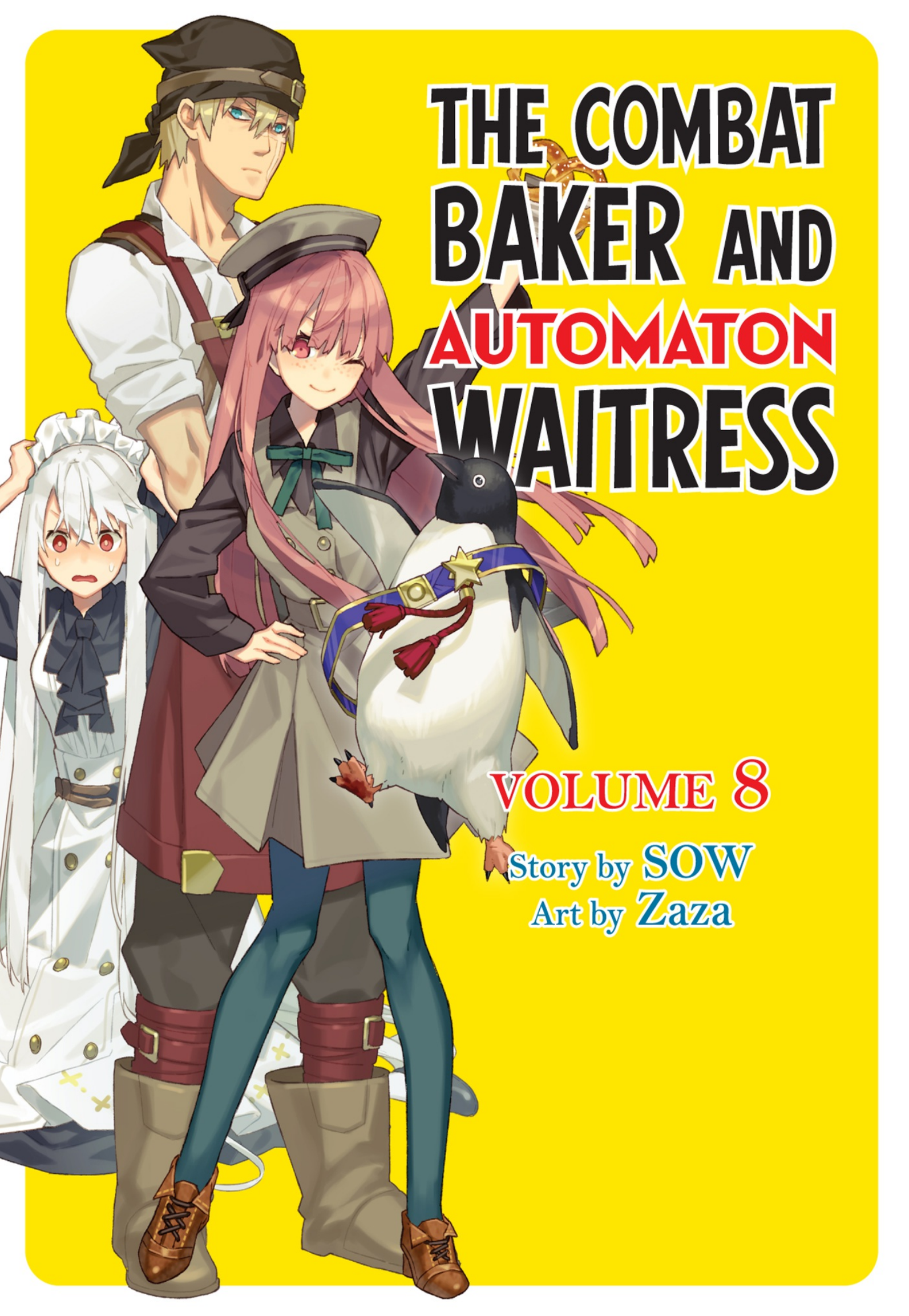
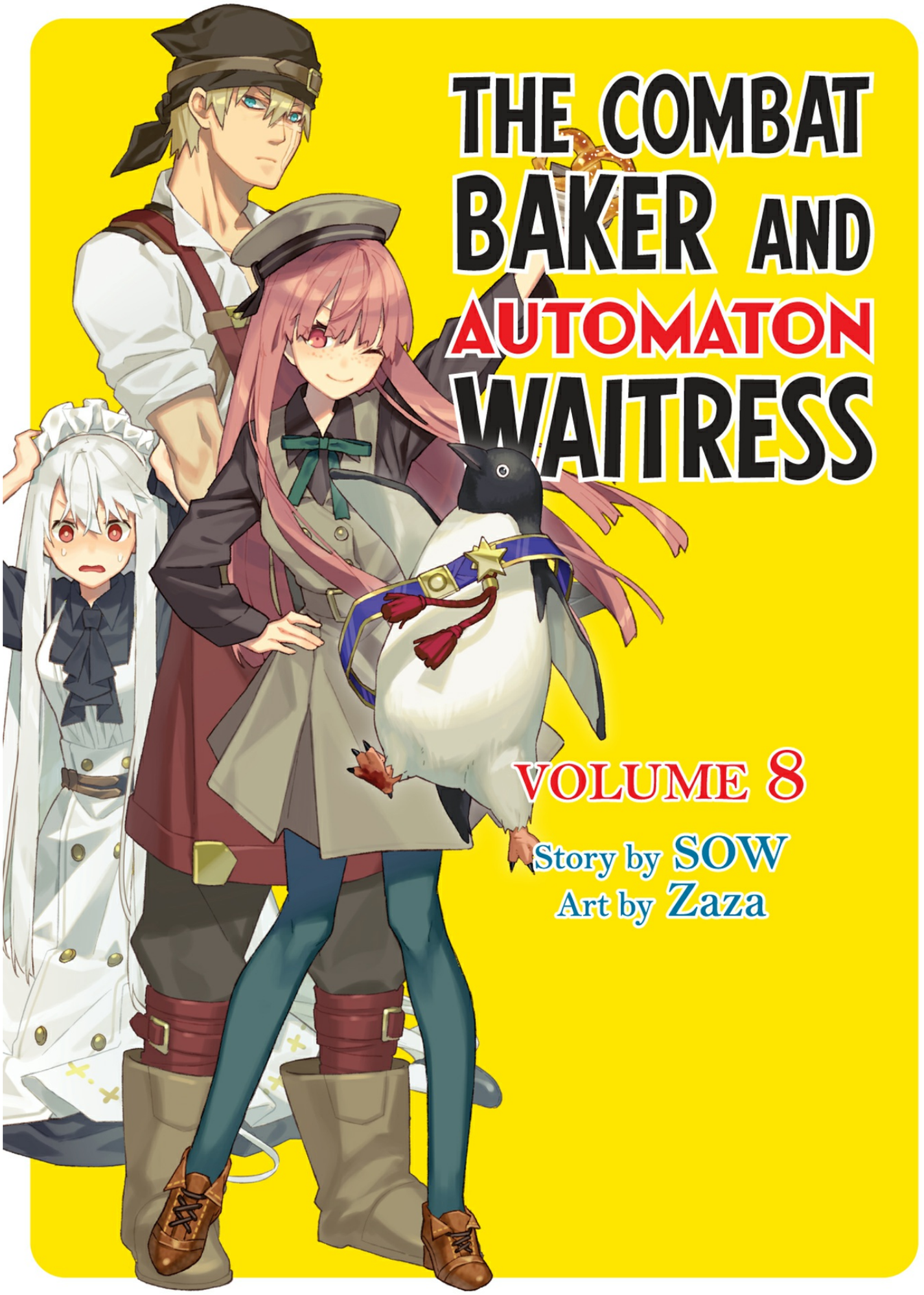


THE COMBAT BAKER AND AUTOMATON WAITRESS

VOLUME 8

Story by SOW

Art by Zaza



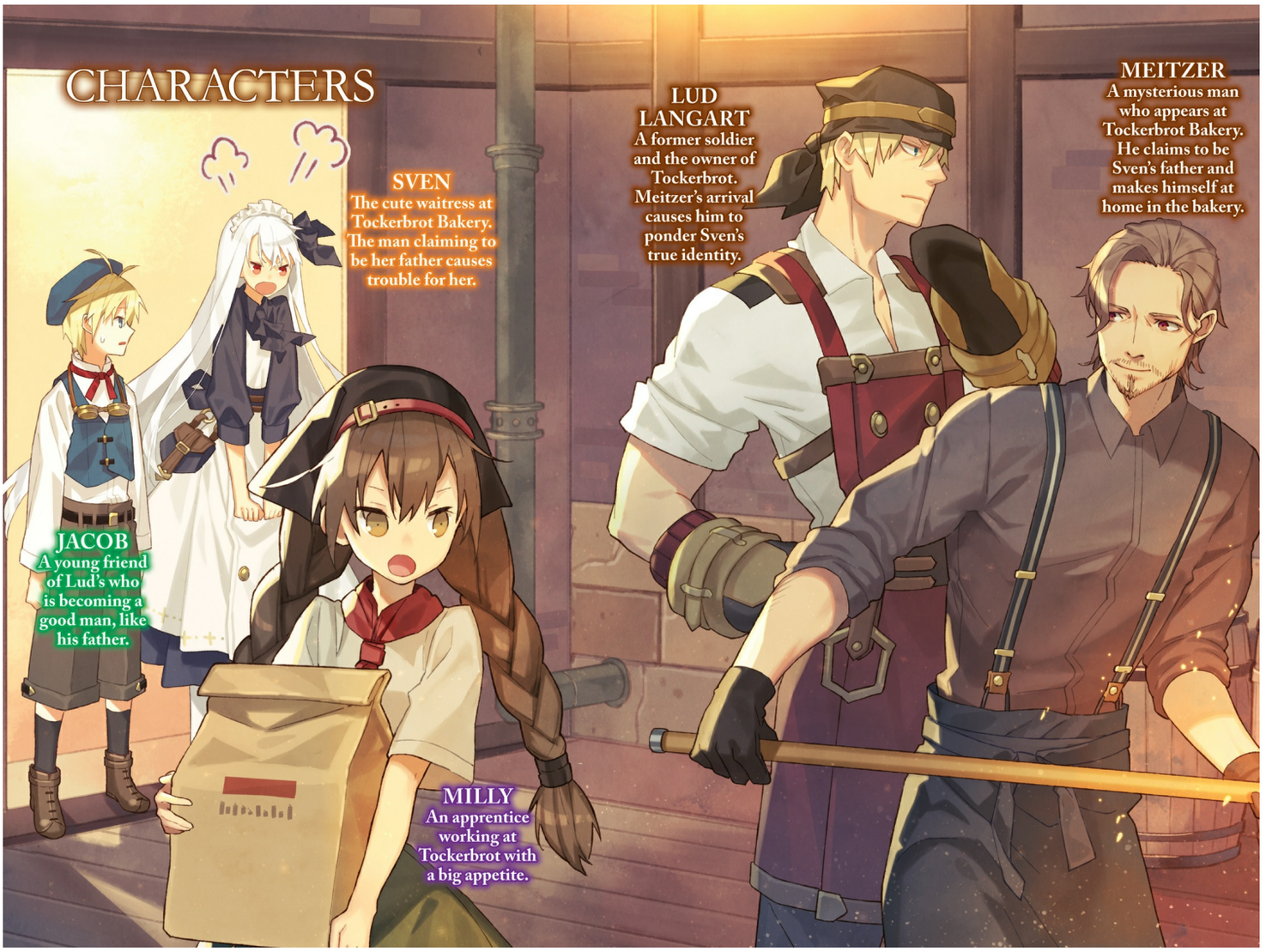
THE COMBAT BAKER AND AUTOMATON WAITRESS

VOLUME 8

Story by SOW

Art by Zaza


"Long time, no see! I'm your dad!"
Sven froze at these astonishing words.
THE COMBAT BAKER AND AUTOMATON WAITRESS 8


CHARACTERS
SVEN
The cute waitress at Tockerbrot Bakery. The man claiming to be her father causes trouble for her.
LUD LANGART
A former soldier and the owner of Tockerbrot. Meitzer's arrival causes him to ponder Sven's true identity.
MEITZER
A mysterious man who appears at Tockerbrot Bakery. He claims to be Sven's father and makes himself at home in the bakery.
JACOB
A young friend of Lud's who is becoming a good man, like his father.
MILLY
An apprentice working at Tockerbrot with a big appetite.


"I'll kill you all!"
Rebecca's eyes glowed red in anger.
"Now you will die!"
Sven's red eyes shone.

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Prologue

Introduction (Part 1): The Man Who Fell From Heaven

Introduction (Part 2): The Woman Loved by All

Chapter 1: Fate Will Open the “Door” for You

Chapter 2: A Workplace Where Smiles Never Fade

Chapter 3: The World Quakes

Chapter 4: Sometimes Kindness Surpasses Despair

Chapter 5: Throngs of Customers

Epilogue: Thus Performers Gather on Stage

Afterword

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

Prologue

For the most part, things don't go well. Young people can talk with bright eyes about love and romance, but men in middle age cannot live on that alone.

It's unfortunate, but I know nothing lasts forever. Yes, things may be valuable precisely because they don't last forever. It can be said that we enjoy the beginning because there is an end. Because of death, we value life. Because of destruction, we value creation. That is the way of the world.

But what would happen if we found something that was truly eternal? Ah, what a tragedy. A tragedy that is a comedy, but a comedy that isn't funny.

So sometimes I wonder. Maybe the end is *relief*. Perhaps things like death and destruction are a kind of *salvation*—as if to say 'enough is enough.' Perhaps this is a mercy given by the true god... if such a being exists.

Introduction (Part 1): The Man Who Fell From Heaven

In the sky, over Wiltian territory in the former Republic of Pelfe, on the continent of Europea...

“We can’t gain altitude! Engine No. 3 has stopped! Output has fallen below 30 percent!”

“Do something! Find someplace for a crash landing!”

Inside an airborne transport, fierce cries rang out. The words exchanged between the captain and co-pilot in the cockpit were practically screams.

They were not inexperienced pilots. They were trained aviators with considerable skill and many flight hours between them. These pilots wouldn’t raise their voices unless the situation was desperate.

There was a high possibility in the air—compared to on land or sea—that an accident would lead to immediate death, so the slightest difficulty could throw the other crew members into confusion. They knew that. Yet they didn’t hide their own fear, which showed how dire the situation was.

“This isn’t good.” Another man sighed as he spoke. It wasn’t because he didn’t understand the situation. Comprehending it all, he continued softly. “That’s enough, men. Out you go.”

“Huh?” The crew didn’t understand and responded with surprise. “Please, stay seated! We’ll handle this somehow!”

“No, that isn’t necessary.” The man appeared calm in the face of the captain’s shouts. He wasn’t just calm. He was expressionless, and spoke with no emotion. “Use the parachutes to bail out. At this height... Well, you’ll break a few bones, but you won’t die.”

“Um...” The aircraft was so low they could clearly see the trees below. “That’s not the point!”

“Whatever. Just go.” The aircraft was violently shaking and rumbling, but even now the man spoke gently, shoving parachutes at the pilots and physically picking them up.

“No, wait!”

“I’ll take care of the aircraft. I’ll take her down safely where it won’t cause damage.”

Then he opened a sliding hatch and tossed the resistant pilots out, as if he were a father seeing his children off on a holiday, saying, “The weather’s nice, so go play out front!”

“—!!!” The pilots were shouting something, but their forms rapidly grew smaller as they fell.

Confirming that their chutes had opened and they were slowly drifting down, the man muttered, “That’ll do.”

“Now what? Where am I?” He threw switches to silence the emergency alarms. Then, while depressing the control stick, he pulled out a map. “Hmm... We were almost to Berun. But apparently it’s still dangerous around Pelfe. Let’s see... Oh... Yes, that’s perfect.” He stabbed his finger at a spot on the map marked “Organbaelz.”

And with that, the curtain rose on another incident.

Introduction (Part 2): The Woman Loved by All

The August Federation was a vast nation with territory covering two-fifths of the continent of Europea and one-third of the continent of Aesia. This nation was founded approximately ten years ago.

At the beginning of the Great European War, August was an imperial nation—and one of the strongest. However, revolution had suddenly erupted and the royal family and others in power were massacred, and the country had raised its flag as a "nation without a king."

No monarch ruled August. Attending to the needs and opinions of a population of over one hundred million people was difficult. Councils were composed of representatives, and those representatives selected regional representatives, and those representatives selected ministers for the various affairs of state. As a result, people who were considered equal to the king administered the nation without a king.

This council of six members was called the Soviet Six and its decisions were final. Again today, its six members gathered to haggle over the essential problems of national management.

"Well, what should we do?" asked an elderly man seated at Chair One of the Soviet Six's table.

"What should we do about *what*?" responded the man in Chair Three. He was middle-aged and had a military demeanor.

"He must mean *you-know-what*. Her ladyship is *highly* displeased," said the slender man in Chair Six.

"And what is *you-know-what*? Have we done something to anger her?" asked the man with long hair in Chair Four.

"Indeed we did. In Wiltia. Or rather, in *Pelfe*." The elderly woman sitting in Chair Two glared with eyes surrounded by wrinkles.

"Are you talking about Vissario?! That moron! I heard he was conspiring with

some Wiltian boy! Where is he anyway?!" The man in Chair Three spat insults about Vissario, who was supposed to be in Chair Five.

"I never liked him!!"

"Settle down, Comrade Kalinin!" The elderly man in Chair One attempted to calm him, but the man in Chair Three—Kalinin—didn't stop.

"How can I be calm, Comrade Ulyanov?! That man is trying to steal your position as chief secretary!!"

There were no class differences in August—officially. Everyone was equal, whether minister or peasant. However, Ulyanov was the head of the Soviet Six. He sat in Chair One, in the position of chief secretary who "bundled the national opinion." He was the highest authority in August. At least officially.

"Don't worry, Kalinin. Vissario is no longer among the living." Another voice spoke up. It was a young woman... Or rather, a girl's childish voice.

"—?!" The atmosphere in the room froze. And at the same moment, an object was dropped onto the meeting table.

"Yikes!" The slender man in Chair Six shrieked.

The rolling object was the bearded head of a middle-aged man.

"V-Vissario?!" Kalinin's stiff military countenance twitched in fear.

The political enemy he had just been cursing was now a chunk of meat.

"W-Why?!" Ulyanov—the chief secretary in Chair One—was speechless.

How could anyone kill someone like this? He had seen decapitated heads many times. And all of them wore expressions of terror, gripped with the pain of death. But, Vissario's head looked as if he had been shouting in his usual aggressive manner.

"He was behaving like an imbecile. So, since I no longer need him, I fired him—and then lopped off his head while I was at it. Tee hee hee!" The girl jumped on top of the meeting table as she spoke.

She had violet hair and red eyes, and wore a black and white dress. She possessed a cold, inhuman beauty that inspired chills of fear.

No one but the Soviet Six could enter this meeting room. It looked as if an angel had descended among six priests. However, one of the priests was now a severed head and, in any case, August forbade religion. Nevertheless, the girl was menacingly god-like and made the others forget that.

“The Wiltian boy who played at being the emperor of the Holy Empire... Was his name Genitz? Vissario joined him and plotted something absurd.” The girl lightly pranced atop the table, her shoes clacking as she spoke to the five council members beneath her.

“.....” No one could speak—neither Ulyanov in Chair One, nor Kalinin in Chair Three, nor the old woman in Chair Two. The slender man in Chair Six seemed pale and about to faint.

She wasn’t a normal girl. She was the actual decision-maker in the nation. And not only in August. She had been the most powerful in the monarchy that existed before August. Even the king had kneeled before her and resigned himself to licking the bottom of her shoes in front of his wife and daughter.

After many years, the kingdom fell into decline. In the end, it lost a battle against a young remote nation. So the girl gave up on the monarchy. To reinvigorate the nation, she created a new August with a new political system.

And to that end she used the Soviet Six—now only five—as her representatives and official statesmen. Even if they heard of it, the intelligence agencies of the other nations wouldn’t have believed the truth without some kind of evidence.

“Miss Saint...”

“Yes, Trikus?”

As if beseeching God, Trikus—the long-haired man in Chair Six—asked a question of the girl they addressed as “Saint.”

“What was Vissario doing? I hear Genitz’s coup in Wiltia failed and he died. What in the world was he doing?”

Trikus’s eyes—and the eyes of the others—shone with awe as they looked up at her. It was awe composed of both fear and reverence for the superhuman girl who had changed them, mere third-rate politicians, into leaders of a great

nation.

“Haradin. Vissario was causing trouble there. He was a real pain!” As she spoke, the Saint used the toe of her shoe to roll Vissario’s head. She looked like a cat playing with a ball.

“I’ll have Chair Five clean up this mess.”

“Huh? But...” Trikus raised his voice in confusion.

The person who had occupied Chair Five was Vissario, who was now just a head.

“What?!”

But Trikus’s confusion was soon dispelled. Chair Five was suddenly occupied by an unknown woman.

“I brought someone new for Chair Five. Everyone will cooperate with her.” The Saint spoke to the five with a pert smile.

And that was the end of the conversation. When she made a decision, no matter what it was, they would act accordingly. Within the great nation of August, crossing her will was forbidden.

“As you wish.”

Whether it was Ulyanov or Kalenin or Trikus who responded, it certainly wasn’t Vissario, because he was dead.

“Miss? Um... what should we call you? Tell us the name you prefer.”

The Saint had brought her so they could not refuse. But they needed to know the name of their new member.

“.....” The woman did not answer Trikus’s question.



They did not even know whether she had heard.

“Go on, answer. They’re your friends.”

Prodded by the Saint, the woman finally opened her mouth.

“Mary. Mary Ville Mehl.” Mary, the woman newly assigned to Chair Five, answered with the lifeless eyes and expressionless features of a doll, and her voice sounded like an automaton.

And so the curtain rose on yet another incident.

Chapter 1: Fate Will Open the “Door” for You

1420 24.04.921— (Time: 14:20, date: April 24, year 921)

Tockerbrot was a small bakery in a corner of Organbaelz. The local people loved the bakery’s bread. Despite the owner’s scary face, the townsfolk now accepted him and no longer burst into tears at the sight of his frightful expression.

“Thank you very much.”

Nevertheless, the shop’s popular waitress Sven had dark shadows on her face.

“What’s wrong, Sven? You seem down these days.” Jacob was a young friend of the owner and helped out at the shop. He noticed her sad expression and spoke to her with concern.

“Do you feel bad? Are you sick? Have you caught a cold?”

“No, it’s nothing like that.” Jacob tried to guess why she was depressed, but Sven didn’t know how to answer and just mumbled.

It was one month since Tockerbrot was seriously threatened. Even after a month, Sven couldn’t forget what happened. Mary Ville Mehl had both fiercely hated and loved Tockerbrot’s owner. And now she was dead. Sven had decided not to tell Lud, or anyone, about Mary’s death. However, the girl’s unexpected death was too immense to keep inside, and Sven felt weighed down as if by lead.

I can’t tell him. Sven sighed.

She cared about her master above all others. She used to be indifferent to whether anyone aside from her master lived or died. But despite the fact that Mary had been their opponent, her death saddened Sven.

It will soon be one year since... She glanced at the calendar on the wall.

Sven first came to Organbaelz in the spring last year. Summer, fall, and winter had passed since then. The new year had arrived, and it was now the middle of

spring again.

So much has happened.

Many events had occurred and she had interacted with lots of people. As a result, she was now more “human” than she could have imagined one year ago.

“Let’s see... Should I tell Lud?”

“Huh?”

While she was pondering, Jacob spoke uncomfortably. “Lud isn’t *that* thick-headed, but he shows affection in a strange way, which I suppose could be frustrating.”

“Jacob? What are you driving at?”

“I’m asking if Lud has done something to upset you.”

Jacob’s guess wasn’t entirely wrong. For Sven, Lud came first, second and last. Every worry and concern she had was directly connected to Lud. It was natural for Jacob to assume that Lud was the source of Sven’s trouble.

“Jacob, how old are you?”

“I’m eleven.”

“Oh... right. You just had a birthday.” Sven spoke in surprise. “I wish you would see things with *age-appropriate* sensitivity.”

Jacob probably thought she was troubled because her relationship with Lud wasn’t going so well. Just like Jacob said, Lud was indeed too gentlemanly. Even though they lived under the same roof, they never appeared like a man and a woman in a romantic relationship. That bothered Sven, but having a young boy point it out was also off-putting.

“I think Lud should heed the saying that it’s shameful for a man to reject a woman’s advances.”

“Jacob, you shouldn’t even *know* that saying!”

Sven worried about how Jacob would turn out as an adult. The others around him worried about that, too.

Perhaps he inherited this trait from his father.

Jacob didn't know that his father was Erich Blitzdonner, the greatest of the ace pilots in the Wiltian military, earning him the nickname Crimson Hawk.

He was enormously skilled, so the August Federation, which had suffered bitterly at his hands, had put a price on his head. But he was even more famous for his fondness for women. His behavior with women was so incorrigible that he was almost arrested after receiving a medal from the royal family and then selling it that same day to give money to a woman.

"Like father, like son."

"What's that?"

"Oh, nothing." Thinking Jacob probably *did* take after his father, Sven hesitated. "Anyway..." Sven changed the topic, because if she continued, Jacob would see that she was hiding something. "Did you feel a strange shaking last night?"

"Shaking? You mean an earthquake?" Jacob was confused because her choice of words was unusual.

"Have you heard anything? Like, about an accident at the mine?"

Organbaelz was a mining town. And mines often have accidents that could trigger incidents such as falling rock.

"No, I don't think so. If so, there would've been a big fuss."

"Yes, that's right."

Sven had felt the shaking late the night before. The townsfolk—and even Lud the baker, who was the earliest to rise—were asleep. Sven had felt a strange trembling. It was a vibration insensible to humans but detectable by a high-quality seismometer.

If it was caused by something striking the ground instead of an earthquake... Sven put a finger to her mouth as she wondered.

She had been involved in a number of incidents over the past year. When she boarded an airship, it had been hijacked. While on sales deliveries, special ops soldiers had attacked. During the Thanksgiving Festival, she was embroiled in a coup d'état in the royal capital.

“I hope nothing strange happens again.”

Her master only wanted to live quietly and peacefully as a baker, but somehow trouble kept knocking on his door.

“What’s the matter, Sven?”

“Oh... Master.”

As Jacob and Sven were talking, Tockerbrot’s owner Lud Langart appeared from the back of the shop. It was already after noon, so the shop was quiet. Lud took his break between the busy periods, practically at afternoon tea.

“Shall I brew some tea for you? Jacob, why don’t you take a break, too?”

Just as Sven was about to make tea, a person appeared in front of the shop, as if timed to that precise moment.

“Oh...”

The bell rang and the door opened. A man about forty years old appeared.

“Welcome to Tockerbrot!” Sven immediately switched on her sales smile and welcomed the man. At the same time, she was instinctively alarmed.

The man wasn’t from Organbaelz. Organbaelz was a small town where most people knew each other and outsiders were immediately noticeable. Sven was familiar with all the local faces and names after living in town for the past year.

“.....” The man standing in the entrance was staring at Sven in silence.

She wasn’t alarmed just because he was a stranger. His physique, the way his muscles were developed and even his walk... She was able to characterize his bearing at a glance.

He doesn’t look like someone who makes an honest living.

He was clearly trained and experienced in combat. She sensed he was highly skilled, possibly surpassing Lud, his senior officer Sophia, and the other opponents she had faced.

“Are you looking for something particular? If you don’t mind, I can help you choose.” Nonetheless, Sven treated the man to a smile. If Lud and Jacob hadn’t

been there, she might have made the first move. But since she couldn't...

The best plan is to get within range so he makes the first move!

She approached the man, her body ready to react to a sudden attack no matter what move her opponent launched.

"....." When she was within range—a distance of less than one meter—the man's arms shot out.

"—!" Sven was prepared for an attack to her face, arms, trunk or legs, but what the man did was unexpected.

"Sven!!" He said her name with a broad smile and clasped her to him. It was a warm, forceful and heartfelt hug.

"What?!" Sven had sworn she would never allow anyone but Lud to lay a hand on her body. She made a fist to punch the insolent lout when the man spoke.

"Long time, no see! I'm your dad!"

"What?!" Sven froze at these astonishing words.

During the European War, which lasted over ten years, there was a soldier feared as the Silver Wolf. He piloted a plain white Hunter Unit, then abandoned his life as a soldier after the war and chose to live as a baker in a small, rural town. His name was Lud Langart.

A rare genius scientist in the Royal Weapons Development Bureau had transferred the assistive AI from Lud's Hunter Unit to a *humanoid* Hunter Unit in the form of a young woman. That AI, who now appeared to be a young woman, was Sven. She didn't *have* parents. She wasn't human. Nonetheless...

W-What's this idiot blathering about?!

Sven drew her arm back to throw a merciless fist at the man still hugging her. But before she could, he mumbled something.

"Is that really what you want, Avei?"

"—?!"

He had lowered his voice to a whisper. He purposely pulled Sven close so he

could whisper for her ears alone. Lud and Jacob hadn't heard.

"Who are you?"

Avei was the name Sven had received when she was a Hunter Unit. Not many people knew that name, so if this man called her Avei in her current human form, he must know what she was.

"For now, I suggest playing along." After saying this, the man gently and caringly patted Sven's head like a real father might.

His statement was a warning. A warning that if she didn't play along, it would go poorly for her. And it was more effective than threatening her with a knife or a gun.

"Is this your father?" Jacob, who had missed their quiet exchange, raised his voice in surprise.

"Oh, um..." Sven turned around and fixed her eyes on Lud. He was the person from whom she most wanted to hide her true identity.

"Sven, is that...?" Lud's face was slightly suspicious.

If she denied it, then and there, he would believe her. But then the man would tell Lud she wasn't human. And what if he offered proof?

If that happened, Sven's heart—if she had one—would freeze at the sight of Lud's face. Inside her chest was a glowing red rezanium reactor that drove her machinery and powered her brain.

"Let's see, um..." She had to handle her present predicament, even if it meant lying. "Yes, he's my father." In a strained voice, Sven went along with the man's story.

"Well, what a pleasure to meet you! You must be Mr. Langart! You look exactly as my daughter described!" The man became irritatingly cheerful and stepped toward Lud.

"Hey! You—!" Sven raised her voice to stop the intruder from approaching her dear master, but before she could say more, the man flashed her a broad smile as if to purposely rub her the wrong way.

"What's the matter, Sven? Don't be so distant toward your papa."

“You—?!” Sven struggled against her impulse to strike the grinning imposter.

What’s with this guy? No... I need to get through this moment. In the worst case...

As Sven decided to get rid of the man later, Lud asked him a question.

“So you’re Sven’s father? She’s been a big help to me!”

Although his face looked scary, Lud was generally well mannered, so he spoke politely without an inkling of what Sven was thinking. “Let’s see...” Lud stopped as he reached out for a handshake. And he looked at Sven. “Um...”

Sven was confused until she sensed the question in his glance. He was asking for the name of this man calling himself her father. A daughter would of course know her father’s name, but since she *wasn’t* his daughter, she had no idea.

Sven hesitated, but the man answered for her.

“My name is Meitzer. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Langart!” The man, Meitzer, shook Lud’s hand with a warm smile.

1620 24.04.921—

News of Sven’s father rapidly spread around Organbaelz because everyone in town visited Tockerbrot. Until a year ago, the business was in a slump, but Sven boosted the shop’s popularity as its skilled and friendly waitress. And this man was supposedly her father. Everyone wanted to meet him, so the shop was busier than usual as evening approached.

“Hello, everyone! Thanks for looking after my daughter!”

Without being asked, Meitzer had offered to help serve customers at the bustling bakery.

“What a pretty lady! If I were a little younger, I’d have designs on you!” He was gentlemanly toward single women and gave them a winning smile.

“I’m jealous of your husband for marrying such a beauty!” He was gentlemanly toward married women and gave them a beaming smile.

“Are you all right, Ma’am? Please, take my hand. I’ll walk you to the door.” He

was gentlemanly toward older women and gave them a sincere and respectful smile.

“Wow... Your dad’s got charm!” The man’s customer service was excellent and his stunning skills were superior even to his daughter’s, which impressed Jacob.

“Doesn’t anyone in this town have anything *else* to do?!” Amazed at how Meitzer enchanted the women, Sven sighed.

“They can’t help it. There’s no entertainment around here.”

“But Tockerbrot isn’t a freakshow! It’s a bakery!”

The bakery’s business had improved after the arrival of the beautiful and clever Sven, although she originally seemed out of place in that rural community. And now a handsome and sociable middle-aged man, also out of place, had appeared. It was understandable that the shop was crowded with curious townsfolk.

“You guys are indeed father and daughter! You’re so similar!”

“What?!”

Jacob didn’t know Sven’s true background. He didn’t know that Sven had no father. Seeing them together, it wasn’t strange to hear they were father and daughter. But Jacob’s comment caught Sven off guard and made her uncomfortable.

“I mean you’re both nice looking.”

“Oh, *that’s* what you meant...”

Sven was created to be a lovely young woman. Meitzer was a handsome man.

“And... How should I put it? Your aura is...”

“Huh...?” At Jacob’s comment, indescribable confusion crossed Sven’s face. She had no parents. She had no relatives so there was no one who looked like her. The idea was unnerving and upsetting to Sven.

“Oh!” Sven’s train of thought led her to realize something. Or rather, to *remember* something.

0220 25.04.921—

At midnight, after closing the shop for the night...

Sven set out for the forest on the outskirts of town. She didn't tell Lud because she expected to have a conversation that she didn't want Lud to hear.

"....." Silently, she proceeded into the woods.

The midnight forest was pitch black and a typical person would be scared to take one step into the darkness. It didn't matter to Sven because she wasn't human. Even on a moonless night, her mechanical eyes could magnify the dim light of the stars to create daylight visibility.

When she was deep in the forest, where even the beasts were asleep, she called out. "I know you're here, so come out!" She couldn't be calling to anyone human in the frightening black forest. It could only be an animal or...

"I didn't want to contact you like this." It was a girl in a long red dress. She appeared mysteriously, as if floating out of the darkness.

Sven didn't have anyone she could call a parent. But she did have a *sister*... Or more accurately, a sister *machine*. This girl was another humanoid Hunter Unit. And her name was Rebecca.

"I did not want to contact you so often either."

Rebecca was monitoring Sven on orders from Daian Fortuner, the director of the Royal Weapons Development Bureau. Actually, he was supposed to retrieve Sven, because she was a valuable experimental weapon that had escaped the Bureau. Instead, he ordered Rebecca to monitor Sven without interfering in her activities.

Daian was known as the most eccentric individual in Wiltia. No... in the entire *world*. So Sven had no idea what his intentions were. If he was setting her free, if under surveillance, she had no need to go to the trouble of eliminating Rebecca. Nonetheless, it was uncomfortable having someone watch her all the time, so she avoided contacting the other humanoid Hunter Unit.

"Who is that man?" There was no need to explain. Rebecca must have known

about Meitzer's arrival. "Did *you* send him? In that case you've got bad taste!"

Rebecca was expressionless at Sven's accusation. "I do not know what you are talking about."

"What?"

"I understood some of your conversation with that man but I could not catch all of it."

Rebecca's vision—the range of her visual sensors—was better than Sven's. She could see inside Tockerbrot from a distance of several hundred meters. However, she couldn't pick up sound.

"I read your lips. Sometimes you turned your back or were in a blind spot, so I could not understand everything. But Meitzer is your *father*?" She asked a question back at Sven.

"Don't be stupid! You know we don't have parents!"

"That is correct." Rebecca's tone was insinuating, but Sven didn't notice.

"Then who is that man? He seems to know about me."

"I cannot make a determination."

"Moreover, he helped himself to lodging over the shop!"

Meitzer told them he had no place to stay. There were no decent hotels in Organbaelz. Sven wanted to send him out to a hotel in a neighboring town, but Lud was a kind man and made a generous offer. "It's small, but if you don't mind, please stay here at the shop."

"Former Captain Langart is such a pain." Rebecca spoke in exasperation but Sven responded with a yell.

"Master's kindness is bottomless!!"

Lud thought he was merely being hospitable to the parent of a diligent employee, but he was making things complicated for Sven.

"Anyway, I can't let such a suspicious person near my master!"

"Then... what will you do?"

After thinking briefly, Sven replied coldly. “I’m willing to *eliminate* him.”

“Hmm...” Rebecca had no opinion.

The man was an unknown opponent and a possible threat to Sven and to her master. If Rebecca had been in the same situation... No, when she actually had *been* in the same situation, she eliminated her opponent without hesitation.

Humanoid Hunter Units developed hearts. They loved the people who gave them their hearts with their entire souls and all their affection. If someone threatened to hurt their masters, they wouldn’t hesitate—in the worst case—to take that person’s life.

“Do you want me to cooperate with you?”

“Yes. If the Development Bureau isn’t involved, then he must be a danger to your people, too.”

Sven didn’t know why the Weapons Development Bureau and Daian had let her go free. Nonetheless, she understood that they wouldn’t overlook this stranger who knew she was a humanoid Hunter Unit and suspiciously contacted her.

“That is outside my line of duty.”

“You didn’t hesitate to interfere before, did you?” Sven was grumpy in response to Rebecca’s unhelpful attitude.

“Yes, but...”

Rebecca had agreed to this surveillance mission, undertaking the difficulty of repeated travel between the royal capital and Organbaelz each month, because she had orders from her developer Daian. But there was another, more important, reason. She too had someone she wanted to protect in Organbaelz.

“Very well.”

If something happened, he might be in danger, too. That possibility was enough to force Rebecca to help.

“So what is your course of action?”

“Well... tomorrow, I’ll lure him out with some clever story.”

The two mechanical women devised a violent solution.

“That isn’t necessary!” Another voice joined their discussion.

“——?!” Sven and Rebecca simultaneously turned toward the voice.

It was Meitzer standing before them—the very subject of their conversation.

“When did you—?!” Rebecca was usually calmer and more careful than Sven. Actually, she was more like a machine than Sven, but even she showed surprise.

“If I had known you wanted to hold a secret chat in the forest, Sven, I would have come with you. After all, you’re my darling daughter.”

“You!” Sven shouted and leapt over Meitzer.

They weren’t at Tockerbrot. Her beloved master wasn’t here. This time, she didn’t need to hold back.

“Die!”

Sven had a fragile appearance. However, her hand chops could strike an opponent sharper than a knife, and her grip could crush rock. She had mowed down an entire platoon of the Greyten Empire’s fully armored soldiers and special operations mechanical soldiers all by herself.

“What?”

“Are you in a rebellious phase?”

However, Meitzer easily stopped her fist, which could pierce metal plating, with only one hand, as if defending against a small girl.



“What the?!”

Sven had sworn she wouldn’t go easy on him. She intended to crush his whole arm if he tried to block her.

“What did you do?!” Sven demanded with a frustrated look.

The man looked human. And, using all her sensors as a humanoid Hunter Unit, she judged him to be human.

“I’ve told you many times. I’m your father.” Then Meitzer grabbed Sven’s fist and twisted her wrist. Sven’s body spun around like a top.

“Aagh?!” Sven couldn’t recover quickly enough to break her fall. Instead, she made a sound improper for a lady and smashed to the ground.

Is he using bujutsu?

Bujutsu was a martial art from the continent of Aesia, a region that was culturally very different from Europea. Lud and his senior officer Sophia used *bujutsu*. But if this was *budo*, which was more formidable... It was said that a human master of the art could keep up with a humanoid Hunter Unit.

No, this is different!

Meitzer’s action didn’t seem to fit *budo*. He hadn’t simply used a fighting technique. And he hadn’t used all his might. He had reacted naturally, as if turning on a water faucet. That was exceptional.

“Hey, are you all right, Sven?”

And that’s why Meitzer’s concerned question sounded so strange and surprising.

“Who in the world are you?”

Sven had fought many different enemies, but he was unlike any of them. Well, one thing was similar.

When a man took over the royal capital, he had seized total control of Sven using only words. Sven had lost her power and freedom, including freedom of thought. And she felt something similar now. Her fist refused to harm him.

“Hm?” Meitzer shifted his line of sight.

“There’s an opening!!”

He was looking at a fast-moving red-tinged shadow. Rebecca was running through his blind spot to launch an attack.

With a tree branch as foothold, she became a veritable scythe of death, leaping and launching multiple powerful kicks. If she struck with full strength, she could rupture a human’s internal organs in one attack. Her kick was three times stronger than her punch. And she was aiming at Meitzer’s face.

“Oh my...”

However, he didn’t dodge. He didn’t even try to avoid her attack. His expression said, “That won’t be necessary.”

“What?!”

In the next moment, the unbelievable happened. Rebecca’s body, which was flying through the air, stopped still as if the very space around it had frozen.

“What a silly maneuver.” Meitzer sighed and Rebecca’s legs jerked up as if plucked by an invisible giant hand, and she smashed to the ground.

“How did you—?”

The impact was harder than Sven’s fall. Rebecca’s thin, elegant legs were now twisted in what would have been serious fractures to a human being.

“You’re not my daughter, but I hate to see a girl suffer. Even if you *are* a machine.” Meitzer’s tone was quiet, with heartfelt concern toward Rebecca.

But his meaning was completely inscrutable.

“You... Who are you?! What do you want?!” Sven sounded furious and astonished that the two mighty humanoid Hunter Units were beaten before they could even fight.

What was this man’s plan? If he attacked her master, she wouldn’t be able to protect him, and that terrified Sven the most.

“I told you. I’m your father. Can’t a father visit his daughter?”

“You’re still talking that nonsense?!” Sven grew angry once more at Meitzer’s brazen lies, but she couldn’t use force to question him.

“Don’t worry. I have no intention of harming your ‘master.’ That would make you sad, wouldn’t it? I would never want that.” His tone sounded like a father reassuring his daughter. “For now, let me stay at Tockerbrot. I have things I want to ask and learn.”

After this statement, Meitzer turned away from Sven and Rebecca, who were still lying on the ground.

“.....”

With his back turned, he was wide open. Sven thought she could finish him in one strike if she attacked now. But that was probably impossible. Her attack would never reach Meitzer.

“Very wise,” the mysterious man said with his back turned. He could sense Sven’s emotional conflict without looking at her.

“Ugh...” Sven moaned quietly but could do nothing more. Meitzer had demonstrated overwhelming superiority, and Sven could only grind her teeth.

I’ll have to wait for him to make a move.

Sven had no idea who Meitzer was or what he was thinking. There was no choice but to keep a close eye on the situation.

“Anyway, I need to return to the shop at once.”

It would soon be dawn. If she didn’t get back before Lud woke up, he would be suspicious.

“Oh...” Then she remembered something.

“Ungh...” With one leg bent unnaturally, Rebecca was moaning.

“What should I do with *you*?” Sven couldn’t leave Rebecca there—and that was a problem.

0955 26.04.921—

In Berun, the capital of the Principality of Wiltia and far away from Organbaelz, the military headquarters was under tight security and the atmosphere was tense.

“The day has finally come. I’ve been plagued this last month with shoulder pain and headaches!” Sophia von Rundstadt, a major in the Principality of Wiltia’s military, complained as she sighed with exhaustion. Today, she was wearing a full-dress uniform for a ceremony.

“But Major... today is the big day!”

“What’re you talking about? Everything *until* today was the big day!” Sophia replied to her adjutant Marissa in irritation at the correction.

“Noa’s idle general is a pain in my rear end!”

“Nonetheless, we can’t ignore him.”

Noa was a nation on another continent with different customs and rules from Europea. It was a strong nation, so it was said that if it had joined the forces allied against Wiltia during the recent Great War, the conflict’s outcome would have been very different. Noa had maintained a policy of complete noninterference until the end of hostilities.

“Neither enemy nor foe.” This policy had made the greatest contribution to Wiltia’s victory.

“But why now?”

“For goodwill between the two countries.”

“Ha! I wonder!” Sophia’s response was caustic.

The military leaders were anxious because a general from the great nation of Noa was making a goodwill visit to Wiltia. He occupied the highest rank in Noa and was recognized as the marshal designated to lead the entire military, both army and navy, in the future. So Wiltia wanted to maintain friendly relations with him. And this man would arrive in less than thirty minutes.

“To begin with, it hasn’t even been six months since the rebellion.”

Genitz’s rebellion, even though it lasted only a few days, had almost taken full control of the royal capital. The rebelling forces had been crushed, but confusion was still rampant.

“As you know, I am now in charge of security.”

Sophia was usually a captain of the guard at the Royal Weapons Development Bureau. However, even after the rebellion was eliminated, a pro-Genitz faction still existed inside the military.

Ironically, the Wiltian military had hundreds of thousands of soldiers, but there weren't many leaders trusted by central headquarters.

"Tsk! What if that weirdo causes trouble in the meantime?"

The "weirdo" to whom Sophia referred was Daian Fortuner, the director of the Weapons Development Bureau. Sophia's responsibilities as a guard extended beyond protection of the Bureau. She also had to watch over this heedless genius who, all on his own, was capable of upsetting the military balance of the world. Meanwhile, he could build a new weapon to erase entire nations from the map.

"Urgh. Thinking about him gives me stomach cramps."

Sophia's most recent meeting with Daian was one week ago. She had warned him repeatedly to behave, keep quiet, and to *be serious* instead of acting like a clown. And that eccentric man's response had been to reply theatrically, "Oh, Sophia! Are you that sad to be apart from me? Don't worry! My heart is always with you!!"

"I should have *killed* him or at least sent him to the hospital!"

"What are you saying?" Her superior's mumbled comment was so unsettling that Marissa paled.

"Anyway, today is a big day. We'll show every hospitality and politely send him on his way."

Sophia was never relaxed. Advance preparations for an important visit by a foreign dignitary were more difficult than handling matters after the fact. She had to expose rabble-rousers inside the country, and at the same time, prevent outside troublemakers from entering the country.

Acts of terrorism could be executed within a day, but they usually required careful planning, research and preparation. If terrorists wanted to shoot, they needed to purchase guns, so tracing the route of weapons acquisition was one way to uncover them. By repeating a process of searching, discovering,

destroying, suppressing and arresting enemies over the past few weeks, they intended to discourage their opponents by demonstrating that while the prey was large, the risk was high.

It was impossible to completely eradicate terrorism. The only option was continued effort to make it hard to execute. And it was very tiring.

It was easier during the Great War.

After this was over, she would request a vacation and relax somewhere. As this thought crossed Sophia's mind, a soldier approached.

"Major Rundstadt, the singer is here."

"Ah... very good."

A courier reported the arrival of the entertainer for today's event.

"We need to meet before the performance."

As a part of the welcoming ceremony, a Wiltian student would offer a "gift of song." The student's song would extol the friendship between the two nations. This student had just arrived.

"I heard she's from a military academy."

"Yes. We were originally going to use civilian children, but..."

They had changed the plan for security reasons. It was a horrible thought, but there were terrorists who would commit indiscriminate acts of violence using children. Even worse, sometimes the children's parents assisted them. They would plant a bomb in their own child's bag, and when the target's guard was lowered around the child, the bomb would explode. Such an incident had happened only a few months ago.

"This child comes with good references. Her title is low, but she's from a noble family."

"This is ridiculous..." Sophia groaned at Marissa's report.

As the title "von" suggested, Sophia was from a noble family too. Furthermore, she was from one of the more prominent families in Wiltia. Sophia was tired of showing respect for the power of a good family.

“The students are here.”

One of her subordinates escorted a pair of military academy students. One was a boyish girl with short hair. The other had long hair and a striking smattering of freckles on her face.

“Hm?” Sophia made a quizzical sound. “What? I was expecting only one.”

Sophia was told that there was only one military academy cadet who excelled at singing. However, two girls stood in front of her.

“I apologize. There are, um... circumstances.” One of the two students spoke apologetically.

“Um... what circumstances?” Sophia asked the student with black hair.

Her name was...

“I am Hildegard von Hessen.” Hilde continued awkwardly. “Um... I’m not sure myself how to explain, but...” Hilde was confused and glanced at the girl next to her, who wore a bright smile, and asked her, “Why did you follow me?”

The long-haired girl’s name was Lillie. Like Hilde, she was a student at the military academy.

“Love requires no reasons.”

“What?!” Sophia’s eyes popped wide at Lillie’s reply, offered with a big grin.

“I’m sorry! Please, ignore what she says... um... Major!” Hilde wore a tired expression and hung her head. Her face said that she had done everything she could, again and again, to shake off Lillie, but Lillie dogged her with an incredible tracking ability.

“Oh, I see...” There were circumstances here beyond Sophia’s understanding.

She didn’t know Hilde’s background. The girl standing before her was a former member of the Schutzstaffel who had served under Genitz and attempted more than once to murder Lud, who was Sophia’s former subordinate and like a brother to her. However, Hilde had also devoted effort to resolving the recent rebellion after Genitz abandoned her.

“Do you mean... she’s your friend?”

A different organization had erased Hilde's previous record for the sake of her future, but Sophia knew none of this.

Hilde also didn't know that the officer in front of her had a connection to Lud.

"Well, I guess so..." Hilde agreed with Sophia's characterization, but Lillie jumped in to deny it.

"No. I am her *lover*," Lilly continued.

"What?!" Sophia's eyes widened again.

"I'm sorry, Major! Please, ignore what she says! Don't listen to her!!" Hilde shouted, nearly in tears.

Hilde was a former soldier of the Schutzstaffel, but she also had a rare singing gift. She sang during a lesson at the military academy and both the teachers and students were impressed and word had spread, resulting in her invitation to the friendship ceremony.

That was fine, but Lillie was obsessive in her love for Hilde and followed her around as if she couldn't be away from Hilde for even a second.

"I am Lillie Grunschurter! This is a letter of introduction from my patron. I come with good references, so you may feel at ease."

"Oh... okay."

Lillie's letter of introduction held the signature of a high-ranking official at the Foreign Affairs Ministry of Wiltia. It was enough to ensure her identity, but Hilde wanted to know more.

"Why do you have a connection with an officer at the Foreign Affairs Ministry?"

"Such details are not important. You are here and I am with you. This irrefutable fact is of greater importance."

Hilde was suspicious, but Lillie dodged her question.

"Is this letter of introduction real?"

"Whether it is real is not important either. What is important is that our love is real."

“Why won’t you give me a straight answer?!”

Neither Hilde nor Sophia, of course, knew that Lillie wasn’t human. She was a humanoid Hunter Unit, like Sven and Rebecca, that the Weapons Development Bureau, as part of a political deal, gave to the allied nation of Yamato.

She didn’t have a heart like the other two, so Daian had abandoned her as defective. Then, after meeting Hilde, a heart had blossomed within her. However, her heart had manifested feelings for Hilde that were stronger than friendship.

“.....” Speechless, Sophia stared at the two.

“N-No, you don’t understand, Major! She’s...”

“That’s enough. You don’t have to explain.” As Lillie clasped her, Hilde tried to undo the misunderstanding, but Sophia quietly stopped her.

“Love takes many forms.”

“Huh?”

“One person’s love for another, whatever form it takes, is precious.”

“Um... Major?”

“Live with your chest thrown out. I heartily approve!”

“No, wait!” Until now, Hilde was trying to be polite because Sophia was older and an officer in the military, but now her tone grew harsh at the woman’s misunderstanding. “You don’t understand!! She and I... It’s not like that!!”



Hilde thought of Lillie as a dear friend. That was an indubitable fact. She had saved Hilde from many crises. And when Hilde had been hurt, Lillie was as angry as if it happened to herself.

“Right, Lillie? We’re just friends, right?”

But Lillie’s love was deep. *Too* deep. Hilde even felt a threat to her chastity. When she awoke in the mornings, Lillie was asleep in her bed. Hilde was afraid of what Lillie might be doing while she slept, so she tried not to think about it.

“That is correct. I am Hilde’s friend...”

“Thank you!”

“... for now.” Then she whispered a few extra words.

“Hey! What’d you just say?!”

“Now, now... Calm down.” As the adult present, Sophia attempted to quiet the two squabbling girls.

“Hm? By the way... your name is Lillie?”

“Yes. Why do you ask, Major?” As if suddenly remembering something, Sophia looked at Lillie.

“Have we met somewhere before?”

“What?!” Now Lillie’s behavior was strange.

“I feel like we’ve met someplace, but where? I don’t have any acquaintances among officer candidates.”

“Hm? Huh? Huuuh?! Maybe it is your imagination?” In a panic, Lillie tried to evade the question, but of course it *wasn’t* Sophia’s imagination.

They had indeed met before. In the midst of a deadly struggle. During the recent rebellion, Lillie had not yet developed an ego. A unit under Genitz deployed her to pursue Sophia, who had escaped confinement within the royal palace. Later, when she was given to Yamato, Lillie had undergone exterior repairs of damage suffered during the battle. While her face remained the same, there were other changes in her appearance, such as her hair color.

“Oh... maybe it is just my imagination.” Sophia, having no idea that the girl

before her was a mechanical doll rather than a human being, ended the conversation without pursuing the matter any further. The important representative of another nation was arriving soon, so she didn't have time. Military officers need to be shrewd in focusing their attention.

"Well, we don't have time to go over everything in detail, but you've heard the basics, right?"

"Um, yes! I hand flowers from the Foreign Affairs Ministry to General Douglas."

"That's right. Don't flub it up."

Flowers had been prepared for her to give to the general. And the bouquet had already been checked to make sure there were no weapons hidden inside, or an explosive device. Moreover, the flowers had been picked from a garden at the royal palace to ensure an attacker had not mixed in poisonous plants.

"Um, Major? May I ask something? What is General Douglas like?"

Sophia made a troubled face at Hilde's question. "Well, I don't really know."

"Huh?" Hilde showed surprise at her answer.

In the military, it was unusual not to at least recognize someone with a rank of general, even one from a foreign country, and especially one received as a state guest.

"Apparently, General Douglas doesn't like to have his photo taken. So even I don't know what he looks like."

"There isn't a single photograph?"

"Not one. Not even a painted portrait."

The Principality of Wiltia had requested images of General Douglas, partially for security, but they had been refused. Noa insisted that not even one image existed.

"Does the general believe that superstition about a camera stealing the soul of its subject?"

"No, that's not it. I suppose he's guarding against assassination."

There were many reasons assassins might target an important officer in a great nation's military.

"So it's quite an event for him to show himself in public today."

Sophia didn't know the particulars, but the general was a highly charismatic figure in the Noa military and had incredible support among the soldiers throughout the armed forces.

"We must see that he has a safe visit. So I remind you, no matter what, no flub-ups."

"Yes, Ma'am!"

Sophia didn't want to pressure them unnecessarily, but as officer candidates, they would be responsible for the future of the nation's military. Sophia wanted them to tackle challenges with a sense of duty, and Hilde listened and responded seriously.

"The general's car has arrived." At that moment, soldiers on standby at command headquarters reported the news.

"All right, let's go!"

"Yes, Ma'am!"

A great warrior long ago once said that war was but one face of diplomacy. One might say that hospitality toward guests from other nations to strengthen diplomatic relations was important military activity in times of peace.

Sophia and the others braced themselves as if for battle as they headed for the front entrance to headquarters. A red carpet covered the long staircase, with an honor guard in ceremonial dress lining each side. A black luxury car carrying General Douglas was parked in front.

"He's here."

As even greater tension coursed through those assembled, the car door opened and a form slowly appeared.

"What?!" Hilde couldn't stop herself from exclaiming.

She had imagined different features for the mysterious man based on soldiers

of war throughout history and the generals of great nations. But none of those images was even close to the appearance of the figure that appeared.

“Skwawk!” The new arrival made a sound, neck tilted in perplexity before the stunned soldiers.

“That’s... General Douglas?”

“Is it... really?”

As Hilde and Sophia stood dumbfounded, he approached, waddling and wobbly and flapping his limbs.

“It’s a penguin.” Only Lillie remained calm, and she simply labeled what she saw.

And it wasn’t a metaphor. General Douglas had appeared, and he was a penguin.

1500 24.04.921—

A little earlier, about the same time the man claiming to be Sven’s father appeared at Tockerbrot, something else was happening.

“The train goes chug-a-chug-a-chug!♪” Daian Fortuner, the genius scientist known as the Sorcerer, was singing. “Ahh, travel by steam train is wonderful! I’m usually holed up in the laboratory. It feels good to take a rare outing!” Daian was in fine spirits as he enjoyed the view outside the window.

He was on board the Said Express, a transcontinental railroad crossing the national borders within central Europea. It took six days to trace a path over 2,500 kilometers from Parise, the capital of Filbarneu, to Busantion, on the eastern edge of the continent of Europea. The train’s interior was different from normal passenger trains. Inside, the cars looked like hotel rooms.

Since it traveled through many nations, the train’s service was stopped during the Great War, but then resumed after the conflict ended as further evidence of peaceful times.

“Oh dear. You appear to be in a bad mood. What’s wrong, Major?”

In contrast to Daian, who was singing happily, the man seated in front of him

wore an expression that was impossible to describe as bright, even to be polite.

“Of course I’m not happy. I’m not Rundstadt, but you pressed me into service as your guard.” The man in a red coat spoke with a sour look on his face.

He looked young, but he was in his mid-thirties and had a child. His name was Erich Blitzdonner. He was the most powerful man in the Wiltian military, bore the moniker of the Crimson Hawk, and was a hero of the Great War.

“Please, don’t say that. I’m important to Apuvea too, aren’t I? What if I just happened to head on over to the other side?”

“.....!” Daian’s comment, although said jokingly, made Blitzdonner’s eyes narrow. His glare was clouded with hostility suggesting caution and even a willingness to do harm.

“Doctor, you must not say that even in jest.”

“Ooh... scary, scary!” Daian shrugged.

Blitzdonner belonged to a special intelligence organization called Apuvea, which meant “shield.” His job was putting out fires before they spread, thereby preventing a new war. In fact, it would be better to kill Daian, who was superior in all ways, rather than let his brain fall into the service of other nations. The fact was that Blitzdonner could pierce Daian’s heart and take his life in less than five seconds if he felt like it.

“Hmph! Getting killed by one of the mechanical soldiers I created wouldn’t be funny!”

“So don’t make me do it!”

Blitzdonner’s arms and legs were mechanical. But they weren’t merely prosthetics. He was connected to Hunter Unit limbs decreased to human size. In other words, he was a cyborg.

“I am thankful to you. So don’t test me.”

“Fine, fine. Thanks to your strong sense of duty, Major, I can live a long life.”

Daian and Blitzdonner had known each other for a surprisingly long time. Early in the Great War, beginning with the development of the Hunter Units, the two were acquainted as a developer and a test pilot. And it was Daian who

gave Blitzdonner his new arms and legs. After that, they hadn't seen each other often, so while they had long been acquainted, that acquaintance wasn't deep.

"You-know-who isn't here today."

By "you-know-who," Blitzdonner meant the humanoid Hunter Unit Rebecca, who was usually at Daian's side.

"I had her go to Organbaelz. I want people to think I can't act unless she's with me."

Like Sven, Rebecca's existence was a top-secret matter within the Weapons Development Bureau. But people talk. Her name was not public knowledge, but it was very possible she was known to a number of organizations employing people with the requisite ability to gather information, inside or outside the nation.

"Anyway, she was too visible during the recent rebellion. She is now also known to members of the Security Department."

"Those guys... Urgh..." Blitzdonner exhaled in exasperation when Daian mentioned the name of that department.

Officially, the Sicherheitsdienst—aka the Security Department—carried out security for the Principality of Wiltia's public facilities. In reality, it also used its principality-wide network for secret police actions. Furthermore, there were rumors that it served as a cover for remnants of Genitz's faction, which had been expelled from the military and the government.

"Apparently, under Genitz's control, they excelled in information warfare. It's difficult to get a lead on them, and they were recently at work behind-the-scenes in Pelfe. In the end, however, no proof was obtained."

"Sounds hard." Daian acknowledged Blitzdonner's effort, but he wasn't actually very interested in affairs between top-secret organizations. Right now, he needed to handle something else right away. That's why he was on this train.

"Anyway, that's the situation. I purposely sent Rebecca away so I wouldn't be watched and requested cooperation from Apuvea. When it comes to this matter, our goals at least are the same."

No matter what, he had to take care of this in utmost secrecy. Daian had decided on quality over quantity when it came to his security, and he needed a single man with combat power comparable to one hundred fighters. He chose Blitzdonner, whose strength as a mechanical soldier far surpassed that of a regular human being.

“But don’t you have affection for your former partner? You should go see her. If you want, I could return her to her original form and give her back to you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Doctor.”

Daian had created Rebecca with the AI from Blitzdonner’s beloved Hunter Unit. He was her master who had given her a heart. He was more important to her than her own life, just as Lud was to Sven.

“If she returns to her original form, wouldn’t it mean a state of war?”

He didn’t show himself to Rebecca or his family because, unlike Lud, he was still engaged in hostilities. What if his opponents targeted those close to him? What if the hands of evil reached out for his son Jacob or his wife Charlotte? The best way to prevent that was to fake his death and hide that he was the boy’s father. So he didn’t reveal himself to his family or even inform them he was alive.

“But she’s a real beauty now! I’d like to give her a fitting life!”

And his protective feelings extended to his former Hunter Unit, with her young girl’s heart and body. If she learned he was alive and engaged in secret intelligence work during peacetime, she would rush to his side. And she would try to protect him even at the cost of her own life. He didn’t want to expose her to such danger.

“But didn’t you expose yourself during the rebellion?”

“That was only because I had to! I had no choice!” With a sour expression, Blitzdonner barked back at Daian, who was grinning maliciously.

During the rebellion, Rebecca was caught in a trap by the rebelling army, and her life had been in danger. So Blitzdonner intervened, rescuing her and revealing his existence.

“Why don’t you get out of the business, like a certain former captain?”

“I want to, but I can’t. As long as you-know-what remains, war will come again.” Blitzdonner waved his hand to signal an end to the topic.

“Yeah. Genitz sure left behind a pesky legacy.”

“That man is more of a problem *dead*!”

That problem was the reason for this journey. They intended to secretly remove it from existence.

“Uh-huh. If word got out to other countries, Wiltia wouldn’t escape condemnation.”

“And worse. It could spark another Great War.” Blitzdonner spluttered vehemently to Daian, who looked as if the matter wasn’t his concern. “I can’t believe he thought of and then actually did it. What was in his brain to come up with something so absurd?!”

Genitz’s “legacy” was a secret plan he was working on before he died. The Great War had ended and public opinion in Europea and around the world was directed toward preventing another war. The decade-long war had scarred the world in many ways.

“No one knew until it happened that repeated technological and systemic upheaval, combined with enforced conscription in wealthy nations, would give humanity the power to destroy its own civilization.” Daian chuckled.

So the nations around the world had further developed the existing International Conference through the establishment of the Society of Nations. And they had embarked on a policy of worldwide disarmament to prevent future war.

“But humankind won’t learn wisdom that easily. Or more accurately, it’s too *clever*. People will find an excuse to create devices for their own benefit.”

An international treaty for disarmament proposed restrictions on arms stockpiles. It included regulations on new warships and the prohibition of inhumane weapons such as toxic gas, but also certain provisions that Wiltia could not overlook.

“Wiltia was told to regulate the number of Hunter Units. At that time, Wiltia had a veritable monopoly on them. In the name of disarmament for peace, the Society of Nations tried to reduce Wiltia’s military power.”

Wiltia’s victory in the Great War was due to the Hunter Units. Attacked simultaneously from opposite sides—by the great nations of Filbarneu in the west and August in the east—Wiltia would otherwise have had no choice but to continue a defensive war ending in defeat.

But, all at once, the Hunter Units—each equal to a hundred foot soldiers—changed the face of war. Steel giants strode the battlefields, fighting on two fronts with strength left to spare. They trampled enemy combatants, forcing enemy soldiers to retreat and the aggressor nations to raise white flags.

“That’s because you were so effective on the eastern front.” Blitzdonner responded to Daian as if it were of no importance.

“That was a long time ago.”

The Wiltian army, drastically outnumbered, met August’s army as it advanced from the eastern border. The Hunter Units, having just been introduced to actual combat, blocked August’s way. And Blitzdonner, who boasted an outstanding battle record, was there. He singlehandedly destroyed an entire division, then pursued and trampled August’s combatants faster than they could flee, making his nickname the Crimson Hawk a synonym for the devil in August.

“Hunter Units are essential for the Wiltian military. Restricting them was equivalent to ripping off the nation’s arms and legs. Greyten and Filbarneu acted wisely.”

Both nations were opponents of Wiltia during the Great War, and they had lost. So they had secretly collaborated to draw Wiltia into a disarmament treaty. They created a situation whereby, if Wiltia objected, the international community would believe it intended to start another war.

“Wiltia was forced to reduce its Hunter Units by 30 percent. It resisted strongly, but that was the most it could do. As a victorious nation, its territory had increased, but it didn’t have enough manpower to guard it all. On top of that, the number of Hunter Units was restricted. It took one hit after another.”

Wiltia had sent Hunter Units to its forces in every direction, thereby leaving defenses for the crucial homeland understaffed.

“That’s why Genitz devised this reckless plan and set it in motion.” With his mechanical hand inside a leather glove, Blitzdonner made a tight fist.

“I can’t believe he was developing weapons jointly with August.”

Genitz’s plan used methods that no other country’s military would have expected at the time.

Wiltia’s ability to develop and manufacture new Hunter Units was restricted within the nation. So Genitz planned to simply do it *outside* Wiltia. If he used a satellite nation, it would come to light. So he devised a scheme to develop and manufacture Hunter Units within the territory of a rival nation.

“August has vast territory, immense resources and a large population. However, it’s a revolutionary government, so successive purges have drained its intellectual class and left it short on technical minds.”

The intellectual class included technicians and scientists, who were generally under the nation’s protection because securing such human resources helps preserve the nation’s technological strength. However, the revolutionary government of August took the lives of many intellectuals at the same time as it destroyed the monarchy. August was now like a giant child that had resources and equipment but no idea how to use them.

“It’s actually a good plan. Wiltia is technologically advanced, but it’s scarce in resources. Mutual provision of what each side lacks is the basis of negotiation.”

Without informing the government or military, Genitz had negotiated with August for proprietary development and production of new Hunter Units in one of August’s satellite nations using Wiltia’s technology and August’s resources.

“Only members in the Society of Nations have to obey the international disarmament treaty. As a non-participating nation, August is not subject to inspections and is under no obligation to submit reports. Genitz may have also intended to train pilots.”

“I could hardly believe my ears when I heard about it. I’d rather he had made a deal with the devil.”

And Genitz's plan didn't stop at simply maintaining Wiltia's military power. He intended to start the next war—the Second Great European War—and was *increasing* armaments.

"What happens if we give Hunter Unit tech to August? In six months, the number of dead in the next Great War could surpass all the deaths in the ten years of the last one! And I doubt he was unaware of that."

Genitz was known for his genius, so he would have calculated all of that. He had based his plan on the expectation that if Wiltia's opponents grew in strength, then Wiltia would grow even *stronger*.

"I suppose he was serious about conquering the world. That's why Wiltia's military strength before disarmament wasn't enough."

"And worse still, he discovered something powerful enough to guarantee the success of this reckless idea."

Even if August doubled its current military strength, with this additional element, Wiltia would have ten times its current strength. Genitz had discovered something that could ensure that.

"Indeed. And I've come all the way from Noa to investigate it." Suddenly, another voice joined theirs. It was a woman's voice, sultry and enchanting.

"Oh, Fianna! You're back?"

The owner of the voice was Fianna Libera, the third person to join the outing.

"Hey... Why are you half-dressed like that?!" Blitzdonner's voice sounded surprised.

"Don't you know? The Said Express has a restaurant, café, bar and even a shower!"

"I know! But that isn't the problem. I'm asking why you're in nothing but a bathrobe!"

Fianna's hair was still wet, and her full bust was in danger of spilling out from her robe.

"Oh dear... Don't you like my body?"

“I’m asking why you aren’t embarrassed!”

Of course, she wasn’t wearing anything underneath her robe. Returning from the shower room, she had walked along the corridor to their private room barely dressed.

“Hmf! I’m not the least bit ashamed of my body! I can show it off to anyone!”

“That isn’t what I meant...” Unable to get his point across, Blitzdonner held his head.

“It’s no use. Fianna doesn’t live according to the standards of ordinary people.”

“You should talk! You’re the *Sorcerer*!”

“Which is why I know what I’m talking about!”

Fianna shot a miffed look at Daian, but he paid no mind.

“Tch! You scientists are all alike!”

Blitzdonner’s lack of common sense had once led to many legends. But looking at Daian and Fianna, he realized all over again that he was only slightly outside the bounds of common sense. The woman, Fianna Libera, was a scientist like Daian. And, according to Daian, she possessed a world-class scientific mind.

“I say! Wiltian men! They’re all so serious... and *boring*! Much too insignificant and tame for *me*!”

“Yeah, only a great nation the size of a continent could handle you!”

Fianna had once been a Wiltian herself, but she had emigrated to the nation of Noa on the new continent.

“I’ve seen your film.”

“Oh! Really? Want my autograph?”

“No!”

Fianna wasn’t going to go easy on Blitzdonner, and he sighed. She was a scientist, but she was an actress before that. Actually, she was *still* an actress. She had once swept the Wiltian cinematic world as one of the most beautiful

actresses.

“No wonder there was an uproar!”

When she had resided in Wiltia, one of her films had rocked the nation.

“The only real problem is that such a thing would cause an uproar!”

She had performed a love scene—a *sexual* love scene—in one of her films. According to her, “If there’s artistic merit, then there’s no reason to refuse,” and the exposure of her voluptuous, naked body had packed theaters for days.

“Beautiful things are themselves works of art. My body, like lovely flowers, is a work of art! Critics who object by claiming that it’s dirty or obscene only prove that they are driven by evil emotions!”



“Yeah, but... isn’t that why you couldn’t remain in Wiltia?”

“Don’t get the wrong idea! It’s not that I couldn’t stay there! Wiltia just isn’t a suitable country for me!”

The film had been a huge hit as well as a social problem. Critics had labeled it pornography and called Fianna a whore. But instead of backing down, she just moved to a country where her artistic expression was permitted.

“There, there, Fianna. For now, come here,” Daian said.

To calm her down, he took a bottle of beer from their cooler and handed it to her.

“Oh my! How considerate of you!” Flushed from her shower, Fianna happily gulped the cold beer.

“In beer alone, Wiltia is the best! This is the only thing I miss!”

Fianna Libera was a beautiful woman who wouldn’t back down against an entire nation—she was a *goddess*.

“I doubt Wiltia expected that the actress it drove away would return as a scientist,” Blitzdonner responded sincerely.

When Fianna Libera lived in Wiltia, she was known as a woman of many love affairs. And that hadn’t changed since her move to Noa. She loved and was loved by many men. However, she liked slightly unusual men.

“That’s because there were so many great men in Noa.” Fianna let out an alluring titter.

Her taste in men had nothing to do with looks, money, physique or influence. It was all about intelligence. She adored smart men.

“I like brainy dudes! I want to know everything about them! And the next thing I knew, I was brainy myself!”

She had absorbed a volume of knowledge commensurate with the number of men she had loved. She had already been a gifted genius in mechanical engineering, but her unusual ability to absorb knowledge put her in a whole new category of scientific intelligence.

“If you like eggheads so much, how about the Sorcerer right here?”

“Hunh?” Fianna glared at Blitzdonner, who was ironically pointing at Daian.

“I like geniuses! And he’s in the highest class! But... am I right, Mr. Crimson Hawk?” Fianna knew Blitzdonner’s background. Wickedly, as if to test him, she stared into his eyes. “A dish may look tasty but still be poisonous. So no thank you! I’ll have none of that!” Having had her say, she drained her bottle.

“I don’t understand how you two think,” Blitzdonner said, but he knew Fianna indeed owned a brain equal to Daian’s.

She was a doctor of electrical engineering, and the advanced radio technology she invented with the knowledge she gained from two famous musicians had revolutionized the world’s communications net. And it led to the successful development of a radiolocation device that was expected to take another fifty years before it found military use. Both technologies would be crucial to the world’s information and communication technology for the next one hundred years.

“So two of the world’s most treasured brains are going to investigate this.”

“Yes, that’s right.” Fianna grinned and smiled.

She truly was beautiful. She had no doubt stolen the hearts of countless men with that smile. She wasn’t Blitzdonner’s type, and he suspected she wasn’t Daian’s either, so she was just plying her charms naturally.

“In any case, that one object has the potential for unimaginable impact.”

“Genitz found a new Door and even the government of August doesn’t know about it.”

The lips of this beauty just confirmed the existence of a relic that could determine the fate of the world.

Chapter 2: A Workplace Where Smiles Never Fade

0733 25.04.921—

The small bakery Tockerbrot was located in a corner of the mining town of Organbaelz. A short distance away, there was a repair shop, or a *former* repair shop. About a year ago, the owner retired due to health problems and took the shop's sign down. Inside the shop, Rebecca woke up in a room used as both a workshop and residence.

"Huh...?" The sun was up. Judging from the light coming through the window, Rebecca guessed she had been asleep for five hours. She tried to remember the last thing that had happened to her.

She remembered trying to attack and overtake the man claiming to be Svelgen Avei's father, but she had crashed to the ground before she could even launch a strike. The man hadn't touched her arm, leg or any part of her body. Instead, it had been as if her body had simply rejected her commands.

Who was that man? He was like... No, more importantly...

A more immediate issue took precedence.

"Is this place...? It cannot be!!" Rebecca looked around the room. The room wasn't large, and it looked as if it had been renovated from a storeroom. There was a bed, a desk and a chair. However, the furnishings were all somewhat undersized, as if for a small woman... No, for a *child*.

"Huh? Why...?" Rebecca usually spoke in tones so polite and formal they were almost robotic. Someone listening would think she had no emotions. It was rare for her to sound so openly confused.

"What?!" She was upset because she recognized the room and she knew who lived here. Why was she sleeping in a bed in *his* room?

"Oh, you woke up."

Before she could determine the answer, the door of the room opened and a

boy appeared. It was Jacob, the room's occupant and the grandson of the former repair shop's owner.

"Jacob?!" As soon as Rebecca saw his face, she exploded like a firecracker. "W-Why are you here?!"

"Because this is my room."

"Y-Yes, that is correct, but..."

Rebecca recognized the room and the house. She had come all the way from Berun to observe Sven and the others for the past week. It was a tiring mission requiring the utmost secrecy, so she snuck into military transport airplanes to travel back and forth with the freight.

There was a reason she was taking the task so seriously. It was because of Jacob, who was standing before her.

"What's the matter? Um... Your name is Rebecca, isn't it?"

"Y-Yes..."

Jacob was the son of Blitzdonner, her master when she was an assistive AI in a Hunter Unit. Jacob was as important to her as her beloved master. To protect him, she had been secretly traveling back and forth between Organbaelz and Berun.

"H-How did I get here? Can you tell me?"

"Hm? Sven brought you. Want coffee?" As Jacob answered Rebecca's question, he handed her a mug of coffee.

Four hours earlier, Meitzer had thoroughly defeated Rebecca. Sven didn't know what she should do with Rebecca, who lay unconscious with a broken leg.

"I can't just leave her like this."

Even if Sven abandoned her, nothing would have happened to the humanoid Hunter Unit. Rebecca wouldn't have died.

"Let's see..."

Sven's past self would have abandoned her, saying, "You're useless!" The

popular waitress was surprisingly cold to anyone other than Lud and the people he cared about. However...

“I kind of owe her.”

When Genitz stole Sven’s physical and mental power, Rebecca had helped her. Rebecca had her own reason for doing so, but Sven felt an obligation to her nonetheless.

“Umff!” Reluctantly, Sven lifted Rebecca and carried her somewhere safe.

She couldn’t take Rebecca to Tockerbrot. Meitzer was there and Rebecca’s presence would cause trouble for Lud. Sven needed someone who would shelter and take care of Rebecca without asking questions.

“There’s only one place.”

So Sven had headed to Jacob’s house.

Back in the present...

“Sven surprised me. She showed up before dawn and asked me to take you in for a while—no questions asked.”

“So that is how I got here...” After hearing Jacob’s account, Rebecca finally understood.

Indeed, this was the only place in Organbaelz capable of sheltering Rebecca.

“How embarrassing!”

Rebecca had vowed to protect Jacob before anyone else in the world. She couldn’t forgive herself for appearing so shamefully before him.

“It’s been awhile. The last time we met was during that mess in the royal capital, but you disappeared. I was a little sad I didn’t have a chance to say good-bye.” Jacob tried to cheer her up.

During the disturbance in the royal capital, Rebecca was seriously injured while fighting an enemy. Or rather, she suffered serious *damage*. Her arm was broken, and her face was wounded so anyone could tell at a glance that she was a machine. Since she couldn’t reveal what she was, she had left quickly,

dragging her damaged body, without saying good-bye to Jacob and the others.

“About that, um... I am sorry for being rude.” Her tone was completely different from usual, and her face wore a truly heartfelt apologetic look that even Daian, who had given her rebirth in human form, had never seen.

“Oh, I didn’t mean it like that. I’m just glad to see you again.”

“Guah?!” Rebecca let out an odd cry at Jacob’s bashful words. “Agh...” And she blushed all the way to her ears, turning redder than her dress, hair or eyes. “Aagh...”

Sven and Rebecca had both developed hearts from their powerful feelings for their masters, and both were humanoid Hunter Units in the form of human girls. However, their hearts had turned in slightly different directions.

“Uwaaah...”

To Rebecca, Blitzdonner was more like a father who had given her life, rather than a possible romantic interest. She hoped that someday he would lead a peaceful life with Jacob’s mother Charlotte. He had referred to her as his beloved since Rebecca was his assistive AI.

“Waaaaah...”

Rebecca believed it was her duty to protect Jacob, because he was necessary for her master’s happiness. However, as a result of watching over him, a change had occurred within her.

“Gwaaah...”

She felt strong, *very* strong, affection for Jacob, who closely resembled his father in appearance, but was sweeter.

“Um, Miss? Are you all right? Uh...”

The boy’s words disintegrated Rebecca’s composure. “Sorry, but you have... sort of... well, actually *more* than sort of... stolen my heart.”

And that confused him. “What do you mean?!”

The girl in red was happy to hear him express his joy at seeing her, but she was so happy that it took her mind away from her present circumstances.



“Why don’t you relax here for a while? After all, *you’ve* taken care of *me* a few times. All right?”

“Yes... all right.” Rebecca obediently agreed to Jacob’s suggestion.

She believed Jacob was now seducing her by asking her to stay.

Is this heaven?!

Rebecca was wrapped in a euphoria that she had never known before.

Usually, contact with the mission’s target of observation was forbidden, but that caution no longer existed for her. Luckily, Daian—who had sent her on this surveillance mission—had announced that he would be away from the royal capital for a while and disappeared. So Rebecca told herself that she could stay and enjoy some happiness here.

“I never expected to owe Svelgen in this way...”

“Did you say something?”

“Oh... nothing.” Rebecca deflected Jacob’s question as calmly as possible. Inside, however, she was rejoicing like spring in full bloom.

1024 25.04.921—

There are many kinds of bread. The different types vary by country, and in Wiltia, because of the serious national character, the bread was distinguished by the ratio of wheat to barley.

Greyten, the nation of gentlemen and tea, favored scones and crumpets, which went well with both. The people of Filbarneu, with its capital known as the City of Art, loved hard bread, such as batards and baguettes that made one’s jaw tired to chew.

Painting, music and literature are important in describing a nation’s culture. However, a country’s food, in which all human beings participate and which is closely connected to universal behavior, can represent a nation’s inner nature. Thus...

“Mmmmmph?!” The girl’s muffled cries were audible even in Tockerbrot’s oven room.

“Hang in there, Milly!!”

Milly, the apprentice at Tockerbrot Bakery, had collapsed, her eyes rolling. Lud, the owner of the shop, shook her.

“It’s no good! She couldn’t eat another bite!” Lud shook his head and gently laid Milly on the floor.

“Oh no... Did I do something wrong?”

“No, she always does this. It looks like she went over capacity.” Lud replied consolingly to Meitzer, who spoke apologetically.

Milly’s mouth was stuffed with appetizing, freshly-baked bread. The bread had an unusual shape. It was twisted into a conical spiral like the horn of a goat.

“We fed her too much. This... Let’s see... Is it a coronet?”

“No, a chocolate *cornet*.”

Meitzer, who claimed to be Sven’s father and was staying at Tockerbrot, was helping with the baking because he didn’t want to take advantage of their hospitality, and this resulted in Milly’s collapse.

“Well, I’m glad she likes the bread so much.”

It seemed unlikely that an amateur baker would be any help, but Meitzer claimed he had learned how to bake a long time ago. Then he began kneading dough with impressive skill, shaping it, baking it, and turning out bread impressive even to a professional baker like Lud.

It tasted wonderful. And Milly, with her large appetite, had tasted one after another until she fainted.

“Anyway, um... Meitzer? Where did you develop such skill at baking bread?”

Lud was also in the oven room tasting the bread and was surprised at the man’s workmanship. Meitzer had used the same ingredients that Lud used. So Lud knew Meitzer had considerable expertise as a baker.

“This isn’t an easily attainable skill.” Lud was impressed, because Meitzer’s bread might be better than even he was capable of producing.

“Well, I’ve got some years on you, and that counts for something!” Meitzer

wasn’t boastful. Instead, he replied with a bright smile.

“And all the different bread you’ve made... I’ve never seen any of them. Which country are they from?”

Lud had learned to bake in Haugen, a nation between Wiltia and Filbarneu. Later, he studied in various countries around the continent of Europea. He was confident in his skills and knowledge, but he had never seen the bread Meitzer baked.

“This bread with jam inside is good. It’s more like a sweet than a bread.” Lud was holding jam bread. It contained homemade apricot jam sold at Tockerbrot. “And this one has custard cream. I’ve never eaten anything like it!”

Meitzer had baked with the same dough, but introduced different flavors by changing the filling. It wasn’t the first time Lud tasted bread baked with that method.

“They’re similar to the bean-jam buns!”

“Oh! Milly... you’re awake.”

Milly, who had fainted after eating Meitzer’s delicacies, had finally recovered.

“The same idea was likely behind those, too.”

One of Tockerbrot’s specialties was bean-jam buns. They consisted of dough around boiled sweet bean paste.

“Meitzer, have you ever been to Yamato?”

In his military days, Lud learned how to make bean-jam buns at a cultural exchange event with the allied nation of Yamato.

“A cook from Yamato who taught me how to bake bean-jam buns said the people of Yamato originally ate rice.”

Aesia was a different cultural region than Europea, and the people ate more rice than wheat. Along with the other nations of Aesia, in Yamato, rice was an indicator of economic prosperity and national strength. That’s how strongly the people were attached to rice.

“There’s rice in Europea too, but when it cools down, it doesn’t taste good.

However, the people of Yamato adore rice and have improved the quality over time to create rice that's tasty even when cold."

For that reason, the people of Yamato preferred food called rice balls, which were made out of rice packed with salt. And they had created numerous variations by inserting different ingredients.

"Yes, I have. I picked up most of my skill in Yamato. Isn't this bread interesting? The filling isn't sandwiched between bread or spread on top. Instead, it's wrapped inside. There are some foods like this in Europea, but the people of Yamato prefer this kind of bread."

They were all bread, but the way they were baked and eaten demonstrated the cultural characteristics of the different nations.

"Yamato is a fascinating country. It develops rapidly by integrating foreign cultures with its own—which is clearly visible in this bread. The inclusion of jam and chocolate inside the bread creates new flavors." Meitzer talked delightedly about the culture and thinking of the people of Yamato in the unique idea of wrapping bread around a filling.

"The bread I baked is a sweetbread. It was developed by the same baker who created the bean-jam buns you're familiar with. Isn't that interesting?"

Even though the continent of Europea was vast, few bakers made bean-jam buns, let alone related sweetbreads.

"Would you mind teaching me how to make them?" Without reservation, Lud asked Meitzer for instruction.

This was his *artisan's spirit*. Usually, this referred to the closed-minded attitude of one who has specialized in and mastered a particular skill. However, Lud's pride as a baker lay in ignoring his own pride so he could make better bread, even if just a little better, and thereby please the people who ate it. Thus, his pride was to *abandon* his pride.

"Of course! I'd be happy to! Nothing would please me more than for my experience to be useful to you!"

"Thank you!"

Meitzer laughed cheerfully at Lud's gratitude. "You look after my daughter, so this barely begins to show my thankfulness." He wasn't just being polite. His face revealed that he was pleased from the bottom of his heart.

"By the way, Milly. Do you know where my daughter went?"

It was right before lunch, the shop's busiest time. They could handle the shop without Sven for now, but Meitzer wondered why he hadn't seen her.

"Huh? She delivers bread to the school and mine around this time."

"I see..." Meitzer appeared to wonder at this and the smile disappeared from his mouth. "Oh well..." Then he grinned once more.

Lud hadn't seen the change in Meitzer's expression, and Milly didn't notice.

Clang! Then, as if timed to that moment, the door of the shop opened. It was Sven, the very subject of their conversation.

"You! What are you doing?!" Usually, Sven maintained her smile as the popular waitress of Tockerbrot, but now her temples were twitching.

"What do you mean? I'm baking bread with Lud. This *is* a bakery, isn't it?"

"You've got some nerve!"

When Meitzer answered with a smile, Sven grew angrier. The oven room at Tockerbrot was Lud's sanctuary. Even Sven rarely went inside, so seeing Meitzer there agitated her.

"Sven, you should speak more respectfully to your *father*."

"Don't press your luck!" Sven glared with hostility at Meitzer and his lighthearted attitude.

What would happen if this mysterious person stayed at Tockerbrot? It would be best if Sven could keep an eye on him all the time, but she had many duties outside the bakery. She was in charge of delivering bread to the schools, city hall and mine cafeterias since Lud's face scared the customers. She had no idea what Meitzer might do while she was gone.

He knows my identity, but if he uses that as an excuse to harm Master, I'll lose everything!

He wasn't just a mysterious man. He was a dangerous opponent who had easily incapacitated two humanoid Hunter Units.

"You don't want him to know who you are, so you'd better keep quiet, right?" Meitzer spoke quietly so only Sven could hear.

"You..." Impatience, anger and frustration ignited inside Sven. She didn't know what his plan was. However, she didn't want to repeat what happened once before. Genitz had taken control of her body and mind and endangered Lud. She wanted at all costs to avoid that.

"I'm gonna *kill* you!" Sven spoke softly to Meitzer, but her voice filled with hate as she glared at him.

"What's the matter, Sven?" Lud hadn't heard their conversation, but he noticed the strange air between them.

"Huh? Um..."

"There seems to be some friction between you two." Milly had also noticed the distance between them.

"Um..." Sven was flustered as Milly continued.

"You guys are quite similar."

"What?!" Openly offended, Sven raised her voice.

It bothered Sven that the people around her thought she and Meitzer were alike. It wasn't only Milly and Jacob. Over the last few days, everyone visiting the shop made the same comment after hearing Meitzer was Sven's father.

"It's such an unpleasant comment!" Sven couldn't help but complain.

"I heard Sven's dad is here? Oh, you two really look alike!" Just then, Marlene—the nun from the church atop the hill—opened the door and this was the first thing out of her mouth.

"You, too?!"

"Huh? What?!" Sven's shout cowed Marlene.

"All of you just—arrrgh!" Sven was furious.

Usually, she acted reserved and a little distant, except toward Lud and his

friends. She pretended to be the perfect girl, in part to keep up appearances. So by revealing her hostility toward Meitzer, Sven looked more like a young daughter being mean to her father. However, it wasn't only that.

"What part of me resembles him? I can't agree!"

"It isn't your resemblance to each other so much as your spirit..."

"Enough with that vague answer!"

Sven could no longer hide her irritation at Marlene's comment, but they were indeed similar. Their hair colors were different, but they had the same skin hue and they both had red eyes.

"How should I put it? You're both kind of unfathomable."

"Urgh!"

Marlene didn't know what Sven really was. However, she knew Sven had once repelled terrorists invading Organbaelz while unarmed. It was unlikely a person of God living in a rural town would suspect the girl in front of her was a mechanical humanoid weapon.

"Think about it calmly. At the very least, you're not an *ordinary* girl, right?"

"Well... I guess I'm not."

Marlene didn't ask Sven for details about her past because Marlene herself had been through a lot. She understood that everyone has things in their past they don't want to discuss.

"That man is more than just handsome. And if someone told me he's your father, I could see it."

"Did you just say I'm handsome? Having such a pretty nun praise me is very pleasing!"

Sven openly showed irritation at Meitzer when he joined the conversation. "Hey, you! Stay out of this!"

"That's not how you should address me, is it? Call me Dad!!"

"Never!"

"Or Papa."

“Never, ever!!!” Sven yelled, with her eyes shooting daggers at the grinning Meitzer.

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

Lud, Milly and Marlene watched their exchange in silence.

“Oh...” Sven noticed and hurried to correct her behavior. “S-See? We’re not like father and daughter at all, are we? A daughter wouldn’t behave like this toward her father!”

Sven didn’t want people to think she and Meitzer were alike, so she was desperate to insist that, while they may be father and daughter, they weren’t similar. However, the reply she received back wasn’t what she expected.

“You two are *very much* like a father and daughter.” Marlene answered seriously, neither joking nor teasing.

“How so?!”

“I mean, that’s exactly the way a parent and child behave!”

“Huh?!” Sven was at a complete loss. She didn’t have parents, so she didn’t understand relationships between parents and their children.

“When children grow up, their parents irritate them. I see it all the time. A child is usually calm, but when his parents show up in front of his friends, he treats them thoughtlessly.”

“No. This is...” Sven wanted to say this was different, but she couldn’t get the words out.

She was usually better at handling things like this. Typically, she wouldn’t have been so obvious. She would have behaved more like a daughter so Lud and the others wouldn’t become suspicious. But this time she couldn’t. She didn’t even feel like trying, and she couldn’t stop herself from venting her feelings. Lud was the only person with whom she would normally behave like this.

“That can’t be!!”

“Wow! You surprised me!!” Marlene flinched when Sven suddenly shouted.

Lud was more important to Sven than her own life. There was no one else to whom she would show her honest feelings—although in Meitzer’s case, she was showing hate not affection. Sven didn’t think there would ever be another such person for her.

“There, there... Calm down.”

“Don’t you tell me that!”

Meitzer tried to calm Sven down, but she yelled at him.

“You shouldn’t be so emotional.”

“I said don’t talk to me!”

“I mean, there are many different kinds of people in the world.”

“What?!”

Meitzer indicated Lud and the others with his gaze. Lud and Milly were smiling wistfully.

“What a touching parental scene...”

“Yeah...”

“Oh...” Sven finally understood. Lud and Milly didn’t have parents. They had lost both their fathers and mothers during the recent Great War.

“Uh, let’s see... Um...” Even quarreling and fighting with a parent was something they missed and longed for. Realizing that, Sven didn’t know how to reply and felt uncomfortable.

“You should show a little more consideration for those around you, no?”

“Argh!”

Meitzer had apparently guessed Lud’s and Milly’s history from snippets of conversation and from their reactions. Sven could only make a frustrated sound after he chided her.

“Sven, I understand how you feel, but you should treasure your father.”

“That’s right. Try to get along with your father.” Both Lud and Milly spoke gently, and Sven had nothing to say in reply.

“Urgh...” In agony, Sven held her head. She was in such a predicament that everything else—even the issue of Meitzer’s identity and purpose here, and how long this confusing situation would last—felt unimportant.

1147 26.04.921—

Meanwhile, a welcoming ceremony for General Douglas was taking place in Berun, the royal capital.

“Skwawk?”

The mayor of Berun had given a speech extolling good will between Wiltia and Noa.

“Skwawk?”

The Wiltian military band played their respective national anthems, and Hilde sang a song in praise of their friendly relations before a crowd of important politicians from parliament and top military brass.

“Skwaw-wawk?”

Then the flags of the two allies were hoisted to great applause.

“Skwawk...”

And General Douglas, the penguin, grew bored and wandered around the stage waving his flippers the whole time.

“My stomach hurts!!” During a break, Sophia crouched in the guard unit office.

“Major Rundstadt?!” Hilde ran over when she saw that Sophia was seriously in pain.

“The way those big shots from the military and the government are looking at me actually *hurts*!!”

On the whole, Wiltians were serious and hardworking. Once they decided on

a program and the necessary decorum, they would see that through to the end. Even though their guest was a penguin, it should be treated as an honored visitor, so they would behave accordingly. Therefore, they were all very serious in front of the penguin. They were busy and important people. But, their accusatory looks, directed squarely at Sophia, said, “Why must we go along with this charade?”

“But it isn’t my fault!” This woman with an iron will now had tears in her eyes.

Sophia was only in charge of the guards for the ceremony. However, the person present is the one who takes the blame.

“What is Noa thinking? Are they making fun of Wiltia?” Hilde spoke angrily.

Her comment was understandable. She had been told a high-ranking military official would visit, only to have a penguin appear. However...

“It’s not quite what you think.” Sophia held her painful stomach and stopped Hilde.

“What?”

“This often happens.” Munching on a pretzel, Lillie spoke in a relaxed manner to Hilde, who wore a puzzled look.

“What do you mean, Lillie?”

“The military often uses animals as mascots.”

They were called *military animals*. Animals played important roles in the military. Carrier pigeons were a means of communication, and military dogs, with their excellent sense of smell, searched for buried land mines. And there were certain roles only animals could play. One example of that was providing *comfort*.

“I’ve heard the Greyten Empire keeps a goat and August keeps a bear.”

“Seriously?” Hilde looked incredulous at Lillie’s story. It was hard to imagine animals healing frightened soldiers.

“Wiltia has the same custom.” Sophia joined the conversation.

“Many soldiers on our navy’s battleships bring cats, because there’s an old

legend that a ship won't sink with a cat on board."

Of course, they didn't really believe that legend. However, military service was a job that could mean death tomorrow. Any small charm could help encourage and bring peace of mind.

"Perhaps General Douglas serves such a purpose."

"But would they still call the penguin a general? That's misleading!"

Hilde understood about keeping animals in the military. However, she thought such a confusing nickname was unnecessary.

Lillie interrupted again. "That doesn't seem to be the case. General isn't a nickname. It's an official title."

"No way!!" Hilde was still a student, but she was also a former member of the Schutzstaffel.

She had been a first lieutenant. Considering her age, it was an impressive rank. However, a general—even a brigadier general, the lowest type of general—was eight ranks higher than a first lieutenant.

"Am I supposed to salute that thing?!" Hilde was confused by this surprising fact.

"I've heard the Noa military keeps penguins as their mascots, and their rank is hereditary."

"What the heck?"

Normally, of course, military rank didn't extend beyond one generation. But they were dealing with penguins.

"The mascot is promoted with every celebratory occasion, and replaced by successors, so the mascot advances quickly. It's officially listed among the generals of Noa's military."

"Gimme a break..."

So the officials of Noa weren't lying. However, they should have mentioned it from the beginning. No one would think to ask, "Is the visiting general a human being?" Such a question would cause problems.

“Then maybe Noa isn’t very well-disposed toward Wiltia?” Hilde sighed as she asked.

“Um...” Sophia looked troubled and folded her arms. She was unable to answer Hilde’s question.

“Considering the current international situation, in which the three nations of Wiltia, August and Noa control the world, if Noa sees Wiltia as an enemy, it’s not good.”

If Wiltia flew into a rage and claimed Noa was ridiculing it by sending a penguin, it would look as if Wiltia had misunderstood and overreacted.

“It was once said that an essential element of foreign diplomacy is to alienate one’s opponent. I’m afraid that’s a possibility.” Sophia sighed. She was a soldier, not a diplomat. This kind of maneuvering was outside her field.

“Um, I don’t think that was their intention.” Lillie interrupted for a third time. “It seems they have their own difficulties. He was happy that the Wiltian people organized a welcoming ceremony.”

“What?”

General Douglas had not come alone. Attendants had accompanied him. They all looked pale, were palpably tense, and barely spoke.

“*Who* said that?”

“He did.”

“Who’s ‘he’?!”

“C’mon! C’mere, boy!” Lillie called it out from its hiding place to stand in front of the dubious Hilde.

“What?!” Hilde’s face froze when she saw who it was.

“What?!” Sophia looked astonished.

“Skwawk!” It was General Douglas—the penguin.

“Did you not think Hilde’s singing was simply wonderful?”

“Skwawk!” General Douglas answered Lillie’s question happily.

“See? He is saying— Ouuuch!’”

“What’re you doing?!” Trying hard not to faint at the bizarre situation, Hilde gripped Lillie’s collar. “Where did you get him? How? Why?!”

It was a penguin, but it was also an important national guest. If anything should happen to it, it would become a serious international problem.

“Uaaagh?!” This sudden development had Sophia ready to pass out herself.



“Major Rundstadt, pull yourself together! Lillie, what have you done?” Hilde spoke tearfully while clasping Sophia, who was practically frothing at the mouth.

“I often have no idea what you’re thinking, but this is crazy, even for you!” Hilde usually thought of Lillie as a valuable friend. “The authorities won’t consider this to be a mere prank! What should we do?!”

She wanted to rescue Lillie, who had really messed up. Hilde wondered how and to whom she should apologize to settle this quietly, but she couldn’t think of a good solution.

“Um... What is the matter, Hilde?”

“You...”

Showing no concern at all for Hilde’s struggle, Lillie asked as if suggesting Hilde was the crazy one for being so upset.

“So...”

“He wants you to save him.”

“What?!” Hilde was about to yell at Lillie, but the girl’s words stopped her. “Save? What’re you talking about?”

Hilde noticed that Lillie’s tone was unusual, awakening a certain suspicion, and she couldn’t believe Lillie would say such a thing. “It sounds like... I mean... like you *understand* him!”

Lillie was an unusual girl, but Hilde didn’t think she was *that* strange. But, in a sense, Hilde almost wished she *were*.

“Yes. I understand what General Douglas is saying.”

“Rgraaaaaaaaargh!!!”

There are many kinds of people in the world. And personalities and ways of thinking differ by age.

“Hey, is your friend... a little... *that* way?” Sophia asked. She had recovered.

“No, I don’t think so, but...” Hilde answered vaguely.

“It’s common. Hearing flowers talk or having the ability to communicate with animals... I had an acquaintance like that when I was in the military academy.”

“Some people try to make themselves unique that way.”

“Yeah. After a while, they claim they can hear spirits.”

“And then they say they can hear God.”

“Well, that’s another story.”

Their backs turned to Lillie, they were whispering to each other loudly enough that Lillie could still hear.

“Are you treating me like some kind of weirdo?” Lillie spoke with frustration. “You have me all wrong. Right now, he is saying I can understand him.”

“What do you mean you can understand? What’s it saying?” Hilde asked. She was stunned.

“Is it saying it loves you and wants to be friends?”

“No!” Lillie answered Hilde, who seemed to be getting tired of defending herself.

“He said, ‘Help, they’re going to kill me.’”

“What?” Hilde froze at the menacing words.

“Skwawk...” And General Douglas, who had been quiet, now made a pained cry.

“Let’s see... He said his flock... No, his attendants were all killed, so he wants help.”

“Hey, are you serious?”

Lillie’s voice held no tension. It sounded as if she spoke the truth. Lillie was indeed unusual, but she would never joke about someone’s death, and especially not to Hilde. Hilde would hate that. And Lillie never did anything that would anger Hilde.

“Wait, Hildegard.” Sophia stopped Hilde, who was confused.

Sophia no longer looked troubled and she wasn’t holding her stomach in pain.

Her eyes were those of a soldier who had been through Hell in the last war.

“Look at General Douglas’s feet.”

There was something red on the penguin’s webbed feet.

“That’s...” Hilde fearfully reached for General Douglas. Examining the back of his flippers, she found blood.

“On the way back from buying a pretzel, I found him alone, walking slowly along the hallway. Then I looked through the door and everyone inside was dead.” Lillie related this tragedy matter-of-factly.

“Then...”

“You...”

Hilde and Sophia yelled at Lillie at the same time. “Then you should have said so sooner!!”

Someone had snuck into the welcome reception and, in an effort to destroy relations between Wiltia and Noa, tried to assassinate General Douglas. That was the situation they now faced.

1117 26.04.921—

The small nation of Haradin was at the far eastern edge of the continent of Europea. This was where Daian and his companions were going.

“Fianna, did you know animals can communicate with each other?”

“What are you talking about?”

After finishing their journey by Said Express, they transferred to several local railroads. Now, in the car heading to their destination, Daian suddenly brought up something completely unrelated.

“Of course, they’re incapable of anything as complicated as human speech, but they can express a certain amount of information, like the appearance of a predator, an attack on the herd, a cry for help, and so on.”

“Oh, uh-huh.” Fianna replied vaguely as if she couldn’t care less, but Daian continued.

Daian wasn't concerned about the reaction of his audience. He talked because he wanted to. "And it's not just large animals. It can be observed in cats and rats and other small animals. Even birds have a brain of corresponding size, so possibly birds too."

"Mm-hmm..." Fianna was checking her manicure, but Daian still wouldn't stop.

"With a certain amount of audio data, you can compare the sounds to roughly determine what the animals are saying."

"So did you make a device for speaking with animals?" Fianna responded as if dealing with a child's chattering.

"Yes. Some time ago. It was surprisingly compact, and I installed it in the unit that was helping me at the time."

About 10 percent of what Daian did was truly important, while the remaining 90 percent was of no significance. Therefore, even this event he described had no meaning. What it caused or revealed wasn't important.

"So why are you telling me?"

"Oh... no particular reason."

The reason, if he gave it, would have been just because it crossed his mind.

"Tch! You brainy types are so full of lofty conversations!" Blitzdonner spoke sarcastically from the passenger seat. "It won't be long before we arrive you-know-where."

"You-know-where" was the secret base Genitz had established deep in the countryside of Haradin. Calling it a secret base sounded hackneyed and childish, but it was the only label that fit.

Haradin appeared to be an independent nation, but it was actually a satellite state of the August Federation. To be precise, it was a *puppet state*. Because it shared a border with a nation Wiltia had colonized, August established it as a buffer zone. For appearances' sake, it engaged in limited international relations with Wiltia. By going through the appropriate channels, Daian and the other two might have entered the nation legally.

“Genitz was being extremely careful to create a base here.”

It was a remote area, two hours by car from the nearest town with a train stop. It was separated from surrounding villages, each with a very small population. It was the type of place where you were more likely to see foxes than people.

“How did you find information about it, Mr. Crimson Hawk?”

“Stop calling me that.” Blitzdonner responded to Fianna’s question with an irritated face.

“Not long ago, I caught a small-time political agitator at a certain officer’s school.”

He was referring to an attempted armed uprising by extremists known as the Peace Faith at Dangoltinoza Military Academy, which Hilde had attended.

“I retrieved one name after another from the guy I nabbed there, and one had connections to August and he coughed it all up.”

After his capture, he spilled everything through a plea bargain in the hopes of avoiding charges. And he revealed that the recently departed Genitz had been secretly dealing with August.

“Oh. What a dunce.” Fianna sounded as if she found it utterly ridiculous.

“Well, I suppose he does sound that way to you.”

Fianna and Daian had strong egos and saw the nation as nothing but a means to their own goals, so it was unfathomable to them a person would feel the need to prove one’s worth by relying on ideology.

“I’m telling you, what we’re doing is basically illegal entry. As far as any documentation is concerned, you aren’t even here.”

Wiltia’s genius scientist and Noa’s greatest mind. If they tried to enter through legitimate methods, August would immediately hear of it. So they forged passports to enter.

“Apuvea doesn’t have many operatives here, but it does have a few.”

Blitzdonner was implying they should be more alert, since he may not be able

to protect them if worse came to worse.

“Aren’t there any Augustan soldiers at the secret base?” Daian asked.

That place must be important so it was hard to imagine August would simply let it go unprotected.

“Well, about that...” Blitzdonner’s face clouded faintly. “According to intelligence agents, the soldiers on site disappeared after the rebellion.”

The three were going to see a “Door,” which contained the heritage of the ancient Europea Empire that fell to ruin a millennium ago. That empire had possessed incredible technology unthinkable today. That heritage was sealed beyond Doors positioned in various places around the continent of Europea.

The treasures to be gained from opening just one Door were inestimable. In fact, behind one Door, Wiltia had found the means to create a new weapon—the Hunter Units—that outstripped all existing knowledge and allowed Wiltia to be victorious in the Great War.

“It seems Augustan soldiers and researchers were analyzing the Door before they disappeared about six months ago.”

As if they had departed in a hurry, equipment and materials were still lying around.

“Six months ago... That would be exactly when the rebellion was being subdued.” As Daian spoke, he looked out the car window.

“Aw... I suppose they learned of Genitz’s failure and cleared out in a panic before the fire could reach *them*.”

And that indicated something. If August had been carrying out secret deals at the national level, it wouldn’t simply abandon the Door. On the contrary, it would have dispatched reinforcements and desperately defended it.

“In other words, this matter was carried out without the full approval of the higher-ups. Or, to be more precise, the Soviet Six.”

The Soviet Six was August’s highest decision-making body.

“So one of them did it unilaterally? In that case...” Daian didn’t say any more, but the other two understood what he wanted to say.

Top officials in August were largely unaware of the matter. They may even be in a state of confusion. If that was true, then...

“Now is our chance.”

The heritage asleep beyond the Door was powerful enough to change the current state of world affairs. And even if nothing was inside, it would still appear that they had obtained a new power—which itself could serve as a new deterrent. If they could open the Door and investigate what was inside before August returned, Wiltia would be able to walk away with the rewards this time.

“I wonder how this’ll turn out?” Just as Daian was muttering, the car, which had been bouncing along the rough road, finally reached its destination.

Chapter 3: The World Quakes

1548 25.04.921—

"... *SIGH*..." Inside Tockerbrot, Sven sighed very deeply. Lud wasn't there. He was procuring wheat in a neighboring town. Milly, the apprentice, was helping him.

"...*SIIIGH*..." Sven sighed again. At this moment, Sven and one other person were in the shop.

"Hey, Sven? If you sigh that much, happiness will run away." That other person was Meitzer, who claimed to be Sven's father.

"I just don't have the energy to get angry at you..."

Sven was wondering how she got into this situation. Lud probably considered this an opportunity for her and Meitzer to spend time together. She could have cried for joy.

"Don't make such a forbidding face. I just wanted to talk with you alone."

"Oh, now I get it." Sven suddenly realized the truth. She thought Lud arranged this, but it was Meitzer. Perhaps, Meitzer had told Lud that he could leave because Meitzer would take care of the shop.

"What do you mean when you say you're my father?"

"Hm?" Meitzer looked curious in response to Sven's question.

"So you admit I'm your father?"

"I don't wanna play word games! Just explain... And quickly!"

If Meitzer was a fraud, the explanation was simple. However, he had told Rebecca that she *wasn't* his daughter. If he had wanted to sneak into Tockerbrot and harm Sven, he would have no need to make such a distinction.

"If you want to talk, do it fast. We don't have much time."

Lud and Milly would return in a few hours. And the shop was open for

business. Although it wasn't a busy time, customers could walk through the door at any time.

"What I mean is we share the same blood. And such a relationship is only true for parents and their children."

"What?" Meitzer's reply dashed Sven's hopes for a simple explanation. "Do you know what you're saying?!"

Meitzer said they were related by blood. And Sven didn't *have* blood.

"You still can't abandon your behavior from your days as a weapon. Don't just look at what's immediately in front of you. You must grasp something *deeper*." However, Meitzer spoke to Sven like a parent reasoning with a child. "What exactly *is* blood? It circulates inside the body and maintains life. So, Sven, what is blood for *you*?"

"It's... What?!" Sven scrunched her face at the riddle-like question.

No blood circulated inside her body. However, she did have something *like* blood. Just as humans have blood to convey oxygen and nutrition around the body, Sven had something that conveyed her power to function. It was the rezanium reactor inside her chest.

"No way! That doesn't even make sense!!" Sven trembled in disbelief.

They shared the same blood? If that meant what she thought it did, it changed everything.

"Are you a humanoid Hunter Unit too?"

Her rezanium reactor was made of a special ore called rezanite. If Meitzer was also equipped with a rezanium reactor made of rezanite, then it would be as though they shared the same blood. In that case, the man in front of her wasn't human. But...

Given his exceptional strength, it's possible!

Two humanoid Hunter Units had been unable to even scratch this man, so he might be a humanoid Hunter Unit with stronger capabilities. But...

"No, I'm not a humanoid Hunter Unit."

“You’re not?!” Sven almost fell over when Meitzer shot down her guess.

“That’s an impressive guess!”

“That isn’t important!!” Sven’s eyes shot daggers as she yelled at Meitzer, who wore a pleased look.

“You weren’t far off. Consciously or unconsciously, however, you’re avoiding one possibility.”

“And you’re playing with words again!” Meitzer’s riddles irritated Sven. Her stomach had started to hurt, and she didn’t even have a stomach.

“Do you know how unique you are?”

“What’re you yapping about *now*?!”

It wasn’t necessary for him to tell her that. A humanoid Hunter Unit was neither human nor a weapon. It was something in between.

“No, no...” However, that also wasn’t the response her self-proclaimed father wanted to hear.

“I don’t know how many humanoid Hunter Units exist in this world, but you’re unusual even among them.” Meitzer extended his fingers to point at Sven’s chest. “You must be aware of it. You’re special.”

“.....!” Meitzer’s words struck a nerve in Sven. They reminded her of a part inside her that she tried to ignore and couldn’t understand at all.

“I’m sure you’ve considered it.”

“That’s...” Sven had encountered her own surprising strength many times.

The first was during the fight against Augustan special ops soldiers who came to Organbaelz. The next was during the *Defairedead* incident. And then it had happened during the rebellion in Berun, the royal capital.

“A rezanium reactor is the brain and heart of a humanoid Hunter Unit. At the same time, it’s a power source with a pre-existing high-quality calculating machine.”

Rezanite could magnify a weak electrical current to achieve many times more energy. Certain gemstones could increase the quantity of light heat a few

thousand fold by internal refraction. A rezanium reactor was said to have the same effect. And that effect could function as both an energy amplifier and a calculating machine.

“Do you know about quartz? It’s used in clocks. Rezanite is on a whole other level, but the way it functions is similar.”

Quartz is the crystal used for oscillation in clocks. Applying an electrical current to quartz crystals results in a fixed number of oscillations. Based on the number of oscillations, a quartz clock can keep time more accurately than a spring clock.

“Your rezanium reactor is your power source and brain. And its artificial intelligence results from a specific number of vibrations determined by the rezanite.” Meitzer was explaining cutting-edge science. And it was top secret technology held by the Wiltian military.

“Daian Fortuner... I don’t know where he obtained the knowledge, but this was the most secret technology ever created by the ancient European Empire.”

Meitzer and Sven didn’t know that Daian had told Sophia about it the other day.

Human beings are what they are because of the vibrations of a single strand of the strings that are the smallest component of all things. Daian had created technology that used vibration to simulate a human heart. That was the true nature of the artificial brain and heart inside Sven and the other humanoid Hunter Units.

“Daian was able to create waves from vibrations, but he couldn’t generate the vibrations themselves. Only God could do that. To artificially create vibrations, someone has to transmit them. And that someone is the one you call Master.”

Such transmission could only happen in the extreme state of war, which revealed the true nature of human emotion. The Great Europea War had lasted over ten years, but to Daian, even that calamity was only a huge, dreadful experiment for completing his theory.

“Who are you? Why do you know such things? What do you know about me?!” Sven was too upset to maintain her usual voice. She was so upset that

she returned to the voice she had used when she was Avei.

“Your vibration... It was reproduced from a human being’s. And that surprised me. I hadn’t expected the family to be reborn in such a manner.”

“—?!” After hearing these words, Sven finally remembered. Why hadn’t she remembered sooner? “You’re that voice!”

She remembered hearing Meitzer’s voice before. She heard it soon after coming to Organbaelz. And after Genitz had stolen her soul, Lud activated a reset code intended to erase her memories and thereby release her from that control. She had heard Meitzer’s voice then, too.

“At last, you remember. And, finally, we meet.”

“Father...” Sven was in a daze, but the word slipped from her mouth.

What did I just say?!

After uttering that word, she was greatly troubled. She didn’t know anything about Meitzer. Nonetheless, her mind recognized him as her father. Her mind, drawing upon instincts that extended beyond reason, told her he was her father.

“Who are you really?!” Sven had never known such fear. Because she couldn’t understand her own mind. What now showed on her face was fear more desperate than when Genitz had controlled her.

“.....”

“Answer me. Who are you? No... who am *I*?!”

Meitzer stared at Sven silently as her body shook and she fired a string of questions.

“W...”

“W...?”

“Welcome!”

“What?!” When Meitzer finally spoke, Sven doubted her ears.

“Look! We have a customer. We can talk later!” At Meitzer’s words, Sven turned to see an elderly woman entering the shop.

“Oh my! Welcome to Tockerbrot, Ma’am! What would you like today?” Meitzer’s serious expression vanished. In an instant, he switched to his business smile to welcome the elderly woman.

“My teeth are bad, so I want bread that’s soft!”

“All right! We have just the thing! This bread right here is as soft and cushy as your cheeks!” Meitzer showed the woman around with dedication fit for escorting a queen.

“Why you...!” Sven was speechless watching Meitzer’s quick transformation.

The more she tried to figure Meitzer out, the more unknown he remained. An unusual type of static, a disruption completely different from the kind that characterized her feelings for Lud, was playing with her emotions.

1202 26.04.921—

There was also confusion in the royal capital of Berun.

“How did this happen?!” Sophia was mumbling in a daze. “My life has always been this way. After my two older brothers died, I was forced to become the head of the family, so I had to leave *him*. And when we met again, he only saw me as his senior officer. Then, after the war, I had to watch over that *weirdo*.”

Looking exhausted, Sophia complained about her past frustrations. “Then I was assigned to provide security for this event... and look what happened! What did I do to deserve this?! Grar!!”

“Calm yourself, Major Rundstadt!” Hilde did her best to stop Sophia from shouting.

They were in the waiting room on Noa’s side of the venue for the goodwill ceremony. The scene in front of them looked, in a word, *horrifying*.

“This is brutal... One attack killed almost everyone. What kind of weapon did this?” Lillie was the only calm one among them. She was carrying General Douglas—the penguin—and examining the corpses on the floor.

General Douglas’s attendants should have occupied the waiting room. However, they were now silent, bloody corpses littering the floor.

“These people were more like animal caretakers than diplomatic messengers.”

They were attendants to the penguin. Their job had been to care for General Douglas. Perhaps some of them had been recruited only for this event.

“Do you mean someone killed them even though they were unfamiliar with national secrets?!” Hilde couldn’t restrain her anger.

She despised death. When she was a member of the Schutzstaffel, she had a sense of privilege and treated life carelessly. However, that attitude disappeared when she witnessed a man’s death. No, to be precise, she learned the obvious but often overlooked fact that life, once lost, never comes back.

“This is terrible!” Her eyes brimming with tears, Hilde mumbled and ground her teeth.

“Yes, it really is.” Sophia was next to Hilde. She had been ranting and raving, but now had returned to herself and was speaking calmly.

It’s not true that excellent soldiers never lose their cool. Their place of work is the battlefield, where the unexpected happens. Yet soldiers were taught to manage their panic.

“I threw a fit, but now it’s time to do my job as a soldier.”

When powerful emotions overflow, it’s best to release rather than suppress them. Then, Sophia could face and focus on reality. That was her method.

“Your work as a soldier? What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to capture the assassin.” Sophia answered Hilde’s question as if it were obvious.

Her duties were to provide security and serve as a guard at the ceremony. No matter what, she couldn’t allow any problems. If problems arose, then she must handle them.

“This is a diplomatic issue between two nations. We have to catch the killer or the relationship between Wiltia and Noa will collapse!”

She could not kill the assassin. It was crucial that she take the killer alive. Otherwise, people would think Wiltia had killed a national guest from Noa and

then invented—and *eliminated*—the assassin to cover it up.

“But... how?”

Many people had gathered at the venue. And the killer may have already escaped.

“I never thought his parting present would prove useful.” Sophia sighed.

When Daian, the director of the Royal Weapons Development Bureau, had heard Sophia would be in charge of security, he gave her a small present. At first, Sophia had refused, saying, “I don’t need it! Whenever you get involved, everything goes to pot!”

But Daian insisted. “When everything goes to pot, unnecessary things come in handy.” So she had accepted it.

“What is that?”

Sophia pulled a small device from her pocket. It looked like a radio but had a small monitor.

“I’m not entirely powerless. There are only three entrances to the venue—the front entrance, the back door, and the service entrance. I’ve stationed subordinates at each location.”

All other entrances had been closed, and grates welded over ventilation shafts. The preparations before the event were the main concern when it came to security, and she had performed her duty diligently over the last few days.

“I required everyone on site to wear a pass. And I’ve ordered the capture of anyone who isn’t wearing one.”

“Everyone” included invited guests, honored visitors and staff.

“Is this the pass?” Hilde was, of course, wearing one on her chest.

“Yes. There’s a special transmitter inside it.”

“Huh? Where?”

The smallest transmitter that science and technology was currently capable of creating was the size of a thumb.

“I know an eccentric scientist who made a transmitter the size of a scrap of

paper, like a thin sticker."

That was the present Daian had given Sophia. It was an ultrathin transmitter, and Daian had given her *hundreds*.

"The signals from all these transmitters appear on this terminal."

However, the terminal showed more. The transmitters were thin and didn't have much range. Their signals wouldn't reach the terminal from outside the site.

"I knew it. The number of signals hasn't changed."

But the terminal *was* able to indicate any increase or decrease in the number of signals received in the past few minutes.

"The killer is—*probably*—still on site."

Sophia looked at General Douglas as Lillie carried him.

"The killer didn't know the target was a penguin."

The unexpected circumstances must have confused the assassin. However, the killer hadn't abandoned the mission. Wiltia's inability to protect a national guest from Noa, whether human or penguin, would be enough to produce the desired effect.

Then who is the killer? August? Filbarneu? Greyten? Or a domestic militant faction?

There were plenty of possible culprits.

"Our country has too many enemies!" Sophia spat the words bitterly.

"Can you identify the killer from those transmissions?"

"Unfortunately, I can't." Sophia was regretful as she answered Hilde. If she had used the full potential of Daian's device, she might have prevented the deaths. She regretted putting her pride first. "But the assassin doesn't know about the transmitters, or even that such a thin model exists."

Which was why this killer was still on site. The assassin must have been confident of eluding discovery even after committing the crime.

Think! Who did this?!

“Um... Major?” Apologetically, Lillie tapped Sophia’s shoulder.

“I have determined the identity of the killer.”

“What?!”

“Repeat: I have determined the identity of the killer.” Lillie spoke as if she was revealing who had swiped and scarfed down a cookie hidden in a cupboard.

“No other person is capable of using such a weapon.”

“What *was* the weapon?”

“Of greater importance is how the killer obtained it.”

Understandably, all the participants were searched upon entry. And no bags were allowed in. Security guards even supervised preparation of the flower bouquet General Douglas received from Hilde.

“The general told me.” Lillie patted General Douglas’s head.

She was able to understand what the penguin said because Daian had implanted within her a translation device allowing limited communication with animals. The device could only convey simple internal states, such as hunger. It couldn’t convey the name or the face of the killer.

“The killer is...”

It could, however, provide a significant hint.

“I see...” After hearing Lillie’s revelation, Sophia thought it over.

“Um, Major? Is Lillie really trustworthy?”

“What? That’s not a very nice thing to say, Hilde!” Hilde openly showed her doubt, and Lillie looked insulted.

“I can’t help it. *I* believe you, but I don’t know if others will.”

It was intel from a penguin, so would anyone else take it seriously? Even if they apprehended a suspect, they still didn’t have evidence.

“No, that’s not quite true.” Sophia laughed as if to dispel all worries. “What’s crucial is that Lord General Douglas has already given us the answer. Now all we need to do is prove it. If we know what we’re looking for, there are plenty of

routes to take.” As soon as she spoke, Sophia wheeled around and left the room.

“General Douglas, in return for this, I’ll feed you anything you like! So think about what you want!” Sophia made a promise to General Douglas.

“Skwawk!”

“He would be pleased with fresh fish.” Lillie provided simultaneous translation for General Douglas’s answer.

1630 26.04.921—

Meanwhile, Blitzdonner was in the corner of a nameless valley in a rural area of Haradin.

“Well then...”

This was where August had cooperated with Genitz in researching the Door.

“There certainly isn’t anyone here!”

The location was far from the nearest town, but it wasn’t entirely unpopulated. Although it had been neglected, there was a road nearby. Nonetheless, people rarely visited and the area didn’t even have a name. According to Apuvea’s research, the people around here simply called it “that place.” It was as if they were afraid of recognizing its existence.

“I wasn’t certain, but it’s real.”

The Door stood deep in the valley as if hidden behind countless rocks.

“Oh dear. What’s wrong Crimson Hawk?” Fianna, the genius scientist with the beautiful face, spoke to Blitzdonner as he stood there.

“I told you to stop calling me that.” Blitzdonner responded to her with a tired sigh.

He knew that no matter how many times he told her, it would have no effect. Daian and Fianna were both egotistical. They didn’t even want to listen to what others said.

“That name is too grand for me.” Blitzdonner had to tell her anyway because

he had his own feelings about the matter.

“Oh dear... You’re Wiltia’s greatest hero but admirably humble!”

Fianna’s face didn’t suggest she was teasing. Was she simply being honest?

“After all, look at the state I’m in.” With a self-deprecating grin, Blitzdonner removed a glove, revealing a mechanical hand. It wasn’t just an artificial hand. His arms were replaced with machinery from the shoulders to the fingers.

“No one who is defeated so shamefully can be called a hero. It’s too much of a burden for me.”

Wiltia possessed the technology to create mechanical soldiers, but so did the Greyten Empire, the Filbarneu Republic and the August Federation. However, Wiltia’s technology was much more advanced. And it was Daian himself, the genius of their time, who had performed Blitzdonner’s operation. It was extremely well done, so the machinery made almost no sound.

“It was... eight years ago, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, about that long.”

Blitzdonner had been a powerful combatant early in the Great War. In August, they had feared him as an “enemy of the people” and placed a bounty on his head. But he suddenly disappeared from the battlefield.

“Even rebuilt as I am now, I doubt I could beat that monster.” A deep, dark shadow crossed Blitzdonner’s face as he remembered the day that had marred him.

“Well! That’s certainly *gloomy*!”

“Don’t expect me to apologize. You started this.”

“Hmf!” Fianna returned a smile that said she wasn’t sorry at all.

“Ugh...” Seeing her expression, Blitzdonner shook his head and changed the topic as if talking to her was a waste of time. “And...?”

“And *what*?”

“You know what!”

Daian was now inside the Door taking a look around to analyze the interior.

Fianna had accompanied him and just reappeared from inside.

“Did he find anything? Treasure? Anything?”

“Well...” Fianna smiled wryly at Blitzdonner’s question.

“Why in the world did I bother coming all this way?”

Now it was her turn to heave a deep sigh. “Surely you don’t mean...”

“Allow *me* to explain.” Daian, the Sorcerer, stuck his head out through the Door.

“Oh... Daian. I gather you didn’t find much?”

“Um... no.” Daian was usually relaxed no matter how dark the situation, but now he wore a serious expression. That alone was enough to suggest that things had not progressed as expected. “To get to the point... But first, Major? No one has been inside, have they?”

“What? I don’t know about the Augustans, but agents from Apuvea have held the location since they left, and no one went in.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“I see...” Having confirmed that fact, the apparent disappointment on Daian’s face grew darker.

“Then we really *are* screwed. There isn’t *anything* inside!”

Usually, it required technology from the ancient empire to break the seal and open any of the Doors. It was impossible to destroy them. There were examples of Doors that had been opened, but no one could just casually get inside.

“This Door has already been opened, and there’s nothing inside. Our efforts have come to a big nothing.”

“Are there signs of anyone removing the contents?”

This would explain why the Augustan researchers had left.

“No. I’ll have to investigate closely to know for sure, but I think the Door was opened quite some time ago.”

A Door should be so thoroughly sealed that the interior would give no indication that hundreds of years had passed. But that was only if the Door had been completely sealed.

“There may have been a small crack allowing in air. Some places inside show rot from mold, moisture and so forth. There’s very little left, and what remains is of no value.”

It was all junk, such as rotten cords and rusty bolts. Even though study might produce worthwhile results, Daian had already found similar remains in better condition inside other Doors.

“In other words... we came here for nothing?”

“That is correct, Major.” Blitzdonner sought confirmation, and Daian answered with a shrug.

“Aw... this is *stupid*!” Then, as if she could hold it back no longer, Fianna raised her voice. “Do you know how many days it took by ship from Noa to Europea? Seven days! Then I rattled by steam train for three days! Then I spent a whole day in an automobile! After all that... *nothing*?!”

Fianna raged in disbelief. “Did you know? Life doesn’t last forever! Now I have to spend the same amount of time going *back*! You’ve made me waste too many precious days of my beautiful youth!”

Fianna was the rare person willing to describe herself as beautiful.

“Hey, don’t blow your top. You saw inside yourself? There’s nothing there and there’s nothing we can do about it!”

“What do I care?! You shouldn’t have invited me unless you knew something was there! Argh! I am so *done* with this!” After shouting, Fianna turned on her heels and strode away.

“Where are you going?”

“Home!” She answered Daian with a shout. “Anything’s better than hanging around here until the next train! You made hotel reservations in a nearby town, didn’t you? If I don’t take a bath and find a cold beer, I’ll go *crazy*!”

Daian had invited her to inspect the heritage of the ancient empire because

she had an excellent brain. But the object of their study was gone. Having expended great effort for nothing, she could only rant and rave.

“.....”

“.....”

Daian and Blitzdonner said no more to Fianna as she left. They just watched her back.

When she disappeared, Blitzdonner spoke. “What’s going on, Daian? What happened?”

“As expected, the heroic veteran understands immediately.” Daian wore a dark expression, but he answered in his customary tone, derided as clownish. “I can’t believe it. There wasn’t a thing inside, and that’s a *good* thing. It suits my purposes nicely.”

Fianna had misunderstood. Daian’s objective had been to confirm that nothing was inside the Door. If nothing was inside, then there was no problem.

“If something had been there, it would have been fine, as long it was something inconsequential and worthless for Fianna to take home as a souvenir.”

Daian had brought Fianna along to preserve diplomatic relations between Noa and Wiltia.

“I do rate her highly, but that’s the only reason I invited her. Apparently, she didn’t know that.”

The joint military development Genitz had been planning was also a scheme of Wiltia’s upper echelons. But their partner wasn’t August. It was *Noa*.

“Like August, Noa is a continental nation with plenty of natural and human resources. If Wiltia were to share technology with Noa, it could form an alliance that would determine the course of world affairs for a hundred years. But... that doesn’t mean anything to me.”

Wiltia had approached two large nations, saying to each one, “We’re only mentioning this to *you*.” In other words, it was two-timing them both on an international scale.

“If I remember correctly, some military big-shot from Noa is visiting the royal capital right now. I think Rundstadt—whom you’re so fond of—is handling it.”

Blitzdonner knew that. “Yes. Apparently, it’s a general named Douglas. I don’t know what kind of person he is, but if we showed him the contents of the Door and sent him home with that, it would lead to some kind of deal.”

Fianna had come to investigate inside the Door without any preconceptions to confirm that Wiltia was not hiding anything. That was her intended role, even though she hadn’t known it.

“There shouldn’t have been anything here. Without a doubt. That’s why Genitz halted research and rebelled with his own military force.”

He had intended to occupy the capital. Then, with Sven’s power, he would open the Door beneath the Development Bureau to achieve his *real* aims. But Lud prevented that and then re-awakened Sven, whom Genitz thought he controlled. All his plans ended in failure and Genitz had departed this world.

“I don’t understand. What have you learned?” Blitzdonner was a military man, so he couldn’t fathom the mind of a scientist like Daian. He didn’t know what Daian had observed.

“What I’m saying is...” And Daian knew that. He decided to convey the gravity of the matter in easy-to-understand terms. “Um... it’s empty inside the Door now, but that doesn’t mean there was *never* anything in there. Nor does it mean that someone went inside and made off with the contents. Furthermore, it doesn’t mean that the Door was opened causing the contents to waste away over time.”

“What are you driving at?”

“Whatever was inside opened the Door on its own and left.”

“?!” At last, Blitzdonner understood.

The empire had fallen to ruin a millennium ago. It possessed technology that far surpassed that of the present world and equal to the power of a god. Then, one day, the phantom country suddenly disappeared from the face of the earth. And someone from that time was at large in the world.

“When... did that happen?”

According to Daian’s estimations, it had been some time since the Door opened.

“Not 200 years. At most, 150.”

“That’s during the Lion Emperor’s time.”

The Lion Emperor was a man who proclaimed himself emperor about a hundred years ago after nearly uniting the entire continent. But his empire died after one generation and disappeared from history. And yet, his appearance and the disturbance he caused had advanced the rapid militarization of the world and, as a result, science and industry made significant progress.

“Isn’t that right, Mother?” Daian whispered. And he remembered the words his “mother” had left behind. She said that the Saint and the Devil had caused the fall of the empire.

Chapter 4: Sometimes Kindness Surpasses Despair

The life of Lud Langart had been full of ups and downs. He was born into a family of moderate wealth, but his parents died when the war started. Then, when he was ten years old, he was tricked out of his inheritance and became a street urchin.

The military rescued him and turned him into a type-three soldier, and he went along to survive. But he was overqualified, which brought him to the attention of Genitz, who enlisted him in a special operations unit known as the Werewolves.

After his involvement in the worst tragedy of the war—the slaughter of Lapchuricka—he lost the will to continue as a special ops soldier. Later, he recovered and became a regular soldier and a Hunter Unit pilot, where he displayed outstanding skills and achieved great deeds, earning the nickname Silver Wolf. After the war, he retired from the military and opened a bakery in a rural town.

When everything was listed like this, his life looked *too* eventful. And because of that, Lud had adopted a motto... “Everyone has their own individual circumstances.”

If he was burdened with such a past, then it made sense that others also had circumstances. And just as he wouldn’t casually discuss his past... No, just as he *couldn’t* discuss his past, other people would have reasons for not wanting to discuss theirs. So he didn’t ask other people about their pasts.

And that included the fact that his friend Jacob’s father was a hero from the Great War. Lud didn’t ask about Marlene, the nun from the church atop the hill, who had once been a troublemaker and then became a terrorist.

He had managed well so far, and he intended to continue the same way. As a result, however, he had diverted his gaze from something important.

1719 26.04.921—

Peace had come to Tockerbrot. In fact, it was so peaceful it felt abnormal.

“Meitzer, let’s take a break.” On one such abnormal day, when it was almost dusk, Lud spoke to Meitzer, who had now been at Tockerbrot for three days. “It helps to have you here, Meitzer.” Lud set chairs in a corner of the oven room and handed Meitzer a mug of coffee.

“I’m glad to hear it. I thought I might cause trouble if I intruded.”

“No, not at all.” Lud wasn’t feigning kindness.

“To tell the truth, I was short on help.”

It was hard to believe Tockerbrot’s business had once been in a slump. In less than a year, business had improved to the point where the shop couldn’t keep up with demand for bread, which was their main product.

“I’m embarrassed to admit I even collapsed one time.”

“Ha ha ha! Did my daughter turn as white as a sheet?”

“Uh-huh.”

Lud had fainted one day while working. Sven had panicked as though the world was ending.

“So I’m grateful for your help.”

After the recent incident, demand dipped briefly, but now business was recovering. An excellent baker was always appreciated and welcome.

“Oh... In that case, I just might keep the job and stay here!”

“Well, if you did, I’d be thankful.” Lud didn’t turn Meitzer down, even though his offer was partially a joke.

“You never reject people.” Meitzer answered in a tone that implied something more.

“Mr. Langart, it seems you’ve been through a lot. That’s why you never poke your nose into other people’s affairs. And I think that’s a virtue.”

“Y-Yeah...” Lud was surprised by Meitzer’s earnest comment, and the man

continued.

“At the same time, though, does that mean you’re frightened? If you don’t get involved and if you don’t know more, then you can keep things just the way they are.”

“Meitzer, what are you suggesting?” Meitzer had struck a sensitive spot for Lud.

“Why did you take in my daughter?”

“That was, um... because of my face.”

Lud’s past experiences left him unable to smile. He looked so intimidating that it drove away customers no matter how much effort he put into his business.

“If Sven hadn’t become such a popular waitress, Tockerbrot would have closed a long time ago.”

“Did you not understand the point of my question? Or are you *trying* not to?”

“.....?!”

That wasn’t what Meitzer had asked. Sven was a popular waitress whose identity and origins were unknown to everyone. And that wasn’t all. She had combat skills superior to the special ops soldiers from August and mechanical soldiers from Greyten, and Genitz had made her a key element of his rebellion. If someone saw her abnormal strength, it would naturally lead to one conclusion.

“She isn’t human. And you know that, right?”

Rather, it would be strange if Lud *hadn’t* reached that conclusion. “Well, um... !” Lud was at a loss for words. Indeed, he *had* known it for a long time. But despite knowing, he never asked Sven about it.

“Why do you pretend not to see how unusual Sven is? Are you just being kind? You *are* being considerate by pretending not to know or see, but... No...” After sipping coffee from his mug as if to loosen his tongue, Meitzer continued.

He had painful words for Lud. “You realized her identity a long time ago. So you don’t *need* to ask her. Am I right?”

“—!” Meitzer’s tone was quiet, calm and rational as if merely relating facts. Lud couldn’t immediately reply to him. “.....”

And Lud’s silence indicated Meitzer was correct.

“Normally, this would be unbelievable. The weapon you once piloted came to you in human form. But as a seasoned and excellent soldier, you see things a different way.”

Nothing is impossible, so anything can happen. This wisdom was known by those experienced with the ceaselessly shifting fortunes of the battlefield. Before they analyzed what happened and why, soldiers projected what was possible based on the conditions of current reality.

“Is... Is Sven actually Avei?” Lud was trembling as he asked the question.

Avei was the name of the assistive AI in the Hunter Unit Lud had once piloted. And he gave it that name.

“Are you really asking me that? Will my answer satisfy you? Or...” Meitzer paused before questioning Lud further. “Do you really want to cling to the possibility she *isn’t* Avei? And if I tell you she isn’t, will you use my answer as an excuse to keep pretending you haven’t noticed? I don’t think that would be kind.”

“.....” Lud *had* noticed.

Not only had he discovered Sven wasn’t human, he had also recognized that she was his old partner. Sven’s words suggested that she knew Lud when he was in the military. And there were other signs.

By any standard, Lud wasn’t good at dealing with other people. With her, however, he was able to talk from the first time they met, as if they had known each other for a long time. Moreover, when she arrived, Lud had been wearing himself thin managing the bakery alone, and her appearance made him feel as if reinforcements had arrived.

“Um, I...”

He knew that he felt that way because he had shared life and death with Sven. Human or not, there was only *one* such person.

“You didn’t need logic or reason, right?”

“Oh...”

He had known it. But he was unable to ask. Lud had thought Sven wasn’t telling him because her circumstances prevented her from explaining. So he decided to pretend he hadn’t noticed until she could tell him. He would wait until she was ready.

“You’re a kind person. And you’re kind because you’ve hurt and been hurt a lot. But, as a result, you’re unable to get involved with others.”

Lud still couldn’t respond, so Meitzer continued. “What if she *can’t* speak? What if she were afraid of telling you and losing everything?”

If they both continued to pretend not to know, the situation wouldn’t change and their relationship would stagnate. If the other person thought the same...

“I’m sure you’re uncertain, too. You’re willing to take misfortune on yourself, but you won’t do anything that will make another person unhappy. I suspect you’re that kind of person.”

And Meitzer was correct. Lud tended to undervalue his own life.

“But that’s cruel for someone whose greatest happiness is to have a life with you.”

What is happiness? Each person’s answer is different. No one can say for sure what absolute happiness is. One person might risk his or her life for something that another might see as unfortunate.

“Being with you takes priority for Sven, and she would sacrifice everything for that. But you can’t get involved with her, and you won’t let her get involved with you.”

“I...” Lud couldn’t say anything.

It didn’t occur to him to ask the identity of this man who knew more about Sven than he did. His mind was so agitated he couldn’t even consider such things.

“I shouldn’t be the one telling you this, Mr. Langart.” Meitzer spoke a little apologetically. “But circumstances have forced me. To ask my daughter... to ask

Sven... I needed to confirm your feelings toward her."

"Ask? Ask her *what*?"

"About something important. The same thing must not occur again. This time, that mistake must be prevented." Meitzer answered Lud's question with a faraway look. His eyes looked as if staring further into the past than was even measurable.

"Yes, that's..."

"That's—"

Before Meitzer could answer, the door of the shop made a clanging noise.

"Oh, we have a customer."

"Wait!"

Meitzer stood up and left the oven room.

Sven wasn't in the shop. She was visiting Jacob, who hadn't been to the shop for a few days.

"What?"

Meitzer changed his demeanor so quickly that Lud decided not to follow him. Instead, he crouched down. He felt as if he had been saved. The question facing him was too big for an immediate decision.

1225 26.04.921—

At the ceremony welcoming national guests to Berun, the royal capital...

A female soldier had a troubled look on her face. "Ugh... The military is a hierarchy, so I have to follow my superior officer's orders, right?" Corporal Marissa Haven, a member of the guards under Sophia's command, was muttering to herself. She was assigned to the guards six months ago, after the rebellion. Due to massive vacancies, recruitment prioritized quantity over quality, so Marissa was a new soldier without much military experience.

"Bunga? Bunga-bunga?"

"Um... sorry, but I have no idea what you're saying."

She had been ordered to delay one of the state guests as long as possible.

“Chuk alami!”

“Sorry! Sorry! I don’t even know why I am supposed to do this!”

“Nar trov swig!”

“Chill! Don’t get angry!! And no hitting!”

The guest she was ordered to stall wasn’t a citizen of Wiltia or Noa. He was the diplomatic ambassador from the Abignon Empire. And he was trying to tell her something.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t understand a word you’re saying!”

Many foreign nations had embassies in Berun, the royal capital of Wiltia, and Abignon was among them. Filbarneu and Greyten were in the European region, so Marissa could have managed a simple reply to visitors from those nations, but Abignon was on the far western edge of the continent of Aesia, and separated by the sea, so she couldn’t make out anything he was saying.

“Sorry, sorry... I’m really sorry!” Marissa couldn’t understand at all, but she could tell he was angry, so she apologized.

Perhaps it was characteristic of his people, but the ambassador from Abignon was over two meters tall—tall enough to almost reach the ceiling. He was also well built, so compared to the much smaller Marissa, it was like the difference between an elephant and a puppy.

“This isn’t easy for me either! But it’s my superior officer’s orders! And she’s scary!”

“Rubor yob?”

“Her eyes are really fierce, you know? They’re so scary that one direct look is enough to make my heart stop beating!”

“Bunn po...”

“Seriously... She’s majorly frightening! Sometimes I forget to breathe! Maybe it’s like what they say about small animals: when faced with a ferocious beast, they will stop their heartbeat and respiration and play dead? Maybe it’s like

that!”

“Taff...”

“Do you understand?”

The Abignon ambassador couldn’t communicate with words she could understand, but he showed sympathy for Marissa, whose pitifulness was now less like a puppy and more like a squirrel or a mouse.



“What’re you yapping about?!”

“Yurlfowp?!” Sophia suddenly appeared. Seeing her, Marissa made a strange sound and jumped.

“H-How did you make that sound?!”

“Y-You startled me!”

“You’re *still* not used to me?” Sophia worried that she frightened her subordinates, and she sighed a little sadly.

“Um... Major! I, uh...”

“Yeah, good work. You are relieved.” Sophia gave her frightened subordinate permission to leave. Then she looked at the Abignon ambassador. “I apologize, but due to security concerns, no one may leave. And you may not return to the event hall.”

“Bunga?” The ambassador shook his head as if he did not understand Sophia’s words.

“Oh, you don’t understand me? That’s fine, just listen.” Sophia continued talking as if unconcerned. “Ugh... I can’t believe it. Officials confirmed the identities of everyone participating in today’s ceremony.”

In addition to officials from Wiltia and Noa, the guests invited to today’s goodwill ceremony included people connected to foreign embassies stationed in Berun. The purpose was to emphasize to all participants how strong the ties were between Noa and Wiltia.

“We told the foreign embassies that only the people named on the invitation would be admitted, and they must come with an introduction bearing the ambassador’s seal. And the number of attendees we counted today matched the number invited.”

“Bun... ga?” The ambassador tilted his head, and Sophia continued.

“But I didn’t notice that even if we checked who went in and out, we wouldn’t detect if the number of people inside decreased.”

The Wiltian government had sent invitations to the various embassies, then

registered who would attend and created a guest list. Based on that guest list, they handed out passes bearing thin transmitters and required all participants to wear them.

“We were expecting two participants from Abignon. But only one is currently on site. Where is the other one?”

“.....” The ambassador from Abignon didn’t say a word. But that wasn’t because he didn’t understand what she asked. He understood but clammed up.

“What does this decrease mean?”

The Abignon ambassador’s face contorted at Sophia’s words.

“Wiltia’s soldiers are more skilled than I expected.” He spoke with a slight accent, but he was fluent in the Wiltian language.

At that moment, the ambassador’s back swelled.

“...!” At the disturbing sight, Marissa opened her mouth with a silent scream. Something sprang out from the swelling on the ambassador’s back.

“Graaahhh!”

It was a human being. But he was very small and had long arms like a monkey —long *mechanical* arms. And he used them to attack.

“I knew it! A mechanical soldier!!”

Sophia drew her beloved short sword hanging from her waist, and at the same moment, the mechanical soldier attacked, using claws like assassins of long ago. Metal clashed with metal.

“Tch!” Sophia narrowly dodged one attack, but the claws tore her sleeve.

“I am surprised you noticed. Few would.” The ambassador from Abignon smiled fearlessly.

“Well, it’s not the first time I’ve battled your kind!” Sophia flashed her own smile at the two opponents who had split from one body.

She had fought a mechanical soldier from Greyten during the incident involving the airship *Defairedead*.

“No matter how well-crafted mechanical soldiers are, they don’t look like a human being. Something is always unnatural about their bodies, so they dress in clothes that hide their silhouettes.”

The mechanical soldier Sophia had fought was a contemptible man calling himself a priest. In order to conceal what he was, he wore clerical garments.

“I don’t know what kind of clothes you are wearing, but... Is that traditional Abignon garb? Anyway, it would certainly hide any physical abnormality.”

There were various types of mechanical soldiers. Some had mechanical arms or legs, and some had both. Some were mechanical from the neck down.

“I’m surprised to learn there’s also a two-in-one!”

The Abignon ambassador contained two mechanical bodies that combined into one: one large and sturdy, and the other very small. The smaller one had used some sort of mechanism to enlarge his body to blend in earlier during the ceremony. Then, after committing his crime, he combined with the larger body.

If the larger man attracted attention, no one would suspect him of being the killer. And if someone saw the smaller one, no one would suspect he could hide inside the other’s body. And if he disappeared, everyone would simply think he had fled the scene.

“I am surprised how much you understand.” The large mechanical soldier disguised as the Abignon ambassador smiled as if truly impressed.

“Well, we sort of cheated.”

There were three hints. One was General Douglas’s assertion that the killer was a “monkey.” The second was that the signals from the thin transmitters carefully prepared by Daian had overlapped.

“But the finishing touch was *this*.” A small fragment of metal rested on Sophia’s fingertip.

Lillie found it piercing a victim’s body at the crime scene. It was a piece of the small mechanical soldier’s metal claw.

“Is this aluminum alloy? Heh... That’s very rare.”

Aluminum is light, easy to manipulate, and resistant to rust, so research into

various applications, especially weaponry, had been underway since the time of the Lion Emperor. But using aluminum in weapons presented one challenge. Aluminum is too *soft*.

“If you make a weapon with this, you have to mix it with other metals to create an alloy. But that process is expensive, costing about as much as the same weight in silver.”

For that reason, application in weapons for mass use was still far away.

“However... for example... when the amount needed is far less than for a tank or jet, and you want to make the most of its characteristic lightness, it’s the perfect material for mechanical soldiers.” Sophia grinned as though she was a famous detective who had solved the crime.

Lillie had taught Sophia all this. Humanoid Hunter Units also contained aluminum. Otherwise, it was hardly ever used. Furthermore...

“And aluminum wouldn’t set off the metal detectors at the entrance.”

Metal detectors using magnetism were installed at all of the entrances and exits of the ceremony. Anything metal, even a fountain pen, would set the detector off.

“That’s how we knew that mechanical soldiers on an assassination mission had entered.”

That was the third hint.

“You have foiled us. But we won’t allow you to catch us!!” As the large man waved his arm, the smaller one sprang from the blind spot behind it and attacked.

“Kyaiieee!”

But he didn’t attack Sophia. He was headed for Marissa, who had missed her chance to escape and now stood rooted in place. And he didn’t intend to take her hostage. A soldier knows when involving one’s troops is necessary to capture or eliminate an infiltrating enemy. And the mechanical soldiers knew that.

“You will be our shield!!”

The guards at the event were only equipped with a small caliber pistol. Whether a human being was alive or dead, its body could block bullets.

“Whoa...” But before the small mechanical soldier could close in, a fraught voice interrupted.

“What?!” By the time he cried out in surprise, it was already too late.

Lillie zoomed in like the wind, grabbed the little mechanical soldier’s head, and bashed him to the floor.

“Gurf?!”

Defeat from a single attack. A mechanical soldier was a strong opponent against regular humans but it wasn’t fast enough to beat a humanoid Hunter Unit.

“What?!” The large mechanical soldier couldn’t believe Lillie was so much stronger than he and his cohort. He recoiled, and offered an opening.

“Hyaaah!!” Sophia’s glare, known as the Dragon Slayer, didn’t miss that opportunity. “Take *this*!!” She smashed a fist into the left side of the large mechanical soldier’s chest.

The move was from *ryuku*, known as the *bujutsu* of the east. No matter how tough the flesh or how thick the armor, the force of the blow alone would inflict damage directly to the heart.

“Nfffgh?!”

But what made this move so devastating was that the trauma to the heart disrupted the heartbeat. The larger the opponent, the more wildly the robust heart would beat, threatening to burst out of the body, which was wracked with intense pain so it couldn’t even stand.

“Gaaah!!” Blood spurted from his eyes, nose and ears, and the large mechanical soldier fell where he was.

“Whew! That’s taken care of!”

The two fallen mechanical soldiers were barely breathing. They would be tightly bound to prevent them from attempting suicide, and then turned over to the appropriate authorities.

Abignon was a small nation. And to its north was August. Each year, August expanded further south, but with Wiltia's backing, Abignon had attempted to preserve its sovereignty. However, many within Abignon sided with August in hopes of benefiting themselves. This time, August had used such people to send assassins.

But they won't be quick to admit it.

Sophia realized she had done all she could do.

"Hilde! That's enough! Come out now!"

Hilde—who was holding General Douglas—appeared from behind a door. "Okay..." She was warned about the killers from Sophia, but found it hard to believe. "Such soldiers... really exist, huh?"

"Even if reality seems unbelievable, look straight at it. If it's happening before your eyes, possible or not, you have to deal with it. That is a soldier's philosophy."

Daian often unbalanced Sophia, but she was a veteran with experience on the battlefields of the Great War. Hilde was in the Schutzstaffel, but she lacked combat experience, which made a big difference.

"The way I see it, the girl with you is even more unusual."

"Oh..."

Sophia was looking at Lillie, who had swiftly ripped the limbs from the two mechanical soldiers, and was now tying them up.

"That's no mere student."

"Um..."

No matter what explanations were offered, no student would have such combat abilities.

"Oh, I get it. So that's it..."

Sophia had an idea who, or what, Lillie was, and not just because she had encountered her during the rebellion. Earlier, she had crossed paths with someone similar. But, she had been even more unusual. She recalled the silver-

haired girl she met through her former subordinate; a man who was like her little brother.

She's sort of the same, isn't she?

But Sophia sensed this girl, Lillie, was slightly different. Lillie was less extraordinary than the silver-haired girl.

"Um... Major? Uh..." Hilde spoke hesitantly. "Lillie is, um... my friend. That's all. Uh..."

"I know that." Sophia wouldn't ask any further questions.

The Wiltian Foreign Affairs Ministry had cleared Lillie, so she probably fell under the dominion of some public institution. Besides...

"I get the feeling someone I know may be behind this."

"Huh?"

Sophia thought of the grinning face of that clown who posed as a sorcerer.

"Well, Corporal Haven, I got you into some trouble. Are you all right?" She called to her subordinate, whose relaxed manner had caused the mechanical soldiers to let down their guard, but there was no response.

"Eep..." Corporal Haven apparently found the situation too much to handle and had fainted.

"Well, at least she's all right." Sophia was just pleased that her subordinate wasn't injured. "And that wraps this up!"

"Yes, it does."

"Skwawk!"

Sophia, Hilde and General Douglas voiced unanimous relief.

"How nice! Even General Douglas is pleased!" Calmly, Lillie relayed the penguin's message.

"Even I can understand him this time!" They had captured the assassin, so even without a translation, Hilde could tell General Douglas was reassured.

"Oh, right!"

But she didn't expect what Lillie said next. "He says, 'The other General Douglas would be pleased, too.'"

"What?!" Both Hilde and Sophia froze in surprise.

1730 26.04.921—

Deep in the countryside of Haradin...

After analyzing what was behind the Door, which turned out to be nothing, Daian was shocked. He sat down in a rocky area and thought in silence.

It was unusual for him to be speechless. His acquaintances—Sophia, Blitzdonner and Rebecca—only saw him wearing his flippant, clownish smile. But now he looked downcast as if facing the darkness of the void.

"What... does this mean?"

He had come to analyze this Door in order to prove one thing. The last words spoken by his mother, who had named him Daian.

"Those two destroyed Europea. The Saint and the Devil."

Daian wanted to uncover the truth behind those words.

"Major?"

"Yes?" Blitzdonner, the Apuvean agent dressed in red who had accompanied Daian as his bodyguard, stood behind him.

"Would you listen as I think aloud?"

"I don't mind, but am I worthy of a scholar's high-flown thoughts?"

"It's all right. You just need to listen. I don't care if you're a tree or a rock."

"Don't be sarcastic."

Silent thought often doesn't go anywhere. Some people need to organize their thoughts as they take a walk or lie in bed. And this talkative genius organized his thoughts through *dialogue*.

Perhaps this was because his knowledge was acquired through conversation with the one he called mother. He had ripened his thoughts by speaking them

out loud and hearing them with his own ears. But to do that, he needed someone to listen.

“Do you know why the European Empire fell to ruin?”

“That was because... you know. They awakened God’s wrath. Didn’t they?”

It wasn’t known exactly why the great empire disappeared a thousand years ago. But people created a legend to explain it. It was the tedious story that the empire fell because it had awakened God’s wrath.

“Wrong. Well... actually, it’s the truth. But strictly speaking, it isn’t correct.”

Europea had been destroyed. It was the truth that it was destroyed because it incurred the wrath of God, but it wasn’t the correct answer.

“It was God’s wrath, but it was the people of Europea who created that god.”

“Is a god... something you can make?” Blitzdonner didn’t look convinced.

People usually believe that God created people, not the other way around.

“What is the definition of God? Something eternal? The creator of all things? Something that uses a strange and mysterious power? Those aren’t incorrect answers. But the answer should be simpler.”

What is God? The answer varies by religion, by sect, and even from person to person. But there was one common characteristic.

“God is infallible. It is absolute. People expect this from a god and it is the necessary element of divinity.”

God is not human. So God does not make the mistakes that humans make. If to err is human, then gods do not err.

“God is the unfailing regularity of the sun rising and setting, the seasons changing and the laws governing all things.”

“So how could people create something like that?” This discussion was beyond a military man’s comprehension, so Blitzdonner was puzzled.

“The people of Europea thought that human beings were made in God’s image, but were incomplete, not perfect copies.”

Human beings are different from animals. Animals evolve and they adapt to

fit their environment, but human beings develop reason and dominate their environment. If human reason was a fragment of God's reason, then it could provide a clue.

"Each person both resembles and is very different from God. But what if you combined hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people? What if you gathered the pieces of God inside each person?"

They connected the spirits of all people to create a massive accumulation of information. No matter how difficult or foolish the question, all that information could provide the perfect answer. In fact, there would be no need for questions. They could rely on that god for everything and act, live and die as it directed. Because it would be absolute. But, it still might differ from God.

"They couldn't be certain that it would always provide an absolutely correct answer. It just had to be able to convince them. In that sense, it really was like a god."

God is the object of all human faith.

"But why would that god destroy Europea and the people who created and believed in it?"

"Because they incurred its wrath. They killed the girl God loved."

"You're not talking about Saint Europa, are you?"

Saint Europa was part of a foundation myth shared across the continent of Europea. In the beginning was God. A girl stole his heart and he proposed marriage to her. God bestowed many gifts upon her, but she spurned his offers.

God spoke. "I shall give you the whole world." And the girl's name was Europa.

"All the royal families of this continent claim to be descendants of Europa. And they claim the right to rule the entire continent. But no one *actually* believes it."

It was just a myth used to reinforce the divine right of kings.

"Yes, that's right. Myth isn't reality. But what if something that the myths are based on actually happened?"

Something called a god must have existed. So the girl courted by God and named Europa could also have existed.

“Are you saying that girl should rule the world?”

“No, that isn’t right. But, unlike in the myth, God got angry.”

“Hey, wait. In that case, are you saying...?” A wild idea crossed Blitzdonner’s mind.

His idea was so wild that it didn’t come close to the sophistication of Daian’s question about the Saint and God.

“I think you’re right, Major. Indeed, you are the famed playboy of this life!”

“No need to make fun of me. Are you saying... that the part about God getting angry is...”

“Yes, Saint Europa rejected God’s advances, so he got mad and destroyed the world.”

“Hey now...” Blitzdonner needed a better reason for destroying the world. It was like a child’s temper tantrum.

“Why did she rebuff him, anyway? God is absolute, right? He doesn’t make mistakes, right? Then...”

“Yes... that’s right.” Blitzdonner’s questions were exactly the response Daian wanted. “The jolt from an absolute being, a god, making a mistake is what destroyed the empire. Because the Saint...” Having pursued the matter this far, Daian’s thoughts now went deeper.

“Yes... that’s what’s strange. What if that was inside the Door? But, why 150 years ago? Why so recent? Did it waste away and disappear sooner? But isn’t it weird that it was there? That means... and I hate to say it, but... there’s a contradiction! But if so, it would explain everything! And in that case...”

“H-Hey, Daian?” Daian, muttering with a ghastly look on his face, was so agitated that Blitzdonner, a stalwart veteran, swallowed in trepidation.

“Try looking at it *this* way... What if the Saint and the Devil were already free?” Another voice joined theirs.

“——?!” Turning around, they saw Fianna, who they thought had left in anger much earlier.

She wore a gentle expression and a self-assured smile. She looked like a different person.

“Who... are you?”

No. It was as if her very existence changed and her contents had been replaced. Blitzdonner sensed this change and a sweat broke out on his forehead and his mechanical arms and legs were trembling.

“Wait. Just... hold on.”

Soldiers face whatever is before them without waiting to make sense of it. No matter how impossible something might seem, if it happened, it must be real. Thus, this unbelievable situation was reality. Blitzdonner understood that, but this was too far removed from reality.

“You’re impressive, Sorcerer. I knew you were the only person who could get this far.” Fianna slowly split down the middle. Her voluptuous body opened and fell away, like machine parts.

“Oh... is *that* what’s going on?” Daian understood this bizarre occurrence before Blitzdonner did. But he didn’t think like a soldier. As a scientist... No, with his knowledge as a seeker of truth, he grasped the nature of this strange being.

“You came too close to the truth, Sorcerer and Crimson Hawk!”

Standing before them now was a girl in a black and white dress. She had purple hair, red eyes, and she was chillingly beautiful.

“You must be... the Saint.”

“Yes. I cast down the European Empire. And I am the one who is going to kill *you!*” The girl answered Daian with a smile worthy of the Saint she claimed to be.



Chapter 5: Throngs of Customers

1720 26.04.921—

Jacob's house was near the Tockerbrot bakery in Organbaelz.

"What the heck's going on?!" In Jacob's room, Sven turned her cold eyes on Rebecca, who was in bed.

"What? Is there a problem?"

"A problem?! It's been two days, so your damages—I mean, your *wounds*—should've healed by now!"

Two nights ago, Meitzer defeated Rebecca and severely injured her leg. But humanoid Hunter Units are machines, not human beings. The damage didn't reach her frame, so if she had autonomously healed her biological parts and used a simple repair kit, she should have regained the use of her feet and returned to the Weapons Development Bureau in Berun on her own.

"I am playing it safe. Unlike you, I am extremely careful, and make very certain before cautiously proceeding."

Rebecca was sitting upright in bed and clinging to Jacob—the owner of the room.

"I'm not convinced that's your reason."

"Well, I do not *need* to convince you!"

"Um, Sven? This girl, uh..." The boy Jacob looked troubled by the way Rebecca was squeezing him.

"I'm sorry, Jacob. I never thought Miss Red would be so obsessed with love!"

"When it comes to obsession with love, I do not think I can beat you, Miss White!" Rebecca replied to Sven with a glare.

"Miss what?!"

"You said it yourself earlier!!"

The two humanoid Hunter Units were shouting at each other.

“Oh no! Calm down, please! Both of you! Okay?” Jacob tried to stop them. He didn’t know much about their relationship, but in their previous encounters, Jacob saw that they were neither strangers nor friends. They were more like sisters who didn’t get along.

“Anyway... um... she isn’t really inconveniencing me. Actually, I’m sort of happy.”

“Jacob?” Sven responded in mild surprise to this eleven-year-old boy admitting what wouldn’t be strange coming from a man—that he liked having a pretty girl fawn over him.

“Oh... I am not an inconvenience? Then let us do more! Can we kiss?!”

“Knock it off, Miss Red!!”

Rebecca was usually cool and collected, but when it came to Blitzdonner and his son Jacob, she forgot herself.

“I’m sorry, Jacob. But would you give us a minute?”

“Um... sure.”

Sven pried Jacob away from Rebecca, apologized, and asked him to leave them alone.

“Urm...”

“Oh, don’t be pitiful!” Sven thundered at Rebecca, but then quickly calmed herself.

“What is going on? Have you discovered who that man is?”

“Um...”

Yesterday, Meitzer had revealed a number of shocking facts to Sven. She was special even compared to the other humanoid Hunter Units. And Sven had admitted that she was indeed Meitzer’s daughter. She was confused by her own heart and realized that the only person she could discuss it with was Rebecca, another humanoid Hunter Unit.

“You, um... You have a master too, right?”

“Why are you asking that all of a sudden?” Rebecca looked suspicious at Sven’s unexpected question, but she answered anyway. “Yes, I do. He is the best master in the world.”

“Oh... really?” If Sven was asked that question, she would have responded the same way, but hearing it stated so boldly, she wasn’t sure how to react.

“If you could meet him again, what would you do?”

Sven’s conversation with Meitzer had shaken what might be called her *core*. More accurately, she could no longer understand her own feelings. As a result, she was now hesitant to see Lud, the person most important to her, face to face. In order to take another hard look at herself, she wanted to talk about this with someone whose circumstances were so close to her own.

“That hardly deserves thought. I met him recently.”

“Huh? No way!”

“Why would I lie?” Rebecca’s casual reply caught Sven off guard. “It was during the rebellion in the capital. I was truly surprised. After all, he knew what I am.”

“He... knew?”

“Yes.”

“Ugh...”

Sven hadn’t revealed herself to Lud, so she hoped Rebecca’s words would provide a clue toward resolving her conflict, but they weren’t helpful.

“Why are you saying ‘ugh’?! Do you have a problem with my master the major?!”

“No, that’s not it. You’re so touchy.”

“Of course! I have no reason to tangle with you in other matters.”

“Argh! You’re a pain in the butt!”

Sven and Rebecca usually spoke so politely it sounded almost ridiculous, but they were military weapons. They were considerate toward people who didn’t know what they were. But they knew each other’s identities, so when speaking

to each other, they used polite tones to make biting comments. Their courtesies were only superficial.

“Um... Actually...”

Sven started to tell Rebecca about her conversation with Meitzer. But they were interrupted.

“—!” The two looked around at the same moment. Nothing was visible. And nothing was audible.

Nothing was visible or audible to a human being, that is. But they had sensors far exceeding human senses, so they detected something.

“The sound of an explosion?!”

“Gunshots... and multiple people!”

It wasn’t the sort of clamor that would occur during the day in a rural mining town. Calculating the direction and distance of the sound, it came from Tockerbrot.

“Tch!” Sven stood ready.

She would show no mercy to anyone who threatened Tockerbrot, no matter the reasons or circumstances. She was about to rush off.

“Be careful.”

“Hey. What about you?”

Her sister machine Rebecca didn’t budge.

“What? There is no reason I should help you. And I believe I informed you that I am forbidden from unnecessary contact.”

“Why you...!” Sven wasn’t really expecting help, but Rebecca’s cold manner angered her.

“Oh... Are you leaving, Sven?” Jacob’s mother Charlotte came in.

She knew that Rebecca was staying in her son’s room. Learning that Rebecca was Sven’s acquaintance and had helped Jacob in the past, she heartily agreed to let her stay. However, Charlotte’s father—Jacob’s grandfather—didn’t have a great reputation around Tockerbrot, so Sven told her to keep Rebecca’s

presence a secret.

“Sorry for the intrusion! Oh...!”

Sven warned Charlotte and Jacob to stay away from the shop. “Make sure you tell Jacob! The shop—”

“Jacob? He just left for Tockerbrot.”

“What?!”

Jacob had been unable to go anywhere over the last few days because of Rebecca. Finding himself free, it was understandable that he would poke his head in at his friend Lud’s shop.

“What awful timing!” Before Sven could explain to Charlotte, the red girl was already out of bed.

“Umf!!!” She sprang to her feet, burst through the glass window, and made a beeline for Tockerbrot.

“W-What the heck?!” Having no idea what was going on, Charlotte was astounded.

“Sorry about that! I’ll make sure she pays for damages! Now I gotta go!!” Sven followed Rebecca through the broken window and ran toward Tockerbrot.

1725 26.04.921—

A little earlier...

“We have a customer!”

Lud and Meitzer were in the oven room talking. Their conversation was interrupted when the door to the shop opened, signaling a customer’s arrival.

“Hey!”

Just when Meitzer was getting to the crucial point in their conversation, he had to go into the storefront. Sven, Milly, Marlene and Jacob were all away at the moment. Lud couldn’t serve the customers because his face frightened them.

“... *sigh*...” Lud wished Meitzer could have stayed to talk a little longer. But

then... “Hm?” From behind the oven room door, he looked into the shop. He peered through a peephole that gave him a narrow view.

“What is...” Jacob, the boy who hadn’t come over for a few days, was in the shop.

“Oh... you’re Jacob, right? Have you come to visit Langart?” Meitzer greeted him with a smile, but Jacob looked tense.

“S... Sorry, Mister.”

“What for?” Jacob looked pale and was sweating. Behind him stood an elderly woman. It was the same woman who had interrupted his talk with Sven the day before. She wore a gentle smile just as she had before, but it hung from her face like a mask.

What the... Looking through the peephole, Lud thought something was unnatural about that face. His instincts as a former soldier rang alarm bells.

“Oh my... Is it you again, Ma’am?” Meitzer looked at the woman in exasperation. “Didn’t I tell you not to come again?”

What is he talking about? Lud didn’t understand why Meitzer would say that. He moved closer to the door for a better look—but then something happened.

“General Douglas... You noticed, did you?” The old woman now spoke insolently with a man’s voice and an Augustan accent.

What?! Before Lud could budge, the situation became even more bizarre.

The old woman’s face split in two, revealing an iron mask. And that wasn’t all. The whirr of machinery sounded from her spindly, twig-like limbs as they extended. Lud recognized her new appearance.

“A mechanical soldier?!” As he cried out, one of the old woman’s... No, one of the mechanical soldier’s joints revealed a weapon barrel.

“Uh-oh!” Meitzer shouted and grabbed Jacob’s shoulders.

“Langarrrt!” The man shoved Jacob toward Lud, who had noticed the danger and rushed out from the oven room.

“Meitzer!!”

Then the barrel fired a shell with a *poom!* It was a grenade launcher that fired explosive shells.

“Gah!!”

Meitzer used his body to contain the blast. There was an immediate explosion. The blast was much less destructive than it would have been, but it still significantly damaged the room.

“Ungh!!”

Lud was only just able to grab Jacob from Meitzer and take him to shelter in the oven room.

“What the?!”

No human being could suffer such a blast and survive. Its power would blow a person to bits finer than mincemeat.

“Who are you people?!”

There were more mechanical soldiers. They were disguised as an old man, a housewife, a mail carrier... One after the other, as many as twenty people appeared who looked normal at a glance, but parts of their bodies were mechanical with projecting firearms.

“L... Lud? Who are these people?” In Lud’s arms, Jacob was trembling as he asked.

There were limits to even Jacob’s unusual maturity. Faced with these bizarre visitors, it would be irrational not to be afraid.

“What should we do?” The mechanical soldier dressed as a mail carrier asked.

“Objective complete. Retreat is permissible.” This reply came from a mechanical soldier disguised as a housewife and equipped with a gun that looked like a baby.

“Eliminating witnesses is advised.” This from a mechanical soldier wearing the reading glasses and clothes of an old man.

“Agreed. To be thorough, let us torch the place.” The mechanical soldier disguised as an old woman gave the order.

When did these soldiers infiltrate town?!

These monstrosities blended in with the ordinary townsfolk. It was like the plot of a cheap horror novel. But reality was more ruthless than fiction.

Urgh!

Lud had experience fighting a mechanical soldier. His opponent had been a Greytenite mechanical soldier called a *Dreadnought,* made of machinery from the neck down. And Lud had been powerless against him.

But compared to him, these are nothing.

The mechanical soldiers in front of him now were not nearly as advanced. The military technology responsible for them must have been less sophisticated in development or had prioritized secrecy over quality. Lud could handle one or two of them.

But... There were too many. He couldn't defeat them all. *Even worse...* Jacob was beside him. Jacob's safety was of the utmost importance. *Should I escape out the back with him? No, they'd immediately catch us!*

That left only one option. Lud could serve as a shield and allow Jacob to flee out the back. That was the only choice. However...

But... Ordinarily, he would have swiftly reached that conclusion and acted immediately. And he would have said, "Jacob, don't worry about me, just save yourself!" But he couldn't say it. His mouth clamped shut. He remembered what Meitzer had said just moments ago...

"But that's cruel for someone whose greatest happiness is to lead a life with you." He thought of Sven. If he served as Jacob's shield, Lud was sure to die. He would never see Sven again. He would never talk to her again. Everything would end for him.

.....! His body froze and he couldn't move. He couldn't move because of fear.

"Proceed." The barrel of a gun hidden in the old woman's cane turned toward Lud.

It was too late to run. They would never escape in time. Everything would...

end. Just when despair clouded his vision, she appeared.

“What’re you rotten scumbags doing?!” Faster than a bullet, sharper than a blade, and burning with anger hotter than fire, Sven’s kick smashed into the side of the old woman’s face and sent her flying.

“S-Sven?!” Lud was stupefied. She had appeared with timing too good even for a convenient hallucination.

“Master! Are you all right?!” And this was no hallucination. It was the real Sven. Hearing the explosion, she had arrived in the nick of time. “I’m so glad!” The silver-haired girl turned a heartfelt smile on him, then looked around. The half-demolished shop surrounded them.

“You dirty, rotten...” Unsteadily, Sven glared at the mechanical soldiers.

Tockerbrot was Lud’s castle, his holy ground, his life. They had defiled it, destroyed it, and—to make matters worse—tried to kill Lud.

“I’ll kill you all!” Sven’s red eyes shone. They actually radiated light. The rezanium reactor in her chest had released all restraints, so she could kill her foes at full strength—efficiently, thoroughly, and mercilessly.

“Who... is this?” The mechanical soldiers were startled. But Sven was not the only one to concern them.

“Why did you involve Jacob in this?!” A pure red girl stood opposite Sven behind the mechanical soldiers.

“If you want to die, just tell me, and I will pulverize you until even your bones disappear!” Rebecca’s eyes glowed red in anger.

“Now you will die!” The two girls, who had once been known as the Silver Wolf and the Crimson Hawk, shouted at once.

“R-Run!! Ruuun!!” This command didn’t come from one of the mechanical soldiers. It was Lud, who just nearly met his death, but now warned his opponents. He was a merciful man. He couldn’t even kill his enemies. Or those who tried to kill him. Lud knew well the two girls’ combat abilities. Crude mechanical soldiers, even twenty of them, would be powerless against Sven and Rebecca.

“What?!” In the confusion, however, the mechanical soldiers did not hear his warning. To be precise, Sven and Rebecca were already attacking before they could hear it.

“Ugah?!”

“W-What?!”

“Sh-she is too fast!! Like an arrow!”

“Retreat! No... it is too late! Gyaah!!”

“Reinforcements! Call for—”

It wasn’t really a battle. It was a one-sided demolition, an *onslaught*. It was unilateral slaughter, by two girls in a rage, one white and one red.

“Whoa... Wow...” The fight was so decisive that Jacob, whose life had just been in danger, muttered without concern.

The two girls ripped the mechanical soldiers into scrap, tossed them aside, then ripped some more.

“Ungh!” But they had given in to their anger so completely—

“You...”

—they missed someone who was still alive. They had failed to completely immobilize that opponent.

“Damn youuu...!!” The mechanical soldier disguised as an old woman, whom Sven first kicked aside, rose to her feet. An arm and leg were broken and half her face was crushed, but the soldier could still move. And she could still fire her remaining explosive shell. She pointed the barrel at Lud and Jacob.

“Master!!” Sven immediately placed herself between the weapon and Lud. But she wasn’t using herself as a shield. “Hyah!!!” She did it to deflect the shell with a kick.

Grenade launchers fire explosive shells, but its shells aren’t like the bullets of handguns. They fire something like a small missile. The shells travel slowly enough to follow with the eye. A humanoid Hunter Unit could intercept the shell before it exploded.

“Master! Get down!!”

But that would only prevent a direct hit. It wouldn’t prevent the explosion or stop the blast.

Sven covered Lud. She could withstand a blast of this intensity. At least according to her calculations. However... unforeseen circumstances can always overturn calculations.

“Gaaah!”

Sven’s calculations had been accurate. A blast like this really wouldn’t kill her. She successfully protected Lud and secured her own survival. Indeed, she had calculated correctly. But she had overlooked one important factor.

“Agh...”

The first one to notice was Jacob. “Sven... You...”

And then Lud noticed, too. “Huh...?”

Seeing their reactions, Sven understood. Her exterior had indeed withstood the blast. However, it had not been able to shield itself from the debris and rubble propelled by the explosion. A piece of debris had stabbed Sven through the back and was projecting from her chest.



“Um... Master?”

This damage would not destroy a humanoid Hunter Unit. It wouldn’t even render it inoperative. But it would certainly kill a human being. A human would spit blood, collapse and die. It would be astonishing if that didn’t happen. She should be dead, but...

“Sven... Oh...” Lud shook his head sadly. Visible through her pierced chest was, unmistakably, a mechanical body. And the sight would allow no evasion. Lud couldn’t pretend he hadn’t seen or act as if she were just a little unusual.

Sven, the popular waitress of Tockerbrot, wasn’t human. She was an automaton. Sven knew that today, right now, Lud clearly saw what she was. And Lud knew that Sven knew.

“Svelgen!!! Get up!” Rebecca shouted at her.

They had not yet silenced the enemy. The mechanical soldiers that were still functional moved to attack Lud and Sven.

“Aaagh!” But Sven didn’t move. She was immobilized by the shock of Lud discovering what she hadn’t wanted to reveal.

They heard the sudden roar of a dragon.

“—?!” Rebecca looked up.

In the sky above them, spreading its massive wings, was a dragon. No... it was a *Wyvern*, a large Wiltian transport aircraft, and it was coming in at low altitude.

“What is *that* doing here?!”

The aircraft that Rebecca used for her regular flights to Organbaelz didn’t suddenly appear in daylight like this.

The explanation was soon apparent. A hatch opened in the aft section of the *Wyvern* and soldiers jumped out, one after another. It was a surprise attack by an airborne division. By penetrating deep into enemy territory and descending by parachute, they could directly engage a specific location.

“It is the Wiltian airborne! Who called them?”

Wiltia was one of the strongest military nations, but it closely guarded its

aviation power. It guarded its paratroopers, who operated in conjunction with aircraft, even more closely. The soldiers and their equipment were far more valuable than regular troops and equipment. The only one who could call in such a strike would be...

“Yes, there is such a person.” Rebecca recognized the first soldier to land and now understood.

A hero of the Great European War was called the Black Spear. That woman had piloted a black Hunter Unit, and had accomplished exceptional military feats. People had compared her to a devilish knight wielding a long spear because she usually carried an anti-aircraft gun as a long-range rifle. And her name was...

“What a bunch of scum-buckets!!” It was Sophia von Rundstadt. Before she could hit the ground, she fired her Gerlich anti-tank rifle.

“Captain?!” So many unexpected events were occurring but this one appearance surprised Lud more than the others, so he raised his voice in surprise.

Bullets were picking off mechanical soldiers. Each bullet could pierce tank armor on impact. Half machine also meant half human. Even the mechanical soldiers could not withstand the barrage, and one shot through the mechanical soldier in the appearance of an elderly woman.

“You’re *not* getting away!!” Sophia had landed. She turned her gun on the mechanical soldiers attempting to flee. “Nuh-uh! I won’t let you get away!”

But before she could shoot, a girl who had touched down at the same time nailed the mechanical soldiers with astonishing leg strength and muscular power.

“Im... possible!” The mechanical soldier dressed as a mail carrier was panicking. He had strength surpassing a human being’s, but he couldn’t stop this innocent-looking little girl.

“Hilde! I got one! I even gagged him so he cannot commit suicide!”

“Uh, yeah... I see that! Ugh... my legs are shaky!” The girl spoke casually and, like a hunting dog seeking praise for catching her prey, she waved at her master

Hilde, who had just landed with the assistance of another soldier.

“That girl...” Rebecca recognized the voice and made a suspicious face. The girl was Lillie, the third humanoid Hunter Unit.

“Captain... and Hilde, too? Why are you here?!”

Sophia and Hilde each had a past with Lud. The two would come to help whenever something happened to him. But it wasn’t possible that they had learned of this current situation and rushed here from Berun.

“Um... we came to pick up someone.”

“But, um... why did you bring a penguin?”

“There’s a reason for that!” Sophia looked as if explaining why a penguin was strapped to her back would be difficult.

“We came for General Douglas Meitzer of the Noa military.”

“Douglas... Meitzer?!” Lud raised his voice in surprise for the nth time that day.

“It will take forever to explain.”

After subduing the assassins at the goodwill ceremony, the penguin General Douglas told Sophia that there was another General Douglas. The circumstances had suddenly changed. After putting the screws on staff from the Noa embassy, it became clear that there was a human General Douglas in addition to the penguin.

“Why is everything always so complicated?!”

“Noa sent him in another vessel as a joke on Wiltia.” Lud looked astounded, and Sophia sounded the same as she explained. “But then a problem arose.” His aircraft malfunctioned on its way to Berun. “It was probably due to sabotage of some sort.”

There was no doubt that August was responsible for the assassin disguised as Ambassador Abignon, the fallen mechanical soldiers, and the airplane malfunction.

“General Douglas forced the two crew members on board to abandon ship.

Then he made a crash landing in Lake Merevin nearby. We confirmed that much before he disappeared. That was three nights ago."

"Oh..." Meitzer had appeared in Organbaelz the next day. But that raised questions. "Why didn't General Douglas immediately summon help?"

"I don't know. Apparently, he's known as a total nut in the Noa military. The staff from the embassy of Noa didn't know what to do, so they tried to pass off the penguin Douglas as the real Douglas to buy time."

It was such a reckless plan that they must have been completely discombobulated to even consider it.

"So, we readied a transport aircraft to fly here, leading an airborne division to the rescue. That was five hours ago."

"Talk about a forced march! But, um... I'm surprised you were able to pinpoint his location!"

"Hmf! Well, about that..." Sophia looked away as if answering Lud's question was difficult.

Meanwhile, Rebecca stared at Lillie with suspicion. "Have I met you somewhere before?"

"Um... I do not know! Maybe I resemble someone else?! I have common features, do I not?" Lillie replied awkwardly and didn't look directly at Rebecca.

Sophia continued to explain to Lud. "That girl... She requested to come along. Then, during the flight, she suddenly indicated this location."

"Oh..."

"Then, just as we were observing the area, an explosion occurred. So we made a U-turn and deployed the paratroopers."

"You're quite the reckless captain."

Sophia behaved sensibly around Daian. However, Lud had witnessed her recklessness in wartime, and it had caused him a lot of trouble.

"That's okay. Everything worked out in the end."

"Yes, that's right. Uh-huh... This feels sort of familiar." During his military

days, Lud had learned that it was pointless to object, so he just gave up.

“Anyway, where’s General Douglas? Where’s General Douglas Meitzer?”

“Um... about that...” Sophia was searching for General Douglas—Meitzer, the man at the heart of this—but Lud didn’t know what to say.

He was surprised to learn Meitzer’s true identity, since he seemed like just an unusual eccentric. And just minutes earlier he shielded Lud and the others from an explosive shell and was blown to bits.

“Captain Sophia, um...” Lud looked uncomfortable and began to tell her about the man’s fate, but then...

“Yoo-hoo! I’m right here!” Meitzer suddenly popped out from the rubble.

“Huuuh?!” Lud was speechless with surprise.

“Are you General Douglas? Um, why’re you naked?” Sophia asked in amazement.

There wasn’t a single scratch on Meitzer’s body. But that didn’t mean he had escaped the explosion. Burnt bits of cloth still clung to him where the explosion had incinerated his clothes.

“Um...”

“Now, now... calm down, Langart. Um, sorry. Could someone bring me something to wear?” Still stark naked, Meitzer calmed Lud while he borrowed some clothes from a Wiltian soldier.

“The Wiltian military... Or rather, the government will officially explain this incident.”

“Oh dear.”

He was a state guest, so they had to show at least minimal courtesy, but Meitzer had caused unnecessary trouble, so Sophia’s eyes were cold. “‘Oh dear’?! Don’t gimme that! This is a big problem that the Wiltian government can’t overlook! How are you gonna compensate for all this?!”

“Noa will accept the Liebenber agreement regarding Perry and promise to cooperate in every way.”

“Hm?!”

Perry was an island between Wiltia and Sparia, which was across the sea. Two hundred years ago, the Luftzand Domain, which was Wiltia’s precursor, had purchased the island from a Sparian noble named Liebenber, thereby annexing the territory. In recent years, however, Sparia had claimed that Wiltia’s right to the island was invalid, resulting in a sticky territorial dispute.

The focus of the dispute was the actual agreement with the noble Liebenber that had transferred ownership of the island. That document was in Wiltia’s possession, but opinion was divided over whether it was recognizable according to international law. If Noa backed it, the territorial dispute would turn in Wiltia’s favor.

“Urrrgh...”

“I can at least do that much to make amends. And now...” Meitzer approached Sven, who was sitting alone and trembling in a corner of the shop.

“What in the world *are* you?” Hearing Meitzer’s true identity and having Lud learn her true identity... It was all incomprehensible and depressing.

“For now, let’s cover that wound.” She had already removed the debris that pierced her body, but the open wound revealing her mechanical parts remained. “I wanted to help you... I’m sorry.” Meitzer offered a sincere apology and lightly patted her back.

He patted the wound extending all the way to Sven’s chest.

“—?!” Feeling a strange sensation, Sven looked up.

“My wound...”

“I can only heal what’s visible. Sorry.” Meitzer’s eyes were tender, like those of a father consoling his daughter, much as they had the first day he appeared.

“What are you? What do you want with me?” Sven repeated the questions she had asked him many times.

“General, soldiers have come for you. Hurry, please.”

Military reinforcements had arrived from a nearby base.

“Oh... is that all the time we get? Too bad. It was fun.” Meitzer sighed and turned his back to Sven. But first he answered her final questions. “Who am I? I am the Devil.”

“Huh?” He had answered her first question: “What are you?”

“And I came here to ask you a question, Sven.”

Then he answered her second question: “What do you want with me?”

“Sven, do you want to be human?”

Epilogue: Thus Performers Gather on Stage

1740 26.04.921—

Deep in the countryside of Haradin...

A young girl calling herself the Saint appeared from inside Fianna.

“Uh-oh... This can’t be good,” said Daian.

“I never expected to meet *you* here,” said Blitzdonner.

Daian “The Sorcerer” Fortuner was the most famous brain on the continent of Europea. And Erich “The Crimson Hawk” Blitzdonner was a hero from the Great War. The faces of these two great men—brains and brawn—were tense.

“Oh dear... What’s the matter with you two? I may be cute, but there’s no need to get so jittery. Just *relax*.” In contrast, the Saint smiled as if enjoying herself.

“Does this mean you were manipulating us the whole time?” Daian was grinding his teeth in frustration, which was rare for him.

The Saint had used Wiltia’s secret maneuvering with Noa and the ancient heritage Genitz had discovered to create this situation. She had gathered everyone who knew what was inside the Door, or who was trying to find out, so she could attack them all at once.

“Now I know why the Augustan soldiers who were here disappeared. They didn’t pull out. You *eliminated* them. Am I right?”

“Yep! You got it!” The Saint answered Daian’s question cheerfully.

“I diced them up finer than grains of sand, so they returned to dust. Yes, this land will give bloom to abundant flowers.” Her voice was beautiful. And from that beautiful voice she almost sang the bloody words.

“Just like with me!!” Glaring at her, Blitzdonner spoke roughly.

The Saint had appeared before Blitzdonner early in the Great War when he

was called a hero for his bravery and military success. And immediately after she appeared, his beloved Hunter Unit *Sharlahart* had ceased functioning. When he crawled from the cockpit, the Saint had used some kind of power to sever all four of his limbs in a flash. The Saint was the reason Blitzdonner now relied on mechanical arms and legs.

“Yes, I lopped off their hands and feet, just as I did to you, turning them into caterpillars. They were adorable as they wriggled around. Then I carefully crushed them one by one.” The Saint’s voice was like birdsong. “Back then, August’s foundation was still very weak. It was so weak that you were able to halt the advance of the front line singlehandedly. That’s why I confronted you.”

“How brazen of you! But why did you disappear without finishing me off?”

“Well...” Then the Saint’s charming smile clouded slightly.

“... someone *annoying* got in the way.”

“.....?”

Someone annoying... Who? Neither Blitzdonner nor Daian knew. And the two instinctively sensed that the Saint no longer wanted to answer any questions.

“Well, shall we get started?”

She never intended to have a conversation with them. She was like a small child playing with a doll. They had spoken of their own accord, and she had simply responded.

“Hey, Daian... When I give the sign, run like mad.” Blitzdonner’s body tensed as he spoke. “My mission is to protect you, so I will do all I can.” Nonetheless, he had a good idea of how this would end. Even using everything he had, he couldn’t hold the Saint for more than one minute.

“Aw, gimme a break. I don’t have much strength, and I suck at exercise!” Even if Blitzdonner sacrificed his life in the effort, he would only extend Daian’s life by a minute and a few seconds.

“Then may I escape by myself? If I’m lucky, I just might make it.”

“Don’t even think about it. I’d be lonely!” As Blitzdonner prepared to run, Daian clung to him.

“Argh! We’re totally cornered! I’m imagining the faces of my family!”

“Your family? Oh, right. You have a son.”

“How do *you* know that?!”

“Well, about that... there are circumstances.” Daian was chuckling.

“Aw, I don’t wanna die! Argh!!”

Just when Blitzdonner thought there was nothing left to do, Daian pulled something from his inside pocket. “What a coincidence, I don’t want to die either, so...”

It looked like some kind of tag. It wasn’t regular paper. It was parchment with a code of unknown letters in red dye.

“What’s that?!” When the Saint saw it, her face showed surprise.

“Right now, I’ll stoop to anything!” Daian tossed the tag into the air. Before disappearing, it traced lines of light in the air. From the light, which sketched the same code that was written on the tag, stepped a human form.

“You...!”

A bewitchingly beautiful woman with black hair and black eyes appeared. It was Hanussen, the Royal Sage.

Hanussen was spoken of like a figure from a fairy tale and had a private contract with the public office of the Principality of Wiltia, which treated her as an honored guest. She was also believed to be a magician who had disappeared long ago.

“Oh dear... Is this right, Sorcerer? With this, I can repay everything I owe you?” Hanussen spoke as if her presence was trivial.

She owed Daian a number of personal debts. And she had promised to grant his wishes to repay what she owed. During the recent rebellion, she had helped Lud and his comrades. This was done at Daian’s instigation, so he had used one of his wishes.

“I don’t care as long as I live!”

This would be his last wish. According to rumor, there was almost nothing

Hanussen *couldn't* do, and Daian would try to get out of this pinch with her help one last time.

"Very well. It makes little difference to me." Hanussen held the palms of her hands up toward Daian and Blitzdonner. Light burst forth and washed over them.

"W-What the?! What are you trying to do?!" Blitzdonner shouted with no idea of what was happening.

"What a noisy *insect* you are! I don't have time to explain. Oh, right. Imagine the face of someone you want to see. Otherwise, you'll just dissipate into nothing!"

"Dissipate?!"

Hanussen spoke with little concern, and the next moment the two disappeared in the light.

"....."

Before he vanished, Daian turned to smile at the Saint. He seemed to say, "You're gonna regret letting me escape!"

—!!

The two were gone. Spatial transference magic was not part of the heritage from Europea. It was a power from a completely different system that transported the two out of danger.

"Now you've done it." Only Hanussen and the Saint remained. Angry, the Saint raised her hands, but Hanussen raised her own to stop her.

"Stop. It won't work." Hanussen spoke as if the Saint's attempt was ridiculous.

"I cannot kill you and you cannot kill me. We belong to different worlds." Hanussen spoke without emotion, as if simply presenting the facts, and then used the transference magic on herself.

Was she running? Or retreating? She didn't see it like that at all. The royal sage had finished her business here, so she left. A moment later, Hanussen's form disappeared and only the Saint remained.

“Oh, come *on*...” The Saint spoke softly in her beautiful voice. “Give me a *break*...” Her unbelievably beautiful voice continued. “Why, of all the lowdown dirty rotten— Argh!!!” With her unbelievably, amazingly beautiful voice, she shouted her anger, resentment, hatred and curses.

“This always happens!! Things never go the way I want! *That one* never does what I want! *They* never do what I want!!!” Full of anger, she ranted and raved. “That’s why I hate... this whole world!!” Contorting her lovely face, the Saint vented her fury against reality.

1750 26.04.921—

At Tockerbrot in Organbaelz...

“This shop is a disaster zone again...” Lud’s shoulders slumped in dismay as he looked around the half-obliterated bakery.

This was the second time the shop had been destroyed. A fire had consumed the entire building, the last time, including the living space. This time the damage wasn’t *that* bad, but it was still a mess.

“Will the military pay for repairs?” Lud asked Sophia, who had stayed to help clean up.

“Ask Noa. I can deliver the bill.” It was a kind answer from his former superior officer.

“But...” He looked around again.

“Like I said!!! We have definitely met!”

“I do not know! I do not know anything, not even one little bit!!” Rebecca and Lillie were arguing fiercely.

Not long ago, before Rebecca developed her heart, Lillie—under orders—had knocked her into the Sephira River in Berun.

“It’s quite lively around here.” Looking around, Lud saw Hilde and Jacob. Since they were conscientious and thoughtful, they were quietly clearing away rubble. “Hey, kids. Be careful of broken glass.”

“Okay!”

At the edge of the shop, Sven was still sitting alone in confusion.

“Lud, you should go to her.” Jacob saw that Lud was at a loss with Sven in this state, so he encouraged him.

“I didn’t see anything, so...”

“Jacob... You...” Jacob was there and knew what happened. He saw Sven’s inner machinery through her pierced chest.

“If you and Sven decide that you don’t know anything and didn’t *see* anything, then I’ll play along. It doesn’t matter either way.” The eleven-year-old boy looked at Lud with gentle, caring eyes.

“I’m no match for you, Jacob.” Lud’s response was heartfelt as he turned to approach Sven.

What should he say? Should he say he had known for a long time? Should he say he *hadn’t* known? No, there were other things he could say. But the words wouldn’t come out.

“Um...” Nonetheless, he tried but his voice broke off...

“Hm?” Sophia spoke as if she noticed something.

“Huh?” Jacob spoke as if he guessed something.

“What?” Rebecca spoke as if she sensed something.

All at once, the three raised their heads. The roof of Tockerbrot had been blown away, and through the empty space, they saw two forms appear.

“Guah?!”

“Ow!”

Suddenly, light burst through and two men descended.

“Ow... ow, ow, ow! W-Where are we?!” One was a blond man in a red coat.

“I don’t know!” The other was wearing strange clothing and looked like a clown.

“Huh...?” Seeing the first man, Rebecca was as stupefied as if God were descending.

“What...?” Recognizing the face of the other man, Sophia looked more astounded than if a marching band were floating into the shop.

“Wh-Who’re they?”

“That’s...” Having no memory of either men, Lud was confused. But Sven remembered one of them, and her eyes widened in surprise.

“Hey! Why if it isn’t Svelgen! What are we doing here?” The two men, transported here from faraway Haradin by spatial transference magic, were Blitzdonner the Crimson Hawk and Daian the Sorcerer.

In the history of Tockerbrot, this incident would come to be known as the Three-Day Throng of Customers. The people gathered there would soon experience the Earthshaking Nine-Days.

To be continued...



Afterword

This is SOW. Thank you for reading volume 8 of *The Combat Baker and Automaton Waitress*. This time, I only get one page for an afterword, so I'll have to make it short!

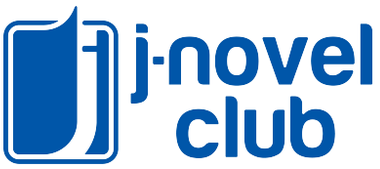
In this volume, the various characters whose paths have crossed are all together. I hope you'll stick around to see what they do in the future.

In Japan, there were two voice dramas of this book. Rebecca is the main character in the second voice drama. In the illustrations for volume one, she was only shown from behind, so she's really moved up in the world! I hope you'll enjoy her in the voice drama too!

Do an Internet search for "A-koe"!

Agh! There's no space left! Anyway, see you again sometime!

SOW



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 9 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

The Combat Baker and Automaton Waitress: Volume 8

by SOW

Translated by Ari and John Werry / HC Language Solutions, Inc.

Edited by Hope Matthiessen

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2018 SOW

Illustrations Copyright © 2018 Zaza Cover illustration by Zaza

All rights reserved.

Original Japanese edition published in 2018 by Hobby Japan This English edition is published by arrangement with Hobby Japan, Tokyo All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: September 2020