

The Winged Guard's 5th Division

Feodor Jessman disliked his appearance.

His wavy and dull silver colored hair was difficult to comb. His deep purple eyes, glittering with natural menace, had to be hidden behind black-rimmed fake glasses. As expected of an Imp, his unblemished skin was pale white.

He had no horns, fangs, or scales – the clear, unavoidable appearance of a markless.

The markless whose numbers included Feodor were hated by by most of Regul Aire's inhabitants. The whole bunch was rotten to the core, and Feodor had on several occasions mused to himself half-seriously that it'd be considered a favor to the world if every last one of them were to disappear.

Like many of those living in the cramped environment of Regal Aire, Feodor's own race was mixed. His father's great grandmother was a troll, and far up his mother's side were ancestors who had been fox-beastmen. However, Feodor's blood didn't appear to have done anything for him; his appearance and traits, like the majority of the Jessman family, were that of a typical Imp.

The Imps were a subspecies of Ogres, the descendants of a demonic race that arose within Emnetwyte civilization long ago. Lurking in the shadows of the Emnetwyte, they had lived a most misguided existence, leading individuals towards debauchery and ruin with their cursed eyes and dark whispers.

The Emnetwyte were long extinct now. For no apparent reason, their shadows lived on.

Imp eyes were once said to hold an outrageous power capable of confusing and manipulating others. When their activity was at its height, one great individual supposedly drowned a small country in revelry and depravity with their eyes alone. However, through the passage of time and mixing of species, the Imps no longer possessed such splendid power. They were now just another typical markless race, perhaps slightly better with words and lies than most.

Feodor Jessman was but one of the many sorry descendants produced by that pitiful race.

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Boom! An explosion-like sound rang out. Slamming his feet into the bronze-paneled floor, the wolf-headed beastman launched into the air. He violently twisted his large body forward and swung his arm down. The mass of conditioned muscle arched, whiplike, and down from the sky came roaring a mighty punch that could split someone from skull to groin.

It was a cleanly executed fist technique with graceful form in every seemingly-brash movement. One might call it refined brute force; believing in one's strength, obeying that strength, and ultimately relying on it. The idea was to entrust everything to one's own muscles and power, one's greatest weapon. It was a state only attainable through solely pursuing the concept of "crushing," something that the beast races born with "rending" claws could not easily reach.

Well, I doubt I can stop that.

His opponent was just too ridiculously strong. Even if he were to try and push that incoming arm, its trajectory likely wouldn't budge an inch. He could go for a leg sweep, but the foot his opponent pivoted on was currently midair. Before any of that, considering his opponent's momentum, it was obvious that he would be sent flying no matter where he made contact.

He dropped into a low crouch, his right hand hidden in the shadow of his body. The beastman's eyes reflexively darted there as Feodor shifted his center of mass onto his left foot, then made a sharp sliding motion with his still-hidden hand. The almost magician-like flourish imitated the moves of a dagger-wielder; it hid the user's intent, the blade's shape, and all other information from the enemy until it struck.

If one thought it through, of course, that was an impossible scenario. They were in a training arena, sparring with bare hands. There was no way for a fighter to bring in a real weapon. Still, the beastman flinched, his inborn instincts and hard-won warrior experience instantly perceiving the most dangerous attack Feodor's actions could result in, and he twisted his body to avoid a fatal blow. His head – having eyes, nose, and ears, all areas impossible to toughen no matter how strong one might be, all weak points through which his skull could be pierced – jerked back and out of the way of any angle Feodor's attack might come from.

The graceful sequence of movements faltered, a fatal error introduced into it.

No matter how rapidly a top spins, it will lose control and motion if its axis is shifted. Every ounce of momentum that had served to support the beastman's landing instead became exhausted by his hasty dodge. By the time the first inklings of regret surfaced in the beastman's eyes, everything was over.

Bam! Wham! Whaaam!

The beastman tumbled, flipped upwards, and rolled through two nearby sparring soldiers, sounding much like someone pulverizing a barrel with an axe, until he came to a stop against the wall.

A few seconds passed as everyone present turned their eyes to the fallen beastman, their own matches long forgotten. An uneasy silence filled the training field.

“...Gahahahaha! Oh, that was great stuff. You’re good, you know!”

The beastman raised his head good-naturedly. “To think you got the better of me with that sneaky trick of yours! If it weren’t for that little counter move, I would’ve pummeled you flat!”

Feodor shook his empty hands. Of course, he wasn’t holding any real dagger. He had merely made a suggestive movement in front of a master, which had caused his opponent to reflexively dodge and lose balance.

One by one, the questions rose among the people surrounding them: *What happens now? Why is this giant beastman so happily declaring his defeat?* Only the two involved could understand the situation.

Feodor fixed his misaligned glasses back into position. “Your assessment boosts my confidence, Portrick.” He went over to the toppled beastman, took his extended arm with his own hand, and pulled him up with all his strength. “Though, you don’t need to praise me. After all, I cheated rather than used my own power. It’s something that could only work against an overly strong person like you.”

Imps were a deceitful race. The affinity for deceiving others was rooted within his species. It was only natural that the methods of his fighting style would reflect that wicked nature.

"What strange humility! Still, that’s not a bad way to put it." Portrick slapped Feodor’s shoulder with explosive *bams* until it hurt. His words aside, his body language was like that of a pleasant old man towards the neighborhood troublemaker. A lycanthropos known in the division as “Bruiser,” Private First Class Portrick was the strongest, perhaps the second strongest, of the soldiers belonging to the Winged Guard’s 5th Division.

"It hurts."

"Ah, my bad." He withdrew his hand with a half-baked apology, laughing heartily.

Just then, the flighty voice of Private First Class Nax came floating in from a nearby doorway. “Oh, hey – hey, Fourth Officer Jessman. The Division Chief’s calling for ya. Didya get up to anything you shouldn’t have?”

"Hmm? The First Officer wants to see me?”

I wonder what it is.

Feodor wasn’t sure why he was being summoned. As Fourth Officer, he had irreproachable conduct and was an exemplary soldier. His actual personality and behavior aside, he should at least have that much of a general record.

On the other hand, if any of his past misdeeds turned up in his records... *That would be unpleasant.* But if he was summoned for that reason, there would've been some forewarning. Probably.

"Could it be? A talk about promotion?"

Feodor vaguely smiled at Portrick's wildly positive guess. "If that's the case, I'll be happy."

As he started towards the corridor that went to the general headquarters, his thoughts went back to the earlier physical training.

How idiotic.

In the first place, the army was formed to battle the 17 Beasts, destruction itself given form. All it took was witnessing the Beasts for one to lose the will to live. Punching or kicking them was unlikely to be of much use.

Our training is meaningless. It's nothing more than the excuse that 'we're doing as much as we can'. Supposedly it's intended to keep us ready to go, but it just exposes how much we've become complacent in peace.

"Absolutely *idiotic*."

After making sure nobody else was in the corridor to hear him, Feodor vented.

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The Winged Guard was the sword and shield of Regul Aire. For better or worse, that was what their entire existence hinged on; their greatest strength and weakness.

To begin with, Regul Aire was not a monolith. Countless races called it home, numerous communities flourished within it, and endlessly differing values clashed. No single system of morality, no single definition of good and evil intentions, could be shared by all who dwelt upon the floating islands.

And this unnatural state of existence was born of the Winged Guard's creation.

Roughly four hundred years ago, a Teimerre had drifted up from the gray plains below and come to rest onto the 27th Floating Island. Because of the great threat to all other islands presented by the Teimerre, it was then suggested that all those who inhabited the islands should band together to battle it.

What had happened next could only be called comedy.

First, goodwill groups obstructed military operations one by one, insisting that attempts at communicating with the Beast should be made.

Next, a fleet was unable to even leave its port because it was swarmed by civilians demanding that they should also be allowed to fight.

Another incident came about when soldiers were detained and prevented from fighting by groups who waxed philosophically on the evil of life-or-death battles.

Again and again, emergent governments competing among themselves subverted one another's plans of attack. An army appeared one day, pretending to work in concert with the Beast. Conspiracies that the Beast's entire invasion was nothing but a false flag were thrown around. The value of the silver coin was rewritten almost every day, certain people becoming extremely rich while others lost out. Groups that were disliked from the start were blamed for the arrival of the Beast and wiped out one after another.

Around that time had been the birth of the "Heaven's Arrival" cult, who claimed, among other things: *The Beast is a messenger of death sent by the Visitors; for those of us who dwell in sin, we must accept our deaths joyfully and without resistance...* The cultists, believing in their righteousness that everybody should be sacrificed to the Beast, worked in unyielding conviction towards their goals.

Throughout all this time, though not a single ship reached the 27th Floating Island and not a single shell was fired at the Beast, dozens of airships crashed and tens of thousands of lives were lost.

A decade or so after the disaster, the Winged Guard was established.

Regardless of what those on the islands might believe, the Winged Guard existed only to protect Regul Aire, obeying the Constitution of Regul Aire alone and disregarding any other laws or customs. It was only dispatched to go against confirmed invasions of the Beasts and defeat them. Furthermore, any military power aside from the Winged Guard was strictly prohibited from participating in these battles. By single-handedly assuming the responsibility to deal with internal and external threats, further problems were therefore prevented from occurring.

The Winged Guard was founded under that principle, and uphold it to this day.

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"Of course, I don't intend to talk about any minor wrongdoings," the First Officer said. The smoke from his cigarette wafted through the general headquarters office of the Winged Guard's

5th Division. "Though, I suppose something like, say... a military officer slipping out a hole in the chain-link fence to buy and eat donuts... would go against regulations."

Feodor winced. *That's one crime exposed.*

"If you do sneak out and buy something, you should get something forbidden like alcohol. That way you'd gain prestige even if it was found out, right?"

No, wait a minute, what's he going on about now?

"Ah, well," the Armado sighed. "Now, about what I actually called you in here to talk about..."

"...what you said just now wasn't the main topic?"

"Nope, just a little chitchat. There's a matter I want to put you in charge of."

Among the military officers belonging to the 5th Division, Feodor was particularly outstanding. Individual martial arts, knowledge of tactics through the ages, battlefield artillery operations... he was more proficient than anyone else in pretty much in every skill required for military officers. That was why, despite being an Imp with poor physique, he'd been able to rise up to the position of a ranking officer.

If there was any obstacle to his success, it would be that he was still quite young and hadn't yet been blessed with the opportunity to distinguish himself in actual combat. That was a problem that would in time be resolved, however. There were whispers that he'd soon be charging up the ranks to 3rd and 2nd – and he intended to do just that.

The First Officer nominating him for the upcoming duty meant it should be an opportunity to rack up achievements. It seemed like a good chance.

"I'm glad to receive your assessment, but it's a bit intimidating to be selected as the person in charge," Feodor said. "Have we even discovered the plans those Heaven's Arrival fanatics have in mind for causing mass destruction?"

"No, but fortunately that won't be your mission. It's a bit more of the peaceful variety."

Huh? That was strange. If it was that kind of thing, it didn't seem like Feodor's talents would be needed.

"I understand what you want to say, but I'm certain that you're the most qualified individual." Finished speaking, the First Officer glanced at the wall clock tiredly. "They're late."

"Sir?"

"Your duty will be the supervision of four first-class equivalent soldiers dispatched from the 11th Floating Island by the Winged Guard's 2nd Division."

"...Huh." The First Officer was moving at his own pace, forcing Feodor to rapidly digest what he was saying in order to keep up with the conversation. Because of that, his responses were delayed. "They're equivalent soldiers?"

Although the term was unfamiliar to him, he had memorized the Winged Guard's military regulations, and thought he recalled a description about such a rank.

As it went, the rank of "equivalent soldier" was special, temporarily issued when it became necessary for someone to have the same authority as a regular soldier over a period of time. By itself, it seemed like a convenient framework; scattered among the various races of Regul Aire were individuals whose raw strength equalled a trained soldier, and to obtain their cooperation without creating confusion in the chain of command was attractive.

In reality, however, it was impossible to put into action and had never been done before.

That was because the requirements were strict to the point of being unrealistic – specifically, a line stated 'The signatures of three ranking officials of first rank or higher are required'. The Winged Guard currently possessed within its ranks thirteen First Officers and 16 First Technicians, and above them only seven generals. Obtaining approval from three of those thirty-six people was a request on the same level of uniting the entire army in agreement. Consequently, it was pretty much impossible to utilize in response to the immediate needs of a combat site.

If you wanted to treat an ordinary civilian as a soldier, it was much quicker to give them an actual military title rather than the troublesome position of equivalent soldier. As a matter of fact, there were positions for such an event: purely decorative officer ranks like that of Third Patrol Officer and Second Enchanted Weapons Technician, for example. The fact that someone on the 11th Floating Island didn't do just that meant that there was some reason to not do so. In other words...

"Infamous criminals, I'm guessing..?"

As he muttered, the thought seemed plausible. *They need to be used as military personnel, but can't actually be given military status. If there's some politically delicate situation, it makes sense to jump through all those hoops.*

He sketched out his mental picture of one possible first-class equivalent soldier. *The fierce, hardened criminal is known to everyone on the 11th Island. His physique is the same as or larger than Private First Class Portrick. Perhaps he could be a member of the Giant tribe. His hands*

dyed red from the countless people he murdered, his prominent blood vessels pulsing along his bald head, his eyes constantly bloodshot, his mouth distorted into a heinous grin.

I understand. I definitely wouldn't give somebody like him a regular military rank. The decision to treat him as an equivalent soldier is understandable.

The Armado nodded, as if he had read Feodor's mind. "If nothing else, they're certainly a troublesome group to deal with."

"But why now?" Feodor questioned. "We still have time before the day comes to make an attack on the Croyance, but there's not much time left either. The 5th Division already has its hands full."

"That's true."

"Right. Which means there's no time to deal with some outsiders who have their own problems—"

"That's why I asked for you."

"...What does that mean, if I may ask?"

Knock-knock-knock.

A steady tapping came from the door of the general headquarters. A young woman's voice, sounding very much lost, spoke. "Um, sorry for being late. We've arrived."

"Please come in," the First Officer said.

"Excuse me..."

The knob turned. The door slowly opened—

"Sorry to keep you waiting!"

The door vigorously banged open and a girl with orange hair came tumbling forward into the room, accompanied by a slight shriek. She had probably been the one knocking.

A girl around the same age with cherry blossom-colored hair energetically strode into the room next. "Is this the general headquarters?"

She was followed by a quieter young girl with purple hair, who bowed. "Pardon the disruption."

All three of them possessed no fangs, horns, or any other extraneous features. They were markless.

Feodor was silent for a long second, then looked back over his shoulder. "...Um, First Officer?"

Three girls in front of him. First-class equivalent soldiers visiting from the 11th Island. His wordless gaze asked, *Surely not?*

"They are the soldiers." The Armado's answer was straight and to the point. It was also exactly what he'd hoped to not hear.

Feodor looked back at the girls. By their appearances, they were only fifteen years old.

"Question. When did the Winged Guard start training children?" He himself was seventeen, not actually that much older than them, but that was of course an entirely separate matter altogether.

"As I said, they are the soldiers."

Annoyance was clearly present in the First Officer's voice, but Feodor persisted regardless. "No matter how you slice it, they're delicate ladies. To put it mildly, our division is a den of vulgarity, isn't it? Is this really a good idea?"

"Hey now, are you calling this place a den of vulgarity in front of the officer responsible?"

"Are you going to deny it?"

Just then, Private First Class Talmareet's angry shouts could be heard from the training grounds; a morally questionable tirade of words whose utterance outside the military base would have vigilante groups dogpiling the speaker. The orange-haired girl blushed and looked downward, while the cherry blossom-haired girl tilted her head, looking puzzled, and the purple-haired girl chuckled strangely.

"...See? Isn't this place a vulgar den?" Feodor's lip curled; he was beginning to feel a sinking sensation. "Whatever, I don't care anymore."

"Be that as it may, Fourth Officer Jessman," the First Officer waved his hand, "I wasn't asking for your personal opinion on this assignment. Your orders are to supervise these first-class equivalent soldiers, and I won't permit any objection."

Well, that's that. This was the army. Whether or not the explanation was to your taste, you couldn't choose what you wanted to do.

"I have no particular objections. I am honored that you entrust important tasks to an inexperienced person like me," Feodor replied grudgingly. "But at the very least, let me ask something. I'm a military officer, this is the armed forces, and we're in an emergency situation. Our capabilities are limited. What in the world am I supposed to do to supervise these children?"

"Nothing."

"...What?"

"These first-class equivalent soldiers will be stationed here. As far as peacetime training and duties are concerned, treat them the same as any other soldier. They've passed the basic training curriculum on the 11th Island, so you won't need to worry about their ability at that level."

The cherry blossom-haired girl added a cheerful "Yep, yep!" in agreement.

"However, they're still our precious guests. As much as I'd like to allow them to run freely without restraint, that's impossible under the circumstances. These girls must always be under the supervision of the military, and their overseer must be of the officer rank or higher. A superior officer in name is necessary. And furthermore—"

His stumpy finger jabbed in Feodor's direction. "Just as you've said, the 5th Division is a vulgar place, and one would be reluctant to simply throw these girls out into that chaos. So in short, they need a chaperone. That person needs to be somebody who's glad to help others, understands the 5th Division well, doesn't have prejudices against markless, and has a logical mind. It just so happens that, in this entire division, there is exactly one ideal Fourth Officer who satisfies all of these conditions. Any questions so far?"

"...None, sir." It was a reasonable evaluation of him. Feodor Jessman was a good person. He was calm and conscientious, kind to everyone and yet strict. He excelled at many things, but didn't lord his superiority above others. He always remained positive, had grand goals, and never slacked off.

At least, others looking at him would assume so. That was the image he'd carefully cultivated.

"Of course, I don't make the decision without any concerns. Your races are similar and you're close to them in age, not to mention you're male and they're female – so that makes me slightly uneasy. Say, you're an Imp, aren't you? When exactly is your mating season again?"

"I don't have... that kind of thing." *Why is this old man talking about dirty things in front of girls?*

"Uh huh. Well, whatever, as long as there's consent involved I don't care what you do. It's a delicate time for all of us though, so don't do anything untoward or else the whole division's morale will be damaged—"

"I *won't*," Feodor interrupted heatedly. Feeling the girls' gazes on him, he reconsidered. *Maybe immediately rejecting the idea was a bit too much. I don't want them to think badly of me.* "Er, that is to say, while I do think they're pretty enough, I'm devoted to my fiancée. I'm not about to drift away to other women."

That wasn't entirely a lie. His family had once chosen a fiancée for him.

But I'll never be able to see her again. He hid his innermost thoughts behind his smile.

"That so? First I've heard of it."

"Yes, well, it's not something I spread around too much. By the way, First Officer..."

"What?"

"Earlier, didn't you say 'four first-class equivalent soldiers'?"

"I did," the Armado nodded.

Feodor turned to the girls and did a head count. The orange-haired one was blushing bashfully, the cherry blossom-haired one had boldly puffed her chest up for some reason, and the purple-haired girl just stared back amusedly.

"...I seem to count only three present."

The orange-haired girl seemingly mustered up some courage and raised her hand. "Ah, um, may I speak?!" she asked a little too eagerly.

"Oh, what is it?"

"Erm... First-Class Equivalent Soldier Tiat Shiba Ignareo isn't here."

That's an overly long name.

"S-she's not feeling well. She might be a little late, b-but she'll be right here..." Going off her attempts to stand still and the cracks in her voice, the girl was desperately trying to cover for her missing companion.

"Ah, I see." In contrast, the First Officer's reply was delivered with almost breezy nonchalance. "That's fine."

Out of the six divisions of the Winged Guard, the 5th Division is said to possess the highest grade of laziness and irresponsibility among its troops. Whether or not that reputation is caused by the people in charge having the personality to match, or else those leaders are chosen by the top brass due to the notoriety of the division itself, remains a mystery.

"It's not like you girls have a schedule to follow yet, anyway," the First Officer was saying, "so as long as you're not late for something important it's not a probl—"

The door, still half-closed, suddenly burst all the way open as if kicked.

"E-excuse me for being late! First-Class Equivalent Soldier Tiat, reporting in!"

This one has poor timing, Feodor mused. As he'd expected, the newest girl was the same age as the other three, with grass-colored hair. She'd probably run here as fast as she could; her face was flushed and she was out of breath.

She was the girl he'd met atop the abandoned theater the other day.

Ah... Feodor found that he wasn't entirely surprised by this new development. *Somehow, I had a feeling it'd be like this.*

The girl swiveled her head around, taking in everything her wide eyes could see in the room as she rushed and tried to catch up with the situation. Once her gaze landed on Feodor's figure in front of her, she froze.

"...Wait, y-y-you?! Wh-why are you here?!"

"Er..." He wasn't sure if he was still supposed to have forgotten about her. Nevertheless, Feodor took the first move, acting in accordance to what she'd wanted from him back then. "It's a pleasure to meet you, ladies. Apologies for the late introduction, but I am Fourth Officer Feodor Jessman. Just now, I've accepted the duty of being your supervisor and guide to our humble 5th Division."

He placed his hand on his chest in salute and flashed them his best smile. "You may already be aware of this much, but the 5th Division is currently engaged in battle preparations. I believe this can be confusing even for the 2nd Division's elite members, so if you have any questions please come talk with me. As your superior, I shall try my best to be of assistance."

"Y-y-yes s-sir – ow!" The orange-haired girl had bitten her tongue. "It'll be... pleashure workking... with you!"

"Oooh!" The cherry blossom-haired girl exclaimed, oddly impressed. "The smiling face of a womanizer!"

"Nice to meet ya, Fourth Officer." The purple-haired girl grinned at him. "I'm sure we'll get along. Hopefully it won't be too brief."

Feodor turned to the girl with green hair, the one he'd seen slip and fall into the water tank yesterday.

"Nnh... Nice to meet you..." Her eyes flickered back and forth nervously, the situation having passed her by long ago, but she managed to keep up with his act. "I-it's my... pleasure to work with you..."