Apoptosis

by matchka

Summary

the 104th know that death comes in many forms. But plague is not an enemy they know how to fight.

{ in which a deadly and fast-moving epidemic hits inside the Walls, and the 104th - isolated and alone out in Survey Corps HQ - thank their lucky stars that they're safe. But when one of their own falls ill, fear and paranoia sweep through their ranks, and the time they have to find a cure is running very, very short...}
"I've got bad news."

Hanji drops a heavy sheaf of papers on the desk and they look up at her, expectant; Erwin's face is drawn but neutral. Levi's is all but unreadable. She sifts through the papers with jittery hands until she finds the one she's looking for: handwritten, almost entirely illegible except for the numbers, a neat column of them running down the right-hand margin.

"First confirmed case in Trost," Hanji says. "Twenty-three other suspected cases."

Levi blinks. "That's faster than expected."

"I know." Her eyes are red beneath her optics. She's been awake for two days straight and looks set to make it three. Levi can smell whatever chemical concoction she's been imbibing to keep her upright, and beneath it, the animal scent of unwashed skin. "Professor Lindeman is now estimating a minimum of twenty-four hours between initial exposure and onset of symptoms. That's halved the proposed incubation period, and it means it's going to be extremely difficult to contain."

"Impossible to contain," Erwin says, "unless we call an immediate halt to all movement between towns."

"They won't do that. People'll riot," Levi says. It's not a suggestion, but a certainty.

"He's right," Hanji says. She sits for a moment, then seems to think better of it and stands, shifting her weight every few seconds. The perpetual motion of her almost makes Levi a little seasick. "We don't know enough about this White Rot to justify those kinds of measures, Erwin."

"I wish you wouldn't call it that," Levi says.

"Why not? It's a perfectly reasonable name. Unscientific, certainly - it causes sores, not rot, there's a substantial difference. But people like to name these things. They like to have a concrete identity for the things that frighten them. Did you know that there are twenty-three different names for Titans within Wall Rose alone? In Jinae, they call them Pappuni – literally, 'gluttons'. And in Dauper..."


She responds with a laugh that cuts through Levi, high and shrill and bordering, it seems, on hysteria. Forget White Rot, or whatever idiot name they've given it, it'll be sheer exhaustion that does Hanji in if she doesn't get some damned sleep soon.

"What do we know?" he says, once she's sitting.

"It's obviously infectious," Hanji says, rubbing her eyes with the heel of her hand. There's a purple mark on the bridge of her nose where her optics sit. "We don't know how it's transmitted. We could be looking at something blood-borne - direct contact with open sores in the late stages of the disease, something like that. It could be airborne. That would be the most difficult to contain. Lindeman’s working on some theories. The major problem is, we don't know where it came from. It seems to have appeared out of thin air. We need to find the index case and work from there. Otherwise, we're really just pissing in the wind."
"So we know nothing," Levi says "except that every fucker that catches it seems to die."

Hanji raises a hand. "There have been some reports of people recovering, although nothing substantiated, and we’re not sure why they survived. It seems it’s not impossible, but the mortality rate is very high. Around ninety-five percent, according to reports from the Health Department."

"Then we don’t have any choice," Erwin says. "We have to control movement between districts. Nobody in, nobody out, except authorised personnel."

"It’s not that I don’t agree with you," Hanji says. "But it’s a little like shutting the barn door after the horses have bolted. The sickness has reached epidemic proportions. It’s too late to worry about how far and wide it might spread. We need to find out how it spreads, and most importantly, where it came from. We need a cure."

"Best get on your knees and start praying," Levi says. He drains the last of his tea and gets to his feet, gathering his cloak from the back of his seat.

"I can do better than that," Hanji says. She grins in the yellow candlelight, jaundiced and close to terrifying. "I’ve been given permission to take samples. I need access to the dead, Erwin. That’s why I’ve come to you."

*

"You can’t make us do this."

Ymir, strident, arms folded across her chest and placed, as always, as close to Christa as is decent in such a formal environment. And she’d opened the floodgates with that, a wave of doubt pouring fourth, fear evident in every voice that struck up the chorus.

"I am your commanding officer," Erwin replies, perfectly calm but never, thinks Armin, never underestimate the threat inherent beneath all that control. "I think you'll find I can make you do anything I ask. You joined the Survey Corp of your own free will. I’m asking you to do your job. I don’t think that's an unreasonable request."

"But Commander..." Christa's voice this time. Her internal conflict is evident in the querulous tone of her voice, and the heavy slump of her shoulders. She desperately wants to help, to do right by her commanding officer, but people are dying, and this is not an enemy they know how to fight.

"We...all of us. You. We could get sick. We could die."

“You’re hardly unique in that respect,” Levi says, offhanded. He leans against the wall, remaining mostly on the periphery of proceedings. “The Garrison are scraping the dying from the streets while they’re still warm and bloody, and you’re pissing yourselves over poking a few stiff.”

“He’s right. We’ve fought Titans,” Eren says (but even he looks a little pale, a little uncertain, scanning the crowd desperately – please, someone, back me up here.) “All of us. This is nothing compared to that.”

“What are the risks?” Armin asks. It’s all very well arguing about it, he thinks, but Erwin is not a stupid man, and Levi is not a heartless man, and they must have some idea. Hanji must have some idea. Neither of them have ever struck him as the kind who consider their recruits cattle for the slaughter. (No, Armin thinks, that’s just a side-effect, an occupational hazard; join the Survey Corp, there’s a 60% chance you’ll be dead before you reach eighteen. Choose between several exciting means of death, including, but not limited to being eaten by a Titan, or choking on bloody fragments of your own lungs.)
“You’ll be provided with protective gear,” Erwin says. “It’s not our intention to put you in harm’s way. Squad Leader Hanji herself will oversee the operation.”

“You might have noticed we’re a little short of hands here right now,” Levi adds.


“At least this one is astute,” Levi says. Armin’s not sure if he’s joking or not. Nobody has ever called Connie astute, or anything close to synonymous.

Armin looks to the back of the crowd. Bertholdt and Reiner exchange wordless glances, communicating telepathically or perhaps just eye-fucking at an incredibly inappropriate time. Mikasa is perfectly still, the jut of her jaw defiant, staring down Levi with stone cold eyes. Armin knows what’s going through her head. It’s the same set of processes that occur every time she encounters a potential threat to Eren’s safety – if he catches so much as a sniffle one of you is going to pay in blood. (How she intends to protect Eren is another process entirely; it isn’t as if she can physically throw herself in the path of the disease, slay whatever threatens to harm him, but for Mikasa the act is never as crystal as the intention: if the worst happens, she will give herself entirely to her cause, and Eren’s opinion and the plausibility of her plan can go to hell. Nobody ever suggested their relationship was healthy.)

Then there’s Jean.

Jean stands rigid, like every muscle in his body is pulled taut and ready to snap. He meets Armin’s curious gaze for half a second, long enough for the smaller boy to recognise the rabbit-in-a-snare brightness of his eyes.

It’s okay, Armin mouths.

And Jean nods, a sharp jerk of his head like he’s ashamed of this, angry at himself for being afraid. Jean’s the kind of emotionally constipated asshole who thinks storing up all of one’s negative feelings until they explode in a cataclysm of barely-coherent rage is normal.

“If any of you begin to show symptoms of any kind, it is imperative that you speak to Squad Leader Hanji or myself, so that we may quarantine you in good time.” Erwin is perfectly dispassionate about this possibility; indeed, with most matters, and perhaps he’s from the Jean Kirschtein school of emotional repression – his perfectly-maintained poker face never falters except, perhaps, behind closed doors, where he can grieve and rage and nobody will think him a weaker man for it.

No doubt he seeks solace in Levi. They all know that there is some unspoken intimacy between the commander and captain, some profound connection that – though the exact nature eludes Armin – nonetheless seems a thing to aspire to.

(Ymir says they’re just fucking to let off steam, and maybe there’s a little truth in that too.)

Armin is too young to know what love is, but he’s reasonably sure it’s something like that.

He hopes to understand it some day, if he lives long enough.

*

Hanji’s instructions are not especially specific – ‘samples’, it seems, pertains to any part of the human anatomy still reasonably warm, and the kind of samples Hanji gets will depend entirely on the individual constitutions of those collecting them.
Somewhat surprisingly, Bertholdt appears to be in possession of a cast-iron stomach. He seems to think little of splitting a corpse down the middle and plunging wrist-deep, pulling glistening purple viscera and examining it with an almost terrifying neutrality, as if he’s not certain what he’s looking at, and doesn’t particularly care. His gloves and surgical gown are streaked with dark gore up to the elbows. Green eyes stare impassively out from above his white mask as he cradles a lump of wet tissue in his cupped hands, testing its weight.

In this moment, he is the most disturbing non-Titan spectacle Armin has ever seen.

The rest of them perform their duties with varying levels of enthusiasm and courage. Reiner and Mikasa cut delicate swatches of flesh from their cadavers; they move like automatons, stiff-limbed, placing what they procure in glass pots and pushing them aside, as if to pretend they were never there. Eren and Connie watch with increasing horror as Sasha – intrepid hunter-girl, no stranger to delving in among entrails – takes a serrated knife to the fingers of her own corpse, arranging the severed digits in a pot with strange care. She’s coy at the possibility of opening the dead man up, though Hanji has taken pains to ensure all the dead have hessian sacks over their heads – it’s as thoughtful a gesture as Hanji has ever provided. But Sasha had only ever cut open prey-animals, and a human is not prey.

Not to them, anyway.

Behind him, Ymir gently coaches a trembling Christa in the use of a scalpel – she’s yet to draw blood, but she’s trying, really trying, and Ymir whispers encouragement, hands clasped tightly around Christa’s own. She treats Christa like she is something precious and terribly delicate, with surprising tenderness, pressing kisses against her forehead, guiding her hands, applying pressure where Christa cannot.

Jean sits with his back to his assigned cadaver, knees drawn to his chest, glaring at the crumbling brickwork as if it has said something disparaging about his mother’s reputation. He’s wearing the mask and the gown, but the gloves lay on the floor, untouched, along with the scalpel and glass specimen jars.

“You’re not even going to attempt it?” Armin asks.

Jean raises an eyebrow at the untouched corpse between Eren and Armin – two assigned, and not a single incision made. “Perhaps you should lead by example.”

“I’m not squeamish,” Armin says, a little indignantly. “I just…”

“Slicing up Titans is one thing, but hacking out bits of dead people for that mad scientist’s playtime isn’t exactly what you signed up for?” Jean’s smile is tight and artificial. “And front-row seats to the pandemic of the year. I can barely believe our good fortune.”

“Some things are bigger than ourselves,” Armin says.

“I know that,” Jean says, and Armin doesn’t doubt that he does. He’s not the same person these days, but when he’s frightened he tends to regress into that old personality, wears his selfishness like armour, because it’s easier to pretend not to care than to admit to being shit scared. “But there has to be a better way to make ourselves useful.”

“This is the best way. If Hanji’s team can find out how this spreads, and how it kills, we can work with that information. We can figure out how to contain it, if nothing else. They need to see what’s happening on a cellular level. They’ve brought the microscopes down from Sina especially for it. This is a big project, Jean.”
The other boy looks entirely unmoved.

“You have to consider...what if it were someone you cared about, dying like this? Wouldn’t you want to do everything in your power to stop it? Even if you didn’t want to?”

Jean’s eyes darken.

“The people I care about are either in this room, or dead,” he says, cold. “Go cut up your corpse, Arlert, and stop being a fucking hypocrite.”

Armin looks down at the corpse laid out before him, flesh like cold wax, hessian bag concealing the face – though in Armin’s imagination, the dead man (at least fifty, judging by the pale grey curls carpeting his chest, skin like old crepe) looks a little like his grandfather.

He has no moral objection to what they’re doing – it’s true, there’s no sanctity in this, Hanji has almost certainly secured these bodies without familial consent, and the possibility makes Armin uneasy – but he understand the practicalities. The necessity. And this ought to be a simpler task than taking down a Titan, but there’s the rub: this is not what they trained to do. Titans are not human. They are the enemy, the other, and whether or not they feel pain, or grieve, or comprehend a single thing beyond walking and eating is irrelevant. But this man, laid out on a slab without a name, or a face – what did he feel before he died?

Nobody weeps for a dead Titan. Who weeps for this man?

*Think of them as Titans,* Armin tells himself.

It takes all of Armin’s strength to roll the dead man onto his side. Eren, momentarily distracted from Sasha and her finger-snipping sideshow, rushes over to help him; together, they take the corpse’s weight, lowering gently (they don’t need to speak, not after all this time. Each can tell what the other is doing; they translate each movement as easily as the spoken word, know when to shift the weight, when to lower, when to let go.)

Armin pushes the hessian up so the neck is exposed.

The scalpel feels too light in his hand, too insubstantial. And when he cuts down into the neck, slicing vertically along the ridge of the spine, no blood spurts out; there is no plume of steam, no thunderous crash as a Titan body falls to the ground. Just a thick red ooze slowly draining into the open incision.

*Think of it as a Titan. Pretend, Armin. You can do that, can’t you?*

The scalpel slips through the flesh, scouring bone, and when Armin completes his circuit he slices deep, lifting skin and fat and muscle from the yellow-white spine, limp in his trembling hands, and all but throws it into the specimen jar so he won’t have to see it anymore. He squeezes his eyes closed, breathes hard and slow, hot against the oppressive surgical mask.

Eren’s hand is firm against his shoulder, a steadying presence. Funny. It’s usually the other way round.

He opens his eyes. Meets Eren’s gaze.

“I think that should be enough,” Eren says.

Armin nods. There is a part of him – the part that has grown cynical, weary of this world and the things they have to do in order to survive it – that wonders why Eren never volunteered to make the
cut. Eren, for whom a knife in a stranger’s back is an old story, for whom slicing open a human is a
means to an end, a task like any other, when it’s for the greater good.

A fear to be overcome.

And then Armin understands.

And he looks down at the dark blood coating the fingers of his gloves, and he is not afraid of it
anymore.

(Behind them, the sound of Connie unsuccessfully trying not to retch as Sasha holds up a freshly-
severed ear, examining the whorls, the way the dim light illuminates the thin cartilage, and Armin
thinks – if we weren’t all f**ked up before, we sure as hell are now.)

* 

“What you’re asking them to do,” Levi says, pausing to drape his cravat around his neck. “How sure
are you they won’t all drop dead before breakfast?”

Erwin watches the other man dress with a casual longing – he knows he’s not to be touched, not
right now, but it’s impossible not to think about it – muscles like wire under the skin, the perfect
symmetry of clavicles guiding the eye down, ribcage compact like a bird’s, but strong, almost
unbreakably so, like his bones are made from iron and cast in perfect miniature. Everything about
him is narrow and slender but nothing is delicate, evidenced by an encyclopaedia of scars, each
detailing a time in which Levi might have been broken but held firm.

“I’m not sure of anything,” Erwin says.

“We were forbidden to touch the dead,” Levi says, working nimbly at the buttons of his shirt. “In
hindsight, it was a smart rule to implement. Because if you don’t know how a sickness spreads, the
sensible thing is to stay away from its source.”

“Mahrime,” Erwin says. The word feels strange in his mouth. It’s not the first time Levi has
discussed the matter around him – in the laying down of boundaries, there had been the introduction
of certain small rituals, fragments of the life Levi had lived as a young man. Clothes and utensils are
washed under separate water-pumps. The dining table is cleaned thoroughly before meals. These are
allowances, the only things Levi has left of an identity he can barely remember, torn away from his
kin at such a young age.

Erwin does not begrudge him these things, and Levi – more gadje himself now, though there are so
little trace of his people left inside the walls that it seems there is no clan left to belong to – Levi does
not berate Erwin on those few occasions when he gets it wrong.

Levi’s mouth curves in a small smile. “It sounds like shit when you say it,” he says, without malice.

“The dead are unclean. That’s all I know. That’s all we were told.” Implicit in his words: I would
have known more had I been given more time to learn it all. “I’m not about to argue with Hanji’s
judgement on the matter. But neither am I enthusiastic about what they’re doing down there.”

“I trust Lindeman.” He understands Levi’s objections. To an extent, he shares them. But they’re at a
dead end, and Erwin is not about to cower in the corner and wait for death to find them. And he sees,
in the hardness of Levi’s face, that he is equally unwilling.

Levi nods. He finishing tying his cravat, brushes his shirt down before taking his jacket from the
coatstand. He looks so much more fragile dressed, the flowing lines of his clothing masking the lean
muscle beneath. It’s part of his considerable mystique – Levi thinks it ridiculous, Erwin considers it
terribly entertaining – that a man of such an unremarkable silhouette can deal such grievous damage.

There are many things people don’t know about Levi.

“Then so do I,” Levi says.

Chapter End Notes

I've been rolling the possibility of a Romani Levi around in my head for a little while now (half of my family are Romanichal - I want to stress that I am no authority on Romani culture and traditions, having been raised with only the stories and knowledge passed down by my grandfathers, and my own learning and research.) But I felt compelled to write something which partially explored this possibility, so...here it is.

I know it's a tad on the grim side, but I hope you've enjoyed it nonetheless.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

it gets worse.

[[What should happen now is this:...

...Levi rises onto the balls of his feet, pads softly across the room and crawls into Erwin’s lap with such impatience that Erwin wonders if he’s been silently angling for this all evening. And only then – only then, when Levi’s hands grasp him with utter unambiguity – does he lean forward, hands braced around Levi’s waist, and whisper: “Levi. Undress, please.”

But this is not what happens.]]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nobody is hungry but Levi insists that they eat, because a squad of malnourished brats is good only for shovelling horseshit. And the glum looks on their faces suggest they’ve all dealt with enough body waste today. So they eat without tasting, a mechanical motion; it’s curiously entertaining to watch, like a troupe of sad-eyed clockwork toys, chewing listlessly.

Levi has his own cup, his own bowl, will eat only that which he has prepared himself - and sometimes, that which Erwin has prepared, because Erwin knows how, and even though he is gadje he is the closest thing Levi has to a clan. And he is beginning to accept, now, that his piecemeal knowledge of the ways in which his people lived – past tense, Levi does not believe in miracles – means it is near impossible to be certain that his efforts are enough. That he would not be found wanting, if his clan were here to judge him.

Still, he keeps the old ways alive out of sheer stubbornness. Someone has to.

("Some of the new recruits think my...habits...are some kind of affectation," he'd told Erwin, in the first days of the Survey Corp's expansion. "Some way of showing I'm better than them."

“They don’t know,” Erwin had replied. “Some of them don’t even know what ‘Romani’ means.”

Their ignorance would be startling but for the fact that there are almost certainly no Romani left to speak of. They don’t teach of them in schools, nor speak of them in polite company, as if the mere mention might magic them into being; a pack of gipsies, come to steal their gold and their babies.

As if they had nothing better to do.

As if they weren’t too fucking busy struggling to survive.

When Levi dies, all that will be left are those stories, and history will remember them only as a cautionary tale; beware the baby-snatchers, beware their arcane curses.
He’s thought about this a lot.)

The young ones all look a little wan, a little drained. Connie is still a faint shade of green, sipping delicately from a cracked china cup full of herbal tea Sasha has put together. Mountainfolk medicine, almost certainly a placebo, but it seems to be working. Levi has been observing them, mining them for useful traits, and Sasha is perhaps the biggest surprise. He’d been certain, upon her arrival, that she had rocks for brains, but thought she is not booksmart, she is more intuitive than most. Her talents are unorthodox. That’s a thing to appreciate. Training tends to knock square pegs into round holes, force them to grow right-angles so that they might fit neatly.

The 104th, though, emerged a little warped, a little wrong.

For Survey Corps purposes, this is a good thing.

*

“Cutting up dead folk. I mean, I can see how a thing like that would be useful. Don’t know exactly how, but I never was a scientist. But us? Wouldn’t a physician be better? Someone who knows what they’re actually looking at?”

Connie’s been pacing fretfully up and down, thinking much harder than is healthy for him. (It’s not that Connie’s stupid, exactly, but he’ll never be a fountain of knowledge. There’s no shame in that, thinks Armin, they all have their uses. Critical thought is only one niche of many.

Jean, in one of his less charitable moments, once suggested that Connie might make a nice paperweight for the Dancho.)

He’s not alone in trying to make sense of this. In their isolation, out here, news of the sickness has been sparse, and they had begun to think themselves safe. And they were glad of that. All of them.

So many of them have no family now, or do not speak of family – Christa, Jean, Sasha, all presumably estranged or detached in some way – even fear for their loved ones hadn’t been enough to drive them from their haven. And now they share their haven with the dead, and their flesh crawls when they think of the bodies in the basement, rank with disease.

They are as bitter now as they are afraid.

“The physicians are busy attending to the sick,” Mikasa says. “What we did today was a service.”

“What we did today put us all at risk.” Ymir looks up from trying to hand-feed Christa, like she’s a baby bird in need of nourishment. Ymir’s eyes are hard, dark slits cut high above her cheekbones, staring Mikasa down. “It’s no coincidence that our benevolent commander and his fuck-toy weren’t expected to get their hands bloody.”

“What are you afraid of, Ymir?” Mikasa’s voice rarely rises above a certain decibel level. Her tone is cold, questioning, though Armin knows she cares little for Ymir’s opinion. (This is nothing personal: Mikasa keeps her heart closed out of necessity. She has lost so much already.) “Is it death? Does it scare you to think that you might die alone, in your bed, without the fanfare you think you deserve?”

Ymir’s lips pull back from her teeth, a predator’s smile. She has sharp teeth. Animal’s teeth. “You have no idea,” she says "of the kind of things that frighten me.”

Beside her, Christa shudders a little.

“Do you think you could take this somewhere else?” Jean holds a cup of Sasha’s tea in one hand,
though he hasn't so much as sipped it. “Only I kind of have a headache, and your little dick-waving contest isn’t nearly as entertaining as it ought to be.”

"Yeah," Bertholdt says quietly, although he seems to be referring to the headache rather than the 'dick-waving contest'; both his hands are placed against his temples, fingertips gently massaging the space there.

Sasha frowns, reaches out her palm to Jean's forehead. He bats her hand away, irritable.

"I'm not sick," he says (forcefully, as if the words themselves are a talisman; strangely superstitious for someone so rational.) "I'm just tired."

"You didn't do anything, chicken-shit," Ymir replies, arch. "You sat on your backside staring at the wall the entire time."

"Perhaps I'll wear a pretty blonde wig next time, hm? Maybe then you'll overlook my shortcomings in the vain hope of a pity-fuck." There is no real bite in Jean's words, Armin thinks; he sounds tired, looks worse, propping his head up on one hand, staring up at Ymir through half-lidded eyes. Even so, Christa turns visibly red, tries to stammer out some kind of apology, or justification, or defence of Ymir, but it's never realised, because Ymir suddenly pushes her chair aside and stands, one stiff, sharp motion. She shoots Jean a look of such anger that Armin is certain she's about to reach over the table and grab him by the throat.

She doesn't. Her fists stay tightly bunched at her sides.

"God forgive me," she says, voice low, "but Kirschtein, if any of us have to fall, I hope you're the first."

And nobody knows what to say to that. It's as dire an invocation as any of them could utter right now, with the dead festering under their feet and the fear alive in their veins. It feels like an omen, like the last taboo has been breached.

Christa's shoulders sink. She looks as if she's about to cry. Ymir glances at her, but her stance remains unrepentant. And Jean's trying hard to look as if he doesn't care but his cheeks are flushed with anger; he keeps his mouth tightly shut, and that's a small miracle in itself.

"None of us are going to fall," Armin says. They might not be in the right frame of mind for rational thought - tired, frightened, shellshocked as they are - but it's got to be better than all this bickering. "Squad Leader Hanji gave us protective equipment for a reason. Even if the sickness is in the blood...we all had gloves, and gowns, and masks. Our commanding officers aren't stupid. And even if you interpret their motives selfishly, the fact that they sat and ate dinner with us tonight suggests they don't consider us a potential source of infection. Why would they put themselves at risk?"

"Armin's right," Reiner says. "We've been fine up until now. No reason that should change."

"We're better than this," Eren says. He's eyeing Ymir with deep mistrust; he and Jean may fight like children, but invoking the spectre of illness involves a level of spite neither of them have ever stooped to. "We've survived Titan attacks, and here we are taking bites out of one another because we're a little rattled. The truth is, if those bodies are the closest we ever get to the White Rot then we can consider ourselves lucky."

"It will be," Armin says. Eren's eyes meet his and for a moment, Armin sees just how uncertain of himself he really is. Just how much of his confidence is pure hot air. He does it for all of them, these inspirational speeches, moments of bravado in the face of crushing despair. He does it because
somewhere in that horribly confused little heart of his, he understands that this is his family now, and they have to protect one another, because nobody else in this world is going to.

*Trust me*, Armin thinks.

And he sees, in the half-smile Eren gives him, that Eren does, at least for now.

*Mikasa is alone when she leaves the dining hall, having taken on Christa's half of the cleaning duty. The girl is not as fragile as they sometimes think; it's not for herself but for Ymir. Christa serves as a proxy-heart, caring in Ymir's stead, gladly shouldering the burden of Ymir's complete inability to connect emotionally with anyone but her.

Christa's emotional fortitude could stop bullets.

"Mikasa."

She turns. Jean stands in the doorway. There's a rifle slung loosely over his left shoulder and an oil-lamp hanging from his hand, which means that, tired though he may be, he's on first watch tonight.

Jean seems largely indifferent towards her these days, and Mikasa is fine with that; she has little interest in the vagaries of his personality. She trusts him to do the right thing. This is the only quality that matters in a comrade.

"You were wrong," he said. "About Ymir."

She says nothing, inviting him to continue.

"It's not death she's afraid of," he says. He's leaning ever so slightly towards the doorframe, as if not entirely convinced of his own ability to stand upright. Still, his expression is perfectly neutral, betraying no signs of distress. "It's suffering. Probably not even her own. The thing about Titans is that once they catch you, it's over. None of us want to go that way, me least of all. But if we were forced to choose..." he shrugs, indicating just how unpalatable a choice like that would be. "Death by Titan is quick. Maybe thirty seconds of pain. But quick, comparatively. This, though...I've read reports, Mikasa. Do you know what it does to a person?"

She doesn't. And she'd prefer not to.

"I have some idea," she says.

"Nobody wants to go through that. Most of all, they don't want the people they care about to go through it either. They don't want to lose the people they love. I know that's something you can appreciate." His fingers play distractedly at the lid of the oil-lamp, but he's sharp, focused; he knows exactly where to strike, damn him. It's a skill he's picked up watching Armin - strange, unlikely friend and confidante, and though Eren's approval is not forthcoming, she thinks Armin would be wasted remaining under their communal wing forever.

She knows they'll never lose Armin, no matter how far he strays from their nest. She can say that with absolute certainty, because there are only two constants in Mikasa's life, and she will die before she'll give either of them up. But these days, Eren seems wary of what tomorrow holds, and she won't begrudge him that.

“I never thought I’d hear you standing up for Ymir,” she says.
“Don’t misunderstand,” Jean says. “I’ve no love for that woman. I just…you can be real icy sometimes. I wanted to make sure you understood.”

"I understand." And then, because he fired the first shot: "You look like hell, Jean."

He laughs at that. He actually laughs, a dry little chuckle, and if she were in any doubt that his feelings for her have long burned out, she knows now. (She has suspected, for some time, that Jean's heart has been locked tight since the last of Marco's bones burned down to the marrow. That the space inside is full of ghosts.

That's something she can understand too.)

"You're not looking all that great yourself, Mikasa." Entirely without malice. Just a statement of fact. He's probably right. Then he shoulders his rifle, raises the oil lamp; the corridor beyond is suddenly awash with a dull orange glow. "Sleep well, yeah?"

“Yeah.”

When he leaves, he doesn’t look back.

* 

Mikasa takes the long route back to the dormitory, moving slowly; a sleepwalker down dark corridors, listening to the echo of her own footsteps, loud in the silence.

She stops outside the same room most nights. Places her palm against the door. It's locked, but she can recite from memory what's inside.

(On dark nights like this, she can still feel the gentle pressure of teeth against her throat, and blunt fingernails raking a trail up her thighs. It still makes her shudder.)

Mikasa gently rests her forehead against the door.

Annie, she thinks. Of everyone, why did it have to be you?

* 

“I met Lindeman today.”

Levi sits on the windowsill, an empty teacup perched delicately on one drawn-up knee. Some nights, he sits there until the small hours, and when he crawls into bed at last he’s a cold and fragile presence, pressed up against Erwin like shared warmth is the only kind he knows. Sometimes, he doesn’t come to bed at all, and by the time the sun rises he’s a tangle of limbs and blanket huddled in the armchair, curled up and awkward.

Tonight, he seems to be leaning towards the latter scenario.

“What was your impression of him?”

Levi gives a noncommittal shrug. “Very tall. Uses a lot of unnecessary words.”

“All scientists do.”

“Hanji seems certain that he knows what he’s doing.”

“Yes.” Erwin sips at his own tea; he can’t drink it scalding, straight from the pot like Levi does. “I’m
certain of that too.” And then, to Levi’s quirked eyebrow: “As certain as it’s possible to be, under the circumstances. I’m no physician, as you know.”

Levi makes a small ‘tch’ sound, indicating his satisfaction with Erwin’s addendum, and turns back to the window. He’s almost grey in the evening light, a bleak, beautiful thing, like sunbleached bones on a dry riverbed. His shirtsleeves are rolled to the elbows, wrists pale and smooth save for the gnarled protrusion where Erwin had once, quite unsuccessfully, attempted to reset a broken bone.

(It was the first and last time he’d ever heard Levi whimper. He still has the belt, complete with a perfect half-moon of Levi’s teethmarks; occasionally, he takes it out and runs his fingers over the shallow indentations, wonders what they would feel like duplicated on his skin.)

“I’m going to have them take the horses out tomorrow,” Erwin says. “Take their mind off things a bit.”

“It’ll take more than a day trip to calm their nerves.”

“I wasn’t aware that you cared.”

Erwin had expected a withering look of some kind, but Levi merely stretches his legs, bare feet flat against the windowframe. “They’re spooked,” he says, flexing his toes, one after the other like fingers on a piano. “They’re no good to me spooked.”

“They’ll get used to it. And frankly, they’ll be a good deal more use once they have.”

Levi smirks. “You’re all heart, Dancho.”

“I suppose you would know,” Erwin says. His voice is quiet, now, regarding Levi over the rim of his teacup. And Levi stares at him for a moment, uncertain as to the meaning of his words, but beginning to understand. Slowly, he draws his legs in, feet on the sill now, turning to face Erwin, who sits upright and patient in the armchair.

(What should happen now is this:

Levi slips his legs – long legs, for such a small man – over the sill, onto the floor, until he’s upright, mimicking Erwin’s posture, except Levi’s shoulders are a good deal less square, his frame a good deal less imposing. And Erwin says nothing at all, eyes never leaving Levi’s; this is Levi’s choice, always Levi’s choice. In the privacy of their quarters, Erwin is commander only when Levi has made his intentions clear.

…and then he is commander only because that’s the way Levi chooses it to be.

And Levi rises onto the balls of his feet, pads softly across the room and crawls into Erwin’s lap with such impatience that Erwin wonders if he’s been silently angling for this all evening. And only then – only then, when Levi’s hands grasp him with utter unambiguity – does he lean forward, hands braced around Levi’s waist, and whisper: “Levi. Undress, please.”

But this is not what happens.)

Erwin hears their visitor approach before they knock, and Levi does too, frowning at the sudden echo of footsteps on stone, growing louder as they draw close. Three sharp, quick raps on the door. Erwin and Levi exchange glances.

“Yes?”
The door opens a crack. The warm glow of an oil lamp fills the dark space in the moments before Jean Kirschtein’s face appears, harried and wide-eyed, tentative in the doorway.

“I’m sorry, Dancho.” He opens his mouth to continue, but is momentarily thrown off by Levi’s presence, still and expectant on the sill, and the presence of only one bed in the chamber – even in his agitated state, he’s still doing the mental arithmetic and coming up with an answer that, surely to God, cannot truly be a surprise to him. (Levi says the Kirschtein boy is knife-sharp; at this moment, Erwin is not convinced.)

“What seems to be the problem?”

“It’s Bertholdt,” he says. His hands are trembling.

A sudden cold weight descends in Erwin’s gut.

“He’s sick, Dancho. Bertholdt’s sick.”

Chapter End Notes

if you were expecting a glimmer of hope, I’m sorry to have crushed your dreams. At least there were no exposed bodily organs though, eh?

Thank you all for persisting with this gloomy little story so far. I am terribly grateful to all of you :)


Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Hanji does science, Jean gets punished (and has an epiphany) and Erwin is a smooth operator even in times of turmoil. Poor Bertl, though...

(My advice apologies for any mangling of medicine in this chapter. I'm a lab tech & an assistant nurse, but no doctor.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I knew something was wrong when he never showed up for second watch. If it was anyone else...but Bertl, he's the kind of person who turns up five minutes early, apologising for not being ten minutes early."

Erwin nods, silent, attentive.

They're grey-faced in the early morning light, some still bundled in blankets. Jean's still holding that damn oil-lamp like it's something immeasurably precious, even though the light burned out hours ago. He's at the centre of their rudimentary confession-circle, cloak folded on his lap; his shirt is spattered with bloodstains so dark they are almost black.

Reiner's absence is conspicuous.

"I wasn't supposed to leave my post," Jean continues "but half an hour had gone by and I knew something had to be up. So I came inside..." a subtle, narrow-eyed glance in Mikasa's direction; very little escapes Armin's notice. "The dorm was quiet. I thought maybe Bertl had accidentally slept through or something. Happens to us all, right? So I crouch down by the bed to wake him, and I notice the floor's a little slippery. I turned the lamp up..." he shudders visibly at this part. "And...I've seen blood, Danchou, more than I care to remember. But that's the most damn blood I've ever seen come from a man with no visible wounds."


"I tried to wake him up. I was panicking. Connie..." Jean looks to Connie, who is admirably stone-faced, though his eyes are flat, almost glassy, and Armin knows he's in some kind of shock. "Connie helped me get him upright and we could see he was breathing, talking, even, though his mouth was full of blood and I'll be fucked if I know what he was saying."

"He was real warm," Connie says, quiet. "Like a Titan, when you slice 'em up."

"The rest of it's kind of a blur. I lost my head a little." Jean looks shamefaced; nobody is more critical of Jean Kirschtein than the boy himself. "Reiner and Eren carried him down to the infirmary. And I came to find you. You know the rest."

There is a long pause. The girls - hearing this story for the first time - look uniformly appalled. Even Mikasa, who plays at being stoic but counts all of them as part of her extended, eccentric family - she'd never admit it, probably doesn't even admit it to herself, but sometimes Armin thinks Mikasa
has been playing this part for so long that she’s come to believe in her own character.

"The first thing I can tell you," Erwin says, after a time - he's still in uniform, still rigid and professional despite the hour and the circumstances - "is that Bertholdt is alive. By the skin of his teeth, but alive all the same."

"Is it the White Rot?" Christa whispers.

Erwin glances at her. "We don't know for certain," he says. "The symptoms fit, although there are certain...irregularities, which make it difficult to ascertain. Your hard work collecting samples will no doubt make it a good deal easier to identify the cause of his illness."

"Collecting samples is the cause of his illness," Ymir hisses.

"Enough, Ymir." Eren says, weary. He's wearing fresh clothes, skin pink where he’s scrubbed the blood away; there’s still a black half-moon of dried blood crusted beneath his fingernails. Armin will have to point it out to him later. “It’s too late to worry about it now. Our friend is sick.”

“We could be, soon,” Connie whispers. Sasha makes an awkward fumble for his hand, catches a swatch of his nightshirt instead; she holds it all the same, gripping tightly. He barely seems aware of it. “What happens then?”

“We deal with it.” Mikasa gets up. She’s a jumble of hair and nightclothes, her cardigan inside-out, but she still manages to look intimidating, eyes stony beneath the ragged tangle of her fringe. “If it happens.”

“You deal with it,” Jean says, by way of correction. He stands too. His limbs creak as he stretches. They are barely adults, but their bodies haven taken such punishment over the years, and their bones ache sometimes, in the cold. “Because I’m fucking done with all of this. I’m taking Bertholdt’s shift. If I don’t come back, you can assume I’m dead.”

“We live in hope,” Ymir says, under her breath. (Christa flinches; all this hostility is like a spear to the gut, but she takes it, swallows it, grim and determined, because Ymir can’t possibly mean it. Can she? Conflict is written all over her face. Armin thinks she must be close to breaking point. She won’t be the first to break. Of that, Armin is certain.)

“Corporal Levi is on watch,” Erwin says. He has barely moved the entire time, stood like a sentinel at the door. Talismanic even in his failure to repel the plague now circling overhead. He regards Jean with impassive eyes. “However. Since you appear so enthusiastic about our security, I'll appoint you first watch on the infirmary. Nobody in or out except authorised personnel.”

Jean visibly flinches. "You can't be serious."

"Ymir, you're to take second watch. Everyone else, get whatever rest you can. There'll be work enough for you when dawn comes." He stares a moment longer at Jean, inviting further argument, but none is forthcoming; Jean throws up his arms in disbelief, teeth tightly clenched, but his commanding officer has spoken, and Jean may speak of dissent but he is loyal in all things. As he passes Armin - all stiff shoulders and clipped, awkward gait - it's clear he's cursing that particular trait.

* 

Tobias Lindeman never sleeps.
Unlike Hanji, he seems entirely unaffected by it, like he's some kind of automaton running entirely on air and strong black tea. He's a giant of a man, with a dark complexion which no doubt turns heads up in Sina; he has hands like shovels, handling the delicate glass tubes with impossible gentleness. When Erwin enters the makeshift laboratory, quiet, so as not to disturb whatever vital work is being done. Lindeman is peering down into one of his contraptions, adjusting dials in what appears to be an entirely random fashion.

"Good morning, Commander Smith." He doesn't look up, and Erwin's footsteps are near-inaudible; how Lindeman senses his approach is a mystery. "Or is it still evening?"

"Neither." Across the room, sprawled out on the sofa and covered in an untidy pile of horse-blankets, is Hanji. Sound asleep, face pressed hard into the cushions; her mouth is open, tongue protruding, optics still clutched in one dangling hand. He feels absurdly fond of her then. "I see Hanji is being tremendously useful to you."

Lindeman looks up from his work, offers Erwin a small smile. "She's a marvel, Commander. I've never met an untrained individual so adept. She has turned her hand to human biology with remarkable speed. If only you could persuade her to rest before she collapses, she would be quite indispensible."

"She doesn't believe in half-measures, Professor." Erwin approaches the table, casting a woefully unqualified eye over the gadgets and samples scattered, apparently haphazard, glass vials containing pink tissues and bloodstained fluids. "And I understand you've met Corporal Levi?"

"His reputation precedes him." Lindeman is deadpan; Erwin can't tell what manner of statement he's making, but as a rule, Levi is not fond of medicine-men. He has his reasons. "Hanji finds him endlessly fascinating. I suspect she intends to make a project of him."

"They have an interesting friendship," Erwin says.

"As do the two of you," Lindeman replies. "I hear he defers to nobody, yourself excepted."

"Has he...been impolite?"

Lindeman erupts into merry laughter, a deep sound, low in his chest. "No. Not in the slightest. He's an unusual character, I'll admit. But he's exceptionally polite for someone who so obviously mistrusts physicians. You're surrounded by the unorthodox, Commander. I suspect you may be the only ordinary man among us."

Erwin smiles. Passing for ordinary is perhaps his greatest skill. "Have you looked in on Bertholdt, professor?"

"My sample has a name? How delightful." He sounds genuinely pleased. Erwin supposes this must be the first instance of this epidemic in which he's had a living person to observe. "I have. And I must say, Commander..."

"Erwin," he says, polite. "We're discussing medicine. I have no need of my rank."

"Erwin, then." Lindeman places both hands flat on the table, thick fingers fanned out, shoulders like a tree-trunk turned sideways. "Your boy is of most...unusual physiology. Hanji and I are quite unable to figure out what's happening to him. It's the same illness, that much is certain. All the diagnostic hallmarks are present. But the disease is progressing in a very strange order. Please-" he beckons Erwin with a nod, directs him towards the microscope with one hand. Erwin squints down into the lens, the eyepiece cold against his skin. A bright blur emerges. Lindeman's hands fiddle
expertly with the dials until the image contorts, contracts, becomes a mass of pinkish shapes quivering in the bright light, as if terrified.

(This, Erwin thinks, is how Titans must see us.)

"What am I seeing?" Erwin asks.

"Cells." Lindeman's voice is disembodied, floating in from somewhere behind him. It's an unnerving sensation. "Those particular cells are from a subject's liver. What you're witnessing, Erwin, is a process called 'apoptosis'. Cell death. Cell suicide, to be exact. A perfectly normal process. But this 'White Rot'..." Erwin can almost hear the inverted commas, and thinks Levi would like this man, physician though he may be. "It appears to trigger apoptosis en masse. In layman's terms, the body destroys itself, one system at a time. Up until now, it seemed the progression of the disease was fairly uniform - lesions of the soft tissue, gastrointestinal disturbance, reduced liver and kidney function. Later, impairment of the nervous system, followed by haemorrhaging and respiratory distress; the cause of death is typically blood loss or respiratory failure."

Erwin looks up, sight blurry in this sudden low light. Lindeman's expression is static, unmoving; the soft angles of his face look to have been carved into sandstone. It is not a face which invites argument.

"What makes your boy unusual, Erwin, is that he has skipped several stages of the disease entirely - haemorrhage and neurological deficit are, without exception, late symptoms. I spoke to Reiner Braun a short while ago. He is quite adamant that this young man exhibited no symptoms prior to his collapse."

Erwin is not a man of medicine, or of science, but the stark impossibility of this is not lost on him. "You mean to say that the illness is changing."

Lindeman shakes his head. "That was my first hypothesis. But he is the lone example. You're aware of how fast this disease spreads; if it had mutated, we would be seeing others like him. But we haven't. I've received word of five new cases in the last two hours, and all of them are typical in presentation. When I spoke to Corporal Levi, he informed me that all but yourself and Hanji had been isolated here, away from potential infection, for the past six days. And neither of you appear to be carriers."

"Which means..." Hanji's voice, rough with sleep, floating in from the side of the room; she's sat up now, cross-legged and swaddled in blankets. Her eyes seem small and sunken without her optics. "...That Bertholdt has been incubating this disease for almost a week, with no obvious ill effects."

"Which is unheard of." Erwin glances between the two of them. "Unless the corpses..."

Hanji shakes her head. "Not possible," she says. "Tobias and I are certain the disease is transmitted via contact with infected fluids."

"Which Bertholdt was covered in," Erwin says. "His gown was near-saturated."

"Not possible." Hanji repeats. Her feet are bare as she pads across the stone floor, untroubled by the cold; the blankets hang from her like a monstrous second skin. Lindeman affords her his full attention. He must think her quite something, Erwin thinks; she is an anthropologist, and Titan-biology is merely a hobby. "Those samples we obtained from the cadavers...not one of them contained a live sample of the virus. It seems that once the body enters rigor mortis, the virus becomes inert. It can no longer transmit. I don't know how Bertholdt came into contact with the virus, but it wasn't from the bodies."
“However.” Lindeman’s voice is grave, now, moving to stand beside Hanji; he dwarfs her entirely, and yet she’s barely diminished, newly awake and already abuzz with vibrant energy. “The boys who found him – I don’t recall their names – were covered in his blood. Most of it was on their clothes, but…”

He doesn’t need to finish his sentence.

The dread Erwin feels is probably not becoming of a leader, a man used to sending his young charges to their doom in the name of progress. The ‘greater good’ – Levi says it sneeringly, though Erwin knows they are both agreed on the necessity of it. Still, for all his detachment, he knows their losses take a greater toll on Levi than they ever have on him. This is what Erwin tells himself, in those dark, fleeting moments, when the bodies are lined up before him and he wonders what he’ll say, when he writes the letters to their relatives: He was a brave soldier. She did her duty. His death was mercifully quick.

The last one is almost always a lie.

*

Jean, head-to-toe in protective gear, enters the infirmary with almost comical hesitation, as if the sickness might be hiding under the bed, ready to tear out his throat. He knows he looks ridiculous, but at this point in his life Jean has made looking ridiculous into an art form, and frankly, he’d rather be a live, healthy idiot than a dead one.

The infirmary is a rudimentary affair; there are three beds laid out in a tidy row, each perfectly made except for the far left, which houses (barely) an unconscious Bertholdt, and beside him, tucked into a chair far too small for his frame, Reiner. He’s got one hand wrapped tightly around Bertholdt’s. The taller boy’s fingers are limp in his grasp; a long, clear tube protrudes from a needle sited at his wrist, trailing up to a bag of clear fluid dangling from a pole. He looks strange and pale in the pinkish dawn light, like something not entirely human.

It probably smells like every other infirmary Jean has been in: of iodine and antiseptic. He can’t tell; the surgical mask is uncomfortably tight against his nose and mouth.

“Didn’t think I’d see you here,” Reiner says, quiet. He eyes Jean’s protective gear with something approaching disdain. He’s angry. Probably not at Jean – Reiner doesn’t get angry with people, he’s possessed of seemingly infinite patience for idiocy of all kinds. But Bertholdt is suffering, and Reiner is strong and resilient and clever but even for all of this, there is nothing he can do to ease Bertholdt’s pain.

“I’m on watch,” Jean replies, sullen. He drags a chair to the door and sits, propping the rifle up against the wall. He hates these rifles. They’re ugly and clumsy, an utterly unrefined and unsubtle method of dispatch requiring little skill: lift, point, shoot. They remind him of the Military Police, those spoiled, lazy oxygen-thieves. They remind him of what he could have been. What he used to be.

They remind him of Marco.

Reiner laughs, a dry, humourless sound. “Watching for what?”

“I don’t fucking know. Anyone insane enough to actually want to risk contagion.” He realises then that Reiner is staring at him, and that Reiner could easily knock his head off with one blow, were he so inclined, and he adds, quickly: "Not that I'm saying you're insane. You have good reason to be here, I'm sure."
"If he's going to die," Reiner says, "I don't want him to die alone."

Jean's breath catches in his throat. He swallows hard. "That's a good reason," he says, affecting a casual air. As far as anyone else knows, he's over Marco's death. He's moved on. Made progress. It's as blatant a lie as Jean has ever told, and Jean, for all his many and varied faults, is not a liar.

"Besides." Reiner places Bertholdt's hand gently on the bed, wrist upturned, and stands up slowly. He looks in desperate need of sleep. "Squad Leader Hanji tells me she's certain he's been incubating this disease since before we ever caught sight of those bodies. Five, six days, maybe."

Jean frowns. "That's not possible."

"Apparently, it is. I don't understand a lot of it, but from what I gather, those bodies weren't infectious. The sickness is in the blood, but it can't survive for long without a live host." He's pacing the length of Bertholdt's bed, a slow, ponderous motion. "I can't understand it. We've been stuck in here since the plague hit, twiddling our thumbs for nearly a week. We should've been safe. He should've been safe..." Reiner is generally a pillar of emotional strength, a man known for shouldering the worries of others without hesitation. But when he looks at Jean, he's almost pleading: his eyes are a little too bright, his mouth a tight, downward curve.

His fingers are streaked with dried blood. Jean tries to ignore that part.

"They want to run tests," Reiner says. He exhales slowly, shakes his head as if to clear this momentary surge of emotion. "This doctor...Lindeman, was it? He says Bertl's fighting it. He doesn't understand how, but he is." When he sits back down, he scoops Bertholdt's hand back up, runs his thumb gently over the ridges and calluses of the other boy's palm. "But Bertl's not a laboratory rat. He's a human being, and he's alive."

"I get what you're saying, but Reiner, it's for the greater good..."

Reiner grins, lips pulled back over bare teeth. A corpse-grin. "For your greater good, you mean," he says, not an accusation but a statement. Jean's self-preservation instincts are no secret. "I won't let them, Jean. He is not a lump of flesh to be dissected. They don't come near him while I'm around. Is that clear?"

Jean is spectacularly unnerved by all of this. He's seized with the urge to flee the room entirely, leaving Reiner to play as Bertholdt's nursemaid-in-shining-armour. But something is off here. Something doesn't fit. It's as if the sudden rush of nervous adrenaline has sparked something in his brain, knocking him out of his self-pitying funk.

If Hanji and her doctor friend are right - if, because although Jean generally considers Hanji reliable she is no expert on deadly, bloody disease - then Bertholdt must have come into contact with the sickness before their exile here, in their dilapidated castle in the woods. He presses his steepled fingers against his mouth, the thick cloth of his mask stifling. His brain is almost itching with the sudden activity. Think, Kirschtein. Remember.

His memories come in fragments, pictures; he pieces them together like a jigsaw puzzle. The sickness had been officially declared an epidemic on the second day, late in the afternoon; they'd been tending to the horses. Mikasa had stepped ankle-deep in horse-shit. They'd been laughing their faces off when Erwin arrived with the news. On the first day, there'd been a scattering of cases, but nothing definite. Nothing unduly alarming. They'd eaten breakfast, gone about their usual duties.

The day before that, though...
We were out. Beyond Wall Rose. Short-term expedition, testing alterations to the formation. They didn't work. We almost lost three men. If it hadn't been for Levi, we probably would have. Andreas, Pavel, Janusz. Standard wounds: broken bones, lacerations, and...

Then it clicks.

He leaps from his seat so quickly it makes Reiner jump. He scoops the rifle up and all but shoves it under Reiner’s nose, desperate to be rid of the ugly thing. “You’re on watch,” he says, breathless, tearing the mask from his face and shoving it into the pocket of his protective gown. “I’ll be back soon, I swear it.”

“Where are you going?”

He’s halfway out the door before he responds, catching sight of Reiner’s bemused expression as he pivots, utterly graceless, in the doorway.

“I have to talk to Armin,” he says.

Chapter End Notes

as always, thank you for sticking with this grim fucking rollercoaster of misery. I sincerely hope this chapter pleased you.

There'll be a bit of a delay on the next chapter as I have some boring non-fanfic irl stuff to do, but fear not. I will be back shortly. (Contact me on Tumblr if you have any questions and whatnot...I'm always happy to talk)

Next time: Jean and Armin are the brain trust, and paranoia is king.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

"For all their hard-won maturity, they are all still frightened children, hiding under the bed from the monsters that lurk out there, in the dark."

Desperate times call for desperate measures, and paranoia is as contagious as any illness.

It’s long past dawn when Mikasa arrives for the morning watch, and Levi doesn’t bother to admonish her for turning up late. Punctuality tends to go out of the window when the people around you are bleeding slowly to death. She’s ragged and exhausted, grey around the edges; she holds herself with the same proud poise, the same assurance, but she’s running on sheer adrenaline. It’s far from ideal, but it will have to do. It’s not as if any of the others are in a better state.

"I apologise for being late, Heichou," Mikasa says, snapping a salute. "I’m...I slept longer than I intended." Despite the newly-risen sun and the sheer volume of winter clothing she's wearing, she looks half-frozen already. He makes a 'tch' sound, shucking off his gloves - horsehide, soft and supple - and hands them to her. She accepts them with a look of mild surprise. "Thank you," she says, a little hesitant.

"Keep them," he replies. They're probably a perfect fit; Levi has always had delicate hands and slender fingers, although the skin is scarred and callused, betraying his profession. Mikasa slips the gloves on, wriggling her fingers in the residual warmth of Levi's skin. She bunches her hands into the folds of her skirt, gloves buried in among the fabric. They'll be mahrime now, although she won't understand that; it doesn't matter to her, anyway. It matters to so few people now. "You'll be no good on watch with numb hands."

She nods, shouldering her rifle. Her priorities are interesting, Levi thinks. She could take down a Titan with her eyes closed - probably has, at some time or another - but her respect for rank and title is absolute. He's treated Eren harshly in the past, and he'd seen, each time, the bright spark of anger in her eyes, the desire to drive a fist into his teeth and show him exactly who he's fucking with. But she's not a stupid girl. She understands what's necessary, even if she doesn't approve.

Well. Nobody ever said she had to.

"Sasha Braus is on next watch," Levi says, placing the extinguished oil-lamp back on its pedestal. "Report to me afterwards for full debriefing. And by the way, Ackerman." Her eyes widen, just a little, at his sudden change in tone, and he thinks she knows exactly what he's about to address. "Rumour has it that you spent the early hours of the morning inside Annie Leonhardt’s holding cell. Do we really need to go over all the many and varied reasons why we keep that room under lockdown? Why nobody but armed guards set foot in there?"

She's somewhere between sheepish and defiant, embarrassed to have been caught but furious at the prospect of being kept away. "With respect, Heichou..."

"With respect, nothing. This is not a debate. I don't give a single mouse-turd what your reasons were. Frankly, there's nothing you can tell me that I won't have heard before. You abused what little authority you had, and I won't stand for that."
Her frown deepens. "Jean told you, didn't he?"

"Damn right he did. He told me because I asked him. That's how the chain of command works, Ackerman. You do what your immediate superior tells you. And I'm telling you that if you set foot in Annie Leonhardt's cell again, you'll find yourself mopping Garrison latrines so fast it'll make you dizzy. I don't give a fuck how good you are." It's the most he's said in hours, and his throat is desperately dry. Mikasa doesn't look remotely cowed by him. He should be pissed off about that, but he's almost amused. Sometimes, it's like looking at himself at the same age: she knows exactly how good she is, and what she represents. The only difference is she's not inclined to tell him to go fuck himself.

He'll have to work on that.

"Is Bertholdt still hanging on?" he asks, by means of closing the subject.

"I haven't seen him," she replies. She's staring out into the distance now, at the copse beyond the grounds; sometimes, on quiet mornings, deer feed there. There haven't been any for days. Perhaps they can smell the sickness in the air. "How likely is it that he'll die?"

Levi shrugs. "I don't know shit about medicine," he says. "I know he's a study sonofabitch, even if he does jump at his own shadow. But I don't deal in probabilities. Ask Hanji, she'll draw you up a chart or something."

Her silence indicates her total non-amusement, and he thinks this is as likely a time as any to take his leave. The Leonhardt thing...it could be problematic, if she chooses to exercise her defiance. And truthfully, he wouldn't care at all if she decided to set up in that cell: drag her bunk in, maybe decorate Annie's crystal casket with fucking daisy-chains, but it's the principle of the matter. And yes, her obsession verges on the disturbing, but the Survey Corp is full to brimming with inverts and perverts of every stripe, and Levi gave up caring a long time ago.

It's an exercise in observation for Hanji; her new favourite game is guessing the proclivities of their new recruits. She's written off Ymir, Ackerman and Braun as 'obviously homosexual', Kirschtein and Lenz as 'on-the-fencers', and Braus as 'some kind of insanely exuberant dominatrix'. Every now and again she'll try to coerce Levi into betting actual money on the outcome, and even if Levi weren't so utterly disinterested in the personal lives of the 104th - not to mention mildly creeped out by the whole thing - he still wouldn't bet against her. Hanji is very rarely wrong.

She was right about Levi, in any case.

*

Jean finds Armin back in the dorm, presiding over Eren's sleeping form. If Mikasa is Eren's personal attack dog - not that he needs one, but that's about the size of it - then Armin is his pale-faced guardian angel, with his halo of blonde hair (askew, now, hanging wild about his face.) The curtains are drawn across the window, and Armin is cross-legged at the end of Eren's bed, dressed in civilian clothes. He nods a greeting as Jean approaches, pressing his index finger to his mouth: let sleeping Titan-shifters lie.

"I need to talk to you," Jean says, as quietly as he can. Apparently it's not quiet enough, because Eren stirs in his sleep, and Armin's about to shoot him an irritated look when the other boy stills, settling once more. Slowly, Armin eases himself off the bed, padding across the floor with bare feet; his eyes pass over Jean's protective gear and Jean swears he rolls his eyes a little.

They head out through the corridor and into the kitchen, where Sasha's pumping water into a cast-
iron teakettle, and Connie's dozing at the table, bowl of half-eaten porridge in front of him, spoon still in hand. They sit at opposite ends of the table, because it feels like the thing to do: Armin, at the head, the brains of the operation, and Jean at the foot, bookending a resolutely unconscious Connie.

"What's it about?" Armin asks. He's a little antsy, like he wants to get back to the important business of staring at Eren while he sleeps.

"I thought of something," Jean says. "About this disease. I might...this is going to sound stupid as hell, okay, but just listen for a minute. I think I might have figured out where it started."

He's half expecting to be scoffed at; it's not Armin's style, the kid's far too accommodating for that, but Jean's pissing in the wind at this point, and Armin probably knows it. Still, all he gets is a poker face and a small nod. "Go on," Armin says, hands clasped before him, looking like the world's youngest psychiatrist.

Jena takes a breath. "If Hanji's right, and this disease has been sitting around inside Bertholdt for a week - taking a fucking vacation or something, I don't know - then we've got to narrow down the sources of potential exposure in the days before that. Right?"

Armin nods sharply, already impatient for Jean to get to the point. Behind them, Sasha places the filled kettle on the already-hot stove and waits patiently, pretending she's not listening as she does. Let her listen, Jean thinks, for all the good it'll do her.

"And we know the disease moves fast, so logically you're looking at a one or two day window at most. Think back to seven days ago - the day before the first cases occurred. Where were we?"

"Out on recon." Armin says. He narrows his eyes, like there’s something out in the distance he just can’t see; a memory he can’t grasp. Having recently cycled through that same thought process, Jean can’t help but sympathise. “We…the rear flank were attacked. It was sheer luck that nobody died.”

“It wasn’t luck,” Sasha interjects, crumbling some kind of dried plant into the kettle. “It was Levi. If he hadn’t been there, they’d all be Titan-vomit by now.”

Beside them, Connie stirs in his sleep, making faint muttering sounds, and Jean and Armin share a look of mild alarm. “Is he okay?” Jean asks Sasha, indicating Connie with a nod. He looks as if he’s literally fallen asleep mid-meal; his face is pressed against the grain of the table, arms limp at his sides. If it weren’t for the occasional snuffle-snort, he’d almost look as if he were dead.

(They’re both checking for flushed cheeks, cold sweat, the first droplets of blood beading about his nostrils. Jean would be ashamed of his paranoia if he weren’t so utterly invested in not dying.)

“He’s exhausted,” Sasha says, a little coldly, as if it’s their fault Bertl started spontaneously leaking blood from every orifice. It’s not like her to be cold. Jean wonders if she’s afraid – nervous, secretly, beneath the cloud-cuckooland act. If she’s not convinced herbal tea and wishful thinking will be enough to ward off the sickness now it’s among them.

“What happened to Janusz?” Armin asks, sudden, back straightening in his chair as if he’s suffered a sudden electric shock. The resulting jolt to the table starts Connie off on a mumbled, half-coherent monologue about ‘bringing the sheep in before the rain comes’. His spoon clatters to the table, finally released from his cast-iron grip.

The sharp, grassy smell of Sasha’s concoction permeates the air.

“He lost a leg,” Jean says. “The last time I saw him, he was in the cart, bleeding like a stuck pig and burning up with fever.” This is it, he thinks, the moment he’s been building up to; Armin’s either
going to think he’s completely fucking insane, or some kind of genius. And Jean doesn’t really want to bet on either right now. “I’ve got a theory,” he says, blurtling it out in one go. Armin looks mildly alarmed at the suddenness of it, but nods anyway, and Jean could just about hug him for it.

To say Jean knows next to nothing about medicine is an understatement, and it occurs to him that he’d be next to useless in the field if someone ever obtained an injury. But he can put two and two together, and usually comes up with four, and he’s hoping his record will hold. Jean knows his ideas are solid. It’s just that few people are inclined to believe him.

Sasha’s watching him over Armin’s shoulder, interest apparent now, and for some reason this just makes it even more difficult: he’s not sure why, since Sasha’s thought processes are best described as ‘abnormal’ and therefore her scientific opinion probably counts for beans. And yet.

(He doesn’t remember when these people stopped being ‘peers’ and started to become ‘friends’.)

“I think,” Jean says, trying to sound firm and authoritative, “that we haven’t seen Janusz because he died a short while after that mission. And I think if you were to look at his records, you’d see the cause of death listed as something mundane. Gangrene, most likely, from the amputated limb. Some kind of infection, anyway. Standard stuff, but maybe if you looked in the notes – assuming they make notes and don’t just throw the corpses straight on the pyre – you’d see unusual symptoms. Things that I’d guess aren’t typical features of gangrene.”


“That Janusz was the first person to catch White Rot,” Jean supplies, which would earn him an eye-roll from anyone else, but Armin is unfailingly polite, even when his intelligence is being insulted.

“…that he was the index case, yes,” Armin replies, perhaps a little haughty. “It’s plausible that some of the more aggressive symptoms may have been overlooked once they’d determined septicemia. They take uh, a somewhat utilitarian approach to healthcare here – pool resources for those who can be saved, and make it quick for those who can’t.” He’s pragmatic about this, perhaps because they’ve all thought about it: what would happen if they returned home, grievously injured and unlikely to survive. And the thought of being kept alive in agony has never appealed to Jean, who still lays awake some nights, wondering how long Marco lay there before everything turned black.

“I’m willing to bet,” Jean says, resting his chin on his interlaced fingers, “that the first recorded cases were connected somehow with Janusz. People who came into contact with him, somehow. Doctors, nurses, something like that.”

“Or people close to them,” Armin adds. He’s practically vibrating, Jean notices, newly energised with possibilities. He looks up at Jean, hands tightly clasped, and in that moment he’s a tiny Erwin, the fine angles of his face and wide, pale eyes belying the merciless intellect beneath. And then he’s on his feet, making for the door, Eren temporarily forgotten in the wake of this discovery. Forget Erwin, Jean thinks, this kid is a Hanji in the making. “If I can just get into the infirmary, I can find the information we need.”

If it were anyone else, Jean would be inclined to rain all over their plans with his customary brand of pessimism. But Armin has this strange knack, not only for working around restrictions and authority figures, but for making Jean forget he’s supposed to be the curmudgeon of the group. And it feels good, sometimes, to have a little hope. To believe in unlikely things, because Armin is logic and reason, and if he judges a thing possible then it surely must be.

This is probably why he seeks Armin out so often.
“I, uh…” Jean casts a glance down at his protective gear, suddenly remembering himself, his responsibilities, Reiner sitting in the infirmary with Bertl's hand in his, and Jean’s rifle propped against his shoulder. “I’m supposed to be on guard right now.”

"Levi's going to be back any minute," Sasha says. “He’ll gut you if he sees you’re absent.” She places the teakettle on the table, heavy with water; it makes a loud thump, and Connie's suddenly awake, pale eyes wide and comical, brandishing his spoon like a weapon.

"What happened?" he asks, a little shrilly, although his voice is raspy with sleep. He stares uncertainly at Jean, then at Armin; the ghost of recognition is there, but they might as well be strangers. "Who's dead?"

And Sasha smiles fondly as she reaches out a hand, but there's a sadness in her eyes, and as she strokes Connie's stubble-fuzzy head she looks like she's trying very hard to keep that smile afloat. "Nobody's dead, dumbass." She says 'dumbass' the way other people say 'darling'. "C'mon, your breakfast isn't going to eat itself."

This seems to placate Connie, who resumes eating his long-cold porridge in silence. He moves mechanically, spooning mush into his mouth without chewing it; Sasha's hand is tentative on his shoulder, as if she's afraid to wake him from whatever reverie he's in. And Jean realises what's got her so nervy: he's in some kind of shock, and she's not entirely sure how she's supposed to make him better.

"Let him sleep," Armin says, soft now; he probably figured it out long before Jean did. "He's not due on guard duty until later tonight, and I can't see us training today. It'll do him good."

Sasha nods, a little uncertain. She leans down so she's speaking almost in Connie's ear; her lank, unwashed fringe must tickle his face, but he doesn't seem aware of it. "I'll be back soon, okay?" she says, nudging him with her nose. "I'm just going to give Reiner some tea. I think he could use it right now."

He responds to her gesture with a pallid half-smile, and he looks so unlike himself it's almost frightening; like someone pretending to be Connie Springer without ever having met him. Frankly, it gives Jean the creeps. He can't even imagine how Sasha must feel about it.

They head to the infirmary, all three of them, and the silence is almost painful; they don't talk, because what would they say? They're all afraid, although Armin's fear has been momentarily eclipsed by his excitement (and perhaps Jean too: the strange adrenaline rush of a partially-solved puzzle seems to have quelled his frayed nerves, at least a little. And he has more faith in Armin than he does most other people, himself included, and if Bertholdt can just hold on a little longer.)

Those thoughts evaporate on entering the infirmary. Reiner's dozing, but he snaps awake at the sound of their footsteps, hands tightening around the rifle until he realises who he's looking at. Still, he's got the look of a hunted animal about him, face drawn and eyes narrow, pale hair sticking out in wild tufts. Like he could strike at any time. Like he would, if he had to.

Sometimes, Jean thinks Reiner and Bertholdt are two halves of the same person, and their closeness is not based on any traditional notion of romantic love, but because they simply cannot function without one another. That they are symbiotic, mutually entwined in the most basic biological sense, and that they function as a whole, as a single entity. If Bertholdt dies, Jean thinks Reiner might simply cease; all there'll be left of him is a Reiner-shell, disconnected and dessicating slowly.

(He suggested something like this once, and Ymir - Ymir, of all people - ripped him a new orifice for it. Told him he was a cold, unromantic asshole. Like Ymir would know anything about romance, the
Jean tugs his mask back on, but Sasha walks in like she's invulnerable - or perhaps just blissfully ignorant. She places the teakettle as gently as she can beside Reiner, and reaches out, not at all tentatively, giving his shoulder a gentle squeeze. Her hands seem tiny compared to the broad bulk of him, but Connie adores Reiner, and so Sasha adores him too, and it's probably never occurred to her to be afraid of him. "Hey," she says, unsmiling but gentle. "I brought you some tea. You need to keep your strength up."

He doesn't smile either, but his face softens a little. His hands leave the rifle, reaching for the teakettle and the ceramic mug Sasha's placed alongside it. Jean can almost hear the creak of his muscles as he moves, perhaps for the first time since Jean ran off in search of Armin. He's already begun to rot, Jean thinks; he'll sit here for weeks until he turns to stone. Sasha helps him pour the tea, and the familiar botanical scent is almost comforting: mint, nettle, elderberry, faint undertones of something else that Jean can't quite identify.

"Is Connie okay?" Reiner asks, as he lifts the cup to his lips. His voice is a little hoarse, like he's been crying, but that can't possibly be right. "And everyone else? Nobody's sick?" It's almost an afterthought, but even mired down in his own personal despair, Reiner still finds time to care about other people. So perhaps Jean’s wrong about him and Bertl; perhaps he’s grown new roots, found himself a home among them. Time will tell, surely, because Bertholdt's a frail presence in the bed beside him, bloodless and china-pale, and there can’t be much left in him now, no matter how hard Reiner might pray for it.

"Connie’s fine," Sasha says, airy, like it’s almost the truth. "And we are too. All of us. So you shouldn’t worry, okay? Drink up, I’ll bring you something to eat too.” She smiles at Bertholdt, but it’s strained. “You need to be strong for him. He’s going to need you when he wakes up.”

There’s the barest hint of a smile at Reiner’s mouth as he drinks, draining the cup in two long gulps. He must have been thirsty; she pours him another and he drains that too. Sasha shifts her weight from foot to foot, watching him drink as if she can’t stand to look at Bertholdt anymore. (Jean doesn’t blame her; the pale thing in the bed could be any of them come tomorrow.)

Reiner wipes his mouth on his sleeve – what is decorum when you’re exhausted and on edge? – and looks up at Sasha, grateful for this small kindness. He turns his gaze to Jean, who’s still in the doorway, breathing hot under his mask, and he goes to speak – hey, Jean, are you going to take this damn rifle back? – but stops mid-motion; his mouth is stuck open, tongue protruding stupidly, and for a long, horrible moment Jean is certain that there’s going to be blood. Torrents of it, streaming from Reiner’s open mouth, through his splayed fingers, pawing numbly now at his face. But it never comes, and after a few seconds Reiner collapses, boneless, back into his chair.

“….fuck,” Jean manages, caught between the urge to run full-pelt in the opposite direction and the thought that he should help Reiner somehow. And Sasha’s just standing there, clutching the teakettle to her chest and staring at Reiner like there’s nothing at all wrong. “Do something!” Jean hisses, fully cognizant of the utter hypocrisy of this statement.

“It’s okay,” Sasha says.

“It’s not okay, Sasha, he’s sick, he’s…”

“Jean.” Her voice is dull, suddenly; when she turns to face him, she looks almost pained, mouth tight and downturned. Her hands are almost white, gripping the teakettle hard, and he realises what’s happened a split second before she speaks. The tea. Of course, it was the tea.
“I didn’t want to,” she says, protest dying on her lips before it even makes it out. And she’s as ashamed as she is adamant, as conflicted as Jean has ever seen her. “But…Squad Leader Hanji… they need those samples, and Reiner won’t…Jean, I can’t let anyone else die. I can’t. Don’t you understand?”

He blinks, stunned and silent; Sasha, of all people, and he can’t help but admire the sheer guts it must have taken her to poison Reiner, even with the best of intentions - he hopes Reiner’ll never find out what she did. In desperate times, Jean thinks, we do desperate things. Even drugging our friends at the mad scientist’s behest. This is what they’ve become. Paranoid and cutthroat and terrified of dying.

"I don't want to lose anyone else," Sasha says quietly.

For all their hard-won maturity, they are all still frightened children, hiding under the bed from the monsters that lurk out there, in the dark.

*

"Hanji got what she needed, I assume?"

Levi nods, peering up from the book he's obviously pretending to read. And Erwin knows he stinks of horse sweat and hay and probably horseshit too, even though he left his boots at the door, but the look Levi's giving him is as if he's been rolling in manure.

"She's working on them as we speak, I'd imagine," Levi says, laying the book on his lap. One of Erwin's, a strategy manual from the early days of the Expedition, when Titan behaviour was still very much an unknown quantity. Levi probably couldn’t give a shit about any of it.

"Was it you?" Erwin asks.

"It was my idea," Levi says, nonchalant; he's evidently been expecting this question, and he's not remotely troubled at the answer. "Hanji put it to her, and it was Braus herself who mentioned the sleep-tea. She seems to know a recipe for just about everything, Hanji tells me: ague, breakbone fever, galloping diarrhoea, erectile dysfunction.” He lets out a harsh bark of laughter; this is Levi’s idea of a hilarious joke. "If you ask me, she's nuttier than squirrel shit, but it worked. I wouldn't want to be her if Braun ever finds out about it, though."

"Which he won't," Erwin says.

Levi shrugs. "He sure as hell won't hear it from me," he says. He's got his legs crossed, a curiously feminine posture which doesn't suit him. He's in a contrary mood tonight, and Erwin can't quite pinpoint why. Is he spooked? Is it the physician's presence, sparking discomfiture? "As far as he's concerned, he collapsed through exhaustion. That's what Hanji intends to tell him, and unless Braus is some kind of self-sacrificing moron she'll stick with the narrative too."

"Do you think this was the right way to go about things?" Erwin asks.

Levi makes a sour-milk face, and there, Erwin thinks, this is where the problem lies. He allows Levi autonomy over the trainees, since the likelihood is a few of them will end up under his command - assuming he doesn't strangle them all first. And with that autonomy comes the power to make decisions Erwin himself would not make.

Erwin's no stranger to white lies, but he's distinctly uncomfortable with the sledgehammer approach Levi has taken. But Levi believes in getting things done, consequences be damned. He's interested in the end result, and he will take no prisoners if it means getting there faster.
"We can't afford to waste time sweet-talking the idiot into *not being an idiot,*" Levi says. He's not the most outwardly passionate individual; his voice is still a careful monotone, barely raised above a whisper, but there's an intensity about his face that tells Erwin everything he needs to know. A hard glint in his eyes. "What you're really asking me here is, do I think there was another way? And yes, there probably was. But people might have died in the meantime."

Erwin gives a curt nod. "Then you'll hear no opposition from me on the matter." He turns his back on Levi, peeling his sweat-damp shirt from his back and tugging it, still buttoned, over his head. He can almost feel Levi's perplexed gaze burning into him, almost see the consternation on his face as he wipes the sweat from his face, the sweet smell of hay still strong about his hands. And he hears Levi get to his feet - to argue, perhaps, asserting Erwin's obvious hypocrisy, or maybe to assist Erwin with his disrobing; Levi is unpredictable - but Hanji appears, quite suddenly, arms raised in a way which suggests she’s about to impart some vital revelation, and it occurs to Erwin that he should perhaps invest in a lock for the door.

Hanji peers owlishly at them from behind smeared optics. “I’m sorry, did I interrupt some sort of mating ritual? Never mind, you’re going to want to see this.” She all but shoves a scrap of paper in Erwin’s face; he plucks it gently from her frantically-waving hands. It’s a brief note, scrawled in some kind of elaborate script Erwin can neither read nor identify. He turns it sideways, upside-down, and it becomes no clearer.

“Shouldn’t you be off saving humanity?” Levi asks.

“I was,” Hanji insists. She smells rank, worse than Erwin; she’s all unwashed hair and old sweat and chemicals; Erwin thinks she’s probably been wearing that shirt for the past three days, and she’s so mired in her current obsession that she probably hasn’t noticed. “I left Lindeman and Moblit in charge because…just look at the note, Erwin, it’s *important.*”

“I’m looking,” Erwin says mildly. “I’m not comprehending. Summarise for me, Hanji. It’s been a long day.”

She looks a little disappointed at his lack of enthusiasm, but plucks the note neatly from his hand; she rolls it into a tube, transferring it between her fingers like an unlit cigarette.

“In summary,” Hanji says, “This…” she waves the rolled-up note “This was at Bertholdt’s bedside. The script it’s written in…as far as I can see, it’s not a language that exists within the walls. I’ve certainly not come across it before. But I sincerely hope I can find someone to translate it, because it appears that this note is all that’s left of Reiner Braun.”

“He’s dead?” Levi’s up before Erwin has had time to react, moving to grab the note, but Hanji holds out her hand, gesturing for him to stop; somewhat amazingly, he actually does.

“You misunderstand,” she says, lowering her hand. “He’s not dead. Well, not as far as I know.”

“Then what…?”

She shakes her head. “It’s the strangest thing. His belongings and 3D gear are all here, but Reiner Braun…Erwin, he’s gone missing. Somehow, he’s simply disappeared. And this note…I think it explains why.”
Felice Tanenbaum is a formidable woman cast from the same physical mould as Nanaba: tall, broad-shouldered, unsmiling, her hair a dark bird's-nest atop her head. She appraises Reiner's letter through halfmoon optics, reading and re-reading. Levi watches as she scribbles notes on a scrap of parchment, arcane scrawlings that make no more sense to him than Braun's strange script. He's had dealings with her before; Tanenbaum is frostier than a January morning, but Hanji has great faith in her as a linguist, and frankly, Levi's more interested in her ability than her personality.

"It's a Cyrillic script," she says to nobody in particular. "The strokes suggest fluency. Your scribe knows his way around these letters as easily as our own, perhaps better. This is likely his first language."

"How can that be?" Erwin asks. He's a statue in the doorway, alternating his attentions between the matter of the note and the hurried motion of the recruits as they pass by. "Hanji seems certain that the language doesn't exist within the walls."

"Maybe it does," Levi says. "Some languages aren't written." More's the pity, he thinks, turning his attention back to Tanenbaum's furious scribbling. His parents were illiterate, like so many of their kin; if there exists a written record of the language they spoke, Levi has never found it. "Doesn't mean they don't exist."

(Once upon a time, Erwin had suggested he consult Tanenbaum about his heritage, that perhaps she might be privy to information and histories that Levi hadn't seen. And Levi had rankled at that; the idea that some scholar might know more about himself than he did. "I won't be anyone's project," he'd said, and Erwin had nodded, polite as always, and there the matter had ended.

He almost regrets his refusal. Almost.)

"Oral traditions are still dominant in some minority cultures - the Pavee folk of Dauper, for example," Tanenbaum agrees, looking up from her work. "But I don't believe that to be the case here. It's not identical, but this script bears strong similarities to several Old World languages - Russian, primarily, and that does exist within the walls, in some places. But there are several major differences." She places the note in front of Levi, indicating one nonsense-word with her finger. "Here, for example. At first glance, these appears to be errors - this character is reversed, and these two have been combined to create an entirely new symbol. But look." Finger moving down, indicating a different
nonsense-word. It's giving Levi a mild headache, trying to make any kind of sense out of it. "The same errors, replicated. And here, you can see what the corrupted characters are supposed to look like. Clearly, the scribe knows his letters, so why mangle them in some words and not others?"

"A code," Erwin says.

"Of sorts," Tanenbaum says. "It lacks the sophistication of an established code. What I think we're looking at here is an obscure dialect, deliberately corrupted to make it look like a completely new language. He knew the note would be discovered. This is an educated guess, but it looks like he's taken pains to make it look incomprehensible whilst trying to maintain some semblance of the original dialect. The recipient still has to be able to understand the note, after all."

"Shame the recipient’s comatose," Levi mutters. "You're sure you can figure it out?"

Tanenbaum stares coolly at him, dark cat-eyes hard behind her optics. "Why don't you let me do the thinking, Captain? I'm sure you have lots of busy-work you could be doing. Nappy-changing and the like. I hear the Survey Corp is staffed by children these days." It's a hollow barb; Tanenbaum herself was barely fourteen when she joined the Military Police, and Levi recognises the ‘efficiency-through-rudeness’ approach when he sees it. He’s been a devotee for years.

"And soon, we'll be staffed by corpses." He rises from his seat nonetheless. Her eyes follow him as he moves, scooping his jacket from the back of his chair. Let the thinkers do the thinking, he tells himself; Hanji's neverending procession of scholars must serve some kind of purpose. "If you could endeavour to translate the note before all my recruits drop dead, I'd appreciate it."

Erwin never bothers to chastise him for his irritability anymore, but he avoids the other man's gaze as he slips past. Sometimes, that familiar resignation in his eyes is the most bitter pill to swallow.

*

"Nothing about this makes any sense at all."

For once, Eren's saying exactly what Jean is thinking. The world suddenly seems to have been turned on its head. Of everyone who might crack under pressure and run from the weight of responsibility, it's universally agreed that Reiner should be the least likely candidate. And with Bertholdt barely keeping his head above water, the idea that Reiner might risk letting him die alone is incomprehensible to Jean.

The late morning sun is pleasantly warm, and there’s something almost restorative about being out here, in the yard; the fresh air and cool breeze are a tonic compared to the claustrophobic gloom inside. If this were a normal day, they might gather out here after training, with the sun low and red in the sky, and spend their downtime together: Armin with his nose in a book, Connie and Sasha wrestling on the grass with Ymir and Reiner making increasingly ludicrous bets on the outcome. Jean would laze in the sun, chatting idly with Mikasa and Christa while the latter crafts complicated and beautiful headpieces out of long grass and flowers.

Jean’s a cynic, but he won’t give up hope that someday, things might be like that again. Simpler.

"There's something missing here," Jean says. He's elbow-deep in soap suds, futilely scrubbing bloodstains from blankets that will probably never be clean again. "When I spoke with him, he wasn't prepared to leave Bertl alone." When was that - this morning? Yesterday? With their usual routine forgotten, they seem to measure time only in the changing of the watch. "He sure as hell wasn't about to let anyone near Bert, not even to take samples. I'd never seen him so adamant about anything."
"He must have known they'd taken samples," Ymir says, feeding a damp sheet through the mangle. "I saw the marks on Bertholdt's arms, plain as day." On the other side, Sasha pegs sheets to a length of twine strung between two stunted trees. She performs her duty with dull efficiency, uncharacteristically silent. The others must think she's worried about Connie, out on watch despite his thousand-yard stare. At least he's completing sentences now, and that seems sufficient criteria in Levi's eyes to send him out. No doubt that's a part of it, but...

Jean knows the whole truth, but it's Sasha's sin to confess, if she sees fit.

"I don't understand his opposition to it," Eren says. He dumps another armful of washing into the tub; a tidal wave of suds and lukewarm water slop over the side, and Jean scrambles back just in time to avoid a soaking. He shoots Eren a glare, but it's half-hearted. Watching your friends drop like flies tends to put a dampener on petty rivalries. "Doesn't he realise they need as much information as possible to save Bertholdt?"

"Makes you wonder what he’s hiding," Ymir says.

"He’s scared," Sasha says. They all pause, looking up at her; it’s the first thing she’s said in hours, and she looks desperately uncomfortable with the sudden attention, fumbling with the pegs in her hand. "People don’t think straight when they’re scared. They do stupid things. Think stupid thoughts." She finishes hanging up the sheet; it hangs at a crooked angle. This, at least, is normal for Sasha. "Nobody tell Connie about Reiner, okay? I don’t think he’d deal very well with it right now."

"Wasn’t planning to," Ymir says, offhand. "He’ll find out soon enough anyway. Assuming his brain’s not so fried he’s forgotten who Reiner is."

"That’s not likely," Eren says. He rolls up his trousers so they hang just below his knee and kneels on the grass, plunging both arms into the washtub. Jean can feel his fingers scrabbling in the water like fast-moving fish, plucking pillowcases and nightgarments and scrubbing them deftly. He’s never been bothered by these kinds of chores, never thought of them as woman’s work, and Jean’ll give him credit for that because even Bertholdt looked a little surprised the first time he got asked to wash the girls’ nightgowns.

"Reiner and Connie are close. He wouldn't forget."

"It’s a shame he’s gone all zombie on us," Ymir says, resting both arms on the mangle. Her sleeves are rolled up, the olive skin of her forearms dark against the stark white of her shirt. "He’s dumb as a rock but I’ll bet he’d have some idea why Reiner ran out on us."

That seems to break Sasha completely. She lets the pillowcase fall and turns, her stiff-legged walk turning very quickly into a run. The others let her go; fits of sudden emotion are to be expected under the circumstances, and Sasha’s no stranger to sudden emotional breakdowns. Eren, at least, looks a little shamefaced; he must think all this talk of Connie is too much for her to handle, that shouldering the burden of his shock has left her fragile.

"Give me a minute," Jean says. He draws his dripping arms from the tub, shaking off the suds, and follows Sasha across the yard. Eren shouts a protest but fuck him, Jean thinks, if they’d all just kept their damn mouths shut instead of gossiping like fishwives maybe this wouldn’t have happened.

(And even as he thinks this, stomping across the yard with his damp, grass-stained trousers flapping around his bare feet, he feels guilty: even Jean’s unnerved by Reiner’s sudden vanishing act, why wouldn’t they be talking about it? This is how they cope with things. It’s what stops them from imploding: emotional bloodletting, or perhaps a strange group therapy where the presiding theme is always ‘it's okay, I'm as confused and frightened as you are'.)
Jean would probably do well to learn from them, but he’s a stubborn mule at the best of times. And this is not the best of times.

The path narrows towards the back of the building, heading towards the watchstation. It's here he finds Sasha, slumped like a grain-sack against the peeling shingle wall. She looks broken, limbs hanging like her strings have been cut. She's not crying. It would be better if she did, Jean thinks, easing himself to the ground beside her; she's full to the brim with fear and sorrow, curdling inside her, and it'll poison her soon enough, if she lets it. One braindead village idiot is enough.

He scoops up a handful of shingle from the paving stones beneath them. "Who did you lose?" he asks.

Sasha looks up. "What?"

"You said you didn't want to lose anyone else. That's why you drugged Reiner." He doesn't look at her, concentrating instead on the shingle in his hand; the shards scatter through his open fingers, trajectories random. Some settle in the lines of his palm, tiny stone fragments like grey sand. "Which implies that you lost someone already. Who was it?"

For a long while, the only sound is the breeze rustling in the upper reaches of the trees, and the distant squeak of the mangle. When he looks up at her, finally, she's staring at him with something like amazement.

"Don't look at me like that," he says, a little irritably. "I'm capable of using my brain."

"It was my mother," Sasha blurts. "There was a sickness. I was young, I...I don't remember much. She looked all pale, like an angel. Like Bertl does now, only...she never really looked sick. She was smiling, at the end. Like she knew she was going to die, but she was okay with it." Her eyes are bright, but still no tears; her throat bobs violently, swallowing down the glut of emotion threatening to spill out. "And Bertl's fighting so hard, and I just...I want him to live. It's different when we fight, you know? We make that choice, we know what could happen. We know we might not come home. But this isn't a choice. This isn't fair."

He feels his mouth curl into a sneer, but stops himself; no, the world isn't fair, and anyone who's spent even twenty minutes in the Survey Corps should know that by heart. But despite himself, he understands. This wasn't what they signed up for. This wasn't the sacrifice they agreed to make.

She draws her knees to her chest, rests her head forlornly on her knees. Bright, buoyant Sasha, curled in on herself now like she wishes she could retreat forever and never come out. Jean sits beside her and pulls her to him, holds her awkwardly. He rests his chin atop her head and mentally runs through a list of encouraging phrases, rejecting each one in turn: too trite, too cheesy, too untrue.

"You don't have pretend to be strong," he says, finally. "Not for anyone."

And that’s about as good as it’s going to get. This was always Marco’s job, he thinks, arms stiff around her. He's never been good at giving comfort; he sometimes thinks he was born missing some vital element that would allow him to connect, to feel what others feel. She's a numb thing in his arms, and they sit like that for a while. He knows she's listening intently to the thump of his heart and praying for it not to stop, because Sasha cares so deeply about everyone, regardless of whether or not they deserve it. And Jean's not sure that he does. He's never been sure.

After what feels like an eternity, Connie appears, dressed in a too-long green cloak, the usual garb of the designated watchperson. He looks utterly exhausted, almost dragging himself up the path towards them. So, not a coincidence that she came here, of all places. Connie’s eyes fall to the two of them as
he approaches, and for a second Jean thinks he’s going to walk past, that he’s lost in his dreamworld again. But his eyes meet Sasha’s, and Jean can actually pinpoint the moment his heartbeat quickens, and the wheels in that tiny little brain of his start whirring again.

“Sash?” he says, voice tremulous. He crouches beside her, tentative, as if he’s afraid to touch her. As if she’ll dissipate if he tries. Wordlessly, Jean passes her to him like she’s a bundle of rags, and that’s when the tears finally come. Great, heaving sobs, her face pressed into Connie’s shirt, clinging to him like she’s got nothing else in the world. And despite his own tenuous grip on reality, he somehow finds it in himself to do what Jean can’t, murmuring in a bastard hybrid of their own hick dialects, wiping her tears away with a clumsy thumb. He looks up at Jean and mouths ‘thank you’, his own eyes bright and threatening to spill over.

And Jean has to go, then, because he’s a coward, and he can’t stand to see them looking so fucking sad.

*

Armin bursts into Hanji’s laboratory, arms laden with papers; if it were anyone else he’d show more decorum, but Hanji’s a whirlwind of a person, and there are no hard and fast rules beyond ‘never ask Hanji a question if you don’t have at least an hour to spare’.

There’s a stranger in the lab, though; a tall man, skin mahogany-dark, and he regards Armin with calm eyes as he enters, laying the papers on a spare inch of desk space. This must be Lindeman, the professor they’ve called in from Sina. He’s easily as tall as Mike Zakarius and every bit as broad, white coat draped over wide shoulders like a tablecloth; he doesn’t look much like a professor, Armin thinks. He looks like a statue, still and imposing in the middle of the room, making no move to introduce himself. Now, thinks Armin, would be the time for decorum.

“My name is Armin Arlert, sir, I’d like to speak with Squad Leader Hanji if I may.”

He’s carefully expressionless as Armin salutes him; Hanji might not care about propriety, but you can never be too careful with people from the Interior. Some of them view a sloppy salute as tantamount to treason.

The low, rumbling laugh Lindeman gives in response suggests he’s not one of those people.

"Save the military salutes for the military men," he says, with a dismissive wave of one huge hand. "Though I appreciate the intentions all the same. Hanji is in the infirmary - I suspect she’ll be with us very shortly. You seem quite enthusiastic about something." He eyes the papers on the desk before him, unabashed in his intentions. "Would you care to share it with an old scholar?"

Lindeman doesn’t look especially old, but if Armin has learned anything from Levi, it’s that age can be a deceptive thing. "It’s sort of classified, sir," Armin says, which prompts another thunderclap laugh from the professor.

"Nothing is classified, young soldier. There are only two kinds of information: that which doesn't matter, and that which they don't want you to see. I can see from your expression that what you have here is the latter. It’s quite all right, I won’t have you thrashed for filching information. That is what you’ve done, isn’t it?"

He’s so affable, almost grandfatherly, approaching Armin's transgression like it’s a trifling matter. Armin gives a stiff little nod, and Lindeman takes this as his cue to pluck the first yellowed page from the pile. He reads quickly, dark eyes darting over the print; his mouth curves into a frown as he nears the last paragraph.
"This would appear to be Janusz Roden's post-mortem report," Lindeman says. He picks up the rest of the papers, shuffling through them with blunt fingers. "An interesting thing, to be certain, but why bring it to Hanji?"

"It's all connected, sir..." Armin says. His voice is trembling; he can't remember the last time he felt this nervous. It's different with Hanji. She's willing to entertain all kinds of strange and outlandish theories, listening to Armin with the same rapt attention she offers Erwin, or Levi; with Hanji, Armin is an equal, age and rank be damned. She thinks him an intellectual in the making and he prizes her opinion, doubly so when Erwin appraises him silently and does not contradict her assessment. But this man is from Sina, and for all his calm geniality he can't possibly be interested in the half-baked theories of a fourteen year old boy.

"Please," Lindeman hands Armin the papers. They suddenly feel very heavy in his arms. "I'm all ears."

Armin breathes. If he can cut up a corpse without retching, then this ought to be easy. He imagines Eren's there with him, standing just out of sight, because Eren thinks there isn't a single thing Armin doesn't know. And that's enough, most of the time.

"Jean Kirschtein brought it to my attention that we hadn't seen Janusz at all since the last expedition beyond Wall Rose. That was seven days ago. Janusz's squad were attacked by Titans; Janusz himself suffered amputation of his left leg, losing most of his femur. He was feverish on the ride back." He exhales, steeling himself. "It was Jean's theory that Janusz might be the index case, and all the evidence I've uncovered suggests he's right."

Lindeman's eyebrow lifts a little at this, but Armin wills himself to continue; he's got the evidence, he can show his working, a man of science must be able to appreciate that.

"The timing would fit, since the first cases of White Rot occurred the following day. In fact, according to the reports I found, the first five patients seen to exhibit symptoms of White Rot were brought in a little over twenty-four hours after the expedition returned. To begin with, it was explained as an isolated outbreak of some unknown fever. After that, the number of cases increased very quickly, but I had very little time and...I was only able to focus properly on the first case."

Armin slips the fifth page from the pile, passing it up to Lindeman. He knows their contents by heart, even in this short time. "This is the postmortem report of Aliette Lorenz, the first case officially indicated, retrospectively, as having died of White Rot. Recorded initially as an unspecified encephalitis, although the postmortem findings don't support this. She was in the Garrison, Wall Rose South district. Her name wasn't familiar to me, but I saw her portrait included alongside her obituary - her unit met us on our return from Wall Maria. And I remember her face clearly. She was the one who lifted Janusz from the cart and brought him to the infirmary."

"Thus coming into direct contact with the blood from his amputated leg," Lindemann says. "Continue."

"According to her records, she came in roughly twenty-eight hours after helping Janusz, and died the following day." Armin says. "Which would mean your theory of a twenty-four hour incubation period was correct from the start."

Lindeman's expression is utterly impassive, but he hasn't laughed Armin out of the building yet, and that seems as good a sign as any. "It's difficult to support your hypothesis with only one case," he says, which makes Armin's heart sink a little. "But...that doesn't mean you're wrong, either. And frankly, at this point, I'm willing to test any theory. We're running alarmingly dry of those ourselves. I trust you have the details for the other four patients?"
Armin nods. "It's all there, I just haven't had a chance to look it over in detail. But I'm certain that if you look, they'll all have come into direct contact with Janusz in the early stages of his illness."

"Assuming that's so - and I must stress that it's a big assumption at this stage, without studying the evidence - you've left one important question unanswered." It's not a rebuke; he's regarding Armin with unconcealed surprise. Armin understands. He doesn't look like much - young, girlish, woefully unsuited to his chosen occupation. Lucky, then, that he's able to think or he'd likely be good for nothing at all. "How did Janusz Roden become infected?"

"Well, while we're entertaining nutty theories, mind if I suggest one of my own?"

They both turn suddenly, surprised; somehow, Hanji has managed to creep into the room unnoticed (or perhaps they've simply been too embroiled in the conversation to pay much attention.) She's dressed in a white coat beset with a variety of interesting stains, her hair pulled back into a tight and unflattering ponytail. Her optics sit atop her head, smeared with blurry fingerprints and splatters of black ink.

There's that look in her eyes. That glimmer, sitting somewhere between genius and insanity.

"I think I've cracked it," she says. "I think the origins of this virus can be traced back to the Titans."

*

It's barely dark, but with the way things are it seems sleep is a precious commodity. Not that Mikasa is sleeping; the sheets feel too heavy, the air too still, as if the world is holding its breath. And perhaps it is. It feels like time has stopped, and there's nothing beyond these four walls but the watchstation.

Eren's taken on the evening watch. Somehow, she feels like he's safer out there. It's a stupid superstition; fresh air has no magical healing qualities, and the moonlight is no ward against disease. But Eren with a purpose is infinitely preferable to Eren mooching around indoors, fretting over the fate of the people he cares about. Never himself. Not because he thinks he's invincible – he appears to be over that particular misconception – but because he's tied his own fate to that of his strange surrogate family. If they survive, surely he will too?

She hasn't the heart to correct him.

Mikasa dozes fitfully, torn from the precipice of sleep by terrible visions – Eren, frail and pallid in a hospital bed. Armin, blood coursing down his face in great dark gouts, terror bright in his eyes. She shifts in her bed, restless; a week spent cooped up in this false sanctuary and already she can feel her muscles atrophying, the strength leaching from her with each day that passes. She is stagnating, here in her bed, and the blankets will form her cocoon. She'll be safe in here, at least. No blood. No death. Nothing.

She's dimly aware of someone slipping out of bed, the soft press of bare feet against the stone. She peers out from under her blanket, squinting in the grey dusk. And for a second – one blessed, wonderful second – it's Annie standing there, pale and naked at the window, golden hair standing wild around her face like a corona. Except when Mikasa blinks, the shape's all wrong; the soft roundness of her belly and gentle swell of hips, smooth flesh where there ought to be hard muscle. Her skin is prickled with gooseflesh. She's shivering, Mikasa thinks, pulling the blanket back.

It's not Annie. It was never Annie. Christa stands there, stark naked and shivering. She regards Mikasa with blank, uncomprehending eyes as she climbs out of bed, blanket bundled in her arms. And as Mikasa draws near she can feel the fever baking off her in waves, see the sheen of sweat
across her forehead.

Her heart is a drum in her too-tight chest.

“That’s really warm tonight,” Christa mumbles, “isn’t it?”

Mikasa drapes the blanket around Christa’s shoulders, covering her nudity. “Ymir,” she calls, quietly at first, so as not to wake anyone. But Ymir doesn’t even stir, and the panic is rising in her now. Christa swaying under the weight of the blanket. “Ymir, wake up!” She sounds near-hysterical but she doesn’t care. Ymir stirs beneath her blanket, irritation quickly giving way to alarm as she scrambles out of bed. She all but snatches Christa from Mikasa’s grasp, breath catching at the heat of Christa’s skin.

“Ymir,” Christa murmurs, smile radiant despite the sweat pooling in the dimple of her upper lip. “You came back for me.”


It’s the first time Mikasa has ever seen Ymir look truly afraid.

Chapter End Notes

if you’re all still reading this, know that you have my unconditional love and gratitude
<3
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Armin does science, the kids bond over shared tragedies, and Levi is tired of waiting in fear.

Chapter Notes

Firstly, please read this re: my temporary fic-update hiatus

Secondly, and far more importantly, please go take a look at the stunning fanart februeruri made for Erwin & Levi's conversation in Chapter 2
- it's actually perfect.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Come in, come in. Take a seat. Actually, don’t, it’s better if you stand. I have so much to show you.”

Armin had been soundly asleep when Hanji came for him, and any irritation at having been dragged from his bed had been swiftly replaced by a strange sense of pride. He knows less about medicine than Hanji, and she herself is a mere student, but Lindeman himself had asked that Armin be present. He’s not about to look that kind of gift horse in the mouth.

He’s no coward - whatever other spectres of self-doubt might linger, making themselves known in the quiet moments, his bravery in the face of terror is no longer in question - but Armin dreams of a place here, among the scholars and scientists, where his fledgling intellect might grow into something formidable. Something vital. This is his niche, and though he’s stared into the faces of Titans and lived to tell the tale, several times over, he knows his mind is truly his greatest weapon. And what better chance than this to prove it?

The thought of recognition earned off the still-warm bodies of his dying comrades is as bittersweet as anything Armin has ever tasted.

Hanji’s mouth splits into a knife-slash grin as Armin approaches. She’s all strange angles, Hanji, from the aquiline curve of her nose to the sharp right-angles of her shoulders; her arms move stutter-stop like a windup toy, arranging her papers and pipettes and glass vials into an order which probably only makes sense to her. “This is a wonderful thing,” Hanji says, plucking a glass slide from the rack. She passes it to Lindeman, who, with a delicateness belying his broad stature, slides it into place beneath the microscope’s lens.

Armin’s heart gives a curious flutter. He’s heard of microscopes, of course, and seen them on his first visit to Hanji’s cave of wonders, but the possibility that he might actually get to use one - to see the mysteries of the body unravelled on such an infinitesimal level - it’s how Eren must feel when he faces down a Titan, that mix of trepidation and exhilaration. Because that oblong of gore-streaked glass represents both the end and the answer. Death and enlightenment, and the latter only if they
endeavour to understand it. The sheer responsibility of this must be crippling, but Hanji just looks excited, and Lindeman...he’s as difficult to read as the Danchou, perhaps even moreso.

(Over time, they’ve learned to interpret the twitching of muscles and motion of pupils which constitute Erwin’s outward displays of emotion. He’s not impenetrable; it’s just that his body speaks a different language to the rest of them.

Levi, for all his deliberate obtuseness and ill-timed toilet humour, is perhaps the simplest to read. This is true at least for Armin, who cracked the code of him a long time ago.)

Hanji beckons him forward and he takes a tentative step, floorboards creaking underfoot. He’s holding his breath, he realises, as he places a hand on either side of the microscope. Like the merest breeze might send the contraption flying, or destroy the integrity of Hanji’s carefully-sourced samples. She must notice, because she claps a hand on his shoulder and says “don’t worry, it doesn’t bite. Take a look.”

So he does.

He’s seen cells before, depicted in delicate watercolour in the dusty pages of some huge textbook - probably one of Hanji’s, come to think about it, her personal library is astonishingly diverse. But those images seem woefully inadequate next to the reality - a pink-grey cluster, delicate and perfect, like a stained-glass window. The human form, reduced to mere bricks and mortar. It would be a humbling sight, but Armin is feeling plenty humbled already.

“These are cells,” Hanji says. Her hands are firm on his shoulders, holding him in place; does she think he’ll bolt at the sight of them? “Aren’t they beautiful?”

They are. Each is a slight variation on the last, like snowflakes arranged and magnified; he feels like he could look at them forever, cataloguing each tiny difference. They quiver, a sluggish, aimless motion, like the death throes of a very old man.

One cell, in the upper left of his vision, seems noticeably larger than the rest, trembling more violently. As he watches, enthralled, it suddenly explodes. A dull firework of white mushrooms briefly outwards before collapsing in on itself, leaving only fragments behind. He pulls away, mouth open, a tide of questions ready to spill out but Hanji just smiles, mouth crooked. She’s taking joy in his amazement. It probably reminds her of herself.

“You saw it, didn’t you?” she says. Behind her, Lindeman slips the glass slide from the microscope, replacing it with a second. His silence is unnerving; how can someone so large move so soundlessly? “Did you hear that, Tobias? It was timed perfectly! I was so sure he’d miss it…”

“It just...blew up,” Armin says stupidly.

“It self-destructed,” Hanji replies. “If you watch it long enough, they’ll all do it. Every single cell. Eventually, the entire organ - those were kidney cells, by the way, fresh from the cadaver before it went cold – the organ will fail completely, and that’ll be that.”

“The other organs quickly follow suit,” Lindeman says. “Apoptosis is a normal bodily process, but the presence of the White Rot virus accelerates it to such a degree that the body simply cannot keep up. Think of it as systemic housekeeping: usually, the body issues macrophages to clear up the remnants of the dead cell – the fragments you saw after the cell exploded. And after a time, a new cell would take its place. But White Rot destroys cells at an unprecedented rate.”

“Eventually, all that’s left is a tiny cluster of barely-functional cells and an awful lot of mess,” Hanji
adds, almost gleefully. “And then…well, I suppose you know what happens, you’ve seen it first hand, haven’t you?”

Armin understands perhaps a quarter of what’s being explained to him – the concepts and vocabulary are so alien it’s like listening to Connie and Sasha trade jibes in mountainfolk-speak. But he nods, hoping he looks a good deal more confident than he feels. Hanji’s hands grasp his shoulders, guiding him towards the microscope. This time, when he looks, the cells are perfectly still; an assortment of peculiar shapes frozen in time, and now he’s truly lost, because these bear almost no similarity to the other cells: they’re entirely random, like a handful of gravel, colours and shapes and sizes conforming to no particular standard.

“I don’t know what I’m looking at,” Armin says, because it’s better to be honest, and he hears Lindeman give one of those low chuckles of his, like it’s exactly what he’d expected him to say.

“These are cells from a Titan’s severed finger,” Hanji says. “They’re still because they’re quite old – well preserved though, aren’t they? They work such wonders in Sina. If only we could get that kind of technology down here in the sticks we could make such strides in our research!” Her fingers tighten uncomfortably around his shoulders, punctuating her enthusiasm. “Now here’s where it gets complicated. The accelerated apoptotic process you saw before – I knew I’d seen it before somewhere. So I went through all my old papers – you wouldn’t believe how long it took – and I found it. These cells are from Baba Yaga, a captive Titan the expedition brought back. It was before you joined, I think, I’m sure you’d remember Yaga, it was such a character…”

“Hanji,” Armin says, in a small voice. “I’d like to look away from the microscope, if I may.”

“Oh!” She releases her vicegrip on his shoulders, and he steps back, eyes blurry; the pale ghost of the dead cells are imprinted on his retina, dancing like an aurora when he blinks. He rubs his eyes with the back of his hand. “Well, anyway, the point is, when a Titan regenerates a lost limb, this exact same process occurs.”

“The key difference is that in a Titan, there exists a parallel process which not only replaces the dead cells with new ones, but creates entirely new ones.” They work in perfect tandem, Hanji and Lindeman, each picking up where the other left off; it’s easy to forget Lindeman hasn’t always been here, though his physical presence would surely have been conspicuous. “Hence the ability to replicate the missing body part. Hanji’s theory is that the virus is actually the agent which allows this replication.” He looks to her briefly, and she offers a small nod. “It would prove extremely destructive to humans, because we lack the parallel regenerative process. Effectively, the virus breaks down our organs to prepare for replacements – but no replacements are forthcoming.”

“So the end result is a body full of ruined organs,” Armin ventures. Somehow, putting things in such clinical terms seems to stave off the worst of the horror, although he’s certain that later, surrounded by friends and acutely aware of their vulnerability, he’ll remember this and a bolus of panic will rise in his throat. He shakes his head. “Janusz must have contracted this when the Titan took his leg. He was splashed with Titan blood when Levi rescued him, and of course, fluids from the Titan’s mouth…it’s the only thing that makes sense. I just…”

The expeditions have never been safe, but the risks were always known, always quantifiable. That the greatest risks might be those unseen unnerves Armin to the bone. If the expeditions continue – if there are enough of them left, when all of this is over, and Armin is no longer certain of that – will they have to be quarantined after each return? They’ll have to present this information to the Danchou, of course, but then what? How can they possibly find a cure when they have only the barest understanding of how Titan biology works?

“There’s one thing I still need to look into,” Hanji says. If she’s aware of Armin’s increasing pallor,
she’s not troubled by it. “Bertholdt. He presented with advanced symptoms, yet somehow he’s persisted far longer than any of us expected. I need to look over his samples, compare them with another live victim – come to think of it, wasn’t Lenz brought into the infirmary earlier? She’d make a perfect subject…”

“What?” His muscles contract suddenly, painfully; he feels as if he wants to run, very fast and very far, but he’s rooted to the spot.

“Christa Lenz,” Lindeman says, a good deal less offhandedly than Hanji. His dark eyes are soft, almost regretful, although this is a physician’s affectation – pantomiming sorrow where there is only cold, clinical interest. “She fell ill late last night. She’s…”

But Armin doesn’t wait to hear the rest. He lets his muscles guide him, not away but towards, running despite his trepidation to the infirmary, and all he can think is we’re done. All of us. This is how it ends.

Not in the mouth of a Titan, but wrapped in bloodstained sheets.

*

It feels as if Jean’s life has become some kind of theatrical farce, only nobody’s laughing; he paces the same rooms over and over like he’s physically unable to exist beyond these few sets. And here they are again, around the old wooden table, listless faces and drooping shoulders and the question heavy in the air like thunderheads: which of us is next?

The one small blessing to come out of this is that Ymir seems to have been rendered temporarily speechless. It’s the eeriest thing, watching her just sit there, responding only in grunts. It isn’t the same kind of catatonia as Connie’s - hers is more of a total refusal to communicate, her head wedged firmly up her own rectum in a bid to thwart any attempt to pull her out of the mire of her own grief. She’s an obstinate mule, which is a quality Jean quietly admires, for the most part. Nobody on this earth can move her save for Christa, which seems poetic somehow; this tiny little blossom of a girl, sweet and quiet but so powerful, her influence on Ymir profound. If she dies…when she dies, Jean thinks, because it seems a numb certainty now…will Ymir flee into the night like Reiner did?

He paces around the dining hall, irritated by everything: the clumsy sound of his own feet on the floorboards, the way Ymir pauses every so often to sigh, almost inaudible, before continuing in her relentless silence. Even the smell of food slowly cooking on the stove – doubtless it’ll be the same insipid root-vegetable mess they’ve eaten for the past several days, for almost every meal. Their food stores are running low, and it’s hardly as if they can take a jaunt into town to stock up.

His legs itch. His fingers itch. He needs to get out of here, just for an hour. Go running in the woods, maybe, or saddle up a horse and ride out somewhere. Anywhere. Because the sad eyes and downturned mouths of his comrades are infectious, and Jean is barely keeping afloat on his own tide of grief.

Connie comes in from the courtyard, dangling two freshly-skinned rabbits from a length of vine. They glisten pinkly in the light, exposing a delicate tracery of blue veins. It’s meat, and a precious variation to their recent diet, but it looks so unpleasantly biological that Jean feels his stomach shrivel into a dry little knot, and whatever little remains of his appetite is stone dead now. But Connie looks aglow with pride, and so Jean offers a tight-lipped smile at the sight of his prize. Connie’s a farm boy, not a hunter like Sasha. She’s taught him to use a bow, and he’s moderately good at it, but give the boy a wire and a knife and he seems to possess an uncanny ability to place traps in the perfect location. Not bad for a kid who borders on illiterate and can’t focus on a book for more than five minutes without going cross-eyed.
"Sasha found wild garlic," he says. He's still a little drawn, a little pale, but the glaze is gone from his eyes, and his reveries are infrequent now. He's found purpose, keeping Sasha's head above water, and purpose is a powerful thing to Connie, who feels in lieu of thinking. "We're gonna roast them out in the yard later. She says proper food'll do us all good."

Jean thinks of Reiner then, and the poisoned tea that was supposed to do him good. He almost envies Reiner his escape, although Jean's much too cautious to attempt such a thing. With his luck, he'd probably fall ill out there, in the forest, where only creatures and huntsmen tread. Perhaps the wolves would find him, attracted by the smell of blood, or the heat of his fever. The thought of it is sufficient to keep Jean rooted.

"Sounds good," Jean says, and Connie brightens visibly at that, proud that his contribution might make some small difference to their fast-dwindling crop of survivors. He peruses the knife-block for the appropriate tools - no doubt he'll leave this job to Sasha, Jean still remembers the way he'd puked through his nose at the sight of a severed ear.

The outer door swings open again, and it's Mikasa this time, incongruous in her running gear. Her hands are strapped with bandages, and she's holding a set of punch-pads, one beneath each arm. They're handmade, canvas stuffed with sawdust and hay. It'd been Reiner's idea, and Christa had presented them to Mikasa on her birthday, smiling gently in that sunshine way of hers. The memory makes Jean's throat constrict, and he swallows hard, forcing his sorrow as far down as it will go.

Mikasa dumps both pads in front of Ymir, who barely flinches at the sudden thud. Her dark, lank hair hangs in her eyes, hands bunched and entwined to form a tight knot of fingers and knuckles. She looks silently up at Mikasa, eyes dull and uninterested.

"We're going to train," Mikasa tells her.

Ymir lets out a little snort of derision and stares back down at the table.

"You can't possibly sit there all day," Mikasa says, folding her arms across her chest.

"Watch me," Ymir replies, without looking at her.

"This will be good for you," Mikasa insists, but Ymir's total lack of acknowledgement indicates that this conversation is over. Mikasa glares at Jean like she's expecting him to back her up, and he just shrugs: let her be. They all deal with grief in different ways. Some of them break down, some of them freeze up, some of them disappear without saying goodbye. Ymir just happens to be even more sullen than usual. As coping mechanisms go, it's fairly benign.

"I'll train with you," he says instead.

"What?" This is clearly not what Mikasa was expecting. She and Jean are not close. They're not especially distant, either, but move in separate orbits, crossing paths occasionally when the stars are just so. They co-exist peacefully, and without question, as if they both take it for granted that the other should always be there.

"I'll train with you." It's not an act of kindness, diverting her attention from Ymir. If Jean holds on to this nervous energy for much longer, he's apt to wear holes in the floor from his endless pacing. He scoops the pads up, savouring the surprising weight of them. Mikasa gives Ymir one last glance, and there's a bitterness there, like she's angry that Ymir would spurn her attempt at kindness. Then she follows him out into the stableyard, bare feet delicate on the paving-stones. Tufts of grass shoot through the cracks, caught in the space between her toes. It's another unseasonably warm day, and somehow this feels appropriate: the world's been turned upside down, it make sense that the weather
He slips his hands through the rope-straıps and holds them up. He's taller than Mikasa, but she's lithe, and it's no trouble for her to adjust the trajectory of her kicks. Even with the pads, the impact reverberates through his body, and it almost feels good; the judder of his teeth in his skull, and the wrench of his muscles as he holds firm against a flurry of punches. It feels good because it hurts, just a little, and that reminds him he's still alive. He's been numb for days.

"I feel guilty," Mikasa says, after a while. "About what I said to her before." She slams the flat of her hand into the pad; Jean feels the shudder of it up his arm like a shock.

"About her being afraid of dying without fanfare?" She lines up a kick, and he angles the pad to catch it just right. "Don't be. You know what she said to me first thing this morning? She said 'it should have been you.'" Mikasa pauses mid-kick, drawing her leg slowly back; she's graceful even in her aggression, moving like a dancer. Jean imagines this must be how Levi fights. "She's still a stone-cold bitch, Mikasa, and what happened to Christa doesn't change that. Save your guilt for someone who deserves it."

"There's more to her," Mikasa says.

"Probably," Jean says. The yard smells of sunbaked manure; the faint, familiar whinny of the horses in the stables reminds him he's still here, still captive to his own lack of courage. "Maybe she collects money for orphans in her spare time or something. I couldn't give a shit, really, but I've got a funny feeling she's going to be the last man standing when all this is over."

Three whipcrack punches follow in quick succession. She stares up at him through sweat-matted hair, though she's barely out of breath. He still thinks she's beautiful, perhaps the most beautiful thing he's ever laid eyes on, but it barely matters anymore. She's not a prize but an entity, a complex constellation comprised of a multitude of suns, each burning with an intensity that scares him.

She is power, and will, and beauty doesn't come into it.

"And the rest of us?" she asks.

Jean shrugs. "Either we fight it like Bertholdt, or we die."

"They say there's something different about Bertholdt. That's how he fights. But the rest of us are ordinary."

"Some of us are," Jean says, evenly.

She seems to chew over that for a moment, fists raised in a stance echoing Annie's, so long ago, only she seems unsure what to do with them. Slowly, she lowers them. And then she wrestles the pads from Jean's hands, easing them free from his grip. He unclenches his fists. His hands sting where the rope has dug in, abrading the soft skin. He hadn't realised he'd been holding them so hard.

"Your turn," she says.

He's not exactly dressed for the occasion, but he obeys all the same. He's less graceful than Mikasa, not quite as powerful, but he's quick as an arrow, and about as unpredictable. She struggles at first to stay grounded, dark eyes darting back and forth in anticipation of his next move. And that feels good too, outfoxing Mikasa, at least until she works out the unconscious pattern in his blows. It doesn't take her long. He hadn't expected anything less.

"Tell me about Annie," he says.
She stiffens visibly at that, but they've been batting this conversation around since the night Jean saw her enter Annie's cell, and now seems as good a time as any to entertain it. He shucks off his shoes and goes right on hitting, the ground cool beneath his newly-bare feet.

"You think she's a murderer," Mikasa says, flat. It's almost an accusation.

"I think she killed a lot of people," Jean replies. Faces flash in the recesses of his mind, people he never spoke to, knew only by name, people unlucky enough to have found themselves in the shadow of the Female Titan. "Not convinced she set out to kill them, though. It's collateral damage. She had a purpose, and those people got in the way." It's weird, how dispassionate he feels about it all now, like it all happened a very long time ago, somewhere very far away. He brings up a leg, pivots on his left foot; the impact of the kick almost sends Mikasa reeling, but she rights herself in time. She always does. "I don't know what her purpose was. I wish I did. I know you do too."

"I've asked her," Mikasa says. "Over and over. It's stupid of me. She's safe in there, and she's not coming out. Not even for me."

"For what it's worth, I'm not sure it's a choice, staying put inside that crystal." Jean drops back, stretching his arms, feeling the tight burn of underused muscles. A thin sheen of sweat glimmers across the bridge of his nose. He runs his fingers through his damp hair, pushing it away from his face. It doesn't matter if he looks a mess. He'll look even worse when the White Rot comes. "Listen, Mikasa, I know what you're thinking, and the truth is I'm not sure if she killed Marco. But I don't think she did. That's what I choose to believe, and it helps me sleep better at night."

The look on Mikasa's face suggests she doesn't either, but she lowers the pads, letting them hang at her sides. "She had his gear," she says, quiet, and there's something like suspicion in her eyes. This wasn't what she was expecting, which is entirely Jean's fault, because in his anger and sorrow and general emotional incompetence he'd cursed her name in all manner of colourful ways, laid responsibility for all manner of sins at Annie Leonhardt's crystal-encased feet.

(Once, not long afterwards, Levi had told him that he might make a decent squad leader, if only he could find it in himself to keep his fucking emotions in check.

He's still working on that.)

"She saw an opportunity," Jean says. "Even then, it's a shitty thing to do. But that doesn't make her a murderer. Just a fucking vulture. I'm angry at her for the things she did. Maybe I even hate her a little, I'm still figuring it out. But she was Annie first, you know? Before she was anything else. She was Annie and we all loved her." He pauses. There's a distant pain, somewhere deep inside him, like someone prying at an old scar. "Some of us more than others," he adds, and she smiles at that, just a little. It's a sad smile, acknowledging Annie's betrayal even through her fondness.

"She had her reasons. I wish I knew what they were." Mikasa says. "Though I don't suppose it matters much anymore." She lowers herself to the ground, curling her legs up beneath her in a half-lotus. Jean follows her, because it seems like the thing to do. She plucks listlessly at the yellowing grass, rolling it between her fingers. "Are you scared, Jean?"

"Me?" He gives a laugh, dry as old bones. "I'm terrified."

They sit like that in silence for a time, with the pale sun on their upturned faces, breathing in the cool morning air like this'll be the last chance they ever get.

*
Levi strides into Erwin’s office with a scrap of parchment tucked up his sleeve, perching himself neatly on the edge of Erwin’s desk. He looks hawklike, balanced there, gauging Erwin’s mood with a sweep of his eyes. This is not their quarters; he cannot simply impose his physical presence upon Erwin, although the way Levi’s body inclines towards him suggests he’s considering it anyway.

(“We sneak around like a pair of adulterers,” Levi had said once, in the aftermath of a particularly fraught fuck in a vacant stable. Not his choice of venue, but in the days before they’d relocated to Wall Rose, shared quarters might have drawn more than the occasional raised eyebrow. Erwin had explained, as politely as possible, that as with adulterers, their superiors generally did not care what peculiarities the pair of them chose to pursue, provided they pursued them discreetly. The choice, therefore, was between the occasional clandestine fuck, or enduring sexual frustration. He’d always let Levi choose, and Levi rarely chose the latter.)

Levi passes the parchment; it slips through his balletic fingers as Erwin takes it from him, rolls it out, and begins to read. Tanenbaum's handwriting is precise, each letter as small and tidy as the one preceding it. There's a severity to her script which seems to match her perfectly. The words are Reiners, but he can't help hearing them in her voice.

"It's paraphrased," Levi tells him. "Tanenbaum says the grammar was almost impossible to make sense of. But she's certain that what you have there is the essence of the note." He's quiet while Erwin reads, squinting slightly - he'll need optics soon, though he's reluctant to submit to that just yet. When he's done, he looks back up at Levi, seeking clarification: the note is vague to the point of poetry in some parts, and Tanenbaum will no doubt have theories as to the meaning of it all.

"He never refers to Bertholdt by name," Levi says, shifting so he's almost above Erwin; his legs dangle off the desk, one either side of Erwin, and there's a certain pleasure in finding himself between Levi's thighs even in such an innocuous context. "He uses a word which, according to Tanenbaum, translates quite precisely as 'Warrior'." Levi shrugs. "Possibly a weird sex thing, I don't know. The rest of it is mostly crap - empty platitudes and the like. But the last line is where it gets really interesting."

"I await you in the village of stone, in the room beneath the earth'," Erwin reads aloud. "'Find me there. We left home as boys. We shall return as warriors.'"

"The village of stone," Levi repeats, for completely unnecessary emphasis. Erwin must look as bemused as he feels, because Levi lets out a dry little laugh and says "don't worry, we were as lost as you. Until Hanji took it upon herself to do a little digging. According to Eren, Shiganshina was a limestone quarry in the days before permanent settlers. Her histories confirm it; back in the early days, it was known as Stone Village."

"Imaginative," Erwin says.

"They were quarryfolk. I don't suppose they were blessed with abundant imagination."

"And this ‘room beneath the earth?’"

Levi's eyes narrow. He looks predatory, poised above him, all arched back and hands like talons splayed out on his knees. His mouth curls into a sly smile. Knowing things Erwin doesn’t affords him a certain power, and Levi is not too shy to glory in it, just a little.

“Use that brain of yours, Commander,” he says, leaning in close; Erwin can smell the lye soap on his skin as he reaches out an arm, tapping two fingers against Erwin’s temple. “What room in a house lies beneath the earth?”
And suddenly the riddle is laid bare, exposed for all its simplicity, and Erwin would feel ridiculous for not having seen it sooner but that would afford Levi a satisfaction Erwin would prefer to deny him. He sits back in his chair, calm, steepling his fingers beneath his chin like they’re in a council meeting, and he’s been posed a particularly vexing question.

“Eren Jaeger’s basement,” Erwin says, after a moment. “That’s where he’s headed.” He doesn’t ask why. It seems redundant; that’s the real riddle, the centrepiece in the puzzle of Reiner’s disappearance, and – Erwin would stake his reputation on this – perhaps in Bertholdt’s continued survival too.

A Titan-borne virus. A boy surviving against the odds, his lover spirited away. The basement, and the secrets contained within. The key to Eren’s transformation. Perhaps the key to humanity’s survival.

The missing piece connecting all these things is frustratingly elusive, and Erwin is not used to being eluded.

“I’m going after him,” Levi announces, airy, like he’s just taking an evening stroll.

“We’re unprepared,” Erwin replies. “You know that...”

“We’ll never be prepared,” Levi interrupts. Suddenly, all the fire is gone from him; the sly smirk and curved spine dissipate, and ice forms in their wake. He slips from his perch, rigid, feet meeting floor without so much as a sound. “As long as we live, you and I, the Survey Corps will never really be ready. But now we have no choice. Bertholdt is fighting the White Rot, and Reiner Braun knows why. Fuck the basement, I want to find him. I’ll chop off his fingers one by one if I have to, but he will tell me everything.” He pauses for breath, eyes never leaving Erwin’s face. He talks with such dispassion, like cutting off a man’s fingers is simply a means to an end. And perhaps it is. “Damn your preparation. If Reiner can go alone, then so can I.”

“No,” Erwin says, a little too sharply. Levi lifts an eyebrow at that, and Erwin clenches his jaw, regains his composure as quickly as he’d lost it. If Levi is ice, then Erwin is stone. “Not alone. Jaeger goes with you. He will show you the way. And doubtless his ability will prove useful.”

“Fine. Give me Ackerman, too, then. If I’m to have a bodyguard, I’d prefer them to be competent.” Even in his sneer, there’s the ghost of a smile; perhaps he’s taking pleasure in this power, too. Or perhaps he’s pleased, in his perverse way, that Erwin cares so deeply that his composure might crack even for a second. It’s almost a game, this. It has to be; love is a thing easily realised, but borne with difficulty, and this is doubly so when the probability of your lover’s death increases exponentially with each year that passes.

They take pains to temper their affections, because there is no more constant companion than death, and death spits on love.

“I’ll need to seek General Zackly’s permission,” Erwin says. “To open the gate.”

Levi regards him silently, sullenly.

“Do what you need to,” he says. “But do it fast. Lenz is dying, and others will follow. We’ve wasted enough time, Erwin. I intend to leave today.”

Chapter End Notes
Come, gather round, I've made tea and cakes for everyone affected by this circus of misery. Please accept these virtual snacks as a token of my gratitude for persisting with this fic even as it plumbs the very depths of grim unhappiness. You are all champs.
"So you're going, then."

Mikasa looks up from her knapsack. "Pack only what you need", Levi had told her. "The lighter we travel, the faster we move, and time is not our ally." In the doorway stands Sasha, hands clasped tightly, a curiously formal stance. Her hair is damp, hanging about her shoulders in wet tendrils; it's raining outside, and she's been hunting. Mikasa can smell the loam on her boots, the rich scent of pine needles rotting in the earth. It suits her. It always has.

"I'm going," Mikasa says. "But I'm coming back." Even as she says it, she wonders if she has any right to: how can she make such a claim? The truth is, she doesn't know, can't know, but Sasha doesn't need to share Mikasa's doubt. She needs to believe Mikasa is fearless. She needs to have faith, to be the heart of the team, like she's always been, and hers is a lion's heart, brave and fierce and strong.

"What does he hope to find?" Sasha asks.

Mikasa purses her lips. So far, only she and Eren have been privy to Reiner's note, and Erwin has been quite specific about keeping it between them. She understands his reasoning. Cryptic though it may be, there's something deeply unnerving about that note. It speaks to her of ulterior motives, of secrets and betrayal. But she's been jumping at shadows lately, and Annie's lie is still a raw wound, fresh and bloody.

"Answers." She pulls her cloak over her head, smoothes the wild tangle of her hair with her palms. "The sickness is Titan-borne. To find answers, we need Titans. And to find Titans..." she leaves the rest unsaid. Sasha is smart enough to fill in the blanks, and fool enough to swallow the lie. Just as Mikasa is fool enough to tell it.

"And what if you don't find answers?"

Mikasa pauses. Sasha regards her with calm eyes, empty of speculation. She's still afraid, but it's a different fear now: resigned, as if she has accepted her eventual fate but fears it all the same. She looks over at Christa's empty bed, stripped clean of sheets and mattress, a mere skeleton now. Ymir's bed remains unslept in; she spends her days and nights in the infirmary, refusing to leave Christa, and it's surely a matter of time before she sickens too. When Mikasa is gone, it will only be Sasha left in here; her, and whatever ghosts choose to linger, staring hollow-eyed in the shadows. Perhaps Connie
will join her, and the two of them will huddle together in a too-small bed for warmth and comfort, counting each heartbeat like it might be the last they'll ever hear.

"Then we die. But it won't come to that." Her hands curl into fists. Her teeth ache from clenching them. "I won't allow it to. Whatever else you believe, Sasha, you can hold me to that. I won't let any of us die."

"I know." Sasha nods, a sharp motion, chin held high and defiant. Mikasa is a reluctant messiah. She's never wanted to be what she has become: Levi's protégé, a symbol of humanity's refusal to bend their collective knee, but Mikasa is just one person, and she's as frightened as the rest of them. It's just that she's got something to fight for; a reason to survive. Her persistence gives people hope. And if it gives Sasha hope then she will gladly carry each and every one of their lives in her hands. "I know you won't."

She shoves the last of her belongings into the knapsack and buckles it shut, clumsy fingers betraying her trepidation. This is it, she thinks. God have mercy, this is it.

"Wait for us," Mikasa says, with a confidence she does not feel, can barely even feign. "We'll be home soon."

*

It seems to Erwin that, teetering on the precipice of his mission to Shiganshina, Levi is occupying a strange and quiet place between fear and determination.

Fear holds no shame for Levi. He is pragmatic, a realist to the point of cynicism; the world holds few surprises and fewer secrets, and when a man knows as much as Levi he learns quickly that fear and suspicion provide the quickest route to self-preservation. It's why Levi is alive, and his family are not.

“How can it take so long to say goodbye?”

Erwin looks up from his desk. Levi is a slender silhouette at the window, the edges of him bleeding out into the bright morning sunlight. He is restless on the sill, flexing his bare feet like they might shrivel without the constant motion.

“It gets easier with time.” Erwin puts down his quill, laying it perpendicular to the page. He hasn’t written a word as yet. It’s proving difficult to explain to one’s superiors that the Recon Corps are the reason why half of the population are drowning in their own bloody fluids. That the Titans are not the only threat beyond the walls. “The more expeditions they have under their belts, the simpler a task it’ll be. Until then, let them have their moment. This has been hard on them.”

Levi turns his face towards Erwin. He’s grimacing, lips pulled back into a tight line, but he doesn’t argue. The death of friends and comrades is no longer a new and terrible experience for either of them, and the time will come when the same can be said of Eren and Mikasa, for Jean and Connie and Sasha. If they live that long. If the White Rot doesn’t burn them out first. Levi would argue that the sooner they’re purged of this kind of useless sentimentality, the better. And he’s not wrong, either; theirs is a uniquely merciless little microcosm.

They - Erwin, Levi, Hanji, symbiotic triad that they are - shed their sentimentality like a useless skin so many years ago. Their goodbyes are quick and functional, their welcomes muted, joy tempered by the knowledge that the next expedition might not end so agreeably. And though he feels a curious
detachment over this - Levi's suicide mission, Hanji calls it - he can't help but fear the finality of it, just a little.

"I have something for you," Erwin says. "For your expedition."

Levi raises a curt eyebrow. "Oh?" He pivots slowly, uncurling his limbs languid as petals. His expression is blank, but his eyes are sharp, almost suspicious; there is no such thing as a gift given freely.

"Yes." Erwin makes a show of rummaging in his desk drawer, searching beneath stacks of papers. He knows exactly where it is, but there's a perverse pleasure to be taken in Levi's obvious curiosity, and in his mulish refusal to show it. Still, the steady tap of his toes on the sill reveals more than any curl of his lips. Erwin unearths the box from where he'd hidden it earlier, beneath a bundle of spare quills and the flat nubs of burnt-out candles. It's a small wooden thing, rough-made and terribly unimpressive. He holds it flat in the hollow of his hands and waits patiently for Levi to climb from the sill (slow, always slow, because the world can stand to wait.) He stands on the other side of Erwin's desk, looking for all the world like a newly-reprimanded schoolboy.

Levi takes the box.

At this point in their lives - with all the years that have passed, all the scar tissue acquired - the giddy excitement of new love is a distant, if pleasant memory. But when Levi's fingers play at the edges of that ugly little box, prying the lid gently open, a strange electricity runs through Erwin, and he remembers, just for a second, how it feels to be surprised by a person.

Levi places the lid carefully on the edge of Erwin's desk. Inside, there's a small bag of undyed silk. He lifts that out, peering at Erwin with a look of thorough confusion. Just what kind of gift comes in a bag so small? And how can it possibly be of use beyond the walls? But as he slips his index finger inside his eyes widen, and there's no hiding anything now; he looks down at his hand, at the perfect, rough crystal caught between his fingers. He holds it up to the light, staring in bemused wonderment.

"Salt," Levi says. And then, eyes dark and narrow and suspicious: "How the fuck did you get your hands on this?"

"It doesn't matter. There isn't much."

"It doesn't...Erwin, you fat-headed idiot, this stuff is valuable."

"Mahrime," Erwin says. Levi's face contorts almost instantly into a frown, and Erwin has to physically restrain himself from smiling. Levi's disgust is almost Pavlovian in its predictability. "You're going to be gone for at least a full day and night. You'll have to take shelter wherever you can find it..." he indicates the lump of salt. It seems almost obscene to Erwin that something so small should be imbued with such power, at least to Levi, but he cradles the bag in his palm like it's filled with diamonds. "...I can't guarantee your safety, but at least you can maintain some semblance of cleanliness."

"Wuzho," Levi says. It is not an invitation to repeat the word. The laws of his people are arcane, a vague mystery to Erwin, for whom 'clean' and 'unclean' are purely physical concepts. "My grandmother used to say..." Levi begins, attention focused almost entirely on the salt, the hard angles of it, but stops once he realises what he's doing. His mouth slips shut, his lips tight and sullen. Wordlessly, and with great care, he returns the salt to the silk pouch, and the boundary between their cultures stands firm once more.

Erwin has never taken it personally.
He places both hands flat on the desk, examining the wide, flat nails, the callused skin of his fingertips. "I won't patronise you by asking that you come back safely," Erwin says, speaking mostly to his hands. "You always do."

He feels Levi before he sees him, a sunburst of warmth unfurling against his chest; he climbs across Erwin's desk, scattering papers and quills but not the box, not the silk bag. His hands seek rough purchase in Erwin's hair, the space between collar and throat, the hot, damp slit of his parted lips. Erwin takes Levi's fingers between his teeth, tasting salt. And then Levi is in his lap, and his hands are in a hundred different places, industrious and clever and so very quick. Erwin shifts to better accommodate him; he's hard, already, and he wonders how long Levi has wanted this. How long he's craved it, fighting that familiar battle within himself: sex is dirty and messy and mahrime, doubly so with another man, and yet he relents every single time, succumbing helplessly to the delicious heat of Erwin's mouth, the deft motion of his hands. It's as if they can't not fuck, like there's some terrible force driving them; like they were always meant to fit like this, with Levi's hands tight around his cock and his teeth hard against his throat.

Levi straddles Erwin's thigh, knee pressed into the juncture of his groin, and he licks the taste of Erwin's skin from his lips with a look of hazy-eyed, predatory satisfaction.

"I always come back," he says.

"Yes," Erwin replies. He eases Levi up, arranging their limbs so he's half-kneeling on Erwin's lap, knees pressed into the worn leather of his chair. Erwin's hands find Levi's buttons, tug his trousers halfway down; he sinks back in his chair, tilting his head until the angle is right, until he can look up and see Levi staring down, exasperated and desperate. "You always do," he says, sinking his fingers into the muscle of Levi's ass, and when he draws Levi's cock into his mouth he hears the sharp intake of breath, the hiss of pleasure, and things may be irrevocably fucked up but in this moment everything is perfect.

*

"No. This can't be right."

Armin's eyes are bleary, microscope-blind; he peers up from his cells, unwilling to part from them for too long lest they shrivel and die in his absence. He rubs his eye with the heel of his hand, watching as Hanji lifts her head from her own microscope. Her hair is a thick, matted mop; she smells rank as an animal, but even that is a strange comfort. Surrounded by the strange and the new, she represents Armin's link to the non-cellular world, and the smell of her is there even when the cells dance and shudder before his eyes.

"No," she repeats. Her optics glimmer in the candlelight. They are the only clean thing about her. "There must be some error."

"What's wrong?" Armin asks. Across the room, Lindeman peers up from whatever chemical solution he's mixing up, expression placid. If there's something worth sharing, Hanji will share it. He is economical with words; he sees no sense in wasting them.

"This." She waves a hand at her microscope. She sounds faintly outraged, as if the cells are deliberately disobeying her orders, behaving in some bizarre and provocative manner. "Bertholdt. His red blood cells were displaying some highly irregular behaviour. I thought perhaps it was directly related to the progression of the disease - he's been haemorrhaging at random intervals, he should be quite depleted of red cells by now but what I saw was a perfectly healthy level of mature cells. I'd expect some degree of reticulocytosis but there was nothing. It does lend credence to my hypothesis but still, there's so much to confirm..."
“Speak plainly, Hanji,” Lindeman looks vaguely amused at how animated she is, flinging her hands around like some strange nonverbal punctuation. “You’re confusing the young man.”

“I’m okay, honestly,” Armin says, although she might as well be speaking in code for all he understands. Hanji squints briefly up at the ceiling, as if she might find the simplified version of events written up there. Her hands press together briefly. She has large palms, long fingers; decidedly masculine hands with their blunt nails and square tips. Several porcelain mugs sit on the tabletop, each containing a shallow pool of cold tea-dregs. He hasn’t seen her eat anything in almost twelve hours, and yet she’s as ebullient as ever. She thrives on discovery, on solving the mystery. And if they find the answer, Armin wonders, will she simply shut down? Does Hanji run only on air and tea and enthusiasm?

“Give him the basic rundown anyway,” Hanji says, turning back to her microscope. She switches slides, exchanging them without looking. “I need to double-check something.”

“We know how the disease works, yes?” Lindeman says, glancing between the two of them. ‘We’, in this case, means ‘Armin’, but he includes Hanji all the same; he never singles Armin out, despite the fact that he is by a wide margin the least qualified person in the room. Armin nods; his grasp on the science of it all is tenuous, but it’s there all the same. “Well,” Lindeman continues, “the simplest way to put it is this. Bertholdt’s continued survival appears to hinge on one thing: his body is replacing the dead cells with new, fully mature versions. And it’s happening almost as fast as the depletion. Not quite fast enough, however. Not enough to overwhelm the disease process. It’s essentially a dumbed-down version of the process which allows Titans to regenerate lost limbs – which you saw earlier.” He shakes his head. “But to be quite truthful, I’m thoroughly confused. Humans simply don’t have the biology to produce new cells at such a rate. By all rights, Bertholdt should be dead many times over by now, and yet…”

“That’s because he’s almost certainly not human,” Hanji says.

The ensuing silence is so brittle it seems to Armin that it might shatter at any moment.

“I ran some comparative tests,” Hanji continues, utterly unruffled by the pregnant pause. She doesn’t even look up, adjusting the dials with apparently imprecision. “We haven’t got access to live Titan samples, but here on these slides I have the next best thing. It's theorised that Eren Jaeger’s biological makeup is roughly two-thirds human, one-third Titan. He can transform, and regenerate parts of his body, but because of this disparity the transformation requires tremendous effort, and a prolonged period of recovery.” She pulls away from the microscope, sliding her optics down her forehead. “The important thing to remember is that Eren is our primary source of proof that Titan biology and human biology can co-exist productively. We know this to be a fact, though the means elude us. But anyway, I'm rambling.” She grins, wild and alarming. "Tobias, would you look over these for me? I'm pretty confident that I'm right, but I'm merely your apprentice - you'll know better than I will.”

Is that strictly true? Armin's no longer certain. It seems that, in the strange and unprecedented arena of the White Rot, the two of them need each other. Lindeman's knowledge and Hanji's abstraction are a potent mixture.

“What conclusion have you come to?” Lindeman's careful tone suggests he already knows, but Hanji’s thought process is almost its own entity, an unpredictable thing, and confirmation is always necessary. Even Armin can already guess at what Hanji’s trying to say, but it’s an enormous, terrifying possibility; after Annie, the fragile web of all his hard-won friendships is already in disarray, and Armin isn't certain if it can take much more upheaval.

Please, he thinks, remaining still and silent. Not that. Don't let it be that.
He waits politely as Lindeman checks the slides, watching as the broad, flat plain of his face runs the usual gamut of contortions. In his element, Lindeman becomes remarkably expressive; between him and Hanji, Armin's previously po-faced assumptions about scientists have been well and truly shattered. Standing opposite, Hanji is the picture of restraint, though he can almost sense the excitement boiling in her veins like a fever. Oh, he thinks, as Lindeman's eyebrows rise in impossible arches, this is big. This is a huge discovery.

"It's what I think it is, isn't it?" Hanji asks. She's practically vibrating, Armin thinks, and he's almost appalled by it; no matter what happens here, there's no emotional fallout for her, no broken pieces to sweep up. She barely knows Bertholdt. He's the ghost on the periphery of their little group, a shy boy with remarkable physical ability, a clever boy who keeps his ruminations mostly to himself. But he's a good person. A kind person. And the excuses flood in, then, like Annie before she ground redemption to dust beneath bloody Titan feet: he must not have known, it must be a latent ability, maybe he did know but he'd never use it, not against us...

and then, a smaller, quieter voice:

_He wouldn't hurt us. He's my friend._

Lindeman lifts his face away from the microscope, brow furrowed into a frown so deep it looks to have been carved irreversibly into the dark flesh. Armin's guts dance an uneasy gavotte, and he knows then, can see it in the black of Lindeman's eyes; Bertholdt, his friend, gentle and sweet and kind and a Titan-shifter.

"We're going to have to take him into custody," Lindeman says.

"You can't put him in prison!" Armin yelps. His fingers are tight on the countertop, nails blanching under the pressure. He's never felt so useless, such a child, but he doesn't care anymore. What do appearances matter now? "He's too sick. He'll die..."

"It's okay, Armin." Hanji's hand is too heavy on his shoulder, her skin too hot. He shrugs her off, sick and angry and miserable. "This is going to be our secret. For now, at least. Bertholdt could very well be the most valuable human behind the Walls right now, and we're going to do everything we can to keep him alive."

Somehow, it doesn't make Armin feel any better.

*

The sun is high, the clouds sparse. There's a light, dry wind. It's a good day for an expedition.

Levi leads the horses out into the yard, and Eren helps him load them up. They're travelling light, but they have rations, water, canvas for shelter. They'll be gone for two days, maybe more if things don't go to plan. Jean envies them. If he were stronger, more capable, perhaps Levi might've picked him instead of Mikasa. It might have been Jean leading his horse out through the gates, where the breeze smells of dew and wet earth and frost. Away from the acerbic stink of antiseptic and sickness. Away from here.

Still, there's precious little value in self-pity, and Connie's not around to deliver a swift smack to the skull, so he gets up. Mikasa's still absent, and her horse remains tethered, grazing placidly on the yellowing weeds springing up through the cracks in the paving slabs. He approaches without caution. Their horses are not easily spooked as a rule - a certain robustness of personality is necessary in the Survey Corps, not only for the humans - and Jean has something of an affinity with these animals. He's always liked horses. They're serene creatures, uncomplicated; it's easy to tell what a
horse thinks of you. They make few demands: shelter, food, somewhere to shit and somewhere to sleep. Horses are simpler to deal with than humans. Their positions are consistent.

Jean strokes the animal's muzzle. The familiar smell of sweat and manure and clean hay reminds him of prior expeditions; that roiling of the stomach, a sensation midway between terror and anticipation. How must Eren and Mikasa be feeling now? This is nothing like they've ever done before. This is it, the expedition they've been building up to, suddenly upon them like an avalanche, and it's hard to breathe beneath the urgency of it all.

The sun is warm on the back of his neck, but the breeze is chilly. It speaks of snow on the way.

He busies himself fitting the saddle, tying the bags; his fingers tie intricate knots with ease, distributing the weight so as not to over-encumber the animal. He works quickly, quietly, distantly aware of Levi and Erwin pausing in their own preparations to watch him. It's okay, he thinks. It's not like they invited him to participate. It's not like Mikasa can't do this herself. He just needs to be busy right now. To be productive. Armin has his science, Connie and Sasha their hunting; Ymir has Christa. Between watches, Jean paces up and down the corridors, staring into doorways as if the disease might be waiting for him in the shadows. Once, he stopped outside Annie's cell, hands pressed to the solid oak separating them, wondering what he'd say if he could ask just one question.

Footsteps echo lightly in the courtyard. Boots against stone. He looks up from his work. Mikasa approaches him with apparent caution, knapsack slung loosely across her chest.

"I uh..." he gestures stupidly at the horse, as if it might provide him with a handy explanation as to why he's even here at all. The horse merely snorts, flicking away midges with its tail. "Your stuff's ready," he says.

And she smiles. It's a tiny smile, barely even a ghost, but it's there. Jean recognises that the smile is not for him, not personally; she'd smile if it were Connie or Sasha or Bertholdt in his place. And that doesn't trouble him, because he'd have done this for any one of them too. All they have left are these gestures, these tiny kindnesses.

He can feel Eren's eyes on him. That doesn't trouble him either.

"Thank you," she says. Her voice is small and scared despite her smile, and there's a sadness in her eyes, her posture hunched and strange. She's never had to hide the truth from him, although she still tries, sometimes; he sees through it all, can sense the lie like a wolf scents blood. She's afraid, and he can't blame her for it.

"Good luck out there," Jean says, nodding vaguely in the direction of the gates. "If anyone can do it, it'll be you." He's less convinced by Eren, but faith is infinitely preferable to doubt, and Eren is at his most competent when the stakes are high. His ability is still an unknown quantity, and Eren's as wary of it as the rest of them. But it might be the only way to forestall their doom.

(Jean still has faith in Armin, always has faith in Armin, but he's not in the mood to hedge his bets. Lately, his joints have been aching, and he's sleeping badly, and he's not sure if it's paranoia or sickness or something else entirely. Still, he can't shake the feeling that he'll be next.

Marco used to roll his eyes and call Jean a pessimist. Jean has always preferred the term 'realist'.)

"I want to believe that," Mikasa says. The determination is there; she's got an iron rod for a spine and more balls than the entire 104th combined. And Eren is hardly lacking in drive, though his emotions are unstable, wild as Jean's own. As a team, they're formidable. There is nobody on earth Mikasa would fight half as fiercely for as Eren.
"Come on, now. You've got a Titan and Humanity's Shortest on your side. How can you possibly lose?"

She blinks in surprise. "Jean. Did you just make a joke?"

He feigns injury. "My sense of humour is my best quality." In truth, he stole the nickname from Connie, who seems to have a moniker handy for just about everyone (that Levi is actually taller than him is an irony which eludes Connie entirely.) Cracking jokes, for Jean, is like pulling teeth. He lacks comic timing, wit, charm. It's worth it, though, just to pull Mikasa from the quagmire of her trepidation, even for a few moments. Just to see that enigmatic little smile one more time.

And then she does something completely unexpected.

She leans up and kisses him.

There's no fanfare, no fireworks, no doves bursting in a white-winged cluster into the blue sky. It's a dry little peck, as chaste as ever a kiss could be, devoid of lust and romance. And there might have been a time in Jean's life when he'd gladly have shovelled horse shit with his bare hands even for a kiss like that. But as she pulls away, lowering back onto her heels there's only sorrow, heavy like a stone in his chest, because he knows exactly what that kiss means.

"You're coming back," he tells her, but his voice catches in his throat, and she goes to say something but -

"Ackerman," Levi calls, a little irritably. "Let's move."

She gives him an apologetic tilt of the head and takes the reins, leading her horse out to join Levi and Eren. Jean watches her go. Along the way, his gaze meets Eren's. The other boy's eyes are a brilliant, extraordinary green. He half expects some manner of rebuke but the animosity between them is an old story, and one they're both tired of telling. Eren gives him a small nod, and Jean returns it; implicit in this gesture is the promise they never speak but somehow both understand. That Jean will take care of Armin, keep him strong and brave and whole until Eren returns.

They depart without crowds, without applause; three horses trotting in single file, a trio of green cloaks disappearing through the arch and away, out into the world.

Jean touches a thumb to his lips. The fading warmth of her is like some distant dream.

Goodbye, Jean. Tell everyone I love them. Tell them I tried.

*  

Hanji and Lindeman are already in the infirmary by the time Erwin arrives, standing on either side of Bertholdt's bed. The boy himself is blissfully unaware. Clean sheets are draped up to his neck, crisp and white - no blood spatters today. Erwin does not know whether or not this is a positive sign. But his skin is sallow, and the blue web of his veins stand bold beneath; he looks to be made from papier-mâché, a sad approximation of the boy that was.

In the bed opposite is Christa Lenz. Presumably, it's her; Ymir is hunched protectively over the head of her bed, scowling at the sudden, unwelcome intruders. According to Lindeman she's fading by the hour despite their best interventions, and it can only be a matter of days before they lose her.

And then there's Armin. He looks utterly stricken, sitting upright at Bertholdt's bedside like a tiny statue. Whatever plans Hanji and Lindeman have made for Bertholdt, it's clear that Armin is not willing to be a part of them.
"What's all this about?" Erwin asks. He's had something of a briefing from Moblit, who spends most of his time these days scurrying about sending messages for Hanji, bringing her lunch and taking it away, picked over or uneaten. Their discovery should be unbelievable, but Erwin is finding the boundaries of his disbelief being eroded steadily with every day that passes. Eventually, there'll be nothing left; he'll start believing in the magical powers of salt, or that the Walls are great stone gods.

"Commander." Hanji snaps him a brisk salute. "We require your permission to take Bertholdt Hoover into custody."

Ymir's dark eyes suddenly fix on Erwin. There's no harm in her knowing, Erwin thinks. She'll discover the truth soon enough, and he prefers to be forthright with his team. And there's hardly an abundance of people to whom she can spill the metaphorical beans. Total isolation has its benefits.

"Would you care to explain the reasons behind your request?" There's no need to be this formal, really, but it's safer to do things by the book, especially in the presence of a man from Sina. Lindeman seems more friend than foe, but it's never wise to make that kind of assumption. Not with the stakes so high.

"We have reason to believe that Bertholdt is, in fact, a Titan-shifter."

Erwin nods, indicating that Hanji should continue, but he's watching Ymir from the corner of his eye. She doesn't react to this revelation; not even a raised eyebrow.

"Blood and tissue samples show a marked similarity to samples taken from Eren Jaeger. In fact, the presence of Titan cells in Bertholdt's body overall appears to be quite a bit higher: perhaps as much as fifty percent of his biological composition." Still, Ymir doesn't budge, still and silent as a snake in the undergrowth, waiting for the moment to strike. "We've already determined that the virus is Titan-borne. Tobias and I propose that Bertholdt's physiology is the key factor in his fighting the White Rot."

"What Hanji and I are asking," Lindeman says, spreading his hands as if to reveal the cards hidden up his sleeve, "is that we might use Bertholdt as a test subject. We believe the answer to the White Rot is inside him."

"A cure," Erwin ventures.

"Potentially," Lindeman says. "A vaccination, at the very least. Either way, this is our best chance to halt the spread of this disease."

Erwin looks to Armin. He looks thoroughly miserable; both hands are wrapped around one of Bertholdt's, fingers interlaced, suddenly fearless in the presence of the sickness slowly picking off his comrades. "What's your opinion, Arlert?"

Armin looks at Bertholdt. He seems to study the boy's face, taking in the dusky pallor of him, the too-sharp topography of his cheekbones. "Reiner didn't want it," Armin says, staring resolutely at Bertholdt. "And Bertholdt can't consent. He's so weak, Danchou." He squeezes Bertholdt's hand as if to prove this; Bertholdt's hand is a limp, useless thing. "I'm afraid it'll kill him. Whatever they do to him. Even if he is a Titan-shifter, he's one of us. He's my friend. I can't let anyone harm him."

Erwin has never seen such conviction in Armin's face; the set of his jaw is sharp, determined, almost angry. There's a definite echo of Eren Jaeger in there; it's a learned defiance, but no less legitimate for it. The boy has come a long way.

"They say this could save lives." He's gentle even as he makes to trample Armin's good intentions
"A great many lives. Christa's life..." the emotional manipulation is sour in the back of Erwin's throat. "I can't afford to bet everything on Shiganshina. If nothing else, this might buy us time until Levi returns."

"You're going to let them do it, then." His voice is flat. As if he'd expected more from him, somehow.

There's a perfectly saccharine speech on the tip of his tongue - I'm going to let them save as many lives as they can, blah blah - but Ymir suddenly gets to her feet. Her chair scrapes against the floorboards. All eyes are on her, now, and Erwin's absurdly thankful for whatever distraction she's about to provide.

"Take me instead," she says.

There's a pause. And then Hanji starts laughing, a shrill, manic sound in the sudden silence.

"Oh, Ymir." She pulls her optics from her nose, wipes a tear from her eye with the pad of her thumb. "It's not that your offer isn't appreciated, but Bertholdt's physiology is quite specific..."

"So's mine." Ymir crosses her arms. Her lips pull back in a rictus grin. Even in her exhaustion there's something faintly dangerous about her, and, not for the first time, Erwin finds himself wondering why she missed out on finishing in the top ten.

Armin looks quite bemused. "Ymir, what are you saying?"

She takes a step forward. She's at the centre of the room, now, all eyes upon her. "You say there's a chance you can cure this. Which means there's a chance you can save Christa." She thrusts both wrists forward, sleeves rolled up, revealing the bulge of dark veins beneath her skin. "It's Titan-shifter cells you need, right? Then take me. I consent." She spits out the last word like it's an expletive. "I consent. But you save Christa first. You promise me that before you take a single vial."

"Ymir." Armin's face seems to crumple in on itself; it's as if this new revelation has finally broken him. Eren, Annie, Bertholdt, Ymir. Who else is not as they appear? How many more secrets do the 104th harbour? Levi was right when he said these children were different, wrong somehow, but even he couldn't have known just how deeply strange a bunch they would turn out to be.

(Somewhere in the back of his mind, spontaneous equations erupt into being, and Reiner Braun's face recurs with almost alarming regularity. He'll ask those questions later.)

"You're telling us you're a Titan-shifter," Erwin says. "You understand the implications of your confession?"

"Assuming it's the truth," Hanji adds, almost offhanded.

Ymir turns, snarling. "Do you want me to demonstrate, Squad Leader?" She lifts her thumb, holds it threateningly to her open mouth. Her teeth are neat, small.

"That won't be necessary." He believes her. He knows Hanji does too. There's always been something anomalous about Ymir; no surname to speak of ("I'm an orphan," she'd said once, casual, as if announcing what she'd had for breakfast that morning. "I don't remember my last name.") Older than the rest, but indeterminately so. "She's a useful eccentric," Levi had said. "I don't need to know her life story, long as she earns her keep."

Well, Erwin thinks. If ever there were a time to earn one's keep...
“Squad Leader Hanji. Professor Lindeman.” Erwin clasps both hands behind his back. "You have my permission to take Ymir into protective custody."

"You save Christa first." Her eyes flit between them, narrow and suspicious. Suddenly, her stance is defensive, arms raised. Her mistrust is plain, but she's taking the risk. All for the frail little thing in the bed behind her. Her dedication will get her killed someday. Erwin is certain of it. "Understand?"

"If we determine a treatment, she'll be the first to receive it," Lindeman says. He's staring at her with faint amazement. "You have my word."

“Then why are we still here?” Ymir glares up at Erwin. She blames him, he realises. Christa is dying and she blames him for it. “Quit wasting time. Christa doesn't have much of it left. Start testing.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your tremendous patience during this awkward semi-hiatus - I hope to be back in the game properly in a few months or so. In the meantime, all of your comments and messages are keeping me afloat in this sea of deadlines - I am so fortunate to have such sweet people reading my fics, even if they are miserable and grim.

<3
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

In which everything is a means to an end, even pain, and the end itself draws ever closer.

(Oblique allusions to torture in this chapter. Please proceed with caution.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Everything is a means to an end.

Armin recites it to himself over and over, as if repetition will make it true. As if believing it will absolve him of everything he’s been complicit in. Because it has to be so. There is the greater good at stake, the survival of humanity, and one woman’s suffering is a small price. And besides, she consented. They ask her again every so often, their eyes hollow and sunken in the shadow of their surgical caps: Are you sure you want to continue? We can stop. Just say the word and we’ll stop. And every time, she says yes. Keep going. Don’t stop until you’ve found your answer. She’s all breathless insistence and tight-gritted teeth and pale gown, hard muscle swathed in billowing bloodstained white. You can see right through the fabric, the gentle curve of her breasts, the dark thatch between her legs. Her nakedness beneath is startlingly obvious, and yet she’s not concerned. There is no modesty in pain. Armin can see in her eyes – flat, now, the wild spark bled utterly dry – that Ymir is slowly diminishing. That soon, there will be nothing left but scar tissue, and bone, and dust.

And it’s all for Christa. Armin cannot begin to understand that kind of dedication. It almost scares him.

Hanji and Lindeman drift silent as spectres, enveloped from head to toe in pale green surgical outfits. Their hands are thick-gloved and yet nimble, efficient, moving with a speed and accuracy that astounds Armin. Not a drop of blood is wasted. They communicate with nods, hand signals, the occasional murmur. It’s as if they’ve ceased to be human behind those masks, and indeed, so little of them is visible that perhaps it’s so. Only their eyes are visible in the slit between cap and mask, perpetually alert.

The room stinks of raw meat and iron and sweat, of antiseptic sharp in the back of his throat. Ymir lies curled on the bed in the centre of the room. Her bare limbs tremble, as if with cold. She’s criss-crossed with scars that heal even as Armin watches, angry red puncture wounds fading to pinkish, puckered little mouths, to pale knolls of rugged scar tissue, melting away into the landscape of her
skin as if they were never there at all. It’s terrifying, her propensity to heal, but also beautiful. A thing of hope.

Armin holds a clay mug of nettle and blackberry tea in both hands, the residual warmth spreading out across his palms like a slow sunrise. Ymir watches him approach, wary even in her exhaustion. Her gown is almost transparent where it sticks to her back, wet through with sweat though she’s cold as a bone; it’s like approaching a corpse, albeit one with dark, dull eyes peering through a damp-matted hair.

“What’s that?” Ymir asks. Her voice is low, raspy. She must be desperately dry, but she refuses everything they bring her, sniffing at it like it must be poisoned. It's a strange thing - why would they want to poison their sole living test subject? And yet, not a single drop or morsel has passed her lips since they brought her here.

"It's tea. Sasha made it." Armin perches delicately on the edge of the bed, offering the cup to her. She regards him with suspicion, but takes it anyway, easing her stiff limbs up into a half-lotus. Her fingers tremble as they close around the cup. It must be hot in her hands, but she doesn't flinch. "You have to drink something. You need your strength."

"I don't need strength," she says. "Just persistence. You forget, I'm part-Titan. I can replenish the blood as fast as they're taking it. I can create more bone marrow while they're staring at it through their contraptions. All I have to do is lie back and let them cut me to shreds. That's easy, Armin. Easier than watching Christa die."

"I had no idea you...cared about her so much."

"I care about her more than I care about myself," Ymir says, matter-of-fact. She lifts the tea to greyish lips, takes a halting little sip. Her throat bobs as she swallows. "I would let them drain me dry if it would save her. Have you ever felt that way, Armin? Have you ever loved someone enough that you would give everything you are to keep them alive?"

A memory comes to him, vivid as a dream: Eren, bloody and broken and wide-eyed in the mouth of a Titan and Armin, stinking of dead flesh and sour Titan saliva, crouched on the very edge of a Trost rooftop. He's frozen solid with fear, and Eren's green eyes are beautiful in the dark, glowing like an aurora as the Titan's teeth descend. And as the teeth close like a guillotine, scything through bone with a brittle snap, Armin wishes it had been him in there instead. Because the world needs Eren. The world is a better place with his determination, his passion, his fire.

"No," Ymir says. "I didn't think so."
"How come you never told anyone?" Armin asks. "About being a Titan-shifter?"

He's seen her 'other' form. They'd all been sceptical, Hanji most of all, though her excitement had been palpable, a storm cloud thick with electricity. They had tested her abilities out in the open; a full set of restraints and Mike, Erwin, Nanaba and Hanji fully-weaponised and waiting for the hint of a false move.

They needn't have worried. Her Titan form is unlike anything Armin has ever seen before. She's tiny, for one thing; barely twice the size of a human and ugly, remarkably ugly considering the languid beauty of her human form. And yet despite the twisted features, the vicious jut of the jaw, the slope of the forehead, she moves with a dancer's grace, her step light and sure.

Hanji had almost drowned in her own saliva at the sight of her.

Ymir grins, a savage baring of teeth, utterly without humour. "And what would have happened to me then?" she asks. "Imprisonment? Experimentation? If you'd told me back then that I'd have ended up as Hanji Zoe's plaything regardless, I'd have cut my losses and taken on the Titan bitch. Won myself a medal. At least I'd have something shiny to look at while they cut me open." She shakes her head, placing the still-full mug on the table by the bed. "You're a good person, Armin. You have a sweet soul. Christa does too. She would have spoken up for Bertholdt if she'd been able to. She cares about everyone. And somehow, in spite of everything, she cares for me. How did I get that lucky? I ask myself all the time. She's a fucking angel. She's precious beyond reason. It would kill her to see the things they do to me. It doesn't kill you though, does it? Not at all." Her eyes are narrow now, shadows set deep above the perfect curvature of her cheekbones. "I thought you were weak for the longest time. Pathetic. I judged you and found you lacking, and I was wrong. Because you get this, don't you?" She sweeps an arm. A ragged crevasse of purple scar-tissue bisects her forearm, wrist to elbow. "You understand. All of it. The sacrifices we need to make. The horrors we have to face to make all of this stop. I've watched you as they held me down and sawed into my bones to suck up the marrow. I've watched your face, watched you gag on the smell of it, but no matter how loud I screamed, you didn't flinch. I was wrong about you, Armin Arlert. You're not weak. You're stone fucking cold."

He doesn't quite know how to respond, so he just nods, rising to his feet. She licks her dry lips. She's breathing hard with the effort of talking, lowering herself back down onto the pillow. Her dark skin has taken on a sallow undertone, though it could be the light. "Let me bring you some food," he says, quiet. "Persistence might keep you going, but your body needs sustenance. If you die, Christa dies. Bertholdt too. Maybe all of us. Your sacrifice will be wasted."

Behind them, the door creaks open, and there comes the soft shuffle of Hanji's shoes on the hardwood. He knows what he'll see; the trephine, brutal in its efficiency, the hard glint of the saw-
blade like the teeth of a predatory animal. The syringe, primed and ready.

"It takes root in the bones," Hanji says, breathless, like she’s been running. "That's where it starts."

Armin does not turn around. He stares at Ymir, measuring the tiny lines around her eyes, the cracked fissures in her lips. And she meets his gaze, eyes hard and unafraid. Just how old is she? What manner of things has she seen, wearing that other skin of hers? Will she ever tell, if she lives long enough for him to ask her?

"We're so close." Hanji's voice resonates with excitement. She's like a child, discovering the stars for the first time. "We need more marrow. Armin, will you help me?"

"Yes," he says. He swallows hard. His throat aches.

"Stone fucking cold," Ymir repeats, almost a whisper, and it almost sounds as if she’s proud of him. She shimmies up her gown, revealing the lean curve of her naked femur, the constellation of perfect little punctures dark against her skin, inviting the unforgiving agony of the trephine as easily she might a lover's touch.

He takes the syringe, holding it steady. She is all defiance, no shame, no fear. The least Armin can do is show the same.

*

They skirt around the ruins of a small village a short while before sunset. They've been travelling on open ground, mostly, and so far the Titans have kept their distance. Occasionally, one will appear on the horizon, a great shadow against the hazy blue sky, and they'll change course. Levi takes point, sets the pace, barks orders without ever looking back. He knows they're behind him. He trusts their ability, and their obedience. Mikasa isn't sure which he considers the most important quality.

"We'll stop here for a while," Levi says, slowing his horse to a trot. The village to their west is little more than a scattering of cowsheds and barns, and the occasional woodbuilt dwelling, rotting now in their exposure. It's all low-rise, enough so that any approaching Titans can easily be seen. To the east is lush open grassland as far as the eye can see, a cobalt sky gradually yellowing at the edges as evening slowly sets in. She had forgotten just how much colour there could be in the world.
"Why are we stopping?" Eren asks. Mikasa instinctively sucks in air through her teeth, awaiting the tongue-lashing she's sure is coming, but it never does. Levi is surprisingly tolerant of Eren and his incessant questions.

"I intend for us to travel through the night," he says. "Hanji's research suggests they're much less active in the dark. She might be a little insane but I'm willing to take a bet on her being right. So we're going to rest up here until nightfall. There's a stream a few minutes up from here, so we'll have water. We'll eat, and take watch in turns while the others rest. An hour each, maximum. By that time, it'll be full dark, and we'll keep going."

They swing down from their saddles one by one, passing the reins to Eren, who sets off to secure them to a fence sticking out of the long grass.

"If we're travelling at night, how will we know if we're going in the right direction?" Mikasa asks.

Levi makes a face. "You grew up in the mountains, didn't you? Don't tell me you've never navigated by the stars before."

She shakes her head. "We didn't usually go out in the dark," she says, slipping from the saddle. Her feet are grateful for the solid ground beneath them. Her thigh muscles ache, a pleasant burn. "There are dangerous animals in the mountains. They see in the dark far better than we can. Better not to gift yourself to them."

Levi shrugs. "A life lived in fear is a life half-lived," he says. "Where I grew up, there was no danger greater than other people. So you learned how to fight, and you learned fast. Because when you're the most dangerous, fear is no longer an obstacle. The same is true for animals. Learn their weaknesses, make yourself threatening to them. When you're the most dangerous animal in the mountains, who sees best in the dark is a moot point."

"You can't apply that logic to Titans," Mikasa points out.

His teeth pull back from his lips, a grin or a sneer; she can never really tell with Levi. "Good thing I wasn't trying to," he says. "Make yourself useful and fetch some water. Take Eren with you, get him to collect firewood. There's a small copse just past the stream, should provide some decent kindling. I don't need to tell you to be alert."

"How do you know where everything is?" They must have come this far on recon, but he has no
map, no notes to consult. One ruined village looks much like another to Mikasa. Old buildings reclaimed by nature, consumed by ivy and weeds tall as a man. Birds roost in the eaves of ruined houses, dark against the sky as they flit back and forth. They don't seem nervous. That's a good sign.

Levi rummages in his knapsack, laying out items on the grass. A leather waterskin, empty. A small linen pouch. A battered steel dish. A length of green fabric cut from an old cloak, wrapped tight around an object Mikasa knows is a hunting knife. "Here's a survival tip for you, Ackerman," he says, idly running a finger up the curved edge of the knife. The fabric is thick, but he must be able to feel the bite of the blade, the chill of the metal. "Always remember where you've been. You spend all your time looking ahead, wondering what's coming. That's natural. But if you spend too long staring into the distance, you'll lose perspective. I know where the stream and the copse are because I pay attention to everything. You never know when you might have to come back this way. It pays to remember the things that matter." He places a finger to his palm, taps it as he reels off the list: "Water, shelter, firewood. Food too, if you're low on supplies. Observe everything and you'll miss nothing."

"I see," she says. She's a little chagrined at the suggestion that she might not be paying as close attention as she ought to be, which is only compounded by the fact that she knows she's not. Levi's right. She's looking for Titans, scanning the forward horizon for any sign of them. The landscape around her disappears into the distance without so much as a second glance.

It's only because she's trying to keep herself safe. Keep Eren safe. Levi too, though he'd probably laugh if she told him so. Because he looks tired. The shadows beneath his eyes are darker than usual, finger-smudges of grey in the concavity of the sockets. He's as alert as ever, but there's something careful about his movement, guarded, like he's trying to conserve energy, or he's carrying an injury. Perhaps he really is just tired. She sure as hell is. Sleep has been an elusive commodity lately.

"Ackerman?"

He stares at her, eyes narrowed in suspicion. She averts her gaze, tries to pretend she hasn't been studying him. "Yes?"

"Water's not going to collect itself," he says, although his empty waterskin remains by his side. "Go make yourself useful."

"Fine, she thinks," as she heads over to where Eren is unloading the horses. "I'll observe everything. I'll start with you, Heichou."

When they return to camp, laden with kindling, waterskins hanging clumsy from their belts like
overfull bladders, Levi is busy skinning a hare. He's got his hunting knife out, a wicked looking implement with a serrated blade. He uses the very tip to pare back the skin, slicing through the pale film of connective tissue with expert precision. By his side, the leather waterskin is full, fat and bulging on the grass.

"Get a small fire going," Levi says, without looking up. "Not too big. Don't want to risk attracting Titans."

"I haven't seen any so far," Eren says, dumping his armload of firewood to the floor with customary lack of grace. He's come so far, she thinks, remembering the days when collecting even a few sticks of kindling was too great a task for Eren and his skittish attention-span. "Why do you suppose that is?"

Levi shrugs. He peels the hare from its skin, easy as shucking a pea from a pod. It glistens in the cool afternoon light, shimmering pink and blue and red, marbled with pale fat. "Could be that they're concentrated down in Shiganshina proper," he says, laying the hare out on the grass. There's a smaller waterskin on the ground by his feet, one Mikasa hadn't noticed before, lying next to the little linen bag. He uncaps it with his left hand, fills his right palm with water. "It could be that we've just been very lucky so far. But there's a long way to ride yet. Don't get sloppy." He rubs his hands together, rinsing off the tacky coating of hare's blood; the water runs between his fingers, little pink droplets falling to the grass like rain. He caps the waterskin again and slips it back into his knapsack. The linen bag goes with it. She wants to ask him what's in it, but thinks better of it.

Later, when Eren's dozing by the fire and it's just the two of them, silently whiling away the time until darkness falls, she sees him take out the small waterskin again. He rinses his steel dish, rubbing the residual grease away with a handful of wet grass. Levi is a man of many strange rituals; he has a dinner-set only he uses, and on the rare occasion that he does deign to eat with them all, he shuns anything prepared communally. She'd thought it rudeness to begin with, but she's not so sure. She's never sure of anything when Levi's involved.

"He's not sick, is he?"

She looks up. Levi sits hunched, cloak draped listless and heavy over his shoulders. He pokes at the ashes of the fire with a long, thin stick, stirring up embers the colour of sunset. The sky is a bright, arterial red tonight, the sun an open wound bleeding out onto the horizon. "Eren?" she asks, glancing over at his sleeping form. He looks so small, so young. "He's fine, as far as I know. Why?"

"He didn't eat." He indicates Eren's portion of hare, wrapped up in a scrap of skin and tied into a bundle with strands of grass. "I haven't seen him drink since we set out either. Dehydration is dangerous out here."
"He'll be fine," Mikasa says. She stifles a yawn with the back of her hand. Soon, they'll wake Eren and it'll be her turn to rest, if only for a short while. The insides of her eyelids burn with the promise of sleep. "It's just the time of year, that's all. He won't eat until sunset, usually. You'll see when he wakes up."

Levi appraises her with curious eyes. "Why sunset?"

"It's something his mother used to do," Mikasa says. Carla Jaeger is still a vivid presence in her memory; the smell of her, warm and earthy like cloves, the soft, low sound of her laughter. She misses Carla terribly. She can't imagine how Eren must feel. "One month of every year. From the new moon until the old moon, she would fast between sunrise and sunset. We - Eren and I - we never had to. She used to say it was between her and her god. But after Carla died, Eren decided he would do it too."

"He doesn't know what it's supposed to mean?"

"Not really. No more than I do. But it mattered to his mother. On the day before the new moon, Carla's family would visit and they'd lay out a feast. There'd be a table full of food, and dancing, and all kinds of sweet things to eat..." she shakes her head. Even now, it hurts to remember. She's lost two families, and now here she is, riding out into the unknown in a surely hopeless bid to save the lives of the only people she has left in the world. She wants to believe she'll come home. She wants to believe she'll hear Connie's gravel-throated laughter again, see Sasha's warm sunshine smile and Ymir's dark-eyed scowl. "It means something to him, even if it's not the same thing. It's how he keeps his mother alive."

She expects Levi to scoff, make some flippant remark about how stupid it all is, but he just nods, gazing back at the remnants of the fire. There's still a little heat emanating from the blackened core, but the evening chill is beginning to set in. It's going to be a long, cold night. She still has Levi's gloves, tucked into her knapsack. He's never asked for them back.

"Saltwater," he says, after a moment.

"I'm sorry?"

He nods at his own knapsack. "In the waterskin. I saw you watching earlier. It's saltwater. There are things which are..." he stops, considers his words before continuing, "...pure and impure. It goes beyond simple cleanliness. There are things in the world we can't see, that just are, and an impure
thing can never be pure, no matter what you do to it. But you can remove the taint of impurity. My mother believed that saltwater could do that. Make things clean again." He clears his throat. He sounds a little embarrassed, like he's telling her some dark and terrible secret. "I never understood the rules. Why certain things are considered impure. They just are. Maybe I'd have found out someday."

"Is your mother...?"

"Dead?" A small, bitter smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. "My parents are both dead. Most of my family are."

"Oh." Suddenly, she doesn't know what to say. She picks absently at the hem of her cloak, rolling the thick wool between her thumb and forefinger. "I'm sorry," she says at last, because she is, because somehow it's important that he understands that.

Behind him, the sun spills the last of itself out onto the dark line of the horizon, and the sky is a rich blue, like blood pooled beneath the skin.

"So am I," Levi says.

*

Jean never thought an empty room could be oppressive, but he's learning new things every day.

Watch is abandoned. Erwin's logic is that there aren't enough healthy bodies to keep up a regular watch schedule, and in any case the likelihood of anyone wanting to sneak into a certified plague zone is so low as to be negligible. All of which means they have an abundance of free time in which to spend haunting the corridors, trying to find some novel distraction from the crushing weight of the sickness hemming them in from all angles.

Jean has been reading books.

The space beneath Armin's bunk is crammed with them, a treasure-trove of dusty leatherbound volumes spanning an eclectic range of subjects, from botany to military tactics, poetry and theology. There are books he's reasonably sure are supposed to be forbidden, discussing the possible flora and fauna of the region in the years before the Titans came, and the walls with them. He reads about huge cats with long, pointed ears, about waxy yellow fruits so sour they sting your lips when you eat
them. For a while, he loses himself in these histories, fascinated by the possibilities; this must be taboo, this material, illicit in some way, but who remains to stop him? What rules still apply in this terrifying new world?

He's crossed-legged on the bed, reading about immense bodies of water called 'oceans' when the scuff of feet against floorboards breaks the silence, disturbing the total inertia of Jean's world like a stone dropped into a pond.

Jean looks up. There's Armin, ghastly in his exhaustion, shambling into the room with his shirt untucked, crumpled hem hanging almost to his knees. He shoots Jean a weary half-smile, apparently oblivious to the haphazardly-stacked books at the end of Jean's bunk.

"They finally let you take a break, huh?" Jean says, marking his place with an old scrap of paper.

"They made me," Armin replies. He crumples bonelessly onto his bed, head sinking into the pillow. One pale eye peers up at Jean, pink-rimmed with lack of sleep. "I didn't want to. Too much still to do."

"They can handle it," Jean says. "They're scientists. It's their job. You'll be no good to them asleep on your feet."

"That's what they said," Armin says. His voice is muffled through the sheets, but he makes no effort to move. "Do you have any water? I'm so thirsty."

There's a ceramic jug sitting on the table beside Bertholdt's empty bunk. Jean gets up from his bed, unfolding long legs with care. His muscles are still stiff from his training with Mikasa a few days ago, and his calves burn a little as he crosses over, retrieving the jug. It's a good burn, he thinks, bare feet quiet against the cool floorboards. It means he's not completely rotted away yet.

He perches on the edge of Armin's bed. The springs creak a little under their combined weight. "Here," he says, proffering the jug. There's not a lot of water in there, but it's reasonably fresh, pumped from the well that morning. He waits patiently as Armin struggles to arrange his tired limbs into something resembling a seated position. His eyes are webbed with bright red veins, contrasting unpleasantly with the cool blue of his irises. He's chalky pale with exhaustion, hair a greasy straw-coloured mop atop his head. He's turning into Hanji, Jean thinks, passing him the jug. Soon, he'll start smelling like her too.
Armin drinks greedily, gulping down water like he might never get to taste it again. When he's done, he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. The empty jug perches on his lap, held up by his other hand. His fingers are trembling, though Jean's not sure whether it's exhaustion or the desperate need to get back to work.

"When was the last time you ate?" Jean asks.

"I had a little barley stew," Armin says.

"That was last night," Jean says, a little horrified. No wonder he looks so drained; he must be running on pure enthusiasm and determination, burning through stores of energy he doesn't have to keep him going for just a few more hours. He gets to his feet, ignoring the strident complaint of his quadriceps. "There's some porridge left over, let me get you some before Sasha eats it all..."

"No," Armin says. It stops Jean in his tracks. He turns, frowning. Armin's staring up at him through the lank forest of his fringe, blinking slow like a boy newly woken. "I'm not hungry," Armin says. "Let Sasha have it. It's not like she'll have time to make more."

"What do you mean?"

Armin sighs. Rubs at his eye with the heel of his hand. "They've got Connie under observation," he says, sounding utterly fed up of the entire thing. "It might just be the 'flu. No bleeding or anything yet. But he's running a relatively high fever. It's just a precaution." Unspoken, the implication: for now.

Jean's heart thumps spasmodically against his breastbone. "When was this?"

"About three hours ago," Armin says. He lowers himself back down onto the bed, pulling the jug with him. He hugs it to his chest like a favourite toy. A dribble of water escapes, soaking into the blanket. "Didn't you notice he was gone?"

He shakes his head numbly. Sasha and Connie have grown even more insular of late, withdrawing almost entirely into their own private little world of shared glances, the occasional snippet of conversation in a language Jean doesn't understand. The truth is he has no idea what Connie has been doing lately. His nose has been firmly buried in the books, escaping into a world where strange fruits grow on alien trees, and huge fish with wolves' teeth lurk in the dark water. Guilt weighs heavy in his chest. He should have known. He shouldn't have abandoned them...
The melodious tinkle of porcelain shattering jolts him sharply from his reverie. The jug has slipped from Armin's grasp, landing heavily on the floor, and now bright white fragments are scattered all over the floorboards, jagged teeth knocked from a huge mouth. "Armin..." he begins, but as soon as he looks he knows, and the certainty of it washes over him, a cold wave crashing overhead. It's like waking up from a long dream. He looks down at Armin, limp and exhausted and grey as a winter sky, and the other boy just smiles apologetically, as if it's his fault.

"How long?" Jean asks, choking down hot fear like bile in his throat.

"I'm fine," Armin replies, and it's as barefaced a lie as he's ever told. His voice is thick in his mouth. "I just need to sleep a while. We're so close, Jean. We know how it starts. We know how it spreads. We just need to find out how to stop it..."

"You don't need to do anything," Jean interrupts. He scoots off the bed, kneeling to scoop up the shards. They are cold in his hands, edges jagged, biting at his palms as he gathers them up. "You need to stay here and rest. Eat something. You'll burn out and then what happens?"

“They need me,” Armin says.

“We need you!” The shrillness in his voice is entirely unexpected, and Armin’s eyes flutter wide at the sound of it, blue parasols bursting open. Jean clutches the shards in his hands, the warmth of his blood pleasant as it fills his palm. The pain shoots up his arm, jolting his synapses awake. He can smell, suddenly, the intermingled odours of disinfectant and sweat and something else, like charred bones long turned cold. He thinks of the box under his own bed, of Marco’s bones wrapped in torn strips of his shirt, the unhealthiest of souvenirs from a love he should have left behind a long time ago. “We need you more,” Jean says again, quieter this time, “Connie and Sasha. Me. Eren and Mikasa, when they come back.” I have to keep you safe for him, Jean doesn’t say. Bright red beads drip steadily from his closed palm, spattering heavy on the floorboards. He watches it with dumb fascination, unwilling to look at Armin now. He lays his head against the mattress, breathing in the scent of Armin, of the room, of the leather-bound books and their thick, sour coating of dust. Of Connie’s soap and the wet-earth scent of his clothes. He looks over at Connie’s empty bed. His eyes burn with tears, and he blinks them back angrily.

He’s so close to losing everything.

Armin’s hands are clumsy against Jean’s hair, delicate fingers stroking with the tentative uncertainty of one who is not used to giving comfort. The warmth of his skin is obscene.
“I read about the ocean,” Jean says.

Behind him, Armin shifts his weight with the soft rustle of bedclothes. His hands play at the rooster-comb of hair at Jean’s crown, forever unruly no matter how carefully Jean combs it down. It feels nice, and if Jean closes his eyes tight he can translate the motion of Armin’s fingers to a summer breeze, the fever-heat of him to the afternoon sun. He can pretend to be anywhere else but here.

“I made Eren promise we’d go there together,” Armin says. “Someday. When it’s safer beyond the walls.”

_Someday may never come for you_, Jean thinks. _Not unless you face up to what’s happening._

“Armin, you have to tell Erwin. If they start treatment quickly…”

“I said no.” Abruptly, his hand withdraws. The mattress creaks as Armin swings his legs over the edge of the bed, unsteady, bracing a hand against the bedpost. “I’m not sick. I still have too much work to do…”

Jean wants to grab him by the shoulders and _shake_, rattle his brain hard enough so that something in there might finally click, but Armin’s up before he can do a thing about it. He moves with the determined but unsteady gait of a man fighting his drunkenness, shoes crunching tiny shards of porcelain to dust. Jean scrambles to his feet, catches up with him in three easy strides. He puts his good hand on the smaller boy’s shoulder but Armin turns on his heel, and his teeth are bared, feral, an animal ferocity that Jean has never seen before. “You can’t always be a hero,” Armin spits, wrenching himself from Jean’s grip. His feet skitter on the floorboards, but he stays standing. Only just. “And we can’t fight this by sitting around and hoping it’ll go away. We need to find a cure. I need to help them do it. And you need to let me, Jean. You need to believe I can do it. Because I believe it. We’re so _close_. Do you understand? We can still save Christa and Bertholdt.”

And then he’s gone, striding back towards the infirmary with a renewed vigour, and how will he explain the tremors to Hanji when they begin? The nosebleeds? The conjunctival haemorrhage, staining the whites of his eyes a bright, awful red?

_How will Jean explain to Eren that he let Armin die?_

Chapter End Notes

You have just finished reading the penultimate chapter of Apoptosis - the end is quite literally in sight. Thank you, lovely readers, for your persistence and comments and
messages and general support for this fic. Apoptosis is my baby, and it means the world to me to know that other people find it entertaining. So, thank you, everyone, you've made this so worthwhile <3

Stick around. We're almost there...
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

In which all things must come to an end.

(Warning for major character death. Tread carefully, friends.)

Chapter Notes

It's New Year's Eve 2014 and here I am, uploading the final chapter of this relentless descent into misery. And I want to thank everyone who has read, commented, left kudos and supported this fic in every way, big or small. You have made the entire process so much more enjoyable, and if I could bake you all a cake of your choice as a means of thanking you, I would do it.

This chapter is dedicated to Cat, whose headcanons helped turn Roma Levi from a concept into a person. Happy birthday, puro chaw, and thank you so, so much <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His head is awash with bright static; the ceaseless crackling of an electrical storm deep behind his eye sockets. There is no sound but the heavy, rhythmic pulse of blood in his ears, the sole reminder that he is still alive.

The quill in his hand is unsteady; his handwriting grows increasingly illegible, a wet smear of ink barely resembling letters through the fog of his failing vision. Still, he writes. His head is too thick with noise to serve as a useful space for thought. Everything pours onto the page, spilling out like a glut of black blood. In there somewhere, he is sure, is the answer to everything, if only he looks hard enough.

A bead of sweat trickles between his eyebrows, poised on the tip of his nose. He raises an absent hand to wipe it away; his palm comes away bright with blood. He stares at it for a moment, registering this sudden blush of colour, this unwelcome intrusion into the monochrome world of ink and parchment. And writes on, undeterred by the mark his hand leaves on the page, a perfect scarlet comma.

It takes root in the bones...That's where it starts.

In the bones. Ymir's bones like ivory, bright in the glistening crevasse of excavated tissue. Ymir's teeth, bared in pain, the stutter of rigid muscle tensed beneath sweat-glossy skin. Ymir as Titan, restrained and grotesque, the snarl of her features like twisted scar tissue but the eyes, the eyes clear as daylight and terribly human, the worst thing of all. Knowing that beneath that monstrous exterior lay the same mind, the same heart, each insult and injury committed to memory and recalled on dark nights, recumbent and slack-limbed and dreaming of the sweet blonde girl dying in the next room.

The marrow, then. He pushes through the fog inside his skull, searching for what he's filed away.
The knowledge he's buried in here. Cells and viruses. Titan blood, Titan marrow. Apoptosis, the word burned into the wall of his skull. Cell death. Cell suicide. Words and concepts alien in their abstraction. But in this moment, his own bones heavy with an ache so profound he feels they must be splitting from the inside, he can only think of the ocean.

He rests his head on the desk. The polished mahogany is cool beneath the damp skin of his cheek. When he closes his eyes - the bright comma-smear of his own blood vivid in the black space behind the lids - the bass-drum pulse in his ears fades to a hiss, and he imagines this is what the ocean must sound like. That impossible, endless expanse of water. The sand will be cool beneath his toes, the breeze deliciously chill. Eren will be there beside him, and they will watch silently as the sun begins its descent, setting the sky on fire as it slips slowly beneath the horizon. And when it is gone - when there is nothing left but water, and the pale glitter of stars reflected in their billions, and two silent boys standing on the shore, he will slip his hand into Eren's, quiet as a whisper, and Eren's fingers will close around his, and everything will be perfect.

I'll take you there, he thinks, though his head throbs with a sick insistence, and his stomach burns with nausea. But you have to come back to me.

Armin refuses to acknowledge the potentiality of his own demise. And he's aware of Jean, lingering in the corridors like a lonely ghost. He's aware of the fear radiating from him, of the smell of it, sharp as blood. Jean does not speak, or make eye contact, pausing only to observe the rise and fall of Armin's chest before resuming his endless pacing. Jean has not yet confessed the nature of Armin's condition to Erwin, and for that Armin is grateful. He has this small window of time, now. It's not enough - it never could be enough - but he can do more good here than he ever could in an infirmary bed.

But his eyes sting with sweat, and his throat feels as though it's been stripped raw, and it would be so simple just to lay here, resting on the pillow of his own damp hair, dreaming of salt air and the warmth of another's palm in his. To close his eyes and find himself elsewhere. What a beautiful way to die, he thinks; calm and at peace even as the blood drains from him, first the gentle effusion of capillaries and ending in a great gush of scarlet, pooled beneath him as black as the ocean at midnight.

It takes root in the bones...That's where it starts.

They know so little. The Survey Corps are the troublesome eccentrics, the pool of wasted talent raving deliriously about knowing the Titans, not just cowering behind walls that cannot stand forever. If only they hadn't dismissed us, Armin thinks, lifting his face slowly up. The light from the far window is weak, but it hits him with the force of a fist through the skull. If only they'd given us resources, manpower, faith. What do they know about Titans, when you pare down all the speculation and theories to the core? What can be said to be absolute truth? They eat people. They are numerous, and large, and gluttonous. They have at least one weak spot. They can regenerate lost limbs.

Lost parts.

What parts? He's seen them regenerate teeth, eyes; sockets awash with blood and deflated, filmy tissue bloom with ocular organs like the strangest fruit. The sheer diversity of cells required to recreate such a complex organ, a functional organ...what facilitates this? The virus, emptying the body of cells in preparation for new ones that their frail human biology cannot create. Apoptosis, so destructive a process, and yet a key part of Titan regeneration. What do they have that humans lack so catastrophically?

Bones. Marrow. He'd watched in rapt horror as Hanji cut into Ymir's Titan arm, her subject straining
against the chains that held it to the floor. He remembered the thick plume of steam rising from the fresh wound, the awful animal sounds emanating from Ymir's throat...not human, no, but the distress was palpable, the pain palpable. And Hanji, dropping thick slices of dripping tissue into glass jars, passing them to Moblit, who held them at arm's length as though they might bite him. As though they might infect him.

When Ymir came back, drained and depleted and grey, staring with undisguised reproach at Hanji and her obvious elation, her left arm had already regenerated.

The parallel process. That was how Lindeman had described it - the second, indispensable half of this equation, rebuilding what the body has swept away. He presses a hand to his abdomen, feeling the heat of his skin beneath his sweat-damp shirt. Inside him, right now, the virus is at work. Soon, once the apoptotic process turns his organs into useless globules of flesh and fluid, he will be dead. Because his body cannot differentiate between its own vital cells, and those of a sufficiently similar alien.

The answer hits him then, sudden as a heart attack.

Despite the weakness, despite the warm blood oozing from his nose and the sour burn of his gut, he runs all the way to the infirmary.

*

Full dark approaches with the speed and suddenness of a hawk closing in for the kill. The night is cold, far colder than Mikasa had anticipated; Levi's gloves are snug against her fingers, but her military-issue trousers were not made for the cold. Still, out here in the open, the ability to move swiftly and unencumbered takes priority over personal comfort.

She sleeps when Eren wakes, relaxing only when she has seen him eat - his eagerness and the spark of hunger in his eyes reassures her that he's still well. She doesn't expect to be able to sleep in the open like this, but when she burrows into the down-filled sleeping bag and shuts her eyes she's out like a snuffed candle. When she wakes - Eren's hand upon her shoulder, his voice low as he pries her gently from a dream she cannot remember - the darkness is almost complete, and she feels a deep ache somewhere in the vicinity of her spine. Her body is stiff from being propped up on horseback, and her head is thick with sleep. She feels terrible, but at least she can quantify each ailment. She's not sick. Just tired and saddle-sore.

Levi is a small, lumpy shape in his sleeping-bag, curled tight against the cold. They can't keep a full fire burning. It's still uncertain as to whether the Titans are drawn to heat or light. What they have is a pit of embers, smouldering just enough so as to emanate a low heat. It's enough to keep the shivers at bay, though the cold still seems to penetrate through Mikasa's clothing, worming beneath her skin, chilling the very bones of her.

"You've eaten enough?" she asks.

Eren nods. "I told him what to do with the hare. The words to say." The peculiarities of meat preparation in the Jaeger household are as intimately familiar to Mikasa as the habits and rituals her own parents once held. She knows how to drain the blood, the sound of the prayer spoken - words like poetry, like a song spoken aloud, though she cannot decipher the meaning nor give the words shape with her own clumsy tongue. "He didn't seem to mind. Seemed interested in why it had to be that way."
"He's got his own strange ways," Mikasa says, thinking of the saltwater. Of pure and impure, the rules Levi follows without deep comprehension. Just like Eren, mimicking Carla's ways because it's the only part of her he can keep alive now. They hold on to these parts of themselves as though they were unimaginably precious, and perhaps they are. These boundaries, beautiful in their strangeness, the spaces between them not bleak and empty but filled with wonder. Words spoken in unfamiliar tongues. Prayers said over flowing blood.

"I wonder how Bertholdt and Christa are holding up," Eren says. Of the three of them, he is the one who shows no signs of wear and tear. He runs on determination, which in Eren Jaeger is a nearly inexhaustible resource. A part of her knows that if they can't find the answers they seek - if the White Rot takes them all, one by one - Eren will live on longer than any of them. Surely, his immune system must be as stubborn as he is.

"I hope they're still with us," Mikasa says.

"I wonder how Bertholdt and Christa are holding up," Eren says. Of the three of them, he is the one who shows no signs of wear and tear. He runs on determination, which in Eren Jaeger is a nearly inexhaustible resource. A part of her knows that if they can't find the answers they seek - if the White Rot takes them all, one by one - Eren will live on longer than any of them. Surely, his immune system must be as stubborn as he is.

"Have a little faith," Eren replies. In the red glow of the embers his eyes are huge and dark, and there's an innocence about him that she prays he'll never lose, though she knows that can never be so. Eren has seen more in his short life than most men see in fifty years. Who knows what the world looks like through those eyes. "We're going to figure this out, Mikasa. You and me and Levi. I understand why Danchou was worried but we're strong. And those we left behind are smart."

"We're badly outnumbered," Mikasa says.

"We've got Armin," Eren says, a reverent whisper.

Mikasa doesn't respond. She is not given to pessimism but someone needs to keep Eren's feet firmly on the ground. His confidence is infectious, though, and his instinct is powerful. Somehow, she finds herself believing, in spite of the odds, that perhaps they really can do this. Maybe they will get home. She imagines the look on Jean's face when they return through the gates, proud and upright and bearing all the answers in their open palms. Imagines the smile in Ymir's eyes when Christa begins to show signs of recovery, and the blood returning to her cheeks as the illness recedes. And Armin, bright and triumphant, his beautiful mind working in tandem with Hanji's to synthesise the cure.

It's a dangerous path to go down, and illusory to boot, but what else do they have now?

She watches Eren clean his blades. He is methodical, precise; this ritual is of his own creation but he follows it with the same care and dedication, working to a perfect rhythm. They wield deadly weapons like tools, their craft lethal by necessity. For Mikasa, her body is as important a weapon as her blade, and she hones her muscles the way she would the sharp edge of a knife. Out here, she can feel the accumulated sludge and dust of frustrated inactivity sloughing from her system. Clean air and motion, sunlight and the ache of overused muscles. She feels sharp, efficient. She feels good, at long last.

After a time, she gets up, stretches her legs. Her joints crackle briefly with disuse. The thought alarms her. "It's time to wake Heichou," she says. "I'll get the horses ready to leave." They're not skittish in the dark, and care has been taken to ensure they don't bolt at the scent of Titans. Jean, of all people, has proven a surprisingly adept stablehand, and under his care the animals seem calmer, hardier. Sometimes, a strength is not apparent until a person finds themselves in a new and unusual situation. She wonders how Jean is doing, if he has finally harnessed the power of his nervous energy or succumbed entirely to anxiety. If he's taking care of Armin, or if Armin is keeping him afloat instead.

She wonders how Annie would have coped with all of this. Her mind paints a picture. Sleepy blue eyes and perpetual frown, lifting gently at the corners at the lilt of Mikasa's voice. Lean muscles like wire beneath the skin. Fine golden hair like dandelion fuzz on her legs, soft beneath Mikasa's palms.
The unbearable smugness in her eyes as her deft, clever fingers worked between Mikasa's thighs, a maddeningly perfect rhythm; her other hand clamped gently across Mikasa's mouth, stifling her breathless cries. And afterwards, curled close beneath a shared blanket, the silent appreciation of one another's warmth and the sweet fullness of Mikasa's heart. She wonders if she'll ever feel that way again.

Mikasa is saddling Levi's horse when she hears Eren's voice, shrill and panicky in the dark. Her stomach drops like a rock, settling somewhere deep in the coils of her gut.

"He won't wake up." Eren's eyes are bright, his mouth a tight, terrified line. He kneels beside Levi, one hand clapping the other man's shoulder. Even in the dark, Mikasa can see the sheen of sweat glistening on Levi's skin. The thin runnel of blood marking a path from the corner of his mouth. "He's breathing, but he won't wake up."

No, Mikasa thinks, staring dumbfounded down at them both, heart stuttering low in her throat. Oh no. Now we are done for. Now we are damned.

* *

In the early hours of the morning Jean and Sasha sit side by side in the infirmary. A solemn, silent room, save for the laboured breathing of the sick and the occasional hitch of Sasha's throat. She isn't crying. She hasn't cried at all, not even when Connie awoke with sclera the colour of a freshly-slit throat, trembling with fever and muttering incoherently. Every now and again her eyes mist, and she swallows her sadness with a grit and determination that Jean - a boy barely in control of his emotions on a good day - can only admire, silently, hands laced tightly atop his knees. How did he come to be here, in this room, with these people? When he closes his eyes it's as though he can feel the sickness in the air around him, a malevolent presence waiting to close its fingers around his throat. Even now, his fear of the sickness is greater than that of losing his friends. Somewhere not so deep down, he despises himself for this.

He moves from bedside to bedside, keeping a futile vigil. The White Rot has made sad puppets of his friends, turning skin into paper, hair into straw. They breathe with mechanical regularity but the oxygen never seems to reach their lungs. The fluid dispersing into their veins might as well be sand. Hanji, Lindeman and Armin are all sequestered away in various hiding holes, working frantically to find the magic words, the miracle cure, but even their oversized intellects and mad flashes of brilliance can't breathe life back into the skin-and-bone marionettes lying silent in their beds. Every hour of continued survival is a gift.

An uncharacteristically harried-looking Hanji scurries past the infirmary, head down, hair scraped into a bizarre topknot. She doesn't pause to take vital statistics, to question Sasha or Jean. She must be on urgent business.

"They have to be close," Sasha says. "They've been working for so long." She too looks in danger of collapsing in on herself. She's barely moved from Connie's bedside. Jean knows things would be no different were their positions reversed. He doesn't know the nature of the love between the two of them, only that it is deep and unshakeable, and he sees no reason to ask any further questions on the matter.

Connie is not yet as diminished as Bertholdt and Christa. His skin is still flushed the bright pink of burst capillaries, the sheen of sweat still visible on the exposed ridge of his collarbones. The bandage that bind his chest have, on Hanji's orders, been removed from around his narrow ribcage; the small but prominent swell of his breasts is visible as a smooth curve beneath the sheets. They all know this about Connie, have tacitly agreed never to speak of it; in their training days, Reiner had always been Connie's fiercest champion, standing guard in the shower room, curtly correcting anyone who might
dare to refer to him as 'her'. This sudden exposure is an indignity on Connie's part, certainly, but it changes nothing about him, not to Jean or to Sasha, who each love him in their own fashion.

"They know what they're doing," Jean says.

"And Mikasa..." Sasha's fingers tighten around Connie's hand. "Does it sound strange when I say I feel braver when she's around? I feel like she can protect me from anything. I mean, I know we - all of us, we can protect ourselves, but...Mikasa...she's just...she's so strong. When she's not here..." She trails off. She doesn't have to continue.

"You're plenty brave," Jean says. He wishes he had Marco's gift for consolation and comfort, the way he could reassure with just a hand on the shoulder and a smile. "You didn't think twice about staying here with him, even though it puts you at risk. You never gave your own safety a second thought. Seems to me that's a pretty brave thing to do." He picks at the frayed edge of a sleeve; his clothes are grubby, and he thinks the heavy, gamey scent of old sweat is an equal contribution from both Sasha and himself. They are rank as animals and nobody cares. They have all the time in the world for laundry and long, luxurious baths but decency is a distant concern and, Jean thinks, the faint miasma of unwashed bodies is infinitely preferable to the sterile stink of the dying. "Brave, but also stupid as hell," he adds, and Sasha elbows him gently in the ribs. When he looks up, she is bedraggled and grey beneath the eyes but the soft smile on her lips is a tonic.

"Guess you're as stupid as I am," she says, voice soft. "I thought you didn't care about any of them much."

He remembers the unnatural heat of Armin's skin, the limp drape of his limbs. "I care," he says.

From behind them comes the whine of old bedsprings. They both turn, muscles tensed should they need to run for Lindeman. In the farthest bed, a mound of blankets shifts; it appears that Bertholdt is moving. A slow, questing hand makes its way across the sheets, reaching into the air with fingers outstretched. Searching. And above, the glimmer of a wide-open eye.

"Is Bertholdt awake?" Sasha leaps from her seat, skirt billowing behind her. She all but sprints the short distance to his bedside, coming to rest upon her knees beside him. Jean follows, slower, more cautious. Will there be blood? Are they witnessing the end in progress? But as he approaches, he hears the low murmur of voices and realises that Bertholdt is talking. By some miracle, he is awake.

Sasha looks up at him, cheeks flushed, eyes bright and beautiful. Her hands are wrapped around Bertholdt's, laughably small against the prodigious span of his palms. "He's back with us," she says, unable to hide the joy in her voice. "Should I get Hanji? We should get Hanji. Or Lindeman. Someone needs to know about this..."

"He's trying to speak," Jean says.

"Oh!" Her giddy enthusiasm is snuffed instantly out like a candle flame. She leans in, face pressed close to Bertholdt's; his lips move, but what emerges is a sound unlike human speech, the dry hiss of wind against old bones. Jean can't make sense of it, but Sasha seems to, straining her neck to decipher the whispered syllables. And when she turns back, afraid and suddenly very young, Jean already knows what it is Bertholdt is saying to her.

"Bertl's asking after Reiner."

Jean sighs. What is there but the truth? If those above them know why or where Reiner has fled, they're not letting on. Which leaves the rest of them firmly in the dark, knowing only that Reiner is no longer among them. They all know his disappearance is completely out of character, especially
Jean, who recalls the intensity in Reiner's eyes and immoveable set of his great shoulders - If he's going to die, I don't want him to die alone. What makes a man go back on such a proclamation? Jean, resolutely straightforward and therefore somewhat lacking in imagination, can think of only two possibilities. Either he ran towards something - the cure, Bertholdt's only shot at survival - or he ran away from something.

They've heard rumours. Insubstantial mutterings, impossible to piece together into anything solid. Ymir is being kept behind closed doors for reasons none of them understand, and Bertholdt's prolonged survival is a source of great confusion to the scientifically-minded among them. Jean does not know a great deal about science, nor does he believe in miracles. If Bertholdt has held on this long, then sheer force of will must, he is certain, play a part. But Ymir. Ymir is not sick, she has not broken down - not while Christa still breathes - and nobody will say why they've hidden her away. Violent dissent surfaces as a distinct possibility, a sort of furious rebellion. Why her beloved? By what act of cruelty does the universe dare to impose upon the sweet, improbable domesticity they have built together? He imagines Ymir in shackles, raging in the lonely dark of a basement cell, and concludes that this is not an unlikely scenario.

He kneels beside the bed. Bertholdt's eyes are barely open. Sasha looks to him expectantly and a part of him resents her for it: why couldn't you do this yourself? You know as much as I do. He forces himself to look Bertholdt in the eye. "We don't know where Reiner is," Jean says. What is the correct tone to take when delivering such news? "He disappeared not long after you became sick."

"Disappeared." The word is slurred and clumsy, but clear enough.

"Yes. His 3D gear is still here, but he's gone. As far as we know, there's no indication where he might be." He looks to Sasha, who nods her affirmation. "As far as we know."

Bertholdt’s thinness has left his profile aquiline, sharp nose jutting outwards. His forearms rest before his face, propped against the pillow. The dull, pinkish cast of recently-scarred skin is lurid in the light. "They ran tests?" he asks. He speaks in small bursts, as though each word costs him a great deal of energy.

"They had to," Sasha says. Her guilt is plain, but she remains admirably stoic. Her fingers tighten around his, her message implicit: we care too much about you to just let you die. "Others are sick now. Christa and Connie. They had to know what was making you ill, or else how would they be able to help you?"

Bertholdt says nothing. He looks as though he's too weary to really process any of it, but he rolls slowly onto his back, slipping his hands from Sasha's; even this slight motion takes a long time, and when he's done, he lets out a deep, rattling sigh. His lungs seem to deflate entirely. All the breath he has been holding is expelled in one long exhalation.

"I don't know where he's gone," Jean says, "but I know he didn't want to leave you. He fought to stay by your side." He fought to keep them from using you like a laboratory rat, he doesn't add, though he can feel Sasha tense beside him. He won't tell. She did what she had to. "He said he wouldn't let you die alone, and he meant it. If he's gone, it's because he had to go. You have to believe that, okay?"

Sasha's hand creeps into his, small and cold. He tries not to picture the virus crawling across her palm like some huge, repellent insect.

"I understand." Bertholdt says. His voice is strange. Resigned, almost. Then, after a moment: "Please, don't tell Hanji I'm awake."
Jean stares at the marks on Bertholdt's arms, wonders what kind of force was used in making them. Bertholdt is right. Better to keep it hidden until Hanji discovers it for herself. Let the boy rest some more. Let him regain his strength, if the sickness wills it - if this sudden return to consciousness is not just the prelude to his decline. (Whatever natural optimism ever existed within Jean is worn down to powder now.)

He looks to Sasha. "We won't say a word," he says, a notion with which she looks profoundly uncomfortable. But no dissent is forthcoming, so he rests his fingers lightly upon Bertholdt's arm, ignoring the crawl of his skin and the urge to pull sharply away. "We'll be here if you need us."

"You're not alone, Bertholdt," Sasha says. Her voice trembles; she sounds like she's crying, although her eyes remain stubbornly dry. "You never have been."

It's at that moment that Armin appears in the doorway, breathless and red-faced, lips a scarlet smear, and Jean barely has time to scramble to his feet when Armin collapses; utterly undramatic, all his strings cut at once. He falls to the floor and the only thing to cushion his fall is a similarly floorward-bound Jean, catching the other boy clumsily in his arms. Jean's head makes loud, undignified contact with the floor; a starburst of pain pulses out behind his eyes, rattling the roots of his molars, and through the red fog of this sudden concussion all he can hear is Armin's mumbled, feverish pleading, the boy like lit coals in his arms begging Jean to please, take me to Hanji, I've found it. I know how to fix it. I know how to fix everything.

* 

It's only when Levi is pressed against her - held upright by a loose framework of leather belts and his own semiconscious determination - that Mikasa realises just how fucking heavy he really is.

He's always looked astonishingly delicate, fragile as spring ice but deadly as the chill water beneath. But beneath the carefully-cut clothes and perfect posture are muscles as thick and strong as heavy-duty cord. His build is economical, compact; all that he is is condensed into this slender frame, and as a consequence handling his dead weight is like lifting granite. It takes Mikasa time to wrestle him up on the horse, struggling with straps and her own obstinate musculature to keep them both there.

Eren has gone on to Shiganshina. It's his own decision, and she had pleaded and cajoled and yelled at him to reconsider but in the end, his calm assurance won out. "I can do this," he'd said, serene even against the full force of her opposition. "I can't leave Reiner out there alone."

She'd watched him go. He hadn't looked back. Her heart felt crafted from lead, a heavy, ugly thing inside the cradle of her ribs.

Morning will come soon enough, and with it the Titans. Mikasa will not stop for them. They made it this far in a few hours shy of a full day; without stopping, they might make it back in twelve hours. And that might be enough. It will have to be enough.

She will bring Levi home alive.

* 

Armin does not know how much time elapses between collapsing to the infirmary floor and waking here, in this bunk, a sleeping Jean propped awkwardly on the floor beside him. The space between is populated by fragments: the taste of blood and Jean's fingers stained scarlet, the gentle pressure of Jean's arms around him as he's lifted into the air, weightless and dizzy. Hanji's hands, cold and merciless, poking and searching and his garbled explanation: it's the cells. The parallel process. Isolate the cells which enable regeneration. You can't stop apoptosis but you can counter it. It's in the
bones. The marrow.

And the look on Hanji's face, that mix of pride and pity when she says we already know.

They already knew. The fact is a globus in Armin's throat, and at this point missing the mark hurts almost as much as the burning of his muscles and the gnawing pain at his centre, a beartrap clenched around his stomach. They knew, and those hours spent fighting through the fog in his head like a man lost in the snow were for nothing. He might as well have crawled into bed and slept. Perhaps then he wouldn't be feeling so horrendous now.

They're taking cultures from Ymir's marrow. Working on a theory - aren't they always? - that the cells which enable Titan regeneration are not only compatible with human biology, but can differentiate into a multitude of cell types in order to stimulate the repair of damaged tissue. Furthermore, Hanji postulates, it's entirely possible that an organ damaged to the point of failure might be regenerated. If it works, there will be side effects; introducing Titan cellular matter into a human being in order to facilitate a process they ought never be capable of must, by the laws of biology, be fraught with the possibility of complications. And for that reason, Hanji is uncertain whether those in charge will approve such a risky venture. It hasn't stopped her trying it out, though; the last thing Armin remembers of her is a vial full of serum, glistening yellow, and the triumphant expression on her face as she held the syringe aloft.

(His brain hurts too much to fully comprehend anything Hanji has said to him, but one thing hits him: Eren's recollection, piecemeal, of his father wielding a wickedly large syringe, the burn of needle penetrating bone. It takes root in the bones. That's where it starts.

If it doesn't work, they are fucked. That, to Armin, is simple enough to understand.)

He remembers Jean requesting that Armin be allowed to rest in his own bed, and some kind of restrained verbal altercation which concluded with Jean scooping Armin up, a little rougher than Armin might have liked, quickly redeemed when Armin found himself ensconced within the familiar, comforting scent of Eren's sheets.

"You're still with us." Jean shifts, stiff-limbed, his tiredness evident in the blue bruises beneath his eyes. His legs are splayed awkwardly. He flexes his bare feet. "Guess that's a good sign. Has the good doctor been round with his miracle cure?"

"Hanji won't test her serum on me," Armin says. It's like there's a manacle clamped tight around his larynx, and it's hard to find the breath to power his speech. "She has too much invested in me. If it goes wrong, I'm the least dispensable."

"Huh." His neutrality sounds genuine. Perhaps he lacks the energy to power any emotional response. "How does that feel?"

"In a few hours, it won't matter at all."

Jean grimaces. "Don't say that."

"It's the truth." In his mind, he has drawn a diagram of his bodily systems. Which ones have already begun to degrade, which are likely to be next. Over the course of the evening the drop in red cells will likely induce a debilitating fatigue; blood leaking from his capillaries will place an unbearable pressure on his brain, and he will slip into a coma. Which will be an act of mercy, in truth, because he will not want to be awake when the rest of his body begins its dissolution.

"You have to have faith in Hanji."
"I have all the faith in the world in Hanji. Lindeman too. They did this together." He swallows, tasting blood, faint and acerbic. "But it's also possible that this thing is beyond our comprehension. It's funny, isn't it? We always thought Titans would herald our extinction, but not like this."

Jean rests his face against the mattress. His hair is a wild tangle, sticking up in clumps of dark gold and russet. "That's not funny in the slightest," he says, his eyes sad beneath their heavy lids.

And when Armin thinks about it - when he ceases to think of his body as an anatomical diagram, annotated and impersonal - he realises Jean is right. It isn't funny. It isn't interesting. Soon, he will begin to leak blood from every opening, and this nagging, restless pain will multiply, bearing down on him like a birth pang until he is ready to welcome the sweet oblivion of coma with wide-open arms. The likelihood that he will never wake again is a stark, ugly thing. He will slip into the black and in that moment he will want it more than anything in the world. More than he wants Hanji to be right. More than he wants to see Eren one last time before the end.

He's not sure if what slips down his cheek is a tear, or a droplet of blood.

"I'm scared," he says, after a moment, and Jean does not move but his eyes flick upwards, taking in the entirety of Armin's face. "I'm trying very hard not to be. I'm trying to believe that Lindeman and Hanji are right. But I hurt all over, and I can feel myself getting weaker, and..."

"It's okay," Jean says, so softly Armin can barely hear him. "I've been scared the entire time. It's okay to be scared, Armin. But I swear to you, I'm going to keep you alive."

"You can't make that promise," Armin says.

"Watch me," Jean replies. His jaw is set, muscles tight, and Armin has not seen such determination in Jean Kirschtein's face since Annie in her crystal. How a person can believe, with such fervour, that they can halt the progress of a deadly virus simply through force of will is utterly beyond Armin's comprehension, and at any other time he might find the entire thing risible. But right now, all he can think of is Eren, and his unshakeable belief in the unlikeliest things, and he misses him so badly he can hardly stand it.

He cries silently, chest aching with the force of each suppressed sob. After a short while, he feels the sudden give of the mattress as Jean clammers up, slipping quietly into the space between Armin and the wall. One arm forms a protective cage around Armin's shoulders, drawing him close. The other reaches up, fingers smoothing away the sweat-matted mess of Armin's hair. Jean's chin rests atop Armin's head; each slots into the vacant space of the other like they were built for this. He presses his back against Jean's chest, feeling the bones of him, the steady drum-beat of his heart. Taking solace in the solidity of him. He thinks - though he cannot be sure - that the heat of Jean's body is verging on the feverish.

"He's coming back to you," Jean murmurs. "I'm going to keep you safe until he does."

And for a moment, Armin believes in him.

They're drifting into a fitful doze when the door creaks open, loud in the silence. There stands Sasha, hesitant, calling out in her small voice. She sounds a long way away. When she moves closer, coming into the light, Armin can see the tears flowing freely down her face, the tight downturn of her mouth; her lower lip trembles as she fights to control herself. Jean shifts behind him, propping himself up on a single elbow.

"Jean, we lost him." Her hands are pressed together, held against her heart as though it's the only thing keeping it from breaking in two. Her voice is thick. She's been crying a while. Armin feels the
breath catch in Jean's chest, the almost imperceptible tightening of his hand on Armin's shoulder. "We lost him. Bertholdt's gone."

*

"Surely this means you’re wrong about all of it?"

Erwin has barely slept, and to judge by Hanji’s inability to stand still, neither has she. Her nerves are fried, sparking at random; Erwin wonders how well her judgement can be trusted. He dismisses the thought immediately. He’s seen Hanji in worse states, and she has never been wrong yet. Still, there’s a first time for everything.

“No,” Hanji replies. She’s perched on the edge of his desk, hunched over, a perfect replica of Levi save for the glimmer of her optics in the red light of sunrise. Her legs jerk periodically, violently. She needs rest. It’s a miracle her immune system hasn’t already caved in, though she shows no signs of illness; she smells horrendous but there’s no fever about her skin, no flush in her cheeks. “We’re not wrong, Erwin. This serum is the answer, I swear it. Tobias and I are not wrong. Titan cells are pluripotent. I’ve seen the same cell culture stimulate the growth of hepatic cells, renal cells and cardiomyocytes. The capacity for repair and regrowth is beyond what Tobias and I anticipated. This works, Erwin.”

A headache has taken root in the deep spaces behind his eyes. It’s a familiar ache; he should be wearing optics, but he’s scarcely had the time to have a pair fitted. “Then explain why a boy - a Titan-shifter, and therefore in natural possession of the very cells you’re transplanting into my recruits as a cure – should die so suddenly, after showing signs of improvement?”

“Sasha Braus says Bertholdt spoke,” Hanji says. “That doesn’t necessarily indicate a major improvement.”

“Regaining consciousness after several days seems like an improvement to me.”

“It’s not that simple.” Hanji sighs. She smoothes grease-stringy hair back from her face, pulling the straps of her optics up so that they rest atop her forehead. Bright red pressure marks indicate the position of her optics upon her nose, around her eyes. “You’re right about one thing. Logically, Bertholdt ought to have survived without our intervention. His human biology succumbed to the virus, but his own Titan biology should have repaired the damage. One would expect the illness to take a much shorter course, improving rapidly once his body recognised the process. By all indications, this is precisely what had begun to happen. Blood samples taken immediately post-mortem show a small improvement in red cell count. But Erwin…what happened to Bertholdt isn’t as simple as science would have it. You’re forgetting that in all illness, there is an emotional and psychological component.”

Erwin leans back in his chair. There is a porcelain cup before him filled with black tea that has been cold for almost a day. A waste of expensive resources. “What point are you making?”

“Bertholdt’s physical condition was beginning to improve. Given six to twelve hours, he might even have been in a position where we could accurately consider him in recovery. But that didn’t happen. His death is illogical, yes, and I can only conclude that physiological causes weren’t solely to blame. A few hours before his death, Sasha and Jean Kirschtein report speaking with Bertholdt. They say he asked after Reiner.” She pauses, running her tongue over her lips; she’s considering her words very carefully which, to Erwin, indicates an insinuation of fault on his part. Fine, he thinks. Let her say her piece. “Since neither Sasha nor Jean knew the details of Reiner’s disappearance, they were only able to state the fact. No reassurances could be given. It’s my opinion…Tobias’ too…that he simply gave up.”
“Gave up.”

The ensuing silence lasts no longer than a heartbeat, but it is excruciating.

“Yes,” Hanji says. “In literature, you see it referred to as ‘death from a broken heart’. In his weakened state, and with the emotional trauma of Reiner’s disappearance – ostensibly, his running away – well, Erwin, he just stopped fighting. Presumably, he suppressed his Titan biology and let the virus destroy him.”

“It wouldn’t have been right to tell them,” Erwin says, though he’s not as certain as he sounds. “Fostering suspicion among one’s allies when we ought to be pulling together…especially after Leonhardt.” He shakes his head. The headache is nagging away like teeth gnawing at his grey matter. “I stand by my decision. Putting the unity of the Corps at risk at a time like this simply wasn’t an option.”

“I don’t disagree with you,” Hanji says. Without her optics, her eyes look small and dull. She draws her legs up to her chest, wrapping long arms around her knees. Suddenly, she resembles a very young, very tired child.

“For god’s sake, Hanji,” Erwin says, gentler now. “You’ve done all you can do. Until I speak with the minister for health, you should consider yourself at rest. And please, do rest. The last thing any of us needs is for you to drop dead before we cure this.”

“And after we cure it?”

Erwin quirs a small smile. “After we cure it, you can drop dead whenever you please. Now, to bed please, Squad Leader.” He gives a small, mock-dismissive wave of his hand. The gratitude in her smile is genuine. It lights up her face, reminds Erwin of when they were both young and vibrant and filled to the brim with optimism. She slips from the desk – not cat-silent like Levi, but clumsy, feet thudding against the floorboards – and weaves her weary way to Erwin’s bed, where she collapses bonelessly. He scarcely has time to reprimand her, and by the time she’s done cocooning herself deep within the sheets he’s lost the will entirely.

He’ll have to change the sheets before Levi comes back. God knows this entire room is mahrime enough without Hanji’s presence to complicate matters further. Perhaps he’ll be able to track down more salt, do the job properly. Perhaps it would even raise a smile.

He’s still thinking of Levi, the salt glistening crystalline in his palm, when he drops off to sleep, still sitting upright at his desk.

*

Erwin is startled awake by the sound of knuckles against the door, timorous at first but growing louder the longer he fails to answer. He shifts in his seat, groaning inwardly at the terrible stiffness of his limbs; his neck aches from the awkward angle it’s been listing at. I’m getting old, he thinks, rising slowly from his chair. The pops and clicks issuing loudly from his joints only serve to reinforce this assertion. Across the room, bathed in fading yellowish sunlight (just how long has he slept?) Hanji is the picture of serenity, her sleeping limbs tangled happily in the bedsheets.

At the door is Sasha Braus. She’s dressed in her civilian clothes, looking every inch the timid country girl he knows she is not. She is tired and ragged but she stands straight, snaps him a perfect salute. “Commander Smith,” she says. “A Minister Loren is here to see you.”

Erwin blinks. The meeting with the Minister for Health had been scheduled for the evening. It is impossible to tell just by observing the sky, but the position of the sun - low down and burning bright
- suggests late afternoon. The Minister is early, but he has slept far longer than intended. He glances over at Hanji, crashed out in the corner, contemplates shifting the meeting elsewhere but the building is haunted by the sick and the dying, and Erwin's patience for propriety has worn desperately thin.

"Fetch the Minister, please," Erwin says. He straightens his clothing, smooths his hair into the approximation of a neat side-parting. With everything they've had to deal with, surely the Minister will forgive him the informal reception.

Minister Loren is a thin, sallow man, pale skin the jaundiced hue of old parchment. His eyes are a wide, watery blue, and when Sasha introduces him Erwin notes that his handshake is as limp as a dead fish. He doesn't consider this a good sign.

"Please," Erwin says, stepping aside so that the Minister can enter. The other man casts a sharp glance over at Erwin's cluttered desk, and beyond, at Hanji bundled upon the bed like a sleeping child. "I must apologise for my lack of decorum," Erwin says. "It's been rather a fraught few days, and Squad Leader Hanji is quite exhausted. Thank you for coming all this way on such short notice."

"Yes, well..." Loren's voice is deceptively low, far deeper than befitting of his wispy stature. A chair sits before Erwin's desk but he does not take it, opting instead to stand. "Commander Smith, I'm afraid this is a most unorthodox situation..."

"I trust you've been briefed?"

"Yes." He stares for a moment, like he's unaccustomed to being interrupted. "I shall get straight to the point. What Tobias Lindeman is proposing is madness. Sheer madness. And you, Commander Smith...to be informed that you are somehow in favour of this insanity is beyond my understanding. I'm aware that the remit of the Survey Corps extends to the unusual, but I have long considered you the lone voice of reason. That's why Sina allows you the autonomy to operate as you do. But the matter has been discussed at some length, and it is without hesitation that I inform you that we at Sina cannot and will not support what you are proposing."

"Thousands more will die." He looks Loren directly in the eye, noting the way the smaller man shrinks slightly at the intensity of his gaze. Erwin has little authority in Sina, but they are not in Sina now, and on Erwin's territory this watery-eyed whisper of a man is very out of his depth. "Lindeman's estimates have ninety percent of the population behind the Walls dead within two months if we do not act immediately. Already, we've lost somewhere between forty to sixty percent. Those remaining will suffer extreme food shortages as our agricultural system fails through sheer lack of manpower. Within two months, Minister Loren, we will be as good as extinct."

"This is conjecture."

"Have you been out among your people, Minister Loren? Have you personally witnessed how fast this sickness spreads? How quickly it kills? I have." His voice is calm, even, mindful of Hanji asleep across the room. In the eyes of the men in Sina, to lose one's temper undermines even the most legitimate of arguments. Erwin has learned this through years of careful observation. He is aware of the traps these men set for their perceived inferiors. "Professor Lindeman and Squad Leader Hanji have studied this virus as thoroughly and carefully as possible, and if they tell me this serum is the answer, then I trust them absolutely."

"Tobias Lindeman is an officious crackpot of a Negro who receives funding solely to keep him from becoming a nuisance." Loren stands whipcrack-straight, and his eyes blaze with a sudden ferocity. "I would no more trust his assessment on the matter than I would that of a horse. And Hanji Zoe is no scientist, Commander Smith, however...esoteric her areas of expertise may be."
"I trust in my own observations," Erwin replies, matching steel with steel; geniality be damned, if this man wants to assert his authority he'll have to damn well fight for it. "And my observations are sufficient proof that Lindeman and Hanji know what they're talking about. I have been locked in with this sickness, Minister. I have seen it raze through my recruits and I have seen Lindeman proven right every step of the way. Such is my faith that I will gladly have this serum tested on my own men, and report back to Sina with the results myself. Will you grant me this, at least?"

Loren scoffs, but there's a slump to his shoulders and Erwin knows he had not come expecting resistance. "You'd put your own at risk? For what, Smith? For pride? For that fool of a professor?"

"For the lives of my recruits," Erwin says. In the corner of his eye he sees Hanji stirring. Rising from the bed, offering him a sleepy smile - Loren may as well not be there at all for all the mind she pays him. "I have already lost a man today. I am not prepared to lose any more. Either you grant me official permission to test this serum, or I will do it anyway and when Sina are on my doorstep, praying to share in our salvation, I will politely remind them that Lindeman is an 'officious crackpot of a Negro' and send them on their way." He plucks his teacup between his thumb and forefinger, sipping delicately; it tastes foul and bitter but there's something definitive about the act, an offhandedness that punctuates his polite tirade quite wonderfully. "I leave the decision in your hands, Minister."

"By god, Smith, I..."

"Erwin." Hanji's voice floats across the room from the window, where she is stood, hands pressed against the glass. "Something is happening outside."

"The Minister's escort must have arrived. What fortuitous timing..."

"No," Hanji says. When she turns, her brow is knotted in panic. "A rider. Looks to have come from the Wall. Just one horse, Erwin."

Erwin swallows hard. The acid in his gullet tastes something like fear.

"Squad Leader," he says, managing somehow to keep his voice steady, his posture firm. "Would you be so kind as to show Minister Loren to the infirmary? I believe it would be very motivating for the recruits to see just how seriously Sina takes our plight."

Loren splutters, reaching a hand out to Erwin as he passes by. "Now, I don't think..."

Hanji salutes. "Commander."

It is only when he is several strides out into the hallway, and certain that nobody is behind him that Erwin breaks into a run.

* *

She steps into the doorway, stinking of horse sweat and soaked through with perspiration that is not her own. And he watches her come, bearing in impossibly strong arms a green-cloaked bundle which cannot possibly be what he thinks it is. His stomach is a clenched fist, lungs full to bursting. Her eyes are wide and frightened; it is only her who has returned, windburnt and breathless and clinging to what she carries as though it is incredibly precious. She steps into the doorway, and the afternoon light forms a hazy corona around her, rendering her angelic; in here, in the relative dark of the hallway, she comes into focus.

"I came as soon as I could," she says, and holds out her arms.
A flash of green fabric falls away. Beneath the hood, revealed, those dark, sullen eyes shut tight, lashes like palm fronds against bright-flushed cheeks. Hair soaked through with sweat and clinging to his forehead. Erwin's heart aches to behold him, fragile as a porcelain doll, skin burning with an intensity he can barely stand. Humanity's strongest, this ferocious powerhouse of a human being diminished to a scrap of skin and cloth in Mikasa Ackerman's arms.

And what can be done? Levi, so mistrustful of physicians, so leery of medicine and all it entails. He knows physicians are mahrime, that the infirmary is a deeply impure place and god only knows what a serum made from Titan cell cultures would mean to Levi. But everything comes down to this choice, and Erwin does not know how to make it alone.

Give Levi the serum, or let him die.

He has always tried to maintain a careful respect for Levi's beliefs and superstitions, accommodating his strange rituals with a quiet neutrality. He has never wanted it to come to this. Levi's beliefs are not his to question, but in this moment he feels he has no other option. What good is it to keep the old ways alive if there is nobody left to mark them? If Levi dies, everything – mahrime, wuzho, the things he believes in so fervently – will die with him. And if he lives...

If you live, Erwin thinks, swallowing the glut of emotion threatening to spill from his chest, I pray you'll forgive me for what I'm about to do.

"Give him to me," Erwin says. He hears his own voice from very far away; he sounds strangely calm. Silently, Mikasa steps forward, and he takes Levi from her, noting the tremble of her overtaxed muscles as he slips Levi into the sling of his open arms. He is surprisingly heavy, but his body – this perfect cradle of skin and bone and muscle – feels empty, as though Levi no longer resides there. The thought makes his heart ache.

Callused fingers caress the sweat-slick curve of Levi’s jaw, feeling the slow but definite beat of his pulse.

He always knew he would lose Levi someday, but not like this. Never like this.

“Forgive me,” he murmurs, “for my selfishness.”

He turns. Sees Hanji, wild-haired, holding herself with a terrible slack-limbed fragility. She looks like she might fall apart at any moment. She looks like Erwin feels.

“Take me to Tobias,” Erwin says.

* 

As the sun sets over Shiganshina, a bright streak in the sky like an arterial splash, Eren Jaeger picks through the weed-choked rubble of what was once his home, heading towards a familiar silhouette on the near horizon.

He knows these streets by touch, by instinct; even with all the lost years and the utter destruction, he knows where he is, where he’s standing, what he’ll see when he turns around. The shattered glass glistening among the smashed redbrick of the old bakery; the gnarled silver birch which, somehow, has grown strong and beautiful despite the ugliness surrounding it. He breathes in clean air and tastes snow.

His feet ache miserably. The horses are tethered at the town entrance, sheltered beneath the eaves of
a long-abandoned church. The ground here is so uneven and unstable that riding them any further 
would have been far too risky. He wants to get home. He wants to return before it’s too late. But his 
purpose here is not done.

The silhouette comes into slow focus as he approaches, feet light against the rubble. They are quite a 
way from his home, still, and Reiner sits beneath the shelter of a front porch, head in his hands; he 
must have lost his way. Shiganshina always was a maze of streets, a jigsaw puzzle of a town built in 
layers, and this is not Reiner’s territory.

“You couldn’t find it,” Eren says.

Reiner looks up. His heavy-shadowed eyes are a raw pink, his face smeared with soot and grime. He 
looks twenty pounds lighter and five years younger, shoulders hanging limp from their sockets. 
Whatever will he once possessed has dwindled to mere ashes.

“No,” Reiner says, after a long time. His voice is rough with disuse.

Eren settles beside him on the porch, and Reiner shifts to accommodate him. He turns his face up to 
the sun, feeling the warmth of it on his skin. His fingers flex. It feels good just to sit. Just to be.

“You can still come home,” Eren says.

He feels Reiner tense beside him, but he doesn’t look. He allows the other boy his privacy.


“Whatever you did…whatever reason you had to run…it doesn’t matter anymore.” He closes his 
eyes. If he’s very still, very quiet, he can almost imagine he’s back in his mother’s garden. He smells 
pine needles and wet loam, damp wood and brick dust. “Things are different. They have to be. What 
matters is that we face this together. You’re still one of us, Reiner, and nothing you’ve done will 
change that. We have to do right by one another now. All of us.”

“I don’t know how.”

“Start by coming home.”

When he looks up at Reiner, his eyes are bright with tears, caught in the pale forest of his eyelashes. 
Eren places a gentle hand on Reiner’s forearm and he turns, catches Eren’s gaze and holds it, eyes 
desolate, mouth grim. There is a deep and awful fear in the hard lines of his face, the loose cord of 
his spine. He has never seen Reiner afraid before. He hoped he never would.

“Bertholdt needs you,” Eren says.

Reiner stands, slow and ponderous, like he’s forgotten how to move. Like he’s sat here so long he’s 
begun to turn to stone. He looks out across Shiganshina, gaze moving across the levelled landscape, 
over half-ruined buildings turned a brilliant green with moss. Their eaves are thick with ivy. 
Amazing, Eren thinks, how life goes on without us.

“Okay,” Reiner says.

And they go, together.

Chapter End Notes
Please turn left at the sign for your complimentary hug and packet of tissues. You have been wonderful. Thank you.

End Notes

if you're still reading this, and don't yet want to strangle me...thank you

And if you want to punch me for being cruel to your favourite character, my tumblr is here. Come and say hello, I like talking to people about stuff.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!