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THE SILVER SEER

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Abstract

War is on the horizon. A seer hides his past, a mechanical hybrid chases promises, and a prince desires revenge. Corruption runs rampant throughout the ranks while outsiders observe from the shadows.

Felix Adelric is a seer. Serving as the Lieutenant General of Switzerland, he values trust between his officers more than anything, hoping they'll listen to his orders when their lives are on the line. But when a letter arrives, old memories are reawakened, and Felix must pay a price for every lie he tells. Even if that price is betrayal.

Reko Erkki is a mechanical hybrid. Half-soldier, half-child, he's both extremely violent but undeniably adorable. Pledging his life and loyalty to Felix after being saved from death in Finland, Reko will do anything to ensure Felix remains alive and well. Even if it means going behind his back and embracing the soldier he knows he was never meant to truly be.

Lars Theodor is a prince. The Crown Prince of Denmark who was forced to flee his kingdom after his parents were killed. As his speculations behind their murderer — and their image within his own eyes — change, he must question if he truly desires revenge. Or, perhaps his motivations are more selfless than he believes.

But as allies become enemies, and friends turn on one another, it soon becomes apparent that the cost of trying to end the impending war might be too great.

Unless a life is willing to be sacrificed.

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Introduction

“The Silver Seer” is the first novel within the trilogy and novella known as the “Blood Trilogy”, which follows each of the three main characters as they struggle with their pasts, traumas, and identities. The first novel follows Felix Kaizer Adelric, a 21-year old seer and Lieutenant General of Switzerland, as he must prepare for a war with Russia after receiving a letter from his father, Pavel, who is also the Marshal of the Russian Federation. Though Felix is the protagonist, he is classified as a tragic hero (more specifically, a modern tragic hero with aspects aligned with the reluctant and trauma-forged heroes) with some of the traits and methods of an antihero, as compared to a classic/epic hero. Though later in the novel, he begins to drift towards aligning more with the traits and methods of a villain.

As a seer, Felix is able to foresee and prevent the deaths of those close to him, which encompasses any officers and soldiers under his command. This also includes foreseeing and preventing his own death. Despite the clear advantage this ability gives Felix, it causes him extreme anxiety and stress, as there is no warning before a vision occurs. Within the novel, this is written as a rewinding of time — Felix will witness either his own death or that of someone else, and when he blinks, time “rewinds” and he gets the chance to act before the death occurs. Of course, his visions are fallible — external factors out of his control may change the outcome he saw, though he usually acts fast enough so those factors aren’t life-threatening. His emotions also affect his visions — if he is not in a stable mental or emotional state, his visions either won’t occur or there will be repeated visions, and Felix will be unable to act, not able to come back to the “present.”

Besides his ability, Felix also suffers from severe abuse that his father inflicted on him when he was 13, after being forcefully enlisted into the Russian military. Though the abuse

stemmed from his ability, its effects go far beyond, often causing Felix physical pain or reminding him of the abuse, which only intensifies as the beginning of the war comes closer. He also carries guilt, specifically survivor's guilt, from an event referred to in the novel as "Forchheim", where a massacre happened that was carried out by Felix's superiors. He and Reko are the only survivors of the event, and Felix's determination to protect all his officers stems from the unfortunate outcome of that event.

Serving underneath Felix are 25 different officers, each in charge of one of Switzerland's 25 cantons (excluding Bern, which Felix commands). Not all 25 officers' perspectives are explored throughout the novel — there are five other officers who receive chapters in their third-person point-of-view — the most important chapters coming from Reko Levo Erkki, the second main character within the novel.

Reko is a 16-year old mechanical being — a hybrid between a soldier and a child. Reko was one of many mass-produced soldiers in Finland, and the only survivor of the invasion that Russia initiated against Finland due to the threat that mechanical soldiers like him could pose. Felix eventually traveled to Finland and saved Reko's life when the latter was 12 years old, and the novel begins four years after the rescue. Because Felix is the first person Reko met and became friends with, his loyalty to Felix is absolute — to the point where he is willing to injure his fellow officers if they threaten Felix in any way. Unfortunately, their strong devotion to one another is unhealthy, and begins to border on self-destructive as the novel progresses.

Externally, Reko appears like a normal human being, the only odd features are his bright red eyes and golden oil as his blood. Underneath his skin is where his mechanical aspects are housed, though these are not explored in-depth within the first novel. He excels at military tasks, and is assigned as second-in-command of Bern if Felix ever has to leave the canton or cannot

lead in any capacity. But he often speaks and acts like a child, seeking praise and validation from Felix, giggling, smiling, and often reflecting back on memories he made with Felix — the most prominent being the two creating flower crowns back when Reko was first rescued.

The third main character is 20-year old Lars Einar Theodor, the Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Denmark. Though not related to the other characters in the way that Felix and Reko are, he is driven by the belief that a mechanical soldier murdered his parents — Mathias and Cecilie Theodor, the previous monarchs — leading him to violently collide with Reko when the two eventually meet.

Lars was forced into exile at nine years old after watching his parents die. He spends the next eleven years before the beginning of the novel trying to learn who killed his parents, and then restlessly trains to kill a mechanical soldier after he determines they must be the culprit. His fixation on Reko is obsessive, to the point where he disregards his own safety to achieve his vengeance. He does not desire to go back to Denmark — he believes he is not worthy of ruling as a king until he kills Reko. But after it is revealed to Lars that Reko did not kill his parents — and the possibility of the culprit being a mechanical soldier at all is impossible — his motivation and outlook on the future slowly begin to change.

This novel takes place over the course of 16 days, within an alternate future version of Europe (referred to as New Europe) consisting of only three countries — Germany, Switzerland, and Russia. Each country has considerably grown in size, claiming neighboring countries as their territory in an effort to deter war, in an event known as The Decision. Russia is the largest, followed by Germany, and finally Switzerland. Instead of the world playing a physical role within the novel, it plays an emotional role, especially in regard to Felix, who essentially lived three different lives in each country — born in Russia, lived/served there until he was 15, served

for two years in Germany from 15 to 17, and served four years in Switzerland, from 17 to 21. Frochheim is a city in Germany, further connecting the country to Felix's guilt and trauma, and even aspects of Reko's trauma. Finland was invaded by Russia but liberated by Switzerland (and therefore under their control), while Denmark is under German occupation. Countries can gain independence from their occupants, and Denmark is the only country to explicitly gain independence, though the notion is simply referred to in the first novel.

The world also influences the languages the characters speak. Though the novel is primarily written in English, there are some words and phrases that are written in other languages, including Danish (exclusive to Lars), Finnish, German, Italian, Polish, and Russian to add a unique voice to the other officers and reflect the internationality of the characters within the novel. The word most commonly seen is "Komentaja" — Finnish for "Commander" — and is what Reko addresses Felix by (though through narration, he is called "Felix" or "his (Reko's) captain") to show the closeness of their relationship.

The chapters within this project are part of the fifth draft of the novel. The idea for the initial novel, "Angels of the Forsaken", began back in 2020, containing six different characters whose point of views alternated between chapters. It took inspiration from Leigh Bardugo's "Six of Crows" duology, specifically the first book with the same name. Felix is the only character who remained consistent throughout all the novel's drafts, with only small changes occurring in his backstory. Reko was not a mechanical soldier at that time — he was an orphan of war and forced to become a soldier, whereas in this draft, though has the option to depart, he refuses to leave Felix's side. And Lars wasn't even a character until the fourth draft of the novel, though he is introduced earlier in the current draft (Chapter 4 as opposed to Chapter 9 in previous drafts).

Lastly, though there are 40 total chapters, only the first 15 are collected within this capstone. Everything within the 15 chapters occurs across two days, and jumps between points of view. Felix's chapters are the only one in first-person, in order to more vividly explore the mental and emotional impacts of his ability, past, trauma, and identity. His main arc is internal and focused on interiority, so a first-person perspective allows me to more easily express his motivations and desires and makes readers "feel" what he is. Reko's, Lars' and the chapters of other characters — Lumi, Kirsi, Rodion, Leon and Thilo — are in limited third-person, restricting how they are perceived which is vital to their arcs: Reko's soldier vs the child, and Lars' weapon/exile vs the king.

This novel has been an absolute joy to write, and though the arcs of these characters are complex, messy, and rarely happy, there are moments of calm, revolving around found family, courage, and the ability to see and try to do good in a world that punishes goodness. To those who read it, if anyone, I hope they come to realize, like Felix, Reko, and Lars, that your identity and your past do not have to define you — you are defined by what you choose to be.

References

Bardugo, Leigh. *Six of Crows*. Macmillan, 2015.

Chapter 1: Forever With You

I stand in front of the mirror within my office, fiddling with the last of the golden buttons that keep my navy uniform's overcoat together. With winter approaching, my office grows colder each night as autumn's colorful leaves give way to winter's pure white snow. So, to keep myself warm, I bring out the overcoat to my uniform. I assume my officers will soon do the same as they continue their daily activities, like drills, training, and patrols.

I begin to turn away from the mirror but find my feet rooted to the spot. Instead of my reflection in the mirror, I see a group of soldiers – enough for a simple patrol – become lost in a plume of smoke. And though the scene does not last long enough for me to watch the smoke clear and determine the outcome of what I fear has just occurred, a small headache confirms my doubts.

“Dammit... Where were they?” I try to recall the details of the landscape from what I glimpsed in the mirror. A river, a bridge, falling leaves... Basel. A beautiful town, now presumably up in smoke for a reason I do not know, nor can I even begin to consider.

I shake my head to clear my mind of my assumed overreaction. My visions aren't perfect — flashes, fragments, and sometimes wrong entirely — but never meaningless.

Walking over to my desk against the back wall of the office, I remind myself the decisions I make influence the entire nation, seeing as the military is the supreme authority in each remaining country — Germany, Switzerland, and Russia. Though I may be the youngest Lieutenant General Switzerland has ever appointed, that doesn't mean I lack the experience to make the decisions that matter .

I grab a pair of white gloves from off of my desk's surface and slip them on my hands before turning my attention to a knock on the front door.

“Yes? Who is it?” I move another pair of black gloves into the desk’s top drawers.

“*Huomenta, Komentaja!*” A cheerful voice comes from the other side of the door, speaking a language I learned just so I could communicate with him: Finnish.

I smile to myself and walk over to the door, opening it and stepping to the side to allow the visitor to walk in. He immediately sits down in my desk chair, pushing off the floor with his foot, and spinning around as a smile lights up his face.

His blond hair gleams in the dim lighting of my office, and his vermillion uniform matches the color of his eyes. I can see the remains of bandages around his pale left wrist, from an injury that he claims he received by “protecting my reputation,” whatever that means.

From behind him, I can see the map of New Europe, and I focus my eyes on the border Switzerland shares with Russia. So far, Russia has remained far from our border, but if what I saw in the mirror wasn’t some kind of horrible accident...

I can’t always keep thinking of the worst possible option. If those soldiers didn’t die, they were at most fatally injured. But I can’t seem to help it — the weight of command still sits strangely on someone my age. I briefly close my eyes and bring myself back to the boy, who giggles as he continues spinning in my chair.

“Good morning, Reko. You’re earlier than usual.” I glance up at the clock hanging above the mirror. It’s 5:45 a.m. I’ve been awake for 45 minutes now.

The time I spend alone in my office gives me time to prepare for the day ahead. Thankfully, though Reko’s visit is a surprise, it’s a pleasant one that doesn’t disturb the otherwise calm day I have planned for my officers.

“I went to bed earlier than usual last night. Aren’t you proud of me?” Reko’s tone is akin to that of a child looking for praise, and I cannot help but continue to smile as I step around him, avoiding his feet as I move toward my desk again.

“Of course, I’m proud of you. Why wouldn’t I be?” I open another drawer of my desk and lift out a silver watch, wrapping it around my left wrist before closing the drawer and turning to stare at Reko as he slows the rapidly spinning chair until it comes to a halt.

He playfully shakes his head. “Because you’ve lectured me about getting enough sleep for the past two weeks. I don’t need as much sleep as normal soldiers, you know.” He stands up and wanders about the office, taking several moments to look at the nine medals hanging on the wall across from the mirror while I walk over to the door, setting my gloved fingers on its handle.

“That still doesn’t give you the excuse to perform the stamina drill all night for those two weeks until you’ve nearly passed out. I don’t think you can further improve yourself via your efforts until Kirsi allows you to.” I try my best to explain why I don’t want Reko to train himself so hard, but it seems to go right over his head every time I’ve attempted to lecture him in the past. This time is probably no different.

“Yeah, but Kirsi’s so slow with updates! And the past three I’ve had are boring. Vision, improvement of something lame in my internal system, and eye-hand coordination don’t help me at all. I want an increase in my stamina and an improvement in my speed and response time. I’ll be an even more efficient soldier and protect you better than I could before!” Reko is beside me in a second as I open my office door.

The person he’s referring to – Kirsi – is the young prodigy behind the creation of Finland’s mechanical soldiers. They told me they were originally creating mechanical

children for couples or people who couldn't have children, but the government caught word of their engineering talent and demanded they begin to make soldiers. So, they did, and as far as they and I know, after Russia attacked Finland with the goal of eliminating the so-called "maniac slaughter machines," Reko is the only survivor, and the last "soldier" Kirsi created.

Because he was Kirsi's last creation before the young genius went into hiding, he has more child-like traits than a mechanical soldier, so he breathes, eats, and even comes to know about emotions and how to display them with instruction from me. I have ensured, ever since I rescued him in Finland after the war, that he feels as human as possible. I know he hates being a mechanical soldier, and maybe even a mechanical child, but I can only hope that when he is around me, he feels nothing but the love Kirsi believed their mechanical children could receive. Even if that child has grown up into a soldier.

I begin walking towards the Grand Room – the area where I hold my briefings, Reko walking beside me, humming a joyful tune. I quickly glance up at the silver flagpole, able to catch the red and white flag of Switzerland softly blowing in the slight breeze. A sign that reaffirms my confidence in this nation's military and its numerous officers.

As we continue, out of the corner of my right eye, I catch Dimitry - a native Russian whom I let join Switzerland's ranks because of the poor governmental situations arising in his nation at the time - walking toward me, a white envelope in his left hand.

"Reko, go on to the Grand Room without me. I'll be there shortly." Reko shoots me a doubtful look, to which I just smile and gently reply. "Go on ahead."

Satisfied, Reko gives me a single nod and continues to walk, while I stop and wait for Dimitry to pause, salute me and say his greeting. "Good morning, General Adelric. This came

for you today.” Dimitry hands me the envelope, and I quickly open it, not finding any reason to spare a moment to mentally prepare myself for what may be in the letter.

That is a mistake.

Narrowing my eyes and letting out a short sigh, I march past Dimitry and continue to the Grand Room before he can inquire about the contents of the letter.

This is the surprise I was expecting – one that doesn’t only ruin the one day I hoped would be relaxing for all those under me, but also the entire course of the next year, maybe even further out than that.

I throw open the doors of the Grand Room and begin walking straight toward the podium.

Already inside the room are officers from all the major bases stationed in Switzerland, stemming from its 26 cantons, though the most important are those stationed in Zürich, Geneva, Luzern, Fribourg, and Basel, which is divided into Basel-Landschaft and Basel-Stadt. And, of course, I am the designated “officer” in charge of Bern’s military base, with Reko as the secondary commanding officer if I ever have to travel to another base in the country. Though some are fooled by his childish demeanor, Kirsi did engineer him to be a soldier, so everyone knows he can lead as effectively as I do — sometimes more.

Usually, the officers present would all be chatting and laughing – something I don’t mind. But they appear to sense the sudden urgency in my stride alone and go completely silent.

And though most of the officers notice my presence and part to let me through, I stop just short of one of the younger men, who quickly turns around, eyes wide, then stumbles back and salutes me in a silent apology.

I don't blame him for not parting immediately, as I usually stick to the walls of the room, choosing to avoid having them move out of my way. But I do not have time to show them the compassion I usually do.

Stepping up to the raised platform, I turn to face them at the podium. With their hands behind their backs and eyes focused straight ahead I would usually say the two words that allow them to relax. This time around, I don't.

I need them to give me their full attention.

Before speaking, I clear my throat. "I have just received a letter from intelligence stating that a troop of Russian soldiers stand at our border, seemingly poised to launch an attack at any given moment. I have not received any information on why they may attack us, how long they have been stationed at our border, or how many soldiers are present. But I suspect they are here to finish what they couldn't twelve years ago.

"Who were the members that were sent to Finland from this nation to rescue any survivors from the aftermath of the war?" At my question, only a few hands rise, fewer than I expected.

Well, it's understandable. Many of the officers present at that time were sent to Forchheim, where they-

No. Not now. That's in the past – it's over and done with. This potential outbreak of another war is more pressing, it's the present. Focus on that instead.

Reko's red eyes look straight at me from the back of the room. From this distance, I have no clue if he understands what I'm referring to, but it deeply concerns him. I just hope he remains alive at the end of everything this nation may be put through.

I quickly scan my officers before continuing. “Those of you who were part of that mission know a mechanical soldier came back with us and has since become one of you – soldiers loyal to Switzerland. The letter I have received implies that Russia has gained knowledge of this soldier’s whereabouts, and may plan to formally declare war on us if we do not give that soldier over to them peacefully, though-”

Murmurs break out amongst the officers immediately, and I can see Reko’s eyes grow wide, his figure growing restless – either out of fear or anger, both possibilities given what he experienced between being rescued by me and what I’m saying now. I silence the room with a wave of my hand and try my best to offer reassurance to my officers, but most of all to Reko.

“I have no intention of giving the soldier over to the Russians, and I trust all of you to hold those same intentions in your minds and with your actions as we move forward. I will attempt negotiations with Russia’s higher-ranking officers, but if it does appear that going to war is the only option we have...” My voice trails off, and I force myself to blink, swallow, and take a deep breath before speaking in a voice hiding the terror I feel at the idea of going to war.

“Then we will fight with the ferocity and valor that we always have. Know that I, as your General, will do everything in my power to ensure you are all safe and ready to fight before drawing up plans and giving you orders. That is all. You are all dismissed.”

The officers finally relax, though I can still sense their slight tension through raised shoulders and pursed lips before they file out of the Grand Room. In a matter of seconds, Reko is on the floor below me, staring up at me with eyes wide with either fear, anger, or genuine curiosity. I had hoped to soothe his anxiety and other emotions with my words, but I am now unsure if I achieved such.

I move to the leftmost end of the platform and quickly descend, stopping in front of Reko, ready to listen to whatever he has to say.

In the moments before he speaks, one emotion overtakes his expression.

Fear.

It lasts no more than a second before he speaks, and it fades away as if it were never there. “*Komentaja*, why don’t you just give me over to the Russians? Why have the prosperity and safety of Switzerland been threatened if-”

I seize Reko by his shoulders and stare at him with an expression I cannot begin to describe. I don’t know what I’m feeling, but I do know what I want to say.

“Listen to me, Reko. I am *never* going to give you up. You will suffer under their control if you don’t die, and I’m almost certain they will attempt to create an army of soldiers just like you before they torture and kill you. I don’t know every detail about your life in Finland during the war, but I’m willing to bet what you will suffer under Russian control will be as horrible, if not more, than what has already happened.

“Like all the other soldiers under my command, Swiss, German, Russian, Finnish– what have you– I will never sacrifice one of you for the survival of this country. Because we, *together*, give this country life, and we will protect it. We honor those who died for our ideals and our wishes for a better future and fight in hopes that the dreams of peace we have become a reality.

“You are just as loved by me as all the other soldiers, and nothing can change that– not even a threat of war. But as I said, I will attempt negotiations with the Marshal of the Russian Federation. . .” My voice trails off again.

An uncomfortable warmth comes over my entire body as I find myself growing nauseous. My vision goes in and out of focus, while a cold sweat begins to form on the back of my neck.

“*Komentaja?* Are you alright?” Reko’s voice is slightly distorted from my disoriented state, and I take several breaths, coming back to my normal self to say what I wish before departing.

“Excuse me.” I hurry out of the Grand Room and shoot straight for my office. My right hand finds the letter and pulls it from the pocket of my overcoat as I open my office door and close it, ensuring it is locked, before unfolding the letter and looking it over once more.

It is written in Russian. Usually, I would have Dimitry translate it, but I know he’s an unreliable translator. Not because he doesn’t know Russian – I put him in command of Communications because he knows both Russian and German well, along with a bit of Italian and French, the last three being the languages commonly spoken in Switzerland.

It is because he leaves contents of letters and other written media from the country out, specifically when informing me of such information, in concern for my mental health.

I know I can fire him on charges of dishonesty. But I don’t want him to become suspicious of my knowledge of Russian – a language I shouldn’t even know to begin with.

Yet I do. So, I know everything the letter says. I have just lied to my officers about the contents of the letter. Though they have threatened to go to war if I do not surrender Reko to them peacefully, they want one more thing. One thing that I will *never* give them.

They want me. They want me to return to the place where I was born and where I served for just two years before being kidnapped by the Germans and brainwashed to believe I was born there. I served Germany for two more years before arriving here, in Switzerland, and

have since served in this nation for four years, amounting to a total of eight years spent in the military – a little under a third of my entire life so far.

I glance down at the name written at the bottom of the letter. As soon as my eyes take in the name, my back begins to burn. And the more I come to realize who the name belongs to, the burning intensifies.

Pavel Konstantin. The Grand Marshal of the Russian Federation; but more importantly, my father.

While in Russia, at only 13, I was forced to join the military per my father's wishes. It was soon discovered that I was a seer – I could foresee the deaths of Russian soldiers out on the battlefield with enough time left for them to be saved. So, whenever the military was sent on a mission, I was locked in a white room, chained to a metal chair, and forced to suffer terrible headaches as the deaths of those I served alongside yet never trained with or saw, flashed before my eyes. My voice was recorded and sent to Communications, where they would send that information to the soldiers in question and prevent their deaths.

But I was not perfect. I could not see two deaths at a time, and sometimes it was due to a miscommunication or malfunction, but soldiers died. It couldn't be avoided – though the truth is bitter, soldiers die protecting the country they pledge to serve. All my comrades knew that, but my father blamed such occurrences on me. He accused me of lying out of spite, and so he ordered I be punished for the number of soldiers that died per mission.

Anywhere from one to ten meant lashes – five lashes per lost life.

Eleven to twenty meant burning – scalding hot water poured over me while I sat in that cold, metal chair, screaming as my skin was seared – a gallon for every life lost.

Twenty-one to fifty was cutting – a razor drawn across my skin. Luckily – if I could even consider it mercy – every life lost translated into seconds to which I was cut. Each cut was long and slow, putting me through agonizing pain. And though most of the scars healed with assistance from German medics when I was kidnapped and brainwashed by them, some scars remained.

Over fifty was electrocution, a personal favorite of my father. His eyes glistened with excitement as he watched his only son scream and writhe as increasingly severe shocks were sent through his body until they rendered him unconscious. I was left to wake up in the same white room, still strapped to that chair.

On one mission, hundreds of soldiers lost their lives in a horrible accident. I was unable to see those massacres, or maybe my ability as a seer was not developed enough at my young age to take in such information, but my father said my punishment was to be the worst thing I would ever experience.

I braced myself for the pain. The unimaginable pain that would bring the sweet mercy of death brushing against my outstretched fingertips.

But it was not physical pain. Far from it.

My father shoved my mother, Anastasia – a beautiful woman with an abusive husband and a tortured son – into the white room and gave her his pistol before closing the door and leaving us alone.

I stared at my mother, tears already streaming down my face. She, too, was crying, and she walked toward me, her steps small and uneven. I was surprised she didn't stumble and fall.

She gave what she could of a hug to me and told me she loved me with all her heart.

I closed my eyes and relished in her warmth, readying myself to be shot by my mother. But her arms released me, and with tears still streaming down her cheeks and falling onto her white dress, but a smile gracing her lips, held the pistol to her head.

I screamed. The vision I glimpsed for just a moment came true before I could do anything to prevent it.

The white walls and floor were painted crimson, and I struggled against my restraints so aggressively that the chains cut into my skin and allowed my silver blood to mix with the vermillion. I knew that day I was nothing but a tool to the Russian military – to even my father - and the only way to free myself from this hell was to escape.

The night following my mother's suicide, I was kidnapped by the Germans who had gained knowledge of my ability, and woke up in Germany, surprised to find myself in a warm bed and a medic already tending to the worst of my wounds. I found my life in Germany far more enjoyable than that of Russia despite the initial brainwashing. Unfortunate occurrences happened in that country as well, but not as many as in Russia.

The Russians attempted to kidnap me back, but their plan backfired when I escaped while they were stopped in Switzerland, freeing myself from what I hoped was my hellish life. But I only knew of life in the military, so I joined the Swiss army, and now I was here, commanding officers of my own.

The excruciating pain of the scars on my back– the lashes I received in Russia – brings me back to the present. The letter flutters from my hand and ends up on the ground as I clutch the sides of my head with my hands, trying to lessen the pain my memories are both physically and mentally causing.

My entire body grows hot, and sweat begins to run down my face, neck, and back. I tear off my gloves and overcoat, throwing them to the side of my office while I struggle to breathe.

My office is completely dark – I cannot see where I am, nor where I go as I begin to lose my footing from the pain and go flying into an object. I hear the crack of glass, and a sharp pain in my upper left arm before I hit the ground.

The mirror. I have hit the mirror. Why couldn't I have just hit the desk or the floor itself instead? I assume the pain comes from a loose shard of glass that cuts through my uniform.

With tears already escaping my eyes, I push myself up, wincing as shards of glass dig themselves into the palm of my right hand. I shakily stand up, and face the mirror, staring at my fractured reflection.

But my black hair turns blond while my blue eyes remain the same. My navy uniform and white combat boots become a black frock coat with similarly colored boots. I close my eyes and vigorously shake my head, but when I open my eyes, the person reflecting on me does not change. So, I stare them down, despite my pain, and recite what I was brainwashed to believe. "My name is Felix Kaizer Adelric."

The figure in the mirror smiles lopsidedly and replies in a soft but cruel tone. "*My name is Rodion Ilya Konstantin.*"

I narrow my eyes and continue. "I was born in Forchheim, Germany."

They, too, speak. "*I was born in Moscow, Russia.*"

My body begins to tremble. Am I hallucinating? Why am I hearing my younger self speak?

Despite my questions, I force myself to recall more recent details of my life. Surely, they can't counter them. "I am the General of Switzerland."

A scoff. *"I am the pride of Russia. I am their savior. And you are nothing but a failure, a ticking time bomb that will destroy Switzerland. You've already destroyed Russia and Germany. Come back to Russia and aid in its restoration of glory and formation of an invincible military. And don't forget what your father failed to do, and what you can so easily achieve. Kill the boy and bring his corpse back to your home and make Russia powerful. Only then will you receive what you've wanted from your father for eight years: love. That is what you want, isn't it?"*

My body continues to tremble. But it is not out of fear. It is nothing but anger now.

With a scream, I hit the mirror with my left fist, causing the glass to further shatter. I continue to smash the mirror, staining both it and the shards that cover the floor a shimmering silver as my blood leaks from my sliced and pierced hands. My voice is lost in the darkness as I fall to my knees. The burning pain I felt from my scars is no more – only the ache of my cut knuckles is all I can feel. I turn my head to look into the mirror with what remains of the glass, and staring back at me is my initial self, face stained by tears and navy uniform painted with silver streaks.

With what strength I can muster from my tortured self, I reach out with my bloodied left hand into the merciful darkness and whisper six words. "Release me from this hellish world."

Chapter 2: Dual Knowledge

Reko stands in the Grand Room, watching his captain disappear into his office. A few officers slip past where he stands near the doors leading outside, and he notices the three officers who also come from Finland – Heseziel, Lumi, and Kal – shoot him concerned glances with furrowed brows and frowns upon their lips before the sunlight obscures his view of them.

He catches a shadow of a taller, broader officer mesh with his that is cast against the wall nearest to the door, and Reko recognizes who they are even before they say a word. Major General Thilo Haegel, Felix’s best friend. When Reko first encountered Thilo, he will admit he didn’t like how close he was to Felix, but after seeing his captain smile and laugh more than he used to around Thilo, Reko forced himself to take on a friendlier tone when talking to the man. Thankfully, they got along quite well, and Reko is thankful for Thilo’s friendship with his captain.

“I know it’s in your nature to worry about him, but don’t. Chances are, this is just an empty threat. I know I sound outrageous, but if you want a second opinion, talk to any of the officers from Russia. They seemed just as surprised as I when we heard the news.” Thilo’s voice is calm and offers a lukewarm comfort to the teenager, who spares a glance at him.

Thilo has a habit of brushing off danger — a coping mechanism he’s carried with him since his years under Heilewis’ iron rule in Germany.

“And if the threat turns out to be real?” Reko inquires, recalling the effort the Russians made in finding him the night before Felix saved his life.

The pounding of boots that could be felt through the ground, the shouts made in both Russian and English and distant explosions replay in his head. He almost prayed he could die so everything he heard and felt would no longer haunt him. But the first time he saw that blue-eyed,

smiling face, though Reko was terrified at first, he forced himself to grab the hand extended to him. Felix became the first person Reko ever interacted with since the orphanage he was staying in burned down five years prior.

Turning his focus back to Thilo, Reko watches as his gaze hardens, and he looks out over Reko's shoulder at the activity outside. "Like Felix said, we're going to fight like hell to keep you with us. This is not just a war fought for you, but also Switzerland and Finland. Germany will surely come to our aid if we need it – I'm certain Heileis won't turn down a request from Felix."

"If they don't, what then?" Reko receives a raised eyebrow in response.

"Don't bother with hypotheticals. For your, mine, and Felix's sake. If you have any more *legitimate* questions, I'll be here for a while longer. I'll travel back to Vaud by the end of the day, so if you want to chat with me then, tough luck, kid." The teenager can't help but let a smile break through his expression as Thilo playfully punches his arm and winks before heading out of the Grand Room.

Reko waits a few seconds before turning around and noticing a few officers remain in the meeting room, though none of them are by themselves. The two twins that command Basel's two cantons – Basel-Landschaft and Basel-Stadt – Liam and Leon, are together. The teenager keeps his eyes trained on the movements Leon makes with his right arm, curious if the prosthetic he created needs to be improved or replaced. But, all the movements are fluid and without noticeable sound, so the mechanical being nods to himself, satisfied with his handiwork.

Mikhail and Katerina talk with one another, and Reko is tempted to take a few steps closer so he can listen to their conversation, knowing the cantons they command border Russia.

Yet before he can debate whether to step forward or back, Katerina catches sight of him and invites him over with a wave of her hand.

“Ah, Major General Erkki, there you are. You’re pretty close to Lieutenant General Adelric, right?” To her question, the teenager nods. “I thought so. Do you think he would mind if Mikhail and I wanted to ask about his opinion on actions we should take in our cantons with the threat of a war now involved? If something happens because of lazy security or a miscommunication, I don’t want to face his wrath. I’ve heard that the most compassionate people can be the most frightening when provoked.” Katerina explains, and Reko nods.

“I think he’d like that. Is security lazy in your cantons?” At Reko’s question, Mikhail shakes his head.

“Not at all. Quite the opposite actually – we’ve both raised security after sighting the Russians a few days ago. Given how tense Adelric seemed, we just want to confirm his judgement.” Reko finds his left hand has moved to rest on his knife’s handle at Mikhail’s comment, but he grinds his teeth and relaxes his arm.

“Sharing your concerns will help settle his own. He’s prone to grow suspicious of you since you have close ties to Russia.” Reko retorts, before turning on his heels and marching out of the room.

How *dare* Mikhail insult his captain. How should Felix react towards a looming war? Calmly? Indifferently? Reko thinks the way he acted – urgent yet understanding – was fine, considering the immediate threat to Reko’s life. He does not want to die, and Felix offered him more comfort than he needed in that regard. Though he is faring alright, he’s confident his captain is not.

Which is why Reko finds himself right outside of his office, hand balled into a fist and hovering over the oak door. But he lowers his hand, sighs, and turns around, instead walking towards Communications, where one of the Russian officers Reko likes most – Dimitry – spends most, if not all, of his time. All he needs within the building is a bed and a closet and he'll be home.

Reko opens the door to the dark room, feeling an odd sense of familiarity when he sees the glowing lights of various devices illuminate the room a little further down the hall from the foyer he finds himself in. Reko supposes the room he walks towards mirrors the laboratory where he was created, though he doesn't have a recent recollection of the area. He can only recall his bedroom, the orphanage, and a black and gray-colored Finland, littered with debris of houses and eerie silence constantly broken by yelling, screaming, gunfire, and explosions.

A calm voice pulls him from his thoughts. "Major General Erkki. I had a feeling you'd like to chat with me after the news." Dimitry faces the mechanical being from where he sits at a small table, his blond hair appearing closer to white in the light of the screens surrounding him.

In front of him is a black laptop, along with a silver phone, most likely Dimitry's own personal devices, and Reko wonders if he would betray Switzerland by sending confidential documents to Russia via his own devices.

As if reading his mind, Dimitry chuckles. "Don't worry, these are strictly for military use, though I am able to travel with them if need be. I would never dare think about doing anything behind Adelric's back. But enough about me – why are you here?" He gestures over to the chair across from him, and Reko nears it, yet doesn't sit down.

Behind his captain's back? To do something he wouldn't know about isn't something that Reko would ever consider, but an idea pops into his head.

So, he turns to face Dimitry, and voices his question and following request. “Do I have the data the Russians need to make more mechanical soldiers? If I do, can I use your library card to access the building’s basement?”

As he expects, Dimitry smiles, a smile Reko knows will come with a rejection. “From my conversations with Kirsi, I have no reason to think you don’t have that information. The Russians probably know this, most likely from twelve years prior, hence why they’re at our border. They couldn’t extract the data from the others, since shooting soldiers in the head destroys the chips. In regard to the library card, you know I won’t just give it to you. Access to the basement is restricted to officers with full clearance, so technically letting you down there at all is bending Adelric’s protocol. But, if you really wish to go down there, I’ll be more than happy to accompany you.” The man rises from his chair when Reko nods, and the teenager leads the way out of the building, heading straight for the library.

Reko has always felt that Dimitry, more than most officers, believed he deserved to know the truth about himself — maybe because he’d been kept in the dark for so long.

“Do you think the threat is real?” Reko remembers what Thilo mentioned earlier, and feels the most comfortable asking Dimitry, seeing as how Mikhail and Katerina seem slightly hostile towards his captain.

Plus, Dimitry’s canton of Nidwalden is close to Bern, so security in his canton is usually high, and extremely independent, able to operate without the commanding officer’s supervision, seeing as he spends so much of his time in Bern.

“I do not want to give you a straightforward answer for a subject I am unsure about. But their threat does bring up a question – why now, and not in any of the previous years when you served here? How did they even obtain details regarding your whereabouts? It may relate to

Kazimir's betrayal, but that was nearly three years ago." Dimitry stops at the entrance to the library, and holds his card up to the scanner near the doors.

Reko quickly glances at the words upon the screen before the doors open and he follows the young man inside.

Major General Dimitry Voronin – Full Clearance

The library is a rather large but cozy place, with bookshelves that seem to touch the ceiling on the walls, while those that are shorter make up smaller aisles across the floor. The teenager glimpses a few people, though he can't make out if they're officers, soldiers, or civilians, sitting in the chairs near the staircases leading up to the second floor, chatting and reading.

But Dimitry makes a sharp turn left, and approaches the silver doors of the elevator that will take the two down to the basement. He scans his card one more time, and the doors slide open, allowing Dimitry to step inside first, with Reko following close behind.

"I appreciate your honesty." Reko remarks through gritting teeth, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Would you rather have me lie to you, and tell you that the Russians are liars, and won't wage war with us? Or that they'll burn all our cantons to the ground without regard for surrenders or conferences centered around peace?" Dimitry counters, and Reko is grateful the elevator dings and its doors open so he doesn't have to apologize for his rudeness.

But he can only take a few steps forward, as he feels his uniform tighten around the front of his neck. He hears the doors behind him slide close, and he resists the urge to try and free himself from Dimitry's firm grasp on the collar of his uniform.

“You’re not allowed free range of the basement, Erkki. I will drag you to where the information you want is located if I must. Come along; I don’t want Adelric or the other officers who have access to question me if they happen to travel down here shortly.” The man informs Reko, and the mechanical being sighs, before walking right beside him as they start down the aisles of books.

Unlike the ground floor of the library, the basement is not as well-lit, and the shelves, besides containing books, also hold boxes labeled with neat cursive handwriting that Reko instantly knows belongs to his captain. There is only one table with four cushioned chairs around it at the far end of the room across from the elevator.

Reko decides to ask questions to both pass the time and try to get more information out of Dimitry, but he doubts the latter will work. “What’s in the boxes?”

“Confidential information.” Vague, just as he predicted.

The mechanical being flashes a smile. “Like how to make a mechanical soldier?”

The man rolls his eyes and tugs Reko back and to the left as he walks between two shelves. “*Swiss* confidential information.”

“I don’t see how that’s any different.” The teenager tugs his arm free of Dimitry’s grip

“What you want is *Finnish* confidential information, which is-” The older officer grabs a black book from the left shelf. “-right here.”

Reko reaches out to grab it, yet Dimitry brings it closer to his chest. “We will sit at the table, and I will watch you read what you want to know. After that, it gets returned to the shelf. Who knows what Adelric would do if he found out a book he brought over from Finland would go missing?” Dimitry leads Reko over to the table, and the teenager reluctantly takes a seat across from him.

Finally, the book is slid over to him, and he wastes no time opening to the table of contents and looking for what he wants to know. Yet upon looking at the rows of information, he notices the style of the black ink across the pages. Though some of it is faded, the entries near the end are in Felix's handwriting.

Aware of Dimitry's intense stare, Reko traces his finger down the table, until he finds a section titled "Information Pertaining to Construction". He flips to the indicated page number, and reads the first three paragraphs of the section.

All mechanical soldiers contain the information regarding how to create another within their heads, though to extract that data takes great care and precision, as if one aspect of that chip is damaged, the data is unusable. Attempting to construct a soldier with what is obtainable results in a defunct soldier, one who, if operable, will go berserk in a short time.

All mechanical children contain the information regarding how to create another within their hearts, and it is far simpler to extract that data, though for both processes, the being must be temporarily deactivated. If one aspect of the device is damaged, and a child is constructed, the parents responsible for raising the child will have to take extra care when teaching the child whatever information was found to be damaged.

There is only one hybrid. This being contains both pieces of information in their aforementioned locations, with the same precautions if data extractions are ever attempted. Though if I ever had a choice, I would extract the data regarding the creation of soldiers and proceed to destroy it. There is no need for childlike soldiers in the reborn Finland.

Reko reaches up to his head with his right hand, and his left hand clasps over his heart, or at least where the device mimicking his heart should be if his captain taught him anything. Is he, as his creator bluntly put it, a "childlike soldier?" He wants to be a child who decided to stay in

the military and become a soldier of his volition, though he has a natural (or artificial) talent for anything related to the military.

“Find what you desire?” Dimitry’s voice brings Reko’s eyes back to him, and he hesitates.

But his hesitation makes the ding of the elevator echo across the dim basement, and the sound of footsteps follows.

“Noel.” Dimitry shoots a narrowed glare over his shoulder. He holds a finger up in Reko’s direction and rises from his chair, disappearing from the teenager’s line of sight.

Once he’s gone, Reko cautiously stands up, dashes over to a bookshelf, and pulls out a black book that looks identical to the one Dimitry grabbed, and swaps the two. He slips the first book underneath his uniform, using his arm as a clamp to ensure the book doesn’t fall out of its mediocre hiding place.

He has just enough time to sit down before Dimitry appears near the bookcase, and motions for Reko to grab the book and follow him.

“How did you know it was Noel?” Reko tries to look down the aisles he passes for any sign of the fashionable officer, yet doesn’t see anything other than the gray concrete walls on the other side.

The pair return the book to its rightful place among the other books of Finland, and Reko stays perfectly still and expressionless as the older officer stares at the book for a moment before shaking his head and passing Reko to take the lead back to the elevator.

“His footsteps don’t make the same sound as those of every other officer around the base, since he chooses to not wear combat boots unless ‘absolutely necessary, because the enemy

won't shoot if dazed by my beauty'. That mindset will most likely get him killed first." Dimitry mutters, and Reko is finally able to catch the officer's off-white uniform.

And, as noted, though he does wear boots, they aren't the usual height or style of the combat boots both the mechanical being and Dimitry wear. Reko looks down at his dark burgundy boots, slightly kicking his feet out in front of him. Yet his right foot flies further up than expected, and he hits Dimitry's shin, which makes the officer spin around, hand automatically on the gun in his holster.

Reko just smiles at him before gesturing to the elevator, the shining silver doors allowing the teenager to see his reflection. Dimitry sighs and turns back to face the elevator, and as soon as the doors slide open, the pair enters.

"Thanks." Reko whispers as soon as the doors slide closed and their short ascendance begins.

"If you need any more assistance, I'll be more than glad to help." The officer waves his hand in a gesture of farewell after exiting the elevator as soon as it arrives at the ground floor.

Finding himself alone with no more questions, the mechanical being ventures outside once more, sparing a glance at his captain's office. Before he can make up his mind about whether to try and visit him, the same shadow looming over him from earlier makes him meet hazel eyes and receive a playful ruffle of his hair.

Reko swats Thilo's hand away, frowning. "You'll mess up all of *Komentaja*'s hard work."

The man just chuckles. "Oh, is he your father now? If I remember, he also lectured you about 'rolling around in the mud like a wild dog' and how it 'wasn't appropriate for a soldier of your position'."

“Woof, woof, whatever.” Reko rolls his eyes. “Listen, can I visit you in Vaud once you return? I have a proposal.” He knocks his fist against the hidden book.

He catches Thilo’s eyes widen then dart around the base, probably trying to look for Dimitry, Noel, Emilia, Siegfried, or Felix – the five people who have access to the library’s basement.

“You really are a wild dog.” He grumbles before letting out a breath through his nose. “But yes, I suppose I can’t turn down a request from you. Do tell me one thing, though: are you going to get Felix’s permission?”

Reko shakes his head. “He’ll say no.”

After a moment, Thilo nods. “Fair enough. I’ll see you later today.” Without the same wave of the hand that Dimitry gave him, Reko watches as Thilo walks past the teenager, and joins in a conversation with Liam and Elena.

Looking in the direction of his dorm, the mechanical being closes his eyes and prays that this threat will cease to exist before it can bring any damage to Switzerland. But if it does, Reko will not hesitate to kill anything and anyone to protect Felix.

Chapter 3: Worry-Go-Round

When I finally emerge from my office, it's nearly noon. Though the sunlight stings my eyes and tempts me to retreat back into the darkness of my office, I just look at the ground and wait for my vision to adjust.

Around both my hands are bandages, my left hand containing slightly more than my right. I can also feel the slight pressure around my left upper arm from treating the wound created by the broken glass of the mirror. I've since turned the mirror around, to hide not only the fragmented glass and silver blood, but also any possibility of Rodion showing up as my reflection. Though I hope the first time I saw him will be the last.

Before I can look up to register whose fast-approaching footsteps I hear, a familiar head of blond hair collides with my chest, and I catch myself on the office's closed door to stop from falling backward.

"Komentaja! Et kuollut," Reko exclaims, finally releasing me from his hug to stare up at me with a wide smile on his face.

"Good afternoon to you too," I ruffle Reko's hair.

"It's comforting to know his first thought is if you died in there." Another voice makes me look up from Reko's face, to see Kal offering a wave.

"Major General Raimo, it's good to see you." I return my gaze to Reko, who frowns as he tilts his head backward to glimpse Kal's figure. "Can I ask you a question, Reko?"

The teenager's head returns to looking up at me, and he offers an eager nod. "Who insulted you? Who do I need to— teach an extremely nice lesson?" He still beams at me as he steps back, and I catch Kal shaking his head, but he doesn't say anything.

"No bloodshed?" I arch an eyebrow.

Reko shrugs. “Probably.”

“You won’t be injuring anybody today.” I roll my eyes at his pout before asking my question. “If I need to leave Bern, can I trust you with taking over command in my absence?”

He pulls off a quick salute. “*Kyllä, Komentaja*. I’ll be more diligent than Berlyn!”

Smiling at Reko’s declaration, I pat his shoulder. “Then make it a competition.” I focus my eyes on Kal. “May I ask about Ticino? I know it borders the Mediterranean, but I’m confident the Russians will send their navy after us if given the chance.”

Similar to his fellow officer, Kal nods. “I’ll ensure security is heightened upon my return. If you want, I could let Lumi and Heseziel know to do the same.”

I accept Kal’s offer. “That would be perfect; thank you.” Turning my attention to Reko, I kneel to be level with him. “Hey, are you feeling better after what happened earlier?”

To my relief, he nods. “Are *you* okay? What’s with the bandages around your hands?”

“I’m okay now. Don’t worry about my hands – I just cut them on some loose glass, nothing too major.” I pause, wondering what my next question should be to hopefully draw the attention away from the previous events. “What do you have planned for the rest of the day?”

Though the mechanical being eyes my hands for several seconds, he gestures to a path just near the garage that leads to a small patch of wildflowers. “I want to make flower crowns for everyone before the war breaks out. Will you be able to help me?”

I shake my head, and Reko frowns, crossing his arms over his chest. I used to teach Reko how to make flower crowns when he first arrived at Bern’s base four years ago, and when I didn’t have so many officers and soldiers to look after. “I’m afraid I have a lot I want to get done today. Maybe some other time.” I watch as Reko skips towards the garage.

But I also notice Kal, who hasn’t moved an inch.

“Kal? Do you have another question for me?” My voice snaps the man back to reality, and he nods.

“Are you confident Russia will strike?” His tone borders hostility, but remains neutral.

I hold my next breath for too long. “They gave us a week to prepare.”

“Prepare,” he echoes.

“Yes, that’s what the letter I was handed stated.”

Kal’s stare narrows and his posture straightens a moment before I realise I slipped.

“I thought Dimitry translated it for you. Do you know Russian?”

My mind scrambles to make up another excuse – to tell an officer yet another lie. But a joyful cry makes both him and I look at the source – Hesekiel dashing towards us, and Lumi following behind, shaking her head in silent disapproval.

“Kal, there you are! I was worried you were going to fly off to Ticino without offering a drive to Lumi, here.” Hesekiel’s hand flies out, most likely to either land on Lumi’s head or shoulder, but she slips behind him and ends up on his other side with a swiftness that makes me chuckle.

“*Ei tällä kertaa*,” she whispers.

“I was about to. Our Lieutenant General here,” he gestures to me, and I feel something mimicking anger rise up in my chest, yet push it down, “wants us to be prepared for the Russian threat.”

“Well, yeah.” Hesekiel’s dismissive tone soothes my nerves. He’s never quick to catch on to subtle threats, of which I’m thankful for this time. “I’m sure he expects that of *everyone*, not just you.”

Lumi looks at me. “Us too?”

I nod, and all three pairs of eyes are on me. Freezing, I am briefly reminded of the stares I would get when Russian officers entered the white room I was in. They always came in threes before punishment was announced. One would handle the whipping, another the scalding water, and a third the cuts. I was told my father oversaw the electrocutions. Fitting.

“—acting strange ever since this morning.” I catch the tail end of Kal's statement, and vigorously shake my head.

“Enough,” I demand. The trio’s heads turn to look at me, eyes all widened in shock at my sudden change of tone. “Yes, I require all cantons to prepare for a threat like it’s going to happen. I’m sorry if my vigilance comes across as suspicious and if my knowledge of a letter in Russian, which my officers on the eastern side of the canton and Major General Voronin know quite well, is alarming. If you have nothing more important to say, leave.”

Kal mutters something under his breath, and grabs Hesekei’s wrist, practically dragging him towards the forest behind my office.

Lumi lingers, the hurt caused by my statement just barely evident in her eyes. “Sir.” Her voice is barely audible. “Stay safe.” She walks past me, following after Kal and Hesekei before I have a chance to say anything more.

If even my own officers are beginning to question me, then Russia doesn’t need to strike — I’ll unravel on my own.

Taking several deep breaths and using the faint pain from my hands to steady me, I spot Berlyn and Emilia chatting together near the Grand Room. Though Berlyn isn’t much of a distraction from the current tension, it differs from what I faced from Kal. Nonetheless, I brace myself as I walk to the pair, hoping Berlyn especially won’t hear me approaching until I choose to make myself known.

Berlyn, as usual, appears as if he is carved from marble, his spine so straight I wonder if it's crafted from steel. As soon as he sees me, his salute is so quick and immediate that Emilia flinches. She, on the other hand, offers a bow when I stop in front of them. "Lieutenant General Adelric, I'm glad to see you're in good health. Do you require any medical care for your hands?"

At this point, I want to go back to my office and fetch my gloves if every other conversation I have will concern my hands. But I just dismissively wave my hand at her generous offer. "I was just clumsy, that's all." I see Berlyn is still saluting me, and I decide to address him. "Berlyn, at ease please. I want to ask you both a question concerning the cantons you command."

While the male officer nods, Emilia perks up. "I was talking to my sister earlier. She was asking if our cantons, being so close to Russia, will require us to devote less attention to our usual duties here and in other cantons with many injured people."

Her twin – Elena's – concern is reasonable, as they are the two most skilled doctors in all of Switzerland, spending a lot of their free time traveling to the various military hospitals in the cantons that contain the most patients and helping care for them. I admire their dedication, and without their skills, some officers would not be here today.

"Speak with Katerina and ensure she will take the necessary precautions. If the situation appears to be progressing unfavorably, I ask that both you and your sister attend to the duties in your own cantons. But for now, I see no reason why your attention shouldn't be on patients." I hope my words provide clarity for the woman, and by her nod, I conclude I did well.

I turn to face Berlyn, who is still stuck in a formal position, this time with his hands behind his back.

"Permission to speak, sir."

Resisting the urge to tell him to relax or express my annoyance, I let out a breath. “Go ahead.”

“I have already increased patrol frequency and reinforced the northern and western borders. I will continue to coordinate with Major Generals Frei, Lang, and Sokolov. Any suspicious activity will be reported immediately.” Berlyn states, keeping his eyes focused on something over my left shoulder.

I force a smile. “Thank you, Berlyn.” Turning away from them, I take a breath.

Beginning to walk away, his voice follows, still rigid and formal. “Your orders will be carried out without fail, Lieutenant General.”

My shaking hands force me to continue walking back to my office, letting my head fall against the wood, trying to soothe a headache I can sense coming on, yet for a different reason other than the deaths I can foresee.

Berlyn’s formality was something I initially admired when I was first named Lieutenant General. If he held any ill will towards me after my promotion, he hid it extremely well, unlike other officers who left the army upon knowing I would be their commander.

I don’t blame them. I still feel unworthy of my title, and wonder what my life would have been if my promotion was contested. Rumors spread faster than truth: dishonorable discharge, torture, execution. Some officers believed I should have met any of those fates.

If I was still alive, the German and Swiss officers and soldiers who held immense hate toward me would end my life themselves. They had their own reasons, of course.

Their whispers backed me into a corner. Murderer. Psychopath. Sinner. Devil. They mocked me, encouraging me to end my life as easily as I ended the lives of my superiors. I was just as worse – if not more – than they were; why couldn’t I bring myself to end my life? If I

died, I wouldn't have to live with the guilt of walking out of Forchheim alive when no one else did. Yet I do.

Now I'm here, and my officers respect me. Berlyn's continued loyalty to me is shown through the standard respect given from a Major General to the Lieutenant General. A simple salute was enough for him to show his appreciation for my command, and therefore, my continued determination to live and lead.

But loyalty won't matter if Russia forces me to confront the past I've spent eight years burying. Every officer who looks to me for stability has no idea how close I am to breaking.

Now, his formality usually gives me headaches. I wonder if serving under Mieke Heilewis, the Lieutenant General of Germany, ingrained the mannerisms into his head, as every time I assure him he's free to be casual with me, he refuses the notion.

Remembering one officer who I wish to chat with – and who will be a welcome contrast to Berlyn – I head out of my office – taking care to lock the door – and to the garage. He's either always there, the mess hall, or his dorm; it should be rather easy for me to find him compared to Oksana or Friederike, who are usually wild cards regarding their location.

Wherever there are books, Rainier is close by, so I'll usually check the library. Thilo and Armin share an interest in mechanical engineering and tinkering in general, so they're guaranteed to be in the garage. Emilia and Elena are in the hospital, while Sigfried and Leon enjoy training in the barracks together with Liam and Allegra spectating. Silvan can be found near the edges of the base, usually coaxing a lost cat or dog onto the premises so he can take them to Terenzio in the mess hall's kitchen and ask for him to spare a few pieces of raw meat or fish. Dimitry spends all his time in Communications, while Katerina and Mikhail enjoy chatting in or near the Grand Room. Noel and Joliette are usually anywhere outside, while Callalily,

Guinivere, and Meia enjoy the time spent in their dorms. Lately, Berlyn has been spending a lot of time in his dorm which is unlike him, but I assume he's just enjoying the silence and time he gets alone. Though sometimes I wonder if there's another reason than what he claims is the truth every time I inquire about it.

Reaching the garage, I see one of the three doors leading into the base is open, and I stand just outside of it, unable to see Thilo like I had hoped. But Armin reveals herself from under a nearby vehicle, and sits up. Upon seeing me, she offers a salute, then pulls her hand back, and I can't help but smile as a black mark is now on her forehead.

"Didn't think it through, did you?" I call out to her.

She shrugs, picking up an already stained cloth from beside her and wiping her forehead clean of the oil. "Eh. Wanted to acknowledge you. Looking for Haegel?" I nod. "Hm. Should be in the mess hall. Wanted 'to have one last decent meal before going back and eating Vaud's slop.'" I narrow my eyes at her repetition of Thilo's statement. "His words, not mine. Bern's food is great. Give Terenzio my compliments." She disappears back under the vehicle, leaving me to turn around and start my walk back across the base to the mess hall.

Friederike and Oksana come into my view, walking from the Grand Room to the flagpole in the middle of the base. Catching their attention with a smile, they stop, salute me, and keep their positions until I stop and allow them to relax. "At ease, you two. I want to ask about security in your cantons. Because Geneva and Jura border Germany, I don't see an immediate threat coming from either one unless something drastic happens with Swiss and German relations. But, Friederike, Geneva is the westernmost canton bordering the Mediterranean. I'm not sure if the Russians would risk their naval forces going into German – and therefore enemy –

waters to reach you, but I want to ask for you to keep an eye open and ear out for any related activities.”

They both nod, and Oksana speaks next. “Should I let Sigfried know of your plans? I’d assume what you wish for me to do would also pertain to him and Neuchâtel as well.” Her thoughtfulness receives a nod, and I bid both of them farewell before finishing my trek to the mess hall.

Slipping inside, I scan the rows of tables for signs of the familiar gray uniform and brown hair that give the man away. I catch him sitting with Meia, Liam, and Leon, though his back is turned to me.

Perfect.

Walking as casually as I can, I stick to the middle of the aisle between the rows of table, and I’m glad that the officers, soldiers, and civilians I catch don’t alert Thilo to my presence, yet still give me greetings including smiles, waves, nods, and the occasional salute.

I sneak into the row of tables Thilo sits in, and stop right behind him. He’s deep in conversation with Liam, and though I see Meia’s and Leon’s eyes meet with mine, I hold a finger up to my lips and gesture to the man, to which they train their gazes back on him.

The oldest officer chuckles, leaning back just slightly after a remark Liam makes concerning the vehicles in Basel-Landschaft. He picks up a piece of rye bread, dips it in a small bowl of potato soup, and as soon as he puts it in his mouth, I make myself known.

“Better than the slop you eat in Vaud, Haegel?”

The man’s head whirls around to face me, but he quickly turns back and lurches forward, coughing. The three officers across from him break out in laughter, and I conclude that I can

safely slip into the empty seat to Thilo's right so his head doesn't have to turn as much when he finally finds the means to address me.

"Who the hell told you I said that?" I raise an eyebrow, and he sighs, shaking his head.

"Damn you, Lang. I can't tell you anything."

"You shouldn't be insulting your canton's chefs. They work extremely hard to cater to *your* tastes, I hope you know."

"I'd forgive them if they'd offer *biersuppe* once in a damn while."

"Uh-huh. And what happened the last time they did that?"

Meia raises her hand as if she's back in the academy, and I nod in her direction. "He had seven bowls, got an awful hangover, and received a lecture from you, not to mention being unable to have any more alcoholic drinks or meals served to him except during major celebrations," she explains flawlessly.

All of us — save for the subject — give her a short-lived round of applause.

"Oh, shut up. This is coming from the woman who claimed she wanted to know how to wield a sword, but only wanted Berlyn to teach you, not Sigfried, Leon, or I. Kind of strange, don't you think? Do you, perhaps, have a little crush on him?" Meia vigorously shakes her head, and I notice her eyes dart to me, but all it does is make Thilo laugh. "Oh, you think he likes Felix?" He spares a glance in my direction. "That's ridiculous; have you seen how much Berlyn gets on his nerves with his damn formalities? You think he'd act the same way if he were to ask for sex?" Thilo jests, but I punch him in the arm, frowning. "Ow! Fuck you."

Everyone at the table falls silent, their eyes either falling on Thilo or I. Meia bites her lip, avoiding looking right at me. Noticing the silence of one table, the entire hall is soon engulfed in it.

“Say that one more time, I *dare* you.” My voice is a whisper, and my mouth curves into a sly smile.

But even as I joke, something within me feels stretched thin — the threat from Russia, the slip with Kal, the mirror. I can’t afford to lose control here.

Teasing Berlyn – or any officer for that matter – means he pays the appropriate price. A little bit of humiliation is something Thilo can certainly handle; I’ve seen him endure through far more than what this simple tease may amount to.

But Thilo smiles back at me. Of course he won’t go down without a fight. Though he fights with his fists, I’ve learned his style, so it’s pointless to try and win this with strength. But I’ve been known to provide convincing negotiations, so I’ll treat this like another meeting with Heilewis or Petra.

“Sure. I’ll say it loud and proud so everyone can hear.” Thilo rises from his seat and clears his throat. “*Ich.*”

Scheiße. I forgot he could do a perfect Berlyn impression.

“*Will.*”

His smile widens to become malicious as he continues to stare at me.

“*Dich.*”

My face heats up, but I don’t tear my eyes away from Thilo.

“*Ficken.*”

As soon as the last word escapes his mouth, the echo of boots just registers in my head before another sound fills the mess hall. I turn my head to see, of all people, Berlyn, the slight frown on his face the only indication of his anger. Thilo clasps his right hand over his cheek, but his eyes clearly burn with hatred for the man before him.

“Adelric’s Bitch. Perfect timing.” The smile reemerges on his lips. It’s a devilish grin, but I know there’s a hint of playfulness. Dangerous playfulness. Which makes this confrontation all the more worse, and high up on my list of things I need to end peacefully.

“I don’t appreciate your tone, Major General Haegel. Didn’t Lieutenant General Heilewis teach you any manners? Or did it go through one ear and out the other because of your numerous hangovers? Did Adelric’s lectures after-the-fact ever reach you?” Berlyn’s voice is eerily calm, and I look over my shoulder at Leon, Liam, and Meia, all of their eyes focused on the pair as well.

“Unfortunately for you, Heilewis isn’t here. But I’m more than happy to settle things like we did back in Germany.” Thilo pushes both hands against Berlyn’s chest with enough force that the man has to take a few steps back.

Yet when Thilo tries again, Berlyn catches him by the wrist and flings him around, sending him nearly colliding with a few onlookers, who hastily move out of the way.

“Thilo, Berlyn, cut it out.” I spring up from my seat, watching as Thilo recovers from the move and throws a few punches at Berlyn. A few catch him on his nose and mouth, but he retaliates after blocking a couple, and he lands a particularly nasty hit above Thilo’s right eye.

“Fine. You asked for it.” I can hear Thilo claim, before he catches Berlyn’s fist and twists it, a painful yell echoing through the hall before I see him pin Berlyn against a table.

“Thilo. Berlyn. This is your last warning,” I have to raise my voice over the cheer of others in the hall, who have now formed a circle around the two.

Hearing the unmistakable sound of a fist against flesh, I squeeze my eyes shut, not desiring to see either one of my officers beat to death over such an insignificant thing. It’s both their faults – Thilo for making the initial declaration, and Berlyn for angering him.

I open my eyes just in time to see the glint of a metal utensil in Thilo's right hand, which is then moved over Berlyn's left eye. Berlyn's left hand struggles to hold the utensil back, and at that moment, I know how to end this.

Berlyn's feet slip out from under him, sending Thilo forward into the table as soon as I pull my pistol from my holster, aim it into the air, and fire.

The gunshot reverberates throughout the hall, and everyone falls silent, eyes on me. I take this opportunity to order the two men to stand, "Haegel, Ethelheard, on your feet."

Berlyn and Thilo spend several seconds where they are, the first on the floor, and the second preventing himself from falling face-first onto the table with his fists holding him up. But their lack of further movements prompts me to stride across the floor to Berlyn, grab him by his uniform's collar, and yank him upright. I lessen my grip on him as I examine his face for injuries. Though he has a sliced lip that's actively bleeding, Thilo's attempt on his eye wasn't successful.

I glare at him for a few seconds before moving over to Thilo, seizing him by the left side of his uniform's collar and pulling on it until he's forced to stand and turn to face me. His stare meets mine, and though I see a bruise on his forehead and the usual bloody nose, there's nothing else requiring immediate medical attention.

I release Thilo, and turn to face Meia, Liam, and Leon, who are still seated exactly where they were earlier. "Diethelm, Adalheids, give punishments to those you feel deserve them. I'm sure Terenzio would delight in having extra hands for cleanup and dishes." Focusing my eyes on the two men, I let out a sigh. "Haegel, Ethelheard, my office. Now."

Taking the lead out of the mess hall, those who formed the circle during the fight quickly part for me, and I can hear Meia begin to give orders regarding cleaning up the disaster that was created. I make it outside, and spare no nearby officers even a glance, but they seem to sense that

something major occurred, considering not only is my closest friend from Germany following me, but also the most popular officer among those who serve Switzerland.

Reko's red eyes from the right catch my attention, and when I look at him, his analysis of the situation brings a smile to his face. But upon narrowing my eyes in his direction, it vanishes and he takes several steps back, ending up being obscured by the darkness of his dorm room.

I extract my office's key from my uniform's pocket, and unlock the door, entering first while Thilo follows second and Berlyn closes the door upon his entry last. My hands ache when I lean on them atop my desk, trying to figure out how to resolve this dispute.

Finally, I turn around and face them. Thilo's bruised forehead now produces a ribbon of blood that runs down the left side of his face, and an area above Berlyn's nearly lost eye is bruised. But it's nothing major. They didn't kill each other, though I bet they would have if I didn't act.

"Thilo, you had no right to lash out at Berlyn. Berlyn, you shouldn't have taken Thilo's declaration so seriously. You two are model officers, the people others look up to. That fight just now doesn't only ruin your image, but mine because I was involved. I will not say I didn't play a part – I let you make your ridiculous claim, Thilo, and I didn't argue when you implied you wanted to fight Berlyn like you did in Germany. But I want you two to realize what you said and what you did, *especially* you, Thilo, is unacceptable. I want to hear you give the other a formal apology." I watch as each man stands completely still, hands behind their back and eyes focused on something over my shoulders.

A natural reaction from Berlyn, but something Thilo barely ever does unless requested or implied. In this case, it's the latter.

Eventually, Berlyn turns both his head and body to face Thilo. “Forgive me, Major General Haegel. I should not have reacted the way I did to your comment, nor entertain your invitation to physically fight. I will make a conscious effort to think before I act. All I ask from you, if you would consider, is to watch your language. I fear Lieutenant General Adelric may have found what you said to be offensive.” Berlyn throws a glance my way after bowing in his peer’s direction, and I nod in approval.

But Thilo’s response is a grumble, “*Was auch immer.*”

I snap back at him, “*Erbärmlich.* I’m not letting you leave until you give him a *formal apology*. You’re a grown man – a Major General, if that helps get my point across any better. Act like one.”

The man rolls his eyes, then only turns his head to look at Berlyn. “I’m sorry I nearly gouged your eye out with a fork.” He glares at me. “*Befriedigt?*”

I shake my head. “Address what he asked of you.”

He sighs and tilts his head up to the ceiling. “I can’t make promises, but I’ll consider what I say before speaking.” As soon as I nod, he marches to the door. “I’m going back to Vaud. I’ll heighten security at the western border if Germany gets on my nerves.” He turns to face me once more. “Or would you rather I fight them off?”

“Thank you, Thilo. Dismissed.” I exhale as soon as the door to my office slams shut.

Noticing Berlyn’s eyes lingering on me, I ask a question, “Everything okay?”

He blinks, then nods. “Yes. Sorry, sir.” He clears his throat before continuing, “May I stay in Bern for a while longer?”

“I see no reason why you can’t.” I offer a small smile to the officer, who reciprocates the gesture.

He turns, and extends his hand to grasp the handle, yet he stops just short and looks at me over his shoulder. “Sir, I...” His voice trails off.

A raise an eyebrow. “Yes?”

He whispers something I can just barely catch before shaking his head and speaking clearly, “*Nichts*. Have a pleasant rest of your afternoon, sir.”

His exit is swift, and though he closes the door far softer than Thilo did, his whisper echoes in my head.

Ich genieße Ihre Gesellschaft immer.

Chapter 4: In Search of Revenge

The needles of the pine trees are nothing more than green blurs. The melodies of the numerous birds mock the passerby, but he continues on. He prays that the information he received from a citizen yesterday concerning a nearby military base being just beyond this pine forest is true. And within that base *should* be the object of his long-burning desire.

A mechanical soldier. The one who killed his parents eleven years ago. Their tell-tale red eyes still haunt his nightmares and every waking moment of his life. A bloodthirsty, emotionless slaughter machine that murdered the two people who loved him in front of his own eyes without hesitation. Without the thought that they were a family who loved not just each other, but their kingdom as well.

What was left of their kingdom, anyway. Denmark agreed to the terms Germany presented for occupation, and everything was going well. The monarchy wasn't as influential as it was when the nation was on its own, but it provided a sense of stability and familiarity in the people after joining Germany's territory.

But Lars heard the stories of turmoil and unrest growing in the kingdom after the murder of his parents and especially his – the Crown Prince's – disappearance. It was for his safety at first, but he couldn't ignore the growing desire of revenge that began to drive his actions.

He gained as much information as he could on the mechanical soldiers, learning that they can only be killed by a fatal head injury, and they were produced seventeen years ago in Finland. But, they were all slaughtered by the Russians and none have been seen (at least to the knowledge of those he asked) four years since the end of the invasion.

He has dedicated the last eleven years of his life – years he should have spent learning how to rule the kingdom he would once reign over – hunting down the last mechanical soldier.

Though the soldier will not feel the same despair that overwhelmed Lars when his parents died, he will ensure they experience more pain than what his parents did.

Keeping his right hand on his rapier's golden handle, his eyes remain focused on the countless trunks and leaves that suffocate his every step, and urge him to keep moving forward. He can't tell what time of day it is now, only that he entered the forest at dawn and has kept walking ever since. He can't tell if it's windy or even hot, but in the middle of a Swiss November, the heat isn't a concern.

And though it is still dim, he is able to hear a sound before seeing one figure off to the left in front of him. At first, he stays completely still, debating if he can sneak up on them before either killing or interrogating the person. Yet the sound of more footsteps and a voice makes Lars slowly walk over to a rather large tree and hide out of sight of the now three people he spots before turning his head away and closing his eyes.

"Hesekiel, slow down and have the patience to walk *with* us." A male's voice chides.

"But talking with you means paying less attention to the forest that may very well not exist in a month." Hesekiel's voice, a little higher in pitch and more cheerful than the one before, complains.

"There are other forests in Switzerland other than the one in Bern." The first male lets out a sigh.

"Is it just me, Kal, or do you sound a lot like Lumi, talking about the forest?" Hesekiel inquires.

"Silence." A woman's voice, who Lars assumes is Lumi, offers a one-word response.

Hesekiel speaks again. "I'm just saying, we don't know if the Russians will destroy this forest in the war."

“You sound so sure of the war, and awfully pessimistic about it too, if you think the Russians have a chance of reaching Bern.” Kal retorts, and sparks Lars’ curiosity.

A possible war between Switzerland and Russia? How long ago did the idea occur? Why? As far as he knows, even during the years when Germany, Russia, and Switzerland were proposing terms (or just using force and violence in Russia’s case) to grow their territories and prevent further wars, Switzerland was extremely pacifistic and neutral in its approach.

“Quiet.” Lars can barely hear Lumi’s response.

A sigh from Heseziel. “I know they have to, at the very least, get past Sigfried in Neuchâtel if they start in-”

“They aren’t going to come from the west because Germany is our ally, you idiot.” Kal spits back, and Lars can’t help but tilt his head at the notion.

Alliances mean nothing to Lars. There is either Germany or a fierce fight to take back Denmark’s independence that is the last thing on his mind right now. But as soon as he kills the mechanical soldier, maybe he’ll return to his kingdom.

“Then Valais—” Heseziel attempts to continue.

Kal cuts him off, disbelief and anger evident in his tone. “You don’t have confidence in Lumi’s canton? Did you leave all common sense back in your dorm?”

“Shut up.” Lumi’s voice comes across loud and clear for everyone, and Lars lets a smile sneak across his lips for just a moment before the woman speaks further. “Think about Reko.”

“Reko is fine. I’m sure if he was allowed to fight the Russians, he would slaughter them all in record time. That’s what mechanical soldiers were designed to do, anyway.” Heseziel reveals, and Lars’ eyes snap open.

Reko is the soldier who murdered his parents. Drove a sword through his father's back, and again in his mother's chest. But leaving him, a young boy, alive? He didn't wish for death at that moment, as an escort scooped him up, put him on a horse, and rode far from his burning kingdom. But in retrospect, he could have very well died, and he wishes he did. He'd be reunited with his parents.

Yet his revenge would never be satisfied. Or someone else would take up a sword and declare revenge. But now it is his to have and his alone. Nothing and no one is going to stand in his way. Not this time, when he's so close.

"He's a child, too. Adelric won't let him fight because of that. If he did, he'd be no different from Lieutenant General Evena – bless her heart." Kal adds, but Lars doesn't care for a sympathetic explanation.

He needs to kill Reko to satisfy his decades-long desire. There is no other thing that will grant him more satisfaction than staring into Reko's red eyes as his rapier pierces straight through his head. The golden oil he calls his blood will stain Lars' rapier like the Crown Prince's personal trophy. A trophy that, though fleeting, will mean everything to him and, hopefully, to his parents as well.

"The General of Finland?" Lumi asks a question, and Lars closes his eyes, trying to hear whoever answers her.

"Bingo. The government basically held a sword to her neck and forced her to ask Kirsi to alter the children into soldiers. I heard from Dimitry that Kirsi recalled Evena regretting ever allowing them to create the soldiers." Heseziel explains, and Kal sounds just as surprised as Lars is for his rather intelligent remark.

“Oh, so you do remember something useful. No wonder Adelric still trusts you with Grisons. Though I don’t know how he expects you to fend off the Russian army *and* navy, if they even dare to try.” The sensible officer teases, and Lars can hear both Lumi and Hesekeiel sigh.

So there’s someone behind the creation of Finland’s soldiers, whoever this “Kirsi” is. Do they still create the soldiers, despite it being the cause of Russia’s invasion of the small country? It was a scare for Denmark, as Lars recalls from stories he heard from the Lieutenant of Denmark’s Royal Life Guard that the armed forces of the kingdom were on high alert as Finland was being invaded. It lasted past the invasion’s end, until Switzerland sent a group of soldiers over to liberate what was left of the nation from any remaining Russian soldiers. But on the night his parents died, he, along with all the other guards within and outside the palace, were slaughtered.

Knowing how powerless fully trained guards were against a single mechanical soldier only fueled Lars’ determination to train himself into a human who could kill them. He knows Denmark’s military is still standing, but if they were to, hypothetically, get involved in a fight with multiple of Finland’s soldiers, they wouldn’t even have enough time to regret their decision.

“If you’re willing to insult me and my command of Grisons, do you feel confident about your abilities to hold Ticino together?” Hesekeiel asks, snapping Lars out of his recollection of several years ago.

Kal scoffs. “Of course I do. Though I still question why Adelric put *me* in charge over Terenzio, Noel, or Joliette, I have complete confidence in myself.”

“They speak Italian.” Lumi interjects.

“That’s right. And who doesn’t speak Italian? You don’t!” Hesekeiel mocks.

“*All* of our cantons contain Italian-speaking citizens. And last I checked, you don’t know any Italian either. *E, a differenza tua, io presto attenzione durante le lezioni.*” Kal counters.

Lars peeks out from around the tree, just in time to see Lumi nod. “*Impressionante.*”

Hesekiel kicks a fern growing near his foot, flinging a clump of dirt at Kal’s ankle. “At least I can run through the rain without eating a mouthful of mud, which happened to someone during the latest stamina drill. I swear I saw Adelric hold back a laugh.”

Kal’s hands ball into fists. “That wasn’t *my* fault. Thilo tripped me!”

“Because you stole his screwdriver and didn’t give it back. Consider yourself lucky you didn’t get a screwdriver through the skull.”

“He seemed pretty fed up with you a few days ago, when you tried to critique his fighting style. Consider *yourself* lucky he didn’t slice your head off.”

“Berlyn wanted to do the same to you when you dared to interrupt his monthly report of canton activity,” Hesekiel counters.

Lumi’s voice can barely be heard above the shouting match. “Speak of the devil.”

“Because he was accusing me of being deaf to the noise complaints! It was just stupid kids setting off fireworks!” Kal’s yell is near-defeaning for Lars.

“Fireworks cause fires! He had a right to be concerned!”

“Ha! So you are smarter than you look!”

Hesekiel pauses, mouth open to retort, yet nothing comes out.

Another pair of footsteps approaches, forcing Lars to return to staying hidden, just as he realizes Lumi was staring at him. For how long, he doesn’t know. But he prays she stays silent. If he’s found, he’ll lose his chance to take Reko by surprise. And his only chance would be while the soldier is sleeping. Even then, it comes with risks, as he’s heard the soldiers are half-operable

when asleep, able to respond to emergencies and threats almost immediately. So though Reko may be fast, Lars believes – no, he *knows* – he’s faster.

Kal snarls, “Shit. Look what you did.”

Hesekiel, for once, stays silent.

“Major General Raimo and Major General Toivonen. Why am I not surprised it was you two screaming at each other? What was it about this time?” Lars flinches at the voice, though it’s not unpleasant to listen to, but holds a commanding presence on its own, without a look at the speaker.

“Important matters, Major General Ethelheard.” Hesekiel clears his throat. “Sir.”

“Liars.” Lumi points out, and Lars smiles again.

“*Lumi!* You’re supposed to cover for us.” Kal hisses.

“I will not ask again. Do not make me report you to Lieutenant General Adelric.”

Ethelheard’s threat appears to affect the pair he addresses, as after several seconds of silence, they confess.

“Major General Toivonen doubted my ability to command the Canton of Ticino, sir.” Kal declares.

But Hesekiel refutes. “You were the one who started it! He also insulted my understanding of Italian and said I was smarter than I looked.” His voice drops upon admitting the last accusation.

“Major General Koskinen, do you agree?” Ethelheard inquires.

“Yes, sir.” Lumi confirms.

“Very well. Toivonen, Raimo, you two will follow me back to the base so I can bring this up to Lieutenant General Adelric. Doubt among officers, especially regarding the command of

your respective cantons, will not be tolerated.” Lars hears one set of footsteps, but not the two others he would expect to follow.

“We were just joking around, sir.” Kal clarifies.

“If the Russians were not posing a threat to Switzerland, I would let it go. But not with the current circumstances. Major General Koskinen, thank you for not engaging in their behavior. Have a pleasant rest of your afternoon, ma’am.” Ethelheard bids farewell to the woman, who offers no verbal reply.

Lars waits until the footsteps he hears fade before exhaling and turning his head in the direction of the base, just in time to see the backs of two vermillion uniforms and one gray become obscured by the brown trunks of the trees.

Blinking, he freezes as he sees who he assumes to be Lumi staring right back at him. Her green eyes study him, while her long blonde hair is tied back in a ponytail. Lars meets her eyes, wishing he could offer something that convinces her that he is no threat, at least to her and three other people he heard earlier.

After a minute of silence, Lumi speaks, her voice a whisper. “I like your hat.”

Lars reaches up and takes his cavalier hat off of his head, looking at the white feather that stands out against the black fabric.

He glances back up at Lumi, muttering a reply. “*Tak.*”

The woman tilts her head, and the young man opens his mouth to repeat himself in English, but Lumi’s reply silences him. “*Olet kotoisin Tanskasta.*” She points at Lars’ chest, and he looks down, noticing that a small golden pin, in the shape of the emblem of the royal family, sits on his red uniform.

“Yes, I am.” He places his hat back on his head.

“Why are you in Switzerland?” Her voice remains soft, but he doesn’t hear any reasoning behind her question other than genuine curiosity. Yet if she is to know about his true intentions, she could very well tell Reko, and he’ll lose his chance at revenge.

He stays silent, not sure of what excuse to give her. Eventually averting his gaze, the woman nods in response. “Please stay safe.” She offers a small bow before turning around and leaving.

Lars takes a few steps forward yet stops himself from following her, refocusing his mind on Reko. He assumes he’s close to the military base, seeing as four officers walked by. Though it would be a risk to attempt to kill Reko, he can’t turn back or doubt himself now. Death doesn’t scare him. Not since he was hunted by all manner of people – spies, guards, nobles, officers – until crossing over into Switzerland from Germany.

Letting his right hand rest on his rapier, he lets himself smile again at the thought of driving his rapier through the soldier’s head. It will be quick and painless, but it will bring the young man an indescribable amount of satisfaction. Then, he’ll return to his kingdom, rally the people together, and pursue independence.

He’s confident it’s what his parents would want for him and his kingdom.

Chapter 5: To Stop a War

Reko peeks out of his dorm after seeing Thilo pass by, a scowl on his face. When he saw Thilo *and* Berlyn following his captain, both with blood on their faces, he was amused at the thought of Felix punishing them. Yet catching his captain glare at him made Reko realize he was smiling, and he retreated back into his dorm.

Deciding that the proposal he hinted at to the older officer needs to be revealed for them to actually begin on the project, Reko grabs the book from off his nightstand, hides it back under his uniform, and dashes from his dorm, bothering only to close the door. Knowing Thilo will most likely be in the garage, he heads in the building's direction, looking out for any sign of other officers who might notice that something is underneath his uniform.

The only person he spots is Berlyn, who stands alone, seemingly looking at nothing in particular, as if he's lost in thought. Reko stops walking, and debates whether or not to ask if everything is okay, despite his aloof behavior is most likely due to his captain's scolding. The mechanical being looks towards the garage, able to see Thilo is still walking over there, and Reko nods, making up his mind. He has time.

The younger officer doesn't even make it ten feet from the older before Berlyn takes notice of him, offering an acknowledging nod after blinking a few times, probably able to hear Reko before actually seeing him.

"Major General Erkki, greetings." Berlyn's voice is softer than usual, and rather monotone.

"Is everything alright? Was Adelric too cruel with your punishment?" Reko wishes he could call his captain *Komentaja* when chatting with Berlyn, but he's always nervous that Berlyn will either disapprove of the name he gives the Lieutenant General, or won't know what it

means, at least in regard to addressing Felix. Even though Thilo and Dimitry aren't from Finland, Reko still calls Felix *Komentaja* around them, as they know what it means.

"Lieutenant General Adelric requested only a formal apology from the both of us. I was simply thinking about the outcome of the fight Major General Haegel and I engaged in if it were not for his quick thinking." Berlyn reaches up to his right eye, and Reko notices blood above it, which Berlyn presses his fingers against.

The realization of what Berlyn is implying causes Reko to glance once more in the direction of the garage, watching as Thilo's gray uniform disappears inside.

"He tried to gouge out your eye?"

Berlyn nods, sighing. "Yes. But I will say I played a role in entertaining his notions, so I suppose I deserved it. I was just trying to protect Lieutenant General Adelric's reputation. In retrospect, Major General Haegel was joking around as he does, but I took it too seriously."

Reko glances down at his hands, the right still wrapped in a thin layer of bandages. He and Berlyn, if what he says is correct, have one thing in common.

A yell comes from the garage, and though Reko tries to understand it, the German is too complex for the mechanical being to understand. But the voice undeniably belongs to Thilo, and Reko rushes off to the structure, abandoning his conversation with the young man.

He reaches the garage just in time to see Thilo slam the door of a vehicle closed and start the engine, wasting no time before leaving, most likely for his canton, Vaud.

To confirm his suspicions, he dashes over to a tense Armin, who stares at Thilo leaving with wide eyes. "Is he going to Vaud?"

The woman nods, but offers a word of advice. “I wouldn’t bother him. I believe whatever warranted a lecture from Adelric has soured his mood. Nothing new.” Armin shrugs, and Reko purses his lips before running off after the older officer.

Waiting until he has a clear view of the vehicle, Reko snaps with his right hand, and a silver dagger is summoned, which he holds along with his chef’s knife. His pace automatically quickens, and it’s the one thing he values as a mechanical soldier. Whenever he summons a blade, he can run faster, and from what he can remember his captain saying, the blade summoning is due to his system gathering material from around him to create it. Which makes sense, considering the blades he summons aren’t as effective at injuring others as his actual chef’s knife is.

In regard to his quicker pace, it’s just a part of his system that his captain cautioned him about utilizing. When he engages in activities that make him exert himself more than the normal soldier, it expends more energy, and his system begins to heat up. Each few degrees it rises, so does his chance of going “berserk”, a state in which he will kill anything and anyone in sight. Kirsi never intended their creations to be soldiers — the berserk state was a flaw born from their rushed modifications, not their original design. Usually, taking a short rest helps lower the chance, but sleeping is the most effective method of allowing his system to cool (even if he’s half-operationable when asleep).

Catching up to the back of the vehicle, Reko spies the perfect item that would allow him to latch onto it. He pushes his system to run faster, and once he’s within arm’s length of the item, he leaps, stretching out his arms. He jams both the dagger and the knife in the spare tire, and hugs it, able to see Thilo glance in the rearview mirror and catch a glimpse of the younger officer.

All he offers is a smile and a wave, yet is forced to hug the tire as the vehicle is violently pulled over to the left, and Reko clings to the tire as if it will protect him from Thilo's wrath. And by the way the vehicle sways when the officer throws open the driver's side door, the mechanical being regrets his decision to chase him.

“Ich gebe Ihnen fünf Sekunden, um zu erklären, warum Sie mir das Leben schwerer machen, als es ist. Wenn Sie scheitern, wird Adelric sicherlich mit einer verstümmelten Leiche aus Drähten und Metall zufrieden sein.” Thilo unsheathes his sword, and Reko finds it pointed at the left side of his neck.

Yet his smile doesn't disappear, and he giggles in reply to the threat. *“Ehdotus.* I still have the book.” Reko jumps down from his spot, sheathes his knife and leaves the dagger to dissolve on its own, before revealing the book from under his uniform.

He watches as Thilo freezes — the same way he had when Reko hinted at the “proposal” earlier. Narrowing his eyes, he sheathes his sword before gesturing for Reko to get in the passenger side. “You owe me a new spare tire. Next time, jump a little higher.” He mutters as Reko closes the door after jumping into the leather seat.

“I could try in my free time. But *Komentaja* might have questions.” Reko notices that Thilo's knuckles on his right hand turn white as he tightens his grip on the steering wheel.

But his tone is cool. “Don't mention Adelric right now. *Bitte.*”

“Is it about the fight in the mess hall?” Reko asks, remembering what Berlyn implied.

“It was just a damn joke. But Adelric's Loyal Fucking Dog, as he *loves* to do, turned it into a big deal. If anything good came from it, I proved to myself that I still retain my skills from Germany.” Thilo shoots Reko a short-lived prideful smile, but the mechanical being senses his hand resting on his knife.

It takes a fair amount of willpower to force his hand to lay on his lap, and he distracts himself by looking out at the passing views. The green landscape, dotted with houses, flowers, hills, and rivers never fails to remind him of the home he used to know. He can barely remember what Finland looked like past eleven years ago. Even then, smoke was still seen in the sky and his bedroom would be awash in an eerie red glow. His time in the orphanage was no better, but there were days when he was able to feel joy, like when the nearby lake would freeze over and an ice-skating contest would be held amongst the orphans. Reko never came out on top, but he wasn't too bad.

“So you're mad at both Berlyn and *Komentaja*?” The mechanical being eventually breaks the silence upon seeing a sign that welcomes the pair into Vaud.

“If I stayed in Bern, I'm pretty certain I would have killed Berlyn. I'm more annoyed that Felix couldn't take a fucking joke. We used to laugh all the time in Germany. But ever since Forchheim, he's become a completely different person. Not that it's bad, but sometimes I miss the 'old' Felix, so to speak.” Thilo explains, and Reko slowly nods.

Though Reko may be the only one who truly knows what his captain went through after Forchheim, he does know the young man changed. Before the massacre, he was far more assertive, not afraid to give out orders to lower-ranking officers if need be. He encouraged and disciplined soldiers accordingly, and brushed off any criticism as heat-of-the-moment remarks.

But Reko still witnessed the softer, friendlier side of him after he was rescued four years ago. The young man who would offer a smile, wave, and simple one-word greetings whenever they crossed paths. He would actively search Reko out during meal times, always sitting across from him and chatting about whatever he wanted, probably trying to gauge if they had any interests in common.

After the massacre, he retreated back into his office. Reko never saw him in the mess hall, or even out around the base. Berlyn took over drills and related trainings, and Reko noticed that he shared the mechanical being's concerns regarding their superior officer's health – physically, mentally, and emotionally. But he never realized just how bad it was until he gained enough courage to look at his beloved captain through one of the windows of his office.

His frail frame, resulting from malnourishment, was a darker shadow surrounded by the darkness that suffocated his office. Reko could just barely make out his silver pistol, the barrel against the left side of his head. And though he could not clearly see his captain's face, he could only assume he was crying. But even when the mechanical being put his ear against the door, he couldn't hear a single sob or plea.

The vehicle braking to an abrupt stop sends the teenager forward, and brings him out of digging through his memories. Vigorously shaking his head, he hops out of the vehicle as soon as Thilo does, recognizing that they have successfully arrived in Vaud.

Still carrying the book with him, Reko follows behind the older officer, taking note of how the others around the base react to his arrival, wondering if the news of what he did to Berlyn even reached his canton.

An officer shouts from their right. "Ey, Haegel! Heard that you taught that damn dog a lesson. Too bad Adelric respects him, else I'm sure he woulda let you kill him." Upon reaching Thilo, they slap his right shoulder, and Reko catches him smiling.

The officer meets eyes with Reko. "Oh, hey Erkki. How are ya?"

Reko beams. "*Aion tappaa sinut.*"

"Good to know. See ya around." With a wave, the officer disappears, and the pair continue their walk to what Reko assumes is Thilo's office.

Other officers give Thilo knowing smiles and thumbs-up, and Reko soon finds his hand on the handle of his chef's knife yet again, transferring the book to his right hand. But instead of pulling his hand away, he gives into temptation and pulls the blade from its sheath, before flipping it as he walks, catching it by the handle each time.

He narrows his eyes at each person who makes even the slightest acknowledgement of Thilo's "victory", sometimes even imitating bringing his knife across their neck with a childish grin.

Anyone who insults his captain – whether it be directly or not – deserves to die. And if the bandages around his wrist tell anyone anything, let it be that Reko will go through with his vow. For Felix's sake. He never deserves to suffer, and Reko will ensure he does, even if it costs the teenager his life.

"Reko, can't you sheath your knife for a moment?" Thilo calls from over his shoulder.

"*Ei.*" He responds, right as they arrive at the entrance to the man's office.

Thilo unlocks the door, and allows Reko in first, before following in behind. Setting the black book on his desk, he spins on his heels and crosses his arms over his chest. "*Komentaja* said a mechanical soldier will prevent the war. So I propose we make one that is identical to me. This book should help us do that."

Thilo raises an eyebrow. "And you're certain that if you propose the idea to Felix, he'll reject it."

The mechanical being nods. "He knows what happened to Finland."

He knows that's more than enough explanation. Even though Thilo was not even in the Swiss military at the time, he's confident the man heard about the invasion and the rescue effort through Felix when they reunited two years ago. He didn't know everything about Finland, but

he knew enough to understand why Felix would never allow another mechanical soldier to be created.

“Okay, I’ll help you. But you need to promise me you won’t utter a word about it to Felix, alright?” Reko uncrosses his arms, returning them to his sides.

“And you’ll keep your mouth shut too.” Reko demands, unsheathing his knife, flipping it once, and pointing it directly at Thilo.

Frowning, the man walks to his desk and sits down, making Reko turn back around. “You don’t have to threaten me; I get it.”

Reko shrugs. “*Varma. Mitä ikinä sanotkaan.*”

Thilo cocks his head to the side, but doesn’t ask any further questions. Instead, he pulls the book over to him, and opens it to the table of contents, glancing up at Reko.

“Let’s get started.”

Chapter 6: Berlyn to Berlin

I glance down at my watch from where I sit at my desk, pouring over documents concerning the previous Lieutenant General's – Agatha Petra's – relationship with my father, or Russia in broader terms. It's nearly 17:00, meaning I've spent a good four hours searching for the answer to a question that I'm beginning to accept is hopeless. The only time I can think of when they interacted was during their meeting to initiate The Decision, where each nation would present terms to the other in regard to occupying their territory. It was in an effort to deter war after hearing about Russia's aggressive invasion of Finland over mechanical soldiers that looked identical to human children (making both nations' action unethical), and it seemed to work until earlier today.

Now, I'm debating whether or not to bring the matter up to Lieutenant General Heilewis in Germany, just to confirm that Switzerland would have their assistance, should the Russians try to transverse their land or waters to come at us from the west. And even if she reassures me that Germany is our ally, I'll still call upon Friederike, Thilo, Sigfried, Oksana, Liam, and Leon to strengthen security on the west side of their cantons, just in case something unfavorable occurs.

I don't want to travel there alone, seeing as some officers from Germany may still hold grudges against me for my actions two years ago, despite none of them actually being there. If they were there, they lie in a cemetery in Forchheim that I visit every year on the day of the massacre. Placing a cornflower on each grave and softly singing the nation's anthem might not be enough to make me feel as though I'm atoning for my sins, but at least I'm doing *something* to honor those who sacrificed their lives.

Traveling with an officer from Germany would be ideal if my first choice, Reko, is somehow busy, though the last time I saw him was in his dorm. With my destination in mind, I

slip my gloves over my hands to hide the bandages, and open the door leading out of my office, careful to close and lock it. I never leave my office's door unlocked if I'm not in there, not just because it's a good habit, but because the items in the office hold personal significance to me, and I don't want officers to have a glimpse of those items and ask about them.

Most of those items, though, are in a locked drawer. They come from my life in Russia, including tapes of my father explaining important missions or events either to me or in general, and a box of medals. Medals my father taunted me with – mere prizes for my monumental contribution to the Russian military. Even if they were replaced with a whip, a bucket of water, a razor, and electrical currents.

I walk up to the door leading into Reko's dorm, and raise my fist, gently knocking on the smooth wood surface. He usually enjoys waltzing into my office unannounced, but at times, he will be courteous and knock, usually in the early mornings.

Hearing no response, I knock again, this time a little louder. "Reko, may I ask a favor of you?" I'm positive he would say yes without knowledge of the favor, which sometimes leads him to complain about what he does. I always remind him that he could've refused, but he just shakes his head and blames me for giving him "boring jobs not fit for a mechanical child".

"Are you looking for Major General Erkki, sir?" Berlyn's voice causes me to turn around, to see the man standing across from me, assuming the usual formal position of both his hands behind his back.

I nod. "Do you happen to know where he is?"

"I believe he traveled to Vaud with Major General Haegel. I do not know when he's due to come back." The man informs me, and I let out a sigh at the mention of Thilo.

I'm still bitter towards him for what occurred in the mess hall. Honestly, I should have only punished him, since Berlyn was clearly the victim in the fight, nearly having his eye gouged out with a *fork* of all things. If I ever find myself with the chance to speak with him alone, I might just question him about the action while trying to avoid him becoming paranoid about my intentions.

Realizing that Berlyn is still in front of me, I decide to extend the invitation to him. He did serve with Thilo and me in Berlin after all, and I'm positive the officers, soldiers, and civilians present at the base will tolerate my presence if Berlyn is with me, seeing as he was nothing but respectful to everyone while there.

"I was going to ask Reko if he'd travel to Berlin with me. But, seeing that he's in Vaud, and you're here, would you like to accompany me?" I'm not expecting a certain answer from him, as I know I requested that he eventually return to Zürich, so if he wants to head there, I'm fine with asking someone else. I just don't want to go alone.

The older officer is still for several seconds before he nods. "I'd love to, sir. I haven't visited since I left three years ago." Berlyn falls into step beside me as I begin towards the garage, able to see that it's already open.

I catch Armin sitting at a workbench, tinkering with something, and I gesture for Berlyn to pick a vehicle fit for the drive there while I come up to the woman's left side. "Thilo left you here all alone?" My voice is my soft in an effort not to spook her.

Yet she perks up, and turns in her stool, giving me a quick salute. "Seeing how sour he is, I'm actually happy he's not here, sir. He yelled something about a stupid dog and their owner when I inquired why he was grouchy. I can only assume he was referring to...you know." Armin glances over at Berlyn, and I can't help but silently curse the man.

Maybe, while in Berlin, I can convince Heilewis to take Thilo back. She was the one to send him to Bern, so it's only fair I ask for him to be returned. It would put a lot of much-needed separation between him and Berlyn. He's a fine officer when it comes to following orders and commanding those in his canton, but his recklessness more often than not lands him in hot water.

"I see. Did you take anything he said personally?"

She shakes her head just as the engine of a vehicle starts, and I bid farewell to her before hopping into the passenger side of the car.

"Hopefully you don't mind if I take the wheel, sir. Driving puts me at ease." He glances at me, and I shrug, looking out at the darkening sky as we begin towards Germany.

The last time I was in the nation's capital was the day before the Russians kidnapped me from my dorm and drove across Switzerland in an attempt to return me to Russia. I was a silent teenager, not choosing to speak for the entire duration of the ride. I'm not sure if I was accepting my fate or trying to defy it, but I was lucky to find Lieutenant General Petra near where my kidnappers stopped to grab some food. She rescued me, and had nothing but respect for my efforts and contributions, never once inquiring about why I was with the Russians.

I can only assume she spoke with Heilewis and was told everything, as the only thing I remember saying was that I was from Germany, because the brainwashing enjoyed kicking in at convenient moments. Now I have to actively avoid thinking about Russia, which isn't happening any time soon. The more I think about Russia, the higher the chance I'm due to break and let my last slip. And if my officers know of my past, my trust with them will be shattered. It will be a repeat of what occurred after Forchheim, and who's to stop me from pulling the trigger of my pistol this time?

“Why do you wish to travel to Berlin so soon, sir?” Berlyn’s voice snaps me out of my memories.

The watch on my wrist reads 18:00. I’d love to get to Berlin before 20:00, seeing as Heilewis won’t be as easily agitated from what I remember of Thilo’s recalling of all the late-night lectures he received from her. “I want definite confirmation that we have Germany’s aid if the war breaks out. I’m not feeling confident about finding a compromise with Russia. Plus, if Russia decides to attack us from the west or try to sail through German waters, Heilewis taking the offensive will be of great assistance.” I explain my hopes to Berlyn, and I hear him hum.

Yet he remains silent. I distract myself by staring at the passing houses, fields, and forests. Usually, if I’m in either Basels or Geneva, I’ll take a walk around, thankful for the beauty of the cantons. It also reminds me of the days I would spend alone in Germany during the celebrations I was barred from attending (those that Heilewis had no real say in), where I’d sit atop a hill and look out at a lake surrounded by wildflowers.

The hill that I travel to now mirrors the landscape, but a river replaces the lake, and the wildflowers are fewer in number. But unlike Berlin, where I’d almost always be alone, Reko is guaranteed to be sitting beside me in Bern. I genuinely enjoy his company, as I do with any of my officers, and—

Ich genieße Ihre Gesellschaft immer.

Berlyn’s voice echoes in my head. Instinctively, I turn to look at him, yet before I realize what I’m doing and move to stare the other way, his eyes meet mine.

“Is everything okay, sir? Would you like me to pull over?”

I vigorously shake my head. “No, that won’t be necessary. I was just thinking about what you said after Thilo left my office.” I force the last statement from my mouth, figuring if we can talk about it, I’ll be able to stop thinking about it.

It shouldn’t be a hostile conversation at all. At the very least, a little awkward for the both of us, and a warm comfort at best. So I take a deep breath and wait for an answer from the man beside me.

Several minutes pass, and when it is clear that we’ve arrived in Germany, Berlyn speaks. “What I said stands true, sir. I am not only thankful for your company, but also your leadership and kindness, qualities that most people in your position possess only one of, not both. If you felt offended by my comment, then I deeply apologize; I didn’t mean to offend you in any way.”

My answer is cut off by a distant yet familiar sound coming from my right. Gunfire. But in Germany? And if memory serves me right, Forchheim is where they’re coming from, which only heightens my desire to forget I heard anything, and pray Berlyn doesn’t hear it. But the silence only works against me.

“Would you like us to survey what’s occurring in Forchheim, sir? I fear some citizens may be at risk if whatever is causing the commotion isn’t dealt with in a swift manner.” Berlyn suggests, and I push away my personal grudges, glance down at my watch that now reads 19:30 – there goes avoiding an irritated Heilewis – and nod.

“Yes. Let’s just be cautious.”

Berlyn parks the vehicle behind an abandoned building far enough away from the plaza of the town to avoid being seen, and we keep close together as we approach the source of the gunfire. The nearer we get, I can begin to make out words and phrases. Though my mind translates them automatically, every word makes me sick to my stomach.

They're Russian. Russians are in Forchheim's plaza. And before we get a clear view of the plaza, I know why and what their target is.

They fire at a statue in the plaza's center, noticeably chipping away at its foundation, with the end goal of toppling it. Which, in my opinion, if it stops the Germans from remaking the statue, great.

I pull out my pistol and hand it to Berlyn, gesturing to his sword. "More effective for long-range combat if things go south." He nods at my jest, though I feel slightly uneasy without my primary weapon on me. A quick reminder that I still have my switchblade temporarily settles my doubts.

The statue is of myself, dated back in December, two years ago, when I "saved" Forchheim. When I killed three of my superiors because I felt betrayed by watching them kill their own soldiers for nothing more than money. Greed was their driving force – not the safety of Germany during a diplomatic talk with Finland – which is what my comrades and I were under the impression was the mission's purpose.

Destroying the statue wouldn't affect me in any way, but it may cause the citizens of Forchheim, if they hold me in high regard, to ask that another be commissioned. I didn't have a say in the current one, so I doubt they'd be willing to extend the request to me again.

I turn to my left, yet see Berlyn is gone. Taking a few deep breaths, soothing the panic that begins to build up in the back of my head, I remind myself that he would never do anything reckless, unlike a certain other officer. Even Reko isn't as cautious as Berlyn, but he feels as if he can jump into things without regard for his own safety because he functions differently from human soldiers, being mechanical. But I still worry for him nonetheless.

Gunshots from near my location instinctively lead me to pull out my switchblade and slowly walk towards the sound, though I can hear the gunfire in the plaza cease, replayed by yells and grunts. As I turn the corner, the area is completely silent.

Berlyn turns around just as I see his figure, and he freezes once his eyes rest on my switchblade that I hastily slip back under my uniform. “Sorry. Though you were the enemy.” I glance over Berlyn’s shoulder at the four bodies on the ground, their blood just beginning to pool upon the concrete.

He glances to look at the scene, then meets my eyes. “I couldn’t stand to watch as they dishonored you, despite your emotions surrounding what happened two years ago, sir. But if I may, I’d like to confess something more to you.”

Summoning a nod, I allow Berlyn to continue.

“Even though I believed that you were born in Forcheim when I first met you, Heilewis later disclosed to me, before I left, that you were actually from Russia. She told me about your experiences, and also let me know that another officer was informed about your past.”

I am stunned into silence at Berlyn’s confession. What did I think he was going to tell me? Something I already knew? It just had to be about my past, the *one* thing that I’ve been hiding from my officers, now more than ever with the letter from my father.

Pushing away my urge to shut my mouth and remain silent or snap at a person I should be nothing but kind to, I ask him my question. “If you know that, does your opinion of me change with knowledge of the threat?”

Instantly, he shakes his head. “No, sir. You have my life and my loyalty. Hearing about how abusive your father was makes me understand your determination to stand with Switzerland

in this fight. Just because one was born in a country differing from where they currently serve does not dictate where their true loyalty lies. That goes for you and I both.”

I let out a sigh, nodding at his explanation and comforting words. “I see.” I gesture to what lies behind him. “Let’s deal with this before continuing on to Berlin. I want to make it there before nightfall.”

All we do is snatch a dog tag from each of the soldiers, and I contact the commanding officer of Forchheim’s base, a friend of mine from when I served, and get her confirmation that she’ll arrive and take care of the other matters.

We continue to Berlin, while I check my watch often, wondering if we’ll have to stay the night or can return to Bern.

Reaching Berlin at 20:30, I allow Berlyn to park the vehicle and let him know of our presence while I let him know I’m going to take a quick walk to clear my mind. He lets me go with a nod of acknowledgement, a wish to stay safe, and returns my pistol to me.

I’m not completely sure if this walk will really clear my mind, as the more I think about it, my doubts and thoughts surrounding Germany being an ally in this war and even what I did in Forchheim return to me. So even though I recognize the soft grass I walk upon, and the approaching twilight sky hanging above my head, the emotions that I carry now differ from what I felt in the past walking this same path.

I begin walking up the hill, memories from my two years in Germany – both the good and the bad – clouding my mind with each step. The first time I woke up in Berlin. Meeting Lieutenant General Heilewis and Thilo. My first group mission, and my first solo one. The names I was called and the insults hurled at me. The minor celebrations I weren’t allowed to

attend and the larger ones that I found so loud and rowdy that I would often walk up this same hill and the view from the top would take my breath away.

And it still does.

The twilight sky above me is perfectly reflected in the still water of the lake below. Wildflowers appear to capture the last remaining beams of the fading sunset, glowing in their red, orange, and yellow hues. They compliment the blue and purple petals of the cornflowers I often kept by my bedside in Berlin, and currently keep in a small vase in my office in Bern. Yet I always feel the cornflowers from Germany were more vibrant than those in Switzerland.

Soft footsteps from behind remind me of the presence of another person, yet I'm not alarmed at all. The only two people to ever follow – and join – me were Thilo and Berlyn. Knowing Thilo is in Vaud, though the canton shares its western border with Germany, it would take him longer than a few minutes to catch up with me. Which leaves the familiar sight of warm ivory skin, brown eyes, and matching hair belonging to Berlyn to comfort me.

His presence reignites a specific memory in my mind, one so strong that I express it aloud. "Melchior."

"Sir?" Berlyn turns his head to glance at me.

"Because your first name was identical to the capital, many called you Melchior Ethelheard." I clarify, keeping my own eyes focused on the lake below.

Hearing the man chuckle, upon looking at him, I realize that he's smiling, something I barely ever see him do, even back in Germany and around Thilo.

"That's my middle name, a nod to my Polish origins."

"You're from Poland?"

“You sound genuinely surprised. I swear I mentioned it during one of the many nights we spent up here, but I suppose I wouldn’t blame you if it slipped your mind. Yes, I was born in Poland, but was forced to flee and ended up in Germany.” His tone changes to reflect regret. “Going to Switzerland was not my choice. Heilewis, after learning that Poland accepted Switzerland’s terms for occupation, deemed it best for me to serve with Lieutenant General Petra.” He glances over his shoulder. “Speaking of, we should probably begin to Lieutenant General Heilewis’ office before it gets too late.”

Seeing no reason to stop him, I silently follow him down the hill and finally step onto the base. The layout and structures look the same as when I served, but the people I see are all new faces. Which most likely means they know none to little of what I did in Forchheim, and if they do know and hold hate in their heart, hopefully news of Berlyn will soothe any doubts they have.

Arriving at the front doors of her office, Berlyn steps forward and knocks. A few seconds pass until the rightmost door opens, revealing Heilewis herself. Her expression – furrowed brows and a frown – convey her initial confusion at Berlyn showing up, yet when she catches sight of me, she smiles.

“Lieutenant General Adelric and Major General Ethelheard. Please, come in.” She opens the door in front of me, allowing both of us inside, before closing them and leading us down a near hallway lined with awards and pictures of previous Lieutenant Generals. “It’s a pleasure to see both of you again. May I ask why you’ve made the trip?” She lets us into her office, and I shiver upon walking into the room.

I recall walking inside and meeting Thilo. Receiving lectures, punishments, and praise from her on numerous occasions. And then the last time I saw her, regarding my actions in

Forchheim. Her gaze was cold, unforgiving. I was positive she was going to contest my promotion, and therefore allow the appropriate punishment to be enacted, yet she never did.

“Earlier today, I received a letter from the Grand Marshal of the Russian Federation threatening to wage war with Switzerland if Russia does not receive a mechanical soldier. I reassured both the soldier and my officers, a few of which come from Finland, that I will not give him over. In the event the Russians do go to war, I wish to ask for your support if they decide to attack from the west.” I summarize only the facts to her, avoiding talking about my ties to the enemy and unnecessary details about Reko.

Having assumed a formal position, Berlyn nods, though he offers no words.

She rounds her desk and sets her hands against its polished wood surface. “So you, the man who single-handedly destroyed Forchheim, wish to ask me, the woman who would have contested your promotion if it weren’t for a certain officer, for this nation’s assistance?”

Even if I tried to speak, I have nothing to say to her. I try to sense if this is some joke, but her narrowed eyes stare at me with nothing but the same hostility and fury she gave me two years ago. Is Heilewis’ anger towards me purely personal, or is it how most of the officers in Berlin – or even all across Germany – feel? What about the citizens in Forchheim? Was she the one who ordered the Russians to destroy the statue of me in the plaza? Is she already working with the Russians behind my back? Will Germany also be our enemy in this war once the Russians attack? If Germany attacks from the west, and Russia from the east, Switzerland will fall in several months, maybe even a year, but that’s being incredibly hopeful. And I will need to live with the guilt that my actions from two years ago led to the destruction of the nation I have pledged to protect with my life.

I avert my gaze over her shoulder, yet the view outside doesn’t make me feel any better.

It's Forchheim. The sky is black, filled with smoke from the flames that dance atop the rubble of houses and vegetation. The blackened ground that the soldiers lay upon make the blood nothing more than dark puddles that reflect the smiles of their superiors that have killed them without mercy. I can see my own figure appear at the top of a small hill, and it takes me only a few seconds to survey the area, conclude what has happened, snap out of my stunned state, and march down towards the closest officer, pistol drawn.

Blinking, I turn my head to look at Berlyn, who continues to look in Lieutenant General Heilewis' direction. He clears his throat. "Permission to speak, ma'am."

Scowling, the woman moves her eyes to glare at the young officer. Her voice is low and threatening. "Permission granted. Watch your words."

But I don't allow Berlyn to speak. I can't let him take the blame for something I caused, and what he played no part in. This is between Heilewis and me. And I aim to keep it that way.

"I didn't come here to beg." I look her straight in the eyes as I speak. "You know I was already punished for the wrongdoings I committed, no matter how many say it was the only reasonable conclusion. The guilt of what I did remains with me, and it remains in Forchheim – it is only fair to say all of Germany still remembers and resents me. But I ask not because of past grudges, or in spite of them. I ask because I carry millions of lives on my shoulders, and your assistance helps to protect them, not me. You can continue to hate me, but don't punish those I'm responsible for."

Silence hangs in the air like a knife after my explanation as I close my eyes. The faint smell of smoke, gunpowder, and the heat from the flames beyond her office remind me of the sin both she and I know I carry, and will never forgive myself for or forget.

A click breaks the silence. Berlyn stiffens beside me.

Opening my eyes, Heilewis' gun is aimed at my chest. She smirks, though her eyes speak what she refuses to say. She will always despise me for what I did. And she's intent on finishing the job she started two years ago because something – or someone – stopped her.

“Your plea sounds eerily similar to one I heard two years prior. The threat of execution hung over his head, as well, but I decided he'd be better off serving under you, so I had him transferred. I thought he'd be the one to visit me instead of,” she waves her gun at Berlyn, “him.”

Her reveal hits me like a kick to the ribs. Thilo was the one who contested my promotion. I never thought, in the two years we served together, we were ever so close that he would put his career on the line to justify my actions that Heilewis still sees as heinous. It also means asking for her to take him back is hopeless. I owe him a genuine thank-you, despite what he did earlier.

I stare down the barrel of her gun. Two years ago, I would have loved this. Seven years ago, I would have begged for this. But tonight? When Switzerland's fate hangs on my shoulders? I can't die. But I can't retaliate – the moment my hand even moves an inch towards my pistol, I'll be shot. Not right between the eyes, like she praised me during training years ago, but she might hit an eye. Irony considering who stands beside me.

She smiles, and her finger twitches on the trigger. A gunshot echoes through the room, and pain blooms from my right side before a similar sensation manifests in my head. Yet I find I'm still conscious. I should be dead. Then that means...

The realization dawns on me, and I scramble to my knees, immediately pressing my hands over Berlyn's side, the crimson stain on his uniform only becoming warmer and darker.

His eyes flick to meet mine. “*Nie mogłem pozwolić ci umrzeć.*” Berlyn's voice is barely audible, and I bite back a cry, instead lifting my red gloves off of his still body and facing Heilewis.

Yet who I see isn't the female Lieutenant General.

"Be grateful you're a seer. That might just save your damned nation." Rodion mocks, his smile just as daunting as Heilewis' was, before he's gone as I blink.

I'm back in my place beside Berlyn, and still staring down the barrel of her gun. I watch her expression like a hawk to orient myself with how close the event I just witnessed is.

The second her lips twitch, I speak. "Berlyn, could you wait outside for me?" He turns to look at me out of the corner of my eye, and I cock my head towards the door. "*Sie wird mich nicht töten.*" I return to meeting her eyes. "*Oder etwa doch?*"

Heilewis exhales, returning her gun to its holster. Berlyn glances between her and me, before nodding and leaving the room. As soon as the door closes, Heilewis giggles. "Ahaha! I nearly forgot you're a seer. It's certainly served you well. Maybe Melchior was able to figure it out based on what I told him."

I don't allow her mockery to affect me. "You had no right to tell him or Thilo about my past in Russia. That's not information *you* can freely give out to whoever you want. Do you realize how much pain this threat has been causing me, because I'm trying to keep what I suffered a secret from the rest of my officers? If Berlyn or Thilo – god forbid – lose their temper and let it slip what they learned about me from you to other officers, they'll accuse me of betrayal. The *one* thing that led me to nearly take my own life after Forchheim.

"I *know* I didn't deserve that promotion. I know *you* didn't think I deserved it. Hell, maybe even Agatha thought the same way. That month I spent in my office, pistol against my head, finger on the trigger, mocked and taunted by the voices of those who died because of *my* mistake to go looking for a damn mechanical *child*, was the worst month of my life. But that

same boy I saved in Forchheim was the same boy who saved me from suicide. He knows, better than anyone, the person I have become after the massacre.

“If you don’t wish to assist Switzerland, so be it. If it’s solely because of Forchheim, I understand. I don’t want your pity or your sympathy – I don’t care for either of them. But let me say this: thank you for allowing me a place to stay in the German military. If not for you, I would not have met Thilo and Berlyn, two officers I respected and looked up to, and still do, hence why they’re commanding their own cantons. Without your kindness, I most likely wouldn’t be standing in front of you.” I bow in Heilewis’ direction before turning on my heels and beginning toward the exit of her office.

“Hey. I didn’t say you could leave yet, Adelric.” Her voice, though stern, doesn’t faze me in the slightest.

I glance over my shoulder at her. “I’m not a Lieutenant anymore, ma’am. I’m your equal.” With those words, I open the rightmost door and step out into the hallway, letting out a breath as soon as it closes.

Berlyn is right beside me as I begin walking again. “Thank you, sir.”

A raise an eyebrow. “For what?”

“For saving my life. You saw my death, didn’t you? Your eyes – I only saw it for the quickest moment – changed from blue to silver.”

Briefly closing my eyes and letting a quick smile across my lips, I reply. “Yes, I did. That’s why I intervened. But I do have one piece of advice for you the next time we visit her.” We step out into the cool night of Berlin, and I am able to clearly glimpse the stars in the sky above us.

“What would that be, sir?”

“Bring a gun. If you’re ever threatened again, it’s a fair duel.”

Chapter 7: Wrong Objective, Wrong Time

Lars has no idea what time it is when he dashes out of the forest under the cover of night. All he knows is that it's dark enough so he can hopefully slip by any patrols unnoticed, though his red uniform and white cloak don't help his stealth in the slightest.

And though he knows he can kill any people who catch him sneaking into the base, he'd rather avoid unnecessary bloodshed. The only blood that he needs spilled is Reko's golden oil. Then he'll leave Switzerland, return to Denmark, rally the citizens together as their king, and start what he hopes will be a successful war for the kingdom's independence from Germany.

If the revolution fails, he won't mind being executed. Under occupation, there is no use for the monarchy, so there is no need for him. But he'll only allow it if he gets to kill Reko first. Nothing else matters at the moment except the death of the soldier who murdered his parents.

The young man can only make out the dark silhouettes of buildings, and is too far to see what they may be. But he keeps his eyes out for the smaller structures that would be each officer's dorm in the nation's capital city, suspecting one of them to house Reko. Who, Lars hopes, is asleep.

A small wooden structure comes into view, and Lars quickens his sprint, yet sees a shadow pass over him a moment too late. Knowing it has to be someone he didn't notice was on patrol, before they can even register who passed them, Lars unsheathes his rapier.

"Antænde." His rapier bursts into white flames, and he slashes straight across their throat, jumping back to avoid being hit by their falling body.

Staying completely still for several seconds to listen for any other signs of activity, the young man sheathes his weapon and finally rests his back against the wooden structure, uncertain if this really is an officer's dorm or something else entirely.

He ends up at the front door and tries the handle, but finds it locked, and sighs. He debates whether or not to try his lockpicking skills, but ultimately decides against it and turns around, surveying what he can see in the slightly better lighting.

To his left are more of the same-sized wooden structures, and he assumes those are the dorms. A large gray building is also in his line of sight, along with a flagpole far off in front of him. To his right is a structure that mirrors a small cathedral, and further beyond that lies a rather elaborate structure, though he can't pick too many details out given the lack of strong light.

These are nothing like the castles and seasonal estates of the royal family. Despite barely remembering a thing, he knows they were far more grand than any military base. But he never did get to travel to where the Royal Guard Company would gather and train recruits. Would their area look similar to this, or completely different?

Pushing his memories to the back of his head, Lars heads to the first dorm, and sees a small plaque with what appears to be a name inscribed next to the door, which contains the symbol of what he assumes to be a regiment. Taking out his rapier, he whispers the same word he did before killing the soldier from earlier.

“Antænde.”

The light from the blade allows him to read the name.

Major General Berlyn Ethelheard. Isn't that the name of the man who dragged two other officers to Felix's office back in the forest? What a peculiar name.

Not Reko. Lars continues to the next dorm, keeping his rapier ignited so he can read the names more efficiently and also have a faster response to any patrols who may see him, as the odd light may attract unwanted attention.

Hesekiel Toivonen. Kal Raimo. Lumi Koskinen. Those are the three officers from whom Lars learned about Reko. And Lumi is the one officer he met. Though soft-spoken, she's quite nice from what Lars was able to observe and hear for himself.

Dimitry Voronin. Armin Lang. Rainier Albrecht. Liam Adalheid. Leon Adalheid. Meia Diethelm. Allegra Frei. Elena Cattaneo. Emilia Cattaneo. Callalily Laval.

All of the other names he glimpses are foreign to him. And it slowly drains him of his hope to find Reko. Yet he continues on, praying just *one* of these plaques will be inscribed with the soldier's name.

Thilo Haegel. Katerina Belova. Mikhail Sokolov. Silvan Mathys. Guinevere Lenoir. Oksana Krylova. Terenzio Vecchi. Noel Aubin. Joliette Aubin.

One last structure remains. Lars trudges towards it, yet notices bright lights coming from a structure far from where he stands. Taking a risk, he continues forward, and raises his rapier's blade so the flame briefly illuminates the name upon the last of the twenty-three plaques he's already looked at.

Reko Erkki.

A bolt of energy runs through his body, and he straightens his posture and readies his rapier, setting his hand upon the handle of the door. Without a second more of hesitation or the quickest moment to second guess himself, he throws open the door, the white flame illuminating—

An empty bed. A completely darkened room, and a slightly ajar door just beyond it that he guesses leads to a bathroom. But this *is* his dorm. Lars knows it is; his name was inscribed on the plaque. The young man blinks several times, not sure whether he's warding away tears or the tiredness that he now believes is messing with his vision.

He steps back and ends up feeling something against the back of his head. His left hand, holding his rapier, twitches, preparing to spin and slash out at the enemy who snuck up behind him while the prince was in a momentary daze.

“Don’t.”

The voice that meets his ears is stern yet soft, sweet yet threatening. But Lars just bares his teeth and whips around, his left arm outstretched to land another slash against this person’s neck.

But the flame of his rapier catches only empty air as his opponent ducks and fires their pistol, the sound causing the teenager to stumble and hit the doorframe. He loses his grip on his rapier, yet when he regains his composure, he finds it already in the hands of his enemy.

A young man, with black hair and skin the color of paper, matching his white gloves and combat boots. A long navy-blue coat with golden buttons sparkles in the wavering light of his blade, filling Lars with an odd sense of peace, yet also fear. Who is this man to predict his attacks and avoid them with relative ease?

“I do not wish to harm you. Promise me, if I am to give your weapon back to you, that you will not use it against me or any other people you may see around here.” The man’s voice loses any threatening tone, only a gentleness the prince would not expect from someone in the military.

With a single nod, Lars snatches his rapier from the man’s hand, sheathing it as the white flame disappears upon the transfer. But he catches a familiar figure over the man’s shoulder, staring right at him.

Lumi. Did she alert this man to Lars’ presence? How did she know he was here, but he couldn’t catch her standing anywhere near him as he walked by each and every dorm?

“Please, let’s talk inside my office. No harm will come to you.”

As much as the prince would refuse the offer and continue his search for Reko, he concludes he is back to having no knowledge of where he could be. The least he can do is ask this young man for the soldier’s whereabouts, and start from there. Any other information that he gives Lars is a bonus. His only goal is to kill Reko by driving his rapier, alight with the white flame, through his head.

Following behind the young man, Lars notices they’re walking towards the first structure he came across, which also means the person he killed would be within the area. And, sure enough, the young man stops and glances at the prince upon noticing the still body.

“Did you kill them?” The man’s voice is eerily calm, and Lars hesitates before nodding. “Just them?” Lars nods again, and receives an exhale in response.

The young man pulls a small device out from underneath the long coat, and speaks into it. “Dimitry and Terenzio, please come by my office. There’s a body I’d like you to take care of. Don’t worry about an investigation, I can handle it myself.”

Lars stays silent as the man continues to his office’s door, pulls out a key, and unlocks it, stepping aside before allowing him to enter as well.

The area is oddly comforting yet small. A desk sits against the back wall, what appears to be a floor mirror against the rightmost wall is turned around, and a bookshelf is against the left wall, placed next to a small closet. A small vase holding cornflowers adds a little color to the otherwise dull room besides the spines of the books.

“Please, feel free to sit. I’d like to have a bit of a conversation with you if you wouldn’t mind.” The young man pulls forward a chair from the corner of the room for Lars to sit in, while he himself takes a seat in his desk chair, turning it to face the prince. But Lars doesn’t sit, his

eyes darting to the silver pistol that he's surprised hasn't been pointed at him yet, though it did fire earlier.

He pauses before asking, "Why haven't you killed me?"

The man lets something out akin to a laugh. "Unlike most commanders, I see people before I see threats. And, judging by that pin on your uniform, you're the last remaining member of the Danish royal family. Lars Theodor, Denmark's Crown Prince, correct?" Lars nods, and Felix continues. "I'm already facing a war threat from Russia — I don't need Denmark to be added onto that list. Besides, if I killed every frightened young man that made a mistake, I'd have no soldiers left." He takes a short breath before asking, "When, may I ask, did your parents die?"

"Eleven years ago."

"Eleven years ago, Reko was living in a now-burned orphanage. He was only five — there was no way for him to travel to Denmark, much less learn or even attempt any acts of violence."

Lars' hands curl into fists. If Reko didn't kill his parents, who did? He had a single lead, and now it's vanished. But he swore it was a mechanical soldier. Red eyes have been haunting his nightmares, he's sure of that defining feature. Could another soldier have murdered them, and the people Lars asked simply only knew of Reko as the "last" one?

"Do you know who killed them?"

Felix shakes his head. "Unfortunately not. If you'd like, I can arrange transportation to Finland so you can ask the creator of the mechanical soldiers, Kirsi, if they have any idea about who may have taken the lives of your parents. But I'm afraid I won't be able to guarantee you a way back here or even your own kingdom."

Lars studies the man for any sign of ulterior motives, yet finds nothing. Though another act of kindness is slightly suspicious, he'll take whatever leads he can get now. "I'd like that. Thank you for your generosity...sir."

"Ah, I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Felix Adelric, and I serve as Lieutenant General of Switzerland and the commander of the Canton of Bern. Reko is one of the twenty-six officers under my leadership."

Lars slowly nods, remembering the plaques he read. Twenty-six officers for the twenty-six cantons of Switzerland. He has quite a handful of people to manage, but the prince assumes he wouldn't be in this position if he couldn't handle them well.

"It's a pleasure to meet you." The formalities make Lars sick to his stomach, but he watches as Felix just smiles and dismissively waves his hand.

"Please, addressing me by my first name is fine. I constantly tell my officers such, but some of them insist on remaining formal. I don't wish to keep you any longer if you want to seek answers — you're free to leave or stay here until the helicopter arrives."

Muttering another thank you and quickly bowing in Felix's direction, Lars leaves the warm and well-lit space, returning out into the cold and dark atmosphere outside.

He instantly catches Lumi staring at him from afar, and marches up to her, narrowing his eyes. Yet as intimidating as he hopes he is, Lumi's neutral expression and gaze convey something different.

"You ratted me out."

"Rats are pests. You are not a pest."

"That's not the point I'm trying to make. You told Felix about my whereabouts, didn't you?"

Lumi shakes her head, her expression unchanging. “No. I was an onlooker.”

Sighing, Lars turns to leave. “It’s pointless arguing with you.”

“Be careful.”

“Of what? Why? Scared I’ll face the consequences of killing someone on patrol?” The young man retorts, not even looking at the woman.

“Of Reko. He loves Kirsi.” She clarifies, and the prince can’t help but laugh.

“I’ve been training my whole life to kill him. He should be scared of me.”

Continuing forward, Lars is just able to hear Lumi’s final words – a meaningless plea – carried upon the soft breeze that blows across the base.

“Please don’t kill him.”

Chapter 8: My Worst Enemy

Reko's eyes snap open as soon as his ears pick up footsteps nearing his temporary dorm in Vaud. He rolls to his right, allowing himself to fall out of bed on the side farthest from the door, peeking underneath to see if he can identify who it is that dares enter his dorm when it's still night.

Ever since Dimitry mentioned that the shoes Noel wears are different from those of other officers, Reko has begun to pay more attention to the specifics of each officer's shoes. Though most of them wear combat boots, Reko can spot a few differences. His captain's boots are either black or white depending on his outfit, and are usually pristine. Armin's boots are brown with slightly darker stains of oil. Even his own burgundy boots are unique.

The door opens, and Reko studies their boots. Black. But either they – or the person wearing them – smells strongly of engine oil, so Reko knows exactly who it is, even before their voice hits his ears.

“Dammit, Erkki. Don't play games with me.” Thilo's tone alone is enough to make the teenager pop his head up from below the bed. “Felix requested you come back to Bern immediately. I'm here to ‘fulfill his wishes’,” the man grumbles, and Reko jumps up, skipping out of his dorm and towards Vaud's garage, where a vehicle already sits waiting for them.

“Is there another reason you're going with me?” Reko teases, and he giggles when Thilo nods after getting into the vehicle.

“*Ich schulde ihm eine Entschuldigung*,” though he mutters the reason in German, his captain's language lessons have taught the teenager well.

“Hehe! I knew you'd do it eventually. Ah!” Reko ducks to avoid being hit over the head by the hand Thilo extends out in his direction.

“It would be great if you could just shut up for the rest of the drive. Don’t, and I swear I’ll drive this thing straight off a fucking cliff. Piece of shit,” Thilo threatens, and Reko just shrugs.

“*Sinun tappiosi.*” Reko closes his eyes after his final statement for the entirety of the drive back to Bern, hoping to catch just a bit of the rest he was so rudely woken up from. Even though he technically doesn’t need sleep, it’s a nice way to relax and recover. Though this time is more for the former, and the latter is saved for when he’s injured.

And though he would be in no danger if Thilo did decide to cut their drive short, he believes he captain wouldn’t appreciate his closest friend’s untimely death, nor the threat posed to Reko’s external self.

He wonders if his captain knows he went to Vaud, either through the commanding officer themselves or another person, which Reko would assume to be Berlyn or Armin, as those are the only two officers he spoke to before taking off after Thilo.

Their time spent with the book was just glossing over the very basics, and Reko answering the occasional “Are you sure you can do this?” and “Do you want to do that?” questions, which he would always either nod or give Thilo a definite “yes.”

Having no clue what time it was when they left, Reko has no idea what time it is when his head nearly collides with the dashboard as the vehicle comes to an abrupt stop in Bern’s garage. Which the mechanical being is only able to identify due to the two twins that command Basel’s cantons – Liam and Leon – chatting with Armin.

But, all of their attention is now turned to Reko and Thilo, the latter jumping out of the vehicle and marching out of the structure, while the former waits several seconds after the officer disappears from their view before exiting.

He is welcomed over to the trio by Leon waving at him with a smile, to which Reko responds in kind. “Major General Erkki, odd to see you with Major General Haegel. I assume he’s still sour over what occurred in the mess hall? I was there and it was definitely a sight to see.”

Reko catches Liam nodding after his brother’s statement. “It was the first time I ever saw Thilo and Berlyn physically fighting. Up until that point, I only ever heard stories from them and Lieutenant General Adelric.”

“Thilo should be apologizing to *Komentaja* in the near future, if not now. Was the fight interesting?”

Armin glares at the teenager after his question. “Erkki, don’t tell me you’re going to start picking fights with officers around the base.”

He giggles in reply. “*Minä voittaisin.*”

The woman shakes her head and turns her attention back to the two twins. “Like I was saying before Mr. Sour Face nearly ran us over, if you require any assistance in Basel-Landschaft or Basel-Stadt for any reason, don’t hesitate to let any of us know. Adelric may be busy, but he will assist you, same with us.”

Both twins nod, and Reko cocks his head. “What happened in Basel?”

Leon speaks, leading the mechanical being to conclude that it occurred in his canton, Basel-Stadt, “A patrol was ambushed seemingly out of nowhere. Some soldiers may have lost their lives, but Adelric wants both of us to heighten security and for me to survey the damage. I’m most likely going to get some rest before actually going to the last known location of the patrol.”

“And he won’t let me assist him,” Liam remarks while Reko cracks a smile at the bickering that follows.

“Stadt isn’t your canton, if I remember correctly. Plus, Landschaft is the larger of the two. That’s more work on your part.”

“What, like I can’t let the officers command their own soldiers? Are you saying my command is lousy? You’ll be preoccupied with two important matters – it will be best if you split the work. Let me help.”

“You’re so insistent. Just because I have mechanical limbs doesn’t mean I’m any less capable than you. I can do both tasks just fine, thank you very much,” Leon spits out, crossing his arms and turning away from Liam.

Reko glances over at Leon’s right arm, making sure it still looks as operable as it did earlier in the Grand Room.

The young man catches his gaze. “It works great. Thanks again, for all the work you’ve done.”

“If you break it, it might take some time for me to create a new one. I want to help *Komentaja* with as much work as I can so he can take some time to relax. But, he always takes on so much work so I don’t feel overwhelmed. I just end up bored,” he huffs, and Leon laughs.

“I can’t make promises, but I can try.” He turns back to face his brother. “We should get going now before I don’t have an excuse to rest.”

Though Liam nods and begins walking towards a vehicle nearby, Reko can still hear his voice. “Like I said–”

“*Nein, Punkt.*” Leon cuts him off.

The mechanical being looks at Armin, who just shrugs and smiles. “You know just as well as I do how well they work together. A little bickering every now and then won’t hurt them. Unlike a certain rough friendship.” The woman turns her attention to a device on a workbench, and Reko takes it as his cue to leave.

Bidding farewell to her, he walks from the garage and surveys the nearby area to see if any officers are around that he can chat with. He eventually wants to speak with his captain, but he doesn’t wish to interrupt him if he’s busy. Especially if Thilo is, in fact, apologizing to him. One wrong look in his direction would further ruin his already foul mood.

Maybe Reko could sneak some alcohol into his office one day. Of course, he’d have to ask Terenzio for a bottle and hide it from his captain, but it would help lighten the older officer’s mood, if only for a while. If not alcohol, a single bowl of *biersuppe* should do the trick, and would help the teenager avoid questions.

Speaking of, he sees the talented chef outside the mess hall, chatting with Joliette and Guinivere. He’s cautious of whether he can approach them, seeing as they are all Italian officers, so they’re most likely speaking Italian if not English or German. And though Reko knows basic words in Italian, his captain isn’t fluent, so Reko isn’t. Dimitry would most likely be the person Reko would turn to for Italian language lessons, if he deemed it necessary. But as it stands now, he sees no need to know a fourth language as well as he knows English, German, and Finnish.

“*Buonasera*, Reko. You enjoy *korvapuusti*, correct?” Terenzio is the first to take notice of him, and Reko bounces over to them with a smile on his face, vigorously nodding.

If this conversation pertains to his favorite food that reminds him of home, he needs to be present.

“I thought so. Before we all end up separated from one another, I wanted to ask for everyone’s favorite desserts, and then present them all at a banquet. Being so close to Felix, you know his favorite dessert, right? I’d ask him just to double-check, but I think it’s best if I don’t bother him,” Terenzio states.

Reko conjures up an image of his captain’s favorite food, imagining himself eating a slice. He’s never had it, but by the way Felix described it, he thinks he’d like it. Now that he thinks about it, he’d probably like every dish served. Sweet treats are something he can’t turn down as a mechanical child.

“*Kirschwähe*,” the young man responds, earning a slow nod from all three officers.

“I’m not the biggest fan of cherries, but I’m still willing to give it a try,” Joliette admits, and Reko furrows his brows, his hand moving to rest on his chef’s knife.

“She doesn’t mean it as a threat. At least, I don’t think so.” Guinivere’s soft voice coaxes the mechanical being to pry his fingers from the cool black surface.

“Sorry,” he mutters, averting his gaze from both women.

“Don’t be. I know how you are concerning Felix. It’s admirable, to be honest. I wish I could feel the same towards my brother, but he often is too deep into photography or fashion to pay much attention to me in any form. Hopefully he won’t act like that in Obwalden.” Joliette admits, and Reko can’t help but look down at her shoes upon the mention of Noel.

They, in contrast to her brother’s shoes, are an off-white color of boots that match her uniform. Terenzio’s shoes have a slight shine, most likely from grease. And the laces of Guinivere’s boots are threaded through tiny flowers that Reko suspects she handmade.

“Your boots are pretty.” Reko gestures to her feet, and the female officer looks down, then back up at Reko with a small smile.

“Thank you. Felix said I can do whatever I wish with my boots as long as it doesn’t hinder any activities. When I couldn’t fall asleep one night, I decided to pass the time, which resulted in them. If you’d like, I can tell you the significance of each flower once you find the time to visit Zug,” Guinevere offers.

Reko scrunches his nose at the mention of the woman’s canton. Last time he traveled to Zug, he wanted to leave as soon as possible. It’s not as beautiful as Bern, and doesn’t even begin to compare to Geneva.

The woman takes notice of the teenager’s reaction. “Do you think Felix put me in charge of the canton so I could bring beauty to it? Could that be the only reason? Does he not think I’m a good officer? I try so hard, and yet, I always come up short. . .” Guinevere’s voice trails off, and Reko opens his mouth to refute his reaction.

“I have never once doubted your abilities, Guinevere. Reko, as with everyone, has biases. I believe Zug is a fine canton – it has its own charm.” Reko turns his head to his right, a smile breaking out across his face as he sees his captain.

Behind him is Thilo, who still has a scowl on his face. To be fair, the apology may have been given to ease Felix’s nerves about what occurred in the mess hall, not Thilo’s. Though Reko believes there is a bit of the old, lighthearted jokester that Reko knows Thilo to be behind his current expression.

Yet Reko walks over to him, with one question on his mind. “What are we going to do about the soldier?”

The man furrows his brows, but they shoot up as he tilts his head upward at the realization of who Reko is referring to. “*We*? Bold of you to assume this is a team effort.” He clicks his tongue before continuing. “I’ll head back to Vaud and get started on it. Visit after a

week, alright? And don't go telling Felix. I *do not* need another lecture," the man states, and the mechanical being shrugs.

"Maybe it'll knock some compassion into you."

Thilo narrows his eyes and balls one hand into a fist, while Reko instinctively finds his hand back on his knife. "Fuck off. Stick to saying your insults in Finnish so I don't understand them."

He makes a fair point. Reko usually does that with threats, unless he really wants to get something across. Then he'll speak in English, and maybe German if he knows the words and how to fit them together. It's all just a jigsaw to him, being a child. He had to take the effort to learn it. Only full soldiers can translate languages.

"*Ymmärretty*." The teenager flashes a smile, waving farewell to the man as he walks in the direction of the garage.

Once he's out of sight, Reko turns his attention to his captain, but finds that he's chatting with the small group. Curious as to their conversation without the young man's interference, Reko strains his ears to pick up what they're talking about.

His captain's voice comes through first. "A banquet? That's awfully kind of you, Terenzio. Are you positive you can put it together and leave time for Glarus?"

Despite Reko only going once, Glarus is a pretty canton. Much more so than Zug.

Terenzio chuckles. "I wouldn't be suggesting the idea if I didn't think I could handle it, sir. The atmosphere's suffered ever since the threat. I hope to bolster our spirits before the war, if it comes to fruition."

“I must agree with him. Even Noel is quieter than usual. I tried to ask him about his latest outing, seeing if he took any interesting pictures, but he acted as though he didn’t even hear me.” Joliette chimes in.

Reko finds Guinivere’s eyes on him, and he briefly wonders if his nonverbal comment in regard to her canton was more offensive than he thought. He mouths an apology. “*Scusa*.”

The woman lets her eyes linger on him for a while longer before he nods and turns her attention back to the conversation at hand. Reko is about to tune back in as well, but he catches his captain gesturing for him to come up to his side.

“Once again, thank you, Terenzio. I look forward to what you have planned.” He focuses his eyes on the mechanical being. “I’d like to speak with you in my office. You’re not in trouble.”

Reko purses his lips, but follows his captain as they break away from the group and walk towards his office. Did he hear about his meeting in Vaud? Does he know about the book? Was he able to decipher his and Thilo’s plan for another mechanical soldier? Did he just tell Reko he’s not in trouble to lure the boy into his office?

“How did you take Thilo’s apology?” He decides to shake the meaningless question from his head by focusing on what he hopes the older officer did.

Maybe *he* told Felix what Reko’s plan was. It wouldn’t be out of character for him considering his mood. Usually, on any normal day, Reko would trust Thilo to keep secrets. Even if he’s had a bit to drink which was towards the beginning of their four years together. Too much was a risk no one was willing to take. Post-hangover Thilo was not a joyful person to be around.

His captain's answer brings him back to the present. "It was more sincere than what he gave Berlyn. But that doesn't mean I forgive him." He waves his hand dismissively. "Enough about that though. I have to tell you something I came across tonight."

Arriving at his office, Reko waits patiently as Felix unlocks the door and steps inside, flicking on the lights. The teenager follows after, and looks around at the area. A smile appears across his lips as he gazes at the vibrant blue petals of the cornflowers sitting in the corner of the desk. But he takes note of the mirror facing the wrong way, and moves to turn it around.

"*Kädet pois*, Reko." His captain's voice is sharp, and Reko instantly returns his hands to his sides and faces Felix as he sits in his desk chair.

"*Anteeksi*," he whispers in reply.

All he receives is an acknowledging nod. "I fear someone is out to hurt you." His voice is full of concern and worry, yet Reko does not see a reason why.

Of course someone – or rather, an entire country – is out to hurt him. The Russians slaughtered all of his siblings eleven years ago, and have been searching for him ever since. But Felix already assured him that he wouldn't let the Russians anywhere near the boy. So why bring it up now, in the tone he's using?

Remaining silent, Reko allows his captain to continue. "An hour ago, I saw him outside your dorm. If you weren't in Vaud, you may have been killed. He moved to injure me, but—"

The mechanical being instantly draws his chef's knife and bares his teeth. "Tell me where they are," he demands, yet Felix stands, slightly raising his hands as if to calm the younger officer down.

“I’m fine. He didn’t draw any blood. But he told me who he is and why he’s seemingly out to kill you. The timeline he gave me didn’t match up with what you’ve told me about your life, and I let him know that. I then offered to allow him to visit Kirsi in Finland, so—”

Before his captain can finish his sentence, Reko is out the door, bolting towards the large gray building that marks Communications. If Felix is calling after him, he doesn’t hear it. Even if he did, he wouldn’t go back. He needs to protect his creator – the one person Reko loves who still remains in his homeland. Sure, his loyalty lies with Switzerland, but Finland will *always* hold a special place in his heart, and he assumes the same is true for Hesekiel, Kal, and Lumi, the latter of the three Reko can catch standing just outside of the aforementioned structure’s front doors.

Reko bursts through them, racing down the hall. The racket his entrance makes is enough to make Dimitry’s figure jump from where he sits at the same small table the teenager always finds him at, and the younger officer wastes no time catching his breath before speaking, “*Täytyy mennä Suomeen. Kirsi on pulassa.*”

He is grateful for Dimitry’s fluency in multiple languages, as he would have refused to state his reasoning in English or even German. The man senses the urgency in Reko’s tone alone, and nods before pushing off with one foot and swiveling to face a computer’s glowing screen.

“Fastest way is by helicopter. And lucky for you, one just touched down on the northwestern side of the base, just past Adelric’s office. Safe travels, Major General Erkki.” Reko quickly bows in Dimitry’s direction as a show of his gratitude before sprinting out of the building.

Yet he is violently yanked backward, and whips out his knife, poised to strike at whoever grabbed him. When he turns to face the person, Lumi's usually gentle eyes, now filled with an odd sense of urgency, meet his own.

"Olla varovainen." Her voice remains a soft whisper.

"Miksi?"

"Ole hyvä ja älä kuole."

The younger officer can't help but scoff at both Lumi's evasion of his question and reply. Though it's like her, so he can't complain.

"Huolehdi liikaa." He flips his knife once before sheathing it. *"Minä pärjään."*

Taking her averting gaze as a sign to leave, he takes off towards the body of the helicopter he can glimpse as he takes a detour, careful to avoid his captain in case he wants to elaborate on his unfinished explanation. Reko doesn't have any more time to spare than the hour he's already lost.

He doesn't feel any ill will towards his captain for sending the stranger who wishes to kill Reko to Finland – he does not understand what circumstance Felix was in at the time. Maybe he was being threatened or forced to abide by whatever was demanded of him. Or perhaps something out of his control occurred. Whatever the reason, Reko just knows one thing as he flings himself into the helicopter and tells the pilot his destination.

He needs to kill the person who dares to threaten his creator's life.

Chapter 9: To Know the Truth

Lumi quietly sits on the edge of her bed within her dorm, arranging flowers within a small vase on her lap. She grabs a white ribbon from beside her and ties it around the vase, before standing up and exiting her dorm.

It's early morning, yet the sun hasn't even come over the mountains. Though the time for her usual walk with Heseziel, Kal, and Reko would be approaching, they all left to attend to tasks in their cantons, save for Reko, who Lumi prays is safe in Finland.

She gave Lars a warning to tread lightly going after Reko, and told the teenager to be careful as well, seeing the hate in the former's eyes for the mechanical being. If her warnings had any effect on the two, both should survive their encounter. Whether Lars would return to Bern with Reko was up in the air, but Lumi wouldn't mind. He's a kind soul, and she hopes he can rule Denmark whenever he decides to return home.

Shaking the thoughts from her head, she approaches Berlyn's dorm, hoping that he hasn't traveled back to Zurich yet. Though it wouldn't be too long of a drive, she would rather avoid driving. She usually has Heseziel or Kal drive if they're available, not wanting to risk zoning out and crashing into something or someone. Especially now that the threat of snow is upon them, she would much rather just take a train back to Valais.

She stops at the oak door and raises her fist to knock. The vase she holds contains a multitude of colors ranging from white to pink, composed of flowers wishing for a fast recovery, like chrysanthemums, hibiscus, and poppies.

A soft voice replies, "Come in."

Carefully, Lumi turns the door's knob and pushes it open, able to see Berlyn standing right by his dresser, facing her while buttoning his gray jacket.

“I can come back later,” Lumi whispers, taking a step back, but Berlyn’s smile stops her.

“Major General Koskinen, it’s a pleasant surprise to see you. I thought you would have traveled back to Valais last night with Major General Toivonen and Major General Raimo. Do you still have business to attend to in Bern, or are you simply sticking around?” The man’s voice is warm, and Lumi takes a few steps forward, ending up inside his dorm, eyes focused on the dark hardwood floor by Berlyn’s black combat boots, already neatly laced.

“I want to stay. Just for a day more.”

“As do I. I’ll be heading back to Zürich tomorrow.” Lumi notices his eyes catch the vase in her hands. “That’s a beautiful arrangement. Did you make it yourself?”

Nodding, she walks until she is in front of him, holding out the vase for him to take. “I made it for you.”

Berlyn’s expression is one of surprise, mouth slightly parted and eyes wide. Yet after a moment, he smiles again and takes the vase in both of his hands, turns it around, and places it atop his dresser with a nod at her. “Thank you, ma’am. It’s quite stunning. But, if I may ask, why did you give it to me? What did I do?”

Lumi catches a painting above Berlyn’s bed that brings her attention away from the officer. On a white canvas is a tree, with leaves of different colors and shapes covering the branches. No, not leaves – flower petals. And, though she can’t make any of them out, she assumes the black cursive writing outlining each petal provides a name. Remembering Berlyn’s question, she returns to looking at him. “You are injured. I want you to recover. Quickly.”

Berlyn chuckles, letting his fingertips brush the cut above his eye. “It’s nothing to fret over. Major General Haegel was just being reckless, as he always is. I doubt that’s the last time he’ll initiate a fight. But I appreciate the thought. I’m in your debt.”

“It’s okay. You’ve already done so much. Thank you.” She pauses before asking her next question. “Do you hate Thilo?”

A smile crosses Berlyn’s lips. “Hate is a strong word. I suppose I resent him, though it goes back farther than our time together here. He always had Lieutenant General Adelric’s back while we were all in Germany together. I suppose I regretted never stepping in as often as he did. Perhaps our little scuffle in the mess hall is the beginning of my redemption arc. Even if it nearly ended with me losing an eye to a fork.” Waving his hand through the air dismissively, Lumi takes it as her cue to leave.

Quietly shutting the door quietly behind her, decides to visit Felix, just to check up on him after he ran into both Lars and Reko.

Surely, he'll be waiting back to hear news from either Reko or Kirsi about their encounter with the Crown Prince, unless – no. Reko is too loyal to Felix, so he would never die fighting to protect himself. As awful as the thought is, Lumi knows it’s true. It’s honestly admirable how devoted Reko is to who he calls *Komentaja*. But if her life was saved as a child in a war-torn Finland, maybe she would understand his perspective.

Finally reaching the front door of his small office, Lumi knocks, knowing he’s awake. But she doubts herself yet again as she hears no answer. Spending a minute debating whether she should turn away or enter, she steels herself and clears her throat.

“Sir, may I come in?”

The only response she gets is a moan, which only urges her to take a deep breath and open the door.

The office is completely dark, yet Lumi can make out Felix's right arm laying across his desk, but the rest of his body is obscured by his desk chair. Flicking the light on, a dim and soft white light causes her eyes to widen as she rushes forward, as if to confirm what she sees.

Felix's head lays on his desk, eyes staring at the underside of his right wrist, which leaks blood colored silver from slits made by the switchblade that lays just out of reach of his hand. Lumi glances to her right, able to see the floor mirror is shattered, the glass pieces in a small pile, though they sparkle with the same fluid that leaks from Felix's wrist.

She is stunned and frozen, forced to look at her superior officer's suffering. After a minute of silence, she forces a word from her mouth.

"Why?"

A barely audible response. "Reko."

Lumi perks up, then bends down to be level with Felix's gaze. She prays he's looking at her, though with eyes as empty as his are now, she relies more on her words.

"Reko is okay. He's going to return."

And though her mind screams at her for the uncertain answer she just gave, she silences it. She *knows* Reko will return alive. He must. For both his own and Felix's sake.

Yet another sight directs her attention to Felix's back. His uniform is noticeably darker, and she takes a step towards him, yet a groan stops her.

"Sir, let me see." Lumi's voice takes on a stronger tone, and by Felix's body moving to be sitting straight up, she takes it as a sign of acceptance.

Quickly unbuttoning both the navy jacket and white undershirt, along with undoing the blue tie around his neck, she removes the articles of clothing, casting them aside into a pile. They'll have to be washed.

“Please stand, if you can.”

Her request is slowly answered, and she assists him in getting to his feet, before walking to look at where the stain originated.

His entire back is silver, but Lumi can see the bright red marks of scars – reminiscent of whipping – scattered across his skin. Many of them actively bleed, and before Lumi can make a sound, she is out the door and dashing in the direction of Berlyn’s dorm.

The most reasonable action would be to get Emilia or Elena Canetto, but something tells her that Berlyn would be able to assist him just as well as they would, maybe even more. She knows he served alongside both Felix and Thilo while in Germany and is Felix’s most loyal officer. He would be able to comfort him regarding Reko and soothe any other doubts he may have. She is willing to bet he even knows why Felix’s blood is silver, as Lumi has no clue.

She finds the desired man still within his dorm, and he quickly stands up from sitting on the edge of his bed as Lumi bursts open the door. Without words, she grabs Berlyn’s left wrist and pulls him up and out, running back to Felix’s office.

As soon as she can see the silver blood across Felix’s back, she releases the man as he sprints into the office, immediately checking the younger over for any more injuries. She arrives just as he holds Felix’s right arm in his hand, sighing and shaking his head, though it is out of concern rather than disappointment.

“Sir, you...you must have seen–” he stops himself as his eyes fall on Lumi, but he purses his lips and continues anyway. “If I know one thing about Major General Erkki, it is that he will always come back to you alive. Going to Finland means he is protected by Kirsi, so rest assured that he will return.” Berlyn’s affirmations soothe Lumi, but she doesn’t see any reaction from Felix.

He just remains standing still, and Berlyn locks eyes with her, gesturing to his back. “If you could assist me with cleaning and bandaging his wounds, I would greatly appreciate it, Major General Koskinen.”

Without hesitation, Lumi obeys, helping Berlyn grab the first aid kit from a drawer in Felix’s desk, opening it, grabbing the required supplies, and treating his injuries. Felix doesn’t make a single movement or sound, even when the alcohol is applied to the open cuts, and Lumi wonders if he’s even conscious. Yet she checks his face and finds his eyes are open, yet they still possess that empty quality to them.

And as she looks at Berlyn, she knows this must be a hard thing for him to witness. He was there firsthand, and she was always the one to hear about it from others, regarding the month Felix spent in his office, trying to commit suicide over what occurred in Forchheim. She still stands by the claim that it was never his fault, but she knows he believes it is, even if she, Berlyn, and even Reko – who was the only other survivor of the massacre and the one person Felix saved from getting killed by a Russian spy – tell him otherwise.

As she wraps bandages around his torso, she decides to ask Berlyn about her questions regarding what she’s seen. “Why is his blood silver?”

Watching the man’s eyes flick to her from where he kneels near Felix’s right wrist, he bites his lip before presumably looking at his superior, as if he even has a clue about what is happening. Eventually, he sighs, shakes his head, and asks a question in response. “Do you swear to not tell anyone else what I’m about to explain?”

Lumi gives him a single nod. She already barely speaks as it is, always preferring to listen over talk, the opposite of Heseziel.

Berlyn begins his explanation. “I’m sure you’ve been in situations where you thought you would die on the battlefield – I’ve experienced more than I could count. Thinking about those situations, specifically when Lieutenant General Adelric is in his current position, he always seems to give you an order, whether it be to retreat, hold your ground, or even change formation. You listen to his order without question, and the thought might cross your mind that you may very well die, or some of your other officers and soldiers may.

“But no one does. That’s because he’s a seer. His silver blood is one of the telltale signs of it, along with his eyes briefly changing color from blue to silver upon witnessing an upcoming demise. I cannot even begin to imagine the immense stress it puts on him as it is, and I doubt this” – he gestures vaguely to the man still standing in front of him – “is the worst he has suffered through. His father physically and psychologically abused and tortured him; the scars you’re caring for right now are one of the many lingering signs of that.

“Maybe some would say he doesn’t deserve to live such a life. Even after Forchheim, *so many* people wanted him to be executed, or at least his promotion to be challenged and stripped away. But believe it or not, Major General Haegel, just a Major at the time, asked Lieutenant General Heilewis to hold off on contesting Adelric’s promotion. She listened but sent him to Bern at the beginning of February.

“But knowing what he has experienced, I find his desire to assist us, even if it puts his own life at risk, is admirable. Even though I do not express it, I pray that he can live another day, because without his leadership and compassion, we would not be where we all are today. I’m positive many – if not all – of us hope the same, even if they do not understand his circumstances like I, Major General Haegel, and now you do. That is all I can say, in respect to his wishes. If he wants to say anything more to you, then he can, but you will have to ask him.” Berlyn glances up

at Lumi, who pulls her hands away from Felix's body, finished with bandaging the worst of his wounds.

"Shouldn't he be watched?" Lumi questions, worried that Felix's current state could escalate into something that would put his life at risk if Reko – or any one of his officers – were to be in danger again.

Berlyn shakes his head. "Formally doing so would require explaining his past and his ability. Even if the Canettos have witnessed more than we ever will, they haven't seen silver blood. And if Lieutenant General Adelric does not wish to disclose his past to others, then I will respect that. At this point, it will only cause him further pain and stress – the last things he needs."

Lumi nods. "Thank you."

She never once believed that Felix may have seen her death, and instead of letting her die, saved her life. Before Berlyn's mention, she never thought much about it, but always expressed her gratitude by sending him a bouquet of cornflowers after missions which she believed were her last if not for his orders.

They finish in silence, and Berlyn stands up, looking at Felix for several seconds before offering his body for him to lean on. "Please allow me to take you to your dorm, sir. I believe some rest is the best thing for you right now."

But Lumi watches Felix shake his head and sputter a single name yet again. "Reko."

Taking a deep breath, Lumi looks into Felix's eyes and summons as confident of a voice as she can, pushing all doubts from her head. For his sake, Reko *must* return. And Lumi will make sure of it. "He is fine, sir. He's not reckless."

She glimpses the slightest smile across Berlyn's lips at her indirect reference to another officer. But as reckless as he is, he somehow always survives, and Lumi is grateful for his presence around the base. His friendly demeanor and smile has brightened her mood on multiple occasions, though the one time she did work up the courage to say thank you, he laughed, waved his hand through the air, and told her not to worry about it – his mood and gestures were simply a habit.

Felix raises his head and locks eyes with her. Despite what she has witnessed and heard today, and everything on her mind, she smiles and nods to him, and that is enough for him to lean on Berlyn as the latter bids farewell to Lumi and takes Felix out of his office and towards his dorm.

Exiting the office and closing the door behind her after the two men disappear from her view, she detaches her communication device from her uniform and pauses upon lifting it. She decides to contact the one person she needs first. Turning a small dial until his last name followed by his first appears on the small screen, she presses a small red button and speaks into it. "Reko, something happened concerning Felix."

An instant reply. "What about *Komentaja*?"

Her throat tightens as the sight of the silver blood staining both his desk and the floor beneath his right wrist comes to mind. Yet she squeezes her eyes shut and only tells him what she can. "He is unwell."

The device goes silent, and Lumi knows his priority has now switched to returning to Switzerland and checking up on Felix. But before she can spend too much time thinking about the other person she debates whether to contact, she finds their name already on the screen.

"Thilo."

There is a second before the man replies. “Lumi? What’s going on?”

She understands if anyone else was contacting him, he’d probably respond differently, but hearing Lumi’s voice has probably already told him that something dire has occurred.

This time, she can tell him more than she revealed to Reko. “Felix hurt himself. There was blood everywhere.”

She can hear sounds from the other end of the device, and Thilo’s rather soft voice comes through before the line goes silent. “Fuck. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Returning the device to her uniform, she glances over in the direction of Felix’s dorm. She offers up a silent prayer for his quick recovery. Not just for herself, but for the entirety of Switzerland. Now more than ever, the nation needs his command and guidance.

Chapter 10: Desires of a Broken Heart

A person, with bright red hair that contrasts their white lab coat smeared with golden oil, scribbles down notes as they sit at a desk, their green eyes glancing up once in a while at a laptop's glowing screen.

The area they work in is rather large for one person. A kitchen sits in a corner, while large tanks holding human-like beings submerged in some kind of clear fluid are on the right side of the wall. A large screen, though it has remained dark for a long time, stays up on the right wall, while a few of the smaller screens around it flicker on, displaying quick bits of information before going dark. The control pad underneath them periodically flashes an array of colors. At least the sounds are gone. Reminiscent of the livelier yet more stressful days spent in the laboratory, barely sleeping just to achieve a meaningless unethical demand. But if they never agreed to the proposal, death would have been the consequence. They wouldn't be able to experience the bundles of happiness and life that their current children give them.

Yes, "children". Not "soldiers". Not anymore, at least. Sometimes in the silence, when their mind isn't on anything else, they will hear the echoes of the monitoring system going berserk, the flashing colors bathing the entire lab in colors. Sounds and colors that made them duck under their desk, cover their ears, and close their eyes. Praying to whoever that was listening if it could all end. It would end in two ways though – their death or the death of their creations. And as much as they were glad they survived, he has never forgotten the hundred of both children and soldiers that were slaughtered eleven years ago.

The slight echo of footsteps from the front of the laboratory tears the person's eyes away from the screen, meeting the figure of a teenager with black hair and brown eyes. They associate the appearance with a name, saying it aloud, "Aki, good evening. Have you and Taru finished

your work in the garden already? That was certainly fast.” They glance down at a watch on their wrist. It’s only been fifteen minutes since he gave the two children the project of planting flowers around the outside of the laboratory, hoping to begin bringing just a little bit of beauty back to the barren, burnt landscape. Trying to hide the scars of a war, or maybe to act as a memorial and a wish for better days ahead. It’s all up for interpretation. Just like the intentions of the Russians back then.

“Someone was spotted heading this direction. Their projected time of arrival is in two minutes,” Aki states, and the person rises from their desk, slipping their hand into their lab coat.

Within the pocket lies a pistol. Against multiple trained soldiers, it’s useless. But if it’s just one threat to their life or the lives of their creations, it should do.

It was the same pistol they fired at the arm of the Russian officer who slaughtered Levo’s parents. Well, he’s not Levo now. Reko. They saved Reko Erkki from death’s grip, and they’ll do it again in a heartbeat.

“Did they have any weapons on them? Any distinguishing features? What did their outfit look like?” The person throws questions at Aki, hoping for an answer to at least one of them.

“They didn’t appear to have any noticeable weapons, and they were dressed in all red, seemingly in a military-style outfit.” The person perks up at the mention of their outfit.

They know that officers from Finland in the Swiss military wear vermillion uniforms to distinguish themselves from officers of other origins, like German, Italian, or Russian.

Returning the hand into their pocket back to their side, they breathe a sigh of relief. “It must be a Finnish officer from Switzerland’s military. Thank you for letting me know, Aki. You’re free to return to your task.” They smile at Aki as they nod, then turn on their heels and head out of the laboratory, passing the visitor as they step inside.

As soon as they spot their creator, they run forward and envelop them in a hug, a gesture the receiver knows their last remaining hybrid cherishes, especially from them and the current Lieutenant General of Switzerland, as he was the one to find Reko after the war and essentially saved his life while also, in time, becoming his first friend since then.

“Kirsi! *En ole liian myöhässä.*” Reko breaks the hug to look up at Kirsi, who frowns.

“Not too late? Is there something else I don’t-”

Rushed footsteps finally register in their head before Reko spins around, drawing out his chef’s knife to meet the point of a rapier, level with either the hybrid’s head or Kirsi’s heart.

“Tsk. *Jeg kom foran mig selv.*” They speak in a language Kirsi doesn’t recognize as one of the five that are spoken in the Swiss military, but by their outfit alone, they don’t appear to even belong to the military.

The only people Kirsi knows that would desire Reko’s death are the Russians. But this person doesn’t even look remotely close to someone from that nation. So why be so quick to try and kill Reko or themselves?

Kirsi only has enough time to mutter two words to Reko before their creation shoves the rapier away from them before engaging in a fight. “*Pelaa puolustusta.*”

Though a soldier would usually give a nod to acknowledge they heard their creator’s (or, in some cases, superior officer’s) words, Reko doesn’t even give Kirsi a sign that he heard them, but the creator can already see that he is taking a defensive position against his opponents attacks.

While he blocks and deflects thrusts and swings, he sometimes jumps back, rolls, or rushes forward to avoid the rather calculated and quick moves of the young man wielding the

rapier. But none of them show signs of tiring and Kirsi sometimes has to move out of their way to avoid being knocked to the ground.

This will most likely end in the death of Reko's opponent if they make a single mistake allowing the teenager to give into the instincts of the mechanical soldier within their system and end the fight with death.

Coming to a quick conclusion, Kirsi dashes over to a cardboard box beneath the console near the screens, and digs through it, hoping to find a single device. The last time it was used was in an event that almost cost Reko his life. But Kirsi will ensure this young man who is so intent on killing Reko doesn't make that desire a reality.

Grabbing the device from the very bottom of the box, Kirsi jumps up, rushing over to the fighting pair, points the antenna on the black device in Reko's direction, and presses the red button. In an instant, Reko freezes mid-block and falls to the ground, not even able to say a single word or let out a sound. His opponent is quick to set a foot stop his chest and point his rapier's blade – not engulfed in a mesmerizing white flame – right at Reko's forehead.

Yet Kirsi steps forward, their left hand out as if to dissuade them by actions alone. "Please, don't kill him. Though I might not know why he's your target, I can assure you he's done nothing wrong. Just allow me to know why you've traveled all the way here." They keep their voice calm, though the tension in the air is high.

Looking between Kirsi and Reko for several seconds, the young man mutters a single word before stepping away from the hybrid and sheathing his rapier. "*Bøde*."

Kirsi presses the button on the device again before slipping it into a pocket of their coat, and watches as Reko turns his head to give his creator a look between betrayal and anger before

pushing themselves up, and glancing quickly at their opponent before flipping his knife in his hand and sheathing it as well.

The young man clears his throat. “My name is Lars Einar Theodor, Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Denmark. I believe a mechanical soldier, with blond hair and red eyes, killed my parents when I was nine. I have been looking for them for eleven years now.” He trains his gaze on Kirsi. “Tell me the truth: Did Reko kill my parents? If not, who did?”

They catch Reko scowling, arms crossed over his chest, cursing under their breath. *“Tyhmä prinssi. Syötät koko valtakuntasi sotaan, jos teet hätiköityjä johtopäätöksiä kuin peloissaan sammakko.”*

“Reko, *ole kiitollinen, että elämäsi säästy.*” Kirsi counters, yet the young officer just scoffs as they both turn their attention back to the prince. “Reko did not kill your parents. Eleven years ago, he lost his adoptive parents during an invasion Russia launched against Finland. He was not saved until four years ago, and he has remained in the Swiss military since then. If you don’t believe me, you can ask Lieutenant General Felix Adelric. He was the man who saved and now commands Reko.”

But Lars sighs, averting his gaze. “I already did. He directed me to you.”

Reko brings out his chef’s knife and points it in Lars’ direction, his eyes narrowed and voice lower than usual, taking on a threatening tone. *“Melkein tapoit hänet! Minun olisi pitänyt leikata kurkkusi, kun minulla oli mahdollisuus.”*

Lars’ left hand moves to rest on his rapier’s handle and he moves his left foot back, a stance Kirsi knows indicates he’s preparing to either attack or defend.

“Lapsi, rauhoittua,” Kirsi demands, yet all it makes Reko do is lower his knife as Lars returns to standing upright. “I have no clue who killed your parents, but I assure you it wasn’t a

soldier or even a child of mine. Those you see outside the lab were made, at the very least, four years ago. They're newer models of the children I first began creating. None of them are soldiers. Reko is the only one left, though he's only half-soldier." They explain, hoping for Lars to show just a hint of consideration and hopefully not move to take Reko's life again, when Kirsi can't intervene and prevent either of them from dying.

"So every single soldier is dead except for Reko, but he's a hybrid," Lars reiterates back to the creator, who nods.

"Yes, that's correct." Kirsi looks out at the laboratory's entrance to check on their children and hide the tear that falls from their left eye.

"Why did the Russians kill them?"

"They believed the soldiers would pose a threat when they eventually came of age to serve in the military. So, they invaded Finland without our knowledge, and they were quick to kill not just the mechanical soldiers, but their parents, mechanical children, and even human children as well, since they looked so similar to one another. The only distinguishing feature of a soldier from a child, mechanical or human, are their red eyes."

"Would Finland have any reason to attack Denmark if a mechanical soldier killed my parents?" Lars bitterly adds onto his question after Reko shoots him a narrowed stare.

"Hypothetically."

Kirsi purses their lips, ending up shaking their head. "No. I would say either someone from Germany or Russia killed your parents. Denmark was already under German control when they died, right?"

"Yeah. *Jeg vil bare hævne deres død*," Lars declares, and Kirsi nods.

“Keep asking around. Maybe Reko can help you.” Upon glancing at the officer, they realize he’s near the three large tanks against the laboratory’s right wall.

“*Ovatko he kunnossa?*” Reko looks over his shoulder at his creator, who walks up to be right beside him.

In the tank directly before the two, a mechanical child seemingly sleeps upright, eyes closed, and long brown hair floating around their face as if they’re submerged in water. They are submerged in a fluid, but it’s not water.

“Something happened a week ago near the laboratory. Some kind of tremor from a nearby earthquake. A few of my children were injured, some so badly I needed to put them in the tanks. But Yrsa should be almost healed by now.” Kirsi walks up to a small screen upon a pedestal connected to the tank, and lightly taps, watching as it lights up with the remaining time – fifteen hours.

“What’s in there?” Kirsi hears Lars’s voice from his right.

“Mercury.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?” the prince asks the expected question.

“For us humans, yes. But for mechanical beings, it’s a good conductor of electricity so their wounds can heal faster than if they were to undergo a shutdown out here.” Kirsi gestures to the laboratory behind them.

“Did I ever have to go into one of them?” Reko walks up to a tank and softly knocks against the glass that Yrsa peacefully floats behind.

Kirsi smiles as the teenager looks back at them. “You were already with Aura and Kaius then. They were so happy to know you would be theirs...” Kirsi’s voice trails off, and they turn away from the tank, walking over to a small picture frame atop their desk.

Picking it up and turning it over, they study the three people in the picture behind the spotless glass. To the right is a woman with long blonde hair and blue eyes, her smile as bright as Kirsi remembers. On the left is a man with brown hair and green eyes, his sense of humor making the child between them, with blond hair and red eyes, laugh for the first time.

But they are quick to set it down as another image comes to mind. Blood coloring Aura's white nightgown a deep crimson, and Kaius' black suit only becoming a shade darker, their eyes both staring up at something Kirsi could never hope to see, even now. And in the middle of the room is Reko – he was Levo, then – staring at the still bodies of his parents, unaware of the man aiming his pistol at him.

Kirsi was faster, drawing their own gun and shooting the man in the arm, rendering him exposed and injured enough to leave the scene. The creator scooped Reko up into their arms and dashed from the house, bringing him into an orphanage under the new name the young boy chose for himself.

Since then, they hadn't seen Reko until today. They can sometimes hear his voice and can even speak to him remotely, but it's never the same as seeing his dear child in person.

A female voice coming from behind them causes Kirsi to turn around, their eyes scanning the laboratory for a child of theirs, but instead focus on Reko, who reveals a black device from under his uniform and speaks into it.

"What about *Komentaja*?" His voice is filled with concern for the young man who saved his life four years ago, and who Kirsi is ever thankful for.

"He is unwell." Kirsi recognizes the voice belongs to Lumi, a soft-spoken officer who is valued more for her observational skills than those relating to communication, at least from what

they have heard from Reko and Dimitry, when he used to contact Kirsi during the period of the invasion.

For a moment, Kirsi meets eyes with Reko, and his creator offers nothing but a single nod, allowing him to go back to Switzerland and take care of Felix. But they wish to hear one thing from him before the teenager departs. "*Lupaa minulle, että tulet käymään uudelleen.*"

Reko stops following behind Lars, and faces Kirsi. With a smile and nod, they know of his answer before he says anything. "*Tietenkin. Lupa.*"

With those two words, Kirsi waves their hand in farewell, and watches the two as they leave, their figures soon becoming silhouettes and finally blending in with the night sky.

They close their eyes and wish for Reko's safety above all else. Hoping that Lars does not pose a threat to him and the Russians will leave him alone. He will be of little use to them anyway if he is ever caught, being only half of a soldier. But they pray it will never come to that. What happened twelve years ago has no reason to repeat.

Chapter 11: Origins of Pain

A man with blond hair, wearing a black uniform, sits at a desk, shaking a collection of colorful feathers attached to a stick above the wood surface. A black cat, its eyes trained on the feathers, bats a paw upward in its direction, meowing once when it misses.

“Don’t complain, Vera. I know you can jump.” The man looks up from his beloved pet as he notices a shadow move past the windows of his office, stopping at his front door.

Sighing, without waiting for the person to announce themselves, he conjures an excuse, “I’m busy.”

But his door opens, revealing his father. A man who looks exactly like him, though older by many years. He wears the same black uniform his son does, though it is a bit more decorated, considering he is the Grand Marshal, while his son is only a rank below him – General of the Army.

“Rodion, you love that cat far too much. What if it is to die in a conflict?” his father suggests, and the addressed man bares his teeth, which makes Vera turn her head to the man and hiss.

“First off, her name is Vera. Second of all, I’m not stupid enough to bring my child anywhere near a warzone. When I leave, she stays here, with Lieutenant General Alisa looking after him.

His father just chuckles, but his expression turns serious a moment later. “You know, you should be standing and saluting me.”

“But you’re my father.”

“I’m still your superior officer, and I deserve the respect either way.”

A flicker of someone familiar in the floor mirror in Rodion's peripheral vision irritates him instantly. "Damn you."

"Excuse me?" his father takes a few steps towards him, his eyebrows raised.

With another sigh, Rodion stands up and salutes the man. "That wasn't directed at you. Just remembered all the work I have to do today."

When he looks over at the mirror again, the person whom he saw has disappeared. But he knows he can simply summon him whenever he wishes. It's not like they'd ever be in the same world. This is a different Russia, a Russia where everything has gone perfectly. Rodion has earned the respect of the Grand Marshal of the Russian Federation and his father, Pavel. The man who visits him in the mirror is nothing but a failure that makes Rodion sick, but also offers a pleasant form of entertainment some days.

"If it's as you say, I'll leave you alone. But this" – his father plucks the cat toy from Rodin's desk before either the younger man nor the cat can react – "comes with me." He turns on his heels and leaves the office, closing the door behind him and whistling a tune as he walks away.

Looking at Vera, Rodion frowns. "Yeah, I know. Sorry."

She just meows before jumping down from the desk and prancing over to her plush bed, before curling up and taking a midday nap.

Meanwhile, Rodion wheels his chair over to the mirror, and seemingly calls out to no one. "So what makes you show yourself today, coward?"

As expected, a man a few years younger than he, with the same blue eyes yet black hair and dressed in a navy uniform, appears. His expression is neutral, yet Rodion knows he never expresses any sort of anger or even irritation. Maybe he hasn't gotten on his nerves enough.

“Has he truly changed from the man he was years ago?” His voice is soft, and his question genuine.

Yet the older scoffs, waving his hand around in the air. “Depends on the day. Most of the time, yes. Especially now that I’ve earned my way out of that truly awful room both of us suffered so much in. I don’t mention Anastasia much, but I will still say I hate him for that. So at least we have one thing in common.” He trains his eyes on the man mirrored back at him. “Say, *Felix*, do you think you’ll ever return to your world’s Russia? You could be like me, just say the word,” Rodion coaxes, yet Felix shakes his head.

“Your experience may be different, but that doesn’t mean mine will upon my return. My loyalty and life lies with Switzerland now more than ever with the threat of war.”

“A war that would be solved if you just returned.”

“You know just as well as I do that I won’t.”

“Even if it cost the life of those you hold most dearest to you? Even that dysfunctional mess of scrap metal and wires?”

Felix’s eyes narrow. “*Du machst mir keine Angst.*”

Rodion chuckles. “*Я говорю только правду.*”

“*Hypothesen.*”

“*Если вы так говорите.*”

They both know war costs lives. But they both have a defense against it. In Felix’s world, it is him, and in Rodion’s, it is also himself. Their silver blood, along with their eyes turning silver when the death of someone close to them occurs, is the only sign of their mysterious ability. How they came to have it is beyond both of them, and Rodion doubts Felix has any more time than he does – or even cares at this point – to figure out a reasonable explanation for it.

Vera walks up to Rodion, brushing her head against his boot, so he bends down and picks her up.

Upon seeing her, Felix raises an eyebrow. “That’s Vera? She’s certainly very pretty.”

Despite himself, Rodion smiles and scratches her head as she meows. “So you can say nice things.”

“Unlike you.”

“Like I said, I only speak the truth. Lying is for cowards.”

“It wasn’t my choice to end up in Germany, I hope you know.”

“I’m not stupid. But did you know your father beheaded the officers who were supposed to look after you as soon as he heard you went missing? Odd he waited two years before trying to take you back, but I suppose he knew you’d go through a bit of a name and appearance change. Quite the clever man.” Felix opens his mouth to reply, yet a meow from Vera interrupts him, and Rodion sets her back down. “And abusive, I know. But that was in the *past*. What you’re seeing now” – he gestures to himself – “is the future. Your future if you go back.”

He gets no reply, but the image of Felix in the mirror flickers, and the glass cracks. A hairline fracture, running exactly where Felix’s reflection is. Odd for it to crack now, when it hasn’t in past conversations. Rodion frowns, but dismisses it. “Playtime’s over. What a shame. Maybe I’ll see you later, maybe I won’t. Either is fine with me.” Rodion turns around in his chair and pulls himself back to his desk using his feet, and spies Vera back in her cat bed.

But Felix’s points call him back to his memories of several years ago. For five years, he was tortured in that white room, begging for it to end. The Germans didn’t save him – those who were supposedly sent were tortured for information, and ultimately killed. He knew he wouldn’t die, and that made the abuse so much worse. Knowing either his father or the officers tasked with

the gruesome tasks could be as violent as they could be, but had to stop when he was on the cusp of death. His ability was too rare, too valuable to be cast away with his death.

On his eighteenth birthday, he was finally granted freedom from that room, and his life drastically changed. He came to shed the scared, cowardly teenager that was locked in that room and became a serious, ruthless commander, a person his father could be proud of. And, judging by his current position – next in line to take command of Russia when his father either dies or retires – Rodion fulfilled his wish.

Shaking his head and sighing, he turns his attention to the stack of papers he pushed to a corner of his desk so he could play with Vera. But, seeing as she's napping, he supposes he has no choice but to get started on the work he told his father he had to get done. Grabbing a pen and plucking the first paper off of the pile, and sets it in front of him, and stares at the line where he must sign his name.

"A desk job is certainly better than that room."

He has no idea what time it is when he signs off on the last paper. Vera sits on top of her cat tree, grooming herself with her tongue, but glances at Rodion every now and then. Standing up, he walks over to the black feline and pulls a small treat from his pocket, holding it out to her. With a purr, she takes it, and Rodion scratches the top of her head before whispering, "You get to take naps. I don't. Which means I need to get some rest before tomorrow. And hey, if my father comes in here with more paperwork for me to do, could you rip it up for me? Thanks." With a smile, Rodion leaves his office, and heads over to his dorm, passing a few officers on the way.

They all spare a few seconds saluting him, and to each movement, Rodion gives them a nod of acknowledgement, wondering if the officers in Felix's Switzerland do the same, or if they think he's just as much of a coward as Rodion believes he is.

If he had the chance to go back to the world Felix is in, he'd right whatever wrongs caused him to betray his country of birth and make it as inviting as possible, all in an attempt to make him return. Or, likewise, he could just make Switzerland a living hell. Both are fun, but the latter makes him laugh as he enters his dorm, dresses into his nightclothes and lays down in bed.

Making Switzerland hell and Russia heaven would be entertaining. Then he'd get what Rodion knows he desires, no matter how much he denies it: his father's approval and love.

What awakens the man is a meow and a weight on his chest. Opening his eyes, Vera's amber eyes stare right at him, and he bolts up at the sight, coughing as she jumps off of his chest.

"Vera, how the hell did you get in here? Who let you out of my office?"

His questions are only met with a meow, and Rodion curses under his breath as he registers just where he is. He feels grass under his hands, and looks down, seeing that he's back in his uniform. But the landscape around him is still shrouded in the darkness of night, yet he can glimpse the glow of lights coming from behind him.

Wincing, he jumps back as Vera hisses and bats at his leg, her claws cutting through his trousers and drawing blood from just above his ankle. Cursing under his breath, the man kneels and examines his wound. But what he sees swelling up from the cut isn't silver blood. It's crimson, like the blood of all regular humans. Did he lose his abilities as a seer upon coming here? Is that the tradeoff?

Ignoring the wound, he picks Vera up and continues to look around, unable to make out any of the familiar landmarks of Russia. Did he end up in another country? Another continent entirely? If he wished to return to Russia, could he? Though he's confident his father and the other officers will fare just fine without him, he'd want to be present just for his own happiness.

Eventually, he spots someone walking towards him, holding a flashlight that illuminates not just his black uniform, but the blue uniform across from him. But what catches Rodin's attention is his right arm and left leg, both of which are seemingly metal, their gray and silver sheen visible in the moonlight.

Rodion lowers Vera down in the grass, and she slinks behind his feet, while the man raises both of his hands as he sees the person – a young man – wrap his hand around a sheathed sword at his right side.

“I can promise I am of no threat to you. I'm simply lost and wish to find shelter and food for my dear Vera.” Rodion gestures to the feline, who meows and rubs her head against his left leg.

“It's about a 30 minute walk in the opposite direction to the nearest village in Germany. They should be able to have everything you're looking for.” the man states, and Rodion conjures a smile.

“Thank you, sir. Would you mind giving me your name? Mine's Rodion.”

“Leon Adalheid.”

“It's a pleasure, Leon. Do you, perhaps, command the base behind you?” He gestures to the shining lights and large silhouettes behind the man. Plus, his uniform gives away his position – Major General.

“Yes, that's correct.”

“Who, if I may ask, commands you?”

Leon hesitates before answering, “Lieutenant General Felix Adelic. He also commands the canton of Bern, Switzerland's de-facto capital.”

Despite himself, Rodion's eyes widen. Was he really transported to Felix's world? Does he get the opportunity to change his fate and ensure Russia returns to the glory it can experience under his leadership? His talents are wasted on Switzerland, but he's too blind to see and too ignorant to understand that.

"Once again, thank you for the directions, Leon. I hope you appreciate Felix's leadership." Without any further words, Rodion turns around and walks away, soon seeing that light from the flashlight disappearing as he assumes Leon has turned away from him.

He sees Vera's figure at his heels, and smiles. "Hopefully you can tell the difference between a battlefield and a base. I'd hate for my father to be proven right, and especially if you were to die. You're the only thing keeping me sane." A loud purr is his response.

Smiling to himself again, he makes a single vow. A promise he will stop at nothing to achieve.

Switzerland will become your living hell, Felix. Just you watch.

Chapter 12: Makings of a Knight

Leon stares out at the ruined valley before him. What was once a beautiful area filled with flowers, trees, and even a nearby river is now a black and barren landscape, with the mangled and bloody corpses of soldiers to add to the tragedy.

Initially, he was at a loss regarding how such an event could happen. But after hearing about Russia's threat from Felix, he places the blame on the Russians. Even if the Germans, with their proximity to Basel-Stadt, would be a more obvious suspect, last he heard, relations with Lieutenant General Heilewis were friendly. Of course, it doesn't completely rule out a rogue group acting on their own, but the more Leon thinks of possible perpetrators, the more paranoid he becomes about further attacks.

Narrowing his eyes, he begins walking forward, remembering the task Felix asked of him. Survey the damage, look for clues as to why the attack happened or who was behind it, and then report back. Easier said than done.

He is just able to see the first body near a blackened tree when his phone vibrates in his uniform pocket. Automatically, he knows it's his twin brother – everyone else would contact him on his communication device. The only other people he voluntarily gave his number to were Armin, Callalily, Oksana – the three officers whose cantons are closest to him, excluding Basel-Landschaft – and, of course, Felix. But Liam is the only one to have called him thus far on his phone; everyone else finds the black device strapped to his belt a better way to communicate.

Speaking of, the device makes a sound before a familiar, yet unexpected voice comes through. "Major General Leon Adalheid, you're currently surveying the damage from the patrol ambush?" Berlyn inquires.

Detaching the device from his belt and pressing a small button, he replies. “That’s correct. I’ve just begun. Did something else come up?”

“Not relating directly to the ambush, no. But please report your findings to me. Lieutenant General Adelric is currently unavailable for the time being. I’ll inform him of what you’ve shared with me once he has the time. Please be careful.” With the caution, the line ends, and Leon returns the device to his belt before his phone vibrates a second time.

Ignoring the vibration, Leon kneels near the first body, and notices both of their dog tags are still around their neck. So, it was either rogues or the Russians, seeing as they didn’t care for dog tags. But other than that, nothing can be glimpsed from the first body.

Standing up, Leon grinds his teeth as he feels a slight pause before a third vibration. He doesn’t need Liam always checking up on him like he’s as helpless as he was when first discharged from the knights. He’s gained his limbs back since then (albeit mechanical) and even commands his own canton. But no matter what he says, or what he does, his brother never lets him go.

The second and third bodies are a little more mangled than the first, but the deal is the same: dog tags untouched. Yet the method of how they were attacked seems to be an explosive of sorts rather than gunfire, based on the absence of bullet wounds.

Letting his mechanical right arm rest on a rather large rock that seemed to stop the fourth and final body from moving very far, Leon’s breath stops. This soldier has lost not only their right arm, but also their left leg, none of which are in sight. And it only brings up a flood of unwelcome memories.

It was several years ago, in the summer. Leon only knew it was the summer because the sun had been relentlessly beating down on his leather armor, and he was tiring faster than usual,

taking swings at a practice dummy. None of the other knights were available for spars or declined the offer he extended.

He raises his wooden sword, trying to keep the now heavy weapon from falling from his grip or affecting his ready stance. With a deep breath, he swings high, ducks low, lunges forward, thrusts upward, and then rolls back, ending up pointing the tip of his sword where the dummy's neck would be if it were a real person.

A slow applause makes Leon turn around to see his father standing right outside of the fenced arena where training and spars take place. The smile on his face is either genuine joy or mockery. Will his next words be praise or yet another insult directed at his twin, which Leon is led on to believe is a complement to his abilities?

“Well done. Shame you weren't facing a real opponent. The look of defeat on their face would have been priceless.” Leon flashes his father a half-hearted smile before retiring his sword to the wooden rack at one end of the arena and relinquishing his armor into a pile at the other.

“A real opponent counters.”

“Not as fast as you strike.”

Though the praise would usually make the teenager proud, it disgusts him instead. How would he receive any real training if he was left to spar with hay-filled dummies when his father didn't demand otherwise from his knights?

His father extends a hand that lays upon Leon's left shoulder as he passes through the gate and begins walking back to his dorm. “I want to speak to you in my office.” Leon glances at him with a rather apprehensive expression. “It won't take long, promise.”

He has no choice but to follow his father as he walks towards the grand white building that marks the headquarters of the knights, its exterior nearly blinding in the sun's intense rays.

Leon only asked his father once why there were even knights in Switzerland, after his brother was sent to the military once he turned sixteen. His reply was hostile, as if Leon should have known that or instead kept his mouth shut. The knights were to deal with domestic threats to Switzerland, while the military was to deal with anything foreign. Very rarely would the military require the assistance of the knights with a foreign matter, and his father wasn't keen on accepting every single request.

But the Lieutenant General at the time, Agatha Petra, wasn't the most assertive woman regarding asking for assistance, so every decline was met with a "thank you for your consideration" before it was never brought up again. And she barely ever made appearances in Geneva at the headquarters, which his father enjoyed, saying "if she were to make trips over here, then I would have felt at least a slight obligation to take on at least some of the tasks requesting our help."

Walking up the steps leading to the second floor, filled with the offices of the most important members of the knights, his father gestures for Leon to enter into his office first, followed by the man himself who closes the door behind him. He rounds his desk and sits, then glances between a chair on the other side and Leon.

"Please sit. Let yourself relax after your session. It's not as good as your bed, but it can do it for now, yes?"

Pursing his lips to prevent a scowl from forming rather than the expected smile, Leon begrudgingly takes a seat and looks out the window behind his father as he types something on the keyboard of his laptop. As soon as he looks at Leon, the younger knight meets his eyes.

"I received a request from Petra. This one, I'm going to take."

“Okay.” Leon lets his fingertips drum against his legs, always restless in the presence of his father. He always must be doing something, else his father will become angry and berate Liam to make Leon feel as though he’s the superior of the two and, therefore, expected to do more.

“It’s near the German border, and a rogue group is expected to try and cross into Switzerland. The military officers and soldiers in Jura are too busy with their own things to spare any people to deal with the threat, so we’ve been asked to step in,” his father explains, tapping his own fingers against the black wood of his desk.

“I still don’t see why you’re telling me this.” Leon bites back the more bitter reply: Well, maybe if you asked my brother, he’d be more than happy to help you, and resumes staring back out the window at the cloudless blue sky. There isn’t anything to watch outside other than the occasional bird, but it’s better than his father’s icy eyes.

“The expected date of their passing is tomorrow night. I want you to take a small group of knights and stand watch at the border. Kill any who pass and warn those that haven’t yet.”

“You want me to—”

“Yes. Leon, I’m putting you in charge of this mission. You’ve shown you’re more than ready. I’d give you something more dangerous, but supposedly Petra is saving that stuff for the military. This is all she’s got.”

Leon stares at his father, shocked into silence. He’s only heard about the missions that the other knights of his rank have embarked on. He was always jealous, yearning for the day when he would get to accompany a group on a mission. But to oversee one is completely different. All the responsibilities fall on him. If he’s successful, his feats will be talked about for months on end. But if he fails, he may as well relinquish everything he has and go back home. Maybe he

could try out baseball. He and his brother used to play all the time whenever they found themselves with free time between their father's frequent sword lessons.

Unsure of how to feel, Leon stands up from his chair and bows. "I will gather a small group and head out tomorrow afternoon. On my honor as a knight, I will not let you down."

Only glimpsing the smallest smiles on his father's lips before turning and leaving his office, Leon clutches the railing just before the staircase. He spots a few knights walking across the marble floor, the echo of their steps only making the headache and nausea Leon feels worse.

There must be a reason why he was chosen for this mission, yet even as he walks towards the border beside another knight just below his rank, he can't figure out what his father's intentions were.

The only light comes from the moon, but it's a clear night, so it's more than enough illumination to see their way across the rather rugged terrain and the slightest of moving shapes about half a mile from the border.

He brought six other knights with him, and they all form a straight line, three to his left, and three to his right. The younger knight glances at him. "Sir Adalheid, why isn't the military handling this? It's a foreign threat, right?"

Leon nods, eyes trained on the moving shadows. One, three, five, eight. Manageable. But he blinks and narrows his vision. A few of the inexperienced knights won't be able to handle two rouges. He replies to the younger's question. "Lieutenant General Petra must have those in Geneva and the neighboring cantons occupied with something different. We can handle this threat. Besides, it doesn't look like—" He's interrupted as the rouges inch closer to the group.

He recounts shadows. There's no longer eight. Not even ten. Dozens. Maybe more. Leon senses the other knights shifting their weight as the faintest glints of weapons can be seen across from them.

"Shit..." Leon curses under his breath as he draws his sword, prompting the other knights to reach for their weapons. But if they stay – if they fight – together, they'll die together, and Leon doesn't want to be responsible for any deaths, especially for a mission he was put in command of. Even if he wouldn't come back from the mission itself alive. In his father's eyes, it would be a cowardly death, not honorable, like those of past knights. Even in death, he wouldn't be able to get his father's approval. Finally, Leon plants his feet into the ground and enters a fighting stance. Someone needs to stay behind. "Retreat." He swallows. "Call for backup. I'll hold them."

A female knight to his left clears her throat. She doesn't move. No one does. "Sir—"

The rogues surge forward, their war cries echoing across the valley. Leon shouts his last order to be heard above them. "Go!"

The shadows on either side of him disappear, and he resists the urge to look back. He can't afford to lose sight of the rogues. Steadying himself with a quick breath, he meets the first rogue's weapon with his sword. He lets his armor take the brunts of damage from the other weapons from some of the other rogues, yet he's soon surrounded and caught off balance as pain blooms in his right side, and he collapses to the ground, using his sword now as a barrier between the upper half of his body while trying to kick rogues and push weapons away as he's quickly overwhelmed. But he won't surrender. Not when he just needs one opening, and he'll find himself back on his feet.

Even as his sword is pried from his hands and tossed to the side.

He needs to do this.

Even as he feels daggers slice into his hands that raise to block the otherwise fatal blows.

He needs one more chance.

Even as his legs go numb from kicking and the constant pain inflicted upon them.

He needs to make his father proud.

Even as his vision begins to fade and his movements become sluggish.

He needs to...

Even as his world becomes dark and silent.

The next time he comes to his senses, he lays in his own bed, and his mind registers everything that slowly comes back to him is all a dream. He'd never let his pride get the best of him. Never.

But as he fully comes to his senses, his body feels lighter. An odd sense of lightness, as if one side of his body is weighed down by bricks, and the other is floating up in the clouds. He moves his hands to try and grasp something to help him sit up, but only his left hand is able to grasp something – his right hand must be numb.

Finally able to sit up, Leon freezes. He can only see his heavily bandaged right leg – his left leg is gone. Not even just the part below the knee. His entire leg is gone. And the sight to his right either makes him furious or desperate, as the same thing has occurred to his right arm. Not the hand, nor everything below the elbow – the entirety of his right arm is gone, while his left is in a similar condition to his remaining leg.

“So, they were more skillful than you thought, hm? Or maybe your training was lacking? Perhaps your command needed some work. Either way, I’m disappointed.”

His voice is as cold as his eyes once Leon turns to look at his father, sitting in a chair in the far-left corner of his dorm.

“The other knights, who found you and carried you back here, said that you told them to call out if they needed help. Yet by their accounts, you didn’t utter a single word. You were unconscious, and the limbs you don’t see now were just barely hanging to your body upon returning here. The medics had no choice but to sever them completely. Honestly, it’s a miracle that you were even able to wake up. You should be dead.”

No. No, that couldn’t be the case. Just make some prosthetics, and I’ll be more careful on missions. Just let me stay with the knights. Let me prove myself to you once more. Please. Don’t let me go. Please.

“Prosthetics,” is all Leon can say, coming out as a hoarse whine that makes him sound even more desperate than he thinks himself to be.

His father scoffs and stands up, grabbing two crutches from where they lean beside the dresser across from Leon. “You’re beyond prosthetics. They only replace parts of missing limbs, not entire ones. Besides, you won’t have any use for them. Starting now, you’re discharged from the knights. Return home, and maybe you’ll find more use than your brother.”

Knowing screaming out for mercy would fall on deaf ears, Leon just watches as his father leaves his dorm in complete silence, throwing the pair of crutches at the foot of his bed.

All he wanted to do was to make his father proud and prove himself. Instead, he nearly got himself killed and now lays in the grass of their house’s front yard, too shaken to make it up the porch steps to the front door. And now that he’s fallen, getting up is a near impossible task that will either take the assistance of another or time that Leon doesn’t want to waste on his worthless self.

His father is right – he’s just like his brother. But at least Liam has something else to do. At least he’s making someone proud instead of his father. Leon lost that chance. Took a gamble, was overconfident in his abilities, and almost paid the ultimate price. Or maybe he did pay it, as laying here is just as worse, if not more, than death itself. At least if he were dead, his father might have felt pity and paid his respects to his once useful son. Leon wouldn’t have to hear his disappointment.

“Leon!” A vaguely familiar voice registers in his head before he sees a blue uniform, and the figure of his brother running to his side before staring, wide-eyed, at his body. “My god, Leon. What the hell happened to you?”

Through tears, Leon recounts everything that he can remember, from the moment his father called him into his office, to collapsing on the front lawn, defeated and humiliated. But after the recall, Liam doesn’t laugh, nor agree with their father. Instead, he curses at their father under his breath and snatches Leon’s crutches, before helping him up.

“Come on. I’m taking you to Bern with me. There’s someone who can help you.”

Leon didn’t find any reason to protest. The military? Maybe he’d find some use there, but for what, he can’t even begin to wonder. Even as Liam walks right beside him as they approach a large white building that Liam says is the formal office of the new Lieutenant General of Switzerland, Felix Adelic, originally born in Germany, and was Petra’s pick to take over her position after her surprise resignation.

Liam carefully helps him up the steps, and the doors are automatically opened by a passing officer, who takes one look at Leon and shoots him the same pitiful look he’s gotten ever since he entered Bern’s garage and began the extremely slow walk here.

Glancing at the awards in display cases, the pictures hanging upon the walls, and even the red runner that the pair walk upon, Liam talks about how Felix prefers a smaller, wooden structure as his office compared to the larger, more formal one that he's in right now. Something to do with the difference in atmosphere and preferring comfort to formality.

Watching as Liam takes the liberty of knocking upon the door, a rather soft voice answers moments later. "Come in."

Pushing the leftmost door open, Liam holds it ajar, gesturing for Leon to enter. Though hesitant, the twin steels himself to be given yet another pitiful look by a man with graying hair, given a lecture about "youth these days" followed by the usual "when I was your age" nonsense, then told he can just sit in a chair and learn to do paperwork with his remaining hand, while his twin answers to whatever he desires.

What meets his eyes when his crutches finally hit the dark hardwood floor baffles him. Sitting at the desk across from him at the far end of the room is a young man with black hair, wearing a navy uniform with the various decorations and insignias that speak to his high position. And standing to his left is a younger boy – Leon would guess probably fifteen – wearing a vermillion uniform that is decorated similarly to his twin's, meaning they must be the same rank. Leon only takes note of his red eyes because they appear to be giving off some sort of light that makes them brighter than normal human eyes, yet the color puts him on edge all the same.

Instead of the pitiful look he expects to get, the man sitting behind the desk rises, rounds it, and ends up in front of Leon, offering his right hand to shake instead of his left, so Leon can properly greet him. "Leon Adalheid, twin brother of Liam Adalheid. Your brother speaks very highly of you, yet poorly of your father. I can only assume he is to blame for your current

circumstances. But don't worry—" he gestures to the younger boy, who has since moved to lean against the front of the desk, eyes sweeping over Leon's figure and lingering on his missing limbs, "I've asked one of my officers here if he'd be willing to provide you with a new arm and leg."

Leon glances at Liam, who only has a wide smile on his face. Looking back at the young man, he continues speaking. "Oh, I forgot to formally introduce myself, though I assume Liam must have told you who I am. My name is Felix Adelic, and I serve as Switzerland's current Lieutenant General after Miss Agatha Petra's resignation. But, as I tell all my officers, and you are no exception, please just call me Felix."

Three pairs of eyes fall on the boy in the vermillion form, yet he only meets those of Felix, who encourages him with a nod and smile. Looking at Leon once more, his voice is rather high-pitched. "My name is Reko Erkki, and I serve as the Major General of the Canton of Bern when Komentaja is gone."

"Komentaja is the Finnish word for commander. It's what Reko usually calls me," Felix interjects.

Leon summons enough courage to finally ask a question, though he's not quite sure which person it would be directed at. "You mentioned new limbs?"

Reko catches his attention first by nodding. "They'll take a few days but should feel just like your old limbs. They won't look like them, but that's the downside of metal prosthetics. Function over fashion." He remarks, and Leon can't help but let a small smile appear on his face at the idea of getting a functional arm and leg.

"Once you receive your new limbs, since Liam has told me that you already have years of combat training, albeit with a sword which doesn't pose a problem at all – some of my officers

prefer fighting with blades, like Reko – you’ll be put in charge of the canton of Basel-Stadt. It’s right next to Liam’s canton, Basel-Landschaft, and borders Germany. That is, of course, if you’re willing to take on the role,” Felix proposes, and Leon is speechless.

All of this is coming at him so fast. One moment, he’s berated and cast aside by his own father, and the next, he is promised new limbs and offered a position of command. But the incident that caused all of this in the first place flashes back into his mind, and he glances at Liam.

“Are you okay with this?”

Liam turns his head to meet his gaze and offers a nod. “Of course. I know how much it meant for you to be in a position where you felt as though you could prove yourself to our father. But now you have no one to prove yourself to except yourself and Felix. And, if I’m being honest–” he flashes a quick smile at Felix, who offers a similar expression, “you’ve already proven yourself to him, just by standing here.”

But the pang of guilt he felt towards his father, and the fury that followed still overwhelmed his thoughts, even when he was presented the limbs, presented a blue uniform, presented with his new title, and presented with an entire canton that was his to command, previously under his brother’s care.

And now as he returns to the ambush he was sent to survey, eyes still locked on the soldier who lost the same limbs he has, he wonders if they found themselves in a similar situation. Did they cry out for help? Could they? Were they left to writhe in pain on the ground, or did the explosion end their suffering in the blink of an eye? Did they feel as though they had to prove themselves to anyone? Did their father love them? If they were still alive, would they be

offered prosthetics? Prosthetics that only serve as a reminder to Leon that he is still the worthless twin, the desire to please their father serving as his downfall.

So, he can't stop himself as he moves the large rock up just a bit, able to force his arm into the small crevice between it and the ground before grabbing another rock and slamming it against his shoulder, where the prosthetic connects to the rest of his body. Though it hurts at first, as a few of the nerves present in his shoulder respond to the pain, it isn't as bad as what he felt the day he lost his limbs, his pride, his dreams, and his worth of being someone more. He wanted to be a knight his father could be proud of – hell, who his brother could be proud of – and instead he screwed up his only chance and lost everything he had except for his life.

A scream meets his ears, and he's pulled back from his position, but the entire hand of the prosthetic, caught under the rock, comes disconnected from the rest of the arm, and Leon hits the legs of who he can only assume is his brother, who kneels beside him and holds his right arm in one hand while extracting the hand from underneath the rock with the other.

Both are mangled, most likely beyond a quick repair. Either they'll have to be disconnected from Leon and brought to Reko to be fixed or just thrown aside and replaced with new ones. The latter would take longer, but the mechanical soldier has mentioned that if Leon happened to accidentally break his prosthetics, he'd rather make newer ones with better materials and functionality than fix the older ones.

"Leon, what the hell? Maybe it was a good thing you didn't answer my five calls, because I wouldn't have gone out to find you. What drove you to smash your own arm into oblivion?"

He doesn't need to answer. The tears beginning to trail down his cheeks, and the sobs escaping his throat say it all. And before he can even form a single word – an apology that he

isn't sure would be seen as genuine or otherwise – Liam's arms are around him, and he buries his face into his shoulder, letting his brother's voice and comforting caresses on his back soothe him.

One day, he's going to return to the knights and make his father proud. But that day won't be today, or tomorrow, a week from now, or maybe even a year. Whenever he returns, he'll show his father that he's the best damn knight he's ever seen. He needs to, else he would rather die.

Chapter 13: Swift Judgement

Lars doesn't make it very far from the laboratory before a mechanical child, with brown hair and hazel eyes, points to his rapier. "What's that?"

Despite himself, he glances around for any sign of Reko, who he swears was right behind him, yet fails to find him. So, he slowly unsheathes his weapon and holds it, hilt up and blade down, close to his body.

The child stares at it with wide eyes, then looks up at Lars. "Can I touch it?"

Shaking his head, the prince replies, "You'll cut yourself – the blade is sharp." He bites his tongue before he insults the child for their curiosity.

If they were a soldier, Lars would question their intelligence, as he assumes they would know what a weapon is – regardless of its form – and have the knowledge that it is dangerous no matter what it looks like or who is wielding it. But he almost admires the child for the interest in his weapon, more so with the notion that they probably don't know how to fight or fend for themselves in general.

He can't help but think about the situation he found himself in eleven years ago, helpless and defenseless as he watched his parents – not just one, but his mother *and* father – die right in front of him. But he was left alive, swept up by an escort – either through sheer luck or strategic planning – and was whisked away from not just the palace, but his kingdom too, and soon found himself alone. Unlike the child standing in front of him, before the escort found him, he grabbed the outfit he currently wears and the rapier he holds from his study, both presents from his parents for his birthday just days earlier.

He is the legacy of his kingdom – the person destined to lead it into a new era. Yet he has remained far from his kingdom, chose to keep running, and won't return until he's satisfied his

own desires. As a prince – or the soon-to-be king he'll return to his kingdom as – his citizens should *always* come first. But he's allowing himself to be selfish, to focus on and pursue what he wants, before letting all that go to fulfill the role he was born into. He never chose to be a prince, the crown prince, the heir, the next monarch, but it is what he's been raised to know and accomplish. So, though he may run from his future responsibilities – or even his current ones – he will find himself returning once ready, and finally lead his kingdom into an era of peace and prosperity, free of the chaos he witnessed his kingdom plunged into as he looked back at what he was forced to leave.

“What does the pin on your outfit mean?” The child's voice brings Lars back to the present moment.

He doesn't even need to look down and find the pin – it's the only one that he grabbed among the countless scattered across his desk and attached it to his uniform himself. The insignia of the royal family, a constant reminder of who he is, and if anyone else cares to recognize it, who he is to them. He may be a useless monarch, a runaway prince, or a revenge-driven warrior in their eyes, and though they are all true, he doesn't care what others think. He never did and never will.

“It reminds me of my family and my home.” Lars' voice involuntarily grows softer, the emotions surrounding the two aspects affecting him as if the events that led him here occurred yesterday.

“You have a family? What's that like?” Though their question is genuine, the prince can't help but narrow his eyes, grind his teeth, and sheath his blade.

“*Had*. They died.” His voice, now stronger and clearer, is fueled by the fury that has served as his sole purpose for moving forward ever since their deaths.

He avoids their second question entirely, unsure of the answer himself. He's spent more years without a family than with and has never experienced a desire to find those feelings of love, safety, and warmth since then. Vengeance, danger, and loneliness have replaced them, and he's left to their whims. Whims that could end in his death, but not before he can kill the person – whoever it was – that took away all those past emotions and experiences, and those he would have had, if they were still alive.

“Oh. If it makes you feel better, I don't have a family either. At least what I've been told about what a family should be. I guess Kirsi would be the closest to a family that I have,” the child explains, and Lars nods, despite still being unable to relate to their own experience.

He's nearly relieved to hear another voice, and the blond hair and red eyes place it with its owner – the teenager Lars nearly killed minutes ago. “That's good to know. Hopefully, in a few more years, it can return to the Finland that I knew when I was created. Like I promised Kirsi, I'll come back and visit sometime.” The soldier enters Lars' view, and he uses it as an excuse to drop the conversation he was having, stepping around the child, and ending up at Reko's side.

As they walk away from the laboratory, what greets them is blackened land, burned debris of what he can only assume to be buildings and vegetation dotting the otherwise flat ground. Glancing over at Reko, Lars notices that he's completely silent, his eyes roaming over what he once called — or may still call — his home.

If he returned to Denmark and found it in a similar state, he'd probably act the same way Reko is. But he would be expected to take his place on the throne and assist the citizens in pulling the kingdom out from the depths of the hell it was thrown into. Reko does not have any responsibilities that demand he stay in Finland — he can come and go as he likes.

Although this would be the opportune time to try and get the upper hand in a scuffle and kill the soldier, Lars shakes his head, his left hand moving to grip his rapier's handle until his knuckles turn white.

Someone who looked eerily like Reko killed his parents. But if it wasn't him, then who was it? It couldn't have been another soldier, as Kirsi said. Would it have been possible that a person from another country dressed to look like a soldier, snuck into the palace, and murdered the royal family?

"You wouldn't be alive if a mechanical soldier killed your parents," Reko finally speaks, his voice monotone, a sharp contrast to the cheerfulness it held earlier.

"Why do you say that?" Lars releases his rapier, letting his hand hang at his side.

"They act on orders but are naturally violent. Unless someone explicitly stated to leave you alive, they'd slaughter *everyone* in the palace."

"Are you 'naturally violent'?" He questions, recalling Reko's talent fighting him, especially with shorter, smaller weapons.

There is a long period of silence before he answers, "I used to be. I tried to injure anyone who insulted me when *Komentaja* first brought me to Bern. Lectures went right over my head, and punishments were ineffective — mechanical soldiers lose a lot of the humanity that makes those methods so effective. A combination of time and *Komentaja* interacting with me finally made me realize that my life was no longer in danger, and I didn't have to fight to stay alive. It was then that I began to learn about the emotions and feelings that I should have already experienced, being half-child. But, sometimes, I find myself itching for a fight." He turns his head to look at Lars. "And you put up a good one. So, thank you, I guess."

The smallest of smiles crosses the prince's lips before another sound catches his attention. It's the whirling of helicopter blades and based upon the slowly growing black dot in the sky, it's headed for them.

"Is that our way back to..." Lars' voice trails off, unsure if Reko would want him back at Bern.

"Switzerland? The only safe way to return, yeah. You're back to the beginning with the mystery of your parents' deaths – you could ask some of the other officers if they would know anything to assist you. Unless you want to go back to Denmark." Reko gestures to his right, and Lars peers over in that direction, unable to see anything other than the horizon meeting the black soil.

"I'll go back with you." Lars nods to himself, seeing Reko's suggestion as the only thing he can do if he wants to achieve his revenge and return as soon as possible. Hopefully his kingdom is in a better state now than Finland is, granted it didn't suffer a full-on invasion. Reko responds with a nod, and they wait, side-by-side, for the helicopter to descend and the pilot to give them the go-ahead to hop in.

The flight back to Bern is completely silent, and though Lars would usually spend it thinking about his next course of action or about his past, he's already thought of the latter too much today, and doesn't want to bother with the former.

So, he entertains himself by looking out the window, down at the small stretch of sea that separates Finland from Europe's mainland, before seeing the territories that Switzerland peacefully overtook.

Finally, the helicopter lands, and Reko offers a word of thanks to the pilot before jumping out, Lars following shortly after. But as he looks around, he can't recognize any of the structures that make up Bern's military base.

"Huh. I swear I asked Berlyn *extra* nicely if we could go straight to Bern. I knew he hated me," Reko mutters, and Lars turns to face him.

"Someone else other than me hates you?"

"Yeah, but they never tried to just kill me out of the blue," Reko retorts, crossing his arms over his chest. "Berlyn, or Major General Ethelheard of the Canton of Zürich is one of, if not the most, formal of all the officers serving under *Komentaja*. His archnemesis is Thilo, or Major General Haegel of the Canton of Vaud. I heard that they fought in the mess hall the other day, and Thilo almost gouged Berlyn's eye out with a fork," Reko explains, and Lars stays still and silent, unsure of how to react.

A voice reaches them before either has a chance to break the awkward silence. "Reko, thank goodness you're here." A man, wearing a blue uniform, with short brown hair, slows to a fast walk from a sprint as he nears the pair.

"Liam? Does it concern Leon?" Reko's question is answered by a nod as the older officer catches his breath.

He gestures over to a dorm near his office. "He's in there. I found him in bad shape in Basel-Stadt. I think he..." Liam's voice trails off as Reko dashes towards the dorm, and Lars has no choice but to follow him, not wishing to acquaint himself with officers of an entirely different nation from his own unless necessary. That duty falls on the shoulders of a king, not a prince.

Upon reaching the dorm Leon occupies, Reko swings the door open, despite it being closed. He doesn't even spare a moment to knock or call out. While the mechanical soldier walks straight into the room, Lars silently peers in on the surroundings and situation from the outside.

The person in question lays in a bed, eyes focused on the teenager. Everything is clean and in place – two nightstands are on either side of the bed, and a dresser is sitting against the far-right wall. It is void of pictures or other mementos and trinkets that would indicate another occupier of the space. Yet in the beginnings of the sunlight that creeps over any obstacles in its way, Lars' attention is drawn to a long, silver item that rests on the nightstand nearest to him. The longer he looks at it, the realization that it is a prosthetic arm – broken into two at the wrist – dawns on him. And with Reko's words and tone, he doesn't appreciate the sight either.

“You're always so thankful whenever I provide you with a prosthetic, but you end up breaking it as if you're careless. If you damaged your leg too, I'd go as far as to call you as reckless as Thilo.” Reko picks up the two prosthetics and inspects them, before stuffing them under his arm. “Luckily, these models were from 18 months ago, so I'll rest easy knowing you have newer ones created with the latest technology and materials available to me.”

Leon gives no other response other than a nod and a single muttered word. “Sorry.”

Reko snorts before spinning on his heel and taking his leave. “*Anteeksipyyntö hyväksytty.*”

Stepping to the side to allow him out, Lars sees Liam replace Reko's position within the dorm, but not before offering a nod of gratitude to the mechanical soldier.

“You create prosthetics? Wouldn't it be easier to just discharge him?” At Lars' mention of “discharge”, Reko whips to face him as if he just said the vilest thing.

“After what he's been through, especially under his—”

“—father and the knights,” Leon’s voice finishes Reko’s sentence.

The soldier shoves the prosthetics into Lars’ arms before dashing back over to Leon’s dorm, but he stays against the rightmost exterior wall, opposite of where the dresser was placed. Lars hesitates before following, even though he’s still unsure of the meaning of Reko’s words before he was cut off.

“You can’t be serious. After everything he’s done to you? After everything *I’ve* done for you?” Liam questions, and Lars finds his interest piqued.

“It’s always about you. *You* found me lying on the grass. *You* took me to see Adelric. Hell, I even bet *you* convinced Reko to make me new limbs.” Leon’s accusations cause Reko to bare his teeth.

“*Ei totta*,” the mechanical being mutters.

“I did all those things because of you. Because you’re my brother. I didn’t want to see you suffer, because I knew I would forever regret it if I didn’t help you to the best of my ability. And if it counts for anything, Reko offered to create your prosthetics on his own accord. I don’t even think Felix convinced him.” Liam’s voice becomes soft, and although Lars has trouble hearing him, he assumes Reko doesn’t.

The soldier nods. “It’s the only large project that I proposed to *Komentaja*.”

“If you can’t bear to see me suffer, then why won’t you at least try to understand why I want to return to the knights?” Leon counters.

Lars notices Reko inching around the building’s outer corner. He grabs the officer’s wrist and tugs him backward, to which the latter swivels around.

“Don’t. If you want to eavesdrop, making yourself known defeats the purpose.” The prince advises, and Reko sighs, crossing his arms over his chest, but doesn’t move again.

“Fine. I’ll listen, but only this once.” Liam’s voice conveys his hostility towards the subject.

Leon takes an audible breath before beginning. “Ever since I was deemed worthy to become a knight, I wanted to make my father proud. Even during the mission where I became a disappointment, I still thought I could make him proud. When I lost my limbs, I gave up that dream. But now that I have new limbs – prosthetics – I can return. I’ve learned so much; I won’t make the same mistakes I made in the past. I’ll finally be able to make him proud.”

There is a period of silence after Leon’s reasoning. Lars moves to step away from the dorm, but Liam’s voice, loud and filled with fury, stuns him into place.

“All about me, huh? Your reasoning is just as, if not more, selfish than mine! Your – our – father sees us as nothing but tools for war. Because I couldn’t meet his standards to join the knights, I was enlisted in the military. I had no say in my future. You were the same, yet you met his standards, so your future was tied to the knights. But that future was ripped away from you, so I gave you the next best thing. You could have said no, but you accepted the responsibility of commanding an entire canton. Did it ever cross your mind that maybe our father is proud of you – of both of us – having taken up positions of authority? We may not be on the exact same level as he is, but we’re close. You’re close enough. Aren’t we proud of ourselves? Aren’t you proud of yourself?” Liam’s voice ends on a gentle note, either due to the fragility of his posed questions, or of his initial raised tone.

More silence follows before something is said that neither Lars nor Reko – based on the frown that appears on his face as he pushes his ear against the wooden structure – can catch, before the door is closed and Liam’s footsteps fade away from the group.

The soldier holds out both of his arms, inviting Lars to pass the prosthetics back to him, which he accepts. Though his mind is filled with questions, he doesn't want to bother Reko with them – at least not yet – assuming he knows all the answers.

Reko points in one direction, where Lars can see a large gray building in the distance. “We’ll just go back to Bern by taking a car.”

Raising an eyebrow, Lars follows Reko as he walks towards what the former assumes is a garage in some capacity. “You can drive?”

He shrugs. “Can’t be that hard.”

Dying in a car crash with a mechanical soldier at the wheel was never a fear of the prince’s until now.

Chapter 14: Risky Decisions

When I finally remember most of what I can, I open my eyes, greeted by the ceiling of my dorm. I saw Reko fighting Lars in Finland. I didn't know the outcome, and thought he died due to my own decisions, or lack thereof. It pushed me to hear the voices I did two years ago, and the only way I figured they would disappear was to rightfully punish myself for what happened.

I didn't feel any pain, just numbness. I heard a few voices, and was soon able to distinguish between Lumi, who found me, and then Berlyn, who helped treat my wounds.

Yet I can see a slight shadow out of the corner of my left eye and turn my head just enough to see the one person I wouldn't like to see at all. One of the two must have told him what happened – I'm betting it was Berlyn, even though I suspect the two are still on sour terms.

He catches my gaze and says something before I even have a chance to open my mouth. "I'm not angry. Or disappointed. Just...concerned."

I know he's referring to when he found me in a similar state in Berlin one night. But the circumstances are completely different now. At least he knows I'm a seer, so I don't have to step around those details if he wants an explanation.

"Where's Reko?" I try to sit up, but a sharp pain shoots up my spine, and I find it best to lay back down, letting out a defeated sigh.

"He's fine. He returned just a few hours ago, another young man who told me his name is Lars beside him. Last I heard they were in the dining hall. But enough about them, tell me what I want to know. Why did Lumi contact me so late at night?" Thilo's voice switches from soft to serious, and I continue to look up at the ceiling.

“I thought Reko died. If he did, it would be on me. I sent Lars to Kirsi when I shouldn’t have. I told Reko about what I did, then failed to stop him from going to Finland. None of this would have happened if I had just acted sooner. It’s just like Forchheim, only this time, I gave into the voices and dealt myself an appropriate punishment.” My voice is unwilling to give away any other emotions other than guilt and shame.

“You shouldn’t feel the need to punish yourself for your own shortcomings. I might not know how much stress being a seer causes you, so it might not be my place to say anything, but I just don’t want you to hurt yourself anymore. If you need to release the stress, find another way.”

Though I can understand what Thilo is trying to say, I can’t make my voice nor the words that come out of my mouth convey it.

“It’s not stress, Thilo. It’s failure. I cannot fail. Because if I do, it’s a repeat of my past. My scars, my burns, my nightmares, my torture – all of them. It’s all going to come back if I don’t succeed.”

There is silence after my frenzied statement, which Thilo breaks with a whisper. “Then maybe, it would be best, if you took a break.”

Ignoring the pain in my back, I sit up and look right at him. “What are you suggesting?”

He meets my gaze, his voice calm and gentle. “Let someone else fulfill your responsibilities while you work on taking care of yourself.”

It takes several seconds for Thilo’s words to register in my head. When they do, I’m nothing short of furious. “Are you telling me to step down because I’m not mentally stable enough to hold my position? That’s awfully ironic, coming from the same man who risked not only his reputation, but his career and very life to put me where I am now! What do you suppose I do with my newfound free time? Go to the Christmas market? Distract myself from the deaths

that I'll still see, because it does matter where I am, or what I'm doing; I'll always see them, and no one – not me, not you, not anyone – can ever change that." I regain my breath spent on my outburst, yet before Thilo can counter, I narrow my eyes in his direction. "Get out."

His expression changes for just a moment to reflect the hurt my command has inflicted upon him. "Felix."

"*Verschwinde von hier! Ich will dich nicht wiedersehen.*" I can't help but raise my voice as if it will get my point across more than speaking in my normal tone would.

But instead of listening to me, Thilo stands up and walks until he's right at my bedside. I continue to stare at him, blue eyes meeting hazel.

Before I can say anything more, his hands find my neck, and the force of his grip causes me to end up lying back on the bed, his body following.

Though I am initially sent into a panic, I automatically tell myself this is just a vision. Any moment now, it will end, and Thilo will still be sitting in the chair. But I'd still have to find a way to defend myself, nonetheless.

Speaking of, I feel my right hip resting on something cold and hard and am able to grab it with my right hand. Instantly, I can tell it's my switchblade, and I silently thank Berlyn for leaving it with me.

Unsheathing it, I slash at Thilo's left arm, ripping through his gray uniform's sleeve, and drawing blood. Thankfully, he releases me, and I end up gasping for breath, still aiming my blade at him. With narrow eyes, he spits a few curses at me before turning and leaving my dorm, slamming the door shut behind him.

And the next time I blink, he still sits in the chair in the corner of the room, staring at me. He doesn't move to stand up, but I grab my switchblade from beside me and point it at him.

He furrows his brows and tilts his head at my actions. “Why—” It takes a moment for the reasoning to hit him, and he stands. “Felix, *was zur Hölle? Ich würde nie—*” He cuts himself off and purses his lips, balling his hands into fists.

Yet as he moves towards the door to finally leave my dorm, I stop him. “Bottom left drawer of the dresser. I was going to deliver it myself, but you may as well take it before you leave again.”

Thilo obeys my directions, and I see the bottle of his favorite drink in his right hand as he closes the drawer with his foot. He looks in my direction with an expression I can’t even begin to distinguish, before leaving me alone in my dorm, shutting the door quietly behind him.

Not soon after he leaves, I hear a knock. Mentally exhausted, I skip over asking who it is and just let them inside. “Come in.”

I’m not at all surprised to see Berlyn enter, and he offers a simple question as he closes the door. “Are you feeling well, sir?”

Offering what I can of a smile, I set my switchblade on the nightstand closest to me. “Better. Thank you.”

The older officer nods before his eyes travel to the blade. “Ah. No wonder Major General Haegel looked as if he would have delighted in killing me. I figured I’d keep it with you just in case. But I still can’t...”

“He suggested I step down.” I fill in the silence that would have followed Berlyn’s voice trailing off.

His eyes widen, and he is unable to produce any sort of reply. I know he would never openly agree with Thilo, but I’m curious if he thinks similarly.

“Like me, he knows you’re a seer. Surely, he concluded that your state was caused by your ability, and not something else. Though any other day, I’d come to your defense, I fear if I do, it’ll cost me my eye or my life. Of course, I’m willing to lose both for you, sir,” Berlyn explains, and I simply sigh and shake my head.

“Don’t bother. Maybe he’s—” I am cut off from speaking at the sound of a louder, more frantic knock that makes Berlyn step away from the door.

I don’t even have time to answer before it bursts open, and a blur of red and blond barrels into me, sending my body backwards against the bed. But instead of hands around my neck, arms are around my torso, and I try my best to return the gesture.

“Reko...you’re okay.” My voice is hoarse, and the young officer breaks the hug, rolls off my body, and sits up on my bed.

He stares at me with a worried expression. “Are you sick? What happened to your wrist?”

His mention of my bloodied limb brings me to look at the pristine white bandages covering it. Though judging by the heaviness, there are two layers, probably to hide any silver blood that could appear on the first layer.

I glance over at Berlyn, who gives me a subtle nod. Catching Lars beside him, I offer him a smile. But my attention is brought back to Reko as he tugs on the sleeve of the sweatshirt I’m wearing.

Remembering his question, I shake my head. “I’m not sick. I just tripped, that’s all.” I pray he believes my blatant lies for the sake of not diving into subjects I don’t want to reveal.

Though he looks at me for several seconds with slightly narrow eyes, he frowns and crosses his arms over his chest. “Did someone trip you?”

Again, I shake my head. “You don’t need to hurt anyone.”

With a pout, the teenager rises from my bed and walks over to stand near the door, casting his eyes towards Lars.

“Thank you, Lars, for sparing Reko’s life.” I figure I should express my gratitude to the very person who caused me to end up where I rest now yet didn’t let me continue any further.

If Reko – if any of my officers – were to be fatally injured and I couldn’t prevent it, I would never be able to forgive myself. Even if Thilo said I shouldn’t blame myself, he never had a father that constantly reminded him that the lives of thousands – millions – of soldiers rested upon their son’s shoulders.

I tried. I really tried the best I could while being treated like something other than human. Not a martyr, or a god, or even a seer, but an animal. Chained into one place and forced to perform. And when the performance faltered – when I failed to save one life or many – punishment was inevitable.

Was the pain supposed to improve my ability? I never thought it helped anything, only serving to instill fear about my circumstances. About saving lives. About punishments. But never about death. Hell, there were so many times I wished for that eternal release from my pain. I was wounded beyond saving and wanted to be put out of my misery.

I never considered my mother's state before she appeared in the white room. Was she in pain, was she suffering, witnessing my deteriorating state with each year, each month, each week, each day, each life that passed? Did she accept her eternal rest, her eternal release, as soon as it was presented – offered – to her? Or did she resist, did she fight and argue before finding anything and everything she did and said would be futile? Did she know, in the end, she was nothing but a tool for my father to use – another punishment to simply be inflicted upon me?

If I was not born as a seer, if I did not have silver blood, if I did not have a cruel father, then none of what I was cursed to endure would have occurred. But how would that change the future that I experienced? Would I still end up here, commanding officers of my own – ensuring the safety of an entire nation? Even that position came at a cost though, yet Thilo nearly sacrificed himself to save me from another punishment.

Perhaps I punished myself for my shortcomings because that's all I've known. And nothing I can do will change that.

Blinking, I realize that Berlyn has taken Thilo's place in the chair situated in the corner of my dorm, while Lars and Reko are nowhere in sight. I look at the older officer for an answer to my unposed question.

"Major General Erkki and Prince Theodor wished to return to the mess hall, sir. Apparently Major General Haegel cut their meal short with the news that you were awake," the man informs me.

I absently nod, finding myself staring at Berlyn for several seconds, and I know he's looking right back at me, though not directly into my eyes.

"Does Dimitry know?" I break the silence.

The man's expression changes for the quickest moment as he considers the meaning behind my vague question. Yet he shakes his head. "I've never brought it up to him. It's not of importance."

"But Poland is your home. It's where you were born." I know I sound like a hypocrite, telling Berlyn that his home – a nation that was never rebuilt after a war that brought its complete destruction – is important when I never want to think about my own.

“You’re correct in both those aspects, sir. But the nation is gone. What will come of me if I’m associated with a country that lost everything?” His voice grows soft, and I’m concerned that he will begin to cry, but he turns his head away from mine. “Major General Koskinen already saw me tear up. I do not wish to have you witness the same thing.”

I softly smile at his words. “Losing your home is an event that would warrant sorrow from anyone, even the most stoic of people. And that includes you. Your tears and my scars are one of the same, so don’t be afraid to cry, Berlyn. Like you said, I’ll always enjoy your company, and am here to support you, regardless of the reason.” I hope my words offer even the smallest of comforts to the man, and by the way he returns to look in my direction, it helps.

“Thank you, sir.” Berlyn remains quiet for a moment before finding the courage to speak again. “Do you really believe I should tell Major General Voronin about my origins?”

I can’t hide a smile. “He most likely already knows. I’m willing to say he may even know a little bit of Polish, just because of you.” Raising an eyebrow, I add, “Are you scared of him?”

Berlyn is quick to shake his head. “No, of course not. If I’m honest, I admire his intelligence, sir. He knows so many languages, not just so he can understand messages from other countries, but to hold a casual conversation with all of us, even if we all know and understand English,” he expresses, and I find myself nodding.

Though I can never hope to mirror Dimitry’s determination, I do know four languages, one more than the three everyone knows – that of their nation (if it’s not Germany or Switzerland), German, and English. But I often use Finnish rather than Russian as the third language I can speak, despite knowing both, the latter regrettably better than the former.

Chuckling, I force myself into the present moment. “That is the reason behind appointing him into the position he’s in now. If he hasn’t already traveled to Nidwalden, it wouldn’t hurt to

visit and have a chat, putting languages and your origins to the side.” I swallow and take a breath before I address something that Berlyn simply mentioned in passing earlier but gravely concerns me. “You said Lumi assisted in bandaging my wounds?”

I watch as he nods, before his mouth parts ever so slightly, and he raises both hands in front of him as if to calm me down from the slight pang of anger I can feel welling within me. “Forgive me, sir, but she did ask why your blood was silver. She is a very quiet woman, and she came to me rather than the Cattaneos, so I figured I could tell her, at the very least, of your ability. I may have vaguely mentioned your father and Major General Haegel’s involvement in your promotion, but I didn’t tell her anything more.” Before I can answer, Berlyn stands up, and bows his head. “If you wish to discharge me for revealing information I should have kept to myself, then I will promptly depart. If execution is what you wish, then—” Berlyn begins to pull his sword from its sheath at his hip.

He only draws it halfway before I jump up. “No, please, it’s okay. Thank you, for your honesty, and telling Lumi what you figured was significant to her understanding of my situation.” I sit back down on my bed as Berlyn raises his head after sheathing his blade.

“I apologize, sir. I shall refrain from telling anyone anything more about your past or your ability. I did direct her to you if she had any further questions. I am unsure if she will follow up.” Berlyn confesses, and I sigh, nodding.

“Thank you. And you’re forgiven. You’ve done nothing wrong, so I don’t find any use in keeping anything against you. Unlike a certain officer.” As if on cue, my communication device buzzes from its place on the nightstand, as does Berlyn’s, which is on his belt.

We exchange glances before I grab mine and glance at the name.

“Dimitry, what’s the news? Something good, I hope.” I watch as Berlyn tilts his head from side to side and stretches.

“I can’t say it’s necessarily ‘good’, but one of the tracking devices for Bern’s vehicles is headed towards Germany. I believe Major General Haegel is at the wheel.” The man reveals, and I hold back the urge to throw down everything and follow him.

Heilewis mentioned, the next time she saw Thilo (or heard his opinion about me), she'd kill him. She may not always be a woman of her word or quick to act, but she and Thilo are quite an unpredictable pair.

“Did he state reasons to anyone? Or do you have any ideas yourself?” I bite my lip, hoping he was able to ensure Vaud’s security was heightened before leaving to watch over me while I recovered. If not, I’m certain I can steal back that bottle I gave him, give it over to Terenzio, tell him to make something with it, and avoid serving it to Thilo. That seems like a suitable punishment.

“The only reason I can assume is it may have concerned the outcome of your request for Germany’s assistance in the event of the war breaking out,” Dimitry informs me, before we bid one another our goodbyes as the line goes silent.

I meet Berlyn’s surprised expression. “Let’s just hope he doesn’t get himself killed.”

Chapter 15: Revisiting Demons

“Fucking Heilewis. Damn woman is making everything ten times harder than they must be. Didn’t know a grudge could last for two years. I thought I fixed that whole shit-show myself, but I guess not.” Thilo mutters to himself, fists stuffed into his pockets as he catches the gazes of many of the officers walking around Berlin’s base. If someone dares to come even within a foot of him, he’ll probably punch them right in the face. Pockets may slow down his reaction, but they won’t be able to completely shut it down.

He heard from Berlyn in passing that Heilewis refused to ally with Switzerland if Russia were to stay true to their threatening word. So, he’s taking it upon himself to ask her in-person. Even if his presence would infuriate both of them, the circumstances warrant another try.

Eventually, he reaches the two doors leading right into her office, his hand hovering over the rightmost door handle. Yet he instead balls that hand into a fist and knocks. It’s the nicest thing he can bring himself to do now. Because he knows, the moment she sees that he’s come to visit her, she’ll turn bitter and rude. As if what already occurred didn’t irritate the man enough.

“Come in.” At her invitation, Thilo opens the door and steps inside, taking care to quietly close it after he enters.

When he turns back around to meet her gaze, her eyes are narrowed and she’s frowning. “Oh. It’s you,” her voice conveys the displeasure she’s experiencing.

“Thanks for the warm welcome,” he retorts, clicking his tongue.

They stare one another down for several seconds, the silence stretching between them tense.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” Heilewis implies, and Thilo raises an eyebrow.

“I didn’t get into any fights on my way here. Though I’m gonna have hell to pay when I go back to Bern.” Thilo nearly flinches as he thinks about how furious Felix will be upon hearing his reasoning for traveling. He has yet to experience an infuriated Felix, though what happened earlier might have been the closest he’s ever been.

“Not fighting. Need I spell it out for you? A salute,” Heilewis states.

Thilo stops himself from breaking out into laughter. What a ridiculous request to make! He calms himself down by trying to gauge if she’s joking, but based on her unchanging expression, she’s serious. And shallow.

“You’re not my superior officer.” She narrows her eyes, to which he adds, “Anymore.”

“And you’re still testing my patience, Haegel. Salute me or leave – your choice.”

Sighing, the man pulls off a salute, keeping position until Heilewis offers a smile. “At ease. Now spit it out and leave.”

He opens his mouth, ready to insult her attitude, yet bites his tongue and remembers why he came here in the first place. He would hate to leave Berlin and return to Bern empty-handed. “I want to ask that you reconsider your earlier decision.”

A mischievous glint sparkles in her eyes. “Hm? What decision, Haegel?”

Regretting his vague request, his mind wanders back two years ago, when he stood in the same place, in front of the same woman, and requested the same thing. The words she left him with ring in his ears.

“If anything happens, it falls on you, Haegel.”

He’s carried those words – and the consequences that came with them – ever since. That is why he strives to protect Felix but also brighten his mood and make suggestions in his best interest. Ironically, what he’s done in that regard has only served to irritate or cause him distress.

Recollecting himself, Thilo clarifies his request. “I want you to reconsider your decision regarding not allying with Switzerland against Russia’s threat of war.”

Heilewis raises an eyebrow. “I wasn’t going to ally with them, due to a certain person’s past actions in a specific place, but I changed my mind. I sent a letter several hours ago to said person reversing my decision.”

“So, I came here for nothing.” Thilo narrows his eyes, resisting the urges to stick his hand back into his pockets or let a curse slip through his lips. Though he does relax his shoulders an inch in relief.

“It’s not entirely pathetic. Here.” Heilewis reveals a slip of paper from behind her desk and slides it in Thilo’s direction.

He walks up to the desk, picks up the paper, and squints at the writing. It’s an address somewhere in Munich.

Glancing up at Heilewis, he furrows his brows. “What’s this?”

She offers another smile. “You haven’t seen your family since you joined the military. They called me about two weeks ago, wondering how you were. I was eventually going to tell Felix about it, but now that you’re here, I figured I’d let you know myself.”

He cut all contact with his family upon joining the military, and only gave his father’s number to Heilewis after she mentioned wanting to know “who to call when you wind up dead.” Though he doubted his family would care if he died. Though hearing they called clearly suggests otherwise.

Thilo looks once more at the address, stuffs the slip into his pocket, then turns on his heels to leave. “Thanks.”

“And thank you for refraining from cursing. I had thought—”

The man cuts her off as he opens the door and raises his hand in a one-finger gesture, a smirk emerging on his lips upon hearing her gasp.

His walk has slowed considerably after arriving in Munich and parking the car in a half-filled lot, several blocks from the address. It's in a more rural area of the city, with the cozy houses on either side of the street displaying neatly kept lawns and furniture on front decks or the occasional laughter of a child carried on the breeze.

Eventually, he stops in front of a two-story house with a brick exterior and a black front door. He debates turning away, going back to Bern, never seeing his family. Why would they wonder about him now, and not in the ten years he spent away from them, susceptible to death at any moment? Do they harbor hatred towards him, for the decision he made back then, out of anger and spite? He pursued it, but after a conversation with Heilewis – as unbearable as she is – decided it best to forgo destroying himself and focus on surviving instead.

Taking a deep breath, he ascends the few brick steps that separate him from the door. He opts to ring the doorbell rather than knock on the door, knowing he'd hesitate and second-guess himself in the time it took for his fist to rap against the polished wood.

He stands completely still, frozen in place, forced to watch as a figure passes in front of a window next to the door, before it opens.

Meeting his eyes is a woman with long brown hair, hazel eyes, dressed in a light pink dress with white flats. A pearl necklace and matching bracelet wrap around her ivory neck and wrist. Her eyes sweep over Thilo's outfit – still dressed in his gray uniform with Switzerland's flag patch upon his upper right sleeve.

He clears his throat to at least offer a simple greeting, but instead finds himself in his mother's embrace, the scent of lavender wafting around the pair.

“I had a feeling you’d visit. You have no idea how happy I am to see you. Oh, your father is in the living room; he’ll be overjoyed to know you came by.” She breaks the hug, and Thilo is able to catch her reddened face for a moment before being pulled into the house and straight into the living room.

His father sits on the couch with strands of gray threaded throughout short black hair. Brown eyes settled within a warm ivory face turn to look at him, surveying him the same way his mother did. Smiling, he stands up and gives Thilo a brief and firm hug, clasping his shoulders upon stepping back.

“You’ve grown so much – dare I say into an admirable man. Mieke told us you were quite reckless while in Germany, finding yourself in fistfights,” his father’s tone is lighthearted, followed by a laugh.

Thilo finally finds the voice – and the words – to speak. “One of my most well-known traits.”

“She mentioned you chose to be transferred to Switzerland. Do you serve under someone new? Do you like them?” His mother questions, and Thilo is quick to hide the scowl that he can feel developing on his lips.

Leave it to Heilewis to lie about everything he does. But, in this instance, he supposes it’s for the best – he’s confident his parents wouldn’t want to know that he risked everything for Felix, and more so that he serves under him.

After all, if she lied to them, why shouldn’t he? “They’re okay. I don’t like them, but I don’t hate them. There aren’t any fistfights in Bern or in my canton of Vaud, so–”

“You command an entire canton? I knew you’d do great things, but I never expected...” The voice of his father trails off before he clears his throat. “I’m proud of you.”

His words only cause Thilo to half-heartedly smile. Though he knows they're genuine, he can't bring himself to mimic his joy. Even his mother stands beside her husband, hands clasped over her chest in either disbelief or amazement.

After a period of prolonged silence, Thilo glances over his shoulder. "It's been a long ride here. Could I?"

"Oh, yes, of course. Down the left hallway, third door on your right. I'll go make some tea." His mother nods, heading into the kitchen.

"I may as well help her." His father excuses himself, and Thilo is quick to slip out of their sight.

Walking down the hallway, he can glimpse the silver letter *T* in a cursive fashion that adorns his bedroom door at the end. Yet he stops at the second door, past a closet, displaying a gold cursive letter *A*. He pauses, noticing his trembling hand gripping the golden knob that he debates whether to turn.

The clink of china causes him to turn the knob, open the door, step inside, and swiftly shut it behind him. He doesn't even get a chance to turn around as he catches a lined piece of paper taped to the dark violet wall. Written upon it, in her signature neat handwriting, is a law. Certain sections of the law are highlighted, and commentary – positive and negative – are offered. What words mean, the implications of phrases, the entirety of the law written in simpler terms for the everyday citizens to understand. The walls of the room are covered in the papers, only one section blocked by a bookshelf reaching from the dark hardwood floor to the similarly colored ceiling. Large books, multiple volumes of laws, names, places, times, and reasons, are lined within, though their spines are coated in a layer of dust.

He walks over to the still neatly made bed, letting his fingers brush the purple and blue butterflies stitched above the red and yellow flowers decorating the white comforter. And, in the same style of writing that adorned her door, is the name of the room's owner on a pillow: Adelaide.

Thilo closes his eyes to suppress the tears that begin to form at the edges, yet they fall regardless. He lets a modified curse escape from his mouth, remembering how she would always playfully scold him whenever he did happen to curse in her presence.

Yet that image, with her paler skin, green eyes, and black hair, brings back memories of her smile, and her laugh, and the way she would twirl for him, wearing the various dresses she loved. The headlines the next day in the newspaper are quick to follow. *Reichstag Bombed in a Devastating Terrorist Attack – No Survivors*. His parents were delusional. They hoped that somehow, when he signed up to go see how the Bundestag operated, she could have survived. The train could have been late. A current session could be finishing up before the one she could observe would begin.

Thilo was silent. He knew better than to comfort himself with lies.

They bring the man to his knees, squeezing his eyes shut and suppressing a sob as his head rests against his forearms upon her bed. He feels pathetic, crying in uniform, when he promised, dressed in it, to avenge her death.

Even if it killed him.

She had such a bright future ahead of her, and because of her death, Thilo threw away his own future, as if punishing the people that killed his sister would change anything. The damage was already done, yet he doesn't know if the knowledge of the downfall of those who killed her would help him in any way.

His mother's voice calls from the kitchen. "Thilo! Come drink your tea before it gets cold."

Standing up, the man wipes the tears from his face and spends several seconds in place, waiting for his expression to regain a bit of its normal complexion before taking a deep breath and slipping out of her room, closing the door.

He follows the scent of the tea to the living room, where his mother and father sit on the sofa, the space in between them empty, and most likely meant for the man. Yet he decides to sit down on the loveseat, his gaze focused on the black television screen, his dark reflection staring back at him.

"Darling, would you like something other than tea? I think I have some cocoa if you'd prefer that instead." His mother speaks up after what feels like an eternity of silence.

Thilo's eyes flick over to her, catching her concerned expression, before he looks back at the television. "What did she like?"

The only sound the man can hear is his own breathing. Periodically, it hitches, and he's worried he might begin to cry again. Yet he doesn't know if his parents will share the same emotions he does over Adelaine's death. Do they wish he avenged her death or at least died trying? Was it a mistake to come here? Perhaps it is one of Heilewis' many lies, made to punish Thilo for what he asked of her several years ago.

But if he didn't stop her, Felix would have died. And Thilo can't imagine Switzerland – can't imagine his own *life* – without him. He imagines Berlyn feels the same way, though it was understandable why he didn't get involved – he had a different connection to Felix and those who lost their lives on the mission than Thilo. Even after all these years, Thilo has never once regretted his decision. If a similar situation ever dares to occur again, he will put everything on

the line for the young man, even if he knows he is going to lose everything he stands for, and his own life along with it.

Without another word, Thilo stands up and leaves the living room. His eyes stay trained on what's in front of him, never traveling to his parents, and his ears block out the single call for his name as he closes the front door behind him.

He doesn't know where he's walking, but he doesn't stop until he arrives back at the now empty lot where his mode of transportation sits. Staring at his reflection in the metallic sheen, he eventually closes his eyes and takes a breath.

His hand travels into the pocket of his uniform, and he pulls something soft and fluffy out. It's a small plush deer keychain, a gift Thilo gave to her before she left for Berlin. Yet he thought she brought it with her, instead of leaving it on her desk where he found it. Unless—

Unless she knew she wasn't going to return.

Though his mind wants him to run back inside the house and into her room, to search every crevice and hiding space for something to confirm his suspicions, his feet stay rooted to the spot. It's been ten years since her death; if he was to discover anything, it would have been far earlier.

Before he has a chance to change his mind, he arrives back in Bern, his head lowering to rest against the steering wheel. The feeling that someone is watching him becomes too great to ignore, and he raises his head, prepared to curse at Armin. Instead, a navy uniform that invokes a slight fear within him, even more so with the presence of a black uniform that Thilo has rarely ever seen outside of Communications, stands right in front of him.

Without hesitation, the man hops out of the car and offers a salute to Felix, whose eyes are narrowed and arms crossed over his chest. "Sir."

“You traveled to Berlin when you should have been in Vaud, to solve something that already corrected itself. Care to explain why?” Felix’s voice doesn’t sound too different from when he nearly yelled at Thilo several hours earlier.

Thilo’s eyes travel to Dimitry, who is hiding his amusement regarding the current situation extremely well, if he’s even entertained.

“I wasn’t informed of the change...sir.”

Felix walls forward until they stand a foot apart. He looks right into Thilo’s hazel eyes, as if attempting to freeze him in place. And Thilo doesn’t move a single muscle.

“I don’t need you to solve my problems. Going to Heilewis, out of all people, who admitted to me that she’d kill you if she ever saw you again – did you want to die?”

Though the older officer knows he’s angry, Thilo can catch the hint of worry in his tone. A concern that he has barely ever heard Felix convey.

He wants to reach out and rest his hands on Felix’s shoulders. He wants to pull him into a hug. He wants to reassure him that everything will turn out alright, even if what’s on the horizon suggests differently. He wants to lie to him if it means he will soothe his doubts. He wants to put himself in harm’s way if it means Felix will be safe.

Is it because of his failure to protect his sister? It may have used to be, but not anymore. And though he wants to tell Felix exactly how he feels, he can’t bring himself to, uncertain of the younger’s reaction. Based on his past experiences, he wouldn’t take it well.

Unable to offer a reply to his words, Thilo shakes his head and sighs, stepping around Felix and casting a sideways glance at Dimitry, who meets his gaze without any type of emotion.

But he speaks as soon as Thilo assumes he walks out of his view. “Major General Haegel.”

Remaining silent, the man swivels to face him, careless as to his expression. He must have been the one to discover that Thilo was traveling to Berlin and made the decision to inform Felix. His greater tolerance than what Thilo has with Berlyn is slipping, seeing how both could be considered his loyal dogs. That's an expectation that Felix has with all his officers, of course, but some things are better done in secret, even if it will warrant fury or worry on Felix's part.

Dimitry cocks his head in Felix's direction, and Thilo's eyes widen as he sees the keychain hanging from his fingers. It must have slipped from his pocket, or wherever he put it as he left the car.

Approaching him once again, Thilo prepares for the usual question that will pry information from the man that he's still reluctant to share, despite him and Felix being rather open with one another. Even if none of it was Felix's choice.

Palm open, the man finds the keychain placed in his hand. Felix's gaze softens for a moment, but hardens quickly, losing the scrap of hope Thilo possessed regarding any concern about his own life, albeit personal.

"I won't ask." He gestures to behind the man, who turns to see an unmissable vermillion uniform and matching eyes, their blond hair even more striking. "Reko insists he speak with you."

Muttering gratitude under his breath, Thilo leaves the garage, ensuring the keychain is securely with him, at least until he returns to his dorm here or his office back in Vaud. Or perhaps he'll keep it on him, so he never loses it – the last remaining memory of his sister.