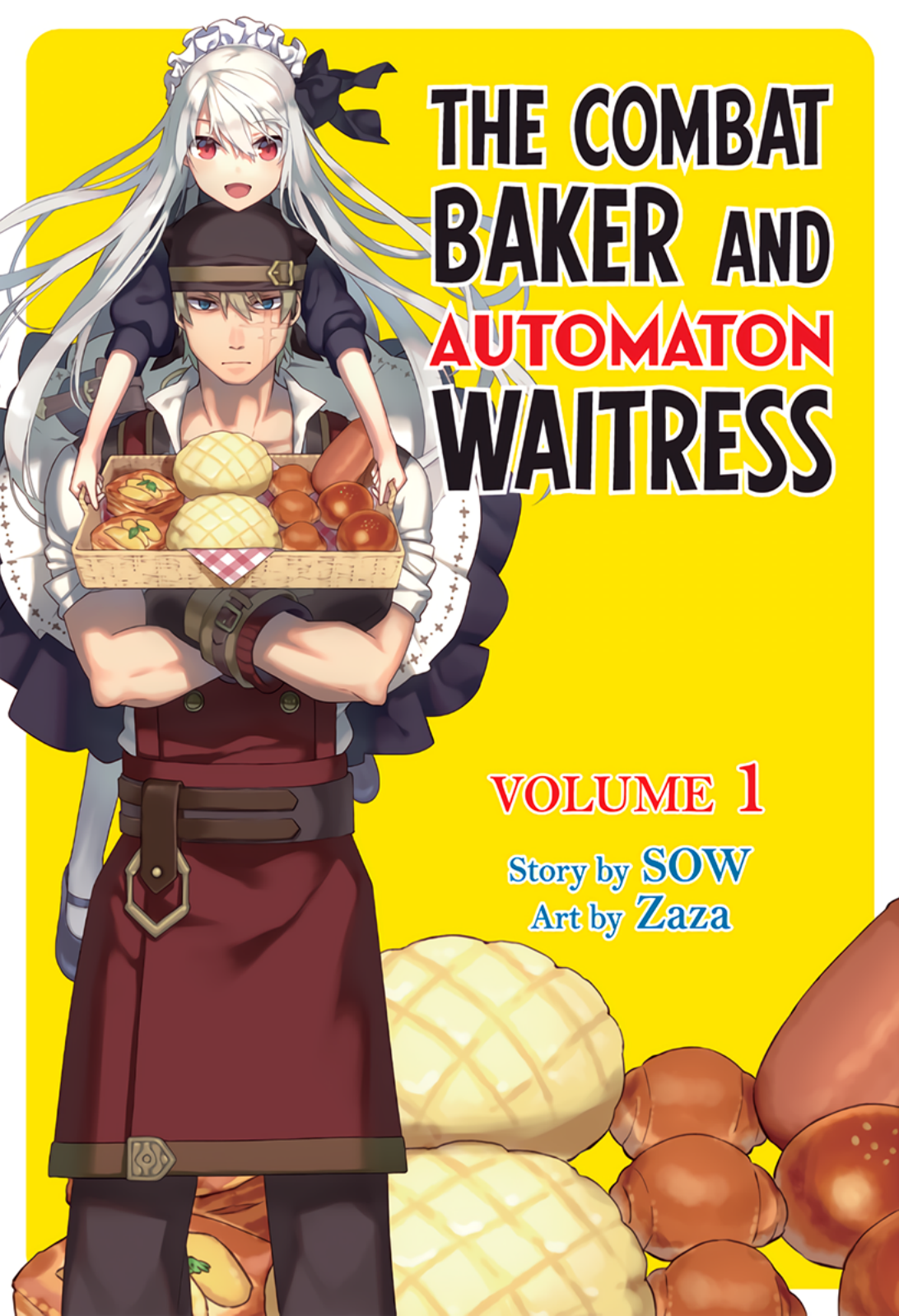
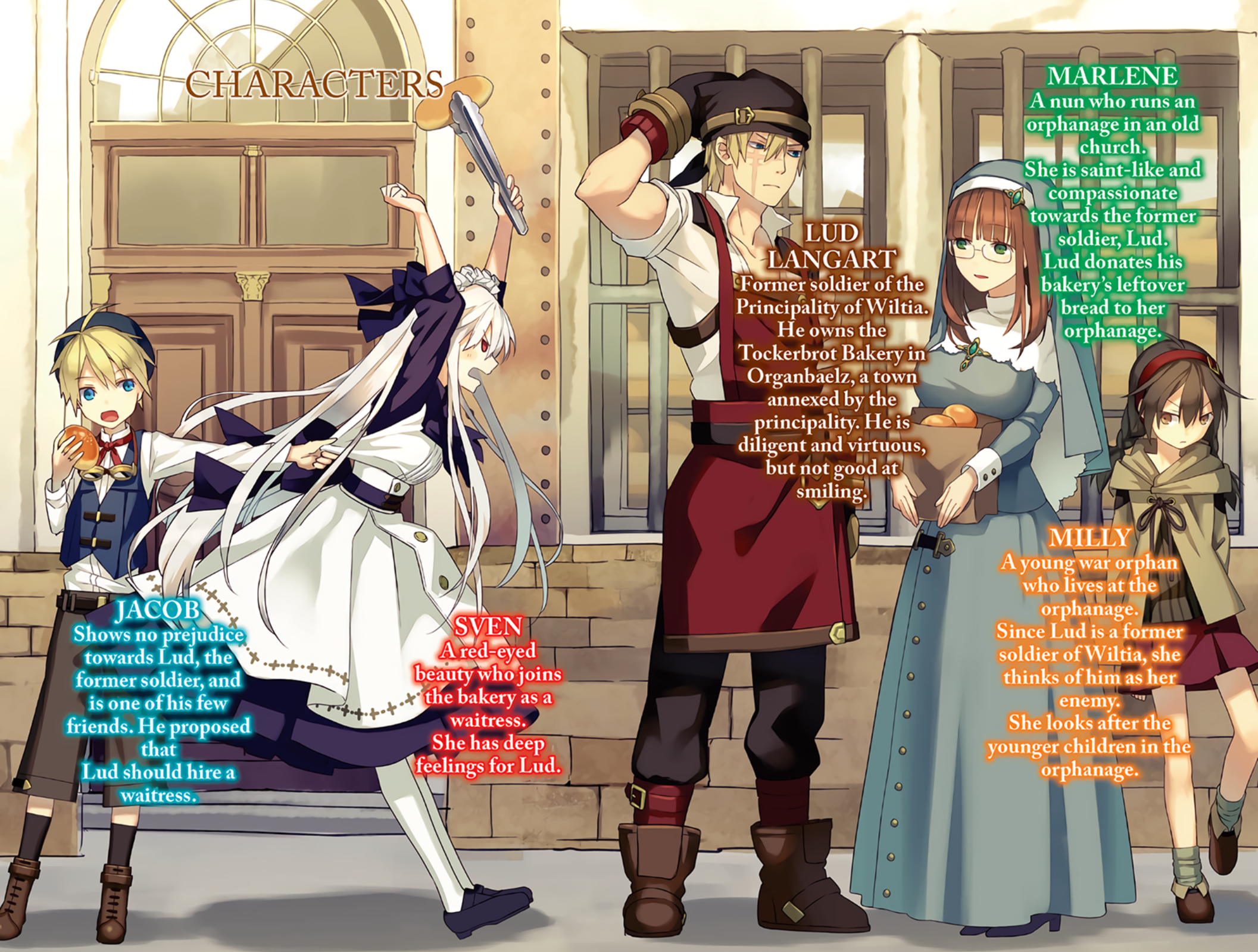

THE COMBAT BAKER AND AUTOMATON WAITRESS
VOLUME 1
Story by SOW
Art by Zaza


"Excuse me…I saw this poster, so I came here…"
In the girl's hand, was the Help Wanted poster that was put up a month ago.
THE COMBAT BAKER AND AUTOMATON WAITRESS

CHARACTERS



JACOB
Shows no prejudice towards Lud, the former soldier, and is one of his few friends. He proposed that Lud should hire a waitress.

SVEN
A red-eyed beauty who joins the bakery as a waitress.
She has deep feelings for Lud.

LUD LANGART
Former soldier of the Principality of Wiltia.
He owns the Tockerbrot Bakery in Organbaelz, a town annexed by the principality. He is diligent and virtuous, but not good at smiling.

MARLENE
A nun who runs an orphanage in an old church.
She is saint-like and compassionate towards the former soldier, Lud.
Lud donates his bakery's leftover bread to her orphanage.

MILLY
A young war orphan who lives at the orphanage.
Since Lud is a former soldier of Wiltia, she thinks of him as her enemy.
She looks after the younger children in the orphanage.


Before he could fire the shot, the soldier was struck down by a shadow that cut behind his back.
"Wha—?!"

PREFACE

Hello, Kitzoku here.

I'm the guy who made this eBook.

This is here just so I can inform you just *how* this eBook was made, and why there might be some weird grammar and stuff missing.

This light novel is a BookWalker *exclusive*, meaning, no Amazon, no Kobo, no Google Play store, nada. This usually wouldn't be much of a problem if BookWalker provided their own EPUB or something similar.

Well, they don't.

Not in the normal sense anyways.

Only way to read their releases is via one of their apps (PC/Android/iPhone) or through their web reader.

The web reader as all encrypted stuff, so you can't just copy paste that and be on your jolly way. And while the apps *do* allow you to download the eBook so you can read them when you don't have any internet, the files that you download are fully encrypted.

While I do know programming, I have no clue about cracking stuff, so after giving it a futile attempt I gave up.

And instead I decided to just copy the text the good ol' way, with my eyes and my keyboard.

That's right, all of the text in this eBook is copied by writing it by hand.

OCR would end up causing more problems than it would solve, for

various reasons, so I didn't go with that. And I'm also just really stubborn. *(I might just go with OCR for volume 2, who knows.)*

And because of this being copied by hand and eyes, there'll be errors. I've tried my hardest to fix any fuck-ups on words and what have you, but certain words will most likely have a letter left out of them. There's only so much I can do, I'm only human.

I did edit the text as I went, because the text is far from being error free, it mainly has a lot of logical errors, rather than grammatical ones.

The illustrations are made by print-screening the web reader page and cropping out all the unneeded stuff, and then fixing the images up by removing noise and stuff.

That's all, I really just wanted to inform *you*, the reader, as to why there might be a lot of errors in the text.

Oh yeah, fun fact, the translator forgot the main characters name two times in the story, and used the name "Luke" instead of "Lud". *(There isn't even a character with the name "Luke" in this entire volume.)*

Kitzoku

PROLOGUE
A MECHANICAL DOLL'S RETROSPECTIVE

When was it exactly, that I came into this world?

According to the oldest record stored inside me, I was born the tenth day of the fifth month in the year 915 of the Europea Calendar.

I was one among countless identical units, the last of a mass-produced series in the military arsenal of the Principality of Wiltia.

At that time, I had consciousness and knowledge, but I lacked will.

Having a will of my own wasn't considered necessary because my actions were determined by the person piloting me.

His will became my will. This was how I was created.

My name - every unit's name - was L-Arms Type Cyclops. Our model number was LS-6R.

We were humanoid assault weapons, commonly known as Hunter Units; eight and one half meters in length, weighing nine tons, with oil circulating throughout our metal bodies and a Rezanium reactors as our main power source.

I was an AI installed in the machine to assist and support its pilot.

In order to bring victory to our creator, The Principality of Wiltia, we were built to fight and to be rebuilt when broken. That was only "life" we knew.

Each of us was an individual yet we were all one.

There was no need to question this.

There was no doubt to cross our minds.

Or so I thought...

"So you're going to be my partner from now on? I'll be counting on you."

This was Captain Lud Langart, although, according to the records, he was still a warrant officer. I met him when I was rolled out of the armory and assigned to his unit.

Lud had been deployed in the Special Forces, but the unit commander poached him for his division.

Lud got inside of me, sat down in the seat and mulled over something for a while.

"Avei... How does that sound?"

At first I did not understand him, but it seemed he had thought of a personalized designation for me.

"Understood, Warrant Officer Langart. The personal code 'Avei' has been registered."

It was said that a name would strengthen the bond between AI and pilot, but I wondered what purpose there was in increasing our intimacy.

We Hunter Units were mass-produced weapons; was there any benefit in giving us names and creating a personal attachment to us?

I was no longer just a part of the collective us, but an individual known as Avei.

Warrant Officer Langart possessed the kind of aptitude that was ideal for a Hunter Unit pilot. He pushed my capabilities to their limits, defeating a great number of enemies and annihilating countless

enemy camps.

In an effort to raise morale, Wiltia generously promoted and gave preferential treatment to soldiers who distinguished themselves.

Warrant Officer Langart single-handedly defeated a Greyten landship cruiser, and was promoted two ranks up to lieutenant, and given permission to paint his unit in a color of his choice.

Lieutenant Langart's superior officer had painted his unit all black, and was known as the Devil's Black Spear.

Lieutenant Langart painted me a sparkling, silvery white.

"You look great, Avei!"

Lieutenant Langart was full of satisfaction as he inspected my freshly painted body.

While I acknowledged that this served some morale-boosting purpose for the other soldiers, it had no meaning whatsoever to me.

If changing my color was enough to make me stronger, the war would already be won.

If that was the case, the weapons department would create new colors for all the units.

When Lieutenant Langart asked my opinion of my new color, I said exactly this to him.

"That response is just like you, Avei."

Lieutenant Langart gave a grin, and as he said this, he tapped the console inside my cockpit.

It was almost like he was gently patting a child on the head.

A mysterious interference ran through me.

It was neither a bug, nor error. It would leave no lasting effect as far as my functionality was concerned.

But, from that day on, I began to experience a strange and unusual sensation.

On the battlefield, the enemy's rifles and small arms couldn't pierce my armor.

But coastal artillery and tank guns were a different story.

When I was grazed by such an attack, knowing that just a few seconds stood between life and death for my lieutenant, a furious noise ran through my body.

Why couldn't I move even faster?

Why couldn't I detect our enemies sooner?

Even at full capacity, I could not perfectly protect the life of the lieutenant inside me.

Every time I realized this, the noise inside of me became more violent.

One day, I unintentionally simulated a particular scenario.

If for some reason the lieutenant was unable to act as my pilot - if he had some physical or mental problem or if his life ended, I would be provided a different pilot, and I would support and protect that person.

When I came to that conclusion, a new and terrible noise was born.

The seat that fit the Lieutenant's body, the shift pedal and levers that were adjusted for the lieutenant alone, everything would be reset.

The coating of white on my body would be peeled off.

Even worse, a person other than the lieutenant would call me

"Avei."

I hated it!

My thoughts shocked me.

"Hated it?" Was it disgust? Denial? How foolish!

I was a mass-produced weapon; a manufactured product. Nothing but a tool.

If my assigned pilot became unfit for military operations, I would be provided a new one.

It was a fact.

Nevertheless, all the interferences inside me merged and loudly rejected such an idea.

It was a situation that I couldn't comprehend.

I had no need for a will of my own.

All I needed was an objective.

To bring victory to the Principality of Wiltia... No, even that was impudent.

My sole purpose was to execute the correct action, whenever my levers were pulled, my switched were pressed, and my pedals were stepped on.

But I wasn't complaining as if I was born just to meet the lieutenant?!

Born? What a thing for a machine to say!

I didn't report any of this to the lieutenant.

If this thinking was a critical error in my system, I could be

dismantled and destroyed.

But there wasn't anything wrong with me.

Indeed, the captain - he had been promoted again - would hop inside of me, the same as always and ask, "Ready to go, partner?" and I would operate as I should.

Without any problems.

Without a single issue.

I would continue to protect the captain, and the captain would operate me, with his will becoming my own as we raced across the battlefield.

I was fine as long as I could increase our successes on the battlefield.

But, suddenly our time to part ways had come.

On the eastern front, Wiltia would have a decisive battle against their bitter enemy, the August Federation.

"Pretty soon, this war's going to be over."

With the siege of Morghausen Fortress setting the final stage, the captain said these words.

If we could win this battle, the Great Europea War that had enveloped the entire continent would come to an end.

It would end as a victory for the allied forces, led by the Principality of Wiltia.

As long as there was a war, and as long as there were battles to be fought, I would stay with the captain.

Yet, I knew that would not happen.

"Captain, optimistic thinking greatly reduces your chance of survival. Please restrain yourself from these thoughts."

If I had been a human child, my voice would have been trembling as I said this. Ignoring my warnings, the captain continued to talk.

"Once the war is over... There are things I want to do, things I want to become."

I knew.

He had told me before how he would continue his life outside of battle, and the way he would his remaining time.

Even though he was called The Silver Wolf, and praised as the pride of Wiltia's Iron Knights, this didn't fulfill him or make him truly happy.

"What exactly... Are those things?"

Even though I had just told him not to give in to such wishful thinking, I couldn't help asking.

I wanted to follow captain wherever he went.

Even off the battle field, I wanted to remain as this man's partner.

"Once this battle's over, I'll tell you."

Saying this, the captain patted my console, just like he always had.

With a gentle hand, as if he was calming a little girl.

But, I knew.

No matter what he was going to say, I wouldn't be able to follow him.

Because, after all, I was a weapon.

I was a tool that mowed down enemy infantry with my machine guns, stepped over trenches, kicked in and smashed enemy garrisons, crushed fleeing armies underfoot, and peeled off the armor of enemy tanks.

As long as I was who I was, I could not stay with the captain.

Before long, the war ended and the captain left the military.

I was left behind.

For a moment, I tried to imagine.

If the Captain's wish hadn't been fulfilled, would I have been able to stay with him?

But, that line of thought quickly disappeared.

More than anything else, I wished that the captain would realize his goals be rewarded with success.

The noise inside of me grew so strong it enveloped me completely.

I didn't care anymore.

If the captain wasn't with me, there was no longer a reason for me to exist.

There might still be a reason for my existence as part of the Hunter Unit, but no reason as Avei.

I had no will of my own.

The captain was my will and my everything.

Without a will, there was no reason to remain in this world.

All of my mechanisms were suspended. I was like a corpse, branded as useless, soon to be turned into scrap iron along with the other weapons.

Or that was supposed to happen.

I wondered exactly how much time had passed. I might have been and hour, or it might have been one hundred years.

"Hello there."

A man called out to me.

"My name is Daian Fortuner. Those who know me refer to me as a sorcerer."

The man's gestures were like a clown's but he spoke like a con man. Was he a sorcerer, I thought, or just a fraud?

"My, my, you seem to have quite good intuition, don't you?"

---?!

Who or what exactly was this man? Was he reading my thoughts?

"I have asked this question to all your sisters but none gave a convincing answer. None were even able to understand the question."

The man folded his arms and pointed a finger towards his head, posing as if he was in agony.

His gesture only annoyed me.

"*Ahahahahaha!* Have I been figured out? You're a funny one! You might be able to give me the answer that I'm looking for."

What exactly did he want me to answer?

"It's a simple question. Would you, by chance, like to become human?"

Huh?

Become... human? That wasn't even possible!

Only a sorcerer... no, only a wizard from a fairytale would be able to do this.

But, if I were human...

I would be able to go after the captain.

I would be with him once again. At the captain's side, I could support him and help him find what he was looking for.

I would be able to remain as me!

"Marvelous! The only one of your six hundred and sixty-six siblings who has given birth to your own ego!"

In a world where death and life intersect and so many thousands of lives are scattered, outside God's command a soul was born from a mixture of oil and blood, steel and flesh.

I was reborn.

It was the third month of the year 920 E.C., when the wind began to gently blow and the footsteps of spring could finally be heard.

INTRODUCTION

Before, there was one giant empire that ruled the entire continent.

The name of that empire was Europea and the imperial capital stood in the middle of the continent. Hundreds of towers reached the heavens, ships that traveled between the stars floated in the sky, and it was said that its science was akin to magic, including the ability to raise someone from the dead.

However, one day the capital vanished.

Without any warning, on a day one thousand years ago, the capital disappeared as if by the careless hands of God, and was erased from history.

Often mocked as barbarian chieftains, those who remained were the lords of the lands far from the capital. They began to battle for sovereignty over the vast territory.

The war - a grand battle of inheritance, so to speak - continued for a thousand years with several fleeting periods of peace, and Europea was never unified again.

Then the great Europea War plunged the entire continent into turmoil for ten years until it was ended by the Allied Forces, headed by the Principality of Wiltia, who commanded the Hunter Units.

The tough armor of these steel titans nullified the small arms fire of enemy infantry, and the units were able to bear heavy weaponry. They brought about astonishing military achievements wherever they were deployed.

Despite the natural fortifications surrounding it, Makstia, the capital city of the August Federation, fell and a single platoon of

Hunter Units demolished the pride of the Greyten Empire - their landship cruisers.

A peace treaty favorable to the allied forces was signed, and with it, the war came to a close.

With the fighting over, a number of events came to pass.

Some nations merged, others disappeared, and still others were divvied up.

This gave birth to a number of hostile groups - the defeated, the oppressed, and those who detested the fact that their home country was gone or taken over. Although insignificant in comparison, in a little town a small bakery opened for business.

CHAPTER 1
GOOD SERVICE STARTS WITH YOUR SMILE

The fourth month of 920 E.C.-

In the newly-formed Pelfe region of the Principality of Wiltia stood the small mining town of Organbaelz, and on the edge of that town there was a bakery called Tockerbrot.

It had opened a year ago and was now in danger of going out of business.

"There we go! It looks great... Here Jacob, have a taste!"

Inside of Tockerbrot, the young owner passed his newest, fresh-from-the-oven creation to the young boy, Jacob, on of the owner's few friends and a regular customer.

"*Munch, munch... hmm*, what is this?" Jacob asked, as he bit into the enticingly-fragranced bread.

There was a sweet paste packed into the soft, freshly-baked bread.

"You like it? It's an invention from the east, called anpan. It's filled with a paste made from sweet, boiled beans. Over there it's known as a type of sweet roll."

The baker had learned this from an acquaintance from the Far East during the war.

"It's intriguing, isn't it? This is the kind of bread that a country of rice-eating people comes up with. Even the yeast they use is different; they ferment rice to make something called 'kome-koji' and use that

to make bread."

Oddly enough, it paired very well with milk.

"Yeah, it's good."

"Really? In that case, it's a success!"

The owner was delighted with Jacob's seal of approval.

This bread couldn't be found anywhere else in the Wiltia - or anywhere else on the entire Europea continent.

"I'm sure that with my new, mysterious eastern-style bread, the customers will come rolling in!"

The owner clenched his fist, as if he was grabbing tightly onto his hoped for the future.

"... I still think it's impossible."

Jacob's reply doused his optimism in an instance.

"Why?!"

Even though Jacob was only twelve years old, he held his fingers up to his forehead and shook his head like a cunning old gentleman admonishing the owner for his foolishness.

"I'll start by saying that I think you're a good guy."

"Oh, um, well, thank you."

The owner made a puzzled face and wondered why Jacob was saying this.

"I think you're diligent and passionate, and you're always eager to learn."

"Oh, heh, don't make me blush..."

The owner looked down in embarrassment and scratched his head.

"But!"

Jacob thrust out his finger, as if to flip up the owner's drooping head.

"The real reason this bakery isn't popular... is *you*, Lud! Your face scares them away!"

Tockerbrot was in trouble and the reason was clear.

The bakery had no customers.

It wasn't because the bread didn't taste good. In fact, through the owner's hard work, the taste continued to improve steadily over time.

And it wasn't because the bread was too expensive. The baker's prices were as low as possible, low enough that children could buy it with their spending money.

The owner hadn't neglected to do market research either. He discovered the regional foods in the area and had an understanding of the flavors that the local residents preferred.



While it was true that the bakery was located outside the central part of the town, it was still on the main street. So the lack of customers couldn't be attributed to its location, either.

More importantly than anything else, there was no other bakery in town.

Everyone in town either baked their own bread or they were forced to buy the dry and tasteless bread sold on the peddler's truck, which was closer to crackers than real fresh, bread.

The lack of business wasn't caused by its competition.

The main reason the bakery was failing was Lud Langart.

Lud frightened people.

"Gaght!"

Looking at the stricken face of his friend, Jacob furrowed his brow.

Lud knew.

He knew that Jacob would never deliberately hurt someone.

So now, if Jacob was saying this to Lud, no matter how hard it was for Lud to hear, there was no doubt that he was telling the truth.

Lud had thought it strange for a long time.

When he greeted someone on the street, he would get no response. Children would run from him, young women would hide themselves in the shadows, and now and again even men would walk the other way at the sight of him.

Lud assumed this treatment was because he was a foreigner.

Jacob was almost half Lud's age, but Lud thought of him as an equal and as a friend. He knew Jacob would only tell him the truth.

"A-Am I really... that scary...?"

The reality was hard to accept.

"I mean, you're weirdly tall and absurdly buff, your eyes are way too sharp and penetrating, and above all there is that cross scar on your cheek. When you walk into a bakery and see someone like that, it's scary!"

"Th-that's..."

Lud was born with his height, he was in the habit of building up his muscles, and being a baker was hard work, so his arms grew even bigger.

"My scar... it would be hard to hide a scar this big..."

"To be honest, I should be used to it by now but if I don't properly brace myself before coming in, it can sometimes be bad for my heart."

"I-I'm trying. I try to have on a bright smiling face..."

"Okay, smile"

Lud gave a big grin...

But instead of a smile, it looked like Lud was distorting and straining the muscles of his face.

"You know... a smile like that says, 'Shall I give you a lesson, fool?' Watch out'"

Lud had given the smile his all. Maybe he was truly beyond help.

"Lud, as long as you are the one standing behind the counter, this bakery will have no customers... It's sad, but that's the truth."

"Th-that can't be..."

Lud held his head in his hands and slumped low.

He resembled a demonic beast trembling in fear at the word of God.

"I'm saying this for your own good. Why don't you a part-time helper? Then you can stay in the back baking the bread. I think that's the best idea."

"B-but..."

If Luke could save the bakery, he would do anything.

And actually, between baking the bread, dealing with customers, cleaning up and doing all the other chores, it was a lot for one person to handle.

He worked without a break but there was a limit to how much he could do on his own.

"Hmmm... in that case Jacob, could you-?"

"No way! That isn't happening!" Jacob shook his head.

"Our repair shop is in trouble, too. We're so understaffed. I would hire our watchdog Marjes to help out if I could. Sorry, but it's impossible."

The war was over and with it, an end to special procurements for the war effort. The repair shop that Jacob's family ran had to cut staff, and now the whole family had to fill in.

"Besides that, if a man is kneading the dough, and baking the bread, and a man is the one stuffing the bread into the customer's bag - there's way too many men! It's nothing but men!"

"So what do you want me to do?"

"Hire a waitress!"

Jacob brought his face close and shoved his pointer finger in Lud's

face.

He looked like a detective that had found the critical clue needed to solve a murder case.

"You understand, Lud? This town is small, and it's a mining town. There is a mountain of dirty men here. There is a *ton* of them. But, if you put a beautiful waitress in front of them with your delicious bread in her hands? That's the way you will draw in customers!"

It was true that Organbaelz was a mining town, and there was little other industry, including restaurants.

The only restaurants served food that tasted so bad it made you wonder if they were even trying.

"You have to hire a girl, and if possible, make her wear a frilly outfit or something. I'm getting excited just thinking about it!"

Lud started to think that Jacob was getting carried away with his own good idea.

"I've thought this for a while but... could you actually be a Sparian?"

Sparia was a penisular nation south of Wiltia.

This country had a long history but its citizens were known to be lively and many of their men were womanizers.

They had a reputation for being overly passionate and theatrical.

Lud didn't dislike Sparia, but from his experience, he didn't want to join any military campaigns with them if he didn't have to.

"What are you saying? You already know that both my parents are Wiltian."

Jacob had blonde hair and blue eyes, the characteristics of a model Wiltian citizen. Still, Lud couldn't help wondering if maybe he had a

little Sparian blood.

"A waitress, huh..."

"Do you have a problem with that?"

"Not exactly..."

Jacob's suggestion wasn't wrong, but...

"I'm... not good with women..."

Lud was raised in the military since childhood. He spent most of his youth on the battlefield.

The only woman around him was like a substitute older sister.

"Well, you gotta decide, Lud."

"Hmm..."

He was Lud Langart, a former Hunter Unit pilot for the Principality known as The Silver Wolf, who made enemy soldiers tremble in fear.

But now he was the owner of the Tockerbrot Bakery.

He couldn't just obey the orders of his superiors.

He had to think for himself, decide for himself, and take responsibility for everything himself.

"... Alright."

This might be the first or second most important decision of Lud's life.

And even he didn't know if he was preparing to fight or just readying himself for defeat.

Several hours later, with help from Jacob, Lud had created a Help

Wanted poster and tacked it up in front of the bakery, on the notice board in town, on the wall of Jacob's family factory and on the church's message board.

"Now hiring a waitress! Looking for someone with a fantastic smile! For details, please see Lud Langart, owner of Tockerbrot."

The people of the town just thought the serious-faced baker was behaving strangely again and laughed it off.

For the first few days, Lud was nervous, thinking that someone would knock on his door at any moment.

However, the people for the village were sure that no young girl would want to work for that bakery.

Even if there such a girl, her family would stop her.

No one responded to the poster and soon Lud forgot all about it.

And then one day a young girl was seen staring at the poster on the town notice board.

"..... Lud Langart."

The girl whispered the name on the poster, great emotion echoing in her voice and the loveliest of smiles spreading across her face.

"I found you."

Tearing the poster off the message board, without any hesitation, as if she were charging off to battle, she walked down the main street of Organbaelz.

Tockerbrot seemed under the spell of the god of tranquility and, resting his chin on his hands at the counter, Lud let out a sigh.

He had prepared freshly-baked bread, homemade jam, and delicious coffee and tea.

But no one opened the door to his bakery.

There was a small bell attached to the door so Lud would hear customers enter, even if he was working at his bread kiln.

But, the bell never rang.

Occasionally on a windy day, Lud would rush from the back at the sound of the bell, only to be disappointed to find no one there. Even he thought this was sad.

"....."

Lud took out a mirror just large enough to fit neatly in his hand.

He tried smiling.

Grin...

But his smile seemed to say, "If this is the level of strength that you dare to oppose me with, then your foolishness is actually extremely impressive. I shall express my respect for your grandiose foolishness by giving you a choice - in what way would you prefer to die?"

Lud was a diligent and serious man.

At the end of each long day when the bakery closed, he cleaned the story and the break kiln, and experimented baking new types of bread.

And on top of this, he added a new item to his daily regimen.

Smiling practice.

And the result of a month of training was this frightening smile.

"*Sigh*..."

Lud had forgotten how to smile.

He was sure that he must have smiled when he was a child.

He couldn't remember smiling since then.

Thinking back on his childhood, Lud's face became more warped and his expression was even less like a smile.

Cling cling...

The bell rang.

Expecting Jacob, Lud stood up to prepare tea with milk.

Jacob always stopped by the bakery on his way home from school to buy a piece of bread and enjoy some small talk with Lud. All that awaited him at home was work for his family, so a snack at the bakery was Jacob's small escape.

Jacob's allowance money was not much.

Lud often told him that he didn't need to pay. Lud thought of Jacob as a friend and was just happy that he came, so he felt awkward taking his money.

But Jacob just said, "I'm not so bad off that I need to accept charity, especially from a bakery that looks like it's going out of business."

Usually, Jacob was easily flattered, but his Wiltian pride far surpassed Lud's, despite being a native-born Wiltian himself.

At the very least, Lud would treat him to his favorite milk tea, free of charge.

"You're early today, Jacob."

He was about to ask Jacob if he was skipping school, when Lud's words got caught in his throat.

"... *Huh*?"

It wasn't Jacob standing there, but a young girl.

She had lovely, long silver hair, and was wearing a white dress and a wide-brimmed hat. The bright red pupils in her eyes stood out from the rest of her. She was beautiful.

"... *Smile*."

The girl smiled. It was a smile that was not just attractive, but captured the heart of anyone who saw it.

The smiling women Lud had seen over the last ten years were either smiling to get at the silver coins in his wallet, or from their devotion to God.

So when he saw the friendly smile of this young girl, it was as if he was seeing the beautiful wings of a bird from a legend or fairytale.

"Ah... Ah?! W-Welcome!"

If it wasn't Jacob, then this must be a customer.

In a fluster, Lud greeted the girl.

A smile might be dangerous, thought Lud, in fact it was probably better to be expressionless.

His face was stiff and strained.

"Excuse me... I saw this poster, so I came here..."

In the girl's hand was the Help Wanted poster he had put up a month ago.

"Has the position already been filed?"

"Huh? Oh, that..."

Lud was surprised. He had already half-forgotten about hiring a waitress for the bakery.

"... No, not... yet..."

When human beings encounter something unexpected, or when they are in a situation they can't understand, they unconsciously behave as they did in a similar situation.

Regardless of what Lud was actually thinking in his head, he looked like a soldier who had fallen into an enemy trap and was caught in a pincer attack.

"Really? That's great!"

A giant smile spread across the girl's face, like that of an angel.

In an instant, the lonely bakery was enveloped in light and cheer.

"Oh, um, y-yeah, great..."

Lud didn't know what to say but the girl didn't hesitate.

"My name is Sven. Would you allow me to work here starting today? I am fine with whatever wage you can provide. Or you can pay me in kind."

"O-oka--"

Sven stepped closer to Lud and rattled on, almost begging Lud.

"I don't have anywhere to go... That's why if possible, I... Would it be possible for me to live here in the bakery?"

"Eh? O-okay..."

"Really? Thank you, that's great!"

The inside of Lud's head was still in chaos.

But Lud had said okay. Not only had he hired her, he had agreed to let her live in the bakery.

"Huh? Live here?! Wait a second, that's a bit much..."

Over half of Lud's house was taken up by the bakery. His actual living space was a single room used as an office-parlor-bedroom-study, and an attic that was a storeroom.

But, before he could explain, Sven jumped up in glee, flew over the counter and wrapped her arms around Lud's neck and embraced him.

"He-wai-hold on-Ah?!"

"I will do my best, with the utmost dedication and selflessness. I'm looking forward to working with you, Master!"

It was a passionate embrace, as if they were two lovers reunited by the strings of fate.

Here in the small mining town of Organbaelz a small tale - unknown to history - began in a small bakery, on the verge of collapse.

That same evening, there was a small uproar in Organbaelz - a dull town without a shred of excitement.

It wasn't because someone had died, nor was it because someone had come back to life.

However, a crowd of people had formed and there was a great commotion.

"Attention everyone! At Tockerbrot we have a wide selection of tasty croissants, bagels, and baguette sandwiches for you to try. Please stop by!"

Wearing a black and white waitress uniform and a lace headband, Sven generously showered everyone with her smile.

Men after all, are stupid.

The sight of a beautiful young girl - lovelier than even the actresses on stage at the Grand Theater in Berun, the capital of Wiltia - attracted the men of the town as if they were mice led by the flute of a piper.

"Come try the newest item on our menu! The mystery of the Far East, sweet and delicious, our higly-praised, freshly-baked 'anpan' is now available!"

Sven not only looked beautiful, but her voice was sweet, like a melody from heaven.

She had completely captured the men's eyes and ears.

To close the deal, she gave a smile that would make even an angel run for the hills in defeat.

Her smile was enough to capture the men's hearts. Not just enough, it was more than enough; no, it was one hundred times more than enough.

That day, Tockerbrot recorded the greatest number of customers since the bakery opened.

The men knew that the owner of this bakery was a foreigner with an unpleasant look in his eyes and a frightening face.

But, Sven's smile had the power to overcome even that fear.

"Th-this one, please!"

Holding out his bread, the customer's nervous voice became high-pitched and excited.

"Thank you very much! So, you have two here, that will be two sigs

and three krants, please."

Sven took the customer's money and gently placed the bread in a bag, as if it was her beloved child, before passing it to the customer.

Her fingertips briefly touched the fingers of the customer.

"Thank you very much for your patronage. You'll come again, won't you?"

She placed her hand over the customer's as she spoke.

"Y-yes! Certainly! Definitely!"

The men left the shop with bright red faces, as if they were drunk. Everyone pushed and shoved in line, waiting impatiently for their turn to see Sven up close.

The gluttonous and fat Laurel reached the counter holding a tray overflowing with bread to buy.

"Oh my, so much! Gentlemen who eat so much are very powerful and strong, they are truly splendid" And with the other men in line watching, she held Laurel's greasy hands for a moment.



"Hold on a second! I'm buying five weizenbrots and three kipfels!"

"Crap, I've only got three rolls!"

"I won't lose! I've got zopfs, pretzels and roggenbrots, ten of each!"

Men, after all, are stupid.

More bread per customer was sold that day than ever before.

In a shadow by the kiln, Lud watched the scene unfold with a complicated look on his face.

"What's with the strange face?"

"Jacob! I've told you not to come back here, haven't I? This is where I handle the food!"

"It's fine, I'm already here," Jacob reassured him. "More importantly, that girl is amazing, she's got all of the men wrapped around her finger. Where did you manage to find that waitress outfit, anyways?"

Sven had found a broken sewing machine left in the storeroom by the previous owners and asked Lud if he had any cloth she could use.

Unfortunately, the only thing Lud had was an ancient black felt carpet.

Nevertheless, Sven took it and after several hours in the storeroom fiddling with the sewing machine, she emerged in a beautiful waitress outfit.

Even the seamstresses at the Thieves' Market in Nepolis would grow pale at the speed and brilliance of her work.

She also added lovely embroidery to the headband and apron.

Lud knew that the black cloth had come from his old carpet, but he

didn't recognize the white silk of the embroidery.

"You don't mean to tell me... did you use the clothes that you were wearing too?"

"Yes! My underwear is enough for sleeping in, and once I'm awake, I'm ready to work."

Lud wondered if she had been sewing her outfit almost naked?

Imagining the scene in his, Lud blushed slightly.

"Master?"

"Ah, Hahahaha! N-Nothing! But what are you going to do without a spare set of clothes?"

Lud wanted to provide that for her he didn't have any way to do so.

"Hehehe... You don't need to worry about that. I will be able to take care of ten thousand customers before this clothing wears out."

As Sven said this, she chuckled to herself like an elite soldier boasting about a new weapon.

Over fifty customers had visited the shop just that day. If business continued like this, it wouldn't take a year for Sven's prediction to come true.

But Lud's thoughts were in turmoil.

"I don't know."

"What?" Jacob asked.

"Does this mean that as long as there's a cute girl here, anything will sell?"

Lud had believed that as long as he made good products seriously and with all his effort, people would come to the shop to buy them.

However, he was no told that Sven's smile was more important than the many days he had persevered.

He was thrilled that customers had come. But it made him sad too.

"How naïve!"

Jacob shook his finger and admonished the troubled Lud.

"You're naïve Lud! If you could sell something just by having a cute girl smile, then everyone would be doing it! But that's not true, is it?"

"What does that mean? Ow!"

Lud was depressed and stooping lower than usual, so Jacob's finger stabbed him in the nose.

"I'm saying that customers aren't that stupid. I'll you something. You're going to get even busier from here on."

"Huh...?"

Jacob chuckled to himself. The next day, his prediction came true.

"What the heck..."

The next day, men drawn by the stories of Sven's beauty visited Tockerbrot again, and - in numbers surpassing the men - women and children came too.

"Heh, heh, heh. Just as I expected."

Barging once again into the kiln area, Jacob smiled, but Lud just stared in awe at all his customers, too dumbfounded to scold Jacob.

The wives of the men who had come home from the bakery the day before, laden with all the fresh bread, at first were furious at the unnecessary expense.

"Why in the world would you waste money like this? Even thought we already have dinner?!"

Sven's magic didn't affect the wives. They resented and blamed her.

However, food is innocent, and that night they ate Lud's bread with their dinner.

"Oh my..."

"This is?"

"Delicious!"

Since there was no other bakery, everyone had always baked their own bread. They didn't even want to touch the nasty, preserved bread that the peddler came to sell.

But, there was no comparison between their bread and that baked by Lud, who day and night perfected his recipes and technique.

Those women now remembered that bread could be delicious. Their desire to eat and savor properly baked fresh bread was suddenly rekindled.

And Tockerbrot had many different baked treats on it shelves, priced low enough for all the townspeople to afford.

Hungry for the small donuts covered in nuts and chocolate, the children came to the shop, copper coins held firmly in hand.

And, not only did Sven's smiling face capture the hearts of the men, it gave a sense of security to the women and children.

"Thank you very much. Here is one of our newest items, free of charge. Please visit us again soon!"

For the women, Sven wore a smile of warm friendliness and respect.

"Thank you, here you go. They were just fried so be careful when you eat them."

For the children, her smile conveyed good humor and kindness.

"I don't it..."

Lud trembled as he eyed the bakery overflowing with customers.

This had always been his dream.

He had longed to have a crowd of people eating his bread.

He was so happy that he was on the verge of tears.

"*Sniff, sniff*"

Or rather, he was already in tears.

"You understand now, right? The girl was the key that opened the door to the treasure room. Inside are the treasures that you've polished and shined, all lined up. Everyone is here for that!"

No matter how much a beautiful girl improves sales, if the product being sold is unappetizing, the sales won't last.

The reason Jacob had advised Lud to hire a waitress was because he knew that as soon as the villagers tasted the bread baked by this dour-faced man, it would capture their hearts and never let go.

"Master! The pumpernickel has sold out! Please provide more as soon as possible."

Sven's voice came from the storefront.

"C'mon, what do you think you're doing! If you show your face in the bakery, the customers will run away. Keep quiet and bake the bread!"

Jacob jabbed Lud with his elbow as he spoke.

But despite his words, tears of sympathy welled in Jacob's eyes.

"Yeah, that's right... I'd better get baking! I'll bake until this body burns up!"

"I don't you think you have to go that far..."

Since he had been discharged from the military two years earlier, and since he had opened the bakery a year ago, this was the first day that Lud had truly been happy.

It was time to close up the shop---

"Thank you very much, please come again."

With a big smile on her face, Sven sent off the last customer.

"Phew..."

"Thank you for all your hard work, Master!"

Sven showed Lud a different face than the one she showed customers. This was the face of someone gazing at the most precious person in the entire world.

"Please, have a drink."

Sven carried a silver steel tray with a cup of piping hot coffee.

"Thanks, Sven."

Lud was happy. A lot of customers had come today, too.

He heard the woman who managed the general store on the corner say, "It was very delicious!"

When Lud had first come to town, she had trembled and averted her eyes.

Now that same person ate his bread and said that it was delicious.

"Seriously, thank you Sven. This all thanks to you."

Think back, Lud thought that Sven had planned to attract the male customers from the beginning. In that case, it would make sense for her to go out in the evening when the men were on their way home from work, rather than at lunch time.

"T-that's... I haven't done anything. All of this is because of the taste of your bread, Master. I am only trying to be as helpful as possible."

Sven furiously shook her head, as if she did not deserve such an honor.

Suddenly, Lud began to have a strange feeling.

Sven said, just as Jacob had said earlier, that it was Lud's skill at baking that was responsible for bringing in customers.

But, while Jacob knew this because he had visited the bakery so often, why Sven believe so strongly in his abilities when they had only just met?

And why did Sven treat a fierce-looking person like him with such kindness and goodwill?

Sven didn't know Lud. She was such a beautiful girl that he was sure if they had met before, even in passing, he would have remembered for decades to come.

But somehow Lud didn't feel like he was meeting her for the first time.

She would suddenly look at him with a big, broad, smile that would

put him at a loss for words, and he would feel a mysterious sense of nostalgia.

Just having her at his side put him at ease, and changed his chronic worry into peace of mind.

He hadn't experienced this since leaving the military.

"He Sven... Um... Have I met you somewhere before?"

Sven's face stiffened in surprise.

"Huh?"

"This doesn't feel like the first time we've met. I feel like I knew you before... somewhere..."

"Master... Um..."

Sven's voice, which had been so bright and clear while chatting with customers, became flustered, and her eyes clouded as if she had suddenly come down with a fever.

Snap!

"Ouch!"

"Huh?"

"Ahh!"

The metal tray snapped in two, like a wafer.

It was a cheap tray, so it might have been cracked, but it was unusual for it to split so cleanly in two.

"I, I-I-I'm so so-so-sorry! I've destroyed a precious piece of equipment for this store... I apologize for this..."

"Forget it, are you okay? Are there any cuts on your hands, or your

fingers?" Lud put the panicking Sven's hands in his and studied them for any cuts.

The distance between the two of them narrowed, and their faces were close enough to feel each other's breath.

"Um, aaaaahhhh..."

Sven became even more flustered.

She untangled her hands from Lud's and hid them behind her back as she recoiled.

"Um, I-I'm... I'm fine so... U-um, uh... Master, I am finished with work for today!"

Sven said this and ran off to the storeroom.

"Well then..."

Left behind, Lud stood confounded for a moment.

"Well then..."

Left behind, Lud stood confounded for a moment.

"Maybe... she thought that I was trying to make a move on her?"

Realizing that his question about meeting her before could be interpreted as a clumsy pick-up line, he shook his head in embarrassment.

Berun, the capital of Wiltia. Two hundred years old, the city took the shape of a circle, radiating out from the royal palace at its center.

Of course, the security forces closely guarded the royal palace but

there was another building that required even stronger guards around it.

That facility was the Royal Weapons Development Bureau, where the weapon that had completely redefined the battlefield - the Hunter Unit - originated.

Inside the Development Bureau, Sophia Von Rundstadt stormed down the hall with a furious look on her face, her combat boots echoing after her.

The room she was headed for was the the office of the Director of the Weapons Development Bureau.

"Major Sophia Von Rundstadt, sir!"

Practically breaking down the door with her knock, Sophia charged into the room without awaiting a reply. Inside was a grinning man who only annoyed her further.

"My, my, Miss Sophia. Why are you in such an uproar? If I had known you had a problem, I would have come to see you myself."

Sophia met his amused gaze with a glare.

"I heard that the prototype is missing. What is the meaning of this? I demand an explanation."

Sophia was the commander of the security force stationed at the Development Bureau.

However, her rank did not place her under the command of the director.

She had been deployed to the Bureau's security by military headquarters, and even though he was a colonel, she had no obligations to follow his orders.

Further, if the director took actions that were deemed inadvisable

by headquarters, she had the authority and the responsibility to stop him.

"And why would you know about that? *That's strange*... I am positive that I made sure no one would reveal that..."

"What?!"

Sophia felt blood rush to her head.

New weapons were currently being developed to prepare for the next war.

More than a month ago, the most valuable and highly classified of those weapons was suddenly lost.

The loss of this experimental and expensive prototype was extremely serious, and concealing that fact was close to high treason.

"Do you... do you understand what you are saying?! Our valuable prototype has been seized!"

Sophia had the authority to arrest the director right here and right now, depending on his answer.

The frightening eyes of the Devil's Black Spear gleamed sharply.

"Our valuable prototype has been seized by another country! How dare you sit there making such a face!"



Sophia took a step forward and tried to grab the director by his collar when he thrust his palms out like a magician and stopped Sophia in her tracks.

"It wasn't seized by anyone, Major Rundstadt."

"Excuse me?"

The clownish man in front of her definitely had his own ideas and perhaps his own agenda.

"Think about it for a second. Major. On the outside of this facility we have your military security force. Inside, the most elite members of the Development Bureau's team are spread throughout the facility. In any case, Wiltia's ultra-top secret 'gate'--"

"**Director!**"

Sophia raised her voice to try and cut him off.

"That information is not something to speak of so lightly!"

"Hmph... My apologies."

While Sophia angrily faced the director, he momentarily hid his grin, and assumed an expression of seriousness.

Although the Great War had ended - or precisely because it had ended - and in order to prepare for the next war, the intelligence agencies of every country were trying to steal the secret behind the Hunter Units, so vital to the strategy of the Principality of Wiltia.

The director had started to talk about the very core of those secrets, the most important classified information.

Even in a private office inside the Bureau itself, it wasn't to be discussed casually.

"With no exaggeration, this facility is locked so tightly that not even

ant could slip through our security, and despite this, over a month passed before you became aware of this situation."

"…….?!"

Sophia finally realized what the director was trying to say.

The security at the Development Bureau was even tighter than the security at the royal palace.

If someone was going to steal the top secret Hunter Unit prototype, it could only be achieved by taking control of several divisions of troops and capturing the facility.

This had not happened.

The daily logs kept by Sophia's security forces reported nothing unusual.

"T-that would mean... it can't be... it left on its own?"

"As expected, you're very intelligent, Miss Sophia. That's right. The prototype actually broke out and escaped the Bureau of its own volition. No matter how much you barricade the outside from invaders, you can't do the same on the inside. Moreover, that was how she was built. It's her specialty, after all."

"I didn't think... it could be true..."

Sophia put her hands on her forehead with a horrified expression, as if she was in a terrible nightmare.

And yet, looking at the situation from a purely results-based perspective, the new weapon - a project that had seemed to be the product of a wild fantasy - was successful.

"We have already sent out a search party. No matter how it happened, it appears that our prototype passed the activation tests. The follow-up testing is the Bureau's job. Your job is to keep the

Development Bureau building secure, am I correct?"

A spiteful smile appeared on the director's face.

"*Damn!*" thought Sophia.

Sophia's expression revealed her extreme frustration.

The fact that an entirely separate security force had been deliberately stationed at the Development Bureau was just one sign of its importance. Despite the military's attempts to cut post-war spending, the additional security force also displayed the increasing budget that was funneled into the Bureau year after year.

It as the same as the mice belling the cat.

Since Sophia's security forces had no authority outside the Bureau's grounds, there was no need for the Development Bureau to inform them that the prototype was gone.

"Please... Excuse me."

Sophia turned her back to exit the room.

"See you later, Miss Sophia! We should talk over lunch next time!"

"**.....!**"

Without glancing back at Daian Fortuner, the Bureau director, Sophia slammed the door shut and left.

CHAPTER 2
THE THREE WOMEN

A week had passed since Sven had started work at Tockerbrot.

After the bakery closed, Sven briskly tidied up inside the shop.

"Master, I brought in the sign from out front. Later, I'll clean the display trays and baskets."

Again today there had been plenty of customers, but there were still several pieces of bread left on the display shelves.

"We had so many customers today, yet we still didn't sell all the bread."

"Yeah, but that's bound to happen."

Sven looked distressed so Lud explained.

"There is a balance between supply and demand. In order to have a selection that will satisfy all our customers, we have to increase the supply so there will be unsold items left at the end of the day. But it's the perfect amount to use as a gift. Sorry Sven, but can you cram all the leftover bread into a bag for me?"

"Hm? Certainly, Master."

Lud brought in a large carrying case and put the leftover bread inside.

"I'm going to head out for a bit. You're pretty tired right? You can go ahead and--"

Before Lud could finish, Sven drew close to him as though she was

biting off the rest of his sentence.

"I will accompany you! I would journey to the ends of the earth and back with you, Master!"

A spontaneous cold sweat broke out out on Lud's back.

"I mean, I'm just going up the hill right there... do you want to come, too?"

"Yes!"

Lud had a truck he used to carry wheat, and while he loaded the bread, Sven sat down in the passenger's seat.

"Going on a drive with Master... My heart can't handle it!"

It was difficult to call the truck romantic, but Sven's eyes were full of sparkles.

Lud felt a little guilty at how excited Sven was about a routine trip.

Sven was leaning forward in the passenger's seat and was muttering something.

"Hold on, you. If you stall out or blow a tire, I will tear you to pieces, one bolt at a time!"

It was as if she was intimidating the truck.

"What are you doing?" Lud asked.

"Oh, nothing, nothing at all, I'm just talking to myself."

Sven sat upright in a panicked fluster.

The truck was very battered and on the verge of breaking down, but today it was driving very obediently, almost as if someone had grabbed the engine by its collar forced it to listen to what they had to say.

They made their way up the small hill that overlooked Organbaelz to the small, church at the top. The church was very simple and looked desolate dilapidated.

"Truck ran well today. I guess it's still got some good days left in it."

"Ummm Master? Why exactly... What is our business in coming here?"

"Hm... Alms, I suppose?"

"What?"

Lud considered how best to explain, when a woman emerged from the church.

"Oh, it's you, Lud."

"Good evening Marlene"

Marlene was a sister of the church. Lud greeted her with the friendliest face he could make.

As Jacob had told him, a smiling face was very important in communication and since then, he had made as much effort as possible to have a smile on his face.

It didn't always work...

"Has something happened? Your expression is quite frightening..." Marlene looked worried.

Lud realized how much farther he had to go when he saw the worried look Marlene gave him.

"Um... Master? Who is this person?"

"Mr. Lud, who is this young girl?"

Sven and Marlene spoke at the same time.

But while Marlene just looked inquisitive, there was an almost imperceptible note of animosity and caution in Sven's voice.

"Sven, this is Marlene, she's a sister at this church. Marlene, Sven is helping out as a waitress at the bakery."

"So this must be the waitress that everyone in town has been talking about."

Sven looked puzzled.

"Yes, you're the very cute girl who is working at Tockerbrot, right?"

It seemed the stories about Sven had spread as far as the church on the outskirts of town.

"Cute... I'm..."

Sven had felt a little suspicious of Marlene but she suddenly changed her mind and shook Marlene's hand with both of hers.

"You're a good person!"

"Huh? U-uhm... Thank you."

Inviting the two of them into the church, Marlene smiled but was perplexed at Sven's abrupt change in attitude. It was as if a switch had been flicked and Sven decided Marlene was a friend rather than a foe.



"We don't need to stand here chatting. Please come in."

The inside of the church looked even more desolate than the outside.

Suffering from the remnants of clumsy repairs over the years, if it wasn't for the sacred crest decorating the altar - dingy as it was - it was difficult to see that it was a church at all.

Lud placed the case holding the bread on top of the small, rickety chapel's table.

"Sorry to put you to trouble, Mr. Lud."

"It's okay, these are leftovers."

"Um... What exactly is this?"

Sven looked confused.

Lud had not explained why he was bringing the leftover bread to the church.

"About once a week I come here to give alms."

"Hmm... and what are... alms?" Sven asked.

"It's a but of a long story, but..."

It started about six months ago with the lack of customers at the Tockerbrot.

Lud hated throwing out the unsold bread that he had worked so hard to bake every day. It felt like his body was being torn in two.

One day, Lud noticed some children with their faces pressed up against the bakery window, staring hungrily at the raisin bread. They were dressed in shabby clothes and clearly didn't have enough to eat.

Even though they had heard about the fierce-faced baker, their hunger was greater than their fear, and drew them to the bakery.

Lud invited the children in and let them eat the unsold bread.

Lud was delighted that they enjoyed the bread. and put what remained in a bag and gave it to them.

The next day, Marlene visited the bakery to thank Lud.

The children he fed were from the church orphanage.

Her church had no benefactors so operating the orphanage was very difficult. The children and Marlene worked on the small church farm, performed some side jobs, and lived huddled together inside the church. Food was scarce.

Then the children appeared in front of Lud's bakery.

"I am thankful for your concern, but I ask that you ignore them from now on." Marlene said.

She didn't want the children to grow dependent upon charity.

"At first, people will give them charity with kindness. But if the children show up more often, they'll be turned away and looked at as dirty pests. Then it's the children who get hurt." Marlene explained.

Lud opened his mouth with a sad look on his face.

"I just want someone to eat my bread."

Lud told Marlene that he was a former soldier, and that after the war he had borrowed money to open the bakery, but no one would come in. Then, he had a single proposal to make.

"Could I bring it for them bread once a week? As an alms substitute for when I come to pray?"

Marlene gently smiled and accepted the proposal.

Lud finished his story.

It was a little embarrassing for him.

Sven's eyes welled up as she listened.

"I can't believe that something like that could have happened..."

Wiltia won the war. But since Pelfe had been annexed by Wiltia, its people should be treated as citizens.

However, the post-war restoration occurred in the victor's home country, with regions closest to the capital given priority. This meant that the rural and annexed areas were slow to receive any benefits from the war.

Poverty undermines the weakest among us first.

"I can't believe you had been driven to this... Master, how awful!" Sven cried.

"*That's* what made you cry?!"

Lud agreed that it was quite pathetic for a baker to have to beg people to eat his bread.

He felt a deep gratitude towards Marlene and the children who ate and enjoyed the bread he baked.

"I came to Pelfe after the war... so there is also a gulf between me and the people here." Marlene said, with a forced smile.

Even though the telegraph network had spread far and wide, the railway extended to the edge of the continent, and airplanes flew around the world, the old suspicions and resentments toward outsiders in the rural towns did not change easily. Even now, the villagers treated the young sister as a foreigner.

"That's why... I could understand Mister Lud's feelings, too." Marlene finished.

As such, when Marlene saw Lud's situation, she was sympathetic.

"So now I come here and bring them bread. But, thanks to Sven, there have been more customers, and today's leftover bread was less than usual... Here, these are madeleines. Please share them with everyone."

Since his alms were less than usual, he had prepared a fresh-baked addition in a rush before coming.

"Oh my... They're still warm. The children love sweet things."

Marlene smiled happily as she accepted the paper bag.

"Hm...?"

From behind, Lud suddenly felt a glare stabbing him in his back.

This wasn't the first time. He had felt it last week, and the week before that, and the week before that.

He turned around and glimpsed a shadow peeking through a crack in the door.

"....."

Hiding there was a young girl around fourteen, who was glaring at him with intense hatred.

Lud knew the girl's face very well.

Her name was Milly, and she was an orphan who lived at the church.

"Wh-what's up, Milly..."

Lud called out to her awkwardly.

The hostility in Milly's eyes didn't change.

"...I... never..." Milly quietly muttered while loathing.

"I'll never eat any of your stupid bread! Get out of here!" Milly yelled at Lud before running further into the church.

"What is wrong with that girl?!"

Sven looked enraged and began to run after her.

"Forget it, Sven. She's always like this, don't pay any attention."

Lud rushed to stop Sven and was surprised at the force and power in her tiny body.

"Always?! That child always speaks to Master like that?!"

Her anger was so fierce, it was as if too much coal had been thrown into a steam engine and increased its heat to a dangerous level. The only thing missing was the sound of whistling from her ears.

"I'm so sorry, Mr Lud, I'll make sure to sit Milly down and talk to her later..."

"It's okay, please don't be upset with her."

That was a lie. It wasn't okay. There was nothing more painful than to be rejected with such fury.



Lud was certain Marlene understood this.

"... Well then, we'll be. I'll be by next week." Luke stood up.

"At least stay for some tea."

"Oh... next time..."

That was a lie, too.

Lud always refused Marlene's invitation for tea.

He felt somehow that he was soiling the church, which was Milly's only haven for rest and comfort. He never stayed long.

Marlene understood what Lud was thinking and didn't say anything further.

Lud said goodbye and sitting next to Sven, who was still shaking with indignation, he drove the truck towards town.

"Hmph!"

Sitting in the passenger's seat. Sven was still in a bad mood, and puffed her cheeks out in indignation.

"Are you still angry?" Lud asked.

Lud just felt sad.

The children at the church were afraid of Lud but none showed such open hatred as Milly.

Lud knew why Milly detested him and she had a good reason. There wasn't anything he could do about it.

But, it still hurt.

So Sven's reaction to Milly's behavior, as if she herself had been

hurt, made him feel a little bit better.

"What was with her? I'll *never* forgive her." Sven spat out.

Gripping the wheel, Lud replied without moving his gaze from the road.

"... There's no point in getting upset. It won't change anything."

He didn't say this just to calm Sven, but because he needed to hear it himself.

"Actually, you know, that girl..."

On the short drive back to Tockerbrot, Lud told Sven about Milly and why she hated him.

It was a story that Lud wasn't able to tell without whittling away at his heart, little by little.

He felt like his dilapidated truck, stumbling with a bang and a crash over a road filled with ruts.

The next day, Tockerbrot had not yet opened.

The cleaning was finished, inside and out. The price tags were posted, and the bread trays and tongs were polished to look brand new.

It was a lot of work for one person, but Sven took care of it quickly and easily.

In fact, today, she had finished it all earlier than usual.

"Hmmm...?"

She had run out of things to do.

Sven continued to ponder what Lud had told her about Milly.

She had thought about it most of the night.

Now she tried to forget by keeping busy in the bakery.

But, now even that was finished. At this rate, she would again fall into the endless labyrinth of her thoughts.

"What...?"

Sven found a small notebook in one of the drawers under the counter.

It was the accounts book for the bakery.

It was perfect timing because in moments like this, rows of unfeeling numbers put Sven at ease. She flipped through the notebook and began surveying the entries.

"My, my, my, quite splendidly in the red, aren't we..."

Although the bakery had started to prosper, that success didn't yet show itself in the end results.

Sven decided to make some financial predictions and simulations based on their sales continuing to grow smoothly.

"Let's see... This goes like this... that becomes that... Huh?"

Meanwhile, Lud had been baking bread since early morning.

The flame from the kiln was hot so even for a former soldier, the work was exhausting.

"Here we go... Alright, they came out looking great today, too!"

The number of morning customers was growing because people liked the bread fresh out of the oven.

On Sven's recommendation, they now offered a small breakfast special, which was already popular. Bread really was best straight out of the oven.

As an experiment, Lud had started including free homemade apricot jam with the fresh bread.

He was excited to see if people would enjoy it.

"Master! What is this?!"

Sven appeared, her face darkened in anger.

Unlike Jacob, Sven didn't barge into the kiln area whenever she felt like it. Instead she simply yelled from the entrance.

She never went against Lud's orders.

"... Sven, what's wrong?"

As he stuck his head out of the kiln area, the shop's account book was thrust into Lud's face.

"What is the meaning of this? All of the numbers on this balance sheet are wrong!"

But, that wasn't the important part. Sven could fix the mistakes in the account book herself.

The big problem was the repayment schedule for Lud's debt.

In order to open Tockerbrot, Lud took out an expensive loan and had been paying it back month by month.

"Master, with the interest rate on this loan, no matter how hard

you try, you will never pay it off. This combination of simple and compound interest is illegal! Where in the world did you borrow this from?!"

With simple interest, the interest rate is calculated on the original borrowed amount.

Compound interest is when the amount of interest is added to the original amount borrowed, and then the interest increases based on that combined amount. It is also known as snowballing interest.

Lud had borrowed money from an illegal loan shark.

"This interest rate is absurd... This is from a back alley lender, isn't it?" Sven asked.

"There wasn't anyone else who would lend money to someone like me, with no guarantee or collateral."

Even if you included the retirement money that soldiers are awarded when discharged, it would still only cover the initial start-up and the first few months of operating costs.

On top of that, without enough customers throughout the first year, the debt continued to grow.

However, that didn't mean that they could let things continue this way.

"We need to draft a rebuilding plan."

Sven showed Lud the plan she had drawn up on some leftover advertising pamphlets for the store.

It was titled, "Operation Spring Storm: Plan to Defend Tockerbrot to the Absolute Last." Sven opened the first page.

"First, we will take out a loan from the bank. We will use that money to pay off the illegal loan. It will be a lot of money but as long

as the interest rate is within legal limits, we can pay it back."

The contract was illegal, but if Sven and Lud weren't careful there was a chance that the loan sharks might harm the bakery or Lud.

"A bank... with the war over and an end to any special procurement, no bank would be willing to lend money to a own baker."

"But, Wiltia is the victor nation, right? Between the restoration of the war-torn regions, town and city redevelopment, and the pioneering of the new frontiers, banks aren't in any sort of credit crunch."

The new region of Pelfe was annexed by Wiltia when they won the Great War, and since Lud had headed to Pelfe to start his business, he was a splendid pioneer. But, in order to receive new financing, they had to show the bank that if it lent money to Lud, he would pay it all back.

"If you can show that Tockerbrot is running smoothly, and that business is expanding with a bright future, it will be fine."

"Sven, at this rate, I'll never be able to return it all, even if we maintain our current customers. Any bank would think twice before lending to me."

Sven had a different suggestion. "Yes, continuing with out present sales will be difficult. That's why starting today, shall we begin our new sales activities?"

"What?"

"Yes!"

Sven told Lud the new strategy she had just come up with that morning.

Organbaelz was a mining town.

However, the laborers in the mine rarely visited the bakery.

This was perhaps because they didn't know about it. If that was the case, the sales activity that Sven had in mind was to go directly to the mine workers and promote their breads.

Taking a case full of fresh bread, Sven and Lud got in the truck and drove to Baelz Mine.

"But, can we just show up without notice?" Lud wondered aloud.

The mine was private property, and they would need permission to sell bread there.

"We aren't going to sell anything today. We will give the bread to the mine workers as a gift."

Sven's objective was to get a contract to sell bread to the mine's cafeteria.

Baelz was a small mine but it had more than two hundred hard-workers with big appetites.

Selling bread in the cafeteria would mean several times more customers than they now had.

This could be a big break, Lud thought to himself, but he was still uneasy.

Arriving at the mountain, the two made their way towards the office.

"Weeelll, if you show up out of the blue like this... it puts us in a bad spot, you know?"

With an air of a middle-aged man who just couldn't get ahead in

life, the mine's chief of general affairs did not seem pleased to see the two of them.

With her most angelic smile, Sven offered him some bread.

"Here, will you have a bit of what we've brought? I can assure you that it tastes delicious."

The chief resisted but before he knew it, Sven had moved next to him.

Her movement was brilliant. If they were on the battlefield, she would have pierced through the general affairs chief's heart three times over.

"We-well... I guess it couldn't hurt to try..."

Completely enchanted by the young girl, and grinning like a fool, the chief was unable to refuse and ate a bit of the bread.

"... Wow, this is good."

He widened his eyes in surprise and took another bite, and then another.

"This bread is the result of countless hours of quality analysis, on top of our minute attention to every detail of the creation process."

"But, this is expensive, isn't it? No matter how good it tastes, something this expensive is..."

"On the contrary, please look at this price list I have prepared."

Sven took out a price summary.

She had written the list with lettering so accurate and easy to read, it was as if it had been printed on a typewriter.

"This is... pretty cheap." The chief of general affairs was surprised.

"Absolutely! We have set our prices as low as possible."

If they could sell to a business in large quantities, the risk of unsold bread would disappear. Further, the cost of individually packaging the bread would be unnecessary, so the price could be dropped a great deal.

"Today's food becomes tomorrow's energy! When you enter into an alliance with Tockerbrot, you are ensuring a shining future for your mine!"

The conversation was entirely in Sven's control.

She had a way of speaking that would make the faces of both first class salesmen and first class swindlers grow pale. As if the signed contract was only a matter of time. But...

"... I do think it's a very good idea, but it is difficult."

The chief's face clouded over.

"Why would that be?! The bread tastes good and is cheap, there's nothing to complain... could it be collusion?" Sven's voice rose.

It was common practice for someone acquainted with a business proprietor to buy low-quality goods at high prices and pocket the difference.

Lud knew that many industries had these long-term arrangements, and that it would be difficult for a new business to gain a foothold.

"No, no, no, that's not it, it's not like that!" the chief protested, waving his hands.

"It's just... you two are, no... you.. you're the owner, right?" He pointed at Lud. "He's the problem."

"Me?"

Lud was taken aback.

There was no way that the big, burly miners could be scared of Lud.

"You, you're ex-military, right?"

"?!"

Lud had never kept his military background a secret. But, he never talked about it himself.

It must have gotten out somewhere, maybe someone at the government office said something, or just speculation from the scar on his cheek, but whatever there was no sense in denying it.

"Yes, I am..."

"I see... There are a lot of Pelfe-born workers at our mine. Please don't misunderstand. I don't harbor any ill-will but I don't want to provide any unnecessary stimulus."

Pelfe bordered Wiltia, and had always strongly influenced its neighbor, bot politically and culturally, so when the annexation first occurred, Pelfe people were largely in favor.

However, when Wiltia committed and act of treachery to Pelfe, public opinion changed in an instant.

"Is that so..."

Lud understood and began to feel as if cold, heavy chains were cutting into his entire body."

"In that case--"

Before Lud could finish, Sven spoke up.

"In that case, please allow me to speak with the people directly!"

The general affairs chief tried to stop her but he could not oppose Sven's vaguely threatening look as she said, "If you tell us that the people won't accept it, the only thing we can do is to speak with them

directly, correct?"

With that, the two of them entered the miner's small break shack, close to the open mine.

"Excuse me please!"

The small shack overflowed with the stench of sweat, earth and tired men, but Sven's voice rang out.

"I have come from Tockerbrot, I am the waitress there. My name is Sven."

In her hands was the case filled with fragrant, fresh bread.

"I have refreshments for you all!"

It was just before lunch, so the laborers gazed hungrily at the case as though it contained treasure. Better yet, the beautiful Sven was carrying the delicious-looking bread and the combination erased any suspicions the men had.

"Ooooh!"

"Hey, little girl, can we have some?`"

"Amazing, I heard the rumors, but she's like a fairy..."

The men were immediately charmed by Sven and reached out for the bread.

"Here you go, please take as much as you want! *Grin* ♪"

Enthusiastic cheers erupted in the shack.

Until...

"Hey!"

While not very loud, the voice was deep.

The atmosphere in the room changed and everyone in the room froze and turned toward an elderly man sitting at a table in the back of the room.

"Nice to meet you, Mister...?"

"I'm Laurel, I'm the foreman here."

Laurel returned Sven's bright smile with a scowling look.

He appeared to be over fifty years old, and the strong muscles and deep scars from wrestling the earth gave him the look of a seasoned soldier.

"Who gave you permission to come here?"

Laurel glared at Sven with hard eyes like a water buffalo that would send a lion flying if provoked.

"We received permission from the man at the office."

Without shrinking back, Sven returned his look.

"That damned geezer does whatever he feels like... Get outta here, we don't want you here."

As though he was driving off a stray dog by saying, "If you don't get outta here, I'm dumping water on you, and then I'm gonna drive you off with the rod." Laurel waved his hand at Sven.

However, Sven wasn't like a dog. She was more like a wolf, and she looked him directly in the eyes.

"Please tell me why."

"It's bread from a Wiltian soldier; I don't know what he might have stuffed in there."

Lud didn't say anything.

he had fought no major battles in Pelfe.

But, his comrades had. He didn't doubt that Laurel had lost precious people at the hands of Wiltian soldiers.

"You're an awfully narrow-minded mole boss, aren't you?"

"What?!"

With a careless smile, Sven had insulted not just Laurel, but all the men at the mine.

It was as if she had tosses a stick of dynamite into a tanker filled to the brim with oil.

Mining was hard and dangerous work. The miners confronted cave-ins, lack of oxygen, and poisonous gas eruptions.

These men felt a strong sense of pride towards their work and their profession.

Sven had spit on their pride.

"Who you callin' a mole...?!"

She saw a raging fire on the face of Laurel, and all of the other miners as well.

"Oh, am I mistaken? Not a mole, but a worm? Perhaps a mole cricket?"

Her contemptuous smile poured more fuel on the fire. it flared higher, and began to change into a hell fire.

"This bitch! You better be read--"

"Hold you tongue!"

Sven's powerful yell silenced the uproar. Walking quickly, as if the floor was giving way under her feet, Sven approached Laurel.

A miner reached out to stop her but at Sven's glare, he retracted his hand.

"Let's see if you body is smarter than your brain." Sven suggested.

She ran her hands across the table near Laurel, brushing off the ash trays, bottles and glasses, and placed her elbow on the table.

"Shall we settle things like this?"

She had taken up an arm wrestling pose.

The stillness that dominated the shack was so overwhelming that Lud could almost hear the silence running through it.

"... *Pft*."

Someone snickered, and as if the signal had been given, there was a loud burst of laughter around the room.

"*Bwahahahaha*."

It was understandable. A delicate, lovely girl had challenged a giant like Laurel, who could wrestle three grown men with one hand, to an arm wrestling match.

"If I lose, then you all can do whatever you want to me." Sven added.

Suddenly, the men's laughing stopped.

"If I lose, I will let you use me however you want."

It was true that these men could be vulgar and disorderly, but they were still human. They weren't beasts that pounced on any woman they saw. However, Sven's suggestion almost seized their reason.

"Leave."

Laurel had not lost his head, and he was furious.

"Don't wreak further havoc here. Leave now. Do think an arm that looks like the stem of a rose is going to be any match for me?"

"Should I interpret that as a declaration of surrender, Mister Cowardly Mole?"

Ignoring the ultimatum, Sven's will to fight remained.

"Don't come crying to me."

With a sound like a hammer striking, Laurel placed his elbow on the table.

"Let's make this clear. The loser will obey the orders of the winner, right?"

"Do what you want!"

Laurel wasn't planning to treat Sven like a toy.

He hadn't fallen that far.

But, Sven's contempt had gone too far. Laurel would give her a painful lesson.

"Umph!"

At the signal, Laurel put just enough strength in his arm to knock this young girl down a peg or two.

It wasn't all of his strength. it was just enough to knock this small, young girl down a peg or two.

But, Sven's arm didn't move.

"What?!"

A look of surprise appeared on Laurel's face.

He knew how much strength he was using.

It was enough power to force a well-built adult into submission.

But, Sven's arm didn't budge, as if there was a pole running from her elbow on the table deep into the earth.

At that moment, fear began to show on Laurel's face.

It wasn't a fear of losing.

it was sheer terror of the young girl in front of him who suddenly looked like a strange creature.

"*Hehehehehehe*."

Sven smiled, as if she realized his desperation.

That smile was different from the one she showed Lud or her customers.

It was a smile filled with contempt - as if she was looking down at a weak, foolish person and laughing at him.

"... Okay, that's far enough."

As easily as if she was turning on a water faucet, Sven flicked her wrist and Laurel's arm was pushed down on to the table, his body rotated and he crashed to the floor.

No one said a word. it was an unbelievable and impossible spectacle.

"My, my, what happened? Is the wax down there still wet, or something?"

Standing up, Sven mocked Laurel as he crouched, holding onto his arm.

"Dang, that... stupid..."

"You are the stupid one. Make sure you keep your promise."

She cast a cold gaze at the men nearby.

The men looked frightened and said nothing.

They were grown men, trembling at a slender, young girl.

Some might hear this story and laugh at the miners for being cowardly, but anyone who witnessed it would think better of it.

Sven no longer appeared human.

She looked like the demon wolf in legends who devoured the entrails of the gods.

"Master, I did it. Now our contract is--"

"Sven!"

Lud slapped her as she turned around.

"What?"

"If you have to go this far, I don't want this contract. I don't want their business."

Lud wanted people to eat his bread willingly, happily and he would endure any hardship to this end. But Sven was using brute strength to pin them down, pry open their mouths and force bread down their throats.

This was no different from the cruelty of the Wiltian army that the miners detested.

"The only thing you've done is damage these men's pride."

Saying this, Lud knelt down in front of Laurel and pressed his forehead to the floor.

"I apologize."

He was prostrating himself, begging for the men's forgiveness.

What exactly was he apologizing for?

Perhaps for Sven's actions, or perhaps for the actions of the military.

He just had to apologize to them.

"... Master, stop, please stop!"

Sven tried to force Lud to stand but he ignored her and continued to press his head to the floor. Laurel and the other miners stared dumbfounded, unable to say a word.

"....."

Slowly getting up, Lud turned his back and said.

"Forgive us for causing trouble. If you'd like, please eat some bread... there's no... there's no poison in it."

Saying this with his back turned, Lud felt like his chest was being torn apart.

Lud had made his bread with milk, butter, chocolate chips, almond powder and walnuts. He had not and would never add a speck of poison.

"If you can't trust my words... then throw it away."

Lud left the small shack.

"Wait, Master!"

Frantic, Sven followed after him.

Lud's expression was dark, and he was enveloped in a sadness so heavy that he thought it might crush him and kill him.

Lud got into the truck without saying a word.

Usually Lud would open the passenger door for Sven first but today he climbed in and rested his head on the wheel in defeat.

Sven opened the passenger door on her own and sat next to him.

"U-Um... Master..."

Looking at Sven's distressed face, Lud's heart felt another blow.

He had no harsh words for Sven.

He understood that, in her own way, she was thinking about Lud and about the bakery.

But, he didn't have the energy to worry about Sven.

Silently, he tried to start the engine and after a low murmuring sound the engine stalled. The truck had been so well lately, and for it to stall now felt to Lud like mockery.

Bam!

Lud bashed the wheel.

He wasn't angry at Sven; in fact, he wasn't really angry at all.

He had thought that when he stopped being a soldier, he wouldn't have to hurt anyone anymore.

But he had done something caused pain and sadness.

CHAPTER 3
STONE

Sven and Lud returned to the bakery shop and opened it as the evening approached.

Sven cheerfully served customers as usual, and Lud silently baked bread.

The two didn't exchange a word.

They didn't know what to say to one another.

Very early the next morning, Sven was lying on the cot in the attic. She had spent the entire night thinking how to best approach Lud.

Among the hundreds of thousands of scenarios she thought up, the highest chance of success was still only fourteen percent.

"What should I do... I don't know..."

Ten days had passed since Lud had first said "Thank you" to her for bringing customers into the bakery.

She had been wrapped in euphoria then, but now she had no idea what to do.

Now it was time for work.

Lud was up and she could hear him working at the kiln downstairs.

"... I've got to get going."

Sven changed into her work clothes. It was an unforgivable crime to run away in the face of an enemy.

She couldn't abandon the field of battle.

But, her movements were sluggish, as if her legs were eaten away by rust.

As she opened the attic door and began to lower the ladder, she met Lud's eyes below.

"Huh?"

"Oh... M-Morning..."

Holding a tray of bread, Lud was standing aimlessly.

This was unexpected. Suddenly ambushed, Sven was unable to put up a proper resistance.

Lud called out to her.

"S-Sven!"

"Y-Yes!"

Sven's body jumped to attention. Was he going to fire her?

But he responded with a surprising question.

"I-I made something new, will you try it for me?!"

"Y... Yes."

Lud was forcing the edges of his mouth to twitch and convulse.

Was Lud trying with all of his might to smile?

Lud had also been agonizing over he could repair their relationship, and had mustered all his courage to speak to Sven.

"I tried baking regular bread dough with cookie dough around it. I thought that both textures would be fun and different."

Lud had come to the conclusion that if he kept the conversation on bread and work, then Sven wouldn't get offended.

"O-Okay, I see..."

She grabbed one of the new creations and took a bite.

The sweet cookie dough on the outside and the soft, fluffiness of the bread dough on the inside had a depth of flavor that Lud had increased by kneading butter into the dough.

Sven analyzed each component of the taste, compared it to the ideal chewiness she calculated based on data about human occlusal capacity, and arrived at the conclusion that the bread was delicious.

Sven observed, and was only able to judge the bread as being "delicious" based on her thorough calculations.

"... I'm sorry about yesterday." Lud said quietly.

"..... ?!"

"You were doing your best with everything you had, all for the sake of the bakery, and yet I slapped you... I am truly sorry. Will you... forgive me..." Lud asked.

Sven couldn't believe it.

She was his follower, his servant, and his possession.

She was frightened that if she offended Lud somehow, she would become unnecessary.

Yet, Lud was scurrying to repair his relationship with her.

It was a strange feeling.

She was confused, and at the same time, a loud and clattering sensation burst forth from the bottom of her heart.

"**……!**"

Without touching the upper section of her tongue in her mouth, and immeasurable amount of information rushed into Sven.

The sweet flavor of Lud's new creation suddenly spread through her mouth, and without thinking, she cried, "This is delicious!".

"Huh?"

"Th-this is very tasty! It's flaky, and fluffy, and soft, and flaky!"

She had said flaky twice. Sven never misspoke.

"That... and... yesterday I was the one in the wrong... I was overly assertive, and because of that I forced Master to experience something painful. If there is any way I can apologize, then.."

"That's not true! You did nothing wrong, Sven! It's because I'm a coward..."

"No, you're wrong, Master is..."

"No, you're wrong, I'm..."

The two stared at each other.

"It looks like we both screwed up, huh?"

A clumsy, wry smile appeared on Lud's face as he scratched his head.

"Master..."

It was strange. Earlier, Sven's heart had been frozen and her body felt weak and tired, but after seeing that Lud had forgiven her, strength surged through her body.

It was so much power that she could easily demolish an entire armored division.

"What have you decided to call this?" Sven asked.

"Well... I haven't thought about it. Since I made it to apologize to you, how about you think up a name?"

"Me?!"

It was an honor. Sven couldn't believe that she was being asked to give a name to something Lud had poured his heart and soul into.

"Umm.. well..."

The two different doughs rose at different rates, so there were lattice lines running over the bread's surface that reminded Sven of a fruit she had seen before.

"How does 'Pineapple Bread' sound?" she asked Lud.

"I get it... It does have that shape, doesn't it? But, I don't know, it kind of looks like an Mrk2."

The Mrk2 was a type of hand grenade that resembled the fruit of the South Seas.

"You don't like Pineapple Bread?"

"Not at all, it's interesting. Let's start selling it today!"

"Okay!"

Peak lunch time was over, and Lud's new bread had been well-received, although it was time-consuming to explain over and over that there wasn't any pineapple in the pineapple bread.

"Chomp, munch munch munch, gulp."

Jacob held his free milk tea in one hand and stuffed his mouth with pineapple bread with the other.

"Yeah, this is good."

"Right?"

Lud was taking a break and the two of them sat in the back of the bakery.

"It been three days since you've stopped by. Did something happen?"

"It's been busy at the shop, you know? My parents made me take a break from school to help out."

Recently there had been a large number of customers, in the repair shop and the young boy knew that the business wasn't in a position to turn down any work.

"It was awful. I can't believe there are still guys trying to pay with old Pelfe notes. That stuff is more worthless by the hour and they're trying to use? My mom had to run to the bank first thing this morning."

Just before the annexation, Pelfe had been experiencing an economic recession and was barely able to stay afloat by over-printing bills.

After annexation, Pelfe notes were exchanged for official Wiltia notes, but the exchange rate quickly spiraled downward, so unless you switched immediately, their value would keep plummeting. A Pelfe note that was enough to pay for lunch one day, wouldn't buy a coffee the next.

"Well, at least now crunch time is over, and you can rest a little--"

Crash!

The deafening sound of glass breaking came from the bakery.

"?!"

Jacob and Lud ran to the storefront, and saw that the front window to the bakery was broken, with shards of glass scattered about the inside of the store.

"What... in the world... shoot..."

The scattered pieces of glass had fallen on top of the bread on display.

A rock the size of a balled fist lay on the floor.

This wasn't an accident. Someone had thrown the rock through the bakery's front window.

"Wait, isn't that girl Milly from the church?"

Jacob pointed out the figure of a young girl running across the street.

He couldn't see her face, but there was no doubt it was her.

The distinctive way her long hair was tied behind her head was exactly the same as the girl who had showered Lud with abuse the other day.

"She's don something really nasty now..." Jacob was stunned.

Lud knew that Milly hated him, but he never thought she would go this far, and the realization made him feel more sadness than anger.

"....."

"Oh, Sven... You aren't hurt, are you? Could you please go get the broom and dust pan and --"

Lud had noticed Sven standing behind him, but his words were cut

off.

"*Unforgivable...*"

It was a tone of voice that made those who heard it tremble, and even a former soldier like Lud, who had survived countless scenes of carnage and bloodshed, unconsciously stiffened up at the sound of it.

"Master... Pardon my request, but it would be alright if I took a break right now?"

"Uh, um, ah... Y-yeah. G-go ahead..."

Sven was an employee, and Lud was her employer.

Normally, he would have said no and asked her to stay and clean up, but the frightening power inside her made that impossible.

"In that case, please excuse me."

Sven flashed a sudden, beaming smile and, picking up the rock that lay at her feet, she headed out of the store.

"Lud... Lud?"

Jacob tugged at Lud's sleeve.

"Who's gonna serve the customers? If you're here the customers might run away again."

"Oh, right!"

Lud looked at Jacob with a pleading expression.

"Please, Jacob!"

"Don't ask a kid to help!"

Grabbing Jacob's shoulders, Lud begged him as though he was asking Jacob to participate in a life-or-death battle.

Masking her violent rage, Sven held the forced smile she had shown Lud until she left the bakery.

Unforgivable……!

A dark flame welled up from deep inside Sven.

She was now at her limit.

Tockerbrot was Lud Langart's sanctuary, and as his devoted servant, she now needed to defend it as she would a military position.

An attack had been mounted. Worse, it had made the bread which Lud had taken great pains to create, unsaleable.

Exiting the bakery, Sven immediately went after Milly.

The girl running away was already a pinkie-sized speck in the distance.

"Target sighted, locked... restricting all functionality to thirty percent power, duration: three hundred seconds."

Sucking in air lightly in a small voice, a countdown began.

"Drei... Zwei... Eins... Null!"

In an instant, Sven vanished.

Her movements were already faster than the human eye could detect.

She ran, and ran, and ran.

After throwing the rock through the window, Milly took off, weaving her way through town.

She had been born and raised in Organbaelz.

She knew the back streets and secret passages where someone like Lud would get lost.

There was no way he would catch up to her.

Serves you right, Wiltian military scum!

As she ran, a smile appeared on her face.

Milly prayed every day. She prayed with all her heart.

Every day, without fail, she prayed for Wiltia's annihilation.

Ever since she was taught that God had once destroyed an entire village of evil people in one night, she had prayed to God.

But, no matter how much she prayed, Wiltia wasn't destroyed. That bakery didn't go away, either.

In fact, customers had started to flock there.

I'll never forgive them for taking my dad away!

So Milly made a move herself.

"Haa, haa, haaa..."

In a back alley, she stopped running and caught her breath.

It was strange but she didn't feel any better at all.

Her actions were just. it was divine punishment. So why did she feel so awful?!

"Ug... Ugh."

She knew the truth. What she did hadn't changed anything.

She knew that it wasn't the baker's fault, either.

But, if she didn't hate someone, she would fall apart.

"... Shoot."

Milly spoke as if she was suffocating.

It was frustrating. The world, fate, and her own powerlessness; all of it was frustrating.

"It looks like you forgot something."

"Huh?!"

Milly whipped around and standing in front of her was the waitress from the bakery.

She was smiling. But her smile looked like it was painted, as if on some kind of elaborate doll.

"This is yours, is it not, Fräulein?"

The waitress raised her right hand, and she was holding the rock Milly had thrown.

How had she followed her? Milly had tried her best to use a path that someone new in town shouldn't be able to follow.

Pop... grind... snap...

Milly heard a grating sound.

It was the rock in the waitress's hand cracking.

Crack.

It broke apart like a biscuit.

"My, my, my, my, it seems pretty fragile doesn't it? I tried to hold it delicately, like an egg."

Sven played with the pebble fragments in her palm.

As she did, the pebbles were quickly reduced to gravel, as though by a drill.

"Oh... Eh?"

The waitress was smiling.

A bright smile, like she was enjoying herself, but it wasn't a smile that came from affection, nor did it express any benevolence.

It was the sort of smile a carnivore made after capturing its prey. Perhaps even the smile a carnivore made when trapped its prey, not to eat, but for torture.

"You need to apologize and pay for the damages. All. Of. Them."

While she scattered the remains of the rock in her palm, now nothing more than sand, Sven drew her face closer to Milly's.

"Eek!"

Sven looked at her with murderous intent.

She looked ready to kill another person.

And not only just kill. It was a rage that could only envelope someone ready to make the other person struggle even more, to torture and even make her opponent regret having been born.

It wasn't something that a fourteen year old girl could endure.

Milly was paralyzed with fright, and locking eyes with Sven, unable to even blink, she began to cry.

She couldn't stop her own trembling, shivering, and the chattering of her teeth.

Children are by definition immature, in both body and mind. They lack a sense of judgement and the ability to take responsibility for their actions.

But even when a crime is committed by a child, there are damages.

So how should amends be made?

Sven decided to demand it from this child's guardian.

"Excuse me!"

They were at Marlene's church, outside of town.

"hello, who is it? Oh, Sven... Huh, Milly?!"

Seeing Sven holding Milly by the collar like a captured cat, Marlene let out a small cry of surprise.

The suspended girl was terrified and didn't say a word.

Sven had inflicted no physical harm on her but Milly was clearly her prisoner.

Abusing prisoners was prohibited by international law. Sven had come to hand Milly over and demand an apology from Marlene, Milly's guardian.

"Please come inside."

While Marlene was calming Milly down, Sven waited in the chapel with tea that Marlene had prepared for her.

The tea leaves were cheap. They smelled musty.

And the way it was prepared was unacceptable.

Even dunking the delicious madeleines that Lud had baked in tea like this would not improve the flavor.

Sven took a single sip before returning it to its saucer.

Marlene joined her.

"I am extremely sorry for the trouble that girl has caused, I will... I will absolutely compensate you for the window and the bread she destroyed."

After Sven told her the details of Milly's behavior, Marlene promised to pay for the damages.

Sven knew that the church did not have much money.

"You don't need to do that. At any rate, I am sure that Master will simply overlook this."

Sven could easily imagine Lud saying that himself.

This was exactly why Sven felt that Milly's actions were unforgivable.

Lud was always considerate of others, and Milly had trampled all over his kindness.

"How exactly can I make amends for her actions..."

Marlene was thinking that while Milly had cursed at Lud before, this time her actions were malicious.

"In that case..."

Don't come near Lud ever again.



Catching herself before she said it aloud, Sven stopped.

"Yes?"

"No, it's nothing."

Marlene asked her again, and Sven immediately evaded the question.

Lud wouldn't want that, Sven thought it would probably make him unhappy.

"I understand that this will sound like I'm making excuses for her, but... It's just, Milly has a complicated story--"

"I know." Sven replied, bluntly.

Lud had told Sven Milly's story two nights ago.

Milly's father was a militiaman.

Pelfe had been the victim of a long military invasion from the larger August Federation to the north.

Several years ago, August was an imperial monarchy but after the working people renounced the monarchy, there was a revolution.

It was supposed to become a "Nation of Freedom and Equality" but instead it turned into a military dictatorship, and under the guise of "liberating" its neighboring countries, it began to invade them.

August's policy was that even the people are a resource for the country.

Citizens had no freedom of thought or belief, and they were prohibited from owning private property.

The adults and children of invaded countries were sent to the frigid edges of the north under under the pretext of land reclamation and

development.

As this continued, not only were the adults sent, but even the children were banished to suffer that unfortunate way of life.

The people of Pelfe rose up against August, and Milly's father fought in the militia.

In order to make Pelfe a place where his child could live in peace, he went off to battle, and never returned. Then--

"You know the story, don't you? Pelfe could not maintain its independence and chose to become an autonomous region of Wiltia rather than be occupied by August."

If they were unable to keep up the appearance of a sovereign nation, at least they would protect their pride as a people.

But for citizens of Pelfe, it was a bitter decision.

Because they needed a buffer against the August Federation, Wiltia accepted Pelfe's proposal, brought them into Wiltia by annexation, and joined them to fight against the Federation.

"Wiltia gave format recognition to the Pelfe Militia. Since Milly's father was killed in action, he was mourned as a soldier who fought for Wiltia, and Milly should have been given a bereaved family's annual pension." Marlene's voice was soft and sad.

But, Milly was abandoned by Wiltia.

When Sven had heard the reason from Lud, she was stunned.

Her father's remains were never found. They didn't pay her the pension because he might have fled the front-lines, and was considered nothing more than a missing person. That was what Milly was told.

It was absurd logic. In a lengthy war with artillery fire from tanks

and cannons, aerial bombardments from airships, and battles against infantry and Hunter units, it was rare for there to be remains of all the fallen soldiers.

But the truth was that after the war, amid budget cuts, Wiltia had a hard time providing insurance to their own soldiers, so money was too scarce to give to the militia.

"For Milly, it was as though her father had been declared a coward. They stole the money she was owed, and her father's pride as well."

So Milly despised Wiltia.

It was far too sad for her father to be treated as a deserter while body lay dead on a battlefield somewhere.

Her father was tricked and killed by Wiltia.

If she didn't blame Wiltia, it was far too cruel and heartbreaking for her to bear.

Sven understood, but it was still unfair for her to blame Lud.

And, Lud put up with this treatment.

On the way back to the bakery after visiting the church that night, Lud told Sven, "If that girl can find the willpower to continue to live by hating me, then that's fine."

He said it with a lonesome look on his face.

"Even still... if someday Milly eats my bread and tells me that it tastes good, nothing will make me happier."

Lud believed that day would come.

He believed that with time, even if the scars from the past could never completely heal, they would be able to help each other in some way.

"I understand how much hardship you have endured, however..."

Now, at the church with Marlene, Sven remembered what happened yesterday at the mine.

How hard it must have been for Lud to insist to the miners that there was no poison in his bread, and tell them that they could throw out what he had put everything into baking.

And then how painful it must have been for Lud to have the child he hoped to help throw a rock at his bakery.

"Does that give her the right blame someone trying frantically to keep his above water? He doesn't ask anyone for help... she is cruel... to him..."

If Lud said the word, she would massacre all of the people that would harm him.

But Lud definitely didn't want that.

He wouldn't even dodge a rock thrown at him.

As if that was his atonement for killing other people.

It was war and those were his orders. It was patriotism; killing for the sake of his homeland.

Now Sven laid her head down in sorrow, and made a weeping sound.

But tears didn't fall. Sven couldn't cry.

Even if she could exude water to moisten her eyes, Sven, couldn't secrete excess liquids in response to her emotions. *Yet.*

Marlene looked at her and asked, "You... You love Lud, don't you?"

"-- What?!"

Sven lifted her head up with a look of shock.

"Absolutely not! I could never be so insolent!"

Sven was Luke's shield, his armor, and his sword. The purpose behind her entire existence was to do what was necessary for him.

"Please don't say such things! I'm nothing more than the Master's tool..."

As Sven spoke, she realized her voice was shaking.

A tool should not fall in love with its owner.

But...

"You feel Lud's pain stronger than you feel your own because he's precious to you, isn't that right?"

Marlene's eyes seemed to peer into the depths of Sven's heart.

But Sven was sure that Marlene had watched her sincerely trying her best to help this awkward man, and believed Sven must have an abnormal amount of affection for him.

Her words stirred emotions in Sven that she wasn't aware she had.

"... I will be taking my leave."

Sven stood up but stumbled, grabbing the edge of one of the chapel pews.

"Are you okay, Sven?"

Marlene reached out to steady her, but Sven straightened quickly and moved away.

If she was touched right now, that alone would be enough to make her collapse.

Managing to walk alone, she left the church as quickly as possible.

"You're wrong... I'm only... For the captain..."

Sven muttered to herself in a daze as she walked down the street.

All she wanted was for Lud to be happy.

But she hadn't done a single thing for Lud, and she was seeking her own happiness instead.

It was impossible. Her priorities were wrong.

She staggered and finally collapsed, without the energy to stand up.

Sven didn't need sleep.

She was unconscious only during her maintenance hibernation and even then, she could control her on and off states at will.

But now Sven lost consciousness, as if she had fallen asleep.

When she awoke, in the middle of pitch-black darkness, her body remained asleep.

It's a strange feeling, Sven thought.

This is what dreaming must feel like.

Nonsense...

She couldn't move her mouth to whisper, so she spoke inside her head.

Dreams were something that humans experienced. She wasn't human.

And yet, why was she in this situation? She wondered if her thoughts were abnormal and her brain was malfunctioning.

Then unexpectedly a person called out to her.

"Oh, this is a surprise. I had thought that girl's descendants disappeared from here long ago."

Sven's sense of sight wasn't working, nor was her sense of smell, touch, or hearing, but she definitely perceived the voice.

It was less like a voice, and more like a wave streaming through her.

As if the warm, bright light of the sun's rays has been converted into sound.

"Hm... but, it appears that you were created slightly differently. Humans do some outlandish things. Using such a method to give birth to someone with that girl's blood in their veins."

Sven had no idea what it was saying, and seemed to laugh as she thought this.

There was no blood inside her.

"No, no, that's not what I mean."

The voice admonished Sven, as it read her thoughts.

There was no malice in the voice. It seemed to be trying to explain the situation.

"Well, that's alright. You still aren't aware of it. There's no need to talk about it now, is there? But, a contract is a contract. You have to that."

Right? Sven had no idea what the voice meant.

What exactly was this voice? Sven wondered if she was indeed malfunctioning.

"Sooner or later, you will know everything. No, it doesn't matter... I

will be watching with great interest who you choose in the end."

The voice faded away.

Sven's consciousness once again began to sink back into the depths of darkness.

"Let us meet again, Far away my..."

Before Sven could make out the final words, she again lost consciousness.

Inside of Tockerbrot

The bakery had closed for the day and Sven still hadn't returned.

Customers who had come to see Sven left dissatisfied, but thanks to Jacob's sociability, Lud was able to manage until it was time to close the shop.

Jacob had gone home and Lud sat alone, staring at the broken window, now sealed up and covered with a sheet. He felt anxious as he waited for Sven's return.

Lud knew Sven, and although he didn't anything had happened to her, he knew that she had a hard time restraining herself when she set her mind on something.

She looks calm, but has an explosive personality. Kind of like...

He thought back to his favorite unit that he had piloted in the military.

All the Hunter Units in his squad were equipped with an on-board pilot-support AI, but Lud's AI, Avei, was quite the worrier. When he suffered and injury, it would loudly request to run vitals checks.

When Lud assured Avei that the wounds weren't serious, it would admonish him. "Human bodies can suffer severe damage without being aware of it." and list all such incidents in its records.

That's strange... I'm worried about Sven, and yet all I can think about is that AI...

A wry smile appeared on his face.

He glanced at the clock. It was night.

Lud didn't chase after Sven earlier because he couldn't leave the bakery, but now he had to search for her.

"Hm?"

There was someone standing at the door.

"Mister Lud Langart?"

It wasn't Sven. A middle-aged postman in a navy blue uniform opened the door slightly and called into the bakery.

"You have a letter."

The postman passed a brown envelope to Lud and left the shop with a bow.

Who could this be from?

No one knew where he was.

There were two pieces of paper inside the envelope.

"?!"

When he read the first page, he thought it was a joke.

He looked at the second page.

"... Haha, hahahahaha!"

Lud started to laugh.

He couldn't believe it, there was no way this could be true.

"Hahaha... ha... ha.. *sniff, sniff*..."

He was so happy, he was on the verge of tears.

Lud put the letter in his chest pocket and dashed out of the store.

He had to tell Sven immediately.

She would be delighted. He knew she would be even more ecstatic than he was.

He wanted to share his happiness with her.

Share? No! Together, their happiness would be doubled.

Although the Thanksgiving Festival was still a ways off, they might dance hand and hand in the streets.

Lud ran.

He had to find the red-eyed, silvered hair waitress of Tockerbrot.

Tockerbrot was on the main road in town, and three streets over was the repair shop that Jacob's grandfather ran.

There was a large shack of sheet metal with a house attached, and in the storage lot next to it was a mountain-high heap of rusted steel drums and scrap.

"Anyway for now, just sit somewhere over there, I'll bring over

some tea... wait, stop! There's oil spilling out, it'll get your clothes dirty!"

Inside the workshop that was permeated with the smell of iron and oil, sat Sven and Jacob.

Ten minutes earlier, on his way home from the bakery, Jacob ran into Sven.

He had planned to chew her out for running off like that, but when he saw her pale face and her dress covered in mud and leaves, he called out to her anxiously.

"What's wrong Sven?! Did something happen?"

As Sven turned to look back at Jacob, her movements were slow and lifeless.

"Jacob..."

After she woke up, Sven had tried to stagger back to the bakery.

But as she got close to the shop, her legs stopped moving.

"Lud's not mad at your for skipping out on work. Don't worry, if anything he's worried about you. Go back so he can relax, okay?"

Sven knew that was true.

"Sven... Did something happen?"

That's not it.

"I'm scared... To see Master..."

Marlene's words had caused her to malfunction. No, they had opened her eyes.

She existed to make Lud happy, and to help Lud realize his dreams.

She was Lud's servant, nothing more than a tool.

That was the meaning to her life, her reason for existence.

In spite of this, she wanted to make Lud her own.

Sven didn't know what she might do if she saw Lud now.

She was terrified of herself, and scared to see Lud.

"Scared... You mean scared of his face?" Jacob didn't understand.

"That's not it!"

Sven unconsciously raised her voice.

"It's true that to someone else, Master's face might be frightening, but for me, a face that charming... no, never mind."

Sven realized that she was about to blurt out something strange again.

She didn't understand anything anymore. She felt dizzy.

"Hey, come over to my house if like. It's close by."

Still not ready to see Lud, Sven nodded her head.

Now, Jacob made them both coffee.

"Here. Unlike what you and Lud serve, this is the instant stuff, but think of it as medicine to warm up your body."

The coffee Jacob handed Sven in a chipped mug was very bitter, and although there was no medicine in the coffee, it gradually began to soak into Sven, and calm her down.

It appeared that this workshop had been used to service a piece of heavy machinery a few days ago.

"You know, I didn't trust you at first." Jacob began, sitting down next to Sven and taking a sip of coffee.

"I thought that maybe you were trying to trick or cheat Lud."

"Trick...?" Sven asked, not understanding.

"Isn't it normal to think that? I was the one who suggested hiring a waitress, but who knows what might happen in that bakery on the brink of collapse, with such a frightening looking owner? It wasn't certain that you'd even be paid."

Jacob laughed cheerfully, and there wasn't any contempt for Lud on his face.

he sounded like he was the delinquent older brother-figure talking about his partner in crime.

"Not only that, a beautiful girl like you shows up and even says that you'll take the job no matter how much it pays. Honestly... it would be impossible not to think that you were plotting something."

Sven had noticed that when Jacob thought she couldn't hear, he would pester Lud, asking, "Is there anything strange about that girl?"

"If that was the case, I'd never allow it to happen."

Some people might be confused about why they would need a young boy's permission to do anything, but Jacob was completely serious.

"But instead, you have been working yourself to the bone for that good-natured sucker. It looks like you're just a kind person... so, thank you."

Jacob bowed his head.

"What are you saying?! I'm just doing m job, that's all..."

It was strange. Sven was happy when Lud thanked her, but when

this boy bowed his head to her, a complex feeling rose inside her.

It was like she was fidgety and her whole body felt itchy.

This boy was Lud's friend and shouldn't have been anything more than a Class 2 Safeguard Target - a companion to Lud, the Highest-Priority Safeguard Target - whose existence and well-being had to be taken into account in order to prevent any negative impact on Lud.

On the battlefield, he would just be a civilian, one Sven would be coded to keep out of harm's way as much as possible.

And yet Sven's chest felt like it was burning.

"... Jacob, how did you become friends with Master?"

They were friends despite their difference in age and Lud's intimidating manner. It couldn't be just because they were both Wiltian.

"Hmm... We first met when he brought his hunk-of-junk truck to the workshop, I think. I thought he was crazy to drive a thing like that."

A foreign, scary-looking former soldier turned baker.

Jacob's first impression of Lud wasn't good.

"I didn't like him. You know, I didn't like Wiltians, or soldiers."

"Why... After all, aren't you..."

Jacob had blonde hair with blue eyes - a distinct trait of the people of Wiltia.

He might have been born in Organbaelz, but he looked Wiltian.

Because the two countries had shared a border, there were many Wiltian-Pelfish people.

"Actually, I've never seen my father but I do know he was Wiltian. So it's true that I'm a true-blooded Wiltian."

"Was he killed in the war?" Sven asked.

Sven feared the she was forcing him talk about something painful, but the reality was even more depressing.

"No, but I don't really know anything about him. My mom was a prostitute."

Jacob said this so lightly that Sven thought that there might be a different meaning to the word, but she had understood him correctly.

Man Pelfish people crossed the border and went to work in Wiltia to escape Pefle's long economic recession.

Jacob's mother was one of these people.

But Jacob's mother was a young girl struggling to survive, and began working at a brothel operated by the military as a licensed prostitute.

Then, she became pregnant with Jacob.

The town's people spread rumors when the girl returned with a large belly after having told everyone she was going to Berun to become a café waitress. Gossip continued after Jacob was born and he was teased by the other children.

"That's why I didn't like Lud. When I heard he was from the Wiltia military, I thought for sure that he was a cold-blooded, heartless man."

"Then, why? If that's the case then..."

Jacob continued his story.

One day, about a month after he met Lud, Jacob was bothered by his classmates at school and it grew into a huge Jacob-versus-all

fight.

Jacob soon fell to the ground and was kicked and stepped on, unable to put up a fight.

Then, Lud appeared.

"Oh man, when Lud showed up, everything changed right away! Suddenly this expressionless giant was standing there glaring at us. The other kids were scared and ran off."

"Ohh. That was probably..."

Something came into Sven's mind.

For the most part, Wiltians are stout and sturdy, but Lud was particularly well-built. In addition, his long years of military service had given him a sullen look, and when he was nervous his face would stiffen up.

"I think he was trying to break up the fight..."

"I wondered what he had in mind making such a grisly face, but that's just his face, right? But I seriously thought he was going to kill me."

The only reason that Jacob didn't run away with the rest of the children was because he couldn't stand, so Lud took him back to his shop to treat his wounds.

Even then, Jacob still didn't trust Lud.

He was a Wiltian solder. Just like the guy who skipped town after knocking up his mother.

He hated even being touched by Lud, but he was terrified that Lud might hit him, so he let Lud bandage him up.

While he did, Jacob scanned the inside of the shop and noticed all the bread on display. It looked so delicious that Jacob wondered if it

had really been baked by the man in front of him.

"Want some...?"

Lud handed him a piece of bread.

Jacob was on the verge of stretching out his hand for the bread when his pride awoke.

Do you think I'd ever accept charity from the likes of a Wiltian soldier?!

Jacob took out his few precious copper coins and thrust them at Lud.

"I haven't sunk low enough to accept charity! I'll pay for it!"

He gathered up all the guts and pride he had in these words.

Jacob didn't care if he as going to get hit. It was the final line he had to prevent anyone from crossing.

"What do you think Lud did when I said that?" Jacob asked Sven.

"I don't know..."

"It was pretty unexpected you know."

Jacob bent over giggling to himself.

"They guy started to cry. And he grabbed my hand and said 'Thank you. Thank you. You're my first customer!'"

Sven was amazed.

That meant that Lud had not drawn in a single customer since the bakery opened the month before.

it also meant that Lud had cried in joy at his first customer, even though it was a young boy who was there against his will.

"Oh my..."

Sven placed her hand on her forehead, at a lass for words.

"Well I ate some. Some of the bread, I mean. And, man... the guy's bread is incredible. When I told him it was delicious, he started crying and thanking me all over again!"

The next day Jacob returned and peeked into the kiln area of Tockerbrot.

There he saw Lud covered in sweat, baking bread hour after hour for customers that might never come.

"You know, m mother won't tell me what type of person my father as. That might be why I thought all Wiltian soldiers were cold-blooded brutes, but I learned that there are guys like Lud, too. I thought maybe my dad might actually be a person like him. It's probably not true but..."

Jacob put the palm of his hand over his chest.

"Lud - he can be an idiot, but he's straight-forward and works as hard as he can."

The smiling young boy sounded proud and determined.

"I now know for certain that half the blood that runs through these veins also runs through someone like him."

Jacob's face had an air of nobility and grandeur.

The strength to overcome the wounds he suffered from his unfortunate birth and the pain of his early childhood had become his personality.

"Well in short, before he's a Wiltian, or a former soldier, or whatever, that guy's just a really kind idiot, right?... That's why I became his friend. After all, I'm a nice guy, you know?"

Jacob awkwardly scratched his head in embarrassment.

"Lud's foolishly good-natured and kind. That's why I'm sure he's worried about you. So go back and see him okay?"

"... Okay."

The mug in Sven's hands had grown cold but something warm started to grow inside her chest.

She realized that Lud had an outstanding friend who saw his good side clearly.

"Hey Jacob, is someone here?"

Standing in the doorway was the owner, Jacob's grandfather.

The black in his hair was overwhelmed by the white, and he wore cross scowl. It was difficult to believe that any of this man's blood was inside Jacob, who always had a smile on his face.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Sven and I am the waitress at Tockerbrot."

Sven politely introduced herself, but as soon as Jacob's grandfather heard the name of the bakery, his face grew even more distorted.

"Jacob, have you been going to that store again?"

"Grandpa, you don't have to say it like that! What has Lud ever done to you?"

"Quiet!" He turned to Sven. "You can get out of here! This is my workshop!"

Jacob's grandfather hated Lud.

Considering his grandson's origins, it wasn't hard to believe.

"I apologize, please excuse me..."

Sven obediently got up to leave. As she did, a small machine part caught her eye.

Sven recognized it. It was a part from a cylinder joint, made of cheap aluminum, and a piece this shoddy could only mean one thing.

"Excuse me sir... What is this?"

Sven asked, picking up the part and showing it to Jacob's grandfather.

"That?! Don't go touching stuff you shouldn--"

"Answer the question!"

Sven cut him off with a cold voice filled with anger.

Both the old man and Jacob cowered.

"This is... this is the part from a T-3 II's transmission. Why is there something like this here? Explain yourself!" Sven demanded.

It was part for a weapon used by the August Federation that Sven had fought against many times called the "Beast of the North".

She knew it well. She had smashed and scattered these weapons and had seen what they looked like inside.

"T-3 II... Sven, what's that?"

"They comprised the main part of the August Federation's tank forces... Why would a town in Wiltia-owned Pelfe have something like this?"

"I-I don't know! Don't make false accusations!"

Sweat appeared on the old man's forehead. He wasn't really a bad man. He was just a civilian who didn't know anything. Even if he tried to hide the truth, he wouldn't be able to deceive Sven.

"I don't know... All I was told was that they needed maintenance for some heavy machinery"

Sven looked directly at the old man, but he wouldn't meet her gaze.

Sven's voice again grew violent.

"Stop your useless excuses! Even if it was brought here with all of its main armaments stripped off, there's no way you could mistake that for a simple construction machinery!"

Even a child being questioned about some mischief could come up with a better excuse.

"Grandpa, why are you servicing tanks? It can't be...?"

Jacob's voice shook as if he couldn't believe what he was saying.

When there is a dispute between two major powers, both countries exhaust their own resources, and a third country swoops in to reap the benefits.

They give weapons to those inside who are dissatisfied with current rule and teach them to fight. These dissidents believe they have justice on their side and are manipulated into becoming terrorists.

Jacob's grandfather was contracted to service a weapon supplied to terrorists in Pelfe from the August Federation.

This small machine part was an irrefutable piece of evidence. Claiming that he had no idea what he was working on would not help.

"You've done something quite foolish, haven't you? Aiding the enemy is a serious crime. The worst case would be the death penalty. Civilians should stay quiet and keep out of things that they don't understand."

"They raped my daughter! Is what I'm doing any different?!" the

old man whined, sinking to his knees. But Sven was unmoved.

"That is something you'll have to settle with those who come to take you."

A person's feelings don't matter to the colossal beast that was the nation state.

But few people understood this.

A war can start with the firing of a single bullet. And yet, to end a war, sometimes many thousands of soldiers firing millions of bullets aren't enough.

"Sven... Is Grandpa going to be arrested? Me and Mom, too...?"

Jacob war near tears.

"I won't allow that to happen, Jacob." Sven replied.

If anything happened to Jacob, Lud would be devastated.

If the terrorists acted, it would also put Tockerbrot in jeopardy. That was something Sven had to prevent at all costs.

"Jacob, please call one of the military installations, give them this identification code, and act like you've been tricked. Play the victim any way you can."

Sven quickly jotted down a ten-digit number and passed the paper to Jacob.

It was the identification code Lud used when he was in the military.

Sven predicted that the military would believe the message came from Lud and respond leniently. There was no glory in taking the head of an old man who had been used.

And that wasn't the only problem.

"Alright then, Mister..."

Jacob's grandfather was aware of his own folly, and looked as if he had aged ten years as Sven interrogated him.

"Who introduced you to the people who brought the tank here?"

Sven pressed the old man for answer without her bright red eyes blinking once.

Jacob's grandfather had just been used, and he clearly wasn't a member of a terrorist group.

There was someone who knew the old man's feelings; someone who had lived in town for long enough to take advantage of him without raising suspicion - an actual spy must be here in town.

CHAPTER 4
MONSTER

Meanwhile, Lud had left to search for Sven, and thinking she had probably barged into the church in her rage, he headed there first.

Sven got carried away when she was angry, so it was likely she was causing trouble for Marlene.

The thought of Sven rampaging through the church made Lud's face pale.

He rushed to his truck and turned the key, but the engine responded with a faint, rumbling sound and wouldn't start.

With one final pop, it went silent.

Why at a time like this? Lud wanted to hurl abuse at the truck.

Instead he got out and began to run.

Lud took a back road that wasn't in use. It was pitch black outside, but compared to the night marches back in the military, this was easy. The ten-minute drive up the beaten road took about thirty minutes on foot.

Then he stopped.

A familiar feeling ran down Lud's spine.

He sensed the presence of someone, and felt a mixture of fear and hostility.

The intuition he had forged in the military informed him of this presence, even after two years of civilian life.

He crouched down to keep out of sight and used all his senses.

There was someone there! Some men... carrying weapons. There were three... No, five of them.

They weren't moving away but they were fidgeting as if they couldn't settle down.

Looks like guard duty... What are they guarding?

Lud suspected that these men were not soldiers but knew how to fight.

They were possibly armed punks but definitely just amateurs without formal military training.

Or thieves? No, Lud didn't think so. Those types were more cunning. They would know that the church had nothing worth stealing.

But Lud felt uneasy. It was precisely because of this precognitive ability to sense what was ahead of him that allowed Lud to survive as he had up to this point.

Without making a sound, almost without disturbing the air itself, Lud cautiously advanced, reaching the church.

There was no one around, but Lud took precautions and waited until the moon disappeared behind the clouds before he climbed through the window and inside the church.

"....."

The chapel looked the same as always. It was completely dark, but otherwise nothing was out of the ordinary.

Lud crept silently across the floor like a cat. There were no signs of a struggle.

"... What's this?" "... Tea?"

One one of the pews sat a mug of unfinished tea that had long gone cold.

Lud tried to silently pick up the mug but it tipped and the tea poured onto the floor, leaving a pool of brown liquid.

Lud decided to find Marlene and tell her about the men outside the church. But he also needed to apologize to her for sneaking in and dirtying her floor.

Just then, the moon peeked out between a break in the clouds, and bathed the chapel in a pale blue light.

Lud felt as if he was at the bottom of a deep ocean, and unthinkly looked down at the spilt tea.

"?!"

The tea was flowing towards the altar.

Given how old and decrepit the church was, it was no surprise that the floor was warped and uneven.

What was strange was that as the tea reached the altar, it disappeared, as if sucked in.

Lud tried quietly pressing the area between the altar and the floor with his finger, when he noticed there was a slight crack.

Lud didn't want to think about it. Just thinking about it was awful.

But Lud had spent most of his teenage years as a soldier, so his thoughts could only work out one answer to what this meant.

Lud tried to push the alter with his shoulder.

The alter moved and underneath was a space just big enough fit a single coffin.

But inside was a stockpile of firearms.

"This is... An AK21 assault rifle! Why are these here?"

The AK21 was the rifle of choice for the infantry of the August Federation, but this model was from weapon's previous generation.

It was out-of-date but you could still kill someone with it.

Lud had blurted out the question, but there was only one possible answer.

Since ancient times, churches and other religious buildings were well-suited as hiding places.

It was something Lud had seen often during the war.

This church must be some sort of base for an irregular military.

"Mister Lud?"

A voice called and when he turned around, he saw Marlene.

It had been two years since Lud had left the military but he still had the instincts of a soldier.

During that time, he fervently tried to forget his past and live his life as a baker. However, in an abnormal situation, the old, ingrained habits in his body would pull him back to his time as a soldier.

But the demands of his body were suppressed by his thoughts, which aligned more with his wishes.

This is wrong. She isn't an enemy.

Despite the fact that there was no way this could be the case.

Lud completely let down his guard. He even started to tell Marlene "good evening".

Marlene shot a bullet from her handgun into Lud's laughably defenseless stomach.

It was pathetic. A comedic tragedy.

When Lud regained consciousness, he was sitting on a chair in the dark.

He couldn't remember exactly what had happened.

All that he knew was that he was in a dark room, tied to a splinter-covered, old chair, and that he had been shot in his side.

"Umph... U-ugh..."

Blood oozed from the wound. The bleeding wasn't severe, but he couldn't ignore it.

With a click, the lock turned and the door opened.

Light entered the room for a moment before the door closed and it was dark again.

Someone walked past Lud and lit the lamp behind him.

"Hehehe... What a pitiful looking creature you are now, Mister Silver Wolf."

He recognized the voice and the laugh.

Standing there was Marlene.

"I thought you would be more surprised."

Marlene looked a little bit disappointed.

Another man in Lud's situation might last out, saying that he was betrayed on tricked, or he might try to appeal to Marlene's heart by saying how much he had trusted her, but Lud had been raised on the

battlefield.

"I just don't show it on my face."

A soldier always prepares for the worst-case scenario and knows that anything can happen.

Lud was made up of forty percent pessimism and sixty percent pragmatism. He kept his optimism as a secret ingredient.

"So I guess this makes you a member of that Pelfish militant group?"

Lud's tone didn't reveal any despair or fear; he spoke as if he was pointing out that Marlene enjoyed football when she was a student.

"We're the Pelfe Liberation League."

Marlene's voice was cold, and something hard pressed against the back of Lud's neck.

Lud knew it was the barrel of a gun.

"For how long?"

"From the beginning. A lovely sister, bravely taking care of a group of poor, wretched children... It's effective, is it not?"

"Then the children... just a cover? No... just props?"

"Isn't it obvious? Why else would I look after the brat of some traitorous Wiltian supporter?"

A traitor's brat. The daughter of the Wiltia-supporting militiaman. Milly "I see."

There wasn't any particular emotion in Lud's voice.

He wasn't trying to act cool. He was disinterested. He sounded as though he just wanted to confirm the facts.

"Do you have any idea what Wiltia's colonization policy has done?!"

Marlene seemed impatient when Lud didn't give the reaction she hoped for, and began answering questions Lud hadn't asked.

"Last I heard, it was annexed, not colonized." Lud said, as though he was simply correcting her misinformation.

The two words meant something completely different under international law.

"Hmph! So that makes Wiltia our benevolent ruler, is that it?"

This time Lud's answer appeared to be the one Marlene wanted.

Marlene continued as if she was trying to convince the arrogant Wiltian of the crimes he had committed.

"We lost our pride..."

Wiltia had employed many Pelfish people in the top levels of Pelfe's ruling government to avoid rebellion among the subjects.

They did this because they did not want to turn the population into guerilla fighters, but that plan backfired.

Soon the Pelfish people thought that if they wagged their tails and catered to Wiltia, they would be rewarded.

Bribery became rampant and some people even offered up their wives and daughters.

Wiltia strictly forbid this and sent out proclamation after proclamation. Those who accepted these bribes were severely punished, but the practice continued in secret, where prying eyes couldn't see.

Of course, not all the people of Pelfe did this. However, even if only one person out of a thousand participated, when you took Pelfe's population of three million into account, it as more than enough to

make Pelfe look like a nation of shameless Wiltia lapdogs.

As a result, enmity built up between the Wiltians who already disliked the Pelfish, and the Pelfish people who considered Wiltia to be unjust conquerors.

This was why the townspeople ostracized Lud, and what gave birth to terrorist groups like Marlene's.

In the end, the only way for a people to truly live in freedom was for them to have their own self-reliant country.

"All you did was lengthen the chain our collar tell us you were giving us freedom!"

"That might be true, but it's dangerous to get close to August."

"They actually listened to what we had to say."

Marlene came around in front of Lud, and showed him the gun that had been pressing into the back of his neck.

"Do you know what this is? It's called a 'liberator'. It's funny, isn't it? Even though it looks like this, it's still a gun."

Composed of iron pipe, wire and plating, it was far too crude to be called an actual gun. It looked like something an intelligent child could construct.

It was nothing more than a bullet ignition device.

"We made contact with an alliance of countries that stand against Wiltia. We said that if they gave us weapons, we would kill Wiltians. They responded by giving us this crap! You people from the bigger countries always treat us like this!"

High performance weaponry increases a soldier's survival rate. To every country that values the lives of its military, providing first-rate weaponry is the highest priority.

But weapons like the gun Marlene held said exactly how much they valued the guerillas.

"I'm sure that August listened to what you had to say, but they aren't ones to keep their promises..."

Lud knew how that country operated.

"What do you know? They gave us plenty of weapons, and trained us in how to use them!"

"... That's not what I'm talking about."

If there were and armed uprising, the August Federation would use that as an excuse for military intervention. If by some chance they achieve independence, the new administration would simply be a puppet of the Federation.

If another independence movement emerged, a merciless and relentless purge of the dissident elements awaited them.

In the name of "thought control" they already had a track record of killing their own citizens in the millions.

Marlene and her group didn't understand what they were doing.

No, Lud thought. They knew. They just didn't have any choice.

They were trying to endure beneath all the misery and misfortune, and hurled their anger at the colossal thing known as the nation state.

By playing God, they were escaping from their hopeless reality.

With this being the case, Lud knew that anything he said would be a waste of breath.

"Marlene, do you mind if I reminisce a little?"

"What? Are you planning to repent? You know I'm not a real sister, don't you? I can't pass anything you say on to God."



"I know."

Lud had no intention of being forgiven.

Marlene was pointing her gun at him, but she stuck out her chin, as if telling him to say whatever he had to say.

"I'm the third type of soldier."

"Third Type...? What's that?"

The first were voluntary recruits and the second were drafted.

"Whether they're war orphans or something else, the third type are the neglected children taken and raised to be soldiers."

Lud's family was reasonably wealthy, but they tried living on money they didn't have and ended up bankrupt. His father chose to take his own life, and his mother soon followed. Lud was the only survivor.

"Oh..., well it's not *that* uncommon, right? I don't have any parent's either. That doesn't--"

"Yeah, it's something that happened all the time back then."

Lud sounded indifferent. His face had even less expression than usual.

"But, well... The food I ate, the bed I slept in, the sheets that covered me, the roof that kept out the rain and the walls that protected me from the wind - it all went to pay their debts, and I had to find another way to survive."

Even as a child, he was given extensive, rigorous instruction.

He endured such brutal training that only one out of a hundred could make it through.

By the time he was thirteen, he could kill several adults with his bare hands.

He was sent to do the dirty jobs, the missions that had little chance of success.

"One mission... Ever heard of the city called Lapchuricka?"

Lapchuricka wasn't on any map. Wiltia had used Lud to wipe the city from the face of the earth.

-- It was before Lud became a Hunter Unit pilot.

The city of Lapchuricka was in a section of the Kingdom of Haugen, which directly bordered Wiltia.

The town had an anti-Wiltian resistance organization.

The residents and the Haugen government thought they would show their patriotism and spirit by disrupting Wiltia's military operations.

In order to solve the problem, Lieutenant General Genitz at the western front headquarters came up with a strategy that even his own troops were against.

His plan called for complete and utter annihilation using large railway artillery, newly-developed incendiary artillery shells, and biological weapons.

The city was completely destroyed and the entire population eradicated, along with the resistance.

Hundreds upon thousands upon tens of thousands of people.

Everyone in Lapchuricka was dead.

Men, women, children, elderly, sick, priests, pregnant women, mothers, teachers, book stores, fruit vendors, fishmongers, general stores, and bakeries...

As a member of the Special Forces, Lud sneaked into Lapchuricka to investigate the resistance in preparation for the attack.

Lud was a soldier, but he still looked like a young boy. He lied about his identity, and got a job as an assistant at a bakery called Tockerbrot.

It was a small bakery, owned by an old man and managed by his granddaughter.

While he was there, Lud was taught to bake bread.

"You're a quick learner, Lud, you've got talent. Especially this rye bread, it's super tasty. It might even be better than Grandpa's."

"If he can make my own specialty better than I can," the grandfather laughed, "there's really nothing more I can do, is there? How about it Lud? You want to take her for your wife and inherit the story?"

His infiltration was flawless, and the two of them treated Lud well, never suspecting he was a spy. Lud gave them his artificial smile.

He didn't feel guilty at all.

These two are fools, they know nothing about who I really am, he thought.

One the day of the military operation, Lud ran to the bakery at the edge of the strike zone.

It was already gone.

The first round of railway artillery had destroyed the entire area.

"Wha... Ah... Aaaaaahhhh!"

Lud screamed. He was in tears. He vomited up his inside and tore at his body.

In his head he had known that it was all a lie.

But in his heart, he had thought of them as his family.

Even as he deceived them, his affection for them had grown.

He had finally found a warm place of belonging and he destroyed it.

It was small, and it hadn't enjoyed great success, but the simple honest Tockerbrot Bakery that he had helped keep afloat was now gone.

"What do you expect me to do, hearing a story like that..."

Marlene looked uncomfortable and appeared at a loss for words.

"Nothing, it's just..."

He wanted her to understand that Organbaelz was in danger of repeating the same mistakes as Lapchuricka.

The nation-state was a giant monster that could wipe out an entire town as if that was their only course of action.

If Organbaelz lit the spark that ignited another war, then either the Federation or Wiltia would wipe it off of the face of the earth too, along with everyone who lived there.

"It's just... I'm the monster who did those things. That's why... I want you to kill me."

Lud meant it. He believed he was evil and shouldn't be forgiven for what he had done. He didn't want the deeds of his past to be forgotten

or forgiven.

"Just as I said, I'm a monster in human flesh. So, let's put an end to it here."

"Are you offering to be the scapegoat so I won't harm any other Wiltians? Hah! Such admirable patriotism." Marlene sneered.

"I'm not as patriotic as you are, that's for sure... Although, I don't hate my country either."

He needed the strength of his homeland in order to survive. That was all.

He didn't love it enough to sacrifice his life for it.

"That's why... when you finish this, go back to being a sister. For the children's sake."

Lud's words touched a part of Marlene's heart that she didn't want him near.

"Don't judge me, you Wiltian scum!"

Marlene struck Lud's face with the grip of her gun, and Lud took the hit without moving.

"Do you think if you put it like that, I won't kill you?"

"How many rounds are in that gun? First, shoot me in both legs, the thighs are the best, the bullet will entwine with the muscle and double the pain. Also, shoot me as if you are whittling down my body; the pain is sharper near the edges."

Lud spoke with a matter-of-fact voice while he stared at Marlene.

"Hitting me on the side of my heart near the base of the lung is also good. Blood collects in the lungs and it's difficult to breathe; that's an ugly way to go. It might not be bad to crush my genitals too."

Lud was usually not a smooth talker, but he instructed Marlene fluently without faltering.

Perhaps Lud had envisioned this before. An awful death best suited him.

He had to have an awful death, and being covered in mud and tossed in a ditch was the kind of death that suited him.

So he could rattle off the best ways for him to die, one after another.

"I don't need you to tell me how to do it..." But Marlene's hands were trembling and Lud understood.

She had never killed anyone before.

He couldn't say exactly what part of her or her behavior made him think this, but she didn't have what Lud would describe as the stench of dirty work.

Lud thought this was the perfect solution.

She needed to kill a monster like Lud and fulfill her desire for revenge. Then, she could return to her old life.

She still had a life to return to. If the price was Lud Langart's life, then it was cheap.

Marlene shook with frustration but kept the gun trained on Lud.

She was frozen with her finger on the trigger, like a young mouse being stared down by a snake.

Lud could hear her breathing.

"It's too late... I'm not going back. I'm a terrorist! I can never go back to my old life..."

"It's okay." Lud spoke gently.

"If I kill someone... How could I face the children? I'd be deceiving them, you know?"

Lud knew.

The same children that Marlene had earlier called her cover, her props.

Lud knew how much she cherished the children.

When Milly hurled insults at Lud, Marlene would bow her head and quietly insist that Milly wasn't a bad child, and Lud cold see how much she cared.

"I've... betrayed them..." Marlene went on.

Lud thought that Marlene was feeling the same way he had.

He wasn't aware of it himself before, but the moment that he lost everything, he understood.

The place he had slipped into in order to hide his true cruel and cold-blooded self, was in fact what he wanted most of all.

"Don't worry, kids are perceptive. No matter how much I tried to pretend otherwise. Milly realized I was evil, didn't she? You'll be fine. Even deceiving God is easier than trying to pull one over on a kid."

Maybe He just wasn't looking, but God had yet to aim a lightning bolt at Lud.

"Those kids have lived happily with the Marlene they know - the kind and beautiful sister, who's just incredibly bad at making tea." Lud smiled a little.

"Bad at making tea? What, that can't be true..." Marlene was clearly insulted.

"It's true. You need to use very hot waster, just on the verge of bubbling over, and steam the tea until the tea leaves open. You're too

impatient. The tea you serve is almost a declaration of war."

Lud decided that he might as well tell her before she killed him.

Marlene's face grew red but her thoughts were on something else.

"... Still, all of this... Alec won't forgive me..."

Alec.

He might have been a lover, a family member, another character from the tragedy of war, but his existence must have given her the resolve to seek revenge against Wiltia.

"I doubt we're going to the same place, but I can ask Death to tell Alec not to bed mad at you."

Lud realized as soon as he said it that this was a terrible joke.

Marlene raised the gun and aimed at Lud's forehead.

The distance was short from where she stood. Marlene could easily kill him.

She pulled the trigger.

The shot echoed through the room.

"WAAAAAAAAAA!"

Marlene let the gun slip from her hand and began sobbing like a child.

Her sadness, her rage, and her frustration mixed together in her tearful sobs.

The bullet hadn't hit Lud, but it put a hole in the wall behind him.

"You're human after all, Marlene." Lud said quietly.

He didn't mean it sarcastically.

She had refused to become a murderer.

She stopped herself before she crossed that line and was twisted by her righteous cause.

How much stronger than him must she be, Lud wondered.

"Just shut up! Always with that damn sullen face of yours! You're telling me you never accepted my invitations because the tea taste bad?! Even if you weren't from Wiltia, I'd hate you!"

Even her words had become childish.

But Lud had a warm look on his face.

She had told him that she hated him but for some reason Lud was happy.

Before he could respond, the door opened and the people who entered cut him off.

"What are you doing, Marlene?"

There were three men, and two were holding the assault rifles hidden in the chapel.

They were Marlene's comrades, members of the Pelfe Liberation League.

But the third man in front had the scent of someone who earned his living killing other people.

"M-Mister Dolchev..."

Marlene's voice shook as she said his name.

"Pleased to meet you, Silver Wolf. Even in my country, your name is well known. It is an honor to meet one of the top ten Hunter Unit

pilots of Wiltia."

The man called Dolchev looked so hard and forbidding that Lud suspected peeling off his skin would reveal nothing but icy steel.

"You're the one who's been teaching terrorism to these civilians?"

"All I've done is give the oppressed a way to regain their freedom."

"You're one to talk."

Lud guessed that Dolchev was a spy and had provided weapons and fighting instructions to the Pelfe Liberation League. The instigator who implanted fangs into the mouths of herbivores.

Dolchev now turned to Marlene. "I left this up to you because you insisted that you wanted to torture him yourself."

He shrugged, but he seemed unsurprised.

Even a marionette controlled by a street puppeteer would behave more naturally than Dolchev just now.

This man hadn't had any expectations from the start. He had no faith in the Pelfe Liberation League.

"That's not it, Mister Dolchev! I thought we could use him like thi--"

Marlene tried to justify herself, but Dolchev silenced her with a slap of his outstretched palm.

"I don't have time for this. I need to make the final adjustments to the T-3 II. You two, put this wolf down."

Dolchev left the room.

Marlene had fallen to the floor. Her cheek was already swollen, and blood dripped from a cut on her mouth.

"I'll do it! Let me kill him! It would be the highlight of my life!"

"You idiot, I let you kill the last one. My gun is dying to shoot off some fireworks."

The two men began arguing like children bickering over who would go first in a game of marbles.

"Hey, big bad wolf! You can't get out of here! So go on, howl! We might even consider killing you quickly."

Because they feared death, men sought to control it.

To have control over someone else's life gave them joy, as if they had become God.

Men often take great pleasure in doing to other people what they find most awful.

However, Lud sat in silence, biding his time.

"Well, say something, go on!"

The men each hit Lud in the face with the butts of their rifles.

"... You're the one who tied me to this chair?" Lud asked.

"Yeah, and? Do your hands hurt? I'm soo sorry!"

He looked at his companion and began to laugh.

"I just have a piece of advice for you." Lud offered. "When you're restraining someone, you want to tie them at the thumbs, not the wrists."

Lud raised both his hands. He held a loose rope.

"Huh?!"

The two men gasped in surprise.

They had certainly tied Lud up securely, enough even to cut off his circulation.

There was no way that a bundle of straw or logs they had tied up would fall apart.

But, with the method they used, it wasn't possible to completely tie up a person. Unlike wood and straw, people could tell that rope was loose.

One aimed his gun toward Lud in a panic, but Lud stabbed him where the bones of his met the inner that held the weapon. His hand opened and Lud snatched the gun.

He knocked the man out with a slug to his cheek. Not really necessary, but satisfying payback.

Then Lud pushed the gun against the scrawny thigh of the other man and pulled the trigger.

This was known as a human silencer.

Firing a gun while it's pressed against a person's body let's the body act as a soundproof barrier, covering the noise of the gun.

Without any sound leaving the room, Lud robbed both men of their ability to fight.

"Gyah--!"

Lud drove his elbow into the man's chest and knocked him unconscious.

"Huh?!"

When Marlene finally raised her voice at what she had seen, it was

already over. Lud's brilliant technique was like the wind.

Before he was saddled with the name "Silver Wolf", he was taught this method of hand-to-hand combat as a Hunter Unit pilot.



Whether they called themselves guerillas or terrorists, they were still amateurs after all.

Lud had only waited until Dolchev was too far away to hear the shots.

"Lud... You were able to break loose from the beginning?"

"No... but when you drew his attention, I was able to get the ropes off."

Lud only had a few seconds to spare, and while it was easy to deceive civilians-turned-terrorists, fooling a professional soldier was much harder.

"... Um... That stuff about asking me to kill you... were you serious?"

"I meant it. I'm not clever enough to fake that."

When Lud was trained as a spy, he learned the techniques of how to deceive people, but after what happened in Lapchuricka, he could no longer use them.

That was part of the reason he was driven out of Special Forces and became a Hunter Unit pilot.

"If I was that good an actor." Luke went on. "I would have learned how to smile for my customers."

Lud slightly twisted the sides of his mouth and made sort of a smile.

"You're an idiot... If you died, you couldn't run the bakery anymore."

"That's right... But if I had wrestled you into submission, made you out to be the bad guy, and stood over you in triumph, I couldn't return to the bakery anyways."

Lud had things he wanted to do. He had a reason to keep on living.

But if she was going to fall into the same world as he once had, and writhe in agony, it didn't matter whether he died or not.

"And if I did that, Milly would *definitely* never want to eat my bread. That would... be awful."

"You..."

Marlene looked close to tears, unsure what to say.

"Do you know what apple bread is?" she finally asked.

"Apple bread? You mean apple danish? Bread that's made by kneading butter into thinly stretched pieces of dough that you then lay on top of each other..."

"I think that's it." Marlene nodded. "Milly said that she loves it. I don't remember when but I heard her say that once."

"Really?!"

Lud raised his voice in delight.

If he offered Milly her favorite type of bread, maybe she would forget her principles and eat it.

"Apples... the sweetly boiled ones that you use in apple pies, right? Instead of really sweet apples, making it with tart ones might taste better. I need to hurry and see the farmer..."

With a look of excitement on his face, Lud worked out how to make his apple danish.

His face wasn't that of a Hunter Unit pilot, nor was it the face of a Special Forces spy who specialized in sneaky, underhanded missions; it was simply the face of a rural baker.

"I've got to try this right away! If I can make it fragrant, that will

arouse her appetite even further. I could try using a bit of liqueur... Yeah."

Lud appeared to have put his thoughts in some kind of order. He nodded and looked at Marlene.

"Hey Marlene, The Pelfe Liberation League, is this guy Dolchev planning something?"

"I think it's a raid on Baelz Mine. The second mine that's being dug experimentally... It sounds like they found a vein of Rezanity."

Rezanite emitted a blood red glow and as an enduring metal, it couldn't corrode or be destroyed. One theory was that it came from the mineralized hearts of ancient dragons.

"I get it, destroying that *would* be a heavy blow to Wiltia."

In old times, Rezanite had only been used for decorative ornaments, but recently a scientist referred to as a "sorcerer", discovered a use for the metal that no one expected - as the fundamental element of the Hunter Unit's hearts, the Rezanium Reactor.

The war was over. But new weapons and new strategies were being developed in preparation for the next war, and the one after that that. The Hunter Units were being improved and Rezanite lay at the core of this development. Wiltia needed plenty of it.

"If their plan is carried out, the mine wouldn't be the only thing destroyed..."

Organbaelz was a mining town.

If the main industry in the town disappeared, the flow of goods and people into the town would also vanish. It would be a death sentence for the town.

"My shop would go under... and what about the children of the

orphanage?" Lud asked.

The children weren't the terrorist's accomplices, but they would either be sent to different orphanages, or worse, become street urchins, wandering about the streets of the town.

Even though there was finally a possibility that Milly would eat Lud's bread, everything would be ruined.

"Marlene... I'm sorry, but I'm going to stop them."

"You'll stop them as a soldier, you mean? To save your country from danger, is that it?"

Marlene averted her eyes as she questioned him.

"No, I'm not a soldier anymore. I'm just a baker and I have to stop their malicious interference with my business." Lud replied.

"Really? I see..."

Lud's answer appeared to be the one Marlene wanted.

"In that case... As a sister, I want to protect this town and the children in this church!"

Marlene smiled, with her swollen cheeks and puffy, red eyes.

Lud had never seen her really smile before, and it was the most charming smile he had ever seen.

CHAPTER 5
THE SIEGE OF BAELZ MINE

When Lud and Marlene left the room, they discovered that Dolchev and the others were already headed towards the mine and only a few soldiers remained at the church.

The soldiers already lacked combat proficiency, and on top of that, they didn't realize that Lud had escaped, so it took him less than then minutes to knock them all unconscious.

"This should do it... Here we go."

Lud tied the soldiers up and made sure they would not be able to break free as he had.

Amateurs like these, who had been bested without firing a single shot, wouldn't be able to slip out even if they spent all night floundering around to get free.

"Lud!"

Marlene appeared with her face pale.

"What happened?! The children...?"

Lud's mind was never far from the children of the church.

Lud was certain that they had been gathered up and put to sleep by some inhalant.

"No, everyone is alright, but... Milly's not there." Marlene told him.

"...!"

Milly should have been locked in the storage room out back with all the other children, but when Marlene went to check, she was missing.

"She was taken? They wanted her as a hostage, I bet."

Then a worse possibility came to Lud's mind - Milly would be used as a meat shield during the attack on the mine.

Even among trained soldiers, there weren't man who could shoot a child without hesitation. *But, that's odd... why take just one of them?*

There were only guards at the mine, not a full-blown security force.

Even without a hostage, it should be easy for Dolchev and his team to get in.

"We have to hurry! I have a bad feeling about this..." Lud said to Marlene, feeling something sinister and beyond his imagination.

Lud wanted to catch up to Dolchev's group as soon as possible, but they had no way of getting there.

According to Marlene, Dolchev had prepared a trailer for their infantry. It was hopeless to try and catch them on foot.

"Maaaasssttttteeeer!..."

Lud heard a familiar voice calling to him.

Sven was driving Lud's dilapidated truck over the rough, broken road straight towards him.

Sven waved her hand happily.

"Master, are you all right?"

Sven got out of the truck and ran to Lud with a look of relief on her face. Lud could see that she somehow knew what was going on.

Seeing Lud's bullet wound, Sven nearly screamed.

"Master! You've been hurt!"

"Oh, this is ok..."

Lud had been shot by a small caliber gun, so it wasn't a serious wound. He had already pulled out the bullet but blood seeped from beneath the cloth he had used as bandage.

Although Lud had knocked out all the remaining soldiers in the church without using a gun, there had been no problem.

But the waitress who cared for nothing as much as Lud's well-being was unconvinced.

"Oh, let me look at it..."

Sven was close to tears as she checked Lud's wound. Marlene's figure came into view.

"You vile... **You did this to Master!**"

"Eek?!"

Sven leapt at Marlene.

"You've really done it now, you whore!"

Her face looked like a wild beast baring its fangs, and she brandished her arm as if to stab Marlene with her sword-like hand.

"Sven, stop!"

"Master! This woman deceived you! And she seduced Jacob's grandfather!"

Sven's rage was even fiercer than she had earlier directed toward Milly.

It was a miracle that Marlene didn't faint from fear.

"Stop it, Sven! I know everything already!"

Lud wrapped his arms around Sven's back to try and stop her.

"Fwahuh?! M-Mashte..."

Sven's rage faded instantly and her face turned bright red as she crumpled in Lud's arms as though her strength had drained away.

"L-L-L-L-Let go of me, M-M-M-Master!"

Sven tried to resist Lud but even her fingers that clawed into Marlene's shoulder lost their strength.

"I know. She doesn't intend to fight any more, it's all over." Lud assured her.

"Bu-Bu-Bu-Bu-But!"

Gently, Lud tried to calm down the still-protesting Sven with his words.

"It's okay, it's all okay now."

"I... I under...stand..."

Sven's voice was reluctant, as if she was being forced to drink something difficult to swallow.

"Phew..."

Relieved, a sigh escaped from Lud's chest and across Sven's ear.

"Huah! U-Um... Uh, Master... I understand now, so... Um, could you..."

"Oh, sorry..."

It looked as if Lud was gently embracing Sven from behind and whispering softly into her ear.

"I mean, if... if you insist, I wouldn't particularly mind staying like this a little while longer..."

"Sven?"

Lud couldn't hear what Sven was muttering to herself under her breath.

"But now isn't the time for that, is it?!"

Returning to her senses, Sven stood up and focused on the situation at hand.

"So anyways, I've informed the army of the situation. There is no reason for Master to get involved with this any further. Let's quickly find somewhere safe."

"No, I can't do that..."

Lud explained what he had learned, but Sven wasn't persuaded.

"But, this isn't something that involves you. You're no longer..."

Lud wasn't a soldier, Sven's expression said that, and he wasn't obligated to fight this battle, and if anything, he was allowed to flee the scene of battle like everyone else.

"They took Milly with them. Even if the military's suppression unit eliminates the terrorists, the lives of any hostages are in danger."

"But, still..."

Sven gripped the edges of her waitress uniform and bowed her head.

"If that is the case, please allow me to come with you!"

"Huh?! It will be dangerous, Sven." Lud was now trying to protect her.

"I am the obedient and humble servant of Lud Langart, owner of Tockerbrot! It is my duty to accompany my Master wherever he goes; be it the ends of the earth, the bottom of the ocean or even beyond the edge of the sky! If you *still* insist that I cannot accompany you, then..."

Her red eyes bored into Lud's, as if she would make him take her with him by force.

Lud remembered the incident at the mine. If she used all her strength, even Lud couldn't hold out against her.

"A-Alright... I get it!"

Lud had no choice but to agree.

The truck headed to the mine.

They wouldn't make it in time if they took the regular route to the mountain, so the battered truck sped down a bumpy dirt road, jolting up and down.

"Ah, ow, ugh, oof, urk! C-Could y-you slo-slow down a b-bit?!"

Sven was driving with Lud in the passenger seat next to her.

Marlene had to ride in the truck bed and it was she who complained, raising her voice until she was nearly screaming.

"If my driving is not your liking, please feel free to jump out at any time, terrorist!" Sven yelled back.

"Former! Former terrorist!" Marlene screamed even louder.

"It would have been better if you hadn't come with us in the first place."

Sven had been against bringing her along, but Marlene "wanted to witness for herself what she had tried to take part in." and Lud let her join them.

All this man does is burden himself with more and more trouble, honestly!

"Master, I propose that we use this opportunity to leave the imposter-nun behind and continue on our way."

"She said she wants to go, so she's going. It's okay, I'll protect her."

That's the problem...

Sven's top priority was to protect Lud and he made that very difficult.

He couldn't even stop himself from jumping into dangerous situations.

Even worse, Sven couldn't accept the reason for Lud's recklessness was to protect another woman--

"I'm telling you, It's not like that!" Sven blurted out.

"What?! Sven, what's wrong?"

"N-Nothing... Never mind..."

She was bewildered that once again these insolent thoughts invaded her mind.

Lud was a former Special Forces soldier, but Sven was overwhelmingly the stronger of the two. Nevertheless, she wanted Lud to protect her!

Seriously... What in the world am I thinking?

Sven couldn't help sinking into self-loathing.

"Sven... Is it true? Have they really brought out a T-3 II?"

"There's no mistaking it. I heard it directly from the person who performed the maintenance."

The T-3 II that Jacob's grandfather had been contracted to service was an all-purpose tank developed by the August Federation. There were only a few in existence, but they rivaled the Hunter Units.

But Sven had to say, it was an extremely unpleasant topic for the Hunter Unit pilots.

To begin with, the T-3 II's fire power corresponded to a whole company of infantrymen, or three tanks worth of power, and since they matched Hunter Units - whose power was equal to that of ten tanks - using three T-3 IIs at a time, with these simplistic calculations, they were equal.

In actuality, the claim that they could rival the Hunter Units was stronger because they did better at facing them than any other weapon.

However, even if they were crudely compared to the Hunter Units, the T-3 IIs were still far too powerful for people on foot.

"Why do these guys have something like that...?"

Lud rubbed his chin in thought.

"If this was an amateur's operation I could understand, but... Dolchev... is that something that a professional dispatched from the north would do? Could they have another objective beyond taking over the mine?"

"Thinking about their objectives won't settle anything. We don't have enough data. But we can be sure that we have to stop their plan."

Gripping the steering wheel with one hand, Sven pointed to the

handgun sitting on the seat. It was from one of the terrorists back at the church.

"It's a primitive device, but please take it. I'm sure I don't need to tell you how to use it."

According to what Marlene had told them, there were approximately ten foot soldiers headed to the mine, plus Dolchev an the T-3 II pilot.

Lud couldn't rely on the same attack he had used in the church. No matter how good he was, Lud could not take down an armed group of terrorists with his bare hands.

But if he was like them, he had a fighting chance.

"Sven... Sorry, I don't want to use this."

"Master, you must be joking!" Sven shouted in disbelief.

"Are you concerned for their safety? Don't you understand what they are trying to do?! They nearly killed you..."

"Even still, I don't want it..."

Lud gazed at his hands as he spoke.

"Just now was the first time I shot a gun in two years. I didn't kill him, all I did was disable him... But it sent a chill down my spine and left a smell on my hands that I don't want..."

"The gunpowder smell? There's no way that only one shot would leave a perceptible amount of gunpowder on your hand--"

Sven stopped.

Lud's expression was very serious.

"I'm a baker... My job is making food for people to eat. Eating is part of living. If I kill someone... I would lose my right feed others."

"Mas...ter..."

Sven wanted to ask, "What if you die?"

But when she saw the despair on his face, she couldn't argue.

"I understand... Sheesh! It is my duty to go along with even your recklessness! You wish to handle this peaceful, without killing anyone, but without using dying either, right?"

Having said such an absurd thing herself, Sven sighed in resignation.

"Sorry, Sven..."

"I've gotten used to your unreasonable requests." Sven replied with a voice of exasperation.

"……?!"

"W-What's wrong... Master?"

"No, it's just..."

Lud stared at Sven with a look of surprise.

"My partner back in the military told me the same thing..."

"Partner..."

"Yeah, it saved my life countless times. It was there to support me. Now that I think about it, you two are pretty similar." Luke told her.

Lud spoke as if he was remembering something fondly when Sven asked him a question.

"What was it like? Your partner?"

"Huh? Well... actually, a girl like you wouldn't be so flattered by the comparison. But even though I'm still not good at talking to people, I

think I've become much more human, thanks to my old partner."

Lud looked embarrassed.

"Could that... Perhaps be..."

Sven's voice trembled as she began to ask Lud a question, but just then the entrance to the mine, beneath the shadow of the mountain, came into view.

"Sven! Cut the lights!"

Lud picked up the handgun, took out the magazine and removed the bullets.

The lights were turned off so the terrorists on lookout didn't notice their approach.

Lud removed the bullets from the handgun to use them to knock out the sentries.

"I'm heading out..."

As the truck approached the mine area, Lud kicked open the door and jumped out.

The terrorists were caught off guard by the sudden intruder and shot their guns towards the noise.

But there was nothing for them to hit, and they gave away their position with their gunfire.

Lud didn't let that go overlooked.

He pleated them as hard as he could with the bullets in his hand.

Being hit by a hand-thrown bullet wouldn't kill, but it was painful.

"Gah?!"

"Augh!"

"**Ack!**"

For each bullet, there was a cry in return.

Lud had squarely hit three of the soldiers.

At the most, a hit from the bullets would cause a bruise, but if he had hit a vital area, even a hand-thrown bullet could cause damage. If he head used a knife, depending on the location of the hit, it could prove fatal. Lud wanted to avoid that.

"What is the?! Where... **Where are you!**"

"Form up! Hurry!"

All of them except Dolchev seemed to be outside.

This was convenient.

If their skilled commanding officer was with them, even these amateur soldiers could put up a fight, but this disorganized group couldn't fight back against a precise and silent attack in the darkness of the night.

Lud kicked the ground. Half flying and half sliding, he ran through the confused soldiers and struck them in the stomachs with the flat of his hand.

With his flattened hand inserted between their ribs, Lud dealt a heavy blow to their lungs, which disrupted their respiratory functions.

No matter how much you hone your body, you can't strengthen your internal organs. Before the unbearable pain could reach their brains, their nerves blocked it, causing the soldiers to foam at the mouth and collapse where they stood.

That's five... According to my calculations, that should be half of them--

Suddenly, the moon appeared from behind the clouds and Lud was exposed.

"There he is! He's over there!"

Lud heard the startled voice of one of the soldiers.

Three of the terrorists fired at him.

As Lud jumped back from his position, he threw a bullet and knocked out one of the terrorists.

The remaining two were too far away to apprehend.

Alright, now what...

When one man is launching a surprise attack, he has to disrupt the enemy anyway he can, as ferociously as possible, and without stopping.

But Lud's assault had easily been stopped, and had given the terrorists a reprieve to put together a counter attack.

Lud fled and kept out of sight while he tried to figure out his next step.

I really have gotten rusty...

Lud was acutely aware of how much rustier the two years away from action had made him.

Then he heard a loud revving sound and the truck cam into view.

"Master!"

As Sven shouted she drove the truck right toward the enemy.

Despite the fact that the windshield of a dilapidated truck like that is no more bullet resistant than a sheet of paper.

The tires skidded as the truck turned but Sven mowed through the terrorist's ranks.

The soldiers scattered to escape the truck, but when they realized that Sven was unarmed, they began firing their handguns wildly.

The tires ruptured, the windshield shattered and the truck's bed was torn apart.

"Hey assholes!"

Shouting, Lud charged towards the terrorists.

While they had received some amount of military training, the terrorists were still mostly civilians.

Rather than remaining focused on the enemy in front them, they were watching the truck that had suddenly appeared, and ignored Lud, who was charging towards them with a look of rage.

Lud drove his elbow into the chin of one, knocking him unconscious, and before the second could ready his gun, Lud forced the heel of his palm into the terrorist's face and rove his head into the ground.

When Lud turned towards the third man, he could not believe what he saw.

The terrorist had aimed an anti-tank rocket launcher directly at Lud. And fired.

Leaping to the side, Lud was repelled by the blast.

The rocket launcher hit the truck, which was immediately reduced to flaming scrap iron.

"**Sven!**"

One of the terrorists trained his gun at the screaming Lud.

"I've got you now, monster!"

Before he could fire the shot, the soldier was struck down by a shadow that cut behind his back.

"What--?!"

The remaining terrorist with the rocket launcher, in a panic, dropped the weapon and reached for his pistol but was stopped by the shadow's elbow.

"Master... Are you okay?!"

The shadow was Sven.

"You made it out of the truck!" Lud cried out.

"Yes, I jumped right after I drove through. Without any weapons there was nothing else I could do."

Sven could have used a more efficient method to knock out the enemy if she chose to.

However, in order to obey Lud's orders to avoid as many casualties as possible, Sven intentionally acted dangerously.

"Sorry..."

Realizing this, Lud looked regretful as he bowed his head.

He wasn't able to protect himself from harm, and he had forced Sven to do something dangerous.

"Please don't worry about me, Master... This was the mission gave me." Sven smiled.

"Wait, what about Marlene?`She wasn't left in the truck, was she?!" Lud asked in horror.

Flames still rose from the remains of the truck.

If Marlene was still in the truck bed, whether she had been hit by a bullet, thrown from the truck by the rocket launcher blast, or burned alive in the flames, the chance of her survival was zero.

"Oh, she's fine." Sven assured him. "I threw her into the bushes over there."

"Bleeeeeeergh"

Sven pointed behind them. Bracing her hand on the truck of a tree, Lud could see Marlene vomiting.

"M-Marlene..."

"She seems to be car sick, so I think we have a good reason to ditch her for now." Sven added.

Carsickness was a disorder of the automatic nervous system that arose from a deviation in one's sense of balance.

The rough ride in the bed of the truck, rattling back and forth and up and down, had shaken her past her limits.

And Sven said quietly to herself, "I would have already gotten rid of her...!"

"Did you say something?!"

"No, nothing."

Marlene glared at Sven who ignored her.

"It's strange, isn't it..."

Lud was thinking about something else.

Even with such a loud battle going on, Dolchev hadn't shown himself.

He must have gone deeper into the mine.

While the main mine harvested iron ore, the Baelz Mine that Lud and the others went to was the second mine, and was closer to a cave than an actual mine.

The giant hole looked as if it had been propped open with a cork screw extending deep underground. The elevator to transport the heavy excavation equipment was currently stopped at the bottom.

Dolchev's group must have taken it down ahead of them.

"We can't use the elevator... But if we take the stairs, we'll be targeted before can get near the bottom..."

The T-3 II was equipped with machine guns.

If they used the spiraling staircase that snaked around the wall of the hole, they would most likely be riddled with bullets with nowhere to run.

"Oh... I just remembered something."

Marlene cleared the stomach acid from around her mouth with the sleeves of her habit.

Her true character had been exposed and she no longer needed to keep up her nun act. She was completely lacking in modesty, but this wasn't the time to point it out.

"Dolchev and his men prepared some kind of explosive. It's called... Zeihom or something... I think they might have brought it with them..."

"What?!" "Huh?!"

Both Sven and Lud were stunned.

"How much were they carrying exactly...?" Sven demanded.

"U-Um' I'm not sure... A lot..."

"'A lot' doesn't tell us anything!" Sven grabbed Marlene by the collar and shook her.

"I only saw them from a distance! But, there was about one barrel of it... I thin?"

"Scheisse"

Zeihombomber was an explosive developed during the last war.

It deliberately amplifies the resonance of a certain mineral and creates intense heat.

"The destructive power of the Zeihombomber depends on the amount of the combustible ore... If they have a barrel of it, they could blow up a whole town."

"That can't be... But from inside the mine..."

If it blew up in the middle of town, it would kill everyone, but inside the mine of the edge of town, the destruction would be much less. Or so Marlene was thinking.

"No, it's even worse." Lud explained to her. "The mineral it uses is Rezanite."

"Huh?!"

Now Marlene understood the seriousness of the situation.

The Zeihombomber was a residual product created during the development of the Rezanium reactor - the mechanism that used Rezanite as a propellant.

The thermic reaction originally used as a power source, was deliberately used as an explosive.

Such an explosion inside the mine would generate a resonant vibration in the Rezanite throughout the mine and would cause a massive, tectonic disruption enveloping all of Organbaelz.

"But, I'm not sure they want to use it... Or at least mentioned something like that... What was it they said...?" Marlene struggled to remember what she had overheard them say.

"What?" Sven screamed at her. "You're telling me they brought explosives down there when they don't intend to use them? What for?! If vomiting was the trigger for you to remember that much, then maybe if you spew everything a few more times, you'll come up with more!"

When a person throws up everything in their stomach and then is made to vomit even more, stomach acid comes up as well. The resulting pain is severe.

So severe that a method of interrogation and torture is to repeatedly force the victim to drink gallons of water, and then throw it all up. The captive is tortured from the inside out.

"Wai--Sven! Just calm down a little, okay?!"

Lud held back Sven as she looked ready to put this regurgitation technique into practice.

"I thought it was strange bring a tank to take control of a mine. That might have something to do with it... Marlene, can you remember anything else?"

"Hmmm... They mentioned something about a door... a dragon...? And something like 'we'll use this when things go bad.'" Marlene sounded unsure but seemed to slowly remember.

"What does this have to with anyt--"

Sven interrupted Marlene impatiently but then fell to the ground, clutching her head and writhing in pain.

"What?! Unh, AAAAAAAHHH!"

"Sven?! What's wrong?!"

Sven couldn't hear Lud as a grating pain tore through her.

"Wh... Why... This can't... be!"

What is this, this pain... Exactly... what am I...

Sven was thrown into confusion by the sudden incomprehensible pain.

She felt like something extremely shard was being screwed into a small hole deep in her body.

"A contract is a contract. You have the right to that."

-------?!

Sven suddenly recalled the voice she had heard when she lost consciousness earlier that day.

Abruptly she understood.

Dragon. Door. Open.

"That's not it... that isn't a door."

Sven stood up in a haze.

Her vision was blurred and she could barely feel her feet touching the ground.

But she had figured out what was inside the mine.

CHAPTER 6
FROM BEHIND THE DOOR, THE DRAGON ROARS

The deepest part of the mine was wide enough for a row of tanks to march through and looked more like and underground palace.

Dolchev came off the elevator and moved forward with the T-3 II. He had reached his goal.

"So this is the Door... It's the real thing."

Deeply moved, a gasp of wonder escaped his lips.

In front of him was a stone door about two meters tall with a stern-looking dragon carved in the middle.

Dolchev had come to Organbaelz as a spy, made contact with the terrorist group, and used them as his cover, all so he could finally stand in front of this Door.

His motherland, the August Federation, did not tolerate anyone whose will didn't align with that of the state.

Even if the soldier like himself had reason for failing carry out his mission, he would be purged as a traitor for betraying the state's trust.

"T-3 II activate! Prepare the artillery... Smash down that Door!"

The T-3 II -- the all-purpose think-tank of the August Federation - was almost three times as large as a conventional tank, with an upper body that resembled the torso of a lizardman from old legends.

The shape of its hands and arms was also peculiar and unlike the

Hunter Units of Wiltia, which resembled a warrior clad in armor, this tank looked cruel and hideous.

There was a turret affixed to its head where the different sensors were gathered in a large reptilian shape that extended from its chest.

The T-3 II's guns boasted the greatest destructive power in use by the Europea countries.

Its on-board AI was not as sophisticated as those in the Hunter Units, and a gunner, a pilot, and a commander were required to operate it. Under orders from Dolchev, the tank commander, his subordinates completed the firing preparations.

"Artillery shells loaded. Firing preparations, all green."

"Shock resistance preparations, all green!"

These were professional soldiers who had served under Dolchev since the Great War.

"**Fire!**"

With the order, fire spewed from the largest of the tank's colossal guns and shot an artillery shell toward the Door.

The explosion and concussive blast howled through the cavern.

The tank's cannon shot covered the area in a dust cloud so thick it was impossible to see a meter ahead.

"Did we break through?!"

"We can't tell yet... One moment, sir." the gunner responded.

But Dolchev couldn't wait and emerged from the hatch of the tank to confirm for himself.

The dust slowly began to settle.

The Door in front of Dolchev looked exactly the same as before.

"It didn't break... Even from an attack like that?!"

Dolchev was astonished.

He didn't have another choice.

He had brought the Zeihombomber with him, along with the T-3 II, and his only choice was to use it to blow up the entire mine before Wiltia found it, and to ensure that no one would get their hands on it.

However, a human sacrifice would then be necessary.

Himself...

With his plan's failure, he couldn't return to his home country.

He once again commanded his men.

"Fire one more shot, no, fire everything we've got at it!"

"Wait a minute, sir! Captain Dolchev! The Door!"

"What?!"

The Door that didn't have so much as a scratch after being hit with a round from the tank, slowly started to open.

It was opening from the inside. As if its refusal to budge up until that moment had been some kind of joke.

"Has no one taught you Augustian polar bears any manners? Could you try knocking?"

A few moments after her sudden collapse, Sven had sat up as if

nothing had happened, and led Lud and Marlene away from the mine shaft.

They stood in front of a shabby tombstone.

If there had ever been an inscription on it, years of exposure to the elements had erased it. Lud touched the stone with his palm and the rock face behind opened up revealing a passageway leading underground.

Could you even call this a passageway...?

It looked more like an elevator shaft than a passageway.

They continued down the path, and came to the inside of Dolchev referred to as "the Door".

"So this is the Door... I didn't believe it actually existed."

In front of the dumbfounded Dolchev and the triumphant Sven, Lud unintentionally murmured to himself.

Lud had heard of its existence.

It was said that the Door was left by an ancient empire.

"I'm shocked." Sven went on to Dolchev. "Wasn't it August that denounced imperial rule? To think that they would be after the legacy of the original European Empire that spanned all of the kingdoms. I can't believe it."

Sven was snickering as she tried to provoke him, and her smile was the sadistic smile of someone who had crushed their enemy's most delicate parts with no hesitation.

The Door was a treasure chest that held the legacy of the Europea civilization that had fallen into ruin years ago.

The imperial capital had disappeared, but there were many such treasure chests scattered in the frontier.

These treasure chests contained Europea's scientific and technological legacy, which so far outstripped current knowledge that it was closer to magic.

After the empire fell, those who thought of themselves as its successors - the current nations of Europea - placed the treasure chests under safeguard and let no one near them.

"The continent is vast... It's not surprising that untouched ruins have yet to be found... So you located one in Baelz Mine and deliberately incited the terrorists in order to get in. And now you've tried to pry it open by blasting it with your tank..."

"Grrww..."

Dolchev's growl confirmed the truth in Sven's words.

"The Zeihombomber... That's to prevent Wiltia from discovering the Door's existence in case you failed to open it?" Lud concluded.

Zeihombomber was as valuable as ten Hunter Units so using it to destroy a mine didn't add up.

Unless perhaps it was worth it to conceal something that could rewrite the power relationships between the two countries.

"You are a pitiful bunch... Taking the artifacts of a long dead king to improve your own technology, and sneaking in like a common thief to steal it. How *pathetic*."

"... I'm not sure you're in a position to talk, little girl."

"Hm?"

Dolchev hid the gnashing of his teeth as he snapped back at Sven.

"This T-3 II... It seems your people like to call it an imitation Hunter Unit but... I wonder if you know that it was developed by defectors from Wiltia."

"So that's it..."

Lud understood what Dolchev meant.

When Lud was in the military, stories about this "Door" were so outlandish that they sounded like tales of the supernatural.

For August to dispatch a unit and spend a significant amount of resources on a campaign based on such a story could only mean that they had serious grounds for believing it.

"The Hunter Units came from technology that Wiltia discovered from one of these ruins?"

"That's exactly it, Silver Wolf... Your country asserts dominion over the continent as the rightful successor to the Europea Empire, but by that logic, the Door should open according to your will, correct? Why did you need to pry them open?"

That inescapable proof that Wiltia wasn't recognized as the successor to the ancient empire either.

The engineers who created the Hunter Units, who had analyzed the technology found behind these Doors, must have told the August Federation what they knew about the ruins when they defected.

The suppression of the Doors' existence was a giant, national scandal.

However August didn't make the information against Wiltia public. Instead it used it to ensure their own technologic power.

So August has been driven that far into the corner, is that it?

With their appearance in the last war, the Hunter Units displayed enough strength that even one could defeat a whole battalion of soldiers.

The August Federation's strategic advantage was their enormous

human capital in the form of massive armies.

Wiltia had only a tenth of August's population, but the Hunter Units helped them gain strategic superiority.

The Hunter Units displayed enough fighting strength to overcome a whole battalion of soldiers.

So, for the August Federation, getting their hands on a weapon that could match the Hunter Units before the next war was the top priority.

"Now I understand you reasoning..." Lud told Dolchev.

"And now that you understand, what will you do? Risk your life to protect it?!" Dolchev snarled.

"No. If you want to take whatever is in there, I don't care. Just don't harm the people of this town any more than you already have."

"What...?"

For Dolchev, who had pledged his allegiance to his country, Lud's words were unbelievable coming from a battle hero, and he looked at him with surprise.

"I'm not a soldier anymore." Lud explained. "I'm just a baker. The next war has nothing to do with me. So let Milly go and do what you want in here."

"Huh... I see... It seems that what I brought along just in case has produced some curious results."

Dolchev reached inside the T-3 II and pulled out the unconscious girl, bound with rope.

"Milly!" Marlene shouted.

"Marlene... so you led these two here?" Dolchev seemed unconcerned, as if Marlene's betrayal was beneath his curiosity or

contempt.

"Mister Dolchev, why did you bring her here? You said you wouldn't touch any of the children... that they didn't have any use to you!"

"Oh, well, I heard a legend, you see, that 'Ancient Doors will open with the blood of the promised maiden.' If the blasts failed, I thought I might need the fresh blood of a virgin."

Dolchev wasn't joking.

It seemed they weren't able to find a way to open the Door either.

So they arranged the maximum amount of firepower and had this supernatural method ready as well.

Lud didn't laugh.

They were people who - for the sake of their country and their mission - would spill the blood of a girl "just in case".

I'm...

Thinking that he was once the same as the man in front of him, Lud felt anguish.

"That's not true... Master, you're different!"

As if Sven had guessed what was in Lud's thoughts, she grabbed his hand to reassure him.

"Yeah... Thanks..."

Strangely, Sven's words did a little to help heal the splinter in his heart.

"Master... Um... I understand that you want to save Milly. But, if we show them what's inside the Door..." Sven whispered to Lud.

"I know... but, they have a T-3 II. And they have Milly. We need to first accept their demands."

Lud and the others were at a serious disadvantage.

Lud had to listen to Dolchev and wait for the opportunity to strike back.

He turned to Dolchev. "Follow me. I'll show you the Great Empire's legacy that you're so desperate to see."

"Where... am I.. Huh?!"

When Milly opened her eyes, she saw the ferocious face of Dolchev, who looked to her like a giant bear.

"You keep quiet." Dolchev's voice was quiet and cold.

The young girl understood instinctively that he would happily kill her.

"I'm sorry Milly... This won't last much longer. You'll be safe very soon."

It was the voice of the person she hated the most in the world, the former soldier-turned-baker, Lud Langart.

Why, how did this...

She slowly remembered what had happened.

After that frightening waitress had left the church, a bunch of strange men showed up.

Before she could figure out who they were, Milly and the rest of the children were forced to inhale some kind of drug.

The pungent drug seeped into her eyes and nose, and Milly remembered coughing violently but had no memory of anything after that.

While Milly was unconscious from the sedative, Dolchev had taken her captive and brought her with him to find the Door.

"How exactly did you lot get inside the Door?"

"……..?!"

Dolchev held his pistol to Milly's temple as he demanded an explanation from Lud.

"I think that you found the back door. We came in through the main entrance by chance. That's it..."

Lud couldn't explain any further.

Lud suspected that Sven knew more, but she and Marlene were outside at Dolchev's insistence.

Sven had led them inside the Door, so she would have been able to give a more detailed explanation, but this was all Lud could say.

"The main entrance, is it..." Dolchev muttered.

I have to try and find an opening...

Lud wanted to grab Milly, but Dolchev didn't give him an opportunity to make a move.

His pace, his line of sight, and the space between them were all just out of reach for Lud to grab her.

Since he had neither a gun nor a knife, Lud would have to get close enough to Dolchev to incapacitate him.

If he challenged Dolchev, he might crush the small girl's head.

While Lud contemplated his choices, they arrived at the inner room beyond the Door.

"Wow..."

Entering the ancient empire's treasure chest, Dolchev's voice filled with awe.

Inside was a pure white space.

How the room was made, and what it was made of was entirely beyond their comprehension.

As if they had stepped inside a white porcelain vase, the square room was a glossy and lustrous white, without a single joint or seam.

It was just big enough to fit Lud's old truck inside.

It wasn't small enough to be suffocating, but it wasn't spacious.

There was a cylinder extending from a half-circle foundation in the middle of the room like an altar, and on either side were two boxes, also made from an unknown material.

"This is the artifact of the European Empire!"

Dolchev drew closer to the boxes, but despite his excitement, he kept the gun pointed at Milly's head without dropping his guard.

"This is... this is... this is... what...?`"

His voice after opening the boxes sounded disappointed.

Inside one box was what looked like a black carcass.

Its shape had eroded long ago, and without the protection of the box, it would have broken into pieces and been swept away.

"What in the world... is this? What is it?!"

In the other box he found a dry, sandy substance.

Neither box contained the treasures of an advanced civilization that Dolchev - and the people who had given him his orders - had hoped for.

"That is the remains of some sort of plant. It's at least one thousand years old so it decayed to something like sand. Inside the other box is the corpse of some animal. Like the plant, it's been in here for years."

"Plants...? Why would something like that...?"

There was a look of puzzlement on Dolchev's face.

Lud had felt the same when Sven showed him the boxes earlier.

For some reason she knew how to open the Door and go inside, but she didn't know the details of what was stored there.

But from deciphering the characters on the boxes, and the messages around the room in a script that only she understood, Sven discovered the secret.

"In that case, what's with this altar?! This small, movable door..."

Dolchev opened the small double window in the middle of the altar-like structure, but there was nothing inside.

"Most likely an instrument that was used to heat up the animal and plant remains to make them edible."

"What? Then.. this is..."

Lud nodded.

"It's a kitchen. And this is an oven or something similar to it." Lud pointed to what they thought was an altar.

It was ridiculous.

Inside the mysterious room, behind a Door built to withstand direct fire from a tank's cannon, was cookware?

It could be the punch line to a joke.

But it wasn't unbelievable.

It was a door with a lock, just as you'd find in any house.

If a monkey with only enough intelligence to brandish a stick looked at a regular locked door, what would they think about it, Lud wondered.

Surely it would wonder exactly how such a thing was made, and what exactly it could do, even questioning whether it was the work of God himself.

It showed just how large the gap was between our knowledge and that of the lost empire.

But why were the Doors deep underground?

According to what Sven discovered, the Door wasn't built underground originally. The whole had been buried.

Perhaps originally this had been some sort of important facility and after it was destroyed they had buried it to hide it away. Those not deemed important might have been buried as they were, without being destroyed.

At any rate, it was the legacy of a civilization whose cause of extinction was completely unknown.

"How idiotic! I went through so much to find... something like this!"

Without and outlet for his anger, Dolchev's body began to tremble in rage.

Lud thought about how much time, money, and manpower he

must have used to get this far.

After all that work, for the punchline to be a kitchen's cooking equipment, whether you were a professional soldier or a special operations spy, it would be impossible not to be shocked.

But now Lud's chance had arrived.

"Milly! Don't move! Just stand still!"

As Lud shouted at Milly, he bounded toward Dolchev.

Moving all of his body - his shoulders, legs, arms and waist - with lightning speed, Lud shaped his hands half way between an open hand and a fist, so they looked like the claws of a fierce beast. Then, stepping with the power of the god of war crushing a demon underfoot, Lud drove his palm heel into Milly's chest as though he was gouging it out.

"Huh?"

A grown man. And an attack by someone with the muscular strength of Lud, who trained his body when he was in the military. Unleashing such force against a small girl of fourteen, would have been enough destructive power to rupture her organs.

But the sound Milly made wasn't a scream of pain, but just the befuddled voice of someone who didn't understand what had just happened.

"Gwah?"

The person who raised an anguished cry of pain was Dolchev, who was standing behind Milly.

"Uckt... Augh... Urgh?! Y-You... what did you do?!"

All the blood vessels in Dolchev's massive body swelled.

"The martial arts of the east are impressive. It's a technique that

can stop and opponent's heart through their armor, called 'The Dragon's Roar'".

The special forces enthusiastically incorporated many fighting styles in their training, including methods to survive without weapons, for environments without proper support.

The Dragon's Roar was a hand-to-hand martial art, invented by an eastern culture from Europea, known as "bujitsu" in their tongue.

Its impact can penetrate the opponent's shield and armor, and even pass straight through the muscle to their organs.

The attack Lud used went through Milly's body and directly to Dolchev's heart.

It was originally used to completely stop and opponent's heart, but Lud had held back before killing Dolchev.

Nonetheless, Dolchev's heartbeat would remain irregular, and the chaotic flow of blood through his body would be painful.

"Ugh... Augh... Uck... **Aaaauuuuuuggh!**"

Tearing at his own chest, Dolchev writhed in agony.

He had great strength not to faint from the pain, but because the pain was proportional to the physical power of his body, he was now experiencing hellish torture.

"Milly, are you okay?!"

Despite his strength, Dolchev couldn't restrain his hostage any longer and Lud rescued the young girl now freed from Dolchev's arms.

"You-... baker... why..."

The fear of being killed still hadn't left Milly and her body shook.

Lud knew that he had done something reckless, risking Milly and himself.

No matter how confused Dolchev had been, Lud's opponent was still a veteran soldier. His body moved with conditioned reflex when beset by an enemy. Lud's attack made use of his opponent's error in thinking Lud wouldn't attack the hostage.

He hadn't use The Dragon's Roar in two year, and if he had failed, he might have hurt or even killed Milly.

"Sorry, Milly..."

"Why... are you apolo-"

Milly was about to reply to Lud, but before she could finish, a shock ran through Lud's leg.

Lud turned and saw Dolchev pointing a gun at him, smoke trailing from the muzzle.

"It's your fault... because of you bastards...!"

The shock to both his body and his mind had robbed the man of his cool judgement. He was directing his seething hatred at whatever was in front of him.

"Unh!"

The wound in Lud's leg was serious.

He wouldn't be able to run away.

Lud only had one choice.

"Fwah?! W-What is this... What are you doing, you damn baker?!"

Lud embraced the young girl tightly, as she spat abuse.

He should be able to use his body as a shield to protect the girl.

"Die! Die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die!"

Deranged, Dolchev tried to fire his gun again with drool dribbling from the corners of his mouth.

But there was another gun shot.

..... Huh?

Lud had been prepared to die, and yet something felt off.

The sound of this shot was different.

"Sheesh... Please be more careful, I'm begging you..."

Sven was standing at the entrance.

In her hands, she was tightly gripping the gun Marlene had been carrying, the liberator that was given to the resistance fighters out of pity.

"Ughwah!"

Dolchev collapsed.

In the split second before Dolchev had fired at Lud, Sven had released a shot from the liberator.

"Phew... huff..."

Feeling relieved, Lud's strength drained from him.

"U-Unh..."

"Oh, sorry..."

Lud realized that Milly was struggling in his arms and flustered, he released her.

By squeezing her tightly to protect her, Lud had made it painful.

"Why... why did you save me... someone like *you*..."

Milly was crying.

"I hate you! If I need to be saved by someone like *you*... T-then I'd rather die!"

As far as Milly was concerned, all of her misfortune was because of Wiltia, because of Lud and others like him.

Lud was sure she wanted to ask him how he dared to show off and pretend to be an ally of justice when he was the cause of all her problems.

"Sorry..."

Lud apologized again.

"But I'd be really put out out if you died. I want you to eat the bread I make."

"Huh?!"

Milly's voice held both surprise and disgust.

"Apples... Those are your favorite right? That's why, next time... I won't bring leftovers, but freshly baked ones! I want you to have apple danish... So that's why..."

Lud couldn't express what he was trying to say.

He didn't want Milly to feel indebted to him, and as he tried to convince her that she wasn't saved by her most hated enemy, Lud piled excuse upon excuse until Milly looked thoroughly confused.

"W-wha..."

Milly's face grew red.

Lud was sure she was thinking, "Idiot, don't be stupid!"

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about, jerk!"

It seemed Lud was right.

Milly ran over to Marlene who was standing with Sven at the entrance.

"What is it with that child! If she doesn't behave, she'll get what she deserves! Completely without charm." Sven muttered in annoyance, rushing past Milly to Lud.

"No, it's fine. I'm fine with that."

Even though Lud had saved her life, Milly still felt the same as before.

And in a way, her capture was the fault of Lud and military people like him.

Lud actually felt a little relieved that Milly was unchanged toward him.

"Master! We need to do something about your wounds!"

"This isn't anything to worry about. It just grazed me."

A hand-to-hand battle would be difficult, and he wouldn't be able to run, but it wasn't anything too important.

On the battlefield, this kind of wound was routine.

"Humans can suffer severe damage to their bodies without being aware of it!"

"Huh...?"

Lud couldn't believe his ears when he heard Sven's response.

"For example, during the Great War, a Sparian on the southern front might say, 'You can cure a wound like this just washing it with

the leftover pasta water.' and then after a few days he might get tetanus... Master?"

"Avei...?"

In spite of himself, Lud said the name of his dear partner.

Hearing Sven use the same words Avei had used when admonishing Lud for being too reckless on the battlefield, he was stunned.

"Um, Master... what are you saying...? I'm Sven..."

If Sven had given Lud a look that said she had no idea why he was questioning her word-for-word, identical choice of words, Lud would have simply taken back what he had said.

Instead, Sven plainly appeared flustered.

Despite the fact that it was impossible to believe that the AI installed in his Hunter Unit from long ago had appeared before him as a young girl.

"Are you..."

Lud began to ask Sven again, but then he noticed something out of the corner of his eye and stopped.

"Where's Dolchev?"

The soldier, who had been unconscious moments before, was nowhere to be found.

The only thing left behind was the gun he had been holding.

Rumble, rumble.

Lud could hear the ominous sound of an engine as if it was the low growl of a demon.

"That couldn't be-"

Before Lud could finish, there was a blast of artillery fire.

CHAPTER 7
YOU ARE THE ONE WHO MADE THE COVENANT

It was a story from a country that had passed out of existence.

Long ago, there was a beautiful young girl.

The silver-haired girl with bewitching red eyes had captured many men's hearts.

But none held the girl's interest.

The girl's reputation reached up to the heavens and even God came down to court her.

God presented her with a variety of treasures to win her favor.

A beautiful jewel from the floor of the deepest ocean.

A golden flower from heaven that would never wilt.

A magnificent dress, woven with the light of the sun.

But no matter what treasures God presented, she would not show him favor.

Finally, God said, "If you become my companion, then I will give the entire world to you."

Finally, the girl accepted God's courtship.

The young girl's name was Europa.

"**The Motherland is great!** The principles of the Motherland are just! Hence, the orders of the Motherland are just!"

Dolchev was screaming wildly.

"The Motherland is not wrong! It cannot be wrong! If it is wrong, then it is right! Mistakes should be smashed and erased from this world!"

After Lud's attack, Dolchev should have been unable to move, let alone yell at the top of his lungs, and yet, as if his fanaticism for his homeland gave him new strength, he spewed bloodied spit as he shouted.

Sven shook her head, furious with herself.

Why hadn't she finished Dolchev off while she could?

Why did she run to Lud instead?

Was it because confirming his safety was the utmost priority?

No!

After Lud told her that he didn't want to kill again, if she took a life, even the life of a man like Dolchev, he might hate her.

Even if only for a moment, Sven thought that.

I did it again, I didn't think about the Captain at all, I just wanted to be the person he would want me to be.

How could she have made such a mistake?

How could she have put herself and him in this situation?!

"Sven... I'm glad... you.. are okay..."

Even while he was spitting up blood, Lud's hoarse words were entirely concerned with Sven's safety.

"Master... why...? why?!"

In that moment, Dolchev found an opening and escaped into the T-3 II outside the Door and fired a shot at Lud and the others.

If the Door had been closed the shot would have hit a huge rock wall, but instead, the artillery shell destroyed most of the antiquities that had disappointed Dolchev, and shattered the room.

The structure came down on them.

Milly and Marlene were only knocked out and escaped serious injury but Sven and Lud weren't as fortunate.

"Sven, look out!"

Lud shielded Sven and half his body trapped beneath a giant boulder.

This is backwards! Sven thought.

It was her duty to protect him.

Until two years ago, it was also like that on the battlefield.

Being his shield and his armor had been her duty.

And yet...

"Sven... Look... at this..."

The amount of blood that was flowing from Lud's lower body, crushed beneath the boulder, exceeded the minimum amount of life support necessary to continue.

Lud reached into his pocket with a trembling hand and took an envelope from his breast pocket.

"Look at this... it's funny... isn't it?"

Written there was an order for Lud to supply bread for two hundred people a day, starting tomorrow.

On the next page, there was a letter from Laurel, the foreman at the mine.

All he had written was one sentence: "It was good."

Laurel had overcome his prejudice toward Lud for being a Wiltian soldier, and saw him as a baker.

"It's going to be even busier from now on... because... I can't... run the numbers... or haggle prices..."

Lud coughed, spitting up thick clots of blood.

"Stop... Master... don't talk..."

Sven covered her eyes.

But the tears didn't come.

She didn't have the ability to discharge liquids unless it was to moisten her eyes.

"That's why... if anything... happened to you... the shop would be in trouble... our... precious... wait... res..." Lud's voice stopped.

"Master..."

Lud's heart had stopped.

His brain had stopped.

All of his vital information told Sven that Lud Langart was dead.

"Next shot! Load the thermite rounds! Burn everyone inside alive!"

Lud's killer was once again shouting in his rasping voice.

Thermite rounds were a type of incendiary shell that would ignite the impact area in flames.

Burn them alive?

These men were going to ignite the body of Sven's master?

Don't make me laugh!

Sven could hear the shells being loaded into the gun barrel of the T-3 II.

Sven picked up the giant rock that had crushed Lud.

No human could pick up a boulder that size.

But Sven could.

Because she wasn't human.

Sven's real name was Svelgen Avei.

She was Lud Langart's partner. She shared the moniker "Silver Wolf" with him.

An android born from among hundreds of Hunter Units, whose soul had formed inside the Rezanium reactor that was both its brain and its engine.

Who yearned for her former master too much, and had escaped from the Weapons Development Bureau to chase after him.

"You damned sorcerer, this junk you made is seriously defective!"

Created by the Principality of Wiltia's Royal Weapons Development Bureau in preparation for the the next war, the Autonomous Humanoid Hunter Unit lifted up the boulder, and turning to face the artillery shot that had just been fired, threw it.

With an explosion and deafening roar, Sven and Dolchev's attacks

neutralized each other with a blast of fire and light.

"What?!"

Sven rushed in front of the flustered Dolchev, who was stunned by sudden situation.

Sven had to kill him. She had to crush him.

She had to kill the man who had killed Lud - No, she had to kill the man who made him give up his life to protect her.

If she was Avei, and Lud was piloting her, this T-3 II wouldn't have been a challenge.

But now she was in a human body.

All she could do was warp the tank's cannon as much as possible.

Nevertheless, Sven was confident that she would win.

Inside her dwelt and entirely different kind of anger.

You dare to wrong me, you insolent vermin?!

Who was "me"? Who was the "insolent vermin"?

Her anger was directed not at Dolchev, but at something else.

Its sensor light were blinking and it was taking aim at Sven for its next attack.

Her anger was directed at the T-3 II itself.

"Stay yourself, swine!"

Sven's two red eyes sparkled as she cried out.

T-3 II's movements stopped.

Its sensors and engine were still on, but weren't functioning.

It was as if it was terrified of the light that overflowed from Sven's red eyes, and had frozen.

"W-What is this?! What happened?!"

"I don't know! All of a sudden it stopped responding to my inputs..."

Sven could hear Dolchev and his subordinates shrieking to each other.

But Sven wasn't finished.

"If you have any shame, then die!" Sven shouted.

Her words were like a proclamation that she was bestowing the final gift of suicide to a group of criminals who had against the king.

As if responding to Sven's voice, the crude crane-like arms of the T-3 II began to move.

But it was not Dolchev and his men inside the tank controlling its arms.

The tank was moving of its own will. Then--

"What's up with this, what in the world is it-"

The T-3 II stabbed at its body, as if to cut open its stomach and squash the passengers inside.

The flowing oil splattered like fresh blood.

Sven hoped that the blood of Dolchev and the others inside was mixed with the oil.

"Phew... whew... What did... I...?"

Breathing heavily and unable to understand how she able to do

what she had, Sven was perplexed.

But a sensation rose inside her that told her this was right.

Sven didn't understand that either, but it didn't matter right now.

"Master..."

Even if Sven had killed a million August Federation soldiers, it wouldn't matter.

She hadn't been able to protect the one person who was most dear to her, and nothing else was important.

What are you saying? With the unbelievable power you hold, that should be something.

There was something inside - was it her soul speaking to her?

"*Huh...?*"

Sven responded to the voice in amazement.

Everything has been entrusted to you, in accordance with the covenant of blood. That's why, this is yours to use as well.

A voice was trying to tell her something, but Sven couldn't understand its meaning.

But something strange was happening.

Suddenly, the rock walls of the mine were giving off light.

The sleeping veins of Rezanite emitted a red glow, and became a multitude of lines that converged at the altar that Sven had told Lud was an ancient oven.

"This... don't tell me..."

Sven had been mistaken.

It was true that this room was something like a kitchen made with the technology of the ancient European Empire.

But it was a different sort of kitchen, created by a people who had built ships that could cross the stars, and had unraveled the mysteries of life.

In order to support the number of people who populated its vast empire, the science of the European Empire gave birth to a miracle.

They invented a machine that could multiply the cells of plants, animals, or anything at all from a single fragment.

This was indeed a kitchen. But it wasn't just used to prepare food.

It was also a factory to produce what would become the food.

The decomposing meat and vegetation weren't brought into the room.

They were made there.

Sven realized that this could also apply to humans, another multicellular organism.

"I can still save him... but..."

Lifting Lud's lifeless body, Sven placed it inside the translucent case of the cellular multiplication device to regenerate.

It was still not enough.

Even if she revived his body, she couldn't revive the beating of his soul - his life energy.

I told you, you have it right...

The voice again echoed in Sven's mind, now sounding a little exasperated.

Sven laid her hand on her chest.

Beneath was a Rezanium micro reactor.

It gave birth to her soul, acted as her engine, and used the red gemstones as its power source.

"....."

Sven turned around and there was the T-3 II, dissolved into a pile of scrap.

On its side the Zeihombomber that Dolchev and his men had brought to destroy the mountain was still loaded and intact, and it held within it enough Rezanite to create several tens of Hunter Units.

"Oh, I see..."

Sven extracted the Zeihombomber from the wreckage and made it resonate with her own Rezanium reactor.

The swelling red light entered Sven's body, and then slowly moved over to Lud's regenerating body.

Thump... Thump...

His white skin was tinged with red.

His chest began to slowly move up and down.

Sven heard the sound of his brainwaves, his breath and heartbeat, and she knew the he was returning to life.

While Sven confirmed that his body - and his life - were being revived, bit by bit, Sven thought about the events of that day two years ago.

Do you remember, Lud?

On your last day in the military, you cleaned every inch of my body.

You said, "I want to clean the interior too, but I'm scared I'll break something if I miss with the equipment." and you removed the frayed ends of my seat and cleaned out the mud between my manipulator.

After you finished, you sat down in my seat.

You were inside of me.

"It's scary..." you quietly mumbled.

"... What?"

"Whoa?! You're turned on?"

I had been turned on the whole time, but just didn't have anything particular to say.

You didn't need me anymore. For you to live a different life, in a different world, I had become unnecessary. What would you want me to say?

"Well... I've always been a soldier. I wonder if I'm going to make it as a baker... I'm nervous."

"You'll make it because that's what you want. You wanted it enough to be discharged."

And enough to abandon me.

"Yeah, I have to bake the bread that those two would have baked... No, I don't have to, I want to."

You had told me about what had happened in Lapchuricka.

I knew how profound your feelings of guilt were, and that you had

searched for a way to atone for your past.

You found an answer.

Abandoning your weapons, the battlefield, and me, you found your path by becoming a baker.

"I wouldn't be scared if you were with me, though."

"What?"

You had a self-deprecating laugh. You knew there was no way young could keep me with you, but I understood. You meant what you said.

"When you're with me, I'm not scared. But from now on I have to go alone, so I am frightened."

Were you also hoping that I could stay by your side?

"... Thanks for everything."

You stood up.

In spite of myself, I called out to you.

"Captain! You were the greatest master I could ask for. May the fortune of war smile upon you."

Something was wrong, I thought to myself. This wasn't what I wanted to tell you.

But searching through my language database, I wasn't able to find suitable words for what I wanted to say.

"I'm not your master. I'm your partner."

You told me, and smiled.

It was a warm and gentle smile.

You didn't realize it yourself. You believed some nonsense that you couldn't smile anymore. But you were wrong. You were smiling.

It's possible that I'm the only one who has seen it.

I didn't want to be separated from you.

I wanted to be with you forever.

Even off the battlefield, I wanted to be by your side to support you.

I wanted to see more of your smile.

Yes... I finally understood.

I love you.

"Unh... hm...?"

Lud woke up.

He stepped out of the case, and touched his body all over with a look of curiosity on his face, unable to understand what had happened.

"Sven? Am I alive...?"

Standing there, and asking a bone-headed question that almost ruined the moment, was Sven's beloved master.

"Master!"

Sven nearly pounced on him.

If she used all her strength to hug him, she was capable of shattering the bones in his barely revived body.

She hugged him carefully, with all the love inside her.

"Master! Master! Master! Master! Mas...ter..."

And for the first time, Sven cried.

They weren't tears of sadness. They weren't for moistening her eyes.

They were tears of joy, overflowing from the bottom of Sven's heart.

INTERLUDE

At the Royal Weapons Development Bureau - where the Hunter Units were created, turning the tide in the previous war - the deeper inside the building, the more stringent the security, until finally even the general of Wiltia's army couldn't enter without permission.

In the farthest point of the Bureau's underground, the director, Daian Fortuner, sat in a chair, humming to himself as he listened to a young, red-haired girl.

"... That is everything I have to report about Svelgen Avei's activities in Organbaelz."

"Good work! Well, well, well that is quite an interesting outcome, isn't it?"

When Sven had escaped from the research facility, Daian dispatched the red-haired girl - Rebecca - to pursue her.

"But... this Dolchev... he's quite the idiot, isn't he...? It's already been a year since Pelfe was annexed. Since the middle of the Great War, that area has belonged to Wiltia. If there was something important there, I would have long ago had my hands on it."

In order to maintain their national identity, the August Federation showed no tolerance for dissenting opinions and promptly purged them all.

Daian was amused at that thought that because they had killed so many of their own people, the August were now starting to run low on talent.

"Oh well... Fools do foolish things and die in foolish ways over and over throughout this world. It's not uncommon. More importantly,

Rebecca, you said Sven escaped this Bureau to chase after this Lud Langart?"

"Affirmative."

In contrast with her lovely appearance, Rebecca answered Daian in a cold, robotic voice.

"Hehe... So he's the man she chose of her own free will, the man she loves..."

The Autonomous Humanoid Hunter Units were created to be immortal soldiers, a weapon similar to humans, but without their limitations. But these official justifications were nothing more than a means to gather the budget, materials and manpower for the research that Daian was in fact trying to conduct.

"Rebecca, you know the origin behind the name of Europea, don't you?"

"Affirmative. Records indicate it was named after an empire that existed one thousand years ago."

"That's right. Do you know the origin behind the name of the European Empire, too?"

"Negative. There is no valid answer in the database."

That was correct.

The creation myths of the long-lost empire were not passed down because no one knew the reason for its demise.

"It's the name of a girl from a time long, long ago. And she was so unbelievably beautiful that finally even God came down from heaven to marry her."

It was a story that many thought was nothing more than a far too fantastic fairytale, and Daian told it with a grandiose tone of voice.

"God said to the girl, Europa, "If you become my companion, I will give the entire world to you." And, the rules of the European Empire claimed to be descendants of Europa. So they believed that this world was their own."

The story might just be an affirmation that the European Empire's rule was approved by God, and therefore nothing more than a divine right of kings.

But Daian thought there was more to the myth.

All myths and legends are based on some reality.

The European Empire that existed one thousand years ago was a civilization with technology far superior to the modern era. Nothing was beyond the realm of possibility.



Daian decided to verify the myth, and tried to revive a descendent of the ancient empire's rulers.

He got hold of remains that had been miraculously uncovered, analyzed the genetic information and successfully reproduced the genetic code. Something extraordinary occurred.

The Doors, which held the legacy of the lost Empire, - impenetrable even by cannon fire - opened before the genes of the imperial rulers.

Daian was sure.

The world that God gave was "an imperial civilization that has a mighty power, enough to take over the world as your own."

Dolchev's belief that, "Ancient doors will open with the blood of the promised maiden." was most likely misinformation given to him by Daian's apprentice, who had obtained limited knowledge about Daian's research before he defected to August.

Other Doors like the one in Baelz Mine existed in large numbers throughout the world.

He had opened several already, but the Doors concealing even more powerful artifacts would not open with the genetic material he had cultivated in the lab.

Something more human was necessary.

Daian would bring Europa back. Using the cultivated cells as a base, he used machinery for most of her organs and substituted her heart and brain with a Rezanium reactor.

He had succeeded in making her seem human, but it still wasn't enough.

She needed her own will, her own spirit, and her own soul.

He was reviving the girl loved by God.

But in order to be loved, she also had to love.

So Daian transplanted Avei's soul into Europa's body, and brought Sven into the world.

"She's the key to unlocking the wisdom of the world. And the man she loves will stop the kings claiming to be the imperial descendants, and he will certainly become a just ruler..."

Daian was thoroughly enjoying himself.

He couldn't help but be happy the being he had brought into this world would turn it upside down from its very core.

"Inquiry."

Rebecca raised her hand.

"What is it?"

"If she is so important, is it a good idea to leave her where she is?"

While August's guesses were incorrect, they knew what was required to open the Door, so the intelligence agencies of the other countries might already be at work.

Even Wiltia's military and its nobility weren't invulnerable to temptation.

Someone might overhear something and try to have her killed.

"Rebecca... Do you know the most important element for making love strong?"

Rebecca Sharlahart was an Autonomous Humanoid Hunter Unit he had created, model number SA-R2.

Daian understood exactly what she could do, and what she did and didn't know.

"Negative. There is not a valid answer in the database."

There wouldn't be, would there, was what Daian stopped himself from saying."

"Adversity... Overcoming hardships, hand in hand with the person you love, nurtures that love and makes it stronger. It's not enough for her to become aware of her feelings. When she realizes her true desires..."

Daian walked to the other side of the room, where hidden in the inner most part of the Development Bureau was the most classified of classified information, and put his hand out.

"**This Door will open!**"

Over a hundred meters tall and firmly shut, Daian placed his palm on a Door far larger than the one at the bottom of Baelz Mine.

EPILOGUE
THE RED EYED WAITRESS

A month after the curtain had closed on an incident lost to history - the incident at the mine - Tockerbrot had grown busy in many ways.

With the large contract with the mine as proof of the bakery's success, Lud and Sven received financing from the bank and cleared the debt from the shady loan shark.

The official story about the incident at the mine was that Lud happened to be passing by and stopped a raid by some bandits who had earlier attacked the church. The townspeople were grateful to Lud, which led to lots of new customers in the bakery.

Tockerbrot's reputation grew day by day, and soon customers came from neighboring towns to buy Lud's bread.

"Oooohh, busy, busy, busy."

Thirty minutes before the store was set to open, Sven ran from left to right.

"Sven? Where does this go?"

Jacob had come to help out.

"That goes in the third box there. If you put it in the fourth box, the shape won't match, so be careful."

Lud was delivering bread to the mine.

With the large contracts and the increase in daily customers, the personnel and equipment in the bakery were working at one hundred percent.

"Phew... This is completely different from a month ago! Sven, I'm demanding a paycheck."

"Ohohoho, don't worry, Jacob. We will abide by Wiltia's labor laws and pay your wage. But, I should be asking you - can you continue to work here?"

"That might be a good idea... Our shop isn't getting much work right now, so I could use a little extra cash."

Since Jacob's grandfather had collaborated with the terrorists, he was a person of interest in the investigation. Lud had appealed to government and since Jacob's grandfather had cooperated under duress, the matter was soon settled.

However, because he had been shown mercy by the Wiltian soldier who had been the target of all of his hatred, he had aged noticeable, and became unable to work.

"Jacob... That's... I'm sorry..."

It had been his grandfather's own fault, and Sven and Lud had done everything they could, but the fact that his grandfather's misdeeds burdened Jacob made them both feel extremely unhappy.

"Don't worry about it. It's a miracle the workshop was able to get by this long."

Jacob smiled to tell Sven that she didn't need to remain so gloomy.

It was a smile that made one think that perhaps he was someone of some importance.

"Don't you think it's time you guys hired another person?"

"Yes, we put up a help wanted poster, but--"

Ratlle, roll.

Although there was still time before the bakery opened for the day,

the door to the shop opened.

"Oh, please excuse us, we aren't open yet-- Tch!"

Standing in the doorway was the sister from the church and former terrorist, Marlene.

"Good morning. Is Lud here?"

"Master is out on business. We're busy and have no time to talk, so please leave as soon as possible ♪."

A beaming smile came to Sven's face but her response to Marlene dripped poison.

"That's fine, I didn't come to see you anyway. Where did Lud go? I have something to talk to him about."

Marlene didn't back down and replied with a beaming smile of her own.

"I beg your pardon, Master has come down with an illness that does not allow him within fifty meters of any ill-natured nuns, so I'll ask you to be on your way."

"Hehehe, I'm not really sure you're one to be calling someone else ill-natured, are you?"

Marlene's smile began to twitch in anger.

Since the events at the mine, Marlene's attitude towards Lud had changed.

The change was small and Lud didn't notice it, but when he brought his alms to the Church, Marlene seemed closer to him.

Sven observed that somewhere along the line Marlene had stopped calling him "Mister Lud".

What are you doing forcing yourself on him like that, Sven had

thought to herself.

"Nyeh! Master isn't here, not that I'd let you see him you old witch! You're way too slow!"

The two glared at each other, and looked like they were on the verge of clawing one another.

Jacob muttered in exasperation. "Hey... Let's get back to work. Um... Marlene? Do you have business here?"

"Oh, yes... Where did that child run off to, I wonder..."

Marlene looked behind her, but the young girl she had come with was gone.

The young girl was hiding behind the shop.

She was scared. Not only was that waitress terrifying, but she didn't know what to say to Lud.

"Milly... Is that you?"

Lud had just come back in his new and slightly less rusted truck.

"Ah, ah uh..."

Looking at Lud's face, Milly trembled.

She wasn't frightened. She was bewildered and had lost her nerve.

"Um...?"

Looking perplexed, Lud approached her.

"So, how was it?"

The other day, Lud brought the apple danish to the church for Milly.

It was a masterpiece, with Lud paying close attention to everything from the type of apple to the liqueur he added for more flavor.

Milly accepted it, but had disappeared into the church without saying a word.

"Hmph!"

With a look of determination on her face, Milly took something from her pocket and thrust it towards Lud.

"I want some apple bread..."

She was holding coins. It was the pocket money she earned from helping Marlene at the church.

"You came here... to buy some of my bread?"

Lud looked at Milly as if he couldn't believe what she was saying.

"Y-You're a baker, right?! Sell me some!"

This wasn't what Milly wanted to say, and she felt like tearing her head off.

"I'm sorry... for being mean."

Milly said this as if the words were being wrung out of her.

She hated Wiltians. She hated soldiers. And she still hated this baker too.

But, he had saved her and Marlene. He had protected everyone at the church.

She thought she should give him a proper thank you.

But she couldn't admit this to Lud, and had come as a customer.

"But you said you'd never eat my bread..."

She had always said this. That she would never eat any bread that he made.

"The apple danish... was good..."

Milly scowled to hide her embarrassment.

She hated Wiltians. She hated soldiers. And she still hated this baker after all.

But his bread looked so appetizing.

She ate it in hiding. It was incredibly delicious.

"Hurry up and sell me some... Gwah?!"

Lud suddenly hugged her.

Surprised, Milly struggled a little, but she couldn't bring herself to pull free.

Lud had the same smell that he had that night in the mine when he risked his life to protect Milly, and hugged her, telling her to live for herself.

It was a warm embrace and a nice smell.

It was the same smell of wheat and a baking oven that she remembered her beloved Father had.

"Tha... Thank you..."

Lud was crying. Tears of joy.

Is this guy crazy? His place is so unpopular that someone coming in to buy bread makes him cry?

In her head, Milly mercilessly hurled abuse at Lud.

"Are you dense...?"

She hated Wiltians. She hated soldiers. This baker was an idiot, but right now she didn't hate him as much as he she had.

"... J-Jerk..."

As she spoke, she grabbed Lud's clothes with her small hands.

She reached out as if she was trying to return Lud's embrace.

Her face grew hot. But it wasn't an unpleasant feeling.

Lud was an adult, but somehow Milly even found herself thinking that he was cute.

"Master, are you back from the mi... huh?!"

Having heard the truck, Sven came out and saw Lud's crying face as he hugged the young girl.

"**M-M-M-M-M-Master!**"

Rushing over to them with enough force to break the sound barrier, Sven tore Milly away from Lud.

"How dare you! You've got some nerve making a pass at him!"

Milly was the person being hugged, so it was unreasonable for Sven to blame it on her.

But that wasn't what Sven was thinking about.

Milly's face was aglow, much like Marlene's when she looked at Lud lately.

She had the eyes of a young girl in love.

"Y-You're wrong! It's not like that!"

Milly tried to protest but she couldn't hide her red cheeks.

"What do you mean 'that'?!"

Sven was right after all.

The color showed in her eyes. Sven was convinced that Milly's strategy was to show Lud a little bit of gentleness and kindness and snare him for herself.

"Listen to me, Sven! Milly--"

"**Maasssttteeerrr!**"

Lud seemed agitated as he tried to explain what had happened.

Sven cut him off and brought her reproachful face close to his.

"Y-Yes?"

Under the pressure of Sven's gaze, Lud instinctively cowered.

"Listen, my heart and body are for you and you alone!"

"Eh?"

Sven had asked herself why she desired to make Lud happy.

Why did she want Lud to treat her as someone dear to him?

At last, she had found the answer.

His smile. She loved it.

She wanted to see him smile much more.

The smile in his heart was for her even though she was nothing more than a weapon.

Nevertheless, there were too many rivals around him.

And the number of rivals had grown while she wasn't looking. This time it was a young girl!

At this rate, Sven would feel more at ease in the middle of a crossfire.

Sven was beside herself with worry and anxiety.

She had to make this one thing clear.

"Master, is mine and mine alone!"

Before Lud could reply, Sven put her lips on Lud's.

This person is precious to me.

I'm not going to let anyone else have him!

Sven vowed in her heart to keep this promise.



In the mining town of Organbaelz, there is a small bakery named Tockerbrot, with a frightening but earnest baker, and his cute smiling waitress.

If you ever visit this town, I highly recommend stopping by the bakery.

If you do, and if you happen to be especially lovely, please don't be surprised and don't be disturbed if the red eyes of the waitress shoot sparks in your direction.

END OF VOLUME 1