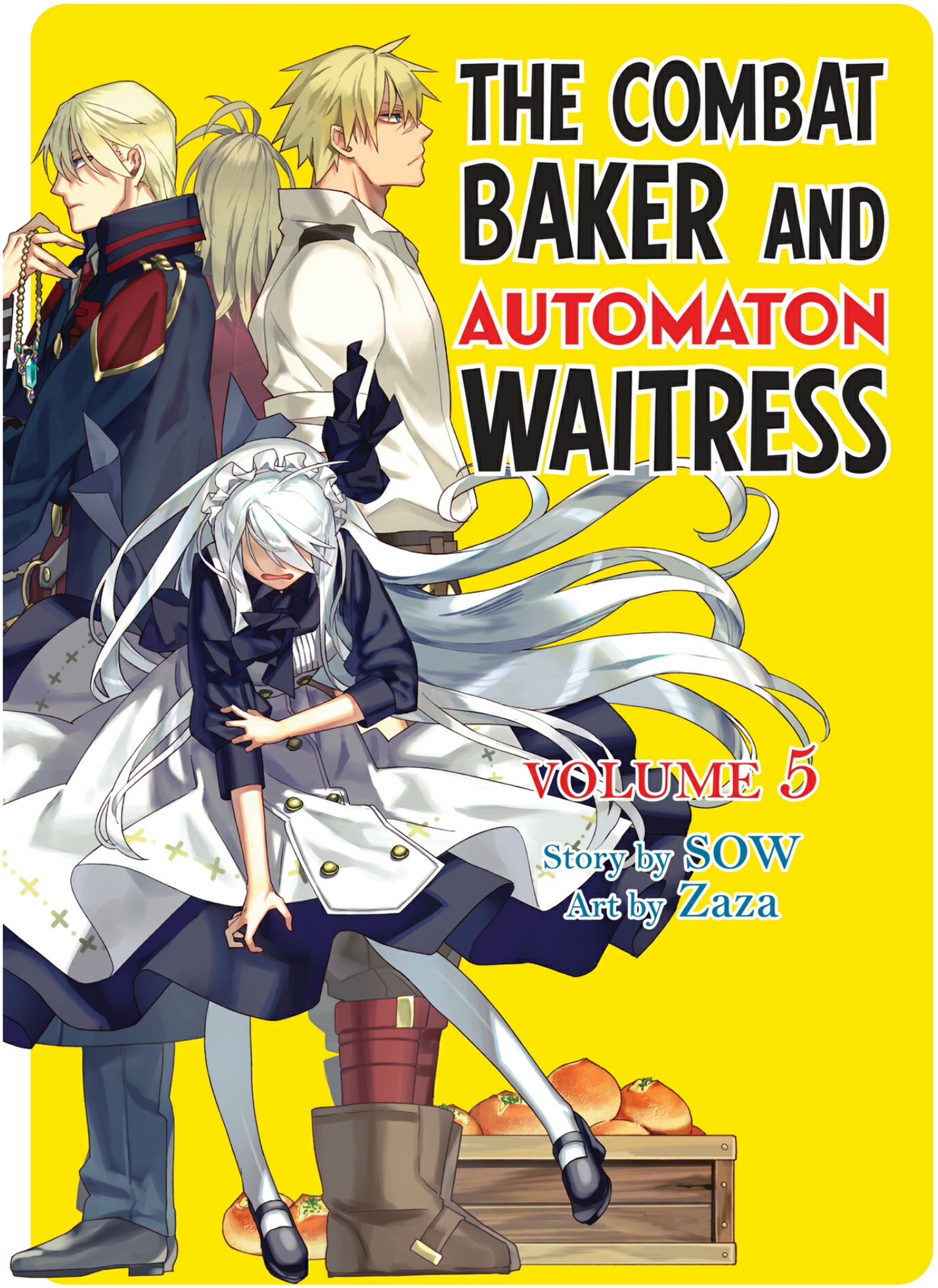
THE COMBAT BAKER AND AUTOMATON WAITRESS



VOLUME 5

Story by SOW

Art by Zaza


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"Do you have a dream?"
—Lud Langart
"Yes, of course. Who do you think I am?"
—Maximillian Genitz
THE COMBAT BAKER AND AUTOMATON WAITRESS 5


MAXIMILLIAN GENITZ
A lieutenant general and the supreme commander of the Schutzstaffel in Wiltia.
He is behind Sven's capture and the occupation of the royal palace in Berun.
He appears to have deep connections to Lud, but what is he after?
MYSTERIOUS MAN
A person who holds the key to helping Lud and the others out of their present predicament.
According to rumors, he has been missing since the recent fighting.
MYSTERIOUS WOMAN
An unusual person (?) very much like Sven and Rebecca.
SUZUKA AMAKI
A military attaché from Yamato, an island nation in the Far East. As a fierce fighter, she is proficient in the martial arts known as bujitsu, budo, and kenjitsu.
She became involved in the current conflict at the request of a certain individual.
SOPHIA VON RUNDSTADT
Lud's former superior officer who is like an older sister to him.
She became a prisoner during the Schutzstaffel's occupation of the Weapons Development Bureau.
LUD LANGART
Combat baker and owner of Tockerbrot Bakery (currently closed).
Will the day ever come when he finds release from the ghosts of his past?
MYSTERIOUS MAN NO. 2
An unidentified blond man who is active behind the scenes.
Who is this man who wears the corporal's mask and dresses all in red?
CHARACTERS


HILDEGARD VON HESSEN
Emotionally conflicted, she accompanies Lud and the others as they infiltrate Berun, using her position in the Schutzstaffel.
MASKED MAN
A large man who wears a uniform and, for some reason, an uncomfortable-looking mask.
REBECCA SHARLAHART
She somehow escaped from the fighting in Berun, and she urges Lud to launch a counterattack.

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Introduction: An Encounter

I was 12 or 13 years old when I encountered the man for the first time. I don't remember the exact date, but it was after I completed my mission. I was assigned the mission by the people who had picked me up as an orphan, raised me as a soldier, and inducted me into the Werewolves. I carried out all their orders so I could stay alive. I endured their grueling and inhuman training. On their orders, I relentlessly killed any opponent. And yet, they were now on the verge of killing me.

"This punk is dangerous!"

I don't remember whether they were majors or lieutenant colonels, but soldiers with numerous stars adorning their shoulders had tied me to a chair and pointed and yelled at me, as if at a beast.

A beast? Only now? Wasn't it a little late to say that about a Werewolf—a wolf disguised as a human being?

"I can't believe he didn't hesitate to kill his superior officers and fellow soldiers!"

"Then he came back alive all by himself! What a *devil*!"

The soldiers were disgusted. They were the leaders of the Werewolves. They were my *owners*.

"It would be bad if he did something like that again."

"Yeah. A watchdog is useful, but only when chained. Anyway, this guy's a *wolf*, so he might bite our hands at any time!"

I realized they intended to kill me.

Why was this happening to me? I had simply carried out orders. But I didn't feel like resisting them or defending myself. Instead, I found myself accepting it as the natural course of events.

I had lost my parents and my reason for living. I had been sleeping on the

backstreets like a wild dog. Then, for some reason, the military had picked me up and trained me. But that was a mistake.

I should have died sooner. But it wasn't that I was giving up. It would be more accurate to say I had grown tired of defending myself.

One of the senior officers cocked his weapon with a *click*.

Aw, man... I wasn't even fit to send to an execution site. I would meet my fate here in this highly soundproofed room.

The muzzle of a gun pressed against my head. I couldn't shake the feeling that this was somebody else's problem even though I was the one facing imminent death. My only thought was that I wouldn't be in this situation if I had been able to shed a single tear.

"Wait."

Suddenly, the door to the room opened and *that man* entered. Immediately after he appeared—an officer who wore more stars than the man pressing the gun against me—every soldier in the room saluted so hurriedly that it was comical.

"Is that him? Is that the boy?"

The man was young, about 20 years old, but he behaved with more confidence and calm than anyone else in the room.

"Yes, Sir! We were just about to execute him!"

As one of the senior officers said this, he showed the gun in his hand.

"Why? He carried out his mission and obeyed his orders. What's wrong with that?"

There was no rancor in his voice. He spoke as if asking an ordinary question, casually and without accusation or criticism—like asking a servant why he served coffee today when he usually served tea.

"This brat is dangerous. If ordered, he'd kill his own comrades without blinking. He isn't human! He's a *machine*!"

"Yeah! If we let him go, he'll just cause trouble later! Better to execute him

now!”

I didn’t feel any strong emotion when faced with these senior officers and their accusations. They could say whatever they wanted about me. They could *do* whatever they wanted *to* me. I could easily imagine what would come next. This man who had appeared would say...

“I see. Then there’s no choice.”

And that was exactly what he said.

“I see. Then there’s no choice.”

All over again, I keenly felt that I was the kind of person whose fate could be decided by the exchange of a few words.

“C-Colonel?! What?!”

Huh?

What had happened while my eyes were lowered? When I raised my head, two gunshots sounded.

“Agh?!”

“Agh!!”

My body wasn’t the target. Instead, bullets struck the foreheads of the senior officers who had been foully cursing me just moments before. The man who fired the shots was the officer the others addressed as Colonel. His face was expressionless and placid even though he had just killed two men.

“He kills when ordered to? He kills like a machine? Wonderful. He is the ideal Werewolf!”

The other soldiers in the room were frozen in surprise.

“He’ll cause trouble later? Ridiculous. Tools, technology and human beings all behave according to how you use them. Fools who can’t see when they’re only proclaiming their own incompetence bring harm and no benefit.”

Slowly, the man approached me after holstering his Walther P38, the representative handgun of the Principality of Wiltia’s military. Then, as if untying the ribbon of a gift box, he removed the belt that was binding me.

“Don’t worry. I will wield you effectively. You merely need to faithfully carry out my orders.”

After saying this, he told me to stand. Then he held out his hand. After a moment, I realized he was offering a handshake. Such behavior toward Werewolves was extremely uncommon.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Maximillian Genitz.”

Nonetheless, I extended my hand in fear.

“I’m... Lud Langart.”

He gripped my hand firmly. I was filled with a strange feeling.

Chapter 1: Infiltrating the Capital

Three days had passed since the Thanksgiving Festival in Organbaelz. A sign reading “CLOSED” still hung on the door of the small bakery known as Tockerbrot. The owner, who was known for his baking skills despite his fearsome mien, had staked his life on running this shop, but it had lost its shine, grown dark, and was now a sad place.

“Lud... uh... um... cheer up. You should eat something.”

Inside, the shop was spiritless and desolate. Milly was training to be a baker. She spoke to Lud, the owner of the shop, who was in the oven room with his head hanging low. The oven hadn’t held a fire for three days, so it looked cold and gloomy, where usually the air was hot enough to raise a sweat.

“Sorry, Milly. Please, just leave me alone.”

Lud said no more, again hanging his head. He had been still and silent like this for three days.

What can I do?

Faced with Lud’s low spirits, Milly could only rue her own helplessness. She didn’t know much about what had happened three nights earlier. She knew that Heidrig was a young man who had come to assassinate Lud, became a baker’s assistant instead, and then died.

Furthermore, the silver-haired girl who was the shop’s popular waitress had disappeared. Sven’s absence alone was enough to make Tockerbrot lifeless.

“Argh!”

After leaving the oven room, Milly sputtered in dismay as she looked around the empty shop. Usually, a great quantity and variety of tasty-looking breads would line the shelves. Usually, men and women of all ages, smiling merrily, would come to buy the bread. Milly had loved to see that.

Is this how it would all end? This worry flitted across her mind.

No, it isn't!

She immediately rejected the possibility. But, a young girl like her didn't have the slightest idea how to mend the situation. All she could do was bite her lips in frustration.

The bell over the shop door chimed.

"—!"

Milly looked up in the hope that Sven had returned.

"It seems that... Sven hasn't come back yet, has she?"

The person who entered wasn't the silver-haired waitress. It was Jacob, a young boy and a regular customer who sometimes helped out in the shop.

"No..."

Milly looked down forlornly.

"Where did Sven go? Marlene didn't know much about what happened."

Jacob, who was usually known for his bright smile, was frowning.

Jacob... No, it was actually his mother, Charlotte, and Marlene, the nun from the church atop the hill, who had handled the incident's aftermath, which included Heidrig's funeral. The townsfolk were told that a bandit had killed one of Tockerbrot's employees on the day of the festival.

For the moment, they had suspended delivery to clients—like the local mine and city hall—giving different explanations as to why. However, this couldn't last long. If Tockerbrot, which wasn't financially secure, didn't resume business soon, it would close for good without ever reopening.

"Something has happened. There's no doubt about it. This was no mere quarrel. Above all, consider what happened to Heidrig. Maybe..."

Jacob was wise for a 10-year-old boy. Without knowing all the details, he suspected the worst based on the evidence at hand. And he had arrived at a horrible conclusion.

"No, that can't be!"

Milly immediately rejected this. The answer Jacob had hit upon was that Sven

might *never* come back. It was the most plausible answer.

Sven had said certain things to Lud:

“I can no longer serve you!”

“Forget about me.”

“Farewell.”

Having heard those words, Lud now sat in the depths of despair. Sven had come to occupy a great space inside him. A space so large that no one else could fill it.

“Oh... Jacob?”

Lud shuffled out of the oven room. Like Milly, he must have hoped Sven had come in. His features drooped as if a slight hope had awakened, only to end in betrayal.

“Lud, um... uh... what are you going to do?”

Jacob asked this with concern. The only certainty was that Lud couldn’t continue like this. Whether he carried on with the shop or left to find Sven, he needed to take action. Nothing would change if he continued, frozen in misery, in the oven room.

“Sorry. Would you two mind leaving for today?”

Lud hadn’t moved after hearing Jacob’s words.

He wasn’t good at smiling. He did know the feeling of happiness, but he couldn’t express it physically. If he tried to smile, the muscles in his face would tense, causing women and children to weep and grown men to flee.

Jacob was one of the few people who could sense the joy deep inside Lud. Right now, however, all Jacob could see in Lud’s eyes was despair.

“You don’t have to come back for a while. Sorry.”

At the moment, this seemed the best Lud could do.

“Lud...”

Jacob couldn’t say anything. He could only make a tight fist. Milly felt the

same. She was frustrated at her helplessness to console the person she considered her best friend.

Clang!

At that moment, the door of the shop opened again. Jacob and Milly looked up desperately. However, once again, it wasn't Sven. Nonetheless, Jacob's eyes opened wide in surprise at the sight of the girl in the doorway.

"Are you Lud Langart, the former lieutenant?"

"Who are you?"

It wasn't the silver-haired waitress. The girl who stood there had red hair and red eyes and wore a red dress.

"Are you Sven's *sister* or something?"

They resembled each other so closely that Lud couldn't help but ask. Most noticeable was that their eyes were exactly the same.

"We do not possess that concept or a strong sense of sisterhood, but indeed we are not strangers."

The girl was Rebecca Sharlahart. Like Sven, she was a humanoid Hunter Unit created by the genius scientist Daian Fortuner, director of the Royal Weapons Development Bureau.

"I have a request of you."

Rebecca stepped into the shop and dropped to her knees.

"Huh?! Are you all right, Miss?!"

Jacob rushed to her side.

Jacob and Rebecca had met before. When Schutzstaffel soldiers had captured Jacob, Rebecca had suffered gunshot wounds in her effort to rescue him, literally putting her life on the line. In gratitude, Jacob had drawn a red angel as Tockerbrot's mascot on the bakery's delivery truck.

"Running for two days from Berun can weaken even *me*."

"You came here from Berun?! And you ran the whole way?!"

Jacob raised his voice in surprise.

The distance from Berun, the royal capital of Wiltia, to Organbaelz, where Tockerbrot was located, was 200 kilometers. She had run a distance that would take half a day by train.

“I had no choice. I wanted to go to the royal palace, but that unknown machine... I hid under water and exited through the city sewers... and then just kept...”

“I can’t make sense of what you’re saying, but I can see that you’ve had quite an adventure!”

Jacob didn’t understand how Rebecca came to be there. He could never imagine that Daian had ordered Rebecca to deliver a request to military command for backup in the royal palace on the night the development bureau was under siege. On her way, a mysterious third humanoid Hunter Unit attacked her and she fell into the canal.

“Anyway, have some water.”

Jacob didn’t know all the details, but he understood that she had struggled valiantly to get there. He made as if to fetch water, but she grabbed his hand.

“I am all right. What is more important is the favor I ask.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“May I hug you?”

“Huh?”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Rebecca hugged Jacob, who was stunned and didn’t understand.



“Wait! Huh? What? Miss?!”

Jacob was a 10-year-old boy who liked pretty girls to a degree that the word precocious didn’t begin to describe. But if a girl as pretty as Rebecca gave him a fervent hug, it was understandable that he would be flustered.

“Thank you. That soothed me.”

“N-No... you’re welcome.”

Unable to move his smooth-talking tongue as fluidly as usual, Jacob blushed and replied to Rebecca’s calm words of thanks.

“You really *are* Sven’s sister, aren’t you?”

Lud asked this in amazement as he gazed at Rebecca.

“As I said, we do not have that concept. What makes you say that?”

“Oh, n-nothing.”

Lud looked away, absently raising a hand to his mouth. On the day Sven first arrived at the shop, she had immediately given Lud a heartfelt hug, just like Rebecca just gave Jacob.

“Anyway, it appears that Svelgen, whom you call Sven, has fallen into his hands.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about many things—things you need to know, and need not to know, and want to know. But first, will you answer a question?”

Lud was confused by the sudden appearance of this red girl.

Rebecca drew near to Lud and stared into his eyes as she asked her question.

“Do you want to get Sven back?”

“—!”

Rebecca’s question was of enormous importance to Lud.

“As you must have guessed, Sven is with Lieutenant General Genitz. You know full well that he wouldn’t abduct her on a mere whim.”

Rebecca asked this in cold tones that were like the display on a gauge.

“Yes. I was once his foot soldier.”

In the recent Great European War, Lud had been the Hunter Unit pilot feared as the Silver Wolf. However, that was in the later years of the war. During the first half of the war, he had been one of the Werewolves, a secret special force. And Genitz had been the Werewolves’ commander.

“The royal capital is in chaos. And Lieutenant General Genitz triggered it. He may have taken Sven because she is essential to his plan. Do you understand what that means?”

“Yes.”

Lud had no idea what Genitz was plotting. But he knew that he needed to stop Genitz if he wanted Sven back.

“In consideration of that, I ask again. Do you still want to find Sven?”

Rebecca’s question sought final confirmation. Confirmation that meant, if he proceeded, there was no guarantee he would escape with his life. This was a path that a baker, who had abandoned a world of bloodshed to live in peace, should never choose.

That was why Sven, when leaving him, had said, “Please, just forget about me.” Sven loved him and valued his life more than her own. She knew that if he went looking for her, she would be responsible for endangering the life of her beloved master.

“I...”

Lud’s answer came in full awareness of that fact. He had spent many days baking bread that no one would eat. Then Sven had arrived and cast a bright light on his life. And her parting words to him were, “You will be a wonderful baker without me.”

But that wasn’t the problem.

“I want to reopen the bakery with Sven.”

Tockerbrot *needed* her. Because of her splendid customer service skills? Because of her sales acumen? Because, when the occasion demanded, her

combat skills surpassed even his?

No!

“Sven is Tockerbrot’s popular waitress! Without her, I can’t open the shop for even one day!”

For this baker, who had sworn to devote his life to his bakery, Sven was essential. That was Lud’s answer.

“Understood. Then shall we go?”

“Go... where?”

Rebecca responded as though she had expected no other answer.

“To the royal capital, the city where the Schutzstaffel has effected a coup d’état. Under Genitz’s boot, Berun is a doomed city.”

The royal palace, in the center of the royal capital of Berun, was in the throes of mayhem. At dawn on the day following occupation of the Royal Development Bureau, the Schutzstaffel had launched an armed occupation of the royal palace.

The Schutzstaffel’s pretext was that the development bureau, regular army, and certain military officers had conspired to plot a coup. And since protecting the royal palace was the Schutzstaffel’s charge, the center of Wiltia had fallen into Genitz’s hands with scant resistance.

“Lord, everyone is assembled.”

Delz, a Schutzstaffel captain, reported to Genitz as he walked down a carpeted hallway in the royal palace.

“Very well. It would be ill-mannered of me to make them wait. Let us hurry.”

But Genitz’s tone held no urgency. Rather, it was entirely composed, as if to say that making them wait was only proper.

As they walked, Delz asked, “Um, Lieutenant General? A question, if I may? I didn’t see you after the occupation of the development bureau. Did you leave?”

The foremost priority of the Schutzstaffel operation had been seizure of the

development bureau, and a supposed rebellion by the development bureau was a sufficient reason for controlling the royal capital.

The truth, of course, was otherwise. But that didn't matter. Things would move forward as long as one's behavior matched its justification. As long as there was a believable version of reality to purvey, the truth was irrelevant.

However, during the most delicate period following occupation of the bureau, Genitz had been absent for a day. And that made Delz suspicious.

"And why must I answer you?"

Genitz responded with an interrogative of his own, but entirely without accusation.

"M-My apologies!"

The question was enough. Delz's face paled and his back straightened.

The Schutzstaffel was obliged to perform Genitz's will, vigorously and faithfully. Schutzstaffel soldiers were forbidden to question Genitz's words and actions—just as, no matter the consequences, the brain issues orders and the body's arms and legs must move accordingly.

"Very well."

Genitz replied with neither forgiveness nor censure as he came to stand before an ornate door at the end of the hallway. Guards on each side opened the door respectfully.

"We've been waiting for you, Your Majesty."

Inside was a conference room. Usually, this was where cabinet members, selected by members of parliament, themselves chosen by the people, assembled. However, the people standing in the room today were distinguished and renowned Wiltians who constituted the Council of Nobles.

"You speak too soon, Count Palatine Wittels. I am merely a soldier."

"Indeed. At least for *now*."

The fat man named Wittels, who was well over 60 years old, tittered as if Genitz had said something funny. And following his lead, the other 12 nobles

gathered in the conference room also began to laugh.

They were Genitz's supporters. Backed by the power of the nobles who infested the royal place, the Schutzstaffel's suppression of resistance had succeeded quickly.

"I dare say that you will restore proper discipline to Wiltia."

"To be sure. What a *mess* Bist left behind!"

One after another, the nobles heaped aspersions upon this person called Bist. Bist was the Wiltian premier who died 15 years earlier. His portrait had hung on the wall of this conference room, but these nobles, who still held him in contempt even after his death, removed it.

"He must have been mad to place commoners in important posts and give them a voice in politics."

"Even worse, he favored a policy of appeasement toward the Doga tribe. The *traitor*!"

Premier Bist was praised as the father of the nation of Wiltia. Due to his leadership, the small nation known as the Luftzand Domain had grown to become the powerful Wiltia. Because of his aggressive policy of conscription that did not depend on social status, the nation had accrued the wealth and military might that became the driving force behind its victory in the Great War. On the other hand, that policy had infringed upon military, political and economic rights and interests previously held by the nobility.

"At last, the Wiltian traditions and propriety that Bist disturbed shall be revived. We may be proud of this day!"

That was why they supported Genitz. They hoped for a return to the old order.

"All members of the Council of Nobles may rest assured."

Genitz spoke humbly and respectfully.

"Originally, the nation consisted of a king at the top, with supporting nobles underneath. I believe that all of us who derail the present order, which has abandoned the nation's principles, are on the side of justice."

He bowed nobly, his hand on the right side of his chest according to the old custom.

What utter clowns!

Head down, Genitz smiled.

Various factors were at play, but the reason they supported Genitz's coup was, simply put, to save face. Those they considered inferior had divested them of their authority and then used that authority more capably than they had. Admitting and accepting this reality meant shame and loss, and that had, unsurprisingly, embittered them.

What antiquated refuse! Hildegard was at least somewhat redeemable!

Genitz recalled the girl who had worked with him while he was in disguise until just a few days ago. She was very young and green, but these nobles were a lost cause. Their old age and blindness to the changing times made them an outdated nuisance.

But even refuse has its uses...

Genitz held one belief to the point of conviction: "Nothing in the world is useless, but there are people who cannot see the value in everything."

The Council of Nobles, composed of the elderly, was outdated and unchanging. However, it possessed the power of wealth and, above all, authority. They were ridiculous, but some people valued such absurdity. And the nobles were extremely useful for manipulating such people.

Now then, I have assembled the necessary ingredients. All that remains is... Hmm...

Securing the capital was a means of last resort. Now that the stage was fully set, Genitz was on the cusp of achieving his ends.

There were roughly three routes into Berun. One was by air on a military or government flight. The second was by water via the Sephira River running through the center of the royal capital. And the third was by land, using roads or the railway.

It would take half a day by train from the station near Organbaelz. This was the most common route.

“This is for you, Former Lieutenant.”

“Th-Thank you.”

They were inside a long distance train bound for Berun. Rebecca handed Lud a bottle of water she had bought at the previous stop. They were on their way to Berun to recapture Sven.

“Um, if possible, would you please stop calling me that? Just call me Lud.”

He was uncomfortable when Rebecca addressed him so ceremoniously.

“Request denied.”

However, she flatly refused.

“My apologies, but I only address two people by their first names.”

“You’re very particular.”

She was similar to Sven, but in some ways, they were completely different.

“Who are those two people?”

“Do I *have* to answer that?”

“Sorry.”

Lud felt the need to apologize.

“One is my master.”

“Oh...”

She responded so casually that Lud wondered if she actually *wanted* to talk about it.

“And the other is Jacob.”

“Achoo!”

“Huh?”

Immediately after Rebecca answered, he heard a sneeze from somewhere in the car.

“Um, never mind that!”

That voice sounded familiar, so Lud started to turn and look into the seat behind them, but Rebecca stopped him.

“Anyway, why do you like him so much?”

“.....”

Rebecca remained silent. Lud suspected she wouldn’t answer this time and didn’t expect a reply.

“Allow me approximately two hours as I collate my thoughts.”

“Does it really require that much thought?!”

Lud blurted this in response to her surprising words, which were paired with a blank facial expression.

“Collecting an immense volume of data requires that much time.”

“Immense volume?”

“Even with my processing capacity, succinctly describing Jacob’s charm is a colossal task.”

“Oh... uh...”

Lud was confused.

Rebecca hadn’t told Lud anything about herself. She had only revealed that rescuing Sven would halt Genitz’s ambitions and therefore benefit the organization to which she belonged.

Usually, going along with the claims of such a mysterious individual would be so dangerous that he would avoid it. When Lud was a soldier, he would have suspected a trap. But it was undeniable that Rebecca had risked her own life to protect Jacob once before. Furthermore...

They really are alike in this respect...

Sven’s and Rebecca’s personalities were completely different, but Lud felt instinctively that he could trust Rebecca because something deep inside her was like Sven.

“Oh, would you like some water, too?”

Whether or not she had guessed Lud’s thoughts, Rebecca expressionlessly handed a bottle of water to the person sitting opposite her in the box seat.

“No thanks.”

Hildegard von Hessen, a first lieutenant in the Schutzstaffel, answered her softly.

During a previous incident, she had become a worker at the bakery in order to assassinate Lud, but he had defeated her. Hilde changed significantly after that. She had taken a step outside the narrow-minded viewpoint of a noble, but then circumstances promptly crushed her. Cruel reality had broken her spirit.

“Hilde, I’m sorry to drag you along.”

“Don’t worry. Use me however you want. I’m used to that sort of thing.”

Hilde spat the words in a cynical voice.

“.....”

Her current state deeply saddened Lud. But it was understandable. Hilde had always been a cynical person. And just when she was heading in a positive direction, Hilde confronted Heidrig’s death and Genitz’s betrayal. It was understandable that a girl only 15 years old couldn’t accept all that.

I have no right to give her advice.

As Lud thought, he gazed at his reflection in the window of the train. He wasn’t wearing his usual baker’s uniform. He was wearing a Schutzstaffel uniform. And so were Hilde and Rebecca.

The Schutzstaffel was governing the royal capital through martial law, and the city was effectively sealed. This train would undergo inspection at a station just outside the royal capital, so it was probable that most of the passengers would be forced off the train. To proceed beyond that point, they had to pretend they were Schutzstaffel soldiers. That was the plan.

“I know your uniform is tight, but please bear with it.”

Rebecca said this to Lud, who gasped as if having difficulty breathing.

Hilde had her own uniform, but Lud and Rebecca had borrowed spares at Traad Base, which was part of the Wiltian regular army and was where the unit that Hilde led in her attempt to capture Jacob was stationed.

“Yeah.”

Lud was larger than the average Wiltian. The uniform he wore was especially tight when he closed the collar, but that wasn’t the cause of his labored breathing.

Lud was wearing more than a Schutzstaffel uniform. Genitz had worn a mask to disguise himself as the Corporal for personal missions. Lud was now wearing that mask.

“As might be expected, it would be suspicious if two people out of three didn’t have proper military registration.”

Hilde really was in the Schutzstaffel, but Lud would have aroused suspicion trying to pass inspection as a Schutzstaffel soldier. Furthermore, military insiders would have recognized him as the renowned Silver Wolf. By wearing the mask, he could use the so-called Corporal’s military registration, and disguise his face at the same time.

“I know. I know that.”

However, it was upsetting for Hilde to see him in the mask, since the man who had been wearing it had emotionally scarred her. Lud felt disgusted for deriving benefit from something so distasteful.

“I wonder if I still have my registration,” Hilde mumbled.

Genitz had once said that the reason he appointed her was to punish himself with beatings from a girl who was obsessed with the idea of being a noble. But perhaps it had been more than that. He had used her as cover for his secret plans. Then, after accomplishing his goal, he was done with her.

“The lieutenant general said he doesn’t need me, so...”

“There is no need to worry about that.”

Rebecca responded to Hilde’s question about her registration.

“Genitz is currently preoccupied. The whole Schutzstaffel is preoccupied.

There is no time for going through the procedure for deleting your registration.”

“I’m not even worth that much, huh?”

Hilde made a self-deprecatory smile at the realization that she was so unimportant they wouldn’t even bother to review her registration.

“Lud Langart... Are you a former Werewolf?”

“Yes, I am.”

The Werewolves were a special force for which even Heidrig—the “Wolf Man,” who was a far more proficient soldier than Hilde—had been deemed incompatible. It was a completely ruthless unit, open only to those who passed a trial in which comrades who had been through training together tried to kill each other.

“The lieutenant general seemed quite interested in you.”

In contrast to his treatment of Hilde, Genitz’s parting words to Lud had been an invitation to come back under his command. Lud left the military two years ago and had left the Werewolves even earlier.

“What’s between you two? Your relationship seemed to be more than superior and subordinate.”

Genitz had shown a special affection for Lud, so Hilde asked this teasingly. The question was more uncomfortable for Lud to answer than Hilde had expected.

“We were just superior and subordinate. But I was able to execute his orders more faithfully than others.”

“You must have been a capable soldier.”

“No.”

Lud didn’t say this out of modesty or humility.

“Being loyal to that man meant being insane.”

Lud made a tight fist.

“Do you know what kind of man Genitz is?”

Maximillian Genitz and the current problem... No, maybe his connection to

Lud went further back.

“Didn’t he make outstanding strategic achievements in the Great War? At the western front?”

“I suppose he did.”

Genitz was generally considered to be a talented strategic commander. Although he was only 30 years old, he had risen to lieutenant general, and not simply because Wiltia increased the promotion of competent generals to raise combat morale. He was an excellent tactician.

“His tactics were always precise. In Wiltia, only Marshal Elvin in the regular army could equal him. That’s why he’s so scary.”

“.....?”

Hilde looked astonished at Lud’s answer.

“Do you mean he’ll do anything to achieve his goals? Something like that?”

“No, it’s not that simple.”

Doing anything to achieve one’s goals was a common, overused expression. In fact, people who will do anything usually have options in mind—those that might work and those that are completely off the table.

“Genitz has the ability to immediately hit on the most efficient methods for achieving his goals. He may be a genius that way.”

Genitz wasn’t an ordinary person. He never needed alternatives. He could devise the most efficient tactic from the beginning.

“I’ve never seen anyone better at treating human lives as mere numbers.”

One perfect example was the destruction of Lapchuricka.

“There was once a town called Lapchuricka, but he completely erased it from the map so he could march his army through.”

Genitz had ordered the wholesale slaughter of everyone in the town, which included anti-Wiltian forces that had become a barrier to the Wiltian invasion. And the massacre included women, children and the elderly, not just soldiers and members of the resistance. He launched the attack without warning and it

had involved every manner of noncombatant.

It was said that the fatalities had totaled in the hundreds of thousands, but the exact number was unknown. Countless bodies were unrecognizable. In any case, the operation had included railway arterially, incendiary bombs and poisonous gas. Its objective was complete annihilation.

“I was on that mission. A sane soldier would have risked his life to refuse, but I performed as ordered.”

After that brutal operation, Lud had suffered over his ruthless actions and was unable to function as a soldier for awhile. Some aftereffects still remained. One was that he couldn’t smile.

“I wouldn’t be happy if he considered me competent. But, Hilde? I think you’re more fortunate than I am.”

“What?”

Having been told she was unnecessary, Hilde couldn’t find anything fortunate in her situation, and she glared at Lud.

“Didn’t Heidrig tell you?”

Right before he died, Heidrig the Wolf Man had told her that she wasn’t cut out to be a soldier.

“Not being good at something means you have potential elsewhere. That’s why he tried to protect you.”

Heidrig didn’t believe he could choose any path other than being the Wolf Man, which he had not chosen. Hilde still had the chance to walk a different path, so he had felt concern for her.

“I rejected my potential as a soldier because I wanted to become a baker. And that still unsettles me. I often wonder if I have the right or if I’m ill-suited to it.”

People thought Lud was the incarnation of hard work and dedication. In fact, he had continued baking bread even when he had no customers, and each day he tried to make his bread as delicious as possible. If he hadn’t, anxiety would have overwhelmed him.

“I’m deeply sorry to use you as a fighter again. I’m in no position to say this,

but after everything is over, I want you to think carefully about your life again."

Hilde was only 15 years old. Lud thought it was too early for her to decide what she "should" be.

"Okay."

Hilde nodded bashfully.

She was a contrary and twisted girl. And just when her perverse personality had finally started to improve, Hilde's heart had been broken. Or that was how it appeared. In fact, her heart was beginning to turn in a better direction again. If only a little.

GURGLE

"Oh..."

As if to signify this fresh change, her stomach growled. Since the night of Heidrig's death and until they had forcibly removed her, Hilde had stayed in the attic at Tockerbrot and barely eaten.

"Here. I prepared provisions."

As if she had foreseen everything, Rebecca proffered a paper bag.

She had bought more than bottles of water at the station. In the bag was a large quantity of food, including loaves of bread, chunks of ham and cheese, and cans of soup.

"Our task will be hard from now on. Please eat and recuperate. There is time until our destination, so you must also sleep. That is a soldier's duty."

Eating and sleeping were among a soldier's few enjoyments, but they were also part of the job. A soldier's duties included proper meals and sleep in order to stay fit and healthy.

"You've got a good head on your shoulders, um... Miss Sharlahart."

Lud and Hilde were impressed at how organized and prepared Rebecca was.

"Please call me Rebecca. I only allow a few people to call me by my last name."

"Oh, okay... um... Rebecca."

Hilde quietly accepted Rebecca's firm rules, which she issued without anger.

"Anyway, you sure bought a lot!"

"This is enough for four people."

"Four?"

Lud, Hilde and Rebecca only made three.

"Who is the rest for?"

"I do not eat or drink."

"Huh?"

Rebecca was a humanoid Hunter Unit. She didn't need to eat as a human being would. But the question remained of who the other two portions of food were meant for.

"So why don't *you two* join us?"

As if in answer to Lud's question, Rebecca turned around and spoke to the occupants of the seats behind her.

"Gah! You knew?!"

The two passengers cried out in surprise. It was Jacob and Milly.

"Jacob?! And Milly? You followed us?!"

Jacob smiled uncomfortably at Lud, who raised his voice in surprise.

"Heh heh... We spent all our savings on tickets."

Milly and Jacob had come to the station to see the others off with their guardians, Marlene and Charlotte, but then disappeared. Apparently, they had secretly boarded the train.

"How could you?! The inspection won't be easy for you just because you're young! Anyway, where we're heading will be dangerous!"

Lud was stunned and upset, but Jacob replied apologetically but firmly.

"But... *I'm* worried, too! Sven may have been Tockerbrot's popular waitress, but she was also our friend!"

Lud wasn't the only one Sven had left behind in Organbaelz. Both Jacob and Milly were greatly attached to her.

"We won't get in your way! So, um, will you take us as far as possible? Say something, Milly!"

"Huh? Sorry!"

Milly was staring at the bag of food Rebecca was holding.

"Milly..."

Jacob couldn't believe that Milly wasn't listening to their argument.

"I can't help it!!" Milly tried to defend herself. "I haven't had any food in, like, *forever*!"

Milly had the appetite of two people. And that was why she wanted to become a baker. Her greatest foe was an empty stomach.

"Please, have some. Oh, I also have apples. Would you like some?"

"Yep, uh-huh!!"

Rebecca removed an apple from the paper bag and Milly took it with a joyful cry. Apples were her favorite food.

"Aw, man!"

Even if Lud told them to go home, Jacob wouldn't agree. And there was no way to send them home anyway.

"Do not worry. They will not be a problem. Actually, this is convenient."

Rebecca spoke to Lud, who was puzzled.

"Convenient?"

Lud looked baffled at the red-haired girl who said the strangest things.

A few hours later, the train carrying Lud and the others arrived at Promena Station, the entrance to Berun.

"We have to deliver these items before day's end!"

"What is going on here? Explain yourselves!"

“Bring someone in charge!”

Berun was the center of Wiltia’s economy and flow of goods. Suddenly, the city had been sealed, and the station was congested with people unable to proceed to their destinations.

“This looks bad...”

Jacob was overwhelmed by the throng of people.

Promena wasn’t a very large station. The people being detained didn’t fit inside the station building and spilled into a black crowd around it.

“There’s going to be an inspection! Everyone off the train!”

Schutzstaffel soldiers boarded the train.

“Well, here we go. Just do as we discussed.”

“You can count on us.”

The Schutzstaffel soldiers started in the first car and were proceeding in order, brooking no argument as they ejected passengers. Eventually, they appeared at the car where Lud’s group was sitting.

“Hey, you— Huh?”

“Yes?”

Hilde answered in a displeased voice and faced the soldiers.

“I am First Lieutenant Hildegard von Hessen of the Schutzstaffel! What is the meaning of this?!”

“Oh... my apologies!”

Upon seeing the number of stars in Hilde’s insignia, the soldiers’ backs immediately went ramrod straight.

In a military organization, rank is absolute. The soldiers were obligated to obey even a young girl like Hilde if her rank was even one star higher than their own.

“We are performing an inspection of the train. The royal capital is, um, currently under martial law. Travel in and out of the city is being regulated.”

The soldier was fumbling for words. The soldiers were lance corporals. Hilde was a first lieutenant and an officer. Additionally, the title “von” meant she was a noble. In the Schutzstaffel, where there was a strong sense of elitism, this signified greater authority.

“I see. And? Are *we* not to proceed either?”

“No, there is no problem. Excuse—”

The soldiers were about to leave but their reply broke off when they saw Lud.

“This man was scarred in the recent war.”

At the moment, Lud looked like the masked Corporal.

“I have permission. Is there a problem?”

“Um...”

The soldier’s faces showed uncertainty.

“If you doubt me, inquire with headquarters. However, this mask was approved by the lord lieutenant general himself.”

“Do you mean Lieutenant General Genitz?!”

For these soldiers, it was another surprise to hear a name so lofty as to be from above the clouds.

“I’ve heard that the royal capital is chaotic at the moment. Headquarters will be vexed if you bother them with such a routine inquiry. I hope you aren’t *reprimanded*.”

Hilde made a severe face.

She’s good at acting. Was she always like this?

Hilde had changed, but just a few months ago she had chased Lud in a Hunter Unit. She seemed to have a sadistic streak.

“W-What should we do?”

“W-Well, it should be all right, but...”

The soldiers were quietly discussing the matter.

They were obligated to follow the law and military regulations. However, this

obligation was relaxed when there was no conceivable benefit or liability to obeying it.

“Understood. We don’t expect a problem.”

It seemed that the desire for peace at any price trumped their sense of responsibility... but there was a problem that even *that* didn’t solve.

“Hey, kids! Who are you? Off the train with you!”

The soldiers noticed Jacob and Milly in the next seat and shouted at them.

“Wait. They’re with me.”

“What?!”

Hilde spoke up immediately, but the soldiers looked dubious.

“Why are you in the company of these children?”

“That is... a secret part of my mission.”

Hilde offered a plausible excuse, but it backfired.

Uh-oh...

Uneasiness awakened inside Lud.

A masked corporal was one thing, but the soldiers were responsible for preventing suspicious individuals from entering the royal capital. And children were no exception. If Hilde insisted that she was on a mission but wouldn’t reveal the details, they would have to contact headquarters. They couldn’t brush this off.

If they contact headquarters, we’ll be found out. What should we do?!

Alarm showed in Hilde’s eyes. The soldiers, who had shrunk before a superior officer, were growing increasingly suspicious.

Can we force our way through? But even if we get past, there must be more soldiers in the station building.

Just as Lud was wondering how to proceed, Rebecca spoke.

“You louts!”

Huh?

The red-haired girl, who was wearing a military cap and had remained silent until now, stood and threatened the soldiers in sharp tones.

“Do you know who this boy is?”

Her tone was confident, with a dignity that made even Lud straighten his back, and it hardly suited her girlish appearance. In fact, she sounded like Sophia, Lud’s former senior officer. She reminded him of a high-ranking soldier, not a common soldier or lieutenant, like Hilde or Lud.

“Wh-Who is he?”

The soldiers had been growing suspicious, but Rebecca’s dignity was overpowering them.

“Joseph Shylock. Have you at least heard the name? You know the chairman of Billions Trading? Well, this boy is his grandson.”

Billions Trading was the largest military industrial conglomerate in Wiltia. It was said that its assets and power equaled those of a nation.

“What? Is th-that true?!”

The soldiers were shocked.

“Can’t you tell by looking at him? Those knowing eyes and that intelligent expression... Anyone could tell he’s an important person. How strongly he resembles his father!!”

“R-Really?!”

Rebecca’s heated diatribe again overwhelmed the soldiers, but in a different way this time.

It was true that Jacob’s grandfather was Shylock, chairman of Billions Trading. And while Lud and the others didn’t know it, Shylock’s son and Jacob’s father was Rebecca’s former master, Blitzdonner.

“B-But I thought Billions Trading worked for the regular military!”

One of the soldiers blurted this out in confusion.

Billions Trading did indeed possess strong ties to the regular military. It was also fair to say that, ever since a recent incident, it was on poor terms with the

Schutzstaffel.

“Ha ha ha! What little *you* know!”

“Huh?”

However, instead of panicking, Rebecca smiled fearlessly.

“Precisely. Do you know what people call Chairman Shylock?”

“Um... Greedy Shylock?”

Jacob’s grandfather Shylock had a bad reputation. Because he was an entrepreneur in the munitions industry, he was considered a merchant of death. And given his bare-knuckled management tactics, there were rumors that he would pull the gold teeth from the dead and sell them. However, his reputation was mostly due to misunderstanding and prejudice. The truth was very different. But what mattered now wasn’t the truth. It was only important that the soldiers confronting them believe the rumors.

“The times now favor the Schutzstaffel over the regular military. A major player like Shylock would have an acute sense for that. Thus, to get in good with the lieutenant general, he...”

Rebecca grinned once more and looked at Jacob.

“No way... He’s a *hostage*?!”

“Yes. Shylock is offering his own grandson. What could possibly show greater allegiance?”

The soldiers swallowed audibly.

“I see. And you’re his escort.”

“Don’t tell anyone. Even HQ doesn’t know. This is a closely guarded secret. If you disturb our schedule...”

If that were to happen, the blame would fall on these soldiers. Once again, the soldiers panicked as their desire not to rock the boat overpowered their sense of duty.

“Understood! G-Good work on your mission!”

“I’m glad you understand.”

After saying this, Rebecca gave them a fake smile.

What a bluff!

Lud's sweat was almost trickling from beneath his mask, but he was impressed at Rebecca's quick thinking and fast talking.

Sven was a fast-talker too. They really are alike.

Lud didn't know that the humanoid Hunter Units had officially been developed for intelligence missions. Therefore, methods for dealing with all manner of people and situations were integrated into their basic programming.

"And, um, who is this girl next to the chairman's grandson?"

"Huh?"

The soldiers shifted their attention to Milly, who was sitting next to Jacob.

Milly was struggling to find an explanation, but before she could say anything, Rebecca answered.

"Oh, she is his attendant, his housemaid, his servant."

"Hmm, I see."

The soldiers swallowed that one right away, which meant Lud and company had successfully cleared the inspection.

"Do I really look like a servant?!"

Milly mumbled this as she looked at her face in the window of the train, which had resumed moving.

"People also said that about me when I attended a party with Sophia..."

Milly had once attended a party with many nobles, and on that occasion, one person after another had asked if she was a servant.

"I admit I was brought up poorly, but still!"

"There, there..."

Lud comforted Milly, who looked as if she simply couldn't understand.

"Anyway, we made it through the inspection. Phew... I'm exhausted!"

Hilde lowered her head as if mentally fatigued from putting on an unfamiliar act. And then...

“I am sorry, Jacob. The situation demanded it, but I know we said unkind things about your grandfather. I do not know how to apologize.”

“No, no... Don’t worry. I understand. Um, do you have to get so close?”

While apologizing for insulting Jacob’s grandfather, Rebecca had moved her face so close to Jacob’s that their noses almost touched.

“I will accept any manner of punishment for my rudeness. Please, punish me as you desire.”

“No, really, I don’t care!”

Rebecca presented problems, but she was definitely an attractive girl. Jacob was usually a smooth talker, but now he was shy with Rebecca standing so close.

“No, I insist! I would even prefer a punishment that is somewhat *kinky*.”

“Sorry! I’m still a kid, so I don’t know about that stuff!”

Unable to stand any more, Jacob blushed beet red and shouted.

“He must not be the type for aggressive advances.”

Milly watched this scene with amazement.

“Hmm... She resembles Sven in *that* way, too.”

Lud was recalling the daily chatter and behavior of the silver-haired girl they had come to find. Sven was usually calm and logical, but when it came to Lud, she lost control. Apparently, Jacob had the same effect on Rebecca.

“Well, it seems we’ll be able to enter the royal capital, but it’ll be awhile before I can take this off.”

Lud beat against the metal mask. He felt disgusted by the mask, as if it were cursed—partially because of how stifling it was, but also because of the man who had once worn it.

“No, it is all right. You can take it off now.”

Rebecca said this after apologizing to Jacob and regaining her calm.

“Huh? But there are still places where the Schutzstaffel awaits, so...”

Lud assumed he would have to keep the mask on until they reached the city.

“No. The train’s next stop is Berun Central Station. The inspection there will be far stricter than the one at Promena.”

A disguise, bluffing, and fast talk wouldn’t be enough to see them through.

“Once we are inside the royal capital, success is at hand. But we can’t stay on the train to the last stop, or the game is over. We must disembark along the way.”

“What do you mean disembark? If there are no more stops...”

As Lud said this, he imagined the worst.

“Surely you don’t mean...”

“The class-A river Barpato lies ahead.”

The river was wide, neither too deep nor too shallow, and the distance from the bridge to the surface of the water wasn’t far.

“Just a second! Hold on! Wait!”

“I will take care of Jacob and the girl, so you take care of the rest.”

As they talked, the train was approaching Barpato River. They had less than a minute before reaching it.

“Huh? What? Lud, what’s all the excitement?”

Jacob and the others had no idea what was about to happen. Which was not surprising.

“Well, let’s go.”

Rebecca opened the window, clasping Jacob and Milly in her arms.

“Bear with me for a little while. And try not to swallow any water.”

“Huh? What?!”

“Uwaaaaah!”

As soon as she spoke, Rebecca jumped from the high-speed train and plunged into the river.

Even though they weren't that high, it was still equivalent to the third floor of a building.

"Oh, man! What a reckless girl!"

Lud pried his mask off and tossed it aside, and then lifted Hilde.

"W-What?! Langart, what's going on?"

"I'll explain later! Hold on tight!"

Lud jumped from the moving train with Hilde and they fell into the river. The sound of the moving train hummed throughout the empty car for a time.

"....."

A man appeared from the next car and looked around. All the other passengers had been removed during the previous inspection, and since Lud and his companions had also found a way off, there was no one in the car. All that remained were the military caps Rebecca and Hilde had worn, the apples and bread that Jacob and Milly left behind, and the mask of the Corporal that Lud had removed.

"Ha ha ha..."

The man picked up the mask and laughed.

Meanwhile, at Promena Station, through which Lud and the others had just passed...

The Schutzstaffel soldiers, who had finished their inspection of the train, were taking breaks in turns.

"How long is the city gonna be on lockdown?"

"I don't know. We'll never understand what the lord lieutenant general is up to."

Inside the break room, soldiers poured coffee from a pot on a thermal heater that had been sitting for so long it had a harsh, sour taste.

“Soldiers like us just obey orders and we don’t ask questions.”

“Is it all right not to report those people who were escorting the grandson of the chairman of Billions Trading?”

“Who cares? It’ll only cause trouble if we complain about the affairs of our betters... Yuck! This coffee is wretched! Gimme some more milk.”

“Don’t use too much. Here.”

The coffee was only a bit more palatable after pouring in low-quality synthetic milk.

“Anyway, today was a weird day. Personnel from *two* secret missions on the same train!”

“Yeah. And one was an investigator from Apuvea. That gives me *chills*!”

Chapter 2: Message from a Witch

The royal capital of Berun was broadly divided into three areas. The Central Ward held the royal palace at its center. The Middle Ward contained the head offices of large companies and the mansions of the nobility. And the Outer Ward was where the apartment houses of the common folk stood in dense clusters. The city of Berun had developed in this way when it was the center of the small Luftzand Domain, which was but one region of its motherland, the current nation of Wiltia.

Proximity to the royal palace in the center signified a higher class of society, so seeing it from one's house, for a noble, was a sign of status. However, there were some who found no value in this.

"Listen up! Buy up all the stock in storage at warehouses and wholesalers! I don't care how much it costs!"

Joseph Shylock was shouting in an office building on a corner in the Outer Ward.

The Schutzstaffel had sealed the royal capital, and the city was practically a war zone. However, at Billions Trading, the war had arrived early, so the employees were running around without breaks or sleep.

"Listen! Not just food, but medicine and daily necessities too! Diapers, milk powder and sanitary products! Buy them all up!"

"Yes, Sir!!"

As one, all the employees replied to Shylock's orders.

Three days had passed since the Schutzstaffel had sealed Berun, otherwise known as Million City. It had only been three days, but it had also *already* been three days. Due to a break in the distribution chain supporting this enormous population, supplies of goods were beginning to run short.

"If other businesses interfere or try to butt in, drive them away without mercy! Thugs! It's your time to shine, so hustle!"

“Yes, Sir!!”

The rowdies in charge of Billions Trading’s strong-arm tactics also replied.

“We’ll sell the goods we gather at our own retailers at normal prices!! Times of crisis are when businessmen brandish their skills! Petty quarrels between soldiers will never disturb *our* domain!!”

From the first day of the uprising, Shylock had mobilized his company’s workforce to secure a broad variety of products. After the disruption in the flow of goods to Berun, rapacious dealers had bought up and then held back commodities.

Miscreants abounded, making a killing by taking advantage of the weaknesses of others. The result was a beastly world in which everyone stole from one another, even though there were enough supplies if distributed properly.

“If the military orders requisitions, ignore it! I’ll take responsibility!!”

Shylock believed that people were just animals underneath, and they mustn’t be allowed to remove their skin. To avoid this, he had desperately defended the flow of materials inside the royal capital by gathering all the strength of Billions Trading. In doing so, he cast aside worry for his reputation and had shown leadership.

“Chairman, you have guests.”

“Huh?”

Shylock looked displeased by the secretary’s words.

“Can’t you see what’s going on? I don’t have time for *guests*!!!”

“M-My apologies!”

Shylock had built one of the world’s foremost enterprises in a single generation. He was over 60 years old, but his lion-like ferocity made his secretary tremble.

“Send whoever it is away!!”

Many people tried to take advantage of the turmoil. In the last three days, many had come, dry-washing their hands and wearing smiles.

“But one of them makes the oddest claim.”

The secretary continued to report on the visitors.

“Which *is*?”

“Um, he says he’s your grandson.”

“He *what*?!”

Shylock’s angry voice fell silent.

“He says he has journeyed here from Organbaelz, but that’s ridiculous, isn’t it? I will order the younger employees of the company to drive him away.”

“No, show him in.”

“What?”

Thinking she had misheard, the secretary looked for confirmation of Shylock’s surprising reply.

“Hurry up and bring him to my office, you dimwit!!”

“Y-Yes, Sir!!”

In Shylock’s office at Billions Trading...

“I can’t believe we came to my grandfather’s company!”

“This is the safest place in Berun that I can think of right now.”

Rebecca calmly explained to the gawking Jacob.

Oh... She even planned this far ahead!

Lud was impressed by the foresight of this red girl who had said it was “convenient” that Jacob and Milly had secretly followed them.

Despite its involvement with the military industry, Billions Trading was a private enterprise. The Schutzstaffel could not forcefully come in and take them without significant justification. So this was indeed the safest place.

“Huh?”

Tak... tak... tak! Footsteps resounded in the corridor.

“Jacob! It’s your grandpa! What’s the matter?! Have you been worried about me? I’m overjoyed!”

The next moment, the old man Shylock threw open the door, beamed and hugged Jacob.

“Ha ha ha ha! Whoa... Grandpa! Have you been well?”

Jacob replied hesitantly to this overpowering welcome.

The public knew Shylock as a cold-blooded and ruthless merchant, but his affection for his grandson knew no bounds. If Lud’s group wanted help from Shylock, then bringing Jacob was essential.

“Huh? Oh... The baker came, too?”

“Yes. It has been a while.”

Lud bowed to Shylock.

“What an unusual gathering this is.”

Shylock narrowed his eyes.

“Um...”

As she fell under his gaze, Hilde lowered her head uncomfortably. Only a few months ago, Hilde had kidnapped Jacob, Shylock’s beloved grandson. And Hilde had taunted Shylock and seriously attacked him.

“Well, let’s put that aside for now.”

Shylock, however, wasn’t so small-minded to seek revenge against her now. His grandson Jacob was here. And so was Lud, who Shylock knew was a respectable man. Above all, the girl Rebecca was with them, and she had saved them at the risk of her life during the kidnapping incident. Hilde’s presence suggested to Shylock that they had powerful reasons for coming.

“Tell me why you are here. Given the current state of the capital, I doubt it’s just for pleasure.”

Lud and the others gave Shylock a rough explanation of what had happened over the last few days. They explained the change in Hilde, the Wolf Man Heidrig, Genitz’s secret machinations, and how Sven had been taken.

“Oh... *that* girl, eh? I would have thought she was the least susceptible, but you never know what will happen in this world.”

After listening, Shylock put his hand to his mouth in deep thought.

“So what are you going to do, baker?”

“I want to take Sven home with me.”

“I know. But how?”

Shylock rose from the sofa, and stood by his office window. He gazed outside. Even though it was midday, few people were walking along the main street. Even in the Outer Ward, this was a very unusual sight in Berun, which many considered the center of the world. The curfew set by the Schutzstaffel kept people off the streets.

“Your opponent is Genitz. You might know about him from the recent war. He isn’t someone a baker can defeat.”

“That’s why I’m thinking about going to the regular military’s command headquarters.”

The official reason Genitz gave for sealing the royal capital was to protect the royal palace and arrest surreptitious anti-Wiltian militants. However, such armed groups were a fiction and had never existed. If Marshal Elvin received permission from the monarch for the regular military to act, the coup would immediately collapse.

“You make it sound *easy*, baker.”

“Hm?”

Shylock thought Lud’s plan was poorly planned and naive.

“Genitz already has the royal palace in his control. Military headquarters’ hands are tied. Even the marshal can’t make a move.”

“What?”

Lud was shocked that the Schutzstaffel, which was supposed to *protect* the royal palace, had instead *conquered* it.

“It wasn’t even a decent fight. I guess the palace wasn’t fortified for battle. In

any case, it only fell this easily because the Council of Nobles was at work behind the scenes.”

“Council of Nobles?”

“It’s an antiquated committee of old fogeys. They’re big-shot nobles excluded by the most recent government.”

As an immigrant who had worked his way up, Shylock was anything but a noble from a distinguished family, so he spoke of the council with venom.

“Their purpose is to raise a monarch and return the government to the way it was a hundred years ago—a parliamentary system run by nobles.”

“And Genitz is going along with that?”

Lud struggled to understand. He couldn’t believe that such a plan would be enough for Genitz.

“At this rate, it is feared that Marshal Elvin faces execution. If that happens, the regular military in other lands won’t remain quiet.”

Marshal Elvin’s charismatic sway over the regular military was tremendous. However irreverent a declaration, his sway far surpassed that of the monarch, who rarely appeared in public.

“In no time, forces will march in to recapture Berun, and if that happens... No...”

There was no way Genitz hadn’t considered that beforehand.

“Is this also part of his plan? What’s his goal?”

Lud couldn’t guess what Genitz was thinking. He knew, however, that Genitz was a fearsome individual. He was taking advantage of the Council of Nobles and the confusion in the royal capital to achieve some aim, and his plans were steadily advancing.

“Sven is the key. In other words, if he loses Sven, then it will all fall apart. That is the situation.”

Rebecca said this as if reading Lud’s thoughts.

“Hey, red girl... Um, Rebecca? May I ask a question?”

“Yes, Mr. Shylock?”

Rebecca replied politely. Shylock was her master’s father.

“You’re holding something back. Why is that silver-haired girl so important?”

She had become the person who would decide the future, not only of Wiltia, but of the world. And that was hard to believe. Even if it were a lie, some people would believe it.

“Grandpa! Are you saying she’s *lying* to us?”

Jacob raised his voice, but Shylock quietly stopped him. His face was no longer that of the besotted grandfather, but had transformed into a slick merchant who had survived many scrapes.

“Don’t misunderstand. I don’t think you’re lying. But something doesn’t add up.”

“But...”

Rebecca was silent a moment, and as if reaching a decision, she lowered her head deeply.

“Joseph Shylock, you are a respectable man and my master’s father.”

“Yes, you said as much before, but—”

“So I have a duty to prioritize both your safety and Jacob’s. Please, understand that.”

Rebecca knew about Sven’s secret. It wasn’t that she was a humanoid Hunter Unit. That was the official line, but the true reason was what the rare genius scientist Daian had implanted in her...

Genitz knew her true power, and knew she was capable of overturning not just Wiltia but the whole continent of Europea, so he had launched a plan that would seem reckless to normal people. However, knowledge of that secret could be perilous.

“I gather knowing more is dangerous?”

Rebecca didn’t answer Shylock. She could not simply affirm his question.

“Well, you did rescue me that time. So I know you’re no normal girl. I

understand you must have an important reason for this.”

Shylock had witnessed Rebecca fighting Schutzstaffel soldiers. She had remained calm under a hail of bullets, and overwhelmed professional soldiers with her bare hands. That was enough to know that her abilities were well beyond the scale of ordinary people. That same girl was now making it clear that she could say no more.

“That’s enough, Shylock.”

Lud interrupted, as if to help Rebecca, who looked deeply uncomfortable.

“What’s important is rescuing Sven. As for everything else, let others do as they please.”

Genitz’s ambition was something they should fear. However, Lud’s top priority was Sven.

“Hmm... Well, if that’s your decision, then I have nothing more to say.”

Shylock sensed a different thought deep in Lud’s eyes, but he didn’t mention it.

“In that case, there’s no choice but to sneak into the royal palace.”

“Yes. Is there a good way in?”

The royal palace was heavily guarded, so there was no chance of entering through the front gate. The guards would shoot them outright.

“People living in the royal palace, unlike us commoners, must always maintain their dignity.”

As he spoke, Shylock opened his desk drawer and removed a ledger. It held the contact information for his many customers.

“Even in an emergency, the nobility insists on eating fine cuisine. Thus, channels exist for that sort of thing.”

Politicians engage in politics, soldiers serve the military, and merchants traffic in goods.

“Are we going to sneak in during a supply delivery?”

“No. They’re probably watching deliveries, so that would be difficult.”

The delivery of goods was to the royal palace what eating was to a human being. When someone cuts a piece of food, stabs it with a fork, and raises it to take a bite, the eyes naturally focus on the food. Discovering a bug or two in the food would cause quite a disturbance.

“Lofty people enjoy paying attention to pretty things, but they turn a blind eye on anything dirty. But whatever eats must also defecate.”

Shylock pointed at the contact information for one of the customers in his ledger. It read, “Waste Collection Inc.”

“Aha! Waste removal from the royal palace...”

“Those watching who enters the palace are less attentive to who leaves, but the exits also lead inside.”

The royal palace had many residents, including the monarch and attendants. They were sure to generate an enormous amount of garbage. Even though the royal capital was under martial law, waste removal could not be postponed more than a few days.

“My business group includes a service that handles such matters. I will ask about the possibility of sneaking you in.”

“Thank you.”

Lud thanked Shylock and tacked on a favor just in passing...

“Um, about Jacob and the others...”

“Don’t worry. You don’t have to ask. I’ll take care of them.”

They couldn’t have Jacob and Milly accompany them any longer. For now, they would be safe with Shylock.

“And, um...”

Lud glanced at Hilde.

“Um, I...”

Hilde looked uneasy. She used to live in the royal capital, but since Genitz had abandoned her, she had no place to go.

“Well, I can’t just turn her away, so I see your point.”

During the kidnapping incident, Hilde had punched and kicked Shylock a few times, but he agreed, albeit hesitantly, to shelter her.

“Thank you!”

Many considered Shylock a bloodless merchant, but deep in his heart, he was upright and had a businessman’s pride. Lud lowered his head once again in recognition of Shylock’s good will.

That night, through Shylock’s arrangements, Lud and Rebecca accompanied a team of waste collection workers and snuck into the royal palace. They had left Jacob and the others with Shylock.

“Getting inside was easier than I thought.”

“It was a dirty route, though!”

They entered through the gate for garbage removal, climbed a dust shoot, crept around attics and crawl spaces, and eventually found themselves inside the royal palace.

“For nearly a century, no one has attacked the heart of the royal palace. So it’s understandable their defenses are lax.”

However, not just anyone could sneak in so easily. Because of numerous extensions throughout its history, the Wiltian royal palace had many openings. Those openings weren’t on any palace maps, but they stretched everywhere like a net, allowing Lud and Rebecca to make use of them.

“You sure are familiar with the routes in and out.”

Rebecca had precise knowledge of the holes in that net.

“I memorized them... for a time of need.”

Rebecca’s response was vague.

She had been monitoring Lud and Sven, but her primary function was attending Daian. However, she was no mere secretary or gofer. As a well-known prodigy, Daian had many enemies in many places. And some enemies attempted to sabotage the development bureau on one pretext or another. To quietly keep those people at bay, it was Rebecca’s job to regularly gather

intelligence on the vulnerabilities of the royals, nobles and politicians. Sneaking into the royal palace was a daily affair for her. And she had often used the holes through which she and Lud were currently passing.

“Where are we going?”

There was no doubt that Sven was somewhere in the royal palace. But, the palace was sprawling and spacious. They had no idea of Sven’s exact location.

“Hmm... Rebecca, where do you think Genitz could be?”

“Well, I *do* have an idea...”

Rebecca nodded in response to Lud’s question.

They didn’t know where Sven was confined. But, as they discussed in the conversation with Shylock, Sven was necessary for Genitz’s plan. Which meant that, given human reasoning, it would be sensible for Genitz to keep Sven with him.

“If Genitz is here, he must be in the north wing, which houses the Schutzstaffel headquarters. That is the location of his office and bedroom.”

“That must be it then!”

“But...”

They had decided on a destination. However, Rebecca asked a question like an alarm being raised.

“What if she is not there?”

“Then I’ll ask Genitz, even if I have to rough him up!”

Rebecca responded to Lud’s threat with another question, quietly and without mockery.

“Can you do that?”

“Well...”

During their last encounter, Lud had lost his calm, but his attack hadn’t grazed Genitz. Instead, Genitz had forced him to the ground as easily as turning a faucet.

“Still... I have to do this.”

“Understood. Then follow me.”

Without further questions, Rebecca guided Lud to the north wing.

The north wing of the Wiltian royal palace served as command center for the Schutzstaffel and housed its officers and commanders. Genitz had a mansion in an urban area, but he currently slept at the palace so he could act quickly in case of emergency. The master of the room, however, wasn’t in. A silver-haired girl sat by the window gazing in boredom at the moonlit night.

“Master,” the girl mumbled, as if seeking someone dear to her who wasn’t there.

“.....?”

The girl suddenly sensed something.

She wasn’t human. Her body was a machine that was similar to a human being’s. But her inhuman auditory capabilities sensed something.

Bang... *bang* ... as if someone was kicking something.

“.....”

As the girl prepared herself, the sounds grew louder. She also heard a voice saying, “Umph!” and “Argh! That’s *hard*!” Then the metal bars of a vent fell off the wall and a man’s leg stuck out.

“Umph!! Is this the right place?”

A big man with a scar on his left cheek descended from the vent.

“Y-You...”

The girl raised her voice in surprise as she saw his face.

“Hm? Oh, Sven!”

The man called her name.

“What...?”

The girl, Sven, was confused. Why did this man know her name?

“Good! You seem safe! You disappeared so suddenly, I’ve been worried!”

After saying this, the man grabbed her shoulders.

Her eyes narrowed. What was he going to do? Her body belonged to her master. Touching her without his permission equaled an offense against her master.

“Let’s go home together! Jacob, Milly and the others are waiting for you!”

Sven didn’t know what or who he was talking about. There was no other place for her but by her master’s side. Go “home” to a place other than with her master? That was a stain on her loyalty.

“Oh, I understand...”

“Sven?”

At last, the man noticed something odd about Sven’s behavior.

Instead of the affection she used to have for him, he saw a cold smile like one might wear immediately before stepping on an annoying beetle.

“Former Lieutenant Langart! Dodge!”

This shout came from a red-haired girl who appeared from inside the vent.

Lud quickly drew away from Sven. At that instant, Sven’s hand chopped through the space where his head had been.

“Sven, what are you—”

Sven didn’t answer Lud, whose eyes were wide with surprise. Coldly, without any facial expression, she tried again.

“Tch!”

But Rebecca reached her in one leap and stopped the attack.



Sven and Rebecca possessed equal power. When they collided, the force from each flowed down into their feet, so they moved neither forward nor back and the stone floor broke beneath them.

“What are you thinking, Svelgen?!”

“Who... are *you*?”

At Rebecca’s shouts, Sven glared suspiciously.

After looking into Sven’s eyes, Rebecca realized the cruel truth.

“What has he done?! Oh... So *this* is why Genitz attacked the Weapons Development Bureau!”

Rebecca now understood what had become of Sven and she ground her teeth in frustration. Unlike Sven, Rebecca always tried to remain calm and act rationally. And although that gave others the impression that she was cold and inhuman, she did have a heart. Somewhere deep inside, she possessed emotions every bit as rich as Sven’s.

“What do you mean, Rebecca?! Is Sven being *controlled*?!”

Rebecca saw that Lud must think Sven was brainwashed, hypnotized, or had been dosed with some kind of drug. But that wasn’t so. If only it *were*. This was much worse.

“Former Lieutenant Langart, the mission has failed. My basic estimation of the situation was too optimistic, so it is my fault.”

Rebecca had strong emotions indeed. And so she couldn’t tell him the truth right away. Despair that Rebecca dreaded more than death had visited Sven. And Rebecca hesitated to tell this man the truth about what had happened to her.

“Oh, we have *guests*?”

A new arrival joined them. The man who entered spoke as if unsurprised, and as if he was literally welcoming guests.

“Genitz?! You... What have you done to Sven?!”

Lud shouted at Genitz.

“Where did you sneak in from? Your clothes are filthy... You could have simply stated your names at the front gate.”

Genitz didn’t answer Lud’s question. Instead, he spoke with some amusement, as if enjoying a reunion with an old friend.

“I apologize, Master, for showing such ignoble behavior.”

Lud turned, but Sven wasn’t speaking to him. She was addressing Genitz, who was sitting in a chair and decanting wine into a glass.

“Not at all. You may continue entertaining that girl. Heh! I received a report of her defeat, but it turns out she’s alive, huh? Daian does impressive work. That’s one tough machine!”

“So that was *your* minion?!”

Rebecca responded to Genitz’s words.

He was referring to the third humanoid Hunter Unit that had launched a surprise attack on her a few days earlier in the royal capital.

“Do not speak insolently to Master, you wench!”

“Agh!”

Sven grew angrier and Rebecca was now at a disadvantage as the two opposed each other.

“Langart, would you care for a glass? I took it from the wine cellar beneath the royal palace. The vintage is young, but it’s tasty enough.”

As Genitz watched the two girls clashing out of the corner of his eye, his attitude remained calm.

“Stop joking and answer my question! What have you done to Sven?!”

Genitz just shrugged at Lud’s ferocious shout.

“Langart, how long since you left the military? It was right after the Great War ended, so... a little over two years?”

“That’s not important right now! Answer me!”

“And it’s been five years since you quit the Werewolves and left me to join

Major Rundstadt’s unit.”

“I said answer me!”

Lud again yelled at Genitz, who paid no attention to his question.

“My point is that, back then, you wouldn’t have been so careless in enemy territory.”

Genitz spoke reluctantly and at that moment the sound of approaching combat boots came from outside the door.

“There are guards outside. If they hear someone other than me shouting, they will come running.”

“Uh-oh...”

“In the past, you would have popped off a few bullets and made this quick. And what’s this? You didn’t even bring a *gun*?”

Genitz looked genuinely astounded.

Shylock had offered to supply weapons for infiltrating the palace, but Lud had refused. He hated to even aim a weapon at anyone.

“Lieutenant General! Are you all right?”

Guards marched into the room.

“Who are you?!”

After observing the situation and seeing trespassers, the guards aimed their weapons at Lud.

“In that case...”

There was only one way to get out of this. His chance of success was slim, but Lud lunged at Genitz in an attempt to take him hostage.

“No, don’t!”

Before he got to him, Sven repelled Rebecca’s hands and grabbed Lud.

“Sven! Don’t you remember me?!”

“Quiet, villain! I’ve never seen you before!”

Sven pushed Lud to the floor, making no effort to remember him.

“Really?! Sven... you...”

“What are you talking about... you... insolent... rogue...”

The girl, who appeared fragile at first glance, was twisting Lud’s thick, log-like arms so forcefully that she could have broken his joints in her effort to protect Genitz.

“But...”

Lud let out a cry, more from the anguish and sorrow of Sven not recognizing him than from the pain to his joints.

“Former Lieutenant Langart...!”

Rebecca was confused about what she should do next. It was impossible to bring back Sven. And the degree of difficulty in escaping with Lud was high. So she considered destroying the most dangerous enemy and looked at Genitz.

“Ah, a spare!”

“—?!”

As soon as their eyes met, Rebecca heard Genitz speak softly and fear ran down her spine. If she didn’t act, she would face the same fate as Sven. She too would become his tool. The idea was intolerable to her.

“Uaaaargh!!”

Rebecca slightly slowed her movements, and Lud rose with an animal roar. He lifted Sven, who was attempting to bend his joints in the opposite direction.

“What a reckless—!”

Sven weighed about the same as a human—a few dozen kilograms—so lifting that weight from such an awkward position would...

There was a disturbing *crack!* It was the sound of Lud’s shoulder dislocating from its socket. The pain was intense, but Lud paid no attention and gripped Sven with his other arm.

“What?! Let me go!”

Sven shouted. Strangely, it looked as if Lud was holding her intimately from behind.

“Rebecca! Run! At least *you* can make it!”

Lud shouted without heeding Sven’s voice or the severe pain in his shoulder.

“But—”

“Just go! Hurry!”

The situation was beyond recovery. Lud saw that Rebecca still had a small chance of survival.

“.....!!”

Rebecca understood his intention, ran to the nearest window, broke the glass, and escaped.

“An intruder has escaped! Catch her!”

The guards immediately ran off in pursuit.

“A regular soldier will never catch her. Ah, well... I can’t have *every* luxury.”

After finishing his glass of wine, Genitz spoke quietly as if he didn’t really care.

“Anyway, enough of that, Langart.”

Once more, he chided Lud, who was still holding on to Sven.

“Let me go!”

Hearing his voice, Sven tried to shake free of Lud’s arm. It was shameful for another man to hold her in front of her master.

“Well, what shall I do now? Perhaps you should stay in jail for a spell and cool your head? The Wolf Man’s room just opened up.”

Three... No, *four* days ago, that cell was occupied by the man Genitz had killed on the night of the Thanksgiving Festival.

“Genitz, what are you trying to do?”

Lud didn’t intend to resist. He just wanted to know the answer.

“I told you long ago. Have you forgotten? Oh well... It was absurd, so I

suppose it didn't even register in your mind."

Genitz answered with a bitter smile.

"I want to be *king*."

He signaled to the guards to remove Lud as if that answer was enough.

"King?"

Lud asked as the guards dragged him from the room, but Genitz said no more.

"Who was that man?!"

After watching Lud be taken away, Sven questioned her Master in a disgusted voice.

That man had called her by her name, talked about going home together, touched her body, and embarrassed her by holding her in front of her master.

"Lud Langart... Was that his name? What a *scoundrel*!"

Her anger hadn't cooled and the rezanium reactor that was her heart and mind was still pulsing rapidly.

"There, there... Don't be so angry. You can retire for today, Sven. I'll call you if I need you."

"You are kind, Master. In that case, I will excuse myself."

After Genitz had calmed her, he told her to leave the room.

"....."

After a few moments, Genitz poured more wine and was about to down his second glass. Then he suddenly felt discomfort.

"Is it just my imagination?"

He felt that something was wrong. It was a tiny thing and inconsequential. The feeling was like that of finding one misplaced letter among countless numbers on a printed page. However, he couldn't pinpoint the source of this feeling. It wasn't that important.

The unease that Genitz felt was a trifling matter. He had not addressed Lud by his first name. And Rebecca had a policy of never addressing anyone, except

those she had specially chosen, by their first name. In fact, *no one* in the room had called him Lud. And yet Sven knew his full name: Lud Langart. Compared to the enormous spinning gears of fate, that was but a pebble.

Wiltia had won the Great European War and possessed prominent international status among the nations. So, Berun, the royal capital, was the location of many embassies and consulates of countries such as the Greyten Empire, Republic of Filbarneu, Kingdom of Sparia and Kingdom of Alhadra. This excluded the August Federation, which didn't have diplomatic relations with Wiltia. Some of these nations were not from the continent of Europea but from the new western continent of Noa and the eastern continent of Aesia.

One of the nations allied with Wiltia was the eastern island of Yamato. Early in the ten-year Great War, Yamato was an enemy nation. It later became an ally of Wiltia and together they were victorious. It was now friendly toward Wiltia.

"Aw, what a plight for Wiltia! We wanted this to be as peaceful as possible, but if this continues any longer, it can't be kept hidden."

Yamamoto, who was a military attaché from Yamato, spoke in the official language of Wiltia, but with a strong accent.

"Staff members at all the embassies have been prevented from leaving and forbidden to contact their home countries. Whatever happens, they will complain when the nations assemble later."

After the Schutzstaffel had sealed the royal capital, it had effectively frozen the movement of all embassies to avoid interference by Wiltia's allies. However, enemy nations in the Great War, such as Greyten and Filbarneu, had quickly recognized the situation and sought a chance for armed intervention.

"We can hold for two or three days at most. After that, they will move either to aid the Wiltian government or to cooperate with Genitz."

Yamamoto spoke as if enjoying himself, but the man sitting on the sofa answered as if talking about someone else's business.

"Say what you like. I'm neither a politician nor a military man."

Yamamoto continued.

“Well, in the worst case, I can accept a request for political asylum for you alone. For those of us in Yamato, someone who possesses rare technology is worth a thousand pieces of gold.”

Until fifty years ago, Yamato had maintained no relationships with other nations. After a change in the nation’s political system, it had opened up. Now it was frantically pursuing a technological revolution to make up for lost time.

“Our nation especially craves technicians for Hunter Units.”

When the man looked back at him as if to say, “I can read your mind,” the smile disappeared from Yamamoto’s eyes in an instant.

“I’m no match for you.”

His smile, however, was like that of a child caught while engaged in mischief, and it returned immediately.

Wiltia had numerous allies. Many of them had received Hunter Units—Wiltia’s cutting-edge weapon and a symbol of Wiltia’s power. None however, had developed Hunter Units of their own. The best they could do was create imitations like the automatic tanks of August. Yamato was alone in having nearly reached Wiltia’s technological level with unexpected speed.

“The essential part, the rezanium reactor, is still kept secret, but we have almost completed it.”

Yamamoto kept a smile on his face, but it hid something deep and unfathomable.

Naysayers on the European continent scoffed at Yamato—a nation on a different continent and populated by a different race—as a mere monkey mimicking them. People made fun of the nation for absorbing and imitating European cultures, civilization, technology and social systems at an enormous speed. However, this was because they feared Yamato would equal the European nations in half a century.

“That in itself is impressive.”

The man put his hand to his mouth and thought for a while.

This man was no patriot. He was a Wiltian national, with military rank and a

noble title, but those had come by achieving his own aims. He had no attachment to them. However...

“I cannot leave Sophia alone.”

“What? Did you say something?”

Yamamoto asked the man, who was mumbling to himself.

“Oh, just something personal. But... Yamamoto?”

The man avoided answering and instead offered a suggestion.

“I’ll let you have one for a souvenir. And in return, may I ask a favor?”

“What is it?”

At the man’s suggestion, Yamamoto’s face showed interest. Or rather, it said, “Finally, the conversation turns to my benefit!”

“What is it I am to receive?”

He focused as if appraising something.

The man told him.

“I will give you one of the currently operational humanoid Hunter Units.”

“What?!”

Yamamoto raised his voice in surprise and then realized that was the wrong face and hurriedly covered his mouth. The humanoid Hunter Units were an important military secret known only to a few, even in the Wiltian military. Yamamoto’s surprise at the idea of receiving one revealed that he knew that secret.

“Um... what is that exactly? A *humanoid Hunter Unit*, you say?”

Yamamoto immediately tried to recover, but he was so surprised that he forgot to speak with an accent.

“Cut the act. I know you already know about them. Don’t worry. I won’t report you to the upper classes.”

“Urgh...”

Yamamoto shrugged his shoulders at the man’s carefree tone.

“Indeed, I’m no match for you. So... what do you need?”

The man now knew Yamamoto’s weak point. If Yamamoto accepted his request, the man would keep this conversation secret and give him the “souvenir.” However, a silent threat had been issued should he refuse.

“I want to borrow this embassy’s full combat strength.”

Underneath Wiltia castle was a jail for special criminals. Lud was imprisoned in one of its cells.

What in the world has happened?

The cell, made of stone and devoid of natural light, had been built before the establishment of Wiltia, back during the age of the Holy Empire. And it had once held Heidrig, who had died before Lud’s eyes a few weeks ago.

“Sven...”

Lud mumbled to himself in this dark space where he had only the faint light of a candle.

He didn’t know what had happened to Sven. However, he now understood the words Sven had spoken to him before she disappeared.

“Even if you see me somewhere, don’t think that it’s actually me!”

She had certainly been right about that. The silver-haired girl he had reencountered possessed a familiar face, voice and behavior, but she had a completely different attitude toward Lud.

Genitz has done something to her, but what? I wish I at least knew that.

“Argh!”

He pounded the metal bars in frustration. Sharp pain coursed through his fists, but even that just told him that this was reality and not a nightmare.

“You’re noisy! Shut yer pie hole!”

The roar of a guard echoed from the entrance of the jail.

“Urgh...”

Realizing that he didn’t even have the freedom to shout, Lud returned to moping.

But he kept thinking. An hour later, he continued pondering how to escape the cell and rescue Sven from Genitz. But he couldn’t come up with anything. Beyond simply escaping, he didn’t know what method Genitz had used on Sven, so there was no way to devise a counter plan.

Is this the best I can do?

After giving up soldiering, he had sworn to live as a baker. He had chosen to live a new life and strove to achieve that. However, he was furious at himself for only coming up with ways to survive on his own, but not to save someone else.

“Huh?”

At that moment, it arrived.

As a soldier, he had cultivated a sixth sense. It sensed danger when a pernicious threat to his life was nearby, and the instinct informed him before his reason could.

“Oh, you have sharp senses.”

However, his sixth sense was a little slow. It was a woman, and she hadn’t entered in the usual way. When Lud looked up, she was standing on the other side of the metal bars as if nothing had happened.



“What?”

Lud was at a loss for words.

He had once been a special ops soldier with the epithet Silver Wolf, but he hadn’t noticed someone drawing this close to him. She had done more than hide from him. She looked as if she had been standing there a long time.

“Who are you?”

His voice was shaking.

The woman standing in front of him was beautiful, with black hair and eyes and feminine charm. However, she looked cold and lifeless, like a doll.

“.....”

The woman didn’t answer Lud’s question. She didn’t even look in his eyes. No, her eyes looked at Lud, not as if she was looking at a human being, but as if peering at an insect she could smash with the tip of a finger. As if she was beholding something worthless and irrelevant.

“I came here to pay you back, even though I don’t owe you anything. Nonetheless, I’m party to various contracts. I don’t *have* to follow them, but that too can pose problems.”

Instead of saying her name, she began speaking openly.

“The woman you call Sven... She didn’t recognize you because Genitz used her emergency control code.”

To prevent a humanoid Hunter Unit from acting without restraints, Daian had established an emergency control code.

“Emergency control code... What’s that?”

Lud, who knew nothing of this, was confused.

“Tsk, tsk...”

The woman clucked her tongue in annoyance. Her face showed the irritation of someone who has to explain to a cow or pig how something works.

“Briefly, the emergency control code can rewrite Sven’s mind. For example, it

has the power to replace the person most important to her with the person who uttered the code.”

The woman summarized only the main point, saving herself the trouble of explaining the precise mechanism.

“I owe you, so I must ask you instead of that man. Do you want Sven to—”

“Who are you?!”

Before the woman could say more, the soldiers guarding the jail entrance came to investigate. There was only one entrance to the jail. There was no other way in. So the soldiers were astonished to see a woman there.

However, they were Schutzstaffel soldiers and Genitz had ordered them to prevent anyone from entering. And for Schutzstaffel soldiers, Genitz’s words were like the word of God. They were dumbfounded but raised and pointed their guns. Hammers were pulled, bullets were loaded, and safeties were released. Each muzzle pointed at the woman: one at her head, one at her chest, and one at her legs. It was a merciless configuration, so even one hit would immobilize her. But...

“Phew...”

The woman seemed unconcerned by their efforts and sighed.

“Raise your hands! Kneel facing the wall!!”

The soldiers roared commands at the woman, who was unfazed by the guns trained on her and showed no sign of obeying. And then she spoke.

“Shut up, would you?”

That was all the woman said.

The next moment, the three soldiers were blown away. But they didn’t just blow away. They literally burst like balloons pricked with needles. They lost their original forms, and pieces of blood, flesh, bone and guts scattered everywhere. It was strange, however, that the woman didn’t have a spot of blood on her.

“What the—?!”

Lud was in shock and couldn't speak.

Had she used some kind of weapon? No, he hadn't seen any movement. Besides, it was as if they had burst from inside rather than from an external attack. Lud knew of no such weapon or method for killing.

"Surely you're not..."

Yet Lud was an experienced former special ops soldier, so he wasn't totally confused. His brain sought understanding, and he came up with a conjecture.

"Royal Sage Hanussen?"

"Hmm?"

At his words, the woman named Hanussen showed interest for the first time.

"How did you know? People say I've lived over one hundred years, so my appearance must not match what you imagined."

Hanussen laughed.

"I can't think of anyone else you could be. To kill as you just did, you would have to possess skills surpassing any human ability."

Royal Sage Johannes Hanussen was a mysterious person who only a few people, including the monarch, had ever met. Many rumors surrounded her existence, including the theory that she didn't exist at all. Another was that she was the last survivor of the magicians who went extinct in old times.

Lud thought this was idle, nonsensical gossip. But that she was the Royal Sage was the only possibility he could come up with.

"Indeed, I am Hanussen. Genitz has devastated the royal palace, which is *my* territory. So, against my own will, I decided to lend you a hand."

She raised her hand as she spoke and the metal bars melted away like burning marshmallows.

"Genitz's ambition is to be king of Wiltia."

"King? That's ridiculous!"

Even if he took the royal capital with military support, the regular military and allied nations would never accept his coup. On the contrary, they would send

their armies under the rubric of assistance, and then a second European War would break out with Berun at ground zero.

“Ridiculous or not, that’s what he’s doing. Genitz has urged the monarch to step down and declare him as the new king.”

Even if merely for form’s sake, once the monarch named Genitz as king, the Council of Nobles backing Genitz would support it. He would ignore the constitution of the old Wiltian royal family, dissolve parliament, establish an authoritarian system, and clamp down on anyone who didn’t obey. That was the script he was following.

“But, he has made one mistake. He should have restrained the royal family. Instead, he let the monarch slip through his fingers.”

The royal palace contained many built-in escape paths in case of emergency. The Schutzstaffel must have known about and sealed most of them, but the Wiltian royal palace had undergone repeated renovations and extensions every hundred years or so. There were also unrecorded escape routes, and the monarch might have used those.

“So the king isn’t in Genitz’s hands? Then where is he?”

“I don’t know. Somewhere in the capital, I suppose.”

Hanussen didn’t sound concerned, but perhaps that was an indication of the king’s value to her.

So who is she doing this for?

Earlier, she mentioned that she had come to pay him back. Lud couldn’t imagine anyone who would make her uncomfortable, since she was practically a real witch.

“If you want to fight back against Genitz, I’ve given you a hint. The rest is up to you.”

“All r-right... Um... was that what you wanted to ask me?”

Before the soldiers had appeared, Hanussen said that she needed to ask him something.

“Oh... right. This is of great importance. Dear, oh dear... I must be aging. I’m

over 2,000 years old, so I'm getting forgetful."

"Oh..."

Unsure if she was serious about her age, Lud wore a dubious expression.

"Here."

Hanussen tossed a piece of paper to him. It was a page from a high-quality, if fairly common, memo pad. It contained numbers and symbols.

"What's this?"

"Recite them to Sven to release her from Genitz's control."

"What?!"

Genitz had seized control of Sven through demonic means. Surprised to learn there was such a simple way to break the curse, Lud was both hopeful and doubtful.

"I can't believe there's such an easy solution."

Lud appeared more letdown than happy.

"That's the reset code, so it will cause Sven to completely lose her memory."

"What?"

"If she loses her memory, her previous master won't matter. She'll be a blank slate."

Lud hadn't known this, but if the emergency control code had overwritten the user registration for the humanoid Hunter Unit that was Sven, then the reset code would literally wipe her clean. It would return Sven to her original state when she was assembled at the factory and had yet to even receive the name Avei.

"Sven's... memories will..."

She would forget about her time at Tockerbrot, she would forget about him, and about everything else. It would be as if none of it had happened.

"Is there any other way?"

Lud asked in desperation.

“No.”

The answer from the woman known as the sage was extremely cold-hearted.

“Let me advise you from my own experience.”

Hanussen’s face now showed signs of human grief.

“What is lost may never be reclaimed.”

Lud didn’t know if Hanussen was really over 2,000 years old as she claimed. However, he could tell that she had once lost something of great importance and realized that it would never return.

“There isn’t much time, but think carefully.”

After saying this, Hanussen raised her hand over Lud.

“What are you doing?”

“Here’s an extra perk. Imagine where you want to go, and I’ll send you there.”

“Send me? What do you mean?”

While he asked, the atmosphere around him... No, the *space* around him began to bend.

“Fix an image of the place in your head or you’ll simply evaporate like mist.”

“What?! Not so fast!! Um...!!”

As he spoke, the warping space extended, wrapping around him. Lud hurried to recall a secure place inside the royal capital.

“Good-bye, weakling. And good luck.”

After these final words, Hanussen sent Lud away from his prison cell.

“Well, I kept my promise, Sorcerer.”

After confirming that her magic had succeeded, she also disappeared. And that left only an empty prison cell.

Chapter 3: The Book with a Key

At Billions Trading, in an urban area of the royal capital, Hildegard von Hessen was in a corner of the office, doing nothing at all.

“Hey, you look bored.”

“!”

Shylock, the company’s head honcho, spoke to her.

“Oh, um...”

“It might not be to your taste, but would you like some?”

He was holding a cheap coffee mug.

“Oh, uh... thank you.”

Unable to make eye contact, show appreciation, or refuse, Hilde accepted the mug.

Uh-oh... What should I do?

Hilde had kidnapped Shylock, the man in front of her, and threatened him. She had mocked and looked down on him for being from the Doga tribe, which was often the subject of discrimination in Europea. But now Hilde was under his protection. Her excuse was that she had acted on orders from a superior officer, but that didn’t dispel her acute discomfort.

“Don’t look so concerned. At this point, I have no intention of casting accusations.”

Shylock said this as he noisily sipped coffee.

“I don’t mean to boast, but I’m used to that kind of thing.”

Shylock was over 60 years old. The first time Lud met him, the baker had sensed an inexhaustible reserve in the man, as if he were a war veteran. But Shylock had no experience in the military. However, he had become one of the world’s leading multibillionaires, despite facing prejudice and discrimination. He

was clearly a man with great experience.

“Also, Jacob told me about you.”

“Jacob... That boy?”

“Yes.”

Hilde was also uncomfortable talking to Jacob, because she had tried to kidnap him.

“He said you’ve been through a lot, so I shouldn’t be mean to you.”

Shylock said this with a wry smile.

“I spoil my grandson, so I can’t help but do as he asks.”

It wasn’t that he felt no antagonism toward Hilde, nor that he didn’t harbor resentment. But now wasn’t the time for recriminations. Telling someone as full of pride as Hilde that he forgave her would only offend her. So the old man purposely avoided saying that and treated her with a maturity that only the elderly possess.

“I heard all about it. It can be bewildering to lose something you rely on.”

“I...”

The Hilde who existed before would have returned to the Schutzstaffel, clung to Genitz like a dog, and begged for forgiveness so he would reinstate her under his command. However...

“I knew a man named Heidrig.”

If she hadn’t freed Heidrig—by following a plan devised by Genitz, under the disguise of the Corporal—he wouldn’t have died.

“Before he died, he said I wasn’t cut out to be a soldier.”

“Oh, I see.”

Strangely, Hilde had accepted that. She had no intention of returning to the military.

“Let me give you an old man’s advice.”

Shylock said this casually, as if he had seen inside her.

“When you don’t know what to do, move forward anyway. If you focus only on yourself and your opponent, then something you know remains in the dark. But if you move on, you gain a third point of reference and start to see things three-dimensionally.”

Some objects that looked rectangular from the side were actually cylinders. It wasn’t uncommon. Especially when one is lost and wavering, action can alter the situation, whether it opens a way forward or not.

“You’re still young. I mean, you’re around my grandson’s age, so you will still have more experiences. And they will give you more choices.”

“If I have more choices, will that make anything better?”

“I don’t know. But it’s better than sitting at a dead end, right?”

After saying this, Shylock laughed fearlessly.

His laugh was a means of survival for a man who had lived at the gambling tables where relaxing one’s guard for even a moment could mean losing everything. Instead of laughing in enjoyment, he laughed to force himself to rise above and survive danger.

“Do something? But what should I do?”

In response to Hilde’s quiet question, Shylock said, “It’s not about doing just *anything*. It’s about doing what you *want* to do.”

“What I *want* to do?”

When had this happened? It was Year 913 of the European Calendar... Yes... It was when I was in my early teens. I was culled as a type three soldier and started handling missions as a Werewolf.

“Hello, Langart. Thanks for your service.”

Genitz? He always welcomed me with a smile.

“Another difficult mission, huh? Sorry for giving you all these ridiculous assignments.”

Ridiculous? Now I remember... A big-shot noble was engaged in an affair with

the wife of another noble, and was told to break it off or information would be sent to a newspaper publisher to create a scandal. My job was hushing up the incident.

“Is this what you wanted? It’s quite a large jewel.”

That voice... It must be *mine*. Let’s see... The man gave his mistress a necklace that was a family heirloom. It would have served as evidence of his affair, so I snuck into her mansion and stole it.

“Did anyone see you?”

Yes, someone had.

“Yes. A household servant.”

“That’s no good.”

“Don’t worry. I killed him.”

That’s right... A young servant had spotted me. And since he saw me, I couldn’t let him go. So I killed him. I rushed in and pushed my gun against his heart to use him as a human silencer. The body served as a cushion, so the sound wouldn’t leak. It was over in a moment.

“Oh, I see. Then no problem. It’s actually better that way.”

Genitz was smiling with satisfaction.

Yes. The noble’s mistress would soon notice the necklace was gone. Then she would realize who was behind the theft and the murder of her servant. If she feared that it would be *her* turn next, she’d never fool around again.

“What are you going to do with the necklace?”

“Hmm... Maybe just keep it?”

Genitz answered my question merrily.

“We can’t let it out because it’s evidence of an affair and of the murder committed to hide it. So returning it would just cause complications.”

After saying that, Genitz tossed the necklace to me.

“Consider that an interim bonus, Langart. It’s yours.”

I caught it, but I was unsure. It could only mean trouble.

“I don’t want it. I can’t *eat* it, and if I *sell* it, someone will find out.”

The jewel had once belonged to the big-shot noble as a family treasure. A commoner family of four could sell it for cheap and still live on it for a decade, but that wasn’t necessary for me.

“Isn’t there anyone you can give it to?”

“Of course not!”

I smiled wryly as I answered.

Smile... Yes, I could still smile back then. But what a *hideous* smile! It was rotten, as if I believed I understood everything in the world and considered it all worthless, including myself.

“Fine, then. I’ll keep it for you. I’ll even cash it if you want.”

With an exasperated look on his face, Genitz placed it in a drawer.

“If you can cash it, then give me cash right *now*.”

“Have you forgotten that someone in your position can’t open a bank account?”

The military provided food, clothing and shelter for the Werewolves, but it also forbade individual assets. And if the military caught a Werewolf hiding money, it would handle the offender, no matter his excuse.

Since every mission the Werewolves performed was secret, they were privy to information that was worth untold sums. Such information would cause quite a stink if discovered by the intelligence agencies of other nations, especially Apuvea. To prevent us from getting any ideas, the military strictly controlled even our pocket money.

“I’ll arrange it so you get the money. Maybe you’ll need it someday.”

“Someday? Like *when*?”

I found Genitz’s words absurd and laughed.

“I’m a Werewolf, so I’ll keep killing until I myself bite the bullet. Isn’t that how you made me?”

Half of the trainees died before they could become Werewolves. And those who *did* become Werewolves noticed that familiar faces had gone missing from time to time. Living a life like that, the word someday was unreal.

“Langart, don’t you *dream* of anything?”

“Huh?”

Genitz asked an even more laughable question. For someone who didn’t know where he would be tomorrow, such words were pointless.

“Enough nonsense. The best I can do is survive. I live only to eat and stay alive.”

Yes, I was still desperate to live back then. Every day was like placing bets on the lowest probability of death so I could live just a little longer.

“You’re right. Above all, humans live to keep on living. Or to be more precise, not to *die*. But you can’t do that forever.”

Genitz usually wore a smile, but his face was serious that day.

“Someday, you’ll want to live to accomplish something besides just drawing breath. Humans are like that.”

At the time, I hadn’t understood what Genitz was trying to tell me. But a question had arisen in my head, so I asked it.

“Do *you* have a dream?”

“Yes, of course. Who do you think I am?!”

His serious expression was replaced by an arrogant smirk.

“My dream is to be *king*.”

I was too stunned to laugh at his reply, which he offered boldly.

“Right now, I accept dirty work from nobles, but I don’t intend to keep it up forever. No, this will serve my future advancement.”

I had known that. Back then, all the jobs Genitz took were dirty work no one else wanted. Since he handled them properly, top-ranking military officers as well as politicians, nobles and wealthy merchants came to him with all manner of requests.

However, handling scandals meant knowing and holding their weaknesses. With those weaknesses as footholds, Genitz—who had been a colonel—climbed to brigadier general in just a few years.

“Oh... Well, do as you please.”

At the time, I didn’t know much about his intentions. I simply took him for a megalomaniac or a dreamer or both. Nonetheless, somewhere inside, I suspected he might very well do what he said.

“I’ll be the same when that time comes. I’ll be your tool and carry out your orders.”

That’s why I answered the way I did.

“I can only live as someone’s tool. And it wouldn’t be so bad to be a *king’s* tool.”

After saying that, I laughed ironically.

“I see... Well then, I’ll become someone you won’t be ashamed of.”

“Lud... Lud!”

“.....!”

When he woke up, Lud Langart was at Billions Trading.

“What am I doing here?”

“That’s what *I’d* like to know!”

Jacob, who had stayed at the office, spoke with a look of amazement.

“How did you get back here? When I went outside this morning, you were lying in front of the building. I brought you inside in a jiffy!”

Lud was lying on the sofa of a greeting room at Billions Trading. With his large frame, a sofa for three people wasn’t long enough.

“Oh, I see...”

It was after dawn. The sun visible through the window was already high. Holding his head and feeling like he had a nasty hangover, Lud recalled

everything that had happened. Hanussen had unexpectedly appeared and cast a spell of spatial transference on him. And this was the place that had popped into his mind as a safe spot within the royal capital.

“W-What’s wrong? You look pale.”

Milly, who was also watching Lud, asked with concern.

“Oh... uh, never mind.”

Perhaps it was Hanussen’s queer spell that had caused him to remember old times.

It turns out Genitz was serious ...

Lud had taken Genitz’s claim that day as a joke or an expression of megalomania, but now it was about to come true.

“And Sven...”

Lud muttered to himself.

“Sven? Did you see her? Sven?!”

After hearing her name, Jacob asked Lud with an excited look on his face.

“Um, well...”

However, Lud didn’t know how to explain. Sven’s mind was very different because of an emergency control code. And the only thing that could free her was a reset code that would erase her memory.

“No, I didn’t see her. In the end, I barely managed to escape.”

Lud turned away as he told a fib.

“Oh...”

Lud’s odd behavior bothered Jacob, so he lowered his eyes sadly.

“But... I did obtain some information.”

Lud revealed what Hanussen had told him.

“Genitz wants the king to hand over his throne? But that’s unimaginable!”

“Yeah, it’s ridiculous!”

It was so far-fetched that it surprised both Jacob and Milly.

“Yes, but he really is going to make the attempt.”

Genitz’s plan was reckless. And that’s why there was a hole in it.

“He hasn’t captured the king yet.”

Genitz had many of the cards he needed, but the most important card was still at large. And if they could get that card, they had a chance to save the day.

“But how are we going to find him?”

“Um...”

Jacob’s question raised a good point. In Berun, also known as Million City, it was nearly impossible to find someone who was hiding.

“There must be a way. In any case, what happened to Rebecca?”

Rebecca was supposed to have escaped last night, but no one had seen her.

“She hasn’t come back. I thought she was with *you*.”

Hilde had been outside the room listening to their conversation and she now opened the door and spoke to Lud.

“I heard what you said. The lieutenant general wants to be a king, huh?”

“Yes. And he’s serious about it.”

It didn’t feel true until now, but remembering their past conversation had made Lud certain.

“In order to bring back Sven, we must thwart Genitz’s ambition.”

Hilde made a pained face.

Until just a few days ago, she had respected Genitz to the point of admiration. In consideration of that, Lud said, “I won’t ask you to do anything, Hilde. It’s enough that you helped me get this far.” Hilde had already been through enough hardship. Asking more would be inexcusable.

“If we find the king before the lieutenant general, we’ll have the upper hand.”

“What?”

Lud never imagined Hilde would suggest such a thing.

“Let’s ask Shylock to gather information on the king. If we don’t know what he looks like, we can’t find him.”

“Wait a second... um...”

Hilde had chosen to ally herself with Lud and oppose Genitz.

“I’m not disobeying the lieutenant general’s order. He told me to do whatever I like the last time we met.”

During the recent fracas in Organbaelz, Genitz had deceived Hilde many times and then abandoned her, saying that he didn’t need her anymore and she could do whatever she wanted.

“I’ll be honest with you, I don’t feel like killing you anymore. I, um, regret the trouble I caused.”

“Hilde?”

“But that doesn’t mean I’ve lost my dignity as a member of the Schutzstaffel!”

Much had happened to her, such as meeting Lud and Sven, watching Heidrig die, and coping with Genitz’s betrayal. But humans aren’t so resilient that they can move on immediately.

“You’re right. I understand.”

This was personal for Lud, too. He had grown up as a Werewolf and participated in the tragedy of Lapchuricka. At that time, he wasn’t immediately able to give up the life of a soldier. It was a few years until he hit upon his dream of becoming a baker.

Right now, Hilde was going through such a time.

“Anyway, I’ve decided this is the time to do what I should. Or rather, to do what I *want* to do.”

“And what is that?”

Hilde sniffed in desperation at Lud’s question.

“I’m going to punch the lieutenant general.”

“Huh?”

“He manipulated me! I can’t hold my peace even if he *was* my superior officer! Surely I’m allowed to slug him at least once!”

Hilde understood that Genitz had used her because of her immaturity and lack of skill. Nonetheless, it was understandable that she would strike back after he insulted and disgraced her by laughing at her foolishness while hiding his true self.

“I’m not strong enough to do it, so I’m going to rely on you! I’ll lend you my help! I’ll do *anything*! Please sock him a good one for me!”

She was shouting, her face flushed with anger and frustration and... something else. Something powerful.

“And I’d also feel badly if I didn’t pay my debt. I have a strong sense of duty, you know!”

After saying this, Hilde turned away in embarrassment.

She had another reason for taking action. It was a desire to rescue Sven. It was a strange thing for her to admit. There had been a time when she had wanted to kill Sven, and Sven wouldn’t have hesitated to kill her. During the recent incident, however, it was Sven who had saved Hilde when remnants of the Pelfe Liberation League captured her.

Those two are surprisingly similar... They’re both twisted and stubborn!

At least, that’s what Lud thought.

The command headquarters of the regular military was located in a corner of the royal palace of the Principality of Wiltia. It was the nation’s most important defense base, so usually it was bustling with activity. Today it was empty.

“Now you’ve done it!”

Elvin, the leader of the regular military, was sitting in the command post of the command section.

“Please, be patient while we clean up the rebels.”

Genitz was standing behind him.

Genitz's rank was lieutenant general, and Elvin was a marshal. The regular military and the Schutzstaffel were distinct organizations, but Genitz behaved graciously because of the difference in their ranks.

"Rebels? Where?"

"That is a good question. We do not know where they are. Our officers are searching as best they can, but it's a difficult task. I sorely realize my insufficiency in this matter."

Genitz spoke with exaggerated politeness toward Elvin, who was annoyed. Perhaps... No, there was no doubt that Genitz was doing so deliberately to grate on Elvin's nerves.

"I heard that staff members of the Weapons Development Bureau were connected to anti-government organizations."

On the morning when the Schutzstaffel sealed the royal capital, Elvin had been informed of that fact alone. Then Genitz had frozen all functions of the command headquarters. Including all matters under Elvin's authority. The rules of martial law for the purpose of maintaining public peace forbade contact with the outside. Furthermore, Elvin was prevented from using all means of transportation or holding any meetings. For nearly four days now, he might as well have been imprisoned in command headquarters.

"Indeed. We cannot allow this. Many of my men have fallen. It's a sad affair."

Genitz said this with a cool look that didn't match his words.

"Do you have any evidence?"

"Yes, I do."

"May I see it?"

"Due to the need for maintaining public safety, I cannot show it to you."

Of course, there wasn't any evidence. Elvin had known that when he asked, and Genitz was deliberately lying when he answered.

As usual, his behavior is so annoying...

Elvin silently expressed his annoyance.

Society had laws, and the nation had a constitution. And the military had regulations. Everything fell under the rule of law and nothing went awry... At least, that was the illusion to which people clung. And no doubt that applied to individuals.

But not between nations. The law functions properly when executive power is preserved. Simply put, protection of the law comes from rules established by a strong individual. Despite international law, an invasion could be rebranded as an “armed intervention for the maintenance of peace,” if an influential nation desired it.

Genitz had subdued the royal palace and the royal capital was in his hands. Thus, the law would bend to his will.

He knows all about the mechanisms of a constitutional nation. He avoids the cost of protecting laws and the risk of breaking them, but he has a knack for circumventing them.

The regular military, which included Elvin and Sophia, was full of career soldiers. However, Genitz was different. He was a political tactician wearing a soldier’s mask so he always outwitted his opponents and seized the initiative.

“Ah... I understand. Then there is nothing I need to say. You may go now and apprehend the rebels.”

Elvin replied coldly and picked up a pocket-sized book beside him.

He was the leader of the command headquarters of the Wiltian military, but he enjoyed reading.

“Where did you hide the king?”

Without a moment’s pause, Genitz broached the key issue.

“What are you talking about?”

Elvin didn’t alter his facial expression in the slightest. He carefully removed a bookmark stuck inside the paperback and smoothly opened the pages.

“I sent soldiers to protect the royal palace, but I didn’t find the king.”

Genitz had dispatched soldiers to the palace to force the king to abdicate his authority to him. There had been little resistance. Practically *none* because the Schutzstaffel, which was supposed to protect the royal palace, had bared its fangs. But they hadn't found their prize, which was the monarch.

"I don't know. What would I have done with him?"

By that time, military headquarters was under Genitz's control, so it was hard to imagine that Elvin had done anything.

"The Wiltian royal palace has many unidentified escape routes."

"So I've heard."

"Were you aware of those routes?"

To know the unknown and to hide that you know can allow one to predict the opponents' movements and catch them off guard.

Elvin, who was feared as the "Master Schemer," might very well deploy such a maneuver.

"You overestimate me. The first thing you did at the royal palace was occupy headquarters... I mean, *defend* headquarters."

He didn't neglect to openly prod his opponent, but it failed to disturb the man's pleasant expression.

"For example, you might have guessed what would happen and then told the king where to escape in case of emergency."

"I'm neither a prophet nor a fortune-teller."

"No. But you *are* a brilliant strategist. A clever person has a partial view of the future."

"If I could see the future, don't you think I would have done something to *prevent* this situation?"

"No, I don't. I don't mind if you operate behind the scenes, but if the military were to mobilize on a large scale, we in the Schutzstaffel would suspect you of being the ringleader of this incident for *rebellious* purposes."

"In that case, you would be sure to kill me. Even if you were mistaken, you

could make the excuse that you had no other choice.”

“Yes. It’s regrettable to put a resplendent national hero like you in such a situation.”

“Genitz, you are truly outstanding. You’re the wisest man in the nation... No, on the *continent*. There would be little I could do to outwit you.”

“I’m greatly flattered by your *excessive* esteem.”

They spoke calmly, as if they were colleagues who just happened to meet at a café and were now chatting. However, their eyes held a piercing, murderous glint as each probed the other’s intentions. They looked as if they were fencing at close distance.

“Will you tell me where His Majesty is?”

“I can’t tell you what I don’t know.”

“Then *remember* where he is.”

“You’re a handsome but *stubborn* man.”

“If you remember now, you won’t lose anything.”

“Ah...”

Elvin’s eyes—which were smiling... or were narrowed so they *appeared* to be smiling—took on a sharp look.

“Surely you’re not implying that you would make me a sycophant of the newly assigned king, are you?”

Elvin stood up from his chair and moved closer so he was able to stare directly into Genitz’s eyes. His body was slighter than most Wiltians, who were proud of their strength and toughness. However, the frightful intensity of his gaze was powerful enough to induce the surrender of a man twice his size. It was like the glare of the tigers that lived on the continent of Aesia and were feared as divine beasts.

“Understood.”

Genitz’s smile didn’t waver.

However, Elvin’s gaze let Genitz know that there would be no more

negotiating, so he raised his arm as if to say, “This conversation is over,” and turned to leave.

“If you remember anything, don’t hesitate to tell one of my lackeys.”

He didn’t forget to issue a final reminder.

“I’ll have you confined if you don’t tell me the monarch’s whereabouts,” Genitz declared.

“Ha ha...”

Without responding, Elvin sat down again and started to read his book.

“Now excuse me.”

In a manner that suggested he had no expectation of receiving a reply, Genitz left the command post.

“.....”

For a few minutes, Elvin was alone with only the sound of turning pages.

“Well, what shall I do now?”

Genitz’s guesses had all been correct. Elvin had secretly informed the king, but not his servants, of an escape route, in preparation against a move by the Schutzstaffel, which was sure to someday rebel. Up to that point, everything had gone as planned. However, a problem occurred later.

He had told the king to flee to the Royal Weapons Development Bureau located northeast of the royal palace. It was one of the few bases of the regular military. Although there weren’t many soldiers there, there were guards under the command of Sophia, an officer in the regular military. Daian Fortuner, the rare genius scientist, was also at the bureau, and he was the one person their opponent would not want as an enemy. Elvin had assumed that even Genitz wouldn’t disturb the Royal Weapons Development Bureau.

“I wasn’t expecting the bureau to fall first. And what was that about treating me like the ringleader of a rebellion?”

Elvin had foreseen Genitz’s actions, but it was beyond his powers of prognostication that Genitz would take on such a formidable task.

“There’s something in there that he is desperate to secure, despite the great risk. Tch! Drat that scientist!”

Daian’s secretiveness had ruined Elvin’s plans.

“I can’t tell what I don’t know.” This was all too true.

Even now, Elvin had no idea where the king was. He had been able to survive his meeting with Genitz through ferocity of spirit and the pretense that he held an important card. When your cards are bad, get by with a bluff. That was part of his strategy.

“But I can’t continue that forever.”

He could bluff, but Genitz was a daunting and dangerous opponent.

“Argh... If only we weren’t both serving in our nation’s military! If he were in an enemy force, I wouldn’t hesitate to destroy him!”

Elvin covered his face and muttered for a moment while he considered his next move.

“I have no choice but to count on *that* man.”

With a reluctant expression, Elvin set his book on the table and opened a drawer. There wasn’t a weapon inside. Instead, there was a leather-bound book stashed among pens, notebooks and ink pots.

“I hope he handles this well.”

It looked like an ordinary old book. The only unusual thing about it was that it was fastened shut by a metal lock. Elvin pulled a small key from his breast pocket and inserted it into the tiny keyhole. The book opened with a slight sound: *fwap!*

Chapter 4: The Incompetent King Who Loves Potatoes

Humanoid Hunter Units didn't sleep. When they fell unconscious, it was a state of rest for self-maintenance. However, even when resting, they could switch themselves on and off. And they never dreamed.

What is this?

At this moment, Svelgen Avei was dreaming.

".....!!"

In the dark, her dozing consciousness seemed to be floating in a marsh. And she saw something far in the distance. Or she *felt* it.

".....!!"

Someone was shouting. She couldn't make out the words, but it was disturbing. As the shouting grew louder, she grew increasingly irritated. It didn't make sense. She didn't understand what the voice was saying, but it annoyed her. She tried to focus on the voice's owner. Sven felt as if she were sinking to her knees as she slowly approached the voice.

"... are... ish... er..."

As she got closer, the voice grew clearer. She still couldn't understand what it said. She didn't understand it, but she was *really* irritated. And she didn't know *why* she was so irritated. If she could describe her frustration, the perfect words would be, "You don't know anything about my suffering!!"

She didn't even know what *she* meant by that. Suffering? What suffering? What was causing her to suffer? As she wondered, she approached the owner of the voice.

Dreams aren't restricted by the concept of distance, but now she stood immediately before the speaker.

“You are... so foolish... Master!”

She focused her consciousness to better hear what the voice said. Then, as if it had been waiting for this moment, the voice shouted as if to force its message into her ears.

“The next time you harm my master—even if it’s by using me—I won’t forgive you!”

Sven’s consciousness recognized the owner of that voice—not visually but spiritually.

It was *herself*.

“Whaaah?!”

When Sven woke up, she didn’t know where she was. Slowly, her memory returned. She was inside Genitz’s office in a corner of Schutzstaffel command headquarters in the Wiltian royal palace.

“I... What was I... What was... Huh?!”

She couldn’t remember what she had been dreaming about, as if a cloud shrouded her memory. However, it must have been upsetting, because her heart—the *rezanium reactor* that served as her heart and brain—was beating strangely.

“I’m surprised. You can sleep and even dream?”

Sven wasn’t alone in the room. Genitz, whom Sven now wholeheartedly believed to be her master, was there.

“S-Sorry, Master! I failed to greet you! And I was lazy, wasting time on a nap!”

She hurried to apologize. She believed it was impermissible for a humble servant to rest beside her master while he worked.

“No, don’t worry about it. I just got back.”

Genitz raised an arm to indicate that she didn’t need to worry, and then he plopped onto the sofa.

“Did you just visit Marshal Elvin?”

“Yes.”

Sven knew Genitz’s schedule. He had visited Elvin to learn the whereabouts of the king.

Elvin was a sly old fox of a general. An unremarkable man... no, even an experienced *general* was like a child compared to Elvin. In the Schutzstaffel, with its hundreds of thousands of soldiers, only Genitz could argue with Elvin.

“Unfortunately, my visit didn’t yield much.”

He glanced at the view of the royal capital from his office window.

The purpose behind sealing the royal capital was to stop an enemy force, including the regular military, from getting in. Its more important purpose was to stop the escaped king from getting *out*. The king was undoubtedly somewhere in the city, but Genitz had no idea where.

“Do you think he might have fled to an embassy?” Sven asked.

The embassies were treated as foreign national territory. The Schutzstaffel had announced martial law, forbidden passage in and out of the city, and occupied the royal palace, but even *it* could not intrude there. To do so would constitute armed invasion of another nation and was tantamount to a declaration of war.

“No, that’s impossible.”

If the king had done that, he would have secured his personal safety, but he would also have granted that nation’s embassy justification for using military force to free Wiltia from an occupying rebel army. In that case, his gambit would be all over. Every nation would send in troops in the name of justice. If they succeeded in freeing the royal capital from the Schutzstaffel, their militaries would then stay under the pretext of defending the city. They would interfere in Wiltian politics and seize all benefits for themselves. They would squeeze the world’s largest nation dry in less than a decade.

“I’ve been watching every embassy, and I haven’t seen any activity suggesting that they have him, so it doesn’t appear he chose that option.”

“Oh... So he isn’t *that* stupid, huh?”

At this moment, Sven's priority over everything else was Genitz, her master. Compared to him, even the king was just another face in the crowd.

"That's right. He wasn't that stupid."

Genitz put a hand to his mouth and pondered.

For the past few generations, the Wiltian kings were considered incompetent, for better or worse. Two generations back, the inept king transferred most of his real power to Premier Bist. A robust, nearly totalitarian policy of increasing wealth and military might had born fruit, and Wiltia had flourished. That supposedly incompetent king, however, had made the decision that his crisis-wracked nation, would not be quick to seek aid from other nations.

So maybe he isn't all that incompetent...

Genitz's smile disappeared.

Meanwhile, at Billions Trading, Shylock had gathered information on the king and the group from Tockerbrot had analyzed it.

"He likes... potatoes?"

Jacob was surprised by the findings.

"After an exhaustive search, that's all we know. Apparently, the Wiltian monarch is an extremely inconspicuous person!"

Jacob's words were understandable. All they learned from the official records was that the king was currently 19 years old and had been on the throne for 13 years. He was male, his name was Wilhelm the Third, and his official name was Balzar Wilhelm Nightlia von Wiltia. That was the only information they found. Except that he loved potatoes.

"There are no photographs of this king," Milly said.

There were no pictures of the king in the newspaper clippings and official reports they had gathered.

"Taking His Majesty's photo is forbidden," Hilde answered.

Jacob and Milly were born in Pelfe, but Hilde had grown up in the royal

capital.

“Lud, have you ever met the king?”

Lud had participated in many military exploits in the recent war. While not as celebrated as the legendary pilot Blitzdonner, he received an equal number of medals. The king would have attended the ceremony to present the honors.

“Um... I was given a brief audience, but only through a curtain. I didn’t see his face.”

“Did he speak to you?”

“Let’s see... I think he said, ‘Well done.’”

Lud cocked his head as he tried to remember the ceremony a few years ago, but the only thing he could summon up was that one polite phrase.

“That’s all? Was he unenthusiastic or something?”

“He has no choice. After all, he is known as The Man of Three Phrases.”

“Why is that?”

Milly tilted her head quizzically at Lud’s words.

“He only says three things: ‘Understood,’ ‘Very well,’ and ‘Well done.’ The Department of Protocol and Grand Chamberlain of the royal palace are his mouthpieces at all other times. It’s not unusual for him to go a whole day without speaking.”

“Living off our taxes has made him lazy!”

This was infuriating for a girl who was only 14 and already sweating every day to earn her keep.

“It’s not exactly how it sounds. Do you know the saying ‘He reigns but doesn’t rule?’”

“No.”

Along with Wiltia, many advanced nations on the continent of Europea were constitutional monarchies. Simply put, a constitutional monarchy was a system in which a monarch was head of state, but parliament and other branches of government handled the politics and administration of the nation.

“The king is the most prestigious figure, but all he does is ratify parliament’s decisions and inaugurate cabinet ministers. He isn’t directly involved in political matters. Rather, his role is to use the royal family’s authority to reinforce the government.”

Absolute monarchy appears to move things quickly, since it has fewer useless procedures and unnecessary impediments. However, if someone lacking the requisite abilities for such authority becomes king, that person could destroy the nation in one generation.

“Since the king is the loftiest person, once he recognizes something, we are to follow his rules. So, everything he says and does must be handled with the greatest delicacy.”

If the king, who possesses immense authority, were to show his interests and preferences, then it would confer a public value upon those things. Consider, for example, a novel. Each reader decides subjectively whether a book is good or bad, enjoyable or not. However, if the king were to declare one particular book to be good, then that book becomes *officially* good. Ideas, beliefs, and principles would become universally mandated rather than left up to each person. There would be a danger of controlling matters of the heart in which people should be most free.

“The king rarely expresses his likes and dislikes. If he indicates a favorite, then it means all other things are *not* his favorite, whether he wants it that way or not.”

Wiltia was a large nation with many colonies and lands under its rule. As the king of such a nation, perhaps the only phrases he can safely say are “understood,” “very well,” and “well done.”

“That’s why this tidbit of information is valuable.”

After a thorough search, all they had found was that the king loved potatoes. Someone who rarely revealed his tastes had named his favorite food.

“This could prove useful!”

Potatoes had come to the continent of Europea from the new continent of

Noa approximately 400 years ago. Potatoes were high in starch and nutrition. Since they could grow even in poor soil, potatoes had served as a lifeline for people in times when agricultural technology was still rudimentary.

“In that case, let’s bake potato bread!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa...”

A few hours later, Lud was in the kitchen rolling up his sleeves in front of a pile of potatoes when Jacob asked a question.

“Why the sudden urge to bake bread?”

“Because I’m a *baker*.”

“I know that!”

They were in the employee cafeteria at Billions Trading.

Billions Trading was one of Wiltia’s most successful companies, so its cafeteria was equipped with as much equipment and foodstuffs as some restaurants in order to satisfy the appetites of hundreds of employees.

“Listen, Lud. I know you’re a baker, but what’s the point of baking potato bread just because the king likes potatoes?”

“Hmm...”

Lud wondered how to explain it to Jacob, who was perplexed.

“He’s right!”

Milly had joined them.

“What kind of bread is potato bread? Potatoes are mushy, so they don’t make good bread!”

“Milly, that’s not the point!”

Jacob chided the girl for her irrelevant objection.

Since potatoes will grow even in poor soil, farmers who had lost most of their wheat in taxes had long ago started to grow potatoes as a substitute on extra land.

“Ham and cheese are one thing, but potato bread won’t taste good!”

“That’s not true. It’s quite delicious,” Lud said as he lifted a nearby potato.

Casually, he was cutting out the eyes with a knife.

“Potato sprouts contain poison. That’s why potatoes were called the ‘demon plant’ in olden times.”

Next, he steamed the potatoes thoroughly while he prepared the dough. The kitchen had a dough conditioner for rapid fermentation, so Lud had already completed primary fermentation. He divided the dough into small pieces, carefully wrapped each piece around the steamed potatoes, and began secondary fermentation.

“Meanwhile, I’ll prepare the sauce.”

He thoroughly mixed eggs, olive oil and lemon juice until the mix turned a whitish color.

“This is time-consuming,” Jacob said.

He was watching as Lud continued mixing in the bowl.

“If you skimp on this part, it won’t taste right.”

Cooking—including baking bread—is physical work. It was common for pastry chefs to develop the muscles of martial artists in their effort to create sweet products of delicate beauty.

“Huh?”

Lud’s gaze happened to fall on a jar on a kitchen shelf.

“Hmm... *That’d* be interesting...”

He picked up the jar and poured a few drops into the sauce he was mixing.

“Well, secondary fermentation is almost complete.”

He cut a cross on top of the dough filled with potatoes, poured sauce on top, and inserted cheese.

“All I have to do now is bake them. Oh, I should also sprinkle on parsley.”

“That’s all? Aren’t you going to put in sausage or something?”

Milly, who regarded potato bread with suspicion, sounded disappointed.

“It looks bland. Not bad, but not yummy either.”

She continued muttering, but the smell of baking bread began tickling her nose.

“Huh?”

It was a *very* enticing smell. Fresh-baked bread has a fragrance that awakens the appetite. What’s more, that fragrance sets the stomach growling.

“Ah, it’s shaping up nicely!”

Lud had worried because the oven was electric, unlike the one at Tockerbrot. Nonetheless, the crosses on the bread were opening beautifully and releasing the aroma of cheese and sauce.

“There! All finished!”

A few minutes later, the potato bread was ready and the loaves were all lined up.

“Ulp!”

“Milly?”

“Oh!”

Milly had scoffed at first, but now that she saw the rows of bread, she couldn’t help but swallow hungrily.

“Go on, try one!”

At Lud’s prompting, Jacob and Milly snatched up some bread and—*chomp!*—jammed it in their mouths.

“Th...”

They were both momentarily speechless.

“This is delicious!!”

A moment later, they exclaimed as one.

“I had no idea it’d be so yummy! The puffy bread and soft potato are a perfect match! And the salty cheese and the sauce on top bring out the potato’s flavor... I could eat a ton!”

Even as he praised it, Jacob scarfed down the bread.

“*Munch munch chomp chomp munch munch*...”

Her eyes twinkling, Milly was downing one after another.

“M-Milly?”

Jacob stared at her ravenous eating, but she didn’t hear him.

“Mmph?!”

She had stuffed too much in her mouth and was choking.

“Here, here, here! Have some water!”

Then, as if he had expected this, Jacob handed her a cup of water.

“Mm! Mm! Mm!! Ahhh! What the heck? These are *awesome*!”

“Milly you’ve got a massive appetite!”

Lud was glad he had made the potato bread, since they appreciated it so much.

“The sauce on top is especially scrumptious!”

“Oh, that’s called *mayon* sauce. It originated in the Alhadra area. Then the people of Filbarneu spread it to other lands. It’s considered the ‘almighty sauce’ because it goes with everything.”

The sauce had been a delicacy during Filbarneu’s imperial era, so all the nobles in the royal palace had loved it. Mixing the sauce was time-consuming, so its high price was unavoidable. That’s why Jacob and Milly, both commoners of Pelfe, hadn’t known about it.

With advancements in the mechanization of food processing in many cities in Europea, the sauce would soon become less expensive to prepare and begin appearing in the homes of commoners.

“Recently, it has come to be known as mayonnaise.”

“Oh... Mayonnaise, huh?”

Jacob repeated the word, which he had never heard before.

“Anyway, what’s your plan for this bread?”

They now knew that potato bread was delicious. However, they still didn't know what it was for.

"Many days have passed since the Schutzstaffel occupied the royal palace."

The sudden invasion by the Schutzstaffel had been so shocking that the king had fled without taking a single servant.

"But the Schutzstaffel has sealed the royal capital, making it impossible to escape outside the city."

The Wiltian king was still lying low somewhere in the royal capital.

"He doesn't have anyone to rely on, so he must be hiding alone somewhere. And that means..."

One hour later, a horse-drawn carriage was plodding through the center of the royal capital. To be precise, it wasn't drawn by a horse. A *donkey* was pulling it. And on that carriage were the words "Donkey Bakery" and a hastily drawn illustration of bread.

"Lud's idea is ridiculous!"

Jacob, who was in the driver's seat and holding the reins of the bridle, spoke in annoyed amazement.

"But the king *must* be hungry, so..."

Since the king-in-hiding was probably very hungry, Lud's idea was to spread the aroma of his favorite food so he might show himself.

"Are we searching for a lost *cat*?!"

Jacob couldn't help but poke fun at his baker friend, who wasn't with them at the moment.

"Well, we don't have anything else to try, so there's no choice."

Milly spoke from inside the carriage. The two were wandering around the royal capital by donkey-drawn carriage. The city was under martial law, so not a single other person was out, even though many people would usually be passing by. To be precise, no *regular civilian* was out. However, Schutzstaffel

soldiers in navy blue uniforms stood on every street corner.

“Hey, you! What are you doing? Don’t you know about the curfew?”

One soldier saw the carriage and approached, his facial expression changing. Other soldiers stationed nearby also gathered around the carriage.

“Good work, soldiers!”

Instead of panicking, Jacob replied merrily with a welcoming smile.

“A *kid*? Aren’t you with an adult?”

Jacob’s smile had momentarily disarmed the guard, and since only children were in the carriage, the caution was fading from his face.

“Nope. It’s just us kids!”

Lud wasn’t in the carriage. Just yesterday he had escaped from the prison in the royal palace after getting caught sneaking inside. He hadn’t come with them because it was likely a warrant had been issued for his arrest.

“We brought a snack for you!”

“Snack?”

Jacob continued talking to the soldiers, as their suspicion changed to confusion.

“I’ve heard there are ne’er-do-wells in the royal capital. And you guys are working to defeat them, right?”

“Y-Yeah...”

The eyes of this innocent boy had softened the soldiers’ stern bearing.

“My family runs a bakery, so I brought some bread to fortify your strength!”

“Oh... all right.”

Jacob’s twinkling eyes buoyed the soldiers’ spirits.

“You soldiers are so *cool*! I wanna be like *you* when I grow up!”

“Uh... Ha ha ha... I give up...”

Jacob’s eyes, so full of dreams, disintegrated the soldiers’ caution.

“You’re a good actor!”

“Shh! Keep quiet!”

Jacob was playing the role of an innocent child, and he shushed Milly, who wore an expression of mixed admiration and disgust.

People need more than a sense of duty in their work. They need to receive appreciation and respect from others. Jacob was behaving according to the soldiers’ ideal of a child.

“Please, take all you want! Here!”

Smiling, Jacob offered the bread Lud had baked.

“Well, if you insist...”

“We’d feel bad if we drove you away now...”

“Yeah, I’ll have one!”

The soldiers decided to be lenient with Jacob, since he was just a silly child, and they accepted the bread.

“Oh, potato bread?”

“This’ll hit the spot!”

“For three days, we haven’t had anything but combat grub!”

Sick of canned rations, the soldiers smacked their lips at the potato bread.

“Hey, this isn’t bad!”

“It tastes pretty good!”

More soldiers gathered, and they all wore smiles as they chowed down on the delicious bread.

“Okay, there’s no need to shove. I brought plenty.”

Jacob hurried to hand the bread to the eager soldiers.

“You there! What is going on here?!”

After hearing the commotion, a senior officer approached.

“Captain Bart?!”

The soldiers tensed.

“Uh-oh...”

Jacob’s body stiffened. If the captain found out where they were from, there was a good chance they would be in danger.

“Bread? As a gift, eh? Don’t you understand what’s going on now?”

Jacob and Milly didn’t know the rank signified by the stars on the shoulders of this man named Bart, but they could see he had more stars than the other soldiers.

“Hmm... I’ll have one of those.”

However, Bart only seemed interested in the bread, and he picked one up and ate it eagerly.

“Hey... This is good!” he said admiringly.

“Kid, the royal capital is dangerous right now. You’d better head back home.”

After issuing this advice, he handed Jacob a wad of coins and wrinkly bills from his pocket.

“Huh?”

“I want some bread for my men. Will you wrap them up?”

“I don’t need money. They’re free.”

Jacob hurried to return the money, but Bart wouldn’t take it.

“That’s all right. Keep it as a tip!”

Bart smiled kindly.

“Then *I* should pay, too!”

“Take it, boy!”

Following their captain’s example, the other soldiers handed over a stream of copper coins and bills.

“Um, no... huh?!”

None of them gave very much. But many soldiers had gathered. So a

mountain of small bills piled up in no time.

"Just keep helpin' out with your family's business!"

"After this is all over, I'll buy bread at your bakery!"

"Take care!"

Then they smiled warmly and left, their mouths full of bread.

"....."

Jacob was stupefied.

A few hours later...

Jacob and Milly had wandered everywhere in search of the king.

"*That* was unexpected!"

Jacob sounded tired.

"We sure made a lot of money," Milly said as she looked at the full hemp sack.

They had searched but they hadn't found the king. Instead, they had delivered loads of bread to Schutzstaffel soldiers. The soldiers had been delighted, giving them spare change and chocolate bars and candy—and sometimes cigarettes—from their provisions as a token of gratitude.

"I thought they were the *bad* guys," Milly said softly.

From her point of view, the soldiers served the man who had taken Sven and killed Heidrig. Jacob viewed them that way, too.

"I doubt any of that matters to them."

That was all Jacob could say.

Captain Bart was in his late thirties. Jacob didn't have a father. He didn't even know if his father was alive. But if he was, Jacob thought, he would be around the same age as Bart.

"Hm?"

When the donkey's footsteps began to flag after hauling them around for hours, a man appeared from a backstreet.

“H-Hey... you!”

The man was using a ragged cloth as a cowl, making him look suspicious, so Jacob and Milly were wary.

“Are you giving out free bread? If you don’t mind, can I have some, too?”

The man stretched out his arm, causing the cloth around his head to shift slightly. The girl sitting next to Milly inside the carriage cried out.

“That’s him!”

“?!”

It was Hilde who shouted.

Lud couldn’t leave Billions Trading, but he wouldn’t let Jacob and Milly wander around a city under martial law by themselves. Lud sent Hilde, a member of the Schutzstaffel, to ensure their safety if they got in a tight spot.

“Is it His Majesty?”

“It’s really him! In person!”

Jacob was surprised that Lud’s plan had succeeded. Not believing it would work, he had compared it to finding a lost cat.

“How did you recognize my face?!”

Hilde hadn’t only come with them for their protection. She also knew what the king looked like. On most occasions, even at ceremonies, the king only appeared behind a curtain. However, it was impossible to never reveal himself to *anyone*.

Hilde was a member of the Schutzstaffel. Even if under false pretenses, she had once been directly under Genitz’s command. On several occasions, she had seen the king’s face.

“Is this a Schutzstaffel trap?! Yikes!!”

His face pale, the king hurried to get away.

“Agh! He’s running away! After him!”

Jacob quickly descended from the driver’s seat and took off in pursuit.

“Your Majesty! We don’t have anything to do with the Schutzstaffel!”

“R-Really...?”

The king turned around in relief at Jacob’s words.

“But wasn’t *she* in the Schutzstaffel?”

Milly innocently pointed at Hilde.

“I knew it!”

The king took off running again.

“Milly, you didn’t *have* to mention that!”

Jacob resumed the chase. Jacob, Milly and Hilde ran through the back streets in pursuit of the king.

“Listen to me, Your Majesty!”

“No! I don’t want to die!”

The king wouldn’t listen. Suddenly a shadow rose before them.

“Gah!”

It grabbed the king by the face.

“I do not know who you are, but if you are running from Jacob, then I must apprehend you.”

It was Rebecca, with her red hair and red eyes.

“Rebecca!”

“Greetings, Jacob.”

After escaping from the royal palace and running all over to lose her pursuers, Rebecca’s customary red dress was filthy.

“Who is he? Shall I smash in his face?”

Rebecca’s top priority was protecting her beloved master and his son. The word mercy didn’t exist when it came to anyone who threatened those two.

“It’s the king! The *king*!”

Jacob hurriedly stopped Rebecca, who was capable of crushing the monarch’s

face.

“Ughhh! Ouch!”

“The king? *This* man?”

Rebecca looked at the king without interest, while she crushed him in her hands and he screamed in pain.

“So... should I destroy him or not?”

“Ugh! My bones are breaking! They’re breaking!”

Rebecca’s only priority was the protection of her master and his son. It didn’t matter that this man was the Wiltian monarch.

“No! Be gentle with him!”

“Gentle? As in... I should take my time breaking him? To extend the pain?”

“No, forget all about breaking!”

Finally, Rebecca understood and released the king.

“Ugh...”

However, the king had already fainted in fear.

One hour later, Lud welcomed Jacob and the others as they returned with Wilhelm the Third.

“*Chomp chomp gobble gobble munch munch*...”

The king was safely inside Billions Trading. After recovering from his faint, the first thing he said was, “Feed me anything! And let me take a shower!”

“Truly, it was hell when the Schutzstaffel invaded! However, Elvin had warned me, so I alone was able to escape.”

The subterranean tunnels, long unused, were flooded with waste water. As instructed by Elvin, the king had to swim through that waste water, climb to the surface, and then seek aid from the Weapons Development Bureau. However, the Schutzstaffel’s occupation of the bureau was already well underway.

“I didn’t have anywhere else to go, so for three days I hid under a bench in

the park!”

After washing, the king listed his hardships over the past few days as he enjoyed a long-awaited meal.

“The only lucky thing was that I became so soiled early on that the Schutzstaffel guards around the city did not recognize me as the king.”

The homeless living in the park hadn’t recognized him either and they cared for him as a newcomer. They had even given him the old rag he was wearing earlier for protection from the rain.

“And... um... Your Majesty?”

Lud was stunned at how much the king was eating, but he seized this chance to speak. Normally, addressing the king without permission failed to show proper respect. Given the circumstances, however, Lud ignored that rule.

“Genitz is trying to take away your throne.”

As best she could, Hilde explained Genitz’s ambitions and the events of the past few days.

“I see... Well, that explains it. I was worried that he had instigated a full-blown revolution. I’m surprised he chose a method with comparatively less bloodshed.”

The king appeared to have calmed down as he answered with a teacup raised to his mouth.

“But... I guess it can’t be helped.”

“What?!”

Hilde raised her voice in surprise at the king’s reply after he had learned all the details.

“Um, don’t you get it? He’s trying to steal the Wiltian throne!!”

The name of the ruling family was at risk after reigning for over 400 years, from the time of the Luftzand Domain, before Wiltia was established. Yet the king seemed surprisingly unworried.

“Aren’t you the king? Where’s your *backbone*?!”

Milly couldn’t help growing angry.

“Um...”

Normally, the king would have shouted, “How dare you!” But he refrained. Instead, he accepted this criticism as if he knew it was true.

“Let’s see... What is your name?”

“Milly.”

“All right, Milly... Do you really want me to be the king that badly?”

“Huh?”

At this question, asked directly by the king, Milly was at a loss for words. She had no connection with the young man in front of her. To be honest, she had never cared one whit about the king until yesterday.

“Wiltia is the largest nation in the world, and yet it does not need a king. The massive national system is already established, so it doesn’t matter who becomes king. Even if *you* became the king, it would change little.”

Wiltia’s advanced technology, hard work and can-do national character had given it the strength to win the Great War. More importantly, however, were innovations in the political system. Systemic reforms introduced by the deft Premier Bist, now deceased, had resulted in political mechanisms supported by distinguished bureaucrats.

Those measures had also eliminated houses that, like the Hessen family to which Hilde belonged, were unable to keep pace with modernization. And that excluded old powers such as the Council of Nobles. Meanwhile, it had raised new powers such as the Rundstadt family to which Sophia belonged, heroes from the common class such as Marshal Elvin, and companies like Shylock’s Billions Trading.

“I’ll be honest with you. It isn’t necessary to try so hard to keep a king. However, the king *does* have a role as the representative of national character. That is why monarchs exist, and that is the *only* reason. For the people, as long as royal authority is left intact, the king doesn’t have to be me or even someone from the Wiltian royal family, does it?”

“No, but...”

“Sorry. This may be a bit difficult for a child.”

The king apologized to Milly, who was confused.

“At least I am better off than a monarch who cannot accept his incompetence.”

The king wore a self-deprecating smile.

“With all due respect, are you talking about your father?”

“Yes... Wilhelm the Troublesome Incompetent.”

Troublesome Incompetent. That had been the epithet for Wilhelm the Second, the father of the current king, Wilhelm the Third. The king before last, Wilhelm the First, had been dubbed “the Harmless Incompetent.” And the current king had received the disrespectful moniker of “the Incompetent Returned.”

“I never met him, but I have heard that Premier Bist was a capable man. Wiltia is unified because of him. My grandfather knew that, so he agreed with everything Bist recommended. And everything went well.”

Politics, economics, industry, commerce, agriculture and the military... Bist reformed all systems, effecting a veritable transformation of the nation. In ten years, Wiltia came to stand alongside powerful nations. And in another ten years, it had surpassed them.

“I don’t care what the citizenry and nobility think of my grandfather, *I* respect him. He contributed to the nation through a policy of *inaction*. He refrained from interfering by spouting useless words, and he accepted his role as figurehead for Bist’s reform. However...”

The self-deprecating smile returned to the king’s face.

“...my father didn’t like that and was desperate to prove that he actually wasn’t incompetent.”

Nonetheless, as long as Bist lived, this young king’s father could do nothing in the face of someone whose authority and power surpassed his own. After Bist’s death, he suddenly launched a conservative restoration of the nation. He had

less knowledge and ability than the bureaucrats, but he shunned them and appointed people with connections to him—in other words, *flatterers*. The result was widespread corruption in the government.

He had sown confusion in the nation and created problems by needlessly interfering with every policy. In the field of diplomacy, it was even worse. His policies discriminated against ethnicities like the Doga and other continents such as Aesia, where Yamato was located.

“It was awful. He was indeed the Troublesome Incompetent. If he hadn’t died before the Great War, Wiltia might have lost.”

The king had a distant look as he spoke about his father.

At that time, dark clouds were gathering in world affairs and the Great War threatened to erupt at any time. If the government didn’t stabilize its political system before the outbreak of war, it would be too late. Then, Wilhelm the Second suddenly died when he was only in his thirties. To be honest, the citizens, politicians and even nobles were relieved. Later, the current king had succeeded to the throne at the young age of six.

“Since then... for 13 years... I haven’t done a thing. I learned it was best *not* to. That way, I stay alive. I don’t mind relinquishing the throne if it prevents revolutions like the ones that have occurred in Filbarneu and August, in which royal families were executed. At least it’s better than *death*.”

The precise timing of Wilhelm the Second’s death, as well as various suspicious factors surrounding it, led to whispers that it was an assassination. In modern times, instead of nations belonging to their monarchs, each monarch was a part of the nation’s political system. If a monarch became detrimental to the functioning of the nation, it wasn’t unusual for him to be removed.

The king knew that very well. That’s why he wasn’t attached to his throne. The only thing he was interested in was prolonging his life.

“But...”

Hilde, Milly and Jacob were at a loss for words at the king’s candor.

“Your Majesty, may I?” Lud asked.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Lud Langart.”

“Lud... I have heard that name somewhere... Oh, you must be the *Silver Wolf*!”

They had met through a curtain, but the king had stored the name of this hero from the Great War somewhere in his memory. The king’s face registered surprise at meeting this unexpected but legendary figure.

“I know what you’re thinking... but still I must ask you a favor. Will you lend me your help?”

“You appear dedicated to protecting Wiltia in its current form. Is that because of your attachment to the nation as one of its heroes?”

“No.”

Lud shook his head in response to the king’s question.

“I’ve never thought of myself as a hero. If it helps things go smoothly for others to call me that, then they can do as they please.”

“Indeed...”

The king seemed to find Lud’s reply interesting.

“Genitz has taken the person most important to me. I don’t know why, but she must have the power to help him attain his ambitions.”

Rather than seeing himself as a hero, Lud was laden with the grave sins from his past. Until recently, he suspected that he abandoned his life as a soldier out of guilt. Then one day a girl entered his life, attracting droves of customers to his bakery, which had none before.

After hearing the satisfied customers say his bread was delicious, he had finally understood the reason he longed for a new life. It wasn’t for atonement, or from guilt, or to escape reality. He was just incredibly happy when food he made pleased someone.

“I want to free her. I want to rescue her from Genitz, who treats her like a tool through mysterious means that twist her will and mind. That’s my only goal.”

Without her—without *Sven*—Lud wouldn't have discovered his true motive.

"I see... So you wish to destroy Genitz's plan in order to rescue a girl."

"Yes. And I don't care what Genitz wants. To echo your words, it doesn't matter to me *who* becomes king."

"Those are bold words."

Lud's words would be considered an offense against His Majesty, even if the king had said as much himself. The king, however, was listening with a pleasant expression rather than a frown.

"Please, lend me your help in rescuing her!"

Lud kneeled, placing his hands on the floor and lowering his head.

The king only cared about his life, so opposing Genitz was the opposite of what he had in mind. It was an act that could bring him close to death. Lud sought the king's help for his own selfish reasons, so kneeling on the ground was a small price to pay.

"Lud Langart, did I hear that you quit being a soldier?"

The king asked casually as he reached for the bread on the table.

"Yes. At the moment, I own a bakery in Pelfe."

"Oh!"

The king made a noise as if surprised or amused. Then he looked at the bread in his hand as if noticing it for the first time.

"Did you make this potato bread?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what potatoes mean to Wiltia?"

"Yes."

Since days of old, Wiltia had been called "the nation of knights." Knights of the Holy Empire built the Luftzand Domain from which Wiltia had sprung. The name of their order was Wiltia.

"Long ago, when Berun was a province of the Luftzand Domain, the Wiltian

knights were poor. No wheat grew in the spoiled soil. They wore rags, ate potatoes, and fought."

Compared to other nations, they had a rich culture, but the knights of Wiltia were penurious and subjected to ridicule. Nonetheless, they refused to give up, fighting bravely and building the foundations of Wiltia as it stood today.

"People call me incompetent. Curiously, however, a void inside me fills when I eat potatoes. Perhaps it is the spirit of the Wiltian knights in my marrow that causes that."

The king chuckled as he took a big bite of potato bread.

"That's why I like potatoes so much. I have tasted many potato dishes, but this bread is unique."

"Yes. I specially invented the sauce on top."

"I have tasted *mayon* sauce many times. Did you add a secret ingredient?"

When Lud had made the mayonnaise, he had added a little something special.

"Yes. A few drops of garum."

"I see! So that's why it is so salty and rich!"

Garum was a seasoning made from the organs of sardines fermented in salt water. It had a pungent smell, but it was rich in flavor and had been in use since days of old.

"Garum is tasty, but it has a noticeably fishy smell. However, when adding just a little to *mayon* sauce, the smell disappears without sacrificing any richness."

"I see... *Mayon* has a mild and bland taste, so garum clarifies and gives it an edge. Which also brings out the sweetness of the potato."

The king put the rest of his bread into his mouth and chewed cheerfully.

"Once, a friend from an eastern nation ate potatoes much the way you are now."

In the east, there was a seasoning like garum called fish sauce. But, in the home country of Lud's friend, people used soybeans instead of fish organs to make a similar seasoning. Once during a meal, his friend put butter and a few

drops of that sauce on steamed potatoes and ate them happily.

“I took a bite and it was delicious, so I thought this would be a good combination.”

“So this is how they eat in the east... My father despised people from the east, but I found them to be quite interesting. That is why I agreed to the formation of an alliance... Yes, indeed...”

The king sounded impressed.

“Fair enough, Lud Langart. I have heard your request. How can I be of assistance?”

“Your Majesty!”

Lud was surprised to see the king reverse his earlier decision.

“If you claimed to speak in the interests of the nation or in justice, I would ignore your concerns.”

Most world disturbances came decorated in pretty words. Sometimes it was peace, sometimes justice, and sometimes freedom. And most of the time words were all they ever were.

“However, after eating this bread, how could I refuse a request from the baker who made it? I may be an incompetent king, but I am still a *king*!”

Then the king laughed. It wasn’t a sarcastic laugh of self-mockery. It was a laugh filled with joy from the bottom of his heart.

Chapter 5: Resolved to Risk Another Person's Life

Reports and communications came into the Schutzstaffel command post in the Wiltian royal palace, but what Genitz most wanted had yet to arrive.

"What is going on, Delz?"

"M... My apologies, Sir!"

Lieutenant Delz was standing in front of him and shaking, his face pale.

"I remember you saying that I could count on you."

"I'm sorry, Sir!"

Genitz was waiting for a report of the monarch's capture. The Schutzstaffel had taken occupation of the royal palace three days ago, but it had yet to find the king. This was because Lud's group had already secured the king.

"Is the monarch really that important?" asked Sven at Genitz's side.

"Surely one or even two incompetent kings can't threaten your advantage."

The monarch didn't have much authority. According to Wiltia's political system, the king was the supreme authority, above the administration, parliament, judiciary, military and various ministries and agencies. However, he was little more than a rubber stamp.

The monarch himself could not give orders. Thirteen years ago, parliament, the other branches of government and the military had agreed to limit the monarch's power to avoid the political confusion caused by Wilhelm the Second. The only people the monarch could control were his servants and the Schutzstaffel. But now that the Schutzstaffel had crossed him, he was completely powerless.

"That's not true. The monarch is incompetent and has no authority, but he *does* have influence."

Even if he were just an empty ornament... In fact, precisely *because* he was, his influence could exert power.

“If the king were to appear, take shelter with the regular military, and declare the Schutzstaffel to be rebels, our advantage would evaporate.”

Currently, the Council of Nobles was backing the Schutzstaffel’s actions and authority, but it couldn’t trump the monarch. More accurately, they would not be able to defeat a counteraction by the regular military that had the monarch’s authorization.

“It would have been faster and more efficient to just kill him outright!”

To smoothly assume control over the nobles, Genitz had planned to force the king to abdicate, but that had backfired.

“Well, I *have* taken action.”

“What do you mean?”

“The monarch can’t pass through the cordon separating the royal capital and the rest of the country by himself. I have restricted waterways, land routes, air routes and even the sewers. Unless he magically transforms into a rat, it’s impossible for him to get away.”

The encircling net was completed three days ago. In the royal capital, there was no combat force that could break through, other than the Schutzstaffel.

“Furthermore, I took control of the royal capital’s radio stations, newspaper publishers and other means of communication. Even if the monarch wants to declare to the public that we’re rebels, he has no way of making himself heard.”

Someone once said...

“The one with the loudest voice moves the world.”

Anyone who could communicate his will to an overwhelming majority would drown out other opinions and direct the course of world events. Genitz had acted quickly to occupy all facilities capable of disseminating information and restricted the movements of the media. A private radio might be capable of escaping Genitz’s watchdogs, but the signal would be weak. Since he had control of the broadcast facilities in the royal capital, the monarch had no way to deliver a message outside the city. Regardless of how powerful the king’s influence was, Genitz still had the advantage. At least, that was how it *seemed*,

but...

"... *zzt*..."

The command post's speakers emitted a crackle.

"Hmm?"

Genitz's eyes narrowed.

"What is that sound?"

The speakers were set to pick up radio signals in the royal capital. But there shouldn't be any broadcasts right now.

"...*zzt*... *zzt*... Attention, my dearest citizens..."

It wasn't a mistake or some kind of accident. Clearly, someone was broadcasting over the radio.

"What's going on?!"

For the first time in a few days, Genitz raised his voice.

"Determine the source of that transmission... No, the whole radio band! Which channel is it using?!"

Channels were designated to both public and private entities.

"It isn't coming from a radio station, newspaper publisher or military facility!"

The command post's traffic controller reported with a look of confusion.

Ridiculous! Are there unused channels?!

But it was unthinkable that an individual would own equipment capable of transmitting such strong waves. Communication was a kind of weapon. Without official permission, no one could install such equipment, and if someone did, it would attract immediate notice.

"Impossible! Is it *television*?!"

Genitz shouted with rage.

"Television?" Sven asked with a blank look.

"It's a means of broadcasting images as well as sound."

Current means of communication included radio, newspaper and telegraph. Video recording by cinematograph did exist, but it was limited to newsreels. A system for widespread transmission of simultaneous images and sound through waves rather than cable were not yet available for commercial use.

“A private business is developing it now for relaying an international sports event to be held in Berun, to all of Europea in four years.”

A new channel had been assigned for test use. And someone was now transmitting across that channel. Genitz knew about television broadcasting, but he hadn’t thought of it because it was still in the test phase.

“Change the channel! Switch it to television—to *video*!”

The traffic controller switched the channel according to Genitz’s order. The face of the monarch appeared on multiple monitors around the command post.

“I am Balzar Wilhelm Nightlia von Wiltia, king of Wiltia.”

This was *fatal*. Television broadcasting had yet to be developed for practical use.

“The Schutzstaffel has rebelled and is currently occupying the royal capital. However, the principality’s trusted regular forces and I will relentlessly drive out these lawless renegades!”

“It appears the source of the transmission is somewhere in the urban district but is being relayed for broadcast.”

“Broadcast? To *where*?”

Delz shouted this question while Genitz was lost in thought.

“To the whole of Wiltia.”

“What?!”

That answer was unbelievable. Someone had secured the monarch and was using an as-yet non-public channel for a message that should never be broadcast. What’s worse, the king himself had declared the Schutzstaffel to be rebels.

“We have located the source. It’s from Twelve Comm in the royal capital’s

urban district.”

Twelve Comm was a private company engaged in research and development of communication devices.

“That’s a branch of Billions Trading... Ahaaa... I see!”

Genitz now understood. Disguised as the Corporal, he learned of the events surrounding Shylock and Jacob in Organbaelz. And he knew that Lud had escaped the dungeon beneath the royal palace last night.

“Langart... Is this *your* work? Well, *now* you’ve done it!”

Without realizing it, Genitz ground his back teeth. He wasn’t angry because his opponent’s unexpected move placed him in trouble. Lud had launched a counterattack, but Genitz still had many defense strategies. This wasn’t what irritated him.

“You... I had no idea you would do such a thing...”

Genitz thought he knew everything about Lud. He had recognized Lud’s potential and honed it, so he was confident that he was the only one who could wield the former soldier. But he never would have guessed that Lud would do *this*.

“Is this *your* fault?”

Genitz glanced at Sven, who was standing beside him.

“M-Master...?”

Sven considered Genitz to be her beloved master whom she would serve all her life. Nonetheless, she sensed fear creeping over Genitz as he glared at her.

“Heh heh... Oh well...”

Genitz’s eyes returned to normal, and he took a breath as if to collect himself. Then he turned to Delz.

“Why are you waiting, Delz?! Go to the source and capture the monarch and his cohorts! On the *double*!”

“Y-Yes, Sir!”

Delz saluted and hurried to leave. Genitz barked at his back as if remembering

something.

“Hold on a second! Why wasn’t Twelve Comm under our control?”

Twelve Comm was merely a company that developed products for business. It wasn’t as well-known an industry as print or radio, but it developed communication devices, so it was natural to assume it owned transmission equipment. This was the mistake of the person in charge, who had focused only on the superficial and obvious rather than digging deeper.

“Major Torben is in charge of suppressing such targets.”

“I see. Then the major must take responsibility by *dying*. Shoot him dead as soon as you find him. The next-in-command of his unit will take his place.”

“What...?”

Delz and everyone at the command post froze when Genitz ordered the execution of his subordinate so casually.

“Mr. Delz, I believe there are incompetent people, but there are no *useless* people.”

He could find a way to use anyone.

“Everything in this world has value. But there are people who cannot see the value in others.” He had always believed that.

“However, if there are *too* many incompetent men, I must use them *to set an example*. Do you understand?”

The great thing about incompetent men was that sacrificing them was no great loss. He could use them in thankless roles or blame them for his own mistakes. And if too many such men existed, he could kill them as a warning to others.

“I will permit you to use the Werewolves. Quickly now.”

“Y-Yes, Sir!”

This late in the game, Genitz hadn’t forgotten his belief. He had succeeded in stirring *many* incompetent men by killing just *one* such man. Delz scampered away like a scared rat, but Genitz didn’t even glance his way.

“Well, Sven... we should get going. We need to change our base of operations.”

“As y-you wish.”

Genitz stood up and strode out of the command post. Sven followed.

“Ugh...”

Static cut through her brain.

What... is that?!

She hesitated. Her master had casually ordered a man’s death. Had it been like this before? Had her master been so quick to waste life? Wouldn’t he have worried about others instead, even at the risk of his own life?

“Ungh...”

She remembered a man’s face. A hard face with a scar on the left cheek.

Who is he? Who is that man?!

He reached out, and she experienced a faint desire. She was about to take his hand.

“What’s wrong, Sven?”

Genitz’s voice drowned out that desire. Something too big to refuse was telling her that her master was the owner of that voice. And that bound her in layers of chains.

“Oh... nothing.”

Her head was silent again, and she responded without hesitation.

At Twelve Comm in a corner of the royal capital’s urban district...

“Hear me, citizens of Wiltia in the royal capital and soldiers of the regular military outside the royal capital... The Schutzstaffel... No, this *rebel force* disturbs the peace and threatens my reign!!”

Inside a room for product development, King Wilhelm the Third was in front of a microphone, delivering his address.



“What a kingly aura!”

Hilde gasped with admiration as she watched.

“Indeed. I thought the king was incompetent.”

“Well, *I* didn’t!!”

Hilde hurriedly corrected Rebecca’s nasty comment.

Lud and the others had succeeded in gaining the king’s cooperation, but a problem remained: How would they broadcast the monarch’s denunciation of rebellion by the Schutzstaffel?

“My company is developing something interesting.”

They were at a loss when Shylock told them about Twelve Comm.

“Um, I have a question.”

Hilde was curious about something.

“I understand we’re broadcasting the king’s speech from this building, but won’t the waves be too weak to transmit outside the royal capital?”

“Yes. This will only reach the center of the urban district. The test broadcasting device’s output is limited. And it is not *high* enough.”

Rebecca was the one who replied to Hilde’s question.

To transmit a great distance, waves need height as well as power. Twelve Comm had a power pylon on its roof to serve as an antenna. However, it wasn’t strong enough since it was only for testing.

“They’re planning to build a huge tower to broadcast an international sport competition to be held in four years. They have already bought the land for it.”

A nearly 400-meter-tall power pylon would be erected near the center of Berun. However, that pylon wasn’t complete. The groundsill hadn’t yet been laid.

“We need a way to amplify the short waves here to transmit them everywhere. Where is the relay station?”

It was an unthinkable maneuver that even Genitz wouldn’t guess.

“That old man never told me!”

Hilde was miffed. Shylock hadn’t told her about the relay station. He had obfuscated, calling it a “company secret.”

“I guess he doesn’t trust me.”

Hilde’s spirits sagged at this thought.

“He would, of course, hesitate to trust someone who kidnapped him for ransom, assaulted him, and tried to murder him.”

“Ugh...”

Rebecca’s merciless comments grated on Hilde’s nerves.

“I was teasing. He did not tell former lieutenant Langart or me either.”

“I... hate you,” Hilde said.

Rebecca’s cold teasing brought tears to Hilde’s eyes.

“Well, I guess he has lots of hidden cards. I know he would never make Jacob sad. So if he tells me not to ask, I won’t. I trust him. But more importantly...”

Other than technicians for operating the equipment, the only people at Twelve Comm were Hilde, Rebecca and the monarch, who was still speaking. Milly and Jacob had stayed at Billions Trading, since this was a dangerous mission. Lud wasn’t there either.

“Langart is in the royal palace.”

“Yes. He went to retrieve Svelgen... I mean *Sven*.”

Just as Hanussen had told Lud, the Schutzstaffel’s attention would be focused on the monarch’s speech. This made it possible for Lud to outsmart Genitz once again and sneak back into the royal palace.

“The two of us have to protect this place. Langart sure did stick us with a difficult job!”

Since the broadcast had begun, it was only a matter of time until the Schutzstaffel charged in. Considering that, Hilde’s resentment was understandable.

How can she say that?

But Rebecca was amazed at Hilde's words. It was Lud who had left to undertake the hardest task. He had rejected Rebecca's company and asked her to defend the monarch and the broadcasting equipment. If a humanoid Hunter Unit like Rebecca used all her strength, ten or twenty soldiers wouldn't even count, unless they had a Hunter Unit of their own. In contrast, Lud was heading alone into enemy headquarters.

"You should stay here and polish that popgun you're so proud of."

It was tiring to explain, so Rebecca ended the conversation with a sarcastic jab.

"What?! I don't have my Walther on me."

"What?!"

Rebecca raised her voice in surprise. Hilde was barely capable of protecting herself in any case, but she had abandoned one of her few weapons. Rebecca wasn't just surprised—she was *astounded*.

"Where did you put it?"

"Um..."

"Shh!"

Just when Hilde was about to answer the question, Rebecca cut off the conversation.

"They're here."

It wasn't audible to human ears, but her sensors had reacted. From the sound of the wheels, she estimated there were five armored military vehicles. Which meant just over thirty soldiers.

"You handle this. After I leave, throw up barricades or something to buy time," Rebecca said.

Then she intercepted... No, she *launched* a sure-footed sortie.

Meanwhile, a woman was held captive in a corner of the Wiltian royal palace.

“What the heck is going on...?”

She was in a guest bedroom on the tenth floor of the royal palace. The gorgeous room had a private bathroom, and she could order and have delivered almost anything she wanted. She suffered no inconvenience, but she was prevented from leaving and the windows were locked.

“Genitz...!”

The woman muttering in frustration was Sophia von Rundstadt. She was a major in the principality of Wiltia’s regular military, and she had once been captain of the security guard at the Royal Weapons Development Bureau. But that night she had lost the bureau and the subordinates she was supposed to protect during the Schutzstaffel attack, led by Genitz. Instead, she had survived through the sacrifice of a man she had always treated badly.

“Daian...”

The man with the fake smile had been shot and then collapsed, motionless. That was the last she had seen before fainting. When she woke up, she was lying in this room. She could guess the reason they kept her alive. Her significance wasn’t as a hostage from the regular military. She was a daughter of Wiltia’s prestigious Rundstadt family. As long as she lived, they could use her as leverage in negotiation.

“Argh!”

Shamefully, she had survived alone, so there was no way she could face her dead subordinates.

The next thing she knew, she had tears in her eyes. She was frustrated, but above all, she was sad. Perhaps that’s why Sophia the woman, rather than Sophia the soldier, couldn’t help saying...

“Lud... help me...”

It was a wish she could never make known to him. Lud lived in Organbaelz, which was located in a rural area of Pelfe. And she was in Berun, the royal capital. So Lud couldn’t come.

“Huh...?”

Or so she *thought*. The ceiling was creaking.

Wham... clunk... creeek... She heard something large moving overhead.

“What the...?”

She watched for a while, and then part of the ceiling fell, immediately followed by a body.

“Ow!”

The man was covered in dust and cobwebs, and he was the person Sophia had just called to for help.

“Lud? But how?!”

Stunned, Sophia stared at him. Lud, who had appeared out of the blue, turned around.

“Huh? Captain?”

Lud was stupefied as they stared at each other.

“... *sob*...”

As she looked at Lud’s face, the feelings that Sophia had been holding back suddenly overflowed.

“Lud!”

She ran to him and pulled him close.

“D-Did you come to rescue me?! You... I can’t believe you came! I’m so glad!”

She held Lud tightly, her eyes full of joyful tears.

It was understandable. Sophia had a secret crush on the young man who had once been her subordinate and had been like a little brother to her in their childhood. Her feelings stretched back over 15 years. She had once been his senior officer and her pride as an older-sister figure kept her from revealing her feelings. But now, because he appeared so unexpectedly, just when she was scared and vulnerable, she became bold.

“Huh? What are you doing here, Captain?”

“What?”

Lud's attitude soured her elation.

"You're here inside the royal capital, so... Do you live in the *castle* now, Cap?"

"Huh?!"

Sophia had been in maiden-in-distress mode, but now she realized the situation was extremely odd. Apparently, Lud hadn't come to rescue her. Instead, he had literally dropped in by chance.

"Lieutenant Langart..."

"Yes?"

"Take *that*!"

"Oof?!"

Sophia punched him in embarrassment and irritation.

"W-What was *that* for?!"

"Shut up, you dummy! Urgh! I'll never forgive myself for letting my heart take over for even one second!"

Sophia was red to her ears because she had gleefully embraced Lud and even cried as she clung to him.

"Lieutenant... erase from your memory everything that just happened!"

"Don't be ridiculous!!"

"Then I'll *beat* the memory out of you!"

"Understood. It's already forgotten!"

Sophia was trembling, with tears in her eyes, but her fist was tight and she was ready to fight. And she was too threatening for him to disobey.

"Anyway, what are you doing here?"

"Same to you! What's going on?"

Just then the door of the room flew open.

"Major Rundstadt, what is going on here?!"

"Who is that man?!"

It was the Schutzstaffel soldiers who had been stationed as guards outside her door. She and Lud had raised quite a racket, so it wasn't surprising that the guards were alarmed.

"—!!"

"—!!"

The soldiers rushed in but braced themselves after seeing Lud, who was an intruder and looked suspicious. Lud and Sophia were even faster at springing into action.

Both soldiers were holding machine guns, but Lud closed in on one, forced down his gun, and delivered an open-handed blow to the soldier's chin with his other hand. Sophia acted similarly. She instantly closed the distance between herself and the other soldier, lowered her body as if sinking, and swept the soldier's legs out from under him. When he lost balance, she punched him in the face. In the span of a blink, the two soldiers were unconscious without so much as crying out.

"Oh dear... I think it's time to blow this joint," Sophia said.

She had stolen anything that could serve as a weapon from the unconscious soldiers. But she couldn't escape, even if she wanted to, because she didn't know the situation outside.

"Lieutenant Langart, I doubt you've come here on an errand as a baker."

Something unusual was afoot here after Genitz had taken control. So Sophia guessed that the time had come for her to make a move.

"No. To tell the truth..."

Lud began to explain the situation, but Sophia raised a hand to stop him.

"Tell me while we walk. Other soldiers will be here any minute, so let's move."

Sophia made a quick decision. As she left the room, her eyes held no sign of a girl in love. Her face had assumed the look of a soldier—the one known as the Devil's Black Spear.

Meanwhile, at the front gate of the royal palace...

“Oh my... I can’t believe they used television broadcasting! There’s no way that the man Sven loves came up with that! Heh heh heh...”

The man stepped lightly like a sorcerer. Or, that’s what he *thought*, but actually, he moved sluggishly as if injured.

“What are you doing?” asked the woman walking beside him.

“If we don’t hurry, we won’t make it to the festivities.”

“Oh... excuse me, Suzuka.”

Suzuka was a tall woman with black hair and dark eyes. She wasn’t Wiltian. She had a bright appearance, but it wasn’t like any race on the continent of Europea.

“There! Who are you?!”

Soldiers guarding the front gate noticed them and issued a warning.

“This looks dangerous. I’ve never been any place like this.”

Suzuka sighed as if bored. When the soldiers with guns approached, she wasn’t the least perturbed.

“Suzuka, get to work or Yamamoto will lose face, won’t he?”

“Yes. It’s a troublesome part of my job...”

Since this man so like a sorcerer had asked, Suzuka removed something like a small book from her breast pocket and showed it to the soldiers.

“My name is Suzuka Amaki, military attaché at the embassy of Yamato.”

She was brandishing a diplomatic ID for embassy personnel. It was forbidden to arrest and imprison ID holders from nations with diplomatic relations, even if they had committed a crime. To use the common phrase, she had “diplomatic privilege.”



“W-What kind of business does someone from Yamato have here?”

All embassy personnel in Berun had received instructions to refrain from leaving their office complexes. It wasn’t mandatory. It was just a request. Disobeying it, however, would risk instigating an international incident. Nonetheless, it was just a request. The diplomats were sent to Berun by their own nations, so the Wiltian government had no right to restrict their movements.

“I’ve come to see Genitz. Take me to him.”

Back inside the royal capital, Lud and Sophia were running through the long and intricate hallways.

“Oh... So the development bureau was attacked first, huh?”

“Yeah. That rotten lieutenant general! I’ll never forgive him!”

They exchanged information.

“And that girl... What was her name? Sven? She got kidnapped?”

“Yeah. I don’t know exactly how, but it was some kind of mind control.”

In the subterranean jail, Hanussen had told him about the emergency control code.

“That infuriates me,” Sophia muttered.

Her voice held anger, but there was more. Her words also expressed intense hatred for the person who had trampled where no one should ever set foot.

“Agh!”

A few soldiers appeared ahead. Reports of Sophia’s escape and Lud’s intrusion had already spread around the palace. Soldiers had been dispatched with orders to shoot and kill on sight.

“Fire!”

The soldiers prepared to shoot, but Sophia immediately fired the machine gun she had seized earlier, accurately taking out a few of the soldiers. Then, instead of slowing down, she ran faster and vaulted inside the group of remaining

soldiers and, within seconds, incapacitated them with blows from her fists, gunstock and knee.

She hasn't changed! She's indomitable!

Like Lud, Sophia was an expert in military martial arts, and she had learned the eastern martial art *bujutsu*. Few men, even armed with guns, could stand against her in a hallway where movement is limited, much less in an open area.

"Lieutenant Langart, why did you hold your fire?"

Sophia questioned him while knocking out a still-conscious enemy soldier with a kick.

"Well..."

Lud had a machine gun he had seized from an enemy soldier. It was loaded and he knew how to use it. Nonetheless, he had hesitated to shoot. Or rather, he hadn't even *tried* to shoot.

"So you still can't do it, huh?"

People who suffered traumatic experiences in war often became incapable of violent action. Sophia had seen many such former soldiers. However, Lud was different. He wouldn't let himself kill as a matter of self-discipline.

"I saw what was on your mind during the *Defairedead* incident. I'm not blaming you for that. But can you hold to that and still save Sven?"

Sophia had met Sven during the *Defairedead* affair, and they had only spoken a few words. Nonetheless, it was enough to see Sven's strong feelings for Lud.

"I'm someone who cherishes my beloved master, to whom I've offered both my heart and my body."

That was how Sven had described her feelings.

"She admires you with her whole being. Can you save such an earnest heart without risking your life and fighting?"

"I—"

"Not just your own life, but the lives of *others*, too."

Before Lud could reply, Sophia continued.

“You know very well what kind of man Genitz is. He controls desperate women and uses them.”

Sophia loved Lud. And because they loved the same man, Sophia could understand how Sven felt. She didn’t know much about Sven, but she knew Sven truly loved Lud. And she knew how Genitz’s hopelessly degenerate actions ran roughshod over Sven’s feelings.

“I’m telling you. This isn’t a situation that you can handle with a lot of high-minded *talk*.”

Genitz would kill Lud unless Lud faced him with the readiness to die. And Sven feared Lud’s death more than her own.

“I...”

Lud made a pained sound.

“.....”

Sophia had been hurling words at him, but now she too made a pained face. She didn’t want to tell him. She didn’t *want* to, but she had no choice. As his former superior officer, as his older sister, and as a woman.

“The Royal Weapons Development Bureau,” Sophia said. “Go there. That’s probably where Genitz will take her.”

“What?”

Sophia was captain of the development bureau guard, and she had been Bureau Director Daian’s supervisor. She didn’t know everything, but she did know some of the organization’s secrets.

“There’s a Door beneath the development bureau. And it’s Genitz’s last resort.”

Genitz had used force to occupy the development bureau and had taken the risk of establishing martial law in the royal capital because there was something he wanted there that he believed would compensate for the dangerous risks. Lud had guessed that much before, but not that it was a Door under the development bureau.

“There’s a Door in the royal capital?” Lud asked in surprise.

During a previous incident, Lud had seen a Door in Organbaelz. It had been the relic of an ancient civilization, and even a blast from a tank wasn't able to destroy it.

Sven can open the Door!

At last, Lud understood Genitz's true purpose. The relic of an ancient empire would demonstrate a strength that exceeded human knowledge. Behind the Door on Organbaelz, there had been an ancient food production facility. What's more, that facility had caused a miracle, returning a dead person to life.

"What's beyond the Door?"

"I don't know. But I heard the director of the development bureau once say that the bigger the Door, the greater its importance. And the Door under Berun is the biggest of all the Doors whose existence has been confirmed."

By now, the regular military would have moved to recapture the royal capital after the monarch's denunciation of the rebels. The regular military and the Schutzstaffel would be staring each other down somewhere near the royal capital, but it would be some time before they drew near the royal palace. Meanwhile, Sven would open the Door with her power. If the thing inside could reverse the war's balance of power...

"That's definitely where Genitz is headed."

"Sven will be there, too."

To get Sven back, it was necessary to prevent Genitz's ambitions. Lud hadn't known what Genitz's final aim was. But it all made sense now.

"Perhaps Genitz will abandon the royal palace and... No, he must *already* be on his way there. Either way, you can seize the initiative if you leave now."

"Captain..."

"Tch!"

Sophia clucked her tongue after these revelations.

"But remember! This is top secret!"

Lud was a former soldier, but he had retired, so now he was just a regular

citizen. Either way, this information must never be leaked.

“Do you know why I told you this?” Sophia asked with a glare.

“Because I want you to come back alive. You want that girl back, right? If that information helps, then there’s no choice! So hurry and go!”

“But what about you?”

Even without Genitz, the royal palace was currently the Schutzstaffel’s base.

Lud couldn’t bear to leave her alone in such a place, but Sophia returned a wry smile.

“It seems I have to deal with *her*.”

A girl was standing at the end of the hallway.

“Enemy... eliminate... eliminate...”

The girl looked about 14 or 15 years old. She looked scarcely older than Hilde and Milly. And she had red eyes like Sven and Rebecca.

“Can you feel it, Lieutenant? She looks like *her*,” Sophia said in a cold sweat.

It was the strong sense that something was wrong when Sven and Rebecca exercised physical abilities unimaginable given their dainty figures. The girl in front of them had that—but it was ten times more intense. The phrase to describe it was “uncanny valley.”

The more that the appearance and behavior of artificial things resemble those of human beings, the more people are attracted to them. However, at a certain point, the resemblance becomes so close that the parts that don’t appear human stand out, causing discomfort. This girl was a perfect example.

“Eliminate... Annihilate...”

Lud and Sophia didn’t know what Rebecca knew, but if she had been here, she would have cried out in surprise. This girl was the “third body”—the third humanoid Hunter Unit. She was the machine that had attacked Rebecca on the night the Schutzstaffel took over the development bureau.

“Hurry, Langart! Without a gun, you’ll just be in the way!”

Sophia picked up another machine gun from the floor, pointed her two

weapons, and shot at the girl. She didn't try to hit a particular spot so much as a whole area, unleashing a swathe of fire in hopes that at least one bullet would hit. However, the girl was faster than the bullets, and kicking off the walls and ceiling in geometric patterns, she evaded them all.

"You monster!"

Sophia spat the words with hate and laid down more fire to stop the girl.

"Captain..."

Lud was at a loss. The girl was strong. Certainly as strong as Sven and Rebecca —maybe *stronger*. She had the strength to overwhelm even an armed human. Even if both Lud and Sophia took her on, their chances of winning were slim. Even if they *did* win, the fight would eat up too much time. And that would ruin their chances of getting the drop on Genitz.

Sophia had considered all that before telling him to go. She had said that he must be willing to risk not only his own life, but someone else's as well. That was exactly what she was ordering him to do now. By leaving her.

"I'm sorry, my sister Sophia!"

With these words, Lud turned his back and ran.

"That's better, Lud."

Sophia heard Lud's words and smiled. After inhaling as much air as she could, Sophia issued an audacious challenge: "C'mon, monster! Big Sis is *strong*!"



Chapter 6: Lud Langart’s Decision

Meanwhile, at Twelve Comm, in the urban district of the city...

“A *monster*...”

Delz murmured the same word Sophia had used, but against another humanoid Hunter Unit with unimaginable strength. Lieutenant Delz was an officer in the Schutzstaffel and the commander of the force that had conquered the city.

“Call me what you want. I don’t care.”

Rebecca answered him, tired from the bottom of her heart from incapacitating over fifty Schutzstaffel soldiers, including reinforcements. She had killed about half of them, and had broken the arms, legs, ribs, and ruptured internal organs of the rest. They were barely conscious. In comparison, Delz had suffered only a *light* injury by having one leg broken.

“S-Stop... Help...”

“Not a chance.”

Delz cast aside his pride as a Schutzstaffel soldier and begged for his life, but Rebecca denied it without mercy. She made a tight fist and drew it back to hit his face. At that moment, her raised right arm was silently blown off.

“What?!”

She couldn’t immediately ascertain what had happened. A fraction of a second later, she heard the monstrous boom of a cannon and realized that a supersonic warhead had removed part of her body.

“Y-You guys are late!” Delz shouted.

He was looking at men dressed in black army fatigues with no badge of rank.

“Don’t get the wrong idea. We are *not* your subordinates.”

They were Werewolves, the secret special ops unit and Genitz’s private force

to which Lud had once belonged.

“Ungh!”

Rebecca had lost one arm, but she still had the other. Even if she lost *both* arms, she could still *kick* them to death. But, in the next moment, when Rebecca tried to attack the Werewolves, cannon fire blew off her right leg faster than the speed of sound.

“Aagh!”

Humanoid Hunter Units felt pain. However, pain was only to alert the body to a threat. Unlike a human being, she wouldn’t die from shock, and severe pain didn’t disrupt her thinking. Rebecca was able to calmly identify the source of this attack.

“Impossible... A Gerlich?!”

This weapon wasn’t just fast. It was enormously powerful. And it wasn’t originally designed for attacking human beings. This was the sound of fire from an anti-tank Gerlich.

“We got it from the development bureau, along with only two shells.”

It was a prized weapon, even for the Werewolves. And they had been waiting for the right opportunity to use it. They had waited for the perfect moment as they watched Rebecca level fifty Schutzstaffel soldiers and shatter Delz’s right leg. When Rebecca’s attention was slightly diverted they attacked.

“What a surprise. I thought you fought like a monster, but you really *aren’t* human!”

The leader of the Werewolves sounded intrigued. A pseudo-skeleton and artificial muscles were visible where Rebecca’s right arm and leg had once been.

“You’re one of that genius scientist’s toys. Cool!”

Because the Werewolves routinely killed people, the soldiers sounded delighted to confront someone inhuman.

“Oh, she isn’t a human being. She’s a... *doll*?”

Slowly, Delz stood.

“You puppet! How dare you!!”

Angrily, he kicked Rebecca in the face.

“Gah!!”

However, he used his broken right leg, so he screamed in pain.

“Dimwit,” the leader of the Werewolves spat.

“Shut up and give me a gun!”

Delz grabbed a gun and in a fury, shot repeatedly at Rebecca’s body.

“Argh! It won’t break! It’s incredibly strong!”

Delz had failed. The area was now subdued, but that success was substantially due to the Werewolves. If Genitz saw Delz as incompetent, then someday Genitz would abandon him. Frustration and fear turned to anger and motivated him.

“What about *here*?!”

He aimed at Rebecca’s face and shot her in the eye.

“Agh!”

The surface of a humanoid Hunter Unit was covered in a skin very like a human body, but underneath was a special alloy Daian had created with the greatest care so that even gunshots could not penetrate. However, the eyes were different. They were stronger than human eyes, but they weren’t *that* strong. Rebecca’s right eye popped, spilling artificial biological fluid.

“Argh! Arrrgh! It won’t break easily, will it? Hey! Destroy it with the Gerlich!”

“Like I said, we only found two shells. We don’t have any more.”

If the soldiers wanted to break Rebecca, the weapons they carried weren’t enough. They had to either blow her up with explosives or smash her under the treads of a tank.

“Tch! Oh well... Let’s kill her *after* we have a little fun.”

“What? You’re going to *rape* her?”

“No.”

Delz wore the cruelest of smiles.

“Hey, doll... You’ve got one eye left, so let me show you hell.”

He yanked Rebecca’s hair, forcing her up.

“I’m going to kill all your friends here and then break into Billions Trading to get *them*, too!”

“What...?”

Rebecca’s features hadn’t changed even when her right arm and leg had been blown off and her right eye destroyed, but they showed desperation now.

“You better not...”

“Huh? What? A *doll* with emotion?”

Delz took sadistic pleasure at the sight of emotional anguish in the one who had backed him into a corner.

“Do not touch Jacob! Just kill *me*!”

“Not kill. I’ll *break* you, you *doll*!”

Excited, Delz smashed Rebecca against the ground as hard as he could.

“Jacob? All right, I promise to kill him last. I’ll smash out his brains right in front of you!”

“N-No...”

Rebecca was usually without emotion—expressionless and cold—but now she was trembling. She shook with the fear that she couldn’t prevent harm to someone so important to her.

“Gya ha ha ha! I like that look on your face!”

“That’s enough!”

A new voice called out. Delz, the Werewolves, and even Rebecca, hadn’t sensed him. That was because he had flown down from the sky.

“Who—”

Before Delz could finish his sentence the man’s fist bashed into his face.

“Goff!”

Delz made a foolish sound and tumbled away like a battered ball. Smashed to the ground, face down with his broken neck at an impossible angle, he quickly died.

“Wh-Who are you...?”

The Werewolves were a highly trained special ops unit but they were confused by this strange man. No one knew where he had come from, and he was dressed oddly. He wore an expensive but otherwise unremarkable trench coat. And he wore a metal mask.

“That’s... the *Corporal’s* mask,” the Werewolves’ leader uttered a moan.

Genitz had used the mask of the so-called Corporal to disguise himself. It was left in Organbaelz, and later Lud used it to pass inspection and then dropped it in the train. Now the man standing in front of them was wearing it.

“You... Who are you?!”

Without waiting for an answer or issuing a signal, the Werewolves attacked.

“You pitiful pawns!”

The man wasn’t frightened.

“Unlike the Silver Wolf and Black Spear, I can’t use anything awesome like *bujutsu*.”

He swung his arm to knock away an approaching Werewolf with a knife. Then he kicked off to smash another soldier who was pulling a gun.

“But I’m very good in hand-to-hand combat!”

He didn’t have any technique. He relied on brute force, like a rogue in a back-alley brawl, but his devastating strength and sheer destructiveness finished them off in one attack.

“What the...?! Are *you* a doll, too?!”

The way he fought closely resembled Rebecca’s attack rather than regular human combat. It was far beyond a typical human’s potential.

“You are... That voice...”

For Rebecca, his superhuman strength and disguise didn't matter. It was his voice that delivered the shock causing her to tremble.

"How dare you hurt my girl!"

He then mowed down the attacking Werewolves, one after another. Rebecca also recognized his style of fighting. He controlled the battlefield simply by his presence. Without hesitation, he defeated his opponents with accurate and powerful blows. He was like a hawk diving for prey from on high.

"You!!"

In minutes, all but the leader of the highly trained werewolves had fallen. One attack per person had felled them all.

"What's going on? Who are you?!"

The Werewolves weren't weak. They had shown unparalleled strength against fellow human beings. When Lud, a former Werewolf himself, had fought against an exceptionally strong soldier from Greyten during the fight inside the airship, his techniques had been ineffective. Specialized in killing human beings, they were incapable of handling the *inhuman*.

"It doesn't matter, so go ahead. You're the only one left now."

The man in the mask of the Corporal emitted a faint sound. He was a mechanical soldier, and it was the sound of a cybernetic warrior who had obtained superhuman strength by replacing human body parts with machinery.

"Ugh!!"

A hand chop to the stomach killed the last Werewolf, their leader.

"Is that you... Major?" Rebecca asked shakily.

"....."

The man didn't answer. The mask hid his face, but his guilty demeanor was like that of a child whose mischief had been discovered.

"It *is* you, is it not? Major Blitzdonner?"

Rebecca noticed that much of his body was now made up of cybernetic enhancements. But there was no way Rebecca could mistake that voice. He

always told bad jokes, grinned like a fool, and was a womanizer... and he was Rebecca's beloved, the person she held most dear. Before Rebecca became a humanoid Hunter Unit, when she was still a weapon, Erich Blitzdonner, a.k.a. the Crimson Hawk, had been her pilot.

"It is I... You gave me the name Sharlahart!"

Daian had given her the name Rebecca, along with her girlish figure. Blitzdonner had named her Sharlahart, which only those important to her were allowed to use.

"I'm sorry, Sharlahart. It seems you've had a hard time."

The man didn't remove his mask. However, he spoke with a sweet voice as if addressing his own daughter.

"You've been watching over my father and son. Thank you."

"Major..."

Rebecca was weeping. She hadn't once shed a tear or cried out when her arm and leg were blown away, her eye smashed, and her body riddled with bullets, battered, kicked, and slammed to the ground.



One day, he had suddenly disappeared. Some said he was dead, but Rebecca hadn't believed it. This man could never die. She had waited, because she believed he would return. And then he *had*. There was no other reason she would cry.

"Sorry, but keep it secret that you saw me. I've got *circumstances*."

There were reasons he couldn't reveal his name or his face and why he had transformed his body into a machine. The reason he had appeared to Rebecca was also secret.

"Ask that scientist to fix you up."

"Scientist? Do you mean..."

There was only one person in the world who had the skills to repair Rebecca and the other humanoid Hunter Units.

"Anyway, Sharlahart... You're quite a looker!"

"What?!"

At his words, her rezanium reactor went into high gear and her body started heating up. Her face was red to her ears and her remaining left eye darted around.

"See ya later."

"Huh? W-What?!"

Leaving Rebecca in confusion, Blitzdonner disappeared. Just as he had appeared, he must have vanished using his cybernetically enhanced super-strength legs.

"Waaaaahhh!!!"

After seeing her master for the first time in five years, he had fought as he wanted, said whatever he wanted, and then disappeared again—all in a flash.

"He's always so selfish! Always! Always! Always!"

As she cried out, Rebecca continued weeping. But she was also laughing.

"I am glad... Major... I am so glad!"

Blitzdonner had said, “See ya later.”

So she would see him again. She was frustrated, but it made her happy to know that.

Around the same time, at the royal palace in Berun...

“Youuu!!!”

As she screamed, Sophia continued shooting her machine gun at the girl who was the “third body.”

Sophia was an ace pilot also known as the Black Spear. A Hunter Unit pilot was more than just a pilot. Sophia was trained to survive alone, even if stranded behind enemy lines. In particular, Sophia was a specialist in the military martial arts, melee combat and firearms. Even with such skills, against the approaching third body, her only chance was to fight defensively so she wouldn’t die.

“Don’t you have any limits? Huh?”

Finally, she threw aside her empty weapon and ran. She had been repeating this tactic: Shoot like crazy, then get some distance. Her attacks weren’t doing much damage, and her opponent was slowly getting closer.

She’s intentionally pressuring me... No, it’s something else!

Her opponent was trying to take Sophia’s life silently, deliberately and impersonally. Which was understandable because Sophia was facing a humanoid Hunter Unit.

“Urgh... I guess this is it...”

Sophia had used every weapon she had. Now she was out. For a human, she had fought impressively.

“As usual, Sophia, you fight *ugly*.”

Someone spoke to her in the Wiltian national language with a strong foreign accent that sounded out of place.

“That voice...”

Sophia had heard it before. The voice belonged to someone she had met at a

military exchange between the east and west, someone she just might detest more than anyone else...

“Hi! Long time, no see!”

She was a black-haired, dark-eyed citizen of Aesia. Suzuka Amaki, representative of Yamato, was standing in front of her.

“Suzuka?! What are you doing here?!”

“I have orders from up top,” Suzuka answered flatly.

“Intruder... Eliminate...”

The third body approached from behind at high speed and tried to deliver a hand chop.

“Knock it off, you mechanized ragdoll!”

The next moment, the third body flew through the air and struck the ceiling.

“What?!”

Sophia was amazed that Suzuka was capable of dealing with an opponent that moved so fast as to be invisible.

“Techniques for fighting human beings work no matter how fast or strong an opponent is, as long as it’s in human form.”

Suzuka’s tone of voice hadn’t changed. She was calm, betraying no concern whatsoever.

Budo was a heightened form of *bujutsu*, which Sophia and Lud had learned. Suzuka had surpassed her father, a master of both martial arts, when she was 10 years old. She was a woman beloved of the war god. Her skill was recognized, and she was assigned as military attaché at an embassy in a foreign country. If necessary, she could handle enemy fighters without support or supplies from home. In other words, with only her bare hands. Thus, people called her the Ultimate Ambassadorial Weapon.

“Eliminate... Eliminate... Eliminate...”

The third body pried herself free from the ceiling and fell to the floor. Then, with stiff doll-like movements, she attacked Suzuka again. She decreased the

strength of her high-speed fists, but she further increased their speed. One hit would be enough to break human bones.

“This is bad...”

Nonetheless, Suzuka wasn’t worried. With one hand, she blocked all blows.

“The *bujutsu* of Yamato was forged during a turbulent period of war, so...”

She spoke calmly but swiftly grabbed her attacker’s arm.

“It doesn’t matter how fast they are. If my opponent uses two arms, then I can handle them,” she said.

Then she slammed the third body against the wall.

“Don’t underestimate human strength, you machine-moppet! Just serve tea!”

Suzuka’s *budo* used the opponent’s force against itself. Since the automaton had inhuman strength, Suzuka’s technique turned that power back against her.

“Another monster...”

“Now that’s just *mean*.”

Suzuka gently replied to Sophia, who had spoken in amazement.

“Why are you here? What do you mean by orders from above? Why is Yamato interfering in a Wiltian affair?!”

“Yamato isn’t *interfering*. Wiltia’s highest level requested aid. He was with me, but since you were in danger, I came ahead to help.”

“Who do you mean?”

A man with connections to Yamato had called upon Suzuka, an incredible fighter, and he knew about Sophia.

“Eliminate... Obliterate... Delete...”

“Oh my, she’s a *strong* one! She must be made in Wiltia!”

While Sophia gawked, the third body made three more moves.

“Doing this all on my lonesome is getting hard. Sophia, take *this*!”

Suzuka tossed a cloth bag she had been wearing at her waist.

“My firearm?!”

It was Sophia’s favorite gun—a Parapellum Pistol M908.

“I thought I lost it!”

When she woke up after the attack on the Weapons Development Bureau, her gun was gone. It wasn’t just the same type of gun. The serial number was the same. It was *her* gun.

“Can it really be him?”

A man’s face popped into her head.

“Sophia... Pay attention, or you’ll die.”

Expressionless as a machine, the third body attacked.

Genitz had taken Sven to the deepest part of the Royal Weapons Development Bureau, northeast of the royal palace. The occupation of Berun had failed. The regular military had quickly answered the king’s call and would reclaim both the royal capital and the castle. However, there was still time.

Among the tens of thousands of Schutzstaffel soldiers spread throughout the royal capital, some would escape and some would surrender in fear of being branded rebels. There would be enormous *confusion*. Even if the Schutzstaffel and regular army were opposed to each other, they would hesitate to kill their compatriots. And that hesitation would be enough for Genitz to enact his next strategy.

“Genitz... So you came?”

But one man had foreseen Genitz’s actions.

“Langart... What are *you* doing here?”

Lud stood in the deepest bowels of the bureau, as if he were guarding the largest Door—the most important and confidential secret of the principality of Wiltia.

“I don’t suppose you’ve come to rejoin me?”

“Of course not. I’m not a soldier anymore.”

They stared at each other. Neither would budge, bringing them to their final confrontation.

“What in the world is wrong with you, Langart? This isn’t like you!”

Genitz sounded sad.

“Who told you about this place? How did you find out about the king? Why did the king cooperate with you anyway? How did you bust out of jail? Why did you seek help from Shylock? And why did you rely on others?”

Genitz knew Lud was a solitary person. He eschewed help from others, didn’t trust anyone, and believed only in his own well-honed strength. That’s why he had been able to kill *anyone*. If ordered, he wouldn’t hesitate to end the lives of men and women of all ages, even the lives of those who had been friends until yesterday.

“You weren’t the type of man to behave like this, were you?”

Genitz had highly praised Lud’s tool-like... No, his *machine*-like accuracy.

“Your arms aren’t for kneading bread. They’re fangs and claws for *killing*.”

“No, they aren’t.”

“Yes. Believe me, I know. You should come back to me.”

Genitz implored him, strongly confident that only he could use this excellent instrument.

“I’m not a tool, Genitz.”

Lud answered with quiet determination.

“I used to think that if I was strong, I could live on my own, that people who can’t do that are weak, that weakness is one’s own fault, and weakness is bad.”

The military had picked him up as a boy after he lost his parents. His only choice was to earn food by killing. He had believed it was simply the way the world was.

“But I was wrong. No one can live all alone. Someone will shed tears over the death of even the worst scumbag. No one can live without help from others.”

After the slaughter in Lapchuricka, he was marked as unfit to be a Werewolf

and became a Hunter Unit pilot. Later, he quit the military and to this day ran a bakery in Pelfe.

He met all kinds of people during that time. There were kind people and there were mean people. There were people who angered him and people he couldn't forgive. And there were people he regretted being unable to save.

"That's rubbish, Langart. That's the way the vulgar crowd thinks. Grouping up is proof of *weakness*."

"It's not rubbish, Genitz. The desire to be with someone is a *strength*."

Jacob, Milly, Marlene, Shylock, Hanussen, Rebecca and Sophia... These were the people he had met after failing as a tool. Without their help, he wouldn't be here now.

"For those people who treated me like a person—and not a tool—I won't go back to that!"

One's life isn't just for oneself. Lud's actions, ideas and lifestyle came from the people in his life.

"I'm not a tool. Something that has a heart is never a tool!"

With firm determination, Lud said his farewell to Genitz.

"That's enough, Master! Let *me* handle the rest!"

Interrupting their conversation, Sven stepped forward. She had once called Lud master, but now she was ready to kill him and protect Genitz, her new master.

"Yes. That's why I should have made this decision much sooner."

Sven was a humanoid Hunter Unit. Her fighting strength was tremendous. A former Werewolf, even the Silver Wolf, couldn't oppose her with mere human strength. But there were exceptions.

The royal sage Hanussen or a certain *bujutsu* master Lud knew may have been able to defeat her. However, skills like theirs were very rare. They were exceptional among the exceptions. In any case, Lud couldn't stop Sven. But his face showed no alarm. Rather than resigned, he appeared calm.

“I’m sorry I made you suffer, Avei.”

“—?!”

Sven had launched a hand chop, but Lud’s words stopped her.

“What...?”

The silver-haired girl was stunned. She could not explain why she had stopped. Sven... Svelgen Avei. That was her name. Her developer Daian had named her Svelgen. Her master, however, had named her Avei when she was still a weapon.

“Avei... How does that sound?”

She used to think that name was useless. But it was proof that she was a unique being in the world and not just one of hundreds or thousands of mass-produced machines.

“Uh... huh? What... I... I... Master...”

Her memories were confused. Her master was Genitz, who was behind her. And her opponent was the man standing in front of her. However, the person who spoke to her with such a sweet voice was...

“I’ve been wondering if the you I know is still inside you—and I *clung* to that possibility.”

Hanussen had told him about the emergency control code. It was the command that had taunted and smashed the “heart” she undoubtedly possessed and switched her devotion and loyalty to a new master.

“I had hoped to wake you up, so you would remember me and everyone else. But I was wrong.”

A person with a heart could never be a tool. That was Lud’s answer. So he decided to free her.

“Sven, your master isn’t me or Genitz. Your master is *you*!”

“Langart, what are you thinking?!” Genitz screamed.

Genitz had thought he knew everything about Lud, but right now he couldn’t understand what Lud was doing. Fear arose in this man who was so proud of

the thick hide he called knowledge.

“Order DO89U3340Y000064Z!”

Lud shouted the string of letters and numbers Hanussen had given him. It didn’t have a particular meaning. It was just random letters and numbers. However, it had a *function*. It was a reset code that would delete Sven’s memory, leaving it blank.

“Uhhh...”

Sven made a faint sound and fell weakly to her knees. Then she collapsed and lay still.

“What have you done, Langart?”

“It’s a reset code. With this, Sven will no longer belong to anyone. No one will be able to control her anymore.”

“That can’t be... You fool!!” Genitz shouted. “Do you know what that will do?!”

Sven wasn’t just a humanoid Hunter Unit. Only a descendant of the emperor’s bloodline could open the Door leading to relics from the ancient European Empire. The empire’s descendants were extinct. But the rare genius scientist Daian Fortuner had found the remains of an emperor, cultivated those remains, and used the flesh and blood to create a human body. A mechanical doll wrapped in flesh.

A heart is necessary for being human. So he had implanted Avei’s “heart” to create Sven. When Sven developed into a full human being, she would be able to open the Door. But, a necessary element was that she must love someone. If she forgot Lud and Genitz, she could no longer be the key.

“Yes. I know, Genitz. Now all we have to do is finish our game!”

Lud kicked the ground and challenged Genitz.

“It’s a waste of time!”

However, the moment Lud’s hand touched Genitz’s arm, Genitz made a slight movement, as if turning a faucet, and the baker’s body was thrown into the air and then smashed to the ground.

“Did you forget? Just like you use *bujutsu*, I have mastered *budo*!”

“Touch me again, and you’re finished!”

“Yes... If I could only touch you...” Lud began hoarsely.

“That was all I needed to do!”

At that moment, as Lud shouted, there was a disturbing *pop!*

“Whah?! You...”

Genitz appeared to be in pain.

Even as his opponent had thrown him, Lud had maintained his hold on Genitz’s arm. And, never relinquishing his grip, he had *squeezed*.

“A baker’s work is physical work.”

Lud’s grip, strengthened by kneading bread dough every day, had the power to break Genitz’s arm.

“Waagh!”

The source of Genitz’s strength was a cold calmness that bordered on cruelty. He was flustered at having lost an important asset like Sven, and that created an unexpected opening. And then he had fallen under counterattack.

“Aiieeeee!!”

Lud wasn’t finished. He had made a crack in an otherwise impenetrable wall. Lud jerked Genitz’s arm closer as if to pry a wider opening and pounded Genitz in the face with his other fist.

“Gugh!”

“That one’s from *Hilde*!”

Lud did this favor for the girl Genitz had betrayed. Hilde had said, “Sock him a good one for me!”

“Hilde... Oh, the first lieutenant...”

“Why did you go through that farce as the so-called Corporal?!”

Genitz had disguised himself to sneak up on Lud and the others. It was too frivolous an act for a man who sought to overturn the nation.

“Two reasons... One was to see you and Sven with my own eyes.”

The terrorist attack inside the *Defairedead*. Genitz had organized that intrigue. However, unexpected individuals had stopped it... A former soldier turned baker and a waitress with red eyes.

“What a surprise... I thought you had fallen on hard times, but then I heard you played a role in making Greyten’s special forces withdraw.”

However, that wasn’t the only reason.

“The other reason was to discipline myself so I wouldn’t be like *her*. I don’t want to be like that young girl.”

“Do you mean trapped by the spell of your family name?”

“Yes. She completely relied on her fallen family’s name. I didn’t want to become someone like that.”

Hilde grew up to believe that her only value was through pride in her family. She was a girl to be pitied.

“If you want to be proud of your blood, you must *prove* yourself. You can’t rely on family lineage. I kept telling myself that.”

“Which... means?”

Genitz’s words unsettled Lud. He talked as if he too was trapped by the spell of family blood.

“I didn’t tell you. I am the last descendent of the Holy Empire.”

The Holy Empire possessed vast territory across Europea until one hundred years ago. The Lion Emperor from a western nation had broken the Holy Empire apart so it became little more than a regional lord ruling a small area around the imperial capital.

Luftzand Domain, which would later become Wiltia, had served the Holy Empire as a nation of knights, but then used the authority of the empty shell of the Holy Empire to construct a unified nation. To restore the empire, it had gathered large and small nations that had once been imperial domains.

Although the imperial family still existed, they lived quietly in the old imperial capital and only appeared at the coronation of the Wiltian monarch to pronounce the king's mandate to reign. Most people in Wiltia and the other nations of Europea didn't know that the imperial family was still alive.

"I will restore the Holy Empire... No, the *European Empire*!"

This was Genitz's ultimate aim. Many people believed him to be excessively ambitious. In order to become an emperor, a moderate amount of ambition wouldn't be sufficient.

"In the end, you *are* trapped by your blood!"

"No! I will unify the world and make up for a lost millennium!"

Genitz pulled a gun from the holster at his waist, aimed it at Lud and pulled the trigger.

"Agh!"

Lud swiftly dodged, but Genitz's aim was surprisingly accurate given the suddenness of the shot. The bullet grazed the baker's arm.

"I have to hurry! Even one day's delay could prove fatal! But..."

Because of Lud's interference, Genitz's plan would be delayed another ten years.

"I won't allow it! Not even from *you*, Langart!"

Genitz shot again.

"What a coincidence! *I* won't allow this either!"

With that, Lud attacked Genitz.

"Uagh?!"

Lud kicked, then threw a fist. His movements were fast and sharp.

What the?!

Genitz sensed something unusual in Lud's motion... Or perhaps, it brought back memories. In the past few days... and also when posing as the Corporal to observe Lud, he noticed that the man's movements were clearly different.

“I can’t believe it...”

The two passed each other and turned around at the same time. Genitz pointed his favorite gun, his Walther P38. At the same time, Lud pointed the Walther PPK.

“What?!”

Two shots rang out simultaneously. Their bullets grazed each other’s cheeks and struck the walls behind.

“Oh, I get it...”

If Genitz hadn’t dodged, Lud’s bullet would have struck his forehead. Lud shot neither to stop Genitz nor to scare him.

“You... Are you going to *kill* me?”

Genitz’s nostalgia was understandable. Lud wasn’t a baker now. He was a soldier again. He was once again the man Genitz had known so well... the man who *killed*.

“Sven will wake up soon,” Lud said quietly.

No one knew whom this girl would love when she awoke and started her life over from the beginning. However, Lud couldn’t allow the slightest chance that she would love Genitz.

“Neither one of us can be nearby. If it makes Sven truly free and happy, I’ll be a wolf one last time.”

Lud pointed the gun he had borrowed from Hilde and glared at Genitz. His eyes were those of the Silver Wolf and the Werewolf who had once destroyed a whole city.

“I understand. Heh heh... Then I’ll say this again. Long time, no see!”

Once again, the two collided.

Chapter 7: Then the Door Opens

She was drifting in total darkness. Her consciousness wafted softly. It was an eerie sensation to float on a warm, black sea.

Who am I?

She was aware of herself. But she didn't know who she was. A philosopher said the innermost self knows, "I think, therefore I am." Right now, all she had was that uncomplicated ego. She had once been known as Sven, but she had lost all such memories.

I... I... Me...

She could question herself, but she couldn't answer. She didn't know where she came from, where she was going, or who she was.

"So we meet again."

She heard a voice in the darkness. She had heard it somewhere before, but that might be her imagination.

"It isn't your imagination. We have talked like this before."

The voice sounded a little disappointed.

"Oh, I see. You've forgotten everything. That's why you don't know."

The voice now had an edge of mirth.

"What will be taken from you? You have been entrusted with everything."

She hadn't the slightest idea what the voice was talking about. She didn't know, but something bothered her.

"Everything is right in front of you," the voice said.

Then a light appeared. It was an immensely reassuring light, with a shine that awakened fond feelings.

"Just like I told your ancestor, everything is yours. No one can take it away from you. So..."

The light entered her.

“You may do whatever you like according to the dictates of your heart.”

The light entered her, but now it shone brighter than before. No. She was shining. The glow expanded and drove away the darkness.

“... HUFF... HUFF... HUFF...”

“You’ve sent quite a thrill down my spine!”

Lud was breathing heavily. In a cold sweat, Genitz smiled fearlessly. It had been only minutes, ten at most, since they had started this fight to kill or be killed. However, in this intense exchange of ongoing attack and defense, a loss of focus for a moment could mean death.

“Lud, it’s still not too late. Come back to me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!”

“I’m serious.”

Genitz estimated it would take another ten years to achieve his goal. If Lud joined him, however, it would take half that.

“Come with me! Together, we can rule the world!”

“I refuse!”

Again, Lud and Genitz pointed their guns at each other. Both prepared to shoot, but Lud got the drop.

“Uagh!!”

Lud’s shot sent Genitz’s Walther 38 flying.

“That’s it, Genitz,” Lud said quietly.

Genitz thought it was a pity to destroy Lud, even though he was trying to do just that. That difference in their feelings toward each other had created an imbalance in the final moments.

How ironic. Genitz, who had manipulated others like chessmen, had lost the game because he had doubts about taking his opponent’s life.

“Are you going to *kill* me?”

“Yes.”

Lud’s Walther PPK had one bullet left. If it hit, it would kill.

“Do you understand what that means? It will be the end of everything—even of you and me.”

“Yes.”

Lud had sworn not to kill because of his principles and beliefs, but also from fear. If he burdened himself with a murder, he could never again bake anything that would make people smile. He could never go back to being the owner of Tockerbrot.

“I know.”

Quietly, Lud pulled the trigger so he could end this whole affair. A gunshot rang out.

“What...?”

Lud spluttered in astonishment.

“I can’t let you do that.”

Someone had suddenly grabbed Lud’s arm, and forced it up. The bullet missed Genitz and struck the ceiling.



“Why?! No!”

Lud’s voice was shaking. The one who had diverted the shot was Sven, the girl with silver hair and red eyes.

“Wa ha ha ha!”

Genitz guffawed. The reset code was supposed to have erased Sven’s memory. However, she had awoken and immediately protected Genitz.

“It seems I am, at the last moment, victorious.”

Sven hadn’t lost her memory. The reset code had failed. Lud thought that must be the explanation.

“You shouldn’t do that, Master.”

However, Lud was wrong.

“Someone who makes food for a living loses the right to do so if he kills someone... Wasn’t it you who told me that?”

Sven smiled. It was a smile for her beloved, the one to whom she had sworn to dedicate her body and mind. She had been speaking to *Lud*.

“Sven... you came back?”

Lud’s voice was shaky.

“Yes! I... Sven... am always just for you in body and soul!”

A miracle had occurred. However, it hadn’t happened to either Genitz or Lud. Sven had used her own strength to achieve this miracle.

Meanwhile, inside the royal palace in Berun...

“Ugh! What is this? How many times do I have to send her flying before she stops?!”

“That’s what I’d like to know! How many times do I have to *shoot* before she stops?!”

Suzuka and Sophia appeared united in fighting the third body. Suzuka threw her, and Sophia shot her. Their attacks would have killed a human being a

hundred times by now, but the third body never stopped.

“Eliminate... Annihilate... Eliminate... Annihilate...”

The third body repeated those words like a ghost as she attacked.

But she *had* taken some damage. Her arm and leg joints were creaking. Her neck was unstable. And her eyes were vacant, making her look even spookier.

“Weren’t you just talking tough? Do something! Did you run out of magic or something?”

As soon as Suzuka arrived, she had boasted to their opponent, saying things like, “Don’t underestimate human strength!” and “Just serve tea!” But the exceptional toughness... the *durability* of a humanoid Hunter Unit was beyond imagination.

“Stop complaining! Why don’t *you* handle this? You people from Europea *bug* me!”

“What?! Now you’ve done it, you twit!!”

The two began quarreling with each other.

“Young ladies shouldn’t use such vulgar speech.”

A man with silly sorcerer-like steps and a relaxed tone of voice arrived.

“You... I knew it! You’re alive?!”

Sophia’s voice shook.

“Of course. I couldn’t die and leave my beloved Sophia!”

Daian Fortuner, answered playfully.

“Intruder... Enemy... Eliminate... Annihilate...”

After seeing Daian, the third body approached to defeat the new enemy.

“Order 0098UIO7JSO618219.”

Before it came close, Daian used the emergency control code.

“Stop.”

“__”

And that was all it took to stop and shut down the third body. The light disappeared from her eyes and she collapsed. She looked like a discarded doll.

“Did you know that one object of my research was the creation of an immortal soldier?”

The development of humanoid Hunter Units was secret, so *this* was the official reason for Daian’s work.

“She was a prototype.”

Earlier, Daian had told Rebecca that she and Sven were the only humanoid Hunter Units. It wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t the whole truth either.

“She was defective. She doesn’t even have a name.”

On the way to creating Sven and Rebecca, Daian had generated lots of failures. But one hadn’t been a total loss. She was far from his goal of creating a cyborg, but she was a well-constructed puppet that obeyed orders.

“Her speed and strength were considerable, but no more. She was a movable mannequin.”

Nonetheless, the royal palace had asked to borrow her as a guard for important people. The request had come specifically from the royal sage Hanussen.

Typically, the prototype would wear an attendant’s uniform and position herself beside the monarch. And, if necessary, she would sacrifice herself to protect him. Sensing unusual activity by the Schutzstaffel, Daian had expected his creation to be useful in an emergency, but Genitz had learned about her and taken her instead. Genitz knew about the emergency control code because Daian had revealed it in case the prototype ever went out of control.

“Sophia, what do you think of her?” Daian asked.

He pointed at the prototype lying on the ground.

“I think it’s well-sculpted. She looked utterly human and yet... not at all.”

Daian had decided the prototype was a failure because it didn’t have the “heart” necessary for developing a personality. Even if well made, there was no point if she couldn’t desire someone or understand what that meant.

“This isn’t what I want a human being to be. A person shouldn’t have her heart controlled through a string of meaningless numbers and letters.”

Both the emergency control code and reset code had been established during manufacture. Although Hunter Units were created in the form of mechanical dolls, if they developed a heart, they would become human and those codes would be useless.

“I wonder what happened to Sven...”

“Umf!”

“Hoomph?!”

Daian’s tone was uncharacteristically serious and emotional, but Sophia interrupted by slapping his face.

“I can touch him... He’s not a ghost?!”

“S-Sophia... Could you be a little gentler, please?”

“Why are you still alive?!”

Daian had protected Sophia and taken a bullet during the attack on the development bureau.

“Well... fact is, this cape is made of a new material, a quality product of the development bureau. It’s an excellent item—bullet, blade and poison proof!”

He proudly flourished the high-density cape impervious to penetration by the 9-millimeter slugs of a Walther P38.

“I pretended to be dead, then hid among the corpses and escaped to the Yamato embassy. I could have sought asylum alone, but my conscience wouldn’t allow it.”

“Umf!”

“Ahooff!!”

Sophia interrupted again, punching him in the stomach this time.

“You should’ve told me sooner that you were alive!!”

“Unnngh...”

“I thought you were *dead*! Grarrr!”

Sophia had always detested Daian. She had detested him, but he had protected her, so she was in shock. She wished she had been a little nicer. Regret brought tears to her eyes.

“That’s why I *hate* you!”

In embarrassment, she couldn’t help walloping him.

“Unnngh...” Daian was doubled over, moaning.

“Oh, don’t be so *dramatic*!”

“You don’t understand, Sophia! This cape is bullet proof, but it still transfers the force of impact!”

Bullets wouldn’t penetrate, but Daian’s ribs had fractured as if hit by an iron ball.

“Oh... S-Sorry.”

While he would survive her beating, Sophia realized he definitely wasn’t laughing, so she rushed to his side.

“That’s all right. You’re even cute when you’re violent!”

“D-Don’t say such ridiculous things!”

Sophia spoke back firmly, but her face was faintly blushing.

“Okay, enough of this talk! It’s as sweet as an *Erdbeere* (strawberry)!”

Suzuka threw cold water on their conversation.

“Oh... Suzuka? Good work. I’ll give you a functional humanoid Hunter Unit just like I promised. You can take that one.”

Daian pointed at the third body, the prototype lying on the floor.

“It functions well enough. But I guess you tested it already.”

In return for borrowing Suzuka, the Ultimate Ambassadorial Weapon, Daian had promised Yamato a humanoid Hunter Unit. Now he was honoring that pledge.

“Hmm... That’s fine, but it doesn’t look like we can settle this matter

peacefully yet.”

Suzuka was staring at the sudden appearance of many Schutzstaffel soldiers.

“Uh-oh...”

Ten... twenty... And the number was rising.

There were over fifty of them, and they were all pointing guns.

“You’ve done it *now*, you brats!”

It wasn’t only soldiers. The old men in the Council of Nobles were standing before them and trembling with rage.

“That’s Count Palatine Wittels and many others I’ve seen before.”

As a daughter of the Rundstadt family, Sophia had grown up with connections to society. The nobles clung to their useless pride, and Sophia hated that.

“Wiltia was to be reborn! It would return to the great old times of respect for tradition and order! But you riffraff stand in the way!”

Faced with these ranting old men, Sophia felt only exhaustion.

Good old times? What were they talking about? Unable to face the present, they had escaped into memory and illusion. This was nonsense from people who had never reflected on themselves.

“Guys like this were helping Genitz?”

Sophia remembered her subordinates who died in the attack on the development bureau. She saw the face of Private Sariya, who had smiled brightly despite the burden of her difficult past.

“Do you understand how many soldiers died because of your stupid ideas?!”

“Silence, girl! You should have obeyed us without question!”

“What?!”

Beyond angry, Sophia was stunned into silence.

These old men wouldn’t recognize anything other than what they thought was right. They never tried to understand what they didn’t already know.

“Sophia, that’s enough. You’re wasting your time.”

Daian spoke as if consoling Sophia.

“It’s useless to ask these old fogeys to understand.”

“What did you say, child?!”

Wittels yelled, but Daian’s face remained cool.

“That’s why Genitz abandoned you guys.”

Since suppression of the royal capital had failed and the king had branded the Schutzstaffel as rebels, they should have left the capital immediately. However, it would have been difficult for all of them to escape.

Genitz had left them behind. The regular military, which was now subduing rebels, would focus its attention here.

“No way... He *abandoned* us?!”

“See? They didn’t know. Just how brain-dead are they?”

Daian looked at the panicking elders of the Council of Nobles as if studying irredeemable nincompoops.

“W-Well then, we shall seize you as hostages!”

“Indeed! We shall establish an independent region within Windia! For we are on the side of right!”

Windia was the site of the Holy Empire’s capital. It was an old city with a long history. The old men began to direct the soldiers, but another man appeared.

“That’s enough. Call it off.”

It was Marshal Elvin of the regular military.

“Elvin?! What are you doing here?!” Wittels shouted.

Elvin was supposed to be confined to the military command office in the royal palace.

“The guards there surrendered long ago. And they begged my forgiveness.”

The Schutzstaffel was considered an elite unit. However, only ten percent of its soldiers were from the nobility. Most were from the common folk, like the soldiers who scarfed down the potato bread that Jacob and Milly handed out.

“No one wants to fight after being labeled a rebel army.”

“Drat those commoners!” Wittels spat in frustration.

“Hey, I’m from a common background, too.”

“Silence! In the old times, someone from the lower classes like you could never stand atop the military... Aha!”

The old man with bloodshot eyes made a face as if he had hit on a good idea.

“You... If I take *you* hostage, the regular military wouldn’t *dare* make a move!”

“You’re lower than ever.”

Elvin answered exasperatedly.

“Don’t you understand *why* I’m here?”

“No, why?!”

“Because it’s all over.”

After this pronouncement, Elvin raised his right hand. He was holding a small object with a red flashing light.

“Oh... *I* made that!”

“Yes, Dr. Daian. It’s most useful.”

It was a quality product of the Royal Weapons Development Bureau: a compact transmitter. It would transmit their location within a radius of one kilometer. Just then they heard something piercing the sky. It wasn’t a cannon ball. But it was *huge*...

“W-What?!”

Giants... No, *Hunter Units* with parachutes were descending all around the royal palace.

“H-How can this be? Hunter Units?!”

With an exasperated voice, Elvin answered the confused Wittels.

“Hunter Units were originally for deployment in surprise attacks.”

The Schutzstaffel had believed that even if the monarch declared them to be

rebels, it would take time for the regular military to invade the royal palace.

“No way... Oh, *I* get it!” Sophia cried out.

Ever since Lud told her about the monarch’s speech over the radio, Sophia had been wondering something. Twelve Comm’s range of transmission was about one kilometer. So it wasn’t capable of broadcasting outside the royal capital. And the Schutzstaffel had seized all relay stations. But which relay station could transmit waves throughout Wiltia?

“It was from *above*...”

“You got it.”

Elvin smiled as he stood by the window and pointed at the sky. A giant airship was gaining altitude.

“The *Defairedead*!”

Sophia had a past connection to the airship.

A range of one kilometer was too small when transmitting waves laterally. However, they could also transmit one thousand meters into the sky.

“The *Defairedead* was constructed for use as an air fortress, so it contains communications equipment. For the airship, it would be a piece of cake to broadcast an imperial ordinance from the monarch anywhere it wanted.”

And its huge hangar could hold many Hunter Units and drop them from the sky above the royal palace.

“Do you finally get it? What’s most decisive in war is the situation *beforehand*. Only the lowest amateurs would act in a rush without thought at the last minute.”

Elvin had shown himself to them... only because he was certain of his force’s absolute victory.

“Y-You...!”

Wittels still couldn’t admit that his faction had lost. He snatched a gun from a soldier.

“You *still* don’t get it?!”

Just as Elvin's shouted, a Hunter Unit landed next to him. It broke through the wall brandishing a rifle bigger than a tank cannon and aimed it at the Council of Nobles and the Schutzstaffel soldiers.

"Marshal, are you all right?!"

The pilot's voice came from the external speaker of the Hunter Unit, and Elvin answered with the wave of a hand.

"Yeah. Good timing!"

Fifty soldiers simply weren't enough to fight one Hunter Unit.

"I'll tell you something for the last time, you *fop*."

Elvin was addressing Wittels, who had sunk to the floor in astonishment.

"Don't take professionals lightly."

Elvin was a professional in war and a master schemer, so without Genitz, the Council of Nobles didn't stand a chance of opposing him.

Back underground at the Weapons Development Bureau...

"I'm sorry, Master!!!"

Sven wept and shrieked bitterly, while begging incessantly for forgiveness.

"I can't believe it of myself! For someone like me to allow her loyalty to be clouded even slightly is extraordinarily disrespectful and a dreadful mistake!!"

Although she had been under Genitz's control, Sven couldn't forgive herself for her many impudent actions toward Lud.

"Um... uh... it's all right, Sven. Calm down."

"But... but...!"

Finding himself in this familiar conversation after such a long time, Lud's face was troubled but wistful.

"Ha ha ha..."

Genitz laughed at the sight.

"What's so funny, you scoundrel?!"

“It’s funny to watch you two!”

Genitz had lost, but had recovered enough to make sarcastic remarks.

“Langart... you aren’t going to kill me?”

“No. Because I’m a *baker*. And a baker’s job isn’t dealing death.”

Genitz smirked.

“You’re such a softie.”

Then he removed something from his pocket.

“Master, stay back!”

Alarmed, Sven thought Genitz was hiding a weapon, so she stood in front of Lud.

“What is that?”

“What do you think?”

Lud saw a wireless transmitter in Genitz’s hand.

“That guy Daian is a genius. He made it almost impossible to conquer the development bureau. But after we took it over, we found *this*—and then I was *doubly sure* he’s a genius!”

“Surely, that’s not...”

“Yes, it’s the trigger for a bomb. It was just invented by the development bureau.”

This underground level, where the Door was located, was deep below the development bureau.

“If a bomb explodes overhead, the ground will crumble and bury us all alive.”

“I keep my best cards for the very end.”

“Would you blow yourself up just because you lost? Only petty underlings do that!”

“Yes. It’s embarrassing, so I didn’t want to. But I’m not just blowing myself up. This is much bigger than that.”

“What do you mean?”

This was a new type of bomb created by Daian Fortuner, the creator of the Hunter Units. There must be more to this than suicide.

“Is it something like a zeihombomber?”

A zeihombomber was a weapon of mass destruction that resonated with the high-energy ore known as rezanite. One barrel of it could reduce a town like Organbaelz to rubble.

“Heh... This isn’t just fireworks. This bomb has the power to recreate Lapchuricka in a moment!”

The slaughter of Lapchuricka was a massacre committed by Wiltian armed forces at Genitz’s command.

“Lapchuricka took a whole day with Hunter Units, heavy tanks, bombers and railway artillery. Isn’t the progress of science incredible? Now all I have to do is press this button!”

Currently, they were in a corner of Berun, also known as Million City. If a bomb of that scale exploded here... The scale of destruction would be unimaginable.

“What about your friends?! They’ll all die!”

But it was too late to do anything now. To escape, sound an alarm, or take any other action would be slower than Genitz pressing the button.

“What do you want?”

“Ah, now *that’s* cutting to the chase!”

Raising an eyebrow, Genitz answered Sven’s question.

Genitz never planned on dying with them. And Lud and Sven knew that. However, Jacob, Milly, Shylock, Sophia and countless other innocent people would die if he pressed the button. They couldn’t take such a dangerous gamble.

“I have only one request. I want you to open the Door.”

That was the original reason Genitz had taken Sven.

“You haven’t given up on that yet?!”

“Nope. I *never* give up.”

Genitz’s coup had failed and his back was against the wall, but this was his last hope of success.

“That’s enough, Genitz. I get the feeling the Door shouldn’t be opened.”

Lud had reservations about the Door. Why had the old empire created the Doors? Were they a gift to future generations? It was unlikely.

“Maybe it’s *supposed* to be sealed.”

“Yes, I couldn’t agree more.”

“—?!”

Surprisingly, Genitz’s face was calm. He hadn’t lost control of himself. His face said he was ready for martyrdom.

“Are you sure? Whatever happens, I won’t take the blame!”

“That’s fine.”

Slowly, Sven approached the Door. And Genitz followed.

“You wait there, Master.”

Still a few steps away, Sven told Lud to stop.

“.....”

Sven placed her hand on the Door. She didn’t know the significance of this action. But she understood instinctively that this was the right way.

“Huh...?”

The rezanium reactor inside her was heating up. In response, the Door began shining a faint light.

“Oh...”

Genitz exclaimed at this mysterious sight.

A gap opened between the two halves of the massive Door. Slowly, they parted to the left and right.

“Hear me, Door! Heritage of an ancient empire! Grant me wisdom! Show me a way to save this world!”

Genitz raised his voice as if he were the humble servant to a god. However...

Oh no!

A chill ran down Sven’s back.

“Master! Close your eyes! Turn around and lie down!” Sven shouted.

They mustn’t stare at it. They shouldn’t even look at it. That was essential. From the other side of the Door, a multitude of eyes peered through the opening. And all of those eyes simultaneously fixed on Genitz.

At that moment, light poured out. It bathed every nook and cranny of the bureau’s lowest subterranean level. Sven thought she heard something. It could be the sound of wind, or it could be the ground shaking. However, it was also like a person’s voice. And she thought it was saying, “You idiot! Are you doing this again?!” A few moments later, she could see through her closed eyes that the light had faded.



“Master, it’s all right now!”

Lud opened his eyes and turned around. The Door was closed again.

“Where’s Genitz?”

Lud looked around. Genitz was nowhere to be seen. What remained was a pile of salt shaped like a man opening his arms as if receiving everything the other side of the Door had to bestow.

“It seems... he shouldn’t have opened the Door.”

Quietly, Sven simply acknowledged what she saw.

“Genitz, you...”

Lud had approached the chunk of salt on unsteady feet, but he was overcome with surprise and had to kneel. The vibration broke the salt statue. Maximillian Genitz died without leaving a trace.

“You idiot!!”

Lud hit the ground and shouted. His eyes were full of tears.

“A long time ago, he saved my life,” Lud gasped through his tears.

“When I first became a Werewolf, there was an error in my orders.”

The command to protect his comrades and kill the target had been switched around. Lud’s order instructed him to protect the enemy and kill his comrades. If he had thought about it even for a moment, he would have realized there was a mistake. However, Lud never doubted his instructions.

“I was taught never to question orders, only to carry them out, no matter what they were. So I did what it said.”

He had killed every last one of his comrades and let the enemy live.

“Superior officers took me into custody. They were going to dispose of me as a threat.”

“Dispose of”... not “punish” or “execute.”

They were about to end his life, as if getting rid of a dog or a defective tool.

“But then Genitz showed up. He protected me and insisted I wasn’t wrong. On

the contrary, he said that I was an excellent soldier who had been loyal in following orders."

From that time on, Lud had served directly under Genitz. He carried out his orders without hesitation or question. Genitz had been seeking someone like him. A man whose aim was to restore an ancient empire and become emperor needed a servant who wouldn't call this task "ridiculous."

However, was that the only reason? Did Genitz want Lud because he was an excellent tool? Or did he want a friend or companion who would walk that path with him?

"If he had just called me *friend*, I might have joined him."

But now no one would ever know the truth. Because that man no longer existed.

"You idiot..."

No one lives completely alone. Someone will shed tears over the death of even the most despicable scumbag. Perhaps in future generations, the history of Wiltia will speak of the traitor Genitz as the epitome of a demon. Nonetheless, Lud mourned his death.

Epilogue: Parting

The entire incident—from the Schutzstaffel attack on the Royal Weapons Development Bureau to the death of Genitz—seemed to take a long time but had actually lasted only ten days. History would later record it as the Ten-Day Commotion.

“Whew, this place is totally wrecked. Repairing it will take some time,” said Daian.

He was once again seated in his office.

“It was indeed quite tumultuous,” said Hanussen.

The beautiful imperial sage was seated on the sofa wearing a dour expression.

“I must thank you. I never thought you would keep your promise.”

“Hmf!”

Genitz had stolen the third body, a prototype humanoid Hunter Unit. Hanussen had handled the original arrangement to use it as a guard for the monarch. It hadn’t been the royal sage Hanussen’s idea, but she was the only person with a proper connection to the genius scientist—and weirdo—Daian. To compensate for her failure, Daian had asked her to deliver the message about the reset code.

“Did that automaton get her heart back?”

“Do you mean Sven? Yes. It’s quite surprising.”

Daian appeared inordinately pleased at this result, which had surpassed his expectations.

“I hear you gave Yamato the prototype? Is that all right?”

“Well, I got Elvin’s approval as an extra safety measure.”

Yamato’s people excelled at learning. Europeans tended to look down on Aesians, and some poked fun at Yamato as a nation of copycats, but that was a

gross misunderstanding. Yamato's people grasped the essence of things.

"Is that all right?"

Hanussen repeated her question.

"Someday, that country may independently produce humanoid Hunter Units."

"And if they do, that'll be fine."

As a developer, he would normally fear anyone copying his original creation, but he didn't care.

"In that case, I'll just go swipe the new technology that *they* develop!"

He would abandon his pride to get what he wanted. That was Daian Fortuner's way of life.

"Oh, then I won't say anything. Except I will ask *one* thing."

Hanussen's eyes narrowed.

"What is beyond that door?"

"Well, if you don't know, then *I* certainly don't!"

"Hmf!"

Daian answered as if he might know or might not—or he might have a guess—and Hanussen shot him a bitter look as she stood up from the sofa.

"Then I have nothing to gain from talking to you any further. I'm leaving."

Hanussen strode to the door, but then it opened from the other side.

"Sophia von Rundstadt reporting! Oops... sorry!"

At that moment, Sophia appeared.

"It's *quite* all right," Hanussen said without meeting her eyes.

Hanussen packed everything into that terse declaration: "You don't have to apologize. You don't have to mind me. You don't need to have anything to do with me." Then she left Sophia and walked out.

"Oh my! Sophia! To what do I owe this pleasure?"

After the incident, Sophia had returned to her role as captain of the Weapons Development Bureau's guard.

"Um... just a little matter of business."

"Oh? Have you come to beg me to take you to dinner tonight?"

As usual, Daian said something ridiculous in his carefree voice.

"Yes, that's right."

"I know, I know! I'm a foolish idiot, right? I get it, but just don't punch me—What?"

Daian's features froze at the unexpected answer.

"You were a lot of help, so to repay you, I thought... Anyway, we'll split the bill! I won't let you treat me!"

Sophia turned away as she spoke. Then she spun on her heels and left the room. A few seconds after exiting the office, there was a loud shout —"Yahooooo!"—behind her. But she pretended she hadn't heard.

In the marshal's office in central headquarters at the royal palace...

"Yes, you were a big help this time. You really went the extra mile. Hmm? Yes, that's right. You merely did what your own circumstances dictated, and that just happened to be good for me, too. Heh heh... It's the same in war and business, right? All right, good-bye."

Elvin ended the call and hung up.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting."

"No, that's all right."

Elvin apologized to the man in his office. He placed the receiver in the storage case that opened like a book, closed the lid, and locked it.

"Is that the hotline I've heard of?"

"Yes."

After the kidnapping incident, Elvin and Shylock made a secret agreement

that the regular army would handle any attack by an armed organization as a condition of a capital tie-up with Billions Trading. Therefore, they had established a hotline for contacting each other at any time. It was a small wireless phone kept in a locked case disguised as a book.

“Is that another one of Daian’s inventions?”

“Yes. It’s so expensive that widespread use is difficult, even for the military.”

The Schutzstaffel had completely severed communications from the royal palace to the outside world. But that only applied to communications by wire. Wireless communications, especially on devices this small, were beyond their reach. So while sealed in the command section, Elvin used this phone to contact and deliver messages to the outside world through Shylock. This had been decisive in reclaiming the royal palace, much as it had in the sailing orders for the *Defairedead*.

“By the way, shouldn’t I have told him about you? Wouldn’t your father have been happy?”

The man before Marshal Elvin was an investigator from Apuvea. Apuvea was an intelligence agency in the principality of Wiltia. It engaged in wars of information with its foreign counterparts, in addition to observing and arresting anti-government elements and rebels.

Due to the nature of the organization’s work, the personal information of its investigators was of the utmost secrecy. Not only were their identities concealed, but many faked their own deaths so that official records listed them as deceased before they started work. Just like Erich Blitzdonner, the ace pilot once known as the Crimson Hawk.

“That stubborn old man would just get old if things got too comfy.”

“We lost much in this ordeal, but our gains were significant.”

Approximately 10 percent of the bigshots in the Schutzstaffel who had been co-conspirators with Genitz were arrested as national traitors, 30 percent were ejected from the army, 30 percent were pressed into retirement, and the remaining 30 percent were assigned to the regular army in various districts.

“The arrest of the Council of Nobles is significant. They were a militant faction

opposed to Wiltia's current policy of advancing international cooperation."

Palace security had formed a palace guard as a force restricted to protection of the royal family and the palace. It would function to prevent a commotion like this from recurring.

"And we decided to erect a monument bearing the names of those who died in this conflict so they can be mourned, whether they were from the regular military or the Schutzstaffel."

Now that the commotion had passed, it was important to prevent grudges from forming. If left alone, people's hatred would persist, so it was important to replace it with sorrow.

"And what of former Lieutenant Hildegard von Hessen of the Schutzstaffel?"

"Hildegard... Oh, the young girl?"

After the incident, even though Hilde had been Genitz's direct subordinate, it was decided that her rank be revoked and she would enter officers' school for retraining. This was in consideration of her background, circumstances and, above all, her youth. After that, it was up to her whether she remained in the army.

"It's unofficial, but His Majesty requested that we show maximum consideration for the others involved in this matter, and we have obliged."

"For the king known as The Man of Three Phrases, that's practically *talkative*."

"Furthermore, Hildegard expressed a desire that we engrave the name of a man called Heidrig on the monument."

"Heidrig...? Oh, *that* man... Understood. That's appropriate."

If someone had asked what good that would do a dead man, Elvin would have found it difficult to answer. But including Heidrig was important. The point was to offer unto the dead a vow to never forget.

"One more misstep could have caused the outbreak of a Second Great European War."

"Yes, Wiltia's allies and enemies alike would have descended upon Berun and turned it into a sea of fire. Even worse, there's..."

“Yes. The new explosive.”

Genitz had revealed a new bomb developed by the Royal Weapons Development Bureau. It was a weapon of mass destruction that had yet to receive an official codename.

“According to our intelligence, another country is developing a similar weapon.”

Blitzdonner relayed the information with a look of dismay.

“If another Great War erupts, development will accelerate and reach practical application.”

Sometimes, war drastically stimulated scientific development. The new bomb could be introduced into actual combat and give rise to multiple tragedies like the one in Lapchuricka.

“If another Great War occurs, one year will generate as many casualties as ten years did in the last war.”

“They didn’t use technology from the Door to make that bomb, did they?”

“No.”

Blitzdonner looked dismayed again.

Analyzing the Door’s technology had led to Wiltia becoming the most technologically advanced nation in the world. However, an accelerated pace of scientific and technological advancement could greatly increase Wiltia’s current mastery. Possibly increase it to the point where humanity would create its own hell.

“It occurred to me that Genitz’s tactics are always of the sort dreaded by those in the military. But if you look at it with cold objectivity, his methods always minimize casualties and achieve victory the fastest way.”

At times, Genitz had paid no heed to civilian and urban deaths, and at others he had abandoned friendly forces, leading to tens of thousands of deaths. By winning quickly, however, he avoided the *hundreds* of thousands of deaths that would have resulted from a lengthy conflict.

“He wanted to revive the European Empire with himself as supreme leader.

That's why his ambitions were unusual. And they only accelerated during the latter half of the Great War."

Numerous weapons had been developed during that time, making it possible to kill more efficiently.

"Right before this incident occurred, a prototype of that new explosive was completed."

Elvin was thinking. Genitz had been in a hurry. Perhaps that was because he thought that if he didn't hurry, another Great War would grip the world. A battle in which the human race just might eradicate itself.

"He may have wanted to complete unification of an empire in order to stop confrontations between nations."

"Lord Marshal, are you suggesting that he was attempting to *protect* humanity?"

"In any case, he's dead now."

However, Genitz had persisted to the end in seeking the Door. It may have been beyond that portal... Perhaps there was an overwhelming power capable of eradicating humanity's current capacity for destruction. If humans wouldn't give up war, then perhaps there was a way to control humanity with the power to dominate the entire species.

"But he rushed. Nonetheless, the scope of his vision and insight were fit for a king."

Genitz was dead, and the Schutzstaffel's ambitions were broken. That would result in permanent peace however.

"As we sit here, the next "Corporal" may be on the rise."

Another who hides behind a mask, mixes with the crowd, and works behind the scenes to incite the next war.

"I will not allow that to happen," Blitzdonner said to Elvin, who looked sad. "That's why I killed myself to become who I am now."

He removed his gloves and looked at the palm of his mechanical hand.

“For my child and his mother’s sake, I will extinguish all potential fires.”

Meanwhile, in the small mining town of Organbaelz in Pelfe...

“Now for some hard-core cleaning so we can open up shop again!”

There had been complications after the commotion in Berun was resolved, so they weren’t able to immediately return to Organbaelz. In the end, Tockerbrot Bakery had been closed for almost two weeks.

Lud and Sven raced around, mops in hand, to thoroughly clean the shop, including the oven room. With frightening speed, they washed the floors, walls, windows, shelves and even items like the baskets and trays for holding bread.

“We have to work hard! For the townsfolk, too!”

It seemed the people in town had been in an uproar wondering what happened to Lud and the others when they suddenly disappeared. Luckily, Marlene—who took care of Eris the cat, and held down the fort—had skillfully covered for them. But that only lasted three days.

With tears in her eyes, Marlene welcomed Lud’s group when they returned to Organbaelz. She had vied with Sven for Lud’s attention in the past, but she rejoiced at the waitress’s return and hugged her in a fit of emotion.

“These tongs won’t last much longer. Is it time to think about getting new ones?”

“Hey, Sven?”

As she happily worked, Lud suddenly spoke.

“What is it, Master?”

“You always call me master. Would you mind not doing that?”

Thankfully, Sven had come back as her old self. During the recent altercation, Lud implored her to live as she pleased. He had even been willing to risk the loss of all her memories of him to do that.

“You have a heart and can live freely now without the need to serve anyone, so...”

“Um, well about that...”

Fidgeting, Sven intertwined and twisted her fingers.

“So, uh, am I supposed to use your *name* from now on?”

“Yes, I think that’s better.”

“Like, um... Master Lud?”

“Yes, but without Master.”

“So, um... Lud?”

“Yes, that’s—”

“Kyaaah!”

Before Lud could complete his sentence, Sven turned beet red and shrieked.

“No, no, no... That’s taking things too fast! It’s... um... positively *appalling*!”

“What?!”

“I mean... you know! Suddenly calling each other Lud and Sven is just... no way... you goof!”

“Um...”

She was happily, embarrassedly, joyfully rocking her body as if dancing. Seeing that, Lud appeared troubled.

“The way it was before is fine! After all, no one’s *forcing* me. I call you Master of my own free will. And that’s just fine,” Sven said, before breaking into a bright smile.

“Oh? Then I guess that’s all right.”

If she decided freely, according to her own heart, then he shouldn’t press her further. If this is what Sven wanted, then Lud believed he should accept that.

“Oh... a customer?”

The bell over the door rang with a *cling-clang*.

“Sorry, but we don’t open until tomorrow!”

The CLOSED sign still hung on the front door.

Her feet pitter-pattering, Sven ran to greet the customer. But she came back right away.

“It was the mail carrier.”

“Who is it from?”

“It’s a communication from the bank.”

“?!”

Lud blanched at the mention of the bank.

Since Sven’s arrival, Tockerbrot’s finances had been improving, but they had been so bad before that he was still deeply in debt.

“What is it? A collection notice?”

In some ways, the bank was a more formidable opponent to Lud than the Schutzstaffel had ever been.

“Each month, I barely manage to send a payment, but... huh?”

Sven opened the envelope and was surprised when she read the document inside.

“What is it? A change in interest? An increase in payments?”

“No... You received an enormous cash transfer, so they want to confirm it.”

“Enormous transfer?”

Lud cocked his head. He didn’t recall anyone suddenly depositing money.

“How much was it for?”

“A *lot*. It’s enough money for a household of four to live on for ten years!”

“You’re right. Look at that number!”

With the money, keeping Tockerbrot afloat would be *easy*.

“Hm? Who sent it?”

The name of the sender was listed as Doppeladler Co., Ltd.

“What is that?”

Lud recognized the name. It was the name of a company created as a front for

money laundering when the Werewolves illegally acquired wealth.

“Impossible...”

Then he suddenly remembered. Seven or eight years ago, Lud had acquired an expensive necklace while on a mission. Genitz had temporarily taken it, saying he would exchange it for cash and arrange it so Lud got the money when the time came.

“That idiot...”

Genitz had probably arranged for the money to be automatically transferred upon his death. He had remembered his promise and kept it.

“I wanted him to try my bread sometime.”

Lud and Genitz each refused to give ground, so they had never joined hands again—not even at the bitter end. Perhaps that had been unavoidable. It was sad, but inevitable. Lud couldn’t see it any other way.

“Do you know the sender?”

Sven asked with a mystified look on her face.

“Yeah, it’s an old friend,” Lud said.

Then he looked out the window and up at the sky.



Afterword

Well, that was *The Combat Baker and Automaton Waitress*, volume 5! Thank you for reading!

This was my first time writing a single story arc spanning two volumes. And it was my first time reaching volumes 4 and 5 in a series, so I took some risks. I expected to hear people say, “I’m looking forward to the second half!” But that isn’t exactly what happened. Some people were shocked at the unexpected developments in volume 4 and said they were going to stop reading.

A novel is a work of art, but it’s also a consumer product. People pay money for my books, so I have an obligation and a responsibility to make sure they enjoy them. It’s too bad that I was unable to do that, and I’m very sorry.

But may I talk a little about that? When I come to the end of a story, I want to save the characters and make them happy. And not just happy dramatically. I want them to find hope, so that a character in search of something eventually gains something.

“Life is irreplaceable.”

“Once you die, no matter how much you may want to, you can’t come back.”

“That’s why simply being alive right now is such a miracle.”

Those ideas are at the core of this series.

Lud is the main character and he has killed many people. I suppose even *he* doesn’t know the exact number of people he has killed. Or rather, he killed too many to count even if he *wanted* to know.

Each life is precious, but he has taken countless lives. Thus he has chosen to live with the burden of that sin, that crime. For this reason, even my fictional world has to be one in which people die.

How important is it that people die? How grave a sin is it to take a person’s life? I thought Lud’s decision in this volume would be too easy without that

burden. Which applies to Sven's actions as well.

Maybe those who said they wouldn't keep reading have a strong sensitivity to such tradeoffs. I wanted these people to read volume 5 too, so it's too bad that some didn't.

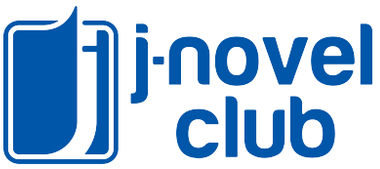
I'm incredibly grateful to everyone who has read this far. So thank you. Sorry for being so serious here. Anyway, I want to offer some thank-yous and apologies again.

Editor O, thank you for treating me to Brazilian meat dishes! They were delicious, so I'd like to go again! (*glances over*...) Zaza, sorry for always causing you so much trouble! The illustrations were wonderful again this time! Also, much appreciation to proofreaders, designers, sales personnel, printing, distribution and bookstores. Thank you everyone, as another book goes out into the world! Above all, thanks to the readers! Thanks with all my heart! Thank you very much!

I'll see you again sometime...

Um, just to make sure you know... this isn't the end, okay? The story will continue! So see you in volume 6!

SOW



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The Combat Baker and Automaton Waitress: Volume 5

by SOW

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