

THE COMBAT BAKER AND AUTOMATON WAITRESS

VOLUME 9

Story by SOW
Art by Zaza



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**“Jacob...
is that
you?”**

Meeting his
child for the
first time,
Blitzdonner
didn't know
what to say.
But, his son's
reply was
short.



**“This
can't
be!”**

**THE COMBAT
BAKER AND
AUTOMATON
WAITRESS
9**

**“Happy
birthday,
Sven!”**

Lud's voice
was kind.





“Sophia...
What
is this?
The full
service?!”



“Oh...
You two
have that
kind of
relation-
ship?!”

“Nooooo!!”

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Prologue

When did I first meet her? I think it was soon after I assisted in the slaughter of Lapchuricka and was deemed unfit as a special operations soldier. The Hunter Unit division had been hastily organized and there weren't enough people capable of handling the complicated new weapons, so they drummed up people like me.

Now that I think about it, Captain... or Sophia, may also have had an influence. It was hard for me to deal with people. I'm still not good at it, but I was even worse back then. Talking to people, looking at them or being looked at by them made me afraid in some way. I felt like a monster infiltrating a group of human beings and pretending to be human myself. I was scared of any contact with other people. Maybe that's why encountering something that wasn't human was a kind of salvation for me.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Warrant Officer Lud Langart."

Assignments had been in numerical order, and I met her in the cockpit of the mass-produced weapon. She wasn't human but she spoke human language. To her, I was no different than any other human being. When I realized that, it must have made me feel better, because I was suddenly a halfway decent partner in conversation.

"Nice to meet you. Starting today, you're my partner, huh?" I was able to casually reply. I adjusted my seat, checked the location of levers and pedals, and started up the system. Lastly, I was told to choose a name for her.

I thought a moment. It wasn't like naming a cat or a dog. I was naming a partner to whom I would be entrusting my life. I thought hard about the right name. And what came out was...

"Avei... How's that?"

What does it mean? Oh, right. It's from an old language and it means something like "hello" or "congratulations." It's a blessing.

Later, I thought it was a pretty ironic name. “Hello” as the name for a weapon rushing across the battlefield? “Congratulations” for a dangerous machine firing flame and overrunning the enemy position? A god of death would definitely identify itself with a better name. But that was the name I chose.

Perhaps it was a *wish* on my part. A wish that someday—in response to something or perhaps through a mistake—the blessing of a happy encounter would happen to this mechanical doll, despite carrying a monster like me.

That was how I met her. How I met Avei... and Sven.

Introduction

“Unexpected things happen in life.” This is a tired sentiment. Everyone knows it’s overused, but they say it anyway. Most likely, human beings said it one thousand years ago, and they probably will one thousand years from now. Perhaps the truth is *always* that way.

An old musician once left behind a masterpiece, saying, “Thus, fate knocks on the door!” However, in reality, fate is not so courteous. It doesn’t knock on the door even once. It comes suddenly—and in a rush. Indeed, just like two middle-aged men suddenly appearing out of the sky...

“Where... are we?”

“Oh my! What a...”

General Douglas Meitzer from the large nation of Noah, who claimed to be Sven’s father, had visited and then abruptly left... Mechanical soldiers had attacked... And Sophia and others came to the rescue... It all happened so quickly, literally turning Tockerbrot, a bakery in Organbaelz, into a war zone. Then still more visitors unexpectedly arrived.

“You’re... Daian!! B-But how?!” Sophia von Rundstadt, Lud’s former senior officer and a major in the Principality of Wiltia’s military, spoke with a voice that suggested she was having a particularly nasty daydream.

“Major Blitzdonner!! How?!” Rebecca Sharlahart was a humanoid Hunter Unit created at the Royal Weapons Development Bureau, just like Tockerbrot’s popular waitress Sven. She exclaimed with a voice that sounded like a nun witnessing God descending to Earth.

Daian Fortuner was a genius scientist known as the Sorcerer, and Blitzdonner was a Wiltian hero feared as the Crimson Hawk—and the two men had just materialized out of nowhere. They had been in some kind of danger but mysteriously escaped and landed in Organbaelz.

“Hmm... Interesting. I see... Hanussen’s transportation magic has produced a strange effect.” Daian feigned ignorance.

Hanussen, the Royal Magician, had performed magic, which transferred them to this location. The magic she used was real. Lud had experienced it on another occasion. She could bend dimensions and transfer objects to faraway places. If the objects weren’t human, there was no problem. But in the case of transferring people, their thoughts could influence the way the dimensions bent.

“I carelessly thought of Sophia, wherever she was, and that caused this miracle!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I’m gonna thrash you anyway!”

Daian was often told that Clown was a better nickname for him than Sorcerer. His words—offered with no explanation—only angered Sophia.

“What’s going on?” Sven was confused too.

A moment earlier, something happened that had rocked her very existence. Before she recovered from that shock, Daian—whom she hadn’t seen for a long time—suddenly appeared. Events were happening so quickly that even the extraordinary speed of a humanoid Hunter Unit couldn’t keep up.

“Ughhh...” That was also true for another humanoid Hunter Unit. “M-Major?! What are *you* doing here?! No, that doesn’t really matter! Waaaaah!”

Rebecca, who had red hair and eyes, and wore a red dress, was a cyborg too, with a mechanical body like Sven’s. She had once belonged to Blitzdonner, who now stood before her. While her dedication differed from that expressed by Daian about Sophia, Rebecca—usually cool and collected—was too confused to speak as she faced her master, whom she thought about when awake and asleep, from morning to night.

“Sharlahart... Why are you... Hey, where am I?”

“This... this is Organbaelz!” Despite her confusion, she answered her master’s question. But not without stuttering a little.

“Organbaelz, huh? Which means...” Blitzdonner’s confused eyes darted

around. In addition to Rebecca, he saw Sophia throttling Daian, a stunned Sven and Lud, Hilde looking confused, Lillie rubbing her cheek against Hilde's, and... "Jacob... is that you?"

And there was Jacob, an eleven-year-old boy.

"Huh...?" Jacob was confused. It was understandable. The man who had suddenly appeared, the man whose face he somehow recognized because it looked like the face he saw in the mirror every morning, was staring at him as if Jacob was his son.

"Jacob... That man is..." Rebecca sensed the uncomfortable atmosphere and was confused—in a different way than earlier—about what to do.

Jacob didn't know much about his father. His mother, grandfather and his friend Lud knew about his father, but they didn't tell him very much. Although mature for his age, Jacob was still a child, so no one had told him that his father was alive and was the ace pilot praised as the best in the principality's military. Even Rebecca hadn't told him.

"Um..."

"Could that man be..." Jacob directed his question at Rebecca. "Is he... my father?"

Jacob was an intelligent boy. Seeing the reactions around him... he had intuited the answer.

"Um... uh... It's been awhile... Erm... What should I say?" Blitzdonner had once turned twelve Augustan autonomous tanks into scrap in three minutes, but now he couldn't find any words to say to his son.

He knew about Jacob. Sometimes, he secretly came to watch Jacob and the boy's mother—his former lover—from a distance. However, he never told them he was alive or spoke with them face-to-face. They were father and son, but Jacob had no recollection of ever meeting Blitzdonner.

"Um, uh..." Meeting his child for the first time, Blitzdonner didn't know what to say. But his son's reply was short.

"This can't be!"

“What?!” His voice was calm. Or rather, it was *disappointed*. “What do you mean this can’t be?” Blitzdonner was stunned.

“Jacob...?” Rebecca was confused.

“No, this can’t be. No, no, no...” Jacob spoke lightly, but with a firm will, making an X with his arms in denial of reality. As he talked, he drew back.

“Lud?” Ignoring his father, who had frozen during this first meeting with his son, Jacob addressed Lud, his friend and the shop owner. “Sorry, but... I’m going home now. Let me know if anything comes up. I’ll help in any way I can.” As usual, his tone was casual. It was weird precisely *because* his behavior wasn’t unusual.

“Oh... all right.” Lud could only make a vague reply.

Then Jacob turned to Sven. “Sven, thanks for everything. Good work today.”

“Uh, yeah...” Sven couldn’t say anything either.

“See you later.” Then Jacob left, as if he had nothing more to say. And he walked out, without once looking at Blitzdonner, the father he had just met for the first time.

“.....”

“M-Major...?” Rebecca spoke hesitantly to Blitzdonner, who stood unmoving. She had never seen him look this way.

“What did he mean this can’t be?!” The Crimson Hawk cried out and collapsed to the floor.

“Major!! Please, pull yourself together!!” The red girl tried desperately to cheer her master.

“Are you mocking me?!”

“Ah ha ha! Sophia, your love is so strong it hurts. In fact... I can’t breathe!” Daian was turning purple within Sophia’s clutches.

“I do not understand what is happening. Only one thing is certain in this world. *Love*.”

“Stop touching me, Lillie!” Nearby, Lillie was pulling Hilde into her obsession.

“Skwawk!” And, for no particular reason, the penguin was there, too.

“Jacob was the most decent person here, and he left.” Sven sighed as she surveyed the chaos.

This was the beginning of Tockerbrot’s Earthshaking Nine Days.

Chapter 1: A First Day of Mismatched Feelings

Tockerbrot had been damaged many times. Since Sven had come to the shop, windows had been shattered, there was a shootout, ruffians had barged in, and—to top it off—the shop had been totaled in a fire. Each time, the shop was rebuilt, remodeled, extended, and returned to life. In a way, the bakery was indestructible.

“Well now...” It was nighttime. Sven was mumbling in the dark as she surveyed the half-demolished shop.

Tockerbrot was in horrible shape, with toppled walls and a collapsed roof after the sudden attack by mechanical soldiers. This was better than the last time, at least. Only the sales space was destroyed. The oven room in the back of the shop remained mostly undamaged.

The repairs themselves won't be that hard.

A bakery's oven room is designed with the utmost care. When baking bread, a baker ferments the yeast, allows the dough to rise, and bakes it in the oven. To that end, the baker needs the right structure and environment for fermentation, and an oven suited to baking. And the baker's careful adjustments are necessary to maintain that environment.

In contrast, the main role of the sales space was to be the shop's public face. It could be repaired in the same way as fixing a private residence. Even a tent can provide protection from rain and wind.

“I'll have to summon the carpenters.” It was late, so there was nothing Sven could do about the shop today. “Well...” Besides, she had another problem to solve.

“... *sob... sob...*” A man was crouched and sobbing in the corner of the half-destroyed shop.

“Excuse me. Would you mind getting out of here?” Sven spoke to Blitzdonner, the crying man, with a look of exasperation.

His son Jacob had rejected him and walked out, and he hadn't moved from that spot since.

"What are you saying, Svelgen Avei?! How can you talk to the major in his sorrow like that?!" Blitzdonner wasn't alone. Rebecca had stayed to console him, and now sounded accusatory.

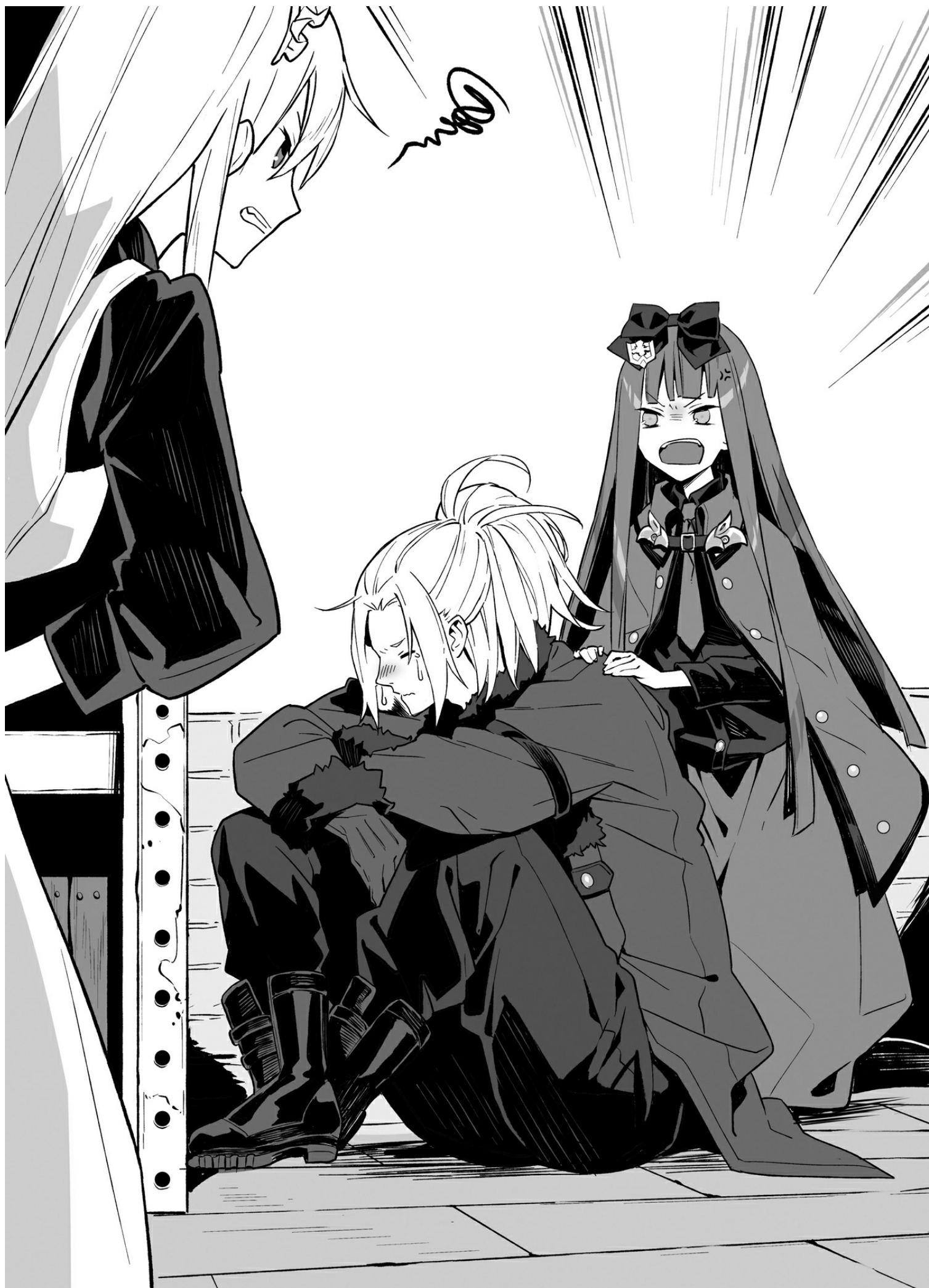
"But he's in the way. I hate to point it out, but it was actually *considerate* of me to leave him alone until now."

Sven had dealt with the people who came to the shop after hearing the fighting and explosion, and she managed them without any difficulty. Blitzdonner had been weeping behind her the whole time, and it was quite... No, it was *greatly* annoying.

"You're cruel, Svelgen! Are you cold-blooded?!"

"My blood is just like yours. I don't *have* any," Sven replied calmly to Rebecca's accusation.

Sven and Rebecca were humanoid Hunter Units. They reproduced movement that closely resembled human musculature by storing enormous electricity generated by a rezanium reactor—the power source in their chests—in a condenser and delivering it through power conduits to fluid pulse mechanisms. If the simulacrum of bodily fluid flowing through those mechanisms was blood, then their blood was white.



“The major just talked to his son for the first time, and the boy’s cold treatment traumatized him!”

“Yeah, but...”

Rebecca was usually calm, but she lost control when it came to Blitzdonner and his son Jacob. Sven was the same way about Lud.

Blitzdonner and Lud had given Rebecca and Sven their “hearts.”

Argh! I sort of understand how she feels, but...

Sven recognized Rebecca’s feelings about Blitzdonner, as well as the man’s sadness. However, Sven wasn’t in any condition to worry about others.

“What should I do?”

During the recent battle, Lud finally found out the truth. He discovered that Sven wasn’t human.

When I think about it with a clear head, it’s actually strange he didn’t figure it out before.

Sven’s external appearance was that of a good-looking girl, slender and elegant. If she had lied and said, “I’ve never carried anything heavier than a rose,” people would believe her. She was a beauty with a fragile appearance. But, despite that appearance, what had she been up to?

I’ve been kicking butt—wiping out terrorists, trashing tanks and trouncing mechanical soldiers.

She had achieved a combat record unthinkable—not just for a normal girl, but for a highly trained veteran. Nonetheless, Lud had never asked if she was human.

Master probably noticed a long time ago but didn’t ask. For my sake, he pretended not to notice.

Instead of forcing her to answer, he waited for her to offer the information herself. He assumed she hadn’t told him for a reason, so he pretended not to notice.

The captain is that kind of person.

Sven knew Lud was such a man. And she realized she was overly dependent upon his kindness. She wondered, however, if that was the only reason.

Perhaps I was...

She recognized that the feeling was irrational.

No, that can't be... It's too illogical.

She immediately shook her head and dismissed the idea. It was out of the question.

Anyway, Master will be back soon.

There were unexpected visitors in and out of Tockerbrot. The mysterious Meitzer, who claimed to be Sven's father, had left. And Jacob had gone home. Sophia said she would stay in town for a while to finish cleaning matters up before reporting to a nearby Wiltian military base. Hilde, Lillie, and the penguin—who was still around for some reason—were to stay at Marlene's church atop the hill. But Daian's presence was unsettling.

Sven had almost forgotten she was a prototype that escaped from the Royal Weapons Development Bureau, of which Daian was director. Daian had seen her with his own eyes, but left without saying anything. And he hadn't returned to Berun, the royal capital. He said he would stay awhile at a nearby hotel.

I have no idea what he's thinking...

Some people said that only a crazy person could fathom the mind of Daian Fortuner. His thoughts were that mysterious. Even the humanoid Hunter Units Sven and Rebecca had given up trying to guess what filled that man's head.

Lud was giving Daian and Sophia a ride in the shop truck.

"....."

What should Sven say when he came back? She had no idea what expression to make, or what to say. She was unsure and afraid. She was frightened of facing the person she most wanted to see.

"—!"

Just then, almost as if sensing her trepidation, the door of the shop opened.

The cowbell over the door clanged. Without turning around, Sven knew who was standing there. And that wasn't because of her sensors as a humanoid Hunter Unit. She could feel his presence even without sensors.

"I'm back, Sven." Lud's voice came from behind her.

"W-Welcome back..." Sven squeezed words out somehow, but she didn't have the courage to turn around. She had appointed herself Lud's faithful servant, and had said, from the bottom of her heart, that she wouldn't hesitate to die for him. But today was the first time she was rude and didn't face her master.

"Oh, Major! You're still here?" Lud didn't seem to mind. Instead, he turned in surprise to Blitzdonner, who remained crouching on the floor. Lud had retired from the military, but its customs had stayed with him. He spoke politely to Blitzdonner, who was a senior officer. "I thought you left, Sir."

"What?! Former Captain Langart!! Are *you* treating the major like a nuisance, too?!" Rebecca raged at Lud, her eyes blazing.

Lud had spoken with Rebecca before. During Genitz's rebellion, they engaged in a joint operation.

"N-No, I didn't mean it that way..." Nonetheless, he had never seen Rebecca so emotional. He was dismayed and wanted to help. "Um, I don't know anything about your circumstances, but do you have a place to stay tonight?"

Blitzdonner's only relatives in Organbaelz were Charlotte and Jacob. It was common knowledge they were his wife and son. However, Jacob had rebuffed him, so how could he go to them now? There was no way he could.

"Please stay with us. You can use my room." Lud understood the situation and offered his quarters.

"You don't mind, Captain Langart?" Blitzdonner asked with a voice that now wasn't weepy.

"I'm a *former* captain. Anyway, I don't mind. We've never met before, but your son has been good to me. I can sleep in another room tonight."

Lud hadn't offered his private room to the senior officer because he had once

been a soldier. He did it because Blitzdonner was his friend's father. Lud conveyed his purpose clearly.

"I appreciate your kindness, Mr. Langart." Blitzdonner understood and switched from rank-based military etiquette to civilian manners.

"Well, I should retire to my room now. Oh..." Lud looked at Sven again.

"—?!" Sven was silent as her shoulders shook.

"Good work today, Sven. Will you show the major to my room? See you later." Lud spoke in his usual tone as if nothing had happened. Then he disappeared into the back of the shop.

"....."

So in the end he didn't say anything?!

As expected, Lud didn't ask Sven anything.

Does this mean he's going to keep pretending he didn't notice?

Debris had pierced Sven's chest, but not a single drop of blood had flowed from where her heart should be. Even after she revealed her mechanical body before his eyes, Lud said nothing about it.

Hmm...

She didn't know what to say to him. Sven's feelings—sadness, relief, frustration and regret—were all mixing together and staining her heart an unidentifiable color.

"Svelgen..." Rebecca spoke to Sven.

"Hm?" Sven thought Rebecca sensed her complicated feelings and was about to offer kind words, but...

"Can I sleep in your room tonight?"

"What?!"

Instead, Rebecca made an unexpected request.

"The shop's living space has another room in addition to the former captain's bedroom and your bedroom, right?"

Due to repeated extension and reconstruction, Tockerbrot wasn't as small as it had once been. The oven room and storeroom for flour and other supplies occupied half the area. Most of the remainder was used as sales space, leaving only Lud's room, Sven's room in the attic, and a small room barely big enough for someone to lie down. That space served as an office and break room.

Since Lud would sleep in the break room, that only left Lud's room, where Blitzdonner would sleep that night, and Sven's room in the attic.

"Spending the night with the major in the same room... I'd go bonkers!! While I hate to ask, can I sleep in your room? I'll crash on the floor!" Rebecca's hair, eyes and dress were all red, and now her face and ears turned red, too.

Humanoid Hunter Units didn't sleep in the usual sense. They entered a standby state for a few hours each day to perform self-maintenance.

"Ugh... Just do what you want!" Sven's shoulders slumped as she faced Rebecca. The fellow Hunter Unit didn't know how Sven felt. She was focused on her own concerns.

Meanwhile, in the neighboring town of Saupunkt...

Saupunkt was actually more of a city than a town. It had a station for a long-distance train, a well-developed commercial economy, and a sizable population. Consequently, it had luxurious hotels far outclassing anything in Organbaelz.

"Still, this is nothing like a top-quality hotel in Berun, the royal capital."

Daian and Sophia were in an elegant guest room.

"Don't ask for too much. All a hotel needs is a roof, walls, beds and a shower. That's good enough." Sophia responded to Daian with irritation.

"This is why we should have made use of the military barracks."

Before coming here, Sophia and Daian visited Traad military base near Organbaelz.

The military was a hierarchical society. When soldiers from the royal capital in central Wiltia conducted operations in an area under eastern military control, they had to provide advance notice. Sophia had skipped that formality this time

because it had been an emergency, but she still needed to visit the base to report after the fact. Fortunately, the commander at Traad military base, Colonel Bardenbelger, was a reasonable person. Instead of accusing Sophia, he praised her work and offered lodging at the base that was ordinarily for generals.

“But you got greedy and said you wanted to stay at a hotel!!”

Sophia wasn't merely angry at Daian for turning down the base commander's generosity. Daian belonged to the military, although it was only for the sake of form. The cost of this lodging was coming out of the military budget. And the military budget came out of the *nation's* budget—in other words, from *taxes*.

“Do you think the common folk enjoy paying high taxes?!”

Directness, sincerity and thrift were Wiltian characteristics. For Sophia, who came from a Wiltian warrior family that stretched back generations, the waste was unforgivable.

“It was necessary! The enemy could be hiding *anywhere*!”

“Urgh!”

Daian spoke frightening words, but with his usual unworried expression.

“What the heck happened to you anyway?!”

It was exceedingly strange how Daian and Blitzdonner had suddenly popped out of thin air. But if anyone could find a way, *he* could. The question was *why* he had resorted to such means to come to Organbaelz.

“My arrival wasn't exactly intentional. I'll skip the details, but it was like I was pulled to the people I'm connected to.”

Blitzdonner's son Jacob was there. Daian himself had created the humanoid Hunter Units Sven, Rebecca and Lillie. If all of them were there through happenstance, then it was not a coincidence that Daian was drawn to their location.

“We encountered someone truly frightening and barely escaped.”

Daian and Blitzdonner had gone to study a “Door,” the relic of an ancient empire hidden in an Augustan satellite nation. A mysterious woman calling

herself the Saint appeared. She was ruling August from behind the scenes. The Wiltian intelligence agency Apuvea had organized the research of the Door, and it had proceeded in the utmost secrecy. Nonetheless, the Saint had been manipulating it all. August's... No, *the Saint's* operatives were even inside Apuvea.

"We don't know who is friend or foe, Sophia. I know *you're* my friend, but..."

There was a chance of encountering enemies even at Traad military base. A hotel in town, where many people—and many witnesses—would be passing by, was safer than the military base, which was isolated, thereby preventing detection if something happened.

"Hey..."

For a variety of reasons, Sophia often yelled at Daian, but now his face looked unusual. The man who customarily played the clown, even when his life was in danger, had lost his smile.

"Um, are you okay? Is there anything I can do?"

Sophia seemed stern, but she was actually exceptionally warmhearted. Even though she ordinarily was harsh toward Daian, he looked so downcast that she had to change her attitude.

"Sorry, Sophia. There are things I can tell you—as well as things I *can't*."

"Argh!"

She couldn't press him any further. After all, she was a soldier. When the military was involved, many facts were subject to secrecy.

"But... I guess as long as I only talk about my private experiences, no one can complain!" The Sorcerer once again wore his smile. "And since it's in response to a request from my dear Sophia, I *gotta* answer, right?"

Daian was trying to behave as usual. Seeing that, Sophia couldn't yell at him the way she usually would.

"No, you don't have to tell me."

"Huh?" Daian looked deflated at Sophia's reply.

“For some reason, I don’t want to make you talk.”

Daian was probably going to place his trust in Sophia and reveal a military secret. But he would do it reluctantly because, in his words, it was in response to a request from his “dear Sophia.” Sophia didn’t like that.

“I don’t want to persuade or force you to tell me because you like me.”

Sophia wouldn’t even appear to prey on another’s good will for her own benefit. Straightforwardness and sincerity were Wiltian characteristics. As were earnestness and inflexibility. And Sophia was very Wiltian.

“Phew...” Daian sighed with relief. And his smile didn’t look fake. It was unusually pleasant. “I adore that about you.”

“What?”

Daian had revealed his affection for Sophia before, but this was the first time he expressed it from the bottom of his heart, and she felt him get through her defenses. Subconsciously, she put her hand in her left breast pocket. That was where she kept the ring Daian had given her four months ago. She took it off while on duty.

“Y-You...”

Uncharacteristically, Sophia blushed. Daian smiled affectionately at her and spoke as if he had reached a decision.

“I’m going to talk to *myself*. This is just a monologue and you just happen to be here, all right?” Daian started talking.

Meanwhile, at Marlene’s church atop the hill...

Hildegard von Hessen, also known as Hilde, was in the cemetery behind the church. In front of a fresh grave, she began to quietly sing...

God fell in love with a girl and sent her many gifts.

A jewel that shone more splendidly than the light of a star... A rose made of gold... A dress woven from the blue of the sky...

He gave her everything, but she did not respond.

The girl was already in love with someone else.

She loved a poor shepherd, and not God, in his omnipotence, immortality and beauty surpassing all else in the world.

God wept and sank into despondent depths.

Light disappeared, trees wasted away, rivers and oceans ran dry, and life faded from the land.

The world was dying, so a frightened servant of God devised a plan.

The shepherd whom the girl loved must die.

Accusations were cast upon him, he was pushed from a cliff, and he died.

And yet the girl still did not answer God.

She followed the shepherd and threw herself from the same cliff.

God raged at his servant for this thoughtless action.

He cast countless thunderbolts and caused untold mountains to spew fire.

He divided his life in two and gave half to the girl and half to the shepherd so that they might live once again.

God fell into a deep slumber.

Then the sun rose again over a lost world.

The girl and the shepherd were risen and the world revived...

...little by little.



It was a traditional song—an old song from an ancient nation. Hilde had learned it from her departed mother. The man lying in the grave in front of her had praised the song, calling her rendition “good singing.”

“Sorry I haven’t been able to come more often.” Hilde spoke nostalgically and a little sadly to the interred man.

There was no name on the gravestone. Hilde didn’t *know* his real name. Before he could tell her his name, the man buried there—Heidrig the “Wolf Man”—had died.

“Your singing is still wonderful. But perhaps it’s more polished now?” Marlene, the nun from the church, spoke from behind her.

“Come to the chapel. I’ll make tea.”

In the church chapel, Marlene and Hilde sat together and drank tea.

“It’s tasty,” Hilde said quietly.

“Well, I’m still learning about tea leaves and how to brew them.” Marlene replied cheerfully.

She was once so bad at making tea that people said it was actually destructive and might be taken as a declaration of war against Greyten, whose people loved tea. However, she had since acquired skills in preparing tea that would put a professional to shame.

“People change whether they like it or not.”

Marlene was not officially a clergywoman. She had pretended to be a nun and used this abandoned church without permission. Now, however, she faithfully served the townsfolk.

“You’ve changed, too. Before, you were a little more... um... you know.”

“Ha ha ha...”

Hearing Marlene refer to her former self, Hilde felt a mix of embarrassment and discomfort. When she first came to this town as a young girl in the Schutzstaffel, she was under Genitz’s command and her head was full of abuse

and scorn for others.

“Well, a lot has happened.”

She had experienced many things, encountered many people, and witnessed many deaths, so her former disposition—like a small dog that would bark at anyone who came near—had disappeared.

“Hilde! Do something about these children!” The voice of one of those people who had helped her change rang out in the chapel.

“Agh! General Douglas isn’t a toy!”

“Skwork!”

Rowdy children from the church’s orphanage were surrounding Lillie and the penguin General Douglas.

“Oh dear, oh dear!” Marlene looked dismayed.

The church’s orphanage was no longer financially distraught, but it didn’t give the impression of luxury either. The kids were thrilled to have new guests as well as a rare animal they had never seen before.

“Wow, Lillie! You’re so popular with kids! Children, have her play with you instead of paying for lodging!”

“Hilde! You are mean!!”

Lillie’s passion for her threw Hilde out of sorts. Today, as if to get revenge, Hilde refused to bail Lillie out.

“This girl’s awesome! She’s super strong!”

“What the heck? I’ve never seen this animal before!”

“Throw us into the air!”

“Helllp!”

“Skwawrk!”

As more children appeared and begged them to keep playing, Lillie and General Douglas sounded on the verge of tears. And then...

“Hm?”

There came a knock on the chapel door. It wasn't late at night, but the sun had set.

"Is Marlene here?" It was Jacob.

"Oh my... What's wrong? And at *this* hour..."

"I don't approve of children going out at night." Backing up Marlene, Hilde gently chided him.

"Like you can talk! You're not much older than me!" Jacob looked and sounded disgruntled.

Hilde was sixteen and Jacob was eleven. Between adults, that age gap would be negligible, but to a boy and girl still under twenty, it was a significant difference.

"Has something happened?"

Marlene didn't know the details of what had happened at Tockerbrot earlier that day. She didn't know that the visiting man who claimed to be Sven's father was a general from the large nation of Noa, or that Augustan special ops soldiers had come after him. But since Hilde had come from Berun, Marlene guessed that something unusual was going on.

"Anyway, please have a seat. I'll brew more tea."

Marlene wasn't a genuine clergywoman, but there was something about her that seemed even more clerical than a real clergywoman. She would never turn away anyone who knocked on the door in need of someone who would listen.

A few minutes later...

Jacob talked as he drank the freshly brewed tea. "Um, today... At Lud's place... My... um... father showed up." This young boy was usually as well spoken as any adult, but now he was struggling with his words.

"Hilde, you're in the military, aren't you?"

"Yes, basically."

Hilde was a military cadet. She had once been a ranking officer in the

Schutzstaffel, but that had been rescinded so she was starting over from the bottom. She was undoubtedly familiar with the military.

“Do you know about him?”

“Major Blitzdonner? *Everyone* in the military knows about him.”

“Oh.”

Jacob had come to the church because, while he appeared calm on the outside, meeting his father for the first time had shocked him.

“What kind of person is he? I, um, don’t know anything about him.”

Jacob hadn’t known his father’s name or even that he was alive.

“Hmm... Well...”

Hilde knew of him, but she wasn’t confident she could explain precisely and accurately. She was certain that Blitzdonner was an ace pilot whose skills were off the charts.

“Early in the European War, he subjected the Augustan forces to staggering defeats on the eastern front. I am serious that without him, the winners and losers of the Great War might have been diff—Hey, do not pull my hair!”

It was Lillie who spoke but was then interrupted by the children, who treated her as their new favorite toy.

“Lillie, do you know much about him?”

“Yes, I do. I can explain as much as you like. Just please help me!”

Lillie was a humanoid Hunter Unit. In some ways, her strength—especially in hand-to-hand combat—surpassed even that of Sven and Rebecca. Obviously, however, she could not send the playful children flying. She was proud of her abilities and found it troublesome when she was prevented from using them.

“Milly! Milly! A little help, please!”

“Okay.”

Marlene summoned Milly, who lived at the church. She worked at Lud’s shop as an apprentice baker.

“Hey now, kids! You’re bothering the nice lady! Come with me!”

She was the oldest child at the orphanage. In fact, she was old enough to leave and live on her own. However, she refused to separate from Marlene, who was like family to her, so she lived as a helper at the church while also working as a baker’s apprentice.

“Whew! Thank you.”

Milly led the children away, and Lillie was finally free. Her hair was a disaster.

“Um... uh...”

“Oh. We haven’t met. I am Lillie. Pleased to meet you.” She introduced herself to Jacob because they had barely spoken when they first met at Tockerbrot.

“Um, you were talking about Major Blitzdonner. Erich Blitzdonner, also known as the Crimson Hawk. He is well-known in Wiltia, but he is *notorious* in August.”

Blitzdonner had been active early in the Great War. Situated between Filbarneu to the west and August to the east, Wiltia faced a war on two fronts.

“At first in the Great War, Wiltia’s strategy was to dispatch 80 percent of its military forces to the west. Then, after it forced Filbarneu to capitulate, it turned around and hit August with its full might.”

However, it was only necessary to use 20 percent of its forces to stop the Augustan military, which had ten times the troops.

“So they sent the Hunter Units, which were experimental at that time.”

The Wiltian military was still skeptical about using the Hunter Units. After all, humanoid mechanical weapons sounded like something from a cheesy science fiction novel. The fact that Wiltia employed them in battle was a sign of the tight situation in which it found itself.

“At first, if they could just hold on for six months—or even *three* months—that would be enough. No one expected the soldiers to survive. But they operated outstandingly. In fact, Major Blitzdonner displayed such prowess in battle that it was said he was equal to an entire division.”

It was a heroic scene, rare in modern warfare. A single giant trampling upon an onrushing horde was like something from myth.

“His exploits in war were so exceptional that at first he was a sergeant major treated like a warrant officer. But within one month, he skipped three ranks and was promoted to captain. He was granted a personal color, and he gained the nickname Crimson Hawk because his Hunter Unit was painted red. Friend and foe alike feared him.”

Blitzdonner’s achievements in the Great War caused the Wiltian military to change its strategy from the ground up. It fought a two-front war using a “Host of Giants” centered on the Hunter Units.

Wiltia fought in a way that defied previous common sense, simultaneously confronting large nations to both east and west. Preparations were made for mass production, Hunter Units were sent to the battlefield, victories piled up in both directions, and eventually Wiltia was victorious and became renowned as the country that won the Great War.

Until then, Wiltia, like Greyten, focused on developing land battleships, which had been their primary weapon. If it hadn’t been for Blitzdonner, the Wiltian military would have continued to pursue large vessels with big guns. Other countries with greater production capabilities would have defeated Wiltia and placed its very existence in danger.

“Major Rundstadt and Captain Langart were famous aces, but a single soldier changed the nation’s strategy and altered history. Major Blitzdonner was a hero on a whole other level.”

Even modern history textbooks recorded his name.

“You... really *do* know a lot, huh?”

Since Lillie offered to explain, Hilde expected her to be fairly knowledgeable, but Lillie knew a great deal.

“Yes, I suppose so!” Lillie proudly thrust out her chest.

Blitzdonner’s story was her own history, so it was only natural that she possessed a lot of information.

“Oh... So my father is a famous man.” Jacob’s voice was slightly sarcastic.

“Jacob...” His demeanor awakened an uneasy feeling in Marlene.

It was understandable. Jacob was now eleven and he had never met Blitzdonner. He hadn't even known his name.

After the war, children of mixed Wiltian and Pelfian parentage were objects of prejudice in Pelfe, which had become a Wiltian territory. They were treated like the children of dogs who had wagged their tails for their new masters. And they were not just treated this way by other children. Even some adults cast such dirty insults.

Jacob was surprisingly mature for his age because he had struggled to bear the crushing weight of that environment.

"If he's that famous, I guess he couldn't come out to the sticks all the time." Jacob muttered this even more sarcastically.

His father hadn't appeared even once. Not when Jacob was suffering, or sad, or having trouble. It would have been better for Jacob if his father hadn't known about him. But even if he couldn't forgive his father, he might be able to *understand* him.

"Um, he looked at me and asked if I was Jacob. So he knew my name. And he knew *about* me. Which means he knew but still didn't show his face."

Even worse, Blitzdonner had come to Organbaelz for another purpose. He had shown up unexpectedly, and his son just happened to be there.

"But... it turns out he's alive."

"Huh?"

Lillie dropped this comment just as a shadow began to fall across Jacob's features.

"What do you mean?"

"He was missing. Or rather, it was unclear whether or not he still lived." Lillie answered Jacob's question. "One day, the major's personal unit was found on the battlefield but he had vanished."

"Yes, I've heard that," Hilde said.

Eight years had passed since Blitzdonner disappeared from official records and was listed as missing in action.

“Usually, after a certain amount of time when it still isn’t known if a soldier is alive, the military treats that soldier as killed in action. It was so unlikely that the major was killed, however, that the mystery has been treated as unresolved to this day. For that reason, he has not been promoted, as is customary after death in the line of duty.”

“Yes... and that is not all.” Lillie’s words hinted at something else.

There are three ways a soldier goes missing from the battlefield. One is when the soldier dies in battle but the body isn’t found. Another is when the soldier becomes a prisoner but, due to a mix-up, the home nation fails to learn of the captive’s status. The third is when the soldier deserts or turns traitor.

Blitzdonner’s feats were among the most distinguished in the Wiltian military, so he was held aloft as a hero and even extolled as a symbol of Wiltian strength. For such a soldier to die or fall captive was a stain upon the country’s dignity. Thus, the military had designated him missing in action.

“His disappearance is counted among the Seven Mysteries of the Wiltian Military.”

Hilde was young, so she was unable to guess the military’s rationale.

“I’ve heard tons of rumors. Something about an old lover shooting him in the back or him wandering off with a beautiful woman from an enemy nation... There’s no shortage of scandalous stories about that guy!” She spoke innocently, as if simply relating amusing stories.

“Stop, Hilde!” Lillie tapped Hilde’s shoulder reprovingly. “I do not think you should say those things in front of his son.”

“Oh... right!”

Usually, it was Hilde who chided Lillie for her lack of control. Today their positions were reversed.

“S-Sorry!” Hilde hurried to apologize, but it was too late.

“Why are you apologizing?”

“Well, um...” At Jacob’s quiet response, Hilde was at a loss for words. She hadn’t meant to suggest that his father did things inappropriate for children to

hear.

“Don’t worry about it. In any case, my father is *that* kind of guy, huh? I read you loud and clear.” Jacob stood, making a forced sound of effort.

“Jacob? Didn’t you come here for something?” Marlene asked him as he began to leave.

“Um...never mind. Sorry to intrude.” Jacob had come to the church to consult Marlene.

Perhaps he didn’t know how to face his father, meeting him for the first time. He may have wanted Marlene to tell him that his suspicions about his father were misplaced.

“Um, Jacob? Uh...”

“I’m fine. Don’t worry.”

Hilde, who had only deepened his fears, spoke to him in distress. Jacob just replied tersely, opened the door, and left.

“Aw, man!” Unable to say anything, Hilde’s hand, which had been reaching out to stop Jacob, now had no place to go, and hung unsteadily in front of her. “I sure messed that up!” Hilde raised her voice in regret.

“Yes... you really did.” Finding no way to cheer Hilde up, Lillie laughed wryly. “I thought you would understand how a child with such a complicated background would feel, but...”

Hilde’s own birth and childhood had been troubled, especially her relationship with her father. She came from a house of the fallen nobility. Due to his problems over that, Hilde’s father was very hard on her. And that led to her earlier warped personality, and the severed ties with her family.

“No matter how happy or unhappy the circumstances of your own birth, you can’t truly understand someone else’s feelings about their family.” Marlene said this as if stating a fact, not to criticize or console Hilde. “We make a great deal of that boy’s cleverness, but he’s still just a child. And do you know what adults must never do to a child?”

“No. What?”

“They must never force adult circumstances on them.”

Blitzdonner was famous. And there were many complicating circumstances to his life. To Jacob, however, he was no more or less than the man who had abandoned him and his mother.

Chapter 2: An Ominous Second Day

Mornings start early at Tockerbrot. As they generally do at bakeries. Bakers must begin preparing before dawn.

“Hey, um...”

After the sun rose, Lud, Sven and Milly—the bakery apprentice from the church atop the hill—were running around busily in front of Blitzdonner, who was staying at the shop.

“Oh, are you Jacob’s father?” Milly spoke to Blitzdonner.

“Y-Yes... But how do *you* know that?”

“Jacob came to the church last night and was talking about you.”

“R-Really?”

It was the day after the disastrous first meeting with his son. What Jacob said about him was more important to Blitzdonner than international conflicts.

“W-What did he say?”

“Let’s see...” Milly hadn’t been paying much attention to what Jacob said. She had only heard bits and pieces as she took care of the children. “They said something about how you didn’t come sooner because you chased after a pretty woman from an enemy nation.”

“That’s a misunderstanding!!” What Milly thought she heard wasn’t accurate, but it was enough to make the strongest man in the Wiltian military give a shout of despair. “That’s not true, Miss. That was...”

“Sorry, Mister, but I’ve got work to do.”

Blitzdonner was trying to clear himself of suspicion, but Milly had no time to listen and hurried to the oven room.

“Oh dear. The poor major...” From the shadows, Rebecca was watching Blitzdonner with tears in her eyes.

“Anyway, the shop is a wreck, so why are you working?” Blitzdonner turned to ask Sven, who was working nearby.

“The shop front is a disaster, but we can still do business.”

Walls had fallen, glass had shattered, and chairs and shelves were in a sorry state. However, they had removed the debris and picked up the broken glass. And, while half the chairs and shelves were broken, that left half untouched.

“Today is a regular business day. Customers who don’t know our circumstances will come, and we can’t disappoint them.”

They had erected a simple tent, ordered the day before, in front of the shop to serve as a roof.

“Besides, we deliver bread to the mine cafeteria and to the schools for lunch. We can’t halt business just because half the shop got trashed, Major.”

Sven wasn’t a soldier, a former soldier or a member of the military. However, she was a military weapon. Whether she respected Blitzdonner or not, her tone of voice was respectful since he was a major.

“*Phew...* You guys are hard workers.”

“If you don’t work, you don’t eat.”

“I see. How very Wiltian of you. But *I’m* only half Wiltian.” Blitzdonner spoke with a brazen smile.

Straightforwardness, sincerity and diligence were Wiltian characteristics. However, while Blitzdonner himself was born and raised in Wiltia, his father was a descendant of the immigrant Degas Clan.

“By the way, um... Svelgen, was it?” Blitzdonner knew about Daian’s humanoid Hunter Units—Sven and Rebecca—and he was aware of the circumstances of their creation. “I like a big breakfast.” He hinted that he wanted her to give him breakfast.

“Understood. In that case, why don’t you move this shelf over there? And cover the damaged walls and bullet holes with cloth so they won’t unsettle our customers.”

“Hey now... what?” Blitzdonner spluttered at Sven, who had understood his

request but gave an unexpected reply. “Weren’t you listening to me?”

“The same goes for *you*, Major. Weren’t you listening to me?” Sven had declared that if you don’t work, you don’t eat. “I’ll serve breakfast *after* you’ve finished your chores.”

“You... Huuuh?!”

Sven was still using the appropriate tone of voice for addressing a major, but now she didn’t sound so respectful.

“That’s enough, Svelgen!!” Unable to stand it any longer, Rebecca raised her voice. “I’ve been listening, and you were way too rude to the major!”

“I don’t care. We’re not at a military base or on a battlefield. Or rather, we’re on my *master’s* battlefield! You came here without permission, so unless you accept my leadership, you can leave!”

The red and white humanoid Hunter Units glared at each other.

“Wait, Sharlahart. Stop.” When the disagreement was on the verge of a physical clash, Blitzdonner reined in his servant.

“But... Major!”

“It’s all right. Svelgen is right.” Blitzdonner’s face suggested he had made up his mind. “Fair enough. I accept your offer. So let me show you *my* way of life!”

A new battle began for this veteran war hero.

A few hours later...

“Welcome, ladies! They’re fresh-baked and this is your only chance to buy them!” At the stand under the simple tent in front of the shop, Blitzdonner was wearing an apron and buoyantly selling bread.

“Hm? Where is the handsome gentleman who was here until yesterday?”

“Oh, he’s gone. He had some business in his home country.” Blitzdonner was making cheerful conversation with a middle-aged woman visiting the shop. She was asking about Meitzer, who had been helping at Tockerbrot.

“Aw... what a pity.”

“Am I not good enough for you, Ma’am?”

“Oh dear! Of course you are! You’re handsome, too!”

“How kind of you.”

Blitzdonner appeared so young and good looking, no one would know he had an eleven-year-old son. Nothing could be more pleasant to the women customers than for such a man to cheerfully serve them. His customer service and sales chatter were brilliant, as if he’d been doing business for over ten years.

“Major, you seem accustomed to this.” Sven was truly impressed at the sight.

“It’s no surprise. After all, he *is* my master.” Rebecca thrust out her chest as if to say her master’s honor was *her* honor.

Yeah... I guess that makes sense.

Sven was surprised, but she also understood.

Blitzdonner’s son and father have the same qualities, so it isn’t strange he does too.

Blitzdonner’s father was Joseph Shylock, who was well known in Wiltia and was the biggest of the powerful businessmen. Since the same blood flowed through Jacob’s veins, he also had an excellent disposition for sales, even though he was only eleven years old.

“Anyway, Svelgen, where did your master go?” asked Rebecca.

Lud wasn’t inside the shop or in the oven room.

“Today is the day for traveling sales in the next town, so he left before noon.”

Lud’s attitude hadn’t changed since the incident yesterday.

“Did he... find out your true identity?”

“Yes.”

On orders from Daian, Rebecca had been observing Sven and the others in Organbaelz for weeks. She knew a great deal about Sven and Lud’s situation.

“He hasn’t asked me anything, and he hasn’t changed. But...” There was no

way for Sven to ask Lud his feelings about her being a humanoid Hunter Unit.

“Maybe that means he wants to continue as before. Maybe he doesn’t mind, so he plans to pretend he didn’t see anything.”

“Yes, maybe so.” Sven replied to Rebecca’s words as if in pain. Maybe Rebecca was right. Sven’s chest tightened at the thought of that possibility.

“Um, I heard the shop was destroyed, but it looks better than I imagined.” Another voice joined theirs. Marlene had arrived.

“Oh...” Sven was about to reply, but Blitzdonner spoke to Marlene first.

“Ooh... What a beautiful nun! You almost make me want to change my religion!”

“Hardly, but you’re a skilled flatterer.”

“No, I cannot lie. Teach me another expression to describe such a knockout.” Blitzdonner had his arm around Marlene’s shoulders and had pulled her to him.

“Your master is quite the smooth charmer!”

“The major always impresses! His moves haven’t changed in ten years!”

“Huh? What? He’s been this way for a decade?! He isn’t Sparian, is he?!”

Sparia was a peninsular nation on the continent of Europea. The people living there were characteristically spirited lovers of pasta and wine. The people there held the questionable conviction that it was rude not to flirt with women.

“Huh?” Blitzdonner was flirting with Marlene with enough force to make even a Sparian blanch. Then he felt another pair of eyes on him.

“You’re sure enjoying yourself!” It was Blitzdonner’s son Jacob.

“Jacob... What are you doing here?”

“I have friends in this shop, so I wondered if there was any way I could help.” Jacob stared at Blitzdonner with a look so cold it was hard to believe he was looking at his own father.

“

“

They stared at each other in silence.

“Well...” After a long pause, Jacob opened his mouth. “It seems like they have plenty of help, so I’ll go home.”

“W-Wait, Jacob! Um... why don’t you stay so we can talk? Your da—”

“My...?” Blitzdonner tried to prevent Jacob from leaving, but before he could finish his sentence, Jacob glared at him.

“My *what?*”

“No, um...”

“Your dad.” Are you calling yourself my father? Are you the kind of person who can call yourself a father? You left me alone at birth.



And you even flirt with my friend!

The boy's eyes conveyed his thoughts with a force equal to a million words.

"Good-bye." As if there was nothing else to talk about, Jacob walked away without looking back.

"Oh..." Blitzdonner's hand had stretched out toward Jacob but now hung empty in the air.

"Uh-oh..."

"Major, you poor thing!"

It was a sight of such alienation between father and son that even Sven and Rebecca together couldn't help.

"By any chance... did I cause trouble?" Marlene also lost her smile at the sad sight.

"No, it wasn't your fault. You just came at the wrong time." Sven shook her head helplessly. "By the way, did you want something?"

Marlene also helped at Tockerbrot, but she didn't work today.

"Yes, I heard from Hilde. It sounds like you had a hard time." Marlene was looking at the half-demolished shop, which no amount of cloth could completely cover. "I stopped by on business and to express my sympathies."

"Ugh... My head hurts just thinking about the cost of repairs."

Since Sven's arrival at Tockerbrot, business had increased, but because it had run at a loss until then, along with the troublesome incidents that happened, its debt had risen and fallen.

"If there's anything I can do, don't hesitate to ask. I'll help however I can. I just can't lend money."

"Your honesty is refreshing." Sven knew about the church's financial straits, so she smiled wryly.

"Lud isn't here? I'll stop by again later." The nun exited the shop.

"Huh?" After a moment, Sven realized something.

Some business? What did she want from my master?

Sven wondered but then thought, “Oh, well.”

Since the townsfolk often consulted Marlene, she had been put in charge of such events as the Thanksgiving Festival and Holy Festival. Sven guessed Marlene had come about something like that. Or that was how it seemed *then*...

Meanwhile in Saupunkt, a town neighboring Organbaelz...

“So that’s how...” Sophia was phoning the Royal Weapons Development Bureau in Berun from the telephone room at the hotel. “The situation has become very complicated. I need more firepower before I can return to the royal capital. Contact Marshal Elvin and request the dispatch of *that man*.”

The subordinate Sophia was speaking with reported the chaos caused by Sophia’s absence. However, all Sophia could offer in reply was, “Hang in there a little longer. I’m sorry. I think I can be back in a few days. I’m counting on you.” Sophia abruptly ended the conversation and hung up.

“Phew...” She sighed once. “I wish I hadn’t heard that.” She mumbled to herself as she recalled the night before.

The previous night in Daian’s room...

“Have you heard the story of the Saint and the Devil?” Although Daian had said he would just talk to himself, he began by throwing this question at Sophia.

“It’s a legend from the Dark Age. It’s a kind of children’s story that became the origin of the Holy Festival.”

“That’s exactly right.”

A thousand years ago, the vast European Empire, which had ruled the continent, suddenly collapsed. The reason was still a mystery. The chaos that occurred after its disappearance was too devastating for history to record, so it was called the Dark Age.

“A woman appeared out of nowhere, saved the people, and became a powerful force in restoring civilization during that chaotic time. People called

her the Saint, but...”

“But?” Sophia looked quizzically at Daian, who seemed to be suggesting the woman actually *wasn’t* the Saint.

“The Devil also appeared and inflicted great suffering. We don’t know, however, *the* details of what those two did. It’s a story from a millennium ago, so people have embellished it countless times.”

The existing oral tradition had been embroidered with rumors that the Devil had spread contagious disease and the Saint had cured it, that the Saint had halted the passage of a raging river, that the Devil had caused a landslide, and that the Saint had stopped a volcanic eruption caused by the Devil. But these stories had little credibility.

“All the oral traditions have something in common. Do you know what it is?”

“The Saint defeating the Devil?”

“Yes.” Like a teacher, Daian praised Sophia for her correct answer.

“Are you looking down on me?” Daian’s tone of voice made Sophia think he was mocking her.

“No, not at all. Smart people are to blame. They believe they have to give difficult answers to difficult questions. And that causes complications.” Daian seemed to have experienced this often, so he smiled ironically.

“You’re right. Many nations on the continent of Europea—like Wiltia, Filbarneu, Greyten, Haugen and August—have children’s stories about the Saint and the Devil. There are differences in detail, but they all end with the Saint defeating the Devil.”

“Which is relevant *why*?”

“I already told you. A woman calling herself the Saint attacked Blitzdonner and me in a rural area of Haradin.”

“Hold on a second.” At that point, Sophia interrupted Daian. “Surely you’re not saying the Saint from the children’s stories actually exists.” Daian was famous for his eccentricity, but Sophia couldn’t believe this had come from his mouth.

“Sophia, oral tradition usually contains a grain of truth.”

“But that’s impossible. She existed one thousand years ago.”

“Yeah... there *is* that complication.” Daian sounded doubtful himself.

However, he was a scientist. And scientists are, for the most part, realistic. What happened in front of his eyes was what mattered, and if it didn’t make sense, he would examine it again.

“In myths and oral tradition, the positions of the characters often change.”

For example, consider a legend about a hero defeating a monster that was terrorizing a village. Many such stories turn out to be metaphors for real events, such as a general slaughtering the local forces that held the village in its grip.

“This is just a theory, but what if the Saint was actually the Devil?”

Setting aside the premise of a good and an evil being, suppose there were people with *paranormal powers*. Suppose one behaved in a way that was beneficial to human society and the other behaved harmfully. The people would treat the helpful being as holy because it had defeated the being who was destructive.

“But then, over time, their positions switched, or someone purposely juxtaposed them. It’s possible. Someone could, conceivably, benefit from that.”

“Still, it’s odd. And if true, then the Saint was defeated, right? And even if she survived, why would she appear now? What has she been doing all this time?”

In reply to Sophia’s sensible question, Daian explained the hypothesis he had formulated in Haradin. “What if she wasn’t defeated but *sealed*?”

“Sealed... for a whole millennium? Where exactly could she be kept for such a long time?”

A millennium is a very, very long time. Human beings would rot, turn to bone and wither away to dust.

“There is something that has existed for a thousand years.”

There were things in the world that defied common sense.

“Do you mean the Door?!” Sophia gasped as she asked.

A leftover from an ancient empire, a relic that had endured the passage of a thousand years...

“That’s right. The Saint was not fully vanquished. They sealed her within a Door. Why didn’t they kill her? Or *couldn’t* they kill her? I don’t know.”

Daian had been thinking about this for a long time. Before dying, the previous Daian—the mother who raised him—told Daian that the Saint and Devil destroyed Europea. And she said he must flee with his full strength if those two appeared. Her statements were proof that the beings that destroyed a great empire with superior technology were still alive and well.

“I speculated that she was imprisoned within the Door in Haradin. But that theory was incorrect—after a fashion. She *had been* there, but she wasn’t any longer.”

The Door was opened over one hundred years ago.

“So the seal imprisoning the Saint dissolved? And now she’s cooperating with August toward some end?”

“No, that isn’t correct.” Daian had lost his smile as he answered Sophia, who was gradually turning pale. “She came back long ago. As many as 150 years may have passed.”

“What?!” Sophia raised her voice in shock. “If she came back that long ago, wouldn’t she have made more of an impact in that time?”

Sophia thought it would be impossible for the Saint to recreate the annihilation of the European Empire through something like the destruction of the current international order.

“Hey, Sophia? What happened 150 years ago?”

“Huh?” Sophia put her hand to her mouth as she thought. She was born into a famous noble family and received higher education in the military. So she had a fair grasp of modern history.

“That was before the establishment of Wiltia, about the time of the Luftzand Domain. Luftzand and Greyten fought together against the Holy Empire, which was then ruling Europea.”

This was when the continent entered a tempestuous period. Filbarneu rejected royal authority and changed from a monarchy to a republic. Greyten continued its invasion of the continental mainland in a succession of skirmishes.

On the new continent, the longstanding subjugation of colonies was stopped and the continental nation of Noa was founded. In Aesia, the great empire of Kuhron began to weaken and Yamato restricted relations with foreign countries. Furthermore, the Lion Emperor arose, generating turmoil and seizing control of 70 percent of the continent of Europea.

“From that time on, the European continent was in turmoil. Unlike any time before, large wars broke out frequently.”

“Surely you don’t think the Saint caused that, do you?” Sophia thought Daian was taking his theory too far. Even if the Saint had paranormal powers, it was hard to believe she could control events on a continental scale.

“Sophia, you’re a military woman. So, like a soldier, you think from the perspective of the battlefield. However, you must understand that war is not the only form world events can take.”

Why do wars occur? Many would answer philosophically that conflict is human nature, but that wasn’t Daian’s point.

Why is it possible to *instigate* wars? And on such a large scale?

Massive resources are necessary to dispatch soldiers across mountains, valleys and even oceans, to take the lives of the enemy in the hundreds and thousands. Manufacturing weapons requires metal. Feeding an army requires provisions. And raising a vast army demands a growing population.

“It was called the Industrial Revolution, and that’s exactly when it occurred. Ever since that time, the world—and especially the nations on the continent of Europea—have experienced a dramatic increase in production capacity.”

Beginning with steel and textiles, an industrial revolution occurred. There was also a revolution in the transportation industry, involving sea vessels and rail. And that’s not all. Drastic increases in food production created a new epoch in agriculture.

“A rise in production leads directly to a rise in population. Do you know what

happens when the surplus population climbs and food production keeps pace with it?”

“Um... the formation of standing armies?”

“Bingo.”

Based on world history, a standing army—in other words, a military force capable of engaging in war at any time—is only possible for wealthy nations. And even wealthy nations don’t commit such waste. It is extremely illogical to maintain an army in the absence of war. The minimum force necessary for preserving borders and maintaining order in urban areas would be enough.

It was routine to conscript soldiers and hire mercenaries after the outbreak of hostilities. This had been true for centuries. But that order crumbled 150 years ago.

“The Saint interfered and used the vast wisdom and knowledge of people from the ancient empire to accelerate the progress of human civilization.”

In a little over a century, the world’s population, and the population of the European continent, had doubled. And as the number of people increased, so did the scale of war.

War is humanity’s largest consumer activity. In war, scientific and technological progress speeds up, leading to even larger wars. And the result was...

“You could say the Saint caused the Great European War, which embroiled the continent and the whole world for ten years.”

“What?!” Sophia was stunned by Daian’s words.

The Saint was the cause of an unprecedented Great War involving tens—even hundreds—of millions of lives. And Daian had just told her that the Saint had also been behind the battlefields on which Sophia had fought and risked her life.

“Is that... even possible?” If anyone else had told her this, she would have been less shocked. But this unparalleled genius scientist and the world’s foremost weirdo was dead serious.

“Right now, the Saint is cooperating with August, which has vast national territory, enormous resources and a huge population.”

“What is her goal?” Sophia couldn’t imagine what an ancient being sought to accomplish by manipulating human history from behind the scenes for over one hundred years.

“I still don’t know her objective, but she wants human civilization to advance. And the fastest path to that end is war. In other words, she wants to instigate another one.”

“Another war?!” Sophia didn’t even want to think about what this suggested.

“A Second Great European War.” Daian said it anyway.

Sophia thought as she walked along the hotel hallway.

This situation may already be beyond anything a single military officer can handle.

Everything Daian said was still just a theory. Nonetheless, it chilled her to the core.

“The more I think about it, *that guy* may have known about this.”
Unthinkingly, she muttered out loud. She was thinking about Genitz, who had instigated a rebellion in Berun, the royal capital, as recently as six months ago.

If you know a being with mind-blowing abilities has been secretly manipulating history and is about to start another Great War, then the options are limited.

Wiltia currently placed an emphasis on international relations and was pursuing policies of cooperation and disarmament. If another war arose, it was doubtful Wiltia could defeat the Saint, who was working with August. One course of action would be to seize power through a coup d’état and switch to a hard-line policy of military expansion.

“What he did was unforgivable, but at least he was on the side of human beings.”

Daian and Genitz were both inhuman monsters and aberrations. At least,

that's what Sophia thought. But, faced with someone unfathomable who wasn't human gave Sophia chills.

She walked along the hall and soon stood outside Daian's room. Usually, she would just open the door, but today she knocked a few times. There was no answer.

"Hey... I'm coming in, okay?" She turned the knob with a rattle and stepped into the room. "Hm?!"

Daian wasn't there. She searched the bedroom, bathroom and sink area, but he was nowhere to be found. "That dingbat... What is he thinking?!"

Since before the establishment of Wiltia, the Saint had secretly been manipulating events around the world. So her operatives could be anywhere. Sophia and Daian had stayed at a hotel instead of military barracks because of this. And Sophia had requested trustworthy backup from Berun.

"He can't just go gallivanting around!"

Daian knew this better than anyone, but he had disappeared anyway.

Saupunkt was the town next to Organbaelz. It had a larger population than Organbaelz and flourishing commerce. Tockerbrot staff came here to sell bread several times each week.

"Sven didn't come today?"

Jacob's mother Charlotte was an enormous help.

"No, she's watching the shop." Lud did his best to answer as usual.

"I heard something happened at the shop yesterday. Is everything all right?" But perhaps he was thinking too much. His features looked tense and troubled, so Charlotte spoke to him with concern.

"Yes... no... well, it's no big deal. There was just a little incident."

The details regarding the attack by special ops agents from another country hadn't been revealed to the public. Apparently, the military wanted it kept secret. Lud didn't want it to get around either.

Just recently, a thief had hidden in his shop and Jacob was taken hostage. Charlotte had been so upset that she fainted. Lud didn't want to do anything that would cause her further strain.

"Um, Mr. Langart? Are you all right?" But Charlotte had something else on her mind. She was more worried about Lud than about her son. "It's not just that you look after my boy. You always help us. If there's anything I can do... I don't know if there is, but please don't carry the burden all by yourself, okay?"

"Uh, sure... all right." Lud was taken aback. He looked her in the eyes again.

We're not that far apart in age...

Charlotte was married and had a child, but she was still in her twenties. Lud wasn't much younger.

She's been through a lot...

Charlotte had carried and given birth to Jacob when she was in her mid-teens. Jacob had told him that people once shunned her. But recently her mood had been brighter.

"It's all right. There's no problem. Oh... right. What time is it?"

The hours Lud was allowed to sell on the street were restricted.

"Um... there's only about three minutes to go, so it's all right if you start now."

Permission was needed, but it wasn't strictly enforced. If they started selling five minutes early, neither the police nor city hall would mind.

"Um, Charlotte?" Lud sensed something unusual about Charlotte's behavior. She made a point of looking around and checking the clock tower. "Uh, is yours broken?"

Charlotte always wore a pocket watch around her neck. But she hadn't looked at it.

"Huh? Oh... you mean this?" Slightly embarrassed, Charlotte laughed. "It isn't wound. It didn't break. I just stopped it." As she spoke, Charlotte opened her pocket watch. The watch's hands—for seconds, minutes and the hour—were unmoving.

“That’s a military watch.” Lud only just now noticed.

The design was different from the watch he had received as a soldier, but it was one of the types the Wiltian military supplied to soldiers. The watch was made in Wiltia, which was proud of its technology. It was made to be durable and precise, so it should accurately keep the time.

After the war, surplus watches had flooded the market and were sold cheaply. Many people cherished them. But the watch Charlotte had was different from those supplied to low-ranking soldiers. It was a luxury model for commissioned officers.

“Erich gave me this.”

“What?!”

She meant Erich Blitzdonner.

“I think it was a little over ten years ago. Before Jacob was born, I returned to Organbaelz from Berun. Erich came to see me off as I boarded the train bound for home.”

He had sent her home alone—the woman carrying his child. It was during the war, so even if he had wanted to live with her, it wouldn’t be allowed.

“He gave me this watch. He said I could sell it for a fair amount. But I’ve kept it all this time.” Charlotte laughed in embarrassment, but she didn’t take the matter lightly.

Her household was by no means prosperous. She lived with her aging father and young son. Selling the pocket watch would have eased her burden. But she hadn’t done that.

“Um... the time you’ve stopped it is...”

“Yes, and I know it’s sentimental of me.” Charlotte nodded sadly to Lud’s question.

She had stopped the watch at the time she parted from Blitzdonner. For ten years, time had stopped for her and she held that moment inside.

“When we parted, he said he would come for me.”

Looking at her distant gaze, Lud felt heavy.

Should I tell her about the major?

Charlotte didn't know Blitzdonner was alive. Apparently, Jacob hadn't told her last night. He hadn't told her that her husband was here.

What should I do?

Jacob hadn't told Lud not to tell her. But if Jacob hadn't told her, it wouldn't be right for someone else to.

Every family has its own circumstances. Butting into their troubles often makes them worse.

"Hmm..."

"Mr. Langart?"

"Oh, um, it's nothing!"

People thought Lud's face looked scary no matter what he was feeling. When he thought about something difficult, he gave off a particularly fierce aura.

"Well, I'll be waiting over there. Otherwise, um... I'll hinder sales."

"Yeah. Uh... sorry."

People in Organbaelz had grown accustomed to Lud's frightening features, but that wasn't true in the neighboring town of Saupunkt. Charlotte was an enormous help because she possessed the calm of a mature woman, unlike Sven and Jacob. Another reason was her beauty.

"Pardon me, are you open?"

"Yes."

However, before Lud could move away, a customer appeared, perhaps having heard about Tockerbrot's reputation.

"Uh-oh..." Lud hurried to get away, but the customer called out to him, almost as if in pursuit.

"No running away! Captain Lud Langart... am I right?"

"Huh?" Lud instinctively turned around when the man addressed him by

name and even knew his rank.

“How have you been? I didn’t get a chance to say hi yesterday. Sorry about that.” Daian Fortuner, the Monster of the Royal Capital, also known as the Sorcerer, stood before him.

A few minutes later, Lud and Daian were sitting on a bench in a park near the main street. One was dressed like a clown and the other was large and radiated strong feelings. People naturally kept their distance.

“You know, I was hoping to meet you sooner. But I rarely leave the capital.” As Daian gestured broadly, his hand held a paper bag containing bread Lud had baked. He picked out one piece of bread and put it in his mouth.

“Hey, this is good. Your bakery lives up to its reputation!”

Daian had dutifully paid for the bread. And he even refused his change. But Lud made sure to give it to him anyway. He had a vague feeling that he needed to be careful around this man.

“If your bread is this tasty, you could be a success in Berun! Actually, this is far better than the bread from that shop on Court Way with the huge sign.”

Court Way was in central Berun, the royal capital, and was the main street that led to the palace. To hang a shop sign on Court Way required a hundred gold coins, so its shops were among the finest of first-class locations.

“But I suppose you have no intention of returning to Berun. It seems a lot has happened.”

“Do you want something with me, Director Fortuner?” Daian was beating around the bush, so Lud was blunt.

“Oh, do you know me?”

“I’ve met you a few times.”

Lud was once an ace pilot in the military. Becoming an ace required more than just fighting on the field of battle.

Lud was chosen to investigate the effects that adjustments to detailed specifications of the weapons had on pilots. He had spoken to Daian on a few

occasions when he visited the Weapons Development Bureau and its test sites.



“Is that so? Oh dear. I beg your pardon. I don’t remember.” Daian casually blew it off. But he had an excellent memory. He could boldly recite from memory a complicated formula equivalent to a magic spell. If he didn’t remember Lud, it meant that Lud’s existence had not been worth remembering.

“.....”

Lud didn’t respond angrily or admonish him. It was well known throughout the military that Daian Fortuner didn’t change his attitude, even in the presence of upper-ranking military officers like the now deceased Genitz, or Marshal Elvin, who was the top director of the military. And it probably wouldn’t change even around the monarch himself. His treatment of Sophia—while she didn’t like it—was special, an exception to the exception.

“I created Svelgen Avei, the one you call Sven.” Daian broke the silence to blurt this revelation.

“.....?!”

“You’d like to hear about it, no? I’ll tell you. A long preamble would be a waste of time.” Lud was stunned, but Daian spoke lightly—as if making small talk—and chewed on one of Tockerbrot’s famous bean-jam buns.

“She isn’t human. Blood doesn’t flow through her veins. All her internal parts that correspond to muscle, bone and organs are artificial. She’s called a humanoid Hunter Unit. Simply put, she’s a Hunter Unit shrunk to human size.” Daian related all this matter-of-factly. From the distant look in his eyes, he looked as if he were explaining the botany of nearby flowers.

“Her personality is derived from the artificial intelligence in the Hunter Unit you piloted. You named her Avei. Got it?”

Hearing the truth about Sven presented so dryly, Lud was momentarily speechless.

“There’s also the red girl infatuated with Blitzdonner and... Oh yes, that girl clinging to the dark-haired girl who was with Sophia. I also made *them*.”

He meant Rebecca and Lillie.

“It would be hard to say, by any standard, that I succeeded with the other girl.

For some reason, she has a surplus of emotion. Rebecca's another matter." Daian talked about the two girls as if evaluating new weapons—which he literally was.

"I should explain that their thoughts are spontaneous and autonomous. I'm not involved." Daian spoke as if he anticipated Lud's thoughts.

Lud was astonished.

"I'm not their birth father. I delivered them, like a midwife."

Daian just brought what already exists into the light.

"I do have some feeling for them as their creator, but I have no further attachment. I'm interested in how they grow up, but I've never given a thought to how I *want* them to grow up."

Daian's words might sound cold or indifferent. And while it was difficult to understand, what it all boiled down to was...

"I'm trying to say that I have nothing to do with how she feels about you." Daian only wanted to convey one thing. "Sven's love for you comes from inside her... I guess that's what I wanted to tell you."

When he finished speaking, Daian popped the lid off a bottle of milk and began drinking. "It's strange. This bean-jam bun, I mean. It's got sweet bean paste made with produce from the East, but it goes well with milk!" He seemed intensely interested in the difference between the milk and the bean-jam bun.

"You don't want to... you know... take Sven back?" Lud asked.

Regardless of the reasons behind her creation, Sven was a prototype of a military weapon made at the Weapons Development Bureau. The military had poured in more money, time and labor than usual for a new weapon.

"Did you hear what I said?" Daian answered as if troubled. Or with exasperation as if speaking to a dull student. "I'm interested in how she lives—her choices and how they turn out—but I don't want to interfere. If I influence the results, they are no longer pure."

His perspective was strictly that of a scientist. Nothing was important to him but observing the performance of his creations.

“I had a reason for creating the three girls initially. But it was just an excuse to secure a budget. You were in the military, so you understand, right? It’s loose about money.”

“Yes, that’s true.”

The military sometimes uses objects, money, and people on a different scale than in the outside world.

Future historians might claim that there was no way the military would put such an inefficient plan into effect, and that it must have been camouflage for some kind of subterfuge. They would develop conspiracy theories to explain it, but—as surprising as it sounds—the military had no ulterior motive.

“It would be someone else’s head on the chopping block, so I didn’t really care.”

Daian’s brain was so valuable that he influenced national policy and the Wiltian military’s strategic decisions. If a problem arose, it was likely that someone other than him would be punished. But those who would be punished approached him because they believed that if Daian achieved results, it would count among their own accomplishments. So he had no need to feel guilty.

“Anyway, don’t worry about that. You two should do as you like.” Daian threw the empty paper bag and bottle of milk into a nearby trash bin and stood up unsteadily.

“Did you come to tell me this?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Lud didn’t know that Daian could fall under attack at any time. Despite this, when Daian saw Tockerbrot’s truck pass by, earlier, he had left the hotel without telling Sophia.

“Why?”

“I wonder that myself.” Daian thought over Lud’s question.

During Lud’s army days, he was just a tester for Daian’s experiments, so the scientist hadn’t bothered to remember his name. But now he saw him as an individual and felt the need to explain to him.

“Anyway... I hate you.” Daian said this with a wry smile. “After all, you’re my rival in love. The girl I like can’t get over you.”

“Huh?” Lud didn’t know what Daian meant, but the scientist paid no mind and continued.

“And... oh, right. The being who raised me wasn’t human.” Daian’s customary insolent smile had disappeared. He wore a serious expression that he rarely showed. “However, I love her like my *mother*.”

Daian’s mother, who raised him and gave him the name Daian, had been a robot that spent nearly one thousand years alone behind one of the Doors performing meaningless maintenance activities.

“Maybe that’s why I worry about you hiding behind ridiculous excuses.”

You can develop strong ties to something that isn’t human. That robot was his true mother, even though she didn’t have blood and she was a machine.

“If you’re going to reject Sven, then you must do it honestly and fairly and of your own will. That’s all I wanted to say.”

Daian had to make sure that Lud did not reject Sven on the pretext that Sven’s heart had been created by Daian and was therefore false.

“Well then, I’ll be going. Oh, one more thing. Tell Svelgen that I’ll be staying here in Saupunkt for a few more days.” Daian spoke with his back turned. “If anything happens, come to me. That’s all.” The Sorcerer said no more, as if he had completed his task.

“Wait!” Lud spoke to his back.

“Yes?” Daian asked without turning around.

“You’re not Sven’s father.”

“No. I suppose they think so.”

“In that case, I want to ask you something.”

Daian said he wasn’t the birth father of the humanoid Hunter Units. He just delivered them, like a midwife. Lud had a question he could only ask that person...

Intermission 1

Across the border from Organbaelz, inside the Principality of Wiltia, was the nation's royal capital of Berun.

"Well, let's go, Miss Marisha! Let's explore your country!"

"How did this happen?!"

General Meitzer, of the continental nation of Noa, laughed cheerfully. As she looked at him, Marissa Haven exhaled in confusion and frustration.

She was a corporal in the security force at the Royal Weapons Development Bureau. She served under Sophia. A few hours ago, Marissa received a phone call from her superior officer, who left yesterday for Pelfe, across the border.

Marissa Haven had come to military headquarters to relay Sophia's message to Marshal Elvin, the highest commander of the Wiltian military. During that visit, she had inexplicably been appointed guide and guard to General Douglas Meitzer.

"How did I get into this mess?" Marissa folded her arms and again thought over the events that led to this moment.

"C-Corporal Marisha Haben reporting!" A few hours earlier, she visited Marshal Elvin's office at military headquarters. And she stumbled over her own name.

This wasn't a place a low-ranking officer would usually visit. A meeting with the marshal required permission. Ordinarily, she would submit a request in writing describing the nature of her business, and only after the marshal's executive department had determined that her visit was necessary could she go to military headquarters.

How did I get through?

But while Sophia was only a major, she was also a member of one of Wiltia's

few renowned noble houses. And Marshal Elvin treated her as one of his confidantes. For that reason, she had been ordered to observe Daian, who was a key individual in national strategy.

If Sophia followed every procedure, she couldn't efficiently accomplish many of her missions. So Marissa was permitted to directly convey this message to Elvin. Nevertheless, to a commoner like her, Elvin was an exalted person.

"Ah, you serve under Sophia!" Marissa was frozen stiff, but Elvin didn't hector her. Instead, he wore a cheerful smile and returned her salute.

"Hwah?!" Marissa was facing the person who made the greatest contribution to Wiltia's victory in the recent European war. He was the most heroic of heroes. Furthermore, he was a living legend, counted first among those who had rendered distinguished service during the recent rebellion in the capital. Marissa's tongue still couldn't form her words correctly.

"Hmm... You've come at the perfect time."

"I have?" Marissa had never heard of top brass calling anything perfect, so she asked her question with a stunned voice and expression.

"General Douglas, this is an excellent soldier recognized by an outstanding subordinate of mine. I shall assign her to you."

"Oh, thank you!"

Besides Marshal Elvin, another man was in the office. He appeared to be in late middle age. However, he had a youthful air and eyes like a boy's.

"Um... your name is Corporal Marisha Haben? Pleased to meet you!"

"Huuuh?!"

Elvin smiled and said, "I'm counting on you."

Marissa couldn't understand what was going on, but the military is a hierarchical society, so a superior officer's orders were absolute. Elvin was the marshal and she was a corporal. No matter what he ordered, there was only one available answer.

"Yes... Sir?"

And that was how Marissa met General Douglas of Noa, who claimed to be Sven's father.

"Um, General Douglas?"

"Oh, sorry. My apologies, Marisha. Call me Meitzer." Meitzer responded breezily with an easy manner that was extremely hard to imagine in a top military executive. "I'm too famous. If my identity gets out, I'll be thronged by my fans."

Douglas Meitzer had great influence, not just on the nation of Noa's military, but also on the government. There were many who would target him if they knew he was wandering alone in a foreign nation.

"Oh, really? I guess the famous have it hard, too."

However, this lower-ranking officer, who was like a small animal in comparison, hadn't understood, and she changed her form of address as requested.

"So, um... Mr. Meitzer. Where would you like to go?"

She didn't know *why* she was accompanying such a high-ranking officer from another country, but she had received an explanation of *what* she must do. Her orders were to be Meitzer's sightseeing guide in Berun.

"Well, what do you recommend?"

"Hmm... I recommend the Berun Grand Theater. And the Royal Cathedral is worth seeing. Oh! And Court Way! There are lots of wonderful shops there!"

"Oh, that sounds nice." As Marissa suggested various sights, Meitzer nodded with amusement.

If Marissa hadn't been in military uniform, she would have looked like a dutiful daughter taking her father from the country sightseeing around the royal capital.

"But all the shops on Court Way are expensive. I went into the bakery there and a tiny baguette cost seven sigs! I was appalled, so I left without buying anything!" Marissa had gone out with a few friends, but she was shocked that

the prices were so beyond what the common class could afford.

“Ah, a bakery?” The light in Meitzer’s eyes changed when she mentioned the bakery, but Marissa didn’t notice.

“Well, I don’t mind if it’s expensive. Let’s go to the shops you want to visit! And if you see something you want, I’ll buy it for you. And how about hitting the bakery afterward?”

“Oh, can we rea—” Marissa shrieked in joy, but then her voice broke off. A wealthy upper-ranking military officer and a young, low-ranking female soldier...

Huh? Oh no! What’s going on? Is this...

Unpleasant ideas popped into her head. She imagined Meitzer grinning and saying, “Heh heh heh... If you want something, I’ll buy it for ya!” before taking her someplace raunchy and doing all sorts of unspeakable acts with her.

“Eep!! No, no, no thanks! I’ve got a boyfriend!”

“Hm?” Meitzer looked perplexed.

“You have a boyfriend?”

“Uh-huh!”

“Well, that’s nice.”

Anyone might be taken aback by this revelation of private information that was not asked for.

“Apparently my daughter also has eyes for someone.”

“Huh?” This time, Marissa was the one taken aback hearing Meitzer’s private information.

“We’ve been alienated for a long time, so we’ve never even walked together like this.”

“Oh... really?” When Marissa learned that Meitzer merely thought of her in the same way as his daughter, who was probably about her age, she felt embarrassed. “Um, uh, sorry!”

“Why? Did you do something?”

She bowed her head repeatedly at Meitzer, who wore a mystified expression. Apologizing was in Marissa's nature.

"Hmm..." Meitzer had no way of understanding what she was feeling. He understood, however, that she was a decent human being. He smiled pleasantly. "Elvin assigned me a good girl."

Marissa didn't know why and under what circumstances Meitzer was visiting Elvin. There was no way she could have.

"But, Miss Marisha... let's go to Court Way later. There's someplace else I want to go first."

Meitzer had been identified in Organbaelz. He had then been transported to Berun and finally finished making the formal rounds. But that was no more than his official political business as a general. His true purpose was to go elsewhere.

"I want to go to VfR."

He had asked Elvin to contact the people there for him.

Elvin was in his office at the military headquarters of the Principality of Wiltia. After his guest left, he sighed.

"I wonder why he wants to go there?"

He had learned through the recent incident that Douglas Meitzer was eccentric. Meitzer was the kind of man who would send a *penguin* to appear in his place. He might do something bizarre like that and there might be no meaning to it.

But there are many people in the world who do pointless things but claim that there is a point.

"That place is full of dreamers! It's a kind of *hobby* for them."

When Meitzer had asked him to schedule a meeting at VfR, Elvin had tilted his head and said, "Where is that again?"

The group was outside, but not entirely unaffiliated with the government. They occasionally submitted an activities report, but that was all.

“Hmm...”

Marshal Elvin was a military genius. He was called a master of strategy, and his nickname in other nations was the Master Schemer. He was always able to see several moves ahead and inside the minds of others before he himself was even aware of it. Such excellent perception accounted for his achievements on numerous operations.

“I think my motto applies here.”

His motto was “Always expect the worst.”

“Pardon me, Sir!” The door opened as if timed to that precise moment. “You summoned me, Lord Marshal?” It was the man Sophia had requested that Elvin dispatch to Organbaelz on the double.

Because of disarmament and territorial expansion, the Wiltian army was suffering from severe personnel shortages. You might even say that human resources were currently the most depleted resource in Wiltia. For that reason, superb soldiers were worth their weight in gold.

“Leia... you came.”

This man was just such a soldier. To hear Elvin tell it, he was worth more than his weight in jewels. He was the man feared as the Blue Shudder, and his name was Captain Leia Toolman.

Chapter 3: Real and Fake

On the third night, at Tockerbrot in Organbaelz...

“Ugh... I’m tired, but this is a *nice* tired feeling.”

Blitzdonner, who had been known as the top soldier in Wiltia, finished his work and was enjoying a short break. His task today was far removed from fighting on a burning battlefield. He had been kept busy again today with customer service in the bakery.

“This reminds me of old times.”

“Old times?” Sven responded. In the three days since he arrived, she had grown accustomed to him.

“Yes. Back when my family was even poorer.”

Only Sven and Blitzdonner were in the shop. Lud had gone out as usual after the morning baking. Then he returned before lunch to bake bread, and left again to pick up stock and make deliveries. And Jacob, who was a valuable member of the customer service staff, wasn’t there either. Sven was the only one left to run the shop.

She had been vaguely uneasy around Lud. He hadn’t thrown up a wall between them. Instead, he seemed to be avoiding her.

“Your father is Mr. Joseph Shylock, right?”

Perhaps because of that, Sven felt like talking to this problematic and uninvited guest. It helped relieve her stress.

“That’s right. I guess you’ve met him a few times.”

“Yes. Your father set fire to our shop once.”

“I s-suppose... that caused some difficulty.”

Joseph Shylock was Jacob’s grandfather and Blitzdonner’s father. He was one of the most successful businessmen in Wiltia. Just over six months ago, he

accidentally ran into Jacob and tried to take him to Wiltia. He had caused a lot of turmoil, and after a number of incidents, a fire completely destroyed Tockerbrot.

“But he did pay the entire cost of repairs.”

“Oh...” Blitzdonner nodded as if that made sense.

“Along with that, we asked him to pay for an extension, new machinery, and a new oven.”

“I s-see...”

Sven hadn't let Shylock stop at just restoring the shop, and Blitzdonner was taken aback by the way Sven could turn anything into a profit.

“You're impressive. The whole world would be surprised to know that you pried money from Greedy Shylock.”

“You've got that right!”

Old Shylock was known as a monster in business. In Wiltia and around the world, he was known as Greedy Shylock.

“What estranged you from each other?” Sven asked casually, without thinking.

“Huh?” Blitzdonner scratched his head for a moment as if wondering how to answer the question. “Let's see... I was young, and I guess the old man couldn't handle it.”

“Huh?” Sven looked dubious at Blitzdonner's answer, which wasn't really an answer.

“I don't know how else to put it.”

Blitzdonner had run away from home just over ten years ago after a fierce clash with his father.

“My mother died around that time, and the old man was difficult after he got so rich, and then a business competitor pressed false charges against him and got him thrown in jail.”

“Is that when you became a different person?”

Blitzdonner was a false name. But, it was his official name according to Wiltian records, which suggested he had obtained someone else's citizenship through an extralegal measure.

"It was a confused time, before the war, so there were ways to erase one's history."

The Principality of Wiltia had been forced to fight a war on two fronts. There weren't enough soldiers, so the nation used illegal means to compensate. It even gathered starving orphans and trained them as type-three soldiers.

"Even criminals and convicts could obtain new names and registration once they joined the military."

Some were sentenced to prison time. Blitzdonner was better than those people, at least.

"Back then, I was still around seventeen, and the old man was forty. I didn't know it at the time, but when you get to the age your parents once were, you start to see some things."

In order to grow his business, Shylock had undertaken many dirty jobs of which the public would have disapproved. He knew if he wanted to have power and expand his holdings, he couldn't just stick to jobs that kept his hands clean. Without power, the public wouldn't hesitate to crush him. And he knew if that happened, it would also crush the futures of his family and employees.

"He scattered money among politicians and bureaucrats, and he got his enemies to cave in by slapping them with wads of bills. He hired tough guys for strong-arm work and found lawyers who specialized in legal manipulation. He would stint at *nothing* to accomplish his goals."

However, it was all so he would bear the responsibility for the dirty work, leave everything to his son, and have himself cast down as a scoundrel.

"He said it was all for *me*, and I hated that idea. I thought he was blaming me for his actions instead of doing it *for me*."

Young Blitzdonner had been unable to forgive that. He couldn't forgive his father for blaming his only son for his own dirty deeds.

No, that wasn't all. He was also worried about whether he could take over the business his father had created after so much effort.

"In the end, what I did was out of spite against the old man. It was an escape from reality."

He had run away and after drifting around, he fought in the war as a soldier, eventually becoming a hero with a new name.

"But now I have a son, so for the first time I finally understand how the old man felt. Now I would take any harm upon myself to make sure my son remains unhurt."

"Is that why you never showed yourself to Jacob?"

"I guess it is." Blitzdonner replied to Sven's question with a bitter look on his face.

Sven didn't know the details about Blitzdonner. However, since he was working with Daian, she guessed he had been appointed to a risky—even deadly—mission.

"When someone who is notorious gets near you, your life is put in danger. Isn't that right?"

"Yeah, I guess so." Hearing his answer, Sven remembered something.

During an incident six months ago, Jacob had been kidnapped because he was the grandson of the extremely rich Shylock. Shylock was involved in a lot of shady business, but Jacob was an honest person. He was only in danger because he was the old man's grandson.

Blitzdonner was a figure of international intrigue, so there was no telling what would happen to Jacob if people found out he was Blitzdonner's son.

"If being near Jacob would endanger him, I couldn't reveal myself. That was the best solution."

"....."

"At least, that's what I *thought*."

"What?"

Before Sven could agree, Blitzdonner contradicted his own words.

“I suppose part of me was scared. I wondered if someone like me had a right to his son. I won’t deny that I had such doubts.”

That was why Blitzdonner understood Shylock’s feelings. He had used his son as a reason and an excuse.

“I’m so pitiful. This is the true face of the Crimson Hawk. I’m scared of my own son!” After this comment, Blitzdonner laughed self-deprecatingly.

“That’s not true.” Sven wasn’t just trying to cheer him up. It was her honest opinion. “Nothing is worse than a soldier paralyzed by fear on the battlefield.”

“Aw, give me a break.”

“But it’s an important truth.”

Blitzdonner interrupted, but Sven continued speaking.

“Fearless and reckless acts result in harm—not just to the person committing them, but to *everyone*.”

Once when she was a weapon racing across the battlefield, she saw many machines that were destroyed because their masters acted without fear or caution.

“Perhaps you and my master survived *because* you were afraid.”

Reckless people, proud of their recklessness, might be considered outstanding but never *heroic*. A hero is someone familiar with fear. It’s someone who knows fear but presses on anyway. In that way, they win people’s hearts.

“I sort of understand how you feel.” For the first time, Sven felt a strange sympathy for Blitzdonner. “Because I’m scared, too.”

Sven had never told Lud what she was. Was that because she didn’t want to confuse him? Or was it because she didn’t want to involve him in any trouble stemming from her escape as a top military secret?

There were many reasons. And none of them were false. But there was another reason for her fear. What if Lud rejected her when he found out what she was?

“So you haven’t told Langart yet?”

“No.”

From her slight movement, Blitzdonner understood how she felt. She didn’t know if he understood because he was a skilled pilot like Lud or because he was a deft womanizer.

“I envy you and your family.”

“Huh?”

“The same blood runs through your veins.”

Shylock, Blitzdonner and Jacob... They were fathers and sons. They misunderstood each other, but that was because they cared about each other.

“I don’t even *have* blood. Every part of me is artificial. It’s all *fake*.”

This time, it was Sven who smiled self-deprecatingly. No, it was a *sad* smile. She believed her love for Lud was real. But she couldn’t dispel her doubts. Her arms, legs, bones, muscles, organs and every single hair on her head were all artificial. Could her feelings of love actually be real?

“Hey.”

“Yes?”

Blitzdonner’s voice held annoyance as Sven’s head sagged in sadness.

“Why are you saying such dumb things?”

“Because they’re true.” Sven looked in Blitzdonner’s face as she spoke. His expression didn’t suggest he was trying to cheer her up. The face and voice of the man in red expressed something closer to *anger*.

“Do you mean to say that everything man-made is fake?”

“But...” Sven was throwing up an emotional wall as if to say, “You’re human, so you wouldn’t understand!” But...

“Look.”

Sven stopped talking when Blitzdonner removed the gloves he always wore.

“That’s...”

“And it’s not just my hands. Both my *arms* are like this.”

He showed her his mechanical arms. They weren’t like artificial limbs. They were more than replacement body parts. They were made with the same technology used for the arms and legs of Sven and the other humanoid Hunter Units.

“Half of my body... 54 percent, to be precise... is mechanical.”

There were mechanical soldiers. Sven had fought against some from the Greyten Empire. Blitzdonner’s body was like a more precise and sophisticated mechanical soldier that Wiltia made using technology from the development of the humanoid Hunter Units.

“What happened to you?”

Officially, all nations—including Wiltia—were forbidden from using mechanical soldiers in the military. That was a matter of course. It would be crazy to use a human being as a weapon. But there was *another* reason.

Mechanical limbs made with Hunter Unit technology offered hope to people who had lost body parts to accidents, sickness or congenital problems. However, if such technology were openly used in weaponry, it would become the target of regulations. For that reason, mechanical soldiers were a transparent secret in the military.

“I guess I’ve been through a lot.” Blitzdonner’s reply was vague.

Since it was an open secret, the government could disguise it if—in the worst case—something happened to the mechanical soldiers. In fact, the Greytenite government insisted to this day it had no involvement in the *Defairedead* airship incident, in which mechanical soldiers were deployed. Greyten acted as if the special ops mechanical soldiers who swore loyalty to the nation had never existed.

“So... does this body mean my feelings toward Jacob are half fake?”

“No, not at all!”

“Why not? According to your reasoning, the feelings of an artificial object are fake, and half my body is artificial.”

“But you’re...”

“What’s the difference, huh?”

Sven took a step back from Blitzdonner’s ferocity, which allowed no argument. Was that because he was the Crimson Hawk, the top ace pilot in the Principality of Wiltia? No. It was because he was a father who cared about his son.

“Because only my arms, legs and organs are mechanical? Because I have my own brain? Because I was born human? Rubbish! There’s no difference between us at all.” Blitzdonner stood up and stepped closer to Sven, who had just taken a step back.

“There are people we care about, and our heads are filled with those people. Their laughter makes us happy and their tears make us sad, and we would do anything to stop their suffering. When you have such feelings, fake and real don’t apply!”

Blitzdonner took another step closer. “Tell me, Miss Intelligent Pilot Assistive A.I. What clear standard separates fake from real when it comes to love?”

Sven couldn’t step back any farther. The intense will of the man in front of her washed over her and stopped her from moving.

“It’s...” Sven tried hard to find an answer. But she couldn’t come up with anything. It was impossible to draw such a distinction.

“Do you get it now, Svelgen Avei? Fake and real have nothing to do with love.” Blitzdonner’s face had worn a severe expression, but now it loosened. “All you can do is believe. In yourself and in the person you care about the most. That’s what changes rock into diamond.” After these words, Blitzdonner tapped Sven over her sternum.

“Didn’t a great man long ago say you have to believe or you won’t be saved?” Blitzdonner broke into a carefree smile.

Oh...

Seeing him smile, Sven noticed it again. Blitzdonner’s smile resembled Jacob’s. And it wasn’t because their features were alike. They resembled each

other in the way they both communicated a mysterious friendliness when they smiled.

I'm so jealous...

For some reason, Sven envied that smile.

“Um, wasn’t it something like, if you ask, it shall be given to you?”

“Aw, don’t fret over details. It doesn’t really matter, so take your pick.”

Blitzdonner laughed away Sven’s question.

I see. So this is...

Sven had developed a heart after meeting her master Lud. At the same time, Blitzdonner’s Hunter Unit had also gained a heart through encountering him. Blitzdonner’s personality was rough and unrestrained, while Lud was reticent and sensitive. They were hardly alike at all. But they were similar in some way.

“Anyway...” Sven suddenly spoke again. “If you’ve got such a bold philosophy, why are you so clumsy in dealing with Jacob, Major?”

“Remember this, mechanical doll... Humans are blind to their own shortcomings, so they talk big.” His former solemnity had disappeared. The man in red covered his head and crouched down right there.

Then...

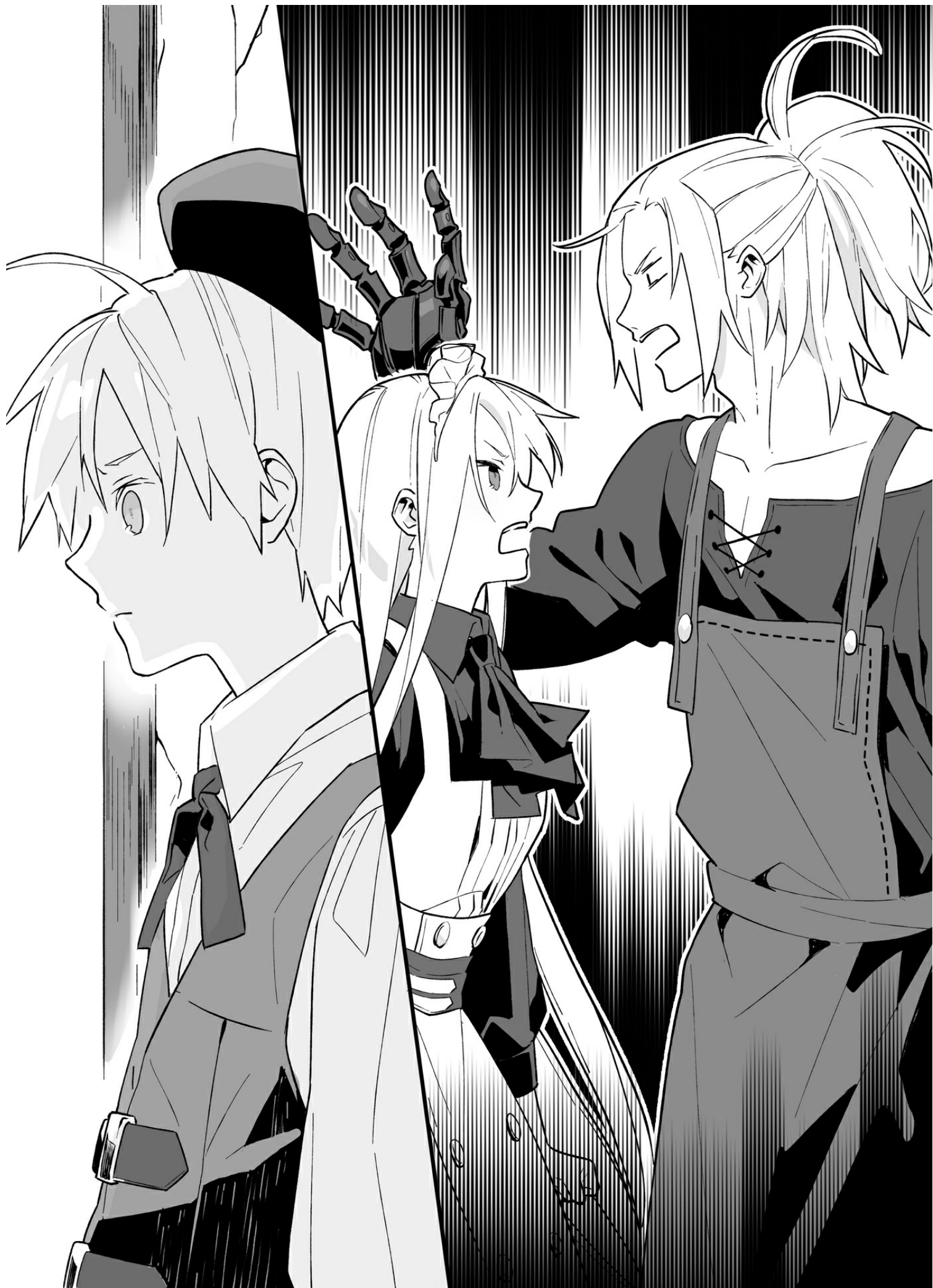
Tockerbrot was half-demolished, with collapsed walls, so voices inside were clearly audible outside the shop. Jacob, who had snuck in through the back door, heard the whole conversation between Sven and Blitzdonner.

“.....” The boy pressed against the wall in silence. “Why...?” Jacob didn’t know who he was mumbling to.

Jacob didn’t feel hate or anger toward Blitzdonner. He *was* angry about Blitzdonner leaving him and his mother alone. But there was another reason behind his rejection of his father, who had suddenly appeared.

Yes, he did feel those feelings of anger. But he had another feeling in equal measure. Fear. He was indescribably afraid of getting closer to his father. He was afraid of what would happen if his father rejected and denied him. And he

would never have experienced those feelings if he had believed from the start that he had no father.



“We’re the same...” He mumbled again and walked away.

He thought as he walked. His father was scared of Jacob, just as the boy was scared of him. Blitzdonner was afraid of getting close because if his son rejected him, he might never recover.

“.....”

Jacob couldn’t find a way to approach his father, especially since their relationship was so unusual. He kept walking.

“Jacob?” The girl in the red dress, who made him think of his father, was in front of him. “Aren’t you going to see the major... I mean, your *father*?”

“I don’t need to.” Jacob replied spitefully to Rebecca’s question.

“Jacob, I don’t have a parent.” Rebecca spoke sadly to Jacob. “So will you teach me? Do parent and child only meet when it’s necessary?”

“.....”

She wasn’t asking sarcastically. Both Blitzdonner and Jacob were important to Rebecca. It was painful for her to see the miscommunication between them. Nonetheless, if they claimed they didn’t mind, then she didn’t intend to interfere. Her duty was to fulfill their wishes, even if it meant she was tormented by feelings that tore her to pieces. So...

“Are you *sure*?”

She needed to make sure his answer was really the right choice.

“That’s, um...”

The boy mumbled and Rebecca handed him a small bag.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a *roche*.”

A *roche* was a baked sweet. Its name meant rock. It was baked with egg whites and sugar mixed with almonds and other nuts.

“Former Captain Langart told me you like these.”

Roche was a common bakery sweet. Baking bread required lots of eggs, with

the yolks often used for glazes. The leftover egg whites were whipped into a meringue for making the *roche* that were lined up in a corner of the bakery.

“This is all I can do.” Rebecca’s shoulders shook in frustration at her powerlessness. “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?” Jacob felt hopeless as he replied to the red girl, who was crying.

“I...”

What should he do?

All of a sudden, someone else spoke to the boy, who was looking away as if he didn’t know how to fix his mistake.

“What’s up, you two?” It was Milly, the apprentice at Tockerbrot.

“What? Why is the red girl crying? Did *you* do that, you jerk?!”

“No!” Usually, Jacob would reply with a joke, but now he wasn’t emotionally capable of any smooth talk.

“Anyway, Marlene told me to find you.”

“Marlene wants to see me?”

“You and... What a coincidence! You too, red girl.”

“My name is *Rebecca*. What does she want *me* for?”

Rebecca and Marlene had met during the recent rebellion in the royal capital.

“Will you come to the church tonight? Red girl... you too, please.”

“Huh?”

Then Milly said she was busy and hurried off.

“What the...?” Rebecca had just been thinking that she had missed her chance to see Marlene. But she couldn’t help tilting her head at how unexpected this was.

About 130 years ago, there lived a man called the Lion Emperor. He ended the hierarchical system of the Holy Empire—which then still existed as the world

order, though a mere shell of its former self—and he almost achieved the first continent-wide rule since the European Empire. Even after his death, his name lived on and became a byword for “revolutionary.”

He had started as a petty officer born on a small rural island, but rose rapidly in status by taking advantage of the troubled times. The Lion Emperor was a powerful and invincible general, almost god-like, and he possessed a demonic wisdom as a politician.

Not many people knew that he was also a keen archaeologist. When he was a petty officer, he joined a mission to explore ancient ruins. There was no record of what ruins he investigated or where they were. However, all the members of that mission died mysteriously, except the Lion Emperor. Some said the deaths were due to a curse from the old royal families. And those who spread such rumors also died mysteriously.

The Lion Emperor tried to maintain his success, and started calling himself the emperor, but the expeditions he sent to the Greyten Empire and northern nations met with successive failure, and gradually his rule weakened. This was the sad fate of a man who had risen to such heights in one generation. His rule through absolute power instantly collapsed the moment that power faltered.

In the end, attendants betrayed him—or more accurately, those he *believed* to be his attendants—and he was imprisoned on the small rural island of his birth.

“Why?!” The Lion Emperor roared and snarled inside a shabby mansion on the small rural island. He no longer had the lion-like dignity signified by his title. His howls were those of a wild dog that has been beaten.

“Why must I suffer like this? The fools! They shouldn’t underestimate me! This is poppycock!” He hurled a chair against the wall, breaking it and ripping the wallpaper. The wine bottle on the table shattered. “How did this happen? Why? I did everything just as you told me to!!” The Lion Emperor’s eyes were wild as they stared at the girl in the corner of the room.

No public documents recorded her name. Only a history book that was more like a cheap novel made slight reference to her. It said, “The Lion Emperor

always had a girl with unchanging features by his side.”

“Calm down, Master. Tee hee hee...”

The girl was as beautiful as an angel. Anyone who saw her would think she really *was* an angel. She was beautiful enough to suggest that angels *don't* really have wings.

“You didn't make any mistakes, Master. You are playing all your roles to perfection.” The girl spoke to the Lion Emperor in the voice of an angel.

“I am? Do you jest? How can that be? I was stripped of my title, exiled from the country and ordered to live on this puny island for the rest of my life!! People will laugh as I rot here until I die!!”

“Oh dear...” The girl laughed as if uncomfortable at the sight of her furious master.

Since ancient times, throughout many dynasties, the final days of those stripped of their royal titles were miserable. Some were not even allowed poison to kill themselves, and one emperor had been strangled to death.

In comparison, it was a rare show of mercy to send the Lion Emperor home with the assurance of his life as long as he did nothing for the rest of his days.

“Every one of them is looking down on me! But I am the Lion Emperor!!” His reasoning made little sense.

People are emotional and do not always see from a rational perspective. As they climb higher and higher, they cling to the view from their elevated station. Those accustomed to drinking expensive wine—one bottle costing as much as feeding a commoner for a whole year—will turn up their noses at an offer of the cheap wine they used to love.

“Master, you impressively accomplished what was required. I am absolutely sure of that.” The girl maintained her gentle smile toward the Lion Emperor.

And that smile put out the flame of the Lion Emperor's rage. It wasn't that her smile calmed him. Rather, he wondered what she had meant.

“What are you talking about?”

“Because of you, the continent was almost unified. Each nation shared

technology and knowledge, and new technologies were developed.” The girl continued smiling as she talked.

“Also, this colossal international coalition presents a threat to the surrounding nations, spurring military buildups and weapons development, resulting in further scientific progress. More progress has been made during the less than ten years of your rule than in the preceding one hundred years!” The girl’s cheeks were red with excitement, and she spoke with passionate admiration.

“What are you talking about?” The Lion Emperor still couldn’t understand.

When he was a young officer on an archaeological dig, this girl had appeared from the ruins. And as soon as she appeared, she picked him out among the stunned members of the excavation team, as if carelessly choosing one potato from a pile in a basket, and she had said...

“Do you want to be *king*?”

Why had he believed her? No, he *hadn’t* believed her. He had just been attracted by her mysterious beauty and nodded his head. Since then, he had lived according to her instructions.

He had fought the way she asked, and he had won just as she predicted. He had made friends with those she told him to befriend, and he had rejected those she told him to avoid. He shunned the friends she told him to abandon, sometimes even taking their lives. The next thing he knew, people were calling him a hero and penning songs in his praise. Then he became a king, just as she had said, and he took the throne as emperor.

However, at some point, things started to go awry. The fights she suggested he start ended in utter defeat. As a result, campaigns that began with one million soldiers ended with only five thousand. The Lion Emperor’s myth of invincibility crumbled, and now he found himself *here*.

“Are you saying you *planned* all this? My loss and downfall were just what you expected?!”

“I made you a king as promised, didn’t I? Even more, I made you *emperor*.” The girl replied boldly. She didn’t think her actions were the least bit wrong.

“The continent of Europea must not unify yet. The nations need to become

more suspicious of each other, seek greater power, and achieve further progress. So... Master? You played your role. Good job!" After these words, the girl smiled appealingly.

But that smile felt exceedingly cruel to the Lion Emperor.

"What do you take humans for?! I'm no mere *puppet*!!"

"Excuse me, but I *know* that."

At his words, the girl looked exasperated. She didn't think humans were puppets. She just thought there was very little difference between puppets and humans.

"Well then, thank you for your hospitality. But now I must go." Politely and respectfully, the girl bid him farewell.

"Go where?"

"Since you came here, a competition for leadership has been raging on the continent. I have to carefully stimulate it and usher in another war." Her tone sounded as if she were talking about grocery shopping for tonight's dinner.

"Master... Oh, whoops. You're not the master anymore. Mr. Leon, please don't get any ideas about escaping from the island. Just live the rest of your life in peace. Well, see ya!" The girl left the room.

When the girl was gone... the Lion Emperor, or rather, *Leon*... now a middle-aged man like any other, stood there stunned and speechless.

"Ha ha ha..." After a little while, Leon laughed dryly. "Give me a break!! Who does she think I am?! I won't die in a dump like this!!!" He sprang to action.

Leon escaped the island and returned to the continent. Before too long, he reclaimed the title of emperor and seized power. The Lion Emperor fought for hegemony over the continent against allied national forces created specifically to defeat him. And he *lost*.

For a man considered to be a strategic genius, it was an extraordinarily swift defeat. His administrative power hadn't lasted one hundred days. He was caught, but he wasn't executed. If he was killed, his name would be deified and he would be remembered as a hero. So, once more, he was exiled to an island.

This time, it was a tiny, faraway island in the middle of the ocean, where even the birds didn't visit. There was no need for a jail. There was no hope of escaping the island. After a decade, the man who had called himself the Lion Emperor grew haggard, withered and finally died.

While he lived, he spent his days raving. His few guards watched with pity, thinking he had gained glory but lost everything and went mad. "That girl! Everything is that girl's fault!!" They watched as the former emperor shouted as if spitting blood.

"What's wrong?" The Saint realized she was being asked a question and turned around.

"I was just remembering the good old days."

She was called the Saint. No one knew her real name. She was a singular being in this land. Names are for distinguishing among members of the same group. But there was no one like her, so she had no need of a name.

"That man who was here before was a hoot. I warned him, but he *insisted* on tomfoolery."

Time passes differently for every person. When young people use the phrase "a long time ago," they mean about ten years ago. But when an elderly person says it, it means half a century ago.

No one could know that this girl, who looked only eighteen years old, meant over 130 years ago when she said "not long ago."

"He was helpful, so I gave him a peaceful life, but..." Her voice didn't sound regretful. She sounded as if she were talking about a sheepdog that was no longer able to chase sheep, so, reluctant to kill it, she decided to keep it alive, only to have it escape and get run over by a car.

"It doesn't really matter. Did you need something?" The Saint turned to face Mary Ville Mehl, the woman who had spoken to her.

"Um, you saved me from the Wiltian soldiers who wanted to kill me. Then you took me to August and made me a member of the Soviet Six."

“Yes, that’s right.”

“For what purpose?”

Someone had attacked the train carrying Mary Ville. She had narrowly escaped death, but soldiers had appeared to finish her off. They were Wiltian soldiers. And the Saint saved her.

“I knew about your activities, and I thought it was the perfect opportunity.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you want to be queen?” The Saint spoke as if accustomed to asking this question. “Actually, you’d be *chief secretary*. But it amounts to the same thing.”

“Are you asking if I want to be the leader of August?”

It was wildly unbelievable. August was a superpower spanning the continents of Europea and Aesia. It had lost to Wiltia in the recent Great War, but that only meant its invasion had failed. Its national territory had never come under threat. In fact, ever since the time of the Lion Emperor, 130 years ago, August had thoroughly repelled its enemies. And that was true even now, after it changed from an empire to a republic.

“Yes. You show promise and seem perfect.”

For some reason, Mary Ville didn’t think, “Can you actually do that?” She had no doubt that the pretty girl before her could easily accomplish what she promised. After all, she brought her here, and on that very day, placed her in Chair Five of the Soviet Six, August’s highest decision-making body.

“The other five are getting along in age, so it’s a good time for renewal. Besides, you’re well known.”

Mary Ville was born in Lapchuricka, a city in Haugen that was controlled by Wiltia. She then went to the Greyten Empire and fought against the power structure backed by that nation’s aristocracy.

“Don’t you know? You have many fans inside August as well.”

“Well, um...” Hearing this, Mary Ville stammered.

Fans didn’t just mean followers. It meant supporters who would secretly

remove opposition through the use of information, funding, materials, manpower, and sometimes organized activity.

“I’ve been in contact with them a few times, but...”

“Yes, entering an enemy nation and sowing confusion in the guise of a social movement is a common occurrence.”

Sometimes national and personal interests clash. To take an extreme example, what if there is a house in the spot where the government wants to build a fortress to prevent an enemy invasion? And what if the individual who owns the house refuses to vacate the premises?

It might have been difficult to drive out a private individual one hundred years ago when recognition of human rights was weak. But difficult doesn’t necessarily mean impossible. And yet, what if citizens raised their voices in protest against the infringement of an individual’s rights? If they gathered public opinion and pressed ahead behind a shield of righteousness, it would be hard for the government to use brute force.

At the very least, such a movement would inhibit the politicians, who would fear for their chances in the next election. Accelerating such activity would give rise to mistrust between the citizens of enemy countries and the nation, thereby making it difficult to govern. Such means were used repeatedly over the long arc of history.

“Your philosophy is good for August. Who cares if you’re from a foreign country? You might become a warrior for liberation—a hero! No... *you will.*”

“.....”

The Saint’s words awakened a mysterious feeling in Mary Ville.

As a matter of political ideology, August disparaged imperial rule and aristocracy. Those systems allowed pernicious but powerful people to rule over others, so freeing the masses from those forces was a matter of national policy. To August, invading other nations wasn’t an act of aggression. It was a war of liberation.

“What do you stand to gain from having me do this?”

“I love it when someone gets right to the point!”

The Saint pulled a piece of paper from a nearby case.

“What’s this?”

It was a technical drawing. It looked like an airplane or a cannon—or both—but Mary Ville had never seen anything like it before. It looked like the spindles for spinning yarn that Mary Ville had seen in her childhood.

“This is *Verne 1*. Anyway, that’s what I’m calling it for now. It’s one heck of a weapon!”

“Weapon? This is a weapon?”

Mary Ville wasn’t a soldier or affiliated with the military. But, she had a fair knowledge of weapons, although she was just an amateur. Nonetheless, she had never seen or heard of a weapon with such an odd shape.

“Your reaction is understandable. This has never been used in human history, or at least not in the past one thousand years.” Seeing Mary Ville’s confusion, the Saint explained. “This weapon can fly through the air with enormous speed and across great distances.”

The Saint spoke with a voice filled with rapture. “Direct attacks by aircraft and high-altitude airships can’t compare to this. It can level cities in enemy nations across seas and mountains.”

“Such a thing exists?!”

This weapon would make it possible to attack enemy strongholds from a special launch facility at the flip of a switch and without advancing an army. It was a weapon that could change the very fundamentals of war.

“Is human science capable of creating it?”

In the past century, human science and technology made enormous progress. Giant vessels crossed the vast oceans, aircraft flew through the sky, and railroads crossed continents. Nonetheless, Mary Ville doubted humanity had the knowledge to make such a weapon.

“Yes, it is.” The Saint unhesitatingly answered that question. “Even if we can’t now, we *will*.”

“Do you... mean...” An idea occurred to Mary Ville.

It was a rumor, little more than an urban legend, but spoken about as if it were true. There were Doors containing relics of the old empire of Europea. It was said that the technology for the Hunter Units, which Wiltia relied on as its main source of military strength, came from one of the Doors.

If we could revive the ancient empire’s technology or...

But her guess was wrong.

“No, that’s not it.” The Saint shot down Mary Ville’s silent speculation. “There is no need for that.”

The Saint’s back was turned, so Mary Ville couldn’t see her face, but her voice was different. It sounded *darker*.

“I’m going to have Wiltia make this.”

“What?!” Mary Ville was speechless.

Wiltia was going to develop this weapon? The Saint was going to have August’s greatest rival create a weapon capable of directly attacking a distant enemy base without the need of an army?

“Why would you do that?!”

“Why indeed. After all, it presents an existential threat to August.”

August had been able to avoid war for so long because of the mountains that protected it from invasion by a large army, and because of its long and frigid winters. The Lion Emperor invaded with a force of one million, but that unrelenting winter 130 years ago, said to freeze people in midstride, broke the invasion and it ended in losses nearing total annihilation.

“The mountains and dreaded winters, said to be August’s shields, won’t hinder this weapon.”

“But why do this?! If you do...”

“Yes?”

Mary Ville finally understood the Saint’s intentions. “You want to start a war. And not just any war. You want to instigate another Great European War.”

“Correct.” The Saint laughed with a charming grin. “If an enemy nation has a weapon that it can use against your nation, there’s only one way to handle it. You must strike first.”

There was no way to successfully block all missiles attacking from the sky. And whether nations sign treaties, prattle about harmony, or form alliances, as long as it’s impossible to see into the other’s heart, fear and doubt will remain.

“Possession of this weapon is a military deterrent to other nations. At the same time, it’s a threat and provocation. All I need is a little stimulation to set off a massive explosion.”

The previous Great European War erupted because a young man from a nation supported by Greyten and Filbarneu shot and killed a prince from a nation allied with Wiltia. A single bullet had caused a large-scale war that lasted a decade.

In contrast, this new weapon could wreak destruction upon a whole city. It might kill one hundred, one thousand, or even ten thousand people. This weapon was certainly capable of sparking a war.

“No way...”

Chills coursed across Mary Ville’s back. She didn’t understand why the Saint would do such a thing. She didn’t know, but she had a guess.

“Were you also behind the assassination that started the last Great War?”

“You human beings have smartened up. All I needed back then was a pitiful boy and a single bullet, but now I have to concoct something much more elaborate.” The Saint laughed with delight.

She had filled an innocent and foolish child with malicious intent and placed a gun in his hand. And that had altered history. She was responsible for countless tragedies and hellish scenes.

“.....”

“As for what I want from you... I want August, as a free and progressive nation, to defeat the evil, tyrannical Wiltia that has developed a weapon of mass destruction, a deed equivalent to a hostile act. And I want *you* to lead that

holy war.”

The Saint continued explaining her plan to Mary Ville. “Don’t worry. I don’t care who wins. I just want it to be long and catastrophic.”

The Saint’s smiling face remained as lovely as ever. She sought a destructive, drawn-out war that would kill millions as if she were asking for a beautiful flower, a pretty gem, or a cute stuffed animal.



Intermission 2

Berun was the royal capital of Wiltia. It was designed to spread in a circle around the principality's royal palace in the center. Land was more expensive closer to the royal palace, so government offices, noble mansions and embassies from foreign nations lined the streets. The commoners lived in clusters of apartment buildings in the outer circle. Meitzer and Marissa were outside that outermost area in a suburb of the royal capital.

"This is barely part of the capital!"

Berun's famous streetcars didn't come out this far. Meitzer and Marissa had borrowed an automobile from military headquarters, bounced along unpaved roads, and finally arrived at their destination.

"This place feels like the edge of the world!" Marissa said the first thing that popped into her head.

"There sure are a lot of fields..." Meitzer didn't disagree.

They were visiting VfR.

"What in the world is VfR? It's the first time I've heard of it."

"Well, not many people know it. Its official name is Verne für Raumschiffahrt."

"Verne... The Association for Space Travel?" Marissa cocked her head at the word. "I feel like I've heard that name somewhere... Oh!" She clapped her hands when she remembered. "I ran across that name when I used to read *Fantastica*!"

Marissa wasn't born into a wealthy family, so she applied for a student loan to pay for her studies and joined the military to pay it back. She enjoyed reading and had a paperback book in her pocket at this very moment.

"Oh, you know it?"

"Wasn't Verne the name of an author?"

“Indeed it was.”

If Marissa remembered correctly, the novelist J.B. Verne had once been popular.

“He wrote stories about circumnavigating the globe in hot air balloons and sea vessels and exploring an ancient empire on the seafloor. They were all really interesting.”

“Yes, that’s him.”

Verne died almost twenty years ago, but he had possessed incredible insight and imagination and described the dreams of science rather than pseudoscientific fantasy. Much of what he wrote came true, so he was also highly respected for his accurate predictions.

“In one of his works, humans journeyed into space, so this place is named after him.”

“Oh...” Marissa thought about it for a moment and then looked surprised. “Can people really go into space?” Scientific progress had been rapid, during which the Hunter Units—which even Verne hadn’t foreseen—were developed. Excitement tinged Marissa’s voice as she wondered if humanity would now touch the stars.

“No, that is still impossible.” Meitzer laughed good-naturedly. “However, the people here hope to make it happen someday. And they receive government funding.”

“Oh, really? That’s surprising.”

Wiltia had been victorious in the recent Great War. However, while production swelled, demand had drastically fallen, resulting in a poor economy that was gradually eroding various sectors of society. Even public agencies were being forced to decrease budgets, and the military was hit especially hard. Some military bases were having trouble even finding the money to fix broken showers.

“When the government is so tight fisted, I’m surprised it’s funding such a non-essential area.”

The government was pouring tax money into space travel when its finances were tight. Marissa, whose viewpoint was that of the common person, was surprised and dismayed.

“You misunderstand, Miss Marisha. Public funds are precisely for projects with long term results.”

“Really?”

“When something is sure to pay off, private investors and corporations will shell out money, even if you don’t ask. When a venture doesn’t pay off, public funding is necessary.”

Public money built housing, provided healthcare, and found work for the poor. Those were enterprises with no prospects of revenue. If you prioritized profit when it came to survival necessities such as electricity, water and means of transportation, people would die, starting with the poor.

The nation’s *raison d’ être* was protecting the people. That was its guiding principle, so seeking profit and high returns from that endeavor made no sense.

“VfR is researching space travel. Tell me, Marisha, what would be necessary for travel in space?”

“Huh?” In response to Meitzer’s question, Marissa was silent. She didn’t have an immediate answer. Flustered, what came out was... “F-Food!”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“It is?!”

“But what can you eat in outer space?”

“Huuuh?!”

Meitzer hit her with another question.

“You don’t know? Well, they don’t know either, so they conduct research and perform experiments to find out. And in the course of their progress, they may come across new technology and knowledge applicable in other areas.”

“Does it really work out that well?”

“Most of the time, no. But the basic theories that give rise to new technology

bloom because of countless failures. Given that, it isn't a waste. Not at all."

If one hundred investments ended in failure but the one hundred and first gives birth to a revolutionary new technology, that alone could change the world. The aircraft now common in the skies began with brothers who ran a bicycle shop. And it's well known how strangely people first looked at them.

"Wiltia won the recent Great War with the new weapon known as Hunter Units. That's probably why the government decided there is a value in investing with the promise of giving birth to new technology that may in turn lead to new weapons."

"Oh... I *think* I get it." Marissa spoke as if he hadn't fully convinced her. She still wondered what kind of revolutionary technology could come from a research facility located in the middle of a rural suburb. And then...

"... t!"

She heard a voice. "Hm?" Looking around, she saw a small human in the distance. It was waving a hand and shouting something.

"Someone welcoming us?"

The military had sent prior notice of their visit.

"Hmm... But something doesn't seem right." Meitzer put a hand to his mouth as he pondered, then he looked up. "Oh no... This is bad."

"What do you—gack!"

Meitzer tucked Marissa under his arm and took off running. He ran so fast it was difficult to believe he was carrying someone. He ran with such power that it churned the earth, and the next moment, they were several hundred meters away.



“W-What the?! What happened?!”

“Miss Marisha! Don’t talk!”

Just then, right after Meitzer spoke to Marissa... There was a huge explosion behind them.

“Why—ow!!” In shock, Marissa bit her tongue hard. “Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow...”

“That’s why I told you not to talk... Are you all right?” Meitzer spoke with concern to Marissa, who had tears in her eyes. “It didn’t hit you, did it?!”

The human who had waved them away drew near enough that they could make out his face.

“No, and that’s thanks to your warning.”

“Um... sorry about that.”

A full-bearded man in early old age looked at Marissa covering her mouth and moaning, and at Meitzer, who responded with a wry smile. “Are you... Professor Auguste?”

“Oh, do you know me? Are you the visitors the military mentioned?” The man was Auguste, and he answered with a surprised look on his face.

A short while later, Auguste led Meitzer and Marissa to the Association for Space Travel.

“Whoa... What a mess!”

The facility was spacious, but there were mountains of documents, presumably research materials, and various experimental tools scattered around leaving little space to walk.

“Please, right this way.”

Auguste showed them toward the back, where the floor was barely visible and a sofa suggested they had been expecting visitors. It would be hard to reach it however.

“Some of this stuff looks expensive. If I break it, it’d wipe out my monthly pay!”

Marissa was walking carefully. At her feet lay some kind of experimental sample that looked like avant-garde art.

“No, not your monthly pay. More like your *annual* pay!”

“Hwaaah?!” Marissa cried out from the bottom of her heart hearing this comment from Meitzer, who was striding smoothly but carefully through the objects, despite his large frame.

A low-ranking soldier’s salary wasn’t high. Marissa was still repaying her loan from her student days, so she lived frugally. She had recently taken a relatively decent side job, but she still didn’t have money to waste, and the loss of a month’s pay was a hardship she could not afford.

“Please, wait a moment. I’ll have someone make tea.”

“No, that isn’t necessary.”

Having finally reached a place where the floor was clear, Marissa sat on the sofa, feeling exhausted spiritually and physically.

“Hey, Helmut! Make tea! Huh? There are no cups? Well, there are beakers, aren’t there? I think so anyway! Use ones that have been washed!”

“Whoa...” Marissa exclaimed in a voice conveying concern over just what the beakers might have been used for.

“So what brings you here?” Auguste asked Meitzer with curiosity.

“It’s hard to tell whether our group is a bunch of visionaries or just delusional. Luckily, thanks to my past life, the government arranged a research budget, but it isn’t a lot of money.”

Auguste was a former professor from Berun University. He was an unusual fellow, a former medical doctor who later became a physics scholar. He had a laudable history in medicine, so his name was influential with government big shots. That was what he meant by his past life.

“Actually... I’ve read your work, Doctor, and it was quite interesting.” Meitzer offered praise to refute Auguste’s humility. “I think it was called “The Path to the Stars.” It described how humans could leave the earth’s atmosphere and visit other planets. And how we could go to the moon. I had the impression that

you were serious and had developed your theory considerably.”

“Oh my... You read that? I’m much obliged.”

A few years ago, after the conclusion of the Great War, Auguste published a paper. Most scholars dismissed it as little more than the summary of a science fiction novel. They believed it was impossible for humans to go into space.

“Many academics declared it impossible for human beings to live in a world without air, water or even gravity, and wondered how it would be possible to navigate a void. But I felt differently.” Auguste’s eyes sparkled in response to Meitzer’s words. He was probably over fifty years old. But now he looked like a young boy.

“I’m so happy. It’s been a long time since anyone said that.”

“I’m glad, Professor.”

Auguste’s helper Helmut, who had brought tea, also laughed joyfully. As if second-guessing the wisdom of serving tea in beakers, Helmut had poured it into cups, albeit slightly chipped ones.

“Well? Is your research going well?”

“Actually, we’re locked in a tough fight. When will the day come that we can head into space?”

“To me, it appeared to be going smoothly. That experiment earlier looked like a success.”

“Hm?” Hearing Meitzer’s astute comment, Auguste closed his mouth.

“Earlier? Um... what *was* that earlier? A bomb?” Marissa, who had nearly been caught in the mysterious large explosion, was eager to know. The government wouldn’t look the other way if they were setting off mysterious explosions. She would have to report it through specific channels.

“No, you don’t understand, Miss Marisha.” Meitzer spoke to Marissa, whose face was now stern. “That was the experiment’s objective. It’s a rocket.”

“Rocket?” Marissa had never heard the word before.

“There are various definitions, but in this case, it means a machine that ejects

internal matter for thrust instead of taking in air from outside.”

The word rocket was derived from a word meaning bobbin. That was because rockets had a similar shape.

“Traveling through a space with no air, water or gravity requires thrust from a reaction to an explosion caused by chemical combustion. We launched a rocket, and that explosion occurred when it fell.”

“You appear to know all about it!”

Meitzer grinned at Auguste’s surprise.

“That’s why you have your laboratory out here in the boonies, isn’t it? It’d be hard to perform such experiments in the middle of the city.”

“Yes, that’s it exactly.”

The rockets Auguste was studying combined liquid oxygen and liquid fuel. Burning that fuel caused an explosion that provided powerful thrust. Such an explosion was more destructive than the blasts of crude bombs.

“The rocket reached the projected altitude, so the experiment was satisfactory. We were right about the blend ratio of liquid oxygen and fuel.”

Sometimes science achieves productive results even when it appears that it has failed.

“Then if you make a bigger rocket, will people be able to go into space? Like, to the moon?”

“No, too many problems remain. With current technology, it’s impossible to leave the atmosphere.”

“Oh, is that so?”

“But...”

Meitzer unintentionally narrowed his eyes. “So long-distance flight is already possible *within* the atmosphere?”

“?!” Auguste’s face tensed at Meitzer’s words.

“The government isn’t pouring tax dollars into the Association for Space Travel because it’s drunk or handing out charity. They figured you would

someday develop technology with practical applications. But, that's not true. You've *already* reached that point. Am I wrong?"

"....." Auguste didn't answer.

Meitzer continued. "The military is paying the Association's bills because it expects the technology to carry over into military use. And you've already achieved results."

Under the cover of the Association for Space Travel, which sounded like something from *Fantastica*, was a test site for new weapons. That was its true function.

"You know the military occasionally plays a role in scientific and technological progress, don't you?" Auguste finally spoke back. "There will be temporary drawbacks. However, it will be a blessing to humanity."

"I suppose so. I can't deny it."

Meitzer was a military man. He even had the rank of general. So he understood the man's reasoning.

"The fact is that science made dramatic progress during the ten years of the Great European War. That technology trickled down to the average person and has enriched humanity. There's no doubt about it."

"In that case..."

"But it mustn't happen too fast."

Meitzer's eyes took on a glint of intensity. "You *must* halt this research. Such technology should never exist in this world."

"What... do you know?"

The technology developed by Auguste and the Association for Space Travel could be applied to one particular weapon. Even the mere fact that it existed could destroy the balance of world powers.

"*Verne 1*. The world isn't ready for that weapon yet."

Application of the rocket development technology could give birth to a very dangerous weapon. That weapon was the ballistic missile, and the only two

people in the world who knew about it were Meitzer and the girl known as the Saint.

Chapter 4: Temporary Closure

Sven was alone inside Tockerbrot. “Hm?” She tilted her head.

Over the last few days, ever since her true form was revealed, Lud had been acting strangely. He wasn’t avoiding her, but his interactions with her were unusually superficial. If she said hello, he said hello back, which was normal. But, he was trying too hard to respond normally.

Sven thought he might try to pretend he hadn’t learned her true identity, but something else was strange, too. He had left the shop in Sven’s hands and dedicated himself to baking bread in the oven room before leaving again. Tonight, he returned from traveling sales and then went out again after preparing to close the shop.

“What’s going on?”

And that wasn’t the only odd thing going on tonight. All of a sudden, Blitzdonner and Rebecca were nowhere to be found. And Jacob had never even shown his face today. After finishing work, Milly went straight home. And while Marlene usually visited even if she didn’t have a reason to, she hadn’t appeared. Furthermore, Sven couldn’t find Hilde or the unusual girl who was always with her.

“Why do I feel so... alienated?” Sven felt lonely, as if everyone had left her out. No... “This is probably the way things are *supposed* to be,” she muttered.

After all, she was *different*. No matter how similar to a human being she appeared, she could never be the *same* as Lud—not in any *real* way. In the end, she was no more than a *fake*.

“Fake and real don’t apply to love.” She remembered Blitzdonner’s words. Ever since he said them, those words had been lodged in her heart.

“But...” As long as she couldn’t prove that her feelings were real, she could only feel proud inside. It was such a disheartening path. “Why do I want to be with Master?” She suddenly asked herself this question.

Why had she come here, seeking something that would never have occurred to her when she was a weapon, even going so far as to abandon her former incarnation?

“Master...”

Sven couldn’t find an answer, so she continued moping.

Meanwhile, at the church atop the hill...

“Thank you for coming, everyone.” Lud spoke in front of the chapel altar, where a priest would usually deliver a sermon. Faces he knew were assembled in front of him.

“Why do you look so serious, Lud?”

Jacob had been Lud’s first friend when he came to Organbaelz.

“He’s going to explain that now.”

Marlene, the church nun with a tumultuous past, had also become Lud’s friend.

“You look *dead* serious.”

Until about a year ago, Milly had insulted him every time they met, but now she worked as an apprentice at his bakery.

“If it requires physical strength, leave it to me. I’ll gather the young fellas.”

Laurel was the leader of the miners. He had once refused to eat Lud’s bread, saying he had no idea what might be in it.

“If there’s anything I can do, just tell me.”

The young girl Hilde was a former member of the Schutzstaffel who first attacked with the intention of killing Lud.

“.....”

Looking at them, Lud had a strange feeling. None of these friends had thought well of him at first. Some had tried to trick and kill him. But now they sat here listening to him. These were people he had met as Lud the baker in Organbaelz, not as Lud Langart the Silver Wolf and ace pilot of the Principality of Wiltia’s

military.

“What’s wrong, Lud?”

“Oh, um, nothing.”

Jacob spoke with concern for Lud, who was so deeply moved that he could barely speak.

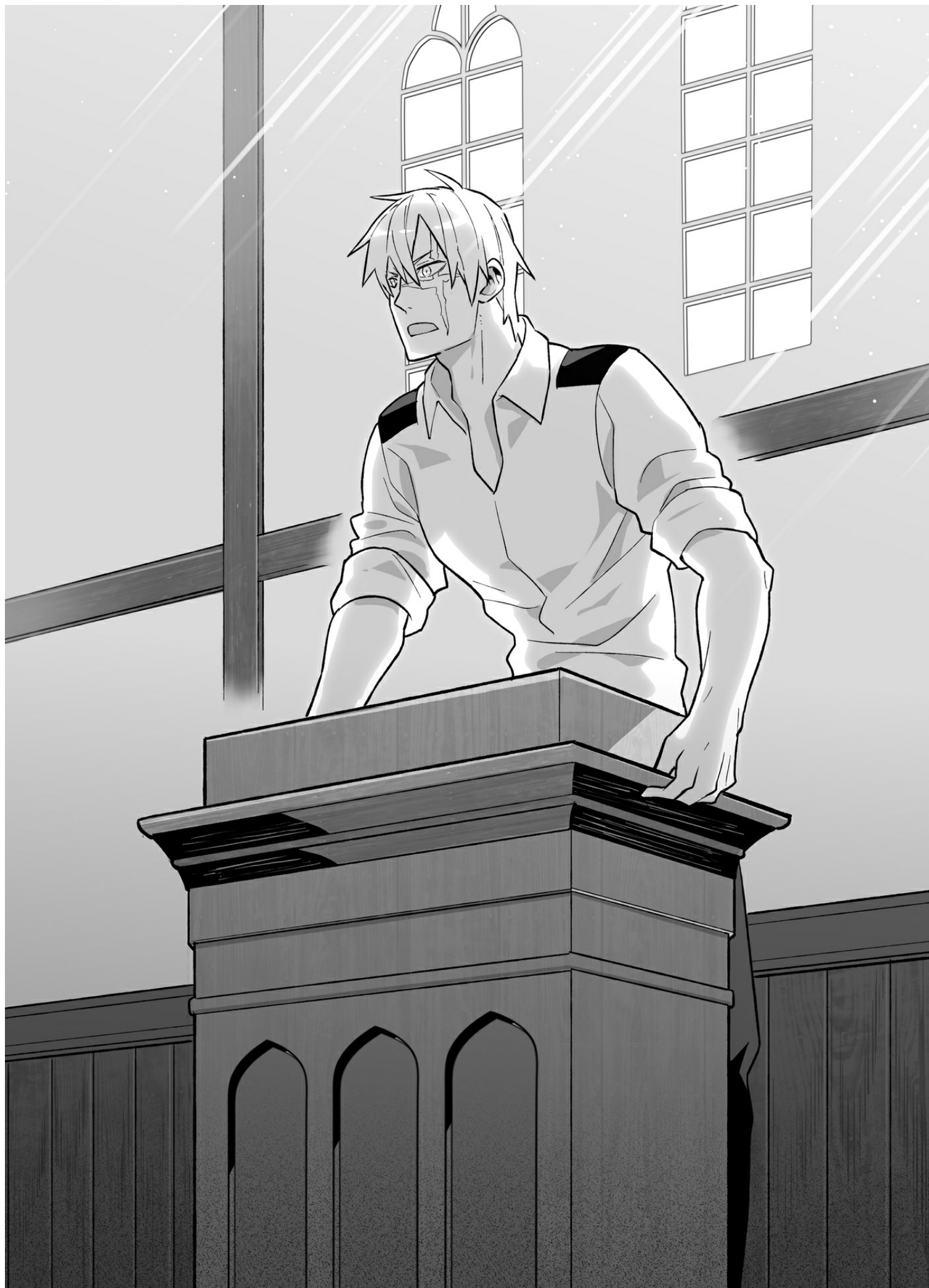
“To be honest... I have a favor to ask all of you.”

“—?!”

The faces of nearly everyone showed surprise.

“A favor? Lud, are you going to ask us to do something?”

“Y-Yes.”



Marlene's face showed disbelief. "This is a surprise. You always seem to stew over problems alone."

Laughing loudly, Laurel smacked a hand to his forehead.

"Oh... I do?" Lud looked like he was going to object that it wasn't *that* surprising, but then Jacob interrupted.

"Well, sometimes you'll ask things like, 'Hey, would you hand me that?' But until now, you've never looked so grave and said, 'To be honest,' and made a real request." After speaking, Jacob smiled impishly.

As his best friend suggested, Lud was a very serious person. He thought he had to solve his problems by himself and had a tendency to avoid involving even people he was close to. In fact, he didn't involve them precisely *because* he was close to them. That's why he tried to keep everyone at a distance when a troublesome organization had disrupted his business during a previous incident.

"If you ask, then we have no choice. Right, everyone?"

"Yeah, since he asks..."

Marlene asked, and Laurel answered.

"I guess there's no choice, so you can rely on us," Jacob chimed in.

"Oh, um... sorry."

Something welled up inside Lud when he heard their responses.

"That's wrong, Lud." Marlene wasn't actually a clergywoman, but she spoke to him as if she were the real thing. "In situations like this, you should say *thank you*."

".....!"

At those words, Lud once again looked back on his earlier behavior. Due to his guilt about his past, part of him thought he didn't deserve to be happy. That's why he had thought relying on people around him would bother them. So, apologizing became a habit. Today, however, he decided to rely on everyone for his *own* sake.

“Thank you, everyone.” He responded with a fresh expression of thanks. And then he delivered his request. “I want to throw a birthday party for Sven.”

Yesterday, Daian had told him that he was less Sven’s birth father than he was a midwife who delivered her.

“When was that?” Lud had asked. When had Sven changed from Avei to Sven? And Daian had answered that question.

Learning that the date happened to be the next day, Lud made up his mind. At his words, everyone momentarily showed surprise, and then understanding.

“Yeah. That would be good.”

“Not a bad idea. I’ll help!”

Marlene and Jacob raised their voices in agreement.

“I’ll lend a hand, too!”

“Uh-huh. Let me chip in.”

Laughing, Milly and Hilde also agreed. And then...

“I do not quite follow the situation.”

“In times like this, just agree with everyone, Missy.”

Lillie and Blitzdonner stood by the chapel wall.

“But I did not meet this girl until three days ago.”

“And yet that black-haired girl you fawn over has agreed.”

“Yes, if Hilde is going to help, then I will do anything.”

Neither Lillie nor Blitzdonner had known Lud for very long. But people important to them cared about him.

“Are you the third one?” Due to her comportment, movements and—above all—her distinctive personality, Blitzdonner realized that Lillie was a humanoid Hunter Unit like Sven and Rebecca. “The professor said he gave one to Yamato.”

“Do not misunderstand. I am not the *third* one, I am the *first*.”

“Oh, I see.”

Lillie was produced before Sven and Rebecca. To be exact, she had been a test unit made before the officially adopted units such as Sven. While some of her functions surpassed Sven and Rebecca's, she also had many defects.

"Major." Lud spoke to Blitzdonner. "I have a favor to ask. Do you mind?"

"Hm?"

Blitzdonner and Lud never met while they were both in the Wiltian military. They had been in the same army, but Blitzdonner was not Lud's commanding officer. And Lud was now a civilian.

"Ask away. Maybe I can do something to pay for my lodging."

He didn't always sound like it, but this man was compassionate, with a strong sense of duty.

"All right. Um... I'd like you to attend the party with Charlotte."

Blitzdonner had intended to remain unsurprised no matter what Lud asked, but he raised his voice letting out a cry. "What?!"

"Hey! Lud?!" Jacob also gasped in surprise. "Why is that necessary?"

Lud shook his head as if he didn't know how to explain. "It just... It just is." Lud couldn't answer any other way.

"But..." It was a request from Lud, but Jacob couldn't agree immediately.

"....." And as if that was also true for Blitzdonner, his face clouded.

"Understood." There was someone else who granted acceptance. "Former Captain Langart, I accept your proposal." And that was Rebecca, who stood still and ready at Blitzdonner's side.

"What's gotten into *you* all of a sudden?!" Blitzdonner was astounded by Rebecca's willful behavior.

He didn't resent it. But he was surprised. Ever since Rebecca had been assistive A.I. in Blitzdonner's Hunter Unit, she had obeyed his orders, never ignoring his instructions or making her own decisions.

"Um, Rebecca? Who put *you* in charge?!" Jacob was friendly with Rebecca, but he was startled too.

“.....”

Rebecca bit her lip hard, with an expression that suggested she was fighting her natural inclinations. Usually, she would never do anything that neither Blitzdonner nor Jacob wanted. But now she had acted in opposition to both. “Jacob... you’re former Captain Langart’s friend, right? Are you going to refuse his request?”

“No-no, but...”

“Major Blitzdonner, the former captain has saved your son, wife and father from danger countless times. Are you going to reject this chance to repay your debt to him?”

“Well, um, if you put it like that...”

Both father and son were unable to argue with Rebecca.

“Right. There won’t be another chance, will there?” She was usually calm, and people sometimes thought she lacked emotion, but now she spoke quietly and sadly.

“.....”

“.....”

Faced with that, neither Jacob nor Blitzdonner could oppose her. And in this circumstance, silence was the same as agreement.

“Former Captain Langart, I will take responsibility for carrying out your request. Please, do not worry.”

“Okay... th-thank you, um, Rebecca.” Lud expressed gratitude, and Rebecca stared at him in silence for a moment.

“...?”

Then, in a quiet voice inaudible to Jacob and the others behind her, she spoke to Lud, who had tilted his head toward her. “Thank you.”

Something had tortured her these last few days, but now she had finally found a clue to resolving it. Blitzdonner needed to repair his relationship with his son Jacob and wife Charlotte, from whom he had parted before Jacob was

born. From Jacob's point of view, it was unforgivable that the man left Charlotte alone for such a long time, and that bothered him more than the fact that he too was abandoned by his father. Perhaps now, the two might get back together. Whether Rebecca was aware of this or not, she expressed thanks to the man who had given her this chance.

"Well, then... I'm counting on all of you!" Once again, Lud addressed the group.

"Yeah!"

"Understood!"

"Roger!"

"Leave it to us!"

"Oh dear..."

"Hmm..."

They all responded in their own way. Then, the area around Tockerbrot got quite lively indeed.

"What's going on?" The next day, unexpected words shocked Sven.
"Temporary closure?!"

It wasn't one of Tockerbrot's regular holidays. They were basically open every day, all year long. On special occasions such as the Holy Festival and Thanksgiving, and around the New Year, they took time off, but otherwise they worked. One exception was the time they got embroiled in the rebellion, Sven had been abducted and whisked away to the royal capital, and there was an adventure surrounding her recapture.

In the absence of such a major event, Lud would never take time off. In fact, he had almost collapsed once from overwork. Nonetheless, he said they would close the shop for the day. And he hadn't offered any explanation. When Sven asked, he merely said, "I've got a small matter to attend to."

If her master Lud said so, all she could do was obey. He left no room for argument. And if he didn't explain, she didn't need an explanation. That's all

there was to it. But...

“What the heck is this about?!”

Instead, he asked her to visit Sophia, who was staying in a hotel in a neighboring town. It was as if he was telling her to get out of the shop and out of Organbaelz altogether!

“Why would he do that?!”

But even as she nursed her injured feelings, Sven headed for Saupunkt as instructed. And then...

“Hm?”

Sven was going to call Sophia from hotel reception, but the desk attendant told her it was all right to just go up to the room. Sven got on the elevator and went to a first-class room on the top floor.

“She sure is living it up on the government’s money,” Sven muttered sarcastically to herself as she rang the room’s bell. But the person who opened the door was Daian instead of Sophia.

“It’s been a while, Svelgen! Or should I call you *Avei*?”

“Either way. What’s the meaning of this?”

“Stop shooting daggers at me and come inside.” Daian invited Sven in and recommended a seat on the sofa, but Sven remained standing.

“I’m here for *Major Rundstadt*.”

“Hee hee hee!” Instead of answering the question, Daian merely laughed. “You don’t have to be so cautious. I have no intention of dragging you back to the royal capital.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

All of Sven’s parts were made with the precision of works of art. The production cost of one Hunter Unit was comparable to the cost of funding an entire division in the military. But compared to the budget poured into developing humanoid Hunter Units, even that was a trivial amount. *That’s* how

valuable Sven was.

“Can you just let me go free forever?”

Daian had discovered her location. But Sven assumed he let her go so he could obtain plentiful data by allowing her to blend in with human society. And she was *half* right. Which meant she was also half *wrong*.

“Hee hee... If I were the army’s dog, that would indeed be the correct course of action.”

In that case, Daian would remove the rezanium reactor that was Sven’s heart and brain, analyze the data, and preserve her as a sample to improve the next generation of humanoid Hunter Units. That was actually what he *should* do.

“But don’t worry. I don’t feel like it.”

“Why not?”

Daian answered Sven, who was still suspicious. “The honest answer is I don’t have time to do that sort of thing now.”

“That sort of thing...?” Sven couldn’t imagine why Daian would leave her when she was a walking conglomeration of military secrets. As she overcame her suspicion, her expression became perplexed.

“Besides, I’m not the army’s pawn. I’ll just come out and say it: I’m a *love hunter*!”

“Huh?”

The man in front of her spewed incomprehensible nonsense along a completely different trajectory. “If I did something like that to you, Sophia would despise me. She’s a big softie at heart.”

“Oh... right. Where *is* the major?”

Sven had assumed that Daian had taken advantage of her business with Sophia and somehow got her to come to his room, but that wasn’t the case.

“Um, Sophia is occupied at the moment.”

“Occupied?”

“She’s in the shower.”

“Huh?!”

That meant Sophia and Daian were staying in this room *together*. It was spacious, but it was still *one room*. A man and woman under the same roof, and the woman was now freshening up...

“Oh... you two have *that* kind of relationship?” Sven guessed.

“Yes, we do.” Daian affirmed it.

“Nooooo!!” But Sophia appeared and denied it forcefully.

“Sophia... What is this? The full service?!”

Apparently, it was true that Sophia had been taking a shower. She was wet and wearing nothing but a bath towel. At that moment, the smile Daian showed Sven disappeared, replaced by a broad grin.

“Shut up!! You really... You shouldn’t joke about that!!” Tears welled in Sophia’s eyes.

“Major, show some shame,” said Sven.

“What do you mean?!” Sophia lashed out at the thunderstruck Sven.

“I had no idea you and the Monster of the Royal Capital were an item!”

“As I said, we’re *not*!”

“Okay, whatever. But will you put on some clothes?”

“Oops! Hold on a sec!” Sophia went to get dressed.

“Oh dear, oh dear...” Sven sighed in exasperation.

Sophia was the daughter of nobility, a military family stretching back generations. And she was an unusual woman who refused to rely on the advantages of her birth. She had applied herself and become a military hero known as the Black Spear—and she was *feared* accordingly.

Military life doesn’t conform to pretty words. Many situations arise that require casting shame aside. Nonetheless...

“She’s too wild.”

“Yeah, and I *like* that about her.” Daian laughed with amusement at Sven’s

chilly attitude.

“So... what did you come for?”

“This.” Sven handed the letter Lud had given her to Sophia, who had returned quickly, now fully dressed.

“It’s from Captain Lud Langart?” Sophia looked mystified, but understanding soon dawned as she read the letter. “That guy... He’s as discreet as ever.”

Lud didn’t know the details, but he guessed Sophia was staying in Saupunkt on military business and hadn’t immediately returned to Berun. In fear of surveillance, he gave Sven a letter instead of phoning Sophia.

If he were to call me at military headquarters, he could use a military line, but if he called from the bakery...

Lud had quit the military, but Sophia was pleased he was still attuned to military considerations. She knew Lud regretted his past as a soldier. However, if he denied his past entirely, it also denied everything about their shared history in life and death situations. For that reason, she felt lonely, not as a senior officer deprived of a subordinate, but as a comrade-in-arms.

“Hmf!” Before she was aware of it, Sophia smiled.

“Ur...”

“Urgh...”

Sven and Daian looked a bit put out.

“What is it, you guys?”

“It’s nothing at all,” said Daian.

“Yeah, nothing,” agreed Sven.

The two simultaneously answered alike.

“Anyway, what does the letter say?” Sven asked.

“Hm? You haven’t read it?” Sophia replied. Sophia was still perusing the letter.

“Of course not! I can’t read a letter from Master without permission!”

However, Lud didn't say she couldn't *ask* what was written in the letter. So she asked Sophia.

"Well, the first line says..." Sophia flashed a mischievous grin. "... that I'm under orders not to tell you what's in the letter!"

The letter was an invitation to Sven's birthday party. Lud wanted it to be a surprise, so it had to be kept secret from Sven. Even though the party was for Sven, it was Sven who had unknowingly delivered the invitation, so Sophia struggled to contain her mirth.

"Whaaat?!" Sven was surprised Lud got the drop on her, but... "Th-That's just like Master! He knows me better than anyone!" Actually, it made Sven a little happy.

"Ur..." Seeing Sven's joy, Sophia looked miffed.

"Urgh..." Seeing Sophia's irritation, *Daian* looked miffed.

"Why do *you* look unhappy?!"

"Never mind that!" Sophia immediately shushed him. Daian looked away, but then swiftly peeked at the letter in her hands.

"Um... hey!"

"Oh, I see..."

Sophia objected, but Daian had already taken most of it in.

"That guy does the darnedest things..." Daian chuckled as if he found it fascinating.

"Uarrgh..." Sven groaned in frustration. Lud had told Sophia not to tell her, so she didn't bother asking again. She understood this was a matter she mustn't inquire about, but it frustrated her.

"Aw, don't sulk!" Sophia spoke as if she were talking to a younger sister. "I can't reveal any details, but I'm supposed to go with you to Organbaelz."

"With *me*?" When she heard that, Sven looked surprised. She had gone to the trouble of delivering the letter, only to find out it said she was supposed to return with Sophia, so the whole mission felt pointless.

“But... Hmm... There’s a problem.” In contrast to Sven, however, Sophia looked troubled.

“What’s wrong? Do you have to go back to Berun right away so you can’t come to Organbaelz?”

“No, that’s not the problem. I *want* to return, but I *can’t yet*.”

“Huh?”

Sophia wanted to return with Daian to the royal capital as soon as possible. However, now that she had heard about the Saint, either August’s or the Saint’s minions might attack at any moment. Until the regular military from the royal capital came, even the Black Spear couldn’t act.

“I don’t mind going, but...” Sophia glanced at Daian. Daian was under her guard, so she couldn’t leave him.

“I don’t mind, Sophia. Don’t worry about me.” Daian spoke as if he had read her thoughts.

“Well, I *should* mind. Let me be clear, though. I’m not *worried* about you. I feel a sense of *responsibility*.”

“Well, that’s putting it clearly!” Daian responded to Sophia’s bluntness with a droll expression.

“No, I don’t mean *that*, Sophia. Why don’t I just go *with* you?”

“What?”

“I mean... if we go to Organbaelz together, isn’t that more strategically sound?”

“Hmm?”

Lud Langart the Silver Wolf, Blitzdonner the Crimson Hawk, and the three humanoid Hunter Units—Sven, Rebecca and Lillie—were all currently in Organbaelz.

“Altogether, we could take on a whole company!”

What’s more, Sophia von Rundstadt, aka the Black Spear, would be joining them.

“Oh, I see. In that case... Aw, man!”

Sophia thought Lud might have foreseen all this when he sent the invitation. With Sven and her together, they would be safe on the journey to Organbaelz.

“Well, do you suppose it’s all right?”

Sophia felt a slight pain in her neck. It was something that happened on occasion. It was the feeling when an enemy army caught you off guard, or you fell into an ambush, or were attacked by guerilla soldiers disguised as civilians while patrolling an occupied territory.

I’ve got an uneasy feeling about this...

Sophia was worried, not from reason, but from instinct—a *soldier’s* instincts.

Chapter 5: The Clock Starts Moving

Meanwhile...

Even in a small rural town like Organbaelz, there was a tea shop. This tea stall belonged to Laura, an elderly woman who had served the townsfolk for decades. It was an open stall, and therefore very simple, but it was a relaxing place for the people to meet and rest.

“What are you going to do?!”

“What *should* I do...?”

“Aw, don’t give me that!”

“Eep!”

Jacob and Blitzdonner had been sitting together for hours and their faces suggested they had difficult problems. The boy had just shouted, and the man responded timidly.

“If you’re gonna go, get moving! Don’t just sit here staring into space!”

“No, but... Um... uh...”

Last night, Lud had asked Blitzdonner to attend Sven’s birthday party with Charlotte. Before he could ask why, Rebecca—who saw it as an opportunity to mediate between the estranged couple—agreed. Jacob and Blitzdonner both felt obliged to Lud and Sven, so they couldn’t refuse. However...

“I don’t know how to face her.”

“Argh! You old fart!”

The request had come from his close friend. So Jacob had set his own concerns aside and reluctantly agreed to present the man to his mother. Ever since dawn, however, Blitzdonner made one excuse after another not to go to his own house to see Charlotte. Blitzdonner had already had seven cups of coffee.

“You’re a well-known ace pilot from the military, right? Then why are you so *pitiful?!?*”

“Give me a break! I’m more scared of this one woman than I am of a million enemy soldiers!”

“Don’t try to make yourself sound cool! Because you *aren’t!*”

Blitzdonner’s reluctance made perfect sense. Charlotte had been carrying his child when he disappeared. Then, without ever informing her he was alive, he stayed hidden for years. Even his son Jacob was unable to sort out his feelings, so he didn’t want to imagine what Charlotte’s shock would be when they met.

“To be honest, I’m uneasy about you meeting Mother, too.”

Charlotte had been only a teenager when she carried Jacob. She had been living in Berun, the royal capital, where a dishonest employer had tricked her into prostitution. And then she had met Blitzdonner. When she returned to Organbaelz, pregnant with a child, townspeople had looked upon her coldly.

“I know you have your own circumstances, but that’s another matter.”

Her son Jacob had also suffered discrimination. Matters worsened because Wiltia had annexed Pelfe. Some people had even insulted Jacob as the son of a female Pelfe dog who had rubbed up against her Wiltian master.

“Yeah, I know.” Blitzdonner answered as he gripped his mug of coffee, which was now lukewarm. “I know I have no right to even show her my face. And I know I have no right to act like your father. But...” As he spoke, the man called a hero looked as if he was on the verge of tears. “There was never a day when I didn’t wish to see you both.”

“—!”

For a moment, the two were silent. And then...

“How long do you intend to stay here, Major?” Suddenly, Rebecca was standing at their table with a frightening expression on her face.

“Sh-Sharlahart?!”

It was the first time this girl, who had sworn absolute loyalty to Blitzdonner, had looked at him this way.

“Charlotte is in her house and you’re taking forever to go there!”

“I know... I know, Sharlahart. I’m just... waiting for the right time.”

“Major, I’m sorry. But it’s time you called me Rebecca.”

“Huh?”

Her full name was Rebecca Sharlahart. She refused to allow anyone but Blitzdonner to call her Sharlahart. Sharlahart was the special name her beloved master had given the assistive A.I. of his Hunter Unit. But today she had to forbid even Blitzdonner from using that name.

“Major, what is the origin of my name?”

“It’s... a variation on Charlotte.”

“Come to think of it, you *did* mention that once.”

Jacob had also heard the origin of the name. Sharlahart—which Blitzdonner had taken from the woman he loved most—was a Wiltian reading of the name Charlotte.

“Think about it. If her husband reappears after ten years accompanied by a woman bearing her own name, things could get complicated.”

“Oh... right!!”

“You got it? Then let’s go.” With a tug, Rebecca lifted her master from his seat.

“W-Wait, Sharla— I mean Rebecca! Um, let me stay just a little longer, for just one more cup of joe?” Blitzdonner was groveling again.

“Jacob, how many cups has he had?”

“Eight.”

“No, only seven!”

“Which is enough!” Rebecca used force to drag him away.

“But... I don’t know what to say! How can I face her?! I haven’t the slightest idea!”

“And you don’t need to!” Rebecca thundered at her master, who was

yammering tearfully. “After all, *I* would’ve been happy to see *you* under *any* circumstances, Major!”

“Rebecca...”

Ever since the day ten years ago when Blitzdonner disappeared, Rebecca had longed to see him again. She hadn’t known whether he was alive or dead, but she always believed he was alive.

“Do you have any idea how worried I was? I thought you might be dead! I forced such thoughts down, but I was worried, so...”

When he reappeared during the rebellion in the capital and she learned he was alive, she had sobbed tears of joy.

“How long do you plan to treat Charlotte the way you treated *me*?”

“Ulp...” Blitzdonner was speechless in the face of this tirade.

She had come to Organbaelz on orders from Daian with a mission to observe Sven. At the same time, however, she was watching over Jacob and Charlotte. During the rebellion in the capital, after she learned Blitzdonner was alive, she had given serious thought to telling his wife and son, but eventually decided against it.

“I know you had reasons, but now you have a chance for a reunion. So I’m begging you...”

Blitzdonner hadn’t revealed he was alive because he didn’t want to cause them any trouble. It wasn’t that he didn’t care for them, and he certainly hadn’t forgotten them.

Nonetheless, Rebecca couldn’t bear to watch any longer. “Just *go* already.”

Jacob spoke curtly. “I didn’t know you were alive, and I’d never even met you. So, to be honest, I guess I’d given up hope.”

People are surprisingly able to deal with an absence when it’s something that was never there. Jacob was confused now because his father, who had been absent, was suddenly present. But it was different for Charlotte. She had lived in worry this whole time.

“You just have to beat it over there, get in her face and say, ‘I’m alive!’”

“Yeah, but...”

“But you don’t think she’ll *forgive* you, do you?”

“Huh?” The harsh words from his son’s mouth upset Blitzdonner.

“There’s *no way* she’ll forgive you. Do you think you can just say something nice and it’ll all be fine? Well, it won’t! I hope she yells at you, and hates you, and bombards you with insults, and stabs you with a knife!”

“Jacob, isn’t that a bit much?” Rebecca tried to stifle Jacob’s violent ideas, but the boy wouldn’t stop.

“That’s what it means to take responsibility for your actions! So don’t try to be cool! *That’s* what looks the *worst!*”

“Jacob...”

“If you’re my father, then act like one! If you don’t...” Jacob’s shoulders were trembling.

Blitzdonner finally summoned his determination. “I’m sorry. You’re right. For some dumb reason, I was trying to be cool. Ha ha... And that *is* the worst!” As he spoke, he gently patted his son Jacob’s head. “Let’s go! I’ll prostrate myself before her!” In high spirits, Blitzdonner marched toward Jacob’s house.

“Whoa... He’s walking so awkwardly!”

“Major...”

Blitzdonner was on his way, but he was still nervous.

“Was that guy really an ace pilot?”

“He was incredible! He really was!” Jacob was disgusted, but Rebecca desperately reassured him.

Eventually, they arrived at Charlotte and Jacob’s house.

“Good luck, Major. You can do it!”

“Th-Thanks!!” In response to Rebecca’s encouragement, Blitzdonner put on a show of courage.

“Don’t be so tense...” Jacob looked exasperated.

“Y-You don’t... understand.”

“Understand what?”

“Someday, when you truly fall in love, you’ll understand.”

“Urgh...”

Blitzdonner trembled. He was less than one meter from the door. But that one meter felt like a great distance. That one meter represented ten years. That door was farther than the far side of the world.

“W-Well, here goes!” Blitzdonner steeled himself, but as he raised his hand to knock on the door, it opened from the inside.

“Hm?”

And there stood Charlotte, the woman he had come to see. She looked at Blitzdonner’s face in surprise.

“Kyaaah?!” Blitzdonner was speechless.

“M-Mom! Um, this is...” Jacob tried to explain, but his words wouldn’t come out.

“Ma’am, this is...” Rebecca also tried to intervene, but she couldn’t get her mouth to work either.

“Erich? Oh my... You came?” Charlotte was unruffled. On the contrary, she was the very picture of tranquility. She *was* surprised. But her face showed the kind of surprise that comes from something mildly unexpected.

“Charlotte? Um...” Seeing her composure, Blitzdonner was flummoxed.

“You’re late.” Charlotte spoke with a perky smile.

“Agh!”

Hearing those words, Blitzdonner remembered. It had been long ago, soon after they discovered she was carrying Jacob. Charlotte had been tricked into prostitution, so Blitzdonner sold a medal he had just received in order to shoulder her debt and pay for her to return home. She was boarding the steam locomotive bound for Organbaelz when he said...

“I promise. I’ll come for you.”

The royal family had held a ceremony to award him the medal, but he sold the diamond in it, and was almost found guilty of insulting the royal family. He was absolved of the offense because he had been an excellent soldier, but his promotion was rescinded and he was sent into fierce fighting. Then, three years later, he suffered an accident resulting in the loss of his four limbs.

“Charlotte, you...”

He had not forgotten his words that day. However, he thought he didn’t have the right to fulfill that promise. He was prepared to leave her alone if she thought he was dead or had remarried. But she had waited. That’s why she wasn’t overly surprised. Because the person she always believed would come, had come.

“Seriously? Hey, now...” Blitzdonner muttered, put a hand to his face, and laughed hoarsely.

“What a good woman you are!” Then he hugged his wife with all his strength.

“Erich...”

“Aw, man... Argh...”

On this day, from the bottom of his heart, Blitzdonner was sorry that his four limbs were mechanical. His arms couldn’t feel the warmth of this woman who was so wonderful that he had no right to receive her love. He was frustrated, and happy, and the next thing he knew, he was crying.

“.....”

As Jacob stared at his two parents hugging, Rebecca hugged *him* from behind.

“Jacob... you must understand one thing.” Rebecca spoke with emotion, as if she wanted very much to convey this one point. “You were born to two people who love each other. At least understand that much.”

Blitzdonner hadn’t cast him aside. And he hadn’t been a burden to Charlotte. Rebecca wanted him to accept that fact.

“Yeah...” Jacob gently pressed Rebecca’s hand as it held him.

“I guess I understand now, because they’re *showing* me.”

He was an immensely intelligent boy. He was still an eleven-year-old child. Nonetheless, he possessed a very grown-up mind.

“Hmph! With such a troublesome father, no wonder I’ve had it rough!”

But, now Jacob laughed playfully. He smiled with his usual good humor—and that hadn’t happened for days.

“Jacob...!” On the verge of hugging him with her full strength, Rebecca controlled herself. She could easily crush human bones. He was so endearing she could almost do that.

For the first time, a unique but troubled family became a *loving* one.



Chapter 6: Lud the Baker

In the oven room of Tockerbrot, Lud and the apprentice Milly were hustling.

“This is the third tier.”

Lud was a baker. The task he was now performing was closer to building than it was to baking.

“Hey, Lud? Is that really a birthday cake?”

“Uh... Mm-hmm.” Lud answered Milly’s question a little evasively, his face hiding something. “I mean... you know. I’m a baker, so I don’t want to make a cake that’s just for show.”

After he sent Sven out as a messenger, Lud began baking something indispensable for her birthday party later today: a birthday cake. Lud was an excellent baker of bread, but he could also make pastries and sweets. When he applied himself, he was more skilled than the average chef at a pâtisserie. However, this cake was to celebrate the birthday of Tockerbrot’s popular waitress. So he wanted to bake a birthday cake worthy of a great baker.

“In the center, there’s a soufflé base with thin layers of bread shaped like a cake, alternated with layers of rum-soaked fruit and cream. It’s luxurious. I had to close the shop to make it.”

This is why Lud was a flurry of activity. Earlier, as a kind of apology and at practically no charge, Lud had delivered bread that would keep for a while to the mine, town hall and schools, where he usually made daily deliveries. The bakery’s clients respected Tockerbrot, and Sven was, in a sense, a celebrity in Organbaelz, so they had all agreed to the closure for the sake of the celebration.

“A cake made with bread... It’s like a pancake!” As if finding this funny, Milly laughed. Actually, Milly knew the two were quite different. She understood Lud’s desire to celebrate this special day with a fine product—in other words, a cake that showcased his skills—so she just chattered away.

“Did you know?” Another voice joined in. It was Jacob, who stood in the doorway to the oven room. “The ‘pan’ in ‘pancake’ means a frying pan. Long ago, that’s what they called sweets baked on a flat plate.”

“Oh... I didn’t know that.” Jacob listened to Lud’s explanation, and looked like he had nowhere to go.

“How did it go with Charlotte and the major?”

“Hm?”

Their reunion had gone on for quite some time.

“Well, they’re seeing each other for the first time in over ten years, so I left them alone. But I think they’ll show up in time for Sven’s birthday party.”

“Oh, that’s good.” Looking at the boy’s puckish, smiling face, Lud understood the reunion had gone well.

“But why do my parents have to attend?” Jacob had agreed because it was a request from his friend, but he didn’t really understand the reason. “Sven... Um... Does she know my father?”

“No, I doubt they’ve met.”

That was because Sven hadn’t been created from the assistive A.I. known as Avei until after Blitzdonner had disappeared. Their relationship wouldn’t have obliged Blitzdonner to attend.

“Then why?”

“Because I don’t know any other married couples.”

“Huh?”

“Agh!” Lud had whispered his answer reflexively. Then he panicked and covered his mouth.

“Um, are you plotting something?”

“No... not at all!” Lud quickly looked away from Jacob, who was staring at him with piercing, suspicious eyes.

“It’s something you can’t even tell *me*?”

“Um...” Sensing the boy’s cold glare behind him, Lud could find no words to say in response.

“Hmm... Oh well.”

But that coldness disappeared.

“When someone who can’t hide anything is hiding something, it’s for someone else’s benefit.”

“You...”

Jacob had said it with some sarcasm, but he trusted Lud, so he understood there was a reason why Lud couldn’t talk about it. They were separated by age, but Lud was proud to have a friend with such a generous spirit.

“Thank you. But...”

“But?”

“It isn’t for someone else. This is... for *me*.”

“Huh?” Lud’s words surprised Jacob.

Lud sometimes didn’t take his own feelings seriously enough. He was strong. He also fully knew how to make use of his physique, giving him advanced combat abilities. Even if Jacob tried every method he could think of... Even if he used poison or small arms, it would be very difficult just to bring Lud to his knees. However, being strong didn’t necessarily mean one could do *anything*.

And this was also true for Lud. Nonetheless, Lud often chose a path that could *harm* himself. So his friend was surprised to hear him say this was for his own benefit.

“Hey, Lud? Why did you decide to celebrate Sven’s birthday?”

It was a natural thing to do for close friends and family. But Jacob knew this was different. He knew because of the disturbance at the shop recently. He had seen with his own eyes that the silver-haired girl wasn’t human. So he didn’t think this celebration was just a birthday party.

“Hmm... I’m not exactly sure.” Lud responded as if deep in thought, but with a calm face, as if he were deciding tonight’s supper. “I guess I want to make

amends.”

Amends for all the days he had pretended not to notice. He wanted to put an end to the time when he had thought that was enough for him, and for Sven as well. After that, he didn’t know what would happen. He might lose everything he had benefited from but taken for granted. Nonetheless, he wanted to do this.

Then he could stop being the soldier called the Silver Wolf and become Lud the baker at a small bakery in a small town. The greatest operation in the life of Lud Langart was just beginning.

“Well then?”

Sven returned to Organbaelz with Sophia and Daian in tow. But when she turned her feet toward Tockerbrot, Sophia stopped her. “His letter said to come to the church on the hill.”

Sven responded with a question. “What for?”

“I don’t know.” Sophia answered with a face that, despite her words, looked like she actually did know.

Those two are a lot alike that way...

She had heard that Sophia and Lud had been childhood friends, and Sven knew Sophia had been Lud’s superior officer.

“And I don’t know where the church is, so you’ll have to lead me.”

“Okay.”

The church on the hill wasn’t far. An adult could walk there in ten minutes.

“Isn’t it ironic?” Without thinking, Sven muttered to herself.

Soon after she came to Organbaelz, terrorists had used the church to store weapons and ammunition, and when Lud learned of it, he had almost been killed. Now she was taking the military officer Sophia there.

Come to think of it...

Suddenly, she realized something. It had been one year since she came here.

The feeling that *only* one year had passed was mixed with the feeling that a *whole* year had passed.

A lot has happened...

Her time here had been much more intense than her days as assistive A.I. in a military weapon, and many more unpredictable events had occurred. She had fought terrorists, was embroiled in an airship hijacking, clashed with the Schutzstaffel, and was dragged into a rebellion in the royal capital. And it had been even more difficult for her to make people smile in her everyday life. That had been harder than any military operation. And the joy when she was successful was...

“We’ve arrived.”

Ten minutes was far too short a time to reflect on an entire year. She stopped thinking and snapped back to reality. When she reached out to open the doors to the chapel and lead the other two inside, her hands froze.

“What’s wrong?”

She sensed something beyond the doors. It was normal for someone to be in the church. The nun Marlene and the children of the church’s orphanage lived here. And Lud had summoned them, so he *should* be here. However, she could sense many others and clearly hear commotion on the other side of the doors.

“Don’t worry. It’s all right.” Noticing Sven’s hesitation, Sophia spoke.

“Major, what are you planning?”

“It’s all right. Just open the doors. After all, it’s a request from your master.”

Because of the letter from Lud, Sophia knew what awaited inside, so she spoke with a kind face, exactly as if calming a fearful, inexperienced soldier.

“All right...” With trepidation, she opened the doors. And inside was...

“Huh?”

For a moment, seeing the scene before her, Sven had no idea what was what. A large number of people were packed into the rundown church chapel that she knew so well. It was filled with the townspeople of Organbaelz, whose faces she recognized. They were the customers who came to Tockerbrot every day and

whom she had served on countless occasions. Among them were friends like Jacob, Milly, Hilde and Laurel, the leader of the miners. They were all people she knew as Sven, not as Avei.

“What’s going on here?”

She thought there must be a festival or some special occasion. It was not solemn, as if for a funeral. They appeared to be waiting expectantly for someone and had gathered to celebrate that person.

Sven’s gaze fell on the five-tiered cake placed in front of the altar in the center of the chapel. It was gorgeous. A lot of effort had gone into creating it. And it was carefully decorated with a marzipan figurine on top. The figure’s hair was white. No... but it probably contained coloring that looked that way. The hair was silver and the eyes were bright red.

“Hey, um... is that...” She couldn’t believe it. Only one person was capable of baking this cake. There was no one else who would make this for her.

“Sven.” Lud was standing in front of the cake.

“Master... Uh... what is all this?”

Why was *that cake* here? Why had everyone gathered? It was exactly as if... exactly as if they were here for *her*. It looked like they were going to celebrate her birthday even though she wasn’t human.

“Happy birthday, Sven!” Lud’s voice was kind.

Her guess, which couldn’t possibly be, was true. Everyone broke into applause. They smiled and lavished her with celebratory words like “Congratulations!” and “Happy birthday!” Dozens of people made it clear they thought it was a good thing she was here.

“Why...?” As Sven stood stupefied, Daian whispered in her ear.

“Mr. Lud Langart asked me when you became Sven.”

Then Sven remembered. It had happened today—this very day. There was no way she could have forgotten. But she didn’t consider it a particularly important day.

The days that were important to her included the day she first met Lud, the

day she was manufactured at the factory and switched on, and the day she began working at Tockerbrot as Sven. But Lud viewed the day she had turned from Avei to Sven as her birthday and had prepared a celebration.

“Please, understand why he chose this day.” And with that, Daian moved to stand by the wall. He was like a clown who had concluded his role to play.

Trembling, Sven walked down the aisle and faced Lud. Why today? With each step, she thought about the answer. Why today?

Before she could find an answer, she was standing in front of Lud. He gently held out his hand. “Avei...” And he called her by her old name, the name he had given her.

“Yes... Master?” Sven didn’t deny it. Because she saw that he already knew. “Sorry, I... I’m so unreliable. You came after me because you were worried.”

Lud spoke gently to his partner, his former trusty Hunter Unit who had changed her form to come and find him. “It’s all thanks to you. This event would have never happened if it weren’t for you.”

“That’s not—”

“Yes, it *is* true, Sven.” This time, Lud called her by her new name.

Because of his frightening face, no customers had come during the bakery’s first year, nearly forcing Tockerbrot into bankruptcy. They had cast abuse, saying the bread was baked by a murderer. Debt had accrued, and he baked bread every day that no one would eat. But this popular waitress changed all that.

“Thank you very much.”

Lud had been thinking about what he should do for a long time. No, he didn’t have to think. He realized long ago what he must do. But that wasn’t quite true either.

Sven herself had asked him over and over and over. She asked him to appreciate the present with her as Sven and to disregard her past as Avei.

Still wrong! That’s not it. Lud was a soldier who had earned his bread by killing, and she was a weapon made to kill. Their meeting was a part of them.

And they were here now because of that. So he couldn't reject Avei either. Rejecting Avei would be rejecting *Sven*.

"After much thought... I've finally decided." Lud had wondered if he had the right to announce the conclusion he had reached out loud.

He was sinful and he was foolish. Nevertheless, he had made a choice. He had chosen a way of life in which he bore his sins and yet strove to be happy.

"Sven, I want to keep living with you, including your past as Avei."

If he hadn't made that decision himself, he wouldn't have been able to speak these words. He accepted Sven, including her birth as a weapon. That was why Lud chose to celebrate her birthday today. It was the day that the combat weapon Avei became the girl known as Sven.

"Sven... Svelgen Avei... Happy birthday."

Understanding the meaning of those words, Sven trembled.

Oh... He accepts it all...

Lud had decided to face his frustration, sadness, worry, regret and even his past... and to bear it all. His intense seriousness and inflexibility had exasperated her. That was why the shop had nearly closed and had racked up debt.

"Master... thank you!"

Those words were enough. This man thought her birth was a good thing. That alone meant there was no need to worry about—

"Sven? Um..." Then Lud asked a question that she could never have imagined. The words shocked everyone present.

"Will you marry me?"

"Hoowah?!"

Before, Sven was wrapped in happy feelings, blushing, and on the verge of tears. But now her eyes widened in surprise, her jaw dropped, her mouth opened wide, and she let out a ridiculous sound.

Epilogue

Several days are special to Sven. One is the day she became Sven, which Lud celebrated as her birthday. Also the day she was switched on, and the day she met Lud. Then there's the day Lud gave her the name Avei, and the day she rejoined Lud as Sven. There are so many, *countless*, special days. But among them, a few lit a great fire within her.

For a time, she was Lud's beloved Hunter Unit and spoke regularly with him. Lud had a reputation for not talking much or confiding in others about himself, but he often spoke to her inside the cockpit. Perhaps he found it easier to talk to her because she wasn't human.

"That was long ago in Lapchuricka."

There was the day she heard about his sad past.

"I've found something I want to do."

And the day she had learned of his dream of becoming a baker.

"Thanks for everything."

And the day the war ended and he said goodbye.

Amidst all of that, it had come to her. Something passionate, fierce and precious had awakened inside her. It was...

"What?!" Sven froze hearing Lud's sudden marriage proposal. She never expected this. The faces of everyone present also froze with startled looks.

"S... sorry. I know it's sudden and out of the blue, so... sorry." Lud spoke apologetically to Sven, who was frozen.

"But I just thought... um... I want to keep living with you. For happy things and fun things... and probably sad things, too. I want to share all of that."

Lud had decided. He had chosen a way of life in which he accepted the iniquities of his past and still tried to be happy. And that resolution meant

sharing his life with Sven.

“But, um... maybe you don’t want to?” Lud continued speaking to Sven, who remained frozen. “Sven... I love you.” As soon as he said it, it felt like a melodramatic comment. Unintentionally, Lud laughed.



“Huh?” Sven returned to herself. She had seen something that *forced* her to return to herself.

Lud had laughed. Lud Langart had laughed. And she had thought he would never laugh again. He was a man who couldn’t laugh because it didn’t look right and people would mistake him for a murderer. That man now laughed with a face radiating embarrassment and joy.

“Oh...” Then Sven remembered. He had also laughed on the day he said goodbye. She had been unable to forget his smile. And she had longed to see it again. She thought she could overcome anything if it meant she would see him smile. And now he was smiling at *her*.

“Um... Sven?”

“Of c-c-c-c-course!!!” Sven shouted at the top of her lungs. For a girl answering a marriage proposal, she presented a dramatic sight. But that didn’t matter. “I... I... I...” She was a machine without a heart, but the man she loved... the man she loved so much it had awakened a heart within her... had just told her he loved her.

Compared to that, even the gravest matters were trivial. They were of no consequence.

“I... love you... too... Master!” Her mechanical body and the fact that she wasn’t human didn’t matter at all.

“Ha ha ha ha ha!”

Everyone began laughing. They understood that the number of reasons this was such a happy day had just increased.

“That’s wonderful!”

“I’m so happy for you both!”

They all offered congratulations.

“This is... quite a surprise.”

“Yeah... it’s good. They look happy.”

As they applauded, Hilde laughed and Lillie shrugged.

“Well, I’ll be! Good for you, baker!” Laurel, the leader of the miners, laughed loudly.

“Ahh... Mr. Langart. How entertaining! Tee hee! Hm?”

“.....”

Daian grinned, while Sophia stood still beside him.

“Sophia?! Sophia!! Breathe, Sophia!”

Ever since they were children, she had nursed a one-sided crush on Lud. All alone, her heart quietly ceased beating. And...

“Oh, I get it... Darn you, Langart. So *that’s* what was going on!” Blitzdonner laughed as if everything had suddenly become clear.

“What do you mean?”

“Traditionally, the witnesses have to include a husband and wife.” Blitzdonner responded to Jacob’s question with a roguish smile.

“Witnesses?”

“For a wedding.”

“Whaaat?!”

“This is where *we* come in.” Blitzdonner took Charlotte’s hand and stepped forward.

“You did it, Langart. But what would you have done if she refused?” Blitzdonner spoke teasingly to Lud, who had finagled reconciliation between another couple so they could serve as witnesses at his marriage to Sven.

“If that happened... um...I’d have been pretty embarrassed.” Lud scratched his head, a little shamefaced.

“Tch! You’re incorrigible!” Blitzdonner realized what was up, and wouldn’t refuse.

“I see... Tee hee hee!” That was also true for his wife Charlotte, the woman he loved above all others.

“Oh, I see... So this is it, huh? Umf!” Rolling up her sleeves, the nun Marlene

stepped forward. "There's no priest at this church, so I'll perform the ceremony."

A wedding ceremony involves oaths taken before God. A member of the clergy leads the couple as they state their vows.

"Hmf..." Marlene's face looked a little melancholy. When she had cooperated with terrorists, Lud had pulled her back to an honest life, so she admired him.

I guess he'll never know how I feel about him...

The thought made her a little sad.

"Um..." Sven knew how Marlene felt, so she made an apologetic face.

"Don't make that face." Marlene admonished her with a look as dignified as any member of the clergy. And, appearing kindlier than a saint, Marlene smiled at Sven. Marlene had feelings for Lud, but she also thought of Sven as a friend.

"Well, Lud... Do you have the ring?"

Exchanging rings is part of the marriage ceremony. It's possible to omit a ring for the groom, but if a ring isn't placed on the bride's finger, it simply will not do.

"Uh..." Lud looked troubled, but then something struck him in the head. "Ow!"

Someone had thrown a woman's ring at him.

"You'll just have to deal with the difference in size!" Sophia spat these words with an indignant face. "Hmf! You're so troublesome!"

"Sophia... Um, that ring... Isn't that the ring I gave you as a present on Holy Festival night?" Daian looked a little sad to see her so casually give his present to someone else, but then he saw Sophia's face.

"Shut up... Daian." Her mouth was crooked and her face was contorted in an effort to hold back tears. If she cried, she would ruin this special occasion in the life of the man she loved. So she was trying as hard as she could to behave like Lud's older sister and superior officer.

"I'll make you another one." When he noticed her struggle, there was nothing

else he could say.

“Keep me company tonight. I won’t be able to handle this if I don’t drink!”

“Should I be happy or sad about that?” Daian shrugged, and Sophia leaned closer to him.

Witnesses were present. A clergywoman was present. And there was a ring. They had everything they needed.

“Sven...”

“Master... Or rather, *Lud*.”

Lud and Sven declared their love and then kissed. It was a blissful moment for Sven. In the midst of her joy, she reaffirmed her resolve.

I want to live with this man. I want to share happiness and joy and sadness together. And...

That may have been an unreasonable hope for an automaton. Her head told her she couldn’t do that.

I want to grow old and die with this person.

On this day, she resolved to hold on to the words that Meitzer—the man who claimed to be her father—had said before he left.

“Sven, do you want to be human?”

On this day, Sven decided to become human.

Intermission 3

In a suburb of Berun, the royal capital, at a laboratory of the Association for Space Travel...

“Surely an outstanding individual such as yourself understands that the weapon will upset the world’s current balance of military power.”

“.....”

Auguste didn’t respond to Meitzer’s comment. He merely sat very still on the sofa, holding his now lukewarm cup of coffee. The ballistic missile *Verne 1* was a new type of weapon that could, with the flip of a switch, directly attack a foreign nation.

“Technology opened the way for space travel... It’s still difficult, but ballistic flight has made it possible to send bombs across long distances.”

If that were to become a reality, the next war would cause the slaughter of unprecedented numbers of civilians. No, it would be *worse* than that. If news were to spread that such a weapon existed, that alone would light the spark for a new war.

“What’s more, it appears you have joined forces with a vexatious partner.”

Meitzer had asked Elvin to introduce him to Auguste. If an organization was secretly developing military weapons, there was no way Elvin, as the supreme commander of an army, could let the general of another nation go. Moreover, Elvin assigned him only a single inexperienced soldier, Marissa, who was hardly a sufficient watchdog.

“Marshal Elvin doesn’t properly value the Association for Space Travel. At least not yet. But your research has already reached the practical stage.”

The amount of funding the association would receive was limited if the military and the government didn’t value its work. The only research they could perform would be to launch a test rocket no more substantial than a pencil.

“The man who supported your research up to this point is no longer among the living, am I right?”

“—?!” Auguste’s face paled even further.

So it’s true...

Meitzer made a point of not *saying that man’s* name. If he did, Auguste’s position would worsen whether he denied it or not. Meitzer took that into consideration.

Even after death, that man still shows his face.

Perhaps that was because he was an outstanding man, but the trouble he had caused made Meitzer sigh all over again. That man’s name was Genitz. And he had instigated the rebellion in the capital. He was also the man involved in numerous plots designed to spark a new Great War.

You could say this facility is his legacy...

Having confirmed that much, another question occurred to him. Genitz had left this world, and the Schutzstaffe had collapsed. Despite that, the Association for Space Travel was still receiving aid, so who in the world...

“After the rebellion, Marshal Elvin’s regular army hunted down all remnants. They refused to overlook even the slightest connection. And yet *you* escaped the purge.”

No investigation had been conducted here. Auguste had not been taken into custody or placed under observation. Some kind of organization was protecting, hiding and supporting them. If there was an entity in Wiltia that could do that...

“The Security Department?”

“—!!!” Auguste was no longer able to keep his face blank. He was pale and trembling violently.

“Oh my...” Learning this fact, Meitzer groaned.

The Security Department, aka the Sicherheitsdienst, was the organization of secret police feared as “Wiltia’s ears.” And its members had appointed themselves to carry on Genitz’s mission.

“Someone is sure to continue my research.” As he shook, Auguste spoke. “Even if I stop, someone else will accomplish it sooner or later.”

The association was receiving support from a secret society and was involved in the development of a weapon of mass destruction. But if he didn’t do it himself, someone else would finish it. Auguste was suggesting that it would be worth it to further his dream of sending humanity to the stars.

“But whether it’s sooner or later is crucial.” As Meitzer spoke, he narrowed his eyes sadly.

Auguste was a good person. He had the good conscience not to openly state that he didn’t care how many sacrifices were made for scientific development. But he also wasn’t resistant to the desire to leave his name in the history of space development.

“It has only been two years since the war ended. Or... three years? Anyway, the nations are still in the middle of post-war reconstruction and they’re exhausted. If they learn that a weapon like *Verne 1* exists, another war will break out.”

And it wouldn’t be confined to a single continent. It would spread to other continents and cultures such as Noa and Aesia and culminate in a global Great War.

“If that happens, it will be bigger than the Great European War. The next war will be a *World War*.”

And it would result in casualties far outnumbering those of the last Great War. The problem was even bigger than that. Humanity would be unable to withstand such a war. There would be poverty and chaos from which it would be impossible to recover, and post-war conditions would be worse than during wartime.

“Our current pace of development is abnormal. It’s like livestock that would normally take a few years to raise and force feeding them so they fatten grotesquely while the bones and organs can’t keep up.”

As Auguste had said, the ballistic missile *would* be developed, whether sooner or later. But it must not be used in battle until the world developed to the point

where human society could survive it.

“At this rate, humans will become animals who do nothing but wage war. War may be part of human nature, but it must remain no more than a means of survival. The way things are now, war has become the *goal!*”

There are many factors necessary for survival—such as land and resources, worldviews and religion—and war sometimes kept people alive. But people should never live for the purpose of war.

“No...” Now Meitzer noticed something.

Human thought is mysterious. Some conclusions are impossible to reach in solitude. However, speaking your thoughts to others and hearing them with your own ears can stimulate a synergistic effect.

“Oh... Is *that* her goal?” Meitzer unintentionally mumbled at the same moment that Auguste, who was sitting in front of him, grew pale. Not because he grasped the significance of Meitzer’s words. Rather, the blood drained from his face when he saw the man standing behind Meitzer.

“No, don’t.” Meitzer issued this warning without turning around. “It’s a futile gesture. No matter where you plug me with that peashooter, it won’t have any effect.”

During the recent fracas in Organbaelz, Meitzer had taken a direct hit from a grenade launcher fired by an Augustan special ops soldier, but remained unharmed. The average human couldn’t comprehend the power he possessed. If the person behind him fired a bullet directly into the back of Meitzer’s head, it would have no effect.

“So don’t bother, um... was your name Helmut?”

Auguste’s helper stood behind him with a gun.

“Ah, I see. You’re a spy from the Security Department.”

Helmut had looked young, as if the freckles had barely faded from his face, but now he wore the grim expression of a soldier.

“Yes, Lord General.” Helmut readily answered Meitzer’s question.

“What the...” Auguste was astounded. He hadn’t even noticed that his pants

were wet from the contents of the cup he had dropped. Apparently, he hadn't known that Helmut was observing him either.

"But if you just wanted to stop me, you wouldn't have gone to all this trouble."

"Hm?"

Helmut continued speaking to Meitzer, who raised an eyebrow at these words.

"You know about the existence of the Saint."

"Oh... ?" Meitzer quickly dissembled, but he understood it was pointless. He sensed the situation was worse than he thought.

I see... The Security Department knows about her. Or rather, that was why it was established.

He understood that Genitz, who had formed that organization, had also launched his reckless rebellion in order to oppose the Saint.

Apparently, he was descended from the imperial family of the Holy Empire.

Meitzer remembered a report he had once received from Noa's information department.

While the Holy Empire was at death's door, the Saint used the Lion Emperor to destroy it. To Genitz, she was the enemy of his ancestors.

The Saint had been interfering in human society and manipulating history for the past 150 years. Genitz had vowed to defeat her, and had tried to seize control of Wiltia to mount resistance. And *Verne 1* was one means to that end. Now Genitz was dead and his remaining adherents were trying to carry out his plan. But the results benefited the Saint.

Those people are also Europe's... No, they are our sacrifices.

A feeling of guilt akin to sadness gripped Meitzer's chest.

"Helmut... No, uh, I don't know if that's your real name or not, but if you leave right now, I won't pursue you or do anything."

He knew it was pointless, but he issued a final warning to try and make the

man understand. If that didn't work, Helmut should expect a broken bone, at the very least.

"General Douglas Meitzer, I hear you're incredibly strong. Inhumanly strong. But what about *her*?"

Helmut's tone of voice didn't change. On the contrary, it became even colder.

"Hmm?!" Meitzer noticed too late.

Helmut's gun wasn't pointed at his head. It was pointed at Marissa, who sat beside him in shock with no idea what was happening.

"So what are you going to do?"

It was an unnecessary question. Marissa was a low-ranking soldier. She didn't occupy a position of importance to the nation, and she didn't possess precious technology. Furthermore, she wasn't from a respected household. If she died, nothing would happen. Negotiations between the nations might get a bit sticky, but no loss that couldn't be handled.

However...

We made a promise...

Marissa had swooned at the bakery's high prices on Court Way. And they had promised to go there later.

"If I let her die, my daughter will never speak to me again!" Meitzer raised both hands as if surrendering.

"Thank you for deciding wisely."

"Whatever." Meitzer responded to Helmut in scathing tones while the young spy gloated in his victory.

"But let me ask one thing. In what stage is *Verne 1*?"

There were various stages of development. There was preliminary planning on paper, theoretical development, and the creation of models for launch tests. The situation would change depending on that information.

"I suppose it's all right if I tell you. After all, this is a day to celebrate." Helmut's voice contained joy so palpable Meitzer sensed it from behind his

back.

“Celebrate?”

“Yes. We finally finished the experimental model. The test launch of *Verne 1* is slated for this week.”

And with his answer, the hands on the clock jumped closer to the world’s destruction.

The Nine Earth-Shattering Days... were only half over.

Afterword

This is volume 9 of *The Combat Baker and Automaton Waitress*!

I'm surprised. Only one year has actually passed in the story. But I guess that often happens. You know, battle movies and sports manga are like that. Martial arts tournaments and national competitions can go on for ten years if you aren't careful. Nonetheless, I get to keep writing, which makes me happy.

Anyway, this time my concept was to bring together characters that had little to do with each other before. For no particular reason, many characters who have all been part of the story since volume one had never conversed. Like Lud and Daian, and Sven and Blitzdonner.

And by the way, the bumbling soldier Marissa, who stands out in this volume, was a new character from the last volume, and she'll play a big role in the next volume, too. She gets caught up in the action.

On another note, human beings show different sides to different people. Not many people treat everyone the same. Parents, children, lovers, friends, senior and junior members of the same group, bosses and subordinates, *et cetera*, *et cetera*... Sometimes when two people talk about the same person, they have completely different opinions because that person shows each of them completely different faces.

There is no contradiction in the worst person from one's point of view being the best person from another's point of view. I think this will be an important theme in the next volume.

Now for my usual apologies and thanks and so forth. I'm deeply grateful to everyone who participated in publishing, distributing and selling this book, and to Zaza, who provided incredibly wonderful illustrations again this time. I know it isn't easy, so thank you very much!

Above all, thank you to everyone who has the book in hand at this very moment. Next time, we reach the ten-volume mark. See you then!











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by SOW

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