphere.

His father spoke up, finally. A small smile on his lips and gaze still locked on his food. “Remember when you were starting preschool and we got called in because you were being bullied and you had…made solutions of your own to deal with it?”

Armin nodded. He could never forget his childhood. Especially the first time he got into a fight. The memory now made him feel sheepish. His body was so small and inexperienced he almost did more damage to himself than the kid who wanted his lunch.

“You’ve been preparing for this ever since, haven’t you?” Mr. Arlert asked not accusingly.

“Your grades, the sports, boxing,” Mrs. Arlert listed off, “it was like you were a prodigy in all areas. You could have been anything you wanted and yet…” she bit her lip and reached out for his hand. She was warm and comforting, her skin soft with aromatic lotion and a hint of her own natural perfume. “I’m not – we’re not disappointed.” Her voice wavered, “but we’re scared.”

“We know we can’t convince you change your mind,” his father said, shaking his head, “we want to, but when you make your mind up you stick to it. It’s what’s made you who you are, and we’re proud. We really are.”

“And your fighting for us,” his grandfather added, his old raspy voice louder than Armin’s parents. “You’re fighting for our right to live.” His smile was watery, blue eyes sharp on his grandson. “Thank you.”

The table obscured the ability to hug, but the three adults clasped their hands with Armin’s, reminding him that they were here, alive, and supporting him with all their hearts.

..."So...how many recruits was that?"

Everyone turned to Hanji, still recovering from their shock. After the ceremony they thought it best to avoid the mess hall, seeing as the parents of their recruits might want to throttle them. Instead they opted to wait in the guest building, which had so far remained empty and contained a comfortable lounge. While they chatted amongst each other, their commander was off to the side, buried in his own work which included the ancient art of a pen and paper. Hanji loved to make fun of him for that.
“Where the hell did these kids come from?” Petra asked no one in particular, shaking her head in disbelief. “Do you think they even realize what they’re volunteering for?” she gasped sharply, “do we even have enough rooms for them at HQ!?”

“Oh fuck, are we gonna have to share rooms?” Aurouo smacked his face with a groan.

“Didn’t you see their faces?” Levi said, not looking up from his tablet on his lap, “they have the same mugs those kids have,” he nodded to the four youngest members of their legion near the front door where they looked at pictures of past officials on the walls. “Like they’ve been through hell and are eager to jump back in again.” He flicked through his tablet, sifting through the documents emailed to him. He stopped at one and held it up to the others, “especially this Jaeger guy,” he stared at the small photograph at the corner thoughtfully, “what’s with this kid? Was he constipated when he took this picture?”

“Jaeger?” Hanji leaned over to take a good look. “Ah, so that’s Dr. Jaeger’s son.”

“Who?” everyone echoed owlishly.

Whipping out her own tablet from her cloak like it was some magic trick, she thumped her fingers around the screen with a growing smirk. When she found what she was looking for, she held it up to show a news article on Dr. Grisha Jaeger. Those close enough to see curled their top lips in bafflement.

“Is that a tabloids site? What is he a celebrity?” Erd asked, unimpressed.

“He’s the guy who succeeded in the tissue regeneration project,” Hanji answered eagerly. “Last year he was under fire for illegally letting one of his patients enlist in the military – oh!” her cheeks reddened in excitement. Snatching Levi’s tablet (and earning a scathing look from the man), she shuffled through documents with an erratic thumping rhythm of her fingers and gasped a gasp so high pitched it made everyone wince. “This guy!” she held up the profile excitedly.

Gunter squinted at the fine print, “Marco…Bodt? How do you know it’s – hey!” he jumped back in surprise at the sensation of someone standing beside him.

Hanji looked at the blonde girl. It was rare of her to break away from her little group, and even rarer for her to approach the legion officials. Hanji looked from her wide icy blue eyes, to the tablet in her hand.

“What is it Annie?”

Outside in the aftermath of the graduation ceremony Dot Pixis smiled down at the five young men and women lined up in front of him. Watching them part from their class to his waiting soldiers had been a refreshingly amusing thing to see, especially the dawning realization melting over everyone’s faces.

Fives recruits moving to join the stationary guard.
No one else left their spot.

Nile’s face.

Erwin’s face!

The old man couldn’t help bursting into roaring laughter. Humanity had a rational fear of death, and an even more rational fear of titans. Contrary to poets of glory, and ancient times when people held great wars against one another, the people of this age were a cowardly sort. A whole squad of military trainees unifying and joining a cause so outdated and hopeless was unthinkable.

And yet it happened.

Every single one.

Because he’s willing to bet his earnings that the five before him would much rather be with their squad mates than stay behind the safety of the walls. It was their body language that screamed this. Standing side by side, stony faces as perfect a soldier’s mentality as any. It was the complete opposite of the laid back attitude the stationary guard maintained. These were soldiers eager to fight.

They didn’t join because they wanted some sort of safety. There was an ulterior motive here and it only served to amuse Pixis further.

So they weren’t just nerds.

If his judge in character hadn’t withered yet in his old age, he was confident in believing the new recruits weren’t spies. Hard soldiers their postures said, but there was youthful honesty in their eyes. Pride, even. It was easy to see why Keith had so much trouble picking the top ten.

Pixis arched a gray brow. Top ten…

“I’m happy to have you join us, but may I ask why you haven’t joined the scouting legion like your friends?” He asked finally. “And you can relax, it’s not like I’m Kitts.”

“We want to continue reinforcing and protecting the walls,” the freckled girl of the group spoke up loud and clear. A quick glance at the papers (because he used his age as an excuse to avoid the popular tablet) told him she was Hannah. Simple looking girl, not a stand out, yet her academic record was impressive, as was her fighting abilities. Her expertise lied in sniping and hacking. She definitely could have been an asset to Erwin’s army.

She was top ten material. There seemed to be a mutual agreement within the 2104th to join the battlegrounds, yet she stayed despite her skills. She wasn’t a coward either. Not that the stationary guard was cowardly, they just lacked motivation. Maybe that’s why they joined. To bring it back in shape.

Next to her was a tall fellow. Franz, not the brightest in the group, but that didn’t make him stupid either considering his squad mates. His specialty resided in combat and weapons. Additional notes said he preferred to be the follower not the leader, although if the role was unavoidable, he could be quite charismatic.

The other two were Nack and Millius. Their profiles were so close to the same it was like they were
one person. Both held about the same strong academic record, they were remarkably skilled in the Maneuver X, and – of this group – they held the highest kills in titan simulations. The only thing different between them were their names. Looking at them now, Pixis could see a distinct difference. Millius was a bit sterner and Nack a bit rougher around the edges. They would be an interesting pair to work with.

The fifth and final recruit was Dazz. With all the competition from his comrades, he was strikingly unremarkable. He was above average, but in a nest of overachievers he was beautifully ordinary. Sort of. According to the profile, he would have bursts of motivation. The timeline on the side of the page showed dramatic leaps in his placement in the squad. On some months he was barely brushing the top ten, and then on others he’d be dead last. An odd little wild card.

Pixis’s sharp eyes glanced across the field where Nile was uncomfortably talking to a few eager reporters. Outside the military, word got out to the public about the recently graduated squad’s formidability. Those curious enough started reading about it in the political papers – or rather, sites. Pixis would never get used to saying that. The added light came from the scandal surrounding Dr. Jaeger and the unnamed patient. Well…unnamed to most. Pixis may have slipped the name once or twice just to see what happened. It probably wasn’t one of his brightest moments…

The only time the public was allowed on training grounds was graduation, and the reporters took the chance to swarm the place, much to the headache of Keith. Watching Nile squirm, however, brought some new ideas to the high official. The younger man had no recruits to go home with, it was the perfect opportunity to set some curiosities to rest.

“As it just so happens,” Pixis spoke thoughtfully, his eyes glinting mischievously as he twirled his mustache between his thumb and finger, “I have a mission for the five of you.”

Dazz and the others waited patiently, a foreboding feeling itching at them the way Pixis kept playing with his facial hair.

“It involves Utopia. The military police, and a lot of sneaking around,” the old man slowly smirked. “I’ll give you a map to help you out.”

The five hid their elation behind stoic faces. This was too perfect, was Pixis saying what they thought he was saying!?

This was going to be a lot easier than they thought.

Juggling between her angry and then crying parents, Christa finally got them to calm down enough to talk privately and give her space. As it happened, she was in desperate need of fresh air, and so stepped outside for a walk.

The badge on her uniform shined in the sunlight, rightfully declaring her a part of the top ten of her class. Unlike last time, she now accepted the award, knowing that all her own effort brought her there. She even ranked higher than her old tenth slot, and while it made her proud, there was still that sadness that hadn’t left since the first day she woke up in this world.
Society in that walls had changed. The circumstances of her birth remained the same, but culture had loosened up and instead of being shunned, she’d been accepted from the start. It had led to a wonderfully peaceful eighteen years of living with her family.

But they named her Christa Lenz.

She didn’t know whether to be baffled or hurt. Her family didn’t find anything wrong with it, and it dampened some of the happiness she had. Asking for her original name seemed like a ridiculous request at the time. They’d start asking questions, a fight might blow out, and then she’d be kicked out once more, and she didn’t think she could handle that.

By herself, she knew she wasn’t as strong as her friends tried to make her believe. She was vindictive and angry, and all these little monsters that made her hate herself. The only person to make her feel any sense of control and accept her demons wasn’t even in the walls. She should have been, but she wasn’t.

Twenty-one years without her and Christa was sure she would literally break from the loneliness. Not even her friends and the renewed tightness of the 2104th could fill the void.

Her best friend. The one person who understood and accepted her…

It was in times like these that Christa was back to wondering why it hurt so much.

Her listless wandering led her towards the guest building where she could hear voices. Not in the mood to be near people, the petit girl changed direction, her earlier elation of graduation dissipating rapidly at the thought of Ymir.

The important events that occurred in Wall Rose were reported to headquarters. There was no hole in the wall, the ape titan disappeared, and with it the mysterious appearances of titans. It took them a year to scour the lands for any possible sightings, and then another to ensure that no diseases were left behind, but eventually they declared Wall Rose safe to live in again.

Connie’s village remained abandoned, and as the final groups of refugees returned to their homes, the truth of Ragako’s fate began to grimly settle over them.

Like Eren, Connie no longer had a place to call home, or a family to go back to.

The truth hit him hard. After parting from her father and rejoining the legion, Sasha was the only one who was able to comfort him, despite not knowing the pain he felt.

Watching the two close friends huddled by the stables, Eren felt a stab of jealousy. He had Mikasa and Armin, but due to the nature of his shifting abilities, he was kept away from most of the army, tended to by either Hanji or Levi. Now that the 104th were assigned to be Levi’s new squad, he had more opportunity to be with his family. But it still wasn’t enough.

Embarrassingly, he’d come to miss affection the most. His two superiors were great when it came to
advice and the occasional joke, but they weren’t close to him. Mikasa and Armin’s hugs weren’t what he was after either.

“What’s taking you so long?”

Jumping, Eren hurriedly dumped the bucket of dirty water over the grass. He spaced out too long. He hadn’t made a dent in his chores and the day was carrying on faster than anticipated. Rushing back into the house, he tripped over the first step and went flying with a hushed swear.

There was a few frightening seconds of his body dipping for the ground, mixed with mortification of displaying such clumsiness in front of the man he’d admired for years.

His face never touched the floor, though. An arm reached out across his chest and stopped him short, knocking the breath out of him.

Levi was unimpressed, it was strangely easy to tell from his patented indifference. Eren righted himself quickly, cheeks burning. The older man continued staring at him, making him squirm self-consciously the longer time ticked by.

“You have dirt on your cheek,” Levi said with disgust. Turning on his heel, he left at a brisk pace.

Their new home away from home would be in a small village near the end of south Rose built specifically for their needs. It was named Isra, and it was a place meant only for rest. There were no shops, no banks, just cabins, a mess hall, training section, and infirmary. In actuality, it was quite similar to training camp, without the nuisance of instructors breathing down their necks, but with the bonus of an airbase.

Since Isra was the farthest village from society, it wasn’t as up to date on modern technology. The government finances made sure of that. There was the necessary electricity and plumbing, however if one wanted to record something from the bulky twenty year old television, they were stuck with video cassette and shitty quality. Luxuries were sparse.

Getting there took about half an hour on the plane. Due to size, a second plane had to fly over to pick them up. It was the first time Eren traveled in one, and after getting over the initial lurch of his stomach on takeoff, he ended up spending the rest of the trip staring out the window like a little kid.

He’d never been this high up before with the Maneuver X. He could see the thin lines of the walls, and dots of guards wandering on top of them like ants. They were pointed in a different direction, so he couldn’t see Shiganshina, but he could see the end of Wall Maria, and the titan territory beyond. There were a few fleshy masses, and his excitement dried up on the spot.

The invention of flight had been groundbreaking, but to use it to travel outside the walls would be suicide. There would be no place to land before getting ambushed. Bombings had been attempted, but the titans soon learned that if you threw a tree or giant rock at the flying metal bird, then it would crash and pop out humans free for the taking.
They landed at base and were directed to their cabins. A very limited number of cabins, which meant about four people to a cabin meant for two.

As if by instinct, Eren almost went to Levi before remembering he wasn’t a threat to anyone this time. His heart sank as he followed Armin to their cabin which was luckily built for four people, or rather, had been modified for four. To his even greater annoyance, Jean would be joining them, along with Marco, but Marco was okay.

“I wonder who these allies are,” Armin spoke out when they entered the small wooden structure. It was more personal than the barracks in training camp. There was a couch, two rooms and a bathroom. In a corner there was a small refrigerator and sink. “We never got to see them.”

The allies Erwin referred to in his speech were apparently at the ceremony, and would have met them if they weren’t called to go back to Wall Maria for some pressing matters. Mike accompanied them, so the recruits didn’t get to see him either.

“We’ll probably see them later,” Jean hitched his rucksack higher up his shoulder and trudged to the closest room. Smiling, Marco followed.

Eren stared after the pair, then turned to Armin once the door shut automatically. “I’m gonna need earplugs after they grow a pair and start fucking.”

Expressing the exhaustion of this old argument with a long suffering sigh, Armin went to their room, “You’ve said that for two years now and nothing’s happened. I doubt anything will.”

“It will happen,” the tanned young man insisted, “and when it does, we’re going to suffer the trauma of banging on the walls and love declarations every five seconds!”

Armin gave him a look; dumping his bag on his bed. It was a bunk bed, and seeing as the top bunk was unreasonably close to the ceiling, he opted for the better half to punish his best friend. “I think I liked you better as the ‘kill all titan’s’ psychodrama.”

Eren opened his mouth to argue, then shut it grumpily and gave Armin the finger.

851

The day had come to a close and lights out called for Eren to return to his room. Everyone else was already asleep, and apart from himself Levi was accompanying him. A request done by the older man.

Eren walked dejectedly down the narrow hall, now littered with pictures done by Sasha and Christa – or rather Historia – in an effort to make the place more like a home, none were really very family oriented with placements and smiles. The girls chose to catch people off guard – though how they managed it with their clunky camera was a mystery. There was a picture somewhere of Eren and Jean in a rare moment when they weren’t fighting. The residents liked to look at it when they were feeling down for some reason. Eren didn’t get it.

Especially not now. A mix of unpleasant emotions over how awful the day had gone was swimming
inside him. His plans were set in motion perfectly, and yet it all ended with humiliation on his part, and aggravation on Levi’s. The whole walk to his room, Eren tried to find a way to apologize without sounding completely pathetic. He couldn’t believe he was so stupid! Why in all of burning hell did he think things would actually turn out okay? He was freaking sixteen and letting his dick think for him was probably one of the worst decisions he’d ever made.

That and following Jean Horseshit Kirchstein’s advice.

At least the silver lining in this mess was no one but Levi was witness to Eren’s horrible attempts at seduction.

Then again that was just as bad. If not, ten times worse.

…argh! He was so stupid!

The hall muffled the sounds of their boots to thumps. The dry night air gradually turning clammy the more Eren berated himself. He purposefully kept his eyes up front, his mortification keeping him from looking at Levi.

Damn this sucked. And he was so sure he was reading the signs right. Shit, he even turned to Armin for a second opinion and got a tentative confirmation.

“But I wouldn’t read too much into it,” he also added.

He should have listened.

This was all that Horseface’s fault. Screw him and his crap advice. Stupid son of a –

“Eren.”

He jolted, “Yes!” he barked way to eagerly.

Levi kept his eyes ahead. Eren couldn’t tell what he was feeling. Was he still mad? A lecture wouldn’t be amiss here…Or was he going to admit to returning –

“Look, I’m flattered and all,” he said, his tone flat as always, “but we can’t.”

There it was. Eren tried not to look too disappointed. Really, he shouldn’t have expected more. There were so many reasons to go against his outrageous feelings. For one thing, he was much younger that Levi – a little over a decade younger. For another, he was still considered a monster, a relationship with his ‘caretaker’ wouldn’t look good for either of them, especially in the face of the government. Nile would use it as an excuse to kill him off. What’s more, Levi didn’t even…

Wait. He said ‘we can’t’ not, ‘I don’t feel the same’ or, ‘I don’t swim that way.’

Just, ‘we can’t.’

Against his better judgment, Eren dragged his eyes to the squad leader. He was annoyingly calm, his fluster from earlier gone as if it’d never been there. Bastard was treating this so trivially and yet…

“We can’t,” Eren repeated.
“No, we can’t.”

“Not ‘I’m not gay’ or ‘you’re too young for me’ just ‘we can’t’?”

The clacking of boots stopped short. Levi seemed troubled for once, and Eren took the opportunity to push him against the wall and press his body flush against him. The size difference was dizzying. The older man’s hard muscles felt even through the fabric of their uniforms. It left Eren breathless, his heart hammering and blood rushing south. Levi glared up at him, but made no move to shove him off.

“Corporal,” Eren said softly, his courage returning, “that’s a poor choice of words.”

Getting a good look at Levi didn’t happen until later that day when everyone was gathered in the mess hall to welcome the recruits. The two hundred veterans who survived the last mission mirrored the shock of their superiors from earlier.

It was followed by hysterical laughter, then tears, then laughter again, and random gospel of hope and a surprising amount of ‘up yours Nile Dawk!’

Levi was standing by Erwin’s right as he addressed the hall. Still short and sour faced. Just from the blank look and the way Hanji and the others treated them on the plane, Eren knew they didn’t recognize them. Like their parents couldn’t remember their previous lives.

And that meant that he and Levi…

The day would have ended with Eren feeling shitty for himself if Erwin hadn’t chosen that moment to explain the current situation, which was the matter of Wall Maria and the last official mission.

“Three years ago on our retreat, we received the aid of four titans who helped break up the ambush and brought us to safety,” he said, addressing mainly the new recruits. “Initially we assumed the titans were sentient enough to not want to eat us. When we reached wall rose, we discovered that these titans are actually controlled by people.”

Eren sat up sharply.

Wait.

It couldn’t be.

“This can confirm that the legend of Trost is possibly real,” Hanji added eagerly, “they’ve been with us for about three years now and have continued helping us in our goal of sealing Wall Maria.”

Behind her Moblit rolled in a dry erase board which she immediately set about in drawing a curved line for Wall Rose at the bottom, and the end of Wall Maria at the top. She then marked four circles in a curving line towards the hole, but not directly in its path. “With their help, we’ve managed to make safe zones for us to make camp and restock on ammunition.”

To the side she drew a close up of what the safe zone looked like. It was basically a spit of land in
which a wooden tower was built and was surrounded by giant spikes that could only be done by the hands of a titan. Further explanation from the squad captain revealed that the spikes were wrapped with high voltage cables that could instantly turn a human into ash, but would definitely hold down a titan if they came close enough to touch it.

Added precaution had snipers at the top of the tower to spot oncoming enemies, and strike them before they struck back.

Four safe zones had them about halfway to the hole.

“There was a recent attack on zone four,” Hanji continued, “It’s not as protected as the others since it’s new, so our ‘shifters’ went to help defend it.”

“They’ve returned a few minutes ago, so I thought now was as good as any time to introduce them to you.” Erwin said. He turned to the kitchen door at his right, and the soldier standing guard opened it, allowing four individuals to hesitantly step into the silence of the mess hall. “Keep in mind that they’ve spent three years with us and have proven their loyalty many times.” Hanji threw him a furtive glance, biting the inside of her cheek to hide her drooling excitement

No one said a word as the four young adults faced them side by side.

They looked a little older, but not much changed. Physically they were every bit the same people the 2104th remembered, but something was different about them. It was a mixture of grief and unspoken horrors, giving off such an intensity that it rendered everyone mute.

The commander watched their reactions carefully, sensing the alarm and rage like an impending storm, especially from the bright eyed Eren Jaeger, rank two of the top ten. All that calm and pride they honed to an art was melting away at the sight of these four people. Hanji started shaking next to him, her brain working on overdrive. He, however, was wondering how to make this work in his favor. He needed, proof though, a louder reaction to see if he wasn’t imagining things, and that what Annie told them last week was the truth.

A small blonde girl slowly stood up. Her angelic face pale. She was one of the top ten, too. Christa Lenz.

At another table, the freckled boy he’d been warned about, Marco Bodt, stood up. His surprise turned into an easy smile.

“Wow, you guys are shifters? You’re so young!”
Marco's Warning

One Year Ago

Training Camp

It wasn’t that Jean wasn’t happy to have Marco back. He was his best friend after all, and the only person with enough patience to put up with his crap. Jean remembered once that Marco admitted to finding him amusing. He knew that half the time Jean ran his mouth off it was really just for something to say out of boredom than anything else. Quality entertainment; that was Jean Kirchstein.

Amusement or not, Jean liked that he at least had one listener. Marco always had a way with making him feel less doubtful of himself. Moments when he was away from everyone and memories of the past would start eating him up Marco had been there to shoulder his fears, because he had the same and he didn’t want to face them alone either.

Marco was a good person.

Fuck what the Nile Dawk said about him. Fuck the news for messing his name up even more. Jean would stand by Marco’s side no matter what.

It was just...

Sometimes he’d see a side to Marco he couldn’t recognize.

Like right now.

It was late and Jean planned on going to the maneuver center to burn off being in the presence of Eren Shithead Jaeger. To get to the changing rooms, he would have to pass the observation deck. No one was there, and the light was off, but from the window he could see someone flipping around erratically as they fought off an alarming number of titans. Jean couldn’t think of anyone with moves like this, so he checked the log board next to the window out of curiosity. It was an easier way of recording people who went into the simulation room, a detector would be activated on the suit and the board would instantly identify it and display the name and current rank on its LCD screen.

Glaring at him in bright little letters was Cadet Rank 12 Marco Bodt.

Stupefied, Jean gaped at his friend’s fighting ability. It was unconventional and effective, titan’s falling one by one. More kept forming, but Marco never slowed down.

Wanting to give him a piece of his blown mind, Jean clicked on the communications button and hovered over the mic.

The room was filled with uncontrollable giggling. Guffaws that chilled Jean to his bones. His words of praise died in his throat. Ears burning with the maniacal laughter of his best friend. It now made
sense why his movement was so erratic. It wasn’t skill, he was enjoying his slaughter so much it shook his whole body.

Jean stood stalk still, feeling that same horrible feeling when he first saw Marco dead in the streets of his hometown.

2856
Isra

That same feeling was sinking in again.

Jean thought perhaps he was losing it too, because he wasn’t sure if he was entirely disturbed as he knew he should be.

The shock of reuniting with the shifter quartet had subsided after Marco’s ice breaker. He’d vocally made a choice for them and they silently agreed to stay quiet. If they spoke up their outrage, they’d get into a huge mess with the scouting legion and probably be suspected of insanity and get booted off for therapy. Even worse, Erwin might take the quartet away to keep them safe from the 2104th’s thirst for revenge.

Ymir not so much, but the others…

They would wait and see what happens.

At the moment, Jean realized that Marco didn’t speak up on behalf of the squad. He wanted a more private reunion. After their seniors left for their bunks, they caught Bertholdt by himself behind the mess hall. He remembered distantly that Christa took Ymir away somewhere. He didn’t know what happened to Reiner and Annie.

“Do you remember me, Bert?” Marco asked curiously, an arm thrown over the taller boy’s shoulder, creating an awkward position for them both, “do you remember training with the 104th?”

Darting his eyes between Jean and Marco, Bertholdt nodded, his normally tan face pale in the lonely light post a few feet away. Crickets were chirping in the distance, contrasting with the mood in the atmosphere.

“What the others remember?”

Another nod.

Jean swallowed. Maybe he should say something…

“So that means you remember That Day,” Marco stated, voice distant. Bertholdt remained quiet, his lips thinning in a grimace. “And you’re the Colossal Titan.” The only response he got was Bertholdt’s silence, a shamed dip of his head. “Reiner’s the Armored Titan then. How old were you when you invaded Shiganshina? Just a child? I heard age is frozen when a shifter’s in a titan form – it’s what happened to Ymir.” Marco looked off thoughtfully, “But I guess none of that matters now. There hasn’t been an invasion for two thousand years. I think you’ve learned your lesson.” The
lightness of his attitude faded away, warm eyes turning cold. “It doesn’t erase the blood on your hands though.”

Bertholdt winced, face twisted in pain and remorse. A little voice in Jean’s head whispered that it wasn’t enough. The image of Marco’s corpse was still too clear, and that anger…that thirst for revenge…it was starting to grow stronger.

Marco smiled darkly, pulling the taller boy down to speak in his ear. “This is a different life, so I’ll give you a free pass. But if I ever catch even the slightest hint of betrayal I will force you to watch me destroy your precious friends. They won’t even have time to change into titans to fight back – in fact, I’ll have them end themselves in the slowest possible manner so you will come to understand the pain you’ve put my friends through – what you’ve put Jean through, and when it’s over and your covered in Annie and Reiner’s blood,” his smile widened, “I will tear you apart.”

Bertholdt cowered under Marco’s grip, breathing in sharply through his nose. He couldn’t hold it in anymore, he coughed, spraying out the blood that flooded his mouth. A few flecks dotted Marco’s cheek, making his freckles pale in comparison. The tall shifter wheezed, leaning against the shorter boy and gritting his blood stained teeth.

Jean was starting to really hate himself. The pathetic state of the shifter was doing nothing to tug at his heart. He thought he was a bit more merciful than this. Maybe he was just was fucked up as Marco.

“Understood?” the freckled boy asked innocently.

Bertholdt nodded feverishly, “I…p-promise!”

“Good.” Marco let him go and pulled back the knife he had dug deep into Bertholdt’s stomach, giving it a moment of consideration before tossing it back at the bleeding boy who had crumpled to the floor clutching his wound. Steam was starting to emit from it, his blood disappearing as the healing process commenced.

As Jean and Marco walked away, leaving behind soft whimpers and weeping, Jean seriously wondered if he was losing it because he was with Marco so much, or if he’d been this way from the start.

“Look, the blood’s already leaving,” Marco said cheerfully, holding up his steaming hand. Jean watched the crimson paint steam in the moonlight. Not many people knew this because there was never a chance to show off, but Marco’s preferred weapon was not the blades of the maneuver gear, but instead the knife. Sharp. Cruel. Quiet. The perfect torture weapon. Jean had seen him play around with switchblades on their breaks. It had been both mesmerizing and disturbing the way his friend smiled at them. “Did I freak you out?” Marco asked after Jean didn’t react.

Not. Not really, Jean thought. If Eren were in Marco’s place he wouldn’t have been surprised either. Bertholdt had committed mass murder after all. Stabbing him in the gut was nothing compared to the deaths at his hand.

He felt Marco’s hand land gently on the small of his back. He’d become very affectionate with him. It freaked him out at first, but lately it was his only source of comfort. Leaning closer into his best friend, Jean sighed contentedly, shaking his head to answer Marco’s question.

Of course he wasn’t scared of Marco. He was his friend. His good friend.
And if Berthodt or anyone harmed him ever again, Jean would do much worse than Marco promised.

... 

Everyone had settled down for the night, but there were still some loose ends to tighten up. Particularly with the story Annie gave them.

Erwin and his squad leaders gathered in the aftermath of the mess hall. Annie and Reiner in front of them and unfazed by the reaction earlier that evening. The commander had doubts beforehand, resulting in a backup plan should the blonde girl’s tale turn out to be a fake. Thankfully, it wasn’t and the shifters would continue to live another day.

This did, however, bring up the obvious question.

“How is this possible?” he asked, demanding a swift answer.

Reiner’s set in frown deepened, but Annie spoke up before he could. “How are titans possible?”

“Touché,” Hanji smirked.

“Then it’s true that the giant brat is the same titan who broke Wall Maria,” Levi stated rather than asked, “and you,” he turned his beady eyes at Reiner, “are the same Armored Titan.”

The boy fidgeted slightly under the corporal’s steady gaze, nodding with great shame. “Our mission then was pretty straightforward. Find the coordinate, bring him home, and our village would be safe from titans.”

“What is this coordinate?” Levi asked.

“A shifter with the ability to control lesser minded titans.”

“And who gave you this mission?” Erwin asked.

“The beast known as the Ape Titan,” Annie answered. “He gave us the ability to shift. We never got to complete our mission and as a result we were punished for our failure.”

“That was two thousand years ago,” Hanji said not unkindly, “what is your mission now? You’ve helped us so far. Casualties have dropped and while I’m ready to give you full trust, the commander here needs a little more meat from your words. No offense.”

“It’s alright if you continue to be suspicious of us,” Annie said, clearly not affected by Erwin’s distrust. Three years had passed, and their distance from the man was the same as ever. She preferred to keep it that way. They were, after all, a danger to humanity. “It’d be wrong if you didn’t.”

“Your security will be doubled,” Erwin nodded, “judging by their reaction, I don’t doubt you’ll be facing retaliation when they think we’re not looking.”
“We deserve it,” Reiner muttered, crossing his brawny arms.

“I still can’t believe it,” Hanji sighed, a hand to her cheek, ignoring Reiner’s comment, “real proof that reincarnation exists. And the new recruits! It makes sense doesn’t?” she turned to Levi and Erwin, “hardened soldiers coming back thousands of years later to continue fighting for humanity. If I were them I’d also work my ass off to be stronger than before – and they’re history buffs! Of course they would be!” Reiner flinched, she was starting to drool. “A supernatural phenomenon! There’s got to be a scientific reason behind this!”

Levi gave her a look of disgust and turned back the younger pair. “Hanji’s boner aside, what’s the deal with this Marco Bodt? You looked like you had a heart attack when you saw his picture last week.”

Annie’s brows knitted into a scowl. “That is a personal matter.”

Utopia

“I’m taking this unique opportunity to plug you five into the military police,” Pixis said when they arrived at his office to discuss things properly, “Nile has no graduates to come home with, so I’ll offer you since you’re all good enough to be considered top ten quality in any other squad. He’ll hopefully not find it suspicious – you’re all brand new and frankly my offer will probably be seen as a jab at his public humiliation.”

“Wouldn’t that make him turn you down, sir?” Nack asked uncertainly.

Pixis smiled cheerfully. Beside him his personal assistant, Anka rolled her eyes. “Nile needs new recruits to maintain his retired numbers every year. This year eighty three old farts stepped down. He needs all the help he can get. He’ll accept, he has no choice.”

The military police brigade was just as corrupt as two thousand years ago. On the first day Dazz and the others were assigned to Utopia (though some questionable paperwork by Pixis and an eager invitation from the king), they tried to uphold the morals of being a soldier, and were soon mocked by their seniors.

“Loosen up, it’s not like we’re fighting titans here,” they said between chuckles.

They didn’t even care that there were only five recruits from the southern camps this year and the rest went off to the scouting legion. It was frustrating to hear them make bets on how many losses they would suffer this year, but the five kept their mouths shut. The less they stood out, the less attention they would grab.

So they accepted their uniforms in silence and followed what little orders their seniors gave even if it was as menial as getting them a glass of water. The uniform itself was the simplest of the three branches. The scouting legion’s casual was mostly camouflage apart from the green cloak, still good for hand to hand combat and held pockets over pockets of hidden weapons and anything else needed for survival. The stationary guard was beige and gray to better match the wall tone and give titans harder time at spotting them. The uniform was just as weapon protected as the smallest branch, only bulkier and less tech savvy than the scouting legions.
The police brigade’s uniform, however, was a good deal thinner in layers and lower in weapons. Due to their duty as enforcers of the law, their uniform had to stand out. It was black with silver and blue linings, and a fancy badge hooked on the belt. Weapons included a standard issue glock, electric shock gun, and retractable bo staff – all secured around the belt. Other tools were cuffs, a slim walkie-talkie, and basic brigade tablet for investigations and second form of communicating. That, and a flashlight.

It was a lot less bulky than they thought and they felt exposed outside their trainee uniforms, which gave them more security than this uniform.

Today they were meant to be given a tour of Utopia, but their guide either forgot, or was too lazy to get up. They were allowed explore on their own.

Utopia was a city far more advanced than any other district. Its buildings were designed in some of the sleekest, oddest shapes, and were powered by solar panels and earth friendly materials. This helped make the city look literally like a utopic world. Nature brimmed with life in its organized sections that split the ring of cities in the innermost wall, the lakes were crystal clear with no pollution or disease, and even the citizens enjoyed daily exercise on designated paths and workout areas.

The city was shaped into a ring. On the outer rim there were thin, clipped forests and agriculture, and on the inside, the kingdom resided further guarded by a man made river and security measures that everyone exaggerated but didn’t really know.

The castle itself was shielded by Smart Tech similar to the automatic protective digital cells used in the public maneuver gear, except the shield was constant and covered the castle in a colorfully lime green dome.

Dazz could see this when they rode Utopia’s famous ferris wheel and their carriage halted at the top. From this view they could see the beauty and perfection that was Utopia. And therefore, get a picture of the city.

After a few flashes, Hannah plugged a USB into her digital camera, loading the pictures into the small device. A precaution if the camera was somehow destroyed. Next to her Dazz studied two maps. One from Pixis, and the other from their flaky guide. The first map was handmade and marked in random spots of interest. Little notes explained they were inhabited by suspicious people. The second map was a standard map anyone could pick up at a drugstore.

“Let’s try this spot next,” Dazz said, pencil marking a sparse area northwest of the city. The others leaned over for a look and nodded in agreement.

They were just checking areas previously visited by Pixis, their real goal was getting inside the castle which would be in a week. Right after Pixis handed a formal letter to Nile, another letter was issued by the king to have the five over for the night. It was an odd invitation, and while it wasn’t the direction Dazz was hoping to go, it was still the palace – the most heavily guarded place in all the walls. It was also the place Pixis was very curious about. On his last visit, he came to suspect that the king was holding dangerous weapons in his vault. It could pose a threat to humanity, and seeing as the five recruits were being invited with open arms, it was a good chance to find out what the king was hiding.

Right now, as they waited for the week to pass, looking through Pixis’ map was their way of killing time.
But it never hurt to double check.
The cafeteria was still abuzz after meals were finished, laughter and conversation burst from everywhere. Most of all, around Eren’s table where those who were closest to him wanted to know one important thing.

“Can you still turn into a titan?” Jean asked uncertainly, though laced with begrudging hope.

The other boy’s smile slipped. Everyone leaned in eagerly, but he shook his head, “I’ve tried whenever I was in a big enough space on my own, but nothing happened.” He held up his hands, displaying scars of several cuts and bite marks. There was a collective hiss of sympathetic pain, “I can’t even heal like I used to. Whatever made me a shifter is gone.”

Disappointment loomed over the table. Jean leaned back and crossed his arms thinking hard. “So then whatever made you a titan wasn’t naturally from you. It was put in you,” he muttered.

Eren clenched his teeth, hating Jean for voicing his thoughts. If he had been human back then, that would mean he somehow either stole the ability to shift, or something or someone gave it to him. Right now he couldn’t think of anything else except those vague memories of his father injecting him with a syringe, and his cryptic words about the basement.

The basement in which still hadn’t been explored.

He didn’t want to think of his father that way. He may be flawed, but he could never hurt him. Could he?

Ymir was the only shifter the recruits had no grudge over. Not entirely. As a person she still wasn’t their favorite, but at least she hadn’t intentionally killed hundreds of people. Plus, if Christa was on her side, then she couldn’t be that bad. As a result, they remained in the mess hall the next night for another hour to hear Ymir’s story.

“I was born in the same village Annie and the other two boneheads were from,” she said flatly, arms crossed. She was sitting on one of the tables that faced everyone, Christa latched to her side. “At least I was in this lifetime, I don’t know if I’m actually from there, back in the Stone Age.”
“Does this mean…they’re really different now? They’re on our side?” Armin asked.

Ymir shrugged, “Reiner is. Bert and Annie, though,” she made a noncommittal grunt, “They’re more on the revenge wagon,” at their inquiring faces, she shrugged again, looking away uncomfortably. “Our village was destroyed. It survived outside the walls because we got protection from the Ape Titan so long as we did what he wished – namely gaining intel on humans. We hadn’t needed to do that for a while and we started growing anxious – we wanted more freedoms. Time was wearing on and the younger generations were doubting the whole ‘worship the titans’ deal.” A puff of breathed huffed out in bitterness, “so the Ape Titan did what he did best. He turned the villagers into mindless titans and that was that. Annie, Berthodt, Reiner, and I were the only ones to escape. We managed to get in Wall Maria by the time Erwin and the others found us.”

Armin thought over this quietly, and Eren could tell more questions were forming in his head. He had questions of his own. Everyone did. But it was starting to seem that Ymir may not be able to give answers. Unless she was hiding something, which he doubted she was. He knew she was the type of person who’d look out only for herself, but in the last few years of his life when she rejoined and fought alongside them, he also knew that she didn’t give a shit about missions issued from the Ape Titan. Especially if it involved harming Christa in some way.

“You’re a part of the original 104th squad,” Armin said, “have you come by any adults that remember their past lives? Why is it only us?”

Ymir looked around everyone, the dip of her brows thoughtful. “Hanji said that based on Annie’s story – she told her about the reincarnation thing – we’re from the era that had been wiped from history. The Great Wipe, she called it.”

Mikasa spoke up softly, “our history has been erased. No one’s been able to find any records between 850 and a hundred years after our deaths. Even our names never surfaced. The only thing that survived is the Battle of Trost. Eren’s role as shifter is now considered a bed time story, no one really believes it happened.”

“All that work for nothing, huh?” Ymir smirked at Eren, he threw her a snarl, but said nothing else. “That would explain why no one believed us. I thought they’d remember us at least since they’re reincarnated too, but…it’s just us who remember? Tch…that sucks.”

“Why is it just us, though?” Armin asked aloud to no one in particular, “there’s got to be some reason. I refuse to believe this is all just a supernatural phenomenon of angry souls reincarnating.”

Ymir stared at him for a long time, annoyed by something. “I’m sorry, who the hell are you? You remind me of someone, but I know I’ve never met you before.”

Armin was jilted from his thoughts enough to look back at her indignantly. “Seriously? It’s me Armin Arlert? Little sissy boy? As you used to call me.”

The tanned girl’s eyes bulged out. “Shit, are you…” she turned to Christa for confirmation and only received a smile, then turned back and sized him up. “Not my type, but you’ve filled out pretty nice,” She smirked easily again, “well played puberty, well played.”

Not used, nor would he ever be, to the compliment, Armin turned a shade of red and squirmed in his seat. “In any case. Do you know anything about a new coordinate?” he asked, desperate to change the subject.
“Eh?” Ymir said smartly, “what are you talking about, there hasn’t been one for two thousand years, there is no new coordinate, it’s still Eren.”

“Coordinate?” some people voiced. Not everyone had completely caught up with Eren’s story, and he never bothered to elaborate. It was pointless if he wasn’t a shifter now. Telling them that part of his final years would have gotten them hopeful for nothing.

“I can’t be the coordinate,” Eren shook his head, showing her the scars on his hands, “I can’t even turn into a titan anymore.”

Ymir studied his hands skeptically, disappointment dawning. “Well…” she crossed her arms, then scratched her head at a total loss. “Fuck.”

2856

One Month Before Graduation

The news of Dazz choosing to stay behind to continue digging for clues about their past had spread through the rest of the squad in a matter of days. Most weren’t sure how to feel. Dazz had grown much more as a soldier than the last they saw him at fifteen. He had his slip ups, but he stubbornly worked hard to get past it, and as a result, he was now just under the top ten. A mighty leap from when he finished near the bottom.

With all that effort, it was assumed that he’d join them with the scouting legion. While it was disappointing to hear that he had other plans, they couldn’t say that his intentions were wrong. They knew he wasn’t chickening out, and in a way, his goal was probably more important than their desire to kill the titans.

After a few weeks of consideration, Hannah and Franz approached him one day at the gym.

“We want to help,” Hannah said, making Dazz pause from his position on the high bars, it nearly fucked up his neck if he didn’t twist away and let go to land clumsily on the mat below.

“What?” he winced, wringing out his arm from where he strained it too much.

“The Great Wipe,” Franz explained, “we heard you’re staying behind to find answers. We want to help out too.”

The other boy raised his eyebrows. Looking from one to the other and anticipating some exclamation of a joke. They merely smiled back at him, stretching the silence long enough that eventually Dazz believed them. “Why? I thought you wanted to join recon.”

Hannah looked up at her boyfriend with a sad smile. Before she said anything, Dazz remembered overhearing Armin after the Battle of Trost. Franz was killed, and Hannah went MIA. In his shaken report, Armin said she’d been trying to perform CPR even though it was too late what with Franz being half eaten.

Dazz knew himself enough to know he wasn’t as intelligent as his fellow trainees, but if he were in
Franz or Hannah’s shoes, he wouldn’t want someone he loved to go off into danger after losing them once. It was touching, and it made him a bit jealous of what the two had.

“We’re going to join once we’ve figured out what happened,” Franz said.

Dazz’s mental picture of the overprotective couple shattered as instantly as it formed. So much for trying to understand people…

“Are you guys sure? The legion could use people like you, I’m not even sure I’ll find anything,” he argued lightly.

Hannah seemed to anticipate this, “historians and archeologists have had trouble, but we know how these walls looked before, we’ll probably be able to uncover more than the people before us ever tried.”

“You guys are going to help him out?” Armin walked up to them, sweat glistening over his skin, emphasizing the clean curves and ripples of his muscles. He’d gone for a practical style for his hair, tying it all in a tail. If he wasn’t training to be a soldier, Dazz would bet money that Armin could be a famous movie star by now, or a model at the very least. At Hannah and Franz’s nods, the young man turned to Dazz, fishing through his pockets, “I’d been meaning to talk to you.”

“You’re joining too!?” Dazz’s eyes bulged out.

Armin laughed and shook his head, pulling out a cell phone either thirty years overripe or thirty years ahead of its time. It was a black flip phone with a camera lens at the front and a little plastic panda head hanging from it. The blond handed it to him, and he flipped it open. The keyboard was as old as its design. Actual buttons and directional arrows. The screen displayed an overhead picture of Eren, Mikasa, and Armin’s shoes formed in a circle.

“Uh…” Dazz said smartly.

“If you find anything, I’d like you to call me so we can work it over while I’m stationed at the legion,” Armin explained, “my dad works for Comet,” he said, referring to the popular cell phone company, “he got me that phone and this one,” he held up a matching phone equally personalized, “they’re not connected to the system, so the lines are clean.”

Hannah looked from one cellphone to the other, “you want us to call you when we find any clues we might not even find?”

Armin nodded cheerfully. “I’d join you guys, but Eren and Mikasa need me,” his smile softened fondly, “now, let me show you how the phone works.”

Dazz hadn’t expected such enthusiasm and support from his squad mates. He’d been so used to them encouraging him to put his skills into use and fight. Now they were doing the opposite, helping him in his originally personal goal in finding their history. It was…nice. Now that he had two people helping him out it increased the chances of finding clues. He was starting to feel good about himself. He could really do this!

Then things turned even brighter. A week later, Nack and Millius approached him.
Security had been ridiculous. Right at the river, the five had to go through fingerprint and passport identification. Followed by an invasive pat down for any hidden weapons. Then after taking the ferry to cross, the security on the other side repeated the same thing with the addition of flashing their eyes with a light that also read their identification.

Near the front doors they had to remove their shoes and jackets to walk through a metal detector in which they stood on a platform and a large metal bar attached spun around them, giving the computer a full body x-ray. Their phones and cameras were taken. At the first security stand their military issued guns were being kept in a safe.

Finally, after being questioned by the final guard, the five plus Nile Dawk, were allowed to enter the palace.

When they arrived in Utopia, the plan had been to find a weak point in the palace's well secured perimeter, and sneak in. They hadn't expected a royal invitation to stay the night from the king himself the first day in the city. Though, the man was under the impression that he would be meeting the top ten of their class. An error Nile had called in to correct. The king still wanted to see them, and not wanting to waste such a rare chance, they accepted. Crazy security aside, things were looking well for them. Apart from the discombobulating feeling of being in street clothes rather than uniform.

All the while Armin's phone remained in Dazz's pocket. He wasn’t sure how, but it survived all the security. From what he understood, the material was experimental – it didn’t have metal, and it couldn’t be detected through x-ray. It survived the pat down at the first stand because the guards were looking for weapons; they knew the next few stops would take the phone away. Dazz wasn’t sure if Armin knew this beforehand or it was all a stroke of luck. Whatever the case, he was glad to still have the phone.

“Welcome to the palace,” their tour guide said cheerily. He was a stringy old man with round glasses and trimmed beard and mustache that twisted to points, “I am Yannick, your guide for today, you are the graduates of the 2104th I presume?”

“That’s us,” Nack nodded, feeling wary under the man’s piercing eyes.

“Not the top ten,” Yannick tilted his head to the side in mild disappointment that rubbed them the wrong way. “The King has been eager to see them, but you're still a part of that class so it’s all right.” He shook his head, “anyway, shall we begin?”

The following hours were spent walking down grand hallways full of lush carpeting and glass protected items of the royal heritage. It was really more like a museum, and though Yannick was informative of the royal family’s history, he laced it with continuous jabs of Dazz and the other four not being in the top ten. He sugar coated it with their being just as qualified in any other squad, but it was obvious he wasn’t very impressed with them, which resulted in Hannah and Nack pulling faces behind his back.
Fortunately, or unfortunately depending on how it could be interpreted, Dazz was used to this sort of treatment. Before joining the military, his family was known for being a little on the wild side. Being a meek boy, Dazz was the black sheep and was teased for it. This was actually why he originally joined the military. To shut everyone up.

Then when he almost died in the mountains if Ymir and Christa hadn’t brought him to safety, he realized then he was in way over his head.

He was getting that same feeling now.

Dazz wasn’t sure why, but in some weird and twisted way, Hannah, Franz, Nack and Millius were looking to him like he was their leader. He didn’t know how it happened. All he said was he wanted to find answers about their past and now they jumped on the bandwagon and waited for him to give the order. It had been like that ever since they arrived in Utopia. Pixis had given the map to Franz, but he then handed it to Dazz. As soon as he suggested a spot to look through, they followed without question. He hadn’t realized until now that he’d been doing it.

It was starting to scare him. They were in the palace now, if anything happened, it would be all his fault. Having all that responsibility on his shoulders was not something he planned on when he made the decision to stay. Armin would have been a better leader than him.

In fact. Dazz just going to go ahead and assume Armin was the leader. He may not be with them now, but the phone in his pocket was the only connection they had to report their findings. Armin was the bigger brain behind this, not Dazz. Dazz was playing the curious cat, Armin was the man with the cards.

Right.

Armin. Leader.

That made Dazz feel a little better.

Well. Good enough to sneak out of the guest room for the vault Yannick had mentioned in passing. All he said was ‘the vault downstairs’ while talking about the ‘treasures’ that would keep the kingdom thriving. Dazz hadn’t listened past ‘vault’ so he wasn’t sure. He had a lead and he was taking it. They hadn’t met the king yet, oddly. He wanted to save the anticipation until breakfast, which left them to sleep over in their assigned guest rooms, wondering what kind of person the king was like. Sadly, due to all the security and the nature of their visit, they couldn't bring their uniforms, so he settled on the darkest clothes he owned and stuck to the shadows.

Slipping on an earpiece, he clicked the communications button and was flooded by a heated argument done in whispered voices.

“– Can’t believe he would – ”

“I know! And all that talk about the king and his stupid – ”

“I don’t even want to see this guy anymore, screw the fancy breakfast I’ll eat in some hole in the – ”

“We should totally ransack his bedroom or something – teepee the shit out of it and – ”
“Eat his precious chocolate collection. I am so on this – ”

They were arguing so feverishly it was hard to tell who was who. “Uh, guys?”

“Dazz? Finally! What took you so long?”

The young man sighed, walking down the dark hallway. It pleased him to know that his friends weren’t always serious. “I was waiting for the right time, how’s everyone?”

“Franz and I are on security, as planned o’capitan,” Hannah answered, “we see you, but the guards can’t. You have roughly half an hour before the system reboots. By the way? Finding the right cables was a bitch. I hope Yannick wasn’t too attached that that bust of Queen Elodie.”

Thirty minutes. Great. That meant he had to find the vault fast or pull an excuse out of his ass to stay another night, and did Hannah just call him captain? He shook his head. “Ha you guys found a map? Blueprints?”

“Working on it,” Franz muttered distractedly, faint keyboard tapping the background. All of their electronic belongings save for Armin’s phone had been taken away. The only reason to explain Franz messing with a keyboard was that he and Hannah not only found a few cables connecting to the security cameras, they found the actual room. Dazz gave himself a moment to appreciate their work.

“We were bullied into patrol because apparently we’re not as smart as Hannah,” Nack’s voice fizzed in sarcastically. “Anyone gets near you, we’ll take care of it.” Dazz raised his eyebrows in surprise and looked around. The hall was empty, but instead of feeling fear, he felt perfectly safe.

“Once you reach the vault I’ll guard the door,” Millius pitched in.

And again, he wondered how they decided to let him do the vault invasion while they kept an eye out. It was like he was some sort of prince and they were his guards.

…If he kept thinking of himself that way his ego was going to inflate so he erased that image altogether.

“Hope this works,” he said, marching down the hall, “because I can’t think of a backup plan if it doesn’t.”

Isra

As promised, the shifters were kept under higher protection. They mostly stayed with Hanji to help with her experiments. Ymir was the only one who freely joined the 2104th with no animosity on their part. From what Levi understood, she had been an ally back in the Wiped era. This was mainly due to her attachment to Christa Lenz. Or Historia Reiss as she now demanded to be called. The corporal didn’t really care, but at least no one was killing each other, which was a step in the right direction.

Their next mission wasn’t due for another month once everyone had enough practice on battle
formations and their wounded soldiers were good enough to jump back in. The new graduates may have helped their numbers, but they were still a pitifully small army. They would need all the manpower they could get.

That wasn’t what bothered Levi, though.

He hadn’t noticed at first, being busy with helping Erwin organize his plans on the next mission, but now that he had some down time, he could feel the prickles at the back of his neck.

That kid was watching him. The Jaeger brat.

He was used to the stares. Levi looked young for his age, and he was short which made his age even more ambiguous, not that he cared. The prisoners on their death penalty had eyed him skeptically on first sight too. How could this short stack be leader of the special ops squad? He wasn’t about to argue with them, he liked to make them eat their words by displaying his skills on the battlefield. It was the easiest way in gaining respect and it worked since the day he was thrown in the legion after the government finally managed to catch him.

For a sentence to life on the battlefield, Levi was finding it harder and harder to hate the government. Years of being a soldier helped him find camaraderie that wasn’t based on a single selfish goal. He learned to have faith in people, actually care for people. He had his own bonds back in the streets, but the soldiers here were different. They felt cleaner, braver, and even after their deaths Levi never thought them as the idiots society labeled them.

So when they grew to respect Levi, and stopped staring so doubtfully, he’d walk on and accept their trust in him.

This brat though. He wasn’t looking at him skeptically. Skinny fuck was looking at him like a creep. He’d always have this bittersweet smile on him, and when he addressed him, it was with a soft and sad voice like someone died, and it was starting to really eat at Levi’s nerves.

Did this kid know him from somewhere?

And it wasn’t just him. Some of the others were looking at him with the respect that would normally take weeks for new blood to attain. The fact that this squad was eccentric from Keith’s reports only made their stares stronger. Levi wasn’t famous. No one from inside the walls should know his name. Yet they spoke to him at a familiar level that struggled to stay respectful.

It made him come to the conclusion that maybe they did know him. Which meant that if they actually were reincarnations, then he may have lived two thousand years ago, too.

Ymir stared down at him with her arms crossed, and he stared back in the same position, though how he managed to stare her down was a mystery. To an outsider they looked like they were having some sort of apathetic war. The girl eventually hummed thoughtfully, mouth curling in consideration.

“You…would be right.” She answered after another minute.

Levi’s eyes narrowed. “And you were going to tell us this, when?”

“Never, unless we wanted a one way trip to the loony bin,” was the quick answer. “Would you have believed us if we told you that not only has the 104th reincarnated, but the rest of the people from our time? We kept our mouths shut as soon as we figured out you didn’t remember us. You and
Levi said nothing for a minute. Ymir was right. He had a clear memory of his life, and nothing – not even a dream – hinted at a past life. He was...bothered, for sure. It was a concept that needed time to accept, and he was already having a hard time believing Annie. The only thing proving her story was the reaction of the 2104th the first night. That should have been enough incentive to send her, Berthodt and Reiner to the government to pay for their crimes two thousand years ago, except the punishment would end up being to go back to the legion and eventually die by titan. The legion's reputation would suffer in light of a skeptical public as well.

They couldn’t waste more time with political toils anyway.

“And the Jaeger kid?” he asked, “was he…” his face twisted in disgust to find the right words, “was I close to him?”

“Eren?” Ymir asked in surprise. “Um…” she was back to thinking again, Levi had half a mind to tell her to stop pulling such stupid faces, he was eighty percent sure she did that just to pull his leg.

“Eren…used to be a shifter. Dunno what happened, he was eighty percent sure she did that just to pull his leg.

“Eren…used to be a shifter. Dunno what happened, he should still be, but he’s not anymore. He was the first one discovered,” she snapped her fingers suddenly, “the shifter of Trost, that was him. Military police wanted to dissect him, scouting legion didn’t. Eren ended up helping in the war. To keep him guarded in case he went full stupid titan, you volunteered to watch over him.”

“I did?” he asked dully. This sounded made up.

“I had this theory that you two had a thing going on, but everyone says Eren just worshiped the ground you walked on,” Ymir ended bitterly, “I swear you two had a secret love fest going on…”

Levi couldn’t tell if the other girl was joking or not, but all the same it made his gut tighten and feel nauseous. His eye twitched involuntarily. “A thing?”

Utopia

The vault had been found in ten minutes. Dazz’s quarters were near the dungeons, so getting there was a matter of speed. Twice he heard the struggle and grunts of Nack and Millius knocking out people nearby. No one was in the dungeons, the cells having been empty long ago. The door itself was disguised as the stone wall at the end, opened automatically after a few nervous minutes of Hannah hacking past its alarm sensors. She wasn’t a master either, and it made Dazz wonder how much damage a true hacker could do in the palace. The entrance security was strong, but inside they might as well hand their well kept secrets over with a pretty bow on top.

Instead of a room glowing with gold as he secretly imagined, the vault was like a storage room for files. Gray cabinets filled the space in rows, much like a bank would. Millius gave him a nod as he stood by the door, and Dazz stepped inside, feeling dread on where to look.

Lucky for him, the cabinets were labeled by year, not alphabetical order. He breezed past the thousands all the way down to the end of the room – which was a lot bigger than he first thought. At the very end he came upon two dusty filing cabinets. The bottom drawers marked 850, and the other 856 – just within the Great Wipe.
Biting his lip and hoping not to trip an alarm, Dazz opened the first. There was a typed up document titled Battle of Trost. Pulling out Armin’s phone, Dazz started taking pictures of every page, then gave up halfway – he was wasting time, and the legend was already well known. He opened the next cabinet and found a laminated letter that was yellowed with age and slightly torn in places. It was the only item inside, so he took a picture and put everything back in place. He looked to other cabinets hoping for more that had designated years of the Great Wipe, but the following ones had 958 when history started recording again.

Reluctantly, Dazz snuck out to join Millius.

“Find anything?” Millius whispered.

“Trost and a letter,” Dazz muttered back. They closed the vault and made their way out of the dungeons. This was too easy. They expected a little more resistance. A trick wire or something. The night was unusually quiet and it made him nervous.

Still, they made their way to Dazz’s room with no further problems, sparing two minutes before the security cameras rebooted. They didn’t feel any success. Only two guards were knocked out. It was like they were welcome to dig around supposedly locked doors. In a bout of paranoia, Dazz locked the door and turned off the lights, leaving Armin’s phone the only source of light.

“That was too easy, if we don’t get caught by tomorrow, then this place is as stupid as its king,” Nack muttered, sitting on the lone bed where the others gathered. Dazz stood before the wall in front of them and carefully took down a generic painting of a flowery cottage. He clicked through the pictures taken and selected a display option.

A stronger light flashed off the phone, hitting the wall in the shape of a square. The picture of the letter was now magnified and easy for everyone to read. Dazz’s hand was shaking too much though, so he dragged a desk over as quietly as possible and set it there. The other four huddled by him for a better look at the wall. The words were written in a neat scrawl in an ancient language, but they could easily read it and already felt a kinship to the long dead writer.

To You Two Thousand Years from Now

I am writing this in the hopes that the war is over and humanity has been able to live on in freedom.

I am from a dark era that continues to thrive in hell. Our kind – near extinct now – has been forced to hide behind walls by the great humanoid monsters we refer to as Titans. I have worked diligently for ways to end their reign to no avail, and am now close to death for my suffering. It has been four years since the death of my son. Eleven since the death of my wife, both at the hands of titans. In my search for vengeance I have found many answers, but also many failures. It is with this last attempt that I write to you, fellow reader.

I am a man of science. My work has saved hundreds of lives from plagues. To save humanity, I have even put my son in line of fire. A decision I’ll regret to my grave. In my despair my research took me to ancient tombs of religion and myth. My obsession led me to try to recreate theories into reality. Experimentations that labeled me a lunatic and tarnished my reputation and credibility.

However, I have gained a small following of people just as desperate as me. We have worked together to help create a means to gather the spirits of this hopeless world and bring them back to fight once more. Our attempts have borne no fruit, and constant research to find the error has led me to believe that the result will not be instant, but within a few years. Perhaps hundreds. My
personal prediction is two thousand years, a ripe age when humanity has made advancements far beyond this time. By then I pray that the titans have already been eradicated and the reincarnated can live a peaceful life beyond the walls.

I leave this letter in the hands of the king who has given me and others shelter from the invasion occurring now, and who will keep it safe until the day his descendent finds the people who have returned.

If this is you, Eren, my son. Apologies are not enough for my actions and my absence. Please know that I did what I did to keep you safe. And that I have failed.

Grisha Jaeger

The silence in the room was deafening. This wasn’t what they were looking for, but it was the answer to the question they’d been asking themselves since birth, and now that it was here, glowing on the wall from Armin’s ugly and incredibly useful phone, they were too shaken to say anything.

They didn’t come back by a stroke of fate or some weak theory that their souls were angry enough to come back. This was the work of a man dabbling in things beyond his understanding, and it worked!

Someone swallowed, the squishy noise loud in the room. Dazz turned to the others, pale in the dim light and stiff as boards. One by one they turned to him, helpless and lost.

For once, Dazz willingly took the reins, “okay. So now that we’ve figured out why we’re back, let’s continue our mission.”

Closing slack jaws, their eyes hardened with purpose, weak grins admitting their disorientation, but thankful for Dazz returning things to normal again.

Isra

He found them at the gym. It was a few minutes until dinner, and people were shuffling toward the mess hall. Jean had just come out of the locker rooms after changing out of his sweaty clothes, leaving Marco behind on the spring mat to finish up a routine he’d been toying with. When he returned Marco had already finished and was talking to Annie by the front doors. She hadn’t shown her face since the first day at Isra, a safety precaution done by Erwin – claiming it was to keep everyone safe should the shifters go rogue.

It obviously wasn’t that big a deal if Annie could go waltzing around on her own.

Sensing he was invading something private, Jean hid behind a pile of mats closest to the pair and unabashedly tried to listen in. The topic of Annie was something Marco avoided, leaving Jean to wonder what role she played in his death. The freckled boy didn’t seem to have any grudge against her unless she planned on betraying them again, and he had no qualms with including her in his threats to Berthodt, so Jean was left feeling unsure one way or the other.

The pair stared at each other, like a mental conversation was going on. Marco didn't seemed bothered by her, and she returned the favor.
“I’m sorry,” she said, just barely over a whisper.

“It wasn’t your fault,” he returned, his face never changing. Her eyes narrowed in that way Jean had seen his friends do when they messed something up and were hating themselves for it.

Annie’s lips thinned briefly, having an internal struggle before relaxing again. “Are you going to tell him?”

“Eventually.”

Jean frowned, leaning closer and barely keeping the mats from toppling over. What the hell were they talking about?

“Eventually?” Her icy eyes questioned.

Marco smiled. It used to be the type that would reassure people and feel safe. Now it sent chills down Jean’s spine. “Until I’m sure.”

Annie dug her hands into the pockets of her sweater, looking away briefly and seemingly ending their conversation. Marco thought so as well, and started to turn away when she spoke up again. “He thinks I killed you. They all do.”

“Do you want me to correct them?”

She pursed her lips and glared at him. Marco chuckled, running a hand through his sweat dampened hair. “Bertholdt won’t talk to me or Reiner. You did something.”

He lowered his hand back to his side, the lighthearted chuckle cutting short. “I only told him what he needed to hear. Is that all you wanted to tell me?”

She looked away again, her cheeks coloring a delicate pink. “Don’t tell him eventually. Tell him now. I’m not going to be used as a substitute anymore.”

“Fair enough,” he dropped his smile, “as long as I’m not your substitute either.”

Satisfied with a nod, Annie left, leaving Marco to stand at the door while Jean remained hidden, confused as all hell and feeling oddly dirty.
“We found footage, sir.”

The phone call caught Nile just before he left the office for the palace. Early morning and restless sleep were clinging to him. The paperwork he had to get done didn’t make him feel any more alert than when he dragged himself out of bed. This phone call only made him feel more out of sorts.

He didn’t recognize the voice, however, seeing as this line was private and secure, it had to be someone from the brigade. “Who is this?”

“Marlo Freudenberg, sir, one of the recruits stationed at Stohess.”

“Stohess?” he rubbed his eyes. He didn’t know a Marlo, and held back from saying so, poor kid sounded so damn ‘official’ unlike his lazy drunkard veterans. “What footage?” he asked instead.

“One involving the murder of Marco Bodt’s parents, and the other of the Jinae bus accident. They were blurry shots, but Boris managed to get a –”

“Wait,” he turned away from the door and rushed to his desk, pulling his tablet out of his jacket and clipping it onto the built in touch screen keyboard. “The Bodt Case? That assignment was given to Dennis Eibringer, he closed it himself, who gave you the green light to open it again?”

“He did,” Marlo answered, a touch uncertain, “the assignment was handed to me yesterday.”

“Yesterday,” Nile mimicked. A cold case was given to a shiny eyed brand spanking new recruit yesterday. Dennis Eibringer was this kid’s superior officer, Nile trusted him to get at least something out of the Bodt case two years ago and nothing came up. Even on the night Marco’s his parents were murdered, officers handling the case couldn’t find anything other than the account of a traumatized boy. The fact that it was kept from the media made investigations slow to a stop until it became forgotten. And yet this Marlo found something in just twenty four hours.

The faith Nile had over his veterans could not be any smaller.

“Yes, Boris, Hitch, and I have been working on it, sir. I thought you’d like to know we found footage seeing as it was a cold case and you had some interest in it a few years ago.”

Boris. Hitch. Nile couldn’t remember those names either. He ran a hand through his hair irritably over his lack of attention to recruits from the other camps. He could guiltily remember the names of the recruits Pixis shoved at him, and the many standouts from the 2104th. “Where are you now, are Boris and Hitch with you?”

“Y-yes! We’re in the computer room, I’ve just emailed the videos to you.”

“Aww, isn’t he cute when he’s sucking up?”

Truths

Utopia
Nile twitched at the voices in the background. Just from their one liners he could already tell their personalities. “Put up the Conference Line, I’d rather not use the phone,” in truth, he wanted to get a good look at their faces before visiting Stohess and confusing them for other people. There was some fumbling at the other end and light argument, but eventually his tablet received a request for a group video chat, which he accepted.

Immediately his desk came to life. Holographic screens lit up over the desk, loading up live feeds of three young people sitting in the computer room back in Stohess. The one in the middle with the bowl cut and stern eyes had to be Marlo. The only girl grinning at him was most likely Hitch, and the third, Boris.

“Now, explain everything to me again.”

“Yes, sir,” Marco clicked around the keyboard, pulling up two videos beside his window. He maximized the top one and hit play, “this is the security footage of the murder.”

There was no sounds, the murder had occurred in poverty stricken area. The Bodt seniors were running down an empty street, practically carrying their son who – from his body language – looked confused. They were agitated. Nervous. Definitely running away from a pursuer. They were gone from the video’s range, but rushed backwards, shielding their son behind them and shouting at another unseen party.

A few seconds of begging, and the assailant came into view, stabbing at their vital points with cold precision. As they crumbled to the floor, the killer stared at the frozen boy, then left.

“We couldn’t get a good look at his face with the blurriness,” Boris said once the video finished. “So we put it through the pixilation program and came up with this,” the video went back to the full view of the killer, and was forced into a close up and sharpening of so many layers that it took a long five minutes before the image was clear.

The man was young – late teens. The night shadowed most of his face, but Nile could still see thick black brows and a roundish shape of a face. Nile expected to see knives in his hands, but they were empty. Meaning he killed the Bodt’s with his bare hands through blows strong enough to cut through them like bullets. This boy was insanely strong.

“This is the accident,” Marlo interrupted, playing the video. Nile leaned forward with interest. He was told that the accident had destroyed the camera’s leaving them with only interviews with the passengers to go by. It didn’t help much since they were too traumatized to remember the important details. He would have to make a call with investigators on this case as well. The lack of commitment in his brigade was really biting at him.

This video was a bit clearer and with sound. It was a right side overhead view. The daytime splashed the interior in color. It was filled with chatty young passengers on their way to Jinae University until the bus suddenly tipped over and flipped causing Nile’s speakers to scream from the chaos ensuing. He swallowed down bile as he watched the gory sight of the twelve unfortunate passengers lose limbs from the impact. There was a quiet moment of confusion when things settled down, then more screaming once the able bodied victims saw the result of the accident.

“Rewind that for me,” Nile said, there had been a passenger who stood up seconds before the flip.
He was two seats from the front of the bus, but he had to be sure.

“You saw it too, right?” Hitch drawled. He spared her a quick glance then went back to watch.

Marlo paused the moment the passenger stood up, the image was magnified and there, in full view with his messenger bag and knitted vest and jeans was a shocked Marco Bodt. “The state of his death had been due to standing when the driver lost control. He had no time to prepare for impact and was sent flying across the walkway, severing half of his body against the back board of the driver’s seat with the momentum of the speed the bus was going at.”

Nile was glad for the description, it spared him from seeing the accident a second time. “What made him stand up?”

The video changed to the left camera and focused on a young man in a black hoodie staring back at Marco. Another close up and Nile recognized the dark eyebrows to the killer of Marco’s parents. He was grinning.

Nile was going to kill Dennis. This was footage three kids found in a day, and the man couldn’t do it in two years!

“This fits with the theory that the accident was premeditated.” Marlo broke his thoughts. “The evidence surrounding the bus and the state of the engine and wheels supports this. Marco Bodt was being targeted by this man, and it didn’t matter if other people ended up dying in the way.”

“So you have any other theories?” Nile leaned back in his chair, asking all three members.

Hitch blinked and laughed, “Don’t look at me, they did most of the work.”

“I...don’t think Marco chose the scouting legion just to kill titans,” Boris said, he was shifting in his chair, a little shy of voicing his opinion after Marlo dominated the floor. “The killer took his parents, and then put innocent people in harms way when he went after him. According to personal friends of his childhood and Keith Shadis’s reports, Marco is described as a kindhearted individual who puts the priorities of others before his own – ”

“Once you get past the whole crazy deal,” Hitch added, earning glares from her two comrades.

“My point is,” Boris snarled at her then turned back to Nile, “I think he joined recon to keep his murderer away from citizens should he go after him again. At least with soldiers they can defend themselves.”

Nile nodded, somewhat accepting the theory. He’d seen Marco a couple of times, it was hard to tell if his cheerful sunshine and daisies persona was real or an act. “So this guy went after him to keep his identity secret from his first murder of Marco’s parents. Finishing the job, so to say.”

“We thought that at first,” Marlo nodded. “But why walk away from the first murder when there’s obviously a witness standing right in front of you? We did some digging for reasons behind the murders. The parents could have been a random act of mugging, but to go after Marco through such a coordinated plan suggests there’s something more behind this.”

“And what did you find?”

The videos were taken down to show three ID pictures of the Bodt family. The father looked nothing
like his son save for his eyes and friendly smile. The mother, however, could have passed for Marco’s twin, her freckles sprinkled over her face that grinned at the camera with a devil may care demeanor. “Nicolas Bodt was a teacher in Jinae’s private academy, he instructed various subjects including math, history, art, and literature. He even wrote a book on the Battle of Trost. Before Marco’s birth Eva Bodt was a forensics scientist specializing in the ancient artifacts unearthed within the walls. Her work on the remains in Trost helped build the legend as it is today. Taking early acceptance classes at Jinae University, Marco majored in history up until the end of his freshman year when the accident occurred.”

Wait a minute.

Nile looked closely at the ID’s, the information showing age, ID number, name and occupation. History was a common area of interest in the walls, people were starting to give up the old traditions of ignorance, and the 2104th were notorious for their interest of the past. But this connection was so obvious that he started having second thoughts.

Marlo helped him banish that doubt. “The Bodt family were historians – very particular historians.”

Oh, Dennis Eibringer was so dead.

Utopia

The Palace

Contrary to their fears they received no trouble the next day. Yannick came to each room to wake them up, they enjoyed a hot bath in their private quarters, and changed into the best clothes they could bring to see the king. Best meaning casual shirts and jeans that could pass at a fancy restaurant. Yannick gave them a tight smile and said nothing as he led them to the dining hall.

It was a grand room with a grand table large enough to serve more than twenty guests. The hall was surrounded by tall gothic windows that gave no room for shadows, the sun splashing the massive chandelier in a crystalline glow. Servants were walking back and forth at a leisurely pace, bowing to the five guests and their guide with cheerful ‘good morning’s.

The man who requested their visit sat at the end of the table on a gaudy monstrosity of a chair, leaning to the side to talk quietly with another person in a black suit and sunglasses. This final stranger was an oddity against the brightly dressed occupants of the palace. He would have fit better standing next to a political leader and actively shielding him from attacks.

The king himself was very young. Probably younger than Dazz and the others. There had been news reports a few years ago that the previous king and queen died in an accident while traveling to Hermiha. This left their only son to assume the throne at the tender age of fourteen. Not much was known about him other than the boy developed a case of agoraphobia and locked himself up in the palace, passing the time playing videogames. There were rumors flying around that his username was HiJinx, a skilled player and expert troll.

His name was Erik Segher, no added rank or middle name. A first in the royal Segher line. His mother was a Fortuyn who married a citizen and chose to take on his last name, breaking the Fortuyn line. Erik was just as peculiar as his mother, sitting at the table with his knees up, he was still in his pajamas of soft cotton patterned with pink bunnies. Instead of a crown, he donned a matching bunny
hat with floppy ears over his strawberry blond hair. If Dazz remembered correctly, the king was around the age of seventeen, and a little too lanky to be wearing cute attire.

They felt stupid bowing down to the teenager. Stupid and self-conscious.

“Cool, you guys are here!” he exclaimed, turning away from the man in the suit. “Sit down wherever, I’ve been real eager to see you guys! You're boss Nile Dawk called in, he'll be picking you up later, he had urgent business apparently,” he rolled his eyes and scoffed, "as if I'm not important enough!"

Struck dumb, the group stiffly picked a chair and sat down, nodding numbly in thanks to the servants who placed pancakes and toast in front of him. Other breakfast foods piled the table, towering and giving off a stomach growling aroma. Were Sasha in the vicinity, she’d eat the whole thing including the table.

“G-good morning your highness,” Millius stammered, the others murmured equal greetings, not quite sure how to go about their speech. They were meant to speak politely, but the boy was obviously the pick your nose casual type.

“Morning,” he nodded back with an exaggerated flourish of his hand. He smiled at the man in the suit and the latter walked away and left the room, not before eyeing the five suspiciously. Once the doors shut behind him, they began to feel the heavy silence in the dining hall and realized that the servants had left as well, leaving them and the king to dine privately.

Shit.

They knew things were going too well.

Merrily unaware of their nerves, Erik fished through his pockets and pulled out a portable game console. They didn’t recognize the design; the sleekness and shiny purple frame suggested it was worth more than their earnings.

thumbs expertly flying through the controls, little beeping noises emitting from it, Erik spoke again, “so how was your night at the palace?”

Dazz almost jerked, but kept as calm as he could be, “very comfortable, your highness. Thank you.”

“Hmm,” he was still smiling, and they were beginning to think it was permanently glued to his face. The boy stood up and set the console in the middle of their small section. Out of curiosity, Nack leaned over to peer at the screen and saw that there was no game paused, rather a green ring with six dots within. The sixth moving and matching Erik’s movements.

Nack slowly looked at the king. Erik pressed a finger to his lips, winking. Nack looked at the others who were trying and failing spectacularly at trying to stay at ease. There was a bead of sweat rolling down Franz’s temple, and Millius looked like he was trying to hold in a painful fart.

Erik walked down the table, eyeing the placed flatware and silverware before he was satisfied and returned to the occupied side. He then took the pitchers of juice, milk and water, and placed them on the flowerpots placed by the windows. He did the same with the beverage filled goblets, considered the small pitcher of maple syrup, and did the same as well. When he was satisfied with his work, he returned to his chair.
“Sorry,” he apologized, “Can you rest your feet on your chairs? Like me?” Baffled, they did so, feeling very silly and wondering when their punishment would come. “I had to make sure all sources of noise and vibration were eliminated.”

“I’m…sorry?” Hannah feigned, except not really since she genuinely was confused.

“You went into the vault last night,” Erik said simply, earning ghostly faces, “your squad – the 2104th, is famous, there’s been news all over the media about your aptitude and battle skill. And then there’s the whole graduation fiasco. I meant to get the invitation out to the top ten, but that hardly matters because you guys still came and you did exactly what I hoped you’d do,” he finished in excitement, his cheeks flushed pink.

Damn. Maybe this king wasn’t as stupid as they thought.

“We get soldiers who are interested in history from time to time, it’s pretty common,” he went on, waving his hand around again, “but not of an entire squad keen on the wiped era. I invited you with the intention of giving you the letter personally, but I thought this way was better, and holy shit I still can’t believe it!”

This…wasn’t making sense anymore.

“You wanted to give us the letter?” Dazz hazarded.

“Well, if you read it, you’d know why,” Erik grinned, crossing his arms, “you’re not in trouble by the way, don’t look so scared – I thought you were soldiers – anyway, I tried to make sure you got to the vault easily, but those guards got in the way. They’re freaking out right now, but I’ll just give them a raise and vacation, no biggy.”

Nack was pulling a baffled face that would have made the table giggle, except they were just as lost. “So…you’re saying you let us rough up your palace guards, break into your super-secret vault, let us take information inside, and all because you expected us to?”

“Yep, I even sent Anwir off to Yalkell to make things easier,” he nodded eagerly, “he takes his job too seriously, he would have noticed you hacking into the security system,” he turned to Hannah who flushed.

“So…not in trouble,” Millius had to be sure.

“Nope. Besides,” he grinned mischievously, “just because my guards have cameras in this palace doesn’t mean I don’t. I watched you from my room. Each of your rooms had a camera, actually.”

“Wh-what!” Franz and Hannah shot up, their faces burning. Nack and Millius couldn’t help snickering, and Dazz felt second hand embarrassment for them.

“Ah…I cut off that part,” Erik blushed, “I was looking for your reactions to the letter and that happened before you went to your own rooms to ah – ahem – sleep.”

Mortified, especially now that they basically revealed their actions after the mission, the couple sat down, their faces so red steam should be blowing out of their ears.

Dazz shook his head to get the images out. They weren’t in trouble. The king even made their little break-in easy for them, and he wasn’t going to cut their heads off for it. The letter had mentioned that
a descendent would give them the letter, but it had been written so long ago in a world still relearning the basics of science. In this time everything was scrutinized, especially the unlikely scenario of people from a lost era reincarnating to their time. No one would believe such a tale.

In short. King Erik was still strange.

“We don’t have much time before Anwir comes back,” Erick took off his bunny hat, his thick wavy hair made him appear younger, like a cherub. “My mother told me about the myth behind the letter – no one knew about it except our family – or…me now that I’m the only one,” he mumbled, fiddling with the floppy ears. The group felt a pang of empathy, understanding the loss. “I didn’t believe it at first, but I wanted to keep my promise, or tradition, whatever you want to call it. I figured I’d chance it when I heard about the 2104th, and I made the connection between the Grisha Jaeger in the letter and the doctor in Jinae – even his son, Eren. I couldn’t leave the palace to hand the letter over; I figured an invitation would do. After graduation, because I’m polite like that,” he shrugged, “I didn’t expect him to join the scouting legion…so I figured you five were good enough. You’re all interested in the wiped era – your era, so that means you remember your past lives.”

“And how did you know we’d go to your vault?” Dazz asked, still perplexed someone outside their squad knew about their secret. It almost felt like they gained a powerful ally. Even if he was a seventeen year old nutjob.

Erik grinned lopsidedly. “I kept throwing Pixis hints whenever he visited. Made it seem like I had weapons in there and I was planning to use them should there be no other choice. Nile would flash a warrant in my face and knock down the vault, but Pixis would be sneakier. It was a giant leap of faith on my part. I’m surprised things turned out so well.”

They were impressed. This kid was almost as smart as Armin. Shit, they even had the same blue eyes. What was it with smart people and blue eyes? And he was blond…

“Your highness,” Dazz said, subconsciously clutching his knees, “do you know what happened to our era?”

What little cheeriness left in the boy melted to soberness. He dug into the interior of his hat where an enclosed pocket was sewn in. They waited with baited breath as he produced two skeleton keys dull and marked with age, both of very different designs from each other.

“The letter came with these keys. I’m not sure where they go but – ” Erik blinked at Millius who leaned closer for a better look. “But I’ve kept them safe after I inherited them from my mother.”

“That one looks familiar, but I can’t remember where,” Millius frowned at the key with the end designed in a hollow square shape with circles at each point. It was plain, yet struck chords in his memory. The other was even plainer with numbers engraved at the handle that was in the shape of a generic circle.

“Please take them,” Erik took his hand and gently placed the keys on his palm, staring at them wistfully now that he had to part ways. “They came with the letter, they’re meant for you. When you leave I’ll give security the pardon to allow you to leave without a pat down. I don’t want anyone knowing you have these – not even Nile Dawk.” He smiled sadly, “and no, I don’t know anything about the wiped era. I’m sorry.”

A knock at the door alerted the king to snatch his console back from the table and shout for whoever was on the other side to wait.
“Quick!” he hissed, scrambling out of his seat and stuffing his hat back on, every bit the little kid he had been five minutes ago, “help me put the drinks back!”

Isra

Levi was having trouble focusing and he was putting the blame on Eren Jaeger. Screw science, the brat was pulling some magic shit, and screw Ymir too, it was her fault for putting too much information in his head. Screw Annie for that matter. She started the whole thing by all that talk of reincarnation.

…Screw everyone!

Eren watched him uncertainly. For the longest minute, Levi held his mug to his lips and hadn’t moved since. His squad was peacefully oblivious, enjoying the hot beverages their new recruit prepared for them.

“Is there something wrong?” Eren asked, completely innocent.

Ymir had said the boy was a shifter in his past life. That he and Eren had something together, called it a ‘love fest’. Levi couldn’t see it, he was too old for the kid. No matter what his face and height implied, he was about a decade – more than a decade older. Two thousand years ago maybe people wouldn’t bat an eye. They probably wouldn’t care that it was between a senior officer and subordinate. Their ancestors were kinky like that, but right now, if he ever tried to pull something he’d be breaking some taboos, and his own personal rules.

If their roles and ages had been the same back then as it was now, he couldn’t imagine how such a relationship functioned. Wouldn’t Eren be too immature for him? Ymir never got into the details, but if Levi volunteered to watch over Eren back then, and was allowed, then that meant he had to have some level of higher authority, right? Which had to mean he was older.

He was thinking too much, and Eren was starting to look like a kicked puppy.

Finishing his sip, Levi set down the mug. He could ask Eren directly and get a straight answer, risking a potential broken heart because he could see now that the boy has crushing something fierce. Or he could stay quiet, forget what Ymir said, and move on with his life.

“No, its fine,” he answered shortly. Eren’s spirits sprung back up, his tanned cheeks flushed, and Levi looked away, already feeling bad.

“This is just the way I like it,” Petra sighed contentedly, hugging her steaming mug close to her, “Eren how did you know?”

“Yeah,” Gunter looked up from his tablet, “did you work at a café or something?”

“Er…you could say that,” Eren laughed nervously, “my customers were very particular…” He let out a yelp when someone grabbed his arm, Erd loomed over him with scary piercing eyes, Auruo right behind him like a shadow.

“You’re making our coffee every morning, no excuses,” the blond said.
“And tea! Tea too!” Petra cried, gazing at Eren with sparkling devotion.

“U-uh…sure,” the young man laughed nervously as Petra latched onto his other arm. “If that’s all right with you, sir,” he turned to Levi.

The corporal eyed his squad with a mix of embarrassment and defeat. They were Eren’s seniors, they should hold a little more restraint. Next to him Gunter snorted into his mug and he threw him a none too subtle evil eye before turning back to Eren.

Bright green eyes stared back expectantly. He was just brushing into his twenties, but he still looked like a kid no matter how tall he was. His longish hair was reaching down the nape of his neck, lazy bangs framing and further softening his youthful face. He needed a haircut. Badly. If one looked at him too quickly, he’d be confused for a girl. Then again, if put on his rage face, as Levi had seen during…

Wait.

Levi froze.

He’d never seen Eren angry yet, how did he know what he'd look like if he only met him at graduation over two weeks ago? There was the dinner when they introduced the shifters, but that was only a brief moment, and Levi was sure he'd seen Eren far angrier before.

This was going to bother him all day.

“I’m okay with it,” he finally answered, hiding his irritation behind his tea as he took another sip. The leaves were infused in just the right strength, the water at just the right temperature, and the faint aroma of honey giving it just the right amount of sweetness and flavor boost.

Exactly the way he liked it.

Fuck.

Training Camp

Curfew hadn’t set in yet, they finally returned after the harsh week in the mountains, so the trainees were allowed a free evening to rest their aching muscles. Dinner was spent quietly with the occasional moan of pain and longing for bed. Once dinner had ended, most filed off to the barracks. Annie was used to the abuse on her body, leaving her to wander around camp to clear her head.

They lost two trainees that week. Their bodies were too weak to handle the harsh climate, and if it weren’t for Ymir and Christa the last time they went to the mountains, they would have also lost Dazz. Not that Annie was all that fond of the boy, but it would remind her how weak humanity truly was.

She didn’t know who the two trainees were. She’d seen them in passing, but the way their friends mourned their loss hit her somehow. She thought that would be it for them, they’d quit, go home,
and pretend this never happened. She didn’t think they would train harder than ever, as if
shouldering their dead friends’ spirits made them stronger. It had spread like a domino effect,
reinvigorating the rest of the group to keep fighting no matter how much their bodies screamed.

Even the frail little Armin was pulling his weight and it made her pause. Made her rethink her beliefs.

Maybe the weak could change the flow of things. Maybe they could push back against those taller
than them.

Perhaps humanity was stronger than she originally thought.

She stop short in her musings when she walked past the dark and empty mess hall, and saw Marco
standing against the wall, his hand covering his face and his shoulders shaking. All telltale signs of
something she should not have barged in on. To her shame it was her shock that kept her rooted on
the spot.

She didn’t have time to catch herself and walk away, as soon as her footsteps were heard, Marco
turned to her sharply, his eyes red rimmed and cheeks wet with tears. For the slightest second she
could see the immense sadness in his eyes before mortification replaced it and he turned away to
roughly wipe his face.

“A-Annie,” he stuttered, freckled cheeks red. He sniffled, and distractedly looked away, wiping his
nose on his sleeve, “what you – I thought you’d be in bed by now.”

“I felt like walking,” she replied as noncommittally as she could. Marco nodded and kept his face
turned away. She understood it as a sign to leave, but against better judgment she remained. Marco
was hardly the first person she’d think to find crying in a corner. Nothing else happened after those
deaths, and she was pretty sure the boy hadn’t been close to them. This was something different, and
her curiosity was winning over polite respect to leave.

Marco was generally a happy person. Sympathetic and kind – traits she tried to banish to keep up
with her mission. It was hard to think of anything that could make him cry in secret. She was sure if
he got news of a relative dying he’d accept the comfort of friends. Death couldn’t be the issue. Or
was it imminent death? Was he starting to realize the fragility of his own mortality?

The mortality of others?

She knew he was close to Jean and Mina, and according to Mina he had a habit of playing the
martyr. He risked losing points during attack exercises so his teammates could score instead. Annie
could never understand him.

“Hey,” he spoke up calmly now, but still not facing her, “have you ever liked someone so bad it
seems impossible to get over them?”

Oh. Annie realized she’d become tense at the sight of the taller boy’s tears, and relaxed.

“No,” she answered honestly.

Marco laughed sadly, a sound she didn’t think could exist, but now struck her as abruptly as the
deaths in the mountains. “That’s harsh, I guess none of us are good enough for you.” He paused, and
Annie was starting to feel sheepish, “but I guess you’re lucky.”
Annie remained silent. Marco liked someone. Whoever this person was, didn’t feel the same, hence the crying. She almost sighed, feeling like she was wasting her time. Romance had never been her thing, especially if it involved unrequited feelings. Although, she couldn’t imagine anyone not liking Marco. If the guys harbored Christa as their goddess and were making secret plans of proposal, the girls did the same to Marco. They were just really good people who put others before themselves and were so easily approachable. That always attracted admiration.

Unless, she corrected herself, if it were a guy Marco liked. Then things could get messy. They would have to share the same sleeping quarters, baths, change around each other…She could see why this troubled the freckled boy so much. His crush would be so close yet so far away.

“You like Jean,” she concluded. Or hazarded. Marco was the only one to tolerate the other boy’s personality, and that had to involve more reasons than patience. She could only handle small doses of Jean herself.

Marco didn’t reply immediately, but he did turn enough for her to see half his face, dry now, and rubbed raw.

“What would you do if you had feelings for Mina?”

Annie couldn’t imagine it, but she tried to humor him. “She’s thinking of joining the scouting legion thanks to Eren. I’m going to the military police. I’d tell her.”

“Because you’re both probably never going to see each other again,” he construed. Annie nodded and he chuckled again, “and what would you do if that’s not the case?”

“Then I wouldn’t,” she could feel her cheeks warm up, “I value our friendship. Telling her might ruin it.”

Friendship. One of the few important things she learned while being in the walls. It was hard for her to make friends, and when she did, she never thought she’d value it as she did with Mina. It was starting to cloud her judgment.

“I value mine too…but it’s hard to take the hugs platonically when all you want is to…” he shut his mouth and shook his head. “I’m sorry. I don’t even know why I’m telling you this. It must be trivial for you.”

It was. And at the same time...“Not really,” she admitted, stuffing her hands in her pockets. “You’re only human.”

Marco smiled sadly again. “You say that as if you’re not.”

She wasn’t. Not completely. Her time here was making her start to wish she were. That way she wouldn’t have to hide so much…

Her humanity was torn from her before she had a chance to fight back. She’d seen Reiner struggle with his identity in private, every day he disassociated himself further from his childhood the more attached he became with the squad. Berthodt had been ruined far longer than herself, already lost to the mission given to him, yet he too held the guilt from Shiganshina. His self-hate taking form in his lack of self-confidence that everyone came to know as an unfortunate trait. Moments like these made her realize how little she truly knew about the drive of the human spirit. How much more freer these trapped people were in soul than her village could ever be outside the walls.
It burned her.

“I’d better turn in,” Marco pushed himself away from the building, “curfew’s almost – ” he looked down at the tiny hand grasping his arm.

“You should tell him,” she said, contrary to her earlier advice. “Maybe there’s a chance.”

“I’ll tell him eventually.”

“Eventually?” she looked at him, unimpressed.

Marco shrugged, the miserable state she found him in returning as a ghost. “When I’m not so terrified.”

“Why?”

“You *have* noticed the way he looks at Mikasa, haven’t you?” he arched an eyebrow at her. “I’ll tell him later…much later. When I don’t feel this strongly for him,” he lowered his head as if ashamed of his own feelings.

It got Annie thinking again about the mysteries of humanity. Love was not a weapon that could tear through their skin and blow them apart like a cannon. Love was a feeling. It made one stronger, or weaker. It could drive a soldier to great lengths, gift a mother with the strength of an army. And it could shatter them enough to bring them to their knees.

Right now it was striking its blow on a normally strong and healthy boy. Someone who did nothing, but look at their friend and realize something no one else could see, and it was hurting him.

It was a powerful weapon.

Annie hoped to never feel love like he did.

But she also wouldn’t be able to stand by and watch him gaze at his friend with the loneliness she could see now. That would be as distracting as her growing issues with the mission.

She kept her hand around his arm, feeling strong developing muscles underneath his plain shirt. He along with everyone else were slowly becoming the soldiers Keith demanded them to be. Could that ever be enough against the titans? “I’ll help you,” she said.

“What?”

“I’ll help you,” she repeated.

Months later, after so many nights hidden in dark corners, he continued to call out his name. By then Annie could no longer brush off Marco’s feelings for Jean. She sympathized. She understood his bitter loneliness. The ache in her chest that had never been there hit her like a punch in the gut. The idea that love could go away though self-discipline was laughable. It hurt, and it felt like it could never go away.

It was also the most wonderful feeling to ever experience.
She found herself wishing with everything she had that this world could be different and it wouldn’t be Marco in her arms, but another as they hid in empty closets clinging to each other in a mess of tangled limbs and sweat. That the person she called out for could hold her, kiss her, comfort her and convince her to not go ahead with the mission. She knew that’s what he would do, he always had a way with words...

2856

Isra

The cabin was quiet that night. Eren was strangely quiet when curfew set in, and Armin was busy fiddling with his old fashioned phone to bother with anyone else. This left Jean more opportunity to mull over his thoughts from yesterday. He didn’t want to, but the lack of distraction was forcing him.

If he was interpreting the conversation between Marco and Annie right, Annie didn’t kill Marco. She just stole his gear. A plausible fact that still didn’t settle right in his stomach because she stole Marco’s gear. And he was going to ignore the fact that he did the same to another dead comrade because he at least didn’t use it to hide any illicit actions like killing titans crucial to a certain crazy scientist’s experimentations.

Okay.

Annie didn’t kill Marco.

He could live with that.

Now, what was the rest of their conversation about? Who was the ‘him’ they were referring too? They also mentioned substitution – or rather they were each other’s substitution, but for what?

Jean had an idea, and the more he thought about it, the more he hated it. He knew it wasn’t any of his business. Asking Marco was out of the question, and like hell was he going to talk to Annie. He could always ask Armin, get a scolding for his troubles, then an articulate interpretation that’d probably smack Jean in the face and make him feel stupid.

…Or he could pull an Armin and sneak the answer out of Marco.

Jean considered this with growing distaste. Nah, he wasn’t smart enough.

Maybe the innocent straight laced question would do. “Hey, Marco, you asleep?”

“Nope.”

That caught him off guard. He was expecting a sleepy reply. Jean gathered his thoughts, rolling to his side to face the room, his movements rocking the bunk bed since he took the top. “I…” he pursed his lips, “we never talked about how you died. Back in Trost.”

Movement from below rocked the bunk bed again. “I thought that was obvious. A titan got me.”

A titan. Right, he forgot. That didn’t fully answer his question, though. “Was Annie there?”
“Oh.” Silence followed, and Jean was starting to regret asking. Marco never really talked about his death, or death’s seeing as he died twice. The fact would always make Jean fear that his friend would leave him again. “She was helping us. An aberrant got me right when she arrived. She had nothing to do with my death—although, she did take my gear,” he ended with a chuckle, “you guys never failed to remind me of that.”

Jean’s fingers dug into the stiff sheets, biting into the corner of his mouth. How could he say that like it was a running joke? “I thought for the longest time that she killed you. We all did.”

A pause, then a blown out sigh. More rustling and creaking, and Marco was out of his bed. Jean watched his tuft of black hair move to the corner and hoist himself up onto the top bunk, crawling over the mattress keeping in mind not to hit his head on the ceiling, and lying down to join him. He face was so close Jean could count each freckle individually in the dim glow of the night. His breath caught in his throat under Marco’s dark eyes.

Occasionally his right eye would flash red, but Jean had three years to get used to it.

“I might die again out there and it still won’t be her fault,” he said quietly, keeping the silence undisturbed. “I died fighting for humanity, I won’t regret that. No matter how messed up I become, I’ll never side with the titans. I’ll never leave your side.”

Jean was feeling a funny twist in his throat and he blurted out, “I don’t want you to die again.” His hands latched onto the front of Marco’s shirt. Embarrassed, Jean duck his head, his forehead bumping against Marco’s collarbone.

“You seemed fine with me joining recon when we were training,” Marco wrapped an arm around him.

“Yeah, but…” he shook his head, letting go of his best friend’s shirt to hold Marco close, “back then we didn’t have to fight titans within a few weeks. You’re stronger now, but…” he remembered catching Marco in the simulation room. The uncontrollable laughter. The slaughter… “Sometimes you scare me, and I don’t know what to do or say to bring you back.” He bit his bottom lip, a warmth coiling in the pit of his stomach, “half the time I don’t even want to and I end up scaring myself.”

“Really?” Marco said softly, reaching up to bury his fingers into Jean’s tousled hair. “What are you trying to say? You like me when I lose it?”

Beneath him Jean flushed, going rigid in this arms. He swallowed loudly, and nervously shook his head. His smaller frame squirming in discomfort against Marco. “That’s not what I…I meant…”

“No, that’s exactly what you said,” Marco smiled, hope and giddiness bubbling inside him. Tiptoeing beyond his boundaries, a surprisingly slim amount when it came to Jean, he ran fingers down his spine and slipped under the worn shirt, circling little patterns with his thumb against hot soft flesh on the small of Jean’s back, a single scar from training marring the smooth skin there. Jean’s breath hitched and shuddered, but he made no move to push him away and took it as an invitation to go bolder.

Annie had told him to tell Jean. While this wasn’t talking, actions spoke louder than words.

“What are you —?” Jean jerked at the feeling of wandering fingers sneaking under his boxers to curl over and massage his cheek. He stared up at Marco with wide eyes, shuddering again at the
unfamiliar feeling of being touched so intimately. The other boy stared back, unabashed as if he wasn’t playing with his ass.

“I’ve wanted you,” Marco said, hot breath brushing over Jean’s lips, “I can’t even tell you for how long. I feel like I’ve always wanted you.”

Jean let out a little sound of surprise at the confession. Funny, because he wasn’t. He kept denying the looks and affectionate gestures, but…Sina, this made that conversation with Annie a lot more sense. And if substitute meant what he thought it meant, then Marco and Annie…

No. He felt something in him snap. His hate for Annie swelled all over again for largely different reasons. Marco should never have gone to her! They never should have…were they still…?

No. Annie broke it off and Marco was fine with it. Good.

Wrapping a hand behind the Idiot-Who-Took-Forever-to-Confess’s head, Jean pulled him in and smashed their lips together in a fierce dance that would drive away any memory of Annie touching Marco’s body.

Marco was his. Only his.
His body was hot. The cold clamminess in the bedroom did nothing to cool him down, not with the other boy against him as they lay on his bed, his paler thighs straddling the younger's lap. He found he didn’t really want to break away. Wrapping his arms around a naked torso, feeling years of training and battle tightened into well-defined muscles. He stared into luminous green eyes, half-mast with lust and something more.

“Levi…”

The heat within him burned deliciously as their lips met. Their tongues lapping and dancing, greedily clinging to each other. He rocked forward into the younger man, their arousals grinding with beautiful friction that made his breath hitch. He tangled his fingers into black locks, needing to feel them, to see his green eyes and abused lips.

Their short breaths intermingled, eyes never steering from each other until he couldn’t stand it and shut his eyes and arched at the feel of being stretched in his intimacy. Feel his lover slide inside him in a slow and tender thrust. He moaned as softly as he could, seeing stars beneath his eyelids.

Gathering himself, he looked back at him, kissed him once more and sharing another moan when they moved ever so perfectly to a rhythm only they could make.

...

Levi drifted to consciousness feeling breathless and lost for a few moments. He could feel his face was warm from the last dregs of the dream, still so vivid in his mind. Looking around, his disorientation dissipated when he realized he was in his own private quarters with the sun streaming over him, and the mother of all boners.

He stared at the tent in his lap, almost as if he didn’t recognize what it was.

It kind of hurt, too.

Levi clenched his jaw and roughly pulled off the sheets. He was going to need a cold shower. Like hell was he going to fap off to a wet dream about a kid. He could already feel the self-disgust boiling in him.

Utopia

They finished their rounds for the morning and were now huddled in the unused conference room staring at the holographic screen from Hannah’s tablet displaying Dot Pixis’s thoughtful face.
As King Erik promised, they got out of palace grounds without the regular security check. Their valuables were returned, and Nile led them back to headquarters.

“I have urgent business in Stohess,” he told them on the way, “I meant to personally give you your scheduled patrols for the day, but I’m trusting Adalet to do it for me.”

After he left via car, they naturally assumed another free day was given to them, but Adalet was one of the few veterans who took her job seriously. She directed them to their posts in the southeast section of the city and gave advice concerning how to approach certain situations. She was blunt and didn’t take shit from anyone. Dazz and the others liked her immediately.

By the time they were done with their first patrol and back at headquarters for a break, it was midafternoon. They hadn’t had any time to contact Pixis until now.

He stared at the photographs of the keys they sent him through email. “The square one is a mystery to me, but I believe this second one opens some kind of safe or locker. Something that would require the need to put a number on the key.” He rubbed his chin, still skeptical, “then again it could just be a serial number of the key itself…”

“We spoke to Armin about it, sir,” Franz said, huddled between Nack and Hannah. “He told us his parents gave him a book on touring the districts. Certain places like Trost name spots in their cities in order to keep with organization and historical significance.”

Pixis’s eyes glinted with his smirk, “I’m assuming you have a plan then?”

“We can think of three districts that might fit the origin of this key,” Dazz said, counting off his fingers, “Stohess, Yalkell, and Hermiha.”

“These are all from Wall Sina.” He looked troubled, yet amused, “I’m guessing this is all due that letter you found.”

The group nodded. After a long eight hours of patrol, they had thought hard on whether to show Pixis the letter. The connection of Grisha and Eren Jaeger was explicitly written there, and telling the older man would risk the doctor being called in for questioning. They knew the Grisha Jaeger of this time had no recollection of the past, telling Pixis about the letter would only make unnecessary trouble. They couldn’t complicate things further, but they had to push their point across.

The next best thing to do without revealing any notes of reincarnation or names was to brief it up. They gave Hannah the assignment to crop and manipulate the letter through a photography program. With luck, Pixis would find it legit and not ask questions. She’d done a good job, the photograph looked very convincing.

“The contents of the letter implies that the king was forced to take refugees into his palace in order to keep them safe from an invasion,” Millius said, underlining the brief line in the letter that their superior was also seeing. “We can only assume the invasion was from titans.”

“Wall Rose would have been breached,” Pixis nodded grimly, “how on earth did we survive such an attack…? And reclaim Rose for that matter…”

“If Rose had been invaded, that would mean that whatever this key went to had to be within safe reach of humans since the numbers suggests it’s a public key, thus the districts in Wall Sina.” He
held up the square key, “this one, however, has no serial number or engraving, suggesting it went to a room in the writer’s home. If he was forced to leave his home to stay at the palace, then this key could either belong in Rose or Maria seeing as he could also be a refugee from the third wall. Based on the simplicity of the design, I’d say Maria.”

“Mm,” Pixis was rubbing his chin again. “You didn’t mention Utopia.”

At this Nack held up a thin text on the history of locksmiths and flipped it open to a two page spread of skeleton keys. It had been a fairly tricky book to come by since it was such a looked over subject, much less if it was about its history.

“The Wiped Era may have taken a gap in history, but the ages before are still intact,” he said, pointing to the year 700’s underneath a very rusty looking key. “Let’s assume that no design changes occurred between the 700’s to the 900’s.” He pointed to the simplest set at the far left, “these are supposedly keys from Maria before the fall. The designs are similar to the square key. Rose is around the same. Personal ones have no numbers, and public ones go by an alphanumeric system. The circle key doesn’t have letters so it’s safe to rule any district in Rose out.”

“But it’s still a simple design,” Pixis rationalized. “What makes it not from Maria?”

Nack turned the page and pointed to the districts of Sina. There were five keys of public use. Three of which were identical to the circle key. The forth was close, but slenderer, and with a detailed vine design around the circle. Notes attached said that the district this key originated from was known for trying to imitate Utopia’s standard of luxury.

To answer Pixis’s earlier question, the common key of Utopia was much more flamboyantly designed. Made of gold, it had a flat engraved initial of Utopia surrounded by rose vines. It looked more like a decorative item than anything functional.

“Yalkell, Hermiha, and Stohess are closer matches, along with the numerical engravings,” Nack concluded. “To narrow it down further we took into account that the circle key is made out of copper. Iron was the most common metal used for everyday items with the exception of Utopia – they used gold and silver exclusively,” he grinned, “three guesses which district that points us to.”

Narrowing his eyes, Pixis’s face invaded the screen as he looked closer at the pictures. “…Hermiha.” He seemed surprised at his own deduction, then frowned again as something else in his head clicked. “Hermiha?”

“Is there something wrong sir?” Dazz asked, not liking the look on the man’s face.

Pixis shook his head and waved him off, “just a thought, nothing to worry about.” He leaned back in his chair, and let out a puff of breath he’d been holding, “well that was much more than I thought I’d learn. You kids should have been detectives.”

The group failed to hide tiny smiles at the compliment, “we just really like history,” Hannah shrugged shyly.

“No secret weapons in the vault, eh?” they shook their heads, reminded of the methods Erik used to pick at the old man’s curiosity, “I guess that means you’re off to Hermiha. This is much more interesting than a couple of nukes in the palace.” He laughed to himself. “I’ll come up with an excuse to pull you out of Utopia. In the meantime keep those keys in a safe place.”
The day provided the distraction Levi needed. Right off the bat he had to visit the prisoner section of the village. It was a secluded area far from most of the cabins, and built much like a prison, though the inhabitants lived in far better conditions than they would in a cell in the walls. The idea was that seeing as they were going to die in battle, they may as well have some comfort before then.

The public would have argued otherwise, but Erwin had kept the accommodations under wraps and away from reporters. Plus it also helped him gain loyalty from the criminals, as Levi and the commander reminded them every day, they could have simply been thrown into Wall Maria right from the start. The semi comfort provided to them was the only mercy the prisoners were given, and for most, they were thankful for it.

Today, Levi had to oversee their training in the Manuever X. No new prisoners arrived, which made things easier for him. This group had already developed a respect for him and it didn't need a newbie to change their mind. Levi had been one of them after all, there was a kinship there. He appreciated their loyalty, however, due to the nature of their sentences, he was also aware that some were ruthless killers. For those, he showed no mercy.

Most of the morning was spent insulting them and working them to the bone. A good time, so when he walked back to Hanji’s office, it was in high spirits, though no one would be able to tell.

When he arrived, planning on bugging her while resting on one of her comfortable couches, he instead was greeted by the woman rushing about with tablet in one hand and a dry erase marker in the other. She’d been muttering feverishly to herself, her glasses about to slide off her face, and hair sticking out from her ponytail. Briefly he wondered where Moblit was.

Levi looked at the board. There were drawings of DNA, little scribbles, a time map, and equations he could not for the life of him understand. He had a feeling Hanji stuck them there just to feel smart.

“Levi!” she dashed to him, producing a syringe out of nowhere. He’d been so distracted by the board he had no time to avoid her grabbing his arm.

“What the hell are you – ” he bit back a yelp of pain when she stabbed him in the arm and extracted a small sampling of blood. Snatching the bandage handed to him, Levi angrily covered the tiny wound. “Hanji…” he said threateningly, his tone falling on deaf ears as the woman ran off to her desk covered in papers and tech that would fit better in a laboratory.

“Ymir told me about Eren’s past as a shifter,” she explained, taking the bottle from the syringe and placing it on a slot in a machine that lit it up in a blue light, “it got me thinking…the samples I took from the shifters were mostly human except for a tiny anomaly known as the Titan Gene. It’s what helps them become titans at their own will – ”

“We know this already, why do you need my blood?” Levi scowled, stepping beside her. "And shouldn't you be wearing gloves?"

“I have a theory that the gene can’t be introduced, but the DNA can be warped,” she paused as she observed the screen reading Levi’s blood. There were spikes, but nothing dramatic, and when she was satisfied, and mumbling, “you’re human…”
“No shit.”

She uncapped the bottle and snatched another in a nearby case marked 'Berthodt'. Levi remembered her gushing over the specialized bottles that would keep the shifter blood from evaporating. With a giddy grin, she poured a drop in Levi’s bottle. The spikes in the screen heightened. “Aside from the gene, yours and Berthodt’s blood types match, but look.”

Levi’s upper lip curled in disgust when his bottle reacted and fizzed, spilling over in a boiling mess.

“With the introduction of oxygen, Berthodt’s blood is trying to evaporate, but yours won’t let it,” Hanji explained. The fizzing stopped and settled back, but because the blood was exposed to the air, it started to steam, “and now your blood is titan.”

Levi arched an eyebrow skeptically, “so what, are you going to make us all titans?”

“I couldn’t do that, the process would be painful. You’d die from your blood boiling out before anything cool would happen,” she pouted at him, “we do have a living result of such an experiment. Eleven of which are back in Jinae.”

“Who?”

She was biting her lip again in excitement, “Marco Bodt.”

“…What?” he thought back to gossip surrounding the recruit. A patient of Grisha Jaeger with a few screws lose and a propensity for breaking his nurses. If he had titan blood, where did Jaeger get the means of acquiring it?

Would he have used it on Eren?

...He absolutely hated that random thoughts would now run back to the brat.

“I read through Dr. Jaeger’s reports on the tissue regeneration project,” Hanji snatched a pile of papers from the desk, “he never mentioned titan blood, and unless you’re researching them, no one outside the field would recognize the DNA formation. I’m the only known researcher since I come in contact with titans the most, so I noticed the pattern immediately. And then I had another thought… how did Dr. Jaeger get the titan gene? He’s not allowed outside the walls so there had to be a living specimen – another shifter – who gave the sampling to him.”

Ymir’s words the other day came back to him. Levi visibly clenched his jaw.

“Apart from Marco, I took a sampling from the only other person here with a connection to Dr. Jaeger. His son.” Hanji removed his blood sample and fiddled around the case she produced Berthodt’s blood, taking out another labeled 'E. Jaeger'. “Now look!” she snapped it on the slot and pointed to the spikes but larger than Levi’s. “These spikes are unique only to the shifters, but not as strong,” she shuffled through her messy desk and Levi’s eye twitched with the need to organize it.

Though a scientist, Hanji had no respect for cleanliness.

The woman shoved a picture in his face, “this is a visual I got of Eren’s DNA,” she pointed to a vague image of DNA, “and these,” she pointed to large bumps, “are the titan gene, basically inflated parts of the structure – BUT!” she moved her finger to show a smoother dot over the bumps like pimples, “this is something not a part of any shifter or human genetic makeup. I’m willing to bet it’s a
He was starting to piece it together, or at least follow where Hanji was going with this, “Dr. Jaeger blocked his abilities. He’s still a shifter…”

“What?” Hanji raised her eyebrows, “still?”

Shit.

She grabbed his shoulders, vibrating for information, “tell me what you know!”

Needless to say, by the time he was done telling her what Ymir told him, he went to the kitchens in need for some tea to deal with the headache that was Hanji Zoe. This headache was made worse with the presence of Eren Jaeger’s lone figure hovering over the stove and handling four pots with well-honed practice.

The tall young man was in an apron, his hair tied in a short tail, and bangs sticking out of his faded blue bandana. Levi stood by the door, taken aback. The boy carried on, unaware of his intruder. He grabbed the sauté pan to the left and shook it, flipping the contents like a pro. He grabbed a pinch of seasoning from the side and sprinkled it over the second pot, stirring the contents with a wooden spoon. There was no sign of mess. Even from the tiniest spill, Eren cleaned as he worked and Levi hated the pleased tug in his chest.

His movements were fluid and wasted no time or effort. Like a professional. It brought up images in Levi’s head. He could imagine a younger version of Eren, covered in bandages and burns, struggling over a pan of eggs with a glare of determination. He could also picture Mrs. Jaeger hovering over her son in case he hurt himself again.

Whatever he was cooking, it smelled nice. Levi sat down at the table as quietly as he could and waited patiently for the other boy to finish up whatever he was creating.

For his part, Eren was too zoned in to feel eyes behind his back. From the partial turns of his slim body, Levi could see a glimpse of a smile on his lips.

“I never learned how to cook. My mother was taken from me before she was able to. The most I did in the kitchen was peel potatoes and wash the vegetables.”

Levi stiffened. A vague voice slipping up in his head. There had been a lengthy conversation about cooking. A subject they fell upon out of boredom. Living on the streets, Levi had to steal to survive, cooking was hardly something he ever did until joining the survey corps. Erwin believed it taught him discipline, and as a clean-freak, it only worsened his OCD.

…Levi couldn’t remember anything about cooking duties in this life. He went straight to maneuver gear training and was more focused on surviving than anything else. It led to a higher rank and a squad of his own.

He rested his forehead on his palm. This was stupid. These…voices felt like they were coming from another person’s life. He couldn’t remember the raw feeling of fighting in ancient 3D maneuver gear, nor the feel of tanned hands running over his body. Whispering worshipful words in sultry tones that shouldn’t have lit him on fire but did.

He shouldn’t feel any attraction toward Eren Jaeger, but as soon as Ymir put that thought in his head,
he was…feeling something. Damn her to hell.

Something crashed, snapping him out of his secret plans of killing the shifter. He looked up to find Eren staring back at him with a red face. “Corporal!” he exclaimed, then realized he dropped his bowl of bread crumbs and scrambled to clean it up.

Levi could feel his face twist into a grimace. He’d help the boy out, but years of Hanji tormenting him with chick flicks taught him to back away when classic tropes presented themselves in reality. And he just didn’t want to be that close to the taller man. Screw that junk.


“Sorry, did I scare you?” Levi said, not that concerned if he did, the silence was grating him.

“Just startled me,” Eren snatched a rag from his apron and wiped up the last bits of crumb before standing and dumping the ruined food into the trash. “I was given lunch duty for your squad. Petra wanted to see if I cooked as good as I made tea.”

“And can you cook?” he was going to have a talk with that woman…

Eren shrugged, placing the emptied bowl in the sink. “My mother taught me ever since I was old enough to walk. Since then I made a hobby out of making dinner for my parents,” he smiled affectionately. “They’re always so tired from work or minding the house that cooking was my way of taking care of them.”

Levi hummed thoughtfully. Admittedly it was refreshing to see a young man so attentive of his parents. Nowadays kids were more obsessed with the internet and gossiping about their favorite celebrities or the next episode of some overrated drama. The laborious efforts parents went through to make their children happy often went ignored.

As the son of a well-known and highly paid doctor, Eren was the opposite of the spoiled child. Levi liked that. It meant he was independent and mature. But seeing as he was a reincarnation of a darker age, those two traits were inevitable.

“I am aware that you’ve reincarnated from a past life,” Levi said conversationally, “you and your whole squad.” Eren froze.

“I heard Annie told you,” he said quietly, turning back to the stove. “Do you believe her?”

“I only have speculations,” he half lied. He had the urge to move, fidget, kick his leg, do something before he opened his mouth and said something he’d regret. Eren’s back remained to him, and he took the chance to nervously run a hand through his hair. “I’ve only had suspicions, but Ymir said that people outside the 2104th – including me – have also reincarnated.” The spoon that Eren was stirring slowed to a stop. “I don’t remember anything about a past life.”

The young man’s shoulders sagged in the silence that followed, Levi tried not to feel bad, but even with his back facing him, Eren still looked like a kicked dog. “Oh,” was all he said.

“Is it that disappointing?” of course it was. What the hell kind of question was that?

Eren shook his head and smiled brightly at him. “It just means we can get to know each other again.”
The 180 caught Levi off guard. He could only manage with a distant, “Sure…” and Eren was cheerfully back to cooking.

By curfew, having listened to his squad worship Eren’s cooking from one ear, and Hanji babbling about genetics in the other, Levi decided he shouldn’t have opened his big fat mouth. Because a smiling Eren was much more dangerous than a sad Eren.

Jinae

He received the phone call at three in the morning by an erratic woman who spoke too fast for the sleep muddled mind, and too loud for his wife to sleep comfortably. Irritated as any person would be if they were interrupted from a good REM sleep, Grisha rolled out of bed and took the phone outside the bedroom.

“I’m sorry, who is this?” he yawned, blinking sleepily in the darkness of the hallway.

“Hanji Zoe, sir. Titan researcher and squad leader from the scouting legion,” the manic woman replied, “I’m calling you in regards to your son, Eren Jaeger.”

His mind only wrapped around two things. “Titan researcher? My son?”

“Mmhm,” he could feel her smile even through the phone, “you, my dear, have some explaining to do.”
Eren had exhausted his mother again. Only a few months away from achieving one year, and the boy was already crawling around like a curious little cat. The hospital understood Grisha would be home more often for the baby, granting him a bit of paternity leave. Unfortunately, because he was one of the best doctors in Jinae, and flu season was starting, they could only manage a few weeks here and there and calling him in on emergencies.

Today, or rather last night, he had to perform an on the spot surgery for a child who swallowed a bunch of plastic beads from a jewelry kit not meant for kids under thirteen. It would have been fine for other surgeons to take care of it, but the child’s parents were very insistent on it being him.

With all that bizarre drama over, Grisha came home to his wife sleeping on the sofa with Eren gurgling over her chest. His arrival startled the baby to turn to him with wide green eyes and a little jump, tipping over the edge of the sofa.

Grisha couldn’t have gotten there in time. His legs rushed forward, but he was still several feet from Eren, the floor coming much faster than he ever could. Carla snapped awake from the loud burst of excitement, only half a second too late to catch her falling son.

A soft tumble, then a crash of the low level bassinet lying stranded on the floor tipping over. Grisha watched in slow motion as Eren landed hard and smacked his face onto the floor with a loud bang. Suddenly the house was filled with raw throaty sobbing. Letting out a cry of alarm herself, Carla scooped up her baby and frantically looked him over. He was bleeding heavily from his mouth where he split his lip.

A wave of relief of nothing worse happening to his son had Grisha swaying on the spot, then hardening in anger, “How could you let him on the sofa like that!?"

“I left him sleeping on this – ” she kicked at the small bassinet, “ – thing! He must have woken up and climbed on top of me!”

Their panicked yelling over his crying only made Eren wail harder, his face turning red and fat tears rolling down his chubby cheeks. His little fists were trembling from the force. Wordlessly, Carla handed him over to her husband’s outstretched arms, following closely behind as he cooed at his son to try to calm him down. He hurried over to the kitchen and turned on the sink, soaking a dish towel and dabbing gingerly at the bleeding lip.

Not liking the pressure and newly added sting, Eren squirmed in his arms, turning his head this way and that. “It’s okay, it’s just a little cut,” Grisha soothed. It wasn’t really small. The cut was deep and ripping wider the more Eren cried and stretched his lips. He would need to get stitches. Face contorted in pain for his son, Grisha pressed the rag over the wound, careful to leave breathing space. “It’s really deep,” he said grimly, turning to his wife. Already tired and frustrated from lack of sleep,
the fear of her child being seriously wounded was driving her to tears. “Get your coat,” he said gently, feeling guilty for yelling at her earlier.

“How bad is it? He’s bleeding so much!” she quivered.

“He’ll be fine, but he’ll need stitches,” he rocked Eren in his arms, hoping to calm him this way, “I’ll take us to the hospital.”

Nodding with a loud sniffle, Carla dashed off to grab her coat. Grisha followed right behind her, or would have if he didn’t stop short. There was steam coming off of the baby’s mouth. Alarmed, Grisha snatched the rag away.

He could see the cut cleanly for the briefest of seconds before blood flooded out again, quickly emitting steam. Words caught in his throat, he felt around the cut. It was hotter than normal, but instead of continuing his wailing, Eren was slowly calming down. That frightened Grisha into holding him closer.

“Eren?” he said in a distant voice. Watching for any changes in his son’s pupils. This was the one thing he was terrified of ever since Eren’s birth. The dangerous timeframe in which a baby, for no explanation, would stop moving.

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.

“Eren?” His vision was swimming. He could feel his son relaxing, the steam over his mouth becoming smaller. As soon as the crying stopped, Grisha waited with his heart in his throat for any sign that his son would leave him.

The cut was gone.

Eren blinked up at his father, gurgling and reaching up to try and snatch his glasses.

Carla entered the kitchen, struggling to shrug on her jacket, “Grisha lets go!”

“No,” he shook his head, “it’s fine. I…overreacted…Eren’s…Eren’s fine…”

2856

Isra

That was the story.

Eren stood in the middle of Hanji’s office gaping wide eyed at the holographic video of his father lowering his head in…shame? Guilt? He couldn’t read him.

“Mom doesn’t know?” he heard himself ask.

Grisha shook his head, “I made up an excuse. She was upset and I didn’t want to make things worse. I…” he shook his head. “What I’ve done is unforgivable.”

Eren shook his head. His father did what he would have done. That is, if he was smart enough to
pull such a feat off. “You saved lives.”

“I played god!” his father corrected vehemently, “I dabbled in something that should never have been touched. Something as sacred as death should never…” he shook his head again, “The only good thing out of this is that the public doesn’t know about the Titan Gene. That’s too much power in the wrong hands.”

“But you brought back Marco!” Eren argued, “all those people in the bus accident! You could use your formula to bring back the soldiers we’ve lost to fight again.”

“The body must be as fresh as twenty four hours, and that is not my decision to make!” Grisha said back sharply, “and besides I can’t do such a thing again. I’ve refined the formula on order of Dot Pixis and burned all previous samples,” he looked at his son firmly, “it’s too dangerous.”

“And what does this new formula do?” Erwin spoke from behind Eren. Since it was such a huge discovery for Hanji, it couldn’t stay secret forever, and their commander would have found out anyway. Now he stood with all the other squad leaders also clued in, listening to Dr. Jaeger’s explanation with interest.

Grisha sighed tiredly, running a hand through his hair. “It heals lost matter through a much slower process – months. The Titan Gene helps the healing process that would have otherwise simply left a stump of the missing limb, but without all the bonuses that comes with it. Namely superior strength…”

Eren couldn’t remember being stronger than he was now, he was as fit as any other soldier and just as competent. His father noticed his confusion.

“When I first worked on your blood sample, I recalled legends of shifters using self inflicted wounds to turn into a titan. If I introduced the gene to a random person, my theory was that they’d become a titan as soon as he hurt himself, and that would cause mass panic. I had to come up with a formula to dilute that possibility. When I reached a final answer, I used it on the victims of the bus accident solely for experimentation. Adler was the first to revive. I later learned that it was due to their DNA still functioning after death. That window was growing small, and I wanted to save their lives while I still had a chance. It worked.”

“And the super strength?” Eren asked.

“An unfortunate side effect,” Grisha sighed. “With all its properties buffered and diluted, the most the gene could do was provide more adamant strength and rapid healing. If you haven’t noticed yet, Marco favors his right arm and he hasn’t a single scar on his body.”

Eren hadn’t been close enough to the other boy lately, but he was sure Jean would know. “What about the buffer on me?” he asked, “Was that you too?”

The sadness was back. Eren could see thick emotion in his father’s eyes, and he quickly understood. What other reason would Grisha block his shifter abilities? The bubbling anger of all his secrecy subsided with this conclusion.

“I was afraid that if the government found out you were a shifter…they’d take you away from me.”

Hermiha
Two Weeks Later

Rose’s expansive lands had been known for its farmlands. It was solely responsible for feeding the masses, and had done a splendid job in keeping with potentially life threatening acts of mother nature. Districts would then use the produce in whatever way they wished, developing in a personality that aided with the tourism of visiting outsiders. Trost’s architectural mix of modern and ancient historical landmarks also went into how they prepared their food. Walking down the food markets, it wouldn’t be strange to find things such as pig thighs hanging out in the open. Broken sanitation laws aside, the citizens paid no mind and everyone could agree that Trost had the best ham of all districts. Along with cheese, wine, and other such culinary staples. Their biggest customer was the ever eclectic Stohess.

Hermiha, on the other hand, was known for handling their food with a touch of science. Their work on mass production with the Rose farmlands was what helped them earn a living, and overweight population. Unfortunately, a recent movement for organic foods had forced the district to adapt. Thus the grand opening of a joint company from Hermiha and an organic farm from the neighboring wall.

Unlike the simple poetic cutting of the red bow, grand openings in Hermiha demanded attention grabbing spectacles to gain the eye of the public. This particular opening held a fair all over the district with products from the new company, Leben. At the center of the city was a clump of rides promoting the jumping man logo. Kids ran around with face paint and ice cream, and adults milled about buying half off merchandise and sample products. By the end of the day there would be a concert held by popular bands and singers.

Typical of any Hermiha opening, the celebration would last the whole weekend. That meant an increased number of military police to patrol the streets. It was normally a perfect opportunity to push the recruits into the fray since such occasions were mostly incident free. Pixis capitalized on the good timing.

Dazz’s team was amongst the fifty plus recruits called in to patrol Hermiha.

Day One was very involved. Stations were assigned, standard MP 3DMG’s were issued, and other essential gear and weapons had to go through a safety check. The amount of visitors would increase towards the end of the weekend when a final concert and fireworks were held, but if anyone thought a slow opening was going to happen, they were wrong. The warmth of summer gave Leben a great chance to benefit from the mass of oncoming customers eager to enjoy the weather. The citizens were already starting the celebrations. All the initial introductions and getting a scope of the city held Dazz back in searching for clues.

By the next day, when they finally got their bearings, they waited until nightfall when their patrol was over to go and ‘enjoy the opening’. Hermiha was lit up with glow sticks and festive lights. Drunk people dressed in ridiculous flashy attire that made the group appear darker in their street clothes. The thrum and bass of music vibrated through the streets, and made Dazz feel nauseous.

“Seriously, I’m jealous of these people,” Millius grumbled as they wandered through the crowd, watching spectators laughing and enjoying the Leben products sold through street vendors. “I want a caramel apple…”

“Den ge’ one,” Nack said through a stuffed mouth, holding an ice cream sandwich.
Millius smacked him upside the head, “we’re supposed to be working you idiot!”

“Where did you get that ice cream!?” Hannah screeched, eyeing the treat enviously.

“Guys,” Dazz called out, hushing them up in an instant. He would never get used that. Not sure of what else to say now that he had their attention, he went back to looking at the map on his tablet.

Pixis had been a world of help by giving them an old map of Hermiha. It was a few centuries later than the desired time, with highlighted sketches of newer buildings, but it was the best they got. Lucky for them, their hopes that the number on the copper key was a locational code had been true. Hermiha was comprised of a thick crowd of small homes and public buildings. Governing leaders of the district at the time found it useful to organize the city with numbers. The system had changed long ago. Apartment complexes were much easier to categorize than individual little homes and the system was dropped in favor of naming streets and buildings.

With the numbers gone, Dazz had only the map to rely on. Their metaphorical X on the treasure map was in the east end of the city where the crowds thinned significantly. According the modern map and general public knowledge, the east end of Hermiha was nicknamed Sterben. It was a poor section that suffered from the corruption of the military police. Crime rates there were the highest, people lived in poverty, and it was also where Erik’s parents were found dead as a result of a car crash.

Sterben was also unique in that thirty years ago it stopped modernizing like the rest of Hermiha. Funds ran short to do so, leading to the section becoming a little like a district of its own, only very miniscule. It ran for about twelve short blocks.

The quickest way to get there was through the air. As soon as Dazz put away the tablet in his jacket, he triggered his street maneuver gear, the cable shooting out and hooking on the apartment building in front of him. With the summer evening breeze billowing through his hair as he flew up, he could hear the hiss of cables from his group following behind. It was moments like these that took them all back to the days of gas powered maneuver gear and twin blades on their hands.

Flying across the lit up city, Dazz subconsciously pat the holster under the belt of the maneuver gear. His military gun was still there, snug at his hip like a friendly reminder that he wasn’t completely defenseless.

His front pocket vibrated with a new text message. As he briefly landed on the side of a business skyscraper, he pulled out Armin's phone and read the message.

*Good luck*

He wished he felt the positive sentiment.

But Dazz had a bad feeling.

Isra

Jean may have screwed up.

The day had been going well. Two weeks of being in Marco’s arms helped make that happen. They weren’t overly affectionate in front of everyone, Jean knew that shit could be annoying to some
people, but they made it clear that they were together. Most of the time Marco never let go of his hand, and others Jean would lean into him and occasionally give him a peck on the cheek. Observers simply rolled their eyes muttering ‘finally’ under their breaths. It was like a honeymoon phase.

Jean stared up at Marco draped over him, unable to read his blank expression, the darkness of their room giving his right eye an eerie glow. Jean was beginning to believe it happened when Marco was feeling strongly about something.

The problem occurred after battle formations. They were in separate groups, and they’d spent most of the morning in the Maneuver X. Erwin had them go through attack strategies, long distance sniping, and double teaming maneuvers. They didn’t have the luxury of a simulation room, but they had Annie and Reiner in their titan forms playing dummies. One of the rare occasions when they were allowed to work together. It hadn’t been very hard for anyone to get into it. Although there were a tense few minutes at the start when everyone thought the shifters were going to go on a rampage.

Jean remembered staring up at them, nightmarish memories flowing back of his home falling apart. Veteran soldiers being squashed like insects. He didn’t think he would ever look at the female titan and feel any sense of trust. It was extremely conflicting for him to have her fighting alongside them against Reiner.

Bertholdt would have been a part of the practice drill, but his form was too large and would have caused panic in nearby villages. Isra was secluded, but not that secluded.

After working up a sweat regardless of the cooling systems in the suit, Jean pulled off the helmet for some natural fresh air. He wasn’t sure what he did, but it made Marco chase him down after changing, and drag him off to an empty toolshed by the prisoner camp.

Ten minutes of heavy making out, and Marco had Jean pinned against the shelves, the discomfort nothing compared to Jean’s fried nerves as Marco’s tongue did wonderful things to his mouth. Appreciatively, he dug his hands under his lover’s faded shirt, and spread them over smooth freckled skin, the attention bringing Marco closer until their arousals bumped against each other.

“What the hell’s gotten into you?” Jean managed to say between kisses, groaning as Marco latched onto his throat.

“You looked way too hot in the suit,” he murmured into Jean’s ear. “It hugs you in all the right places,” he sucked and kissed at the curve of Jean’s neck, determined to leave a mark there.

The slimier boy flushed, “I’m not that – nnh!” his eyes shut of their own accord when a firm hand groped at his hardness. His shoulders pushed harder against the shelves as he bucked his hips forward. His legs were starting to shake and lose strength. Something dropped and hit the floor with a metallic twang. “Oh fuck…Mikasa!”

The cry stopped Marco dead on the spot. Clutching onto his shoulders, Jean stared wide eyed at the door where the girl stood with her hand still on the doorknob. Stunned, but not as embarrassed as him.

“Sorry,” she said, tugging her scarf up over her mouth distractedly. “I didn’t know anyone was here.” Instead of going away, she stepped inside and took the broom she’d been after. “I’ll tell the others not to come here.”
She left. Roughly five seconds of her presence was all that was needed to ruin two weeks of their little honeymoon.

“Crap, that was so embarrassing,” Jean ducked under Marco’s still arms. “Killed my boner, too.” He expected a chuckle or murmur of agreement, but the other boy remained silent. “Marco?” When he looked up Marco was glaring at the door. Chocolate eyes blazing with a quiet fury that made Jean turn cold.

He’d never seen such a strong look on him before.

After that, things became awkward. No matter how much Jean tried, Marco didn’t seem in the mood to give him any kind of affection. Not even a conversation could hold his attention and Jean didn’t know what to do. He wasn’t used to being ignored by Marco, not even when they were friends.

In retrospect, Jean could see what had been bugging him. He’d be in a shitty mood too if it were Annie who interrupted them.

“Hey,” Marco said, his voice quiet and ghostly in the darkness. “What would you do if she ever liked you back?”

Jean squirmed underneath him, “‘Ever’? That’s a bit cruel.”

“Answer me.”

He didn’t want to. The question was like bad medicine in his mouth, the answer much worse. Mikasa had been such a huge part of his youth that it was a wonder Marco managed to squeeze in. She was still beautiful in a tragic mysterious way, except now Jean could see it in an aesthetic perspective. He liked her, but not as badly as he used to.

Mikasa was like a decoy. A pretty distraction, but not real like Marco.

And as a decoy’s job, Jean would fall for it, then realize the mistake he made.

“She wouldn’t make me happy,” Jean settled.

Marco didn’t smile, but he could tell he was pleased with this answer. “Good,” he said. “I don’t want you to be happy with her.”

Jean should have felt hurt at the selfish statement, but he didn’t. That weird part of him that sprouted since reuniting with Marco felt good that he was so possessive. He knew he shouldn’t have, he knew it was unhealthy, but he didn’t care.

How long had Marco listened to him pine over Mikasa? How much did Jean hurt him? He remembered Annie and their talk, and started feeling awful for driving Marco to do something so stupid. Exactly how long did he have that kind of relationship with Annie, anyway? It pissed him off every time he thought about it.

He should have noticed Marco sooner.

“I don’t want to be with her,” Jean shook his head, snaking his arms around Maco’s waist “I want to be with you.”
The freckled boy leaned down and kissed him briefly, pulling away as Jean pushed up for more. He nuzzled into his neck, darting his tongue out and brushing over warm skin. Jean made a small noise at the touch, he’d been deprived of Marco all day. He moved to curl a leg around his waist, but Marco stopped him by straddling his hips instead, his ass firmly planted against his growing hardness.

Jean swallowed thickly when Marco’s right hand caressed his cheek and rested smoothly around his neck. He’d seen Marco in action with his fists, he knew how strong he was. If he wanted, Marco could choke him right now for his mistake earlier, but instead of scaring him, it excited Jean. He was starting to like this side of Marco a little too much…

Marco, on the other hand, was still upset that their moment had been interrupted by Jean calling out a girl’s name, even if it had been for a valid reason. After so many years and finally getting what he wanted, Mikasa’s shadow still haunted him. Her constant presence made him wonder if he was ever good enough for Jean, or if he was just a convenient replacement, just as Annie had been back in their training days. He couldn’t have his heart broken again. He had to believe in Jean. He’d been loyal to him so far…

The lust flooding into Jean’s eyes took him aback a few seconds. He squeezed lightly around his throat, feeling his lover’s pulse quickening, growing harder underneath him. This was supposed to be punishment, not turn Jean on. Marco bit back a smirk of triumph. It was too early to feel victory.

“Convince me then,” he whispered.

On the other side of the cabin Eren was busy moping at the ceiling while Armin was watching something on his tablet, occasionally texting on his phone. He’d been doing that a lot lately, and muttered unhelpful ‘hmm’s and ‘yeah’s whenever Eren asked what he was doing.

Tonight Eren didn’t feel like asking. All day he’d been trying to talk to Levi or please him in some way. It was what he did in his shifter days, and it seemed to work in getting the older man to return his feelings. Disappointingly, Levi was too preoccupied with other duties that Eren hardly got a word from him. Not even during break when he started making meals for the special ops squad did Eren get to talk to Levi.

He was beginning to suspect the corporal was avoiding him.

Eren tried not to feel hurt by this, but after a short time of actually having Levi to himself; to have him be his superior again and not his lover was like a kick in the gut. It sucked. He missed his kisses. His touches and even the damned cravat. Levi no longer had one. It was like a part of his personality was missing leaving Eren to grapple with what was left of him.

He missed the Levi he knew.

Muffled thumping snapped both roommates from their individual thoughts. At first they thought someone was knocking on their front door, but the thumping became consistent, scattered moans thrown in here or there.

“Is that what I think I’m hearing?” Armin deadpanned below Eren’s bed.
“Yep,” the tanner man replied, rolling over to his discarded tablet and sticking on his headphones that he dug from his messy sheets.

“While we’re in the other room?”

“Yep,” he turned his tablet on and selected the music section. “I told you it was gonna happen.”

“How long have they been doing it?” Armin squeaked, ever the virginal angel. Eren would have laughed if he wasn’t in such a sour mood.

“I dunno, like two weeks maybe? You sleep like a rock when they’re screwing around by the way, I’m shocked it took you this long to find out. You losing your touch there?” he scrolled through his personal list of music, and winced at the choices. He’d been meaning to get new songs.

Armin scrambled out of bed and dug through his rucksack for his headphones. “…Should we tell them to keep it down?” he asked uncertainly.

Eren had considered this many times. Along with bursting in and embarrassing them. He wasn’t in the mood tonight, however. Not after a full day of Levi ignoring him. Plus, loathe as he was to admit it, he could empathize for their need to make up for lost time. If he was back with Levi they’d be doing the same thing.

“Nah,” he said finally, “we’re gonna fight titans after next week. Besides, it’s taken them two thousand years to get a clue, you wanna try and cock block that?”

With a red face, Armin stuffed the ear buds on and turned up the video on his tablet, “good point…”

Eren settled into blaring music in his ears and playing some games to further distract him. It worked for the first five minutes until an alert paused his card game – which he was winning. Hanji sent him a message.

Come to my office, your father’s here 8D

His father?

And Levi’s here too, so you can make googoo eyes at him while I have my way with you ;P

Armin turned to Eren sharply when he jumped down the bed, “wait,” he paled as his best friend pulled on a pair of sneakers. “No. You’re not…don’t leave me here with those two!”

“Hanji wants to see me, just go outside or something,” Eren said easily, walking out the door.

Armin gawped at him helplessly with an outstretched hand, “but it’s curfew!”

Hermiha

Sterben was quiet and empty save for the odd homeless wanderer or scantily clad prostitute. Even dwellers of these dark and moody streets were out celebrating Leben’s opening. The map led them to a closed down library stuck in the 2820’s. There were old posters hanging limply on the rain dried
windows – few that were shattered. In its day the library would have been beautiful with its grand
architecture of stone chiseled lions and gargoyles. The interior even more so with the marble floor
and shimmering chandelier. This was all tarnished with graffiti and tossed garbage.

The lights didn’t work, so the group lit up their flashlights and split up to cover more ground, their
footsteps echoing loudly against the walls. It was an impressive library. Or, had been. Most empty
shelves were toppled over and covered in cobwebs and dust. There was a second floor which they
ruled out in exploring. If the spot they were looking for had been torn down to make room for the
library, then there would have been a huge media spread about it since the secret room supposedly
dated back to the Wiped Era. It would have provided historians with great material to fill in the gaps
of history. Seeing as no such thing happened, they could only assume the room was never found.
Thus, it should be underground.

“Going down the east wing with Franz,” Hannah spoke into the communications device, pulling out
her gun in case they weren’t alone. She and her boyfriend walked cautiously down the stairs, trying
not to sneeze from all the dust.

“I got west,” Dazz muttered back. “Nack, stay upstairs in case we get visitors, Millius come with me.

“I’m stuck on guard duty again?” the boy pouted, secretly glad no one was around to see it. He
pulled out his gun and went upstairs to look over the lobby. He almost fired at the sound of rustling,
but his flashlight revealed it to be a few rats. Making a face, Nack turned away. “I don’t care what
the movies say, rats are gross.”

Down below, the two groups reached the basement. With no windows to bring in a spit of light, their
flashlights were the only thing to help them see. Dazz was starting the feel the prickling feeling of
fear the further away he and Millius got from the stairs. Their lights were helpful, but they also
created long shadows that could be easily mistaken for a second person. The silence made it worse,
like the calm before the storm.

They kept walking around for any sign of an ancient door or stairs to take them further down. The
basement was large. Posters told them that it was dedicated for children’s and young adult books. Of
the few lying around, they recognized the stories they read while in pre-school, except in vintage
covers.

“The Little Caterpillar of Chlorba,” Millius read, focusing his flashlight on the colorful and very
dusty book, “that was my favorite story.”

“Really?” Dazz looked at the other in surprise, “I thought it was creepy. I liked Mrs. Kitty’s
Adventure.”

“My favorite was The Apple Tree,” Hannah pitched in.

“Jorgan the Goldfish,” Franz added.

The group waited patiently when Nack made a noise of consideration, “I liked...The Haunting of
Trost.”

No one replied immediately. They didn’t recognize the book as a pre-school story, and the title was a
bit morbid considering it was probably a take on their spirits haunting the city. “You read that when
you were a kid?” Millius asked skeptically.
“The pictures were pretty, and in case you don’t remember, I was self-aware since birth so yes, I did read it, and I loved it.” Nack was totally sticking his tongue out at them.

“You had a poor second childhood, didn’t you?” Hannah uttered flatly.


“Hey,” Dazz took offense, “Mrs. Kitty was a badass.” His team giggled good-naturedly. Shaking his head, he continued wandering around the basement, occasionally seeing the distant flashes of Hannah and Franz passing by. When he looped around the farthest left shelf he found a bunch of books lying on the ground. There were piles here and there from his search, so like with them, Dazz pushed them away in case something important was underneath.

There was a faded line mark of a carpet having previously lied here, within the pale section was a handle to a trap door.

“I think I found something. I’m in the left section by the wall,” he grabbed the handle and pulled, faintly hearing hurried footsteps of his teammates. By the time they arrived, he was staring down a pitch black hole with stone steps leading the way. From what little the light revealed of the narrow interior, the walls were also made of stone. Very unlike the structure of the library.

“We’ll stay up here and guard the area,” Franz said, the playful banter from earlier gone. Beside him Hannah nodded.

“What’d you find?” Nack asked.

“Trap door, looks like from our time, but I can’t be sure,” Dazz answered. Swallowing his fear of walking straight into the unknown, he went down the stairs with his flashlight pointing forward and his gun placed under it and at the ready. Millius followed closely behind. There was some echo, meaning that though the passage was narrow, it was pretty long.

Dazz counted twenty steps before reaching the bottom. It got a little wider for Millius to walk comfortably next to him. The deeper they went, the more Dazz recalled of the underground cities some districts attempted to make back in his time. The cobwebbed torches they passed by were a dead giveaway that the timeframe was around the Wiped Era. His heart stuttered in his throat.

The silence allowed him to wonder about the trap door. It wasn’t really in a secret location. Back in the days the library was open, the curious child could peel back the carpet and find the door themselves. The people who worked here should have definitely seen it, especially after cleaning up the building after its closure. Wouldn’t anybody have been curious enough to open it and go in like he was doing right now?

The bad feeling from earlier was rearing its ugly head again.

“There it is,” Millius broke his thoughts. They reached the end of the hall. It was a stone wall save for a small keyhole tucked in a cracked stone big enough for the copper key. Judging by the lack of hinges and no signs of a doorframe, Dazz guessed the whole wall was a door. The wandering adventurer would probably figure this was the end and turn back. Maybe that’s why no one looked in here properly before.

The other side could provide answers to the Great Wipe.
His hands shook as he fumbled the key out of his pocket, sliding it in the keyhole with a decisive crunch. Rust and age made it hard to turn after years of not being in use, but with a few tugs, there was an audible click and he and Millius pushed the wall.

Three Blocks Away

Later

Nile was willing to acknowledge that he could be an asshole most of the time. Special occasions when Erwin was within his radar that level would reach royal status and no one wanted to be his friend. So he could admit that he was an ass for not paying attention to his other recruits.

Marlo, Boris, and even Hitch when the mood struck her, were all much more competent than his veteran officers. In the short time that he joined them in Stohess, they uncovered much more than investigators did in years. It made Nile mad enough to put Dennis on cleaning duty and threaten his manhood. The three recruits were now probably on everyone’s shit list, but Nile didn’t care. At least these kids were doing their job.

Watching them work together, Nile was impressed with how well they functioned. Marlo was too nosy for his own good. Combine that with his passion for justice and upholding the moral duty of the military police, and the kid was able to unveil things his seniors looked over in the Bodt Case. Boris had an eye for computers, which helped Marlo in his snoopiness, and assisted in sharpening pictures thought to be unsalvageable. Without his help, Marlo wouldn’t have gotten footage from the bus accident.

Hitch was the weakest link. Nile had the sneaking suspicion she got the top ten slot through favoritism. Despite that, she wasn’t completely useless. She thought with common sense, and had better understanding of the assailant and victim’s feelings even if she expressed it in joke to goad at her teammates. She especially loved to make Marlo and Boris second guess themselves. Nile took that as her way of making sure they were absolutely certain of their theories.

Thus, after two weeks of investigation, they uncovered not just the Bodt family falling victim to their murderer, but several others. The unfortunate victims were at first unconnected to each other unless one counted Sterben their grave. They had different professions, didn’t know each other, and most weren’t caught on camera for their final moments. This led their cases to go cold or wrapped up as an unfortunate homicide typical of the area.

The trio, however, looked into their lives and found a common trait. Whether they were businessmen, dancers, or chefs, they were all interested in the Great Wipe. Interviews with friends and family revealed that they were also unlikely to go to Sterben to hang out. Two or three videos they found showed the victims running away just as Marco’s parents. The assailant was always the same.

That had to mean the killer lived in Sterben, or was somewhere in Hermiha. He wasn’t just a random thug, either. He killed because his victims went looking for something and he would do anything to prevent them from finding it. That, meant, if their suspicions were true, that the answer to the Great Wipe was somewhere in Sterben.

This was a lot bigger than a family becoming target to an unnamed murderer.
The three recruits and their superior stood in front of an old monument by the outer rim of Sterben. It was a stone angel reaching up to the skies, the plack at her feet declaring ‘Freiheit’. The piece had been done by an artist who wanted to change things in the mini district. He created the monument in memory of those who were killed by the deplorable life of living in the streets. Basically an artistic ‘fuck you’ to the government.

At the foot of the statue there was a clump of dead flowers and used candles. Rotting letters mixed with pictures of the perished king and queen. Their accident occurred in this spot. Nile and Pixis had been in charge of the investigation personally. One of the very few cases they worked together on. There was no mystery behind it. The driver fell asleep and crashed into the royal’s. The impact killed everyone in both cars instantly. From word of mouth and many news articles, the couple had been visiting Hermiha to try and help finance the decaying edges of the city. Namely Sterben. Ironic that the place they tried to help ended up killing them.

It was lucky that the king and queen were loved in spite of their lack of real political power, otherwise they wouldn’t have gotten so many mementos.

“They could be victims of our suspect,” Marlo said darkly. “They’re deaths could have been orchestrated like the bus accident.”

“The driver who fell asleep was a known alcoholic,” Nile said, considering the young man’s suggestion, “his license had been suspended and he hadn’t driven for two months. The suspension wouldn’t be lifted until the end of the year after he finished his rehabilitation…” he turned to the three listeners. “Pixis and I spoke to the man’s family, they weren’t surprised he went driving again, but the fact that he stayed off the road for two months had them hoping he was changing for the better. If he genuinely was trying, what could possibly have made him go back driving under the influence?”

“Maybe someone came up to him when he was feeling thirsty,” Hitch shrugged, not serious, yet the idea hitting home with the others. “And then bam! K.O. for good. The killer probably even tried to help the king and queen just to look good. Maybe get an award – half a billion in gold, a swanky ass apartment. Hell, if it were me, I’d take the highest pick and go straight for the throne.”

The three men stared at her. She smiled back, on the verge of laughing at the looks on their faces. Boris felt over his pockets and produced a packet of cookies from the festival. He gave one to her.

The Library

The room on the other side was about the size of the library itself. Their flashlights glowing over dusty shelves that hadn’t seen light for two thousand years. The entire cavern was filled with shelves of different types and sizes, stuffed to the brim with books and scrolls. In a daze, Dazz and Millius entered the secret room, flashing their lights on every crevice and shadow they could see.

“Get Armin,” Millius said.

Hesitantly putting his gun back in its holster, Dazz pulled out the tablet and connected to Armin. The signal was weak, but after twenty minutes of standing around, Armin accepted the invitation for a video chat. His holographic head looked back at them miserably.

“Guys, Jean and Marco are having really loud sex in the other room and Eren left me alone to
suffer!'"
“Guys, Jean and Marco are having really loud sex in the other room and Eren left me alone to suffer.” Was not what they expected the blond to say.

Dazz almost dropped his tablet, and Millius made a weird gagging sound.

“Wait, is that Armin? What did he say?” Hannah spoke in their earpieces.

“He says Jean and Marco are fucking,” Millius said bluntly while Dazz’s turned pink. He did not need to know this right now. The images!

There was a collective huff and cries of ‘finally!’ before things quieted and Nack had to ask, “Who’s topping?”

“Jean for a while,” Armin said gloomily, before Dazz could stop him, “then I think they switched or pulled some weird move that broke something – maybe their bed. I don’t know, Marco said something about Jean's ass…” Hannah and Nack giggled hysterically while the others groaned at the visuals they didn’t want to think about.

“We can talk about our friends sex lives later,” Dazz said unevenly, shaking his head as if that could get the images out. “Armin, I think we found something.”

Their friend snapped to attention, “under the library right?” he asked, referring to the texts they’d been exchanging a few hours earlier.

Dazz nodded and held up his tablet and flashlight awkwardly as he gave Armin a better visual of the cave. His reaction was the same theirs had been.

“Holy…” he breathed, unable to finish.

“Is it really our history down there?” Franz asked quietly.

A well of emotion ran through Dazz. He nodded only to remember that Franz couldn’t see him so he choked out, “I think so,” and turned to Millius, “let’s get started.”

Later

Two Blocks Away

They went to the other murder scenes on their list of victims. Some had few tokens of respects here and there, but the nature of Sterben and the elements washed most of it away. Investigating during the day time would have been more convenient, but Nile was eager to get the case rolling. Too eager. He hadn’t felt this motivated since the crash that killed their king and queen.
As predicted, they didn’t find anything new. Strictly speaking there was nothing significant about the places of death other than being in a high fatality area. They instead opted to go towards the direction the victims had been running from in case any clues could still be found.

Sterben was basically a long strip of blocks that curved the eastern most edge of the wall. It lay in shadow and contained street names of ancient origin. In the time of naming, the governor held responsible was deeply knowledgeable in etymology and names that hadn’t been used for centuries. Half the time residents couldn’t pronounce the names and settled on making up their own pronunciations.

According to videos and case descriptions from witness accounts and physical evidence, the victims sans the king and queen, had been running away from one direction. Quispe street. It was the eighth block of the strip where the road widened to accommodate an old fountain of birds that would have been beautiful in its day, but was now covered in graffiti and hadn’t produced a single drop of water in years. Currently, its base was being treated as a bed to a homeless man snoring softly with a dirty child huddled in his arms.

The man he could deal with, but the little girl…

Nile winced. He wasn’t ignorant to Hermiha’s needs to recuperate its lost corners of civilization. He always brushed it off in favor of protecting the other more demanding districts, trusting in charities to unite and help Hermiha themselves. The most he could do was send in officers to help stabilize the crime rates, but he knew some of them liked Sterben for reasons he’d rather not know, and this was the result of his back turning to those in need. The place had become uglier since his last visit. Perhaps it was because the night provided a darker aspect. Furtively, he looked to his recruits.

Marlo was openly shocked, that anger and need for justice swimming in his eyes. Boris looked sad for them, but not overly surprised. Hitch didn’t seem to care at all, though she remained uncharacteristically quiet.

Guilt weighing on his shoulders, he grabbed Marlo’s arm just as he made to approach the slumbering pair. “There’s nothing we can do,” he said stonily, “this is the life here. You have no idea how many people have tried to save this place, and failed.”

For a brief second Marlo was visibly hurt by his words. He pulled his arm away and reluctantly stayed put. “Just because our system is corrupt doesn’t mean I’ll go with the flow,” he grit his teeth, glaring at the floor, “Thing’s will change, this place will change. You may have lost hope, but I will do everything in my power to stop these people from suffering,” his hard dark eyes looked back at him fiercely as he spat out a, “sir.”

Hitch grinned and made a hum of amusement, “found your balls there, Skippy?”

Nile stared back at him in wonderment. There had been a time he had been like Marlo. Optimistic and passionate about revitalizing the military police. All his hard work was what brought him to the high post he was in. Sadly, for all his hurrah in his early rookie days, that passion had dried up leaving a man too preoccupied with the bigger picture than the details that quickly unraveled underneath.

He could see Marlo becoming chief one day.

He could also see him losing himself just as Nile had.
Sometimes a single candle wasn’t enough to light the darkness.

Nile’s thoughts were interrupted by Hitch wandering off and sitting down on the stone steps of an abandoned library. She huffed and leaned back, crossing her legs. “When are we gonna go back already? I’m tired as hell!”

The chief gave the girl a look of annoyance. He wasn’t sure when, but somehow between arriving at Stohess to now, Hitch was treating him more casually than she should. Such an act would receive a swift admonition, but even then Nile doubted the girl would start saluting and talking with the respect he at least deserved being her superior. He was beginning to think that was his own fault for his lack of control over his officers. In short, Hitch had discovered this and had no fear of getting kicked off the force for treating her chief with just disrespect.

Nile was about to correct her belief when something caught her attention by the stone railing next to her. She followed it with her eyes up the stairs and over the front doors.

“Hey,” she said, head pulled far back it almost touched the steps. “I don’t remember getting footage from this place…”

One Hour Earlier

…I miss mother. With each passing day the pain of loss has not ebbed and I catch myself talking to her from time to time, earning concern from friends. Dr. Jaeger doesn’t know if she will return two thousand years from now, but if you are reading this, mother, I love you very much and I hope the time you live in is more peaceful than this wretched war…

…We’ve done the best we could with the doctor. Wall Rose has fallen again. Titan’s have massacred the villages, Yalkell devoured. Our only hope is surviving in Utopia. We probably have a mere number of days before food runs out. Just as the first time Rose fell, war will break out amongst humans gone mad from hunger. I pray my end will be quick…

…A week has passed and Utopia still stands. The scouting legion has long been wiped out. Military police are quickly diminishing in numbers. People having fallen weak from lack of food. This is hell, the last few days of humanity and we are cornered like rats…

…This cavern is the only last remnant of our legacy - everything we could salvage that wasn't destroyed. Ten trusted people know of its location including myself. I am the last survivor of those ten and if humanity manages to survive, our history will not be forgotten. We can no longer trust each other in the face of titans. There are people known as shifters who can transform into titans by will. We had one shifter fighting for our freedom, now long passed. The rest have aided the monsters that continue killing us. Their numbers are unknown, it started with three, then eight, and now no one knows if the person standing next to them is an agent for the beast titan. Their leader and our executioner…

Dazz and Millius carefully read through the fragile scrolls and texts. Blatant letters to them from their people long ago. There were hundreds of entries retelling the second fall of Wall Rose. Armies of titans being led by the ape titan that claimed Eren’s life. There were books and diaries of the ancient citizens – memories of the past to ensure that the Wiped era was explained in every detail even to the five page children’s storybook. Amongst all the papers there were even artifacts such as wooden
dolls and everyday tools. Things to make historians shit themselves.

Best of all, there was a section in one of the aisles specifically for military obituaries. Millius was reading the small paragraph dedicated to him with morbid fascination. Dazz found his own splashed across a newspaper.

*Rookie Stationary Guard found Dead in his Bed.*

The picture below the emboldened title showed his picture saluting in front of the Stationary Guard flag. Dazz read the short article with growing indignation. He had been killed brutally in an alley by an unknown and viciously strong killer. The article was telling him that he had been killed in his own room.

His murderer moved him somehow. Investigations surrounding his death claimed he committed suicide with his own rifle. Autopsy had to have debunked this, but the closing lines of the article was convinced of the theory. They even added that he had been upset about his comrades in the scouting legion dying in a mission, adding fuel to the suicide.

Dazz didn’t want to die. Even back then he was terrified of his own mortality, why the hell would anyone think he’d be upset enough to go that far?

“Look what I found!” Millius hurried to him holding a yellowed paper in one hand and Dazz’s tablet with Armin still connected in the other. “The list of the people who created this place for us.”

Gingerly accepting the letter, Dazz read over the faded ink. There were signatures following a longwinded paragraph of the fall of Rose and the agreement to salvage the last dregs of human history.

*Grisha Jaeger, Dot Pixis, Anka Rheinberger, Keith Shadis, Darius Zackly, Pastor Nick, Lord Balto, Nicolas Bodt, Eva Bodt, and Lanius Tase.*

He recognized all the names except the last. It was a group of people he would never think to have banded together. He recalled that Lord Balto was responsible for some of the deplorable living conditions in districts around him, a greedy man who only looked out for himself. Pastor Nick was so deep into the wall cult that he despised soldiers who used the walls to climb to the top, he hated the army period. Except for the last three, these were people who held some form of power over society. Yet, in the supposed last days of humanity, they trusted each other enough to swear in secrecy of the location to the cave.

Dazz could only imagine the despair they were going through to drive them to that decision.

“Marco’s parents were a part of that group,” Armin said soberly. “I’m guessing they were also refugees at the palace in order to have gotten mixed in with all these important people. Do any of you know who Lanius Tase is?”

Both men shook their heads. Even the name itself rang a little foreign to them. “Could be another citizen like the Bodt’s,” Millius shrugged, “come to think of it, didn’t Marco’s parents die a few years ago?”

Armin nodded sadly, “he doesn’t talk about it much. It started as a rumor and he confirmed it. He never said how, but the story got mixed in with all that scandal with Eren’s father. People are saying it was a murder. Even the police won’t talk about it.”
“He dies in Trost, and they die in this time,” Dazz read the names again, “they never got to spend a long enough time together like we did with our families. That’s rotten luck.”

“I’d be pissed as shit – screw that, I’d go mental,” Millius muttered, shaking his head. There was a moment of silence as they sympathized the tragic hand that was given to their friend. This was supposed to be their second chance, and yet Marco was reborn to suffer twice as much as anyone else. How he was still standing was commendable to his strength of character and it made them realize how much stronger he was compared to them. Their respect for him grew.

“We should report to Pixis,” Dazz said, breaking their little moment, “we’ve only just scratched the surface of our history and already we’re all in danger.”

Millius darkened and nodded, “the shifter spies could still be in the walls.”

Dazz was already heading toward the door, “right and –” his foot kicked something that skid across the floor with an audible plastic clacking. He pointed his flashlight to the sound and found a lone flash drive a few inches away. Mystified, he picked it up and studied it. It wasn’t military issued, but it was still pretty expensive, a few years old in design – containing an unnecessarily massive space of sixteen terabytes. It wasn’t his, so he showed it to his teammate.

“You drop this?”

Millius frowned and shook his head. Dazz could feel himself grow cold.

They weren’t the first to enter the cave.

…Could it have been the king? He had the key last, a flash drive this expensive could be a plaything to him. But he wouldn’t lie and say he knew nothing of the Great Wipe. Erik struck Dazz as the honest type, and he couldn’t have left the palace because of his agoraphobia. This had to belong to someone else. Someone who kept the cave and its contents a secret.

“Guys,” he said, calling out to the other three through their communications line, “we’re heading out, we might not have been the first to discover this place.” There was no reply, just a fizz of empty white noise. “Guys?”

“Nack, answer!” Millius joined.

Nothing.

Dazz’s bad feeling was returning. He glanced at Millius and motioned him to pull his gun out while he did the same. Nodding, the light haired man gave Armin’s worried holographic head an apologetic look before shutting off the tablet and stuffing it in his jacket. Both soldiers approached the door cautiously with their guns out, lighting up the pitch black hallway.

No one seemed to be there. The eerie silence worked at their nerves. Clenching his jaw, Dazz walked down the hallway, body taut and ready for a sneak attack. He could hear Millius close the doorway, his own light joining his a minute later. Their footsteps were as quiet as a ghost, sweat beading on their foreheads the closer they got to the stairs.

When he reached the top after a moment of hesitation at the mouth of the trapdoor, Dazz reached the basement, his light landing on two bodies lying on the floor. His legs trembled. It was Hannah and
Franz. He could hear Millius swear behind him at the sight.

No. Not them. Not again.

Dazz scrambled over them and forced his hands to stop shaking as he checked for pulses. Millius flashed his light around their immediate vicinity in case the attacker was still out there. All was quiet.

“They’re alive,” Dazz said with a breath of relief, “just unconscious.”

“Whoever did this got to them fast, probably more than one person,” Millius muttered angrily, still looking around protectively, “we didn’t even hear a struggle.”

That was more alarming, and they still hadn’t seen if Nack was still alive. They needed to leave before the attackers struck again. Reluctantly sheathing his gun, Dazz unscrewed the head of the flashlight from the handle. Police issued flashlights had been redesigned for situations like these. The light could be removed and hooked on the collar of the jacket to continue providing light. Dazz did this and hoisted Hannah up. Behind him Millius struggled, but succeeded in lifting Franz.

As a precaution, Dazz kicked the trap door shut and shoved a few of the thrown books over it just as it had been before. The pair trekked up the stairs and managed to reach the lobby where the evening provided gray light to the building.

“Wait here, I’ll find Nack,” Dazz set Hannah down by the receptionist desk and pulled out his gun again.

“Wait, I’ll go with you,” Millius set Franz down, but Dazz stopped him with a palm to his chest.

“You need to guard Hannah and Franz,” he handed him the flash drive. “If anything happens, run and contact Pixis. We need to get that information to him no matter what,” he could feel his face twisting in regret, “I brought us here, this is my responsibility.”

The man stared at him. He numbly accepted the flash drive. Before he could change his mind – and he really wanted to – Dazz turned away and ran as quietly as he could to the stairs that led to Nack’s post.

No one probably noticed this peculiar trait of Dazz. Back in the early days he joined the training camps to prove to everyone he was tough shit. His neighborhood always thought he was a wimp resulting in his original intention to attain glory. Three years of hard training and skirting around death sobered such selfish and naïve aspirations. Ymir and Christa showed him how weak his body was against the harsh elements. Mikasa taught him how little he knew about being strong. Armin made him realize that though lacking in strength he made up for in brains – both of which Dazz didn’t have. Best of all Eren and Jean made him see how cowardly and meek he truly was.

The titans, however, taught him one thing that no one ever noticed.

Dazz was incredibly ruthless when he was truly terrified.

The first occurrence happened in Trost when he was forced back in battle again. His squad members fell one by one around him. There was nowhere to hide from his position and in due time, he would become another casualty like his teammates.

He was petrified.
His leader. All the other squad mates who were leaps ahead of him in skill. They all died right in front of him. In a matter of seconds like all that training had been useless.

He didn’t want to die.

*He didn’t want to die.*

And as a grinning titan reached out to wrap its thick fingers around him, he let that fear take over and punish the creature for instilling it in him.

Walking up the steps, Dazz was terrified now. Not just for himself, but for Nack whose status was unknown. He brought them here. He was responsible. There was no way he’d forgive himself if one of them died in this mission.

He reached the top and found the raven haired man sitting against the railing of the balcony with his head lolled forward. A quick check for a pulse told Dazz he was still alive, but he was bleeding heavily on his left side where he’d been stabbed. No other signs of a struggle apart from a growing bruise on his head told him Nack was caught by surprise, too. Peeling back soaked layers, Dazz scrutinized the large wound. Nack hadn’t been hit in a vital area, but the blood loss could still pose a danger, he was already very pale. Dazz took off his jacket and pressed it against the wound.

“Nack’s alive,” he said into his ear piece, “but he’s hurt, we need to get him to a hospital.”

*“Got it, I’m calling for an ambulance right now.”* Millius replied.

Just as Dazz prepared to lift his friend, he felt the prickling sensation of someone watching him. He turned sharply and saw a rat climbing a broken down shelf. Slouching in relief, he turned back to Nack.

There was a man standing in front of him.

Later

The four officers stared up at the lone video camera lodged into the stone lion’s mouth over the doorway. It was government issued, and it looked like it functioned if the red dot was anything to go by. What picked at their brains was that in all their search, they never came across security footage belonging to the outside of the public library.

“There’s the interior, but that’s it,” Boris frowned, “I checked all available camera’s past and present. Nothing regarding this one popped up. Not even in private records on personal surveillance.”

“That’s because it belongs to the killer,” Marlo concluded, turning to Hitch who stared back blankly. “Right?”

“What are you looking at me for!?” she sputtered.

“It makes sense,” Nile ignored her, “the killer would need to know who’s going in and out of this building, making it easier to target his victims. So the clues behind the Wiped era might be in here,” He eyed the wooden doors curiously. “Let’s see what this guy’s trying so hard to hide.”
At that moment gunfire went off inside the building. All four jumped and grabbed their guns on instinct. They waited for any more shots, but what followed was shouting and muffled sounds of movement. Nile looked to his recruits. They weren’t prepared for engaging in a real fight. Marlo maybe, but Boris’s hand was trembling and Hitch looked like she’d seen a ghost.

Nile hid his scowl by turning back to the doors. Competent though they were, they were still recruits. He needed to tread carefully, especially with Hitch who definitely got in the top ten through some kind of bribery or favoritism. He didn’t know if she had any skills useful for a fight.

“Stay behind me,” he said, reaching for the handle. Before his hand closed around it the doors burst open and a bloody mass of what looked to be two people holding bodies like luggage crashed out and knocked the chief and his three recruits over.

Earlier

It happened in a matter of seconds. Long enough for Dazz to recognize the black suit and shades. This was Erik’s personal guard, Anwir. The man who Erik didn’t trust enough to listen to their conversation…

Anwir reached out with his fingers pointed straight at his head in a move Dazz never thought he’d see again. He dodged the oncoming attack and rolled away from Nack, trying to get the man closer to him instead.

The Anwir’s face remained stony as he calmly walked up to him. That move he just did. Dazz recognized it from the night he’d been killed. That couldn’t be. Had his killer reincarnated as well? Was this a descendant?

He rolled away from another jab and fired his gun, missing the attacker’s shoulder by a millimeter and knocking plaster off the wall behind him.

“Dazz! What’s happening? I heard gunfire!” loud footsteps echoed downstairs. Anwir took his distraction to use and charged at him. Dazz caught him halfway and wrapped his arms around a lean waist stopping him in his tracks.

“Don’t come up here!” he yelled loud enough to carry over the lobby. “Get the other’s out of here! Run!”

“I can help!”

“You are more important right now! GO!” Dazz shouted, struggling against his hold. He almost mentioned that the information was more important and was glad that he didn’t give Anwir another reason to go after Millius.

Anwir hooked his arms under Dazz’s arm and flipped them over awkwardly, slamming him into the floor and momentarily winding him. Coughing and wheezing, Dazz rolled to his feet, his grip on his gun weak. Anwir was already far from him, stepping over the balcony railing. He was going to go after Millius!

Desperate, Dazz fired several shots at the man. He juddered violently with every bullet, falling over in a heap on the bookshelves below. Taking his chance, Dazz grabbed Nack and carried him down the stairs as fast as he could. By the time he was close enough to Millius, trying to drag both Franz
and Hannah to the door, the other man was knocked over by a chair thrown at him. He tumbled to
the floor with pained grunts, his hands unable to block his face from slamming head-on to the
wooden floor boards. When he turned over, his nose was bleeding freely.

Shocked, Dazz turned back to the source and saw Anwir running at them, his bullet wounds hissing
with steam.

Steam…

A common healing trait among titans.

“He’s a shifter!” he heard himself scream. He dropped Nack by Hannah and met Anwir halfway,
forcing him backwards and over a table. “We need to keep him inside!”

A shifter!

Anwir was a shifter! A spy for the ape titan!

Dazz couldn’t believe it. The man had plugged himself in human society so well he was now the
king’s personal guard. He –

Anwir’s sunglasses had been discarded in the struggle and Dazz stared back at cold black eyes and
thick brows. He was a little older now, but the features were unmistakable. This was him. The
fighting style, the face, it was all the same!

“You!” Dazz breathed, his shock allowing Anwir to grab his shoulders and toss him aside into
another table. He could feel the chairs bruising into his back, his head knocking at the leg of the table
with a bang. Before he could gather himself, Anwir lifted him by the neck and pulled his fist back to
punch him like he had the first time they met.

But years of bottled up anger and regret taught Dazz to be prepared. He grasped the hand choking
him, and hoisted himself up as best he could to drive his knee into Anwir’s unprotected chest,
blocking his fist on the way. The jab caught the man off guard into dropping him from his weakened
hold. Fighting against the need to recuperate lost oxygen, Dazz landed on all fours and spun around,
shooting his leg out and hooking his foot around Anwir’s ankles, knocking him over.

Millius jumped in and emptied his gun at Anwir’s head. Standing up and swaying from his vision
spinning, Dazz looked around for something to hold the shifter down. As much as he wanted to, they
couldn’t kill him, Anwir had a lot of questions to answer and they couldn’t exactly get them if he
was dead.

A bookcase might do…

Marching over to an upturned shelf, Dazz grasped the edge and pulled as hard as he could. It was a
slow process, and as he was a few feet from Anwir and Millius, the man woke up again and punched
Millius so hard across the face he flew a few feet and crashed into the reception desk. Dazz dropped
the shelf in horror.

This wasn’t going to work. Anwir was too strong.

He grabbed a chair and smashed it over the shifter, keeping him down. “Millius go! He’s too
strong!”
He crawled out of the crashed desk, his forehead bleeding profusely to match his nose and staining a portion of his matting hair. Millius was too disoriented to have caught what Dazz said and buckled to the floor, unable to withstand his headache.

He had to keep Anwir busy. Grabbing the broken leg of the chair, Dazz straddled the young man and pinned the leg over his throat. The man was still a little out of it from the surprise attack. He looked up blearily at Dazz with his black pitiless eyes, the blood running down the side of his head steaming into nothing. His well-mannered raven hair in complete disarray.

“Who are you?” Dazz growled, digging the piece of wood down harder, “do you remember me at all!? Is Anwir even your real name!?"

The man choked, gritting and baring his bloodied teeth. “It’s useless…” he wheezed, his voice unexpectedly young. He grasped at the chair leg blocking his windpipe, but Dazz put all his weight into it earning another gurgled noise from the shifter.

“How many of you are there?” Dazz demanded with dangerous calm, “why have we survived this long without an attack?”

Anwir rattled out a broken laugh. He stopped squirming for freedom and humored the other man by remaining pinned to the floor. “Why else? Because you’re funny!”

Dazz’s glare sharpened. His lips pulled back menacingly, choking Anwir harder. He hated this man! He killed him in cold blood and dumped him on his bed so no one was the wiser. Then he had the gall to call humanity funny? Like they were some kind of entertainment for him?

It made his blood boil.

“How did you find us?” he calmed himself enough to ask.

Anwir gave him a smirk, “I’ve been…keeping an eye…on you…you’re too nosy for your own good!”

A thought struck Dazz. How could Anwir find them so easily when they swore secrecy to the king before they deduced their next stop to be Hermiha? Their conversation with Pixis had been private and on a clean line. Could the reassignment to Hermiha have clued Anwir in? They’d have to have been followed both days before the other man made his move…

More importantly, how could he have known about the secret cave unless he managed to listen in on their conversations, which had been strategically vague to outsiders to begin with?

He knew about the secret cave when previously only ten people knew of it with the exception of the last visitor who left behind the flash drive. The small piece of technology could belong to Anwir for all Dazz knew.

Who was this guy and why didn’t he just burn down the cave?

The man was still smiling at him, the blood on him painting a morbid picture. Anwir didn’t burn down the cave, because it gave people like Dazz hope. Like dangling candy over a kid and stuffing it in your mouth. It was pure and simple, Anwir didn’t destroy historical evidence because he wanted to see their faces go from hope to despair in a matter of seconds.
This man thrived in chaos.

Anwir wheezed more, his face finally screwing up in pain. He could have just thrown Dazz off like he did to Millius. He had the strength of an army, but the more Dazz thought about it, the easier it was to believe that Anwir was some kind of sadomasochist. His strength alone didn’t really fit with the description of shifters. According to Eren, when human, shifters were as normal as everyone else. There was no super strength or any other enhanced abilities. The only reason they jumped into the fray risking their limbs was because they were aware that they could rapidly heal. Reiner, Berthodt and Annie were only strong because they’d been trained since their diaper days for the invasion of the walls. Ymir was only strong because she did everything she could to survive. This strength was all gained through training and experience.

To further prove this point, Eren was the weakest since he never had any formal training or was in any danger until the fall of his home. Even then he never sprouted miracle super strength. That was all honed alongside everyone else during training, and he only became good because of his sheer force of will.

Anwir was not a typical shifter. This guy had muscles on his muscles. He should have died when Millius shot him five times into Sunday in the head. Shifter or not.

“What are you?” Dazz heard himself ask.

Anwir opened his eyes, the pain on his face fading, “No one important.”

Dazz let out a strangled cry caught between a gag and a scream. He looked down to where Anwir’s arm lodged deep into his right side. His blood poured out like a waterfall, splashing them both in their chins. The shifter pulled his hand out and shoved Dazz off him, meeting no resistance and stood up to turn to the stunned Millius.

Dazz lay clutching his wound.

This was just like that day…one punch and he was gone. It was happening again. Soon Millius and the others would meet the same fate and all that information they still needed to dig into would never be revealed on time. Armin was their only hope, but…

He didn’t want to die!

Not like this! There was still so much he needed to do! His family…his…his friends…all the people waiting for him to report his findings…

His head lolled to the side to see Anwir lifting Millius by the hair. Fist pulled back to deliver the finishing blow. In the moonlight he could see Millius’s maneuver gear glint.

Dazz was still wearing his maneuver gear…

There was a hiss and a squelching thump as the cable shot forward and lodged itself into Anwir’s spine, pulling him back like a rag doll and forcing him to let go of his victim. He collided with yet another table, hurrying back to his feet and pulling the cable from his steaming back. It retracted and lodged back in Dazz’s belt.

“Even if you kill us here, there’ll be others coming back to find that cave,” Dazz heaved, pushing
himself up on his trembling knees. His hand flew to the wound on his side, quickly becoming sticky and wet in his own blood. His vision was going wonky again. “The king’s already been informed of your betrayal…there’s nowhere for you to run…”

“You’re bluffing.”

Of course he was.

Dazz gave the raven haired man a shaky smirk, “what do you…think my friend there,” he nodded back to Millius, “has been doing while I had you pinned? Not admiring the dust…I can assure you.”

As if on cue. Millius waved Dazz’s tablet cockily. Or as cockily as he could given that he was still on his knees and two seconds away from passing out. Anwir hesitated.

Then to both solders’ surprise, he turned and ran away.

There was no chance of surviving if they gave chase while heavily wounded. Reluctantly letting the man escape, Dazz hobbled to Millius as quickly as his body would let him. “Let’s get the hell out of here…before he changed his mind.”

The other man nodded and stood with a wince. His leg was injured. They dragged themselves to their unconscious friends and lifted them as best they could, pushing forward through the exit in a burst of energy.

And crashing into Nile Dawk, and three other people Dazz didn’t care to recognize before passing out.
Crossing Paths

Chapter Notes

I've never had anyone draw art for my fics, but Glitchikinns made an awesome pic of Dazz!
Here you go! http://glitchikinns.tumblr.com/post/67113826333
Thank you muchlies Glitchikinns!! (hugs!) X3

Trost had been saved at the cost of so many lives. His friends. The people he trained side by side with. He could still feel their screams ringing in his ears. The blood that painted the streets…the titans…so many titans…

He was scared.

His family. He wanted to go back to his family. Why did he think he stood a chance in the military? He was such a fool. He let his friends die…

Eren was dead. Mikasa. Armin. Jean…everyone. The strongest most dependable people were gone in an instant. And yet he lived hiding behind the safety of the walls. Crying his eyes out as if that would bring them back.

It hurt to suffer so many losses. Feel all that self-hate over his lack of bravery. Their voices haunted him. Eren’s bullheaded words that inspired listeners, Mikasa’s quiet and blunt poetry. And Marco…Marco wrestling him down and yelling at him not to run away. To fight for humanity.

He missed them. He missed their huffs of exasperation when he couldn’t pull his own weight. The small smiles when he did. They weren’t close, he was too insignificant to be in their crowd, but there was a camaraderie there, and even though the other graduates of the 104th were still alive in the guard, he felt utterly alone.

That’s why he went after that stranger.

That’s why, for the slightest second, Dazz was determined to at least do one thing right.

Those eyes. Those cold black eyes….

He would never forget them. Never.

Hermiha Trauma Clinic

Two Days Later
Nack had woken up yesterday, the pain medication keeping him from feeling the gaping hole in his gut. The doctors managed to get a match for his blood type and replenished what he lost. It would be a while before he could get back out in the field. Franz and Hannah suffered nothing worse than concussions, a fact they were trying and failing to not weigh on their shoulders.

Millius was covered in bandages and on crutches due to a kneecap displacement from when Anwir threw him. The nurses insisted he remain in bed, but he defied them and hobbled around, too anxious to sit down.

Dazz hadn’t woken up yet.

He was the most heavily wounded of the three, yet he suffered minor damage to the head, despite all the bruises. The doctor commented that he might be in shock. That Dazz would only wake up when he was ready.

Now the three with Nack in the neighboring bed, sat huddled around their teammate, covered in bandages and looking like a train ran over him. There were angry tears glittering in Hannah’s eyes. They could all tell she was mentally berating herself.

“So Dawk knows everything,” Nack broke the silence, idly picking at the needle stuck in his arm.

“Almost everything,” Millius corrected. “He doesn’t know about us per se…just that we were snooping around and got caught up with the same killer he was looking for. Apparently Anwir’s been doing some side work apart from guarding the king. Dunno how he does it, he’d need to be in two places at once…”

“Could the king be his eyes?” Franz asked suddenly, “the kid’s smart…he could have set us up…”

The others had considered this. It made sense; that way Anwir wouldn’t have to move around much. The thing was, it could also ring true to anyone at the palace. Even Yannick. Unless Erik was a good actor, they doubted someone with childlike propensities and staggering paranoia, would find the use in killing people just so historical secrets were left in the dark…

“I…I checked the population logs back up to ten years,” Hannah faltered at first then forced herself to stop wobbling her voice. “There’s no identification or citizenship for an Anwir in any district, village, or town. The name is fake.”

Millius nodded, he’d been suspecting that ever since Dazz went psycho and started interrogating the shifter.

Before anything else could be said, he sensed the other’s tensing, and felt the telltale tickle at the back of his neck. Gingerly avoiding irritating his wounds, Millius turned around and was face to face with a stony Nile. His three lackeys standing behind them.

“We need to talk,” he said with a tone that bared no argument.

Nack didn’t seem to catch it, “why?”

“This,” he held up the terabyte flash drive. Gaping, Millius patted himself. He’d been sure he pocketed the device… Looking back up with wide eyes he saw the only girl in the group smiling
That little –

“You’ve hidden evidence from me,” Nile narrowed his eyes darkly, “you’ll receive penalty later, but for now I need you to answer some questions regarding the owners of this flash drive.”

There was a moment of intense glaring until his words sunk in and they did a double take. “‘Owners’?” Hannah repeated quietly, “plural?”

The dark haired recruit with the unfortunate cut, eyed them all uncertainly, “you haven’t looked in it yet?”

“We were a bit busy coming out of our comas,” Nack scowled. “Wouldn’t you know.”

“Who are the owner’s?” Millius asked over him, already grabbing his crutches to get up.

Marlo was about to answer, but Nile cut him off with a curt, “the Bodt family.”

The Next Day

Isra

Things were getting loud in Sina and for a moment Armin was starting to regret joining recon. Mental trauma of having to listen to Jean and Marco screwing each others brains out aside (he would never look at them in the eye again...), he would have been better help to Dazz's team if he'd been right there with them than a useless contact they had to report to. There wasn’t anything in the news yet, but from what Millius reported it seemed they were attacked by a super strong shifter – the same guy who killed Dazz back in their time. They also crossed paths with Nile Dawk and some recruits, resulting in a mess of lectures and exchanging information of what they learned.

This Anwir person may have been responsible for killing Marco’s parents and a whole slew of other victims from Sterben. Armin wasn’t sure, but he had a feeling this guy was either reincarnated like them, or survived the whole two thousand years. It wasn’t that big of a stretch. Ymir lived for sixty years as a titan before joining humanity as a teenager. Two thousand years was more than enough time to build up the strength Dazz’s team claimed Anwir to have.

On that matter, Dazz hadn’t woken up yet.

Nack suffered similar wounds, but revived some hours after being treated at the hospital. To be fair, Dazz had been going toe to toe with his attacker and suffered more damage. From the doctor’s perspective, the reason to the young man’s coma-like state was shock. Made sense, Armin would be too if he was faced with his killer again.

He was still mind blown at how much Dazz changed since their early days. According to Millius, he’d been trying to keep Anwir away from the group to give them – or rather Millius – enough time to escape. It put his own life at risk, and yet he still battled a man much stronger than him.
Armin was proud of Dazz. He just hoped he came out of his coma soon to see how worried he made his teammates. He totally pulled an Eren and they were going to give him a tongue lashing for it. After all the crying, of course.

In the meantime, Armin had to do his part in the investigation. One of Nile Dawk’s recruits, Boris, had a few video shots of Anwir in his past crimes, Hannah sent them to him along with a sketch of his head. This was all done without Nile knowing, who wouldn’t have let them leak sensitive information, but it was vital because while Armin didn’t recognize the face, the other shifters would. He hoped.

Now he found himself in the gym a few hours before it was open to the other soldiers. This schedule was set up so the shifters could train with Hanji without being scrutinized by everyone else. No one really knew what went on. Eren had a running theory that Hanji was playing surgery with them to both test their healing abilities and for the simple pleasure of dicking around.

Armin was prepared for anything when he snuck into the gym. Giant robots. Blood and guts. Even a guy in a chicken suit. He was relieved to see none of that and instead the four shifters, dressed in shorts and tank tops, standing in a boxing ring surrounded and covered in little machines with water balloons attached. It was thanks to his ability to quickly read the situation that Armin wasn’t gawping like a fish.

Hanji was off to the side with Moblit, shouting something before pressing a button on a control in her hands. Her assistant followed with a matching piece and suddenly they were flicking their thumbs over buttons as if in the middle of a heated video game.

The little machines sprung to life and rolled around haphazardly, some crawling on the shifters. At the same time Annie and Reiner began fighting Berthodt and Ymir, who charged at them with grim determination. All the while the two shifters moved carefully around the machines. Berthodt and Ymir didn’t seem to care, lifting the little things up and pointedly trying to destroy them.

Armin inched closer and hid behind a support beam. The spar lasted for ten minutes and only three balloons popped. There was a lot of control in Annie and Reiner’s moves, their different fighting styles oddly complimenting each other as they ganged up against their two companions. Hanji was having a blast through the whole ordeal, laughing maniacally or crying out when a machine was flung in the heat of the fight. More than once Annie and Reiner caught them with careful grips and swaying back slightly as if the balloon were a person and they were helping to go with the momentum so the ‘person’ wasn’t killed instantly upon contact with their hands.

This training was definitely long honed and demanding, the shifters were sweating by the end. Hanji stopped the round with a blow of a whistle. “Break time guys, now will the mouth breather please join us,” she smirked at Armin’s direction, “it’s rude to spy.”

Blushing, the blond stepped out from his hiding spot. The shifters didn’t seem fazed by his presence, although Reiner did look a little pained.

“We’re doing a bit of combat practice,” Hanji grinned, holding up a water balloon, “for when they’re titans on the battlefield.” Armin nodded, having gotten the gist of it.

“The gym isn’t open for you yet,” Moblit said apologetically, “is there – ”

“Ah! Come to think of it, you have a boxing license right?” Hanji cut in, her glasses shining in the
light ominously. “How about a spar with Annie. She’s been trained in kick boxing and all sorts of crazy stuff, but close enough, right?” she turned to Annie eagerly, “and you haven’t been able to stretch your skills with anyone else. How about it?”

“What?” Armin deadpanned, looking from the squad leader to the blonde who narrowed her eyes at the woman suspiciously. “That’s not what I came here – ”

“Actually, I wanna see this, too,” Ymir said with a playful smirk, earning a harder glare from Annie.

“Eren would be a better choice,” Armin said sheepishly, he didn’t talk much about his license. Everyone else liked to glorify that he had one, and it always embarrassed him. “He’s been wanting a rematch for a while.”

Annie’s glare vanished back to suspicion as she turned to him, “he…has?”

Berthodt and Reiner shuffled uncomfortably. They hadn’t said a word since Armin’s arrival. During their united close combat practice sessions, they didn’t speak much either. The 2104th returned the favor, only working side by side with them because they had to. Armin could accept their usefulness to the cause, but as a native of Shiganshina, he could never forgive them, no matter how sympathetic he felt to their plainly displayed guilt. Annie was a different matter.

It was hard to understand the girl. She had been a murderer just like the two men, but that one moment in Maria when she could have crushed Armin and didn’t always made him wonder…

“Come on, show us your stuff,” Hanji grabbed his arm and yanked him closer to the ring, “then you can tell us what you’re here for,” she cocked her head to the side and laughed, “unless you misread the schedule.”

Armin tried to argue, but Ymir and the others were already clearing the mat of the water balloons. The freckled girl smirked devilishly at him as they left, leaving him and Annie to face each other uncertainly.

“Look, I’m not here to spar,” he held up his hands and took a step back in surrender. Annie scrutinized him in that unruffled way of hers, and instead of backing down, she placed her right leg back, bent her legs and lifted her fists protectively at eye level. Two thousand years and she still did the same pose. Armin would never admit it, but a part of him was excited. He never sparred with Annie simply for the fact that he’d been a pint sized swizzle stick and she was a monster not even Reiner could beat. Eren was the only knucklehead stubborn enough to take her on.

And now it was Armin’s turn.

Swallowing another excuse, he got into an offensive stance and tried to gauge how to attack. They weren’t wearing gloves, he had to be careful both to her and himself. He’d sprung up a good height rivaling Reiner, and he worked hard to accommodate the new build. Annie was still pretty short, but that didn’t mean it was a weakness. Last he recalled, she’d been schooled into using her height to her advantage. It’s why she could flip muscle tank Reiner over her shoulder so easily. Armin had to approach her with his brains, and seeing as she was allowing him the first move, he had to do it soon.

Back in Karanese, Armin joined the boxing club on a whim to continue conditioning his body. He was still small and unimpressive, but the coach let him in the ring for the hell of it, and though he got his ass handed to him by his opponent, the old man could see potential. Armin was still developing, what he needed was a training regimen.
The result of his time at the club was now present in his lean muscles and self-discipline. He could see a spark of approval in Annie’s cold eyes, acknowledging his efforts of getting to this point.

He walked cautiously around her, fists up and looking for an opening. Annie waited patiently, doing the same. Finally, he stepped closer and tested a jab, easily dodged, but giving him another angle to swing his right fist.

Annie retaliated with a swing of her own, but he caught it last second with his arm and rode the punch to lessen the blow. He could feel her small knuckles digging bruises into his arm.

They continued firing punches and blocking swings. She never used her legs, choosing to fight on his turf. The longer they went at each other, the more he could see her excitement grow. He could feel it in her rapid fists. He was breaking into a sweat, dancing around her with practiced footwork.

Their hits probably would have landed much harder if they were wearing gloves, but they were both careful to hold back just enough power to not break each other’s jaws. Barehanded, such lands could be pretty damaging. He could feel bruises forming on his knuckles already.

Eventually he managed to catch her by surprise with a fake right hook, and though she blocked it, the blow was hard enough to push her backwards, slip on some residue water from the water balloons and fall over in a gasping heap. It happened so fast he looked down at her with raised eyebrows, not really believing his achievement.

Their audience clapped, Ymir and Hanji making general noises of surprise themselves. Flustered, Armin stretched a hand out to Annie, half knowing that she’d ignore it and stand up herself. He was pleased when she took it.

Her hand was clammy and trembling. The fall must have affected her more than he thought.

Wait. Really? Annie could take a hit, why would she be shaken up?

Her face didn’t betray whatever her hand was doing, and when she stood up, she took it back immediately, turning to Hanji who was smiling giddily.

“I’ve never seen anyone take Annie down!” she exclaimed in fascination.

Armin rubbed the back of his sweat sprayed neck, “she didn’t use her style. It wasn’t really even.”

“But she definitely enjoyed herself,” Ymir grinned toothily, eyeing the girl as she hopped out of the ring. Armin stared after her speculatively. “So what’d you come here for, meathooks?”

Ah. Right. He fished out his phone from his pants, mentally grateful that it hadn’t been damaged in the fight. “There’s been a lot going on in Sina and it’s going to come out in the media eventually, so I thought it best to come to you myself before Dawk or Pixis can.”

“Nile Dawk?” Moblit frowned.

“Pixis?” Hanji’s demeanor changed.

Armin nodded. “On graduation you remember that five of our squad mates joined the stationary
guard. The intention was to go looking for clues regarding the Wiped Era.” This earned a deep frown from the squad leader. “A few nights ago they succeeded in finding a cave in Hermiha with everything dating back to that time. Unfortunately, they were attacked by a shifter. One of them hasn’t woken up yet, but the rest were able to send me a few photos of the culprit.”

The group hung onto every word with growing alarm. He flipped through the messages he received and picked the best picture of Anwir.

“Do you guys know this man?” he handed it over to Berhodt and the others.

Ymir didn’t recognize the face, shaking her head with a shrug, but the other three were very pale. Reiner’s hand flew up to grasp at his short hair.

“That’s…that’s Berwick.”
Nile and all six recruits moved to a private room in the building. It was meant as a counseling room for visitors just recently suffering a loss. There were squashy sofas, a coffee table, a well-placed box of tissues, and a TV. It was a very comfortable place to be. If you weren’t mourning, that is. Now Dazz’s team and Nile’s posse were sitting opposite each other with their superior in between. Millius was still glaring at Hitch, bitter for her pickpocketing.

“Let’s go over this again,” Nile said heavily, placing his tablet flat on the table and activating the holographic program. Marlo switched the light off behind him and the darkness was lit up by the colorful hue of the hologram. With expertise, Nile opened the files for the external flash drive, revealing several icons for albums, documents, and videos. For the past three days, the group had been through every file trying to discern what was important and what was menial.

Nile selected a video recording of a hike from several years ago. They at first ignored it until they realized that to some extent all the other files had some bit of importance regarding their investigation. This video was of a hike in Dauper a few months before the murders.

It started with Nicolas holding the camera as he followed his wife and son who were up ahead dressed in boots and hiking attire with rucksacks that were almost double their size. The midday sun and overhead trees speckled them in shadows and light.

"So...Dauper again,” Nicolas Bodt said conversationally to the viewer, “we’re a few miles from town, just skirting towards wildlife territory. The last trip didn’t turn up anything, hopefully this time we’ll find some clues."

“He’s thinks he’s a detective again,” thirteen year old Marco giggled at his mother who laughed back.

They walked for a bit more, Nicolas moving the camera to focus on a few birds, his own feet, and at one point, a worm. The scenery changed to late afternoon with the family doing the finishing touches to their camp. Eva had the camera this time, but had focused instead on what looked like a piece of garbage. It was a flat piece of metal covered in rust and lodged between a rock and a tree.

Millius recognized the shape, but didn’t have to explain himself because the next second Eva called her family over excitedly.

“What do you think? Could it be...?”

Off the corner of the camera, Marco and his father scrambled to move the rock. It was larger than it looked, and they had to do some digging to at least nudge it little, but that was all they needed for the trapped metal to slip free. Eva grabbed it with a latex gloved hand, holding it closer to the camera.

It was actually around the shape of a rhombus. Part of it that was protected from the rain was discolored and spotted with orange dots here and there. The edge ridged in a way that suggested it
was a part of something. One side was beveled to a fine cutting edge.

“That’s a piece of the blades used to kill titans,” Marco spoke up when his mother turned the camera to him. “It must have broken off during a practice run or from battle.”

“If it were a battle, it could back up the theories of Rose being invaded,” Nicolas said thoughtfully.

“There’s something in the…” Eva focused on the blade’s cleaner corner. There was an engraving done sloppily by hand. It was hard to read in its rusted age, but not so bad that it couldn’t be spotted. The letters read ‘Hist’ some space and then ‘eiss’. “Anyone you know?”

Marco shook his head with a shrug. “Nope.”

The video cut off, leaving the room in dimly lit darkness. They had seen the video countless times and it was still as vague to a certain extent as the others. Millius and the others understood it perfectly, but Nile and his three recruits were still scratching their heads over it. As much as they wanted answers to their questions, Millius doubted they’d understand if they gave it to them.

One look at his teammates and he knew they faced the same dilemma.

On one hand, if they told Nile what they knew and what the videos implied, they’d be on the same playing field with a better chance at catching Anwir. On the other, Nile would highly doubt their story and they’d be accused of hiding something. Their only proof was the cave, and even if they did go there Nile would stubbornly go through standard procedure regarding the contents of the cave and maybe along the way, destroy precious historical artifacts. Preventing any damage to their history along with following Nile’s stiff rules and going through every little detail in the cave would take weeks, and that was time they didn’t have.

But if they kept their mouths shut, that would only take them longer in catching Anwir.

“Out with it,” Hitch broke the silence, shaking everyone from their thoughts. The young woman pointed to Millius, “you’re hiding something, I can tell,” she smirked.

The room turned its attention to the sheepish man. He looked again to Nack, Hannah, and Franz, weighing his options. How should he say this without looking crazy?

“Marco Bodt was able to discern a piece of metal found in the woods two seconds upon seeing it,” Marlo said pointedly, “his own parents – historians of the Battle of Trost – couldn’t even identify it, and when their son told them what it was they were quick to believe him. I know Marco’s a bit of a prodigy, but to know that much from just a piece of metal?”

The question was open and made his group think. Millius was still battling with what to say when next to him, Franz spoke up.

“Marco’s parents were interested in the Wiped era, it would make sense if Marco was sucked in with the obsession and did some research of his own.”

“Yes, but this file,” Nile closed the video and opened a document of an old photographed letter yellow and torn with age. There were notes from Eva and Nicolas following it. “Suggests that Marco Bodt died in Trost two thousand years ago. It implies that the current Marco is a descendent of this soldier. Eva and Nicolas’s notes imply that they’re one and the same.”

“So either that means Marco’s two thousand years old, or they had some kind of psychotic break,” Boris said, crossing his arms and watching the four carefully. “Also,” he ran his finger over a name in the first paragraph, his move highlighting it. “This says Marco’s body was found by Jean
Kirschstein, a fellow soldier and member of the 104th training squad just like him. There’s currently a Jean Kirschstein from your graduating class who joined recon.”

Damn. Millius was hoping they hadn’t noticed that bit in the files. “So you have your own theory? What is it?”

“Is Bodt a shifter?” Nile asked bluntly.

“Of course not,” Hannah scowled.

“The king’s life is in danger if your account of Anwir is correct – even more so if he finds out where we’ve hidden his highness,” Nile reasoned, “this USB has been telling us that the Bodt family were researching the Wiped era with Marco as their bloodhound. They were killed in Sterben – the very place where clues to the Wiped era lie and to which you refuse to give us the full details. We’ve waited long enough. Now you will tell us what you know or we’ll have to assume that you are traitors to humanity and will henceforth be put under arrest for endangering not only the king’s life, but every single individual who lives within these walls.”

Nack clucked his tongue sourly. “And if we tell you the truth, who’s to say you’ll believe us?”

“We’ve taken the king to a bomb shelter well out of the palace in spite of him suffering panic attacks due to his agoraphobia,” Marlo said sternly. It was the first thing Millius told them to do as soon as he found himself face to face with them at Sterben. “I believe a reason should be given to us other than his bodyguard being a titan spy. We know there’s more to the story just from the USB alone. We’re willing to listen.”

The four looked at each other doubtfully. While they relied on faith, the group opposite them relied on facts. They were too different.

“Tell them.”

They whipped around to the door. Dazz stood there in crutches, his head bandaged, body painted with bruises and cuts, and his left ankle and wrist bound in braces. Hannah was the first to rush to him with the intention of hugging him, but stopped short when she realized she’d be doing more damage than good. The others mimicked her as well, at a loss, but extremely happy to see Dazz up and about.

“You’re awake!” Hannah squeaked. Their faces were ten times brighter than they were a second ago. Nile watched as Franz took Dazz’s crutches while Nack and Millius held him firmly under his arms to help him settle on the sofa. Once things quieted down, the group seemed tighter with the addition of their fifth friend. The care for the blond startled the older man. When he first saw them in Utopia they were just another group of recruits bound by age and training history. Now, after only a few weeks, it was like they were a family.

Or had they always been like this and Nile just hadn’t noticed?

To be fair, Dazz was just as openly perplexed as he was.

“Uh…thanks,” he gave his friends a small smile before turning to the other quiet half of the room. “You said you were willing to listen?” Marlo nodded wordlessly, “Alright fine. But before you make any assumptions, I’m sure you’ve seen my diagnosis, I’m completely sane.”

“You’re killing us with the suspense,” Hitch drawled, her head resting against her palm, the complete picture of boredom.
Dazz nodded and took a deep breath, ignoring the stab of pain that reacted from his wounds, “there’s a reason why everyone in the 2104th – especially Marco – is obsessed with the Great Wipe. We were all self-aware since birth, retaining memories of past lives surrounding the early years of the Walls. Back in the 800’s, our squadron was the 104th. This is why we’re so bizarrely disciplined and knowledgeable. We’ve retained everything we learned in the past and adapted to this era in order to join the military again to finish the war on titans.” The more he spoke, the more his listener’s faces slipped from attentive to increasingly skeptical. “Our history lies in the Great Wipe. We,” he waved to himself and his group, “joined the police in order to find out what happened. Our search ended up crossing paths with you.”

“And this search ended at the library,” Boris added, “we’ve been tracing back Anwir’s murders to that place, the fact that we found you there further proves the answers to the Wiped era are in there.” Dazz nodded, baring no hesitation or doubt. “If what you say about…retaining memories is true, does this mean you’re…”

“Yes,” Hannah answered for him, “we…have been reincarnated from our past. We remember everything, including how we died,” she glanced at her boyfriend and took his hand.

“So how’d you die?” Hitch asked with a hint of amusement. She didn’t believe them. None of them did, but Boris seemed willing.

“I was ripped in half,” Franz said sheepishly.


“Stepped on,” Hannah mumbled, her freckled cheeks pinking.

“Murdered,” Dazz said quietly, his grim tone offsetting the lighthearted replies. It got everyone’s attention. “Unless there’s records of anyone before me, you could say I was Anwir’s first victim.”

The atmosphere darkened again at the mention of their missing suspect. Dazz set his jaw, remembering the day he died, and the fight practically a week ago. He almost died the same way again. He’d grown stronger and had better control over his fears, yet Anwir got him again. He was lucky to be around help, otherwise he really wouldn’t have survived.

And that angered him more than anything.

He really wasn’t strong enough…

Dazz nearly jumped at the hand resting reassuringly on his knee. Millius gave him a nod of understanding. He’d been the only other one there to witness Anwir’s strength and come out of it with his life. It hit Dazz that the other man could have died, too. Hannah, Franz, Nack. They could have all died…

How on earth could they look at him like this? Like they still viewed him as the leader? Millius had a better head for the spot. Franz too if he put some effort in to it, just standing there would give anyone reassurance. Hannah had become a great hacker and growing strategist when it came to their missions. It was easy to follow orders from her and she definitely never stepped back from a job. Shit, even Nack could hold better charisma over him. So why did they all look to him for the orders? Him, the only ordinary guy in the whole damn squad?

The guy who almost killed them running headfirst into a vicious neighborhood?

“You’ve become a great team,” Nile’s compliment brought Dazz back to the present. His comment
was shared with equal confusion from all recruits, and he shrugged, staring at the hologram of files from the Bodt flash drive. “Reincarnation sounds like a stretch, but when you think about it…the behavior of the 2104th, the camaraderie, the Kirschstein’s name in this old letter…it’s not normal behavior when compared to the average twenty year old.” He ran a hand over his face, brushing over a thin shadow from his lack of shaving. “You five worked together to find something no one else was able to uncover. It’s commendable.”

“Thanks…I guess,” Nack’s top lip was curled up in bemusement.

“Er…I’d like to correct you there,” Dazz said, “we weren’t the first, the Bodt’s were. For some reason they left behind their flash drive and we ended up finding it.”

“Can you take us to this cave?” Marlo asked, between a genuine request and a demand.

“There’s no time,” Millius shook his head. “Anwir’s still out there, our next best shot is getting ahold of Marco himself except there’s a problem. Darius Zackly approved the survey corps next mission to go into Maria again. They’ll be going in two days – not enough time to get all the answers we need from Marco.”

“Why not?” Nile frowned. It was really only a few questions, simple enough to be done though an online chat.

Hannah looked visibly uncomfortable. “Marco’s kind of…”

“ Weird?” Nack suggested.

“ Closed off?” Dazz said.

“ So he’s as crazy as the rumors suggest?” Hitch hazarded, earning several head shakes of denial.

“More like he’s got a hidden agenda up his sleeve and as much as he plays the goody two shoes card nothing can hide that creepy red eye thing he’s got going on,” Nack said, “You told us Anwir killed his parents. Then he was targeted a few years later. Why not join the MP to finally catch the guy? You,” he pointed to Boris, “think he joined recon to drive Anwir away from civilians – make’s sense, if Marco were the Marco we knew.”

“Then what’s the real reason he joined the scouting legion?” Nile asked evenly, his eyes curious.

Dazz was looking at Nack just the same. He hadn’t really thought much of Marco as Nack clearly had. He barely noticed the subtle differences between past Marco and current Marco. Nack took pleasure at the attention, crossing his arms and hitting his wound by accident. He winced slightly, and went on to say, “I don’t know the entire reason, but the main one I believe is that he wants to protect Jean.”

“Kirschstein?”

“Is that his boyfriend of something?” Marlo blurted out.


“Then he has no grudge against Anwir,” Nile concluded with a frown.

“Oh no, he does. Or he should,” Nack corrected himself. “I mean, if Marco’s so nice to put others priorities over his own, then the priority of his parents is at the top of his psychotic little head.”
“Sooo….” Hitch waved him to continue, humoring him.

“He’s planning revenge of epic proportions,” Nack’s enthusiastic tone turned grave disconcertingly. “You said the family was in Sterben – running away from the library. The flash drive was found in the cave. Assuming the whole family got in somehow – they had to have – that means Marco saw everything we saw and yet kept the information to himself. He said nothing to Dazz, whom everyone knew wanted to find clues on the Wiped era. Why do that? My guess is he doesn’t want anyone to know what he’s planning. His revenge is personal, and crazy enough to keep quiet so no one will back him out of it, and whatever he’s planning to do – it lies either in Maria or beyond the walls. No one can get past Rose unless they’re in the scouting legion.”

A beat of silence. Millius turned stiffly to Nack. “You’ve thought about this for a while haven’t you?”

“Only since they told us how Marco’s parents died,” the raven head answered chirpily.

Nile really hated that his veterans weren’t as smart as these kids. Screw Dennis, he was going to kill the whole fucking brigade, and then maybe himself for being just as incompetent.

Pixis too. Because Pixis was in on this somehow, he knew it.

“So Bodt’s not going to give us a straight answer,” he sighed. “We’ll have to start putting up wanted posts of Anwir. It’ll endanger the civilians who actually do find him and think they’ll have a fighting chance, but – ”

“I…have a better idea,” Marlo cut in.

“Are you gonna need string, a left shoe, and the latest hit from Queen Munny’s Twerk It Gewd album?” Hitch grinned, unfazed by the man’s Frown of Disapproval.

“What is it?” Nile pressed.

Marlo looked around uneasily before facing his chief again. “We kill the king.”

No one had time to react. Armin's phone buzzed in Millius's pocket and he flipped it open. Everyone watched curiously as he read the message briefly. "We have a name," he said, shutting the phone, "Anwir's real name is Berwick."

"Berwick?" Nile echoed, "how do you know?" he flared up indignantly, "who else knows about this investigation!?"

"A friend," Dazz quickly answered, his tone indicating finality and throwing the chief off, "Marlo, what's this about killing the king?"

A few days ago when Hanji called Eren into her office past curfew, he knew it was for good reason. Her message hadn’t lied, Levi and his father were there. Along with Erwin and Mike. The office had been cleaned up on the insistence of his father, leaving space for his own toys. The transformation had been so dramatic that at first Eren thought he was in the wrong room.
“Your mother wanted to be here,” Grisha said apologetically. “But she’s not cleared to enter Isra since she’s an ordinary citizen. I’m sorry.”

“What’s this about?”

“The buffer,” Hanji said, hold up a small titanium case, “Dr. Jaeger made an anti-version of it,” she grinned at the older man, “and in such a short time! I’m starting to think you’ve had the formula as back up.”

Grisha squirmed under the woman’s knowing gaze. Eren’s focus, however, was on the case. “An anti-buffer?”

“In theory you’ll be able to shift again after taking it,” Levi explained. Eren looked at him, but quickly turned away self-consciously. He hadn’t forgotten how the older man ignored him all day, now he wasn’t sure how to act around him without embarrassing himself. He already humiliated himself enough trying to strike meaningless conversations with him.

“Right,” he rolled up his sleeve and walked up to Hanji and his father, “let’s do this.”

The new serum was slow acting. Reactivating the titan gene which had been dormant for twenty one years within minutes could lead to either cardiac arrest or his blood boiling out before it had a chance to readapt. Even so, after taking the anti-buffer, Eren was hit with a high fever and had to be put on bed rest at the medic building for a few days.

Grisha had taken care of his temperature his whole stay, and he received visits from friends. Armin had been telling him something important, but Eren was too fuzzy headed to fully understand. The only bits he got were that Dazz may have found something, but he was now in the hospital and Darius Zackly approved their mission to go back in Maria.

He may or may not have gotten a visit from Levi, but he was pretty sure he was hallucinating at that point.

After a few days of sweating out his fever, Eren was back on his feet and ready to test out his shifting abilities. If they really did return.

Levi was the one to escort him to the training field. The others had gone ahead to set up precautions in case something went wrong. Eren wasn’t sure if he should feel happy or upset with the man's presence. This wasn’t the Levi he knew, this one was ten times more guarded than his Levi, and cared about him as much as the other recruits. He was nothing special to the corporal.

When he saw him at the door in his Maneuver X, though, Eren’s mouth went dry. The design for the suit really emphasized all the good bits a person could show off, and Levi in the suit really screamed how much of a perfect specimen he was.

Well. Perfect if he didn’t have shadows under his eyes. He looked like he hadn’t slept in weeks.

The pair walked down the village in silence. The butterflies in Eren’s stomach threatening to physically float him away. It had been a long time since he was this close to the corporal. Their arms just a few inches from touching. Eren’s whole body was thrumming with excitement.

“Arlert told us your friends in Sina found clues of the Wiped era,” Levi said. His voice casual and smooth. “They’re working on a super secret mission with Dawk, but they were able to tell us that all of our obituaries are in this cave they found.” He looked troubled. “I died in the last scouting legion resistance.”
Eren kept quiet. He was mostly happy that Levi was speaking to him again, but the new information worried him. Super secret mission? What was that? “I died in that battle, too,” he said softly, “you, me, Mikasa, Armin…a lot of people died.”

“They called me Humanity’s Strongest,” Levi scowled, “what the hell kind of shitty title is that? My own name is easier to say in a sentence. I hope I didn’t come up with it myself.”

“Well. You were the strongest,” Eren said with a light shrug, “I…” his could feel his cheeks warming up, “I’ve always admired you. Ever since I was little,” he chuckled, “the first time we met I was in a cell going under trial for being a shifter. You had to kick my face in to prove to the judge that you could control me. You saved my life…”

Levi’s tired eyes lowered and looked to the side. “I know.”

Eren stopped, forcing the shorter man to halt a few steps ahead. “You know?” he repeated, scrambling after him. He grabbed his shoulder, “you remember!?”

Levi shoved his hand off with a whack of his hand. “No,” he started walking again, “not completely.”

“What do you remember!?” Eren chased after him, “even if its small it’s still something! I can help – ” he reached out to him again, but Levi smack him away angrily.

The calm demeanor was gone. He was trying to keep it together, but Eren could see him cracking. The corner of his lips was very subtly trembling and his sharp eyes were becoming glossier. He wasn’t falling apart yet, but any second Eren could feel he was either going to break down, or beat the shit out of him.

“There’s one memory,” he said heavily, his lips barely moving, “keeps repeating in my head. I’m flying in a forest – using that piece of crap maneuver gear, and every single one of my squad is littered all over like fucking squashed daisies.”

Eren took a step back, all hope of Levi remembering him vanishing with the guilt of that day returning with full force. He remembered perfectly too.

He also remembered going back to base and listening to Levi chatting his head off even though he barely spoke to Eren before. It was as if Petra, Auruo, Erd, and Gunther were sitting there with them and Levi didn’t realize that they never would be ever again.

That was the only reaction he saw from the corporal regarding the loss of his squad, and seeing him holding it in with much less control than two thousand years ago was almost a relief for Eren. It was the confirmation he needed from Levi that he really did care for his squad. He wasn’t as cold as he made himself appear to be.

“That won’t happen again,” he said, watching as Levi cooled down and reigned in his emotions. “That day you told me that I should make my own decisions when the situation called for it. I wouldn’t know what would happen if I did something or not. I was too late that day. I won’t be this time.”

Levi regarded him with a set jaw, then they continued walking, a new determination driving Eren. The older man gained enough control to say, “I’m not the Levi you want me to be.”

Eren smiled sadly, the ache his heart twisting painfully. “I know.”

Levi reached up and rubbed at a temple. His headache was growing the more these nightmares
haunted him. None of the others were experiencing flashes of the past like him, why was that? It wasn’t fair that he had to suffer the deaths of his soldiers while they happily yammered about theories and titan blood.

“That won’t happen again.”

Damn. Why did Jaeger have to say something so mature like that? He threw the younger man a glance. Their discussion left him looking years beyond his age, and loathe as Levi was to admit it, it made him look handsome.

_I’m going to hell,_’ he thought to himself in defeat.
Chapter Summary

Ymir has a moment of reflection and Levi's headache takes a turn for the worse

Chapter Notes

soooo...thanksgiving's coming up and since I work at a bakery that means HOLYSHITSOMANYORDERSITSTHEENDOFTHEFUCKINGWORLDAAHHH!
This may be the newest chapter for maybe a week lol OR I might be able to squeeze in another one by Sunday or Monday. Can't be too sure because I've been getting orders for my own business X_X (tries to think about the money...) wish me luck guys! @v@

2848

Shifter Village

Watching other people die happened so much, that at this point, Ymir was numb to it. If they died, they were simply not strong enough to survive. The world was made of predators and their prey, nature demanded death without prejudice. Her whole life had been to fight off the predators, and become one herself.

Watching Historia die had killed her before the titans got her. For that split second that made the final judgment, she was okay with dying if she could remain with her only true friend.

Instead she was born here, outside the walls and far away from Historia. Standing stock still with Annie as they stared stupidly at two boys standing on the edge of a bridge.

This was not the second chance she envisioned for herself.

Her time with her parents was brief. The most she could recall was their faces, vaguely familiar to hers, before disappearing altogether. It was three short years, but long enough for Ymir to know that they loved her, making their loss even harder to accept. She couldn’t remember what her parents were like in her first childhood. She hoped they were as kind as the pair in this lifetime.

Unfortunately, for all her experience in survival, Ymir was still three years old, with a toddler’s body and no relatives to look after her. As soon as the accident was reported, the officials carted her off to an orphanage where they would keep her until sixteen when she was old enough to care for herself.

Although modernized, the village was still miniscule in terms of choices for schooling. Everyone knew each other, so when a little freckled girl entered preschool with her caretaker, they knew she was the orphan of the couple who died drowned in the river. They were quick to keep an eye on her, as was the nature of the village. Here, everyone was like family.

The attention was something Ymir needed time to get used to. Her last visit to the village had been
centuries ago when denizens were passionate about the titans to the point of religious zealousness. Thus her quick exit after getting the information she needed to help the scouting legion. Never let it be said that she didn’t try to get the shifter’s perspective in the war.

Now, however, things had mellowed out and Ymir grew up feeling accepted in this strange new community. It made the pain of Historia’s absence a little more bearable.

She met Annie, donning a familiar sweater, in seventh grade when she arrived in the middle of the year. Until that point, the blonde was being homeschooled, and by the look of her stance and stony eyes, she’d also been taking a few extracurricular lessons. Ymir smirked behind her hand. Annie was still the same as ever.

They caught each other’s eyes during introductions. One tiny gasp and Ymir knew Annie recognized her, but when she tried to strike a conversation with the girl, she was only met with silence and short notes from her notebook. At first she thought Annie didn’t want to talk to her, what with her cold eyes and aloof nature. It made her mad enough to strike a one sided argument – because really? The first person she encounters who remembers the past and they don’t want to talk about it!? It took a few minutes of calming down before her fellow shifter wrote a new note.

Annie hadn’t spoken a word since birth.

There was nothing wrong with her voice box. She was just one of those selective mutes. Ymir didn’t like it. So she stuck by her side and continued prodding her to say at least one word. This wasn’t received well with her teachers. If Annie didn’t want to talk, then she had to respect her wishes. Ymir, thankfully, wasn’t that much of a respectful girl, and Annie oddly didn’t seem to mind. Maybe because Ymir was her only friend now.

Bertholdt and Reiner were in the same school, but their class was different. The most the girls saw of them was when they passed by in the halls for class. Ymir tried talking to them too at the beginning, and while Reiner seemed okay with her prodding, Bertholdt had been very uneasy. They treated her as they would any other student. They didn’t recognize her, nor their lives of the past.

She didn’t believe it for one second, but unlike Annie, she understood their discomfort and backed off. The feeling was mutual anyway, there was something off about them. She couldn’t put her finger on it until a few months later when she and Annie came upon a crowded hall on their way to lunch.

The teachers were having a hard time controlling the curious onlookers as two security guards came out of the boy’s bathroom. One of them was holding a brown paper bag inside another plastic bag, not saying a word to the inquiry from students. Bertholdt walked between them with his head hung low. There were murmurs weaving through the crowd as the three cut through them for the principal’s office. Ymir watched until the door slammed shut, wondering what could have happened.

Looking back at the thinning groups of onlookers, she saw Reiner looking sick as he turned and left. Bertholdt never came back to school after that day, his situation remained unknown. It was the only big thing to happen that year, making it the most talked about subject in school.

There were three popular theories. One, the contents of the bag had been drugs and someone tattled on Bertholdt. Two, it was actually a gun and he was planning on a shooting. Three, he was planning to shoot himself. He was a quiet guy with little to no friends, the three rumors had heavy weight of possibility to them.

As minimally expressive as Annie was, Ymir knew she worried for the other boy. The carefully
crafted extroverted persona Reiner developed was falling apart within days, and by the end of seventh grade, he dropped out of school altogether and became as obscure as Bertholdt.

No one had heard from them all throughout summer. A time in which Ymir discovered that they were orphans like her. The only reason she didn’t know was because they kept it private and had been housed in a different orphanage on the other side of the village. They’d been so good at keeping it secret that no one suspected a thing.

Ymir thought about them from time to time, mostly feeling pity. They didn’t forget the past, like hell they forgot the past. She could see the years in their eyes mirror her own. Their goal had been to follow orders and return home to their families. The cost was thousands of lives, and it was taking a toll on them just as it had with Annie.

“You’re lucky,” she told her on their way to school that warm September. “You still have your dad.”

Annie shrugged next to her, clutching the straps of her bag. Ymir couldn’t tell if it was a reply to her comment, or her readjusting her bag.

“Tch,” she pouted, “one of these days I’m getting a word out of you.” Her answer was a cold glare which made her snicker. They reached the bridge that would take them to the north end of the village where their school resided. Ymir was going to add another smart comment, but the words died in her throat.

Maybe it was fate that she’d been thinking about Reiner and Bertholdt that very moment.

They were standing over the bridge’s rail, holding hands and gazing at the sky. Fifty feet below was a rushing man made river – the village’s only source of water and the grave of Ymir’s parents. The sight was so surreal Ymir was frozen on the spot, watching in a horrified daze as the two boys tipped forward and plunged willingly to their deaths.

2856

Isra

“Ymir?”

A slender finger poked her side, making her squirm and peek an eye open. The day had been like a break from all the training and battle strategies. Because of such a huge influx of recruits, getting everything ready for their next mission went by a lot faster than anticipated. With all weapons and gear packed, everyone was left to enjoy the next two days.

Well, everyone not a part of the test for Eren becoming a titan again.

Someone was taking care of informing all soldiers to be alert, Ymir couldn’t remember who. Some guy named Moses or Roses. She had to report to the training field with the other shifters in an hour to keep the area secure.

Ymir took the small bit of free time to take a nap in the mess hall, eager to enjoy a moment where time was not of the essence. Historia would have been with her, but she’d been pulled away to Mike’s squad to help security. Her arrival now could only mean that Ymir was needed.

“Ngh,” Ymir buried her face deeper in her folded arms.

“Ymir, we have to go,” her friend prodded. Ymir watched her move around the table meaningfully, and gave a reluctant grunt, standing up to stretch the kinks from her muscles, then latching onto the
blonde from behind. It was a little cumbersome with Historia already in her battle suit, but she hadn’t put the helmet on, so Ymir was at least able to snuggle the crook of her neck. The hug attacks used to annoy Historia or sometimes get little to no reaction from her since she was so used to it, now the smaller girl giggled softly and wrapped a hand over her encircling arms, keeping her close.

The pair awkwardly walked out of the mess hall, snorting when they tripped every now and then. When they reached outside, Ymir placed a kiss on Historia’s exposed neck and basked in her delicate scent.

“What were you dreaming about?”

“Hm?” she let go to walk better next to her, holding her hand as their only connection. “Dreaming?”

“You looked like you were dreaming,” Historia smiled up at her.

Ymir returned it on instinct. “It wasn’t really a dream. More like a memory.”

“Of the past?”

“Not the past past. It was about the village,” the pleasant feeling in her chest slowly dried up as she recalled the dream. “Well…it was more how I met Annie and the others.”

“Through school right?” Historia had been told about it before. Ymir didn’t tell her everything yet, she wasn’t sure if it was her place, and she was sure Historia wouldn’t take lightly to the real story. “Is something wrong?”

She shook her darkening face and pulled up a smile, “nope.”

They reached the field scattered with organized groups. Eren was standing at the center with Hanji and his father making last minute touches to the elastic cables draped loosely on him. About forty yards away in all directions, a squad leader was standing with a few soldiers, all in Maneuver X and standing by cannons. In the nearest building’s roof, and atop surrounding trees, more soldiers lay in position with sniper rifles.

Reiner, and Annie were in a ring – or it would be a ring once she joined them - between the soldiers and Eren. Bertholdt was in Erwin’s team, his form too big to be a part of the shifter formation.

Giving Ymir’s hand a squeeze, Historia left to join Mike’s team. They were the farthest group, stationed closest to the village. Their main job was to create a warning for those not in the field. As she passed by them, Nanaba wordlessly tossed her a communications earpiece which she clipped on.

Hanji discovered early on that when in their titan forms, the shifters remained clothed and conscious. Like one mind for two bodies. Ymir used to lean out of the nape for a few seconds to talk with others. It gave Hanji the idea to test whether an earpiece would work just as well without the hassle of moving back and forth. The test had been successful and from then on they used the earpiece in all missions.

Ymir entered the circle, standing at the only large gap between Reiner and Annie.

“You’re late,” she heard Annie say in her earpiece, their distance too far to have a proper conversation.

“They’re late,” Ymir pointed to Hanji and Grisha, “party hasn’t started yet, I’d say I’m on time.”

Annie didn’t answer, and from how far she was, Ymir was willing to believe she was grinning a little
there. She looked over to Reiner, recalling the dream, or rather memory.

Nothing in his face gave away what he and Bertholdt did when they were kids. Ymir still didn’t know what all the fuss was about regarding the brown bag that got Bertholdt expelled. He wasn’t going to tell her, Reiner wasn’t going to tell her, and she knew they never would. The two idiots liked to suffer alone.

‘Whatever,’ she scowled and turned her attention to the people in the middle of the circle. ‘They can hate themselves all they want.’

Her eyes landed on Eren next, too focused to care that Reiner and Annie were nearby. After all this time in Isra, Ymir thought he’d get to them as soon as they were unprotected. She thought he’d take extra joy off of fighting them in the mock battles.

He did nothing.

Bertholdt had been quiet recently, which Ymir suspected was Eren’s work, but Annie said it wasn’t. She didn’t say who was responsible either. The whole thing was a mystery to Ymir, and it was starting to rub her the wrong way. Not that she was Bertholdt’s mother, but she’d seen the progress he made since the destruction of their village, and now all of the sudden it was like he relapsed. Yet it wasn’t Eren’s fault.

Curling her lips contemplatively, she looked over Eren’s shoulder where the special ops squad was stationed far away. Maybe the reason to Eren not bothering to exact revenge on team BRA was because he had other things preoccupying his puny one track mind…

Levi’s squad was a few yards closer to the middle. Marginally, but not by much. Gunther and Erd were on one of the trees, ready to pull the trigger if Eren showed any signs of violence. They were positioned right behind him, giving them faster access to his weak point. In a bad case scenario, everyone would keep Eren distracted while Levi shot up and ripped him out. They already saw that the scars on Eren’s hands had disappeared, a few missing limbs could be just as easy to heal.

“Do you think Eren can create crystals on himself like Annie?” Petra asked through the comm in Levi’s helmet. An image of her flashed in his head. Crushed against a tree in a grotesque arch with her blank blood sprayed face towards the skies. There was a numb feeling attached to the image warring with grief, like the him in the past had such a vice like grip on his emotions, not even a tear could be shed. “Corporal?”

“We’re not sure,” he heard himself say, mentally shaking the image out of his head.

“I wonder what he looks like,” Erd said, “skinless or fleshy.”

“Gross,” Auruo sneered.

The blond wasn’t even whole in the memory. Half his body was torn off, his remains strewn on the grass. Auruo lying in a spattering of his own blood, the legion emblem glaring at Levi in mockery.

Levi felt nauseous. He stubbornly swallowed it down and tried to focus on what Erd said instead. What did Eren’s titan form look like? He didn’t know. Eren described it as a fleshy type with a
muscular body. His hair right now was similar to his titan form as well. All Levi could picture was a naked Eren running around. Sadly that did nothing to dissuade the sickening images of his dead squad.

“Looks like they’re starting,” Gunther observed, watching Hanji and Grisha leave the center for the former’s own squad.

He was hanging off the branches of a tree in his own cables, head snapped –

Levi grimaced. Stop. He needed to stop!

Curling his fingers into fists, the corporal flicked his wrists, releasing blue holographic blades that hummed upon activation and silenced altogether. Behind him Erd positioned himself at the cannon while the others held up their rifles.

His headache was turning into a migraine. There were three simultaneous cracks of lightening as the shifters transformed into titans. After the dust settled, their voices filled his helmet.

“Ymir, testing.”

“Annie, testing.”

“Reiner, testing.”

“Testing’s positive,” Hanji confirmed, “Eren, you’re turn.”

“…Right.”

Levi watched as, far away, Eren lifted his hand to his mouth and bit hard.

There was a second where nothing happened. Levi was irrationally hopeful that nothing would and all this preparation was a waste of time…

“Trust us.”

Levi stiffened. They were riding on horses. Racing through a forest of giant trees…Eren shouting for orders, begging to be of help. Petra yelling back to…

“Trust us.”

The memory was so strong he could smell the blood of the fallen mingled with the crushed scent of grass and dirt. The clopping of their horses hooves, and the screams of dying soldiers ringing in his ears. He could feel the female titan’s heavy steps pulse ominously through his body.

“Corporal!?"

A hand caught him from behind. He didn’t have time to realize he’d been tipping to the side because what followed was a thunderous crack that struck the center of the circle, lifting the dust once more and temporarily blinding everyone.

Righting himself, Levi activated the heat signature visual. Inside the ring of dots that were soldiers, there were four tall figures. A great muscle mass known as the armored titan, a shorter titan next to it, the curvy female titan, and at the center, a figure of a giant man with longish hair.

A deafening cry peeled out. Raw and angry.
Levi switched visuals back to standard. The dust had settled, showing the three known titans and a fifteen meter class, tied up in cables and emitting steam from the fresh transformation. There were several clicks of rifles being aimed and ready to fire. It hadn’t done anything beyond scream so far.

“Corporal, are you all right?” Petra asked urgently. Judging by the lack of reaction from the others, Levi guessed she switched to private mode. He did as well, pressing a hidden button on the side of his helmet.

“I’m fine,” he said.

“You looked like you were going to fa – ”

“I’m fine,” he repeated firmly.

“Well. He’s fleshy,” Erd said, stating the obvious.

“Still gross,” Auruo said.

The new titan lifted what he could of his hands, flexing his fingers experimentally. The other titans stood by, fists up in anticipation.

“Testing. Eren, can you hear me?” Hanji said.

There was no reply.

“Eren, respond.”

Levi bent his knees, preparing for a one shot blast off to the nape of the titan’s neck. All he needed was the order or any sign to act on his own. The titan dropped his hands, looking around slowly in a daze.

“Kill…”

There were several noises of displeasure in the communications. Some were already asking to fire their weapons.

“Standby,” Erwin ordered, “Eren. Respond!”

“Titans…kill all titans…”

_A cell in the dungeons. A boy chained to his bed with a pleased smile as he said those morbid words._

Levi grit his teeth at another stab from his head.

“Eren! Snap out of it!” Armin shouted in his helmet, not making his migraine any better, “remember the ocean!”

Ocean? What the fuck did that have to do with anything?

“We have this dream. Armin, and I,” Eren murmured against his bare chest, “to see the ocean once the war is over. Our first step into exploring the world."

“This is Erd reporting, something’s wrong with the corporal.”

“What!?” several voices exclaimed. Erwin shouted something else, but Levi couldn’t catch it. There was a rushing sound in his ears. More flashes of memories were flooding in, increasing the ache in
his head and dotting his vision. There were arms wrapping around him, but he hadn’t sensed that he’d fallen.

The new titan was looking in his direction. Lipless mouth releasing breaths of steam, deep set green eyes formed into a permanent frown of anger, pointed ears and hair that flowed in wild disarray. Levi felt like he were meeting someone he hadn’t seen in years, and with it slammed an onslaught of memories long forgotten.

_Flying around in stolen maneuver gear, unnamed friends following right behind._

_Eren smiling underneath him, his eyes glittering mischievously._

“Corporal…that’s a poor choice of words.”

_Erwin on his knees, looking up at him stonily, unsurprised at the blade aimed for his head._

_Blood. So much blood. So many comrades gone._

"You have done a great deal. And you will continue to do so. The resolve you leave behind will give me strength. I promise you… I will obliterate the Titans!"

Sensors in his helmet picked up elevated heartbeat and unnatural spikes from his brain. The screen flashed red with an exclamation mark, short clipped beeps announcing a call to other receptors for help. His helmet was removed, the red replaced with blue skies, something warm and wet was running down his nose. The roar of the titan overshadowed the increasing voices of alarm. He didn’t know what was happening, his head bursting with pain as more and more visions of another life threatened to crack his skull from the overload.

“You’ll never say it back to me will you? You were just letting me live out my fantasy…”

“Levi! We need to get him to a doctor!”

Then nothing. A darkness cut off the bright blue and snuffed out the screams of his comrades.

_Jinae_

The best Grisha was able to do was set up a live feed through the television. Since that morning, Carla was planted in the living room in her pajamas, clutching her untouched coffee which had now grown cold. Hanji needed video recordings of the test, allowing Carla to watch from Jinae seeing as the test subject was her son and all.

The sight of Eren standing there one second, and then exploding into a massive figure naked and angry, had nearly made her drop her mug.

Then confusion ensued as soldiers looked around in alarm. The titan hadn’t done anything else apart from roaring. It didn’t even try to rip off the cables. Minutes passed by as orders were screamed and people started running. Her eyes were starting to tear up from lack of blinking. A stretcher was rushed to the other end of the field, three titans holding down the rogue titan as he began to struggle with his bonds. Just when the stretcher came back in view, the feed was cut off for an important announcement from the government, leaving the lone woman blinking and shaking her head in bewilderment.

Setting down her mug with a clang on the coffee table, she snatched her phone and speed dialed Grisha. It rang straight to voicemail, forcing her to hang up and redial again. Three more tries and her husband finally answer.
“Carla –”

“What happened!? The video was cut off!” she blurted out before he could finish. “Is Eren all right? Was someone injured?”

There was heavy breathing on the other end as Grisha ran to an unknown direction, people speaking quickly in the background and the rogue titan – Eren – screeching desperately. “I’m not sure yet, one of the squad leaders just had a seizure, I’m taking him to the medic.”

“And Eren?” she pressed her phone closer to her ear.

“That’s what I’m not sure about,” Grisha said grimly, short of breath. “He was fine until he reacted strongly to the man’s seizure. The other shifters are holding him down, they’re trying to get him out of the titan form. He’ll be fine.”

“Does he know him?” Carla’s nerves were making her want to stand up and pace, but she couldn’t do that and focus her attention to Grisha at the same time. Unconsciously, she pressed her legs together, taught with anticipation and sending her nearly off the edge of the couch. Even though she was on the phone, she was leaning forward as if that would help her listen better. “The man who –”

“Yes, he’s a corporal. Levi, I believe.”

It took her a minute, but she recognized the name as quickly as she recalled Mikasa and Armin. “That’s…that’s the name Eren used to call out in his sleep! Remember? When he was having those nightmares!”

“I…” Grisha paused on the other line, “I hadn’t thought of that… Yes, it’s the same name.”

“What the hell’s –”

“I don’t know. I have to go, we’ll talk about this later, I’ll call you as soon as I can.”

The line went dead, the words Carla had been meaning to say dying in a choke of indignation and anxiety. There was nothing she could do now, but wait for Grisha or someone else to call her back. She lowered the phone to her lap, wished it to ring.

“…Execution of King Erik…”

Carla looked at the television, thinking in her frazzled mind that she heard wrong. The news report showed the headline ‘King Erik Under Arrest’, a recording of Nile Dawk and several of his policemen escorting a young man walking hurriedly in their protective ring with a jacket over his head to block his face, and hands cuffed behind his back. The mob of reporters all crowded around them, stretching out their mics and yelling questions over each other as they entered the court building.

“King Erik Segher was arrested days ago for orchestrating the deaths of the late King and Queen Segher of Sina. The couple had been killed five years ago in a car accident in Hermiha, a recent investigation in the accident pulled up evidence of foul play leading to a list of suspects that eventually pointed to the royal. Chief of military police Nile Dawk will be personally working on the oncoming trials, although it is likely that the law won’t be in King Erik’s favor.”

King Erik? Carla blinked. The boy couldn’t even leave his own palace, how could he kill his parents if their deaths affected him enough to fear leaving his home? From what little she could remember of him, he seemed to be a gentle type of creature.
How…?

“As the law stands, assassination attempt or success of the royal line shall be met with the highest punishment. Darius Zackly has refrained from commenting on the matter.”

Carla bit her lip. The news was big – another scandal. But all she could think about was her son miles away from her, and if he really would be okay.
The Calm Before the Storm

Chapter Notes

.omg....tired as hell...hannukah...thanksgiving...black Friday...relatives...so many relatives..sooo many orders...(collapses)...(waves white flag)... on another note omg I meant to say this in the last chapter but THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR ALL THE FEEDBACK YOU GUYS!! YOU’RE AWESOME AND I DIDN’T EXPECT SO MANY COMMENTS AND POSITIVE RESPONSE! A THOUSAND HUGS FOR ALL OF YOU AND CANDY AND CUPCAKES AND KISSES! MUAH!

EDIT: SHIT! I FORGOT TO MENTION! Glitchikinns did another piece! (smacks self) http://glitchikinns.tumblr.com/post/68208323703 it's exactly how I pictured Armin and Eren! TT^TT THANK YOU GLITCHI!!!

Hermiha

The Cave

The plan had been set in motion. News reports were already presenting an all-day announcement over the arrest of King Erik and his first trial beginning today. With all eyes on Stohess, it was easier for police to march into Sterben under the guise of continuing investigations of the murdered royals. Even if there was no more evidence to find.

Much to Anka’s displeasure, she had to be parted from her ward to lead a select team into the cave. Pixis, for now, would be with Gustav. As an assistant to the south defense’s highest administrator, Anka was privy to the activities done off the record. She was aware of the five recruits moving into the military police for some investigating, and she knew about the mystery surrounding Sterben’s cold case murders. She didn’t know the two were connected until Pixis told her of the discovery of the cave that nearly killed those same five recruits.

To her knowledge there were about six to eight victims of Berwick. Father Nick, a religious nut who was losing faith the last few days of his life; Lord Balto, an escaped patient from Yalkell’s psychiatric ward who insisted on being addressed with ‘lord’ before his name; Nicholas and Eva Bodt, the historians with the crazy son; the King and Queen – supposedly; and Heath and Elena Munsell. The last pair had been killed almost fifty years ago, but witness accounts described the killer with Berwick’s exact features. Their motivation to going into Sterben had been the same as the aforementioned deaths. They were searching for clues on the Wiped era.

Not counting the last four victims, the rest were part of the ten people who created and kept the cave a secret. As soon as they discovered this some officers were sent out to the remaining living members to protect them as a precaution. Grisha Jaeger was safe in the scouting legion village, but his wife and only other valuable connection was defenseless. She would be receiving two guards in hopefully a few minutes.

Since Anka was part of the ten, the soldiers outside were there to help warn her if Berwick changed his mind and came back to Sterben to finish her off. In short, if he went to Stohess or her, he would
be caught either way and whatever he was trying to hide in this cave would be inevitably revealed.

Now all that was left was for the plan to work, and for Anka’s team to continue investigating anymore clues in the cave. The problem was that the place was so vast and filled with personal letters, that finding anything of immediate value would take weeks – possibly months if they were careful not to destroy the delicate scrolls and artifacts. Hence the selected team she got, and her growing restlessness over the safety of Pixis.

“Anka.”

The young woman looked down to where Rico was kneeling, holding a photograph she pulled from the bottom of the shelf they were searching though. Gingerly accepting the picture, Anka looked it over and bit back a gasp.

It wasn’t that she didn’t have faith in Pixis. But the idea of reincarnation and those five soldiers retaining memories of a past life was so bizarre that it had to make one skeptical. She had her doubts like everyone else.

The picture was preserved in a case, dusty glass darkening the photograph underneath, but not enough to completely bury it. There were ten people huddled together for the picture. Pixis stood by a corner, just as old as he was now, and with more years and grief in his eyes than she ever could imagine him with. Lord Balto actually looked like a lord from his posture to the fat golden ring on his index finger. Father Nick looked much sterner, and the Bodt’s were much poorer and weary than their recent pictures and careers provided. The only reason Anka couldn’t doubt the sincerity of the picture was because she was in the picture. It didn’t look like a photo manipulation, and she couldn’t remember ever taking it. They all looked like they had seen too much death and destruction than was healthy for any human.

Anka recognized all ten. Including the mysterious Lanius Tase.

“Rheinberger to Pixis,” she said to her earpiece, “we’ve found a picture of Lanius Tase.”

The others had gone off to collect firewood and food supplies, unintentionally leaving Eren and Levi alone to finish cleaning up. Sasha would have stayed behind to help, but no one trusted her near the kitchen without supervision. And when Levi was cleaning it was hard for him to keep track of anything else.

Eren, however, was making good progress in changing that.

Levi, he was ashamed to admit, was caught off guard when the younger man wrenched him away from the window. He landed on the floor with a heavy thump, Eren draped over him like a blanket, mouth on his neck with youthful need.

Levi sighed both from the pleasant ministrations, and annoyance at being interrupted from his precious cleaning. “You’re making a bad habit of this.”

“So?” Eren pulled back to grin cheekily.

Grasping his wrists, Levi flipped them over, earning a grunt of surprise from the teen. He paused to admire the surprised blink from Eren, his hair in disarray from the shift. The corners of the corporal’s lips turned up very slightly at the sight. “I was cleaning.”

“Say it, and I’ll let you go,” Eren countered.
“I’ve actually got you pinned, smartass,” Levi arched an eyebrow indifferently, “so I don’t have to say anything.”

“Yeah, but I can still keep bugging you until you do.”

The shorter man huffed, “brat…”

“Come on,” Eren teased happily.

“Didn't we get past this already?” Levi grouched, unable to stop his cheeks from pinking. “Why do I have to say it again?”

“Because you get embarrassed and it’s cute,” Eren chirped, giggling underneath him as his lover’s glare was cancelled by his blush. “Don’t you want to get back to cleaning?” he tone lowered suggestively, “I cleaned my bedroom and you know how bad I am at cleaning…”

Levi’s eyes widened a fraction. That wasn’t supposed to turn him on. Damn. Eren had come a long way in such a short time from his stumbling attempts to get him in bed. “Fine,” he bit out, “I fucking – ”

The house rattled. A series of heavy thumps growing louder and louder. Both men quickly forgot their banter and stood up, running out of the house and grabbing their maneuver gear on the way. The whole pasture was rumbling. The horizon disturbed by a wall of dust rolling toward them from far away. There was a moment of bafflement at the strange sight, quickly dwindling for fear as realization began to dawn on them.

Levi felt Eren’s clammy hand wrap around his, wide green eyes glued to the mass of dust and what lay beyond.

“Levi…” He said so quietly it was almost lost in the quaking of the earth.

He could hear the others returning, screaming off the top of their lungs, their words overlapping each other the more hysterical they got.

“TITANS!”

2856

Isra

They waited outside, the door shut and blocking any noises from inside the room. Eren sat in the only chair in the narrow hall, his foot tapping restlessly the longer he had to wait. He suffered little to no injuries and barely any disorientation once Annie finally managed to get him out of his titan form, but it was still humiliating to have been pulled out when by the age of seventeen he used to be able to get in and out easily. He’d been twenty-one years rusty.

To add to the embarrassment, he was still conscious enough to realize he was surrounded by guns aimed for his head. There was still excitement going on behind the tight ring, and even with his life on the line, Eren was more concerned over what happened to the corporal. There was still that little bit of unwashed experience that kept him from completely forgetting what went on when he was in his titan form. Something happened to Levi, and he needed to find out what.

It was thanks to Mikasa and Armin that he even managed to get in the medic building with Levi’s squad. Without their convincing words, Eren was sure he’d be handcuffed to the cells in the prisoner section of Isra.
That was hours ago, and the embarrassment had ebbed away. Leaning back in his seat, he looked at the others waiting just as silently. Across from him Levi’s squad stood by anxiously, and even further down was Bertholdt, Annie, and Reiner. Their presence had been bugging Eren, not because of who they were, but because he didn’t know they were close to Levi.

Jean and the others of the second generation special ops squad wanted to wait with them, but the hall could only take so many people, leaving them to go back to their rooms and wait there for any more news.

“You don’t have to stay here, you know,” Petra broke the tension gently, “Dr. Jaeger said it wasn’t as serious as we thought.”

“We may not all get to see him, either,” Erd added.

“I know,” Eren shrugged, glancing at the three shifters. Annie looked back, nothing in her face giving away discomfort. “But I still – ”

The door opened and Eren completely forgot what he was going to say as Erwin stepped out tucking his tablet in his jacket. He raised his eyebrows at the crowd grouping up expectantly. In the room Eren saw his father walking by with his back to him before the commander shut the door.

“He’s fine,” Erwin said as everyone opened their mouths to ask, “Dr. Jaeger’s putting him on bed rest for a couple of days as a precaution, he says the cause might have been significant stress and lack of sleep,” he turned his blue eyes to Eren, “Levi said something about a basement?”

“He’s awake!?” Auruo exclaimed while Eren fell quiet.

“For now, but he’s going back to sleep,” Erwin held up his hands as the younger man approached him eagerly, “or try to,” he corrected himself. “The mission’s being pushed back for a few weeks at the least. Dawk gave me a call, he’s going to need you four,” he addressed Levi’s squad, “to assist in a problem that can’t be done by his brigade alone.”

“What?” Auruo blanched, a scowl quickly forming, “now we have to pick up where their lazy asses can’t? Are you serious!??”

“Your more of a standby in case things go out of control,” Erwin said simply, “I’ve allowed it since Levi can’t lead you in Maria. Mike will be joining you.”

The elder squad shuffled uncertainly. Beyond them Eren could see Bertholdt and Reiner exchange nervous looks. “What’s happening in Sina?” Gunther asked, “and why do they need the help of the scouting legion?”

“I’ll explain it to you in my office.” Erwin walked down the hall to the exit, leaving the squad to reluctantly follow. Eren watched them go until the door shut behind them.

Something was happening in Sina? Hadn’t Armin told him that Dazz and the others managed to get in Sina? Were they okay?

“Eren.”

The raven head turned sharply. It was Reiner who spoke, hesitantly stepping forward, and looking very unsure of himself. Eren couldn’t remember ever seeing him like this, and it was fitting considering everything. He waited patiently as the other man gathered his thoughts, but he seemed stuck.
Figuring it was a good time as any to get this over with, Eren spoke instead, “You’re not here because of Levi, are you?”

Reiner shook his head, tiny sigh escaping him, “It’s been a month and we haven’t really talked.”

“You haven’t made it easy.”

The muscular man winced slightly, “good point…”

Three pairs of eyes watched him cautiously as Eren stood up and approached them. “You’ve had me for a month, nothing’s happened – especially after I transformed, so I can at least trust you not to drag me off to whoever your boss was.”

That stung, the three accepted the dig. “We’re not asking you to trust us,” Annie said, “or forgive us.”

Eren looked at them each individually. They expressed different levels of pain, but it was equal in their eyes. The kind he had when he first enlisted. The eyes of someone who witnessed the destruction of their home and watched everyone they ever loved die. Punching them or picking up where they left off held no meaning anymore. Everyone who Eren knew from Shiganshina was back and safe within the walls. These three had no one but each other, just like he only had Mikasa and Armin when he lost his mother.

It was a constant pain he never wished on anyone and now Annie, Bertholdt, Reiner, and even Ymir knew it well.

“I think you’ve paid enough,” he said. The three shifters stared, doubting whether they heard right. “I wouldn’t say we’re friends either, but I don’t think we need to be friends to be a team.”

The three shifters nodded. Bertholdt seemed to want to say more, Eren could tell. Of all people, he wasn’t sure how he’d handle the taller man. He was much more remorseful now, and he’d been remorseful in the past, too. Rapid healing or not, Eren could tell Bertholdt never had good sleep in this life.

Then sleep reminded him of when Jean and the others used to use Bertholdt’s sleeping positions as a way to predict the weather. Back when the shifter was a boy just like them who shied from attention and seemed so small in a giant body.

With one kick to the wall he murdered an entire city.

With a second kick, he murdered his friends.

How could he live with himself? Eren used to think. Looking at the man before him, he realized he didn’t. Bertholdt looked like he was rotting away. All that talk of being a warrior was merely a way to convince himself that what he did was necessary, that he wasn’t as evil as the little voice in his head said he was.

Eren tried not to let his pity show.

Right on time the door opened a second time and Hanji stepped out, her eyes landing on the group.

“Eren, he wants to see you,” she said, looking from him to the other three curiously.

Eager to depart from anymore dark memories, Eren hurried past the squad leader and entered the room. Hanji watched him go and shut the door behind him, turning her attention to the remaining
visitors.

“I believe you’ve gotten the heart to heart you’ve been needing from Eren,” she said knowingly, walking up to them. “Now come with me, the commander’s filling Levi’s squad in right now about Berwick, they’re going to need your side of the story, too.”

“You could have just let us go in instead of them,” Reiner said as they joined her down the hall.

Hanji gave him a little good natured snort, “and cause mass destruction to a city worth almost as much as Utopia? Not only will you expose the existence of shifters to ordinary citizens, you’ll also be put under fire by them. They’ll want you killed on the spot. The special ops can get your friend cuffed cleanly and quietly. They’re that good. Also,” she added apologetically as she opened the door for them to go through first. “We just don’t trust you.”

“He was attacked in Hermiha – had every means of shifting,” Reiner argued, “the only reason he didn’t is because he either needs to keep his cover – blown as it is - or he can’t shift at all.”

“Even better for our side,” Hanji winked, “come on, we’ll pick up Armin on the way.”

The room was dimly lit, and his father was in the middle of tucking away a few of his tools in his case. For some reason Eren thought Levi would be hooked up to machines with tubes down his throat and an oxygen mask to finish the sad picture. Instead he was stripped down to his shirt and pants, sitting up comfortably on the bed. He looked vaguely confused, but otherwise didn’t give the impression that hours before he suffered from a seizure.

The episode was still mindboggling to Eren.

“How is everything? No trouble with the commander?” his father asked, detracting Eren.

“No,” he shook his head, “I almost got shot, but…” he recalled the other shifters plus Mikasa and Armin shielding him. He’d been so worried about Levi he almost didn’t notice. “Everything’s fine now, I’ll need to practice more and get used to shifting.” His father nodded stiffly, fiddling with the latch on his medical case, “I didn’t freak you out did I?” This was the first time his father saw him in his titan form – literally the first time.

“You’re my son,” Grisha said, shaking his head, “but I am a little overwhelmed I…” he looked to Levi who’d been listening quietly. “Trust me, it’s not just for the shifting but…” he shook his head, “we’ll talk later, I need to call your mother,” he gave his son a stiff hug and excused himself, leaving the corporal and Eren alone.

There was an awkward silence as Eren stood there, trying not to feel too hurt by his father’s quick exit. Changing the topic and expressing his worries about what happened earlier would only annoy the corporal, and Levi really did look like nothing happened to him.

“He knows everything,” the Levi was the first to speak. At Eren’s confusion he elaborated, “About your reincarnation. He thought I was going crazy, but Hanji and Erwin vouched for me.”

“He knows?” Eren asked stiffly.

“Yep,” Levi gave him a nod, “you’re still useless regarding information of the Wiped era, so he won’t ask too many questions, and I doubt he’ll run off to the nearest historian to make you a celebrity.”
“But he said he’d call my mother,” the shifter shook his head, “she’s going to flip her shit…”

Levi regarded the younger man quietly. He was not the same boy from the past. He was mature now, retaining some dregs of his old self, but definitely more in control of his impulses if one didn’t count the incident earlier. Knowing Eren as he had been, he was grown up enough now to not attack him and force him to remember a past that could never be relived.

However, the corporal knew Eren desperately wished to rekindle what they lost. “The basement in Shiganshina,” he changed the subject, “you told us it might hold answers to the titans.”

That’s right, Erwin said Levi mentioned it. Eren jolted, the implications clicking in his head, “you remember!?” He was at the man’s side in an instant, reaching for his hand, but stopping himself the last second.

Levi ignored the hesitance, and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Yeah…” he muttered, “it came back like an explosion,” he gave a short bitter laugh, “even in my past life I was a criminal.” Eren settled down on the only chair next to the bed. “But Shiganshina…”

“All this time and we haven’t made any progress,” Levi scowled at the sheets, “how did we even reclaim Wall Rose a second time?”

“Levi.” The man looked up, still bothered. It saddened Eren to know that his hometown was gone, but he had time to mourn the loss, what mattered now was that the corporal admitted to remembering everything. And if he really meant everything, maybe there was still hope. “Do you remember us?”

There was a split second where Levi looked like a deer caught in the headlights. It transformed into another frown and he looked away. He reached up in an uncharacteristic act of nervousness to touch his collar only to realize that whatever should have been there wasn’t and he dropped his hand with a scowl. “This isn’t like the past when death tolls ran higher. There are laws now for soldiers to retire if they wish, that means lifestyles have changed. I’m still your superior – ”

“That didn’t stop you back then,” Eren reasoned, “and you’re not that old, in case you haven’t noticed, I’ve been legal for three years.”

“I could be decommissioned from my post,” Levi hissed angrily, “and then what use would I be to the war?”

“This army is small as it is,” Eren argued back, “I don’t think anyone would want their strongest soldier leaving the army because he’s in a relationship with his subordinate!”

“People are trying to disband the scouting legion! I can’t give them another reason to – ” he froze as Eren wrapped his hand gently behind his head, pulled him in and pressed his lips against his. Whatever point he’d been trying to make was forgotten instantly.

Eren’s lips…so forceful and young, full of life. Levi forgot how good they felt, and contrary to his argument, he kissed back, their lips moving with familiarity of an old dance that was never quite buried with time.
Fuck.

His senses were invaded by everything that was Eren. The soft pads of his fingers scraping the nape of his neck, digging coolly into his hair. His taste and smell…the pleased little sounds he made…

The pair didn’t register the door opening, nor the voice of their intruder stopping short with the words dying in their throat. All they could focus on was each other and relieving the ache of years keeping them apart. The need for oxygen, however, grew important enough for them to part, dazed eyes locked on each other for a minute until they realized they weren’t alone anymore.

Grisha Jaeger stood by the door with an unreadable expression.

Fuck.

Stohess Courthouse

Like all the other districts, Stohess had advanced to a metropolis. Though not as shiny as Utopia, it was one of the more desired districts to live. While Jinae had its doctors, and Trost its culinary fame, Stohess had innovation. It was the home of Sky Industries, and birthed the multibillion phone company Comet. The city was constantly alight with flashing signs and big screen advertisements plastered on about every building. On that account it was closely similar to the equally bright Chlorrab, though not as artistic nor as cheerfully rude.

Three centuries ago renovations and increase in budget allowed the government to go back underground and rebuild the plans that had been given up in the early days. With the industrial era moving rapidly into the digital era, the idea of an underground city was reinvented to create a hip and large shopping district webbed with retro trolley lines to help citizens travel both above and below. This revolutionary invention of travel was copied by some of the other districts. Recently an InterWall train connection was made for travelers going from one district to another without the hassle of buses or planes. Dazz and the others used this line to get from Hermiha to Stohess. The trip was surprisingly short, which made them wonder if Berik used this as a means to go back and forth from the palace to Sterben. It would make a little more sense that he was able to kill so many people and go back to Utopia as if nothing ever happened.

They hoped he would use it now.

The first trial wouldn’t begin for another hour, and already the group was feeling anxious. Nack, Millius, and Dazz were too injured to be in the field and were instead stationed back at Stohess HQ where they watched news reports and live feeds in the computer room. This left Franz and Hannah to be teamed up with Marlo, Hitch, and Boris. The new lineup barely had a day and already they were polar opposites.

The 2104th squad had unintentionally gained attention in the media for its exceptional trainees, while all the other squads were ignored and as a whole considered an incompetent community. The five of the 2104th didn’t know of the public opinion until joining the other three in Hermiha and seeing the citizens giving them looks of awe while the other rookies received unimpressed once-overs. Hitch didn’t care, the treatment rolling off her shoulders like practically everything else. Boris and Marlo, however, didn’t appreciate it, and by the time Franz and Hanna were reassigned to them, their opinion on the pair had grown bitter.

Count in the fact that one side would rather be in recon while the other genuinely wanted to be in the police, and it was like mixing oil with water.

Now they stood in their station on the roof of the courthouse waiting for orders and keeping an eye
out for any sign of Berwick. Nile was in the courthouse with the other officers waiting for the trial to begin. After being told about the situation, Pixis had joined the fray with his own officers and was currently with the king. With the added numbers there were hundreds of groups dotting the city. Everyone was dressed in civilian attire with only their flair guns, glocks, and earpieces to keep them safe and connected. Franz and the other four were in janitor uniforms, sweeping the roof and seemingly not paying attention to anything else.

“Just got a message from Anka down at Sterben,” Dazz buzzed in their ears, “there’s no written record of Lanius Tase except for his signature on the paper we found, but it looks like Marco’s parents had been a part of the refugees at the palace where they crossed paths with Dr. Jaeger. They left letters.”

“And a picture,” Nack added. “It’s kind of creepy.”

Franz exchanged a frown with Hannah, but Dazz continued before they could reply, “We’ve also got a PM from Commander Smith, he’s sending Captain Zacharias and Corporal Levi’s squad over. Levi couldn’t come himself, Smith said it had something to do with training.” There seemed to be more he wanted to say, but he kept his mouth shut leaving the rookies wondering what he meant about ‘training’.

“Any sign of Berwick?” Marlo asked, keeping his head ducked as he swept a corner of the roof. Furtively, he looked below where a crowd of reporters and bystanders were talking loudly amongst themselves. There was probably ten or twelve of the genuine article down there.

“Nope,” several anonymous voices said through his earpiece.

“Last video footage had him at the palace after Erik left,” Millius said, “there might be a potential sighting in Yalkell, though. The media should have announced the arrest by now, so he definitely knows where the king is.”

“All the more reason for him to avoid taking the bait,” Hitch said from across the roof with a hand to her cocked hip. “Guy’s probably running off to Rose.”

“He would be if he weren’t so attached to Erik,” Dazz countered, “why leave five witnesses – three of which were incapacitated and two who were on their way out – after being told that the king now knows who he is? Leaving so abruptly means he wasn’t thinking with his head. Millius couldn’t have sent an alert to the king after being knocked down the way he was unless Berwick was terrified enough to believe it and he was. Either he cares for the king enough to make sure he knows nothing about him being a murderer, or he stuck so close to him after years because he has some use for him.”

“Plus, why would he sit back and let us live if he were a spy for the titans? We’ve advanced enough to have a fighting chance, what enemy lets us do that?” Nack said.

“He’s still a murderer,” Marlo frowned disapprovingly.

“All the more reason to catch him, duh!”

The young man snarled and turned away from the edge of the roof. The 2104th recruits were not the kind of people he pictured them to be. They were emotional and brash, especially this Nack who had yet to say something without sounding like a smartass. With a graduation profile of high marks and titan simulation kills that would make all other graduating squads pale in comparison, one would think they’d hold themselves a bit more professionally. Marlo even got that impression when they discussed what happened at Sterben the first night at the hospital. Then he really got to know them
and it was like they had transformed into overgrown children.

They didn’t even make proper preparations when going on a mission, they just jumped right in and hoped for the best. It was with that kind of thinking that landed them in the hospital, and would have gotten them killed if they hadn’t gotten help so quickly or so luckily.

Really, the only serious person in the group was Dazz and he suffered the most injuries out of everyone.

And Marlo still seriously doubted the five were reincarnations of soldiers from the Wiped Era. The only reason they hadn’t been carted off to the loony bin was because they were practically the strategists of the plan and were the only ones to come out alive from fighting Berwick.

“This is Dietrich, the suspect has been spotted in Exit Gate 3 bus terminal, he appears unarmed and in casual attire. Dark gray shirt and jeans, black sneakers and black military cap. Permission to move in.”

The five on the roof froze at the report. They waited for Nile to speak, but Dazz spoke instead. “Shit, he didn’t take the underground after all. That’s a negative, he’s too powerful even without weapons. The tunnels would have been perfect to keep him contained, but he’s out in the open and much more dangerous if he decides to shift. Tag him, everyone else proceed with phase one.”

A long five seconds of awkward silence passed and Dietrich said, “no offense kid, but I was talking to – ”

“No, do as he says, he has a point,” Nile cut in, “the main focus right now is keeping the civilians safe.”

“He actually showed up,” Hitch murmured next to Marlo in surprise. “He really is stupid…”

“Or confident enough in his abilities to get out of this without a scratch,” Franz said, looking over the roof. Down below their disguised officers had come to life, holding up badges and shouting orders to the startled citizens. Within minutes, they were herded off to Subway 12 where an InterWall train was waiting to take them to Utopia. The plan was to get as many people out or at least underground to avoid casualties should Berwick turn into a titan. It would be a slow exhaustive move and there would be mass confusion and panic, but Nile chose to do it this way only after they were sure of Berwick’s location. If warnings were issued out beforehand, the shifter would know and make his turn up even less likely.

Sure enough, people below started yelling their confusion and walked faster in fear. If they started running to the subway, accidents and losses may happen. Hence Pixis’ men filling what control the military police couldn’t hold. It was a good thing Stohess was littered with subway entrances, crowds were easier to thin out this way and thankfully, they were underground within minutes. At least the civilians that had been outside. Warnings were soon issued to all personal media access tech within Stohess, hopefully people remaining in the buildings would stay put or they’d have to fend for themselves. The people currently around Berwick would have to have luck on their sides.

“He doesn’t seem to suspect a thing,” Dietrich noted, “he’s moving…”

“This is Mitabi, I see him,” a deeper voice joined. “Suspect is heading north for the courthouse.”

“Got him,” Dazz said shortly, “special ops are on their way. We need to have him surrounded by then, start the perimeter when he’s past twenty-fourth street. Squads at the courthouse get ready. No one engage yet.”
Marlo listened anxiously, looking down the south end of Stohess where Berik supposedly was. The skyscrapers were in the way of a clear visual, and he was still too far to be seen, making Marlo’s nerves on higher alert. Why would Berwick arrive with no weapons into a city heavily guarded by police for the trial of King Erik? In his casuals no less? There had to be more to this.

“He’s going to shift, he has to,” he said finally, “why would he come here unprotected?”

The hum of quiet in the earpiece was his only response as everyone thought of this. Hitch and the others gave up pretending to be janitors and joined him by the edge. The police downstairs were gathering back one by one as they finished sending off the last dregs of citizens. There was no guarantee that everyone got underground safely, but at least the bulk in this area were gone. There was tense silence as everyone on the street waited, walking around as normally as they could.

“This boy has something up his sleeve,” Pixis said soberly. “Can anyone scan him?”

There was two forms of scanning. Stationary scanning was a more typical type for security check in airports or places kept heavily guarded. It’s main purpose was to detect any suspicious items in bags, and any piece of metal on the person.

Motion Scan was the second and more expensive form. A product of Sky Industries, it was a portable device much like goggles that can quickly produce an X-ray of anything its camera landed on, and zoom in to the particles of dirt underneath ones nails from yards away. Because of its unbiased design that could lead to trouble when in the wrong hands, Motion Scan was a military only device and was limited to important missions like these. At the moment, someone close enough to Berwick activated the scan and followed the young man’s movement from their position on the roof.

“No guns or knives,” Mitabi reported, “no tablet either. The only piece of technology on him is a small rectangular item. I think it’s...it’s a remote. Homemade. There’s no company logo or serial number.”

Remote? Marlo head thought quickly. No guns, knives, or any form of weapon or communication. Just a remote. A small rectangular homemade remote.

“Squads 20 through 25!” Dazz buzzed in urgently, “fan out! Look for any signs of a bomb!”

Isra

Eren hadn’t returned from the medic, and Armin had been avoiding them like a disease leaving Marco and Jean to have the cabin all to themselves. Normally they’d take the opportunity to be as loud as they wanted, but considering the circumstances under which they returned, the mood wasn’t right to fool around.

Instead they opted to go to the mess hall and worry their brains out with everyone else. On their way Marco spotted, Armin, who had disappeared shortly after Eren was removed from his titan form. He was too far off to be noticed by them, but the blond was walking alongside Hanji, Annie, Bertholdt and Reiner. All were grim faced and holding a deep discussion. Marco wanted to sneak closer and listen in, but just as he made to move Armin caught him and urged the others to move faster.

Hanji looked over her shoulder to him, her eyes narrow and suspicious. The group disappeared behind a building, and knowing they would be keeping an eye out for spies, Marco was forced to continue on to the mess hall with Jean.

Huh.
That was strange…

Inside the mess hall most tables were occupied by snacking soldiers, making it a bit of a hassle to find a comfortable spot. Ten narrowly avoided collisions with heads and shoulders, and the pair finally reached the semi empty table near the kitchens.

As fate would put it, this table was occupied by Mikasa, Sasha, and Connie. Three of the people Jean and Marco would find the most comfort in. Sans Mikasa, for Marco. Ever since the mess up in the tool shed, Marco wasn’t very fond of her. Not that she was aware. He made sure to appear as if he didn’t want to choke her to death. It wouldn’t do to upset Jean with his dark fantasies.

“Where’s Ymir and Historia?” Jean asked, settling down opposite the trio. “I thought they’d be here.”

Sasha looked up from her piled plate. An unfortunate habit of hers whenever she was worried. “Historia wanted to make a call to her parents,” she said, chewing down her food and stabbing her fork into a steamed broccoli. “The commander sent out a message - the mission’s been held back. You guys hear anything else from Eren?”

The couple shook their heads, and the girl sighed in disappointment. Next to her, Mikasa was staring at her tablet lying on the table, occasionally pressing the screen that was presumably the refresh button. Connie and Sasha had theirs out too, but they weren’t as attentive to them as the stoic girl. Joining the party, Marco and Jean pulled out their tablets from their light jackets and turned them on, waiting for any notifications from the higher ups.

The silence at the table interrupted by the munching from Sasha lasted for twenty more long minutes. Enough to bore Marco into starting a chat line with Jean.

‘He should be fine, Dr. Jaeger brought me back, I’m sure a seizure’s nothing for him to handle.’

There was a second where Jean jumped at the message, wrongly thinking it was from Hanji or someone reporting his former squad leader’s state of health. When he realized it was from Marco he visibly deflated and threw him an incredulous look before furiously typing back a reply.

‘Seriously!?! I’m sitting right next to you!’

‘You’re texting back too.’

‘Not the point!’ Jean sucked his teeth. Marco waited him to say something, but Jean reluctantly returned to his tablet. ‘I know Dr. Jaeger will help the corporal, but it’s still weird. I never thought he’d have a seizure…is he really that old to have them?’

‘I’ve had them too when I first started healing. Parts of my brain were still repairing themselves. I haven’t had a seizure in years, but I don’t think the corporal’s that old.’

Jean stared at his reply long enough for Marco to turn his attention back to the other three. They either hadn’t noticed them messaging each other, or were ignoring it for their own thoughts. Sasha wasn’t really eating anymore, poking the remnants of her plate here and there with a lost look. He knew they were all a part of Levi’s squad after Rose was reconquered. Jean told him the story back in training, and Armin had given him a better less emotional summary of their two years under the corporal’s command. They had respect for the man, but also a familial fondness that had made Marco a little jealous. Especially with how Jean told stories of their down time in the small house the squad shared.

To them, Marco supposed Levi was more like a father or older brother figure. He didn’t share the
sentiment. He didn’t know any of these scouting legion people until graduation. It made him feel like a stranger amongst friends, even with Jean who always had a story to tell. If he weren’t as sharp as he thought he was, he would be under the assumption that Levi was after Jean. Luckily this was quickly snuffed out by Eren, who had become less careful in hiding his giant crush on the man. It was so bad his ancestors could see it.

A soft ding announced a new message. ‘Is that why your right eye goes red?’

His eye? Marco had to read the previous messages to remember what they were talking about and almost laughed.

‘Sort of. There was a complication with my eye, it didn’t heal right and Dr. Jaeger had to put in a cybernetic replacement. I just realized I never told you this, did I?’

‘No. I thought you didn’t want to.’

Marco really hadn’t. He actually, kept a lot of things from Jean he’d been meaning to say. The timing was never right, and he’d been too focused on graduating to think of anything else. This past month had him completely distracted with finally having Jean all to himself, and by then he wondered if maybe he shouldn’t tell him at all. He didn’t want Jean to hate him…

‘That’s actually kind of cool,’ Jean went on, ‘way more badass than an eye patch. Why didn’t you tell me sooner? I wouldn’t have been grossed out.’ His fingers hovered over the screen, as if about to type some more, but they pulled back gently, slim fingers curling into loose fits.

Marco smiled, appreciating the comment. ‘Actually, I’ve been meaning to tell you a lot of things. I – ’

The message was cut off by a new ding and window announcing a general message from Commander Erwin. The mess hall became alive with similar dings and soldiers greedily reading it from their own tablets, murmuring under their breaths in confusion.

‘There has been mass titan sightings in the safe zones in Maria. Squads will team up with recruits and gather into sniping formations to save the posts. Shifters will aid in battle including Eren Jaeger. Lance Corporal Levi and the special ops squad will not be joining in this engagement. You have one hour to get to your stations.’

Right after Marco finished reading, alarms sounded off throughout Isra. The mess hall exploded with action as everyone scrambled out of their chairs and ran outside to their waiting squad leaders. All recruits had already been assigned as soon as arriving at Isra, so figuring out what squad they belonged in had been no problem for them. Levi’s squad was exclusive, which meant no one had been recruited, nor would they be until they got a few battles in to show whether they were good enough to be a part of his team.

Leaving the mess hall with his friends, a thought struck Marco. This chaos was the perfect opportunity. Grabbing Jean by the arm, Marco pulled him towards the medic building – the opposite of where they needed to go.

“Marco what the hell!?” Jean yelled, yanking his arm away, almost tripping over his own feet “we need to get moving!”

“I know,” he grabbed him again and pulled him inside the building, clamping a hand over Jean’s mouth before he could protest. “Just stay calm,” he said into his ear, “and I’ll explain everything.” Jean grunted angrily, struggling under his effortlessly vice-like grip. When he realized he had no power over the stronger man, he grudgingly deflated and glared at him with his hazel eyes. “Good.
Now. I need you to do something for me.”

“Mm?” was all Jean could say.

“I need you to knock out Dr. Jaeger.”

Outside the Walls

100 Miles from Shiganshina

The coordinate lived again. They could sense it in the air. The Ape Titan knew it was time to act before retaliation hit them hard enough to cripple them. His spies had dwindled over the centuries. Years of living inside the walls softening them into betraying him and taking the side of humanity. It left him with one last warrior, and he wasn’t even sure the man was still loyal. There’d been years of radio silence between them, mostly due to avoid suspicion from the humans. With the coordinate gone, the beast allowed it, putting all his focus on advancing the civilizations of titans that were starting to truly flourish around the globe.

His lack of attention to the walls was what made him realize too late that the coordinate had somehow returned. It shouldn’t have happened. He personally made sure that Eren Jaeger was dead.

He had to act now, when the boy was still trapped in the walls. Hopefully as vulnerable as he had been when he died by his beastly hands. Behind him was an army of over three hundred titans of all different sizes marching with him. Their crude armor glinting in the sun, and hollowed out boulders protecting their heads.

The first battalion had been sent out ahead of them, no doubt bruising any fighting chance humanity’s soldiers had against the titans. Their army was small. Too small to be any real threat. Whatever tools they came to invent in the recent millennia would prove useless with their pathetic numbers. Reports from surviving titans indicated that the new suits were formidable, yet still did nothing to prevent deaths. The faster they destroyed the suit, the faster the human died. That’s all they had to do. Child’s play.

What they had to focus on was Eren Jaeger, and the four shifters that allied themselves to humanity. Get rid of them and the war was won.

The Ape Titan paced closer and closer in the direction of the walls. This time Eren Jaeger would not only die, but the entirety of his race and any trace of their violent existence.
A Game of Chess

Chapter Summary

What everyone was up to before shit hit the fan

Chapter Notes

I meant to get the action started in this chapter, but more ideas kept coming in and before
I knew it I had eighteen pages X_@ oops. Also, I believe I've been spelling Berwick's
name wrong? I don't know where I got 'Berik' but there's been a bunch of references to
'Berwick', and the wiki's under the same name, too so I'm just gonna stick to it from
now on :P

2852

Jinae Trauma Clinic

Eleven of the twelve patients were healing much faster than anticipated. Adler was already walking
around without his crutches or any other form of aide, and he was now assisting Grisha in his
research. Others were in similar shape, eager to use their newly healed limbs and second chance at
life. The gratitude Grisha had been given was neverending.

The only one who remained quiet for the most part was patient three. The youngest victim and most
delicate of the twelve. Unlike the others who died from lost limbs and blunt force trauma, this one
died instantly after losing nearly half his body from his head to his waist. Healing procedures had
him in pain or unconscious for the first few months. No scarring had resulted due to the healing
nature of the titan gene, but the psychological repercussions were apparent. The other patients tended
to suffer from phantom pains and nightmares of the accident, but to Marco Bodt, his reaction was a
bit different.

Dr. Jaeger hadn’t noticed at first. He had eleven other people to focus on after all, and Marco seemed
like a well-rounded boy. His first nurse had taken a shine to him, too. She would recount their chess
games and conversations on history, and he offered an ear whenever she felt like talking about her
home life.

Grisha didn’t suspect a thing until he saw her again a few weeks later, much thinner and more
miserable than before.

“It’s nothing,” she said tiredly, holding a tray of Marco’s dinner, “just broke up with my
boyfriend…”

The next week he found her in the stairway mumbling to herself and ripping up a paper that had a
phone number written on it. She was wearing a sneaker in one foot and the standard nurse shoe in
the other, mismatched socks and her hair sticking out of her bun.
“What if he’s right?” she told him before he could ask what was wrong, “what if I did kill my dog on purpose? Does that mean I killed my parents? Am I a murderer?”

He sent her home immediately and ordered her to take the week off, but the next day she was back and serving lunch to Marco. He didn’t know until another nurse told him. Fearing she’d put his patient in danger, Grisha hurried to his room, but instead of finding Marco under the grips of his mentally unstable nurse, he instead held her by her mangled arm, smiling sweetly down at her.

“What if he’s right?” he asked innocently. His nurse nodded with a shaky smile, tears rolling from her painfully wide eyes.

She was immediately carted away to repair her broken arm, and then off to the psychiatric ward to deal with personal issues Marco had apparently used against her. His next nurse was more carefully selected. One who was coldly professional and wouldn’t let Marco sweet talk into his head.

He fell faster than the first nurse and came out of it with a broken leg. Just as the previous victim, he was fiercely attached to Marco and felt he deserved the injury.

Grisha was forced to keep a closer eye on Marco, and keep him strapped down in case he chose to hurt anyone else. Counselors were frustrated to report that there seemed to be nothing wrong with the boy, other than the accident and starting college at such a young age, his mind was perfectly sound. He showed remorse for hurting his nurses, and enthusiasm for education. If anything was disturbing, it was his perfect personality.

Grisha was determined to let that faux identity shed away and deal with the real problem Marco was suffering from. Research on his past had turned up very little. All he got was information he already knew. Marco was an orphan of historians who died mysteriously, leaving him to fend for himself and eventually get accepted into Jinae University at a young age.

Tonight, Grisha planned to learn more. Most doctors had gone home and all other patients were asleep. The clinic was dead quiet around now, and with only a lamp to give them light, the doctor and patient were enjoying a light game of chess. Grisha was losing.

“Shouldn’t you be getting home to your family,” Marco asked with a hint of concern. The game they were playing was not with traditional physical objects. It was a board with simulated pieces that required the use of a touch pad. The board was sitting on Marco’s portable table, and they each held a small square touch pad. Moving his finger over the smooth pad, Marco selected his pawn, which brightened on the simulation, and moved it right into the older man’s path. “I’d figure you’d want to spend as much time with them as possible, given how time consuming this project can be.”

Dr. Jaeger hesitated, but picked his knight and took Marco’s pawn with it. He’d only played a few games with the teenager, but every time they did he was always unnerved by how quick Marco was to sacrifice his pieces, even the more important ones. And he still won every game.

“My family understands how important this project is,” Grisha said, watching the white pawn fizz out and appear in smaller form on his list of pieces set on the side of the board.

“Are you sure?” Marco moved his bishop a few squares close to his queen. “Sounds like you want to believe that.”

Grisha studied the board. His queen was protecting his king, and his pieces were scattered enough to take care of any threats. Marco’s king was out in the open, just asking to be taken. He’d fallen for this ploy before.
“I do believe it,” he said, wondering if he should move his knight again, or pull a decoy with his rook. “But let’s not talk about them. What of your family?”

“My family?” Marco cocked his head to the side, “my family’s dead, Dr. Jaeger, you know this.”

“Would you like to tell me how they died?” he asked casually, moving his rook up a few squares, “It won’t leave the room.”

The freckled boy didn’t make a move. He wasn’t paying attention to the game now, he was keeping his eyes on the doctor. Grisha waited expectantly, sitting back in his chair and loosely locking his fingers over his crossed legs. He wasn’t able to get a word out of the military police, and he was beginning to think they forgot about Marco’s case as well. It was sad how quickly the young man was forgotten. Orphaned prodigy? People barely paid attention anymore.

Perhaps the core of Marco’s anger was that no one seemed to care that he was constantly ignored.

“My parents were killed,” he said shortly, “in front of me.”

“Killed,” he had a feeling that was the case. To be witness to such a traumatic event would surely have serious impact, especially on a child. “Did they catch the killer?”

“No,” Marco looked back at the game and moved his knight a few spaces away from Grisha’s rook. “If you think I want to seek revenge on him you’re wrong…going after someone evil enough to kill a child’s parents – in front of him – is like willingly stepping in front of an oncoming train,” his eyes darkened, “I know revenge won’t bring them back. It won’t bring me closure.”

Grisha regarded him. They were wise words, but Marco’s actions spoke otherwise. All that manipulation and violence had to stem from somewhere. If it wasn’t from the murder of his parents, then what was it?

Was it his fault for bringing the boy back to life? Was he with his parents in the afterlife? Grisha was too much of a realist to believe in such a thing. He still recalled the wheezed words from Marco after revival. He didn’t want to die. He wanted to live.

“Then why did you break your nurses’ arm and leg?”

Marco bit his lip and fidgeted in the restraints keeping him confined to his bed. “I was bored.”

Bored.

Grisha sagged in disappointment. An intelligent boy like Marco broke his nurses because he was bored. Bullshit. He was manipulative enough to keep them loyal to him even after destroying their lives prior to breaking their bones. Cold, manipulative, violent, and most definitely angry. His victims were mere playthings to help channel all that bottled up anger. Whether it was because he was ignored, orphaned, or something else.

Grisha fought to keep his calm. “You know I can’t release you until you learn to control that boredom.” He gave chase to Marco’s knight with his rook. At the last minute he realized where he was positioned and added, “check.”

Marco smirked and took Grisha’s rook with his queen which the older man hadn’t noticed until now. “I don’t think I’ll be going back to society if that’s what you mean. I want to join the scouting legion.”

The doctor raised his eyebrows. That was big life change from historian major. “That’s suicide,” he
“I don’t plan to die,” Marco chuckled, moving a pawn closer to Grisha’s bishop. “But I feel I can do more in the army than inside these walls. You’ve not only healed me, but improved my strength.” He looked down at his right hand, resting underneath the restraints and holding the touchpad control. “I’d like to put it to use.”

Was he speaking the truth? Grisha stared at the board. If Marco continued to be violent to innocent bystanders, he would eventually be sent off to the scouting legion anyway. He had a brilliant mind on his shoulders and he was wasting it. What use did he believe he had in the army? He was aware of his son’s interest in recon, and as much as he cared about Marco, he cared for Eren more and felt uncomfortable with having the two in the same training camp. What if Marco went after Eren?

They continued playing quietly. Strategically moving their pieces and circling each other in a cautious dance. Eventually Grisha’s king was cornered by a knight, a queen, and a rook. There was no way to escape. The game was over.

Marco’s right eye glinted red triumphantly. The artificial eye had been a joint product by Grisha, an ophthalmologist, and a branch in Sky Industries that dealt with cybernetic implants. It worked much like a telescope. On brain command, Marco could focus on an object, zoom in and out, and read words beyond the distance the average person could read. It had taken a few months for him to adapt to, but he was a fast learner. On occasion the eye would flash red, an indication of him either zooming in or out. It was a sign for when he was emotionally intense about something whether it be happy or sad. Grisha had grown to be unnerved by the sight. It made Marco look ten times more menacing.

“Let me join the scouting legion, and I won’t break anymore bones,” Marco said with a dark smile, “checkmate.”

2856

Isra

Before the Alarm

Catching your son making out with an older man nearly twice his age wasn’t what Grisha planned to do in his life. He was already trying to accept the idea that Eren was a reincarnation of a Wiped era soldier (that explained the easy upbringing…), finding out that he was in a relationship with his commanding officer was pushing past the limit of supernatural phenomenon Grisha could take for the week.

Lucky for him he was the second person in the world aware of the relationship. The other person being that sarcastic shifter with the freckles.

At least they were just as embarrassed as he was. Levi looked like he wanted to kill himself before schooling his features and acting like nothing happened.

They tried to explain what they could. They were together for a few months before their deaths in their first life, and if Grisha understood well enough that meant *Eren was seventeen* at the time which made things much worse. Needless to say it was a lot to take in and the cherry on top was that he had to decide whether or not to tell Carla. Dear *Rose* that wasn’t going to be any fun…

It had been almost relieving when Eren saved himself more embarrassment and left so that Levi could get the rest he needed. In retrospect, maybe it was a tactless move because for the next ten
minutes the two men were alone. The corporal was waiting for threats or punches, and Grisha was too weary and mind blown to give them.

“Are you both happy?” he asked, not having anything else to offer, and genuinely curious.

Levi regarded him quietly, trying to gauge whatever it was he was trying to find in his words. “We were. We’re not together now, what you saw was Eren catching me off guard.”

That was relieving, Grisha supposed, but didn’t that mean…“wait, so my son still wants to be with you?”

Levi’s scowled and turned away. “I’m too old for him.”

Right. That meant the feeling was mutual. Great. Grisha should have packed a gun to shoot himself. “I see…”

A long awkward silence hovered between both men. If a cat puked a hairball in the next room they would have immediately jumped on that subject than the current one. Grisha clenched and unclenched his hands. What should he say? Stay away from my son he’s barely an adult you old fart? He could tell Levi was responsible enough to not want a relationship with Eren because of that. The problem was getting Eren to back off.

But did Levi want that himself?

Grisha rubbed the bridge of his nose. Shit. This was too much to think about. Why couldn’t Eren go after one of his friends? That boy was too ambitious…

He looked out the only window. It was a bright and mockingly sunny summer day. Perfect to go to the pool for a swim. Or sun bathe with a tall glass of lemonade. He could go for some lemonade. Isra didn’t have lemonade. They had water. How hard was it to get some lemons and make homemade lemonade?

He was avoiding the subject. Approve or not approve the thing that was his son and corporal Levi.

“He won’t listen to me,” the bedridden man said, his face not showing any sign of remorse other than stone coldness. The doctor had to wonder what Eren found so attractive about this guy. “Maybe he’ll understand if you reason with him.”

Grisha barked a laugh. “I’m afraid I’d be less persuasive. Eren is too stubborn and determined. If he wants something he’ll get it. If you can’t get him to change his mind then you’re stuck with him.”

Levi wasn’t pleased with this. He turned sour and looked away, a second too late from hiding the light tinge in his cheeks. Grisha almost laughed at the man’s own stubbornness. “When he was a child, Eren suffered nightmares – of the past I’m guessing. He would call out names. Mikasa, Armin, his mother…but he mentioned yours the most.” Levi’s shoulders sagged slightly, “no matter what I say it won’t stop what he feels. I’d be a little more forceful if he were after…I don’t know a psychopath? At least you’re not a criminal.”

Levi stiffened.

“And there’s much less I can do if you feel just as strongly for him,” Grisha sighed. He was digging his own grave, “Eren does know when to back off, and you obviously haven’t given him much reason to do so.”

“He’s a child.”
“He’s twenty-one,” the doctor corrected. “Old enough to make his own decisions.”

Levi was still trying to stomach his words when he finally drifted off to sleep. Grisha took the time to pack up the rest of his things and find Eren. There was a lot he needed to explain. Plus the longer they talked, the longer he could avoid telling Carla.

He left the room quietly with this mentality when the emergency alarms sounded off, but found Marco standing in the hallway, blocking the exit. All thoughts of Eren being with an older man flew out the window.

Grisha knew this was going bite him in the ass someday. The boy was as patient as a serial killer, three years of hiding behind the gentle mask was nothing for him. He struck when the time was right, and right now that time had come. He could feel it in the way the young man was looking at him.

The narrow hall was becoming constricting fast. Nothing had happened yet, Marco was there, all smiles and glowing red eye. The muffled alarms sounding off outside only completed the picture that something wasn’t right. The need to see his son had grown stronger.

“Marco,” Grisha said, barely above a whisper.

The young man gave him a nod. He filled out more in his three years of training. Defined muscles of an acrobat and soldier combined cleanly lining his thin black shirt and camo pants. He had transformed once again. Much more dangerous than before.

“We hadn’t had a chance to talk,” he said, his tone light and innocent as always. “The mission’s been cancelled, but an emergency in Maria came up. We’ll be going in anyway. I wanted to see you before we left.”

An emergency? Grisha clutched the handle of his med kit. That meant Eren was going in wasn’t he? It was happening. His son was going to go to the other side to fight titans…

“I’d rather not use force, you’re the man who brought me back to life after all,” Marco smiled, pocketing his hands casually, “I understand that the whole reason Eren was being tested in his shifting was due to removing a buffer of some kind?”

The buffer. Grisha still had it and the anti-buffer on him in case it didn’t work the first time. Did Marco plan to use it on himself so he could shift? That wouldn’t work, Marco’s titan gene was warped, not natural or properly blocked. Adding the anti-buffer would be like injecting himself with placebo. He’d only think he could shift. He’d only think he was stronger. If anything the injection would probably kill him.

“No,” Grisha took a step back and shook his head. “I know what you plan on doing. It won’t work. You’re not a true shifter!”

Marco stared, taken aback. His right eye stopped glowing as his face slackened. Then he broke into boisterous laughter, the sound disconcerting to the doctor. “I don’t plan on using it on myself, are you crazy?”

He didn’t believe him. If he didn’t want to use the anti-buffer on himself, then whatever he was going to use it for couldn’t mean anything good. Grisha had already been hesitant in handing Erwin a small sampling, Marco could do much worse with it.

“Dr. Jaeger,” Marco calmed down, back to his cool and calculating tone. “Give me the buffer and you won’t ever hear from me again.”
It took Grisha some time to redouble and pause in confusion. Marco wanted the buffer? What for? The serum blocked all titan abilities. If he was speaking the truth over not using it on himself, then the only other people the buffer could be used on would be the shifters serving the army. Including Eren…

It was starting to click. The lack of remorse for hurting people. No desire to exact revenge for the death of his parents. The scouting legion. The buffer. This wasn’t any higher calling to fight for humanity, it was the opposite! Marco was going to use the buffer on the shifters to cripple the army! He played his cards so well, Grisha wouldn’t put it past him to even orchestrate his own death so he could become stronger through the tissue regeneration project. Grisha helped him every step of the way!

He had to warn someone.

If he recalled correctly, there was another exit at the back of the building. The structure was small and wouldn’t take much time in getting to the end if he managed to outrun Marco.

Just as he turned around he was face to face by mere inches from a young man with two toned hair and guilty golden eyes. The next thing the doctor knew, his head exploded with pain and he was swept away in darkness.

The Cave

“He looks a little younger here, but it’s him,” Anka said.

The team had gathered around one of the wooden tables in the cave, comparing several shots of Berwick and the single photograph of the ten secret keepers. It had been blown up through her tablet with a holographic program, casting a dim golden glow over the table. It was focused on Lanius Tase. He was a round faced muscular boy of probably around sixteen. Thick black brows and messy hair, with stern eyes of a seasoned warrior. She hadn’t received any news from Pixis or Nile, leaving the group to think over things themselves.

“He’s over two thousand years old,” Rico said, not quite believing it herself. She was rubbing her chin in deep thought. “Or he reincarnated with everyone else…both sound absurd.”

“Who was it that identified him?” Darius asked, his tone deep and stern as he stared at the images over his glasses. News media had him located at the Stohess courthouse, but it was a red herring to keep the attention on the city while he snuck into the cave to investigate with his own eyes.

“A friend of Dazz’s,” Anka replied, “from the scouting legion. He says there’s someone in Isra who knew Berwick personally. They haven’t disclosed whether he’s reincarnated or truly is two thousand years old. The murder of the Munsell's implies the latter.”

“Hm…” Darius didn’t like this, his gray brows burrowing further, “I’m going to assume they didn’t know Berwick was living inside the walls…?”

“It seems that way,” Anka nodded, “I’ve been told they were just as surprised.”

The old man shut his eyes briefly, “I’ll believe that for now.” He placed an ancient book on the table, The cover was black save for the binding which had the title Hanji Zoe’s Titan Notes. When the others leaned over to read it, they whipped back in shock. “This reincarnation story…it’s becoming more and more plausible. Hanji Zoe is a squad leader, and head of the scouting legion’s research department regarding titans. Unless she happened to waltz in and leave her notebook here, I’d say she’s also reincarnated from the past. Considering the numbers, it seems we all have.”
No one argued. The more they looked through the cave, the more identities surfaced. A look through in the obituaries listed many people they knew. Rico had been sickened when she saw a group listing of her entire squad perishing in the Battle of Trost. Her own was not there, leading her to assume that not only did she survive Trost, but several other mass killings and important battles. If she time framed things correctly. Not counting Berwick, the cave had been maintained for roughly thirty years until the last one died. The Wiped era continued to last for about seventy more years, leaving that gap unwritten. Unless Berwick somehow did continue filling the cave with seventy years more of history. That would mean that back then he truly was on the side of humanity.

And now he was betraying them.

Rico shook her head. That wasn’t right. Dazz said he was Berwick’s first victim. Died in cold blood. They needed to continue searching to be sure if Berwick did or didn’t continue maintaining the cave after…

A small gasp escaped her, gaining the others attention. She looked over the table, covered in letters they all read through, and spotted the one she was looking for at the corner.

It had been a letter from the last surviving member of the ten founders. Now that she read it again, it was signed by…

*Lanius Tase*

That fucker. It was written in a way that wouldn’t cause suspicion that the writer was a shifter – it actually helped the reader learn that there were spies in the walls. If this letter was so pro-humanity, and if it truly was legitimate, then what happened to make Berwick turn his back on them?

Why kill Dazz?

“It looks like the theory of humans inside titans had started in the Wiped era,” Darius spoke, disorienting Rico’s thoughts. He was reading Hanji’s notes, very carefully turning the yellowed and cracked pages. “The cause is the Ape Titan. Just as we assumed.”

Though the creature had never been sighted personally – as it never returned to the walls since Rose’s breach two thousand years ago – probes sent out by the military revealed its existence every now and then. It was the only one of its kind, making it the center of many theories regarding titans. It was highly intelligent, and had been observed to be a teacher for the lesser minded titans. Recent probes reported it helping its kin create a crude, but distinct village. Many clusters of these could be seen around the world.

“‘No humans were found in the captured titans. I believe that if the body is not in the nape like a shifter, then the body has instead been fully absorbed into the central nervous system of the titan,’” Darius read, leaning over the book to better read the handwritten scrawl, “‘hope of returning the Ragako villagers to their previous forms seems less likely.’”

Anka crossed her arms, “their humanity was completely stolen. They couldn’t find a cure then, we don’t have one now. Killing them is the only option left to us.” It was cruel, but true. The book was proving that titans were actually human victims to the Ape Titan. The more their soldiers tried to help them, the more men were lost. The theory had been taught through training, to give the trainees the reality that they could be killing people like themselves. They needed to be cleansed of that guilt from the start, or risk their own life in the war.

"Mm?" Darius’s eyes narrowed. "There's a page missing..."
Both women looked at the book and could see the ripped edges of a missing page. Great. Missing pages implied important information.

“We need more answers. Maybe that info's in another book,” Anka turned away to continue her search.

At that moment the floor shook horribly, sending her stumbling to the side and knocking into another table. The rumbling lasted for two more minutes until everything settled back down from little tremors to stillness. Shaken, and annoyed, Anka turned to the others who had held on to something supportive in the quake, looking just as bemused.

“What the hell was that?”

2856

Isra

Sometime Before the Alarm

Most soldiers were waiting for news at the mess hall. Historia and Ymir had been there as well, sharing a table with Sasha and the others. Both had been keeping an eye on their tablets when Historia received a chat request from her mother. They barely spoke during graduation, and now that she had Ymir by her side again, Historia was ready to ask all the questions that had been burning inside her.

Not wanting her friends to hear what she had to say, she took her tablet and stepped outside, Ymir following close behind.

“Are you gonna stop beating around the bush and tell her?” she asked, once they walked around the building and settled down on the back door stoop. The small trip only made Historia’s nerves work overtime, and she held Ymir’s hand for comfort.

Answering the question, Historia nodded and accepted the chat request. A video connection later and she was staring at her mother, blonde and blue eyed just like her, and with anxiety written all over her face. From the background and positioning, they could tell that she was in the living room computer and no one else appeared to be home. Ymir took a moment to admire the expensive décor, a few religious tokens here and there, but nothing overwhelming.

“Christa? What took you so long?” she said, more confused than angry, “how are you? We haven’t spoken in a while.”

“I’m fine,” Historia said shortly. With Ymir leaning over her shoulder, her mother looked at her questioningly; eyes straying to the freckled girl. “This is Ymir,” she introduced. Both nodded to each other, one more uncertain than the other. Licking her lips, Historia felt her hands begin to sweat and her heart hammer, “she’s my girlfriend.”

Mrs. Reiss’s mouth slackened. She was having a hard time trying to form a coherent word. Historia could feel Ymir stiffen, and bit back a yelp when she nudged her. Ymir hissed under her breath, “quit chickening out, that was supposed to be after – ”

“I-I see,” Mrs. Reiss said a little breathlessly. “I-I…hello. Ymir. Um…it’s nice to meet you…” She was at a loss. “Christa…?”

“I love her with all my heart!” Historia burst excitedly, her face turning red the more afraid and embarrassed she became, “and we’re going to get married, live in a huge house, adopt kids and have
Ymir covered her mouth with her hand before she could vomit out anymore nonsense. “Why did you name her Christa Lenz?”

Mrs. Reiss was taken aback. “I’m sorry?”

“Your family name is Reiss,” Ymir pressed on firmly, “if she’s your daughter why isn’t she carrying the name?”

The woman looked from one girl to the other. She was still flustered and probably hadn’t fully understood Ymir’s question. “Wait, so you’re not…” she tapped her fingers together meaningfully.

“No, we still are,” the shifter smirked, causing Mrs. Reiss to laugh nervously and trail off into another flush. “Now why did you name her Christa?”

Historia’s mother squirmed in her seat. She opened and closed her mouth several times. The awkward silence calmed Historia enough for Ymir to let her go and wait anxiously for an answer.

This was it. The moment she’d been eager and afraid of. She’d been so scared of getting the answer to the question she couldn’t ask before. She didn’t want to know the truth if it meant she would be back to her own little island of loneliness abandoned by her family. Her life was good this time, her grandparents, relatives, they all loved her. The only thing she had to deal with was the pain of not carrying their name. The only sign that maybe it was all just pretend. She didn’t want to it be the truth. But she also didn’t want to continue lying to herself.

“When I was in college I had a good friend who majored in teaching,” her mother said, running a hand through her golden hair, “we weren’t very close. He had all these crazy ideas about the Great Wipe. None of it made sense to me…towards the end his wife gave birth to a boy around the same time I became pregnant…” there was a strange conflicted look crossing her face. Historia recalled the circumstances of her birth. By college, her mother had been married, but it was formal and she hadn’t been happy. Historia was the result of her brief happiness found in another.

Though out of wedlock, her birth was accepted instead of rejected.

“I was having trouble figuring out what to name you, and he suggested Christa Lenz. His wife came across some documents linking that name to the Battle of Trost. There was no credibility to it though, so those documents never met the publishing table, he just liked the name and it did have a ring to it,” she wasn’t smiling. An oddity considering this was a story of a supposedly exciting time. “Your father didn’t mind it either, but he wanted a different name. Then my friend and I had a falling out. I was too critical of his research on the Wiped era, and he thought I was too cynical,” she shook her head sadly, “graduation was the last I saw of him and his wife. I still considered our friendship special and…well I guess as a token, I named you Christa Lenz. It was meant to be Christa Lenz Reiss, but…” she grimaced and didn’t finish.

Historia leaned closer eagerly. “But what?”

“Right after your birth we got a visit from Father Nick – to bless you,” she elaborated, “He said he knew the name, but a different one fit you more,” her brows knitted, “he told us for your safety that you couldn’t carry the Reiss name.”

Historia blinked. “My safety? From what?”

“I don’t know,” Mrs. Reiss shrugged, “I thought it was because you were born out of wedlock, but he said that you held a heavy burden, a spirit of the past – poetry, basically. I didn’t get it and I
insisted on you keeping Reiss. He warned us that by doing so, you would be killed,” she shuddered, “I couldn’t believe a holy man was threatening us, but two weeks after blessing you, he was killed in Sterben. I took it as a sign to drop the Reiss name on your documents.”

Historia took a moment to swallow it all. She’d been named by her mother’s college friend out of documents that probably listed soldiers participating in the Battle of Trost. At the time she was still working under her alias, so naturally ‘Christa Lenz’ was marked down instead of her true name.

Why did Father Nick believe she was going to die if she kept her real name?

“What was the name he believed fit me better?” she asked in a quiet voice. Ymir gave her shoulder a small squeeze.

“Um…” Mrs. Reiss ducked her head in thought. It had been a long time since she heard it. “Something with an H? I think it was…History? Uh…”

“Historia,” her voice wavered. Her mother looked at her in surprise. “My name is Historia Reiss.”

“It does have a ring to it,” the older woman said faintly. “How did you…” she shook her head. “Christa, please don’t take the name. I don’t know what Father Nick meant, but I don’t want you in danger – you’re already in the scouting legion!”

Historia smiled innocently, her lips wobbling slightly. Her fears were banished. ‘Christa Lenz’ was given to her to protect her, not push her away from her family! They really did love her…

“Is your friend still researching the Wiped era?” Ymir asked curiously. “I have a few friends he might piss his pants over.”

The worry in Mrs. Reiss face dropped gradually at the thought of her friend again. It darkened and became grave with regret and sadness. “I’m sorry. He and his wife died in Sterben a few years ago. Just like Father Nick.”

Both girls straightened up. That was too much of a coincidence. Three people connected to naming Historia killed in the same place? “Who were they?” the blonde asked.

Mrs. Reiss looked away uncomfortably. “I’d rather…” she drifted off with a sigh and turned back to her daughter. “Nicholas and Eva Bodt.”

Ymir and Historia’s eyes widened. They were about to explode with questions, but a message popped up from Erwin in both their tablets, forcing them to direct their attention to it. Mrs. Reiss watched as their faces grew more and more sober. She was starting to fear the worst when they finally looked back to her.

“We’re being called for battle,” Historia said gently.

Her mother paled, eyes beginning to glisten. She took a deep shaky breath and nodded. “Okay…” she managed to say in a tiny almost childlike voice, looking from Ymir to her daughter, “O-okay…”

“I’ll be okay, I promise,” Historia said firmly, hoping to instill some faith in her mother. It was ruined once the alarms started going off.

“Christa, you’re everything I have,” Mrs. Reiss said, a tear escaping, “please…” she turned to Ymir desperately. “Keep her safe.”

The shifter nodded. “She won’t leave my side.” And then, to break the tension, “seriously, she
won’t. I’ll have her swimming in my hair if I have to.”

Both her girlfriend and Mrs. Reiss gave choked laughs of bewilderment. When they settled down they said their final goodbyes and reluctantly cut their connection. Wiping her eyes, Historia hardened back to the soldier she trained to be. She stood up with Ymir and both ran to their cabins to suit up.

This was the moment she’d been waiting for ever since birth.

A chance to fight again.

Stohess

The mission was a lot more important than Erwin implied in the medic building. They were given the initial objective once they were in the commanders office. Basically, they had to help stop a rogue shifter from going titan in a populated city. A set up was currently underway to keep him contained, but it wouldn’t last long with so many military police unused to battle. The garrison would be of some help, but this required the finesse that only the special ops could deliver.

Then Hanji came in with three shifters and a blond recruit. Their story was much more bizarre than the mission. The shifter in question was an old friend of theirs by the name of Berwick. He wasn’t born in the village they came from, leading them to believe that he was over two thousand years old.

Which brought on the second most important topic at hand. Pretty much everyone including those with some connection to the military had been reincarnated from the Wiped era. At first it was only the 2104th as they retained memories of their past lives. But now with Levi’s seizure, Hanji discovered that he regained memories as well, confirming that they were all from the past.

The story was unbelievable, which made Armin come forward to question their doubt with anecdotes of several recruits having trained themselves since birth in order to get in the army. How else could it be explained that not a single casualty occurred in training, and nearly the whole squad chose to join the scouting legion?

Counter argument. What about the five that stayed behind?

Dismissed. They stayed to look for clues regarding the Wiped era. Found it. And were now reporting their discovery. That, and they were currently working to capture rogue shifter, and killer Berwick.

What Erwin had in mind was to make use of Dr. Jaeger’s invention. The buffer he made to hide his son’s nature would now be used against Berwick before he had a chance to shift. The supply was small – they only had one sample enough to work on a fully grown adult. Gunther would be in charge of blasting it from his rifle as he was the best sniper out of the whole squad.

But in case the bullet didn’t meet its target, for the first time since its creation the squad would be outfitted in the Maneuver X while in public and engage the titan while a Plan B went underway. What Plan B was, they had no idea.

Gunther stared at the specialized bullet in his hands. They’d been flying via private jet no more than twenty minutes. The distance from Stohess to Isra wasn’t long, but they had to curve in order to reach the right district. The four were in their public uniforms without the cloaks. Each carried a black backpack in which their battle attire resided, at the ready in case things got too crazy. “If only we had a bigger supply of this stuff. Fighting off titans would be a piece of cake.”

“We’re not even sure if it’ll work on regular titans,” Erd said reasonably from his seat across from
him, “there’s no proof they even have people piloting them.”

The door to the cockpit opened and Mike stepped out, tapping his earpiece. “There’s been a surge of titans in Maria. As soon as we wrap things up here, we’re flying straight over to push them back.”

“Is Levi…” Petra sat up in apprehension.

Mike shook his head, “Erwin’s keeping him out of it. Let’s hope those recruits are as good as their records.”

The veterans looked at each other uneasily. In practice, they really were exceptional soldiers, but were they good enough to go against real titans? Every year the bulk of their losses had always been recruits. Closely followed by prisoners.

As soon as they landed in front of the wall that would let them in Stohess, they rushed out of the jet, rifles in hand, and met a few soldiers waiting there. They gave them earpieces to connect them with everyone inside the city.

“Berwick is already talking to the chief in front of the courthouse,” one of them said, as they followed the five past the opened gates. “I’d suggest putting on the maneuver gear in case he shifts.”

Erd nodded. They were late. They needed speed on their side now. Gripping the straps of his backpack, his thumb pressed onto a hidden button near the bottom and as they ran out of the mouth of the gates and into the glittering splendor of Stohess, their bags came to life. Within twenty seconds, each of the black bags unraveled into a spidery mess of fabric and flat plates. Controlled by the signals woven into the fabric, they wrapped around their bodies into a snug fit, the plates latching onto their neighbors and fastening securely onto the uniform. Reaching behind them for the final item lodged into their blossomed bags, they unhooked their helmets and pulled them over their heads.

The screens blinked into life, reading the immediate vicinity and detecting an organized mass of people near the center of the city.

“Split up,” Mike said through their communications, already kicking into the air and heading west.

“Yes, sir!” they followed suit in different directions.

BOOM!

They didn’t feel the earth shake, but they could see its effects due to the city groaning in protest. Shining glass windows shattering from the force. The loudest noise of all could only be compared to gigantic rocks cracking. This was accompanied by several more ‘boom’s and clouds of dust and debris.

“What the fuck was that!?” Auruo screamed in their helmets.

Their screens flared red, announcing the presence of several more titans. Way more than the squad, or anyone, had been prepared for.

Stohess Courthouse

Berwick arrived at the courthouse within a half hour. He showed no other sign of suspicion, nor called any attention to himself. Some squads were still trying to get left over citizens underground as quietly as possible. In such a short time, there were still innocent people in danger of getting in the way.
Having seen the shifter a block away from his surveillance recordings of the immediate vicinity, Nile stepped outside the security room he’d been sitting in with Pixis. Having Berwick inside the building would be perfect to keep him from shifting, but the young man knew that they were aware of his abilities – at least since Dazz would have told them anyway. He would work to avoid small places. Just the walk from the gate to the courthouse showed him taking routes around wide open spaces.

They needed to tread carefully. Stall for time so that the special ops could arrive.

Both officials held back by the doors and waited to see what would happen. The perimeters were already tightly formed. The middle ring were on the buildings with their guns aimed at their target. Undercover police and garrison feigned innocence as they watched Berwick approach the building. They were beginning to hope he would step inside, but he stopped right by the grand stone steps.

“Now what?” someone buzzed in Nile’s ear.

“We wait,” he said. “Squads twenty through twenty five any signs of a bomb yet?”

“Negative,” was the reply, “area around the courthouse is clear, we’ll be checking the outer perimeter.”

Nile barely caught that. Outside, he could see Berwick raise a pocket knife, his thumb pressed threateningly over the blade. The ‘reporters’ had been subtly surrounding him, making it appear like they were walking around out of boredom. As soon as the knife was out they instantly slid into formation, the inner ring kneeling for the outer one to have a clear shot, all guns were whipped out, a staccato of safety’s being clicked off. Nile and Pixis rushed out of the building, their guns out and ready.

Berwick smiled, the brim of his hat casting a shadow over his eyes. “Now that we’re all out in the open, I’d like to make a deal,” his deep voice rang out calmly.

“Drop the knife, Berwick,” Nile called out, eyes glued to the shifter. “Or do you want to see if you can shift faster than we can put a bullet through your head?”

“Don’t provoke him,” Dazz warned quietly.

“Release the king, and I’ll leave the walls,” Berwick ordered, not dropping the knife.

“The king is going on trial for the murder of his parents,” Pixis said, sharp eyes glaring over his raised gun, “there is proof that he orchestrated their deaths. He’s not leaving with you, kid.”

“Erik can barely care to wear matching socks, you think someone like him is cruel enough to commit the murder of his own parents?” Berwick arched a thick eyebrow. “Who you really want is me, and since you won’t agree to my deal how about something more persuasive?” He tossed the knife behind him haphazardly. It skittered to a stop by a soldier’s foot. Pulling the remote from his pocket, Berwick held it up for everyone to see. “I’m guessing you already know what prize this leads to.”

Nile’s eyes narrowed. So it was really a bomb? Twenty through twenty-five hadn’t reported yet. They needed to know right now where the bomb was before Berwick pressed the trigger. If it wasn’t near the courthouse where the hell else could it be? He thought furiously over any other meaningful places to stick a bomb. Someplace that was meant to get him to surrender…

Where the fuck was special ops!?

“The king or humanity,” Berwick’s voice rang over the streets.
Everyone stared at the shifter. Some glanced at each other nervously. Was he implying that he had bombs planted all over the walls? Nile grit his teeth. He couldn’t comply with Berwick’s wishes. He didn’t have a means to, despite what the killer thought. Negotiations were over, they had to proceed with phase two, but first they had to get rid of that remote.

“All right,” without looking back, he waved at soldiers stationed by the doors. They ran inside, and minutes later came back with the king, still in cuffs, and still with a jacket over his head. They dragged him into the perimeter and stopped next to Nile. “The remote for the king.”

Berwick looked at the captor up and down in disgust. “That’s not Erik. Show me his face.”

Nile scowled. “It is the king, now give me the remote.”

Snarling, Berwick snatched the jacket and ripped it off, startling the captor and the soldiers holding him. Instead of Erik staring back at his personal aid it was a young man with a bowl cut hair. Marlo refrained from swearing under his breath, and broke off the fake cuffs, grabbing his gun from its holster on his waist.

Behind Nile Pixis murmured into everyone’s earpieces. “Get rid of that remote. Proceed with phase two.”

Dazz tried to cut in. “Wait! Don’t fire!”

Cracks blew off from all around Berwick as every bullet was fired toward his right hand. They completely destroyed the arm leaving only a bloody stub, and the man to stumble from the force. He didn’t even scream from the pain, already healing his lost limb in a cloud of steam.

The soldiers in the ground perimeter lost no time. They pulled out small cases from the bags they’d been wearing in their variety of disguises. Opening them, they activated the cable wrapped tightly inside, springing it to life with a press of a button.

Several cables shot out, and before Berwick had time to blink, he was held down to his knees by the black metallic snakes wrapping all over his limbs. Those in control of his arms, pulled them behind his back with no resistance.

Nile kept his gun up as he walked closer to the shifter, “you are under arrest for the murders of nine people including the king and queen, and a soldier from the Great Wipe. As an agent of the titans, you will receive no trial and – ” He stopped short in horror.

The remote was lodged between Berwick’s teeth. He dropped it right before they blasted off his arm!

In that moment, the searching squads reported in panic. “We found them! They’re hooked up to the – ”

Smirking around the remote, Berwick bit down on the small device. Triggering the bomb.

A series of explosions sounded off all around Stohess. None within the city, rather on the walls themselves.

There is a lesson taught to certain trainees. A dark secret kept from the public to avoid mass panic. The only reason the walls had remained for so long without any more damage from invading titans was because the walls themselves were supported by the enemy. It had been discovered a few centuries ago when x-ray technology had started to develop. Humanoid shapes of colossal heights, all crammed inside and unmoving. It had been a frightening sight, and became a well kept secret.

Those aware were soldiers selected by their trainers, allowing them to take the extracurricular lesson,
and put under vow to continue keeping the secret.

Nile stared dumbstruck at the towering walls that protected them for so many centuries. He and many other soldiers watched as giant pieces of rock cracked and tumbled in slow motion to the ground, revealing bit by bit pieces of massive red muscle and wide toothy grins.

It was a sunny summer day.

And after thousands of years of sleep within the walls, the titans that hid away in the walls that protected humanity were now wide awake and ready to stretch their great and powerful muscles.
Battle for Humanity Part 1

Chapter Summary

In which everyone's shitting themselves and Marco and Jean do something crazy

Chapter Notes

soooo I got majorly distracted by my sudden discovery of kpop (I blame the snk fandom for This Love :P) I've been surfing youtube for MV's and viewed practically all available clips from Shinhwa Broadcast, by the time I got back to this fic I realized a week passed O_O and that I have a problem lol
ANYWAY I'll try not to get so distracted next time! We're getting closer to the end guys!! I LOVE YOU FOR KEEPING WITH THIS STORY!!! I believe I edited this maybz three times, but if there's any hiccups...it's all Shinhwa's fault!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

2848

Shifter Village

Ymir's parents died in the river. They'd been walking down the path that ran along it, and being a three year old with clumsy hands, Ymir lost the ball she'd been playing with. It fell into the river with a plop and drifted lazily down the stream that would lead to the sewers. Not finding any danger in snatching it back, her father dived in and managed to catch it before it was lost for good. He would have swum back, but the hem of his pants got caught in something underwater and dragged him back. Seeing the problem, her mother jumped in to help, but once she wrapped her arm around his waist, the rush of water strengthened the closer they got to the sewers and pushed them closer to its waiting mouth until they were completely taken away. The bars that would have kept them away were weakened with time and never replaced. Their fate was sealed.

Rescuers found them in a mangled soiled heap at the end of the sewers. A mile away from the river, and the ball Ymir had lost still clasped tightly in her father’s hand. The journey had broken their bones and tore their skin, leaving them almost unrecognizable. Ymir had been blocked from view as soon as she ran down to see them, but she still managed to get a glimpse.

Even at the age of three Ymir had the ability to become a titan. She had the experience from the past and training from experts to easily switch back and forth. Had she shifted the moment her father showed signs of distress, she may have been able to save him and prevent her mother from jumping in as well.

She never thought she’d freeze up as she watched her parents struggle for their lives.

The sight of their mutilated corpses had sunk guilt into her heart that took many years of counseling sessions to get over. It still hurt to think back on it, and there were still pangs of ‘what if’s, but she was able to move on.
Seeing Bertholdt and Reiner standing over the bridge, just a few yards below where her parents were taken from her, she froze up once again. Haunted by their last moments and the stupid handball that caused it all.

As soon as the boys disappeared over the edge, Annie who hadn’t spoken a word since birth, who rarely showed any extreme emotion, screamed.

It was like a siren that triggered Ymir’s consciousness and made her take action. All she could think of in her head was to not let what happened to her parents repeat. She had to stop this somehow. She could stop it! So as she grabbed the railing and jumped over it, biting deep into her finger hard enough to break the skin. The brief lurch of her stomach from the fall was quickly changed in direction as she flew back under the transformation of her body.

After the accident, the bars to the sewers were replaced with a grid, the two boys wouldn’t suffer the trip Ymir’s parents suffered, but there was still the possibility of the river’s pressure pushing them to the bottom and drowning them. Stomping through the river, splashing water everywhere, she snatched them up with one in each hand and threw them to the path on the side, following them seconds later, smoothly pulling out of the titan body.

Bertholdt and Reiner coughed and wheezed in their drenched heaps. Ymir didn’t give them any time to figure out what happened because as soon as she was close enough she delivered each one a slug to the face, slamming them back down to the ground.

She was furious. Having seen what the river could do, the images of her parents in the sewers, why would anyone want a fate like that? Why would anyone want to die?

Snatching the wet collars of their shirts, she pulled them close and screamed in their faces so harshly it threatened to permanently ruin her throat, “WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU!”

2856

Isra

The alarms continued to wail throughout the village. Soldiers burst out of their cabins, transforming into their Maneuver X uniforms as they ran to the air base. Ymir and Historia met up there with the other recruits, all dressed and ready for battle. Running past them, they went to the armory inside the base where weapons were being handed out. Ymir hooked a rifle over her shoulder, and grabbed a holster to load herself with smaller guns and ammo. It would slow her agility in battle, and she would mostly be in her titan body, but it never hurt to be prepared.

Historia, being so small, had to gear up with significantly less weapons, but she learned to use her size just as Annie had. Ymir watched her check through her choice of guns before sliding them in her holster. The shifter knew this was a time of crisis, but damn did Historia look hot checking her weapons and loading them like the expert she was.

“When you’re done here report outside to your designated squads,” the veteran handing out the weapons told them, “Ymir, the commander wants you in mid guard.”

Mid guard? Ymir nodded and walked away with Historia. That meant Reiner and Annie were taking the left and right near the front. In the past it would be her in the front to cause distraction to the titans before the other two delivered the final blow. It seemed ludicrous since she was the smallest most vulnerable of all the shifters, but because of her speed, it served enough to confuse the titans into falling victim to the second wave that was Reiner and Annie.
The fact that she was being pushed back and the other two front meant that the situation was really that bad. They needed to hit hard first and make a big enough bruise to go on for a second wind.

“‘You’ll have me swim in your hair?’ Historia said with a small grin. Ymir looked at her blankly. It took her a minute to remember what she was referring to. Then she smiled and wrapped an arm around the blonde’s shoulders, pulling her close.

“You can dance in it too if you want,” their noses were close enough to nuzzle. Historia grabbed the strap of her rifle and pulled her down for a warm and tender kiss. It sent pleasant tinges all over and down to Ymir’s toes, and when they parted, she couldn’t stop the goofy grin.

“I’m properly introducing you to my family once this is over,” Historia promised.

If Ymir was nervous about that statement, she didn’t show it. She knew the hidden meaning, and she took Historia’s hand, so small and fragile in the glove, “I can’t wait to traumatize your mom again.”

“Hey guys – whoa!”

Ignoring Connie. The two shared another kiss, an unspoken good luck, and parted ways. Once he got himself revved up in weapons, Connie chased after Historia, eager for the story and why the hell he wasn’t aware of it.

Making her way past gathered squads taking orders from their shouting leaders, Ymir made it to Hanji’s squad, who typically took mid guard and was no different this time. Amongst the lined up crowd of soldiers both veteran and recruit, Ymir spotted Bertholdt and Eren. She had to double take at that.

Eren literally just shifted with poor results. Having him in the middle would – though chaos would be lessened – do serious damage to the formation should he go berserk. Ymir guessed she was put in the middle so she could somehow calm him should this happen, but Bertholdt’s presence was a mystery. Ever since joining the army, he had been a permanent fixture in Erwin’s squad. Erwin, and sometimes Levi, would be able to keep a better eye on him this way. Looking at him from a few rows behind, Ymir could tell he wasn’t pleased with this new arrangement.

He was gripping his forearm, body slouched and yet tensed. They were all without their helmets at this point. Ymir could see the side of his normally tan face pale and starting to shine with sweat. Every now and then he would rub his arm, as if he had an itch that couldn’t be scratched. An itch that hadn’t occurred in years.

Ymir grimaced and looked away. The others had adapted well enough to this new world, but Bertholdt had suffered the most. Reiner was a close second. The village was a tight knit community, and they tried to help out those in need, unfortunately their hands couldn’t quite reach the two boys. It was too late to reach them. Reiner attempted to create an extroverted and brotherly persona much like he had in the 104th, but the quiet and meek Bertholdt couldn’t pretend. He’d been drowning in haunting nightmares and hateful voices in his head. The only thing left for him to do in a new world that made him feel so alone and increasingly unhinged was to find a way to escape, even for a little while.

The solace that he found was what got him kicked out of school.

The day Ymir saved them from drowning, and she was done screaming her head off she had paused to see if they’d say anything back and they didn’t. They were barely focused on her, pupils blown, and wondering why they were still alive. Lethargically, they lay back against the cement of the walkway they’d been thrown on, and went back to observing the sky.
The weather that day was warm enough to go out in a T-shirt, and both were each sporting one. Out of an unexplainable curiosity, Ymir grabbed Bertholdt’s limp arm. There were three small and abstract colorful patches on the forearm, soaked now from the river, yet still clinging to tanned skin thanks to the tiny needle fibers that injected its juices into Bertholdt’s system. Reiner only had one even smaller version on his own arm.

That had been years ago, when help was available and Ymir had time to care enough to guide them back to reality. They never truly healed. At least they stopped trying to escape.

Or at least Reiner did. Ymir glared at Bertholdt’s back. The shifter found something. She could tell. And he was dying to use it again.

Stohess

A silence swept through the city. Thick with suffocating terror that sucked the breath out of everyone.

They were all skinless colossal titans. Unmoving and eyes locked on the frozen people gawking up at them. Those that hadn’t taken the lesson specifically tailored to select trainees were beginning to back up, fear taking over rationality. The shock had loosened the cables enough for Berwick to break free and make a clean escape, taking advantage of everyone’s distraction. Nile didn’t even notice him running away, too preoccupied by the sight of so many titans surrounding them.

This was the end.

All that training. Millennia of peace. The advancements. In the end they were all just ants compared to their natural enemy. Knocked off the top of the food chain and just asking to be devoured. They were nothing. They were cattle. Useless. Fated to be slaughtered. Nile had never felt despair as great at this.

“Do not give up,” Dazz said through the com. His tone had gone through a dramatic change. Gone was the insecure voice that sometimes trembled with resolution or embarrassment, rarely strengthened by the need to get his point across. His voice was strong now. Hardened with the experience of a soldier who’d been through what everyone was currently feeling. Sprinkled with faith that there was still hope. It reached into what little consciousness Nile had left and woke him from his paralysis. “There are four hundred of us and about fifty of them. We have them out numbered. Colossals are slow movers, we have them beaten in speed. We have the special ops, and we have our weapons and skill. You can either fight now and defend our home, or run away and hide like cowards behind the families you’re meant to protect. You’re families.”

It struck a chord in some soldiers who stood a little taller indignantly. One by one they started snapping out of it. Some swore under their breaths and whispered names of their loved ones, tightening their holds on their guns. Nile didn’t have anyone to come home to, but he could feel the ripples of will awakening in his brigade. That resolve to protect what was most important. Their right to live.

“This is squad leader Zacharias reporting,” a new voice joined in gravely. “We’re going to need your best flyers.”

Some relief swelled and encouraged the crowds. They were breathing again. Special ops was here and that made things seem less bleak.

Nile nodded to no one, “They’re yours. Everyone get in gear, we take advantage of the titan’s speed.
A chorus of ‘yes sir!’ resounded in his ear as everyone jumped into action. Nile marched with purpose down the broken up crowd to the two police arguing with each other. They were holding the knife Berwick had been threatening them with. Now with a semi clearer head, Nile realized that the shifter was supposed to be unarmed. The scan reported so. How did he get a knife without detection?

“I told you, I didn’t even realize he swiped me you ass hat!” the angrier of the two snatched the knife and pocketed it in its sheath on her belt. She was one of the few officers who wasn’t under disguise and the reddening of her cheeks showed how humiliated she was over not detecting a theft on her person.

“If he was that close to you – ” Both paused when Nile came into their seething line of vision. He must have had a scary face because their argument died in their throats. He was surprised they were unafraid enough of the walls falling for them to argue about something so trivial.

“Get ready for battle,” he said steadily, “you can argue all you want after this is over.”

Straightening sheepishly, they cried out ‘sir!’ and ran off to their squads. The presence taking place next to him told Nile that Pixis was there. It calmed the chief’s nerves that the old man was with him in this hopeless situation. Dazz was right that they outnumbered the colossal titans, but that meant nothing when one step of their swollen muscular feet could crush ten of his best men.

What was worse, he could see regular citizens in the buildings, staring out the windows with hands over their mouths and gesturing wildly to each other. The most they’d seen of titans was in the textbooks of their schools. Guaranteed there was someone stupid enough to run outside to snap a picture.

“There’s still many citizens that haven’t been evacuated. And those kids in HQ…they’re too injured to fight,” Nile scowled. He could already imagine Dazz, Millius, and Nack hobbling to the armory and preparing for combat in spite of their wounds. He didn’t have the heart to stop them if it was true. This was probably the last breath of humanity anyway, and those three were at the top of the best recruits he’d ever gotten. He’d seen their work in the simulations down to the power needed to carry their friends out of that library when they themselves were bleeding themselves out. They were built for war.

Pixis chuckled mysteriously, “I guess now’s a good as any chance to make use of Dr. Jaeger’s experiments.”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh…well,” the old man smiled blushingly, looking up at the giants that began to take painfully slow steps forward, the force emitting winds that shattered nearby buildings “those twelve patients he saved had some after affects that may be of use to us. It’s why I never put the mad doctor in a cell. I’ve been training them for over a year. They’re eager, strong, and have just enough titan juice in them to not die real easy.”

Nile’s eyes widened. The case last year revolving around Grisha Jaeger and Marco Bodt had made the media cream themselves with rumors and gossip. It escalated quickly until Pixis pulled the plug and let Grisha off with a slap on the wrist. It had been a huge mystery for a while, and no matter how Nile tried, he couldn’t get a word out of the old man.

Still smiling, Pixis pulled out an outdated flip phone that used to make the chief cringe. He watched
quietly as he dialed a number and waited for the ringing to be answered. “Hello, Adler? I’m guessing you heard the explosions…yes…yes it’s time, get your asses here asap, you’re up.” He hung up shortly after, “we’ve got three hundred of our own, seasoned soldiers from the special ops, and a gift from our resident mad scientist, Dr. Jaeger. I think we’re set. Don’t you?”

Nile stared. Long and hard. “What can these people do, Pixis?”

“Oh, a lot of things even a child wouldn’t be caught dead attempting,” Pixis said with a wild grin, “they’re super soldiers.”

Isra

There weren’t enough helicopters and planes to hold the prisoners, recruits, and veterans. The plan had been to fly over the titans and fire at them from overhead while the prisoners below took care of things ground level with the shifters. It was a cruel tactic, but at the very least Erwin had set up those battalions with the most sinister criminals who had long since been sentenced to death. The ones who had no remorse for their crimes.

Still, their numbers were too big, forcing some sacrifices. Being more experienced in close combat, the veterans joined the ground ranks while most recruits took the to the air. Flight wouldn’t last long since titans had learned to throw boulders at them. It oddly made fighter jets useless, and the larger helicopters more tactful mostly for the amount of damage they could deal with a bigger load of guns. Fighter jets were still used as a form of distraction, in a way helped with a strategy known as the Sniping Formation,

Normally the big cargo planes would have been sufficient for this tactic, but because they needed as many people in the air as possible, they had to use the older birds as well. Boarding the helicopters old and new that were big enough to hold twenty soldiers a piece, they took off flying up and over Wall Rose.

The recruits felt their breaths stolen at the sight.

They had all seen pictures and video probes of Maria and beyond in school, but it was different to see it in person. So familiar and unchanged, the uninhabited lands of Maria looked almost exactly as they had left it years ago, only a little wilder with overgrown vegetation and animals taking residence. The river was the same, pastures and trees the same. It was like they were home again. It would have been a beautiful sight of nature at its best if not for the few splotches of naked titans running around.

The jets took the first step by flying further ahead to gain the attention of the monsters. Once they accomplished this, the helicopters would move in and strike at their backs.

Getting into position, the helicopters spread out and headed towards the general area of the safe zones. The formation was to have three waves of attack. The first ring of helicopters would move in and shoot as many enemies as possible before they got a clue and fired back. The second and third waves farther off would use their best long distance snipers and slowly move in – hopefully by the time they got close enough, the titan count would be in the single digits. This tactic was the reason why they lost so many planes, and why the government was so reluctant to give them replacements. Unfortunately, bullets could only go so far, and the shifters could only fight for so long, the helicopters eventually had to close in. This inspired the military weapons and aerial department of Sky Industries to make some modifications to their planes to further help the survey corps.

Built for combat, the helicopters held the structure of a small whale. The tail and top of the head held rotors that whirred with an incessant ‘wup-wup-wup’, there were small wings on the sides, and
hooked below them – four missiles of four feet each. The older helicopters were of similar design, but with less missiles and moved much slower. Smart tech cushioning shielded the crafts enough to give soldiers time to escape before they were caught in the explosion caused by a thrown boulder.

There were no doors on them, laser cannons were stationed at each opening, massive and intimidating, with a seat and screen to lock on a target. There were ten cannons per plane. Ten soldiers took each while others took to standing by the doorways and pointing their rifles to the cannon’s blind spots.

Upon getting closer to the safe zones, they started seeing the fleshy masses of titans grow thicker. When they spotted the metal birds in the sky, they reached up, their spacy grins widening. Those more intelligent than others began throwing what they could find be it a conveniently placed boulder or one of the smaller titans that were near human size. Unaffected by the behavior, the soldiers fired at will.

Weapons of the scouting legion were very different from a few centuries ago. Bullets couldn’t tear through titan skin, and the use of the twin blades became less popular since they eventually became impractical after a limited number of slicing. The search for finding a better weapon came in the form of discs of that same metal, and lasers. Their creation was what inspired the blades of the Maneuver X.

The biggest difference between a regular rifle and a standard recon rifle was size. Scouting legion rifles were almost as big as bazookas. The way the rifles worked was that upon firing, a spit of metallic spheres of six inches in diameter would shoot out and widen into discs thanks to the speed they traveled and the spinning that would trigger the transformation, all due to small sensors detecting wind change and momentum. Wing-like blades with teeth would spring out, further lengthening the size of the disc. Like the old blades, they would slice through the nape of the titans, successfully eliminating them. These weapons worked mostly for titans up to ten meters since their necks were small enough to make cuts deep enough to kill. Lasers from the cannons took care of the bigger titans, working much the same way in terms of bullet-like firing that widened the closer they got to their target.

Once the gathering of titans grew thicker, Pilots honed in on the bigger clusters, targeted them, and dropped their missiles. They gained altitude to get a better view of the damage. Smoke and debris had blocked the naked eye, but heat sensors picked up their massive bodies, some lying in pieces and steaming into non-existence.

Taking advantage of the confusion, Annie and Reiner delivered the first ground level blows, having a few minutes to go all out before the human troops arrived to aid them.

Flying in a circular formation and firing their weapons at titans still standing was a difficult task. There were continuous large objects being thrown their way, pressuring the pilots to dodge as best they could. This meant that snipers had to be prepared for the sudden movements that might make them hit the trigger before locking on and killing a comrade.

The top ten recruits were skilled in all areas, but they also held special talent in certain forms of combat.

West of the formation, Armin had a keen eye for predicting movements of the enemy and creating new formations out of thin air within seconds. He may have been a newbie recruit, but after the first few rounds and hitting their targets dead on from his orders, everyone on the helicopter listened to him including the pilot who was supposed to be their squad leader.

On the east Historia had a gift for support, but also an incredible knowledge of firearms. Her grading
on the subject was what got her a cannon since control of the machinery usually took an experienced hand, and hers was more than qualified. Just on one shot she managed to fell five titans in a row. Apart from her skills from personal training and memory, her talent with guns was what ensured her a spot in the top ten.

The other eight minus Eren were exceptional in another particular skill.

“Prepare for hand to hand!” pilots started yelling, flicking buttons and preparing themselves for emergency escape.

The titans were getting more focused on trying to destroy the helicopters. Two had already gotten hit, the passengers jumping off and activating flight on their maneuver gear before they blew up. Sensing their own time to jump, the rest of the soldiers began to take dives as well, shooting out into the air.

“Connie!” Sasha yelled to her best friend who had flown a few feet from her. Taking her signal, the smaller of the two activated camouflage on his suit. The pair went back and forth with it in rapid succession as they spun in practiced formation creating the illusion that they were several soldiers moving ever closer to their target. Their titan was too slow to predict their movements and kept grabbing the air. Within seconds, they sliced through its weak point and moved on to the next titan.

Working as a duo as well, Marco and Jean were making quick work of their victims. A master in maneuver gear just as he had been with the first generation suit, Jean was able to employ moves most of his graduating class weren’t able to even fathom, and was one of the few able to work on manual rather than automatic. His suit emitted pressurized air in short and quick bursts, making him moving around titans like a bolt of lightning. Marco took great interest in the human and titan anatomy while training, studying weak points and using them to his advantage in the simulation runs. Being around him so much served Jean to have the same knowledge and increased their competence as partners in battle. They targeted the bigger fifteen meter aberrant types, flying around each other without colliding despite their breakneck speed, and sliced through weak points before their victim had a chance to fight back.

Farther from them Mikasa, lone wolf that she was, had activated her camouflage as well and zoomed past several monsters, the giants falling one by one behind her. There was a reason she was ranked first of the class, just as she had been the first time around. She showed no mercy or joy in her work. Her goal was to kill as many titans as quickly and sufficiently as possible. Eren may have proven to have gotten stronger in both lifetimes, but the fact that she died unable to protect him still burned her and pushed her beyond her limits to not let it happen again.

Mina and Thomas watched them in action below, recognizing them through their fighting styles. The pair hadn’t been in the original ten, their rank going a few spots below. Trost had been a heavy reminder of their lack of skill, and when they realized they were getting a second chance, they were determined not to die so easily again.

“The second wave of copters are coming in ten minutes,” their pilot announced, swerving the craft a few feet higher to avoid a thrown three meter titan. “Prepare to engage.”

Thomas hit the privacy button on his helmet, signaling it to Mina who repeated the motion. “Scared?” he asked, his quiet unwavering voice filling her helmet. She looked up at him through the protective screen of his helmet. He was grim faced and showed not a single sign of fear. Being fellow Trost citizens, and having died in their district from the same squad, they shared the same kind of kinship Nack and Millius held when they returned to the military. They understood each other’s feelings regarding their deaths. The same bitterness and determination that fueled their need to be better. Trost instilled fear in them, but now as they watched the chaos below, there was a strange boil of adrenaline coursing through them.
Mina shook her head, reading Thomas’s face as easily as she felt her own resolve, “No.”

They were standing together by the open doorway with the laser cannon between them. Below she could see the blonde head of the female titan fighting with careful precision, slaughtering titans, and cautious of the humans around her. Mina never thought such nimble and hyper alert fighting was possible with giants amongst ants, but both Annie and Reiner were accomplishing it effortlessly. It made Mina pause and consider their sincerity in allying with humanity.

She hadn’t spoken to Annie in all her time in Isra.

Mina had been her closest friend before Trost. She liked to think she knew Annie on a better level than anyone else. Mina knew of her crush on Armin, even if they never mentioned it. She knew that Annie was hiding something, but continued being her friend because it seemed she was the only one who tethered the shifter to the ground. Hearing all the stories of the female titan…all those people Annie killed…the families she destroyed…

It wasn’t that she was angry, although that had played a small part, it was because she didn’t know what to say when she finally saw her old friend in Isra. What could she say? In the end her mouth remained shut the whole month, keeping respectfully away from them and treating their battle sessions with cold professionalism.

She would have liked to talk to her though. Get her side of the story and see where their friendship stood.

“Everyone jump!” their pilot shouted, already unfastening his belt to jump out the door by his side.

“Ready?” Thomas asked, holding up his hand tightened to a fist.

Mina smiled, holding up her own and wrapping her arm around his. Without another word they jumped out of the helicopter, the loud boom telling them it got hit with something and exploded. They sped down to the throng of titans reaching up with their meaty hands. Activating camouflage, the pair swerved around them, and used their own teamwork against the enemy.

A series of ‘Vwoom! Cshh! Vwoom!’ and the cluster of eight titans only had time to let out a final breath before collapsing in a mass of steaming decomposing flesh.

Stohess

Police Headquarters

They didn’t need to look at their screens to know what was happening. The instant they felt the tremors and booms of explosions, they could see from the window that the walls had fallen. Whether they were chosen for the special class or not, the 2104th knew about the secrets of the walls. It was one of the first things those who survived Trost were able to explain to the ones that hadn’t.

Dazz only heard rumors and vague pictures in newspapers when he first heard the story. To see it come to life right outside headquarters brought back that quaking feeling he felt in Trost and Sterben.

His first priority was to make sure his friends were okay. Footage of the courthouse roof showed Hannah and Franz standing stock still with Boris and Hitch, watching the walls crumble. Down below he saw Berwick making his escape while the others were rightfully distracted.

No one did anything, disintegrating into panic the greater the reality became to them. Dazz understood their fear, he was terrified too. If he were the same person from Trost he would have tried to dig a hole and hide in it, but his friends were still out there and like hell he was going to watch
them all die again. It was hard enough to see it in their first battle.

It was only after he delivered his little speech that he realized what came out of his mouth and he became conflicted with crumbling in embarrassment or following his own advice. Nack and Millius looked at him with a mix of shock and admiration. Whatever doubts they had in electing Dazz their leader was eliminated, and he could see it clearly in their faces. Nack seemed more impressed than his counterpart, who relaxed and in the end didn’t seem all that thrown off.

“Damn Dazz, I think I might have popped a boner,” Nack said, ever so eloquently.

Dazz bristled, his own stupor breaking. Steering around the computers with his cane, he hobbled his way out of the computer room, “Berwick’s heading for the subways, we need to stop him before he leaves Stohess. If he has any more bombs planted in the other districts we need to stop him before he has the chance to blow away any more walls.”

“You’re too injured,” Millius protested, using his own cane to guide himself just as badly to Dazz, “the next time we see Berwick you’re not coming out of it alive.”

He shook off the hand that reached his shoulder and walked down the hallway leading to the armory, “in about ten minutes we’ll all be dead anyway. I’d rather be of some use than sit around crying like a baby.”

Nack and Millius watched him go. It had barely been two days since they left the hospital on police duty. If the doctors in Hermiha had their way, they would have been stuck in the hospital for another two weeks until they were determined well enough to go home. Modern technology helped the healing process quicken enough to walk around a fair amount of time, but their wounds were still too fresh to do any kind of combat, three times already Nack had reopened the hole Berwick left him. They were extremely lucky Nile let them stay and continue the plan in apprehending the killer.

Now Dazz wanted to go out there where fifty odd titans – all of sixty meters – were stomping around; purely to catch the man who killed eight people, and almost killed him again. In severe wounds that were so fresh they could cripple him if he didn’t take care of himself properly.

“No seriously, I think I legit popped a boner,” Nack muttered uncomfortably to Millius, who punched him in the arm.

As the two made to chase their leader, a crash from outside and screams hit an old memory of chaos for the pair. They looked behind them and could see from the window at the other end of the hall that the building in front had a corner knocked off. The exposed interior showed a child screaming. Another boulder flew at her, breaking past what was left of the security screen programmed into all Stohess buildings. In a splash of blood she was gone as easy as stepping on a grape.

The rest of the building turned into panic as police remaining at HQ ran around, hoisting on their maneuver gear and cursing the gods for their pitiful existence. Sensing more oncoming boulders, Nack and Millius moved past their screaming seniors, plans forming in their heads on how to track down Berwick.

“We need to order squads stationed in the subways to close the gates leading out of the district,” Millius said, almost falling over when an officer bumped past him. He grunted in annoyance, but kept walking, “if security hasn’t already, we need to alert them into maximizing the shields in the city,” he grimaced, “that is if there’s anyone there…”

“We’ve got it covered,” Hannah said, startling the injured men. “The building’s just a block across the street, we can make it.”
“How are you guys?” Nack asked urgently, “Hitch and Boris? They snap out of it yet?”

“Hitch is freaking out and Boris ran outside to check on Marlo,” Franz reported. They sounded a little breathless at the other end, muffled sounds of footsteps echoing and the background noises of Hitch indeed rambling between sobs, informing Nack and Millius that the group had moved inside the courthouse, “we’re going to check on the king, Pixis left him with his other assistant.”

“Be careful –”

Another crash and a strong force of wind blew the pair and anyone around them off their feet and across the hall. The landed on their stomachs, right on their injuries, and held back screams of white hot pain that shot through their bodies and almost paralyzed them. With much effort, they pushed themselves up and looked behind them. What was once a semi decorated hallway that led to the conference and computer rooms was now a gaping hole that revealed the streets outside. Those that were unfortunate to have been in the way were nothing more than splotches of blood. The closest corpse had been torn in half from the waist down – a foot away from Nack and Millius.

At the other end, the source of the damage, a piece of the wall the size of a truck, was stuck deep into the building, stained with blood and rubble. If they stayed in the computer room a second longer, they’d be dead by now.

“NACK! MILLIUS! ARE YOU GUYS OKAY!? IS DAZZ OKAY!? WHAT HAPPENED! ANSWER!”

“We’re fine,” Millius said dazedly, the ringing in his ears making it hard to hear Hannah screaming. He stumbled to his feet, his cane miraculously still in his hand. “We’re going to find Dazz. Franz, you and Hitch find the king,” he swallowed thickly, “Hannah and Boris, you guys get to that security system asap.”

“But…” Hannah’s voice was trembling. This would be the first time she and Franz would be separated since joining the military. Millius felt a pang of guilt. The couple had been so careful to ensure the other was safe. In all their missions, Dazz didn’t even stop them from taking on assignments together instead of in different groups. He understood. “Okay,” she said quietly.

“You two are the best hackers out of all of us,” Dazz chose that moment to speak apologetically.

“It’s going to be okay,” Franz said, his tone betraying his confidence.

They said more, but Millius noticed Nack not paying attention and looked at what he’d been staring at with wide eyes that spoke volumes of a crazy plan forming in his head.

The blow to the building pushed them to the end of the hall where there was a display case of five types of maneuver gear spanning from different points of the past. There was the first design, the uniform sending chills of nostalgia down their spines, a 980’s one that was powered by gasoline, another that held more protective layers and was powered by electricity, and two others that were closer to the current uniform.

The sounds of a stick knocking on the wooden floor announced Dazz’s presence, they turned to him and the same look Nack had been holding reflected off of him.

“I got dibs on 2099.”

Isra

He’d been dreaming of a journal he found outside the walls. At first he didn’t know if it was a
dream, or a memory until the name on the cover confirmed that it was a scene from the past. He knew the journal was the final gift of a dead soldier, its contents ringing bells in his head over a new mystery that would continue to haunt the legion until a recruit joined their forces and made them ask more questions.

Levi was about to open the Ilse’s journal when the incessant wailing that had been going on throughout the dream continued to get louder until the dream washed away and he was staring at the ceiling of the medic building, wondering how the hell he got there, and why there were alarms screaming all over the village.

He shot out of bed in an instant.

And stumbled to his knees when the world tipped to the side.

Swearing under his breath. Levi gave himself a minute to recover, and gingerly pushed himself up. The Manuever X, safely tucked in its backpack was in the guest chair, thankfully not taken by Erwin or Hanji. He took it and left the room, ready to jump into action when he tripped over a pair of legs.

Barely saving himself from another fall, Levi looked down. At first it looked like Dr. Jaeger was sitting against the wall lounging around, and Levi almost ignored him in his still delirious state. The wailing of the alarms in the background the with the man not showing any panic and the contents of the doctors bag spread out across the floor, however, were enough to tell him that something wasn’t right.

Kneeling down, Levi got a good look at him. There was a growing bruise on the side of his head, and he had a pulse. Whoever knocked him out was nice enough to position him against the wall, although that didn’t do much since Levi still tripped over him.

His fumbling over him was enough to wake the doctor. He stirred, then winced and blearily opened his eyes.

“Levi…” he said, lightly touching the tender part of his head and wincing, “what…” he straightened up and looked around, his crazed eyes finally landing on his bag, “No…” he grabbed it and looked through the contents feverishly, then to the spilled items with growing frenzy, “no, no…shit!”

“What happened?” Levi laid a firm hand on his shoulder, demanding him to focus.

“Marco…” Dr. Jaeger shook his head in disappointment, then anger, “he took the last buffer I had! I think he’s going to use it on one of the shifters!” He made to stand up, but his head was still woozy, and he fell back on his ass again. “Damn. I should have been more careful!”

“Buffer,” Levi thought quickly, “the formula you used to block Eren’s abilities?”

“Yes,” Dr. Jaeger, went back to his bag and pulled out his phone which had miraculously survived without a scratch, “I’ve got to warn Erwin.”

Levi helped him up. He was surprisingly thin under his layers, probably from all the stress of last year and putting up with his son joining the army. The corporal feared he was going to snap his arm in half when he lifted him. “What’s with the alarms?” he asked as the older man scrolled through his contacts, “are we under attack?”

“From what I understand, all the soldiers were heading towards the airbase. I’m not sure why,” he found Erwin’s number, but realized suddenly that the commander might not be in his office with much chaos happening. Marco said something about Maria…Eren was going to the other side...

“Maria’s under attack!” he remembered. “And Marco’s there! He’s going to use that buffer on a
shifter, we have to…” go to Wall Maria. The doctor froze and paled.

“I’ll go,” and Levi gave no invitation for Grisha to join him. “You’ll die out there, I’ll find Marco myself and take care of it.”

“He has an accomplice,” Grisha said quickly, “young man, tanned, his hairs two colors…um…” that was literally all he could remember before the kid knocked him out. “I don’t think he wanted to hurt me…” Was he another victim to Marco’s manipulation? “That poor kid…”

“His name is Jean,” Levi frowned. He remembered his last two years with his second squad, Jean didn’t seem like someone who would do something like hurt an innocent person. He needed to think about this. Marco had the buffer and had Jean wrapped around his finger. If they were going to use the formula, it would have to be on Bertholdt, Reiner, Annie, or probably Ymir. Eren was on good terms with Marco, and Levi knew that towards the end of their lives Eren and Jean grew to respect each other.

Ymir eventually returned to the legion and received barely any animosity from Jean. Levi wasn’t sure about Marco since he died before he could meet him.

That left the three shifters responsible for the fall of Maria. Annie might not count because she wasn’t active until Eren joined recon. There was the story of her stealing Marco’s gear but…

“It’s Bertholdt,” Levi concluded, “he’s the only one responsible for breaking the wall, and if he hadn’t breached Trost, Marco would have been alive. Jean told me once that after graduating he and Marco would join the police. Bertholdt changed all that,” the corporal scowled, “he’s also one of the most dangerous shifters…if it’s anyone that the 104th has a grudge on it’s him.”

Grisha opened his mouth to say something, but right then screams from outside could be heard.

“HELP US! TITANS! TITANS IN ROSE! STOHESS IS GONE!”

Levi shut his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, “you’ve got to be shitting me.”

Maria

The battle continued fervently, people left and right zipping between titans, blades out and maxing out their use. Many of the lesser trained soldiers, namely the prisoners, had already been devoured. Their blood and limbs staining the battlegrounds and their comrades.

They must have killed at least one hundred titans, and yet the monsters still held the upper hand. Special ops wasn’t around to give them a hand, and Levi was stuck at Isra. Fighting for so long was starting to strain their muscles.

On the front lines Erwin moved farther up to reach the fourth safe zone. The second and third were still standing, but after clashing at the first zone, the tower fell and many soldiers were killed when they hit the electrified barbed wire. The fourth zone was probably in shambles since it was the least protected and the first to get hit.

The commander couldn’t stop to help his group as one by one they were plucked away. Reiner and Annie were doing their best to keep up with him, but the crowds of titans were slowing them down, and Ymir was having trouble on her own. He had no idea what was happening with Eren, he hadn’t even shifted yet.

“Jaeger, what’s the hold up?” he asked, landing and jumping off a thirteen meter class.
"I can’t…hold on, I’m trying, sir!” the recruit grunted.

“I don’t fucking believe it, you’re getting cold feet now!?” Jean shouted angrily, breathless from battle, “you unreliable piece of shit! My dog can do better than you!”

“Try ordering them around!” Historia cut in before Eren could retaliate. “You’re still the coordinate, remember!?”

There was some grunting on Eren’s end and then silence in which everyone thought he was focusing on transforming again. Erwin was starting to see the top of the fourth zone, when the young man spoke again.

“Shit! I forgot!”

Which was followed by his friends cursing him out and screaming over each other. The moment was lost on Erwin. There was much more pressing matter at hand, and it was approaching fast from up ahead.

They stood out against the regular titans, their stone helmets gathered so tightly together it almost looked like a wave of rock was plunging toward him. Leading them in all its seventeen meter glory was a titan Erwin had only seen pictures and video clips of. He was the tallest of his army with broad shoulders, long hair arms that almost reached the ground, and a small ape-like face with beady black eyes that stared steadily back at the commander.

The wave of new titans broke up into three groups, the left and right running off to the sides with their crude spears clasped in their hands. Their eyes were not glazed over like their kin. They were sharp and grim, completely conscious of their actions and moving with purpose.

“Annie or Reiner, I’m going to need you up front,” the commander said heavily, the sight nearly rendering him immobile. “Those still in copters, move further south, I need you to – ” someone started giggling. Erwin blinked in surprise, but continued, “I need you to target the incoming throng of titans – they’re protecting their weak points, get rid of them.”

The giggling went on after the commander finished his orders. Others were starting to murmur in discomfort, trying to figure out who it was and what they found so funny. It irritated Eren enough to shout, “Shut the fuck up!”

“C-Commander Erwin?” the giggler spoke. The soft lighthearted tone helped the man recognize him as one of the recruits with the questionable psychiatric report. He was about to say his name, but the other man spoke up again, “get out of the way.”

He snapped around in time to see two soldiers swerve past him. In the split second where he could see their faces behind the lightly shadowed helmet screens, he caught eyes with Marco, wide and crazed with a smile to match. After he passed, Jean followed, his face the complete opposite and looking like he was walking to his own grave. Erwin was so stunned, he let them move ahead to their deaths.

“MARCO! JEAN! WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU GUYS DOING!?” Sasha screamed into everyone’s helmets.

Shaking out of it, Erwin pushed his suit beyond its limits and tried to catch up to the pair, but it wasn’t enough. Several yards ahead, the pair reached the waiting beast titan. He watched in horror as they willingly flew into the monster’s mouth. They were so fast that the titan only had enough time to snap his jaws and bite off Jean’s leg from the knee down with his sharp vicious teeth. It wouldn’t
have worked with a normal titan since the suit was equipped with crystals to protect the body like a bulletproof vest, but it didn’t work this time since the titan’s jaw was bigger and stronger than what the suit was used to. Jean’s limb fell uselessly to the ground, the left overs of the suit still active with its digital fibers, unraveling and shooting up into the beast’s mouth just as he opened it again.

“Why would they…?” Connie trembled.

“Those idiots…” Eren breathed in shock.

Erwin floated on the spot, not able to believe what just happened either. His lack of attention would have cost him if another soldier hadn’t come in and chopped off the hand of a titan reaching out to grab him. The commander looked at the man as he spun to a stop and floated up in front of him.

“The walls of Stohess were destroyed,” Levi said grimly, “the colossals are out.”

“You’re supposed to be on bed rest,” Erwin said faintly, feeling the need to drive this across in spite of the dire report.

The corporal scowled. “Eren? If you don’t transform now, Jinae will fall and your mom will get eaten just like before. Not to mention your dad and all the friends stuck in Stohess.”

“My parents live in Stohess,” Mikasa spoke abruptly.

Levi narrowed his eyes at the commander, “where’s my squad?”

Erwin guiltily stared at the younger squad leader. He was about to truthfully answer and accept whatever punishment Levi was going to deliver, but it never came.

There were two simultaneous thunder claps. One of them had to be Eren, who roared distantly behind them. The second could only mean…

Levi looked up over Erwin’s shoulder. His face taut and seemingly unimpressed save for the involuntary twitch on his eye. The reflection on his helmet showed the commander the outline of a titan so tall it cast a shadow over them all the way to the forest a mile ahead. He didn’t need to turn around to know what happened.

Bertholdt had finally shifted.

Chapter End Notes

I hope the battle tactics weren't too confusing or lacked common sense T_T I'm not very battle savvy...
Battle for Humanity Part 2

Chapter Summary

the conclusion of many things happening at once

Chapter Notes

I wanted to update in the holidays but the problem with that is that 1. I'm a baker, and bakers get NO breaks on holidays X_X and 2. Putting this chapter together was surprisingly hard because as new ideas popped up, the previous ones looked lame so I ended up deleting and rewriting A LOT TT_TT in the end I settled for this bit and separated a segment for the next chapter :P

and HOLYCRAPWTFBBQ! Sudden influx up comments and kudos! You guys must have all been on vacation XD I remember when I had those... ;_; but thank you so much! And I'm sorry I couldn't update faster, but with January here (it's the slowest month of the year for my job), I should be able to punch more stuff out!

Also, I apologize in advance if this chapter is too confusing ._.; the good thing is that it'll get its answers in the next chapter ^_^ any typos here are my fault for not catching them for the millionth time...

2853

Isra

Their names were Annie, Ymir, Bertholdt, and Reiner. Kids on their last years of adolescence who could turn into titans by will. They called themselves shifters, proving that the legend of Trost might actually be true. Hanji was head over heels in love with all of them, taking them under her wing for experimentations and training.

They were the last survivors of a village from outside the walls that got destroyed by the mysterious Ape Titan. Because of their shifting nature, Erwin chose not to make their existence public. As open minded as the walls were, there were still many powerful people who could use them for personal gain, or convince others to kill them off.

The shifters had been cooperative so far, but if there was a chance that these shifters showed any sign of suspicion, Erwin would be right there with preparations ready to deal with the damage. It was in his nature not to trust anyone.

The year was coming to an end, and the army was able to come back with minimal damage thanks to the aid of the shifters. The second safe zone had already been built, which left a light bounce in everyone’s steps. Erwin was quietly pleased with the way things were going, feeling for once like humanity was truly taking a step forward.
Isra was alight with celebration. Cabin’s vibrating with laughter, the mess hall literally a mess of food and soldiers falling over each other. Happiness was brimming in all corners. Not only was the mission a success, the following day soldiers would be allowed a month’s leave for their homes. For some of the older veterans, this meant retiring from their duties to a life of peace behind the walls.

On his way to his office, Erwin watched them all celebrate with a tired smile. He felt good about the second safe zone being established, but in the end of their month of break he would have to go to the training camps to get new recruits. That was never a good experience. Last year he managed only two recruits who were pissing themselves all the way back to Isra. The year before that he came back empty handed.

He thought about mentioning the shifters in his speech this year, but with the space station’s own success in creating a farm on Mars the walls were currently too hyped up about colonizing the planet to care about the war with the titans. Nile would surely use that as his cherry on top in his speech.

Isra was divided into certain sections. There was the air base on one end, and the prisoner camp on the other while the middle was speckled with cabins of different ranks, training areas, and the mess hall. In the heart where it was better to keep an eye on the entire village there was the main house where the high ranking officials were lodged. It was there that Erwin saw one of the shifters sitting on the front steps with his head ducked and a tanned hand buried in his raven hair. He was still in his Maneuver X, save for the helmet, and in no mood for celebration.

The shifters all had unique forms as titans. Ymir was the closest to a regular titan and the smallest in the group, but she was fast and had a deadly set of teeth to go with it. Annie was the second smallest, but skinless and built and trained for hand to hand combat. Reiner was a giant mass of muscle and crystal – aptly named the Armored Titan. Bertholdt, however, was the most frightening of them all and wholly useless to the legion.

Erwin only saw him shift once the first time they met, and though at sixty meters he was able to kill a lot of titans, his clumsiness in massive size ended up killing some of the commander’s soldiers. He turned back into a human after that and never shifted again. Erwin always thought it was a shame. Bertholdt could have used his size to help block the hole in Maria while they continued building safe zones. The only thing that would be an issue was how slow Bertholdt was.

Maybe he was having a change of heart now. “Bertholdt,” Erwin greeted.

The young man snapped to attention and looked up at the older man in surprise. His eyes were red rimmed, but there was no sign of tears. Erwin frowned down at him, wondering what could be bothering the boy. There was still a lot of mystery behind the shifters. They rarely spoke of their life in the village the Ape Titan destroyed. Half the time Erwin found himself walking on eggshells when talking to the four teens.

“Is something troubling you?” he asked, watching as Bertholdt ducked his head again, becoming smaller as he dug his fingers into his long legs.

“I…need to talk to you,” he said quietly, his voice surprisingly not shaking.

2856

Stohess

They managed to reach the security building with no damage. With flying pieces of wall and falling skyscrapers in the way Hannah and Boris had to twist and turn in their street maneuver gear to get to their destination. Because they were public officials, military police didn’t have access to the
Maneuver X, hence the emergency call to special ops. Hope was growing when they crashed through the windows – or at least tried to. A strong smart tech cushion from the building pushed them back. After two more tries with no success and growing bruises, Hannah and Boris landed on the street below and were forced to enter through the front doors.

Glancing behind him, Boris saw an oncoming flying car and grabbed Hannah by the arm. “Watch out!” he wrenched her to the side, crashing them both into the lounge area of the lobby. There was no great explosion of the front doors giving away, however.

Looking up from over the sofa she fell on, Hannah frowned at the entrance. It was still intact with the car against the doors, now squashed from landing against the shield. Other things like mailboxes and old telephone booths flew head-on to hit the building, but bounced back from the smart cushion. Setting her jaw, Hannah pulled herself to her feet and hurried past the abandoned front desk for the stairs, Boris close behind.

“Hannah to Dazz,” she huffed into her communications, “looks like security drained the city’s protection to save their own asses.”

“Can you reverse it?” Dazz asked.

“I’ll try,” she turned to Boris. He, Hitch, and Marlo were assigned to Stohess, they should know buildings like this one like the back of their own hands. “Can you take me to the main controls?”

Nodding, the other ran past her for the stairs. He swung the door open, but stopped short, making Hannah collide into him from behind.

There were about ten security guards lined up in the stairs. Their eyes were lit with fear, hands trembling and dangerously close to pulling the triggers on the guns in their hands – all pointed to the pair.

“Take one step further!” the man at the front warned waveringly, fresh tears running down his pale cheeks, “and we’ll blow your brains out!”

Hannah looked at them all. Utterly taken over with terror, the guards in charge of protecting the city were turning tail for their own safety. It reminded her of Trost. The kids barely over fifteen too scared to fight back, barricading themselves just like these men rather than help their comrades refuel on gas and blades. Seeing it replayed should have gained Hannah’s sympathy, but all she could feel was pity and anger.

Innocent people were dying because of these cowards. Franz was out there, in danger of getting killed again.

“The safest place to go is underground. Forget security.” Boris and Hannah whipped around to see Marlo walking up to them, or rather dragging himself to them. His left leg was injured and limp, he was also clutching his arm which was bleeding heavily from the shoulder down, and he was bleeding somewhere from the left side of his head.

“You’re injured,” Boris stiffened at the sight. Even after seeing so much gore in the last few minutes, he never thought he’d see a comrade he’d been working so closely with injured as badly as Marlo. Hesitantly, he rushed over to help him sit down so he could help stop the bleeding. Hyper aware of the mutilated arm, and treating it like fragile glass.

“I was helping with evacuations,” Marlo mumbled grumpily, “I was wondering why the buildings weren’t resisting the blasts as well as they should,” he glared at the group clustered in the stairway, “I
estimate a total of one hundred and fifty civilian casualties alone. There are hundreds of others in critical condition,” he sneered at them hatefully, “do you even care that some of these people might be your family or friends?”

“Of course we care!” someone in the back cried out pathetically, “we did everything we could to shield the buildings, but there wasn’t enough power!” he sobbed and lowered his gun, bitter tears spilling, “the only thing left to do was fortify this place. If the building goes down, the city goes down…”

“The city is going down anyway, you’ll be trapped here until power runs out and the titans get to you,” Marlo scowled, then winced when Boris pulled too tightly when dressing his wounds.

“There’s a connection to the subways from the basement. Go there and get to the shelter two flights below. There’s an emergency armory upstairs, correct?”

Uncertainly, the guards in the stairway started lowering their guns and looking to each other. Being so terrified, they hadn’t stopped to realize the safer route was to go to the shelter. Some started paling when it became clearer that if they just fortified the rest of the city with whatever power they had, they could have left right after for their own safety. People were dying because of them.

“Shit…” someone said faintly, dropping their gun with a clatter.

“Just go already, you’ve done enough damage,” Marlo said grimly.

They didn’t move from the stairway, but at least they weren’t aiming their guns at them anymore.

“We’ll take you to the control center,” the first who spoke said shakily, “but there’s not much in the armory. Just some old suits the docs were fiddling with as a pet project.”

“Are they functional?”

“I guess?” he shrugged distractedly and wiped his face.

“Good enough – argh!” Marlo glared at Boris who flushed and angrily went back to cleaning him up.

Subways

The suits weren’t built to form fit and were much bulkier, but thanks to advancements done around the 2000’s, they were equipped to make up for what Dazz, Nack, and Millius couldn’t do – namely help them move around without the need to use canes. The gear still irritated their wounds, but that was mostly the suit preventing them from reopening. As soon as they thankfully came online, the suits detected their injuries and reinforced protection on them. This made those areas of the suit stiffer, and places like Millius’s knee aided him in walking better. They were almost as good as the Maneuver X without some of the useful stuff like the holo-blades or automatic pilot. They also didn’t have the protective fibers of the titan crystals.

The three managed to get to a subway entrance without any problem. “Dazz to Dietrich, do you still have a lock on Berwick?”

There was some fizz and sounds of struggle on the other line. The trio didn’t stop to listen as they ran down the stairs as best they could, using the attached maneuver gear to fly across the rest of the way into the underground shopping district. They had to stop short, however, crowds of frightened people filled the entire area, making it hard to move around.

“This is Dietrich,” a voice huffed in through their communications, “he’s in station eight, train 805, it’s the Jinae express.”
“Shit!” Nack and Millius said simultaneously.

“He’s going to leave Erik just like that?” Dazz frowned. That didn’t make sense, up until now Berwick showed attachment to the king. He was afraid of the young man learning the truth of his murders, even walked straight into a trap in order to get to him. Why turn tail and run? Why leave Erik to die with everyone else?

Or did Berwick believe the king would somehow survive?

How the hell could Erik survive being trampled by titans?

“Can you get that train to stop?” Dazz asked.

“I’ve been trying ever since Berwick boarded,” Dietrich said angrily, “the conductor’s hysterical, he won’t listen to a thing I say. The best thing you can do is follow him into Jinae and stop him there.”

“Got it,” Dazz looked around for any express trains to Jinae, thinking furiously for a plan to trap the shifter again. To add to his frustration, people were pushing each other in disorganized panic as they fought to board any train that had enough space for them. There was the constant shatter of store windows breaking and children crying. The soldiers in charge of evacuations were minimal and losing control fast, their screams for order going unheard. Dazz grimaced at the sight and went to the information stand for more space. “Anyone in the special ops, the shifter is headed toward Jinae. If he intends to bomb another district I’ll need a hand in capturing him.”

“This is Ral reporting, I will assist. There’s a colossal headed that way, we’ll hit two birds with one stone.”

“If I may,” a new voice politely added, “I would like to help too. My name is Adler, I’m an assistant of Dr. Jaeger.”

Dazz had looked up at the voice in confusion and miraculously happened to spot the train he was looking for. It was currently boarding desperate passengers, the bright digital sign over the sleek rectangular windows flashing ‘Jinae Express’. He, Nack and Millius pushed past thick crowds to get to it. Flying to Jinae would have been faster if he were in the Manuever X, but these older models were slower and still relied on cables, the trains in this instance were much faster. “Can you fly?” he asked the new person.

“No,” was the honest answer. “Walking will do just fine for me.”

Dazz stopped short. “I need something better than ‘walking’.”

He winced when a thunderclap struck his earpiece, his two comrades jolting as well. Gusts of wind muffled the screams of others into the background until things settled down again and the trio was able to make sense of what was happening above ground.

“How many of you are there!?” someone shouted angrily.

“Are the others the same?” Dazz recognized the voice to be squad leader Zacharias.

“To an extent. Now, what can I do to help?”

Dazz looked to Nack and Millius with raised eyebrows. The pair mirrored him, their jaws slackening. “Adler, are you a shifter?” Millius asked uncertainly.

“An imitation,” was the answer, “I use pills, and one hour is my current limit. Mr. Pixis and Dr.
Jaeger wanted to keep us secret, but since it’s the end of the world I think it’s okay to spill the beans.”

There was a pause in which Dazz figured the people on the other side were still dumbstruck over whatever form Adler shifted into. He was thinking furiously too, his hopes rising again now that they suddenly had an ace up their sleeve. If Ral and Adler got to Jinae before he did they could warn the city before even Berwick got there and they could safely get to the shelter without any problems. They could also warn them to keep an eye out for the shifter in case he tried to make himself scarce in the crowds.

If only he had his tablet to send the message. His suit didn’t have a pocket big enough to store the device. Neither did Nack and Millius. The best they could do was bring their phones.

“Adler, you go with Petra, Auruo, and Erd to Jinae – stop that titan and call for evacuation. The rest of us will try to keep the titans from straying from Stohess,” Zacharias spoke, “Adler, are the rest of your group colossals? Can they shift right now and help contain the area?”

“Yes, they can – ”

“Perfect,” Nile spoke up, and Dazz was surprised to hear from him. In all the chaos, the chief was directly in the line of fire, it was oddly good to hear the older man was still alive. “Keep the colossals in Stohess while I send out troops to initiate a full scale evacuation on Rose. Dazz, what’s your location?”

The young man winced guiltily. “Subways. We’re going after Berwick.”

“And you can’t stop us,” Nack said, defiantly crossing his arms.

“I don’t plan to,” Nile sighed, “I’ll alert the other guards underground to help – ” He was cut off by a loud crash that sounded like a house exploding. The three stood still as all the blood drained from their faces. They waited for their superior to speak again, but there was nothing. Not for a long while. The reality of what happened hit them like ice on their shoulders.

“Aw man,” Nack said softly, looking from Dazz to Millius, “is he…?”

“I’m not dead yet!”

“Fuck!” the young man yelped, whipping his hand up to his searing ear. Letting out a breath he’d been holding, Dazz turned and headed toward the Jinae Express. They flashed their badges to the frazzled staff herding everyone in, and stepped inside. There was no place to sit. The aisles were crowded, and some people had taken to sitting on top of each other. Thanks to the destruction to power supplies dotted around the city, the train was running on emergency backup, leaving the lights on a dim setting.

“Dazz, you and your two bonehead lackeys do what you can to stop Berwick,” Nile spoke up again, “and be careful.”

As he said this, the doors shut and the engine hummed under their feet. Outside, they could see stranded citizens banging on the windows, either in tears or fury. Dazz watched helplessly as their faces slid past him as the train began to move. Three innocent people could be riding this train if they hadn’t slipped in first.

Then again, they’d be going to their doom if Berwick planned to destroy Jinae.

“This is police recruit Hannah to all units. Smart tech cushion for the city has been compromised.”
Millius swore under his breath and Dazz shut his eyes in disappointment. “I’m using the last bit of power to buy us some time. Dietrich, link me to your tag on Berwick. Dazz…I have a plan.”

2853

Isra

The commander and shifter were sitting in the former’s office. Muffled noises of celebration from outside were the only sounds cutting the long silence that followed Bertholdt’s story. Erwin hadn’t moved from his spot behind his desk, chin resting atop his laced fingers steadily keeping his eyes on the younger man who was staring gloomily at his lap.

If the commander was honest, he wasn’t entirely surprised with what Bertholdt told him. The body language alone was a dead giveaway. Fighting alongside him for a year – especially since he was in his squad – Erwin had developed his own personal theories regarding the lives of the four shifters. They were kids running away from a monster who took their family from them, no one could get out of that without a few souvenir scars.

Erwin wasn’t even thrown off that before the end of his village, Bertholdt had already been suffering personal issues. The kid just seemed like that kind of person.

“Thank you for telling me, I know it’s not easy to talk about something like this,” he broke the silence, leaning back in his chair. Bertholdt nodded, his shoulders sagging with relieved tension. “Do the others know?”

“No…” the shifter swallowed loudly. “I was… I-I couldn’t…” ‘They would be disappointed,’ Erwin mentally finished for him. He allowed the silence to last while he thought of what to do to help. Bertholdt obviously didn’t want his friends to know, which was unfortunate because they would be the best anchor he could have. Hanji would have been the next best person to go to, but she had a problem with keeping secrets, and her sympathy for the kid would have been so transparent anyone would figure out the truth.

Erwin could see why Bertholdt came to him. “I’ll have to inform the nurses to lock up all medications. You’re going to see a specialist – privately. If Ymir and the others ask questions, we tell them you’re helping me out with papers or something trivial,” he paused, already picturing Ymir yelling at him if she ever found out the truth. She’d always spitfire insults to the other shifters and claim not to care, but whenever they got injured or threatened, she never failed in defending them like a rabid mother hen. “Are you sure you don’t want to tell them? I’m glad you told me, it would be even better if you included them. They could help you through the process.”

Bertholdt shook his head again. His bangs hid his ducked face so well that Erwin couldn’t tell if he was going to cry or not. “It’s not easy to pilot a colossal titan,” he said quietly. “Whenever I shift it’s like everything I feel goes numb. It worsens the more I shift, and it’s taking me longer to become human again. When I tried to help you that day, but ended up killing some soldiers by accident… I wasn’t horrified. All I knew was that it was bad and I needed to shift back into a human if I needed your trust so I could survive. All of those numbed feelings don’t come back until I’m human, and when it does…it’s a nightmare.” His sigh shook, he was becoming tense again, crossing his arms tightly like he needed to contain all the pain lest it explode from him. “That’s part of the reason why I can’t shift anymore… the next time I do, I might not remember that I’m human. I can’t take that risk.”

Erwin could understand, but by keeping himself from being useful, Bertholdt was holding back the progress in closing Wall Maria. This cold logic he was talking about couldn’t be the only reason apart from prolonged time in the titan body. There was something the shifter wasn’t telling him. This
was the real source of his pain, and if the other shifters didn’t question his vow to never shift, then it had to be something really terrible.

“If things get bad in a mission,” Erwin said finally, “you will have to shift regardless of the casualties and do what you can to seal Wall Maria. Promise me that, and I promise to keep your relapse a secret.”

Bertholdt looked at him with his deep sad eyes. He nodded eagerly, relieved and probably ready to promise anything if it meant Erwin would keep his mouth shut. “Yeah, I can do that. Thank you.”

2856

Jinae

The alarms started approximately ten minutes after the fall of Stohess. Around the same time the underground subway systems were invented, the government decided to make use of its advantages should an attack within the walls occur. Not that they believed such a thing after so many centuries of peace. The idea put to life eased some of the growing tension within the districts at the time, and encouraged them to continue supporting their government.

Protocol demanded that all citizens be evacuated to the closest subway entrances and moved two levels below where a bomb shelter resided that would be outfitted to sustain its citizens for a month. Hermiha’s creation of meals in a pill helped save space on food storage. Should the stay in the shelter last longer than a month, there were built in gardens that used special lighting to imitate the sun, and connections to the river supplying them with a comfortable amount of water.

Barely an hour passed since Carla spoke to Grisha. She was having a hard time believing her husband’s story of a soldier from the Wiped Era reincarnating into her son, and as soon as the sirens sounded off, the guards outside her home knocked down the door and ordered her to come with them to the subways. She only had time to grab her phone before they dragged her outside where her neighbors were being pushed out of their homes.

“Wh-what’s going on?” she looked back and forth between the two men. Being hauled out of her house while the city was in a state of emergency was taking a toll on her overworked heart. “Why is everyone going underground?”

One of them was too busy talking into his ear piece, but the other guy, a middle aged man with graying blond hair, spared her a glance, his face stony like he’d seen something horrifying. “Stohess had fallen. Titans will be headed this way. We have minutes before they reach the city.”

Carla was so horrified she almost didn’t hear her phone ring. Sandwiched between the soldiers, she cut through the growing crowds of panicking citizens, and struggled to answer her phone. At one point a child got in her path and she tripped over herself trying not to run him over.

“Carla!?"

A worry she didn’t have time to confront flushed with relief at the voice of her husband. “Grisha! What’s going on!? They’re telling me Stohess as fallen? Where’s Eren? Is he okay? Where are you?”

“You’re okay,” he sighed in relief, “I’m in a bomb shelter under the scouting legion’s headquarters. You need to get underground too,” his tone darkened, “Carla, someone bombed the walls of Stohess. There were titans inside those walls. Sixty meter colossal titans.”

“Titans…” all the air escaped her lungs. She tightened her grip on her phone and pressed it firmly against her ear. “And Eren? He’s with you, isn’t he? He’s just a rookie, the more experienced
soldiers should be taking care of this, right!?”

There was a pause way too long for Carla to handle. The soldiers escorting her had to urge her to keep going since she stopped suddenly, her heart in her throat and anxious for an answer she knew she’d never get.

“Y-yes, he’s with me.”

She choked and burst into tears. They reached a line going down the closest subway entrance. A man in front of her was holding his son in his arms, the brim of the little boy’s cap hiding his face and his chubby arms circled around his father’s neck. Carla had a brief flash of Eren as a toddler falling asleep in his play area and Grisha gently picking him up to tuck him in bed. “Remember when he was still a baby and he would play with his action figures?”

“I…yes. He always took good care of his toys…”

She wiped her nose on her sleeve. Her eyes were burning as she looked around at the Jinae citizens, all of them confused and scared, texting furiously on their phones. “I used to think he was so smart and mature for his age. Those games he played, the made up battles, the trips to the park to play on the monkey bars…it really was all preparation wasn’t it? Every day, ever since he was little…”

“Carla…”

“And you said those nightmares were memories, right?” her bottom lip trembled. “He watched me die…”

“And he doesn’t want to see it again. Get. Underground.”

She took a few shaky breaths and nodded, then remembered Grisha couldn’t see her, “I’m at – ”

“AHHHH!”

Her head snapped to the screamer in momentary surprise. It was a young woman a few feet away, her pale complexion staring up at the wall that connected to Rose. A few people around her were also staring. The chaos hushed in one smooth sweep as people began to realize that there was a large round shadow looming over them.

Swallowing thickly. Heart thudding in her chest, Carla turned around and looked up.

The wall into Rose was a few feet taller than Maria had been. However, it was not so tall enough to completely block the face of a giant head looking over the city. Skinless, with sleepy eyes and lipless mouth, its mile long road of teeth glinted in the sun.

“Carla! Are you there!? What happened!?!”

A loud thunderous crack rang in everyone’s ears, the source coming from the great red hand clutching the edge of the wall so tightly the structure began to crumble. It snapped people out of there stupor, the screaming and chaos rushing around Carla’s frozen form as they killed themselves trying to get in the subways.

Eren had to fight monsters like this?

“CARLA!”

“Mrs. Jaeger we need to get moving!” one of the soldiers grabbed her arm and pulled her through the
crowds of people, the line now evaporated in panic. All the while her eyes remained glued to the
titan grinning down at Jinae, morbidly wondering what it would do. Kick the wall?

A second pair of colossal hands suddenly appeared and grabbed the first one by the head, pulling it
back so painfully slow the strain could be heard like the crunching of a tree falling. Once again Carla
froze on the spot with a flicker of hope and confusion.

To the left of the first titan’s neck, three little figures shot up in the air and dived down in spinning
motions, slicing deep into the thick muscular neck in quick successions, further aiding the second
titan into tearing off the first’s head. This time the soldiers with Carla stopped as well, watching in a
trance as slowly, the first titan’s head was fully ripped off. A dense cloud of steam exploded from the
slain body, the hand on the wall slipping off and hitting the ground on the other side with a
thunderous boom.

There was too much confusion and fear for people to start celebrating. The second titan was still
there.

One of the figures that helped kill the first titan landed on the wall and ran to one of the watch
stations that dotted the tops of all the walls. A minute later, the emergency speakers clicked on and a
young woman’s voice echoed all over Jinae.

“This is special ops agent Petra Ral. A state of emergency is under effect. All citizens please move to
the underground shelter in an organized fashion, notices will be put up when the danger has passed.
A state of emergency is under effect, all citizens please move to the underground shelter in an organi
– ”

“Where’s the garrison!?” someone yelled, his voice unable to reach Petra, but having a rippling effect
with listeners around him, “and the scouting legion!? Why are we left defenseless!?”

“Are you blind!? They just took down a titan!”

“He’s right, though, most of the stationary guard isn’t here, they went to that stupid trial for the
king!”

More and more restlessness began to waver and stall the people from following Petra’s instructions.
Some started chanting and waving their fists. Carla looked at them all in shock. The scare should
have encouraged them into going underground faster, but they were choosing now to be angry?

“OI!” Someone else yelled into the speakers, a man this time, and by the sound of it, not so nice like
Petra, “DO YOUR PROTEST SHIT AFTER WE’VE KILLED THE FUCKING TITANS!”

“Aurai!”

“YOU WANNA GETTING EATEN THEN STAY WHERE YOU ARE YOU UNGRATEFUL
SPOILED – ”

“AURUO!”

“YOU WANT PROOF!? HERE’S YOUR PROOF!”

Several video ads built into the buildings of Jinae were replaced with live footage of an
unrecognizable city up in fire and smoke. Beside her, Carla could feel the blond soldier freeze up.
Several titans like the two on the other side of the wall were walking very slowly around, their
movements alone doing great damage to a once lustrous city. Dots of soldiers were zooming around
the giants, fighting desperately in trying to slay the monsters. More than once, they crashed into solid
masses of muscle, their speed backfiring and killing them on impact. These were not experienced fighters. Every time a soldier died, Carla kept picturing Eren in their place, and fought to keep from breaking down completely.

Anymore protests died down.

“NOW GO UNDERGROUND YOU SHIT STAINS!”

Maria

The initial wave of titans had all but gone to the back of everyone’s minds. With the arrival of the Ape Titan, his army was taking over with frightening precision. Heavily armored giants bounded in with their handmade clubs the size of trees, brandishing them in deadly slashes that knocked out any soldier within its path. Snipers had to fly closer to get a better hit with their cannons at the armor the titan’s donned. Unfortunately, most of their hits proved fruitless. The best they could do was blast their boulder-like helmets off. The heaps of crystals on their necks were a tougher target to break.

With the shock of Marco and Jean flying straight into the Ape Titan’s mouth, everyone was too distraught to snap back in time for the first hit the more intelligent titans delivered. Within ten seconds, forty soldiers were either knocked out or killed.

Annie and the other shifters were trying to stop any more deaths from happening, doing their best to rip out the protective crystals from the enemy. Ymir never got the knack for creating crystals on her own and had to rely on her sharp teeth, but Annie and Reiner crystalized their fists and smashed through the ‘armor’ with brutal swings. They were so focused that they didn’t really see that Bertholdt had shifted until his shadow cast over them ominously. The roar of the Rogue Titan told them Eren finally shifted as well.

“Reiner to Bertholdt, do you copy?”

“Eren, are you with us? Respond.” Hanji joined. She was flipping her way past titans to Eren with youthful ease, blinding the enemy with passing nicks from her holo-blades.

“Levi. What's that you said about my mother?” The muscular shape of the fifteen meter class huffed steam from its lipless mouth.

“Eren,” Armin flew to his friend, regardless of the giant hands reaching for him, “focus. Levi said Stohess fell, your mother should have time to get underground before the titans reach Jinae. We need you fighting he – “

Whatever else the blond was going to say was cut off by a swing from an intelligent titan who struck him square on the side and sent him careening backwards. Having been close enough to see him coming her way amidst the battle, Annie quickly let go of the titan she was strangling and reached out just as she had with the water balloons. Feeling Armin’s little body just touching her palm, she tilted back to slow his speed and held him close for a better look.

The half of the suit that had been hit was shattered in parts from the crystal fibers stubbornly holding until it couldn’t anymore. She could see it coming back together and tightening in areas that Armin was bodily damaged. The impact had broken his arm, and his leg looked mangled before disappearing behind the suit. Underneath the repairing helmet, Annie could only see blood and tufts of golden locks.

“Armin?” she said as steadily as she could through the com. The young man remained ominously still even after the suit had fully repaired. She was so intent on Armin that she didn’t notice the titans
heading her way, or that Mina had come to fight them off.

“Annie, it’s okay! He’s only unconscious, can’t you see his heartbeat in your helmet?”

He wasn’t moving.

“For fuck’s sake, Leonhart,” Levi growled, suddenly reaching to the left of her head and kicking it hard, “you can cry all you want later. Fight right now or I’ll finish you off myself!”

Who was it who hurt Armin? She looked around, but there were too many titans donning clubs for her to pinpoint the culprit. Frustration was eating her harder than she ever could resist. It used to be so easy to control her emotions. Convince herself that she needed to survive and see her father again even if it meant killing the only person in the world who made her want to feel human. Stohess had taken a lot of self-control. A lot of willpower.

She didn’t have any of that now.

Those around her winced and covered their ears as her scream pierced the battlegrounds. Unbeknownst to her, it was enough to flitter Armin back into consciousness in time to see the female titan scream furiously with a stream of tears running down her skinless cheeks. His body was in too much pain to move, and didn’t respond when he tried to push past it. Why was Annie so upset?

His helmet fizzed to life and took in his surroundings, slightly blocking his visual of the titan holding him so gently. It highlighted the overwhelming number of enemies, and the distant presence of the other shifters.

Armin’s head hurt. It felt like someone took it as a basketball, dribbled it on shattered glass, and gave it back to him upside down. He was so disoriented he began to wonder why the sky was so blue, and why there was a sixty meter titan standing over them and if they could be friends.

Then Eren spoke this time, his voice like a smooth silk of anger and madness spun together. “**Kill them all!**”

Unable to resist the orders of their coordinate, the less intelligent titans lost interest in the humans, and turned their attention to their own kin.

**Jinae**

**Underground Shelter**

There was so much unorganized chaos that the trolley system was shut down for people to walk down the tunnels. Carla held tightly onto the two soldiers muscling their way through, their now rasp voices going ignored by the terrified citizens. She counted too many bodies trampled, too much noise to figure out which way to go. For the next tense minutes her guards were her eyes and ears and even they were having trouble keeping steady. The emergency lights overhead lit up the tunnels in a dim glow sparse enough to see and more likely for someone to get hurt. Many times she wanted to stop and help an old citizen or child stand up from where they fell, but the soldiers weren’t giving her any time to do that. She either followed them or stayed behind and risked getting killed. It hurt her to choose the former. The only thing that kept her going was her determination not to have Eren suffer the loss of a mother again.

Reincarnated or not, those nightmares were very real to him. She saw how much it pain it caused him ever since he was a child.

Reaching the end of the tunnel, everyone pooled out to a massive base lined with round metal
structures the size of vans and the shape of pills, with a long window cutting through them horizontally. In the first ones she passed, Carla could see people huddled inside strapped down with belts. She along with every other citizen in the walls learned about these pods since grade school.

During the time of attack, all citizens had to initially hide inside these pods until the destruction passed. The pods were designed to resist damage done within the base in case the shelter itself fell apart. Recently there had been plans to start remodeling the pods into space shuttles to transport citizens to Mars. Unfortunately, that idea was still in the blueprint stage.

Organization here was better than the tunnels. More officers were around to guide people to a pod and strap them in. Carla went with the two soldiers believing they would still be with her, but they strapped her in and hurried out.

“You’ll be safe here,” the blond said with a shaky smile, backing out of the pod.

“Wait! Aren’t you staying here too!?” she panicked, the belts digging into her shoulders as she reached out to grab them.

“We have our duties,” the darker counterpart said, tugging the other to follow him out. “Corporal Levi and Dr. Jaeger wanted to make sure you got here safely. Now we have to help everyone else.”

“I…” they were right. She was being selfish. Defeated, she slumped in the cushiony seat. “What are your names?”

The two soldiers looked at each other, then back at her. “Hannes,” the first said, “of Stohess,” he smiled sheepishly, “former karate teacher.”

“Hugo,” his partner said, “Karanese.” Then he gave Hannes an eye roll, “former boxing coach.”

Carla nodded, taking their last few seconds together to memorize their faces to properly thank them later, if they survived that is. “Thank you,” she said, settling back in her seat. The pair nodded and ran off leaving her to look around the pod.

The interior wasn’t made for aesthetics. There was a vent in the end opposite the door, five other seats lining the walls, and an eco light on the low ceiling. The seats were made of leathery material and were comfortable enough to not feel too much like stone. The décor was agreeably plain with no painting or any attempt to make it pretty. It was the same gray as the outside with only the window to give view of all the other identical pods in the shelter.

Apart from herself there were two other people sitting in the six person compartment. Across from her was a young heavy set woman of probably twenty, gripping her straps so tightly her knuckles were turning white. She was in layers of clothing including a scarf that wrapped around her head that only her downcast eyes could be seen from under a tuft of shiny red hair. Carla couldn’t understand why such a person could go around in so many layers on a hot summer day.

Next to her was a young man with a black military cap. He was filled out with muscle and an overbearing aura that made Carla feel uneasy. Completely the opposite of the girl, he seemed relaxed and ready to ride the titan invasion through.

Carla snapped rigid in embarrassment when his dark eyes landed on her. “Hi,” was all he said, noncommittal and hard to tell if he was annoyed by her staring.

“Hello,” she greeted back, feeling rude if she didn’t, and not really in a conversational mood.

Three more people were pushed into the pod and buckled in. They were a mess of sobs and
hysterics, cutting any chance of conversation between Carla and the stranger. Once the pod was full, the overhanging door was pulled down and locked with a resounding band that left everyone’s ears ringing.

All that was left was to wait and hope.

Nervously, Carla glanced at the newcomers. Just as layered as the girl, they were huddled together, each carrying long boxes that looked to contain some kind of musical instrument. They were most likely musicians, and from the state of their clothes, street performers.

A large hand landed on her knee and squeezed gently. The young man had his attention on her again. Concern in his eyes. “It’s going to be okay.”

Carla hadn’t realized she’d been crying and roughly wiped her face. “My son’s in the scouting legion,” she blurted out. How could anything be okay?

“Then he’s a brave man, you should be proud.”

His voice was soothing, and his eyes were warm and comforting, but Carla couldn’t shake the feeling the something wasn’t right. He seemed nice enough, though, so maybe that was her own paranoia. Sniffling, she wiped the remainder of her tears.

“I’m Carla,” she introduced herself, offering a tight smile.

He nodded and smiled as well. “Lanius.”

Her phone buzzed in her pocket again. Thinking it was from Grisha, she practically tore it out and answered it, only to realize it was a text message not from her husband, but from a government address.

*This an emergency notice to all citizens of Jinae. The man responsible for the fall of Stohess is in Jinae. Please remain calm and alert the authorities if you see or hear of him. DO NOT attempt to engage the suspect, he is armed and dangerous. The suspect was last seen wearing a black military cap, dark gray shirt, jeans, and black sneakers.*

This was followed by a video still of a man walking by a park in the middle of the day.

Wearing the same clothes as the man sitting right next to her.

Carla carefully looked up from her phone to the others. The three hysterical newcomers weren’t paying attention to anything but their grief, but the scared girl kept glancing at the man next to Carla. Pale as paper and sweat dotting her forehead, she was slouched to the side which got Carla to notice the growing dark blotch around the right of her abdomen. She was injured. Badly, if the blood managed to get through so many layers.

Her pale eyes landed on Carla and widened meaningfully. Lowering her head ever so slightly, and gesturing with little downward jerks of her finger.

Duck?

Carla stared harder at the girl, wondering if she understood right.

Wait. She narrowed her eyes skeptically. There was a clean weaved line on the roots of her bangs. That was a wig!
Carla could feel her breath quickening. Why was there a girl with a wig gesturing her to duck? Did she know the man next to her was responsible for Stohess? Was she going to try something?

Squeezing her eyes shut, Carla gripped her teeth and swooped down, fighting against the belts attempting to pull her upright again. Right over her neck she could feel something whizz by so close she felt if graze her skin. This was followed by several other wooshes and bangs as whatever was used connected to the walls of the pod.

Taking deep breaths once the noise fell silent, Carla hesitantly looked up and hit her cheek against a metal rod above her. Many more rods were sticking out next to her, about the size of a standard cane, and all impaled deep into the Stohess bomber. Bleeding heavily with steam puffing out of him, the victim struggled against the rods with angry grunts, impossibly alive and unhappy with his situation. She was in so much shock and horror she couldn’t even scream. She was surprised the other occupants weren’t screaming.

“Dazz to Dawk. Berwick is under custody.”

Carla looked up to see the ‘girl’ removing her wig and shaking out short black hair. The other three who had been sobbing were now standing and holding huge guns they pulled out from their large cases. Now that she had a better look at them, she realized they were all pretty young – around Eren’s age. One of them talking into his earpiece reminded Carla of one of the soldiers from the graduation ceremony who didn’t join the scouting legion.

When he pulled off the hoodie he’d been wearing over his head, she realized that it was him. Him and two other people. The fourth she didn’t recognize. He was tanned and holding a strange gun at the Stohess bomber.

“Much as I’d like to shoot you now and end this, we’re taking you in for questioning,” he said sternly. The suspect remained quiet and glared at the man. “Don’t even think about shifting either, these pods are built to withstand ninety plus tons of a collapsing city. You’ll only kill yourself, and I doubt that’s what you want.”

“You’re Mrs. Jaeger,” the first who spoke, Dazz, walked gingerly to her, a hand over his side. Behind him, one of his comrades rushed to the injured ‘girl’, pulling up his shirt enough to reveal a patched up wound that was drenched in blood. “Are you all right?” Carla looked up at Dazz and shakily nodded. “We’re stuck here until it’s safe to go topside,” he said apologetically. “Don’t worry about this guy,” he pointed to Berwick, “we’ll make sure he’ll stay where he is.”

His tone was the same as the bomber, but unlike him, Carla felt nothing but security from Dazz. Letting out shuddering breaths of aftershock, she nodded, keeping her phone close to her chest.

Maria

In the front lines Erwin was too busy fighting for his life to give enough attention to the now shifted Bertholdt. Levi had left him to jump into the fight as well since Bertholdt hadn’t moved after his transformation, and the titans had gotten over their surprise to begin attacking. It wasn’t easy fighting something fifty times taller than you with enough brains to know how to fight. Granted, these brand of titans fought like muscle head brutes, but they didn’t need any more smarts if they knew how to use their size against the humans. At the moment, Erwin’s army were maxing out their maneuver gear in trick movements to confuse them. It worked for the most part, unfortunately nothing could be done about the protective crystals on the necks so they were really only buying time.

Eren’s command of the weaker titans, however, was quickly tipping the scale in their favor. One minute Erwin was struggling between two ten meter class titans when two more burst in and
knocked them down for him, hungrily biting into their flesh and clawing at their armor.

Having been given more time, the commander flew up to oversee the battle. Far north was a litter of bodies and steam that trailed all the way to where he was. The thickest action was happening at the fourth safe zone. He lost a lot of men, but there were still more fighting as hard as they could. The blasts coming from the far distance told him he still had his snipers.

Erwin looked up at the Colossal Titan. Even from where he was positioned he hadn’t passed the shifter’s shoulders. The creature was massive and still as a statue, watching grimly at the violent battle at its feet, wafts of steam puffing out of its thick muscular body. “Hoover, can you hear me?” Erwin demanded stonily, barely able to keep himself from sounding out of breath.

The there was no reply except for the grunts and cries of his soldiers fighting. Erwin flew higher up, releasing his holo-blades in case the Colossal Titan wasn’t conscious of its surroundings. “Bertholdt –”

“These titans are from my village.”

Erwin looked down at the armored titans. As soon as Bertholdt said it, Ymir, and Reiner hesitated to a stop in their blows. Annie was still very upset, holding Armin close to her while looking around and seeing each of the titan’s faces. Their pause left them open for attack which the enemy took and toppled them over.

Erwin remembered the shifters explaining the fate of their village the first time they met each other. How the Ape Titan grew angry at their independence and turned them permanently into titans as punishment. He looked to the beast responsible and realized it hadn’t moved from its spot since swallowing Jean and Marco.

Actually, the Ape was standing very still, steaming trails of blood leaking from its leathery lips.

“Smith to Bodt or Kirschstein,” Erwin called, “respond.”

There was no reply. A message on the screen announced the connection to both their helmets had been severed and were currently repairing themselves.

There was still time. “Bertholdt. Remember your promise. The hole!”

“The...hole?” the Colossal tilted his head down very slightly. Erwin swore it looked troubled the way its exposed muscles twitched. He looked back at it steadily, remembering the conversation he had with the shifter. If Bertholdt held on to what little humanity he had left, the battle was won.

One swollen foot lifted and pitched forward in slow motion.

“Everyone get out of Bertholdt’s way!” Erwin shouted into the com, flying backwards and away from the titan. Even with his warning and the lethargic pace Bertholdt was in, some soldiers hadn’t been able to fly fast enough and were crushed underneath the shifter. Other titans suffered the same fate, their weapons doing nothing to slow Bertholdt.

Once he was at a far enough distance, Erwin flew down to the beast titan, raising his blades in preparation for cutting its hairy neck open. Whatever the two recruits had done, it rendered the Ape immobile. There was a chance they could still be alive, and an even greater chance at ending the near immortal titan’s life.

He was within ten feet of it when a gigantic skinless hand wrapped its blood red fingers around its head and pulled so torturously slowly that it almost made Erwin feel sympathy for the victim. The
tighter Bertholdt squeezed, the more hesitant the titan army became. Whatever connection they had with their leader was starting to lose its strength.

In morbid fascination, Erwin watched as the Ape’s head tore off tendril by tendril, spraying its rapidly evaporating blood everywhere. Bertholdt raised its severed head up to his gaping jaws, biting down the Ape’s head with a sickening crunch and munch. Out of paranoia, Erwin turned back to the body that fell in a heap on the ground, expecting a new head to grow.

Instead, two people were crawling out of the torn neck. Marco and Jean were alive. The message on the side of Erwin’s screen announced their connection was back online.

“Everyone stop fighting!” Historia yelled through the com. “The titans aren’t fighting anymore!”

With collective exclamations of confusion, soldiers on the battlefield looked around and realized that the girl was right. Every titan they’d been going head to head lost complete interest in them and wandered around aimlessly, dropping their weapons, and disintegrating their protective crystals. They didn’t even blindly step on those that were on the ground.

Erwin landed beside Marco and Jean, pulling off their helmets to better see what state they were in. Jean’s leg was fully regrown, although how that was possible, the commander would have to ask the pair later. They were unconscious.

“Bertholdt!”

Erwin whipped around in time to see the Colossal Titan’s body vanish as if it were never there. There was the faint outline of the young man falling with no resistance. Ymir was the first to reach him and catch him before he hit the ground. “Hey, idiot, you okay? Say something.”

“...Did they...change back?”

“No...” the Dancing Titan shook its wild head.

They had to retreat, Erwin decided, staring up at the destroyed fourth safe zone. Three years of hard work, gone in a matter of hours. Bertholdt couldn’t even follow his orders to seal the wall. It made every bone in him ache with bitterness. He wasn’t sure what to call the conclusion of this battle. The Ape was gone, but so was their progress in sealing the hole in Wall Maria.

How many letters did he have to write this time to the families of his fallen men?

“...To...Smith...This...Mike...Smith.”

Erwin straightened up, the white noise blocked most of Mike’s message, but he easily fixed that by pressing a hidden button on the underside of his helmet. It made the range stronger. “Mike? Can you hear me?”

“The colossals have stopped moving, repeat, the colossals have stopped moving.”

“Why?”

“You’re guess is as good as mine,” Mike huffed, “they’re reacting to a woman holding up a flag.”

“A white flag?” Connie and Sasha hazarded.

“Negative. It looks to be a family crest. Hold on – ”

A great shadow cast over Erwin. He looked up to see a raven haired eighteen meter class smiling
down at him. Before either of them could make a move, the titan’s head jolted. It fell to the side, revealing Levi’s small form flying down and landing next to the commander.

“I don’t think it was going to attack,” Erwin said flatly.

Levi shrugged and shut off his holo-blades with a flick of his wrists. “It looked pretty hungry to me.”

Mike spoke again. “I’ve got someone to talk to the woman. Something Reiss, she says she – ”

“MOM!?” Historia cut in bemusedly.

As conversation melted into a screaming match, Erwin looked around himself at the state of the battlefield. The titans really weren’t targeting the humans anymore. Most of them were already gone. A few yards down he spotted Annie kneeling and holding a body in her hands. Eren was by her side, glaring down at the body with Mikasa standing on his shoulder. Ymir was carrying Bertholdt to Reiner, and those who could flying were rushing to help those who couldn’t move.

“There’s something else that happened before you left Isra,” Levi said darkly. “Bodt and Kirchstein stole a buffer from Dr. Jaeger, right after knocking him out. He thought Bodt was going to use it against one of our shifters.” He turned to the disintegrating body of the Ape Titan, its rotting stench so strong it was permeating through Erwin’s helmet. “Guess he was wrong.”

Erwin looked back down at Marco and Jean. He’d been watching the former closely ever since his arrival, and yet his actions only told him that he was a levelheaded leader with no signs of anything the psychological report said. What happened today just proved that he was a good actor, and that whatever he did, it helped win the battle.

But why keep the intention of using the buffer a secret?

Why knock out Dr. Jaeger to get it?

Erwin narrowed his eyes at the unconscious pair. There was a piece missing from this puzzle. He had a feeling Marco wasn’t done yet.
Dealing with the aftermath, soldiers from both sides of Rose try to recover. More flashes of the past. And Jean has everyone on edge.

Warning: brief gory imagery, some of which are children

as soon as I say January would be slow enough for me to work on this fic a million people call me to hang out and have a life lol wow... so I've been writing a little bit here and there with what time I could squeeze in and this morning I realized 'shit I'm already 6 pages into what's better off being the next chapter' this fic is lengthening out a lot more than I planned it's like the ending is so close but I don't want it to end! TTATT

Thank you all soooo much for the comments! One of you asked for some more Ereri...it will come, but the plot's getting in the way lol I will say this though, smut's not my best strength (I'm so embarrassingly shy!) so it might not happen, but IDK at the moment, maybe I'll snap out of it and do it lol but def more Ereri coming (I left it hanging, how could I not get back on it?) so thanks again guys! Enjoy!

The sky was blue and vast. The air fresh and crisp with the aroma of spring. Nothing like the ground where everything was concrete and steel. The gentle beauty of nature had been stolen away for tall structures to block the sun. Its creators dragging themselves around in their oblivious trance of 'socialization', laughing and discussing menial subjects, not at all aware of their own cruelty. He could only watch behind a barred window as the world continued without him. Not caring that he was suffering. That his mother was too 'stupid' to survive the world.

He wished he was taller so he could touch the clouds.

Bigger, so he could fight back. He wanted to forget the horrors of his life so badly, but everytime he looked in a mirror, he was reminded again and again that he was not natural. He wasn't of the natural world he so admired and wished to be. He was a freak thanks to that...that evil being.

The Evil Being called himself a Human. A Doctor. Savior. He would hurt him and his mother so badly, scream at their faces and spit in their food. Laugh at their pain, call them names and beat them senselessly. Then he'd go in a room and lock himself for hours. Mumbling and giggling, becoming more unhinged as time passed.

Was this their purpose in life? Become the stress reliever of a deranged beast?

He killed his mother yesterday. Put something strange in her. A 'new serum' for the good of Humanity. She died within minutes. Not by the 'serum' but by him. By a single bullet driven right through her chest.
She fought so hard...

Was his only source of comfort...

It made him angry. He knew that's what the Human wanted. He could see it in the Doctor's eyes. 'Do something,' they dared.

He had to be smarter. All he needed to do was get his hands on that 'serum', use his lessons against him. Then maybe he would be free. Once that freedom was touched, Humanity would get its due punishment.

The world would heal with him.

2840

Jinae

He didn’t remember much about dying. One second he was in the air, the next there was the strange sensation of one side becoming lighter than the other, quickly followed by a flash of intense pain and then a darkness so thick it felt like his whole consciousness quit for good. He didn’t have time to realize he was dead when he woke up later in an infant body with his parents cooing over him.

It felt like a dream. He hadn’t seen them in three years, and here they were, younger than he remembered and brimming with joy. Growing up again in Jinae felt like relearning how to read. This world was run by computers, his previous life was now tentative guesses in history books. Adapting to all this bizarre and wonderful technology encouraged him to give up his dreams of the military police, and just take a peaceful life in the walls.

He would too, if not for the nightmares.

There was a period in his childhood when his parents worried for his state of mind and took him to counselors. The visits typically went nowhere because Marco didn’t know what to say without sounding like a lunatic. He remembered the past too clearly for it to be made up in his head. He could see the dead bodies of his friends and seniors every time he shut his eyes. When his sessions with the counselor bore no fruit, his parents gave up and took him home.

They wanted to know what he was suffering from. They were willing to listen and open minded enough to accept his story. He knew that, and yet he was still scared.

He wasn’t aware he started speaking in his sleep until his parents sat him down one night and mentioned it to him.

“Who is Jean Kirchstein?” his mother asked gently. They were gathered at the table, dinner long finished and a folder tucked under her arms.

Marco squirmed in his seat self-consciously. He was six right now, and felt very small compared to his parents. It would be ten more years before he’d gain a few inches over them. “He’s a friend from school,” he mumbled, swinging his feet under the chair.

“And Mina Carolina?” his father asked, “Eren Jaeger?”

“School…” he shrugged.

His mother watched him carefully, and he avoided eye contact, knowing she could pick up when he was lying. Eva opened the folder she’d been holding, pulling out a few old and yellowed pages that
were cracking at the edges. Marco stared at them curiously. He’d been thinking they were official documents for a children’s institution given recent visits to the shrink.

“I’m pretty sure your class doesn’t hold over three hundred students,” Eva said, her finger lightly running through a list of names written on the delicate paper. “Marco, do you know what we do? Professionally, I mean.”

“Professionally?” he asked innocently. He knew what their work involved.

“It means what we’re experts in,” Nicholas answered patiently, “it’s what we do to earn money.”

“Like doctors or teachers,” Eva explained, “you’re father teaches a whole bunch of subjects, but his favorite is history. Before I retired, I was a forensics scientist specializing in historical artifacts. Do you know what our favorite part of history is?”

Marco didn’t have to guess. He’d seen his father’s book in the public library and his mother’s name in several others as a consultant. “The Battle of Trost.”

“850,” Eva nodded, her hazel eyes glittering with fondness. “The only piece of history that survived the Great Wipe.” She slid the yellow papers across the table to her son. “We found this a few years ago. It was never confirmed as a real piece of the past, but…what do you think?”

Marco trailed his eyes over the first page. It was ripped in some parts, but the area’s that survived showed a list of names. It was in alphabetical order, his name appearing in the second column just a few spots away from Armin Arlert. He recognized it as the roster of the 104th graduating class of the southern military training camp of 850. Not sure how to interpret what his parents were trying to say, he looked back at them with wet eyes, unable to hide the overwhelming emotions of seeing his friends names on an old piece of paper.

“We’re not going to think you’re crazy,” Nicholas said, his chocolate eyes reflecting honesty, “We just want to know what we can do to help. You’re only six years old, but you’re so smart and mature that…” he hesitated and shrugged sheepishly, “it’s like you’re an adult in a child’s body. Let us be your parents, Marco, we hate seeing you have so many nightmares.”

He bit his lip and went back to staring at the paper.

2856

Isra

The first thing they did as soon as the battle was won was get the shifters to the end of Wall Maria and finally seal the hole. It had grown bigger over the centuries, but with four shifters carrying boulders, the job went through quick enough that by the time they came back to the battleground, everyone was still preparing to head back to Isra.

Two thousand years for a job that took no more than ten minutes.

It was a mixed joy and disappointment that all that effort and billions of dead soldiers resulted in a task that was too frustratingly easy. It made one feel as if humans couldn’t do anything without the aid of shifters, and while they were grateful for the help, some prides were stung.

It didn’t change that after so long, Wall Maria was finally sealed. And as anticlimactic as that was, it still felt good to know that today humanity won.

The retreat back to Isra took a lot less stress than originally thought. The shifters remained in their
titan forms, carrying whatever they could to the end of Wall Rose where transportation of bodies would take place. Snipers had to leave the helicopters to make space for the dead and injured. Even though there were titans milling about, no one was under threat of being eaten. As Historia said, the monsters lost all interest in the humans.

It was the need for medical attention that was stressing.

With humanity being attacked in two different sides within the walls, many of the districts were being called to help, and most of that help had to be given to the citizens mainly affected by the bombing of Stohess. The scouting legion had to rely on the medical team they had in Isra. Because of the abnormally large amount of recruits, that meant more injured soldiers than the nurses were used to. It also meant a bigger body count.

Having sustained no injuries in battle, Levi was still being looked over by nurses from his earlier seizure. It was a miracle he was able to fight right after the episode, especially with the physical demands of the Manuever X and the visual demand of the helmet.

Nevertheless, more attention had to be given to the other soldiers, so Levi was left alone after a quick checkup and advice – or rather threat – to stay put.

He went outside as soon as the nurses were gone. The building wasn’t big enough for all the wounded soldiers, leaving the medical team to set up cots outside and separate the critically injured from those who got away with cuts and bruises.

Walking past the chaos, Levi drifted off to the outskirts of Isra where another group was being separated. The dead.

He found Erwin watching over his soldiers, and stood next to him. The body count was the biggest in both their careers. Piles and piles of corpses lay before them in morbid little mountains. Most unrecognizable, and just barely making out the shape of a human.

“They’re mostly the prisoners from the first wave,” Erwin said, not taking his eyes off the piles. “we’re getting them separated from the regular soldiers. So far I’ve counted fifty-two of our own.”

Levi nodded, watching as bodies were moved from one place to another. ID’s were read through small signals on the inside of the battle suit helmets. Names and status’s showing up on the reader’s own helmet along with a profile picture. Once or twice Levi could see a volunteer stop at a particular corpse, their body language telling the corporal everything.

The stench of death was intense.

“I’ve talked to Nile,” Erwin spoke again. “I remember he was trying to pull Bodt out of training camp.”

“And what did you find?”

“Well…” the commander turned away and Levi was forced to follow him back to inside the village, “I’ve got Hanji searching through Marco’s things. We found nothing in orientation, but with such a huge recruitment, things may have been overlooked.”

“And what are you looking for?” Levi arched an eyebrow, “as far as I can tell, Bodt’s a war hero. The buffer was found in the Ape Titan, Dr. Jaeger confirmed it.”

Erwin eyed him over his shoulder, “you don’t mean to tell me you’re not even the least bit suspicious?”
Levi scowled, “of course I am.”

The commander nodded, “my point exactly.”

2847

The Cave

It took him a while, and in the end he decided to trust his parents. He told them everything he could remember up to his rebirth and trying to understand why it happened. To an outsider it sounded like a made up story, but he told them key points in history involving Trost and the events that led up to it. His mother and father soaked it all in like eager students, only interrupting with one or two questions, their eyes sparkling with excitement. The theories they developed, he either confirmed or debunked, and not for a second did they doubt their son.

Inspired to go back into work again, Eva and Nicholas started taking him on trips all over the walls every weekend, exploring abandoned areas rumored to be haunted, and finding little trinkets of history whether it was a bottle opener from 2145 or a used up pen from fifty years ago. Nothing truly useful popped up until they went to Dauper.

The first ray of hope were the remnants of a blade dating back to the Wiped era. The next day they explored further and came upon a metal box with a letter and a key. The contents of the letter were short, the owner entrusting the box’s resting place to a Lanius Tase, and an address that was probably no longer in use since it was in the ever developing Hermiha. Its final note declared that this was the writer’s ‘final duty’ and that they could ‘rest in peace’ knowing that they kept their word on a ‘pact’ that was never explained.

It was signed by Nicholas and Eva Bodt.

According to the address in the letter, and relentless research on older maps of Hermiha, the lock to the key would be in the one place rumored to be worse than titan territory. Sterben was not a place Marco’s parents wanted to take him to, and it took much convincing on his part to change their minds. They were still trying to get him to remain at the hotel they were staying in long after they arrived.

“This is my history,” he argued back reasonably, “if you come across something you don’t understand, I might be able to figure it out.”

So, on they went to the library marked in the map.

That was where they met Anwir, a soft spoken young man who guarded the building from time to time as a community service to the seedy district. When the family explained their reasons to explore the building he reluctantly allowed them in on the condition that he accompany them.

The key led them to a cave underground. The small family was gob smacked over all the endless shelves of information they’d spent their lives searching for. Marco spent most of his time in the obituaries, looking over all the people he could remember. When he reached Jean’s name, he was shocked to find his name listed with the scouting legion that perished in a horde of titans. This whole time Marco believed his friend had gone on to the military police. What on earth changed his mind?

He took a break from the obituaries after that and wandered over to a shelf dedicated to the science—or theories—behind titans. Hanji’s notes were found in the bottom corner as if whoever organized the shelf didn’t care much for the information she had to offer.

His parents were with Anwir far off on the other side looking over letters and battles outside of Trost.
Not wanting to disturb them, Marco sat down on a nearby table and read the book. There were a lot of experimentations Hanji performed, none of which had very conclusive information. Mostly it consisted of all of the lessons he learned in his training days. It was after the shifters started popping up that things got interesting.

Self-inflicted cuts plus intent as simple as picking up a spoon triggered the transformation of a shifter. With some practice, they remained conscious and in control of their titan body. The test subject, Eren Jaeger, had to go through a year of training to fully use his abilities without causing unnecessary damage both to himself and those around him. Speaking was still an issue because as a titan Eren had no lips, making words hard to form. They had to instead create a sign language for him to communicate with soldiers.

Twenty pages were dedicated to Eren alone until the subject changed suddenly to the Ape Titan. About two meters taller than the Rogue Titan, this creature had the distinctive features of its title and spoke the ‘language of humans’ leading Hanji to wonder if the titan was actually a shifter. Possibly the only known shifter to be an animal.

...Our first true encounter was during the second attempt of sealing Wall Maria. He spoke to Eren only, offering a place in his army if he switched sides. When Eren refused, the Ape Titan transformed several soldiers into titans. We were attacked by our own men. Regrettably, they were killed. The Ape disappeared after our retreat, we have not seen him since...

Marco had to read over the information twice. Marco frowned at the word ‘transformed’. The last page mentioned that the Ape Titan had the ability to turn a mass amount of people into titans, a perfect example being the villagers of Ragako. Marco had studied the subject of titans at school, he knew of the Ape Titan and its intelligence, what disturbed him was that if it could turn humans into monsters, then it could mean that it had done so to the rest of the world. Was it a mission to create a new age for titans? Eradicate the humans and continue the evolution process?

That couldn’t be right. From one individual? What the Ape was doing was genocide.

Marco shook his head. If the beast were somehow killed or removed of his power, then maybe the titans could become human again...

It has been months since the encounter with the Ape Titan. It has attempted to invade again, but we were more prepared. Capturing it was a failure, and I was swallowed by it for a few seconds before Corporal Levi rescued me. Those few seconds inside the titan’s throat, I saw a strange creature lodged in the back. It was distinctively ape-like, though it appears that its body was disintegrating much like how I’ve previously assumed humans have when turned into titans. I managed to touch it and once I did my head was filled with images of this creature’s life.

I can confirm that the ape is a shifter – possibly the first shifter in history. The images I saw imply that it was alive before the titan invasion. I have not told anyone what I saw, the visions could be hallucinations on my part due to my life going under threat of being eaten alive. I thought it best to write down what I saw and sort out my thoughts this way instead...

What I saw was not the humanity I hoped for...

“Look at this,” Eva spoke up curiously, she was holding a paper so frail it seemed it would shatter to dust. “It’s an account of Rose’s second invasion!”

“Is it from a soldier?” Nicholas asked, leaning over her shoulder for a better view.

Marco looked up from the notebook to his parents and Anwir. For a simple volunteer guard, he took
great interest in the contents of the cave, claiming he was a history buff himself. Marco would have believed him if he recognized his parents for their work on Trost. Until the discovery of the cave, Anwir was more eager to have them go home than take a step further into the library. He was a strange man, Marco thought, and hard for him to fully judge.

The thirteen year old went back to reading Hanji’s notes. Her account of the visions was not very encouraging to the titan war. By the end he began to wonder if there should even be a war at all.

“Eva,” his father suddenly said breathlessly, a hopeful smile on his face that lit up the room. Marco remembered his teachers and even neighbors telling him he smiled like his father. “With this information we can tip the scale in the war!”

His wife was practically dancing on the spot in excitement. Anwir didn’t show the same enthusiasm. “What do you mean tip the scale?”

“Well,” Nicolas pointed at a spot in the letter Eva found, the young man didn’t lean over to look. “It’s obvious isn’t it? The Ape Titan transformed the villagers of Ragako, it proves all the theories we’ve had of his abilities! If we manage to kill him, no more humans will turn titan, and…” he shrugged, still grinning, “there’s a chance that maybe the titans will become human again.”

Anwir stared at the pair. An unexplainable cold shiver ran up Marco’s spine. “I was under the impression that you came here purely for the sake of history…”

Nicolas’s smile twitched in hesitation. “Of course we are. But the point of history is to teach us not to make the same mistakes again. This place,” he waved around the cave, “could hold answers for us to end the war. Two thousand years of war. Instead of hiding behind walls, humanity finally has a chance for freedom!”

Marco watched the exchange with growing unease. Anwir didn’t share his father’s enthusiasm. His face unnervingly blank. He wasn’t the same soft spoken man from before, he stood taller and more menacing. Why though? This was their chance to end the war; that should have made him just as excited. Did he want the war to continue? Was he an avid supporter of the space program?

Marco recalled a few entries back in Hanji’s notes that some shifters apart from Eren and Ymir were revealed to be spies for the Ape Titan. Kids his age whom he thought were his friends. One of them he was even getting to think was his best friend…

“You’re just like the others,” Anwir muttered, loud enough for Marco to hear. “You claim to be peaceful and yet you want to use information to gain the upper hand. Not take in knowledge for the sake of knowledge.”

Eva frowned at the accusation. “We are peaceful, Anwir. We’re historians for a reason – we want to save people with knowledge. Haven’t you dreamed of seeing the world outside the walls? Seeing the ocean with your own eyes?” She shook her head, “if we put this information to use, no more lives have to be sacrificed.”

“What did you mean by ‘others’?” Nicolas asked, no longer smiling. Anwir didn’t answer immediately, and the older man prodded on, “are you saying there were others before us who found this cave? Why haven’t they said anything – why haven’t you said anything!”

Anwir let out a long drawn out sigh, his cold passiveness melting to something like pity. “Because they were like you. Liars who wanted to use this information for their own needs.”

Eva took a step back and shot a glance to her son who felt rooted to the spot. He could tell she was
thinking quickly, piecing together what he already figured out, and trying to come up with a solution. Subtly, her hand wrapped around her flashlight that hung loosely on her belt.

“And why haven’t they said anything?” Mr. Bodt repeated firmly.

The young man didn’t smile proudly, or show any remorse. “They’re dead.”

In a flash, Eva whipped out her flashlight and bashed it across Anwir’s head. Taking the precious few seconds they had, Marco dashed over to his parents and together they ran out of the cave as fast as they could.

They only got two minutes of fresh air before their murderer caught up with them.

Isra

Present

Mina found Annie inside the medic building while searching for more supplies. The atmosphere was just as hectic as it was outside. Nurses and doctors running around the halls screaming for assistance and the wounded whimpering helplessly. It was not the place to be if one had claustrophobia. Once or twice, stretchers were carrying out those that didn’t make it, their lifeless bodies obscured by the bloodstained sheets that covered them.

All the rooms were open for Mina to see the hell happening in each one. As she reached the end of the building where there would be more supplies stacked, she spotted some of the shifters huddled together. There had been no time to speak to them since coming back and it was one of the things she’d been meaning to do. Throughout the entire battle they had every chance to betray the legion and side with the titans, but they stood firm – even at the arrival of the Ape Titan. Mina felt a growing shame the trek back to Isra. She only had stories to rely on to paint the ugly picture of Annie and the others. It was a picture she could barely imagine because she still believed in her heart that they were the same people she trained with.

The battle in Maria had cleared her inner conflict.

Mina stopped short in front of Ymir, Reiner and Bertholdt. Her last few memories of Ymir weren’t very pleasant unless Historia came into the picture. Seeing her here with the two young men, Mina felt like she was staring at a whole different person. Ymir was somehow softer. In her own way, more caring not just for herself and Historia, but for Reiner and Bertholdt. Mina could tell that living in the shifter village had changed Ymir for the better.

Reiner and Bertholdt, however, were different. The guilt of their crimes caught up with them, the betrayal of the Ape disillusioned them, and the loss of their home village broke them. Bertholdt could be read like an open book, but Mina could tell that Reiner was hurting just as bad. His eyes spoke volumes. The playful spark he used to have was gone. Not even the death of the Ape Titan could bring it back.

Still weakened from his transformation, Bertholdt was sitting heavily in a chair, head ducked and shoulders hunched. Whatever he’d been saying had upset his friends. The three didn’t acknowledge Mina’s presence, and she was beginning to sense that she was intruding on a private conversation. Her need to speak with them could wait…

“And you’re telling us this now because you relapsed again?” Ymir spoke, her tone soft and deadly. Mina froze.

Bertholdt snapped up to look at Ymir in surprise. “No! I haven’t done anything, I’ve been clean for
two years! I just…” he deflated again, “I didn’t want to keep it a secret anymore and…” he crossed his arms the way he usually did when he felt nervous, “after I shifted the numbness came back, and Shiganshina…Trost. I wasn’t prepared for it… I…” he bit his lip, “then I shifted back and now all I can think of doing is…” he opened and closed his mouth, unable to finish his sentence as tears started trailing down his tanned cheeks.

Mina stared in shock as did Ymir and Reiner. She really shouldn’t have barged in. Luckily the shifters hadn’t noticed her, more concerned with their companion who was sobbing quietly in shame. If she understood what Bertholdt was trying to say… then that meant that he was…

But then considering what he went through it made perfect sense which made it worse, and intensified her pity for him.

“I… I don’t want to be alone.”

She swallowed thickly, watching as Reiner leaned down and hugged Bertholdt tightly. The tanner man buried his face in his broad shoulder, only looking up when Ymir placed a surprisingly gentle hand on his head.

“Idiot. We’ve wanted you to say that for years.”

Bertholdt choked out another sob. Now really feeling like an intruder, Mina walked away as inconspicuously as possible, their conversation trailing behind her. Her heart was pounding from the revelation. Memories of the past were shattering. These were not the people she remembered. While she grew up in this modern world doing everything possible to get back in the battlefield, they had no one but each other to rely on even in the scouting legion. They had become a family. Just like the 104th. The only difference was the shifters weren’t looking for the same goals as them.

It was salvation.

It was definitely what they needed. Seeing them so vulnerable like that. Open and honest for anyone to hear… it was sad.

Mina reached the end of the hall and found Annie standing outside one of the rooms, stock still like a statue. Mina remembered how distressed she was over Armin. It had been disturbing to see the Female Titan – or any titan – show such wide range of emotions as she did on the battlefield. Even as a human, trying to get her to smile was like trying to rip ones teeth out.

“Annie?” Mina asked, gently enough not to startle the girl.

She looked up at her with her cold eyes, not a single twitch betraying anxiety or upset. “He’s awake.”

He? Mina looked past Annie and saw a crowd inside the open room. Many of her friends, and an irritated nurse. She couldn’t see much of the patient except maybe a clump of blond hair sticking out of bandages. Mina turned back to Annie.

“You should go in, too,” she suggested, “I’m sure he’d like to thank you for saving his life.”

The blonde scowled at a spot on the floor to her left like it did something nasty to her, “if I’d paid more attention, he wouldn’t be there.”

“If you hadn’t caught him, he wouldn’t be alive,” Mina countered. Annie looked at her sharply, to which she returned with an easy smile that caught the girl off guard. Annie was more expressive in this new world, Mina was relieved to see. This was probably the work of Ymir and living most of
her life in the village. She was oddly grateful for this, even if it meant that Annie eventually lost her home and all the people she must have cared about. It was good that she grew up surrounded by a caring community. Mina couldn’t imagine how life must have been like in Annie’s village two thousand years ago.

“You kept him safe too…” Annie mumbled, crossing her arms. “After I left to seal the wall.”

Mina shrugged. All she did was keep an eye on Armin while the more medically inclined soldiers dressed his wounds and put him in a helicopter. She didn’t really do anything.

“Annie,” hesitantly, Mina reached out and took her hand. They were clammy and cold. Of the few times she held her hand, Mina couldn’t remember Annie being so nervous. “I’m sorry…for keeping my distance. I didn’t know what to think when I saw you again.” Annie looked at their clasped hands as if they were a weird phenomenon she couldn’t work out. “I know some of us hate you for what you did. But we all came back - all of us. What if this means that you’re not here for punishment, what if this is a second chance?” Annie stared at her, her face completely blank. Or at least trying, Mina could see it starting to crack. “I’m still your friend.”

Her eyes widened a fraction, hand twitching like it was stuck between pulling away or holding on. Annie clenched her jaw, the word ‘friend’ affecting her so bad Mina worried she might have a panic attack.

“I’m sorry,” she managed to choke out. “I couldn’t save you in Trost…!”

Mina let her hand go and wrapped her arms around Annie’s shoulders, pulling her close. The shifter remained stiff, occasionally shuddering at the act of affection. She was trying so hard to not let her emotions spill out…

"She's with police recruit Nack in Jinae, I don't know if the doctor - "

“Is everything alright?”

Annie tried to spring away from Mina, but the latter held her closer, turning her attention to the commander and corporal who were both watching them curiously. They hadn’t seen Annie so emotional either.

“She’s just a little shocked, she’ll be okay,” Mina said. The older pair accepted the excuse, spared Annie another glance, and stepped into the room.

When they noticed the two seniors, the group of visitors stepped back and fell silent, giving Mina a full view of the patient. His arm and leg were in casts, and half his face bandaged.

“Commander?” the Armin said weakly, his one eye looking from Erwin to Levi.

2856

Stohess

Stohess was declared a state of emergency. All medical help and volunteers flooded in from all districts to help the survivors in some way. Taking command of what team went where and ensuring that the frozen colossals were properly shielded from the sun, Nile had taken no time to rest and it was starting to show by the time Dazz and the others arrived with their captive impaled by a total of sixteen metal poles of three feet each. The fact that Berwick was breathing further proved that he was not human.
The chief stumbled through piles of rubble, a gas mask covering his face to block the thick clouds of debris and any gases that had been exposed to the air. A team had confirmed a number of gas leaks from certain company buildings dotted throughout the city. If inhaled for a long enough time it could kill a fully grown adult, and if someone chose to strike a match the result could be catastrophic. Already there’d been three explosions to the west of the city. This was the main reason why it was so important to find any stranded citizens.

Nile lost count in the numbers of bodies he had to walk by. Adults were one thing to stomach, but to see the mutilated corpses of children was another thing entirely. He almost couldn’t move when he saw an infant impaled and hanging on the branch of a tree. To see all this mindless death must be like a regular day for Erwin Smith. How could the man live with himself every time he sent his soldiers out to fight a losing battle?

Nile’s line of work lay in keeping order within Sina. Solve cases regarding human crimes. Seeing Stohess fall, and watching his men kill themselves trying to save the city made him feel like a failure. He had no reason to believe that Berwick would bomb the walls, and yet he couldn’t stop blaming himself for not having that foresight. Most especially, he blamed himself for not having his men better prepared.

Erwin would have seen it coming.

The entire scouting legion would have seen it coming.

“Boris, Hannah,” he spoke into the earpiece, trying to shake the guilt from his voice, “any sign of the king? What about Franz and Hitch?”

“Negative,” Boris answered back gravely. “The courthouse is completely flattened, we’re getting a group to start digging. Unless they managed to get underground on time I doubt there’s any survivors.”

“There’s still hope,” Hannah said strongly.

“Hannah – ”

“There’s still hope!”

Nile grimaced. He already checked for any survivors that came from the courthouse, none of them were the king or the officers assigned to watch over him. It only meant one thing, and he loathed to come to terms with it. Another trophy to add to his failures.

The king was dead.

Isra

Erwin chose to continue his conversation with Armin in private. Everyone had to file out and wait outside, although that didn’t last very long as there were more duties to take care of and not enough people to do them. Levi took the opposite direction and walked deeper in the building for the one room that was heavily guarded.

He nodded his greeting to Dita Ness and Moses Brown, both soldiers who were part of the second sniping wave and therefore, not as heavily injured as the others. Standing at attention, they stepped aside from the door they were guarding, and let Levi pass.

There were only two beds in the room. In favorable conditions, the occupants would have been separated, but the demand for space pushed them together if only to keep them in one place and
away from the other soldiers. Levi hadn’t seen them since they crawled out the Ape Titan’s neck, and was surprised to see them strapped to their beds with not only rope, but chains.

A perfect example of Erwin’s paranoia.

Apart from the patients, there were two more soldiers standing at each bed, and Grisha Jaeger checking over the monitors reading Marco and Jean’s vitals. Upon Levi’s entrance, the doctor turned to him in surprise, clearly not expecting visitors, much less Levi.

“Dr. Jaeger,” he greeted.

“Corporal,” the older man nodded back. “I’ve lost contact with my wife, is she –”

“She’s fine,” Levi confirmed. Grisha sighed in relief and the shorter man realized he’d been tense the whole time. Having delivered that piece of good news had transformed the man instantaneously. Levi held back on explaining that Carla Jaeger had actually been in the same security pod as the Stohess Bomber. The doctor didn’t need a heart attack. “How are they? Any sign of waking up?”

Grisha turned his attention to the two young men. “No. There’s no damage to their brains or vital points – they’re not injured at all, but…” he shook his head darkly, “I took a quick test on their blood.”

Levi looked at Jean’s legs. The severed one was being kept in a testing room below the building where the doctor and Hanji’s team would take a better look at it, but here both of Jeans legs were fully healed. Like a fucking lizard. He had an idea why that was.

“I’m sure you’ve figured it out, too,” Grisha said, “they have the titan gene in their system.”

Damn.

“Can you buffer it?”

The doctor shook his head. “I have no more samples here. On Jean it might work, but because Marco had a warped version previously, the gene is unstable. I don’t know if he’ll survive the next few hours.”

Levi frowned. “And if he does survive?”

Dr. Jaeger didn’t answer right away. It wasn’t even a possibility. Marco would survive. If not for his titan gene, then for his fierce will to live. It reminded Grisha of a legend about a man so evil hell threw him back into the land of the living. It fit Marco perfectly except Grisha couldn’t figure out whether the young man’s actions were for the greater good or for a sinister plot.

If Marco survived this ordeal… “I have no idea what he’ll do.”

Before the Battle

The alarms were reaching the point of annoyance by the time they joined the others at the airbase. Jean remained quiet after Marco explained his earlier actions. If it weren’t for their hands loosely clasped, Marco would have feared his lover no longer trusted him. He was happy to see that Jean was giving him the benefit of the doubt.

They grabbed their weapons without exchanging a word and took off to find the one person essential to the plan. They hadn’t spoken since the first night at Isra, Marco said his part and felt he no longer needed to say more. Bertholdt didn’t make any attempts to talk to him either which meant he didn’t
care or he was scared shitless of him.

They found him heading towards the commanders squad. No one was paying attention, and taking his chance, Marco grabbed the taller man from behind and pulled him to the side of one of the planes nearby. Bertholdt was halfway into pulling out a knife until he realized who grabbed him. He stopped short, but his hand remained wrapped defensively on the weapon.

“Relax I’m not going to stab you this time,” Marco smiled, next to him Jean turned his back on them and kept an eye out for onlookers. It made his smile widen. “I’d like to ask a favor.”

The shifter regarded him suspiciously. “Favor?”

“I need you to get me to the Ape Titan.”

Bertholdt stiffened. As Marco recalled, the Ape Titan was responsible for the destruction of the other man’s village. He and the other shifters all harbored grudges on the titan which was part of the reason why they sided with humanity. Bertholdt narrowed his eyes, the mention of his home’s destroyer changing his demeanor.

“Why?”

“I plan on killing it,” Marco answered simply, “with your help of course. In the heat of battle, a couple of runaway soldiers will go overlooked. The three of us will head toward the end of Maria, and from beyond that you’ll shift and lead us to him – I’d rather not waste time going on foot. Shouldn’t be too hard. You’ll have to be nearby to leave with us though we’ll be around mid-guard. Erwin wouldn’t mind, right?”

“It’s a lot harder than you think!” Bertholdt exclaimed, his hand on his knife tightening. “We’ll be eaten by titans before we reach the end, and even if we did make it…you don’t know what it’s like to shift – I haven’t shifted in two years! I can’t go numb – ” he snapped his mouth shut and looked away in shame.

Marco pulled something out of his pocket. It glinted in the sunlight, and caught Bertholdt’s reluctant attention. In his hand was a syringe with a clear substance in its slim case. Hit by old memories, Bertholdt shuffled uncomfortably. Marco watched with interest, he wouldn’t put it past Bertholdt to be afraid of needles.

“This is the buffer that was used on Eren before Dr. Jaeger took it off,” he explained, though he didn’t need to since the shifter was one of the first to be told of it. “We use it on the Ape, he loses any ability regarding titans, and we can finish him off. Simple.”

Bertholdt was still doubtful, “how can you be so sure he’s a shifter? My village regarded him as an evolved titan…”

“I have proof,” Marco answered shortly, “I’ll show it to you if we survive. Are you in or not?” Bertholdt shuffled uncertainly against the plane he was pinned against. “You do realize that you can get your revenge once we get the buffer in him. The Ape Titan took your home from you – your friends and family.” He leaned closer, dark eyes boring into the taller man, “If you think this is what you deserve for what you did at Shiganshina and Trost, then maybe you didn’t care enough for the people of your village.”

“You stabbed me because of that,” Bertholdt scowled, “I would think the destruction of my home would satisfy you. You can’t sweet talk me into – ”

“I would have been satisfied if I’d been there to see you fall apart,” Marco admitted softly, gazing at
the syringe glinting in the sun, “the people you grew up with all turning into grotesque monsters with no sense of self. I bet the moment they laid their empty eyes on you they couldn’t wait to rip you to pieces. Not even calling their names and begging them to stop would bring them back. Did you try reasoning with them? Remind them of their dreams and life goals –”

“Shut up!” Bertholdt took a swing just as Jean turned around in shock, but Marco caught it with his free hand, barely budging from the force.

“Help us defeat the Ape, and I’m sure some of us will have the heart to forgive you. Don’t help us and it’ll prove all along that you are not with Humanity. And that you’re a coward.”

Isra

Present

Though they were far from the medic building and inside the commander’s office, the muffled noise from outside still managed to get into the room. It went ignored for the information currently being given to them by the four shifters sitting opposite Erwin’s desk.

Even Hanji didn’t interrupt Bertholdt’s story. Her jaw tightening the closer to the end the shifter got. Beside her Erwin leaned back in his chair with the tiniest squeak and crossed his arms. He didn’t seem upset with this new information, but Hanji could tell he was already forming a plan.

“Then it’s safe to assume that when the Ape Titan popped up in wall territory leaving the walls was no longer necessary,” the commander nodded to himself, “you weren’t going to assist them because they already got what they were looking for, but after they got in and rendered the Ape immobile, you chose to risk it and shift to kill him off in one go.”

Across from him, Bertholdt nodded.

“How did they know he was a shifter?” Levi asked, his scowl twice as powerful now, “with all the advances we’ve made, no one was able to figure it out. All we had were theories.”

As an answer Hanji slapped a piece of paper on the table. It was protected inside a plastic bag, the condition yellow with age and cracking at the edges like a dried leaf. Drawn to it, everyone gathered closer for a better look.

“I found that in Marco’s belongings,” Hanji explained, “it’s my handwriting,” her voice raised slightly in mild surprise. “I believe it’s part of a journal entry. There’s no date, but you can all guess when it’s from.”

Levi arched an eyebrow, “I’m shocked you’re not pissing yourself with joy.”

“You were swallowed by the Ape,” Erwin ignored them, eyes running breezily through the notes on the old paper. “And you had a vision of his life, how is that possible?”

“Marco knew the Ape was a shifter because of this paper.” Hanji said, “why didn’t he say anything to us? This kind of information could have saved lives.”

“Armin said the police had resurfaced Marco’s case,” Erwin said, rereading the letter, “his parents were killed in front of him when he was thirteen by a shifter named Berwick,” the name made the younger group bristle. “This same Berwick is responsible for the bombings in Stohess and several murders in Hermiha. He’s suspected of being a spy for the Ape Titan. One of Nile’s officers believes Marco’s on a revenge mission. Take down the Ape, finish off the subordinate. Typically missions like this would run the other way, but the Ape was never Marco’s target. What he wants is for
Berwick to know that his leader is gone, that he's cornered. Marco wants to torture him through a slow and painful death. Or maybe no death at all. To some, death can only be salvation. Something Berwick doesn't deserve.”

“How did Marco know the Ape was connected?” Ymir frowned, “for all he knows, Berwick could have been an ordinary killer.”

“Could be a psychotic break,” Levi offered, “loss of his parents by murder? That’s big enough to want to believe the killer was a special kind of evil. He could have come to this conclusion just as easily if he believed Berwick literally worked for the devil. The fact that he was right only meant he made a lucky guess.”

“There was a report on the night of the murder, only one and it was found by one of the recruits working on the case recently. Marco gave them a description and made heavy accusations that Berwick killed others before his parents. He said Berwick admitted it himself. Unfortunately, the case went cold and Marco never found justice,” Erwin picked up the delicate paper, chin resting on his knuckles, “He believes these victims were people searching for the history of the Wiped Era—a recent connection the police uncovered. The officers he spoke to didn’t take him seriously, they thought he was trying to sugar coat the trauma he faced, and they also didn’t believe he found a cave holding records of the Wiped Era. He was taken to a counseling center and written off as a delusional tragedy. It’s shameful work on behalf of the military police, there must have been someone behind them ordering them to close the case. Nile never told me how Marco made the connection to the Ape, his visit to the cave might have given him some clues, but he didn’t say anything.”

“Still,” Hanji shook her head, “he kept it quiet – even from Dr. Jaeger, the only person apart from Jean who was close to him. By refraining to disclose his discovery of this paper and how dangerous Berwick was he helped the rest of the world continue to be oblivious of the Titan’s weak points, therefore aiding in the deaths of soldiers that could have easily been saved.”

“The police didn’t believe him the first time, why would they believe him a second time? With how he was treated, that’s was probably Marco’s thought process. According to Nile, Berwick succeeded in killing Marco in the Jinae Bus Incident,” Erwin added reflectively, “at that point he didn’t say anything about facing his killer a second time. His official statement was that he didn’t notice anything amiss when the bus turned over. The video recordings Nile found prove the opposite,” he paused, sharp eyes narrowing the more he thought about his discussion with the police chief. “If he said something there would have been more effort to search for Berwick. In fact…given the time of the accident. If Nile’s guess is right, the King and Queen never would have been killed…then again who would believe him?”

A hush fell over the office, interrupted from the excitement outside. Distant whirrs of helicopters and planes could be heard taking off for the districts where better medical attention would be given to the critically injured. If that was all silenced, a pin drop would be like a thunderclap.

Levi stared at his commander in shock. He’d only been given a brief explanation of Nile’s investigation before they all joined up in Erwin’s office, he had no idea what the man was talking about, but it was a heavy accusation – one that settled uncomfortably in his gut because it was true. By letting a killer go free, Marco let Berwick continue his rampage undetected. On the other side, Hanji mirrored his expression, for once speechless.

“If I’m getting this right…” Ymir cut the silence, “you’re telling me Marco orchestrated the deaths of the King and Queen.”

Erwin took one last look at the old piece of paper and placed it back on the desk. “It’s a long shot – they’re currently only suspected victims on Berwick’s list of people he’s killed. The setting of their
accident was too much of a coincidence and he was the first on the scene trying to save them. I’m implying that even if Marco wasn’t aware of it, by not speaking up he let Berwick free to continue his killing spree. Then again, he never really showed any guilt of letting him get away.”

“Because he doesn’t give a damn,” Levi said.

“Marco isn’t as evil as you all think.” Everyone looked to Annie, having forgotten she was in the room. The only reason she was here at all was because Berwick had some past connection with her like the others. They didn’t know how close she was to Marco. “If he was he would have gone after Berwick, then take his punishment by joining the scouting legion afterwards. Given the time it took for him to recover from the accident, he would have graduated later than Jean and go through a year not knowing if he’d survive without him. You also haven’t considered that he might not have said anything about Berwick being in the bus because he died right after and once he was revived, he probably thought he was hallucinating.”

“Bus accident aside, why didn’t he make a better effort in getting the police to investigate his case?” Levi countered.

Annie stared back at the corporal unflinchingly. “He want’s revenge. That’s true. But he himself wouldn’t betray his king on a personal vendetta. He used to dream of serving the king in the military police. If one scrap of who Marco was survived, it’s his loyalty.”

A soft ‘ding’ sounded off from the tablet lying on Erwin’s desk. He tapped the alert bubble and stared back at the message on the new window. “Jean’s awake. Let’s go.”

Maria

The Belly of the Beast

The only light they had after the Ape closed its mouth was the soft glow from their helmets. It was enough for Marco to see the back of the glistening throat coming up as he slid past the giant wet muscle that was the beasts tongue. Activating his holo-blade, Marco used the split second of opportunity and stabbed deep into the end of the throat, keeping him stationary while his suit took the saved time to recuperate and restart its air systems to keep him afloat. From the corner of his visual he could see that Jean hadn’t followed him and was on his way to being swallowed, not even the emergency systems of his suit was helping him. Snapping out his arm, Marco wrapped it around Jean’s waist and pulled him up.

Both of their helmets were damaged from the initial impact, but they held enough power to tell Marco that his partner was in danger and on his way to unconsciousness. His store of oxygen was depleting due to the suit trying to help Jean with his injury.

A severed leg.

“Jean…” the other man didn’t respond, their communications were down. Just as Marco tried to figure out how to pull out the buffer with both arms occupied, Jean weakly flicked on his holo-blade and stabbed into the fleshy wall, supporting half his weight on it while he leaned heavily against his lover, allowing him to free his arm.

They looked at each other, Jean mouthing the word ‘hurry’ through gritted teeth. A quick scan of his suit told Marco that it completed its emergency first-aid on Jean. It tightened at the stub, internal workings stopping the bleeding. For the first time since initiating his plan, Marco began to regret his choices. Or rather, regret letting Jean come with him after he insisted so much. He should have stood firm on going at this alone.
A low growl from the Ape shook their tight surroundings, threatening to shake them off their hold. Marco dug deeper into the throat, blood splashed out like a shower, obscuring his visual and mixing with the mucus and saliva that unforgivingly coated them. Next to him, Jean stabbed harder too, using his remaining engine on his uninjured leg to keep him up.

Just as he allowed himself to get distracted by this, Marco felt his blade brush over something hard. The ape-like being Hanji described in her notes wasn’t present anymore. Time had allowed the beast to evolve and become more titan than whatever he’d been. If Marco was right, whatever he brushed over could be the remainder of the original form of the Ape.

Taking his chance, Marco pulled out his second blade and started tearing at the throat, igniting more growls from the titan. The suit immediately activated its cooling system to counter the extreme temperatures, but it wasn’t enough to completely block off the intensity. Marco felt like his arms were slowly baking.

Jean cut the hole Marco made wider and continued slicing through soft tissue, lessening the burning heat. The Ape growled again, the back of its tongue pushing against their backs as it tried to swallow them. The more they tore away, the more what was underneath began to surface.

There was a creature there, or the remains of a creature. Its skin was nonexistent. Frail boney remains latched onto the throat by thick muscles. Its arms were spread out in the same position a shifter would be found in. Marco didn’t even know if it was still sentient. Most of its bones were gone, only the major ones remained. He could be sure about one thing though. The skull was not human. It really was a primate.

Would the buffer work on bones?

“Release me, human.”

Ah. It could speak. That made things easier. “You can gift humans with the titan gene,” Marco said back, not at all shaken by the deep rumbling voice of the monster. “Give it to my partner so he can heal, and we’ll talk about releasing you.”

“Negotiations will not be made. He will die. And you will follow.”

Even if the buffer wouldn’t work on bones, there was plenty of muscle to pick up the serum. Needing no further incentive, Marco stuck the needle into one of the muscles attached to the skull. “Before I end this, I’d like to thank you for sending that spy into human territory. If you hadn’t I would never be in the unique position of lodging myself in your throat and driving anti-shifting juice into the remains of your old body.”

“Human…!”

Jean lost his hold on his blade, the jostle startling him into reaching out for anything that could hold him. The second it took for Marco to realize what was happening it was too late. Jean grabbed onto the skull, his grip so tight that it crumbled under his fist and shattered the glass tube of the syringe, its contents spilling silently over the contracting muscles.

Marco stared at the invisible mess.

Jean convulsed beside him.

There was a rotting brain beneath the skull. And Jean’s hand was still on it.
They found Eren in the room with Dr. Jaeger and the four soldiers. They seemed to be in the middle of a deep conversation when they arrived, and cut off on their arrival. Erwin waved for the others to wait outside. He approached the doctor and his son and saw that behind them, Jean was indeed awake. He was sitting up, pale and haunted as if he’d seen ten years’ worth of nightmares. Some of the restraints had been removed, but the chains were still wrapped around his wrists and ankles.

“How is he?” Erwin asked, eyes locked on the young man. He didn’t seem aware of his surroundings, staring off at his lap with shadowed eyes.

Dr. Jaeger shook his head helplessly. “He hasn’t said a word since he woke up.”

Erwin looked at the only other bed. Marco was still out, blissfully unaware of the tension in the room. The commander walked past the Jaegers and sat down in front of Jean. He didn’t acknowledge his presence, not even to the slight dip of the bed. He seemed harmless, and an anchor for Marco, so Erwin let him go past his radar in the hopes that when Marco did have some psychotic break, Jean would be there to keep him from losing it. That didn’t mean Jean went completely ignored, he was a close friend of Marco’s after all.

A citizen of Trost. Skipped a few grades after showing accelerated aptitude at a very young age. His parents weren’t all that special, average working class citizens who paid their taxes and never got in trouble with the law. Because of his drive to finish school as quickly as possible, Jean didn’t have many friends, nor did he seem to care for them. He wasn’t entirely a bookworm, joining sports teams to keep in shape – basically training himself like his 2104th comrades. Many big name universities wanted him. He didn’t stay long enough to complete his bachelors program by the time he was old enough to join the military.

If he interviewed any of the people who knew Jean, Erwin was pretty sure they would say he was the quiet nerdy kid who could hold his own in a fight. He heard stories pop up of Jean and Eren’s famous rivalry, but he saw none of that in the month they’d been in Isra. In fact, he could hardly believe Jean was the loud and snappish soldier the 2104th fondly spoke of.

Maybe Jean was as messed up as Marco. He was just better at hiding it.

“I’ve read Hanji’s letter regarding the Ape Titan,” Erwin said, watching the young man carefully. “She was inside like you and Marco. Said there was a creature in the neck? It showed her visions of a life before the titans. A humanity that…disillusioned her?” There was a subtle twitch in Jean’s hands. “I’m guessing you saw what we’re all capable of through the eyes of an ape. We’re a cruel race, aren’t we?”

“Commander Smith,” Dr. Jaeger warned quietly. “I would advise not provoking him. The titan gene is active, he can shift whenever he wants.”

“Would you prefer it if you shift?” Erwin asked, “you have the power now. You can finish off what the Ape wanted to do. Cleanse the world of our evil and start anew.”

Jean’s eyes darted to the left. Then the right where Marco lay. His heart monitor spiked slightly, but he showed no other sign of agitation and thankfully no hint of shifting. Erwin figured it safe enough to continue.

“I won’t sugar coat that as cruel as we are we can also be merciful. One kind soul does not excuse the greed of millions. We are flawed…but we’re here. We’ve been here for millions of years, we have the right to be here as much as any living creature on this planet.” The young man’s hazel eyes
landed on his. They weren’t empty like he expected. Sorrowful perhaps? It was a swirling mix of pain and confusion. The commander felt a pang of sympathy and had to keep from reaching out to the young man. “Am I wrong?”

“No,” Jean spoke softly, clear enough for the room to hear that it snatched everyone’s attention. “But when the titans are defeated we’ll only find another enemy to battle.” He choked out a bitter laugh. “We’ve been rotting in here for two thousand years, imagine what we’ll do when the walls go down.” The laugh turned into a sad giggle. “We’re like locusts. We eat and destroy our resources and leave a path of death behind us.”

There was the not so delicate clicks of safety’s being pulled. Without looking away, Erwin raised his hand to signal the soldiers to stand down, which they did with reluctance. “What did you see, Jean?”

He took another glance at Marco, clenching and unclenching his sheets, making the chains jingle. “He wasn’t fully an ape or a human...I saw the world covered in pollution. Violence. Children dying of hunger…” his eyes watered. “People turning a blind eye...so much pain...and a man called Dr. Reiss.”
**Recovery**

Chapter Summary

Team Dazz learn of a legend. Jean's confused. Erwin initiates a plan. Eren is confused. And Marco makes his move.

Chapter Notes

sooo funny story. True story. My laptop literally broke and when I took it to the store to get repaired, naïve little assistant breaks it even more. I ended up waiting 4 weeks to get a new screen, so I thought 'I'm fine! I can still use the house computer!' conveniently forgetting one sister's retraining herself on excel for a job interview, and the other's still in college T_T With 4 weeks of doing nothing I ended up with writers block X_X Boohoo me. Anyway after kicking myself in the ass I finally got the inspiration to turn this story where I wanted so I could get this plot going again. This chapter's more an information dump again, but...

I manage to squeeze some ereri in! EEEEEEEE! MANGA SPOILER ALERT! the March chapter gave me a big idea, but since the timing's off, I'm only using the broad idea of it, not the bits where Nick died and everyone knows about the Reiss family. I'll explain it better in the next chapter. THANKS FOR READING AND THE FEEDBACK/KUDOS!!!!

ALSO blue_eyed_hanji made a gift fic based on this one. It's snippets of scenes with her OC, check it out! http://archiveofourown.org/works/1410010/chapters/2958793 (IDK html enough to form links T_T)

There was crisp click of a lock that woke him up. The darkness of the room bathed in moonlight from his lone window. For a second, another strip of light lit the other end of the room, narrowing shut as the door gently closed. Any sluggishness of sleep melted away by curiosity and a sharp pain in his arm. Pawing at the source, he pulled out a syringe that had emptied out its contents in him. Tossing it across the cage, he forced himself to relax from the panic swelling in his chest. Nothing seemed wrong with him at the moment, he didn’t feel sickly – which was probably more worrying. He needed to find out what happened. Where was the doctor?

He strayed his eyes to the lock on his cage and saw that the handle was sprung free.

It was too good to be true.

His shock momentarily forgotten, he cautiously sat up and looked around more carefully. There was no sign of the doctor or anyone else. The room was dark and dead save for himself. That couldn’t be right.

This was a trap.
Experimentally, he eased open the door of his cage. Nothing happened.

Dragging his human-like fingers across the newspaper lined floor, he ripped a chunk out and balled it up, tossing it outside and watching it gently hit the edge of the worktable and tumble uselessly to the linoleum floor. Still nothing happened, but that no longer bothered him.

The room, he realized, was completely cleaned out.

Feeling a sense of alarm, he risked it and slipped out of his cage with a hop, his bare feet smacking on the floor in his hurried stumble.

There was a brief euphoria of independence.

Freedom…

Crouching more comfortably with his feet flat and his knuckles brushing the floor, he walked towards the worktable. He swiveled his head this way and that suspiciously, but no attack occurred. With every step he took, the braver he felt.

That is until he paused to look at his reflection on the metal table. It was too blurry to get the details, but the general shape showed him an oval head with a brownish complexion. The doctor liked to call him ‘monkey’ many times with a nastiness that delivered shame and disgust.

He looked away and continued exploring.

The cabinets were all empty. Not even the trash cans held any scrap of paper. He knew he should have broken for an escape long ago, but something was keeping him in place. Something wasn’t sitting right in his gut.

Why would the doctor leave like this with his cage unlocked?

His eyes drifted to the office. The only place he could never enter. When he was let out of his cage for testing, the doctor would always hurt him for trying to get in his office. He only caught sparse glimpses of the interior which was of a small desk cluttered with papers and books, nearly burying an admirable little lamp. Over time he grew to understand that in that tiny office there could be clues to his existence.

But if he opened that door, the doctor could be on the other side ready to strike.

Freedom, or his questions answered?

His hand was on the handle before he made his decision. Setting his jaw, he turned it and the door fell back without resistance. Save for the desk, there was no one inside, and the area was just as bare as the work room.

Disappointment sank in his chest, and he almost turned to leave, but his eyes landed on a spot under the lonely desk. It looked to be the corner of a paper. Hesitantly, he pulled it out.

It was a drawing with a photograph attached.

His fingers trailed over the figures in the snapshot, bringing it close to his nose to sniff curiously. It smelled old with faint traces of chemicals. It was a glossy photo of three girls huddled together in a rose garden. Certain traits like their noses and hair color were similar, the youngest one had short hair just below her ears. The drawing was of a three ring structure, small notes citing certain loops that stuck out from four areas of each ring.
A faint ticking reached his ears.

Sniffing the air, he followed the sound out of the office and back towards the worktable. Nothing seemed out of place. He fingered the surface, the legs, then peered underneath. There was a box taped to the roof. Wires sticking out of it with two brown boxes on either side covered in duct tape. At the center was a little screen of flashing numbers counting down.

8…7…6…

He’d learned enough in his lessons to know he needed to leave as fast as possible.

Letting out a frightened cry, he bounded for the door, but it was too late. He didn’t have enough time. There was a burning heat firing up on his back that propelled him out of the workroom and into the hallway where he slammed into the wall. He was in so much pain that he blanked out.

This was all the doctor’s fault.

Humans…humans were so cruel!

A strange sensation shot through his body. It felt as if his blown limbs were magically sewing back together. Growing and extending into a better body.

A stronger body.

The pain was gone. His prison was gone.

The freedom he longed for was now in his grasp. Fresh breezes of the world touched him gently, welcoming him. He stared at the night sky in wonder. It was so big and vast. The stars and the moon glittering and just out of reach…

Someone screamed.

It was so far down, and when he looked, he realized the city he used to look outside his window had become miniscule under his feet. The humans were running around. Terrified. Terrified of him.

“MONSTER!”

And why shouldn’t they be?

Looking impassively over the panicked city, the Ape Titan took his first steps in ridding the world of humanity.

Stohess

Present

Of the devastation left by the colossals, none felt the most damage than the courthouse. It was completely flattened and suffered a tunnel collapse completely blocking any chances of escape. There were many teams trying to dig their way through with all sorts of tools and machinery, but as the minutes slipped by, grief and doubt were beginning to sink in. This was no longer a rescue mission. The whole area carried the air of a tomb.

Hannah’s fingers were torn and bloodied the harder she dug through the rubble. One of her nails was ripped clean off, but she barely felt the pain. What mattered was getting to Franz. There were precious few minutes left before he’d lose oxygen, and even less before he’d die of asphyxiation.
“Keep digging!” she screamed into her communications, her own voice echoing in the gas mask, shrilly ringing in her ears.

“This is getting hopeless!” Someone yelled angrily, “haven’t we dug enough for a scan!?”

“Keep digging,” Pixis ordered firmly.

Hannah lifted part of what was once the bust of an ancient official, the rock almost slipping from her sticky fingers. Underneath was a mop of dirty blond hair. Immediately flashing into an image of Hitch, Hannah dug with renewed vigor, peeling away rocks and piping to reveal a round face and no body attached.

It wasn’t Hitch.

Hannah’s vision swam, and she peeled out a helpless sob.

Rose

Refugee Camp

Nile was too busy in the rescue mission with other teams in the city. If they hadn’t irritated their injuries during the chase, Dazz and the others would be out there as well. He wasn’t too bad off, but Nack had re-opened his wound and was currently being stitched up again in Jinae where the doctors were much more stubborn than Hermiha and refused to let him return to Stohess. In the end it was only Dazz, Gunther, and Millius who returned with Berwick.

With everything happening at once, finding a sturdy prison for the shifter was a complicated ordeal. Stohess was destroyed, and the closest village in Rose with a prison was too far away, and too weak to hold the shifter. They had to settle for one of the police vans that came to help. Gunther and nine odd soldiers and policemen were keeping guard, the former sitting inside with the prisoner – buffer poised to shoot.

Their mission complete, Dazz and Millius were left sitting in the middle of a sea of injured soldiers wondering what more they could do to help, and only the view of the towering colossals draped over in massive sheets to keep them entertained. Already, some of Special Ops were working to slay the titans, though the process was slow due to the fact that they had to be careful not to disturb the sheets. The ‘super soldiers’ they’d heard of that helped stop the colossals from harming anymore villages were nowhere to be seen. It was assumed they’d transformed back into humans to help Pixis in Stohess. Dazz had too much going in his head to worry about them, though.

The old suits Dazz and Millius donned during the chase were trimmed down to the pants so they could continue walking without the aid of a cane. Their wounds were cleaned up and re-dressed long ago, and now that they were having a moment of respite, the pair were beginning to feel the repercussions of pushing their battered bodies to the limit. Pain killers had been offered to them many times, but they didn’t like the intensity of the medication, they needed to keep their minds focused. Nevertheless, the discomfort was making them antsy to do something to take their minds off the pain. They couldn’t go into Stohess, and they would be useless standing guard with Gunther.

Thankfully their restlessness was answered by Mike who came specifically to them with an odd request.

“I need you two to come with me,” he said, removing his helmet to better speak with them. He was unexpectedly clean underneath and enviously uninjured without even a hint of sweat, “You’re the best historians available right now. One’s I can trust.”
The recon squad leader brought them to a small camp site off the edge of Stohess where many dusty citizens were resting and waiting for rescue teams to take them to safer shelters. The silence was heavy, only broken by the heartbroken sobs of the traumatized. Volunteers maneuvered around them, handing out food and water and generally offering words of comfort. Several nurses were dotted all over the crowd, providing oxygen tanks and checking for any injuries. Dazz’s eyes landed on a middle aged woman sitting very still on her knees. Her tanned face was gray with a layer of dust, cut only by two dark tear lines running from her eyes down to her chin. She was staring off at nothing, face blank and eyes empty.

She was holding a little boy’s shoe in her blood spattered hands.

Dazz looked away, but was faced with an old man sobbing into his phone, eyes rubbed raw and his words muffled by his cries. The deeper he walked through the group, the harder it was for Dazz to breathe. He wasn’t a stranger to this. Watching so many people lose their families. He’d been through this before…

“You’re not a failure.”

Dazz gave a short humorless laugh, turning his gaze to the ground where he wouldn’t have to see such grief. “I don’t think these people would agree, Millius.”

“We stopped Berwick from destroying another district thanks to you being a stubborn prick and going after him even though you were crippled with injuries,” the other man said calmly, “We saved as many as we could here with the evacuations, but in Jinae we saved an entire city.”

Dazz looked at him skeptically. “Why do you do that? Why are you always trying to cheer me up?”

Millius seemed genuinely surprised by the question. “Because you’re the most negative person I’ve ever met. You have your moments, but for the most part you constantly doubt yourself – you don’t even have to say it, it’s in your eyes and the way you kind of recoil on yourself. You need to believe that the decisions you’ve made have been the right ones. We all believe you’ve made the right decisions.”

He stared into Millius’s gray eyes, trying to find some hint that these were all just words of comfort, not genuine honesty. Of the five of them, he was the more stoic and clearheaded, keeping order and reliably delivering every task given to him. Before teaming up, he and Nack were so alike in the simulation runs that Dazz was given the impression that they were also equal in personality. In reality they were so different it was hard to believe the two were best friends. Dazz envied him. “You would have been a better leader.”

“I wouldn’t have gone after Berwick personally,” the other man rationalized soberly, “the odds were in his favor. If I had to make a decision, I would have called a team to follow him.” He shook his head, “but we’d be sitting ducks in Stohess. And we’d be dead if we didn’t leave the building – there’s nothing left of it now.” He reached up and squeezed Dazz’s shoulder, “if you want to know why we follow you, it’s because all through training everyone’s seen how much you’ve changed. We’ve seen you do everything you could to be a better soldier.”

“I wasn’t the only one,” Dazz countered, “have you seen Armin? And Thomas and Mina got into the top ten.”

Millius nodded in agreement. “Yeah, but they didn’t stay behind to find our history, you did, and that’s arguably more important than going off to fight titans.” Dazz opened his mouth to protest, but Millius cut him off, “and we wouldn’t have come until you opened your mouth about it. I don’t know what your definition of a leader is, but for me a leader knows how to use the strengths of each
member of the team, you’ve done that. They aren’t cocky, they carry themselves with a humility and self-awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses. You need more confidence, but you’ve never let it rule over your decisions. They have charisma – if you haven’t realized, you managed to inspire over hundreds of soldiers and military policemen to fight an impossible battle with sixty meter titans.” He let out a small breath that could have passed as a laugh. “I guess one flaw for a leader is that they put the needs of others before themselves. Sterben solidified my belief that I chose the right person to follow.”

Dazz looked away and fought the lump in his throat. He didn’t want to be reminded of Sterben and what could have almost happened. He’d been so terrified for his teammates, all he could think about was it was all his fault and he had to keep them safe somehow. He was even ready to sacrifice himself.

“We were stuck in that pod with Berwick for only a few seconds. He could have killed us the moment he recognized our faces,” Millius went on, “I should have been scared, but I wasn’t.”

“Now you’re just rubbing it in,” Dazz mumbled.

“Dazz look around you.”

Reluctantly, he lifted his head and did so, not feeling any better with all the grief stricken citizens surrounding him. “If this is supposed to make me feel any better…”

“There are over three thousand citizens of Stohess. Two thirds evacuated before the bombs went off, that’s two thousand lives saved. Of the one thousand left I think the current number is one hundred and eighty civilian casualties. There’s three other refugee campsites. You worked with Dawk, Pixis, and Marlo to form the plan to capture Berwick. It didn’t work out the way we wanted, but the fact that the city was evacuated as a precaution saved many more lives than if we hadn’t prepared that far ahead.”

There were hundreds of people in this camp alone.

“The Ape Titan is the titans greatest and only leader,” Mike spoke up without turning around. Dazz blinked in surprise, he’d completely forgotten the man was walking right in front of them. His cheeks started to burn now that he realized the older man was listening to their conversation. “He was defeated in Maria a few hours ago. With Berwick’s capture we have now sealed the fate of the titans. Humanity won today. You were brave to face him again with all your injuries.”

“All right, I get it,” Dazz huffed, “I’m awesome. Balls of steel. Whatever.”

Millius snickered and pat him on the back hard enough to make a loud smack and some bruises smart. Before another argument could occur, the three reached a tent where the crowd thinned down. At the front there were two stationary guards who saluted Mike and allowed him to walk inside.

There wasn’t much to gawk at. The tent was made not more than an hour ago, and contained only a flimsy plastic table and a woman who looked like she went through hell. She was beat up pretty bad, some bruises and cuts dotted her face and whatever was exposed from what was once an expensive blouse. She looked very familiar with her bright eyes and blonde hair, like an older version of…

“Gentlemen, this is Mrs. Reiss, the mother of your friend Historia,” Mike said, waving them to sit down at the table, the woman flinched at the name, but said nothing. “Mrs. Reiss this is Dazz and Millius – recruits from the 2104th, they trained with your daughter.”

If Dazz recalled correctly, Armin mentioned something about Christa re-christening herself as
Historia Reiss. He had yet to figure out why.

The three exchanged quiet greetings, then immediately turned to Mike for direction. He gestured to the older woman, who jumped a little and quickly pulled something from her lap. It was an old white cloth of a sturdy material that was yellowed with age and split in some areas. Spreading it out on the table, all in the tent could see that it was an old and frayed flag. At the center was the head of a woman with a crown, an old language embedded on the ribbon that surrounded her.

Anyone could recognize the woman as Sina.

“The colossal titans stopped moving after this flag was shown to them,” Mike said as Dazz and Millius leaned closer in fascination, “Mrs. Reiss, would you care to explain why that was?”

The blonde nodded, pushing a stray hair behind her ear, “it was just a legend in the Reiss family. I didn’t believe it was real until this afternoon when Stohess was bombed…” she fingered the loose threads of the fabric nervously, “according to legend there was a man who was a master in alchemy – some time before the walls were erected. People would come to him for cures to illnesses, and revered him as the greatest alchemist of their time. When the first titans started popping up he figured out a way to steal their power and have humans use it to fight back. The titans were stronger though, and in the end, what was left of the human army – the colossals – were sacrificed into forming the walls so that humanity would remain protected after the titans devoured the rest of the world. This flag is a symbol of Sina; created by the alchemist and the only anchor the colossals had to humanity.” She looked to Dazz and Millius, and the more they took in the shape of her face and eyes, the more they could see Historia that it was unnerving. “I thought it was a bedtime story, but…when Stohess fell I took a chance and ran here with the flag hoping it would help.”

“You saved thousands of lives by doing so,” Mike said respectfully.

Mrs Reiss turned to him pleadingly, “is my daughter all right? I lost my phone – no one will tell me anything!”

“She’s fine. Unscathed,” Mike added, “my commander told me she was in the last sniping wave, the battle was over before they could go in hand to hand.”

Mrs. Reiss’s eyes started welling up and she let out a shuddering breath of relief, finally able to relax. Letting her take a moment to gather herself, Millius and Dazz studied the flag. The words weren’t of any language they’d seen before, including two thousand years ago when the dialect was vastly different to the present. If the legend was actually true, that meant that this was a dead language from the world before the titans.

“This guy wasn’t an alchemist,” Millius muttered, lightly fingering the stitching of Sina.

Dazz nodded, “he was a scientist. Experimental. And like Dr. Jaeger, he figured out a way to make titan shifters.” A chill ran up his spine, “do you think those colossal’s still have humans piloting them?”

“Berwick survived for two millennia. Supposedly,” Millius shrugged, “but to be in a titan for that long, and standing in one spot with no space at all to move around? Stomping around Stohess is exactly what I’d do. This flag must have reminded them of their duty to protect the city and froze them on the spot.” He shook his head sadly, “but if their human bodies survived, Special Ops would have made some noise by now. No, they’re gone.”

Sobering silence fell over them. The only one feeling out of the loop was Mrs. Reiss, who was trying to wrap her head around the idea that the family legend might actually be true.
“Are there any flag bearers?” Mike asked, “for Maria and Rose?”

Mrs. Reiss shrugged and shook her head, “I married into the family, the legend is all I know.”

The squad leader turned to Dazz and Millius, “you two are the historians, did you read anything regarding the walls?”

“We didn’t have enough time to find anything like that,” Dazz said darkly, thinking of Sterben. “But Rheinberger went with a team to this cave holding historical pieces of the lost era. Has there been any contact with them? I heard they found identification of Berwick from the Wiped Era, maybe they found something about the Wall origins.”

“Actually…” Millius mumbled, brows set in deep frown, “I came across a theoretical book on the Walls before enlisting. ‘A Look into Sina, Rose, and Maria by The Ever Clever Balto’.” Dazz raised his eyebrows. Having gone through book after book of history since the first appearance of titans, he was surprised he didn’t hear of this. “It’s been discredited by the board of archeology, and banned in all districts,” Millius explained, “I happened to come across a salvaged copy when I visited an aunt. There were a lot of typos and the subject constantly changed. I couldn’t believe it got approval to be published…”

“Wait,” Dazz shook his head, “The Ever Clever Balto? You wouldn’t happen to mean – ”

“Lord Balto,” Millius finished, “coincidentally, after his book was banned, he was sent to the psychiatric facility in Yalkell for his crazy theories. After three months he escaped and went to Sterben where Berwick killed him.”

“What was this book about?” Mike asked with interest.

“I was ten when I read it,” Millius muttered apologetically, “the most I remember is basically the legend you told us,” he nodded to Mrs. Reiss, “titans trapped within the walls. A scientist who first discovered the titan gene. There was a giant paragraph about a list he found with the names of the soldiers that sacrificed themselves to become the walls. He also talked a lot about a treasure in Sterben and very strong opinions regarding the legitimacy of the monarchy – kept saying they were frauds. But now that I think about it I bet he was starting to remember the Wiped Era, he just couldn’t interpret the memories right – that’s why people thought he was crazy, and why his book was banned. He couldn’t prove his theories unless he went to the cave – which he tried, but Berwick cut him off before he could.”

“Maybe Berwick influenced the board to ban the book,” Dazz said, thinking quickly, “and because he knew Balto was remembering, he sent him to Yalkell. Balto’s reputation would be destroyed – no one would believe his theories.”

Mike cleared his throat pointedly. Snapping out of it, the two young men looked at him sheepishly, but he was secretly pointing to Mrs. Reiss from his crossed arms. She looked very confused.

“I’m sorry, what?” she shook her head as if to shake the disorientation away, “are you saying he had memories of the Wiped Era?”

“Oh.” Dazz felt himself go hot and cold, darting from the woman to the squad leader. Mike’s eyes on him hardened, very softly shaking his head. “It’s a long story,” he waved it off, and went back to looking at the flag, “so about that legend – ”

“This is Chief Dawk to all squads.”

Mrs. Reiss looked around worriedly as everyone fell silent.
The news of Jean waking up spread throughout the village despite Erwin trying to keep things quiet. Within minutes, most of his friends able to walk were huddled outside in the hallway, anxious to see him and get the full story. Levi had to step outside to control them, much to his displeasure.

Eren remained in the room on Erwin’s request.

Jean explained as much as he could about what he saw in the Ape Titan, but it wasn’t enough to answer some of their questions. Namely if he was now influenced to side with the titans. According the paper the old Hanji wrote, she saw similar visions Jean experienced, and was beginning to doubt her faith in the war and in humanity.

Hanji was one of the most resolute soldiers Erwin ever met. What could she possibly have seen to make her rethink herself?

And if she was that easily influenced, then what about Jean?

The young man settled down after his story, leaning back against his propped pillows and looking like a tremendous weight was lifted off his shoulders.

“Now what?” Eren said impatiently, “are you siding with the titans?”

Jean didn’t answer. Behind Erwin, Eren sucked his teeth and shuffled around in frustration. The commander remained calm, watching Jean closely, a poker face planning out the next move. The new shifter had been throwing glances at Marco, biting the corners of his lips and fighting off tears every now and then. He said the Ape titan had been a creature before the fall of humanity. Not truly an ape despite all the bony evidence, but a hybrid.

Part man. Part primate. His structure gave the impression that he was an animal, yet what Jean saw gave more insight to the truth.

He wasn’t a natural phenomenon.

He was a plaything.

The people were ignorant to the world outside the walls. Probes took great strides for them to learn, however, they can only go so far. To study an animal cost a vast amount of money that always risked the technology being destroyed by a wandering titan. More money was being shoved to the space program, and for a time no probes went outside beyond one hundred miles of the outer walls. What was studied most exhaustively though, were the monkeys that had yet to go extinct. This was all thanks to researchers wanting to learn more about a link between them and the Ape Titan.

Nothing was found. Not with better investigation that required physically being there. The project was killed off twenty years ago.

In an effort to not let this information go to waste, it was taught to students. Erwin among them.

If he recalled his lessons right, the chimpanzee had a bad reputation of becoming aggressive once it reached adulthood. Jean described the Ape Titan’s original body to have been a mutated chimpanzee. Mutated, because it had the hands, feet, and intelligence of a human.

Human intelligence plus primate aggression plus nurtured hate for humanity. That was bedlam
waiting to happen.

“The Ape was an experiment of Dr. Reiss,” Erwin repeated one of Jean’s earlier explanations, “and since birth, he was abused and taught to hate humanity.”

Jean nodded.

“Declaring war against humanity was inevitable. Dr. Reiss should have seen it coming, and from what you seem to be implying…he wanted the Ape to do it.”

“But Dr. Reiss left right after the Ape took the titan gene,” Jean said quietly. “He had a private office away from the Ape. When he left he cleared it out but let behind a sketch of blueprints. The beginnings of the Walls.”

Erwin shut his eyes. He could feel his youth sap out of him the more he let the tale sink in.

“Everything that led up to this point.” Eren said shakily, his eyes wide in dawning horror, “the walls…the titans. They were the makings of a lunatic…!”

“Was there anything you saw that explained Dr. Reiss’s motive?” Erwin asked.

Jean shrugged, “what I saw was through the eyes of the Ape. When he burst into Dr. Reiss’s office it was mostly empty…” his voice softened, “there was a photograph though. Three girls. Siblings I think…”

“Daughters?” Erwin suggested.

“Probably. Yeah I think so…” Jean nodded distantly. “Actually…without all the details. They would be the faces of Sina, Rose, and Maria.”

More heavy silence followed. Pieces were falling into place.

The Ape Titan was a creation by Dr. Reiss. He would be his pawn in order to…what? Kill off humanity? That didn’t explain the blueprints of the walls or the obvious that Sina, Rose and Maria were named after three women in the man’s life. Erwin backtracked and shook his head, he was looking at this the wrong way. This wasn’t about extermination at all. The walls were made to protect humanity, there were even religions built around them.

“This was all a plot to paint Dr. Reiss the hero,” Eren concluded, though his tone hinted that he wasn’t sure himself.

“If that were the case Dr. Reiss would not only be the name the cults would be worshipping, he would be humanity’s king,” Erwin shook his head. “He abused the Ape and taught it to hate humans. Then planned out the walls in order to save them. It’s almost like he wanted to teach us a lesson. That we’re evil and spoiled. Once we got tipped off the food chain, we began to see how vulnerable we are…when you have a common enemy, you group together and find strength in each other to fight back.”

Eren almost snorted. “Pixis said the same thing to me once. I still think it’s awfully optimistic.”

“Actually, at the beginning,” Erwin said, “you can tell that a larger number of people than today volunteered to fight titans. There was a time when the Scouting Legion were viewed as heroes. It was brief, but it existed. Time helped corrupt our government and armies, that’s where Dr. Reiss failed.”
“He didn’t fail,” Jean said softly, “time made humans show their true colors. There’s nothing worth saving.”

The soldier’s standing guard eyed Erwin meaningfully, fingers itching to pull the trigger to their guns. Eren kept them at bay by breaking the spell with a fierce scowl enough to put Levi to shame. “You’re not exactly helping your situation. Idiot.”

Jean didn’t muster the energy to retaliate, and Erwin took his chance to point out the obvious. “You have the ability to shift. You’re inside human territory. Why aren’t you killing us off yet?” then he added lightly, “are you waiting for Marco’s orders? You’ve been throwing glances at him the whole time we’ve been talking.”

The younger man jolted, amber eyes struck with surprise.

“You’re conflicted, Jean. The memories of the Ape are making you believe we should be killed, but your own thoughts still believe we’re worth saving. Your problem is you care for us too much to carry out the Ape’s wishes.” As it left his mouth, Erwin realized it was true. There was something off about Jean, but nothing as severe as Marco. Jean was too honest to be cold and calculating, he could see it all over the man’s face. The Ape’s memories were influencing his thoughts, but not enough to betray his own kind. What Jean was feeling was pity. He wanted to do something to fix it, but it was too late. The Ape was gone. All that was left was for humanity to reclaim the world.

The door slammed open, Sasha and Connie bursting in as an commendable impersonation of a mini hurricane. “Jean!” they yelled, crowding around their friend, ignoring the hand Erwin raised to stop them, “we heard you woke up! How are you? Everyone’s flipping their shit about you! – What’s with these chains!?”

“Oh…er…everyone?” Jean managed, completely disoriented.

Quickly forgetting her own questions, Sasha threw herself across the bed and pulled him in a tight hug that didn’t look in the least bit comfortable, but Jean did nothing to push her off. Erwin looked at the doorway and found Levi grumpily patting his pants where he undoubtedly must have fallen over. Turning away before he could laugh at the sight, Erwin waited for the small group to calm down.

The presence of Connie and Sasha seemed to upset Jean further, his face was twisted in pain, and he was unable to look at them as they babbled on. It was probably what he needed. Jean was at a crossroads, he needed to be reminded of the people he still cared for. Erwin needed to let that influence the young man’s confused head.

“Would you be willing to kill them? They’re humans too,” he said. Jean threw him a sharp glare while Connie and Sasha looked at their commander in innocent confusion. They were like the comedic duo of an otherwise tragic play, Erwin mused. As good as they were, the pair didn’t get away with a few scratches. Sasha’s left eye was patched over, and Connie had his arm covered in a hurried cast. Erwin was impressed they had enough energy to bounce around.

The commander looked at Marco. Asleep and chained to his bed. His freckled face looked much younger when he was sleeping, peaceful and innocent, it was difficult to believe he was capable of hurting people. Erwin turned back to the doorway where Levi was now leaning against the frame with his arms crossed, eyeing him pointedly. He shifted to the three young adults still huddled together.

“The Stohess bomber was captured,” Erwin said casually. Jean froze. Connie and Sasha immediately at attention. “It was a shifter by the name of Berwick. His other crimes include the murders of several particular individuals, the Bodt family among them. He’s allegedly a spy for the Ape Titan.”
The silence returned. Jean’s friends looked like the air had been sucked out of them.

“What?” Eren said softly.

“They have him imprisoned just on the other side of Rose,” Erwin went on. Jean’s eyes connected with his over Sasha’s shoulder. Terribly lost and sad. “It would be easy for Marco to go there and seek the revenge he’s been craving for.”

“What’s going on?” Connie asked, looked around the room in concern. “The bomber killed Marco’s parents?”

Erwin didn’t answer, he stood and excused himself, “Eren, come with me.”

The shifter did a double take, “wha – but…” he looked to Sasha and Connie helplessly.

“It’s okay,” Sasha smiled brightly, cuddling closer to Jean, who winced from her painful grip. “We’ll protect him.”

“But…” Eren hesitated. He looked to Jean anxiously and was only met with a halfhearted shrug. Now liking this, Eren grudgingly followed the commander out of the room. He was so confused, that he missed the look Levi gave Connie and Sasha, which was returned with grave nods before the door shut, cutting them from view. “Commander, Jean has no idea how to control his abilities. He could shift without meaning to! Connie and Sasha are unnecessarily in the way!”

“I’ve already debriefed them, Eren, don’t shit yourself,” Levi swiftly answered. The taller man whipped around in shock, but awkwardly shut his mouth looking like an overgrown child trying to not look like he was scolded by a man half his size. Levi nodded curtly to Erwin, “I’ve sent her to Stohess.”

“Her? Who?” Eren snapped his attention to the commander.

“Good. I need you two to go to Shiganshina,” Erwin replied, completely ignoring Eren’s question. Both men paused and regarded their commander with concern one would feel toward a friend losing their mind. Eren opened and closed his mouth feeling dizzy and out of the loop. Not that this was anything new when it came to his superiors. “Levi you mentioned after your seizure that the original point of the mission was to seal Wall Maria. The next phase was to infiltrate Shiganshina for a basement that held secrets to the titans. Part one’s done; the titans are ignoring us for the moment. Now’s the best time to take action.”

“There’s nothing in Shiganshina,” Eren argued with a tone of sadness.

“The probes only took images above. Not what’s underground,” Erwin reasoned, “I need you both to see if the basement still exists and if it’s any use to us. Take one of the helicopters.”

“We’ll need Hanji,” Levi said.

Erwin shook his head, “I need Hanji here,” now the corporal grew suspicious.

Erwin couldn’t have overheard his conversation with the doctor, could he? Levi resisted the urge to look at Eren. There’s no way the younger man was stupid enough to console with the commander…

“Hanji would have a nerdfest in Shiganshina. Is there a reason you want this mission to be just us?” he questioned snappishly, “There are other perfectly capable soldiers who can provide first aid. What’s the deal?”
Erwin quirked an eyebrow, his face growing stern and not at all playful. That pretty much said he didn’t know shit between Eren and Levi, and he was starting to wonder why his corporal was acting so weird. “We have a shortage of medical help, Hanji’s the only one apart from the doctor who can detect if anyone’s been hit with the titan gene. Marco and Jean weren’t the only ones in close proximity to the Ape Titan. Dr. Jaeger’s not sticking around either, he’s heading back to Jinae to work on making more buffers.”

Levi wasn’t about to be tricked just yet. He narrowed his eyes at the older man. “Sending two men into titan territory is suicide. What makes you think they won’t change their minds and eat us on the spot?”

“What makes you think the colossals on the other side of Rose won’t start moving again?” Erwin countered smoothly, “The only thing keeping them from the sun is a piece of cloth that could blow away at a moment’s breeze. Even if none of them move, the bomber’s still there, and he has not yet received the buffer. I need every man available in case he risks shifting. Eren’s your best bet at safety. If the titan’s find you appetizing, he can order them to back off.”

Levi pursed to his lips. “You,” he said tersely, “are an asshat.”

“Noted,” Erwin curled his lips into a subtle grin, “now go.”

Rose
Refugee Camp

Dazz and Millius managed to make it to the other side of camp in record time the moment Nile’s team arrived carrying four stretchers. In the chaos, the two couldn’t tell who was who, the injured were that wrapped up. It was only when they got to emergency aid that they got the full story from Boris.

“We dug most of what was aboveground,” he said, his proof being his entire body cast in a thick layer of fresh concrete powder. It was nothing compared to Hannah, who needed to get her hands bandaged for blindly digging through endless pounds of rubble. Dazz couldn’t be sure, but he swore one of her fingers was shorter than he remembered. “We reached a stairway that led to the basement and found a room that remained intact – an old cell that used to be part of a dungeon in our time. The king, Hitch, Franz, and Gustav managed to get there before the building caved in. They were out of oxygen by the time we reached them, but not for long and we had tanks on hand.” He held up a phone with a cracked screen, “this is Gustav’s, if we’re lucky, we can use it to our advantage.”

“What?” both said in unison.

“He’s been using it as a backup plan. Pixis’s orders,” he re-pocketed the device. “Idea came from the king himself.” He didn’t elaborate further, leaving Dazz and Millius to mull over what the phone contained.

Dazz looked at the four. Erik was being fretted over the most, but he was breathing properly again, and suffered less damage. Franz, thankfully, was in one piece, but he endured many broken bones. That was probably due to trying to shield the king with his body. Hitch got a concussion, they would know how far the damage went once she woke up, and Gustav was currently getting his broken arm looked after.

A few cots away, Marlo was arguing with a medic over his wounds. Dazz couldn’t believe the man had gone on the rescue mission so banged up. Then again, he’d gone after Berwick like an idiot so he couldn’t call himself smart either.
“You guys caught Berwick,” Boris said, changing the subject. “Has he said anything?”

“Not to our knowledge,” Millius muttered, breaking from their small group for Franz. Hannah finally escaped the clutches of the medics and rushed to her boyfriend’s side as well. Her bandaged hands were trembling, unable to touch Franz without hurting him or herself. Weakly, he opened his eyes and gave her a small smile.

Dazz knew he had no control over what happened to the Franz, but it didn’t lessen the responsibility weighing heavily on his shoulders. This was Sterben all over again.

“How did you capture him?” Boris’s asked, noting the change in composure.

“We uh…changed suits as Hannah said,” Dazz cleared his throat and blinked furiously. “Finding the clothes wasn’t hard, we ended up in a small shopping area in Jinae’s subways. Nack went ahead to keep a closer eye on Berwick once we tracked him down. Then we followed him into a safety pod in the shelter. We got a hold of a few…weapons in the security offices. They’re not even meant for battle, they’re – ”

“Meant for construction,” Boris nodded, he heard the story running around camp about Berwick being impaled by rods of metal. “That’s crazy. And Nack?”

“Back in Jinae, he opened his wound and stayed behind to get stitched up again,’ Dazz answered, cracking a tiny grin. Nack had put his artfully crafted words on the doctors in an effort to go back to Rose with the others, but the medics wouldn’t have any of it, “Did anything else – ”

“Urgh…” Erik stirred uncomfortably, weakly waving off the hands of his doctors. Dazz rushed to his side. “Anwir…” he mumbled, bruised eyes opening a tiny fraction. He shut them again and shook his head sluggishly.

“We have him under custody,” Dazz said as soothingly as he could. “You’re safe.”

“Take me home, Anwir…” Erik whimpered, “I’m not safe here…mom…”

Dazz backed off sadly. Seconds later, Erik passed out again.

The Next Day

Shiganshina

The district was as the probes reported. Taken over by nature, and run with titans. Not a single house was able to withstand their blind destruction or the ruthlessness of the elements. Maria had been a sobering sight. What Eren felt when he finally arrived home was emptiness.

Erwin’s orders gave no leeway for them to back out. He and Levi left as soon as they were given, but the day had been long, and by the time they reached Shiganshina, it was nightfall and too dark to do any real exploration even though night time was the perfect opportunity to slip passed the weakened titans. They ended up stripping down to their casuals and slept in the helicopter with some spare blankets Levi had the foresight of packing. It hadn’t been a peaceful night with all the titan’s stomping around and the constant threat of being eaten. The only good out of it was they survived.

Were this mission with anyone else, the titans would have been the main priority.

Finishing the last leg of standing watch, Eren ended up watching Levi toss and turn in his sleep. At first he thought the corporal was trying to get comfortable, but after a while, he realized the man was suffering from a nightmare. He would occasionally whimper and grunt, muttering names and short
exclamations. Eren shook him awake once, and when Levi realized where he was, he instantly calmed down and flushed with shame, then wordlessly fell asleep again only to have another nightmare.

When this happened, Eren decided to do what his mother did when he was little. He very gingerly lay down next to Levi, cold sweat shining over his pale skin, and ran a soothing hand through his hair, whispering soothing words in his ear. The whimpers and thrashing died down and for the rest of the night Levi slept peacefully. It had been hard for Eren not to doze off, but he managed.

He waited another hour until the skies lightened before he got up and took it upon himself to prepare breakfast. They didn’t pack much of food – this was supposed to be a quick trip – so he made do with sandwiches and tea. The latter was made by using an old portable induction stove he found forgotten in one of the helicopter’s compartments. It was a pleasing sight for Levi to see steaming tea ready for him when he woke up, though how he could stand such a hot beverage in the summer Eren had no idea.

The awkward tension between them was palpable.

There were so many things Eren wanted to say. He didn’t know where they stood, or if Levi was too ashamed to talk about his nightmares. Things shouldn’t have been awkward between them, Eren left for battle thinking things had worked out, but when they got back to Isra Levi avoided him every chance he got. It stung.

He’d been just as suspicious of Erwin sending them on a dangerous mission together with no back up, but unlike Levi, he could see why the commander chose them. Levi was still considered a man worth an army, and he proved that his seizure had no impact on his ability to fight. As unbelievable a feat that was. Even if it did, Eren was still the coordinate, he could fight off any titans and get the corporal to safety. This all rode on the possibility of the titans breaking their current peace with the humans.

Paranoia left them to suit up in their Manuever X as soon as morning hit, so when they had breakfast, they were already suited up. Eren watched discretely over his paper cup as Levi stretched his back before enjoying his tea in silence. Not for the first time Eren thanked Sky Industries for making such a revealing suit, even sitting cross-legged he could see how lithe and powerful the other man’s body was, the lines and plates emphasizing his build. So close yet so far away.

Levi let out a small sigh of content and set down his finished tea, he seemed unaffected by the restless night. Their eyes locked. Horrified at being caught, Eren quickly looked away and wolfed down the rest of his breakfast. Thankfully keeping quiet, Levi got up and went to his bag for his tablet. Eren’s face was still burning when he finally spoke.

“Colossals haven’t moved yet,” he skimmed through the report mailed to him. “Media’s gone nuts though. Nothing’s been leaked on the bomber other than his arrest.”

Eren accepted the tablet handed to him. There was a window of an email sent from Erwin, and then another of a media site covering different stories regarding Stohess. To his knowledge, news reports would have a few articles on devastating events much like the Jinae bus accident, but because they were a part of certain districts, the coverage was usually limited and would get a front page spot for only one day, or even a note on the lesser known areas of some sites. Yesterday was so huge, though, that it covered the entire site.

Wall Feed, which was the most popular news site, offered news from all districts including links to other similar sites. The main page would display top stories with images and live stream videos. On the top bar where districts were listed, the only thing on each headline news was Stohess.
Splashed on the site’s main page was Stohess Wiped Out followed by a photograph of the destroyed city, and citizens being rushed out by medical personnel. Other big stories were of the colossals, Dr. Jaeger’s patients, and an investigative article regarding the bombs planted on Stohess’s walls.

Not one section was clean of the effects of Stohess. In the entertainment world celebrities were mourning fellow colleagues that died in the bombings and donating piles of money to victims. The same was repeated in the section dedicated to sports. Even the business and finance section were discussing the cost of Stohess and how deeply it would affect the rest of the districts. Not everything painted the military in pretty colors, unfortunately. There were two or three criticizing the preparedness of the police over the bombings, and one heavily questioned the scouting legion’s use to humanity when they weren’t present during the colossal rampage.

“They don’t know about the Ape Titan,” Eren murmured bitterly. “These reporters lack the ability of keeping their articles neutral. They always have to have an opinion.”

“That’s how the world runs today,” Levi said flatly. “A reporter can wage war with just a flick of a pen.” Disgusted, Eren handed the tablet back; looking at Wall Feed reminded him how harshly they criticized Erwin and Levi in the past. “It’s best that they don’t know of the Ape yet. It could cause unnecessary hopes to rise. A few idiots might think it’s safe to leave the walls.”

“Mm,” Eren agreed on that aspect. In his time people were afraid of going outside the walls. It was still true in the present, but unlike millennia ago people had become a little too adventurous. The amount of videos Wall Feed uploaded were mostly from citizens who were more concerned with filming the catastrophe than their own lives. “We should get going,” he set down his cup and started gathering the remnants of their breakfast. “Get this basement job over with so we can get back to base.”

“Eren.”

He paused and looked up, his anger over the news paling with the tone Levi used. Quiet, calm. Soft. It made his heart flutter with hope. Stubbornly, he bit it back with reminders that they were on a mission, if Levi was going to talk to him, it was going to be over more pressing matters than anything to do with their almost nonexistent relationship. Eren tried not to look too eager.

Levi parted his lips, then shut them, thinking better of whatever he was going to say. He actually flushed, a dust of pink blossoming over his pale cheeks. Eren hadn’t seen such a reaction in a long time. That hope he’d been squashing punched back with a force it almost made him whimper.

“Thank you. For the tea.” Levi turned away and stuffed his tablet back in his bag.

Just as quickly, that persistent hope was shot and left to wither. Eren was either going to return a polite reply or snap. Levi didn’t notice anything amiss, grabbing his empty cup and stuffing it with his used napkin. Cool, collected. They were attributes Eren admired of the older man, but now it just pissed him off.

“For fucks sake!” he snapped. Of course he would snap. Two thousand years, and better upbringing would never be enough to blanket Eren’s short temper. Instead of being surprised the corporal looked relieved. “You’re just going to sit there and pretend nothing ever happened between us aren’t you!?” The cup he was still holding caved in his grip with a soft ‘pop’. “You giant brat!”

Levi bristled, “I’m not the one yelling, brat.”

“Is it because I’ve gotten older?”
“What?”

“I’m not seventeen anymore, right? You can’t find me attractive any – ”

“If you finish that sentence I will fucking shove a grenade so far up your ass you’ll never shit again!” Levi hissed frostily. Angrily, Eren swallowed the rest of his sentence, settling with glaring at the shorter man. “We’re not doing this here.”

Eren’s mouth curled in disgust of those words, and his hands clenched with clamminess of hurt and loneliness. Fucking loneliness. It was another thing he had to fight while growing up with his nightmarish memories. He didn’t have Mikasa or Armin to anchor him to sanity, he had to do it all on his own. He’d been so jealous of Jean and Marco, wishing that one day Levi would come to him and hold him just as they held each other.

Was it selfish of him to want to be loved?

The question hurt even more, and he could feel himself deflate as it stabbed him over and over.

He bit his tongue. “If you don’t feel the same way…and it’s not because I’m younger or you’re my superior, then just say so.” His lips thinned to a line in an effort not to explode with heartbreak. He felt like a child again. “I’ll back off. I swear.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Levi crossed his arms and looked away, scowling at himself with frustration. “I need time. I…” he huffed and ran an irate hand through his hair, “you don’t understand. I’ve grown up in this life thinking I’ve seen the worst in this war, but then all these memories come back…all the deaths I’ve had to witness. So much more than how it is now.” His eyes glazed distantly, reliving whatever horrors were swimming in his head. “And I never caved from the pressure. Not even once…” His voice began to shake. He seemed fragile. All the anger and hurt Eren felt quickly sapped out of him. “How cold must I have seemed to them? I must have been like a shell.”

“Levi…” Eren hesitantly reached out. His hand shook with the sudden dramatic change. It scared him.

“Do you know how terrified I was when I found out my squad left for Stohess?” Levi mumbled, just barely above a whisper. Pale and wide eyed. “I should know that death is a common occurrence in war. Even if they died, I should have respected their deaths as soldiers. But I was terrified!”

“Levi,” Eren cautiously stepped closer and framed his face in his hands, forcing Levi to focus on him, “They’re fine. All of them. You have to let it go.”

Levi let out a shuddering breath. “How were you able to handle this for twenty years? Didn’t you have nightmares?”

Eren softened sadly. “Of course I did. We all did.”

Levi sighed again, gently prying Eren’s hands off him. The initial shock of his past life coming back to him felt like he woke up from a long sleep. But as time wore on, the more it sank in, and the older he felt. There was so much weight on his shoulders, piling with faces of unnamed soldiers. Their families sobbing over their remains. Petra’s father obliviously chatting away about marrying his daughter off to him. Unaware that she was never coming home again…

And Eren was able to blow past that and live his new life. He was barely into his twenties, and though he was wiser, he didn’t look as scarred as he’d been when Levi first met him in that dungeon long ago. He looked healed. There was only a ghost of the enraged child in this now calm young
“You’ve grown,” Levi found himself mumble.

“That’s a good thing, right?” Eren blinked. Levi scowled again and uttered ‘idiot’ under his breath, but it put a smile on Eren’s face, though it didn’t last long. “Levi.” He wrapped his arms around him, feeling the tension between them drop enough to feel safe to do so. It was such a relief to have him in his arms again, even if the plates on their suits dampened the hug from feeling more natural, “I didn’t have anyone to help me with the nightmares. I had to get over them on my own. But you have me now. So it won’t take you twenty years.” He stared over Levi’s shoulder at the wall of their small helicopter where a row of empty seats were lined up with parachute packs overhead. He focused on them instead of him, needing to keep himself grounded otherwise he’d embarrass himself with a breakdown. “I won’t push you anymore. And if you want to stay friends. Then that’s okay.” He fought down a lump in his throat.

“I just need time.”

Eren nodded, hating those words. “I’m sorry for trying to…” He blinked furiously, “it’s just been so long. Our time together was too short. I thought I’d never see you again…”

Levi relaxed a little, letting his head rest against his shoulder. It was more than Eren could hope for. They held each other for a while longer, with only the heavy thumps of titans outside to keep them mindful that they weren’t in safe territory. Eren soaked up this moment between them from the plain soap smell on Levi’s hair, to his frame fitting perfectly against him. Carved it all in his memory because he didn’t know when he could ever have this again.

“We need to find that basement,” Levi said, pulling away, his cheeks still a little pink. “We’ll have a sob fest later. Let’s go.”
“You try getting out of that bed again, and I’m rearranging your face.”

Nack stuck his tongue out behind her back, then greedily dug into his snack. “I love you so much right now, Mrs. Jaeger,” he sighed through a full mouth. “Did you see Dr. Jaeger yet?”

“Yes, he’s fine, but we couldn’t talk much,” Carla answered shaking her head, “he went straight to the clinic after we met up. At least now I know Eren’s safe.” Nack hummed thoughtfully, chomping on another handful of chips. Carla decided to change the subject, “You shouldn’t stress your wounds like that,” she scolded, sitting down in the only chair next to the bed, “you’ll be no help if you end up opening something and bleeding to death.”

Nack paused midway into biting into a chip, his face darkening. “Those colossals are out there in plain sight.”

“The military’s already working on eliminating them,” Carla said, recalling a news report from the morning, “so far ten have been slain. The problem’s already being dealt with, you should focus on getting better.”

“I know,” he stared at his Yum Chips container heavily. “But I can’t help feeling like something’s off. Some of the Scouting Legion came over, but they’re putting their forces on Berwick. I thought Commander Smith would be out there too, but he hasn’t shown up. At least that’s what Dazz told me.”

“They’ve been fighting titans in Maria and suffered a lot of losses,” Carla pointed out sadly, “maybe he wanted to stay to personally handle their deaths.” She was about to continue, but Nack shook his head.

“Look, I’ve heard the stories. Commander Smith is not the kind of person who will leave an unfinished matter to another person. He’ll see it through regardless of the body count he leaves behind,” he paused thoughtfully and flushed, “that makes him sound like an asshole, that’s not what I meant…”

“No, I get it,” Carla nodded. Nack continued to eat, now much quieter and contemplative. In the short while they got to know each other, Carla was already growing fond of him. He was a ball of energy most of the time, but when he calmed down he showed how serious and surprisingly intelligent he could be. The earpiece had been taken from him, but he managed to procure a tablet from another soldier and constantly checked for updates from his friends. With each new message, he would fall into silence to mull over the gathered information. Carla wondered if Eren was like this in the Scouting Legion. So serious and always thinking.

She missed her son.

Her eyes landed on the plain slim key hanging around Nack’s neck. It was a skeleton key with a hollow square design on the handle. One of the few personal items he refused to be parted from. Carla had been wondering for a while now if it was given to him by someone he treasured. They were little trinkets she imagined soldiers carried to remind them of home. The idea that Nack had someone special enough to give him this key put a smile on her face.

“Say, Mrs. Jaeger,” he said thoughtfully, another chip between his salt and oil coated fingers. “Can I ask you a weird question?”

Blinking, she gave him her full attention, “sure.”

“So…” he stared at his one chip and took a bite from it with a comically loud crunch, “have you ever
at any point in your life – with your friends and not family ‘cuz that’d be weirder – felt like a third wheel?"

“Huh?” her face automatically twisted in confusion before she could let the question sink in and properly react. “Um. You mean if two of your friends are dating and whenever you’re hanging out it’s awkward?”

“No, more like,” he waved his hands abstractly and struggled for a better explanation, “maybe not a third wheel more like you’re sitting with your friends and two of them are super mushy and it’s awkward but your used to it except now you’re getting that same vibe from your two other not-dating friends and now your just sitting there alone and cracking jokes while hyperventilating in your head like ‘holy shit no fucking way! I need to get a girlfriend before I get labeled the loser! Why did I not see this before? What the fuck do I do? Do I help them or do I help myself? Shit!’” he lowered his hands and looked to Carla expectantly, then winced belatedly, “sorry, I swore didn’t I?”

And she sat there completely lost because she may have been fond of Nack, but she did not know him long enough to understand him or his friends to give the right answer. The best she could do was a smart, “Um…”

“Yep, I’m confused too,” Nack nodded forlornly, leaning heavily into his pillow. “Maybe I’m looking into it the wrong way.” He picked up another chip and nibbled on the crisp edge, his flash of energy gone again, “I feel like I’m losing my best friend.”

“Oh…” she softened and began to see what he was trying to say. “Sweetie, unless they’re trying their best to avoid you I doubt you’ll ever lose them. Unless you pull away first, which I don’t think is what you want either.”

He was pouting again, Carla ruffled his hair to get rid of it, and he chuckled at the gesture. The beep announcing a new message cut off anymore motherly teasing. Nack snatched the tablet from the portable table set next to his bed and eagerly read through the new information. Greasing up the screen with his dirty fingers.

“It’s from Rheinberger,” he announced quietly. Carla nodded, having heard him mention her every now and then. Nack said no more as he continued to read, his dark brows lowering further and further, lips curling in bewilderment. In the end he settled with, “you’ve got to be kidding me.”

“What?”

Nack looked up at her, thinking so hard he looked bemused. “We have a queen.”

Refugee Camp

That Night

As vigil as the soldiers were, the main priority still was to send survivors off to safer districts where they would remain until all the colossals were disposed of and any lasting dangers like gas leaks in Stohess were taken care of. There were still plenty of titans left, and that divided the attention of the military. With Berwick stuck in a flimsy van until a proper cell was prepared for him, it was the perfect opportunity to strike.

Or it should have been.

He snuck past the first round of guards as an EMI, the unfortunate victim knocked out and naked in his own van. He stayed in that disguise for another hour, helping anymore survivors in need of medical care. The act gave the passing soldiers enough trust not to suspect anything from him. The
real challenge had been to avoid recon soldiers and the elite squad. He was even more careful when he spotted Dazz and Millius skirting a little too close to him for comfort.

Keeping his head down and his ears on alert he was able to figure out that the van guarded so heavily was a fake. A few minutes later he took down a police guard as quietly as possible and donned his uniform. He dressed him in the EMI’s clothes, and arranged him in one of the ambulance’s explaining to the tired volunteer worker that he’d been attacked by a hysterical man. The man was taken care of, of course.

One more hour passed, now as a guard. He meshed in perfectly, talking comfortably with the affected citizens, gaining trust this way and that. It would have made anyone confident enough to continue on to their target, but he waited patiently. Lazy and crooked the military police were, but with Dazz and Millius in the mix, he knew he couldn’t get too cocky. He’d watched their progression in training. He knew what their minds were capable of.

Another hour passed, and cool and collected he found himself guarding the very van that held the murderer of his parents. Just as calmly, he waited thirty minutes before rotation was announced and he was given the chance to sit inside the van.

Just as always he kept his head down, the brim of his hat hiding half his face. He shuffled inside and slid onto the metallic bench next to Erd who was wielding a gun. He kept his nerves calm and stared across from him to the creature impaled by a numerous amount of metal poles and looking comically bored.

He was not surprised to see Erwin Smith sitting to the bomber’s right.

To his left was a young and beautiful woman with snow touched skin littered with cuts and bruises, and silky jet black hair framing her pretty face. War hardened Asian eyes stared stonily back at him, aiming a gun similar to Erd’s not to Berwick, but to him.

Sitting in the van with their little party was Mikasa Fucking Ackerman.
A Touch of Faith

Chapter Summary

The interrogation begins

Chapter Notes

thanks again to all you wonderful readers. I believe we're one more chapter away from finishing this! Sorry for any typos I might have missed!

The Palace

Before the Fall of Stohess

Pixis led a small team confidently through the maze of halls of the palace. There were more squads waiting outside under disguise to keep the situation calm. There were no alerts from the palace guards regarding the arrival of Anwir or the disappearance of the king, meaning they still had time to escort the royal out to safety.

“Gustav, have you ever had to handle anyone with anxiety disorders?” Pixis asked conversationally.

The young man answered grimly, “not recently.”

“Ah,” Pixis nodded, “this may not be a pleasing experience for you then. The king’s disorder can get quite severe. He hasn’t stepped outside since the death of his parents.”

Gustav nodded. “Guess that explains the nurse,” he said, referring to the sole burly nurse behind him. Dressed in white and sticking out against the earthy clothed officers in their small group.

They continued walking, passing portraits and closed doors; the rich carpeting softening their hurried steps. Some servants were still around, muttering to each other, not ashamed to stare at their presence. Pixis wondered if they knew the situation and if any information got leaked to the public.

Eventually they reached Erik’s room. His predecessors had an eye for showing off or expressing their personalities with their doors, to give a hint to visitors just who they were dealing with. Erik’s door, however, was designed to blend perfectly with the wall complete with an inconspicuous little table on the side holding a vase of fresh lilies. There was rumor that there was a hidden camera in the vase. The flowers gave no clue to the room it was hiding, they were constantly changed. The portraits nearby didn’t expose anything either, the only reason Pixis was able to pinpoint the right location was because he’d been over just as often as Nile.

The officers behind him shuffled nervously when he knocked on the wall. Probably thinking he’d gone insane. After a minute of silence, the door was pulled open to reveal a simple room inside with grand windows overlooking the gardens, a massive bed with matching pale sheets to compliment the
gold and white wash of the room, and an even more impressive television screen nailed to the opposite wall where no doubt the king played his video games.

The king himself stood before Pixis with a pair of scissors in his hand. His jeans and shirt torn in too many places to be considered artful. Erik was pale, and there was fear in his eyes, but he otherwise remained calm. Pixis glanced around the room past him just in case, but found no one else.

“So it’s true?” the king asked quietly, “Anwir’s…he really murdered all those people?”

“We’re tracking him down as we speak,” Pixis nodded, eyeing the trashed attire curiously. He knew the king was a little eccentric, but this was pushing it, “your highness, I think it would be most prudent for a change of clothes? We don’t have much time left and I doubt my men can hold off a killer who can shift into a titan.”

Erik looked down at himself and flushed. “All right,” he swallowed and fiddled with an extravagant ring on his right middle finger. Pixis was surprised he was wearing any jewelry at all, the king was not one for such things, especially rings. “But these clothes will come with me. I have an idea…”

He explained no further and walked almost robotically to his vast closet where he snatched some clothes, a bag and a black box. His hands shaking more as he proceeded to hurriedly change. The torn shirt and jeans were stuffed in his bag along with the box. Reluctantly satisfied, he returned to the officers and closed the door to his room with a finality that sounded like he was walking to his own doom.

Pixis watched the king carefully as they marched through the hallways of his palace. The farther away from his room they got, the more shallowly Erik breathed. He kept muttering ‘it’s okay, it’s okay’ under his breath, clutching his bag close. By the time they reached the entrance hall, his steps stuttered to a halt, and no matter how hard he tried to move, the fear kept him immobile until Gustav had to guide him to the doors.

That’s when the panic attack hit.

**Stohess Camp**

**Present**

“I’m guessing you guys want to say Checkmate?” Marco dropped his surprise for an unsurprised smirk.

“Marco,” Mikasa spoke, just the slightest twitch in her eyes expressing disappointment. She spoke her words heavily, digging each into his brain, “This is not your fight alone. Kill him now, and you will never find closure. Your parents would not want you to choose this path.”

“That’s hypocritical of you to say considering you killed the murderers of your own parents,” Marco threw back smoothly. Mikasa’s eyes narrowed. “I’ll settle my personal vendetta on my own terms, idiots. I’m here for some answers.”

Nobody moved when the engine purred to life.

**Shiganshina**

**Some Hours Ago**

It had been a long time since Eren had been to his old house, yet it was easy for him to locate where it had been. He recognized the distance from the wall, now eroded and taken over by vines and
wildlife, and where the sun hung from where his house stood. He walked up the small hill, his mind
providing him with images of the houses that used to dot it. The cobble stone streets were now a
spray of its leftovers, mostly hidden by grass and flowers. Eren gazed over the area morosely. There
were sparse hints of an old civilization still lying around, mostly frameworks of buildings that stuck
up from the ground, and boulders that used to be pieces of the wall.

At one point Eren came across something brown on the grass. A pipe, lumpy and rusty from time.
He imagined it being a part of a sink to a long dead friend’s kitchen. Or the kids who cornered
Armin for his curiosities of the outside world.

The thought of his best friend now lying immobile on a bed back at Isra sent a chill down his spine.

The pair stopped at the top of the hill where nothing but a patch of grass and a mossy boulder lay.
Not even bits of his house remained.

This was where his mother lay, pinned under their home and screaming for them to run away. Where
a giant hand grasped her broken body and lifted her effortlessly. Smiling with mad glee.

“Eren,” Levi’s voice brought him back, “this is it?”

Shaking himself, Eren turned to the corporal. They were both wearing their helmets now, so he only
saw a ghost of his face against the blinding sun.

“Yeah,” was all he could manage without his voice breaking. Levi either didn’t notice, or he chose to
ignore how quiet he became. Instead he pulled out a small grenade from the bag he’d been carrying
and pinned it under the boulder, setting it off for twenty seconds.

The pair took off in the air a good distance from the blast’s radius. A few nearby titans scrambled
away in fright from the explosion, but they didn’t lash out right after. They stared stupidly at the
cloud of dust, then returned to stomping around.

Automatically seeing past the dust, Eren’s helmet informed him of a small cavern below what had
been the remains of his old house. He and Levi floated down and landed just on the edge.

“That was easier than I thought,” Levi said listlessly, “only took us two thousand years.”

Eren snorted softly, feeling a little better with Levi’s wit. He activated his suit again and floated
further down to the interior of his basement, hearing Levi follow right behind and muttering
something about ‘filth’.

The basement was caved in from the explosion, but not too bad that a little digging couldn’t fix. Dust
and cobwebs were disrupted and floating around. The remnants they covered revealing themselves to
the two intruders. Eren felt his eyes water.

The basement had miraculously survived most of what time could throw at it. The walls were
cracked from tree roots and plant life moving in, but nothing could grow further as proved by the
lack of sunlight and well-crafted stone interior.

There was a table in the basement holding wicker baskets full of clothes that hadn’t seen daylight in
ages. Shelves lined the walls, full of books and curious little trinkets from a time long forgotten. Eren
walked over the fallen roof, and scanned the shelves, too marveled to get a word out. He recognized
a few of the books as tales his mother read to him at night. Legends of the walls and their spiritual
entities. He used to be mystified by the tales until Armin introduced him the greater wonders of the
outside world.
There were a few books here Eren didn’t recognize and assumed were texts his father didn’t want him to see. Careful for fear of breaking the shelf, he pulled out a particularly thick text, gloved fingers running over the intricately detailed embossed cover. He couldn’t read the title, just that it was one word in big gold letters. An illustration underneath depicted a blonde girl sitting daintily against a tree with a book on her lap. The basement preserved the book enough to remain untarnished save for the fading colors and bug bitten edges. Eren gingerly lifted the cover, internally wincing at the loud crinkles the spine made.

Another picture greeted him of a bright red apple that had been bitten in the corner.

“Where does this door lead to,” Levi broke the spell, and snapping the book shut with more force than he meant, Eren set it back on the shelf and hurried to Levi. He was standing near the back where there stood a rotted door. There was a rusty lock under the handle, some gold sticking out, stubborn against the time that had passed.

“I don’t have the key,” Eren realized, reaching up to his chest where the basement key used to hang. Levi gave him a long drawn out look. “Seriously?” he activated his holo-blade and stabbed through the door, effortlessly slicing it down. Splintered wood fell at their feet, making more dust puff out, “you wanted to use a key on a door that was already falling apart?”

Eren flushed and grumbled, “I haven’t been here in a while…”

Ignoring him, Levi used his holo-blade as a source of light and entered the dark room beyond. If the basement survived the test of time, this room had won the battle. The walls and floors were still in one piece, and no plant life had reached it. The only thing that it really needed was a thorough cleaning from all the dust and cobwebs that covered the room in a thick gray layer.

It was a small room, with one shelf and one desk. The latter was piled with books and papers that hadn’t been touched for two thousand years. The shelf itself was a mix of books and caged vials filled with dark substances and small solids floating inside.

Eren activated his own holo-blade on one hand and dusted off the desk with the other. The books here were much more different than the ones in the other shelf outside. They had strange titles and images of genetic codes. Even the material was similar to the textbooks handed out to schools in poor districts.

What had his father been involved in?

“Two thousand years ago your father was using science textbooks we now use in high schools,” Levi said, lifting one of them and eyeing the cover with narrow eyes, “this shit never existed back then…”

“They’re from a time before the walls,” Eren said softly in astonishment, “the titans wiped everything out and we had to start all over again.” He searched over the desk again, there was a set of drawers built on the side, all unlocked. They were filled with papers and rough sketches, mostly reports on experiments and documentation regarding patients his father worked with. One of them even had a picture of a smiling Mikasa when she was very little, long before Eren met her. The bottom drawer held a small leather bound journal. It looked promising.

Doing his own digging, Levi picked out one of books from the shelf, It was out of place with its neighbors, the picture on the cover depicting a lightning bolt. Upon opening it, he found a photograph inside of a creature looking sadly up from its crouched position. It was hairy and ape-like, but its hands and feet were human. Its arms also looked much longer than was normal for an
ape. On the flipside was a date going back before the walls or titans came to exist.

He flipped through the first blank pages of the book and came upon the title. It was in a language slightly familiar, but the scrawl underneath translated it as ‘Frankenstein’. It sounded like a made up word. On the next page before the story started was a note in the same handwriting.

‘A token for our work together, old friend. Thank you for your years of kindness to an old and weary outsider.’ It was signed by a ‘Viktor’.

The rest of the book looked to be written in the form of correspondence, but again Levi couldn’t understand the language. There were some words that looked very similar to the current dialect, but he knew they weren’t the same. ‘Die’ to him, was ‘death’ but the word was so constantly repeated in just one paragraph that he knew it held a different meaning. Other words like ‘Bedaurn’ he had a feeling meant a form of ‘regret’ but it was spelled differently. That word was now spelled as ‘bedan’.

It seemed like parts of the current language stemmed from whatever this one was from. They really needed Hanji to help them out with this…

There were no translated notes beyond the title. Dr. Jaeger must have either learned the language, or the book was meant to hide the photograph of the strange creature.

Levi was cut off his thought process when Eren swore loudly. He was holding the journal he found with wide eyes. The corporal leaned over to read what was so shocking. After finishing the entry, he could justify the younger man’s reaction.

I am writing this journal specifically for you, Eren. Most of my research regards you, and you deserve an explanation to what I’ve done. Even if it means I will never earn your forgiveness.

This story begins on the day I met a man by the name of Viktor. He came to me from a village outside the walls in search of sanctuary from the titans. His home was one of the few human villages that worshipped the titans, an idea he did not believe in. This was before I met your mother. We studied medicine together for a few years, and on accident during one of our experiments, he lost his arm. Before I had time to stop the bleeding, the stub of what was left began to steam, and repair itself in a matter of minutes. He revealed to me that he had the ability to turn into a titan on will. I didn’t believe him until he took me to the forest of giant trees in Maria. There he transformed into a titan of thirteen meters. I was terrified for my life.

Yet I was also hopeful.

Viktor told me that night that his true goal in getting in the walls was to search for a girl from his family. She ran away from the village and hadn’t been seen for over forty years. There had been searches for traces of her body, or clues of where she’d been, but nothing was found. I could only think that she had been eaten by a titan, but Viktor doesn’t believe it. She is of great importance to his village. So much that even the titans do not go near her. Some even show her human-like respect. Viktor came here under the hope that she managed to find a way in just like he did. So far his search has been fruitless, and as time continues, I don’t think she’s alive. Her name was Ymir.

According to Viktor, she was a girl of sixteen when she went missing. The reason for her departure from the village may have been pressure from her family in regards to her lack of belief for titans. In this sense, Viktor identifies with her, thus his motivation in finding her. I tried explaining to him that even if we didn’t find her, he is still on the side of humanity, and must therefore consider using his talent to help aid the Scouting Legion. Viktor rejected the idea. He did not wish the ability to ‘shift’ on anyone, especially those who wish to use it for their own gains. He hates titans, but he has no trust in humanity as a whole.
His opinion, however, changed at the time of the plagues that started up, he agreed to use his blood in our search to find a cure. He didn’t know that I kept a sample to use in my personal research on ‘shifting’. I thought if I could give our soldiers that ability, then we could be done with the war. At the very least the death tolls. Viktor sacrificed a lot in finding a cure. Including his life. I was left to handle the plagues on my own.

It was around that time that I married your mother and she became pregnant with you. She wasn’t aware of my secret research, nor that I came to a final formula that could theoretically gift humans with shifting.

You were born very weak. Carla took care of you as best she could, but as a doctor I knew you only had weeks of life left. I hit a point where I seriously considered giving you the formula, but I wasn’t sure if it would worsen your condition. I took some samples of your blood to try to test it against the formula. The result was your blood boiling out. I couldn’t save you this way.

I discovered an inconsistency with your blood, however. An anomaly I found in Viktor, but much smaller. I spaced out the time frame of the samples I took from you and found that the anomaly only grew stronger each passing week. I am still searching for the answer of why that is. When I met Viktor, he had with him a few books of the old world. He taught me some of the old language and I learned about an unchangeable ‘genetic code’ called ‘DNA’ within all living things on the planet. After discovering the anomaly in your blood I went back to those books and found that it’s very different to the humans from the old world.

The ‘DNA’ of humans are much weaker in design than the current generation.

One month passed and you survived my estimated date of death. The blood tests I’ve been taking from you are not only to make sure you have not been struck with illness, but to see if the anomaly continues to grow. It stabilized after your fifth age, and is drastically weaker than Viktor’s anomaly. This discovery and curiosity regarding Viktor’s books has led me to test the blood of my patients, Carla, and myself.

We all have the same anomaly, but in much weaker levels than yours. The only reason I haven’t caught it firsthand is because they are so faint they’re almost undetectable. The anomalies grow strong in children, though not at the level yours currently is, then grow weaker when they hit puberty. I feared that when your anomaly weakens, you will also follow and fall into the same state of when you were an infant. Thus I worked to find a solution in keeping that anomaly strong for the rest of your life.

There is a consequence. Should the anomaly stay at the level if strength it’s currently at, further purified by my formula, if I complete it, you will have the ability to shift just as Viktor. When the time comes that I must give you my new formula, I can only hope that I can explain it to you in person, and not in this journal.

“Ymir,” Levi muttered, “there was a journal a soldier left behind outside the walls before being eaten. Wrote down every detail about a titan she came across. It bowed and mistook her as Ymir, then got pissed when it realized its mistake.” He leafed through the fragile pages, “I’m gonna hazard a guess that she was some kind of ‘chief’s daughter’ for that village. Ymir still has no recollection of her past life before joining the military. Says being a titan turned her into a clean slate until she figured out a way to be human again.”

“My dad gave me an injection before running off – back when Shiganshina was invaded,” Eren explained, a frown marring his face, “he kept apologizing over and over…if everyone has this ‘anomaly’ does that mean we all have the potential to shift?”
Levi looked past Eren to the vials sitting on the shelf. “He said the books of Viktor showed no anomalies in the DNA of our ancestors. So, yeah, I’m guessing we all do. How else could the Ape turn us into titans?”

Scratchy shuffling snatched their attention. They held out their holo-blades in preparation and eased out of the tiny office. A smallish titan three feet taller than Eren slipped into the basement and was slowly moving around. It stumbled over the table and shelf, then fell to its knees and lay flat on the floor, melting into dust within minutes.

Eren was at a loss. The sight made him want to throw up. Next to him, Levi sneered in disgust, “This is why we needed Hanji.”

To a Place Unknown

Present

Mikasa and Erd hesitated. Erwin didn’t move a muscle. The van drove on smoothly to wherever their driver was taking them. Marco turned his attention to Berwick, frozen into a sitting position from all the metal sticking out of him. Whatever pain he felt was left to the imagination of his observers because he was currently watching the scenario with boredom. When their eyes met, the bomber only arched an eyebrow. Marco smiled and wrapped his hand around one of the poles closest to him.

Mikasa was on alert again, “Marco!”

He twisted and tipped it, delighting in the sudden grunt and pained writhing from Berwick. Some blood that had been halfheartedly crystalized from the gashes to stop the bleeding, shattered, allowing the trapped blood to spurt out and spray droplets on the floor. This particular pole was sticking out of Berwick’s chest, so when Marco moved it, he felt it knock into some ribs.

“Berwick,” he started, sweet smile in place, “did they tell you I killed your boss?”

“If you came here to rub it in, Toupee here beat you to it,” Berwick said through clenched teeth, inclining his head to Erwin. “And just so you know, I don’t give a damn.”

A spark lit up in Marco’s mismatched eyes, “that wasn’t the boss I was referring to.”

Isra

That Morning

The meds had knocked him out in the afternoon clean into late morning the following day. Having not moved for hours beyond the regular sleep cycle, Armin felt like his muscles turned to jelly, and his brain couldn’t decide if he was sleeping or not. Any twitch resulted in dull throbbing on his entire left side. If he were more awake he’d probably start panicking at being so immobile. He was so used to being active.

His throat was dry.

Armin tried to call out for water, but just as he was about to whimper for it, something smooth and cool was pressed to his lips. It was tilting carefully, and in second’s cold and beautifully refreshing water poured in. He gulped at it hungrily, going through two glasses until he was satisfied.

Ignoring the pain of his stiff muscles, Armin turned to his savior and was faced with Annie, sitting back into her chair, her light bangs casting her blue eyes in shadow. There didn’t appear to be
anyone else in the room except for the lucky few who managed to get a bed. The presence of the shifter was surprising, but not unwanted. Armin knew what she did to keep him alive. Regardless of their past, he’d been meaning to thank her.

The chaos of the battle was now a ghost in his head like a constant nightmare. Occasionally flashes of it would pass by, mixing with the battle that took his life. He remembered Annie as the Female Titan cradling his tiny body against her while she screamed at the titans, kicking them away in desperate efforts from getting him further injured. It was only brief wisps of memories, but he knew he wasn’t hallucinating. His friends made sure to describe in great detail their shock.

“Annie,” he started weakly. The girl shifted slightly, clasping her hands on her lap. The Annie he remembered didn’t look so small. When people spoke to her, she gave them her attention, listening quietly and saying very little. What she did say ended up being honest with the slightest hint of curiosity.

At least that was how she responded whenever he came to her in their training days. It gave him the impression that she wasn’t as cold as she seemed. Like she wanted to say so much, but firmly held up a mask to keep everyone away.

She was different now. Armin could tell. He wasn’t sure if it was because of growing up in a better environment in her home village, or because she was trying to make up for the past by fighting for humanity. He wanted to say something cool or funny to ease the awkward atmosphere, but he wasn’t really good with that. Ymir was better suited to this.

“You saved me,” he attempted to smile, but it came out shaky, “thanks…”

Her clasped hands tightened. “They’ll be sending you to Jinae in a few hours,” she murmured. Her soft voice offsetting her tense appearance. “You won’t be on active duty for about a year or until you’ll be able to walk again.”

Armin let out a puff of air, his disappointment heavy, “Yeah I figured that would be the case.”

“Maybe it’ll be enough time for you to consider…retiring from the front lines,” she said, staring at her lap. “There are other ways you can help recon…”

Armin started laughing, but the jostling reawakened more stabs of pain from his broken side. He winced and tried to relax, smiling up at the ceiling. “Do you know how many of us tried to live a normal life? We had our families back, our friends. Everything we lost was given back to us, why not take advantage of it? And this new world is so much easier and happier, what culture we lost has been reinvented, and that’s added to the brilliance of this time…but after a while…it didn’t feel right.” He shut his eyes sadly, “not when those walls are still up. I had everything except my dream, and that was to go beyond the walls…discover what was lost.”

Annie whispered something that even in the silence of the room he couldn’t catch. He focused on her again, but she ducted her head even further, making Armin completely unable to read her eyes.

“What?”

Her bottom lip slid between her teeth. “I’m sorry. You don’t have to…forget it, I – ”

“No, I have no idea what you said,” he clarified, then raised his eyebrows when she visibly flushed.

Annie seemed to contemplate whether to repeat herself, and it piqued Armin’s interest. Several times she switched from opening and closing her mouth, biting her lips and hesitating over and over.

Armin waited, taken aback by such uncharacteristic behavior.
Eventually, she relaxed, evidently coming to a decision, “It doesn’t matter.”

“It sounded important.”

“It wasn’t.”

Armin failed to resist pouting. He sank in his pillow, thinking of ways to squeeze whatever he missed out of her. He knew it was important, and whatever it was made Annie uncomfortable and weird.

He decided to change the subject for now, “Eren’s not back yet?”

The shifter shook her head, “No, and Mikasa was sent to help at the refugee camp. Most of the refugees have been moved to other districts. They’re mostly waiting for hospitals to become available and traffic to lighten up. Reporters haven’t been making it easy.” She was back to normal again, her tone flat and informative. “Most of the colossals have been killed, too.”

“I see,” Armin wondered if Dazz and the others were okay. Erwin said they were yesterday, but they were gravely injured. They were right there on ground zero, and already on crutches thanks to their previous engagement with Berwick. “And Jean? Last I heard he was still unconscious.”

Annie paused too noticeably, “he woke up just after you went to sleep. He…tested positive for the titan gene. Marco, too.”

“But he’s okay…right?” that meant humanity gained two more shifters in their arsenal. They would need to be trained, but…Armin backpedaled. Marco tested positive?

“Jean experienced visions of the Ape Titan’s memories,” Annie answered, “his mental state is delicate at the moment. Erwin has Connie and Sasha with him to keep him grounded. It’s been working so far. Erwin’s considering getting Jean’s parents to talk to him via video chat, but he doesn’t want to overwhelm him.”

“But Marco…”

She didn’t answer. Armin watched in fascination as another side of Annie surfaced. She wasn’t nervous anymore, nor cold. She had leaned back enough for him to be able to read her face, and what he saw was sadness. So many shifts of emotion had passed through their conversation, and it was more than the three years when they were just kids learning to be soldiers. Again, Armin was struck by how much Annie had changed. She seemed so…open.

Human.

He was seriously considering saying it aloud, but she spoke up again. “Marco isn’t a bad person. He’s just a little broken. As long as he has Jean, he won’t do anything to jeopardize humanity.”

“He’s not the same person he used to be,” Armin reasoned gently.

“I know,” she briefly met his eyes, the first eye contact they had since he woke up. It was so short that he wondered if he imagined it. He’d forgotten how striking her eyes were. “But I knew him better than most think back then. He didn’t know my secret as a shifter, but we confided in each other when we couldn’t to our closest friends. Even when he smiled at everyone I would wonder how he was able to do it without breaking something. Maybe he entertained himself with his imagination. Maybe just talking to me about his problems helped him find release.” She was looking at him again, and it was relieving because he was growing tired of trying to interpret what she was saying while struggling to see past her bangs, “I think this Marco is the one the old Marco was trying to hide.”
“And how should I interpret that?”

“That you should have faith in him.”

Armin was still mulling over her words when Erwin came by. She had to leave earlier on Hanji’s orders, leaving behind her tablet he could use with his good hand. With the sole connection to the world, Armin spent most of his time reading through news articles and trying to get in contact with Dazz or anyone from the police willing to talk to him. It was expectedly silent on the other end. Too much was still going on. Surfing through Wall Feed turned up pictures taken by citizens and articles that weren’t helping him keep his calm. The only picture he found that warmed him was a picture of Mikasa hugging an upset survivor. The shot was taken far away, probably without their consent.

In that moment, the commander stopped by his bed after checking on the other patients. He didn’t look like a man who survived a bloody battle and immediately had to handle the damage of the army. It was a trait everyone was jealous of, even his hair was neatly combed. “How are you Armin?”

“As good as I’ll be with half of me broken,” Armin shrugged his good shoulder, “Any news from Eren?”

Erwin nodded, “Levi reported an interesting find. I’d like your input.”

Armin raised his brows, “…okay,” he waited as the man took out his tablet and selected the holographic application. “Commander,” he said before he could stop himself. Erwin looked at him expectantly, “what do you plan on doing when Marco wakes up?”

Erwin regarded him as his tablet displayed two sets of DNA, one slightly different than the other. “It’s a complicated matter. We know he has a plan, but we don’t know if it’ll have a negative impact. I know he’s your friend, but…if he threatens the peace within the walls I will have to take action.”

‘You’ve already taken action,’ Armin wasn’t fooled.

“I will give him the benefit of the doubt, however,” he went on, “Marco isn’t awake yet, we don’t know if he’s been influenced by the Ape’s memories.”

“Commander,” Armin stared at the displays of DNA. They really were very similar. “What if I were to say that we test Marco’s loyalty. Get him to prove to us that he’s not the monster we’re painting him as.”

Erwin gave a wan smile, “I was thinking the same thing.”

Armin returned it, thinking quickly over how he was going to do this ‘test’ as he was sure Erwin was too. But now that was out of the way, “Commander, what is that DNA from?”

“Oh,” he pointed to the regular DNA, the one with the trillions of lines that it almost looked like a solid ribbon. “Levi and Eren found a few books in the Jaeger basement. This is the sample from a regular citizen, and this,” he pointed to the weird one with significantly less lines, “is the DNA of the average person before the time of the titans.” Armin’s eyes widened, “that is, according to the description in the books.”

A Place Unknown

Present

The boredom slipped off Berwick’s clammy face. He had his attention now. On either side of him, Mikasa and Erwin were notably much grimmer. “What did you do with Erik?”
Marco gave a soft giggle. “Oh, I think the question is what didn’t I do to him?” At Berwick’s silence he leaned back to pull out something from his chest pocket. It was a silver ring with intricately encrusted jewels that sparkled in the van’s light. It was also partially smeared with blood. The bomber stiffened at the sight. He recognized the piece of jewelry. “Is he dead? Is he alive? Personally, I think he’d wish he were dead and if he’s not, that can be easily taken care of once I’m don’t with you.”

“Erik has nothing to do with this,” Berwick spat out tightly.

“Don’t be so arrogant, he has everything to do with this,” Marco fiddled with the ring and slipped it on his index finger, admiring the sight, “I think it looks better on me than him. I’m keeping it.”

“You – ngh!” Berwick winced when Marco nudged another pole, this time the one impaling his gut. “Think carefully of what you’re doing,” Mikasa said warningly, “he can shift if you force him into a corner, Marco.”

“And die in the process before he can regenerate,” Marco added plainly, “even if he does survive I doubt he’ll get far. I can shift too you know,” he flicked a finger on the pole, Berwick narrowed his eyes. “Parting gift from the monkey.”

Stohess Subway

2852

There was rumor of an unnamed shop hiding in the seedy corner of the illustrious Stohess. Unless one were a dedicated bibliophile, it went unnoticed to even the neighbors. The shop was well under the government’s radar and therefore perfect for anyone searching for books that had been banned in every store in the Walls. That is, if one knew where to look. And they had to look hard.

First, they had to hear of it. Those who frequented the shop were all under unspoken agreement to never speak of the treasure trove unless they were absolutely sure they could trust their listener, which was usually never. Marco ended up hearing about it from his history professor.

Who thought it was nothing but a myth. She heard it from a friend in the archeology department, who heard it in passing.

Whether it was true or not, they both agreed that the shop resided in Stohess. Marco didn’t think much of it until he looked up a website on banned books to further flesh out the research his parents were unable to finish. He wasn’t aware someone was watching him until they spooked him from behind.

“If you want to learn more, I can tell you of this shop in Stohess. But you can’t tell anyone.”

The rather vague instructions led him underground in the shopping district, very off to the back where shadows cloaked over the much older shops, now out of business for maybe ten to twelve years. Marco wouldn’t have found the place if he didn’t see the very last little shop at the end with the wings of freedom painted on the lone window. It was a tiny piece, done on the right corner and covered in shadow by a board nailed over the window.

Pocketing the instructions he tested the door. It opened easily and allowed him inside.

The shop was empty. There was no light, and the design of the shop would have fit perfectly in the Wiped Era. Marco pushed back his disappointment and inched further towards the back where there was a shut door that would lead to the storage room.
Nothing happened when he reached the door. The silver lining was no one was around to watch him make an ass of himself.

He took a deep breath and felt his cheeks burn, “F-Four hundred and fifty one degrees…Fahrenheit.”

His embarrassment exploded when nothing happened. He rubbed the back of his hot neck and scowled, “knew this was a – ”

“Confirmed.”

The female robotic voice scared him so bad he let out a very undignified shriek. A series of locks clicked on the other side of the door and slowly swung open, welcoming him in.

Unlike the drab and empty shop he entered, the other side was homier. He walked down a beige carpeted hallway, lit with electric candelabras that were nailed to the walls. When he reached the end he was met with a warmly lit room about the size of an average apartment, filled with towers and shelves of books, all of which he’d never seen before.

There were one or two people wandering around with their noses in their books. They threw him curious looks before digging back to reading.

“Congratulations on finding my shop,” a petit and freckled woman probably in her late twenties emerged from a desk piled with books. Her presence was so small and undetected that Marco had to do a double take. “What can I do for you?”

“Um…” he started shyly, rubbing the back of his neck again, “I was wondering…if you had anything on the Wiped Era?”

She hummed and tapped her chin, “I think you’re the first person to come here for that.”

Yeah right. “Bullshit,” he blurted out, then flushed again. The woman laughed goodheartedly and walked down one of the aisle, waving for him to follow.

“My shop’s only been open for almost two years. A very limited number of people know of this place, and those that do are usually either searching for history beyond the age of titans or they just want to feel edgy.”

“You have books of the old world?” Marco asked in amazement, “how…?”

“I used to work in the exploration department on recon,” she explained, “We’d take probes out beyond the walls and try to scavenge for anything left of the old world. I found a lot of good junk, but the government thought we were wasting our time. They wanted to use the funds given to us on the space program. Killed my job, and they got what they wanted,” she finished with a bitter note. “They weren’t even interested in looking over the stuff I found.” She waved around at all the weather-beaten books, “the truth is, most of these aren’t even banned material.”

“Then why not go public with them?”

She looked back at him curiously, “I did. And I got a heavy fine from the king.”

Marco tripped over himself, “that can’t be – what? Why would – ”

“I don’t know, I wasn’t sticking around to find out,” they walked on to another aisle beyond, and stopped at a tiny section labeled ‘Wiped Era’ in thick permanent marker on what looked like a page from a cheap notepad. There were only three books available. One of which was from Marco’s
parents that he’d never seen before. “These guys were banned before they even tasted sunlight.”

Marco took his parents book off the shelf. It was published a few years before he was born, and it had a picture of the street in Trost he died in. It was taken at night when none of the tourists were around, giving the area a more cryptic feel. The title was ‘The Ghosts of Trost’. Bizarre.

The other book was much older, written by another couple. A Heath and Elena Munsell. The cover was of a broken piece of blade with the letters ‘Hist’ and ‘Eiss’ engraved. It was the same piece he and his parents found in Dauper…

“What’s your name?” Marco jumped, having forgotten the shopkeeper was still with him.

“Marco,” he took her outstretched hand, “and yours?”

The woman smiled. “Ilse.”

A Place Unknown

Present

The bomber grit his teeth, and he repeated, “what did you do to Erik?”

“I did way more research when I went to college,” Marco carried on conversationally, fiddling again with the ring, “found some clues that answered some questions. I got too close to the truth and then – ” he flew his hands up, accompanying it with the sound of an explosion, “Jinae bus accident goes and snaps my body in half. Thanks for that, love my new eye.”

Berwick’s lips formed a thin line. He was trying to regain his aloofness again, but the bead of sweat rolling down the side of his face wasn’t helping.

“There was a book I found in an old shop with an…interesting reputation,” Marco said, keeping his eyes locked on Berwick. “The owner believed the best way to screw with the government was by selling banned books. She used to be from recon,” he shrugged, “at least that’s what she told me. Dunno if she’s still alive, you probably killed her today her shop was in Stohess.”

“Recon?” Erwin spoke for the first time.

“Ilse, if you remember her at all,” Marco provided, not looking at the commander. “I got a lot of juicy information from her. Best thing she sold me was a book by The Ever Clever Balto.”

“Never heard of him,” Berwick said stiffly.

“Really?” Marco raised his eyebrows, “well, that’s unfortunate. It talks about a legend on the origins of the walls, an alchemist who stole the titan’s powers, a cave with goodies from the Wiped Era…”

Berwick scowled, “Sounds like a bedtime story.”

“You’re not wrong,” Marco nodded, “in fact, the legend of the alchemist originates from a family my parents used to be friends with…well, the wife at least, I don’t know about the husband – ”

“Fascinating.”

“My parents also named their daughter, inadvertently saving her life. Do you know what her mother was going to name her?” Berwick fell silent, another bead of sweat crawling down his temple. “I didn’t understand until I went to Ilse’s shop. I mean, why would you go after so many people trying to get to that stupid cave if there wasn’t a reason? You weren’t hiding secrets to killing the titans, you
were hiding one simple secret that involved Erik’s fate,” he crossed his arms, watching Berwick feign ignorance, “took me three years to realize my parents were red herrings in case anyone wondered why people in Sterben were getting killed.”

Mikasa lowered her gun a fraction. “What are you saying?”

Marco only had eyes for Berwick. “Heath and Elena Munsell were former soldiers from recon about fifty five years ago. They retired and picked up the hobby of collecting historical artifacts. One of them happened to be a piece of a blade with the words ‘Hist’ and ‘Eiss’ etched in it. This was found in a forest in Dauper. They began research on the Wiped Era, joining countless others too curious for their own good. They made friends with the wrong people, began to get paranoid, and got rid of the blade by returning it to where they found it, almost as if it was cursed. They stopped researching for a while, but picked it up again when more questions and clues began to surface. That led them to Sterben, and led them to their deaths.” He smirked at Berwick’s darkening face, “if you’re wondering how I managed to get all this info, my parents were historians, I’m part of that community and know a bit more about digging than apparently even the military police.”

“What clues are you talking about?” Erwin asked calmly.

“A page with the names of the 104th squadron,” Marco answered coolly, his eyes hardening, “soldiers who participated in the Battle of Trost. And a cute picture of three girls named Sina, Rose, and Maria Reiss.”

Refugee Camp

Yesterday

“You will go to the refugee camp to increase security on the bomber.”

The flight took no less than ten minutes on the jet. It was enough time for Mikasa to suit up in her casuals, with a bulletproof suit underneath. The concept was to appear weak in front of the bomber, give him a false sense of security. She managed to keep her appearance relaxed, but in her head she couldn’t stop worrying over the condition of her parents.

They were regular citizens with no connection to the military like Carla and Grisha Jaeger currently were, meaning that getting a call from them would be tough if they lost their phones in the chaos. Or couldn’t get a signal from fallen power lines. Mikasa had already tried numerous times to get a hold of them with no luck. People in the news were already reporting a long list of missing citizens, her parents among them. The missing currently didn’t mean that they were dead. There was a large count of evacuees before the bombs went off, and since two thousand people was too big number to get a name on every single individual, Mikasa could only hope that her parents had made it to another district.

“You will be taken to Nile. He’ll bring you up to date.”

The camp was spread out against the outside of what was left of Stohess. Mikasa owed it to her self-composure not to freeze and sway on the spot. She’d seen pictures of her fallen city, but seeing it in person struck a loud and brutal chord in her. There were buildings she recognized either half blown or completely gone. Some of the newer towers that boasted of durability were now heaps of metal and glass, pipelines stuck up at odd angles, and power lines lay in tangled lumps. There were some emergency response teams still closing off the more dangerous areas, trucks passing by carrying fallen debris.

With the walls down, Stohess looked smaller against the landscape than Mikasa remembered. To
think it once housed three thousand citizens comfortably…

“Why me?” she asked. “What is the commander planning?”

_Levi eyed her hard, arms crossed over his chest, “because Stohess was your home. To get a killer to talk, we must first break him down.”_

There were small camps she passed by of miserable citizens huddled together. All now homeless and labelled refugees. The amount of volunteers was immense, but not even nice words could uplift the victims. Mikasa passed them and followed her guide to the farthest side of the camps where more and more policemen were standing guard. They reached a van drowned out by the thick crowd of guards standing watch with their guns on hand.

She spotted Nile speaking to one of the younger officers. Her guide excused himself and went elsewhere, but as she made for the chief, she became side tracked by a growing fight occurring nearby.

Three soldiers were holding their guns against a dusty old man holding out a grenade. His clothes were torn, and there was some cuts on him, his eyes bloodshot and spilling angry tears. Mikasa recognized him as the baker from her neighborhood. On special occasions her parents liked to buy the pastries he sold. He was a gentle person, his wife died early on from terminal disease, but he wasn’t completely alone. He had a daughter Mikasa’s age. They used to play together in the park when they were very little. The girl wasn’t very keen on Mikasa’s wish to join a dojo, and the two drifted apart.

The argument escalated into a screaming match, gaining the attention of other guards, who put up their guns as well.

Unable to see anymore, Mikasa ran up to the growing group, “put your guns down!”

“Who asked you!?” one of the guards, a military police yelled back with panic in his voice.

“He’s an ordinary citizen, your bullets are not meant for him!”

“You!”

Mikasa turned sharply to the upset baker. His devastation mixed with anger, pointing his gray finger to her accusingly. He was glaring at her casual uniform, specifically at the badge of the wings of freedom over her the left of her chest.

“You’re supposed to fight titans!” he cried, “where were you!? Why didn’t you help us!? WHY!?” he stumbled forward, grabbing onto the front of her shirt and shaking her, “she was going to be an engineer! She was engaged!” more fat tears spilled, his face a mess of grief, “she was just starting to live her life and now she’s gone!”

A brief image of a little blonde girl with a gap toothed grin and flowery dress flashed across Mikasa’s mind. She couldn’t even remember her name.

The man peeled out a sob that shook his body, “she was all I had…my Adara!”

She couldn’t give him any excuses. They wouldn’t be heard and they wouldn’t be good enough for him anyway. He started sobbing again, crying ‘Why? Why? Why?’ over and over, sinking in the weight of his loss.

Carefully taking the grenade out of his hands, she held him close, sharply glaring over his shuddering
shoulders at the little army of guards staring uncertainly with their guns still out. Sheepishly, they pocketed their weapons.

‘Click!’

The sound alerted everyone to three people standing nearby with their camera’s out. News photographers. Eager for a distraction, the guards broke away and chased them off.

The moment broken, Mikasa let the man go, looking at him straight in his puffy eyes. “I’m from Stohess too. The bomber will pay for what he’s done.”

Beneath all the grief, the man began to recognize her. His sobs slowed to a stop, sad eyes accepting her words. “I remember you…you went to…you’re from the 2104th, aren’t you?”

“Graduated first of the class,” she nodded, in her head pondering exactly how popular her squad had become. The old man’s eyes widened in awe.

“Sir, if you please follow me, there are no citizens allowed in this area,” both turned to the new person. A young man with pale hair, and another wearing a strange set of pants better suited to an apocalyptic video game. He looked more beat up than his friend, and he had a permanently weary look on his face.

“Dazz,” Mikasa couldn’t stop the surprise in her voice. She’d heard the rumors about his capture of the bomber, but she had to admit she’d been a little doubtful until now. The man looked like he lost a fight with a garbage truck took the pants as a souvenir.

“Mikasa,” he greeted, turning his attention to the old man, “Boris will escort you to a bus that will take you to Ragako. That area is now secure and open to accepting refugees. You’ll be taken care of there.”

“I don’t want to be ‘taken care of’,” the man said softly, fresh tears brimming his eyes, “I’d rather die. There’s nothing left for me here…”

Dazz’s eyes hardened, “dying will only give the bomber what he wants. Survive and he loses.”

The man shut his mouth with a bitter scowl. He shuddered a sigh and followed Boris away from the area, turning back once for a final look at Mikasa.

They watching them leave before focusing her attention back to Dazz. “How are you?”

“Not in the mood to see any more people die,” he answered flatly, “Nile told me you were coming. I heard you were having trouble contacting your parents, I’m having Millius working to locate them. Hannah would have gotten the job done faster, but…” he shrugged one shoulder, “she kind of fucked up her hands on a rescue mission. It’s not protocol, so let’s keep this between us.”

Mikasa nodded, fighting hard with her emotions. “Thank you.”

Dazz proceeded to explain to her how things were going to go regarding the bomber. The more she listened, the more determined Mikasa became. The shifter was currently immobile with large pieces of construction poles impaled in him. The plan had been to give him the buffer at the first sign of shifting, but because he was currently stuck in a van with no chance of survival if he did try to shift, he was instead threatened at gunpoint with the buffer. If he were shot with it, the poles would finish the damage and instantly kill him once his regenerative abilities were stopped.

“Do not react rashly to anything he says,” Dazz warned, “Nile’s already spoken to him, and he
hasn’t broken a sweat. Berwick thinks he’s got everything planned out, we have to wait for the right moment to get him to slip.”

“Break him, but don’t provoke him,” Mikasa summarized. They paused at the van where four guards were standing at attention with their inner wall standard rifles out. They looked one step away from snapping. Compared to them, Dazz was a cool as a cucumber, “Dazz, are you really all right?”

The man’s eyes narrowed, “we almost lost Franz. The doctor looking after him just told me he has a high chance of becoming permanently paralyzed from the waist down unless he undergoes emergency surgery. Hannah lost a finger digging him out. Nack was dangerously close to bleeding out, and Millius is compartmentalizing everything so well I’m worried he’s going to hit a really bad breaking point. Of course I’m not okay.”

Mikasa studied the wounds decorating him, “you should be resting. Dawk has more than enough help.”

“Not until I see this through,” he uttered darkly, reaching up to knock on the back door. “Shift change!”

The pair waited while someone moved inside, and opened the door. A dirty blond man in his thirties stepped down, breathing a sigh of relief. He spotted Dazz and jerked in fright with a high pitched squeak. Clumsily, he saluted the younger man and scuttled away. Mikasa watched the reaction with interest.

What exactly had Dazz been up to while in the military police?

She hopped into the van, closing the door behind her. Gunther threw her a glance, his focus solely on the man sitting across from him, exactly as Mikasa imagined his state to be. She was annoyed to see that the bomber looked close to her age.

“Another scouting brat,” Berwick said, his tone of boredom not doing a thing to piss her off, “oh joy. Are you here to take me on another guilt trip like everyone else has?”

Don’t act rashly.

“Stohess was my home,” she started. Berwick rolled his eyes, “I lived in the middle class neighborhood – the nice side of the city. On special occasions my parents would buy these little cream pastries from a bakery two blocks from our home. The owner was a nice man. He lost his wife a few years back from an illness. They had one daughter. We used to play in the park, she liked dolls, and I wasn’t interested in toys. Yesterday she was attending college to become an engineer. The only thing she had on her mind was finishing school and buying a home for herself and future husband. That and probably paying a visit to her father who was proud of her achievements and dreaming of grandchildren and how he was going to spoil them.” Berwick was not affected, but she continued, “she was…probably the most oblivious person I’ve ever met. But she was kind. I would see her helping out in the bakery on my way home from school, that way her father could rest from the hard work he had to do to push her to a better life. They had no one but each other to rely on.”

Berwick stared back at her dully, “did you have a family? Do you still have one now?”

“She name was Adara. She will never graduate. She will never marry. And her father will never have the grandchildren he’d always dreamed of.”

A Place Unknown

Present
Berwick instantly tried to lash out at Marco, snarling and grunting in fury when the poles lodged in him kept him in place. The most he did was damage himself. Steam began to hiss out of his wounds. Marco settled back, unable to stop the laughter that bubbled down to a giggle.

“You’re lying!” Berwick spat.

“If I were you wouldn’t have reacted so strongly,” Marco laughed, “come on, Berwick, two thousand years is more than enough time to master your emotions.”

“Sina, Rose, and Maria…are you saying those girls are who the Walls are named after?” Erwin asked over Berwick’s growls and grunts.

“I think that’s a little obvious, don’t you?” Marco grinned toothily, “Lord Balto discovered the origins as well and did some digging and theorizing of his own. His book was banned because it questioned the legitimacy of the monarchy among other things. At least that’s what the government believed.”

“What do you mean?” Erd spoke for the first time, listening intently to the story despite himself.

“Don’t you fucking – ”

Marco kicked one of the poles while crossing his legs. Berwick’s threats cut off with an angry cry, “if the government bans a book based off beliefs that it questions the monarchy – something that has no real power nowadays, and doesn’t even have much connection to the government anymore – then there must be some truth to it, right? I was reaching the answer until this moron paid me a visit in Jinae. The fact that he came after me at that point was too much of a coincidence. My theory was solidified.”

“SHUT UP!” Berwick managed to wrench his arm free of a pole. He swung blindly at Marco, but didn’t get very far. Mikasa flicked a switchblade hidden in her sleeve and stabbed it clean through his hand, swinging it down to pin it to his knee.

Everyone sat momentarily stunned with the reflexive reaction. Even Marco was regarding her with some spark of respect. Not an easy thing to accomplish since he still wasn’t very fond of her.

Mikasa kept her hand firmly on the handle, keeping Berwick’s escaped arm in place. She eyed Marco coolly, “continue.”

Isra

Last Night

Connie and Sasha ended up staying long after Erwin left. Guards changing shifts were strictly ordered not to bother the pair. Jean was secretly thankful for their presence, it eased the atmosphere and he needed someone to talk to after everything that happened. Talking to his friends distracted him from the images in his head.

The three ran out of things to say after exhausting the topic of who did or didn’t die. They switched to Stohess, but weren’t in the mood to talk about such a grim topic they all felt some responsibility for. Even if they had nothing to do with what happened.

Jean watched them from his corner of the bed. They were sitting much closer than he remembered, tightly holding hands. Sasha was closer to Jean, and from her right side he could see her free hand was trembling. They had seen each other die in the titan ambush, and it almost happened again.
Fighting titans always reminded a person to treasure what they had.

“Jean,” Sasha said suddenly, looking over her shoulder to him, “you remember That Day, right?”

He squirmed uncomfortably, “that’s a dumb question. Yeah, I remember. I wish I could forget.”

“Do you think we deserved it?”

Jean sank in his sitting position. Feeling heavy again, “we’ve killed hundreds of them, but…”

“We’re only defending ourselves,” one of the guards spoke. Jean recognized him from his first time joining recon. The man was still wearing his scarf to hold his long hair. Dita Ness, if memory served right. He had his gun out, but he wasn’t aiming it anymore, and after the long pause following his comment, he became sheepish. “Well, we stopped when they stopped, that counts for something.”

Jean mulled that over. “That’s true…”

“And what about Marco?” Connie asked grimly. “Whose side is he on?”

Three hours since Erwin left and Marco still hadn’t woken up. Dr. Jaeger reported that he was out of danger. His cells or something adapted faster than he thought to the induction of the raw form of the titan gene. All that was left was to wait for Marco to wake up.

Jean hoped he wasn’t suffering from the Ape’s memories like him.

But even if he was, his personal vendetta was more than enough to give him a push to where he stood. He even told him the answer to Connie’s question once.

“Marco will always be for humanity,” Jean replied, looking across the other bed at his slumbering lover.

Sasha smiled, her good eye shutting. “That’s good.”

Jean stared at the gauze covering her injury. He’d been meaning to ask, “How bad is your eye?”

Her smile slipped and next to her Connie froze. Gently, she prodded the bandage, “It’s…it’s bad,” she answered stiffly, “luckily nothing inside was damaged, but the nurse said its irreparable unless Dr. Jaeger gives me his all healing juice.” She buried her sadness beneath a hard grin, “I’m gonna look so badass with an eye patch!”

Jean tried to grin back and agree, but they both knew it was all show. Sasha was an expert marksman and archer and that was mostly thanks to her eyes. To her, losing one was just as bad as becoming paraplegic.

“I’m sure Dr. Jaeger has some of his miracle formula lying around,” Connie said encouragingly. Sasha nodded eagerly, more to be done with the subject than hear any more about it.

There was knock on the door followed by Hanji entering with a clipboard. She looked over at Sasha and Connie with surprise. “I was wondering where you ran off to,” she approached the bed they were gathered on and ruffled Jean’s hair much to his annoyance. “I hope you don’t mind,” Hanji said cheerfully, “I’d like you to give me a recount of the Ape’s life for me.”

Jean blinked, “Didn’t Erwin you tell everything already?”

“He did,” the squad leader nodded, “but I want to time frame it. Give me all the details you remember. Did he have a window in the lab he was kept in? What type of city was he living in?”
“It was…” he tried to picture the Ape’s prison in his head, “clean? Modern? It was probably a little older than our technology. I remember seeing cars.”

“Cars,” Hanji hummed, jotting it down, “what about medicine?”

A Place Unknown

Present

“Father Nick was a religious man who took an oath to keep the secrets of the Walls. Mikasa, I believe you know why?” Marco said, recovering quickly.

She did. “The higher figures in the Wallist cult were aware of what was inside the walls, but kept it secret. Their religion was rooted to keeping the people away from the walls by regarding them as holy. It encouraged believers to remain inside and banish any desire to see the outside world. People who defied that belief were regarded as heretics.”

“Spot on,” Marco grinned, enjoying the growing anger boiling in Berwick’s eyes, “that secret has lasted to this day until you bombed Stohess. I’m pretty sure a few Wallists are having a big fat ‘what the fuck’ moment right now. Imagine how much they’ll break when they find out the walls are named after three ordinary girls and not some all-powerful deities.”

“You were talking about Father Nick,” Erwin interjected.

“Funny thing about him,” Marco said, “He crossed paths with a mother who wanted him to bless her daughter. She had a name that didn’t quite fit her. My parents used to tell me stories of their friend. How she married into a family too high class for her tastes. A family with the name Reiss.”

Mikasa swore softly, her dark eyes wide.

“I was smart enough to trace their family history. Connecting the dots straight to a legend now exclusively passed down in the Reiss family. There was one person in their entire history with a name that a friend of mine now bears. I know this because of the evidence found written in the blade that my parents found. ‘Hist’ and ‘Eiss’ the rest was etched off with time. She fought in Trost and eventually donned the name she was originally given. I learned of that when I was reunited with my friends in the military.”

“By word of mouth,” Berwick spat, “you’re not a very good investigator if you believe something without solid evidence.”

“I’ve been right so far,” Marco shrugged innocently, “I was able to connect Father Nick with the Reiss family, who were connected to my parents. Balto’s book, however horribly written, proved that there lay a cave in Sterben. The only mystery resides in the Reiss family themselves. Why is this daughter so important? Why did Father Nick forbid her parents from giving her the name that really fit her? I never got to uncover that bit, that’s why I came to you,” he pulled out a phone from his pocket, opened a gallery and picked a picture, his eyes glinting with glee, “I wouldn’t lie if I were you,” he held up the phone to show the captive a photograph of Erik lying in a stone cell with his hands chained behind his back. He was bloodied and bruised, his face barely recognizable. “One wrong answer and he won’t survive the night.”

Berwick’s jaw clenched visibly. Teeth grinding loudly. “Erik is the legitimate king!”

“First question!” Marco said cheerily, “who are the Reiss family?”

“A wealthy family with past connections to the government, that’s it!”
“If that were true then why would Historia Reiss have to hide her name?”

“How the hell should I fucking know? She’s just another soldier, there’s – ”

“You aren’t making a good case for yourself, Berwick,” Erwin cut in, “you’re panicking. Panic means your hiding something.” The shifter growled in frustration, attempting more violently to break free. “If you’re seriously considering shifting, I should warn you that we are some fifteen feet below ground in one of the narrowest tunnels of the InterWall line. If that doesn’t influence your decision, perhaps this will.” He nodded curtly to Mikasa.

Keeping her hand on the knife, she leaned over and opened the back doors, revealing that they truly were in an underground cement tunnel, lit up by yellow light bulbs twenty years into the past. It was crowded with a group of armed soldiers. Standing in front of them, was Dazz and Marlo, holding a trembling and bloodied Erik between them with a gun pressed to his skull.

“Atwir…” Erik said faintly, paling at the state of his former personal aide. Berwick was speechless. He watched immobile as one by one Mikasa, Erd, and Erwin shuffled out of the van, the last pausing briefly to lay a heavy hand on Marco’s shoulder.

The doors shut with an air of finality. The two shifters were finally alone. Slowly, Berwick tore his eyes from the metal doors and landed on Marco, no longer smug. The younger man’s face was placid, unaffected by the bomber’s reaction to the king.

“You planned all this,” Berwick said softly.

“I was going to leave you alone,” Marco said, voice much calmer than when he was provoking him. “You killed my parents in one shot barehanded, what chance did I have against that? But you went after me. Pardon me for feeling a little special, going after me twice meant you’d keep it up until I was dead for good,” he observed his right hand, flexing it a few times, “living in the Walls was no longer a luxury I could enjoy. So I joined the scouting legion… I wanted to kill the Ape to end the war and give you nowhere to run. Everyone thinks I wanted to kill you myself, but my plan was to take you down from the outside until you had nowhere to run and I would be there to enjoy it. I used to amuse myself with fantasies of how I was going to do it,” Marco softened eerily, “hurt your reputation. Risk the lives of the people you cared about. Make them see what you really were…It was supposed to be a slow burn and in the end you would have been begging for death,” He gazed at the ring that rightfully belonged to the king, shining obnoxiously on his finger. Marco chuckled softly at the look on Berwick’s face between his fingers. “I wanted you to suffer for a long time before I was satisfied…”

“What happened?” Berwick said through gritted teeth. Mikasa was forced to leave behind her knife to keep his free hand in place, and he was desperate to remove and make use of it. He had to keep Marco distracted. “Did you realize torturing me in the flesh was a better idea? You put an innocent person – a high profile figure – in the way, is that the length you’re willing to go?”

“I’m not quite at your level yet,” Marco jiggled the phone tauntingly, “you killed in order to keep a secret. Killed over one hundred people who could care less about what skeletons are hiding in your closet. I’ve hurt people, but I haven’t stooped to killing, I have to set an example for Jean. I won’t kill you either. That’ll be up to the higher ups, and maybe the citizens of Stohess.”

“Then what do you want?” he could feel the blade inching back the more he tugged.

“If there were so many secrets in Sterben you didn’t want the world to see, why not burn it instead? Why go through the fuss of killing people instead of destroying the evidence they’re looking for?”
Should I tell him? Berwick thought, feeling the knife give away a little more. Marco may now be a shifter, but that didn’t mean he was as strong as him. He was still new, probably didn’t know how to control his healing abilities. What Berwick needed was to bet on how fast of an adapter Marco was and use it to his advantage. He needed to be faster, hit where it truly hurt.

“Fine,” he pursed his lips. This was his territory now. Marco was smart, but that could never compare to two thousand years’ worth of cunning Berwick was forced to learn. “I didn’t destroy the cave because some part of me had faith that there was at least one person on this planet who would take the history at face value and learn to use it as a lesson towards a peaceful life, and not as a weapon of war. My preservation of the cave was a test for humanity. So far no one passed.”

“That’s…ridiculous,” Marco deadpanned. “It doesn’t explain Historia’s right to the throne, nor why failure to this test means death.”

“All right then,” Berwick shrugged as best he could, “you’ve got a theory in that twisted mind of yours, alright, what is it? Humor me.”

Isra

A few Hours Ago

Marco was having unpleasant dreams of Trost, and the last hours of his parents. When he woke up it was with relief, quickly replaced with confusion, then alarm.

Erwin was standing at the foot of his bed. The bed next to his seemed to have been recently occupied, its messy sheets having not been done yet. Apart from himself and the commander, there was no one else in the room. Not even Jean.

The alarm came when he realized he was chained to his bed. “Commander?” he felt his voice croak. He was really thirsty. “W-what’s going on? What happened to the Ape Titan?” he swallowed dryly, “where’s Jean.”

“He’s fine,” Erwin answered calmly. “I’m sure you’re wondering why a war hero like you is being restrained to his bed.”

“Yeah, an answer would be nice…” he pulled at the chains experimentally. They jingled in mocking merriment.

“You tested positive for the titan gene. You and Jean. Dr. Jaeger went back to Jinae to prepare more buffers,” the commander explained, walking up the bed to the chair beside Marco. “This was the result of having been so close to the Ape. Jean’s also suffered a…memory invasion of the Ape’s life. Moblit’s counseling him right now. He’ll need friends and family to help him recover. Especially you, Marco.”

‘Of course he’ll need me!’ he almost said indignantly. The trip to the Ape was only supposed to be about killing him, he didn’t intend for Jean to be given souvenirs. “How bad is it?”

“Not as bad as it was at first. He responded almost coldly to my questions. The memories seem to have affected his moral compass, but I’m having Sasha and Connie stay with him to keep his head clear. Now that you’re awake, he’ll be in better spirits,” he sat down and rested his elbows against his knees, fingers intertwining in a relaxed posture. “There’s no need to act so frightened, Marco. I know about Berwick.”

Marco cocked his head to the side, brows knitted, “Berwick? I…I don’t understand.”
"He was the one who killed your parents in Sterben, and who went after you in Jinae."

The younger man paused too long to come up with an excuse. Erwin knowing about his past meant he did some digging that Grisha couldn’t do because of his citizenship. The commander must have gotten ahold of his cold case file, which meant talking to Nile. The very man who tried to kick him out of recon because of falsified documents.

Nile must have done some investigation as well in order to find proof that he was unfit for the scouting legion. Marco thought he would have stopped after mysteriously letting him remain in the army, but maybe he hadn’t. He must have found something.

Marco dropped the innocent act. No use in hiding when Erwin was looking at him so sternly with his thick eyebrows. “What do you want?”

“I want to have faith in you,” was the answer Marco wasn’t expecting. “You’ve been acting alone for what a lot of people believe is a mission for revenge. That, I can deal with, what’s questioning our trust in you, and the reason why you’re chained to your bed is because we don’t know what kind of opponent you’ve chosen. We don’t know if you went after the Ape for the titan gene to help with your revenge, or if you’ll use that ability against us; the people who ignored your cries for help.”

Marco hummed thoughtfully, eyeing the older man skeptically, “you have a point...how were you able to theorize my motives?”

“That was done by a team from Nile’s branch. They were graduates like you from a different training camp,” Marco raised his eyebrows, honestly surprised. “Their investigation on your case was actually by chance. They found more information their seniors couldn’t find, and presented a viable case to make you a priority. Before Stohess, of course. A skirmish in Hermiha brought that group to team up with your classmates who were looking in on a personal case that in the end involved you. That’s how they came across Berwick, and how they tried to arrest him at Stohess. It’s been a stressing week for them.”

“Hm,” Marco nodded, “you’re telling me an awful lot of classified information. Didn’t you just say you didn’t trust me?”

“I said I want to have faith in you,” Erwin corrected. “That involves giving you intel that might or might not bite us in the ass.” He paused briefly, and Marco waited patiently, mentally mapping out how to use this information freely given to him. And whether the information was solid at all. Erwin pulled something out of his front pocket, a mobile phone, and a gaudy monstrosity of a ring. “A member of the special ops returned from Stohess on Nile’s orders. He wanted me to use you, and these, as a means of interrogating Berwick.” He turned the phone on and selected the gallery, handing the device over to Marco.

There was a series of photographs of King Erik lying beaten up in a prison cell. He looked at the camera with frightened eyes, blood dripping from his bruised lip.

“Nile has more backbone than I thought,” Marco said, impressed “he does realize he beat the crap out of our king? That’s enough to get him a death sentence.”

“True,” Erwin cracked a grin, “but seeing as it’s convinced you, then convincing Berwick should be no problem. Staying locked up in his palace for years has helped Erik develop skills he otherwise would have brushed aside if he was willing to leave his home.”

“Like what?”
“Art.”

Marco blinked at the blond man, then back at the picture, putting two and two together. “This is fake,” he concluded, “he…what? Manipulated a picture or roughed himself up for the camera?” He chuckled in amusement, he was starting to view the king differently now, “and now you and Nile want me to go against Berwick with this. Why me? I have the titan gene. I can shift. Wouldn’t I want to kill him first then ask questions later? I thought the rules of conduct in an interrogation was to use someone not emotionally compromised with the accused. Armin would be a better pick.”

“Armin is currently in Jinae undergoing surgery on his injuries,” Erwin stood up, his visit coming to a close, “you should be aware that the military police are hot on your heels. We won’t be able to hide your test results with the brains they’ve recently recruited. If they find out you can shift, they’ll have a hard time believing you won’t harm them and anyone connected to them. I’m giving you this chance to prove that you aren’t the monster they think you are.”

A chance? Marco looked at the phone in his hands, it felt like a ticket to someplace wonderful. Too good to be true. He’d come to terms with no longer living a normal life. He tried and failed to push past the death of his parents by moving on, only to have his own kind turn their backs on him. He hated the military police for their poor attention to his case. Hated that they now started dusting him off as if years of bitterness could be so easily washed away.

And now they were giving him a chance. For what? They thought he was a monster? After everything he did for humanity…

He didn’t have to accept ‘their chance’, what needed to be done was for him to give them a chance. They needed to prove to him that they weren’t the selfish ignorant bastards they’d always been. They needed to prove to him that they weren’t the real monsters.

“I should also tell you that whatever decision you make will make a huge influence on Jean.”

Marco turned to the commander sharply, “what?”

“I did say Jean was in a delicate state,” Erwin said grimly, “he’s very comfortable with either saving or obliterating humanity. So long as it’s what you wish.”

Underground Rose

Present

The tunnel was eerily silent as everyone waited with baited breath for the doors of the van to open. Petra, Erd, and Auruo lined up a few feet from the doors with their guns aimed and ready. Gunther and Mike were positioned behind them to solidify the protective wall. At the front of the van were eight more soldiers, lined up the same way.

Further behind Gunther and Mike was Millius and Boris, and then Erwin, Nile, and finally Dazz, Marlo, Mikasa, and Erik himself. The king was safely tucked behind the trio, refusing to be taken away to a safer area now that his role was done. It had been a whole two days since he left the palace, and after Stohess fell, he felt as if all the irrational fears of the outside world were fading away because of all the chaos. It was overwhelming, and he was surprised he wasn’t locked up somewhere with a nurse to calm him every five minutes. Erik supposed the trick to his current state was that he managed to put all his focus on the problem regarding Berwick. It was a huge event he’d been a part of since the funeral of his parents, and it helped deal with his anxiety. Especially now that he was in a narrow enclosed space that was probably worse to handle than stepping out of the palace.
Rather. It helped that he was angry.

Berwick had been by his side for years. He’d been invasive and overbearing, but Erik held trust in him enough to keep him close.

He was a killer.

Erik didn’t know the feeling of betrayal could be so strong…

So he kept quiet. Practiced his breathing exercises when he needed to. Waited for the doors to open so he could finally see who Berwick truly was.

Some feet from him, Erwin tapped on an earpiece lodged in his ear. Next to him, Nile did the same, standing grimly and listening to the conversation occurring inside the van. Neither of its occupants were aware of the small bug Erd left behind, and Erwin hoped it would stay that way.

“Are you sure Marco can get answers out of Berwick?” Nile asked.

“He’s very manipulative.”

Nile snorted, “Right. That’s how he was able to break his nurses and still keep their loyalty.” The man scowled, glaring at the van as he thought about the investigation done the past month, “you’re putting high stakes on this gamble, Erwin. Giving Marco what he wants will only put false belief in him that he can do whatever he wants. It doesn’t work that way.”

“He has the ability to shift,” Erwin said darkly.

“He’s mentally unstable!”

“We need him on our side. At least until Dr. Jaeger has prepared a buffer for him and Jean,” he shifted his gave to the chief, “this is his chance for him to prove that he is on our side. And it’s our chance to show him that we care.”

Nile didn’t argue the last statement. That was a burn on his shame of his branch. “Berwick may have stopped our investigations regarding his parents,” he muttered bitterly, “I wasn’t even aware of it, and the officers in charge of the investigation kept it quiet…this wasn’t what I pictured handling when I first signed up for this job.”

The pair fell silent as the conversation in the van took an interesting turn. Their faces became wearier as questions they had began to get answers.

After few minutes Nile let out a long breath, “This is going to take months of investigation… Berwick’s plugged himself into so many organizations before reaching the palace. How –”

Everyone held their guns a little tighter when a loud bang rocked the van to the side. It continued to shudder left and right for a bit until things settled back down again.

“Hold your ground,” Erwin called out to everyone.

The violent banging picked up again. It was as if a beast were caged inside and was trying to break free. Sweat began to roll down Nile’s temple. He listened as patiently as he could, then froze when he heard Berwick scream at Marco. He resisted looking behind him at Erik.

The van stopped moving, but the stream of words Berwick spat at Marco continued. He was getting confident. That meant he had Marco at his mercy. Which meant…
“Marco’s hurt,” Erwin stated, not moving from his position just yet. “Boris,” he said to the light
haired man in front of him, “call in a medic. Tell them to be prepared to come in.”

The young man nodded and murmured hurriedly into his earpiece.

An enraged scream deafened Nile and Erwin. They winced as the earpieces wheezed in their
ear drums. The scream was so loud that it could be heard from the soundproof van. The confidence
Berwick had was slipping. Marco did something to shake it. He sounded very weak, but the snark
was still in his voice. The van made one final shudder, then silence.

Exactly ten minutes passed before the door opened. Steam and the stench of blood spilled out from
excessive healing done by both shifters.

Marco stumbled down, drenched in blood steaming off him. As it dissipated, his stony face began to
become visible again, as well as Mikasa’s knife lodged to the hilt in his heart.

No one moved. He snorted. “You should see the other guy,” he managed to wheeze before
collapsing.
A New Beginning

Chapter Summary

Some mysteries are left unsolved, but for now it's time to start anew.

Chapter Notes

omg I wanted to get this in weeks ago, but life's been exhausting and I haven't had a free weekend to get much done T.T anyway. haha longest chapter of all - 40 fucking pages, wow. Hope you guys like. Any typos/grammatical fuck ups are my own because I suck (but please point em out if there's problems!) :P Anyway thank you sooo much for reading! I love you all goddamnit!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A Long Time Ago

His new home was the best the town could offer after all his work on rebuilding the area with a crystal material good enough to withstand the beasts. It was small and humble, but it had a plumbing system, and one of the last remaining electric heaters that could run independent from a power source. It would last another month or two until the battery died. His home also had a gas stove and oven, a luxury nowadays as people were forced to use their fire places. Barely a month into the attacks humanity was torn down of its modern resources. Power plants were destroyed, airports were invaded. Everything that could have been useful in either fleeing or fighting was gone. What was left was what could be made with hands. They were living in the dark ages again.

He had begun the process of putting the next step of his plan into motion for a much safer stronghold where humans could safely live without fear of the monsters. Already he made deals with political leaders in order to turn his blueprints to reality. Money was no longer a bargaining chip. People were ready to throw in anything of value so long as it insured their lives.

They were beginning to view him as their true leader and savior. Some rumors were spreading to name him their king of all things. Him. A mere scientist whose previous work went ignored.

The day was darkening for evening. There wouldn’t be much attacks tonight. It was raining and the creatures were weak without the sun. It was now time for the town to come back to life again.

Just as he predicted, outside his window he could see some people leaving their homes with dimly lit gas lamps. Most had on homemade clothes, or old patched up creations. Clothing stores, as well as any other store, were virtually extinct now. What people did was a lot of trading in order to survive.

He returned to his work, a detailed blueprint of the ‘Walls’ he wanted to create. It would be meters taller than the monsters, with sections labeled Districts. They would be the bait for the monsters in order to get others to safety underground in case of an invasion.
The walls alone wouldn’t be good enough, however. The strength of the beasts put together could topple skyscrapers. He needed something stronger…

His eyes drifted to the only picture on his desk. A family photo of himself and his three daughters. They were gathered in a duck pond, grinning happily at the camera. He remembered that day his youngest tried to climb a tree and pretended to be a monkey, like the ones he kept in his lab. Her summer dress was ruined. Torn in places and decorated in pieces of bark and leaves.

They got ice cream on their way home.

Rose accidentally spilled some on her shirt. Chocolate. It was a dark stain against white. Sina, ever the kind sister, offered her some of her own.

The drive hadn’t been that long…they got home…had dinner…

The company he worked for at the time weren’t satisfied with the results of his project. People were dying, they said. The vaccine had to be created soon or he’d lose his job, they said.

He didn’t think the pressure was so great that they’d take his children and use his formula on them. He’d only realized what happened when he saw their fragile corpses in the test lab. His bosses angry and frustrated with the failure.

No one would help him. Not the police. Not the government. It was like his children held no importance in the world. They had ‘bigger problems’ to focus on. Impending wars. Money. They hoped he understood. The people responsible would be jailed, but the ‘vaccine’ was still needed to help the world. He needed to refocus again.

And no one would help him.

They had better things to do. He was only one person. They needed to focus on the big picture!

Whatever happened to those messages from the good hearted people? ‘Help those in need’. He was in need of help. He wanted his girls back. He needed more than sympathetic pats on the shoulder. More than ‘these things happen’.

He needed a time machine so he could’ve been better prepared. Stop his superiors from taking his girls. Make them pay for what they’d done.

Stop them from killing them.

Stop them from using a formula not yet ready to cure…

Dr. Reiss let out a shuddering sigh, leaned back in his chair and wiped his eyes. He needed to stop thinking of the past. If he needed something to keep him sane, he had to think of the present and what needed to be done.

He needed to think of the woman in the next room who understood his pain and was carrying his unborn child. Those were the people he had to protect now.

His anger returned and he went back to his blueprint. He never thought he could learn to care again. Sina, Rose and Maria were his life. The only meaningful treasures he had in this world. Finding someone else after everything he did, rebuilding the pieces of his life when the rest of the world was falling apart…

The plan was to teach humanity a lesson. Play god for a bit and save them when they had no one,
but each other to rely on. That’s what the walls were meant for. A reminder that humans were not the kings of the universe. He didn’t even care if he survived to see if they made it. He would have preferred if humanity didn’t make it at all.

But now he had a child on the way. A chance to start again. The walls were quickly becoming his own salvation.

Construction would need to take place in an area not populated by the monsters. A place big enough to provide essential natural resources and fertile lands. It was still enemy territory, though. He would need creatures on the side of humanity if they stood a chance in building the walls without chancing destruction.

The Ape showed intelligence after transforming. If he could use the serum on humans, there was a possibility that they could be lucid post-transformation. They could fight off the monsters, shield the humans…

Dr. Reiss paused thoughtfully.

‘Shield the humans’

That sounded promising.

Pulling a separate sheet of paper from his desk drawer, he sketched out a close up of one of the walls. It would be thick enough for groups of people to walk on without fear of falling. Inside the walls themselves would be monsters of colossal size. Voluntarily giving their lives for the continued existence of humanity.

He needed to create a formula that would make these colossal….titans. Yes, that’s what he would call them. Titans.

The doctor tapped the table with his pencil, another thought hitting him. What if there was a beacon in case the titans lost lucidity? Something that could guide them and keep them from harming the humans.

Like a coordinate, or a leader. This leader could even match up as a formidable enemy to the Ape. In fact…

Perhaps there was a chance humanity could survive after all.

That Day

852

They were supposed to meet with the suppliers at the edge of Dauper. Connie and Sasha went ahead to meet with her father, while Jean chose to go into town for the newspapers to see what was going on regarding the government. Historia and Ymir were forced to wait on the suggested spot, which was just outside of the village and within the woods that went almost untouched by the villagers. There were rumors that wolves resided here, but no sightings had been seen yet.

“Not much longer,” Historia said, sitting next to Ymir against a tree. “I wonder what kind of food Sasha’s getting…”

“Probably something crazy like a bull or a bear,” Ymir said distractedly. Bewildered, Historia whipped around and found her scraping a beat up piece of nail most likely taken from the house, against her maneuver gear blade.
“Ymir!” Historia gaped, “what are you doing!?”

“Immortalizing my name, what’s it look like?” she scraped harder with determination, her tongue peeking out between her lips. The smaller girl leaned over curiously. Ymir’s name was roughly written near the hilt, the metal too hard to make a good imprint. The older girl continued scraping, gradually darkening the lines until she was satisfied.

“We shouldn’t treat our weapons this way,” Historia argued weakly.

“We shouldn’t be nameless bodies either,” Ymir shot back, admiring her work. Historia pouted, then fumbled to catch the nail thrown at her, “you do it too.”

“But – ” she stopped short at the look she was being given. She wasn’t really against the idea. It actually sounded fun. Ymir simply grinned smugly at her when she relented and pulled out one of her blades and started scraping her name on the surface. “We’re going to get in so much trouble if the corporal sees this…”

“We’re getting supplies today,” Ymir shrugged, leaning over Historia’s shoulder to watch her work, “we can just leave the blades here and replace them with new ones. It’ll be our little hiding spot.”

Historia flushed lightly, concentrating on getting her ‘H’ right. “That doesn’t sound so bad.” Ymir laughed, nuzzling against her. The act of affection made her blush again. Having Ymir back reminded her how much she needed her by her side. Everyone would say how quickly she transformed by the return of the shifter. With Ymir gone, Historia felt like half of her was missing. She found herself waking up every morning terrified that Ymir wouldn’t be there, only to sigh in relief when she was.

She kept working on her name, her hand cramping at the pressure. Historia ran over her name over and over until she was sure it wouldn’t fade away easily. Ymir was starting to doze off against her shoulder by the time she finished, and made a start when Historia presented her the completed name.

Ymir hummed, impressed. She fingered the freshly scraped work. “Even with a nail you have neater handwriting than mine. Come on,” she stood up, holding out a hand for Historia, “let’s find a place to hide these.”

They didn’t go very far. The untouched land was a goldmine for hiding spots. In the afternoon the forest looked magical with the sun streaming through the trees and casting a warm hue over them. They ended up by an old tree with a hollow center and dug their blades into the earth, crossing each other so that they stuck up like an X. A suggestion made by Ymir.

“What a waste,” Historia sighed, her smile at the display telling different. “I hope the corporal never finds out about this.”

Ymir giggled softly and wrapped her arms around her tiny frame from behind, “Levi will only wish he did this with Eren.”

“Eren?” Historia laughed.

Ymir joined her. Her shaking body so close and making the smaller reddening at the warm feeling blooming in her chest. “Just kidding.”

“Hmm…” Historia fell silent, reaching up to place her hand over Ymir’s tanned and freckled hands. She felt safe here. Like this was their little world and nothing bad could happen. It put a smile on her face. She leaned into Ymir, breathing in her earthy scent. She could feeling her take deep steady breathes, as if she were sleeping. Ymir’s heartbeat a faint thumping behind her head.
“Hey…” Ymir whispered, her breath tickling her ear. “Let’s come back here again…tonight. Once everyone else is asleep.”

“Mm,” Historia nodded.

The leaves shook and crunched with the heavy thumps stopping behind them.

Whatever moment they had slipped away like cold ice. There was a large bodily shaped shadow looming over them. The reflection on the personalized blades revealing a naked humanoid creature breathing heavily over them.

There was no time to think. Historia dashed to the blades and attached them to her handles while Ymir dug her teeth into her finger, blasting her body into the form of the Dancing Titan.

They had to warn the corporal! They had to find the others!

Yalkell Police Headquarters
2856
One Week Later

The conference room was hosting a number of strange guests. Nile and Pixis were sitting side by side at one end of the long table while Dazz and his team were planted across them. At the middle were Darius, Anka, Gustav, and Rico. Those that weren’t physically present, but connected through holographic video were Erik, Marlo, Nack, and Franz. The last three were properly recuperating in the hospital.

Yalkell’s headquarters hadn’t hosted this many people in a long time. It was one of the quieter districts with the shortest criminal record. If they ever got a visit from a high official it was usually for inspections of the prisons, or requests to temporarily hold dangerous criminals until their final sentence. The district wasn’t considered a city, or a town in the sense of how the other districts functioned. It prided itself in the safety and good service to its guests, and promoted nothing but comfort and happy memories. In a nutshell, Yalkell was a getaway for the overworked both young and old. One of the great mysteries of the district was how it managed to safely jail heinous criminals on one side, and entertain guests in another.

From his position to the window, Dazz could clearly make out the shape of one of the giant water slides in Yalkell’s famous waterpark. It didn’t exactly fit the mood of the conference room. There should have been water gushing from the slide as well, but for the week the park was closed in remembrance of Stohess. A lot of other theme parks and public places were closed for an extended time in solidarity, too.

In the days following Stohess, the wall community had transformed dramatically. Flags of Sina could be seen hanging out of windows and the top of buildings. Ratings for news sites and networks skyrocketed, and people were treating each other with a level of caution and care not seen in society for years. Everyone was working together to heal.

There was anger.

But not as great as sorrow.

“First order of business,” Darius said, adjusting his glasses. He was dressed down for the meeting, like everyone else. His shirt rolled up to the elbows, and his tie missing. “Chief Dawk, I believe a recount of Bodt’s unorthodox interrogation of the Stohess Bomber would be a good place to start.”
Nile pulled a sour face. He set up his tablet to play the recorded interrogation, but paused before he hit play, “Bodt’s involvement to the case was…my responsibility,” he glared at his tablet, “prior to his arrival I’d been exchanging information with Commander Smith. He wanted to know more about Bodt’s mental state due to the result of the recent battle they were in, and I had to gain support from his army to continue evacuations. I…” his scowl deepened, “I disclosed information regarding a suggested method of interrogation by Erik. He fabricated being tortured, and Officer Gustav took photographs as further proof. I didn’t learn of this until after we rescued them from the courthouse. I thought…I thought it was a good idea.”

Everyone listened quietly, staring down at the Nile who couldn’t look them in the eye. “The only reason you allowed Bodt in that van was because either you were stuck or Erwin worked his magic on you,” Rico said dryly. “Which was it?”

Nile grimaced, cursing Erwin in his head for having to do this alone. “Both,” he answered. “I’d been considering how to approach Berwick with the pictures when Erwin called to send in more squads. He noticed I was planning out Berwick’s interrogation and made the suggestion of using Bodt. As a victim of Berwick, he would have the motive to go after what he held dear and use it against him. It would also be…” he scoffed, “a chance to prove himself to us.”

“Because the last battle resulted in his obtaining this ‘Titan Gene’,” Rico concluded, “His partner also acquired it, what of him? Can we trust either of them?”

“Let’s not touch that yet,” Darius said, leaning forward to rest an elbow on the table, “so Erwin convinced you to use Bodt,” he directed to Nile, “the last case on that boy claimed he was mentally unstable and forged papers with his doctor in order to join recon. Why use a person like that in an interrogation that requires strategy by someone who’s been trained for it?”

“It was a chance,” Nile repeated. “We handled the Bodt murder case disrespectfully. Over the course of the week I’ve gathered a total of ten officers who’ve been bribed by Berwick to drop the case, including the Jinae accident where Bodt was targeted again. Having no one to help him find closure, it would be logical for Bodt to hold a grudge against us thus the reason why he withheld information regarding the cave, and joining recon to execute his own plan of revenge. Berwick is easily at the top of his hit list, but it wouldn’t be unlike him to put us on that list as well.”

“And has he proven himself?” Darius asked, then added, “Did we prove ourselves?”

“At the moment, yes,” Nile nodded curtly. The room murmured with mixed feelings, “now, I believe you all wanted to hear the interrogation.” The quiet hum cut short and all eyes fell on his tablet. He pressed play.

Dazz felt his jaw tighten with every word that came out of the recorded clip. He heard it before after Marco was taken away for his wounds, and hearing it again still made his stomach turn.

“…what is it? Humor me.”

“You came into the walls with a different mission. Annie, Bertholdt, and Reiner were the muscle. They were supposed to take down the walls from the inside, and if they found the coordinate, they would take it back with them to whatever hole they crawled out of. Your job was to observe us and see how far our intelligence went – seeing as we invented weapons against titans. Your sole duty was to learn as much as you could, report back, and find a way to make our weapons useless.”

“Not bad,” Berwick answered tightly, “except I never got through Shiganshina with the others. A titan ate me before I even made it to the walls.”
“Betrayed by your own kind,” Marco laughed.

“I was eaten when it was already at its limit and got puked up shortly after. That’s how I managed to survive.”

“Ew.”

“The rest is history. Literally.”

“You mean you stayed in the walls for two thousand years doing nothing, but gathering intel? We’ve advanced to the point where recon death tolls have gone from 60 percent to 30, at what point did you stop to think that maybe you should have started reporting back?” Marco said incredulously, “The rest is not history, there’s something else. You made it to the walls. You integrated into the communit and just like Annie, Bertholdt, and Reiner, you began to get too attached. That’s why you stayed so long. You got comfortable, and by the time we advanced too far, you remembered why you were here at all. No reports of mysterious deaths occurred around Sterben until the Munsell’s. That’s when you started your killing spree – hurgh!”

There was a sound of something fleshy being sliced, followed by a struggled and a crash.

Berwick snickered loudly near the microphone. His voice filling the room. “You’re far smarter than anyone before you, even amongst your little squad. It’s true. I did get comfortable with living here. The people I’ve met taught me to feel human again. I was so taken by this stupid community that at one point I completely forgot I was even a shifter!” Marco grunted against him in the background. “I gained the trust of several people – enough to earn me the title of co-creator to the very cave you and your parents found under Hermiha’s rotting library! I protected that cave. Caught between letting people find it or giving it to the Ape. I didn’t even know if anything in it was more useful than what humanity already invented until the Munsell’s began their own investigations!”

“…That’s…when you started spying…on everyone,” Marco coughed. “You made your decision…by killing…them!”

There was another struggle, but Berwick still had the upper hand. “They were going to use the information for their own gains! I had to stop them!”

They fought again, this time Marco turned the tables and was breathing more easily. “You killed because two thousand years of hiding was enough to turn you into a psychopath! You became addicted to killing people. Not just anyone, either. Keeping the cave safe was the perfect lure for your victims! There’s nothing glorious behind it! You. Are. A. Serial. Killer!”

Berick’s laughter sent chills down Dazz’s spine. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You started getting cocky, Berwick,” Marco said, dangerously soft, “setting up the bus accident so you could finish me off when I refused to quit researching. I was at the cusp of proving the true royal line when you decided enough was enough. And when the job was done, you targeted the king and queen. I know you did. That’s how you ended up in the palace. You killed them off and tried to publically save them. You were treated as a hero. Worked your way up to the palace guards, and finally – you reached the ultimate goal. King Erik, the last of the royal line.” Berwick’s cackling died down abruptly. “You knew about the Reiss family right from the beginning. Killing off the new king while in such a high post would have kept you in prime position of the throne – a gift for the Ape Titan.” He chuckled, “but you kept quiet. All because you believed a teenaged boy sympathized with your view of humanity. ‘People are cruel. People are dangerous. They took my parents from me. I hate them.’”
Nile looked up at Erik’s holographic feed. He was visibly upset, keeping his head ducked.

“You became so attached that you stopped killing for a while. No one came near the cave, and now you had a new obsession to distract you. Your love for the king.” Berwick didn’t reply, but the grunts he was making implied he was ignoring the statement for the pressing matter of getting Marco off him. “You had all the cards in your hand. You could have killed the king at any time, but you didn’t. For years. I didn’t even know you were in the palace for that long a time until I heard Armin talking to some friends in the military police. All my wild guesses ended up being truths…but best of all, you have nothing left to hide behind.”

“What the hell are you – ”

He shut his mouth at a recording Marco played from the phone. A message from Erik.

“I knew there was something off about you…but part of me wanted to believe it wasn’t true. You were there for me after I lost my parents. You were my anchor. I trusted you…you killed my parents. Killed so many people. I can never forgive you. You are not my friend. Not my aide. Not anything to me!”

The recording was cut off by Berwick’s furious scream. Nile turned it off, leaving the room ringing with its echoes.

“Your highness,” Darius spoke up, adjusting his glasses again. “Dazz’s team was attacked a little over last week by Berwick. Was it because he believed they found proof of the true royal family?”

Erik nodded stiffly. “Yes. I don’t doubt it.”

“And is it true that your line were just figure heads to protect the Reiss family?”

The young man shook his head. “I grew up learning very little of my family history. What I learned, Yannick taught me. And what I wanted to learn, he kept from me. Anw – Berwick tried to persuade my curiosity to other projects. All that I had of the past were the keys I handed down to Officer Dazz and his team.”

Darius hummed, resting his chin on his hand. Next to him Anka shook her head, “it’s an awkward situation. The Reiss’s didn’t respond to our request to join the meeting. I don’t think they were aware they were royalty. But what’s bugging me is Historia. Why was her name such a taboo?”

“Mrs. Reiss didn’t know herself,” Millius replied, “when we questioned her about Marco’s claims, along with what was discovered in the cave by Anka, she thought we were crazy. She did tell us more about Father Nick, however.”

Rico tapped through her tablet for the report they emailed to her and everyone else in the room, “According to Marco, he knew of Historia’s ‘true name’ when she rechristened herself after joining the scouting legion. I’m assuming that he put two and two together with the artifact he found in Dauper. Did he personally ask Historia for confirmation?”

Millius quickly caught on. “According to everything Armin’s been able to tell us, Marco hardly ever spoke to Historia. He was friendly with everyone, yet kept his distance. His only attachment was to Jean. I guess asking if she wrote her name on her blade may have been too strange a question. He was careful not to raise suspicions about his investigations.”

“Yeah, and he failed spectacularly,” Nack rolled his eyes. “We figured him out within a month of joining the police!”
“His research is incredible,” Pixis said with grudging respect, already looking over the reports he was forced to accept on his tablet. The old man still wasn’t fond of them. Technology had advanced admirably, but there were still glitches that always made the pen and paper more preferable to him. Flicking his finger on the screen at the lengthy report Marlo compiled with his comrades, Pixis was impressed with the hard work put into the case. But he was impressed even more by the single handed work done by Marco, who had no one but himself to rely on. “If I’d have to rank the 2104th by best researcher he’s a star.”

“…But we’re pretty high up there too, right?” Nack asked.

“Yes,” Pixis said distractedly, earning a pout from the young man, “but look at what he’s done before the accident. Even before enrolling at Jinae University, Marco was able to compile theories surrounding the deaths of Sterben that matched his parents. He obsessed over finding a reason why his parents had to die. He was only thirteen and within three years he was able to profile Berwick’s motives and theorize the truth behind the Walls. All before having them confirmed after joining the military.”

“I guess it’s lucky for him you all remembered what went down in your past lives and were willing enough to blab it for anyone to hear,” Hitch said flatly. There was no lilt in her voice like there used to be. The bombings affected her to a point that it was rare moment to see her smile. Since waking up, it was hard to tell whether Hitch’s comments were either jokes or honesty.

“How was he able to obtain such information like the Walls or the significance of Historia’s name?” Gustav asked. “You say in your reports that he found a picture of Sina, Rose, and Maria, but – ”

“Page eight,” Marlo said instantly. Gustav blinked at him. “Marco found the picture while visiting Historia’s home district. This happened when he was fourteen while compiling information of Berwick’s victims. He tracked down Father Nick’s church and broke into his room. The church had been abandoned some years after the Father’s death, witnesses who saw Marco merely assumed he was just a runaway looking for a place to stay. They left him alone, and he was able to find the picture with no problems,” Gustav nodded as he read through the indicated page, “when I spoke with Marco yesterday after he awoke, he told me he knew of the Reiss’s because Nick kept a journal regarding events that happened two thousand years ago. We’ve had a look at the entries ourselves, they’re personal accounts of that time.”

“He remembered his past life like the 2104th,” Pixis said, “he has no connections to any of the cave’s founders in this life, and no evidence suggesting he researched the Wiped Era’s breadcrumbs. Yet he still went to Sterben in search of the cave because he remembered it being there. That explains his death. But Historia?”

“Historia is named in the family records I found in the cave,” Anka explained, “her father was royalty, but he wished to hold power in the government rather than the monarchy. It was also a means of safety to stay hidden in plain sight. The king had to face death threats by disgruntled citizens due to lack of money and food, it drove the attention away from the Reiss’s. Historia, however, was born out of wedlock and rejected from her family, forcing her to don a new name so that the public didn’t know she was a Reiss. This rejection could have been their downfall, she would be a genuine threat to the throne if she chose to overthrow the king by legitimate means – her bloodline. Almost the same occurred this time except Historia is accepted in her family.”

“But she was still a danger,” Boris finally spoke from his corner of the table. “Her family is unaware of their heritage, and kept to themselves. Historia was a mystery — would she want to be queen? Or would she rather live a normal life? When her mother came to Father Nick with ‘Christa Lenz Reiss’ he recalled of the same girl in the past with a similar alias. He knew at once that the reincarnation
experiment worked and that her real name was Historia Reiss. However, he had a gut instinct to have
her take an alias. A precaution, especially for the daughter of a wealthy family – at the very least it
would protect Historia from kidnappers, a common occurrence among the rich. The last entry in his
journal revealed that his reason for going to Sterben was to collect the Reiss documents before
someone else could use it to their advantage. He never made it.”

“So why didn’t Berwick destroy this information? If he wanted his highness to remain king,
wouldn’t he take measures to keep it that way?” Pixis asked.

The attention was on Nile again. After Marco was done with Berwick, Nile had to secure the shifter
again and immediately performed a psychiatric evaluation once they were able to move him to
Yalkell. The result had been interesting.

“Berwick didn’t grow up in a nurturing environment,” he began. “He was sent from his village as a
child with a mission that risked his life, got eaten by a titan, then was forced to carry out his mission
by himself since he lost track of his friends. The community helped feed him the kindness that had
been missing in his life, and it skewed his beliefs into wishing to remain in the Walls. There was still
a part of him that was dedicated to his original purpose, which is why he was able to gain the trust of
the nine other founders of the cave. He’d been living with his inner conflict for centuries, hence the
survival of the cave. It was a time in which he convinced himself that his childhood was merely his
imagination. To him, protecting the cave meant that no one was to touch it including researchers. His
killing spree was triggered by the Munsell’s – the first to come close to finding the cave.”

“He thought he was only doing his duty as the last remaining founder,” Darius construed. “But as his
victims piled up, his psyche began to fall apart and his last remaining link to sanity was completing
his mission to the Ape Titan. Unfortunately for him, now that we’ve advanced so far, it would be
hard for the Ape to fight us without losing a good number of his armies. Berwick needed to do
something bigger to help him.”

Anka picked up after him, “He then targeted the royal family to destroy the foundations of our
system from the inside. A royal family assassination meant chaos. The perfect apology to the Ape for
taking so long in his mission.”

“But when he reached the last heir through means of gaining his trust, he grew attached and couldn’t
go through with it,” Rico finished.

“Then he attacked us – the last to look for the cave,” Dazz said, “he wanted to stop us before we
found evidence of the Reiss line, but since we managed to drive him away and secure the library, he
wasn’t able to come back and destroy the documents. His only solution was to get Erik and run for
it.”

“I had an episode once,” Erik said quietly, “a few years ago when the deaths of my parents were
still fresh. I...became hysterical and spouted cruel things about humanity...” he cleared his throat
uncomfortably, “I...wished everyone would die and...maybe he took it to heart. Maybe that’s why he
bombed Stohess. If the explosives were so intricately wired to the walls that could only mean that he
took a good amount of time to complete my wish. Such a large feat couldn’t have been completed
within a day...”

The mood shifted awkwardly. Erik ducked his head, his eyes glistening. “Like you said, you had an
episode,” Millius consoled, “what happened in Stohess wasn’t your fault. Berwick was becoming
more and more unhinged once his cover was blown. The blame’s on him. We’re finding more
bombs around the walls in other districts, too. If Berwick planted them there, it took him much longer
than when he knew you.”
Darius set down his tablet, the motion feeling like a finality of the report. “Your highness, with the truth of the Reiss family now revealed, what is your wish in regards to the throne?”

Erik opened and closed his mouth, shifting in his position which jostled the camera’s view of his face. “I’ve actually sent a letter to the Reiss’s and a personal one to Historia. I believe it’s up to them to decide…if…if they want to reclaim the throne. I can’t exactly say no.” He flushed, “I’m actually looking into buying a house…”

Darius shut his eyes briefly, “that would be a big step for you in regards to your illness, I wish you luck.”

Erik cracked a tiny grin, “Well I spent almost forty-eight hours outside my home, survived an entire building falling on top of me, and waited in an underground tunnel for most of an evening. I’m…I’m getting better.”

Darius nodded, turning back to the rest of the table. “All that’s left is deciding Berwick’s sentence. The Reiss’s still need to be spoken to, and Erwin needs to get back on us about what was found in Shiganshina. Anything else?”

Nile cleared his throat pointedly. Once everyone had his attention, he tried to meet them in the eye, but couldn’t and stared hard at his tablet. “In regards to my decisions done with Berwick’s interrogation…and lack of effort to fix any of the internal problems in my branch before they escalated in Stohess, I’m resigning from my post. I believe it’s only right given that over four hundred lives were lost due to my flubs as chief.”

Another awkward silence followed this announcement. Dazz, Millius and Hannah shared looks of shock. Not even Nack could find anything to say. They lived two lifetimes with Nile as the head of the military police, for him to resign voluntarily was the strangest thing they ever heard.

Rico broke the silence with a snort. “The public’s not going to like that.”

“Resigning now would not put them at ease,” Marlo added, “you haven’t been able to fix the problems in the brigade because the source was too good at hiding his footprints. One person wasn’t enough to go against centuries of corruption.”

“You fought in Stohess and tried to save as many lives as possible,” Boris said as well, “many of those citizens consider you a hero. They feel safe that you’re in charge. Stepping down will make them feel fear again.”

Nile looked at his recruits in surprise. He only knew them for a short while and yet they held respect for him that he never felt from his veteran subordinates. It made him feel…needed. Maybe his purpose in the brigade wasn’t so useless after all. “I – ”

“This is your opportunity to rebuild the brigade, leaving it unfinished will only make you feel worse,” Franz said reasonably, “besides, there’s been an increase of respect for you within the branch. There are a lot of officers – veterans and recruits – who wouldn’t take your resignation lightly. You’re stuck.”

Nile really had no idea what to say. He hadn’t noticed or thought of any of that. Only his failures ran through his head.

“I believe your subordinates have put up a good argument,” Darius said amusedly, “I am also against your decision. The corruption of the military police has lasted centuries and no one’s been able to clean every dirty corner, but once you found one of the sources to the problem you’ve worked
relentlessly in fixing it. There’s still many more issues to deal with, and I doubt anyone else can shoulder the responsibilities you’ve been able to handle.” Nile sank in his seat, a little dumbfounded by everyone’s reactions. “Now then. Our only loose thread is Bodt and Kirshstein.” Darius’s steely eyes landed on Dazz, “you’ve kept in contact with Mikasa Ackerman, what’s the latest?”

It wasn’t Dazz who spoke. Nack cleared his throat and let out a nervous trill of a laugh. “That’s a little complicated…”

Jinae Trauma Clinic

The smell of sterilized air and clean sheets were what greeted Marco when he woke up. He felt dizzy. Like he just came out of a bad fever. Sunlight was trying to force its way past the gray blinds that lined his window, casting his room in a gloomy and stagnant atmosphere. He knew this place…

It was slightly different, though. The bed next to his was blocked off by curtains. All he had to entertain himself with was the television screen hovering across his bed, and the angry shouting from outside.

His ears perked up.

Whoever was shouting was making a scene. Marco could hear other people begging them to quiet down. He sat up, growing more interested, then realized belatedly that he was perfectly fine to walk around.

Right. Titan gene.

Slipping out of bed. He tiptoed to the door, pausing to look at his neighbor. It was empty. Not a trace showed that it had been occupied. He snorted softly, of course he wouldn’t have a roommate. He was too much a danger. As if he had much use of a complete stranger…

Reaching the door, Marco pressed his ear against it and listened intently.

“…I’ve waited enough!”

Jean? Marco fought back from opening the door.

“He’s still sleeping. You’ve seen him just an hour ago – we said we’d alert you when he wakes up, you need to go back to your room – ”

“I’m fucking tired of talking to shrinks! I’m fine! I’ve behaved!” his voice died in a whimper, “please let me see him.”

“Jean,” Marco immediately recognized Eren’s voice, “Marco’s fine. This is 2856, he’s Not. Dead. 2856, remember?”

Jean was sobbing softly, gulping for breath.

“He’s fine,” Eren repeated firmly. “We’ll let you see him for a few minutes, but after that, you have to go back to your room for at least two hours.”

“Mr. Jaeger…”

“It’s okay, I’ll be with him.”

Marco opened the door before they had a chance, too concerned to continue listening. There were three nurses filling the hallway, Eren was right by the door in street clothes, with Jean behind him.
He looked thin. Dark circles ran under his reddened eyes. He was dressed in impersonal hospital issued pajamas underneath a thin gray robe. For a time, they’d been Marco’s as well when he was under Dr. Jaeger’s care.

“Marco!” Jean gasped, pushing past a wide eyed Eren and throwing himself over him. Marco stumbled back from the force, wrapping his arms around him. Jean buried his face into the crook of his neck, muffling his fresh wave of tears. “You’re alive…”

Marco glared pointedly to Eren who entered the room and shut the door behind him. He looked weary and old for someone so young. Together they gathered around his bed, Jean never letting Marco go.

“I’m here,” he reassured the weeping man, running a comforting hand up and down his back. It helped calm Jean, his sobs eventually drifting off to sniffles.

“How are you feeling?” Eren asked.

“Upset,” Marco answered flatly, “what happened? How long have I been out?”

Eren stopped short in surprise, then crossed his arms, his gaze drifting uncomfortably to Jean. Marco held him a little tighter. “I guess you’re lucid now. You were awake yesterday and well enough for the police to interview you, but I guess you really weren’t all there. I’ll have to call Dazz…” he muttered to himself, then shook his head, “A week’s passed. Berwick is being held in Yalkell. They have one of the best cells suited for him, the court is deliberating what should be done with him. He’s already been given the buffer. They should have done that when they sent you off to play interrogator. What was up with that, anyway? Why you? Everyone’s been telling me different answers.”

Marco frowned. Berwick wasn’t dead yet? “I guess you didn’t get the memo that I had a grudge against him. They didn’t trust that I was going to use my new shifting ability for humanity. Erwin decided that going against Berwick would help improve my…image to the police.”

Eren shook his head, considering this. “I knew about the grudge, I was guarding you before they sent me off to Shiganshina. It was still a risk to let you in the same vicinity as Berwick. I heard you literally mutilated the guy. Didn’t know you had it in you.” His smile slipped, “But he almost…” he stopped short, glancing at Jean, “someone with the buffer should have been in there with you. What they did was…it was like they were hoping for the best. What kind of protocol do the police run by?”

Marco ran a soothing hand through Jean’s hair. “I need to talk to Erwin. Where is he?”

Eren sighed irritably, “he’s with Armin. He was transferred here to recuperate from his surgery – first to take my dad’s formula.” He stared at Jean again, decided against saying anything else and stood up, “I’ll go get him. We’ll talk later.”

Marco watched him leave, only giving Jean’s his full attention when the door closed. The other man finally pulled away enough to look up at him. His face was smeared with tears. Eren had been careful to avoid explaining Jean’s state. Probably to spare the man in question the humiliation. He was far from the person Marco fought side by side with in battle.

Sad amber eyes met his, a cold hand reaching up to caress his freckled cheek. “You’re real,” he murmured, voice trembling. Marco leaned down and kissed him tenderly, holding onto him as Jean melted in his arms. “You’re real,” he repeated against his lips.
“Sleep,” Marco lay them both on the bed, practically cocooning Jean against him, “I won’t leave you
again, I promise.”

Yalkell

The meeting ended on a light note. Nile escorted the younger crew outside where they would go
their separate ways for their much deserved day off now that everything that needed to be taken care
of was done. Already Dazz was making plans to visit Franz, then go back to Chlorba to see his
family. And pass out for the next week…

“Throwing Berwick to the titans will no longer be an option for us,” Nile said, answering a question
from Hitch, “The scouting legion has reported the depleting rate. We’ll have to personally take care
of him ourselves.”

“We haven’t had to sentence a mass murderer differently for centuries,” Millius noted with concern,
“will the court be able to make the right decision?”

Nile rubbed his hand over his face. He needed coffee, and a shave. “Whatever decision they’ll make
will never satisfy the Stohess survivors. They lost families. Killing or torturing Berwick won’t bring
them back. No matter what, we’ll be the ones to blame for our lack of preparedness.” He smiled
bitterly, “and they’re right. Our branch has been rotting from the inside for so long it’s no surprise we
weren’t able to find the bombs years ago. We are to blame.”

The light note they left from headquarters quickly dimmed.

“At least we’re working on it,” Hannah said halfheartedly, “we’re cleaning out the officers who
accepted bribes from Berwick and suspended those who committed lesser crimes. It’s influencing
others to finally take their jobs seriously.”

“We’ve also lifted the ‘Top Ten’ qualification so more recruits could fill the void,” Marlo added.
“it’ll be hard rebuilding what’s lost, but it’s better than going on the way we have.”

Nile nodded. They reached the subway where they would go wherever they wished to go. It felt
strange to see them off. Nile felt like he were a father sending off his children to their first day of
school. He knew they’d be back to Stohess the next day to complete the cleanup, but it still felt like
he was experiencing a bit of empty nest syndrome.

He didn’t think he’d ever felt so proud of the recruits he’d gotten this year.

Which reminded him. “Most of the dismissed officers were squad leaders,” it was a huge blow to the
brigade. The group knew this. “I’ve looked into replacements, but there’s still many spots waiting to
be filled.”

“We’ve met a few who are good for the job,” Dazz turned to Millius and Hannah who nodded in
agreement.

“Yes, I’m still reviewing those who are due for a promotion,” Nile buried his hands in his pockets,
“but the fact remains that there are spots open – many spots. You’ve all been able to work on this
case faster than any recruit or veteran I’ve seen. That alone deserves some consideration.”

Marlo was the first to speak. “You mean us?” then flushed embarrassedly, “we’ve only been in the
force for a month, shouldn’t someone with more experience – ”

“Those with more experience will be given higher priority, yes,” Nile assured with a wan smile, “but
you’re hard work won’t be ignored either.” The group couldn’t help the tiny grins of pride bursting
from their faces. The chief turned to Dazz, Hannah, and Millius, “I know you three only came in to spy for Pixis, but you’ve done your job. If you want to join the scouting legion, you’re free to do so, if you wish to stay…it would be of great help.”

“If that’s how you feel…” Dazz looked at Millius and Hannah. To tell the truth, he was warming up to the idea of staying in the brigade, if only to help reconstruct the system. “May I make a suggestion?”

Jinae Trauma Clinic

His room was splashed in sun and flowers. There were so many balloons and get well cards that Armin feared he’d end up buried in them the next time he woke up. He received many visitors over the course of the week since having his surgery. First his family, who were practically camped in his room. Then his friends once they were off-duty to pay him a visit. He’d been going through so many emotions and pain medications, it was hard to tell whether something was said as a joke or not.

The only person who had yet to pay him a visit was Annie. He still had her tablet.

Every time the door to his room would open, he became more disappointed when it wasn’t her. Seriously. He was starting to feel guilty about taking her tablet.

That same slump fell over him when the door opened and Mina walked in with an arm wrapped around an enormous fluffy teddy bear with a red bow and white fur. It looked like the ultimate prize given in arcades.

“Please tell me that’s not for me,” he squeaked as she happily plopped the monstrous plush toy on his good side. “I’m too old for this!”

“They’re a gift from the guys back at Isra,” she snickered, “no matter how buff you’ve gotten you’re still the baby of the family.” Armin groaned miserably, the bear fell backwards and plopped over his face with a ‘whumf!’ earning another groan from him. “Aw it’s not that bad,” Mina fixed up the teddy bear and fluffed its head, “how’ve you been? Still on bed rest, I see.”

“Yeah,” Armin grimaced, “it’s not fun when I really need the bathroom.” Mina giggled, playing with the teddy bears hands. She looked much different in street clothes. He always imagined her to be the kind of girl who’d wear pastel summer dresses and pale flats. It reminded him of Mrs. Jaeger because Mina looked like her younger version with just her face and hair.

Mina was dressed in dark jeans, worn sneakers that had been doodled on, and a red t-shirt with a rock band logo over her chest. He didn’t recognize the name, but the image was memorable. It was a sketchy old man’s face with a pair of sunglasses, and fedora. He was also wearing pink lipstick.

Armin shook his head. How the hell was he able to compare Mrs. Jaeger with Mina?

“Has Annie come to see you yet?”

“What?” he blinked. Mina waited expectantly, “no. I still have her tablet, too. I’d been hoping she’d come over so I could hand it back. Is she still in Isra?”

Mina scowled and muttered angrily under her breath. Armin strained to hear, but missed it. “She’s been in Jinae for the past three days. She told me she was going to see you once she arrived.”

“What?” he sat up, then quickly fell back from the dizziness and mild ache, “I haven’t seen her at all, what’s she been doing in Jinae for that long?”
“I dunno!” Mina threw her hands up exasperatedly, “she fought tooth and nail with Hanji to be allowed to see you. She’s not exactly off the grid either, she came with Moblit, and he’s been reporting regularly.”

Armin stared at her disbelievingly, “‘fought tooth and nail’? She wanted to see me that bad?” he was having trouble picturing the girl arguing with her superior, “Annie?”

“Well, what do you expect? She’s been in love with you for years,” Mina said breezily, “I’m surprised she didn’t go titan to get her point…” her words drifted away. Armin’s eyes flew wide in shock.

She stared at him.

He stared back.

Then it clicked in her head a little too late. “She…didn’t tell you. Did she?”

He didn’t have to say anything, it was written all over his face.

Mina paled. Her grip on the teddy bear’s arms were making the toy appear as terrified as her. “But I thought…she said she did…she – I…shit!”

And still Armin was unable to properly respond.

Rose

The Safe House

852

He woke up to the sun burning through his eyelids no matter which way he turned. It was a rare moment when he’d sleep in so late. Last night had exhausted him to this point and he wasn’t sure he wanted to do it again. It messed with his schedule, and it messed with his authority in the house. The brats were probably lazing around thinking he was going to give them the day off.

Then again. He wouldn’t be in this state if he hadn’t slept with Eren almost every night. As expected, when he cracked his eyes open a fraction, there he was; sitting upright against the headboard with his face tightened in what looked like a painful attempt not to cry.

When he saw Levi awake, he choked out a short dry laugh.

There were few times Levi saw Eren like this, and they were usually either from nightmares or him thinking too much of the past. He had demons like everyone else, but Levi was one of the very few to see how deeply they cut into the young man. There had been two separate occasions where Eren broke down that they never spoke of.

Levi reached out to him, sliding his arm around Eren’s waist as he pushed himself up to sit closer to him; the bed sheets slipping off his bare chest. Saying anything soothing was never his strength, so Levi settled with planting a few kisses on his shoulder, climbing up to his tanned cheek where a tear was already trailing down.

What was he upset about? He wondered.

Was it his mother?

Friends?
He wished Eren would say it already. Seeing his face twist up like that was upsetting.

“You’ll never say it back to me will you? You were just letting me live out my fantasy…”

Say what? What fantasy? Levi felt his brows crease in confusion. Eren wiped his face. Sniffling roughly, he pushed Levi away and got out of bed, gathering his clothes which had been thrown carelessly all over the floor. Levi couldn’t remember that happening last night, but none of that mattered because right now he was stung with that wretched feeling of rejection piercing through his body.

The only time he remembered feeling this had been when he was very little and too innocent to understand the rotten luck that befell his childhood. He hated this feeling.

Biting back the urge to pretend not to care and let Eren leave, Levi slipped out of bed and grabbed him before he really could leave. He was more alert now. More afraid and confused. The smell of sex was still in the room and he was starting to fear this was the last of it between them. Eren was acting like something was wrong with them. After finally getting over their awkward beginnings. Levi couldn’t let him go without an explanation.

“What are you saying?” he asked, too unsure to sound indignant or demanding. His own voice sounded alien to him.

Eren sniffled again, another tear breaking free. “Levi. Tell me the truth. Do I do anything to you at all? Or am I just something to pass the time?”

Levi couldn’t answer. He understood what Eren wanted, but it was hard to say it out loud. It was almost like he didn’t even know how to say it because he grew up learning never to utter it. He didn’t want to now, and he didn’t want to when they first got together. He was impressed it took Eren this long to wait, but…

No. He couldn’t. He couldn’t say it.

“Eren –”

The shifter snatched his arm back and continued getting dressed. “Never mind,” he said, pulling his shirt over his head, “we slept in. You leave first, I’ll follow after a few minutes.”

Levi stood back, still stark naked. Should he let the subject drop? He knew now how much it bothered Eren. Sleeping with him without giving a proper answer would make things awkward again and he hated that. He liked what they had. He wanted to keep going for however long they survived.

He didn’t want anyone else.

But it was so hard to say such a sentimental thing out loud.

Shiganshina

2856

It was the first time in the whole week that Hanji was finally allowed to enter the ancient district, a trip she’d been squealing over since the start of the plane ride, much to Levi’s annoyance. Now that they arrived, she was becoming more unbearable, fawning over the artifacts in the Jaeger basement.

Levi wished Moblit had been able to join the trip to shut her up. He could only take her in small
doses, and at the moment he wasn’t especially focused on the mission which was irritating the crap out of him because what was distracting him was a stupid anxiety that had yet to leave him alone. His squad should have been with him, but there were still problems going on in the cleanup of Stohess that required their help more than a quiet trip to the outskirts of human territory. Levi had to grudgingly let them continue being led by Mike.

For Hanji’s sake, the corporal stood watch above with Reiner and Bertholdt. Since his last visit, Shiganshina played host to a significantly less number of titans. All through his first stay, more titans began turning into dust. Probes that had been sent out the day before reported the same from areas within fifty miles.

Hanji believed that with the Ape titan – the queen bee to the hive – gone, that meant the foundations of the titans were collapsing. No leader, no titans. Her theory was that the titans that lived for centuries, were devolving back to their human state, but because of their age, they turned to dust. So far, her only proof was that the titans Bertholdt and the others recognized from their village were still wandering around with no sign of decomposing. She predicted that within a month, the titan population would dwindle down to two percent or less. Already satellites were sending images of previously occupied lands now abandoned and covered in dusty winds.

Shiganshina only had two titans ambling around. There was a ten meter class trying to climb a tree near the hole on the wall. Each time it fell, it got back up and tried a new way of climbing. It was a disturbing sight. Like watching an overgrown nude man and imitating a toddler. Another titan was off in a far corner, walking aimlessly and occasionally tripping over the remains of the city.

Personally, if Levi had to visit this ghost town with a shifter, he was glad it had to be Bertholdt and Reiner. Eren was too much a distraction and Annie…

He wasn’t ready to be in the same vicinity as her. He still had nightmares of seeing his squad’s corpses. Not that he was going to admit it, and he wasn’t going to admit to other certain dreams either. They would only give Eren hope.

One of his recent dreams had been of the first time Eren confessed to him. They were in the safe house in Rose, the others were inside cleaning up and Eren was helping him with tending to the horses. The younger man had been acting ridiculous, trying to ‘help’ him by invading his personal space, saying cliché one liners and generally making an ass of himself. Levi couldn’t believe he was actually attempting to flirt with him until Eren ‘tripped’ over a bucket and landed them both on the ground.

Levi remembered being angry and impressed at how absurdly ballsy Eren had been that day. He noticed the looks Eren gave him for months, but he never thought he would end up acting on his hormones and the advice of the one person who constantly failed at being smooth. Who goes to Jean Kirschstein for love advice anyway? Was he that thirsty?

Thinking of the dream was making Levi more irritated. As clumsy as Eren had been, the fact that he went after him ignited a spark of interest. He was used to people like Eren admiring him from afar. He was able to treat Petra professionally even though he knew she’d been harboring a small crush on him. Anyone that came on to him, he was quick to brush away.

How in the hell did he get easily taken by a teenager who was so flagrantly bad at flirting?

Levi glared at the titan still trying to climb the tree. He wished it would attack just so he could let some steam out. It was much better than thinking about Eren and his stupid bright eyes and stupid smile, and stupid kindness. And he really was so stupidly kind now. Backing off when in the past he was too hormonal to think. Leaving him alone so Levi could have ‘time’ as if he hadn’t been waiting
for twenty years.

Damnit that wasn’t what Levi needed to hear.

…He didn’t even know what he needed anymore!

If Eren were still a teenager with his constant anger and impishness to keep him going, maybe it would have been easier for Levi to let him go, but he just had to grow up. He just had to learn to put others needs before himself. He…

Levi paused, feeling a little sick. ‘Let him go’?

He sucked his teeth, and grumpily crossed his arms. His mind wasn’t going where he wanted. He didn’t like Eren that way. He shouldn’t. Eren was too young for him. He wasn’t the same tortured boy who lost everything. He healed, he could be with any other person and enjoy a long and healthy life with them. Levi…he was still the same. Eren didn’t need that.

“Sir,” Levi turned to Reiner, the sun was glaring over his helmet, making it impossible to see his face, “are you okay? You look…” he paused, and Levi thought he was going to say something thoughtful, but the younger man instead said, “constipated.”

Levi scowled, “yes, I had a big bowl of oatmeal and now I need to dump a fat one,” he spat scathingly. Reiner stood his ground, and Levi could swear he was amused. “I’m fine.”

“Is this about…your memories?” Bertholdt asked hesitantly from behind Reiner, “have we triggered something?”

“No,” he answered, keeping his voice level, his crossed arms tightening, “I said I was fine.”

They didn’t bother him for a few minutes, leaving Levi to once again drown himself in his thoughts whether he wanted to or not. That was the bad thing about trying not to think about something, you end up thinking about it more.

Stupid Eren…

“I know you don’t want to talk about her,” Bertholdt broke their short lived silence, “but Annie told us that she’s slowly beginning to forgive herself. She said that Mina told her that maybe we weren’t brought back for punishment. Maybe we were brought back for a second chance.”

Levi narrowed his eyes, “you’re right, I don’t want to talk about her.”

“But it’s not about her,” Bertholdt said quickly, “what I mean is…maybe this is your second chance to do what you couldn’t do in the past.”

“Really?” Levi scoffed, “I think I did a little too much.”

“We all died young,” Reiner said gruffly, “I don’t think we did enough.”

“It’s just been so long. Our time together was too short. I thought I’d never see you again…”

Levi’s scowl deepened. The echo of Eren’s heartbroken voice swimming in his head. “Why do you think I need a second chance?”

The shifters looked at each other uncertainly. “Because…” Bertholdt started.

“Even you have regrets,” Reiner hazarded, “you were a criminal with only the army life to pick up
afterwards. You were never able to really enjoy life…wait are you still a virgin?”

“Reiner!”

Levi turned sharply to the muscled man. How did the conversation… “Excuse me?”

“Uh…” Reiner rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly, “you know what? Maybe I should just shut my mouth before you slice me up, yeah?”

In a rare moment, Levi didn’t insult him. He was thinking of his dreams again. Hidden away in a dark bedroom, heavy breathing filling his ears, and unmarred tanned limbs wrapped tightly around him. Slick with sweat. Pearly teeth nipping his skin…

“Guys!” Hanji shot up from the basement, carrying a metal suitcase in one hand. All three jumped for different reasons. “We need to get to the labs! I’ve got tests to make!”

Pretending that no one saw him jump out of his skin, Levi marched away to their helicopter. Curse his fate for being attracted to that stupid kid with the stupid eyes and the stupid fucking smile!

Jinae

Jean had fallen asleep long before Erwin arrived. Marco used that time to order the nurses brave enough to step into his room that he didn’t want him moved. For the past two hours, he kept Jean close to him, coming up with reasons for his current state.

And whether or not he was okay with it.

It was nice to have Jean so in need of him. It was exactly what he wanted. What he constantly fantasized about in the shadows of the night.

But this wasn’t the Jean Marco fell in love with. This Jean didn’t willingly play into his fantasies, he was broken. Everything that made him charming and interesting were stripped away within the course of one week.

“He went into shock,” Erwin answered the unasked question. The man had walked into his room like a ghost. Careful to keep his steps quiet for the sake of the sleeping man. Erwin was out of his uniform, donning a pair of slacks and a deep brown shirt Marco recognized as part of the casuals from training. It made the commander appear younger and oddly more vulnerable. “It’s not all that surprising, considering what he’s gone through.”

“What do you mean?” Marco watched Jean sleep. He looked a great deal better now that he was out. He gave the impression that he hadn’t slept well for a long time.

“We tried to keep your meeting with Berwick as quiet as possible,” Erwin helped himself to the chair Eren previously occupied, “but your friends can be pretty gossipy, by the time we got you here, Jean already knew what happened and snapped.”

“What? But…” Marco stopped short, his mind providing the answer before Erwin could give it. It was the only answer he could think of. He almost died a third time… “Oh.”

“He was already struggling with the Ape’s memories. To have you almost die again made him revisit your…first death? Sasha and Connie have said it was in Trost.”

“Eren was reminding him that it was 2856 not 850,” Marco recalled distantly.
“Your first death was so horrific that his mind’s been switching between the past and the present,” Erwin nodded, “it’s become difficult for him to discern the two apart. We had to move him here where he’d be closer to you as proof that you’re still alive.”

“But you’re still trying to control his visits.”

Erwin hesitated for a fraction of a second. “We believed it would be better to help him regain some independence by limiting his source of attachment.”

Marco’s right eye flashed red. Erwin remained comfortably in his seat, his face unreadable beneath his cool exterior. The gray shadows of the room blanketing over him were beginning to make Marco feel a little trapped. As if he were about to be accused of something absurd.

“You’re trying to take Jean from me?” he asked softly. Dangerously.

“Of course not, you’re his only…beacon, let’s say.” he waved his hand for emphasis. “I take that away and Jean has no one to stabilize him. Sasha and Connie did well before he learned you went to face Berwick, but right now you are the only one that can help him recover.” He shook his head, “he has no one else. Not even his family can gain his trust.”

Marco laced his fingers with Jean’s. He felt so warm and light, a comfort against everything Marco had gone through. A reminder that he wasn’t completely alone. He didn’t like that Jean was suffering because of him…

Was this all his fault for keeping him so close?

No…Jean stayed out of free will. Marco didn’t really do anything. Did he?

“You know,” Erwin said lightly, “they say that when people bite their lips it’s because they have something to say.”

Marco paused. Then realized he’d been digging his teeth into his bottom lip. He quickly stopped and glared sharply at the older man. “What do I need to do?”

“Let go.”

His face twisted, “what?”

“Let go,” Erwin repeated, as if it were the simplest thing in the world. “Your parents were taken from you, you were killed and forced back from the dead, no one listened to you, and for years you were consumed with anger and loneliness. If you want Jean to get better, you must get better,” and then he added right as Marco was about to argue, “you’re not okay. You’ve been great at pretending you are – tricked a lot of professionals with your lies. But you and I, and half the military knows you aren’t.” His face softened, “the more you run away from healing, the worse Jean will get.”

Marco’s hand tightened around Jean’s. Erwin was using him to manipulate his decision. He had a clear enough head to realize that now. He did it before when he woke up after the battle in Maria, too. Marco had the titan gene and a thirst for revenge. The problem was he also could have targeted the police which meant they had to play nice and give him Berwick and hope he wouldn’t go after them later. That made sense.

And now…he was still a threat. Even if he was buffered, he could still be angry and smart enough to plot revenge on the left overs of his hit list. Erwin was using Jean as the bargaining chip just as he used Berwick…
…Or.

…Or he honestly was concerned.

Marco clenched his jaw. He wasn’t sure anymore. The face-off with Berwick left him exhausted, all he wanted to do now was curl up with Jean and sleep for another week. He was too tired to feel any anger, it was sapped clean out of him leaving only…

Why – ?

“Marco,” he snapped his attention back to the commander. He still looked sympathetic, and Marco only felt a ghost of annoyance amongst the sea of confusion in his head, “you and Jean haven’t been buffered yet. It was a request from Eren. He believes you both can help with the expedition. Once you’ve been trained, of course. And when you’ve both been cleared to go back to Isra.”

“Expedition?”

“The first in two millennia,” Erwin nodded with a smile, “thanks to you two.”

Marco stared at the commander. His heart was hammering in his ears. He’d been complimented before, but it felt different this time. There was gratitude in Erwin’s eyes, and it was more meaningful than any other time someone thanked him for something stupid. Then it hit him that this wasn’t something stupid. It was important, and they were discussing it in a tiny room locked away from the world…

“The war is over?” he heard himself ask.

Erwin nodded again, a tiny chuckle making him appear much younger and livelier than Marco had ever seen him. “It’s over.”

Marco sat there. Processing. His hand still latched to Jean’s. Biting his lip. Leveling the pros and cons. Trying so hard not to overthink every little detail as he’d been accustomed to for most of his life. Considering, genuinely considering, that Erwin truly was – despite his reputation – being honest. Not just about the war. But about…

Was it really that hard for him to believe that people cared for him?

“Chief Dawk has been working all week to dismiss the officers who’ve dropped your case under Berwick’s orders, and any other cases that should have been handled better,” Erwin went on calmly, “a hefty number have been removed – enough to drop the top ten eligibility from the training camps.”

Marco snorted cynically. “That can’t be…” he fell silent when Erwin pulled his phone from his pocket and fiddled with the screen for a few minutes before handing it over to him.

It was an article from Wall Feed, glaring back at him in big bold letters were ‘Bodt Case Influences Dramatic Changes in Police Brigade’, below was a picture of groups of officers exiting a building with their hands cuffed behind them.

‘Bodt Case’

Marco scrolled down to skim over the article.

‘…War hero Marco Bodt…’
‘…investigations led by recruits…’

‘…Statement by Chief Nile Dawk…dismissal of 23 commanding officers…Stohess Bomber…’

“Everyone knows?” Marco asked quietly.

“Nile issued a statement yesterday,” Erwin said, “people were asking about Berwick, and reporters started digging and making their own conclusions. They painted you a flawless hero.” Marco spotted a few related articles with titles like ‘Bodt an Angel Amongst Us’, and ‘Prodigy Saves Humanity’. “I don’t think any of them remembered you made waves in the papers before with Dr. Jaeger. I think you’ve hit celebrity status now.”

“I…missed a lot in a week,” Marco agreed, eyebrows shooting up when he spotted an article titled, ‘War Heroes: Best Friends to Lovers’ complimented with a picture of him and Jean together at their graduation. It was strange to know that happened over a month ago. He handed the device back to Erwin.

“You have all the time in the world to catch up,” Erwin shrugged, pocketing the phone, “by the way, when I said you could go to Stohess to see Berwick, I didn’t mean you had to sneak in and knock out two people to do it.”

Marco blinked, and laughed in spite of himself; the memory of that night bringing some amusement. “I thought it was a trap…you’re infamous for being manipulative. How was I to know you weren’t really trying to lure me to the police? I couldn’t trust that Dawk was willing to let me talk to Berwick.”

“Good point, and you’ve just proven what I said earlier. Will you consider my advice?”

His distraction from the earlier topic had Marco a little lost, but he quickly remembered and fell into his confused stupor again. He didn’t want to talk about this anymore.

“I’ll consider it.”

Jinae

Fritz Cafe

Three days and she hadn’t set foot in the trauma clinic. Moblit’s patience was beginning to run dry. Each day Annie told herself to stop being silly and just go, but then she’d find herself an excuse and not go at all. Armin may still be tired from the surgery, maybe he didn’t want visitors so soon, what if he didn’t want to see her?

She knew they were stupid excuses. Armin was too nice to push away any visitors unless he really felt he couldn’t. She had a full conversation with him last time and he didn’t once seem uncomfortable with her presence.

Annie set down her coffee, the black contents swirling lazily with the motion. Across from her Moblit looked up briefly from his tablet. He was reporting their current status, as routine since their arrival to Jinae. The shifter ignored him for the view of the city.

Inside the quiet hub of the café, the city looked like a closed off world that was only meant as entertainment for the patrons. She’d never been to the district when it was still made of bricks and stone, but like the other cities, Jinae had become a quiet metropolis with skyscrapers and flying citizens showing off in their maneuver gear. True to its reputation, there were a decent amount of citizens dressed in pastel uniforms, all either nurses or surgeons taking their break. Annie wondered
if any of them worked at the trauma clinic. And if any of them helped in Armin’s surgery.

“This is the last day we can stay,” Moblit broke her thoughts, he was still fiddling with his tablet, “we’re needed at Isra to go over new formations. Erwin wants to prepare a fleet to clean up Maria and make it habitable as soon as possible.”

“I know,” Annie went back to staring outside. “I’m just – ”

“Excuse me?”

Both looked up to a couple standing at their table. They were middle aged, weary and nervous. Annie wouldn’t have recognized them at all if it weren’t for the woman’s telltale Asian features. She held a striking resemblance to Mikasa. The pair looked as though they hadn’t slept in days.

“You’re from the scouting legion, right?” the man gestured to the wings of freedom on the left breast of their shirts. “Do you know where the Jinae Trauma Clinic is? We’re from Stohess, we lost our phones, and only got this address,” he held up a worn paper with the clinic’s title scrawled on it, “but we don’t know this area. Can you help us? Our daughter is there. She’s a soldier.”

“Please,” his wife pleaded with watery eyes.

“Mikasa,” Annie said instantly.

“You know her?!” they pounced, “is she all right?”

“She’s perfectly fine,” Moblit stood, waving at Annie to follow, “we were actually going to the clinic right now, I’ll alert the commander that we’re on our way. Annie,” he smiled darkly at her, “I believe it’s your turn to pay.”

Eye twitching, Annie pulled out her tablet and placed it in the slot at the corner of the table where it gave her many options of pay as well as tip. Once that was dealt with, the four exited the café to the hot streets of the city. The gust of humidity felt like it was sucking the air out of their lungs.

Annie looked across the street where the hotel they were staying at resided. She couldn’t back out now.

Isra

Hanji hadn’t stopped moving since the return from Shiganshina. Reiner and Bertholdt awkwardly chased after her, trying to keep up with the squad leader and tripping over themselves when she stopped short whenever an epiphany struck. Having nothing else to do, Levi sat in the sidelines and watched the show.

“Each of the blood samples…and this and…the text books show that…the study of genetics back then was extraordinary! To think…” it went on like this for a good few hours and as boring as it could have been, the two shifters were making the spectacle entertaining. It had done its job in thoroughly distracting Levi from his own confusing vomit churning in his head.

Bertholdt dropped the stack of papers Hanji tossed at him, “but that would mean the explosion Jean described kick started the titan invasion!”

“Exactly!” Hanji snapped her fingers, then ran to the white board where she drew a time line and swirly lines beneath.

“Wait, what?” Levi couldn’t make sense of her doodles.
“It’s simple!” he hated that statement, “Jean said that from the Ape’s memories, there was a laboratory where he was tortured. His ‘creator’, Dr. Reiss, injected in him a serum that would transform him into a titan. It would make sense if there was more of it stored around the lab. The explosion would then expose the serum to the air where the city it resided in would then inhale it and become titans themselves – but less powerful because the serum wasn’t directly injected in them!” She drew a stick figure and a bigger one and put an equal sign in between, “But!” she crossed the equal sign and drew a new ‘equation’ with the addition of a hairy stick figure, “that wouldn’t instantly turn them into titans. They would need a trigger, which is what the Ape was! If he weren’t, then the entire world would have become titans within months before the walls could be constructed – we wouldn’t have existed!”

Levi squinted at the swirly lines, and quickly realized they were the DNA drawing’s he and Eren sent Erwin upon their first trip to Shiganshina. “Then that means the serum warped the DNA of our ancestors, forever mutating their genes to the code we have today.”

“Precisely!” Hanji laughed, adjusting her loosening glasses, then doodling again. It was another stick figure with Eren’s name underneath. She added a goofy smile and longish lines to represent hair, “Eren is the only mystery I haven’t cracked yet,” she stood back and tapped the end of her marker to her chin, “why is he the coordinate? How did the shifter village know of his existence?”

“We would need to go to the Ape’s origins to know,” Levi said, staring at Hanji’s stick figure art. It didn’t look like Eren at all. He had the itching urge to fix it. “That’ll have to be when Marco and Jean are ready for the expedition.”

Hanji pouted with a disappointed whine, “who knows how long that’ll take…”

He kept his eyes on the board, “have you heard from Eren?”

“Hm?” Hanji blinked owlishly, “not recently. Last I heard he was still at the clinic helping Dr. Jaeger. You remember his last message – Armin’s recuperating well, Marco survived the stab wound, and Jean’s…” she hesitated, “uh…”

“Annie hasn’t come back either,” Reiner added, “Moblit’s check-in’s say she’s fine, but she hasn’t gone to the clinic yet.”

Hanji scowled, pushing her glasses up to rub her eyes, “after practically begging me to let her go… exactly what is so terrifying about seeing Armin?”

“Armin?” Levi arched an eyebrow, “why would she want to see Armin?” apart from her freak out in the battle, and her behavior afterwards, he couldn’t recall ever seeing them close. Annie and the other shifters had been good at keeping their distance from the recruits.

“She must have some attachment to him,” Hanji shrugged, turning her attention back to the board, “was she close to him in the past?”

Reiner and Bertholdt exchanged uncertain glances. “Um…”

A knock at the door interrupted them. Ymir and Historia stood there, the shorter carrying a duffel bag over her tiny shoulder. She was still in her casuals, and looked like she felt out of place with the way her eyes kept shifting from one place to another.

“Your highness!” Hanji greeted grandly, throwing her hands up and flinging her marker across the room. Historia winced at the title. Hanji snickered unapologetically, “ready to meet the…” she paused and turned to the others for help, “is he still our king?”
“He will be until the Reiss’s decide to reclaim the throne,” was Levi’s best answer. “So?” he asked Historia, “is that what you’ll do?”

The blonde held tightly to the strap of her bag. She looked like a scared little girl. “I don’t want the throne…but I don’t know if that’s what my parents want…”

“We’re going to her place to figure it out before Dawk starts sniffing around for answers,” Ymir said, wrapping an arm around Historia’s shoulders, “besides, she’s been meaning to properly introduce me to the in-laws,” she smirked, “two birds. One stone.”


He eyed the ink stained finger apprehensively, “me…?”

“You need to go to Jinae.”

He made an embarrassingly accurate impersonation of a fish. “Wha – why do I – Jinae?” Ymir snorted again. He hated that she was witnessing him flubbing around. Every time he heard the name Jinae, his mind instantly went to Eren. And he knew that she knew, which made his stuttering ten times more mortifying.

“You need to report our discoveries!”

“What discoveries?” he sneered, “that shit’s short enough to put in a text! If you feel the need to do this in person, you should go not me!”


Levi pursed his lips. She was baiting him. Damn this idiot, did she know…?

He wasn’t falling for it, “fine. I’ll go.” He turned on his heel and marched to the door, “do you need anything else?”

“A souvenir would be nice,” was the chirpy answer.

He gave his fellow squad leader a curt nod, “Bring back Annie, got it.” He brushed past Historia and Ymir, throwing the taller girl a sharp glare that had no effect on her and only made her more amused.

Hanji grinned proudly at the board, “so the titans were created by Dr. Reiss, who set to punish humanity by turning us into monsters. The picture of the three girls found in his office definitely holds a strong meaning to him…what if something happened to them that made him believe people were evil? Enough to want to punish the entire population, and then play hero by building the walls where we would be trapped for centuries…”

“Maybe they were killed or kidnapped?” Reiner suggested, “or raped?”

“Hmm…” Hanji mulled that over, her grin slipping at the horrific imagery, “revenge for the pain inflicted on three innocent girls. It’s killed billions of people over the course of history. That’s an extreme for revenge…people can be so diabolical.”

“We don’t have to be,” Bertholdt said softly, slouching behind Reiner, Ymir watched him latch onto his left arm, the very place she first saw the patch back when she dumped him out of the river. Since confessing to her and Reiner, Bertholdt had been more open with talking to them. He appeared more relaxed now and smiled a little more. It was far from a full recovery, and Ymir doubted he’d ever
attain it, but at least now he didn’t have to fear their rejection by hiding his pain. “We can be better…”

“Yea,” Hanji agreed with a sad smile, “we can be.”

Jinae Trauma Clinic

Later

Keeping the eager reporters away from the clinic would have been an emotionally stressing ordeal for Eren if Mikasa wasn’t there to help him out. Survivors of traumatic events were always interesting people to get a story from, but to get an interview with heroes who changed history by a daring act was a goldmine. Especially if those heroes are lovers. And most especially if they have a tragic past. Most of Eren’s time at the clinic was spent lurking the halls and stairways for any reporter who managed to sneak in.

By the time afternoon hit, he was tempted to go titan and scare the crowds away. He would have done it too if Mikasa hadn’t sat him down for five minutes and recharged him with a strong cup of coffee.

The small moment of respite had done him well enough to remind him that he wasn’t the only one suffering. A week had passed and Mikasa had yet to see her parents. The only contact she made was with Millius who got an officer in Karanese to find them and direct them to the clinic. They lost their phones and tablets from the evacuations, and no change to use the public phones, much less their credit cards to get money out of the bank. The best they could do was have a brief conversation with Mikasa, telling her they were fine, and they would be at the clinic as soon as they got a ride. This was two days ago, and as much as Mikasa wanted to go find them herself, her duty was to guard the clinic. Her only comfort was that her parents were safe.

Eren set his empty cup on the table. Across from him Mikasa had barely touched her own. She was fingering the edge of the plaid scarf he gave her the first day of training. He remembered being determined to find her and Armin amidst the crowd of trainees. He grew up thinking they hadn’t reincarnated, and if they did, they probably didn’t remember him. No one looked for him even with all the social sites the internet provided, but to be honest he didn’t really look for them either. He’d been scared. Just like everyone else.

When he finally found Mikasa and Armin, he was hit with a strong sense of guilt for being a coward, and happiness at reuniting with his family. Then sadness for witnessing their deaths, and his failure to save them. He didn’t know how much he missed them until he finally saw them.

The scarf had been his only source of comfort before giving it away to Mikasa. He would never say it out loud. It reminded him of his past life – not of the tragedies, but the moments that made living more bearable. Of Armin showing him books of the outside world. Mikasa holding them in the night as their only source of comfort. The jokes and dreams they shared. And the tears that could only be cured by each other’s presence.

That’s why it was so unbelievably easy for Mikasa to keep him from punching a reporter in the face.

“Hey,” he said softly, staring at the bottom of his cheap paper cup. She immediately stopped fiddling with the scarf and gave him her full attention, “if you and Armin weren’t there for me…I’d probably end up like Marco.”

Mikasa reached out and placed a comforting hand over his. It always annoyed him how strong and calloused her hands were, whereas his own felt like they never experienced labor. Now they’d
become a source of comfort. That he had friends to help carry the load on his shoulders.

“Do you think Marco’s a bad person?” she asked.

Did he? He was used to the kind and selfless person Marco pretended to be in training, the cold and off kilter man was even harder to picture since he never truly witnessed it, but the man he spoke with earlier was like meeting a new person altogether. He didn’t seem evil, and he didn’t seem like an old friend. It was like he were talking to a stranger.

“When I was in that van,” Mikasa didn’t wait for his answer, “I had to sit with Berwick for five hours before Marco arrived. He had no regrets, no guilt. There was emptiness in his eyes. When Marco arrived…I didn’t know who I was looking at.”

“I felt that way too,” Eren murmured sadly.

“Berwick’s only attachment was the king. And to everyone Marco’s only attachment is Jean,” Mikasa shook her head, “but as he spoke of Berwick’s victims, I could tell – as casual as he acted – that he didn’t just mourn the deaths of his parents. He was hurting for everyone. He knew every detail of their lives, took three years of his life looking into their history while everyone else forgot them.” Mikasa quirked her lips into a small smile, “if Armin and I weren’t there for you, yes, you’d probably end up like him. I’m glad it never happened…I wouldn’t want you to feel that much pain.”

He stared at their clasped hands, warmth in his chest making his eyes burn. “Thank you.”

“We should be there for them now,” she added, “Marco and Jean need to learn to trust us. They need to remember that they have friends.”

Eren nodded and was about to reply when he spotted something at the corner of his eye.

Levi stood by the doorway, face stony, and arms crossed. “Where’s Erwin?” he demanded tightly.

Eren didn’t know how to answer. The corporal looked furious. “I…he’s…” he cleared his throat, and stumbled out of his chair, giving enough time for his brain to reset and manage an, “I can take you to him!”

Levi sneered, “no need, I’ll find him myself.” He turned his heel and would have walked out as silently as he came if he didn’t walk right into Annie, who had Moblit and two people coming in behind her. He didn’t have much time to react either because the two strangers dashed past him and grabbed Mikasa with cries of joy.

She let them hold her out of shock, probably processing a minute late that her parents were finally with her. When it did hit, she hesitantly hugged them back, caught between staying strong or falling apart.

She sniffled, hiccupped, then buried her face in their arms just as a flood of tears began to spill. It was the first in a long time Eren had ever seen her cry.

He backed out of the cafeteria quietly, knowing the family would need some time to themselves. He stood awkwardly next to Levi, who was watching the small group with a mix of surprise and confusion. He wasn’t in maneuver gear. Dressed down to casual camouflage pants and brown t-shirt. Eren hadn’t seen him for a week since their return from Shiganshina, and even before then the last time he saw him out of the combat suit had been right after his seizure.

If he were being completely honest. Levi looked smaller. The muscles, however, more than made up for it. He had a lot less scars than Eren remembered. Levi looked…normal.
Eren cleared his throat, working to fight back a blush, “I can take you to Erwin if you want.”

Levi clenched his jaw. “Fine.”

Both turned down the hallway and walked to the patients rooms, where Eren was pretty sure Erwin was paying Marco a visit. They passed by nurses, all who greeted him with respectful dips of the head. His mother received much more familiar greetings because she visited the clinic more than him. It made him envy her because for the past week he had to deal with ‘Mr. Jaeger’ and ‘sir’ as if he were a forty year old man with a mansion and personal satellite, and not a kid fresh out of his teens. He blamed his discomfort on having died too young to earn such formal respect.

“Anything new happen while I was gone?” Levi asked a little too curtly.

Eren eyes him perplexedly. “Marco finally woke up, Jean’s been cooped up in his room and Marco refuses to let him out of his sight. Um…Armin’s recovering well from his surgery,” he thought hard for anything else that happened, “the super soldier squad Pixis and my dad created are volunteering to aid in the next recon expedition…um…oh,” he said uncomfortably. Levi looked at him with ill-hidden curiosity, “my dad hasn’t been able to figure out why the titan gene can’t heal eyes. He’s working on it, but it looks like people like Sasha are going to have to get glass eyes as a replacement – or cyber eyes like Marco if they have the money.”

“That’s it?” Levi said disbelievingly.

Eren frowned, what else was he supposed to say? “Yeah. I mean if you want to talk about the meals they give here –”

“No,” Levi shook his head, the strange stiffness magically disappearing. “Just take me to Erwin.”

“Okay…” they walked a few more paces, passing more doctors and nurses, the halls crowding and clearing. “Is everything all right?”

“Fine.”

That was too fast. Eren waited until the hall cleared again before asking discreetly, “did you have a nightmare?”

“No.”

Affronted at the sharp reply, Eren pursed his lips, not liking Levi’s cold attitude. Didn’t he say he’d help him when he’d have nightmares? What was his problem!?” “You sure? You don’t seem your usual perky self.”

Levi glared at him, then quickly averted his gaze for the elevators they were approaching. “I’m fine. Just doing an errand Hanji could have easily done herself,” he then mumbled angrily, “an email would have been easier.”

“If it’s not that important, what is it?” Eren asked curiously. They stopped at an elevator and waited for any door to open after pressing the call button.

“Hanji believes the explosion Jean saw in his vision was rigged with the titan serum the ape was given,” Levi replied, staring back at his reflection on the opaque silver doors, “the explosion exposed the serum to the air infecting everyone in the vicinity. She based that all on the blood samples we found in Shiganshina. Don’t ask me how.”

“I see…” one of the doors chimed and opened. The pair stepped inside, the smell of cleaning spray
and sterilization invading their noses. “She must be excited.” Levi snorted derisively. Eren counted that as a win. “How was Shiganshina? I heard titans have been showing up less.”

“There were only two stupid ones,” Levi said flatly, “all the intelligent ones have disappeared.”

Eren laughed dryly, “We’ve trained for three years. I thought we’d see more battle than this.”

“Be glad you were spared any more deaths,” Levi remarked. “You’re a better person now than you were then.”

Eren’s lopsided grin stopped short. He did a double take. “Wait, are you saying I was awful?”

“I’m saying you’re happier,” the corporal sighed exasperatedly, “you smile more, you’re more mature – more responsible, less angry,” he hesitated, “it’s…a nice change.”

Eren’s face was burning. He stared hard at his feet, feeling the need to do something with his hands just to appear casual. He buried them in the pockets of his jeans. “R-really?”

Levi didn’t answer for a long time. Unable to resist looking, Eren peeked a glance. The other man was frozen, his pale face a bright shade of pink.

Levi hadn’t meant to say all that.

The younger man’s smile returned. “I think you’ve changed for the better too.”

He received a punch to his side, but it did nothing to ruin his happy mood.

…

Armin stared at the door where Annie stood. After Mina left, he saw Eren and Mikasa, then Erwin, a few nurses and finally got some peace and quiet. It was getting late, though. He wasn’t expecting any more visitors for the day. He was actually going to use the free time to think over his discussion with Mina.

…Which was unlike him.

Erwin’s visit gave him much more to think about. They discussed what the next move of the branches should be, what Dawk was planning to do, how to go about making Maria habitable again. The matter of Stohess…those were all topics Armin usually gave higher importance. And yet the only thing filling his head was one simple crush.

He blamed the human need in him to be wanted. He knew he grew up fairly attractive, friends at the boxing gym would constantly complain about it. What stumped him was how Mina worded Annie’s crush. ‘She’s been in love with you for years’ implied that Annie liked him way back when they were training together.

Exactly what about him did she like? He knew it couldn’t have been his looks, Annie wasn’t so shallow. Was it his intelligence? Personality? He couldn’t understand.

All the questions backtracked and self-destructed when he saw Annie at the door. Unlike last time, she had her bangs to the side, making it easier to see her eyes. She was in army casuals, for which he figured those were the only clothes she owned since she lived in Isra and mostly kept away from the rest of society. Her fist was raised against the doorframe. He spotted her before she could knock.

She probably had no idea that he knew now. He had to act natural.
“Uh-er-what’s-arr-I mean…hi-hi-ee…”

…Wow.

Annie was visibly taken aback, but she quickly recovered, and stepped inside. “Hi.” He suddenly felt very self-conscious about how pathetic he must look. Bedridden post-surgery, with half his body covered in bandages and casts. The opposite of the boxer who one upped Annie in a match. Although, now that he thought about it, he probably only won because it was difficult for her to see him as an opponent because of her crush…

Damnit, he was thinking about it again!

“How are you?”

“What?” he squeaked, then turned red in embarrassment. “Oh, um. Fine. Better. The doctor said I should be strong enough to start rehabilitation in maybe the next month or so. He doesn’t want to push it.”

The corners of her lips quirked, “that’s good.”

“Yeah,” his uninjured hand fiddled restlessly with the bed sheets, his eyes darting around the room, searching for something to say. He was beginning to break into a cold sweat and it sucked because he never felt this nervous around Annie.

Furtively, he stole a glance at her posture for any sign that he wasn’t the only one feeling uncomfortable. She hadn’t sat down yet, surprisingly not in a sweater because of the searing weather. Her habit of stuffing her hands in her pockets transferred to her pants pockets, and he could just see the lumps of her knuckles against the fabric. She would have appeared calm if her knees weren’t trembling. Armin wouldn’t have noticed either if he hadn’t really looked.

That made him feel a little better. At least he wasn’t the only one.

He could not believe Annie actually had feelings for him. What was he like in her head? It was hard to imagine Annie with romantic feelings at all! She was just so cold.

And quiet. And shy.

Could he return her feelings? She’d done so much harm in the past…

And yet she suffered and tried to make up for it.

What should he do?

He was nervous. She was nervous. They couldn’t continue their halfhearted conversation. In a fit of anxiety, Armin laughed.

Annie stared blankly at him, “what’s funny?”

“Nothing!” he choked, “nothing. It’s just,” he could feel himself relax a little. Enough to remember, “Your tablet! I still have it!” he pointed to the side table where the device sat, surrounded by all the gifts from his friends. Annie picked it up, then noticed the giant bear sitting on the floor. “Mina brought that over,” Armin defended weakly, “a gag gift from the guys at base.”

“It’s cute,” the shifter mumbled, her pale eyes drifting up towards all the trinkets littering his side of the room. “I wanted to give you something, but I guess you’re covered.”
“You wanted to…” Armin felt his face burn, and there was no way he could hide it in his position. Lucky for him, Annie was just as red faced and had conveniently kept her gaze on the cards. Armin could feel his blood rushing in his ears, accompanied by the heavy thumping of his heart.

It was only a few words.

‘Years…’

‘Love…’

He could feel his perspective slowly start to change. Maybe even heal. His whole life was built on determination and one goal. This changed everything. It was a mess of feelings he never experienced before. Confusion. Gratitude. Something he couldn’t put his finger on. Yet most prevalently, curiosity.

And he wasn’t prepared.

He couldn’t call it love. It was fluttery and new, and it hadn’t quite gotten his full understanding. Almost like a math problem that could never be solved, but was so tempting to figure out it was infuriating. He wanted to understand. He wanted to…

Armin sucked in a breath.

He wanted to give it a chance.

“Armin?” Annie had calmed herself enough to face him again. She looked concerned and Armin would have immediately noticed if the sunset hadn’t streamed in at the perfect angle and give him a view he’d seen a million times, only now it was completely different. She was different.

“U-um…” he almost laughed again at his inability to speak throughout her whole visit. “You asked me once if you were a good person…I said I never liked that question.”

Annie’s eyes darkened, “I killed people. To them I’m not a good person.”

“You saved my life…” he smiled gently, “it may be selfish, but to me you’re a good person. I’ve wanted to believe you were ever since I found out you were a shifter. Even after everything you did.”

Her brows creased with the memory of her past. She looked lonelier. Fragile. And maybe it was that moment when Armin realized that ever since they first met, no matter how aloof she appeared, there was always a bit of herself seeping through. Always.

She hadn’t been very subtle either whenever he was around her…

How the fuck did he not notice!?

“How did it…” her hands in her pockets dug further with ill-held anxiety. “How did it be all right if I help with your rehabilitation? Once and a while?”

Armin felt his face heat up again. Was this her way of asking him out? “Sure!” he squeaked again, “I mean… I’m probably going to be a pain and you have your duties at Isra…”

“I don’t mind,” Annie’s cheeks were flushed, but since the first time he’d met her, the shifter looked genuinely happy. It was a really nice thing to see. “Once you’ve recovered, we can have a rematch.”

Yeah. Armin smiled. This was totally her way of asking him out. “That’d be great.”
“Hey,” Levi said irritably, his face depicting his current mood of complete annoyance with no room for jokes. “If this is your idea of a first date, I’m ripping your balls off. Then your teeth. Then your nails. And maybe your tongue.”

Eren blinked at him innocently. The clinic was closed, but the café was still open to the employees who had to stay overnight. Mikasa was allowed to leave temporarily and spend time with her parents, making Eren and a few other soldiers left to guard the building. Levi was actually about to leave, but the younger man offered him coffee and now here they were in a dead cafeteria that made no attempts to appear classy.

Levi was fine with coffee. Tea would have been better, but he refused to touch the poor excuse of ‘Grade A’ tea they served in the clinic. The coffee wasn’t any better, but he needed it more than his tastes demanded.

He expected a Styrofoam cup with black crap and maybe a snack from the vending machine. He was not prepared for a fucking hot meal steaming and waiting on the table for him. It was the kind of food he expected from Trost. Spaghetti sautéed in garlic and eggs, topped with grated parmesan and sprinkled with chopped parsley. Complimented with a humble side of spinach salad accentuated with grape tomatoes and a light spray of dressing.

His stomach did an obnoxious growl that made Eren plaster on the perfect grin to represent his now overinflated ego.

And while Levi would have just taken the coffee and left, Eren’s smile was affecting him too much to be a complete dick, so he sat down with him and tried not to look like he was in heaven as he demolished his meal like a true barbarian.

“My dad got the green light to use his new formula on the Stohess victims,” Eren said, already done with his plate, “it’ll take some time to mass produce and regulate it, but it’s a step. A giant step.”

“A lot of patients won’t be able to afford it,” Levi frowned, “if it’s new, there’s no telling if it’ll work on certain individuals or not, or if they’ll get a horrible reaction.”

“Hence the regulating,” Eren nodded, “no. My dad wants to make it available to those in true need of it – amputees, mainly. He’s recruiting a team to spread out and try the formula on the first patients that take it. He’s gotten a lot of crap for taking the cautious route, but at least now the media should quiet down now that he’s giving it to the public.”

“Armin was one of the first to take it, right?” Levi swirled his fork lazily in the remainder of his pasta, his stomach now pleasantly full. “Annie was with him, but he seemed better.”

“Yeah he –” Eren did a double take, “That’s right! You came in with Annie! How was that? You didn’t hurt her did you? You probably did – she too fast a healer so I wouldn’t have seen a bruise –”

“Calm down,” Levi finished the last of his food and set aside his plate. Eren waited patiently, and Levi instantly pictured a dog waiting for his helping of lunch. “I met her and Mikasa’s parents at the lobby…we just ended up going to the same area.” Eren remained skeptical. “I’m not a child, Eren, I don’t go punching people in public places. Especially if they’re with two upset parents.”

“So you would have punched her in private,” was all the shifter got out of that.
“It would make me feel a little better,” Levi admitted unashamedly. Eren shook his head, then laughed and went to swiveling the remains of his tasteless coffee. With nothing better to talk about, Levi’s attention drifted to the rest of the cafeteria. They were the only ones there. The kitchen was closed for the night, but the door was open to allow employees to make their own coffee. Some of the lights further down were off, making the place was dimly lit. It would have given off a vibe of a slasher movie, if the company wasn’t so goofy.

He meant goofy in the nicest sense of the word.

…But yeah, Eren was goofy.

And dorky, and too optimistic.

And maybe he was a decent cook. Grown up. Patient. Selfless.

And kind of really hot –

No! He wasn’t going there!

Levi downed the rest of his coffee with a grimace. “I should get back to base, Erwin needs me to…” He couldn’t think of anything. Fuck. “…Watch over Hanji.”

Eren wasn’t buying it, “‘Watch over Hanji’,” he repeated dully.

“Yes, that idiot’s become a pain now that we went to Shiganshina,” he stood up and gathered his disposable dishes to dump. “Thanks for the meal.”

Eren wasn’t buying it, “‘Watch over Hanji’,” he repeated dully.

“Yes, that idiot’s become a pain now that we went to Shiganshina,” he stood up and gathered his disposable dishes to dump. “Thanks for the meal.”

“Wait,” Eren stumbled to his feet and grabbed his wrist, “I haven’t seen you for a week, why not stay a little longer?” He quickly corrected himself, “as friends! We can catch up, talk about…about something – I…” he dropped his head in defeat, “I sound desperate, don’t I?”

Levi’s eyes narrowed, “So this was a date!”

“What?” Eren snapped back up, too shocked to be embarrassed, “It’s not! I mean…not unless you want it to be. I just wanted to talk about your nightmares! Hanji told me you’ve been having them every night!”

“What?” Levi flared up. “Hanji. Told. Me! As in, I didn’t say shit!” Eren threw his hands up. “And why are we yelling!?”

“I don’t know!” Levi yelled back. He forced himself to relax, picturing all the ways he was going to kill his fellow squad leader. Was this why she wanted him to go to Jinae? He hadn’t realized his nightmares were so bad that other people noticed. Did he talk in his sleep? “I haven’t had any intense nightmares. I’m a grown man,” he needed to leave, “this is all a misunderstanding. I’m fine.”

Eren grabbed his arm again, forcing him to look at him. “Levi, you looked like shit when you came in. If it wasn’t nightmares then what was it? I want to help you.”

Levi stared at him. Didn’t he just mistake their dinner as a date? Wasn’t that enough of a clue? How dense could this kid be?

Wait. When did this turn from annoyance that it was a date to annoyance that it wasn’t?
“Was it about your childhood?” Eren guessed, “I used to have those and think they didn’t affect me. My doctor said I was struggling to find a happy place, but what I needed was to remember that my life now was what mattered. If I continued to stay with my happy memories I’d end up replacing reality with – ”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Levi deadpanned.

“Well, she didn’t know that my dreams were memories, so maybe she was little off,” Eren relented.

“No. I meant…” Eren was giving him that eager look again. The big eyed puppy look that no one could resist. Levi remembered being on the receiving end of it whenever Eren used to visit his room after everyone was free for the day. The first time he’d been on the receiving end of it had been on his first days in the scouting legion. Enthusiastic, and willing to please. All Levi did was order him to clean up the rooms, and though he did a bad job of it, Eren hadn’t complained. Much.

Now the stupid idiot was making that face again.

“Fuck you,” Levi grabbed him by the front of his shirt and pulled him in, mashing his lips against his.

Eren muffled a startled noise against him, nearly falling from the sudden movement. It took him a total of two seconds to realize what just happened. Then two more for his brain to order his mouth to react before Levi changed his mind.

The longer they kissed, the foggier Eren’s mind became with joy and a high he could only experience with Levi. He wrapped his arms around his smaller, yet stronger frame, drinking everything his senses could take. The feel of Levi’s muscles rippling with movement, his smell of cleanliness and soap, and a taste of the garlic from a meal Eren had intended on eating alone.

He never thought he’d be with Levi like this again.

They parted just enough to feel each other’s heavy breaths against their faces. Eren found himself pinned to the table, their empty plates having been shoved to the floor. His ears were ringing. Heart pounding.

Or was that Levi’s?

“Don’t cry,” the older man grunted, still trying to catch his breath.

“I’m…” he was about to say his wasn’t, but his vision was blurring quickly. He was fighting a losing the battle. “I’m trying. I just…need a moment.”

That wasn’t the answer Levi was looking for. The ridiculousness of it made him choke out a laugh. He would have laughed more, but the rest was lodged in his throat by the strange warm feeling in his chest. He felt like he was floating.

He ran his fingers through Eren’s long locks of smooth ebony hair. Burying them deep in soothing circles.

Just like he had in the nights they shared…

He stared into Eren’s watery green eyes. His own vision beginning to distort. It was beginning to click now, and he wished it clicked earlier. The memories and the present. They were two different worlds, but they were still both him. He’d always doubted their relationship, but Eren constantly made it work. Made him forget there was anything wrong in the first place. He…
He was perfect.

A tear fell over Eren’s cheek. Crap.

“Levi,” Eren quivered, running a hand up and down his back. “It’s okay. I…I’m here – ”

“Shut up,” he kissed him again, more tenderly this time. He needed to reacquaint himself properly. Revisit all the little details and spots that turned Eren into a musical instrument. Slower. With care.

They had all the time in the world now.

And he was never letting go of him again.

Chapter End Notes

sooo there IS an epilogue. It's finished. But I didn't post it with this chapter because as I was editing it I accidentally triggered myself with a topic I hadn't realized I was writing ;_; I didn't want anyone else getting triggered so now I've got to rewrite almost the entire thing. Hopefully it'll be up soon!
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

one year later

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Karanese

One Year Later

It was as sunny as it had been that day. Barely a cloud in the bright blue sky, and the heat burning down their backs. That morning played witness to the memorial of Stohess. In place of the fallen district was a large stone wall in the shape of a U. It was seven feet tall, and covered with engravings of names and dates. The ceremony was such a huge and solemn event that neighboring towns could hear the speeches being given without looking at the television coverage.

Dazz and his team had been on stage wearing their formal military police uniforms. It was hot. They were sweating underneath the stiff material – it didn’t help that the uniform was a dark navy which did nothing to reflect the sun, but they made no complaints. If they felt disgruntled at all, that was wiped away when survivors approached them with gratitude. Over four hundred lives were lost in Stohess. Two hundred citizens, and two hundred and twenty soldiers. When the final body count had been announced, Dazz lost feeling in his legs.

For a long time he drowned himself in guilt over his ill-preparedness of Berwick. He would still be struggling if his friends weren’t there to help him move on. They were there for him every time he fell into a slump, and every time he doubted his ability to lead them. He returned the favor when they fell to their knees, too. It was thanks to them he was able to crawl out of the hole he dug himself in and emerge as one of the most respected captains of the military police.

“No major incidents,” Hannah reported from her post, “just a few fights we stopped.”

That was good. Dazz scanned the city from his position. There wasn’t much to do on his end either. There was no grand pathway made for the scouting legion. Mainly because they could care less for
one. They could have easily left for their expedition the same way they usually went into Maria, but there was something sentimental about leaving the old fashioned way. The Karanese gates hadn’t been used for hundreds of years, to see them open again to let the green cloaked soldiers pass would mark a historical moment in the history of humanity. Once they passed the gates, they would board to helicopters waiting for them on the other side, and leave for the expedition. Everyone – even those who’d been against leaving the walls – was excited.

That meant that there had to be something special to drive home the significance of this expedition, and that was a few words from the high officials.

Facing the city from the side of the gates was an elevated stage playing host to a number of uniformed officials decorated with badges that glittered in the sun. Standing on the podium, with his strawberry blond hair much shorter, and a simple black suit with only a golden family crest pin to represent him, was the king. Much taller, and more confidant.

There was a lot of speculation and gossip surrounding who was the true royal family. The Reiss’s had spent an entire week at the palace discussing the matter with Erik, who at the time was convinced he would have to move out. Historia wanted no part in ruling the kingdom, and her parents were flummoxed with all the responsibilities a royal had to shoulder – even for a figure head.

What resulted was a lot of confusion and uncertain agreements. The week in the palace was too overwhelming for the family. They were wealthy enough to know of luxury living, but to live as a royal felt too stifling and grand for their tastes, especially Mrs. Reiss. It convinced them not to take over the throne as everyone assumed they would. Instead they were satisfied to be honorary members of the royal family. They didn’t live in the palace, and they didn’t need to be a part of every major event like the king.

Today, though, they were on stage to represent their daughter who would be taking part in the expedition. The paparazzi had gone nuts on their arrival. They would be especially keen on getting a picture of Historia once she arrived with the army. All the attention to her family had naturally shifted to her and people were immediately taken by her lack of interest in being queen or princess. They loved that she was a soldier who not only graduated in the top ten on her own merit, but could kick anyone’s ass if they ever tried to touch her crazy girlfriend.

Dazz and his team were invited to be on that stage too since their work in Stohess left a giant footprint in history as well, but he wasn’t good with audiences like these. He had a more important job to do than sit on stage and look pretty. The last time he’d been on stage was when he had been awarded a badge of honor for his efforts in capturing Berwick. He shed a few tears not of pride, but of grief that he wasn’t able to save everyone. The reporters ate it up like candy, and his popularity shot up because of his inability to control his emotions. It wasn’t a good experience, and he avoided any chance of getting on stage when he could.

Erik’s voice echoed across the city, and in the homes of all the citizens where they were watching the live stream. Thousands of guests were captured by the king’s gentle, yet earnest speech, their emotions barely in check. He’d come a long way from locking himself up in his palace to standing in front of an audience. His visits to other districts and towns were scarce, but Dazz could tell the young man was starting to open up. Since the bombing of Stohess everyone was extra careful around each other. In a good way. The crime rate dropped dramatically, people were offering donations to homeless Stohess victims. It was a time of peace at a heavy price.

“...I was with a team of officers in Stohess. Underground in one of the first tunnels that caved in. One of the officers – a rookie at the time – shielded me with his body as the ceiling fell over us. I remember seeing a lot of blood, feeling fear for the first time not for myself, but for the man who
risked his life to save mine, a stranger too afraid to step out of his own home,” his tone faltered, “He has spent the past year going through intensive therapy to regain the ability to walk, balancing his job and surviving with the support of his wife. Please welcome co-head of the Wall Intelligence Department, Captain Franz,” Erik stepped aside and joined the audience in welcoming Franz to the podium.

Franz, who still travelled in a wheelchair, accepted the cane Nile handed to him. His wedding band twinkling in the sun. Gingerly, he pushed himself off the chair and took slow and careful steps to the podium, earning much louder applause when he reached it. Dazz smiled proudly at his friend. Where he was awful at public speaking, Franz was eloquent. Soft spoken and honest when he chose to open his mouth, and people listened. He was the best person to represent their team.

He slipped out a small flash drive and plugged it into the dock on the corner of the podium. An inclined holographic screen popped up, displaying his speech for him. As the audience settled down again to listen, Dazz thought back to the past year and the struggles they came through together.

The military police had undergone many changes thanks not only to them, but Marlo’s team as well. They broke down rules that no longer were in use, set up a new mentality for rookies, and created new departments to further sharpen the brigade’s organization. Marlo’s team was more inclined toward the investigative side and communicated a lot with Hannah and Franz, who were a part of Dazz’s team, but also in charge of the Intelligence Department which mostly involved a lot of hacking and research. Dazz’s team, on the other hand, were more like the special ops, in that they took care of especially dangerous cases, and usually aided Marlo when a case needed extra muscle.

It hadn’t been an easy change. But looking back at all their failures and successes, the lives they were able to save with the new system; it was worth it.

“Today marks a moment in the history of humanity,” Franz began, voice echoing from the speakers.

Maria

Plantations

It had taken months of hard work, but finally with summer coming back, they were beginning to see the fruits of their labor. Many plots of land diced and organized for agriculture were now sprouting tomatoes and carrots, others herbs and vegetables. Potatoes were also a success, along with wheat and lettuce. Dita was assigned with two other squad leaders to maintain the plantations and oversee any significant changes.

Connie and Sasha had witnessed the squad leader falling asleep on top of a bed of carrots they cultivated, then running around ten minutes later. It was funny the first few weeks it started, but now it became a sight as natural as the surrounding vegetation.

Sasha fiddled with the eye patch once they dropped off their haul of tomatoes by the farm house, a rebuilt structure from one of the safe zone towers that were left mostly intact. She lifted the patch to get some fresh air to the covered area. It had taken her some time, and there were moments when she’d upset herself in front of a mirror, but she had grown accustomed to having a fake eye. It helped that it wasn’t going to last forever. A replica of Marco’s cybernetic eye was being manufactured for her. Stohess had been the base of Sky Industries, and also the home of the branch responsible for the artificial eye. Not much could be salvaged from the destroyed labs and they had to rebuild again in Chlorba where they also had to attend to more pressing matters.

She would have gotten the eye two months ago, but there were a lot of Stohess survivors under the same predicament, so she decided to wait until they were taken care of first.
Getting used to seeing through one eye was a hassle though. Her first few weeks she kept bumping into things. It was heartbreaking when her archery skills dramatically dropped. Had it been her other eye, it wouldn’t have been that bad, but her good eye was taken, and it made a huge difference.

Connie dropped his crate of tomatoes, wiping off a trail of sweat from his forehead. Their time at the plantations had been so time consuming he stopped bothering to shave his head, there was now a thin layer of hair growing and spiking up from the brief times he had to cool down by throwing water over his head. Sasha personally liked the new look, his hair was soft and fun to manipulate. He paused briefly when he noticed her still messing with her patch. “Wanna take a break? Moses should be done making that lemonade.”

She left the patch to rest over her bangs and nodded. “Today’s the day of the expedition, isn’t it?” she said as they walked to the Farm’s doors.

Connie nodded sadly. “It’s going live over the internet. You want to watch it?”

Sasha shrugged. They were both supposed to be in the expedition, but after volunteering for the Maria Project, they fell in love with the work. For Connie it had been a nostalgic experience, but for Sasha it was therapeutic after struggling with the loss of her eye. It was ironic how the one thing she used to hate helped her get back on her feet. They weren’t quite ready to leave the farms when there was still so much to do.

It was still almost bittersweet that all their friends were going to be a part of the first expedition in centuries. The only thing that didn’t make it a complete tragedy was that they would be joining the next expedition.

“Hannah and the others are gonna be there. I hear Franz is going to be saying a speech,” Sasha said.

“If we didn’t have to this job to take care of we could have been there to see them off,” Connie grumbled. “We still can, I mean we could catch a train…”

“Where from?” Sasha laughed, “there’s no civilization here for miles. No subway.”

“I’m just sayin’,” Connie threw his hands up. They entered the house and greeted a few soldiers and volunteers hiding from the sun. The place was air conditioned, but the heat still managed to get into the little cracks of the building. The pair reached the kitchen, thirsty for a cold beverage.

The room was a crowded with more people huddled by the holographic screen on the counter, all sipping tall glasses of lemonade. Sensing the somber mood, Sasha and Connie took their own glasses and watched with them.

Franz’s tall figure stood at a podium. His voice filling the kitchen.

“A year ago today we won a war at the cost of lives too great to count. We also suffered a senseless tragedy of a number of people we’ll never see again. People who had dreams, hopes, and those too young to have a voice of their own. These were people of a vast array of origins. A colorful spectrum of beliefs, and lives all different from each other. They were targeted for one simple reason that shouldn’t have been a reason at all. That they, like us, were human.”

Jinae Trauma Clinic

Renovations had to be made to accommodate the growing number of patients coming to see Grisha. There had been such a huge influx that he had to partner up with constructors and other businesses to open up other clinics for easier access to patients. It had been a stressful year of training the doctors with the formula, keeping tabs on the other locations, and trying to pay his bills on time. Only now
was he beginning to feel some breath of relief. Especially in the form of Carla who had been with him every step of the way.

“You’re healing on schedule, Ms. Lagner,” he said to the young woman, re-wrapping the bandages on the stub where her leg had been. She was one of the later patients on the wait list and on her second month of the formula. His announcement put a huge smile to her freckled face. The stub on her left arm was healing nicely as well.

“How much longer now?” she asked as eagerly as she asked last month.

“About four more months, depending on how the bones and muscle tissue reset,” there’d been cases where such abnormalities occurred, forcing him to perform emergency surgery before the setting would become permanent. “After that you’ll be put in therapy to strengthen your arm and leg.”

Ilse nodded, not disappointed with the time frame. “Thank you, doctor.”

Smiling in welcome, Grisha excused himself and left the room. He had three other patients to see before he could take a break and check in with Eren via live chat.

“Would you be willing enough to stop for a sandwich?”

He whipped around and beamed at the sight of his wife waiting by the door with a plastic bag in hand heavy with food. She was also hoisting an impressive shoulder bag carrying all the electronics essential to her studies at her new school. She smiled back, looking younger and more vibrant than Grisha had ever seen her.

“Three more patients, then lunch,” he greeted her with a quick peck on the lips and guided her down the hall. “We can treat it as a test to see how much you’ve learned.”

“It’s only my first year,” Carla laughed, “and I came here for a break, not end up in school again.”

“Fair enough,” he smiled down at her, admiring her quietly. She had her thick hair pulled back in a ponytail, exposing her pale neck and a thin silver chain that ran down to where a skeleton key hung. “I’ve never seen that before,” he nodded to the necklace, “isn’t it a little too big for jewelry?”

“Hm?” she played with the key fondly. “Nack visited me this morning and gave it to me. He said it was part of a case he’d been working on, but since he and his team found nothing, they decided to close it for now. He said it was okay for me to have it so long as I didn’t lose it.”

“You? Wouldn’t that get him in trouble?” Grisha grinned in amusement, “he’s grown attached to you hasn’t he?”

“I actually thought it was a personal possession of his,” Carla ignored him, “but if it’s alright for me to have it, I might as well wear it.” She held it up to shine in the hall light, the hollow square winking at her, “I wonder where it went to.”

“Thousands of years ago there was a time when humans filled every corner of the world. Our ancestors were notorious for wars sprouted from poverty and greed. They killed each other under beliefs of righteousness, and taught their children that anything – any miniscule detail – different to them was punishable and evil. Pettiness and fear was what drove them near the brink of extinction. It was our history of violence that created the existence of titans.”

Isra

This year’s recruits had a near one hundred percent entry. It was less than last year because the
military police opened their doors to more recruits, but the turnout was still amazing. Erwin was currently working to get more funds to make Isra bigger to accommodate their growing numbers.

At the moment, the scouting legion had gone up to over six hundred soldiers.

Mina finished checking over her maneuver x for any missing or faulty parts. They had a few more minutes before they had to leave for Karanese. She’d been too busy to pay attention to the social media, but there was rumor around Isra that the wall community were making the expedition a huge event. She wasn’t sure how true that was, she grew up around people who loathed the scouting legion, the most she knew was that the king would be there to send them off with a speech.

Turning away from the mirror, she grabbed the cloak hanging on the closet door, ironed and ready for its debut. The traditional scouting legion cloak had gone through an upgrade to celebrate the expedition. It was still a cloak with the wings of freedom on the back, but the green was now camouflage, lighter and easy to maneuver around, and treated to repel liquids making it a good emergency tent or blanket if such a chance occurred in the outside world. It also came with pockets to store samples for later research – the main reason for the expedition.

Throwing it over her shoulders, Mina let the cloak’s internal system recognize the sensors on her collar and hook itself there. The system was an extra precaution built like a skeleton in the cloak to act as a further shield by automatically fanning out and making the cloak spread out into a tight barrier. It was a last minute decision by the manufacturer who wanted to make the cloak more useful than a symbolic representation of the legion, and it was the main reason why the cloaks could be made into tents.

Satisfied with her suit up, Mina left her cabin and found Thomas there, already in his cloak and suit minus the helmet, which he held in his hand. Past him were other fellow soldiers donning their new cloaks and hurrying to the airbase. The cheerful atmosphere gave the small village the feel of high school students on their way to graduation.

“Ready?” Thomas grinned, holding out his arm for her.

Snorting at her best friend’s silliness, Mina wrapped her hand around it and together they walked for the airbase.

“We’ve been asked many questions regarding the investigation behind Berwick. Why did he do this to us? Where do titans come from? Why do we suffer? The truth is, our history is to blame. We are naturally violent, and cruel, and selfish. He hurt us because he believed humanity was a lost cause. But we can also love and be selfless. We can be better. We are better. We provide protection to people who can’t help themselves. Offer a shoulder to a stranger who needs it. We comfort…We encourage. We are a community that has suffered and paid for what our ancestors have done. And we’ve suffered again with the loss of Stohess.”

Karanese

The city was silent as they hung onto Franz’s every word. The celebrations were now a ghost, the truth of his speech touching a sore spot in their hearts. “Stohess will be known as one of the most tragic events of the decade, but on that same day, on the other side of this wall, there were over three hundred soldiers fighting for our freedom. The fallen will not be forgotten…and we must not forget how fragile our lives are…”

Dazz set his jaw. From his position he could see who was from Stohess and who wasn’t. Everyone suffered at some level, and what Franz was saying, hit them in different ways. Some were quietly crying, and others were somber and holding on to each other.
“We are a small community with the unprecedented opportunity to reclaim a world without titans,” Franz continued. “We have a chance to live again, explore and discover what the world has to offer. Let us do it right this time. Without violence or greed, but on the faith that we can work together for a future without walls.”

His voice continued to echo a second longer after he took a pause. People were already applauding, mournful tears running down their faces.

“A single event can change the course of history,” he spoke again once they settled down. At that moment on the other side of the city the gates into Rose opened, it remain ignored in the excitement. “A year ago today, four hundred and twenty lives were lost in Stohess alone. Two hundred civilians, and two hundred and twenty soldiers. The Scouting Legion lost over one hundred and fifty in its small army. In a single battle. We can never predict when we will die. The person sitting next to you could disappear the next day. Remind the people you love how precious they are to you. Hold them, help them, and let them help you. You are just as precious and just as important as those that we’ve lost in the past.”

Dazz clenched his jaw again. He knew Franz was trying to spread a message to the audience, but it was a little too obvious that he was directing it to him. It took him some time, but Dazz learned to confidently control a room the way a captain should. His idea of building specialized departments in the brigade was what gave him the right to lead his own squad in Chlorba for months now.

But he was still new to so much responsibility, and sometimes, when he was sure no one would see him and there was nothing important to distract him, he’d hide in his office and just sit there feeling like he’d break from the pressure. No one caught on, and he honestly thought his way of dealing with his issues were healthier than other self-destructive methods. Then one day, after closing a case that hit him harder than he expected, he sat in his office and found Millius there, waiting for him to talk his problems out.

It didn’t really dawn on him until that moment that what Dazz really needed was to be with his friends and not the professionals they had to be. It was really embarrassing wailing like a baby in front of Millius after having just chased down and jailed a notorious child abuser, but the cry had been good and Millius didn’t mind.

And then everyone else gathered around him and he didn’t know whether he should have felt touched or humiliated that Millius told them all that he was feeling lonely.

“To wear the green cloak takes a person willing to sacrifice their life for a freedom thought to be unattainable,” Franz began to conclude his speech. “They must be strong not just in body, but in spirit. These people have attained an unpopular reputation of wasting funds in a seemingly endless war. They’ve been mocked and ridiculed, lost more than they won, and yet they relentlessly threw themselves in the line of fire. To be in this army takes only two special qualities. Bravery, and a love so strong that fighting a losing battle makes everything worth it. These are the people who’ve given us our freedom.”

The end of the speech humbled the spectators. They clapped politely as he walked back to his chair, not sure if they should feel scolded for his parting words. It did achieve one thing, and that was appreciating what recon had done for humanity.

Erik returned to the podium.

“Please clear the way for the Scouting Legion.”

It was like a spell had been broken. The audience perked up and looked around in a daze. Behind
them stood a sea of people in green. Their dark maneuver x uniforms shining dully in the sun. At the very front was a blond man staring back just as perplexed. No one cheered or screamed, they were all taken aback by the army’s sudden appearance.

Then as if in one mentality, the crowds began to clear the street they were filling, allowing the soldiers to pass through.

It was like watching a parade on mute. Both sides were so struck with awe. One side because they were in the presence of their heroes, and the other because they didn’t think so many people would see them off. There were so many homemade green cloaks…

At the front Erwin tried to school his shock. He knew there would be a crowd, but nothing of this magnitude. It looked like the entire wall community had come to see them off. Next to him Mike nudged him on the side.

“Why do I get the feeling that each time we think we’re prepared, this happens?” he muttered to him.

“Are they really here for us?” Nanaba asked uncertainly, scanning over the silent crowd as if expecting someone to throw a shoe at her.

Nothing was thrown, however. One by one, people began to slowly raise flags of varying sizes. All a mix of Sina, Rose, and the now reconquered Maria. Signs were lifted with messages of gratitude and luck.

‘Thank You’
‘We’re Free’
‘We <3 U!’

People started clapping the closer they reached the gates. Eren glanced at the stage as they passed by and happily spotted Shadis grinning down at them. The sight of the old man really drove home the significance of this moment, and he wobbly smiled back.

The spectators eventually snapped out of their stupor and the scattered clapping suddenly turned into a roaring applause. It continued long after the scouting legion made it through the gates for the world beyond.

The first expedition of the modern age had now begun.

The Shifter Village

Some Time Later

The home of the runaway shifters was surprisingly not far from the walls. They expected to see very few remnants of the village since titans were famous for destroying everything in their path. It was a pleasant surprise, however, to see that some of it remained untouched enough to show that there was once modern civilization here.

They landed their helicopters just outside of the village and filed out. No titans were around to disturb them save for old footprints fading away with age. The titans who were once residents of this village finally turned to dust a few weeks ago. For the native shifters it felt like losing their family all over again. They’d been riding on the hope that they could somehow revert them back into humans. Special buffers had been prepared for the trip, and Hanji had made strategies on how to approach the titans. Learning of their fate crushed all that hope and the shifters were left to mourn
They entered the ruins with caution, small guns on hand and sensors on alert for signs of danger. Nothing but little garden creatures could be detected. The place was a ghost town. The tone much sadder after everyone had been prepared to welcome the villagers once the buffers were put to use.

The squads broke into their groups and explored the village, noting some of the architecture dating back a couple of decades from the wall community. Hanji explored every detail with a sober respect that only made everyone feel worse because they’d been so close to saving what Ymir and the others had lost. For the first time Moblit had no problems keeping up with her.

Armin felt a little more somber than the squad leader, having dealt with a crying Annie since the day the deaths of the final titans were announced. The village was small, but the closeness of the buildings and streets that survived four years of heavy snow and rain, implied there was a touch of charm to it. He could imagine a tight community living here, painted with homely architecture and cultural aesthetics that no one in the walls could understand. This place had been an oasis in a world of titans.

“How’s your hip?”

He patted his right hip where he felt twinges from time to time. On days it felt really bad he would need to use a cane, but with the suit stabilizing his muscle movements, he felt nothing at all. He grinned down at Annie, only seeing a ghost of her face through their screens. “Pretty great.”

She wasn’t very convinced, but she didn’t press him. Being back in her home village was probably distracting her from being too concerned. As the first to receive surgery with the formula, Armin experienced a problem during therapy that Dr. Jaeger wasn’t able to immediately catch. One of the muscles on his hip healed awkwardly, and became strained when Armin exercised it too much. It required another surgery that was currently still healing. In truth, he should have still been at home resting, but with the expedition finally coming to realization, he didn’t want to miss it and had to beg his parents, Erwin, his doctors, and anyone else in charge of keeping him in bed to let him go. Annie was strongly against him coming, but she was easier to convince than the others.

He wasn’t going to kiss Dr. Jaeger.

They walked down one of the more held together streets, reaching a short hill that peaked at a bridge still sturdy enough to support their weight. Armin ran his hand over the rusty metal railing, overlooking a creek below of what had once been a river. It was running clean, rushing below the bridge to some place beyond. Past it he could see a few more crushed buildings trailing off towards the beginnings of a mountain miles ahead. It was both a sad and beautiful sight.

“Wow,” he murmured. “Hey, Annie…” She hadn’t followed him to the bridge. She was kneeling at the end, brushing away clumps of grass and flowers that had slowly begun to take over. When he reached her, she completed her work, revealing a stone shaped into a curvy cylinder that held the railing of the bridge. At the bottom were words crudely scraped into its smooth surface. Armin magnified his screen to get a better look.

Annie, Bertholdt, Reiner, Ymir

He leaned back and watched Annie run her gloved fingers over the childhood engravings. Belatedly, he remembered her telling him the story of how they all met again. Or rather, how they became a family.
“We did this in celebration for their first year of being clean,” she explained, her voice wobbling slightly, “Ymir’s idea. She likes vandalizing public property.”

“It’s called art.”

Right behind them were the three other shifters plus Historia. They were suitably quiet, their eyes glued to names that survived time. The only ones feeling left out were Armin and Historia, who only learned little pieces of their lives in the shifter village.

Bertholdt was the first to clarify. “We were given a coin of accomplishment on our first year. Ymir wanted to celebrate by coming here to commemorate the day.”

“And to remind us why we even managed a year at all,” Reiner added, “this bridge has a lot of bad memories for us…”

“Yeah, and I wanted to give it the bird,” Ymir said, kneeling down next to Annie, “I lost my parents to this river.”

“But you saved me and Bertholdt,” Reiner said, “and wasn’t this place the first time Annie spoke?”

Annie’s hand over the words paused. “Was it?”

Ymir shrugged, “you screamed. Good enough.”

Armin wrapped his arm around Annie as she leaned against him. They sat there huddled together. He could picture in his head how the four managed to meet on this bridge. Annie told him stories of how they’d been in school together before Bertholdt was expelled and Reiner dropped out, yet they never really interacted until the moment on the bridge. He didn’t know about the engravings they did, but he could understand them coming back to do it.

Push away the bad with something good.

Beyond the Walls

Unknown

When the first probes had been sent out to explore the world there were some regions they couldn’t reach. This was thanks to titans sabotaging the equipment, or nature taking its course. More were sent out to make up for uncovered ground, but it was a difficult and slow task, especially when groups of titans began developing intelligence enough to know the probes were an enemy. Unfortunately, as more money went toward the space program, less went into the outer wall exploration and the project died down.

Now that they were allowed to go into the first expedition in two millennia the plan was to find these unmarked regions and fill in the gaps from the research done of the outside world. To quench her natural curiosity, Hanji was assigned to the shifter village. Mike was to take a group further off west where past probes detected some distant images of an ancient civilization. Erwin chose to go north. This area used to be covered with titans, the more intelligent ones destroying the probes before anything could be properly recorded. Now that they were gone, everyone could see what had so long been hidden. It was like a replica of Stohess post-destruction, but with nature having taken over. The town was rusty and rotting with little holes made by forest creatures. Some skittered away at their presence.

“What is this place?” Eren asked no one as they all split up to explore. He detected no signs of
radiation or poisonous gases, and took off the helmet. Humid gusty summer heat immediately swamped his face. He took in a deep breath, his lungs filling and feeling younger and more refreshed.

The air was different than from the walls.

Opening his eyes, it also felt like he could see things more clearly, everything sharpened in color. The sounds were different and somehow bigger without walls to muffle them. He could hear the trees singing in the summer breeze. A constant rush so similar to the roar of blood in his ears when he got excited.

Others followed his example and removed their helmets, the only one not surprised was Levi. He remembered his expeditions. If he didn’t have to worry about titans, he would have chosen to live outside the walls all by himself.

“Wow,” Eren breathed, a smile spreading over his face. He felt…amazing. He was finally out. Finally here in the outside world...

Levi watched him take in the moment. The last time he’d seen him this happy was when they shared their first real kiss. The way his teal eyes turned a brighter green, and his tanned cheeks flushed as he experienced his first breath of fresh air. He was glowing. It made Levi feel that warm surge of happiness himself, and it took him a while to accept that it was because of Eren. It was always because of Eren.

And that didn’t really annoy him anymore.

“Sir, Armin says they’ll be meeting us here in a couple of hours,” Mikasa snapped him back from his ogling, “he says Hanji may have found something.”

“Like what?” he discreetly looked away.

“He didn’t say.”

“Hm…” they stood there awkwardly. Levi no longer felt comfortable enough to go back to staring at Eren like an idiot with Mikasa right there. He was beginning to warm up to Eren’s parents who also needed time to adjust to their relationship, but Mikasa was like the guard dog who raged at anything approaching her pups. When she found out they were together it was exactly the way they feared.

They were back at Isra. Found some time to make out in a random toolshed. Classic. She found them. Eren wasn’t wearing any pants. And Levi ended up with a magnificent black eye for a week. After he woke up from the K.O of course. Consequently this spurred rumors all over Isra, which of course led the nosy shitheads to investigate and learn the truth about him and Eren. The news got to Erwin, who called them in his office not to reprimand, but to tease the ever loving fuck out of them.

Levi still had nightmares about that day.

Mikasa also said something about it being the second time she caught a couple in that same toolshed. They never went there again.

“Captain Zacharias hasn’t reported anything?” Mikasa asked quite out of the blue.

“No,” he observed the other soldiers carefully pulling away vines from one of the buildings still standing. There was chipped panting underneath. Peach and coated in dirt. Who paints their house peach?
“Guys! Look what I found!” Eren yelled excitedly, kneeling over a patch on a building he cleaned up.

It was a very faded blue house, and when Levi and Mikasa reached Eren, they could see that he uncovered what looked like a painting on the wall. It was cracked in places and lost a lot of its colors, but it was still legible enough for them make the profile of a blond man looking up. It looked like propaganda for a campaign, or army recruitment. Neither of them were knowledgeable on dead languages like Hanji, so they couldn’t read what was left of the headline. Just one word.

REISS

Eren began to pull away at the rest of the vines before Levi told him to.

West of the Unknown Lands

The ruins they found was of a city made of metal and concrete. There was so little of it left that from afar it appeared like an open field of boulders and oddly angled trees. It wasn’t as disappointing as it could have been, though. They were still ruins, and there was still much to learn from them.

The new recruits from Dr. Jaeger’s clinic were dutifully collecting samples of plants and dirt. They were a happy bunch with a lot of enthusiasm. Marco could hardly believe he’d been a part of their group as the famous twelve victims of the Jinae accident. Being associated with them at all was bizarre. The only one he really recognized was Adler, who even now felt uncomfortable around him. Marco liked to exploit that fact a lot, and almost made the poor man jump out the helicopter on their way here.

But he supposed they were all right. In small doses.

Point being, he went the opposite direction they were going and busied himself with one of the boulders thickly covered in nature. Jean joined him in pulling out the weeds, their quiet work slowly revealing a rusty skeleton half of a car. The glass was gone, and the interior was filled with grass. Still from a quick look at the design, it looked like an old model invention from the walls, though this one definitely stuck around for much longer than that.

“I thought round cars were our idea,” Marco stood back to admire their work. There was no hint of its paint job. Everything about it was round and held a vague resemblance of a ladybug, or some kind of roundish insect. The missing area was twisted in the edges and parts were swollen with rust as if the car had been torn in half. The cushioning in the passenger and driver’s seat was gone; little traces of fiber being the only remains amongst the rusty bolts and metal frames.

“I’ve seen these before…” Jean moved around the front and wiped at the bumper where the license plate should be. It was no longer there. Still hopeful, he stuck his arm into the gaping front of the car for the glove compartment. The flap gave away and fell off after struggling with it, freeing several startled bugs and bits of flaky material.

He pulled out a hand full of the stuff, but it was too eaten up to be identified, and further broke down in his hand. Upon his second dig, Jean produced a handful of coins. They were dusty and worn at the edges, but due to its storage and lack of contact with the elements, their designs didn’t fade as much.

The numbers were easy enough to identify. Some were of copper and others had a mix of what looked like steel or silver, and gold. This was one of the bigger ones and had an eagle in its center with stars surrounding it. The other side had the number two with the name of its currency, it was placed in front of an image the pair remembered from their lessons in school. Satellites and probes
didn’t get much of the finer details of the world, but they were able to take images of the planet, and pinpoint where the walls resided. They were on the western edge of a large northern continent. That image was on the coin.

Marco picked up the coin and flipped it around, testing its weight and shining it up for a better look. There was some writing on the edge that caught his attention. The words were vaguely familiar, but they were probably easier for Jean to read, so he handed it to him.

One of the treatments Jean underwent with his therapist was to try and make use of the memories he ‘stole’ instead of letting them haunt him. This included many sessions with Hanji, one of the few people who studied the ancient dialect before the titans by studying the dialect from the early years of the walls. She wasn’t fluent, and neither was he, but they managed to help each other fill in gaps and interpret some of the stuff found in Shiganshina. They still came across words they had trouble pronouncing, but what they accomplished in a year, brought a lot of answers to research being done of the past.

These sessions also encouraged Jean to regain his sense of independence. He was focused again, and had recovered much faster with this new hobby. He still had trouble with some of his own memories from time to time, but he was a lot better now than how he was a year ago. His transformation was probably the only thing that helped Marco recover from his own issues.

“’Einigkeit...und recht und…freiheit’,” Jean read aloud slowly, then repeated it again under his breath thoughtfully, “I’m pretty sure that means…‘unity and justice and freedom’.”

Beyond the Walls

North

Hanji met up with their group around the time they were able to piece together their findings. Mike arrived two hours later with his own evidence and theories. The leaders and some recruits and veterans who knew a bit more of what they discovered gathered by the helicopters, attempting to decipher the books that survived, and photographs that managed to hide in spots that preserved their images. The rest of the soldiers were free to enjoy a small break for their efforts. The first thing they figured out was obvious.

“We were in the city that experienced the first outbreak,” Mike said, his tablet showing the huddled group a scale of dramatic spikes and another with much lower spikes. “We recorded the levels of titan gene in the air straight from leaving Shiganshina. The farther we got, the stronger they read once we reached the ruins. I went a few miles past that point to see if it would continue to spike, but they lowered.”

“There were animals living there, and from what my readings detected, these gases are no longer harmful to humans,” Adler reported, “there’s traces of them, but they’re not strong enough to infect us, nor would they ever be if someone were to reinvent the formula. We all already have the titan gene to a certain degree, being exposed to this gas again would be like breathing regular air. We’re immune to it. The only way to become a titan would be if we were injected with it the same way the Ape was.”

“Our other proof of the city’s origins is this,” Nanaba showed them an image of what had been a box. This had been found while digging through weeds. It was rotted away, but small fragments highlighted identified it as the inner workings of a bomb. “Jean identified it as the bomb the Ape found strapped to the bottom of a table in the lab he was kept in.”

“So, Dr. Reiss stages an explosion to jumpstart the invasion of titans, then leaves the city with
evacuees, all evidence of his involvement destroyed,” Hanji concluded, then showed images of her own discoveries. There was a picture of a small shrine surrounded by dead flowers being buried under new ones. The display was of a block of stone engraved with writing of an ancient language. “I haven’t spoken with Ymir yet, but it looks like we found her origins.”

Eren perked up, “my father’s journal talked of a descendant of hers…”

“And that stone was able to clarify who she was,” Hanji nodded, zooming in on the engravings. The only person able to understand it was Jean, he was leaning forward to read it intently. “According to this, Ymir was born to the founding family who created the village in tribute to the titans. There’s no friendly connection to the Reiss’s, they considered them traitors to what they believed was evolution. They worshiped titans as the next step to human evolution – a passage into becoming gods of the earth.”

“Ymir ran away because she didn’t believe any of that,” Eren said softly. “Becoming a titan wiped out her memories before she was able to become human again.”

“Funny that she was able to steal the shifting abilities from Berwick,” Levi noted, “however she became a titan remains a mystery I don’t think we’ll ever solve unless she finally remembers something.”

“It could have been the Ape himself,” Hanji suggested, “he was vengeful enough to turn the village into titans for their lack of worshipping after gifting them with the ability to shift, punishing Ymir for defying him makes sense. Especially if she started off as a normal girl with no shifting abilities. Finding Berwick was a stroke of luck.”

As the group considered this, Moblit asked Erwin, “What did you guys find?”

“Reiss’s second home,” Levi nudged Eren in the ribs. He immediately activated his tablet and pulled up multiple images of the house they cleaned up. “We guessed evacuees of that city came here as a temporary safe zone. There’s evidence of strongholds around this place.”

Eren maximized two pictures of collapsed woodwork that were angled and fixed in a crossed pattern typical for a tower.

“The house we found was fixed with stone and a special cement with crystals a lot like the walls. That same material was found in most of the houses here, which is why this town hasn’t completely disappeared,” Erwin continued. He held up a small journal, the leather was crinkled and torn, and it held everyone’s attention, “this was found in a safe in what’s assumed to be Dr. Reiss’s home. We can’t read it, but since it was purposefully kept preserved, we believe this is his final message to us.”

Hanji accepted the journal with the kind of care one would to an infant. She waved for Jean to sit next to her as she very cautiously opened the cover, digging her teeth into her bottom lip with excitement.

Stohess Memorial

Celebrations in Karanese had continued as the day wore on. Nile had assigned a new team to give Dazz and his group a break, allowing them to enjoy the festivities, but he wasn’t in the mood, and being around so many happy people didn’t make him feel any better.

He was happy about the first expedition, and for his friends taking part in it, but this day also held a sad note to him and all the officers who were in his shoes. He had to leave the city to get away from all the noise. His friends followed in quiet agreement.
They found themselves at the memorial. A formal service had been done in the morning before attention was moved to Karanese. There were a few people here, too. Probably feeling as somber as Dazz.

He walked around the display, looking at the gifts left behind by visitors. Unopened letters, balloons, flowers and plush toys. The structure was a giant stone set up tall and wide in the form of a U. Between each spacing of the names was a design of a flower to signify their passing on. The citizen’s names were etched in the inner curve of the memorial, the soldiers and policemen were on the outer side, to signify their duty to protect. Dazz read over those names many times since the completion of the project, and every time he stopped at squads 20 through 25. They were the first to find the bombs on the walls just before they exploded. Not a single member survived.

Dazz didn’t know them personally, but it was from his own orders that he sent them to their deaths. Thinking about it too long made him want to crawl in to a corner and pretend it never happened. It was one of the things that haunted him most when he locked himself in his office, and also one of the things his friends helped him get over. Now, looking at the names again, he felt sadness. There was nothing he could do about the bombs, he couldn’t predict when they would go off or that they even existed. He didn’t pull the trigger. Berwick did.

“Don’t do that.”

Dazz looked over his shoulder at Millius, “I know. I’m not.”

The other captain stood beside him, staring up at the wall of names. “People used to always talk about how corrupt and cowardly the military police was. Look at how many sacrificed their lives for them.”

It was a great deal more than the garrison. That was probably more due to the fact that the police were notoriously the weakest of all branches. The people, however, didn’t view it that way. The numbers only showed them that integrity within the branch wasn’t completely dead. Nile being in the middle of the battle trying to save the district was also the reason why so many didn’t want him to leave his post despite his previous declining popularity.

Consequently, leading the team to Berwick’s capture and saving Jinae put Dazz in a spotlight he used to want to be in a long time ago, but no longer wanted now. Marlo’s work in Stohess and the Bodt case also got a lot of attention that he quickly grew weary of because reporters kept wanting an interview and he just wanted to get back to his job.

There was actually a popular rumor that either Dazz or Marlo were going to replace Nile once he retired. Nile never spoke of it, and neither were sure they wanted the position anyway. Personally, Dazz thought Marlo was more suited to the title, he had that infectious need to continue improving the brigade that was a common trait among leaders.

“Berwick finally cracked about Stohess, by the way.”

Dazz quickly masked his shock, “when did this happen?”

“Yesterday, I didn't have time to tell you,” Millius stared at the names, and to outsiders they looked like they were having pleasant conversation. “Those bombs were made years ago, as we thought. Precaution in case his cover was blown or something. As soon as explosives were invented he used the technology as a backup distraction so he could get away. Humanity would be obliterated and he’d be in the clear…if he managed to get away from the chaos himself.”

“And…” Dazz frowned, “what about the king?”
“It was a last resort,” Millius shrugged, “he was willing enough to sacrifice the king if he could escape with his life. I think part of him was relieved Erik survived. Even if he lost his friendship.”

Dazz’s eyes landed on another name on the wall, Kitts Verman. He wasn’t aware the man had been in Stohess until they came up with a final body count. “Berwick’s a psychopath. Whatever sympathy for humanity he had dissipated from living too long. He only ‘loved’ Erik because he was defenseless and dependent of him. I think the only thing that made him pull that trigger was the moment he realized Erik was helping the police capture him.”

“He wasn’t thinking clearly ever since we discovered the cave and lived,” Millius agreed, “we messed up his cycle. He – ” he cut off when they sensed Pixis approaching them. Dazz couldn’t make out his expression, but his presence was a surprise. He thought the older man was still in Karanese. He looked a confusing mix of troubled and relieved. The pair saluted their superior uncertainly once he reached them.

“Anka’s just reported,” Pixis said, his tone sober, “Berwick’s dead. He found a way to hang himself in his cell.”

They were stumped, mirroring the same strange expression as the older man. “Are you sure it’s not a trick to escape?” Dazz asked.

He shook his head, “They did a scan of his body before opening his cell. He was already decomposing. Figured that’s because he’s been alive so long he’ll disintegrate faster once he’s dead.”

“Does his highness know?”

“Not yet,” Pixis looked over his shoulder. A few yards from them a few families still around were talking quietly amongst themselves, glancing a few times to the young officers. “A public announcement is being prepared for tonight, when we’re one hundred percent sure Berwick’s not pulling a parlor trick on us.”

Dazz nodded, after a moment of silence, Pixis excused himself and left. They were alone again, digesting the news. Today was the first anniversary of Stohess’s fall. The first day the scouting legion lead their first expedition outside the walls. Berwick’s death on this day was like closing the book of a horror story and feeling the beginnings of a new and mysterious tale opening up.

“It’s over,” Dazz whispered distantly.

“I KNEW IT!”

Both jumped at the sight of Nack running to them with an accusatory finger. Hannah and Franz lagged behind in mild amusement. By the time they caught up Nack was gesturing wildly at Dazz and Millius. Hannah was snorting under her breath. If they were reacting to the news of Berwick’s death, Dazz wasn’t sure it was appropriate. Or even fitting. What the hell was so funny?

Nack dropped his arms and deadpanned, “I need to find a girlfriend.”

Dazz gawked, “that’s…great?”

“How long?” he demanded.

Dazz looked at Millius for direction, but the other man was lost as well. “Um, a few hours ago? I don’t know – ”

“A few hours!?” Nack blew up, making Hannah snort harder and Franz laugh nervously. “I thought
“it was at least a month ago!”

Dazz blinked stupidly.

“I mean you two got really chummy on some of the recent cases –”

“Wait,” Millius frowned.

“And you’ve,” Nack pointed sharply to him, “been visiting his office a lot – I know! We’ve texted long enough for me to know what’s up! I thought ‘shit, it’s happening’ and now I’m the fifth wheel.” He sobbed weakly, “I need a girl. Or a guy. I’m not picky…”

Millius and Dazz stared at Nack cursing his fate. Whatever he was wailing about, it wasn’t about Berwick.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Millius dragged out slowly, still trying to make sense of his best friend’s dramatics. He hated when Nack got like this, he changed emotions too fast to keep up.

Nack paused to give him a dirty look. Even Hannah and Franz were looking at them oddly. The couple whispered to each other, which annoyed them even more because now they were feeling like the stars of an inside joke they weren’t aware of.

Nack cleared his throat and inclined his head to the space between them.

They were holding hands.

When did –

Millius snatched his hand back first in shock. He tried to form an excuse, but found to his embarrassment that he didn’t have one because he had no idea how they were holding hands in the first place. He kept opening and closing his mouth, becoming more and more mortified the longer the seconds ticked by without a coherent sentence being said.

Dazz still had no idea what was going on. For the rest of the day he was left in the dark from all the jokes between his three friends, and Millius being unable to look at him without turning red in the face.

But even with all the confusion, Dazz found himself relax and smile more easily. Berwick was gone. Humanity was free. This was the beginning of a new age.

He was ready to be a part of it.

Beyond the Walls

The abandoned town was slowly revealing secrets of a dead culture that kept Hanji and even Jean on their toes and everyone else at a loss. It was a chore Levi quickly grew tired of, and in need of a break that was surprisingly easy to find. The ghost town was small, but not enough to make every corner visible, he took advantage of this by finding the most secluded spot much farther into town, and away from the rest of the crew, dragging Eren along with him. If he had to worry about anyone, it would have to be his squad who either treated him like glass because of the seizure last year, or their need to mercilessly tease him and Eren. Petra had become particularly cheeky with her comments, and Auruo kept making too many lame jokes about dicks. Out of all of them, Erd was the worst. He constantly gave them sex tips.

Levi was quite confident in his ability in the bedroom, he didn’t need to hear stories from his
“Levi, where are you – ” Eren was cut off as he was slammed against the decaying wall of a crumpled building. His protests died as Levi pressed himself flush against him, the flat plates of their suits tapping loudly from the force. The lack of feeling actual body heat from each other was disappointing, but that was quickly ignored for Levi leaning in for a kiss.

Eren shuddered at the sensation. A gloved hand tangled in his long hair, the other on his hip traveling up and tickling nerves there desperate for real contact. If they weren’t on duty, their suits would have been removed long ago.

Their only solace was the kisses they could steal. Levi’s exploring tongue sent shivers down Eren’s spine. He was commanding and yet tender. It made the younger man’s legs tremble, his body shake with need both knew couldn’t be satisfied here. Eren leaned heavily against the wall, hips bucking as he tried to adjust.

The relief of friction was an electric shock through his body. The soft noise and sharp intake of breath from Levi was enough to tell him he wasn’t alone.

Maybe they could remove their suits. Just for a little bit.

The thought brought a rush of excitement to Eren. He kissed back harder, his whole body flushing and shuddering, he needed more friction, more relief. The suit was infuriatingly in the way!

“Calm down,” Levi panted against his bruising lips. Eren wasn’t sure, but he thought he heard a chuckle there somewhere. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Eren smiled breathlessly at him. It didn’t matter how many times he said it, those words always felt new and heartfelt. As if every time Levi said it, it was for everyday of the twenty years Eren was forced to wait for him. “Say it.”

“Mm?” Levi kissed the corner of his mouth, running his fingers soothingly through his hair.

Eren giggled at the gesture, pulling back enough to look at him properly. Green into gray. Of the short time they’d been together before now, Eren couldn’t remember ever seeing such gentleness in Levi’s eyes. It made the butterflies in his stomach flutter. This was what he always wanted. What he hoped they’d achieve if they hadn’t died so young. To trust each other enough to express their feelings without the need for words.

…Still. He needed to hear it one more time.

“Say it?” he repeated quietly.

Levi gave him another short kiss, “I love you.”

And that was it. Eren’s cheeks were going to be sore for life from smiling so much. That heart pounding rush continued to make music in his ears. He was floating with the sound. With Levi here with him. Finally with him. He leaned down for another kiss, and another, and another. Let his senses get spoiled with Levi’s taste in his mouth, the softness of his lips, his clean soap scent mingled with the saltiness of the air…

Saltiness?

Eren opened his eyes, parting from the kiss with hope slowly rising. That rushing sound, he realized, wasn’t coming from him. It never came from him.
“Levi…” he couldn’t wait for an answer. He grabbed his hand and ran for the sound, straining to hear where the rushing was coming from. It was…if he remembered his studies right…all the books Armin showed him…

“Where are we going!?” Levi demanded, put out that their alone time was cut short by Eren the bloodhound finding a new scent to hunt.

The hiss and whoosh of maneuver x flying to them, interrupted Eren’s focus. He looked up to find Armin and Mikasa flying overhead.

“We’ve been looking all over for you!” Armin grated through their earpieces, “what’s going on? Is there a titan?” He looked around, reading signals in his helmet.

“Take your helmets off and listen!” Eren shouted excitedly. His friends reluctantly did so, but they didn’t have to, because as the rushing graduated to roaring, Eren turned a corner into a street with spaced out heaps of dilapidated houses, exposing hints of a blue horizon behind them. The salty smell in the air grew stronger. Eren ran harder.

The broken streets transformed into sand.

He could feel his eyes begin to prickle with tears.

They brushed past the last row of houses, their feet struggling over the soft sands that sprayed up and created dust clouds behind them.

This was it.

This was the place.

Eren fell to his knees once he reached wet sand, the waves of the beach arching toward him and crashing with a loud roar, its waters crawling in a mass of foam to greet him. Mikasa and Armin landed next to him. Equally in awe of the sight they were finally able to see.

“There’s no end to it,” Armin laughed brokenly, tears of joy spilling.

Eren laughed too, unable to control his own tears. Levi sat down with him, taking his hand. On his other side his two closest friends joined him, huddled together in a heap.

There really was no end to it. The dark blue mass of water constantly moving and glittering under the sun, spreading out into a horizon with mysteries beyond yet to be discovered. Just like their lives were now. Safe from the age of titans, with no knowing of how their lives would unfold. This was how it was supposed to be.

Eren shut his eyes and breathed in the memorable scent of the ocean. He felt alive. Felt free. They were free.

And they were going to do things right this time. They were going to prove Dr. Reiss wrong and bring an age of peace to humanity.

This was their new beginning.
and that's it, it's finished! I'm so sorry if it came off preachy! TAT Thank you sooo much for reading. I doubt I'll ever be able to write something this massive again (I still can't believe I wrote it lmao) all the kudos, hits, comments, etc have been wonderful and encouraging you're all awesome! X3

Note: the word BRAY wrote on the bridge is Russian for 'Live' ...because I'm a giant cheeseball and omfg I hope I translated that right! (I also hope I correctly translated all the other German/French/whatevs I plugged in the fic cuz that would be really embarrassing...)

Works inspired by this one

A Thirst For Revenge by orphan_account

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!