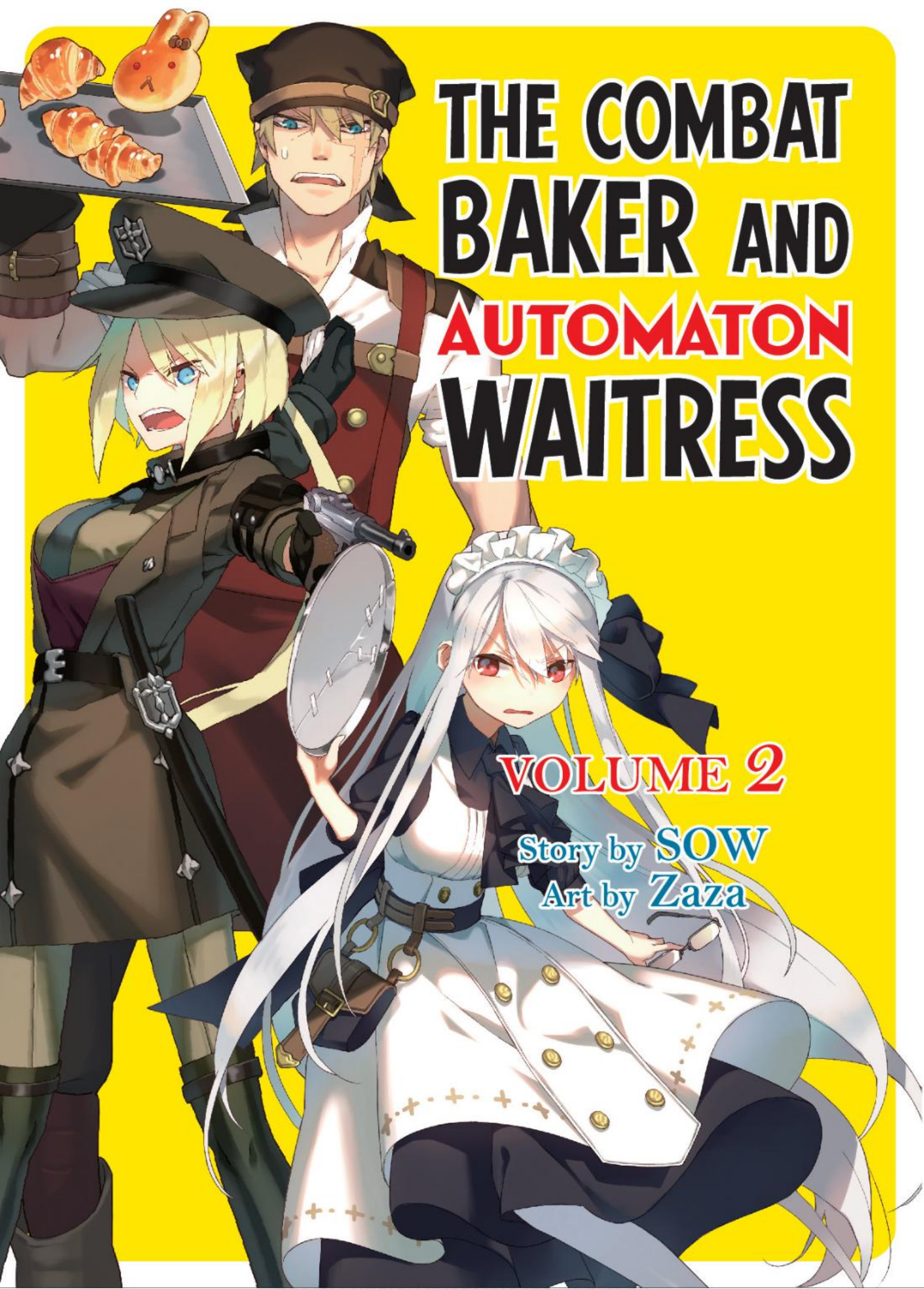
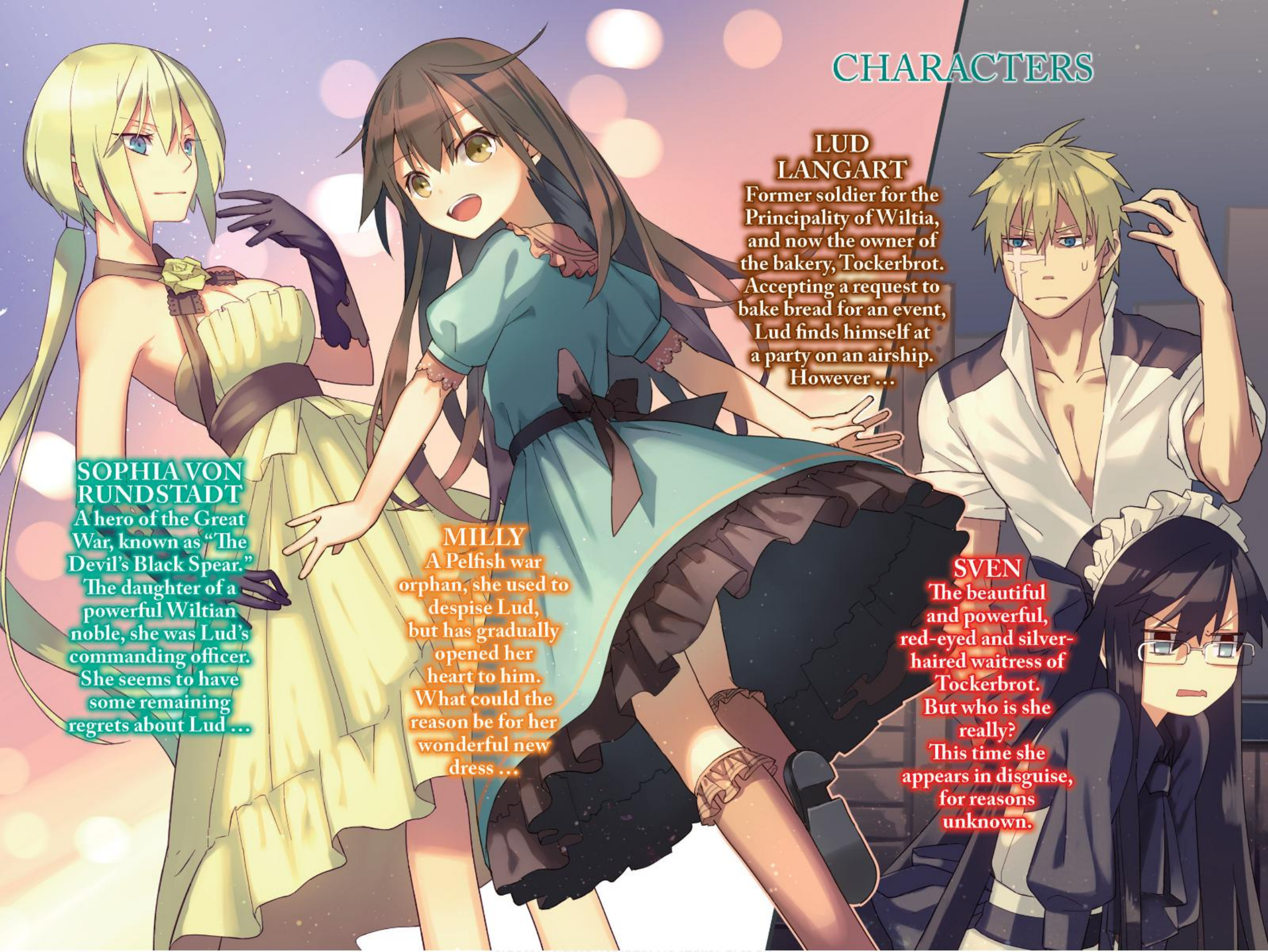

THE COMBAT BAKER AND AUTOMATON WAITRESS
VOLUME 2
Story by SOW
Art by Zaza

THE COMBAT BAKER AND AUTOMATON WAITRESS 2




CHARACTERS
LUD LANGART
Former soldier for the Principality of Wiltia, and now the owner of the bakery, Tockerbrot. Accepting a request to bake bread for an event, Lud finds himself at a party on an airship. However …
SOPHIA VON RUNDSTADT
A hero of the Great War, known as "The Devil's Black Spear." The daughter of a powerful Wiltian noble, she was Lud's commanding officer. She seems to have some remaining regrets about Lud …
MILLY
A Pelfish war orphan, she used to despise Lud, but has gradually opened her heart to him. What could the reason be for her wonderful new dress …
SVEN
The beautiful and powerful, red-eyed and silver-haired waitress of Tockerbrot. But who is she really? This time she appears in disguise, for reasons unknown.


"Tch … Damn you …"
Sophia ground her teeth in frustration, which only increased her opponent's pleasure.

THE COMBAT BAKER

AND AUTOMATON WAITRESS

VOLUME 2

STORY BY SOW

ART BY ZAZA

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prologue
Chapter 1: An Invitation to a Party in the Sky
Chapter 2: Military Town Reunion
Chapter 3: The Little Stowaway
Chapter 4: The Festivities Begin
Chapter 5: The Cowards' Fate
Chapter 6: Sophia Von Rundstadt's Pride
Chapter 7: The End Bomb
Epilogue
Afterword

What exactly does "Hell" look like?

Everyone has imagined the scene at least once, and without a doubt, that nightmarish vision was nearly identical to the scene playing out now.

Raging flames and deafening cries.

Some were crying out in pain, some calling for help, and others cursing their own fate.

Some were desperately shouting the names of their loved ones.

What had been an unworried, peaceful townscape a few moments ago had turned into a chaotic pandemonium, after a blinding flash of explosive flame and light.

From an unscalable height, murderous will stormed down, and with each thundering explosion, innumerable lives were instantly snuffed out.

"Maria! Cynthia!"

This man's cry was one among so many others.

One among a multitude of similar cries.

His was just one desperate cry among the incalculable despair brought about that day, and throughout that night.

PROLOGUE

The fragrance of freshly baked bread is the smell of happiness.

Who once said this?

One day, in a corner of the small mining town of Organbaelz, the Tockerbrot bakery was filled to the brim with that smell of happiness.

"Alright, try a bite."

The owner of the bakery handed the freshly baked bread to the two young customers visiting his shop.

"This bread … it's actually very pretty."

One of the customers—Jacob—let out a gasp of admiration, as if the slice of colored bread he was looking at was a box of jewels.

"This is called 'pain de seigle noix raisins.' It's rye bread with walnuts and raisins baked inside, but … I went even further and tried adding dried oranges, raspberries and cherries as well."

The reds, oranges, and purples were beautiful, as if they were painted on a rye bread canvas, and together with the fruity fragrance, it aroused one's appetite.

Munch, munch … "T-This is delicious …"

Jacob's eyes widened in surprise.

"It isn't sickly sweet at all. You think the fruity fragrance will attack and overwhelm your nose, but a delicious sweetness expands inside your mouth … and yet, the aftertaste doesn't last, and it's actually quite refreshing!"

It was like a magnificent dance, performed by a woman of peerless beauty.

It was so wonderful that a sigh would escape one's lips after finishing the last few bites.

"Really?"

Unexpectedly, after hearing Jacob's extravagant praises, there was no change of expression on the young owner's face.

If anything, his stern face only stiffened, looking even grimmer.

"Hearing you praise my work makes me very happy!"

Or one would think he looked stern, but actually his face showed the man's utmost happiness.

Lud Langart, the young owner of Tockerbrot.

He was a very warm-hearted man, and trustworthy and serious almost to a fault.

The greatest joy in his life was seeing the smile on a person's face as they ate the bread he baked.

One could say he was a stalwart and good man.

However, he had one enormous fault.

Lud's face was frightening.

He had a sharp gaze and his mouth was tightly shut in a thin line.

A large cross-shaped scar was carved into his left cheek.

On top of this, he had a massive physique, one that was remarkable even among the people of Wiltia, who prided themselves on their strong, stout bodies.

Lud's legs were as thick as logs of wood, and the mass of his chest was visible even through his work clothes.

His thick arms and giant hands looked like they could break an iron fire poker in two.

Finally, what he found to be the most difficult of all was —

"Um … you're happy right? Yeah, that must be it."

Jacob nodded, as if Lud's stern demeanor was the same as always, and too familiar to be shocking.

At a glance, his stiff, stone-like expression didn't change, but his heavier breathing was a sign that he was euphoric because someone praised the bread he had worked hard to create.

This was Lud's defect: He was extremely bad at smiling.

It wasn't that he was born with this surly and unfriendly look.

Immediately after he was born, he cried, of course, but he smiled too.

However, because of events in his past, by the time he turned twenty, consciously making a smile had become almost impossible.

And because of his inability to smile, up until just a few months before, Tockerbrot had been in danger of going out of business.

If an elderly customer with a weak heart walked through the door, seeing such a large, intimidating man would be quite enough to send her into a fit of convulsions.

"Milly, what do you think?"

Lud asked the other customer, a young girl from the orphanage on the hill near the outskirts of town.

Munch, munch, munch … munch munch munch …

The young girl with her hair tied in two impressive braids was completely focused on stuffing the pain de seigle noix into her mouth.

"This isn't really worth all that praise, actually."

Despite being a few years younger, Jacob shrugged his shoulders and looked at Milly as if he was looking at a baby.

"What?!"

Milly then noticed the two people staring at her.

Although she looked younger, Milly was fourteen.

Little by little she was growing more aware of herself as a woman, so it was very embarrassing to be seen gorging herself on the delicious bread.

"What the heck are you two looking at?!"

Milly shouted, her face turning red.

"S-Sorry … Um, what do you think? Did it taste good?"

"W-Well ... You're on the right track."

Milly answered Lud's flustered apology with a sulky look.

Hearing this from her was high praise, since until a few months before, she had hurled cutting words at Lud any chance she had, often telling him that she would "never eat any bread made by someone like *you*."

"Is that so … In that case, this should be fine, shouldn't it?"

That day, Lud was testing out his newest baked creation and had asked his two young regulars, Milly and Jacob, to sample it.

This wasn't to say that there was no one else to try it for him.

He specifically wanted the opinion of people their age.

"Is this because of that thing? You're planning on using it for that?"

"Yeah, that's it … After all, children like sweet food, right?"

Lud answered Jacob's question with a grave look and a serious tone in his voice.

His expression was grave to begin with, but it seemed to cloud over and become even more solemn.

"What … Did something happen?"

"Oh, you didn't hear, Milly? You see, we have a new job to provide lunch to the elementary school."

It was difficult for a privately owned bakery to turn a profit if it only served individual customers.

Lud, in particular, required larger clients because he had taken a considerable loan to offset years of financial strife and his initial startup investment.

"They've started giving out food now? That's awesome."

Milly quietly muttered this to herself.

Milly attended school during the era of the economically fragile Republic of Pelfe, at a time when the country couldn't afford to concern itself with the nutritional needs of the nation's school children.

This was one of many benefits that had come about with the country's annexation by Wiltia.

"Weeelll, I wouldn't say that. The bread was hard and tasted bad. It was really awful."

"I see … That's probably because they used old grain and shoddy milling. Using cheap ingredients is the quickest way to cut costs and increase profits."

Lud replied to Jacob, who was shaking his head in disgust at the memory of the terrible bread.

"More than likely, they struck a hard bargain to buy grain stored during the war for nothing more than a trifle. It's a terrible story."

"That's it, that's it! Being handed bread like that feels like punishment more than food."

The supplier that the Organbaelz elementary school had previously hired did business solely based on low prices, and was said not to be of high quality.

"I didn't mean it like that …"

Milly had meant something different in saying that the school serving lunch was awesome.

"Hm? Then what *do* you mean, Milly?" asked Lud.

"Shut up! Stop asking me about every little thing!"

Milly yelled back at him.

"So, then what happened?"

"Right, right, so then, instead of that horrible bread, we started getting Lud's bread."

Trying to suppress his grin, Jacob continued.

"The kids around my age are fine with the old stuff. We've gotten used to it. But it was different for the kids in the lower grades."

When Lud visited the school to drop off the bread, the smell that floated from the bread case had delighted the children.

Hearing the children's voices, Lud instinctively turned around to see where they were coming from.

The children saw his face—the same face that could paralyze a grown man if he came across Lud on the street at night.

"Maaaan … It's incredible hearing forty kids all crying at once, let me tell you. I could hear it all the way from my classroom."

"I … really screwed up …"

It might have been fine if Lud was wearing his usual stiff expression.

But at that moment, Lud made an effort to show off the brightest smile he could muster.

He marshalled all the muscles in his face and tried to create an expression that looked like a smile.

"W-what the heck kind of face did you make for that to happen?"

Milly said, slightly exasperated.

"Hmm, well did you ever read the book, *The Troll Under the Bridge*?"

"Oh, Marlene read that to me."

The *Troll Under the Bridge* was a classic picture book read to all children brought up in the region.

"I heard that Lud looked almost exactly like the troll in the book when he tries to eat the travelers who cross over his bridge."

They all screamed out "The troll's here!" and the whole group of children become slightly hysterical.

"It was even enough to cause one child to piss himself. So, after that, the school asked for someone other than Lud to deliver the bread."

"Oh, that's why *she* ain't around …"

Milly understood now why the girl who should have been in the store was absent.

"That's right, that's why it was so easy for you to come here, right?"

"You got something you want to say to me?"

"No no, nothing at all."

Jacob feigned ignorance as Milly glared at him, her cheeks tinged with red.

"Anyway, with this and that happening, Lud ended up with quite a shock."

"I was just … happy. That's all …"

For the man who, until a few months ago, had spent all his days baking bread that no one ate, seeing children charmed by the smell of his bread and running toward it with a smile was like a scene from his dreams.

"Yeah … When I think about how I caused all those kids to cry …"

It was profoundly shocking to him that he had erased their smiles with his own terrifying face.

"Ever since then, this guy's been absorbed in making his latest creation."

In order to bring smiles back to the faces of those children, Lud had tried many different ideas, and through trial and error, finally arrived at the pain de seigle noix raisins he served today.

"So that's what it was … But—"

"Yeah, I know what you're going to say."

Jacob looked at Milly, who finally understood the situation, and nodded his head as if the next words were too painful to say.

Even taking their biases as Lud's friends into account, his baking was the best of the best.

Lud had worked in a bakery ten years ago, and while he already had the basics down, during Tockerbrot's business slump, he continued to single-mindedly polish his skills.

Not only would one have a difficult time finding a bakery of this caliber in the former Pelfish capital of Ponapalas, it would even be hard to find a shop to rival Lud's in Berun, the capital of Wiltia.

"There isn't a problem with the taste …"

Even the crying children didn't hate Lud's bread itself.

In fact, they ate all of it, without leaving even a crumb.

"There has to be a way … a way to convey that I'm not scary …"

The large man nodded to himself with his arms crossed, deep in thought.

This guy really is earnest …

Jacob gave a wry smile.

Lud's extreme sincerity was, little by little, starting to be appreciated, and while there were still many people who

were scared of him, the number who had grown to love his breads was increasing as well.

And while it could be said that it was only because of his role in solving a certain incident there, Lud had even managed to win over the workers at the mine who had been standoffish and threatening toward him before.

Then …

"It's fine right? I mean … I don't … really think you're that scary, anyway …"

Milly mumbled as she chose her words awkwardly.

Just like the miners, until recently Milly had an intense loathing for Lud, but now she spoke warmly to him as well.

"Thanks, Milly … for cheering me up."

Lud gave a friendly smile—well, it was actually quite far from friendly, but Lud gave the gentlest expression he could summon as he thanked Milly.

"I t-told you … that's not what I meant!"

Milly yelled with her reddest face of the day.

Well, this guy won't give up anyway …

Super good-natured, serious to a fault, and unbelievably stubborn.

Jacob knew that this was the type of man Lud Langart was.

Ring-a-ling.

The small bell on the bakery door rang.

It had been set up to announce when a customer came in, but the shop had yet to open for the day.

A young girl wearing a black skirt with a pure white maid's apron entered, with beautiful silver hair trailing behind her.

"Master! I've returned!"

She gave a wide smile that seemed to sparkle and twinkle.

She looked the polar opposite of Lud—not only in her physique and gender—but particularly in her smile. She was Sven, the waitress at Tockerbrot.

She had just come back from the delivery she had completed in Lud's stead.

"Oh Jacob, you're here. Thank you for your patronage ♪. And, it seems like we have one more, too …"

Sven's million-watt smile clouded over in an instant as she looked suspiciously at Milly.

"W-What? You're saying that I can't come here?!"

"No, not at all … Let's just make sure you aren't making any passes at my Master, okay?"

Sven's cold answer warned Milly.

"How many times do I have to tell you?! It ain't like that!"

"There's nothing more horrendous than a young girl with a mouth like that!"

The two quarreled as if they were each about to bite the other's head off.

"How can I put it … It's tough being such a lady-killer, isn't it?"

Sipping the milk tea that had come free of charge, Jacob looked teasingly at Lud.

"Hm? Yeah … wait, what?"

The lady-killer in question tilted his head, looking as if he didn't understand what Jacob meant.

"This guy's hopeless."

Lud's cluelessness was considerable if it was enough to exasperate even a child.

"Master, I finished the deliveries! This goes without saying, but your bread was popular with everyone today, too ♪."



Sven sounded triumphant, as if she was announcing her own grand achievements on the battlefield.

"Really? That's good … Oh, leave me the empty case, I'll clean it up."

Lud reached out toward the case Sven was holding.

"Ah!"

"Oh …"

At that moment, the tips of their fingers brushed lightly against one another.

"Oh, umm … sorry!"

In a panic, Lud seemed to leap back as he moved his hand away from Sven's, but a smile appeared on Sven's face that was slightly different from the one she had earlier.

"Please … that wasn't worth apologizing to me about, was it?"

It was a smile that said even her master's flustered figure was lovely and charming.

"I uh … gotta get back to the kiln. Excuse me!"

As Sven approached to try and touch him again, Lud retreated to the kiln area further inside the bakery, like a child running in fright from a puppy.

"Oh Master, whatever am I going to do with you? ♪."

Despite her chiding, Sven giggled in glee.

"What's up with you?"

"Oh nothing, nothing, Master is in high spirits today."

"Huh?"

Sven looked both embarrassed and delighted as she answered Jacob, who tilted his head in confusion.

A fast three months had passed since Sven first came to the bakery.

She was the driving force behind Tockerbrot's revival from earlier financial struggles, due to her experiences during a certain incident, and through it, the young girl had finally come to understand her own feelings.

She loved the owner of Tockerbrot, Lud Langart.

After becoming aware of her feelings, she could no longer control herself.

One day, leaping at him and almost forcing herself on him, Sven gave him her precious first kiss.

Oh come now, Master, it's been three months since that happened, you don't need to be so wary. But, but, but that's also proof that Master looks at me as a woman … And that means, oh that means, that's just …

"Kyaaaa!"

"W-where'd that come from!?"

Jacob pulled back from Sven who had been so overcome

by her emotions for Lud that she raised her voice suddenly.

"Oh, um, my apologies."

Seeing the person she loved puzzled, embarrassed and flustered by her advances gave her an unspeakably good, almost sadistic, pleasure.

Well honestly … I might have gone a bit too far.

With this thought, Sven became a little more level-headed.

Even so, I thought he would be more mature about it than he has been …

She took pride in the fact that she was closer to Lud than anyone else.

This wasn't overconfidence. She and Lud once had a physical relationship when they were of one body and one mind.

But that was only for a two or three year period in Lud's life, and there was no way to know about the time before they met.

Nevertheless, when Sven considered his age, and wondered what personal relationships he had formed, she was sure he had dated other women, and it wouldn't be strange if he had previous relationships, as well.

Has Master really gone through life without any female

companionship?

In that case, even a normal junior high school student would be more worldly and experienced than Lud.

But, but … you could say that his naivety is part of his charm …

"Teeheeheeheeheehee!!"

"W-What is it now?!"

Jacob moved further away from Sven as she abruptly started to giggle to herself again.

Well, I suppose that just means that no one has had eyes sharp enough to recognize Master's special appeal.

Coming to this conclusion, Sven gave a slight snort through her nose, looking triumphant and proud.

"I'm leaving."

Milly looked somewhat bored, and got down from her chair, attempting to quickly leave the bakery.

At that moment, Lud returned with great haste from where he was hiding in the back of the shop.

"Milly, wait!"

He was holding a takeout bag stuffed with the leftover pain de seigle noix raisins.

"If you like, you can share this with everyone. Thank you … for coming and sampling these for me."

Lud handed the bag to Milly.

She lived in a small church orphanage at the top of the hill.

The orphanage was very poor and the children were starved for something sweet.

Convinced that the children would be delighted by his new bread, Lud handed her the bag with only good intentions.

"Um … uh … wha … tha … ah …"

However, Lud's fingers slightly brushed Milly's, and the young girl's face grew red and she cast down her eyes.

It was just like Lud's exchange with Sven moments before.

"U-Um … Marlene's … she's studying … how to … m-make tea and … said … to c-come visit …"

"Is she now? Tell her that I'm looking forward to it."

Lud gave a warm reply to Milly's faltering and incoherent words.

Marlene was the sister at the church, and she acted as both a mother and an older sister to Milly.

"Um … then … I'm leaving!"

Then, exactly as Lud had done moments before, she ran out of the bakery as though she was trying to escape.

"W-Well now …"

Sven's mouth twitched in anger.

Lud's frightening look was enough to send the elderly into convulsions and to make children cry, and his life had been colored by a fair amount of misfortune, but that didn't mean that someone couldn't glimpse beyond his face and see him for who he was.

Examples could be found in this young girl who used to yell at him and swear that she'd never eat his bread, and the terrorist agent who concealed her true identity by hiding in town, or …

"How incredibly annoying."

Or the AI installed inside the humanoid war machine that Lud had previously piloted.

During the Great European War that continued for over ten years, there was a man admired as a hero.

That man was none other than Lud Langart.

Piloting one of the humanoid assault weapons known as the Hunter Units, the "Silver Wolf" was spoken of with fear by his enemies and with pride by his allies.

However he left the military the moment the war ended, and moved to the rural town of Organbaelz in the

Wiltia-annexed nation of Pelfe, and opened a bakery.

There was also a girl who followed this man.

The girl never spoke about who she was or where she came from, and Lud never asked.

He thought that, much like himself, she had something in her past that she didn't like talking about, and so he didn't pry further.

That girl's name was Sven.

She had another name that she could never tell Lud — Avei.

She had been the Hunter Unit pilot-assistance AI installed inside Lud's unit.

Consumed with thoughts of her master and growing a soul within her, Avei was given an artificial body as part of a top-secret military experiment, and now a young girl named Sven, she set off to find Lud.

Her greatest joy was to support him and help make his new dreams come true.

And yet, Sven realized something.

Why exactly did she desire to see Lud happy?

That answer was that she loved him.

This is a modest tale, sure to be lost in the turmoil of

history, about an awkward baker and an automaton girl nurturing a soul inside her mechanical chest.

CHAPTER 1

AN INVITATION TO A PARTY IN THE SKY

In northwest Berun, the capital of the Principality of Wiltia, was the Royal Weapons Development Bureau, commonly known as Schnecke.

This snail moniker originated because the facilities radiated out like a spiral according to the importance of the research taking place. Just outside the innermost facility of the Bureau, which housed the most important research and development—research even more important than the King's life—was the office of Daian Fortuner.

"It seems you're up to the same old worthless research, as always."

"Oh come now, Hanussen, you're just as scathing as ever, aren't you … Well, I don't live because I want others to understand what I do, anyway."

Daian replied to the caustic words of his guest as if they didn't affect him at all.

As the director of the Weapons Development Bureau, he was also called a sorcerer, and was a scientist of extraordinary genius.

Usually, the highest army rank to which a civilian engineer could be promoted was major.

That was already exceptional treatment for a civilian engineer, but within the military, Daian was treated as a colonel, a full two ranks higher.

Consequently, even his trivial research was lauded and regarded as vital to military tactics.

"This must be the first … no, the second step. The appearance of her ego, as well as the manifestation of her feelings, and her budding feelings of love … Her maturation into a woman has me trembling with excitement!"

Daian had rewritten the course of history as the father of the Hunter Units, which played a pivotal role in Wiltia's victory in the Great European War, and gave his creation unprecedented attention.

"Disgusting."

Hanussen sighed as if his words were utterly worthless.

With her black hair and black eyes, she had a bewitching beauty, but it seemed somehow artificial, and a sinister feeling hung in the air around her.

"I thought you might be of help to my research, but … I have no interest in playing with dolls."

"Oh my … You've said it now."

Daian's response to Hanussen's contempt suggested an awkward and clumsy clown. What others thought or felt was of no concern to him.

He fervently pursued what he wanted.

That alone was his purpose in life, and he didn't consider the feelings of others to be useful at all.

"Staying here any longer is pointless. I'm leaving."

As if she understood Daian's thoughts, Hanussen shook her head in resignation and stood up to leave.

"Oh leaving so soon? Won't you stay just a little longer? You see, I've managed to get my hands on some great tea leaves imported directly from Mughal."

Mughal was a subcontinental nation state in the east.

A colony of the Greyten Empire before the war, Mughal had produced high quality teas and spices, but as a result of Greyten's defeat, a majority of their territory had been ceded to Wiltia, and Mughal was denied trade access with the country.

This meant that Wiltia now had a monopoly on over seventy percent of the world's black tea market.

As such, the citizens of the Greyten Empire, who were said to love tea time more than their three meals a day, to their humiliation were now forced to buy their tea from Wiltia.

"Or maybe … Would you rather have some green tea, as enjoyed by the people of the East?"

"That will be unnecessary."

Answering as if the question itself was absurd, Hanussen continued to grip the doorknob when her hand suddenly stopped.

"Oh that's right, I almost forgot. This isn't a thanks for your worthless prattle, but I've heard that idiot, Genitz, is planning something foolish again.

Genitz was one of the commanders of Wiltia's military.

In the previous war he was called the "Great Conqueror" for carrying out the capture of Parise.

At least, that was his public persona …

"Something foolish? You can't be talking about the Defairedead can you?"

"So you know about it?"

"Well, I have good eyes and ears, you see …"

Daian cackled, suspiciously.

"Honestly, the brigadier general never gives up, does he?"

"Brigadier general … he is not. It seems he was promoted, and is now a lieutenant general."

"I'm not interested in things like that."

As someone who didn't even concern himself about his own rank, Daian had even less interest in the ranks of people who were insignificant to him.

"And, what are you going to do?"

Hanussen asked, the corners of her mouth bending slightly, as she looked interested in Daian's reply.

"What do you mean by that?"

Daian replied blankly.

Daian and Genitz did not get along.

To be exact, Genitz had an intense hatred for Daian.

Genitz, who was a mass of ambition and aspiration, unlike that of any ordinary person, was infuriated that Daian's genius gave him influence and power over, not just the military, but the government and even the royal family.

Daian thought it all absurd.

To him, the Principality of Wiltia and its military were nothing more than a means through which he could gain the personnel, money and facilities necessary for his research.

He only rose through the rank to get more out of them. It was nothing more than that.

"I can't stand that man. I don't want to get involved."

"I see. I suppose that will make the lieutenant general happy."

Hanussen smiled dryly, as if she was watching from above as two badgers ate each other.

—The sound of military boots was heard from the other side of the door.

"Hm?"

The same moment that Hanussen noticed the sound, the door was flung open.

"Major Sophia Von Rundstadt of the Principality Armed Forces!"

Sophia, the commander of the Weapons Development Bureau's security forces, appeared in the doorway.

She was not just an ordinary captain of the guard.

This Weapons Development Bureau housed facilities even more vital than the king's palace, and was a type of military fortress.

She was the commander of an army of soldiers, entrusted with defending that fortress.

She was also sent by headquarters to be the cat's bell—to watch over the extravagant Daian, and warn headquarters about his wild behavior.

Therefore, although he was the director of the Bureau, she didn't treat him as a higher ranking officer, and made a point of being direct, and even abrupt, when speaking with

him so that he couldn't gain advantage over her due to his position.

"… Sir …"

Sophia never waited for permission before entering her superior officer's room, and did so with enough force to kick the door down.

As it wasn't in Daian's nature to raise complaints about things like this, Sophia entered the office as she always did, but she froze in front of the woman already in the room.

"What?"

Hanussen gave her a one-word reply, feeling Sophia's gaze.

Her voice held no emotion, neither anger nor happiness, as if she was listening to a fly buzzing around her.

"N-Nothing … Please excuse me!"

Straightening herself in a panic, Sophia saluted.

"Hmph …"

Looking annoyed, Hanussen left the room without even glancing at Sophia, let alone return her salute.

"Come now, Miss Sophia, we can't have you barging in like that! You should know that even I have guests from time to time."

Daian playfully admonished Sophia.

"T-that woman … Who was she?"

In the previous war, Sophia was a powerful Hunter Unit pilot, known and feared as the "Devil's Black Spear."

She was a war hero, and not a soldier who was dismissed as strong "for a woman."

Despite this, she was overwhelmed by the intense power Hanussen radiated.

"Oh, that was Miss Johannes Hanussen. I'm sure you've at least heard of her, haven't you?"

"Hanus—?! Hanussen, the Royal Sage?!"

Sophia raised her voice in alarm at the name.

Rarely exposing herself to the public eye, only a few high ranking nobles, including the King of the Principality, were allowed to meet the Royal Sage.

Her existence was shrouded in so much mystery that it was rumored that she didn't exist at all.

"That's … the first time I've seen her. I didn't even know the sage was a woman."

"How lovely you were able to catch a glimpse of her."

Daian said this as if he was speaking about a rare animal.

"… Wait! If I remember correctly, isn't Sage Hanussen supposed to be over one hundred years old?"

"Well, I wouldn't know anything about that. After all, it's rude to ask a woman her age."

Daian had judged Hanussen to be far older than what was known to the public, but rather than complicate the conversation further, he answered Sophia's questions evasively.

"More importantly, you have a reason for being here, correct? Could it be that you wanted to see me?! Oh, I'm so happy!"

"Rest assured, that isn't the case at all."

Sophia's reply was so sharp that it met the perfect textbook definition of the word "curt."

"I'm here to inform you that I will be taking a week's vacation starting tomorrow, and will be away from the facility."

"Oh, how unusual for Miss Sophia to be requesting time off."

As a commissioned officer, Sophia could take vacation more easily than privates and lower-ranking officers, as long as she met the necessary conditions and procedures.

The military had a system where individuals possessing exceptional ability—the irreplaceable pieces on the chessboard—were given moderate vacation time to make sure they could

be used as long as possible.

There was no room in the military for humanism or false egalitarianism.

It was purely a system of pragmatism and utilitarianism.

"Well … It will be more like half work. It involves my family."

"Oh, I see … The young daughter of the Rundstadts has it tough, hasn't she?"

The aristocratic "Von" in her name wasn't only for show.

In addition to being a high-ranking military officer, she was also the daughter of a distinguished noble family, known throughout Wiltia.

As a noble, she had duties that she was required to perform.

"Precisely … There's a limit to just how dutiful one can be, honestly."



Usually she replied to Daian's banter tersely, but this topic alone was different, and she openly expressed her frustration and her agreement with Daian's comment.

"Just the thought of having to breathe the same air as those idiots, who think that dancing and playing dress up makes the world turn, is sickening.

"My, my!"

Given his social position, Daian had also been to events among the noble's high society.

He had nothing to say about their parties except that they were exceedingly dull.

Sprinkled with the smell of liquor and perfume, it was a battleground where, behind fake smiles, the privileged tried to gain advantage over one another, and calculated how long they could reap the benefits of currying someone's favor.

It appeared to be one's choice whether or not to participate, but not showing your face at a party often resulted in rumors and gossip.

It was fine if it was just talk, but there was always the risk that one's social position could be seriously damaged by not acting properly, and there was no way to prevent the consequences.

"It's a dreadful way to spend one's vacation."

"Exactly, I'd rather just handle my work here as usual."

"I wonder if I should consider that an honor or not."

In olden days, Wiltia was commended as a country of knights, and was controlled by the military elites.

The vestiges of that history disappeared from high society long ago, but as a member of a military family, Sophia believed that standing on the front lines was the true duty of officers and soldiers alike.

From her point of view, schmoozing with the nobility and protecting Daian and his Bureau were both loathsome.

"But even so, a whole week … That's quite a long engagement. Where is this happening?"

If it was a ball in Berun at a noble's large mansion, or in the palace itself, even allowing for the preparations, Daian was sure that a week's vacation would not be necessary.

"It's in Pelfe."

"Oh, I see … In that case, it would make sense … Huh?"

Hearing Sophia's reply, Daian's face became serious.

"Um … what did you say?"

"It's in Pelfe. The recently annexed region … I was invited to a party there."

"Huh?!"

After remaining calm and unconcerned just a month

earlier when the top secret and classified prototype Sven had escaped from the Bureau, the man in front of Sophia showed a genuine look of surprise for the first time.

"Y-You couldn't mean … the Defairedead?"

"Oh … You know about it?"

At Sophia's reply, Daian silently held his head in his hands and put his face flat on his desk.

"What is it with this timing?" he complained quietly.

"What is it? Is there some sort of problem?"

Normally, Sophia wouldn't be interested, whatever his reaction, but she couldn't help being curious about his unusual response.

"D-do you absolutely … have to go?"

Daian asked her as if the question was being squeezed out of him.

"Well, it does involve my family."

"Ummmm …"

With sweat skirting his brow, Daian—purported to be the genius of the century— kicked his brain into overdrive, and was absorbed in thinking about something.

"Oh, that's right! Miss Sophia, I was thinking, next week do you want to go have fun somewhere?"

"As I said, I will be on vacation next week, and won't be

in Berun."

Sophia wondered what Daian was suggesting, and replied with a skeptical look on her face.

"Come on, don't say that! I've got my hands on two tickets to see the opera at the Royal Theatre! They're VIP seats, you know!"

"Well, in that case, you can just go twice by yourself. Even if it's the same program, you'll discover new things you missed the first time."

"Um, Sophia … That's quite an awful way to use a pair of tickets, you know."

Barely containing her growing irritation at Daian's desperate attempts to keep her from going away, Sophia's tone made it hard to believe that she was speaking to a superior officer.

"I don't have any interest in the opera to begin with."

"Don't be like that! Didn't you just tell me that the mere thought of that party makes you feel sick?"

"Yes, I did say that but the fact is that I have personal things to attend to, and I must be going!"

Sophia brushed off Daian, who was almost clinging to her as he pleaded for her to stay.

"Please excuse me! I've entrusted everything to my

lieutenant, Dankel, so please speak with him!"

Sophia turned her back on Daian as if she hadn't anything further to say.

"Sophia … Do you really have to go?!"

"Of course!"

Without waiting for a reply, she marched to the door, the soles of her steel-toed military boots echoing as she walked.

"Miss Sophia, please don't go! I love you!"

"Well, I don't love you. Goodbye!"

"That's harsh!"

Thinking his confession would cause her to waver, the genius scientist gave a startled reply, during which Sophia quickly exited the room.

"That was mean, Sophia … I was pretty serious …"

Daian grumbled to himself, as the door closed once again.

"Ahhh … Oh well … Rebecca, are you here?"

Immediately after Daian spoke, a young girl appeared at his back.

"Affirmative."

The girl gave a robotic response. Her eyes were red, her hair was red, even her large coat that hid her mouth was

red. The only thing that wasn't red was the black ribbon that tied her hair.

The girl's name was Rebecca Sharlahart. Just like Sven, she was previously a weapon. She was an automaton girl with a soul, a Humanoid Hunter Unit.

"Things have gotten complicated! Is there something that we can do, perhaps?"

Daian claimed that he didn't care about anything outside his own research, but Sophia was the rare exception.

"Talking with Miss Sophia is a great way to relax, you know. After our chats, I make good progress on my research."

Sophia was volatile and had an intense disposition, and for Daian, watching her was excellent entertainment, similar to a tobacco and coffee break.

"Before that."

Before giving her creator an answer, Rebecca had counsel to offer.

It wasn't just answering his question with a question.

Before responding, she had information that made it necessary to reestablish the premise of his question.

"What did you say?"

Listening to Rebecca's report, Daian seemed exasperated, his shoulders drooping.

"Sheesh … When trouble rains, it really pours, doesn't it … What should we do now?"

Folding his arms, Daian pondered for a moment.

It wouldn't be so difficult to handle either of these problems alone.

But one more nuisance had been added to the mix.

Now he needed to hatch another plan from scratch.

"Well, we'll just have to deal with it, I suppose … Rebecca, can you do something for me?"

Daian asked, after thinking for a while.

"I don't really want to interfere with them, or it will weaken the purity of the experiment … Can you handle this as discreetly as possible?"

"Understood."

With mechanical movements, Rebecca took a bow and once again disappeared.

"Picking a fight with His Excellency Brigadier General will also be a nuisance, won't it..."

With Rebecca gone, Daian grumbled to himself.

He remembered that Genitz was now a lieutenant general, but since he was just talking to himself, and didn't care about military rank, Daian didn't bother correcting his error.

—At a slightly earlier date …

Sven was troubled, standing at the counter of Tockerbrot.

"Now what are we going to do about this …"

In front of her was the register where the shops finances were recorded.

The financial records actually weren't something a regular employee was allowed to look at, but because Lud was bad with numbers, the bakery's accounting had come under Sven's purview.

Tockerbrot's sales were increasing every day.

The number of customers was rising steadily. Lud and Sven had managed to get two large contracts with the mine's cafeteria and the elementary school, and were in the process of stabilizing their business.

However, that also caused problems.

With the current size of their store, there was a limit to how much bread they could sell.

"Either we need to make the store bigger … or we need to open up a second store."

Sven had already gone in Lud's place to deliver the

school's bread order today, and since her grim-faced boss couldn't serve the customers, she had put a sign on the door saying the store was closed temporarily while she was out.

"But in order to do that … there are two problems. In the meantime, our most pressing concern is to make sure there are always people working in the store."

Jacob and Marlene would help sometimes, but that was only temporary.

Even if a new employee didn't live in the bakery, as Sven did, they still needed someone to work full-time.

"Then, we'd need to take out another loan from the bank …"

Whether they hired new people, or invested in upgrading the bakery itself, they would need money from the bank.

In order to do that, they had to put together sufficient documentation, to convince the loan manager and the bank branch manager.

"The quickest way would be to get an impressive recommendation, but …"

Perhaps Tockerbrot could win an award of some sort, or receive the praise of a certain gourmet food critic.

Sven thought it was all nonsense, but it was the nature

of the bank not to be persuaded by how delicious the bread might taste.

There had been a similar situation in the military, when it came time to test out a new weapon.

No matter how the weapon's specs were explained, the top official couldn't understand what the numbers meant.

So, they were forced to make it simple to understand.

It was difficult to secure the budget, time and labor necessary to accomplish this.

As a result, instead of the capable engineers, the petty officials, who were only good at wresting money from the higher-ups, threw their weight around to get it done.

"That's right … In order to secure the formal adoption of the Hunter Units into the military, it wasn't until they gave a demonstration of three Hunter Units crushing a full armored division that the officials finally acknowledged their power."

The armored division commander was disgraced by the demonstration, and even now bears a grudge against the Hunter Units, but it was his superiors who agreed to the demonstration in the first place.

"It'd be so much easier if we could just settle this by crushing someone …"

Sven said, letting out a long sigh.

For the sake of her beloved Lud's bakery, if she were told to annihilate a whole armored division, she would accept the order with a smile.

But, Sven was no longer in a world where things could be solved with violence.

For a former military weapon, these byzantine methods were very irritating.

"Excuse me …"

The bell on the bakery door rang, and the mailman came in.

"Oh, Mr. Marks, thank you for all your hard work."

"My, you're looking lovely as always, Sven."

The elderly deliveryman, with little hair left on his head, broke into a smile.

"Come now, flattering me like that won't get you anywhere … but I can at least bring you a cup of tea."

"Well now, that would be great."

In a corner of Tockerbrot, there was a table with some chairs, almost like a tiny food court, where Sven treated customers to tea and coffee with their bread.

If they were able to enlarge the area just a bit, they could increase profits by turning it into a tiny café, but currently even that was difficult.

Gripped by these gloomy thoughts, Sven made tea and brought it over to the table where Mr. Marks was seated.

"Without realizing it, coming here has become part of my daily routine, you know. My feet lead me here even when I don't have anything to deliver."

"My, my, we can't be having that now, can we? Neglecting your duties will have you in front of a firing squad!"

Sven's sales smile sparkled as she bantered with Mr. Marks.

The Humanoid Hunter Unit Svelgen, formerly known as Avei, was officially developed as a weapon specialized in espionage.

She was created to infiltrate hostile places where rogue elements gathered, under the guise of a lovely young girl, and was capable of making even the most hardened of military veterans drop his guard so that she could obtain as much information as possible.

Accordingly, she was friendly with every person she met, and had an interface installed to arouse feelings of strong affection in those around her.

"You gotta let me off easy. Please? Look, I actually have something to deliver to you today."

"Oh, well in that case, I suppose I can cancel your execution just this once."

Sven smiled as she took the letters Mr. Marks handed her.

One was related to official business at the bank, another was a purchase order from the mine, but Sven's expression changed the moment she laid her eyes on the final letter.

"W-Whaaaat?!"

"Blffft?!"

Mr. Marks spit tea from his mouth at the violent and sudden howl that erupted from the beautiful young girl.

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!"

"U-Um … Sven? What's wrong?"

Mr Mark's voice didn't reach Sven's ears.

Sven had a perfect interface installed to make people like her, but this didn't apply when Tockerbrot was concerned, or more precisely, when it involved any matter that was important to Lud.

"Master! This is big news!!"

Sven said, running off to find Lud in the kiln area.

Meanwhile Lud was also worried.

But, the problems on his mind were different from

Sven's.

In the end … This can't keep going like this, after all …

Lud thought, while he waited for the bread in the kiln to finish baking.

He had two problems on his mind.

The first was finding a way so that children wouldn't be afraid of him.

He had a few ideas, but he couldn't quite pin down a good solution.

His second problem was Sven.

What am I going to do about her? She's an incredibly serious person, so I guess I should try to deal with this one way or another …

The people of Wiltia were known for diligence and sincerity.

That was naturally a broad generalization, and not true of everyone, but when it came to Lud, this characterization was right on the nose.

But even still … I can't help but be confused about what to do …

If their relationship was just that of a baker and his employee, it wouldn't be a big problem.

But that was not the case.

Sven assumed that Lud had some experience with the opposite sex, but Lud essentially had none.

This wasn't just because he had lived his teenage years in the military, where there was no time for such activities.

There was another ace pilot, perhaps even better than Lud, and he was said to have broken more hearts than he had brought down enemy aircraft.

The issue with Lud was more a kind of self-loathing.

He would ask himself, "Am I really worthy of loving someone? Am I really worthy of someone's love?"

Lud Langart was a devoted and big-hearted man.

He wouldn't hesitate to put his life on the line for the sake of someone else.

This was thought to be a good impulse, but from another point of view, it could be said that he belittled the importance of his own life.

"Sheesh … Please be more careful, I'm begging you …"

Sven had told Lud this before.

Shortly after ignoring these words, he had almost died.

Fortunately, he was narrowly able to escape death, but being held in Sven's arms as she cried only made him profoundly confused.

I have a life that's valuable enough to make someone

cry tears of joy?

This raised doubts in Lud's mind.

What should I do?

But, that wasn't the only problem.

As long as their relationship bordered on something deeper than the collegial, he couldn't ignore it.

Even if he pretended not to notice, he had to be able to look her in the eye.

Sven's … No, I need to properly acknowledge and accept her feelings.

Lud agonized intently over the situation.

"Master! I have important news!"

Sven appeared at the kiln.

"S-Sven?!"

He had been consumed with thoughts of her until that moment, and Lud was startled as he answered her.

Dashing at full speed through the cramped bakery, she seemed ready to pounce on Lud, but she forcibly held herself back at the door of the kiln area.

"Ngh!"

In the kiln were bread dough and yeast, ready to be baked.

Lud was extremely careful to prevent strands of hair or

any debris from getting into the yeast and dough, and had forbidden anyone from entering the room without his permission.

Sven would ignore everything else around her when something involved Lud, but she would strictly follow all of his orders.

That was the essence of Sven's character.

"W-What happened Sven?"

Lud asked, his voice still somewhat stilted and clumsy.

"A letter! We've got a letter!"

"A letter? Oh no, another bill?!"

Lud worried that there might be some unexpected debt they still owed to their former shady loan shark.

"That's not it! We got a job! A work order came in! It's an unbelievably big one, too!"

Sven showed Lud the letter in her hands.

The sender was the governor-general of Pelfe.

"A business trip to a party in the sky?!"

It was now after dusk.

With business largely done for the day and the closed sign in the window, Jacob, Marlene and Milly all shouted in

disbelief.

"That's exactly right! So … What are the two of *you* doing here?"

"Lud gave us that pain de seigle noix, and I came to thank him."

In response to Sven's cold glare, Marlene smiled as if Sven's gaze hadn't the slightest effect on her.

"And I came with her. Is there a problem with that?"

Milly sullenly added her own blunt response.

"No, no problem at all …"

Marlene and Milly had been growing closer to Sven's dearest Lud, and now warranted Sven's utmost caution and careful observation.

Previously, Marlene had hidden her true identity as part of a terrorist group, but she had since fallen in love with Lud, who knew her secret and tried to save her from her dangerous past.

As for Milly, although she had continued to spit impertinent words at Lud that made Sven furious, after a certain event, she had a change of heart and now seemed to have fallen a little in love with Lud herself.

What is truly irritating is that they think they can hide it from Lud.

Now even Jacob noticed and he teased them about it.

Lud was the only person who didn't realize it.

Lud considered Milly as nothing more than a child, and was delighted that she was finally warming up to him, but Sven was very worried.

If she could, she'd like to chase both of them away.

However Lud considered Milly and Marlene to be his friends.

Sven couldn't drive them out of Lud's life.

This ambivalence toward these two is so frustrating!

Tightly holding back the urge to scratch her head in frustration, a forced, twitching smile appeared on her face.

"Hey, Sven … This is amazing, isn't it?!"

Watching the silent struggle between the three women from the corner of his eye, Jacob raised his voice in surprise at reading the letter Lud had received from the governor-general's offices.

"A party in the sky, onboard the Defairedead … I heard rumors about it on the radio but what an incredible honor that they want Tockerbrot to participate!"

Two years had passed since Wiltia had made Pelfe a part of its domain.

But there was still discord between the people of Wiltia

and the original residents of Pelfe.

In order to ease this tension, the governor-general of Pelfe planned a party in the sky aboard the Defairedead, a Wiltian airship and the largest of its kind in the world.

"They want you to bake the bread for that party … Does that mean that if all goes well, you'll be known as a purveyor to the Wiltian royal family?"

"I think it might be hard for us to get that far, but we'll be praised even in Pelfe as a prominent bakery."

"Well, how did this happen?"

Marlene asked.

"It sounds like a public relations official for the governor-general happened to visit and ate some bread from our shop."

"That's quite a few convenient coincidences, isn't it?"

"What are you saying?! Coincidences are nothing more than coincidences! It was inevitable that Master's devotion to his craft and the deliciousness of his bread would bring this good fortune!"

With words that could turn the faces of the Berun Royal Theatre pale, Sven poetically sang her Master's praises.

"What's important is the opportunity itself! To know what is right—no, to see an opportunity and not take

advantage of it is the worst cowardice, after all!"

Sven excitedly emphasized her words by tightly clenching her fist.

"…… Hmm."

With a worried expression, Lud sounded troubled as he spoke.

"What's wrong Lud? Does something not sit right with you about this?"

As Lud's friend, Jacob was able to pick up on Lud's concern.

"I think … I'm going to turn them down.

Lud said, as if the words had spilled out of his mouth unintentionally.

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!"

"W-What the heck are you talking about?!"

Together, Sven and Jacob raised cries of surprise.

"Mast—"

"Lud! Do you have a clue how important this is?!"

Shouting over Sven, Jacob snapped at Lud.

"Listen up. This Defairedead pleasure cruise isn't just about Pelfe. Even the daily papers and radio in Wiltia are saying it's a huge event! For this bakery to be asked to participate—do you know how significant that is?!"

"I know … I know, but …"

"I'm not sure you really get it at all!"

Jacob barked at Lud, who was recoiling under his friend's pressure.

"Listen. This party will probably be jam-packed with members of high society—nobility, well-known figures, the whole lot! Just being asked to prepare the bread at an event like that is a symbol of status! It's prestige! It'll give the bakery authority and influence! Who do you think that'll have an effect on? It won't be just the bank. Some fabulously rich and wealthy family could decide to finance this store! You'll be able to make Tockerbrot so much bigger than it is now!"

Overwhelming the giant Lud with his energy, Jacob ranted and raved.

"I-Incredible, Jacob … You just said everything that I wanted to say …"

Sven was struck with admiration for Jacob's eloquence, which did not seem to be something a ten-year old boy would be capable of.

"Yeah … But, even so …"

Lud's face remained clouded.

"What could possibly still bother you about this?"

Jacob asked Lud, the annoyance in his voice clear.

"I've been on it before. That airship."

"Huh, really? When? Aren't the tickets super expensive?"

Because of the flood of people trying to buy a boarding pass for the Defairedead, it was difficult just to get on the waiting list, and the tickets were already expensive to begin with.

Lud and the others didn't know for sure how much it cost, but it was certainly enough money to feed an average person for a couple of months.

It wasn't an amount that someone running a corner bakery could get his hands on.

"That's not it—it was during my time in the military."

Oh!

When she heard Lud's reply, Sven realized the cause of his trepidation.

"Master … Are you perhaps talking about Lordlant?"

"Yeah."

Lud nodded soberly.

Sven's hunch had been correct.

"Lordlant … That's the capital of the Greyten Empire, right? What does that have to do with it?"

"Well, that's …"

Lud hesitated to answer Jacob's question.

"I heard that the Defairedead was used by the military during the Great War, but … Is that what you're hung up on, Lud?"

Marlene responded with an answer that was close to what Lud was trying to say.

"When I think about what that ship did … Even now, it's still a little too fresh …"

Lud didn't want to associate his past as a soldier with his current life as a baker.

That was how painful and grim the battles he had experienced were.

"Um … Master, forgive me for being rude, but may I say something?"

Sven understood Lud's feelings so well that it hurt to think about them.

As the pilot-support AI, Avei, she had stormed through many battlefields alongside him.

Nevertheless, Sven had to say something.

"Master, the Defairedead now has been stripped of all its weaponry, and while the ship's registration is under military jurisdiction, it is only for consumer use. Eventually, it seems it will play a part in connecting all the colonies brought

into Wiltia through air travel."

"That might be so, but …"

"Please listen to me."

Sven believed that she existed in order to make Lud's dreams a reality.

She would carry out his wishes, and never do anything he didn't want.

That girl now refused to back down.

"Are you saying that those who step onto the battlefield can never choose a new life for themselves, even after the war is over?"

"—?!"

Sven wasn't just talking about the Defairedead.

Her words included Lud, once feared as the Silver Wolf, and she herself, who had formerly been a Hunter Unit.

"If that's the case, it's far too sad … I completely understand where Master is coming from. But doesn't that mean it's even more necessary for you to accept and acknowledge the Defairedead as it is now?"

This might actually have been Sven's own wish.

Even though she was created as a tool of war, she had rejected the meaning behind her own existence and wanted him to accept her now as Sven.

"… You're right."

Although quiet, Lud replied as though he had made up his mind.

"Now I am just a baker. Similarly the Defairedead is nothing more than an airship … Just because I'm on board, doesn't mean that anything bad is going to happen …"

"That's right! You're now the baker, Lud Langart. It's thanks to that baker that I was able to start over …"

The former terrorist, Marlene, spoke to Lud, trying to appeal to his emotions.

"It's because of you that I … *muhgugh*?!"

As she tried to continue, Marlene was suddenly interrupted by a piece of bread shoved into her mouth.

"Hey, what are you doing?!"

Sven was glaring at Marlene, her eyes filled with scorn.

"Oh nothing, it's just we have some kouign-amann leftover today. It would be a shame for the bread Master baked to go to waste, so I thought I'd give some to everyone."

Sven's diversionary tactic stopped Marlene, who had tried to shorten the distance between herself and Lud when Sven's guard was relaxed.

"Y-You black-hearted waitress …"

"When it comes to the blackness of one's heart, I don't

believe I can hold a candle to yours!"

It was as if invisible sparks were flying between the fierce glares the two gave each other.

"Well, in any case, what are you gonna do?"

Ignoring the other two, Jacob posed the same question to Lud.

Lud confirmed the decision he made earlier.

"Yeah, I'll go … They went to all the trouble to invite me up into the clouds to bake bread, after all. Not going would sully the name of the bakery. "

Seeing his friend's resolve, his stern mouth clenched tight into a single line, Jacob gave a satisfied smile.



CHAPTER 2
MILITARY TOWN REUNION

Thirty kilometers east of Organbaelz is a town called Nazalenka.

There was nothing but a small village there before the war.

It was far from any major roads, and it had no unique specialty, nor any real industry.

All it had were sprawling, vacant fields that stretched in every direction.

But after the war started, this village suddenly changed.

To be precise, it underwent a drastic change after Wiltia marched in and made the territory its own.

The Wiltian military used the open pastures to build an airfield.

The large plains around the village were developed to create a base ready for the expansion of the eastern front, and for their air force and air bases.

However, aircraft pilots weren't the only ones who arrived.

All of a sudden, a variety of specialists and their families settled in the village—mechanics to work on the machinery, base staff, soldiers stationed to guard the base, and all the

people who supported their daily lives.

Soon infrastructure was established, including roads, railroads, waterways, and electricity, and in order to sell goods and deliver them to the base, a number of stores popped up, leading to an even larger migration of people to the village.

There was now over one hundred times the earlier tax revenue, and a large hospital was built that provided cheap but high-quality treatment.

The original inhabitants of the village were given money for renting their land to Wiltia; an amount more than ten times what they earned by thrusting their hoes into the withered earth, and some of the villagers were now living in the metropolis of Ponapalas, the former capital of Pelfe.

Docked at the airfield in Nazalenka, was the airship, Defairedead—five hundred meters in length and one hundred and thirty-three meters tall— the largest flying vehicle that the base had ever housed.

The pride of the Principality of Wiltia's military, the Wyvern-class large aerial transports, weren't even a third of the size of the Defairedead.

Its immensity made it visible anywhere and everywhere throughout Nazalenka.

As if to escape the watchful eye of the Defairedead, now

enshrined in the sky, two men met in a storage house in the back of town.

"At long last, tomorrow will be the day we carry out our plan. There haven't been any oversights in the preparations, have there?"

The tone of Dreadnought's voice made him sound like a knight.

"We've snuck in ten soldiers and twelve armaments … No issues to report, sir. We've provided them food, and they're raring to go. The camouflage is also flawless, sir."

Sutherland spoke calmly, lacking any nervousness.

"They aren't armaments."

Normally, Dreadnought accepted Sutherland's character, understood that it was too late to change it, and didn't pay attention, but he admonished him with a heavy voice, as if his words were a steel sword.

"They aren't armaments. All of them are my subordinates, and our allies."

"Captain … With all due respect, those are—"

"It doesn't matter if they have formal rank or not. Since they move under my command, they are my subordinates, and my allies."

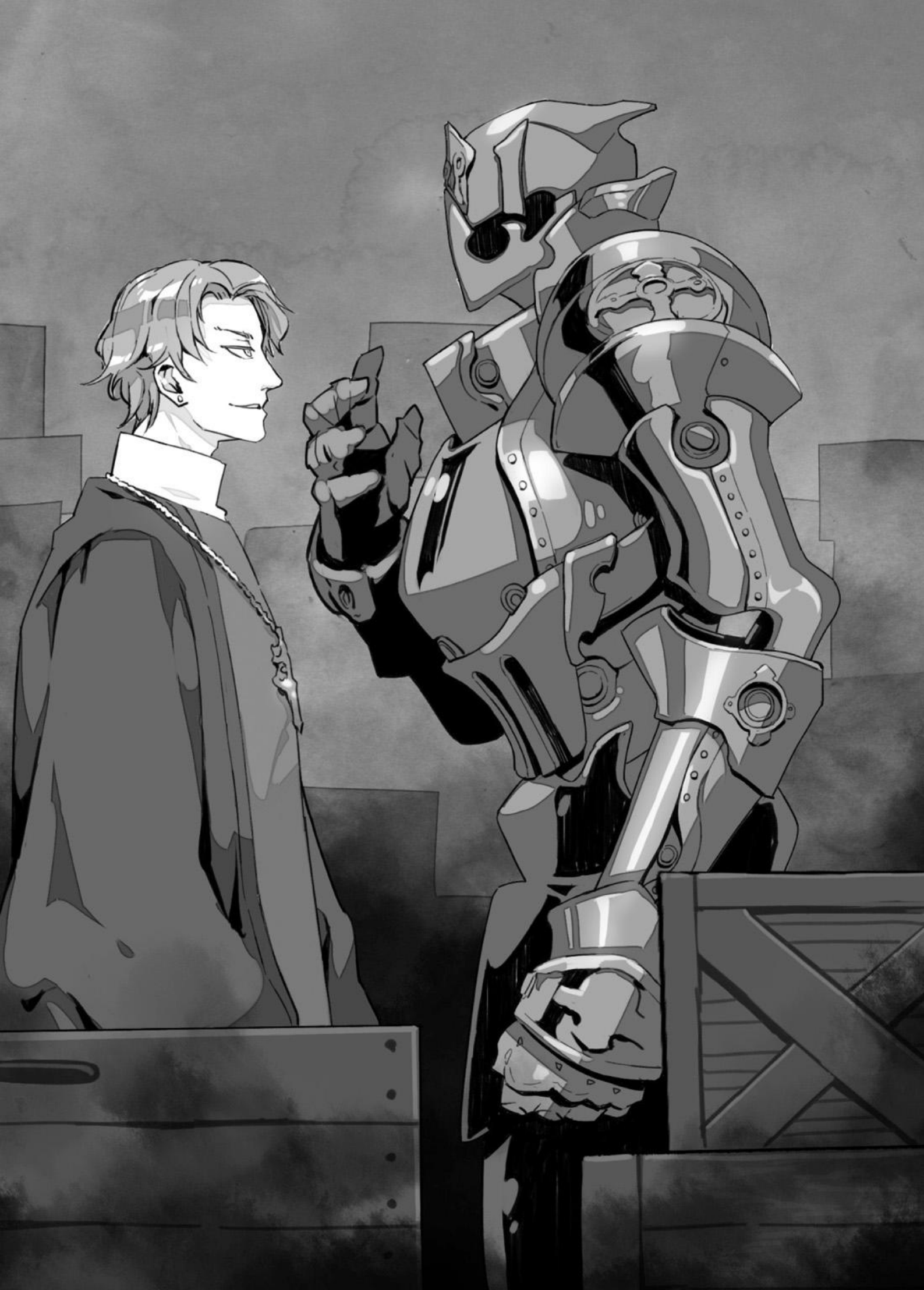
At Sutherland's protests, Dreadnought repeated his words

as though they were an unwavering truth, like he was hammering a nail or shooting a rivet into a steel plate.

"Just like you."

"Gah …"

As if these words had been Dreadnought's way to drive the point home, Sutherland was unable to respond, and bit the corners of his mouth.



"Take heed, Sutherland. For our actions are sure to show the world our righteousness, and will become a beacon for tomorrow. No matter the risks, it is a battle we must see through to the end."

There was only one reason Sutherland wasn't able to oppose Dreadnought.

Dreadnought's higher rank alone was not a sufficient explanation.

On the battlefield, if one didn't set up a disagreeable superior officer to suffer a terrible "accident," one's own life would be in danger.

While it could be difficult, one just needed to kill that superior without hesitation.

However, Sutherland couldn't do that to Dreadnought because he held power that was in an entirely different dimension.

"We will erase the Defairedead, that hideous and repulsive demon, from this world!"

Even if right at this moment, as Dreadnought dangled his lofty views above Sutherland, if he approached Dreadnought from behind and gave him a fatal stab, he was sure that *his* corpse, not Dreadnought's, would be the one found afterwards.

"By the grace of God and Her Majesty the Queen, I wish

you the best of luck."

All that Sutherland could do was correct his posture and salute Dreadnought once his speech was over, to show his obedience.

The following day …

Sven and Lud were visiting the governor-general of Pelfe's branch office in Nazalenka to meet the person in charge of the party they would be attending.

"Well, well, well, hello, hello, hello, you've certainly come a long way. Mr. … um … Vill Langart of Tockerbelt, correct?"

Greeting them was an excessively humble, slenderly-built man—the very picture of a petty, low-ranking official.

"Actually, my name is Lud Langart, of Tockerbrot … This is my waitress, Sven."

"Oh my, yes, my, okay, of course, of course, please excuse me, my apologies. I'm in charge of branch public relations, my name is Wazkane, it's nice to meet you, I look forward to working with you, here—this is my business card."

Rattling on without a break between words, Wazkane nearly thrust his business card into Lud's hands.

"How are you liking it here in Nazalenka? Hasn't it been

built up into a wonderful town? This too is all thanks to the Wiltia military and their interest here. Did you come here by car? Train?"

"Y-yeah … We came by train and—"

"That's right, that's right, isn't it. You're from … Organbaelz, was it? Then that's really the best way, the railways were also built by the Wiltia military. Thanks to them, the flow of goods through the lake towns is up one thousand and five hundred percent from before, over fifteen times higher, you know."

Lud guessed from Wazkane's brown hair and eyes, and the way his name was pronounced, that he was from Pelfe.

Wazkane's prattling went far beyond just pride in his town, and sounded as if he was showing consideration to Lud, who was more or less a genuine citizen of Wiltia, by extolling all of Wiltia's great deeds.

"Have you caught a glimpse of the Defairedead yet? No, no, no that's a silly question isn't it? Its colossal size is visible from the station in the next town, after all. It's without a doubt the supreme ruler of the skies! An air fortress that charms with its stature and majesty! When I first saw it, I was so overwhelmed with emotion that I just couldn't hold back my tears!"

"I-I see, is that so … Yes, it is big, isn't it?"

It wasn't Lud's first time seeing the Defairedead.

He was well acquainted with it since its time as a military vessel, back when it still wasn't decided that Nazalenka would be turned into a military base, but Lud thought it better not to reveal his military career, and left all the talking to Wazkane.

"Its overall height is one hundred and thirty three meters! It's floating as it stays moored so I would guess it's one hundred and fifty meters from its highest point down to the ground."

One hundred fifty meters meant that it was approximately as high as the twentieth floor of an average building.

"None of the buildings in Organbaelz are that tall, are they? After all, that's about the same height as the air control tower on the base here in Nazalenka."

A slight tinge of contempt appeared in Wazkane's grinning face.

Lud realized that it was the pretentious smile of a man from the big city looking down on the country bumpkins in front of him, but he decided to ignore it.

"No doubt, the Defairedead is the greatest and biggest airship in the world."

"Oh, now that's not true."

The waitress who obediently followed all of Lud's orders wasn't going to let that go.

"Huh?"

Faced with Sven's unexpected statement, Wazkane gave a suspicious glance as though he wanted to ask what in the world this young girl from the sticks was saying, but Sven started to chatter away, returning the favor to Wazkane—or rather, getting back at him.

"Airships can be separated into rigid and non-rigid constructions, but fundamentally they have air sacs above that are filled with a gas lighter than air, and they float from that buoyancy. Those that don't have the ability to navigate themselves are balloons. The Defairedead is a Rezaniumcraft-type of hovering airship."

Rezaniumcraft was a system of flight created by Wiltia that was completely different from anything that had come before.

"By applying constant pressure to Rezanite, one can create enormous energy. But conversely, applying constant electricity generates a unique force field. Completely opposite from how a motor works."

There were still a number of mysteries surrounding the unique mineral, Rezanite, said to be formed from crystallized

hearts of the ancient dragons, and it held many special characteristics.

One could use the stone's power for destruction, as with the Zeihombomber, or as a Rezanium reactor, one could make it the central core of a Hunter Unit.

The Rezaniumcraft was another way of using Rezanium; while normally Rezanium would create tremendous electrical energy, by applying a certain amount of voltage , one could create a unique repulsive force.

Rezaniumcraft used that ground repulsion to create buoyancy for flight.

"The air sac on the Defairedead isn't filled with helium gas. It holds a large-scale Rezanium reactor and a generator to supply it with electricity."

"Y-You sure … know a lot …"

Faced with Sven's superior knowledge, Wazkane's forced smile stiffened.

"T-That's correct … Practical applications for the almighty mineral, Rezanite, are a result of Wiltia's knowledge of chemistry—"

"It's not that simple. For a Rezaniumcraft, sufficient space is required to create a repulsion force field. An airplane's wings aren't enough. If it doesn't possess enough surface area, then it

can't generate any buoyancy … It's surprisingly inconvenient, you know."

Sven magnificently evaded Wazkane's attempts to regain control of the conversation.

"When trying to create something to surpass the airship, if you need the vehicle to be the same size as an airship, then an airship's structure is simpler and cheaper. An airship has both superior altitude and navigational distance, correct?"

Existing airships could already circle the whole world.

So, even if one wanted to create something to surpass the airship, it was hard to find a reason to use it.

"In short, this is a result of Wiltia racking its brain to create an alternative to the helium aircraft, because they were unable to procure helium gas during the war. They couldn't fill it with hydrogen, after all."

Wiltia couldn't get helium because the country that produced most of it was an enemy during the Great War.

If the Rezaniumcraft hadn't been developed in time, a hydrogen-type aircraft would have been used, based on the optimistic hope that as long as they were painstaking in preparing their pilots, an accident wouldn't happen.

"If a hydrogen-type aircraft exploded in flames over a city, it would be devastating. It would be an historic tragedy."

"And there was no way the military would use something filled with hydrogen gas."

Lud quietly mumbled to himself, having been silently listening up until now.

"It was originally built to attack the Greyten Empire, which was separated by the ocean. Something this big would be hit with anti-aircraft guns, and they'd release interception fighters. Something that would explode at the drop of a hat like that is a bad joke."

Soldiers are prepared to lose their lives, but they aren't willing to die in vain.

Lud couldn't count the number of top-ranking officials who made irresponsible decisions that endangered the lives of the soldiers who served them, no matter which side they were on.

"Since it's partially a commercial vessel, using this airship for events like this is probably to make it known to the world … That for the technological strength of Wiltia, such an embargo policy is nothing. On the contrary, they are saying 'Look, we've made something that can control the whole world's skies,' or something like it."

Thinking along these lines, the pure flying machine, Defairedead, looking almost like a magnificent flying castle, was a terrifying symbol to behold.

"Well now, you're, uh, very knowledge … Miss—"

"My name is Sven. I am a waitress in the service of Lud Langart, owner of Tockerbrot. I'll ask that you remember our names properly."

With a smile dripping with sarcasm, Sven delivered the final blow to Wazkane, now embarrassed by his lack of knowledge.

"Well … Yes, um … Oh, that's right, that's right! I need to explain to you the upcoming schedule."

Wazkane changed the conversation, feeling uncomfortable with Sven and Lud, and unable to best them, despite the pride he took in his own knowledge.

"After this, Light—"

"Lud!"

Sven corrected Wazkane with a scowl, as he got Lud's name wrong once again.

"Oh, my apologies! After this, Lud Langart will be interviewed."

"Interviewed?! What is this about? We were never informed about that."

"Oh, no one told you? That's strange … I guess there must have been some mistake along the way. That's what happens at events like this."

Characteristic of such government officials, Wazkane continued on, prioritizing the agenda over the feelings of others, as though he was telling them that this was what was decided, and that was how it was going to be done.

"The goal of this party is to deepen the friendship between Pelfe and Wiltia. A bakery that is beloved by the citizens of Pelfe, managed by a citizen of Wiltia … It's incredibly important for our public relations."

"That's … I uh, that is …"

Lud's face grew pale, and greasy sweat streamed down his face.

"Beyond Wiltia, the eyes of other foreign countries are paying close attention as well. Before we take off, you will give interviews to the papers and radio stations. They're even bringing a cinematographer for newsreels."

"Uh …"

Lud was already a poor speaker, and he was the most awkward of the awkward when it came to standing in front of an audience and answering interview questions.

In the military, he had stood in front of people for medal award ceremonies and the like.

On those occasions, he had endured it with a taciturn look on his face, without speaking a word.

For a soldier, reticence and gruffness were seen as merits, but that didn't extend to the service world.

If Lud was interviewed now, Wiltia and the entire European continent would be subjected to his stern, frightening expression.

"S-Sven … Um, I hate to ask, but could you, uh, appear for me?"

Lud had reservations about forcing something he didn't want to do on someone else, but Sven had a sweetness that anyone could appreciate, and a tongue one million times more eloquent and smooth than Lud's.

She was far better-suited for this than he was.

"Um, actually, about that …"

Timidly, Sven apologetically raised her hand.

"If possible, I ask not to be part of any interviews."

"Huh?!"

Lud looked as if he had been pushed into the pits of hell.

Sven's heart ached seeing his expression.

It wouldn't be a problem if it were just an interview.

In fact with her eloquence and speaking skills, making the Tockerbrot name known throughout the world would be a walk in the park.

The problem was that the newspapers were bringing

cameras with them, as well as cinematographers, which were rare even in Wiltia.

Sven was an experimental weapon that had escaped from the Wiltian military's Weapons Development Bureau.

Since her existence was a closely guarded secret, even in a remote military base like Nazalenka, the possibility of the government seeing pictures or videos of her meant that her whereabouts would be discovered.

Yet, she couldn't talk about her reason with Lud.

"Well … um … look at me. My eyes and hair color are different."

The distinctive characteristics of the people of Wiltia were their blonde hair and blue eyes.

There were plenty of people without these features, but what Wazkane's people were looking for was "a pureblooded Wiltian, working in Pelfe."

She decided to stick to her reasoning that it wouldn't make sense for a silver-haired, red-eyed girl like herself to appear in the interview.

"That's why I—oh!"

As she spoke, Sven came up with a good plan.

"I'm counting on you. The interview will be in an hour, at the special stage set up in front of the airfield."

"Please wait just a second!"

Sven grabbed Wazkane's arm and pulled him before he quickly left, as though he had finished his job.

"What is it? Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!"

"Oh, I beg your pardon."

She had pulled on him a little too hard.

"Do you have … where I can … around here at all?" Sven whispered.

"Huh? Why are you asking? This is a military town, you know. It has whatever daily necessities one needs."

"Then can you tell me what shop would handle this for me?"

After forcing Wazkane to listen, Sven spun around and returned to Lud's side.

"Master, there is a small matter that I need to handle,. Please wait here for me to return."

"What … are you going to do?"

"You'll just have to wait and see♪. And as for the interview, please just leave everything to me!"

Sven exited the governor-general's branch office in a blink of an eye and ran toward the city's shopping district.

"I wonder what she's up to …"

Left behind, Lud sat down in the branch office's entrance

lobby and killed some time.

He had only been told he would be baking bread for the party, and he began to feel like things had become extremely complicated.

Hmmm … I have a bad feeling about this.

An ominous shiver ran across Lud's skin.

It would be more accurate to say it had been running through him since they arrived in the city.

It was a feeling he knew well.

Whether it was called a sixth sense or a feeling in one's bones, it was a hunch or premonition that told Lud that danger was drawing near, a feeling he used to experience on the battlefield.

It was not based on facts, but it was often correct.

Since his time in the military, this sensation had saved Lud from the receiving end of an enemy bullet.

It might be because this is a military town … Maybe I'm just overthinking things …

Lud was perplexed by the feeling that there was an enemy lurking somewhere.

The city was fully equipped with many military installations, so he tried to brush it off by saying his senses must be malfunctioning.

"How many times are you going to make me say it?!"

A woman's angry voice echoed across the lobby from the reception desk behind him.

"What?"

Hearing the voice, Lud realized that his ability to sense danger was still working accurately.

"Lud Langart, twenty-one years old, blonde-hair, blue-eyes, citizen of Wiltia. With a large scar on his left cheek! You mean to say that this public office doesn't have any information to give me even with such a conspicuous description?! Do you have any pride as a civil servant?!"

The woman was making unreasonable demands of the reception desk, insisting that this man had come in today and she wanted him brought to her immediately.

If she had been a regular citizen, she surely would have been asked to leave, but this woman was wearing a military uniform and her insignia showed that she was a major.

A civil servant in a military city like Nazalenka could not casually brush such an officer aside.

Lud cowered in shock and surprise.

"Hm?"

Sensing the other presence in the room, the woman turned around.

Before she saw him, Lud exited the branch office, running with lightning speed, which was surprising given his large, stout body.

Why, why, why, why, why, why, why?!

His head was filled with questions.

However he didn't stop to think about them.

His body assessed the situation and moved on its own, before he could even process the fact that his life was in danger.

Anyway, I need to hide!

Concealing himself in the shadow of a garbage can in a back alley, Lud quieted his breathing.

"Stop! Where … Where are you?!"

The woman's voice grew closer.

She had definitely seen him.

Why?! Why in the world is she here?! Wait, she couldn't possibly have been following me this whole time, could she?!

When he had made the decision to retire from the military and become a baker, her reaction to the news had been the angriest.

There were no words to describe her tempestuous rage.

She used her body to persuade others—with fists ready to fight.

"You aren't gonna answer me, Lud Langart?!"

Her angry shouts were drawing nearer to Lud.

He had already stopped breathing.

He didn't even blink.

If it was possible, he would have stopped his heartbeats, too.

Even now, he couldn't forget her demonic face when he asked to be discharged.

Demon … No! Sophia's piercing gaze had often been described as strong enough to kill a dragon.

When she once voiced her complaints to an incompetent general and directed her steel-sharp glare at him, the arrogant lieutenant colonel at his side was paralyzed with fear and trembled like a baby.

Her terrifying scowl and drawn fists had time and time again "persuaded" Lud to rethink and change course.

In the end, Lud had handed in his discharge request and left the base, as if he were escaping.

For two years, he relocated to a number of different places and tried to cover his tracks.

Half of his reasoning for opening his bakery in a remote town in Pelfe was to escape from her.

Clunk.

The sound of steel-soled military boots came right next to the garbage can where Lud was hiding.

"I guess I mistook him for someone else …"

The woman muttered to herself.

That's right … Now, keep going … keep going!!

Lud's silent shouts were almost like prayers.

After a short time, he heard the sound of her boots hitting the ground.

The woman changed her direction and began to return the way she had come.

…… *Phew*

He had managed to stay hidden.

Lud relaxed slightly. But then …

"Achtung!"

With her back still turned, the woman suddenly shouted.

It was closer to a roar, so loud that one had to wonder where in her body such a sound could come from.

In an instant, before he could think, Lud reacted.

"Cra—?!"

It was a movement he had repeated countless times in the military.

The conditioned reflex that had soaked into every cell of his body took over.

"*Hehehehehe …*"

Slowly, terrifyingly, the woman turned around.

She was laughing.

She was laughing, but her eyes weren't laughing at all.

"Nice to see you again, Captain."

She spoke with a triumphant but sadistic tone.

Sophia Von Rundstadt, commonly known as the Devil's Black Spear.

Even among the pride of Wiltia, the Hunter Unit pilots, she was a top-class ace fighter.

She was the only person to be granted the title of Panzer Cavalier directly from the King.

And—she was Lud's former superior officer.

"… Former Captain, Commander …"

It had been two years since he had been under the orders of a commanding officer.

Faced with her spiteful grin, even God himself would have had trouble understanding what emotions were in her heart.

"Augh!"

—Then, as if there was no need to argue about it, Sophia jabbed her clenched fist into Lud's face.

Lud was thrown by the hard force of the punch, far greater than what one might expect from a woman.

"You've gotten full of yourself, haven't you, Captain Langart? Desertion is a serious crime. That's a fine way to talk to me, isn't it, after I've come all this way to see you! I'm surprised I didn't find you in front of a firing squad."

"I-I finished all the proper procedures, and handed in my discharge request—!"

But before he could finish, a foot was driven into his chin.

Sophia's beloved military boots were specially made with steel in the sole. Although she had stayed her hand, or rather her foot, just enough not to break the bones in his chin, the intense pain left Lud unable to talk.

"I'm telling you to keep quiet! Even if supreme command allows it, even if His Excellency General of the Army allows it, even if His Highness the King himself allowed it, I'm your commanding officer! If I don't approve your discharge, you're nothing more than a deserter!"

Sophia was a mass of arrogant and self-righteous dominance.

Logic didn't get through to her. She convinced others by insisting that if she said the answer was no, then it was no.

"I was surprised to hear that you opened a bakery. It can't be very popular, can it? It makes sense. You're a wolf after all. It doesn't matter how gently you use your claws and fangs—

they're only meant for tearing into their prey."

She hurled her words at Lud like daggers as he crouched and held his chin.

"That's not true … Little by little, customers have finally started coming in."

"Finally? It's been two years since you left. Two years later, and it's still 'little by little,' is it?"

Her retort again pierced Lud's chest.

It was thanks to Sven that Tockerbrot had come to life.

But that was evidence that Lud hadn't been able to do it on his own.

Lud couldn't defend himself against Sophia's words.

"On top of that … getting caught up in this party nonsense …"

A completely different emotion appeared in Sophia's eyes.

"W-What are you—?"

"Quiet!"

Lud tried to ask, but was brushed aside with a shout.

"The military is your life, you've got nothing else! Your play time is over, it's time to return to my command!"

With his life as a soldier deep in the marrow of his bones, Lud caught himself before unconsciously nodding in agreement to Sophia's words. At the last moment, the baker

inside him prevailed.

"I can't do that … I'm a baker now. There's no reason to listen to a commander's orders anymore."

"What did you say?!"

In an instant, Sophia's dragon-slayer eyes seemed to turn crimson in rage.

But the fire quickly subsided.

"So it's true, you really didn't accept the Cavalier title, did you?"

"....."

Lud's silence seemed to answer her question.

With his outstanding performance on the battlefield in the Great War, Lud became known as the Silver Wolf, and was considered a hero throughout many countries.

The Royal Palace wanted to bestow the Cavalier title upon him.

Although it was the nobility's lowest rank, they had tried to welcome him as a member.

"I'm a murderer. That's what a 'Panzer Cavalier' is? What a joke!"

He had planned to leave the military after the war anyway, but that incident was the final deciding factor.

"Your words desecrate all the soldiers who fought and died

on those battlefields!"

Whether they were career military or conscripted soldiers, there were many reasons for a soldier to go to war.

Nevertheless, they all fought equally on the battlefield, covered in dirt and blood.

One was free to condemn the act of war itself, but no one had the right to trample on the dignity of those who fought.

"That's not it … That's not what I meant …"

That wasn't what Lud was talking about.

"Are you still letting Lapchuricka get to you?"

"—?!"

Lud's eyes widened in surprise, and he felt a stab in his heart from Sophia's words.

Lapchuricka—the name of the city where the most horrifying and catastrophic tragedy occurred during the Great European War.

"That heinous disaster was entirely the fault of that rotten lieutenant general! Mourning over it forever like a fool won't change a damn thing! You're like a witless mutt, chasing its tail forever!"

Caught between Wiltia and their enemy, Filbarneu, was the small Kingdom of Haugen.

Haugen had declared itself neutral during the Great

European War, but Wiltia tried to pass through the country to invade Filbarneu.

Naturally, Haugen denied their passage, but Wiltia ignored their decision.

Trampling over the resistant Haugen army with overwhelming military might, Wiltia's actions were so atrocious that the international community might have denounced them, had they not ended the war victorious.

Lapchuricka was a city on the border between Filbarneu and Haugen.

There was nothing left there now but ash and ruin.

Wiltia had erased the city from the map.

"That … That was just war! It wasn't your fault!"

"But, I'm the one who killed them."

"So then blame the military! No, it's something the nation should atone for! But you're saying it's a burden for a lowly officer like you to carry? Don't get carried away with yourself!"

"I killed them, didn't I?!"

Before they knew it, Lud and Sophia were yelling in each other's faces.

"They didn't have the strength to fight back, they were just ordinary, hard working citizens and I slaughtered them!

And that makes me a 'Cavalier?!' Hell, no!"

"Quiet!"

Shouting, Sophia grabbed Lud by his collar and pulled him closer to her. Their faces were close enough to feel each other's breath.

"You were just following orders! If someone condemns you for that, if they insult you for that …"

Not anger, but a different kind of emotion appeared in Sophia's eyes.

There was remorse, but another, barely perceptible emotion as well.

The two silently stared at one another.

"Then, I—"

Her voice didn't have the same intimidation that it had earlier.

It sounded like a jumble of emotions—sadness, frustration and gentleness, all mixed together.

Sophia seemed ready to spill out words she had buried deep in her heart, when—

"That will be enough."

Someone stood behind Sophia and was pressing something hard and cylindrical into her back.

"What?!"

Sophia had an explosive personality, but as a soldier, she was calm, almost unnaturally so.

Even when she appeared enraged in order to threaten someone, she would pay careful attention to everything around her. She could fend off an attack even if her attention seemed to be elsewhere.

Yet now, someone had crept up behind her and she hadn't noticed at all.

"I'll ask you to remove your hands from my master."

The voice was polite, but with an ice-cold edge.

Sending a shiver up the spine of the battle-hardened Sophia was the beautiful waitress, Sven.

"… Who the hell are you?"

"I don't remember saying that you could ask any questions."

As Sven spoke, Sophia felt the cylinder at her back press into her with more force.

Slightly twitching her eye, Sophia did exactly as instructed and let go of Lud.

Sven's attention turned toward Lud, which Sophia didn't overlook.

"Who do you think I am?!"

Turning quickly, Sophia drove her elbow into Sven.

Sven stepped back and dodged the attack, but the cylinder she had been holding flew out of her hands.

<>bold<>

"What?!"

What Sophia had assumed was a gun barrel was in fact a metallic pen that Sven always carried with her for customer signatures on sales receipts.

"How dare you underestimate a professional soldier?! I'll teach you some manners!"

With the lightning reflexes of a tiger, Sophia took her gun from her breast pocket, but this time Sven's hands were faster.

"What?!"

She swiftly jammed the gun barrel and prevented the hammer from moving.

What is this … She isn't just a normal girl …

For a second Sophia was frightened, as Sven seemed ready to crush not only the gun barrel, but her finger on the trigger as well.

In contrast, Sven spoke to her tauntingly, ridiculing her.

"It appears the 'Devil's Black Spear' is quite an uncivilized weapon, wouldn't you say?"

Grind!

The sound of Sophia grating her teeth in anger was loud enough that those nearby could hear it clearly. Her anger was now a murderous rage.

It was an agonized rage, completely different from the frustration she had shown toward Lud.

"You damn bitch!"

Sven glared back in response to the towering fire in Sophia's eyes.

Just when it seemed a fight between the two of them was inescapable, Lud yelled out.

"Stop it, Commander! Sven!"

His cry wasn't in anger, but rather an entreaty.

"Captain …"

"Master …"

With his shout, the two stopped in their tracks.

Lud couldn't watch the person he had respected and relied on kill the young girl who was now helping him in his bakery.

Sven removed her hands from the barrel.

"… Scheisse!"

Quietly spitting out a curse, Sophia returned the gun to her breast pocket.

"So, no matter what … You have no intention of coming back, is that right"

Sophia asked, with an almost pleading tone to her voice.

"I won't go back to the military again … No matter how many times you ask me, the answer will be the same."

"If I felt like it, you know I could ruin that bakery of yours, don't you?"

Sophia's words weren't just an idle threat.

The military could trump up some sort of charge on any innocent person and arrest them.

It would be difficult to actually sentence him to prison, but easy to hold him in custody for one to two months.

With his business closed, even temporarily, Tockerbrot would surely go bankrupt.

"Do you … actually mean that?"

At these cruel words from his former commanding officer, a despair-like anger sprouted in Lud.

"Mean it? That's what I should be asking you."

Sophia wasn't blind.

She could see Lud's weakness, even from this brief exchange.

"I'll agree that you are trying to become a good baker. But, can you truly say that you didn't choose this path because you are a former soldier, trying to escape his past?"

Sophia was no longer as overpowering as she had been

moments before, and she wasn't preventing Lud from getting a word in.

Instead she was trying to make clear to Lud the facts that he wasn't properly acknowledging.

"As atonement for those you killed, and to make amends for your former self? No, you don't actually want to acknowledge how poisoned you are, so you're just playing the role of the pitiful baker, and comforting yourself with your own misery, is that it?"

"That's not it, I …"

Lud tried to deny Sophia's words, but his fist was trembling.

"If I'm wrong, why can't you look me in the eyes?"

"Urgh!"

Without realizing it, Lud had shied away from Sophia's penetrating stare.

"You haven't changed a bit … You always do that when you're lying."

Lud was unable to refute her words.

"That's it then, isn't it … I don't know if baking with that sense of shame and lukewarm effort can produce anything decently edible, but eventually it will all be exposed."

"……"

Lud was no longer able to argue, and seemed to accept the truth in what Sophia was saying.

"I'll have you stop right there!"

Sven spoke up to defend her master.

"No matter who you are, I will not allow you to deny the thoughts and feelings of my master!"

Sven knew.

Lud atoned for his past, and felt a deep regret about the crimes he had committed.

No matter how much abuse he might face, Sven was sure he had feelings that went beyond his past regrets.

"Master is happy from the bottom of his heart that many people come and eat his bread. Shame? Lukewarm? His bread isn't something as mediocre and shoddy as that!"

Even if he has regrets, Sven didn't believe that was the only reason Lud kept on living.

"Well then, can you prove that to me?"

Sophia demanded, her tone suggesting that she wouldn't take no for an answer.

"You'll have to show me that you are genuinely prepared to live a life as a baker."

"How exactly would I do that?"

Was she saying she'd taste his bread and make a decision

based on that?

Sophia was a first-class soldier, but she wasn't skilled as a baker, or a food critic.

Her answer to Lud's question was unexpected.

"What? It's simple … You will be attending that party on the Defairedead, right? As a baker for the party?"

"Yeah, how do you know that?"

"This party has been talked about all over. I found your name among the reports."

At first, Sophia intended to give some excuse to turn down her invitation to the party in the sky, but when she discovered a newspaper article that said, "Charming even the people of Pelfe, the Wiltian baker, Mr. Lud Langart, has been invited—" she changed her mind.

"It was only a small article … Lucky you to find it …"

"Honestly, I thanked God for it."

Sophia gave a triumphant snort at Lud's exasperated reply.

"I've also been invited. So … That's right, someone at the party, anyone is fine … Try and make someone say that your bread is delicious. That's my condition."

"That's … it?"

Lud couldn't help but be puzzled by the simplicity of Sophia's demand.

It was so simple, Lud thought Sophia was just teasing him.

"What are you talking about? You do realize that we were called all the way here specifically to bake bread?"

Sharing Lud's feelings, Sven spoke up crossly.

"You'll understand in due time. You'll soon know exactly how foolish your frolicking about has been."

Sophia wasn't joking and she wasn't teasing Lud.

With those words, she was ready to leave them, as she quietly muttered to herself.

"I even wanted to stop you before it got to this …"

"Huh?"

Without explaining what she meant, Sophia walked away.

"What … did she mean by that, I wonder?"

"I'm not sure …"

Even though Wiltians were known as a diligent and trustworthy people, they also could joke and tell lies.

But, Sophia had clearly been serious.

She was convinced that no one attending the party would tell Lud that his bread was delicious.

"What in the world is the Commander …"

Lud had known her a long time, and this was the first time he was unable to read her intentions.

"Don't worry, Master! Once they take a bite of your bread,

they'll all tell you with great big smiles how delicious it is! Honestly, what in the world is Major Rundstadt thinking?!"

Sven said this as cheerfully as possible, in an attempt to erase the clouds of anxiety on Lud's face.

"That's right … no use worrying about it. So, what's up with your hair … and those glasses?"

Sven's flowing silver hair was now pitch black, and polarized glasses concealed the sparkle in her bright red eyes.

"I thought that this city was so big that it would take awhile to find hair dye and a few different pairs of glasses, but I was able to find them sooner than expected."

Hair dye was an everyday necessity, and in a large city like Nazalenka, with so many airship pilots, there were plenty of shops that sold polarized glasses.

High in the sky, the direct sunlight can be harsh enough to burn the eyes, so sunglasses were essential.

"D-do they look good on me?"

Sven asked Lud so bashfully that it was hard to believe the same person had just been boldly squaring off with a professional soldier.

"Um … Well, you won't stand out like that, so that's good, right?"

Lud replied to her with an extremely ordinary, if polite,

response.

"Is that … all?"

"Huh?"

Looking at Sven's head drooping with a slight tinge of disappointment, Lud thought for a moment before the light bulb went off in his head.

"Oh, um … It suits you really well! The black hair, and the glasses!"

Even though it was a disguise to make herself inconspicuous, it was a different look for her, and Sven wanted Lud to tell her what he thought about it.

"Yeah, um, your silver hair is pretty, and your red eyes are lovely, but I think you look good like this too!"

Including hand and body gestures as he spoke, Lud desperately tried to praise Sven's new look.

"I'm so happy to hear you say that, Master ♪."

Sven replied with a great big smile.

Lud's movements looked like an obvious attempt to smooth over his mistake, but Sven was perfectly satisfied with that.

On the other hand, after parting ways with Lud …

"Dammit! Why'd it end up like this!?"

Sophia impatiently strode down the street.

This wasn't supposed to happen.

Happy with their reunion, she was supposed to generously forgive an apologizing Lud for casting her off and leaving her behind, and then, after telling him the truth about the party that was to occur, he would rethink his own participation in the event. Moreover, she was supposed to persuade him to return to the military.

That was what she intended when she challenged his baking skills.

"I haven't seen you for awhile, Captain Langart … No, you're not a captain anymore, are you, Lud?"

This was how Sophia had intended to start the conversation.

Why did it end up like this?!

It's that idiot's fault in the first place! Why did he run when he saw me?! Am I really that scary?!

She hadn't expected to come across him suddenly in a place like that.

Her lack of foresight was the reason her preparations didn't match the situation.

Sophia thought seriously that it was about time she stopped shouting and threatening people when she got angry.

That reminds me, what the hell was up with that girl?

Sophia could overpower anyone, be they men or superior officers, yet Sven had argued with her on even footing.

But she was even more surprised that a girl from the streets of the city directly served Lud—who even among the stern and aggressive military men had an exceptionally overwhelming presence.

And there was an intimacy between them, too.

Sven had looked at Lud with deep, wholehearted affection and concern.

.....

Sophia's frustration was becoming unbearable.

She wanted to slam back a strong drink, but she didn't have time before the Defairedead's departure.

She didn't have enough time before the curtain would be raised on the party.

She was still burdened with the reputation of the distinguished Rundstadt family name, and couldn't arrive at the party drunk.

"Dammit!"

She kicked a nearby trash can.

"Aaah!"

"Huh?"

A young girl's cry rang out with her kick.

Sophia had put a dent in the trash can, sent it flying, and straight into a girl turning the corner at that moment.

"Crap! Hey, are you okay?"

Sophia seemed arrogant and overbearing, but usually she lived her life with restraint, common sense, and even kindness.

She certainly did not take pleasure in injuring other people, like many soldiers she knew.

"Ugh …"

After being hit by the trash can, the young girl had fallen and lost consciousness.

"I give up already … For God's sake …"

In bad times, bad things pile on top of one another.

Cursing her lot and unable to leave the girl lying in the street, Sophia took the unconscious young girl with two long braids in her arms.

CHAPTER 3
THE LITTLE STOWAWAY

At the airfield in the center of Nazalenka—

The airfield was built on a large plot of land with the expectation that one hundred-meter airships would be coming in and out, but this was the first time a ship as large as the Defairedead had visited.

Today, most of the scheduled flights had been cancelled and the immense airfield was on display for the ship's big event.

"Yes, of course♪! Many Pelfish customers come to our shop, and they have nothing but the highest praise for my master's bread … Yes, yes, that's exactly right. It's all made using traditional Wiltian recipes."

There were many different booths lined up on the airfield, some with performers to entertain the crowd.

In addition to the citizens of Nazalenka, people from the surrounding cities gathered to get a peek at the Defairedead, purported to be the largest aircraft in the world.

"Originally, Pelfe and Wiltia had a very intimate relationship, so much so that one could even say they were

one country, historically and culturally. This is true for their food as well. It is my master's idea that the empathy born from food—so closely connected to our origins as human beings—is proof that the people of two countries can have everlasting prosperity as one country."

Among the stalls, on top of a raised stage, Sven was being interviewed as a stand-in for Lud.

There had been a steady stream of boring speeches from people like the mayor of Nazalenka, the commanding officer of the airport base, and top officials of the governor-general of Pelfe and the Wiltian government, and having a stunningly beautiful young girl like Sven—even with her new getup—on the stage encouraged the press corps to flash their cameras.

"I'd never be able to imitate that."

Lud muttered, struck with admiration as he watched Sven from afar.

He had done espionage work as part of the special forces, and at that time, he could speak like Sven. Now that side of him was gone.

Lud was sure that if even a little of that skill remained inside him, he would be able to smile properly to customers, and Tockerbrot would be prosperous, even without Sven.

But Lud believed that it wasn't that he had changed but that he had just returned to normal.

He had always been withdrawn by nature, known for being a crybaby, and had silently cowered when the bullies in his neighborhood teased and picked on him.

That story was long in the past.

Back then, his parents were still alive, and he was living with them, and …

Is it because of the bad things I've done?

Lud asked silently to himself.

"But, she really is clever, isn't she?"

Sven's speech—which was now less of an interview and more of a one-woman show—wasn't just well-spoken, it was downright shrewd.

After all, the point of this party in the sky was essentially propaganda.

Its goal was to spread the word, inside and outside the country, that Pelfe had become a much happier and more comfortable place to live since its annexation by Wiltia.

The media was reporting on the event with this purpose in mind, as well.

Knowing that, Sven was deliberately framing her statements to be easy for them to put in their articles.

"The people of Pelfe are crazy about Wiltian bread."

"They are happy now, thanks to the culture brought to them by Wiltia."

"Giving joy to the people of Pelfe—that is Wiltia's greatest wish."

If she could rattle on like this, the reporters would delightedly write it all down.

So, to Lud, she was "clever."

But Sven wasn't just throwing bait to the reporters out of the goodness of her heart.

"Now then, please take a pamphlet that has all the details about our bakery. It has both our menu and our prices. We are able to offer consultations for catering requests you may have, so please do not hesitate to ask us for further information ♪!"

With exquisite timing, she made sure to advertise the store whenever there was a spare moment.

"Seriously clever …"

Lud could only stand in admiration.

"Now then, let us have a word from Mr. Olfen Borowich."

The head chef of the Defairedead's kitchen took the stage.

He was originally a chef at a world-renowned restaurant in the Wiltian capital of Berun.

From his large, well-built frame and the color of his beard, it was immediately obvious that he was a pure-blooded Wiltian.

"Mr. Lud Langart's bread is quite delicious, and tasty enough for me to serve in my own restaurants. It's the result of his enthusiasm for building a bridge between the people of Wiltia and Pelfe."

Not to let himself be outdone by Sven, Olfen gave the reporters the answers they were looking for, with a similar level of eloquence.

And yet, Lud suddenly cocked his head to the side in confusion.

Lud was thankful for his praise, but wondered when exactly Olfen had eaten Tockerbrot's bread.

A public relations person from the governor-general's office had visited Tockerbrot, and maybe he brought some back to give to Mr. Olfen, but Lud found it strange.

"Master, over here! The reporters all want to take pictures!"

"H-Huh!?"

Sven interrupted his train of thought and urged him

onto the stage.

However beautiful Sven was, now that the head chef for the party had appeared on stage, Lud had to present himself as Tockerbrot's representative.

"Well now Mr. Langart, I'm looking forward to working together today. I'm sure we'll set up a splendid banquet together."

Olfen said, with a big grin.

"T-Thank you … I'm looking forward to working with you …"

Lud awkwardly joined him on stage and returned Olfen's handshake.

With it, the flashbulbs flared intensely around him.

Ugh …

Lud couldn't calm down.

Part of it was his discomfort with these open public performances, but he also had a bad feeling about everything.

He was still wondering about Sophia's challenge and the alarm bells inside him were a warning about something.

Does this mean something's going to happen?

Lud looked up at the giant Defairedead, ready to take off.

Despite the distance, the magnificent airship was barely

able to fit within Lud's view, and silently waiting for lift off, it gave no answer to Lud's apprehensive question.

Then, filled with guests and all their anticipation, the Defairedead took off.

As it rose, a band on the ground, prepared especially for the event, played music, and spectators watched it soar into the sky.

However, in contrast to the uproar on the ground, the ship was surprisingly silent.

"This ship is pretty quiet, isn't it?"

Lud observed to Sven as he watched the ground recede outside his window.

"Airships are said to be the quietest vehicles in the world. That would include a hovering airship like the Defairedead."

Sven answered as if this was obvious.

In a waiting room prepared for them, Sven and Lud took in the unusual lift off together.

Usually passengers are instructed to strap in with a seatbelt during take off.

But the guests on the Defairedead hadn't even been told

to sit down, let alone put on any seatbelts.

On the contrary, the party had begun, with glasses tipped and raised in a toast.

Unlike airplanes that *take off*, hovering airships use their buoyancy to *rise up* into the air.

The navigation propellers weren't entirely silent but the craft was so calm that the water in the passengers' glasses didn't even ripple.

"Just as the name says, it really is a ship that flies through the air."

Floating on the water was certainly different from floating through the air, but as Sven said, the Defairedead did seem more like a ship than an aircraft.

With close to one thousand people including staff aboard, the passenger rooms were equipped with all the luxuries of a first-class hotel, and the airship contained a large party hall, bars, a casino, and even a large communal bath, all prepared for the guests.

It was filled with supplies to service all the guests, and had more than enough on hand to accommodate a one thousand kilometer trip without resupplying.

Even among the most luxurious cruise ships, there were only a few able to match everything the Defairedead had to

offer.

"This is quite something else, isn't it?"

"It really is."

"Now, what in the world is this all about?!"

Sven asked with a sour look on her face, after the lift off sequence had ended.

"This is a waiting room … Or at least that's what it's supposed to be …"

Lud answered, unable to conceal his own confusion.

"This is clearly a storeroom!"

Along the unfinished wall were wooden crates that had been left carelessly after being unloaded. The floor was caked with dust.

Neglected rope and rusted nails were left around, as though someone didn't have anywhere else to put them … It definitely didn't seem like a place to house the tradesmen invited to a party like this.

"Did they not have adequate space for us …"

"No, no, no, that doesn't even begin to explain this! Even the flight crew's nap room would be better than this!"

Sven retorted as Lud tried to put a positive spin on the situation.

"There might have been some sort of mix-up. We can

check later. For now we gotta get over to the galley."

The two of them weren't on the ship just to enjoy a trip through the skies.

They were there to make sure the guests had an enjoyable time.

Changing into their work outfits, they quickly headed toward the galley.

The Defairedead was equipped with a full-scale galley, worthy of its luxury.

It had an oven big enough to roast a large bird and a whole pig, a massive, cutting-edge electric icebox, and even an ice-making machine.

Of course, it was also equipped with a kiln to bake bread.

Because it had to service several hundred guests at a time, its scale was even greater than a first-class restaurant.

However, before entering the galley, Lud and Sven were stopped.

"This area's off-limits for anyone except galley staff."

A stout cook standing in front of the entrance declared, with a cold, unfriendly gaze.

"Huh? Um, I'm the uh, I'm from Tockerbrot, so …"

Lud timidly explained who he was, thinking that there

had been a lack of communication, but the cook's face didn't change.

"You're the baker from the sticks they brought on? So what?"

He said, knowing exactly about Lud.

"What is the meaning of this!? We were asked to come here, you know!"

Sven angrily objected, but as if he was making fun of them, the cook gave a big yawn and didn't even try to listen.

"Um, could you get Mr. Olfen for us? It seems like there's been some mistake... Hello?"

The cook ignored Lud's desperate pleas, as well.

"Just how long are you going to treat us like fools?"

Sven's cheeks started to convulse in anger.

At this rate, she was likely to force her way through even if it meant hurling the cook out of her way.

"P-Please! Get out of the way! Before you put yourself in danger!"

"What was that!? What kind of threat is that!?"

"It's not a threat, the danger is right in front of you!"

Lud appealed to the cook, genuinely concerned for his safety.

If Sven became seriously angry, even Lud wasn't sure

he could stop her.

She was even more dangerous than Sophia.

"What's all this noise!?"

Chef Olfen stood in the open door to the galley.

"Mr. Olfen … Finally!"

Lud hoped that the misunderstanding could now be resolved but those thoughts were immediately shattered by Olfen's words.

"Oh, it's just you two. Why are you here?"

His demeanor looked completely different from the friendly smile he had shown on the stage earlier, and he now wore the glare of a stray dog.

"What do you mean why? We came to bake bread. That's why we're here."

"Wait, wait, hold up … What the heck are you saying? Don't you get it?"

Sneering at Lud, Olfen and the cook behind him, acting as the galley's gatekeeper, both laughed.

"What … is this?"

"Tch!"

At Lud's question, Olfen clicked his tongue with a spiteful look, sometimes characteristic of tradesmen.

His arrogant attitude told Lud and Sven to figure it out

for themselves, and to stop asking questions.

"Listen up, the party on this ship is filled with nobles, millionaires, and top-ranking government officials. I don't need any redneck bakers for such an important event!"

Olfen declared abrasively.

"Those damn idiots at the governor-general's office, sticking us with these damn outsiders all of a sudden. Don't they know how busy we are?! Anyway, this galley is my castle. I'm not looking to get any help from the two of you."

Lud thought to himself that Olfen wasn't even aware that he was committing the worst mistake a person could commit.

For Olfen, it was unthinkable for someone as important as himself to allow a nobody from the middle of nowhere named Lud Langart to enter his domain.

He thought he could say anything to someone like Lud, who didn't understand what, to Olfen, was just common sense.

"Your role is done. Go find yourselves something to do. But, don't go near any of the guest areas or the party hall, got it? We aren't letting the guests be exposed to some hick from the backwaters of Pelfe. Go take a tour around the storehouse and engine room!"

As if there was nothing more to be said, Olfen waved

his hands at them like he was shooing away a dog.

"So … That's how it is …"

Lud muttered, as if the words were being forced out of him.

Finally, he understood what Sophia had meant.

Lud and Sven were just an advertisement—No, just a decoration to add to the advertisement for the party.

All the governor-general's office wanted was a line on the advertisement that the bread baked by a Wiltian was popular among the people of Pelfe.

It was just to reinforce the purpose of this event and to promote the merging of the two countries. Simply a message for the press.

Forget getting someone to say it's delicious, we won't even be able to get them to eat it … Hell, we won't even get the chance to bake the bread.

Lud felt humiliated and insulted.

But he was sure that neither Olfen, nor the governor-general of Pelfe's office, thought anything of it.

They were probably thinking that a backwoods baker like Lud must be happy just to be a part of such an event.

"P-Please, let me borrow your kiln! Even for just a little while is fine!"

Even then, Lud persevered, bowing his head.

There was still Sophia's challenge to worry about, but more than that, not being allowed to bake anything was too painful to bear.

"Haa …"

Olfen let out a sigh as if he was looking down on a profoundly pathetic man.

"You know, we're kind a busy right now. Get out of here."

Not a shred of Lud's pleas got through to him.

"Master, let's go."

Sven said.

It sounded neither pained nor angry. It was a calm and natural voice, so much so that it didn't sound like Sven.

"Huh?"

All signs of her blazing anger had disappeared.

"Sven?"

The extreme complacency of her words left Lud confused.

"Nothing will come of us staying here any longer. We're getting in the way of these gentlemen as well, so we should leave."

Normally, Sven would turn into a vengeful demon to

exterminate anyone who wronged Lud in any way—including women and children—but now Sven spoke with an unnaturally composed and cool attitude.

"Hmph."

Olfen gave a snort through his nose, as if to say, "Well, a least one of them has some common sense," when—

"Oh look, you're got some dirt on your nose."

With a movement barely perceptible to the eyes, as if she was cutting through the air, Sven wielded her hand like a blade, and threw a knuckled punch at the tip of Olfen's nose.

"Gwah?"

With a foolish sputter, Olfen's eyes rolled back in his head and his knees buckled.

"C-Chef?! W-What's wrong?! Chef?!"

The cook's face grew pale and he held on to Olfen's unconscious body.

Sven's strike hit not simply his nose, but more precisely, the philtrum right below it, so before he even felt any pain, the shock of the blow passed through to the medulla oblongata that controlled his nervous system, and instantly knocked him unconscious.

The people around him, and even Olfen himself, had no idea what happened.

"Well then, let's get going."

Grabbing Lud by the arm, Sven lightly walked away from the galley.

"Sven …"

Although he didn't see everything, Lud was the only one who sensed what Sven had done.

"Please forgive me for that, Master! If possible, I would have liked to turn those damn pigs into mincemeat, but I was able to hold myself back!"

Sven said, puffing out her cheeks.

"*Hahaha*, well, that …"

No matter what reason there might be, Lud didn't like to resort to violence.

However, taking a peek behind him and seeing Olfen unconscious with a stupid look on his face, drool rolling down his chin, was a little bit, just a tiny bit—

"I guess … that felt a little … satisfying?"

Lud couldn't deny that this was what he felt.

"But, what are we going to do now?"

Sven's minor revenge had lightened Lud's mood slightly, but that didn't change their situation.

"At this rate, all we can do is go back to that storeroom."

With that, they would sit idly until they were returned to Organbaelz, like cargo being delivered to its destination.

It was too wretched to think about.

"Oh? Did you not listen to what I said, Master?"

"Eh?"

However, it seemed Sven wasn't going to let it end that way.

"Did I mention anything about 'going back,' or 'returning to the storeroom? This battle is only one of many more to come!"

When saying the word "retreat" would dampen morale, a commanding officer might say such things to gloss over the defeat.

However, Sven wasn't saying this to improve morale.

She had some ingenious scheme to break through this roadblock, and was leading Lud to a suitable location.

Which was also why staying in the galley arguing with two ignoramuses like Olfen and his gatekeeper was a waste of time.

"What exactly … are you planning?"

"*Kekekekeke*, you'll see~ ♪."

Sven gave a wide, mischievous grin.

Meanwhile, Sophia sat in one of the guest rooms on the upper level.

"They should be discovering the truth right about now."

The room that she sat in was luxurious, even compared with the many other rooms on the ship.

Having a bed, chairs, table and a dresser, it was even equipped with her own private shower and toilet.

From the large window, she could enjoy the rolling clouds in the sky.

With the telephone in her room, she could call a steward to bring a drink or some food, whatever she wanted for a pleasant and comfortable experience.



"He still doesn't get it … He doesn't realize that society is teeming with scum who don't even realize that they're scum."

Immediately after Sophia learned of Lud's participation in the party, she used her connections and authority to thoroughly check everything behind the scenes.

But, if one took a minute to think it over, it was easy to figure out.

There were a number of reasons why Wiltian and Pelfish people were at odds.

There was the anger of the Pelfish people for being deprived of their cultural identity and pride in their country.

There was the latent discrimination among the Wiltians toward the people of Pelfe.

Wiltia was the victor in the previous war, and a developed nation.

The conviction that they had taken the inferior nation of Pelfe under their wing, and had given them the privilege of joining their country, was deep-rooted in the minds of Wiltia.

This belief caused them to look down on the culture and customs of Pelfe without exception, including their food.

"Even if he's from Wiltia, did Lud think that a famous Wiltian chef would let some baker approved by the 'Pelfish

cretins' into *his* galley?"

Even if he could actually bake his bread, a majority of the guests at the party were upper-class Wiltians.

Sophia thought it highly unlikely that they would put their prejudices aside and eat a single bite.

Just getting the bread in their hands would be hard enough.

Sophia's condition that Lud had to find at least one person to say his bread was delicious had been given with these facts in mind.

I wonder if this will be enough to make him realize …

Holding on to his life as a baker wasn't worth risking that life.

Whether he was finding redemption or atonement, the only thing he could do to make use of his life experience was the military.

"U-Um, excuse me …"

"Hm?"

A young girl behind Sophia spoke.

"I need to be going soon … Miss."

The young girl stood there uncomfortably, as she used the polite but unfamiliar language.

"Oh, you do, don't you … Wait a second, I must change."

Answering the young girl, Sophia pulled across the curtain partition in the room and began removing her clothes.

What am I gonna do … This soldier lady isn't letting down her guard …

With her two hair braids swaying, the young girl—Milly—paced the floor at her wit's end.

Milly's surprising journey to Sophia's room on the Defairedead began at the church on the hill, the night before Lud and Sven headed to Nazalenka.

"Oh Milly, you're still awake?"

The night had darkened and all the younger children were asleep.

Unable to fall sleep herself, Milly stared up at the night sky from the window of the chapel, when Marlene called to her.

"Y-Yeah …"

Her face looked a little as if she had been caught misbehaving.

She wasn't actually doing anything wrong.

She was only lost in her thoughts.

But they were thoughts she didn't want Marlene to know, as she was both a mother-figure and like a sister to

Milly.

"… Hey, will you join me for some tea?"

Perhaps picking up on Milly's mood, Marlene smiled as she invited her to a nighttime tea party.

After the incident from a few months before, the truth that Marlene had been part of a terrorist group had been cleverly covered up.

In fact, her involvement had been rewritten to suggest that she had actually protected the children's lives, and had been forced into helping the terrorists. She then was so concerned that the town would be in danger that she reported it all, thanks to which the entire terrorist group was rounded up and arrested.

Lud used his influence to make sure this story was accepted, while it was Sven who thought it up herself.

Lud testified to the commanding officer at the military base that Marlene pretended to join the terrorists, supplied them with information, and tried to find a solution.

This most likely wouldn't have been believed coming from an average ex-soldier, but Lud was a hero known as the Silver Wolf. His powers of persuasion were on a whole different level.

Originally, Lud didn't like using his past authority, but

he was more than willing if it was for the sake of Marlene, Milly and the rest of the children.

"How is it? I think I've finally been able to get the hang of it."

"Yeah, it's good … It's really gotten better."

Milly gave her honest impression before swallowing the tea Marlene had made for her.

"I see, so you also thought my tea was bad?"

"Uh, no, I didn't mean that at all!"

Marlene's tea had been dreadfully bad, so bad that even a softhearted and good-natured person like Lud compared it to, "almost a declaration of war."

But Milly and Lud hadn't confessed this for a long time to spare Marlene's feelings.

"It's just that the tea itself was bad! It was all musty!"

Panicked, Milly tried to gloss over her words, to which Marlene replied,

"I don't know, these leaves are only slightly better than what I bought before."

Marlene had avoided joining the terrorist group, but the church on the hill was having more and more difficulty scraping together the money to survive.

She had just managed by collecting enough money from

the terrorists as a collaboration fee for allowing them to use the church building to store their weapons.

But after the incident was resolved, that also dried up.

Then, a little bit of luck came their way.

Neither the Wiltian military, nor the offices of the governor-general of Pelfe, were completely filled with heartless and incompetent people.

The commander who had believed Lud's testimony was a military man who had climbed up the career ladder through his efforts during the Great War. He praised Marlene for the brave actions she took for the sake of the Principality, and was deeply moved when he heard that she looked after homeless orphans.

The commander not only personally gave them a sizeable donation, but he also appealed to an understanding official in the governor-general's office to give the church a fixed subsidy every month.

The children in the hilltop church now had three meals a day, and no longer had trouble buying notebooks and pencils.

Soon they had enough left over to buy lamp oil and black tea leaves.

"Hey, Milly … Do you remember what we talked about

before?"

Marlene spoke as the two of them sat together drinking tea.

"You know, about finding you a job."

"… Yeah."

Milly's expression stiffened slightly.

Typically, unless they were part of a very affluent family and could devote themselves to learning, most children left home to work at fifteen years of age.

Depending on the region, it wasn't rare to have even ten-year olds become apprentices.

Milly was fourteen, soon to be fifteen.

Up until now, she had to care for the younger children in the orphanage, but those children were growing up, and able to look after themselves.

It was a suitable time for her to leave the orphanage.

"There's a city called Nazalenka. Have you heard of it? There's a tailor there, you see, and he is looking for a live-in assistant. The town mayor introduced me."

For children whose families had no land to work, or who didn't complete their education, the best way to put food on the table was to learn a specific skill.

Even if Milly started as just an assistant, in time she

could become a seamstress, and if she did well for herself, she would be able to earn money.

It might even be possible for her to open her own store one day.

It was a good opportunity.

"This city, Nazalenka … is it far from here?"

"It's not super far, but it isn't nearby either … If you left early in the morning, you'd get there around noon. You'll need to take the train."

This opportunity meant she would have to say goodbye to Marlene and the other kids, who were like family to her.

And at the same time, it meant that Milly wouldn't be able to clear up a *certain concern* of her own.

"No good?"

"N-No, that ain't it at all!"

It was harder than one might think to find work for an orphaned child.

Milly was sure that Marlene had only found this job after negotiating with a number of different places.

Understanding all the work she had put in, Milly certainly couldn't say that she didn't like the idea.

"Hey, if that's the case, how about you go and see the shop for yourself? We'll be able to cover the train ticket one

way or another."

"W-Wha … Oh, sure …"

With that, Milly was on her way to meet the tailor in the military city of Nazalenka, and a potential new job.

She didn't say a word about the plan to anyone at Tockerbrot, especially Lud.

Even though they were both going to Nazalenka, and could have gone together, Milly took the train after Lud and Sven left.

Somehow, she didn't want them to know.

However, it was the first time she had been to the town, and as she was trying to figure out where she was going, a steel trash can flew up and hit her on the head, knocking her unconscious.

"Crap! Hey, are you okay?!"

Sophia, who had sent the trash can flying in a fit of rage, and feeling responsible for Milly, had frantically rushed her to the doctor on the military base.

The injury was only a minor bump, but Sophia wasn't sure what to do.

"I've done it now … I have to get on the ship, but I can't just leave this girl …"

As Sophia said this, Milly realized that the female

soldier in front of her was a passenger on the Defairedead.

Lud was also aboard that ship.

Before she knew it, Milly had opened her mouth to speak.

"I'm also supposed to be boarding that ship … Miss!"

She said the first thing that popped into her head.

Milly had come to Nazalenka to introduce herself to the tailor in the shop where she was expected to work, so she was wearing her best clothes, well-cleaned for the occasion. She wouldn't have been mistaken for a homeless child.

Nevertheless, she didn't look like someone capable of buying an expensive ticket for the famous Defairedead, either.

However, Sophia unexpectedly went along with Milly's story.

"Perhaps … Are you one of the choir members singing in the chorus onboard the ship?"

At the party in the sky, there was to be a choir performance to sing songs praising Wiltia.

Since they were all amateurs, the choir was made up of children from common families.

"Y-Yes …"

"So … because of some sort of trouble … was your train delayed, so you arrived late?"

"T-That's right."

"And you came here to meet up with your group, but you don't have any way to board the ship, and now you're in trouble, is that it?"

"Yes, that's correct."

The way the conversation went, rather than Milly having to lie, Sophia continued to misinterpret the situation.

"Everyone's … boarded the ship already … Miss."

These words, at least, were true.

… *Sniff.*

Listening to Milly's reply, Sophia wiped tears from the corner of her eyes.

"You're so young, and yet you feel you have to fulfill your duties so you won't betray your fellow choir members … What an admirable sense of responsibility you have! That's how all children of Wiltia should behave!"

Sophia grew deeply emotional.

I'm … from Pelfe, not Wiltia, though …

She was about to retort but kept the words to herself.

"Very well! I will make sure you get on that ship! Rest assured, whether it's one ticket, or two, it doesn't matter! Leave it me!"

With that, Milly did leave everything to Sophia, and in

an unexpected turn of events, she was in Sophia's room, stowing away on the Defairedead.

"Give me just a few more minutes. As soon as I change, I'll take you to the other choir members."

On the other side of the curtain, Sophia took off her uniform, and changed into her dress for the party.

If I'm gonna escape, now's the time …

No matter what the circumstances were, Milly had deceived Sophia about who she was, and she was a stowaway on the Defairedead.

If she was brought to the choir, the truth would be out in an instant.

That's right, stowaways found on boats get thrown overboard, don't they …

Milly had heard a story called, "The Fate of the Stowaway."

Right now, she wasn't aboard a boat, but an airship in the sky.

Wait, are they gonna throw me overboard from way up here?!

She could see through the window that they were already high enough to fly alongside the clouds.

While they were boarding, and on their way to the

guest room, Milly had repeatedly tried to escape.

It was a little ironic, but Sophia firmly held Milly's hand without taking her eyes off her, to make sure her young fellow traveler didn't get lost again.

As a guardian, Sophia was perfect, but to Milly, it was the worst outcome possible.

Just as Milly prepared to run away while Sophia was changing, she heard a heavy thud and could see Sophia place something on top of the table.

It was a holster, with a gun snug inside.

It was the M908 Parabellum Pistol. Invented by Wiltia, with their world-leading technology, the gun had a distinct cartridge mechanism that used the newly-developed 9mm bullet with improved power in close quarters combat.

Milly didn't know any of this, of course.

What she did understand was that if a bullet was shot from the barrel of that gun, and it hit her, she would die.

She's a soldier after all … She acts like she's a good person, but she's still used to killing people.

Milly hated soldiers. She loathed them.

She thought soldiers were nothing but murderers—bastards who joined the military because they wanted to kill people.

But …

Suddenly, Lud's face came into her mind.

A good-natured man, who had bravely put his life on the line to save Milly, and who had been happy from the bottom of his heart when he saw that Milly was alive and well.

That man had also been a soldier.

"Sheesh, changing into something you're not used to is such a pain in the ass."

"Ah."

While Milly was thinking, Sophia had finished changing and opened up the curtain.

Crap, there goes my chance to escape!

Milly came close to shouting this out loud, but she was captivated by Sophia standing in front of her, and her mouth hung open, her eyes wide with surprise.

"Hm? What's wrong?"

"You're so pretty …"

The words slipped out of Milly's mouth.

That was how beautiful Sophia looked in her dress.

The dress emitted a pale yellow luster that seemed to match Sophia's blond hair, and without any gaudy decorations embroidered on it, the simple fabric served to promote the

dress's beauty.

Sophia was a beautiful woman even when she was wearing her military uniform, but Milly now saw that when a beautiful person wears beautiful clothes, the synergy greatly increases their elegance and splendor.

"Hmph! I'm cleaned up, sure, but it doesn't mean anything on the battlefield!"

Unfortunately, Sophia's personality hadn't changed in the slightest.

"If being pretty could win wars, the battlefield would turn into a beauty contest! That just goes to show you how meaningless this is!"

There is a saying that, "God doesn't give with both hands."

For example, when a person is blessed with exceptionally good looks but is lacking in some other capacity, or vice versa.

However, there are also those like Sophia Von Rundstadt, who are gifted with two of God's blessings, but completely indifferent to one, let their gifts become unused treasure.

"But you're really pretty … You look like the fairytale princess come to life..."

"Hm?"

Nevertheless, Sophia was still human.

Being so admired by the honest and innocent child in front of her made her feel embarrassed in her own way.

"Hmph … But, has it actually done any good? Regardless of how much I am complimented, if the person I want to look doesn't turn his head my way, it's all just a wasted effort."

"The person you want to look at you?"

Without thinking, Milly repeated Sophia's words.

It was a surprise to her that a man existed who wouldn't turn his head at a woman as beautiful as Sophia.

"There was, you see … there was a small party where I wore a dress like this, and I stood right in front of him, but … that idiot! He told me, 'Don't worry, Commander, you look like a proper woman.' What the hell was that supposed to mean?! How was that moron looking at me before, huh?!"

"Huh, w-w-what?!"

Milly was at a loss as Sophia reminisced and grew angry at the memory instead of laughing fondly.

"Oh, sorry … I got carried away … Really, half of it is thanks to this dress. What do they say, 'the dress makes the woman?'"

"That's not true … if I could be even half as pretty as you wearing something like that, then even I'd want to wear a dress …"

Milly spoke without thinking.

For the first time, Milly admitted her desire to look pretty, having never wanted to be fashionable in her impoverished everyday life.

"Oh?"

Sophia's eyebrows twitched.

Sophia held her finger up to her mouth deep in thought, then she grinned as if she had a scheme in mind.

She picked up the telephone and called the ship's steward.

"Do you have a child's party dress? Please pick out some suitable accessories and shoes to go with it, and bring them to me immediately."

"Huh …?"

Milly didn't understand at all.

A child's dress. Only she and Sophia were here, and Milly was the only child.

"It's perfect. Since you're already running late, would you come with me to the party for a little while?"

"R-Really?!"

Milly hadn't even thought about attending a party filled with the nobility and rich elites.

"I have to at least show my face at that party because of my position, but going alone, you see … It's a little bit of a pain. You could really help me out. How about it?"

"B-but … I-I'm …"

Milly thought that no matter how she was dolled up, it would be like wrapping a stone in ribbons.

In her case, the dress wouldn't be able to make the woman.

It wasn't just embarrassment. She didn't want to experience her own misery.

"Hm … I see, well I can't force you … In that case, we'll get you back to the choir before I go."

"Hm?!"

For Milly, that was an even worse outcome.

I-If it's in the party hall … there'll be more people … and it'll be easier to run away …

For now, she needed to avoid being caught.

"U-Um, t-that, um, p-party … I'd actually like to … go … I think."

Flustered, Milly tried to cover up her previous refusal.

"That's right, that's right. Children don't need to hold

themselves back, you know?"

Despite Milly's suspicious behavior, Sophia just thought that she had refused to go out of embarrassment, and cheerfully laughed, putting aside any doubts.

Then, after a few minutes—

With Sophia's help, Milly changed into the new dress, put on the highest heels she had ever worn, attached ornaments to her hair, and even wore make up.

"You're still a child so the make up shouldn't be too flashy … Hmph! It's all done!"

"W-wooooow …"

Dressed up, Milly looked like an almost completely different person, with her braids undone and her hair combed smoothly.

"Well, well, well! I'd say you look suited to this stuff, wouldn't you? Polish you up a little and you can see the shining jewel beneath!"

Sophia's comments weren't just flattery.

"Even though I had to pressure them, I'd say the staff managed to find something good."

Sophia looked satisfied, and as proud as if she was talking about herself.

"Uh, um … Why'd you … do this?"

But, Milly was unable to relax, and looked down, not knowing what to do.

She felt as if a spell had been cast on her by a mischievous fairy.

"Now, that won't do. You're attending a party, you know? You don't have to lay the charm on too thick, but you absolutely can't look down like that! Be confident. Don't worry, you're very cute! You have to be dignified, and look up with your back straight.

"*Ehehehe …*"

At Sophia's cheerful smile, Milly responded with a forced laugh, unsure what she should do.

CHAPTER 4
THE FESTIVITIES BEGIN

The Defairedead had been a military vessel.

The Principality had built it as an airborne fortress to seize air superiority in the Great European War.

It had many different functions, but its primary responsibility was troop transportation.

The Defairedead was capable of sending close to one thousand soldiers several hundred miles, without the effort of foot, train or land vehicle travel.

In addition it could carry ammunition, provisions, medical supplies, as well as the Hunter Units and their pilots.

"Heeeeeerrreeee we go!"

On the Defairedead, the top level held the party hall and the ship's core, the second level had the dining area and guest rooms, and the lowest level was used as a storehouse.

In a corner of that lowest level, Sven vigorously sent a locked door flying open with a kick.

"This is …"

While it was many times smaller than the spacious facilities on the upper floors, inside was a relatively well-equipped

galley.

"That's right … The ship had this too, didn't it?!"

Finally remembering, Lud clapped his hands.

"These were the galley facilities back when the Defairedead was used by the military … I can't believe they're still intact!"

When the Defairedead was changed from a military to a commercial vessel, it underwent a major remodeling.

It was disarmed, its night camouflage was repainted, and the inside was renovated to be a luxury passenger vessel, with a newly-equipped galley rivaling the kitchens in top-class restaurants and hotels.

But, it was still only *partially* a commercial vessel.

In order to be able to quickly return it to its original form in Wiltia's hour of need, the new facilities had all been created modularly so they could easily be swapped out for the military-use equipment. However—

"The gas and water lines are intricately entangled, so dismantling and putting it all back together would have been difficult. That's why they stopped using it and just sealed it up!"

In front of her delighted master, Sven puffed out her chest with a proud smile.

Making use of its large payload, the Defairedead was

equipped with exceptional food preparation facilities for a military vessel, and could provide hot food to it soldiers, rather than the plain, unappealing food served at the frontlines.

For example, since the soldiers ordinarily ate nothing but stale, dried bread, the airship was equipped with a kiln to bake fresh bread.

"Yeah … I can definitely use this! We'll be able to do it with this!"

Lud had traveled on the ship before, but had forgotten about this second galley. He was embarrassed by his own carelessness.

"I get it, this is where you were trying to bring me."

"*Hehehehe*, that's right♪! It was a waste of time arguing with those idiots when we can use this anyway. Time is money, after all."

Sven replied triumphantly.

"I forgot about this place. You've got a good memory, Sven."

"Of course!"

It was only natural that Sven would know all about it since she had also been a passenger while it was in use by the military.

However, she was aboard as cargo and as a military

weapon—the Hunter Unit, Avei.

"Oh …"

Her smile stiffened, suddenly feeling there was something wrong with Lud's words.

"Alright! Now then, time to start the prep work!"

"Huh? Oh, yes! Understood!"

The party was broken up into day and night sessions, and even if they couldn't make the day session, they planned to deliver fresh bread during the evening.

"Now then, I'll go and procure some ingredients!"

The kiln had been secured, and Lud had brought as many of his basic baking tools with him as he could, thinking he would rather use tools he was used to for such an important event.

All that was left were the ingredients, starting with the flour.

"There is a food storeroom on the bottom level, so I'm sure they have what we need there. I'll rush down and get it."

The storage vault and ice chest in the upper level galley stored the foodstuffs for each day, brought up from the giant storeroom on the lower level.

The storeroom on the lower level held all of the provisions.

"Is it okay for us to just take it?"

"I don't know what you are talking about, Master! Aren't we here because we were asked to bake bread? We are using the Defairedead's supplies to bake bread for the party's guests. Is there anything wrong with that?"

Sven responded with certainty, once again puffing her chest out with pride in response to Lud's doubtful look.

No matter what their true intentions were, the official document was a request for Tockerbrot to provide bread for the party.

As such, the ship had a duty to provide them with the necessary ingredients.

"Well, if I come across anything rare or extraordinary in the storeroom, I'll grab it. Considering how rude they've been to us, we shouldn't be punished just for snagging some souvenirs."

Foodstuffs weren't the only things stored inside the ship.

It was fully loaded with high quality liquor and treats for the upper-class guests.

"I was thinking we should bring back some souvenirs for Jacob, the sister, and that insolent brat, too."

"Take it easy, okay?"

"*Ohohohoho*, I'm going to give that brat something so luxurious, like nothing she's seen before."

Sven was in high spirits, and Lud didn't try to stop her.

He was known to be an honest, kind-hearted person, but when he was on this ship during the war, he had pinched sweets, alcohol, tobacco and the like.

However, much of his stealing had been under orders, and the commander who had asked him the most often was none other than Sophia.

She had once called him in the middle of the night and ordered him to steal brandy for a nightcap.

The inability to disobey the orders of a superior was a miserable part of military life, and when he stole the brandy and brought it to her, she ordered him to stay until she finished it. In the end, she told Lud, "I'm drunk. I won't be able to put up any resistance, no matter what happens," and he had replied, "In that case, perhaps you should go to sleep, sir."

That's when she beat the snot out of me with the brandy bottle, wasn't it …

The Commander had sometimes behaved unreasonably and irrationally like that, but Lud never understood why, at that moment, she had knocked the daylights out of him.

She normally wasn't an angry drunk, so it was all the more mysterious to him.

"I guess … The Commander is up there right now,

enjoying the party …"

"*Achoo!*"

Sophia sneezed.

"Sniiiiiifff"

She sniffled without the delicate modesty expected of a lady.

"Do you have a cold, Miss soldier-lady?"

Milly spoke up with a worried look on her face.

"No, I'm in extremely good health … maybe it's because of the air pressure?"

Milly and Sophia were in the party hall on the top floor of the ship.

Capable of holding one hundred guests, the middle of the hall had enough space remaining to hold a grand ball.

In the back, it held a stage where a band was performing, with a high ceiling and a luxurious chandelier hanging from above.

"W-Woooow …"

Milly blinked wide-eyed,, having never seen anything like it.

"Jeez, how unnecessarily gaudy."

Sophia appeared entirely unimpressed with it all, and gave

a light snort as she muttered how worthless it was.

"Oh my, if it isn't young Lady Rundstadt."

"It's such an honor to be able to see you here."

"You look as beautiful as always! I mistook you for an angel, fallen from heaven."

Discovering Sophia, a shuffling crowd of men crowded around her.

The sons of Wiltia's nobility, they were all neatly groomed, and wore silly, dainty smiles on their faces.

What's up with these guys?

The only Wiltian that Milly knew well was Lud.

Because of that, she thought all Wiltian men were gruff and stone-like, but the men in front of her were weak and gutless, and Milly suspected they would faint if even their nose was grazed by a punch from one of the miners back in Organbaelz.

"Miss Sophia, won't you let me have a dance?"

"No, please allow me!"

"No, no, first *me*!"

All the men held out their hands.

"My apologies. Today, I have a companion with me."

"Hwah?"

Milly's attention was struck by the change in Sophia from the soldier to the smiling young daughter of a noble.

"Oh, this young girl … Is she your attendant?"

"Your page?"

"Maidservant?"

Bombarded with questions, Sophia gave them a completely unexpected answer.

"No, she's my daughter."

"**What?!**"

Huh!?

It wasn't just the men who were shocked. Milly was too.

"Um … Miss Sophia? Uh, um …"

"Daughter? But, you're … still not …"

"That and … she's …"

The men were all flabbergasted.

What the hell is this woman saying?!

Sophia was older than both Lud and Marlene.

While it wasn't totally out of the question for her to have a child, for that child to be as old as Milly was completely unrealistic.

"Oh, does that seem strange? Our family's greatest ancestor took a twelve-year old wife, and had a child the following year —the successor to our name. There is nothing unusual at all about me being a mother."

This was the true story of the head of the Rundstadt

family, which took place four hundred years ago.

Some events seem typical in the era when they occur, and Sophia's story would have been plausible back when the thinking about marriage was different, but her peculiar explanation only served to bewilder them further.

Or at least, that would be true for the common folk.

"Um, no, well … I didn't mean it like that …"

"Um, I meant that I think nothing of it."

"Uhh …"

The noble buffoons now wore expressions of embarrassment and awkwardness.

"Now then, if you'll excuse me."

As if everything had gone exactly as she had planned, Sophia took Milly's hand and they walked away.

"Sorry for using you like that … Those types can be a real pain in the ass."

Sophia's family, the Rundstadts, was a distinguished family with a four hundred year history, dating back to the time when the Principality of Wiltia was known as the Luftzand Domain.

Moreover, because of her beauty, men would flock to her whether she liked it or not.

Sophia found it unbearably irritating.

"Isn't it impossible, Miss? For me to be your daughter, I mean …"

"Not really. You saw, didn't you? Their stupid faces, with their mouths wide open?"

Just as Sophia had said, the Rundstadt founder's wife had been far too young.

If the young nobles had called out Sophia's story as ridiculous, they would be slighting her ancestors.

It wasn't something they could say because they valued lineage and power above all else.

"But that isn't it … our hair and eye colors are different … heck, our faces don't look the same at all."

Milly wondered just how much better things would be for her if she was beautiful like Sophia, and started feeling slightly sad.

Men continued to appear, one after another, and all were shot down by Sophia. At first Milly shrank at Sophia's lies, but as the party progressed, she started to find it amusing as well.

"What the hell was with that geezer? He was old enough to be your father!"

"There are always some like that … They're under the illusion that all women want to be their lovers."

"How stupid!"

"*Hehehe.*"

Sophia laughed delightedly as she listened to Milly insult the men at the party.

"So, you've finally stopped being so polite with me."

"Oh …"

Because she had been speaking with a soldier and a member of the nobility, Milly had nervously tried to use formal language, which felt awkward and clumsy, but somewhere along the line she had returned to her usual way of speaking.

"T-that's, well … um …"

"Don't worry about it, I like you this way."

Sophia cheerfully reassured her.

Sheesh, this is hard …

Milly was supposed to hate soldiers, but before she knew it, she had relaxed around Sophia—a fact that made her feel like she had been tricked.

"Alright then, should we eat something? You must be starving. There should be something here to fix that hunger of yours."

Sophia pointed with a nod. Milly saw a tremendous feast, with foods she would never have dreamed of, made with ingredients she didn't know existed.

It was an extraordinary sight that seemed to lack any sense of reality.

"Is there … any bread?"

Milly asked without thinking.

"Hm … Bread? There should be plenty at the edge of the table."

At a party like this, a staple like bread wasn't usually offered as a main dish.

Instead they served bread for people who might not be very hungry.

Common products were set out, such as croissants and sliced bread.

Milly picked out a piece of bread and brought it to her mouth.

It didn't taste bad, but it wasn't delicious enough to praise.

This is wrong, this ain't his …

She knew from just one bite.

It was totally different from Lud Langart's bread.

His bread has a more delicious … and happier flavor to it.

Despite the baker's surly and frightening face, the bread from Tockerbrot was filled with kindness.

It had the power to put a smile on the faces of the people who ate it.

It was as though Lud was kneading his own smile into every batch of bread dough.

"So, I guess you really like bread?"

Sophia asked, looking at Milly as she concentrated on the flavor of the bread in her hands.

"My dad … He was a baker."

"I see! I guess that makes sense then … Hm? Was? Did he close down his bakery?"

"He died, in the war …"

The smile disappeared from Sophia's face at Milly's reply.

"Sorry … I didn't mean to make you talk about that …"

With a solemn expression, Sophia apologized sympathetically, with genuine remorse. She didn't shrug off Milly's feelings just because she was a child.

"It's fine, really."

However, Milly gave a slightly curt reply, as though she was telling Sophia, "You're a Wiltian soldier, where do you get off?!"

But Sophia apparently didn't pick up on the meaning behind Milly's reply.

This woman … She's kind of similar to Lud …

A serious, good-hearted person, and while Sophia wasn't as brusque as he was, she was still awkward and naïve to the

world.

"Now then, should we be leaving?"

Collecting herself, Sophia took Milly's hand, and they returned to the same corridor where they had entered.

"Huh, isn't this the wrong way?"

Or so Milly thought, as Sophia was walking in the opposite direction from the stairs that led back to their room on the second floor.

"No, this is the right way. I asked the person in charge, and he said the choir's waiting room is this way."

"Ahhh …"

Without thinking, Milly almost shouted in surprise.

She had completely forgotten about the story she told Sophia.

Milly had planned to sneak away in the crowd at the party, but she had been so captivated by the whole experience with Sophia, she hadn't thought about escaping.

"Uh, uhh …"

Sweat seeped from her body, and her mind was consumed with intense panic.

"Uh, um … I, at least … should change … I have to give back this dress …"

"Don't worry, you can have that dress. That should give

your friends quite a shock, right?"

Sophia was beaming.

It was a lovely and expensive piece of clothing, but under the circumstances, Milly resented her generosity.

"M-My bags … I need to grab them …"

"*Hahaha*, I'll send them along to whoever's in charge. Don't worry about that. Don't you need to hurry? Aren't you performing soon?"

Caught in her lie, Milly didn't care at all about the choir, but in fact, they were to go on stage in thirty minutes.

Sophia regretted selfishly dragging Milly around with her for so long, and was trying to make up for it now, which only served to back Milly further into a corner.

She couldn't stall any longer.

There was no chance for her to run away.

I guess I should just be upfront and apologize …

Milly understood now that Sophia wasn't the type who easily took another's life.

Sophia would possibly hit her, but Milly knew she wouldn't die.

However—

What to do …

She didn't want to see the smiling Sophia, who had

completely trusted Milly and showed her kindness, now be disappointed by Milly's lie.

As she struggled with her thoughts, they had arrived in front of a door at the end of the corridor.

The plaque on the door read, "Band and Choir Preparation Room," and below it was written, "Authorized Personnel Only."

Milly wasn't authorized personnel.

Her lie would be discovered as soon as they opened the door.

"Major Sophia Von Rundstadt of the Principality Military!"

Sophia said, banging loudly on the door.

"Oh, crap … I accidently knocked like I always do …"

Milly didn't even hear Sophia's words.

What should I do, what should I do, what should I do?!

Milly's entire body trembled.

"Uh, um—"

Unable to stand it any longer, Milly was about to confess everything to Sophia.

Bang!

Her voice and an echoing gunshot rang out at the same time.

Baking bread took time.

One had to mix the flour and the yeast, knead the dough, and let it ferment.

Yeast was a microbe, a fungus used in food processing.

Since it was a living organism, it took time to mature.

"Man, what a great kiln. With both gas and electric power, it heats up in an instant … It even has temperature control, so I don't need to worry about the strength of the fire …"

Lud voiced his admiration as he examined the bread kiln, far more convenient than the conventional log-fed kiln he had back at Tockerbrot.

"No, no, this proofing cabinet is even better."

But, as he stood in front of the machine next to the kiln, his opinion quickly changed.

A proofing cabinet matured the bread dough at high temperatures.

By setting it to a temperature that was best suited for the yeast to grow, it greatly shortened the maturation time of the bread.

"If I had this, I could cut down the production time, and really increase our output."

For a long time it has been said that, "the baker is the first

in town to wake."

There are stories about the croissant, which was said to have been created in celebration of a baker from a certain country. One morning, before dawn, the baker discovered a pagan militia preparing a surprise attack on the town, and then warned the villagers and allowed everyone to escape.

The dough had to ferment early in the morning in order to make bread that day, but with a proofing cabinet, the amount of time needed decreased drastically.

"If only we had one … But … It's probably expensive isn't it? I can't imagine how expensive it must be."

It was so expensive that there were probably only ten of them in all of Wiltia.

The war was governed by absurdity.

During the war, there were investments in new technology, because there was the money, time and personnel that would be unheard of during times of peace.

The proofing cabinet might not have been invented without the war.

Nothing is born from battle—but that's not true of war.

This was an unfortunate fact for all the pacifists in the world, but it was the truth.

The technologies were later sold to civilian interests,

further refined and made available to the public, and eventually became an indispensable part of everyday life.

But, Lud wondered how many decades it would take for this progress to reach Tockerbrot …

"I'm back, Master!"

At that moment, Sven returned, carrying a large bag on her shoulders.

She had found flour, butter, salt and other ingredients necessary to make the bread, and she then went back to look for anything else they might need.

"Oh Sven, welcome back. That's quite the bag you've got there."

"Yes …"

Putting the large bag down, she rustled through the contents and lined up the spoils.

"Well, first we have this Dom Perignon champagne and Hennessy cognac."

They were very expensive brands of alcohol, the pride of Filbarneu, a country rich in fertile soil.

"Then we have dry-cured ham and canned caviar …"

She took out a chunk of high quality Sparia dry-cured ham, said to be a delicacy without parallel, and then she produced cans of rare, salted fish eggs that could only be gathered from

the eastern inland sea.

"This whole bag is nothing but super luxury foods. We can have our own party right here."

Looking at all the gourmet food, the likes of which he had never seen before, Lud couldn't help feeling excited.

"There's just one more thing."

"Wait, there's *more*?"

Sven pulled a final object from the bag.

"A time bomb."

"Wow, so they even had a time bomb …… Wait, *what?!*"

Sven's tone was so indifferent, it took Lud a few seconds to realize what this was, and he shouted the second he recognized what was in front of him.

"This has already been deactivated, right, Sven?"

His military training immediately took over.

Having spent years sleeping on a blanket-covered bomb case instead of a bed, Lud now examined the bomb with an extremely cool head.

"Yes, its mechanism was quite simple, so I easily disarmed it."

A number of cords extending from the bomb had been detached, and the timer's clock display had stopped.

"So terrorists are targeting this ship, is that it?"

"That seems to be the case."

Despite the danger, both Sven and Lud were extremely calm.

Soldiers are constantly required to make difficult decisions under pressure, and this taught many of them to be thorough realists.

They could change nothing by talking in circles about the lunacy soldiers were presented with.

Instead, they waste no time before devising plans and countermeasures to deal with the situation.

The former soldier and his former weapon acted as they had been trained.

"It's because Wiltia's pissing everyone off."

"With so many potential reasons, it's almost impossible to identify anything specific."

It could be the result of political or cultural conflicts, it might be religiously motivated, or it might even have been sparked by a personal grudge.

Narrowing it down would be difficult, but Lud could speculate, based on the terrorists' approach.

"This bomb was placed in the food storeroom?"

"Yes, it was placed to be difficult to discover, but it was not

hidden in a particularly clever way."

There were various ways to cause destruction, depending on the bomb.

If many small, high-powered explosives are camouflaged to look like something else, there is a risk that the planted bombs will be exposed.

So, one bomb that is capable of delivering a fatal explosion is hidden very carefully.

In contrast, this bomb was hidden so sloppily that Sven discovered it by chance while prowling around for food.

Most likely, a number of cheaply made bombs had been planted in different places.

"There's only one thing we can do. We have to let the Commander know about this bomb, and force the Defairedead to make an emergency landing. I'm sure the guests will object … Wait!"

He had been thinking like a soldier, but then Lud remembered something.

"Dammit! Now the party will be cancelled! Even if we bake bread, no one will have time to eat it! What are we going to do?!"

"P-P-P-Please calm down, Master!"

The two of them were used to scenes of chaos during

wartime, but the conversation now turned to their bakery.

The pair both held their heads in their hands.

"It's unfortunate but human life can't be replaced …"

"What's going to happen to the challenge …"

Sven spoke with a worried look on her face as Lud's shoulders drooped in disappointment.

The Sophia that Lud knew was a violent and unforgiving superior officer.

She wouldn't accept any excuses for the failure to complete the mission, even if there was a good reason behind that failure.

She imposed the same strict regulations on herself.

"It's over …"

His military training couldn't come up with a way of dealing with the problem this time.

"Hm …"

As he sat feeling gloomy and downtrodden, he heard a noise.

He realized that someone was inside the air vent in front of him.

"Sven … Get behind me …"

Lud was careful as he removed the grate fitted over the air vent.

"… A child?!"

In the air vent was a young girl.

Her dress was in a terrible state, torn and covered in dust.

"… Milly?! What the heck are you doing here?!"

Expecting the young girl to be back in Organbaelz, Lud was shocked to see Milly crawl out of the vent, dressed completely differently from usual.

"H-help … quick … it's terrible …"

Lud didn't know what had happened to Milly, but after finding the bomb planted in the storeroom, there was clearly something dangerous going on inside the ship.

Milly was kidnapped by terrorists once before, and it had been a deeply frightening experience for her.

With those psychological scars not yet healed, she was panicked facing a similar situation.

"Calm down, breathe in, breathe out …"

Lud didn't rush her, and tried to calm her down and make her breathe slowly and deeply.

"What happened? Tell me calmly."

"*Haa … Haa …* T-they had weapons … a lot of them … the person … talked about a 'special forces soldier' …"

"Special forces?"

Special forces were soldiers assigned to specific missions,

which were different from regular military operations.

So this time … it's their handiwork … If that's the case, this is pretty serious.

This was going to be much more difficult than the previous incident, when most of the terrorists had been amateurs.

Only someone with experience in such matters would be able to quickly distinguish between professionals and amateurs.

"You gotta help, quick … she's going to die … Sophia's going to die!"

"The commander?!"

Lud understood that somehow Milly and Sophia had met and come across the special forces soldiers, who had planted bombs on the Defairedead.

Then, Milly had escaped to look for someone to save the ship.

"I can't believe it … The commander's …"

"*Haa … Haa … Haa … ungh* ....."

After having told them all she could, Milly fainted.

The upper level of the Defairedead was in chaos.

The armed insurgents moved quickly, even faster than the

Wiltian military's praised blitz tactics.

All hell broke loose on the stage when the children's choir began their performance with the band.

The guests at the party watched the performers as though they were looking at odd, if amusing, animals.

The Pelfish entertainers on stage were supposed to sing songs praising Wiltia, referring to them as masters, to stoke the audience's sense of superiority.

But the band dashed those expectations as soon as the curtain rose.

Instead of instruments, the band held firearms.

There was no warning before the gunshots rang out.

It was so sudden that many in the audience didn't understand the reality of the situation, and were shot straight through the head as they wondered if it was part of the entertainment.

The armed attackers had disguised themselves as the band.

The large instruments such as harps, basses and tubas had large cases to hold them, and the armed group had hidden the firearms in the instrument cases.

As guests were killed mercilessly and their blood-soaked bodies were strewn on the floor, the rest of the guests finally understood what was happening.

A terrible panic broke out.

Some fainted from the shock, others scrambled over one another to escape, while a few tried to save themselves by hiding behind others. They all lost their heads, and ran around in chaos like a herd of small, spooked animals.

The armed group wasn't large.

There were only ten of them, at most.

In comparison, there were over one hundred guests in the party hall.

Even though they were defenseless, if all the guests jumped at the attackers at once, while there would have been some causalities, they could have dealt with the attackers and brought things under control.

To prevent this, the armed group purposely created a situation where the guests would be unable to make such calm, cool-headed decisions.

From the beginning, they didn't plan to restrain the guests in the hall.

They were thousands of meters in the air. There was nowhere for the guests to run.

From the moment they picked up their guns, and made their revolt—No, from the instant they boarded the ship, the guests were already abducted and imprisoned.

The panic they stirred up laid the ground-work for their next move.

The Defairedead's control room, unlike the two-seated cockpit of an airplane, sometimes derided as nothing more than a chicken coop, was a sizeable room suited for steering an immense ship like the Defairedead, and was filled with operations staff, comparable to the size of the bridge on a large battleship.

"Hello gentlemen. I am very sorry for interrupting while you are busy working, but we will be taking command from here on out."

A giant man, Commander Dreadnought, the leader of the Special Forces, suddenly appeared in the control room, clad in the armor of a long-forgotten era.

The security force stationed on the ship was preoccupied with the disturbance in the party hall, seeing to the safety and protection of the confused guests, so the control room was utterly defenseless.

"W-What the hell … Who are you!?"

Although it was now used as a commercial vessel, the control room staff on the Defairedead was mostly made up of soldiers, transferees from the Wiltian military.

"Under your command … you said?! What do you plan to

do with this ship?!"

The captain fearlessly replied to the strangely-outfitted man who appeared in front of him.

"Do not worry, we have no plans to plunder the ship, or to change its destination. Please keep to your present course to the former Pelfish capital of Ponapalas. There—"

With his helmet visor lowered, neither the captain nor the other staff could discern Dreadnought's expression, but his voice was surprisingly mild and gentlemanly.

"—I'll have you sink this craft. I'd like it to be as horrible a catastrophe as possible, one that will become the stuff of legends, and make people curse the existence of such an airship."

There wasn't a shred of compassion in the words he spoke.

"Nonsense!"

The captain swiftly pulled out his gun.

There were very strict regulations against bringing a firearm into the cockpit of a ship, with the lives of so many people on board at stake.

However, because the captain was responsible for everyone's safety, as a precaution, he was allowed to carry a gun in order to prevent any catastrophic injury or damage to the ship.

But—

"Eh?"

In the next instant, without warning, the captain fell over dead.

"How unfortunate."

Dreadnought had closed in on the captain quickly and before he could pull the gun from his holster and take aim, Dreadnought struck the captain with his powerful, metal arm.

With that, the captain's head was gone.

"It's a crude expression, but … cease all resistance. It's futile and disgraceful."

Dreadnought wiped the blood dripping from his fist with a handkerchief as he spoke, his tone still mild and polite.

Thus, the Defairedead—called the supreme ruler of the Principality of Wiltia's skies—was now under the control of Dreadnought's special forces team.

"What the hell?!"

Now aware of the commotion above him, Lud left the unconscious Milly with Sven, and headed to the upper level.

He set off toward the top level at once, but on his way, he found the guests on the second level in an uproar.

"What's going on, what happened?!"

"Help! The upper floor is a mountain of bodies!"

"What's going to happen? I paid a high price for these tickets, you know!"

In the confusion, the distraught guests who had escaped the hell in the party hall were spreading word about the disaster on the upper level, generating further panic, with everyone on the verge of rioting in the corridor.

It would be impossible for fifty crew members to get this situation under control.

To make matters worse, although Lud wasn't aware yet of the captain's murder, the crewmembers could no longer contact the bridge.

"So that's how it is … They're clever."

Looking at the scene before him, Lud understood the motives of the people who had taken over the ship.

Normally, in order to occupy a facility, personnel would act as guards to prevent an uprising by the hostages.

However, it was impossible to bring in the number of troops necessary to cover a ship this immense.

So they've only secured the important locations … The control room has probably already been taken over.

The soldiers had attacked out in the open, panicking the

guests and leaving them to struggle chaotically.

This was more like the storming of a castle than the hijacking of an airplane.

So the enemy is aiming for the control room … and they've dealt with the security personnel, taking a minimum number of hostages. They focused on occupying only the top floor to do so … so that's it, then?

Even if Lud pushed through the crowd, the stairs had been blocked, and he worried that the elevator had been destroyed as well.

"If that's the case then … Right!"

Coming up with an ingenious plan, Lud stormed through the crowd and headed toward the area near the bow of the ship on the second level—the galley from where he had been ejected just a few hours earlier.

"What in all of heaven and earth is going on!?"

"I don't know!"

In the galley dining room, the host was having an argument with Olfen, who had recovered from Sven's punch.

They were aware of the uproar on the upper floor, but had no idea what to do.

They yelled at each other to disguise their own panic.

"W-What do you want, agghhh!"

Lud entered, pushing his way past the cook's apprentice guarding the door.

"Y-You're that baker from before … W-What are you doing?!"

Lud stood before Olfen, carrying a hatchet used in case of emergency.

"It can't be … Revenge for before? Wait, we can talk about this!"

Olfen's face grew pale as he begged for his life, fully aware that Lud had good reason to take revenge.

The large, muscular man with the scar on his cheek was coming toward him with an ax in his hand.

Panicking, Olfen was on the verge of wetting himself from sheer terror.

But, that was not Lud's objective, of course.

"So there is one after all!"

In the back of the galley was a tiny elevator used for carrying dishes to the upper level.

It was too small to hold a person, but the shaft itself had enough space that even someone Lud's size could squeeze in and climb to the top.

"Heeeere we go!"

Raising the axe high, he smashed the door to the elevator with all his might, and crushed the clasp on the food carriage inside.

It was a violent way to do it, but since this was an emergency, Lud hoped Olfen would ignore it.

I really don't want them to ask for damage compensation after all this …

In a few minutes, Lud had made an opening.

"There we go … S-Sorry for the disturbance."

Lud now noticed Olfen trembling behind him, and after giving a slight bow, he slipped into the elevator shaft and headed for the top floor.

At that moment, on the lowest floor in the old galley—

"Argh …‼"

Having been ordered by Lud to keep watch while he was gone, Sven groaned.

I've lost again …

Lud was her top priority.

Being unable to protect him was her greatest anguish.

But, Lud had given her the order to stay with Milly, and she couldn't disobey him.

"Honestly, this one just loves making work for others,

doesn't she!"

Sven muttered to herself as she sat next to the still unconscious Milly.

If she was honest with herself, the reason she stayed behind wasn't just because Lud had ordered it.

She couldn't leave Milly while she was still unconscious.

She placed significantly less priority on Milly than Lud, but Sven no longer felt the deep hostility toward the girl that she had.

She still considered Milly to be completely lacking in charm, but she cared enough about her to grip Milly's hand while the young girl writhed in anxiety as though she was drowning.

"Sheesh, this is so annoying!"

Sven grew irritated by these feelings that she couldn't understand, and grumbling and complaining, she tried to distract herself by reassessing the current situation.

The upper level of the ship was now occupied by an armed group, who appeared to be special forces, belonging to a formal military organization.

Most likely, Sven thought, there were only a few of them.

What was security doing, allowing them to take over the ship so easily?

There should have been at least a few crew members

equipped with guns in case of an emergency like this.

Moreover, Sophia was on the ship.

Sven judged from what Milly had said that Sophia had been beaten, but Sven couldn't believe that a powerful war veteran like Sophia Von Rundstadt would have been done in so easily.

There's someone on the ship who even Major Rundstadt couldn't defeat? Or … was there someone she couldn't fight?

Sven's thoughts continued to pile on top of each other when Milly awoke with a small groan.

"Nh, hnh … Oh … Where am I?!"

"Don't worry, you're still floating high in the sky."

Sven replied with slight sarcasm, immediately letting go of Milly's hand.

"Where did … where did he go?"

Turning her head and looking around, Milly saw that Lud wasn't there.

"Master headed to the upper level after hearing from you."

"He can't!"

Hearing Sven's response, Milly gave a heartrending cry.

"W-What in the world is wrong?!"

"He can't … He'll … He'll get killed …"

"Killed? What are you talking about, you silly little girl?"

Lud was strong.

He was a kind-hearted man, and was often considered a big oaf, but as a Hunter Unit pilot, and an expert in hand-to-hand combat, he was in a league of his own.

The armed group storming about the ship might be soldiers more skilled than the amateur Pelfe Liberation League that caused a disturbance back in Organbaelz, but that didn't mean they could defeat Lud.

As Sven was thinking that Milly had no idea how strong Lud was, she was suddenly taken aback.

"He can't …"

Lud was strong.

But, he was a very kind and softhearted person.

Even when a terrorist was about to kill him, because it was the sister from the orphanage who he knew and had trusted, he gave her an opening to get the better of him.

On top of that—

"What have I done?!"

The most important aspect of military strategy is to find the right man for the right job.

It meant stationing soldiers where they could make the best use of their particular skills.

And it also meant placing a soldier in a location where his weakness was least likely to be exploited.

Sven felt furious with herself for sending her beloved master to a place where his weaknesses would be very apparent.

The Defairedead control room—

With the captain's death as an ominous warning, all resistance from the other crew members evaporated.

The crew obeyed Dreadnought's demands, and waited for a chance to act.

With communications halted, the ground must have realized that there had been an accident or emergency on board. The security crew currently fighting the terrorists in the party hall would hopefully soon check on the control room.

It was hopeful conjecture, but they did know for certain that if they disobeyed, they'd be killed.

"Well done, Captain."

Speaking flippantly, an uninvited guest entered the control room.

He was a gentle-looking man, wrapped in a loose-fitting clerical dress—Dreadnought's subordinate, Sutherland.

"We've taken control of the upper level. The people are restrained in the party hall … It seems many fled to the lower

levels, but we've blocked the stairs and elevator so that shouldn't be a problem."

Sutherland's assignment had been to disguise himself as the leader of the band, and command the other soldiers pretending to be band members.

"There were some who put up a fight. We killed them all … Goodness gracious, those little one's of yours were actually quite effective. Those Wiltian soldiers, they're so chivalrous, you see … Too easy."

Sutherland chuckled as a scornful smile came to his face.

Because he was dressed as an innocent clergyman, his cruel demeanor was all the more terrifying.

"Please leave the control room to us, Captain."

Sutherland beckoned to his men and ordered them into the control room.

"Wait, Warrant Officer Sutherland … Did you leave the party hall to them?"

Dreadnought asked, coming to a halt.

"How sharp of you to notice …"

Sutherland's smile twisted disagreeably.

Dreadnought hated to lose any of his subordinates, and always confirmed the number of soldiers around him.

The ten special forces soldiers disguised as band members

had all come to the control room.

"Yes, but that shouldn't be a problem. In fact, they were happy. Now they can kill those Wiltians they loathe so much any way they want."

"....."

"What? Is there a problem? We have to defend this position with our lives in order for the mission to succeed, correct?"

Dreadnought glared through his visor, but Sutherland just shrugged, as if he was teasing Dreadnought.

"No, that's fine."

Without any sort of reprimand, Dreadnought left the control room.

"*Phew* … That old man is such a pain in the ass."

The minute he was gone, Sutherland spat abuse at Dreadnought, his superior officer and the commander.

"He's not in any position to criticize, and if he'd just admit that he wants to kill them too, that would be enough … Sheesh, these monsters are such a pain. You guys think so too, don't you?

Unsure how to answer Sutherland's questions, the soldiers were silent as he kicked the corpse of the beheaded captain, still lying in the corner.

CHAPTER 5
THE COWARD'S FATE

Reaching the top floor, Lud stayed alert as he headed toward the party hall.

On the way, he found a trail of corpses strewn about the corridor.

"Tch …"

Lud grimaced at the smell of the dead bodies—less the smell of rotting meat, it was more the stench of death itself.

Among the bodies, many were wearing the uniform of the ship's security personnel.

"They engaged the armed group? But …"

Lud scanned the area, but there weren't many holes or other damage from ricocheting bullets.

It meant that the security crew hadn't been able to fight back, and this had been a one-sided battle.

Lud gently and respectfully checked one of the bodies.

They were shot from behind? And by a small caliber round …

It wasn't the 9mm ammunition normally used by the military, nor was it the even smaller 7mm they previously

used.

It looked as if the wounds were caused by a pocket derringer that women sometimes used for self-defense.

These wounds wouldn't be fatal unless they had been shot at point-blank range.

The security force was made up of former soldiers who had been assigned to the ship.

Lud couldn't believe these soldiers could have been taken down so easily by a weapon so small.

Lud continued on, slowly and carefully, trying not to make a sound.

The corridor was covered in a thick carpet, which made it easier to move silently.

He checked the guide map on the wall.

So, the scenic viewing parlor is on the other side of that corner … The party hall is after that.

Calmly, with no sudden movements, Lud proceeded, until finally he could see the door to the party hall.

However next to the door, he saw a person's silhouette.

"W-Who … Who is it?!"

A child crouched there, trembling.

"It's okay, I'm not a bad guy. I heard the commotion and came to help."

Lud spoke quietly, making sure not to terrify the boy any further.

"S-Save us! The band … We, we didn't know them! All of a sudden, today, there were a bunch of people we didn't know!"

The child was young, and looked to be about Jacob's age or perhaps younger.

He was wearing old-fashioned clerical garments that a monk's apprentice might wear.

"One of the kids from the choir?"

Lud remembered that one of the events during the party was an amateur choral performance.

"I get it, so the soldiers snuck in pretending to be the musicians in the band?"

"……!"

The boy agreed, nodding his head up and down.

"What about inside the party hall? Are all the scary men gone?"

"They all went somewhere … But I'm sacred … too scared to move …"

If Lud's prediction about the small number of soldiers was correct, they couldn't spare personnel to guard hostages who had nowhere left to run.

"I see … Are there any unharmed people inside the hall?"

"Yeah, my friends, and the nobles … but there are so many bodies, I'm scared …"

Lud understood that the agonized faces on the dead bodies would be a horrible and frightening sight for a young child.

"I got it. Do you want to come inside with me? That way you won't be scared, right?"

"Y-Yeah …"

Seeing the boy give a trembling nod, Lud shielded him as they entered the party hall.

"Eek!"

From inside the hall, Lud heard a stifled scream.

One of the surviving guests shrieked, fearing that one of the brutal rebels had returned.

He looked for Sophia among the frightened faces.

He found her lying among a group of hostages, as if she had been dropped there.

She wasn't dressed in her regular uniform, but he knew without a doubt it was her.

"Commander!"

Lud shouted, and Sophia gave a small grown and opened her eyes, staring at Lud.

—No, she was looking behind him.

"Captain, you fool! The enemy's behind you!"

Faster than Sophia could shout, the young boy behind Lud pulled a small pistol from his monk's robes and aimed the barrel at Lud's back.

"Die, Wiltian!"

Lud turned around just before the boy pulled the trigger.

He looked completely … unsurprised.

Nor did he look unaware of what was going on.

In fact, the look on his face suggested that he had everything already figured out.

"I knew it."

Before the boy could respond, Lud grabbed the boy's hand holding the gun, and raised his whole arm toward the ceiling.

The bullet from the gun hit the chandelier above them and scattered shards of glass onto the floor.

"Dammit, he found out?!"

The voice didn't belong to the boy.

Other children crawled out from beneath tables and chairs, pointing similar small pistols at Lud.

"Are you going to shoot your friend!?"

Lud still held the gun and the boy's arm fast.

Even an adult would find it hard to escape his grip.

"Crap … Wiltian scum!"

"Using such a cowardly tactic!"

Pretending innocence about their own actions, the children reproached Lud.

"Captain … How, how did you know?"

Sophia asked with a blank look, ignoring the pain from the gunshot wound in her leg.

"Did you forget, Commander? I grew up the same way these guys did."

Just before his tenth birthday, Lud had been drafted as a class three soldier, and had entered military training.

He had been given lessons from his instructor with both words and fists.

"You guys are weak. You don't have physical strength, but there *is* a weapon that only you can wield."

Their weapon was the fact that they were children.

If the opponent is a child, any soldier will let down his or her guard.

This was true of even veteran soldiers.

In fact, even experienced soldiers who function in battle with their well-trained bodies often moving faster than their minds, will instinctively identify children as noncombatants, and lower their weapons.

The victims shot from behind by small caliber bullets, from a gun with recoil low enough for even a child—all the facts

were clear to Lud.

But more than that—

"And, there's no way … that a kid wouldn't be scared of me, meeting me for the first time."

"Oh … I see …"

Lud's face was so frightening that Jacob, his long-time friend, age difference notwithstanding, even said that when he first met Lud, he was sure that Lud was going to kill him or eat him.

So, Olfen's behavior moments before, when he was terrified that Lud had come to kill him, was a more typical reaction.

"Wiltian soldier scum! To come here disguised as a civilian, you're the lowest of the low!"

Held fast in Lud's grip, the boy shouted furiously, his tone completely changed from before.

"No, this is … My work outfit … I'm just a baker …"

The children thought Lud was a soldier, and disguised as a baker to make them drop their guard.

"Don't screw with us! Like any baker would have a killer's face like that!"

Lud felt a little like he wanted to cry.

"Just give it up. You take advantage by making your opponents believe that they won't be attacked by a child.

Once that's gone, you don't stand a chance."

Even if they were armed, and even if they outnumbered him, Lud's strength vastly overpowered that of ten children.

And now, one of them was restrained by Lud.

"Stop with the crap … You think we'd lose, to the likes of *you* …"

The young boy seemed to mutter to himself rather than to Lud.

"——!"

Instantly, Lud sensed danger.

Lud knew when he said these words, the boy was planning to lay his own life on the line.

"Everyone! Forget about me! Just shoot him! Kill him!"

Unsure what to do, the children obeyed and once again pointed their guns at Lud.

With their inexperience, it would be impossible for them to shoot Lud without killing their friend as well.

"Wait! I'll release the boy. If you want to shoot me, do it after that!"

Lud insisted that he, not the boy, was their target.

At that moment, a white smoke seeped from the vents.

"Gas?!"

It wasn't smoke from a fire.

But, it wasn't gas, either.

The air had turned completely white, and Lud recognized the sweet smell.

"This is … baking soda?"

It was a type of baking powder used in breads and cakes.

Naturally, it wasn't toxic.

Inhaling it wouldn't be harmful. However—

"Don't shoot!!! If you shoot you'll all die!"

The slightest spark would react with the oxygen in the air and cause a tremendous explosion.

A phenomenon that occurred regularly in mines, if uncontrolled, it could lead to many hundreds of casualties.

"Huh?!"

"W-What was that?!"

The child soldiers were confused, unable to see anything in front of them.

Then, with lightening speed, someone seized on that disruption, and rushed into the party hall.

"What?!"

"Augh!"

The cries of the child soldiers echoed inside the dense white fog.

While human vision could not penetrate the thick cloud,

someone who could see took the children's guns, one after another.

Taking less than a minute, the automatic smoke alarm system detected the baking soda, and drained the white powder from of the room.

Standing before Lud was the young black—normally silver—haired waitress.

"It's an old, worn out trick, but I knew it would work!"

Sven stood with a big grin on her face, crushing three of the small pistols in one of her hands.

"You're … that girl from back then …"

With one look at Sven, Sophia remembered the earlier incident, glared angrily at Sven, but since Sven had saved her life, Sophia also looked confused.

"Are you okay, Master?"

"Sven … What are you doing here? Weren't you down below?"

"Please do not worry. The brat—er, Miss Milly, is with me."

Sven had left Milly in the ventilation room next to the party hall.

In order to carry out her plan, Sven had given her the job of sprinkling the baking powder into the air vents.

"I heard about the child soldiers from Milly … I came

rushing to assist you, Master, but it seems that you didn't let your guard down too much …"

With children as the opponents, Sven was afraid that her kind-hearted master would end up in the same situation he had with Marlene.

"Yeah, I guess …"

Lud had a slightly sad look on his face.

The reason he hadn't been deceived was because he had once done the same thing himself.

It was an ironic twist that his own past, filled with events he didn't want to remember, saved his life.

"Master …"

Sven knew Lud after he had become a Hunter Unit pilot, when she met him as Avei.

"Now then, what should we do about these children, I wonder?"

Sven aimed her rage at the child soldiers for making Lud remember such a dark time in his life.

"If … if you're going to kill us, then do it! We'll never give into Wiltian trash like you!"

"That's right!"

Even disarmed, the children had no intention of surrendering quietly.

"Oh?"

Turning to them, Sven looked at the children as if they were completely insignificant.

"Huh?"

Their morale broken, the children looked at a loss.

"I don't really mind. You've already chosen your fate."

Sven crushed the children's guns in her hand, and as she scattered the pieces about, she slowly looked every child in the eye.

"Resistance fighters, partisans, guerillas … there are a lot of different names for them, but they are irregular military forces … And they aren't recognized as actual military."

The crushed guns were scattered on the floor, and the metallic cling and clang as they fell gave Sven an even more ominous presence as she stood in front of the children.

"When soldiers are in battle, international laws govern their behavior. They can be punished for improperly treating prisoners. Officially …"

Implied in her words was that this rule didn't extend where no one was looking.

"However, you all are different. I don't give a damn about whatever magnificent beliefs you may have, but under the law, you're nothing more than an armed group, rampaging

around this ship. Do you understand what that means?"

The child soldiers couldn't look Sven in the eye.

They understood that while she looked like a pretty young girl, inside her was something far more sinister.

Several of the children looked down at the ground, while others winced in fear.

Only one among them defiantly returned Sven's look with a glare.

It was the young boy who attacked Lud.

This one, huh …

The boy wasn't showing bravery from courage or conviction.

It was likely that he was assuming the role of the commanding officer for the other children.

Only his sense of duty, and the pride he took in remaining strong in front of his subordinates, stopped him from giving in.

If I break this one, the rest will follow.

Sven stared hard into the boy's eyes.

She was smiling, but she looked at him as if he was a pathetic animal.

"How admirable, isn't it? I don't know exactly who controls you, but to think that their little kittens actually want to become his disposable tools of war is quite something."

"Tools?! ... You're wrong, we're—"

"Weren't you listening? Once you've been defeated, there is no choice left to you but death. On the battlefield, uncontrolled irregular military groups are killed before they are able to sew chaos. It's common sense."

Sven's words weren't just an idle threat.

The battlefield wasn't just where soldiers killed each other.

The rules were apt to be broken, and were maybe just a promise that combatants would try to observe, but there was very little decorum on the battlefield.

Subversive activity while disguised as civilians— as the children had done aboard the ship—was strictly forbidden.

It wasn't just because it was cowardly.

Soldiers on both sides wouldn't be able to tell the civilians and the soldiers apart, and would have to kill both to survive.

Therefore, such actions taken by an *irregular* military group meant they would be slaughtered the moment their existence came to light.

"Your masters … They're official military men, aren't they? Of course, they know this and still had you do it … Oh my, oh my, perhaps you didn't realize it yourselves? That you were being used as tools?"

"You're wrong … We're … but that's wrong …"

The boy started to shake.

"....."

Lud wasn't worried by Sven's threats.

Her desire to kill was genuine, but Lud knew she had no intention of acting on it.

However, everything she told the children was true.

Lud knew from firsthand experience.

"Hey, behind me ··· can you see? The scummy Wiltian adults you captured ··· If I release them all, and restrain you all ··· I wonder what would happen ···"

".....!"

The boy looked around.

There were no weapons.

But, there were knives to cut meat, and forks to stab food.

"I'll say this just to be clear ··· No one's going to forgive you just because you're children anymore. After all, you fought using your frailty as your weapon, right? Now that you've lost, you won't be able to use it anymore."

Fighting that broke international law meant throwing away one's protection under those laws.

The children could only blame themselves for the consequences.

"Uh ··· oh ···"

The fact that he had been used, the fact that he was to be tortured to death, and the fact that the life he had risked would be wasted—caused countless cracks in the heart of the young boy.

"Now then, which one would you like me to start with?"

Sven suddenly brought her face right up to the boy's nose.

"W-Which?"

"I'm asking you which eye should I gouge out first."

"Eek!"

A fundamental military strategy was finding the right man for the right job.

Sven thought her kind and gentle master wouldn't fight against the child soldiers.

Actually, he had the toughness to confront them, but he had also been hurt.

Facing the children hadn't been the right job for him.

Lud would never be able to kill them.

But, Sven could.

People who hurt her beloved master, people who made him suffer, people who trampled over his feelings, whether old or young, man or woman, Sven would grind every last one of them into dust.

"N-Noooooooooo! Help! Someone save meeeeee!!"

The boy shrieked, face-to-face with her pure, concentrated intent to kill.

A few minutes later—

Milly left the ventilation room and appeared in the party hall.

"Is it, over?"

With her face covered in baking soda, she timidly peeked into the room.

"Oh, thank you, little Miss Milly. You've done a great job."

Sven came over to greet the young girl.

"Lud … and Sophia … are they okay?"

"Yes, Master … and Major Rundstadt are both fine."

"Good …"

Hearing this, Milly looked relieved at last.

"They were easier foes than I thought they'd be."

As she turned around, Sven saw the child soldiers, completely deprived of the will to fight, huddled together trembling, their faces ghostly pale.

Their wretched shaking made one think that even a litter of puppies would pose a greater threat.

CHAPTER 6
SOPHIA VON RUNSTADT'S PRIDE

"Captain, bring me that unused knife and the strongest drink you can find."

"I told you … I'm not a soldier anymore."

"What are you waiting for?!"

"Yes, sir!"

At Sophia's command, Lud brought her the knife and a drink.

"Do you want a cloth to bite on? Or maybe I should do it?"

"Doesn't matter."

Sophia had been shot in the leg.

The bullet from one of the small caliber pistols was still inside her.

"*Hngck*!"

A slight groan escaped Sophia's lips as she used the alcohol to sterilize the knife and then dug the bullet out.

"Ugh …"

Milly turned her head away as Sophia stabbed herself with the knife.

"Hmph, well this is … fine, I suppose."

Pulling the bullet from her leg and disinfecting the wound, Sophia ripped off the hem of her dress and used it as a makeshift bandage.

"Um … Miss Soldier Lady … Are you … really okay?"

"… You managed to stay safe, huh?"

Sophia tried to remain calm and composed at Milly's timid questioning.

"Um … I … I …"

Milly gripped her tattered dress, on the verge of tears.

"You managed to get reinforcements up here. Good job."

Sophia smiled gently and tenderly stroked Milly's cheek.

"The Commander's smiling …"

Standing nearby, Lud stared at Sophia in surprise.

"What's that supposed to mean, Captain!? I can smile when necessary, you know!"

"No, I just … you know … was thinking to myself; 'Wow, the Commander's smile can look like this, too?' That's all …"

Lud remembered when she would give a jovial smile to encourage her comrades, or to coerce an enemy, but he thought Sophia didn't have it in her to make such a warm and gentle smile.

"You're the last person I want to hear that from!!"

Lud didn't have a right to talk about anyone else's smile

when his sent shivers down the spines of those who saw it.

"I get it … So you're their lapdog, is that it?" A voice rose from among the restrained child soldiers.

"You're …"

The voice belonged to the boy, whose will moments before had been broken by Sven's threats.

He gave them a cold and cynical glare.

"You … You're Pelfish, right … And you're buddying up to these Wiltians? Traitor!"

The boy spat venom at Milly, staring her down in rage.

"Tell me something … Why did you all do this?"

Lud asked the child soldiers.

Although he had been in a similar situation, he hadn't been burdened by nationalistic beliefs like this boy.

The children clearly held an intense animosity toward Wiltia.

"It's obvious, isn't it? … You bastards started a war with Pelfe, and now we're like this …"

Although the boy had been trembling and near tears just moments before, he salvaged the willpower to respond defiantly to Lud.

"Dad and Mom both died … Our house is gone, the whole town burned down …"

Pelfe didn't actually start a war with Wiltia.

However, in the previous Great European War, a fierce battle unfolded on Pelfe's eastern border between the southward advancing August Federation and the Wiltian military.

The devastation caused by the battle between the two great powers was inflicted upon Pelfe.

"Everything gone, I dug through the trash everyday … I got kicked like a stray dog, had rocks thrown at me for fun …"

The Wiltian government didn't completely ignore the orphans of war.

However, since some Wiltians turned their country's orphans into soldiers, child welfare still wasn't in evidence throughout the country.

"I was picked up by the vagrant hunters and thrown into the poorhouse. But the only thing waiting for me was rock-hard bread and weak, salt-water soup two meals a day. And being worked like a slave from morning until night!"

Wiltia's war orphan relief was less for the orphans themselves than to prevent the street urchins from threatening the public order.

"You might be right, we might have been used like tools!

But, in that case, what about you Wiltians! You treated us like dogs!"

To these children, Wiltia was the source of their intense and unfair suffering as casualties of war.

Without Wiltia to hate, they would be backed into a corner, with no strength to survive.

"What did we do? What did we ever do wrong?"

Tears spilled down the boy's cheeks.

Tears of sadness—no, Lud thought, tears of frustration at everything that had happened to him.

Faced with the boy's pain, Lud just stood there, clenching his fists.

He remembered back in the galley, when he had been insulted by Olfen.

A Wiltian, even Lud had felt angered by Olfen's irrational contempt for the people of Pelfe.

Once one is stained by anger, it wasn't easy to wipe it away.

"At the end of the day, I bet these Wiltians just treat you like a pet, right? These bastards don't even think of us as human!"

The boy's gaze once again fell on Milly.

Milly trembled.

Clenching her fists and gritting her teeth, Milly shook as she remembered the events that had occurred a few hours earlier.

Sophia had taken Milly to the choir's preparation room.

However, because Sophia had announced her identity as she knocked, the special forces soldiers inside started shooting through the door.

"Look out!"

In a flash, Sophia had saved Milly.

She had taken a bullet herself that normally she would have dodged, to protect Milly.

"Whaaat? I thought the Wiltian military had come on board, but I was wrong?"

It was Sutherland, in charge of the soldiers disguised as band members, who said this, unknown to either Milly or Sophia.

"Tck … Run!"

Sophia ran, trying to ensure Milly's safety.

Sophia carried Milly in her arms, with blood spurting from her leg.

"What was that about?! Weren't those your friends!?"

Seeing that Sutherland and the rest of the group were

dressed in clerical garb and monk habits, Sophia concluded that they were special forces soldiers.

However, she couldn't believe that Milly could be their accomplice.

"I'm sorry … I … I'm not with the choir … I just … wanted to come on this boat … and …"

"You lied to me?"

"I'm sorry … I'm sorry …"

Milly desperately repeated her apology.

She had deceived Sophia, and had taken advantage of Sophia's goodwill and kindness.

And ultimately, her deception had caused injury to Sophia.

"You were just a stowaway? … I'm a fool for not realizing that, I guess."

Sophia angrily spat out the words, but she didn't abandon Milly.

"Alright brats, after them! If we're found out now, we're in trouble! Seize them!"

At Sutherland's orders, the child soldiers readied their pistols and chased after Sophia and Milly.

Sophia ran even faster, but as soon as she turned the corner, she came to a dead end.

"Tch!"

Clicking her tongue in frustration, she looked around and noticed an air vent.

"There's no way I'm gonna be able to get in there … You'll just have to escape by yourself."

"Why?!"

Milly asked.

"You don't … have any obligation …"

Before Milly could continue, Sophia interrupted.

"I'm a soldier of Wiltia. As long as I'm a soldier, I have a duty to protect the citizens of our country. Even if I trade my life for theirs."

"But, I'm not from Wiltia … I'm Pelfish!"

Milly's shouting sounded more like pleading.

She was imploring Sophia not to do anything more for her sake.

"Pelfe was annexed by Wiltia … got it? Pelfe's territory became Wiltia's territory. The citizens of Pelfe became citizens of Wiltia, so you're a Wiltian, too. As a Wiltian soldier, you're a citizen I will protect!"

Sophia didn't know how the rest of Wiltia thought.

This was Sophia's resolution, her principles, and her beliefs.

"Hurry up and run! If you regret lying to me, then tell someone, anyone you trust, what's going on. The enemy is

probably a special forces unit from another country … This ship is in danger."

Saying this, Sophia forcefully shoved Milly into the vent.

Sophia was then captured, but her status as the daughter of a noble family and a renowned soldier prevented her from being killed.

If the Wiltian military discovered that the Defairedead had been captured, and attacked the craft with fighter jets, Sophia could be used as a shield by the terrorists.

But, that didn't happen until later.

At that moment, true to her word, Sophia traded her life to protect Milly.

"Don't lump me together with you …"

Trembling, Milly spoke quietly.

"Look at me … My mom and dad are gone … If there hadn't been a war, it wouldn't be like this … I hate Wiltia, I hate Wiltian people, and I hate Wiltian soldiers …"

Milly's voice was very soft.

Yet, Lud, Sophia, and the child soldiers listened closely to her words, spoken as if she was coughing up blood.

"But … I don't know. I don't really know the names of many Wiltians ..."

Even though she was supposed to detest them, inside her, somewhere along the line, Wiltia had become vague, and now that she knew the names and faces of a few of their people, it was impossible for her to hate them as before.

"Do you even know … What type of Wiltian do you hate? What faces do they have?"

None of the children answered.

They had also forced the irrationality of their own circumstances onto the giant nation known as Wiltia.

"All I know is that Lud and Sophia risked their lives to save me … They thought of me as a person, and protected me!"

It's understandable to hate the country that took your family and destroyed your home.

But, Milly now asked herself if that made it right to blame a person just for being a citizen of that country, and to hate them for it.

"I'm … different … from you all!"

Her emotions boiled over and tears streamed down her face.

The child soldiers couldn't respond to Milly's vehement words.

"That's enough, it's okay …"

Sophia tenderly hugged the sobbing Milly from behind.

"Sorry."

Then, she whispered an apology.

Sophia wasn't apologizing because she was from Wiltia, or because Milly was from Pelfe. She apologized as an adult to a child, because Milly was forced to say these things.

"Hmph … crying over these Wiltians …"

Even then, the young boy spat out spiteful words, but there was little power left in his voice.

"Um, can I say something?"

In an attempt to change the atmosphere, Sven raised her hand.

"What should we do about the bombs?"

"Right!"

Lud agreed, having completely forgotten about the bombs.

"What bombs?! Explain yourself, Captain!"

"Hmm, well you see …"

Her face flushed with anger, Sophia questioned Lud as she grabbed him by his collar, and Lud explained.

"Whaaaat, why didn't you say anything sooner?! There are still more bombs?!"

"If we knew that, we wouldn't be in such trouble, you know. We just happened to find the one and—"

"Don't talk back to me!"

"Whoa!"

Sophia's fist grazed Lud's cheek as he dodged her attack.

"The control room …"

The young boy grumbled, half to himself.

"Dreadnought and Sutherland are there … They said they were bringing the bombs there."

"You're … telling us this?"

"Don't misunderstand … Those two are *super* strong … They'll kill the likes of you. You all should just go off and die."

Lud had been surprised at the unexpected supply of information, but the young boy held onto his animosity to the last.

"This brat still has quite the mouth, doesn't he?"

Sven threatened the boy by loudly cracking her knuckles, but Lud kept her in check.

Inside, the boy's willpower had transformed into complete desperation.

Up until then, a number of factors had backed him into this corner.

Now, Lud thought, the boy was cornering himself.

"Forget it. It's fine."

If this signaled even the slightest change in the boy, then that was enough for Lud.

Lud and the others turned their attention toward planning a counterattack to disarm the bombs on the ship, and recapture the control room.

Their opponents' greatest advantage was that the Defairedead was still flying through the air.

"Those bombs … considering their size and scale … It would be a catastrophe if even one went off."

The Defairedead didn't rely on hydrogen in place of helium, so even in a fire, it wouldn't explode or go up in flames.

However they didn't know if the body of the ship could survive an explosion set off inside.

If they succeeded in taking back the control room, they could make an emergency landing, and evacuate the ship.

"Alright then … The major and I will head to the control room, and—"

"That won't work, Captain."

"That won't work, Master."

Lud started to propose that the professional soldier and the former professional soldier tackle the control room together, but immediately Sven and Sophia both voiced their disapproval.

"Captain … When you were about to be shot by all those

kids just now, what did you say?"

Lud hadn't used the captured boy as a human shield, nor did he make him a hostage, but instead let the boy go so that Lud would be the one to be shot.

"There seems to be ten armed soldiers packed into that control room … I'm sorry for saying this, but it's too dangerous for you, Master."

Sven didn't want to criticize Lud's gentleness, but she couldn't stop herself from speaking up.

"But!"

"You stay here and protect the hostages, and Milly … You're best-suited for that."

The party hall was an important foothold they had won.

In war, defending the base of operations was a fine duty, as a successful defense meant that the offense could go on the attack.

Lud understood the logic, but in that moment, he felt like he was hiding in the only safe place available.

"Please don't worry about us."

To Lud, even Sven's kind words hurt.

"Alright then, shall we get going?"

"Yes! Wait … Why're you here, anyway?!"

Exiting the party hall, Sophia snapped at Sven, who looked in high spirits and ready to head off to battle.

"Amateurs shouldn't stick their necks out in dangerous situations!"

Sophia's had serious apprehensions about taking a civilian like Sven, but Sven wasn't an amateur. She wasn't even human.

"I'm not your subordinate. I don't have any obligation to listen to your orders."

Sven replied with an unconcerned look on her face, and Sophia grew visibly red in anger.

"Hey, tell me, girl … Who the hell are you?!"

"I'm someone who cherishes my beloved master, to whom I've offered both my heart and my body. Is there any problem with that?"

Sven replied easily to Sophia's rage as if her answer was obvious, and as if she had no idea why the question had been asked.

She wasn't trying to provoke Sophia.

Sven protected Lud Langart, and helped him achieve his dreams.

That was her desire, her mission, and the meaning of her existence.

"O-Oh? Hmph. I'm sure that is just one-sided."

"*Mrr*! I-it's true that Master can be modest and reserved, and that he very rarely shows his emotions, but I'm convinced that we understand each other's thoughts and feelings!"

Sven recalled how Lud had been slightly standoffish to her recently, and anxiety mixed with her words.

"Oh, well, well, well, seems like I'm right, doesn't it? You say all this, but he might just think of you as an irritating stalker."

The moment Sophia picked up on Sven's anxiety, she teased her like a schoolyard bully.

"What was that!?"

Sven raised her voice, as though she couldn't let this remark slide.

"My relationship with Master is of one of body and soul, you know!"

Sven wasn't lying.

After all, as a Hunter Unit, she had held Lud inside her, and had memories of them fighting together as one.

"Well, Lud and I have greeted the dawn together in the same bed."

"What?!"

At Sophia's words, the bedrock in Sven's heart began to

shake.

"That's the type of relationship we have. Now that you know that … Show a little humility!"

Sophia grinned complacently.

It was the smile of one who had the high ground over her opponent, and laughed down at her.

"Wha—but, no …"

Sven lost her sense of balance, as if the joints in her feet had gone numb.

T-That can't … Could that be why … Major Rundstadt is trying so hard to make Lud return to the military?!

If she had heard this a few months ago, Sven thought she might have descended into madness.

However, she was different now.

She was an android awake to her love, so much so that even her creator, Daian, would be shocked.

"And so what?!"

With a slam, she stepped forward, objecting to what Sophia had said, as if about to fight her herself.

"Master is a man, too! And an adult! It's only natural he's had one, two, even three old women in his life. It would be stranger if he hadn't!"

"Y-You're calling me an old woman!?"

"Yes, that's right. I don't fuss over a gentleman's past! What's important is now! An outdated model like you shouldn't be acting all high and mighty!"

Rather than being the number two model, Sophia was the so-called old number one model.

Sven was the one always at Lud's side. The past wasn't important; the future was what was precious to her.

"You've said it now, bastard!"

"What are you going to do about it, Miss Outdated?!"

Bashing their foreheads together, the two bitterly stared each other down.

Sven met the much feared, dragon slaying glare of Sophia's head on, and returned fire with her own scowl.

"I'm going to strangle you!"

"If you think you can, I welcome you to try, but ..."

"Oh …"

At the same time the two looked in front of them.

The sign overhead pointed ahead to the Control Room.

"After this is all over!"

"Got it!"

Then, again at the same time, the two began to run.

The entire length of the Defairedead was close to five hundred meters.

However this included the upper floatation system, so the gondola-like portion of the ship— where the guest quarters and control room were located—was just above two hundred meters in length, or about the same length as the Wiltian navy's battleships.

In addition, because of the airship's intricate and complicated construction, the actual distance was close to double in length.

Racing down the long corridor, Sven and Sophia made for the control room.

"Get outta my way!"

"You're in the way, step aside!"

As they ran, they overpowered the soldiers along the way, one after another.

"What?! What's going on?!"



The soldiers had expected some resistance from the passengers, but lost their composure at the attack by two opponents whose skills went far beyond what they had expected.

And neither of them carried a weapon.

Sven didn't have one to begin with, and Sophia's was back in her room.

In contrast, the soldiers had real weapons—guns.

They should have had overwhelming superiority—but it didn't play out that way.

Their superiority gave them an advantage, which made them overconfident. That overconfidence became pride, and then carelessness.

For a Humanoid Hunter Unit and a commanding officer of Wiltia's military with a specialty in many martial arts, not having a gun wasn't even a handicap.

"Well? I've already beaten three of them!"

Sophia gloated, as she sent a soldier flying and knocked him unconscious.

"This is my fourth already, what of it?"

Unconcerned, Sven hurled a soldier, foam spilling from his mouth.

"Damn you …"

"*Hehehehe~*"

Sven laughed at the vexed Sophia, but she was also slightly surprised.

Hmm … Major Rundstadt is doing unexpectedly well …

Sven wasn't competing with her for how many soldiers they could take down.

With Sophia watching, Sven limited her power to an almost-superhuman level, but still within the boundaries of human abilities.

If she unleashed all her power, she'd be able to turn their opponents into corpses in the blink of an eye.

If she'd been left behind, I could clean this up in a flash.

Sophia had been shot in her leg, and with only basic emergency first aid treatment, the fact that she could perform this well was worthy of admiration.

Sven wondered if perhaps Sophia was an android like herself.

"Having a sister like this, what a dreadful thought."

Sven muttered quietly to herself as they moved forward.

"Hey, did you say something rude just now?

"No, not at all—"

Just as Sven turned the corner, she sensed it immediately.

"Tch!"

Falling back in an instant, Sven stopped Sophia.

"What's wrong?!"

A barrage of bullets rained down exactly where Sven had just been standing.

"This is going to be troublesome …"

Sven ground her teeth.

The corridor continued on straight to the control room beyond the corner.

There was no cover, and no other way to the room.

In front of the control room door were three soldiers, rifles at the ready.

There was no way for them to dodge the bullets and reach the door, without being picked off easily.

It was neither coincidence, nor just bad luck.

The ship was designed so that the control room, the most important position on the ship, had limited means of approach, and could be defended by a just a few people.

It was ironic that this safety feature was now taken advantage of by the enemy.

"We can't do anything about this, can we?"

Sophia snarled in frustration.

If they had a stun or smoke grenade, they could obstruct their enemy's line of sight temporarily and rush at them, but

unfortunately they had nothing with them.

They couldn't scatter baking soda in the air vents as before, either.

"I guess we need to search for something to use as a shield …"

"We don't have time for that!"

The armed group inside the ship knew the guests would fight back.

Sven and Sophia couldn't waste time, when every second could influence every passenger's chance of survival.

Someone could die, and that someone might even be Lud.

"Major Rundstadt … I beg you. Please close your eyes and cover your ears, just for five seconds."

"Huh? What sort of nonsense …"

On the battlefield, even the slightest carelessness, the slightest inattention, would endanger a soldier's life.

Telling someone to do that was the same as asking them to commit suicide.

"Please …"

"…… Okay."

Faced with Sven's desperation, Sophia had to go along with her plan.

Not knowing where Sven came from and having just met

her, Sophia didn't find Sven either charming or friendly.

Somehow … I feel like I've met this girl before …

The girl in front of Sophia was somehow similar to Lud, a subordinate who dove into and survived life and death situations. Because of this, she listened to Sven's words.

"Thank you very much."

The instant Sophia closed her eyes, Sven removed two levels of her power limiters.

She was now able to move faster than the naked eye could see, and she disappeared from view.

It was a straight, twenty-meter hallway.

No matter how fast a human body moved, even at top speed, that person would be showered with bullets.

However, Sven wasn't human.

"W-What is it?!"

The special forces soldiers had been trained and they had the skills needed to kill a human opponent.

But, they didn't know how to kill something that wasn't human.

They did not have the techniques to deal with an enemy who moved faster than the human eye could see, and who used the walls, ceiling and floor as footholds, as if she was drawing a geometric diagram as she advanced on their

position.

"What the …"

When Sophia opened her eyes, it was over.

In less than four seconds, the soldiers were defeated.

"My apologies for the trouble, Major."

Sven had her back to Sophia, as if she didn't want to be scrutinized.

"You …"

Sophia thought it was suspicious.

She wondered if Sven held something inside her that was even bigger and more important than their current situation.

And whatever it was, it was probably having a strong influence on Lud.

"Pardon me."

While Sophia was hesitating to denounce her, Sven opened the door to the control room and rushed inside.

"Hey, wait!"

Flustered, Sophia followed her, and the scene inside put a temporary pause on her suspicions about Sven.

"They're … dead? Everyone?!"

There were ten staff members in the control room.

The pilot, the navigator, the radio operator—all of them had a role on the ship.

Every one of them was dead.

"How cruel … They've gone this far?!"

"That's not all, the navigation instruments have been destroyed."

Sven instantly informed the enraged Sophia of her survey of the control room.

It was likely the terrorists had set up an autopilot device and locked in the destination, so it would be impossible to cancel the Defairedead's flight path.

It was an elaborate job.

"With this, we can't change course or land!"

"There is a way."

Sven responded in a calm voice, in contrast to Sophia's indignation.

"What are you going to do? There's some way? Or rather … why would you know about that way?"

"That's …"

"Who the hell are you?"

Sophia asked Sven the same question again, using the same words.

However, her meaning had changed.

She understood now Sven wasn't just an ordinary girl.

Sophia now suspected there was something that was not

human inside her.

"I'm someone who cherishes my beloved master, to whom I've offered both my heart and my body."

At Sophia's question, Sven gave the same response she gave before.

However, the nuance had also changed.

Sven couldn't say anything about it to Sophia, but her love for Lud Langart was genuine.

That was all Sven could explain with confidence to Sophia at that moment.

"....."

"....."

Sophia stared at Sven.

Sven couldn't return her gaze.

For a few moments, they stood in silence.

Then, a third presence broke the silence.

"Major Rundstadt, above you!"

Sven sensed the attack before it came.

Sophia immediately started to roll out of the way to dodge the attack from above.

"You're … from before …"

"What's this, you're that woman."

It was Sutherland, who had taken over from Dreadnought

in the control room, and brutally murdered all of the people inside.

"Tch, I *told* them we should have killed you. Honestly, now you've become a thorn in our sides thanks to the commander's unfortunate mercy."

The man looked like a gentle saint, yet his face was twisted in contempt.

"Well, whatever … Hey, lady. This time the kind knight isn't here. I'm gonna kill you for good, got it?"

As he spoke, he slowly licked his lips.

"But before that, I'm gonna enjoy all the pleasures a woman like you has to offer."

"Scum …"

Sophia's deep repugnance for Sutherland showed clearly on her face.

"Hey, girl!"

She called to Sven behind her as she glared at Sutherland.

"I don't know exactly who you are. But right now I trust you. Do whatever you want. Get this ship on the ground!"

Saying this, Sophia twisted her body, and used the centrifugal and gravitational force to send a kick flying at Sutherland.

"*Gluaughk?!*"

The vicious assault felt like being stabbed with a spear thrown by a heavily-armored knight, and Sutherland crashed through the door and was blown outside the control room and into the corridor.

"This scum … is mine!"

Sophia shouted to Sven, a rage burning in her fearsome eyes that was hot enough to rival the flames of hell.

Sophia left the control room to finish her attack on Sutherland.

Left behind, Sven approached the still-intact display board for the Rezanium reactor.

The terrorists had probably thought it was just a gauge and wouldn't pose a threat left as is.

But, they were just humans.

For a Humanoid Hunter Unit—for Sven—it was the key to changing the course of the battle.

"If I can use its power again …"

In an earlier incident, Sven had ordered an autonomous tank to commit suicide.

She still didn't understand how she had been able to do that.

She knew that her mechanical specifications didn't have that capability.

But there was one thing she had understood instinctively, if not with logic.

Machines were not supposed to possess instincts, but she was able to control other machines by using the Rezanium reactor within her, which housed her soul, heart and her ability to live.

The reactor was composed of a rare mineral that still held many mysteries, and was said to come from the crystallized hearts of the ancient dragons.

I can't believe I have to depend on something so obscure.

On the battlefield, gambling on an uncertainty was the height of stupidity.

However the Rezanite inside the Rezanium reactor was said to hold a will of its own.

Her love for Lud Langart—that alone was something that she would never lose, even pitted against everything the world had to offer.

"In that case, show it to me! Show me the power inside me!"

Sven shouted silently to herself.

The gauge display was connected to the Rezaniumcraft through an output-measuring device.

By turning that device against the ship, Sven tried to

control the floatation system itself.

"Listen to what I say! The supreme ruler of the skies, the pride of the Principality of Wiltia, is being toyed with by vagrants from who knows where! Aren't you embarrassed!?"

The mechanical girl called directly to the machine itself, but the mechanical Defairedead didn't answer.

This machine was on a completely different scale compared to an autonomous tank, which could hold only three people.

The Defairedead carried one thousand passengers, and could race one thousand kilometers across the sky.

"How … stubborn!"

It seemed that persuading such a machine to cooperate was going to take Sven awhile.

"What's the matter, come now, come now, come now! What's wrong, woman of Wiltia!?"

Outside the control room, Sutherland and Sophia were locked in a fierce battle.

However, it was a battle that would be unimaginable to most people.

"You bastard, are you even human?!"

Sophia had sent Sutherland flying with that kick, but even after blows that would knock out a raging bull, the man in

front of her was not defeated.

Even more bizarre was his unbelievable strength as he attacked Sophia from above while clutching the slats in the ceiling like a monkey.

"Don't be so rude!"

Sutherland slashed at Sophia's chest with the long claws on his hand.

"Damn!"

Sutherland's attack tore away not just her dress, but her underwear, exposing Sophia's breasts.

"*Hahahahaha*! Now you're looking good, aren't you? I'll tear it all off one piece at a time! My own personal strip show!"

The laughing man was lost in ecstasy, and as he cackled, Sophia saw that his arms weren't made of human flesh.

"You're, a machine …"

He had a deformed figure, as if the steel arms of a wind-up doll had been attached to his shoulders.

"That's right … We're called mechanical soldiers. I lost both arms in the war, so they replaced them with these. They aren't too bad, but unfortunately I can't feel the skin of a woman anymore. That sucks."

"I see … So Greyten's doing experiments like this too, then."

"What?!"

For the first time, Sutherland's face darkened.

"What makes you think we're from Greyten?"

The Greyten Empire had fought against Wiltia in the Great War, and had been the leader of the allied forces against Wiltia.

"Hmph, you can conceal your appearance but you can't hide your accent. Just how many Greyten soldiers do you think I've faced on the battlefield? More than you could count."

Indeed, by wrapping themselves in clerical robes, and acting as honest men of the cloth, there were many who had been fooled by them. However, Sutherland, now that his lust had been laid bare, was the same beast as the other Greyten soldiers, once Sophia, a woman, had arrived on the battlefield.

"Well whatever, it doesn't make any difference. You're gonna die with everyone else … You're right, we're Greyten special forces."

"What do you plan by sinking the Defairedead?"

"This thing's the symbol of your country's prestige, isn't it? It'd shake your country's pride to the core if it was sunk, wouldn't it?"

The Defairedead used its navigational superiority during the war not just for transport missions, but also to fly to the

Greyten Empire, isolated by the sea, and bomb its capital of Lordlant.

For the impenetrable island nation—who one hundred years earlier had even fought off the Lion Empire, who had controlled over eighty percent of the European continent—Wiltia's attack on their capital devastated morale, and was one of the causes of Wiltia's victory.

"There's one thing I don't understand. Why use children? You have other means, don't you?"

They had incited the Pelfe children, and made child soldiers out of them.

Sophia couldn't understand why they would recruit children for a mission that was dangerous even for a professional soldier.

"That's …"

"That's?"

"That's something your friends can tell you in the afterlife!"

Saying this, Sutherland dropped to the ground, and sliding on the floor, he aimed at Sophia's legs with his claws.

Tearing her skirt, her thighs were exposed.

Worse, his claws scraped the wound she had just treated.

"*Ungh*"

The wound opened, and Sophia's face contorted in pain.

Sophia would have dodged the attack, but she was focused on covering her breasts, and had been surprised by Sutherland's sudden move.

"My, my. It looks like your wound's gotten worse, hasn't it? Either way, you're got a shapely pair of legs. I almost feel bad killing you, *bwahahahaha*!"

Sutherland was gleeful at being able to shame a strong women like Sophia.

"Tch … Damn you …"

Sophia ground her teeth in frustration, which only increased her opponent's pleasure.

Blood was once again flowing from her thigh.

She couldn't move and it would be very difficult to dodge the next attack.

"Man, cleaning up after that commander and looking after those kids has been a pain-in-the-ass mission, but it looks like some fun has come my way in the end."

With a vulgar grin, Sutherland approached Sophia.

"Don't worry, Miss Wiltia. My arms might be machines, but down there is still the real deal, so I'll make sure you have a *great* time."

The brutal man with weaponized arms gloated over his success.

"Are you the one who stirred up those children and brought them here?"

Sophia's voice was weak from the loss of blood and she sounded resigned to her predicament.

"Yeah, after we lost the war, I picked them and instructed them. I said that all their suffering, *everything* bad that happened was because of the people of Wiltia. Good lord, did they take it all in easily. Children can be quick learners, can't they?"

All the child soldiers had suffering unfairly thrust upon them as a result of the fighting between nations.

Sophia was certain the children had questioned it themselves—Why do I have to go through this? What did I do wrong? Maybe I should never have been born.

Crawling around in the dirt, living on mud and trash had been their existence until Sutherland gave them pride and dignity.

"None of you have done anything wrong. The ambitions of the evil country of Wiltia snatched away your happiness. It's Wiltia who has done something wrong."

Sutherland's face returned to that of a gentle and mild-mannered priest.

A warm persuasive voice, offering kind words.

"When I said that, some of 'em started tearing up. What idiots. They're idiots, don't you think? Not just bad luck but bad brains to go with it!"

Sutherland laughed, his cruel expression returning.

Sophia imagined how the children had clung to Sutherland's sweet words that gave their stray dog-existence a target to loathe.

Words that encouraged them to believe that their suffering was the fault of another.

"You bastard … They messed with your head too, didn't they?!"

Sophia didn't want to believe it. She didn't want to believe that humans could be so filthy and mean.

"Unfortunately, this brain's all my own."

Sutherland raised both claws above his head, without her sarcasm getting through to him.

"Time to strip you naked! I'll pull your hair out and tear your face to shreds! The fun will start by tearing the tendons in your arms and legs! I can't wait!!"

Sophia couldn't resist Sutherland's attack—

"You scum!"

Without hesitating, Sophia held out her arms that had been covering her breasts, and just dodging Sutherland's claws,

pinned down his arm, and stepped closer to him.

Ignoring the intense pain in her leg, she stomped it down with enough force to break the floor boards, and slammed her elbow into Sutherland's chest, just above his heart.

"*Gahk*!!"

Taken aback by the unexpected attack and the intense pain, Sutherland vomited stomach acid, and writhed in agony on the floor.

"W-what the … what the hell did you do?! *Ulnhg*!"

"The best technique to make scum like you suffer."

The hand-to-hand combat techniques of "bujitsu," invented in a culture very different from the European continent.

Among these techniques was one that damaged the opponent's heart and killed him, known as the Dragon's Roar.

Sophia had used a variant called the Nine Hells, which caused the body's blood vessels and circulation to run wild, sending a hellish pain throughout the body.

The name, Nine Hells, came from the intense pain, which sent the blood gushing from the nine holes in the human body.

"Damn you … you waited … until I'd come close …"



The pain in her leg prevented her from moving and her half-naked appearance had been bait to draw Sutherland in close.

Sophia was a proud soldier of the Principality and the young daughter of a noble family.

However, her pride wasn't so delicate that she couldn't tolerate humiliation when necessary.

It was a strong and aggressive pride that she could dismiss in order to defeat a hated enemy.

"Even if I sacrifice a leg, and expose my breasts, if I can win, it's a small price to pay."

Sophia Von Rundstadt's pride was her confidence that she could not be devalued, no matter what the situation.

"Now then … Even so, I am yet to be married. You've done what you pleased, so I'll have you pay back in kind."

"W … What …?!"

Sophia looked down at Sutherland crawling on the floor, her eyes so cold-hearted even the devil himself would have given him a more benevolent gaze.

"…… I'll crush it!!"

"N-No …!"

Without listening, Sophia stomped down on the exposed thing dangling from Sutherland's crotch.

"~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~!!!!!"

A scream escaped Sutherland as he lost consciousness, foam spilling from his mouth.

Sophia thought perhaps he died from the shock, but it didn't matter to her.

In the control room, Sven focused entirely on trying to control the Rezaniumcraft, but it wasn't going well.

"Listen to me! If you continue like this, your unsightly appearance will be exposed to all of history!"

If she didn't regain control of the Defairedead quickly, it would go down.

Many guests, including Sophia, Milly, and finally Lud, would all die.

"Please … Listen to me … I beg you!"

She pleaded, squeezing the words out.

Huh?

But, doubt rose inside her.

What am I doing, I'm … begging? Why do I have to beg?

Instead of logic, doubts consumed her mind before she could analyze them.

The machine in front of her was *hers*, and was created to

serve *her.*

Serve me … Serve me … Serve us …

She felt a violent anger at the machines that didn't fulfill their duty to her.

Sven regained her breath, and with a quiet but firm voice, she whispered a single word.

"Obey."

The word was spoken without any doubt, as if everything was Sven's and it was natural for it to be so.

Fshhhhhht …

Suddenly, the Defairedead's floatation system, the Rezaniumcraft, turned the control system over to Sven, as if the entire ship was surrendering.

It was as if a colossal beast exposed its stomach and begged her to show it mercy and compassion.

"Again?"

Sven sensed that something inside her had interfered again, something that knew more about her than she did.

What in the world … am I …

She was perplexed by how infinite and frightening it was, but forced herself to shake it off.

"This isn't the time for me to be thinking about that!"

Now in control of the Rezaniumcraft, Sven ordered it to

quickly land.

Hovering aircraft, like airships, could not take off and land quickly like airplanes.

It landed by steadily reducing its buoyancy, and slowly dropping in altitude.

Even descending as fast as possible, it will still take thirty minutes to land.

It wouldn't be fast enough to change course.

At this rate, they'd go straight to the former Pelfe capital of Ponapalas.

Sven believed this was still the best thing to do.

If the bomb in the control room was detonated, the Defairedead would fall directly on the capital, causing enormous causalities and damage.

"Have we at least avoided the worst case scenario? No, not yet."

For Sven the worst case scenario was Lud's death.

There was still a danger of that happening.

Finding the bomb in a corner of the control room, Sven disarmed the explosive.

Fortunately, it was the same type that she had found in the storeroom.

Sven left to return to the party hall when she discovered

Sophia, slumped on the floor, exhausted, her battle over.

"Major Rundstadt!"

Seeing her right leg stained red with blood, Sven ran over to her.

"*Unh* … you. Did you get control of the ship?

Sophia asked, her face looking slightly pale from the great loss of blood.

"Everything on my end went well. I even disarmed one of the bombs. And the Major?"

Slightly shifting her attention, Sutherland lay collapsed unconscious in the hallway, his eyes rolled back into his head.

"I settled things on my end … But, I might've overdone it a little. I'm going to rest here for a bit."

As if it was too difficult to keep her eyes open, Sophia leaned against the wall as though she had fallen asleep.

Sophia had used the last of her strength to treat her leg, which was no longer bleeding.

"After everything's over, I'll come back for you."

Leaving Sophia, Sven ran to the party hall, and back to Lud's side.

CHAPTER 7
THE END BOMB

Back in the party hall—

All of the hostages were freed and had escaped to the second level.

If the ship was destroyed it wouldn't make a difference, but at least in their rooms, they would avoid any remaining soldiers hanging around.

"We started dropping altitude?"

The view outside of the window showed that the ship was slowly tilting downward.

It was still before dawn, and it was difficult to tell they were descending, but Lud could see the angle of the stars and the moon had begun to change—proof that the ship was dropping altitude.

I didn't really end up doing anything …

They had been saved by Sven and Sophia.

Why hadn't they come to him for help?

They didn't trust him, Lud thought.

He would immediately put his life on the line, and they were afraid he would die.

When the Commander told me that I was just living to atone for my past, I couldn't disagree with her. That's why.

Yet he was sure the joy he felt when someone ate and enjoyed the food he baked wasn't from looking back to his past.

That joy was why he wanted to be a baker.

Lud suspected that Sophia had given him that impossible challenge to make him ask that question—why he truly wanted to become a baker.

"Are those two … going to be okay?"

Milly quietly muttered at Lud's side.

"Yeah … They've probably wrapped everything up. They'll be right back once they're done. By the way …"

Lud asked the question he hadn't been able to ask her while he had been preoccupied with all the trouble on the ship.

"Hey, Milly … What are you doing on this ship anyway?"

"…… Pretty soon, I'm … I'm leaving the orphanage to go to work."

The young girl spent a few moments thinking about how to reply, but then answered Lud with a subdued voice, as if the subject wasn't worth talking about.

"Before that … I wanted to tell you …"

Unsteadily, Milly began to tell Lud something that was difficult to say, when the heavy wooden door of the party hall blew open as if a bomb had exploded outside.

"Excuse me."

Appearing in the door was a giant of a man, wrapped in heavy armor like a knight.

"I've come to get my soldiers."

After looking quickly toward the child soldiers, the man spoke to Lud, assuming the only adult in the room was in control of the situation.

"Your soldiers?"

"Yes, that's right. They're young, but they are my soldiers. If they've been captured, I have a duty to save them."

Lud thought this was a little … no, a very surprising thing to hear from the man.

Lud and the others had believed that the child soldiers had been treated like tools, but the man standing in front of him—most likely the leader of this whole affair—referred to the children as his soldiers, and had come to save them.

"Um … You're …"

"Dreadnought. Forgive me for not giving my name sooner."

"Oh, no … Um, my name is Lud Langart."

Lud was further taken aback that a special forces soldier

would introduce himself properly at all, whether with a false name, code name, or anything else.

With his outfit and armor, the man inside seems like a knight from the middle ages.

"Who would have thought the Wiltian military would camouflage soldiers as civilians. I was careless."

Dreadnought spoke quietly, observing Lud's appearance.

"Um, I'm uh … actually a civilian …"

Lud grew sad at being mistaken once again for a soldier in disguise.

"Oh well, concealing it from you won't make any difference. I'll tell you about our current state of affairs. I'm the only one of our forces left. All the men I left in the control room have been killed."

"Really?!"

"I gain nothing by lying to you."

Lud breathed a sigh of relief that Sven and Sophia's part had gone well.

"But … It seems you don't know of the existence of a third bomb."

"What'd you say?! There's still another bomb?!"

Each bomb had enough power to cause the Defairedead to crash.

"They say one cannot be too careful, right? We estimated two of the bombs would be disarmed, and we prepared a third that, while small, has more explosive power than the other two."

Is he just bluffing?

Lud couldn't read Dreadnoughts expression through the visor covering his face.

Nevertheless, what he said wasn't completely out of the question.

Carrying a final trump card, hidden even from his comrades, was not unheard of.

It was an effective method to trap the enemy by allowing them to base their strategy on misinformation acquired from captured prisoners.

It could also be used during negotiations in the final hour.

"Now about that. I'd like to suggest a deal."

Exactly like this current situation.

"I want you to return my men to me. In exchange, you will be free to use the escape pod as you'd like."

"Escape pod?! This ship has something like that?!"

An escape pod was an emergency apparatus equipped with a parachute which could accommodate approximately five adult passengers.

"However, there are only twenty of them. Subtracting the number necessary for my soldiers … If you pack in as many people as you can, approximately one hundred other passengers could fit into the rest."

"That's all they can fit?!"

"There are many fools in this world who are ashamed to ensure their own means of escape."

The Defairedead was the supreme ruler of the skies. It was an unsinkable airship, the pride of Wiltia.

It was completely safe, so it didn't need emergency equipment, and if it had such equipment, its existence would be an embarrassment.

It was an absurd line of reasoning, but reason didn't always get through to those who valued appearances above all else.

"Twenty … So that means they're just for the VIPs then …"

The escape pods hadn't even been included on the ship's guide map.

Lud was sure that when the time came, crew members who knew would guide the VIP passengers to their location.

"It will be impossible for everyone to escape, but surely the women and children among the passengers can be saved, correct? Of course, I don't care if you hop in."

"You're leaving the others to die?!"

"It's clear that everyone on both sides will die. So, it would be wise for the innocent to survive, would it not? Incidentally, I should mention that the final bomb isn't a timed explosive. I can trigger it at will."

If Lud didn't accept his deal, Dreadnought would set it off here, right now.

That was the implication in Dreadnought's words.

Lud glanced behind him and looked at the trembling Milly.

If he accepted this deal now, Milly, Sophia, and Sven would all certainly be allowed to live.

His mind turned to the child soldiers … Even if they landed, they all would be executed.

"A soldier should choose the action that will lead to guaranteed survival, without any sort of gambits or gambles, right?"

"That's right. I hope you will make the wise decision, Wiltian solider."

Dreadnought still considered Lud to be part of the Wiltian military.

There was nothing he could do about it.

It wasn't just because Lud had been a soldier, nor because of his appearance.

If he was to die saving someone, Lud wouldn't mind dying at all.

He believed that others were more worthy of protection than he was.

The problem wasn't that some lives were more valuable than others.

The very fact that he thought it right to balance his life on a scale was an example of the way a soldier would think.

"Hate to break it to you but … I'm not a soldier anymore."

Lud raised both his hands, and took a stance for hand-to-hand combat.

It was one of the few fighting stances he could use without holding a weapon.

"That's simple isn't it? If I defeat you, then no one dies."

"That is an unsuitable answer for a soldier … But, for a civilian, it might be the correct choice."

Dreadnought's tone of voice softened slightly.

"Shall we go somewhere else? Seeing a friend killed isn't something a child should have to watch."

Turning his gaze slightly toward Milly, Dreadnought invited Lud to follow him to another location for their duel.

The Defairedead's portside scenic viewing parlor had one windowed wall, and the room was used to enjoy the scenery

above the clouds, along with afternoon tea.

"These are in the way."

Dreadnought brandished his mighty arm and mowed down the tables and chairs set up in the room.

What the hell … is that power? Is he even human?!"

In addition to his antiquated but heavy armor, Dreadnought's strength was remarkable.

"To honor your courage, allow me to tell you my origins."

Dreadnought said this as though he were a knight displaying his sword on an ancient battlefield.

"My name is Dreadnought. I am Captain of Greyten's Special Military Intelligence Bureau."

"Greyten …? That's right, this ship's like hell spawn to your people."

"Your astute observation will make my explanation a quick one."

The Defairedead bombed the Greyten Empire mainland. It was said that the attack was among the most savage assaults of the entire war.

The bombs had been dropped from such a high altitude, not even anti-aircraft guns could reach them, let alone lesser quality aircraft.

It was an indiscriminate slaughter, as if the intention was to

bomb the entire city off the map.

"I lost my wife and my daughter to this ship."

Because of his visor, Lud couldn't see whether any color came to Dreadnought's eyes as he spoke.

However he could imagine that they were filled with deep despair and anger.

"That's why you're sinking this ship?"

"That's right … But, just sinking it wouldn't be enough. Even if this ship was completely erased, a second or third version of the Defairedead would be built, and placed back into the sky."

Then, with its compartments filled with bombs, it would shower death from high in the sky, as if it were God itself.

"In order to prevent that, I need to etch into the minds and memories of the Wiltian people that hover aircraft are detestable and horrific. In order to do that—"

"Ponapalas … You're flying us over the city?"

He was planning to drop the colossal airship, wreathed in flames, on the former Pelfish capital of Ponapalas.

Lud wasn't sure how many hundreds or thousands of casualties it would cause, but it would engulf the city in the same hellish inferno that Greyten had experienced.

"You saw the suffering caused by the Defairedead, didn't

you? And you want to bring that about again!?"

"The victors don't understand the suffering of the losers."

The international community should have denounced the indiscriminate slaughter Wiltia perpetrated on Greyten.

However, Wiltia won the war.

"It was a necessary, if drastic, act taken to bring closer the end of the war."

"It was an unavoidable sacrifice."

Wiltia was able to force these pretexts on the defeated nation.

No matter how inhumane and cruel a weapon is, if it isn't used on their country, there is no way for the citizens to grasp its atrocity.

"If you don't understand, then all we can do is give you the same pain."

Lud couldn't refute any of what Dreadnought was saying.

His argument was fair.

As long as people didn't listen to the victims, there was nothing they could do but drag the victors over to see their side of the tragedy.

"Now then, battling you with words wasn't my intention. Shall we begin, Wiltian Soldier?"

Smoke began to blow out of Dreadnought's mouth with a

loud whistle.

"I'm a mechanical soldier, whose body is reinforced by machines. I'm in a far stronger position than you to fight in hand to hand battle … I will drop the output of my machinery down to fifty percent."

This was Dreadnought's mercy and compassion.

Since he could turn a human into a lump of flesh with just one blow from his powerful body, fighting him was equivalent to suicide.

He had to give Lud some chance to win, or it would be far too uneven a battle.

"I apologize but I can't lower my output any further. Forgive me."

"Tch …"

His apology wasn't complacency, nor was it from contempt. It was purely from his heart, and showed his respect for the difference in their respective strengths.

"Hyaaaah!"

Nevertheless, Lud couldn't back down from his challenge.

Lud attacked Dreadnought quickly, as if victory would go to whoever made the first move.

His whole body is armor … In that case, a direct blow won't hurt him …

Lud feigned a frontal attack, but at the last moment he changed course and jumped diagonally to the left.

Weaving into his blind spot and moving behind, Lud twisted his arms around Dreadnought's neck.

If I can just drop him instantly like this!

If hitting him wouldn't have any effect, Lud could only smash his joints and immobilize him.

But, Dreadnought grabbed Lud's head.

"Wha—?!"

Dreadnought's hands bent in the opposite direction from his joints and he grabbed Lud's head from an impossible angle.

"My arms are not the arms of a human. Wiltia took those from me."

Saying this coolly, Dreadnought then tore Lud off of him with all his might and sent him flying with one hand.

"*Augh!*"

His defenses inadequate, Lud collided with the floor.

"N-Not yet!"

Lud didn't stand up, and instead spun like a top, kicking Dreadnought in the knee.

A direct kick to the knee would break the joint and create an effect similar to a joint lock.

"It didn't work?!"

"My legs were also taken—they aren't flesh and blood."

Dreadnought counterattacked and kicked Lud as he lay on the ground.

"*Uagh!*"

Lud's two-meter tall body was kicked as if he was a nothing but a ball, and he went flying to the far end of the lounge and on to the mountain of chairs and tables piled there.

There's no way … This isn't a fight at all!

Lud had heard stories of the mechanical soldiers of Greyten.

It was a project to replace lost limbs with machinery, and with it, grant the recipients superior strength.

However, although the program was declared inhumane and should be discontinued, the research was further developed in secret, and now two years after the end of the war, its level of perfection was on display for Lud.

"Gaaaaah!"

Continuing to challenge him, Lud threw a nearby chair at Dreadnought, but he brushed it off with his arm, as if he was dealing with a child throwing a temper tantrum.

The moment Dreadnought's arm was slightly blocking his visor and his vision, Lud once again charged.

Since Dreadnought's limbs had been retrofitted with machinery, joint lock techniques weren't effective.

Lud suspected that he would need an anti-tank rifle to penetrate the heavy armor covering Dreadnought's body.

It had been foolish to challenge Dreadnought to a hand-to-hand fight to begin with.

But Lud had an idea.

Since he's wrapped himself in all that armor, he'll be overconfident, so once his guard is down—!

He shaped his hand between an open palm and open fist, almost like a beast's claw, and putting all his might into the blow, hit Dreadnought in his left breast.

It was the Dragon's Roar, a technique that pierced right through an enemy's armor and damaged their heart.

What?!

But, the reaction to his attack was unexpected.

It felt to Lud as if he had smacked a large bell with his bare fist.

"That technique is an eastern martial art, is it not? In my country, that's known as *baritsu*."

There wasn't the slightest sign of injury in Dreadnought's voice.

"However, it is too bad but my heart was already taken by Wiltia."

With a loud buzzing, Dreadnought sent out another punch.

Lud instantly protected himself, but even though Dreadnought was still going easy on him, the shock from the attack was nearly strong enough to tear Lud's body apart, and sent him flying into the glass wall.

"……?!"

The glass had been tempered to withstand differences in inner and outer atmospheric pressure, as well as any type of impact, and yet cracks now ran through the glass wall like a spider's web.

"It's unfortunate, Wiltian Soldier. I wish we could have fought when I still had my living body."

Dreadnought lifted the visor on his helmet.

Under it was the undaunted expression of a man who looked to be ten years Lud's senior.

"The only thing left from my living body is above my neck. Everything else has been turned into a machine."

Neither joint locks nor the Dragon's Roar would be effective.

The fighting style that Lud had cultivated as a soldier was composed entirely of techniques to kill people.

He didn't know a single technique to defeat something that wasn't human.

"*Gluh … Agh … Glaugh …*"

Lud tried to speak, but instead of words, stomach acid and blood came out of his mouth.

"It wasn't just my family that I lost to the Defairedead's bombs. In addition to losing my internal organs, my mouth is just a speaker. I can't even drink tea."

A sense of despair showed on Dreadnought's face.

Lud saw that Dreadnought felt more than just despair.

Dreadnought had pledged to erase this ship from existence, even if he had to turn everything, even his sorrow, into steel to do so.

"You fought well. You can't blame yourself for your defeat."

Dreadnought slowly approached Lud.

He intended to deliver a final, painless blow.

"That young girl that was with you back there … At the very least, I will make sure she gets into an escape pod. I used this body to seize victory. Let her life be my small atonement."

Hearing Dreadnought's words, Lud felt in his heart that if this was how it was to end, he was fine with it.

This is where I die … well, somehow … I had a feeling I would …

He had also been a Wiltian soldier, despised by Dreadnought.

Dreadnought had the right to take revenge on Lud, and

Lud had a duty to accept that revenge.

It's been only two years since I left the military … It was only for a few months, but I managed to have a lot of fun …

The people who ate the bread he baked had been happy.

They told him it was delicious.

In those moments, he felt a big hole inside of him fill up.

He had been able to taste such happiness, Lud thought, and that was enough—

No, that's wrong!

Brandishing his fist, Dreadnought swung it down on Lud as if it was a round fired from a cannon.

"Not … yet!"

Lud had thought his body wouldn't move, but just before the strike connected, he slid to the side as he collapsed, and dodged the attack.

"You're quite … a sore loser."

Dreadnought grumbled, sounding slightly disappointed.

Missing its target, Dreadnought's fist shattered the glass wall, and a ferocious wind swirled into the room from the change in air pressure.

Fighting the gale, Lud stood up, legs quivering.

"That's not it … I'm not baking bread to atone for my past."

Lud spat, his vision hazy.

"I was happy … that's it … When I brought a smile to someone's face, I was happy. No matter how good I was at killing, I never felt that, but … for the first time, I felt like I was here in this world … I was able to feel happy to be alive …"

"Are you losing consciousness?"

Dreadnought was slightly bewildered by Lud's words as he staggered about in a daze.

"I want to live … I want to find pleasure in living. I want to prove … that my life isn't something to throw away …"

Having said this, Lud lost consciousness, fell to his knees, and collapsed where he stood.

Or perhaps he had been unconscious ever since he dodged Dreadnought's last attack.

The longing to live in Lud Langart's soul had stirred his body.

"Goodbye."

However it was the end of his final act of defiance.

Dreadnought drew his fist back a third time, filled with his overwhelming and prized power to kill.

"No, your life will be the one to end."

Unnoticed, someone was standing behind Dreadnought.

What …?!

Dreadnought was stunned.

Strengthened by his machinery, his perception was far superior to that of a normal person.

In addition, he was a veteran soldier.

In battle, he would never let someone sneak up behind him so easily.

"It can't be?!"

He thought perhaps he had misheard, or mistook the wind rushing in from the window, and turned around.

There, a lovely and fragile-looking young girl sent a kick into Dreadnought's body.

"Wha—?!"

Dreadnought could no longer feel pain.

There was no need for a machine to feel pain.

His cry wasn't from pain, but from pure surprise.

His colossal body was over two meters tall. With a single kick, his body, weighing more than two hundred kilograms, was tossed into the air.

"How dare you hurt Master … How dare you hurt the Captain … How dare you, how dare you, how dare you!!!"

The girl violently took off her sunglasses, and her red eyes shone with all the murderous rage in her soul.

The girl's black hair floated in the air as if it was synchronized with her rage.

Intense heat shot from her hair, and the dye that hid its true silver color evaporated, and blew away in a puff of black smoke.

"Who are … you?"

"Shut up! There's no need for someone devoted to her master to tell you her name!"

Red eyes and silver hair—the waitress of Tockerbrot, the Humanoid Hunter Unit Svelgen Avei, boiled with intense rage, looking not like a gallant warrior maiden, but like an angel of destruction, revealed to mankind at the end of days.

Now Sven had released almost all of the limiters inside her body.

If she wielded any further power, she would be one small step from breaking the artificial skeleton inside her.

Sven's hair wasn't just for decoration.

It was also a radiator.

The Rezanium reactor, her source of power and the home of her heart and soul, radiated immense thermal energy, and unable to completely discharge, the energy rose in waves from her body.

"I'm going to kill you … I'll erase you from this earth!"

At Sven's angered cry, Dreadnought no longer recognized the person in front of him as a young girl.

Dreadnought thought to himself that even he, who was all machine below the neck, was still more human than this girl.

"Damn you!"



Raising his fist, Dreadnought attacked Sven.

It was dangerous to wait for her to attack.

He feared that the battle would be decided by Sven's slightest move.

"……!"

Dreadnought lunged with his powerful arm, but Sven easily dodged it with inches to spare.

The charge ended with nothing to show for it.

Despite this, Dreadnought felt a certain relief.

The fact that she felt the need to dodge meant that he could still damage her.

Dreadnought was beginning to believe that this girl was an embodied demon raised from the depths of hell, so the fact that he could injure her gave him hope, however small it might be.

If I can launch a series of attacks on her and keep her from countering, then … I can at least bring it to a draw!

Dreadnought began a follow up attack, but as he was about to release his punch, it happened—

"Wha—?!"

Dreadnought's right arm, the arm that had launched his first attack, disconnected from the joint, and fell to the floor.

"Impossible … What in the world …"

"Quite a noisy tin can, aren't you?"

Sven gripped a machine part as she coldly answered Dreadnought.

"When I dodged, I broke off one of your joints, that's all."

"————————?!"

She held the piece of Dreadnought's right arm that connected the joints.

He had misunderstood.

She hadn't felt the slighted threat from the previous blow.

She had evaded the attack because she wouldn't let any man other than Lud touch her.

Then, she had easily deprived this repulsive man of his arm.

"You're a mechanical soldier? You're a foolish bunch. You possessed the one thing I will forever wish for, yet you threw that away to become a half-hearted tin doll."

Sven considered Sutherland and Dreadnought's mechanical existence to be the height of folly.

In the past, when she was still a Hunter Unit, no matter how much she yearned for it, she couldn't give the one she loved a tender touch of her hand.

"What a miserable man you are! If you had your human body, you could have fought my master as a man, and your

battle decided as men. But you gave up your humanity. You've destroyed yourself to become nothing more than a weaponized monster."

Like Sven, he had become inhuman.

"Because of that, I'll give you what you want. Not defeat, not death. I'll demolish you instead!"

Saying this, Sven drew back her right hand, and getting into her stance, launched herself forward with a sharp, sword-like palm, as though she was propelled from a catapult.

"G-Gaaaaah!"

Dreadnought braced himself.

The heavy armor encasing his body wasn't just for intimidation.

No matter how many stabs or rifle shots he took, his armor would not be pierced.

However, Sven's chopping hand cut through his metal body easier than a knife slicing a piece of cake.

"Gaaaaaaah!"

Sven's attacks didn't stop there.

Putting her strength into the assault, Sven tore away Dreadnought's armor, as if she was rending flesh.

The steel armor removed, the exposed inner machine parts were violently torn away, along with the equipment inside.

The Rezanium reactor, from her time as the Hunter Unit, Avei, was transplanted into Sven's body.

She couldn't channel all that power into her current body, but this fragile frame still harbored the colossal power of an eight meter-tall metal giant.

Even if she only used half that power, concentrated in her human-sized hand, it was enough to turn rocks into sand and tear metal apart.

"Stop! Stoooooop!!"

Dreadnought shouted.

He had no way to sense pain.

But, seeing Sven silently tear apart his body made him terrified of being devoured alive.

It was as if he was looking at the mythical silver wolf, Fenrir, who feasted on the entrails of the gods.

"Uh … ugh …"

As he awoke, Lud wondered how long he had been unconscious, and he saw that everything was over.

Everyone was still alive, and he hadn't yet entered the world beyond.

Dreadnought had been defeated, and Sven was in front of

him, bawling her eyes out.

"Master! Thank goodness, you've woken up … I was worried you'd stay asleep forever and I didn't know what to do … Ten years, twenty years or all eternity, I would stay at your side and take care of you, but to no longer be able to hear your voice would be just … just too … *waaaaaah*!"

With a wave of emotion, Sven sobbed as she imagined the tragic scenario.

"I'm fine … I'm fine already … Ow, ow, ow!"

"Don't push yourself!"

Just being alive after battling the mechanical soldier, Dreadnought, was a godsend, but a few of his ribs were now cracked.

He also couldn't move the arm that had taken Dreadnought's attack.

"Did you beat him?"

Lud asked Sven, looking at Dreadnought, with his arms ripped off and his dismembered body looking like nothing more than a pile of scrap metal.

"Um, well … Yes."

Sven had a hard time answering Lud.

She almost looked like a young child, quivering in fear of her mother after breaking a flower vase.

"But, um … He made master suffer so much … that I … well …"

"I know."

Sven had lost her temper at Lud for always disregarding his own life, and pleaded with him to value it more.

"But you know, this time … I was scared of dying."

"Master?"

If there was even an instant when Lud accepted his own death, then Sven had gotten there just in time.

"It looks like I had to almost die to realize it, but I guess I'm the same idiot as always. I … I want to live. I want to live, and think more and more how happy I am to be alive."

On the verge of death, he realized for the first time his strong yearning to live.

Lud's face broke into a troubled, but slightly happy smile.

"That's okay. Master … Wanting to live is a normal and natural desire that all human beings have."

Looking at Lud's expression, an overjoyed smile came to Sven's face.

"Jeez, I always end up causing trouble for Avei, don't I …"

"It's okay. That's my mission, after all …… Eh?"

Sven nodded in satisfaction at Lud's murmuring, but after a few moments, her eyes widened in surprise.

"Um, Master …"

"Sven … Sorry but, can you bring me over to him? My legs … I still can't really stand."

"O-Of course …"

Lud continued talking as if nothing had happened, and Sven carried him on her shoulder over to where Dreadnought lay, having lost her chance to question Lud about what he had just said.

"Are you still alive?"

Had Dreadnought been human, he would already be dead if his body was torn to shreds and his arm ripped off, but a mechanical soldier could survive such damage.

"Just, barely …"

Dreadnought's voice was faint.

Every part of him below the neck was machine.

Lud suspected that his internal life support systems that had been replaced with machines, were beginning to shut down.

"Tell us … where is the last bomb?"

"I can't … tell you."

This was Dreadnought's final will.

If Lud had defeated him with only his human strength, he might have told him the location of the bomb out of

sportsmanship.

However, Sven had looked down on him for being a half-hearted machine, and had said that was the reason he would lose. Once her prediction came true, he decided to wipe the bitterness from his heart and engulf everything around him in flames to compensate for the disadvantage he had during their battle.

"No matter what, you have to make the Defairedead crash, is that it?"

"Yes, I must sink this ship. I must return even a little of the pain to Wiltia for the slaughter of innocent Greytens …"

"My parents were killed by the Greyten Empire."

Lud informed Dreadnought quietly.

"What?!"

"Huh?"

Both Dreadnought and Sven were surprised by Lud's disclosure.

Lud didn't often speak about his childhood as a soldier, and he had almost never spoken about his life before that.

However Lud started to reveal it all to Dreadnought.

"My parents were merchants, and despite what I may look like, we were a pretty rich family."

Langart & Company, managed by Lud's father, was a large

and prosperous business, with clients among the nobility, and it traded both inside Wiltia and internationally.

"But when the war started, right after Greyten issued their declaration of war, my parents made a mad dash back to Wiltia, and on their way home, their boat was sunk."

Generally, when a war breaks out between two countries, the citizens are given a period of time to return to their own country. According to international law, during that period, if boats pass through the other country's territorial waters, they can't be attacked.

But, Lud's parents were in the Kingdom of Alhadra, on the western edge of Europea, and available boats were limited.

If they didn't leave immediately, they were at risk of being sent to a concentration camp.

In a frenzy to get home, people chartered their own boats.

Lud's parents boarded a boat that wasn't registered as neutral, and when they entered territorial waters, the Greyten navy fired with no warning and sank their ship.

"Between the passengers and crew, over one thousand people died."

"T-That's …"

"I know. That ship hadn't applied the paint that would indicate it was neutral, so there was no way to prevent it

from attack. But, the fact remains that the people on that boat were all innocent, and just trying to return to their homeland."

There was no reproach in his voice.

Lud sounded like he was simply stating the facts.

"After that, their fortune was swindled, I became a vagrant, the military picked me up, and I became a child soldier … just like those kids in there."

Lud still harbored a grudge against Greyten.

But, that wasn't the reason he joined the military.

He had been desperately trying to survive, one day at a time, and didn't have time for resentment or anything like it.

"So you're saying to let it go? Because we're similar … you think that kind of logic will make it all right? For me, or for you?!"

"No, that's impossible … Saying that one hundred people dying on one side means it's okay for another hundred on the other side to die—that has nothing to do with it."

No one would agree to exchange the lives of his precious family, lover, or close friend for the lives of a stranger.

"But, I became a soldier. You did too, right? We killed people, and our government sanctioned it. That's how we earned our keep ... People like us can't go and kill someone out of resentment … am I wrong?"

Under the pretext of war, soldiers kill people, and of course, it isn't considered a crime.

Killing was allowed, and went unpunished.

Lud's parents were killed by Greyten.

But, Lud was sure that among the men he had killed on the battlefield, there were some who had kids of their own, waiting for them back home.

"Severing the chains of hatred … It's not something clean or beautiful … But, only we can protect that fine line, or we're no better than murderers."

Lud was still burdened with the guilt of the mass slaughter that he had participated in as a child soldier.

He feared that if he let go of that guilt, he would truly become something inhuman.

"Is that … Is that how you intend to live the rest of your life?"

"It might be easier if I died, but … I still want to live."

Lud and Dreadnought stared at each other.

A silence fell between them.

One was a man who gave up his humanity to reverse the past and clear away his hatred.

The other accepted his hatred, and bore his regrets to continue living as a human.

"Tea …"

Suddenly, Dreadnought broke the silence.

"Could I have a cup of tea?"

"Huh, but …"

Sven was puzzled by Dreadnought's request.

His body was nothing more than a machine from his neck down.

With neither a heart nor lungs, he would not have digestive organs either.

It was no longer possible for him to eat or drink.

"Sven, can you make him some?"

Yet, Lud complied with his request.

In the corner of the parlor, there was a counter for serving light food and drinks.

Sven made tea, still perplexed.

Using the highest quality leaves and the proper brewing method, Sven poured the tea into a cup.

"Do you want help?"

"Don't be insulting. A gentleman of Greyten can't allow such a breach of etiquette. I'll drink it properly, on my own."

Replying to Lud's offer with a dry laugh, Dreadnought clumsily brought the cup to his mouth with his barely functional left hand.

"Awful … Wiltian tea is truly awful."

"What are you talking about? These are the highest quality leaves made in Mughal and—"

"That's not what I mean."

Dreadnought gave a laugh at Sven's objections.

He had no sense of taste.

The taste of the tea wasn't what prompted his statement.

"A cup of tea in my house, brewed by my wife, was much, much better."

Dreadnought's body was now a machine, but his memories of human sensation had not died.

"Wiltian soldier … You said your name was Lud Langart, is that right?"

Dreadnought stood up.

He was no longer in any condition to fight.

Raising his colossal frame to stand on one knee, screws flew from his body, left and right, and oil gushed out like fresh blood.

"Yeah, but now I'm just a baker."

"That's right, you did say that, didn't you … Forgive me for implying it was a disguise."

Dragging his leg behind him, little by little, he turned in front of the glass wall.

"I have a deal … Those children, my soldiers … I used their hatred as a tool, so I ask you to please give them back their humanity. In exchange, I will disarm the bomb."

There was a hole in the glass wall from Dreadnought's fight with Lud, and countless cracks extended from it.

On the other side of the glass, the empty sky stretched for miles.

"…… I understand."

"I've put you through a lot of trouble."

As Lud nodded deeply, accepting his deal, Dreadnought gave a satisfied smile, swung up his left arm, and with all of his strength, drove his fist into the glass wall.

The entire wall shattered, leaving a gaping hole in the ship.

"Goodbye, Baker of Wiltia."

Saying this, Dreadnought jumped from the craft.

"Dreadnought?!"

Lud staggered toward the window.

Although they were slowly descending, the airship was still over one thousand meters up in the air.

Dreadnought's body grew smaller as it fell, and soon dropped out of sight.

Suddenly, there was flash of red light, and with it, a tremendous explosion.

"*Augh!?*"

The shockwaves spread in all directions, and rocked the massive Defairedead.

If the explosive had gone off inside the ship, it would have engulfed it entirely.

"That's … a Zeihombomber … right?! That's what his plan was …"

Straining the Rezanium reactor that powered his suit so it would blow up—the final bomb had been the "end bomb" as well.

"So he risked his life … No, he planned from the start to exchange his life for the mission's success."

Lud was reminded of Dreadnought's vindictive spite once again.

At the same time, Lud quietly closed his eyes and mourned the death of Dreadnought, who in his final moments had put aside his desire for revenge and his resolve to take the ship down with him.

Less than an hour later, the Defairedead touched down in Ponapalas.

Under the circumstances, the hovering airship ignored the

usual landing sequence, but it touched down slowly, and the damage was insignificant.

Compared to the damage that would have resulted if the ship had exploded above the center of the city and fallen in a mass of flames, the actual amount was miniscule.

Since communications from the ship had broken off, the Wiltian troops in Ponapalas suspected an emergency, and rushed to the ship to conduct rescue and relief efforts.

The causalities included more than eighty people, from the captain and the control room staff, to the security personnel, the guests in the party hall and those who died in the panic on the lower levels. There were over one thousand injured, some severely.

This was still minimal compared to the number of deaths if the ship had been destroyed, but Wiltia's prestigious, celebratory event had been ruined.

"What's going to happen to us?"

The child soldiers were captured when the military boarded the ship, and they were now held in a vacant area beside the Defairedead's landing spot.

"It's obvious, ain't it? We're traitors, you know. They'll kill us …"

"Mr. Dreadnought's dead, too … So we're going to die with

him …"

Imagining their fate, the faces of the twelve boys and girls clouded over with gloom.

They had been used by the Greyten Empire's special forces, and participated in the sabotage of the ship and the seditious acts against Wiltia.

Now that the plan had failed, Greyten would be informed that the children were held as prisoners.

However, Greyten would not acknowledge their existence.

Dreadnought and Sutherland had told them that they were soldiers of the Greyten special forces, but that alone wasn't proof. If Greyten claimed ignorance and said that the children were making it up, that would be that.

Very likely, Greyten was prepared, and had disposed of any evidence that connected the children to their military.

As such, the children were at the mercy of the Wiltian military.

They could be kept alive or executed as a warning.

"Hey … Stoll … We're …"

"Just shut up!"

Stoll, the de-facto leader of the children, answered his companions with a cry of anger.

Why did it end up this way?

With neither hope nor a future, he had tried to escape the absurdity of the world he lived in.

All he had wanted was to live as a human being.

So we shouldn't be alive then, is that it? Would it have been better to die with our families during the war?

Stoll was sad and frustrated that, no matter how they got here, in the end, they would be disposed of like stray dogs.

"Man, I'm hungry …"

Stoll quietly muttered to himself.

Knowing that he was on the verge of death, hunger set in as if Stoll's body was still trying to survive.

"Nothing will come from living anyway … so why am I hungry?"

At that moment, a sweet smell tickled the boy's nose.

"Something smells good …"

Stoll wasn't the only one who smelled it.

The other child soldiers raised their heads and looked around inquisitively.

The smell of wheat—it was the fragrance of freshly baked bread.

Lud and the others were walking toward them from the Defairedead.

In his arms was a tray of bread he had baked moments

ago.

"Thank goodness … I got here in time."

After they landed, Lud had hurriedly dressed his wounds, and with help from Sven, set to baking bread.

He baked bread for the children to eat.

"You're hungry, right? Will you eat … some … for me?"

Lud's face, far too stern for the face of a baker, grew even stiffer in his anxiety.

"You pity us? Get lost …"

Stoll spat his reply at Lud with the last of his pride.

However, he gazed hungrily at the bread in Lud's hands.

"W-What the … What is this?"

Without thinking, his eyes grew wide in amazement.

"Is this … a turtle?"

"Look at this one, it's a dog!"

"Its nose is red … Wait, is his nose actually a berry?!"

The other children eagerly asked in surprise, looking at the bread on Lud's tray.

Lud had made baked sweets.

It wasn't just because something sweet tastes so good when one is exhausted.

Lud knew that children liked sweet things, and was sure they would be happy.

But he had added one final touch.

He had shaped the sweets before baking them to resemble different animals—dogs, rabbits, cats, and even turtles and crabs.

"Uh, you know … I … well, no matter what I do, I end up frightening kids … The bread seems to taste fine but … that's why I thought, you know, if I make them into these shapes then maybe they'd be happy …"

After worrying terribly, this was the idea he had come up with.

He borrowed picture books from the elementary school library for the designs, and calculated the exact time needed to bake them to create the proper burn marks.

"Are you stupid?"

Stoll muttered as he picked up a fresh piece of lion-shaped bread, garnished with honey-pickled oranges.

"This ain't what bread's supposed to be …"

Stoll's face and voice were sullen as he spoke, but he took a big bite of the lion bread.

"What the heck is this … It's soft, and sweet, and smells so good …"

Stoll continued to voraciously tear into the bread as he muttered complaints.

"Bread's supposed to be hard, and crusty, without any flavor, and it should have mold growing on it!"

That was the type of bread that had been shoved at Stoll as though he was a dog while he was in the poorhouse.

"What's 'eat some for me,' supposed to mean … you can just throw it at us, can't you? Like feeding scraps to a dog …"

As he ate, tears started to roll down Stoll's cheeks.

The bread hadn't been thrown at him like he was an animal.

It was the crystallization of Lud's feelings, having pondered and researched to come up with this creation, and it was filled with his joy in having others eat it with pleasure.

"What the hell … bread's actually … delicious …"

Lud's bread had the power to melt the heart of the young boy, who couldn't even remember the simple fact that bread can taste good.

"C-Can I have some …?"

"M-Me too …!"

"I want this bunny one!"

Seeing their leader Stoll eating the bread, the other children quickly held out their hands to grab a piece of their own.

"Delicious!"

"What is this? It's filled with some kind of sweet paste …

But, it's so good!"

"I like it too, it's so fluffy and flaky!"

Although earlier they had held guns and their faces had been stiff with hatred, each child's face now displayed the expression it *should* have—a smile.

"That's it, that's it, there's still a whoooooole mountain left so you can eat until your heart's content!"

Sven passed one piece after another from the stack of bread on the tray.

The dough that had matured to perfection in preparation for the party was more than enough to fill up the twelve hungry children.

"It looks delicious. Can I have a piece?"

"Yes, yes, please do, please do! What would you like? A giraffe? A horse?"

Sven responded to the voice behind her.

"Doesn't look like you have any wolves, huh?"

"Major Rundstadt?!"

Standing in front of Sven was Sophia, dressed once again in her original military garb.

She had a determined look on her face, but her body was leaning slightly to one side because of her leg injury.

"Is this your way of wiping away your guilt? You're making

up for your inability to do anything to help them?"

Sophia's tone was biting.

Lud could make them smile now, but given what was in store for them, his bread was only a temporary relief.

To Sophia, Lud's actions were just a way to avert his eyes from reality.

"I'm a baker. Bakers only bake bread. So I baked bread. That's all."

However this time, Lud didn't attempt to avoid Sophia's gaze.

"But, Commander, it's different for you, right?"

"You … You can't seriously … You aren't seriously telling me to do something about these children, are you?! I'm just a single officer. There's a limit to what I can do."

"As a soldier, yes that's true. But …"

As the daughter of the famous Rundstadt family, her influence could make a big difference.

However, Sophia hated to take advantage of her family's connections most of all.

"You're suggesting I use my family's name? You're telling me to skirt the law and give them special treatment?!"

"These children are the victims of soldiers like us. I won't tell you to forgive their crimes. I just want you to give them a

chance for rehabilitation."

"How many thousands of war orphans do you think there are?! Nothing will change by saving twelve of them!"

"But you saved me, didn't you, Sophia?!"

"*Guh?!*"

This was the first time Lud had called her by her first name rather than Commander.

"Even when I was a child soldier, and special forces had decided I was useless, you pulled me out. If you hadn't, who knows how I would have ended up? I wouldn't have been able to even dream of becoming a baker."

"Hold on … just calm down … back up a bit …"

Lud's face was close enough for her to feel his breath.

Then, instead of backing away as Sophia asked, Lud grabbed both her shoulders to plead with her intensely.

"I'm happy being a baker! It's not out of guilt, or atonement or anything like that! The things I make bring a smile to people's faces … and that makes me happy! All of it is thanks to you, Sophia!"

"I-I'm telling you … You're too close, too close, way too close!!"

Lud didn't notice that Sophia's face grew redder and redder with each passing second.

"Even warning me not to go to the party on the Defairedead, that was because you knew the truth, right?! You were worried about me, and tried to force me to quit, right?!"

She had known that Lud and Sven would be given a cool reception on the ship, and she knew that they had only been invited for publicity and propaganda.

"You're actually a really kind person, aren't you, Sophia?! You want to do something for these kids, too, don't you?! I'm begging you! I'll do anything!"

"Anything, you mean, anything?!"

Her face bright red, Sophia's eyes were spinning, and she could no longer get her words out properly.

"Please! Please, Sis!"



"*Hyahn*!"

Lud continued to plead with her as she stood, flustered, and with his final word, to make absolutely sure that his message would get through, Sophia's back arched and she collapsed on the ground.

"Oh sorry … Sis … I mean, Commander."

"I-It's way too late for that, idiot …"

Lud bowed his head to Sophia, who had fainted.

"Um, Master … 'Sis?'"

Sven was surprised at the sudden appearance of the word.

She knew from his official records that Lud didn't have a sister.

It was news to her that the two of them were related.

"Well, no, you see, a long time ago my family were merchants … One of our frequent stops was the Rundstadt estate. Because of that, Sophia and I became friends … Even since I was young, she's treated me like a little brother …"

Lud was often bullied when he was small, and Sophia protected him. She was a tomboy back then, and it was hard to believe she was the daughter of a noble family.

However, when Lud cried, she told him to stop his wailing and hit him with fists stronger than any of the other bullies.

They had been childhood friends but their relationship was

more like a brother and sister.

"Hm … Now hold on just a second … Does that mean … um … Back then, did you ever stay overnight together?

"Huh …? Yeah, I stayed over at the Rundstadt mansion a few times. The bed in the Commander's room was huge, so even with two children, there was plenty of room. Well, I mean, I was only five at the time."

"Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooh, so *that's* what she meant …"

When Sophia told Sven onboard the Defairedead that she had shared a bed with Lud, she didn't mean that they had shared a bed as a man and woman.

"But, I didn't realize she hated being called Sis that much. I tried to stop calling her that when I become her subordinate to separate our public and private life, but …"

"No, uh, um … Master?"

It seemed that Lud didn't understand why Sophia was in such agony.

Lud was like her cute younger brother.

Inside her shell as a soldier and senior officer, Sophia tried not to let her feelings show, but being called Sis was too much for her to bear.

"Uughhh … I-I got it … I'll try to do something … That's

all you want me to do, idiot?!"

Finally back on her feet, Sophia stood up, breathing heavily.

"Really?! Thank goodness … The Commander really is a nice person after all …"

Lud sighed with relief.

"Don't misunderstand. While I *do* sympathize with their circumstances, that wasn't what moved me to help these kids … It's because you, you asked me … You damn fool!"

Sophia snapped at Lud before grabbing a piece of bread from the tray and turning around.

"You won the challenge for now."

"Challenge? Oh right … huh?"

Lud must make one of the party guests say that his bread was delicious, and Sophia would stop trying to draw him back into the military.

That had been her challenge.

"Those children did originally board the ship as passengers, after all … Hmph!"

As she spoke, Sophia bit into the cat-shaped bread in her hands, and quickly walked away, her military boots tapping loudly behind her.

"Send a letter every now and then! Stupid!"

Just like that, without turning around once, Sophia left.

However, Lud saw, superimposed on her back, the smile of the young girl who had been like an older sister to him.

"Thank you … Commander."

Even someone like Lud had people who worried about him.

The fact that he had thoughtlessly done things to endanger his life was an insult to the people who cared about him.

But now, he realized that he did have people who cared, and it made him feel just the slightest bit proud.

As she walked alone, Sophia was deep in thought.

When Lud lost his family, Sophia's father and the Rundstadt family abandoned him.

Sophia had looked for him, but he seemed to have disappeared.

When they met again, Sophia looked at the deep wounds on Lud's cheek, and in his heart, and she was regretful.

If she had protected Lud, he wouldn't have had to go through so much pain.

Her regret made her want to cry.

That was why she had to protect him this time. No matter who became her enemy as a result.

"Even if just a little … I was able to help you be happy, huh …"

Atonement, guilt, redemption—all the words she had thrown at Lud had been about herself.

The feelings, so painful and so strong, she couldn't confess to him.

But, a slight pang of loneliness ran through her.

Her helpless little brother had created his own place of belonging, without her help or protection.

"If this was how things were going to go … I should have told Lud how I felt about him when I had the chance …"

Muttering quietly to herself, Sophia used her sleeve to roughly wipe tears from her eyes.

EPILOGUE

In Berun, the capital of Wiltia, in the director's office of the Weapons Development Bureau—

"This completes my report on the matter."

"I see, I see …"

Daian let out a sigh after listening to Rebecca's report.

"That Mr. Dread-whatever is quite, well, I hate to say it, but he's quite pathetic, isn't he?"

Daian assumed that Dreadnought's plan to destroy the Defairedead was of his own volition for personal revenge, and to make sure that there would never be another indiscriminate massacre like the one Greyten had experienced.

And then, Greyten most likely carried out the plan for its own revenge.

But, there were too many strange facts surrounding the plan for Daian to ignore.

Why was it necessary for them to train Pelfish children to be used as soldiers?

And why did they plan to drop the Defairedead over Ponapalas, rather than Berun?

One could give logical explanations for it all.

Children could blend in with a crowd and would be harder to discover, and their appearance was itself a powerful weapon.

Secondly, Ponapalas was an important city to Wiltia.

However, even if these were possible explanations, claiming it was absolutely necessary for the plan to succeed was a rather weak argument.

"After all, the one pulling the strings behind the scenes was the Wiltia military …"

Deceiving the young boys and girls of Pelfe, turning them into soldiers, and destroying the former Pelfish capital—still an anchor to the past for the people of Pelfe—with the hovering airship.

If it was believed that all of this was arranged by Greyten, then Pelfe's resentment toward Wiltia would turn instead to the enemy nations during the previous great war, starting with Greyten.

The purpose of the party in the sky had been to promote friendly relations between Wiltia and Pelfe.

That was true, without a doubt.

But, some human life was necessary to accomplish that goal.

"Sheesh, his Excellency, the brigadier general, really

thought up a heartless way … Oh, no wait, he's a lieutenant general now, isn't he? Doesn't really matter."

It wasn't something that the nation of Wiltia had done.

It was the members of Lieutenant General Genitz's pro-war faction.

They were displeased with the result of the Great War.

As the victors, Wiltia should have won more.

They thought Wiltia should not only have annexed the entire European continent, but should have annexed the August Federation and the new continent, to unite the whole world under Wiltia's control.

To them, the peace after the war was nothing more than a delay.

They longed for a new war, the next war, and the war after that as well.

This Defairedead incident was to steer the world in that direction.

A good look at the party's guest list made it plain to see.

Many nobles, merchants, and upper class members of society were invited, but the majority of them opposed the pro-war faction.

There were those among the guests who didn't fall into this category—second and third sons of some noble or other—but

as such, they were deemed expendable.

"Dispose of the people in his way, make the people of Wiltia angry, and unite the feelings of the Pelfish people … It's so efficient that it's kind of appalling, isn't it?"

This would be impossible if Genitz thought of the people around him as more than chess pieces to control.

"By the way, did you recover them for me?"

"Affirmative."

Rebecca showed Daian the contents of a dirty leather bag, the clinking of metal accompanying her movements.

Inside the bag was one of Dreadnought's and both of Sutherland's arms, left behind inside the Defairedead.

The person who developed the mechanical soldiers for the Greyten Empire was formerly a pupil of Daian.

He had taken all of the knowledge and technology he learned from Daian and defected to earn distinction for himself.

"Wait … What is all this, there's still blood on this! That's disgusting."

"Apologies … Target resisted, so it was unavoidable. A necessary action to follow new orders."

Rebecca had observed the movements of Sven and the others from the shadows.

However, she had received additional orders from Daian.

The first was to gather a sample of the mechanical soldiers, and the other was to protect Sophia when it was necessary.

At the time, Sutherland had regained consciousness first, and in a violent rage, he had brandished his claws, ready to kill the still immobile Sophia.

Rebecca butchered Sutherland and took his arms.

"After that? What happened?"

"Disposal measures. Thrown overboard."

Still alive after having his arms plucked from his body, Sutherland was thrown overboard.

"Hmmmmmmmmmmm, well that doesn't really matter."

As long as Sven was safely gaining valuable experience, and Sophia's life wasn't in danger, Daian didn't care about the rest.

"But still, what an atrociously ugly design … I thought these could be of some use to me, but these will be no help. I can't use them for Sven … Or *her*, either."

Dreadnought's spite, Sutherland's life, the sorrow of the child soldiers, the Greyten Empire's intentions, and the ambitions of Lieutenant General Genitz—Daian didn't care about any of it.

"Oh well, whatever. These are an eyesore, get rid of them."

The Defairedead incident was over and Lud had returned to Organbaelz, but because of his wounds, he had been forced to close Tockerbrot for a while.

"In that case, while you rest, let's expand the store."

Quick to seize an opportunity, Sven suggested they expand Tockerbrot.

As a result of the cover up surrounding the child soldiers and the Greyten mechanical soldiers behind the incident, the achievements of Lud and the others wasn't brought to light at all. However, their actual achievement of receiving a work request from the governor-general of Pelfe was still quite real.

Regardless of the true reasons behind the work order, Lud and Sven would now be accepted by those people who only valued others based on their status in society.

Although they were paid less than the amount they had originally hoped for, and it wasn't enough to open a second store, they successfully received a new loan from the bank.

With the loan, they set up a small café space in the bakery.

Customers could enjoy not only the fresh bread, but light sandwiches and pastries ideal for tea time, and they offered tea, coffee and other drinks to go with them.

"The profit margins on the drinks are quite lucrative you know ♪!"

Lud couldn't help but admire Sven's cleverness as she reveled in their progress.

With that, the expansion of the store was completed while Lud's wounds healed.

In addition, Tockerbrot welcomed one more improvement.

The day of the grand reopening—

"Hello."

The bells on the door gave a cling and a clang as Jacob entered into the shop.

"W-Wel-Welcome …!"

Milly greeted Jacob, her face bright red and her eyes cast down at the ground.

"No good! Honestly, that's completely wrong! You have to say it louder, with a cheerful smile, like you're dancing, like you're singing, like you're flying … Welcome to Tockerbrot~ ♪! Like that!"

Sven criticized Milly's greeting, picking out the faults

without mercy.

"Huh? What's this? What happened?"

Jacob stared, slack jawed in amazement, at the scene in front of him.

Milly was dressed in a maid's uniform, a size smaller than Sven's, designed to be shorter in length to make it easy to move in.

"Oh, it's you Jacob. I am simply educating our shop's newest employee."

After the events on the Defairedead, Milly had visited Lud while he was recuperating.

It hadn't just been a get-well visit.

Looking as if she had given it a lot of thought, she summoned up her nerve and bowed her head to Lud.

"Please let me work in your store!"

Milly had turned down the offer to become a live-in employee at the tailor in Nazalenka.

She had decided what she wanted to become.

She wanted to be a baker.

"I … want to be a baker too … like Dad … and … I want to bake … delicious bread, like you do."

Lud had been surprised by Milly's request.

But he had seen the determination in her eyes, and how

much the shy, young girl had been plagued with doubts before making her decision, and he accepted her request.

However, Sven was not happy about it at all.

"H-Hey … I came here to be a baker's apprentice, you know … Why do I have to be a waitress?!"

Milly had started working for Tockerbrot as an apprentice, but now, instead of baking bread, she was serving customers in the café section.

"I wonder exactly what you mean? We can't leave the bread baking to someone brand new, can we? First, we'll need to hammer the different types of bread and their individual characteristics into your head, and then we'll need to have you memorize what every customer wants. The quickest way for that to happen is to have you in the shop!"

Sven laid out her sound arguments and didn't give Milly a chance to offer a rebuttal.

"Moreover, she can't leave you alone with Lud back at the kiln, either."

"That's absolutely right! Wait, Jacob!"

Without hesitation, Jacob had hit the mark on Sven's true intentions.

"I'm not … good at this stuff …"

Sven's demands were highly difficult for Milly, who wasn't

very friendly or cheerful.

"At least try to make a smile."

As Sven said this, at a loss about how to deal with Milly, Lud appeared.

"The stollen's finished baking … Oh, Milly, you're starting today, aren't you?"

"*Eep*!"

Milly had been given the maid's dress the day before, and since she didn't think it suited her at all, she shrunk back in embarrassment.

"Hm … It looks good on you. It's cute."

Lud reassured Milly with a gentle tone to his voice.

"R-Really?"

"Yeah."

It wasn't in Lud's nature to compliment others.

If he had the sense to do that, the store might have started flourishing sooner.

Milly's heart pounded in her chest.

She wasn't nervous. A little bit of courage welled up inside her.

"Be confident. Don't worry, you're very cute! You have to be more dignified, and look ahead with your back straight."

Sophia's words from that day on the Defairedead came to

her mind.

"I-I'm … going to do my best!"

Milly said, looking up, with her back straight, and a smile on her face.

"Hm?!"

Without thinking, Sven drew back at Milly's words.

The young girl, who had lacked any charm before, was suddenly wearing an attractive and appealing smile.

"Honestly! Master!"

The number one, certain way to make a young girl flash a beautiful smile … is for her to be told by the person she loves that she is cute.



Miraculously, Lud had drawn out Milly's charm.

"Master! And me?"

"Eh? W-What is it?"

"Well, because … you see, um …… T-Tell me I'm cute, too!"

Not one to let her place as Tockerbrot's charming waitress be usurped, Sven stood very close in front of her most cherished person.

"Um, uh … Sven … if you get up in my face like this, it makes it kind of hard to say …"

"Lud … Sven …"

Watching the two of them, Jacob spoke up in an exasperated voice.

"You guys have customers already."

"Oh!"

"Oh!"

Lud and Sven raised their voices in alarm at the same time.

Thus, another busy day at Tockerbrot began.

END OF VOLUME 2

AFTERWORD

This is SOW. I would like to thank all of you very much for reading volume two of *The Combat Baker and Automaton Waitress*.

Thanks to all of you, the story continues!

This wouldn't have been possible without all of you, the readers♪.

When the first volume went on sale, I wondered whether you all would take to the main heroine, Sven.

I know it's a little strange for the person who created her to say this, but she's a little, well, a slightly strange character, so …

I was particularly anxious about her, so when many of you reacted by saying how cute Sven was, well, do you have any idea how happy that made me? How incredibly happy I was to hear that?!

In one of the early proposals I sent in, she was a more robotic and aloof girl, actually.

Incidentally, the character from that initial proposal was reborn as the other Humanoid Hunter Unit, Rebecca.

I'd certainly like to give Rebecca more opportunities to

show up.

I'll try to make it work in volume three! At the very least, I'd like to have her show up in one of the illustrations.

Now then, this time, Sophia Von Rundstadt has a prominent role in the story.

She also made her debut in volume one, but since her appearance in that volume was minor, I was happy for volume two to go on sale with her having a proper role in the story.

The fact that Sophia carries the Luger P08, also known as the Parabellum Pistol, is purely my personal preference!

Her role in the story isn't finished, so I think that she'll become more involved down the line, as well.

It would be far too cruel to just have her play along with that perverted, mad scientist, after all …

With every bit of gratitude I have to offer, let me say one again, thank you all very much!

Now then, I hope with all my heart that we will have a chance to meet again.

SOW

The Combat Baker and Automaton Waitress

Volume 2

Story by SOW

Art by Zaza

TATAKAU PAN-YA TO KIKAI JIKAKE NO KANBAN MUSUME

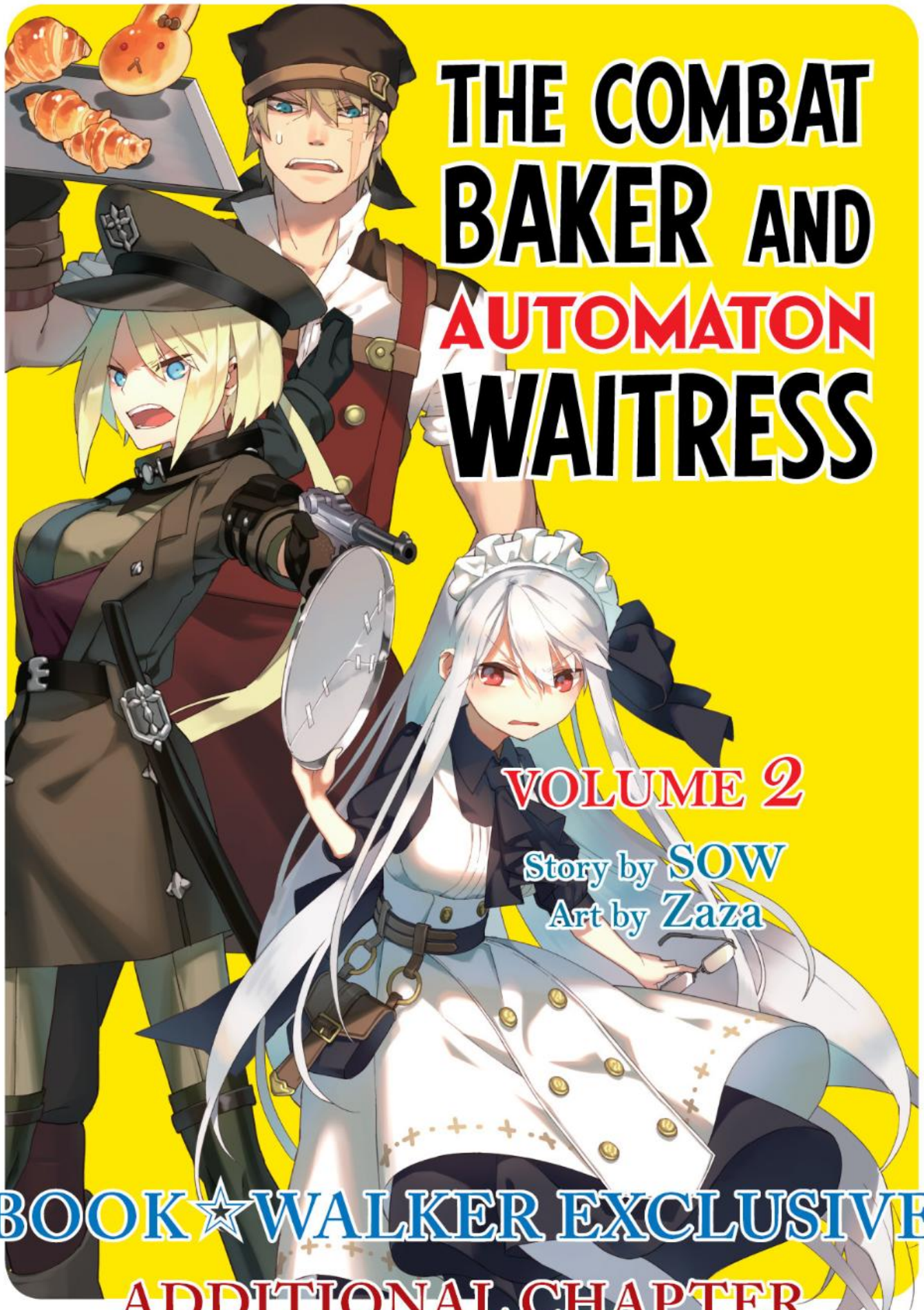
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THE COMBAT BAKER AND AUTOMATON WAITRESS

VOLUME 2

Story by SOW

Art by Zaza

BOOK☆WALKER EXCLUSIVE

ADDITIONAL CHAPTER

THE MULTITUDES OF THE WORLD, ACCORDING TO REBECCA SHARLAHART

Thank you very much, Bookwalker customers, for purchasing Volume Two of *The Combat Baker and Automaton Waitress*.

My name is Rebecca Sharlahart.

Huh?

Who am I?

Did I show up somewhere?

I've appeared in the story already, if only a little bit. I even showed up in Volume One.

Go back and look for me. It's just a small glimpse, and you can only see my silhouette in the illustration in the back …

But, putting that aside, I'd like to tell a short anecdote to thank those who purchased this volume.

Although, I wonder what I should talk about?

Should I reveal my three sizes?

Huh?

You don't care?

I see …

Surprisingly, I'm told that I look quite slender in my clothes.

Who cares?

Understood.

That's right … In that case, how about if I explain more about the setting of the story?

The most important location is the continent of Europea, where both Pelfe and Wiltia are located.

The name Europea originated from the giant empire created by those claiming to be descendants of the maiden who was given the world as a gift from God, long, long ago.

South of Europea is the continent of Gordina, known as the Dark Continent, which still holds many mysteries to this day.

Eastward is the continent of Aesia, and on the other side of the western ocean is the new continent of Noah.

Surrounded by these other three continents, Europea is sometimes referred to as the central continent.

The Greyten Empire, the Kingdom of Haugen, the August Federation, the Kingdom of Sparia, the Kingdom of Alhadra, and the Filbarneu Republic are all situated in

Europea.

Hearing this might make you wonder if the Great Europea War was all an exaggeration, and you might think it was a war that took place on a single continent and only involved a quarter of the world.

That is not so.

Most of the regions in the other three continents are colonies of the various Europea nations.

Seventy percent of Noah, and ninety percent of Gordina, have become colonies of the Europea nations, and while Aesia maintains more independence, over half of it still belongs to various Europea nations.

By defeating an enemy, the victorious nation could take that enemy's colonies under its own control.

In other words, the Great Europea War was a large conflict over world supremacy.

Now let's change the subject a little bit.

In the farthest eastern reaches of the Aesia continent, there is a certain island nation.

Up until half a century ago, this nation didn't even trade with the rest of the world, but after opening itself up, it immediately modernized with tremendous vigor, and was able to battle on equal footing with the nations of Europea.

This island nation assembled an alliance with Greyten, and in the early stages of the war, it fought fierce battle after battle with Wiltia as its enemy.

Before the Hunter Units were deployed in actual combat, Wiltia had tasted defeat many, many times, and countless Wiltian soldiers had been taken as prisoners.

However, it appeared that the people of this country had an unusual cultural custom, whereby they were forbidden from humiliating their prisoners.

Instead they treated them with as much good will as possible, almost as if they were guests rather than prisoners of war.

They were treated so well that the prisoners decided to return the favor, and the former meat processing and packaging workers among them offered their captors sausages.

This gesture so deeply moved their captors that tears streamed down their faces. The base commander even said that he wanted to spread this wonderful food throughout the nation, and with the utmost respect, pleaded for the prisoners to teach them how to make it themselves.

In this unusual way, the food culture of Wiltia was brought to this island nation. I've heard that sausages, bacon,

baumkuchen, and even beer, spread throughout the country.

After that, many people came to Wiltia to learn more about Europea's culture, and they were taught arts, literature, and strangely, sports like skiing as well. This led to some odd cultural exchanges, such as performances of the ninth symphony as part of the nation's new year traditions.

A unique friendship was fostered between these two countries, and as a result, near the end of the war, this island nation abandoned their alliance with Greyten, and publicly became an ally of Wiltia.

From that time, the cultural exchange between the east and west continued, and soldiers from both countries traveled back and forth between the two nations.

It was around then that Lud, the former captain with whom Svelgen Avei is infatuated, and Major Runstadt, both learned "bujitsu," and about the pastry, anpan.

The two nations also exchanged weapons development research, and consequently, there are Hunter Units in the island country as well.

It seems that it was in this country's national character to be very successful at learning, mastering and further developing the technologies of other nations, and I've heard they are advancing their own original Hunter Unit

development.

Perhaps the chance that another country will produce a sister to Svelgen Avei and myself isn't null—or rather, isn't zero.

But, it still might take another nineteen years.

Now then, my story's long enough.

I'll leave it here for now … and if we have another chance, let's chat again.

I look forward to that day from the bottom of my heart.

With that, I bid you farewell.

The Combat Baker and Automaton Waitress
Volume 2
Exclusive additional chapter

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