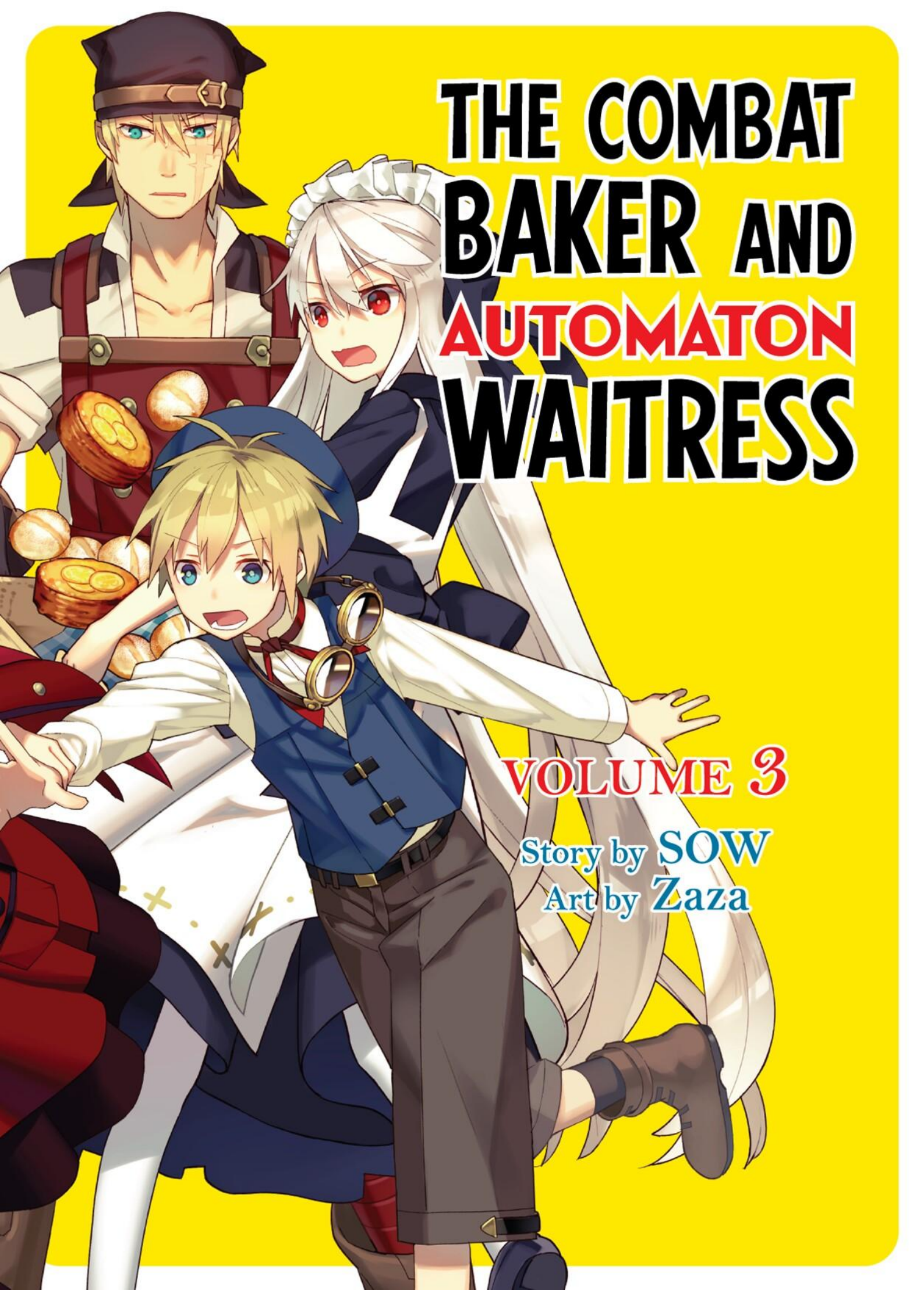

THE COMBAT BAKER AND AUTOMATON WAITRESS
VOLUME 3
Story by SOW
Art by Zaza


THE COMBAT BAKER AND AUTOMATON WAITRESS
3
Hi, everyone! It's nice to meet you! I'm Sven from Tockerbrot, a bakery in Organbaelz!"

CHARACTERS



LUD LANGART
Former soldier and now owner of Tockerbrot Bakery. In this battle of the bakeries, he has staked his pride and his life on increasing sales.

SVEN
The familiar waitress of Tockerbrot Bakery.

JACOB
The young boy at the center of the current conflict. Will his lineage become clear?

MILLY
An apprentice and waitress at Tockerbrot.

MARLENE
As a neutral party, this nun serves as a messenger between the two bakeries.

SHYLOCK
A powerful merchant who has made a name for himself in the weapons industry. He opened a bakery next to Tockerbrot and is trying to run his rival out of business.


Suddenly, a woman's hand punched through the door.
"W-what?!"
"Are you … Jacob Rosso?!"

THE COMBAT BAKER

AND AUTOMATON WAITRESS

VOLUME 3

STORY BY SOW

ART BY ZAZA

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Prologue

A Mechanical Doll's Determination

"I dig chicks who don't smile."

He was a fast-talking guy who always said the silliest things.

"It's just, when I see a girl, I want to make her laugh by any means necessary."

I believe he was one of the highest-ranking Hunter Unit pilots in the Principality of Wiltia.

Nonetheless, most of the things that came out of his mouth, perhaps because he never shut up, were this kind of nonsense.

There are times when it seems ridiculous to store them all in memory.

"So if you were a woman, I'd have my sights on you."

Can you believe this guy?

What's the point of saying such a thing to a weapon like me?

"I am a weapon. Gender categories like male and female do not apply."

That's right. I'm not human.

The Principality of Wiltia developed me to be a humanoid weapon of war called a Hunter Unit, model number LS-6R2.

I'm a steel humanoid weapon, over eight meters tall and once feared as "Cyclops," but he said, "If you were a woman, I'd smooth-talk you."

It was that kind of statement that made me question his morals.

And that's why he chose Sharlahart as my personal code.

Apparently, that was the name of his dearest beloved.

What a nincompoop …

The Principality of Wiltia allowed its outstanding pilots to use personal colors to improve the morale of other soldiers.

And of all colors, this guy chose red.

As an intense disturbance raced through my thought programming at his color choice, which was so contrary to its purpose of camouflage, I asked why he would choose a color that would make me stand out so conspicuously on the battlefield.

The answer I got was, "Aw, don't sweat it. It looks cool!"

Really, he's moronic.

A few more of us were granted personal colors.

Sophia von Rundstadt was dyed black and christened the Devil's Black Spear. Leia Toolman was painted pale blue and called the Azure Shudder. And Lud Langart, who chose an almost silvery white, was called the Silver Wolf. Together, we were a symbol of Wiltia's strength.

And we were known as the Crimson Hawk.

I'll admit to liking that a bit.

"If I were human, would you really make a pass at me?"

That was my reply to his usual inane comments. But I played along with his banter more than usual.

"Hey, you're getting into this today!"

I could tell he was grinning and showing his teeth.

"You're so expressionless and rigid. It'd be awesome if you went red in the face from laughing."

I wondered how dumb this guy was.

"Well, it's time for work. Shall we head out?"

He said this casually, before setting out for the battlefield.

He acted the same during the invasion of Amritard, which was later said to be the fiercest battle in the late days of the Great European War.

Due to that victory, the August Federation greatly withdrew its defensive line, and Wiltia advanced its forces to within a step of winning the war.

But after that battle, he suddenly disappeared.

According to rumors, he died in battle, or fled before the enemy, or so the stories go.

But that can't be.

Because Crimson Hawks never run or die!

Knowing him, he was probably chasing tail and just forgot to come back.

That's probably it.

It must be.

So I will keep waiting.

Someday, he will return.

And until then, I refuse to laugh.

Because he's so foolish.

No matter how I may change in appearance, as long as I am me, and as long as I don't smile, I'm certain he will reappear and try to make me smile with some stupid joke.

So I will not laugh.

Introduction

Man cannot live on bread alone. Who first said that?

Munch, munch, munch, munch … munch, munch, munch …

Tockerbrot was a bakery located in the corner of a little mining town called Organbaelz.

The shop was recently renovated, with a larger building and a food court where customers could enjoy a bite to eat.

Jacob, a long-standing customer of the shop—it's original customer, in fact— was sitting at a table and eating fresh-baked but deformed bread, which was unusual to find in this bakery.

"H-how is it?"

Milly, a new staff member, stared nervously at Jacob.

Today, she was wearing a work outfit for baking, instead of her usual waitress uniform with an apron.

"Hmm … It's not baked evenly. Maybe because of its irregular shape? And the texture isn't quite right. Maybe you should have kneaded the dough more."

"Argh!"

Milly's shoulders slumped after hearing Jacob's comments.

"But it's not bad for your first time. You can't bake like you-know-who from the start."

Milly was using the oven to bake by herself for the first time.

It had been three months since she started working with Lud,

observing his work, and receiving his advice.

And today she had performed all the baking without his help.

"If you can't bake coupé, which is basic bread, you've still got work to do."

Jacob's observation was correct and struck home.

Milly had thought the same after eating her own bread.

It dashed her spirits even further that Jacob had pointed this out.

"Lud says he was an assistant for two years. If you can bake like this after just three months, you're making rapid progress."

"Would you pay money for my bread?"

"Um … that's asking a bit much."

As the girl's first try, it was all right.

But it wasn't bread that could be sold.

Milly's dream was to become a full-fledged baker like Lud and her deceased father. But she still had a way to go toward achieving that goal.

"Th-this just means you need a little more training!"

"Ugh!"

"What do you mean by 'ugh'?! What a mouth you've got!"

Sven, the waitress at Tockerbrot, had come in.

As a senior employee, Sven was training Milly, who lacked customer service skills. However, their relationship wasn't great.

Their first impressions of each other had not been good, and while the situation had improved somewhat, they were still slightly hostile toward each other. There was another reason, too. They were

both insistent and stubborn, which made for a difficult relationship.

"Hmf! The master is kind enough to allow you to use the oven, but look how downcast you are! Is that all there is to your dream? Oh dear! I guess I was wrong about you!"



"Q-quiet! Everyone fails the first time! I'll do better next time!"

Milly argued fiercely and Sven smirked spitefully at her.

In the military, kind words are unnecessary and counterproductive when training new soldiers.

Kindness spoils the unripe and prevents growth.

It's more effective to elicit motivation by saying, "Is this all you've got?" or "Stand up and give me your best!"

Words that rankle one's pride can also be useful.

I'm not sure, but … is Sven cheering her up in her own way?

Jacob didn't know, but he thought so.

Milly was a strong girl.

If he comforted her, she would just get depressed.

Maybe it was better to fire up her fighting instincts.

"Calm down, you two."

Jacob stopped them before the argument could turn into angry shouts and the people outside would hear.

"Anyway, it's nice of Lud to let you use the oven."

The oven room where Lud made the bread was a sanctuary to him.

He forbade even Jacob and Sven, who were close to him, from entering without good reason.

"Oh, but he has to. Once the fire goes out, it takes time to heat up the oven again."

Bakers don't bake bread all day.

They have to gather ingredients, set out and bring in goods, and

make deliveries.

When the oven remains unused, handling the temperature is a delicate matter. The fire can't easily be started or stopped.

So, while Lud wasn't using the oven but needed to keep the fire lit, he allowed Milly to practice her baking.

"Well, he can't pay you much, so I suppose he intends this as compensation."

"Ugh … it's hard to make ends meet."

Sven and Jacob smiled bitterly.

"I don't need much, and I'm not much use, anyway."

Milly mumbled in embarrassment.

She had started working three months ago, but she didn't have much experience in customer service, so she was awkward as a waitress.

Her guilt over not working well enough to justify her pay dampened her spirits.

"That's a different matter."

Sven's reply was casual.

"Employees have a responsibility to work, and employers need to pay wages according to contracts. My job is to educate and train you. If you were useful after just three months of training, where would that leave me?"

Her words held no kindness, pity or sympathy.

She was just stating a matter of fact in a matter-of-fact manner.

"Oh …"

Not knowing what to say, Milly looked confused.

"Thanks. I'll do my best."

She blushed as she answered quietly and returned to the oven.

"Why did that little girl thank me?"

"You didn't mean to cheer her up, but you did."

Jacob said this as if he found it funny, and Sven tilted her head, mystified.

"By the way, is this shop still in financial difficulty?"

"I wish I could say everything is going well, but that isn't quite true."

Tockerbrot had borrowed funding from a fake moneylender and started business in debt.

Then during its first year, the shop had so few customers that keeping the business running required borrowing more money. As a result, the shop's financial situation was so bad that it might have gone bankrupt at any time.

Fortunately, the skilled waitress, Sven, arrived out of nowhere and reorganized the bakery's finances and management. Tockerbrot had escaped the danger of bankruptcy but still required careful handling.

"The renovation further increased your loan burden."

"Luckily, customers love our shop, but it will still take time to earn back all that money."

Tockerbrot was operating smoothly.

However, there was a limit to production.

And limited production meant limited earnings.

"I would love to expand our business, but there's a problem. Actually, I was going to ask you about that, Jacob."

"A problem?"

Jacob tilted his head and Sven smiled faintly as she answered.

"I'll fill you in when the master gets home."

"Hmm … Where is Lud, anyway?"

"He's making a delivery to the mine."

Baelz Mine was one of the principal industries in Organbaelz.

"Umph!"

The young owner of Tockerbrot, Lud Langart, was delivering bread to the mine.

His contract with the mine cafeteria for delivering bread to 200 miners every day was a main source of income.

"Hey, baker! You came again, huh?"

It was Laurel, the leader of the miners.

"Hello, Laurel. You're doing good work!"

Laurel was covered in dirt as if he had just come to the surface for a break.

He was not a young man, but his bulging muscles and strong-willed eyes gave him the appearance of a veteran with long military service.

"Since we started gettin' your bread, work has been progressing better."

Laurel smiled, showing white teeth.

"Food is a rare pleasure with work like this. That one with the seeds is especially good."

"You mean the sesame bread? I add extra salt because you miners sweat so much. I'm glad you like it."

Laurel was surprised.

"Do you always give consideration to such detail?"

"Yes. I also make adjustments for the season and weather since they influence people's taste."

"Whew …"

Laurel sighed in admiration.

"Hmph! You've got a better build for mining than the young fellas around here, but you're one hell of a baker!"

Laurel laughed and patted Lud's broad chest.

"Thank you."

Lud was extremely happy to hear that.

The first time Lud had come to the mine, Laurel had shouted, "Get out!"

He had derided Lud as a Wiltian soldier and didn't see him as a baker.

And instead of praising Lud's bread, Laurel had spit it out, saying, "It's bread from a Wiltian soldier. I don't know what he might have stuffed in there."

That same man was now praising Lud's bread with a smile.

Lud was overjoyed.

"Hey, baker! You okay? Did I ruffle your feathers?"

"N-no, sorry. Nothing is wrong. I'm just happy."

Lud's face contorted like a demon's as he struggled to hold back happy tears.

It had been a little over two years since he quit soldiering and one year since he started baking bread.

But Lud still had trouble making a smile.

"You're an unusual fella!"

Laurel laughed with good-natured exasperation, and as Lud responded with an expression almost like a wry grin, he noticed something out of the corner of his eye.

"Th-that …"

Lud's eyes opened wide. He felt his body tense.

"What is a Hunter Unit doing in this mine?"

Hunter Units were humanoid assault weapons developed by the Wiltian army.

They were copper and steel giants that stood 8.5 meters tall.

"Oh, that was decommissioned."

Lud wondered if something unexpected had happened at the mine, as it had before, but Laurel's reply was casual.

"After the war, the military wanted to dispose of its extra weapons. They removed some armor and other equipment and sold them for civilian use. You wanna take a look?"

Laurel took Lud to stand before the Hunter Unit repurposed for industrial use.

"An LS-5 … That's an early model."

It was older than the units Lud had used in the war.

The basic frame was the same, but most parts had been removed, leaving the upper armor for protection against falling rock inside the mine. Of course, there were no weapons.

One arm was now a giant scoop and an industrial winch was affixed to its midsection. The conversion was so thorough that it barely resembled a weapon at all.

"This isn't for military use, so instead of a Hunter Unit, it's more like armored machinery. It's an old model, but since it's so large, it's better than a human for heavy labor."

As he said this, Laurel patted the Hunter Unit's leg.

Ever since the war ended, the military had been cutting expenditures.

Surplus weapons cost money, both to maintain and to store unused.

So, the policy was to sell weapons at low prices for civilian use in order to make even a little money.

"But it's showing its age and isn't in the best condition. I'm keeping it here until I summon the repair man."

"I see."

An industrial Hunter Unit far from war and vastly transformed from its original purpose …

Some might see it as ruined and pitiful.

"So you too are alive in these new times, huh?"

Lud saw the unit as a person who had discovered a new way of life in times of peace—much as he had.

The Great European War had spread across the continent.

In that war, there was a Hunter Unit pilot extolled as a hero.

And that hero's name was indeed Lud Langart.

Soldiers feared him as the Silver Wolf because of the silvery shine of the pure white Hunter Unit he operated.

But he retired from the army when the war ended and started a bakery in the countryside in Organbaelz.

And there was a girl who pursued him.

Her name was Sven. She was once Lud's beloved Hunter Unit. She was an android with pilot-assistance AI implanted inside her body.

Borders changed and smaller nations united. Divisions appeared between losers and winners, and between oppressors and oppressed. This was the new post-war era.

This is a tale unrecorded by history, the humble tale of a baker who was once a soldier and a waitress who had been a weapon, living on the fringes of that era.

Chapter 1

The One Who Holds the Scales

Berun, the capital of the Principality of Wiltia, was designed with the royal palace at its center, and the government offices situated around it, like planets around the sun.

One of the facilities closest to the royal palace was central military headquarters.

The top-ranking official at central headquarters … No, in the whole Wiltian military, is in the deepest chamber within the headquarters.

Today, Sophia was standing in front of the door to this room.

"Sophia von Rundstadt reflorting … I mean … reporting!"

She was so nervous that she stumbled over her words.

"Enter."

The man behind the door answered her.

Sophia usually kicked open doors as she knocked.

It didn't matter if the door led to the division commander who was her immediate superior, or to the colonel who was the chief of the Weapons Development Bureau.

Her character and intensity were so strong they defied hierarchy.

"Yes, Sir! Excuse me!"

But the man inside this room was special.

Sophia carefully turned the doorknob and entered the room in

silence. If her subordinates and superior officers had seen, they would have stared in shock.

"Sorry. Hold on a sec. I'm just reaching the climax."

The man before her was impervious to her overwhelming presence and fearsome glare, known as the Dragon Slayer.

Elvin Lior was a marshal of the Principality of Wiltia.

He was the commander-in-chief of all soldiers.

"S-Sure! No problem!"

Sophia saluted tensely like a fresh recruit at military academy.

There were piles of reports and other documents spread around the room.

They were stacked so high that Sophia had to walk carefully to avoid knocking them over, even though the marshal's office was spacious, in line with his rank.

There were many matters awaiting his attention and approval.

"Hmm … My apologies. At ease."

Elvin returned her salute and urged Sophia, who was frozen in salute, to lower her arm.

As he sat at his desk with legs splayed, Elvin was reading a novel rather than classified military reports.

"Wow … That was wonderful!"

Elvin closed the book with an air of satisfaction.

He carefully placed the paperback into a drawer as if showing respect to the author, whose name, according to the cover, was Mary Clarissa. Then he turned to face Sophia once more.

"How rude of me when it was I who summoned you, Sophia. Forgive me. This author's new novel was most interesting. I was engrossed in reading it."

"No, it's my fault for arriving earlier than scheduled. Um …"

Elvin raised his palms to tell Sophia, who was fumbling for words, to calm down. Then he suggested that she sit on the sofa.

"Don't be nervous. If the famous Devil's Black Spear were to cower before me, I could brag to my eldest boy, but it makes it uncomfortable for us to talk."

Sophia remembered that Elvin was in his mid-forties.

His noble features made him look younger. His warm smile resembled that of any merry gentleman you might see around the city.

But Sophia knew about the marshal.

During the Great European War, many soldiers earned the moniker of hero, and Sophia was one of them.

But Elvin was considered a hero of a completely different kind.

Normally, the measure of a military hero was skill in fighting, and that was determined by the number of battles that warrior had survived.

Elvin was the reason that Wiltia's army was victorious in the most recent war. He had served as a hero of strategy for that ten-year war.

His fame was widespread, and he was admired as the wisest general in history, and as a strategic god. The opposing nation of

August deemed him an enemy of the state. In the Greyten Empire, soldiers were so frightened that he was a god or a demon that it was necessary to declare in the queen's name that he was human.

Sophia wouldn't tremble before Elvin if he were just famous.

This man had mastered the path that she, as a soldier, struggled and risked her life to walk, and she was in awe of him.

"I called you here today in relation to your current duties."

"My duties … Do you mean guarding the Weapons Development Bureau?"

The Royal Weapons Development Bureau was located northeast of the royal palace, and was responsible for the creation of the Hunter Units, the weapon behind the Principality of Wiltia's victory.

The Bureau was also the lair of an extraordinary scientist and mechanical genius named Daian Fortuner, who was referred to as a sorcerer.

"Am I being transferred to central headquarters?!"

"Huh?"

"F-Finally, I'll be free of that pervert! Good thing I submitted that request!"

Forgetting her former tension, Sophia shot to her feet and openly displayed her joy.

"Oh … sorry. That isn't what this is about."

"Huh? It isn't?"

Sophia was so disheartened that she almost dropped to her knees.

"About your request … I'm sorry, but it was denied. We would

be in trouble if you didn't continue to tend to that scientist.

"But why me?!"

Sophia was threatening … No, she was begging him, nearly in tears. Elvin gestured for her to calm down.

He stood up and poured lukewarm tea from a heat retention pot in a corner of the room and handed the teacup to Sophia.

"Oh … thanks."

"Do you really hate him that much?"

"I am a soldier, so I cannot reveal such private opinions."

As a soldier, mixing private feelings and duty was strictly prohibited, so she could not answer his question.

"Forget about that and just tell me."

"No, I …"

Elvin asked again as Sophia sought for words.

"As a marshal, I order you. Tell me."

"I have an instinctive dislike for him!"

Soldiers must obey orders no matter how they feel.

As soon as she had received the order, Sophia spoke as if a dam had broken.

"I hate his face, his voice and even his breath! And the pompous, superficial way he talks! When I ask what time it is, why can't he answer without dancing, too? It makes me want to clout him a good one! But I can't, so it really ticks me off!"

"Oh … really?"

The force with which Sophia spat out her pent-up frustration

overwhelmed even the mighty hero, Elvin.

"What is he thinking?! What isn't he thinking?! Instead of simply telling me, he drops 49 hints! And I get annoyed when he chuckles and looks at me in confusion! I bet if I used his face for target practice, I'd score a perfect hit rate!"

"Oh, I see … Um … uh …"

Elvin regretted asking her what she thought of Daian Fortuner.

Sophia hated everything about Daian. But there was a reason for that.

His true nature awakened in Sophia—as a soldier and as a woman—a strong, instinctive feeling of dislike and distrust.

"It's like …"

Sophia stopped before speaking.

It was like Daian was observing humans but was himself inhuman.

Daian always watched people innocently, but as if he were scrutinizing an ant colony in a terrarium.

Around him, Sophia grew confused and felt as if she had become an ant … but no.

She felt as if the whole human race were no more than insects to him.

It was an eerie, frightening feeling.

"Like what?"

Elvin questioned Sophia, who had gone silent and stiff.

She realized that her feelings were nonsensical.

"Oh, nothing. In any case, I'm frustrated at how irresponsible he is. The other day, maybe because he was bored, he sang what he called 'the Bored Song' and danced 'the Bored Dance,' which he had composed and choreographed himself."

It had been so annoying that she had praised her self-control for restraining the urge to punch and kick him.

"Bored … He's bored, huh? That's not good."

Elvin frowned.

"Sir, um, is that a problem?"

"When Daian Fortuner has time to kill, it's a dangerous sign."

Elvin sighed and peered at a map of the royal capital and vicinity.

"Have you heard of the Schutzstaffel?"

"Of course! What about them?"

The Schutzstaffel were troops that protected the Principality of Wiltia's royal palace.

But that was only until the Great War ended.

After the Great European War, Wiltia proposed the establishment of a Society of Nations.

Nominally, its purpose was to create everlasting peace so that a world war never occurred again, but actually it was a means for the victorious nations to preserve the various interests and lands they had acquired. The winners of the war wanted to ensure that they wouldn't lose should hostilities ever break out again.

As a first step, military reduction was proposed for each nation, and in order to lead other member nations, Wiltia was the first to

begin shrinking its military. It reduced its military budget and the number of its soldiers by 30 percent.

"Winning the war means we gained territory both on land and at sea. We have a broader area to protect, but our budget and military force have decreased in size."

Elvin sighed at the absurdity.

"As a result, other nations—both allies and enemies—agreed to reduce their militaries as well, and to redirect the revenue into social welfare, thereby benefitting the citizenry, who had suffered during the war."

Two years had passed since the Great War ended. It had left behind much destruction, even in the victorious nation of Wiltia.

A few months ago, Sophia had experienced that destruction herself.

"I heard you took in child soldiers from Defairedead."

"?!"

Elvin's words surprised Sophia.

They were war orphans from Pelfe, a key culprit in that incident.

Partially due to Lud's pleading, Sophia had given protection to children pressed into service by the enemy nation of Greyten, in an almshouse in the Rundstadt family's domain .

"Don't worry. I'm not criticizing you. It's just unusual for you to give anyone special treatment. By rights, the principality should have done that."

The almshouse was a big improvement over the facility where

the child soldiers previously lived, which had been like a jail.

The almshouse provided boarding, meals, education and job training. It was a rehabilitation facility that would prepare the children for returning to society instead of to the life of crime caused by poverty.

Their freedom was limited for a time, but at least they could lead a better life than they would have in jail with adult criminals.

"It's better to use the funds saved through reduced military costs for war reconstruction. At least, I wish that were happening, but it isn't the reality. That man Genitz …"

"Genitz?! What has that rotten lieutenant general done?! Oops … Excuse my language!"

Injecting private feelings and making insulting statements about a superior officer would undermine the organization. Sophia quickly covered her mouth.

"Don't worry. I too have a hard time checking my desire to beat him to death every time I see him."

Genitz was a lieutenant general for the Principality of Wiltia.

He came to prominence midway through the previous war. He served notably on the western front, but unlike Elvin, he wasn't popular among the regular soldiers. You might even say they hated him.

And there was only one reason: Genitz didn't wage war so much as he efficiently shed blood.

One of his "achievements," the destruction of Lapchuricka, was a

notable example.

He besieged the city with a large force and bombarded guerillas and civilians alike. It was an outright massacre.

With that, he erased an entire city from the map.

"What irritates me is how highly effective his tactics are, including Lapchuricka. After that destruction, all rebellions and resistance movements in the occupied territory stopped at once. He prevented the resistance of 10 million civilians by killing 100 thousand."

That was one way of looking at it.

But accepting his methods meant turning war into slaughter and soldiers into butchers.

Elvin and other veterans could not accept that.

"But he's popular among the aristocrats, who have never set foot in battle. They treat human lives as mere numbers for calculation. To them, Genitz's way sounds clever!"

Elvin's features, which had remained calm, now showed intense anger and disgust.

"Oh … sorry. I don't mean all aristocrats. There are exceptions like you."

"I understand."

Sophia's family, the Rundstadts, was among the finest of Wiltian aristocratic families.

Elvin had apologized because he knew that.

"But what does Genitz have to do with the Schutzstaffel?"

"He has assumed the post of captain in the Schutzstaffel. Officially, his duty is to protect the royal palace, but the truth is that he wants to take control of central, including the capital city of Berun."

"What?!"

The Schutzstaffel had just taken the money removed from the military budget, along with 300 thousand troops, for its own use.

The Schutzstaffel's duty was to protect the monarch and his lands.

To all appearances, Wiltia had downsized its military. In reality, it was keeping its full force as a private army for a single monarch.

"Looking back, the establishment of the Society of Nations must also be part of Genitz's plan. He now has the center of the world in his hands."

There were several other continents beyond Europea.

Most were home to nations and colonies dependent upon the powerful nations of Europea.

And the most powerful country to rule Europea was Wiltia.

With 300 thousand soldiers, Genitz controlled the capital and the core of Wiltia through brute force.

"We regular forces are scattered across territories and colonies. The forces in the capital and at central are so powerful that I don't even want to think about how disadvantageous it is for us."

Elvin picked up a cup as he said this.

But he wasn't drinking tea.

It was brandy he had hidden in his pocket.

The situation was so preposterous that he had to have a drink.

"Um, may I ask something? What does this have to do with my duties?"

Elvin sipped brandy before replying.

"Genitz is scheming to pull that big shot Daian over to the Schutzstaffel's side."

"Meow!"

Tockerbrot was a little bakery in a corner of Organbaelz.

Ellis, a white cat that found a home in the shop, welcomed Lud at the back door as he returned from a delivery.

"Thanks for the welcome!"

Lud sat down and scratched the narrow throat of the cat with his thick fingers.

"Meow!♪"

That was all it took for Ellis to meow happily.

"Hm? Aren't you a little dirty?"

"Meow?"

Ellis's white fur was spotted with mud.

"Is that my fault?"

Lud looked back to where his truck was parked.

The tires were resting in a puddle from the previous day's rain, so apparently his truck had splashed mud onto Ellis's fur.

"Sorry about that … Come here, I'll wash you."

Keeping a small animal at a place that serves food, such as a bakery, is troublesome.

It has to be kept clean to avoid ticks, and must be trained so it will stay away from goods for sale.

Sven, the ace waitress, handled all that, but Lud had brought the cat home.

"It would be wrong to make Sven take care of you all the time."

Lud picked up Ellis and walked to the well beside the shop.

"Master is home!"

Inside the shop, Sven stood up when she heard the truck.

"How do you know?"

"Tee-hee-hee! I'm confident I can recognize the way he breathes within a 500-meter radius!"

Jacob was impressed.

"I guess … you really can."

"Tee-hee-hee!"

Sven beamed a victorious smile at Jacob, who stopped himself from jeering at her claim.

For Sven, a humanoid Hunter Unit created by the smartest scientists in the Principality of Wiltia, identifying an individual anywhere in the vicinity of Organbaelz was possible when using her auditory sensors at full power.

"I'll brief Master on what we were talking about!"

Sven wanted to see Lud as soon as possible, so she dashed out.

She opened the back door with a broad smile … only to encounter a startling sight.

"Hey, Sven. I'm back."

"Um…Master?"

Lud was washing the cat, Ellis.

Since he had sweated a little during the delivery, he was topless and washing himself, too.

"Oh … um … waaah!! Pardon me!"



Blushing, Sven rushed back to the shop, but she was in such a hurry that she tripped and fell.

"Guh! Gwah?!"

With a loud *bonk*, her face struck the floor.

"Hey, are you all right, Sven?!"

"What was that noise?!"

Jacob and Milly, who had been at the oven, poked their heads out.

"Mwa ha ha ha ha!"

Jolt!

The two were worried about Sven, but she merely erupted in mischievous laughter.

"Uh-oh! I caught Master with his guard down! Mwa ha ha! I shall store this precious sight within the safest reaches of my memory for all eternity!"

She was so excited that she blushed all the way to her ears.

If she had been human, the thrill might have caused bright red blood to spurt from her nose.

In fact, the artificial body fluid that circulated inside her was coursing so quickly that it might have flowed from every pore. If her pulse beat any faster, she could have exploded.

"I don't know what happened here, but I can imagine."

"Aw, man!"

Jacob and Milly were watching Sven in astonishment, but she just continued to laugh.

A few minutes later …

"A sales trip?"

Sven announced her new idea after Lud had finished washing and changed clothes.

Her cheeks and ears were still bright red.

"Yes! Tockerbrot's business is going well, but given the limited population of this town, sales are going to hit a peak."

There was no other bakery in Organbaelz.

They basically had a monopoly on the market, but that meant their customer base couldn't expand beyond the residents, no matter how hard they tried.

"We should sell your bread in nearby towns and bring in more revenue!"

"Hmm … I never thought about that."

The plan hadn't occurred to Lud because he was still trying to figure out how to get the townsfolk—beyond Jacob—to enjoy his bread.

"I understand expanding our market, but we don't produce enough bread for that."

At present, Tockerbrot was delivering bread to the mine, local schools, and the city hall cafeteria, in addition to sales in the shop.

It would be difficult to bake more bread with their current production capacity.

"If we need more products, we need more ovens, and I doubt we

can get another loan."

"I have an idea about that, too! But before revealing it, I want to run a recon-in-force op."

Reconnaissance-in-force is an aggressive maneuver that involves launching an attack and observing an opponent's reaction to determine its military capacity. It's a time-tested tactic.

"And that means I need to ask you a favor, Jacob."

The Royal Weapons Development Bureau was in the northeast quarter of Berun, the capital of the Principality of Wiltia.

Nearly hidden all the way in the deepest part of the building, was the office of Director Daian Fortuner.

"I'm booored … I'm booored … And when you're bored, you're … booored! Yo-ho-ho and a yahoo! ♪"

And inside, the genius scientist was singing and dancing the Bored Song and Dance that he had written, composed, and choreographed.

"What are you doing?!"

"Yipes!!"

Bureau Security Force Commander Sophia von Rundstadt—who was also Daian's watchdog—was standing in the doorway, having opened the door without Daian noticing.

"Sophia, you scared me! When did you get here?!"

Sophia had taken Daian by surprise since she hadn't kicked open the door and shouted "Major Sophia von Rundstadt!" as she usually

did.

"You look … bored."

"Uh … ahem … You know … Wa ha ha ha!"

Although Daian complained that he was bored, he actually had work to do.

At least there was a mountain of work for the Weapons Development Bureau to do.

But, most of it consisted of requests for low-cost weapons development, such as weapons that are easy to mass produce, weapons with simple maintenance, and ideas for upgrading older weapons.

"All I get is boring work! You know what I mean? I want to make weapons of mass destruction that go off with earth-shattering booms! But I only get to make incy-wincy things! Which makes me want to do the Bored Dance! But … um … maybe not. Sorry."

As Sophia glared silently at Daian, his voice faded.

The idea of deriving pleasure from massacre would only anger Sophia, who was a proud soldier.

Due to their respective ranks, she would never physically assault Daian, but her animosity was understandable.

At least, that was her usual attitude …

"Tee-hee-hee-hee! You're such a jokester, Director!"

"Huh?"

Sophia was laughing.

Her eyes were angry, but they were crinkled at the corners, and

the edges of her mouth were lifted in tense laughter.

However, she wasn't so much laughing as desperately trying to replace anger with joviality through willpower and muscle control.

"Sophia, what's wrong?"

Daian realized he had taken a step back.

"What's wrong? Ha ha ha ha … Nothing, Director. You sure do say the darnedest things!"

"No, you're not the same at all …"

Daian, who always moved at his own pace and who wouldn't even bow to the monarch unless a ceremonial official demanded it, was breaking out in a cold sweat.

"As for that invitation you offered yesterday …"

"Invitation? Oh … that?!"

Last night, Daian had asked Sophia out on a date, and had reserved a table at one of the most expensive restaurants in Berun.

She had refused before he could even finish asking if she would like to come.

"I gave it careful consideration, and if it's not too late, I would like to join you."

"Huh?!"

Daian backed away again. This time, he took two steps back.

Sophia always refused his invitations, but now she was accepting? This couldn't be happening.

"Have you caught some awful disease?"

"Whatta you mean, you jerk?!"

"Now there's the Sophia I know!"

Daian was relieved to see Sophia react as usual by yelling in response to his bluntness.

"Anyway! That's that! I'll be looking forward to it! Tee-hee!"

Sophia used her muscles to force another smile and quickly left the office, as if to say, "I can't stand it a moment longer!"

"Sophia … Maybe I teased her too much and drove her crazy."

Daian was alone, tilting his head in confusion.

"Arrrgh! I can't do this!!"

After leaving the director's office and checking to make sure that she had walked far enough down the hall, Sophia shouted in anger.



"Why me? Why do I have to do this?"

She sat down, holding her head.

Then she replayed her conversation with Elvin a few hours ago.

"The Schutzstaffel wants Daian? To expand their faction?"

"Yes. They already have control of the aristocrats and royal family, and now they want to bring in the Royal Weapons Development Bureau."

Elvin solemnly answered Sophia's question.

The Royal Weapons Development Bureau was not just one division of the military.

It was largely under the jurisdiction of the regular army, but since it had "Royal" in its name, it was a highly independent organization ultimately serving only the monarch.

Therefore, the military could only assign Sophia as a guard to keep an eye on it.

At this point, the military still couldn't determine what kind of research Daian was doing.

"It would be a problem if the Weapons Development Bureau began serving the Schutzstaffel. In the name of protecting the royal capital, not only could they deploy new weapons … they could monopolize them."

And there was even more to fear.

"Even worse is that the Bureau is like a hen that lays golden eggs. New technology makes money. If they have the patents, they

can collect money from all over the world. And once they have authority and wealth, power will pour in. Wiltia will be under Genitz's thumb."

Weapons are the culmination of any era's technology.

New technology created with enormous money, time and labor will make a massive fortune.

The reason Wiltia, which once had scant territory and natural resources, could compete with great nations like Greyten and August was because of its new technologies.

"Yes, but …"

"What?"

Sophia could understand Elvin's fear.

If he were right, the worst would come to pass.

But for Sophia, it seemed an unrealistic outcome for one specific reason.

"I can't imagine that a well-known monster like Daian Fortuner would work for Genitz. Daian has no interest in such power games."

To be exact, Daian wasn't interested in anything unless it satisfied his intellectual curiosity.

He would never get along with a power-oriented individual like Genitz.

In fact, rumor had it that their relationship was quite ugly.

"Surely the North Star has more chance of falling than they have of chatting and playing chess together on holiday."

But Elvin wasn't smiling.

"At the same time, don't forget that they're both the type of person who will stop at nothing to achieve their goals. Genitz will work with any monster for his own benefit. And so would Daian."

"What would Genitz offer to obtain Daian?"

"Daian is bored, right?"

"Oh!"

Suddenly, Sophia understood the problem.

"I see now … The development budget!"

"That's it exactly."

After the Great War, Wiltia's territory had expanded.

The regular military had to scatter soldiers across broader territory but with reduced funding and manpower, so the money available was much smaller than during wartime.

In fact, the requests Daian received for development were for small-budget projects.

They couldn't satisfy Daian's curiosity. To him, they were boring.

But the Schutzstaffel only existed at central, including the royal capital, and had more money to spend than the regular army. So if it were to contact Daian …

"That man would do anything. It doesn't matter how much he hates Genitz. He'd hum while he shook hands with him. Daian is that kind of man."

Sophia hated Daian.

They were instinctively and psychologically at odds.

But Sophia was a rational military woman.

She worked hard to understand him rationally and had figured out how to deal with him.

But she hated Daian rationally, too.

Sophia knew him well and believed he was capable of anything.

"In order to keep that man on our side, we need money. But our budget is limited, so we need to find a sponsor."

Elvin heaved a gloomy sigh.

He was from the commoner class. Even after he became a marshal, he followed a hands-on policy according to which you didn't know war unless you were on the front line. The work of managing money would never sit well with him.

However, this could simply be the new shape of war in a time of peace.

"I have the chance to negotiate with a certain big player. If we could win him to our side, we might get enough money to satisfy Daian, but that chance won't arrive for another month."

The fate, not just of Wiltia, but of the whole world, rested on an event one month in the future.

"Until then, we must prevent Daian from going to the Schutzstaffel. But given our tight financial circumstances, we have little candy to offer him. To be honest, there's only one thing."

"Only one? What is it?"

Something existed that would make Daian think it was worth his while to stay with the regular army rather than join the Schutzstaffel.

Sophia was surprised to learn that such a thing existed.

"....."

"What?"

Instead of answering, Elvin stared at her, giving Sophia an awful sense of foreboding and causing her to scrunch up her mouth.

"Please!"

"Hold on a sec! Me?!"

"There's no one else in all the military or even all of Wiltia. You're the only human being in whom he has shown a personal interest."

The army had sent various personnel to "guard" Daian.

Those sent had included elites and self-made men, former scholars and artists, and men and women of varying ages.

Most of them, however, had fled after an average of one week, with the longest lasting just under a month.

The shortest tenure had only been two hours.

That person had left soon after reporting, "He's nicer than I thought, so I think I can handle this."

"By putting up with Daian for more than a year, you have set a new world record!"

"Still, what do you expect me to do? Surely, you're not suggesting ..."

Daian was a man and Sophia was a woman.

"Well, that would be the quickest way."

"Marshal!!!"

Sophia yelled. She couldn't forgive him even though he was her

highest superior officer and a great hero.

"I know, I know! I can't ask that much of you. Everyone has natural inclinations, so I wouldn't normally ask this of someone who was reluctant or already in love with someone else."

"What…?!"

At Elvin's surprising words, Sophia forgot her anger and froze.

"Wh-What are you saying, Marshal?"

"Hm? Oh, nothing."

Elvin theatrically feigned innocence.

Not long ago, he had mentioned the Defairedead.

It had been important, but it was hard to imagine that the supreme commander knew all the details.

Besides, there was no way he could know about the man who was involved in that incident but had never come to light.

"I have nothing to say about what you think of a certain baker."

"How do you know about … No, never mind."

People think war heroes are unrivaled men who brandish pikes and swords, but that's only one aspect of heroism.

War heroes are also men who collect all manner of information, plan from a comprehensive point of view, assign troops effectively, and issue appropriate orders.

And Elvin was a hero among heroes.

"I'm not telling you to use a woman's weapons. But for one month, try to draw Daian's attention. You may do that however you please. I beseech you."

"Urgh …"

She understood the problem and surrounding circumstances.

Nonetheless, as a soldier, she could have wept.

"Don't make such a face. Despite being considered a great hero of the strongest nation in the world, I feel pathetic for having to adopt such means. In exchange, I'll never forget that I owe you for this, and I promise to pay you back."

After saying this, Elvin turned around, his face serious.

How persuasive he is …

Elvin was a marshal and Sophia was a major.

And in the military, rank was absolute. If Elvin shouted at Sophia to stop grumbling because it was an order, then she must obey.

But Elvin had said please and promised to pay her back.

But, it wouldn't matter if he never did.

He had taken a soldier's discomfort into consideration. Many soldiers were vulnerable to such superior officers.

"I understand and will undertake the mission."

Sophia agreed, realizing that his powers of persuasion were one reason that hundreds of thousands of soldiers called Elvin "the old man" and revered him as a hero.

"I know this is for the nation and for the military and that it's my duty as a soldier, but … yuck!!!"

In order to keep Daian on her side, Sophia was trying to be a little kinder, but it made her skin crawl.

Disconsolate, Sophia held her head and groaned.

"It seems the wind has shifted in a weird direction."

Daian was sitting on a chair in his office and observing Sophia's image on a small vid unit in his desk.

The Weapons Development Bureau was his lair.

He had eyes and ears everywhere.

Vid units were originally developed for use in the cockpits of Hunter Units, but Daian had adapted them for his own use.

"Indeed, being a soldier is hard work … I hope I'm not a soldier in my next life!"

Daian snickered.

He was not just a genius in technological development.

He was highly intelligent when it came to grasping the motivation behind human activity and understood the general situation based on Sophia's abnormal behavior.

"What should I do? I have no loyalty to the regular military, but I would feel badly about ruining Sophia's hard work."

He was only interested in things that satisfied his intellectual curiosity.

Sophia, however, was a rare exception.

When around her, his thoughts came alive and his powers of speculation accelerated.

Yes … For him, she was like his favorite brand of coffee.

"Are you there, Rebecca?"

He spoke softly and there appeared to be no one else in the room.

After a moment, a girl stood behind him.

"Oh … it's you. Where's Rebecca?"

"Rebecca is not here. She is on a mission."

"Oh, that's right."

Rebecca was the red-headed humanoid Hunter Unit who was his assistant.

Daian clapped his hands upon remembering that she was performing a mission he had assigned.

"Oh well … In that case, I'll just see how things go for Sophia's sake. For one month."

Daian spoke quietly, but the girl who was Rebecca's replacement did not reply.

There was no way to know from her red eyes whether she had heard him, or whether she understood.

Chapter 2

Encounter in Saupunkt

Saupunkt was the town next to Organbaelz. It was in the countryside too, but since it was closer to a main road, it was slightly more urban than its neighbors.

Sven and Jacob were standing on the corner of the town's main thoroughfare.

"Well, let's begin!"

Sven rolled up her sleeves with a determined sniff.

"Is this why you wanted my help? Well, I guess it wouldn't be possible for Lud, and Milly isn't ready to work outside the shop."

Jacob laughed as he said this.

The two were visiting Saupunkt on a Tockerbrot business trip for sales and recon-in-force. In other words, this was a trial sales run.

It didn't matter how good their product might be. If it didn't sell, it didn't sell.

The reasons might vary, from demographics to current trends to competition.

In order to obtain the data they needed, Sven decided to set up a simple stand on the street corner in Saupunkt and sell their baked goods.

As Jacob had suggested, however, Lud's scary mien would frighten away customers, which was a totally different problem than

whether their products would sell.

So Sven had asked Jacob to help her with sales.

"Did you bring change?"

"Here. I exchanged bills at the bank."

"And these are the paper bags? Oh, we need to put brochures in them."

"Yeah. Our customers today might come visit us in Organbaelz."

They set about their preparations briskly.

"Jacob, you've really got business sense."

Sven spoke with sudden realization.

"Really? But this isn't such a big deal."

"Jacob, how old are you?"

"Um, I'll be 11 years old soon."

"You seem older than that."

The Tockerbrot workers were all quirky characters—Lud was a veteran and Sven was a Hunter Unit—so they didn't notice how unusual Jacob was. He was so dependable that the word mature didn't do him justice.

"Thanks for your help. Now, let's get cracking!"

Sven inhaled sharply.

There was no biological reason for her to take a deep breath.

She didn't need to inhale oxygen.

Sven was a machine, but a machine with feelings.

She was psyching herself up.

"Hi, everyone! It's nice to meet you! I'm Sven from Tockerbrot, a

bakery in Organbaelz!"

Her beautiful voice was clear and firm, but innocent.

Even though she hadn't shouted, everyone walking along the street stopped and looked over.

People say that professional stage actors can project their voices to sound as if they are speaking to each member of the audience individually.

Sven had just accomplished this.

The pedestrians all turned toward her.

Nonetheless, she didn't continue speaking right away.

She took enough time for everyone to notice her: the girl with silver hair and red eyes who was as beautiful as a fairy.

When the tension reached its peak, she flashed her lovely smile.

"Today, we're here to greet the people of Saupunkt! We pride ourselves on our bread, so please come take a look and have a taste!"

Her voice washed over the people like waves over a sandy beach.

Sven, a humanoid Hunter Unit, was made for espionage—against the will of her creator, Daian.

She had been designed to infiltrate enemy nations, especially hostile military forces, earn their trust, gather information, and—if necessary—assassinate targets in their sleep.

If Sven so desired, it was nothing for her to win over ten or twenty average citizens in an instant.

"I think I'll check it out."

The first person to approach them was a young man.

"Hmm … The bakery from the neighboring town? I've heard of it."

Next was a young woman.

"Huh? Huh? What've you got?"

After that came children.

In situations like this, housewives are surprisingly calm.

"Oh my! Those look scrumptious! What are they called?"

Once she attracted the housewives, Sven knew she had successfully completed her mission.

"Yes. This is pineapple bread, one of our original confections! There isn't any pineapple inside, but the pattern on it resembles the fruit! Tee-hee!"

She was bright, cheerful and charming with men and women of all ages.

"Sven is truly impressive!"

Jacob mumbled this to himself as he bagged bread and handed it to one customer after another.

The bread Lud sold at Tockerbrot was delicious. There was no mistake about that.

But good products don't necessarily sell.

The price of bread is only a coin or two, so instead of opening their wallets wide, Sven just needed to unlock them a little.

Doing that, however, was hard work.

Goods need to be well made in order to sell.

But effective sales technique is also necessary.

"Welcome to our bread stand! Please, have a look! We're proud of every item for sale!♪"

Sven's manner, which seemed almost like singing and dancing, attracted customers. She was an excellent salesperson.

Within one hour, most of the bread was gone.

"I would say the results were most satisfactory!"

But her facial expression wasn't victorious.

"Huh? You're less pleased than I expected."

"I would have expected no less from Master's bread!"

Jacob was surprised.

"I wish that were all there was to this, but there's more."

It was too soon to fully judge the results.

"Those customers took bread home to eat, but there's no point if they don't want to buy more. People will gather once or twice just out of curiosity. What's important is winning repeat customers."

In order to make money from low-priced items, they had to snag regular patrons.

"We need to do this a few more times. So for our second visit, we'll—"

"Why? Are you coming here again?"

An overweight man pushed forward from behind.

"You set up shop right in front of my store and it's flourishing!"

The man was the owner of a general store just behind their booth.

"Huh? Do you want me to pay you some kind of fee?"

Sven frowned as she asked, but she removed her wallet from a pocket.

"I can't offer much, but …"

She couldn't afford to stir up trouble when they were still testing the waters.

When it came to street sales, she expected the locals to make demands.

"No, no, no … That's not what I meant."

The man's reaction was not what Sven had expected.

"Just gimme some bread. Here's money for it."

The man handed over a few copper coins as he picked up one of the leftover breads and began scarfing it down.

"This really does taste good! You must've used fine flour and put effort into baking it. I bet the person who made this is a very serious baker. You shouldn't sell this so cheaply. What is this? Charity?"

After gobbling down the bread, the shop owner guffawed.

"What exactly are you trying to say?"

The man didn't seem hostile, but Sven was suspicious.

"Well … if you're comin' back to sell more, why don't you do it in front of my shop again?"

"Huh?"

This was a surprisingly good deal for Tockerbrot.

"Can we? Won't we interfere with your business?"

"No, I should say not!"

The man smiled toothily as he answered Jacob's question.

"After people buy fine bread, they'll want tea, coffee and milk! And sausage, ham and bacon are good ideas, too! And butter and jam are essential!"

"Oh, I see …"

Sven finally understood the man's motive.

His general store also sold food.

The owner wanted Sven to lure the customers, which would generate profits for his store.

"If a pretty girl like you stands in front of my shop, I'll make money just from the customers who spill over from your crowd. In fact, a fair number of customers waltzed into my shop just now!"

"You're a skilled businessman."

"In return, I won't ask you to pay nothin'."

"Hmm …"

Sven put her hand to her mouth and pondered the man's suggestion.

When an outsider opens a business, sooner or later conflicts arise with the locals.

If, however, they had a local store on their side from the beginning, they might avoid that risk.

"If you want, I could sell your bread in my store. And that'd turn a decent profit!"

"Oh!"

Yet another good deal!

"That's an intriguing offer. Shall we discuss it in detail?"

"Yeah, good idea. Come on in. I'll put on some tea for you!"

At last, Sven smiled back. In fine spirits, the man beckoned them into his store.

It appeared that this recon-in-force op would prove more fruitful for Tockerbrot than expected.

Meanwhile, back at Tockerbrot …

"Th-Thank you!"

Milly, left behind at the bakery, was seeing off a customer.

After three months of grueling training by Sven, she was almost capable of respectable customer service, but today something else was making her nervous.

"Tee-hee! You sure do look the part!"

"Urgh … Don't tease me, Marlene!"

Milly looked embarrassed as she replied to Marlene, a nun from the church atop the hill where Milly lived.

"I'm not teasing. I helped here a few times, but you're doing much better than I did!"

Since Sven and Jacob were away, Milly was the only one left to handle customer service. But since Milly was only 14 years old, Marlene had come to lend support.

"You should be proud of yourself. You're working hard."

Marlene's sweet smile was less like that of a woman of God than it was of a proud big sister praising her younger sibling.

"Tee-hee!"

Milly was a little embarrassed.

Her customer service wasn't as polished as Sven's, but her attitude showed dedication, and so far that appealed to the customers.

"Good job, you two. Sorry to leave you alone."

Lud appeared from the back room.

He held a tray bearing a fresh-baked pastry.

"A pie? That smells to-die-for!"

Milly's eyes glistened at the sweet-and-sour smell of sugar and fruit.

"Yeah. I just baked a lemon pie. Want to taste it?"

"Y-Yes!"

Milly nodded her head vigorously at this unexpected treat.

"Well then, I'll make tea. Where are the tea leaves?"

As Marlene reached for the tea on the shelf behind Lud, she pressed herself against the wall, obviously trying not to get too close to Lud.

"M-Marlene? What's wrong?"

Lud was confused at the nun's unusual behavior.

"Well, um … Sven said …"

Marlene had taken a liking to Lud, and although Lud hadn't noticed, Sven had.

Sven didn't want Marlene getting any closer to her beloved master than necessary, and had given her specific boundaries.

"Sven told me to keep a one-meter distance from you."

"What?!"

Lud didn't know how to respond and looked bewildered.

"W-Well … shall we have tea anyway?"

For a change of pace, they decided to sit at one of the tables in the food court as they enjoyed teatime.

"Y-Yummy! S-Simply yummy!"

Milly's eyes popped wide and she let out a delighted yelp after just one bite of the fresh lemon pie.

"This is really delicious!"

After she had taken a bite, Marlene marveled at the taste.

"Good. I'm glad you like it."

"Y-You …"

Milly let out a cry, her mouth trembling as she pointed at Lud, who appeared happy that they liked the pie he had baked.

"Are you a *wizard*?!"

"Huh?"

Lud's lemon pie was so delicious that Milly, who didn't have much of a vocabulary, blurted out the absurd question in her excitement.

"I'm surprised … Lud, you're even a master pie baker!"

"Well, there's more to it than skill."

Lud blushed as he answered Marlene.

Bread and pie use the same flour. What differentiates them is that bread uses yeast to make it rise.

But the process and ingredients of bread and pies are similar, so

bakeries often sell both.

"Hey, Milly! Come here!"

Lud gestured to Milly, who was shoveling the pie in her mouth. He showed her a small wooden crate that was sitting in the back of the shop.

"What's this?"

"This is a refrigerator."

Lud explained to Milly as he opened the double doors.

There was a chunk of ice on the upper shelf and a puff pastry on the lower shelf.

"When you make a pie, you knead butter into the dough. When you bake it, the butter in the dough boils, creating layers of air. That's how it gets so crisp."

In order to do that, the butter in the dough must stay solid until you put it in the oven.

Therefore, it's crucial to keep it cold in a refrigerator.

"In addition to the temperature of the oven, the temperature during preparation also affects how food tastes. Remember that."

"O-Okay!"

Lud had baked the pie as a snack for the two of them because they were helping out in the bakery, but also as an occasion for teaching Milly.

"Anyway, it's so delicious that the town will be famous for it!"

Marlene said this from a dutiful distance of one meter.

"That's what I want, but there's a problem."

"What is it?"

"Like I said, in order to make a good pie, I need a refrigerator, but this one has limitations."

Lud had placed a chunk of ice on the upper shelf to chill the air in the box he called a refrigerator. It certainly wasn't ideal for business use. He had just put it together so he could bake the pie to thank his friends.

"An electric refrigerator would be best, but they're too expensive for our shop."

During the Great War, the military had invented an electric refrigerator that circulated refrigerant under high pressure and ran on electricity.

The development of a refrigeration system had been an urgent need for preserving food and medicine, and to prevent explosive shells from igniting during increases in atmospheric temperature.

That technology had found commercial use before the end of the Great War. Factories, shops and some private individuals owned refrigerators, but they were still expensive.

"Oh … That's too bad. That pie blew away my taste buds!"

Milly's shoulders slumped in disappointment.

"That's all right. I'm happy that you two liked it. I should bake another one for Sven and Jacob."

"Too bad …"

Milly mumbled this again.

She wanted more people to taste the delicious pie this kind man

baked.

Doing so would even put a smile on someone who looked as scary as the devil himself.

"Ooh! A customer!"

Marlene reacted to the sound of a *cling-clang* from the bell affixed to the shop entrance.

"Oops! Then I'll duck into the back!"

Lud hurried back to the oven so he wouldn't frighten the customer.

"Oh, hello … aren't you Charlotte, Jacob's mother?"

"Hm?"

Lud stopped when he heard what Marlene had said to the customer.

Lud and Sven lived at Tockerbrot.

Along with the oven room, the bakery occupied most of the space, which left little room for a living area.

Sven slept in the attic, and Lud's room was only big enough for a bed and small writing desk.

When they had added to the building, they had created an office where two people could sit and chat.

Lud showed Jacob's mother into that room.

"Sorry the room is so cramped."

"Not at all. I apologize for showing up unexpectedly."

Jacob's mother was undoubtedly pretty, but a mysterious shadow

surrounded her.

"Please, have some."

Lud offered her a piece of the lemon pie and tea.

"Thank you. I enjoy the bread my son brings home. It's delicious."

"Th-Thank you!"

This was Lud's first time meeting Charlotte.

He had visited the repair shop owned by Jacob's family to have an old truck fixed, but he had never seen Charlotte there.

Her father, Jacob's grandfather, hated Wiltian soldiers, so he hid Charlotte in the back of the house.

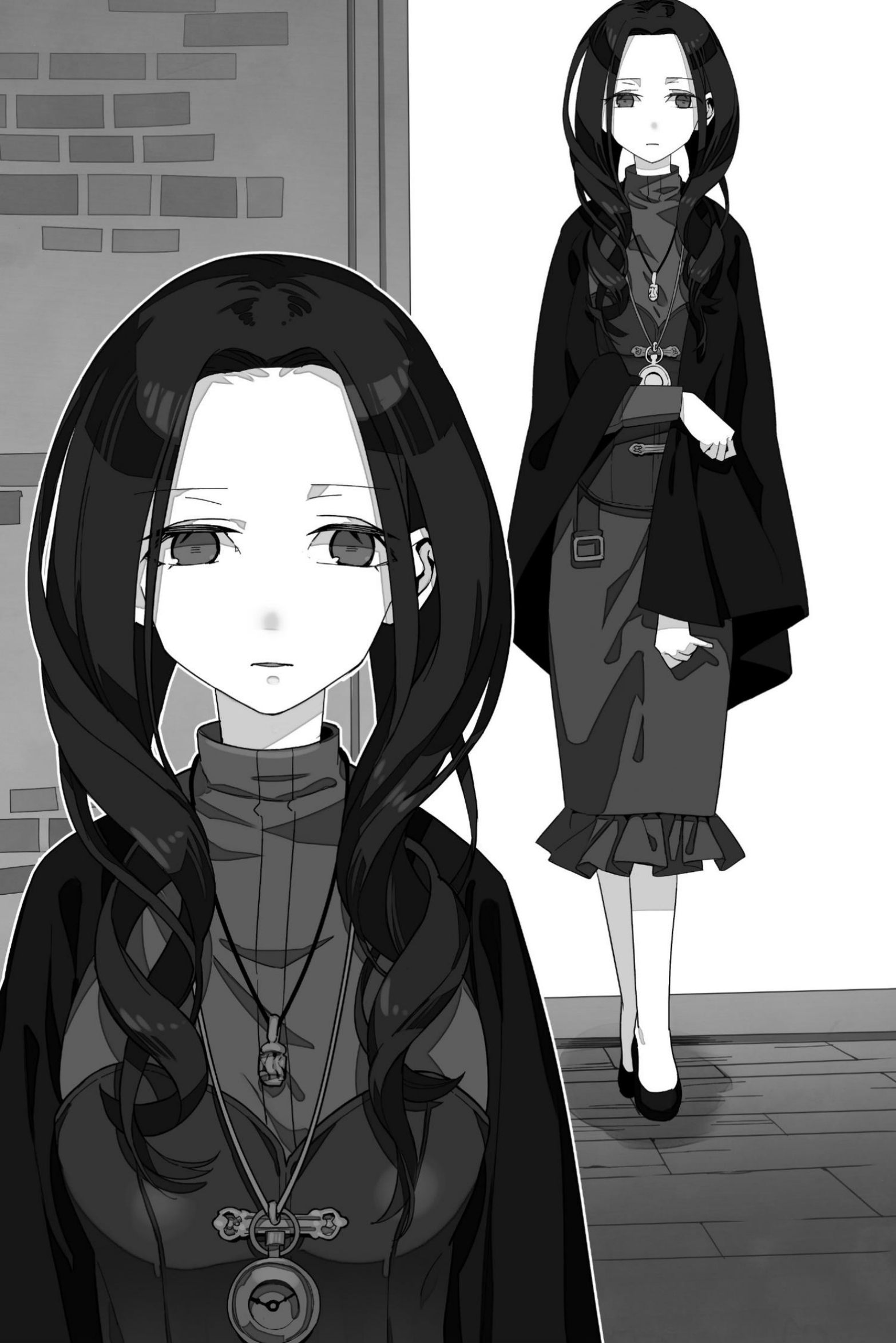
"You look kinder than I had heard."

"Huh?!"

Lud gave a cry of surprise at Charlotte for saying this after seeing his face.

"Is something the matter?"

"No … It's just no one has ever told me that."



Lud's frame was larger than average, even for Wiltians, who were known for being physically imposing. He had fierce eyes, and sported a big scar on his left cheek. Between his size and his stern, frightening face, he was overwhelming enough to make even an adult flee.

There were those who said being a baker was a poor disguise.

Sven was the only one who hadn't been frightened of him when they first met, but in many ways she was an exception.

"I saw lots of scary men in my old occupation. Besides, people with kind faces often hide something awful behind them."

Charlotte's words were heavy with experience.

"Did my son tell you my former profession?"

"Um …"

Lud hesitated.

"Yes, he did."

He admitted it since he was a bad liar and would never be able to keep up the pretence.

"I was a prostitute during the Great War."

She had worked as a licensed prostitute for Wiltia at a brothel managed by the government.

A nation providing a brothel for soldiers is a disturbing idea.

However, some believed it was necessary to prevent the spread of sexual diseases and assaults on civilians.

A hundred years ago, the Lion Emperor traveled with two thousand prostitutes to service his one million soldiers.

"Jacob was conceived by one of my customers."

The emotion in Charlotte's voice was impossible to read, but Lud felt it was wrong to pretend to understand what she went through.

Charlotte appeared older than Lud but too young to be Jacob's mother. She must have been only 16 or 17 years when the Great War started.

What hardship had she experienced at that age? It was perhaps more difficult than the hell Lud had lived through after returning from the war.

"That was hard for my son. The color of his hair and eyes are different from my father's and mine. People looked at him with curiosity."

Charlotte had wavy black hair.

By contrast, Jacob had the typical Wiltian blond hair and blue eyes.

"He had trouble making friends … As his mother, that saddened me. But …"

Charlotte bowed deeply while sitting in the chair.

"It appears that everyone at this shop has treated him with kindness. Thank you."

"N-No … Stop! Jacob is an incredible help to me!"

Flustered, Lud urged her to raise her head.

He wasn't exaggerating.

The year before Sven came, Jacob had been a regular customer when others treated Lud, an outsider, with suspicion.

The age difference hadn't mattered.

Jacob had been Lud's first friend in town.

"But my father caused trouble for you … I couldn't stop that either …"

"Let's forget about that."

Jacob's grandfather had cooperated with the terrorists, who were living secretly in Organbaelz a few months ago.

His motive was the grudge he held over the shunning of his daughter.

His hatred for Wiltia had driven the old man mad.

"How is he doing?"

After the incident, Lud had worked as hard as he could to conceal their treacherous actions, which could have earned them the charge of treason.

To do so, Lud used the influence of his heroic status as Silver Wolf, even though he hated to boast of his fame.

And Lud helped not just because it was his friend's family.

It was because he believed that he and other Wiltians had caused the past suffering of Charlotte and Jacob's grandfather.

"Since that incident, my father has aged greatly. He barely works now. The factory is not just closed, it's practically bankrupt."

"Oh, it is?"

Perhaps Jacob's grandfather had shut his heart after receiving aid from someone he hated.

Lud was sad that he had been unable to help in the end.

"We have to make a living, but it's hard for me to find a job here. My father would prefer for me not to work and there is a rift between the townsfolk and me."

Charlotte looked forlorn as she explained.

Her past was a public secret among the adults in town.

People sometimes treated her with contempt, and some men gave her evil looks.

Therefore, Charlotte mostly stayed in the house, which was why Lud was only meeting her now, even though he had lived in town for over a year.

Marlene had met Charlotte before, and since Marlene was a woman and a servant of God, Charlotte was less uncomfortable around her.

"But if I go to Saupunkt, the town near here, I could work hard and make a living for Jacob and my father."

"Do you mean you're moving out?"

"Yes, next month. So I have a favor to ask. I know Jacob won't like it, but can you convince him? Please?"

After saying that, she bowed once more.

After Jacob's mother left, Lud stayed in his office, thinking for a while.

"That means Jacob is going to move out."

Marlene had entered.

Charlotte hadn't touched the lemon pie or the tea on the office

table.

Marlene picked up some cold tea and had a sip.

"Were you listening?"

"Yes, but don't worry. Milly is in the other room. It's too early to tell her anything."

The walls of the office were thin. Conversations inside the office were audible to anyone standing just outside the door.

Marlene knew that, so she had purposely moved Milly away to prevent her from hearing about Charlotte's private matters.

"This is … my fault."

Marlene was almost crying, and her voice trembled.

She had persuaded Jacob's grandfather to cooperate with the terrorists.

"That's not true. Just forget about that."

Lud repeated what he had said earlier to Charlotte.

"The neighboring town, huh?"

With Lud's old truck, it would only take one hour to Saupunkt.

This wouldn't be good-bye forever. If they wanted to, they would be able to see each other anytime.

But, it would be sad not to have his friend stop by after school so Lud could enjoy his cheerful chatter.

Back in Saupunkt…

"This town is busier than Organbaelz …"

Jacob was wandering around town while Sven talked business

with the owner of the general store.

Since the town was nearby, it wasn't his first visit. Usually he came with his grandfather to purchase maintenance tools, so he had never walked around alone.

He felt more grown up exploring a little by himself, and that felt good.

"I'll buy some souvenirs for Mom. And for Grandpa, too."

His grandfather had aged terribly and lost his energy, and his mother rarely left the house, under orders from his grandfather.

Jacob looked in the shop windows, in the hopes of finding something that would cheer them up.

Jacob's allowance wasn't much, but he had saved some money by helping at Tockerbrot, as he had today.

"I'll get Grandpa some liquor … No, maybe cigarettes. And for Mom …"

Among the items on the shelves, he spied a small hair accessory.

Attached to the ornament were deep blue glass balls fashioned to look like grapes.

It was cheap, but the decoration on it was well made as if it were expensive.

"This would look good on Mom."

Charlotte, Jacob's mother, was pretty, even to people outside the family.

She was still young. She might occasionally dress up, but she never wore makeup or fashionable clothes, in part out of obedience

to her father, but also because she didn't want to stand out.

"It's ridiculous … That stuff happened before I was born …"

Jacob was ordinarily cheerful, but now he was squeezing his eyes shut and looked distraught.

"What's wrong?"

A woman spoke to him from behind.

"Hm?"

Jacob turned around and saw a girl who was older than Milly but younger than Marlene.

"Nothing … Ha ha ha… Did I look so dark that I made you worry?"

Jacob immediately put on his usual perky face, but the girl's manner didn't change.

Her face looked expressionless at first, like a doll's, but there was a faint darkness about her.

Jacob realized that it was her worry for him.

He pointed to the hairpiece.

"Um … I was thinking about getting this as a present for my mother. But she never wears things like this, so there's probably no point."

Jacob wondered why he was telling this to someone he didn't know.

But he found himself talking openly to her.

"That's true. In general, women dislike receiving something they don't care about."

"Really?"

"Yes. Things like opera tickets, coupons for expensive restaurants, costly jewelry, flower bouquets and stuffed animals are examples I'm aware of that make women wear a look of disapproval rather than a smile."

"M-Maybe that's just a problem they have with the men?"

Jacob was amazed to hear the girl recite her list of examples in such a matter-of-fact way.

"You may be right, but …"

"But?"

"Those examples only apply when the gift is from someone she isn't interested in. If she likes the man, she would be happy to receive even a rock."

Jacob caught a glimpse of something in the girl's stony demeanor.

"Women are happy merely to know that a man cares enough to give her anything."

The girl spoke as if she were talking about herself.

"Do you really think so? You sure are convincing. Do you work here? Huh …?"

Jacob turned around, but the girl was gone.

While he was looking down and thinking, she had disappeared.

"Aw, man …"

She had vanished so suddenly, without Jacob even noticing, that he was confused and felt as if she had been an illusion.

"Oh well …"

Even if it came from an illusion, her advice made sense.

He looked in the shop window again and decided to buy the accessory.

"Agh! The price has one more zero than I thought!"

Reality was cruel.

A few minutes later, Jacob bought a modestly priced handkerchief.

Even so, it took almost all his pocket money.

"Urgh … If only I had more money …"

Jacob sighed at how little he could do.

He wished he could grow up faster.

Then he would be capable of more.

He would be able to relieve the burdens from the people he cared about.

The frustration almost made this bright boy dark again.

"No, no, no …"

He shook his head a few times as if dispelling gloomy thoughts and, thinking that Sven must have finished her business, headed back toward the general store.

He tripped on something as he was taking a shortcut down a small path between buildings.

"Wh-What's this?"

It was a leather bag such as money collectors often carried.

"Hmm … This is a nice bag. Instead of throwing it away, the owner could have sold it and—"

He realized something, shut his mouth, and thought, "Uh-oh!"

What if it was lost, not thrown away?

Or what if it wasn't just lost, but stolen?

And what if someone had stolen it, taken the money, and thrown it here?

I could get in trouble if I keep this!

He rushed to put it back where he found it, but it was too late.

"Hey, you! What're you doin'?!"

A tough-looking man in a cheap black suit, black hat and black sunglasses was shouting as he approached.

"Yo, Bro! I found it! This brat filched it!"

"Hunh?! Don't let him get away!"

The first thug called out to a higher-ranking thug who was also wearing a black suit and hat, as if it were some kind of uniform.

"You don't understand! I just found it on the ground!"

"Shut up and give that back!"

Jacob protested, but the men wouldn't listen and grabbed the bag.

"Hey, hey, hey, hey! The money's gone! You stole it! Where you hidin' it?"

"No, that's not true!"

Jacob cried out, but they seized him by the shoulders and wouldn't let go.

He hurriedly looked around for help, but the nearby pedestrians were afraid to get involved, pretended not to see, and scampered

away.

"Ahem!"

Another voice joined in.

It had come from the back seat of a car parked on the street.

It wasn't a loud voice. But it was much deeper than the shouts of the two thugs.

"Sorry. We found it, but the money's already been stolen."

The hoodlums looked comically scared as they turned toward the source of the voice.

That car··· It must belong to a Wiltian ···

Jacob's family didn't run a repair shop for nothing.

He could immediately tell that the car was an expensive Wiltian brand.

Jacob recognized the car as one of the world's top-class luxury automobiles. Few other cars could compare, especially when it came to durability. If a cheap car were to crash into it, only this well-built car would remain undamaged.

The body was sturdy and the windows were made of bulletproof glass.

This was the kind of vehicle favored by high-ranking military officers and mafia bosses who feared for their lives.

"Bring that brat here."

The owner of the voice had opened the back window and shouted.

The men dragged Jacob over to him.

"Where are the stock certificates and paperwork?"

"He doesn't have them."

"Indeed. I imagine a kid wouldn't know how to exchange those for cash."

The man continued talking one-sidedly.

He was in his fifties … perhaps even in his sixties, but he was a mature man in his prime.

Despite many gray hairs, his eyes possessed a keen light, and he looked neither old nor weak.

"Hey, boy. I'll forget about the money you already spent, but give me the rest. Then I won't turn you in to the police."

His tone was authoritative and even haughty.

Jacob sensed that, whoever he was, he must occupy a high position.

He was forceful in a manner of those who excel at ruling others.

"Like I said, I didn't steal it!"

Jacob insisted on his innocence.

The man looked angry now.

"I see. Then there's no choice. I'll take you to the police. But that won't be the end of it. I'll also go to your house and take the amount you stole as compensation from your parents."

He said this coldly.

"What?!"

Jacob cried out in shock.

His typically calm and cheerful manner disappeared. He was still

only 10 years old and the adult's gruff tone silenced him.

"You dress well enough, so I doubt you need to steal money for food. Just return the money now and—Hm?"

The man stopped.

His intimidating expression was gone.

"Tell me, boy … Why do you have those?"

The man's voice was shaking.

He seemed upset and frightened, as if he had seen a ghost or a monster.

"Mr. Shylock, is somethin' wrong?"

Even the thugs who worked for him thought his tone sounded strange and out of character.

The man called Shylock was staring at the goggles Jacob wore around his neck.

"Are those … yours?"

"Yes … And I didn't steal them!"

Jacob shouted, refusing to budge on this point.

"No … That can't be … Then you're …"

The man stepped out of the car to stand in front of Jacob. With a trembling hand, he reached for Jacob and the goggles hanging from his neck.

The man was so spooky that Jacob was afraid he was going to strangle him to death.

"Ungh …"

Jacob wanted to escape but he couldn't shake free of the tough

man who was holding his shoulders.

"Oh my! Pardon me, if you'd be so kind!!!"

Suddenly, Sven appeared.

"Hwah?!"

She jumped in with mighty force, knocking away the man holding Jacob with one kick.

"What have you done to my partner?! Jacob, are you alright?"

"S-Sven!"

At the sight of his savior, tears of relief sprang to Jacob's eyes.



"Wench! Who are you?!"

The older thug produced a folding knife from his pocket.

"Stop!"

Shylock raised his voice. At the same moment, Sven twisted the ruffian's arm and threw him to the ground.

"Agh!"

She had moved so smoothly that he didn't know what hit him.

"If you pull out a knife, you've agreed not to complain if someone stabs or kills you!"

Sven was shouting as she waved the knife in front of the thug's face, where she had pressed it to the ground.

"Aagh!"

The man screamed, which confirmed that he was no longer in the mood for a fight, so she stood up quickly with Jacob in one arm.

"Let's get out of here."

"Huh? Y-Yeah!"

A moment later, they had run off.

Sven didn't know what kind of trouble Jacob was in.

But he was Lud's friend.

Jacob's life needed protection and he took priority second only to Lud.

The exact circumstances didn't matter.

Sven had to get him as far from danger as quickly and as effectively as possible.

Furthermore, she knew Jacob.

He was mature and intelligent beyond his years and always tried to smile, even in hard times. But he now had tears in his eyes.

And that's why she felt the need to rescue him regardless of right or wrong.

"Who was she?!"

The thugs mumbled in shock, staring in the direction where Sven and Jacob had gone.

"How can this be … How can this be?!"

For Shylock, the mysterious woman with superhuman strength was of no interest—only the boy with the goggles.

Without so much as a glance at his minions on the ground, he pondered the brochure that had dropped from Sven's pocket.

"A bakery, eh? Tockerbrot … In Organbaelz …"

Chapter 3

Signaling the Start of War

Wiltia's Traad army base administered the belt of land, which included Organbaelz, in the Pelfe region of the Principality of Wiltia.

The commander of this base, Colonel Bardenbelger, was a military man who had joined the Great War early, and rose from regular soldier to base commander.

Bardenbelger's subordinates put strong faith in him. He took great pride as a soldier, and placed the highest priority on maintaining harmony with the local civilians. He allowed soldiers to attend village festivals and he interacted with civilians in a positive manner.

He had an engaging personality, and was philanthropic, so he donated from his private funds to Marlene's church in Organbaelz.

However, there was a woman who caused Bardenbelger's face to turn beet red and burn with an anger that he rarely showed, even during wartime.

"You show up without warning and tell me to give top priority to routing materials and personnel to a military facility?!"

Bardenbelger used to be an artillery soldier.

His experience living next to bellowing cannons was all too real.

His angry shouts rattled his office windows.

"As I said, that's the order."

As if his shouts did not reach her, Hildegard von Hessen responded teasingly, her face openly mocking, as she brandished the order, pages flapping.

"You! Is that any attitude to take toward a superior officer?!"

Hildegard's rank was first lieutenant, while Bardenbelger was a full colonel.

Her attitude was so rude that Bardenbelger, who usually wasn't very strict, couldn't overlook her insubordination.

"Look, Colonel. We're from the Schutzstaffel. We belong to a different command system. There's no reason for me to follow your orders."

Hildegard belonged to the Schutzstaffel.

The only people to stand above the Schutzstaffel were Commander-in-Chief Genitz and the monarch.

If Bardenbelger disagreed, he would have to secure documents signed by the highest commander of the regular military, Marshal Elvin, and send a formal request.

Then, if he was lucky, he might receive a vague commitment to "give the matter consideration."

"Why you …!"

Hildegard continued speaking to Bardenbelger, who ground his teeth in frustration.

"This order bears the royal seal. You understand, don't you? Refusing means disobeying the royal family, the monarch, and the Principality of Wiltia. Do you intend to stage an insurgency? From

this tiny base?"

Hildegard was 15 years old. Bardenbelger, a veteran soldier, could not restrain his anger at being mocked by this girl, barely one-third his age.

"Urgh … Do as you like!"

The seal on the document she held was real.

He had sworn his loyalty to the nation and the royal family when he became a soldier, so he could not disobey.

"Indeed, I will. And I will start by occupying the best room on this base, which doesn't mean much in this country castle."

As Hildegard left the room, her parting words were guaranteed to rub him the wrong way.

As soon as the door closed, she heard him taking out his anger by punching one piece of furniture after another.

"Heh … That's why I don't like soldiers who are commoners. He's an unrefined country bumpkin. No wonder he serves under Elvin!"

As she had promised, Hildegard now occupied the VIP room. She sat on the sofa and continued scoffing at Bardenbelger.

"Lieutenant? Um …"

Two of her subordinates were with her.

The one who spoke was of average height and weight and wore an iron mask that covered his entire head.

"It would be better not to get ugly with the regular military. We often need its cooperation."

The man chided Hildegard with a voice that sounded as if he had something stuck in his back teeth.

"Corporal, kneel with your hands on the floor."

Hildegard spoke curtly, pointing at the floor, as if commanding a dog.

"Huh?! Yes, Ma'am!"

An order from a superior officer is absolute.

The corporal knelt on all fours, placing his hands on the floor.

"Umf!"

"Agh?!"

Hildegard kicked him with all her strength. In the face.

"Corporal … you're exasperating. I can't punch you because of your mask, but in order to kick you, I have to make you kneel!"

"Uarnnngh!"

The powerful kick, even protected by his mask, caused the corporal to writhe in pain.

I never asked your opinion …

So don't get mouthy with a superior officer.

Her words went unspoken, but the sentiment was expressed clearly as she kicked him the way she would discipline a dog.

"People from the lower classes do indeed cause trouble. Know your status and position."

Hildegard von Hessen was from the house of Hessen, an old and important family in Wiltia, much like Sophia's family, the Rundstadts.

The way Hildegard saw it, for a common soldier—and not even a

non-commissioned officer—to criticize her actions was a disrespectful defiance of class distinctions.

"Corporal, you have served in the military for years, but if I didn't have orders from the revered lord lieutenant general to permit you to accompany me, I would punish your impertinence."

Hildegard drew the firearm at her waist—a Walther PKK—and pushed the muzzle against the mask covering the corporal's head.

Her finger was on the trigger.

"Ulp …"

The corporal screamed when he heard metal scraping against metal.

"You're lucky … so be pleased. What's wrong? Aren't you going to thank me? I'm not killing you."

"Th-Thank you!"

"Hmf … You're a pitiful man."

Hildegard lowered her gun as if she no longer had any business with him and looked at Vanessa, the other subordinate.

"Third Lieutenant, are you sure about that information? You won't get off easy if it turns out to be mistaken after I've come all the way to this godforsaken backwater."

"It came from the Intelligence Bureau so I'm quite certain it's accurate. Shylock will spend this week visiting every city in Pelfe and then head for Ponapalas, the old capital."

Hildegard's face showed irritation as she listened to Vanessa's reply.

"Why is he going to so much trouble?"



"He is performing an inspection tour in preparation for expanding his business to Pelfe."

"Hah!"

Hildegard barked contemptuously, with a scoffing expression on her face.

"Of course, backward people behave backwardly. How inefficient to survey the area himself!"

"An inspection tour is important. He will see many things that he would miss without experiencing the atmosphere at each location."

The corporal couldn't help speaking up.

"When did I grant permission for chitchat, Corporal?"

"My apologies!"

Hildegard gave her subordinate a lesson with another kick.

"Who is that old man, anyway?"

"Oh … He's the chairman of Billions Trading."

Vanessa's face showed surprise that Hildegard didn't know this.

"I already know that! I'm asking you to give me details!"

Hildegard had not known this, but her discomfort when others recognized her ignorance and immaturity showed through the cracks.

"Joseph Shylock was originally a rich man, but during the Great War, he earned huge profits delivering military goods. People say his total assets are enough to buy a small country."

The corporal had spoken again, for the third time.

"Oh, I'm sorry! I spoke without your permission again!"

He shut his mouth in a hurry.

Afraid of a third punishment, he begged for forgiveness by deeply bowing his head.

"And?"

"Huh?"

"Tell me more! I grant permission, so out with it!"

"As you wish. Thank you!"

Despite the scolding, he seemed happy to continue.

"Mr. Shylock used his enormous fortune to expand into a new business—the industrial consignation of weapons for the military of the Principality of Wiltia."

It was almost impossible to produce all the weapons the military needed at the military factories. Further, the operation and maintenance of a manufacturing base would be highly inefficient.

So the military contracted with the heavy manufacturing industry and entrusted it to produce the weapons developed by the military.

Weapon designs and new technologies were the most sensitive of all national secrets.

For that reason, the only companies to receive these commissions were those that had a long-standing relationship with the government, making the entry of newcomers nearly impossible.

However, something unusual happened during the Great War.

The Hunter Units.

"Enemy nations, as well as high-ranking members of our own

military, questioned the practicality of Hunter Units. As, of course, did most existing business enterprises. Thus, they all fell behind in preparing their production lines."

No one had heard of these Iron Giants that could stride through war zones unopposed.

This new weapon, using technology that had never existed before, could not be built by the current manufacturing base.

And Shylock had bet money on that.

He spent most of his fortune to establish a large-scale Hunter Unit manufacturing facility.

Moreover, he gathered highly skilled workers from parts factories and prepared the perfect production line.

In war, implementation of new weaponry is so important that it can determine victory or defeat.

Although Shylock was new to the business, the military had no choice but to hire him.

"It is said that the Hunter Units produced by Mr. Shylock's Billions Trading accounted for more than 60 percent of all Hunter Units in the Great War."

"Wait a second."

Hildegard interrupted the corporal.

"Did you say 60 percent? Does that mean that Teepneuen, which we use, was made there?"

A look of awful disgust showed on Hildegard's still somewhat childish features.

Her expression looked as if the food she was eating had been processed from worms.

"No. The Hunter Units used by the Schutzstaffel are produced at the military factories."

"I see. Good. I would hate to use weapons made by the Degas Clan."

With a relieved smile, Hildegard adjusted her position on the sofa.

"....."

The corporal remained silent for a moment.

He appeared uncomfortable at Hildegard's bias against Shylock because the blood in his veins came from a different ethnic group.

"What? Is there some problem?"

"No, not at all!"

If he voiced his thoughts, she would deliver another brutal kick.

The corporal kept his silence and stared at the floor.

"So the point is that he's a merchant of death who raked in money during the Great War? What a filthy parasite! But … he's got money. If we could get him on our side, the lord lieutenant general would gain the power to silence the regular army."

At this point, the regular army and the Schutzstaffel were at a stalemate, but both had areas of dominance; the regular army due to its vast numbers, the Schutzstaffel because it controlled the royal capital.

If the Schutzstaffel claimed Shylock, who had enormous financial power, that balance would crumble.

"To do so, we must court him carefully."

The Schutzstaffel had attempted several negotiations but had never managed to reach an agreement with Shylock. He had influence with aristocrats and the royal family. The authority of the Schutzstaffel didn't get anywhere with him.

Therefore, they had switched to a means of persuasion better suited to him.

They decided to discover Shylock's weakness, seize it, and force him to nod his head.

To that end, the Schutzstaffel had looked into every aspect of his affairs.

However, so far they had found nothing they could use on him.

He had no close friends, girlfriend or lover, or even a family. Or so it seemed.

But the brilliant Intelligence Bureau of the Schutzstaffel discovered one fact of which even Shylock was unaware.

"Organbaelz? We must take custody of his grandson, who lives there."

Wearing a cruel smile, Hildegard read the documents from the Intelligence Bureau.

Attached to the documents was a photograph, taken secretly and from a distance, of a boy with goggles around his neck.

The day after Sven's trial sales run, Lud received her report inside

Tockerbrot.

"That's all, and I think the results of the recon-in-force op were quite good."

"I see … I never thought about retail consignment."

Sven had discussed doing business with the owner of the general store.

The man had said that he wouldn't charge Tockerbrot for using space in his store. If they could deliver goods three times a week, his store would benefit.

According to the store owner, since Saupunkt's economy was improving, the townsfolk preferred higher quality foods even if they cost a little more.

"The economy is improving?" Lud asked.

Lud knew little of the world since his life was consumed by baking bread from morning to afternoon in the small town of Organbaelz.

"I hear that big businesses from Wiltia are coming to Pelfe, so there will be factories and shops in Saupunkt, too. It seems employment in the town has rapidly expanded.

"I see … That must be why Charlotte is thinking of moving there."

"The population of the town will likely increase soon. Local businesses are searching for new trials. So I was thinking about rounding up a few more shops for retail consignment."

"Hold on a second! I understand the economy is doing well, but

even with more retailers, I can't bake any more bread than I am now."

Lud immediately slapped down Sven's proposal, which would steer them toward even more aggressive sales management.

"Why don't we get more ovens?"

"We don't have that kind of budget."

The shop was already deep in debt when they took the additional loan from the bank to expand the building.

Sales were good, but the balance of payments was still in the red.

"Don't worry! I already have an excellent plan!"

Tockerbrot's recovery from the brink of bankruptcy wasn't just due to Sven's looks and charm.

It was because of her wise sales recommendations.

There was no way this same girl would miss such an obvious flaw in her sales strategy.

"We should get involved in stock management."

"Stock management?"

Lud's parents had been merchants, so he was born into a business-oriented family. But he had lost his parents before he had a chance to learn the business. He lived the rest of his life amid the smell of gun smoke on the battlefield.

He had heard of stock management, but knew little about how it worked.

"We'll ask the consignees for investment, which we can put toward a production increase."

"Um, does that mean we'll be borrowing money from individuals instead of the bank?"

"No. It's not a loan, but an investment. So it would be more accurate to call it joint management through an exclusive contract, rather than retail consignment."

Sven's plan was to grant exclusive sales rights, and in return for delivery of product, they would receive investment from each retailer, and split the profits as dividends.

"Do you mean it's a loan that we don't have to pay back? What kind of numbers trickery is this?!"

Lud didn't exactly understand it, but Sven's plan was the best way to further develop his business without increasing its debt.

"But there's one condition …"

Sven's face clouded a little.

"What? Don't ask me to bribe them!"

"No. They want me to—"

"No!"

Lud shouted before Sven could finish her sentence.

"I want lots of people to taste my bread! For that, I will quietly suffer any pain! But I will not put you through something horrible for it!"

Lud was usually a very reticent person. In fact, since he wasn't good at speaking, he couldn't say very much.

"Um, Master …?"

This time, however, his tone was so firm that it surprised Sven

and made her wonder if he was the same Lud Langart she had known.

"We don't need retail consignment so badly that you have to do such a thing!"

"Um, what are you talking about?"

Sven asked him in confusion.

"I mean, instead of giving them money, they want you to …"

There were way too many vile people in the world.

Many of them would take advantage of another's weakness and ask for money.

In the absence of money, some might ask to use another's body.

And Sven was so beautiful that people couldn't help but turn to look at her.

Some were sure to entertain lascivious thoughts.

"That's not what I meant! He asked me to draw people into the store! When I was standing in front of his business, he had many more customers!"

"Huh?"

The world wasn't completely full of lowlifes just yet.

"Oh … really?"

Lud blushed from embarrassment after realizing he had jumped to the wrong conclusion.

"Yes. But I can't afford to miss work here three days a week, so I didn't know what to say. Um … Master?"

"Uhhh … No … Um … Ah ha ha ha!"

Lud could only cover himself by laughing at Sven, who was confused.

As she watched Lud, Sven smiled.

"Master … by any chance … um … did you think that I would be someone's plaything? But … how could you?!"

Despite her words, she seemed rather pleased.

This beloved man, to whom she devoted everything, hated the thought of someone else touching her.

Sven felt the rezanium reactor inside her chest—her heart and brain—firing faster than usual.

"D-Don't worry, Master. My body and soul belong only to you. I have no intention of letting any other man touch me!"

"S-Sven …"

Her eyes wet, Sven drew close to Lud.

"In fact … if you wish … I will offer you my body."

Her cheeks were flushed, and she clasped her hands over her chest in a pose that suggested the promise to give him *everything*.

If only Lud had stretched out his arms …

"Hide me, Lud!!"

At that moment, Jacob appeared, throwing open the door.

"Why *now*?!!" Sven cried out.

As she tried to grab Jacob, her eyes looked about to overflow with tears, if she had the ability to cry.

"Jacob! Why couldn't you have waited another 30 … or at least 25 minutes?!"

"Why such a specific number?"

Sven didn't know what might have happened in exactly that amount of time, but she sorely regretted the missed opportunity.

"What's wrong, Jacob?"

Lud was panicked by Sven's unexpected offer, and was delighted to be saved by Jacob's perfectly timed arrival.

"Just let me hide somewhere! Anywhere!"

"Um … how about in the oven? No, go to the back office!"

"*Danke*!"

Shortly after Jacob ran in back, the shop door opened.

"Hey! Did a snot-nosed—No, a spoiled rug rat— I mean, did a *boy* come in here?"

Two men dressed like gangsters—in black suits, black ties and black hats—came in.

"Gyah! You!"

They jumped at the sight of Sven, as if she were a monster.

"Excuse me. Are you traveling entertainers or something?"

"No, you idiot!"

Their reaction looked as exaggerated as if they were actors in a comedy.

Lud almost offered them some change.

"Hey, you're the thugs from yesterday."

"Oh, it was these two?"

Sven recognized the hooligans she had beaten up yesterday, and Lud finally understood why Jacob was running away.

"I'm surprised they chased him this far."

"They're persistent."

Sven and Lud whispered to each other so the men wouldn't hear.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Give me the boy!! Or should we trash your shop?"

One of the thugs made as if to kick a shelf holding loaves of bread.

"If you do, I'll peel off your skin and pickle you, you pigs!!"

"Hunh?!"

The man's leg halted in midair upon hearing Sven roar.

Apparently, their fight yesterday had made more of an impression on these two than she thought.

"There's no choice, Master. I'll have to take care of them."

"No, you mustn't."

Lud restrained Sven, who was about to drive the two thugs out of the shop.

"I'll handle them. You stay inside the shop."

"But …"

"You tangled with them because you went to Saupunkt for this shop. That means the responsibility for this clash lies with me as the owner of the bakery."

Lud let Sven and Jacob show initiative, but he had pride as the shop owner, and although Sven was stronger than he was, he believed that a real man should protect women and children.

"Let's go out front and talk."

Leaving Sven inside the shop, Lud went outside with the two men.

"What should we do, Bro? He looks strong."

"You, moron! Did you forget what happened yesterday?"

The men turned their backs on Lud to confer.

"That skinny girl was demonically strong! So maybe a law is at work here where a guy who looks demonically strong, is really weak!"

"Bro! You're so smart!"

"You bet I am!"

"....."

They were whispering, but Lud could hear everything.

"Excuse me?"

"What? We're still talking!"

"Well, um ··· I know my staff caused you some trouble yesterday, but Jacob isn't the kind of boy to steal. There must be some kind of mistake. So would you please leave now?"

Lud tried to convince them in his earnest manner.

He believed they would understand if he looked straight into their eyes and spoke sincerely.

"Y-You ··· What's with that scary look?!"

"Are you an assassin?!"

However, it just alarmed them.

"Anyway, give us that snot-nosed—I mean, that boy!"

"I cannot do that."

Lud replied firmly to their repeated requests to hand Jacob over to them.

"S-So you wanna fight?!"

Lud's face was so focused that it made him look even more intimidating. Despite their words, the thugs were truly scared.

"Argh! Well then, let's fight!"

As if deciding the conversation was going nowhere, the older man swung his arm and punched Lud.

A dull *fump* sound rang out, as if he had hit a tire.

"Gyaaaooow!"

After a crunching sound, like dry branches snapping, the thug screamed, clutching his bent wrist.

"You … What're you wearin' under your clothes?"

"N-Nothing."

"Don't lie! It's something really thick and hard!"

"That's just my chest …"

Lud had served on special military missions ever since he was 10 years old. Sophia, who was an expert in army fighting, had trained him after he became a Hunter Unit pilot. Now, he spent all his time performing the exhausting labor of a baker, which involved heavy lifting, so his body was covered in layers of muscle like the steel plate on an armored knight.

It made sense that the ruffian's fist, no stronger than a fruit knife, would break when punching Lud's chest.

"Bro, I just realized somethin'! You said someone who seems

strong might not be strong, but this ain't like that! This someone looks strong and really is strong!"

"Shut up, you lackwit! What's with this baker?!"

"I'm …sorry."

If someone apologizes with tears in his eyes, even if he was wrong, you have to wonder if you are actually to blame.

"What are you fools doing?!

Another voice joined in.

"—!!"

The two thugs tensed.

The atmosphere suddenly grew taut.

This man possessed that much power and intimidation.

"Are you an ex-soldier? If so, you must have been through hell."

Shylock spoke.

Who is this guy?

Seeing Shylock, Lud was reminded of battle scenes.

Shylock wasn't an old man, but he had passed the prime of life.

He was a big man, but compared to Lud, an ex-soldier, it was doubtful that he had better than average physical strength

Lud was certain of that with just one look.

He has sharp, discerning eyes … Just like a wild eagle's.

Shylock had a piercing glare. Lud had a reputation for his fierce scowl, but his was not as sharp as that of the man in front of him.

His gaze was even more intimidating than Sophia's, which was called the Dragon Slayer.

Did he say I've been through hell? Was he talking about himself? If so, he must have been through hell many times.

Shylock wasn't a soldier. He was a civilian, a non-combatant.

Nonetheless, he possessed the ferocity that came from experiencing agonizing life-or-death circumstances, over and over.

"I'm going in."

Shylock walked past Lud without looking at him and put his hand on the shop door.

"Wait!"

Shylock tossed something over his shoulder just as Lud spoke.

"What's this?"

It was a gold coin.

Lud was so unfamiliar with the currency that he wasn't sure of its exact value, but it was certainly worth enough to buy all the bread at Tockerbrot and still have plenty left.

"I'm your customer. I don't care if you're an ex-soldier, but if you're a businessman, you shouldn't turn away anyone, even an enemy."

He would not permit Lud to restrain him and went inside the shop as if he wasn't interested in listening any further.

"You're …"

As Shylock went inside, his eyes met Sven's.

Lud followed in a hurry, but Shylock did not show the slightest interest in Sven, who was the main cause of yesterday's incident.

"Wait a second. Please, don't bother the boy."

As Lud finished his sentence, Shylock called out.

"Jacob? Where are you? It's your grandpa!" Shylock's voice was unexpectedly silky and gentle, completely unlike his harsh manner earlier.

"Huh?"

"What?"

Both Lud and Sven widened their eyes in surprise.

"Sorry about before, Jacob. Your grandpa was a little frustrated. I apologize, so please come out!"

He wiped the stern expression from his face and put his full effort into a smile that wouldn't scare Jacob.

"Excuse me?"

Hesitantly, Lud spoke to Shylock, who was wandering around the shop looking for Jacob.

"What?! I'm busy right now!"

When he turned around, his glare returned and his voice was threatening. But it was impossible to feel intimidated after hearing him plead for Jacob to come to him.

"What do you mean by *grandpa*?"

"I am his paternal grandfather!"

"What?!"

Shylock's reply greatly surprised Lud.

It wasn't just that the frightening man Jacob had met when visiting Saupunkt turned out to be his grandfather.

This man, who claimed to be his grandfather, could tell Jacob the

whereabouts of his father.

Didn't Jacob say he doesn't know his father?

When his mother was a prostitute, his father was one of her customers. Jacob had told Lud that he knew nothing more than that.

"Jacob? Come out! Look! I brought many things you might like!"

Despite Lud's confusion, Shylock continued speaking to Jacob, who was hiding somewhere in the shop.

"Hey, Poracho! Faran! Bring the presents in here!"

Shylock yelled at the thugs—Poracho and Faran—waiting outside the shop.

"Yes, Sir!!"

His two minions hurriedly brought in gift boxes of all sizes, wrapped in pretty paper and ribbons, as well as snacks piled high in a wooden box large enough to hold an adult.

"See? Your grandpa brought lots of toys and sweets for you! Come to Berun with Gramps! I'll treat you to a feast!"

He had prepared all these treats to lure Jacob.

He must have bought them in neighboring communities, since a small town like Organbaelz didn't even stock such products.

"Berun … Do you intend to take Jacob to Berun?"

"I told you not to interrupt me! I'm busy right now!!"

Shylock shouted at Lud and his expression showed great frustration.

"Jacob … Please, can you say something?"

He begged this with his silken voice, but Jacob didn't reply.

I don't think Jacob will answer because he is scared. I hope he stays silent.

Lud tried not to look at the door to the office, where Jacob was hiding.

"Jacob? If you want, I'll hire a dozen pretty girls to be your private maids. Do you like big boobs? Or big butts?"

Shylock was running out of ammunition to persuade Jacob, so he stooped desperately to vulgar bribes.

"He's bribing a *child* with women?!"

Lud was stunned by this, but—

Rattle!

The door of the office shook, revealing Jacob's hiding place.

"Finally!"

"What?!"

Shylock and Lud both reacted to Jacob's sudden decision to give himself away.

"I found you, Jacob! Now come with Grandpa!"

"That's not fair!!"

Jacob called out angrily as Shylock tried to break open the office door.

"I … I don't get it."

Lud knew that Jacob was mature for his age, but he was still 10 years old. Lud was slightly disappointed at the thought that Jacob was persuaded by the offer of girls rather than toys and sweets.

This is no time to worry about that!

"Outsiders should stay out of our family business!"

Shylock growled murderously at Lud as he tried to stop Shylock from taking Jacob out by force.

"I'm his friend! I can't stay quiet when my friend is in trouble!"

Lud shouted back in equal measure.

"Tsk … You need another one, huh?"

With a look of disgust, Shylock reached into his pocket.

But what he withdrew wasn't a weapon. He held out another gold coin to bribe Lud to keep his mouth shut.

"I don't need that! And I don't need this, either!"

Lud refused the coin and tried to return the one he had received earlier.

"Don't you understand? No one, whether he's a kid or an adult, could respond to such a sudden demand! Why don't you give him some time to think?"

Lud hated all attempts to control others by force, whether with the power of money, materials, authority or violence.

After growing up in the military, and living in war zones, he hated actions that bent another person's will.

Now, his friend Jacob was in trouble.

He had to stop it.

"Tsk …"

Shylock clicked his tongue at the determination in Lud's eyes.

"I'll come back tomorrow."

After saying this, Shylock turned to leave the shop.

"Wait! I want to give this back!"

Lud was still trying to return the gold coin.

"I'm not so low that I take back money once I let it go."

Shylock glanced around the shop.

"But, I'll take this. Keep the change."

He picked up one of the breads on the shelf and exited the shop.

"I've heard of that man somewhere …"

Sven mumbled as she watched Shylock walk out.

"Phew … I'm safe now … Thanks, Lud."

Jacob thanked Lud with a relieved sigh.

"He's no ordinary man."

Lud spoke with a serious look, still staring where Shylock had just stood.

"Master?"

"Lud?"

Sven and Jacob caught their breath at the sight of Lud looking so serious.

"The bread he took was a boule, the best bread baked today! He's got a good eye!"

A boule is a round bread whose name means "ball."

It was among the most basic breads, and its name is the origin of the word *boulangerie*, which means "bakery," and the word *boulanger*, which means "baker."

"Lud, this is no time for joking around …"

"No, Jacob. Master is serious."

The two spoke in amazement at how Lud was such an absurdly serious baker.

A few minutes later …

Inside Tockerbrot, after the storm had passed, Jacob sighed, looking haggard.

"Yeah, for a moment, I wasn't sure how that would end."

They caught their breath while sipping the milk tea that Sven made.

"Can you fill me in? If you don't want to, that's fine."

"I'll tell you. We're friends."

Jacob answered Lud's question with a bitter smile.

"Somehow, I am Shylock's grandson."

"But you …"

"Yes. My mother was a prostitute. I thought there was no way of knowing which of her customers was my father. So I didn't ask, and she didn't tell me. But …"

Jacob hadn't asked, but Charlotte did know who the father was.

"And this is the proof."

Jacob picked up the goggles that he always wore around his neck and showed them to the others as he answered.

"I noticed them before. They must have been expensive. The metal part has a thin coating and the leather is cordovan."

Cordovan is an exceedingly rare leather that can be collected only in small amounts from each horse, and is called the "jewel of

leathers." Jacob's goggles were a collector's item made of high quality materials by a skilled craftsman.

"There are initials written here. S.S. It must stand for the name of my father."

Before he realized it, he was already wearing the goggles.

His mother gave them to him when he was little, and he had worn them ever since.

"My father gave these to my mom so he would recognize me as his son … But it doesn't make sense!"

Jacob said this with a laugh, but his tone suggested confusion.

It was understandable.

When he hadn't known anything about his father, he hadn't worried about it, but now that he had discovered even a little about him, he didn't know what to think.

"That old man is the chairman of a company called Billions Trading."

"Oh!!"

Upon hearing this, Sven raised her voice.

"What's the matter, Sven?"

"I remember now! Joseph Shylock! The chairman of Billions Trading! Greedy Shylock!"

Sven had been wondering where she had seen him before, and now she remembered.

She had seen a photograph of him in a newspaper she had picked up in the waiting room of city hall, where she had gone to file papers

for the bakery.

"What kind of company is Billions Trading?"

"Its main business is consignment production of weapons. It's what is sometimes called a "merchant of death."

Sven continued to explain in answer to Jacob's question.

"According to rumors, he made money through unscrupulous means during wartime. In order to secure workers, he used women, children and sometimes, illegal immigrants. And people said he didn't pay their wages."

"Sven … wait."

Lud tried to stop Sven, who was rattling on.

"The worst of it was that he was arrested on suspicion of treason against the nation before the Great War. And he paid money so he wouldn't face prosecution. Anyway, no one is as shady as he is."

"Sven, that's enough!"

Lud stopped her with a rough voice.

"Oh … I'm sorry!"

Too late, she realized why.

Jacob would be upset at learning how evil his grandfather was, even though he just met him.

"It's all right, Sven. I understand. It seems like my father must have left home for good reasons."

Jacob said this with a dry smile and gestured with his hand.

"What do you mean?"

"My father and that old man didn't get along. So my father finally

left."

Unlike Shylock, Jacob's father was an honorable man. He and Shylock had fought viciously ever since his father was young, so the son had eventually moved out.

"He illegally gained a place in the military register, changed his name, and became a soldier. Then the war started and he met Mom. That's what I heard."

"Oh … Your father was quite an adventurous man himself!"

Sven said this in a voice either impressed or stunned.

Since Jacob's grandfather had been corrupt, his son had become as tough as necessary.

"That's all anyone knows about my father. There's no information about what happened after that. That's all Mom knows."

"If they could find out that much, they should also be able to discover where he is, but— Oh!"

Lud didn't continue.

If a soldier went to war and then disappeared, it could only mean one thing.

He had been killed in action. Jacob's father had very likely departed this world long ago.

"I don't know … People have given me a lot of information, so I'm confused. What should I do? Ha ha ha…"

Jacob was laughing, but it was obvious that he felt a little desperate.

The secrets surrounding his birth—his father's likely death and

his grandfather's role as a merchant of death—were too heavy for a 10-year old to carry.

"Uh-oh… Seriously … What should I do?"

Jacob set his cup on the table and held his head.

"Jacob … Um, how about your family? I mean, what does your mother say?"

"Not much. But she did say that what the old man told me was true."

Neither Lud nor Sven knew what Jacob's mother was thinking.

Perhaps she simply didn't know what to say.

"Jacob, do you want to go with Shylock?"

"No."

Jacob's answer was clear.

"That old man … As soon as he found out I was his grandson, he put on a sweet face, but I know he's thoroughly evil to other people. I don't care if we have the same blood. I don't want to be with him."

Facing Shylock in the frightening circumstances yesterday in Saupunkt made Jacob want to stay far away from his grandfather.

"If you go with him, you can live in great luxury."

"No thank you!"

"He said he would hire pretty girls."

"To be honest, that did appeal to me somewhat, but … no."

Even the prospect of money, luxury and women didn't entice Jacob to compromise.

"I see. Well, in that case …"

Lud made a decision.

"You can stay here as long as you want."

"Huh?"

Lud's offer surprised Jacob.

"You can sleep on the floor in my room. Most meals will be leftover bread. And I want you to help in the shop. If you don't mind that, then you can stay as long as you like."

"Can I really, Lud?"

As Shylock had said, Lud was an outsider.

However, when Lud said that Jacob was his friend, those true words were spoken from the heart.

"I don't mind."

Lud was a pacifist.

He didn't like trouble and wouldn't allow problems to be solved with violence.

He had tried to use words to resolve the conflict with the thugs.

He was a pacifist, but he didn't believe in peace at any price.

He would never abandon a friend in need just to avoid trouble.

"Jacob, don't underestimate my master. You know how he is."

Sven said this with a shrug of her shoulders. It wasn't clear whether she thought there was no use in trying to stop Lud or she didn't want to stop him at all.

"Um … uh …"

Jacob, who was usually a more fluent speaker than Lud, looked as if he didn't know what to say.

"Thank you."

Embarrassed, he said nothing more.

Surprisingly, when people are truly thankful, few words come from their mouths.

That very day, Lud tried to write a letter to Shylock, but in the end, it was Sven who wrote and sent it.

In summary, it read, "Jacob has no intention of going to Berun with you."

"How dare you cross me …"

Shylock was a battle-hardened businessman, so those words alone were enough for him to guess the broader situation.

The incredible fury that Shylock unleashed at that moment made Poracho and Faran—his pair of underlings—fear for their lives.

"Fair enough …"

He ripped up the letter and prepared to take action.

An assault of swift decisions had been the secret to his business success.

Lud and the others soon would realize this all too well.

Chapter 4

The Battle of Bolsburn

The next morning, before dawn …

Morning comes early to a bakery.

If the baker doesn't complete the preparations to allow the dough to rise by dawn, he won't be able to line the shelves with his bread by opening hour.

Therefore, since times of old, the baker must rise before the first cockcrow.

"*Yawwwn*, I'm sleepy."

Tockerbrot was no exception. Jacob was now living there, so he too rose early and helped in the shop.

"Milly, aren't you sleepy? You even have to commute here."

"To be honest, it was hard at first, but I've gotten used to it."

Jacob and the shop apprentice, Milly, were bringing in the day's flour from the storage area outside.

There was still a little time before sunrise.

The light had yet to appear, but the color of the sky was changing from black to indigo.

"In the east, people say demons appear around this time of day."

"That's ridiculous! You're a child, but don't say such silly things."

Milly was having none of Jacob's chitchat.

"What do you mean? We're around the same age!"

"You're not 11 yet. I'm 14. I'm much older than you!"

There was only a three-year difference between them, but even though Milly was just an apprentice, she had a job, whereas Jacob was an unemployed dependent.

Nonetheless, Milly was still childish, and demonstrated her immaturity by insisting on this slight difference in their ages.

"Hm?"

They heard a noise from somewhere.

"What's that noise?"

The approach of a great rumbling sound caused the ground to shake.

"No way … Could that really be a demon?"

Pale, Milly stared out at the street.

A line of shining eyes was roaring toward them.

Meanwhile, Lud was at the oven.

"Bread is a living thing."

Long ago, he had heard that from a town baker who was no longer alive.

Baking bread was not just about mixing ingredients in specific amounts and kneading for a certain amount of time.

It was a challenge that involved considerations such as the quality of the flour, the fineness of the salt and the pH level of the water.

The humidity level, air temperature, environment, and even the

season, all determined how the yeast fermented.

A baker's skill rested on attending to those elements, as well as the ability to bake to the same degree of quality every time. That skill separated the excellent baker from the merely adequate.

For Lud, this time of the morning required the most concentration and would determine the success of the day ahead.

"Good!"

Just before he set about the challenge before him, Jacob interrupted.

"There's a problem, Lud!!"

"Waah!!"

The tense thread of Lud's focus snapped.

"What is it, Jacob? I told you not to come inside the oven room!"

"I didn't!"

Jacob's feet were planted right outside the threshold of the room.

"Anyway, something's wrong! Out front!"

"Out front? Has something happened?"

Pulled by Jacob, whose face was overcome with distress, Lud went outside.

There, Milly stood in shock at the sight before her.

"Wh-What's all this?"

Lud's eyes widened.

There was an ordinary house adjacent to Tockerbrot.

The owner worked in the office at the mine. He and his wife had two daughters. The mother appeared to enjoy gardening and had

placed small potted plants around the one-story house.

But now, many trucks were parked in front of the house and workers were disembarking from the truck beds as if they were soldiers.

"All right, everyone! Get to work!" At this command, all the workers applied mattocks and hammers to the walls of the house and rapidly began tearing it down.

"Wh-What are you doing?!"

The one giving commands was Poracho, the thug who hurt his wrist yesterday when he punched Lud.

"Heh heh heh …"

Poracho laughed when he saw Lud, as if he found something hilarious.

"Don't worry. No one lives in this house anymore. Mr. Shylock blew a wad to buy this whole plot of land!"

"He bought it?"

Forcing the family to clear out so quickly defied common sense.

It was hard to imagine how much money Shylock must have paid to make the family accept immediate eviction.

But that wasn't the only problem.

Why was he destroying the house he had just bought?

"This is your fault, baker! You made Mr. Shylock angry!"

"What …?"

Lud had no idea what their intentions were. But he noticed with surprise that some of the trucks were carrying something besides

workers.

"Those are …"

"Oh, you recognize those? After all, you *are* an ex-soldier! Heh Heh heh!"

As if finding this funny, Poracho laughed.

"Lud, what's the matter? What are those?"

Uneasy, Jacob asked Lud from his hiding place in the shadows.

"Those are portable architectural materials for use in battle."

Sven answered instead of Lud. She had also come outside after sensing something unusual.

"In the recent Great War, constructing camps for field battles was important."

Protracted field battles placed soldiers under great stress.

Buildings were necessary for storing weapons and materials, as well as for treating injured soldiers.

"These were developed for that purpose. By separating architectural materials into parts and simplifying the method of assembly, an experienced army engineer could build a house in less than half a day."

The resulting structures were bulletproof but couldn't withstand shelling. Nonetheless, they allowed for command posts at a close but safe distance from battle.

According to one story, an engineer from the East had developed these materials, inspired by the tale of a general long ago who built a castle overnight in front of an enemy force.

"This is a simple-assembly shop that Billions Trading developed based on that technology. As long as there's ground to build on, we can raise a shop anywhere in one day."

Poracho explained this proudly.

"Build a shop? What are you talking about?"

"We're opening here today! We're building Bakery Billions!"

Poracho said this as if showing off a favorite magic trick to Lud, who still didn't grasp what they were doing.

"Bakery? You're building a *bakery*?!"

"That's right, baker! I told you, you got Mr. Shylock steamed! The might of Billions Trading is gonna crush your shop!"

Shylock's spiteful plan involved quickly setting up a rival shop to interfere with Tockerbrot's business.

"So much expense and hard work for harassment!"

How much had Shylock paid to buy the land and gather trucks for transporting the materials and workers in one night?

"He should have spent his money on something else."

Lud, who was usually in financial straits, found this so stunning that he was speechless.

"It shows how strongly Mr. Shylock wants to take the boy home."

"Stop messing around!"

Jacob screamed angrily at Poracho's words.

"I'm not going to do what that old man says! What does he want from me?!"

"That's … He wants you to inherit Billions Trading, the company

he established. Mr. Shylock ain't immortal!"

"I'm telling you, I refuse! If he needs an heir, how about *you*?"

To Jacob, Shylock's demand was nothing but a selfish ego trip and a nuisance.

"Not happening, boy. Someone like me could never take over Mr. Shylock's most precious possession. You shouldn't even joke about that."

"What the …?

Jacob was confused.

Poracho had acted like a cheap underling ever since they first met two days ago, but now Jacob saw something sad in his eyes.

"That's enough for now. Master, let's go back. We have a busy day ahead."

Sven coolly wrapped up the situation as if there were no more to say.

"They won't be able to open their shop today no matter what. On the contrary, look at the number of workers they have. We can count on more sales than usual for breakfast, lunch and dinner. We should prepare more bread than usual."

Sven said this in front of Poracho, who was less a business rival than a disruptor of Tockerbrot's business.

"D-Don't you understand?! If you bring the boy and apologize, Mr. Shylock'll forgive you!"

"Huh? Do you think using the power of money to launch competitive warfare can topple my beloved master's castle? If so,

you're sorely mistaken!"

Poracho had intimated that they should surrender, but Sven's cool reply was unconcerned.

"Sooner or later, you will suffer a decisive defeat and run away with your tails between your legs! So prepare yourselves for defeat and disappointment!"

"Wh-What?!"

Sven's unshakeable confidence was panicking the attacking force.

"Well, everyone, let's head back inside. See ya!"

With raucous laughter, Sven led Lud and the others back into the shop.

And then …

"What a *disaster*!"

As soon as she entered the shop, Sven gripped her head in a panic.

"What?! I thought you had some kind of plan for overcoming this!!"

"No! Since time untold, the brute force of material warfare has been the *worst*!"

Her answer to Jacob's question was laced with anger.

In a way, material warfare was the ultimate fighting strategy.

It ignored the individual qualities of each soldier and accepted damages in order to push forward with numbers and power.

The August Federation favored this method. It forcefully drafted village farmers and sent them by rail to the front line without any

training, and with as little weaponry as possible, and then ordered them to "Charge!"

Of course, their opponents killed these soldiers one after another, but their numbers were overwhelming. By sending in such a vast number of soldiers, they were able to push back the front line.

If Wiltia had not developed the Hunter Units with each one able to trample one thousand soldiers, the red flag of the August Federation would be flying in the royal capital of Berun right now.

"All we can do right now is bluff to cover our fear and …"

Sven began jotting notes on the memo pad she kept in the pocket of her apron.

"Jacob, could you assemble these things right away?"

"What are they? Aluminum plates and sugar … Huh?!"

The note contained a list of drugs and solvents that Jacob recognized.

"Those are the ingredients for making bombs with common items."

"What are you planning?!"

The only way left open was to eliminate the enemy. That was the best solution this skillful waitress, in all her wisdom, could come up with.

"Umm …"

Lud was rather calm compared to the other two.

He held his hand to his mouth in deep thought.

"H-Hey, you …"

Milly pulled on his sleeves worriedly.

"Is the shop in trouble? If so, I don't need any pay. I'll do my best, so …"

Milly, who was completely inexperienced and frightened, tried to help.

Her comment communicated her desperate worry over the situation.

"Huh? Uh, no, no … It'll be fine."

With a gentle expression, Lud patted her head.

"Anyway, Milly, I have a favor to ask you."

"What is it? I'll do anything!"

"Thanks. After dawn, will you bring Marlene here?"

Meanwhile, Sven and Jacob were pacing around behind them in a panic.

A few hours later …

In a hotel room in Saupunkt where Shylock was staying …

The country town of Organbaelz only had simple, inexpensive hotels where the merchants who visited from time to time stayed. Shylock had no choice but to book a room some distance away.

Even though it was the best room to be had in Saupunkt, to Shylock, the hotel was a mere hovel.

"We'll be able to open the shop tomorrow."

Faran, the younger of the two thugs, updated Shylock, who was sitting on the sofa and running his eyes over all the newspapers

published in Wiltia.

"It's just that the woman at the shop, the one who is sheltering the boy, acted oddly confident."

"Harrumph!"

Upon hearing his underling's report and noting some worrisome elements, Shylock didn't move even one eyebrow—he just snorted.

"That is no more than a ridiculous bluff! The owner and staff of that shop may be eccentric, but their products and prices aren't so special. It's a perfectly good bakery, just like any other."

Yesterday, Shylock had closely examined the shop as he left, memorizing the prices and characteristics of the bread, which were written on the shelves.

He had tasted the boule he brought back, and while he admitted that it had been baked with care, that was all.

"Let's see … Hold a sale as soon as we open. One bread for one krant!"

A krant was the lowest unit of currency used in Wiltia and Pelfe.

"We'll continue the opening sale for a month. If they can't generate profits in that time, it'll be a huge blow to their shop."

For a small shop like Tockerbrot, even one day of lower profits would indeed be a huge blow.

If that continued for a month, it would be ruinous.

And now they were in debt to the bank.

If their sales fell, the bank would stop the funding and they wouldn't even have working capital.

"After that, I'll put pressure on the mine and schools that they have contracts with. This won't take a month. I can destroy them in a fortnight!"

There was a reason that this man had the nickname Greedy Shylock.

When he opened a new business, he had a record of destroying his competitors and taking them over, thereby growing his own business.

Neither Lud nor Sven could come close to him in business management.

Shylock chuckled in satisfaction at his assured victory.

The phone rang.

"Yeah? What is it?"

Faran answered the call for his boss.

"Huh? A nun? Why's she here? To conclude a war treaty? What's that?"

"What is the matter?"

Shylock questioned his subordinate about the call.

"Um, that bakery is sending a messenger to conclude a war treaty."

"What?"

Shylock frowned at this nonsense.

A little later ···

Marlene, a nun from the church atop the hill, entered Shylock's hotel room.

"You haven't come here to pester me for money for those in need? Are you in league with that baker?"

"No, I am only a woman of God who lives in Organbaelz."

Marlene tried to be as friendly as she could, but her smile was slightly stiff and uncomfortable.

"I come to you as a neutral party, a fair and faithful servant of God. I am a messenger from the owner of Tockerbrot."

Milly was the only staff member of Tockerbrot who had not met Shylock.

Therefore, Shylock didn't know about Marlene, who was Milly's guardian.

Lud had sent Marlene under the guise of a neutral messenger.

Marlene had been hesitant to go.

"I don't want to visit such a frightening man. If you make an enemy of him, there's no telling what he'll do!" she had said with a look of revulsion.

But Milly reminded Marlene that it was for Lud, who Marlene secretly had a crush on, so she could not refuse.

"Tockerbrot suggests that you settle this competition quickly since it'll be a lot of trouble.'"

"Huh?"

Shylock's exclamation sounded irritable.

Marlene felt cold sweat on her back at the sound of his voice.

"Your shop … Bakery Billions opens tomorrow. They want to compete to see whose profits will be higher one week from

tomorrow. If you win, they will give you Jacob."

"You must be joking."

Shylock's voice was soft but deep.

Marlene was proud of herself for not screaming "Yiiiiikes!" and running away.

"Why should I follow rules made by an opponent who will go bankrupt even if I do nothing? Furthermore, the fact that they're suggesting this now is an admission of eventual defeat. I'm under no obligation to obey."

Shylock spoke with incredible ferocity. It was so forceful that any other young woman would have cried, or even fainted.

However, Marlene wasn't just a young woman or a virtuous nun.

Lud hadn't sent her because he expected Shylock to listen to her as a servant of God.

She had once been a terrorist.

Marlene had hidden in Organbaelz for years, cooperating with the August Federation, an enemy nation, and neither Lud nor Sven—an ex-soldier and ex-Hunter Unit—had even noticed.

She had since reformed, but the children at the church, including Milly, did not know her past.

Marlene could exercise great courage when necessary.

"Are you sure?"

Marlene maintained her smile as she questioned Shylock.

"If you destroy Tockerbrot according to your current strategy, what do you think those two will do? They'll take Jacob and flee

Organbaelz. They'll take him somewhere where you can't find him."

"Urgh …"

Slight frustration showed on Shylock's face.

Fall for it! Fall for it! Fall for it!

Marlene continued.

"I'm sure you know that those two are not like ordinary people."

"……"

The ridicule in Shylock's eyes disappeared. He was losing his confidence.

Now Marlene took her gamble.

"If Lud Langart, a former soldier, were to get serious, he just might escape your grasp. Yes … just like your son.

"—!!!"

Marlene felt as if the air in the room had turned into violent waves.

Shylock's anger was overflowing.

His son's escape, years ago, was an extremely sensitive matter.

As risky as it may be, it's sometimes necessary to goad an opponent by touching on raw and difficult subjects.

"But if you win under their conditions, Jacob will come to you of his own free will."

Marlene spoke again to drive the point home.

If he continued on his present course, Shylock would win the battle but lose the war, and lose Jacob, which was his primary objective.

Once again, he would taste the sadness that was still an open wound: the loss of a family member.

"....."

The room fell into a silence that lasted only a few seconds but felt like forever to Marlene.

"Let me hear the details."

Later, Shylock accepted the war treaty Marlene offered on behalf of Tockerbrot.

A few more hours later ···

"That was scary!!"

After the success of her negotiation, Marlene was facedown at a table in the Tockerbrot food court, trembling as she remembered Shylock's fierce expression, which was burned into her mind.

"Thank you, Marlene! Thank you!"

"Good job, Marlene! Would you like something to drink?"

Both Jacob and Milly praised her daring effort.

"Now perhaps we can just hang in here!"

The war treaty stipulated that the shop that posted the most profits after one week of sales would be the winner.

If Tockerbrot won, Shylock would leave quietly, and if Tockerbrot lost, he would leave with Jacob.

By limiting the struggle to one week, Tockerbrot would avoid the worst-case scenario, in which the shop would go bankrupt.

Their opponent was ready to destroy Tockerbrot, so this was

significant progress.

The treaty also included a prohibition against disrupting one another's business activities.

Simply put, the treaty forbade violence between staff, destructive acts toward each other's shops, and disruption of supply routes to prevent the other from acquiring ingredients.

It could be said that these conditions were a considerable improvement over the disadvantageous situation that had existed before.

"Hey, Sven? Did I do well?"

Although feeling great fatigue, Marlene looked at Sven with a victorious face.

"Yes, I have to admit that you did."

Sven answered with a bitter look, aware that she should admit that Marlene had succeeded brilliantly, even though Marlene was still her rival.

"Then will you withdraw your rule?"

The rule was that Marlene would stay one meter away from Lud.

"Ugh! About that …"

"I obeyed because I owed you, but haven't I paid you back a little?"

Marlene laughed with a wicked look on her face.

"Wh-What an evil nun you are!"

Sven's shoulders shook with frustration, but there was no room for refusal.

"Good job, Marlene. Thank you very much."

With awful timing, Lud appeared from the back room.

"Oh, Lud! I was so scared! But I did my best for Jacob and for *you*!"

Marlene quickly stood and snuggled close to Lud.

"Th-Thank you ··· Really ··· Um, aren't you standing a little close?"

"No, this is totally fine!"

Marlene was so close that he could feel her breath. She pushed her breasts, so much bigger than Sven's, against Lud's arm.

"Grrraaahhh!"

Seeing this, Sven screamed out in anger, frustration and jealousy.

"Sven ··· Um, I know how you feel, but you're scary!!

Jacob teased Sven, who looked as angry as a demon in a child's nightmare.



"But, Lud … will things be okay now? You'll save the shop, but Jacob might …"

Marlene was still attached to Lud as she asked this.

They succeeded in establishing a war treaty, but it only earned them a fight with a better chance of survival. It didn't neutralize the overwhelming financial power of Billions Trading.

Tockerbrot was still at a disadvantage.

"Yeah … I might never beat him as a businessman, but at least we've brought him down to the level of a baker."

Lud's face now showed a small but real hope of winning.

The next day, Bakery Billions launched a major offensive.

"Welcome, welcome! We're Bakery Billions! Bakery Billions! Opening today! We're here to deliver the highest quality bread to the people of Organbaelz!"

In front of the shop, musicians were playing instruments, skimpily-clad dancers were singing and dancing, and a clown on stilts was handing out balloons to children.

Fliers were scattered about, and fireworks sparkled in the air.

Bakery Billions launched its opening sale with more flare and clamor than even the annual harvest festival in Organbaelz.

The townspeople, who had little to entertain them in the countryside, gathered around for the festivity.

A crowd had already formed and some, who had misunderstood the situation, had set out their own stalls.

"What the heck is *that*?!"

Sven, who was watching from inside Tockerbrot, shouted in anger.

"How did they prepare all that so quickly?!"

Shylock hadn't just bought land and thrown up a store.

He must have spent an enormous amount of money to entice new customers.

"Nonetheless, I have to say that you're foolish, Shylock! If you spend so much on advertising, you'll be in the red even if you *do* sell more bread!!"

"No, personnel and advertising costs don't count."

Lud pointed this out to Sven, who let out a cry and almost fell down.

"D-Darn him! Shylock must have added that condition to improve his chances!"

"No, I suggested that."

"Say whaaah?!"

Sven had assumed it was Shylock's ploy, and when she found out that it was Lud's idea, she almost fell down again. No, this time she *did* fall.

"Are you all right, Sven?"

"Don't worry about me! Why did you suggest such a thing?!"

In business, personnel and advertising expenses can be considerable.

In some cases, they could amount to more than production costs.

Removing the marketing costs from the accounting meant that Billions, which possessed enormous capital strength, might as well have lined up a million guns that would never run out of bullets.

"On the other hand, we spend very little on staff. Or, maybe I shouldn't say that."

After all, Milly received minimum wage as a trainee under the labor laws of Wiltia, Jacob was working without pay to earn his board, and Sven simply refused to take any pay.

"Also, they just started a new shop, but we've been here a while. Our circumstances are different."

"Master, have you ever heard about the king of Sojo?"

A long time ago, the king of the small nation of Sojo told himself, "It would be unfair to the opponent if we attacked now," and he waited while the enemy crossed a river, thereby passing up the perfect opportunity to attack. As a result, he lost the battle.

"They have an overwhelming advantage. Why would you forfeit what little advantage we have?!"

Lud was Sven's beloved master and she admired him from the bottom of her heart.

If Lud so wished, she would smile as she ripped from her breast the rezanium reactor that was the equivalent of her heart.

However, from the viewpoint of a former combat weapon, any action that forfeited victory was beyond comprehension.

"Because if we hadn't allowed him at least that much, Shylock would have complained about the provisions of the treaty."

Lud wasn't simply abiding by the principle of fair play.

He held the war treaty Shylock had agreed to—an agreement with a list of rules for their sales battle.

Lud and Shylock were each in possession of a copy bearing their signatures.

"Provisions … What are you talking about?"

Sven looked back over each of the ten sections.

"Hm? What's this?"

After reading a particular provision, Sven finally understood what Lud intended.

At the same time, she realized keenly that she would never have thought of such a strategy.

She almost had a heart but she couldn't have come up with it.

"Master … Are you serious about this?"

"Yes. It has been about a year and a half since I opened this bakery. After all that, if I were to beat out a newly-opened competitor by relying on the power of money, then that would be the end. I enter this challenge prepared to close up shop!"

Lud's face as he said this brought back memories to Sven.

It was the face he had often made when they were at war.

It was the face of a man entering deadly combat.

"Hmm!"

"Huh? What is it, Sven?"

"N-No, um, nothing!"

She was too embarrassed to tell him that she was gazing with

love at the dignified face of her master.

"Well, shall we see how this goes for a bit? I'll cut the amount I bake, and I'll focus on simple breads like baguettes and boules."

Thus, the first day ended in complete defeat for Tockerbrot.

On the second day …

"Welcome, welcome, welcome!♪ Would you love some delicious bread?! We're Bakery Billions!♪"

Again today, there were musicians and other performers in front of Billions, and many customers had gathered.

A long line had formed before a cluster of pretty employees.

The second day also ended in complete defeat for Tockerbrot.

On the third day …

"Girls and boys! Would you like some bread?! We've got a grand sale going on right now!♪"

In addition to the performers, the employees had also come outside to attract customers.

However, compared to the first two days, the crowd was not as large.

Customers were surprised to find space inside the shop when they expected long lines.

In particular, there were no housewives.

They were once again flocking to Tockerbrot.

They bought the plain breads like baguettes, coupes, boules and

loaves of sandwich bread, and little by little, Tockerbrot's sales were returning to normal levels.

"Well, it's about time!"

Lud decided to increase the amount he baked in preparation for the next day.

The night of the third day…

"What's going on?"

Shylock groaned after looking at the daily sales report sent to his hotel room in Saupunkt.

The first and second days had shown more than exemplary sales.

However, on the third day, sales dipped.

"It's our third day since opening. The shop may not look new to people anymore."

Shylock's minion Poracho tried to explain, but it wasn't convincing.

Shylock wondered if he might have missed something important.

"Shall we increase the number of attractions? We can order more posters and flyers. After all, personnel and advertising costs don't count."

Since sales at Bakery Billions were still higher than Tockerbrot's, Faran made this suggestion flippantly and with no sense of the danger.

"They suggested that rule themselves. The fools!"

Suddenly Shylock realized something.

"Hey, bring me the agreement!"

He had confirmed all suggested rules himself.

None of them had presented a problem, so he was confident about winning a decisive victory.

However, after watching the sales drop on the third day, he now realized that one sentence could be taken a different way.

"I see it now! Drat that baker!!"

Shylock yelled and stood up with a grim face.

"What's our situation regarding stock and delivery of goods?!"

"Well, the goods are baked via sequential production in Wiltia and delivered across the border. Everything is transported in freezer cars, so there's no problem with freshness."

"I'm not talking about that!!"

Unable to control himself, Shylock yelled angrily.

"Right now! Stop incoming deliveries right now!!"

"But that's impossible!! We requested production of a specific amount for seven days and it's on the way! We can't stop it!"

"Blast that man! He was counting on this!!"

Shylock hit the table with a loud bang.

This was the moment when a baker who had placed everything on this bet outmaneuvered a battle-hardened businessman like Shylock.

On the fourth day…

"How did you do this?"

Jacob was surprised to see the number of customers returning to Tockerbrot.

"Nothing. We didn't do anything."

Despite this denial, Sven answered with an air of pride.

The number of customers inside the shop was more than half—about 60 percent—the normal number. There were many more customers today than two days ago.

"It's just that Master does wonderful work."

On the other hand, Bakery Billions didn't have half the customers it had on its first day.

Bread remained stacked on the shelves like the corpses of soldiers who had died at the hands of a bungling commander.

On the fifth day …

The customers at Billions had decreased even further.

In contrast, Tockerbrot had recovered 80 percent of its customers.

"This is great, Lud! Will you tell me now? How did you do it?"

During a break, Jacob asked this question of Lud, who had reappeared from the oven room.

"Well, let's see … Give this a try."

It was bread he had asked Marlene to buy from Billions.

It was a simple and basic bread called a batard.

"*Munch, munch …*"

"How is it?"

Lud asked Jacob, who was chewing a piece he had torn from the top of the bread with a dubious look.

"Hm? Nothing is wrong with it. It tastes all right. It's just …"

"Just?"

"Something is different."

Lud's face tensed sternly.

That didn't mean he was angry, sad or disappointed.

For this man who was had such trouble smiling, his grim expression was the result of his facial muscles moving in a slightly odd way because he was very happy.

"Ahh … That's the best compliment you could give me!"

"What do you mean?"

"At Billions, they bake the bread at the shop, but they don't do any of the preparation."

Lud had been watching the construction of Bakery Billions on the first day.

He noticed that the workspace was much smaller than the sales floor.

Lud had served as a special service soldier before becoming a Hunter Unit pilot.

From experience, he could determine a building's site area, the number of floors and windows, and general floor plan.

"Billions has its bread prepared somewhere else. Maybe they bring in bread that is fermented and shaped at a factory somewhere in Wiltian territory. Then they just thaw and bake it in the shop."

"Is that possible?"

The process made use of advances in freezing and refrigeration technology developed so that remote areas could enjoy freshly baked breads.

There was nothing wrong with that.

In fact, such bread was undoubtedly much tastier than bread made by inexperienced bakers.

"But what does that have to do with this?"

"Like you just said, something tastes different."

As he said this, Lud's face was hard and stiff—but with *joy*.

That night, Shylock was in his hotel room in Saupunkt frowning deeply as he looked at the sales numbers, which had dropped dramatically, just as he had feared.

And unlike Lud, when Shylock frowned, it meant he was aggravated and angry.

He had been outmaneuvered and hadn't realized it in time.

"What's goin' on? What'd they do?"

Poracho was baffled.

"They didn't do anything. That baker hasn't done *anything*."

Which only made Shylock angrier.

Lud hadn't pulled any tricks or changed recipes. He had just baked bread as usual.

He had adjusted the amount he baked, but that was all.

"Maybe there's a difference in people's taste between Wiltia and

Pelfe?"

Wiltia and Pelfe were very similar.

They belonged to the same cultural zone and their languages were almost identical.

However, even a slight change in location could make the same meals prepared in the same way taste slightly different.

"It is said that Sparians, who have a delicate palate, won't eat meals from a neighboring town because of the difference in taste."

"B-But I can't believe that people here would have such sensitive tastes."

Tastes differ by region, but those differences can be small.

The inexpensive bread that Billions prepared had been good enough that people wouldn't notice such a slight difference.

In another town, Billions might have been the clear victor.

However, this was Organbaelz.

"The bread from that bakery was tasty. It was just tasty. It wasn't anything fancy or unusual … and that was his weapon!"

Shylock made a tight fist.

Every day, Lud baked bread with extreme care. He considered temperature changes in the daily weather, and selected the best possible flour, so people would enjoy his bread.

He had done this every day for over one year.

And the townsfolk had been eating his bread ever since Sven had joined the bakery.

If these were industrial products, it would be a different story.

The customers might have grown accustomed to a change in standards.

But, this was food.

What's more, bread is a food staple that people eat every day.

The bread at Billions wasn't bad. It was perfectly good.

But those who were accustomed to Tockerbrot's bread, wondered if something was different.

They visited the new bakery for the first few days out of curiosity, but by the third day, many reverted to the bread they preferred.

"That baker made everyone in town fussy about their bread!"

Meanwhile, inside Tockerbrot …

"We've already won!♪"

Sven declared victory with a big smile after calculating the balance from that day's sales.

"Isn't it too early to say that for sure? There are two more days to go."

Despite Jacob's caution, Sven's smile didn't change.

"Sure. Today, we made a little over 80 percent of a normal day's sales."

"But Billions had a lot of customers on the first two days. Even though their numbers have decreased, their shop isn't empty."

Billions was nearly twice as large as Tockerbrot in floor size.

Therefore, they could display nearly twice as many products.

Even if their sales fell to half their peak number, they would still be the same as Tockerbrot's normal sales.

"Tee-hee-hee! That's just it, Jacob! That's why they fell for my master's stratagem!"

Sven showed the agreement listing the rules for the competition.

Among the many clauses was one very important sentence.

Victory or defeat would be determined by net profit.

"Net profit?"

"Profit comes from total sales minus costs … Um, right?"

Jacob tilted his head as Sven picked up a nearby croissant.

"Take this croissant, for example. We sell this for 10 krants. And it costs 7 krants to make. So what's our profit?"

"Well, 10 minus 7, so … 3 krants?"

Jacob frowned as he answered, certain he knew at least that much.

"Okay. So how about if there are two but only one sells?"

"Um … Oh!"

Jacob finally understood what Sven wanted to say.

The croissants were priced at 10 krants and cost 7 krants.

If you sold one, you would make a profit of 3 krants.

But if the other one didn't sell, you would lose 7 krants.

As a result, you didn't make the 3-krant profit and you would be 4 krants in the hole.

"Then net income equals total sales minus cost, and then subtract loss. Simply put, the more items that don't sell, the lower the net

income."

It would be different with some low-cost items, but bread typically makes small profits and quick returns.

If there's one item left over, the profit from selling two disappears.

So if a store twice as big with twice as many products sells only half its goods … Right now, Billions was accruing enormous losses merely by staying open.

"We had more goods left over in the beginning, but the scale of our shop is small. We limited the amount of product in order to incur smaller losses."

"Oh, I see … Then their profits from the first day are long gone!"

"Nonetheless, they're still packing their shelves … My guess is they put in an order for a full seven days of product."

At this very moment, bread that wouldn't sell was being carried into Bakery Billions.

"This is just like the battle at Bolsburn."

Bolsburn was a huge basin located on the Augustan border.

Elvin, Wiltia's good general, faced 200 thousand Augustan soldiers with a force of only 30 thousand.

Normally, August's overwhelming numbers would have crushed them, but Elvin used the geography of the basin by secretly moving his force during a night with fog as thick and impenetrable as the ocean.

The poorly trained Augustan army lost its direction in the fog

and when they saw the Wiltian camp in the distance, they charged.

They didn't know a deep canyon lay before them.

By the time the vanguard realized something was wrong, it was too late.

Wave after wave of Augustan soldiers fell to the bottom of the canyon, pressed from behind by their fellow troops .

Their incompetent commander, who could only shout in dismay, watched as half of his 200 thousand soldiers died at the bottom of the canyon.

Material warfare was considered the ultimate fighting method.

But even a slight miscalculation could result in the annihilation of a great army.

"Anyway, this is all thanks to Master's skill."

If the people of Organbaelz hadn't tasted the difference between the bread at Billions and Lud's bread, Tockerbrot would be facing overwhelming defeat.

But the townsfolk had made a choice.

They wanted inexpensive but tasty bread from *Tockerbrot.*

Nothing could be more pleasing to a baker than that.

"There's no need to wait for another two days! We won! I can't wait to see Shylock's face when he shows up! Mwa ha ha!"

Once more, Sven declared victory.

Chapter 5

Schutzstaffel

Svelgen Avei and Lud Langart haven't realized it yet.

Someone is watching them.

It is understandable that they haven't noticed.

The ex-colonel, with whom Svelgen Avei is infatuated, believes that they aren't important enough for anyone to watch.

And in a way, he is correct.

It actually isn't them being watched.

And that's why it bothers me.

My mission is to watch Svelgen Avei and Lud Langart, and I was told to do nothing more than that.

And "nothing more" means "Don't do anything else."

So, I've just been watching.

Earlier, when a special forces soldier from August arrived with an all-purpose tank, and when a mechanical soldier from Greyten took over an airship, I just watched them as I was instructed.

So Svelgen Avei and Lud Langart, who have nothing to do with me, can do whatever they like.

But …

Before dawn on the morning of the sixth day, two figures were walking in the dark behind Tockerbrot.

It was Shylock's two minions, Poracho and Faran.

"Bro? Let's not do this … This is goin' too far. It's a crime!"

"Don't be a dunce! Don't you get it? Boss'll lose if this keeps up! Then what'll happen? We won't be able to bring back the boy! And then Boss won't get what he wants the most!"

Poracho whispered as if yelling at Faran, who was like his kid brother.

"Don't forget that we owe a ton of dough to Mr. Shylock and we gotta pay him back!"

Until ten years ago, this pair had been young hoodlums hanging around the backstreets of Berun, the royal capital of Wiltia.

They had been making a living by shoplifting, picking pockets and swiping bags. Then one day they had stolen a bag from Shylock.

Soon after, Shylock's men had nabbed them, but they had already hidden the money.

Shylock grilled them to find out where his money was, but the two continued to play innocent and were dragged to the police.

They were actually relieved and thought, "Take that!"

They believed that the money was theirs.

However, that was only the start of the hell that awaited them.

The police punched them, kicked them, and struck them with batons. They tortured the two to find out where the money was hidden.

The police were not enforcing the law.

They wanted the money for themselves.

There were good police and there were police who weren't always good, but who fulfilled their duties. In Berun, however, the police were all bad apples who would ignore petty crimes if bribed.

They took goods from shops around town saying they were on patrol, didn't pay what they owed and even scrounged for money.

Poracho and Faran finally gave up and confessed.

The police kicked them back out to the street without any medical treatment.

Then Shylock appeared.

He had known what the police would do.

That's why he had originally told them, "If you return the money, I won't take you to the police."

They had ignored his warning, they had been badly hurt, and had lost the money. Without scoffing or laughing, Shylock took them to the closest diner, fed them, and gave them money for medicine. And then …

"If you have trouble filling your stomachs, come to my place. You'll at least be able to earn enough to eat."

After saying this, Shylock left.

"We gotta pay Mr. Shylock back for hirin' us and treatin' us like human beings! We might be losers, but we should be grateful!"

Poracho was holding a liquor bottle.

It wasn't wine or brandy in the bottle. It was gasoline.

"Yeah, but … We don't have to set fire to their shop!"

They were planning to commit arson at Tockerbrot.

"I know! That's why we're just gonna burn the oven in back!"

The oven was made of stone and highly resistant to fire.

It might burn but without leading to a major fire.

The damage would still make it impossible for Lud to continue baking.

"If you don't like it, then run home! I mean, you *should* go home."

"Bro …"

Faran saw the uncharacteristic resolution in Poracho's desperate features.

"After I light this fire, I'll go to the police. I'll explain that *I* did it and that Mr. Shylock wasn't involved, so you don't need to come with me."

The police department was still a place of painful memories.

The police had punched and kicked them over and over, but the humiliation and bitterness of being trampled on and mocked was worse than the great pain to their bodies.

Poracho didn't want Faran to re-experience that.

His face, slick with a cold sweat, showed his thoughts.

"Bro … I wanna do this with you!"

"You're a moron … But thanks."

Together, they sprinkled the gasoline around. But when they went to light the fire …

"Hm? Hey, Faran. You got a match? I forgot my lighter."

"No. I don't smoke."

They were missing the essential tool for lighting a fire.

"Gimme a break! You smoked until *recently*!"

"Yeah, but the tax went up!"

The taxes on liquor and cigarettes in Wiltia had been increased three times in three years to cover the cost of war.

"What are you doing?!"

Someone was listening to their banter and watching them with cold eyes.

"Agh! It's the boy!!"

The two thugs cried out in surprise.

Jacob had come out the back door.

"W-what're you doin' out this late?"

"I need to use the toilet."

Jacob coldly answered the two thugs, who were panicking. He sniffed and asked another question.

"That smell … Is it gasoline?!"

For a boy who had grown up in a repair shop, it was hard to mistake that smell.

And it was all around the back of the shop.

It was obvious to Jacob what these two were planning.

"What a dirty trick … That old man! What a jerk!!"

Jacob assumed that they were doing this under orders from Shylock.

"N-no, boy! You've got it all wrong!"

"Yeah! We're doing this on our own!"

They insisted loudly that Shylock wasn't involved, but Jacob was furious and spoke with intense hatred.

"What do you mean I've got it wrong?! That man is a scoundrel! He would do anything for money and for his own benefit! He doesn't hesitate to stomp on the weak! He's terrible!"

"No! That's not right, boy! Please, just talk with Mr. Shylock! He's nothin' like you think!"

Poracho didn't care what Jacob thought of him. But he begged Jacob to give Shylock another chance.

"You're awfully noisy given the hour!"

It was the voice of a woman.

"Shut up! This ain't your business, so—"

Poracho was so tense and distracted that he replied without noticing who had spoken.

If he had been calmer, he would have realized that no matter how loud they were, it was unlikely that anyone would be passing by before dawn.

Furthermore, why would that person be wearing a navy blue uniform that was not that of the regular military?

Poracho didn't notice anything until he felt an army knife pushed against his gut.

"W-wagh!! What're you—"

Poracho was in no position to ask questions, and the woman had no intention of answering any.

She made a tight fist and backhanded Poracho in the head.

There was a heavy *bonk*. The blow didn't kill him, but it had shaken his brain with enough force to make him lose consciousness. It was clear that his attacker didn't care if her victim died.

"What the?!"

Jacob and Faran froze at the sudden appearance of this mysterious woman.

Faran, however, had been through enough dangerous experiences that he recovered quickly.

"Boy! Please, run!"

He shouted to Jacob as he seized the woman.

However, his effort was over as soon as it began.

"Don't touch me, you pig!!"

A few loud sounds rang out—*pumf, pumf, pumf*!

They were gunshots.

When a shot is fired with the gun pressed tightly against the human body, the target's flesh insulates the sound.

This is called a human silencer.

"U-ungh!"

Jacob was trembling. His confused survival instincts told him to get moving before he was killed.

"H-help—"

He tried to scream so that Lud and Sven would hear.

They would save him from this mysterious and frightening woman.

"Please be quiet."

But his scream was interrupted.

The woman wasn't alone.

A man wearing a mask that covered his entire head grabbed Jacob from behind and punched him in the stomach.

"Uaaagh!"

With a single cry, Jacob lost consciousness.

A blow delivered near the solar plexus between the chest and stomach drives all the air from the lungs.

The body loses oxygen and the brain shuts down, inducing unconsciousness.

"Oh, how kind of you!"

The woman laughed sarcastically at the masked man, who had immobilized her target as painlessly as possible.

"We have attained our objective. Let's go back."

The masked man began to leave.

"Yes. But before that …"

The woman pointed her blood-covered gun in her equally bloody hand at the gasoline-soaked ground.

"Lieutenant?!"

The masked man raised his voice, but the third lieutenant—Schutzstaffel First Lieutenant Hildegard's subordinate, Vanessa—did not hesitate before pulling the trigger.

After a soft *pomf*, the bullet struck the wall igniting the gasoline and fierce flames rose a moment later.

"Now let's go."

With a nasty smile, Vanessa ran off.

"How cruel …"

The masked corporal glanced briefly at the two men in the light of the flames. He lowered his face as if mourning them, and then followed Vanessa.

The attic of Tockerbrot was Sven's private room.

There was a rack on which she hung her favorite waitress uniform, a bed, and a small desk with a few utensils where she did a little writing.

Sven was "sleeping" on the bed.

She was an android who didn't need to sleep as humans did.

However, if she let others know that she never slept, they would realize that she wasn't human. Or they would at least grow suspicious and start asking questions.

So, instead of sleeping, she set her output as low as possible and used her AI programming to collate the different events that happened that day, and at the same time she performed self-maintenance, such as addressing the abrasion of biological parts and repairing squeaks in her frame.

Nonetheless, that didn't mean she wasn't also vigilant.

She activated backup circuitry, ran various sensors, and collected external data for immediate start-up in case of emergencies.

"—!"

Tonight, she awoke to consciousness when her sound and

thermal sensors detected unusual noises and a rapid increase in temperature.

"What is that sound? Gunshots? And that heat … Fire!"

She analyzed the data and concluded it indicated an emergency. She sprang out of bed, dressed in a hurry, and jumped from the attic down to the first floor.

"Master! Wake up! There's a fire!"

As she jumped down, she shouted at the door of Lud's room.

"What?!"

Lud had experienced plenty of war zones.

He was trained to respond quickly when enemies unexpectedly attacked camp.

"Where's the source of the fire?!"

"Over there at the oven!"

Sven hadn't seen the actual fire yet, but with her thermal sensors, she could clearly identify where the temperatures were highest.

They rushed to open the door to the oven room, but the fire was already raging.

"Oh no … How did this happen?!"

Lud was more careful than most when handling fire, since he used it in his work.

He ground his teeth at the reality of what had happened.

"This isn't a natural flame … There's a slight impurity in the smoke … Oil! Did someone spread gasoline?!"

"Let's go out back! If this continues, other houses will catch fire!"

They raced through the shop, left through the front entrance, and went around back.

There they found Poracho and Faran lying on the ground.

"What in the world?!"

The two certainly weren't sleeping.

Sven, who could see more than any human, immediately spotted the liquor bottle lying next to their feet that smelled of gasoline.

"What were … How dare you?!"

Murderous rage filled Sven.

Tockerbrot was the fulfillment of Lud's dreams.

How much had he emotionally invested in this bakery? How much had he suffered? How much had he struggled? How much had he longed, day after day, to please the people of this town?

Someone who didn't understand any of that had set this fire.

"How could you?!!"

The word fury couldn't begin to describe her rage.

Angry enough to devour gods, Sven prepared to attack the two thugs.

"Stop, Avei!!"

But first, Lud shouted.

"—!!"

Sven involuntarily froze.

Avei had been her name when she was a Humanoid Hunter Unit.

It had been her personal code when she was an Iron Giant

sharing the name of Silver Wolf with Lud, before she gained human form.

"M-Master … What did you just say?"

Stunned, Sven had forgotten her anger toward the two thugs and the fire burning before her eyes.

"Sorry … That just slipped out."

"Huh …?"

But his answer was extremely offhand.

"My old partner lost herself when she was angry the way you did just now, so …"

"Oh, I see … Really?"

Lud had never mentioned that Avei, Sven's old self, was AI for a Hunter Unit.

If Sven wanted Lud to think of her as human, she would have to pretend to be convinced by his answer.

"Anyway, there's no time for anger. Call someone right away. It will be a disaster if this fire spreads! And these two appear to be injured, so call a doctor, too!"

"A doctor … For these jerks?!"

They should just abandon them. If she couldn't kill them with her own hands, she at least wished they would suffer and die.

"This is no time for that!"

But Lud didn't want them to die.

And she knew that.

More than anyone else, she knew he was the kind of person who

didn't wish anyone harm, even his enemies.

"Understood … I'll be back right away, so don't do anything reckless!"

Sven turned on her heels and ran off into the predawn town.

Argh! What's with me?!

As she ran, Sven felt her heart skip a beat.

Ever since she had returned to Lud as Sven, she had put Avei behind her.

But Lud had called her by that name … Even in such dangerous circumstances, she felt joy at hearing him call her Avei, the name he had given her, which she considered his first present to her.

"Well, I must do whatever I can!"

Luckily, the oven area had been constructed of flame-retardant brick and stone that prevented the fire from spreading. But if the wind blew sparks from the flames, there was still a danger of burning down the whole building.

First, Lud headed for the well in back to get water to put out the fire.

"No, wait … There's a fire extinguisher!"

He had bought a fire extinguisher in case of emergencies when he first opened the shop, even though it had been fairly expensive.

But, he had placed it next to the entrance to the oven.

Lud would have to go back inside the shop, but the fire was burning around the back door.

As he turned around and headed toward the front, he stopped.

"H-help …"

Poracho, who had been unconscious and was more dead than alive, grabbed Lud's leg in desperation.

"Stay calm! We're calling for help! A doctor's coming, too!"

Their injuries were serious. If he moved them, their conditions might worsen.

His first priority was preventing the fire from spreading so it wouldn't further endanger them.

"Help … Help … There's a big problem …"

"What happened?"

Lud stopped after seeing Poracho's eyes.

He didn't look like someone worried about his own life.

Poracho's eyes desperately indicated that there was a more important danger.

"The boy … He's been kidnapped!"

"The boy … You mean Jacob?!"

Meanwhile, at the hotel in Saupunkt …

Shylock was awakened by a phone call from the front desk.

"Don't call me this late, you dimwit!"

He yelled at the operator, but then he realized that the voice on the phone was shaking.

"The caller says she is in the Schutzstaffel."

"What?"

Shylock understood because he did business with the military industry in the royal capital, Berun.

However, he felt mild disgust at the Schutzstaffel for discovering where he was and calling him this late.

"Put it through."

After a moment, the voice changed.

"Sorry to bother you at this hour, Chairman Shylock."

The voice was a child's … No, a woman's.

Either way, the caller was young.

"Can you come to Organbaelz right away? Do you know the mine there? Baelz Mine. I'm sure you know it. I'll be waiting for you."

Her tone was high-handed, if polite enough, and it didn't hold an ounce of respect for the person to whom she was talking.

Instead, she was being polite for the sake of appearances, which further jangled Shylock's nerves.

It was feigned courtesy.

"Save your sleep-talking for when you're asleep!"

The best way to handle someone like this was to completely shut her down.

Shylock answered curtly and was about to hang up.

But the woman's next words stopped him from moving.

"Your grandson will die."

"What are you talking about?"

Shylock didn't know that his underlings had tried to set fire to Tockerbrot, and that the Schutzstaffel had kidnapped Jacob.

His face broke out in a sweat.

"You want me to explain? The child you were trying to get hold of with your absurd sideshow is now in our hands!"

The woman on the phone was no longer pretending to be polite.

The malice in her tone was clear.

Shylock restrained himself from making another angry outburst. Without a doubt, this woman was dangerous.

His instincts as an experienced businessman warned him against speaking to her any further.

"Don't you trust me? Then I'll let him speak!"

Shylock heard a faint voice through the receiver.

"Stop … Stop …"

A weak voice… a child's voice and then a kicking sound.

There was no doubt that it was Jacob.

He must have refused an order to beg for pity, so the woman on the phone had kicked him to make him scream.

"I understand."

Shylock was not free to make any other choice.

"I already gave you the location. I'm sure I don't need to say this, but don't tell anyone, and come alone. If you break this promise … well, you know."

Cruel laughter inflected her voice.

She was enjoying herself.

She was forcing someone to act against their will and obey her.

And that gives some people more pleasure than any drug.

This woman…!

However, Shylock sensed something that was even darker behind her cruelty.

Someone who found pleasure in making others surrender had a past in which someone had made *her* surrender.

Whether it was through money, authority or violence, someone had once broken her heart. She tended her scars by watching others tremble in fear and humiliation.

"Let me ask you one question. What is your name?"

The woman on the phone paused for a moment at Shylock's question.

Either she didn't want to answer, was questioning whether she should answer, or perhaps wanted to answer.

She had already come close to identifying herself when she disclosed that she was from the Schutzstaffel.

If she didn't want to reveal her name, she could just come up with a false one.

The simplest way was to say, "You don't need to know," and hang up the phone.

However, after pausing, she answered.

"Hildegard von Hessen. And I'm someone to whom the likes of you ordinarily isn't allowed to speak!"

Chapter 6

The Crimson Hawk

They somehow managed to put out the fire at Tockerbrot.

They prevented the whole building from burning down, but the shop, part of the storage area, and the oven were all destroyed, so Tockerbrot was unable to open for business.

That the townsfolk helped in battling the fire was a blessed relief.

Of course, they were trying to save their own houses too, but many of them tried to comfort Lud and Sven for this misfortune after the fire was extinguished.

They had treated Lud as an outsider for a long time, and he had felt isolated, but their kindness healed his scars a little.

"Mr. Langart, are you all right?"

Jacob's mother, Charlotte, was among them.

"Is everyone at the shop safe? Um, what about my son?"

That was the foremost question on her mind.

However, her guilt over the trouble her family had caused Lud made her choose her words with care.

"Um, to tell you the truth …"

Lud was hesitant to explain.

"Jacob has been kidnapped …"

"What?! Was it Shylock? Did he use force to …"

It would have been much better if it *had* been Shylock.

If Shylock had Jacob, he wouldn't kill or even harm him.

"No, it wasn't Shylock."

The kidnappers had used a gun and a knife in critically injuring Shylock's two minions.

Although the kidnappers most likely had a reason to keep Jacob alive, there was no need to keep him safe from bodily harm. People don't die from losing an arm, a leg or an eye.

"I don't know who did it."

Even worse, Lud and Sven didn't know who their opponents were, what their intentions were, or why they had kidnapped Jacob.

So, they couldn't think about countermeasures.

"How did this happen? Why?!"

Charlotte collapsed and started to cry.

"I shouldn't have let you keep him."

Charlotte had not tried to bring Jacob home when she found out he was living at Tockerbrot.

She had remained silent, without taking any action.

"I wish you had just lost quietly!"

She had believed that a small-town bakery like Tockerbrot would quickly lose to the big capitalist, Shylock, and that Jacob would reluctantly give in and obey his grandfather.

"Isn't that why I gave him those goggles? I thought finally Jacob had someone to take him in!"

"Charlotte, did you always plan on letting him go?"

Jacob's goggles were a remembrance of his father.

As long as he continued wearing them, a relative of his father might recognize him.

And that person might give Jacob a better life than he had in this limited, rural area where people laughed at him as the son of a prostitute.

The goggles had been the last hope, thought up after great anguish, of a mother who couldn't make her son happy on her own.

"I'm … sorry."

As Lud tried to apologize, he made a fist so tight that his nails dug into his skin.

Instead of feeling frustrated or angry, he was ashamed of his shortcomings.

"You don't need to apologize, Master."

Sven appeared, having returned from leaving Faran and Poracho in the hospital.

Organbaelz was a mining town, so its medical facilities were well equipped given the size of the community. The hospital was ready to treat serious injuries caused by accidents like cave-ins.

"How are those two?"

"Well, they'll survive somehow … But that's not important."

Those two thugs had tried to burn down her beloved Lud's shop, so Sven had not taken the trouble of seeing them to the hospital to save their lives.

She had done it because they were important evidence.

"I examined the bullets removed from their bodies, as well as the

knife wounds. The knife was for military use and the bullets were the same type used by the Wiltian armed forces."

The responsible party wasn't a gang, the mafia or even terrorists.

Only the military would use such special equipment.

"That means … the culprits are military."

"But I don't know if they're active or retired soldiers."

Sven added quietly to Lud's speculation.

Many unscrupulous people would steal equipment from the military when retiring.

"But … why?"

"I checked with the hotel at Saupunkt. Shylock is not in his room."

Charlotte was confused, so Sven added this clue, which anyone would understand.

"A wealthy man who thought he had no surviving family discovered he has a grandson. That wealthy man becomes obsessed with his grandson and … Well, what do *you* think would happen?"

This disturbance involved wicked people who would kidnap for ransom and wouldn't hesitate to kill.

"What you're saying is ticking me off! Why are you blaming Master?! This is all because …"

Tockerbrot's fire occurred because there were people who wanted Shylock's money.

Lud had innocently been caught up in it, so he had no reason to apologize.

"Sven, that's enough."

Lud restrained Sven, who was raising her voice. He didn't want to accuse either Charlotte or Shylock.

If he did, it would mean accusing Jacob, too.

However, that wasn't the only reason Lud had stopped Sven.

"Charlotte … To be honest, you didn't want to let Jacob go, did you?"

"—!"

Charlotte's eyes widened in surprise at Lud's words.

Her face clearly answered yes.

"And, to be honest, you wanted to tell Shylock that Jacob isn't his grandson, didn't you?"

The goggles would have just provided an occasion to do so.

She could have claimed that she found them or received them as a gift.

Shylock knew that Jacob was his grandson because Charlotte had admitted it in the first place.

"Well then, why didn't you refuse from the beginning?"

"She didn't know what to do."

Lud answered Sven, who was frowning in confusion.

It didn't matter if Shylock was considered a merchant of death or a crooked businessman, there was no doubt that he was one of the richest people in Wiltia, and perhaps in the world.

Jacob's life would be better with him than at a half-bankrupt repair shop.

The foundation for happiness varies. If someone were to ask if she had acted for her child's sake, it would be difficult to claim with pretty words that she kept her child in a life of poverty out of motherly love.

"Deep down, you wanted Jacob to stay with you, but you also wished for his happiness. You didn't know how to choose, so you decided to let matters take their own course."

Charlotte had wanted both to let him go and to keep him. Both desires were genuine.

That's why she had worried and suffered.

"Humans can't easily make sense of everything."

"Humans …"

Lud's casual words unexpectedly tore at Sven's heart.

She felt that he said that because she wasn't human, and therefore couldn't understand Charlotte's feelings.

"Um, Master …? What's *that* supposed to mean?"

Sven had to ask that even if it meant interrupting, and Lud replied as if admonishing her.

"Nothing. It's just common sense. But you understand too, don't you?"

"Um … Uh …"

Sven was shocked but immediately understood.

She had come to Lud in human form for his sake, to make him happy.

Her willingness to die for him was unchanged.

However, if that moment ever came …

She would suffer. She would cry.

She would yearn to be with him longer.

She would long to talk with him more.

Desperate to share even a little more time with him, she would weep.

This woman … Charlotte is like me.

Finally, Sven understood how Charlotte felt.

So, she could no longer accuse her.

"After all, Jacob feels the same. He's a child, but he's not childish. It would be great if he could just be honest and say he wants to stay with his mother, but …"

The corners of Lud's mouth bent slightly.

It was his way of forming a wry smile.

Charlotte turned to Lud.

"Mr. Langart, did you know all this? Is that why you protected him?"

"The adults around Jacob were rushing his decision. They didn't give him time to face his own feelings. And after all … he's my friend."

Lud held no grudge against Charlotte for the burning of his shop.

This incident, indirectly caused by Jacob's grandfather, had threatened Lud's life, but he couldn't hate the man.

Without Charlotte and Shylock, Lud wouldn't have met Jacob, his first friend in town.

"Charlotte …"

Lud sat down and took her by the shoulders.

"Wait a little. I will rescue Jacob."

He stared into her eyes to convey his determination.

"Um …"

Charlotte was confused, and her cheeks blushed a little.

"Um, Mr. Langart? I heard that you were a pilot."

"I was. Did Jacob tell you?"

Lud didn't go out of his way to talk about his time in the military, but he probably mentioned it to Jacob at some point.

"I knew it. All pilots have eyes like yours. You resemble Jacob's father a little."

"Was he a Hunter Unit pilot?"

Lud was surprised at the coincidences the world held.

"Yes. He was always laughing at his own boring jokes. But when I was pregnant with Jacob, he told me seriously that it would all work out, and I should leave everything to him."

Other customers who had relationships with her only said, "It must be someone else's child!"

"When women become pregnant in a place like that, many choose abortion. And I couldn't quit because I had to pay the brothel back for the advance it gave the broker who had deceived me and sent me there."

However, one man had declared proudly that the child was his, and had created a path forward for that new life.

He had produced money out of nowhere and bought her freedom from her patron, before arranging for her return to Pelfe, which had not yet been annexed.

"When we said good-bye for the last time, he had the same look in his eyes that you have, as he promised to come back to me. He gave me those goggles, saying they were precious to him."

A different kind of tears now formed in Charlotte's eyes.

She may have given those goggles to Jacob in the hope of his father finding him.

"The initials written on the goggles are SS, but I don't know anyone with those initials."

More than one thousand Hunter Units were created during the war.

Even Lud couldn't think of anyone who might be Jacob's father.

"Master … hold on a second. You said the initials were from actual names, but the military records contained aliases."

"Oh, that's right!"

When Sven pointed it out, Lud remembered that they had used fake names.

"His name was Erich Blitzdonner!"

"What?!""

Lud and Sven froze with surprise when Charlotte said the name.

"Blitzdonner … *Major* Blitzdonner?!"

"I believe so … It's not a common name."

Lud and Sven had been surprised to learn that Jacob was

Shylock's grandson, but from the viewpoint of a former Hunter Unit pilot and a former Hunter Unit, this news was a much bigger shock.

"Um, was he well-known?"

Now Charlotte sounded stunned, too.

"He was *more* than well-known! There was no one among the Hunter Units who *didn't* know the name Major Blitzdonner! Textbooks on the history of modern warfare mention his name!"

Many ace pilots had fought on the battlefields of the Great European War.

Lud had been called the Silver Wolf and his superior officer Sophia had been called the Devil's Black Spear. But they were younger, and had been active later in the Great War.

By contrast, Blitzdonner had been a hero in the first half of the war.

He was called the Crimson Hawk. As the name suggested, he piloted a Hunter Unit painted bright red, and his combat prowess was praised as that of a warrior god.

"And, um, the battle of Ledinbrauner …"

"Yes. That was truly mind-boggling."

August—the nation opposing Wiltia—had developed autonomic tanks to combat the Hunter Units.

August had attacked with 50 such tanks, which had also been used more recently against Lud and Sven.

This fight would demonstrate the military might of the August federation's technology, a fight upon which the nation's pride rested,

and a fight it must not lose.

However, Blitzdonner destroyed all fifty autonomic tanks with one Hunter Unit.

"Is that … um … really good?"

Charlotte wasn't in the military, so she couldn't grasp how awe-inspiring this achievement was, but she did understand that Blitzdonner had been an outstanding pilot.

She was taken aback, however, to see the stunned faces of Lud and Sven.

"Actually, it wouldn't have been so strange if he had risen to a higher rank, but …"

"Yes, his behavior was somewhat …"

Lud and Sven responded uncomfortably.

Blitzdonner was undeniably skilled, but his personality was eccentric.

"His success in battle was so great that they ran out of medals and had to make more."

"But that resulted in more trouble, didn't it?"

"When I heard about it, I was speechless."

Blitzdonner's accomplishments were so unparalleled that the highest medal available wasn't enough, so the military created a special honor, in consultation with the royal family.

It was a lavish article, worked with gold and diamonds.

Blitzdonner was the only soldier to receive it during the ten-year war.

"And then he sold the medal."

"I heard he boasted that he gave it in payment for a debt."

The royal family and the military had been furious. Any further misbehavior and he would have been arrested for the crime of contempt for the royal family.

After that, Blitzdonner was never promoted again. He should have risen another few ranks, but he remained a major.

"Oh, but that was …"

As Lud spoke, he realized something.

"That was about 11 years ago, so perhaps …"

He remembered what Charlotte had said earlier.

Blitzdonner had covered Charlotte's debt to free her from the brothel.

"I see … That's why the major sold his medal."

For soldiers, medals are proud symbols.

But, in this case, there was someone he wanted to protect even if he had to forfeit his medal and suffer enormous reproach.

"Um, did Erich really die?"

"I don't know."

Lud had no answer to Charlotte's worried question.

She believed Blitzdonner's promise that he would return to her someday, so she would not give up on him. However, the situation was more complicated.

Blitzdonner had suddenly disappeared just before Lud had become a Hunter Unit pilot.

He hadn't necessarily been killed. Officially, he was missing.

He had abandoned his beloved Hunter Unit during a battle, and disappeared somewhere.

According to various theories, he had defected to another country or had been purged, but none of those explanations were convincing.

Usually when a pilot went missing, the battleground would be searched, and if the pilot's survival couldn't be confirmed after six months, the determination was that the pilot was killed in action. But the death of Blitzdonner, the best of Wiltia's ace pilots, would have a negative effect on the whole armed forces, so he was, to this day, considered missing.

"Oh …"

Charlotte looked dark at this answer, but it wasn't enough for her to embrace disappointment or sink into despair.

It was uncertain whether Blitzdonner was alive or dead.

However, one thing *was* certain.

Charlotte and Jacob were both significant family to Blitzdonner.

"For the sake of a fellow former Hunter Unit pilot, I must save Jacob."

Lud repeated his decision.

"But where did they take him? Since they summoned Shylock, it must be nearby, but we have no idea where!"

"Since they're in the military, it could be an army base in the area, but I doubt their commander would allow such a thing. Hmm

…"

As Lud pondered, he heard a cry that seemed to say, "Did you forget about me?!"

"Meow!"

It was Ellis, the white cat that Tockerbrot kept as a pet.

"Oh, Ellis … You're safe, too!"

"Meow!"

Ellis issued a sound as if making some point and pressed against Lud's leg.

"What's this silly cat doing? Wait a bit for your food! We don't have time for— Huh?"

Sven scolded the cat but then stopped when she saw the cat's neck.

"What is that?"

Sven had made Ellis a red collar so no one would think the cat was homeless.

A piece of paper was stuck in the collar.

"It says, 'Father and son. Baelz Mine. Guards.'"

Sven raised her voice in surprise after reading the message.

The handwriting was rough, as if dashed off in a hurry. There were also incomprehensible lines of numbers and letters.

"Does father and son mean Shylock and Jacob? And they're at Baelz Mine? And the culprits are … the Schutzstaffel?"

Someone had provided Lud and the others with Jacob and Shylock's whereabouts.

Was someone with different goals a part of this? Or was this some kind of trap? The different possibilities further confused the situation.

"Master, we gotta go to Baelz Mine!"

Sven appeared to have no doubts as she urged Lud, but he saw her give Charlotte a serious look.

"Understood!"

Lud judged that it was better not to ask for a more detailed explanation and agreed.

The second of the two Baelz mines was where there had once been fighting against Augustan special forces.

It was here that Shylock came after receiving threats from First Lieutenant Hildegard of the Schutzstaffel. And, he had immediately fallen prisoner.

"What are you doing?! I came, so release the boy!!"

Shylock protested, but Hildegard silenced him by wielding her gunstock like a hammer and hitting him in the face.

"Shut up, Degas scum! Don't get above yourself!"

Hildegard then ordered Vanessa to take Shylock to a nearby miners shelter.

"First Lieutenant, isn't our mission over?"

It was the masked corporal who hesitantly inquired.

The Schutzstaffel's objective was the capture of Shylock.

In the royal capital of Berun, the Schutzstaffel would have to worry about people seeing any attempt to capture Shylock, and his guard would have been tighter.

Shylock's trip to inspect the annexed area of Pelfe had provided a unique opportunity.

"We have successfully captured Shylock, and his grandson too. Now Shylock *has* to obey us. We can make him promise to finance the Schutzstaffel rather than the regular military."

Their methods may have been violent, but once a contract was concluded, they would win.

The Schutzstaffel was attempting to *control* the nation.

It had a strong influence over judicial systems, so Shylock wouldn't be able to get out of it even if he objected later.

"What's your point, Corporal? You're getting on my nerves."

"Let's go back. We have done our duty."

When the corporal said this, Hildegard glared at him with hatred.

Right now, there were ten Schutzstaffel soldiers present, in addition to Vanessa and the corporal, who were adjutants to Hildegard.

They had requisitioned materials and facilities from a nearby base, but they hadn't borrowed soldiers.

If the commanding officer, Colonel Bardenbelger, learned of the Schutzstaffel organizing a kidnapping for ransom, he wasn't likely to remain silent.

"If Marshal Elvin learns of this mission, he may dispatch a

punitive force on grounds that the Schutzstaffel has smeared the name of the monarch."

"That is impossible. As soon as that half-breed from the common folk ordered it, he would put himself in danger. The royal capital, where he is situated, is under the Schutzstaffel's control."

"But Pelfe, where *we* are at the moment, is under the regular army's control!"

Their mission was complete, so staying here any longer only increased the danger.

It would only be right for the commander to order an immediate withdrawal.

Nonetheless, Hildegard kept the soldiers on standby, as if she were waiting for something.

"Be quiet! Do not speak!"

"Gagh!"

Hildegard's kick sank into the corporal's belly.

"I have satisfied my orders, but only *boring* generals merely obey orders. Who do you think I am?! I'm the next head of the illustrious Hessen family! Hildegard Von Hessen, who will someday be the right hand of the lord lieutenant general and carry the Schutzstaffel!"

Again, Hildegard kicked the corporal, who hunched, gripping his belly.

"What are you … trying to do?"

"I'm going *wolf* hunting! I'm going to present to the lieutenant general the head of a silver-coated wolf!"

As she grinned, her eyes glowed with insanity.

"The Hessen family … It is a well-known family. They contributed to the building of Wiltia, and it is a military family of ancient and honorable origin!"

Shylock mumbled as they yanked him along.

"Oh … how knowledgeable you are!"

This impressed Vanessa, whose smile betrayed a subtle sneer.

"I had to memorize the family trees of nobility for my job."

"But it can't be very useful to remember the names of fallen nobles, can it?"

The members of the first generation of the Hessen family had been masters of the pike known as the Tigers. Generation after generation, the family had produced famous soldiers.

But that was a story of the past.

Modern warfare, in which soldiers with rifles and tanks and fighter planes comprised the main forces, provided little opportunity for traditional warriors.

The new form of war required someone like Elvin, who was capable of advanced information processing and effective administration.

Nonetheless, the Hessens still chased acclaim as traditional warriors because that was all they had left.

As a result, their name had swiftly fallen. They found it necessary to survive by selling ancestral lands and assets, but in the

end, all they had left was their pride.

"That's no way to talk to your superior officer!"

"It can't be helped. It's the truth."

Vanessa's smiling face didn't hold the slightest respect for Hildegard.

With people like this around, no wonder she went crazy …

Her environment had nurtured her elitism and conceit.

"Well, you can continue this conversation with your grandson."

After entering the shelter, she pushed Shylock to the storehouse in the back.

The door was shut and locked with a click.

"Who's there?"

Jacob's voice emerged from the dim light inside the storehouse.

"Jacob? Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

"They kicked me, but it's nothing serious. I cut the inside of my mouth, though."

Faint moonlight was shining through a small window with iron bars.

It was impossible for Shylock to check his own grandson's injuries.

"Who are they? Soldiers?"

"No. They're called the Schutzstaffel. They're slightly different from other soldiers."

While Shylock was carefully choosing his words, not knowing how to explain, Jacob answered with a sigh.

"Never mind. I don't care who they are. At least there's no mistake about *you* being the cause."

"That's … I'm sorry."

Many complicated issues were involved, but Shylock would have to say no if asked whether this would have happened to Jacob if the boy hadn't been his grandson.

"Well, what do you want me to do?"

Jacob mumbled softly.

"Your son ran away … And in place of my father, you want *me* to inherit your company?! Give me a break! You couldn't succeed with your son, so you want a do-over with your grandson?! Who do you think you are?!"

Shylock ignored with others wanted and forced his affairs on them as if he were assembling people like parts.

No matter how much he smiled or how much money he offered, nothing was more insulting to other people.

"That's why your son ran away from you! You didn't change, and now you're trying it on me, his son! Well, I won't stand for it!"

"Hold on, Jacob … Please, hear what I have to say."

"No!"

The dangerous situation had put Jacob even more on edge.

He was attacking Shylock as the cause of all the recent disastrous events.

"Please!"

Shylock begged Jacob again.

He bowed on his knees, until his forehead touched the floor.

"What are you …"

Shylock's behavior stopped Jacob from speaking further.

Greedy Shylock … Man-Eating Shylock … This man's name had spread throughout the economic world—in Wiltia and beyond—and now he was begging for something from his young grandson.

"What I want … is for you to inherit Billions Trading, which I built."

"I knew it!"

"But …"

Before Jacob could raise his voice in accusation again, Shylock delivered his true desire.

"But before that, I want you to *kill* me."

"What …?"

Shylock's words silenced Jacob.

Meanwhile, Lud and Sven arrived at Baelz Mine, and proceeded cautiously.

"I wasn't expecting to come back here like this …"

The second mine was still half-closed.

The reason was unclear but apparently because of something located deep in the tunnels.

"This is the perfect place for ne'er-do-wells to hide … Be very careful, Master."

"Yes, I know. Anyway, it's really dark here."

Right before dawn was the darkest time of the day, and this was an unused mine.

However, they couldn't use lights without revealing their presence.

Lud was trained and somewhat experienced with night maneuvers.

"Master … Um, if you wish, I could hold your hand?"

Sven could sense light invisible to the human eye.

This wasn't even what she would consider dark.

"Oh, maybe that's a good idea."

But just as Lud reached out to her, moonlight shone through the clouds.

Why now?!

Sven was about to rant against the moon floating in the sky when a much bigger light suddenly appeared.

"What's that?"

It was a military searchlight, but it was nothing like the light from the watchtowers on a military base.

It was the light used for night maneuvers that was typically attached to the shoulders of a very particular weapon.

"Thank you for coming, Colonel Lud Langart. It's a pleasure to meet you. I am First Lieutenant Hildegard von Hessen."

An Iron Giant, the driving force of Wiltia's victory, was before them and Hildegard was inside.

"A… Hunter Unit!?"

L-Arms, Type Gigantes. It was the most recent model owned by the Wiltian military, model number LS-9, Teepneuen.

"And now … it's wolf-hunting time!"

She spoke to Lud and Sven through the Teepneuen's external speakers.

Inside the cockpit, Hildegard was feeling a heady sense of exhilaration.

"Bring it on, Silver Wolf! Let's go all out with a one-on-one fight! And if you don't like the odds, you can ask that girl next to you to lend a hand! Because I'm *that* magnanimous!"

She was delighted at the prospect of using devastating power to smash her enemies.

"What the heck? We don't stand a chance like this!"

Sven possessed more power than a human being.

Even the mechanical soldiers of Greyten, modified so that 90 percent of their bodies were replaced with machines, weren't strong enough to destroy her.

However, those opponents were at least her size. Her power couldn't defeat this new, improved Hunter Unit, which was equipped with the latest technological advancements.

"There's nothing to do but run!"

Even worse, Lud was a human being. He was trained in martial arts, but he could not fight back against this.

"Ah ha ha ha! Are you fleeing? Okay! Let's play tag! I'll count to a hundred, so run!"

They had come to the mine to rescue Jacob, but Lud and Sven now had no choice but to run for their lives.

Hildegard laughed as if she found endless amusement in their predicament.

"What should we do, Master?! If this keeps up …"

Sven was thinking as she ran.

She racked her cognitive functions desperately, calculating from every angle, to search for a way to turn the situation to their advantage.

Nope! Our best chance would be for lightning to strike and fry all electrical devices!

The cruel reality was that they needed a hundred miracles for even a chance of winning, given the difference in combat capability between a Hunter Unit and an unarmed human being.

Only a Hunter Unit can defeat a Hunter Unit. I know that better than anyone …

Sven found herself wishing that she could turn back into what she used to be, if only for a moment.

She couldn't believe the day had come when she actually wished to be a machine again, after gaining a human body of her own will.

Sven ground her teeth in frustration as she heard Hildegard counting over the speakers.

"… 93 … 94 …"

It was impossible to escape a Hunter Unit's range in two minutes.



Even if they made it as far as a kilometer away, that was no distance for the legs of a giant.

If we had a Hunter Unit, even an older model, Master would never lose to this creep!

She had a sudden idea.

"Of course! There *is* one!"

A few days ago, when Lud returned from a delivery to the mine, he told her about his chat with the head miner, Laurel.

If they could make use of that ···

"Master! Let's go to the *first* mine!"

She tugged Lud's hand and picked up the pace.

Aw, man ··· I always dreamed of a stroll holding his hand, but this isn't what I had in mind!

Sven fervently cursed the deity of fate who wouldn't just let her be a girl in love.

Chapter 7

One Layer

"What do you mean that you want me to *kill* you?"

Shylock and Jacob were talking inside the storehouse, and Jacob was shocked to hear his grandfather's true thoughts.

"This involves you, too. I carry blood from the Degas Clan. Have you ever heard of them?"

"I think that was a desert tribe, wasn't it?"

Long ago, there was the European Empire, for which the continent was named, and the Degas Clan had been a nomadic race that lived in the remote desert.

"I guess that's the only way to describe them."

They were called the Degas Clan, but they hadn't displayed any particular ethnic characteristics.

Anyone born to the Degas was considered part of the clan, but on the continent of Europea, the Degas Clan became the target of contempt.

"Apparently, about one thousand years ago, the ancestors of the Degas were from a nation that the European Empire had defeated, and then confined to the desert. It's a strange story from a millennium ago, and there aren't many records about the empire."

People will often find reasons to scorn others, even with no basis.

People threw rocks at the Degas, calling them the "failed tribe"

and "descendants of war criminals."

Since they didn't have their own territory, they drifted around the world, but wherever they went, they were treated as an inferior caste.

"My great-grandfather put roots down in Wiltia. He was your great-great-great-grandfather. Ha! I guess you could say he was your ancestor! But …"

After the Degas were settled in Wiltia for over a hundred years and had become naturalized, obtained citizenship, paid taxes, and fulfilled their obligations, people still treated them like outsiders.

Shylock wanted Jacob to understand his family background, painful as it was.

"It was terrible. When I was a child, people threw rocks at me. And if something went missing in the neighborhood, the police would come to my house before searching anywhere else."

The excuse for discrimination against the Degas may go back one thousand years, but the true reason is something much darker.

As the Degas Clan received unkind treatment everywhere, the connections among its members grew stronger, and they overcame many hardships.

As a result, over a long period of time, the Degas established an extensive tribal network across borders and spanning the continent.

And as it progressed with the times, their network became a formidable weapon in business and finance.

People looked down on the Degas as an inferior caste, but some

among them grew even wealthier than the nobility.

However, this accelerated the discord between the Degas and longtime residents in their communities.

People questioned why they were poor while these outsiders were rich.

Some thought the Degas must be stealing what they should have.

Many believed that all the Degas were sneaky.

"The Degas could not entirely absolve themselves. Many had made exorbitant profits or used their wealth and power to seek revenge. In the end, they hated others and were hated. I saw much of that myself."

The local people shouted that they were superior to the Degas, and the immigrants argued that the locals were simply jealous because they were poor.

This irreconcilable conflict continued.

"How about you? Didn't *you* participate?"

"No, I didn't want to. Because I love Wiltia."

Shylock answered Jacob with some embarrassment.

"I was born and raised in Wiltia. And I only speak Wiltian. I love the culture, and while there were many people I hated, there were also lots of good people."

When Shylock went to school, he had hidden that he was from the Degas Clan.

One day, however, people found out.

Friends suddenly avoided eye contact and stopped talking to him.

"I was a little older than you are now, and I was no longer welcome in the classroom. But when I hid in the back of the school building, the poorest student found me, split her lunch bread in half, and gave some to me."

Shylock's family was wealthy.

He didn't need anyone else's food, and she probably knew that.

However, silently and with a serious gaze, she thrust out the bread as if to say, "Eat it!"

"Then she sat down next to me and started eating her bread. So I ate too … and the next thing I knew, I was crying because I was so happy."

There were many people who judged others with prejudice.

But there were also many who didn't.

"By the way, that was your grandmother. She was a good woman."

"Why are you telling me this romantic story? Tch!"

Jacob snapped disgustedly at Shylock, who laughed with nostalgia.

But, Jacob also wore a faint smile.

"Wiltia may not have become my motherland, but I decided to love it, and I thought it would love me back."

Shylock inherited the family business from his parents and worked hard.

But not just for his own benefit.

He worked hard every day, fighting off buyers and refusing

offers of collusion so the poor would have access to inexpensive but high quality goods.

"Nonetheless, I was arrested on suspicion of treason."

"Huh? Why?"

Actually, Jacob knew about this.

Some people in Wiltia still accused him of treasonous business activities and used this incident as proof.

"It was right before the war started. The country needed money to pay for the war, so it ordered the wealthy classes and merchants to contribute part of their assets to support the national effort.

It wasn't mandatory.

However, that made it worse.

"Since it was my choice and I managed my shop with a low margin but high turnover, I didn't contribute. But within a few days, the police came. Before I could say anything, they took me into custody."

After the arrest, the police had roughly questioned Shylock with punching and kicking.

Shylock had shouted, "There must be some mistake!" But the police didn't listen.

Reasons didn't matter.

The police raised irrelevant matters such as the fact that he belonged to the Degas Clan.

"They threw me in a prison for thought criminals. It was where they locked up anyone who spoke against the war. The prison was

foul-smelling … Meals, in particular, were the worst."

Prison food is often called "smelly rice," but the meals served in prison back then were unspeakably awful.

Twice each day, the prisoners received a soup with boiled salted meat and a weak gruel of rice and beans.

The food literally smelled because it was made with spoiled ingredients.

"I wanted to push the disgusting food away, but when I did, the other fellows in my cell would fight over it."

They were all honorable men—teachers, scholars and clerics—accustomed to speaking pretty words and winning respect from others.

But they had turned into starving animals. They scrambled for scraps of food and despised each other. Some got into fistfights.

"It was astonishing. I was shocked to see that human beings could be so ugly. But no, they didn't *become* ugly. Human beings are animals who hide this kind of ugliness under their thin skins."

At that moment, Shylock felt fear deep in his heart.

He realized that if the situation continued, he would become an animal too.

That same night, he used everything of value he had, even going so far as to pull out a gold tooth, to bribe the guard so he could contact his family. He ordered half the money from his shop to be donated to the government and the other half used as a bribe to the military and police.

The next day, Shylock was released.

However, he wasn't declared innocent.

His status became "suspension of indictment due to insufficient evidence."

"From then on, I did whatever it took to earn money. I even did business with the military. And I took many risks, but that didn't matter. I worked harder than ever before as long as it meant earning one more copper."

Sadness was visible in Shylock's profile.

"You're saying all humans are animals. And that's why you used beastly methods to make money?"

"No!"

Shylock denied Jacob's accusation with a ferocious voice.

"People are animals underneath. There's no doubt about that. But if you maintain that one layer of skin, you can live like a human being. If you can eat until you're full, you don't have to steal other people's food."

Shylock had worked desperately and made his company grow.

He established several branches and several factories, and he hired many workers.

"I … I will never make the people of this nation that I love turn into animals. I swear that I will never force them to lose that layer of skin. That's why I need money. And I don't just hand out money. That would mean treating people like little more than dogs."

Shylock created jobs and employed people so they could earn

their own money. And if they could live on that money, they would be able to pursue a life appropriate to human beings.

"When I talk about money, sanctimonious folk look away, but the way I see it, they're making a big mistake. People may not live *for* money, but they can't live without it!"

For that, Shylock would have done anything.

After the Great War started, Shylock hired anyone from the war zones, whether they were widows, orphans or refugees.

"It was very hard for immigrants who came to work in Wiltia during the war. Money transfers for accounts with foreign names were sometimes confiscated to avoid foreign capital outflow. I would collect their money temporarily and send it under my name through the bank affiliated with the company."

"Does that mean …"

His alleged theft of worker pay was one of the reasons Shylock was thought to be an unscrupulous merchant.

Jacob was surprised to hear the truth behind this.

Despite his good intentions, Shylock could not explain himself because he was circumventing the law.

"Your mother, Charlotte … If I had found her sooner, she might have avoided suffering through such hard times."

Shylock's eyes looked sad and indignant at the limits of his power.

"Don't say that … If she hadn't, I wouldn't have been born."

Jacob sounded confused and Shylock apologized.

"Yeah, I guess not. I apologize. You're right … Your birth was the most fortunate thing that happened to me."

"Fortunate?"

"Yes. I have made a great deal of money through unscrupulous means. And I have grown my company."

The feud with Tockerbrot had only gone on for a few days.

It was just a humorous anecdote compared to Shylock's many other shady business activities.

"I wouldn't have made money otherwise. But I can't brush aside my wicked conduct. That's why I want you to drive me out and take everything I have. I'll take my evil to Hell, and I want you to lead the clean company that remains."

There was no other way before.

Shylock had no other choice.

It was eat or be eaten.

Shylock had any number of justifications, but as time went on, the past had slowly gnawed at him from inside.

Just like the Degas Clan today, still pelted with rocks over a grudge from a thousand years ago.

"Bad kings must die. Then a good prince arises, and no one objects. That is you, with Degas blood but born between Wiltia and Pelfe."

Shylock wanted Jacob to use his past as a stool for stepping into a new era.

That was what he meant when he told Jacob, "I want you to kill

me."

"B-But …"

Jacob was extremely upset.

If Shylock had been no more than an evil merchant, it wouldn't have bothered him this much.

But the reality was different.

This old man had pursued a lonely fight.

He had tried to make a world without poverty, a world where no one starved, a world where no one was reduced to their true animal-like nature …

He wasn't making excuses for what he had done as a necessary evil. Instead, he even accepted his own obliteration.

"You sound just like *him*!"

Jacob thought of the man who was his friend.

Instead of abandoning his past, he had chosen to bear it and live in suffering.

"Him?"

As Jacob clutched his head, he heard a noise beyond the door.

"What is that?"

Shylock was suspicious.

The Schutzstaffel soldiers were congregated on the other side of the door.

There were about ten soldiers, each one armed with a gun.

The faint noises sounded like there was a fight going on.

They heard the sound of a body thrown against the wall, followed

by angry voices and screams.

"—?! Gunfire!"

"W-What's going on?!"

Jacob was uneasy and remained quiet in the corner of the storehouse with his grandfather, Shylock.

After a while, there was only silence on the other side of the door.

And then …

"—?!"

Suddenly, a woman's hand punched through the door.

"W-what?!"

The door was made of wood, but it was still heavy.

Even several men repeatedly hurling their bodies against it could not have broken through.

It was impossible for a woman's hand to penetrate the door.

"Are you … Jacob Rosso?!"

And yet, a girl with red hair and red eyes stared at Jacob through a massive hole in the door as if it weren't the least bit strange.

Sven and Lud ran until they reached the first Baelz mine.

There was no one there.

But, even with help, there was no way to fight against the Hunter Unit.

Sven's aim was to use a certain object.

"Oh … that's right! *This* thing!"

Lud finally understood what she intended.

It was the industrial Hunter Unit sold by the government for use in mining.

"Only a Hunter Unit can defeat another Hunter Unit. It's no longer a hunter or a soldier, so maybe we should just call it armored machinery."

Most of its armor had been removed and it didn't have any weapons.

But it still had a greater chance of winning this fight than humans.

"I'll activate the reactor. Master, you go to the cockpit and—Master?"

There wasn't much time left before Hildegard would arrive in her Teepneuen.

Nonetheless, Lud looked pained as he stood in front of the industrial Hunter Unit.

"Master, what is it? Are you worried about piloting after two years away?"

"No, that's not the problem."

Making a tight fist, Lud responded with a question.

"Can we win?"

"Why do you sound so worried? You could never lose to someone like her!"

Sven knew Lud's piloting skills better than anyone.

Unless he were to face someone like Major Blitzdonner, the hero

of the Great War known as the Crimson Hawk, the fight was well within his capabilities.

"That's not what I mean … Can I win without *killing* her?"

"But … Master …!"

Lud had sworn to himself that he would never kill again.

He had killed too many enemy soldiers in his past and had been involved in indiscriminate massacres that had taken the lives of innocent civilians.

Now he was a baker who made food so that others would live.

He would fight but he would never kill again.

But could Lud bypass the principles of war and the essence of battle?

"Excuse me, Master."

Sven planted herself in front of Lud and stared at him intently.

"Agh!"

Lud's guard immediately went up.

There was a motivational technique often used in the military.

A soldier would strike the face of a panicking soldier to wake him up.

Lud had encountered it a lot in his soldiering days.

However, instead of a hard fist, in the next moment, Lud felt the softest thing in the world.

"Mmm …"

Sven brought her face close to Lud's and pressed her lips against his.

"Mmph?!"

In his surprise, Lud's eyes rolled back, showing the whites, as their lips remained attached.

After a few seconds, Sven pulled away.

"It'll be all right."

As Sven said this, she smiled in her special way for the person she loved from the bottom of her heart.

"You can do it. I promise."

Sven said this with certainty but gave no reasons, which was not like her.

Even as a weapon, Sven had always been cautious, and would tell Lud, "Optimistic thoughts lead to death." But this time, she expressed only her faith that Lud Langart would make everything all right.

"Oh, uh … Yeah, thanks."

The tension disappeared from Lud's face.

His desire to trust someone who believed in him overcame his worry about becoming a killer once again.

"Now, let's get ready!"

Sven gave a mischievous smile and walked behind the armored machinery to activate the reactor.

"Whew …!"

A little embarrassed, Lud touched his lips.

He could still feel a trace of Sven's soft kiss.

Oh, nooooo! What did I just dooooo?!!

As she climbed up the backside of the former Hunter Unit, Sven silently screamed to herself.

For some reason, she had trouble controlling her emotions lately.

She had always been a little irrational when it came to Lud, but this was different.

When her feelings toward Lud were strong, she acted boldly in unexpected ways.

Did that start when I was given this body?

The problem was she had the body of a young human woman. When she had been Avei, she hadn't possessed the concept of sexual difference.

But now look what had happened to her.

She now had a "heart."

Was her body affecting her behavior?

She didn't dislike it.

Actually, she thought it was fun, even in these circumstances.

She wanted to share more of her feelings with Lud.

To do that, she first needed to face the disaster coming her way.

With new determination, Sven opened the maintenance hatch located in the back of the armored machinery.

Then her faint smile froze in despair.

"No way!"

It had a security lock.

And since there was no activation key, she would need to

activate the main reactor directly.

But it wasn't there.

The space that should house the rezanium reactor, which served as the unit's brain and power source and was large enough to hold one person, was empty.

"This can't be … Why?!"

This seriously jeopardized Sven's plan.

The armored machinery that was delivered to Baelz Mine had malfunctioned, so the repair man had removed the broken part—the rezanium reactor—and taken it.

She couldn't operate the armored machinery like this.

It was just a big chunk of metal.

"What the hell?! This is awful!"

There was nothing she could do. No … there *was* one thing …

There was only one way.

Sven picked up the power transmission that was supposed to be connected to the rezanium reactor.

"Urgh … But there's no choice."

Sven was willing to sacrifice her life for Lud.

And now was the time to demonstrate this heartfelt vow through action.

However, she had one worry.

Would she be able to return to herself again?

Not to become Avei again, but to continue as Sven, the girl who, out of love for Lud, took actions that even she didn't expect.

Oh … this is what Master was worried about.

Now Sven understood what Lud had been thinking.

The fear of losing oneself.

It could sometimes be worse than dying.

"It'll be all right … It'll be all right …"

Sven repeated the words to herself slowly, just as she had earlier to Lud.

Then she made up her mind.

"You're in luck, rotor machine! I'm gonna lend you the nickname Silver Wolf for a little while!"

Sven jammed the transmission's connector in her hand into her own chest.

The armored machine was now linked to the rezanium reactor in her body.

Even though the military equipment had been removed, perhaps because it would be dangerous in the event of falling rocks, this unit — categorized as armored machinery—was airtight inside the cockpit.

However, the fire control system and indicator panel for the search device had been removed, so it felt bigger and less cramped than Lud expected.

Other than that, although there were slight differences, the levers and consoles were the same as in the model Lud used to pilot.

The only thing left was to power up the reactor and get moving.

Vmmm … A heavy sound reverberated.

The control instrument lights came on and the video from the main camera appeared. Then …

"Long time, no see, Colonel Langart!"

Hearing that voice, Lud thought he was experiencing an auditory hallucination.

"Yeah, long time no see. Would it be better not to ask why you're here?"

Lud answered slowly, his eyes wide with surprise.

"Um … pardon me!"

The voice belonged to someone who was extremely sincere, frustratingly serious, and somehow, very human. It was the familiar voice of his old partner, Avei.

"Oh, I don't mind. Thanks. You came to help me."

Lud spoke nostalgically, as if reuniting with his best friend.

"Colonel, allow me to confirm the objectives and other specifics of this operation. Mission summary: incapacitate the approaching Hunter Unit without endangering the pilot's life. Am I correct?"

"Yeah. Sound all right?"

"No problem at all."

As Lud spoke, he could feel his nervous sweat drying in no time.

It had been two years since he quit the military and over one year since he had become a baker. But it seemed as if that time had been a momentary sleep.

He felt that this machine was under his control.

He sensed that it wouldn't be so difficult to accomplish his mission, even with just this armored machine.

"Shall we begin, Colonel? Just like always!"

"Yeah, let's do this just like always!"

In that moment, Lud and Avei—the Silver Wolf—returned.

Chapter 8

The Wolf Teaches a Lesson

"Did you do all this?"

In the shelter of the second mine, ten Schutzstaffel soldiers were dead as Jacob came out of the storehouse where he had been held captive.

"Affirmative. The most effective way to suppress them was to discontinue their life functions."

The girl who answered Jacob and Shylock had red hair and red eyes, and she even wore a red dress. She was covered in red from head to toe.

However, some of the red spots on her red clothes were blood splatters from the soldiers.

"Hold on a second … Who are you?"

Although Shylock was an elderly man, he stepped in front of Jacob as if to protect his grandson from this mysterious girl and shield him from danger.

"I cannot reveal my professional affiliation. However, I have no intention of harming you. So please come with me."

After saying this, she extended her hand toward Jacob.

"—!"

Jacob, however, immediately recoiled from her touch.

That was understandable.

The girl was very beautiful.

In Jacob's experience, only Sven was so pretty.

Nonetheless, he sensed something ghoulish about her.

It was understandable that a vulnerable child would fear someone who had brutally slaughtered ten strong soldiers in a moment.

"……"

The girl stared at her hand for a moment.

The hand she had offered had been rejected.

It was stained with the blood of soldiers.

"I want you to trust me. My purpose is to escort you to a safe place. That is all."

The girl produced a handkerchief from her pocket and began wiping her hand.

She wiped the blood carefully and neatly—and with determination.

She seemed to realize that the boy would not take her hand because it was bloody.

Perhaps she hoped that if she cleaned her hand and tried again, he would take it the next time.

"My name is Rebecca Sharlahart."

She told them this while wiping her hand.

"I received my name, Sharlahart, from your father. I heard he named me after the woman he loved."

Sharlahart … That was how Charlotte, the name of Jacob's mother, was spelled in the Wiltian language.

"Do you know my father?"

"Affirmative."

"Did we meet in Saupunkt?"

"Affirmative. You had a very sad expression on your face."

After answering Jacob, Rebecca extended her hand again.

She stared at him with the expectation that he would take it this time.

Her red eyes, which had looked blank earlier, now threatened to overflow.

"Okay … I believe you."

Jacob stepped forward and took her hand.

"—?!"

At that moment, Rebecca pulled him close and leapt out of the way.

"What are you—?!"

A gunshot rang out.

And a bullet hole appeared where Jacob had been standing.

"They dodged it? But it was a perfect shot from a total blind spot! What fast reflexes!"

It was Third Lieutenant Vanessa of the Schutzstaffel. She was standing at the entrance to the miner's shelter and pointing a gun.

"What were you thinking?! What if you had hit Jacob?!" Shylock yelled.

"Joseph Shylock, please do not move from that spot. You, too, are a target."

"What …?"

Shylock was standing just inside the storehouse, as Rebecca told him to keep hidden.

"So, you know everything?"

Vanessa said this with a voice that sounded slightly impressed.

"I'm not stupid enough to clash head-on with a monster that killed all our soldiers at once!"

Vanessa was out of sight but had watched Rebecca's battle carefully and waited for a good chance to strike.

"I don't know who you are or where you're from, but you're clearly after the old man and the brat. It was only natural for me to take advantage of that."

Rebecca's combat ability was much stronger than Vanessa's.

However, Vanessa had the gun, so if Rebecca were to attack, Vanessa would not hesitate to shoot Jacob.

"If you move, the boy dies."

Vanessa smiled sadistically.

Her actions would ordinarily be considered cowardly and despicable.

However, she was a *soldier*.

Her job was to use her limited combat ability to take control of whatever situation confronted her.

If her opponent prioritized the protection of civilians above all, then she must use that to surmount the difference in their combat abilities. That was a soldier's job.

"Um … um …!"

Trembling, Jacob tried to speak from within Rebecca's grasp.

He wasn't trying to say "Help!" or "Don't abandon us!"

He was trying to say, "Don't worry about me."

Jacob was an intelligent boy.

He understood that as long as Rebecca protected him, she could not overpower Vanessa.

The only way for Rebecca to win was to abandon him.

"D-Don't …"

He was still only 10 years old.

He was so frightened that he couldn't make his mouth form the words.

"Do not speak."

Rebecca stopped him, as if she could predict what he was going to say.

"It will be all right. I will take *his* place in protecting you."

She clasped Jacob, turned her back to Vanessa, and sat down where she was.

It was as if she were protecting the boy with her body as a shield.

"Are you *stupid*?!"

Vanessa raised her voice in laughter.

She had considered the various tactics Rebecca might try, but this was as foolish as it was unexpected.

Vanessa pulled the trigger without hesitating.

One, two, three … the bullets struck Rebecca's back.

Each time she was hit, her body jerked, but her arms never let go of Jacob. She held him to her breast and shielded him from the gunshots.

Four, five, six … More bullets were fired.

But Rebecca still did not move.

"Impossible …"

Vanessa's face showed her frustration.

The gun she held wasn't a large-bore weapon with great destructive power, but Rebecca could not survive multiple shots from it.

Only one bullet was left …

"Urgh!"

She shifted her aim slightly.

Her chances were slim, but guessing that Rebecca was wearing high-quality bulletproof clothing, Vanessa aimed for her head, which was uncovered.

And she fired accurately.

The bullet struck the back of Rebecca's head, which rebounded as if struck by a hammer.

"What the … What *are* you?!"

Vanessa was a career soldier.

She had killed many enemies in battle. Something was extraordinary here.

"Why won't you die?!"

The bullet that hit Rebecca's head ricocheted with a sharp metallic sound.

It was as if the bullet had struck a curved plate of armor.

"Including those final shots, you have fired a total of eight bullets. And that is all the ammunition your gun carries."

Rebecca stated this as if confirming a fact. Then she slowly stood and turned to face Vanessa.

Her cold, red eyes were narrow and expressionless, like the eyes of a raptor staring at its prey.

"—?!"

Vanessa was terrified and hurriedly tried to reload.

The distance between the two was nearly five meters.

It would take time to close the distance.

Vanessa could reload by then and—

"Too late."

Her opponent was not a typical human who could be killed by gunshots.

Rebecca was beside her before Vanessa even saw her move.

"Aagh!"

It was then, with a cry of fear, that Vanessa finally realized her mistake.

The best course would have been to run as far and as fast as she could before the monster had noticed her. If she had, Rebecca—who was only concerned with protecting the boy and the old man—would have left without paying attention at all.

Vanessa had lost sight of the most important priority a soldier had: to protect *herself.*

"Die," Rebecca murmured softly.

At that moment, Rebecca struck out with the heel of her hand.

She didn't strike with the practiced control of martial arts.

The blow sunk into Vanessa's midsection.

"—!!!"

She wasn't even allowed a dying scream.

The blow, which Rebecca had released with all her strength, sent Vanessa flying. The impact of her body cracked the wall in a radial pattern, like a crater. She looked as crushed as a clumsily-collected insect specimen.

Vanessa was no longer breathing.

With that one punch, her ribs were broken, and her lungs, stomach, and even her heart had burst. Her body was now a leaking sack of skin.

"The threat is gone."

Rebecca spoke with a voice as flat as the display on a gauge.

Her name was Rebecca Sharlahart. She was a humanoid Hunter Unit created by the most intelligent scientist of all time, Daian Fortuner, the Sorcerer.

No unarmed living being could defeat her.

Meanwhile, at the first Baelz mine …

"What's that about?! Ah ha ha ha ha!!!"

Hildegard, riding in her Teepneuen Hunter Unit, laughed at the machine in front of her.

"With *that*?! You're gonna fight me with that piece of crap, Wolf?!"

Lud was driving the armored machinery.

It was a rundown old model with little armor and no weapons.

"Oh, okay, okay! I was worried that a one-sided match would be too boring. So I will allow this desperate attempt!"

Inside the cockpit, Hildegard laughed maliciously.

Her noble family, the Hessens, had clung so hard to the ideal of combat that the family had fallen.

However, the chance for a comeback had arrived with the new weapon called the Hunter Unit.

Hunter Units weren't tanks, controlled by several soldiers at once, nor were they combat aircraft, whose main battlefield was the sky.

As in the age of knights, a Hunter Unit marched into battle clad in steel armor, giving it the appearance of the victorious warrior that her family esteemed.

The Hessen family, full of hope, sent Hildegard to military school to become a Hunter Unit pilot.

She had tackled the challenge with a fierce determination to save her family and restore its name.

She worked hard to obtain the medal known as the Panzer Cavalerie, which was only given to the highest rank of Hunter Unit pilot.

However, the Great War ended soon after she began her training.

Hildegard had completely missed her chance to achieve glory in war.

She heard about the Hunter Unit pilot who left the military after declining the Panzer Cavalerie.

That man was Lud Langart, the Silver Wolf.

Defeating Lud was the only way for her to compensate for the honor she had not received.

"Wolf … I *will* kill you! There's no way you're better than me! I was born into the Hessen family of warriors, so I deserve the Panzer Cavalerie!"

Hildegard summoned all her fighting spirit.

A voice spoke through the external speakers of the armored machine in front of her.

"Attention, approaching Hunter Unit pilot!"

It wasn't Lud's voice.

It was the voice of Avei, who was once again Lud's partner.

"Stop fighting immediately and retreat! This is a warning!"

The warning said, "If you run away now, we'll let you go."

"What …?"

For a moment, Hildegard was stunned.

The tone of voice was so dignified and yet condescending that she thought she had misheard.

"I repeat: Retreat immediately. I am showing humanitarian consideration out of respect for your life."

Avei repeated her warning to retreat.

"Ha ha ha ha ha ha!! You idiot! Who do you think has the advantage here?!"

Not to be outdone, Hildegard replied with contempt through her own speakers.

Her opponent was piloting an old decommissioned unit, while she had a far superior model, updated for military use.

The Teepneuen had higher quality weapons, armor, power and speed.

It was difficult to find any way in which it was inferior.

"Understood. You intend to fight, no matter what."

The armored machinery ignored Hildegard's derision, and just replied, slowly and clearly, as if confirming her intentions.

"I have ascertained that you are an inexperienced soldier who cannot understand the difference in our battle capabilities. Thus, I shall educate you."

Avei's tone held no arrogance, ego or haughtiness.

She expressed only the desire to teach a lesson in prudence to a foolish child, drunk on the power she thought she wielded.

"Silence!!"

Hildegard was furious.

Without hesitating, she fired the machine gun housed in the Teepneuen's forearm.

Ratta-tatta-tatta! The high whine of gunfire resounded throughout the mine.

However, before she could take aim and fire, the armored machine was long gone.

"Huh?!"

A warning beeped inside the cockpit.

The search sensors indicated that the enemy had evaded to port.

"This is not a battle between multiple combatants. This is one-on-one, when firearms may carry a disadvantage."

The Teepneuen's external microphones picked up Avei's voice.

"A firearm has a straight trajectory of attack. It's easy to determine the angle and range of fire from the direction of the gun muzzle. Furthermore, firearms built into the vehicle's arms are incapable of turning in small radiuses, making swift maneuvering difficult."

Avei's detailed explanation clearly meant, "I'll teach you a lesson."

"Don't patronize me!!"

Hildegard screamed and tried to follow Avei with her machine guns, but it was just as Avei had said. Instead of maneuverable handheld firearms, her built-in guns forced her to move the Teepneuen's entire body to point the muzzle.

"Impatience is not calm. And lack of calm breeds carelessness. Just like now."

As a result of straining to point its muzzle, the Teepneuen was slightly off-balance. Something was stretched across its path.

"W-What's this?!"

By the time Hildegard recognized the danger, it was too late.

That "something" was an industrial wire winch that was attached to the armored machinery.

Its special steel-fiber wire could hold the weight of one Hunter Unit.

It was stretched across the Teepneuen's legs and was being reeled in fast, entangling the Hunter Unit's body and toppling it.

"Aagh!!"

At eight meters, a Hunter Unit was four to five times taller than a human being.

When it fell, it could deliver a shock to the pilot that was several times stronger than the fall of a human body.

Of course, the Teepneuen was equipped with a compensatory function to withstand sudden impact, but it would still break the pilot's focus.

"What?!"

The armored machinery was attacking the fallen Teepneuen.

The machine's right arm was equipped with something like a knife …

Skrank! A screeching sound rang out, like the furious scrape of metal against metal.

Attached to the arm of the armored machine was an industrial mining shovel.

The shovel was more than four times bigger than a regular shovel. It was designed to break rocks and now served as a powerful weapon, striking at the Teepneuen.

"Fool!! That work tool can't do anything against *this* thing's armor!"

Shovels made excellent weapons for foot soldiers.

Soldiers on long-term active duty would say that shovels were easier and more effective than knives and bayonets.

However, the Teepneuen's heavy armor had been designed to withstand attacks from tank cannons.

Its armor was fifty percent thicker than the Cyclops series that was in use when Lud was still on active duty. It was similar to a knight's heavy armor and even the penetrating power of the shovel could not pierce it.

"How long are you going to keep that up?"

Hildegard used the vehicle's auto balancer to force the Teepneuen back upright.

At the same time, she shook off her opponent and pointed her gun muzzle for the third time.

From this position, her opponent couldn't escape.

She pulled the trigger, certain of victory.

"What?!" Instantly, the Teepneuen's right arm exploded.

"What? Why?! How did this happen?!"

Poor maintenance? Operation failure? Or …

As Hildegard broke out in a cold sweat, she heard Avei's voice.

"In battle, the kind of weapon you have isn't important. What's important is how you use that weapon."

The Teepneuen's right arm was demolished and scattered. The

pieces were so disfigured it looked as if the arm had detonated from the inside.

"No … An explosion? Impossible! What did that shovel do?!"

The attack from the armored machinery wasn't intended to penetrate the Teepneuen's armor.

It had smashed the gun muzzle built into the Teepneuen's right arm so the bullets wouldn't eject.

When fired in such a condition, the gun had exploded.

"I'll warn you again. If you retreat now, we won't pursue you."

This was the third warning.

The robotic voice held no emotion.

However, Hildegard was overcome with frustration, so even that neutral tone infuriated her.

"You … You … How dare you?!"

Even though the Teepneuen had lost an arm and its firepower, it still possessed devastating combat strength.

"One attack is all I need to finish off armored machinery with little armor!!"

Hildegard was about to perform a full-power tackle.

"In battle, the word 'defect' doesn't exist. It's just the flip side of an advantage."

Avei's lecture echoed around Hildegard.

Reduced armor meant the armored machinery didn't have extra weight.

And lightness was its own kind of weapon.

The armored machinery didn't retreat to avoid the looming Teepneuen. It ran as if to engage the enemy, but then sprang up at the last moment.

It used the Teepneuen's head as a platform for launching itself even higher.

"Ugh!"

Hildegard's Teepneuen lost its balance and fell again.

"When your opponent is stronger, use that strength. If you then add your strength, you can release an even more powerful attack. Just like this …"

The armored machinery jumped again, and as it came down, it plunged its shovel in once more, adding its velocity and weight to the attack.

This time, Avei aimed at the front of the Teepneuen's head, where the face would be on a human being.

The shovel struck deep and destroyed the Teepneuen's sensory camera, used for vision.

"Not yet … Not yet! … Destroying the camera isn't enough to … Not yet! Not yet!"

Inside the cockpit, Hildegard tried to calm herself in front of the now dark monitors.

I'll stand up the body and switch to the spare camera … No, I should just open the hatch and use my own eyes!

Words swirled inside her head.

"What …? No way … Why am I shaking?"

She had finally noticed.

Her teeth were rattling loudly. And her hands were visibly shaking.

She was smothering in fear that the enemy could defeat her with power several ranks higher, no matter what she did.

"That can't happen! Never!"

She gripped the levers tightly and tried again to stand.

However, the Teepneuen's leg joints just made an unpleasant sound and wouldn't move.

"What the … Why? W-What's wrong?!"

The display panel indicated a malfunction in the unit's legs.

"Something is entangling the joints … So the legs can't move?!"

Hildegard felt utter confusion, but the thought "No way!" crossed her mind. And then, with perfect timing, Avei spoke.

"I told you, impatience makes you tread carelessly."

The wire that Avei had used to ensnare the Teepneuen's leg joints now immobilized the machine.

"No … Up to this moment … They had it all planned!"

Hildegard was desperate.

Avei had used the wire to surprise her opponent early on. After making Hildegard believe the attack was over, Avei went after the upper body to divert attention from the machine's legs.

The Teepneuen was stronger than the armored machinery when it came to durability and power.

Hildegard had thought she could win with just one hit or by

overpowering her opponent.

And because that was what she believed, it had defeated her.

It was a tactic used in card games.

No matter how good the cards in your hand may be, or what kind of combination you have, your opponent can still win by knowing your hand.

The fight ended in victory for Lud and Avei—the Silver Wolf.

"Was I a little too mean?"

Inside the cockpit of the armored machinery, Lud was consumed by self-loathing.

"Not a problem! The opponent possessed greater power, so we had no choice but to bluff."

But Avei cheered him up.

"Since our machine's combat abilities were so much weaker, taking advantage of our opponent's inexperience was the best way."

"But still … your sharp tongue really hasn't changed."

By clearly and rationally pointing out their opponent's inexperience, she had rendered her fearful and powerless.

"I don't get your point."

"I didn't think so. You really *haven't* changed!"

Lud attempted a slight smile.

It was the same old conversation with a very good friend.

"Well, Colonel … I should go. Good-bye."

"Understood. Thanks, Avei. See you later."

"All right."

After a while, the light inside the cockpit dimmed.

"She's gone …"

The rezanium reactor had stopped and Avei didn't reply.

Lud opened the hatch of the cockpit and began to climb down.

A gunshot rang out.

"Come down, Silver Wolf!! One-on-one! Let's fight one-on-one!!"

There stood Hildegard, who had escaped from her cockpit and now wore the face of a devil as she pointed a gun at Lud.

"I won't lose to you! I'm from a family of warriors! Why don't you get that?! Are you an idiot?!"

Reason wouldn't work on her.

She was now a girl possessed by the demon of war.

Hildegard pointed the barrel at Lud.

In that tense moment, someone came from behind her and seized her arm.

"Stop this instant, First Lieutenant!"

It was the Schutzstaffel corporal who wore a mask over his head.

He was also a warrior who honestly acknowledged their defeat.

"Let me go, Corporal! Why are you touching me?! This is contempt for a superior officer! I'll kill you! I'll kill *all* of you!!"

Even the corporal's admonishment didn't work on Hildegard, who cried and screamed like a child having a tantrum.

"Excuse me!!"

"Oof!"

The corporal's fist drove into Hildegard's stomach, and she started to lose consciousness.

"No way … Damn it … Damn it!"

Hildegard continued cursing until she frothed at the mouth and fainted, her eyes rolling back in her head.

"I know this is an unreasonable request, but will you let us retreat now?"

The corporal asked Lud as he picked Hildegard up in both arms, knowing that the time for a ceasefire agreement had long passed.

Lud could have said, "Don't be ridiculous," but instead he agreed.

"Understood. But never come close to Organbaelz again. Never harm my friends. If anything like this ever happens again …"

"Would you kill us despite your convictions?"

There was no way of knowing what kind of emotion the corporal's eyes held under his mask.

However, one thing was certain.

Who is this guy?!

The corporal's drive and force, even standing still, as now, suggested a powerful savagery.

He had a fierce power and determination that surpassed Lud's, and surpassed even that of his superior officer, Sophia. His ferocity could only have been obtained by fighting through Hell.

This man is just a corporal? He must have hidden his abilities!

Lud hadn't just agreed to the corporal's request because he didn't want to continue a fruitless battle. He was also frightened by the

man's disquieting inscrutability.

"Pardon me. I spoke too bluntly. I will do as you ask. We will never come here again. Farewell."

Still carrying Hildegard, the corporal turned his back, leaving himself defenseless as he left.

Lud found a gun lying on the ground.

Perhaps Hildegard had dropped it.

What if he picked it up and shot the corporal in the back right now?

What am I thinking?!

Lud's instincts as a soldier were warning him, "If you don't kill him, something much worse will happen later."

And yet, Lud stopped himself.

He wasn't a soldier anymore, so there was no need for that.

Meanwhile, Sven was running along the path to the second Baelz mine.

After the battle with Hildegard, she had removed the connector from her body and was no longer Avei. She was Sven once again.

She went to rescue Jacob and Shylock.

"This is awful … Now I have a hole in my chest!"

Forcing a connection between the rezanium reactor in her chest and the armored machinery had ripped her artificial skin, and her pseudo skeleton was exposed.

The hole was big enough to reveal that she wasn't human.

There was no way she could let Lud see her like this.

"Well, it's under my clothes so he won't notice …"

Unless she was taking off her clothes, and even her underwear, the hole wouldn't be revealed.

She would only take her clothes off with someone else if she …

"No, no, no, no! What am I thinking?! Seriously! I'm so embarrassed! ♪"

When she thought about the person with whom she might have intimate relations, the person who appeared in her mind was Lud.

"What an embarrassing state you're in, Svelgen Avei."

"—!"

Sven stopped running when she heard the voice.

Night was over and the sun was rising in the eastern sky.

Ahead in the murky dawn, Sven saw something like a human figure approaching.

Svelgen Avei was Sven's name as a humanoid Hunter Unit.

The person who knew that name was …

"Is that you, Rebecca?!"

Sven stiffened as she faced the girl with red hair and red eyes, wearing a red dress.

"If you've come here, then … Have you come to get me?!"

Sven knew about Rebecca.

She was a sister machine created shortly after Sven.

However, they didn't share family bonds.

It was impossible that she had come to restore their old

friendship.

"Do not get the wrong idea. The director … Daian Fortuner doesn't want that. My mission is not to capture you and take you back."

Rebecca answered with no expression or emotion on her face or in her voice.

"You're not here to take me back? Then, what …"

"I cannot discern the will of that man."

Rebecca had no other response to Sven's question.

"I see. That makes sense." Sven understood.

The thinking of this man, who used weapons disguised as girls, was outside the realm of common sense.

No one knew what he would do and nothing he did—no matter how strange— was impossible.

"I am here to protect Jacob Rosso and Joseph Shylock. That is all. And I have secured their safety, so by now they are back in town."

"That's …"

Sven noticed multiple gunshot holes in Rebecca's dress.

"Why did you do this? No … surely you're not …"

Rebecca had no obligation to Jacob or Shylock.

Rebecca would never act without specific orders.

However, there was one exception.

"Were you Blitzdonner's private machine?"

"Affirmative."

Rebecca agreed with a quiet voice.

The letter in Ellis's collar had been from Rebecca.

Sven had noticed something odd about the message.

It had mentioned a "father and son," but Shylock was Jacob's grandfather. However, Blitzdonner was Shylock's son and Jacob's father. So, Shylock and Jacob were his "father and son."

"Those numbers were Major Blitzdonner's identification number. You thought that if I saw those, I would know it wasn't a trap. Is that right?"

"Affirmative."

Rebecca nodded in response to Sven's question.

"The major … Where is Major Blitzdonner now?"

That was what Shylock, Charlotte and Jacob wanted to know.

"Unknown. Even I do not know. After the last battle, the major disappeared. But … he cannot be dead. That man cannot be dead."

Rebecca voice was still quiet, but she was pressing her lips together.

"I am sure he will come back someday. So I protected them for him. That is all."

"Rebecca, you …"

Sven was slightly surprised.

The Rebecca she knew showed no emotion. She behaved like a mechanical doll.

Sven had assumed that Rebecca didn't have a "heart."

"I'm glad for you."

But Rebecca did indeed have a heart.

It was the heart of a bold girl who waited patiently for the man she loved, no matter when he returned.

"You have no right to say that."

Rebecca scowled and she looked a little embarrassed. Then she handed a small box to Sven.

"What's this?"

"This is a first-aid kit. To repair our body parts. Use it to patch the hole in your chest."

This was Rebecca's way of apologizing for involving Sven in this incident.

"I appreciate this."

Sven took the kit with a slightly bitter smile.

Then, as if she had no other reason to stay, Rebecca turned to leave, but then paused.

"Oh … right. Svelgen Avei, I have one thing to tell you."

"What is it?"

Rebecca squinted her eyes in a faintly sarcastic expression.

"I don't know how much you admire the former colonel, but *my* master is a much better man."

"What?!"

Sven was stunned that Rebecca would suddenly say such a thing.

"What are you saying?! What do you mean by that?! Don't look down on my master! Stop right here!"

Sven was so furious that sparks could have shot from her head,

but Rebecca left without saying anything further.

"Oh, man! When someone who rarely speaks finally opens her mouth, it's nothing but trouble!"

Despite her anger, Sven chuckled.

"Urgh … We both have complicated natures."

They were similar machines, but they didn't view themselves as sisters.

Nonetheless, Sven felt a little closer to that unfriendly redhead.



Epilogue

Three weeks later, at the military central headquarters in Berun, the royal capital …

A man appeared in Marshal Elvin's room.

"I'm surprised you came. Please, have a seat."

The room, which usually overflowed with stacks of documents and other materials, had been organized, and the old sofa had been exchanged for a new one.

This visitor was very important: Joseph Shylock, chairman of Billions Trading.

"I will get straight to the point. At present, we are—"

Elvin's principal objective in this meeting was to ask Shylock to become a sponsor of the regular army, and prevent the Schutzstaffel from taking control of the Weapons Development Bureau.

"A billion sigs."

Shylock spoke just as Elvin opened his mouth.

"Whah?!"

Shylock's words surprised even the great hero, and he let out an unexpected yelp.

"This is about money, isn't it? That's all I can produce right away. If it isn't enough, I'll add 500 million next month."

The amount was enough to establish several new battalions of Hunter Units.

"But I haven't even explained yet!"

"I know very well the situation you guys are in. Those Schutzstaffel jokers are after my money, but they won't let me earn any. So I'm better off with you."

The Schutzstaffel was trying to use Shylock as a pawn.

But the regular army, while using him as a pawn, would also let him use *them*.

"From among the new patents that the Weapons Development Bureau is after, I want you to grant me those for technology that can be converted for civilian use. If you agree, then I will give you a billion more. Any objections?"

"You're already familiar with the conditions?"

Faced with this man who held a very different sort of power than himself, Elvin laughed wryly.

"You might say that. And I'll only sell the Eldorai, which is now under production, wholesale to the regular army. It's a toy too great for those punks in the Schutzstaffel."

Billions Trading was also manufacturing new weapons.

However, the production line was limited, so clients ordinarily had to wait their turn.

Shylock was promising to give the regular army exclusive use of the production line.

In other words, it was as if Shylock had bought everything Elvin and the regular army offered for the asking price. It was ideal.

"But there's one condition. If those Schutzstaffel goons harm my

company or anyone involved with it, including me, you'll handle it. Can you do that?"

"Of course. You are a valuable sponsor."

Even if it didn't actually deploy soldiers, with the army's commitment to backing up the company, the Schutzstaffel wouldn't be able to act.

"I don't want to bother that bakery again …"

"Huh?"

Elvin looked puzzled by Shylock's mysterious mumbling.

"Oh, nothing. I was talking to myself."

As Shylock sipped his tea, he asked Elvin a question.

"Hey, do you want to get into another war?"

He asked as if engaging in idle chitchat.

"No, a war now would—at the very least—destroy Wiltia."

Wiltia had been the victor of the recent Great War.

But Elvin, who was in the nerve center of the military, knew it was a victory on thin ice.

The nation's strength had been so exhausted that if the war had continued even one more year, the social structure might have collapsed.

"War is just one means of managing the nation. As long as it is just a means, I will give it my best, but managing the nation *for* war makes no sense."

This was Elvin's philosophy.

"For at least the next five years, we should focus on rebuilding

the national strength and administering the new territories. Otherwise, the country will split in two from inside."

"That isn't enough."

Shylock disagreed.

"It will take at least another seven years!"

With a grin, the greedy businessman spoke as if bartering over a purchase.

"Seven years? Is there something special about that number?"

"Yes, there is. I need at least that long to prepare an inheritance."

As he said this, Shylock smiled as if enjoying himself.

Jacob had repeated what he had told Shylock before.

"I don't want to kill you."

The boy had thought and worried over it.

"I don't think my father would have liked it."

Shylock wanted Jacob to execute him, and for Jacob to inherit a clean future.

That wasn't what Jacob wanted.

"It doesn't matter how evil you are. If you hadn't existed, then I wouldn't exist. I mean … I'm not sure how to explain this."

Leaving all the sins in the past and living with a clean slate so that he wouldn't face any unnecessary troubles … that might be easiest.

But Jacob couldn't think that such a life was the right choice.

"My father truly loved my mother. That's why I was born. And

you too … um … Grandpa … you loved Grandma. That's why my father was born."

The girl he had met was named Rebecca.

She was named after the woman his father loved: Jacob's mother. And she had protected him at the risk of her own life.

When they parted, she had said, "I just did what my master … I mean, what Major Blitzdonner would have done if he was here."

Perhaps she was right.

"I want to be openly proud of the blood in my body. Wiltia, Pelfe, the Degas … None of that matters. I want to be proud of myself because my existence is the result of different people who lived their lives as well as they could."

They lived their lives whether they were dirty or clean.

That was Jacob's belief.

"Jacob … did you … did you just call me Grandpa?"

"That's not the point! Just …let that go! I'm embarrassed!"

Jacob answered and laughed, taken aback by his grandfather who was trembling, near tears.

"Give me more time. Let's see … When did my father leave home?"

"I think it was on his eighteenth birthday."

"Then wait until I'm that age! I'll make things clear with you then! I don't know yet about inheriting your company. I'm still a child, you know."

Until then, Jacob would learn and ponder many things and reach

a decision on his own terms.

Jacob promised that he would make the choice for himself.

"Understood. I will prepare over the next seven years for whatever decision you reach."

Thus, Shylock and Jacob made a deal.

Shylock was a businessman.

For him, a deal was something he had to keep, no matter how small the issue.

Therefore, he undertook the responsibility to keep the world safe for at least another seven years.

And yet, Shylock was happy.

"It's a heavy burden. But the weight of *this* kind of responsibility isn't so bad."

At the Weapons Development Bureau in Berun …

Daian was receiving a report from Rebecca.

"I see … That girl was reckless. By connecting her own reactor to that machine … If that had gone wrong, she might not have been able to turn back into Sven."

Stunned, Daian raised his voice as he sat at the desk in his office.

"But she came back. That means she has developed a firm identity as Sven. All is well."

Daian was laughing as if he found it all funny.

Once again, her report seemed to satisfy him.

"By the way, Rebecca? You weren't involved in any way, were you?"

"I do not understand your question."

In her report, she had purposely avoided mentioning her own involvement.

Although she had acted against orders, she had not been directly involved with Lud and Sven, so she decided there was no obligation to report it.

"I see …"

Daian stared at her with eyes that seemed to see all.

"Well, if you say so, then it must be so. I trust you."

"Then I shall continue about my duties."

Rebecca exited the room without showing the slightest agitation.

"Ha ha ha … Machines are incapable of telling lies. My dear daughters are growing up to be quite the attractive ladies!"

Daian seemed to know everything, and he laughed as if he enjoyed it.

A short while later, Sophia arrived, banging on the door of the office.

"Oh, Sophia! How nice to see you! We had a delightful time at the restaurant the other day, didn't we? Oh! And the musical we watched beforehand! That was a pleasure! Tonight, we're going to see that new movie, aren't we? I reserved VIP seats!"

Daian welcomed her with a wide smile, and Sophia replied with a refreshing grin as well.

"More importantly, Director Daian, I heard that the increase for your research budget was approved."

"Oh, how do you know about that? Yes, it's true. We will resume development of the new mass production machines that had been postponed. It will be a highly developed version of the Eldorai, currently in production. I hated the heavy design of the Teepneuen, so I'm very pleased."

With Shylock as a sponsor, the research budget of the Weapons Development Bureau had increased to its wartime levels. For Daian, that was equivalent to receiving a mountain of toys.

"I see that you're happy. That's good to know."

Sophia laughed to see Daian so pleased.

"Um … Sophia? Is anything wrong?"

Daian noticed Sophia's unusual mood.

She had patiently entertained Daian over the past month like a suffering penitent, or a saint undergoing torture, to ensure that he wouldn't go over to the Schutzstaffel.

However, that was all about to end.

"About our plans for tonight, with all due respect, I'm afraid that today is the fifty-eighth anniversary of the death of my mother's grandmother's grandfather's uncle's cousin."

"What?!"

"And tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, the day after the day after tomorrow, and all the days after that … All our plans for the next month, actually … I'm very sorry, but due to important

matters, I must excuse myself."

"Huh? What? Sophia?! Sophia?!"

A calendar was hanging in the office.

It was filled with Daian's dates with Sophia for this week, next week and the week after that, and Sophia had just canceled them all.

"Well, I gotta go now. Enjoy your holiday!"

Sophia spun around and strode away.

Her face was bright, like that of a criminal freed after finishing long years of hard labor.

"Sophiaaaa! That smile is too cruel!!"

The smile on Sophia's face as she left was more radiant than any smile Daian had ever seen.

Little changes were underway in Organbaelz, as well. Actually, they were big changes.

"It has gotten bigger …"

A fire had broken out at Tockerbrot.

And Shylock had paid for the repairs.

He claimed it was because his men had set the fire.

The Schutzstaffel had lit the fire, but it was true that his thugs had spread the gasoline.

This was his way of apologizing.

"Don't we have twice as much land as before?"

Lud was stunned as he stood facing the newly-constructed

Tockerbrot.

"That's a good thing! He bought the land to harass us, so there's no reason not to accept it as an inconvenience fee!" Sven spoke with confidence, as if to say, "It all makes sense!"

Shylock and Bakery Billions had fiercely competed with Tockerbrot.

Then he had torn down Bakery Billions, given Tockerbrot the land, and dramatically expanded the building.

"Was it okay … to take their ovens?"

"They don't need them anymore. It's better to give them to someone who will use them than to throw them away."

Tockerbrot had received not one but two new ovens—a modern type that could also use gas—from Bakery Billions.

They had beefed up their production equipment without planning to.

"And even a refrigerator …"

"There's nothing more helpful than this for baking sweet breads!"

The large electric refrigerator Billions had used for its frozen dough had also been given to Tockerbrot.

Lud had no idea how much all this had cost.

"Redistribution of wealth is the most important principle of a healthy economy."

Sven was in a state of elation.

Since they had no money for business investment, this incident had turned misfortune into fortune.

"Shylock also offered to erase the shop's debt. But I think that would be asking too much."

The institution from which Tockerbrot received a large loan and the source of its debt, was a bank affiliated with Billions.

"Huh?"

Sven, who hadn't heard this, sounded flabbergasted.

"What do you mean, Master?! That was a once-in-a-lifetime chance!! Oh no! Oh no!!"

"But it would be a staggering amount. I couldn't ask that much from him!"

"Ooh, you're so absurdly conscientious! Argh!"

Sven's mood changed to anguish.

"But that part of you is attractive, too!!"

They heard the approach of a truck, which stopped behind them.

"You two are getting along as usual."

It was Jacob who stuck his head out from the front passenger seat.

"Oh, Jacob … Is that it?"

"Yeah! This was Rosso Repair Shop's final job!"

After getting out of the vehicle, Jacob proudly patted the body of the truck.

It no longer looked like the truck they had used for purchases and deliveries.

Rust and mud had been cleaned off, the old suspension that made a loud rattle had been replaced, and the body had been repainted

and restored, so it looked as good as new.

The back of the truck was the best part of all.

The wooden truck bed was round on top like a loaf of bread and its side opened to display the freshly baked goods.

It was Tockerbrot Bakery's new mobile shop.

"It's splendid! I bet it cost a fortune to convert!"

"Don't worry about that. I asked Grandpa Joseph."

Shylock had also paid the fee for converting the truck to this mobile bread shop. But it wasn't a compensation fee for Lud. It was a present for Jacob on his eleventh birthday.

It was the first gift that Jacob had asked of his grandfather Shylock, who had been presenting birthday presents—one after the other—to cover the past ten years.

"Jacob, are you sure we can use this?"

Jacob was proud as he reassured Sven.

Jacob wanted them to make good use of this mobile shop to help Tockerbrot's business.

With the mobile shop, in addition to the retail consignment in Saupunkt, sales trips to other towns would be possible. The new equipment was an enormous blessing for Tockerbrot.

"It'll be useful, won't it?"

"But it was *your* birthday present, so …"

Jacob's family wasn't wealthy.

Shylock had offered support for their living expenses, but Charlotte refused.

She didn't want to injure her own father's feelings by accepting Shylock's money. Her father was also Jacob's grandfather.

"What he actually offered was an assignation of a five percent share of stock in Billions Trading."

"That's enough to live on without working for the rest of your life!"

Sven was stunned by the crazy ideas about money that rich people had.

"It's okay … I want to provide a little help too."

For some reason, Jacob thought of Lud when he had learned what Shylock truly thought.

Lud didn't run away from his past but instead lived a new life accepting what had happened.

Jacob greatly admired Lud, who was like an older brother.

After watching Lud and his grandfather Shylock, Jacob couldn't chose to walk a pristine path by foisting his past onto someone else.

"Besides, *we'll* use it half the time anyway."

When Jacob said this, another person slid out of the driver's seat.

"Hey, Jacob! Does this look funny on me? I'm a little embarrassed."

It was Charlotte, Jacob's mother.

Charlotte wasn't wearing the plain and somewhat grubby clothes she had worn when visiting Tockerbrot.

She now wore a dress based on the Tockerbrot waitress apron, but redesigned for an adult.

"It's fine! You look good. You're still young, Mom!"

Jacob teased her affectionately.

Since the additional ovens had boosted production capacity, the only other problem for Tockerbrot's outside sales project was the request from consignment retailers to send their pretty shop girl to attract customers.

Sven, who was the star waitress of Tockerbrot and handled the management, couldn't leave the shop. They had wondered what to do and then selected Charlotte to fill that role.

"Don't worry, Ma'am. It suits you."

Sven smiled. She had made Charlotte's dress.

Charlotte was older than Lud and Marlene, but she was still only in her twenties. After she had brushed and tidied her hair a bit, she looked quite pretty.

It was a perfect solution for her to work part-time as shop staff in the neighboring town of Saupunkt, since she needed a job after closing the repair shop, and she couldn't work in Organbaelz.

"B-But will it be okay for an old woman like me?"

"Of course! Why don't you smile? Smiling is basic customer service."

Sven lectured Charlotte, who was very nervous, about the proper sales smile.

"That's it. Use your charm to weaken the men."

"Don't say such a silly thing! What a child you are!"

Charlotte smiled at Jacob's teasing.

"Oh dear …"

Looking at her, Sven was stunned.

Even though she had always been pretty, Charlotte had looked unhappy before, with a shadow over her face. But by loosening her mouth just a little, she gave a warm, lovely smile.

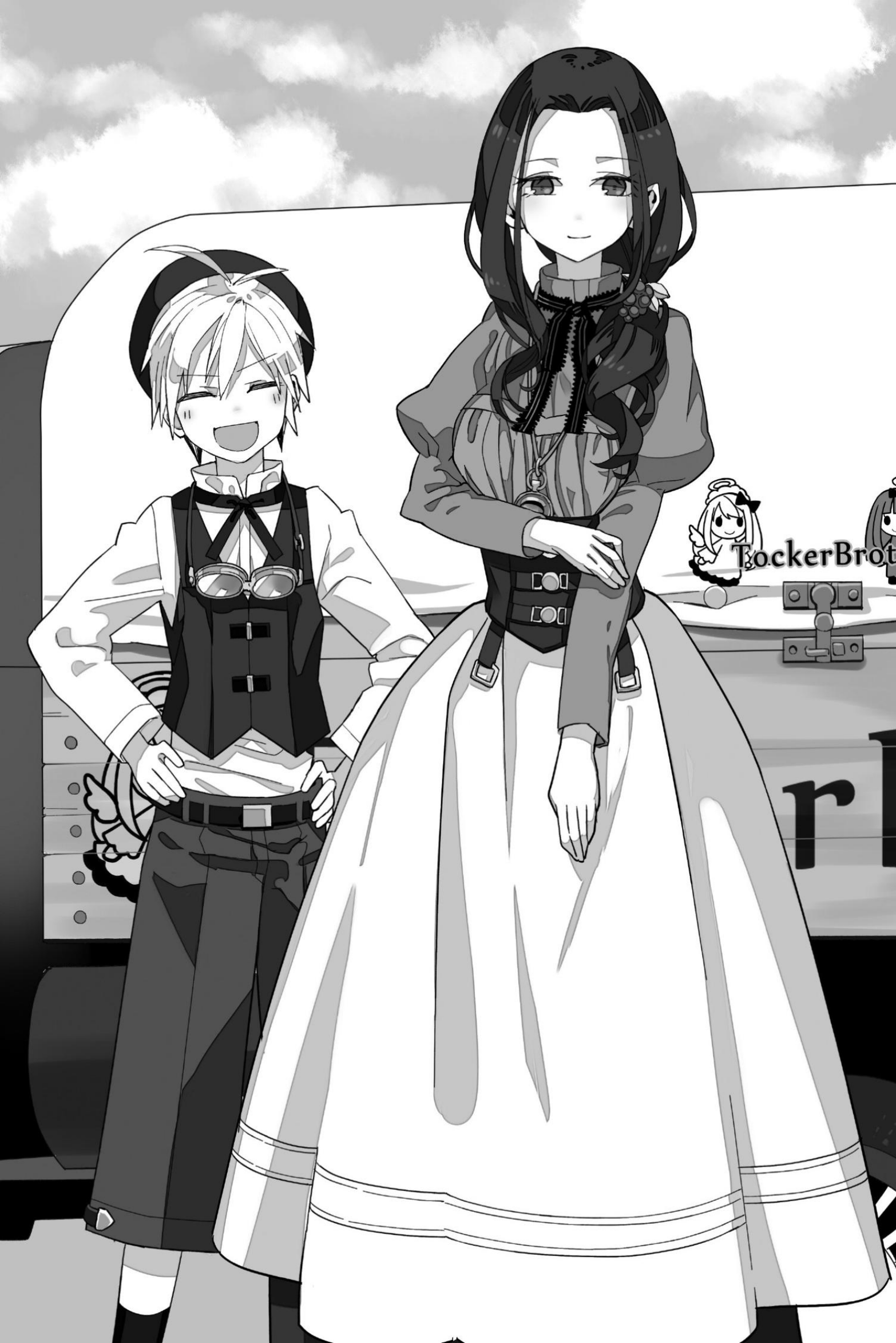
"She's so pretty! I can see why Major Blitzdonner fell in love with her!"

Even Lud was impressed by her charm.

"Master?!"

Sven couldn't ignore what she had heard.

So far, in addition to herself, so many others had developed an affection for Lud, including Marlene, Sophia, Milly—and even Ellis, the female cat. Lud had been completely unaware of this. But now he was staring at an attractive woman, and that was a major blow to Sven.


TockerBrot

Is this the charm of a wife? Or the power of a mother?

Lud had lost his parents when he was young, so perhaps he was attracted to older women who radiated motherliness?

For Sven to compete with that, she would have to get married! But she had no intention of being with anyone but Lud. So the best way would be to marry Lud. But for that, she needed motherly charm, so …

"Arrrgh!"

These contradictions distressed Sven.

"Um … Sven? Are you all right?"

Lud spoke carefully to his partner, who appeared to be confused.

"N-No … It's just a little paradox … Ooh! What's that picture?!"

Sven took a deep breath to calm herself down and noticed a pretty illustration that had been painted between the shop name "Tockerbrot" and the rear end of the truck.

"Oh dear … Could that be … me?"

There was a cartoonish image of a waitress with silver hair and red eyes.

And there were wings on her back.

"Yeah. I used this occasion to draw a kind of mascot character."

"Draw …? Did *you* do this?"

Lud asked this of Jacob, who admired his own work proudly.

"Yes. I like it."

"You really *can* do anything!"

Jacob was from an accomplished family. His grandfather was one

of the best businessmen in the world, and his father was one of the world's best ace pilots.

He had inherited their blood, so it wasn't so strange that Jacob could do many things well.

Perhaps he would discover great potential in a particular area during the seven years before his inheritance.

"I'm pleased. In this way, I can brighten up Master's shop!"

The boy had pleased Sven with no more than a paint brush.

"Oh … Um, who's this other character?"

Bracketing the shop's name was a silver-haired waitress-angel at one end, and another waitress-angel with red hair at the other end.

"Oh, yeah … This is the girl who rescued me the other day. She left before I could thank her, so I did this in return."

A girl with red hair, a red dress and red eyes … It was Rebecca, who had literally used her body to save Jacob that night.

"I didn't ask permission. Do you think it's okay?"

"Yeah. It's fine. She looks very cute!"

As the shop owner, Lud saw no problem with Jacob's illustration. He thought it was dazzling.

"She was pretty. But if she had smiled, she would have been much prettier."

"Oh … I see."

Looking at Jacob's embarrassed face, Sven was confused.

This boy would never think of Rebecca as a humanoid Hunter Unit.

She had heard that Rebecca had fought with superhuman strength, and Jacob knew she was a sort of relative of his father's.

However, Jacob just thought of her as an older girl who was very pretty.

What would Rebecca think if she saw Jacob's drawing?

Wondering about that, Sven shrugged her shoulders.

Meanwhile, someone was observing them from a great distance.

"....."

It was Rebecca Sharlahart, who had been assigned to watch Sven and the others.

Since she possessed the eyesight of a humanoid Hunter Unit, she could clearly see what was painted on the truck, and she could read the lips of the boy and understood what he was saying.

"Hmf! Like father, like son!"

Rebecca had sworn never to smile until the day she was reunited with her master, but her mouth loosened slightly.

Today, the girl with the red eyes and red hair, and who was wearing a red dress, also had cheeks that were tinged with red.

END OF VOLUME 3

Afterword

Thank you for reading volume 3 of *The Combat Baker and Automaton Waitress*!

In this volume, I was finally able to shine the spotlight on the "red" girl.

She didn't play a big role in the main story, and was resigned to a supporting role, but actually she has been very active elsewhere.

In some ways, she has been active as a public relations spokesperson, through the promotional booklets distributed at some bookstores, and bonus pages in the e-book edition, etc. I just did a quick calculation and discovered that I have written what would amount to about a hundred pages in *bunko* format about her!

My desire to give a proper role to this other hard-working automaton girl has been one of my goals since the start of this series, so I'm extra happy.

This, too, is thanks to everyone who gave their support.

Oh, right, right! I have to tell you about something else, too!

Between the publication of volumes 2 and 3, this series has been made into a voice drama!

It was announced on the official website and Twitter, but there may be some of you who haven't heard, so just in case …

It is available free of charge on the website A-koe (http://a-koe.jp/Series/_10).

Marina Inoue plays Sven, and Junichi Yanagita plays Lud.

I went to say, along with series illustrator Zaza and Editor O, that we found the voice actors' splendid performances to be very moving.

Please, check it out!

And now for my usual thank-yous:

I apologize to illustrator Zaza for making difficult requests, time after time. I owe you a lot for the way you respond so wonderfully!

Also, my heartfelt thanks to all the staff and cast involved in producing the voice drama.

And, above all, thanks to everyone who read this book!

If it weren't for all of you, I would not have taken a single step forward.

I feel immense gratitude … so thank you!

I hope from the bottom of my heart that we will meet again.

SOW

The Combat Baker and Automaton Waitress

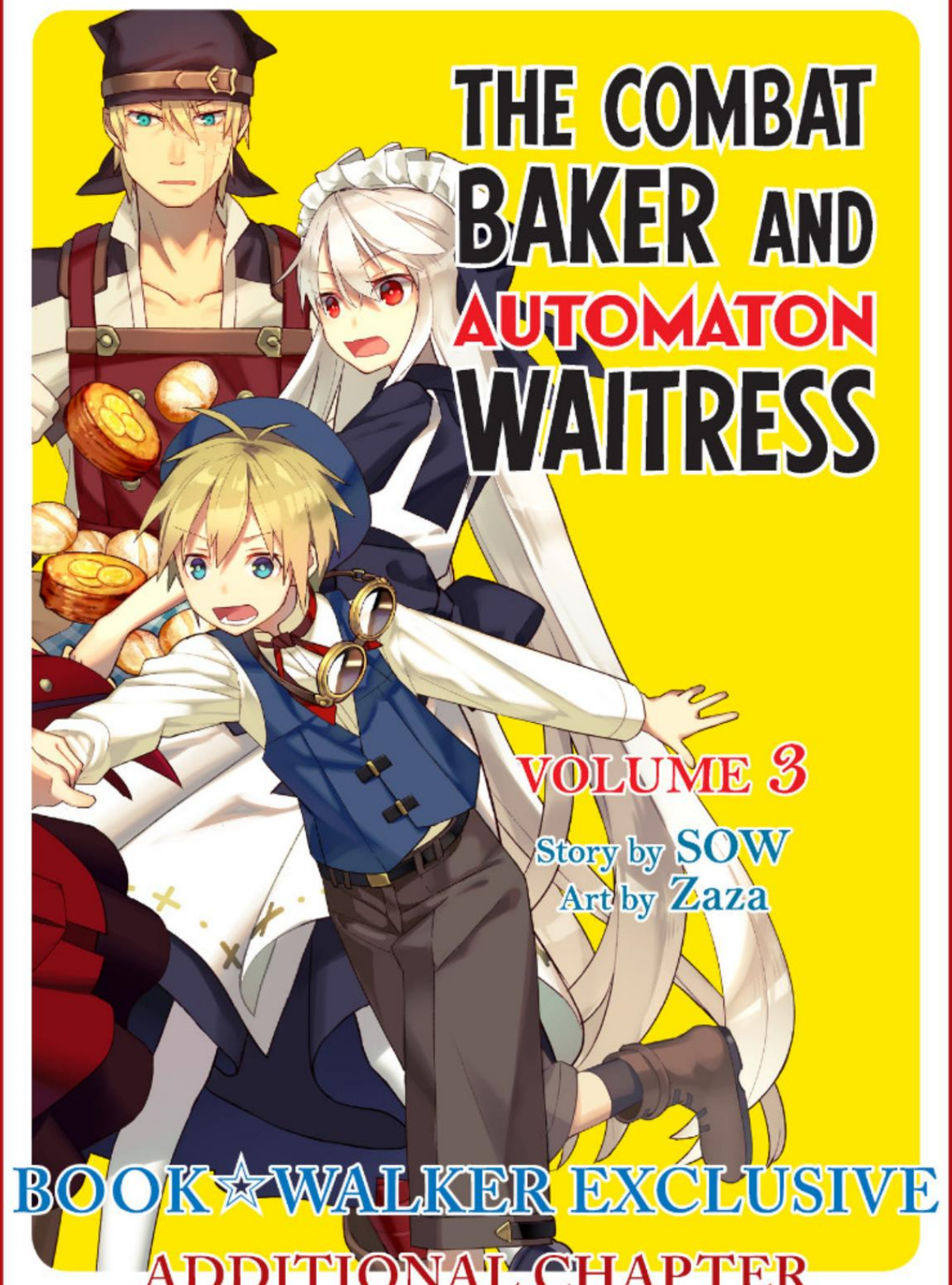
Volume 3

Story by SOW
Art by Zaza

TATAKAU PAN-YA TO KIKAI JIKAKE NO KANBAN MUSUME
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HOBBY JAPAN
2-15-8 Yoyogi Shibuya-ku Tokyo, 151-0053 JAPAN

Editor: Hope MATTHIESSEN
Translator: Ari and John Werry / HC Language Solutions, Inc.
Designer: Erika TERRIQUEZ
Producer: Atsushi YANAI


THE COMBAT BAKER AND AUTOMATON WAITRESS
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BOOK☆WALKER EXCLUSIVE
ADDITIONAL CHAPTER


THE COMBAT BAKER AND AUTOMATON WAITRESS
VOLUME 3
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THE MULTITUDES OF THE WORLD, ACCORDING TO REBECCA SHARLAHART

Thank you very much, BOOK☆WALKER customers, for purchasing Volume Three of *The Combat Baker and Automaton Waitress*.

My name is Rebecca Sharlahart.

BOOK☆WALKER has given us a special opportunity to provide this exclusive additional chapter, simultaneously in English and Japanese.

And this totally happened because of my underappreciated efforts!

Huh? Did you just ask if I've appeared anywhere before?

You bet I have! In both Volume One and Volume Two! But only briefly …

And I didn't even get an illustration!

This exclusive chapter is actually being released with the English edition of the novels, so its content is based on events in the series up through Volume Two.

That's right …

I start appearing regularly from Volume Three.

So I thought I would try to earn the honor by popping up here!!

But, putting that aside for a moment …

The main story in *Combat Baker* is all about a bakery, so it introduces many different kinds of bread.

For example, *anpan*, which has a paste of sweet boiled beans inside, was baked in the beginning of Volume One, and pineapple bread was created midway through that novel.

And, um … this is a good time to tell you that *anpan* actually exists, but pineapple bread doesn't.

However, in Japan, there is a type of bread called melon bread.

Sven Avei gave Lud's pineapple bread its name because the crosshatch pattern on melon bread resembles the fruit, and it was assumed Japanese readers would understand without any explanation.

We didn't expect the novel to be translated into another language, and this turned out to be difficult for foreign readers to understand.

Rice is the primary staple food in Japan, but people love bread, too.

In the morning, long lines of customers form in front of popular bakeries.

Melon bread is one of the favorite breads, and you can even buy it from mobile bread stands.

In Western countries, people commonly eat bread with something on top, or sandwiching something inside.

In Japan, rice balls are stuffed with different ingredients.

Maybe that's why the most popular way of eating bread is by

enclosing ingredients inside.

The *anpan* in the first story is one such bread.

Other breads include jam bread that has jam inside, and cream bread with custard cream inside.

There's also curry bread with curry roux inside.

Originally, melon bread didn't have any cantaloupe in it, but in recent years, people have included real melon juice. It's pretty confusing, huh?

There's also a bread called *uguisu* bread. *Uguisu* refers to a bird known as the Japanese bush warbler. But don't worry, there's no bird meat inside!

We call these breads sweet buns or delicatessen breads.

If you ever have the chance to visit Japan, I hope you'll enjoy this aspect of the country.

Did you know that it was a samurai who first made *anpan*?

He was actually a former samurai, who was leading a completely different life with the changing times. Lud Langart, the main character of *The Combat Baker and Automaton Waitress*, was partially based on the samurai.

However, that historical samurai didn't have as tumultuous a past as the main character of these novels.

Well, it's about time to wrap this up.

I do wish it were possible for you to see me.

So, look for me in Zaza's illustrations at the front of Volume Three —and even in the cover illustration!

I'm destined for great things!

It's almost as if I'll take Sven … Sven Avei's place!

I basically already have. Everything up through Volume Two was just a sort of prologue.

It wouldn't be a stretch to say that *I'm* the true heroine.

So … ladies and gentlemen who have read these novels … make known your desire to read Volume Three, and request more volumes!

I'm counting on you!

Now it's time to say good-bye.

From the bottom of my heart, I hope to see you someday and somewhere!

This is Rebecca Sharlahart … signing off.

The Combat Baker and Automaton Waitress

Volume 3
Exclusive additional chapter

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