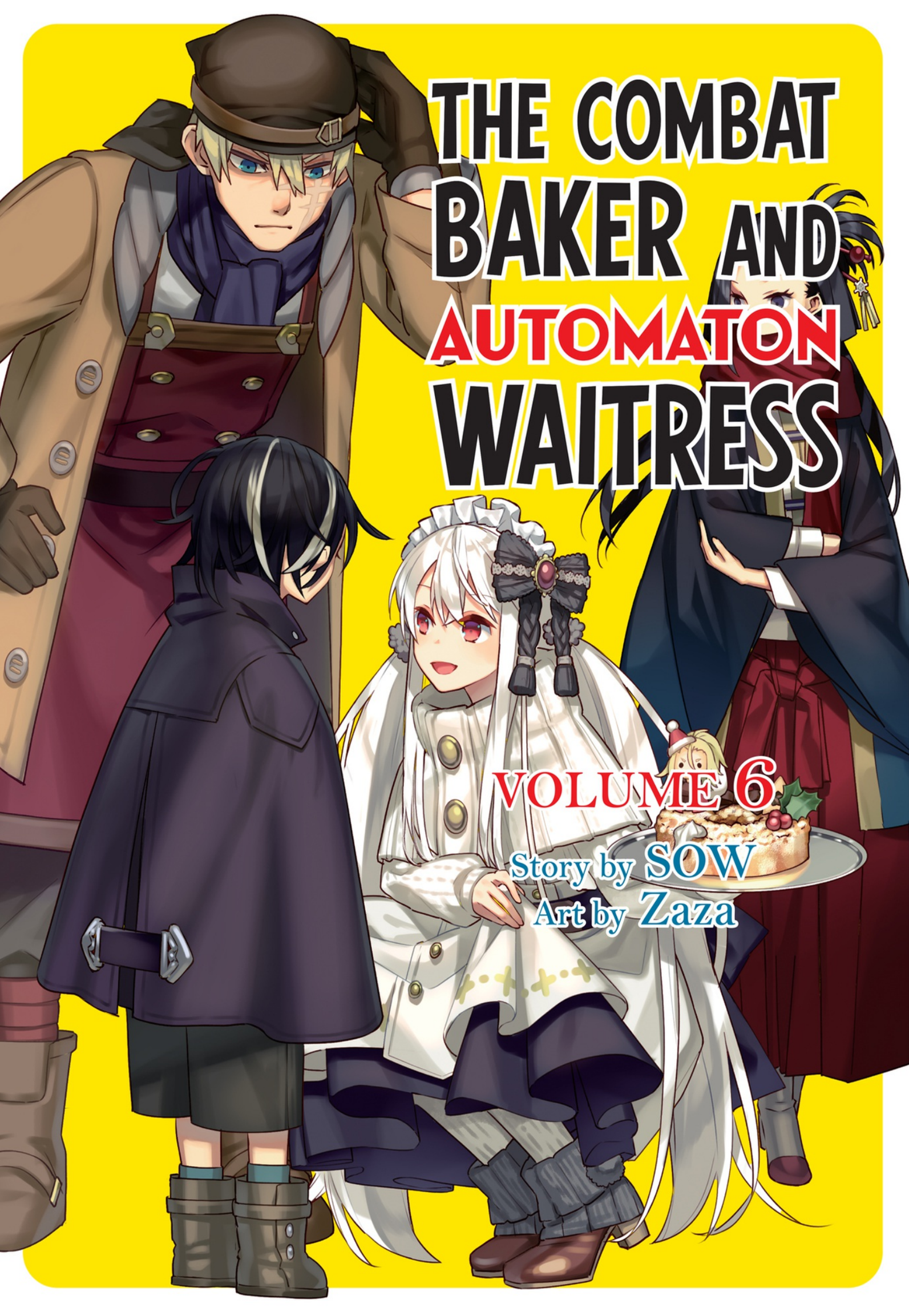
THE COMBAT BAKER AND AUTOMATON WAITRESS



VOLUME 6

Story by SOW

Art by Zaza


THE COMBAT
BAKER AND
AUTOMATON
WAITRESS 6


LUD LANGART
Tockerbrot's kind but scary-looking baker, chosen to be the Holy Festival's Devil who takes away bad children.
HILDEGARD VON HESSEN
Reenlisted in officer's school, which is now referred to as the Preparatory School for Young Ladies since the disbandment of the Schutzstaffel. She is also known as Hilde.
LILLIE
Hilde's classmate at officer's school and the only girl who is friendly to her.
SUZUKA AMAKI
A military attaché stationed at the Yamato Embassy. She has received a summons to serve as special instructor at the officer's school Hilde attends.
SVEN
A popular waitress chosen to be the Saint at this year's Holy Festival, where she hands out presents to the children.
CHARACTERS



Table of Contents Cover

Color Illustrations

Introduction: A Certain Maintenance Worker's Monologue, Part 1

Chapter 1: Hildegard Von Hessen Case File

Chapter 2: A Certain Maintenance Worker's Monologue, Part 2

Chapter 3: The Holy Festival's Saint and Devil

Chapter 4: The Human Theorem

Epilogue: The Sorcerer's Memories

Afterword

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

Introduction: A Certain Maintenance Worker's Monologue, Part 1

My name is Daian Fortuner. This name is all I have. Nothing else is mine, and there is nothing else I control. It is the same as having no life or death. This place, which used to be known as the Holy Tower, is deep underground, beneath the mountains.

Once upon a time, a god resided here. I am sure of it. There can be no doubt. A perfectly complete being once existed here. This god was made that way. And I was made to serve it. But the god is no longer here. Thus, my life has no meaning, and a meaningless life does not even deserve death. My role never changes. I inspect and repair the tower. The purpose of my existence is to maintain this place, lost by my master and home to no one.

One day, I was wandering the tower as usual. Despite being deep underground, the walls themselves emitted light, so I walked corridors that shone as if in daylight. I inspected the illumination and air conditioning within the tower, and discovered no problems. However, one of the apparatuses in Plant 2 had deteriorated over time and required replacement. I also checked and adjusted the power reactor on the lowest level.

I am well aware that no one will come here again. But I was created for this purpose so I perform these actions. It is like a human child pumping its lungs even though it didn't come into this world with the purpose of breathing.

The stock of consumables was running low. I needed to use the plant to replenish it, but it was a pointless gesture. I was keeping the place ready for people who would never come. How long had I been doing this?

When 31,030,072,029 seconds had passed, I noticed an immense change in the earth's crust. I had never experienced such a massive earthquake before. By my assessment, several mountains on the earth's surface had crumbled.

However, this was of no great concern. A few months earlier, the tower's internal electronic calculators predicted such an event. Furthermore, given the tower's strength, I determined that the earthquake was not a problem.

But expectations are often overturned. The estimation of the tower's strength rested on the premise that the tower was whole. The calculations for that estimation did not take the section of the tower damaged on the day of its burial into account. The area deepest underground.

Since it was always underground, to describe it as buried is strange. In any case, this area is usually outside my administration and inspection. However, this was an unusual circumstance. In a case when there might be survivors, it is possible for me to enter the affected area for a limited time.

Survivors? The idea was ridiculous. There was no reason to suspect survivors. No one could have survived in the regions even deeper underground than the tower, buried a thousand years in the past. There was no way... But I was interested. Even if no person was there, something may have been.

I had performed maintenance for what seemed an eternity. A human-like sense awakened within me. You might call it a whim. Yes, it was a whim. I passed through a hole opened during the earthquake and descended deeper underground. That underground area's automatic repair functions were not operational and there were no maintenance workers, so it had remained dark and unused for a millennium and had fallen to ruin.

I advanced inside. No life readings. Still, I advanced. And further yet. No life readings. Nothing was there after all. But what area was this? I repeatedly used my sensors, but still no sign of life. However, former living things were all around. Countless human remains. A multitude of skeletons inside cases. Many, many... Tens... No hundreds, all lined up.

A graveyard? At first, this is what I thought. I cannot experience death, so it was of no personal significance to me. However, humans treat and lay to rest the remains of their dead, and they do this in various ways.

It did not make sense to me. As enshrining something forever is impossible, it is better to recycle it for the benefit of the ecosystem. But that wasn't the truth of this place either.

I decided to try counting the number of cases housing the bones. One, two, three... fifty... one hundred... And more. I reached one thousand... And I continued counting.

Even a single floor of the tower was vast and spacious. But that was not all. There was a deeper floor, and another beneath that. Each floor held one thousand cases with one thousand skeletons. And there were ten underground floors. One thousand multiplied by ten equals ten thousand sets of bones, bones, bones...

When I reached the bottom floor, I finally understood the purpose of this place. More precisely, I found a control device that was still running, if only barely.

This was no graveyard. It was the opposite. It was what had become of people who had clung to life. The cases were cryogenic chambers from the European Empire that had fallen to ruin thirty billion seconds, or one thousand years, earlier.

People say it crumbled overnight, but the truth is they had a little more time. After the disappearance of their god, the empire's disintegration accelerated, causing its people to gather their remaining power and entrust their hopes to the future.

Entrust? Hope? That was just wordplay to beautify the truth. They were unable to avoid the destruction, but they believed their god would return, so... No, that is not right either. The only thing they could think of doing was to rely on a being who might return.

They were pitiful, miserable and comical... Like me, as I tend this tower to which no one will ever come. Unlike me, however, they would die. And that meant they could not wait for their god.

I estimated that the control device could only preserve their lives for one hundred years. I did not know if they thought their god would return within that time or if they had only been able to scrounge together enough power for one hundred years.

The control device, however, had determined that the god would not return within that time. If it could preserve ten thousand people for one hundred years, then it could preserve five thousand people for two hundred years. Or it could preserve twenty-five hundred people for three hundred years, or twelve hundred people for four hundred years.

I doubted there had been any criteria for selecting who survived. The device must have selected them at random, then ceased supplying power to the rest. I doubt the calculations were that simple, but each time power ran low, the ark eliminated some of its passengers, directed power to the rest, and extended life a little longer, and a little longer... In the end, however, it had all been for naught.

Hm? No, wait. If it was all over and all had died, then why was the control device still operating? The control device would reach the very end of its power and stop only after depleting the power needed to start it. Which meant...

“Someone is still alive...”

I spoke for the first time in billions of seconds. A voice is for communicating with others. It was pointless for me as the sole unit in a tower with no people.

Was I... excited? Excited at the thought of someone who would break the silence of billions of seconds? One by one, I checked the cases on the lowest level.

Then I found it. At the deepest point, a case was faintly glowing and inside was an infant. Of course. A child, and an infant at that, would require the least power to preserve life.

The baby was asleep in preservation fluid. Its body temperature was low, its heart did not beat, and it did not breathe. The control device had reduced its life functions to the minimum and brought the child to a state resembling death in order to maintain life for the long wait through time.

I operated the control device to open the case. The preservation fluid drained, exposing the child’s skin to external air for the first time in a millennium. Using the revivification device, I might be able to breathe life back into the child. I was under no obligation to do this. My responsibility was the preservation and administration of the tower. However, I had entered this area outside my customary purview and discovered a survivor, so it was permissible to preserve its life.

Static briefly coursed through me. That too was probably a whim. The insignificant whim of someone who had been around for a long, long time.

Chapter 1: Hildegard Von Hessen Case File

Dangoltinoza Officer's School was located in a suburb of Berun, the royal capital. A busy, international city, Berun was celebrated as the center of the world. Just twenty kilometers away from the royal castle, however, the bustling, populated landscape became rural and peaceful.

"... sigh..."

In the corner of a classroom, Hildegard von Hessen, also known as Hilde, exhaled deeply.

"Mumble mumble mumble mumble..."

"Whisper whisper whisper whisper whisper..."

"Chatter chatter chatter chatter..."

Other girls of Hilde's age whispered as they glanced at her.

"....."

Hilde looked tired as she returned their stares.

"Yikes!"

Acting as one, the girls made small cries and looked away.

How long will this continue?

Hilde sighed again, but this time only inside her head.

The coup d'état in Berun, which Genitz considered a rebellion, was three months ago. The principal offender in the incident, the Schutzstaffel, had disbanded. Authorities had stripped half the participants of military rank and arrested the first-and second-tier leaders. However, 30 to 40 percent of the soldiers had been reassigned—with restrictions—as common soldiers, since they had only been following the orders of their senior officers.

Hilde's situation was difficult. She was from a noble family, and had been a first lieutenant in the Schutzstaffel, serving directly under Genitz, at just fifteen years old. However, after her encounter with Lud and Sven, and especially after Genitz rejected her, she had effectively betrayed the Schutzstaffel and joined

the effort to liberate the royal capital. Through the king's good graces, she did not face charges of treason. But she wasn't completely cleared either.

I'm a soldier, so I know I have to accept this decision.

Nonetheless, she found herself in circumstances that made her sigh in resignation.

Hilde had carried the burden of being alone in a family of warriors, and had tried to become a soldier. In pursuit of that goal, she had become narrow in mind and warped in spirit. But through her encounters with others, she had started to seek new possibilities.

She had grown tired of familial obligation and was looking for a new way of life when she became involved in the recent commotion in the capital. She had been cleared of the charges, but Genitz's ideas had influenced her. She was now free of his control, but the military wouldn't simply overlook her actions and say, "Oh, that's all right." She had to go through military training again and then decide whether she wanted to continue military service. In short, her probation included reentering military academy.

It's a hassle, but there's nothing I can do since so many people have gone out of their way for me.

Supreme Commander Elvin and even the king had been involved in the decision. It was actually a compassionate measure, so she should be thankful for this punishment. If she had been ten years older, she would have gone to prison. She understood that. But still...

"She looks terrifying! No wonder she was in the Schutzstaffel!"

These were the types of comments she now heard.

"... sigh..."

She sighed a third time.

Dangoltinoza Officer's School was also known as the Preparatory School for Young Ladies. But that didn't mean it was a girls' school. In all of Wiltia... No, in all of the European continent, no military school was as undemanding as this school. The graduates would become mere functionaries assigned deskwork.

The school's nickname had come from graduates of the more macho and rigorous military schools as an insult to the students at Dangoltinoza, whether they were men or women.

Elvin and the king showed consideration for me.

They must have thought the students at other schools would bully her for being former Schutzstaffel. So they arranged for her admission to this much quieter, less competitive school. Hilde was keenly aware of the thoughtfulness shown by the adults involved.

"Hilde, what's the matter? You're making that scary face again."

"Oh... Lillie."

The good-natured girl speaking to the frowning Hilde, was named Lillie.

"As usual, you're being unfriendly again. You're pretty, so you should smile more!"

"I can't be nice because things are as usual. Besides, I'm not pretty."

Hilde wasn't in a good mood, but her reply wasn't cold enough to push Lillie away.

"You can't help it. You know our school's reputation. This is the Prep School for Young Ladies."

Lillie found this funny and laughed.

"If you have something to say, then say it."

In the three months since Hilde had entered school, Lillie was the only person to really speak to her. Other students, the instructors, the old ladies in the cafeteria and old men in the school shop all tensed when they saw Hilde. It frightened them that she had been in the Schutzstaffel.

"Let's go have lunch. You haven't eaten, have you?"

"Um... no."

At Lillie's invitation, Hilde stood and they left the classroom. She could hear the chatter pick up behind her as soon as she closed the door. As she set off down the hall, she tried to ignore the vicious talk.

Dangoltinoza Officer's School was more like a vocational training school than a military training facility. Most of the students were from middle-class families in Berun. Lillie's family owned a restaurant in Berun's business district. It was spacious enough to host a fairly lavish wedding if all the seats were reserved. They weren't nobles or merchant princes.

Parents who wanted to provide their children with a sufficient education sent them to Dangoltinoza. While Wiltia had been fighting a ten-year war, it spent its education budget on cannon shells. So during the war, in order to increase the number of schools, many became military schools in name only. Less than half the graduates would ever actually see military service.

"Is it hard, Hilde?"

After entering the cafeteria and finding a table, Lillie began poking at her lunch.

"Um..."

After thinking a moment, Hilde answered.

"To be honest, it's not so bad."

"Really?"

Lillie looked impressed, but Hilde wasn't trying to sound tough.

When Hilde was growing up, people had called her a fallen noble and a black dog, and her own father had called her a child of Polpora. Compared to such open ridicule, discrimination, and contempt, being feared was nothing. At least no one was throwing rocks at her.

Above all, during the months leading to her reenlistment in school, she had almost died several times. Compared to those days, school was peaceful.

"But it's annoying to hear everyone whispering about me."

"Well, the way you first reacted didn't help."

"Ugh..."

On the first day of school, Hilde had grown so angry at all the whispers mixing fact and fiction, she had yelled out, "You got some kinda problem with me?!"

Then she had glared at one girl who was especially loud.

That girl was the leader of the female students, and Hilde's ferocity caused her to burst into tears. But Hilde's current situation wasn't because she made the leader her enemy. It was because she had behaved like a rabid dog from the Schutzstaffel who was beyond the reach of even a class leader at a school like Dangoltinoza Officer's School. At this rate, there was no chance of a normal student coming near her.

"Your glare is too sharp."

"That's not true."

Lillie looked impressed, as well as astounded, but Hilde meant what she said.

"I know a man whose eyes are so fierce, even as he goes about everyday affairs, that women, children and even grown men freeze with fear!"

Hilde had suddenly recalled the baker in Organbaelz.



“Is he... human?”

“Yes.”

Hilde tried to calm herself and relax in her seat. Meanwhile, the other students in the cafeteria were whispering.

“Yeah... this is better.”

She couldn’t deny it was uncomfortable, and if she hadn’t almost died, she wouldn’t have appreciated her current freedom from being killed or from killing others.

“If I have a complaint, it’s the poor bread here.”

As she muttered, Hilde tore off a chunk of rye bread and spread cream cheese on it.

“Really? It seems normal to me.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Hilde was from a family that was noble in name only, so she was used to living in poverty. She wasn’t picky about food. However, she had become particular about bread during her one-month tenure at Tockerbrot Bakery.

“But something seems different lately.”

For the first month or two, the students had kept their distance from Hilde because she was former Schutzstaffel. Recently, there was another reason.

“Is my black hair really that unusual?”

Hilde used to feel inferior because of her black hair, but events had taught her to adopt a more positive view. However, she heard students whispering about her black hair. She had just heard such a comment when leaving the classroom.

“No, I don’t think so. We don’t obsess over that like nobles do. Oops... Sorry.”

Realizing she had made fun of nobles in front of Hilde, who was more or less a noble herself, Lillie hurriedly covered her mouth.

“Don’t worry.”

Hilde waved her hand as if to say, “I don’t mind.”

Nobles valued family blood, and black hair signified an impure Wiltian family line. But since most students at Dangoltinoza Officer's School were middle class, it wasn't likely they valued such things.

"This is just my guess, but maybe it has something to do with that ghost they've been gossiping about."

Lillie spoke as if she had something difficult to say.

"Ghost?"

It was obvious from Hilde's face that she found the idea ridiculous.

"They're making a fuss about something absurd."

"Don't you believe in ghosts?" Lillie asked.

Hilde almost sighed again in amusement.

"Of course not. I've never seen one."

"But—"

"Besides, I'm more afraid of living people than ghosts."

In her fifteen years of life, Hilde had never seen a ghost, but living people had pointed guns at her.

"You're... one tough cookie."

"Why do you say that?"

This time, Lillie looked speechless.

"Anyway, what's the ghost got to do with me?"

"Let's see, um..."

Lillie hesitated. It was difficult for her to tell Hilde.

"The ghost has black hair."

"Hwah?"

Unintentionally, Hilde made a funny sound.

"And I have black hair too, so they think I have something to do with it?"

"Yeah. They think the ghost saw your black hair and has been wandering

around thinking you're her friend."

"But that's ridiculous!"

The insult and discrimination directed at Hilde was because of silly superstition. She couldn't stand the idea that the students were ostracizing her for having summoned a ghost.

"Very well then! If that's how it is, I'll show them just how bad a former member of the Schutzstaffel can be!"

Hilde had experienced many things in life. She had grown as a person, but she was still a 15-year-old girl. There was a limit to how much childish nonsense she would overlook.

"What are you going to do?"

"That's easy! I'm getting rid of that ghost!"

Dangoltinoza Officer's School wasn't much like a military academy, but it was still a military training facility. Its grounds were large enough for activities involving guns and combat exercises. A small city would actually fit inside.

Just after ten o'clock that night, Hilde and Lillie were hiding in the bushes on the edge of a backyard in the northwestern section, rarely visited by students.

"Let's go back, Hilde."

"Not yet. I want to stay another hour."

They were on a mission to get rid of the ghost, which reportedly had appeared around there.

"What if it really shows up?" Lillie asked.

"Not a problem. I'm prepared."

Hilde produced a club. But it wasn't just any club. It was an eastern weapon called a tonfa. It was made of hard oak and had a handle perpendicular to the main body.

"I started using this recently and it's quite handy. With enough force, you can break bones, so it's excellent for protection. Much better than a cheap knife!"

"Hold on, hold on, hold on, hold on."

Hilde was happily explaining away, but Lillie interrupted.

“You know we’re dealing with a ghost, right? Don’t you have anything else?”

“Like what?”

“Like holy water or maybe a symbol for exorcising evil.”

“I don’t know where to buy those things!”

Hilde would use whatever was handiest, whether her opponent was alive or dead. If it worked, great. If not, retreat. That was a basic tenet of soldiering.

“But you can’t get rid of a ghost with this, can you?!”

“It’ll work just fine if the ghost isn’t really a ghost, or if there never was a ghost!”

“What do you mean?”

Hilde continued speaking to Lillie, who wore a blank look.

“What matters is proving I have nothing to do with it!”

That’s why Hilde had brought Lillie. If the “ghost” was just some creepy person, then the problem was solved. And if they didn’t encounter a ghost at all, then the witnesses had been mistaken about what they saw. Either way, it had nothing to do with Hilde. And if Lillie would spread that around, then at least the annoying whispers linking Hilde to the ghost would stop.

“Um, may I ask something?” Lillie inquired with a trembling voice.

“What will you do if there is a ghost?”

Lillie’s eyes were staring at the space past a fountain and beyond the bushes. Her eyes were fixed on a woman with black hair who was walking slowly... almost as if she was drifting.

“What?!”

Hilde barely stopped herself from loudly crying out.

The woman didn’t belong to the school. She wore foreign clothes and her features didn’t look European.

“I’ve heard our school was once a noble’s mansion.”

The name of that noble was Zaltobar, but he was also known as the Headhunter Duke. He had thoroughly defeated the pagans attacking his territory. He was a general and was said to have decapitated prisoners and catapulted their heads into enemy territory.

“He buried the pagans alive, and their dead bodies are still somewhere on campus!!”

“S-Seriously?”

Things you can’t see don’t exist.

Hilde wasn’t really that close-minded, but as she watched the woman with her own eyes, she felt an uncomfortable sweat running down her back.

“Lillie, you stay here. When the moment comes, run away without me.”

“Huh? But—”

“I mean go get help!”

Since they didn’t know how strong their opponent was, if both of them ran, it would only invite pursuit. It was better for one to hold the enemy while the other summoned help. This is another sensible tenet held by soldiers.

She’s a military cadet, but she doesn’t know that unless I tell her?!

Compared to Lud and Sven, Hilde lacked actual fighting experience and was an amateur. But even to her, the students at this school were ignorant.

“.....”

Then the ghost beyond the fountain turned her eyes on them.

She’s seen us!

There was no time to hesitate. Hilde sprang from the bushes, readied her tonfa, and attacked as if victory would favor the one who struck first.

“Graaaaah!!”

She aimed at the woman’s face. Whether Hilde hit her or not, she would at least impede her opponent’s movement. If she stalled her even a little, she would aim for her legs next. Breaking her knee would immobilize the woman and increase the chance of winning this fight. However, that was only if the

ghost had legs. But...

“Huh?”

The next thing she knew, her surroundings had changed. The moon, which had been in the sky, was now shining beneath her. And the ground was blanketing the sky.

No way! What the...

Before she could understand what happened, Hilde was swept upward... No, she was smashed down to the ground. In a flash, the ghost grabbed the tonfa and spun Hilde head-over-heels as if by magic.

“Ow!”

Hilde immediately covered her face and head, but her breathing was uneven from the pain of hitting the ground.

“Hilde?!”

“... idiot! What... you...”

She couldn’t say what she wanted—“What’re you doing?! Get out of here fast!”—to Lillie, who was shouting.

“Huh? I thought a villain had attacked me, but you’re just kids!”

The ghost didn’t sound the least bit disturbed.

“D-Do ghosts... do this kind of thing, too?!”

Hilde didn’t believe in ghosts, but the ones she had heard about moved things with invisible forces, passed through walls, and wielded some kind of spiritual power. But this ghost had just used a physical attack.

“Huh? What are you talking about? And who’re you calling a ghost?!”

The ghost was offended.

“Huh? You’re not a ghost?”

“Of course not.”

The woman sounded insulted at having been mistaken for dead.

“I am Amaki Suzuka, military attaché to the Yamato Embassy.”

She had a strong accent, but she spoke in the Wiltian language.

“Ha ha ha... I see. What courageous girls you are to take on a ghost!”

Hilde and Lillie had explained to Suzuka what they were doing.

“S-Sorry. Um, I know it’s strange, but we heard the ghost is pretty, so we thought you must be the one!”

“Oh my! You can compliment me all you like, but I don’t have anything to repay you with. Do you want some candy?”

Suzuka’s good mood returned when the girls told her she was pretty. She handed some amber-colored candies to the girls.

Lillie handled that deftly!

Hilde was impressed at the skillful way her classmate had calmed the woman’s anger by flattering her.

“Um, why is a military attaché from Yamato wandering around campus?”

Hilde was still in a lot of pain, so it was Lillie who asked.

They accepted that the woman wasn’t a ghost. She was a human being with a clear identity, but she hadn’t explained why she was walking around campus in the middle of the night.

“The school invited me to be a guest lecturer.”

“A guest lecturer?”

“Yes. You know, for cultural exchange between East and West? I’m out here training for hand-to-hand combat.”

Yamato was an island country in the continent of Aesia, which had a very different culture from Europea’s. For a long time, Yamato had limited trade or any interaction with other nations, but it had opened diplomatic relations half a century ago after a change of government.

At first, Europea had looked down on Yamato as a nation of barbarians. The people of Europea typically thought of themselves as the most cultured and advanced of all nations, so they tended to look down on people from other continents.

Wiltia thought the same until fifteen years ago when Yamato was victorious in a war against the Grand Duchy of Lushana, a large nation to the north. Everyone had expected an overwhelming victory for Lushana, but Yamato had decimated Lushana's vaunted navy, drastically reducing the duchy's prestige.

Later, the Great European War erupted. In the beginning, Wiltia fought against Yamato, but after various twists and turns, it concluded an alliance with the island nation. Now, cultural exchange between the two was a regular occurrence.

"Hand-to-hand combat... Do you mean bujutsu?"

"Oh! You know a thing or two!"

Suzuka looked surprised at Hilde's question.

Bujutsu was a combat technique developed in the East. Instead of punching and kicking with full strength, combatants incapacitated their enemies in the most efficient way based on theoretical analysis of the human body.

"Not many people know about it here."

However, mastering the art of bujitsu required advanced skills and intuition. Also, few people were capable of teaching it. Only a small number of the hundreds of thousands of Wiltian soldiers mastered the art through military exchanges.

"Actually, I met someone proficient in it."

"Then the world is smaller than I thought."

Hilde had once witnessed bujitsu. Lud Langart, the former ace pilot known as the Silver Wolf, was highly skilled in hand-to-hand combat and had demonstrated the astounding techniques of this art.

"Well, the type I use may be a little different."

After she spoke, Suzuka laughed.

"What I use isn't bujitsu, it's budo."

Then Suzuka extended a hand to Hilde as if offering a handshake.

".....?"

Hilde took Suzuka’s extended hand, and the next moment...

“—?!”

Hilde crumpled to her knees.

“W-What did you just do?!”

From the position of a handshake, no amount of strength could defeat an opponent. Hilde felt like a giant had pressed down on her head. Or rather...

“Did I fall... by myself?”

It was hard to believe, but that description seemed to fit what had happened.

“This is budo. Bujutsu is a technique for freely moving your body with utmost precision. Budo goes even further so you can freely move your opponent’s body.”

There’s an expression: Seeing is believing. Simply hearing a theory, you might think, “That’s ridiculous.” But when you actually see it, you have to believe it.

“Physical strength doesn’t matter in budo. Whether the practitioner is a weak, pretty girl like me or a wrinkly old man, mastering budo makes you indomitable, even against a much larger opponent.”

“Oh...”

Hilde was too stunned to point out that Suzuka had casually called herself pretty.

“Could I master it?”

Since the school had invited Suzuka to lecture on combat, there might be a chance for Hilde to learn the woman’s fighting style.

“Don’t be silly. This isn’t a minor skill that students can master in their spare time.”

Hilde didn’t know that only people with advanced physical abilities and intuition, like Lud and Sophia, could learn to use even bujitsu. Budo was only open to mastery after relentless, agonizing trials from an early age.

“Hmm... Well, there was one person—someone who learned it in his spare time. And that shocked my master.”

Suzuka spoke with nostalgia. Perhaps she said “was” because that person no longer existed in this world.

“So what’s a special lecturer doing out this late?” Lillie asked.

The girls had mistaken Suzuka for a ghost and attacked her in part because Suzuka attracted attention through her own odd behavior.

“The moon.”

“Huh?”

Suzuka answered Hilde by pointing at the full moon.

“The moon is beautiful tonight. In my country, we call such a moon jugoya. And this feeling is furyu. It gives me the urge for a night stroll.”

“Um...”

Hilde was sensitive enough to look at the moon and appreciate its beauty, but hearing the reason for Suzuka’s odd behavior confounded her.

“What the heck... You’re confusing.”

So the excitement surrounding the ghost stemmed from old ghost stories and accidental sightings of Suzuka wandering the grounds at night. Either way, there was no problem. Tomorrow, when Lillie spread the news about what had happened... No, when Suzuka herself appeared before the students as a guest lecturer, the whole matter would be over.

“Hmm...”

At that moment, Hilde felt a strange sensation. She felt... It.

“—!!”

“What’s the matter, Hilde?”

Hilde turned around, her face pale. Lillie had spoken anxiously to Hilde after noticing her unusual behavior.

“No...”

Hilde’s gaze was directed at the bushes they had just used for cover.

“Hey, um... Suzuka? Can I ask something?”

Hilde’s voice was a little shaky.

“When did you come to this school?”

She had forgotten one crucial detail. Suzuka just arrived today. If she had been here earlier, she might have been the object of the ghost story instead of Hilde, who had been at the school for three months.

No... In the first place, everyone would assume Suzuka was wandering around campus in the middle of night.

“I got here this afternoon. I just unpacked my stuff and was finally relaxing.”

Suzuka’s answer confirmed it. The ghost was seen before Suzuka arrived. And just now... For a moment...

Someone was watching. But who? Hilde felt someone there. It wasn’t Suzuka. Someone had been watching them since they started hiding in the bushes. When she turned around, the feeling disappeared, but she saw red lights.

“Hey... Did you just see something?”

“Hm? What?”

Hilde asked Suzuka again, but apparently she hadn’t seen anything.

Is there another ghost?

It was the next morning at Dangoltinoza Officer’s School. The special class of the day was a lecture on hand-to-hand combat by a military attaché serving as guest lecturer from an allied nation in the East. The lesson was being held in a training area large enough to hold students from several classes.

“Thank you. I am Amaki Suzuka from Yamato. Don’t hold back, and please be friendly, but I will ask you to maintain a certain degree of formality and call me Ms. Amaki.”

Suzuka started her lecture with a warm smile, but quickly established her boundaries. This eastern woman with her terse manners took the students aback.

“Hm?”

Suzuka tilted her head at the students lined up before her.

“Hey, is that Miss Freckles?”

“M-Me?”

She spotted Lillie, who she had met the night before.

“Where’s the shorter girl I saw with you last night?”

“Um...”

Hilde wasn’t among the students.

“Uh... She said she has a stomachache.”

The way Lillie mumbled made clear she was lying.

“Ahh... she’s skipping my first class. Oh dear, oh dear... She must not take me seriously.”

Suzuka continued smiling as she spoke. Or maybe this was just how she normally looked. She was smiling even when nothing was funny, so her expression wouldn’t falter even if she was angry.

“The next time I see her, I’ll treat her to a special lecture. Tee hee hee!”

“Oh...”

The students’ faces grew tense at Suzuka’s spooky laughter.

Meanwhile, Hilde was searching the backyard.

“There are three possible reasons.”

As she looked around, she organized her thoughts by speaking aloud.

“One... It could just be my imagination. That’s the simplest answer, but it won’t explain the ghost seen by the other students.”

She had felt an unusual presence last night. She thought there might be a clue left behind, but there wasn’t even a footprint.

“Two... There really was a ghost.”

If so, there was nothing Hilde could do. The only option would be to call in an exorcist, but that could only happen after ruling out the third possibility.

“Three...”

“Who are you?”

Just as Hilde was about to voice the third possibility, someone spoke to her from behind.

“Isn’t it time for lectures? This simply won’t do... Are you skipping classes?”

It was an old man dressed for yard work. He didn’t seem to be accusing Hilde. Instead, he was giggling like something was funny.

“And you are?”

“I’m the gardener. But I handle other chores, too.”

He must be some kind of janitor working at the school.

The old man was holding clippers for trimming trees and had a folding ladder over his shoulder.

“If you want to skip classes, you should do it somewhere else. Even the delinquents don’t come around here.”

“Why?”

The area was behind one of the school buildings, so people rarely passed through it. It must have been the perfect gathering place to meet at night, as well as during the day when skipping classes.

“Oh, you don’t know about that? Come to think of it, I haven’t seen you before.”

“I just transferred here three months ago.”

“Then that explains it!”

The old man chuckled creepily and extended his gloved hand to point at the far side of the yard.

“Is that a storeroom? No... it’s some kind of warehouse?”

It hadn’t been visible to Hilde in the shadows last night, but there was a small stone building there.

“That’s a charnel house.”

“What?!”

“You know this school used to be a noble’s mansion, don’t you?”

Last night, Lillie told Hilde about Zaltobar, the Headhunter Duke.

“That place used to hold the noble’s remains.”

Nobility is based on an individual’s family line, so the tombs of a noble’s ancestors are important and deserve protection. For that reason, the dead were often preserved in tombs on a noble family’s residential lands.

“Even without a ghost, I suppose it would be uncomfortable clowning around near a burial spot.”

“That’s right.”

As if finding something funny, the old man laughed at Hilde, who seemed to have understood.

“Hey, Mister? When did the rumors about the ghost start?”

Hilde asked in hopes of gaining a clue.

“Ghost?”

Again, the old man laughed with amusement at her question.

“That again, huh?”

“What?”

His reply surprised Hilde.

“The young folk busy themselves with all manner of rumors. A moving statue, a walking headless knight, a middle-aged man running around in only his underpants, a giant wolf as big as a cow...”

One of those examples was a little too easy to imagine—and a bit too weird—for Hilde to casually dismiss, but she let it go.

“Is there a female ghost with black hair among those rumors?”

“I’ve never heard that one.”

“The students are talking about such a ghost. And that’s why I...”

The students blamed Hilde for summoning the ghost with her own black hair.

“I told you. For a long time, people have shunned this place as too darned spooky. So ghost stories naturally arise around it. It’s like the site itself is trying to keep people away.”

“To keep people away...”

If the old man was telling the truth... Before Hilde could complete her thought, another voice joined the conversation.

“You over there! What’re you doing?!”

It was a thunderous, cringe-inducing roar.

“You there! Lectures are in session! State your name and class!!”

It was an elderly man with a stern expression and anachronistic kaiser mustache, rare at this time of the year.

Hilde recognized him. The old man’s name was a tongue twister: Alexander von Schubert Fautio Raimazen. And he was the principal of Dangoltinoza Officer’s School. He was a former army general and had been a friend of the Wiltian emperor three generations ago. However, he was from the time when soldiers rode horses and wielded lances in battle—the era before Hunter Units, tanks and fighter planes.

Even though he was nearly one hundred years old, his spirit was still actively kicking, so he styled himself an “advisor,” and would storm into military headquarters to offer counsel when he thought it necessary. For that reason, the royal palace had exiled him to the Dangoltinoza Officer’s School.

“Answer me!!!”

“Uh-oh...”

The principal’s shouting startled Hilde, and she wondered how someone so decrepit could yell so ferociously.

“Um... I’m, uh...”

“‘I’m, uh, Sir!’ Speak like a soldier!! I demand that you use the proper form of address!!”

“S-S-Sir, yes, Sir!!”

Hilde's father had verbally abused her when she was small. Thus, she had a subconscious dread of men who yelled. Flustered, she immediately made an excuse to silence him.

"Um... I was... helping the gardener!"

She looked to the old man for help.

"What gardener?"

"Huh?"

When Hilde turned around, the old gardener had disappeared.

"What is the meaning of this?! Are you showing contempt and playing me for a fool because I'm an old man?! The youth these days!!"

"Eeeeep!!"

When an old man talked about "the youth these days," arguing was a waste of time. Even if she completely surrendered and apologized, he would claim she was talking back and ridiculing him. And if she tried to explain the circumstances, he would say, "Don't make excuses!"

"All the students at this school are slackers! I never trust commoners! Anyone who turns their colors and flees in a pinch is a coward!"

The conversation digressed by leaps and bounds. He had started with a minor infraction, but now he was yapping about ranks and past generations.

"Since days of old, warrior families have been obliged to struggle on the battlefield with a sense of responsibility, duty and faith! That's how they became honored and noble knights! But now look around! There are weapons developed by barely intelligent people everywhere and the nation's former dignity has disappeared!!"

The principal held forth as if addressing a great assembly and not just Hilde. It was annoying and dampened Hilde's spirits.

What's with this old guy?! He speaks just like my father!

Although their social statuses were as different as heaven and earth, Hilde was getting irritated at the principal for berating her like her fallen noble father

had. He was in histrionics over beliefs, principles and pride, but only people who stayed in the rear at headquarters could peddle that stuff. On the actual front lines, dozens died every time gunfire flashed. How could he chatter on like this when those people were merely a casualty statistic to him?

If I think about it, the Schutzstaffel's rebellion was just like that!

Although she had parted ways with the ringleader Genitz, it was true that his ambitions and dreams had been enormous. However, as soon as the monarch had declared the Schutzstaffel a rebel army, the soldiers had rapidly disarmed and skulked off one by one. Moreover, after the suppression of the rebels, the same people who had pledged their loyalty to Genitz tried to cover for themselves, blaming everything on the dead and claiming they had been forced or hadn't meant to commit such crimes.

The same goes for this old man. He can say whatever he wants, but if a war starts, his age will spare him from battle. He may have played an active role when young, but he escaped to safety and had an easy life in a leisurely post now.

Such people spent their lives prattling about money, honor and high-flown sentiments, and Hilde wondered if they really understood how young people today suffered.

I can understand why the students here are unmotivated. There aren't many schools, so they may have had no choice but to enter a military school. If they don't have an academic background, they have precious few alternatives. Everyone is wracking their brains to get by, but the nobles don't even try to understand.

"Bwa ha ha..."

That thought suddenly made Hilde burst out laughing.

And that's exactly how I've behaved until recently!

"You!! How dare you sneer at me when I'm talking!"

Hilde was laughing at herself, but the principal didn't see that. He thought she was treating him with disdain and raised a clenched fist to discipline her.

“W-W-Whoooaaa! There you are! Sorry!!”

At that moment, as if perfectly timed, someone intervened.

“Hey there! Sorry I left you alone! My apologies!”

The man who had arrived looked, in a word, suspicious. His flabby belly was protruding and his jowls drooped, but his voice was oddly firm. However, what stood out most was his bad taste in sunglasses. Hilde wondered where he had bought them. And she wondered what moron would sell them.

“Oh, Principal! Is something the matter?”

“Is something the matter?! Mr. Samon! Does this girl have any connection with you?”

Hilde didn’t know this man. But apparently his name was Samon and he was a school lecturer. Some lecturers, like the school janitor, didn’t have to wear uniforms. His age was around forty, so he was too old to be a student.

“Well, to be honest, she was helping me haul out some documents. You know, from the underground library? It’s hard for me to carry what I need all by myself.”

“But classes are in session.”

“You’re exactly right about that! I thought we could finish by break time, and we would have, but then I couldn’t find the key! So... you know Ms. Laveival in charge of security in the faculty room? I thought I’d ask her, but I couldn’t find her, so I hunted and hunted! And by the time I found her, I remembered I’d left this student here all by herself. What a dunce I am!”

“Well, in that case...”

“Yes, you’re spot on! If I managed things better day to day, and if I were more careful, this kind of thing wouldn’t happen. Right as rain, you are! A careless heart breeds careless action! My belly’s already gone soft, so if my noggin goes soft too, all hope is lost!”



“Y-Yes...”

If the principal’s harangue was like a cannon volley, Samon’s chatter was machine gun fire. He rattled on, aimlessly and incessantly, never allowing his listener a chance to respond and gradually wearing down the other’s will to interrupt.

“Oh... Anyway, you should return to class right away, Miss.”

“Yessirree! Roger that and understood, Principal! Just leave everything to me —Samon Hunter! Good work, Sir!”

Samon continued talking at the principal, who stammered a few words and left.

Listening, Hilde noticed Samon hadn’t stumbled over his words even once. He was skilled in fast talk, and that—but only that—impressed Hilde.

“Whew! The scary geezer’s gone!”

Then the man turned and asked Hilde a question.

“Who are you?”

When she realized he had stood up for her without knowing who she was, Hilde’s shoulders slumped.

Dangoltinoza Officer’s School was a military school, but it was also allowed to secure a wartime budget set aside for increasing the number of educational institutions. A man like Samon wasn’t, at first glance, suited to training soldiers. His position was as a lecturer.

“It would be too awkward to join class now. Why don’t you have some tea? Let’s see, um... Hilde!”

Samon had been assigned a private office in a distant corner of the faculty building, far from the classrooms. Samon had invited Hilde there for tea.

“Um, what’s that?”

The correct way to prepare tea was by putting tea leaves into a teapot, pouring hot water over the leaves to steam them, then pouring in hot water again. Only then was it ready to be served. However, Samon took a paper-filter

bag attached to a string that contained dried leaves, and placed it in a cup before pouring in water directly from the kettle.

“This is called a teabag. It was invented in Noa. It’s a magnificent invention making it possible to drink delicious tea without all that tiresome paraphernalia.”

Noa was located on a different continent. It had been “discovered” four hundred years ago and was known as the New World.

In the recent Great European War, Noa remained completely neutral and severed all interaction with the nations allied with Wiltia, as well as with the opposing nations. It had established an economic zone restricted to its own continent and had pursued a thorough policy of self-sufficiency that amounted to a kind of isolationism.

“It’s a wonderful nation! No king or nobility! Just people running their own country! Now that’s democracy!”

“Oh...”

As suggested, Hilde sipped her tea made with a teabag. And it wasn’t bad. She didn’t care much about how food tasted anyway, so she wouldn’t have complained. However, something was missing.

Hilde had been a shop girl at the bakery in Organbaelz. And the tea made by the waitress there, even as she complained, had been... No, even the tea clumsily prepared by the unusual nun Marlene was better than this.

“Let’s see... Your name’s Hilde, right? I see... So you’re the notorious girl from the Schutzstaffel!”

Apparently, her disturbing background was well known among the teachers as well as the students.

“Why were you in a place like that?”

Hilde had never met Samon and had never attended his lectures. The sign outside his office read “Social Humanities” and Hilde wasn’t interested in that subject.

Hilde had no connection to Samon, so he might have put on that little show to

rescue her from the principal because...

“Ahh... Now I get it! The Ghost of the Charnel House! Uh-huh... I suspected as much. Then it’s a good thing I spoke to you!”

Samon had known about Hilde, but he hadn’t recognized her face. He had rescued her simply because she was a student under fire from the principal.

“If you’re former Schutzstaffel, then you must at least know his name. He used to be a member of the Council of Nobles.”

“What?!”

The Council of Nobles was a political group consisting of elder nobility promoting a return to the good old days of Wiltia, when tradition and status reigned.

“The ‘good old days’ sounds good, but they’re mostly just old goats hungry to reclaim their authority.”

“I remember. I heard all the council’s key members were arrested during the recent commotion.”

They had cooperated with Genitz... Actually, Genitz used and abandoned them in the end, so the regular army arrested them as it rushed to recapture the royal palace.

“The principal left the council over ten years ago, but he was one of its founding members. He was a powerful noble and an acquaintance of the king three generations back.”

Even though House Hessen, the fallen noble family to which Hilde belonged, also had the title von, there was a world of difference between the two clans.

“He didn’t come to Dangoltinoza because the central authorities sent him away but because he was skillfully eluding pursuit. He’s a fierce old bugger!”

“What does that have to do with the charnel house?”

Hilde wasn’t interested in what kind of person the principal was. The issue was his connection to the Ghost of the Charnel House.

“I’m sure you know that building dates back to the Headhunter Duke. And

beneath it, there are instruments of torture used by Duke Zaltobar."

The dungeon contained many implements frequently used for the cruel execution of hostages, such as pagans, heretics and members of different ethnic groups and wild tribes.

"The members of the Council of Nobles are historical revisionists of a sort. To them, Wiltian nobles are virtuous and upright, so they are treated with leniency even when they're from a different ethnicity. They believe other people naturally accept their control. That's the kind of nonsense they try to pass off as authentic history."

Human beings are neither gods nor devils. Their behavior is not always good. However, history is written by the winners. The winners always seek to portray their path as glorious and blessed. They pretend their past—their cowardly, traitorous, oppressive and bloodstained past—never happened. Or they try to cast it in a new light. And every time they do, they make use of people incapable of protest. The dead... The defeated... They come in many forms.

"That's why he doesn't want anyone to go near the charnel house and acts as if there never was a Headhunter Duke. But that old man wanders around there whenever he has the chance!"

Despite his past military exploits, the principal was now elderly, so he was limited in what he could do. Besides, he held an honorary post reserved for veterans, and he didn't have much work.

"Then what about the ghost?"

"Perhaps that old man was playing a trick. Maybe he hired an actor or had his lover wear a disguise!"

"Huh? Would he let someone from outside enter school grounds?!"

Dangoltinoza was an educational institution and military-affiliated facility. It had outdated rifles for training, and old bullets to go in them.

"That sort of man doesn't care. He may be old, but he's still active in the sack. He wants to look like a hero. It's disgusting."

Samon spat his words.

“But...”

Hilde didn’t know what to say about this shocking revelation.

“This place is dirty. I feel sorry for you guys.”

“You feel sorry for us? Then why’re you lecturing here?”

Sometimes, pity is the same as contempt. Hilde sounded offended as she questioned him.

“So that old man can’t have his way. I have connections with the more conscientious members of the Council of Nobles. Despite restricted circumstances, I can manage to put in a few words. I just want to protect the students of this school.”

He spoke in a theatrical way, as if delivering a speech.

“You mustn’t let that old man brainwash you. If you run into any trouble, you can talk to me anytime. I’m on your side.”

After these words, a bell rang to signify the end of class. It almost seemed as if it were signaling the end of an act in a play.

That night, Hilde didn’t go ghost-hunting. She lay on her bed, just spacing out. That’s when something she didn’t want to remember crossed her mind. She wasn’t sure whether she was awake or asleep. In a trance, she recalled something that had happened not long ago...

“Oh! Hilde! Is it already that time?”

Hilde didn’t remember why, but the man had told her to visit his office. She knocked on his door and entered. He wasn’t at his desk. Instead, he had his legs up on the sofa and was reading an old book.

“Oh, this? It’s a book on foreign military history. Fascinating stuff. Whether one likes it or not, the battlefield exposes the human disposition!”

Instead of reading a paperback to kill time, he appeared absorbed in a book written in a language that wasn’t European.

“Hilde? Here’s an easy quiz for you. Suppose you’re the commander defending a fort when the enemy attacks. How do you deploy your soldiers?”

The fort was situated in the center of a plain and had gates to the north, south, east and west. Hilde had answered that she would assign an equal number of soldiers to all four directions.

“Hmm... That’s no good, Hilde. You should gather as many soldiers together as possible. Breaking into separate locations prevents even a large army from bringing its full force to bear.”

By assigning soldiers to cover every direction, she would be able to temporarily address any attack when it came. But with a quarter of her total number of soldiers, there was a limit to how many opponents she could defend against.

“Remember, you’re not just guarding the castle gates. In war, defense is also offense.”

Hilde realized the man wanted her to guess which gate the enemy would attack first. If she knew where the enemy would strike, she could leave a minimum number of soldiers at the other gates and attack the enemy with the rest of her force. If she knew that, it wouldn’t be hard.

“There are various options. You could engage in reconnaissance, deploy a secret operative, or send traitors to infiltrate the enemy soldiers. But there’s a more interesting way. You could break one gate on purpose.”

This would induce the enemy to attack at the weakest point. But it didn’t quite make sense to her. She suspected it might be too obvious.

“That’s right. If your opponent is an excellent commander, then it’s especially obvious. In that case, what do you do?”

Hilde didn’t know. And she admitted as much. Amused, the man spoke as if revealing a trick.

“You should be even more obvious.”

That’s it! Hilde was half asleep, but she finally understood the real nature of the Ghost of the Charnel House.

She grabbed the pocket watch she had set by her bed. She had received the watch when she was assigned to the Schutzstaffel. It had luminous paint for

night visibility, so she still used it. The time was shortly after ten o'clock. That was about when the ghost would appear in the backyard near the charnel house.

She rose and looked at the bed next to her. Her roommate Lillie wasn't there. Hilde put her hand on the bed sheet... It was cold. Lillie had not gone to the restroom. She must have left at least thirty minutes ago.

"Lillie's probably... there," Hilde mumbled.

She took off her nightwear, hurriedly changed into her uniform, and set out. At the same time, a woman was visiting the charnel house.

"After jugoya is izayoi... This too is furyu."

The woman was mumbling in a lilting voice as she watched the moon gradually wane.

"Miss... What are you doing out this late at night?"

An old man spoke to her.

"At this school, no students or lecturers are allowed out at night. I won't tell anyone, but you should go inside now."

It was the gardener Hilde had seen during the day. His back was curved and he was bow-legged. The way he walked hunched over and leaning on a stick looked like a dwarf in a fairy tale.

"Who are you?"

"I'm a gardener employed by the school."

The old man answered the woman's question.

"Oh my, that's strange."

With exaggerated gestures, the woman feigned surprise.

"I didn't think this school hired a gardener. There's the janitor, but he's in his forties and not as old as you."

After the woman spoke, the gardener... No, the old man in disguise, looked surprised for a moment and burst into loud laughter.

“What a surprise! Who are you?”

When laughing, his voice sounded much younger.

“I’m Suzuka Amaki, a military attaché from Yamato invited here as a special lecturer.”

Suzuka was still smiling... No, she merely appeared to be smiling as she shot a sharp look at the man.

“Oh... You were invited? According to my sources, the foreign affairs ministry played a role in your assignment as special lecturer. One of the officers graduated from the same university as the person in charge at the military department of education and training.”

“So what?”

“That officer has close ties with the Yamato Embassy. I’m sure he would happily oblige with a small favor, such as introducing you into the academy.”

“Oh dear...”

They glared at each other.

“—!!”

Suzuka moved first. But she didn’t run or jump. Instead, she rapidly closed in on the old man, sliding across the ground and then grabbing his shoulder. The technique she used could subdue a large man simply by touching his body, even with just her pinky. As soon as she touched him, she would have a 90 percent chance of overpowering him. However...

What’s with this guy’s body?!

With her detailed knowledge of the human body and her expertise in techniques for efficiently destroying enemies, Suzuka could immediately sense his alien nature. His body wasn’t human.

“Hyah!!!”

Nonetheless, she used brute strength to throw the man. Even though she could not pull it off to maximum effect, the old man would still trace a wide arc through the air before smashing to the ground.

“Too bad, huh?”

But it didn’t happen that way. Instead, he landed lightly despite his aged appearance. At the same time, his body started to transform.

“What are you?” Suzuka asked.

Her smile was steady, but a cold sweat spread over her face. The old man’s body was expanding. Furthermore, it was rattling and clunking like a machine disassembling and reassembling.

“Do you know how many joints the human body has?”

Every time the man’s body made a noise, it enlarged.

But that wasn’t all. He was getting younger.

“Of course I know! Who do you think I am?! There are 230!”

As Suzuka answered, she understood the man’s point.

Human joints contain small spaces between the bones. They consist of synovial fluid and cartilage, which allow bones to move. Compressing those spaces would make the body shrink accordingly. That’s why aging causes the body to diminish in size.

And that’s why the man in front of her seemed to gradually grow younger. He had simulated the body of a little old man by artificially packing his joints to compress his body.

“Are you even human?”

“That’s mean. I’m half human.”

When the man answered Suzuka’s question, his younger form matched his voice.

“A wig and artificial skin for a wrinkly face... The power of science is horrifying indeed!”

The man grinned, giving him the appearance of a mischievous boy.

“I’m sorry, but would you mind not looking deeply into the background of this place? It’s private, and we don’t want others—even allied nations—to know about it.”

“The way you speak... I get it... I’ve heard rumors about Apuvea, and you’re one of them!”

Apuvea was the Principality of Wiltia’s intelligence agency. Its role was information warfare against its foreign counterparts, as well as the investigation and arrest of domestic rebels.

“I bet you caught wind of a scandal in Wiltia and want to use it as leverage in future international negotiations. But that can’t happen. If you leave now, I’ll pretend I didn’t see you. I wouldn’t want to hurt a girl.”

“Oh, you’re such a gentleman...”

The man made tight fists, but Suzuka dangled one arm and her voice maintained a carefree tone. That was her combat style.



She yielded like flowing water even against an attack by someone with powerful strength.

“I can’t go home just because you told me to. That’s the troublesome part of a government official’s job.”

Her opponent was obviously not entirely human. He was a mechanical soldier with superhuman strength.

“Would you like to tell me your name? A woman likes to know the name of the man with whom she spends a thrilling night.”

“Heh... Sorry, but I can’t tell you that. There are too many stories associated with all my names, both fake and real. But, you may call me a Gespenst (Ghost).”

“Well, isn’t that something!”

Suzuka didn’t know the true nature of this man claiming to be a ghost. But his name was Erich Blitzdonner, a.k.a. the “Crimson Hawk,” and he was the strongest man in the Principality of Wiltia’s military.

Meanwhile, in the southeast corner of campus exactly opposite the charnel house...

The lecture hall, which was big enough to hold the entire student body, was used every week by the principal for his lengthy speeches. But it was also used for school ceremonies. Now there were dozens... No, there were close to one hundred students gathered in the building.

“As the Schutzstaffel’s rebellion made clear, this country is rotten! Our victory in the Great War has already become just a past glory! The government and parliament are decaying, so a drastic solution is necessary!”

A man was loudly addressing the students. He had a clear voice and spoke smoothly, with gestures to draw in his listeners. The students’ faces shone with adoration.

“How did this happen? There is one cause! And that is the distortion caused by the outdated system of monarchy! The true owner of the nation is the people! That’s democracy!”

Every time the man shouted, the students' cheeks blushed and their excitement increased.

"We are the ones to win the future! You are the ones who will win the future! Cast down this pitiful government! Expel those pitiful fools! Set a precedent and lead the ignorant masses!"

The man's voice was heating up.

"To avoid another tragedy like the Great War, we must rise up! This is a fight for peace! You must become soldiers of peace!"

As the students raised their fists high in excited agreement, the doors to the lecture hall opened.

"Oh, I see... I get it now."

The black-haired girl, Hildegard von Hessen, entered the hall. The students stared at her.

"I remembered something a man told me not long ago."

She repeated what a man she used to believe in had said.

"Uncertain information sometimes gives birth to a Gespenst."

By manipulating information to make it look as if something exists, it is possible to restrict, and even control, enemy activity. It was basic information warfare.

"There was never a ghost."

She wasn't talking about whether or not ghosts existed. The Ghost of the Charnel House definitely didn't exist. Only unreliable information supported its existence; claims such as "I saw it," or "someone saw it," or "I know someone who saw it."

"From the beginning, it was a lie that the students concocted to keep me away. But not away from the charnel house. They wanted to pull my attention away from this meeting opposite the charnel house!"

Human beings are animals with curiosity. If people heard there was a ghost, they might be scared, but they also might start focusing attention on the place

that was supposedly haunted. Some would even go there to find out if there really was a ghost. And Hilde had done just that.

“You didn’t just make up a ghost story. You implied there was more hidden behind it, something underneath the charnel house.”

A man had told Hilde about a castle siege in a certain country.

“You should be more obvious.”

If you revealed an opening, the enemy would suspect a trap and steer clear. However, what if you made the trap obvious? Then the enemy would guess uselessly. They might wonder, “Is this trap fake, too?” or “Maybe they’re just pretending because they don’t want us to come near.”

This strategy was called Needle in the Air. It was a strategy that involved purposely neglecting your own defense so the enemy would suspect a trap and retreat. She believed this was a version of that. The students thought they could hide one trap inside another, so she would avoid the false trap but fall for the real one.

“You didn’t want me to discover this meeting in the lecture hall, right? I understand that. After all, this is a military academy and you’re engaging in anti government activity.”

Hilde then strode forward with ringing footsteps and glared at the man standing on stage.

“What a surprise. I thought I could hide this a little longer.”

The man didn’t appear anxious that she had discovered his plan. Instead, he looked calm and composed as he pushed up his glasses. It was Samon Hunter, the lecturer at Dangoltinoza Officer’s School.

At the same time, in the backyard, in front of the charnel house...

Urgh! You’re such a pain in the butt!

Blitzdonner continued fighting Suzuka. He wasn’t holding back because his opponent was a woman. Suzuka Amaki possessed such advanced combat skills that restraint was unnecessary. On the contrary, making allowances for her gender would only endanger him.

That wasn't the problem. She was a military attaché assigned to the Yamato Embassy. If he pushed too hard, this could turn into an international problem.

"Tch! This is awkward for me, too! The situation is so weird!"

Apparently, Suzuka felt the same way.

"Hey, Miss! Would you mind backing off? I doubt either one of us enjoys anything other than an all-out fight!"

Both Suzuka and Blitzdonner had risen to the top because of their talents in the art of war. They were no good in fights when they couldn't hit their opponents hard.

"You've discovered a Wiltian scandal, so isn't it enough to report my presence to your superiors?"

An investigator from Apuvea was conducting a secret investigation. That in itself was an admission that Dangoltinoza Officer's School was hiding something from the public.

"That simply won't do. I'm about to obtain information on the Peace Faith."

"Oh, so that's who you're after!"

The Peace Faith was a group of extremists quietly active in the underground after the Great War... No, even before the war. They were vicious, trying to destroy their own country while cooperating with other nations.

Tanks, fighter aircraft and Hunter Units ate up money. Weapons are costly. So the Peace Faith cried, "If you've got money to spend on weapons, then give bread to the poor!"

Since soon after the end of the ten-year Great War, measures to protect social security were faltering in Wiltia and in other nations. However, if the country neglected national defense, both the poor and rich would lose their lives.

"They always focus on immediate problems... Rather, they simplify everything so they can present themselves as warriors for justice and peace."

Blitzdonner let out a tired sigh.

Arms were necessary to protect the nation's territory, assets and people. However, the Peace Faith considered them a waste of money. And yet, if the nation waged war with poor equipment and insufficient supplies that led to casualties, they would brand the government as murderers. It was enough to make one shout back, "Do you expect something to come from nothing?!"

"And that isn't enough for them."

Wiltia had a limited monarchy. The king had authority, but it was limited by the constitution. Even a pronouncement from the king lacked the power to infringe on the people's rights. Absolute monarchy was a thing of the past. Therefore, since the people had freedom of speech, they could speak out. In fact, it was a sign of a healthy democracy. However, this was where the problems started.

"The Peace Faith doesn't allow different opinions. They consider their doctrine alone to be absolute, and anyone who opposes it is considered the pawn or lapdog of the powers that be. They're fanatics who refuse to acknowledge dissident voices."

Democracy can only exist because of such objections and arguments. However, the Peace Faith was one-sided and refused to listen. To them, anything aside from their noble ideas was an evil conspiracy, so destroying it wasn't a sin. In fact, they claimed it was all for the sake of peace.

"They're radical terrorists with attractive rhetoric and flowery slogans."

Suzuka sounded tired of it, too.

The Peace Faith would do anything to achieve its goals, but those goals were twisted. They chanted slogans about creating a peaceful world. But their means were hardly different from terrorism. Not only did they target senior military officials and politicians, they would also hunt down their immediate families and friends.

Naturally, not everyone thought such methods were right. Some people thought it was very wrong. But those "heretics" were eliminated. No, to be precise, they were corrected. They would be repeatedly threatened with violence until they were convinced their ideas were wrong. But most of them died along the way. The Peace Faith would claim they had admitted their

mistakes and killed themselves in shame.

This wasn't ideology. It was religion. And that's why the group was called the Peace Faith.

"It was a little better when they restricted their activities to their own country."

The Peace Faith didn't believe in borders. They prattled on about all of humanity being one in peace. Their network even included ties to enemy nations. As a result, people began using it to their own advantage. It would be strategically beneficial if enemy nations delayed the introduction of new weapons and the development of new armaments in the cause of peace. So the Peace Faith's benefactors included many suspicious individuals.

"I don't care about fanatics. My greater object is finding the people behind them. But I won't figure out anything if I only catch fringe members."

So far, Suzuka had only been able to catch those who wholeheartedly believed their actions were for world peace.

"I've finally spied some movement, and Samon Hunter is active in this area."

"I see... So they've also given you trouble, huh?"

Their network wasn't confined to Wiltia and the other nations on the European continent. They were also active in Aesia.

"Then shall we cooperate?"

Up to this point, they were still engaged in a fierce battle. Blitzdonner and Suzuka had been exchanging blows. Blitzdonner threw fists and kicks that churned the earth, and Suzuka narrowly evaded and forced him to the ground with budo techniques. It was at that point, however, that Blitzdonner offered a ceasefire.

"I'll provide you with info, and you can participate in interrogations. I'm sure you know this already, but even a military attaché stationed at an embassy doesn't have the authority to perform investigations."

She wasn't actually in a position to investigate openly, so her plan was to enter Dangoltinoza as a special lecturer so she could happen to witness

something.

“Hmm...”

Suzuka briefly thought it over. Yamato Embassy’s plan had nearly failed when Blitzdonner found her. It was better to proceed as allied nations on friendly terms.

“Understood. Let’s do it.”

“That was easy!”

In Wiltia, the people of Yamato were known as hard working, serious and strait-laced. But Suzuka seemed to be a little different.

“The way you talk... Do you know who Samon is?”

“Of course. He was the mastermind behind the biggest false alarm of the century.”

During the war, an outrageous rumor had spread through the countries of Europea. According to this rumor, the Wiltian military had created an illegal drug and systematically leaked it to Pelfe, thereby destabilizing Pelfe even as Wiltia used the profits for military funding. The claim was far-fetched, and it had been uncertain whether the Wiltian soldier, Samon, who claimed to be a witness, even existed. The photographs he had provided as evidence were from a pharmaceutical factory creating painkillers for the military.

“How did someone banished from press relations become a lecturer at a military academy?”

“Well, he never admitted it. It is much harder to prove something doesn’t exist than to prove it does. There are even sympathizers defending him in parliament.”

“Oh, dear... What a mess!”

You can repeatedly give someone good reasons why they’re wrong, and they can use sophistry to insist there’s no real evidence that proves their error. No matter how often you tell them their information is false, the truth would fail to reach them because they act on raw emotion.

In Samon’s case, he had even gained prestige as a hero for refusing to

compromise his ideals despite oppression by national authorities.

“But then his calculations went awry.”

Samon had entered the military academy as a lecturer and gradually disseminated his ideas among the students. He planned to draw in more “believers” and eventually use them as his soldiers. At a military academy—even one like Dangoltinoza that was mockingly considered a school for young ladies—half of the students would ultimately join the military. Samon would be able to send future collaborators into the armed forces. But then a certain girl had confronted him.

“That black-haired girl threw off all his calculations.”

Hilde, the black-haired girl, had come to Dangoltinoza bearing a letter of introduction. It was from Marshal Elvin, the top official in the Wiltian military. His letter held no particular meaning. He had simply written, “This girl has issues. Take care of her.”

Her status as a former member of the Schutzstaffel, one who had a complicated history, had created an opportunity for the regular army to strike back at the recent rebellion by her former organization.

“But someone with a connection to the marshal would be a threat to someone with a weakness.”

Samon’s Peace Faith had suspected she was a spy sent to investigate. So they made up a silly ghost story to divert her attention.

“I see... So that’s why you took a chance to come and catch Samon at his surreptitious plot.”

“That’s right.”

Blitzdonner nodded in response to Suzuka’s question.

“At the same time, I changed my physical appearance and guarded the girl.”

“I see... But...”

Suzuka put a hand to her mouth and looked troubled.

“That girl is in serious danger right now.”

Back in the lecture hall...

“I never suspected you had snuck into a military educational facility to raise a revolutionary army!”

Hilde had revealed Samon’s intrigue.

The main clue that had aroused Hilde suspicions was Samon’s own words. “I’m on your side.” People who said such things were usually trying to manipulate others. Compared to the man who had used her in the past, Samon was nothing but a third-rate actor.

“I see... So the marshal did indeed send you here as a spy.”

“That’s ridiculous, you dimwit! Why do you waste time being suspicious over everything! Anyway...”

Hilde looked at the students—Samon’s believers—gathered in the lecture hall.

“I suppose you were keeping an eye on me.”

Hilde looked at Lillie with her innocent freckled face that was impossible to dislike.

“Hilde, it’s not what you think!”

The only person to treat Hilde decently here had been someone ordered to do so.

“What a pity... I thought I’d made my first friend!”

As I expected, this hurts.

If she hadn’t been so injured that day when the masked man betrayed her, she would have cried. Sadly, however, one can grow accustomed to heartbreak.

“Ahh... You mean you aren’t the marshal’s spy and you haven’t brought soldiers with you?”

Samon confirmed this as if insinuating the opposite.

“No... So stop this farce! The charge of treason is severe! Don’t you know that?!”

The nation would fully respect the people's rights. Even if people spoke against the government or held protests, the nation wouldn't interfere. The government would tolerate abuse as long as the people were merely throwing pebbles. However, when the people exceeded their rights, the authorities would act. This was because the government existed to protect its people. When citizens violated other citizens' rights and the government determined it was harmful to the national welfare, the offenders would become the enemy.

And a government is ruthless toward its enemies.

"This isn't child's play anymore!"

Hilde tried to dissuade the students, but their reaction was cruel.

"Just shut up!"

"What do you know about us?"

"You're the system's fawning lapdog!"

A storm of abuse fell upon her.

Hilde could understand why the students idolized a man like Samon. They had left their parents at a sensitive age and now lived in a communal environment. They lived according to different rules from those in the outside world, so they would not permit any disturbance to that order. Opposing that order would make them just like Hilde, the former Schutzstaffel agent they had kept at a distance.

When someone told them, "Poor you," "You didn't do anything wrong," or "You were a kind person to begin with," they thought that person understood them. On top of it all, that person had told them he was on their side.

They're like I was not long ago!

That man had manipulated her, but he had been everything to her. The students behaved just like she had when she served that man.

"We won't back down in the face of your threats! We'll stand for our belief in peace and freedom! Right, everyone?"

Samon collected people who couldn't stand without leaning on someone—and he gave them a push.

“We will not back down!! We will not back down! We will resist our oppressors with a firm will!”

As if that cry served as a signal, the students raised their weapons. Their firearms were outdated models used in training. The guns were from two generations back, but they fired bullets that could kill.

“How stupid can you be?! Do you know what it means to kill someone?!”

As she shouted, Hilde recognized once more how naïve she had been. Until a few months ago, she hadn’t hesitated to point a gun at someone. However, on the night of the Thanksgiving Festival, she had seen a bullet pierce a man’s skull.

“Death is the end of everything!”

She had also seen a former Wolf suffering and worrying, bound by a past when he had killed as easily as breathing.

“If you kill someone, that’s the end for you, too.”

One bullet could easily poison a man’s days with unimaginable pain and regret—as well as negate all hope he might find.

“Shut up! You’re just the authorities’ dog!”

“We have risen up in faith and determination!”

The students were aiming at Hilde and not stopping to listen. They thought she was warning them that if they committed a crime, the police would catch them.

But that wasn’t the case. Words like faith and determination shouldn’t be thrown around so easily. Those were words for people capable of bearing the insult of a violent death, and having their name recorded as a failure, and being remembered as a fool for all eternity. Like Heidrig, Lud and Genitz...

Whether you’re a good person, bad person, or neither... Everyone takes life seriously. And no one should ever rely on borrowed words.

“You idiots!”

At Hilde’s last words, gunshots rang out.

“What?!”

But no bullets penetrated her body. She didn’t have a single scratch. Lillie had rushed over at the last moment and covered Hilde like a shield, taking all the bullets with her own body.

“W-Why, Lillie?! Are you stupid?!”

At first, Hilde didn’t understand why a spy assigned to observe her had protected her.

“... friend... It’s because... you called me... friend,” Lilly mumbled after collapsing into Hilde’s arms.

“What are you talking about?”

Hilde still didn’t understand.

“I never had... a friend... either.”

Hilde didn’t understand, but her tears overflowed when she saw Lillie close her eyes as if falling asleep. Now Hilde realized there had been one real thing amid all the falsehoods and deceptions.

“Lillie! You dummy! Don’t die!!” Hilde shouted.

Yet again, she was witnessing the death of someone she knew. It was unbearably painful.

“Huh?”

However, she noticed something strange. Lillie had been hit with a barrage of bullets. She should be dead, and even if she didn’t die, there should have been plenty of blood.

“Why?”

However, no blood flowed from Lillie’s wounds. There were bullet holes in her clothes, but the bullets hadn’t penetrated her body. Instead, they were smashed flat as if they had struck a bulletproof wall.

“Huh?”

Lillie slowly and silently rose to her feet. Her movements didn’t suggest someone near death. She didn’t even seem human. She stood as if raising her body merely with the strength in her ankles.

“You... Lillie... Why are your eyes red?”

Hilde recognized those eyes.

They were like the eyes of the silver-haired waitress who worked with Lud Langart. They were like the eyes of the red-haired girl who had appeared when they infiltrated Berun. Pure red eyes...

“Release pseudo-interface... Acknowledge emergency situation... Prioritize protection of the life and body of primary object of security Hildegard von Hessen!”

Hilde was shocked at the difference in Lillie’s tone, despite being the same voice coming from the same mouth.

Lillie stood, her tone more cold and lifeless than quiet—almost mechanical.

“For seventy-five seconds, release limiter to level two!”

As soon as Lillie spoke these incomprehensible words, which sounded almost like an incantation, Hilde found herself pulled into the air by an enormous force.

“Yaaaiiieee?!”

The ceiling of the lecture hall was about ten meters high. That was equal to three floors in a typical building. Holding on to Hilde, Lillie rose that height in a single leap and used the roof as a foothold to jump higher.

“Yiiiiikes!!”

Hilde didn’t know what had happened, so she just kept screaming.

“Whaaaaah?!”

As did Samon, who earlier had stood so triumphantly atop the stage.

As soon as Lillie’s soles kicked off the roof, she zoomed closer in a kind of dive-bomb, plummeting at enormous speed and planting a foot on Samon’s face.

“Oogyah!”

Samon squealed like a pig and flipped over.

“Mr. Samon?!”

A beat later, Samon's students—his believers—turned around.

"Total number of enemy combatants: forty-seven. Begin disablement," Lillie spoke mechanically.

Hilde didn't know what had happened or what was going on. But she did know Sven and Rebecca. And if Lillie was anything like them...

"Don't kill them!!"

She at least had to make sure of that.

"Understood."

After replying, Lillie started running. Since Lillie was holding Hilde, her arms were full. So she attacked with her legs.

"Gah?!"

"What the?!"

"Oof!"

Lillie blew through them like the wind, at such a speed that although it looked as if she was just running through the students, actually she was throwing kicks. One kick per student. That was all. However, each kick was strong, breaking the arms and legs of every opponent.

"Ow!"

"It's broken! She broke my arm!!"

The students cried out in panic.

Even with one broken arm or leg, they could have fired their guns. But, everyone abandoned their weapons, overcome by pain. The young warriors for peace had been quick to crumble.

"Oh, dear... It's already over."

Suzuka and Blitzdonner arrived. The situation had been resolved in a flash without them.

"Hey, Yamato girl! What is that thing?"

"This? I got it from one of your scientists."

During the recent rebellion, the Yamato Embassy had secretly cooperated in recapturing the royal palace. In return, and through an extralegal measure, it received a prototype of Wiltia's top secret humanoid Hunter Unit.

"Its communication skills aren't much, though. It wasn't realistic enough."

The prototype's basic abilities were equal to Sven and Rebecca's, but its "heart" was insufficiently developed, so it had no sense of self. Thus, its interpersonal reactions were exceedingly mechanical.

"So I asked that scientist to install a pseudo-interface."

A pseudo-interface artificially represented facial expressions and movements that a humanoid Hunter Unit with a "heart" would display from emotion. The interface was a combination of programs directing the unit how to behave in certain situations. It made the Hunter Unit look like she was smiling, but inside she didn't actually experience happiness.

"To test it and gather data, I sent her among her own age group."

"And you had it engage in intelligence-gathering and investigate that black-haired girl's affairs?"

"Of course!"

Daian had other motives, but the stated reason for developing the humanoid Hunter Unit was intelligence-gathering and undercover espionage. From that perspective, Suzuka's actions made sense.

"Testing it and collecting data in a real conflict... Talk about reckless!"

"But it worked out in the end, so it's okay!"

Suzuka laughed mischievously at Blitzdonner's amazement.

"Even so, don't you find something strange?"

In the center of the lecture hall, surrounded by moans, Lillie was still holding Hilde. Her face was faintly flushed.

"Hilde, you are safe now. I have stopped all the bullies. Do you feel safe?"

"Um, yeah. Uh... thanks. Um..."

Hilde didn't fully understand the situation, but for now she decided to offer

thanks. Yet there was a more pressing problem.

“I can still call you Lillie, right? Um, your face is a little too close.”

Lillie was blushing and her face was so close that Hilde could almost feel her breath.

“Hilde, I’ve never felt like this. I had orders from my master to protect you, but that didn’t matter. When I saw you might die, a large jolt of static coursed through me.”

“S-Static? Um... Anyway, can you please pull back? Let’s chill for a second, okay?”

Hilde tried to move away but found she was still in Lillie’s arms. Hilde moved her arms and legs but couldn’t free herself from Lillie’s grasp. Lillie was holding Hilde gently but firmly, as if to never let her precious treasure slip away.

“Hilde, you are... cute.”

“You’re too close!!”

Suzuka and Blitzdonner were quietly watching the inexplicable current between the two girls.

“Um, what’s going on over there?”

“Oh my! While I wasn’t looking, she developed deep emotions!”

The prototype known as Lillie was unable to develop a “heart,” so she was deemed a defective product. However, unknown to Suzuka, Blitzdonner and even her creator Daian, she possessed numerous heart pieces. By spending time among her peer group, those pieces had stirred and gathered. Then Hilde’s words had provided a nucleus around which they had rapidly connected into a sense of self.

Human beings are social animals. The nature of their existence is determined not only by what they think about themselves, but by what others think of them. Like when Svelgen Avei met Lud Langart. And when Rebecca Sharlahart met Erich Blitzdonner.

“Friend.”

The prototype obtained an individual personality named Lillie when another girl saw her as a friend instead of as a humanoid Hunter Unit. Right now, Lillie was like a chick that just poked its head out of its broken shell. Just as it would believe the first thing it saw was its mother, Lillie had attached herself to Hilde.

“Hilde... I love you!≡”

“Now hold on a second!”

KISS!



This past winter, Hildegard von Hessen turned sixteen. She had no romantic experience and she was still a virgin. She had never even kissed someone on the lips.

“!!!!”

A silent cry rang out.

“Hey, did you name that girl?” Blitzdonner asked Suzuka.

He had covered his face with both hands as if he couldn’t stand watching.

“Yes. It’s derived from the lily in my family’s crest.”

The students were moaning in pain from their broken bones. Hilde was shouting from shock. Lillie was blissing out. And...

“Ungh... ggh... My nose! Argh! It’s broken!”

As blood dripped from his nose, Samon tried to escape.

“Oops. I forgot.”

Blitzdonner and Suzuka blocked his way.

“For now, the charge against you is treason. Or rather, unlawful assembly with dangerous weapons. That’s enough to arrest you, but our investigation will ensure we have a long relationship.”

Until now, Samon had skillfully managed to avoid capture with help from his supporters. However, it would be impossible to escape after he was taken into custody. It was only a matter of time before his treacherous actions, under the guise of fighting for peace, would come to light.

“Shut up and get out of my way!”

In a rage, Samon tried to force his way through them. He threw a punch at Suzuka, since he thought she looked easier to overcome.

“Oh no you don’t!”

However, his opponent was a martial arts master capable of incapacitating anyone she touched. Samon’s hand bent at an unnatural angle.

“Y-Youuuch!”

“Now those charges include assaulting a woman.”

As she spoke, Suzuka looked down at Samon writhing on the floor. She had dislocated all the joints of his arm; from the shoulder, to the elbow, to the wrist.

“Y-You... Don’t you know this is suppression of thought!! You people from the system are forcefully oppressing a seeker of freedom and peace!! This is a human rights violation!”

Forcefully detaching joints caused intense pain greater than breaking bones. However, Samon was still talking and spraying tears, mucus and drool.

His glib tongue was impressive and had helped him become influential in the Peace Faith. But that was the only impressive thing about him.

“Spare me your nonsense. You? Seeking freedom and peace? You make me laugh!”

What Samon had done was incite children in order to use them as his soldiers. The children didn’t even understand what he wanted from them. They had done nothing but join a grand narrative and earn praise as if they were the only people trusted with the truth. Samon was responsible for that.

“You tried to silence that black-haired girl for contradicting you. Alone, without weapons or support, she tried to convince you to stop, but you tried to kill her.”

The real oppressor here was Samon.

“Shut up! What are you talking about?! You’re just the system’s lapdogs!”

Samon would not accept defeat. He still believed he was right. Reason wouldn’t work on him.

Some people believe that only they represent justice. They see anyone who thinks otherwise as the enemy. So they believe it’s all right to eliminate them, even to kill them. Because they alone are in the right, fighting for peace and freedom.

“You sure have it easy! You get all puffed up, just shouting with outrage! If I’m a dog, then you’re a pig!”

“What?!”

Samon’s face visibly flushed. He burned with hatred toward Blitzdonner and forgot his pain.

“You won’t get away with this!”

Then he mumbled ominously.

“Our comrades are everywhere. We’ll find out about you and that black-haired girl in no time! Your kith and kin! Your friends and acquaintances! I hope they don’t meet with an accident!”

Then he began laughing mirthlessly.

“You’re the bad guys! We fight for peace and freedom! Anyone who opposes us is an enemy of peace and freedom!”

“Wait. Who appointed you to represent world peace and freedom?”

Suzuka couldn’t help asking, but the man putting on airs wasn’t listening.

“Shut up, you yellow monkey!!”

Apparently “peace and freedom” discriminated by skin color.

“... siiigh...”

Blitzdonner sighed as if he found Samon exhausting. He turned toward Samon and spoke with an expression that suggested this was the last thing in the world he wanted to do.

“May Lin Po at the Western Seal, right? You like ’em big-boobed with baby faces.”

“Whaaat?!”

Samon’s eyes opened wide in surprise.

“And you’re infatuated with Anri Jasmine at Lorrain Poir, no? They’re all high-end establishments. How can you afford to go every week?”

The names Blitzdonner had given belonged to brothels in Berun and to prostitutes working there.

“As a man, I understand your desire for such places, but that isn’t easy on the salary of a military academy lecturer.”

Those brothels were all so expensive that even military field officers could rarely visit. Even nobles and merchant princes would struggle to become regular customers. Yet Samon went every week, sometimes without two days in between.

“Are those places really that expensive?”

“Yep. In addition to admittance, the money goes toward the dresses, jewelry, flowers and gifts required by the ladies. Presents for their managers and other brothel staff are basic. To go once would cost this much.”

In response to Suzuka’s question, Blitzdonner raised a few fingers to show his estimate of the cost.

“Wow! What the heck?! That’s about three months of my pay!”

The situation was simple. Decent people who loved peace and freedom had given money to Samon. Money had poured in as activity fees and donations and so on.

“No, that’s...”

Samon’s eyes were swimming. If this got out, he would lose his reputation as a warrior for freedom and peace who battled oppression.

“Your peers can decide whether it’s true or not.”

But that wouldn’t be the end of it. His peers would condemn him as a heretic and fanatic. There would be no escape. That would extend to his relatives, friends and acquaintances, and he would be completely ostracized. No... He would be murdered.

He had witnessed many people suffering the same treatment. And the reason wouldn’t be that he had dipped into funds for peace and freedom. It would be because he had dishonored the organization’s mission to fight for peace and freedom. That was his sin.

“H-Help!!”

Samon clung to them, his face white.

“I’ll tell you whatever you want to know! You gotta protect me! Protecting witnesses is part of your duties! Right?!”

There was a program called the witness protection program. The nation would arrange new housing, employment and census registration to protect someone who would testify to the disadvantage of an organization to which he had belonged, thereby risking retaliation. Samon was shamelessly begging for help from the very man he had just called a dog.

“All right, we’ll protect you.”

Too stunned to speak, Blitzdonner sighed more deeply than before.

“That’s a troublesome part of a government official’s job—for both of us.”

Suzuka spoke sympathetically.

“There’s no choice. Even a guy like this is a Wiltian citizen. As a servant of the nation, I must protect him.”

And so the incident came to an end. It never became public knowledge, so no harm was done to the students involved. However, Dangoltinoza Officer’s School had to close. Samon’s student devotees weren’t arrested, but they were placed under temporary probation. Naturally, they weren’t allowed to transfer to any military-related educational institutions. After closing, the school became a museum showcasing the noble culture of medieval times.

As a side note, the belongings of Zaltobar, the Headhunter Duke, were not really under the charnel house. There wasn’t even an underground chamber. As honorary director, Principal Alexander (other names omitted) took it for his office. The one or two visitors who came each day—whether they were interested or not—were treated to a lecture showcasing his profound knowledge of the exhibitions, which were of no particular historical importance and not much to look at.

Samon squealed to Apuvea and in return obtained a new census registration and fled to a Wiltian colony to avoid pursuit by his followers. Rumor has it he requested plastic surgery to disguise his face, but no one knows for certain. And as for Hilde...

“...mumble mumble mumble...”

“...whisper whisper whisper...”

“...chatter chatter chatter...”

In a classroom at a military academy—not Dangoltinoza—in a suburb of Berun...

From a distance, students were whispering and staring at Hilde as she sat at her desk. How did this happen? It wasn’t only because she once belonged to the Schutzstaffel. It was because she was a bona fide troublemaker who was responsible for the closing of her previous school. As a result of the vague explanations behind the closing of Dangoltinoza, rumors spread that pegged Hilde as the main culprit.

“She slaughtered everyone at the school!”

“She may be small, but she’s a master of eastern martial arts!”

“Huh? I heard she’s an agent for a military intelligence agency.”

Since they consisted of half-truths, the rumors were particularly hurtful. And that wasn’t the only problem. The adults who thought she was finally leading a peaceful life at school learned she had become involved in another mess and decided to help her once again.

“Oh, that little girl... Poor Hilde. Shall I write a letter of introduction?”

Marshal Elvin of Wiltia took up his pen and offered to help.

“Oh, that little lady... Shall I make a phone call on her behalf?”

Shylock directly called in a favor. He was Jacob’s grandfather, Blitzdonner’s father, and chairman of Billions Trading, one of Wiltia’s largest corporations.

“Hmm... Yes, that girl... I know her, so please ask them to treat her kindly.”

Even Wilhelm the Third, the monarch of Wiltia, made a rare request. But all that good will from Wiltia’s pooh-bahs only complicated her situation.

“I heard she’s the secret child of Marshal Elvin.”

“No, there’s a rumor that she’s Greedy Shylock’s granddaughter!”

“No! She’s the monarch’s stepsister!”

The stories snowballed. However, from Hilde’s point of view, it wasn’t so bad. At least when compared to her other problem.

“What’s the matter, Hilde? You look frightening. And it spoils your pretty face!”

“Lillie, why are you here?”

Somehow, Lillie had transferred to the same school as Hilde.

“I think you know why!”

Lillie’s smile was dreamy as she spoke, her cheeks blushed and she crossed her arms.

“Because we’re friends.”

Hilde didn’t know it, but Lillie was technically a weapon belonging to Yamato. A school environment seemed beneficial for the development of her personality, so she had been allowed to continue attending school.

Then Lillie made a forceful request to be assigned to the same class at the same school as Hildegard von Hessen—and even an adjacent seat assignment. Her administrator, Suzuka, had frowned. But Lillie warned her, “If you don’t agree, I’ll slice open my stomach and self-destruct right here.” So Suzuka had to grant her request.

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha...”

Hilde laughed tiredly.

Whatever Lillie’s true nature, she wasn’t a bad person. Far from it. She had protected Hilde and risked her own life. Hilde saw that Lillie thought of her as a friend, and she thought of Lillie as her friend too, so there shouldn’t have been a problem. However, Hilde couldn’t help noticing something more than friendship in the red lights that sometimes shone in Lillie’s eyes.

“Hilde, what would you like to be in the future? I want to be your friend forever!≡”

Lillie spoke from the next seat, and moved her chair closer to Hilde, fawning like a cat.

“I... I just wanna be a normal girl!”

That was a sincere wish from the depths of Hilde’s soul.

Hilde would be involved in a number of incidents at other military academies, and she would solve them all with her best friend Lillie. But those are stories for another time.

Chapter 2: A Certain Maintenance Worker's Monologue, Part 2

My name is Daian Fortuner. In a world abandoned by its god, I continue polishing his throne even though he will never return to it. Of all the maintenance workers in the world, my existence is the most absurd. I spent hundreds of millions of seconds in pointless activity before I happened upon that baby.

He was a miraculous survivor of the lost European Empire. I had neither the obligation nor the authority to raise him. However, in addition to my maintenance and inspection responsibilities, I have a duty to protect any human being inside the tower. I could have reported it to the tower manager and let him handle it. However, I am the only machine in the tower that moves. Thus, I had an obligation to protect the baby until someone arrived who could be entrusted to do so.

Thus, I needed to supply the baby with the necessary nourishment for life support. Thus, I had an obligation to clean his excretory organ after he defecated, because he could not manage it himself. Thus, I had an obligation to dress him in clothes to keep warm and prevent him from dying in the cold temperatures. And, I had an obligation to induce a sound sleep for the preservation of his mental balance by humming music to him when he cried from loneliness.

I prepared everything. The factories still ran. They were the fruits of an ancient empire. With water, air and light, they could create any substance. Food, beverages, clothes, beds, sheets, and toys that would rattle when shaken... I needed designs to fabricate those things, but fortunately I had the data for that. I could perform the necessary duties for his protection without any difficulty. I had spent 315,360,000 seconds—about ten years—during which no one came to take him in.

To be honest, raising him was a little... No, it was a lot of fun. For a long, long millennium, I had done nothing but steadily perform maintenance. Compared to that, a human baby was surprisingly entertaining. After one year, he stood

up. After two years, he spoke. After three years, he was able to communicate with me. And after five years, when I left for my tower maintenance rounds, he followed me.

Such fun! He never tired of watching me. So I decided to discharge one more duty. In case someone finally came to retrieve him, I decided to impart knowledge to him so he might easily form relationships with others. However, I could only use data stored in the tower to give him knowledge of ancient Europea, which had perished long ago. I taught him all the knowledge I had: science, math, physics, engineering, chemistry, medicine, pharmaceutics and astronomy.

Europea had perished, but what had happened outside the tower since? Were they beginning history all over from the beginning? If so, perhaps this child was the only recipient of the knowledge that was the pinnacle of progress and which no one else inherited. Well, that didn't matter.

"Why did Europea perish?"

He asked me this question one day. It was an honest question. I imparted more knowledge and he greedily absorbed it. Why had the empire perished despite its omnipotence? It would be strange not to wonder about this.

"Europea sought a god. Do you know what a god is?"

I taught the boy by directing questions back at him. The computer banks said this was the best way to insert knowledge into a human being.

"Something absolute?"

He answered correctly and to the point. Such a god was different from the gods of religion. A god was something absolute and infallible, and capable of judging everything correctly.

"Europea sought the absolute. To be correct, it sought something that would secure the absolute."

Something that would make right what it deemed to be right. And make wrong what it deemed to be wrong. And separate light from shade and white from black. Furthermore, it was a being that would make the people obey.

“People cannot rule themselves. Conflict arises and wars occur because division and reunification are the nature of life.”

Nonetheless, the people of Europea would not give up. They sought the absolute, longed for god, and for the honor of being god’s people.

“So the Europeans decided to become gods together.”

“What do you mean by together?”

The boy was tilting his head in incomprehension. It was understandable. To be honest, this had even been hard for me to understand.

“The part of human beings that makes them human is surprisingly small.”

Genes are the blueprints within the human body that determine the human form. Only 3 percent of those genes are different from other creatures and make human beings what they are. At the same time, the people of Europea believed something purely human existed inside the spirit.

“What is a god? It is something that transcends humanity. People who are purely human are no longer human. They are superhuman. And the Europeans concluded that the superhuman was god.”

The people of Europea cybernetically enhanced their brains and synchronized their spirits. More than ten million people were joined into one, as if thereby summoning a god. They connected the god-like component that existed within each human being to finally create a god.

Inside this tower existed a dense body of information believed to be a god and enshrined in a giant server. And it provided all human beings with accurate, complete, and absolute answers. The people of Europea, “God’s people,” acquired perfect stillness and absolute peace by living in all ways as God told them, from morning to night, and from birth unto death. Thus, the people finally obtained the ultimate freedom.

“The freedom to renounce freedom.” Release from the necessity of making a choice.

“Their god decided everything and they lived accordingly to their last breath.”

“That’s right.”

The boy looked as if he had heard something horrible.

“How could such a country perish?”

Once again, the boy asked. However, its meaning sounded slightly different this time.

I purposely answered him as if offering a riddle.

“That’s easy. They incurred God’s wrath.”

Chapter 3: The Holy Festival's Saint and Devil

The Holy Festival originated one thousand years ago, after the sudden collapse of the European Empire, when a saint appeared in a world ravaged by chaos. She guided the people and worked many miracles in a world without order. To praise that saint, every nation on the European continent held a festival at the end of the year. The festival was to welcome in a happy new year as the old year ended. People prayed in churches and enjoyed modest feasts at home. And... As winter neared, a woman came to Organbaelz.

"Um, excuse me?"

She had a strong accent that made people from the rural areas wonder about her origins.

"Yes, may I help you?"

However, the waitress in the shop did not look suspiciously at the visitor. She welcomed her with a perfect sales smile as if pleased at a reunion with an old friend.

"I'm Mary Clarissa. Mr. Wazkane arranged for me to come here for research."

The woman, Mary, introduced herself and bowed deeply with anxious politeness.

"Mr. Wazkane?"

The waitress silently repeated the name that Mary had given. The waitress was a pretty girl. Without a doubt, she was a beautiful young woman. Her smooth silver hair and red eyes, which shone like jewels, were particularly impressive.

"Um, are you Sven by any chance? You're as lovely as I've heard."

"As you've heard? You know my name?"

Then Sven remembered the name Wazkane.

"Oh, in the public relations section!"

It was the name of a regional government official in Pelfe she had met during

the airship incident.

“Yes. I asked Mr. Wazkane if there was anybody who might provide information, and he mentioned this shop.”

“Oh... sorry. I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

The woman mentioned prior arrangements, but since Sven didn’t know why Mary had come, she was unsure how to help her. Nonetheless, Sven was a skilled and personable waitress. Even if Mary hadn’t come to buy bread, Sven thought it was only right to welcome her.

“Please, come in.”

Sven politely invited Mary inside Tockerbrot Bakery.

Mary Clarissa was twenty years old. She was a grown woman, but her appearance was dowdy. Her hair was messy, she was wearing glasses with spirals on the lenses, and her cheeks were round and freckled. She was dressed in an old sweater and shabby canvas shoes. To be honest, they looked a little dirty. If she had been sitting at the side of the road with an empty can in front of her, rich people passing by would have tossed in change.

“I’m a writer from Greyten.”

Tockerbrot had a dining area for enjoying light meals. As she spoke, Mary sat on one of the chairs and drank hot tea prepared by Sven.

“A writer... Let’s see...”

“Yes. I do most things that involve writing words and crafting sentences.”

“Oh, I see.”

Sven thought Mary spoke awkwardly for someone whose trade was in words. Perhaps Mary sensed Sven’s thoughts, because she offered an explanation herself.

“Tee hee! I don’t come this way often, so I don’t really know the language. Is my accent strong?”

“No, no! Not at all! It’s just a little distinctive.”

Sven answered with a wry smile. Mary’s accent was very strong, but that was

understandable since she came from Greyten.

“But I speak properly in Greytenese!”

“Yes, I’m sure you do.”

Sven sincerely agreed with Mary.

The Greyten Empire had once been prosperous and known as the Land of the Never Setting Sun. It was still one of the largest nations. A few hundred years ago, however, the European countries treated Greyten as a rustic backwater.

Britniss was the area in Greyten where the capital was located, and was fairly developed. But in Olz, an area even Greytenites considered remote countryside, the national language wasn’t recognized. Someone born in Olz would have to learn the standard language of Greyten, then acquire the common language of Wiltia, which was also used in Pelfe. So it was impressive that Mary’s accent wasn’t stronger.

“Anyway, what brings you to our shop?”

“Well, I’m collecting material on Organbaelz.”

Mary explained that she was a magazine reporter researching lifestyles in Pelfe since the annexation by Wiltia.

“I hear problems remain throughout Pelfe.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Sven agreed with a heavy voice.

Since the annexation, Wiltia had not followed a policy of oppression and abuse toward the people living in the former Pelfe region. However, differences and tensions between the two peoples—the victors who swallowed a neighboring territory, and the defeated who were swallowed without a fight—were unavoidable.

“I’ve heard that many of the people abandoned their traditional Pelfe family names for new Wiltian names.”

“That’s what I’ve heard, too. People say it’s easier to get a job and go to school that way.”

This shouldn’t have been necessary. In fact, the Wiltian government and the regional government in Pelfe had established fair hiring laws, which covered Wiltians and Pelfians. However, if it was necessary to establish such laws, then there were people who would break them.

“Many people try to handle things better, but...”

Since Sven had come here, she had seen many sad and angry Pelfians. The collapse of one country wasn’t a small matter for its people.

“Yes. I want to hear about them.”

Mary spoke brightly, in contrast to Sven’s growing darkness.

“I came here because I heard this shop has good relations with the local people.”

Simply relating a tragedy is an easy way to get attention. However, finding even small hope within the story would make Mary’s article meaningful.

“May I do research here at your shop?”

When Mary broached her main purpose, someone poked his face in from the back of the shop.

“Sven? Who’s there?”

It was Lud, the shop’s owner.

“.....”

Mary froze when she saw Lud’s face.

“Yiiikes!”

She screamed and flipped over, chair and all.

“M-Mary? What’s the matter?”

As Sven anxiously asked, Mary ducked under the table to hide from Lud.

“This is all I have! So please! Just let me go!”

Her hands shook as she tossed out her wallet.

“J-Just leave me enough for transportation back to the Greyten Embassy!”

She was ready to hand over everything but her lifeline as a foreign traveler.

“No, um... sorry.”

Lud lowered his head to apologize.

His face was frightening. To describe how scary it was, even the people in Organbaelz, who were growing used to him, would collapse in fear if they encountered him on the street at night. Winter had come and the sun was setting early. Just the other day, Lud made a grown man fall flat.

“I thought someone I knew had come in. Sorry.”

Although Lud had a terrifying face, most of his friends didn’t cringe at the sight of him. He had overheard Sven and Mary’s conversation as he was working in the oven room, and since it didn’t sound like her usual chitchat with customers, he assumed it was a regular visitor like Marlene or Jacob.

“Let’s see... I’m Lud Langart, Tockerbrot’s owner.”

“Y-Yiiiiikes!”

Lud introduced himself again, but Mary was still frightened and wouldn’t look at him.

“M-Master? Don’t take it too hard. It just takes a little getting used to.”

Sven was a deeply devoted and affectionate waitress, so she desperately tried to reassure Lud, but his shoulders drooped and he looked depressed.

SIGH...

“This is why they chose me to be the Devil this year,” he mumbled dispiritedly.

“Devil? What do you mean?”

At the word “devil,” Mary regained her composure. However, she still avoided looking at Lud.

“Well, um...”

Sven began to explain. The invitation had come one week ago... Tockerbrot’s business hours had ended and the “CLOSED” sign was hanging up when Marlene visited from the church atop the hill.

“What do you want? I’m not offering you tea!”

“As usual, you really have an attitude!”

Many noncustomers, such as Jacob and Milly, regularly visited Tockerbrot. The brief period after closing the shop was the only time Sven could be alone with Lud. Sven was open in her irritation at Marlene’s interruption.

“There’s something I can only discuss with him now. I don’t need tea, but could you get Lud?”

“What’s the matter, Marlene?”

Lud came in after cleaning the oven room.

“I have a small favor to ask of you. Actually, of both of you.”

“Both of us?”

Sven looked puzzled hearing that Marlene had come not just for Lud, but for her too.

“Yes. Were you aware that the Holy Festival is coming up?”

“Yeah, I guess it’s about that time.”

Snow had already accumulated around town and the surrounding mountains grew whiter by the day.

“The end of the year is almost here.”

“Time sure does fly!”

Sven and Lud traded observations that had been uttered millions of times since human beings devised the calendar.

“That’s right. I want Lud to bake sweets to give to the children at the Holy Festival. His Maple Autumns at the Thanksgiving Festival were very popular.”

The townsfolk had asked Lud to bake sweetbreads for the Thanksgiving Festival. He had baked Maple Autumns in the shape of a horseshoe, which was a symbol of good luck. That special bread, with sweet maple jam inside, had sold out in no time. People had raved about it, saying they looked forward to eating it again next year.

“That...”

Lud’s face tensed. If people who didn’t know him had seen that face, they would have thought he was about to yell, “That’s a pain in the butt! Go ask someone else!”

However, that wasn’t what happened.

“Of course, I’ll do it! Please! Let me do it!!”

In excited tones, he accepted and looked ready to hug Marlene.

“What should I make? Krantz or liqueur cake? Or, since it’s the Holy Festival, something beautiful to look at? How about pamier?”

Lud had exceptional skills as a baker, and as a confectioner. Both required using flour, sugar, fresh cream and butter. The two were like relatives.

“I see... The children at the Holy Festival are going to eat my sweets!”

Lud looked happy and deeply moved.

This kind and gentle baker was happiest when he saw the smiles of the people who ate the bread and sweets he baked. This pleased him more than anything else. And on this special day that only came once a year, something he baked would help enliven the atmosphere. In a way, this was a Holy Festival gift for him.

“Um, Lud? To tell the truth, that wasn’t the only thing I wanted to ask you.”

“Oh?”

Marlene made a face as if she had something difficult to say.

“What’s wrong? You sound like you’re holding something back.”

“Well...”

Eventually, Marlene answered Sven’s question.

“I want you two to wear costumes at the Holy Festival.”

The Holy Festival was widely celebrated in the European nations. Prayers and hymns were offered at church. At home, people offered thanks for the past year, prayed for a good year to come, and celebrated with a modest feast.

The celebration was more than religious. It was a lingering manifestation of regional beliefs. Even the August Federation, which officially forbade religion, celebrated the Holy Festival at home. That's how special it was. However, even within the same culture, customs differed by region.

"I guess Lud doesn't know about Pelfe's... Or rather Organbaelz's Holy Festival."

Lud had lived in Organbaelz just over two years. The Holy Festival had been held the year before, but Lud hadn't blended with the townsfolk yet and they had rejected him as a suspicious and frightening baker.

"Last year, I spent the day quietly alone in the shop. I don't really know the particulars of how people celebrate it."

"Master, you recall sad memories so casually."

Next to him, Sven had tears in her eyes.

"I've heard a White Old Man visits homes to give gifts to children during the Holy Festival."

Lud was born and raised in Berun, the capital of Wiltia. In Berun, a large old man with a white beard was beloved by children.

"Is it different in Pelfe?"

"Let's see... Instead of the White Old Man, the Saint visits."

"The Saint... I see..."

After hearing that, Sven made a face of sudden understanding.

"I bet you want me to disguise myself as the Saint!"

In Wiltia and Pelfe, the character who visited homes was different, but they needed someone in a disguise to dispense gifts.

"Yes. And the town council decided the most suitable person would be... you."

Marlene was a nun at the local church, and while its finances had improved, money was still tight. Since part of the church's budget was covered by donations from the townsfolk, they often asked her to serve on executive

committees for local events in return. So she was looking for volunteers to disguise themselves and visit houses during the Holy Festival.

“The Saint has silver hair and wears a white dress. So you’re perfect, aren’t you?”

“Hmm... Should I do it?”

Sven assumed an air of importance.

“Please! Lend a hand for the children’s sake! They would recognize me!”

“Huh?”

Sven didn’t understand Marlene’s point.

“The children at my orphanage... Not the older kids, but the little ones... They believe in the Saint of the Holy Festival.”

In European nations where the Holy Festival was celebrated, mischievous kids were all told the same thing around this time of year.

“The Saint doesn’t visit naughty children.”

However, the reality in most households was, whether children were good or bad, their parents—rather than a saint—put presents by their children’s beds while they slept.

“They don’t have someone to put out presents for them, so they think it doesn’t matter if they’re good or bad because the Saint won’t visit them anyway. Isn’t that sad?”

No one came, no matter how good they were. The problem wasn’t whether they received presents or not. The thought that no one in this world cared about them could scar their hearts.

“Hmm... Since you tell me that, it’s difficult to refuse. Well, then I guess I’ll accept!”

“Really? Thank you!”

Marlene clasped Sven’s hands, pleased to have accomplished her task. Or rather, pleased that she would be able to make the children happy.

“Oh my!”

And Sven wasn't unhappy to see Marlene's joy. The two women usually glared jealously at each other over Lud, but perhaps that was precisely why a complicated friendship had arisen between them.

During a previous incident, Sven had disappeared from Organbaelz. When Lud and the others had left to recapture her, Marlene watched over the shop. And when Sven returned, Marlene had hugged her in tears. Given that, there was no way Sven could refuse to do her a favor.

"And I need one more helper."

Again, Marlene looked as if she had something difficult to say.

She was staring at Lud.

"Am I involved, too?"

Sensing the meaning of her stare, Lud sounded suspicious, and Marlene nodded apologetically.

"But isn't the Saint supposed to be a woman?"

Needless to say, Lud was a man. If it was necessary to dress as a woman, someone else would be more appropriate.

"No, that's not what I meant. At the Holy Festival in Organbaelz, the Devil visits in addition to the Saint."

"The Devil?"

Marlene continued speaking to Lud, who looked stunned.

"Yes. That's the difference here. In addition to the Saint coming on the night of the Holy Festival... the Devil comes to snatch bad children."

Around Pelfe, there was a tradition that on the holy night, a saint would appear to guide the righteous and visit doom upon the wicked. Based on that, a custom had developed on the night of the Holy Festival, when good children received gifts and bad children faced the threat of being stuffed in an old sack and taken to Hell.

"That sounds exactly like Namahage in the East!"

An island nation had a similar custom of adults wearing demonic masks,

threatening children by asking if they had been bad—even making them cry—and warning them not to misbehave.



“And, um... the townsfolk said Lud would be the perfect devil.”

Marlene was deeply apologetic. Her request was like telling Lud to his face that he looked like a devil. And Lud already worried about the way he looked.

“Um, you can say no! I’m so sorry!”

Marlene tried to apologize, but Lud silently stopped her by raising a hand.

“No... I’ll do it.”

Then he tightened his hand into a fist.

“After all, it’ll make everyone smile!!”

To be honest, it was a little... No, it was very painful. He would feel like he was being mocked for his scary face, which he already worried about. However, the townsfolk were expecting it. And the children were looking forward to it. Compared to those realities, his discomfort was inconsequential.

“Even if I’m there as the Devil, at least I can participate in the Holy Festival. That’s much better than last year!”

“Master... Poor you...”

Lud’s touching resolution moved his loyal servant Sven to tears. Marlene was happy and relieved.

“Really? Thank you! This is a huge help! Now I can set a good example for the children!”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, kids these days are so skeptical. They don’t believe in either the Saint or the Devil!”

During a revolution in industry, railways had connected continents, aircraft had taken to the skies, and huge vessels were sailing the seas. Now it was an age when humanoid assault weapons stalked the battlefield. Only a few children wholeheartedly believed in traditions the way they did one or two hundred years ago.

“If you say, ‘Do as I say or the Devil will take you away,’ they laugh scornfully. So I thought I should stake my adult dignity on doing something about it!”

“Were you planning this from the beginning?”

Sven looked suspicious.

“Well... we all have our reasons.”

Marlene laughed mischievously as she answered. So it was decided that Tockerbrot would provide both sweets for the Holy Festival and staff disguised as the Saint and the Devil.

Back in the present inside Tockerbrot...

“Anyway, that’s the situation.”

“I see...”

After hearing Sven’s explanation, Mary answered with mixed feelings.

“But surely...”

Mary glanced at Lud’s face.

“...His face really is perfect for the Devil!”

It was easy to believe from a woman who had cried and toppled over at the first sight of him.

“Please, don’t mention that again.”

Sven chose her words carefully, since Lud’s ferocious looks were difficult to deny. Listening to this conversation, Lud’s shoulders drooped even further.

“That’s why the shop is really busy right now. I’m sorry, but we can’t pay much attention to you.”

Mary came to Tockerbrot to collect information for an article and Sven had actually wanted to refuse her request because they were so busy. But their guest had come all the way from Greyten, so it would be cruel to send her back.

“That’s all right. I’ll follow you around on my own. Pretend I don’t even exist!”

Mary understood and answered Sven accordingly.

Jacob, a regular customer and Lud’s much younger friend, often visited Tockerbrot, and came in as they were making preparations for the Holy Festival.

“Hello, how are— Huh? Who’s this?”

“Oh, don’t mind me!”

Jacob was looking at Mary as she sat at one of the shop tables doing research.

“Oh, Jacob! This is a reporter.”

Mary was collecting information on Tockerbrot as Lud and Sven went about their regular business. Since the bakery was so busy, she simply observed them.

“Wow... You guys sure are involved in a lot at once!”

After hearing the situation from Sven, the boy’s comment suggested either understanding or a lack of it.

“Is Lud here? I have something for him.”

“Um, Master is... Let’s see...”

Sven made an uncomfortable face.

“Is he?”

“Let’s see...”

“Isn’t he?”

“Um...”

Jacob asked again, but Sven looked away.

Lud was working in the oven room. However, he was making sweets to give out at the Holy Festival. Lud and Sven had agreed to disguise themselves and hand out sweets to the children. If Jacob saw the oven room, he would find out that the Saint and Devil were his friends in disguise—and Jacob was still a child. So Sven looked uncomfortable as she tried not to answer Jacob’s question.

“Huh? I came all the way here because he said there’s something he needs in order to make the sweets to give out in his costume at the Holy Festival!”

“What?!”

However, this child’s answer was exceedingly unfanciful.

“Um... Jacob? You know all about it?”

“About what? About you being the Saint this year? I think you’re perfect for it! Good luck!”

“What?!”

In spite of attempts by adults to make the children believe in the traditional story, some children remained thoroughly down-to-earth.

“Oops... is it bad I don’t believe in the Saint and the Devil?”

“It’s not bad, but... How should I put it? I just feel... deflated.”

When Marlene had visited the day before, she had purposely come after closing time so children wouldn’t hear their conversation.

“It can’t be helped. Children don’t seriously believe in the Saint and Devil these days. Well, maybe younger kids do.”

“Oh... okay.”

Not only did Jacob not believe in it himself, he was trying to console her.

Kids these days are less naïve than I thought!

Sven couldn’t help but heave a sigh.

“The Saint, the Devil and the White Old Man? They don’t exist.”

“Oh.”

Sven was troubled as she answered Jacob, who looked amazed.

“Because it’s really a man dressed in red who visits!”

“Huh?!”

The boy’s statement was unexpected.

“Isn’t it a man in red who comes on Holy Festival night? After even the adults have gone to sleep, in the middle of the night, he creeps in through the window! I’ve seen him!”

“Uh... Jacob?”

The boy was suggesting a completely new take on the festival and claimed to have witnessed it himself.

“I saw him once about five years ago. It was a middle-aged guy wearing a red outfit. He gave me a bunch of stuff and said, ‘Don’t tell your mom. All right, dude?’”

“Huh? What? That’s...”

The way Jacob told it, the “middle-aged man” sounded a bit younger.

“But the gifts were weird. Inside the bag, I found chocolates and biscuits, and some change and wrinkly bills, and cigarettes, a whisky flask and magazines with pictures of girls in swimsuits.”

“What the heck?”

The gifts were like a list of the private items a soldier was permitted to bring to the military.

“Oh...”

After hearing this from Jacob, someone sprang to Sven’s mind.

Jacob’s father had mysteriously disappeared. He was the legendary ace pilot Major Blitzdonner, whose reputation even surpassed her master Lud. He had painted his favorite machine red and he usually dressed all in red, too.

“No way...”

“What’s the matter?”

“Oh, um... It’s nothing!”

It was hard to imagine that the missing ace pilot would come all the way to this rural town deep in the mountains to give gifts to his son.

It would only confuse Jacob if I told him that.

Svelgen Avei was a humanoid Hunter Unit with feelings and thoughts very like a human being’s. At this moment, she chose to sidestep the dilemma, with the very human-like maneuver of pretending she hadn’t heard.

“Um... Anyway, what did Lud need for making the sweets?”

Sven changed the subject and returned to the purpose of Jacob’s visit.

“Well, it seems he needs a certain tool for making a sweet called a bambler or a bunkler or something. He asked if I had any junk that might be of use.”

Jacob’s family had run a factory in town until they had to close it just a few months ago. It was the best place in town to find useful junk.

“A bambler? I wonder what that is...”

“Let’s see... He even gave me a diagram of the design. He’s good at drawing!”

“After being in the military, that makes sense.”

A soldier’s job wasn’t just shooting guns. Ten thousand... No, hundreds of thousands of people worked together in the military, requiring more occupations than in a small town. One easy example was cooking duty to feed the soldiers. And a medical unit to treat the sick and injured. And an apparel unit to take care of the uniforms and fatigues. And a maintenance crew to control and maintain the weapons. And a corps of civil engineers to set up military positions, with skills that put professional contractors to shame.

“Master was in special operations, so he had to be able to handle many different jobs and received training in a variety of areas.”

“Oh. Including baking bread?”

“No, that’s different.”

Lud learned to bake in a town where he was sent as a scout. He learned the basics while working as a baker’s assistant for a year.

“The military is a collection of people and unexpected needs arise. Headquarters would consider requests and have special tools developed. Until then, the people on site had to deal with whatever the occasion demanded.”

“Like?”

“Like baths.”

In order to clean sweat, mud and blood from soldiers who were exhausted from the physical labor of battle, equipment for bathing was imperative. However, preparing a portable outdoor water heater wasn’t easy.

“So one unit made their own boiler by combining pipes, an electric heater, an engine and a generator they had on hand.”

“Being a soldier must be hard work.”

Since there were often such situations, and many soldiers had once been technicians in town factories, many military veterans were good with their

hands.

“But what’s Lud going to make with these things?”

The materials were on the design Jacob held. Lud needed materials and the tools for assembling them. A metal pipe, a little steel and a few gears...

“Oh... Jacob. You came.”

Slowly, Lud came out from the back of the shop.

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing.”

Still worried about having surprised Mary the day before, Lud checked to see who was there before fully presenting himself.

“I found some materials you might like. We still have welding tools, so you can use them if you want.”

“Sorry to bother you, Jacob. In return, I was just baking some test sweets for the Holy Festival. If you’d like, have some.”

“Really?! Then I stopped by at just the right time!”

Usually, Jacob seemed so mature it was almost unbelievable for a ten-year-old, but he was really still a child. There was no way he would pass up the chance to taste some sweets.

“Go ahead and try them.”

The test sweets Lud made were lined up in front of Jacob.

“What’s this? They look like jewels!”

Jacob’s attention was caught by the gem-like sweets in vibrant red, green, yellow and blue.

“Um, this has a strange texture... But it’s delicious!”

“These are fruit jellies called pamiers. They’re hardened with pectin instead of gelatin. Isn’t this unique texture addictive?”

Pectin is a polysaccharide contained in plants. When chilled, it turns jam into a form of jelly.

“How about this? Yes... this is good, too!”

“That’s a crepe cake—sponge cake wrapped in crepe.”

Sponge cake is soaked in liquors such as orange liqueur, rum, brandy and vodka, to make it fragrant.

“This is more for adults.”

“Yes. I want the adults to enjoy themselves along with the children.”

With just one bite, a wonderful, rich bouquet rose from the stomach to the nose.

“Master, your skills are impressive!”

Lud had been involved in the incident in Berun, the royal capital. Afterward, he seized the opportunity to visit shops in the city for research. Sven was amazed at how her master put the knowledge he gathered there into practice.

“Hmm...”

However, Lud didn’t look satisfied.

“What can it be? I’m not getting much of a response...”

Jacob’s reaction didn’t seem to be what Lud expected, because he made a pinched face.

“Oh, that’s just because Milly isn’t here today.”

Milly lived in the church atop the hill with Marlene and the children in the orphanage. She worked at Tockerbrot and hoped to become a baker like Lud. She was a big eater and loved delicious food. Every time Lud baked something, she gave him an overwhelming response. Sometimes, when Lud asked her to taste something, her enthusiastic responses were like a scene in a play, and she almost fainted in astonishment at the great taste.

“It’s worth baking for her!”

“Yeah, she gets so excited!”

Milly was given time off from her work at the bakery before the Holy Festival. It wasn’t just because Marlene wanted Milly to spend more time with the other children, who were like her family. It was because they lived in the church. The

Holy Festival was approaching, and Marlene needed help with all the chores.

“What did you think, Mary?”

Lud asked Mary, who was sitting at the table in back, for her opinion. He had offered her a sample, along with tea prepared by Sven.

“Oh... sorry. I, um... food criticism isn’t my field. Sorry.”

She looked away and lowered her head as she answered.

“Oh, I see. Sorry.”

Lud spoke apologetically, too.

“Excuse me, I need to use the restroom.”

Saying no more, Mary left the room, having barely touched Lud’s sample.

“Maybe she can’t handle the liquor.”

“Maybe it was too strong.”

Jacob and Lud spoke softly as they watched Mary leave.

“Anyway, don’t you think this will be enough? The children and the adults will be thrilled.”

These sweets would be like dream creations for people in a rural town who were pleased with even a donut, a mere chunk of fried dough sprinkled with sugar.

“No, not yet. I want to please them even more. Holy Festival only comes once a year!”

Lud made a tight fist as if aiming for a higher goal.

“This man would never cut corners in a matter as important as this.”

“That’s what’s so great about him!”

Sven proudly thrust her chest out at Jacob, who was half impressed and half amazed.

“Well then, Master, what are you planning to make for your main attraction?”

Lud had drawn a design and prepared a special device, so Sven wondered

what he was planning to make.

“Well, about that...”

That evening, Sven visited the church atop the hill to give a progress report.

“So there you have it. The process of making sweets is coming along well.”

“I see. I’ve never heard of such unique sweets.”

After Marlene heard the name of the sweet Lud was going to make, she cocked her head as if she didn’t know what it was.

“Apparently, it’s a local specialty from northern Wiltia.”

Pelfe was adjacent to the southeast border of Wiltia. It was understandable Marlene and Jacob didn’t recognize this sweet.

“I’m sure the children will be overjoyed. I was right to ask him,” Marlene said happily.

Just then, they heard a commotion behind the church.

“Hey! I told you not to fight! Why are you always so violent?”

They heard the soft sound of running coming from the direction of the commotion.

“Oh my! What’s going on?”

When Sven turned her head, she saw a little girl about seven or eight years old running away with a sour look on her face.

“Oh, Fran!”

When Marlene spotted the girl, she called out, but the girl didn’t stop.

“Marlene! Stop Fran!”

Fast on Fran’s heels, a girl Sven knew quite well appeared from behind the church. It was Milly, who worked under her at Tockerbrot.

“You! Why would you do such a thing?!”

Milly was usually tough and unyielding, but Sven thought her voice was sharper than usual today.

“What a ferocious expression you have on your face!”

“Oh... What are you doing here?”

Milly saw Sven and was suspicious.

“I’m here on minor business. Anyway, what happened?” Sven asked.

“You want to know what happened?! I was putting up decorations for the Holy Festival, but Fran ripped them all down!”

The church atop the hill was in ruins. Marlene, who used to be a terrorist, had used it to hide her true identity on her own initiative. So, while it was unofficial, it was still a church. People came there to offer prayers to God, so Marlene and the others hung decorations for the approaching Holy Festival.

“Fran, why did you do that?” Marlene asked.

But the girl didn’t answer. She frowned and clamped her mouth shut.

“If you act like this, the Saint won’t visit you on Holy Festival night!”

Milly scolded Fran, with a standard warning to children at this time of the year. However, instead of correcting her attitude, Fran showed no sign of remorse and just glared back in fierce anger.

“The Saint ain’t never gonna come! Are you stupid?!”

“What?!”

When Milly heard Fran openly call her stupid, her face flushed with rage.

“If you talk like that, the Devil will take you away! Is that what you want?! He’ll put you in his old sack and drag you to Hell!”

Milly tried again to threaten the girl, this time using the threat of the Devil.

“Hmf! The Devil don’t exist!”

It didn’t work either. Fran laughed with scorn.

“Y-You—!!”



“I don’t care about the Saint or the Devil anyway!”

Fran yelled to reinforce her point, then turned her back and bolted away.

“That girl!!”

Milly looked like she was having trouble swallowing her anger.

“Oh dear! It’s exactly as you told me!”

Children these days didn’t believe in either the Saint or the Devil. This scene illustrated Marlene’s fears.

“Um... and there’s more.”

Marlene’s slightly shadowed face suggested another problem.

“The children at the orphanage came here with other issues. Most of them lost their parents in the war.”

And Milly was one of them.

“Most of them don’t have any relatives. But that girl, Fran, has family.”

“Is she here because her family works away from home?”

“That’s right.”

After the Great War ended and the military economy subsided, Wiltia poured enormous funds into redevelopment of the recently acquired Pelfe region. The policy was in part for war reconstruction to assist people who had lost their jobs during the conflict. Many people had left their rural homes for the city to work.

“Fran has an older sister. She’s an old acquaintance of mine, so I agreed to take care of Fran.”

“And her sister hasn’t returned yet?”

“She hasn’t even contacted me.”

Apparently, Fran’s sister had left, saying she would be back by the next year’s Holy Festival. That was one year ago but she hadn’t returned. Marlene had sent a few letters, but they were sent back as undeliverable. Marlene didn’t know where Fran’s sister was now, or even if she was still alive.

“I haven’t heard from her for a whole year. I hate to think it, but...”

“It doesn’t sound good.”

Sven remembered the face of a certain soldier. He had always regretted abandoning his only sister and had lived in desperation, never able to dispel his demons.

“Lud puts effort into his sweets, but they may not reach that girl’s heart.”

What Fran wanted most was neither sweets nor expensive toys nor cute stuffed animals. She wanted her only remaining family and the assurance that she hadn’t been abandoned. And that was more than one baker could provide.

“I see... So that’s what happened?”

The next day, the morning of the Holy Festival, Lud listened to Sven with complicated feelings as she told him about Fran.

“Yes, it’s a sad story.”

Sven also seemed extremely troubled.

“Sven, you’ve changed.”

“What?”

Sven was surprised at his sudden comment.

“When you first came here, you never wore that expression.”

Sven was deeply affectionate, respectful and loyal toward Lud. She wouldn’t hesitate to give her life for him. At the same time, she had considered everyone other than Lud to be basically unimportant. She greeted Tockerbrot’s customers with a smile, but only because treating them politely was important to Lud. For her, the world only existed with Lud at its center.

“You feel sorry for this girl Fran. You want to do something for her, but you can’t and it pains you.”

“I’m... No...”

Sven was confused. If someone else said the same thing, she would have laughed and said, “Don’t be ridiculous!” But Sven knew that Lud understood her better than anyone else in the world, just as Lud felt about her. And it wasn’t blind belief. When she was still a military weapon, and a Steel Giant, Lud had

ridden inside her and shared her fate.

“That feeling is very important, but I once lost sight of it. And I did something that I couldn’t undo.”

Lud was arching his broad back and assembling something with a clink-clank. Sven could sense his difficult past through his back. And she recognized his regret over that past in which he had suffered death, and theft and loss... and in which he also had stolen and become a killer.

“Um, M-Master?”

She started to say something, but her mouth, which usually spoke so clearly, was now refusing to cooperate, so she was frustrated.

“Good morning, Lud. Hm? What are you doing?”

Meanwhile, a visitor had arrived. It was Jacob, who had helped with the tool Lud was assembling.

“Oh, is that the thing for making the whatchamacallit?”

“Yes.”

Lud’s face was the same as usual as he answered Jacob.

“.....”

He wasn’t smiling. Someone who didn’t know him would have thought he was suffering from the hard work. Sven had a sudden thought...

I want to see Master smile again.

When she was still Avei, a Hunter Unit, she only saw him smile once, and that was when they parted. As Sven, she had now stayed with Lud for nine months, and had yet to see that same smile again. It was painful to want this and not have it. Perhaps Sven was sympathetic toward the girl Fran because they were both frustrated by unsatisfied desires.

“Sven, what’s wrong? You’re crinkling your face.”

“Oh no... Um... Ha ha ha...”

As Jacob spoke to her, Sven snapped out of her thoughts. Flustered, she chuckled dryly.

“Lud’s going to use the machine now.”

“Oh, that...”

Lud was assembling a device to make sweets. A metal pipe was extended between two thick metal poles. The pipe wasn’t long, no more than one meter. It was about two or three centimeters thick. An L-shaped handle was attached to one end of the pipe’s axis.

“I was hoping to heat it with electricity, but it’s easier to cook like this, so I’ll manage the old-fashioned way.”

Under the pipe, there was a small wood-burning fire. The firewood was beech and white birch, which wasn’t very fragrant.

“The fire heats the metal pipe, and little by little, we’ll put dough on the pipe.”

Lud was holding cake dough of eggs, flour, sugar, melted butter and a little rum for fragrance.

“Jacob, turn the handle at a steady speed or it will bake unevenly.”

“All right.”

Jacob turned the handle as Lud instructed. As it moved, Lud pressed dough onto the oil-covered pipe. The dough baked quickly because of the hot pipe and the fire, causing a sweet smell to rise, but...

“Jacob, turn a little slower or the dough won’t bake thoroughly.”

“Umf!”

The boy slowed his pace to turn the handle as Lud wanted.

“Jacob, now you’re too slow. The dough will overbake.”

“Urgh!”

Jacob began turning more quickly.

“Jacob, that’s too fast.”

“Argh! I don’t know how fast to do it! Why don’t you do it, Lud?!”

“I wish I could, but I have to apply the dough.”

Spreading the dough evenly required more precision than turning the handle.

“Here, I’ll take over.”

Sven took the handle from Jacob.

Based on a calculation of the degree of heat, the amount of protein in the dough, as well as of the milk fat and sugar, what is the most appropriate rotation speed and number of rotations to... Sven rapidly calculated the best speed for optimal baking and began turning the handle accordingly.

“Yes, Sven! You’ve got it just right!”

There was more to it than turning steadily at a moderate speed. The dough was baked in layers, so each time it turned, a different part of the dough was baked. Accounting for that change in her calculations, she adjusted the rotation speed so each layer would receive the same amount of heat. Sven performed this task perfectly, with a machine-like accuracy that a human being could only acquire after long professional experience.

“Now I’ll shape it with a spatula...”

While applying the dough, Lud used two spatulas—one small, one big—to smooth out the uneven areas. After a while, the dough was baked into a log-like shape.

“And now I’ll remove the cake from the fire and let it thoroughly cool.”

When Lud confirmed that the cake was cool enough, he removed the metal pipe.

“Then I’ll cut the left and right ends, shape it, cut it to an even thickness, and...”



The finished cake had layers of rings like the annual rings of a tree.

“Is this baumkuchen? I see... Just like the word means! A tree sweet!”

Jacob laughed, amused at the unique shape made by applying the dough as it turned and baked over the fire.

“May I try it?”

His face looked like that of a growing child with a healthy appetite who couldn’t wait when smelling fresh-baked baumkuchen.

“Of course.”

Lud wouldn’t deny him.

“This is good! It’s... Holy cow!!”

After just one bite, he reacted as Milly would have.

“It’s puffy, but because of the many layers, the texture melts in your mouth! This is delicious!”

“This sweet is made in the northern part of Wiltia. I don’t know exactly where it originated, but I tasted it in the city of Flander, and I heard the people eat it at their celebrations.”

“Wow... I had no idea such a tasty sweet existed!”

The boy gobbled it up in no time.

“Oh...”

Sven watched in wonder. She felt oddly warm inside, but also jittery and unable to sit still.

What is this feeling?

She felt a mixture of happiness and embarrassment.

“Now that I think about it, we’ve never made anything together.”

“Oh...”

Lud’s observation awakened Sven to the cause of her feelings.

Was this how Lud always felt?

“I’m making something that’s going to please others.”

Lud believed this feeling was worth securing, even if it took a lifetime.

“Oh... b-but, um...”

Sven hesitated.

She worked very hard at Tockerbrot, enough for a dozen employees. That was important and admirable, but she had never actually baked anything herself.

“But all I did was turn the pipe!”

Sven corrected Lud as she blushed and tried to suppress her unruly heart. As her master’s servant, she believed that it was insolent for her to experience the same pleasure he did, and that it was impossible for a mechanical doll like her to attain such a human feeling.

“That’s not true. It’s said that making baumkuchen is difficult. So if you can do it, then you’re a full-blown confectioner!”

The process looked easy at a glance, but to make tasty baumkuchen it was necessary to accurately judge the strength of the fire, rotate the dough at regular intervals, and assess how thoroughly it was baked at any given moment.

“I’m not a professional confectioner, so I wouldn’t be able to make this without your help.”

“But I...”

Sven felt slightly guilty. After all, she was a machine. She measured, calculated and performed a function. Those were the strengths of a machine, and what made a machine what it was. But human beings were different. A machine performed at the flip of a switch, the pull of a lever, the depression of a pedal, so it didn’t deserve praise.

“But you’re happy, right?”

“Um...”

Sven couldn’t argue with Lud’s assessment. She did indeed feel very good at this moment.

“Sven, there isn’t a lot we can do. I mean, about Fran’s sadness. We can’t do

much, but...”

As Lud spoke, he held out a fresh-baked baumkuchen.

“Perhaps it will alleviate her sadness, even if just a little, if we give her a tasty treat!”

Someone once described despair as “sickness unto death.” Because despair could be stubborn and continuous. If sadness is constant, whether someone is awake or asleep, they begin to wither. Their eyes, ears and even their minds stop feeling. That’s why it’s necessary to arrest despair, if even for a second. In that split second, the sufferers can take hold of themselves and, with the slightest stimulation, sense what they couldn’t see or hear before. And that stimulation can prevent the human heart from further despair.

“Let’s bake a little something to make her smile, if only for a second.”

Eating delicious food may not drastically change one’s life. But, a baker can only bake. Lud put all his effort into baking to ensure that others would smile, even briefly.

“Well, let’s bake some more like this. Then we’ll add the final touches.”

“Huh? You’re gonna add something else?”

Jacob was surprised by Lud’s words.

“It’s already quite scrumptious!”

“Thanks, but since the Holy Festival is a special day, I want to make something more than scrumptious!”

Lud Langart didn’t know the meaning of the word “compromise.”

A good 15 hours later...

While the townsfolk were having a modest celebration, Lud and Sven continued baking the baumkuchen—and added an extra twist. By the time they finished and packed the sweets into individual boxes, the sun had set and night had fallen. Jacob helped until evening. He had insisted on staying to the very end, but they sent him home. Although he acted like a grownup, he was still a child. Lud and Sven wanted him to spend this special day with his family.

“This is like the saying ‘Physician, heal thyself.’”

With a bitter smile, Sven described the way they had worked feverishly while everyone else was enjoying the festival.

“That’s not true.”

However, Lud was happy to do something for others on this special day. For him, it was indeed as if the Saint of the Holy Festival had given him a gift.

“Anyway, I’m impressed with my costume!”

And that night, he and Sven had other roles to play. Sven would disguise herself as the Pure White Saint, and Lud would be the Pure Black Devil.

Lud, wearing his costume, was nonplussed at his transformation.

“W-Well, it doesn’t look bad on you!”

Sven, who looked more than perfect as the Pure White Saint, hurried to cheer him up. She was unimaginably pretty to begin with, but now she looked like a dream, even to Lud, who knew who she was. He couldn’t help but think that this was her true appearance.

“All right, let’s go.”

Lud and Sven began their rounds.

Disguised as the Saint and the Devil of the Holy Festival, Lud and Sven visited each house, but they didn’t enter through the front doors. They entered through the bedroom windows of the sleeping children.

And this is how it went... First, the Devil crept in. If the children awoke and wondered what was happening, they would see the massive figure of Lud as the Devil. The children would cry and yell at the sight. Then Sven came in dressed as the eagerly anticipated Saint and drove away the Devil. She told the sobbing children, “Do you want the Devil to take you away next year? If you are bad, he might!”

Waking up to see the Devil and the Saint would make a strong impression on even the most impudent children. If a child answered no, the Saint would say, “Then shall I give you a gift?” She would hand the child a box of sweets made with the utmost care by the Devil—or rather, by Lud.

Sven wore her well-practiced business smile, but Lud didn't need to do anything special. He just stood there and, as if it was a law of nature, the children screamed.

"When things go this smoothly, I start to feel a little sad."

Lud mumbled glumly after they had visited most of their target houses.

He had accepted his role, believing it was much better to be despised as a character from folklore than to be despised as the person he was. But it still bothered him when the kids said his face was scary.

"You were in the dark... So maybe that was part of it."

Sven reassured him.

"But half of the parents screamed, too."

Not only mothers, but fathers too had cried out in fear—"Gyah!!"—so it was understandable he felt sad.

"Some of them were even people I know."

Since Tockerbrot's business had picked up, the number of people frightened by Lud had decreased. Customers weren't overly surprised when he stuck his face out from the oven room to check on the state of the shop. Of course, they had lost all antipathy for Lud by now. And Lud knew that. But it still hurt when they trembled in fear.

"I was surprised that Charlotte wasn't scared."

Charlotte was Jacob's mother. She knew what Lud and Sven were doing and had helped them over the last few days. She worked part-time at Tockerbrot, helping Lud with sales trips to other towns.

They had visited Charlotte to thank her for her help by giving her sweets. When she had opened the door and seen Lud's face, she had simply smiled and said, "Oh, good work!"

"Now that's the woman who stole Major Blitzdonner's heart!"

She appeared to be gentle and pretty, but something about her seemed more fearless than anyone else.

“I wonder if he’ll come this year.”

Sven remembered her conversation with Jacob a few days ago and wondered aloud whether the “man in red” would return this year.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing.”

Jacob was already asleep, but he had asked his mother to offer Lud and Sven hot lemonade since they would spend all night making visits.

“Such a thoughtful boy!”

In addition, he had prepared a small snack for them, in case they were hungry. And it contained sour and salty pickles to help combat their exhaustion.

“He’s just ten years old... I wonder what he’ll be like as an adult!”

Sven had arithmetic abilities that far surpassed a human being’s, but the boy’s future was incalculable even for her.

“Well, only the church is left. Shall we drop by the shop for a fresh supply of sweets?”

“Yes, let’s.”

The two walked back to their base of operations. Then they both froze in place.

“Is that Marlene?”

Lud had been a soldier and a member of the secret special ops unit known as the Werewolves.

“No. We’re behind schedule, so there’s a chance she might come to get us, but she doesn’t have a key.”

Sven was a Hunter Unit created for war. For these two, it was easy to sense something out of place even before they arrived in front of the shop. There was someone inside the bakery.

Meanwhile, inside Tockerbrot...

“Hmm... Is there anything here?”

A thief had come into the shop in the hope of stealing something while everyone in town was celebrating the Holy Festival.

“This shop appears to be popular, so I bet they have quite a stash.”

The thief had searched everywhere but found only small change, so she was irritated.

“Anyway, when did they build this place? It wasn’t here before.”

The thief was alone. And she had never done this before. In fact, she had just decided on the crime in passing.

“Urgh... At this rate, I won’t be able to buy a single souvenir!”

She talked aloud to herself because otherwise her fear at committing her first crime would overcome her.

“Oh!”

She found an old-fashioned cash register on the counter.

“Maybe there’s some money in it!”

The thief stretched out her arm. And the result? There was no money inside.

Tockerbrot’s skilled waitress calculated and recorded each day’s sales, stored them in a safe under the floor, then deposited them in the bank once a week. Every Friday. So Sven had just deposited the entire week’s proceeds at noon that day.

“It’s locked... Should I force it open? Is there some kind of tool around?”

The thief didn’t know much about her target. Since she was committing this crime with no plan, she didn’t even have decent tools. She had broken into the shop by throwing a rock she picked up off the street.

“Huh?”

The thief sensed someone nearby. And when she looked outside, someone was standing in front of the door.

“Hey, is somebody inside?”

The person outside spoke.

Uh-oh!

Of course, she didn't say this out loud. She thought the shopkeepers would be away all night at the festival, but maybe they had returned. She'd be in trouble if they called someone.

I think there was a backdoor!

The thief hadn't stolen much, but there was no point at all if she got caught. She crawled across the floor toward the backdoor.

"Meow!"

A white cat appeared. It was Ellis, Tockerbrot's pet.

"Hey, you're in my way! Move or suffer the consequences!"

The thief plucked up Ellis and moved the cat aside.

"Huh?"

Then she saw a woman's legs.

"....."

The thief looked up and saw the Saint of the Holy Festival standing in front of her. It was Sven.

The explanation was simple. Lud and Sven noticed someone in the shop. Lud had raised his voice to get the intruder's attention, while Sven entered through the backdoor and blocked the path of retreat.

"Um..."

The thief hesitated because the pretty girl in front of her really looked like the Saint. And she was looking, not at the thief, but around the shop with cold eyes. She was scanning the shop.

The thief had been born and raised in Pelfe. So it appeared to her that a saint had descended from Heaven to quietly and calmly punish her for her crime. But that wasn't true. Tockerbrot was Lud's treasure and the fruition of his dreams. And the thief had rudely broken into that sacred place. Moreover, the thief was holding leftover bread because it was the only thing she could find to steal. She had broken in to steal the food that Lud had baked with such care, and with a

wish— almost a prayer—that whoever ate it would be happy.

“You...”

Sven mumbled in a hard voice capable of inducing chills.

“Should I kill you?”

“Yikes!”

The thief felt fear from the bottom of her heart. There was murderous intent in the face of the beautiful Saint.

“Help!”

“I won’t let you go!!”

The thief quickly tried to escape, but Sven drove her back like a hungry wolf. The backdoor was blocked, so the only way out was the front door. She knew someone else was there, but she was sure that whoever it was would certainly be less menacing than this woman. Compared to a saint with a face more frightening than a devil, the real Devil would be a lot better.

“Wait!”

When she opened the door, there stood Lud dressed like the Devil.

“Hwah?”

The thief made a foolish sound and collapsed on the spot. As she lost consciousness, the thief thought to herself that she was wrong. She had thought the real Devil would be better. But...

“The real Devil is terrifying!”

The thief mumbled the words aloud just before everything went black.

At Marlene’s orphanage in the church atop the hill...

Holy Festival prayers had ended. And for a church that usually adhered to poverty as a virtue, a quite luxurious meal had adorned the table. However, Fran was gloomy. It was night, and the lights were off. While everyone else was asleep, she was awake, curled up in bed.

This year, she hadn’t been a good girl. And her only sister hadn’t come to get

her. Her sister had said she would come for Fran on the night of the Holy Festival. Another year had passed, but she hadn't arrived.

Fran knew. She knew that the Saint and Devil of the Holy Festival were adults in disguise. No saint or devil came to children who didn't have parents or any family. And they wouldn't come to a girl whose sister had abandoned her.

During the first year, Fran had tried hard to be a good girl. Back then, she thought her sister would come back. The next year, she had been a naughty girl. Because she knew that even if she was bad, the Devil wouldn't come for her. She didn't have anyone to praise her for being good or scold her for being bad.

Fran held her fist tight and curled her body, twisting it in the sheets. She was all alone in the world, and that solitude smothered her in relentless fear. She glanced at the window. That's where the Saint and the Devil of the Holy Festival would appear. But they wouldn't come. No one would come to her.

"Huh?"

Just then, a figure appeared outside the window. Involuntarily, her heart pounded in surprise.

"Agh!"

She spat out a yelp. Because she knew. She knew that the nun Marlene had asked some bakers to disguise themselves as the Saint and Devil. And she had heard the woman from the bakery talking the other day.

But... Something didn't seem right. There was only one person standing at the window. And while the owner of the bakery was large, this person was much smaller. But its shadow was taller than the waitress.

Her heart pounded. Fran didn't believe in the Saint and Devil. Then who was it? Maybe a thief or... The window opened with a clack, and a figure entered the room. Fran held her breath. There were many rows of beds in the room, and the other children were breathing softly. Someone was walking among them, headed straight for her bed.

Does the Devil really exist?!

Was he going to stuff her in his old sack and cart her off to Hell for being bad?

Finally, the shadow reached her bed and stopped. Its arm slowly stretched toward her...

Fran couldn’t help but scream.

“Stop! Stop! Stop!! I’m sorry!! Don’t take me away!!”

She cried and screamed and begged for forgiveness. Unexpectedly, however, she got a reply from the shadow she thought was the Devil.

“Shhh! No, Fran! You’ll wake the others!”

“Huh...?”

Fran was confused and scared. Moonlight shone through the window.

“Triss...? Sis?”

It was Triss, her sister, standing in front of her with an uncomfortable smile and her finger pressed to her mouth.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner. I’m so sorry, Fran.”

Triss hugged her sister.

“Huh? Why...? How...?”

Fran didn’t understand. Why was her sister here? Was she dreaming? There was no Saint or Devil. And she had been a naughty girl. So why did she get the gift she had longed for the most: her sister? She didn’t know. But...

“Sis!”



The reason didn’t matter. All that mattered was that her sister was right here. That was enough for Fran.

“It worked!”

Lud, Sven and Marlene were watching the emotional reunion through a crack in the door.

“I can’t believe the thief in our shop was Fran’s sister!”

It was a coincidence, but an understandable one. Because...

One hour ago...

Marlene was worried about Lud and Sven who had not arrived at the scheduled time. So she went to Tockerbrot, and was surprised by a very strange sight.

“Anyway, stop crying. Aren’t you hungry? Here, have some leftover bread.”

The Devil spoke kindly to Triss.

“Make sure you savor the taste. This is your last supper, thief.”

But the Saint was cold and threatening.

“What’s going on?”

However, it wasn’t the devil-like Saint or the saint-like Devil that surprised Marlene. She was surprised to see the thief between them, a woman sobbing as she ate bread.

“M-Marlene...?”

The woman was surprised by the visitor, but knew her name.

“Huh? Do you know each other?”

Lud started to speak, but he stopped when he saw Marlene’s face.

“What do you mean by ‘thief?!’”

Marlene had a very cold, almost cruel look on her face. It was the face of someone so furious, someone too angry to fully express her emotion in her face.

“Um...”

“Lud, I’m sorry, but could you turn around, go into the back room, close your eyes and cover your ears?”

“All right...”

Lud tried to speak but faced with Marlene’s rigid anger, he had no choice but to retreat.

“What’s going on here?”

Without concerning herself with Sven’s puzzled look, Marlene marched over to the thief—tak! tak!—and slapped her cheek sharply.

“Ouch!”

“Oh, shut up, you idiot!!”

Then Marlene smacked her a few more times. They weren’t gentle slaps. They were a forceful attack in which she cracked her arm like a whip.

“You didn’t contact me for over a year! And when you finally come back, you’re here to steal, you idiot?!”

Then she started to kick Triss with a stomping motion. The thief couldn’t fight back. She merely begged, repeating, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

“Do you know each other?”

“Yes. Her name is Triss. You know Fran? The girl you met at church the other day? Well, this is her sister!”

“Oh!”

Sven clapped her hands together.

Meanwhile, Marlene continued kicking the thief.

“I’m sorry, Boss Lady! I had to!”

“Why would you have to? If you got caught stealing, you wouldn’t have any right to complain even if they cut off your fingers! Why would you do it in my neighborhood anyway?!”

“I thought it was all right since the shop just opened!”

Triss had purposely chosen Tockerbrot, which had been built after she left Organbaelz and was unfamiliar to her, because older shops in the village might have people in them who knew Marlene. However, her idea had backfired. She would never have tried to steal from a shop run by the person Marlene had a secret crush on.

“Argh! You’re still a stupid idiot, you idiot!”

“I’m sorry, Boss Lady! I’m sorry!”

As Sven watched Marlene scold and slap Triss, Sven put her hand on her chin and pondered: “Hmm...”

Marlene usually acted like a pious clergywoman—like a nun. She was, however, a former terrorist and member of the Pelfe Liberation League. Her face looked very different now as she yelled and berated Triss.

“She calls you Boss Lady... What is your relation to her?”

“Um, we spent time together at the same poorhouse years ago.”

“Boss Lady was the leader of the notorious hooligans in the old quarter of Lapchuricka! And she always watched over me!”

Marlene reluctantly began to explain, and Triss, misunderstanding the situation, got carried away and supplied more information.

“Don’t add unnecessary details!”

“Ouch!”

After Triss revealed Marlene’s past as a gang leader, Marlene silenced her with a serious kick.

“Do you... always play the hypocrite?”

Sven was amazed. Almost everyone in town—even Milly, who was like her family—had no suspicion that Marlene was anything but a nun. Even Sven and Lud hadn’t known who she really was when they first met her.

“I’ve been through a lot, okay?! A lot! Anyway, what have you been doing this past year while Fran was here alone?!”

“Um...”

Triss made a dark face and started talking...

She never considered abandoning Fran. She had planned to pick her up after she found a job and was set up with a life in the city. To accomplish that, she had worked herself to death day and night. However, things didn't go well.

She had worked at a joint public and private factory as part of the war reconstruction. At first, she was supposed to receive a housing allowance or a bed in the dormitory for factory workers, complete with social guarantees and proper wages in an environment that satisfied labor standards laws. According to her contract, Triss expected to send her sister to school within one year. However, the factory broke that agreement without a second thought—or perhaps it never intended to honor it.

The dormitory supplied housing in name only. She found herself packed into a single room with eight to ten other people. The meals were poor, and sometimes consisted of rotten meat and moldy bread. Conditions were harsh, and her employers didn't concern themselves with safety. Many workers were injured, and people began to fall sick, one after the other. But instead of sending them to the hospital, they were fired without severance and sent away.

"I'll die if I continue like this!"

This was Triss's belief as she fled the factory. But if she quit, they would slap her with penalties for causing a staff shortage and losses for the factory.

"It was Hell. More than half my wages were deducted for my uniform and meals. I could barely survive, much less come for Fran."

"I see... So that's what happened..."

Marlene's anger had calmed as she listened to Triss's hellish story. In fact, she started to feel her heart warm toward Triss.

"That's too bad. But it's a common story."

Sven's face was bitter as she spoke.

War caused consumption on a massive scale. When it ended, the inflated production was more than the nation could handle, resulting in deflation across the European continent and around the world. Furthermore, the ranks of

decommissioned soldiers and unemployed workers had swelled.

Capitalism in its pure form is a balance of supply and demand. If there is an excessive supply of workers without a corresponding demand of jobs to fill, then labor sells for cheap—resulting in a decrease in the value placed on people. Therefore, what happened to Triss was tolerated as commonplace.

“Was that factory managed by Wiltia?”

Marlene didn’t like asking this in front of Sven, but she wanted to know. Wiltia had annexed Pelfe. Many Wiltians believed that Pelfians were inferior to Wiltians. As a result, stories abounded of Wiltian owners working Pelfians like slaves.

“No. The owner of the factory I worked at was a Pelfian, but its funding came from the Wiltian government.”

“What a shame!”

Society was growing increasingly distorted. Wiltia hired as many Pelfians as possible to handle the administration of Pelfe. The government thought this would decrease friction between the two peoples. However, Pelfian managers began to feel privileged and special, which gave rise to discrimination against fellow Pelfians. Some of these managers abandoned their ancestral Pelfian names for Wiltian names, and then considered themselves to be “honorable Wiltians.”

“There’s no hope for them!”

Marlene snarled these words in disgust. She was a former terrorist because of her anger against a twisted world.

“I had to run from the factory, but I had nowhere to go. I tried to earn money somehow, but...”

In the city, there weren’t many ways for a young girl alone to earn money. And the choices were more limited after leaving her previous job. It would be difficult for Triss to tell her sister about the work she had been forced to take.

“I tried hard, but... I’m not smart.”

Triss started to tremble and weep.

Seeing her, Sven remembered Jacob's mother Charlotte. She had also left for the city to help her family. She eventually had to degrade herself as a prostitute and later had given birth to Jacob.

"That's enough, Triss. Say no more."

"Boss Lady..."

Marlene firmly held Triss as she cried.

"I'm sorry. I got into debt, so I couldn't come back for Fran. But finally I didn't have anywhere to go. So I came back to Organbaelz and..."

She had broken into the bakery to find something that she could give to her sister.

"Master, you can come in now."

Sven spoke to Lud, who was still in the back of the shop.

"I overheard half of her story."

"Oh..."

Half was enough to understand.

"What shall we do?"

Sven's voice held a bitter pain.

"I wish I could do something."

Triss's attempted thievery wasn't the problem. Lud wouldn't turn her in to the police. But that wasn't the problem. They wanted to help her. However, while business was improving at Tockerbrot, the shop still had debts. They could provide her with enough to get by for a few days, but they couldn't save her from poverty. Even the hero once known as the Silver Wolf was helpless.

"Tch!"

Then they heard a sound.

"Excuse me. I just woke up."

It was Mary, the writer with messy hair and spiral-patterned glasses.

"Mary? When did you get here?"

“I’ve been here the whole time.”

Mary sounded indignant, and Sven was surprised.

While Lud and Sven had been making the baumkuchen, Mary was doing research nearby, and then she had borrowed the space in the back of the shop and wrapped herself in her sleeping bag for a night’s sleep.

“It’s already late. I slept too long.”

“You’re sure a deep sleeper!”

She had nerves of steel if she slept soundly through the whole disturbance caused by the break in.

“Let’s see...Your name is Triss, right?”

“Yeah. Um, who’re you?”

Triss was confused by the sudden appearance of this strange woman.

“I heard your story even though I was half asleep. So do you want to do something about it?”

“Huh? Do something about it? Of course I do!”

Triss didn’t wish for so much. She just wanted a small income to live on with her only sister.

“You can do something about it.”

“Huh?”

Triss thought Mary was either making a bad joke or teasing her.

Mary spoke too casually for Triss to think otherwise.

“You... might be Boss Lady’s acquaintance, but don’t get mouthy!”

“You said Wiltia was funding the factory where you worked, but the money must have gone through the regional Pelfe government. The Wiltian government supervises businesses in annexed areas to prevent monopolies.”

Mary calmly explained.

“In other words, the Wiltian government is responsible for the factory’s operation. They may have a legal route of escape, but not a moral one. And

since they can’t escape, there’s hope.”

Circumstances might be different in other nations, but Wiltia had been victorious in the recent Great War, so the superpower prided itself on being exceptional. That nation had annexed Pelfe and claimed its people for its own, so if it was known that it placed those people in economic servitude, it would lose face.

“Wiltia is the principal member of the Society of Nations. No matter what the reason, if word got out it was enslaving its own people, it would suffer considerable damage.”

Mary was from Greyten, a former enemy nation of Wiltia. And she had come here as a journalist. If someone like her made the information public, the government would have to act.

“Are you saying we should expect government officials to do something about it? That won’t happen. They don’t do anything!”

The regional government consisted of a bunch of lazy good-for-nothings. Even faced with someone desperate and crying for help, they would just point at the break time sign and keep sipping their tea.

“No.”

Triss sounded ready to give up, but Mary corrected her firmly.

“We won’t expect them to help. We’ll make them help. They have a responsibility and obligation to do so. As someone with legitimate rights and a valid claim, we’ll make them help!”

“Make them help? But how?”

“I’ll introduce you to a few good lawyers. If you threaten a lawsuit, they won’t turn you away at reception.”

“But we don’t have the money to hire a lawyer.”

“The right to sue is an important right. And the government has an obligation to protect it. So it may cover court costs or exempt you from paying them.”

Triss was overwhelmed as Mary steadily closed in.

“God helps those who help themselves. Do you know that expression?”

Rights are not unconditionally or automatically effective. They only become effective when those with rights know their value and meaning.

“There is something you can do. You just don’t know what it is yet. If the regional Pelfe government takes action, inspects the factory, and finds your employer has been exploiting its workers, for whatever reason, it will implement severe penalties.”

Triss herself could demand her stolen pay, wages for excessive labor, and compensation for mental and physical duress.

Employee and employer are not equal. Employees are much weaker. Thus the law would work to rectify the situation for those at a distinct disadvantage. Otherwise, the world would know Wiltia was not a country bound by law.

“Got it? People don’t have to punch it out. There are other methods. There is definitely a way to defeat scumbags who play at being the boss by brandishing their authority and financial power and even using violence.”

“Um... okay!”

A light that shone almost like reverence burned in Triss’s eyes as if she were gazing at a war goddess from Heaven.

“Uh... Mary?”

Hesitantly, Sven spoke to Mary.

“Yes?”

Mary turned around with a sharp exhalation.

“You’ve, uh... lost your accent.”

“Huh?!”

Mary looked surprised. She ducked her head uncomfortably but then looked up as if having made up her mind.

“Oh my! It just happened! All of a sudden, I can speak fluently!”

And now her accent had returned.

“.....”

“.....”

The atmosphere turned chilly.

“If the people I’m researching put up their guard, it’s difficult to observe their natural behavior. So, um...”

“So you pretended to be awkward.”

It wasn’t just that Mary now spoke the Wiltian language smoothly. Her affected Greyten accent had disappeared, offering a glimpse of another national accent. If the information in Sven’s databanks was correct...

“Mary! Is what you just said true?! That it’ll work out for Triss?! She can live with her little sister?!”

Despite her earlier fury, Marlene had been worried for her former underling. Now that she saw hope, she looked to Mary with joy and excitement.

“W-Well... Yeah... probably. I’m about 90 percent certain it will go well. To begin with... No... uh, never mind.”

To begin with, the operators of that factory used violence to threaten people into obeying, people with little status in society and without much education. But, if people knowledgeable in the law confronted them, they would crumble in no time.

“For now, I should say good-bye. I’ll go back to Pelfe and make arrangements.”

“B-But, um... what should I do?!”

“Oh...”

At Triss’s question, Mary turned a slightly irritated face toward Lud.

“You should come yourself in the new year. Until then... Have that man keep you busy.”

Saying no more, Mary departed with a jaunty gait that was entirely different from when she arrived.

“Um...”

Mary had told Lud to keep Triss busy, but he was unsure what that entailed. It wasn't long, though, before he thought of something only Triss could do.

"Triss? Let's go see Fran."

A little earlier, back at the church...

Lud, Sven and Marlene went into the chapel to avoid disturbing the sisters' reunion.

"Well, does that settle everything?"

"At the very least, you've given Fran the present she wanted most. Thank you, Lud."

Marlene bowed, politely and with feeling.

"I didn't do anything. It's all thanks to Mary."

"What's her full name?"

"I think it's, um... Mary Clarissa."

Marlene made a sound as if pondering something.

"I've heard that name somewhere..."

She racked her brains but couldn't remember.

"All right, you two! Tea's ready! It may be a little late, but now we can enjoy our Holy Festival treat!"

Sven had been back in the kitchen preparing tea, and now brought it out.

"Lud, you made baumkuchen, right?"

"Yes. And I added a final flourish. Give it a try!"

She opened the box and inside was a pure white, ring-shaped cake that looked like a crown.

"What's this?! It's beautiful!"

"I coated baumkuchen with butter cream in the style of a Flander krantz!"

A Flander krantz was a cake served at celebrations in the Wiltian city of Flander. Krantz was a Wiltian word signifying "crown."

“It’s delicious! The cream is rich, but it melts in your mouth! I could eat a lot of this!”

“Undiluted buttercream is too rich, so I used meringue to make it lighter. And it seems I was right to add almond sugar!”

Lud explained as Marlene ate with gusto.

“If you sell this next year at the Holy Festival, it’ll be famous!”

The talented waitress was already hatching campaigns for the next year.

“Ulllgmmph!”

“You’re pigging out too fast! Just like Milly!”

Marlene had eaten so quickly, the food caught in her throat. Exasperated, Sven served her tea.

“Sorry. I’m making a visitor serve me!”

“That’s all right. I’m better at making tea.”

“B-But I do think I’ve improved!”

Milly was like a little sister to Marlene and she said Marlene was beautiful but clumsy. The way Marlene prepared tea was particularly catastrophic. So much so that Lud had said “People in Greyten are particular about their tea. If they drank that, it could set off a war!”

“Mary is from Greyten, so she may be fussy about her tea. I was hoping she would eat this.”

Lud regretted that he hadn’t given her a Flander krantz-style baumkuchen before she left.

“Master... she isn’t from Greyten.”

“Huh? But she said that’s where she came from.”

“Well...”

Maybe it was true she had come from Greyten. But she was originally from somewhere else. Sven’s auditory sensors had heard through Mary’s affected Greyten accent and analyzed her true national accent.

“She was born in Haugen.”

The next morning...

Mary Clarissa had spent the night in Saupunkt, a town next to Organbaelz. Then she boarded a train bound for Ponapalas, the old capital city of Pelfe. There weren’t many passengers on the train. Mary was the only one sitting in a box for four people. She didn’t need to worry about anyone seeing as she removed her disguise.

She straightened her messy hair, took off her thick glasses, removed the cotton inside her mouth, and wiped away the freckles she had applied with makeup. She then removed the layer of clothing underneath the baggy men’s clothing she had worn to change the shape of her body, revealing her own slender figure.

“Good work. How was Organbaelz?”

There weren’t many passengers on the train, but a man seated not far from Mary spoke to her.

“It was a normal country town. They aren’t saints, and they aren’t villains. They just work hard every day. It’s a typical town where honorable folk live.”

Without the least surprise, Mary removed clothes from her trunk and changed into them.

“I hear officials arrested Samon.”

The man told Mary about the incident one week earlier at an officer’s school in a suburb of Berun—a scandal at a military facility—even though it was not yet public knowledge.

“Oh? That teacher’s name is well-known, so I expected more from him. Oh well.”

Despite her words, Mary didn’t sound as though she really cared. It was meaningless whether or not inciting the officer’s candidates into an armed uprising had succeeded. Even without that, they would reach their goal. They would achieve their revenge.

“It had been a long time since I saw that man. How many years, I wonder? I

don’t think it’s been ten, but...”

His face and body had completely changed. So much so that if she hadn’t known it was him, she wouldn’t have recognized him. It was actually hard to believe he was the same person once known as the Silver Wolf. Before seeing him, she suspected it was simply someone with the same name. However, her doubt evaporated when she met him face-to-face. The moment she saw Lud Langart’s face, murderous rage had instinctively risen within her.

“But I don’t think he recognized me.”

She had been unable to keep quiet after learning about Triss’s predicament. While she intended to play the mediocre reporter to the very end, she had revealed herself.

“Time does not heal all wounds.”

On the contrary, the long passage of time had purified and condensed the anger and hatred brewing inside her.

“What I could forgive the very least was that he named his shop after my grandfather!”

Mary Clarissa was a rising novelist in the Greyten Empire. However, Mary Clarissa was her pen name. Her real name was Mary Ville Mehl. And her grandfather’s name was Tocker Mehl. He had owned a bakery in the now destroyed city of Lapchuricka in the Kingdom of Haugen.



Chapter 4: The Human Theorem

In Berun, the royal capital, Genitz's rebellion had breathed its last and the city finally returned to its peaceful, everyday existence. In one corner of the city, there was a restaurant with a good reputation among the wealthy. It was an ultra-gourmet establishment that stocked ingredients from not only Europea, but from continents such as Aesia and Gordina, and its chef had trained at a three-star restaurant in Filbarneu.

The restaurant staff treated their patrons to impeccable service, and the furnishings and dishes were strikingly luxurious. The vibrant yet harmonious atmosphere put visitors at ease. It was indeed a first-rate restaurant.

"Whattaya think, Sophia? This is a popular restaurant frequented by major nobles, and even visited in secret by His Highness himself!"

"What's the big idea?!"

As usual, Daian was speaking in his absurd, chipper manner.

"Don't you like it?"

The two had come to the restaurant to fulfill their earlier promise. During Genitz's rebellion, Daian had saved Sophia's life. Twice. Directly and indirectly.

Sophia hated owing a debt, so she had accepted his invitation to dinner, which she had refused repeatedly for so long. However, from the moment they entered, Sophia's face clearly expressed her ill humor.

"What's the big idea, huh?!"

She jerked a thumb at their surroundings.

"Is something wrong?"

Daian played dumb.

"No one else is here!"

There were several tables inside the restaurant. But no one else was there. Only the two of them. The restaurant was among the finest in Berun. People seeking reservations had to put their names on a list and wait for cancellations.

Yet Sophia and Daian were the only two diners.

“Reserving the whole restaurant makes it easier to relax.”

“I figured as much!”

Sophia’s frown deepened.

“I said we have to split the bill tonight! So you aren’t treating me!”

“Yes, I know. But that’s just for the meal, right?”

“Arrrgh!”

Sophia had drawn a line in the sand, but Daian had attacked from an unexpected direction. Now Sophia regretted agreeing when Daian had said he would reserve the restaurant.

“Did you think I’d be pleased by this ridiculous behavior?!”

There were women who basked in the self-deception that men fawning over them was proof of love. Some women were unscrupulous enough to demand rare and expensive gifts, summon their suitors late at night or early in the morning, or even have men fight each other. But Sophia wasn’t that type. Rather, she wanted to teach such women a lesson.

“Isn’t this restaurant swell?”

Despite Sophia’s sour mood, Daian maintained his customary smooth, casual tone.

“Yeah, what about it?”

“I thought it might cause problems if the young lady of the great House Rundstadt appeared in such an establishment with me, the royal capital’s biggest pervert.”

“Hmf!”

Sophia was born into a famous noble house boasting a heritage that dated back centuries. If she allowed it, people would talk as if they knew all about her.

“Like I said! This way, it’s easier to relax and talk.”

What’s more, this restaurant was a favorite of the Imperial household.

Usually, famous nobles filled the seats. Even if Daian had reserved a private room, if they were under the same roof, the other patrons would have gossiped about them.

Sophia claimed she didn't care about society, but she didn't want to create complications for herself either.

"That's something I hate about you!"

Sophia insulted him under her breath.

He was a conceited weirdo—heedless, clownish and phony. And his thoughts sometimes raced far ahead of Sophia's.

"It's all right, isn't it? Let's enjoy a delicious meal! I've been bouncing around all day looking forward to this!♪"

Whether he knew how Sophia felt or not, Daian took a glass of champagne from the waiter and spoke in his usual merry tone.

Dinner began and every dish the waiter brought exemplified the finest of fine food. But Sophia's face was sullen as she raised each bite to her mouth.

"I'm surprised. You have table manners."

Sophia was born into nobility and her teachers had been strict. But even to her standards, Daian's use of his knife and fork was beyond reproach.

"I'm good with my hands. And—while I'm not bragging—I have a superb memory. As long as it doesn't involve physical strength, I can remember any activity after seeing it performed only once."

Grinning, he cut a sautéed scallop with precision and put a bite in his mouth.

"Exquisite! Now we can get fresh seafood, even in Berun!"

Seafood was a delicacy in the inland city of Berun. Not long ago, fresh seafood had been difficult for even the royalty to obtain, but the development of refrigeration technology had removed previous obstacles.

"It's proof that the advances in science and technology can make human life rich. Whew! Ha ha ha!"

Daian was a scientist himself, but his specialty was weapons development.

Military technology sometimes found application in civilian life, and it contributed to the rich living of which he spoke. But he was a man who most enjoyed creating weapons of destruction, so whether or not he really thought so was questionable.

“.....”

Sophia was emotional, so her thoughts often showed on her face. When she thought about this unsettling side of Daian, her glower grew more intense.

“Heh heh!”

But Daian looked at her and laughed as if even this was funny.

“I just noticed something. With that look on your face, you really look like my mother, Sophia!”

“Your mother? You have a mother?”

“That’s mean, Sophia. Even I didn’t grow on a tree!”

Daian’s words were true.

“Well... my adoptive mother of sorts. You remind me of her, especially around the eyes. She was beautiful, too.”

Maybe it was because his words sounded uncharacteristically heartfelt and unaffected, but...

“Who... are you?”

Without thinking, Sophia blurted a question she had never asked him before.

“Everything about your background is unknown. I’ve heard you studied abroad in Britniss, but I suppose that’s a lie, too.”

Daian’s identity was a great mystery that even Apuvea, Wiltia’s intelligence agency, had been unable to ascertain.

“It defies common sense for such an enigmatic individual to occupy an important government position.”

However, Wiltia needed Daian because he was a genius whose brilliance superseded the law.

Sophia sometimes thought of Daian not as human, but as a monster. So she found herself surprised when he mentioned having a mother, something that everyone had.

“Sophia, I have some idea of what you think of me.”

Daian was a scientist, but he was treated like a colonel. In contrast, Sophia was a major. Daian wasn’t someone she could ordinarily call a bastard or a fool. Daian wouldn’t take offense, but it wasn’t permitted. And Sophia was typically a stickler for military propriety. She insulted Daian in part from her fear of him.

“Sometimes you frighten me. I’m not sure you see human beings as human beings.”

She felt as if Daian ridiculed all the things important to her: military pride, comrades in arms and subordinates. Daian seemed distant from humanity, and seemed to examine human beings as if they were insects.

“But you... um... helped me before.”

During Genitz’s rebellion, Daian had risked his life to save Sophia. True, she learned later that Daian was wearing a bulletproof garment. But lead bullets could kill even him. Luckily, the bullets had hit protected areas, so he had only suffered cracked ribs. But if they had struck that brain he was so proud of, he would have died.

“So which... are you?”

Sophia was befuddled.

This weirdo in front of her, this bloodless monster, almost seemed as human as she was.

“Sophia, you’re a kind person.”

Hearing Sophia’s uncertainty, Daian only smiled in greater mirth.

“Why you...!”

As expected, Sophia raised her voice in anger, but Daian slowly raised his hand to calm her.

“Don’t worry. I’m human. If I’m stabbed, shot, poisoned, strangled or simply

starve myself, I will die.”

Taking bites of the dinner before him, Daian continued speaking.

“And in about fifty years, I’ll get old, reach the end of my natural lifespan, and croak.”

All of this was normal for human beings.

“Yep, I’m human. Just like you. So I’ll eventually kick the bucket. But, Sophia... if something couldn’t die, would you call it human?”

“What are you talking about?”

Sophia was taken aback at the sudden question.

“What really makes a human being human, Sophia? What would happen if someone cut off your right arm?”

“I would spill blood and soon die from blood loss. Or I might die of shock from the pain. Or it’s possible I would thrash around, bite off my tongue, hit the back of my head and lose consciousness.”

“As blunt as ever, I see.”

Daian chuckled dryly at how Sophia spoke so casually, as if reciting military first-aid procedures.

“I don’t mean that. Which part would be you—the severed arm or the rest of your body?”

“Huh? The rest of my body, of course!”

The fallen arm would have no individual consciousness. It would be Sophia’s severed arm, not Sophia herself.

“Yes, that’s right. Even without an arm, a human being is still a human being. What about without a leg?”

“Same thing,” Sophia replied.

“Right. What about the lower half of your body? And a few internal organs? And your eyes? If you lost your tongue? And if your ears got ripped off?”

That would only leave her heart and brain.

“It’s just my personal theory, but without a heart, a human being would still be a human being. I haven’t actually run tests on it yet, but if you implanted someone else’s heart, the core personality wouldn’t change.”

In that case, where was the seat of the human personality... of the heart?

Daian continued.

“Then are we synonymous with our brains? I don’t think that’s right either. The brain is no more than a recording medium, a kind of calculator.”

“Are you trying to say that what defines people is the information inside them?”

“How incisive you are, Sophia.”

Like a phonograph record that stores songs. The quality of the songs isn’t determined by the vinyl record, but by the information engraved on it.

“But I think even that isn’t the right answer. I think if you trace the source of a substance’s identity, its fluctuation.”

“Fluctuation?”

“There’s a theory that all things in the world are basically, at the smallest level, a single string. Plucking that string produces vibrations that determine the attributes of all things.”

“That sounds like magic.”

“Science and magic aren’t all that different. Have you forgotten my nickname?”

Daian was also known as the Sorcerer.

“I have the idea that what defines people is the vibration of our most elementary parts. If a being, even one born without a flesh-and-blood body, could embrace that vibration, it would be human.”

“Is this related to your research into humanoid Hunter Units?”

Daian’s work at the Weapons Development Bureau was top secret. It was rumored that his many revolutionary technologies, theories, and the birth of the Hunter Units that had led Wiltia to victory, were all for that research.

“Sophia, you had a run-in with one of the Hunter Units when you were with Suzuka. It was defective.”

During the recent commotion in the capital, Sophia had encountered a humanoid Hunter Unit. Sophia was known as the Black Spear, yet when she and a woman loved by the god of war had teamed up against the Unit, even they had been unable to defeat it. It had been a monster in human form.

“Did that one lack the strength to embrace her vibration?”

“She never received the initial jolt. Did you know, Sophia, that all life was once a sea of amino acid that came to life from a single lightning strike?”

The defective unit had not received such a strike. That subtle stimulation necessary to fuse disparate parts and give rise to an organic heart.

“If she had received that, then perhaps... But that’s all in the past now.”

Daian wasn’t trying to create a weapon. He was trying to give birth to a human being.

“If it doesn’t have a heart, you can’t say it’s alive. And something that isn’t alive can’t die.”

Death only comes to those who have life. Therefore, what cannot die does not live. And what does not live certainly isn’t human.

“Sophia, I know why you think I’m creepy. I want to create a human being. And to create a human being, I must understand human beings. And to do that, I must have one foot outside the human world.”

Daian was human, but he also observed humans from a great distance. So despite being human, he had become inhuman. And this was disturbing to the people around him.

“Hey, Sophia? Suppose a mechanical being that looked completely human, like that humanoid Hunter Unit, developed a heart. How could you prove it was human?”

In the back of his mind, Daian thought of the silver-haired girl, who Sophia also knew.

“That mechanical doll would laugh like a human, and get angry like a human,

and fall in love like a human... but for it to be human, one final proof would be necessary.”

“And what would that be?” Sophia asked.

Daian answered quietly but with conviction.

“It would have to die. Machines can’t die. They just break. So dying would prove the automaton was human.”

Epilogue: The Sorcerer's Memories

After finishing dinner, Sophia and Daian left the restaurant. Sophia's car was waiting for her.

"What about you?"

Sophia didn't know where Daian lived. She asked in case he was going in the same direction and needed a ride.

"Uh, no thank you. I drank a little too much. I'll get some night air and sober up as I walk home."

"Wait, wait, wait... Are you..."

Sophia was surprised at his answer. Or rather, she was worried. Daian was, without a doubt, the world's greatest mind. He was one important reason that Wiltia won the recent war. She couldn't let such an irreplaceable person walk the streets alone at night.

"I'm head of the development bureau's security. I may be off-duty at the moment, but I won't allow this."

The usual etiquette was for the man to see the woman home, but the circumstances were a little different with these two. Defeating Sophia without wicked fighting skills would be difficult. She wielded combat techniques capable of defeating Greyten's mechanical soldiers barehanded.

And today, as if it were nothing out of the ordinary, she was wearing her beloved short sword at her hip. And a holster inside her coat held her trusted firearm.

"You... Your brain may be powerful, but you're below average physically."

Daian had less than half of Sophia's physical abilities and about one-fifth her skill.

"Don't worry. I've got guards galore."

"What does that mean?"

Daian wasn't suggesting he had personally hired security.

“Special ops soldiers, Apuvea operatives... plus folks from the recently established Security Department.”

During Genitz’s rebellion, the first location to fall under attack had been Daian’s base of operations, the Weapons Development Bureau. At that time, Daian requested protection from the Yamato Embassy, as well as cooperation in reclaiming the royal palace.

That worked out. But what if he had seized that opportunity to flee to another country? It would have been a massive loss for Wiltia. Reminded of the danger this posed, Wiltia’s various organizations started keeping an eye on Daian. With all that surveillance, a group of bandits could attack and his guard detail would crush them before they could lay a finger on him.

“I’m quite popular! I get invitations from all sorts of countries!”

“You... You shouldn’t say that out loud!”

Sophia paled as she cautioned him against such casual bragging.

Wiltia didn’t want another nation to steal Daian. Not only would that be a loss for Wiltia, it would be an enormous gain for another nation. To prevent that, Wiltia would take decisive action.

“Yeah. They’d rather kill me than see me go somewhere else.”

“You know that?!”

In disbelief, Sophia shook her head.

“After all, I’m not a Wiltian citizen. No matter what happens, they won’t trust me. But I’m not currently thinking about defecting to another country.”

Undoubtedly, he was telling the truth.

“That’s because you’re in Wiltia, Sophia!”

“You...”

Even now, Daian was flippant, but Sophia wasn’t angry.

“Hey, tell me one thing. I know you’re not a Wiltian. So where were you born?”

She at least wanted this one clue to this mysterious man.

“I was born and raised in Europea.”

“Which explains nothing!”

Sophia was exasperated all over again. He said he was born and raised in Europea, but that applied to almost everyone.

Sophia, the waiter in the restaurant, the driver, the special ops soldiers watching Daian, the people of the August Federation, the people of the Greyten Empire, the people of the Republic of Filbarneu, the people of the Kingdom of Haugen... They were all born and raised on the continent of Europea.

“I was born on this same continent. The details don’t matter!”

“Details? You are so...”

The world had just been at war for ten years over such “details” as where one country began and another ended. Sophia herself had fought in that war.

“Oh, right. Sophia! Here!”

As if just now remembering, Daian handed her a small box.

“What’s this? A ring?”

When she opened the box, she saw a silver ring decorated with a rainbow-colored gem.

“This kind of thing is...”

Sophia had a tough personality, but she was also a beautiful woman. She was from a noble family, so countless men flocked to her. She received scores of presents, and jewelry was among them.

“I don’t want you to do things like this!”

Sophia didn’t like it when admirers gave her gifts. She thought they were attempting to buy her affection. And she didn’t want this goofy sorcerer to join their ranks.

“Don’t worry. The stone isn’t really a gem. It was a byproduct of my research. If I sold it to a jeweler, it would fetch no more than a glass bead.”

Daian smiled wanly as if guessing what was in her heart.

“It’s all right. It won’t harm your health. It’ll just sparkle prettily. I thought it would look good on you. That’s all.”

As if alive, the ring’s gem radiated seven colors. It was like a crystallized rainbow.

“By the way, I also made the ring’s setting, so it’s one hundred percent handmade.”

“What?! This is very delicate work!”

“I told you I’m good with my hands!”

During dinner, he had said that he could approximate something just by seeing an example—and he hadn’t been exaggerating.

“Would you please take it?”

“Hrmm...”



After all this, she thought it would be rude if she didn't accept Daian's gift. And she wasn't exactly unhappy at all the effort he made for her.

"Okay... I'll take it. But I'll repay you sometime!"

Sophia answered him with a slightly embarrassed look.

"Heh heh..."

Daian laughed in amusement.

He wanted to add, "That's another cute thing about you!" But if he said that, Sophia's face would turn beet red and she would get angry, so he kept his mouth shut.

"Well, thanks for tonight, Sophia. Let's do it again when we have a chance!"

Then he spun around and—just as he had intended—walked off alone into Berun.

"Uh, hey... Um..."

For a time, Sophia watched him walk into the night. It was strange how she couldn't take her eyes off him. She stood rooted in place until the driver asked, "Are you going to get in?"

After leaving Sophia, Daian walked alone through the streets. As he thought about the evening, he was happy from the bottom of his heart. And because it had been such a wonderful night, he remembered the past.

How long ago was that? He didn't know how old he was at the time. And he didn't know his exact age anyway, so there was no way to confirm it. Nonetheless, he remembered what had happened.

"It appears my time is ending."

Daian Fortuner said this to him one day. Nothing lasts forever. Even Europea, which had once created a god in hopes of eternal prosperity, had fallen to ruin. So nothing lasted for an eternity.

"My operability limit approaches. I will stop in approximately eight thousand seconds."

The life of the rezanium reactor that was Daian's heart and brain was at most

one thousand years. Daian could have used the factories to create replacements for the other parts, but not for the rezanium reactor.

“Why didn’t you say something sooner?” the boy asked as he drew closer.

There wasn’t even enough time to say good-bye to the only person he had known in the ten years since he was born—or rather, since he was removed from the cryogenic sleep capsule.

“Do not look so dispirited. That is why I did not tell you until the last moment. I do not like to see you like this.”

Daian laughed while speaking. It wasn’t an ironic laugh. Daian’s belief was heartfelt. Daian had spent over 500 million seconds with the boy, and the time had been thoroughly satisfying. So satisfying as to make the preceding tens of billions of seconds seem meaningless.

“I am grateful. Without you, my existence would have frozen. Without any meaning, I would simply have disappeared. Thanks to you, I grew a little closer to being human.”

The boy thought about the meaning of those mysterious words.

“You aren’t human?”

Daian laughed at the boy’s response.

“Correct. I am not human. Perhaps it would be better to say that I was not human. But, thanks to you, I can now die.”

Death is not merely an ending. Stopping all movement would be merely cessation of functioning. After human beings end, they are mourned and their existence lives on in memory. That is human death.

“As long as you exist, I will exist within you.”

Daian spoke faintly. The strength necessary for physical movement was beginning to fade, so Daian’s remaining energy was dedicated to thinking.

“No, that is not quite right. I will explain simply.”

Once more, Daian extended an arm toward the boy’s eyes.

“Before I disappear from the world, would it not be sad if there was no one to

cry for me?”

Daian gently wiped away the boy’s tears.

“I taught you everything I know. Knowledge, wisdom and how to survive... So you will be able to live on your own with no problems.”

Daian had concluded that the tower might be unsafe after its lone maintenance worker ceased functioning, so a door to the outside was now scheduled to open.

That probably should have happened sooner, but Daian lacked the authority to initiate the cessation of functioning. There had been no choice but to wait for natural power depletion.

“Oh, right. There is something I must give you.”

Daian had almost forgotten. There was something the boy would need for life outside the tower. Since there had been only the two of them, they had no difficulty addressing each other.

“You still need a name.”

Daian decided to give a final gift to the boy as he went out into the world. Daian wouldn’t need it anymore anyway. Here at the end, Daian could give the boy everything.

“From now on, you shall be called Daian Fortuner.”

This was the last thing she could do for the boy.

“＿＿＿”

The boy Daian spoke to the dying maintenance worker.

“＿!”

As she died, the maintenance worker looked startled for a moment, then smiled happily.

“Ha ha... I like being called that.”

Her final moment was at hand. Only ten seconds remained.

“Yes... that is right.”

As she disappeared, the maintenance worker used her final moments to say something. And those words were...

In Berun, the royal capital, at the Royal Weapons Development Bureau...

Daian was inside the top-secret facility. This area of the Bureau required the utmost security—the area that gave birth to Sven and Rebecca. Daian had created a hidden room here. At a glance, it looked like a wall. It wouldn't open unless he inserted a special card into a seam, then went through voice, fingerprint and retinal identification—plus twenty-four additional checks.

Only Daian could enter. And only Daian knew about this room. During Genitz's recent rebellion, even the Schutzstaffel had been unable to find it. It wasn't included on the facility floor plan registered with military headquarters.

Daian had created this room in utter secrecy as his own special place. There was a woman inside who would never move again and she was still wearing the smile she had at the moment she stopped functioning. It was the body of an automaton that had attained human death. It was she who had given Daian his name. There was a plate on the case in which he had enshrined her. It read "ORIGINAL NULL"—designating her as the model for all the humanoid Hunter Units, including Sven, Rebecca and Lillie.

Daian stood before her silent form and spoke.

"It has been quite some time since that day I left the tower."

It was eighteen years to the day since the automaton Daian had ceased functioning and the newly christened Daian had stepped through the opened Door into the outside world. On that day of the Holy Festival, he had passed through the Door, an ancient relic from an ancient world, to this external world.

"I was born and raised in Europea."

That's what he had told Sophia. And that wasn't untrue. He was the only person in this world left over from the European Empire.

"Much about this world is interesting. I discover many things and they fill me with fresh emotions. And I've met an absolutely adorable woman!"

Daian was known as more of a clown than a sorcerer, but at the moment, his

smile was unusually heartfelt and kind.

“I owe it all to you, Mother.”

He had called her Mother for the first time at the very end, on the day she had named him. Even now, Daian wished he had called her that sooner.

“However, I still don’t understand your last words.”

On this day in particular, he wondered.

“You said ‘they’ destroyed the European Empire. Who did you mean?”

That day, as Daian had died, she had told him something.

“Now you will go out into the world. With your knowledge and skills, you can live in any world. But be careful of one thing. If they come near you, use every means at your disposal to escape. Those two destroyed Europea. The Saint and the Devil.”

Today—December 25, year 920 of the European Calendar—was exactly one thousand years since the fall of the European Empire.

Afterword

Thank you for reading The Combat Baker and Automaton Waitress, volume 6! This is the first time I have structured the book as a series of short episodes. The last volume concluded some important events, so I threw in random episodes as preparation for launching a new arc.

There are a lot of characters now, so I wanted to create a lot of situations in which they could appear, and I also wanted to focus on the pasts of some characters that I hadn't yet fully addressed.

Furthermore, a few fairly eccentric characters have appeared. I hope you'll keep reading to see how the facts revealed here and the new characters intertwine!

Now for thank-yous and apologies...

Again, many apologies to the illustrator Zaza this time, too. And thank you!

Editor O, please treat me to some kind of meal!

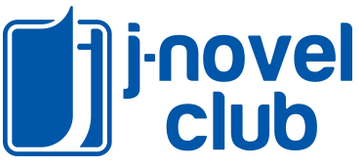
Thanks as usual to the proofreaders, printers, designers, distributors and everyone at the bookstores!

And thank you to everyone who sent fan letters, came to autograph events, and sent neat presents. I'll take them with me to the grave.

Above all, heartfelt gratitude to everyone who picks up this book. I pray from the bottom of my heart for your good fortune and happiness.

We'll meet again in volume 7! Now I'm off to do research at the holy sweet factory Juchheim!♪

SOW



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by SOW

Translated by Ari and John Werry / HC Language Solutions, Inc.

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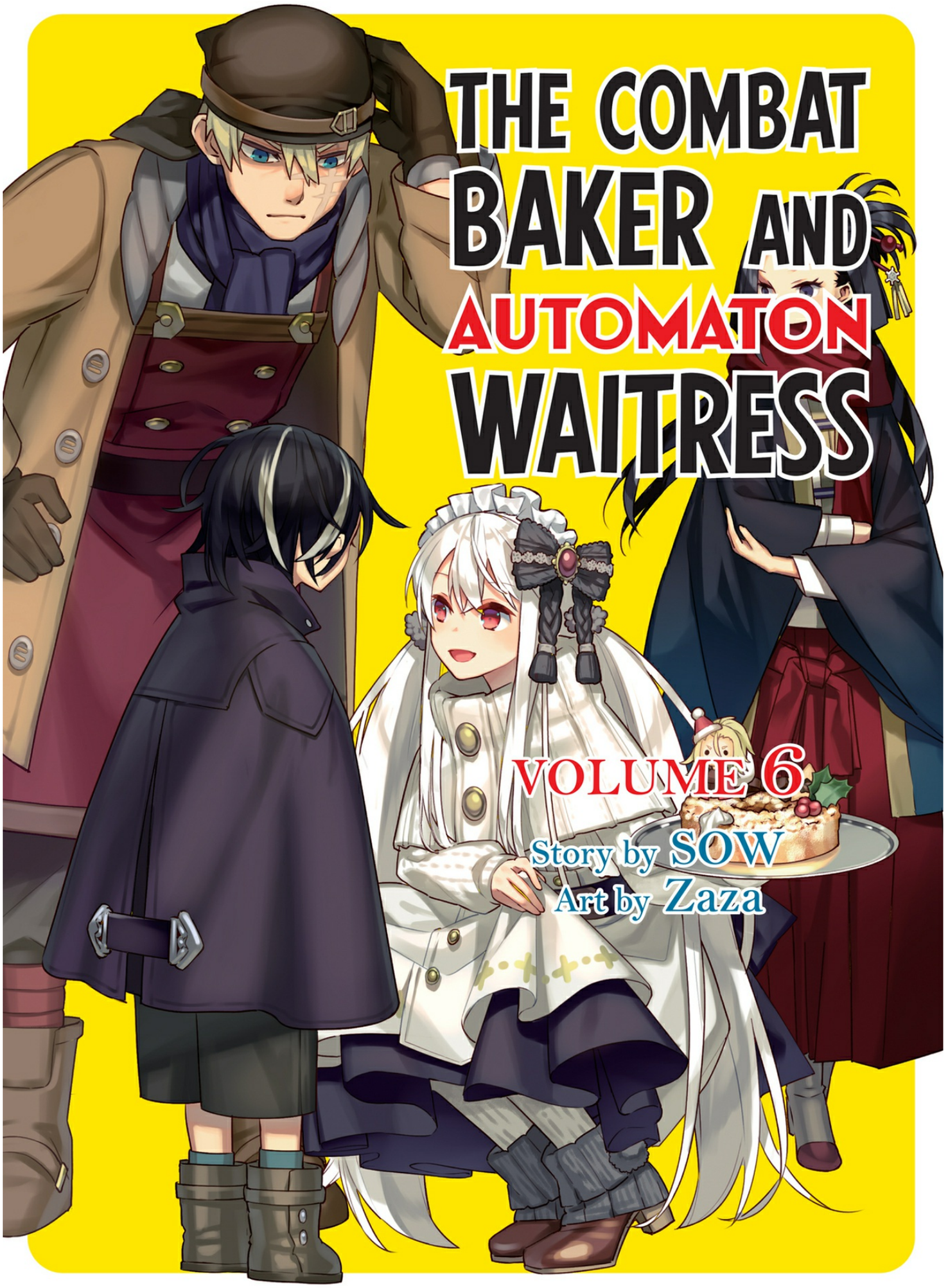
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