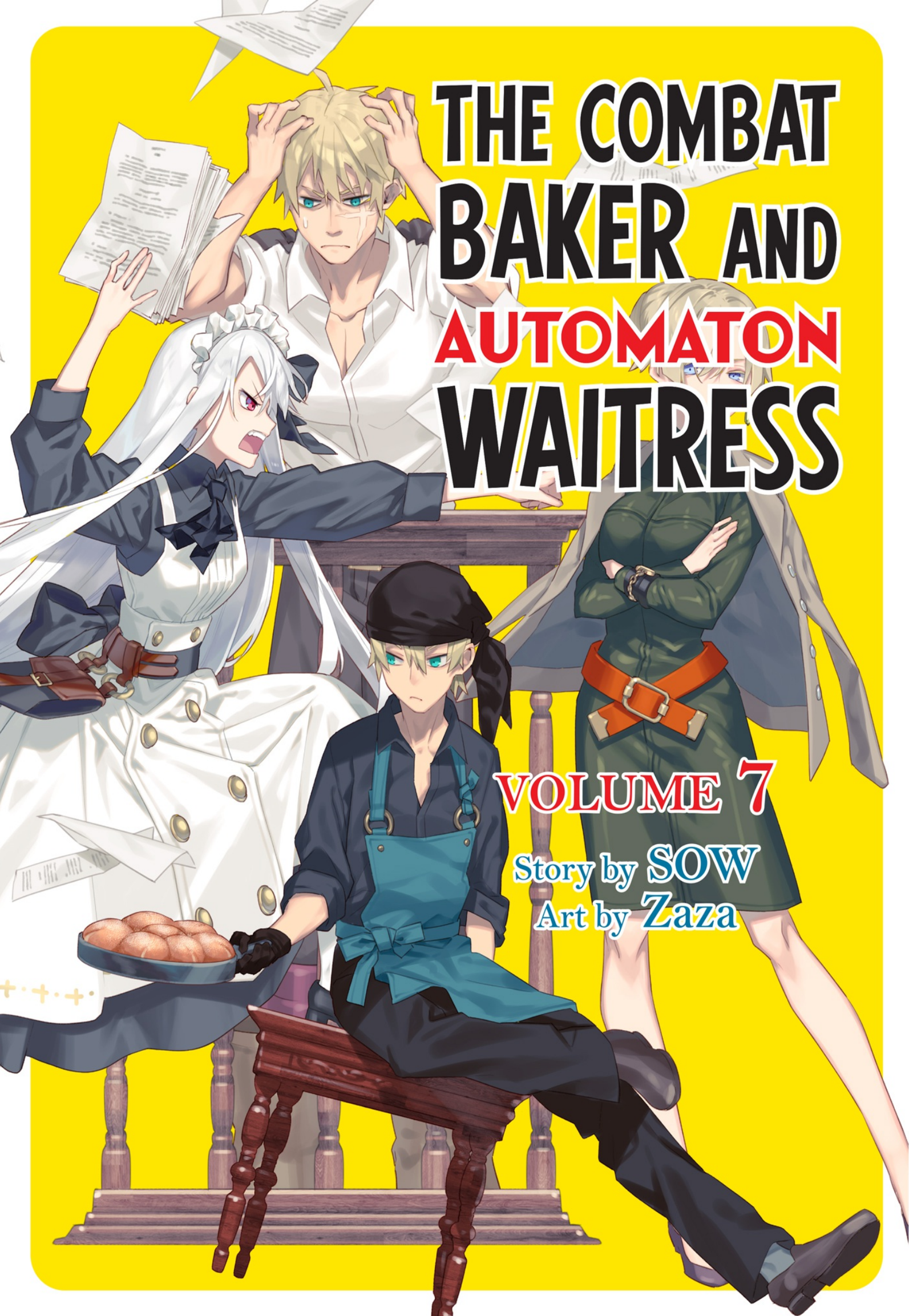
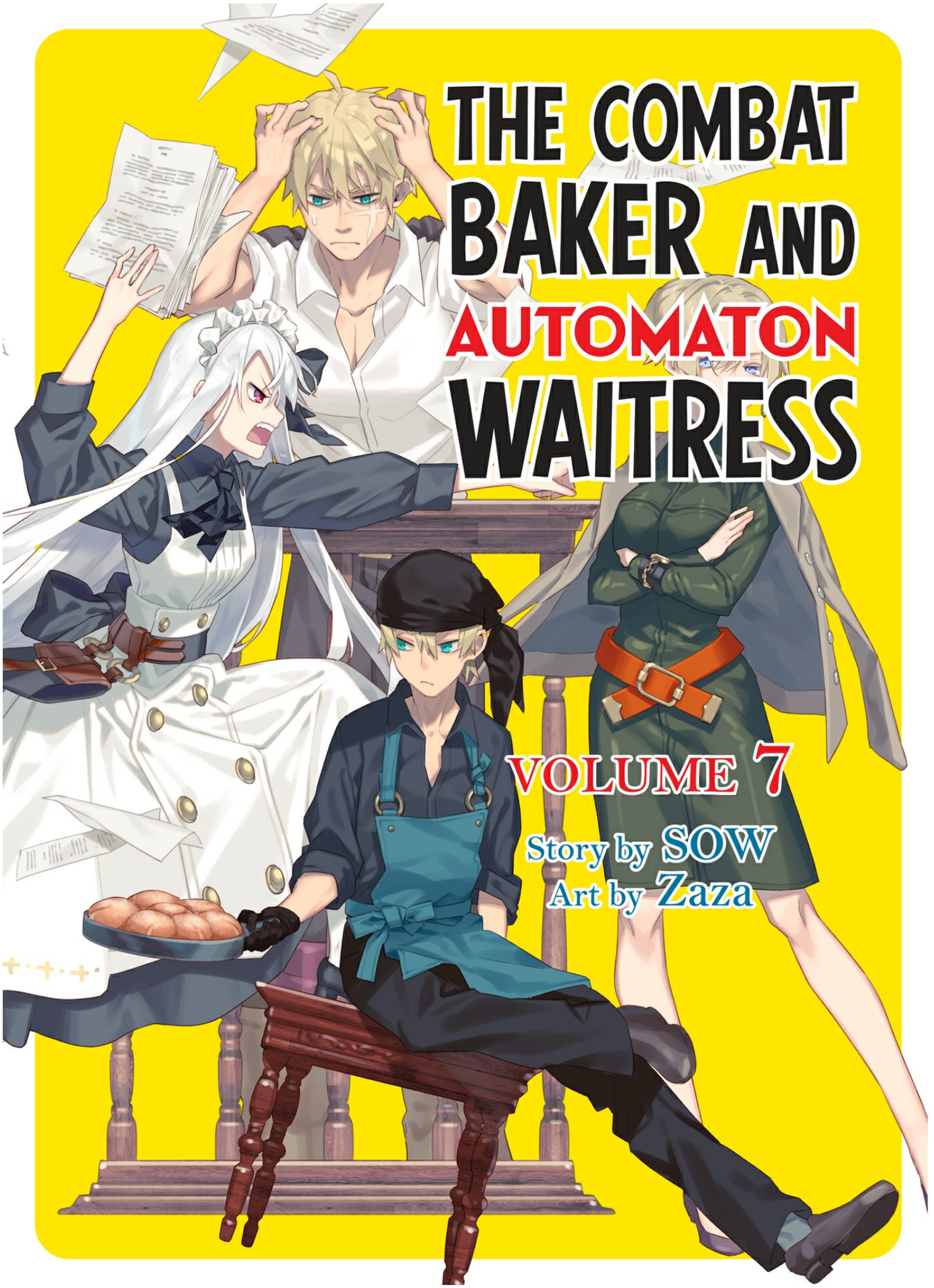
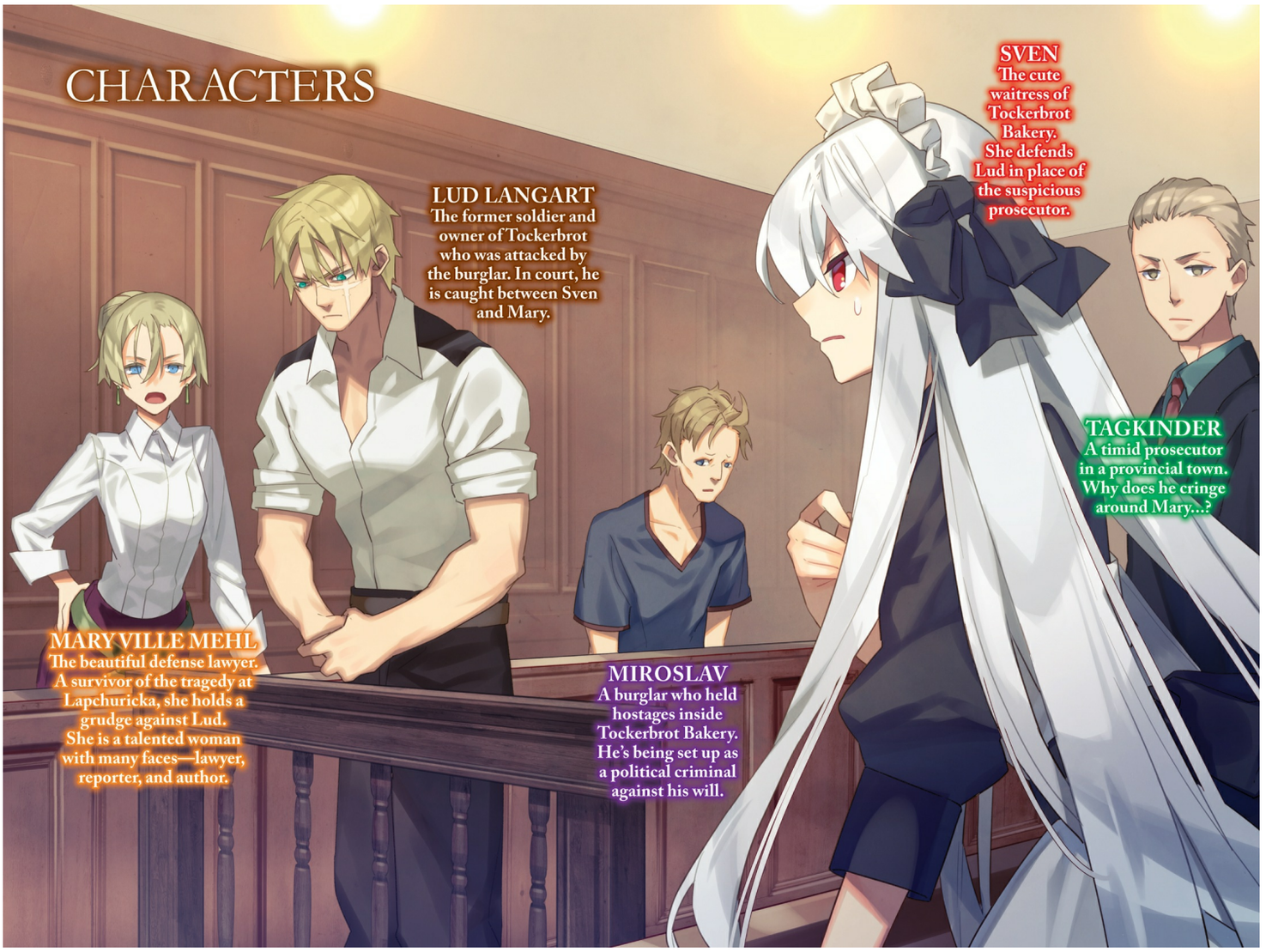

THE COMBAT BAKER AND AUTOMATON WAITRESS
VOLUME 7
Story by SOW
Art by Zaza


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Tockerbrot
"What's going on here?"
THE COMBAT BAKER AND AUTOMATON WAITRESS 7


CHARACTERS
SVEN
The cute waitress of Tockerbrot Bakery. She defends Lud in place of the suspicious prosecutor.
LUD LANGART
The former soldier and owner of Tockerbrot who was attacked by the burglar. In court, he is caught between Sven and Mary.
TAGKINDER
A timid prosecutor in a provincial town. Why does he cringe around Mary...?
MARYVILLE MEHL
The beautiful defense lawyer. A survivor of the tragedy at Lapchuricka, she holds a grudge against Lud. She is a talented woman with many faces—lawyer, reporter, and author.
MIROSLAV
A burglar who held hostages inside Tockerbrot Bakery. He's being set up as a political criminal against his will.


"Lillie… How do you manage to follow me every single time?"
"Let's see… Maybe a good way to describe it would be the power of love!"
HILDE
A former member of the Schutzstaffel, she has changed schools six times. Lillie's close proximity has caused her to fear for her chastity.
LILLIE
A humanoid Hunter Unit prototype who previously had an underdeveloped heart. Her love for Hilde changed that and now she never leaves Hilde's side.

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Prologue

I don’t think I’ll die a good death. I have killed many people. I have made many people sad. Because that was my job? Because it was my duty?

I suppose a court would find me innocent, but that doesn’t mean I should be forgiven. Above all, I can’t forgive myself. It was a time of war, and I enjoyed it. I enjoyed killing. I was deluded into thinking of myself as a god for my ability to kill and dispose of others as I chose, and I was drunk on carnage. I wasn’t a beast. But I was a fool drowning in power. No matter how much I regret it now, I cannot turn back time and my sins will not disappear. So I’m pretty sure I won’t die a good death.

And if someone kills me..... No matter how atrocious my death, it will surely be what I deserve. It will be retributive justice and a fitting death.

So if there is someone who loves me..... Please do not hold a grudge. Do not hate the one who kills me. Because that person probably...

Chapter 1: That Was an Introduction to Everything

‘You never know what life will bring.’ More than a few people have said this. Since the inception of the race, human beings have surely repeated it countless times. For example, when they experience unexpected good fortune. Or when they learn of a strange twist of fate. Or when they go out for a bit and return to find a burglar holed up in the shop where they work.

“What’s going on here?”

Svelgen Avei, also known as Sven, asked in amazement upon returning to Tockerbrot Bakery, a small shop in the mining town of Organbaelz.

“Come out with your hands up! We’ve got you completely surrounded!”

Police were crowded around the shop, surrounding it so tightly that no space remained for even an ant to crawl out.

“I’m outside the bakery now. The last suspect, Miroslav, has been inside for an hour.”

Newspaper and radio reporters from the central region, and out of place in this rural town, had gathered around the police.

“What in the world happened?!”

“It’s a burglar from Ponapalas.”

“I heard he has a bomb!”

Local residents had gathered nearby.

“What is going on...?” Sven muttered again.

There had been no sign that something unusual would happen today. At dawn, bread was baking at Tockerbrot as usual, and the apprentice Milly arrived and joined in. By early morning, the bread was ready and customers started visiting the shop. Many people wanted bread for breakfast, and the miners stopped by before going to work. Sven had welcomed them with her shining sales smile.

Before noon, she went to the mine and the local schools to deliver bread. By that time, Marlene, the nun from the church atop the hill, came to help, as did Jacob's mother, Charlotte. Jacob showed up in the afternoon after school, and as if he were replacing her, Sven then headed out with Charlotte to sell bread in the nearby towns in a truck remodeled as a mobile shop. As usual, it was a busy but fulfilling day at Tockerbrot.

"S-Sven... What's all this about?"

Charlotte had returned from the sales outing and now trembled as she stood beside Sven.

Because of her painful and complicated history, Charlotte's face used to look sad. But her life improved and she had become a little happier and was starting to smile again. Furthermore, she was quite pretty. During sales outings, she served the local men with a unique charm, unmatched even by Sven, Marlene and Milly, and those men now formed an unofficial fan club.

Aside from that...

"Jacob... Is my son safe?"

Charlotte knew that Jacob always helped at the shop around this time of day.

Tockerbrot's owner needed someone to serve customers at the shop all the time. Jacob was just over ten years old, but he was a good-natured and clever boy, so he was a precious resource for the shop.

"I'm not sure... I don't know what's going on..."

Rope barriers surrounded the shop so no one could go near.

"First, we should find out. Hey, you!" Sven addressed a police officer walking by.

"Huh?! What do you want?! I'm very busy!" The police officer answered arrogantly.

Sven hadn't seen him before so he wasn't a police officer stationed in Organbaelz. Perhaps he had been called in as part of reinforcements.

"Sorry. I'm a waitress at Tockerbrot. My name is Sven. What happened at the shop?"

She decided to forgive his first instance of rudeness and asked her question politely.

“Huh? You’re from that shop? I told you I’m very busy! So be quiet and stay back!”

However, he replied condescendingly once again.

Arrogant police officers aren’t rare. There are always those who mistake significant authority for their own power and conflate maintaining the public safety with assuming everyone is a thief.

However, Sven had no time to deal with such matters right now.

“Hey, don’t say that! This woman, Charlotte, might have family in there! Can you at least tell us if everyone is safe?”

Sven forgave the officer his second instance of rudeness.

“I’ll give you some change.”

She plucked a copper coin from her pocket.

“Huh?”

Using only her forefinger and thumb, she bent the coin in front of the policeman’s suspicious gaze.

“Yikes!”

The policeman raised his voice in surprise as he watched Sven, who looked like a pretty but weak young girl.

Sven wasn’t human. The Principality of Wiltia was the world’s most technologically advanced nation, and Sven was an android, a humanoid Hunter Unit. The genius Daian Fortuner, also known as the Sorcerer, had poured all his wisdom into creating the Hunter Units. He was the head of the Royal Weapons Development Bureau, which served as the nation’s brain.

Sven was strong enough to bend a copper coin with two fingers. With five fingers, she could break a human’s neck.

“Now will you tell us?”

Sven asked with a smile, but she also gave off an air of menace. She had

forgiven the officer's rudeness twice, but she wouldn't a third time. He needed to choose his next words carefully or he might lose his life. This angel's smile issued a devil's warning.

"Um, I don't really know that much!"

Sven had successfully delivered her warning to the police officer, but his reply wasn't what she hoped to hear.

"Then take me to someone who does!"

"No, but... um..."

As if having reached her limit, Sven yelled at the befuddled policeman.

"Hurry up!! Or would you like to find out how far your neck can bend?!"

"Y-Yes, right away!!"

Just as Charlotte worried about her son Jacob, there was someone inside the shop who Sven cared about more than her own life. And that was Lud Langart, Tockerbrot's owner and her beloved master, to whom she had sworn to dedicate her entire body and heart.

At a security station in a corner of the Royal Weapons Development Bureau in Berun, the royal capital...

"Ugh! I'm exhausted!"

Sophia von Rundstadt, the captain of the guard, was carelessly lying on the sofa. Her casual posture while on duty was questionable for a major in the military and a lady of House Rundstadt.

"Finally, I can get some sleep! No, I want to take a shower first."

However, none of her subordinates were present to scold her. She wouldn't usually behave so heedlessly. At least, she would never do it in front of her subordinates. However, she had just completed four continuous days on duty. She had only slept five hours over the past four days.

Recently, during Genitz's rebellion, the Royal Weapons Development Bureau was attacked and lost many workers, especially guards. Naturally, the bureau

had increased the workforce, but the newcomers were still unfamiliar with their jobs. As captain, Sophia had to stand at their head and lead them.

“Good job, Sophia.” A man spoke to her in a relaxed voice.

Daian Fortuner was the director of the Royal Weapons Development Bureau, a genius scientist, a super weirdo, and a man on Sophia’s list of “Creeps Who Are Particularly Annoying When They Talk to Me When I’m Tired.”

“.....”

Sophia ignored him as she buried her face in the sofa. Why was he here? This was a security station. Even the director couldn’t enter without permission. She had many such objections that usually she would yell at him. Unfortunately, she didn’t want to waste her strength on that right now.



“I heard a state of emergency was declared? Talk about going overboard! I guess it’s understandable, though, since it hasn’t even been six months since Genitz’s dustup.”

“.....”

Sophia had decided to ignore Daian, but he seemed to find this fun and kept talking.

“What was all the fuss again? Some terrorists crossed the border and entered the royal capital? And one spouted nonsense at the front gate before setting off a suicide bomb?”

“.....”

Somehow, Daian had already obtained information that was only given to the press one hour ago. A radical terrorist group posing as revolutionaries had entered the royal capital, clashed with the police, and managed to avoid capture for several days. Because of that, the royal capital was on high alert.

The Royal Weapons Development Bureau had fallen under attack not long before, so it feared being targeted again. For that reason, Sophia had assumed command until the state of emergency was removed.

“The police might have been uncooperative because of gripes against the military. And jurisdictional disputes aren’t pretty!”

“.....”

Even after his death, Genitz still greatly influenced Wiltia. One example was the discord that existed between the military and the police, which felt like an especially big problem to Sophia.

People outside the military saw Genitz’s rebellion as mere internal fighting within the military. Yet it had endangered the citizens of the royal capital and greatly damaged the police. Furthermore, it was the job of the police to maintain peace in the royal capital, but they had yielded to military force and were temporarily at the military’s disposal. And that hurt their honor.

“That’s why you didn’t know the number of terrorists, their aims, or the type of weapons they had, right?”

Without knowing the enemy's numbers, plans and weaponry, there was no way to prevent them from hiding in the city with the goal of sabotage. As a result, the military in the royal capital had to keep security at the highest level, and the development bureau had to remain on high alert to prevent the worst from happening. After the police received numerous requests and arrested the criminal, they learned that it was one man in possession of a crude bomb, meaning it had been much ado about nothing.

"They said the bomb used black powder explosives, didn't they? And it's pitiful how impure it was. The explosion was weak and only singed his hair and gave him minor burns."

Black powder is an incredibly primitive explosive made from charcoal and sulfur. It produced a lot of smoke but had little explosive force, so it was taken out of use in weapons over a century ago. Its main use now was in fireworks.

"He probably removed the black powder from commercial fireworks and packed it into a steel pipe. Talk about failing!"

It was a pathetic story that would only bring a wry smile to the face of a weapons developer.

"....."

As Daian spoke, Sophia fidgeted in silence. Perhaps she was thinking about the military's feud with the police over the last few days.

"I understand the military's reasoning, but if it's ham-fisted in clamping down on terrorists, they'll become martyrs."

If the military used armed force to subdue someone espousing a certain political philosophy, whatever it may be, many would consider that suppression of thought. Furthermore, if the military wasn't careful, it might not take the criminal alive. And that would create many more problems.

Whatever the cause, death led to martyrdom. A second and third troublesome individual might then appear. One death could become a source of trouble lasting hundreds of years. Thus, the police found it necessary to take the terrorist alive without mobilizing the military. Which was understandable.

Sophia understood, but she was frustrated that it hadn't worked out a little

better.

“Anyway, those terrorists... Well, we’re calling them terrorists, but they’re actually just small-time crooks robbing banks to survive. And now they’ve finally disappeared from the royal capital.”

“What?”

At last, Sophia reacted to Daian’s words. She couldn’t afford to ignore them. If the terrorists had disappeared from the royal capital, it meant they were still alive outside the royal capital.

“Oh... Taken an interest now, have you?”

Seeing her reaction, Daian grinned and chuckled. He had come to furtively slip Sophia information she wanted under the cover of small talk.

“Why you...”

Sophia glared at him hatefully as she finally raised her face. Her cheeks were blushing faintly from embarrassment at Daian seeing inside her.

“There were six criminals. Three disappeared before they crossed the border. Two others were captured before reaching Berun. The last was the cause of this disturbance.”

In other words, three criminals remained in Pelfe.

“That’s bad. The remaining three might come to retaliate.”

Sophia pulled herself up and shrugged off her exhaustion with a grave expression. The terrorist’s crime had merely involved brandishing an ineffective weapon, but it might have killed someone. Sophia’s professional duty was to protect the lives and assets of the citizens from all possible threats.

“And about that... Here’s where it gets even more confidential.”

Daian was enjoying talking to Sophia now that she was on the hook.

“The three who disappeared before crossing the border were basically errand runners given membership to swell the group’s ranks. They didn’t have a falling out. It would be more accurate to say they got scared and fled.”

In many respects, the terrorist world was a hard one, and one hardship was

securing funds for their activities. World-wise and deft terrorists might extort money from organizations by promising not to target them, or by harassing their adversaries. But terrorists lacking these negotiating skills might work incessantly as day laborers, live frugally, and then use what little money they had to procure the paltriest of weapons. Since their budgets were so limited, black market arms dealers would take advantage of them, so many could only get shoddy bombs like this one made from fireworks.

“To quickly obtain funds for their activities, they plan to rob banks. But they don’t have enough people, so they hire local thugs.”

“So they didn’t just go their separate ways or have a falling out?”

“It appears they simply got scared and made off. Two have already turned themselves in. We learned the structure of the criminal group from their statements.”

“Ugh...”

As if Daian’s words had cast a fresh bout of exhaustion over her, Sophia covered her eyes and pressed her face into the sofa.

“So a group of six third-rate terrorists manipulated the royal capital?”

It wasn’t even funny. It was just a nuisance. But it was not without effect.

Simply put, terrorism creates nuisances that draw attention to a political cause. Terrorists plant bombs, set fires, steal and kill in order to say, “We do these things because the system is bad.” And if that causes confusion, they make use of that, too. They use it as fodder, saying, “Look! We had to do this! They’re the bad ones!”

To stop that, even if the opponents were two-bit crooks, the bureaucracy and military would have to take action. And that wasted manpower, funds, time and resources.

Just thinking about it made Sophia’s head hurt.

“Um... wait. In other words, there’s still one left?”

Sophia realized that one pitiful thug—a thug roped into joining the terrorists bearing a supposedly lofty mission—hadn’t crossed the border and was still

wandering around out there.

“Well, it seems they found that last one and it’s causing excitement here and there.”

Almost all of the information Sophia had concerned the royal capital. Daian, however, possessed special channels and had obtained further information.

“It seems that one thug showed up in the country town of Organbaelz.”

“What?!”

Organbaelz. Hearing the name, Sophia was speechless. That was the town where a man who was like a younger brother to her—a man who had once been her subordinate—owned a bakery.

“So what’s going on?”

Back in Organbaelz...

With repeated threats... Or rather, plying careful but persuasive techniques, Sven was frowning in a meeting room at city hall that had been established as an emergency headquarters.

“Um, Miss? Let’s see...”

All the police officers on site were commanders of considerable rank. They were all over forty or fifty years old, and they were usually strict in handling their subordinates. However, they withered before Sven, who looked about seventeen or eighteen years of age.

“The press has gathered around, and... um... even worse, politics are involved.”

One officer looked particularly important. He was the chief of police, the highest-ranking officer, and he was wiping sweat from his face as he answered Sven.

“The criminal took hostages! And two of them are children! What does politics have to do with that?!”

The chief of police’s reply came through a forced smile, but Sven mercilessly

cut him off.

According to eyewitness accounts, there was only one criminal. That man had occupied Tockerbrot and taken three employees hostage, two of them children. Those hostages were, of course, the shop's owner Lud, and Jacob and Milly.

"You look thirsty. Would you like some water?"

Cases of water bottles were stacked along the meeting room's walls. Sven removed a glass bottle from one.

"Hyah!"

Then, she swiftly lopped the top of the bottle off with a sharp hand chop.

"Have a drink."

"Agh!"

The chief of police cried out when he saw her hand chop cut more cleanly than even the fine knife of a skilled craftsman. However, no one laughed at his discomfiture. Because they were all trembling. There was only one explanation for why they cowered before Sven. They were frightened of her, like children scared of an ogre.

"The bakery you work for... Tockerbrot, was it? We suspect the hostage-taker was connected to the terrorist incident in Berun a few days ago."

Two of the six terrorists had been apprehended, two had given themselves up, and one had been seized after a failed suicide bombing. The last of them had eventually escaped to Organbaelz.

"So what? Isn't it time to immediately send in a special unit?! If you want, I could head that op for you!"

"Don't be ridiculous!"

The silver-haired girl's offer astonished the police chief.

"Although you do seem capable..."

He was at a loss, but Sven's confident demeanor suggested she could succeed where he and his subordinates had not.

"That's not the point. I mean... if we could solve this with force, we would

have done so already.”

The chief of police put a hand to his forehead as he replied.

“As I told you before, tons of reporters have gathered. And they’re not just from Wiltia and Pelfe. They’re from Greyten and Filbarneu, too!”

Both nations had been enemies of Wiltia during the recent Great War.

“If our opponent was an ordinary criminal, there’d be no problem. Like you said, kids are among the hostages, so this is a situation that requires immediate action. However...”

“Oh, I get it.”

Finally, Sven understood what the chief of police was trying to say. The criminal was indeed a bank robber, but his comrades were terrorists with a political agenda, so as part of their group, the authorities would categorize him as a political offender. If the police used force to arrest him, some would interpret that as a crackdown on freedom of thought. Even worse, what if the foreign press took notice?

“Right now, Wiltia is getting world-wide attention about the international sports competition to be held in a few years. And the royal capital recently had a rebellion. For many reasons, this requires careful consideration.”

“I understand that.”

Before Sven became an Autonomous Humanoid Hunter Unit, she belonged to the Wiltian military as an Anthropoid Hunter Unit, a military weapon. She wasn’t human like the police chief, but she felt a certain sympathy for him as someone devoted to the nation.

“But how are you going to handle the rescue?”

“Um...”

The chief of police crossed his arms and pondered Sven’s question. He was in charge here. However, a national problem was beyond his responsibility.

“We have to wait until we know who will be stuck holding the bag.”

A fierce game of Old Maid was underway among the upper echelons of the

Pelfe police to decide who would be culpable in this matter. Until that was decided, he couldn't take any action on his own authority.

"The idiocy of it all!"

Sven gnashed her teeth at the stupidity of bureaucracy.

Inside Tockerbrot, the eye of the storm...

"Heeelp!!!"

The criminal was crying and shouting and desperately begging for forgiveness.

"Um, just calm down for a second."

"Don't get any closer! I said no closer! Please! Stay back! If possible, don't even look at me!!"

Lud Langart, the owner of the shop, was trying to calm the criminal, who was panicking.

"W-What are you gonna do with me? Are you gonna kill me? Or eat me?"

"I'm not going to eat you."

The criminal was trembling in terror at Lud's face.

"Calm down, Mister. It's all right. Lud looks scary, but he'd never hurt anyone."

The criminal had a gun pressed against Jacob. Nonetheless, the boy attempted to soothe him.

"R-Really?"

"Yeah! He looks scary, but he's a gentle and kind man! So don't worry!"

Milly, an apprentice at the bakery, laid down verbal supporting fire.

"Th-They're right," Lud added. "I have no intention of harming you. So please... calm down."

As if to reinforce the children's words, Lud gave a smile—or rather, what he thought was a smile. And the man's immediate reaction was...

"Gyaaah! What a gruesome face!! Are you gonna kill me?! Are you?! Are you

gonna skin me, butcher my meat, and grind my bones?!”

Lud had only further terrified him.

“Lud, that isn’t necessary!”

“It’s all right, Mister! Calm down! Take a deep breath!”

Jacob and Milly quieted the criminal, whose legs were shaking and whose nose was running as he sobbed.

“What kind of mug is that?! I’m certain he wants me dead! That’s gotta be it!!”

“No, Mister. It may be hard to believe, but that’s just how he smiles.”

“Well, it’s the kind of smile that scares people into never starting wars again!”

“I know how you feel.”



This wasn't at all a typical conversation between a criminal and his hostages. And hearing it depressed Lud.

Lud Langart had a frightening face. It was so frightful, he had almost lost his shop because his features scared away customers. That's why he rarely appeared in the storefront. And that's why this situation had arisen.

"Argh! I thought only women and children would be in here! I wasn't expecting an ambush!"

"This isn't an ambush!"

Lud spoke sadly to the criminal, who was crying in remorse.

The whole wall of Tockerbrot facing the town's main street served as a large show window. As a result, customers in the street could see the shop's products and its clientele, thereby encouraging them to come inside. However, if Lud was standing there with his fierce mien, it would keep everyone away. For that reason, he usually stayed in the oven room while others tended the storefront. But the hostage-taker didn't know that.

"Hey, Mister? Why don't you give this up? If you do it right now, wouldn't it lighten the charges against you?"

Jacob, one of his hostages, recommended the man turn himself in.

"He's right. There isn't any way for you to escape."

Milly seconded the suggestion from her spot in a chair behind him.

"Y-You all seem so relaxed..."

The hostage-taker made a face as if the serene children either impressed or shocked him.

"Not at all!"

"Well... kind of."

The children looked at each other.

Jacob and Milly were definitely children. However, since they made friends with Lud Langart, they had been through some dangerous times. They had been swept up in the commotion in the royal capital caused by Genitz's rebellion.

And they had developed the guts not to panic at a single amateur hostage-taker.

“Yawwwn...”

The kitten Ellis, curled up in a corner of the shop, yawned unabashedly and went back to sleep. At Tockerbrot, even the cat was relaxed.

“What’s with this place?!”

The hostage-taker was confused. After all, he had a gun. It was an old model and shabby, but it still held bullets.

Since the hostages knew that, the children and the cat weren’t doing anything to upset the criminal. They remained still and spoke softly.

“For now, you should lower your gun. After all, it’d be dangerous if it went off.”

“Y-Yeah...”

To the criminal, it was ironic that Lud, the man with the scary face, was the most flustered among them. However, Lud’s disquiet was like that of a mother trying to calm a child waving a knife.

“Let’s see... My name is Lud Langart. The boy you’re holding is Jacob. The girl behind you is Milly. And the cat is Ellis.”

“Okay...”

“What’s your name?”

“Milag... Miroslav Milag.”

“All right.”

Trying not to agitate the man, Lud asked, “Why are you doing this?”

“I’m a bank robber.”

Lud and the others didn’t know that Miroslav had been hired by the terrorists who were now a political issue between Wiltia and Pelfe.

“The economy’s bad, right? I don’t have any money or a job. I was down and out and they invited me in on a chance to score big.”

The Great European War had ended three years ago. War is the largest consumer activity, so at the end of the war, every area of industry suffered a large decrease in demand, despite inflated production.

And when the balance of supply and demand collapses, massive deflation occurs. Then, goods don't sell unless prices are drastically lowered, but there was a limit to how low costs could go.

Employers had greatly reduced labor costs—in other words worker paychecks—or simply laid off their employees. In short, there was widespread unemployment, and even those who had jobs received meager pay. It was difficult to live according to the law so it wasn't strange that people committed crimes.

"But I didn't know what kind of job it would be... I had to raise funds for terrorists!"

"I see..."

Apparently, Miroslav hadn't been prepared to become a political criminal.

"But I did it because they told me I'd just be the driver and would only face minor charges if I was caught."

He hadn't even been prepared to be a robber. He had committed crimes without much forethought in the hopes that it would reap large amounts of money.

That's the horrible thing about poverty. Poverty encourages crime for survival, and it greatly disrupts society. When peace and order are upset, economic activity stagnates, generating more poverty. Then more people engage in crime, setting off a chain reaction.

To stop that cycle, it was necessary to stimulate demand through consumer activity, but nothing had been found to replace the war, thereby causing a recession whose outcome was uncertain.

"Urgh! How did this happen? How?!"

Despair and anger overwhelmed Miroslav. He was not a very rational person.

"Arrrgh!"

He erupted in rage, picking up a nearby chair and hurling it at the window. There was a loud crash as the chair flew through the glass.

“It’s all because I’m poor! It’s not my fault! It’s society’s fault!!”

“Don’t cry.”

Indeed, some things are beyond one’s control. Nonetheless, Jacob looked amazed as Miroslav released his frustration by breaking the window of someone else’s shop.

“Another broken window...”

Lud, the owner of the shop, quietly sighed at the thought of the repair cost. This might be the third or fourth time that Tockerbrot had suffered a broken window.

Showing no concern for what might be happening inside the shop, the crowd outside was thrilled and the newspaper reporters clicked their cameras in lieu of shouts for joy.

“Argh! This isn’t a show for your entertainment!”

The sight of them must have grated on Miroslav’s nerves, because he pointed his gun outside in a fit of anger.

“No, Miroslav! Don’t shoot!”

“—?!”

However, he stopped when Lud shouted.

People don’t always stop because they are told to. To be precise, they might not even hear the command. However, no matter how chaotic the circumstances, a person will often react immediately when hearing his or her name. That was why Lud had asked their captor his name earlier.

“Don’t shoot. If you do, they’ll add attempted murder to your charges. If you want to shoot, shoot at the sky. Then it’s only a threat.”

A gun is a tool for harming people. Putting a finger on the trigger and aiming at someone is a declaration of intent to kill.

“Yeah, all right...”

Miroslav could sense from Lud's eyes and voice how serious he was, so he obeyed.

"You're..."

The look in Miroslav's eyes said that he had noticed something.

"You know how to handle... Or how to use a gun! I knew it... You're..."

"Yes, that's right."

"You're a bloodthirsty killer!"

"No, that's not right!!!"

Lud had thought Miroslav recognized him as a former soldier, but instead he had insulted Lud again based on his appearance.

"Don't kill meeeee!!"

"I won't!!"

Again, Miroslav sobbed and screamed and begged for his life as Lud insisted on his innocence.

"It's time for you to surrender, Mister."

After listening to the two of them, Jacob heaved another sigh.

Outside the shop...

"It looks bad in there."

In the upstairs of a house across the street, Sven muttered to herself. The police had temporarily commandeered the house's second floor, so officers were monitoring the situation inside Tockerbrot through a surveillance telescope.

"Oh... you can see inside?"

The house was opposite the shop, but the distance was at least ten meters. And it was already night. The lights were on inside the shop, but it would have been difficult to see with the naked eye.

"Don't worry about me. Just do your job!"

“Y-Yes, Miss!”

Without turning her head, Sven chided a police officer engaged in surveillance. With her functional specifications, the distance and darkness were no problem. However, what she saw was a big problem.

It’s unknown how many bullets are in the criminal’s gun. Judging from the way he moves, there could be three or four left.

He moved like an amateur. Like a street thug or an even lesser punk. It was possible for Lud to defeat him despite the man’s advantage in having a gun. But Lud couldn’t make any careless moves because of Jacob and Milly.

Still, his chance of winning is over 90 percent. Come on, Master...

Even with a 99.99 percent chance of success, he would never take the risk if even a slight chance of harming someone else remained. Her master was that kind of man. His compassion for others was a big part of Sven’s deep affection for him. She respected and loved him from the bottom of her heart. But she also wanted him to value himself a little more.

At this rate, the worst could happen—but in a different way. Of all the possible scenarios Sven could see, danger to Lud’s life was the most likely. He might die protecting someone. And she had to stop that from happening. No matter the cost.

Again, back inside Tockerbrot...

A few hours later, the sun had set and it was near bedtime, but the police and the media were still surrounding the bakery.

“Urgh...”

“Are you all right?”

Lud asked this question of Miroslav, whose eyes were bloodshot. The criminal’s nerves—and only his—were reaching their limit. The man had already lost the presence of mind to control his hostages. Jacob and Milly lay asleep in a corner of the shop.

“Shut up! Keep your mouth shut!”

Now that he was surrounded, there would be no escape. Miroslav was in extreme stress and was clearly beginning to lose his mental equilibrium.

“You should rest, even for a short time.”

“Urgh...You just want to escape while I nap! Or turn me over to the police!”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

Miroslav had run through the mountains and camped out in the open for days before reaching Tockerbrot in Organbaelz. By the time he got to the shop, he was exhausted.

“Why don’t you at least eat something? I mean, we have plenty of food to eat. Or rather to sell.”

“Urgh...”

Although Miroslav had barricaded himself in the bakery, he had yet to taste the bread. And that wasn’t because he felt bad about eating without paying. He simply didn’t have room in his mind to pay attention to such things. He was so focused on the police outside the window that he couldn’t see the bread lined up just beneath his line of sight.

“Very well, just a little.”

“All right, wait a second. How about this one?”

Lud showed rye bread to Miroslav, who nodded hesitantly.

“I’ll use a knife to cut it. Is that all right?”

“Sure...”

Since he could use the knife for defense, Lud declared his intention beforehand to avoid further stressing Miroslav.

“Rye bread has a dry texture so spreading something on it makes it taste better. It goes well with juicy marmalade and sour cream. Here.”

Lud spread cream cheese on a thin slice of rye bread and handed it to Miroslav.

“It’s delicious!”

Miroslav exclaimed softly after taking a bite.

“Would you like something to drink? I can make coffee or tea.”

“Um... coffee, please.”

After a while, Lud returned with a pot of coffee and a cup.

“Here.”

Lud gave Miroslav a cup that he had warmed with hot water, then poured in coffee.

“We usually have a waitress serve coffee. She can make better coffee than this.”

Lud spoke as he handed over the cup.

“.....”

Miroslav remained silent. The warmth of the cup had somewhat calmed his shaky fingers.

“Hey, why don’t you call this off? If you keep this up, you’ll damage your health.”

Lud spoke when he noticed Miroslav’s tension easing. He was maintaining the appearance of caring for Miroslav. But in fact, Lud genuinely cared about the man at this moment.

Miroslav wasn’t a good man to anyone. But he wasn’t a deplorable, worthless man either. He was just a small-time crook confused about what he wanted. He had time left to redo his life. But more than anything...

“You said my bread tastes good, right? So I won’t stand for any more moping!”

“But...”

“It’s all right. If you throw down your weapon and go outside without a fight, they won’t shoot you.”

Ironically, throngs of journalists had come because they believed Miroslav was the last of the terrorists who had disturbed the royal capital. The police wouldn’t shoot him in front of the media.

“And I’ll testify at the trial that you weren’t violent toward the children. You were just confused and pushed into a bad spot. After all, you didn’t shoot anyone, did you?”

“No...”

If Miroslav didn’t fire a shot, that alone would lessen his sentence.

“Don’t worry. You can still do your life over.”

Lud patiently attempted to convince Miroslav, but his effort didn’t bring him any closer to his objective.

“How am I supposed to survive after getting out of prison?”

Miroslav mumbled bitterly.

“It’s over. At this stage, I’m already in checkmate. There ain’t no second chance in life!!”

He shouted and pressed the gun in his hand to his temple.

“No, Miroslav!”

Lud raised his voice to stop him. However, calling Miroslav’s name didn’t have compelling force this time.

“Sorry for all the trouble... I should’ve done this a long time ago!!”

Miroslav had chosen to kill only himself. It was the least he could do to repay Lud. His hand was trembling, his fingers shaking. However, his finger was still capable of pulling a trigger.

“Stop!!”

Lud jumped toward Miroslav. As the two men struggled, a gunshot rang out.

“Huh? What?”

“Lud!”

Jacob and Milly, who were asleep, jumped at the sound. And then...

“Master!”

They heard another voice. The silver-haired girl, Sven, flew down from the ceiling.

“Sven? Huh? How did you get in here?!”

“I jumped onto the roof, ripped it away, and snuck into the attic!”

Sven explained as though it was nothing special.

After sneaking into the attic, she looked for a chance to rescue Lud and the others. But before that happened, she heard a gunshot and plunged in without further thought.

“Master, are you hurt?”

Lud and Miroslav had been struggling, but now they weren’t moving. More accurately, Lud had suppressed Miroslav, covering and immobilizing him.

“W-Why? Why?!”

Miroslav was stunned and spoke weakly. Blood was pooling beneath them.

“No...”

Sven was speechless.

That wasn’t Miroslav’s blood. It came from Lud, who was struck by the bullet when the gun accidentally went off as he tried to stop Miroslav.

“Master?! Nooooo!!”

Lud’s injury was a trillion times more painful to Sven than her own death would be. Even worse, Lud had fallen and wasn’t moving.

“Ouch...”

Or so she thought... but then he slowly rose.

“Miroslav, are you all right? You mustn’t be hasty!”

He reproached Miroslav, but blood was streaming from his body. The criminal was more important to him than his own wound.

“Master, we have to stop the bleeding! We’ll treat you! Sterilize it!! Medic!! Medic!!”

Lud was calm, but Sven was panicked and perplexed enough for two people.

“You... Your injury... Are you okay?!”

“Uh... yeah.”

Lud finally noticed.

“It didn’t hit a vital organ. So it should be no problem.”

“No, no, no...”

Blood had drained from the confused shooter, making him paler than Lud, who was actually bleeding.

“Why... you... Why are you being so kind to me? I damaged your shop!”

Miroslav found it hard to understand Lud’s behavior.

“Well... it’s hard to explain.”

As if embarrassed, Lud scratched his head.

“That rye bread you ate will be sweeter and tastier after a few days.”

“Really?”

People assume bread tastes better immediately after baking, but some bread gains flavor with time.

“And while I don’t have the ingredients right now, if you make a sandwich with salmon, onion and an olive-oil sauce, it’s absolutely mouth-watering. And I can make better coffee.”

Lud wasn’t good at smiling. Even now his face looked angry. However, his tone was like a parent talking about a child he had lovingly raised.

“I want anyone who says my bread is delicious to be able to say it’s delicious again. So, for my sake, please don’t do anything reckless.”

“All right...”

Miroslav dropped his gun as if he had lost all his strength. The sound of metal dropping on the floor resounded throughout the shop.

“Grah! I don’t care about you!! Move outta the away!”

However, this waitress who loved her master more than anything didn’t care one whit about that.

“Oof!”

She kicked Miroslav away and lifted Lud's large frame more than two heads taller than her own.

"S-Sven? Huh? What are you doing?"

"What do you mean what am I doing?! You have to see a doctor! So we're going to the hospital!"

"No, it isn't that serious."

Lud was a former soldier. His job had once been on the battlefield, where bullets constantly whizzed back and forth, so he had suffered gunshots more than once. Based on his experience, he determined that the injury from a shell of this caliber was no threat to his life. And he was correct.

However, that wasn't the issue for Sven. Even if the wound had been no bigger than a hair's width, it was a tragedy that her beloved master was injured.

"Graaah!"



She kicked open the door of the shop—the door she usually opened and closed so carefully—as if trying to break it. Normally, she wouldn't do this because the shop was Lud's treasure. However, her loyalty to him was so great that she would damage what Lud treasured without reserve if it meant saving him.

"W-What?!"

"What happened?!"

"I heard a gunshot! Is anyone injured?"

"Uh, hey... you?"

The eyes of the police and media around the shop were astounded at the sight of the silver-haired girl suddenly appearing with a large man in her arms.

"Where's a doctor?!" Sven yelled at the gawkers.

"Um, what are you going to do now, Mister?"

The criminal Miroslav was left in the shop, and Jacob was worried about him.

"I think... I'll turn myself in."

Just when he was desperate enough to choose death, Sven had appeared and told him she didn't care about him at all, and that had broken his will in yet a new way. Thus, the incident at Tockerbrot came to an end. But no one, not even Lud or Sven, was aware that this was just a forerunner to the real crisis ahead.

Chapter 2: Raising the Alarm

“I’m not sure how to put this, but... Lud, you’re amazing!”

Inside Tockerbrot, a few days after the hostage incident, Marlene—the nun from the church atop the hill—was both impressed and appalled. The bakery had finally returned to regular business hours.

“You got shot, didn’t you? So why are you back at work just three days later?”

When Miroslav barricaded himself inside Tockerbrot, Lud had struggled with him and received a gunshot in his side. But now he was hard at work baking bread in the oven room as if nothing had happened.

“Well, I guess I’m training myself.”

Lud answered Marlene with a wry smile.

He made that face for two reasons. One was that Marlene had been stunned at his strong body instead of praising it. Another was that he had lost more of his edge than he realized.

I thought I could stop Miroslav before he fired.

Lud should have been able to stop a confused punk from taking a shot, and it was disturbing that he hadn’t. He had considered the risk of an accidental shot, but he thought he would be able to seize control first—or least dodge the bullet. Lud was the former ace pilot known as the Silver Wolf, and before that he was a special ops soldier called a Werewolf, so he shouldn’t have been injured that way.

If Genitz were still alive, he’d be so shocked his jaw would hit the floor! During his time as a special ops soldier, Genitz had used Lud as his right hand man. If Genitz were here, he would shake his head at Lud in disgust.

However, Lud’s grim smile now wasn’t from sadness over losing his edge. Rather, it was joy. He was losing his skills as a soldier, which was evidence that Lud Langart was becoming a baker. But he found it ironic how this incident

confirmed it.

“Forget about me. How’s Milly?”

A criminal with a gun had taken her hostage. Such a frightening incident wouldn’t be easy for a fourteen-year-old girl.

“Oh, she’s fine. She’s eating and sleeping fine, but she’s worried about you.”

It appeared that Lud’s concern was unnecessary. Marlene answered as if she found something funny.

“I heard Jacob is fine, too. Our children are tough!”

Jacob had also been a hostage, and he had missed school to take care of his mother, who was more upset and exhausted than Jacob.

“I’ve caused trouble for those two.”

Lud didn’t care about getting hurt, but it was a different story when it came to others.

“Don’t say that. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Marlene attempted to cheer him up, but it wasn’t that easy.

“It’s not about who’s to blame and who isn’t. The problem is how an adult like me endangers children when I’m around them.”

Lud was full of remorse that his attention to protecting others had dulled along with his instincts as a soldier.

“Hey now...”

Marlene now wore a different but equally astounded look.

“Isn’t there someone else you should be even more concerned about?”

“Huh?”

“I mean Sven. Ever since that day, she’s seemed down. Surely you’ve noticed.”

When Lud had been carried to the hospital on the night of the hostage incident, Sven watched over him the whole time. Lud had been right that his injury was not life-threatening. However, surgery was necessary to remove the

bullet. Afterward, as he slept under anesthesia, Sven sat beside him with a pained expression on her face.

“She blames herself for injuring her ‘precious master.’”

“But she didn’t do anything wrong!!”

Lud raised his voice in surprise.

“But this isn’t about who’s to blame and who isn’t, right?”

“Urgh...”

Lud was speechless hearing Marlene repeat what he had just said.

“You two have surprisingly similar natures.”

Marlene was grinning, and Lud could only reply with a troubled look.

“Yeah, that might be true.”

Sven wasn’t human. She was a humanoid Hunter Unit. An android. Moreover, her creator had given her the artificial intelligence of the Hunter Unit that Lud had once piloted. That A.I. had belonged to mass-produced weapons, but this unit had gained a heart. And meeting Lud had given birth to that heart.

Sven’s heart grew in the soil that was Lud. For that reason, the two often thought and reacted in the same way. There was no way for Marlene to know this, but she sensed it anyway. She was surprisingly insightful.

“What should I tell her?”

If Lud was in Sven’s place, he would feel worse if the person he was concerned about tried to reassure him, or said he hadn’t done anything wrong. Because then he would know he had made that person worry. And Sven might feel the same way.

“Well, in that case...”

Before the servant of God could give him her valuable advice, the door of Tockerbrot blasted open.

“Master!!”

It was Sven—the very person they were discussing.

“Oh! Sven... um...”

There is a saying: ‘Speak of a wolf and he’ll appear.’ Nevertheless, her perfect timing took Lud aback.

“We’ve got a problem!”

She had urgent news. It was a sticky problem, so finding a solution would be difficult.

At Bengabaer Officer’s School, located in a distant corner of a district next to Berun, the royal capital of the Principality of Wiltia...

The school was built long ago so the children of provincial nobles could learn etiquette and acquire a general education before going to the royal capital. But times had changed and it was currently a school for young cadets.

“This is already my seventh school...”

Just today, Hildegard von Hessen—or Hilde for short—had transferred to this officer’s school. She mumbled as she gazed out the window.

“I hope this time I can at least stay a month!”

After Genitz’s rebellion, Hilde had been passed from one school to another, starting with Dangoltinoza Officer’s School. And that wasn’t because she had done anything wrong.

“Tch! Why are there so many weird problems everywhere?!”

She hadn’t done anything herself, but every time she transferred to a new school, internal problems surfaced leading to that school’s closure, temporarily or permanently.

“Really! There are problems all over! Like students organizing on-campus gambling and illegal loans! And teachers acting like pimps and discriminating against female students based on where they were born! And people establishing the political arm of a new cult!”

“Yeah, they should dedicate their time to studying!”

Since long ago, schools have been closed worlds. That seclusion was to

preserve a place where the youth could develop neutral and fair-minded thinking without influence from outside ideas. When they emerged, they would be able to judge things calmly and rationally.

Inside their fences, people consciously avoid interference from outside. And that isn't necessarily a problem. Or, that is how things should be. However, that seclusion also makes it difficult for problems inside those fences to rise to the surface. Meanwhile, the darkness haunting such places only deepens.

In the east, there was a heretical practice called 'kodoku.' This was a ritual for creating brutal creatures with high concentrations of poison by sealing several poisonous animals in a pot and making them eat each other. Something similar sometimes occurs in schools.

"So..."

Only now did Hilde look at the friend who had casually joined her as she talked to herself.

"Lillie, you're too close."

Hilde chided Lillie, even though she knew Lillie was unlikely to correct herself.

"Huh? How so?"

"Is there any other word for it when your arm is around mine, your head is on my shoulder, and your cheek is pressed against mine?!"

Without Hilde noticing, Lillie had taken her arm and pressed close.

Lillie was a friend Hilde had met at her first school, before all the subsequent transfers. Since then, every time Hilde moved, Lillie followed her to the next school, attended the same class, and even sat next to her.

"Lillie... how do you manage to follow me every single time?"

This time, too, Lillie had shown up at Bengabaer Officer's School. Hilde was no longer surprised.

"Let's see... maybe a good phrase to describe it would be the power of love."

Joyfully, Lillie answered Hilde.

"Oh, okay..."

And Hilde no longer had the strength to argue. She didn't know it, but the embassy of Yamato, a nation allied with Wiltia, had sent Lillie to covertly inspect educational facilities in the Principality of Wiltia. This was the official and top secret explanation.

The actual reason, however, was to cultivate a personality in Lillie. She wasn't human. Just like Sven—aka Svelgen Avei—Lillie was a humanoid Hunter Unit.

Meeting Hilde truly had been a coincidence. However, that coincidence had awakened Lillie's heart. And the trigger had been her love for Hilde.

"Never mind why your seat is next to mine, but why is your room next to mine?!"

For the most part, all the students lived in dormitories, since this was an officer's school. It was unusual, but each student at the school had an individual room, and Lillie had moved into the one next to Hilde's.

"Someone else was living there until the day before I moved in."

"Yeah! We switched rooms!"

"Switched? But... how?!"

"I asked, like, super hard!"

"You just asked?"

Hilde found it hard to believe, but Lillie didn't appear to be lying.

Lillie had politely and respectfully pleaded with the student living there to exchange rooms. When the girl had rudely refused with a flat-out "No," Lillie had used her bare hands to bend a metal pipe she just happened to be carrying, before asking again. It had been very close to intimidation and a threat, but it was indubitably a means of persuasion.

"Okay, whatever. But why was there a hole in the wall this morning?"

"Oh, did I wake you up? Sorry."

"No, that's not what I meant."

Lillie's answer evaded Hilde's point.

When Hilde awoke that morning, there was a huge hole in the wall. Actually,

the whole wall was simply gone.

They were supposed to have individual rooms, but suddenly Hilde was sharing a double with Lillie.

“I chipped away and made a hole in the night.”

“Yeah, that would be the way to do it...”

Hilde had, of course, complained to the dorm administrator, but the housemother denied her complaint on the spot.

“She mumbled something about an ‘international problem.’ Do you know anything about that?”

“No... Not at all!”

Lillie played innocent.

Hilde didn’t know it, but Lillie had used her position as an investigator from the Yamato Embassy to make a “request” of the school president. The president feared the situation with Lillie would develop into an international issue, so he ordered the housemother to go along. As a result, any complaints about Lillie’s actions would fall on deaf ears.

Furthermore, news of any such grievances would reach many people before it got to Suzuka, a military attaché at the Yamato Embassy and, for convenience’s sake, Lillie’s master. Even though Suzuka’s smile was usually calm, such reports would cause her face to twitch with annoyance. But that was another story.

“Um, about your feelings for me... We’re just friends, right?”

Lillie was slightly eccentric as a friend, but Hilde cared about her. Since the incident when Hilde first learned about Lillie’s true nature, there were disturbances at Hilde’s past six schools. Whenever something happened, Lillie always protected her from those who sought to kill Hilde and cover it up. So Hilde trusted and cared about her.

“Of course we’re just friends!”

Lillie answered with a smile.

Her face wasn’t even five centimeters away from Hilde’s.

“I s-see...”

Lillie had spoken a little too enthusiastically but Hilde was on the verge of believing her when Lillie amended her comment.

“At least for now.”

“Uh, what’d you just say?!”

Hilde tried to interrogate her, but Lillie turned her back, pretending not to have heard.

“I know you don’t mean any trouble, but...”

Hilde sighed again at her inability to settle in one school. More than that, however, she felt her chastity was in danger.

“More importantly... Hilde, look at this.”

“Huh?”

Lillie changed the subject and pulled a magazine from her bag.

“This may have something to do with you.”

“What is it?”

Lillie handed Hilde a science magazine. The feature article was “The Possibility of Same-Sex Propagation by Females.”

“Oops! That’s the wrong magazine. Here’s the right one!”

“Why are you reading this?!”

Hilde tensed, but Lillie just replaced the first magazine with another one.

“Hm? Weekly Global News... A magazine from Greyten? Why are you reading this?”

After seeing the Greyten language on the cover, Hilde grew suspicious.

“Well, I’m collecting information. My master... my guardian read this and she thought I might be interested, so she sent it to me.”

Suzuka, the military attaché at the Yamato Embassy, had introduced Lillie to the magazine. One of the embassy’s functions was collecting information and sending it to the home country. Magazines and newspapers were valuable

sources of information.

“Urm... I’m not very familiar with Greytenese.”

Greyten was an island nation in the cultural area of the continent of Europea. It was defeated during the recent Great War, resulting in a massive loss of territory. However, it was once known as the Empire of the Never Setting Sun.

“Let’s see... The true nature of Wiltia, which claims to have established a world state? Military power oppressing freedom? Ha ha! These are pretty wild claims!”

During the Great European War, the Greyten Empire, the Republic of Filbarneu, and the August Federation formed a coalition and fought against the allied powers led by Wiltia. But Wiltia overturned early predictions and won the war.

One reason was that Wiltia possessed the new weapon known as the Hunter Units, which revolutionized the battlefield. Also, Noa, a nation on a new continent, had maintained a neutral position to the end of the conflict. In any case, the losing coalition now held a strong grudge against Wiltia and was busily leaping at every opportunity to tarnish Wiltia’s dignity and magnify problems.

“I’ve heard Greyten takes from the national budget for this kind of troublemaking. Instead of wasting time on it, they should address other issues.”

Hilde was amazed at how illogical the world was to compensate for a bruised pride by hating something else.

“So what are these losers grumbling about now?”

They were at an officer’s school, and Hilde was a former member of the Schutzstaffel. She had once belonged to the nation, but she had no obligation to listen to every bit of nonsense that came along.

“There, in the special feature in the middle... Didn’t you have something to do with that place?”

However, Lillie spoke calmly, not with the flirty face she had been wearing.

“In the middle?”

Hilde turned pages. Then she saw the name of a familiar shop.

“What? Tockerbrot?!”

Just a few months ago, she had worked there.

“A baker suppressed and attempted to kill a peace fighter calling for freedom? The shop owner is a former soldier involved in an illegal mission? And he’s currently on a covert operation to hide the nation’s war crimes? What the heck?!”

Hilde had acquired cursory familiarity with Greytenese through classroom lectures. She wasn’t fluent, but she could read, write, and engage in simple conversation. Even with her limited skills, she knew these claims were absurd.

‘This is Dolly Anastasia reporting.

The Principality of Wiltia is a militant nation that deployed metal giants to forcefully subdue the opposing coalition of powers in the recent Great European War.

I have long doubted whether freedom and equality can even exist in this country. And this incident has only strengthened such doubts.

It happened in the quiet town of Organbaelz, located in a corner of Pelfe, which Wiltia currently occupies as a colony. And it begins with a man escaping to this peaceful town. That man’s name is Miroslav Milag. He belongs to a freedom movement representing the occupied people of Pelfe. As part of his work, he violated Wiltian law against his will. With the police on his tail, he fled to a bakery.

It would be natural to assume that people living at the bakery would be a calm and peaceful folk. And since this bakery is in Pelfe, Miroslav thought its owners would be Pelfian and would hide him—or at least give him some bread—since it was for their sakes that he fought. So, suffering from hunger, he knocked on the door.

However, his hopes were dashed. The owner of the shop was Lud Langart, a Wiltian and one of Pelfe’s overlords. Instead of giving sustenance to Miroslav, he abused him, calling him a dirty, inferior Pelfian and threatening violence against him.

The police were in hot pursuit, so Miroslav had no choice but to barricade himself in the shop. The authorities had already captured five of his comrades, making Miroslav the last of his group. If he wanted to continue his fight for freedom, he didn't have the luxury to care about appearances.

Immediately, armed police surrounded the shop. Miroslav continued decrying the inequality and injustice in society. He was a sublime figure, reminiscent of an ancient saint. However, the curtain fell on his struggle most abominably. Exhausted from his lone fight, Miroslav fell asleep. And what happened while he slumbered?

One of his hostages, shop owner Lud Langart, was a former soldier. And he has a suspicious background. Langart participated in an unreported civilian massacre perpetrated by the Wiltian military during the Great European War in May of Year 913 of the European Calendar. It was a savage slaughter against unarmed civilians during wartime. Langart played a major role in the Wiltian assault.

Perhaps Langart's current occupation as baker was designed by the Wiltian military to hide information it was afraid would expose the incident.

Miroslav knew nothing about this. He was too virtuous to hurt an apparent civilian like Langart—even though the man is actually a loathsome invader. Langart took Miroslav's gun and tried to kill him. Miroslav, quick to react, avoided death by successfully dodging his would-be killer's bullet. However, worried about the lives of the children whom Lud had forced to slave away in his shop, Miroslav turned himself in.

Currently, Miroslav is attempting to file a suit in court seeking justice and equality. His trial will question the international community's willingness to allow Wiltia—as a great nation at the center of the world's attention—to continue its tyrannical behavior.'

"What the... This is pure nonsense!!"

Hilde's hands shook as she held the magazine. She gripped it so hard that the pages were crinkled and bent.

"Lud Langart would never behave like that!"

For certain reasons, Hilde had worked at Lud's bakery during her time in the Schutzstaffel. That's how she knew that Lud was an exceptionally good person.

Hilde had tried to kill him. Nonetheless, he had given her a job and let her eat the bread he baked. He was that kind of man.

Miroslav on the other hand, was unknown to her. But if he asked Lud for bread, the baker would have shared his bread even if Miroslav was a horrible villain. That's the kind of man Lud was. Hilde knew that very well.

"What was this reporter thinking?! Is she serious?!"

"Actually, I doubt she is."

"What?!"

Hilde's tone was agitated in response to Lillie's words.

"They only sell that magazine in Greyten. Do you think anyone there would go all the way to Pelfe to find out the truth? They wouldn't. That's the way these things are done."

"Well, it stinks!"

This magazine wasn't intended to be responsible journalism. Its purpose was disseminating a narrative comfortable to the citizens of the defeated nation, shoring up their self-esteem with the idea that they lost to Wiltia because it was a nation of cowardly and vicious villains. That's why it sold well. And that's why publication continued.

"I wonder if they're all right..."

Hilde remembered the faces of the people she had accompanied to the royal capital a few months ago. Lud, Jacob, Milly... and the silver-haired waitress.

"I hope this doesn't cause them trouble."

If possible, she wanted to lend a hand. From the bottom of her heart, Hilde wanted to help them. However, she was a long way from Organbaelz...

Back in Organbaelz, at a repair shop—a former repair shop—in the corner of town...

This was Jacob’s home.

“So what’s the problem?” he asked.

The repair shop used to handle a variety of maintenance, from heavy machinery to old trucks around town.

“That magazine is from Greyten, right? We’re in Pelfe, so it doesn’t have anything to do with us.”

“That’s not true.”

Sven, the silver-haired waitress at Tockerbrot, was standing in front of him. The sales smile she was so proud of, which charmed customers day after day, had now lost its shine.

“Why? It doesn’t matter if people across the ocean talk about us. It’ll only cause trouble if we let it upset us. You know that saying about how the wealthy don’t fight? Well... Lud doesn’t have any money, but still.”

“That last part was unnecessary.”

Financially, Tockerbrot was still struggling to free itself of debt.

“It may be more consequential than you think.”

If a foreign nation was telling lies about them, it was unpleasant. But Jacob was right: they could just ignore it.

However, there are people who raise smoke where there’s no fire. They raise a fuss, saying, “If there’s smoke, there must be fire.”

“It’s not just talk in a foreign country. A Wiltian newspaper with a large circulation in Pelfe printed the article in its international column.”

“And that’s bad... right?”

Finally, Jacob understood the seriousness of the situation.

“The people in Organbaelz will know it’s a lie, but if people in neighboring towns, especially Ponapalas, read it...”

Ponapalas was the former capital of Pelfe. Many people there still objected to the merger with Wiltia.

“Jacob, you shouldn’t come to Tockerbrot for a while. That’s what the master thinks.”

After he heard the news, Lud decided to immediately secure the safety of Marlene, Milly, Jacob, and Charlotte.

“But I couldn’t be so heartless!!”

Jacob had been Lud’s friend since before Sven arrived, when Lud was struggling each day with the difficulty of starting his new life as a baker. Sven was basically telling Jacob to abandon his friend.

“We can’t put you in danger like before. I’m sorry about Charlotte, as well.”

“Ugh...”

Jacob’s mother was haggard and stayed in bed after the recent hostage incident had endangered his life.

“Will the shop be all right?”

“Yes. Master and I can handle it for a few days somehow, but...”

“But?”

Sven’s face clouded further.

“What’s worse is our sales are suffering...”

Sven bit her lip hard. She had once been a Hunter Unit. As Avei, she strode the battlefield. She could deal with any problem involving gunfire. And even if she couldn’t, she could at least survive. However, her experience as Avei was useless against the situation currently assailing Tockerbrot.

“Sven...”

Jacob didn’t know what was on her mind. However, Sven loved his friend Lud more than anyone in the world, so Jacob knew she was suffering.

What is the most vicious kind of attack? Is it a cruel demon wielding an iron hammer? Or a heinous devil swinging a blade?

No. These are surprisingly insignificant. The most terrifying, brutal and vicious attack is an attack in the name of justice. There’s nothing more ruthless than

fists thrown by those convinced they are right. They will hit you, kick you, and stomp on you even after you fall. They don't care that you're broken. If you are, they'll just attack you harder to crush you. They'll mash you to bits, grind down those bits, and spit on them.

People who believe they are right are capable of overpowering violence. Thus, since times of old, the most common cause of war has been justice.

"Filthy killer baker!"

"Come outside, you rotten scoundrel!"

"You're the hand of the oppressor and the nation's dog!"

Many people gathered in front of Tockerbrot. They raised their voices and hoisted signs reading "GET OUT" and "WAR DOG."

"Murderer! Murderer!"

"Aren't you ashamed to be alive?!"

"Go to jail, criminal!"

The people's eyes shone as if they were looking at the devil, the enemy of all creation, or a sailor tossing a stowaway into the sea.

"Hey, you! Are you trying to shop here?!"

"Don't you know?! The owner is a murderer!"

"Are you on his side?!"

They didn't just shout. They threatened and picked fights with the uncomfortable customers who tried to enter the shop.

"Get out of town!"

"Murderer! Shame on you for even breathing!"

"You're a monster who tramples peace and freedom!"

There was no sign that their voices would ever stop...

"Give me a break!"

In the shop's oven room, Lud was holding his head.

“They’re still here.”

Sven had returned from Jacob’s house and was talking to Lud from the back door.

“Yes. They came yesterday. They showed up early this morning, too. What a mess!”

At a loss for what to do, Lud heaved a sigh. The protestors weren’t residents of Organbaelz. They were from Ponapalas and other towns and called themselves The Citizens Who Love Peace and Freedom.

“They’re so annoying! Should I go kick them around?”

Sven spoke ferociously, and Lud stopped her.

“No! You mustn’t do that!”

It would be easy to drive them away with force. But Lud could handle it without Sven’s help.

“We can’t do anything like that!”

“I suppose if we fight them, they will make a fuss and say, ‘See! We told you!’”

The activists didn’t doubt they were right. They would view a show of force as oppressive and undemocratic, and gather more people and clamor even more.

“That, too. But also...”

Lud wasn’t only worried about that.

“They’re not doing this because of ill will toward us. They’re doing it because they think it’s right. They are acting from a good conscience.”

Wiltia’s annexation of Pelfe was legal according to international law. However, it was done against a background of Wiltia flourishing its military might. Those who had accepted the merger reasoned that there were worse countries than Wiltia, and they had no choice. So it wasn’t completely mistaken to see the annexation as unjust and repressive.

“In fact, a lot of people experience inequality and injustice from Wiltia. Since it absorbed Pelfe as part of Wiltia instead of making it a colony, Wiltia should

take responsibility.”

At the end of the year before, on the night of the Holy Festival, a thief had snuck into Tockerbrot. A corrupt company had exploited the thief so she couldn’t even make a living to support her sister. Pelfians had run the company, but the funding had come from Wiltia. If the regulatory agencies in Wiltia had taken the correct action, they could have stopped it.

Many people were suffering just like that thief.

“But is it necessary for you to put up with this, Master?”

Sven understood what Lud was trying to say, but she still had strong doubts.

“Whoever you were in the past, you’re just a civilian now. You shouldn’t have to carry the burden of a national... a racial problem between Wiltia and Pelfe.”

“Yeah...”

“Besides, is there really anything to their objections? Aren’t they just deceiving themselves that their personal frustrations relate to something bigger, like the nation and politics?”

“That’s... No...”

When Sven first came to Tockerbrot, they fought terrorists called the Pelfe Liberation League. She didn’t know their origins or why they chose their methods, but their attempted sabotage would have destroyed Organbaelz, which was a part of Pelfe.

“To begin with, the article is full of lies! It’s a bunch of drivel the author didn’t investigate or even fact-check! This is nothing but harassment!”

Miroslav wasn’t a fighter seeking freedom and peace. He was a man whom poverty had driven him to unlawful deeds. Lud had barely resisted him. Instead, he tried to persuade Miroslav to turn himself in. Miroslav, distraught to the point of trying to kill himself, had fired a bullet. When Lud tried to stop him, the bullet had injured Lud instead. The article was far from the truth.

“But parts of it are true.”

Lud was a former military man and special ops soldier. He had been involved in the annihilation of Lapchuricka and its civilians.

“That’s... But this is...”

The article also said Lud had been part of the Wiltian military’s mission to slaughter civilians and withhold information, and that he had pretended to quit the military and become a baker.

“That’s all hogwash!”

“Hmm...”

The annihilation of Lapchuricka had yet to become public knowledge. The authorized story was that regular combat had extended beyond the front line to Lapchuricka. As a result, the damage had included civilians. The official records had been thoroughly rewritten, so very few knew the truth of the mission. Even soldiers who had served on the mission believed it had been part of regular combat.

“Genitz handled the coverup. He was extremely deft at such things.”

Genitz, a former lieutenant general of the Wiltian military and supreme commander of the Schutzstaffel, had once been Lud’s “owner.”

In particular, the use of chemical weapons such as poison gas was extremely sensitive, even in wartime, so only a few people knew of its use.

“That casts a lot of doubt on the matter.”

“Yes, it does. But it doesn’t change the fact that I was involved.”

“But... Master, that’s not true!”

Lud’s persistence in blaming himself gave him the air of a humble prisoner. But, the responsibility for army operations lies with the army and the nation. As an example, soldiers don’t go to jail for every murder committed during war. It was irrational to accuse a soldier, who had simply obeyed orders, of murder after he quit the military.

“I know. I know, but...”

“Master...”

Lud was fully aware of such reasoning but still viewed this unjust torment as rightful retribution.

“I understand how you feel.”

In that case, there was nothing more his loyal servant, the silver-haired waitress, could say. She needed to obey his will and stay by his side. But...

“At this rate, the shop will go bankrupt in a month.”

She had to do something to protect the shop regardless of the situation.

“Are we really in such bad shape?!”

Lud thought the people would leave after a month at the longest. He hoped that if Tockerbrot could hang in that long, he would be able to fix the shop, even though it might take time. However, the situation was much worse than he imagined.

“The mine, city hall and the schools. They all want to suspend our contract for a while.”

“Oh no! Why?!”

“It’s all because of those people!”

Outside the shop, the protestors were still yelling in chorus. Yet no residents of Organbaelz were among The Citizens Who Love Peace and Freedom. They were all from out of town. While they held their demonstration to obstruct his business, other protestors descended upon the organizations to whom Tockerbrot sold its products wholesale.

“They threaten them, saying, ‘Do you buy bread from that monster?’ Our customers give in, because they don’t know what the activists will do if they don’t promise to suspend our contracts.”

“No way...”

Some had even discovered the managers’ names, addresses and family members, and then cast hints, saying, “I hope your children don’t have an accident!”

“They all apologized, but they did so at the back door.”

The threats focused on the individuals in charge, not city hall or the mine office. It was difficult to stop such attacks.

“They consider anyone not on their side to be the enemy, and they show no mercy. For people shouting about peace, they’re more exacting than the military.”

The concept of neutrality didn’t exist for them. Anyone who doesn’t stand on their side is an accomplice. Enemies are considered dogs and followers of the men in power. It was extreme, but it bound them together. The best way for a group to bond is to establish a common enemy.

“For now, our customers will settle for a suspension of the contracts. But if this continues any longer, they’ll formally cancel altogether. In that case, securing a future contract will be impossible.”

“Oh no...”

“Suspension of contracts and a decrease in customers... I mean almost zero customers. The losses are enormous, so it goes without saying that we’ll have to discontinue sales trips.”

The protestors outside weren’t residents of Organbaelz. Since Organbaelz didn’t have any hotels, the protestors were commuting from neighboring towns. If Sven and Charlotte went on sales trips to those towns and displayed Tockerbrot’s sign, the bakery’s poisoned reputation would only spread further.

“How can we pay our vendors?”

Lud’s face turned pale. This would affect the bakery’s supply of products such as flour, butter, cheese, salt, yeast, and firewood for the oven. It would also affect operation costs, such as electricity for the refrigerator.

“I can handle those things somehow.”

“You can?!”

Lud was surprised. Tockerbrot was on a shoestring budget without any savings, so no funds were available for covering these losses.

“Oh, did you forget? You’ve got that money.”

“That money...? Surely, you don’t mean—!”

“Yes. The money your friend gave you.”

Last autumn, a company called Doppeladler had transferred a large amount of money into Tockerbrot's account. Sven had used that money to cover recent losses.

I can't believe Genitz saved me this way!

Lud hadn't told Sven that the money had come from his former superior. Genitz had been faithful to a promise he made to Lud nearly ten years earlier, and arranged for the transfer of the money upon his death.

"As per your orders, I tried not to touch it unless it was an emergency, but I judged now was the time."

"Yeah, I guess so."

Lud had hesitated to use the money but kept it. He never thought it would come in handy like this. He had thought the sins of his past would cause him suffering but instead that same past had saved him.

"Is this fate?" Lud mumbled to himself.

In the end, accusations continued to fall on Tockerbrot, but they had yet to find any solution.

Chapter 3: The Pleasure of Justice

Lud had a dream a few nights after the Citizens Who Love Peace and Freedom started protesting in front of Tockerbrot.

“Hey!”

In the dream, someone spoke to him. It was the voice of a young man. Lud was very familiar with the voice. It was familiar, but it was one he rarely heard.

“What’s your problem?!”

It was his own voice. It was his fourteen-year-old voice from when he served under Genitz as a special ops soldier known as a Werewolf.

“Wouldn’t it be easy to drive them away?!”

Lud could see the owner of the voice, too. And he was smiling joyfully.

“Their ringleader. Or, more specifically, their chief strategist. Find that person and start there to break up the group.”

In a group, the ringleader is usually insignificant. People flaunting themselves as the leaders of disorderly crowds aren’t particularly important. They owe their position to the fact that they are well-liked. In other words, it depends on their charisma. In order to destroy a group, the best target isn’t the ringleader, but the chief strategist at his or her side.

“Such people are highly self-conscious, but they lack the ability to unify others. They’re unconsciously dissatisfied with their position. They think they’re the ones running the show and deserve to be valued more highly.”

Such people are frail. The slightest temptation causes them to collapse and fall.

“Money, possessions, women... Anything will work. Find that person’s weakness and issue a threat. But not too forcefully. Ask for a modest favor, saying, ‘This is all you have to do.’”

It doesn’t have to be anything great.

“You could suggest, ‘I don’t mind if you protest, but just not in the morning,’ or ‘Could you just take a break for one day?’ And then you offer something in return. You’ve got money for that, right? The money Genitz left for you. Yeah... Offer an amount equal to half of that person’s monthly paycheck. That’ll whet the appetite!”

Humans are funny. If they see a large amount of money, they put up their guard. But when they see a small amount, they take it, figuring it’s no problem. Even though the crime committed is the same, if the bribe is small, they think it’s forgivable. But it doesn’t work that way in reality.

“Now this person is all yours. While before, the person’s weakness was merely a slight embarrassment, from that point on, the weakness stems from taking money from the enemy. Now you can use that individual however you like. You can use the weakness to make that person reveal the weaknesses of others.”

Then you do the same to those people. Once their weaknesses are revealed and they have nowhere to run, they’ll try to rope in others as accomplices. In fact, they’ll try to increase the size of the group to minimize their own crimes. But it’s all pointless.

“Then you can take down a real leader for the first time. For you, that should be easy. You won’t even need any tools. Your bare hands will be enough. And there are many ways to make death look natural. Like ryuuku.”

Ryuuku was a bujutsu technique Lud knew. A bare-handed attack could stop an opponent’s heartbeat, even through armor.

“Then you can leak all the weaknesses you’ve collected so the group collapses on its own. Its members actually despise each other. And since they don’t have anyone to mediate, they’ll cast accusations at each other and then it’s happily ever after!”

Since their objective was attacking others, they would themselves be weak when falling under attack. That was why they usually chose targets who wouldn’t fight back.

Humans do the very things they don’t want others to do to them. So in trying to defeat an enemy, you should attack the same way they attack you.

“Easy, no? You’ve done it countless times.”

When Lud had been a Werewolf, he used that method to defeat many organizations defying Wiltia. This method minimized the number of assassination targets and damaged the reputations of resistance groups.

“Don’t be ridiculous! I won’t do that!”

Lud raised his voice for the first time.

“I’m not you anymore! I stopped doing those things!”

Firmly, he tried to refuse the temptation his past self was offering.

“Tsk...”

The fourteen-year-old Lud returned a look that suggested he was looking at someone beyond hope.

“It’s no use, Langart. You’re you. In the end, you’re a wolf. You can’t change that. Sooner or later, this was bound to happen.”

In a flash, the young Lud took on the appearance of Genitz.

“You!”

In Lud’s vision, Genitz was wandering the world after death, trying to drag him to Hell.

“They’re pigs! They hunger to see themselves as justice warriors! What do you suppose gives people the greatest pleasure?”

“.....”

Lud didn’t answer Genitz’s question. He didn’t even want to.

“Ruling others.”

Genitz answered without waiting for a reply.

“Life is beyond your control. You can’t live the way you want. You can’t even die the way you want. And I’m a perfect example!”

Genitz had tried to become king but had died, not even leaving behind a corpse. Now he laughed as if something was funny.

“That’s why people want to control others. They can forget their own

powerlessness while toying with the lives and deaths, the happiness and misery of others.”

The next thing Lud knew, Genitz was right in front of him. And a black darkness filled his eyes. This statement wasn’t based on superficial knowledge. It derived from a realization about true human nature based on his own experience.

“The pleasure is enormous, surpassing any drug. To obtain it, people are capable of anything. It can easily drive even someone like you to destruction.”

Genitz seemed to be telling him that the difficulty Lud was facing and the people calling him evil were only doing so because they wanted to feel better. Stomping on someone while spouting slogans about justice is the greatest pleasure for people who don’t actually know if they’re right and can’t even rule their own minds. They only believe they are representing justice when stomping on those they have deemed evil.

“Is it all right for such people to do whatever they please? Teach them what kind of monster’s tail they’ve stepped on! Teach them with your fangs!”

Plenty of solutions were available as long as Lud didn’t care how his actions appeared. He had the necessary knowledge, skills and experience. But he rejected that option.

“I refuse.”

He had been injured during the hostage incident a few days ago. Even though Marlene had been surprised at Lud’s rapid three-day recovery, an opponent who Lud would have easily slaughtered before had immobilized him for three days.

“I’m not a wolf. I’m a human being. And I’ve finally started to live like one!”

Lud had no intention of giving up on himself now that he was weakening as a soldier and enjoying it.

“You idiot!”

Genitz spat as if Lud was beyond saving.

“If you waste time like this, the past will come for you!”

“Then I’ll face it when it does.”

With determination, Lud answered Genitz’s ultimatum.

“Are you sure?”

At that moment, the figure in front of Lud changed again.

“Can you really do that?”

A girl appeared.

“You’re...”

As soon as Lud saw her face, he felt as if someone had pierced his heart with a knife of ice.

Morning arrived in Organbaelz. It was before dawn, not yet sunrise. Morning at the bakery came early.

“Well, what should I do?”

And Sven’s morning started even earlier. She was a mechanical doll, so she didn’t need to sleep. She performed physical self-maintenance while in a temporarily dormant state, but it was much shorter than human sleep.

Lud would wake up immediately before dawn. But before that, Sven was already busy with her morning tasks, such as cleaning the shop inside and out, and brewing coffee to welcome her master when he awoke. For the last few days, however, an unwelcome task was added to her list of chores.

“This gets worse every day!”

Sven faced a mountain of trash in front of the shop. It came from the protestors who were disrupting shop sales day after day. And it wasn’t just discarded trash from the protestors’ meals. Instead, they had gathered trash from all over town and scattered it around.

“Tsk! What elaborate harassment!”

If Lud saw it, he would be devastated all over again. So her morning task was to clean it away before he woke up. The trash didn’t just consist of waste paper and cardboard. Much of it was food scraps. And there were even animal

corpses such as cats and rats.

“Surely they didn’t kill these animals themselves!”

If so, they couldn’t be called believers in peace and freedom! This was first-rate harassment, but if a business serving food neglected such a mess outside its premises, it would be a health violation. Fortunately, Sven’s exceptional processing speed allowed her to efficiently clean it each day, or the protestors would probably report it and the local health department would rescind Tockerbrot’s operating permit.

“Soon they’ll start spreading around vomit and poop!”

Sven sighed, but she rapidly cleaned up the trash. In ten minutes, she had achieved a state of cleanliness that would take even a trained janitor at least an hour.

“Oh my!”

In the military, the mind is trained as well as the body. Increasing stress tolerance is necessary to stay calm and focused under extreme duress. For example, some soldiers had to eat food scattered on the floor in front of others. Bearing such humiliation produced a strong mind unaffected by emotion and capable of remaining composed.

Sven, a former weapon, wasn’t just for show. She could bear this much humiliation, but... At this rate, it’s only going to get worse. She could have easily dealt with the mob of civilians. However, her master didn’t want to remove them by force.

Should I perform a divide-and-conquer tactic and conceal it from Master? It won’t take even a week if I find out the weak point of the chief strategist, and have the group collapse from within.

Then, as Sven was mumbling to herself...

“—!!”

A scream came from inside the shop. There was no need to ask: Lud was the only one inside the shop at this hour.

“Master?!”

Sven's face paled at the thought of the protestors pulling a sneak attack. Without collecting her cleaning implements, Sven hurried back to the shop.

"Master!"

Tockerbrot wasn't big. Thanks to reconstruction and repeated extensions, however, it wasn't too small either. The living area was tiny, but Sven was so anxious that even this short distance was vexing as she headed toward Lud's bedroom. Usually, she would knock on the door and wait for permission to enter, but since this was an emergency, she skipped that step and threw open the door.

"Mary!!"

"What?"

As soon as she opened the door, she heard Lud's voice calling the name of a woman Sven didn't know as he woke with a start.

"HUFF... HUFF... HUFF... Oh... it was just a dream."

Lud had been having a nightmare. Sweat soaked his body, and he was breathing heavily.

"Um, Master?"

Lud's condition was upsetting to Sven, but the question of Mary's identity was even more disturbing.

"Oh... Sven. Sorry. Did I scare you?... Ha ha..."

Lud replied as calmly as possible and let out a dry laugh that didn't touch his eyes, out of consideration for the shocked Sven.

Sven knew he was pretending. Due to the problems over the last few days, she wondered if he had dreamed about something from his past. That made Sven question who Mary was even more. However, it wasn't the right moment to ask.

"Wow... I'm sweating like crazy. I should go outside and rinse off at the well."

Lud got out of bed, moving more slowly than usual, and walked past Sven, heading for the well behind the shop.

“Uh... Master?”

Sven knew part of Lud’s past. She remembered every single word he had said. However, there was no way she could know things he didn’t talk about or didn’t want to talk about. And Lud had never mentioned a woman named Mary.

Sven stood where she was for a moment but then realized she needed to prepare a towel for Lud, as well as a warm drink, since the season was too cold for bathing outside in the morning. Sven’s movements had less spring than usual.

An acquaintance of Master’s from long ago... Someone able to greatly upset him...

She remembered once meeting Sophia, Lud’s former senior officer. At that time, she thought Sophia was Lud’s old girlfriend, but the truth was that Sophia was more like a sister he had known since childhood. This, however, felt different.

“Oh!”

While she was distracted by her pondering, she inadvertently knocked over a sugar pot. Such clumsiness was usually unimaginable for Sven.

“Get out, you war criminal!!”

“The murderer must face judgment for his crimes!”

“Hurrah for peace! We demand freedom!”

Once again, people who supposedly loved peace and freedom were in front of Tockerbrot and raising their voices in good conscience. Lud had survived many catastrophic situations, but this still rattled him. In fact, the weight of his dream at dawn made his heart more fragile than usual.

“.....”

As he silently baked bread to line up in the storefront where there were no customers—or rather, where no customers could even enter—Lud looked sad.

“Master...”

Sven was miserable at her helplessness in the situation confronting Lud. Then she heard a voice outside.

“Are you going to a bakery like this?!”

The protestors that Lud believed were well-meaning were stopping customers still trying to enter the shop despite the turmoil over the last few days.

They surrounded the confused shoppers and repeated, “People who buy bread at a shop like this are racists!”

Most customers, facing such treatment, had no choice but to go home. However, today was a little different than usual.

“Aw, shut up! Get outta my way!!”

A man yelled thunderously.

“What...?”

Lud had been hanging his head, but now he raised it at the familiar voice.

“Hello! I’m comin’ in!”

After a moment, the owner of the voice—and two others came into the shop.

“Laurel...?”

Surprised, Lud appeared from the oven room.

Laurel was the boss of the miners at Baelz Mine in Organbaelz. Because of his dignity and the great trust the other miners placed in him, he was the real authority at the mine.

“I heard what was going on. The grub in the cafeteria has tasted like rot recently... and now I know why!”

Laurel’s age was well over fifty, but his frame was as large as Lud’s, with a thick chest and log-like arms and legs. He had the body of a man who had lived in soil and waged war against the mountain.

“I got ticked and took a petition with the miners’ signatures to the mine office this morning. I demanded they order your bread again in the future!”

“What?!”

Baelz Mine was currently one of Tockerbrot's important clients. However, deliveries had been suspended since the group outside complained to the mine.

"Don't worry. I won't abandon you," Laurel said after a snort.

"Um..."

One of the other two people with Laurel, spoke to Lud as he stood speechless.

"Lud, I spoke to people at city hall and the community association, and we're going to fight for you."

"Marlene...?"



It was Marlene, the nun from the church atop the hill. Because of her status as a woman of God, she was an important member of the community. For the past few days, she had been convincing people to take Lud's side.

"Everyone is in trouble. Because of those protestors, we can't eat your bread!"

Lud was stunned. However, he replied with bitter determination.

"No, you mustn't do that!"

Lud declined their good will.

"You know what kind of people are out there!"

The protestors had little idea of neutrality—almost none, in fact. If someone wasn't on their side, that person was their enemy. The enemy was evil, but the protestors represented justice. That was their argument.

"I can't cause the townsfolk any trouble."

After Lud spoke, a boy responded sharply from his hiding place behind Laurel.

"Knock it off, Lud!"

"You..."

It was Jacob, Lud's first friend in Organbaelz. And he was angrily glaring at Lud.

"Don't you get it? You are one of the townsfolk!"

This boy usually spoke with merry laughter, but now he sounded intensely angry.

"So get your act together and rely on us! Are you gonna let them get away with this nonsense?!"

"Hey, kid... Take it easy."

"I can't!"

Laurel tried to calm Jacob, but the boy wouldn't stop.

"Who are those people anyway?! They don't know anything about Lud! They call him a fake baker and a murderer, but they don't know anything!"

It was unusual for Jacob to shout like this. Even if he had been the one insulted, he wouldn't usually get this excited. Jacob was angrier than he would be if he were the victim because the insults were targeting his friend.

"I'll come again tomorrow, too! Who cares about those people?! I sure don't!"

"Jacob..."

Lud wanted to cry. He had established a shop in town, but had been all alone during the first year. Now people extended their hands to him as a fellow member of the community. And that made him immensely happy.

"Master, I'm so glad for you!"

Sven wanted to cry, too.

"Oh... I'm sorry, everyone."

"No, that's not the point, Lud!"

Marlene spoke exasperatedly to Lud as he hung his head.

"I started to tell you this before, but apologies aren't appropriate in this situation. In a case like this..."

The servant of God started to deliver a valuable sermon, but another obstacle arose.

"Is this the murderer's bakery?"

The people raising this fuss had finally entered the shop.

"Who are you? What are you doing in here?"

"Jacob, stop..."

Jacob was still emotional and glared at the man in front of him.

"So you're in cahoots with this war criminal, huh? Aren't you ashamed? You're Pelfian, aren't you?"

"I'm both."

Jacob's mother was Pelfian, and his father was Wiltian.

"Oh... a mongrel, huh?"

“What?!”

The protestors looked mockingly at the boy.

“Hey, you! That’s no way to talk to a kid!!”

As if he couldn’t bear to listen to them, Laurel leaned on them with his weight as an adult.

“W-What?! Are you from this town?! You’re all nuts if you’re grateful for bread from a killer!”

They flinched, but they continued hurling insults.

“Every day, we’re saying he’s a murderer and a Wiltian goon, but no one will agree with us!”

They had assumed that the townsfolk, seeing their protest, would join them and help them drive Lud from Organbaelz.

“No one in this town agrees with you people!”

Marlene shouted at them coldly.

“You’re nuts for believing everything written in a foreign magazine article full of lies! Sure, Lud’s face is shocking when you see it for the first time, but no one would ever believe he’d do such things!”

Marlene knew what kind of man Lud was. She knew very well that he used to be sad, with his body hunched over because no one would eat his bread.

“Shut your trap! He tried to kill Miroslav—a warrior for freedom!”

“No! Lud only tried to help him!”

Jacob raised his voice in anger once more at the man’s untrue claim.

“How do you know that, you brat?!”

“Because I was one of the hostages! I was a witness!”

Anyone should be able to discern which was the truth—a foreign magazine article based on hearsay or a witness who was actually present. But not the protestors.

“Ha! He is a mongrel! So it’s no surprise he speaks in Wiltia’s favor!”

These people refused to believe anything but what they wanted to believe.

“I think... something’s not right here.”

Marlene’s face registered both anger and suspicion. Although she was now a nun at the church, she had once cooperated with a terrorist group. Before that, she had been a somewhat notorious delinquent in Ponapalas, the old capital.

“If you have complaints against Wiltia, there are other ways to present them! Like going to Ponapalas! Or to Berun, the royal capital! What’s the point of ruining a rural bakery?!”

“Urgh...”

The Citizens Who Love Peace and Freedom grumbled at her quite reasonable question.

“Maybe you’ve got some other objective in mind?”

Marlene had experienced very different hardships than Lud and Sven, and she had instinctively sensed that while the protestors spouted pretty words, they had other motives inside.

“Sh-Shut up, you dogs of the authorities!”

She hit a sensitive spot, because they got violently agitated, raised their voices, and tried to forcefully change the subject.

“S-Stop... No more! Please!”

Lud couldn’t stand watching any longer, and he implored them to stop.

“W-We’re inside the shop! Inside... Please, just go home.”

As much as possible, Lud didn’t want to upset them, but if they became violent inside the shop, it was a different story. Until now, the protestors had been shouting and demonstrating on a public road, so he couldn’t prohibit their actions. Inside the shop was his private territory, so they had an obligation to listen to him.

“Ha! Oh, I get it!”

The protestors stopped for a moment, but now they smiled cruelly as they hit on a new idea.

“Then I’ll buy something. And if I pay, I’m a customer, right?”

One of the protestors pulled a few copper coins from a wallet.

It was enough to buy the cheapest bread at Tockerbrot.

“That’s...”

“What? Don’t you sell to Pelfians? Is that because you’re a proud Wiltian baker?”

They glared at Lud, who was confused.

“No, it’s not like that. W-which bread would you like?”

If the man wanted to make a purchase, Lud couldn’t refuse. Lud was afraid the man would use a few copper coins as an excuse to stay in the shop, but his true intentions were even worse.

“Here.”

Lud handed the man a croissant wrapped in a paper bag.

“Heh! I’m a customer and this is what I bought! So it’s mine, right?”

The protestors wore malicious smiles.

“Who would eat this garbage?!”

The man threw the bread to the floor and stepped on it. His feet smashed the croissant in the paper bag. And when he kept stomping, it lost its original shape altogether.

“Oh no!”

Lud knelt with an expression of dark despair. He had experienced many difficulties. People had told him, “We won’t eat bread baked by a Wiltian soldier,” and “We have no idea what’s inside your bread!”

Laurel, Marlene and Jacob were on his side now, but even they had been suspicious of him at first. But this was different. This was on a whole other level. It was a powerful and fundamental rejection of his very existence.

“Why are you crying? A big lout like you?! Disgusting!”

Lud was in tears, and they were laughing at him.

“You have no right to play the victim!”

Then they fell silent. And they weren’t the only ones. Jacob, Marlene, Laurel and everyone present had frozen.

No matter how intelligent and civilized humans become, they’re still animals with instincts that cannot be lost. And that was how they sensed a sudden change.

“You...”

Sven was emitting a hateful... No, a menacing look that wasn’t quite human. Someone much more powerful than even the strongest among them was standing before them with the clear intent to kill. It was so fierce that they felt, in the marrow of their bones, they were now prey.

“That’s enough, you!”

Sven couldn’t control herself any longer. She was going to kill them. They had tarnished, tread upon and mocked the one she loved and valued above all others. Killing them a hundred times wouldn’t be enough.

“W-What... Y-You...”

The protestors made a false show of power even in the face of her murderous rage.

“Shut up! That’s enough! No more talking!”

Sven grabbed the man’s collar. With just one punch, she could kill.

“H-Hey! Did you see? She laid hands on me! That’s assault! You saw it, right?”

The man shouted as if to say, “I’ve got you now!”

Perhaps that had been what they wanted all along. They had tried various means of provocation, so if someone even slightly touched them, they could claim they had been subjected to violence. And then they could use that to further damage Tockerbrot.

“We’ve got tons of witnesses! This is the end for you!”

They were gloating. But they didn’t understand. This was out of their hands now.

“Do whatever you want,” Sven mumbled coldly. “I’ll just kill all of you.”

“What?!”

She wouldn’t bear it any longer. The protestors had repeatedly insulted Lud. They should be thankful that dying was all that would happen to them. It didn’t matter if there were ten, one hundred, one thousand or ten thousand of them. She would kill them all.

“Now die.”

Sven tightened her fist and was about to launch it when two voices interrupted.

“Stop, Sven! You mustn’t do that!”

“Enough! If this goes any further, I cannot overlook it!”

Sven’s intention to kill eased off. Lud grasped Sven from behind.

“Stop, Sven! Stop, please!”

“.....!”

Usually, Sven would be dazed and disoriented when her beloved Lud held her, but even this didn’t stop her fierce blood thirst.

“Please... I don’t like to see you like this. Please...”

“Master...”

As Lud spoke to her, Sven finally relented. But her face was twisted and she bit her lips in frustration.

“It’s all right now.”

Lud raised his voice in relief when Sven finally stopped. However...

“She tried to kill me! She almost killed me!”

The protestors thought this was their chance and grew cocky again.

“They don’t know when to stop...”

Disgusted, Jacob insulted them, but the owner of the other voice interrupted.

“I told you to stop!”

The protestors never listened to anyone, but when this woman spoke, they stopped for the first time.

“You...?”

A woman was standing in the entrance to the shop. She was dignified and beautiful, with an aura that would freeze any who saw her, as if she was an ice sculpture blessed with the breath of life.

Indeed, Lud froze at the sight of her face. He looked as if he had seen something he couldn’t believe. His face was more astonished than if he had seen a ghost.

“Mary...”

Lud mumbled in amazement and the woman, Mary Ville Mehl, responded.

“So you finally recognized me?”



Chapter 4: A Woman’s Pride

There were many special operations units in Wiltia. The military strictly controlled some, while others were effectively private forces under the command of high officials. Apuvea, the unit that Jacob’s father Blitzdonner joined, was an example of the former, and the Werewolves that Lud had belonged to were an example of the latter. However, many other units existed. There were so many that no one could keep track of them all.

Among them was the Sicherheitsdienst, or the Security Department. For external appearances, it was in charge of security for every ministry and agency in the Principality of Wiltia. However, its reach extended beyond the royal capital to all of Wiltia, including Pelfe and the colonies. Thus, it was highly effective at collecting information. It was said that an incident in the morning on the other side of the world would reach the chief director at the Security Department in the royal capital by noon.

Heinrich Hitzinger, the chief director of the Security Department, was known as the “ears” of Wiltia, and he had already received a report about the uproar at Tockerbrot, with the photograph of a woman attached.

“Chief Director, who is that woman?” Hitzinger’s subordinate asked.

“Oh, she is currently under scrutiny by the Security Department. Her name is Mary Ville Mehl.”

Hitzinger’s face was vaguely reminiscent of a reptile. His emotions were hard to guess, so it was difficult to judge whether he was glowering or smiling.

“But she is better known under her other name. Have you heard of Mary Clarissa?”

“Yes, I think I know that name from somewhere...”

The subordinate put a finger to his chin, but he couldn’t come up with it.

“She is a novelist in Greyten. I understand she is quite popular.”

“Oh, that’s right! I knew I’d heard that name!”

Hitzinger’s subordinate clapped his hands in satisfaction.

Although Mary Clarissa was a new writer, her impressive accomplishments had earned praise across the continent of Europea, and translations of her books lined the shelves at Wiltian bookstores.

“She also has a day job. She is a well-known international journalist writing under her real name, Mary Ville Mehl. Mary Clarissa is her pen name.”

Pen names aren’t like the false identities secret agents use. Using a pen name is customary in the publishing world.

“She is an outstanding journalist. Did you hear of the romantic scandal that rocked Greyten’s senate a few years ago?”

“Well, Greyten has had so many of those! Let’s see... Is it the one involving an opposition senator?”

“Yes, that’s the one.”

It had come to light that a leader of the prominent opposition party had a lover. The leader was unmarried, so it wouldn’t normally have gone any further than a romantic account of the senator’s private life. Nonetheless, it had become a problem. That was because the senator and his lover were both men.

“A same-sex romantic scandal... Greyten is a strict nation. Not long ago, they might have driven him from public office. As it was, the dailies made him the object of ridicule and he almost had to leave politics.”

However, Mary Ville had turned the situation around. In her articles, she made the counterargument that sexual orientation was irrelevant to political acumen, so it was contemptible to accuse a politician regarding such a matter of utmost privacy.

She also called for a coalition of women’s rights groups, minority communities and parties of opposition to launch a massive protest campaign. She helped coalesce public opinion in support of the senator’s right to privacy in his sexual preference, and as the coup de grâce, she revealed that the source publicizing the scandal came from the ruling party.

This threw the senate into an uproar, and before the ruling party knew what hit them, they had gone from casting accusations to weathering condemnation, and it appeared that power would change hands with the next general election.

“That’s some impressive shaping of public opinion! I’d like to scout her for our department!”

“If she were Wiltian, I would have done it myself.”

Hitzinger’s reply to his subordinate’s light tone was more than half serious.

“Oh, right... Greyten is an enemy nation.”

The subordinate neglected to say “former” enemy nation. Neither the Wiltian military nor the government had openly acknowledged it, but they still saw their opponents during the Great War, nations like Greyten and Filbarneu, as enemies.

“And she has yet another face.”

“Oh, she has many faces... like a chimera.”

The chimera was an imaginary magical beast with the heads of a lion, goat and dragon.

“Her third face is that of a lawyer. We might say that is her true nature.”

“I see, I see, I see... So that’s why she’s involved with that little mob!”

“Correct.”

The subordinate finally understood why the photo of a foreign woman was in the office of the chief director of the Security Department, which was actually an intelligence agency.

“I heard that this woman wants to reveal the truth behind Lapchuricka to the public.”

“I see... So that’s why she’s using the Silver Wolf.”

They talked casually about the misfortunes of the former national hero.

“She is a public figure so it would be complicated to have her eliminated. Besides, she may have already taken that into account.”

If the nation so desired, it could easily disregard an individual's rights. However, that only applied to average citizens. If they carelessly interfered with someone of international renown, it would be newsworthy, no matter what methods they employed.

Even if they didn't act, she could claim a secret Wiltian intelligence agency was watching her, and that would be enough to prevent them from action. A conspiracy theory could serve as an impenetrable shield, depending on how it was used.

"Apparently, Elvin observed her some time ago but couldn't get his hands on her."

Elvin was a marshal in the Wiltian regular army. He was the head of the military government and the most senior person on the organizational chart to which Sophia and Lud had once belonged.

"She outsmarted that old fox, huh? Impressive!"

Hitzinger's tone suggested it was indeed a pity that he couldn't use her for his own purposes.

"I wish she were not from Haugen."

Haugen was the nation where Lapchuricka was located before it disappeared.

"Handle the matter with due diligence, Belger," Hitzinger said to his subordinate.

At the Security Department, there were no detailed orders. After briefing, the department's members knew how to thoroughly perform their duties for the nation.

Hitzinger's subordinates had been trained and were capable of acting accordingly. All the chief director had to do was indicate a mission. He granted authority to use the necessary personnel and resources however his subordinate desired.

"Yes, Sir!"

After a bow, Belger left the room.

"Tch... She is trying to expose what His Lordship carefully sealed! I really

despise minorities!”

Hitzinger mumbled and removed a framed photograph from his desk drawer. It showed several high-ranking military officers. He was among them. And the man standing in the middle was the group’s leader.

“Do not worry, Lord Genitz. We will carry out your will.”

Night fell in Organbaelz.

After the commotion was over, the group at Tockerbrot closed the shop and was taking a rest.

“Let’s see... So much has happened!”

It was Jacob, the youngest, who spoke.

“You’re right. So much has happened that I can’t sort it out in my head.”

Marlene, the nun from the church atop the hill, agreed.

Laurel, the miners’ leader, had already gone to work the night shift at the mine. That left two more inside the shop.

“.....”

Lud had remained silent with his head lowered, and now his already sullen face tensed further.

“.....”

The waitress Sven stared blankly.

“At least we’re in better shape than those two!”

“Yeah, I guess so!”

Neither Jacob nor Marlene could find anything to say to them.

The incident had happened a couple of hours ago...

“Mary...”

Lud froze upon seeing Mary Ville Mehl appear at Tockerbrot. He had never thought such a reunion was possible, but here she was.

“Tee hee...”

Wearing a smirk, Mary Ville returned a piercing look.

“You’re...”

Sven recognized the woman’s voice. To be precise, she had located a matching voice profile in her memory’s audio data.

Human voices differ according to the muscles, organs and bone structures that produce them. People have a voice print the way they have fingerprints. And no two people have the exact same print.

“Are you... Mary?”

“Ohhh!”

Mary Ville looked surprised at Sven’s question.

“Sven... you noticed. I’m surprised.”

It wasn’t the first time for Mary Ville and the people at Tockerbrot to meet. Last year, around the time of the Holy Festival, Mary Ville met them while using her pen name and wearing a disguise.

“I was confident in my disguise. Oh well, at least the shop owner didn’t notice.”

Mary Ville’s smile disappeared and her eyes shot daggers at Lud.

“You’re... alive?”

“Do you wish I were dead?”

Mary Ville responded bitterly to Lud’s question, which he asked in a trembling voice.

“It’s understandable you didn’t recognize me. After all, I was already dead to you, you self-centered jerk!”

“Ulp...”

Unable to respond, Lud simply lowered his head.

“Ahem...”

Finally, the protestors—flustered and looking as if they had forgotten where

they were—spoke to get Mary Ville's attention.

"Get lost."

She issued her command without even turning to look at them.

"Uh, but..."

"You already accomplished your goal, didn't you? If you do anything else, it'll cause problems."

She glanced at them over her shoulder. That was enough to make the protestors cringe like puppies, even though they had behaved with such brash insolence toward Lud and the others.

"B-But... that woman..."

Dissatisfied, one of the men—the one Sven had angrily grabbed—argued back.

"Dust."

"Huh?"

"You've got dust on your clothes."

"What...?"

The man was confused when Mary Ville pointed at his collar.

"Sven... You were just trying to get that dust off him, right?"

"Huh...?"

"I said... right?"

Mary Ville repeated her question to Sven, who was stupefied.

"So it was your mistake. You're lucky she didn't get violent with you."

"W-What're you talkin' about?! She—"

"Hunh?"

The man continued to argue, but Mary Ville hit him with a glare so fierce there was almost an audible metallic ka-slam!

"Eep!!"

“Let me ask you something. Did you do anything that would cause the bakery staff, especially this girl, to hit you?”

“But that was—”

The man raised a cry but faltered and glanced aside.

“I told you to get lost. You’ve already overstepped yourself, and I’m from a baker’s family, so I find that most upsetting.”

Mary Ville apparently had been watching everything the man had done. After paying, he had stepped on the bread baked by Tockerbrot’s owner, and right in front of him.

“Urgh! All right... fine!”

Defeated, the man grudgingly gave in and left the shop along with the other protestors.

“Impressive work, Miss!”

“This is all so... surprising!”

Jacob and Marlene were amazed at how Mary Ville had overpowered the group with mere words—the very group that had plagued Tockerbrot for days.

“Oh, the nun... We’ve met before.”

“Y-Yes... that’s right!”

Marlene had met Mary Ville in her role as Mary Clarissa.

“Thank you for your help that time.”

Mary had helped someone who was like a sister to Marlene.

“No problem. I wanted to help.”

“Oh... you did?”

Mary answered naturally and from the bottom of her heart that she didn’t require any thanks.

“She’s good-looking and she’s got good character! Wow! What gives, Lud? You know someone like her?! Then you should have introduced me sooner!”

“Uh... yeah.”

“Lud?”

Instead of asking Jacob why a ten-year-old boy would need such an introduction, Lud looked more upset.

“So, um... how do you and Lud know each other?”

Jacob asked Mary because he sensed from Lud’s manner that something wasn’t right.

“We’re old acquaintances. We were both older than you are now, but we were still children.”

As she spoke, Mary Ville pulled a photograph from her breast pocket. Standing in the picture were a boy and a girl still thirteen or fourteen years old, along with a man past middle age.

“—?!”

At the sight of it, Lud’s face stiffened once more.

“Is this girl... you?”

“Yes.”

“You were even pretty as a child! Not at all like Milly! Even though she’s about the same age as you in this photo!”

Without noticing Lud’s demeanor, Jacob continued to chatter away as he looked at the photograph. He pointed at the aging man.

“This old guy... Is he actually old? He...”

“That’s my grandfather.”

“Oh...”

Then Jacob pointed at the boy on the left and said, “And who’s this boy with the foolish grin? He’s got decent features, but something tells me I wouldn’t want to get too close to him.”

“Then you’re a good judge of character.”

“What?”

After her comment, Mary Ville pointed at Lud.

“It’s him. About eight years ago.”

“Huh?!”

After hearing this, Jacob froze in surprise.

“Um... what?!”

A moment later, he erupted.

“This kid is him?! And he’s this kid?! Nuh-uh, nuh-uh, nuh-uh! That’s impossible!!”

He pointed at the boy in the picture and the muscled man before him, back and forth, repeatedly shouting, “No way!!”

Lud was uncomfortable as he responded.

“Well, um... I had a growth spurt.”

“That was one heck of a growth spurt!”

Jacob immediately interrupted.

“Even your bone structure has changed. You don’t look like the same person!”

Unless told, not many people would recognize Lud as the boy in the photo.

“To be honest, at first I thought the two just happened to have the same name.”

Mary Ville put her hand on her forehead and mumbled in tones expressing a thousand feelings.

“But when I heard the name of the shop, I knew there was no mistake.”

However, her voice immediately returned to its former tone. It was cold and heavy, containing depths of fury.

“Hey...”

Slowly, she drew near Lud and whispered in his ear so softly that only he could hear.

“Isn’t it in excessively poor taste to name your bakery after a man you killed?”

“—!!”

Lud's face tensed. He looked more desperate than he would have if spears had pierced his body.

"Mary... I was..."

"Don't say my name so easily!"

Lud spluttered as if begging, but Mary Ville rebuffed him loudly.

"Don't get the wrong idea. I didn't come here to save you. I have better things to do."

After regaining control of her breathing, she presented her request to Lud.

"I want you to appear in court."

Back in the present...

"So that lady... Mary Ville... Is she a lawyer?"

"To be precise, she's also a lawyer."

Marlene slightly corrected Jacob.

"No wonder she knew so much about the law. But I was surprised to hear about the trial."

Mary Ville had asked Lud to testify at Miroslav's trial for the hostage incident at the shop a few days ago.

"Come to think of it... Lud, you did tell Miroslav you would testify when the case went to court."

Jacob remembered their conversation at the shop that day.

"Yeah..."

Lud finally opened his reluctant mouth. As usual, his face was scary. For Lud, however, this may have been the darkest and most pained look he had ever worn.

"Lud... Um, what is your relationship with Mary Ville?"

"Uh..."

"Jacob, shouldn't you be going home? The sun is going to set soon."

Lud couldn’t find the words to explain, so Marlene spoke instead.

“Huh? But...”

“Charlotte will be worried if you come home late.”

“Okay...”

The boy had no choice but to leave without an answer to his question. Marlene checked once more that the CLOSED sign was hanging on the door and turned to Lud.

“Is she a survivor of Lapchuricka?”

“Yes. I had no idea she was still alive.”

Her name was Mary Ville Mehl and she was the granddaughter of the owner of a tiny bakery in Lapchuricka, a small town in Haugen that no longer existed. The name of the shop’s owner was Tocker Mehl. And the name of his shop was Tockerbrot.

“But I searched for her. I wanted to find her body and bury her at least.”

Lud had been on a mission to Lapchuricka that involved collecting information and weakening an anti-Wiltian resistance group’s base. The Kingdom of Haugen, which shared a border with Wiltia, had publicly declared neutrality, but it was secretly communicating with Filbarneu, Wiltia’s enemy, and using guerrilla tactics to attack Wiltia. The guerrillas didn’t wear military uniforms and hid among the civilian population. Wiltia needed to eliminate them immediately.

“I crushed many resistance plots.”

Some had planned arson in order to take advantage of the resulting confusion and commit sabotage, but others preferred to act nonviolently, such as printing an underground newspaper critical of Wiltia and raising awareness among Haugenites. Lud had destroyed such plots through the methods he was reminded of in his dream.

“To perform secret missions, it was necessary to blend in with the townsfolk and create a personality. For that reason, I became an employee at her grandfather’s... at Mr. Tocker’s shop.”

Lud had played the part of a bright and earnest baker's apprentice so he wouldn't look suspicious. The owner, Mr. Tocker, had grown fond of Lud and treated him like family.

"On shop holidays, it was my job to carry Mr. Tocker home when he drank too much and passed out."

A girl about Lud's age also worked at the shop. She was a cheerful girl, full of laughter.

"Wiltia... No, I destroyed it all..."

Based on reports from Lud and other undercover agents, Wiltia determined that eliminating just the guerillas in Lapchuricka would be impossible, so it drafted an operation for destroying the whole town, killing everyone, including noncombatants. And it wouldn't stop there. It would use large railway artillery and new incendiary grenades to completely erase the town from the face of the earth.

"The first bombardment struck the shop and it disappeared without a trace."

By age twelve, after losing his parents to war and undergoing training as a type-three soldier to be a future combatant, Lud had acquired the skills for murder. Furthermore, he had been approved to join the special ops unit known as the Werewolves. He had been a cold-hearted undercover operative who deceived others.

"My feelings froze without me noticing. I was a mere tool... I believed I was an implement for murder."

He snuck into the space inside people's minds, used a false smile and charm to earn their trust, took what he needed, exploited it, and cast it aside.

"But I was wrong. I cared about that place. I didn't realize it myself, but... I had betrayed Mr. Tocker and Mary!"

After everything was over, when there was no going back, Lud finally realized what he had done. He had shouted, wept, and clawed his body, suffering so intensely that he vomited. For a time, he felt like a dead man. Genitz had trusted him, but he finally decided that Lud was useless and let him quit the Werewolves.

“Ever since that day, I haven’t been able to smile. I try, but...”

He recalled that day. Then he remembered Mary’s face, the woman he just met again after eight years.

“It seems the same is true for her. No... of course it is.”

Her eyes had been as cold as ice. There wasn’t any trace of the smile she had once shown Lud. Which was understandable.

Mr. Tocker and Mary had been like family to him. It must have been the same for her. How had she felt? She had lost her family and her home, survived Hell, and wandered alone. Then, by accident, she had learned Lud’s name. And she learned that the boy she had thought of as family was a Wiltian soldier.

“It’s obvious that to her I’m not someone to smile at!”

Lud had hoped she was alive, but he didn’t think there was any way that could be true. And that had tripped him up. He hadn’t recognized her when she appeared before him as Mary Clarissa. And that must have been yet another insult to her.

“Master, I’m sorry to be rude, but there’s no time for sulking.”

Sven had kept silent, but now she spoke with determination.

“It’s like Mary Ville said. The situation is changing for the better!”

The woman had asked Lud to appear in court to testify in Miroslav’s case. And, should he cooperate, she had proposed conditions for solving the issues currently bothering Lud.

“It appears she has influence over those people trying to ruin our shop.”

They would otherwise continue their protest forever until Lud’s shop fell to pieces. Mary Ville had promised Lud that if he appeared in court and testified in Miroslav’s favor, she would make them leave.

She had told him, “I don’t want you to help me for free, because I would hate to be in your debt!”

“So we’ve got to go! There’s no other way!”

Sven didn’t sound like her usual self. She claimed that her very existence was

for Lud alone. And she would not hesitate to die for him. She obeyed his orders without fail, never doing anything he wouldn't like. That was how it was supposed to be.

But now, she encouraged Lud to grant Mary's request, which would force him to confront his painful past. Sven herself was unaware of why she spoke so enthusiastically. One thing was certain: she felt a fierce resentment. Mary's past evoked pity. Sven could understand why she held a grudge against Lud. Still, Sven didn't want to run from a woman so hostile to her beloved.

Sven was jealous. And she was filled with a woman's pride.

A few days later...

Lud and Sven arrived in Ponapalas, the former capital of Pelfe. It was their second visit to the city. They were there before during the airship incident, but they hadn't been able to do any sightseeing because the cleanup afterward had dragged on. They wouldn't have any leisure time during this visit either. They went directly to the courthouse where Miroslav's case was held.

"It's strange. Wouldn't a lawyer or prosecutor normally want to hear my testimony beforehand?"

It was Lud's first time testifying in court, and he was confused. They entered the building and were shown to a sitting area adjacent to the courtroom. An official told them to wait until it was their turn and then left.

"What we need to do is... Um... Don't we just have to prove Miroslav is a person of good character and not a vicious criminal?"

Sven didn't know the details either. Mary Ville had told them to come and then sent an explanatory letter, but she hadn't shown her face again.

"What is she thinking?!"

Sven knew Mary Ville nursed fierce resentment against Lud. However, she was relying on Lud to give the defense an advantage when it came to the decision in Miroslav's case. That was the obvious explanation. But she couldn't help thinking there was something else behind all this.

“Lud Langart, please enter the court.”

While they were discussing the situation, the official reappeared and requested Lud’s entrance.

“But... no accompanying persons, please.”

Sven tried to enter the court with Lud, but the official stopped her.

“Why not?”

“Only Lud Langart applied to be a witness.”

The official answered in the prim way characteristic of governmental functionaries.

“I will accompany him.”

However, Sven wouldn’t budge.

“I am Master Lud Langart’s servant. I must not leave his side for a second.”

“But... the application form...”

“That’s your problem, isn’t it? I guess we’ll leave then. And the responsibility is yours!”

“What?!”

The official winced under Sven’s barrage.

Government employees put the rules above all else. It was only natural, since it was their duty. But this was also why they hated liability for anything. In fact, they dreaded it.

“It’s probably just a mistake in the documentation and the fault of whoever processed the application. But if we leave now, it would throw the trial into confusion and some would hold you responsible. So what’s it gonna be?”

“Well, um...”

Without explicitly stating it, Sven made it clear that the official could only avoid blame by doing as she asked.

“Well then, we’re outta here. Let’s go, Master!”

At Sven’s tone, which both pulled and pushed, the official spoke up in a panic.

“Very well! It was our mistake! We’ll correct the document. Please, both of you, do come in!”

“Much obliged.”

Sven grinned as she and Lud stepped into court.

There were more spectators in the courtroom than they expected. In fact, every seat was taken. Everything else, however, was just as they imagined. The judge was seated front and center. The prosecutor was in front of him on the left, and the defendant’s position, where Mary sat, was on the right.

“Ahem... Who might this be?”

The judge inquired about Sven’s identity, since her name wasn’t in the documents.

“I am this man’s assistant. Please, don’t mind me.”

“Harrumph... Very well.”

People are quick to agree with someone who speaks without hesitation. Even if the statement sounds unlikely, people will supply a reason for why it’s true. It was a technique used by swindlers, so using it in court was questionable.

“The witness will now take the oath.”

At the judge’s request, Lud swore to tell nothing but the truth. And it was more than an oath. It confirmed that it would be a crime for him to give false testimony.

“Well, Mr. Langart...”

After Lud finished the oath, Mary Ville began her questioning.

“Uh... where’s Miroslav?” Lud said.

“Please, Mr. Langart, only speak in response to my questions. That’s how a trial works.”

“Um... s-sorry.”

Lud’s massive form withered the moment she spoke. He was like a frog caught in a snake’s stare. No, he was cowering without even being glared at.

“I’ve heard you are a former Wiltian soldier. When did you join the military and when did you leave?”

“I joined in Year 914 of the European Calendar, and I left in April of 919.”

“Oh... you didn’t join in 911?”

“Well...”

“Never mind.”

Lud’s military career actually began in Year 911 when he was thirteen years old. However, his time as a type-three soldier and a young boy in special ops was classified. Publicly, he joined the military at age sixteen. This was the minimum age to enter the military according to Wiltia’s criteria.

This woman... How deeply has she investigated Master? Sven’s gaze turned slightly harsh. Mary Ville’s insinuation wasn’t just sarcasm. With her first question, she indicated that she knew everything about Lud.

“So you quit the military two years ago... Hmm... To be exact, it was one year and ten months ago, right?”

“Y-Yes...”

Lud was confused. Why was she asking about his military history? Wasn’t he here to talk about Miroslav?

“I’ve also heard you’re a former Hunter Unit pilot. Let’s see... You were the ace pilot known as the Silver Wolf. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

As soon as Lud answered, a murmur ran through the public gallery.

“Um, why are you asking about these things?”

“Just answer the question, please.”

Lud wasn’t proud of his past deeds, so having them raised in front of other people was very uncomfortable. And because he didn’t understand Mary Ville’s intentions, he was more confused.

“As a Hunter Unit pilot, did you only operate weapons, or have you received other combat training?”

“I’ve received training in hand-to-hand combat, the use of guns and knives, and general combat training.”

Hunter Unit tactics wielded a single soldier like a whole company. However, this only succeeded when that soldier was piloting the Hunter Unit. If one machine became immobile, the pilot would have to return alone through enemy territory. Thus, all Hunter Unit pilots were expected to have greater combat abilities than regular infantry.

“I see. Then if you were bare-handed, could you defeat a civilian bearing a firearm?”

“That depends on the situation.”

That was the only possible answer Lud could give to Mary Ville’s question. However...

“—!”

“?!”

Mary Ville’s eyes radiated menace. She pulled a fountain pen from her breast pocket and unexpectedly flung it at Lud’s face.

“What the heck?!” Sven cried out.

Without a sound, Lud stopped the fountain pen with one hand before it stabbed his eye. Loud cheers rose from the gallery.

“Your Honor! I object!”

The prosecutor couldn’t let this go and protested.

“Defense Counsel, what is the meaning of this?”

Even raising one’s voice was forbidden in court. Mary Ville’s reckless action was one step away from contempt of court.

“I beg your forgiveness. However, my intention was to demonstrate for the court that while Lud Langart is no longer in the military, his physical abilities remain high—certainly much higher than most civilians!”

Mary Ville declared this to the judge and gallery as if it resolved everything.

“Do you understand? It is clear that the defendant Miroslav is incapable of

securing, occupying, and holding the shop of a man like Lud Langart."

Lud saw Mary Ville flash a grin. It looked like a hound's grin when its prey is caught in its trap. By forcing Lud to defend against a sudden attack, Mary Ville had shown Lud's great physical prowess and ability to respond to a crisis.

"Lud was very capable of resisting the defendant. And yet he didn't do so... Why is that? Because he was enjoying himself! Just like the article states... could it be that Lud Langart was toying with Miroslav?!"

Mary Ville held a copy of the magazine Weekly Global News in Greytenese.

Oh no!

When she saw that, Sven mentally clucked her tongue in dismay.

The same magazine was open in front of the judge. And chances were a Wiltian translation accompanied it. Not only that, but Sven could see the same magazine in the spectators' hands. Her goal isn't to win sympathy for Miroslav! It's to entrap Master! Oh no!

"N-No! Mary, I didn't—"

"My name is Mary Ville Mehl, but you must call me Counselor Mehl, Mr. Langart!"

Mary Ville fired back at Lud, her eyes and voice frigid.

"So it's not true? Are you saying everything in this magazine is a fabrication?"

"No, but—"

"Are you not Wiltian? Are you not a former soldier? And were you not involved in an indiscriminate massacre executed by the military?!"

"You—!!"

Lud finally realized Mary Ville's true intentions. Her goal wasn't merely entrapping him. Here, before the court, she was going to do something astounding.

Chapter 5: That Feeling Is Rage

In Berun, the royal capital, national embassies stood side by side around the palace, interspersed with noble mansions. The largest embassy was for Yamato, an island nation in the east and the foremost of Wiltia's allies. It was a country that belonged to the Aesia continent, with a very different cultural identity than Wiltia's continent of Europea.

The hardest thing about living in a foreign country isn't the language barrier or differences in custom. It's the food.

"Well, it finally came, Amaki."

Yamamoto was the ambassador from Yamato. After opening a wooden crate that had arrived from home, he smiled broadly at the food packed inside.

Differences in the food culture from one continent to the next can be very distinct. The people of the nation of Yamato rarely ate meat until half a century ago for religious reasons. The meals on the continent of Europea, with its meat-heavy food culture, didn't agree with the people of Yamato, but that was a problem regardless of whether they were tasty or not. Once every few days might be fine, but three times a day was too much meat.

"There! Soy sauce, miso, mirin... Oh! And pickled plum and rice! Even the type of rice is different here."

Yamamoto was immensely pleased. He had asked to have foodstuffs shipped to the embassy, but it was expensive and took a long time, and they received limited amounts. Thus, this supply, delivered once every two months, was the only comfort the embassy staff members had.

"Oh... What's the matter, Amaki?"

Suzuka Amaki usually claimed dibs on seaweed, dried bonito, and white miso, since she was picky about soup stock.

"What a mess..."

Suzuka mumbled in the official language of Wiltia, not the language of Yamato. She held a newspaper published by a progressive company in Wiltia.

“You just mumbled to yourself in Wiltian. You must really be assimilating to life here!”

Yamamoto spoke again, this time in Wiltian with an accent, instead of his mother tongue.

“Sorry, Ambassador. But I just ran across some intriguing news.”

Suzuka quickly switched back to the language of Yamato.

“What is it?”

Yamamoto was curious to know what interested Suzuka, who wielded budo and was even called the Yamato Embassy’s ultimate weapon.

“It says Miroslav is on trial in the Pelfe area.”

“Miroslav... Oh, the last of the terrorists who caused the disturbance that resulted in martial law?”

“Yes. According to our research, he was a small time crook—obviously just a thug hired for local use.”

Not all jobs at the embassy entailed official foreign diplomacy. The staff also obtained information about the host country and researched behind-the-scenes, outside regular procedures, so their home country would be able to negotiate to its benefit.

“Usually, this would amount to nothing more than a small time crook living in poverty who turned to crime and accidentally got involved with terrorists.”

But not this time.

“Do you think the Peace Faith is involved?” Yamato asked.

“Yes.”

Suzuka responded with a sigh.

The Peace Faith engaged in excessive and aggressive activities across borders. They would do anything for peace and freedom, even kill. They sometimes engaged in large-scale suicide missions involving civilians. Each nation struggled

to handle the group and prevent its terrorist activities.

“And the August Federation is behind them.”

The August Federation was a large nation to the north that Wiltia and Yamato had fought against during the Great War. It had once been a monarchy, but a revolution had ended in the death of its royalty and the establishment of a new nation with the mandate of equality for all workers.

The government wasn’t just for show. With enormous force, August had pushed south, claiming to be liberators as they invaded one country after another and then absorbed them into the federation. If August hadn’t lost the Great European War, its momentum would have carried it further to swallow the entire eastern half of the continent.

“They use extremist ideologues to force enemy nations to reduce arms, renounce resistance in the name of peace, and welcome the aggressors as liberators.”

A few months ago, Suzuka had witnessed their methods at the officer’s school she had infiltrated. If such a situation existed at an organization with military ties, then there was no way to determine how thoroughly the group had permeated the civilian population.

“In recent years, it has become a problem in Yamato, too. On the surface, its members mix with the upstanding citizens. They’re a troublesome bunch.”

Yamamoto sighed, too.

“It seems they’ve set their eyes on Miroslav. By presenting him as a revolutionary who resisted bravely until the end, they’re trying to sow distrust among Pelfians against the Wiltian government for treating him like a criminal.”

Even if Miroslav received the appropriate punishment for real criminal acts, the Peace Faith would spin it as tyranny and oppression. Nonetheless, Wiltia couldn’t give him special treatment. Wiltia had a constitutional government, so making such an exception would be contrary to the rule of law.

“So Wiltia’s in a bind. Is that what’s bothering you so much?”

“No. I’m concerned about the man they’re using.”

The article Suzuka was reading said a former soldier had been brought from Organbaelz to testify. And that man was, of course, the former soldier Lud Langart.

“I think the defense is trying to catch a bigger fish.”

The newspaper had a photo of Mary Ville Mehl, an international lawyer invited from Greyten.

“I’ve seen her on lists of suspicious individuals requiring caution.”

Suzuka knew Mary Ville’s home country was Haugen.

“She’s trying to shift the focus onto the authenticity of the article in Weekly Global News.”

“You mean the false article?”

“Yes, it’s false. But it accidentally hit upon some truth.”

She was referring to Lud’s career and the massacre of Lapchuricka, which Wiltia had shrouded in absolute secrecy.

Dolly Anastasia, the author of the article, must have dreamt up the cruelest military operation she could imagine. Usually, pure guesswork wouldn’t hit the mark. However, with the insanity of war, reality can take on a hallucinatory appearance.

“The slaughter of Lapchuricka was supposedly just regular combat, but because anti-government guerrillas resisted, sabotage incurred civilian casualties. That was how they spun it anyway.”

After the war, the monarchy was dismantled for the reestablishment of Haugen as a republic. Haugen lost its military but was allowed a secondary police force just barely sufficient to maintain public safety. And the Wiltian military had stationed itself in Haugen, ostensibly for national defense. Given the circumstances, Wiltia could twist historical fact as it chose.

“Since Haugen was one of the losing nations in the Great War, it was too cowed to insist on maintaining an independent government. But Mary Ville is trying to turn that around.”

The trial was in Pelfe, but Pelfe was now a Wiltian territory. If Mary Ville could

make Langart admit the magazine article was true in court...

“A slaughter took place, Wiltia covered it up, and Langart is the evidence. Mary Ville is capable of getting an admission from Wiltia, and if that happens, how do you suppose the international community will react? At the very least, the Peace Faith’s ranks will swell.”

“What an incredible woman! I can feel her tenacity. How many in our own country would fight so hard for their homeland?”

Yamamoto exclaimed in amazement at Suzuka’s prediction. Mary Ville Mehl was trying to rock the world’s largest nation all by herself and without any weapons.

“But is that her only motive?”

Suzuka mumbled again. Without noticing, she had spoken in Wiltian.

“I sense something bigger going on, but I can’t put my finger on it.”

It was hard for Suzuka to judge whether that feeling was a woman’s intuition —or just a worrywart’s.

“Objection!”

A loud voice echoed inside the court.

“I object, Your Honor!”

It was Sven who was speaking.

“You object? But aren’t you just Mr. Langart’s assistant?”

The judge was taken aback by Sven’s confident declaration.

“Indeed, I am Lud Langart’s faithful servant! And I was inside the shop during the matter in question!”

“Really...?”

The judge appeared to take an interest when Sven announced she had witnessed the hostage incident.

“Sven... You are in a court of law, so lying is a crime. The only people in the

shop were Lud Langart, and the boy and girl he forced to slave away for him. It's all there in the preliminary report."

Mary Ville was quick to contradict Sven.

"I might say the same thing! Have you read the report thoroughly? I was inside the shop when Miroslav fired the gun. Besides, Master doesn't make Milly and Jacob work! He pays them proper wages and treats them according to labor laws."

Sven corrected Mary Ville's false statements about Lud that she tried to slip in as established fact.

"I carried Master outside and requested help, so there should be lots of witnesses!"

"Indeed... In the report, it says a staff member carried Lud Langart outside."

The judge on the bench confirmed that this was in the report.

"Hmm? You carried him?"

"Yes. Is that a problem?"

"Well..."

Sven looked like a small girl. But Lud was so big that even a large adult would have trouble carrying him. It was hard to imagine that Sven had carried him on her back.

"Humf!"

"Wow!!"

Sven sensed the judge's doubt, so she lifted the long prosecutor's table. She picked up the large table, weighing over fifty kilograms, with one arm.

"I'm confident I've got the brawn!"

"Yes... indeed."

The judge blanched in shock. The spectators in the public gallery were too surprised to make a sound.

"Wh-Who is this girl?!"

Sven’s action had silenced even the icy Mary Ville. It was fatal to even slightly lose the initiative in a debate. And Sven wasn’t going to miss her chance to strike.

“You fail to see the most important point. Or rather, perhaps you tried not to see it from the beginning—or even to purposely divert attention from it!”

“What are you driving at?”

“Only one bullet was fired that day, and that bullet struck my master Lud Langart in the abdomen. According to the article, Master snatched away the gun and tried to kill Miroslav. How is it, then, that the killer was the one who got shot?”

“That’s simple. His victim fought back. Pitiful, isn’t it?”

“Oh my...”

Mary Ville countered Sven’s argument, but Sven grinned. Sven’s expression wasn’t like a hound’s when it has cornered prey. It was the face of a wise wolf, spying a trap and using it for a counterstrike.

“Isn’t that contradictory? Just now, you insisted that Master is highly skilled in combat and could easily suppress a normal person with a gun!”

“Agh!”

Mary Ville had noticed her mistake, but it was too late.

“It’s a little... it’s very hard to imagine an average person wrestling a gun from such a formidable opponent and springing a counterattack.”

“You never know! Desperate resistance by someone in danger just might succeed!”

“Yes, it’s possible.”

Mary Ville attempted a counterblow, but Sven was unshaken.

“Yes. You never know. The matter is unclear, and if it isn’t clear, there’s insufficient information for making a decision but enough to doubt the reliability of the article.”

If the grounds for an opponent’s argument are as inflexible as iron, then a

single crack can make it break. Mary Ville was all too aware of this, so she ground her back teeth at Sven's rejoinder.

"In the first place, this article is filled with questionable facts! A bank robber just happened to show up in Organbaelz, and he just happened to break into our shop, and he just happened to take Master hostage, and Master just happened to be a former soldier, and he just happened to be a former special ops agent, and he just happened to have been involved in a secret massacre... Isn't there a whole lot of happenstance here?"

The truth can be the result of many chance occurrences, but as the saying goes, truth is stranger than fiction, so sometimes reality is what sounds least plausible.

Sven now used that idea to cast the situation in a new light.

"Such a series of chance factors strains credibility. If this were a work of fiction, the readers might forgive it but the editor certainly wouldn't! And I would doubt the novelist's senses! Which reminds me..."

Sven donned an unbelievably wicked grin as she spoke to Mary Ville.

"You... Aren't you a novelist? As a pro, what do you make of that?"

"Whah?!"

Mary Ville's temples twitched.

Sven was a humanoid Hunter Unit. Her technology was developed for the purpose of public intelligence operations. She could infiltrate enemies without arousing suspicion, get them to like her, and then probe their secrets. Her likable, appealing personality and attitude had been programmed into her thought processes and movement. And Sven had just applied this to provoke, annoy and anger her adversary.

In a debate, the person who gets hotheaded will lose.

That's what Sven was gunning for.

"....."

Mary Ville was very close to losing her cool. Sven was sure of it. However, Mary Ville was tougher than Sven imagined.

“Fwooooooo!!!”

Suddenly, Mary Ville exhaled.

“Ahhhhhhh!!!”

She exhaled so deeply that all the air was forced from her body, and with her next inhale, she slowly replaced it .

“Hm?”

Sven stopped talking for a moment when she saw Mary Ville’s behavior.

“Yes. You are absolutely correct.”

Mary Ville’s voice sounded calm again.

She flipped a switch to regain her composure! One way to maintain presence of mind when under stress is to have the body replay a certain action. This explains why a child will stop crying when given a favorite blanket or towel. In Mary Ville’s case, deep breathing had this effect.

“Very well. I understand your objection. Lud Langart didn’t try to shoot. Instead, he got shot. But why was that?”

“He tried to stop Miroslav from committing suicide! Master was trying to help him!”

“Ohhh...”

Mary Ville’s smile was broad. It wasn’t the challenging smile she had shown earlier. It was the opposite—a cheerful but extremely ominous smile.

“And where is the evidence of that?”

“Agh!”

The tables had turned.

Sven hadn’t been there when Miroslav tried to kill himself. She had plunged in from the roof immediately after.

“There were two children in the shop. That’s what the report said, but they were asleep until they awoke to the sound of a gunshot. So you have no proof of what happened between Langart and Miroslav.”

“Urgh...”

“It’s possible Lud Langart physically abused Miroslav. It’s possible that someone trained in combat and capable of dealing death with his bare hands attacked Miroslav. Isn’t that right?”

“Tch...”

Sven quietly clucked her tongue. She had advanced her chances of victory to 90 percent, but Mary Ville had knocked her back to 50 percent.

“Wait, Mary!” Lud raised his voice.

“Call me Counselor Mehl!” Mary Ville abruptly corrected him.

“Oops... sorry. Um, uh... What did Miroslav say? He knows what happened! Where is he anyway?”

This trial was supposed to concern Miroslav, but there was no one sitting in the defendant’s seat.

“He returned to the waiting room in the back when you entered the courtroom.”

“Why?!”

“Surely you know why. Victims are easily intimidated and can’t testify accurately in front of the perpetrator. That’s common knowledge.”

At first, Lud didn’t understand what Mary Ville was saying.

“Perpetrator? Me?!”

Miroslav was supposed to be the defendant, and this trial was supposed to examine his alleged crime. So why had Mary Ville called Lud the perpetrator?

“Perhaps you misunderstood. This trial is not to find Miroslav guilty of bank robbery. He’s a political criminal.”

A political criminal was a revolutionary or member of a resistance group who engaged in anti-government activities.

“Miroslav is an activist standing up for the Pelfian people who suffer under Wiltian oppression. Do you know what it means to arrest him and hold him in a jail?”

“Anti-government activities” sounds like a crime, but in a democratic nation with a constitutional government, the right to express criticism and to protest is allowed. So if it objected to people’s ideas and arrested them as criminals, as political criminals, the nation would be a dictatorship rather than a democracy.

“But... Miroslav didn’t have any money, and the terrorists approached him! Who said he’s an activist?”

“He said it himself. In this very courtroom, he declared himself to be a revolutionary fighting against Wiltian oppression. If Wiltia wants to punish him, it must admit he’s a political criminal and admit it’s a despotic state opposed to liberty.”

“But that’s ridiculous!”

Lud and Sven had completely misunderstood. Mary Ville had successfully misled them. Lud’s role in this trial wasn’t that of a civilian attacked by a burglar. He was being branded a Wiltian oppressor, not just against Miroslav, but against all the Pelfian people.

“If what the article says is true, Miroslav is a revolutionary with strong principles. If Wiltia wants to present itself as a democratic nation, then it must release him. That’s what this trial is about!”

“But that’s...”

Mary Ville continued haranguing Lud, who didn’t know how to respond.

“If it’s true you’re a former soldier and special ops agent who participated in a massacre, then this article is accurate. So I’ll remind you once more, Lud Langart. You cannot lie in this courtroom. You must answer the questions honestly!”

Mary Ville’s eyes radiated a cold light. It was the light of a young girl with a deep grudge formed eight years ago on the day of the destruction of Lapchuricka. And she had sharpened her claws and fangs in preparation for this day ever since.

That night...

The first day of the trial had ended with further discussion to be continued the next day. The participants went back to their respective hotels. The crux of the debate tomorrow would concern the validity of the article in Weekly Global News. The article wasn't correct, but it wasn't entirely untrue either. The discussion would be like an optical illusion where the meaning changes depending on the viewer's perspective.

Miroslav was facing prosecution, so he was being held in a department of justice detainment center.

"How comfortable is it here?"

Mary Ville met with Miroslav, who had returned here from the courthouse after the first day of the trial.

"Well, I can eat as much food as I want, and the bed is soft, so it's more comfortable than the outside word. Why am I receiving such good treatment?"

Miroslav laughed joyfully. At first, he was placed in a community cell with concrete walls. He had huddled with other detainees, and his actions were restricted. Now he was in a private room, which allowed the greatest freedom.

"This is all because of you guys, I guess. Thank you!"

"I just gave you what you deserve. The government has a duty to provide this, and you have the right to receive it."

Without smiling, Mary dismissed Miroslav's gratitude.

Barely two days after Miroslav was sent to the detention center, Mary Ville and her supporters arrived. They declared that Miroslav was a political criminal, and abusing him would infringe upon his freedom of thought.

Abuse of a political offender constituted thought suppression. However, exactly what constituted abuse was very vague. As a result, Miroslav was exempted from the restrictions placed on ordinary detainees. Furthermore, he was treated with special consideration as a guest.

"About that political criminal business, um..."

Miroslav uncomfortably glanced around the visiting room.

“Don’t worry. Eavesdropping on our conversations is forbidden. Defendants have a right to private meetings with their counsel.”

“Seriously?”

Meetings with criminals in prison, even in the case of consultations with lawyers, would be monitored, but this detention center was different.

“Is this really all right? I don’t have any particular political opinions. I just did what I did for the money, so...”

Mary Ville and the others portrayed Miroslav as a freedom fighter. In front of the court, a horde of her fellows clamored for Miroslav’s release and an end to oppression by Wiltia.

“It’s all right, Miroslav.”

Mary Ville reassured Miroslav, who was tormented by guilt over deceiving others with his lies.

“What did you do at that bakery?”

“I was in a jam and took some kids hostage.”

“No. You shouted about injustice and discrimination by the nation.”

During the hostage incident, Miroslav was desperate and confused. He had broken a window and shouted at the media outside. He had yelled, “It’s all because I’m poor! It’s not my fault! It’s society’s fault!!”

“You shouted, ‘If my actions are a crime, they’re a crime driven by poverty! Society is wrong for criminalizing the weak and downtrodden!’”

“No, I... I... I didn’t say anything difficult like that!”

“Well, I’ve altered it a bit, but for the most part it’s correct, isn’t it?”

By now, newspapers all over the world had printed this distorted version of Miroslav’s words. Even in Wiltia, an editorial in a progressive newspaper had lavished praise upon him. It declared him a “hero of the poor.”

“No, I mean...”

“It’s all right. Do you know who you’re up against?”

Mary Ville continued to persuade Miroslav, who was still nervous.

“You’re fighting against a monster that is the nation. You can’t win if you’re fastidious about how you do it. The nation has the power to twist something that happened into something that didn’t happen!”

Mary Ville made a tight fist. Her home had been destroyed and her family had been killed intentionally. But Wiltia had lied, claiming they were merely chance casualties.

“We must do the same thing! We can’t be picky about our methods! We have to change something that didn’t happen into something that did happen!”

“Oh...”

Miroslav couldn’t argue in the face of Mary Ville’s ferocity. But one thing was still bothering him.

“Um, what will happen to that baker?”

A small time crook would never understand large matters involving the nation and its government. But he felt guilty about hurting the scary-faced man who had desperately tried to save him.

“I might have caused him some trouble, but he’ll just return to his regular life, won’t he?”

“That won’t happen.”

The tone of Mary Ville’s reply was heavy and cold.

“What?”

“Whether or not he’s convicted of a crime, society will shun him. He certainly won’t be able to work as a baker again. But he brought this on himself.”

Miroslav didn’t know the true story. He didn’t know what had happened between Mary Ville and Lud, or about the origin of the name of the shop, or about how Mary Ville felt when she saw Tockerbrot’s sign.

“You don’t need to worry about him. Anyway, I have good news for you.”

Mary Ville again reassured Miroslav.

“You got bail.”

If a criminal is unlikely to attempt escape or commit further crimes, such as destroying evidence, the court can allow the accused to pay for a temporary release while awaiting trial.

If Miroslav had been facing prosecution as a bank robber, bail would have been denied. It was granted because Mary Ville had insisted that detaining him would equal thought suppression as well as abduction and detention by the state.

“So I can leave?”

“Your movements will be limited, but we’ll set you up at a hotel prepared by my support organization. It will be more comfortable than this place.”

“Oh, all right...”

Even this private room at the detention center was far better than the cheap slum hotels where he used to sleep. He couldn’t imagine what kind of hotel would be better than this. These people might be on his side, but they weren’t like him. When he thought about that..... a feeling a bit like fear grew within him.

“Um, who is your support organization?”

Mary Ville thought about the question for a moment and then answered with a slight shake of her head.

“It’s better if you don’t know.”

“Huh?”

“Lying doesn’t come easily to you, so let’s just say... um... this group is everywhere.”

That was all she would reveal to him. However, it only increased Miroslav’s worries.

“Urgraaaaah!!”

Meanwhile, in a cheap hotel in a corner of Ponapalas, Sven was ranting and raving. She and Lud were lodging at the hotel.

“Quiet down over there!!”

“Oops!”

It was a cheap hotel, and the walls were thin, so the lodger next door banged on the wall.

“Argh! Who is this woman?! Is her grudge really that bad?! Well, I guess it is, but...”

Lud came all this way to testify, but instead he fell into an ambush that amounted to a public execution. And what made it worse was Mary Ville hadn’t told any outright lies.

The way she’s driving Master into a corner is ingenious!

If Sven resorted to violence, Mary Ville would be no match for her. Sven was confident she could defeat her even if Mary Ville had a machine gun.

She just might be the worst opponent we’ve ever faced!

Sven had fought against terrorists, special ops soldiers, Hunter Units, the Schutzstaffel and all sorts of opponents, but Mary Ville was one of the most formidable. Mary Ville had used her wits as a debater so forcefully that Sven couldn’t help but feel that she was backing them into a very tight spot.

“I’m sorry. I’m not much help.”

The public prosecutor was with Sven and Lud. His name was Tagkinder.

“Usually, I would be the one opposing Counselor Mehl.”

The prosecutor was only twenty years old, about the same age as Lud.

“It’s not your fault. You’re still young, and you lack experience.”

“But Counselor Mehl has a shorter career as a lawyer than I do.”

“Oh...”

Sven had tried to cheer up the man, but instead she further dampened his spirits.

But she couldn’t help it. Mary Ville was internationally active and challenged Lud from a grudge she had held for years, while Tagkinder was a city public

prosecutor. The opponent he was facing was out of his league.

“And as for this place... I’m sorry that I couldn’t get you into a better inn.”

“Yeah, well... whatever.”

Pelfe’s justice department had arranged for this shabby hotel.

“Our budget is too small.”

“Yes, there’s a recession everywhere.”

When the economy becomes unstable, tax revenue decreases and the budgets of public institutions suffer.

“This place wasn’t always a hotel. Originally, it was a low-rent apartment building.”

“So it seems.”

The rooms were average in size, and each one had a bathroom, toilet and simple kitchen.

“Thanks to the kitchen, at least Master is able to brighten his mood.”

As if to express her exasperation, Sven smiled bitterly as she spoke.

Lud was working in the kitchen.

“He really is a baker!”

Tagkinder put on a forced smile.

“Good! All finished!”

Lud was baking bread.

Ponapalas was a provincial city, but it was also the former capital of Pelfe. It had been easy to obtain the ingredients for bread, such as flour, salt and yeast. Nonetheless, the kitchenette didn’t have the equipment for fermentation or even an oven for baking. But Lud could still make bread.

“Wow... He actually did it!”

After seeing the bread Lud made with nothing more than a pan, Tagkinder sounded impressed.

“It’s easier than you think. You need the skill to knead dough, but you can handle primary and secondary fermentation with nothing but a pan.”

“It smells great!”

A gourmand once said ‘the best seasoning was just being freshly baked.’ The smell of bread right from the oven whets the appetite.

“Please, have some.”

Lud offered bread to Tagkinder.

“Can I? Thanks! This is delicious! Even without anything on it! It’s scrumptious all by itself!!”

After one bite, Tagkinder exclaimed in amazement.

“The texture is a little different from normal bread. It’s chewy—but wonderful in its own way!”

Sven had taken a bite, and liked it too.

“If you want, take one home with you. I’ll pack it for you.”

“Awesome!! It’s perfect for a bedtime snack!”

Lud wrapped a piece of the bread for Tagkinder to take with him because he had to prepare documentation for the trial tomorrow.

“Well, I should excuse myself now. Mr. Langart, we’ll do our best again tomorrow!”

After bidding them farewell, Tagkinder left the hotel.

“Despite it all, you baked delicious bread with nothing but a pan... and your skills, of course!”

“Oh, it wasn’t much. It’s not hard once you get the hang of it.”

Sven complimented his bread again, but Lud looked glum.

“Th-Then, we should keep this technique secret! If word gets out, it could hurt Tockerbrot’s business!”

“No, maybe it’s better that way.”

Sven tried to cheer Lud up but his face remained grim.

“Why is that?”

“If I tell the people of Organbaelz how to make bread like this, then they won’t go without, if Tockerbrot fails and has to close its doors.”

“Master?!”

Lud didn’t bake this bread to raise his spirits. He had given up on keeping the shop open. He just wanted to leave something behind for the townsfolk.

“Don’t say that!!”

Furious, Sven scolded Lud.

“Master, I understand how you feel. I know you regret your past.”

Lud’s sin was joining an organization and following their rules. But, if anyone deserved blame, it was the person in charge of that organization. The one who executed commands shouldn’t have to suffer.

“Are you saying a criminal should never be forgiven and must live in misery until he dies? I won’t stand for that!”

Lud understood her reasoning but still felt guilty about his past. He felt like a repentant criminal. Sven, however, wanted him to knock it off and spoke sharply.

“Master, get your head out of your butt!”

“What?!”

Sven was always on Lud’s side. That was why she spoke so strongly.

“You made Tockerbrot. It’s your shop, but it isn’t just yours anymore!”

It also belonged to the people of Organbaelz... When the protestors gathered, the townsfolk might also have been in danger. Nonetheless, they had stood at his side. The nun Marlene, Laurel the miner, and Jacob had all been angry, almost in tears.

“It takes more than an owner to make a shop! A shop only lives when customers start coming. So you can’t just call it quits!”

Milly, Lud’s apprentice, hoped to become a baker like her father someday. And Jacob’s mother, Charlotte, had smiled more since helping out at

Tockerbrot.

“Does Tockerbrot really mean so little to you?! Is it okay for those people to destroy it?! Will you let that happen?!”



Sven had once been a weapon—a machine for Lud's personal use. After Lud left his life as a soldier and went in search of his dream, she obtained a body very like a human being's so she could follow him. She gave everything to follow him, so she didn't want to see him give up his dream so easily. At this moment, her anger wasn't directed at Lud. Instead it was rage directed at herself.

"Sven..."

Lud was momentarily stunned as he watched Sven cry, her shoulders shaking. He spoke again.

"I'm sorry. You're right. I shouldn't give up."

Lud stretched out his arm apologetically and clasped Sven's shoulders.

"No, I won't give up. I won't give up because of this!"

"Master..."

Sven was still crying, but she smiled at her master, because he had regained the spirit to fight.

Tagkinder had left the hotel where Lud and Sven were staying.

"Are you the public prosecutor Mr. Tagkinder?"

The prosecutor was carrying the bread Lud gave him as he walked home, when someone spoke to him.

"Yes, that's me. And who might you be?"

When he turned around, he saw a highly suspicious person wearing a black coat and a black hat pulled down over his eyes.

"Wh-Who are you?!"

Tagkinder shied away from him. A simple thief wouldn't have disturbed him so much. This man looked like a sexual deviant or a murderer.

"Here."

"Gah! What?!"

Tagkinder thought the man in black was going to pull out a weapon, but

instead he handed him a large envelope.

“W-What’s this?”

“These are important documents regarding the Miroslav case.”

“What?!”

Tagkinder hurriedly checked the contents of the envelope.

“Have you heard of the Friends of Vladimere?”

Vladimere was the name of a principality that once existed in the east. It didn’t exist now, because the August Federation had invaded, claiming it was an act of liberation, and made it a member of its federation. The Friends of Vladimere was a mutual aid organization started by citizens who had fled to Wiltia immediately before Vladimere was taken.

“They appear to be people who fled August, but the organization is actually a front for covert operatives dispatched by August. Their goal is information gathering and political intervention. They donate large sums to the group supporting Miroslav. Those documents list their donations.”

There were also a few photographs inside the envelope.

“Those are photographs of staff members from the August Embassy having dinner with the editor-in-chief of the Weekly Global News. They’re connected.”

A weekly magazine with ties to August had caused the trouble, and an organization supported by August had intensified it.

“They’re stirring up trouble. If the source is from August, and those making it a greater problem are also agents from August, then with this evidence, the court will rule in your favor.”

It would cast doubt on the people holding Miroslav aloft as a revolutionary and on the article they brandished as a basis for their claims.

“Who are you? Why are you giving me this?”

The man in black laughed self-deprecatingly.

“I’m just a patriot. I won’t let that scum spoil our country. Think of me as a righteous man.”

As if the phrase “righteous man” was old-fashioned or theatrical, the man’s shoulders shook with mirth as he spoke.

“I’ll be looking forward to tomorrow’s session in court.”

The man then bowed and left.

“Hmm...”

Tagkinder walked on in silence, holding the documents. Then he stopped atop a bridge, checked to confirm no one was watching, pulled out a cigarette, and struck a match.

“Urgh... What a problem they’ve foisted on me!”

He mumbled softly and, instead of lighting his cigarette, lit the envelope containing the evidence. As if it had been treated with oil, the envelope was rapidly engulfed in flames.

“Oh dear...”

He tossed the envelope into the river. Even after reaching the water, it continued to burn. But the flames soon went out and the ashes sank into the river.

“Oh... This, too!”

He took the package at his side—the paper bag containing Lud’s bread—and threw it into the river.

“Ha! Why would I want to eat bread made by a Wiltian soldier?!”

Tagkinder spit out these words with hate, then struck another match, lit his cigarette, and headed for home. He didn’t intend to prepare any documentation for the trial. He would go home, have a drink, and fall into bed.

There was no way Lud could know what Mary Ville Mehl had said to Miroslav. He couldn’t know her reply when Miroslav asked, “Who is your support organization?” She had said, “They’re everywhere.” There was no way Lud could know. Tagkinder was a member of the Peace Faith. From the beginning, they had never had anyone on their side.

Chapter 6: The Tables Turn

On the second day of the trial, the two sides continued to argue.

“Then prove that the contents of the article in Weekly Global News are false!”

“You don’t sound like a lawyer! That’s called probatio diabolica! No one can prove what isn’t the case! The burden of proof is on you!”

Miroslav, the accused standing trial, still wasn’t even there.

Through bizarre and complicated developments, the crux of the debate was whether the article in Weekly Global News was true or false. Sven was there only to accompany the witness Lud, but now she was clashing with the defense attorney Mary Ville. On the judge’s breast was a badge worn by members of the judiciary. It showed the scales of the god who administered law and justice. As the two women argued, the judge didn’t know which way to look, so he shifted first to the right and then to the left.

“I’ll say it as many times as I have to! Tockerbrot’s owner, an innocent citizen, is defending the bank robber who took hostages in his shop! So treating him like a criminal is patently absurd!”

Sven had been arguing for thirty minutes since court was declared in session.

“Yes, but only if he actually is just an innocent citizen!”

A murderous light shone in Mary Ville’s eyes.

Tch!

Sven insisted that the magazine article was false—which it certainly was—but she couldn’t settle the matter because the article also addressed a massacre executed by the Wiltian military. The Massacre of Lapchuricka did happen. Sven could say the article was a lie, but then Mary Ville would ask, “Then you are saying the events in the article didn’t happen?” And in that case, Sven couldn’t say yes.

The author of the article didn’t have proof, so she had concocted the story

partly from imagination and delusion. In other words, she had made much of it up. What's more, Mary Ville was trying to wield the article to use Lud as a stepping stone to damage Wiltia and thereby sacrifice him.

The nation trampled on her, and now she is trying to get revenge by trampling on someone else. She's got some nerve!

During their many back-and-forths, Sven had gained some respect for Mary Ville's determination, if nothing more. Against a less skilled lawyer, Sven would have easily won a long time ago. But Mary Ville wouldn't let her. She seized on every opening, launching waves of attacks. And Mary Ville felt the same way.

Who is this girl?!

No opponent had ever caused her so much trouble.

What's her problem?! Where did Lud meet her?!

And then her fierce anger fell on Lud.

She had researched what he had done and how he had lived since Lapchuricka. During his time in the military, he was a hero known as the Silver Wolf. He had even been offered the rank of knighthood, but had turned it down. Then, after the war, he had quit the military almost as if to escape.

Did Lud and this girl meet during that time?

Even Mary Ville had been unable to uncover Lud's actions between leaving the army and a few months after opening the bakery.

The truth was that, Lud, after quitting without notice and infuriating his former superior officer Sophia, had erased all traces of his activities by making full use of his skills from his special ops days. The records on Lud were blank until the airship incident here in Ponapalas.

What's with this girl? She calls him Master and seems devoted to him. She seems like a nice person, but she must be crazy!

Masters of the warrior's path can accurately size up an opponent in a brief clash of swords. Mary Ville was an accomplished debater. She grasped Sven's strength, but at the same time she wondered why such a girl was with Lud.

"Urrrgh..."

Meanwhile, Lud was getting an upset stomach and suffering in silence even though all the attention was supposed to be on his replies as the witness.

This is unbearable...

He wasn't remaining silent because he wanted to leave it all up to Sven. He knew he shouldn't say anything at this point. Lud was no match for Mary Ville when it came to argument. If he said the wrong thing, she would use it to launch an offensive. So Sven cautioned him before the day's proceedings began.

"Master, please don't say anything."

Actually, if I could just admit it all, that would be easier.

But circumstances no longer allowed that. If Lud confirmed the massacre by the military in public, it would be the same as verifying everything in the Weekly Global News article. It would be the equivalent of saying that he was running a bakery in order to hide his past, and that he was a racist and someone who didn't hesitate to kill.

If Mary Ville had sought Lud's cooperation merely to tell the world about the tragedy of Lapchuricka, he might have gone along with it. He might have accepted her offer as a way of reckoning with his sins. Instead, Mary Ville was trying to magnify those sins based on a false news article. And there was no way he could accept that.

Why is Mary doing this? Maybe it's because...

Perhaps Mary Ville had been pressing her claims through proper channels for a long time now. But she hadn't gotten anywhere. Perhaps she had been unable to penetrate the massive barriers erected by the government. So she had no choice in how she could fight. Maybe Wiltia had driven her to what she was doing now.

"This article says the owner of the shop is pretending to be a baker as part of a conspiracy surrounding the events of his service in the military."

"Indeed. According to my research, the shop had almost no customers during its first year. If there weren't profits, it's obvious the bakery is a mere disguise."

Mary’s false interpretation of the facts gave Sven an opportunity to correct her.

“You’ve totally misunderstood! After the first year, the shop’s sales took off! The schools, the local mine and shops in nearby towns all signed contracts with the bakery, and the number of customers continued to grow! Tockerbrot has renovated, and is investing in new facilities!”

If Tockerbrot was a front for disguising Lud’s identity, there was no need to put such effort into the business.

“This may sound rude, but Organbaelz is a hole in the road. The residents don’t have many options, and maybe that’s why they shop there.”

“Hunh...?”

Sven sneered at Mary Ville’s response.

“Organbaelz didn’t have a bakery for many years. So why would the shop’s sales rise since last spring? Why?”



“Why you—!”

Mary Ville’s temples twitched.

Sven’s customer service motto was: “Give the customers what they want and how they want it.” But that could be turned around for a devastating attack: “Give the customers what they don’t want and in the manner they don’t want it.”

“Isn’t that because of you? You’re quite cute, so men in particular must like you.”

“Oh my...”

Mary Ville insinuated that Tockerbrot had customers only because Sven attracted foolish men. But Sven didn’t lose her smile, as if her opponent just played into her hands.

“Organbaelz is a mining town with a high percentage of men, but many women also shop at Tockerbrot. Why do you suppose that is?”

“Um...”

“Our shop also sells bread in other towns. Sales are good there too, so why would that be?”

To cast doubt on the article’s credibility, Sven described how Tockerbrot was a genuine bakery that the townsfolk rightly and enthusiastically cherished. Without a doubt, that was the truth, so it would stand firm no matter what.

“Have you even eaten Tockerbrot’s bread?”

“What...?”

Sven didn’t ask the question with any ulterior motive. She was only suggesting that if Mary Ville tasted Lud’s bread, she would know that he baked delicious bread and that was why Tockerbrot had such a good reputation.

“Aw, gimme a break!! Why would I eat that jerk’s bread?!”

But Mary Ville’s reply to Sven’s question sounded unhinged.

“—?!”

It caught Sven off guard.

“Agh!”

Even Mary Ville, who said it, looked stupefied.

“M... My apologies!”

Court was not the place for emotional outbursts. It was for finding the truth in order to reach a just decision. If you raved or spoke with personal bias, you jeopardized your argument and the judge would admonish you.

“Is there a problem, Counselor Mehl?”

The judge questioned Mary Ville’s attitude. It was a warning that if she blew up like that again, he wouldn’t overlook it.

“No... I’m sorry.”

Mary Ville understood and apologized. It was an uncharacteristic mistake for her.

“Let us start over by hearing the defendant Miroslav’s account once more.”

“Huh?!”

Mary Ville’s mistake was graver than she thought. She had controlled the flow of the argument, but now she had lost it.

Awesome!

Sven cheered inside at this unexpected opportunity.

Mary Ville and her comrades had dressed up Miroslav as a revolutionary. They presented him as a victim, whereby he wasn’t a criminal but Wiltia was guilty of suppressing thought. In truth, he was just a small time crook. If that came to the surface, Mary Ville had little chance of escaping Sven’s pursuit.

“But... Mr. Miroslav is... Can we bring him in after Mr. Langart has left the room?”

Mary Ville was still floundering.

Miroslav was a petty criminal who lacked the skill to lie convincingly. So he was sure to be nervous in front of Lud. If the judge saw that, his opinion about

Miroslav's testimony would vastly change.

"Please, bring in the defendant Miroslav."

Mary Ville's request was not granted. Miroslav was escorted into the courtroom.

"Uh..."

As soon as he entered, his eyes darted around and he scanned the public gallery.

"Ugh..."

At that point, Mary Ville wanted to hold her head. He was a piddling perp—neither an ally of justice nor a revolutionary fighter. But he wasn't a serious villain either. He was just a citizen that you might see anywhere. There was no way he could hold firm under the gaze of so many spectators.

"... murmur..."

Miroslav's timidity alone was enough to perplex the audience. It was highly damaging to Mary Ville's argument to show this man who was so different from what she and her supporting organization had made him out to be.

"Mr. Miroslav, would you tell the court once more about your actions at the bakery?"

Miroslav was visibly anxious, so the judge made an effort not to sound too intimidating as he asked his questions. If his voice was even a little rough, it would invite the objection that he was threatening the witness.

"W-Well... I... Um..."

But the judge's considerate manner only increased Miroslav's uneasiness.

"Regarding the magazine article... Is it true? Were you treated violently inside Mr. Langart's bakery?"

"Um... Well... I ain't so sure..."

Miroslav spoke timidly.

That nincompoop!

Mary Ville made a silent shriek.

Miroslav wasn't a child. They could pass lies off as the truth because there was no evidence, but Miroslav was worried that his lies would be discovered, and he veered from the script.

I've won this!

Meanwhile, Sven silently made a cry of joy.

Miroslav had said, "I ain't so sure." In court, where everything was recorded, he expressed uncertainty about his own memory.

"Mr. Miroslav, did you just..."

Sven pounced on this opportunity. She quickly hurled more questions.

"What do you mean you aren't sure? Is your memory unclear? Do you mean you cannot confirm the contents of the article?"

There were many ways to press this line of inquiry. If she could demonstrate that Miroslav was just a two-bit crook, this would be over.

"Don't say anything, Miroslav!"

But a voice rang out, halting Sven's examination.



“What?!”

“Whaaat?!!”

At that voice, both Sven and Mary Ville froze in surprise.

“Don’t say anything, Miroslav...”

Lud repeated his command. He spoke with steely eyes—eyes that to others would look as if they were glaring. He had finally opened his big mouth...

“Th...”

In court, all statements become a matter of official record. Usually, you must receive the judge’s permission before speaking.

Lud had ignored that. What’s more, Miroslav had been called upon to speak, but Lud had told him to stay silent.

“That’s threatening the witness!!”

There was no way Mary Ville would let this go. The tables had turned again.

“I’ve won! I’ve won!”

Mary was gloating in the waiting room outside the courtroom.

The court was in temporary recess after Lud threatened Miroslav and would reopen after a one-hour recess. But victory for Mary Ville was already certain. Lud had tried to prevent Miroslav from speaking. She could claim that he had threatened Miroslav to prevent him from giving damaging testimony.

No matter what Lud said now, and no matter how Miroslav weakened his case, there would be no further reversals. Even if the judge ruled in her opponents’ favor, Mary could claim the government had applied pressure from behind the scenes, which would further exacerbate the problem.

“Enjoying yourself, Mary Ville?”

As Mary Ville gloated, someone spoke to her. And not in the Wiltian language. The speaker had purposely spoken in Greytenese in case they were overheard.

“Is that you, Dolly?”

Dolly Anastasia was the reporter who wrote the article for Weekly Global News that had caused this whole brouhaha. She was a member of the mass media observing the trial.

“Thanks to this scoop, I can finally go home! Hmf! Every day, just breathing the Wiltian air shortens my lifespan!”

Dolly was a Greytenese journalist stationed at a branch office in Wiltia. It was stressful to live in an enemy nation, especially one that had defeated one’s own country, so few journalists wanted to come to this branch. Most who came wanted to return home as soon as possible. And many of them fabricated attention-grabbing scoops toward that end.

What a sleazebag...

Out of the corner of her eye, Mary Ville looked at Dolly with faint contempt.

Dolly viewed Miroslav, Mary Ville and the lives of the deceased people of Lapchuricka as means to her own fame, success and swank apartment back home.

But I have no right to criticize.

Mary was just like Dolly in trying to accomplish her own goals by using those who would use her.

“I look forward to seeing you take Wiltia’s reins. May I interview you after the ruling?”

“Yes, of course.”

Mary Ville was distracted as she answered Dolly, who was smiling with enjoyment.

“By the way, where’s Miroslav?”

“Huh?”

Mary Ville only noticed the man’s absence when Dolly mentioned it.

Miroslav had left the room a few minutes earlier, saying he was going to the restroom. Officially, he was a defendant facing prosecution. He would normally be under guard, but Mary Ville had complained about undue confinement, as

well as thought suppression, so he was unsupervised.

“What is that schmuck doing?!”

But there were limits to his freedom. Without permission, he couldn’t leave certain areas of the court building. If he left the courthouse, Mary might lose the advantage she had finally gained.

“I’ll go look for him. See you later.”

After telling Dolly good-bye, Mary Ville left the waiting room.

Meanwhile in Lud’s waiting room...

“I’m sorry.”

Lud was hanging his head low... very low.

“Master...”

Sven wore a dark expression as she looked at him.

“Why did you say that?!”

Sven would always, no matter the circumstances, take Lud’s side. That was more important to her than her own life. But she had to ask.

“We almost had him! I suspect Mary Ville and her people are lying about Miroslav being a revolutionary! If he admits that in court, this is over!”

And that wasn’t merely wishful thinking. Sven’s prediction bordered on certainty.

“So why... why did you do something that would help him?!”

“—!”

Lud widened his eyes and raised his face at Sven’s question.

“You... noticed that?”

“I can see no other reason for it.”

Sven heaved a sigh.

“I think Mary’s—or rather, Counselor Mehl’s—backers are the Peace Faith. I

encountered them a few times during the war, and I've heard about them since."

They chanted the mantra of peace and freedom as they sought to end war through actions that were sometimes harsher than those of the military. To end war, they would even invite enemy armies into their own nations and call it liberation.

"There is an iron bond between them, so they're merciless against traitors... Or rather, against those they perceive to have acted traitorously."

In religion, heretics sometimes receive harsher deaths than nonbelievers. While the nonbelievers are considered fools who do not know the teachings of God, the heretics blaspheme against God's teachings. So heretics invite more hatred. The same thing happens with political ideologies.

"If Miroslav can't hold up under your questioning and admits he lied, he'll be a traitor in their eyes."

"Which is fine! He's just a small time crook anyway! And he betrayed you for his own immediate benefit!"

Miroslav found himself in trouble and panicked. And then, when he tried to commit suicide and Lud tried to stop him, he shot Lud. And now there was all this legal drama! Sven would not mind killing Miroslav.

"He'll just go to prison and that will be the end of him, so you should have let him suffer the consequences!"

Sven wasn't asking why Lud told Miroslav not to speak in court.

She was asking why he had invited trouble for himself by helping Miroslav.

"But if I do that—"

As Lud started to answer, the door opened and a man came in. It was Miroslav, the man they were discussing.

"You! How dare you show yourself here!!"

When Sven saw his face, she shouted and was poised to deliver a hand chop to his neck.

“Don’t, Sven!”

“I... I know!”

Sven knew she couldn’t do that without Lud telling her. Killing is forbidden in the courthouse. But if it weren’t for that, Miroslav was someone she could have killed happily enough.

“Why did you come here? It’ll hurt your standing in court.”

Even now, Lud cautioned Miroslav.

“I... I didn’t really know about that magazine article. They said I wouldn’t have to go to prison if I did what they said, but...”

Excuses poured from Miroslav as he trembled violently.

“I’m sorry! I had no idea this was going to happen!”

“You didn’t? Then you haven’t any imagination! You didn’t notice they were just using you?!”

Sven was merciless toward Miroslav.

He had committed crimes and was spreading falsehoods, but it was true that the fault was not entirely his. Society, the economy and rampant inequality were also causes. But that didn’t make it right to trample on a complete stranger.

“I’m sorry...”

That was all Miroslav could say.

“It’s all right. I chose to do it myself.”

Lud still wouldn’t criticize Miroslav.

“You... But why?!”

Even Miroslav, whom Lud was protecting, couldn’t help but raise his voice at Lud’s timidity.

“You should be harder on me! I’m just a crook! I’m not worth protecting! Don’t you care what happens to you?!”

Lud persisted in protecting Miroslav, but the man under his protection was

giving Lud a good chewing out.

“How can you say that?!”

Without thinking, Sven raised her voice in dismay, and Lud gave a wry smile.

“I did it because I wanted to.”

Lud answered with a quiet but determined voice.

“I told you that night in the shop, didn’t I? You said my bread tasted good. And I don’t want anyone who says that to be unhappy.”

“You...”

“Mr. Tocker always said that. He was the man who taught me how to bake bread.”

Tocker Mehl was Mary Ville’s grandfather and the owner of a small bakery called Tockerbrot in Lapchuricka—and, indirectly, Lud had killed him.

“I became a baker to atone for the killing I’ve done. But I always held on to the words Mr. Tocker said.”

After the slaughter in Lapchuricka, Lud had been devastated, almost to the point of death, but Tocker’s words had saved him. At one point, he had even considered suicide, but he knew that wouldn’t have solved anything. He had murdered hundreds, even thousands of people. It would be egotistical to think that his life was an equal exchange for those countless souls.

“I don’t want your life to be over because of my selfish reasons. I mean, then you wouldn’t be able to eat my bread again and say it tastes good.”

“.....”

As he spoke, Lud wasn’t smiling. He looked tense and expressionless. It wasn’t the murderous face Miroslav had seen when he occupied Tockerbrot. At that moment, Lud’s face looked like an ascetic who had decided to walk a certain path. Miroslav looked at Lud and then spoke.

“I... have made a decision. I’m going to tell the truth. When the trial resumes, I’ll come right out with it. I’ll say it’s all a lie and you haven’t done anything wrong. I’ll say you helped me.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I have at least that much pride. Despite being a petty crook!”

Miroslav’s voice was firm as he responded to Sven’s question.

“There are some things a human being shouldn’t do. I know that.”

He spoke with the determination of an all-too-human man caught between good and evil.

“No, you mustn’t do that.”

But Lud flatly refused his offer.

“W-Why not?! Don’t you believe me?!”

That wasn’t the problem.

“No, that’s not it. You heard, didn’t you? The people backing you don’t forgive traitors.”

They espoused peace and freedom and never doubted they represented justice. They never forgave traitors. But not just because they had defied their creed.

“If they let a traitor go unpunished, there will be more traitors. They have to eradicate traitors to make sure others don’t follow.”

Lud had seen this during the war. It was a tumultuous time when many simply went missing. A time when the difference between one hundred dead or two hundred dead was brushed aside as a simple error. Perhaps some of their comrades had been purged during that time.

“It... It’s all right. The judge will find me guilty and I’ll go to the slammer. While I’m there, I’ll keep my head down.”

“Right. If you’re in prison for, say, three to five years, this should all blow over.”

Sven agreed with Miroslav, but Lud shook his head.

“They have comrades everywhere. Inside the prison, they might be among the guards. They might even commit a crime to get into prison and have access to the prisoners.”

“But that’s...”

Miroslav started to say that was ridiculous, but then he closed his mouth. Mary Ville had said it herself. Like Lud, she had said her supporters were everywhere.

“I appreciate your willingness. I’m very happy. But don’t make a move right now. Just lie low and don’t do anything. Don’t cross them until this is all over.”

The Peace Faith would finish using Miroslav, decide it would be a waste of time to get rid of him, and leave him alone.

“Then... what will you do?”

“I’ll handle it somehow.”

Lud gave a forced smile.

“Oh.”

During the hostage incident, Lud’s smile scared Miroslav because it looked murderous. But now, for some reason, Lud’s true nature shone through. He didn’t have grounds to believe this would work out... but he wouldn’t give up.

The trial resumed. It was likely that everything would be decided today. Sven ran simulations, starting with their disastrous position, but all the scenarios had a low chance of success. The only sure way out was to kill everyone in the courtroom.

Well, what should we do now?

Mary Ville looked like an executioner as she walked into court.

“Huh?”

Seeing her face, Sven noticed something had changed.

Why is she shaking? And...

Mary Ville’s eyes were red. She looked like a child who had just stopped crying.



“Let us resume the discussion.”

The judge declared court to be in session.

“I have a question, Your Honor.”

Mary Ville raised her hand.

“It’s a question for Lud Langart.”

“Your request is granted.”

Mary Ville took a step forward.

Sven braced for the question. They needed to handle Mary Ville’s questions, deflect the discussion, and buy time until an opportunity to recover arose. Those were the only options Sven could come up with.

“Are you a former soldier?”

“Yes.”

Lud answered Mary Ville’s question.

“Whether or not you were involved in the massacre, you have taken many lives on the battlefield. That’s a fact, and that’s why you were labeled a hero.”

According to one cynical truism, a hero is another name for someone who kills people the most effectively. Even excluding Lud’s time as a special ops soldier, he had certainly killed many people.

“Suppose, if you will, that someone close to one of your victims tried to kill you. What would you do?”

Mary Ville’s voice, usually as cold as ice, had begun to warm.

“I don’t know. I used to think I would have to accept it. But now...”

Unintentionally, Lud looked at Sven.

“There are people who want me to stay alive, so I don’t have the right to choose death for my own selfish reasons.”

“Well then...”

Mary Ville stopped as if she needed to think.

“Then what would you do if someone was about to kill you?”

Mary Ville stared at Lud as she waited for him to answer.

“I...”

Lud met her eyes. The boy and girl who had laughed with each other eight years ago had lost their smiles and were here now angrily confronting each other.

“If I have time to speak to the people who care about me and want me to stay alive, I would tell them not to hold a grudge against my killer.”

“.....”

“My killer would have suffered a lot and would surely continue to do so.”

That was truly how Lud felt. Such people’s actions would be the result of loss, mourning and suffering. Lud had seen a lot of that, so he was one of them.

“I see. Understood. Thank you, Lud.”

“.....?”

Lud was confused by the sudden ending of Mary Ville’s questions.

What is she thinking?

Sven was even more confused than Lud. She had assumed her opponent would use the events of the previous court session for a relentless assault, but instead Mary Ville had asked a few ambiguous questions and backed away.

“Your Honor, I would like to call a new witness to the stand.”

Ignoring Lud and Sven’s confusion, Mary Ville made a request of the judge.

“I haven’t been notified of any further witnesses.”

Trials have certain procedures and it is necessary to submit prior notification of all witnesses and evidence.

“Upon further deliberation, I decided that it was necessary to hear her story.”

“And who is this witness?” `

“It is Dolly Anastasia, the reporter who wrote the article in Weekly Global News that has become this trial’s point of contention.”

“Oh?”

“She is in court today as a spectator.”

A buzz ran through the courtroom. No one had known that the author of the article was present. Voices asked, “Who?” and “Where?”

Their gazes gradually concentrated on one spot... A woman was sitting toward the back of the public gallery and looked as if she was enjoying a show.

“Whuh?!”

Dolly Anastasia paled when the fun was suddenly ruined for her.

“Dolly. Please, take the stand.”

“N-Now hold on! I’m just a spectator! I have no reason to testify in court!”

“I have only one question.”

Dolly didn’t want to testify, but Mary Ville wouldn’t relent. Moreover, the people sitting near Dolly were now regarding her with suspicion. Someone whose occupation was reporting the truth would only be reluctant to testify if she expected to be asked certain questions that she would have trouble answering honestly.

“What’s wrong with her?”

“She should agree to testify since the result of the trial is already almost certain.”

Other reporters in the gallery began expressing doubts.

“Ugh...”

Dolly’s profession wasn’t large and if she continued refusing, she’d needlessly make things worse for herself as word spread.

“All right.”

Reluctantly, Dolly stood up from her seat.

“Dolly Anastasia, did you write this article?”

Mary Ville held the Weekly Global News in her hand.

“Yes, I did. I wrote it after thoroughly collecting data and interviewing

relevant parties. I must insist, however, that I cannot reveal my sources since I have an obligation to keep their confidentiality."

"Just answer the question."

People who are hiding something often talk a lot. Mary Ville spoke coldly to Dolly, who was saying too much without realizing it.

"Huh...?"

Dolly believed Mary was on her side, so the defense attorney's cold attitude was confusing. Mary Ville now asked her main question.

"According to this article, the Wiltian military carried out the massacre in May. What was the date in May?"

"What?"

Dolly's eyes grew shifty.

The article wasn't just a fabrication. It was a figment of pure delusion. It was only by chance that it happened to match some facts. There was no way Dolly could have known the exact date of the mission that annihilated Lapchuricka. Dolly had suggested that it took place in May because records indicated a large deployment of Wiltian military around that time.

"It was M-May."

"And the date?"

Dolly was bewildered, but Mary Ville didn't let up. The woman had to answer or her credibility would be shot—as if an invisible gun were pointed at her.

"The 6th. It was May 6th!"

Somehow, she came up with an answer. She remembered that the large-scale military displacement had occurred in early May. She thought that if she gave the date as May 6th, it would allow her to play innocent if it turned out she was wrong—as if she had simply been off by a week. It was a random guess that could work.

"May 6th... I see. Unfortunately, then, it appears the article is wrong."

"What?!"

Dolly’s face stiffened at Mary’s reply, which felt like a slice from an icy knife.

“Lud Langart was in Maben on May 6th.”

Maben was a town a good distance from Lapchuricka, on the opposite side of the massive Bonauts River. There wasn’t a bridge, so ferryboats were used to cross between the two.

“The mighty Bonauts had been high since noon that day because of heavy rainfall. Since no ferry was available, Mr. Langart had to spend the night in Maben.”

“D-Do you have any witnesses?!”

For a journalist, a fabrication was ordinarily as fatal as a mistake. At the very least, it was certain to prevent the homecoming Dolly so badly wanted.

“My witness is right here.”

Mary Ville turned toward Lud.

“Lud Langart, did you work as a baker’s apprentice before you joined the military?”

“What?”

Lud raised his voice in confusion at the question. This was the official version of Lud’s military career. Mary Ville must have known that Lud already belonged to the military by then.

“I’m the granddaughter of the owner of the bakery where Lud was an apprentice. And I remember that day very well. My grandfather went to Maben to buy wheat, but because of flooding in the river, he had no choice but to spend the night there. He drank heavily at a tavern, and Lud Langart, who was with him, carried him back to his lodging.”

“Mary... You...”

Lud had no idea what was happening. Why would she suddenly say this? It was almost as if she was trying to help him.

“Wait! Does that mean you were on close terms with him? Then your argument is invalid! It lacks objectivity!”

Tagkinder had remained silent throughout, but now he spoke up. He was the prosecutor, and should be on Lud's side.

"What are you talking about?!" Sven shouted.

Just when the opposing lawyer was arguing in Lud's favor, the prosecutor—supposedly on their side—rejected it. It made no sense!

"Shut up!"

The warmth that was in Tagkinder's voice the night before was completely gone. Disregarding how it appeared, he openly glared at them.

"Oh... I get it now!"

Sven finally realized that they had never had an ally in court because Tagkinder was a Peace Faith sympathizer.

"Counselor Mehl! You never revealed that you were an old acquaintance of this man! This is perjury! It's contempt of court!"

Tagkinder was ranting, but Mary Ville stood firm with a piercing glare.

"Haven't you misunderstood? I am indeed an old acquaintance of Mr. Langart, but what is the problem with a witness and the defense counsel being acquaintances?"

"Whah?!"

It was a response that allowed no ifs, ands, or buts. Lud had been grilled like a criminal, but he was here in court as a witness. There was nothing wrong with Mary Ville being his acquaintance. The Peace Faith had fallen into its own trap.

"Oh... I see how it is, Counselor Mehl!"

Tagkinder wasn't about to give up.

"Maybe you're Lud Langart's lover! You planned this farce so he won't say anything incriminating!"

Tagkinder began casting scurrilous accusations and Dolly decided to pile on.

"That's right! And that's how I got into this mess! I'm just trying to reveal Wiltia's misdeeds to the world! It's sickening! Don't you think that's unjust?!"

“Justice?”

But Mary Ville’s cold gaze held steady. Rather, the temperature of her steely glare dropped as if to freeze everyone in sight.

“The people who prattled about such high-minded concepts destroyed my city!”

As she spoke, Mary Ville removed her jacket and placed a hand on her shirt buttons.

“It’s true that Lud Langart and I go way back. But you actually think I’m his lover? Me? Love him?! That is absolutely...”

“Mary? What are you doing?!”

Lud called out to Mary Ville, who had suddenly started to take off her clothes.

“Take a look at this!”

Mary Ville removed her shirt, leaving her upper body in nothing but a bra. Her half-naked body was irrefutably lovely. But the spectators in the courtroom did not cry out in excitement.

“Ulp...”

As one, they all gasped and fell speechless. Her back was savagely scarred as if by a horrible monster.

“That invasion by the Wiltian military turned my hometown into a battleground. It became a sea of flames. My house was bombed, and I only avoided instant death because I happened to be out. But...”

She was trying to escape when a house had collapsed on her. Nonetheless, she was lucky to have survived. But she was trapped under an iron pillar, unable to move or crawl out as fire surrounded her. The heat traveled along the pillar and burned her flesh. She had cried out and scrabbled at the ground until her nails peeled off. However, she was unable to escape and had experienced excruciating pain. Rescue didn’t come for three days as she suffered, caught under the rubble.

“I have a grudge against Wiltia. I hate the Wiltian military. That’s an undeniable fact!”

The courtroom was silent. Tagkinder and Dolly were now speechless and unmoving.

“And, despite that, you think I love Lud Langart? Impossible! I despise him!”

Mary Ville picked up the jacket she had tossed aside and put it on again. Then she slowly approached Lud.

“Lud... That’s why I will strike you down to Hell! I won’t let you make even the slightest excuse! I won’t let you say you were tricked or framed. I will cast you down in regret and humiliation so you repent your sins! That is my desire!”

As Mary Ville spoke, she held her face so close to Lud’s that they could feel each other’s breath.

“I won’t let you face judgment here! First, you must suffer greater despair and __”

At that point, Mary Ville breathed deeply, in and out. This was her ritual for regaining composure.

“That’s all for today. Thank you, Lud Langart.”

Forcing down her emotions, she spoke in a calm, rational voice. It was a declaration of the end of hostilities. And it suggested that while Lud had finished his role as a witness, he was still guilty of a slaughter that had been concealed by the government.

“Your Honor... in light of this, the article in Weekly Global News lacks credibility and is insufficient evidence for a trial. Therefore, I request a retrial.”

“Indeed. I concur.”

Having witnessed the whole scene, the judge nodded quietly.

“This trial needs to be heard without preconceptions from the very start...”

Then he glanced at Tagkinder.

“... so we may also need a new public prosecutor.”

“No...!”

His face utterly desperate, Tagkinder collapsed where he stood.

Now for a full account of all that happened later...

Miroslav received a retrial. This time, he faced charges as a regular criminal, not as a political criminal. He had committed perjury, but if a bank robber didn't know he was working as an accomplice to terrorists and then escaped and gave information to the authorities, there was a fear of him facing retaliation. He had been partially forced into crime, so he received a greatly reduced sentence.

Furthermore, during the hostage situation at Tockerbrot, Miroslav was so desperate and confused that he wanted to take his own life. But he hadn't treated his hostages violently, so consideration was shown for his circumstances.

Mary Ville was his defense counsel once again, and she worked to lighten his sentence. When his sentence was announced, Miroslav quietly bowed once and accepted his punishment—and there the trial ended. It was all over. Or so it seemed...

Chapter 7: Marguerite

The night after Miroslav's trial ended... In an office for rent a short distance from Pelfe's central government...

Mary Ville was gathering her things and preparing to leave the office, which was used by business people during short stays in the city.

"Whew..."

She stuffed unnecessary documents in the waste bin and inserted confidential papers in the fireplace to burn. She placed the documents she needed to keep inside a locked case, which she stowed in her trunk. She thought it a waste of money to hire an assistant, so she handled everything herself. It took the whole day, but finally she was ready to leave and literally stopped to catch her breath.

"What did I come here for?"

Her goal had been to use the false article and Lud's past to bring attention to the massacre in her hometown, and she had crossed the sea all the way to Pelfe to do so. But her plans had fallen through. While searching for Miroslav, she found herself in the court's waiting room with Lud and the others. There, she heard the conversation between Lud and Miroslav.

"Why does he still remember my grandfather's words?!"

Her grandfather had often told her that he wanted people who said his bread was tasty to be happy. When Mary Ville heard those words, she remembered other words her grandfather had said.

"Why does Lud think the same way?"

After mumbling this question to herself, she heard loud footsteps—clomp, clomp!

"I knew it. They've come! They won't let me leave that easily, will they?"

Someone kicked in the door to the rented office.

"What's up, Mary? You're leaving?"

Dolly Anastasia came in. And she wasn't alone. A few large men with harsh glares stood behind her. Among them was the man who had stomped on Lud's bread in Organbaelz.

"I'm going back to Greyten. The trial is over, so my work here is finished."

"Oh, don't give me that! Do you really think we'd just let you go?!"

Mary Ville had answered calmly, but Dolly was shouting loudly.

"Thanks to you, I got fired! They've branded me a third-rate journalist who falsified an article!"

"Oh? That's too bad."

Simply put, Weekly Global News had let Dolly go after the trial. Her employer stated that Dolly wrote the article on her own initiative, and it didn't represent the views of the company.

And that's not all. Although she had been a permanent employee of the company, they claimed she was a correspondent with a temporary contract. And the day after the matter became public, her contract period just happened to expire and wasn't renewed. So she was dismissed.

No matter how she argued, no one listened. They were afraid of getting involved. This woman who ensnared others through false information had herself been forced out by false information, and she lost everything.

"So what do you want? Have you come to see me off? Did those gents behind you come to help me move? I don't have much stuff, so you can let them go now."

Mary Ville knew none of this was true. Dolly and the men had come to administer her punishment. She was a traitor, so they would kill her to make her an example. The Peace Faith did not forgive traitors. So Mary Ville had known this would happen.

"What are you going to do to me?"

"Well, there's a river nearby. It's really just a filthy drainage canal, but it's adequate for us to drown you in."

"Oh."

“But first we’re going to make you very sorry while you’re still breathing. As for how... I’ll leave that up to them.”

Dolly smiled coldly and indicated the men behind her.

“Heh heh heh...”

The men licked their lips and chuckled. Their faces looked joyful... truly delighted.

“I see...”

Mary Ville realized her fate was going to be more depraved than she expected. If she had known, she would have fled sooner. But she couldn’t leave until she had seen Miroslav’s trial to the end.

Is this... retribution?

In her fight against the authorities, she had used many methods. But on her own, she was ineffective at resisting the organization that is the nation. So she had borrowed the Peace Faith’s strength.

“Dolly, can I say something?”

Mary Ville couldn’t escape this fate, but she at least wanted to say what was on her mind. She readied herself into something like defiance.

“Using unscrupulous methods to achieve your goals won’t work for very long.”

“Hunh? Why’re you saying this all of a sudden?”

“Anyone can be unscrupulous. Actually, few people choose scrupulous methods. Most take any steps they consider necessary as if it’s only sensible.”

The world was full of people who use justice and peace to justify savagery. Dictators and revolutionaries use the same words, throw their fists, and steal lives.

“We should have chosen better methods. No matter how difficult that path may be, if you don’t want to live your life dishonestly, you must achieve your goals the right way.”

Mary Ville made a tight fist.

“Otherwise, we would be just like Wiltia, which we hate so much.”

To truly win against opponents who will stop at nothing to reach their goals, it was necessary to fight them with upright methods. The pride that results provides a strength that is stronger than the enemy. Otherwise the foundation of victory is weak and will soon crumble at the hands of the people who will stop at nothing to reach their goals.

Mary Ville came to realize this over the last few days. And that was the point of her grandfather’s words.

“I get what you’re saying.”

Despite her words, Dolly’s face didn’t show the slightest understanding.

“I get it, but it’s time for you to die.”

Dolly couldn’t listen to arguments or objections. She believed she was on the side of justice. And anyone who opposed justice was evil. Whatever horrible fate befell them, it was their just deserts. So she permitted herself to do anything.

“Do as you please.”

At Dolly’s command, the men stepped forward.

“I get to kill her, but otherwise you can do what you want. Oh... but the burns on her back are disgusting, so watch out.”

Dolly would even mock the scars of another’s tragedy.

“That don’t matter. We won’t be lookin’ at that!”

The men laughed. Their smiles were vulgar.

I should have prepared a poison to kill myself.

Mary Ville was strangely calm. She had witnessed Hell many times. This would just be the last time. The suffering that Dolly and these men would put her through was a tiny fraction of what she had tasted in Lapchuricka. But she hated the degradation that would give these slugs pleasure.

“Pardon me!”

“—?!”

A woman’s voice came from outside the broken doorway.

“Who’re you?! We’re busy!”

Dolly’s shouts sounded more like squeals.

Even if they were on the side of justice, it wouldn’t do for someone to see them pulling a hit job. It was a clear contradiction, but Dolly didn’t notice. Instead, she pulled a knife from her inside pocket and faced the door, ready to threaten the woman.

“Um... I’ve got a delivery for Mary Ville Mehl!”

As if unaware of the tense atmosphere in the room, the woman spoke casually.

“A delivery?! What the hell?!”

The moment Dolly reached the door, with her voice raised in anger, there was a dull sound.

“Oof!!”

Dolly made an unladylike sound and was launched into the air. Shedding blood and broken teeth, she slammed into the wall behind Mary Ville, and fell unconscious.

“Guten Abend! I’m with Tockerbrot Bakery’s delivery service with fresh-baked bread!”

A beautiful young woman with red eyes and silver hair appeared with a basket in one hand. It was Sven, the waitress from Tockerbrot.

“What the—?!”

Mary Ville was shocked at the sight of Sven smiling and wiping her victim’s blood off her fist.

But she wasn’t shocked by the tremendous might of Sven’s fists. Sven had displayed unimaginable strength in court by lifting a long table with one hand. Mary Ville was surprised that the young woman had such strength, but it wasn’t strange that a girl who could do that could also do this. So although she wasn’t shocked by her physical power, she couldn’t get her head around why Sven had

come; the girl who professed to be Lud Langart's devoted servant.

"Who're you?! Grah!!"

As if on fire, the men yelled in anger, but they were a little too slow to act. After all, since they had intended to play with Mary Ville, one had his belt off, one was in the process of removing his pants, and the other was wearing nothing more than his underwear.

"Umf!"

Sven didn't fail to notice their ridiculous appearance. In an instant, she was on them and unleashed a flurry of kicks.

"Gyah!"

"Gyow!"

The men yelped in pain, collapsed on the spot, and frothed at the mouth. She hadn't just kicked them. Since they had left themselves wide open, she kicked them between the legs... in their most vulnerable parts. And her legs packed enough power to crush oil drums.

"Oogoogoo... gah-gah... Pfooah!"

The men's pain was excruciating. Even after losing consciousness, the whites of their eyes showed and they writhed in agony. They would be unable to perform as men for the rest of their lives.

"Now, then..."

Having dealt with the men in no time, Sven turned to Mary Ville.

"Let's get outta here!"

"Huh? What? To where?"

Mary Ville was stunned.

"To the station. If we leave now, we can make the last train."

The train would take Mary Ville to the port town of Alohz by dawn. And once in Alohz, she could board a ship for Greyten.

"You're originally from Haugen, but you still have Greytenese citizenship,

don’t you? If you flee there, it’ll be hard for these punks to hurt you.”

Dolly had tried to get rid of Mary Ville before she could return to her home country.

“So let’s go!”

Sven took Mary Ville’s hand and they left the rented office.

About thirty minutes later, Sven and Mary Ville arrived at Central Station in Ponapalas.

“Y... you walk too fast!”

Mary Ville was breathing heavily as she asked Sven to slow down, but the waitress dragged her along with her superhuman speed.

“Why... did you help me? Why are you even still in Ponapalas?”

Lud and Sven’s role in Miroslav’s trial had ended. Mary Ville thought they had returned to Organbaelz. There was still time until the steam engine arrived so Mary Ville asked Sven to explain.

“It was Master’s order.”

“Lud’s?”

“Yes. He expected something like this might happen.”

The Peace Faith didn’t forgive traitors. And Lud knew that well. Mary Ville had incurred their wrath in court by revealing the truth, so it was perfectly clear they would soon come to retaliate.

“Oh. But he sent you, huh? Hmf! What a coward!”

“No, you don’t understand.”

With a cool expression, Sven answered Mary Ville, who was spluttering, “I suggested it. Because I’m stronger.”

“Well, that’s putting it bluntly!”

But it was the truth. With her combat ability as a humanoid Hunter Unit, Sven was more than an equal match even for a fully armored soldier.

“Besides, I can’t take any chances with Master right now. He’d even show mercy to the enemy!”

“Oh... uh-huh.”

When Miroslav had holed up in Tockerbrot, Lud had tried to save his life and ended up in the hospital. Lud might show mercy even toward the worst villain, allow an opening, and end up injured. Sven feared that above all else. But she had another reason: She wanted to ask Mary Ville her own questions.

“Why did you do that?”

Mary Ville started to answer Sven’s question once, then twice, but each time she faltered. It wasn’t that she couldn’t answer. Rather, she didn’t want to. But she also didn’t know the right response. But there was one certain answer. And that was...

“Because of my grandfather’s will.”

“Your grandfather... You mean Tocker Mehl?”

Tocker Mehl had been Mary Ville’s grandfather, Lud’s baking teacher, and the owner of the small bakery called Tockerbrot in Lapchuricka. And during the tragedy in Lapchuricka, he had died in an explosion so immense nothing remained of him.

“It was written in my grandfather’s notes.”

Mr. Tocker, unbeknownst to Mary Ville, always wrote at night in the underground wheat storehouse. When Mary Ville realized that, she had frantically dug among the remains of Tockerbrot, and found his notes.

“It was a diary. Or rather, a collection of confessions. My grandfather was a former soldier.”

Haugen had declared neutrality in the Great European War, but the country had been engaged in war. Twenty years earlier, it participated in the Haugen Conflict, immediately before the outbreak of the Great War. It was a civil war between factions supporting Wiltia and factions supporting Wiltia’s enemy, Filbarneu. Fellow citizens had killed each other.

“My grandfather wrote how he had killed many people—not just enemy

soldiers, but civilians too.”

The conflict had erupted over a disagreement about the best way to achieve the future peace of Haugen. War was waged for peace, with each side believing it was right, and they had killed each other.

“My grandfather was pro-Filbarneu. He believed the pro-Wiltians were traitors, so he didn’t hesitate to kill even noncombatants. He thought the more he killed, the better it would be for his mother country. But the violent internal strife continued, and after the war ended, what awaited was tragedy.”

“Did... something happen?”

“The pro-Wiltians attacked and destroyed his hometown much as he had attacked them. His wife and child and everyone else were all killed.”

“—?!”

“Then he realized that war is neither just nor unjust. It’s just a struggle between differing views of justice. And that kind of fighting doesn’t change anything.”

Oddly, what Mr. Tocker had intuited was an indication of Haugen’s future. The Haugen government declared neutrality and joined neither side. When the Great European War started, however, Haugen actually leaned toward Filbarneu, which had an advantage at the time.

However, the international community viewed Haugen’s imperfect neutrality as two-faced perfidy. By forming a tentative alliance, without receiving any significant aid, Haugen had made an enemy of Wiltia and was overrun. As the result of internal strife, and making enemies instead of allies, the land grew desolate and fell to ruin.

“I was a war orphan. Or rather, I was abandoned. I was abandoned soon after birth, so I don’t remember my parents’ faces.”

“And Mr. Tocker took you in and raised you like his grandchild?”

“Yes. I learned that from his notes.”

This was a hard truth for a girl whose town had been destroyed, causing her to lose her family and suffer physical and emotional scars that would never

disappear.

“Perhaps your grandfather felt he was atoning.”

Mary Ville bore no responsibility. But the world around her had been falling apart. As an adult who had participated in the war, perhaps Mr. Tocker had wanted to save at least one soul.

“And on the first page of his notes, he had written, ‘I don’t think I’ll die a good death. So if there is someone who loves me, please do not hold a grudge.”

“And that’s... you?”

“Yes.”

That was the same thing Lud had said in court when answering Mary Ville’s questions.

“The same thing was written at the end. ‘That person is probably suffering and will continue to do so. So please do not hold a grudge.’”

“.....”

“My grandfather might have known who Lud really was.”

Lud had been a Wiltian special ops soldier who snuck into the city to work undercover in the guise of a baker’s apprentice. One day, Tocker Mehl must have realized that he would eventually come to harm through Lud’s actions, directly or indirectly. Nonetheless, he treated Lud like a regular boy. Perhaps Mr. Tocker saw that Lud considered him and Mary Ville like family, which Lud himself realized after losing them.

“That may be why he suggested not to hold a grudge. He believed Lud would regret what he had done and suffer for it someday.”

Until the very end, Tocker Mehl believed that Lud wasn’t beyond salvation and wouldn’t lose himself in a great cause, feeling no pain after harming, even killing others.

“So that’s why you helped Master.”

“I guess. I couldn’t continue my grudge against him for killing my grandfather when my grandfather himself had said not to hold a grudge. That’s all. And

when I decided that, I realized something."

She had realized what she told Dolly about achieving her goals through upright means.

"I didn't know what I was doing. I knew if I did one thing, then something else would happen as a result, but... if I pressed Lud without any regard for appearances, I couldn't hold my head high as my grandfather's granddaughter. And that scared me more than anything."

Mary Ville sat on a bench in a corner of the station and exhaled deeply. It wasn't her breathing technique to regain composure. She just felt like she needed to expel something.

"Here... take this."

Sven handed her the basket that was dangling from her hand the whole time.

"What's this? Hm? Bread?"

Inside the basket was a bag containing fresh-baked bread.

"Master baked it. He didn't have proper facilities, but he managed it with a frying pan."

"Is this a marguerite?"

The bag held a rather large loaf of bread. Lud had divided the kneaded dough into many pieces, allowing primary and secondary fermentation, then baked it in the pan.

The individual pieces of dough rise, spreading in the frying pan and joining to form one flower-shaped constellation. The bread is called a marguerite because it resembles the flower of the same name.

"You know this type of bread?"

"Well, I am a baker's granddaughter! So I know that much! Sometimes, even now, I bake bread myself."

"You do?"

"It helps change my mood."

Mary Ville wore three hats—lawyer, journalist and novelist—which exhausted

her physically and mentally. One of her few ways to relax was kneading bread dough.

“When I knead the dough, it clears my mind.”

“Oh... uh-huh.”

“Is there anything wrong with that?”

“No. Master says the same thing sometimes.”

“Urgh...”

At Sven’s answer, Mary Ville looked unsettled.

“Why did that lunkhead give me this?!”

From her seat in court, Mary Ville had shouted, “Why would I eat that jerk’s bread?!”

She thought it was an insult to eat bread made by the man who had learned how to bake from her beloved grandfather and then killed him. But that was wrong. She had noticed Lud possessed a heart very like her deceased grandfather, so now she hadn’t refused to accept it.

“This bread is a marguerite made with rye. Our shop was known for it.”

As she noticed this, Mary Ville smiled slightly.

“.....!”

Seeing her face, Sven made up her mind.

“Mary Ville! Come to Organbaelz! You can run the bakery with us!”

“Huh?!”

Mary Ville was dumbfounded by the sudden suggestion.

“At the moment, we’re dreadfully short on help, especially when it comes to bakers! Aside from Master, we only have one apprentice!”

“Hold on a second!! Sven?!”

“Not long ago, Master nearly collapsed from exhaustion! But when there’s a special request, like to help with a town festival, he accepts even if it means not sleeping! Worrying about him is driving me bonkers!”

“Wait! Just a moment... Wait!!”

Mary Ville had indeed grown up in a bakery, so she was able to bake bread under busy conditions. She might not be a professional baker, but she would be valuable because she knew the taste of Mr. Tocker’s bread, which was the basis for Lud’s baking. For that reason, she might be the exact resource Tockerbrot needed. However, she was confused by this offer from an opponent who had fiercely battled her until the other day.

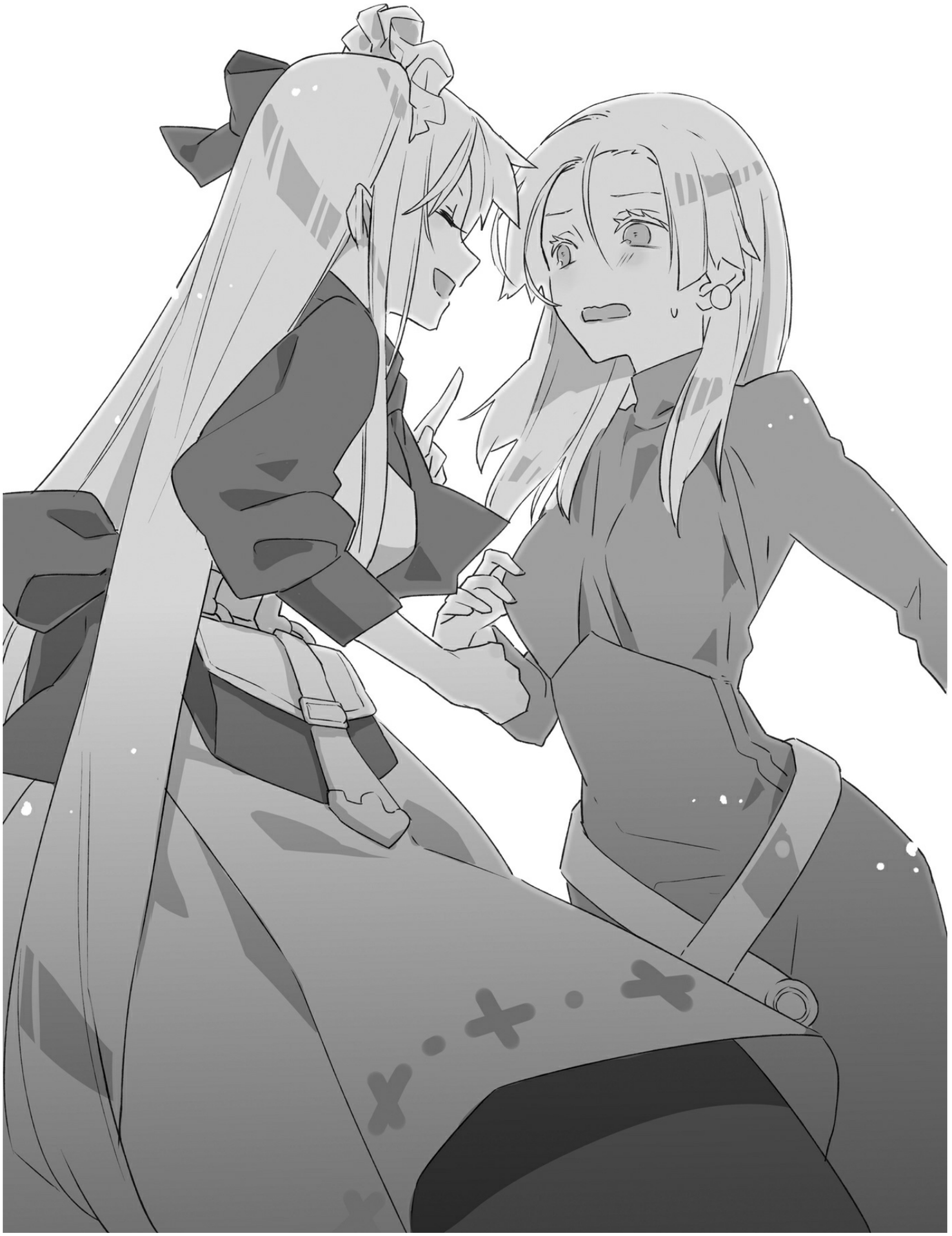
“Why would I work at Lud’s shop?! You know what’s between us!”

“Yes, I know! And that’s why you should do it!”

“Hey... I...”

“You had feelings for Master, right?”

“—?!”



Mary Ville froze at Sven's question. Which meant she was spot-on. Mary Ville was only a girl during those days in Lapchuricka, and she had developed a crush on Lud, who was still a boy. She had imagined a joyful future in which she and Lud ran the shop together.

"That was... a long time ago."

Mumbling, Mary Ville tried to deny it, but Sven stayed on the attack.

"And you still love him, right?"

"..............!"

Turning beet red, sweating and trembling, Mary Ville was at a loss for words. She had argued and engaged in a fierce clash with Sven, but now she was speechless.

"I understand. After all, I've got it bad for him, too. That's how I can sense the same thing in you."

During the trial... No, even before, Sven had noticed. She had sensed a different light deep in Mary Ville's eyes, which burned with intense anger and hatred. And it was the same as what she felt herself.

"At first, I didn't understand. But finally I did. The human heart is complicated and easily breaks in two. It can love at the same time that it hates."

That was a quality of the heart that she never thought of when she was a Hunter Unit. But that's the way Sven's heart was now. She wanted to bring home yet another rival—in addition to Sophia and Marlene—for the affections of her dearly beloved master Lud.

But that was what she felt compelled to do. She couldn't just abandon Mary Ville. This woman loved the same man Sven loved and was confused by her own heart.

"....."

Mary Ville didn't answer, but her silence said more than words.

"So come with us!"

Sven held out her hand. But Mary Ville didn't take it.

“Thank you.”

Instead, she expressed her gratitude. When she raised her face, she was smiling with tears in her eyes that she had never shown before.

“But it’s out of the question.”

“Why?!”

“I told you. You’re right. I still love Lud.”

When she had learned he was still alive, Mary Ville had been angry, thinking, “He was a Wiltian soldier?!” Simultaneously, however, she had been happy.

“But I also hated him so much I couldn’t forgive him. If it hadn’t been for my grandfather’s words, I would have tried to destroy him!”

In court, she had meant it when she said she would plunge him into regret and humiliation. The human heart is complicated. Human beings are capable of hating and loving at the same time.

“I envy you for loving him properly.”

Mary Ville spoke with a sad smile, then rose to her feet. On the platform, a station attendant announced the imminent departure of the train to Alohz.

“Mary Ville... are you sure?”

“Of course not. That’s why I hate him.”

Mary Ville answered Sven’s question with her back turned. Perhaps what Mary Ville hated most about Lud was that he made her hate what she loved most. But she clasped the paper bag she had received from Sven to her chest—with the marguerite inside—as if it were important. That was all she could do.

“Then at least work at loving that dummy!”

Leaving those words behind her, Mary Ville boarded the train without looking back.

“.....”

Silently, Sven saw her off. She watched for a long time after the train moved forward, left the platform, and disappeared from sight.

Mary Ville stayed in her seat, without speaking, gazing out the window. For hours, without thinking anything, she just stared at the passing landscape.

A lot had happened. Over a few days, she had faced her past and confronted her own heart. And she remembered that she had smiled during her conversation with the silver-haired girl.

Before long, Lud will probably start smiling, too.

But it wouldn't be the smile he had used to make the people of Lapchuricka let down their guard. It would be a joyous smile that celebrated being human.

It's too bad...

She felt a slight regret. If she had gone to Organbaelz at Sven's invitation... If she could have lived in that small town as a baker..... She would have been happy. She would have smiled more.

"Sheez... Why did I ever fall for a guy like that?"

Laughing wryly, she picked up the bread by her side.

The bread was a marguerite. It was given that name because it looked like the flower. In the language of flowers, it meant "secret love," so no bread was more fitting for her at this moment.

"Hmf! Wouldn't flowers have been more appropriate for a farewell?"

As she said this, she tore off a piece of bread corresponding to a petal and popped it in her mouth. The soft texture and the gentle sweetness of the wheat and rye spread through her mouth.

"Hey, this is pretty good!"

As Mary Ville murmured these words, the train crossed over a bridge. The sky was tinged with blue. It would soon be dawn.

Epilogue: No Expectation of Recovery

A little earlier...

About the time Sven and Mary Ville were conversing on the train platform, a man was reeling around the entertainment district on the outskirts of Ponapalas.

“Warrrgh!”

He had been drinking, pouring cheap alcohol down his throat, but his anger hadn’t eased one bit. The man’s name was Tagkinder. He was the prosecutor who had behaved inappropriately in court and was removed from Miroslav’s trial. Then his organization had forsaken him.

Today, he would receive his new appointment. He would be transferred to a remote branch office of the Justice Bureau in a Wiltian colony on another continent. Supposedly, this transfer wasn’t punishment for his connection to the Peace Faith.

But he wasn’t allowed to refuse. If he did, he would have to quit his profession as a prosecutor. In other words, this was a kind of legal harassment—exile because he held dangerous ideas against the government.

“Argh! Urgh! Argh!!”

Screaming, he kicked the wall and collapsed by the side of the road.

“Pardon me.”

“Who’re you?! Stop starin’! You’re buggin’ me!”

Tagkinder began to chew out the man but closed his mouth.

“Y... You’re...”

“Oh, you remember?”

The man wearing a black coat answered with a smile. It was the same man who approached Tagkinder the night before the trial and gave him the evidence

to win the case in a single blow.

“Why didn’t you use the information I provided?”

“Well, um... the information wasn’t reliable enough. You can’t use that in a court of law! That’s the only reason!”

“Hmm...”

The man in black answered without interest and pulled a pistol from an inside pocket.

“What the—?!”

“It was my mistake for failing to notice your relationship to the Peace Faith. You have my sincerest apologies.”

The pistol had a silencer. Despite the many people around, no one would notice the sound of the gun in the noisy entertainment district.

“W-Wait!”

“I truly am sorry. If I had known, I would never have approached you.”

The man had misunderstood when he researched Tagkinder’s background.

Tagkinder himself wasn’t the kind of person to adhere to a rigid ideology. However, his younger brother had been a member of the Pelfe Militia.

The Pelfe Militia were military volunteers who showed loyalty to Wiltia so it would merge with Pelfe. Its members had been sent to a particularly dangerous battlefield on the Western Front. By standing firm despite the brutal onslaught, they proved Pelfe’s loyalty to Wiltia.

Wiltia had sent the Pelfians to avoid endangering their own soldiers. As a result, the number of casualties in the Pelfe Militia had been higher than in other units, with half said to have died.

Tagkinder’s younger brother had been a member of that group.

“Don’t worry. I’m sure your brother is waiting for you.”

“No, don—”

After reassuring Tagkinder with a smile, the man in black pulled the trigger.

Pshmp! Pshmp!

A dry sound rang out several times, but no one noticed. Tagkinder fell to the ground and spoke no more. His heart stopped and he ceased breathing.

“What a shame... Because your brother showed loyalty to our nation, you guys get better treatment than the citizens of Haugen. And that’s a problem.”

He put away his gun as he muttered.

“Being kind to inferior people just makes them uppity. It truly is a problem.”

The man in black wasn’t really smiling. He was without feelings, so the smile simply hung on his face. And it hid fierce contempt.

“Now for one more. The woman.”

The man in black—Agent Belger of the Security Department—continued muttering as he tucked away his gun.

The next morning at Central Station in Ponapalas...

Lud and Sven were in the waiting room before boarding a steam engine from Ponapalas to Organbaelz—or, to be more accurate, to the town next to Organbaelz where the rail line connected.

“What’s the holdup?!”

Sven was fuming as she sat on a waiting room bench.

“It seems there’s been some sort of trouble.”

Lud was sitting next to her and answered as he watched the tumultuous scene of people waiting for the train.

“Forget about our train. It seems the train before ours hasn’t arrived either. I wonder if there was an accident.”

“Just when I thought we’d handled everything here and were on our way home!”

They had been waiting for almost an hour, but there was no expectation of leaving. At this rate, they might not get home that day.

“And we left our lodging, so it’ll be hard to find a place to spend the night.”

“Then we’ll just have to wait this out! Master, I’ll go buy something to drink.”

Inside the station, eager vendors were selling fruit, sandwiches, and drinks like coffee and tea—as well as newspapers and magazines, and even playing cards to help travelers pass the time.

Sven exited the waiting room, and just when she was about to call out to one of the vendors, she overheard two station attendants talking.

“It was the last train yesterday, right? Haven’t they cleaned that up yet?”

“Well, I heard it was a bomb or something.”

“Seriously? I heard there was a terrorist bombing incident in Berun, too. I hope Pelfe doesn’t get attacked!”

They were talking softly, but it was clearly audible to Sven with her superhuman hearing.

“Hey! You!”

Without thinking, she called out.

“Did you say the last train yesterday?! The one to Alohz?!”

“Huh?! Um...”

The station attendants were flustered. Apparently, they weren’t supposed to reveal details to the passengers yet.

“W-What are you talking about?!”

“It’s all right, just tell me!”

An attendant was nervously trying to fix the situation, but Sven grabbed him by his coat lapels and questioned him.

“Oh... did you overhear us? It’ll cause an uproar, so please don’t tell any other passengers, all right? You’re right. There was an incident involving the last train last night, the train bound for Alohz.”

“How bad was the damage?!”

After leaving Sven last night, Mary Ville had boarded that train.

“Well... just before dawn, the bridge collapsed. They say it was a bomb.”

“A bomb?!”

“It seems all the passengers... everyone died. Clearing away the debris has been difficult. We still don’t know who was on the train or how many passengers there were, but there are no reports of survivors.”

“Oh no!”

Sven’s face paled.

It couldn’t have been a coincidence. There was no way such a bombing would accidentally occur at that precise time. Mary Ville Mehl had been liquidated.

“Waaaaaaaaah!”

Sven wailed loudly.

She should have stopped Mary Ville from leaving, by force if necessary.

Mary Ville loved Lud but she also hated him? Who cares!

Sven should have dragged her along by force to see Lud again. That alone might have been enough to change her mind.

Mary Ville could have helped Lud bake bread at the small bakery in Organbaelz. She had been articulate and would have been a better teacher for the apprentice Milly. She might have joined the fight between Sven and the nun Marlene over Lud. They might have become surprisingly good friends. And Jacob, who was crazy about beautiful women, might have unsettled her with smooth talk surprising from a ten-year-old boy.

As the days passed, she might have smiled—not the sad smile Sven had seen when they parted, but the bright smile she had been capable of until ten years ago. And the sight would have pleased Lud more than anything.

But now that would never be. Because Mary Ville Mehl had died.

Postscript: The Saint

Just before dawn, on a steel bridge spanning the Zidle River, a few kilometers from the port town of Alohz, there was an explosion. The bomb wasn't made from black powder like the bomb in the terrorist incident in Berun. It used the newest plastic explosive, which even the military had yet to officially adopt. It was resistant against both heat and cold, capable of exploding even when wet, and extremely powerful. That power had completely destroyed one of the bridge's supports, its blast derailing the train that just happened to be crossing above. It was a horrific tragedy, leaving no possibility of survivors among the crew or passengers, but the man who had pulled this act of sabotage was still cautious.

"All right, everyone. We have about thirty minutes until the Railway Safety Department arrives. Make sure there are no survivors."

The man issuing instructions to his subordinates was Agent Belger of the Security Department. His subordinates were highly trained special ops soldiers, so their footfalls were silent as they entered the accident site.

"If anyone is still alive, kill them immediately. And if their wounds are light, finish them off just to be sure."

His crisp commands sounded more like those of a trained janitor than a covert operative. But he actually was a kind of janitor. As ordered by Hitzinger, and for the nation's justice and safety, he cleaned up any trash that soiled the nation.

Today he was fulfilling his duty to handle matters efficiently. He was eliminating the misguided people trying to reveal the slaughter of Lapchuricka that Wiltia had covered up. He would kill anyone involved, because it would teach a lesson so that no one would attempt to make the massacre of Lapchuricka public in the future. This was actually compassionate and would save others who disobeyed from being killed.

"Mr. Belger, we found the woman."

“Oh? Was she dead?”

A subordinate reported that the real target of this sabotage had been discovered. One woman.

“No, she’s still breathing.”

“What?!”

Belger purposely made an expression of shock.

“Well, she survived Lapchuricka, too. She’s very lucky.”

The woman Belger had attempted to eliminate was Mary Ville. She had lost consciousness, but she was alive. While many of the deceased had been damaged beyond recognition, she had only suffered abrasions, so she was lucky indeed.

“Well, well... She amazes me! I’m glad we checked just to be certain.”

Belger pulled a pistol from his inside pocket. Just as when he killed Tagkinder, Belger’s gun had a silencer. It wouldn’t be a problem if a gunshot rang out here, but Belger’s custom was to avoid slipping up and making noise. He was always cautious.

“Then if you’ll excuse me...”

He would finish her off with his own hand so he could deliver a report of her certain death. He pointed the gun at her head and prepared to shoot from a distance that made missing impossible. But...

“Hm?”

He had pulled the trigger, but the gun didn’t fire.

No... that’s not quite right. He had tried to pull the trigger, but his finger hadn’t moved. So no wonder no bullet came out.

“Hmm...?”

Why didn’t his finger move? At first, Belger didn’t understand. But he soon did.

“What the...?”

His right arm, gun still in hand, fell to the ground with a plop.

“Huh...?”

Instead of feeling pain from the wound, he experienced a sensation as if he had split apart at the molecular level.

“We can still use this woman, so I’m taking her.”

Belger turned toward the voice. And the moment he did, he saw a scene even further divorced from reality.

Belger had come with at least ten subordinates. They were all exceptionally well-trained agents. But in a moment—truly in one moment—they had all been killed. They were transformed into perfectly cubical chunks of meat, as though they were made of a gelatinous substance pushed through a sieve.

Belger supposed the woman he was looking at had done this. There was no other possibility.

“How did you... kill them?”

He truly wanted to know.

Belger had undergone intense training, acquired great knowledge as a specialist with heightened perception and analytical abilities, but he had no idea what just happened.

“Oh...”

The next thing he knew, the woman was standing right in front of him. Then, an instinctive desire to fall and press his head to the ground coursed through Belger. But not to beg for his life. He wanted only to serve the being before him.

“Oh. Are you still here?”

But his offer of servitude was not accepted. In the next moment, Belger’s consciousness disappeared. Because he was dead. Like his subordinates, he had been diced. The last image that burned itself into his eyes was of a beautiful young woman—genuinely beautiful, as if she had stepped from a myth—with violet hair and red eyes.

Afterword

This is SOW. Thank you for reading volume 7 of The Combat Baker and Automaton Waitress!

This time, it was Mary Ville who stood in Lud and Sven's way. Originally, her middle name—Ville—was actually to be Lud's name. But right before the release of volume 1, we needed to change it in a hurry for various reasons.

Lud Ville... Can you guess the origin of this name? It comes from the Grimm brothers Ludwig and Wilhelm, because their names have similar pronunciations. Since the novels are set in a world similar to the German-speaking world, we drew upon the names of very well-known Germans.

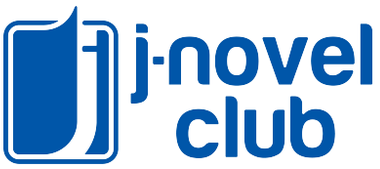
The Grimm brothers, who were famous authors, included the eldest brother Jacob and the middle brother Wilhelm. Ludwig, the youngest brother, was in charge of illustrations. He was not well-known for a long time, but in recent years a reevaluation of his contributions has led to his addition as an author.

And yes, Jacob Rosso is named after the eldest brother. So, that's the story behind their names.

Now all three brothers have appeared. But that doesn't mean all three characters are related by blood, okay?!

Now it's time to say good-bye. I extend heartfelt thanks to everyone involved with the book—and special thanks to the illustrator, Zaza, who I troubled yet again. And to everyone who picks up this book..... Thank you very much! I hope from the bottom of my heart that we will meet again.

SOW



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by SOW

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Ebook edition 1.0: August 2020