

一つの大陸の物語 下

～アリンとヴァイルとリアとトレイズとメグとセロンとその他～

時雨沢恵一

KEIICHI SIGSAWA

イラスト:黒星紅白

ILLUSTRATION : KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI

 電撃文庫

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シュトラウスキー！
メグミカ(メグ)

スーパースター出身の、第四上級学校生徒。
リリアの親友であり、セロンの許嫁。
新聞部。

セロン・マクスウェル

第四上級学校生徒。
メグへの片想いを成就させ、許嫁に。
新聞部。

ラリー・ハップバーン

第四上級学校生徒。
セロンの大親友。新聞部。

ニコラス・ブラウニング(ニック)

第四上級学校生徒。実は男。
歴史マニア。新聞部。

ナタリア・スタインベック
(ナシーヤ、またはナータ)

第四上級学校生徒。ラリーの幼なじみ。大食漢。新聞部。

ジニー・ジョーンズ

第四上級学校生徒。
大富豪の一人娘。新聞部部长。

アリソン・シュルツ

ロクシエ空軍テストパイロット。
リリアの母親。

トラヴァス少佐

スーパースター陸軍の少佐。
ロクシエ首都にある大使館勤務。

リリア・シュルツ

ロクシエ首都、第四上級学校生徒。
アリソンの娘。本名が長い。

トレイズ

第四上級学校生徒。
ベネディクト&フィオナの息子であり、イクストゥアの王子。

ベネディクト&フィオナ

「ロクシエ唯一の王国、
イクストゥアの女王と、その夫。」

Allison Schultz

A test pilot in the Confederation Air Force. She is Lillia's mother.

Major Travas

A major in the Royal Army. He works at the Sou Be-Il embassy in Roxche.

Lillia Schultz

A student at the 4th Capital Secondary School in Roxche's Capital District. She is Allison's daughter and has a very long full name.

Treize

A student at the 4th Capital Secondary School. He is the son of Benedict and Fiona, and is the prince of Ikstova.

Fiona and Benedict

The queen of Ikstova, the only kingdom in Roxche, and her husband.

Strauski Megmica

A student at the 4th Capital Secondary School, originally from Sou Be-Il. She is Lillia's friend and Seron's fiancée, and is a member of the newspaper club.

Seron Maxwell

A student at the 4th Capital Secondary School. His crush on Meg finally bore fruit, resulting in their engagement. He is a member of the newspaper club.

Larry Hepburn

A student at the 4th Capital Secondary School. He is Seron's best friend and a member of the newspaper club.

Nicholas Browning

A student at the 4th Capital Secondary School. In spite of appearances, he is not a girl. He is a history buff and a member of the newspaper club.

Natalia Steinbeck

A student at the 4th Capital Secondary School. She is Larry's childhood friend and possesses an endless appetite. She is a member of the newspaper club.

Jenny Jones

A student at the 4th Capital Secondary School. She is the only daughter of one of the richest people in Roxche, and is the president of the newspaper club.

〈上〉

- 序 章 「懐かしい男」
- 第一章 「アリソンとヴィル」
- 第二章 「フィオナとベネディクト」
- 第三章 「リリアとトレイズ」
- 第四章 「メグとセロン、そしてラリーとジェニーとナタリアとニック」
- 第五章 「謎の転校生」
- 第六章 「心配するは、我にあり」
- 第七章 「証言と推理」
- 第八章 「新聞部、動く」
- 第九章 「エデルマンの罪」
- 第十章 「追う者と追われる者」
- 第十一章 「狙撃」

一つの大陸の物語〈下〉

～アリソンとヴィルとリリアとトレイズとメグとセロンとその他～

〈下〉

- 第十二章 「トラヴァース少佐の戦い」 9
- 第十三章 「めぐりあい」 39
- 第十四章 「続・懐かしい男」 63
- 第十五章 「サイラス」 93
- 第十六章 「イクストーヴァへ」 115
- 第十七章 「思惑」 143
- 第十八章 「奪い合い」 173
- 第十九章 「真昼の夜の決闘」 203
- 第二十章 「ロクシェ首都」 233
- 第二十一章 「結婚式」 269
- 第二十二章 「終わりは始まり」 327

Chapter 12: Major Travas's Battle	7
Chapter 13: The Encounter	20
Chapter 14: A Nostalgic Face - Continued	29
Chapter 15: Silas	40
Chapter 16: To Ikstova	48
Chapter 17: The Plot	59
Chapter 18: The Race is On	71
Chapter 19: A Midday Night's Duel	81
Chapter 20: The Capital District	93
Chapter 21: The Wedding	107
Chapter 22: The End is a Beginning	128

Chapter 12: Major Travas's Battle

The 27th day of the fourth month.

It was just as the surveillance camera in the Capital District was continuing to take photos in secret.

A box in an aeroplane flying over the Lutoni River exploded.

There were almost no sparks, and no smoke. But the powerful explosion sent tiny shards of metal flying everywhere. Most of the shrapnel hit the metal parts of the cockpit.

The bits that did not hit the cockpit were driven into the people nearby.

Captain Barnett, who had opened the lid, took the brunt of the impact. His arms were torn entirely to pieces, a large hole was blown in his stomach, and the bottom half of his face was destroyed.

Without even a chance to scream, he went from man to corpse.

The shrapnel also hit Master Sergeant Lod, who sat on the right side of the cockpit, opposite from Barnett.

Shrapnel dug into the back of his neck all the way up to his head, leaving marks like bullet wounds and spraying blood everywhere.

“Ah...?”

Eyes wide open, completely unaware of what had happened to him, Lod died four seconds after the captain.

“AAAAARGH!”

The only member of the flight crew who had the time to scream was Second Lieutenant Klee.

The shrapnel had struck his left shoulder and elbow, tearing through flesh and blood and rendering his arm permanently useless.

One small piece of metal, meanwhile, hit the left side of his neck and severed his carotid artery.

“What—” The explosion drew Major Travas's attention from the window to the cockpit.

And he spotted Captain Barnett's corpse, Master Sergeant Lod's slumped body, and the third member of the flight crew.

“Major! Come quickly! Koff!”

Second Lieutenant Klee was calling for him, blood spurting from his neck like a fountain.

Major Travas undid his seat belt and rushed across the aeroplane. He passed by the two corpses and went all the way up to the pilot's seat.

“Koff! Koff! The, controls, please, take, the, controls, koff...koff...”

His body drenched with blood, Klee tried to go on as he quivered.

The aeroplane began to tremble. The trembling slowly grew worse.

Second Lieutenant Klee's right arm lost the last of its strength, sliding off the controls—

“Whoa!”

At the same time, Major Travas slipped into Captain Barnett's seat.

His eyes fell on the captain's controls before him. The yoke was shaped like the bottom half of a steering wheel. Major Travas gripped it tightly in both hands.

The trembling stopped, and the aeroplane quickly became level again as though nothing had ever happened.

A droplet of sweat fell down the side of Major Travas's face. He turned to the person who should have been sitting at his right.

There sat a young man whose entire future had been taken away from him.

Major Travas took one hand off the yoke, pulled out the seat belts from under him, and attempted to fasten them.

The effort would need both his hands. Major Travas took his other hand off the yoke.

Several failed attempts later, he finally got the belts on and looked up, when he realized that the aeroplane was listing heavily to the left.

"Whoa!"

He quickly put his hands back on the wheel and tilted the craft to the right.

But he went too far.

The aeroplane immediately tipped to the right and fell into a sharp dive. The world outside the windshield tilted to the left.

If not for the seat belts, Major Travas would have been flung out of his seat. He strained, trying to bring the aeroplane back to level position.

"No..."

But eventually, he relaxed his grip. Rather than try to fight the aeroplane, Major Travas allowed it to remain in its current position. He was locked in an uncomfortable sense of weightlessness.

Then, he discovered the lever between the two seats, to the lower right of the wheel.

He pushed and pulled the lever, then brought it to center position and slowly pulled it back to its original place. The engine output slowly weakened in response.

"What next...?"

Slowly, very slowly, Major Travas turned the yoke back to the left.

The aeroplane was continuing its descent. All he could see before his eyes was the surface of the Lutoni, drawing ever closer.

"There's no rush... Don't be hasty..."

Little by little, and very slowly, he returned the yoke to the left. He made sure to push forward at the same time so he did not end up pulling too much at once.

The aeroplane slowly returned to level position.

"Come on... come on..."

The Lutoni was almost upon him.

In the span of only five seconds, the aeroplane lost almost all altitude and returned to level position.

"Yes!"

Major Travas pulled on the wheel. The surface of the Lutoni was close enough for him to make out every little refraction on the water.

"I suppose just one read wasn't quite enough for a full understanding," he remarked with an almost-casual smile.

The aeroplane shot up only seconds before it could strike the river like an arrow.

The nose slowly pulled up before instantly rising, reducing the angle between the aeroplane and the river.

The altitude also sharply fell.

When the fuselage hit the surface with a deafening crash, it was almost parallel to the water.

The aeroplane hit the river at over 300 kilometers an hour, bounced off against the surface, and hit the water again.

The front of the propellers struck the water, bringing the aeroplane back into the air.

Like a stone skipping across the river, the aeroplane rose and fell. Twice, a third time, then once more.

After four bounces against the Lutoni, the aeroplane lost energy. It lost balance, leaving massive sprays of water behind it.

Though the plane had only slightly tilted to the right, the tip of the right wing, its midsection, then its base was driven into the water, and the resultant drag snapped the wing whole.

The engine roared amidst the screams of breaking metal.

The right wing, snapped at the base, flew backwards and smashed against the vertical stabilizer, destroying it completely. The right wing then hit the river, sinking into the depths with steam and foam rising from the still-spinning engine and propeller.

The one-winged aeroplane listed about 40 degrees to the side and began sinking nose-first.

Then it hit the mud underneath.

The aeroplane slid a long way and finally reached the bank of the Lutoni.

With its left wing sticking into the air, the aeroplane drove itself into the eastern bank.

It lay on a gentle slope by an undergrowth. The left propeller continued to spin, scattering grass into the air like a lawnmower.

The left side of the fuselage was pushed into the dirt bank, cushioning the aeroplane and slowing it to a full stop.

The aeroplane lay tilting to the right, with its nose pointed slightly upwards. Most of the fuselage was on land, but the tail was immersed in the river.

The left wing, which had been pointing at the air at the moment the aeroplane came to a stop, slowly tilted down and neared the ground.

The propeller hit the ground still spinning.

It slashed aside all the grass below, then dug into the dirt underneath and finally stopped.

The engine died in a puff of white smoke. The world was once again filled with silence.

The grass and dirt flying into the air rained upon the camouflaged aeroplane and created yet new patterns.

* * *

Major Travas regained consciousness that evening.

Still strapped into his seat on the crashed aeroplane, he slowly began to move.



It was the tips of his fingers at first, then the eyelids. His glasses were gone.

“Hm...?”

Light returned to his eyes, and his mind came back to life. Major Travas slowly looked up.

He saw many things. Even without his glasses, his eyesight was good enough to see properly.

First, he glimpsed the completely shattered front windshield.

The windshield frame, twisted and bent like a piece of wire.

The yoke, stopped before him.

His own two hands, covered in mud.

The leather jacket he wore, and the seat belts crisscrossing over it.

His right leg, drenched in blood from somewhere—or someone—he could not identify.

And his left leg, twisted in a macabre direction.

He took slow breaths, one after another.

“Argh!”

And the pain struck from his left ankle. It was as though a hot iron were being pressed against it. He also felt a dull ache in his right thigh.

Then came the dizziness, as though he were standing in the middle of an earthquake. And the unpleasant nausea squeezing at his stomach.

His senses flooded, Major Travas mumbled to himself,

“Ah...I made it.”

Major Travas continued to fight for his survival.

His left ankle had been completely snapped. It was bent in an unnatural direction and would not move.

As for his right leg, there was a several-centimeter cut on the thigh from the broken windshield. The bleeding must have been profuse, as his entire right leg was dyed a reddish-brown.

His head hurt as well. The right side of his head had been injured at some point during impact. It seemed to have bled as well, but the bleeding had stopped and left a scab.

First, Major Travas used the limbs available to him—his arms and right leg—to slowly, very slowly, crawl out of his seat. Lurching with dizziness and bumping his left foot everywhere, he groaned in pain as he moved.

Groping through the tiny cockpit with his hands, Major Travas moved on his right leg.

The bodies of the crew were still strapped securely to their seats.

Major Travas pulled out a flight crew survival kit from Master Sergeant Lod’s thigh pouch.

Inside the waterproof pouch were painkillers, sugar-and-grain ration bars, a small multipurpose knife, a fishing line and hooks, a small compass, waterproof candles, and a mirror.

Major Travas swallowed some of the painkillers and began to eat the rations.

Before the painkillers kicked in, however, he cut open his pant leg and took a look at the wound on his thigh. And he began to sew closed the wound, which had begun bleeding again because he moved.

He used the fishing line and the hook.

With his bare fingers he pushed the tip of the hook into his skin to sew up the cut. He ignored the pain so the stitches would be done properly, making sure to close the wound and stop the bleeding.

Then, he used the multipurpose knife to take apart the pipe frame of his seat. He slowly unscrewed the bolts that had been so tightly affixed to the pipes.

He assembled the pieces into a U-shape and put the new creation on his left ankle. He secured it tightly with a piece of seat belt.

Thanks to the makeshift splint, his left ankle would no longer bump into things and cause him agony.

All he had left to deal with was the dizziness and the headache. He ignored the aching until the painkillers finally kicked in.

Major Travas investigated the aeroplane interior.

His biggest concern was the possibility of a fuel leak; but to his relief, the fuel tank was heavily reinforced and had escaped unharmed. Luckily, the fuel that had leaked out of the broken wing had already all disappeared into the river.

Major Travas opened the metal box at the back of the plane. Two wooden boxes were still inside.

Major Travas picked up one of them and gave it a light shake.

He could not tell what was inside from sound alone. He pulled off the tapes securing the lid, and slung the box out the open hatch on the right side of the fuselage. He ducked.

The box landed on the grass and rolled away. The lid opened.

There was no explosion.

Major Travas crawled outside.

And he slowly ate the lunch meant for Second Lieutenant Klee—the now-mud-covered bagel sandwich and dried apple slices. He used some of the water in the lunch to clean the wound on his thigh, and drank the rest.

His stomach tried to reject the food several times. But Major Travas fought the sensation, forcing himself to finish the meal.

Afterwards, he climbed up a maintenance ladder with his arms and right leg, and went up to the top of the fuselage. He surveyed the area.

Ahead of the nose were the plains of the buffer zone and the distant horizon.

There was no manmade structure in sight. Nothing moved, not even animals.

Behind the aeroplane was the ever-majestic Lutoni River. And the setting sun, painting a long orange streak against the water's surface.

Soon the sun would set and complete darkness would fall upon the world. And with the darkness would come the cold.

Major Travas returned to the cockpit and gathered up the leather jackets from the bodies. He brushed the dried blood off them.

He laid two of the jackets on the floor of the aeroplane, wore one, and spread the last one over his legs. He also used his trench coat as a makeshift blanket.

As soon as the sun set, the world went black.

Major Travas closed his eyes and ended his day.

* * *

The next day. The 28th of the fourth month.

Major Travas awoke from his sleep, which had been interrupted countless times by the cold and pain.

Day was dawning.

For breakfast, Major Travas ate the lunch meant for Master Sergeant Lod. The food would raise his falling body temperature.

The pain in his ankle and the throbbing headache continued, but Major Travas did not take any painkillers.

Instead, he thought.

He sat in the middle of the aeroplane and contemplated. He asked one question after another.

What had happened the previous day? Captain Barnett's lunchbox had exploded. The flight crew were killed.

Why? Someone must have put a bomb in the lunchbox. One meant to cause human casualties, judging from the presence of shrapnel.

For what purpose? To cause the aeroplane to crash. If the flight crew were dead, the aeroplane would crash.

Then why did the culprit want to cause such a thing?

There was only one answer. The culprit's mission was to assassinate Major Travas.

Major Travas recalled the conversation from the previous day and realized that Captain Barnett's actions had saved his life.

Barnett had gotten his lunch much earlier than scheduled. The explosion happened when he opened the box, which was originally supposed to be at lunchtime.

If Barnett had followed regulations, then the aeroplane would have lost control where the culprit intended—while it was flying over the Iltoa Mountain Range.

No amount of effort on Major Travas's part would have saved him then. The aeroplane would have smashed into the rugged mountains.

“Thank you, Captain,” Major Travas said to the body lying beside the pilot's seat.

And finally, he asked himself—

Who was the culprit?

Who was this mastermind, who could be no one but a member of the Sou Be-II military?

“I don't have enough information yet. But...”

Major Travas recalled the day he was first assigned to the Sou Be-II embassy in the Capital District. His superior, a colonel almost too portly to be a soldier, had given him a word of advice.

“Remember, Major. Things beyond our wildest imagination happen all the time in this world. You need eyes that clearly see the truth—eyes that will never be obscured by distractions.”

* * *

Major Travas resumed his battle.

First, he investigated the cockpit radio.

The shrapnel from the explosion and the impact that followed had rendered it completely useless. It was not something he could fix on his own.

Then, he climbed up to the top of the fuselage again to survey the area. Other than the time of day, nothing had changed.

The tail was completely submerged and out of sight, and the rest of the aeroplane was so smothered in dirt and grass that it was completely camouflaged.

It was not likely to be discovered from overhead.

If he were to start a fire and create a smoke signal, he was more likely to be discovered.

But Major Travas did not do so. Even if a rescue team arrived for him, there was no guarantee that they would not assassinate him on the spot.

He went back inside and began searching the aeroplane for anything useful.

The most helpful discovery was the crew members' survival kits.

Barnett's kit was half-destroyed and drenched in blood, so Major Travas had to pick out the items that were not damaged.

He also found an empty bottle and another bottle with some of the contents still left. They both had corks and metal caps, and could be refilled with water.

There were no guns on the aeroplane; most likely they had been left behind as they departed Roxche.

However, he found two signal flares.

Each flare was shaped like a baton used in a relay race, a metal cylinder painted red. If the string at the end was pulled, the flare would be launched into the air before descending on a parachute.

Major Travas continued to search the plane.

He picked out a 30-centimeter piece of metal from the wreckage and securely wrapped up the edges with pieces from the seat belts.

Then he searched the bodies for personal effects.

None of the dead seemed to have been smokers, as no one had a lighter. It might have been a good decision for their health, but not one for Major Travas's survival.

Finally, Major Travas searched his own attaché case.

Inside was the infinitely helpful 'Fundamentals of Flight for Beginners', and several envelopes of documents he had received when he left the embassy.

Some of the envelopes were sealed, their contents a mystery. They could contain documents or even microfilm, which could hold large quantities of information.

Microfilm was usually sealed in a sturdy metal case and tightly sealed.

Major Travas wondered if he should destroy the documents or leave them. And he came to a conclusion.

It was an ironclad rule in the military that all important documents and microfilm be destroyed in the case of a forced landing. Otherwise the information could fall into the wrong hands.

But Major Travas decided to ignore the regulations.
He put the attaché case back where it had been secured.

Now that he knew someone was trying to kill him, Major Travas had only one thing left to do.

Of the three bodies, he dragged Second Lieutenant Klee's to the back of the aeroplane. Rigor mortis had begun to set in, which made it difficult for Major Travas to peel off his flight suit. The arm had already stiffened completely, so he broke it to get the suit off whole.

Major Travas pulled everything—from the thermals to the underwear—off Klee's body, and then stripped himself down. Because his left leg was fixed to the makeshift splint, he had to forcibly tear his pants.

Afterwards, Major Travas put on Second Lieutenant Klee's flight suit.

Once he was in the blood-encrusted suit, he cut the badge of rank and name tag off the chest and shoulders with a knife. He tossed them quietly into the Lutoni.

He only put on Klee's right boot.

This time, Major Travas put his own clothes on Second Lieutenant Klee's body. His shirt, suit, and leather shoes.

He even switched their wristwatches. Both were still functioning perfectly, but the one from Klee's wrist was ice-cold.

Soon, the switch was complete.

"I'm sorry, Second Lieutenant Klee. Please, curse me and despise me if you wish."

He raised a metal pipe into the air.

"I'm so sorry."

He brought it down on Klee's face.

Again. And again. And again.

He smashed Second Lieutenant Klee's face with all the force he could muster.

Several strikes later, the skin tore from his face and the flesh and fluids inside splattered all over the aeroplane. Then the eyeballs burst, the teeth began to go flying, and the jaw crumbled.

Then, Major Travas pulled the desecrated body out of the fuselage. He also dragged out the other corpses, still in their uniforms.

Then he pushed them into the Lutoni from the bank.

The bodies soon joined the currents of the great river and slowly drifted, disappearing to the north.

Major Travas watched the bodies depart.

Half-kneeling, he kept up the salute until they disappeared out of sight.

There were no tears in his eyes.

The morning sun rose.

There was a thin cloud cover to the east, but the weather was acceptably pleasant. It got warmer as the sun rose higher and higher.

Major Travas got to work again.

He sewed up one of the leather jackets with the fishing wire and attached seat belt pieces to it to create a makeshift backpack. Another jacket, he simply used as it was, and the other two he cut into pieces to make into padding.

Major Travas loaded his backpack.

He packed it with the survival kits and two bottles filled with water from the river. Though heavy, he also stuffed in 'Fundamentals of Flight for Beginners'. Then he rolled up his trench coat and tied it to the backpack.

With the backpack on his back, he checked the compass and the hour hand on his watch against the sun to direct himself eastward.

There was nothing to use as a crutch on the aeroplane. Nothing from the wreck was long or large enough to act as one, and the tools he had on hand could not help him fashion one. There were no trees around, either.

He only had one way of moving.

Major Travas wrapped the leather padding around his hands and knees.

And he began to crawl.

He moved on his hands and knees, protecting his left ankle.

He had 30 kilometers to his destination.

He had to cross the deserted buffer zone.

* * *

“The average adult walks at 4 kilometers an hour. I wonder what the average adult’s crawling speed is?” Major Travas asked himself, pulling himself across the dirt plains. “A quarter that pace? Then would it take me a day and a half? No, I suppose going without sleep is out of the question. So two or three days...or even longer...”

He traveled across the soft ground on his hands and knees. The ground was just moist enough to be comfortable. Grass had started growing with the coming of spring, but it was not high enough yet to encumber him.

“Perfect for crawling.”

Major Travas crawled.

He simply crawled across the soft ground, not thinking of anything.

Behind him he left not footprints, but a long streak.

The weather was on his side. The sun warmed up the air, but it was not hot enough to cover him with sweat. It was a perfect spring day.

Major Travas took off his jacket and tied it to his backpack before continuing.

He took regular breaks and rehydrated himself. He broke up the rations and threw them into his mouth, and took more painkillers whenever the effects wore off.

He checked his right thigh, which hurt but had not worsened. The left ankle, on the other hand, had become swollen and started to ache, but Major Travas decided not to think about it for the time being.

During his breaks, he dug into the ground.

White insects were swarming inside, mostly moth larvae. Some, however, were beetles.

Major Travas put the larvae into the pocket of his backpack.

To make sure he was going east, Major Travas checked his heading with the compass before deciding on a visual target to reach.

But even that was a challenge when the only things around him were dirt and the horizon.

Major Travas chose whatever marker he could and crawled towards it. Every few dozen meters he would look back and try to overlap his heading on the compass with the line he had left behind him.

If the line was headed due west, he was heading due east.

Klee's wristwatch was for pilot use and had a stopwatch. Though he could only do rough calculations, Major Travas ran the numbers in his head. The distance he had covered, the time that had passed, and the time he had spent resting.

And he realized that within the span of one hour, he had covered less than one kilometer.

He was crawling endlessly at a snail's pace.

"This is nothing."

He simply crawled on and on.

"This is nothing compared to how the dead have suffered."

He crawled forward.

"Compared to how the people I killed suffered—their families—"

He crawled.

"This pain is nothing."

And night fell once again.

The clear sunset meant that the weather would not worsen the next day.

Major Travas stopped.

He was in an area relatively overgrown with grass. If he lay flat against the ground, he would not be easy to spot. He still saw no manmade structures around.

He had half-expected the remnants of settlements from before the creation of the buffer zone, or at least a paved road used for military purposes, but they were nowhere to be seen.

Over the course of the day, he spotted seven aeroplanes flying overhead. All were passenger planes, and naturally, all of them passed without spotting him.

"I must have covered about 10 kilometers today."

Having chosen a spot to spend the night, Major Travas lay his tired body on the trench coat he spread on the ground.

He drank the last of that day's portion of water. Now he was left only with the muddy water from the Lutoni, but he did not let that worry him as he slowly downed the water.

Major Travas then used the metal plate he had brought, and used it as a spade to dig a small pit.

“And I managed to finish correcting everything, too.”

He tore off the pages of ‘Fundamentals of Flight for Beginners’, rolled them up tightly, and arranged the bundles of paper in the pit.

Then he used the waterproof matches to carefully light the pages.

He placed the metal plate atop the burning pit.

Afterwards, Major Travas placed the larvae he had collected earlier on the sizzling-hot plate. The larvae squirmed in agony.

He shook the plate slightly to stir-fry the larvae.

“All right...let’s eat.”

He ate the cooked larvae.

Larvae were an excellent source of protein, carbohydrates, and fat. And if eaten whole, they also provided minerals and vitamins. They were the perfect source of nutrition for Major Travas in his injured and weakened state.

But as for the flavor—

“Hey, this isn’t bad.”

A smile rose to his tired, dirt-covered face.

The next day. It was the second day since the crash. The calendar on Major Travas’s watch indicated that it was the 29th.

His body had clamored for sleep in its exhaustion, but the pain and the fever woke him again and again, and his mind was plagued by nightmares. He dreamt of killing. Of being killed.

His broken ankle throbbed with heat, making him dizzy. He never had the chance to let his body truly rest, and fatigue simply piled up more and more.

The rations he had been saving ran out that day.

He even finished his water. Now he would have to get all moisture from the larvae he found. And the larvae were getting scarcer.

At times, he even lost consciousness while resting and simply lay on the ground for up to an hour at a time.

“I dropped...my frying pan...and it crashed loudly...to the floor...”

He muttered meaninglessly to himself to keep his brain working.

Now when he came across any larvae, he simply stuffed them into his mouth raw. If he did not do so, his body would stop moving.

His skin lost its elasticity, and everything that came into contact with the ground was raw and bleeding.

His face—already slim to begin with—grew even more hollow.

But he crawled, and crawled, and crawled.

And Major Travas lost consciousness in the undergrowth before it was evening.

“Oh...the moon...”

When the harsh cold forced him awake, the world was tinted a pale blue. It was night. The full moon shone brilliantly from the sky, casting its light over the grass.

Major Travas started a fire and ate more larvae. But so strong was the chill that he could not stop shivering.

“Don’t...fall asleep...”

He threw dirt on the fire to put it out and began to move again. Again, he put his elbows and knees on the ground and pressed forward.

This time, he left his trench coat, metal plate, and leather jacket behind, but he did not even have the faculties to notice.

He did not even check his heading. Major Travas simply followed his own moon-cast shadow eastward.

How many hours had he been going? How many times had he lost consciousness?

Even after losing the ability to even ask such questions, the man was still crawling.

“Huh...?”

But suddenly, he could not.

No matter how much he reached forward, no matter how much he pushed against the ground, his body refused to move, as if blocked by an invisible wall.

Not knowing what was holding him back, the man floundered for a short time as though drowning—

—Before he finally stopped moving.

Chapter 13: The Encounter

“Oh no...”

That is the first thing you say when you discover the corpse.

You are on horseback.

You are sitting in the saddle with your feet in the stirrups and hands on the reins as you cross the plains.

Uranos is your family’s beloved old farm horse. He has a brown coat and a white mane, and is short and stocky, just like other Raputoan horses. He is gentle, patient, and stubborn. He can even withstand the cold local winters.

Uranos has been part of the family since before you were born.

But technology marched on, and the introduction of tractors made his work on the fields obsolete. Obsolete farm horses were usually sold off, but the family decided to put up with the extra costs and keep him.

Even now, he works hard for the family and is ridden regularly.

Uranos is trotting as lazily as ever.

Your dog is frolicking around as he follows.

The dog’s name is Todd. He is a three-year-old male.

Like Uranos, he is a common local breed. Though he has no pedigree, Todd’s breed is often called the Raputoan—a very large dog resembling a wolf, with long, black fur and a sharp countenance.

Though Todd is a handsome watchdog, he has the unusual habit of acting like a puppy around people he trusts.

You are on your way back from fishing when you make the discovery.

You live in the countryside, in an obscure corner of the Republic of Raputoa. You have spent all 14 years of your life on this land of endless horizons, and the only entertainment available to you is secondary school and the great outdoors.

One of your hobbies in the great outdoors is fishing.

Raputoa is home to countless rivers, swamps, ponds, and lakes that dot the landscape. You would often go out to cast your line in one such body of water.

There are always insects by the water, which means bait is in plentiful supply.

Your usual haul includes catfish and eel. They taste great when you clean them properly and roast them to a golden crisp over a fire.

It is the 30th of the fourth month. The second day of the weekend. You do not have class tomorrow, as it is a holiday in the Republic of Raputoa.

In other words, today is the precious second day of a three-day weekend.

You went out alone early in the morning to fish. You rode your trusty steed Uranos under the protection of your mostly-reliable watchdog Todd.

The destination today was a large pond about 10 kilometers from home.

You caught many fish in only a few hours. But because the weather report forecasted rain for the evening, you decided to return home before noon.

The spring sun is shining warmly. Plump sacks of catfish are hanging on either side of the saddle as you and the ever-excitable Todd lazily cross the plains.

It is a wonderful midpoint to a wonderful holiday.

That is when you discover the corpse.

Todd's frolicking suddenly stops as he charges without warning into a bush on the right. He barks once. It is a sign that he has found something. You nudge Uranos in that direction.

Ten seconds later, you discover a horrifying scene. A body lying face-down in the sloped mud.

Though it is covered in dirt, you can tell it is wearing a flight suit. It is not carrying anything.

“Oh no...”

The words are out of your mouth before you can think.

Finding a corpse here spells trouble for you.

That is because you are currently in the buffer zone.

The 30-kilometer strip on either bank of the Lutoni River is off-limits to civilians and military personnel.

The pond you visited today is in the buffer zone. It is about four kilometers from the boundary, which is not very far—but still legally off-limits. You entered the area knowing that full well.

Locals enter the buffer zone without a care all the time for fishing and hunting. And now that the war is over, no one strictly prevents entry to the buffer zone. It is too vast an area to enforce.

You told your parents where you were going today. They did not even scold you; in fact, they told you to bring home a big haul to help with the family finances.

But the corpse changes everything.

You must tell your parents about it, and they must report the body to the police.

Then you will have to tell them where you found the body.

Even the local police, who are never fussy about entry to the buffer zone, will have no choice but to charge you.

“Maybe I should ignore it...” you say to yourself.

You do not know why this man has died here in the middle of nowhere, and you have no way of finding out. So perhaps you should simply forget it and go home.

But...

“No. I can't do that.”

Then what happens to the corpse?

You know the answer. The dead rot. They are eaten by the many animals and insects on the plains, and disappear.

You will be going fishing at the usual pond again in the future, and you will be reminded of the body each time. You cannot let a corpse simply remain there. And if Uranos ever steps on its head and crushes the skull, you will probably be traumatized for life.

You resolve to face the consequences. You will report to the police and ask them to give the body a proper burial.

That will be the best thing to do for yourself, for this unknown man, and his family.

But at that moment, Todd grabs the body by the arm and tugs.

“Todd! Bad dog!”

A chill runs down your spine at the thought of your dog eating the corpse. But a second later, your heart almost stops.

The corpse lifts its head.

Out of nowhere, it pushes itself up with its hands against the ground, looking up at you as you stare from atop Uranos.

“Ah!”

You almost fall out of the saddle.

Todd yelps in horror and bolts faster than you have ever seen him move.

The man has the face of a ghoul. His cheeks are sunken and his face is smeared with dirt. His eyes are bloodshot. But he is alive.

And he opens his mouth—

“Where...am I...?” he asks in Bezelese, before falling face-first back into the mud.

You sit frozen atop your horse.

“Ah!”

But 30 seconds later, you come to your senses. Even Todd slinks back from about 20 meters away.

You chide yourself for assuming that the man was already dead. You jump off Uranos and take out an aluminum water canteen from the saddlebag.

You go to the man. He does not seem likely to lash out at you.

A corpse spells trouble for you, but a live man does not. You must help those in need, like this man who lies before you.

One thing you know for certain is that the man is a Westerner. You are very glad that you took Bezelese courses in secondary school.

It is also likely that the man is a pilot.

A Western aeroplane may have crashed somewhere in the buffer zone or the Lutoni, and he may have come all this way to find help. It makes sense.

You do not know how many people may be on the crashed plane. More than a dozen or so, if it is a passenger craft.

That there is only one man here suggests that he was the only one still capable of moving. He may have come to try and find help on his own.

Then saving him means saving everyone else who has been left behind. You shudder at the weight of the responsibility thrust upon your shoulders.

You squat next to the man.

“E-excuse me!” you say in awkward Bezelese, turning the man over on his back. You know it is best to not move an injured person, but if he is strong enough to push himself up, this much should be all right.

It is difficult to move the man, who is larger than you, but you finally succeed in turning him over. You lean him against a mound of dirt and lay him down with his feet outstretched. It is probably not an uncomfortable position.

You have taken basic first aid lessons. You recall the things you learned and check the man's vitals.

First, you gently place your index finger against his neck.

"He's still alive..."

You can feel his pulse.

Then, you lick your finger and hold it before the man's mouth. You can feel his breathing, though it is very faint.

You must call for help immediately, but before that, you open your canteen and slowly let it dribble over the man's face.

The water washes away the dirt and mud. His face begins to move, eyebrows twitching and mouth opening.

"Water..."

You have been waiting for that word.

Giving water to an unconscious person could kill them if the water goes into their windpipe. But the man should be able to drink now.

"Here!" you say loudly, placing the canteen opening before his lips. You slowly tilt it down.

There is plenty of water left. It flows quietly into the man's mouth.

Though his eyes are still shut, the man is clearly drinking. You can see his throat move.

Because it is dangerous to drink too much at once, however, you stop the man after a short while. "You! Are all right! I will, call help. You, wait here! I leave water!" you say loudly, enunciating clearly. You close the canteen and place it on the man's stomach, then place his right hand on the canteen. "The police, will protect you! The information will go to Sou Be-II soon! And will rescue the others!"

You are trying to put the man at ease, but his response is unexpected.

The man grabs your right wrist, and looks slowly at your eyes.

"Not the police... No one left..." he says in a ghastly voice.

You fall into thought. But you do not understand. The war is over. No one would arrest the man or harm him for being a Westerner. Or perhaps he is actually a criminal.

You want to help this man. And whatever the reason, you cannot agree with him—you must speak to the police.

You resolve to deny the man his request, making to shake off his grip.

"Huh...?"

But a memory comes floating back.

Something seems familiar about this man, who stares weakly at you.

You have met him somewhere, you think.

Where? Not at school.

Then on your one visit to Sou Be-II? No.

"Wait a second..."

The image grows clearer.

You have spoken to this man before—in Roxchean.
You spoke about the Republic of Raputoa.
Then you did not meet him in Raputoa.
That leaves the Capital District.
The capital of Roxche, where you stayed for a month in the eleventh month of last year.
You remember how the man commented on your Raputoan uniform—in perfect
Roxchean.

“Aaaah!”

The memories come flooding back in a torrent now.
In your mind, a pair of glasses come over the man’s eyes, and his clothes are replaced by
a navy-colored suit. The high ceilings of the Confederation Library pop up behind him.
This is the man you met at the Confederation Library!
The man who said he once lived in Raputoa!
And now he sits before you in your homeland, inside the buffer zone.
“WHAAAAT?!”
Your cry of confusion echoes across the plains.

* * *

That evening.
A thick cloud cover obscures the moon. It has not started raining yet.
Your home is situated in the middle of the great plains.
Uranos lazily drinks water in the barn, and Todd is curled up in front of the door. Next to
him is a small, rusted car.
Inside the brick house, a man in his sixties steps into the living room. Your parents
follow.
The old man is a local doctor. He is slightly plump in build, and is your family physician.
The doctor pulls off his coat, rolls it up, and places it atop his medical bag.
“How is he, doctor?” you ask, having waited in the living room brewing tea.
You pour a cup of tea for the doctor in the guest teacup. You pour some for yourself and
your parents as well. Everyone takes a seat.
The doctor takes a sip and sighs.
“He’ll live.”
That answers your most pressing question. You must have been wearing quite the worried
look on your face.
“Thank goodness,” you sigh.
“But,” the doctor emphasizes, looking around at your family. He goes on to explain the
situation.
The mystery man took a hard blow to the head, which may have fractured his skull. The
man probably personally patched up the cut on his right thigh, which should of course be redone.
The broken ankle needs to be taken care of at a large hospital. He is malnourished, feverish, and
shows signs of mild dehydration.

“I’ve given him medication. He’s asleep now. But you’ll do well to get this man moved to a larger hospital as soon as you can tomorrow. If his ankle doesn’t get fixed up, he’ll never walk properly again.”

Drops of rain begin drumming against the roof.

Soon, the drumming gives way to a hum, then a roar.

“It’s a little late, but I suppose the weather report was right after all,” the doctor says, and turns to you. “It’s a good thing you found him today. If he were lying out there now, he would have died of exhaustion or hypothermia.”

Your father speaks up then. “So...who is this man?”

It is a natural question to ask.

You have not told them the most important details.

That the man spoke to you in Bezelese today, but in Roxchean back in the Capital District. That the man claimed to have once lived in Raputoa.

After discovering the man, you rushed back home. You woke your father from his nap and explained the situation.

Your father hitched a wagon to the back of the tractor and brought back the unconscious man. Your brother is away studying at an agricultural school, so you laid the man down in his bed and called in the doctor.

You have not called the police yet, saying to your father, “I found him in the buffer zone! I’ll get in trouble if they find out I was in there! And he said there wasn’t anyone else, so we have to hurry up and call a doctor first! It’ll be really bad if we let a guest die on our watch!”

The doctor continues, “I suppose he’s most likely a pilot from cross-river. But it’s strange he doesn’t have a badge of rank or a name tag. That’s standard equipment for soldiers,” he points out. You recall that he was once a military doctor for Roxche.

“You said you didn’t call the police?” the doctor asks.

You twitch. That is the question you were hoping to avoid.

“You must have found him in the buffer zone, yes?”

Spoken like a true local. He has read you like a book.

“You realize we can’t just keep this under wraps.”

He is so correct that you cannot respond.

Your family cannot keep this stranger hidden under your roof forever.

Food is not a concern, as you are farmers. But because this man does not have national medical insurance, his medical bills will cost a fortune. Especially if he is taken to a large hospital for surgery. You cannot imagine how expensive it will be.

You cannot see this man as being a bad person.

But you do not have definite proof that he is not a bad person.

When you spoke to him briefly in the Capital District, he spoke fondly of Raputoa.

But there is no proof that he was not lying.

Perhaps he is a criminal who stole an aeroplane from Sou Be-Il and crossed the border. You have no idea what he might do once he recovers his health. Once you begin to think in that direction, the possibilities seem endless.

Though they do not say so, your parents and the doctor are likely wary of the man because he is from the West. It is like this with everyone who is old enough to remember the war.

“I suppose we’ll have to contact the police tomorrow, ask them for protection,” says your father, “We can tell them that we found him very close to the border, so close it doesn’t cause us trouble. There’s no evidence, after all. I’m sure the government will handle the rest.”

Your mother says nothing because she agrees.

You cannot agree. But you cannot argue, either.

Your father seems to understand your position. He gives you a gentle nod.

“You’ve done well today. There’s nothing as noble as saving someone from danger. And I’m so very proud of you. But there’s no sense in taking on more than you can shoulder, or worrying about things you can’t control. Some seeds just never bear fruit, remember that.”

He is right.

“He’s a very lucky man, to be rescued like that. And if not for Todd, you might have passed him by, too.”

Your father is right. You were on horseback, but without Todd, you never would have spotted the man.

“I’ll call the police tomorrow. I’ll tell them that I was the one who found him, and I’ll take the questioning. All right?”

Nodding is all you can do.

The only thing a 14-year-old secondary school student like you can do is pray that an even greater stroke of luck will come to help the man.

You are standing under the eaves. It is raining bullets.

“Thank you!” you say to the doctor as he steps into his car.

Even though it is a holiday, the doctor did not charge for the treatment. You are overwhelmed by gratitude.

You watch the taillights disappear into the distance.

Your parents turn to go back inside.

Todd is still sitting at your feet. You are about to order him to go to the doghouse when you notice something.

A headlight is bobbing towards you, coming from the direction the taillights disappeared in.

“Is that the doctor? Did he forget something?” you wonder out loud. Your father turns.

For some reason, there is only one headlight. It slowly wobbles towards the house.

“Hm. Is one of the headlights broken?” your father wonders, stopping mid-turn.

Considering the scarcity of motor vehicles in the area, the headlight most likely belongs to the doctor.

But you soon see that the headlight bobbing through the rain does not belong to a car.

The pounding rain concealed most of the noise, but you can now clearly hear the roar of a motorcycle.

The large motorcycle draws closer, growing louder and louder. It turns and reaches your property.

It is too dark to make out clearly, but the driver seems to be a man.

“Who is that?”

“I don’t know.”

Just as you and your father exchange questions, the motorcycle comes to a stop about 10 meters from the door. And it falls over.

“Huh?” “Whoa.”

It must have slipped in the mud. The rider falls with the motorcycle, unable to hold it steady. The exhaust pipe hits the mud and steam begins to rise. The engine stops. Mud smears the right side of the man’s coat.

The man rises, leaving the motorcycle in the dirt. “Hello there!” he calls in Roxchean as you and your father watch in shock.

The man walks closer, and soon the light under the eaves illuminates his face.

The man’s muddied coat is black and slick, likely waterproof and made of rubber.

On his head was a bowl-shaped helmet. With a gloved hand, he pulls down the goggles from his eyes.

The man has a sturdy, athletic figure.

His face is neither too clean nor rugged, giving him a nondescript look. His messy beard made it difficult to tell his age. He could pass for a man in his forties or thirties.

The man stops. He has no intention of getting too close for comfort.

Todd begins growling quietly at your feet. You tug gently on his collar. Now he will do nothing unless you give him a command.

With rain pouring on his helmet and dripping down his face, the man speaks.

“Scuse me! I’m a traveler!”

You become aware of the large backpack strapped to the back of the fallen motorcycle.

“Sorry for barging in like this, but could you let me stay the night? Storehouse, barn, I’m not picky. I just don’t have a sleeping bag with me.”

You understand what he is trying to say. The downpour has put this man in a bind.

The area is considered safe, mostly because it is so sparsely populated. And locals are generally kind to those in need. In the winter, it is not uncommon to allow people whose cars have broken down outside to stay over.

But this self-proclaimed traveler is a complete enigma, and your family is currently looking after another person. Your father responds.

“I’m afraid we can’t let you in the house, but would you be okay with the shed over there? You can bring in your motorcycle, too. It’s got running water, and you can do your business outside somewhere in the area.”

He must have thought things through before giving this reply.

“That’s more than good enough for me, sir! Gods bless Raputoa!” the man cries, and pulls his motorcycle upright. He must be used to this, as he hefts it with ease.

“I owe you! Lemme thank you properly tomorrow morning!” says the man, pushing his motorcycle in the pouring rain.

Your father gently pushes you back into the house. When he tells you to bring Todd as well, you pull him in by the collar. Todd looks happy, as he usually spends even midwinter outside.

Your mother is waiting with a curious look. When your father explains the situation, she tells him to check all the locks again, just in case.

“We’re getting so many guests at once,” she mumbles.

Chapter 14: A Nostalgic Face - Continued

The next day. The 1st day of the fifth month. Early morning.

You open your eyes at the same time as usual.

The previous night, you went back to your room after greeting the traveler.

Your parents took turns looking after the injured man, leaving you with nothing to do. You lay in your bed, upset at your powerlessness, but soon closed your eyes and fell asleep.

You open the curtains. It is morning, but the sun has not yet risen.

The pounding rain has stopped, leaving a layer of morning mist behind. The familiar horizon has been replaced by a world of white.

You change into warm clothes and go out into the living room.

Morning routines start early on the farm. Your mother is preparing breakfast. You greet her and have a glass of water, and then ask how the injured man is doing.

Your mother replies that the man is still asleep, but seems to look more comfortable than before.

Then you ask where your father is. Your mother tells you that he is speaking with the traveler outside. You step out the door.

When you go to the shed, Todd notices you and gallops to your side. His tail is beating the air.

“Sleep well, Todd? Look at you, always full of energy!” You ruffle his fur.

Your father is talking to the traveler outside the shed. Conversation is important, especially when you want to figure someone out. It is a motto your father abides by.

You approach them with a greeting. Your father greets you back. So does the traveler.

“Hey there! Thanks for everything,” he says, a grin rising to his bearded face.

You could not see in the dark last night, but the traveler has dark brown hair slicked back haphazardly. As befitting a motorcyclist, he is wearing black leather pants and a navy sweater.

Todd is not wary in the least; the man must have tamed him completely in the morning. You shake your head.

The man’s motorcycle is parked outside the shed. He must have left it out in the rain on purpose, as the mud has been washed off.

You are no expert on motorcycles, but this one is large with a big engine, and clearly looks expensive. You wonder if the man is actually very rich.

“My name’s, er... My name’s Silas. It’s my real name, I promise. I travel around a lot, but I was born and raised right here in Raputoa. It’s been a while, but there really is no place like home,” says the man. You reason from his words that he must have used pseudonyms in the past.

What kind of man his age would travel the world without a full-time job? Your curiosity is aroused. In fact, you are getting suspicious. You have never met someone so questionable.

But because your father seems to have warmed up to him, you decide to say nothing for the time being.

Your father asks Silas to join the family for breakfast.

“Wow! You’re a lifesaver, sir. I haven’t had anything since lunchtime yesterday!” he cries with a childlike smile. “But I gotta earn my food!” he adds, and offers to help out with odd jobs.

So he ends up helping your father with his morning routine, inspecting the fields and maintaining farm machinery.

You head to the barn for your own routine—cleaning and taking care of Uranos. You clear out the muck, brush Uranos, and give him food and water.

The fog finally clears and the sun begins to light the sky when breakfast begins.

The menu is mashed potatoes with diced carrots, onions, and other vegetables, and crispy-hot bacon.

It is a simple and common meal ideal for consuming carbohydrates, fat, protein, and sodium at once. But Silas's response is comically dramatic.

“Now this is what I'm talking about! An honest-to-goodness Raputoan breakfast! Complete with a mother's touch!”

He wolfs down his food, almost tearing up.

Other than the bacon, everything was raised on your farm—which means it is obviously good food. But you wonder if it really is good enough to merit such a reaction.

Your mother is all smiles. She gives Silas another heaping helping of mashed potatoes.

After breakfast, you all have tea with generous spoonfuls of honey.

Your mother returns to the living room. “He's still asleep,” she says.

“Do you have a patient here?” Silas asks your father, lowering his voice.

He is much sharper than you initially gave him credit for.

On a farm, the only people who are still asleep at this hour are the sick. Anyone in good health is practically beaten awake if necessary.

“Well, yes. Not family, though,” your father replies. Silas stares curiously.

“Then the car I saw coming from the farm yesterday must have been the doctor,” he muses. He is correct once again.

“He's not someone we know, actually,” your father says, “We happened to find this mystery man injured nearby and ended up taking him in for the night—”

You know what your father is going to say next.

“But we have no idea who he is. We'll call the police after breakfast and ask them to take him into their protection.”

You were expecting that much. You kept telling yourself last night that this was inevitable.

But you put down your teacup in agitation.

You are too busy looking at the ripples in your tea to notice Silas's gaze on you.

“Looks like you're in a bit of a tight spot here. You can't not report this man, but you probably don't want the police to question you about all the little details.”

Your father agrees. You can feel your stomach growing heavy, even though you have not eaten enough to feel bloated. That is when Silas makes an unexpected suggestion.

“Then what do you say to claiming that I'm the one who found him?”

“What?” “What?” “What?”

Three sets of eyes turn to dinner plates.

Silas continues without hesitation.

“Think of it as a show of gratitude for letting me stay the night and even feeding me today. My motto of the month is ‘Show kindness to others!’”

You wonder what this man is going on about. Does he mean he has a different motto every month? You become visibly confused.

Silas continues theatrically.

“I found the man nearby yesterday. I even gave him first aid. I was gonna camp out and call the police after the rain let up, but then I spotted this farm and borrowed the telephone to contact the cops! Problem solved. Let the doc know what I’m doing here so we don’t get our wires crossed.”

You stare at Silas’s nonchalance.

“Whaddaya say?”

After a great deal of thought, your father comes to a conclusion.

“Frankly, we welcome your proposal.”

You cannot argue Silas’s logic.

Now your father will not be questioned by the police. He will not be forced to go against his honest nature and lie about where he found the man.

“Then we’ll go with that!”

Silas is so nonchalant that you almost wonder if this is some sort of trap. Perhaps he is some sort of assassin targeting the mystery man.

But if that is the case, Silas should have been keeping an eye on the man since yesterday. But he even took the time to get to know your father. It is too much effort to go through if he simply intends to kill the man.

You go through the possibilities in your head before concluding that the possibility of an assassination is improbably low.

After tea, your family takes Silas upstairs to the man.

You follow your mother and look at the man lying in the bed.

He is still asleep.

The man is in your father’s pajamas. The doctor has attached a splint to his leg. A blanket has been spread over him and a towel is on his legs to keep them warm.

He looks much better than yesterday. He was a ghoul when you found him, but now he is more human.

“So let’s have a look at this mystery man,” Silas says, coming up behind your father.

He looks at the sleeping man.

And freezes.

It almost seems as though time has stopped around Silas. Your father and mother probably think the same.

Silas is a statue as he looks down upon the mystery man.

Twenty seconds pass.

Forty seconds.

A minute.

“Er...” your father begins cautiously.

“Might I ask who it was that found this man?” Silas asks, his gaze still fixed on the man. He suddenly sounds like a completely different person—almost like an aristocrat.

“Me,” you confess. Claiming that your father found the man is a lie for the police; that you are the discoverer is not something you need to hide from Silas.

Silas has always made full eye contact in conversations so far, but this time he speaks with his eyes still locked on the man.

“Is he by any chance from Sou Be-Il? Did he not speak in Bezelese when you discovered him?”

“How did you know?!” you exclaim, forgetting for a moment that you might disturb the patient.

How does Silas know? The injured man has not said a word; he is not in his flight suit; and it is impossible to tell apart a Westerner from an Easterner from appearance. Your suspicions about Silas surge again. But—

“I knew it! Lemme borrow your telephone again!” he says, beaming, returning to his usual self.

Silas turns on his heels and returns to the living room.

You quickly follow after him. Your father tells your mother to remain with the patient and follows after you.

Silas is holding the receiver in the living room.

It cost your family a fortune to finally purchase a telephone last year. But because calling is so expensive, you almost never use it. When you do pick up the receiver, it is usually to deliver the briefest of messages before hanging up as quickly as possible. Your family is almost like the military in that regard.

So how is Silas planning to cover the telephone bill?

Even as the mysteries behind the injured man and Silas himself mystify you, your chief concern right now is the cost of the call.

“Make it a collect call. Tell her it’s Silas. I want to contact—”

At least now you don’t have to worry about the telephone bill.

The number Silas recites is not the police.

Though the number is unfamiliar, you can tell that the recipient is in Raputoa. If she is somewhere else, Silas would have to ask for the member state specifically by name.

Thirty seconds later.

“Hey there! How’s it going?” Silas says into the speaker, with the casual attitude of an old friend. They seem to be so close that he does not even need to introduce himself. But you have no idea who he is speaking with.

“Aw, don’t be like that! Anyway, I need you to listen carefully and do exactly what I tell you to do, all right? I need you to take all this down!”

Neither you nor your father can hear what the woman on the line is saying. All you can do is infer from Silas’s orders.

“I’m in this village called Stern in Reed County. 25 Eighth Street, Stern East. I’m borrowing their telephone right now.”

That is your address. Silas must have heard it from your father, or he might have seen the address on your mailbox outside.

“Yeah, right here. Come as quickly as you can with something that can comfortably carry a patient. We’re going to Raputoa General, so make sure to book a VIP ward too. Huh? You wanna know why? I’ll explain later. And if you don’t like my explanation, I swear to the gods you can kill me then. Got all that?”

For some reason, Silas has just put his life on the line.

“All right! I’m counting on you!”

In any case, the mystery man can now go to the hospital—and not just any hospital, but the best one in the country. You breathe a sigh of relief.

As Silas continues, you find yourself feeling even more at ease.

“Don’t let the hospital contact the police under any circumstances. Make it worth their while, you know.”

You look at your father, standing next to you.

You do not know how much joy is written on your face. But your father glances down at you and smiles.

Silas’s call continues.

“How long’ll it take you? Four, five hours at top speed?”

Stern is far from Raputoa City. When you went to the city by the Ministry of Education’s car last year, it took you eight hours including breaks.

But that car was not in anything resembling good condition. From the contents of Silas’s conversation, however, you infer that he is a very rich man. He could send for a faster car.

The woman on the line responds.

“Aha! Brilliant! I’m counting on you, then!” Silas replies with a bark of laughter. You smile.

Even taking preparation time into account, a car will be here for the injured man within the next six hours.

Two and a half hours later.

You realize that you were too naïve.

You have underestimated Silas.

* * *

Two and a half hours after the telephone call.

You stand outside the door looking up at a wondrous sight.

It is 13 meters long and 2 meters wide, with a height of 4 meters.

Shining a metallic silver, it is adorned with two thin red strips.

Written in large font along the lines are the words ‘Air Raputoa’. The country’s only carrier.

You and your mother and father gaze up, transfixed.

It roars across the sky with the large propellers on the top spinning like a disc.

The gust from the propellers sweeps across the ground and your hair, and sends the windows rattling in their frames.

“What do you think? This is a helicopter! Ever seen one fly in person?” Silas asks, shouting loudly enough to rival the noise.

“Of course not!” you shout back.

The monster machine with the propellers atop its back passes your house once before slowly circling back in a descent.

You have heard of this vehicle before. A new type of aeroplane that can take off and land vertically. A machine called a ‘helicopter’.

It takes off into the air by using the wind generated by the propellers or something, from what you remember.

But this is the first time you or your parents have seen one flying in person.

And of all places, it is headed for your home. Your family can do little but gape at the front door.

The helicopter almost clips your roof and scares the wits out of Uranos and Todd before landing on its four tires in the empty field.

You are finally capable of thinking properly again.

The nose of the helicopter is short and rounded. Thin wisps of smoke rise from the sides—perhaps because the engine is inside.

Through the windshield in the front, you can see two people sitting side-by-side. That must be the cockpit.

Atop the fuselage are the propellers, which were moving too fast to see before but are now slowing down. They are longer than the fuselage, sticking out in front of and behind the rest of the craft.

The front of the fuselage is round, but it tapers off towards the back, which gives it a fishlike shape. Though it is not the right color, it almost looks like a monster catfish.

The engine stops and silence once again returns to the world.

The large door on the side slides open.

Two men emerge with stretchers in hand. They run across the field and draw near.

The men, both in olive green coveralls, go to Silas.

“Sir, we’re here on the president’s orders,” says one of the men.

“That was quick! Good work, guys,” Silas replies with a nod.

You and your parents have no idea who this ‘president’ is.

While you were waiting for the helicopter, Silas explained nothing.

“Don’t worry about it. Just leave it all to me and I’ll tell you everything when the time comes!” he said, lounging around in the living room, playing with Todd (who rolled over everywhere, clearly having fun with him), and even helping your father with the day’s farm work.

“All right! Let’s get him up there while he’s still asleep!”

Silas is having a blast. Your father, eyes still wide, takes him and the men in coveralls inside.

You wait with Todd, who sits blankly at your feet.

The stretcher soon comes out the door, naturally with the mystery man on it. He is still asleep.

There is a blanket over him. Your father brings the man's flight suit over in a laundry bag—you cannot leave it at home, since it is evidence.

“Thank goodness,” you sigh, looking at the man's sleeping face.

The men in coveralls carefully climb into the helicopter with the stretcher. The moment the mystery man leaves your sight, you give a slight wave.

Silas comes out of the shed with his backpack, jacket, coat, and the rest of his things. He approaches you, brimming with enthusiasm.

“I promise I'll come back to explain once it's all over! Thanks so much, I mean it!”

The helicopter roars back to life.

“No problem! Please, take good care of him! I'm the one who should be thanking you!” you reply as loudly as you can. Silas grins and puts a hand on your head.

“Sir, please hold on to my motorcycle!” he says to your father. “If I'm not back in a year, it's yours to keep!”

“We'll be keeping it in the shed!” your father replies, “But please do come back! I wouldn't know what to do with a big thing like that!”

“Ha ha! Then I'll make sure to do that! So long!”

Silas takes his things and runs to the helicopter.

All you can do now is wait.

Silas loads his things on the helicopter first before climbing aboard.

The door slides shut.

The gasoline-powered engine begins to rumble. The propellers spin even faster, fading into the shape of a disc.

And at that moment, it takes to the skies.

The helicopter rises about three meters into the air, glides slightly back, and slowly pushes forward. It flies from the left side of your vision to the right, ascending and causing a furious gale all around.

With your excellent eyesight, you make out Silas waving at you through the window.

You wave back as hard as you can.

The monster catfish grows small in the distance.

And it turns into a dot.

You keep waving and waving.

The dot disappears.

When will you see Silas again and get the answers to your many questions?

You do not know, but you resolve to have faith and wait.

When you peer into the shed, you spot a large motorcycle. So long as it remains there, you will know that the commotion over the past two days was not a dream.

Your parents head in, leaving you outside with Todd.

Todd barks briefly. You look down at him.
“Good boy! I’m so proud of you, Todd!”
And you give him all the belly rubs he could ever want.

The next day is the first day back after the long weekend.
“Guess what? I saw a helicopter the other day! It was flying really low, and the guy inside waved at me! I bet he didn’t do that for anyone else at this school! I think it was headed sort of towards your house. Did you see it?”

You have a hard time responding to your friend. You are forced to go against your nature and lie.

“Er...no, I didn’t.”

* * *

Raputoa City. The capital of the Republic of Raputoa.

A construction boom was sweeping through the city. And chief among the towering new buildings standing in its streets was Raputoa General Hospital.

The cubical 10-story building had been built three years ago. Floors 1 through 3 were dedicated to operating rooms and offices, with everything above being inpatient wards.

The top floor of the building was a VIP ward.

As the name suggested, only VIPs and authorized personnel could set foot on the floor. The floor had fewer beds than the rest and even had extra rooms for security detail and sitting rooms for conferences.

The floor had thus far been used by the president of Raputoa, the presidents and chairmen of large companies, and movie stars, to name a few.

The hospital naturally guaranteed confidentiality for the patients on that floor. No one would ever leak information from the VIP ward to the public.

The first thing Major Travas saw when he opened his eyes was the ceiling of his room.

The last thing he remembered was crawling east across the dirt.

He remembered the taste of the raw larvae he had eaten. They were bitter but soft as cream, and were practically a feast for him in his starved state.

He desperately tried to remember what happened afterwards.

“What happened?”

But for all he knew, he had been teleported to another time and place.

He felt as though he had fallen asleep in the dirt and woken up a few minutes later. But now he was lying on a bed, wrapped up in clean sheets and a warm blanket.

It happened to be around noon when he opened his eyes. Major Travas slowly sat up.

And he scanned the deserted room.

The spring sunlight filtered in through the thin lace curtains. The window was too far from the bed to see anything but the sky outside. So Major Travas had no way of knowing where he was.

He saw white walls, an imposing table, a vase of flowers, and his lower body in a luxurious bed.

Something was being fed into his body through an intravenous drip. With his free right hand, Major Travas slowly peeled back the unbelievably soft blanket from his lap.

His right leg was outstretched.

And so was his left leg. It was fixed with a cast and elevated slightly.

In other words, he had been treated to perfection.

Major Travas pulled off the blanket completely to check his appearance.

His hospital pajamas were a perfect fit, and comfortable at that. He felt bandages wrapped around his right thigh.

He looked around.

Something lay on the shelf by the bed.

Major Travas reached over and took it in his hand.

A memento.

A memento of Second Lieutenant Klee. A pilot's wristwatch.

Someone must have wound it, as the second hand was ticking.

The number '2' was displayed on the face, indicating that it was the 2nd day of the fifth month. If the watch was correct, it had been five days since the crash.

In other words, Major Travas was missing two days' worth of memories.

He wrapped the watch tightly around his wrist.

Then he looked around at the things within his reach. Were there crutches around, or anything that could be used as crutches?

Noting that there was nothing he could use, Major Travas grabbed the string hanging from the wall.

He pulled.

Only 10 seconds later, the door by the bed opened and a nurse entered.

That proved that she had been on standby somewhere close, or perhaps even in the next room. He would not have gotten far in an escape attempt.

The nurse was young and had the looks of a model. She gave him a practiced, refreshing smile.

"Thank goodness you're awake. Is everything all right? I'll bring the doctor shortly, so please hold this under your left arm for now," she said in Roxchean, holding out a thermometer. Major Travas took it.

"What happened?" he muttered.

"I'm afraid I have no idea," the nurse replied.

Major Travas did as he was told and put the thermometer under his left armpit.

In less than a minute, a man in his fifties wearing a white coat—clearly a doctor—arrived with three nurses in tow.

The doctor was short, bald, and rotund.

The ID card on his coat identified him as 'Marx' and the location as Raputoa General Hospital. All in Roxchean.

Major Travas finally knew where he was.

“Good afternoon. How are you feeling today? Any nausea or dizziness?” Doctor Marx asked, taking a seat next to the bed. Major Travas replied that he was all right.

Marx gave him a check-up, checking his heartbeat and his wounds. Major Travas said nothing unless he was specifically asked.

“You seem to be doing all right.”

After finally checking Major Travas’s temperature, Doctor Marx turned to the nurse—who was recording the results of the check-up—and gave her instructions. Then he looked back.

“Well, I’m sure you have a lot of questions. Where should I begin?” he said with a shrug.

“I’m feeling thirsty. May I have some water?” Major Travas asked.

“Of course. Your digestive system is doing just fine.”

The nurse brought in water; Major Travas slowly gulped it down. Then he spoke.

“What in the world happened?”

“I’m not completely certain, myself,” Marx replied, “But I will try to answer your questions to the best of my ability. But before that,” he paused with another shrug. “I have strict orders to refrain from asking you questions you do not wish to answer.”

“From whom?”

“I’m not sure. I hope you don’t expect me to give you answers I don’t have. If I had to say, I suppose the orders come from the person who brought you here.”

“Then please tell me the circumstances behind my arrival. In as much detail as you can.”

“This is unusual. I was sure you’d ask me about your injuries first. In any case, you were brought in here yesterday afternoon.”

“By whom?”

“I’m not sure. You were brought in on an ambulance, but the paramedics tell me they had been called to a village, where you were entrusted to them by a strange man. We were ordered to hospitalize and treat you earlier—that morning, I believe. This sponsor of yours is covering all the costs you incur—and forgive me for saying this, but these costs will not be cheap, considering that you do not have insurance.”

“Tell me what you know about my sponsor.”

“Almost nothing, but according to the person who took the call, he was a man with an energetic voice.”

Major Travas was silent.

“I also have a message for you from your sponsor. Shall I convey it to you?”

“Please.”

Doctor Marx pulled a scrap of paper from his breast pocket.

“He says, ‘Don’t worry, no one knows that you’re here. I’ll come see you soon. For now, focus on recovering and getting back on your feet. We’ll talk more later!’”

Major Travas said nothing.

“It does seem a little suspicious, but the hospital couldn’t very well abandon a patient, and we have been paid,” Marx confessed.

“Then I will be in your care for the time being, Doctor,” Major Travas said with a nod of the head.

Only then did Marx get to explain the wounds he sustained.

The most serious injury was to his left ankle, which had been fully broken. It would take three months to heal. The operation was a success, but Major Travas would need to undergo rehabilitation therapy.

The cut on his right thigh was not serious. It had been re-sutured, but he would be wise not to walk for some time—he would have to use a wheelchair when going to the bathroom.

The X-rays showed a small fracture to his skull, but it would likely heal on its own. But Major Travas would have to make sure he did not hit his head again.

His body was exhausted from the extreme malnutrition, but it was beginning to recover. His diet would be unrestricted starting the next day.

“That is all. Do you have any questions?”

Major Travas shook his head.

“Then it’s my turn to ask: what shall we call you? Our charts simply have you as ‘John Doe’ for the moment.”

Chapter 15: Silas

The 6th day of the fifth month.

It had been five days since Major Travas was hospitalized.

The hospital—and his medical charts—knew him as Charlie Nyman, a pseudonym he invented on the spot. It was a common name indeed in the Republic of Raputoa.

Neither the doctors nor nurses nor the other staff asked him anything unless it had to do with his treatment, or unless he spoke to them first. The VIP ward seemed to guarantee absolute confidentiality for all its patients.

Still, Major Travas remained wary of showing his face to the other patients in the ward. He almost never left his room unless it was absolutely necessary for his treatment.

A TV and a radio were brought into his room at his request. The staff also brought him the paper every day.

Major Travas even took pains to discreetly listen to Western broadcasts and scour old newspapers, but there was no word about an aeroplane crash in the Lutoni area.

His meals and snacks were unbelievably luxurious, and of course, delicious. Major Travas ate diligently so his injuries would heal and his body would recover.

He moved around as much as he was able. When he asked a nurse for bicycle tubes, she brought them to him with a curious look.

Major Travas fixed the tubes to the sides of his bed and did training exercises to build back his arm muscles.

Once his right thigh had healed, he even practiced walking on crutches. When the nurse was away, he also practiced rifle and handgun marksmanship postures on his crutches or on one leg.

Naturally, he contacted no one during that time.

He was being targeted for assassination. He could not let anyone know he was alive, lest he let harm come to the hospital and its staff and patients.

At the same time, Major Travas pondered the identity of his sponsor. But he would have no way of discerning who he was until they met in person.

“Who could it be?”

In the end, knowing the identity of neither his attempted killer nor his rescuer, he simply spent his days focusing on recovery.

* * *

The same day.

Search efforts were drawing to a close in Sou Be-II's Iltoa Mountain Range.

Several surveillance crafts had been deployed in the jagged landscape in search of the twin-engine craft whose communications had been cut off while transporting an officer.

The soldiers sent to the scene were eager to find their missing comrades at first, but nine days since the craft had gone missing—with the crew’s chances of survival growing slimmer by the second—they were simply becoming fatigued.

One of the surveillance crafts had even been forced into an emergency landing while flying low in the dangerous mountainscape, injuring two crew members. If not for the regulation that mandated surveillance crafts to fly in pairs, the search party might have had to deal with another lost aeroplane.

And on the ninth day, they received new information.

‘It has been deemed likely that the missing aircraft never made it to the Iltoa Mountain Range.’

“Dammit! Figure that stuff out *before* we waste nine days on a wild goose chase!”

With the search in the mountains ended, more than a few soldiers threw their hats to the ground in frustration.

* * *

Three days later. The 9th day of the fifth month.

The discovery of a corpse was reported to the Raputoan police.

Raputoan fishermen who had been working on the Lutoni with official permits had pulled it from the riverbank.

Scavenging animals had already gotten to the body, leaving only parts remaining intact.

The fishermen stopped their work to contact the police, and the police soon retrieved the unidentified corpse.

They performed an autopsy.

The corpse was in a terrible state. Its face was crushed, and the body was decayed and partially eaten.

But the police managed to figure out that it was wearing a custom suit from the Capital District. They tracked down the owner of the suit by the size and material of the suit, and compared him to their list of persons reported missing.

The police had received a detailed report about the missing Sou Be-II military aircraft two days earlier.

The body was identified as one of its passengers.

* * *

The 17th of the fifth month.

It had been 16 days since Major Travas was hospitalized under the name of Charlie Nyman.

“Impressive, Mr. Nyman! Most patients lose their appetites during recovery and grow weaker.”

Indeed, Major Travas was almost back in top form.

His right thigh had healed to the point that the stitches had been taken out.

His left ankle was still in a cast, but he could now travel long distances—albeit slowly—on crutches. Major Travas was focusing hard on his rehabilitation, practicing to walk again.

“But that doesn’t give you a license to run off on us. We’ll get in trouble with your sponsor,” Marx advised.

Major Travas did as he was asked. Even if he were to run off, he had no clothes or money to sustain him. He had nowhere to go.

He could not contact the Sou Be-II military or the embassy, either, as he had no idea who his enemies were.

There was one country, however, that could assist him.

And he wanted to avoid taking risks until he could contact the country and they sent for him.

“We are giving regular reports on your recovery to your sponsor. We still have no idea who he is, but he sent you a message: ‘I’ll come get you once you’re ready to be discharged’.”

Once Doctor Marx was gone, Major Travas looked out the window.

The morning sun shone brightly over the concrete jungle of Raputoa City. Beyond was the verdant green horizon he had known for years as a young man.

He looked down. The streets had become more packed than a decade ago. Cars were lined bumper-to-bumper in the busy morning traffic.

“Hm?”

Suddenly, he spotted a police car zoom in between the gridlock. A siren began to wail.

The car was clearly headed for the hospital. It forcibly cut off traffic and pulled into the roundabout at the hospital entrance.

Major Travas’s expression darkened.

His worries were proven correct when, several minutes later, Doctor Marx rushed into the room with several nurses.

“Back in bed, Mr. Nyman! We’re giving you an intravenous drip.”

One of the nurses prepared the drip, which was no longer necessary for his recovery. Another nurse began wrapping his head with unnecessary gauze and bandages.

“The police?” Major Travas asked.

“Sharp, Mr. Nyman. A pair of police detectives from the Raputoa Police Force are downstairs. They’re going to be here any minute,” Marx replied, administering the needle into Major Travas’s left arm. “This is a simple nutritional supplement. It won’t put you to sleep, but I hope it does.”

Major Travas understood the implication of Marx’s remark as he got into bed. “I suppose I’ll be too heavily injured to even speak.”

“Indeed. We take confidentiality very seriously, Mr. Nyman. But we can’t refuse the police entry if they have a search warrant. It looks like we had a leak on the paramedics’ side. No sense of professionalism, those people.”

“I see,” Major Travas muttered. Doctor Marx grinned obliviously.

“It’s absolutely ridiculous what these detectives are claiming. Your Roxchean is perfect—you even know Raputoan slang, which obviously means you’re *not* the Westerner they’re looking for.”

“Misunderstandings can be terrifying sometimes,” Major Travas replied without missing a beat. “Then I suppose I’ll take a quick nap.”

Soon, Nyman—Major Travas—was transformed into a patient in critical condition, his head and face wrapped up in bandages and an intravenous drip feeding into his arm.

“Don’t say a word, Mr. Nyman. Leave everything to us.”

Doctor Marx left the room, leaving only one nurse behind.

Major Travas could not see the detectives, as he was pretending to be asleep. But he could tell from the footsteps that there were two of them following the familiar gait of Doctor Marx.

“Please do try to keep your voices down. This is the man—is he the one you’re looking for?” Marx asked quietly. The detectives stopped next to the bed and said nothing for a time. They could not simply declare if Major Travas was the man they were after.

Finally, one of the detectives—a veteran, from the sound of his voice—spoke.

“We can’t get a look at his face like this. Can you unwrap the bandages?”

“I’m afraid not, Detective. This patient has recently had a skin graft.”

“Do you have a photo of him from before the operation?”

“Of course. Here you are.”

Major Travas could hear Marx pull out a photograph from the file.

“Ugh,” the second—likely younger—detective groaned in disgust.

“How unfortunate. Will he ever have his face back?”

“He’ll have to live with the scars for some time, but our doctors are skilled. Eventually he’ll be able to go out in public without drawing attention. Of course, he’ll need three more skin grafts before that,” Marx explained, almost as if he had treated such a patient in the past.

“How did he sustain these injuries?”

“I’m sure you know already, Detective, but—”

“This information will remain confidential, doctor.”

“Thank you. It was an industrial accident. This patient was injured at work. But the company cares so much about appearances that they sent him here, asking for full confidentiality. Which is why the insurance company isn’t covering his treatment and stay.”

“Then ‘Charlie Nyman’ is a pseudonym?”

“We’re not sure, but perhaps. I suppose it must be, from the way the company officials were acting.”

“Does this man, by any chance, speak in Bezelese?”

“Pardon me?”

“Bezelese. The language they use cross-river.”

“No, sir. He speaks perfect Roxchean, naturally,” Marx replied, confused.

“...I trust you don’t need any lessons on confidentiality from me,” the detective threatened.

“N-no, sir,” Marx replied, a little cowed.

“We have been ordered to track down a Westerner. An atrocious criminal with multiple counts of murder on his record. We’ve been informed by the Sou Be-II embassy that the man stole an aeroplane from cross-river to escape, and crashed into the buffer zone. He is likely heavily injured.”

“...And?”

“There’s no guarantee that a savage criminal like him wouldn’t kill if he’s cornered. He may very well murder anyone who stands in his way out of the hospital.”

Major Travas could practically feel Marx’s trepidation.

The information was clearly fake, but it would make it difficult for the hospital to continue treating Major Travas in secret.

“The Raputoa Police Force is on the case for the time being, but the Confederation Police may soon take over. And you don’t want to cross them. In any case, I applaud the hospital for its dedication to confidentiality. I’d like to stay here myself if I were ever injured.”

“And you are very welcome here, Detective, so long as you can afford it.”

“Not on the people’s tax money, I suppose. Excuse me. I should get going now.”

Major Travas could hear the detective turn. But the sound suddenly stopped.

“Doctor.”

“Yes, Detective?”

“That wristwatch on the shelf. Does it belong to the patient?”

Internally, Major Travas kicked himself.

He had been holding on to Second Lieutenant Klee’s watch to give his family. But it was lying on the shelf by the bed, just as the detective remarked.

Doctor Marx said nothing.

“I suppose it must be. Who else could it belong to? Nurse, please bring me the watch. I’d like to have a close look at it.”

Major Travas could feel the nurse hesitate, but she could not refuse. She picked it up and went around the bed.

“Here you are,” she said feebly, handing over the watch.

Could he take down two men, Major Travas wondered. And he quickly concluded that he could not. He could possibly take the nearest detective by surprise and knock him out. But he could not subdue the other, when he could barely even walk properly. And once he took such a drastic course of action, he would be arrested regardless of his identity.

Nothing on Klee’s watch suggested that it was from Sou Be-II. There was no manufacturer listed on the face or the back.

All Major Travas could do was pretend to be asleep and pray that the detective did not know much about watches.

“Nice watch. Look at this intricate work on the face. I could never afford one of these on my lousy paycheck,” the detective mused. “I don’t see a manufacturer listed here. So it’s a cheap, no-name brand? But it’s a little too well-made. Although I suppose I don’t know enough about watches to say for sure.”

It was clear from his voice that the detective was carefully examining the watch.

“Do you know which company made this model?” the detective asked his younger partner.

The younger detective scrutinized the watch and replied, "I'm not sure, sir. Maybe we can have it checked out back at the station."

"Excellent idea. Would you mind, doctor?"

"I certainly would, detective!"

"I don't see why you're making such a fuss. It's only a wristwatch."

"Detective, I will not stand for—"

"Then I suppose I'll leave the watch. But let us wait downstairs and call in someone from forensics who knows about these things. How's that for a compromise?"

"I-I suppose," Marx replied, defeated. Major Travas listened carefully and planned out an escape route.

The police probably had men stationed at every door into and out of the hospital. But if he fled through the balcony this early in the morning, he would be spotted for certain. Even if he stole a doctor's coat to disguise himself, his injury would give him away.

And as if having read his mind—

"Enough of this farce, Mr. Nyman. It's time to wake up," said the wizened veteran detective. "Do you really want to get more innocents involved? The police are not villains, you know," he said, drawing closer to the bed.

Major Travas could almost feel the detective lean in towards his face.

"Well?"

The hospital room had all the cheer of a sinking ship when the door slammed open.

"Hey there, folks! I'm here!"

An energetic voice trumpeted throughout the room.

Major Travas could hear the detective turn back in surprise, the nurses screaming, and Doctor Marx flinch.

"Wh-who are you?!" the younger detective demanded.

"Who do you think? I'm a friend of the patient! Who are *you* supposed to be? Who gave you permission to be in here?"

"We're from the Raputoa Police Force!"

"Cops, eh? Well, good day to you. You here for me? I don't remember any recent parking violations. I don't even have a car! And you can't honestly apply parking laws for cars to motorcycles, right?"

The voice sounded familiar, yet not.

Major Travas was lost.

The laid-back voice seemed to have no care for the detective, who was probably glaring at Major Travas.

"Now," said the mystery man, "where can I find Doctor John Marx? Is that you, in the white coat? Or the old guy in the tacky suit?"

The nurses burst into laughter.

"I am Marx. And may I ask who you are? Unauthorized persons are strictly forbidden from entry."

"Oh, like our two cops here?"

The nurses burst into laughter again.

Major Travas continued to pretend to sleep as he prayed that the mystery man was an ally.

“We are in the middle of an investigation,” said the older detective. “Who are you?”

“Like I said, I’m the patient’s friend. So an *authorized* person, if you will. I came to see how my buddy was healing up, and imagine my surprise when I see him here, surrounded by cops! Has this man done anything wrong? Other than maybe a minor parking violation?”

“We have our reasons. The police are bound to pursue people hospitalized under aliases.”

“Well, by the gods! So pseudonyms are no good, eh? I should have figured...”

“...If you really are a friend of this patient, do let us in on the details. Tell us who he is and where he is from. Then we’ll finally be able to clear him of suspicion and get to work on addressing your parking violations.”

“Sure, but before that,” the man said, pausing dramatically. “...I trust you don’t need any lessons on confidentiality from me.”

The nurses burst out laughing again.

“Damn you!”

The younger detective was almost ready to lash out.

“Of course. Now tell us who this ‘Charlie Nyman’ really is,” the older detective replied.

“All right,” said the mystery man.

Major Travas had no idea what to expect. Helpless, he simply lay in bed and waited for the man to speak.

A moment later, he was hit by the second biggest shock of his life.

“This guy’s name is Wil. Wilhelm Schultz.”

The bombshell knocked the wind out of him.

“Koff!”

He began coughing, loudly.

“Gah! Koff! Koff!”

It was not an act; he almost began to choke.

“Are you all right?!”

The nurses rushed to his side, also not putting on an act.

“Water!”

“Right!”

They put a glass bottle to Major Travas’s lips.

Major Travas calmed himself down and opened his eyes.

Between the bandages, he could see the beautiful nurses.

Then the ceiling.

Then, he looked to his left.

A middle-aged detective, the very picture of hardened experience.

And a bearded man wearing a sweater.

A man around his own age—in fact, the very same age as him.

A man with a smile on his face.

A familiar face.

A former classmate.

A boy who traveled with him to Ikstova.
A friend of many years.
The image became blurry in his vision.
The bearded man spoke.
“Finally awake, eh Wil? I was worried sick! How are you?”

Tears streaming down his bandaged face, Wil managed to reply,
“Couldn’t be better! Matthew Silas Epstein, you really pulled through for me here!”
Silas grinned. “I knew you’d say that.”



Chapter 16: To Ikstova

A large vehicle was crossing the plains of Raputoa.

It drove down the autobahn that connected Raputoa City to Elitèsa, a 4-lane highway that ran parallel to the East-West border like a runway.

The vehicle was heading south on that warm spring day.

At the wheel was a man in a black suit. Next to him was another man. Both were stern, with sunglasses on their faces. A shotgun lay next to the man in the passenger seat.

The vehicle was an RV, with everything behind the driver's seat a furnished room.

Sofas were placed on either side of the room to form a small living space. The sofas could be unfolded into beds.

The RV was also equipped with a kerosene stove that delivered hot air into the room and exhaust out of the vehicle.

At the back of the RV was a small bathroom and shower. It was even equipped with a water tank for hot showers. A sturdy rack was fixed to the roof.

All the windows were shutter-operated from the inside to prevent entry and keep the cold out. Not even light leaked out the glass panes.

The luxury RV was even capable of crossing all of Roxche. It was, incidentally, a Jones Motors product.

And inside sat—

“You saved my life, Silas!”

Wil, still in his hospital clothes,

“Don't mention it, buddy!”

And Silas.

“You were like a magician back there.”

“Heh heh. Keep the compliments coming.”

* * *

As the detectives stood in shock, Silas held out a bundle of documents.

“Here.”

“What is this, Mr. Epstein?”

“Isn't it obvious? This guy's papers.”

One of the detectives received the bundle and began skimming through them. Doctor Marx peered over as well. The documents were Wilhelm Schultz's official papers.

A birth certificate detailing the address of Corazòn Mut's home for war orphans, the Future House.

A proof of admission and a graduation certificate from his primary school back home.

A proof of admission for Raputoa's very own Lowe Sneum Memorial Secondary School, and a valedictorian graduation diploma complete with photograph.

A proof of admission into Confederation Capital University.

And proofs of payment for several years' worth of part-time work for Epstein, the famous apparel company.

Wil had been declared legally dead after years of being missing. But for obvious reasons, papers identifying such facts were not included in Silas's bundle.

The older detective looked at Silas as he leafed through the documents. "These certainly look genuine. But why bring them to the hospital *now*?"

"Obviously to make sure my good friend here doesn't get accused of being a criminal because he came in under a handle, detective," Silas replied, and spun a tale of lies.

He claimed that he and Wil were fellow travelers and adventurers.

That they usually journeyed around Roxche and came back to the Epstein headquarters in Raputoa City on occasion to earn travel money through part-time work.

That Wil had been badly injured while doing part-time work for the Epsteins.

That the accident could not be officially deemed an industrial accident or covered with insurance because Wil was not officially employed by the company. That the company wanted to cover up the incident and ended up paying for Wil's treatment and hospitalization here.

That the company felt guilty after the fact and decided to bring in Wil's documents to officially inform the police of the accident.

"You seem to be fully awake now, Mr. Schultz," the detective said to Wil, "Let's have a short chat."

The detective asked Wil questions about the information on the documents. About Wil's grades, the subjects he took in school, and even the names of his homeroom teachers.

Naturally, Wil could answer the questions with ease.

"Are we done playing 20 questions, detective?" Silas asked impatiently.

The detective handed Silas back the documents. "So Mr. Matthew Silas Epstein...you're telling me that Mr. Wilhelm Schultz here is an honest, upstanding Roxchean citizen?"

"What? Gods, no."

"Hm?"

"You can't exactly call a guy in his thirties still calling himself an adventurer an upstanding man, don't you think?"

The detective was silent.

"Oh, but he *is* a Roxchean citizen."

* * *

"I wish I'd snapped some photos of the detective back there!"

"Anyway," Wil said, rubbing his left leg, which was outstretched in front of the sofa. "What happened? How in the world did you end up rescuing me?"

Silas took out two bottles of juice from the fridge. He handed one to Wil and opened the other for himself.

"Well, it's a long story. And before that, I've got a load of questions for *you*!"

"I'm sure you do."

"How'd you come back to life, Wil?! I mean, I guess you weren't dead after all! And you're a Westerner now? How did all this happen? Don't worry about the bodyguards—they can't hear from the front. C'mon now, we're friends here. You can tell me!"

"Yeah...I can, Silas. I guess it'll be easier if I explained everything first."

“Great. But first, cheers!”

* * *

“Excuse us.”

The detectives left with sour looks on their faces.

Afterwards, Silas began waving his hands over Wil’s bandages.

“Hocus pocus... Alakazam! All right, I have healed your horrendous burns with magic! You can thank me later, so pack up! We’re getting out of here.”

And so, Wil bid a rushed farewell to the familiar hospital room, and Doctor Marx and the nurses, to whom he was deeply indebted.

“The cast will be enough for the time being, but remember that you will need proper rehabilitation training, Mr. Nyman. And take care to avoid any strong impacts to the head.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

All Wil took from the hospital room were the clothes on his back, a set of crutches, and Klee’s wristwatch.

Silas took him to the RV, leaving the bandages as they were and having him carried on a stretcher.

Then they departed immediately. Silas tried to drive them to the Epstein home in the suburbs, but Wil stopped him. He could not allow harm to come to the Epstein family. Instead, he asked to be taken to the one trustworthy place that was sure to protect him well.

“All right. Where’re we headed, then?” Silas asked.

Wil replied, “To Ikstova.”

And so Wil, Silas, and their two bodyguard-drivers left for Kunst, the capital of Ikstova, in the RV.

The RV drove down the autobahn at a safe, legal speed. It would take them a full day and more to reach Kunst.

They rushed out of Raputoa City as though in escape and stopped at the first village on the road to buy Wil a change of clothes. Because Wil could not leave the RV, Silas picked out his new wardrobe.

And so, Wil was now wearing ankle-high boots, khaki pants, a white shirt, a green sweater, and a short brown coat.

Wil and Silas passed the time in conversation. It went on for hours.

Wil went first.

He explained what had happened in the summer of 3287, when Roxche and Sou Be-II were still at war and Allison landed in the school grounds on a biplane.

“So *you’re* the one who found the Mural, eh? That crazy story you told me was real after all! You *didn’t* go camping! Ha ha! Aha ha ha ha...” Silas trailed off, laughing stiffly.

Then Wil explained what had happened at the end of the same year. About the commotion that swept Ikstova while he and Silas were visiting the country on the school trip.

“You helped Carr Benedict escort the princess out of the village? And you were the one on that aeroplane speeding through the city? I don’t think anything is going to surprise me at this point...”

Then, Wil talked about the incident that happened in spring of the following year after he left the Epstein manor and boarded the transcontinental express.

“Damn! Why didn’t Mother tell me any of this?!”

Wil went on to explain how he became the adopted son of a Western noblewoman and gained Western citizenship. How he needed to throw away his identity as Wilhelm Schultz in order to work as a spy. How he feigned a train accident in Sou Be-II to do so.

“I always knew something was off! You were always way too cautious to get into a stupid accident like that.”

Wil followed by explaining how he received spy training in the Sou Be-II military and how he was commanded by the King of Bezel to work at the Sou Be-II embassy in the Capital District.

His goal was simple: to create and maintain stability between East and West.

“You know how I just said that nothing would surprise me? I take that back. This is nuts! You’ve been going around saving the world while I enjoyed myself traveling!”

Finally, Wil explained how he narrowly avoided an assassination attempt while on his way back to Sou Be-II after his retirement.

He told Silas everything he remembered, from taking off at Leonhart International Airport to the crash and its aftermath.

“I see...so someone is trying to kill you, eh. That was really close. And who knew larvae could taste so good?”

Next, it was Silas’s turn.

First he explained that he was a self-proclaimed adventurer, traveling the world alone.

He would take on part-time jobs or receive funding from his family to travel all over Roxche and sometimes even Sou Be-II.

“So I’m living a freewheeling life. But I *am* paying close attention to how Epstein clothes are selling in the places I visit, and to brand recognition and stuff,” he added.

Then he explained how he found Wil.

How a secondary school student on horseback found him collapsed in the buffer zone, and nursed him back to health.

How the student—for some unknown reason—did not contact the police immediately.

And how, by sheer coincidence, Silas happened to drop by the student’s home to avoid the rain and discovered a familiar face.

“Must’ve been destiny, now that I think about it. It’s a special power of mine. I have to go back there at some point and get my motorcycle back.”

“I’ll have to go with you, then. I have to thank the people who saved my life.”

“Yeah. Although that’ll have to wait until *after* your problem’s been solved.”

“Yeah...”

Silas’s explanation continued.

He had recognized Wil at first sight.

Having recalled that Wil had gone missing in Sou Be-II, he quickly judged that Wil must have started a new life as a Westerner.

“It was pretty obvious that you’d gotten yourself into something big.”

And so, he had Wil hospitalized in complete secrecy.

“Then I started thinking, if somebody’s after you the Westerner, maybe you’ll be safe if you came back to being Wil.”

With that idea in mind, Silas had traveled everywhere from the Republic of Raputoa to the Capital District to get his hands on as many of Wil’s papers as he could.

Because the different jurisdictions did not compile their respective pools of information, Wil’s papers were still accessible even though some jurisdictions had him declared dead in absentia. Silas collected them to prove his identity.

After even forging records of his work for Epstein, Silas waited near the hospital. He originally intended to wait until Wil was fully healed before picking him up.

“But then the police showed up, just as expected. And it was time for those papers to work their magic! Pretty dramatic, eh?”

Afternoon had gone, giving way to early evening.

The RV left the autobahn and entered a rather sizable town.

The drivers refueled and went shopping for a large amount of food. Wil and Silas dug into burgers, sandwiches, snacks, juice, and tea in the RV.

And their grave conversation resumed.

“You have no idea who’s after you yet?”

“No. If I had to be honest, I’ve ruined so many lives over the years that any number of them could be trying to kill me. To them, I was a villain.”

“I guess that’s understandable. Good and evil are subjective things.”

“I have potential enemies on both sides of the river. And until I know for sure, everyone looks like an enemy to me. It might even be someone I’d been working with the day before.”

“Sounds rough, buddy. I say it’s time to call it quits.”

“That was the plan, actually.”

“Sorry to suggest this, but maybe the intelligence agency cross-river is trying to kill you because you know too much?” Silas wondered, genuinely concerned. Wil shook his head.

“No. Allison’s father is still an active major general and the head of intelligence. It’s not impossible, I admit, but unlikely. Not only that, it wouldn’t be easy for someone in Sfreustus to plan so much to take place in Roxche. Maybe if they had someone working here in the East to take care of the logistics...”

“I see. Then I guess it’ll be best if Major Travas stays dead now.”

“I think so too. But—”

“But?”

“I have to let my mother know. As soon as possible.”

“True. She’ll be worried sick.”

“And whoever’s after me might suspect that Major Travas is still alive. Then they’ll hunt me down. Or even Mother and Allison, or the people around me.”

“Right.”

“I have to find the mastermind. I just have to figure out who it is...”

“And you’ll kill him and be done with it?” Silas asked sadly. Wil smiled.

“No. I just have to apply a bit of pressure to prevent him from taking further action. It’ll be easier for me to control the situation if I leave the mastermind alive.”

“You make it sound so casual, buddy. Scary world you live in. I get what you’re trying to say, but don’t push yourself too hard.”

“All right.”

“So who could it be? ...Guess we should focus on getting to Iks all right before we try and figure out that stuff,” Silas said, putting a firm end to the conversation. Wil changed the subject.

“Speaking of family, I owe Euphemia a lot for this, too. She’s covering all the major expenses, right?”

“You got it. Barely lifts a finger to help out her own brother, but when you’re involved, she just forks it all over. Tch.”

“I’m very grateful. I’d like to thank her in person someday. Is she doing well? Your parents, too?”

“Yeah. They’re all great. My folks’re retired now, relaxing away at the vacation home. Eumie took over after Mother—scarier president than she ever was. Too bad she had to hop over to the Capital District for a few days. She said on the telephone earlier that she really missed you.”

The RV continued down the road even after dark.

“Get some sleep, Wil. Too much thinking and you’ll go bald.”

“Yeah. You’re not looking so fresh yourself, Silas.”

“We’re not gonna be teenagers forever. Night.”

“Good night. And thanks.”

“It’s too early to be thanking me. But you’re welcome.”

Even when the lights went out, the RV continued down the road.

* * *

The next day. The morning of the 18th.

The RV reached the city of Elitèsa on the southern tip of the Republic of Raputoa.

At that point, the imposing Central Mountain Range began looming to the right side of the road. Its snow-capped peaks emerged through the morning mist.

After refueling and stopping for supplies, the RV was back on the autobahn.

Silas soon directed the drivers to leave the autobahn, however. They passed a small village and stopped at a deserted field.

At Wil’s urging, Silas ordered the drivers to take the beds and get some sleep. The drivers tried to protest, but Silas was insistent.

“This is an order from your employer!”

So the drivers were given four hours of rest before they resumed their journey, this time up the harrowing mountain road to Iks.

Wil and Silas took over guard duty for the bodyguards, setting up folding chairs on the roof of the RV and scanning the horizon. But not a single vehicle passed by.

Silas put down his shotgun. A set of binoculars hung from his neck. He handed Wil a rifle with a scope.

“Still got those skills from Kaashi, Wil?” he joked.

“Unfortunately, yes. I’ve shot quite a few people over the years,” Wil replied sadly.

They brewed tea on a small stove on the rooftop, chatting the hours away about their youth. About their student days.

* * *

“We’re finally here!” Silas cried, sticking his head out the RV window.

Once the drivers had gotten some rest, the RV went up the rugged mountain roads all the way through one of the two gates into Ikstova, the southern pass.

It was three in the afternoon. The sun began tilting west as it shone over the land.

The pass offered a full view of the majestic Lake Ras and the little boxed garden of Kunst, all surrounded by snowy mountains. The lake had already melted and was glittering blue.

“I can’t believe it’s already been five months,” Wil sighed, his breath taken away. Last time, he had entered the country by aeroplane with his trusted subordinates, with a veritable armory in their possession.

“So you come here a lot, eh? ...It’s pretty cold today,” Silas complained, shutting the window. Raputoa and Ikstova were practically one season apart in terms of climate. “We’ll have to get us some jackets.”

The RV drove down the winding road into the hollow. It was well-maintained and clear of snow, as it was one of only two roads that allowed access to and from the country.

Avalanche-proofing fences had been installed on either side of the widened road, and shelters and watch-houses dotted the landscape.

“Iks really has been modernizing. Expected no less from Roxche’s top tourist destination. Raputoa’s basically just a bridge into Iks these days,” Silas commented, having not visited the country in a long time.

The RV went all the way down the slope and entered Kunst in the light of dusk.

“Where to now, Wil?”

“The police. Follow this street all the way and you’ll see the headquarters on the right side of the thoroughfare.”

“Right. But what’re you planning to do? Turn yourself in?”

Wil and Silas reached their destination just as the sun set. Their long journey had come to an end, for the time being.

Silas ordered the drivers to wait in the parking lot, and to find accommodations for themselves at a nearby hotel if necessary.

Then, he and Wil walked into the police station dotted with decorative stones.

Wil spoke first to a young policeman who happened to be on duty. He was in a navy-colored uniform, wore a badge of rank identifying him as a constable, and had a name tag embroidered with the name 'Piazza'.

"May I speak to Mr. Rein Warren? This is an emergency."

Constable Piazza gave Wil a suspicious look. "The chief is still on duty, I'm afraid. What is your business? And your name?"

"I can't disclose either at the moment. Could you please pass on a message to him?"

"What?"

"This is an emergency. Please, just pass this message to him. He'll understand once he hears what I have to say."

"Well...all right. I suppose I could."

Constable Piazza was ready to take notes, pen and paper at the ready. Wil spoke.

"I am looking for the right-facing Linnea blooming in the valley."

"Huh?"

With a dubious look, Piazza went to Warren's office. He knocked and identified himself.

"Come in."

Inside was a policeman over 60 years of age, his hair a splash of white. The name 'Warren' was embroidered on his breast.

He was wearing a pair of reading glasses and wrestling with a veritable mountain of documents on his imposing desk.

"Ah, Constable Piazza. What is it?" he asked, taking off his glasses.

"Er... There's someone who wants to see you, sir."

"Hm? I don't think I had any meetings scheduled today."

"It was a man in his thirties. He refused to identify himself, so I tried to turn him away, but he asked me to pass on a message to you."

Piazza took out a scrawled note from his pocket.

"What did he say?" asked Warren, as dubious as the younger man.

"Well—"

The moment Piazza read out the contents of the note, Warren rose violently enough to send documents flying.

"B-bring him here at once!"

* * *

"Wil! Oh, Wil! I'm so glad I can call you by your real name again!"

The queen embraced Wil with tears in her eyes.

"Good to see you here, my man! How're those injuries? You've brought enough medication with you?"

And her husband, a man with a rugged beard, welcomed him with open arms.

"This is surreal."

Meanwhile, Silas was left to quietly mutter to himself.

It was late at night in Ikstova's royal palace.

The palace was humble enough to pass for a slightly large mountain lodge, but it was indeed the home of the nation's monarch—and this was the office of the queen herself.

At the police station, Wil and his companion Silas had quickly been led to Warren's office.

Warren asked no questions of Wil, instead preparing a police car to transport him. And so Wil and Silas went to the palace.

There awaited the queen and her husband.

Wil introduced Silas to his royal friends.

“Oh! Er...it's an honor!”

Silas bowed awkwardly.

The queen, in a humble outfit composed of a white blouse and a navy skirt, gave him a beautiful smile. “Welcome to Ikstova.”

Silas trembled. “Er, may I take my leave now?” he asked, trying to escape the pressure of the royal couple's presence.

“I'd appreciate it if you could stay and help me explain,” Wil said, and put an end to his escape attempt.

Though it was late at night, they continued their discussion in the sitting room.

The servants prepared tea and a light meal for them.

Irrelevant to the conversation at hand, Silas learned for the first time that the queen stirred jam into her tea. And that, for some reason, Queen Francesca was also called ‘Fiona’ or ‘Fi’.

And by the time Wil's long story was over, Silas was finally used to the atmosphere. He proudly took the baton and finished the story with a few embellishments.

“Incredible, Wil! I almost wish for some of your amazing luck,” Benedict exclaimed.

“Wil, I want you to stay here with us for the time being,” said Fiona, “We can guarantee your safety. And I'll make sure to contact Allison and your mother tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Fi. But I can't stay in hiding forever. I have to at least figure out the identity of the mastermind behind my assassination attempt.”

“But is it not too dangerous for you to go back to the capital, whether it is in Sou Be-Il or Roxche?” asked Benedict.

“...It is,” Wil replied with a reluctant nod. Benedict continued.

“And this mastermind will not so easily show his tail from now on. You know best that catching one or two people who carried out the plan is useless.”

“...Of course. But...”

“But?”

“But three people lost their lives without cause.”

“Who?”

“Captain Barnett, Master Sergeant Lod, and...” Wil ran a finger over the watch on his left wrist. “Second Lieutenant Klee. They were innocents dragged into the attempt on my life. I as good as killed—I mean, they lost their lives because of me. I will never forget that. But I want to make sure that the one who ordered their deaths will be brought to justice. I know that I have no

right to say such a thing, having done the same to many people in the past. But I do not wish to retire until I have at least put this case to rest.”

“C’mon, Wil. Revenge isn’t like you,” said Silas. “Right, Your Majesty? Sir Benedict? Nothing good ever comes out of revenge.”

But Silas’s pleas to the queen and her husband were met by looks of grim determination.

“If you’ve made up your mind, let us help you.”

“I am of the same opinion.”

“Huh?” Silas intoned in confusion.

Major Travas bowed his head. “Thank you.”

Major Travas left the room to meet with a doctor who had been called to the palace.

“Hm,” Silas sighed. “I can’t believe you offered to help Wil with his revenge. It honestly took me by surprise.”

Fiona looked him straight in the eye. She smiled.

“We offered because it wasn’t like the major to say such a thing.”

“What? What do you mean, Your Majesty?” asked Silas.

“Major Travas is a man with a will of steel. For better or for worse, he would never let himself become obsessed with petty revenge.”

“You mean...”

“He might not realize it himself, but right now, that man is something of a mix between Wilhelm Schultz and Major Travas.”

Silas looked at the smiling queen.

“Ah. I see.”

He nodded.

Chapter 17: The Plot

The 19th day of the fifth month.

It was a cloudy day. A car was making its way down the autobahn on the outskirts of Roxche's Capital District.

This branch of the autobahn encircled the Capital District and was nearly empty, finally clear of the hustle and bustle of the morning rush hour. The car in question was moving at a leisurely pace, allowing the other vehicles to pass it by.

It was a highly ordinary model produced by Jones Motors, the same as practically every other car in the East.

Hartnett sat in the driver's seat.

Confederation Police Force officers generally worked in plainclothes to keep a low profile. Indeed, Hartnett was in jeans with a cotton T-shirt and jacket, and a pair of sunglasses.

In the passenger seat was a Capital District Police Force inspector, the one who had spoken to Hartnett at Bemarté Park earlier. He was in his usual grey suit.

"Two men going out for a drive. Sad," the inspector said.

"This is the best way to avoid prying eyes and questions," Hartnett replied. They were not meeting officially in a collaboration between the two police forces, but as two friends going for a drive.

"How is the Travas investigation going?" asked the inspector.

"We're digging up some fishy stuff. It's very incriminating," said Hartnett. "I have to say, it's really a veritable flood of evidence."

One by one, Hartnett went over the list of evidence that incriminated Major Travas as a party to the drug trafficking operation in the Capital District.

The new drug cartels operating out of the capital had grown in size thanks to their dealings with Sou Be-II—which was apparent in the fact that the Blue Rose was now being dealt in the West.

Evidence suggested that Major Travas had been in constant contact with these cartels since he was first posted to the embassy. He had all kinds of substances legally shipped to the West—but never allowed the packages to be opened or examined closely.

The inspector listened quietly to the end before breaking his silence.

"Ha! Figures," he muttered. His tone was difficult to read.

"Do you have something in mind, Inspector?" asked Hartnett.

"So *that's* your evidence? You didn't find anything suspicious about all this?"

"What do you mean?" Hartnett asked, turning.

"Eyes on the road, Hartnett. Now listen up. It's our job as the police to be suspicious of things. Then it makes sense for us to suspect this sudden torrent of evidence piling up against Travas. This is basic police academy stuff."

"In other words, someone is planting fake evidence to implicate him?"

"What else could it be?"

“But...” Hartnett fell into thought for a moment before looking at the inspector again. “Inspector, am I right in supposing that you personally knew Major Travas before this incident began? Is there something you’re not telling us?”

“Eyes on the road, Hartnett. I’m not planning on dying with you today.”

“I don’t know how you might know him, Inspector, but I can’t let you protect a criminal.”

“I’m not trying to protect him. I hate the man. Call me a bigot who hates all Westerners.”

“Now I’m even more confused.”

“The Sou Be-Il embassy’s the one that said he died in an aeroplane crash, right?”

“Yes. Is that a problem? He was from cross-river, and the craft belonged to cross-river forces.”

“So this man is suddenly found guilty of a whole chain of serious crimes, and he immediately dies in an accident in the middle of nowhere with no witnesses? What about this does *not* look suspicious to you?”

“I’m afraid I can’t follow your line of thinking, Inspector.”

“You don’t have to, so just do your job. Figure out if Major Travas really is involved with the cartels, with your own eyes and ears. Don’t trust all the info they spoon-feed you.”

“That’s a given, Inspector,” Hartnett growled. “What about on your end?”

“They posted a new attaché to take over for him. I’m going to have a word with the man soon.”

“But you can’t access the embassy, Inspector. And even if you tailed him, he would notice quickly.”

“Which is why this calls for a stakeout.”

“Where? Do you know where you might find him?” Hartnett asked dubiously. The inspector grimaced.

“Capital District crisps are irresistible bait for visiting Westerners.”

* * *

The morning of the 19th arrived in Ikstova hours after the Capital District.

Two men ran into each other in the palace bathroom.

“Morning, Silas. Sleep well?”

“Nope. Didn’t get a wink.”

“Why not? The beds were comfortable, no?”

“I’m a commoner, man. Asking me to sleep over in a royal guest bedroom just because it’s getting late? Too stressful for me...”

“Says the son of the third richest family in Raputoa.”

“Second richest now. And anyway...”

“Yeah?”

“Which one are you today? Wil, or the major?”

“...”

“S-sorry. Don’t give me that look.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. But once you’ve done your job, you’d better come back. All right, dead guy?”

The royal guard drove Silas back to Kunst.

It was a blindingly clear day. The remaining piles of snow were shining brightly.

Silas met his bodyguards at the lobby of the hotel they had stayed in.

“All right, men! We’re off to Raputoa again. Sorry to drag you all the way here. You’re almost out of the woods. I’ll make sure to have Eumie give you a hefty bonus.”

“Wonderful, sir. And your friend?” asked one of the drivers.

Silas turned away, gazing dramatically into the distance.

“Yeah. Him. He, or ‘they’, I should say. They’re still fighting out there.”

Silas’s dramatic gaze was pointed in a completely different direction from the palace.

* * *

“Thank you for contacting my family,” Major Travas said over breakfast with the royals.

Carr Benedict had given Travas Ladia a telephone call in Bezelese to let her know of the situation. Naturally, he could not outright tell her that her son was alive, but having met her multiple times since the discovery of the Mural, Benedict managed to communicate the facts in terms that would not catch the attention of any potential wiretappers.

“She was happy to hear the news,” Benedict said, digging into his hot cheese gratin. “I don’t think she believed the military to begin with, anyway.”

Cheese was one of Ikstova’s most prized exports. It was in practically every local dish.

The wooden table was set with Benedict’s favorite—cheese gratin—and cheese fondue with vegetables, stir-fried hash browns with bacon and cheese, and piping-hot ham and cheese sandwiches. Breakfast also included oranges and the usual tea.

“I spoke to Allison last night,” said Fiona, “You’re both amazing. You know, Allison didn’t believe a word of what the embassy told her about you. She was very casual about it. ‘Presumed alive until declared dead by self’ is a family motto, she says.”

Major Travas put down his fork and bowed his head.

“You’ve been a great help, Your Majesty. Thank you.”

“Please, raise your head. Now what do you have in mind? You must be planning something.”

Major Travas nodded. “Yes. I wish to go back to the crash site.”

“You’re going to pick up something?” Benedict reasoned, immediately realizing what Major Travas was going to do.

“Yes. The embassy ordered me to take some documents back to the motherland, and I was transporting them during the crash. I don’t know what the documents detail, and I didn’t bring them out of the aeroplane with me in case I lost them on the way. I did not destroy them, either. If the search crews haven’t found the aeroplane yet, they should still be where I left them.”

“I see. Then it’ll be best to grab them.”

Benedict understood Major Travas's intent, but Fiona was still confused. So Benedict explained the situation. Major Travas continued his meal in the meantime.

"So that's how it is, Fi. —Let's go over this again. From what we heard yesterday, Major Travas was almost assassinated."

"Yes."

"They probably had a few reasons for planning the crash for the Iltoa Mountain Range. First, it's deserted. That's more to prevent leaving witnesses than to prevent civilian casualties. Second, it's almost impossible to land there. And crashing in that area practically guarantees that everyone onboard dies."

"I see. We heard all this yesterday."

"And there's another reason. Because it's a major strategic outpost, occupied heavily by the Royal Army and Air Force. Remember the depas we saw on the transcontinental express?"

"Yes, where we separated the trains."

"Yeah. It's easy to mobilize search crews in the Iltoa Mountain Range. So this is what the mastermind is planning: the military searches for the crash site from overhead, and sends in a search crew once they find the wreck. They find the crew and the major's bodies. Then they find the papers or microfilm—probably microfilm, it's fire-resistant—in the major's belongings."

"Then what happens?" Fiona asked, her series of nods stopping.

"Then this happens. 'Oh gods! We found evidence that Major Travas was actually a terrible villain committing treason against the motherland!'"

"I see!" Fiona exclaimed. "They weren't simply trying to kill him; they were trying to foist blame for other things onto him as well."

"That's the most likely scenario."

"So the plan is to get to the documents before the military does, and trace them back to the mastermind."

Major Travas wiped his mouth on a napkin and rejoined the conversation. "That is the only option we have."

"And they're probably looking for the wreckage on their end right now. They know that the aeroplane didn't crash in the mountains, so they likely moved on to the Lutoni's west bank. It's the east bank next."

Major Travas nodded. "The military must have mobilized by now. Or mercenaries, possibly. Either way, we have to hope that they haven't found the wreckage yet."

"Right. Then the sooner we start, the better! I'll be doing the flying, if the amateur pilot here doesn't mind. We're taking off this afternoon, spending the night at Leonhart International, and beginning the search tomorrow if the weather allows."

"Thank you. I can't thank you enough for all your cooperation, really."

"Don't sweat it. It's the least we can do after the help you gave us at the new year's party! And FYI, I had a feeling something like this might happen, so I had a lovely new amphibious craft waiting in the wings!" Benedict said proudly.

"The camera hasn't arrived yet, though," his wife added with a wry smile.

* * *

Major Travas and Benedict began preparations after breakfast. Their first stop was one of the rooms in the palace, which was set aside for Benedict's hobbies.

"You're gonna need one of these, eh?" he asked, holding out the latest assault rifle used by the Confederation military.

The assault rifle had a metal folding stock and used curved 30-round magazines, and had both semi-automatic and automatic capabilities. It took 7.62 caliber rounds. This was the very same model Major Travas wielded on a certain train two months earlier, with the exception of the stock. Benedict's model had a simpler stock made of metal framing that folded to the right side.

"Ikstova's finally gotten a few dozen of these. You can take one for the trip. Let's take 'em out for a test run later," Benedict said, taking out a 200-round ammunition case and six spare magazines.

"Thank you. I'll take good care of it," Major Travas replied.

Down the slope from the royal palace was Lake Ras. And on the lakeshore was a large, semicircular building. It was the royal hangar, which doubled as Benedict's garage.

Because the facility was close to the lake, it could house seaplanes as well as aeroplanes. In the winter, the frozen lake could be used as a runway.

Major Travas was led by Benedict into the hangar. There he came face-to-face with his friend's latest toy.

It was an amphibious biplane, measuring at 11 meters from nose to tail with a wingspan of 12 meters. Because it had not been painted, its silvery surface was completely exposed.

Most seaplanes were aeroplanes with floats attached horizontally to the base of the fuselage. However, this craft's fuselage was unique in that that it was nearly one with the floats.

The lower wing also had one float under each side for balance.

The craft was a two-seater, with one cockpit and a passenger seat, but there was enough room for two more between the fuselage and the floats—and windows to allow for such boarding configurations. These extra seats could be used for transportation or rescue operations.

An amphibious craft differed from a seaplane in that it was equipped with wheels on its stowed landing gear. In other words, it could also function as an aeroplane.

"Can't arm it, though, since it's officially a civilian craft," Benedict said, giving the plane a gentle tap.

The royal mechanics resumed their work on the plane.

Leaving the mechanics to do maintenance, Major Travas and Benedict began loading the magazines laid out on the table.

"Mr. Hero!"

That was when a girl rushed into the hangar.

She had long, black, back-length hair, and was a mirror image of Treize. The girl was dressed in comfortable jeans and a cream-colored sweater.

"Princess Meriel! It's been too long, Your Highness. Are you well?" Major Travas asked, rising from his seat.

"Stop! You don't have to get up for me!" Princess Meriel of Ikstova commanded.

Meriel was the twin sister of Treize, although it was not known which of the twins was the elder.

"Hey there, Meriel."

Meriel ignored her father and went straight to Major Travas.

“How are your injuries, Major? I heard you went through a terrible ordeal!”

“I’m feeling much better, Your Highness. I’m just waiting for my left ankle to heal.”

“Thank goodness...”

Benedict joined the conversation as he continued loading the magazines, saying that Meriel had been staying in the valley. She had left the royal family’s protected hideaway by car early that morning to rush to Major Travas’s side.

“Please stop throwing yourself into these awful situations! ...But I suppose you would have stopped long ago if pleading were enough to convince you. I shall pray for your safety,” Meriel said, clasping her hands together.

“Show some of that concern for your dear old dad sometimes,” Benedict mumbled from behind.

Gunshots resounded across the lake.

Major Travas did marksmanship practice from the shore, his target a block of wood floating on the water about 50 meters away.

He stood on the concrete ramp that led into Lake Ras from the hangar.

With both crutches under his arms, Major Travas unfolded the stock and took aim. He fired. In spite of his unusual position, he was able to easily take the recoil from semi-automatic fire.

Each time he pulled the trigger, splinters flew into the air.

The block of wood was about 50 centimeters in diameter. But because it was floating, only about half the surface area was a valid target. And yet every bullet found its mark. Major Travas never left a splash in the water.

Benedict spoke up from behind, ready to catch him if he lost his balance. “Looks like you don’t need my help after all. I can’t believe you managed all that while standing on one leg.”

Some guns had something called a bolt, which moved back and forth whenever a bullet was chambered. In such models, the bolt stopping at the lowered position indicated that the magazine was empty and the gun needed to be reloaded.

But this assault rifle had no such function.

Thirty shots later, there was a loud click. The empty magazine rotated with a hollow noise, signaling the need for a new one.

With his left hand, Major Travas gripped the magazine. With his thumb he pushed the magazine catch, and the magazine dislodged itself.

After pulling the lever with his right hand, he checked thoroughly to make sure that no rounds had been left inside.

Finally, Major Travas pulled the trigger without a loaded bullet to arm the safety.

Benedict received the gun from him. “I’ll give you suspenders for it later. You’ll need a bag for the extra magazines, too. Not that I want to let you get into a shootout alone. Just think of this as a good luck charm.”

“I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen. But—”

“But?”

“This is a fight that involves me and me alone. If the need arises, I will take action on my own.”

“...All right.”

They took off their earmuffs and returned to the hangar. There, Meriel had put on coveralls and joined the mechanics in checking and fueling the craft.

* * *

Benedict and Major Travas were in identical aviator jackets and padded aviator hats with built-in headsets.

Both were sitting in the amphibious craft. The nose propeller and the wheels under the floats began spinning, slowly moving the plane down the concrete ramp.

“Be careful!” Meriel cried, seeing them off with the mechanics. The queen also stood with them, watching silently.

The floats reached the water amidst the hum of the engine. The amphibious craft was now acting as a seaplane. The rudder on the back of the vertical stabilizer moved from side to side as the craft zigzagged across the surface of the lake.

Once Benedict found their heading and the engine was warmed up, the hum crescendoed into a deafening roar as the engine propelled the plane across the water.

The floats pulled away from the lake, leaving a massive splash in the wake of the wing propellers.

The amphibious craft took to the sky from the lake in the mountains.

<And we have liftoff. She handles really well, this one,> Benedict said.

<Ikstova is beautiful whatever the season, it seems,> Major Travas commented, enjoying the view.

Benedict immediately set course for the north and pulled the craft into ascent. <Nothing fazes you, eh? Most people who’ve been in crashes or crash-landings develop phobias. Freeze up at the sound of the engine. Some professional pilots go through it too. A few of them never fly again.>

Though Benedict could not see, Major Travas was staring at the watch on his left wrist. It was noon. But the time was not what concerned Major Travas.

<I’ll have time to be afraid later.>

Benedict’s amphibious craft flew over the crystal-clear Lake Ras and Ikstova’s second-largest city, Mushke. Their destination was Leonhart International Airport in Raputoa City.

* * *

Across the Lutoni from the Republic of Raputoa, just past the Western buffer zone, stood what was once the Teruto Royal Army Base.

The base was originally intended to serve as a headquarters for an invasion on the East, which is why it had been manned by high-ranking officials unusual for the size of the base.

But military budget cuts left the base abandoned, with no officers or soldiers manning it now. The large property in the forest was reduced to a storehouse for surplus weapons.

The base also had hangars for aeroplanes and seaplanes.

Aeroplanes would be used to transport the surplus supplies to the base, and the crafts would be left there—either in the hangar or outside it.

The crafts left behind were those the military had been unable to scrap, because they had been granted budgets for a few more years than they could be stored.

The planes inside the hangar might have avoided wear and tear, but the ones exposed to the weather were unlikely to ever see use again. They were beginning to rust over, dying alongside the base.

In spite of this, the Teruto Royal Army Base was still nominally a base, and had reserves of aeroplane fuel. This was why troops were sent in from the nearest base—from a platoon of about 30—on a rotation shift to guard it.

The guards were posted for several days at a time to do little but watch the sun rise and fall.

But no one had been posted in the past few days. Orders from above, an absolute in the world of the military, had forced all military personnel to clear out the previous evening.

The soldiers posted on the base chattered as they left in the back of a truck.

“So they’re finally gonna can the place. Leave it to rot, eh?”

“The canals are still usable, so I’m betting they’re gonna use the base for some special training. Maybe for demolition work.”

“Nah. They’re gonna say there was a fire and tear down the place. Nobody’s gonna question a fire, I mean.”

The soldiers hypothesized one after another, but in the end, they were happy as long as they were freed from the mind-numbing guard duty at the base.

And so, the former castle-turned-command center was left to sleep in the forest, its rusted hangars and aeroplanes becoming overgrown with weeds.

Just as Benedict and Major Travas took off for Raputoa City, another amphibious craft flew into the deserted former Teruto Base.

This model had a body that doubled as a hull, with the landing gear attached to the base.

The craft was on the large side, measuring at 20 meters from nose to tail with a wingspan of 30 meters. It had one long wing with one engine on each side.

The amphibious plane crossed the base from overhead, then circled back and made a clean landing in the canal. Then it climbed up the ramp.

The engines only stopped once the plane was fully inside the hangar. The side hatch opened and seven men rushed outside.

They ranged in age from around 30 to 40, and were clearly a fearless—if not outright ruthless—bunch. They were in a variety of clothes, from flight suits to work wear.

“Line up! I said, line up, you maggots!”

The command came from a tall man about 40 years of age with clean, sharp features. He had short black hair.

The man was dressed in camouflage gear, but the pattern was completely different from the one used by the Sou Be-II military. It was composed of splotches of greens, browns, and blacks, with thick straps around the arms near the shoulders. The straps could be pulled in case of injury to stop the bleeding.

“We’re not here on vacation, you maggots! I said, LINE UP!”

The other men glared back, but eventually arranged themselves as ordered.

“Look, *ex*-First Lieutenant Cornelius. We might be shit left over from the military cuts, but we don’t gotta hear that crap from you. You’re the one who tried to kill people from your own unit with a bomb. Folks like us coulda never pulled that off,” one of them said with a snicker.

“Of course not.”

The former First Lieutenant Cornelius pulled an automatic handgun from his belt holster and shot the man in the right eye.

The target was 10 meters away, yet Cornelius had not paused a moment to take aim, even as he fired with only one hand.

One golden shell casing fell to the ground. As did one dead body.

Cornelius holstered his gun and turned to the five surviving men in line.

“Listen up! We are here to *work*, maggots! Any man with second thoughts or hesitation, speak up now and my gun will answer you!”

No one spoke.

“Good! Now listen up!” Cornelius demanded, grinning. “Ah, yes. I may be as mad and bomb-crazy as they say! I don’t deny it! After this job, I’m back off to the military prison to finish off my century-plus sentence! But not you boys. Not you! You have stacks of cash waiting for you to finish this mission! And to the survivors go the spoils. And out of the generosity of my heart, I have just raised your individual shares!”

The men broke out smiling.

Having tamed five men with a single bullet, Cornelius clapped his hands.

“Let’s get to work, boys! Off to the hangar and take one plane per man! Refuel! Haul out the ammo from the plane and reload those crafts! Tomorrow morning, we leave for Roxche!”



* * *

It was night. The stars were twinkling high up in the moonless sky.

“We’re gonna have clear weather tomorrow. Perfect for flying.”

Benedict was looking up from the balcony of a hotel near Leonhart International Airport, where he had landed in the evening.

Inside, Major Travas was sitting on the carpet with his left leg outstretched, scrutinizing a map in front of him.

The map detailed roads and settlements in the Republic of Raputoa. Now that the cold war had ended, more accurate maps were available to the public.

However, the buffer zone still remained blank. Everything in a 30-kilometer strip on either side of the Lutoni was undocumented.

Major Travas marked out the village of Stern in Reed County, north of Raputoa City. If he was found in Stern, the aeroplane must have crashed in the area, he reasoned. Major Travas traced his finger from the village to the river. There were no identifying markers along the Lutoni.

Benedict came in from checking the weather and took a seat next to him. “All right. If the crash was around here, your flight must have been bound over the Iltoa Mountain Range and headed for Lillianne. I wish we had the full flight plan with us,” Benedict said, going over the route.

“I’m not certain where exactly I was found,” Major Travas replied. “I did travel east from the crash site, but I can’t guarantee I was headed in the right direction by the end. I was drifting in and out of consciousness.”

“Well, we know to start on the east bank. We’ll find it quickly,” Benedict said, steering the conversation in a different direction. “Anyway, are you sure you don’t want to tell Allison about the search tomorrow?”

Major Travas looked Benedict in the eye and shook his head. “She’ll do something rash if she finds out.”

“You make a good point.”

“Last time, she had the excuse of wanting to rescue her daughter. But not now.”

“What, rushing over to rescue *you* isn’t good enough of a reason?”

“There’s no guarantee that I will be found innocent. A written apology won’t cut it this time.”

“All right, all right. I won’t tell Allison. Now get some sleep—we have an early morning tomorrow. We’re taking off as soon as the airport opens,” Benedict said, helping Major Travas up.

Then they went to their own rooms.

Benedict lay in bed, stroking his beard.

“I said *I* wouldn’t tell Allison, but I can’t guarantee that my wife hasn’t. Oh well.”

* * *

Early the next morning.

It was a clear spring morning, without a spot of fog to be seen.
Multiple engines roared to life.

The amphibious craft carrying Benedict and Major Travas at Leonhart International Airport.

The pretext for their flight was practice for an aircraft belonging to the royal family of Ikstova. The plan they submitted had the craft flying along the train tracks to make sure they did not stray into the buffer zone.

The multiple aeroplanes carrying Cornelius and his men at the former Teruto Base.

The purpose of their flight was to cross the Lutoni and invade foreign airspace in search of a downed craft and its contents. All resistance was to be met with violent elimination.

And another aircraft took to the skies—

Chapter 18: The Race is On

The amphibious craft flew in a straight line over the northbound tracks.

Benedict and Major Travas had taken off as soon as the airport opened at the crack of dawn, ascending as they left Raputoa City in line with the rails.

About two months earlier, Major Travas had traveled down the same set of tracks as he escorted a princess traveling incognito. This time, he was making much the same journey by plane.

The craft cruised at several hundred meters, following the flight plan Benedict submitted. Unlike the day before, both pilot and passenger were sitting with the windows open. The window in the pilot's seat opened to the back, and the window in the passenger seat opened to the front, so when both were open, the two panes of glass overlapped.

They had also raised their seats as high as possible. This configuration left them both more exposed to the air, giving them a wider range of vision. They protected themselves from the freezing winds with hats, goggles, and scarves.

It had been an hour since takeoff.

Once they were out of Raputoa City—and then its suburbs—they saw markedly fewer things from their seats.

To the right were the endless plains of Raputoa, stretching on to the horizon. Rice paddies just beginning to be planted, and the sun and the sky.

Below were four parallel sets of tracks that seemed to go on forever.

To the left was yet more land, and the surface of the Lutoni River in the distance.

Benedict confirmed that there were no houses, trains, or cars within sight before making his move. <The coast is clear. Let's get going.>

<Right,> Major Travas replied, pressing the talk button. <I'm in your hands.>

<Hold on to your seat—it's gonna be bumpy!>

The craft banked hard to the left and pulled into a rapid dive. The dirt of the plains quickly drew near.

Having descended west in an instant, the craft slowly pulled up again and began cruising at barely 10 meters off the ground.

Benedict kept the plane close to the ground to keep it out of sight. The grassy plains rushed past the sides of the craft.

Thanks to Benedict's still-polished skills, the craft safely made it past the buffer zone and into the Lutoni.

The great river was hundreds of meters wide. As soon as Benedict reached the air over it, he ascended and slowly banked to the left, pointing the craft due north.

Then he flew low over the edge of the river on the east bank.

<We'll head on north like this for an hour. Let me know if you spot something. I'll keep an eye out too,> Benedict said, starting the stopwatch function on the chronograph on his left wrist.

<Thank you.>

Major Travas took up a small pair of binoculars and scanned the riverbank to his right.

He pulled his goggles onto his forehead and searched, alternating between his own eyes and the binoculars.

The river looked as if it were painted on, the same sights repeating over and over. Grass and weeds grew into massive tangles that painted streaks of brown and green without end.

The camouflaged aeroplane was buried somewhere in that landscape.

If only the vertical stabilizer had not been snapped off during the crash, Major Travas might have been able to use it as a landmark. But he was forced to search the hard way.

Benedict's craft did not have enough fuel to travel up and down the Lutoni multiple times. If they could not find the craft within the day, they would have to return tomorrow. Neither Benedict nor Major Travas could allow themselves to relax.

About 10 minutes passed in tense silence.

<There!> Major Travas cried into the microphone.

<Where? I don't see it.>

<Could you turn us around?>

<Sure thing. I'm landing us in the river.>

Benedict pulled up as he scanned his surroundings, then made a full turn to bring the riverbank to his left. Then he landed.

The plane came to a stop without bouncing once, as though it were sucked into the water's surface. It left a white wake in the brown river. Benedict kept the speed to a minimum as he slowly cruised up the Lutoni, about 20 meters from the shore.

<A little more... Just a little further... It was somewhere around here,> Major Travas recalled. Benedict had to strain to find the craft because the wings of the plane obstructed the view from the pilot's seat.

But several seconds later—

<Found it!>

Benedict also spotted the wreck.

The fuselage was lying on the bank with the horizontal stabilizer submerged. The plane was missing its vertical stabilizer and its right wing.

<All right. I know where the craft is now, so I'm taking off for now.>

<Could you let me off here?> asked Major Travas. There was an inflatable life raft in the seat inside the fuselage.

<And let you cross over on a broken leg? You could pull it off, I'll give you that, but it'll be hard. I'm gonna see if we can land on the dirt somewhere around here,> Benedict replied, pushing on the throttle. The craft once again rushed over the water and took to the air.

Benedict flew low towards the riverbank. He tilted left and crossed the grass, searching for the nearest possible landing point.

<How soft is the dirt around here?> he asked.

<Quite soft,> Major Travas replied, <Crawling over it left clear, visible streaks.>

<That's no good, then. The landing gear might get stuck. Landing's no problem, but taking off will be an issue,> Benedict sighed. If they could not take off, Benedict would be stranded as well this time. They would have the documents they wanted, along with a 30-kilometer walk out of the buffer zone. <No roads nearby?>

Even the buffer zone had some roads for local fishermen who had permits, and for military personnel on scouting and surveillance duty.

<I'm afraid not,> Major Travas said. <At least, I didn't see any last time I was here.>

<That so? I don't see anything, either,> Benedict replied as he circled the air. <Then I guess we're gonna have to go boating,> he joked.

But a second later—

<We've got guests,> Benedict said, <In the 0900 direction. You see them?>

Major Travas turned to his left. He saw the Lutoni, the western buffer zone, and five black dots in the sky. From the direction, they were clearly Western crafts.

<The mastermind's sent in a search party.>

<Indeed.>

If the crafts were flying over the buffer zone and approaching the border, they were clearly not an official search party.

The dots grew larger and larger. They were headed in Travas and Benedict's direction.

<They've probably seen us. Silver sticks out like a sore thumb—should've asked Fi for an extra budget allocation for a paint job,> Benedict sighed casually. <Looks like we're not gonna be boating now.>

<I suppose not.>

<They might have detailed flight plans from the crashed plane.>

<Most likely. They'll probably find the wreckage.>

<Right. And—>

Benedict turned towards the approaching planes, which were clearly about to violate Roxchean airspace. He accelerated full throttle.

<We should normally be turning tail right about now, but let's see how far we can push our luck before that! Get your gun ready, Wil!>

<Sir! An unidentified craft in the 1300 direction! On the riverbank!>

Cornelius took out his binoculars. He glared at the target.

Circling the riverbank was an amphibious craft, a biplane shining a loud silver.

“Ha ha!” Cornelius guffawed, pressing the talk button. <Looks like they've done our work for us!>

Four of the crafts from the former Teruto Base were surveillance seaplanes. They had been picked out of the planes left in the hangars, quickly made usable again after being refueled and repaired.

They were small biplanes with two floats each, once a mainstay of the Sou Be-II military but now slowly being phased out of use.

Though the model was theoretically intended for surveillance, it was also equipped with two 7.7mm machine guns, allowing it to engage in dogfights in a limited capacity. It was no slouch in speed, either, which was why the men had chosen this model. The crafts were painted in green-tone camouflage. They were two-seaters but carried only one man each, their aviator hats and goggles sticking out of their open cockpits.

The last plane was a brown liaison craft. It was long and thin like a fish stripped to the bone, with landing gear sticking out from its underside. The craft was unarmed.

Although it was an outdated model, it still boasted top-notch short-distance landing and takeoff capabilities. It could even land and take off on rough terrain.

In the past, when this craft was still considered new, Benedict had flown the same model—albeit with a different seat configuration—and landed in a square in Kunst with Fiona.

Cornelius sat in the back, wearing his camouflage gear. He ordered the pilot to bank to the right and break formation. Then he contacted the rest of his men.

<We cannot leave witnesses, whether civilian or military. Shoot it down. And kill anyone onboard if they attempt to escape.>

The men responded with enthusiasm.

Benedict's plane and the four Western crafts passed one another by in the middle of the Lutoni.

If a plane were to turn to escape at this point, it would make itself completely vulnerable to enemy fire. Benedict climbed at maximum speed, lunging into the midst of the formation. His four opponents also accelerated to pass him by. This strategy had the downside of potentially leading to a midair collision, but it also opened up a chance for fly-by fire.

<They're not gonna know my craft's unarmed until it's almost too late,> Benedict remarked casually. In the back seat, Major Travas was loading a full magazine into the assault rifle in his bag.

There were 10 seconds before the crafts passed each other.

"All right," Benedict said, changing channels. <Hey! Don't shoot, guys! It's me!> he cried in Bezelese.

"Huh?" "What?" "Hm?" "Oh?"

The other pilots fell into a sudden panic.

In that moment of confusion, the crafts passed one another by without firing a shot.

"Those are some ancient surveillance models. Where did they dredge them up?" Benedict wondered, banking. <Dammit, men! I almost opened fire!> he said, catching up to the other planes and entering formation next to them. He positioned himself on the right side of the plane on the far right.

Benedict's eyes met those of the man on the plane at the end. He grinned and gave a wave.

<Who are you? You're from Sou Be-II?> asked the man. Major Travas could hear his voice as well.

<Obviously,> said Benedict, <How else would I be talking to you? You're looking for the missing aeroplane too?>

Several seconds later, the man replied with stunning honesty. <Y-yes. So who are you again?>

<C'mon, it's me!>

<That doesn't tell me anything! I've been ordered to shoot you down! Identify yourself, or I will open fire!>

<You've got some nerve, man! Who's your commanding officer?!>

<None of your business! Now identify yourself, or I *will* open fire!>

<Calm down. I'm not even armed. See?> Benedict said, flashing the sides of his craft to prove his point. At the same time, he discreetly pushed the craft closer to the man's. <You're doing the same thing as me, right? Searching for the wreckage and retrieving the top-secret documents?>

<So what?>

"I knew it!" Benedict cried triumphantly from his seat, sliding in even closer. He switched to Major Travas. <They're not official military men. Mercs working for our mastermind. Shoot them.>

An assault rifle roared over the Lutoni River.

Major Travas unfolded the stock, raised the gun, chambered the first round, and took precise aim. Then he opened fire.

It was one shot on semi-automatic mode. Blood gushed from the head of the pilot.

The man died instantly, his right hand going limp with the control stick still in it. The craft slowly ascended, but lost speed and balance—then it flipped over into a spiral before crashing into the Lutoni.

<One more! Get the engine on this one too!> Benedict ordered, sliding in closer to the next seaplane.

Major Travas switched the assault rifle to automatic mode and took aim.

He fired without a second's hesitation. The pilot was still staring in a daze when the bullets came down on him like hail.

About five shots later, Major Travas turned to the engine and continued pulling the trigger.

Sparks flew from the engine near the nose. Then came a puff of white smoke.

Major Travas did not stop. He fought the recoil from the automatic fire with the strength he built up while in the hospital. Shell casings leapt from the right side of the gun and scattered in the wind.

Thirty spent casings later, the seaplane began spewing fire from the engine. And it fell to the ground in a trail of black smoke, carrying its fatally wounded pilot.

<All right, we're pulling out! Hold on!>

Benedict gave Major Travas two seconds to put away his gun before diving hard to the right to escape.

<Hey...> <Enemies!>

Only then did the two remaining seaplanes notice that something was amiss.

"Damned maggots!" Cornelius roared, watching two crafts fall into the river. His craft was hanging back—putting its low-speed cruising capabilities to good use—and had just found the wreckage.

The liaison craft landed on the Roxche side, about 300 meters from the river. Taking off in the mud was not difficult for this model.

Cornelius slid the hatch open and stepped out, grabbing a Sou Be-II military-issue submachine gun from behind his seat.

This was the same model that Benedict used during the commotion at Ikstova. It had a wooden stock and looked like a sawn-off rifle. The gun took curved magazines that held 30 handgun rounds.

Cornelius put on suspenders and a belt with a pouch containing three spare magazines over his combat uniform. He also wrapped a camouflage-patterned bandana on his head.

“Stand by overhead and come back once the coast is clear!”

The pilot nodded.

Once Cornelius had gotten to a safe distance, the liaison craft taxied and took off in the blink of an eye. And it escaped at a low altitude to avoid the dogfight overhead.

“Now, then...”

Hefting his submachine gun over his shoulder, Cornelius crouched low and grabbed fistfuls of mud. He slathered it over his face, ears, and neck.

His eyes glinted amidst the perfect camouflage. Cornelius took slow, determined steps towards the wreckage.

<All right! You got two!> Benedict cheered as Major Travas desperately endured the weight of the sharp bank.

The amphibious craft was circling to the right at full throttle. The surface of the Lutoni whipped past Major Travas’s eyes.

Behind them were two hostile seaplanes, hot on their tail and preparing to open fire.

Benedict flew out of the bank and began flying low over the water. He headed due north with the river.

There were less than two meters between the floats and the water’s surface. The altimeter was already pointing at zero.

The surveillance crafts pursuing the plane gave up on flying at the same altitude and attempted to shoot from above.

“Sorry, but no thanks,” Benedict said, moving slightly to the side. He easily avoided the attack. Bullets hit the water and left splashes on the river’s surface.

“Dammit!” the pursuer hissed. Attacking a plane flying low over the water from above and behind was dangerous, as he could easily lose track of his position while firing and crash into the river. This was why his shooting time was limited and his aim easy to predict.

Benedict checked his rear-view mirror as he quickly avoided the shots and resumed his position in quick succession. The mirror was a custom addition of his from the hangar at Ikstova.

The low-altitude chase continued for about a minute. But soon the two pursuers stopped their attacks, realizing that their efforts were in vain. They simply maintained a constant distance from Benedict as they chased him down.

<They’re smarter than I gave them credit for,> said Benedict. <Must have realized it would be better to chase me off than risk running out of bullets.>

<How are we on fuel?> asked Major Travas.

Benedict glanced at the fuel gauge. <Hm. We don’t really have time to be fooling around here, if I had to be honest.>

<Then please climb and turn us around. I’ll see if I can shoot them down.>

<That’s not gonna work. They know we’re armed, so they’ll keep their distance.>

<But—>

<There's no rush, man. I think it's time for reinforcements.>

<What?>

<Our hero should be showing up any second now.>

Major Travas furrowed his brow.

Benedict looked around. "Ha ha!" he laughed, and pulled the control stick.

The amphibious craft entered a rapid ascent. It climbed and slowly began banking to the right.

The pursuers also rose after him, closing the distance.

Major Travas alone was left confused. <Shall I open fire?> he asked.

<Nah, just sit down and hold on to that gun. We're in for a rough ride!>

All Travas could do now was do as he was told. He clutched the assault rifle tightly and bore the weight of gravity upon him.

The amphibious craft was suddenly completely exposed. The pursuers took quick notice.

<Let's get him!>

<Move, I've got this!>

<Bastard! First to shoot gets the kill, dammit!>

<Not if I shoot you first!>

<Hey! If you steal my kill, I'm shooting you down!>

<Gonna try and up your share, eh? Just try me!>

The men argued over the radio for some time, but finally came to a consensus.

<Gods damn you, fine! You shoot him down, and I'll take care of the rest!>

The craft that had been flying closer to Benedict's banked left, allowing the other pilot to take the kill.

<Fine!> the second pilot hissed, but then muttered to himself. "Gonna shoot me in the back, are you? Not if I shoot you both first!"

Benedict was not even circling at this point. He was simply flying due east.

"All right!"

The pursuer turned and gave chase at full speed. He quickly closed the distance, putting his finger on the trigger lever.

That was when Benedict's craft suddenly banked left into a dive.

And another craft entered the pursuer's sights. It was headed right for him.

"Huh?"

The new craft was a green seaplane. A biplane with a wingspan of 11 meters and less than 10 meters from nose to tail, even including the floats. Although it seated two, the back seat was empty. Its pilot sat alone with a finger on the trigger lever.

"HEY! LEAVE MY HUSBAND ALONE!"

The threat never reached the pursuers' ears. Instead, their eyes spotted two flashes from the new craft's nose.

"Huh?"

That was the last thing the closer pursuer saw.

The 7.7mm machine gun rounds tore into his propellers, engine, fuselage, and his head, killing him instantly.

The two crafts passed each other by. One of them evaded to the left. The other slowly tilted forward, left without a pilot. And it slowly descended with a thin stream of fuel ribboning behind it. Eventually, the craft drove itself into the Lutoni with a splash.

“Shit! Reinforcements!” cried the remaining pursuer, who had been planning to shoot his ally in the back. “But if I shoot that one down, I get all the pay for myself!” He nodded and tracked the new craft as it disappeared to the right.

Then the pursuer checked his left side. The amphibious craft he had been pursuing was long gone.

His prey decided, the man banked right into a dive.

<Hey, you two! How’s it going?>

<...Allison. It’s you, isn’t it?> said Major Travas.

<The one and only. Were you expecting someone else?>

<But how—>

Benedict spoke up before Allison could get a word in. <I didn’t say a word, honest!>

<It was Fi!> Allison said. <Sorry, Wil! Fi told me not to tell anyone! But you know, as soon as I heard you died in a plane crash, I got the feeling that you were still alive! —Whoops. So I went to a nearby base! And I talked to an old friend from the transportation unit who works there—hup! Aha! —Sorry! And borrowed this baby! I only knew the general location and stuff, but it took me a bit of time to get this craft discreetly—(ratatatatat) anyway, sorry I’m late! Both of you!>

Benedict and Major Travas looked in the direction of Allison’s craft.

The interruptions in her explanation came from her sliding away from her enemy’s line of fire, and the gunfire came from her shredding the pursuer’s craft—which had leapt ahead of her—and turning it into scrap for the Lutoni to swallow.

Having shot down a plane in the middle of the conversation, Allison pushed her craft back to full throttle and flew side-by-side with Benedict.

Major Travas raised his goggles with an incredulous look.

<All right! What’ve you got planned next, Wil?>

He smiled at the sound of her voice.

<I want to land in the river and head for the wreckage. Cover me from above.>

<Allison, they’ve got one more aeroplane—a liaison craft. He might go and call for reinforcements,> Benedict warned.

<Right. Thanks!>

Allison began flying protectively around Benedict’s plane, almost fluttering.

<Looks like Roxche’s developed another monster...> Benedict mused with a hint of bitterness.

<Isn’t she great? A new surveillance seaplane that can match even a fighter craft!>

<And you borrowed one without permission? You're not going to have a job left when you get back to the base,> Benedict mused casually about Major Travas's biggest concern.

<Then I suppose some royal family somewhere's going to be getting two new hires soon. A dishwasher and maybe a shepherd?>

<I'll ask the wife.>

Benedict once again landed his craft in the river. He stopped at a safe distance of 30 meters from the shore and turned off the engine.

<Can you see it, Allison? The wreckage is on the shore to your left.>

Allison banked almost a full 90 degrees for a look. <I see it.>

"Damn it..."

Cornelius watched the biplane fly over as he crawled across the ground. It never came back.

"It's not over yet!"

Realizing that he had not been spotted, he continued to crawl—with submachine gun secured in his arms, head bowed low, moving as slowly as humanly possible.

He advanced at the speed of a tortoise, or perhaps even slower, as he headed for the downed aeroplane.

"All right. Good luck!"

Protected by Allison and seen off by Benedict, Major Travas stood from his seat. He wrapped a microphone around his neck and stuck an earpiece into his left ear, wrapping the radio around his waist, pouch and all.

Then he heaved the assault rifle over his shoulder and put the bag with the spare magazines across his right shoulder.

Using only his arms and right leg, Major Travas climbed over the left side of the amphibious craft and onto the lower wing. There he reached into one of the windows and pulled out the emergency raft. He threw the raft into the river, holding on to the rope connected to it. The raft inflated on its own into a small two-seater.

<Can you hear me? I'm leaving my crutches behind; they'll only get in the way. Please toss them down from above if necessary,> Major Travas said to Benedict as he tested his connection.

<You're not planning on covering 30 kilometers on crutches, are you?> Benedict sighed.

<It will be easier than crawling,> Major Travas replied, expertly sliding off the wing and into the raft. Benedict breathed a sigh.

Major Travas stretched his legs forward and took out a small folding oar. He would have to switch sides often because he only had the one.

<I know you don't need me to remind you, but don't push yourself. You're still injured,> said Benedict.

<Do your best! You have things to get done, so *do* push yourself!> Allison said from overhead.

Major Travas began to row.

The Lutoni was calm, but if he did nothing, the currents would carry him off. He struggled to orient himself a little more upriver than his destination.

The arms that he had taken care to train—even at the risk of being scolded by the nurses—propelled him all the way to east bank.

Major Travas finally made it to shore about 3 meters upriver from the wreckage, on the right side of the plane. First, he tied the oar to the rope on the raft and stuck the oar into the mud.

Then he crawled out of the boat and continued crawling towards the craft on his left.

He opened the hatch on the right side of the fuselage and entered the plane for the first time in over 10 days.

Nothing had changed inside the aeroplane.

Even his old seat was still the same.

He looked under it.

The attaché case secured under his seat was still there.

With a sigh of relief, Major Travas unfastened the case and pulled it out. He checked it for traps, just in case, but soon confirmed that the case was just as he had left it last.

<I have the documents. I'll be out shortly,> he said to the others over the radio, and turned. That was when he spotted two small batons.

Two signal flares. The ones he had left behind.

He had to hide the fact that he had never used the flares.

“Maybe I should get rid of them...”

Major Travas picked them up and stuffed them into his jacket.

With the attaché case in his left hand, Major Travas crawled across the aeroplane.

He left out of the hatch on the right side of the fuselage, the same way he had come in through.

And he was shot.

Chapter 19: A Midday Night's Duel

Burst fire.

The act of firing in bursts of about three to five rounds at a time—a function equipped on guns capable of automatic fire.

A function used to prevent the gun from running amok in the sustained recoil of automatic mode, or used to create a barrage.

A series of bullets fired on burst mode greeted Major Travas.

Cornelius had not broken his crawling advance, and was about 50 meters from the wreckage when he spotted the approaching life raft and stopped.

Soon, a man disembarked from the raft and crawled into the fuselage.

Slowly, moving at several millimeters a second, Cornelius raised his submachine gun. He took aim, pointing the curved magazine to the left.

Pointing his gun at the right-side hatch of the wreck from amidst the grass and mud, Cornelius waited.

And he pulled the trigger at the man who emerged.

Three 9mm handgun rounds were fired at Major Travas from 50 meters away.

The first round missed the side of his left leg by five centimeters, striking the river with a splash.

The second round flew at the left side of his chest and hit the attaché case he clung to. It shot through the leather and was stopped by the stack of documents inside.

The third round grazed his right cheek and shot straight through his ear, leaving a round hole in flesh and cartilage.

“Grk!”

His ear burning, his chest reeling from pain, Major Travas collapsed on the spot. He landed partway in the water.

Once Major Travas had fallen, Cornelius did not bother to stay hidden.

He rose and took aim with his submachine gun, sprinting at his target. His gun remained trained on his prey constantly, as though his upper body were completely separate from his legs. He knew he had to finish off the target before the target could stand.

Once he had closed about 10 meters, he was able to see the bottom of the fuselage.

And the man lying under it.

The man taking aim at him.

“Tch!”

Cornelius dove immediately to the ground, holding up his submachine gun so it would not hit the mud.

He landed on his face, chest, and stomach in the dive, but had no time to worry about such things.

Then came a series of noises much louder and heavier than those from his submachine gun. The bullets flew faster than the speed of sound, zooming through the air above Cornelius's head.

Major Travas did two things as he fell to the ground.

The first was to let go of the attaché case.

Then he whipped back his right arm and unslung his assault rifle from his shoulder. The moment the right half of his body landed in the Lutoni, the assault rifle was right in front of him.

He grabbed the gun with his left hand and quickly toggled it to semi-automatic mode, and took hold of the grip.

Without a second's hesitation—without even worrying about being shot again—he sat up.

And he spotted the man in camouflage gear rushing across the plains in his direction.

He did not have the time to unfold the stock. With only his hands, he took aim and pulled the trigger to release five rounds.

The attacker fell forward. But Major Travas knew instantly that his shots had not hit their mark.

So he immediately got to work on his next course of action.

When five rounds passed over his head, Cornelius rolled over to his left. Two rolls put him one meter to the side, from where he held up his submachine gun.

He could not see his target, but took aim at a likely point and held down the trigger.

About six rounds were fired, their casings flying through the air.

Cornelius was not so naïve as to assume that this attack would kill his opponent. It was simply a measure to pressure the target and restrict his movements.

Bullets made most people feel instinctive fear. That fear led to less than half a second of paralysis, which made them vulnerable to attack from people who were not affected by such emotions.

Cornelius knew well from his training that fear and hesitation were completely unnecessary in a shootout.

All he had to remember was to shoot his opponent before his opponent could shoot him.

Cornelius rose with the submachine gun in his hands.

His eyes met those of his target.

The target was clutching an assault rifle with a folding stock and standing there without fear that his body would make the perfect target.

The muzzle of the assault rifle flashed, and shell casings flew into the air.

“Shit!”

Cornelius ducked without getting a single shot in. His opponent was firing in semi-automatic mode, shooting two rounds every second. More bullets whipped over Cornelius's head.

Some of the shots flew low and drove themselves into the dirt, scattering blades of grass in the air.

If Cornelius were to push himself up by even a hair, he might put himself in the way of fire. He remained on the ground almost as though trying to fuse with the dirt.

“Gods damn it!” he swore.

The opponent was neither down nor hiding.

In a shootout, it was generally safest to shoot from behind cover. This was common knowledge. But there was one exception.

When one had the absolute advantage.

In such cases, it was more advantageous to risk making a bigger target of oneself and increase one’s scope of fire. By creating a barrage, one could restrict the enemy’s movements and prevent him from getting the chance to shoot back.

It was a good strategy in theory, but few were capable of pulling it off. It was human instinct to take cover when faced with fear.

And yet this man was applying that strategy, believing that it was his best option in this situation.

Cornelius’s ears began to ache from the shockwaves from the bullets flying overhead.

“Not bad! I’m actually going to have to put in some effort!” he roared, encouraging himself.

Over 20 bullets had already passed over him.

He had glimpsed the man’s gun earlier; the magazine was long, but it probably could not hold more than 30 rounds.

That meant that he was close to running out.

Changing magazines would take no less than two seconds.

If more than two people were working together, one could cover for the other. In such cases, the one changing magazines would shout, ‘Loading!’ to his allies.

But this was a one-on-one duel. Only one man came on the raft. And Cornelius was alone as well.

Cornelius buried his face in the dirt and waited for his moment.

About eight seconds after the barrage began, the time came.

The rhythmical sound of gunfire was interrupted.

Cornelius stood, spitting dirt from his mouth. And—

Major Travas stood on his right leg, continuing to fire at the area his attacker had disappeared into.

As he continued, Major Travas’s left hand let go of the gun and left his right hand to shoot alone.

Then with his free left hand, he reached into the bag hanging from his left shoulder. Inside were the spare magazines, each fully loaded.

He grabbed one of them and checked its direction before putting his left hand on the gun again. He continued to fire with the spare magazine in his grip.

Major Travas was not counting his bullets, but he knew that he was about to run out.

And that his attacker was waiting for that moment.

The assault rifle clicked.

It was out of bullets.

Major Travas took his right hand off the grip.

He grabbed the lever on the right side of the gun and pulled it, tightening his hold. With his shoulder alone he supported the stock and the rest of the gun, taking his left hand off of it.

Then he flipped the spare magazine on its side, held it under the gun, and swung forward.

The spare magazine pressed down on the magazine catch, which spat out the empty one. The empty magazine was flung forward.

Major Travas loaded the spare magazine and took his right hand off it. The bolt immediately came springing back into place, chambering the next round.

He was now ready to open fire again.

It had all taken less than a second.

“Major Travas! I just figured out the fastest way to reload one of these guns. Check it out!”

Major Travas remembered how the grinning man once codenamed ‘Yzma’ had showed him the trick, and pulled the trigger.

When Cornelius leapt up, the one-second action moved him to shock, awe, and profanity.

“Damn it!”

In the blink of an eye his mind made the decision between fight and flight, pushing his body back against the ground.

Two shots went flying over his head.

Then came silence.

* * *

Ten seconds earlier.

<Someone’s on the ground! Allison, do you see him?> Benedict called on the radio, noticing the faint sound of gunfire. He had shut off his engine and was enjoying a relaxing drift down the Lutoni, making sure that the plane did not hit any obstacles.

Benedict turned to the wreck. Allison’s plane was circling the air above it.

<I can’t see anything from here. He might be in camouflage.>

<Right! I’ll fly on up and see if I can spot anything.>

Benedict pressed the ignition switch.

Major Travas was panting, standing with his assault rifle at the ready.

He was placing most of his weight on his right leg, but his left leg throbbed and sent waves of agony throughout the rest of his body.

Blood dribbled from his right ear and soaked his collar.

But he could not move.

All he could think about was pulling the trigger the moment his foe raised his head.

Cornelius was on the ground.

“Should have brought a grenade...”

He was just as rooted to his position as Travas was.

They were only 20 meters apart, but there was nothing to provide cover between them. The second he raised his head, he would lose it.

A submachine gun and its handgun rounds stood no chance against an assault rifle. The assault rifle's rounds were about four times stronger.

Cornelius knew that even if they were to fire simultaneously and hit the same parts of one another, he would fall first.

The roar of two planes filled the air overhead. The two fighters were at a deadlock. Dozens of seconds passed. And out of nowhere, Night came.

Major Travas and Cornelius realized instantly that the world around them was growing dark.

The massive moon circled the planet once every eight days. Its speed and size caused frequent eclipses, most of them total. It was such a mundane occurrence that people usually did not pay it much mind. They simply treated it as a minor inconvenience to wait out for a few minutes.

But things were different for the two men engaged in a shootout.

<Damn it! It's Night!> Allison groaned.

She was circling the wreck from a set altitude to find the man fighting Major Travas. But the world slowly began falling into darkness.

Benedict, who had taken off northward on the Lutoni, also noticed the eclipse.

“Why now?!”

The darkness would make low-altitude flight difficult. He forced himself to climb.

When the moon overcame the sun, the world cooled instantly.

“This is my chance,” Cornelius chuckled, and pulled the belt-string off his uniform.

Then he tied the string to the trigger of his submachine gun.

The sky grew even darker; 70 percent of the sun was hidden.

Cornelius jammed the stock of his gun into the mud. The gun remained where he stuck it, pointing at the air at a slight angle.

Eighty percent of the sun was hidden now. A pair of first-magnitude stars twinkled in the sky.

It was so dim that he could barely see his target.

“Ha!”

That was when Cornelius pulled on the string.

The submachine gun began spewing bullets at the darkened sky.

Major Travas took aim at the flashes and pulled the trigger.

His rounds hit their mark, sending the submachine gun flying.

Cornelius ran.

He broke into a sprint as he pulled a handgun from his holster. By the time his enemy had shot at the submachine gun, Cornelius was already taking aim at him.

He opened fire, both hands on his gun.

“Argh!”

The shot did not hit Major Travas. But it struck the left side of his assault rifle and forced it out of his hands.

The moment the assault rifle fell into the Lutoni, the moon eclipsed the sun entirely.

It was a Midday Night.

In the world lit only by the stars, Cornelius ran forward as he fired away.

The bullets grazed past Major Travas, who was now unarmed. Some of the rounds made sparks as they hit the wreckage.

Cornelius stopped in the darkness.

He was only about 10 meters from the foe. If he were to speak, his enemy would be able to hear him.

Remaining where he was, Cornelius continued pulling the trigger.

He kept shooting on and on until his 15-round magazine was empty. He felt the slide come to a full stop, and quickly released the magazine.

With his left hand, Cornelius swiftly took out a spare and shoved it into the gun. He did not need his eyes to do a job he was so accustomed to.

Once he pulled on the slide, it returned to its original position.

And he was ready to pull the trigger again—

“Ugh!”

A powerful flash assaulted his eyes.

Cornelius had no idea what was happening.

The world before him turned red and blindingly bright. It was almost as if the sun itself was rushing at him from where his enemy stood. At the same time, something zoomed past the right side of his face.

His eyes, used to the darkness, were completely blinded.

“There...”

Major Travas had fired one of his signal flares at Cornelius’s face. He had closed his right eye just before releasing the flare.

His left eye took the full brunt of the blinding light, but his right eye retained its vision.

The flare continued to shine from behind Cornelius, casting his silhouette in shadow for all to see.

Major Travas pressed the talk button by his neck.

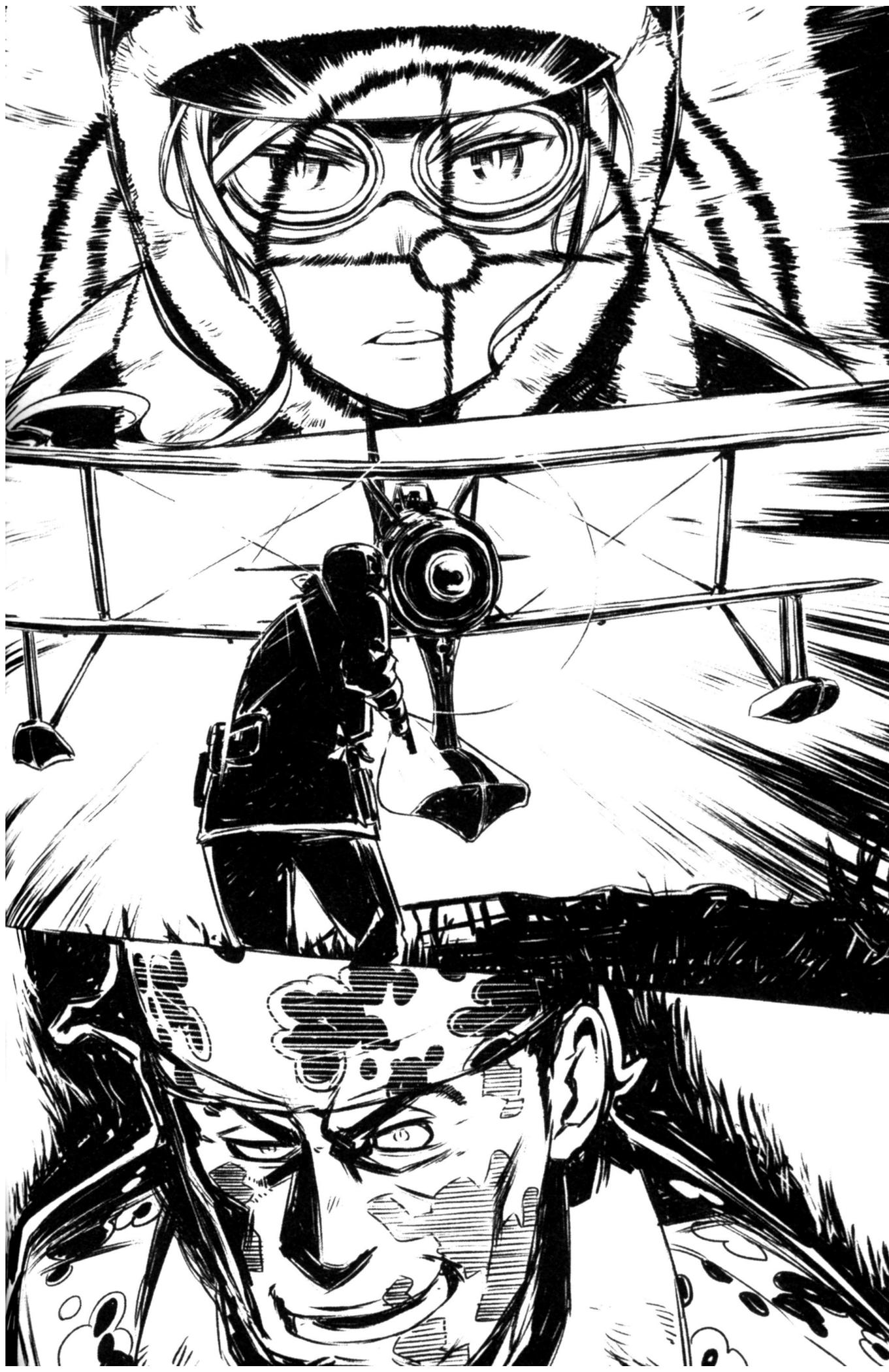
<Allison! Shoot at the man standing seven meters in front of the wreck!>

A second later, he threw the second flare into the sky.

This flare did what it was originally made to do, bringing light to the Midday Night.

“Damn it!”

Cornelius’s eyes managed to make out one thing in the blinding world.



An aeroplane charging at him from near-ground altitude.

“Ha! Now this is more like it!”

He pointed his handgun at the craft.

Major Travas dove into the wreck as Allison’s plane zoomed past in a hail of shell casings.

* * *

A diamond ring began shining in the sky. The Midday Night was coming to an end. The world grew bright faster than it had grown dark, and the stars disappeared without a sound.

Allison landed her craft in the Lutoni. It taxied to the shore without a moment’s pause. Soon half the floats were beached on the muddy bank, bringing the plane to a full stop.

“Talk about reckless... But I suppose I’m not one to talk, since I’m the one who pulled her into this,” Benedict groaned, watching Allison jump out of her plane.

Allison threw off her aviator hat. Her bun came undone and her long blond hair came fluttering loose like a veil of silk.

“Wil!”

She sprinted across the plain.

“Over here!” replied Major Travas—or Wil—next to the fallen man.

The man was lying face-up, his camouflaged uniform stained with blood.

Allison pulled a handgun from her holster and looked at Major Travas. He was engaged in a desperate attempt to stop the man’s bleeding. Not even the fresh wound on his ear seemed to bother him.

“Enough...I’m finished...kill me...” Cornelius gasped, coughing up blood.

“Who is behind this plot?” Major Travas demanded, pressing on Cornelius’s stomach even as the bleeding continued.

“I don’t know... But who are you...?”

“Major Travas of the Royal Army.”

“Ah, a senior officer... First Lieutenant Cornelius, sir... 8th...Special Forces...of the Royal Army...”

Cornelius saluted even as he lay dying. Major Travas saluted back, his hand completely red.

“You are strong, Major... After the war...it was so boring...that I...wanted to fight... stake my life...and fight...and it was fun, sir...what about you...? Did you enjoy...this battle...?”

Those were Cornelius’s last words.

From the tips of the toes and fingers, then to the rest of him, his body began trembling. Finally, blood gushed from his mouth.

“Here, Wil,” Allison said, handing him her gun.

“Thank you.”

Hands stained with blood, Wil took it. He ended his opponent's pain with a single pull of the trigger

* * *

<Let's get going.>

Benedict gave the signal as he slowly pushed the throttle. Allison's craft was slowly towed back into the river.

It was a violent and reckless attempt, but soon the seaplane was freed from the beach and began to float. Benedict turned left to give the rope between the crafts some slack.

Allison started her engine and quickly turned right. The two crafts were floating parallel on the river when their respective pilots untied the rope. They tossed the rope into the river to avoid the trouble of coiling it back.

<You don't need to get that checked soon?> Benedict asked Major Travas, who sat in the back of Allison's seaplane.

Major Travas sat with the attaché case on his lap. He was almost deaf in his right ear, likely because the shot from earlier ruptured his eardrum.

<No. First, we have to find a safe location.>

<Is there one in the area?> Allison asked.

<My craft is supposed to go back to Raputoa, but you can't land there on a seaplane, Allison. And neither of us have the fuel to fly back to Ikstova, do we?>

<No,> Allison replied. <By the way, I wonder where these guys came from? I'm taking off, Wil,> she said, pushing the throttle. The seaplane taxied on the water and lifted off.

<Hey, what's going on?> Benedict asked, quickly following suit.

The second it was in the air, Allison's craft began flying low at maximum output.

It approached the liaison craft flying slowly over the Western buffer zone from behind and blew holes in its left wing with the machine gun.

As the pilot panicked, Allison positioned herself next to him and gave a friendly call. <Excuse me, I have a question. Answer me, or I'll shoot.>

<But you already did!> the man cried.

* * *

"I can't believe we're standing here again."

Benedict stood in the former Teruto Royal Army Base and spun with his arms wide open. Though it was now an aeroplane graveyard, the grandeur of the former castle and command center remained unchanged from 19 years earlier.

"Ah, to be young again. I still remember all the girls..." Benedict sighed. Allison shot him an icy look.

"Fi would shoot you if she heard you just now."

"Just reminiscing. I remember the good old days. They wouldn't even let me grow out facial hair!"

Allison's seaplane was secured in the canal. Before the canal was Benedict's craft, which had made a ground landing.

"Hey!" cried the pilot of the liaison craft, who had been forced to lead them to the base. "You'd better keep your promise! I gotta make it back alive!" he demanded, sitting with his hands tied behind his back.

The trio had interrogated him and learned that the base would be completely empty for the rest of the day. They also learned that they could refuel at the base.

Allison performed first aid on Major Travas's right ear as he sat on the pavement. She put disinfectant on the wound, wrapped it up in clean gauze, and secured it with tape.

"Done. You're gonna have to get a specialist to look at you. How's your leg?"

"Thanks, Allison. It was hurting quite a bit earlier, but I'm all right now."

"Good to hear. But make sure you get yourself to a hospital, okay? Don't do anything reckless."

"I never thought I'd hear those words out of your mouth, Allison."

"Really? But I've always thought that way."

"What?"

Benedict waited for the conversation to end before chiming in. "What are you going to do now? Planning something, I suspect?"

Major Travas looked down at his attaché case. There was a small hole in it.

"I'm afraid we can't read microfilm without the proper equipment. It's a good thing we crossed the border today—I'd like to head for Sfrestus."

"Want a ride?" "You want a ride?" Benedict and Allison asked in unison. Major Travas shook his head.

"Thank you both for the offer, but I'll have to decline," he said. "After all, my mother lives in the area. Why don't the three of us go see her right now?"

"Y-you're coming back, right? You'd better not leave me here to die! I'm gonna be rich, you hear?! Filthy rich!"

They chained up the pilot, who was for some reason absolutely certain of his reward, and locked him in the hangar.

"Don't worry. We'll be back tonight for our planes. Don't run off on us, and if any wolves show up, fend 'em off with your voice."

The liaison craft took to the sky, with Benedict in the pilot's seat and Allison and Major Travas in the back.

Thirty kilometers was nothing when traveling by air. The liaison craft reached its destination in 15 minutes.

Their destination was a small village on the plains by the forest. There were no towns in the area, with only a small road connecting the village to the world. Lining the road were about 20 small houses, several sports fields, and barns for livestock.

At the village entrance was a sign that read 'Future Village'.

Once, a woman had moved in alone to an old home in the area.

She had moved there because it was close to the buffer zone, and therefore the border. The woman had lived alone there, holding on to the handgun left by her dead family. If the Roxcheans ever crossed the border, she would shoot them with the handgun. Nineteen years ago, two Roxcheans crossed the border and came to her home.

It happened to be afternoon tea time at the village.

About two dozen children sat around a large round table on that clear, sunny day.

The children were around elementary school-age. Though they usually lived in Sfrestus, they came to stay in the village at times to learn about nature and its bounties.

Once tea had been served, the maids also took their seats.

Then sat a woman over 70 years of age—elderly but still sprightly with her head held high.

“Madam, look!”

That was when an aeroplane appeared overhead with a quiet hum, almost floating in the sky. It flew over the table, its flaps moving.

“Look, an aeroplane!”

“What’s going on?”

As the children cheered and the adults fretted, the old woman—with her excellent eyesight—recognized the people on the craft.

“Don’t worry, everyone. It looks like my son’s dropping in for some tea.”

The aeroplane landed on a small soccer field made for the children, its engine shutting down. The entire village gathered to see.

Three people disembarked.

“Hey, kids!” Benedict said, taking off his hat.

“He has a beard!” cried a particularly rambunctious boy. Benedict’s face was in every history book in Sou Be-Il, but none of the photographs showed him with facial hair.

“Scuse us!” Allison took off her hat.

“You have blond hair! It’s so pretty!” exclaimed a little girl with black hair.

“Thank you, sweetie. But black hair is just as beautiful,” Allison said, giving the girl a pat on the head.

Major Travas slowly disembarked on crutches. The chief—his mother, Travas Ladia—went up to him.

“You should have called, honey. Look at you, all covered in wounds! What have you been up to this time?”

Slowly, she pulled him into her arms.

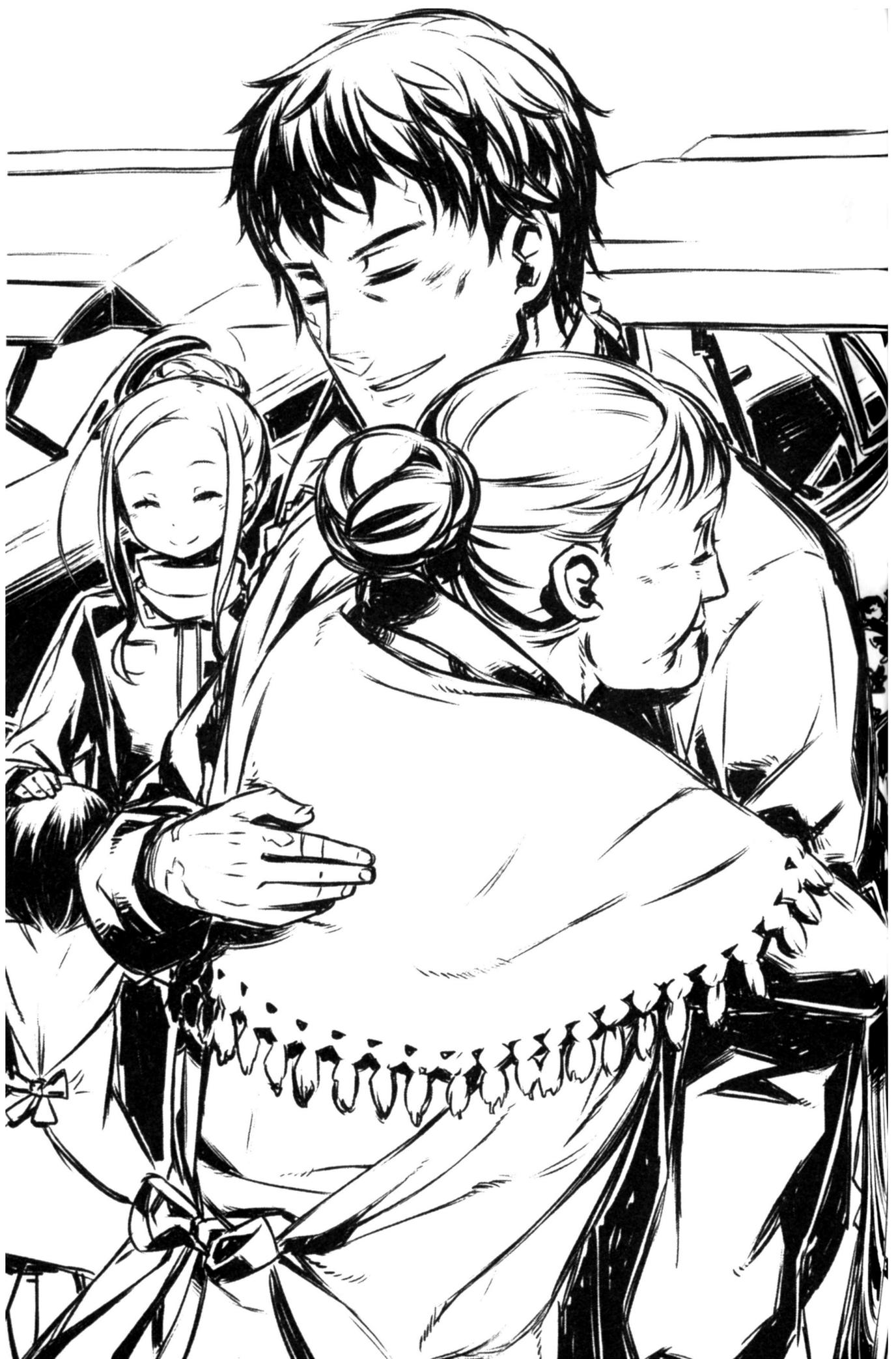
“Welcome home, son.”

Ladia turned to Allison. Allison simply saluted with a grin.

“And you don’t change at all, do you?” Ladia chuckled, saluting back. Then she looked at Benedict. “It’s good to see you, Mr. Hero.”

“It’s wonderful to see you too, Madam. Seeing you again brings back so many memories,” Benedict replied, his eyes narrowing in a smile. He had not come back since he reported to Ladia right after the discovery of the Mural.

“All right, everyone. Let’s save the complicated discussion for later,” said Ladia. “How about some tea?”



Chapter 20: The Capital District

The 21st day of the fifth month.

“Major Kinski of the Sou Be-II Royal Army, currently posted at the Sou Be-II embassy, I presume?”

A man in his thirties was stopped on the sidewalk in front of the crisp store at Capital West Station in the Capital District.

The man wore a plain navy suit. He was of average height and build, with a head of short black hair and a nondescript and unmemorable face that was neither particularly handsome nor ugly.

From appearances, it was impossible to tell that he was from the West.

The nondescript man called Kinski gave his questioner a curious look.

The questioner was a stranger to him—a middle-aged man in a grey suit.

“I think you might have the wrong person,” said the man in his thirties, in perfect Roxchean.

“No,” replied the older man, “I’m afraid I am absolutely correct, Major Kinski Lut of the Sou Be-II Royal Army.”

The sidewalk was crowded with people irritated by the men stopped in the middle. They passed by, frowning.

It was afternoon. The sky was clear.

“Good grief. You would be from the police, then?” Kinski admitted.

The police inspector nodded.

“I see. I have nothing to say, I’m afraid. I’m simply dropping by to pick up some crisps.”

“The crisps will be on me today, if you’d be willing to talk.”

“I’m afraid I must decline.”

“It’s about your predecessor. Travas.”

“...I suppose I could make time for a brief conversation.”

It was still afternoon when the two grown men walked side-by-side down the sidewalk, each holding a paper bag overflowing with crisps.

“I thought the rule of thumb for people like us was to do nothing suspicious, Inspector,” Kinski pointed out. He was walking on the inspector’s right.

“Then you don’t know the Capital District well enough,” replied the inspector, “Going out to pick up crisps for your coworkers but finishing them before you get back to the office is practically tradition around here. The least conspicuous thing you could do. You’d do well to remember that during your time here in the East.”

“Thank you for the lesson, Inspector,” Kinski nodded. “By the way, how long were you waiting for me outside the store?”

“Only two days,” the inspector replied. “Now let me get to the point. I’m sure you and your people at the embassy have heard of what happened to Major Travas.”

“These really are delicious—and yes. Yes we do, Inspector.”

“Best crisps in town, I’d say. Makes you kind of thirsty, though. But back to the Travas matter. Do you really believe what they say?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you believe Travas was in cahoots with drug cartels, and that he died in an aeroplane crash?”

“What is there to disbelieve, Inspector? It’s all fact. We received the reports. We’re too busy to be skeptical about information that is clearly accurate.”

“Even though you’ve never personally seen the scene of the crime or the body? Naïve. You’ve got a long way to go before you can stand on Travas’s level, Newbie.”

Kinski said nothing.

“Cat got your tongue? Your silence is quite telling.”

“Good grief. Nothing gets past you, does it, Inspector?”

“Just don’t make that face when you meet Travas.”

“So you’re implying that Major Travas is actually still alive, and innocent of the crimes he’s been proven guilty of? Where did you get such absurd ideas, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Detective’s instinct. Don’t spies have those too?”

“We don’t move on instinct, Inspector. But we do tell ourselves to trust them.”

“If you trust them, why wouldn’t you move on them? You people make no sense.”

“What is your point?” Major Kinski asked, glancing.

“Nothing complicated,” the inspector replied, “People have told you things, and Major Travas will tell you things. It’s up to you which one you choose to believe. All the best, Newbie.”

Kinski remained silent.

“Quiet again, eh?”

* * *

The 25th day of the fifth month.

The month was drawing to a close.

It had been eight days since Edelman was safely escorted out of campus, and five since the dogfight over the Lutoni.

The weather was warming up in the Capital District. After the particularly harsh winter that year, even late spring felt like midsummer to many.

The 25th was the first day of classes after the weekend. Two girls sat together in the student cafeteria at the 4th Capital Secondary School.

“What’s wrong, Lillia? Is everything all right?”

Lillia’s long brown hair was a scruffy mess, and her eyes had gone baggy. She moved languidly as though half-dead, the piece of bread in her fingers missing her mouth and hitting her face before landing on the table.

“You shouldn’t push yourself if you’re feeling sick,” said Meg, “It’s not too late to go to the nurse’s office to get some rest. Maybe take the afternoon off?” she asked in Bezelese, looking into Lillia’s face. Meg’s slender white hand felt Lillia’s forehead. “I don’t think you have a fever, at least...”

“Oh, Meg... I...” Lillia moaned. She sounded like a world-weary old woman.

“I’m listening.”

“It’s just...my mom...”

“Did something happen to her?” Meg wondered. “Is she ill?”

“No, she’s fine,” replied Lillia, “So full of energy that she wouldn’t die even if you killed her.”

“R-right. I’m glad to hear that.”

“But...”

“But?”

Lillia picked up her cup. The tea was cold and untouched, like the rest of her food. She drained the cup in one go and sighed.

Looking around to make sure no one was around to hear, she put on a grimace. Lillia looked like a crushed frog.

“My mom’s getting the boot.”

“What? Did I hear that right, Lillia?” Meg whispered, going pale. Lillia hung her head.

“More than 20 years of service in the Confederation Air Force...and now, a dishonorable discharge. Do you know what that means, Meg?”

“N-no.”

“See, if a soldier gets caught doing something bad, she doesn’t get tried like a civilian. She goes to a military court. It’s called a court-martial.”

“A-and?”

“They decide her sentence and say, ‘You’re fired!’ and kick her out. That’s what a dishonorable discharge is. And you know what happens if she leaves the military like this?”

“N-no.”

“She can’t claim a single Rox from the pension she saved up in the last 20 years, and no severance pay either. She has to find a new job now, but she’s mandated to write ‘dishonorable discharge from Confederation Air Force’ on her resume for the rest of her life. So she’s not gonna have an easy time getting work. That’s not all. If she lives in the Capital District, she loses voting rights for the next 10 years too.”

Meg was stunned by the list of penalties. She gaped silently like a carp begging for food, her already-fair complexion growing paler.

Lillia looked up and smiled. The bags under her eyes seemed to get deeper.

“So now I might have to drop out of school. Not ‘might’, actually. I have to. Can’t put food on the table if I don’t work. Thanks for everything, Meg. I’ll never forget you. If I find work at a coffee shop, come by once in a while and I’ll give you a free side of sugar.”

“But—” Meg interrupted, but she could not say anything more.

“I might not have many more chances to eat at the cafeteria. Better stuff myself while I still can.”

Lillia stuck her spoon into her cold creamy chicken stew. She scooped it up and ate in slow motion.

Meg could not bear to watch. She slapped herself. “Calm down, Lillia!” she cried. “Could you tell me what happened? Allison is a great test pilot, and she went from child soldier to captain in 20 years, right?”

Lillia smiled. "True. But! Someone at the Air Force told me that she stole the latest aeroplane from a different base and took off with it."

"What?"

"From the Republic of Raputoa Air Force Base. For no reason. If only she had one. You know, like rescuing her daughter from a criminal or something."

"A-and what about now? Where is Allison?"

"A military prison on some base. She's been sentenced to 10 days. I bet she's wearing one of those striped prison uniforms right about now, digging herself an escape tunnel..."

Ten seconds of silence filled the table.

Lillia stopped mid-spoonful and resumed her explanation.

"Her boyfriend died recently."

"Huh? What? Wait, is that today or tomorrow?" Meg stammered, thrown into confusion.

"Didn't I tell you, Meg?" Lillia said. "She was seeing this soldier named Travas who worked at the Sou Be-Il embassy. Apparently he was in a plane crash on his way back to the West. We heard last week."

"Oh no... I'm so sorry to hear that."

"Thanks. That was when Mom kind of lost it. She pulled out all the stops to go on leave the next day and went off somewhere and never came back. I don't know what's happening anymore..."

Meg was silent.

"And now I hear she's been arrested. Ha ha ha... I got the call the day before yesterday. You know what? I understand that. I'm sure anyone would want to steal a fighter plane if her boyfriend suddenly died. That makes sense. It makes so much sense! Ha ha..."

"...Say, Lillia?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you want to come to the newspaper club after class today?"

"Why?"

"I don't know how to help you, Lillia. But maybe the others can think of a way!" Meg exclaimed. But Lillia was not so enthused.

"I'm grateful for the offer, but..."

"No?"

"Well, it's...er... Really embarrassing. I mean, it's true that my mom just did something really shameful."

"Oh. I'm sorry, Lillia. I didn't mean—"

"Don't worry about it! Really, it's no big deal!"

"Did you tell Treize?"

"Not yet. I feel like that'd just trouble him."

"You don't know that for sure! Since you told me, you should talk about it with Treize, too!" Meg cried. The silverware on the table rattled.

Lillia froze. "Oh. Er...well, yeah. I guess. Anyway, I still have a few days before Mom gets discharged..."

"Good. And one more thing!"

"Yeah? What?"

“You have to go to class this afternoon, okay?”

“Why?”

“Because we’re students, and studying is our duty! You can’t let your grades drop, just in case things work out somehow!”

A smile rose to Lillia’s tired face.

“Meg, for once you seem like a real big sister!”

* * *

After class. The newspaper club office.

“Everyone, how much money do you have?”

That was the first thing out of Meg’s mouth when after-school tea time began.

“Please quickly say, ‘me’!” she urged the others, all attempts at proper Roxchean left by the wayside.

Seron’s jaw dropped at the surprising new side of his fiancée.

“Oh, er... I don’t have any savings right now. Spent it all on camping and outdoor gear, and transportation money for training,” Larry admitted with easy naïveté.

“My beauty is the only asset I’ll ever need,” Natalia declared, pushing up her glasses with her pointer finger.

“Are you proposing that we begin dealing in stocks as part of our operations, Megmica? I am all for it!” Nick declared, his attention piqued by something completely different.

“What’s wrong, Megmica?” asked Jenny, the only person to give a reasonable response.

“Huh? Oh, yes! I see. I did not explain this to you yet!”

Meg thought for a moment.

“There is a person in trouble! No, let us say there is a person! The person wishes to attend the secondary school but can’t! Because the person has no money!”

The others each responded in their own ways, but all in agreement. Secondary education was not free, which meant financial difficulties kept some people out of school. It was not easy to qualify for the scholarship programs that schools offered, either.

“Because I think it will be very good if I can help someone like her. How much money will it be until she graduates? And is there any way to get my hand on that money? Can I borrow without explaining why?”

Meg finished her explanation, disclosing as much as she could without getting into the details.

“I don’t really get it, but sounds kinda hard for us. Ain’t possible,” Natalia said.

Nick picked up a crisp (the snack of the day) and agreed. “It will be difficult, even for the president. The money Jenny spends is used with permission from her family—I do not see them granting her such a large sum to send a complete stranger to school.”

Jenny snorted. “You’re right, as usual. Did you get that from a business magazine too? ... Anyway, Megmica, Nick is right.”

Larry, however, seemed uncomfortable throughout the entire conversation. He finally raised his voice.

“Say...I don’t know exactly what’s going on, but if you’re really really desperate, Megmica...”

All eyes fell on Larry.

“...Maybe you should ask Seron?”

“Why? Does he have a small fortune stashed somewhere?” asked Natalia.

“Hm... Can I tell them, Seron?” Larry said, turning.

“Sure. It’s about time Meg knew.”

“All right. Okay. Seron does have a decent fortune to his name. I can’t tell you the exact amount, but it’s about...about enough to set up a small business right now.”

Natalia’s glasses glinted. “How? Rob a bank recently, Seron?”

“No, Lia.”

Nick’s eyes glinted. “Futures trading, then?”

“Why do you always go in that direction, Nick?”

Meg’s pigtails swished left and right as the others spoke. “How is this? I do not understand.”

“Well—” Larry began, but Jenny beat him to the punch.

“From your mother’s company, isn’t it? Maxwell Frozen Foods pays you incentives.”

“Whoa, Jenfie!” Larry cried, eyes widening. “How’d you guess?”

“That’s the only possibility,” Jenny said nonchalantly.

“So what’s this about, Seron?” asked Natalia. “Explain it so someone like Larry can understand.”

“Hey, I already know!”

“Did you not hear the ‘someone like’ part? Go on, Seron,” Natalia urged.

All eyes—especially Meg’s—were on Seron.

“Jenny’s got it. I’ve been receiving incentives from Mother’s company for the past few years.”

“Why?”

“She’s paying me for my idea, Nat. Maxwell Frozen Foods started off by selling consumer-sized packages of frozen foodstuffs that were normally sold only for industrial or retail purposes. That was Mother’s idea, from when she used to work as a waitress.”

Nick chimed in, asking a question he already knew the answer to. “But aren’t frozen meals the company’s top product? Like their pre-made stew, hamburgers, and pizza? Not foodstuffs that need preparing after defrosting.”

“That is right. Our house also buys them,” said Meg.

“I see. So the meals were your idea, Seron,” Jenny said, correct again.

“Really?” “Is that so?” “Is this true?” asked Natalia, Nick, and Meg. Seron nodded.

“Mother was so busy when she first started her business that she had to hire a housekeeper to cook for Leena and me. That’s when I learned to cook and began helping out in the kitchen.”

“I see. So that’s why you’re so good,” Jenny grumbled. She was by no means a capable chef.

Seron continued, “And one day I had a thought. If we could get a professionally-made meal packaged and frozen, we wouldn’t need to spend all this time preparing and cooking meals.

It would make things so convenient for everyone. That was when Mother came home from work early for once, hugging Leena in the doorway. I told her my idea right then and there.”

“Then what happened?” asked Nick.

“She took off before I could blink. Leena started crying.”

“Bwahahahaha!”

“Could you please not laugh like a barbarian, Lia?”

“Mother made use of the idea immediately. She invested a lot into R&D, and finally developed ready-made frozen meals. The new products sold really well.”

“That is no surprise. Maxwell Frozen Foods’ frozen meals are indeed very convenient. My parents are especially fond of them, as it buys them more time for research. It is thanks to your mother, Seron, that Confederation Capital University is now equipped with freezers and ovens.”

Natalia nodded. “I see. So Seron’s mother the president is paying Seron for the idea.”

“She’s thanking Seron with the money,” said Larry. “So Megmica, that’s why Seron’s probably got biggest personal bank account of us all. I don’t know what you’re going through, and I’m not going to pry, but you could talk to Seron about it sometime when the rest of us aren’t around.”

“Oh, yes! Thank you!” Meg cried, bowing.

“You’re gonna get married anyway. That means a third of his savings—or double that—90 percent of his cash is yours, Megmica.”

“Did you fail math, Lia?”

“Current laws state that half of all assets earned after marriage belong to the spouse. It will be easiest to calculate your share if you file the marriage registration papers on the 1st of the month.”

“Thanks for taking all the romance out of their relationship, Nick.”

Meg turned to Seron. She did not seem to know if it was okay to ask for his help.

“Could you give me a bit of time to think about it, Meg?” Seron asked, calm in the face of the sudden crisis.

“Oh. Yes, of course. I will tell you if I learn something again,” Meg replied with a nod.

‘*Knowing Seron, he might take off to the bank the second club ends...*’ Larry thought, but he decided not to say anything.

But he decided he would tell Seron later to not do anything rash.

* * *

The very day the newspaper club in the 4th Capital Secondary School had a lively discussion about finances, a black car was driving through Sfrestus—the Western capital that ran almost 12 hours behind Roxche’s Capital District.

Two men sat in the back of the car.

One was a man in very late middle-age—Major General Aikashia Cross.

He was a Westerner who had once infiltrated Roxche as a spy and became a major in the enemy’s military.

During the cold war, he had smuggled away information on a new weapon that could have broken the uneasy balance of power and shifted the playing field to Roxche's advantage. By bringing that information to Sou Be-II and allowing the West to develop the same weapon, he protected the balance and became an unsung hero.

He was also Allison's father.

The other man was Major Travas, also known as Wilhelm Schultz.

With Ladia's help, he had traveled by aeroplane under an assumed appearance and identity for three days before finally reaching his destination.

However, he did not go to the Royal Army Headquarters. They would not be expecting a dead man—or one missing in action—to show up. But that made things easier for his purposes.

Major Travas had discreetly contacted his superior, Major General Aikashia, for a secret meeting. He reported everything that had happened and left out nothing.

And once the report was over, Major Travas explained what he intended to do next. Major General Aikashia listened to the very end.

"How shall I help you, then? Other than with the microfilm analysis, I mean?"

He meant that he would provide Travas all the help he needed.

Major Travas requested five people.

"Of course. I will be in touch with them," Major Aikashia promised, without even having to ask who they were.

* * *

The 28th day of the fifth month.

Two men were in an office in the Sou Be-II embassy in Roxche's Capital District.

One was Major Kinski, wearing a navy suit instead of a uniform.

The other was a rotund man about 10 years Kinski's senior. His face was as round as his belly, making him look more gentle and affable than his age. He wore a brown Royal Army uniform and a belt around his bulging waistline. His badge of rank identified him as a colonel.

"And you're certain this is not a joke? This is a genuine set of orders?" the colonel asked from his desk, flipping through a set of documents.

"I was wondering the same thing myself, sir. I even took the risk of questioning the orders because they were so dubious."

"And?"

"They are genuine. I am certain of it."

"This is ridiculous," the colonel exclaimed, his eyes wide.

"I cannot disobey orders, sir," Major Kinski said mechanically.

"Of course. Forget the Travas matter for the time being. I leave these orders in your hands. These... absurd orders on the security arrangements for Princess Matilda's incognito presence at the wedding of Roxchean civilians. Who are these civilians?"

"All I learned was that the groom's name is 'Wil'. I cannot say if that is even his real name."

“Either way, our mystery man has some connection to the royal family. Make sure to give him a good scolding for me. Demand to know why he didn’t hold the wedding a few months ago when the princess was here on her official visit.”

“If that is an order, sir. However—”

“I know. I’ll be there myself as well. I’ll greet the annoyance of a man and scold him in person. So the ceremony is on the 9th outside the Capital District? That puts us on duty on a weekend. I’ll have to cancel my golf plans with Roxche’s elites.”

“I’ll be praying for a rainstorm, sir.”

“I suppose that’s all we can do. ...By the way, was the groom’s name the only piece of information you collected? The bride will be there, yes?”

“Yes, unless Roxcheans have a strange marriage custom I haven’t been told of.”

“What about the bride’s name, then? Not even in the official orders?”

“Nothing on her, sir.”

“Hm... Is this really a genuine set of orders? Does the document really bear Major General Aikashia’s signature?”

“Shall I check again, Colonel? I believe the major general will be in attendance as well.”

“Never mind, then. What about local support?”

“I’ve said nothing to the Roxcheans this time, sir. We want to keep things low-profile, so the princess will only be accompanied by the major general and five bodyguards. The bodyguards are all former subordinates of Major Travas.”

“Ah, yes! The perfect men for the mission. They know the drill from the princess’s last visit. If Major Travas were here, he would’ve been assigned this mission instead of you.”

“Indeed, sir.”

“Ah, is that a twinge of jealousy I hear, Major Kinski?”

“No, sir. And—”

“And?”

“Major Travas is no longer here.”

* * *

The 2nd of the sixth month.

“I’m home!”

The owner of the Schultz family apartment made her triumphant return. It was midday, and the sun was shining brightly in the clear blue sky. The early summer air filled the grey concrete jungle of the Capital District’s residential area.

Allison was back from her 13-day departure.

In her jeans and brown outdoor jacket, she looked no different than she had when she left. But Allison was a completely changed woman.

Once a captain in the Confederation Air Force and one of its most talented female test pilots—

“Home sweet home! It was so drafty back in prison.”

—Allison was now unemployed.

“ARGH!”

She was greeted by her daughter’s scowl and clenched fists.

“Oh, is that a new greeting that’s trending around here?” Allison asked lackadaisically, tossing her bag into her room and skipping down the hall.

Lillia’s eyes were no longer baggy, but she did not look uplifted in the least. She ground her teeth and glared at the back of her mother’s head.

“No! Welcome back, okay? Welcome back! There! I’m *so* glad you look all right!”

“Mhm! I’m doing as well as ever. Have you lost weight, honey?”

“Yes, I have! Thanks a lot, Mom!” Lillia shot back, wearing a light blue dress in the warmer weather.

“Calm down, sweetheart. I’ll explain everything now. —Oh! Hey there, Your Highness!” Allison called. She stepped into the living room and was greeted by Prince Treize of Ikstova.

“Hello, Allison. Please don’t call me that.”

Treize was making lunch in a white T-shirt, khaki cargo pants, and an apron. He put a plate of hot sandwiches on the dining room table.

The sandwiches were cooked to perfection, the bread bulging and grilled a golden brown. Honey and tea were set on the side.

“Wow! Did you make enough for three? If not, could I order an extra serving?” Allison said, making demands of royalty without a care.

“You can have my portion, Allison. I’ll make more for myself, and extras if you want seconds.”

“Thanks!”

Allison washed her hands at the kitchen sink, rinsed out her mouth, and seated herself at the table. “So, were you comforting my daughter all this time, Treize?” she teased.

“No. Lillia didn’t tell me a thing until this morning,” Treize replied, to Allison’s visible disappointment.

“This morning? That’s so cold of you, honey.”

“I agree,” Treize said with a nod, taking some ham out of the fridge.

The sandwiches were filled only with ham and cheese, which looked deceptively bland at first glance. However, the cheese had been brought in all the way from Ikstova and could give anything in the Capital District a run for its money—Treize had discreetly cut off a chunk from the home of his two guardians. As for the ham, Treize had gotten a good deal on leftover luxury ham edges from a nearby butcher shop. That they were edges did not hurt the flavor one bit.

Treize cut the ham edges into long, thin slices for the best texture before putting them into the sandwiches. He also added a generous helping of fresh-ground pepper to offset the sweetness of the cheese.

It was one of Lillia’s favorite dishes, which she praised endlessly on her visits to Ikstova. Allison waited for her to take a seat on the other side of the table.

“All right! Thanks for the sandwiches, Treize! ... Wow! It’s great! I love it!”

Allison dug in without hesitation.

Lillia soon joined her.

“... Yeah. It’s good.”

“Phew, I’m stuffed,” Allison sighed, holding a cup of tea.

“Me too. ...Okay, Mother. Tell me what the heck is going on here,” Lillia said with a glare.

“Hm.”

Allison put down her cup and placed her elbows on the table, clasping her hands before her face.

“It’s true that I’m out of work. Sorry, Sweetie.”

“You don’t really sound sorry.”

“Really? I am.”

“...All right. What now?”

“Hm?”

“I’m asking what’s going to happen to us now.”

“Excellent question.”

Mother and daughter glared at each other over the table.

“More tea, ladies? Some honey?” Treize cut in, taking the role of a server. When Allison held out her cup, he refilled it. Then he sat next to Lillia and waited.

“Okay,” Allison said nonchalantly. “First, we’ll have to move out of this place before summer break.”

“I knew it,” Lillia sighed, closing her eyes. She raised her head. “I was ready for this. Ugh.”

“Really? Great!” Allison cheered.

“Argh! Okay. What else?” Lillia demanded.

Treize watched from the sidelines, wondering if Allison was starting with the worst of the news to soften the blow of whatever she was planning to reveal next.

“It’s kind of sad for me too. I mean, this is the house your father and I got together, back when he was in school. But things happen in life, you know?”

“Too many things, in my case. My mom flies fighter planes? My childhood friend is a prince? What’s next? Nothing will surprise me anymore. I’m going to get someone to write my biography someday and sell the drama rights to a radio station.”

“That’s a great idea! I can help out, and we can halve the royalties! Just imagine what’ll happen if they decide to make a film out of—”

“Back to the point, *ex*-Captain Schultz.”

“Yes, ma’am. Now that I’m out of work, I have no reason to be in the Capital District. Goodbye, traffic jams! Goodbye, concrete jungle!”

“I don’t know if you’re being optimistic or if you’re losing your mind...”

“But you still have to go to secondary school, Lillia. Gotta put up with dorm life for a few years, but that’s all right with you, right?”

“Huh?”

Lillia’s jaw dropped. She had been ready to drop out.

“You’ll be living in the same building as Treize. Not the same room, of course.”

“Obviously! ...Wait a second, you mean I don’t have to quit school?”

“Did you want to?”

“No! That’s not what I’m talking about! What about tuition? Secondary school is expensive. So are the dorms, especially with their crazy-luxurious meals!”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Why not? You didn’t even get a severance pay. So unless you have a massive nest egg saved up somewhere...”

“Sure! Er...well, no, I don’t. But...” Allison narrowly managed to stop herself from disclosing the existence of the massive sum she received from the Bezelese royal family. “But it’s okay!” she cried, holding her head high. Lillia looked pleasantly surprised for once.

“Did you find some other job, then? A civilian airline?”

“Huh? No, they don’t usually take people who’ve been dishonorably discharged.”

“Ugh! Then how? How did you work this witchcraft?!” Lillia howled, pulling at her own hair. Allison grinned.

“I’m remarrying!”

Thirty seconds of silence filled the room.

The kettle began to whistle in the kitchen. Treize got up to turn off the stove, then returned to his seat.

“What? Mother, please repeat that for me one more time, in Bezelese,” Lillia demanded. Allison acquiesced.

“Sure. I’m getting remarried! Although I guess that’s not really the right term for it. I don’t think there’s a word for it in Roxchean or Bezelese.”

“...To who, though? Major Travas—”

“Someone else.”

“But he was your—”

“He’s dead. I’m marrying someone else.”

“Whaaaaaat?”

“I mean, you can’t marry a dead person, in most cases.”

“Whaaaaaat?”

“I guess I could die and go to hell to marry him there, but I’m a little young for that, don’t you think?”

“Whaaaaaat?”

“So I’m going to find happiness in this world! Got that, sweetie?”

“Whaaaaaat?”

Treize readied himself. He would give Allison 40 seconds to explain things herself—if she did not, he would step him.

“Then who are you marrying?”

Allison jumped to her feet. “Hold on, okay? Let me show you a photo!” she chirped, skipping out of the room.

Lillia remained frozen mid-scream.

Treize remained silent, still counting down as he waited to see what Allison was going to do next.

There were 10 seconds left on his countdown when Allison returned.

She was holding a small silver picture frame.

Lillia and Treize knew very well what photo the frame contained.

The photo depicted two people from the knees up, but the angle was wonky because it was taken from above.

One of the subjects was a girl with blond hair and blue eyes. A ladylike girl wearing a light yellow dress and a confident smile. A younger Allison.

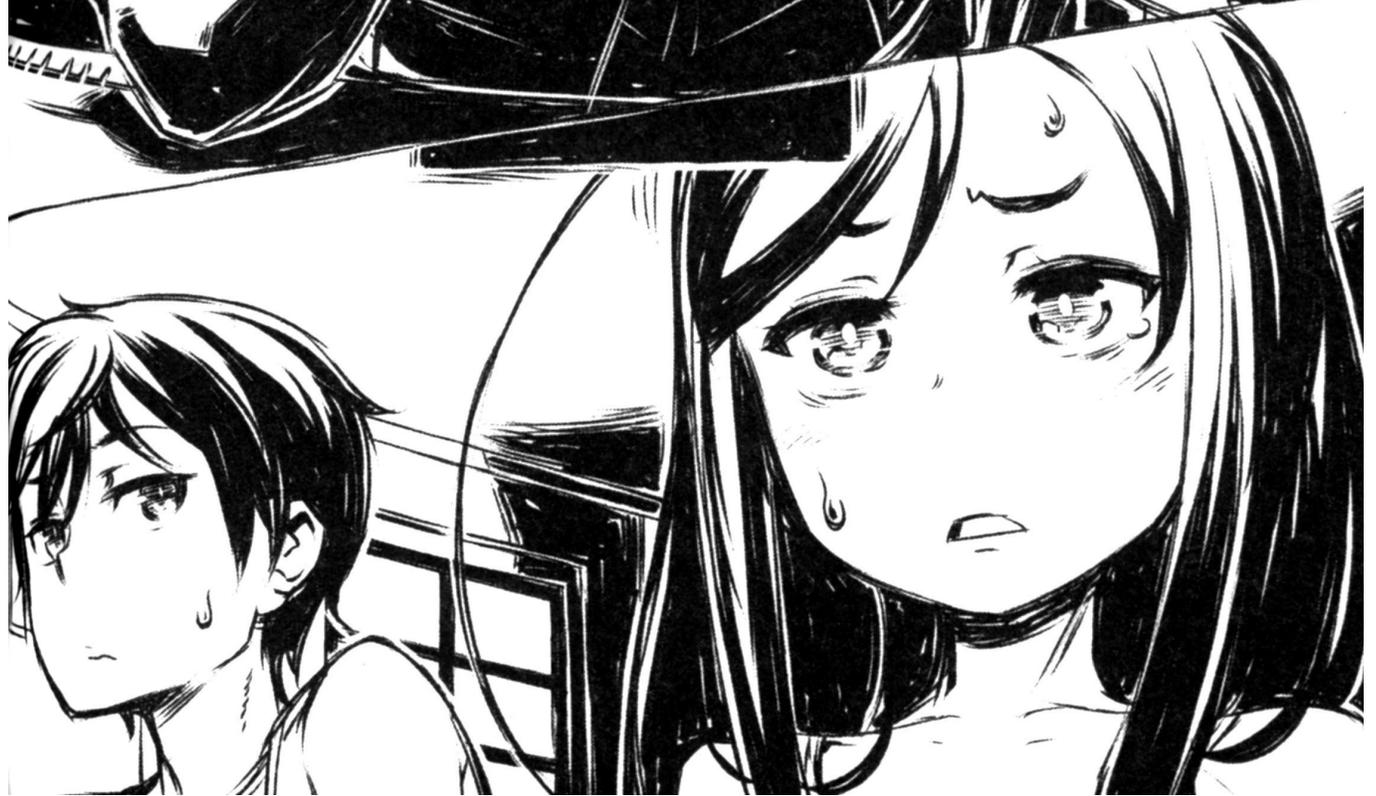
The other was a boy with light brown hair wearing a school jacket and uniform. However, his face was a complete blur.

Seven seconds left. Allison finally revealed the truth.

“This is him! Wilhelm Schultz! I’m marrying your father, Lillia!”

Several seconds passed in silence.

“I think you need an ambulance, Mom...” Lillia finally muttered.



Chapter 21: The Wedding

About an hour's drive from the Capital District was a great plain surrounded by fields.

The plain was part of the village of Parukho, a town in the Republic of Daurade—one of the Confederation member states situated to the north of the capital.

The village was tiny, its industry focused largely on agriculture. But it was famous for a different reason—Parukho was home to an old stone plaza and chapel, a renowned wedding venue. A rich local had commissioned the structure about two centuries ago, supposedly instructed in his dreams by the gods.

The stone-paved plaza was the size of a baseball diamond. Next to it was a small stage and a humble chapel.

The plaza was surrounded on all sides by fields of barley that stretched all the way to the horizon. The only way there was a single road that led through the fields.

The rich man who commissioned the plaza and the chapel eventually went bankrupt and disappeared from history, but the people of the village pooled their funds together to maintain the structure. They cleaned the paving stones and fixed up the building when it was struck by lightning.

For over a century, the building had only been used for small village festivals. But things changed 40 years ago.

A famous actor was married at the chapel.

Parukho was close to the Capital District, and completely isolated at the same time. The actor liked that it was far from prying eyes. It was the perfect location to avoid reporters on the lookout for gossip.

“It was the perfect place,” the actor went on to say. *“If I ever get married again, I’m going back to Parukho Village.”*

The actor went on to mention the venue multiple times afterwards, and people began to dream of having their weddings there, just like the actor.

The village capitalized on the opportunity and began to market the chapel and its plaza as a wedding venue.

Anyone could hold a wedding there, regardless of religious belief or denomination.

The venue was booked for the 9th of the sixth month by Euphemia Epstein, the president of a famous apparel company. She had paid a handsome fee to rent out the chapel all day.

“It’s going to be a spectacular one.” “With lots of guests, too. About 500 or so, you think? More? Are they going to set a new record?” “The street’s going to turn into a parking lot of black cars,” the villagers theorized. But on the day of the ceremony, they were all floored.

Fewer than 50 guests showed up.

* * *

The 9th of the sixth month.

The sun was blazing that day, announcing the arrival of summer. The sky was clear.

And contrary to the villagers' expectations, the road leading to the chapel was not lined with cars.

Early morning had come and gone before vehicles began trickling into the parking lot in the plaza, one car every 10 minutes or so.

The first vehicle to arrive was a mid-sized truck. It was designed for moving produce, equipped with a freezer in the back. It joined a van painted with the words 'Parukho Village' in the lot, parking at the very edge to keep out of the way.

A man and a woman in their thirties, wearing black suits and hats labeled 'Parukho Village Chapel Management Committee', rushed out of the chapel to greet the truck.

From the truck emerged a middle-aged couple dressed impeccably in black formalwear.

They were the Ikstovan royal guards who had sent Treize his sniper rifle and neatly disposed of the bodies of two hitmen.

After exchanging greetings, the group of four began to discuss the proceedings for the day.

The next guests arrived at 9:30 in a small car.

The car was a common model from a Capital District rental company. The company logo was splashed on the side.

In the driver's seat was a woman about 30 years of age. She was slender and tall with medium-length black hair, and was wearing a navy jacket and skirt.

"We're here! All right, you now have permission to unbuckle yourself and step out of the car!" the woman commanded, opening the right-side passenger door.

"Ugh, finally. I was getting so cramped in there."

A girl stepped out of the car.

She had red hair that she must have recently started growing out. The girl was about old enough to be finishing primary school, and had sharp eyes and boyish features.

"I hate this outfit. Why's it gotta be all floofy?"

She talked like a boy as well, but the girl was wearing a light pink dress that made her look like a doll with white frills hanging from the sleeves and hem. However, she wore brown canvas shoes that were easy to walk in.

"No complaining, kid. You should be grateful that I decided to let you wear my old dress. It's only proper to attend a wedding in formalwear. Showing up in whatever you woke up in is barbaric. This is all training for growing into a proper adult!" the woman shot back, just as callous as her ward.

"Sure, sure. Where is everybody, anyway? This place is totally empty. Admit it, Miss Angela, you got lost. Some grown-up you are."

"The way here was too easy to get lost. Although maybe I overestimated how long it would take to get here."

"What the heck? Then what was all that rushing in the morning for? I wanted to play around more in the Capital District!" the girl complained, arms in the air. But the woman was unfazed.

"We don't have the money to play around here."

Soon, the woman of the two royal guards came up to them. “Welcome. Your invitations, please?”

“Here you are,” said Miss Angela. “This here is Carlo, with an invitation from Miss Lillia Schultz,” she said, taking out an envelope from her jacket pocket. The guard did not seem to be concerned that Carlo was a boy’s name.

“Hi there,” Carlo said energetically, punching the air. Her attitude clashed with her frilly dress.

Lillia and Treize had gone on vacation to the city of Lartika the previous summer, where they ran into the orphaned Carlo. Afterwards, they were embroiled in an incident with a seaplane, where they saved the lives of Carlo and many other children.

“And I’m Angela, a primary school teacher. I’m here as Carlo’s chaperone. We’re sorry for being here so early—it wasn’t easy to precisely time everything because we came by night train and car,” Miss Angela said, sounding more ladylike than before.

The guards ushered the first two wedding guests to the tables. They suggested that Carlo and Miss Angela have some tea and juice with cookies while they waited.

Five round tables, each big enough to seat ten, had been set up in front of the stage.

Carlo and Miss Angela took the furthest table to the left, from the stage’s perspective.

“Hey lady! Cookies are good and all, but are there any of those really strong-smelling crisps here they only sell in the Capital District?” Carlo asked, eyes sparkling.

“Of course,” the guard replied, “It wouldn’t be proper to invite guests from other states otherwise. We have crisps by the boxload!”

“Yessss!” Carlo cheered, leaping into the air. She finally landed with her dress aflutter. “You’re pretty good, lady!”

The royal guard, skilled at everything from snack shopping to corpse disposal, smiled. “It’s an honor.”

“This is so good!”

“Don’t stuff yourself. They’ve probably got a fancy lunch buffet waiting after the ceremony.”

“Aw, c’mon! You try some too, Miss Angela.”

“Maybe just a taste. ...Hey, this is good! Pass me some more.”

“Whoa! Kids get first dibs on this stuff!”

“Your brain’s gonna shrivel if you eat too much.”

“That’s what you grown-ups always say. So you think it’s okay for *your* brain to shrivel up?”

“We’re all finished growing, so our brains are fine no matter how much we eat.”

“Liar!”

“You’ll understand once you’re an adult.”

“Nuh-uh!”

“You will!”

As Carlo and Miss Angela argued over crisps at their table, the next car arrived.

It was a Jones Motors limousine.

“Wow, that’s one heck of a long car!” Carlo exclaimed.

“Whoever’s in there must be loaded. They’ve got nothing to do with poor people like us,” Miss Angela remarked as the limo pulled into the parking lot.

Two bodyguards and six secondary school students stepped out of the limo. Kurtz and Litner, and the members of the 4th Capital Secondary School’s newspaper club.

The two adults were in their usual suits. The suits were lighter than the previous month to match the season, but the bodyguards were mandated to wear their jackets because they had to carry around firearms.

The newspaper club members were in student formalwear—in other words, their school uniforms.

They had switched to their summer uniforms at the beginning of the month—short-sleeved shirts with the school crest emblazoned over the right breast, and a matching tie. The uniform also included a vest, cardigan, and jacket for cooler weather.

“Welcome. Your invitations, please,” the guards said, greeting the newest group of guests.

“Yes! Here is mine!” Meg chirped, taking out the invitation she had gotten from Lillia.

“Well, you know. Nothing could possibly surprise me anymore. Ha...ha...ha... If I collapse, you guys have to catch me, okay? Ha ha ha ha...”

To Meg’s great concern, Lillia’s face had been stiff as she handed her the invitation at school.

“We still have some time left before the ceremony. Please be seated at a table of your choosing.”

The party took a seat around a table not too close to the stage, leaving room for guests who knew the happy couple better. They did not sit too close to Carlo and Miss Angela either, as they did not know one another.

Kurtz and Litner, being bodyguards and not guests, returned to the limousine to remain on standby.

The royal guards took the newspaper club’s orders. Everyone asked for tea.

And soon enough, a pile of crisps was placed at their table.

“Bling!” Natalia cried, eyes glinting.

“What was that supposed to be, Lia?”

“The sound of my eyes glinting. Look! We’ve got good weather, good scenery, and delicious crisps! It’s like a textbook wedding!”

“How does that make it a textbook wedding? And by the way, leave some crisps for the rest of us,” Larry said. Natalia was already digging in, and his comment was not enough to stop her. In the blink of an eye she emptied an entire plate and asked for seconds.

“It’s so good to see you’ve got a healthy appetite,” said the royal guard, “It was certainly worth getting all these crisps for today,” she chuckled, serving them more.

Nick sipped his tea elegantly, looking around at the fields. “It certainly is a lovely venue.” He had already given the others a perfect lecture on the history of the village during the hour-long drive to the chapel.

“Hm. I like the tea,” Jenny remarked, sipping tea and chewing on the crisps with composure.

“I’m surprised you’re not taking more photos, Jenfie,” said Larry. “You’re really trying to be a good wedding guest, huh?”

“Yeah, no.”

“Figures. So what’s that mean?”

“If I spot any interesting guests, I’m going to snap photos like nobody’s business. Until then, I’m giving myself a break. I’ve been here eight times already—I’m sick of the scenery.”

“I see.”

And as for the two members who might be able to use the ceremony as a reference—Seron and Meg—

“This place might not be so bad. We could come here to start off our life together.” “That sounds perfect, Honey.” “Heh, it’s kind of early to start calling me that. Everyone’s listening.” “I don’t mind at all, Honey.” “Ha ha, you’re such a tease.”

—This was not the conversation they were having.

“You don’t know who Schultz’s mother is marrying?”

“No, she did not tell me. She told me that he will be announced at the day of the wedding ceremonies.”

Their conversation was as dry as it could be.

“The invitations didn’t give his name, either. Although I suppose if Schultz told you not to worry, there’s nothing to be concerned about.”

“That is true.”

“Us worrying for them won’t solve anything. . . .Let’s eat.”

“I will eat as well.”

They began munching on some crisps.

The third car to arrive was a large luxury limousine.

It was a model produced not by Jones Motors, but their biggest competitor.

“Whoa! Look at that, Jenfie!”

“It’s got nothing to do with me.”

“But it’s from your family’s rival company!”

“Then take a good look at it while you still can.”

“Huh?”

As Larry and Jenny bantered, the limousine slowly pulled into the parking lot.

“It’s just one team of rich folks after another. Who the heck is Schultz’s mother marrying?” Natalia wondered.

“I look forward to exchanging greetings,” Nick remarked.

“With who? The bride and groom, or the guests?”

“Both, naturally.”

“Good to see you’re honest as ever.”

“We’re finally here! This place is great!”

The limousine door opened, and the first person to step out was a man in a dark grey suit and a red tie— Matthew Silas Epstein. His hair was cut clean and slicked back, perhaps thanks to a visit to a hairdresser. His messy beard was gone as well.

He was followed by a beautiful woman with long brown hair. She was in her early thirties, wearing a lavender dress that was neither too extravagant nor humble. Summer flowers decorated her perfectly-styled hair.

“Hm? Are we early?”

“Better early than late, Eumie.”

It was Silas’s sister, Euphemia Epstein.

She was the new president of the Epstein apparel company. Once a young girl who had been turned down by Wil and had kicked her brother into a lake in retaliation, Euphemia had grown into a beautiful woman who still possessed that same spirited energy.

Euphemia was the one who rented the venue for the ceremony, but she was simply allowing the wedding party to use her name. She was now married, but her husband stayed home because he did not know the circumstances.

The siblings were followed by a couple in their sixties—the former president and her husband. Both were now retired, supporting their daughter from behind the scenes. Silas had told them everything.

“Who knew after all these years that we would see Wil again? It really is worth living into old age,” said the former president with a smile on her face. Silas shrugged.

“C’mon, Mother. You’re not *that* old.”

“I suppose not. But it really is fantastic to see him again. And...”

“And?” Silas repeated.

“And it will be wonderful to meet his lovely golden-haired friend again, too.”

The royal guards thanked Eumie profusely for allowing them to use her name to reserve the venue. Then they led the Epsteins inside.

Because the other guests had to be kept in the dark about Wil for the time being, the Epsteins sat far apart from them.

“So who’re those people, Nick? You know most of the rich folks in the capital and every big-name president, right?” asked Larry.

“I cannot be certain,” Nick replied, “But I believe the two women are the former and current presidents of Epstein. The company leadership has been traditionally passed down through the female line.”

Natalia, who was consuming about 60 percent of the crisps on the table, chimed in. “That’s where SC Arthur’s sister works, ain’t it?”

“It is indeed, Nat. Impressive memory.”

“I become a genius whenever I eat. Go on. Ask me anything.”

“Then I shall. How shall we eradicate world poverty?” Nick asked. Natalia answered without a moment’s hesitation.

“Everyone walks off a cliff.”

The next vehicle to arrive was not a car, but a motorcycle.

It was painted black and off white—an off-road model with a boxer engine, with both rear wheels powered. Treize was on the motorcycle, wearing a black jacket and a helmet and

goggles a pilot might use. In the sidecar was Lillia, wearing a cotton jacket. She also wore a helmet and goggles. Both were in their school uniforms.

Seron recognized them first. "Oh, it's Treize."

Meg, who had seen the motorcycle the previous summer when Treize came to visit, recognized them as well. "When you say it, you are right. It is Lillia sitting beside."

"So that's Treize's bike, huh?" Larry remarked enviously. "Nice. That's a civilian version of a military motorcycle. It's not cheap, let me tell you."

"The plot thickens. Perhaps it is not too late to resume our investigation, hm?" Nick suggested.

"Still at it? You should just go up to the guy and ask," said Natalia.

"That'll definitely make things quick. Let's interview him," Jenny agreed.

Soon, the motorcycle reached the plaza and stopped at the very edge of the parking lot.

Treize and Lillia disembarked. They took off their jackets and helmets and put them on the seat of the sidecar.

Seron raised an eyebrow. "Something's strange. Why isn't Schultz coming with her mother and stepfather?"

"You're right," Jenny said with a nod. It was very unusual in Roxche for someone to come to a family member's wedding separately from the family.

Seron noticed Meg's stiff expression. "They must have their reasons," he said to reassure her. "I'm sure they'll tell us later."

Ending the conversation there, he watched carefully and noted that the middle-aged usher did not ask Treize to show his invitation.

Lillia and Treize made the rounds, beginning with Meg and Seron's table.

"Hey there, newspaper club. Thanks for coming out today. The weather's great and—
ow!"

Lillia bit her tongue before she could even finish her halfhearted greeting.

"A-are you okay, Lillia?" Meg asked, expression darkening with concern.

Lillia did not seem any more cheerful than before. She was downright troubled, completely contrary to the beautiful weather.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Anyway..."

Without taking a seat, Lillia introduced herself and Treize to the club.

"Hey guys. I don't think I've really met some of you before, but anyway. I'm Lillia Schultz. Thanks for coming to my mom's really weird wedding. This here is Treize Bain—an old friend of mine who transferred in this spring. He's from Ikstova."

"Hey guys. Like Lillia said, I'm Treize. Seron's been helping me out a lot back at the dorms. He's told me a bit about you, too. Nice to meet you."

The newspaper club members exchanged glances, not knowing who should speak first.

"You're up, Chief," Natalia said. Jenny stood. She offered seats to Lillia and Treize and began introducing the club from one end to the other.

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Jenny, the president of the newspaper club. Four-eyes here is Natalia the bottomless pit. The pretty boy is Nick. He's actually a guy, FYI. Larry here's a military hopeful. And this is Meg, the Westerner."

Having introduced everyone but Seron, Jenny got ready to have tea—

“Pardon me!” Nick interjected. “I actually have a few questions for you, Treize Bain!”

‘*You’re really gonna ask?!*’ Larry thought, almost moved by Nick’s dogged passion for knowledge, but he did not say anything.

“Huh? About what? Er...I guess I could answer a few questions about Ikstova,” Treize replied hesitantly, warned by Seron ahead of time about Nick’s endless curiosity.

That was when they were interrupted.

“Ha!”

A tiny figure came barreling into the table.

“Big sis!”

“Huh?”

Lillia turned. To her right was a little girl in a frilly dress.

“It’s been a while!”

“Er...who are you?” uttered a confused Lillia. Carlo clenched her fists.

“YES! I WIIIIIIIIIIIN!” she declared.

“Huh? Who...hm...wait a sec...C-Carlo?!”

“You got it! It’s been so long, big sis! How’ve you been? I’m totally fine!”

Lillia’s jaw dropped. From behind her, Treize gave a light wave.

“Hey there, Carlo! Good to see you doing all right. By the way, that dress looks great on you.”

“You look good in your uniform too, big bro! Like a real prince!”

Carlo was making an inside joke, but Lillia was completely out of the loop.

“Ah! I get it now!” she cried, jumping to her feet. “I’m in a bizarro-world!” Her chair fell backwards. The newspaper club members flinched.

Lillia spread her arms wide and looked up at the bright blue sky.

“This must be a bizarro-world! Carlo is a girl, and she knows everything! And the dead are coming back to life! Yes, this is definitely a dream! So wake up, Lillia!”

Jenny did not miss her chance to photograph the moment.

Lillia’s cry also reached the Epsteins’ table.

“Oh my. Is the screaming girl over there Wil’s daughter?” wondered the former president.

“I think so. She fits the description perfectly,” replied Euphemia.

“She’s going to be so surprised.” “She’s going to be so surprised.”

“What has Carlo gone and said this time?” Miss Angela wondered from her table, biting into a crisp.

“Calm down, Lillia!” Meg cried, going around behind her to set the chair back on its feet. She sat Lillia down.

“Yeah, big sis! Sorry I scared you!” Carlo said, the calmest person at the entire table.

Lillia was still staring like she had seen a ghost.

“Big sis, I’m actually a girl! Always been one! I just didn’t tell you last year!”

Carlo finally got through to the dazed Lillia, who blinked several times.

“Huh? Really? So...that’s what you actually look like?”

“Yeah, you gotta believe me! I’m a girl! You want proof? I can take off my panties if you want!” Carlo cried and began reaching under her dress. But she was quickly stopped.

“That’s enough, Carlo. I can vouch for you,” said Treize.

“What?!” Lillia gasped, falling victim to another misunderstanding. “Treize...you mean...”

Treize noticed immediately. “N-no! No! She just *told* me, back on the Kurz Sea!”

“*They’re practically a comedy team,*” Larry thought, but he did not say anything.

Completely oblivious, Carlo joined the conversation.

“Big bro found out about me when we were saying bye at the end. But I asked him not to tell you so I could surprise you later.”

“O-oh. Oh. Okay...okay.” Lillia sighed, her shoulders finally drooping.

“Guess that was a big surprise, huh? I mean, you gotta be either a guy or a girl, so is it really that shocking?” Carlo wondered to herself, then turned to the newspaper club. “Hey everyone! The name’s Carlo. Nice to meetcha!” she said, raising her hand.

Jenny took another photo.

“Anyway, this here is Carlo. She’s from Tolcasia,” Lillia explained. “But what’s your real name, Carlo?”

“Who cares? Just call me Carlo, everyone!”

“So she says.”

Carlo scanned the table, looking at the members of the newspaper club. “Say, are you guys all rich? What do rich people in the capital eat?” she asked.

“This!” Natalia grinned and grabbed a crisp.

“Cool!” Carlo grinned back, and grabbed a crisp as well.

“Can’t call yourself rich around here unless you down a thousand of these every day!”

“A thousand! Darn it! Darn you rich people!”

“Even two thousand is nothing for a glasses beauty like me.”

“What’s glasses got to do with anything?”

“Nothing at all, kiddo!”

“Cool!”

Carlo and Natalia had become fast friends. Treize glanced in their direction and breathed a sigh of relief at the fact that Nick was now too distracted to question him.

Meg went over to Lillia. Treize quickly gave her his seat.

“Thank you, Treize,” she said, taking the seat without declining. Then she turned to Lillia and switched to Bezelese. “Don’t worry, Lillia. Your life isn’t going to change so easily. Calm down, okay?”

“Ohhh...Meg...” Lillia whimpered. Meg gave her a gentle pat on the head.

“There, there. It’s okay, Lillia. I’ll be your big sister for today and take care of you! I’ll be your shield, no matter what comes your way! Anyone who wants to reach you is going to have to go through me!”

“Thank you, Meg. I’m so glad you’re here for me!”

“Oh, Lillia!”

Meg and Lillia embraced. Jenny took another photo.

Natalia and Carlo continued to feast away.

“See, Carlo? Girls’ friendships ain’t a myth!”

“Huh. What’re they talking about? What’re they saying?”

“Dunno!”

Meanwhile, Treize took a seat next to Seron.

“Sorry. Looks like Lillia’s going to be borrowing Strauski for a bit.”

“I don’t mind. There’s no need to apologize.”

“Still, we’re kind of interrupting you guys. Anyway, I’m glad Strauski’s so outgoing. Lillia needs a bit of that energy.”

Larry, who had nothing in particular to do, zoned out.

And he was the first to spot the next set of arrivals in the distant fields.

This time, it was a convoy of three expensive black cars. The two at the front and back were ordinary sedans, and the one in the middle was a limousine.

Soon the cars pulled into the parking lot and stopped in a line, taking up a great deal of space.

Out of the first and last cars came four men in total. All were clad in suits and wore earpieces and microphones. They scanned the area with practiced expertise.

‘Not like anyone’s around, though. Nothing short of a cannon’s gonna get to whoever they’re guarding,’ Larry thought.

Two of the men seemed to be in their forties, one in his thirties, and one in his twenties.

One of the older men was very tall and well-built.

‘He’d be a gunner, if he was in the military,’ Larry thought.

The other was much smaller in comparison, but was agile and showed not a hint of weakness.

‘A scout, probably,’ Larry thought.

The man in his thirties had a sharper eye than the others and was clearly intimidating.

‘A hand-to-hand combatant, or maybe a knife specialist,’ Larry thought.

The man in his late twenties carried himself in a completely different way from the others. He was very handsome, slender, and exuded elegance.

‘Pretty sophisticated. He’d be the perfect bodyguard for a rich lady,’ Larry thought.

A beat. And finally, a woman stepped out of the limousine. She was also in her late twenties, with short hair and a sharp but beautiful face. She wore a flattering black skirt.

‘Female bodyguards all feel kind of similar. But this one’s scarier than Litner. Probably killed a man before,’ Larry thought.

Though he had no way of knowing, Larry was right on all counts.

As soon as the larger of the 40-something men—the one once known as ‘Ed’—stepped out of the car, he gave the area a once-over.

The chapel was surrounded on all sides by fields. All he could see was green barley. But the team took into account the possibility of snipers hiding in the bush and scanned the fields with binoculars.

The other man in his forties—‘Ozette’—got to work checking the plaza and the guests who had already arrived. He had received a guest list ahead of time, along with details about what the guests looked like, which he used to see if anyone uninvited was on the scene. Thus far he found no discrepancies.

The man in his thirties—‘Uno’—checked the cars that were already parked. He spoke to the drivers to check their identities, and found nothing out of the ordinary.

The youngest of the men—‘Yzma’, whose real name was Berstein Kane—looked back at the road they had come down through a pair of binoculars to make sure they were not being followed.

Once the men had given the all-clear, the limousine door finally opened.

That was when ‘Ann’—Gratz Axentine—stepped out of the car and held the door open for her principal.

She was followed by a man in his sixties.

The man was of slender build, and wore a dark grey suit. He was blond and balding with soft blue eyes.

He was followed by a young woman.

She was about 20 years of age. Her long blond hair was tied up in a bun, with her fair skin and emerald-green eyes striking a beautiful contrast against her long pink dress.

Larry, who was watching the group past Lillia and Meg, turned to Nick. “Hey, do you recognize those people?”

“I do not, I fear,” Nick replied, shaking his head. “The older gentleman does not seem to be Roxchean, and I believe I may have seen the young lady on the news, perhaps...”

The old gentleman and the young woman approached the chapel with their bodyguards. They looked at the newspaper club’s table, and the woman suddenly gave a light wave to someone.

“Huh?” “Hm?”

Larry and Nick looked around. Who was she greeting? They quickly realized that it was Treize.

“A friend of mine. Let me go say hi,” Treize said to Seron, excusing himself and going up to the new arrivals.

Treize reached them about 20 meters away from the newspaper club’s table. He spoke quietly with the duo, then led them to the table.

“All right, club! Let’s play ‘guess who these guests are’,” Larry said. Seron, who had figured out the answer, said nothing.

“What a mysterious pair,” Nick remarked. “If they are close with Treize, perhaps they are nobility from Iks. Perhaps the woman is Princess Meriel?”

Natalia, who was still competing with Carlo over snacks, shot down the hypothesis. “Nope. Princess Meriel’s got black hair. I’ve been to Iks, you know!”

“Ah, pity. What do you suppose, Jenny?” Nick asked, turning.

“I’m a little busy right now,” Jenny snapped. She was discreetly photographing the duo with her favorite rangefinder, holding it low beside her chair with her bag as a shield as she pressed the shutter again and again.

“Who could it be?” Larry wondered.

“Maybe you’d know if you watched the news once in a while,” Jenny hissed.

The old gentleman and the young woman drew closer.

“Meg...my dearest friend...I’m so glad you’re here for me. Please let me borrow you, just for today...”

Lillia was in the midst of being consoled by Meg.

“Don’t worry, Lillia! Allison can be a strange person, but I’m sure she’ll explain!”

Meg was busy trying to cheer up Lillia in Bezelese.

So naturally, neither of the girls noticed the newcomers being guided to their table by Treize.

The Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa had multiple royal families. Of them, the most prominent was the royal family of Bezel, which was the most powerful of the kingdoms when the alliance was forged.

The current king of Bezel had many siblings, but only one child of his own—Princess Matilda.

The Bezelese royal family practiced absolute primogeniture, which meant that Princess Matilda was first in line to the throne. She was the future queen, a VIP among VIPs.

And now, she was in the Roxchean countryside with very few—but trusted—bodyguards.

She had departed Sfrestus two days earlier on a royal aeroplane and landed in the Capital District. There she went incognito and spent the night at a luxury hotel, then came to the wedding venue in the morning.

The old gentleman accompanying her was Major General Aikashia Cross, whom the king trusted deeply.

Aikashia had a completely forged background. Only Allison and the others knew that he had once lived in Roxche under the identity of Major Oscar Whittington.

The bodyguards were members of an elite team that once worked with Major Travas.

Matilda first greeted Treize and asked, “Where might I find Lillia?”

“Lillia! It’s been far too long,” Matilda said in perfect Roxchean, tapping Lillia on the shoulder.

“Huh?”

Lillia turned. Meg looked up.

“Ah!” Lillia cried.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!” Meg screamed. Lillia flinched, catching her fainting friend.

Several chairs were brought together by the newspaper club to form a makeshift bed for Meg. Natalia and Seron covered her with their jackets.

Meanwhile, Carlo went up to the apologetic Matilda and showered her with questions.

“Who are you, lady? Are you friends with big sis?”

“I am, but I’m afraid I’ve scared her friend,” Matilda replied.

“Don’t worry ‘bout it, I bet she’ll be awake again in no time.”

“Thank you.”

Lillia simply stared, not knowing where to even begin.

“Sorry I didn’t tell you ahead of time, Lillia,” Treize whispered, “They said I couldn’t say anything.”

Major General Aikashia had completely lost his chance to speak. He waited in his chair, glancing at his granddaughter—whom he was meeting for the second time in his life.

The first time had been when Lillia was still a baby, when Allison made the trip all the way across the Lutoni just to show her to him.

About a minute passed after Meg had passed out.

“Ah!”

She found Seron squatting next to her, concern clear in his eyes.

“Oh, Seron...” Meg breathed a sigh of relief.

“How are you feeling?” Seron asked. Meg smiled.

“I am all right. And, I saw an amazing dream.”

“Oh? What was it about?”

“It was a dream that Princess Matilda of my homeland appeared here. It was very surprising,” Meg replied, sitting up and grabbing the jackets before they could fall. Seron took the jackets and responded apologetically.

“Er...that wasn’t a dream, Meg.”

Lillia held Meg from behind in case she fainted again.

“It is unbelievable... Princess Matilda is in front of my eyes... It is the princess in her person, er, her royal person. It is incredible... it must be a dream...” Meg whispered, her pigtailed swishing as she shook her head. It was a surreal sight to behold.

Matilda introduced herself to the newspaper club and Carlo.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, everyone. I am Matilda of Bezel.”

Her name was no longer a secret at this point; Matilda revealed her identity with a smile.

“Huh? Wait a second... What?” Larry stammered, looking around at the rest of the club. “You mean...this lady’s the princess of Bezel?”

“Is there another Matilda of Bezel? No,” Natalia replied, equally surprised.

“Hm...what in the world is happening here? I am witnessing history in the making, it seems. And this mystery surrounding Treize has deepened even more,” Nick mumbled.

Jenny said nothing. She sat with one hand in her bag and waited for a chance to take another photo without showing disrespect.

Even Seron, who had recognized the princess from her face, was lost for words.

Only one person was completely unfazed by the revelation.

“That’s a cool name, lady! The name’s Carlo, nice to meetcha! Here, want some crisps?”

Major General Aikashia finally went over to the newspaper club and stood beside the princess. "It's a pleasure, everyone," he said in fluent Roxchean., "I am Major General Aikashia Cross of the Royal Army. It is wonderful to spend time in the company of such fine young people."

The newspaper club was surprised again, but the shock of Matilda's presence dampened the impact.

'A major general! He's a real big shot!' Larry thought to himself, the only one more surprised by the second introduction. He almost leapt to his feet and saluted Aikashia.

"I am here to escort the princess today," Aikashia said.

"I must be dreaming..." Meg gasped, swaying in a daze. Lillia supported her and listened to the man with one of her middle names, not knowing in her wildest dreams that he was her own grandfather. And she finally spoke.

"Er, can I ask something?"

"Of course," Aikashia replied. Matilda nodded.

"Sorry if this is a rude question to ask," said Lillia, "But there's something I don't get. Why are you at my mother's wedding? I mean, Mom and I've met Your Highness before, but still."

"Yes, during my official visit," Matilda said. The newspaper club now knew why Matilda had recognized Lillia. But that did not answer Lillia's question. So Aikashia did instead.

"I'm sure this has all been quite surprising for you, but your mother will tell you everything herself. It's something you should hear from her."

"I see... I understand," Lillia replied, accepting the answer. "I'll let her explain in person. Thank you."

"You sure you're all right?" Natalia asked.

"Yeah," Lillia replied, "Everything about my mom's been a mystery for the past few weeks. What's another couple more? But I'll make sure she spills the beans on everything later!"

"That's the spirit."

This time, Treize acquainted the newspaper club and Carlo to the Western guests. The newspaper club members stood to introduce themselves.

"I'm Jenny Jones, the president of the newspaper club. It is an honor to stand in your presence, Your Highness. My father is the head of Jones Motors. We are planning a factory in Sou Be-Il this year as well. I pray relations between our country will grow deeper in the future."

"My, how lovely! Thank you very much."

"Natalia Steinbeck, Your Highness. The most beautiful member of the newspaper club, although not quite as beautiful as you. My parents are musicians—they performed for Your Highness and His Majesty two years ago."

"I remember, yes. They gave a splendid performance!"

"My name is Nicholas Browning, Your Highness. My parents are both scholars. Their research has nothing to do with Sou Be-Il, I'm afraid, but it is nevertheless a pleasure to meet you."

"The pleasure is all mine."

“Ma’am! Larry Hepburn, at your service! The Hepburn family has served in the Roxchean military for generations! I sincerely hope for continued peace between our lands! It’s an honor!”

“It’s wonderful to meet you.”

A shadow came over Aikashia’s eyes when he heard the Hepburn name, which he was familiar with from his time in the Roxchean military, but no one noticed.

“I’m Seron Maxwell, Your Highness. My mother manages a frozen foodstuffs company. She tells me that she would love to expand operations to the West someday. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“Ah, the frozen meals in the red packaging. I tried some the other day; it was delicious.”
And finally—

Meg, who was being supported by Lillia, leapt to her feet.

“S-S-S-S-Strauski... M-M-M-M-Megmica—” she began in Bezelese, but tripped over her own name.

“Hey Megmica? Mind speaking in Roxchean for our sake?” asked Natalia.

“But my Roxchean speaking is—”

Matilda stepped up to encourage Meg in her fluent Roxchean.

“I would love to hear your Roxchean, Miss Strauski.”

“Yes, Your Highness!” Meg cried, eyes glinting. “Strauski Megmica! Born and raised healthily in the land of Bezel! From three years ago, I lived in Roxche with my family!” she said, excited.

“And? Don’t you have anything else to say?” Natalia prodded. Meg gave her a glance.

“What else do I say?”

“You know, about your fiancé.”

“Oh!” Meg looked Matilda in the eye. “This here is Seron Maxwell my fiancé! Recently, we have promised our future together!”

“That’s wonderful!”

Matilda beamed. A slightly embarrassed Seron looked into the distance.

Meg continued excitably. “But! If Princess Matilda uses me as her maid, I will quit marriage!”

About five years later, the newspaper club would look back fondly on the day’s events.

“I’d never seen that look on Seron’s face before. It was a valuable experience,” Larry Hepburn would say.

“I’d never seen that look on Megmica’s face before. It was a valuable experience,” Natalia Steinbeck would say.

“I had never expected such an awkward look on the face of such a distinguished person. It was a valuable experience,” Nicholas Browning would say.

“And I didn’t get a single photo of their faces. It was the biggest missed opportunity of my life!” Jenny Jones would say.

“The barley fields were sparkling so beautifully that early summer day,” Seron Maxwell would say.

“I was telling the truth, in a way,” Megmica Strauski Maxwell would say.

After Meg's shocking declaration—

“Pffft! Aha ha ha ha!” Lillia, who had been moping all day, burst out laughing. “Ha ha ha! Meg! You can't say that in front of your fiancé! Ha ha ha ha!”

“Oh! But Lillia, it is not a lie!”

“But still! You can tell the princess quietly in secret later! Ha ha ha!”

“Is it so? Then Princess Matilda! Please secretly make me your maid later!”

“No, no! That's not what I mean! Ha ha ha!”

“Huh?”

Then, Meg burst out laughing as well. The rest of the table followed suit.

They chuckled, snickered, or even howled. Even Seron, who was almost left at the altar, gave a rare laugh.

“I don't know what you're all laughing about, but I'm not gonna lose! Ha ha ha ha!” Carlo joined in, completely oblivious.

Major General Aikashia, Matilda, and Meg, and everyone else was laughing.

Eleven sets of laughter echoed across the field.

“Did Carlo spike their drinks with something?” Miss Angela wondered from her table.

The Epsteins, meanwhile, looked on with amusement.

“Looks like they're having fun.”

“It's good to be young. Maybe you should join them, Silas.”

“What? You're younger than I am, Eumie.”

“Are you picking a fight?”

“What if I am?”

Matilda's bodyguards were the most surprised by the commotion.

“Wh-what just happened over there? I've never seen Her Highness that way before,” Yzma mumbled.

* * *

Meanwhile—

“The place is already packed!”

“It certainly is, sir.”

Two wedding guests were decidedly not amused.

A lone car drove down the road to the plaza. Two men in uniform sat in the back.

One was Major Kinski.

The other was the colonel who served as a military attaché at the Sou Be-II embassy.

Both men were in dress uniform, complete with hats and belts. The uniform included a sheathed ceremonial knife on the left side of the belt, and an automatic handgun holstered on the right.

Major Kinski, who sat on the left-side seat, checked his watch.

“Strange. We’re supposed to be an entire hour early for the ceremony.”

“Indeed.”

The princess’s bodyguards stood outside the chapel. They were familiar to Kinski and the colonel.

That meant that the princess was already at the venue. The colonel scowled.

“Damn it. Did they lie to us about the time?”

“For what purpose, sir? The information comes directly from the Royal Army’s intelligence agency headquarters,” Kinski replied.

“Major. Things beyond our wildest imagination happen all the time in this world. You need eyes that clearly see the truth—eyes that will never be obscured by distractions,” the colonel said calmly.

* * *

“I see, so Treize was acting as a guide.”

Back at the newspaper club’s table, Treize and Lillia were explaining their connection to Princess Matilda.

Because they could not reveal Treize’s identity, those in the know—Treize, Lillia, Matilda, and Aikashia—had to claim that Matilda had made an unofficial visit to Ikstova, Roxche’s only kingdom and the home of the hero Carr Benedict. And that Treize was selected to be her guide because he was around her age.

Lillia had gone from being in the dark to keeping others in the dark. She looked at Meg’s profiled face with an uncomfortable expression.

“I see now,” Meg replied obliviously. Lillia kept the truth to herself, a little sad.

That was when the final car pulled into the lot.

Major Kinski and the colonel disembarked. Several people were watching them through binoculars.

“Good. All the guests are here,” said a man wearing a hat labeled ‘Parukho Village Wedding Chapel Committee’.

“Commence the operation,” said a woman in a matching hat.

Major Kinski and the colonel stepped out of the car.

“We’ve been waiting for you.”

They were greeted with a salute by Ann, one of Matilda’s bodyguards. The colonel saluted back with a scowl.

“Is this some sort of joke? From the looks of things, our invitations were marked an hour late. Were Major Kinski and I not scheduled to arrive much earlier than Her Highness?” he growled, but his round face made him look comical rather than intimidating.

“We’re not sure what happened, sir. We are currently moving on the major general’s orders,” Ann replied blankly with an icy expression.

“Well, I suppose there’s no helping it, then. Not much an outranked man can say here,” the colonel sighed, waving his hand. He fixed his hat, which he had donned as he stepped out of

the car, and turned to Kinski. “The major general aside, I expect you to be on perfect behavior in Her Highness’s presence, Major Kinski.”

“I may be a lowly commoner, sir, but I will make sure to cause her no displeasure!”

“That’s exactly the kind of thing I *don’t* want you to say.”

“R-right, sir!”

The men stepped into the party to meet two people who far outstripped them in rank.

The colonel approached Lillia’s table and greeted the other guests on behalf of himself and Kinski with a salute.

“Pardon the intrusion, and apologies for being so late,” he said, and introduced himself. Kinski did the same. They made sure to speak in Roxchean.

The guests at the table showed varying responses. Matilda and Aikashia, naturally, already knew or knew of the men.

“It’s been a long time, Colonel. And it’s lovely to meet you, Major Kinski.” “Wonderful to see you men here. And don’t worry about the time—we’re the ones who arrived far too early,” replied the princess and the major general respectively.

Of the secondary school students, three recognized the colonel.

“Oh my goodness! Colonel!” Meg cried, rising from her seat.

“Ah, if it isn’t the young lady from the Strauski family! What an amazing coincidence!” the colonel responded, eyes turning to dinner plates.

Meg turned to Matilda. “I have met this colonel some times at the Westerners’ gatherings in the Roxchean Capital District!”

“That’s lovely,” Matilda replied with a nod.

The other two who recognized the colonel were Seron and Larry. “It’s been a long time, sir.” “It’s been a long time, sir,” they greeted him in unison.

“And you two boys! I remember you!” the colonel chuckled. Everyone else at the table save for Meg and Major Kinski were confused. When had Seron and Larry met the colonel?

The colonel explained briefly.

“These two boys helped bring a lost Westerner to the embassy last year. I went out to meet them in person so I could give them my sincerest thanks. Really, what an astounding coincidence.”

The rest of the newspaper club finally understood. The colonel was referring to the case of Mark and Burt Murdoch from the previous summer. It was the case that led to the formation of the club, and—indirectly—Meg and Seron’s engagement.

If not for the club’s intervention, Hartnett would have solved the case and the story would not have had a happy ending. But Seron’s quick thinking and Meg’s connections allowed them to bring Burt Murdoch to the Sou Be-Il embassy for protection. The colonel had been the one who assisted their efforts.

That very colonel was now questioning Aikashia to clear up his concerns.

“It seems I’ve interrupted a lively conversation, sir. What was all the commotion about, if I may ask?”

“Her Highness and I were just surprising the young people here with her presence.”

“Ah, how marvelous!”

Major Kinski and the colonel understood Aikashia's implication that Princess Matilda's identity was not a secret at the table. Aikashia continued.

"That's enough of business for today, Colonel. My apologies for calling you all the way here out of the blue."

"Not at all, sir. It's an honor to be here! But I must wonder..."

"Of course. No one told you whose wedding this was supposed to be."

"I'm afraid not, sir."

"My apologies—the bride and groom wanted to keep things as low-profile as possible. You'll know soon enough."

"I'm looking forward to the surprise."

"In any case, it looks like there may not be enough chairs around this table for us, colonel. What do you say to relocating? Us old folks should stick together," Major General Aikashia said, rising from his seat and taking the two military men to another table. As he departed, however, he whispered one last thing to Matilda.

"Thank you for your cooperation, Your Highness."

<The headmaster is at the center table with the colonel and the major,> Uno reported over the radio.

Major Travas's former subordinates were all in position, on standby for orders. Axe was in the parking lot, with the rest patrolling the premises in pairs.

Once they confirmed that the vicinity was clear of threats, they resumed reporting over the radio, keeping an eye out for any disturbances.

Kane was the first to break the ice, as relaxed as ever. <Can't blame the colonel for being confused. Who'd have guessed that the lady would attend a Roxchean civilian's wedding? He's probably upset he had to miss his golf appointment.>

<We want to know as much as the colonel, though,> Ed, who was walking next to him, voiced a question for once. <Who in the world is this 'Wil'?>

Kane shrugged. From a different location, Ozette pressed the talk button.

<What bothers me is the bride. Ex-Captain Allison Schultz of the Confederation Air Force. She wasn't just an Easterner friend, she was also Major Travas's girlfriend, no?>

"Lucky him." "Maybe." "Hm." The men each commented.

Ozette turned to the one person who might know the truth. <What do you think, Axe?>

Axe put a finger on the switch at her neck. <Maybe, or maybe not. But what does that matter now?> she replied coolly.

"Stone-cold." "A real iron maiden." The men muttered, off the radio. Kane changed the subject.

<And Major Travas is still MIA too. Probably gonna go down as KIA soon. But does anyone actually believe that? Is he really dead?>

The others responded one after another.

<Maybe. But would he really have faked his death in an aeroplane crash? He'd have made it cleaner, taken care of the job without hurting anyone,> Ozette said plainly.

<An aeroplane crash can happen to anyone, my friend,> Uno added. Like Ozette, he did not utter a word of sadness or grief. It was not the sentiment of a civilian.

Ed made a surprisingly spiritual comment. <I'm sure he's still alive somewhere. The world still needs him.>

Axe—who had once resented Major Travas for the death of her father—was the last to speak. <I don't believe that he's been killed. Sooner or later the major will surprise us out of the blue.>

<You'll know soon enough,> a mysterious woman said on the radio.

As the bodyguards furrowed their brows, the woman who had barged onto the secure frequency continued. <You are hereby relieved of security duties. Return to the main venue. This is an order. Code Raspberry.>

In the end, only four tables were occupied.

One, by the four members of the Epstein family.

Another, by Miss Angela alone. She waited for Carlo and helped herself to tea and snacks.

The third, by Major General Aikashia, the colonel, and Major Kinski. It was a table of men.

The fourth—and the loudest—was occupied by eight students from the 4th Capital Secondary School, a princess, and an orphan girl.

One man watched it all from off-stage, muttering to himself.

“Not every day you see a gathering like this. It's a real once-in-a-lifetime sight.”

He was a beardless man in a suit, wearing a cap labeled ‘Parukho Village Wedding Chapel Committee’.

“Oh? Not if another pair gets married here in the future someday,” said a woman in a matching hat.

“Ha ha! You're right,” the man laughed with a flash of pearly-white teeth.

Soon, four men and a woman—the bodyguards—joined the other guests before the stage.

The bodyguards looked around in confusion and walked into view of the stage, following the orders on the radio.

They stopped next to Major General Aikashia's table.

Chapter 22: The End is a Beginning

“Thank you for waiting, everyone,” said a man carrying a megaphone, stepping onto the stage.

All eyes were immediately drawn to the man.

He was in his forties, tall and clean-shaven with short, tidy hair.

“Now presenting...the bride and the groom!”

Many things happened at once.

First, Miss Angela watched alone from her table, muttering, “What a strange wedding.”

At the table occupied by the students, the princess, and the orphan, the princess was asking questions about school life, with Meg and the others answering them.

When the man called from the stage, Meg was the first to speak. “It is finally beginning! The Roxchean wedding is very unique!”

“Nah, it’s just this one,” Natalia noted.

“Is it so?” Meg asked, confused.

“It’s almost like a presentation,” said Seron. “What are they thinking?”

Larry’s thoughts, meanwhile, were on the man on the stage. “Hm. I swear I’ve seen that guy before...”

“Could it be?” Nick wondered, apparently thinking the same thing. “No... But if that really is him...” He guessed and second-guessed himself again and again.

“Should’ve brought a telephoto lens,” Jenny grumbled, taking a photo.

Meanwhile, at the Epstein table—

“Is that him, Silas?”

“Yeah. Looks totally different from before, though.”

“Introduce me later.”

“Sure. He’s married, just to let you know. And so are you, for that matter.”

“Are you stupid? I’m trying to do business here. Imagine marketing luxury coats to rich tourists in Raputoa. Custom-made products you can’t get anywhere else.”

“Ah, here’s the little business monster I know.”

Aikashia and the military men also commented on the introduction.

“So it finally begins. I must say, this is quite the unorthodox wedding,” said the colonel.

Kinski agreed. “Now we’ll finally know who our mystery man is.”

Major General Aikashia smiled. “Don’t be too surprised, men.”

The man on the stage cried into the megaphone. “Ladies and gentlemen! Please get up and come right this way! We’ll introduce the happy couple and give you some time to congratulate them!”

The guests rose from their seats. They crossed the stone-paved plaza to reach the foot of the stage, mingling with the Sou Be-II special forces bodyguards who had joined them. There were 23 people in total.

The foot of the stage was packed.

Now that the guests were close enough, the man on the stage put down his megaphone. “Thank you, everyone.”

The man’s face was now clear enough for everyone to see. Some of the guests recognized him.

The Sou Be-II special forces bodyguards were first, as they had met him during their mission to Ikstova at the beginning of the year.

“Hey, that’s—” Kane stammered. The other men gasped.

“How?” Axe uttered, glancing at Aikashia’s profiled face. He was completely unfazed. “Did the headmaster know...?”

“Hey...I know that guy. I’ve seen him before,” Natalia said. Nick was just as stunned.

“I have as well. Now I am certain of his identity. Although I still have no idea as to what he is doing in a place like this.”

“Well, don’t keep us in the dark, Nick. Who is he?”

Lillia also recognized the man. She had flown with him on the first day of the new year.

“W-wait a sec,” she said to Treize, “Why? How?!”

“Er...who knows?” Treize replied, playing dumb.

“Argh! That’s one more thing Mom has to explain now!” Lillia cried. She was slowly coming back to her usual energetic self.

Meg did not recognize the man. She was happily occupied gazing at Princess Matilda’s beautiful profiled face.

Seron did not bother with the man. He was happily occupied gazing at Meg’s lovely profiled face.

“This...has to be a joke. How...?” The colonel gasped, his eyes turning to dinner plates. Major Kinski also recognized the man.

“The Hero...”

The man who had until just earlier been wearing a hat labeled ‘Parukho Village Wedding Chapel Committee’—who had recently cut his long hair and shaved off his beard—finally introduced himself.

“Good to see everyone here today. My name is Carr Benedict, and I’ll be your emcee for today!”

Everyone else—including Larry, who had been oblivious to the end—finally realized who he was. A historic hero who deserved the spotlight at any event he might attend.

“Ah! The Hero of the Mural!”

“Now, let me introduce our star couple!” Benedict cried. Everyone went silent. “First of all, the bride—Allison Whittington Schultz!”

Benedict waved and pointed at stage right.

There was a quiet wave of cheers when the bride emerged.

“Mom...”

Lillia’s eyes fell on the woman on the stage.

Allison’s long blond hair was done up in a bun decorated with white flowers. She was in a white wedding dress instead of a uniform, her blue eyes sparkling.

“Thanks for waiting, everyone!” Allison cried, not in the least bit a blushing bride, as she strode onto center stage.

“Wait! Slow down!”

Rushing in after Allison was her bridesmaid, a black-haired girl in a bright orange sleeveless dress, holding a bouquet of equally orange flowers.



“She’s so pretty…” Carlo gasped.

“Still such a spirited girl. In fact, she’s gotten even more lovely with age,” Madam Epstein commented.

“Whoa, that’s Schultz’s mother? She’s gorgeous,” said Larry.

“You might look almost as pretty if you grew out your hair,” Jenny remarked coldly.

“She’s certainly beautiful,” the colonel said, impressed.

“Isn’t she?” Aikashia replied, sounding almost as if the bride were his own daughter.

“Hm?” The colonel furrowed his brow.

“Have I…seen her before?” Major Kinski wondered to himself.

“You’re looking lovely today.”

“Thanks!”

Allison and Benedict hugged as they exchanged greetings.

The bridesmaid who happened to be a princess was completely overshadowed by the bride and the historic hero. Treize and Matilda did not bother to point out her identity to the others, however.

Carlo alone looked at the princess of Ikstova and wondered, “She looks just like big bro. Are they twins?” But no one congratulated her for guessing the truth.

“Now, time for the groom to make his appearance!” Benedict declared.

“Ah!” Lillia twitched.

Treize quietly took her left hand in his right.

“Huh? What?” Lillia demanded, turning.

“Nothing,” Treize replied. He did not let go.

“Really? …All right.” Lillia nodded. She did not shake him off.

“Yeah.” Treize smiled.

“I’ll believe you.” Lillia smiled back.

They looked to the stage together.

Benedict continued. “I’m sure many of you must have been wondering about the groom! We’ve been keeping it all on the down-low on purpose, just so we could surprise you all! I guarantee, today will be an unforgettable day for everyone involved!”

The speech was getting so lengthy that Benedict was starting to sound like a politician.

“Looks like he’s having fun,” Larry remarked.

“Now, allow me the honor of introducing the groom—our mystery man—Wilhelm Schultz!”

Those not in the know—the newspaper club, the colonel, Major Kinski, and Miss Angela—were confused by the groom’s last name.

However, no one voiced their confusion because of the possibility that the bride and groom happened to have the same family names by sheer coincidence.

Two people emerged from stage left.

One was the woman who had been masquerading as a chapel employee—Fiona. The other was a man in a black tuxedo. He was walking on crutches, slowly moving forward with his left foot hovering over the floor.

With a new pair of glasses and tidy hair, Wilhelm Schultz—Major Travas—emerged. The guests' reactions varied wildly.

“Looks like he’s in good shape,” Silas Epstein remarked.

“And still as handsome as ever,” his sister mused nostalgically.

“He’s all grown up now,” their mother gasped in tears, almost as though she were marrying off her own son.

“Not my type. I prefer rugged tough-guys.” Miss Angela shrugged.

“He hurt his leg, huh,” Carlo commented nonchalantly.

Seron, Meg, Larry, Jenny, Natalia, and Nick were not floored, either.

‘So that’s the groom.’

‘He looks like a nice person.’

‘Is he injured?’

‘I should take some photos.’

‘Glasses, huh.’

‘He looks like a scholar.’

That was the extent of their reactions.

But a moment later, Natalia recognized Queen Francesca and started a small commotion at the table.

As for Lillianne Aikashia Corazòn Whittington Schultz—

“Oh. Ohhh. I see now.”

She wore a completely blank expression. For three seconds, she watched expressionlessly as the man she knew for years as Major Travas was escorted to center stage by the Queen of Ikstova.

Then—

“Pfft!”

She chuckled.

“Mom, you liar... Congrats, darn it! And you too, Dad...” she whispered, so quietly that only Treize could hear.

Treize had held on to her hand the whole time. He hesitated for a moment—

“It’s okay.”

And he quietly let go.

“Oh, shoot! He really pulled one over on us! Good one, Major! Who!” Kane cheered, not bothering to hide his emotions.

Ed, Uno, and Ozette, who were seasoned veterans with years of training under their belts to prepare them for any situation—

“What?!” “Hm?!” “Impossible...”

—Were equally surprised, unable to hide their shock at the revelation.

Axe was no different. She was stunned into silence for a moment.

“What...is going on...? He was an Easterner? Then...when was Father... What?”

She stood there in a daze, in no shape to even think about guarding anyone.

“Major Travas...” Major Kinski gasped, jaw agape.

The colonel was equally as dumbfounded.

“I apologize for keeping the both of you in the dark,” said Major General Aikashia, not sounding apologetic in the least. “The former Major Travas actually holds Roxchean citizenship as well, although this was top secret when he was still serving in the Royal Army. He is participating in the ceremony today under his Roxchean identity. The marriage has been valid for years, of course, but they’re finally holding the ceremony today.”

“Sir,” the colonel said, dazed.

“What is it?”

“You have a rather interesting sense of humor.”

“Ah. Apologies.”

“You should have told us from the start that Major Travas was alive, sir... Do you have any idea how worried we were?” the colonel asked. Aikashia smiled.

“Colonel, you’re being more sentimental than your reputation suggests.”

“I must be getting old, sir.”

“The same goes for me. I would never have given permission for this little game if I were a younger man.”

“Sir! You mean you weren’t the one who planned this?”

“The planning was all done by the young folks. Major Travas and Mrs. Schultz, and the Hero of the Mural and Her Majesty Queen Francesca.”

“We couldn’t even dream of throwing a surprise party on this scale.”

The older men continued to chat amicably, but Major Kinski could not be any more different. He was as white as a sheet.

“Pardon me, sir,” the colonel said, noticing Kinski’s condition. “Major Kinski and I have something to discuss. I’m sure we can greet the bride and groom after everyone else has taken their turn.” He gave Kinski’s shoulder a gentle push and signaled him to go.

“I see,” Aikashia replied without a hint of concern, watching them leave the table.

The bride and groom stepped down from the stage and were greeted by the guests.

Major Kinski and the colonel, however, walked away from the chatter and to the parking lot. They stopped behind the truck parked there, hidden from view of the drivers on standby.

“What’s wrong, Major Kinski? You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” the colonel said, unperturbed. “You’ll need nerves of steel if you want to survive this career path, my man.”

“B-but Colonel! I don’t understand. How is Major Travas still alive? And what is he doing here, getting married, of all things?”

“Did it take you by surprise?” the colonel asked, looking into Kinski’s bowed face.

“Yes, sir.”

“Like I said before, you must not let that show in your expression or your behavior,” the colonel said. And with a shrug, he pointed at Kinski’s holstered gun.

It was a 9mm handgun that comprised part of their dress uniform. The magazine was loaded with 13 rounds.

“At this point, you have no other options.”

“Sir! Are you ordering me to take responsibility and kill myself?” Major Kinski asked, angry.

“I am not. Don’t get the wrong idea,” the colonel replied calmly. He placed his right hand on Kinski’s shoulder and squeezed. A good-natured grin rose to his lips. “Your killing yourself won’t solve anything. Your killing Travas, on the other hand, will solve many problems.”

“What?”

“You can do it, can’t you? It’s simple. Just join the guests as they greet the bride and groom, and get close enough that you can shoot him at point-blank range. About three rounds to the face or chest will do.”

“B-but...”

“What are you afraid of at this point? You’re the one who ordered the aeroplane bombing. This is no different. With the bombing, you took three innocent lives from the Air Force. This time you only have one target. If you don’t take care of him now, the three sacrifices will have been for naught.”

“B-but...all the witnesses...”

“Don’t worry, Major. I can help you. As soon as you open fire, I’ll restrain you. Then I’ll say to the guests, ‘Don’t kill him! I’ll take him back to the embassy for questioning!’”

Kinski was silent.

“Then you’ll spend a few days relaxing in the basement cell in the embassy, before being found mentally unstable and not criminally responsible. You’ll be taken back to the motherland. Princess Matilda’s presence will help us—it’ll make your madman act more convincing. Do you understand?”

Kinski was silent.

“If we let Travas go now, all our efforts will have been in vain. We cannot let any more of Roxche’s drugs poison Sou Be-Il. You heard the major general—Travas also holds Roxchean citizenship. He’ll continue to work with the cartels as they smuggle drugs to the West.”

Kinski was silent.

“Can you imagine what kind of havoc they’ll wreak? This is our last chance to save the motherland. One day Travas’s misdeeds will be known to the world, and your reputation will be restored. The major general will agree with your actions as well.”

Kinski was silent.

“Still unsure? I suppose there’s no helping it. Shall I do the deed myself? I’m perfectly willing to shoulder the burden, so long as you are willing to rescue me from the basement cell.”

“...N-no, sir. I don’t have that authority.”

“See? We are left with no other choice. It is time to demonstrate your loyalty to the motherland!”

“Y-yes, sir.”

“Major Kinski.”

“Sir?”

“Make absolutely sure to kill him. And do *not* take your own life afterwards. I swear by the gods that I will help you.”

“Yes, sir...”

Allison and Wil stepped down from the stage and began by greeting the Epstein family.

“Oh, Wil! It’s been much too long! I’m so glad to see you!” Madam Epstein cried, pulling Wil into a hug.

“Mother! It’s my turn!” Eumie butted in, pushing her mother aside to also hug Wil.

“Sorry about my sister,” Silas said to Allison. “Let her off just for today?”

Allison smiled. “Sure. Thanks for covering for Wil back in Ikstova, by the way! And for letting him stay at your place before the train trip!”

“Huh? Oh, that stuff! It’s all ancient history now, but you’re welcome!”

They chatted at length about memories from almost 20 years ago.

Once Wil was freed, he briefly shook hands with Silas and his father.

Then the bride and groom went to Bezel’s Princess Matilda.

“My deepest apologies for causing you worry, Your Highness,” Wil said with a bow.

Allison gave an elegant curtsy.

“Father told me everything,” Matilda said coolly. “We can speak more on this matter at a later time.” Then she smiled. “I would rather not get in the way of your meeting with your daughter.”

Matilda stepped aside. Then came Major General Aikashia, and—

“Go on,” Treize said, giving Lillia a push.

Lillia stood on Aikashia’s left side and came face-to-face with Wil.

Aikashia stood face-to-face with his own daughter.

Major Kinski crossed the paved parking lot, his right hand hovering over his holster.

He had loaded the magazine by the truck beforehand. All he had to do now was pull the handgun out of the holster, operate the safety, and pull the trigger. It would not even take a second.

His steps took him to the cheery crowd before the stage.

The colonel walking next to him sounded especially loud in those minutes.

“Er...” Lillia hesitated, looking at the man she had known for years. She waved. “It’s been a while!”

She could not continue the conversation. She could not say a word.

Nor could Wil. But Aikashia quietly smiled.

“Word-for-word,” he mumbled.

“What do you mean?” asked Lillia.

“It’s the very same thing I heard many years ago, when I was reunited with my own daughter.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. And by the way, I’m referring to—” Aikashia’s gaze went from his granddaughter to his daughter.

“Me!” Allison cried, raising a hand, holding up a thumb, and winking at the same time. The pose clashed with the wedding dress.

“Huh? What? The major general is Mom’s dad?”

“I am.” “That’s right.”

Silently and blankly, Lillia stood frozen. Three seconds later, she beamed and clung to Aikashia’s left arm.

“Grandpa!”

“Huh?”

“That means you’re my grandpa, right?”

“Yes, it does...”

“I’m so happy to get to meet you! Let’s go chat over there!”

Allison, Wil, and Treize—who was standing behind them—watched in shock.

“So! I’m just going to go on a date with Grandpa for a while!” Lillia declared, dragging Aikashia away by the arm.

“Apologies, all of you,” Aikashia said, not sounding apologetic in the least, and followed his granddaughter.

“Hm?” “What?” Wil and Treize exchanged confused glances.

“Looks like you’ve been rejected, boys,” Allison teased them mercilessly.

Wil hung his head. “I really am sorry to Lillia about everything.”

Allison gently clung to Wil’s left arm as Lillia had with her father.

“Don’t worry. We have plenty of time to set things right. That’s one of the perks of being alive.”

“Do you understand, Major? Do not shoot immediately. Start by making small talk. Make sure that everyone is in a good mood and distracted when you make your move. Ah, I know! I’ll signal you when the time is right. ‘Perfect weather for a wedding.’ That’s your cue.”

Major Kinski continued to walk as he listened to the colonel.

He spotted his target 20 meters ahead in the distance, surrounded by wedding guests.

That was when Major General Aikashia, one of the VIPs, happened to leave the crowd. Princess Matilda was not among the guests there either. The five bodyguards were foolishly standing around the guests with their sights set on the stage’s surroundings.

Major Kinski pressed forward.

“Guys! Let me introduce you. This here’s my grandpa!”

Lillia pulled Major General Aikashia over to the newspaper club and Princess Matilda, who had become friends and were exchanging casual conversation.

“Huh?” Meg gasped. “Then he is Allison’s mother? I mean, father?”

Aikashia was surrounded by young people on all sides.

“Yes, that’s correct. We had some unusual circumstances barring us from meeting, but I finally got the chance to say hello to my darling granddaughter,” he said, patting Lillia on the head. The veteran soldier was now little more than a doting grandfather.

Naturally, Aikashia had a cover story prepared in case someone inquired about his background as Major Oscar Whittington.

As for Larry, the other military man at the table, he did not know about Allison’s history in the military or Lillia’s unusually long full name. And it did not even occur to him to recall the Lestki Island story he had heard from his grandfather.

<See that? I’ve never seen the headmaster act like...like a normal grandfather,> Kane remarked, standing guard at the outer edge of the crowd.

<I can’t believe I’m seeing that look on his face,> Ed agreed.

<This isn’t some elaborate prank he’s playing on us, is it?> asked Uno.

<Wish I had a camera,> said Ozette.

Ann silently kept an eye on the surroundings. But noticing nothing out of the ordinary, she remained silent. All she saw was Major Kinski and the colonel as they returned to the stage.

“Hey, Wil! Dumped by your daughter, I see!” Benedict joked, slapping Wil on the shoulder. “Lemme officially welcome you to the Dad Club!” he said in Bezelese with a smile.

“I wish we could have invited Mother, too,” said Allison. Travas Ladia had been unable to attend the wedding.

“She wouldn’t want to leave the village for such a long trip,” Wil said.

Fiona snapped a photo with the single-lens reflex camera she had so desperately wanted, and wound the film. “Then you can have a reception at the Future Village! I’d love to visit myself.”

“That’s a great idea!” Allison agreed. “We can do it when Wil’s leg heals and he can carry me, bridal-style!”

“Please control yourself, Allison.”

“But you owe me for the piggyback ride last time!”

“Then we know how the reception’s going to start,” said Benedict, “and Fi will be the camerawoman.”

“Wonderful! It looks like I’m going to need a new camera.”

“What?”

As the bride and groom laughed with their closest friends, Major Kinski and the colonel approached.

“Well, well! If it isn’t the dead man, risen from the grave!” the colonel joked, grinning.

Wil smiled back. “My deepest apologies for worrying you, Colonel.”

“How are your injuries?”

“All better, except for the broken ankle.”

“Make sure you take your time with that,” said the colonel, “After all, you’re retired now!”

“I’m afraid I’ve saddled everyone with work now. Especially you, Major Kinski.”

Major Kinski stood stiffly and saluted Wil. Wil could not salute back because of the crutches, so he bowed lightly instead.

“I don’t know the details, Major Travas, but I’m glad to see you’re safe,” said Major Kinski.

“Thank you. I’m sorry for worrying you as well, Major. How is everyone back at the embassy?”

“They’re doing just fine. Although I do get the sense that you set the bar very high at the office.”

“Major Kinski, you and I have been given different talents. But whatever the others expect of you, don’t forget that you and your unique gifts are crucial to the stability of relations between East and West.”

“Thank you.”

That was when Benedict broke his silence. “Hm? Excuse me, Major. Have we met before?”

“What? No, sir,” Major Kinski lied.

“Colonel, may I speak to Major Kinski privately for a moment?” asked Wil.

The colonel’s grin widened. “Of course.”

Wil excused himself and turned to Kinski.

“I’ve already left my post at the embassy, so this is a request and not an order, Major Kinski.”

“W-what is it?” Kinski asked.

“Someone from the motherland is working to smuggle drugs from the Capital District to the West. You must find and capture him.”

“What do you mean?” Kinski paled. Rage colored his already-tense expression.

“Unfortunately, I did not even notice the matter while I was still on duty,” Wil said. “And now that I am no longer in the military, I cannot lift a finger to stop him.”

Kinski’s right hand slowly went to his holster.

That was when the colonel changed the subject.

“In any case, the weather is wonderful today. It’s a perfect day for a wedding!”

Major Kinski opened the holster cover.

His right hand gripped the handgun. At the same time, Wil whispered—

“Please, René.”

Kinski froze.

As if time itself had stopped.

Wil continued.

“I am truly grateful that you kept silent all those years ago. Your decision saved the world.”

A girl with blond hair.

Blue uniforms.

The Teruto Royal Army Base.

Carr Benedict.

All the pieces fell into place at once and brought his memories rushing to the surface. Major Kinski was pulled back to his days as a private, when he still went by his real name.

“AAAAAAHHH! You’re the fake Royal Guard warrant officer!” Kinski cried, clutching his head in his hands. His gun remained in its holster.

“I am. It’s been a long time, Mr. René Falkrott,” Wil replied.

“Wow!” Allison chirped. “I remember you! You were our guide, right? This is awesome! It’s been a while!”

“I remember you too!” said Benedict, “You were on Green Island the year after! Serving as a specialist! Remember me?”

“I realized who you were earlier,” said Wil, “but I deliberately pretended not to notice. But I’ve come out with the truth now because I have something I absolutely must say.”

“W-what do you want to say...?”

“Something very simple. ‘Trust me’.”

Slowly, Major Kinski lowered his hands.

His shoulders fell as he exhaled.

Next to him, the colonel continued. “Perfect weather for a wedding, wouldn’t you agree?”

Major Kinski did not pull out his gun.

He slowly turned. He met the gaze of the red-faced colonel.

And he quietly shook his head.

“Damn you,” the colonel said, taking out his own handgun.

Major Kinski moved before the colonel could even take aim.

He did exactly as he learned at the Aikashia school, striking the edges of the handgun with both hands to take it from the colonel’s grip.

In the blink of an eye, he removed the magazine, pulled the slide, removed the slide stop, and then removed the slide itself.

Handgun parts clattered to the ground one after another.

“What in...”

The colonel was stunned into silence.

“Please, allow me to investigate,” Major Kinski said, eyes as cold as ice. “We will know the true identity of the one who has been smuggling drugs to the motherland.”

The colonel ground his teeth without a word.

Wil stepped forward, still on crutches. “Here.” He dropped a small capsule into Kinski’s hands. It was silver, and slightly large to be a medical capsule. Inside was the microfilm he had recovered from the wreck. “It contains so-called evidence that I was behind the smuggling operation—falsified evidence, naturally, but it will likely contain clues as to who did the

falsifying. Headquarters in Sfrestus will attest that I have not tampered with these documents in any way.”

Major Kinski’s fingers wrapped tightly around the capsule. “Thank you,” he replied tersely. “I’d prefer not to bother you on such a fine day. I will escort the colonel back to the embassy.”

“Then take three or so people with you,” Benedict said, raising three fingers into the air and making a circular motion.

A second later, Axe and the other bodyguards heard the mystery woman on the radio once again.

<Ed, Uno, Ozette. To Major Travas. Code Orange.>

“Hear that?”

“Yep.”

Ed and Uno, who had been standing near one another, did as ordered. Ozette soon joined them from a short distance away.

“Who is that? And how does she even know the codes?”

“Dunno.”

“Damn it! I can’t believe you’re making me do all the grunt work,” the mystery woman said without pressing the talk button.

She was next to a tall window in the chapel, which had been replaced with a one-way mirror.

“Welcome to newbie life. But you’re not bad at all. It might be worth putting you through the wringer.”

The first woman was accompanied by an older woman, a veteran member of Ikstova’s royal guard.

“I welcome your challenge! Someday I’ll have what it takes to kill the queen with my own two hands. Just watch me!” cried the younger woman, who had black hair and a microphone wrapped around her throat.

“That’s the spirit. Feel free to try when you’re sure you can kill us all, little lady.”

Claire Nichto, the newest addition to Ikstova’s royal guard, fumed.

“Ed, Uno, Ozette, you are now under my command. Take the colonel back to the embassy immediately,” Kinski ordered sharply. The three bodyguards were almost surprised.

“Ignore him, men. I can go back myself!” the colonel cried, turning red, but Kinski ignored him.

On Kinski’s orders, Ed—the largest of the men—stood behind the colonel with the other two on the colonel’s either side. It almost looked like he was a VIP being escorted out of the venue.

Major Kinski picked up the colonel’s fallen handgun and handed it to Benedict.

“I may have to see you for questioning later, depending on the results of the investigation,” he said to Wil, and turned away.

But a moment later, he remembered something and turned back.

“By the way, congratulations on your marriage.”

The car that had driven Major Kinski to the wedding left the parking lot, crammed with passengers.

Wil, Allison, Benedict, and Fiona watched the car depart when Aikashia came up to them, smiling.

“Is it over?” asked the old general.

“For now,” replied his son-in-law.

Aikashia nodded. “Then let’s finally begin.”

“Begin what, Dad?” asked Allison. The others looked just as curious.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Aikashia replied, “The wedding, of course!”



* * *

The bride and the groom exchanged their vows on the stage, standing before Fiona and Benedict, who were acting as both emcees and witnesses.

The wedding had finally become a normal one.

“Lillia,” Treize said, “I’m going to study hard and go on to university in the Capital District.”

“That’s great,” Lillia replied. “Go for it!” She had cheered up completely.

“And I promise, I’ll figure out the answer by the time I’m 20!” Treize declared, placing a clenched fist over where his pendant no longer was.

“Answer to what?” Lillia wondered.

A short distance from the completely despondent Treize were Meg and Seron.

“It is a wonderful wedding!” Meg said, looking up at the stage.

“Yeah,” Seron replied expressionlessly, putting on the happiest face he knew.

“But is Treize’s real self now not concerning to everyone?” Meg asked suddenly.

“Hm? I guess it doesn’t really matter at this point whether he’s descended from morderca or not, does it?”

“It is a relief! Er, Seron? My dear future husband?”

“... What is it, Meg?”

“I still yet have one secret.”

“... What is it?”

Meg quietly brought her lips to his right ear.

“The truth is...that my ancestors the Strauski are a morderca family.”

“!”

“It is a secret from the other people. It is a simple history now, but my parents said, do not tell anyone.”

“All right. I won’t tell a soul,” Seron said, and met Meg’s eyes. “By the way, would that mean you’re quicker than most people?” he joked.

“I wonder so?” Meg replied.

And before anyone had the chance to even notice, she softly pressed her lips onto his.

-The End-



アリソンから続く
『一つの大陸の物語』
シリーズ。
僕にとって
本当に大切に
大好きな
作品でした!!

最後まで応援
ありがとう
ございました!!



黒星紅白