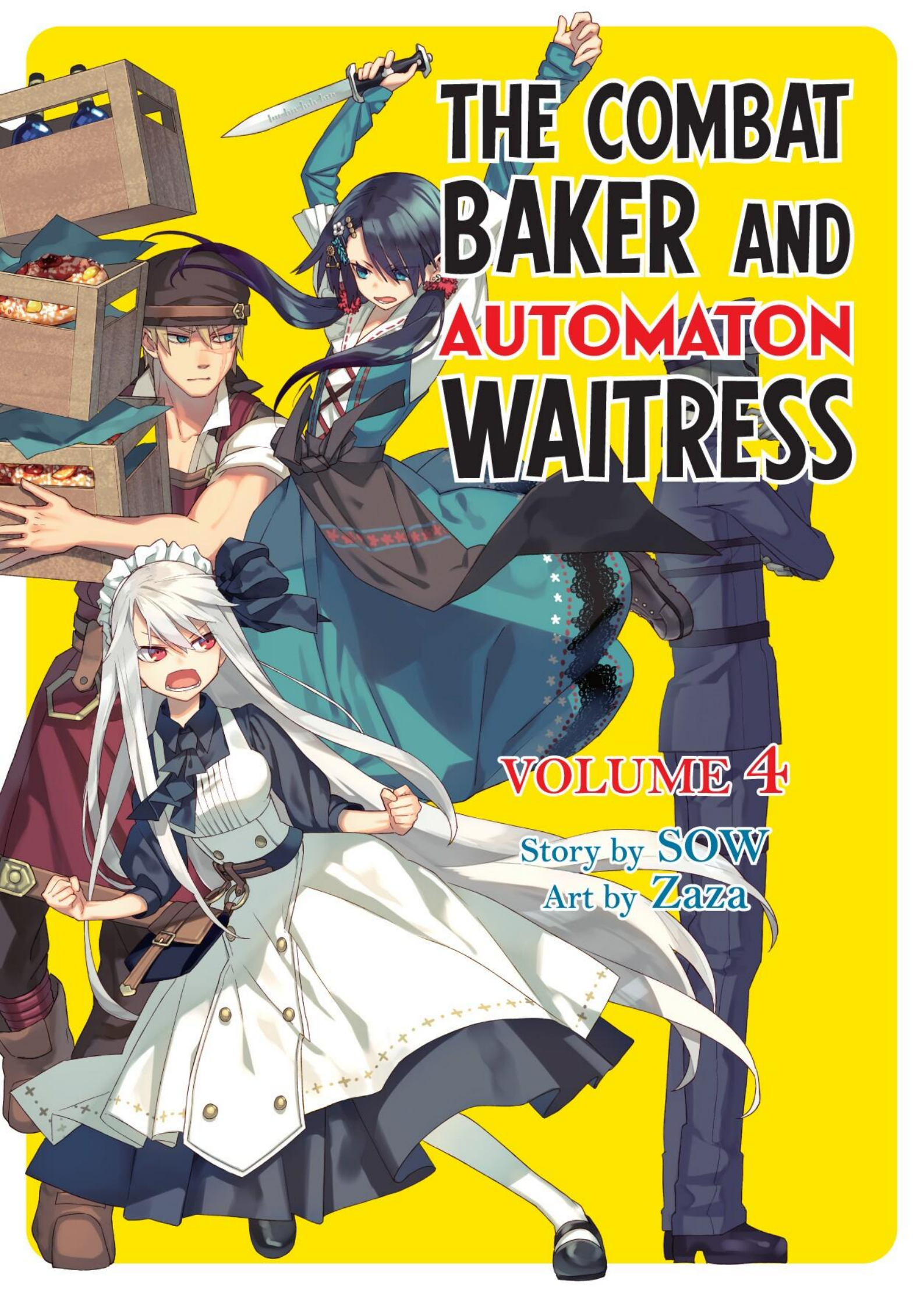
THE COMBAT BAKER AND AUTOMATON WAITRESS



VOLUME 4

Story by SOW

Art by Zaza


THE COMBAT
BAKER AND
AUTOMATON
WAITRESS 4

CHARACTERS



LUD LANGART
Former soldier and owner of Tockerbrot Bakery. Once again, it looks like there will be more to his life than simply baking bread.

HEIDRIG
He became widely known as a legendary special forces soldier during the Great War. He is also known as the Wolf Man and was released from prison to assassinate Lud.

SVEN
The familiar waitress of Tockerbrot Bakery.

HILDEGARD
A first lieutenant in the Schutzstaffel. Sven sees through her disguise immediately.

MILLY AND JACOB
The bakery's apprentice and its first customer.


"Ahhh…"
Hilde
sang out a
long note,
resounding
and clear—
and that was
enough.

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PROLOGUE

CHILD OF POLPORA

When I was little, I heard adults call me a "child of Polpora."

I didn't understand what they meant, so I asked my father.

"What are you talking about?!"

Before I could answer, he hit me.

It wasn't a slap with an open hand, but a blow with a fist. I wasn't even five years old, so it slammed me against the wall.

It really hurt.

But even more painful was how my body cringed in fear at my father's violence, anger, and hate.

Mom saw and pleaded with him in a panic.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! It's *my* fault! I'm sorry!"

Those were her words as she wept and apologized.

It didn't look the way a wife would behave toward her husband.

She looked like a criminal begging the executioner for mercy. It was a pitiful and miserable sight that suggested subservience.

And yet the father would not forgive the mother.

He hit and kicked her. He glared at us and shouted, "It's your fault!" and "You're *both* to blame!"

That night, Mom held me tight.

And as she held me, she apologized.

"I'm sorry … I'm sorry …"

Over and over, without explaining, she apologized to me.

"I'm sorry I gave birth to you."

The words left a deep, permanent scar in my heart.

Child of Polpora … Now I know what those words mean.

They are ridiculous words that amount to no more than a superstition.

And they are words that will follow me all my life.

I am a child of Polpora, an ugly fairy child.

INTRODUCTION

Twwwang! Twang! Twwwang! Twang!♪

This is the director's office at the Royal Weapons Development Bureau, located northeast of Berun, the royal capital of the Principality of Wiltia.

Daian Fortuner, also known as the Sorcerer, was the eccentric and genius scientist who created many new weapons, including the Hunter Units that led the Principality of Wiltia to victory in the recent Great War.

Twang! Twannng! Twang! Twannng♪

Today, he was wasting time playing a stringed instrument instead of working.

"Yahaaah! La-la! La-la!"

"What are you doing?!"

"Gah! You startled me!!"

Daian had started to sing a song, when Sophia von Rundstadt, head guard of the Weapons Development Bureau, suddenly spoke to him from behind.

"Sophia, don't you even knock on the door anymore? Well, given our relationship, such formalities are unnecessary. I'd give you the spare keys to my house."

"As usual, you come out with the wildest remarks! I'm *certain* I knocked!"

Sophia would usually open the door before he answered, but she wouldn't be so rude as to enter a room without knocking.

Today she had banged on the door of his office as if punching it, and announced her name and title before entering, without waiting for permission. But Daian had been strumming an instrument, so he hadn't heard.

"What is that? Where is that folk instrument from?"

Daian was holding a stringed instrument with a long neck that looked like a sitar or lute.

"One of my friends from the East sent this to me. It's called a *jabisen*. It's made of stretched snakeskin. Isn't it nice?"

As he said this, Daian handed the instrument to Sophia so she could examine it with her eyes and hands.

"Hmm … It has three strings. It looks a bit tricky, but …"

Twang … Strum-strummm! After applying a large pick fashioned from the horn of a water buffalo, Sophia began to play effortlessly.

"Sophia … you're good!"

"I've never seen this instrument before, but if you know the basics of stringed instruments, you can manage passably well."

Sophia looked bored rather than proud as she answered him.

"I'm surprised. You also have an education in music?"

"When born into a noble family, one receives training in such minor accomplishments. It's a real pain."

Sophia's family, House Rundstadt, was a well-known and upstanding family in Wiltia.

Those in the noble class managed land, ran businesses, and acted as investors by managing their fortunes. However, that was not exactly "noble work."

So what *was* noble work?

Simply put, it was to be noble.

To protect the eminent family name, a noble must demonstrate dignity and behave in a distinguished manner.

Sophia rejected all that.

She would never like people who thought it was a sign of status to ride around in horse-drawn carriages when the royal capital of Wiltia had, not just widespread motorization, but the most advanced technology in the world.

"There are many nobles who think that dressing up and attracting attention at balls is a matter of life and death. When you grow up in that world, you learn such arts."

"Uh … come to think of it, I do see children like that sometimes."

Daian had not been born to nobility. But, in military rank, he was an officer equivalent to a colonel, and possessed the title of baron.

However, that was just an honor. He had the commensurate authority but not the power.

Nonetheless, the monarchy and powerful nobles sometimes forced him to attend their parties. On such occasions, the nobles would present their children.

"What's that about anyway? I don't see the point."

"It's probably about entering society early in order to make

connections. And to express power."

It was customary for noble children making their debut at society galas to perform for the adults by singing, dancing, and playing stringed instruments, which Sophia had learned.

The mere fact that a child could study such lofty pursuits was a measure of a family's power.

Polish and sophistication cost money.

The ability to engage in such expensive pastimes was proof of a family's wealth.

And a family with wealth and power was worth cultivating.

"The children who appear at such scenes are dressed ridiculously."

"It's painful to see a child not even ten years old wearing makeup."

In order to hire an artisan to design dresses for their child, a noble might pay an amount that a common family of four could live on for a year.

And children grow fast. In six months, the dress that once fit perfectly will be unwearable.

So they regularly had new ones made.

This also demonstrated a family's authority and power.

"Come to think of it … I once saw something unforgettable."

"Oh?"

Sophia spoke as if suddenly remembering.

"It was when I was fifteen or sixteen … Eight years ago."

"You at age sixteen … Hmm … I'm interested. Do you have a photo of yourself back then? If so, could I borrow it? I'll make a copy."

"……"

"Sophia, would you stop looking at me with such cold eyes … as if you're looking at a maggot?"

Daian was on the verge of tears as Sophia gave him the dark and icy look known as the Dragon Slayer.

"If you don't want me to look at you like this, then don't say things to make me look at you like this!"

"Sorry. So what did the beautiful Sophia see when she was sixteen?"

Before continuing, Sophia heaved a single sigh of disgust at Daian's typical flippancy.

"There was a girl at a party. I had heard of her family's name, but to be honest, her family had fallen to the point that I was surprised to learn it still existed."

The girl was wearing a dress that was luxurious and expensive, but to a noble's eyes, it was obviously used.

"She was seven or eight years old. Perhaps she was wearing a dress that her parents had scrounged enough money to rent."

For what reason would a fallen family go to such lengths to appear in society?

Was it to make connections with great nobles and gain their support?

Or—and even *more* torturous for the girl—had she been forced to attend to satisfy her parents' pride?

"No one spoke to her. They all treated her as if she didn't exist. She would have been better off as a wallflower. In all honesty, I pitied her."

And that pity had probably been an insult to her.

The way this girl had remained still, her hands held in fists as if bearing the shame of it, made an impression.

"I see. You saw a pitiful girl? I don't want to be a noble!"

Daian's attitude clearly showed that he found the story less satisfying than expected. He had seen other poor souls constrained by their families, and he was sick of it.

"No, it wasn't just that."

There was more to the story.

"When the party reached its climax, the nobles presented their children and finally it was this girl's turn."

Perhaps it was merely a formality, or maybe the host had taken pity on her, but the girl from the faded family was allowed to display her talents.

"She sang a song … and it was wonderful. She sounded beautiful, like an angel. I … No, it wasn't just me. The gathering of nobles listened attentively, stunned."

The girl sang a song about an old myth from the time before the founding of Wiltia.

It was a song in praise of heroes, courage, justice, and God.

A song that asks for a blessing from God, the way heroes of old once did.

"It was marvelous. After she had finished singing, there was thunderous applause."

"It's impressive that she could elicit such a response from an audience with trained ears."

Nobles were the guardians of culture and served as patrons for artists, with a heightened sense for beauty.

"If she was that well-received, they must have taken good care of her."

It was possible that a string of supporters would clear a path for the girl as a musician.

"No. That isn't what happened."

Sophia's face clouded as she answered Daian's question.

"They all strongly praised her singing, but she gained no more than that."

Sophia's face registered greater sadness.

The injustice that girl suffered remained in Sophia's mind eight years later.

CHAPTER 1
FREEING THE WOLF

October 16, year 920 of the Europea Calendar.

Organbaelz was a small mining town in Pelfe, a new region in the Principality of Wiltia.

And Tockerbrot was a small bakery in town.

After repeated expansion and renovation, it was no longer a small shop, and one day an incident took place.

"Master! Master! Masterrrrr!!!"

Lud Langart, the shop owner, was lying on the bed.

The waitress Sven was clinging to him and releasing a flood of tears.

"How did this happen?! Why?! It's all because I'm not good enough! Why didn't I do better so this wouldn't happen?! Waaah!!"

Sven cried, screamed, and raved.

Her red eyes were puffy with tears and she was flinging around her beautiful silver hair.

"Um … Sven? Why don't you calm down?"

Lud's young friend Jacob spoke to her.

"Ohhhhh, Master! If anything were to happen to you, I would be ready to go to Valhalla at any time … but this … this …!"

Sven didn't hear Jacob and kept wailing.

"You're overreacting."

The shop apprentice Milly spoke in a tone of amazement.

"I curse you, God! How could you lay such a burden upon my master?! Come down here so I can give you a beating!"

Sven, who didn't hear Milly either, cursed God, burning with hate and trying to pick a fight.

"What's wrong?"

Sister Marlene from the church atop the hill came in.

She looked back and forth between Sven, who was panicked, and Jacob and Milly, who were shrugging their shoulders, as if to say, "There's nothing we can do."

"Master! Don't die! Don't leave me!"

Without even a glance at Marlene, Sven placed her head against Lud's prone body and wailed.

"Uh … um … Sven? Calm down, all right? I just fainted."

Flustered, Lud reassured Sven.

"Buuuuut …‼"

It happened thirty minutes ago.

After finishing business for the day, Lud was preparing for the next day when he suddenly felt lightheaded.

He didn't completely lose consciousness, but his legs tangled, and he fell and hit his head on the corner of a nearby shelf.

He only received a small injury, a minor cut with some bleeding, but when Sven saw it, she panicked, wrapped his head in a bandage, and forced him into bed.

"I'm amazed. You're really overreacting."

"No!! How can you talk like that, you nasty nun, when my master is injured?!"

Sven raged as if she might *bite* Sister Marlene, who spoke again in surprise after hearing what happened.

"I understand your worry. But telling him not to die is unnecessary. I could hear you screaming all the way outside."

And now neighborhood dogs had started to gather.

"I told her I'm all right."

As he said this with a troubled expression, Lud unwrapped the bandage from his head.

"Don't, Master! Your wound hasn't healed yet!"

"This is just a scratch. All it needs to heal is a bit of spittle."

Lud attempted to calm Sven's panic.

"I'm worried about you, too—although not as worried as Sven."

Jacob, who had analyzed the situation calmly, spoke again. "Maybe you're working too hard?"

Lud fell simply because he felt lightheaded.

He was, however, a former soldier. This kind of behavior was strange for Lud, who was noticeably robust.

"Hmm … I guess so. But I never imagined such a thing would happen."

The reason he fainted was overwork.

Tockerbrot's business had been steady. The shop was now successful enough for sales trips to neighboring towns to reach new customers outside Organbaelz.

And more customers meant more bread to sell.

Supply and demand is fundamental.

However, the production of bread had been insufficient to accommodate the increase in customers.

"The problem is that only Lud can bake bread. Sven is a waitress, and I can help with shop sales but not baking."

When the bakery had been small and unpopular, Lud alone could earn sufficient, if meager, returns.

However, it was different now.

Jacob and Marlene came to help, but they were sales assistants.

The same went for the talented waitress Sven. She helped with management, sales, and delivery services, but not with the production of goods.

"The size of the shop is now twice as big, with two ovens and double the customer base. If Lud is making all the bread alone, it's understandable that he might get lightheaded."

Lud was handling the work with the physical and mental stamina of his military days, but apparently he had reached his limit.

"Sorry. If only I could be more helpful …"

Milly mumbled with an apologetic look on her face.

With the aim of becoming a baker, she worked at Tockerbrot as Lud's apprentice.

Each day, she renewed her efforts and tried hard to increase her baking skill, but her bread wasn't yet good enough to sell to customers. So, she remained an errand girl.

She felt sad about her helplessness.

"What are you talking about? You're still growing! If you could take my place after less than a year of training, I'd lose my position!"

Lud soothed Milly with a gentle voice.

This wasn't pity or sympathy, and he wasn't lying out of kindness.

Lud was truly happy to see his apprentice developing the honesty and integrity to recognize the limitations in her own ability.

"Y-yeah …"

Milly nodded and replied softly. Her cheeks blushed faintly.

She looked small, but she would turn fifteen years old this year.

Lud still treated her like a small child, but she had developed feelings for him.

"Anyway … moving on!"

Quick to sense the change in atmosphere, Sven immediately interrupted.

"Even if we wanted to add to staff, we would need to hire a professional to bake bread, and that's difficult."

"I agree. There's no one like that in town."

Tockerbrot was the only bakery in Organbaelz.

The town was originally smaller, but when the mine opened, its population increased.

There weren't enough specialists in proportion to the population.

"Oops … I missed my chance to mention something …"

Marlene spoke with a troubled look on her face.

The reason why she came to the shop that day was to deliver a message from town hall.

"Um, you know, it's almost the season for Thanksgiving?"

Thanksgiving, harvest festival, autumnal celebration … It went by many names, but it was a celebration of the year's harvest, and a time to give thanks to God, and prepare for the coming winter.

Even in a small town like Organbaelz, everyone took the day off from work for this occasion.

The whole town pulled together, inviting entertainers and singers for a boisterous festival.

"I have a request from town hall for Tockerbrot to serve food at the festival."

After saying this, Marlene showed them a flier about Thanksgiving.

Berun was the royal capital of the Principality of Wiltia, and in the center of this city was the royal palace, and in a corner of this palace were the Schutzstaffel barracks.

Originally, the barracks belonged to the regular army, but due to cuts in military equipment, it was now the Schutzstaffel's facility for housing their soldiers.

At the cafeteria inside the building, a young-looking officer wore an unhappy expression as she used a fork to stab sausages on a plate.

Her name was Hilde, short for Hildegard von Hessen, a first lieutenant in the Schutzstaffel.

"Damn! Damn!! Damn!!!"

She was barely eating her meal, and instead, stabbed the meat—*bam! bam!*—with a fork, raising her voice in anger and frustration.

The other Schutzstaffel soldiers around wouldn't go near her. In fact, no one ever went near her.

Regardless of rank, hardly anyone in the Schutzstaffel was friendly to her.

"First Lieutenant, what is the matter?"

If anyone tried, it was the corporal, a soldier who served directly under her.

"This cafeteria is only for officers."

Inside the Schutzstaffel, the rules governing position and rank were strict.

Officers and regular soldiers were treated differently in other ways as well.

"Well … actually, I was told that an exception would be made so that I could make use of it."

The corporal sounded oblivious to the bad-tempered Hilde's mood as he answered.

For reasons that weren't clear, Lieutenant General Genitz, the head of the Schutzstaffel, had directly recommended this man.

Apparently, the corporal had considerable battle experience in the recent Great War, and was considered the perfect assistant for

Hilde, who had not been in combat.

How could that be? He looks ridiculous!

Hilde cursed him in her head.

Although he wore the regular uniform of the Schutzstaffel, the corporal's appearance was bizarre, with an iron mask covering his entire head. He said he had an unsightly scar, but the mask made him stand out even more.

There was no one else left in the cafeteria.

Perhaps meals were unpleasant around the grumpy Hilde and this clownish soldier.

"Did something happen? You're always irritated, but today you're even more …"

"Hunh?"

"Uh … nothing."

The corporal hurriedly covered his mouth when Hilde glared at him.

"I just went to see the lieutenant general."

Hilde spoke forlornly.

One week ago, Hilde had failed to satisfy Genitz's orders.

Usually, she would have apologized to him right away, but permission to see him hadn't come down until today.

One hour earlier, at Schutzstaffel headquarters in the royal palace …

Hilde was in Genitz's office.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant General! I will take responsibility for this in

any way I can!"

Hilde respected Genitz.

She believed in him and carried out his direct orders with a joy equal to that of serving God.

So it meant despair greater than death to fail him.

"Oliver Schmitz … Ellen el Ho … Klaus Haudemann …"

Genitz was standing by the window, gazing at the view outside and softly reciting names.

"Huh? Lieutenant General … um …"

"Enrique Hauckgodden … Anthony Nogudd …"

Without answering Hilde, Genitz quietly listed name after name, and all seemed familiar to Hilde.

"Surely, those aren't …"

"Sergei Wilms … Nicolas Fassbender … Drillon zum Thaves …"

Finally, Hilde recognized the names.

She broke out in a sweat.

She was in severe stress and the cold moisture in her body was oozing out through her skin, like it might from a sponge.

"Egmont Ike … Vanessa Steinhauser … Do you know these names?"

As he asked this, Genitz finally turned to face her.

He wasn't accusing or judging her. There was even a certain kindness in his voice, as if he were a teacher questioning a student.

"I … I … I let those soldiers die."

The names belonged to Hilde's subordinates who had died while

on mission several weeks earlier.

The lieutenant general is angry. He entrusted soldiers to me and I let them die for no reason. I have done something unforgivable.

"Ohhh … ohhh … ohhh …"

Her legs seemed to clatter as they shook.

She couldn't stop sweating and her eyes were swimming.

In her frustration, she tightened her fists so that her nails dug into her palms, but she didn't feel any pain.

"No."

Genitz's reply to her was completely unexpected.

"Huh?"

Hilde's response slipped out foolishly.

"What is the meaning of military rank?"

"It … It's …"

"Responsibility."

Genitz answered before Hilde could reply.

"A superior officer is responsible for managing subordinates. I gave you ten soldiers, a brand new Hunter Unit, sufficient information, and a request for support from the local base command office. I gave you plenty of preparation."

His voice was still the same. It was kind.

"But I entrusted command to someone who still couldn't complete the mission. So this is *my* fault. *You* didn't do anything wrong. *I* am to blame for failing to notice your total lack of ability."

"—!!"

The shock to Hilde was as if a knife of ice had pierced her heart.

Genitz was like a god to her.

The joy lay in having that god trust and rely on her.

But he had just told her she was useless.

"Sir … !!"

Hilde didn't know what to do.

She must do something to beg for forgiveness, as subordinates everywhere have always done.

"Forgive me! It's *my* fault! Next time, I won't fail, so …"

She fell to her knees and pressed her forehead to the ground.

She was prostrate in a deep, formal bow.

"Please … please, don't—"

Before she could beg him not to give up on her, Genitz gently put his hand on her shoulder and spoke in a voice that was admonishing, yet offered heartfelt consolation.

"That's enough. Thank you."

His words were exceedingly kind.

His voice, sweet and poisonously smooth, flowed into Hilde's heart.

"Go home. You don't need to do *anything*."

Genitz didn't say anything more.

People scold and get angry at those from whom they expect something.

But they can be as kind as a saint toward someone for whom they care little.

Hilde had become so unimportant to Genitz that he wouldn't even

let her take responsibility for her failure.

"The lieutenant general doesn't need me anymore … He abandoned me … He abandoned me!"

Hilde hit the table hard.

"Maybe you're overthinking this. It was in the report, wasn't it? Someone besides Lud Langart killed ten soldiers, including Third Lieutenant Vanessa."

On her recent mission, Hilde used a Hunter Unit in her fight to defeat Lud.

During that fight, she ordered her subordinates to watch the hostages, but someone had killed them all.



And their deaths had been unthinkable.

They were bludgeoned to death with incredible force.

Vanessa's innards had ruptured.

All the bullet holes at the site had come from Vanessa's gun.

So, they may have suffered a surprise attack and were defeated after resisting.

"Who in the world was it? Someone we didn't count on. When assumptions change, the results may also change. The lieutenant general took that into consideration and decided not to punish you."

The corporal was making a desperate effort to comfort Hilde.

And his great kindness reached her.

"Corporal? Um …"

"Yes?"

Hilde waved him closer.

The corporal moved his face nearer, defenseless, as if to discuss something secret.

"Gimme a break!"

Hilde shouted angrily and punched the corporal in the face.

No, she didn't just punch.

A girl's fist wouldn't break the metal mask that the corporal wore.

Instead of her fist, she threw a plate filled with messy food.

"Are you…feeling *pity* for me? Do you feel *sorry* for me? *You?!*"

Hilde's shoulders shook, and she glared at him.

"N-no! First Lieutenant! I—"

"Shut up!"

The corporal had fallen on his back. Hilde stomped on his face, as if she would crush him, with a military boot reinforced with metal.

"Agh!"

The mask could not protect the corporal and he groaned with pain.

"Damn it! How did this happen?! What can I do for the lieutenant general?!"

What could she do to make him look at her again?

How could she make herself important to Genitz?

Hilde's head whirled with questions.

"Uh … First Lieutenant? Um … there *is* a way!"

The corporal fought back pain as he spoke.

"Hunh?! Just you try spewing some nonsense! I'll gouge out your eyes and murder you!"

"Please, don't. Um … the only way to restore your reputation is to achieve a military feat."

"I wouldn't be in this mess if I could do that!"

This time Hilde hurled the bottle of pepper on the table right at him.

"Achoo!"

The bottle hit his mask and broke. The fine powder fell between the openings in the mask for his eyes and nose.

"Listen! The lieutenant general told me not to do anything. Do you understand what that means?"

Indefinite suspension. Not only did this mean she couldn't participate in missions, it also meant she couldn't allocate soldiers and equipment on her own.

"If only I could bring back Lud Langart's—the Silver Wolf's—head! Then the lieutenant general would lavish praise on me! Unfortunately, Langart's a monster! He's not an opponent that I can defeat alone!"

She didn't know that behind Lud stood Sven, a humanoid Hunter Unit. Moreover, there was yet another figure with different intentions …

She didn't know any of this, but she knew she could not defeat this opponent on her own.

"Achoo! Achoo! Ahhhh … choo!!"

"Pay attention to what I'm saying!!"

"Gwah?!"

This time, Hilde swung the chair she was sitting on and smashed it against the corporal's head.

"Ugh … I see stars …"

"Should I send you to Heaven so you *become* a star?"

The corporal had pushed Hilde's irritation to the limit.

"No … I mean … I'm saying there's a way!"

"Then what is it?!"

"First Lieutenant, you're strapped for soldiers and equipment right now. I think you only have me and one other person."

"So what?"

"So make that other soldier a powerful monster who can defeat the Silver Wolf. An unbeatable monster!"

"....."

Without speaking, Hilde brandished the chair and tried to hit him again.

"Wait! What?! Why are you trying to hit me?!"

The corporal pitifully cowered away from her.

"The way you're building up to the point annoys me!"

"You're mean!"

The corporal pretended, in an overtly fake way, to wipe tears off his mask.

"You should've just kept talking! So? Are you telling me this because you know someone like that monster?"

"Yes, of course."

The corporal wore a contrived smile that Hilde could sense clearly, even through his mask.

"First Lieutenant, have you heard of the Wolf Man?

The Wolf Man was a Wiltian soldier who made his name known throughout the world during the recent Great European War.

In the neighboring country of Filbarneu, his name was synonymous with the devil.

It was said that his undercover work, classified missions, and assassinations had resulted in over 100,000 Filbarnian soldiers either dead or injured.

However, that man was now in custody at a prison for special criminals deep under the royal palace of Wiltia, as if to keep him silent.

"I've heard of the Wolf Man, and he's surprisingly close to where we are."

"He was an extremely dangerous special criminal, so it's better to keep him close rather than in a remote region. When the time comes, it will be easier to get rid of him, too."

Hilde and the corporal were walking down stairs to the underground cell that held the Wolf Man.

The reasons why vary, but special criminals were considered poisonous to society, and especially to the nation.

They were thinkers and religious people who might influence and lead the masses to disrupt society.

"They should have just killed him right away."

Hilde said this casually, but it wasn't that easy.

Death could glorify such a person.

Even the death of someone insignificant and ordinary could lead to that person's sanctification and power over others.

In another country, there was once a man whose airplane controls had malfunctioned. He was supposed to retreat and return, but he accidentally made a suicide plunge into the enemy forces.

The military used him as propaganda, claiming him as a hero who had gone on a lone suicide attack to free his comrades. They erected a statue of the pilot and put his name in the nation's textbooks.

But, he survived, and when he returned to his home country, the military, fearing that he would be a bad influence on society, secretly killed him.

"Sometimes the dead are more trouble than the living."

The corporal replied ironically, perhaps reflecting upon this incident.

"Anyway, this is old."

Hilde touched the wall.

As they descended the long stairs, the walls, which had been concrete, changed to bricks, and now were just piles of old stones.

"I believe these were made in the era of the Luftzand Domain. That was when Wiltia was just a domain of the Holy Empire, and Berun wasn't yet a city."

The Principality of Wiltia was called the "land of knights" because it was founded on land taken by a knight who served the Holy Empire.

"They filled in the land and built the royal palace of Berun over Luftzand Castle, repeatedly expanding and renovating it."

Perhaps because it didn't have proper electricity, the corporal was holding a lantern and shining light to see as he spoke.

"These are like geological layers."

It was as if the stairs, which led underground, showed the history of the Principality of Wiltia.

"If I remember correctly, the Wolf Man returned to this country in an exchange of war criminals after the war."

"Yes. He has been in prison ever since."

There was a reason that the Wolf Man, whom the government would normally have praised as a war hero and assigned to honorable duty, was confined in such a place for the two years since the war ended.

The strongest of the special forces soldiers, a man who had maneuvered secretly during the Great War, suddenly fled his country and defected to the enemy nation of Filbarneu toward the end of the war.

No one knows why.

But, the government was consumed with bone-deep resentment over the Wolf Man's escape to Filbarneu and could not just silently accept it.

After his capture, he was exposed as an inhumane special forces operative.

So, throughout the two years since the war ended, this man, who was frightening to both friend and foe, was locked up here as if to keep him isolated.

"Anyway, how did you arrange to see the Wolf Man"?

"I've known the administrator of this place for a long time. And … I dipped into the secret account."

"I see."

The secret account meant expenses that didn't need to be included in a formal ledger.

In this case, it meant bribery.

"Well, here we are."

Finally, they reached the deepest cell in the medieval jail, where a man sat alone.

"This is the Wolf Man."

Seeing him for the first time, Hilde frowned.

She had imagined a fit, muscular man since he was reputed to be the most violent special forces soldier, but he was rather skinny and he appeared calm and gentle.

He was likely over twenty years of age, but he had childish features.

"Are you sure? I doubt a guy who has been in jail for over two years can be of any use."

Hilde's sarcastic comments never stopped, even in front of this man.

Hilde could only use two soldiers without permission, one of whom was the corporal.

The corporal had suggested filling the remaining position with the Wolf Man, a soldier with elite battle skills. But Hilde was disappointed to see the actual man.

"Corporal, unlock the cell door."

"Huh? But …"

"Don't worry. Look."

The Wolf Man's hands were in manacles and his legs were chained to iron balls.

He could barely move.

"But, um …"

"Just open the door."

Hilde glared at the bewildered corporal, forcing him to unlock the door, then walked inside the cell and rose to her full height in front of the Wolf Man.

"My name is Hildegard von Hessen. I am a first lieutenant in the Schutzstaffel. Cheer up. I'm going to take you out of here."

"……"

"Did you hear me?"

The Wolf Man did not respond to Hilde's snide tone.

He was staring at the floor of the cell with a dazed look on his face.

"I don't like incompetence. I despise useless men! So I'm going to test you. I heard you're a famous soldier, so even in these conditions you should be able to display your strength."

Hilde said this with a wicked grin.

"What would you do if I did *this*?"

Hilde moved to pull her gun from the holster at her waist and point its muzzle at him—

"Huh?"

But it didn't happen.

Her beloved gun, which she knew she had been wearing, was gone.

"What's the matter, First Lieutenant? Did you drop it somewhere?"

The corporal asked from the other side of the cell.

"That's impossible! A military soldier would never fail to properly handle her weapon!"

For soldiers, guns were just as important as their lives.

"Are you looking for *this*?"

Her weapon was in the Wolf Man's hand, right in front of her.

"What?!"

Hilde was at a loss for words.

The Walther PPK, Hilde's favorite gun, was pointing its barrel at her, hammer up and ready to fire.

"When did you …"

She hadn't taken her eyes off the Wolf Man.

No … maybe she had glanced aside for a moment, but she hadn't seen the Wolf Man, who was sitting the whole time, make a move.

"Are you satisfied?"

After saying this, the Wolf Man pulled the trigger without hesitation, the gun still pointed directly at Hilde.

"Eek!!"

Hilde raised her voice, but no bullet fired from the gun.

"Here. I'll give this back."

The Wolf Man returned the gun, spinning it around halfway so the grip was toward Hilde.

"This …"

The magazine holding the ammo had been removed from the gun.

"It'd be dangerous if a shot was fired, so I returned the bullets."

"Returned them?"

Hilde didn't understand what the Wolf Man was saying, and in a state of disbelief, she searched the holster again and found the magazine inside.

"I c-can't believe you …"

He was fast. But even more, he took instantaneous advantage of lapses in his opponent's attention and vision.

If the Wolf Man wanted, he could have killed her three times by now.

"Ha ha ha … Impressive. You passed the test."

Hilde was playing it tough, but she couldn't hide that her fist was shaking.



She played the consummate soldier, but she had never experienced battle.

So this is a real fighter who survived the Great War …

She had felt the same caution when she faced Lud Langart, the Silver Wolf.

"Um, First Lieutenant? I just remembered! We were supposed to leave behind anything that could serve as a weapon before approaching him."

"It's too late to tell me that *now*!!"

Hilde yelled at the masked man who had also returned from the Great War but had no edge at all.

"Anyway, we can win now! I can get revenge against that man! Lud Langart, prepare yourself and wait for me! Wa ha ha ha ha!!"

Convinced of victory, Hilde laughed shrilly.

"Who are you guys?"

The Wolf Man wasn't sure what was going on.

"Um, please wait a second. Right now, she's in a transport of joy."

The corporal said this in a tone that made it impossible to determine his feelings through the mask.

And then…

"Achoo!"

Meanwhile, inside Tockerbrot, back in Organbaelz …

Lud, whom Sven had permitted to leave his bed, sneezed once.

"Master! Have you caught a cold? I knew it! Your health is still …

Let's get you back into bed this instant!"

Sven's overprotectiveness had escalated even further.

"No, I'm fine …"

Flustered, Lud responded with a troubled expression.

He wasn't sick. And he knew it.

But he had felt something … a strange, indescribable chill.

What was that? I hope nothing bad happens.

He possessed a kind of sixth sense that he had earned during his time on the battlefield.

It was a warning of something yet to come, and it was sounding an alarm.

CHAPTER 2
FAKE BLONDE

In front of the main gate to the Weapons Development Bureau, located in a corner of Berun, the royal capital of the Principality of Wiltia …

"What's going on?!"

The bureau's head guard Major Sophia von Rundstadt raised her voice in fury.

She was so angry that one of the security guards, Private First Class Sariya Richter was on the verge of tears.

"S-sorry!"

"I'm not talking about you! What's going on here?!"

It was midnight, when all work at the development bureau was drawing to a close. Suddenly, however, a Schutzstaffel force surrounded the bureau.

"It's not just ten or twenty soldiers! They've mobilized at least two companies!"

According to Wiltia's army regulations, a platoon had fifty soldiers and a company had two hundred.

The number of soldiers surrounding the bureau was at least four hundred.

"We have confirmed armed trucks and artillery units. Impossible! We're in the middle of a downtown location!"

PFC Sariya raised her voice in something like a scream.

"Have you contacted military command?"

"It seems they've cut our communications wires …"

"Tch!"

For a moment, Sophia imagined the worst: an insurgency by the Schutzstaffel.

The leader of the Schutzstaffel was Genitz, whose desire for fame and success was insatiable.

In Sophia's opinion, he was capable of making the worst decisions.

"But … why *here*?"

Sophia was confused about the true intentions of the soldiers surrounding the bureau.

"Huh …?"

Meanwhile, a soldier who looked like a commanding officer approached with a few subordinates from the companies in front of the main gate.

"Are you Major Sophia von Rundstadt, head guard of the Royal Weapons Development Bureau?"

The badge on the man's chest suggested he was a Schutzstaffel captain.

"I am Captain Rudolf Delz. Thank you for your service."

His tone was polite, but he wore a slight grin.

Tch! How typical of the Schutzstaffel!

Sophia glared at him with contempt.

Thirty percent of soldiers in the regular army had retired due to

post-war downsizing.

Most of those soldiers were then reinstated as members of the Schutzstaffel.

Many members of the Schutzstaffel glorified their backgrounds and held a warped pride in themselves, as if they were the chosen ones.

Or perhaps the Schutzstaffel selected such people on purpose.

Those who take excessive pride in belonging to an organization will loyally obey any orders. They're perfect pet dogs.

"What in the world are you doing?! Since when has the Schutzstaffel become a rebel force sending troops to the development bureau, which belongs to the royalty?"

Sophia intentionally condemned him with words that would hurt his pride.

"There is a problem, Major. You misunderstand."

However, it didn't appear to have worked on Delz, since the annoying grin still showed on his face.

"We received information that terrorists who support a rival monarchy are active in the royal capital. We are merely fulfilling our duty to preserve order."

"Rival monarchy? Terrorists?"

Sophia had heard nothing about this.

"What kind of force is it? What sect and what faction are they from?!"

There were many anti-state groups, each with its own beliefs.

The intelligence agency of the regular army had discovered over one hundred so far.

"We are currently investigating."

"Where and how are they active? How many of them are there? What weapons do they have? What damage has been done?"

If entire companies had been mobilized, the trouble must be substantial.

However, there was no sound of gunfire in the royal capital.

"We are currently investigating."

"The development bureau's communication lines have been cut. Did *you* do that?"

"We are currently investigating."

Delz's mouth loosened into a grin as he looked down on her.

"Why you …!"

He looked smugly into Sophia's eyes, whose angry gaze was feared as the Dragon Slayer.

"We rushed here to protect the people of the development bureau. Security enforcement within the royal capital is the Schutzstaffel's jurisdiction."

The regular army's headquarters were inside the royal palace, but the army itself was stationed outside the royal capital.

The purpose was to maintain civilian control and prevent the military from taking over, but the arrangement backfired in this instance.

"Oh … Then this is easy to solve. Get lost! Nothing is happening!

As long as our guards are here, there's no need for your help!"

Sophia yelled at Delz, but his grin remained.

"I can't let you do it your way, Major Rundstadt. A state of emergency is currently in effect for the royal capital. All public authorities are under the Schutzstaffel's command. Do you know what this means?"

"No way … You …"

"You must leave here right now."

Removing an active unit in the name of security enforcement was tantamount to calling them traitors.

"Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha … I've never been subjected to such humiliation!"

Sophia was laughing dryly.

PFC Sariya, standing next to her, was now close to tears.

"Let's fight then. Bring it on."

Sophia's voice was quiet.

"Huh? What are you—"

"I'm saying that if you can do it, then do it, you dogs of the lord lieutenant general!!"

Before Delz could finish his question, Sophia interrupted as though she just didn't care.

"Fine. I'll give you a thirty-minute extension. If you reconsider and leave, I will forget what you just said. Good-bye."

Delz left, keeping his pleased grin until the very end.

"W-what have you done? What are you going to do, Major?"

PFC Sariya was panicking.

Sophia's emotional words were in defiance of authority.

"They're treating us like terrorists!"

"But we're *not* of course!"

Sophia scolded PFC Sariya.

"Remember, they cut our communication lines. And that's a risky action. This could turn into a debacle for them if we call up command headquarters!"

The Schutzstaffel's soldiers were under direct command of the royal family, so technically they only followed orders from the monarch.

However, Wiltia had a constitutional government.

Royal authority was not absolute.

There must be political reasons … No … there's something I don't know. If I could just get hold of information that would foil this reckless action!

The fact that the Schutzstaffel had mobilized two companies was proof that it was trying by any means, even by force, to suppress the development bureau.

And from that she could make an inference …

Was there something inside the development bureau that could upset the current order in the principality?

Sophia was the head guard, but no one told her what was in the depths of the development bureau.

Sophia couldn't interpret the situation any other way.

"Anyway, summon all the guards! Put up barricades! Gather weapons! They won't get away with this nonsense! If we can hold out until morning, victory is ours!"

"Y-yes, Ma'am!"

"I don't think it'll be that easy."

Someone else was suddenly standing next to Sariya, who saluted in response to Sophia's rapid-fire orders.

"Uwaaah!! Who're you?! And how long have you been standing here?"

"Calm yourself, Private. That man is just a pervert! And he's the director of this development bureau."

Sophia calmed Sariya, who looked like a small, startled animal.

"Sophia? Is it normal to introduce me first as a pervert, and then by my position?"

It was Daian Fortuner, the director of the development bureau.

"What a mess. The lieutenant general is finally resorting to violence. Oh dear …"

Although the situation was tense, Daian appeared as relaxed as ever.

"Do you have something to say?"

Daian was responsible for the development bureau.

If he wanted to take sides with the Schutzstaffel, Sophia would be on her own.

"No. I *hate* Genitz. Besides, I would never argue with a decision my beloved Sophia made."

"Then give me command of security personnel assigned to the development bureau. I need more soldiers."

"Sophia, you haven't been very personable recently."

Ignoring Daian, who was mumbling sadly, Sophia hurried to reorganize her unit.

There were about four hundred Schutzstaffel soldiers surrounding the bureau.

By contrast, development bureau personnel amounted to no more than fifty, including Sophia's guards and security staff.

"Didn't someone once say that the attacking side needs over three times the defending side?"

Daian asked as if reading Sophia's mind.

"That's just a rule of thumb."

Since the development bureau handled military secrets, it had strong security mechanisms already in place.

However, the security was only to stop someone from infiltrating the organization and sneaking onto its premises.

Armed insurgents from Wiltia, invading in full force through the front gate, presented a completely unexpected situation.

"I wonder if we can hold until morning. It's already late autumn, so the nights are long now."

Daian's relaxed voice was annoying Sophia more than usual today.

"You …!"

"So I have a better idea."



Sophia was about to yell, but before she could, the eccentric genius with the nickname Sorcerer put his index finger to his mouth and made a suggestion.

In Organbaelz, Thanksgiving is the last Thursday in October.

Wiltia, and most other nations, celebrated Thanksgiving on the *first* Thursday, but the people of Organbaelz had decided to change the date to the birthday of a saint in Pelfe that was closer to the anniversary of the opening of Baelz Mine.

Merging many celebrations, it was the most cheerful day of the year.

"What a problem!"

Inside Tockerbrot, Sven was muttering while cleaning.

"Are you talking about Lud?" asked Jacob, who had come to help.

If there was anything troubling this skillful, silver-haired waitress, there was a 99.99 percent chance that it was related to her beloved master Lud.

"Yes!"

She agreed and sighed once more.

The happiness of Thanksgiving dispelled everyday gloominess and there would be a bountiful feast.

There would be salted pork spare ribs, smoked beef, baked whole chicken, and lamb sausages.

And all-you-can-drink wine and beer would be available.

Plus lots of sweets.

Tockerbrot, Lud's bakery, had been asked to bake those sweets.

"Do bakeries have that much to do on Thanksgiving?"

Sven answered Jacob proudly.

"Yes, they do. The sweets for the festival are called *Königskuchen*. There's a sweetbread like a brioche, pies like kuchen, fried bread with jam inside like a Berliner, pies like galettes, and so much more!"

The shop had received an order for *all* the sweets for that day.

"Oh … Yeah, come to think of it, there are different kinds of sweets every year, but usually they are nothing special. They never taste that great."

Until this year, there had been sugar-covered fried bread, cookies made by regular folk, and cherry pies that were stale because they had been ordered and delivered from another town.

There was no denying that they had been boring and mediocre sweets for such a special festival.

"Didn't we start selling lemon pies last week?"

"They were very popular."

Since they added refrigerating equipment, Tockerbrot's sweets menu had grown.

The reaction of the townsfolk was enthusiastic, which was why they asked Lud to provide the sweets this year.

"To be honest, I want master to turn down the offer."

Sven complained with a troubled look on her face.

"We can afford the ingredients, but we won't make any profit. It'll just take too much effort, time, and manpower."

Instead of a profitable work order, it was more like being a festival sponsor. They wanted Lud to provide sweets instead of donating money.

"But he's willing to do it, right?"

"That's right. He's stubborn and won't budge."

Lud had been delighted when he heard the news from Marlene.

He already had work piling up, but in his spare time he researched sweets for the festival.

"It's unusual for Master to show such enthusiasm."

Sven had tried in subtle ways to convince him to refuse, but it hadn't stopped Lud.

"I guess that's understandable, considering what happened last year."

"Last year?"

Sven looked at Jacob, who wore a bitter smile with his arms crossed.

"Um, it was last year when he came to this town. You know, people avoided him for a long time."

Lud Langart, who was a kind and loyal man, had one drawback.

He scared people.

Women ran away, children cried, adult men got the shakes, and even thugs were afraid.

Once, after encountering Lud, a man had handed over his wallet,

bowed low to the ground, and begged Lud to spare his family.

For a whole year, until Sven had appeared and dramatically reformed management of the business, no one visited the bakery. Lud's appearance was that fierce.

"That's why he closed the shop last Thanksgiving, kept the curtains closed, and stayed quiet inside all day."

He didn't want to upset innocent people by attending the festival.

"Poor Master!"

Sven couldn't stop tears from filling her eyes. She covered her mouth and sobbed.

"But this year they asked him, right? Of course that would delight him! He'd try it even at the risk of his life!"

It was no exaggeration to say that Lud's life depended on his passion for bread.

The bread he baked pleased others. With that as encouragement, he made baking his life's work and had undertaken its challenges.

Honesty and hard work were characteristic of Wiltians, but Lud possessed them more than most.

"Hmmmmm …"

Arms crossed, Sven pondered.

Lud Langart was without a doubt the most important thing in the world to her.

She would face any difficult problem or strong opponent for him.

However, this was troublesome because Lud often put himself in peril.

"He's a former soldier, so maybe he pushes himself too hard."

Jacob said this with a wry smile.

"Oh? You misunderstand, Jacob."

"Huh? But I thought the military was so strict and dirty and sad that it makes you miss home. And they make you put up with it while saying, "It's for the nation!"

"It's not quite like that."

In the military, the most important thing was to train soldiers efficiently and correctly.

In order to do that, a soldier's vital organs and mental state needed to be in top condition at all times.

The military provided army medics and medical facilities in case of injury and sickness. To maintain the soldiers' strength, it paid close attention to meal menus and nutritional balance. Moreover, the military had to provide appropriate leave and rotate troops in order to avoid fatigue buildup.

"For soldiers to perform efficiently, rest is necessary. Master was an ace pilot, so even though he was sent to areas with fierce fighting, he was so successful that he received a lot of leave."

"Oh, so the military is solid when it comes to that stuff."

"Well, I've heard that some people performed so many heroic exploits that they accrued too much leave, and since taking it was difficult, they gave credit to others."

"Some people are weird."

Jacob looked astonished.

"....."

Seeing that, Sven fell silent for a second.

"Huh? What? Did I say something wrong?"

"No, no, no … It's nothing."

Sven and Lud had recently learned that Jacob's father was a former Hunter Unit pilot, like Lud. And he had been an extraordinary ace.

He was so strong that he had accumulated a lot of leave as a reward, but he was a devil-may-care man who had shared his kills with junior pilots.

There were things that Jacob was better off not knowing.

Jacob knew his father was a soldier but not that he had been a monster-class ace pilot.

Following the wishes of Jacob's mother Charlotte, they decided not to mention it until Jacob was a little older.

"Anyway, the military is much more logical than people in the outside imagine."

It was often said that the military used human beings like tools, and that was exactly why it treated people properly and with care.

The outside world had no right to judge military affairs when it was full of dishonest businessmen who took advantage of their employees' poverty, and didn't give them sufficient wages or vacation.

"Yeah, well, you know … If the military tried to handle everything idealistically, then it wouldn't be able to win battles that

it actually can win."

Sven spoke as a former Hunter Unit.

It doesn't matter how much enthusiasm you summoned, or how many pretty proverbs you spouted, a car won't go without gas.

Because she was a machine, Sven noticed things that humans found hard to see.

"That's why we need to have the proper framework in place to pursue lofty aims."

In the meantime, they needed to add fresh workers in order to accomplish Lud's goals right now.

As quickly as possible.

"Isn't there anyone—even if they aren't that skilled—who has what it takes to be a baker?!"

Reality isn't that convenient.

Sven knew that, but the question slipped from her mouth anyway.

A man and a woman were walking along a street in Organbaelz.

They were too close in age to be father and daughter, but they didn't resemble each other like a brother and sister.

The young man had somewhat dull eyes. He squinted as if he disliked sunlight and pulled the bandana holding back his unruly hair down over his eyes.

"We're about there," the young man murmured.

Tockerbrot was close. The shop's name written on his document was the location of their target.

"Don't let your guard down! But you're the Wolf Man, so there's no chance you'll screw this up!"

The girl walking next to him said this with a cold, sinister smile, not in keeping with her looks.

She had blonde hair and blue eyes and was around fourteen or fifteen years old.

She was too young to be considered a woman and she looked childish.

"Can't you lighten up the way you talk?"

She had a very sharp way of speaking.

If she could at least smile cheerfully, she would be adorable for her age.

"What?! Do you understand your position here?!"

The girl tried to be menacing with a deep, threatening tone in her voice.

"That's not what I meant. I'm saying they'll find out who we are. It took a lot of effort to make you look like that, but you're gonna ruin it."

"Urgh!"

Her ferocity was lost on the young man, and he answered her casually. The girl finally understood and hurriedly put her hands on her cheeks.

She did this as if to loosen muscles that she didn't ordinarily use.

"How does this look, my big brother?"

The girl smiled as cheerfully as possible, with her cheeks, the space between her eyes, and her temple twitching.

"I appreciate the effort."

The young man decided to grade her effort later.

"Well, here we are."

The bakery was a little bigger than reported in the document.

Apparently, the shop was expanded after a small fire, when the owner claimed the land next door.

"Well, shall we go?"

Despite the man's chiding, the girl's eyes had regained their murderous stare.

She reached into her pocket and was about to pull out what was hidden inside.

"Don't. I'll go in first. Don't do anything until I give you a sign."

He stopped her, exasperation creeping into his tone.

"What?!"

With a glare, the girl's voice rose in anger, but the young man pressed the point.

"You brought me all this way to assassinate him. You called on me because *you* can't beat him, right? Then follow my instructions."

"Urgh!"

Unable to reply, the girl bit her lips.

Oh man ··· How is this gonna go?

With a weary look on his face, he opened the door to the shop.

"Oh! W-welcome to Tockerbrot!"

Reacting to the *cling-clang* of the bell, a small waitress stammered as she greeted them.

"....."

It smelled delicious inside.

It was the tantalizing smell of sugar and freshly baked bread.

The shop was redolent with mouth-watering aromas.

"It doesn't seem like he's here …"

Behind him, the girl mumbled something, but he didn't catch it.

He scanned the shelves of the shop.

There were croissants, coupe bread, Danishes, focaccia, Vienna bread, brioches and bagels.

It was hard to believe that this was just a country bakery. There was a plentiful selection of products and they all looked delectable.

So delectable compared with the salty, rock-like bread he had been fed in the underground prison.

"Huh? We have customers?"

Someone else entered from the back of the shop.

For a moment, the girl behind him tensed, but the young man didn't budge.

Just hearing a voice, he could tell whether it belonged to a boy or a man.

This wasn't his target. He must be the boy named Jacob.

"Huh? I haven't seen you two around here."

Right away, Jacob engaged them in conversation.

"……!!"

But the girl was increasingly jittery and tense.

The young man silently sighed.

He was amazed, and doubted there was anyone less suited to an undercover mission.

"Yes. We just arrived. There was a recruiting call for new hands to work in the mine in town."

"I see."

With his arm, the man hid the girl's face, which had broken out in a cold sweat, and he answered as naturally as possible to avoid raising any alarm.

They had indeed arrived in town a short while ago.

When lying, sticking to the truth as much as possible is more successful than spinning falsehoods.

There was less chance of slipping up and revealing one's true colors.

"You've got a sharp eye!"

He said this to Jacob in a friendly voice and with earnest surprise.

It was a small town, but the population was at least one thousand.

It would be surprising if the boy recognized the faces of everyone in town, even if he grew up here.

"Yeah. After all, I've never seen that girl behind you."

"Huh?"

He didn't understand.

"You remember the face of every girl in town?!"

The diminutive waitress spoke with an amazed expression on her face.

"No, even *I* can't do that. Only teens, twenty-somethings and thirty-somethings."

"That's a lot!!"

The girl was stunned at his reply.

"Heh … Heh heh …"

The young man laughed dryly. The boy's reply had been surprising, but now he understood.

"....."

However, the girl, still half-concealed behind the man, remained stiff.

Apparently, on her previous mission, the girl had tried to kidnap this boy, Jacob.

And Jacob had seen her face.

So it was natural that she would be tense, but it wasn't necessary given the effort they had put into her disguise.

After much fuss, he and the corporal had convinced her to dye her hair blonde and wear newly invented colored compact lenses—the existence of which was still secret—that fit directly onto the eyeballs and would change the color of her eyes.

If she presented herself boldly, he would merely notice a resemblance. But her nervousness was asking him to be suspicious.

"Sorry, my little sister is shy around strangers."

So he decided to rectify the situation.

"Oh? Hmm …"

Jacob's expression didn't look entirely satisfied.

The boy has good intuition …

Some people are like that.

He was the type to catch on quickly and see things clearly. He didn't miss anything even slightly out of place.

Perhaps Jacob had been born with this ability rather than gaining it through practice.

"I've heard from people in town that the bread here is delicious. We came to buy lunch. What do you recommend?"

He forced a change in their conversation.

Besides, they had come here as customers.

It would be strange to come to a bakery and not talk about bread.

"These casse-croûtes are tasty. I think they would be perfect for lunch."

Casse-croûte meant a light meal.

As the name suggested, it was a baguette with ham, cheese, and vegetables inside. It was a perfect sandwich for a snack.

"Um, if y-you want, you can eat over there! And you can have coffee or tea!"

The waitress at Jacob's side stammered as she made her sales pitch.

She appeared to be extremely shy and awkward. It was doubtful

that such a girl could be a good waitress, but it was appealing how hard she tried to speak with the customers.

The girl pointed at an eating space with several tables and chairs.

"I see … Then we'll take that and … this apple Danish looks delicious, too!"

"It's v-very tasty!"

The girl broke into a bright smile.

"Um, that's my favorite of all our breads! It's yummy! Uh-huh!"

The waitress clearly liked it. She started talking enthusiastically but then remembered herself and hurriedly resumed speaking politely and professionally.

"Heh …"

The young man chuckled.

"I'll take that, too. It sounds like you really recommend it!"

"Y-yes, Sir! Um, would you like coffee or tea?"

With a smile, the waitress asked another question, perhaps from happiness because a customer had purchased what she recommended.

"Which do *you* want?"

The man asked the girl behind him, and she glared at him sharply.

"Hey, what're you thinking?!"

She hissed at him under her breath.

"Do we have the free time to *eat* here?!"

"If we relax and sit down rather than wandering around the

shop, they won't be suspicious. Use common sense."

"Urgh!"

The girl bit her lip again in frustration at the young man winning the argument.

"Okay, two coffees, please."

"Comin' up!"

The waitress couldn't have been very different in age from the girl behind him, but she responded brightly and bounced back to the kitchen.

"Let's see … Hmm, they *do* look tasty!"

The man sat in a chair in the dining space and picked up his casse-croûte.

Inside, there was only ham, cheese and vegetables, but this kind of simple food was the most delicious.

"Tch! Why do I have to buy and eat something made by that man?!"

The girl next to him was still complaining.

"Yes … it's good. I haven't had bread this delicious in a few years!"

Since returning to Wiltia, and even before that in Filbarneu, he'd had nothing good to eat.

"He uses quality wheat, but it's not just that. The bread is firm, but it has a nice texture when you take a bite. He must have made this specifically to be sandwich bread. It's designed to taste best when enjoyed with a filling."

The exterior was crispy, but the interior was puffy and soft, and where the two met was fresh lettuce, ham and cheese. Everything blended together and increased the flavor beyond that of the individual ingredients.

"Hey … are you seriously savoring the taste?!"

The girl said this in astonishment, but he couldn't help it because delicious food is simply delicious food.

"You should eat."

"Me?!"

"It will be unnatural if you don't. It'd be strange for anyone to resist this scrumptious bread."

"Urgh!"

She had come here disguised as a regular citizen in order to murder a guy who might be in the back of the shop.

Thus, she had to do everything a normal person would normally do.

It was simple logic.

"Okay, I'll eat it!"

"Yes, and make it look as though it tastes delectable!"

"Urgh …"

She was irritated, but she put the apple Danish to her mouth, took a bite and began chewing with a spiteful look.

"It isn't *awful*, but …"

"Can't you just admit that it tastes awesome?"

Faced with her stubbornness, the young man sighed out loud

this time.

"You don't understand how I feel."

As she mumbled and reached for her coffee mug, she raised her voice.

"Hey! There ain't no—I mean … Oh dear! I don't see any sugar …"

There was a small jar of milk but no pot of sugar.

"Coffee is better black."

"I can't drink it without sugar!"

He was about to call her childish but remained silent.

"S-sorry!"

The waitress rushed over with a pot of sugar cubes.

The man felt sorry and was about to say something pleasant to the waitress when a woman came in.

"*I'll* carry that for you!"

A waitress with silver hair and red eyes whisked the sugar pot away from the girl and approached their table, wearing a smile.

Who is this woman?!

A chill ran down the young man's back.

At a glance, she was just a woman.

Just a … No, she was too beautiful to be in a rural town.

She had flowing silver hair, eyes like jewelry, and long arms and legs without any blemishes or moles. Most men would lose their souls and go weak in the knees if she stared at them with that smile in her innocent eyes.

Her appearance was unusual but not abnormal.

Rather, the atmosphere around her was intense and spirited. The aura she emitted was uncommon.

She gave the impression of a battlefield in the form of a lovely young woman.

She has the ferocity that even a veteran back from battle doesn't have?!

The young man had repeatedly told the girl with him to behave naturally.

But now he couldn't help feeling the need to defend himself.

If he were just a regular guy, then she would just look like a pretty girl to him. But he felt a kind of terror of her.

"Hurry up and give it here!"

However, the girl with him seemed completely unaware of how unusual this girl was.

"Sure. How many would you like, officer of the Schutzstaffel?"

"Let's see … Three— ?!"

The unusual waitress had asked so naturally that the girl, Schutzstaffel Lieutenant Hildegard von Hessen, answered in a military manner.

"How did you know?!"

Hilde's words came out in a questioning scream, tinged with fear.

Her cry revealed clearly who she was.

"To waste my master's final show of mercy, you must really want to die!"

The silver-haired woman's voice was extraordinarily lovely.

But her words were too sinister for such a lovely voice.

"Argh!"

And yet, Hilde believed there was a chance for her to recover.

She mistakenly thought Sven was just a waitress.

She pulled out the gun hidden in her pocket and tried to point it at Sven.

"Gah!!"

However, Sven, seeing Hildegard's movement, was quicker and sprang into action, instantly knocking Hilde's gun to the floor.

"You incorrigible snot!"

The smile vanished from Sven's face.

This time her voice was cold enough to freeze water.

Uh-oh!

The young man made his move.

There was no doubt that the woman would kill Hilde if he didn't.

He snatched up the fallen gun.

He pointed it at Sven—but it was no use.

The woman moved at a speed that surpassed human comprehension.

At such close range, she would just dodge.

Should he take someone hostage?

Without turning his head, he glanced around the shop.

Both the little waitress and the boy named Jacob were too far away for him to secure before Sven would intervene.

In fact, they were hiding behind the counter.

What a woman!!

Hilde's disguise wasn't perfect, but she still was hard to recognize at first glance. Nonetheless, Sven had penetrated the camouflage in a moment, and had the children out of the way without attracting notice.

Now what do I do?!

The young man—the Wolf Man—realized all this in less than a second.

It was very quick thinking, but when facing Sven, he would be allowed no more time.

However, a savior appeared unexpectedly.

"What's the matter, Sven? What's all this about?"

A large man stuck his face out from the room in the back of the shop.

"Master! Don't come out!"

Suddenly desperation showed on Sven's face, which until now had looked like a cruel executioner's.

It was unexpected and disarming.

This woman, who had shown such ferocity and had an aura of mystery, had given voice to her own weakness.

He wanted to ask why, but the reason didn't matter.

What was important was the end result.

"Don't move."

With his eyes on Sven, as she held Hilde, Heidrig the Wolf Man—

considered to be Wiltia's most brutal special forces soldier—leapt up and pointed his gun at Lud Langart.

Oh no!!

Silently, Sven bitterly cursed her own carelessness.

After finishing deliveries, she had spotted a couple of customers and noticed immediately that one of them was Hildegard, whom she and Lud had encountered during a previous incident in the mine.

The reason she recognized Hilde was simple. It was the girl's voice.

A human being wouldn't have noticed, but Sven had registered Hilde's voice patterns in her database.

The girl's voice had been audible through the Hunter Unit speaker when Hilde piloted it that night in the mine as she mercilessly pursued Sven and Lud. There was no mistake about it.

So Sven had spurred Jacob and Milly to hide behind the counter, and tried to capture the girl.

However, the calm, composed, and skillful waitress had failed in her plan.

She had acted without saying anything to Lud, who was working in the oven room.

She didn't simply forget.

Sven was driven by an inability to forgive.

By coming here, Hilde had broken her promise to Sven's beloved master Lud, who had spared Hilde in a remarkable act of mercy.

Moreover, she had stepped inside Tockerbrot, which was Lud's holy ground.

Sven attempted to catch Hilde quickly before Lud noticed so she could terminate her in the cruelest way possible.

However, that plan had backfired.

"Don't move. I have no idea how fast you are, but you're definitely slower than I am when pulling a trigger."

Heidrig's gun was pointed at Lud's head.

Even from this distance, it would cause a critical injury.

"Urgh! Why you …! Don't you get it?! I have a hostage, too!"

Sven seized Hilde and twisted her arms behind her back.

Sven's fingers were around Hilde's neck. The strength of her grip would easily break Hilde's neck.

"D-don't worry about me! J-just kill him!"

As Hilde shouted, her voice and body were shaking.

She had a lot of pride, but apparently she wasn't ready to die yet.

"If you can't hide your fear, then at least keep quiet!"

Sven yelled at the girl, who had interrupted.

"……"

Lud was the only one who was still calm.

"Why aren't you upset?"

Heidrig, who was pointing his gun at Lud, was so surprised he blurted out the question.

"You're not scared by my face, so you must be a soldier."

"How could you know that?!"

Only veterans wouldn't cringe seeing Lud's face for the first time.

"Does that mean … Oh, I see …"

Lud looked a bit disappointed.

A soldier had to recognize and assess a situation quickly, or chances were high that the soldier would die.

So Lud had immediately grasped the situation in the moment between poking his face out and having a gun pointed at him.

"Master …"

Sven stared at Lud.

She had hoped for some way to escape.

Lud was considered a heroic Hunter Unit pilot.

But that didn't mean he wasn't also specialized in fighting with his body.

With the support of the installed AI, maneuvering a Hunter Unit was possible alone.

If the machine had operational failure, however, the pilot must return to friendly territory from a battleground all by himself.

Therefore, Hunter Unit pilots were trained in firearms, martial arts, and other survival skills. Since they didn't wear armor, many were strong and highly skilled in fighting with their bare hands.

"Lemme go! I said, lemme go, you foul woman!"

But there were also many soldiers like Hilde, who was flopping around and fussing as she tried to break free of Sven's grip.

"Hrngh …"

Lud groaned uncertainly.

"Well, what should I do?"

"Tch! What a mess!"

Neither Heidrig nor Sven could make a move since they held each other's king hostage.

"Lemme go!!"

Only Hilde continued to scream.

They were deadlocked.

They could release each other's hostages at the same moment, but without a barrier between them, Lud and Sven were far stronger in combat in such circumstances.

Heidrig probably knew that, because he wasn't making any careless moves.

"Damn it, Heidrig! What are you doing? And you call yourself the Wolf Man?! Just kill him already!"

Sven's face froze hearing Hilde's words.

Oh, that's … He's younger than I expected. What kind of a monster did this little snot bring here?!

The legend of the Wolf Man had been in her database when she was an active Hunter Unit.

He was a man hated in both Filbarneu and Wiltia as the most brutal special forces soldier.

"You're … the Wolf Man?"

Lud's face also registered surprise, but in a slightly different way.

"Heidrig … Wolf Man … Oh … I see."

It was as if he remembered something, or saw someone

unexpectedly.

Master …?

No sooner could Sven wonder at the slight change in her master's expression than Lud made his move.

"—?!"

He tried to seize Heidrig's arm with a movement so swift and bold that he appeared oblivious to the unlocked safety on Heidrig's gun, with its hammer cocked, and bullets loaded.

"Agh!"

However, Lud wasn't able to seize his arm.

Heidrig immediately spun his body halfway around and tried to place the muzzle of his gun against the back of Lud's head, but Lud crouched and tried to break free.

Before Lud could do that, Heidrig jumped to avoid a foot sweep and then unleashed a kick from that unstable position.

"……!!"

Instead of evading the kick, Lud used his thick arm as a shield.

Simultaneously, he rose and threw a backfist, but Heidrig leaned back, narrowly avoiding the blow.

"Ooh! Agh … Huh? Whoa! Whah?!"

Forgetting about her pinned arms, Hilde gawked at the fierce exchange.

Her eyes couldn't follow the battle between these two men, both so skilled in fighting.

"Master, what are you—"

Sven's eyes, however, observed their battle with precision.

Heidrig's hand still held the gun, but Lud moved as if this was inconsequential.

After they each landed a few blows, Heidrig pointed his gun once more, but he was a little too slow and Lud's palm struck his stomach.

"Oof!!"

Heidrig's body slammed against the door and flew out the front of the shop.

The gun he had been holding fell to the floor.

Lud stomped on it and kicked it to the other side of the shop.

"....."

Heidrig raised his upper body and looked at Lud in silence.

"Why … didn't you use it yourself?"

Lud pointed at Heidrig's sleeve.

A hidden knife was barely visible inside the man's sleeve.

"And that's not all. You must have more inside your coat."

"How do you know *that*?!"

"I could tell by the way you carried yourself and from the sound of your footsteps, which were too heavy for your weight."

Heidrig swayed and stood. He grasped his coat with both hands and showed what was inside.

A few grenades were hanging there.

".....?!"

Sven's eyes widened at the sight.

If he threw just one of those inside the shop, there would be an

inescapable explosion.

Even if Sven used all her strength, there was no guarantee she could protect even Lud.

And Jacob and Milly were still hiding behind the counter.

"Well done, Heidrig! Use them! Kill them all!"

"I said shut up! Get that through your head, you dumb brat!"

In a rage, Sven yelled at the ranting Hilde, as if she might bite her.

"Heidrig, was it? I have your friend! If you try anything foolish …"

She was threatening him with the death of his comrade.

But after saying that, she stopped.

The Wolf Man was a serious criminal, a former special forces agent of Wiltia who had eventually betrayed his own nation.

If necessary, he certainly wouldn't hesitate to abandon his cohort.

"Sh-she's right … It's okay … So just do it!"

Perhaps Hilde had finally realized the danger, or perhaps her pride was forcing her to bluff, because she was pale and trembling as she ordered Heidrig to attack.

Uh-oh … This is bad …

The way he had flown toward the door had been unfortunate.

There was no way for them to escape.

"I've lost."

There was no way Heidrig would declare defeat.

"Please, just spare my life."

Even less likely was that he would beg for his life.

"You see me begging …"

And there was no chance he would bow before them, but …

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

Oddly, Sven and Hilde made the same sound.

Heidrig cast aside his hidden knives, grenades and a few bottles of some kind of chemical. Then he kneeled where he was and lowered his head toward Lud.

"What are you doing, Heidrig? Are you nuts?! There's no way this will persuade them to let us go!"

Hilde raised her voice in panic.

"No, Master! Stay cautious! He may still be planning something!"

Thinking this could be some kind of trap, Sven didn't let down her guard.

"Okay, you can raise your head now."

Lud, however, simply forgave him.

"Whaaat?!"

"Whaaat?!"

Again, Sven and Hilde raised their voices together.

"Master, what're you thinking?! Th-they're—!!"

Sven, who thought she thoroughly understood the depths of Lud's good soul, was utterly amazed at this.

"I can't understand this!"

Hilde was trying to kill them. No good could come from forgiving

someone who had been pardoned once but didn't honor the kindness she had received.

"Yes … You're right. They must take responsibility for their actions."

"I understand."

At Lud's words, Heidrig reached out his arm as if expecting something.

"Do as you like. Break an arm or two. Cut them off if you wish."

"Wh …"

"What are you saying?!"

He was so compliant that Hilde and Sven were at a loss for words.

"Very well. In that case …"

And then Lud gave them his decision.

"Can you bake bread?"

No one expected this.

"Huh?"

Heidrig looked befuddled.

"What?!"

Hilde's jaw dropped.

"WhhaaaAAAT?!"

Sven couldn't make any sense of her master's mind.

So all three raised their voices in surprise.

CHAPTER 3
RECRUIT TRAINING

Thirty minutes later, the security corps had not announced their disarmament and surrender to the Schutzstaffel, still surrounding the development bureau.

Far from it, they had gathered wood, blocks, and even tables and chairs to erect barricades at the front gate. They were ready for firm resistance.

"The fool! And she's the Devil's Black Spear?!"

Sophia was a hero who had served admirably in the recent Great European War, and her nickname was the Devil's Black Spear.

She had, however, achieved her glorious victories while piloting a Hunter Unit.

Captain Delz, the commanding officer of the Schutzstaffel force, underestimated Sophia, and treated her like a little girl without her armor.

"Bring the armored vehicles, followed by infantry! Trample them! Grind those rebels to dust!"

The Schutzstaffel had a devastating force, while the bureau's guards were only armed with firearms the size of machine guns.

With armored vehicles as shields, they pushed through with overwhelming numbers, and it appeared that everything would be over in a matter of seconds.

That's what Delz *thought*, anyway.

PTONK!

"Huh?"

There was the sound of a heavy dent, and the lead armored vehicle rose into the air as if in slow motion.

"What the …?!"

A swirling explosion immediately followed. An armored vehicle exploded in flames with a loud boom, and burnt up without a trace.

"W-what just—?!"

Delz gaped in confusion as a flaming tire from the armored vehicle rolled past his feet.

PTONK! PTONK!

Strange sounds rang out.

One after another, Schutzstaffel armored vehicles exploded in swirling fire and smoke with each sound.

"What is this?! Some kind of magic?!"

"W-wow …"

On the rooftop of the development bureau, Private First Class Sariya quietly marveled at the spectacle.

"What kind of monster is that?"

Standing next to her, Sophia gawked at the absurd sight before her.

"What do you think? It's a heavy anti-tank gun called a Gerlich."

Only Daian was laughing with relish.

In front of them was an anti-tank weapon like a giant's pistol. The barrel alone was two meters long.

"You call this thing a *gun*?!"

Sophia was incredulous.

The anti-tank weapon didn't have wheels. It served as a fixed battery and weighed over one hundred kilograms.

To call that a gun defied common sense, at least when compared with existing firearms.

"No, this is indeed a gun. It's a handgun … for a Hunter Unit!"

"Oh, I see!"

Although Sophia herself was a Hunter Unit pilot, she hadn't made the connection.

The size of this weapon was perfect for an Iron Giant over eight meters tall.

"Not only is the gun itself unique, but its projectiles are special armor-piercing, high-explosive shells."

Armor-piercing shells are cannonballs made with heavy mass for penetrating enemy armor.

High explosives are cannonballs that contain explosive, all the more powerful because they detonate on impact.

"Armor-piercing high-explosive shells are unbeatable weapons that explode as they break through enemy armor and blow targets open from the inside! Furthermore, the Gerlich fires them at four times the speed of sound!"

The weight of a shell wrapped in tungsten alloy was over two

hundred grams.

Against this weight, strength, and speed, an armored vehicle was no more than paper.

"As you hear the sound of the discharge, you see a burst of flame. From the target's point of view, there's a massive explosion nearby, simultaneous with the sound."

Daian explained this with the joy of a child showing off his toys.

"For the target, it's like having a nightmare."

Sophia felt a chill standing near the Gerlich.

"But it's still in preproduction, so I only have this one."

When Daian heard that the Schutzstaffel would invade, he offered Sophia his weapons in preproduction at the development bureau.

Each one was a new weapon that they were deploying for the first time in actual combat.

They used the Gerlich in hopes of surprising their opponent, and it worked well.

"Hmm … The explosions come more quickly than I expected. It'll blow up armored vehicles, but tanks could be difficult. So there's room for improvement."

Daian laughed delightedly and wrote down the results of this "test drive" in his notebook.

"You look like you're having fun."

Sophia observed this coldly to Daian.

"Of course. Test operations aren't easy. There's no point if I can't test new weapons in a situation as close as possible to actual

combat."

There was no point to spinning theory at a desk if it didn't match conditions in battle.

But weapons couldn't be introduced directly into battle, and testing on human beings raised humanitarian issues.

"But *they* showed up uninvited! This is the first time I've ever appreciated Genitz! Ha ha ha!"

Sophia recoiled before Daian's glee.

"You'd be frightening as an enemy, but you're disgusting as an ally. You're the type I would never want to be friends with!"

"Aha! So I'm the type to be your *boyfriend*?"

"Your ears must be as impaired as your head!"

This quarrel was going nowhere.

"Captain! We have a problem. The Schutzstaffel is …"

"What's wrong?"

Sariya screamed as though she could take no more.

"They've abandoned their tanks and are marching toward the front gate!"

"Tch! Deploying a force without consideration for the danger is reprehensible!"

The Gerlich was indeed powerful, but it could only be used against a single target.

Since they only had one, it didn't matter how many times they fired. If the opponent was marching in large numbers, it was beyond the weapon's ability.

"Oh, their fighting methods are so despicable! Hey, bring me that."

Daian still sounded relaxed as he issued the order.

"What's that?"

A mobile battery with six tubes was brought out.

It looked more like a pipe instrument's ghost than a weapon.

"Aim wherever you want and fire at random."

Daian's order was vague.

Guards pointed the tubes at the sky and fired shells accordingly.

The sound of the discharge was flat—*Poom! Poom! Poom!*—and then six shells were falling in arcs toward the Schutzstaffel below.

The swirls of explosion after explosion followed.

The blast wave blew the Schutzstaffel back.

"A multiple rocket launcher?"

Sophia was flabbergasted.

A rocket launcher fired shells across a long distance to destroy an entire area rather than a single spot. However, it couldn't fire quickly, and it only covered a limited area.

"This is called a Nebelwerfer."

And yet, by dropping high explosives in many spots, this weapon could cover far more ground than a regular rocket launcher.

This too was a nightmare for the soldiers.

"Originally, this was developed as a smoke mortar for installation in Hunter Units."

A smoke mortar released a smokescreen to impede enemy

attacks.

"It's impressive!"

As she listened to Daian's explanation, Sophia was astounded.

"But its actual purpose is to release poisonous gas."

"Wait a second. What did you just say?"

Everyone in Organbaelz knew the Tockerbrot Bakery's bread was delicious.

The townsfolk also knew something else.

The bakery's employees increased every now and then.

Come to think of it, a silver-haired girl joined the bakery as a waitress six months ago, and then a nun and an orphan girl from the church atop the hill, and even the young owner of a repair shop that had recently closed were added.

And today, the townsfolk would see another new face.

"Why do I have to do this?!"

"Don't look surly in front of customers, Miss Schutzstaffel!"

Today customers saw an unfamiliar blonde girl alongside the silver-haired waitress. And as they tended the shop, the atmosphere was strained.

"What's wrong with you? Smile, Miss Schutzstaffel! Can't you smile, Miss Schutzstaffel? Now *I'm* the one who has completely lost her smile!!"

Sven's usual charming sales smile disappeared, her cheeks were

twitching angrily, and eventually she let out a scream.

"This was all your stupid boss's idea!"

"Watch your mouth or I'll twist your neck! About 540 degrees!"

Hilde glared at Sven and Sven glared back as she made her threat.

"Argh! Why did master make this decision?!"

Sven would do anything—body and soul—to fulfill her beloved master's wishes, but she suffered agony over this.

Heidrig and Hildegard had come to kill Lud.

For some reason Heidrig had admitted defeat and groveled before Lud, even though he had enough strength to fight.

How could Lud trust them? Even after once receiving pardon, Hilde had attacked again.

And Lud had forgiven her again.

If that had been the end of it, she could have accepted it.

But how could he hire them to work in the bakery?!

Lud had ordered them to work at his shop in exchange for letting them live.

Of course, Sven had tried to stop him.

She had mounted a fierce effort to convince him to change his mind.

Lud just looked troubled and said, "But we're short on labor."

Even if we are short—and it is true that we don't have enough employees—even Ellis would be far better!

Ellis was the name of the cat at Tockerbrot.

Of course, it would be impossible for a cat to knead bread dough.

It would be impossible, but a cat wouldn't try to kill Lud!

Heidrig the Wolf Man … Such a man would never admit defeat so easily …

She didn't know his real name, but along the western battlefront during the Great European War, she had heard his nickname, the Wolf Man, from both friend and foe.

The name Wolf Man figured in many incidents, whether true or not, such as an attempt to assassinate the president of Filbarneu, the plot to bring down the Domino Fort on the border with Wiltia, and the foiled uprising of allied forces against Wiltia with stolen information.

Some considered him the most dangerous man on the continent of Europea.

He must be planning something … I'm certain of it!

Lud and Heidrig were alone in the oven room, which Sven could reach in just ten steps. She was uneasy at the thought of what might happen while she worked.

Sven thought only Lud and Heidrig were in the oven room, but Milly was there, too.

"Wow … you're good!"

Milly said this with genuine admiration.

"I'm not *that* good!"

Heidrig was kneading bread dough on a worktable.

Kneading dough was the heart of making bread.

Mixing flour, water, salt, and yeast stimulates the gluten. It's said that the texture and fluffiness of the bread depends on this process.

Milly was learning how to bake bread under Lud's teaching, but it was more difficult than it seemed.

Her weight and muscle strength were barely adequate, and learning how to apply that strength evenly for fine adjustments required lots of practice by baking bread over and over.

"I worked in the kitchen when I was in the military a long time ago."

"Huh? I thought soldiers only ate canned foods."

"That's a big misconception."

Heidrig smiled wryly at Milly's honest surprise.

During wartime, meals had a big influence on a soldier's morale.

A long time ago, in order to prevent soldiers from stealing food, the military intentionally made the food taste awful. But, perhaps because of higher stress levels, the violent and even fatal incidents increased. More importantly, the bad food had a disastrous effect on critical missions.

"It's hard for anyone to be deprived of good food. And that includes soldiers, too."

The army was now careful to serve the best food possible unless intense battle prevented it, or they were unable to secure supplies.

Professional cooks were often hired as civilian employees and paid high wages.

Heidrig placed bread he had kneaded on a shelf to mature, and then picked up some matured dough and divided it into pieces.

"Did you know that about me?"

He asked Lud Langart, who was working with him.

"I couldn't tell just by seeing you."

Lud answered casually as he adjusted the fire in the oven.

"It's just, when we were fighting, you were careful not to knock bread from the shelves."

During their encounter a few days ago, Lud and Heidrig had grappled inside the shop.

Usually, during a fight, it's natural to use anything that might help you defeat your opponent.

Heidrig could have thrown bread from the shelves, or bottles of jam and marmalade, or overturned the desk, but he hadn't. Instead, he had taken care to collide with Lud so that they wouldn't disturb anything.

"People who make food should know enough to treat it carefully. That's why I asked you to work here."

Lud had asked Heidrig if he knew anything about baking bread, and Heidrig had answered, "A little."

Based solely on that answer, Lud told Heidrig and Hilde to work at Tockerbrot.

But, it was more like he had *invited* them.

"I don't get it … What are you thinking?"

It may seem strange to ponder such a question while quietly

baking bread, but Heidrig couldn't understand Lud's intentions.

The Silver Wolf had been among the top five Hunter Unit pilots in Wiltia.

He went into battle in his teens, and within three years, was performing heroic exploits at the end of the Great War.

I can't understand why he ever walked away from his war record and became a baker.

Lud could have risen within the ranks of the regular military or the Schutzstaffel.

According to what Heidrig heard, Lud declined an honorary knighthood, albeit of the lowest rank.

I can't understand it.

Heidrig turned it over and over in his head.

"Hey, um … Mister?"

"……!"

Heidrig snapped back to reality when Milly spoke to him.

"W-what?"

"That twisty thingy … How do you do it? Can you teach me?"

Heidrig was making cinnamon twists by mixing sugar, cinnamon, and butter into the bread dough and then weaving it into a spiral before baking.

"Oh, this? First, you divide the dough into three pieces and then …"

Heidrig explained how to make the bread in a voice infused with complicated feelings.

"Oh, so *that's* how you do it! It's just like braiding hair!"

"Um … is your name Milly?"

"Yes."

"Uh, instead of 'Mister,' you can call me Heidrig."

Heidrig didn't usually show his feelings.

He didn't get upset over things.

He had experienced many situations that would not change because he cursed his rotten fate and asked, "How could this happen?!" or "Why me?!"

One such situation was becoming a pawn of the girl Hildegard.

Now, however, his voice was shaking and his emotions were rattled.

Uh-oh …

Afraid that Lud had noticed his distress, Heidrig glanced at Lud.

"?!"

Lud was watching Heidrig and Milly's exchange. His face had tensed and turned dour.

"Is s-something wrong?"

Lud started to answer Heidrig's question.

"I …"

That night …

In the attic of Tockerbrot …

The room had once been used for storage, but had been Sven's room since she arrived at Tockerbrot.

After the renovation, they established a proper room for her on the first floor, so the attic was used for storage once again.

Now Hildegard and Heidrig lived there.

"So how did he answer?"

After the day's work, the two had gone back to their room.

Hilde was listening to a report from Heidrig about what had happened in the oven room during the day.

"Oh, nothing important."

"Tell me! That's an order!"

"....."

Hilde's fierce pride wouldn't let her allow anyone to disobey her requests.

Especially, someone who worked under her.

"There's no point in you hearing this."

"*I'll* be the judge of that!"

Knowing the reason for Lud Langart's dismay might help her find a way out of this mess.

"You know that girl who does chores in the shop? Her name is Milly."

"Yeah, that shrimpy girl."

"....."

Heidrig fell silent for a moment at Hilde's reply.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing."

Milly was fourteen years old and soon to be fifteen on her next

birthday.

And Hilde was also fifteen.

It seemed rather childish for Hilde to treat someone who was almost her age like a child.

"Well, she does have a slight build, but she appears to have thick bones, so maybe she'll grow taller."

"Which *isn't* what I asked about."

It was said that trained martial artists could calculate an opponent's strength from the slightest movement of the hand or foot.

Moreover, they could tell if others would be successful as a martial artist simply by looking at the structure of their muscles and the hardiness of their bones while they were still young.

Heidrig was speaking with this knowledge, but that didn't matter to Hilde.

"It's just … I heard that she's very shy, so it took time for her to feel comfortable around Lud."

Apparently, Milly had disliked Lud for over a year.

"Which means what?"

Failing to understand Heidrig's point, Hilde prodded him.

"Lud was shocked to see Milly talking to me in a friendly way the first time we met."

"Huh?"

Now Hilde was even more confused.

"He felt conflicted to see Milly being friendly toward me, when it

took her over a year to get along with him."

Lud had looked down and mumbled, "I don't mean to complain. It's not like that, but … but …" And then, maybe to ease his discomfort, Milly had said, "It's not what you think! It's just, um …" The atmosphere had grown awkward.

"Are you *dense*?!"

Hilde exclaimed this in amazement.

The point was that Lud had felt jealous at how quickly Heidrig had become friends with a child, since Lud was a grownup man with scary features.

"What am I doing here?!"

Hilde felt ridiculous for putting her position on the line by coming all this way to kill such a pitiful opponent.

"But he really *is* strong."

Heidrig chided Hilde.

"I was with him all day, and to my surprise, he never gave me an opening."

"Huh?"

Hilde was surprised to hear this from Heidrig, who she thought had lost the will to fight.

"Are you still planning on …?"

"Were you going to *give up*?!"

"No, of course not!"

Hilde raised her voice at being answered with a question.

"But you begged for your life!"

"Nothing is easier than repairing a bad situation by begging."

Heidrig lightly squinted his eyes.

"It's an unexpected development, but we've infiltrated the opponent's territory. Now there's a better chance to attack him, right?"

"B-but you …"

All of their weapons had been confiscated.

Sven had performed a head-to-toe body check before they started work and said to Lud, "At least allow me a bare minimum of security!"

"We can get hold of something. Like forks and knives from meals. It doesn't have to be anything high quality. Even a single nail can serve as a sufficient weapon."

"Ha ha! Ohhh, I see!"

Hilde had grown desperate in her belief that the mission had failed. Now that she saw that the situation was still evolving, she laughed with relief.

"Don't jump to conclusions. I told you. This man doesn't leave any openings. We failed when we couldn't kill him the first time. Now that he knows we're after him, it'll be harder to get the drop on him."

"Hmf! No problem! He may be a trained veteran, but if we stick with him 24-7, he'll eventually leave an opening."

And they were under the same roof.

If all else failed, they could launch a sneak attack at night or a

raid at dawn.

Or they could attack by setting a fire like before.

There were many options.

"I said don't jump ahead! We've got a time limit, right?"

"Oh …"

At his words, Hilde remembered.

"We only have nine more days …"

Heidrig was supposed to be imprisoned in a dungeon, but Hilde had pulled him out with the corporal's help.

They covered it up by bribing guards and altering records, but they wouldn't be able to avoid the monthly prison check by the Legal Affairs Bureau.

They needed to kill Lud and get back to the royal capital before that happened.

"It'll be hard, but there's no choice. Now, let's get some sleep."

Morning comes early in a bakery.

If they didn't go to sleep, they would be in no condition for an assassination attempt.

"I'm the leader, so I get the bed!"

Sven's old bed was the only one in the attic.

Hilde was first to climb on top as if proclaiming her right to it.

"Fine. Sleeping on the floor here is much better than what I'm used to."

Heidrig had been in jail for years, where he had slept on a stone floor.

"Besides, I wouldn't be so childish as to take the bed from a little girl."

"What?! Why you—!"

He got in a barb at least.

"Sleep. We rise early tomorrow."

Wrapping a blanket around himself and lying down, Heidrig rolled over and quickly fell asleep.

"Argh!"

Hilde let out a yell, but stretched out on the bed, turned her back toward Heidrig, and fell asleep.

"It seems they haven't given up yet."

Sven, who was on the first floor, heard the entire conversation between Heidrig and Hilde.

Heidrig was no idiot.

He had been careful about the volume of his voice so no one downstairs would hear, but he hadn't considered that the person listening might be a humanoid Hunter Unit with highly sensitive sound receptors.

"Nine more days … I only need to protect my master that long."

After that, they might be gone. So in a way, this was good news.

"But nine days is exactly the problem …"

Sven sighed at the irony of luck.

She confirmed that the two were asleep in the attic and walked down the dark hallway.

To her, this darkness wasn't even dark.

Tockerbrot consisted of the shop and a residential area.

Forty percent of the overall area was used for the store, 40 percent was production-related space such as the oven and storage, 15 percent was for living, and the remaining 5 percent was a small room that served as an office.

Sven went there to Lud, who was working late.

"Excuse me, Master."

"Oh, are you still up?"

There was a sketchbook on his desk.

He had drawn an idea for a new type of bread.

"Are you still brainstorming ideas for bread to serve at Thanksgiving?"

"Well, this is my chance to bake something new for the townsfolk."

There were various possibilities Lud could serve at the festival.

It was important to serve traditional foods, but Lud also wanted to give people a fun surprise. He had been puzzling over it every day after work.

"There are only nine days left, so I have to hurry."

Nine days … He was right. Only nine days remained until Thanksgiving.

The two newcomers were planning to kill Sven's beloved master before the happy day when the townspeople would finally welcome him, and together they would celebrate the joys of the year.

"Master? Um, about the Wolf Man and that girl …"

Sven spoke hesitantly.

"You really should kick them out. If something were to happen to you, I …"

Sven didn't want to suggest what she had in mind.

Lud's kindness wasn't saintly and so pure as to be without flaws.

He had once witnessed Hell and had dealt with death.

But his kindness also wasn't merely for atonement.

He wanted to live with his past, so he was kind from a desire to shoulder his sins and live an honest life.

It was heartbreaking for Sven to act against that desire.

"Sven, you've heard of the Wolf Man, right?"

Lud asked after mulling over his thoughts.

"Yes, it's rare to find anyone who doesn't know of his actions in the Great War."

The opposing nation, Filbarneu, held a grudge against him over the deaths of tens of thousands of soldiers.

And his home country of Wiltia abhorred him as a shameless national traitor.

"Do you really think that's him?"

"Huh?"

Lud's question confused Sven.

"Um, are you suggesting that Heidrig isn't the real Wolf Man?"

Despite the legends, the appearance and age of the Wolf Man had long been unknown.

Since both Wiltia and Filbarneu restricted information, his actual appearance remained unknown, but word spread that such a person existed and had performed certain acts.

"Yes, there was a wolf … and he is indeed the Wolf Man."

Lud had trouble smiling.

When he tried to smile, he just looked angry. His facial muscles didn't seem to work for expressing his feelings.

And yet Sven understood that this gloomy, shadowy expression was from unspeakable pain.

Sven knew all about Lud's past as the Hunter Unit pilot known as the Silver Wolf.

She had spent time with him then as the support AI known as Avei.

However, she knew little about his earlier past.

It was the Lud she didn't know who must have noticed something about the Wolf Man that she had not.

"I'm sorry, Sven. Can you bear with my selfishness just a little longer?"

Lud wasn't a blind optimist and he didn't ignore danger.

He understood and yet chose the risky path.

"Master …"

Sven's grip on her apron tightened.

This had happened before during the Great War, when she was still a Hunter Unit.

They had encountered a furious enemy attack, but even after

receiving an order to retreat, Lud rushed to rescue a friendly craft that had been immobilized by a bomb.

Sven—who had been Avei then—had tried unsuccessfully to stop him.

He had said the same thing to her then.

"Bear with my selfishness …"

If it was mere kindness, Sven would try to stop him even if he later held a grudge against her.

Lud knew his actions weren't wise.

And yet that was his decision.

Urgh … Master …

Sven sighed in exasperation.

However, her bitter smile wasn't entirely unhappy.

It's my duty to put up with his selfishness. But … no …

She *wanted* to put up with it.

She wanted to be his strength and make his wishes come true.

"Understood! I will bear it to the best of my ability! As for the girl Hildegard, I'll handle her myself!"

She snorted once, and then she winked and flashed her brightest smile, the one she reserved for her dearest beloved.

"Sorry, Sven. Thanks."

"I'm used to it."

She couldn't resist a little sarcasm.

"Well then … For now, I'll go make tea."

"Yes, please do."

"Yes, Sir! ♪"

She bowed once, then departed for the kitchen.



When people think of tea, they imagine relaxing with an afternoon cup of tea, but that isn't always the case.

Strong and very bitter tea with plenty of milk, sugar, and fresh cream gives people strength to keep going, particularly those who work late at night.

Lud's evening work would continue for some time.

So, Sven's priority was to ease his exhaustion, even a little.

Beginning the next day, Sven went on the offensive.

"What happened here?! When you wipe the table, do it like this! Wipe in a square, not in a circle!"

"And bow exactly 45 degrees! This is basic customer service!"

"And wipe thoroughly between the ridges of tongs! And thoroughly clean every place that food touches so that a baby could lick it!"

From early morning until closing time, Sven provided instruction shrewdly, carefully, and thoroughly by every means.

She sounded just like a ferocious drill sergeant.

"G-gimme a break! You're too strict!!"

Hilde raised her voice to protest Sven's severity.

"Huh? Did I say something confusing? *You* miscalculate change, don't remember the names of products, and forget to sterilize the bathroom. You do nothing but make mistakes!!"

Wearing an unfriendly expression on her face, Sven refused to

listen to Hilde.

"You may be from the Schutzstaffel, but you're an actual officer who completed proper education and training, aren't you?!"

"S-so what?!"

Hilde thought they were talking about work at a bakery, not the military.

"All your flubs are just like reporting imprecise information, misidentifying equipment, and neglecting weapons care in the military. They all seriously damage the broader organization!"

They were all skills drilled into recruits during military training.

"It's sheer arrogance to talk about being a career officer when you can't even work at a bakery!"

"No, that's … seriously?"

"Yes!"

In the face of Sven's rant, Hilde lost the will to fight back.

Allowing for Hilde's inability to perform her job properly, it was quite a stretch to say that it had any bearing on her suitability for the military, but sometimes the victor is the person who can simply ram her ideas through.

"If you have even a tiny bit of pride as a soldier, then stop making excuses and do your duty! Now!"

Sven handed Hilde a dust rag.

"Instead of firing back useless nonsense as a counterargument, go clean the windows! Customers won't wait!"

"D-didn't I just finish that?!"

Hilde managed a retort, but Sven simply sneered with a "Humff!" and marched across the room to point at the window frame.

"Do you mean *this*?!"

Her finger was pointing at a little dust.

"B-but that's nothing!"

"Silence!"

Hilde tried to make an excuse, but Sven shut her down.

"Listen! Windows are the very face of a shop! It is crucial to make them clearer than crystal so that potential customers walking down the street will think, 'Oh, I'll go in and take a look!' A stain on the shop is a stain on yourself! Start over!"

"Arrrggghhh!!"

Hilde's frustration was mounting.

"You! Can't you speak a little nicer? It's like you're *lecturing* me!!"

"What? How can you say that?! Are you blaming *me* for your *own* ineptitude?"

Since morning, Sven had laid into Hilde continually, as if poking her with needles, even if she hadn't resorted to violence such as using her fists or a whip. Hilde's patience had finally reached its limit.

"Oh? Here you are shrugging off your failures and getting angry at *me*!"

Sven would never apologize.

"I don't remember asking you to do anything beyond your ability! I explained everything properly, showed you an example, and had

you try it yourself!"

Sven had covered all the basics in training just as she did in her daily work.

"After all that, you still messed up, so isn't it natural that you suffer some derision?"

"Urrrgh …"

A famous general coined a maxim about training new soldiers.

"Show them, explain it to them, and then have them do it."

Demonstration, instruction, and practice are steps that serve as the basis of all teaching, not just in the military.

"B-but, at least …"

Hilde bit her lips like a sullen child and found it difficult to speak.

"Hmmm? Are you trying to say I should be nice to you? Aren't you an elite officer in the Schutzstaffel?"

Sven covered her mouth and laughed disdainfully.

"Mwa ha ha ha ha!" She laughed just like a villain.

There were more words of wisdom about training soldiers.

"People don't grow without praise."

Instead of blaming trainees for what they *can't* do, the secret to improving their skills is recognizing what they *can* do, even if it's something small.

Sven knew that.

Nonetheless, she disregarded it.

Because …

"Think about your situation. You tried to kill my master but you

were stupid enough to lose. We forgave you, without taking your life or torturing you, in exchange for giving up your weapons and working for us. After showing you that mercy, you want *more* kindness from me? What are you? A child who won't take her medicine unless I mix it with sweet syrup, even though it will hurt your teeth?"

Hilde's position was neither a volunteer soldier nor a draftee. She was, in fact, a prisoner.

Sven could consider herself extremely generous for not resorting to violence against her prisoner.

"Urrrgh!!"

Sven rattled on fluently and forcefully.

Whether a verbal clash or a fistfight, the difference in their combat strengths was massive.

"Th-that's, um …"

Still, Hilde sought a counterargument.

An experienced soldier would never engage in a futile fight when the difference in combat strength between the two sides was obvious.

However, Hilde was immature and a novice.

"Aha! This is abuse! You're abusing a prisoner! I'm an officer and I demand proper treatment!"

Perhaps thinking she had found a way out, Hilde shifted to counterattack with a face as proud as if she had defeated a demon.

International law strictly regulated the handling of prisoners.

This was partly for humanitarian reasons, but also because exterminating all opponents could lead to a war of attrition or mission failure and increase the damage to both friend and foe.

"I see. It's true that international laws stipulate special treatment for prisoners who are officers."

Among prisoners, all officers higher than lieutenant, were entitled to slightly better treatment.

The law forbade forced labor and violence against prisoners, while also regulating the physical prison environment.

From that point of view, Hilde's argument was valid.

"That's right."

Nodding, Sven touched her chin and Hilde smiled proudly, as if she had finally found her path to victory. However, it didn't last long.

"Then why don't you quit?"

"What?"

Hilde was amazed at Sven's reply and raised her voice hollowly.

"I said you're free to quit. We welcome anyone with open arms, but we won't chase after someone who tries to leave. That's the shop's motto."

"But, um … that's …"

Suddenly, Hilde was confused.

She had made a big mistake. She should have retreated or focused on defense and then waited for the situation to change.

To begin with, treaties regarding the handling of prisoners were promises enacted between nations under international law. But this

wasn't about that.

Hilde and Heidrig's goal was to assassinate Lud.

Their target had forced them to work there, but they had decided it gave them an opportunity to stick with their prey.

If they got kicked out now, they would never have another chance.

"Are you done? Then get to work. Another shop motto is 'If you don't work, you don't eat.'"

Hilde's counterattack had failed, so she started cleaning the windows as instructed.

"Just … darn it all!"

Hildegard von Hessen, the member of a family of fallen nobles, was wiping windows and cleaning floors with tears running down her face.

That night …

"Darn it! Just darn it *all*!"

When Hilde returned to the attic after work, she was still frustrated.

"How long are you going to complain?"

Heidrig sounded annoyed.

"You don't understand how I feel! That silver-haired wench! Who does she think I am! That rotten girl will pay for this!"

"A lady from a noble family shouldn't talk like that."

Hilde was throwing a fit on the bed, without even a hint of

ladylike poise.

"Sorry! But my family is just a bunch of fallen nobles anyway!"

"It is?"

"Eep!"

Hilde made a pinched face as if to say, "Uh-oh!"

She had only told Heidrig that she was a first lieutenant in the Schutzstaffel.

In Wiltia, however, only nobles were allowed to use von in their names.

It would be natural to assume that if a fifteen-year-old girl had the title of officer, and that of first lieutenant no less, her family name had played a role.

"My family is famous and has been around since the Holy Empire!"

"Oh, that's impressive."

Hilde's family, the Hessen clan, was one of the most well-known families in Wiltia.

Their ancestors were renowned military heroes and the subject of many stories.

"We're just an old family with an honorable origin. Otherwise, we have nothing!"

Throughout the family's long history, the Hessens possessed neither political nor economic power, and eventually were left behind.

Warhorses and pikes disappeared from the battlefields, leaving

the Hessens without a place to shine, and the house had fallen.

"We sold all our territory and mansions, and our descendants' estates. Now there's nothing left."

The last hope of the Hessens was the Great European War.

A pilot of the new Hunter Units could perform heroic achievements alone, just like in battles of yore.

Even Lud, who was of common origin, could be made a knight of the lowest order.

"To revive my family, I entered military school when I turned ten. But before I could go to war, it ended."

Hilde made a tight fist.

Restoring her family's name was her highest priority, and ever since childhood she considered it the reason for her existence.

Then one day she lost her hope for that.

In that moment, she felt keenly the fate of the Hessens, who were unblessed by history.

"Too bad, so sad."

Heidrig's response was sarcastic.

War only meant hardship and trouble for the common folk.

Commodity prices rose, supplies disappeared, and taxes went up.

If you were drafted and sent to battle, your life was in danger.

Hilde's story would find little understanding or sympathy from people like that.

"But then the lord lieutenant general spoke to me …"

Hilde couldn't bear to look at Heidrig's face.

Instead she saw the face of Genitz, which was still burnt into her eyes.

"When the lord lieutenant general came to inspect the military academy, he saw my name, summoned me, and invited me to join the Schutzstaffel. He welcomed me with special treatment, promising I would become an elite with a central position in the principality."

That had been a happy moment for Hilde.

She was about to be buried, but Genitz had found her and let her join the "chosen ones."

He had recognized that she was someone special and not like the other riffraff.

"But that man … Lud Langart … In the end, my glorious life comes to chores in a bakery! Oh, how did this happen?!"

She wanted fame and envy … But no, not only that.

Hilde wanted to be accepted and esteemed as a person of repute, so being a waitress-in-training at a bakery was humiliating, menial work.

"It seems Sven had you dancing in the palm of her hand."

But Hilde's obsession wasn't important to Heidrig.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"That woman scolded you all day today, right?"

"Yes."

"So if you had planned to make a move on Langart, you couldn't."

"Oh!"

As Hilde finally realized, her mouth gaped.

"She was watching you. And she wasn't just watching. She was actively interfering with your actions and stopping you from even thinking about making a move against them."

Hilde's combat ability was nothing compared to Sven's or Lud's.

She could barely put up a fight against a Hunter Unit.

However, she was capable of indirect attacks, such as poisoning or arson.

This shop was Lud's home base, and they were already inside it.

Inflicting harm on customers, not just on Lud and his employees, by poisoning the breads would cause trust in the shop to plummet. Even mere harassment would cause damage to the bakery.

"That woman interfered with *anything I might have tried*!"

Hilde finally realized the point behind Sven's behavior today.

"By tiring you out from work, she made sure that you can't do anything tonight but sleep. You're completely worn out."

"Argh!"

As soon as she had returned to the attic after the day's work, Hilde had flopped onto the bed with an exhausted, "I'm tired!"

In this condition, she wouldn't be able to spring a night attack.

"Don't look so unhappy. You worked hard and that made the meal afterward taste good, didn't it?"

At Tockerbrot, despite the unpleasant circumstances, they received regular meals.

It was mainly leftover bread, but since the shop was doing well, there was also a soup with plenty of meat and vegetables.

"I saw you eat a whole baguette!"

"Oh … that?!"

Hilde blushed when Heidrig said this.

Did she blush because she had received a favor from the enemy or because she was a young lady whose big appetite had been observed?

Either way, it was a surprising change for someone who claimed that she wouldn't eat any food that Lud made.

And that isn't the only problem …

Heidrig intentionally failed to mention that Sven and Lud knew the two new workers hadn't given up on the assassination.

Even with this knowledge, their opponents allowed them a certain measure of freedom.

They aren't cautious of this girl. It's me they are worried about.

It would horrify Hilde to know that neither Lud nor Sven saw her as a threat.

Sven, the waitress, was actually trying to make sure Hilde didn't interfere between Lud and Heidrig.

What is she thinking?

What was Sven planning, even at great personal risk?

Heidrig didn't have the faintest idea.

CHAPTER 4

LIKES REPEL, OR LIKE ATTRACTS LIKE

Two hours had passed since the Schutzstaffel started its attack on the development bureau.

"Y-you…! The Rundstadt girl!"

The previously relaxed smile on the face of Captain Delz, commander of the Schutzstaffel companies, had already disappeared.

"We have succeeded in breaking through the front barricade!"

This report from an adjutant did nothing to improve Delz's bad mood.

"The damage … How bad is the damage?"

"Ahem! The dead and injured total approximately one hundred!"

"This is disgraceful!"

Breaking through just the front gate of the development bureau, which had only fifty soldiers, had taken a quarter of their troops.

"The personnel inside are still resisting?!"

"Yes. They have sealed every entrance to the facility except the front gate, where they have gathered their forces for resistance."

Gunfire thundered from the direction of the development bureau, apparently from the resisting guards.

"What happened to the men who climbed the wall and approached from the rear?"

"They hit land mines, one after another."

"Argh!"

Delz had no words in the face of this situation, in which their opponent seemed to be toying with them.

"C-contact headquarters and request reinforcements."

"Um, but …"

Attacking with a force of four hundred soldiers and asking for further reinforcements would ordinarily suggest that the commander was incompetent.

When faced with an enemy that was stronger than expected, a brilliant commander wouldn't hesitate to add battle power without a care for how it looked, but unfortunately, Delz wasn't that type of commander.

As Sophia had realized, he was a typical member of the Schutzstaffel who only possessed a strong sense of elitism.

"Doesn't matter! The lieutenant general told me to ensure success without concern for loss of life. He has permitted me *any* means!"

Delz requested reinforcements for a simple reason.

He had permission to cause as much damage as necessary, so he feared failing to complete his mission, and incurring blame for himself.

So it didn't matter to him how many soldiers under his command would die.

He would seize control of the development bureau no matter what.

"What are you doing?! Get moving!"

"Y-yes, Sir!"

Delz raged at the adjutant.

Meanwhile, the sound of gunfire continued, and every time, a few soldiers died.

It didn't concern Delz.

Meanwhile, inside the development bureau, there was fierce fighting between the Schutzstaffel soldiers and the guards.

"That's enough here! Everyone, retreat to the fifth block!"

Sophia ordered her subordinates to retreat.

The building that housed the development bureau was usually called the Snail.

The main area was in the center, with compartments around it in a spiral.

Each area was equipped with strong bulkheads separating them.

"If they penetrate any further, we won't be able to hold them back."

Leaning against a closed bulkhead, Private Sariya spoke breathlessly.

"Well, at least they'll only come from one direction. That makes them easier to engage."

Sophia answered as she replaced an empty magazine.

"The development bureau has many secrets that must be protected. Having just a few entrances and exits is best for maintaining security."

Daian appeared. Even now, he seemed completely relaxed.

"What do you want? I told you to stay in back. Non-combatants will just get in our way."

"You're always so cold, Sophia. But I like you *that* way, too."

"You nauseate me."

"Whoa …"

Given the circumstances, Sophia was even more blunt than usual, but Daian didn't care.

"If they get inside, even your new weapons will be taken."

"What are you saying, Sophia? I have even *more* new weapons. And this bulkhead is one of them."

As he said this, Daian rapped the wall with his fist.

The Schutzstaffel was spraying the other side with a hail of bullets, but to no effect.

"It's made of a newly developed alloy. It can stand against not only shoulder-launched firearms but also a direct attack by dynamite."

And not only that …

The shutters for every window of the development bureau were made of the same impenetrable material and would close automatically. Furthermore, a reticulated alloy was embedded in the walls.

"This place is more like a submarine than a building. It's completely enclosed and wouldn't leak."

Even if the royal capital were submerged in water, the

development bureau was so airtight that it wouldn't flood.

"Wait a second … What about the vents?"

As Sophia asked, she imagined the worst.

"What if they enter through ventilation shafts or use some kind of gas? Then the building being airtight would increase the danger."

There would be no escape if the Schutzstaffel used a poisonous gas such as tear gas, chlorine gas, phosgene, or mustard gas.

"Oh, that's no problem."

Such concerns had not escaped Daian, who might be a pervert, but he was also a genius.

"When I realized we were under siege, I sealed the emissions system. Didn't I tell you? This place really is like a submarine. There's an underground air circulation system that will last for three hundred hours under hermetic conditions without any problem!"

"Then it's perfect!"

"Indeed, it is."

Sophia's expression was a mixture of admiration and annoyance at Daian's ability to see far into the future.

"Well, it'll take at least two hours for their weapons to breach one bulkhead. And we have fifty-three more. Wa ha ha ha!"

Dawn would break before the Schutzstaffel could even reach the central area of the development bureau, much less clear all the bulkheads.

The regular army's headquarters would then notice the

disturbance and send rescue troops.

It was possible that Genitz would lose his standing before then, on charges of overstepping his authority.

"It's not *that* easy to enter *my* castle! Ah ha ha ha!"

Daian was laughing, filled with confidence, but at that moment …

THOOM!!!

Fierce rumbling resounded, and a big dent appeared on the bulkhead slightly above center.

"What the … What?!"

For the first time, Daian's smile froze.

He was chief of the development bureau.

He knew immediately what made that sound.

"That's why I hate those idiots!"

He quickly opened a terminal housed in the wall and switched the video feed from a security camera to a small monitor. It now showed the other side of the wall.

"Is that … a *tank*?"

Looking at the feed, Sophia tilted her neck in surprise.

She could tell that the vehicle had heavy armor and a massive firearm.

However, it wasn't propelled by tracks—commonly known as caterpillar treads—but by *wheels*.

"It's called a combat vehicle."

Other than Hunter Units, tanks are the strongest weapons for ground combat.

A tank has tough armor and powerful guns. It's equipped with anti-personnel weapons, can travel over any terrain, and annihilate enemy lines. However …

"Tanks have more weaknesses than you might think. There are limitations because they're heavy and large, and they lack the ability to turn in cramped confines. They work well on open land but not in urban areas."

Tanks were fine for occupying an enemy city, but they didn't work for protecting one's capital, where it was impossible to indiscriminately blow holes in buildings, roads, and bridges.

"So combat vehicles were developed from the need for a tank-like vehicle that would protect a city. It's called a Kentaur."

The vehicle had six tires with high suspension, and it was mobile enough to turn in small spaces like an armored vehicle. Moreover, it was armed with a fifty-millimeter and high-speed self-propelled artillery weapon.

"Hey, wait … This can't be!"

Sophia was trembling.

THOOM!

Meanwhile, a second attack put another dent in the bulkhead.

"Did *you* make that Kentaur?!"

"I can't help it. It's my job!"

Sophia grabbed Daian's collar accusingly.

"Major! It's dangerous here! We must retreat!"

Private Sariya spoke urgently to Sophia, who was about to

strangle Daian in rage.

"Urgh! There's no choice … but I don't like it."

"I agree. With the Kentaur's heavy artillery, it'll take less than five minutes to breach one bulkhead."

"I'll get you one of these days! Fall back, fall back!!"

In this situation, it was very possible that the development bureau would fall before dawn.

The Schutzstaffel's steamroller strategy was gradually driving back the bureau's guards.

Six days had passed since Hilde and Heidrig started work at the bakery.

"That's an egg tart and an apricot tart. You can enjoy the harmony of a crunchy biscuit and soft dough."

Chomp chomp … munch munch …

"And that's a malasada doughnut. It's fried bread with a rich cream or chocolate inside. It's a food from the Alhadra region."

"Ulp … mm-mm-mmph!!"

"And this is a cinnamon-roll pie. It's swirled pie dough mixed with cinnamon and coated on top with caramel sauce."

"Okay, Lud. That's enough."

It was the afternoon at Tockerbrot, and Lud had lined up prototypes of the new menu items for the Thanksgiving festival. Jacob signaled him to stop.

"It isn't a good idea to make Milly eat these all at once."

Jacob pointed at Milly, whose eyes were spinning in spirals.

"She's gorging herself with too much good food."

Milly was the daughter of a former baker.

And she became Lud's apprentice because she loved bread.

She especially liked sweets, so tasting all of Lud's new confections was maxing out her capacity for happiness.

"Lud, I suspect you're enjoying this a little."



"Oh … well, Milly can eat a lot, so …"

Milly used to hate soldiers, so it took a long time for her to open her heart to Lud. Although she secretly ate his bread, she told him, "I'll *never* eat the bread you bake!"

So now Lud couldn't resist stuffing her with as much as she could eat.

"Heh …"

Heidrig was watching and couldn't hold back a laugh.

"Your name is Heidrig, right? Don't laugh!"

But even as he said this, Jacob was laughing too.

"It seems like you guys are always having fun!"

Heidrig spoke casually.

He had been captured after escaping to Filbarneu and held in custody for a long time. Eventually, he had been sent back to Wiltia, but forced to live in a dungeon.

For years, Heidrig hadn't seen anyone have fun, particularly over something trivial.

So he couldn't help but crack a smile.

"Hey, Heidrig. The busy lunch hour is over, so why don't you take a break?"

Lud was casual as he made the suggestion, as if it were no big deal.

"Y-yeah …"

Heidrig agreed and was about to remove his work apron, when Lud spoke again.

"If you want, you can take a walk. As long as you come back in time, it's no problem."

"Huh …?"

Heidrig's expression showed surprise.

"All right."

After looking puzzled for a moment, Heidrig left the shop.

"Lud, is that okay?"

Jacob pointed at the door through which Heidrig had just left.

Heidrig had tried to kill Lud and in return for Lud sparing his life, Heidrig was working in the shop.

"What if he escapes?"

It was only common sense that letting such a man run free might lead to him scampering off.

In fact, Heidrig was also aware of this. So far, he had barely left the shop's immediate vicinity during his breaks.

The furthest he had gone was to fetch a bag of flour from storage out back. And even then, he had first informed Lud, as if this were a prison.

"He can do that if he wants."

Jacob could usually detect Lud's slight emotional changes in his sullen features, but this time he couldn't tell what he was thinking.

"Hm?! What was I just doing?!"

Just then, Milly recovered from her frozen condition.

"Welcome back, Milly."

Jacob, who was a thoughtful boy, handed her a glass of water.

"Judging from Milly's response, I think serving *anything* would be fine."

"Hmm … I know that. But I want to provide something extra."

Every one of the breads that Lud had prepared for the Thanksgiving festival was a masterpiece.

The townsfolk would be delighted to eat any one of them.

"It's just, this is a special festival, so I want to create something that also looks special."

"Good taste isn't enough?"

Milly, who had tasted all the prototypes, couldn't help asking, "What's bothering you?"

"Um, I think eating is about more than just filling your stomach."

Lud mulled over how to explain it.

"Bread takes various shapes. It can be round, long, or twisted, and each shape has a meaning."

For example, a croissant has ridges and curves to make the butter visible.

And by changing the shape, some breads change in texture and flavor, along with changes in how much they rise and how long they are baked.

"It's the same with people, isn't it? Our faces and figures and pasts vary, but none are right or wrong. I mean, if we have lots of variety, isn't that more fun?"

He didn't just want to make people's tongues happy, but their eyes too.

Bread wasn't just about taste. It should also be an enjoyable experience.

That's what Lud believed.

"Since it's a special festival and I finally get to participate …"

Lud's shoulders trembled as he said this.

"You must be very happy. There, there …"

Jacob tried to pat Lud's shoulder sympathetically, but he couldn't reach it, so he patted his arm.

"Yes. It has been two years since I came to this town and opened the bakery, so this is a long-awaited chance for me."

This scary-looking baker was just happy that these longsuffering days of debt, an empty shop, and ostracism had finally turned into acceptance and belonging.

"Is Lud here?"

Sister Marlene from the church rang the doorbell and came in.

"Hi, Marlene? Have you come to buy bread?"

"Or to see Lud?"

Milly and Jacob spoke at the same time.

"Both," Marlene answered.

"I'm half joking, but …"

"You're also half serious, right?"

Jacob asked with an amused look on his face.

Marlene had been distant toward Lud before, but recently she had stopped hiding that she liked Lud—and this had Sven on high alert.

"Lud, I have something to discuss with you about the festival."

"Is there a problem?"

"Yes."

Since Marlene served God and was kind and sensible, people consulted her about town issues.

She served as a committee member for the Thanksgiving festival.

"We are inviting entertainers from Ponapalas."

Ponapalas was the former capital of Pelfe, and remained the area's commercial and economic center.

"Everyone really looks forward to it every year. The young men are entranced by the sexy dancers."

Jacob grinned. Last year, he had enjoyed the show as a spectator in the arena.

"Th-they do puppet plays, too! I want to see *that* again!"

With a sparkle in her eyes, Milly remembered the puppet show with orchestral accompaniment.

The performers had passed out candy to children afterward, which was another reason for its popularity.

"Yes. The group informed us that they are short on performers."

The notice had come a few hours ago.

While moving large set pieces, a load had shifted and crushed one of the entertainers.

The injury wasn't serious, but that person couldn't tour with the group.

"So they've canceled one of the performances."

"Is it one of the dancers?"

"Is it the puppet show?!"

Both Jacob and Milly cried out together.

"Don't worry. It was neither."

Intimidated by their intensity, Marlene took a step back.

"The one who can't come is a *singer*. So we're in trouble."

The Thanksgiving festival was traditionally an occasion for expressing appreciation to God for the year's harvest, and the hope for fruitfulness in the coming year.

Entertainment was part of an offering to God.

The most important ritual was the singing. Since times of old, people in Pelfe and Wiltia had dedicated their festival songs to God.

"That *is* a problem!"

Jacob finally understood the problem and regained his calm.

"If we had known sooner, we could have managed. Even the children at my church might have formed a chorus, even though they aren't professionals."

"There isn't enough time to practice now."

There were only four days until the festival.

Even if they started practicing now, they wouldn't be ready to perform at the festival.

"Is there any other way?"

Lud was thinking that there might be something like a union for traveling entertainers as a way to find an alternate player. But it wasn't that easy.

"No. The Organbaelz festival is held at a different time from other town festivals. Performing groups have already traveled to different areas, so it's hard to call them back here."

Marlene looked troubled. She had already thought of all other possibilities.

"Lud, do you know of anyone? If not in Pelfe, maybe in Wiltia?"

Organbaelz was a rural town located on the edge of Pelfe but it wasn't that far from Wiltia and the royal capital, Berun.

It took only half a day by train.

"Hmm … An entertainer … A singer …"

It might seem that soldiers and entertainers are such different occupations that they would have nothing in common, but that's not true.

Entertainers visit battlefields as a service, so the two groups become acquainted.

"I don't know anyone I can ask."

Lud didn't care much for those events, so he rarely attended them.

"Oh. It's a problem …"

"Then why don't *you* do it?"

"She can't!"

Jacob asked Marlene the question, but before she could answer, Milly interrupted.

"She's pretty but she can't sing! Or make tea or sew! Marlene's pretty, but she has butterfingers. She sure is pretty, though!"

"Milly, you're making a big mistake if you think calling me pretty will cover up whatever else you say about me!"

Marlene's eyes were moist but she was laughing as she said this to Milly.

"I thought maybe Sven could help. You know, she seems capable of doing *anything*!"

Marlene suggested this, looking at Lud.

Sven was a very skillful waitress, who handled customers, accounting, and sales.

Marlene thought it would be easy for Sven to improvise being a singer.

"I don't think that would work."

Lud's expression was impenetrable as he answered.

Heidrig wandered around Organbaelz.

"It's peaceful."

That was his impression of the town.

During the recent Great War, Wiltia had absorbed Pelfe, where Organbaelz was located.

A lot of damage remained along the eastern border, which had served as the main battleground against August, the large nation to the north. But this was in the west, near the border with Wiltia, and because it had already seemed like a part of Wiltia since the start of the war, it hadn't incurred much damage.

The people passing by and the children running around town

showed no sadness.

It's too bright …

It wasn't just that Heidrig couldn't handle strong sunlight after living in a dungeon.

He squinted at the sight of people living honest lives. He pulled his bandana further down.

"What a nice town!"

He had heard that the mine in Organbaelz had been established half a century ago through the merging of several neighboring villages.

Most of the townsfolk were miners, families of miners, or employees of surrounding businesses.

Since the economic boom for heavy industries had ended with the war, the demand for minerals and coal had decreased. However, because Wiltia introduced a conciliatory policy with Pelfe, there was large-scale construction of public works. So, the town wasn't suffering from a poor economy.

Homeless children weren't sleeping in the back streets.

And that's good enough …

Heidrig had grown up in a slum of Berun, the royal capital.

During the war, people thronged to the city in search of jobs, but many could only find daily employment. Most people became homeless, giving rise to slums in the outer wards of the city. These were places where people sold and purchased stolen items, hired illegal prostitutes, and even boiled and ate wild dogs.

Here in Organbaelz, everyone—men, women, and children—were all preparing for the town festival.

"Let's take a short break. Here's some tea."

An old woman was serving young men who were setting up decorations on the rooftop of a house.

"Oh, is it already that late?"

"Man, I'm exhausted!"

The young men wiped their faces and descended from the rooftop to enjoy the tea.

There were also biscuits in a can atop the wooden box serving as a table.

Anyway… that man … Why is he letting me run free?

Heidrig wondered as he watched the scene before him.

Hilde wasn't with him now.

If he wanted, he could escape.

But then what?

Someone would be sure to follow. Someone from the military.

And there were plenty of reasons.

The deal between Heidrig and Hilde had been to set him free.

But not by exonerating him from his crimes.

It would happen by creating a false death certificate and obtaining a new census registration.

Heidrig would fake his death, obtain different registration, and live like a free citizen.

That was the only way.

What Wiltia feared most wasn't Heidrig's existence. It feared him being alive in the government records.

How did all this happen?

Baelz Mine was the main business in Organbaelz, and its workers were regular patrons of Tockerbrot.

Being a miner is difficult physical labor.

Eating plenty of good food greatly improves a miner's efficiency.

"Come on, bring them in faster!"

"I know! Uuumph!"

Sven and Hilde were making a regular delivery to the mine, and were unloading the bread from the rear bed of the truck.

"Ugh! This is heavy! Hey … you can lift that?!"

"Aw, this is nothin'!"

The trays packed with bread were certainly not light.

While Hilde could barely carry three trays, Sven was effortlessly lifting a stack of trays that was her own height.

"Uargh! I can do that, too!"

Always competitive, Hilde tried to carry more trays.

"Don't try to carry too much. I don't care what happens to *you*, but I couldn't stand it if you flipped over a tray of bread that my master baked!"

Sven warned Hilde as she kept walking, a cool expression on her face.

"W-wait!"

Hilde followed her quickly.

At Baelz Mine, the digging was usually in the first mine. The second mine was closed.

The second mine was a strictly regulated no-entry zone, and due to a recent incident, the neighboring military base had sent soldiers to guard it.

"This place sure brings back memories, eh?"

Sven's tone was sarcastic.

It was here that Hilde had tried to kill Sven and Lud with a Hunter Unit, but had been totally defeated instead.

"Urgh …"

Hilde again groaned in frustration.

"Huh? Did you bring me here to be *mean*?"

"No. I don't have time for that."

As long as Lud had some plan in mind for handling Heidrig, Hilde was a nuisance for Sven to take care of.

So Sven brought Hilde to make the delivery so she could keep an eye on her.

After walking for a while, they came to the mine cafeteria.

They delivered bread through the service door in the back of the building.

"Hey, Sven. You look as energetic as usual. Is that girl a new employee?"

"Uh, yeah. She is working for us."

Cheerfully, Sven answered the cafeteria cook.

"The bread from your shop is popular with the men. But there's a problem. They never used to complain about the food here as long as I added plenty of salt, but now they've tasted really good food, they aren't satisfied with ours."

"Oh, no. I'm very sorry about that."

"Well, at least now when the food *is* tasty, they say as much, so it's encouraging, too."

Sven smiled at the cook, who spoke happily despite what he said.

Sven's smile wasn't just her sales smile.

The miners were enjoying something made by her beloved master.

And that gave her great pleasure.

Hmf!

Hilde seemed bored, with no place to go, as she listened to their conversation.

Six days had passed since she had started work at the bakery, but she was still frustrated and kept asking herself, "Why am I doing this?"

It would all be over if Heidrig would just hurry up and bump off Lud.

Then she could leave this boring town. The exciting city awaited.

She could put this ridiculous place behind her.

And she could enter her dream world.

Why are they dragging on with this stupid chitchat?! Just finish

up and—

While she was silently grumbling, bells started ringing around the mine.

It was a sign that the miners would come to the surface after packing up for lunch.

"I'm exhausted!"

"Aw, man! I'm pooped! Whew!"

With the sound of banter and boisterous laughter, men covered in dirt from the mine entered the cafeteria.

"Hey, it's the bakery girl!"

As soon as they spotted Sven, they waved and smiled.

"Oh my! Good work, everyone!"

Sven carefully plucked the corners of her apron and daintily curtsied.

"It's hard work, but when you drop in every now and then—it's a sight for sore eyes!"

"I'll say! But she's scary on the inside!"

They laughed raucously, and Sven giggled and exclaimed, "Oh, you guys!"

Then another miner showed up.

"Good work, Boss!"

"Well done!"

All the miners bowed welcomingly to Laurel, the leader who bound them together.

"Hello!"

Although he must be getting on in years, Laurel was even brawnier than Lud.

The glare in his eyes was like that of a raging bull.

"Thanks for your business, Mr. Laurel!"

Sven welcomed him with a smile.

"Oh, the bakery, eh? As usual, you're working hard today!"

Laurel raised an eyebrow as he answered and caught a glimpse of Hilde.

"That outfit … Does she work at your place?"

"Yes. She's a new staff member. Sort of."

Sven answered vaguely since it was too complicated to explain the circumstances behind Hilde's employment.

"....."

Laurel's expression was strained.

"I'm just guessing, but … is she like *you*?"

"Like me? Oh, don't worry! She only possesses average physical strength."

"I s-see …"

Sven had once quarreled with Laurel and solved it through arm wrestling.

It had ended in an overwhelming victory for Sven.

Even a man with a miner's superior strength couldn't defeat a humanoid Hunter Unit.

Laurel was a mature man, so that didn't bother him anymore, but the experience of a slender girl overpowering him with superhuman

strength was still shocking.

"Hey, girl. What's your name?"

"....."

Laurel asked Hilde the question, but she didn't answer.

She frowned and looked away.

"Oh dear! I'm terribly sorry! You! A customer is speaking to you. Answer him!"

Sven was quick to scold her, but Hilde bit her lips and ignored them like a pouting child.

"Oh, never mind. Everyone has that kind of day."

Laurel didn't seem to mind and even sounded concerned for Hilde.

"Well, being the new help can be difficult."

He raised an eyebrow and remained jovial.

The Baelz mine had once been just been a mountain, but now people from all over gathered to work as miners.

Among them, many came, not from choice, but because they couldn't stay in their home towns.

Laurel was used to seeing new faces who were unhappy or angry with their new surroundings.

"Hey, girl … even though you're not used to your new job, you still gotta do your best. If you do your work carefully, the people around you will notice."

Laurel didn't intend his comment to be deep, and just wanted to encourage this sulky girl, who was new to her job and having

trouble.

"Your boss used to be like you."

However, these last words struck Hilde's heart.

"Wargh!"

"Huh? What's wrong?"

After screwing her face up painfully, Hilde ran out of the cafeteria.

"Um … did I say something wrong?"

Laurel had only tried to cheer her up, as he would a new hand at the mine, but realized that maybe it was the wrong way to deal with a young girl, so he just scratched his head in vexation.

"No … but thanks for your kind words."

Sven thanked him politely.

"It's just … those words were too bitter for that girl to swallow."

Until recently, the workers at Baelz Mine, including Laurel, had avoided Lud even more than the other townsfolk. In fact, they had *hated* him.

And yet now they admired Lud as a great baker.

That was because Lud always worked honestly and seriously. And that's why he mentioned Lud to Hilde, but Laurel had no idea that Lud was the source of Hilde's unhappy employment at Tockerbrot.

"Excuse me now. Have a nice day."

Sven bowed and followed after Hilde.

As Hilde ran out of the cafeteria, she had tears in her eyes.

She wasn't sure why.

It could be frustration.

It could be anger, or even outrage.

But, much bigger and harder to bear was *pity*.

She was from a noble family, albeit a fallen one, chosen to join an elite unit, and had lived in a special, privileged world. But she was still an object of sympathy and pity.

However, that wasn't the only reason she felt pitiful.

Something much more powerful shook her heart.

"Argh! Argh!! Argh!!!"

Something indescribable aggravated Hilde's mind.

In a fit of emotion, she kicked a drum can in front of her.

The empty can echoed—*klong, klong, klong*—which further irritated Hilde, who felt as if she was mocked.

"Why are you being so foolish, you silly girl?"

Sven, who had followed Hilde, looked angry.

"Don't be rude to customers! What if this causes trouble for Master?"

But this time, Sven didn't speak with her usual withering tone.

It was more casual, as if she were simply warning an inexperienced girl.

"Argh!"

However, that further irritated Hilde.

She felt as if she was branded a troublemaker who must be coddled and placated.

"Uaargh!!"

As she screamed, Hilde grabbed a nearby sledgehammer and swung it at Sven.

"Hey, what are you doing, you twit!"

The hammer could injure or even kill Sven.

However, Hilde didn't have much strength, so it looked like the hammer was swinging Hilde rather than the other way around. It was doubtful she could even make contact with Sven.

Sven dodged easily, and in a flash, she seized Hilde.

"I knew you were stupid, but what are you trying to do *now*?"

Sven wasn't even angry.

She would get angry at someone for endangering Lud's life, or her own, but she wouldn't get irritated every time a spoiled child lost her temper.

"Aaa … agh! Urrrgh!"

Hilde's arms were twisted behind her back and her shoulders pushed down. Sven smashed her flat to the ground and she couldn't budge.

Hilde cried. Was she so pitiful that Sven didn't even consider her a problem? And on top of that, her nose was running!

"Dammit!"

Hilde screamed the howl of the defeated.

"You don't know anything about me!! I wasn't born to do chores like this!"

She was having a tantrum, screaming and raging and crying.

"I'm from a noble family! I'm different from commoners like you! I'm elite! I'm one of the chosen! Don't mix me up with cheap dirt like you!!"

"....."

"The only thing you think about every day is how to secure your wages, right? Well, I'm different! I have more noble tasks than you riffraff!"

While Hilde was screaming, Sven remained silent and stared at Hilde.

Her cold gaze was fearsome and somehow observant.

Perhaps it was the coldest expression Hilde had seen since coming here.

"Is that all you wanted to say?"

"W-what—"

Finally, Hilde realized, with her cheek to the ground, that Sven was acting differently.

"I knew you were dippy, but it's worse. You're a total dipstick!"

"What?!"

Hilde's anger caught fire again and she struggled, but Sven's hands were so tight that she couldn't move.

"Noble? Commoner? Special human being? You have a shallow mind."

As Sven said this, she was remembering how she had once been.

It was right after she started working at Tockerbrot.

She had just changed from Avei to her new identity as Sven.

Lud had grown angry with her when she insulted the miners, even though it was because they were unkind to her beloved master.

After Sven took on a humanoid body, she had only a superficial viewpoint.

She had been created as a weapon, so she had only known the battlefield.

She was programmed with common-sense knowledge but lacked actual experience.

Her emotions and sensibilities remained stubbornly thin and weak.

She had no talent for activities that required more, such as art or any creativity.

She was unable to tell stories, draw pictures, or sing songs.

Which was understandable since a typewriter, printer, or stereo speaker doesn't have emotions and imagination.

"You think you're a special person? You don't know *anything* about people!"

Sven continued speaking to Hilde in a matter-of-fact tone.

"You place others beneath you, because you don't know who you are. You figure if everything in the world is worthless, then at least no one can look down on you!"

After becoming Sven, she had no guidepost.

She was uncomfortable and awkward in a way she hadn't been as a weapon.

A weapon was considered good enough by achieving victory in war. She had only needed to execute the orders of her pilot.

All that was left after she abandoned that were her feelings for Lud.

So Sven had nurtured those feelings at the expense of everything else.

She placed the whole world beneath Lud so that she, who loved Lud, wouldn't be inferior to others.

"I don't care about nobles or elites. You just want to make yourself look good by holding on to shallow authority!"

Without realizing it, Sven's voice was rising.

Hilde's pitifulness embarrassed her, as if she were looking at *herself.*

She had used her beloved master as an excuse to look down on others. As she had when she insulted the miners.

"If you abuse people who work and sweat blood for their families, then are you really noble? If you mock people who live as honestly as they can every day, then are you really elite? You don't even know how to be proud of yourself unless someone *chooses* you!"

Sven released Hilde's hands, as if casting them away.

"*SOB* … *SOB*… *SOB* …"

Hilde, however, didn't stand up.

She continued crying in shame, still on the ground.

"So basically … you don't have *anything*, do you?"

Sven had finally realized.

The revulsion she felt at the sight of Hilde was *self*-hate.

Lud had been so angry with Sven that day because she had trampled on something important that everyone, including him, possessed.

And that had deeply saddened him.

Afterword, he had knelt to apologize to the miners Sven had insulted.

Sven had shamed someone important to her.

Admiring something important doesn't make it necessary to look down on something *else*.

Doing so can damage what is important.

Here at the mine, the very same place where Sven had learned this lesson, was a girl who made the same mistake, making the present overlap the past.

"*SOB* … Waaaaah!!"

Hilde cried and screamed. Then she stood up and ran off without looking back, as if escaping.

"Hey!"

Sven was about to follow.

Her legs were strong enough to easily catch Hilde.

However, she didn't feel like doing that.

The reason Sven was able to endure her misery that day was because she had Lud, who still wanted her to stay with him.

Hilde didn't have anyone, so Sven couldn't think what to say, even if she had caught her.

"*SOB* … *SOB* … Urgh! Argh!"

Crying like a child, Hilde left the mine. She ran, fell, ran, and finally just hobbled along, out of breath and not knowing where to go.

She didn't know what to do now.

But she knew she wasn't ready to go back to Tockerbrot.

She felt utterly wretched and pitiful. She couldn't face anyone at the bakery right now.

"A church?"

She was standing in front of a small church on top of a hill.

"That's right … There's a church here."

Hilde was neither an atheist nor a devoted believer.

However, churches provide a safe shelter in times like this.

Besides, it was autumn, nightfall was at hand, and a chill wind had begun to blow.

"Excuse me …"

Fearfully, Hilde opened the door and entered the chapel.

It was an old church.

The floors creaked and the windows were cracked.

Nonetheless, it was clean, so it wasn't a ruin despite its age.

"Urgh!"

Seeing the spic-and-span window frames, Hilde remembered cleaning the bakery a few days ago.

"Who's there?"

"—?!"

A voice behind Hilde sent a jolt down her spine.

When she turned around, she saw Marlene—a nun at the church.

"Oh … You're …"

Marlene looked surprised.

She often visited Tockerbrot, where she had met Hilde a few times.

Marlene wasn't surprised that Hilde had come. She was shocked by the way she looked.

Hilde was wearing a black dress and white apron just like Sven and Milly.

But she was covered in mud, with leaves in her hair, and her knees were scraped and bleeding because she had fallen repeatedly on her way here.

"Um …"

Marlene thought for a moment.

Hilde looked exhausted and her eyes were red from crying.

"Well, how about some tea?"

In times like this, it was best to calm a person down before asking what happened.

Marlene was experienced in helping those in trouble, and this was her evaluation.

And ten minutes later …

"Here. This should do."

Without asking for details, Marlene sat Hilde on a pew in the chapel and gave her tea while she tended to her knees.

"Let's see … Actually, we haven't really talked before. I'm Marlene. It's nice to meet you."

Her smile wasn't the merciful smile of a servant of God.

She introduced herself with the casual smile of an older woman.

"Hildegard …"

Hilde answered with a frown, carefully sipping her tea.

She didn't give Marlene her full name.

Hilde didn't question why, but there was a reason.

After having her noble pride derided so many times, it was depressing to introduce her family name with its honorific von.

"I see. So may I call you, Hilde?"

"That, um …"

Hilde was a little startled by Marlene's question.

The only people who could call her Hilde, short for Hildegard, were people special to her.

Special people like her parents and Lieutenant General Genitz, whom she loved and respected.

"I don't mind."

However, such pride felt small and unimportant, so she said yes.

"That's good. Hilde, may I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

There were many questions Hilde thought Marlene might ask.

Why did she look so disheveled, why was she here, and did she

need to go back to the shop? And so on.

"Does the tea taste bad?"

"Huh?"

What Marlene asked was totally unexpected.

She must have noticed that Hilde hadn't reached for her cup again after the first sip.

"No, I just can't handle hot drinks."

"Oh, good! I'm so glad!"

Marlene was relieved from the bottom of her heart.

To be honest, although Marlene's tea didn't taste awful, the tea Sven made for break time at Tockerbrot—gruffly saying, "Well, while I'm at it" —was better.

And the problem probably wasn't the tea leaves but the skill of the brewer.

"I don't really mind."

"Oh, okay."

Hilde had a lot of pride and a short temper that caused her to snap at others, but surprisingly, she didn't complain about meals.

Her family, the Hessens, had originally been warriors, so "simplicity and frugality" was the family motto. However, eating plain food wasn't just a characteristic of her family, but came from being fallen nobles. There had never been fine food at the table, so she was never picky about food.

"I try my best but can't seem to make tea for some reason. They tell me it's better than before, but it was truly dreadful to begin

with."

Marlene worried about making tea so awful that even her friends tried not to make her feel badly about it.

"It actually isn't easy."

Marlene picked up her cup, and sat down beside Hilde. She took a sip before speaking again.

"Did Sven scold you?"

"!"

Hilde was caught off guard and flustered at how Marlene's question suddenly came to the point.

She didn't reply, but the look on her face affirmed the answer.

"I can imagine. That woman has a wicked personality. To be honest, I sympathize with you."

Marlene, who often fiercely fought with Sven over Lud, held her forehead and laughed dryly.

"I, um …"

"It's okay. Don't answer. I mean, I've heard you have unusual circumstances."

"Do you know who I am?"

"Somewhat."

Lud and Sven purposely avoided giving details about Hilde's situation.

However, Milly had witnessed the disturbance that Hilde and Heidrig had caused on their first day.

Milly wasn't very talkative, but she confided in Marlene, who was

her family.

"Lud has a complicated past, so certain things are unavoidable."

"Unavoidable? Do you …"

Hilde looked with suspicion at Marlene.

"It's Lud. There's nothing we can do."

By "nothing we can do," she didn't mean Lud getting killed.

She meant that there was nothing they could do about Lud choosing the hardest path after earning grudges and getting into trouble.

"Aren't you going to criticize me? Isn't Lud Langart your friend?

"I guess, but even if Lud said you were okay, I wouldn't feel good about you. But … How should I put this? I just don't have the right."

"What?"

Hilde tilted her head in confusion at the words "I don't have the right."

"Because I tried to kill him, too."

"Huh? W-what?!"

Such words coming from a kind servant of God frightened Hilde so much that she shot to her feet.

"Right over there. I fired a bullet at him."

Marlene spoke as if relaying gossip, but with no sign of a smile, as her gaze indicated an altar fixed to the floor with a few nails.

"But the gun was useless, so while it did leave a scar, the wound wasn't fatal."

"You … Who *are* you?"

"People are complicated."

Marlene's eyes had a sad look in them for a moment. But it quickly disappeared, and her smile returned.

"But now I'm just a nun. I decided that very day."

Sitting beside the confused Hilde, Marlene shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

There was no lie in her expression.

Even if there had been, Hilde wouldn't have noticed. Marlene was a nun and her smile could even deceive God.

Oh …

After seeing Marlene's expression, Hilde felt an unexplainable sense of defeat.

"Urgh …"

"What's the matter? Did I say something wrong?"

Marlene hurriedly asked Hilde, who had started to cry.

"No, that's not why I'm crying."

Hilde finally realized something.

She realized what caused this pitiful feeling she had suffered with for such a long time.

And she realized the reason her pride grew stronger, but nothing else. And the reason she couldn't maintain her sense of self without looking down on others.

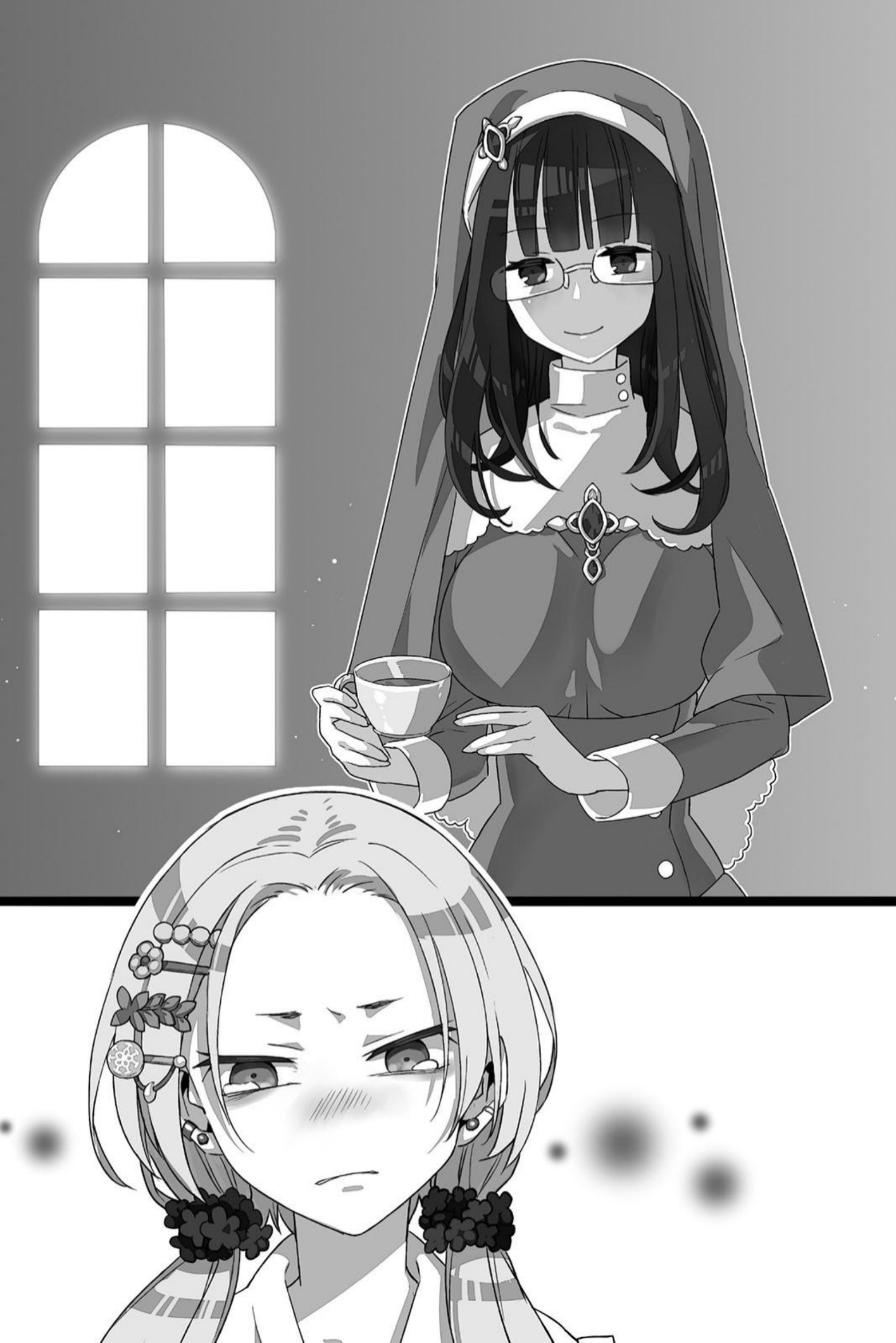
Oh … There's no place for me …

She finally understood by looking at Marlene, who had lived

through a past that Hilde couldn't imagine, but accepted her present as a nun with all her strength.

"Hey, um … Marlene? Can you take my confession?"

Hilde asked as she rubbed her eyes roughly with her sleeves.



"Huh …? I'm not sure I am a sufficient intermediary with God. Is that okay?"

The nun answered somewhat jokingly.

Then Hilde started to talk about her past, which she had tried very hard to forget.

CHAPTER 5
THIRD UNIT

Five hours had passed since the Schutzstaffel started the attack on the development bureau.

It had breached the front gate and Schutzstaffel soldiers were attacking, furiously and repeatedly.

The security guards were resisting boldly under Sophia's leadership, but suffered many deaths and injuries.

Finally, high-speed combat vehicles had destroyed over half the vaunted bulkheads and pushed Sophia and her guards back near the deepest part of the bureau.

"Take thaaat!!"

With a fierce boom, Sophia herself fired the Gerlitz, with shells striking the center of a looming Kentaur combat vehicle.

"More shells!"

Sophia thought she could finish the Kentaur off with one more blast. She ordered the weapon reloaded in a hurry, but Sariya responded in a pained voice.

"We don't *have* any more!"

"Argh!"

The new weapon, of which Daian was so proud, had indeed performed excellently in combat, but it was still just a prototype.

The Gerlitz was unprecedented as a weapon, but it could only

hold a limited number of shells, so it couldn't withstand a long battle.

"We have to abandon this position! Lower the bulkhead, plant explosives, and plug the corridor with rubble! At least we can buy some time!"

Sophia ordered retreat and kicked aside the useless Gerlitz.

"Bury this in the debris! It's useless!"

So far, Sophia and her guards had just been able to hold off the two Schutzstaffel companies surrounding them.

However, faced with successive waves of reinforcements, the situation had grown dire.

"Let's go, Sariya!"

"Y-yes, Ma'am!"

The only consolation was the high morale of the security guards.

Most of them had fought under Sophia since the Great War and had long military experience.

Sariya, however, was a new soldier, recruited just one month ago.

The Schutzstaffel had instigated the fight, but Sophia's stubbornness was partially responsible for this battle.

Retreating was an option out of concern for the lives of the soldiers.

"You're unlucky … Sorry to involve you in this."

"Don't talk like that, Major!"

Sariya, answered Sophia's concern with a smile that didn't suit the situation.

"But … you just joined the military."

Sariya was about twenty years old. This battle was unfortunate for her since she finished her training after the end of the Great War.

"Uh … no. I joined twelve years ago."

"Oh. That's surprising … What?!"

Sophia almost let the answer go, but then she barked at Sariya in surprise.

"More than ten years?! You've been in since the Great War?! Are you kidding?! That's longer than me!!"

"Um, I'm type three."

"Oh!"

Sophia cursed her own thoughtlessness as she watched Sariya dip her head in embarrassment.

Sophia hadn't merely made Sariya say it out loud.

She had grimaced when she heard the words "type three."

"Twelve years … So you were about *eight years old*?!"

"Yes …"

In Wiltia's military system, type-one soldiers were volunteers and type-two were draftees.

Type-three soldiers had lost their parents or were abandoned and then culled and trained from a young age.

Sariya's youth must have been far from happy. Sophia's response amounted to treating her with pity.

"Oh, but don't worry! I'm thankful to the military! I was about to die and they put me in the hospital. After that, I was physically

unfit, so they let me work at a national factory. I've never been on the battlefield."

Sariya was hurrying to ease Sophia's discomfort, but she was clearly putting some effort into her smile.

The military assigned duties to the orphans and they had to work in return for a secure life.

"They paid me! And after the war, I was given proper military training. Then I was attached to this unit."

From the military's point of view, they rescued and raised children who were near death and then had them pay it back with labor, which seemed reasonable. But, it was a system that preyed on the socially vulnerable while the nation's social welfare remained inadequate.

"I see …"

Sophia's expression was still tense.

The person who had devised the military's tri-level system was none other than Genitz, the top commanding officer of the Schutzstaffel.

Sophia had joined the military through that system, created by Genitz, and now she was fighting people under his command.

But for Sariya, it was more like being made to perform as a clown.

Even worse, I supported him!

Sophia ground her back teeth in anger and regret.

"Major … I'm sorry, um, for telling you something so unsettling."

Sariya tried to reassure Sophia when she saw her pained expression.

"No … sorry. Um, I used to have a type-three soldier under my command."

"Really?! Where is that soldier now?"

"He quit the military and became a baker."

She saw the face of her childhood friend.

"Oh … so he finished his term of service?"

The enlistment period for type-three soldiers was in proportion to how much that soldier cost the military.

Such a soldier couldn't leave the military before repaying that debt, other than for extraordinary reasons.

That period was called a term of service.

Sariya had a long hospital stay, so she had cost more and it would take longer for her to finish her term of service.

"After this mess, I plan to request leave. For all the guards. Would you like to come with me to visit my friend at his bakery? His bread … Well, it's not bad."

"Yes! I'd like to join you!"

As Sophia grinned, Sariya agreed with a broad smile.

Meanwhile, in an office located deep inside the development bureau …

Daian sat and wondered.

The office boasted advanced sound-proofing, but he could still

hear explosions and loud rumbling.

It was just a matter of time before the Schutzstaffel marched in.

"I thought we would last until dawn, but they won't allow that."

Under Sophia's command and with the bureau's weapons, ordinarily they would have been able to hold the Schutzstaffel off.

But they were throwing too many soldiers and weapons at them.

They were using brute force to open the doors.

"There is no doubt that he has endangered his position. He'll likely face charges of treason, and yet he's persisting."

Marshal Elvin and Sophia from the regular military detested Genitz. But the precision of his strategic planning was impressive.

If Genitz dared to take this kind of risk, he wanted something badly. And it was enough to compensate for whatever the consequences might be.

"So does that mean …"

Daian tapped his forehead and made an overly frustrated face.

"There's no other explanation. With that, he would be sure to take over, not just Wiltia, but the whole world."

Daian was thinking about the Door, a relic that contained the wisdom of the ancient European Empire.

Analyzing and using a mere portion of it had brought victory to Wiltia.

Doors existed everywhere in the world. One was found at Organbaelz Mine in a rural town in Pelfe.

But of all the Doors, the largest was in the deepest subterranean

level of the development bureau.

"What a total waste of time. He won't open it no matter what he does."

If he could, Daian would have opened it a long time ago.

However, even with his extraordinary, scientific genius, he was not up to the task.

In any case, conquering the whole development bureau would not secure the key to the Door.

The key wasn't here. It was across the border.

"But, I still don't get it."

Genitz's strategy must be to reach the Door, but there was no point if he couldn't open it.

If he was that foolish, Elvin wouldn't be so bothered by him.

Genitz wasn't foolish, which was why he was such a problem.

"He's planning something else. In that case, we can't be picky about our methods. Am I right, Rebecca?"

As soon as Daian asked, a girl suddenly materialized in the corner of the office.

"Did you call?"

The girl with red hair and red eyes and wearing a red dress … was Rebecca Sharlahart.

"Sophia and the others are fighting desperately, but it's only a matter of time until this place falls. So I want you to get help."

Rebecca wasn't human.

Like Sven, she was a humanoid Hunter Unit created by Daian.

With her superhuman physical strength and combat ability, she could escape the encircling Schutzstaffel net and reach central headquarters.

"Is that okay?"

In a voice with no emotion, Rebecca responded with a question.

Only a few in the military knew about the development of humanoid Hunter Units.

Even Sophia, the leader of the security guards, didn't know the details.

Furthermore, because Daian falsified reports and pretended the Hunter Units were still under development, no one in the regular military knew that the project had succeeded long ago, even though it was footing the bill.

"It's impossible to break through the Schutzstaffel forces without immediately attracting attention. It will reveal who I am, and you will lose your position."

"Oh well. So they scold me."

This would certainly result in more than a mere scolding.

Daian would face the gravest charge of deceiving the nation.

He would face arrest, detainment, and then execution by firing squad.

"But Elvin is a smart guy, so he wouldn't kill me. At least not for *now*."

Daian's brain was precious to Wiltia.

The nation had signed an agreement with the Billions Trading

Company and requested financial backing to support Daian's research.

"Besides, if we act right away, we can weaken the Schutzstaffel. After all, it's not *impossible* to destroy them."

With the proper request from the development bureau, the regular military would be able to enter the royal capital.

Moreover, they could attack the Schutzstaffel with a compulsory criminal investigation, much like the Schutzstaffel's current attack on the development bureau.

In this world, being nice wasn't enough to run an organization.

If they pushed hard, they could expel as many people from positions of power as they wanted, even affecting the big nobles who were Genitz's patrons.

"Genitz is not a man who underestimates such matters. Elvin is intelligent in that respect, too."

Daian knew that Elvin would understand the point Daian was making.

Furthermore, the development of humanoid Hunter Units was an absolute secret, but by revealing it, Daian could hide his true purpose, which was hidden underneath.

Pulling this veil aside would be a heavy blow, but it wouldn't be fatal.

"Understood. I'm going now."

"Yes, please see to this immediately."

Daian then spoke further, as if remembering something, and

Rebecca turned around.

"I still have a bad feeling about this. I don't want Sophia to die."

Sophia was a precious amusement for Daian.

She was like a favorite tea or beloved brand of cigarettes. She provided just the right amount of stimulation to sharpen his thoughts.

It would be vexing to lose her.

"Understood."

Rebecca didn't appear to take note of his words. She narrowed her eyes slightly, bowed once, and left the room.

"Hurry! Move that thing outta the way right now!"

"Medics! Where are the medics?!"

"It's no use! He's beyond help!"

For security reasons, entry to the area around Daian's office was forbidden to anyone but select staff members.

Tonight, guards retreating from the furious fighting were nearby.

"Under the developer's authority, restrict total capacity to 75 percent and release limiter!"

Unworried, Rebecca spoke quietly, as if casting a magic spell.

"Huh? Hey, you! How did you get in here?!"

One of the security guards noticed her.

"… *drei* … *zwei* … *eins* …"

Rebecca didn't answer. She continued preparing for her next action.

"It's dangerous here! Come this way!"

A soldier ran to her, but the moment he raised a hand toward her shoulder …

"… *nullllll*"

Rebecca's red eyes glowed and she disappeared.

"Huh?!"

The soldier stood in shock, incapable of understanding what just happened.

There was no way he could understand it.

The mechanical girl in human form had moved with a speed that exceeded human comprehension.

The fall of the Hessen family had accelerated as science advanced, resulting in improved weapons and altered battlefields.

Finally, thirty years ago, its fall became certain when cavalries disappeared in the face of machine guns, cannons, and tanks.

The warrior family, finding itself without a role on the field of battle, had tried to restore itself.

In the end, Klemens von Hessen took a wife, based on her good family name, and married the daughter of an upstanding family that had actually fallen farther than the Hessens.

Hessen believed that if he mixed with noble blood, the resulting child was sure to restore the family, and he clung to the hope of preserving the family's venerable status to the very end.

However, when the baby was born, he was disappointed for two reasons.

First, the baby was a girl.

In a warrior family, a girl could not carry on the family.

Secondly, the baby had black hair and black eyes.

"How awful! This is a *black dog*!!"

That baby girl was Hildegard von Hessen, whose father rejected her, even before holding her, smiling at her, or giving her a name.

Wiltians often had blond hair and blue eyes, but not everyone had those features.

Wiltia was continental, so its people intermingled with other ethnic groups. Even pure Wiltians often had red or black hair.

The reality was that less than half the population had blond hair and blue eyes.

Among the noble class, however, about 80 percent had those characteristics, because all the royal families from Luftzand Domain, the earlier Holy Empire, and the European Empire a thousand years ago, had blond hair.

This background meant that, almost as an article of faith, nobles were proud of the color of their hair and eyes.

It had always been that way.

Still, this didn't mean that people who were not blond and blue-eyed experienced open discrimination.

A family with black hair across generations could, if descended from an old, noble people, maintain pride in its history.

However, it was a different story if a long-standing blond-haired family suddenly produced a child with black hair.

Before the Principality of Wiltia was established seven hundred years ago, the continent of Europea had faced what was called the Dark Age, a time of war, poverty, starvation, and epidemic.

The nations that now ruled 70 percent of the world were extremely weak back then, and were overrun by barbarians attacking from the east.

Anyone who fought the invaders met death, while those who surrendered kept their lives, but the men and children became slaves, and the women were violated.

The barbarians rampaging across the continent retreated after a counterattack by the allied forces of the nations of Europea. All that remained, however, was devastation, with mountains of corpses, and women who had conceived unwanted children, fathered by the barbarians.

The women were frightened.

What kind of discrimination would their children face if they were born with black hair and eyes like those of the barbarians?

However, the children born ten months later had blond hair.

The women were pleased that the physical characteristics of the barbarians weren't apparent in their children. At least not *yet*.

But years later, that generation's grandchildren were born with black hair and eyes.

The time it took for those characteristics to emerge differed from bloodline to bloodline, but once every few generations babies with dark eyes and hair appeared, as if a reminder of the distant past

when barbarians had defeated their people.

Children with black hair were mocked as the children of losers and as "black dogs." They were held in contempt as the descendants of shameless mothers who had begged the barbarians for forgiveness in exchange for their bodies.

"What a shocking story …"

After listening to Hilde's background, as they sat in the chapel, Marlene's heart was filled with horror.

Not about Hilde's background.

She was appalled by the people who irrationally discriminated against children as barbarians and losers because of what had happened seven centuries earlier.

"I don't like to criticize anyone's parents, but your father was wrong."

"I don't blame you for saying that."

Hilde's father was a man who could only feel secure in his identity through "venerable blood."

Aside from that venerable blood, he wasn't particularly talented and thought it was shameful for nobles to work. It had been Hilde's mother who covered the Hessen family's living expenses by working.

"My father wanted to kill me when he saw my hair and eyes. Or he wanted to leave me at the poorhouse."

However, Hilde's mother had tearfully begged him, kneeling on

the ground, to raise Hilde as their child.

"My mother became his slave in exchange for my life. She never disagreed with him and single-mindedly devoted herself to him."

"Um, if you were born into such a household, then why do you still …"

Marlene couldn't understand.

Hilde had suffered because of the narrow-minded prejudice of her noble father, but she was still obsessed with her family's blood.

She might have left such a father and sought a different way of life.

"Have you ever heard of the Polpora?"

"Huh? Isn't that a kind of fairy in folk tales?"

Marlene put her finger to her mouth as she recalled a children's book that she read to the children.

"Yes. They secretly steal beautiful treasures from humans."

Ugly Polpora fairies were fond of anything pretty.

To adorn themselves, they stole lovely objects and left ugly ones in their place.

"If they see a pretty dress, they replace it with a soiled cloth. If they see a shiny jewel, they replace it with a dirty rock. And if they see a beautiful *baby*, they replace it with their own unsightly infant."

"Hold on a second. You …"

"My father told me I was a child of the Polpora."

Hessen didn't think Hilde was his own child.

He was from an honorable, lofty family, so his own child couldn't

possibly be a black dog.

He insisted that his real, beautiful baby was stolen and a grotesque Polpora baby had been left in its place.

"Urgh!"

Marlene was at a loss for words.

Many suffer discrimination because of their birth.

Milly and Jacob also suffered because of their pasts and their families.

Nonetheless, there were actions that were totally unacceptable for parents to do to their children.

"Even as my mother died, she apologized for giving birth to me."

Why had she apologized?

Was it for not giving Hilde the blonde hair and blue eyes that her father wanted?

Or for not immediately killing a black dog with black hair and eyes?

"So I swore to myself … for my mother's sake … that I would become a fine noble and restore the family."

"Maybe … that was wrong?"

Marlene had once agreed to be a terrorist, but for most of her life, she was a common citizen.

She didn't understand the way nobles thought.

But she wondered.

"No, it wasn't wrong! It was … just what I thought."

Even if she was a black dog, Hilde believed that she could

succeed as a noble and get back at her father and others who despised her.

She lived her life with no other goal.

However, she had always questioned that way of life.

"I finally understood that my mother was apologizing to me for bringing me into a noble family."

In the end, even if Hilde achieved the highest honors, she wouldn't be the person she wanted to be.

Hurting someone who had hurt her wouldn't help.

She might grow rich and she might attain power.

But, Hilde wouldn't know what to do with vast riches and influence.

"Marlene, it was *you* who made me think differently."

"What? Me?"

Marlene was surprised to find herself in Hilde's story.

"Yes."

Marlene had tried to kill Lud. In that sense, she was like Hilde.

Furthermore, Hilde wasn't even able to *scratch* Lud, whereas Marlene had achieved results.

"You gave up on killing Lud Langart, didn't you?"

"Yes. I will never again try to kill him."

Marlene deeply regretted that, while a nun, she had betrayed the children at the orphanage by acting as a terrorist.

She thought that she no longer had the right to live with Milly and the other children at the church.

However, Lud had convinced her …

"If you regret it, then as long as they live, make them believe that you're just a nun."

Living with that would be harder than dying or imprisonment.

Nonetheless, Marlene made that choice and was alive today.

There was no reason for a nun to kill. She was incapable of such a thing.

"Well, that's not the only reason."

"Huh?

"Oh, nothing."

The other reason was that she had fallen in love with the person she had tried to kill.

"Anyway, at least you can laugh about it now. I've *never* smiled that way."

When Hilde looked down on someone, when she trampled someone underfoot, she wore a hateful smile. However, in her fifteen years of life, she had no memory of smiling from the bottom of her heart.

Being able to smile meant that she was over her past.

The people she met in Organbaelz all had overcome their pasts in order to smile in the present.

Hilde finally realized that.

What she really wanted was to feel pleasure in the present.

She wanted to feel that she belonged in the world.

Hilde was always irritated because she couldn't have that.

She was irritated because she was worried, and her worry was actually deep fear.

Her own father had cast her out, so she doubted whether she should even exist in this world.

"No, surely you too have something. Something you like … Something you like to do?"

"Something I …"

After Marlene asked the question, Hilde paused.

"Come to think of it, there *was* one thing."

When she was young, she had liked something.

Since her family was poor and Hilde had received little love from her parents, she never received many toys.

But there was one thing she had enjoyed, which she could do without money or possessions.

"I liked to sing."

Hilde's mother was also from a fallen noble family. She sometimes sang in bars for daily wages.

When Hilde was young, she learned a few songs, and her mother had lavished her with praise.

Even her father, who rarely showed interest in her, had praised her singing.

But that led to another tragic experience.

"Singing? You like to sing? Are you any good?"

"W-well, kind of …"

Suddenly, Marlene's eyes had taken on a different look.

She was excited as she grabbed Hilde's shoulders and made a request as if she was pleading.

"Could you sing a little?"

"What? That would be embarrassing! Besides, I haven't sang in a while, so I don't feel confident."

"Don't worry! I'm the only person here! Give it a go!"

Usually, Hilde's hot temper would have taken over, and she would have knocked Marlene away, shouting, "Shut up!" But she was feeling uncharacteristically vulnerable and the look on Marlene's face was too intense to refuse.

"Okay, but don't laugh."

She had no choice but to try a song from her old repertoire.

Hilde coughed a few times and readied her throat.

It's been so long since I last sang …

She remembered that day when her father made her attend a ball, wearing a rented dress, so she could use her singing voice to catch the eyes of a big noble.

She never sang again after that day.

She avoided even humming since the moment she returned from the ball in dejection, and her father had hit her over and over.

However, today, she set aside her resolution.

"Ahh …"

She took a deep breath and sang.

The song, which she had learned from her mother years ago, was about an old nation.

God fell in love with a girl and sent her all manner of gifts.

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

He gave her everything, but she did not respond.

She was already in love with someone else.

She loved a poor shepherd.

The girl didn't love God, with his omnipotence, immortality, and beauty that surpassed everything else in the world. God wept in sorrow, and sank into despondent depths.

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

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

The poor shepherd must die.

The shepherd met his death because he was loved by the girl.

He was accused, pushed from a cliff, and he died.

And yet, the girl still did not answer God.

She followed the shepherd, throwing herself off the cliff.

God raged at his servant for this thoughtless action.

He cast thunderbolts and made untold mountains spew fire.

He divided his life in two, giving one part to the girl and the other to the shepherd, so that they might live once again.

God's life was over and he fell into a deep slumber.

The sun rose again over the world.

The girl and the shepherd rose and the world revived …

… little by little.

"Phew …"

After she finished the song, sweat shone on Hilde's forehead.

She sighed deeply and turned around as if just remembering something.

In her embarrassment, she had turned away from Marlene, and sang facing a holy symbol hanging in the chapel, as if to consecrate it.

"Um, what's the matter?"

Marlene was looking at her in amazement.

"You're really good!"

She sighed in admiration as she spoke with heartfelt surprise.

"Wow … Are you really in the military? I can't believe it!"

Hilde sang like a professional singer. No, she was so good that an average singer would skulk away in shame.

Marlene didn't know a lot about singing.

Nonetheless, she could tell that Hilde's voice was uncommonly beautiful.

Few singers in Berun, the royal capital of Wiltia, or in the grand theaters of Parise, the City of Art, could sing as well.

"So prodigies really *do* exist!"

"Y-you're praising me too much!"

Hilde wasn't used to any praise at all, so her face blushed bright

red as she replied. But Marlene shook her head repeatedly, saying, "No, I mean it. It's true."

"Well, um … thank you."

Hilde sang because she loved it.

Perhaps the purity of that love manifested in a crystal clear and brilliant singing voice.

"This is it … Yes, this is it!"

"What's *what*?"

Marlene balled up her fists and appeared excited.

"Wow! This is just what I needed! Is it the will of God? It must be! I guess it really *is* worth praying even if it's just a formality!"

Considering she was a servant of God, Marlene's comment was surprising.

"W-what are you saying? You … Whoa!"

Hilde had stretched out her hand to timidly ask a question when Marlene spun around and clasped her hand.

"Hilde, would you attend the Thanksgiving festival and sing?!"

"Huh? W-why?!"

Hilde had heard about the Organbaelz Thanksgiving festival, but she didn't know that one of the singers was unable to attend.

Furthermore, there was no way she would know that Marlene was on the festival committee and looking for a replacement.

"Think of it as a favor to me!! I can't sing!! And I'm clumsy! I'm pretty but I'm clumsy! Which makes me both happy *and* sad!"

"Um … I don't understand what you're talking about."

Hilde had no idea that Milly, who was like Marlene's sister, had tried desperately to stop Marlene from serving as a substitute.

"Please! I need you to sing! Besides, I want everyone to hear you!"

This was how Marlene truly felt.

Organbaelz was a small rural town.

The people didn't enjoy extravagant living, but neither were they dying of poverty.

Every day, they led hard lives that lacked amusement.

The miners were paid adequately for their hard labor, but they worked in dangerous circumstances and each year some died.

The Thanksgiving festival was a celebration that the townsfolk looked forward to all year.

"I'm sure everyone will enjoy hearing you sing. So please!"

"Uh … um …"

Hilde's heart seemed to stop beating. Then it began *pounding*.

She hadn't been this excited since she first met Genitz.

She was so pleased that someone wanted her.

"Uh … um … oh … okay."

She looked away, her face blushing, but she agreed.

"Okay, it's decided! Come back again tomorrow so we can make arrangements. But the sun has gone down, so you'd better go back."

As she said this, Marlene pointed to the door of the chapel.

"And someone has come to pick you up."

Hilde saw a familiar man. It was Heidrig.

"When did he …"

Marlene winked at the surprised Hilde.

That night in the attic at Tockerbrot ···

Hilde, sitting on the bed, holding a pillow and staring into space, was unable to sort out her feelings.

She was thinking that it had been a very hard and confusing day, with her emotions rising and falling.

Sven had called her stupid and she had cried and vented her feelings, but perhaps that was why she now felt a little lighter.

"What ··· am I *doing*?" she mumbled.

She had repeated the same thing over the last few days.

Until yesterday, however, it had come from self-pity over her current situation.

Today, she was a little pleased, if also confused, over her strange encounters.

"You're good at singing!"

Heidrig spoke to Hilde bluntly.

"W-were you listening?!"

"Yes. I meant to say something sooner but missed my chance."

Sven had told Lud that Hilde had disappeared, which had worried him.

Sven planned to search for her, but Heidrig returned from his break and suggested that he go instead.

He thought that Hilde might have decided to abandon the mission.

"If you're that talented, you could become a successful singer!"

Heidrig was an amateur when it came to singing and acting.

But even to him, her singing was impressive.

"Long ago, I sang at a ball for nobles …"

"Oh?"

That was eight years ago, before she was ten years old.

Her father had recognized her singing skills and used what small connections he had for an opportunity to show off her talent.

Hilde didn't own a proper dress to wear, so they borrowed money to rent a dress that was too big, and Hilde attended the ball.

"The reaction to my singing was enthusiastic. Everyone praised me and applauded."

However, that was the end of it.

No one had offered to be her benefactor.

Even people who pretended to be patrons of art and culture praised her, but would go no further.

"Because … I'm a black dog."

She had black hair and black eyes, so she was a loser.

It was hard to find nobles with such poor taste that they would take a girl like her under their wing.

"After we got home, my father hit me many times."

He had accused her of humiliating him and had blamed her for being a black dog.

He had hit and kicked her repeatedly, and as she had cried and begged for forgiveness, and she told herself that she would never

sing again.

"So … why did you decide to sing now?"

A slight change of feeling showed on Heidrig's face as he asked.

No matter how much noise she made, Heidrig had taken no more interest in her than he would a boisterous puppy, but now for the first time, he looked at Hilde as if seeing a human being.

"It's just … that nun was pushy and …"

Hilde touched her hair as if remembering something.

It wasn't her own natural black hair.

She had dyed her hair blonde as a disguise.

"If I had been born with this hair color, what would my life be like?"

Her soft words sounded sad.

Meanwhile, in a charcoal-burning forest lodge on the outskirts of Organbaelz …

The lodge had been deserted long ago, but some men were gathered inside now.

"So you found her?"

"Yeah. The nun somehow avoided capture."

"What about the other woman?"

"That waitress who is absurdly strong?"

"Aw, she's just a bit above average."

"There's no doubt about it. She was wearing the bakery uniform, so it was her."

"Yes, it was that blonde girl."

No one—not Hilde, Heidrig or even Lud or Sven—knew about this conversation.

But if they had heard the next words, it would have given them a chill.

"It was just as described by that *masked man*."

The development bureau in the royal capital of Berun was shaped like a single spiral.

An attacking opponent had to destroy each of the structure's barriers from the front, one by one. This also meant that the defending side, in order to counterattack, had to confront its opponent head-on.

This wasn't usually a problem.

The strength of the development bureau's forces lay in defense. Their purpose was to provide security, so there was no need to attack.

But tonight was different.

It was necessary to mount a desperate attack to escape the encircling net and request reinforcements from military headquarters.

For a regular person, that would be impossible.

As soon as an escape was attempted, Schutzstaffel soldiers would close in with machine gun fire, and that person would die, no longer

recognizably human.

However, what if the person escaping wasn't human?

Altering that crucial premise changed everything.

"W-what?! What happened?!"

"Calm down! Report!!"

"Grenade! Bring me a grenade!!"

The Schutzstaffel soldiers were worked up.

Although they had met severe resistance, they had almost reached their goal. However, something suddenly appeared that was disrupting their front line.

"What?! What is happening?!"

The commanding officer Captain Delz, yelled out.

However, he received only a vague reply.

"Something appeared, and the next thing I knew, soldiers were falling, one after the other!"

"What are you talking about?!"

Delz yelled again, but the soldier could say nothing further.

In any case, something or someone was approaching at a speed faster than sound, and sending soldiers flying with every blow.

KA-BOOM! THA-GOOM would be the only way to describe it in words.

Rebecca Sharlahart was traveling at terrific speed, ricocheting off the floor, walls, and ceiling.

But she wasn't trying to attack the surrounding Schutzstaffel

soldiers.

She was just trying to pass through them as quickly as possible to carry out her creator's order, which was to get word to Marshal Elvin at military headquarters, and bring back reinforcements.

Therefore, she was rapidly shoving aside anything in her way.

"Gah!"

A soldier made a strange sound as he flew up and his neck bent at a strange angle.

Rebecca didn't intend to damage or kill anyone.

But it was inevitable when something shot past that was human-sized and moving with lightning speed.

At this rate, it won't be hard to break through ···

Rebecca thought as she ran through the enemy ranks.

Her thoughts, or rather the humanoid Hunter Unit's thoughts, were calm and realistic.

She was created as an AI for a piloted military weapon. Thus, she wasn't programmed with excessive optimism or unnecessary pessimism.

Her thoughts arose from a multi-faceted perspective based on factors such as infantry positions, equipment, and proficiency.

The idea behind the military is fighting against groups.

Person-to-person combat was essential. Nonetheless, in the case of massive combat strength concentrated in one individual ··· Unless they were aware that their opponent was an android with the strength of one hundred humans, there was no way they could

defeat Rebecca.

I've successfully escaped the bureau, so now I need to slip through the soldiers and race across the city.

The development bureau was surrounded, but not so completely that an ant couldn't crawl out.

A human being would have been captured immediately leaving the building, but there was no one who could match Rebecca's speed.

By the time they noticed that someone had escaped, she had launched from the top of an armored vehicle, jumped to the roof of a nearby building, and was on her way through the dark city.

All that remained was to get to the royal palace and military headquarters.

There would be no problem. Or so it *seemed*.

"—?!"

Rebecca's sensors detected something approaching.

She didn't know what it was.

Something the size of a human was getting closer, running across the rooftops after her.

No way!

Rebecca almost let out a cry.

There was only one thing that could move at such speed.

Another humanoid Hunter Unit?!

As far as she knew, the creator—Daian Fortuner—had only produced herself and Sven Avei, now a waitress at a bakery in Pelfe.

There were no others.

Daian had said so.

Here it comes!

Static tangled her thoughts. It was impatience, but Rebecca didn't let that interfere.

On the battlefield, nothing was certain.

The probability might be only one percent, but what would happen, would happen.

Before asking why or how, she would deal immediately with the situation confronting her.

Intercept!!

Something jumped with legs strong enough to sunder roof tiles, and then it attacked Rebecca.

There was no moon. Streetlights dimly lit the roads, but it didn't brighten the rooftops.

Although it was too dark to see, Rebecca could tell that her opponent was a girl with red eyes.

I'll stop her with one blow!!

She tried a hand chop to pierce her opponent's neck, which is a vital spot on humans and non-humans alike.

A humanoid Hunter Unit was strong enough to sever a neck with her bare hands.

That's what *should* have happened.

"Agh—!"

However, before Rebecca could deliver her chop, her opponent

rammed a knee into her stomach.

No way … This girl's faster than I am?!

Even with emotional makeup that was close to a human being's, the humanoid Hunter Units were driven solely by mechanical processes.

Physical speed, strength, and processing speed … Specifications determined all these characteristics.

Compared to me, is she … a more advanced model?

Rebecca lost her balance and wobbled.

She rolled down the roof and fell into Sephira River, which flowed through the center of the royal capital.

There was the sound of a splash of water and something sinking …

"Mission complete."

The attacker stared at the surface of the water to make sure Rebecca wouldn't float, and then she mumbled softly and disappeared, as if to vanish in the dark night.

CHAPTER 6
THANKSGIVING

"There isn't enough to fight over, but there's more than enough to share."

Long ago, a saint said this. When I heard that, I thought …

"What an utter idiot!"

I have a biscuit in my pocket.

That won't change no matter what I do.

If it breaks in two, the original amount won't change.

It won't save one person from starving for even one day.

There is a girl in front of me.

She has hollow cheeks and her eyes are cavernous.

It's obvious that she's ill from the cold and starvation.

I have one biscuit in my pocket.

I'm starving, and I feel as if I might go crazy.

I've already decided what I will do with the biscuit.

"Thanks, Big Bro!"

The girl takes the biscuit and thanks me with a smile.

"Gwaaah!!!"

Heidrig slept on the floor in Tockerbrot's attic. Before dawn, he jumped up with a shout.

"*HUFF … HUFF … HUFF …*"

His shirt was soaked with sweat.

He could have wrung drops of moisture from it.

But it wasn't hot.

The nightmare … He hadn't had it for a long time, and had thought he never would again.

"W-what the …? Hey, what's wrong?"

Hilde asked him from the bed.

She was irritated to be awakened by a shout.

But she was also amazed to see Heidrig sweating and out of breath. Ever since they met a fortnight ago, he was always calm, but now his face was white with fear.

"Oh, uh … it's nothing."

Heidrig's face showed clearly that it wasn't nothing.

"But …"

Hilde was still half asleep, but she could tell he was disturbed.

"It's nothing. Sorry I woke you. Sleep a little longer."

Heidrig lowered the ladder and began to climb down.

"Today is show time for you. You'd better sleep well or you won't make it through."

Heidrig turned his face away after speaking and climbed down the ladder.

At the small well behind Tockerbrot …

Heidrig drew water with a bucket, removed his shirt, and poured water over his head.

"……!"

It was already the end of October, but not yet winter.

At dawn, when the air was chilly, the water was especially cold and sent a shock through his body.

"Argh …"

Nonetheless, the vision from his nightmare wouldn't go away.

It was a dream he had hoped never to suffer through again.

But, after almost ten years, it had returned as if to accuse him.

"She doesn't resemble her *that* closely."

Hilde was the reason he had the dream.

But it wasn't her fault.

She was a young girl and a series of associations had jogged his memory.

If there was another reason, it was …

"How long have you been standing there?"

Heidrig pulled his mind from his thoughts to address a man hiding in the shadows.

"I just got here. I'm impressed. Indeed, you are the Wolf Man."

It was the masked corporal. Heidrig wasn't sure what to think about this man.

It seemed like Hilde trusted him, but it had been too easy for him to free Heidrig, a national traitor, from jail.

"What's the matter? Is there something on my face?"

The corporal asked Heidrig with a flippant voice.

"That mask you wear is disturbing."

"Oh dear, oh dear …"

Heidrig stifled his irritation when the corporal missed his sarcasm.

"Why are you here? Didn't you say you would stay away because you're too noticeable?"

The corporal always stood out, and he had encountered Lud before, so he offered to lend support from a distance.

Hilde had suggested that he remove his mask, but he claimed he would be even more noticeable without it, so they accepted his offer.

Many soldiers had battle scars.

Many were so horribly scarred that even their loved ones wouldn't recognize them.

"Yes. But I told you I would be in contact, didn't I?"

To avoid suspicion, Hilde and Heidrig hadn't brought communication devices, so the corporal had to contact them in person.

Indeed, Sven and Lud had confiscated anything that had looked like military equipment, so the corporal had been right.

"There's a slight complication, so I came in a hurry."

"What is it?"

"It appears that the higher-ups have discovered that the first lieutenant took you from the prison."

"No way!"

There should have been another day until the inspection by the Legal Affairs Bureau.

"It sounds like something is happening in the royal capital. This is a problem."

Even through the mask, Heidrig could tell that the corporal's voice held no tension.

And that made sense.

"As things stand, the first lieutenant is in a very bad position."

Hilde had ordered Heidrig's release from jail without permission, albeit at the corporal's instigation.

In the military, a superior officer's orders are absolute.

Even if that officer were to order something illegal, it must be obeyed.

In a case such as this, all responsibility lay with the superior officer.

So the corporal would not receive punishment because he had simply followed orders.

However, it meant serious trouble for Hilde.

"She's sure to lose her military rank. In the best case, they'll only arrest and imprison her, but I'm not sure what will happen if they suspect treason. It's certain that she will lose her family name."

Hilde would lose everything she had.

Possibly even her life.

"This is terrible!"

The corporal addressed Heidrig, who was biting his lips.

"This may be cold comfort, but they won't charge you with a criminal offense."

Heidrig was already a felon, but the nation didn't want to turn dissidents into martyrs, so they wouldn't execute him.

He had been sentenced to indefinite imprisonment, so he would just go back to jail.

"Is there anything we can do? Should I just turn myself in now?"

The corporal shook his head at Heidrig's question.

"It's out of the question. Suppose you got caught stealing from a store. They wouldn't forgive you if you returned the item, would they?"

"I suppose not."

That brought back memories.

His apologies hadn't mattered. When the shop owner discovered his crime, Heidrig had been unable to avoid his blows.

And this was the military. With the government's backing, it could do *anything*.

Heidrig knew that, too.

"Well, if this is solvable, I see only one way."

The corporal's tone suggested he was casually speculating, so that if someone tried to pull it off, the corporal would be safe from blame.

At last, Thanksgiving morning arrived.

Everywhere, preparations were in the final stages, with people busily double-checking and reviewing plans.

And it was no different at Tockerbrot.

"Finally, the day has come!"

Lud watched the sunrise with deep emotion.

"That's good … *MUMBLE MUMBLE* …"

"Yeah, it really is. It's great."

Jacob and Milly looked sleepy.

"Are you all right? Why don't you use my bed to rest?"

They didn't appear to have the strength to return home, so he suggested they rest in his room in the back of the shop.

"Okay … Wake me up just past noon … for the dancers …"

"Wake me up after lunch … for the puppet show …"

As drowsiness overcame them, they reminded him about the performances they didn't want to miss, and then stumbled to the back.

"Well …"

Lud considered what to do next.

He had finished the difficult preparations, which left only the baking.

"You're up early."

No sooner had Jacob and Milly left, Heidrig appeared.

"No, I never went to sleep. I worked all night."

Lud had worked and reworked his ideas for the bread he would serve at Thanksgiving.

Yesterday, he finally decided, and then he had worked all night to prepare.

"You could have asked me to help you."

Heidrig looked perplexed.

All night, Jacob and Milly helped Lud.

"No, *now* it's your turn. Baking is heavy labor. The right man is necessary for the right job. Isn't it the same in the military?"

"I guess so …"

A big part of a soldier's work was heavy labor.

Working overnight this once wouldn't hurt Lud.

"For now, I'm thinking about baking some biscuits to hand out to the kids in town."

"Biscuits …"

Heidrig's face clouded slightly at Lud's words.

"Don't you like biscuits?"

Lud noticed a slight change on Heidrig's face.

"I don't like or dislike them."

Heidrig answered without making eye contact and walked toward the oven room, but the door opened before he got there.

"I'm back!"

Today, Tockerbrot was closed for the first time in a year.

It wasn't a customer who spoke. It was Sven, who had also pulled an all-nighter.

"Good job! Have you made you-know-what?"

"Yes. It was a crash course but also a piece of cake!"

Sven's hands held a dress with a cover over it.

"Is that for my superior officer?"

"Yes."

Hilde was going to sing on stage at the Thanksgiving festival.

Sven had made her a dress for the occasion.

She had made her own waitress uniform, and the uniforms for Milly and Hilde. Her skill at dressmaking, from measurement to sewing, was greater than even a professional dressmaker. For her, making a dress would usually be very easy, but creating a dress to wear on stage was a little more difficult, as one might expect.

Sven had borrowed space at a neighborhood dressmaker after closing the bakery yesterday, and finished the dress during the night.

"So it seems … nothing happened here?"

Sven asked after looking around the shop and staring at Lud for a moment.

She tried desperately to avoid leaving her master in the shop alone with Heidrig and Hilde, who wanted to kill him.

"Please, give this to her."

Sven brusquely handed the dress to Heidrig.

Lud had ordered her to leave the shop to work on the dress last night, and actually, she had agreed partly of her own free will.

Four days ago, she had made Hilde cry at the mine.

She faithfully reported the whole incident to Lud and apologized for her thoughtlessness.

"My emotions got the better of me!"

Lud, however, had received her report with a look of satisfaction.

He could see that Sven had grown, because instead of verbally abusing someone the way she used to, she just used strong words to scold Hilde for her poor behavior.

There was a yawn, followed by, "I'm sleepy …"

Hilde appeared.

"Geh!"

"What do you mean by that?!"

Frustrated, Sven snapped at Hilde, who looked troubled after seeing Sven.

"What good timing! Why don't you give it to her now? She should try it on. It might need to be altered."

"Y-yeah …"

Sven looked uncomfortable when Lud suggested this.

Marlene had told her what Hilde had confided about herself.

Now Sven knew the suffering and sorrow the girl had experienced, and that she wasn't just a silly, proud girl with an overdeveloped sense of elitism.

Speaking to Hilde was hard for Sven now, and the two hadn't even looked at each other over the last four days, which made work awkward.

"Here, this is your dress for today! I made it, so be grateful and try it on!"

Sven thrust out the dress but immediately rephrased her words.

"I mean … you don't *have* to be grateful. I made it because Master ordered me to and because it'll help make the festival

successful …Yes, that's why! This was just the minimum degree of cooperation for a temporary joint operation.

"Um … uh …"

Hilde was confused as Sven struggled for words.

Over the last few days, perhaps because she was no longer hiding from her past, Hilde hadn't spoken or acted aggressively as she had before.

She had practiced her singing at the church with Marlene after work, and tried hard to do her best.

"Just try it on! If it's too loose or too tight, I'll fix it right now!"

"What are you so angry about?!"

Sven didn't understand her own feelings.

For some reason, she had a growing desire to cheer up this girl, even though she was perhaps still plotting to kill her and her master, whose life was more important than her own.

That's why she had offered to make a dress for Hilde.

"Well, we should make ourselves scarce. We mustn't intrude on a girl trying on clothes!"

Lud left Sven in charge and told Heidrig to go to the oven room.

"Well, what do you think?"

A few minutes later, Hilde had put on the dress and Sven made sure nothing needed to be altered.

"Wow! You could become a dressmaker anytime!"

Hilde was honestly impressed.

Sven had measured Hilde once, but not carefully.

This kind of dress should be tried on and refitted over and over until it fit perfectly.

The dress Sven made for Hilde was perfectly designed not to constrict her chest and abdomen when she sang, but would still make a pretty silhouette.

"Aw, it was nothing!"

Sven answered without hesitation.

The dress featured a design that looked like what a shrine maiden would wear when standing before the altar, and resembled a folk costume native to Organbaelz.

The dress was so perfect that it was hard to believe that Sven had made it in four days. But for Sven, the design was the "optimal solution," generated by collating a vast amount of data.

For example, you could fabricate a novel, if you took countless bits from existing novels and extracted detailed patterns from their common elements to create a template.

However, the result would just be an approximation.

It might succeed once or twice, but it wouldn't make you a renowned author whose work would be remembered by future generations.

"I can't sing. I can manage an approximation of singing, but no more than that."

Although Sven was close to human, singing was beyond her powers.

"That's why only *you* can do this, Hilde. Work at it."

"But I'm … your enemy."

Hilde's desire to kill Lud was fading.

She was already asking herself whether she could continue as a soldier.

But there was still something she couldn't get past.

Just as Sven couldn't sing no matter how much she might want to, Hilde was unable to give up her feud with Lud and Sven.

"Do what you believe in from the bottom of your heart."

Sven's comment was casual.

Sven would have secretly destroyed anything that posed a danger to her master.

"You don't seem to have any actual experience fighting."

"—!"

Hilde cringed at Sven's truthful observation about Hilde's weakness in combat.

"What do you think the most important thing is for a soldier?"

"To complete her duty, by carrying out orders to attack the enemy and—"

Sven interrupted her. "That's only half of it."

Hilde's answer was correct if applied only to the *military*.

However, the answer was different for a soldier.

"The most important thing for a soldier is fulfilling her role and that's all."

A great warrior once said that the military is like a living

creature.

Inside a living creature, the heart, lungs, stomach, intestines, blood vessels, and nerves each perform specific functions to support the animal.

Likewise, soldiers safeguard an assigned location to support the living thing that is the military, thereby fulfilling their role.

"This isn't just true for soldiers. Society works the same way. It functions correctly when individuals perform their roles."

Some people cultivate fields to grow wheat. Blacksmiths make hoes and plows for the wheat farmers. Others transport that wheat, and still others refine it. A baker kneads that wheat into dough to make bread.

There wouldn't be bread on the table unless all those roles were fulfilled.

"My master makes a living in the role of a baker. The role of a baker is to bake bread, not kill enemies."

Sven thought about this as she spoke.

Lud hadn't killed Hilde even though she had tried to kill him.

If she tried to kill him again, most likely he would still choose not to kill her.

Eating is living and living is eating.

A person would lose the right to make food forever if he were to kill someone.

Lud had told her that.

It wasn't about kindness or compassion.

Lud, who had killed so many people that he became a war hero, made that oath so that he could keep on living.

"And the role *I* chose is to support my master. Therefore, this is also my role to bear."

"I don't get it … What are you talking about?"

"Well, I guess you wouldn't."

Sven responded to Hilde's confusion with a bit of sarcasm.

"Not much for *thinking*, are you? First, just carry out the role in front of you. Then, you might be able to see something else."

"Do you really think so?"

"That's how it is for my master."

Amid the roar of gunfire on the battlefield, the lofty causes of those back home meant nothing.

Soldiers just did their best and grasped the slightest hope of surviving that day.

Sven had watched Lud live that truth for a long time.

"That's all I can tell you. You'll have to figure out the rest for yourself."

Sven smiled as she spoke.

This time, her smile was lively and joyful, like a veteran patting the back of a frightened new soldier.

"……"

Hilde reacted suspiciously to Sven's smile.

"Um, have we met before?"

"What are you talking about? You chased us like crazy in that

Teepneuen!"

It wasn't long ago that Hilde had played a high-stakes game of tag with them at the mine.

"No, it's not that … I feel like you lectured me this way before."

"You're imagining things!"

Sven was quick to laugh this off.

When Hilde had tried to kill them in the mine, Sven had connected to a Hunter Unit and thoroughly "educated" Hilde on how to improve her clumsy battle skills.

This girl is smarter than I thought.

Sven felt a twinge of anxiety as she realized this.

While the girls were fitting the dress and starting to understand each other a little better, Lud and Heidrig were working in the oven room, where the atmosphere was complicated.

"Leave the biscuits we baked. Marlene and Charlotte will come later to help wrap them."

"Charlotte? Oh, that pretty woman?"

Charlotte was Jacob's mother.

She helped with Tockerbrot's out-of-town sales. She came to the shop a few times a week, so Heidrig met her before.

"May I ask a question?"

"What is it?"

Heidrig's voice and face were serious as he asked permission.

However, Lud's voice was cheerful.

He usually grimaced when he wasn't speaking but Lud's friendly voice indicated that he was happy.

"What are you thinking?"

Heidrig repeated the question he had asked a few days ago when Lud had hired Heidrig and Hilde, who had come to kill him.

It was true that the bakery needed help. Everyone at the shop was busy over the last few days.

Nonetheless, his decision to hire them was extraordinary.

It wasn't what one would expect a hero would do.

"Yes … No, um … How should I explain?"

As he checked the bread in the oven, Lud's voice was relaxed.

Heidrig usually tried to hide his emotions, but his irritation was evident.

"Forget about that and look at these. I finally finished the new bread for Thanksgiving!"

"Forget about it?"

Lud casually dismissed a matter that affected his very life.

"Are these nussbeugel?"

The bread Lud pulled from the oven was rolled dough shaped into a ring.

"You know nussbeugel? It gave me the idea for making these."

Lud thought for a moment.

"Let's see … Shall I call it Maple Autumn?"

"Maple Autumn?"

The bread lined up on the iron tray reminded Heidrig of

something.

"Surely that isn't …"

As Heidrig was about to continue, Lud spoke first.

"You're not him, are you?"

"—?!"

Because Lud had asked so casually, Heidrig was unable to hide his emotion.

"I knew it."

Seeing Heidrig's reaction was enough to confirm Lud's suspicions.

Why had Lud made Heidrig work with him in the bakery for the past ten days?

Now Heidrig understood why.

So Lud could ask this question.

He wanted to shock Heidrig to elicit an honest answer, so that Heidrig would be unable to just respond with "What are you talking about?!" or "Hunh?!"

"How did you know? Did you suspect from the beginning?"

Heidrig could no longer stop his voice from trembling.

"Did you know right away that I'm not the Wolf Man?"

Thanksgiving at Organbaelz started in the afternoon.

Today, people rested from work and celebrated by drinking and singing.

The sound of musical instruments was everywhere, and

fireworks were launched into the sky.

Food stalls were set up end-to-end, providing drinks and food.

"It sure is spectacular again this year!"

"The puppet show was so much fun!"

Jacob and Milly had joined the celebration right after waking up, and both enjoyed the festival.

"Hey there, you two!"

Sister Marlene called to them as they walked along the main street, which was bustling with entertainment.

Marlene was working at the festival committee booth.

The booth offered a new cocktail, and dishes made with vegetables and meat, fresh from the harvest.

"Wow, it all looks delicious!"

Milly's eyes shone as she looked at the tasty food lined up before her.

"The *wurst* and *klopse* were just made. Would you like to try some?"

"You bet I would!!"

Jacob and Milly nodded in unison at Marlene's question.

"Yum! These are crisp and juicy! I like the boiled one, but I *love* the grilled one!"

Jacob smiled with joy, his mouth stuffed with *wurst*.

Wurst was a type of white sausage.

It was made of minced lamb and pork, mixed with onion, parsley, lemon, and cardamom. It was juicy and delicious, and difficult to stop

eating.

"Y-yummy! Yummy-yummy!"

The *klopse* was a meatball stew made with herbs and white sauce that Milly was happily eating.

"There's also going to be roasted horsemeat, hamburgers and steak."

"Yahoo! I can't wait!"

"Mmph-mmph-mmph!"

Organbaelz wasn't a poor town, but there was only one day a year when the town folk could eat so much meat.

That luxury was out of reach for Milly and the orphans living at the church on the hill, and for Jacob and his mother. Milly and Jacob were both still growing, so they stuffed their faces now as if to store up a year's worth of food.

"Where are Lud and the others?"

"Hm? They're probably still baking. Lud said he didn't need us anymore and we could go have fun."

Jacob answered Marlene with his mouth still full.

Lud had even given the two some change as a "special bonus" for all their help at the shop.

"Milly hasn't done anything but eat at all the food stalls!"

"Wh-who cares!!"

Milly was a big eater, and her eyes were wide as she gazed at the colorful sweets on display.

"She also bought a bird-shaped hair ornament, so I guess she's

interested in girly stuff now."

"How did you know that?!"

Milly had stopped at an accessory booth between all the eating, and splurged on some small items to dress herself up.

"Oh my … It looks like you're enjoying yourself!"

Marlene looked happily at the children chattering away.

"By the way, how is Lud's bread? Do people like it?"

Lud had worried over his bread right up until today.

If the townsfolk didn't enjoy his bread, he would be desolate.

"Well …"

Marlene's face darkened.

"Yes?"

Milly, still gorging on meatballs, stopped eating and her face grew worried.

"Ha ha! Don't worry! They love his bread!"

The bread was baked at Tockerbrot and then carried to the festival.

Apple tarts, malasada doughnuts, cinnamon-roll pies, and cacao canela … Everything was a major success.

And Lud's creations weren't just popular among the women and children who didn't drink.

Even the men, young and old, who didn't usually eat sweets, were now reaching out for more, and praising Lud's bread.

"Especially the Maple Autumns! Those are a big hit!"

As far as Marlene could see, they were so popular that they

disappeared as soon as they were displayed.

The Maple Autumns were made with fall fruits, such as apples and pears, lathered in syrup, wrapped in a thin dough, and rolled into a U-shape for baking.

When biting into the crunchy treat, thick sweet sauce would spill out, eliciting indescribable bliss. They were a delicacy, each one providing a satisfying taste of autumn.

"That's because we helped him all night!"

"He worked us to the bone!"

Jacob and Milly puffed out their chests.

"I get it, I get it … You guys worked really hard!"

Marlene praised their efforts with a wry grin.

"I'm happy for Lud. He'll be pleased."

Jacob, who knew how Lud had worked toward this moment, was relieved from the bottom of his heart.

"Of course! His baking is amazing! No one can say his bread doesn't taste delicious!"

Milly was also pleased to see Lud's effort pay off.

"Oh, my …"

Marlene gazed at the two with delight.

They had their own problems, but their affection for Lud was pure.

He was large and imposing, but they were deeply happy that this soft-hearted, hard-working man was finally finding acceptance among the people in town.

Marlene knew that if Lud could hear these two now, he would weep with joy.

"But it's not just the taste. Lud also has a good eye."

"Oh? What do you mean?"

Milly looked puzzled at Marlene's words.

"It's also—"

Marlene started to explain, but then the clock chimes interrupted her.

"Oh, no! It's already time! I need to go to Hilde!"

As a member of the festival committee, Marlene had a variety of jobs.

She had to assign booths, deliver the dishes, arrange the entertainment, and manage the stage performances.

"Hilde … Do you mean about her singing?!"

"Yes! So see you later!"

Marlene answered Jacob quickly and rushed off.

"She's so busy!"

The boy stared after Marlene.

"That's *braten*! I haven't seen such a big hunk of meat in ages!"

Meanwhile, Milly's appetite was as strong as ever. Her eyes were twinkling at the roasted horsemeat that was just delivered.

A stage had been erected in the town's central plaza.

This was the center of the festival, and today many events were taking place.

Traveling entertainers performed, and plays by a theatrical troupe were providing plentiful amusement for this rural town that generally had little entertainment.

Everyone was drinking and eating happily and their excitement was building.

Hilde was in a waiting room behind the stage, concealed by a curtain.

"I must carry out my role, right?"

The advice Sven gave her that morning echoed inside her.

Carrying out her own role … Defending her post at all cost … Carving out a space where she would belong …

These were things she had always wanted.

She had never found her place in society as a noble of the Hessens, or even among her own family.

She had wanted to succeed in war, but the fighting had ended before she could.

And she was loyal to the Schutzstaffel only from a desire to get back at the people who had despised her.

Her hatred for Lud Langart was, in the end, jealousy of someone who started with what Hilde wanted for herself, and then found something of even greater value.

"I want to be accepted … Not by others, but by myself. I want to prove myself to myself!"

In the mirror, she saw a girl with blue eyes and blonde hair.

It was the girl she had once wished to be.

If she had been born looking like this, her father might have loved her and her mother wouldn't have cried.

She would have attained the patronage of a noble that day at the ball.

"But this isn't me."

Glancing aside, she noticed a jug.

She swallowed.

She could never win against Lud Langart looking like this.

Without accepting who she was, bearing it, and living with it, she could never win.

"I'm not a black dog. I am Hildegard von Hessen!"

She steeled her resolve and took off her stage dress.

"I'm coming in … Huh? Hey, what're you doing?!"

Marlene came in.

She raised her voice in surprise as she saw Hilde removing her dress when she was about to perform on stage.

"Uh … um …! I know that in olden times a shrine girl would appear naked as she offered up a dance and prayer! But, the girl was also physically attractive, so it pleased the people, too!"

"You don't understand … Wait, did you just slip in an insult?!"

Hilde was fifteen.

Her body wasn't as childish as Milly's, but it was still developing.

"It's not what you think. I just don't want the dress to get wet."

"Wet?"

Marlene cocked her head in confusion.

Hilde swiftly raised the jug and poured the water over her own head.

"What?!"

In that instant, Marlene received two surprises.

One was that Hilde had unexpectedly dumped water on herself, and the other was that her blonde hair was quickly turning black.

"This hair dye … It's easy to add the color and even easier to wash it out."

The hair dye, created to disguise intelligence operatives, was still under development at the Royal Weapons Development Bureau in Wiltia.

It wasn't water resistant, so one cup of water could easily flush the color out.

Running her fingers through her hair had removed all the blonde dye.

"Is that all right?"

Marlene questioned Hilde, who was not only revealing her true hair color, but also removing the blue contact lenses.

"I don't mind. I must live with *this* hair and my real eye color. If people want to laugh, they can!"

Determination shone in her eyes.

Like a knight before battle, she glowed with pride.

"That's good!"

Marlene felt very proud of this brave girl.

"The Polpora must be a superstition, because they would *never*

pass over such lovely black hair!"

Hilde smiled widely as Marlene said this with a laugh.

"Master, please hurry!"

"I know … I am, Sven!"

Sven and Lud ran through town, which was crowded because of the Thanksgiving festivities.

They were eager to make it in time to hear Hilde sing.

Lud had been baking since early morning, while Sven made deliveries, but they stopped work to watch Hilde's performance.

"I didn't know you were looking forward to this so much, Sven!"

"Ngah?!"

Sven was running ahead of Lud, but when she heard what he said, she stumbled.

"I'm *not*! But she's a staff member now! If she causes any trouble, it'll be *our* responsibility! So …"

Although she had made a plausible excuse, it was obvious that Sven was concerned about Hilde.

"I see, uh-huh …"

Lud appeared to find this funny, because his mouth curled, but he didn't press any further.

Sven deeply loved Lud and was dedicated to him with her heart, mind, and strength.

However, she was often surprisingly cold toward everyone else.

She was gentle to Jacob, but that was only because he was Lud's

friend.

If someone crossed Lud, she would show no mercy, even to women and children.

To be precise, she *couldn't*.

Lud appreciated the purity of Sven's affection, but he also feared the danger her devotion sometimes posed, and the combination was immensely pleasing.

After running down the main street, they arrived at the town plaza.

Hilde stepped onto the stage right on time.

"Oh!"

Sven raised her voice in surprise.

Hilde appeared without her disguise—with her own black hair.

"She …"

Hilde was publicly revealing the dark hair and eyes that had once caused her to be laughed at as a "child of Polpora" and a "black dog."

It was an act that a Schutzstaffel soldier, obsessed with her pride as an elite, would never commit, even under threat of death.

"Huh? Isn't that the girl who works at the bakery?"

"Oh, it's the one who's always frowning and surly!"

"She must have dyed her hair!"

A buzz arose among the people gathered in the plaza.

"……"

Hilde, standing in front of the microphone, seemed nervous and her shoulders shook.

"Ahh …"

She tried to sing, but she was too nervous.

Her body tensed and her throat constricted.

Marlene had assured them that Hilde's singing was absolutely the real thing.

However, being a good singer and being able to sing in public require different skills and degrees of courage.

"What is that dimwit doing?!"

Sven's voice was raised.

Her face looked as dismayed and irritated as if she herself was on that stage, and she seemed ready to jump up, kidnap Hilde, and make a getaway.

"Just keep watching …"

Lud rested his hand on Sven's shoulder.

"Hey, what's with her? When is she gonna sing?"

Mocking laughter began to rise from the crowd.

"Hey, kid! If you're not gonna sing, let someone else take over!"

"Maybe *I* can sing for you?!"

Drunken men called out mockingly, and the people around them began to laugh along.

"Ungh …"

Hilde made a pained sound.

"Master, maybe I should shut them up!"

"No, don't!!"

Lud quickly stopped Sven, who was rolling up her sleeves and

about to confront some drunkards.

Just then, another voice rang out.

"Pipe down! You're makin' it harder for her to start singing!!

The yell resounded throughout the plaza.

The crowd spun around to see miners arriving. The person who was yelling was Laurel, their leader.

"Don't you got the manners to listen to someone sing?!"

He was crossing his thick arms and glaring at them.

And it wasn't just Laurel. All the big, strong miners looked at the hecklers threateningly.

"Y-yikes!"

The drunkards looked terrified and quickly went silent.

"Hey, girl! We came to hear you sing! So give us a good song!"

"You've got black hair today! Looks good!"

"We're cheerin' for you! So give it a go!"

One by one, the miners cheered for Hilde.

"The miners … But why?"

Sven was confused.

Hilde had met them once when she visited the mine, but she had refused to speak with them and had run off.

"Underneath it all, they're good folk!"

Lud answered Sven, but knew that wasn't the only reason they were here.

Most of the miners weren't originally from Organbaelz. Some came from far away.

Each of them had a past, but once they became a group, they formed strong bonds.

"But they were mean to you…"

"Well, that was …"

That was understandable.

It wasn't as true in Organbaelz, but many towns in Pelfe still bore the marks of war.

If a former Wiltian soldier opened a bakery in such a town, the people would assume it was for amusement or just in poor taste.

They might have been frustrated at what they believed was the haughty attitude of a rich Wiltian baking fine bread for the poor people of Pelfe.

"The miners aren't hard to win over. They'll offer a proper welcome to anyone who tries hard."

They had recognized Lud's desire to have people eat his bread, and when they saw the effort he put into it, they accepted him more heartily than others in town.

Now Hilde was trying to add some sophisticated entertainment to the festival that the people in Organbaelz had eagerly anticipated for a year.

The miners accepted, appreciated, and applauded her.

"……!"

Hilde looked surprised and confused, but then her face tensed with determination, and she bowed deeply.

However, being a good singer and being able to sing in public

were still very different skills.

Singing is a matter of technique, but singing in public requires confidence, and the desire for someone to listen.

The last piece fell into place for Hilde.

"Ahhh …"

Hilde sang out a long note, resounding and clear.

And that was enough.

The raucous crowd now widened their eyes in surprise and quietly paid attention.

Her voice was one they didn't want to miss.

Long, long ago, when the world was still empty, God spoke unto the only two human beings.

"This world is yours, so you may do with it as you will."

The two were a boy and a girl.

"But what can we do in an empty world?"

And God answered the girl's question.

"How can you say that it is empty? Everything is there before you."

Then there was sky in the world.

And then the sea.

And then the earth.

"Do as you will with all you see, for it is yours."

If they cultivated the ground, they would reap fruit.

If they sailed the sea, they would know blessings.

At times, lightning fell from the sky.

Yet merciful rain moistened the earth and the sun brought warmth.

"This world is yours, so you may do with it as you will."

Thus spake God as he passed beyond the Door.

When next the Door opened, God would fulfill the promise.

He left all in their hands.

He commanded them to live, multiply, and fill the earth.

And to enjoy the pleasures of life until they forgot about Him.

It was called the Song of Joy, and it had been passed down since the old days before the establishment of Wiltia or Pelfe.

It was a supplication for blessings from God and a hymn of life.

The song told of how God loves and watches over everyone who suffers hardship.

"Phew!"

Hilde heaved a sigh after she finished singing.

A hush had descended over the audience.

It was so quiet that the calls of distant birds could be heard.

Silence, because everyone in front of her was quiet.

CLAP …

Someone clapped softly.

CLAP CLAP …

Joining in, one audience member after another began clapping.

It was as if a tiny hole in a large dam had widened so that the

whole structure collapsed. The chain reaction spread, and then …

"Hurraaaaahhh!!!

The audience let loose a deafening cheer.

The ovation was earsplitting. People whistled, waved their arms, and jumped to their feet. Every person, in their own way, bathed her in adulation.

"Th … thank you!"

Pleased from the bottom of her heart, Hilde bowed deeply.

She thanked them for listening, and for being pleased by her singing, and for complimenting her, and for *everything*.

By choosing this for herself, she had succeeded without anyone forcing her.

Her smile was happier than ever before, with the great satisfaction of achievement.

"What the …?"

Before Sven knew it, tears were gushing from her eyes.

"What … in the world?!"

This had never happened before.

The tears of a humanoid Hunter Unit like her only functioned to moisten the eyeballs.



But Sven was growing a human heart, and she was now capable of crying from sadness and pleasure.

"I'm not sad, so why am I …"

The rezanium reactor inside her chest that served as her heart, brain, and core was pulsing irregularly.

"Is this how you feel when something is emotionally moving?"

It was the first time she ever felt this. Yet Sven was adrift in an odd sensation of nostalgia.

From the shadows of a back street near the plaza, Heidrig watched Hilde on stage.

The audience's applause hadn't stopped.

People were now calling for an encore.

Hilde responded with a pleased smile.

The gathering now included entertainers accustomed to being on stage themselves, and food stall owners who had left their businesses behind.

"It turns out she really *can* smile," Heidrig mumbled to himself.

He had believed this girl was just like him, yet she was capable of such a radiant expression in just ten days.

"Well, that leaves me no choice …"

Heidrig made up his mind.

He would have to do it.

There was no other way.

He would do it and then he would truly become …

… the Wolf Man.

CHAPTER 7
A SINGLE BISCUIT

In the royal capital of Berun, nearly six hours had passed since the Schutzstaffel launched its attack.

If the sun had risen, the invading soldiers might have retreated, but dawn in Berun comes late in the autumn, so the day was still in deep darkness.

"We're almost there! Keep holding!!"

Sophia called encouragement to her subordinates.

There's a saying that the dark is deepest before the dawn.

If you can persevere through the current hardship, you are sure to see hope.

"At least one hour … No, stand firm for just thirty minutes!"

Among the security guards, less than half could still fight, but considering the difference in the sizes of the opposing forces, Sophia's guards had kept a better rate of survival.

"Tsk!"

The submachine gun firing at the Schutzstaffel soldiers ran out of ammunition.

"Sariya! Bring a replacement mag!"

Sariya didn't reply to Sophia's order.

"Sariya, what's wrong?"

Sophia ducked her head behind the barricade to look at Sariya.

"Sari—"

But Private First Class Sariya wasn't there.

"You idiot … I said I'd give you a vacation after this, so why did you check out *now*?!"

Private Sariya's lifeless body was on the ground.

She had taken a shot to the head without even knowing her number was up.

"Sophia, you're still alive?"

Crawling across the floor, Daian appeared in front of the grieving Sophia.

He wore a helmet that looked impenetrable, another piece of new equipment from the development bureau.

"I don't have time to look at *your* stupid face right now, so get lost. Go cower in fear in the back!"

The only territory left for Sophia and the others consisted of the deepest part of the development bureau and Daian's office.

"Sophia, this is hopeless! We should surrender!"

"What?! You coward!"

Sophia yelled in anger at Daian's suggestion.

"You're our commander, so act like it! You'll lose the support of your subordinates like this!"

"If I was going to fly a white flag, I would've done it a long time ago! We'll find a way out of this soon enough and—"

"No, we won't. *Probably* not, anyway."

Sophia wasn't foolish.

She wouldn't continue fighting, armed with no more than stubbornness and pride, when there was no chance of winning.

If they were holding a castle with no hope of reinforcements, she would have sacrificed herself to protect the lives of her troops without hesitation. However, they *could* still win if they held out a little longer.

"You guys did great, but my projections were a bit too optimistic."

The situation was worse than Daian originally thought.

Daian hadn't told Sophia that he had sent Rebecca, his attendant humanoid Hunter Unit, to request reinforcements over an hour ago.

With her powerful legs, she should have reached military headquarters a long time ago.

But no reinforcements have come. Which means …

It would be impossible for human soldiers, no matter how many, to stop Rebecca.

Daian had created her and he knew her powers.

Nonetheless, she hadn't come back. That meant someone who *wasn't* human had defeated her.

Genitz, what are you thinking? What are you after?

Genitz had deployed a secret operative to counter Rebecca.

Even if they could hold until noon … No, the longer this lasted, the more certain it was that this battle would end in the worst way.

"Shut up! I'm not asking your opinion! There's no way we can retreat now!"

Sophia, not knowing the circumstances, would not consent.

"Sophia, please calm down. At least I can still save *you*!"

If they surrendered, disarmed, and gave Genitz what he wanted, Daian would be sure to survive.

And Genitz might give in to Daian's selfish request to spare Sophia's life.

"Don't joke! Even if we surrender, I have to save non-combatant staff members first, then my subordinates, and then myself! You come *last*!"

"I'm last?!"

Sophia was fiery-tempered to the very end.

"Hm? Wait. Something is wrong."

Sophia noticed a change.

The enemy fire, which had been howling, had stopped.

"What are they going to pull *now*?"

Scared, Sophia peeked over the barricade to examine the other side.

"I don't like it. What if they follow the combat vehicles with a Hunter Unit?"

"Don't invite bad fortune!"

Sophia snapped at Daian, who was also peeking out.

"What …?"

Their gaze fell on Schutzstaffel soldiers.

They were all standing with their guns raised but still.

Why are they doing that in the middle of a fight?!

They didn't crouch or take cover … It was as if they were asking to be shot.

It seemed like they were obeying a command, and it was not to protect their own lives.

The soldiers lined up on two sides, making way for someone coming down their center.

An ominous silence reigned.

It was a silence that was hard to believe given the fierce battle just moments earlier.

The *tak* … *tak* … sound of someone striding across the floor was getting closer.

The security guards, and Sophia herself, forgot to keep their guns raised and ready to fire, as they watched the approaching figure.

"No way …"

Sophia blurted out in disbelief.

It was unimaginable that he would show up here.

"Even *I* never expected this!"

Sophia was unable to respond to Daian's shocked exclamation.

But she did notice that this was the first time she had heard this perennially carefree man sound nervous.

"How dare you persist in this useless defense!"

A young man with long blond hair stepped forward.

"Y-you bastard!"

"No, Sophia!"

Daian shouted to stop her.

Without thinking, Sophia had revealed herself.

The man's appearance had such a strong effect that she forgot she was in the middle of a battle.

"'Bastard'? How disrespectful, Major Rundstadt … I may belong to the Schutzstaffel, but I'm also a general of the military."

On his shoulder, he wore a badge indicating his rank of a lieutenant general of the Principality of Wiltia.

"What're you doing here, Genitz?!"

It was Maximillian Genitz, a lieutenant general of the Principality of Wiltia and the supreme commander of the Schutzstaffel.

"Is there anything wrong with *me* being on *my* battlefield??

Genitz extended his arm gracefully.

He looked as if he were about to conduct a symphony, but he wasn't holding a conductor's baton. It was the renowned gun and a symbol of the Wiltian military—a Walther P38.

"Uh-oh …"

By the time Sophia noticed, Genitz had pulled the trigger.

The gunshot rang out.

Hilde returned to the waiting room at the side of the stage.

"Phew!"

The violent beating in her chest hadn't stopped.

The reaction from the audience was so enthusiastic, she sang

three more songs as an encore.

"I feel really *good*!"

She saw her face smiling proudly in the mirror.

The words that had confined her, such as "child of Polpora" and "black dog," now felt insignificant.

Nobles, soldiers, and Wiltians … They all sounded so inconsequential.

If someone were to say something mean, today she would be able to shout back, "So what?!"

"What should I do now?"

She couldn't give up everything, and she couldn't start all over again.

However, whether she decided to live as a soldier or choose a different path, at least she could determine this according to her own will.

"Huh? Marlene?"

Someone opened the dividing curtain and entered.

This place was also used for costume changes. Marlene would have called out before entering, but this man intruded without a word, and looked around to confirm that there was no one else there.

"Do you work at Tockerbrot?"

He was a plain-looking young man, about twenty years old.

There was nothing remarkable about his appearance. Or perhaps he had removed anything that might attract notice.

"Who are *you*?!"

Although she had never been in battle, Hilde wasn't as careless as an innocent girl strolling about town.

She saw that he was ill at ease and was alarmed.

"There's no mistake about it! It's you! Your hair color is different, so you must have been wearing a disguise!"

However, when she noticed the man's discomfort, it made him … No, it made the *men* violent.

They must have been waiting outside, for the group marched in all of a sudden.

"Somebody—"

Hilde tried to shout, but a hemp sack came down over her head.

It was a large flour sack, large enough to hold one person.

Hilde was short, so it swiftly enveloped her all the way to her feet. And then—

"—!!"

The men punched and kicked her repeatedly through the sack.

Their methods were efficient—they didn't let her shout, they broke her will to resist, and they knocked her unconscious.

"Good. Take her away!"

Now they could carry her without detection.

In a flash, Hilde and the mysterious men were gone.

"What the heck happened here?!"

Sven raised a voice full of surprise, frustration and especially anger.

It didn't take ten minutes for the Tockerbrot group to discover that Hilde had been abducted.

Marlene went backstage right after the show and found a letter.

When she read the contents and the names written on it, she felt as though she had fallen to the bottom of a pit.

"No … I can't believe they're still around!"

Lud made a face even more pained than usual as he spoke.

Unable to go to the authorities, Marlene had no choice but to ask Lud and the others for help.

The letter read, "We have the girl. If you want her back, Lud Langart and Heidrig must come with Marlene to the forest outside town."

It was signed by the Pelfe Liberation League.

"This is all *my* fault!"

Marlene knelt on the floor and cried.

The Pelfe Liberation League was the anti-Wiltia terrorist group to which Marlene had once belonged.

Sometime earlier, Lud and Sven had protected Marlene from them.

Most of the group's members were arrested and the organization appeared to disband, but those remaining must have learned of Lud's existence through Marlene.

"But why the first lieutenant?"

Heidrig was perplexed.

The incident between Lud and the Pelfe Liberation League had

happened over six months ago.

And it had not involved Hilde.

"Perhaps they mistook her for *me*."

Sven said this with a deep sigh.

"I dyed my hair black for that interview."

The photograph in the newspaper had been black and white, and low resolution.

So when Hilde visited Marlene's church and they saw her black hair, the terrorists had mistaken her for Sven.

"And why do they want *me*?"

Heidrig raised another question.

He had only been in Organbaelz for the past ten days. How did they know his name when he had been in prison for years before that?

The Pelfe Liberation League was a puppet organization of the August Federation, an enemy nation of Wiltia.

However, August had already distanced itself from the terrorist group because their collaboration was suspected and August feared an international conflict.

The current Pelfe Liberation League was eager for attention and liked to brag about its power, but it was actually just a gang of ruffians.

They couldn't distinguish between Hilde and Sven, so it didn't make sense for them to know Heidrig's name.

"Obviously, there's more to this picture."

Lud's comment wasn't just suspicion.

"Master, what will you do?"

Sven asked as if she were confirming what she already knew.

This didn't change the fact that Hilde had tried to kill Lud.

Not once but *twice*.

Other than that, they had only known each other for ten days. Their relationship wasn't close enough for him to risk his life for her.

A typical person would certainly refuse to do so.

"We have to do something about this!"

However, Lud's answer wasn't typical.

"Uh-huh … I knew it."

Sven gripped her forehead, which said clearly that she had known he would say that.

Lud often insisted that he was "just a baker," but at times like this, he didn't act like "just a baker."

It was common sense to report the incident to public authorities and let them handle the rest.

However, that would greatly lower the chances of Hilde coming back alive.

It would also put Marlene in danger. There was a strong chance that her past crimes would come to light.

Lud knew all this.

"Sorry to involve you in this, Heidrig."

"No, it's the other way around."

Lud spoke with such a serious look on his face that Heidrig

replied with amazement.

"Ha ha ha … Never underestimate my master's kindness! You got that?!"

Although Sven expected it, she still couldn't find a clear explanation for Lud's behavior.

But because it happened all the time, it was her role as a servant to wrack her brains and find a solution for her beloved master.

"Let's come up with a plan. If we just do as they ask, it won't solve anything, but maybe we *can* figure out another way!"

As she said this, Sven smiled.

Organbaelz was a mining town.

Therefore, its composition as a town was unusual.

The area around the mine, and the roads that carried the ore it produced, were very important, so the town was concentrated there.

There were still untouched mountains and forests outside the urban area.

Thick trees blanketed the land around Organbaelz.

The location where the Pelfe Liberation League wanted to meet was a small charcoal-burning lodge in a secluded part of the forest.

"Hey, I think they're here."

One of the terrorists noticed Lud and the others approaching.

Their letter instructed them to hold a lantern to avoid a surprise attack.

There were three figures: Lud, Heidrig, and Marlene.

"Ugh …"

The terrorists numbered less than ten, but the old lodge was small and stifling, so everyone was gathered around a fire outside as they waited.

The hostage Hilde was with them.

She had been roughly tied with a rope and was lying inert on the ground.

"Why did you come?"

Lud had no obligation to save her.

And Heidrig had no obligation to put his life in danger.

Hilde was more confused than pleased that they had risked their lives to save her.

"I kept my promise, so let the girl go!"

They were ten meters from the charcoal-burning lodge, too great a distance to reach in a single bound.

And the terrorists held guns.

The weapons were outdated revolvers that looked like they were scavenged from some junkyard.

They were little more than iron scrap, with no maintenance.

However, they could still shoot bullets.

And a shot at such a short distance was likely to prove fatal.

"First, bring her here."

The leader of the terrorists pointed a gun as he gave the order.

"She's a traitor. Everyone else was caught, but she went free because she sold us out!"

The way the terrorists saw it, this was revenge against both Lud and Marlene—the man who was instrumental in their organization's destruction, and the woman who betrayed them.

"All right."

Lud agreed.

Marlene had her head down and, with slow and hesitant steps, she moved toward the terrorists.

"Hurry up!"

One of the group pulled the trigger of his old revolver and a bullet struck the ground several meters from Marlene.

"Eeeeek!"

Marlene shrieked in fear.

She trembled but managed to walk over and stand before them.

"Hey."

"What's up?"

The biggest of the bunch grabbed Marlene's shoulder and held her.

"My usual rule is to kill traitors right away, but first I want you to watch something fun."

The leader threatened Marlene with his gun still pointed at her.

"You two! Kill each other now!"

After saying this, he laughed loudly.

"Oh, I get it …"

"I see …"

Now Lud and Heidrig understood the terrorists' plan.

They wanted to kill Lud.

But, if they attacked him, he would fight back.

So they had taken a hostage.

Nonetheless, he might still defeat them with a surprise attack.

So they brought in a man as strong as Lud and would now force them to kill each other.

It was a despicable plan that only people blind to their own weaknesses would choose.

"What now?"

Heidrig quietly asked Lud.

"Let's see …"

Lud mumbled in a troubled voice.

Even if they obeyed and one of them was killed, the possibility of saving Hilde was low.

But, if they refused, it was *certain* that either Hilde or Marlene would die immediately.

"……"

"……"

In silence, the two assumed the stance for hand-to-hand combat.

"Heh heh … This is just as he said! As long as we take care of this black-haired wench, it'll all go well!"

The leader laughed as he spoke.

"Who is 'he'?"

Marlene asked without raising her head.

"He's … I'm not gonna tell *you*, idiot! When one of them dies, *then*

maybe I'll tell you!"

After saying that, he laughed loudly again, as if something were very funny.

"Hey! Start fightin'!"

He shouted at Lud and Heidrig, who were just staring at each other.

"Hmm …"

As he pondered, Lud's voice held no tension.

Awkwardly, he raised a hand.

"I want to ask something just in case."

"Yeah?"

Lud had asked so suddenly, the leader answered without thinking.

"Can't we just pretend this didn't happen? Can't you just return the hostage and leave town?"

"Hunh?"

Lud's casual request stunned the terrorists.

"You must have families and friends, right? I think you should stop doing this sort of thing and go back to a quiet life."

They liked to call themselves terrorists, but they were actually just a gang of urban thugs.

Those arrested during the earlier incident had been chosen to work for an undercover agent from August, so they must have been a little more skilled than these men.

"It's still not too late."

Lud continued trying to persuade them.

Studying their faces, one by one, Lud understood.

They were little better than a backup team. The league may not have even formally recognized them as members.

They were clearly amateurs, from the way they casually monitored their captives, the way they positioned themselves, and even their movements … They left themselves open.

But there was something else Lud noticed.

They didn't give the sense that they had done dirty work, like killing, before.

They didn't have that unique aura of those who had murdered in cold blood.

It was obvious to someone who knew what to look for.

Lud, who had killed many people, could sense another killer, even in a crowd.

Other than Lud, there was only one person among them who bore the burden of such deeds.

"Cut the chitchat and start killin' each other! Do it, you idiots!"

The leader grew excited and fired his gun in frustration.

He shot without aiming.

He had no intention of hitting anything, but it was clumsy.

"If you don't hurry, I'll kill this traitor first!"

He grabbed Marlene's head, forced her to raise her face, and then put the gun barrel to her forehead.

"Huh?"

He had grabbed her so roughly that her veil came off.

Her hair fell free.

"Who're *you*?!"

"Why would I tell a savage like you!!"

It wasn't Marlene under the veil. It was Sven, wearing a nun's habit, her silver hair now visible to everyone.

"I knew you didn't know what the nun looks like!"

They weren't able to tell the difference between Sven and Hilde.

It was also likely that these thugs had never met Marlene, who was their local contact in Organbaelz.

That's why the Tockerbrot group had used a body double.

"How long are you gonna keep your hands on me?!"

Sven seized the large terrorist who was pushing her down by the arm, and threw him with all her might.

"W-whaaat?!"

With one arm, she had tossed aside a grown man, who weighed nearly one hundred kilograms, as though he was an ugly doll.

"Gugh!!"

He crashed to the ground and lost consciousness.

"W-what the hell?!"

"W-what's going on?!"

The other terrorists were panicking.

"Tsk! Utter morons!"

Sven spluttered with disgust, and jumped up to kick the man in front of her.

"Welp!!"

She then used that man as a foothold for launching herself again.

She spun to kick the man on her right in the neck.

"Gwah?!"

She twisted her legs to ensnare him and he smashed to the ground. Then, using centrifugal force, she turned in midair to bring her foot down on the crown of the head of the man who was standing next to the fallen thug.

"Oof!!"

Hooking his head with her foot, she crushed him into the ground, and rebounding, she drove an elbow into another man.

"Gugh!!"

She had quickly defeated four men.

"Y-yaieek?!"

"What *is* she?!"

"No one said nuthin' about *this*!"

The other men were confused and terrified.

There was no way these amateurs could keep calm after seeing a pretty girl waste half of them with monster-like force.

"Wait! Don't run away yet!"

They had relied on their greater numbers and on makeshift methods rather than proper strategy.

And the bonds between them were not strong, because some began to flee as soon as they lost the advantage.

"We've got a hostage, so there's no need to be scared!"

"Whoa … Stop right there!"

Hilde was bound by rope and couldn't move.

Pointing a gun at her would halt Sven.

At least that's what the leader thought, but Sven grabbed his arm before he could make a move.

CRACK!

That wasn't the sound of bone breaking—it was the sound of bone *crushing*.

Sven's physical strength was superhuman.

However, that was when her power limits were set according to a human standard.

Tonight, she had released some of those limits.

Now, her speed and strength were superhuman.

"Uaaaghhhh!!"

When Sven squeezed an arm, it was like pressing it in an industrial-strength machine.

As his bone compacted, the leader struggled against the pain and dropped his gun.

"You're noisy!"

Sven stomped on his face, adjusting her strength to merely crack the cartilage of his nose, and knock him out.

"There! All done!"

The Pelfe Liberation League's scheme ended in total defeat.

"Are they really that dumb? They send a threatening letter to summon us to their hideout, and then they put the hostage where

we can see her. That's *worse* than amateurish!"

The letter had even specified a time and place.

That was extremely foolish because it ensured that the Tockerbrot crew could discover their number, their arms, and any traps.

"They should have prepared a sniper or two! I feel like they were just patronizing us!"

Furious, Sven rattled off complaints, but the main source of her anger was that they had underestimated Lud, who was a battle-hardened veteran.

"Here. Are you okay, you silly girl? What's the deal with a former kidnapper getting abducted herself? In the east, people describe this as *poetic justice*."

As she grumbled, Sven untied the ropes around Hilde.

"Ungh … Ow!"

Hilde was too terrified to form proper sentences. The terrorists had beaten her, and her face bore the bruises.

"It's all right. We solved the problem. Were they too awfully horrible to you?"

No one likes to believe it, but there are people in the world who gleefully commit acts so barbaric that there are no words to describe them.

"Ngh …"

Trembling, Hilde shook her head.

She had been spared the worst.

It was only for a short time, but the young girl had been trapped among savage men. It wasn't hard to imagine how terrifying it had been.

"You're safe now."

Sven reassured Hilde and held her tight.

"*SOB* … *SOB* … Waaah!! Waaaaah!!"

Finally relieved, Hilde began to cry as if expelling all the fear she had held inside.

"You are too … but … that girl's weird."

Heidrig mumbled this while staring at Sven, who was holding the sobbing Hilde as if she were her mother.

"I thought she *hated* the first lieutenant!"

Sven had offered to serve as Marlene's replacement and to defeat the terrorists because that was what Lud wanted.

However, she was now holding Hilde, who was trembling in fear and bawling like a child, out of choice.

"That's the way things are. Human beings behave in contradictory ways. You can't give a clear, rational explanation for everything."

"I guess *not* …"

Heidrig agreed with Lud and walked toward Sven and Hilde.

"That's why the world is such a difficult place."

Heidrig picked up an old revolver lying next to the fallen leader.

There had been six bullets inside. The leader shot two, so there were still four left.

"Heidrig …?"

Hilde didn't know what her companion was up to.

But Heidrig didn't reply.

He gripped the gun and pulled back the hammer.

"Sorry, Lud Langart."

Then he pointed the gun at Lud and pulled the trigger without a moment's hesitation.

A dry, hollow gunshot echoed through the forest.

"Heidrig … What are you doing?!"

Hilde shouted at him.

"What do you mean? Can't you see? I'm trying to kill Lud Langart. The time has come to proceed with what you ordered. That's all."

Heidrig answered matter-of-factly, in a tone that was frighteningly even.

"But even when you're surprised, you can still dodge."

The bullet hadn't struck Lud.

Heidrig had aimed at his target, but before Lud could think, his ingrained soldier's reflexes took over and he ducked.

"But that was *close*."

Close but not perfect.

The bullet had grazed Lud's temple and he was bleeding.

"Stop, Heidrig! I don't want you to kill him anymore!"

"Why? Have you become attached to him? If I don't kill him, you'll die!"

"What are you talking about?!"

Hilde didn't understand that her poor judgment and careless actions had endangered her life.

"First Lieutenant, you're not cut out to be a soldier. It doesn't matter if you become a singer or a baker, but live a different life. You're more likely to be happy."

As Heidrig spoke, he cocked his weapon to put another bullet in the chamber.

She had revealed her identity and put herself in a tight spot.

Hilde could be accused of not having enough imagination.

However, what *is* imagination?

Hilde should have imagined the possible consequences for Heidrig and herself before she undertook this mission.

It was better for her not to imagine such possibilities.

"Live a righteous life. Don't keep making the mistakes I made that branded me a Wolf Man."

There were three bullets left in Heidrig's revolver.

That was enough for Heidrig to defeat Lud, who was barehanded.

However, one person present didn't care about the number of bullets.

"You!! What are you doing to my master?!"

Sven was furious and leapt toward Heidrig at top speed and at full power.

"Don't move, Sven!!!

"—?!"

Her master stopped her.

"Don't move! Stay with Hilde! Please, don't do anything!"

Lud shouted more desperately than the threat to his life warranted.

"Please … Just *please*!"

Her goal was always to protect Lud.

She would do anything he wished.

However, when there was a threat to Lud's life, she would act to protect him, even against her master's orders.

She had been doing this since she was the Hunter Unit known as Avei.

This time, however, she stopped.

Why?! But …

It wasn't from fear that Lud would hate her.

Her heart told her that if she forcefully intervened, it would be the same as killing Lud.

"I told you, Heidrig. I know your true identity."

"Yes. To be honest, that surprised me. Since everyone thinks that's who I am, I came to accept it myself."

Lud and Heidrig stared daggers at each other.

The words "true identity" confused Hilde and Sven.

"True identity? Heidrig … who *are* you?"

His back turned, Heidrig answered without looking at Hilde.

"I am not the Wolf Man."

"Huh …?"

Still not understanding Heidrig's words, Hilde stared at him blankly.

He didn't clearly remember when people started speaking about "the Wolf Man" during the Great European War.

At some point, however, the soldiers of the Republic of Filbarneu, Wiltia's enemy, whispered the name.

The Wolf Man had poisoned a commander on the front.

And the Wolf Man had secretly instigated a speedy defeat against the enemy during a siege.

Further, the Wolf Man exposed information about logistics units that resulted in a breakdown of the supply chain.

Eventually, the moniker of the Wolf Man appeared in official army reports.

An article appeared in a Filbarnian newspaper claiming that a Wiltian special ops soldier with the codename Wolf Man threatened the Minister of the Army, and stole one million *flones* from the military budget.

This turned the Wolf Man, whose existence was now confirmed, into an object of hate, not just for Filbarnian soldiers, but for all of Wiltia.

But the true story was different.

There had never been a Wolf Man.

Since long ago, the neighboring nations of Wiltia and Filbarneu were never on good terms.

It began with a border dispute, in which one side claimed certain territory and branded the other as an invader.

The two countries would then criticize each other's culture and history, while rehashing the past and cursing at each other as barbarians.

The nations, buffeted by turbulent winds, became enemies when the Great War erupted, and would clash without reason or logic.

Each nation tried to keep its dignity by *obstinately* carrying out a war it refused to lose.

In the recent Great European War, however, Wiltia introduced a weapon—the Hunter Units—that drastically changed the course of the war and the very basics of war strategy.

Unable to resist that onslaught, the command centers of the Filbarnian military blamed each other, and ultimately, some were quick to betray their homeland and searched for a pipeline to Wiltia.

Filbarneu would be destroyed from within before the Wiltian military invaded the capital.

This scenario became a distinct possibility.

Out of this, the cynical strategy of the "Wolf Man" was born.

He was to serve as a scapegoat to distract the citizens and the soldiers on the front from their mounting discontent.

The Wolf Man was the lead character in a tall tale that claimed, despite the best efforts of the Filbarnian government and military,

the enemy nation of Wiltia had sent a monster to defeat them.

There was some truth behind each story.

For example, the commander who supposedly was poisoned by the Wolf Man, had neglected his work in favor of frequenting brothels, and had actually died during sexual intercourse.

The failure of the siege was due to a botched strategy by an incompetent general who bought his rank through connections and wealth.

The supply chain had broken down because of the flow of goods into illegal channels.

The theft of military funds was the result of the Minister of the Army fattening his own purse.

The truth behind each incident would have cast a shadow on the dignity of the military, and the prestige of the nation.

That's why the Wolf Man was created.

A scapegoat was required to cover for the authorities.

The republic received cooperation from the newspapers and the media, and the Wolf Man was born.

"I was a soldier in the Wiltian army. I was in the cooking unit. My daily job was feeding the troops, so I'd only touched a gun during training."

But Heidrig didn't dislike his life in the military.

It was more suited to his personality than killing on the battlefield, and there was little danger.

Many soldiers mocked him for not serving in combat, but since he prepared hot meals 24 hours a day, many others expressed gratitude.

He even hoped to open a small restaurant when the war ended and his service was up.

"Then one day, my regiment fell under surprise attack and was destroyed. The Filbarnians took all noncombatants prisoner."

Filbarneu had a competent commander.

Despite inferior numbers, poor equipment, and flagging morale, he had cobbled together a surprise attack and defeated Heidrig's regiment.

"They put me in a concentration camp. Then one day, an officer from Filbarneu showed up. He looked me in the eye, and said I would suffice."

Filbarneu couldn't keep a fictitious character alive with only false information, so they needed an actual prisoner from Wiltia in order to announce the capture of the Wolf Man.

"The Wolf Man isn't even a special ops soldier? You were just a *regular*?! No way! That's ridiculous!"

Hilde couldn't believe what Heidrig told them.

"Then why didn't Wiltia deny it?! Besides, your combat skills are real!"

It would have seriously damaged Filbarneu if Wiltia had revealed the lie.

Wiltia could have humiliated Filbarneu by exposing its inability to

continue the war without spreading a lie among its citizens and soldiers.

"There's a reason. There wasn't a Wolf Man, but at the same time, there *was*."

"Huh? I don't understand. What are you talking about?! Argh!"

Now Hilde was completely confused.

"In the Wiltian military, there was a top secret special force called *the Werewolves*."

The force had worked undercover, locating enemies, and plotting —sometimes carrying out—assassinations. They were a dark unit that Wiltia never made public.

These operatives weren't in the official records because they liquidated important figures in enemy nations, and within Wiltia. If their names were revealed, it would deliver a crippling blow to Wiltia.

"Isn't it ironic? You thought it was all the work of a fictitious Wolf Man, but there actually *were* real Werewolves! It's a lot like the story about the boy who cried wolf."

Filbarneu told lies and Wiltia hid dark deeds.

Heidrig was stuck in between and had become the Wolf Man when the two came together.

"In Wiltia, they knew the Wolf Man was fake, but if they exposed that, people would have learned about the Werewolves. When both major nations won't reveal a lie, then the fabrication becomes the truth."

The role of the Wolf Man was thrust upon Heidrig. And, from prison, he desperately pleaded his innocence.

But no one listened.

While he feared execution at any moment, the Great War ended and he was to return to Wiltia.

"Wiltia spent a lot of time on complicated deals to reclaim me, a military cook, and then threw me in a dungeon."

The authorities needed to confine the pretend Wolf Man forever in order to hide Wiltia's scandal. The victor of the Great War boasted that it was the greatest nation in the world, but it was secretly involved in a massive hoax.

"As for my combat skill … That's easy to explain."

Heidrig retrained the gun on Lud and spoke as he slowly approached.

"I wasn't *the* Wolf Man, but I was *a* Werewolf."

He then fired another shot.

Lud swiftly dodged, but Heidrig hadn't expected to hit him.

Heidrig stepped closer, and when Lud was off-balance from dodging the bullet, he kicked him.

"Ugh!!"

Heidrig's legs were strong enough to kick the mighty Lud aside.

"The suffering inside prison isn't physical. It's *mental*."

Without a pause, Heidrig delivered another kick.

Because Lud was so much bigger, Heidrig used his legs, which were three times stronger than his arms.

It was the right way to fight.

"I had nothing to do all day. I was abandoned in a dark cage. Before long, I no longer sensed the passage of time and thought I had gone mad."

As he said this, he gave Lud a dose of his varied footwork: a spin kick, forward kick, a knee strike, and a side kick that lifted Lud into the air.

"So the only thing I could do to pass the time was train my body."

He delivered a kick to Lud's lower body, and when Lud lost his balance, he switched to a knee strike.

Within his cramped cell, Heidrig's training had been limited.

He did push-ups, squats, back extensions, sit-ups, and used iron bars for chin-ups.

Even in such circumstances, his training was very effective.

"I didn't have a partner to spar with, so I made one up in my head."

He simulated training with an imaginary opponent.

This might have been impossible for someone else, but Heidrig had been in jail for years, and had nothing else to do but focus on his training.

"Waugh!!"

Lud counterattacked and threw a fist, but Heidrig dodged it with a small movement.

This guy's strong!

Heidrig's muscle strength was not exceptional and he was nowhere near as strong as Sven or the mechanical soldiers he had once fought.

However, he was an expert at dodging attacks by a hair's breadth, getting close enough to almost touch his opponent, and attacking from a position that prevented his opponent from dodging.

He had polished his close-combat skills by training in a cramped prison cell.

"Agh?!"

Heidrig's offense didn't slow down.

With his elbow, Heidrig delivered a backhand to Lud's lowered face.

When Lud lost his balance, Heidrig threw another kick.

That kick was heavy and sharp.

Using his heel as a spindle, Heidrig spun in a small circle from which he attacked again.

Lud felt pain cut through the armor of his thick muscles.

Come to think of it, I heard something once.

It was about slaves on the continent south of Europea.

To challenge their owners, the slaves developed a martial art, which they disguised as dancing while in their cells.

The reason he doesn't use his hands is because he was wearing handcuffs.

The reason that Heidrig could dodge with little movement of his hands and legs was because they had been shackled.

Heidrig had mastered techniques that became his own martial art.

Furthermore …

"?!"

Suddenly, a gun barrel appeared before Lud's eyes.

BLAM!!

A bullet was fired. Lud dodged, but just barely.

A shot to the head would be fatal, even from a very old gun.

If Lud was focused on the physical fight, Heidrig could still use the gun.

There were two bullets left. He shot another, leaving only one.

Heidrig still had the killing shot.

"Tch!"

Lud launched off the ground, jumping back to gain distance.

However, his opponent didn't let him go.

Heidrig didn't lose his combat stance as he closely dogged his enemy.

"Uh-oh!!"

By the time Lud realized, it was too late. Heidrig swept Lud's legs from beneath him and he fell to the ground.

"Master!!"

Sven screamed.

His position, in these circumstances, amounted to checkmate.

No matter how fast he was, to stand and reassume an attack position required two steps.

Heidrig, however, only needed one to pull the trigger of a gun.

Once again, he aimed at Lud.

This time, Lud would have no time to dodge.

This fight was *over*.

"....."

But Heidrig stopped.

It was the slightest hesitation, but it was a moment that could make the difference between life and death.

Lud stood, spinning his whole body, and he kicked the gun from Heidrig's hand, knocking it away.

"Agh!"

Heidrig closed in on his enemy and tried to attack from an inside position, which worked best for him. But that was exactly what Lud was waiting for.

"What the?!"

Instead of moving away or dodging Heidrig, Lud took a half step forward.

He placed his fist—the fist on the same side as the foot he had advanced—against Heidrig's stomach as if to adjust his timing, and then released it with force, applying all his weight.

"Oof!!"

The blunt, forceful attack sunk into Heidrig's body, and he cried out in pain.

"There was once a man in the east who was in a situation like this."

Bujitsu was a martial art from the east that Lud had learned.

Once upon a time, a martial arts master committed a crime and was imprisoned.

The master had invented a technique for channeling his full power by moving just a half step with his hands and feet shackled.

Lud had just thrown that attack. It was called the Tiger's Roar.

"Aaaaagh!"

The attack used Lud's full weight, and instead of allowing the impact to pass through, it permeated his opponent's body.

Heidrig kneeled, unable to stand upright.

"I guess I won."

The Tiger's Roar had completely immobilized Heidrig.

It was impossible for him to fight.

"K-kill me …"

Heidrig gasped, through his moans.

"Someone must die to finish this."



"What do you mean?"

"The brass found out that Hilde released me, so if I live, do you know what will happen?"

The Wolf Man had been released from prison without authorization.

Since that was known, even if Heidrig returned to prison, Hilde would take responsibility for freeing him.

But if the story was that Hilde had pursued and executed the Wolf Man, who had somehow escaped, then she would be safe.

"If someone doesn't pay, this doesn't end. Those are the military's rules."

If he couldn't kill Lud, then Heidrig would settle this by sacrificing himself.

That was his decision.

"You … Were you trying to *protect* me?"

Hilde's tone was incredulous.

"Don't get the wrong idea. I don't owe you *that* much! I just … I saw your face."

The girl who had once been empty could now move forward.

She was still unsteady, but she was in better shape than Heidrig, who had soured and shriveled in prison.

"It was as if I was alive but dead at the same time. And then I decided it didn't matter."

Heidrig looked at Lud again as he spoke.

He didn't say anything more.

But his eyes were pleading for death.

"I cannot satisfy your request."

Lud rejected his plea.

"I understand your beliefs, but I'm telling you to act against them. If you won't kill me, that girl over there *will*."

"I won't let Sven do it either. We *won't* kill you."

In a forceful tone, Lud refused even more firmly.

"You're so stubborn! I …"

"*You* didn't kill *me* either!"

"What?"

Heidrig was shocked by Lud's words.

"What are you talking about?"

"You said you were a Werewolf, but that was a lie. You weren't a Werewolf, but I was."

The Werewolves were a secret force created by the Principality of Wiltia.

Its greatest power was in the training of its soldiers.

These soldiers were type three, and were orphans the military trained and educated.

The military selected children with advanced physical abilities and put them through rigorous training to become the Werewolves.

The training was so harsh that many died.

By design, however, the death rate never exceeded fifty percent.

At the stage known as final testing, two trainees would attempt to kill each other.

A child of thirteen years old would kill another child of the same age.

They became soldiers who would perform any order without hesitation.

They became true Werewolves.

"You didn't kill me during the final testing."

"No way … Were you … *that* boy?"

Lud had undergone the final testing for the Werewolves.

His opponent on that day had been Heidrig.

"No … You're lying!"

Heidrig shouted in disbelief.

"He wasn't as big as you!"

"I was still growing."

Lud had been twelve years old at the time, and smaller than average.

He had been bullied when he was younger, so Sophia, who had been like his sister, had often protected him.

"And you didn't have that scar."

"That happened later."

He got the scar on his left cheek toward the end of the war.

"And the boy that day smiled more!"

"That … Well, a lot happened to me."

His smile. That was the most important thing Lud lost when he became a soldier.

At the final testing, Lud lost the fight.

Heidrig was supposed to kill Lud, but he wasn't able to do it.

The military deemed him unfit, so he wasn't made a Werewolf. Along with the other type-three children, he had been forced to work in the military until his term of service was over.

"I'm alive now because of you. I can never kill you."

Heidrig hadn't noticed, but Lud had quickly discovered who Heidrig was.

Lud knew about the Wolf Man.

He knew that designation was to hide the existence of the Werewolves, and that the Wolf Man was created at the expense of an innocent man.

When he realized it was Heidrig, the boy who once spared his life, Lud hired him as an employee so he might live.

"That wasn't … for you. I just …"

"You couldn't bear to kill someone?"

Lud had noticed that Heidrig had never once taken a human life.

Just like the incompetent terrorists, Heidrig didn't smell like a killer.

Of those here, only Lud and one other bore the burden of the dirty work of killing many people.

And that other one wasn't Heidrig.

"I let someone die without helping."

Heidrig spit out the words.

Ten years ago, Heidrig was a homeless child with his younger

sister in a slum of Berun, the royal capital.

Their parents, who were supposed to protect them, had died long ago.

Their days were miserable as they suffered from starvation and cold weather.

His fragile sister wasn't able to withstand the harsh conditions and grew very ill.

Heidrig was desperate to save his sister.

He scavenged in junkyards, begged on the streets, and sometimes shoplifted. And whenever he found food, he gave it to his sister.

However, they couldn't live that way much longer.

His sister weakened by the day, like a withering plant.

Heidrig was hungry and exhausted.

Then a military recruiter appeared.

"Come with me. We'll give you warm food and a place to live."

Young Heidrig knew about type-three soldiers.

He knew that if he accepted the man's help, he would have to go to war. But it was much better to have some control over life and death on the battlefield, as long as he escaped starvation right now.

However, one thing bothered him.

His younger sister was very sick and could die at any moment.

"Don't worry. I'll check your sister into a national hospital. You'll be apart, but you'll be able to see each other again before too long."

On instinct, Heidrig had sensed the man was lying.

When they were crawling homeless around the city, no adult had ever cared about them.

Some of them even shooed them away as if they were wild dogs.

His sister would probably be abandoned.

Her illness made her as useless as trash.

If he didn't stay with her, she wouldn't last a day.

Heidrig knew that.

But he had reached his limit.

"Oh … Then there's nothing to worry about."

As it was, he and his sister would die on the street.

And he didn't want to die. He wanted to be free, so he allowed himself to be deceived.

An adult from the military had told him not to worry.

So he was safe and chose to believe what the recruiter said.

It wasn't his fault.

He hadn't abandoned his little sister.

But he still felt guilty.

"Here, take this. And stay strong."

He had a biscuit.

They always shared.

But he gave the whole biscuit to his sister.

His sister stared at the biscuit in her hand.

Then she smiled with faint sadness.

And his sister said, "Thanks, Big Bro!"

"My sister knew that I was giving up on her, but she smiled and said thanks anyway."

He suspected his sister wanted to say, "Please, forget about me and live."

But she wasn't able to.

It wasn't surprising. A child not yet ten years old couldn't express a wish for her own death.

Nonetheless, she had understood that her brother couldn't keep going as before.

"She thanked me for leaving her, and she thanked me for choosing to live."

Lud suspected that Heidrig had never killed anyone.

But that wasn't entirely correct.

He *had* killed someone. He had let his sister die.

He had killed her in a horrible way.

"Ever since, I haven't been able to kill anyone."

It didn't matter how much he wanted to kill. His body would freeze at the last moment.

That's what happened during the final testing, and it happened in the fight against Lud just now.

When he tried to kill, he saw his sister smile.

And, with that smile, she asked him, "Are you trying to lengthen your own life by taking someone else's? Wasn't killing *me* enough?"

"I couldn't even kill *myself*. Somewhere in my heart, I believed that imprisonment and becoming the Wolf Man were my

punishments. I don't deserve death. I should burn in Hell."

After saying this, Heidrig looked up at the night sky.

The dark night had no moon.

Like a life with no hope.

It may have occurred to him that giving such a life for someone else's sake would make his sister happy.

"Hey, have you tried my bread? The kind I baked today for the Thanksgiving festival?"

He meant the Maple Autumns, the bread baked in a U-shape.

"They're shaped like horseshoes. And did you know? A horseshoe is a charm for good luck."

Long, long ago, when demons were still a scourge in the world, a holy knight appeared and defeated one.

The steed that the knight rode smashed the demon's skull with its hoof, so the horseshoe became a symbol of warding off evil and inviting happiness.

"So I want you to try my bread. And I want the people who eat my bread to be happy."

At the Thanksgiving festival, the townsfolk enjoyed the Maple Autumns because they tasted delicious, but also because their shape represented the wish for happiness.

Ridiculous … How can I be happy now?"

Heidrig spoke bitterly.

If he returned to prison, he would be confined until death.

If he fled, he would be pursued and would have no refuge

anywhere in Wiltia.

"There is a way."

Sven had a suggestion.

"You could defect to another country, either August or Greyten."

"What?!"

As Sven explained, Heidrig was at a loss for words.

"Heidrig, the Wolf Man is anathema to both Wiltia and Filbarneu. But there are a lot of countries that hate both nations."

It was said that the Wolf Man had thrown Filbarneu into chaos and betrayed his mother country of Wiltia.

"But I told you. I'm not the Wolf Man."

Heidrig shook his head to tell Sven that she didn't understand, but Sven merely sniffed as if it was Heidrig who didn't understand.

"It doesn't matter who you really are. If Wiltia and Filbarneu insist that you're the Wolf Man, then you are. And that's all their enemies care about."

The will of one person is nothing when facing the giant power of a nation.

The truth is distorted and falsehoods become reality.

Sven was saying that he could use those lies to his benefit.

"Your enemy's enemy is your friend. You might be a traitor in your own country, but in an enemy country, you're a hero."

It was a common occurrence.

Recently, a former government minister, who was responsible for many failed policies and verbal gaffes, crossed the sea to an enemy

nation and announced, "This country is wonderful compared to my foolish home nation." But instead of causing a diplomatic crisis, he received medals from the enemy nation.

"You would be treated as a guest of such a nation for the rest of your life."

A foreign diplomat once said, "The state of affairs in Europea is a great mystery."

If white could turn black, then one could make black turn white.

"I … never thought about that."

Heidrig, who felt guilty merely to be alive, would never have considered such a solution.

"That sounds like a good idea. You've been through terrible times. This is your chance to take back your life."

Hilde, who had been listening quietly, encouraged Heidrig.

"But if I escape, what will happen to you?"

Unless she brought back Heidrig or killed Lud, all the blame would fall on Hilde.

"D-don't be silly, commoner!"

However, Hilde snapped back as if she had made an important decision.

"Who do you think I am?! I'm Hildegard von Hessen from the noble Hessen family! My pride won't permit you to worry about me!"

Hilde shouted, her fists, shoulders, and voice trembling, but her gaze remained firm.

"A commoner like you is never, ever allowed to worry about a

noble! I've not fallen so far that you can fret over *me*! I will protect you because *I'm* a noble!"

This attitude was known as *noblesse oblige*.

It was a noble's obligation, even at the cost of being disadvantaged, to protect the weak and defy the strong.

The phrase is translated as "the noble's duty," but it is also referred to as "false stoicism."

"Just go. I'll take care of the rest. My house is fallen anyway, and if I invoke my family name for forgiveness, they won't kill me."

In Hilde's case, the word contained *both* meanings.

It wasn't sensible to feign such fortitude, but it showed her pride.

But it wasn't the weak pride caused by a fear of being hurt.

Hilde was beginning to develop a strong pride that *gives up* on selfish, cowardly pride.

"Maybe you will see your sister again!"

"I told you. She's already—"

"Are you sure she is dead?! Have you seen any proof that she died with your own eyes?! You still don't know for sure!"

Ten years ago, in that backstreet, Heidrig believed the military would abandon his sister.

But that wasn't necessarily true.

Perhaps she was lucky, and the military put her in the hospital, and she regained her health.

"The chance that she's alive isn't zero! Maybe she's waiting for you! But if you die, you'll never see her again."

"……"

Lud lowered his eyes slightly as he listened to Hilde's pleas.

Her mother was dead. As were Lud's parents. They no longer existed in this world.

And you can never meet someone after they die.

"The chance … isn't zero …"

Every time Heidrig tried to kill himself or someone else, his sister's face appeared in his mind.

He always thought she was accusing him of killing in order to run away from his burden.

But what if that wasn't true?

What if it was a cry from inside him warning that if his sister was still alive and he died, he would never see her again?

"Lud Langart …"

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry, but … I still want to live!"

Heidrig spoke the words that, for these last ten years, he thought he hadn't the right to utter.

"I think that sounds *good*."

"No, *I don't* think so."

Just as Lud answered, another voice spoke.

Huh?!

Lud whirled around.

A masked man stood there, looking as if he had been there all the time.

What's more, he was holding a gun.

It was the old revolver that Lud had kicked away, the gun that Heidrig had used, and that the terrorists had left behind with one remaining bullet.

And he fired that last bullet into Heidrig's head.

A dry sound—*blam!*—echoed in the forest like a bad joke.

"Agh!"

Heidrig made a sound and then collapsed, blood spattering from his head.

"Did you think you had that right? An impersonator like you should consider himself lucky to have lived *this* long."

The masked corporal spoke quietly, in a voice colder than the iron mask he was wearing.

"Hey! Hang in there!!"

Lud lifted Heidrig.

"Ungh … Ungh!"

Heidrig didn't die immediately.

However, his skull was shattered, and his brain and a copious amount of blood spilled out. There was no way to prevent his death.

"Ungh … Unnngh!"

He was barely conscious and couldn't see or hear.

He was barely breathing.

"I'm … sorry …"

Nonetheless, he gathered all his strength and spoke through hazy consciousness.

"Sariya …"

Sariya. Lud didn't recognize that name.

He thought it might be the name of Heidrig's sister.

But there was no way of confirming that.

"Uarngh!!"

Heidrig, the man who was called the Wolf Man, breathed his last.

"What are you doing, Langart? Taking so long with such a man … That's not like you. You used to finish people off splendidly—and with flair!"

The corporal spoke to Lud as if addressing an old friend.

Once again, Lud looked up at the man in the mask.

What a collection of evil deeds he was!

Not just one or two, but tens, hundreds, thousands.

He exuded the overwhelming aura of one who sent tens of thousands of victims to their deaths, whether friend or foe.

"It can't be you …"

Lud hadn't noticed when they met before.

He must have concealed his darkness by wearing the mask and pretending to be someone else.

"Corporal!! You—!!!"

Hilde screamed and tried to punch him.

Furiously, she ran toward the man who had killed Heidrig when he might have lived a new life.

"Huh?"

However, before her arm could reach the corporal's chest, she

flew through the air and smashed into the ground without realizing what happened.

"Uagh!!"

"Playtime is over, First Lieutenant Hildegard."

As he said this, the corporal slowly placed his fingers on the hooks fastening his mask.

Clink … *clink* … One by one, he undid the hooks and slowly removed his mask.

"I knew it … It's *you*."

Lud realized that his voice was shaking.

The shadow of the war itself had followed Lud off the battlefield.

"Genitz …"

It was Genitz, the supreme commander of the Schutzstaffel and Lud's commander when he was a Werewolf.

"Lord Lieutenant General … Why are you disguised as the corporal?!"

Hilde couldn't believe what she was seeing and her voice trembled with fear.

"Do not misunderstand, First Lieutenant Hildegard. This is not a disguise. I was *always* the "corporal."

He had not just disguised himself as the corporal today.

When he was in the royal capital with Hilde, when she had beaten and kicked him in a foul temper, the man inside the mask was always Genitz.

"Why? Why?!"

"When a man has authority, every word he speaks has power. He can make a soldier resentful merely by the difference in rank."

The military is a hierarchical society.

The number of stars indicating rank on a soldier's shoulders determines whose orders that soldier must obey.

Even if that higher rank is held by a dog, or a pig, or even an incompetent young girl whose only skill is brandishing her fallen family's name, a soldier must obey any order, even to crawl on the ground.

"Tasting humiliation became my punishment. In that respect, Lieutenant, you were ideal."

Having a foolish girl dominate him had engraved in his heart the importance of his authority.

To Genitz, Hilde had been no more than a symbol of self-discipline, reminding him never to become like her.

And for him to say that directly to Hilde …

"Thank you for everything, and now … good-bye, Lieutenant!"

Genitz cast away the old-style revolver and drew his own weapon from the holster at his hip.

"Stop!!"

Lud shouted, but Genitz was already pointing his gun at Hilde.

"That's enough."

But Sven was even faster in swinging around behind Genitz.

"You ridiculous clown!!"

Sven's adamantine fist, which could pulverize iron, was flying

toward Genitz.

"Order E56009490GRTT."

Before she could strike, Genitz muttered something softly.

"—?!"

At that moment, Sven's body stopped.

Her fist, which was a millimeter away from Genitz's face, was frozen in midair.

"What … did you … do to me?!"

It wasn't just her movement that was affected.

She could barely speak.

And an awful static that she had never experienced before was cutting through her thoughts.

"That's an emergency control code. Now, you *cannot* defy me."

"Why … But … No!"

Sven could imagine the worst possible outcome.

She now realized that Genitz was more of a monster than she had known.

If Lud had taught her heart how to love, then Genitz was sure to carve disgust and hatred into her bones.

"Unnn … gghh … aaahhh!!!"

Summoning all her strength, Sven screamed.

If she couldn't rip off these invisible chains, she could at least try to create the slightest chance of freedom.

"M … Master!

Then, with a forced smile, she turned to face Lud, who was in

shock.

"I'm sorry … but I … can no longer serve you!"

Then, politely, she bowed once, investing it with her greatest gratitude, her highest respect, and her deepest love.

"Sven, what are you talking about?"

Lud was in a daze, his understanding far behind the events taking place before his eyes.

"You will be a wonderful baker without me, so forget about me!"

For Sven, these words were so painful that it felt like they were tearing her apart.

But she had to say them.

"Please, just forget about me. Even if you see me again, it won't actually be me!"

This was the final service she could perform for her beloved master.

Genitz had stolen what was most important to her.

"And now farewell."

Sven raised her head, then turned her back on Lud and ran away.

"Sven, wait! Sven!!"

Lud shouted toward Sven's receding back.

No matter what the circumstances were, Sven never disobeyed his orders.

But now she ignored his command and disappeared into the dark.

"Oh, so *that's* her response, eh? How admirable!"

Genitz's body rocked with amusement as he coolly watched this unfold.

"Genitz! You … What have you done to her?!!"

Lud was furious, and he leapt up from his knees, and with incredible speed, threw a punch.

"Hmm …"

But it didn't connect.

Like a willow in the wind, Genitz smoothly evaded Lud's powerful attack, seized his arm, and bent his wrist ever so slightly, as if twisting a faucet.

"Gaaah!!"

Lud's massive frame spun around in a half circle and crashed to the ground.

"That was a pretty good move. It brings back memories, but it isn't enough."

Genitz spoke dismissively, without sparing a glance for Lud, now prostrate on the ground.

"I thought clashing with that man might awaken your past a bit, but … is that all you've got?"

Genitz meant Heidrig, the man he had just killed.

"Now then …"

Genitz glanced at Hilde.

"Eep?!"

She was cowering, and the eyes he turned on her were kind, warm, and completely unconcerned.

"I'm busy, so I can't keep fooling around here. I don't need you anymore. You can do as you please. So long, Lieutenant!"

"Waaah …"

All Hilde could do was tremble.

"Wait!! What did you do to Sven?! Answer me!!"

Lud shouted, but Genitz didn't stop.

Slowly, he walked in the direction where Sven had gone.

"If you want to know, come to Berun. Come back under my command. Only *I* know how to make the best use of a Werewolf like *you*."

Leaving behind only those words, Genitz disappeared into the darkness.

"Wait! Genitz!!"

Lud shouted.

But there was no reply.

"What the hell?! What in the world just happened?!"

EPILOGUE

SHOP CLOSED

At the Weapons Development Bureau in Berun, the royal capital ⋯

After a single gunshot, it wasn't Sophia who fell.

"You bastard!!"

The one who fell was Daian Fortuner.

"Aw, man ⋯ I'm not this heroic ⋯ am I?"

Sophia had stood up, making a good target.

Genitz's bullet should have struck her chest, but Daian shielded her at the last moment.

"Why ⋯ did you do this? You idiot!!"

In the past, Sophia had yelled and called him an idiot countless times.

But she never expected to call him that in a moment like this.

"Yeah ⋯ I surprise even myself."



To Daian, Sophia was a luxury item.

"Well, I was feeling whimsical!"

Even suffering in pain, Daian answered in his ridiculously theatrical way.

"I'm surprised. I thought you were more logical, Daian."

Still holding his gun, Genitz approached slowly.

"Logical? What is the point of this? Soon, some very scary troops will come and rescue us!"

"No problem. As long as I open the Door, I will have power that prevents anyone in this world from threatening me."

"You know about the Door? But how do you intend to open it?"

Wiltia had forced open a Door, analyzed the technology inside, and created the Hunter Units that altered the balance of world power.

For that, however, Wiltia had to pay reparations for destroying an entire city.

"Do you intend to erase Berun from the map? You don't have that much power."

"You say the strangest things. All I have to do is use the key to open it."

"Surely, you don't …"

Finally, Daian understood Genitz's true intention.

Genitz's main goal wasn't the Door.

He wanted to open the Door, but the reason he had mobilized his forces was to secure the Door while simultaneously gaining the

"key."

And the key was Sven.

"Oh, so your goal was to acquire the emergency control code?"

As if those words had expended what remained of his strength, Daian slumped and was still.

"Daian! Hey! Damn it!!"

Sophia was going to avenge Genitz's violence, but soldiers silently appeared and immediately restrained her.

"Urgh! What the … You goons!!"

Sophia was a master of army battle techniques, but she couldn't make a move.

"They are Werewolves. In other words, they are my faithful minions."

"Werewolves … You keep these guys like you did Lud?"

Sophia knew about the Werewolves.

She knew that Lud was once a member, and that Genitz had ordered the slaughter of Lapchuricka.

"Silence. You're hurting my ears."

Genitz would exchange no further words with Sophia.

Under orders, the Werewolves struck Sophia with their fists and she lost consciousness.

"Now then, they caused a great deal of trouble."

Having lost Sophia and Daian, the security forces would no longer be able to resist Genitz's forces.

The development bureau had fallen.

"Mop up any remaining guards and thoroughly search Daian's lab. Information on the code must be there."

"…!"

In silence, the Werewolves nodded and moved to carry out their orders.

The remaining security soldiers died with no chance to resist.

"L-Lord Lieutenant General … Um …"

The soldier speaking timidly from behind Genitz was Captain Delz, commander of the siege troops.

"I didn't think you would come all the way here, Lord … But, anyway, splendid work!"

He was so fawning, as he wrung his hands, that he looked more like a merchant than a military officer.

He was afraid.

He had mobilized over one thousand soldiers, that night alone.

And, in the end, Genitz was forced to come and finish the job.

"You did well. Good job."

But Genitz did not criticize the captain.

Delz was incompetent.

And because he was incompetent, he was useful.

Even allowing for differences in geographical advantage and weaponry, and in the quality of the respective soldiers, against a security force of fifty guards, Delz had lost the lives of hundreds.

The soldiers' resentment—their hatred—would fall on Delz, their incompetent commander.

Running an organization required a clear object of hatred.

It was necessary to have someone incompetent who could be sacrificed.

"My apologies, Captain Delz, but would you be so kind as to arrange air transportation?"

"Hm? You're not going anywhere, are you?!"

Troops had mobilized in the capital.

Considering what would come next, Supreme Commander Genitz couldn't leave the royal capital.

"Ah ha ha! Of course not. Someone *else* is leaving."

Genitz wasn't the one leaving.

The corporal in the iron mask was leaving.

"If they start searching now, they will find what I seek by tonight. And with that, he will head for Organbaelz."

At last, sunlight was visible in the eastern sky.

But it was already too late.

With the defeat of the development bureau, the royal capital would fall under martial law.

Now, even if regular army headquarters learned of the situation, there was nothing it could do.

The curtain dropped on this battle, enacted on the stage of the development bureau, twenty-four hours before Thanksgiving in Organbaelz.

Back in the present ···

"*HUFF* … *HUFF* … *HUFF* … I m-must hurry!"

Helpner Canyon was a short distance from Organbaelz.

Vertical cliff walls carved by the river spread beneath Sven's eyes.

"If I fall from here …"

Sven was about to cast herself to the canyon floor.

Genitz had activated the emergency control code.

It did more than simply stop a Hunter Unit.

It issued compulsory directives to the rezanium reactor that powered and controlled the Hunter Unit, thereby placing it under the direction of the person who input the code.

Originally, the program was developed to stop rampaging Hunter Units. However, the program had a different function for humanoid Hunter Units.

"No … Like this … I'll …"

She could tell that she was being rewritten with alarming speed.

Her deep love for Lud was being redirected toward the man who had punched in the code.

"I must hurry!"

Her legs, which had carried her this far at full speed, wouldn't obey, as if they were no longer her own.

If she took one more step, she could cast herself over the cliff.

If she did, she would undoubtedly break apart and be destroyed.

She *must* do that.

Otherwise, that man would use her to harm Lud.

She had to destroy herself first.

"You are about to learn what a robot is supposed to do."

"—!!"

She heard the voice of the man who surpassed demons.

"A robot must protect itself. Only *humans* commit suicide, Svelgen Avei."

Genitz appeared. He had stolen Sven's heart, the most important thing to her.

"Get … the hell out of here!!"

If she couldn't die, then she would kill this man, so Sven spun around and tried to throw a hand chop.

"Urgh …!"

But she couldn't.

"Robots must never hurt a human being."

Genitz said this cruelly, but also as if he were enjoying himself.

Sven could not kill herself or defy the man who now possessed her.

Then she lost the final remaining part of herself.

"And robots must obey humans."

"Noooooooooo!!!"

Sven's cry of desperation echoed throughout the canyon.

A few moments later, silence fell again.

A sudden silence, as if the world had changed.

"Who are you?!"

It was Genitz who asked this.

"Svelgen Avei … SS-6R1 …"

Her voice was the same, but it sounded like an automated mechanical voice.

"And who am *I*?"

"Lord Lieutenant General Maximillian Genitz … my master."

"Very good! Most splendid!"

Genitz laughed with immense satisfaction.

"Thank you."

The rewritten automaton bowed deeply.

"Now, let us go back to our home in Berun."

There is a small bakery in the small mining town of Organbaelz.

The bakery's name is Tockerbrot.

The owner looks frightening, but he's serious and skilled.

The bread he served at the Thanksgiving festival the day before had won much praise.

But, the next day, a sign reading "CLOSED" hung at the shop's entrance.

No one was inside.




CLOSED

In the afternoon and that night, the closed sign was still hanging.

And no one was inside.

Neither the owner with the scary face, nor the cute, silver-haired waitress.

AFTERWORD

And now … thank you very much for reading volume 4 of *The Combat Baker and Automaton Waitress*!

This time, I really drew out the main story, so there's only one page left for the afterword.

So I'll keep this short.

Just to be clear … This isn't the end, okay?

I've constructed this arc to last through two volumes.

The archenemy Genitz is still out there, Sven has been abducted, Sophia is a prisoner, and Rebecca is on the verge of death.

Lud must face his past and struggle to win his future.

I hope you will read the next volume!

I hope you'll check out *The Combat Baker and Automaton Waitress*, Volume 5.

See you then!!

SOW

The Combat Baker and Automaton Waitress

VOLUME 4

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