

**Raita Jauhiainen**

# **ALLIANCE.125**

**TERRA UNIONIA**

**The First Book**

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Publisher: Books on Demand GmbH, Helsinki, Finland

Manufacturer: Books on Demand GmbH, Norderstedt, Germany

ISBN: 978-952-498-701-1

The original book in Finnish: Allianssi.125: Terra Unionia: Ensimmäinen kirja

Cover and design: Raita Jauhiainen

Images: Raita Jauhiainen

## 1.

Lena Vaal lay on the ground, her chest pressing into the earth beneath her. With bated breath she observed the countryside around her. Then, using her binoculars, she scanned the tree line. The forest was calm and still. Only the song of a bird somewhere in the distance told her that she was not the only living creature in this corner of the world. Lena lowered her binoculars and a smile crept across her face. She whispered softly,

“I guess you lost me, huh?”

She took a deep breath. Her heart was pounding in her chest; the fear had not faded over the past five days but she was no longer in any position to assume anything; she needed facts.

The situation was looking promising. She had not observed any movements in the shadows of the trees for the last few minutes. Perhaps the enemy had finally lost track of her.

“Just take a couple of minutes to catch your breath,” Lena whispered to herself. “You’ve earned a couple of minutes after this morning.”

However, the thought of an enemy sneaking around nearby wasn’t something Lena was able to forget for even a moment. This was her job after all; she was one of the Terra Unionian border guards. Even though sighting an enemy on the border was extremely rare, she had been trained to face such a possibility. Training had not, however, provided her with any tools suppress her fears, not to mention the fact that she had never truly believed she would really have to face a situation like this. Typically, patrolling the border was quite uneventful, sometimes even boring, but her being here now had suddenly become a matter of life and death. She was no longer alone at the border, waiting for her shift to end. This time she was really putting her training to the test; how well had she learned all those lessons during her training for the Border Guard?

During the past few days, Lena had been thinking a lot about the day she had finally become a border guard and earned the right to wear her brown uniform. Her heart had been filled with pride and joy as she had put it on for the first time. She had sworn to “*Defend the territorial integrity of Terra Unionia with her heart and every fiber of her being.*” There was also a mention in the oath about killing anyone who crossed the border into Terra Unionia. Lena had never liked that particular part of the oath, even though it was about defending peace and freedom, yet she was bound to it and truly believed in it. She knew she was defending the last place on Earth where balance, peace, and justice still meant something. Beyond the border was nothing but criminality and contaminated wasteland unfit for human habitation.

However, there had always been peace at the border. Lena had never believed that one day she would actually take a human life. She had also never believed she would have to tail an enemy near the border for days on end, yet here she was.

Lena was quite certain her target was not a defector because they had successfully managed to avoid being seen. Not only that, a defector, unaware of her presence here, would have crossed the border some time ago. No, her target was a Hirundian border guard, there was no doubt about that. She pondered what this could mean. Was this enemy a representative on a reconnaissance mission to check their defense capabilities? Was Hirunda finally preparing to invade? Was the freedom of all Terra Unionians in so much danger that she had no other choice but to stop the enemy by force? Would the death of a Hirundian border guard do more damage than good? Would it give Hirunda a reason finally to cross the border like some huge wave of destruction?

Lena didn't know what to think but she was relatively certain that this enemy representative on the other side of the border was toying with her. Perhaps the Hirundian in question was trying to make her cross the border. Lena wasn't going to allow herself to be tricked into making such a mistake. Five days had already passed and neither one of them had violated the border or voluntarily stepped into view. Lena asked herself what this all could mean. If Hirunda was about to invade Terra Unionia, Lena would have expected their troops to carry out the invasion much more swiftly. If the enemy wanted to kill her he could have simply run across the border and started shooting. At least one could assume that.

Lena was deeply troubled by the uncertainty of the current situation and the endless circles of speculation resulting from it were making her dizzy. Her orders had always been quite clear. Her duty was to watch the border and keep the Hirundians out. Using force was authorized.

However, orders were not offering her much support in her current predicament now. Instead of the enemy stepping carelessly out of the shadows, he was testing her, and Lena had joined in this tracking game they were still playing. She knew very well her target was provoking her and she had taken his bait. The truth was she was no longer tracking her target out of a sense of duty but to satisfy her own curiosity. She could have never confessed her true motives to anyone because doing so would be calling both her professional character as well as her loyalty to Terra Unionia into question. This was the last thing Lena wanted. She loved her homeland.

However, Terra Unionia was still safe. Even though the enemy had been lurking near the border for five days, Lena had managed to keep him behind it. She had done her duty, even though in a slightly unconventional way. The situation was more or less under control.

Lena took a deep breath. She knew she couldn't compose an entirely truthful mission report for the past few days, assuming she would make it back from the border. She would simply mention making an observation or two about movement at the border but she would never record any information about making a conscious decision to track and tail an enemy representative without having reported it and asked for backup. That should have been the first thing to do when she realized the close proximity of the enemy was not a random, temporary coincidence.

Yet this had been her intention. However, once the initial shock of the situation had faded, Lena had realized the enemy was not rushing into their territory. Therefore, she had given him a chance to back away from the border to Hirunda without engaging him but the enemy had not done so. Suddenly Lena realized that she had been following and tracking the movements of this Hirundian for five consecutive days.

"If he has not gone by tomorrow, then I will call for backup," Lena assured herself quietly.

Yet despite her reassurances, she was not at all certain that the situation would progress that way; she simply didn't know what to expect. Tracking an enemy was playing with fire – she knew that much – but she still believed she was in control of this odd cat and mouse game, which both scared her and made her incurably curious.

Lena observed a movement so, holding her breath, she lifted her binoculars. She could see a human-shaped figure moving stealthily in the shadows. This was the clearest sighting she had had throughout the entire five days. The Hirundian seemed to be wearing a dark-gray uniform and he appeared to be physically much bigger than Lena, but his physical shape did nothing to knock her confidence; she was carrying a gun after all. Suddenly the man disappeared from view. Lena knew that he had been heading west. Lena shook her head and another smile crept across her face.

“Nice try,” she whispered, “But it’s not going to work this time. You supposedly exposed yourself by accident but in fact you want to lure me after you so that I accidentally cross the border.”

So Lena let the man go. She placed her binoculars on the ground, took her map from her chest pocket and studied the terrain depicted on it. She scrolled the image to the left to find her current location and as soon as a tiny black letter “T” had appeared, she froze the image and studied the terrain. There was a small blue spot on the map. She deduced from the little blue spot that the enemy was heading towards a little pond which was located approximately half a kilometer from Lena’s current position. According to the map, the border ran along the south side of the pond, meaning it lay in Terra Unionia’s territory.

Lena folded the map and put it back in her chest pocket.

“I’m not afraid,” Lena whispered to herself. “I have a gun.”

Then she rolled onto her back, took a deep breath and remained where she was for a moment as she looked at the tops of the trees above her. She reminded herself that, just like her, the enemy was alone here. Neither one of them had called for any backup. They were still alone here tracking and tailing each other. She felt completely in control of this unusual game of theirs.

Lena asked herself what the enemy’s motives could be? Did he simply want to see her or was he playing with her in order to eventually kill her? If so, what would he gain from killing her? If Hirunda was planning to cross the border during the next couple of days, why was the enemy tailing her? If he was on a reconnaissance mission to learn about Terra Unionia’s defense capabilities, surely he would already have continued on his way instead of running back and forth along the same border section? No – the enemy had seen her and, instead of staying for information retrieval purposes for a possible forthcoming invasion, he had taken a specific interest in her. However much an invasion was feared in Terra Unionia,

Lena had long ago stopped believing that it would one day take place. She had not said it aloud often, but that was the conclusion she had drawn after all her time here at the border.

Lena shifted onto her knees and propped herself up carefully against a tree next to her, bringing her binoculars to her eyes again. There was no detectable movement at the border. Lena didn't, however, let the calmness of the forest fool her.

"You are there somewhere," Lena whispered. "I know you are there."

Lena lowered her binoculars and retreated deeper into the shadows of the woods. When she was certain she was far enough away from the border, she got to her feet and started to run towards the west. She approached the border a few times to look towards Hirunda. When she was convinced she was still out of sight, she stepped back to Terra Unionia's side and kept going. In less than ten minutes she arrived at the location where she believed the next act of this game was to be played.

Lena dropped to the ground. Once she had got her breath back, she started crawling towards the tree line. Once she had found a good position next to a tall pine tree, she took her binoculars and started to scan the area on the other side of the pond. There was no sign of the enemy.

However Lena kept her eyes on the tree line across the border. When she still failed to observe any movement, she lowered her binoculars and closed her eyes. She allowed her breathing to steady and thoughts of what she was doing at the moment invaded her mind once more. She was a Terra Unionian border guard and her duty was to keep Hirundians out. If anyone crossed the border and immediately gave themselves up, she would capture them and take them to the nearest border station. At the station, the enemy's motives would be uncovered and they would be forced to remain permanently in their new country.

If this enemy representative violated the border she had also a third option, which was to let the man go without even reporting the incident. Lena saw this option as the best one. One man violating the border didn't necessarily mean there would be an invasion. On the other hand, letting this man go would result in him telling his fellow countrymen about his experiences and this could be interpreted as Terra Unionia's weakness. In that case a resulting invasion would be Lena's fault and no one else's.

"Stop it!" Lena whispered to herself. "Stop this pointless speculation. Trust your instincts. You also have a gun, don't forget that."

Suddenly Lena heard something. She looked across towards the border and saw movement on the other side of the pond. There he went; the enemy who kept moving to the west. Lena felt her heart begin to beat faster. She had never been this close to any Hirundian. Suddenly she felt a nasty sting in her heart. Why was she satisfying her own curiosity at the expense of her homeland's safety? It was wrong and she knew it.

Lena retreated deeper into Terra Unionia's territory before she got to her feet again and continued tailing the enemy. She couldn't let him out of her sight as this was about Terra Unionia as well, not just her own interests. The enemy had no business on Terra Unionia's side and if this man who kept lurking in the shadows really thought he could break a Terra Unionian border guard by tiring her, he was sadly mistaken.

Lena started advancing to the west along the border. Silently as a cat, she descended a gentle slope before stopping behind a tree, where she paused for breath, still without making a single sound. Then she glanced over her left shoulder and saw the little pond to her right. The forest was silent, but there was definitely tension in the air. An odd sensation overwhelmed her and she was suddenly on full alert. She took her gun, which she had been carrying against her right thigh, and raised it to firing position.

Then something unexpected happened. Lena's senses exploded into life, and her instincts took over. She jumped out from behind her tree and pointed her gun towards Hirunda. She quickly saw she was not pointing her weapon at an empty forest. This time there was a human being – a man – standing about ten meters away.

Lena felt as if the entire world had come to a standstill, with all its sounds. She heard nothing other than the last breath she had taken. She was horrified but relieved to be alive. Her senses were in overdrive as she had never before felt such a tangible sense of danger. She knew she could die any moment now but so far she was still breathing.

Suddenly a memory from years past emerged from a corner of Lena's mind.

"Who broke this?!" her mother had asked angrily, pointing at the pieces of her flowerpot on the ground.

"I did," Anamona had said when she saw the fear on Lena's face.

Anamona had lied to their mother that day, something she didn't do often, but her sister had wanted to protect her as she had done so many times before. However, Anamona wasn't here at Lena's side now, she was quite alone. And all Lena could do was remember her training.

Training was, however, quite different from facing a real situation. Lena was unable to suppress her fear, which had paralyzed her. She reminded herself of her status as a Terra Unionian border guard and the enemy had violated the border by stepping into their territory. As unbelievable as it was, she was in a situation no other border guards had ever faced. She was standing face to face with a Hirundian; with an enemy who had crossed the border.

Lena knew what to do. She should disarm the man, by force if necessary. However, the enemy representative, that man in front of her, was not showing any signs of compliance or hesitation. Instead, he was pointing his gun at her and glaring at her from beneath his furrowed brow. Neither of them made a single move.

Lena glared at the man as angrily as she knew how. She provoked herself into deeper anger in order to disguise her fear, the cause of her racing heart. Fear had no place in her mind at the moment; she needed logic, not emotions. That's why she tried not to see the Hirundian as a person. That *creature* was an enemy; an enemy who could be on a reconnaissance mission in Terra Unionia.

Lena squeezed her gun tighter. The man had wide shoulders and almost unnaturally big hands. His body was out of proportion, almost deformed; no one Lena knew looked like that. The man was a curious size and this size made Lena feel small; a feeling she hated. She was conscious of how deeply grateful she was to have her gun, which she was still pointing towards the enemy without the slightest trace of a quiver.

"Do you understand me?" Lena finally asked.

"I do," the man replied.

The man's voice was odd. It was much lower than most women's. Lena had only heard a couple of young men speaking before, but never this close. She had never talked to a man face to face.

"Good," Lena firmly told him, masking her insecurity. "You have violated the Terra Unionian border. Retreat or I will use force."

"Terra Unionian border?" the man asked. "You are on our side of the border."

"What are you talking about?" Lena asked as a cold sensation filled her heart.

Had she made a mistake and stepped over the border? How was that possible? The border was still almost a hundred meters away behind where the man was standing.

“I mean,” the man said slowly, “That we are standing outside Terra Unionia and therefore you have violated the border.”

Lena inhaled before adopting a serious tone.

“Nice try but I don’t believe a word. Drop your weapon, step back, and withdraw to your country or I will use force.”

“You have violated the border and left Unionian territory,” the man repeated, staring unblinkingly at Lena.

“You are in Terra Unionia,” Lena replied in turn.

“I don’t know what you are getting at,” the man said, “But if you want to play games, let’s play games.”

“Play games?” Lena asked glaring murderously at the man. His choice of words sounded like an accusation. “*You* have crossed the border into *our* territory.”

“The border is located about fifty meters behind you,” the man replied.

“If you want to be convincing, you should practice telling believable lies more often,” Lena said. “The border runs about a hundred meters behind *your* back. So *you* have crossed the border onto *our* side. If you still want to return to your own country, you will drop your weapon now and retreat before I use force.”

“If you shoot me here, you are not only guilty of violating the border but also of murder. Where I come from, a murder is never overlooked; as a matter of fact it actually carries very severe consequences.”

“Shut up and retreat to your own territory,” Lena shouted. “Retreat to Hirunda’s side *now* or stay in Terra Unionia as a prisoner. I won’t repeat these options for you again.”

“What’s your problem?” the man asked calmly, looking at Lena as if she were a lunatic. “You’re outside your territory, Unionian. You are not the one to give out orders here. You will take *my* orders because *you* have trespassed on *my* territory where I have authority.”

“I obey no enemy who is trespassing on my land and I will not lower my weapon when an enemy has crossed the border,” Lena informed him. “*You* have trespassed into Terra Unionia and we don’t overlook border violations; for your information they carry severe consequences as well.”

“We are not in Terra Unionia,” the man repeated slowly as if he was talking to an old woman with hearing problems.

“Typical,” Lena snorted. “We have never wanted anything else but to be left alone. We had never had any other agenda than to keep our own territory sacrosanct and you out.”

“Well, we have never had any desire to support fanatic sects which deny facts. The world doesn’t need people like you.

“If Terra Unionia doesn’t interest you at all, what are you doing here?” Lena asked glaring at the man.

“Terra Unionia is an unstable area and my job is to protect the world from unpredictable elements, whose goal it is to create unnecessary chaos around them.”

“Only a Hirundian man would have the audacity to cross the border and claim it as Hirundian territory,” Lena huffed. “Isn’t it enough that you have claimed the entire planet for yourselves?”

“Say what you will,” the man answered seriously without even a hint of a smile on his face, “But you are standing on our side of the border and that is fact. So lower your weapon, place both your hands behind your neck and press your forehead against the tree next to you.”

“Dream on,” Lena replied.

“You are provoking me to shoot,” the man warned.

“You are provoking me to do the same thing,” Lena retorted, “Even though I gave you the opportunity to retreat.”

The man remained silent which gave Lena a moment to re-evaluate the situation. She was now regretting having given in to her curiosity. It had made her deaf to the voice of reason. Otherwise she would have had backup here right now and the man would have had no choice but to retreat to Hirunda.

Lena continued staring unblinkingly at the Hirundian. She didn’t know what to make of the man. He knew how to be convincing but she wasn’t fooled that easily. She knew very well where the border was, so nothing the enemy told her could shake her certainty. However, she couldn’t deny that the current situation was raising doubts in her mind. The tension between them was tangible and Lena knew either one of them could fire their weapon at any moment. These could very well be the last few moments of her life. If she died, Lena caught herself thinking, she hoped her sister would forgive her for having been so foolhardy.

“For the last time,” Lena finally said, “Drop your weapon and back off.”

“You have no jurisdiction in this part of the world,” the man replied. “I have.”

“I am very close to shooting you,” Lena informed him.

“So am I.”

“Your audacity is beyond belief,” Lena huffed. “I see that telling lies is really part of the male persona.”

The man snorted and shook his head. “In you I can clearly see a Unionian woman’s psyche; mentally unstable, narcissistic, and manipulative.”

Lena’s eyes flashed. “The mentally unstable manipulative narcissist is still pointing her gun at you.”

“As I am pointing mine at you.”

Lena didn’t want to say another word. The man obviously had no intention of backing off, and his stubbornness was infuriating as well as confusing. Lena weighed up her options. She had to either shoot the enemy or call for backup. She was reluctant to carry out the first option and the latter was not possible. One move and the man would shoot her. So they remained where they were, pointing their guns at each other. Lena knew that her life could be over any minute now. The thought of it might have made her sad, if she hadn’t been so busy trying to stay alive.

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Lena didn’t know how many hours she had already been standing facing the man but she could feel the fatigue all over her body. Against all odds she was still alive. Even if the enemy was standing right in front of her, she was still alive! Despite this, she was nevertheless frustrated beyond measure. She wished the situation would resolve itself, but this was a vain hope. The Hirundian had also remained standing still the entire time without saying a word. He had not made any move to return to the border and this made Lena wonder about him. Fortunately, his presence was no longer making her as restless as it had done a few hours ago. Perhaps, she thought, one could become numb to anything, even to men.

Lena rolled her left shoulder and the man noticed.

“I thought you would have spoken more,” he suddenly said.

“What’s there left to talk about now?” Lena asked sourly. “One of us has to stand down first and I can tell you it’s not going to be me.”

“Me neither.”

Lena studied his face. The man didn’t seem as hard-edged as before. Perhaps the fatigue was starting to tell on him as well. Lena took a deep breath, as imperceptibly as she could, in order not to give the impression of

being careless. Anything could trigger the man's aggression. After all, Lena had been told a long time ago what Hirundian men were about. Men killed because aggression was part of their nature, and without proper upbringing men were unable to control their impulses, which drove them to blind violence. So this Hirundian man would shoot her dead if she made even one false move. And what would happen then? The man would most likely hide her body somewhere on Hirunda's side of the border. When the next border guard arrived here to release her, she would already have vanished without a trace. In Terra Unionia this could be interpreted in two possible ways: either she had been captured by Hirundians or she had been killed. Both of those options would make Terra Unionia prepare for an invasion.

"What are you thinking?" the man asked her.

Lena woke from her thoughts. She glared at him but remained silent.

"How long until we get some company?" the man asked her.

"You tell me," Lena snarled.

"It's hard to say," the man answered, vaguely.

"Indeed it is," Lena said, her tone equally non-committal.

"I don't know why but I expected you to be quite different," the man replied.

"Why are you talking to me?" Lena snapped.

She immediately regretted her sudden outburst. The man had gotten under her skin and that went against her training. She should never show her emotions to the enemy, not even when being tortured. However, patience was not one of her virtues. It never had been.

"So we will go on standing like this until our feet start to bleed," the man remarked. "I bet your feet will be first."

"I wouldn't be so sure if I were you," Lena replied, drily. "You know nothing about us."

"And what do you know about the rest of the world?"

"Enough."

"I should have known that," the man mocked.

"I have no interest in engaging in a conversation with you," Lena replied as flatly as she could. "I don't want to know anything about you."

"What *do* you want then?"

"What do I want? I want to get rid of you. I want you to return to the Hirundian side and keep going. I want to avoid composing a report about this incident. I want to avoid being reprimanded because my dealings with the enemy representative didn't follow official procedure."

“What does that mean?”

“What do you think it means?” Lena asked angrily, before realizing she was yet again revealing too much about her state of mind to the enemy. “What are you supposed to do in a situation like this?”

“Detain you,” the man answered matter of factly.

“As I should detain you.”

“I don’t think you have ever met anyone from this side of the border,” said the man.

“We are on Terra Unionia’s side,” Lena reminded.

“We haven’t reached agreement on that,” the man said and took a deep breath.

It caught Lena’s attention. The Hirundian was obviously getting tired of their situation. Fortunately so because it allowed Lena to acknowledge her own discomfort as well.

“You are a woman,” the man said.

“And you just realized that?” Lena asked sourly.

“Your frame is more fragile than mine. Without your gun you would have no chance against me whatsoever.”

“You want to put that to the test?” Lena asked. “Let’s lower our weapons and I will demonstrate how hard a Terra Unionian can hit.”

“Nice try, mousekin,” the man snorted.

“Was that supposed to be an insult of some kind?” Lena asked sarcastically.

“Both of us can’t be right,” the man said.

“No we can’t,” Lena stated.

“So either we are in Terra Unionia or we are not. One of us is wrong.”

“That’s you,” Lena told him without hesitation.

“I am equally sure it is you,” the man stated, “And this is just one of your tricks to mix my head up, so that I will let you go.”

“So you have no intention of letting me go?”

“You admit you are on the wrong side of the border?”

“Never,” Lena told him. “If I was on the Hirundian side, which is not the case here, wouldn’t you give me the same opportunity as I gave you?”

“I don’t think so,” the man said. “My orders are clear and I will follow orders, not feelings. My orders say that I will detain every single Terra Unionian who crosses the border.”

“Well, you must find it pretty annoying that we are not on the Hirundian side now,” Lena whispered, looking at the man and smiling slyly. “That’s

why I am reminding you that if you take so much as one step closer to me, I will shoot you.”

“Not if I shoot you first,” the man said.

“Well, that would be an easy way to start a war,” Lena said.

“What war?” the man asked. “There is only one nation in the world and that is one unified mankind, which cannot go to war with itself.”

“Terra Unionia is not part of Hirunda and never will be,” Lena stated with a fierce look in her eyes.

“That is exactly how we want it,” the man retorted.

“Why are you patrolling the border then?” Lena asked.

“To keep the maniacs away from the rest of the world.”

“Maniacs?”

“If you start making trouble, we will have to resolve any unfortunate disagreements by force, so there will never be another war in this world ever again.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” Lena said sarcastically. “I didn’t know invasion could be looked at as *resolving unfortunate disagreements by force*.”

“If we had any interest in your little sect,” the man continued, “We would have crossed the border a long time ago. We could easily still do that, if needed.”

“Which brings me back to the question I asked before – what are you doing here?”

“I am here to ensure the maniacs remain on their side of the border,” the man stated.

“Then why did you cross the border?”

“You crossed the border,” the man argued.

Lena sighed. The man’s stubbornness was frustrating beyond belief. It was obvious that he had been completely brainwashed. Lena leaned against the tree next to her and slid down to the ground. If she was going to continue pointing her gun at the enemy, she could do it just as well sitting down.

“So you yielded first,” the man said and raised his eyebrows.

“You’re wrong,” Lena stated. “If I have to keep you at gunpoint for days, I may as well restore my strength and do so sitting down.”

“Alright,” the man said and slowly kneeled down.

Lena was even more frustrated. She knew the following moments would be the longest ones of her life, but would they also be her final ones?

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“Aren’t you getting bored looking at my face?” Lena finally asked and by doing so, broke the silence which had been like a dense fog between her and the Hirundian for hours now.

“I’m doing fine,” the man told her. “And I will see even less of you once darkness falls.”

Lena sighed. The hours she had spent with the enemy were beginning to feel more and more like wasted ones. They were making no progress whatsoever. The man would not back down yet she was unable to detain him. They were simply waiting. They were waiting for the situation to resolve itself, which most likely meant shooting one another.

“I really didn’t expect the last days of my life to be like this,” Lena said, without even knowing why she was bothering to talk to him. The silence of the forest and all the unspoken words made her long for diversion. If that meant talking out loud with the enemy, then so be it.

“I’ve never heard of anyone on our side facing a situation like this,” the man said.

His words went against everything that Lena had expected to hear. His honesty surprised her.

“Neither have I,” Lena confessed, every fiber of her being instructing her not to say another word. “I was prepared for defectors; men who would give in immediately simply to reach this side of the border.”

“Don’t hold your breath waiting for men like that,” the man snorted.

“There has been a few of those,” Lena stated, suddenly realizing she had already said too much.

“That is a lie,” the man noted sourly.

“Yeah, it is,” Lena said. “I was just testing you,” but her words seemed to make the Hirundian suspicious.

“Who on Earth would want to come to Terra Unionia?” he asked in apparent confusion. “Who would ever want to abandon civilization and retire to be with a bunch of crazy people?”

“Just forget it,” Lena replied, trying her best to ignore the man’s provocative words.

“I will,” the man declared, “But at least I have found out that I can’t trust a single word that comes out of your mouth.”

“Whatever,” Lena sighed, “Whatever.”

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“I have to admit that I expected your backup to get here a little bit quicker,” Lena said.

The man shot Lena a look and she noticed from his expression that he had not expected her to say anything. Talking out loud was about the only thing now that was keeping Lena on alert when the rest of the forest had darkened. Not to mention that keeping the man at gunpoint had turned out to be quite mind-numbing. She couldn't allow herself to lose her focus, however, because this Hirundian was the silent type and therefore one of the most dangerous.

“Maybe they have been observing us for a while now,” the man remarked.

“I don't think so,” came Lena's reply. “I don't think there is anyone in this corner of these woods besides us. So if I shot you, I would get rid of you quite easily.”

“Then why don't you?”

“Maybe I will,” Lena told him.

“Maybe I will kill you first.”

“Maybe,” Lena noted, “Yet so far neither one of us has been particularly willing to do so.”

They stared at each other for a moment without saying a word. Lena knew however, that she was right. Even though the man was Hirundian, for some reason he had not killed her. In fact the man seemed to be quite even-tempered. There was something threatening in his silence, though, and therefore Lena felt she couldn't trust the man at all; not even to turn her eyes away from him for a second.

Suddenly the man raised his arm and something landed with a thud on the ground near Lena's feet.

“What the ...?!” Lena snapped and pointed her gun at his forehead. “One more move and you can say goodbye to your unfortunate life.”

“That's my map,” the man said with not a hint of irony. “You can take a look at it to see where we are.”

“I know exactly where we are,” Lena snapped, “So don't even dream that I would take the map to study it. It would only give you the opportunity to shoot me.”

"I have had that opportunity the whole time!" the man snapped in return. "Just like you have had the opportunity to shoot me at any moment!"

"Maybe so," Lena said. "I have to say it's quite surprising you haven't done so yet. I thought it would be quite easy for a man to do."

"I expected the same from you," the man told her. "I would have expected you to fire your weapon, just to shoot me in the leg if nothing else."

"I'm not brutal," Lena told him. "You still seem to forget that I gave you the opportunity to return to the Hirundian side when I first got you in my sight."

"*You* got me in *your* sight?" the man asked, laughing. "I think it was the other way around."

"Are you really trying to provoke me?" Lena asked. "Do you really want me to shoot you dead? Is that what you want?"

"If it is the only way of getting rid of you I might actually choose that option."

"Just say the word," Lena gritted her teeth. "I am more than ready. In fact, I should shoot you without any mercy just because you have not retreated from our territory despite ordering you to do so many times already."

"We are on my side of the border," the man snapped. "There is a map by your feet. Take a look at it!"

"Your map is useless!"

"Look at the map and you will see you're not a guard here but a detainee!"

"Gaah!" Lena growled in frustration. "One more word and you will die!"

"Take. The. Map," the man said slowly, but quite more demanding than even once before.

"Why won't you just give up?!" Lena asked in frustration. "Do you *want* to die? Do you *want* me to shoot you dead just because you cannot admit that you have crossed the border?!"

"ME?!" the man yelled. "*You're* the one who has crossed the border!"

"I don't care how many times you repeat that mantra!" Lena told him. "It does not change the fact that we are in Terra Unionia!"

"Take a look at my map!" the man said, exhausted.

Lena stared unblinkingly at the man. What was he trying to do? Why had he thrown his map down by her feet? What were the real risks if she took

the map in her hands and studied the technology used in Hirunda? Why should she do something like that? The man was a Hirundian and Hirundians were murderers. Lena *hated* them. So what was she waiting for now? Where was her anger?

“Take a look at that map,” the man told her again, much calmer, like he had sensed the turmoil within Lena.

“Why should I?” Lena asked.

“Why not?” the man asked in return. “What do you have to lose? Or do you want to shoot me?”

“Of course I do,” Lena claimed.

“I don’t believe it,” the man said, “Because if that were the case you would have done so already.”

Lena didn’t respond. She was annoyed by the man’s sudden calm. Was it some kind of trick? What was his game?

“Take a look at the map,” the man said one more time.

“Fine,” Lena finally agreed. “I will take the map and look at it.”

“Alright.”

Lena glared at the man from beneath her eyebrows and wondered if this was the last moment of her life. Everything she knew and believed in was fighting against what she was about to do. Yet she knew she didn’t always do the wisest things. In her family, the role of the sensible one belonged to her sister; a sister she might never see again.

Lena transferred her gun to her right hand and started to feel on the ground down by her feet with her left hand. Finally her fingertips touched something and she picked up the small device about the size of her palm. The touch of her fingers illuminated its display and Lena saw a map on it.

Lena took a quick look at the map and saw the pond which was to her east about twenty to thirty meters away. Suddenly she saw something quite unexpected. According to the map, the Terra Unionian border ran behind her.

“Well?” the man asked.

Lena didn’t know what to say but she felt her heart skip a beat. She had been wrong. She had made an error and crossed the border to the Hirundian side. The tears welled up in her eyes and Lena turned the map to the ground. She didn’t want it to light up her face to reveal her shock to the man; shedding tears in front of him would simply be too humiliating. She would never give him such pleasure.

“Well?” the man asked again.

“Your map is a forgery,” Lena hissed at him.

Her accusation made an impact on the man.

“It isn’t,” he said quite seriously and the tension between them tightened its grasp again.

“It is,” Lena claimed. “The border is located in the wrong place. What kind of trick is this?”

“You are on our side of the border,” the man told her again. “So you finally admit that.”

“Never!” Lena shouted. “We are in Terra Unionia!”

“The map doesn’t lie,” the man stated. “You have made a mistake and you have crossed the border! You have violated the border!”

“Shut up!” Lena shouted. “I am not in Hirunda!”

“Yes you are!”

Lena shouted in frustration as she stood up again. Then she leapt towards the man as quickly as she could and in an instant the cold barrel of her gun was pressed against his forehead, but her foolhardiness came at a price; she could feel the hard metal of the man’s gun also pressing against her temple.

“Calm down or I will fire my weapon,” the man stated. “Don’t even think I don’t mean it.”

“You and your map,” Lena hissed and she felt her anger getting stronger. “You Hirundians are much more deceitful than I expected.”

“Lower your gun and come with me,” the man said. “This does not have to end in bloodshed.”

“I’d rather die than go with you,” Lena stated. “You and your forged map won’t convince me that I am in Hirunda. I am not in Hirunda!”

“We’re not in Terra Unionia either!” the man shouted. “You saw that from my map with your own eyes!”

“Your map is a *fake*,” Lena hissed, the rage in her exploding.

All of a sudden she lowered her weapon in order to hit the man’s face with it. He lost his balance and took a cautionary step back. Quicker than the wink of an eye he was able to steady himself and responded in kind, returning her gesture. Even though Lena tried to dodge his arm, he still managed to hit the corner of her eye. His blow was strong enough to make her lurch backwards and for a moment all she was able to see was white sparks against the blackness.

“Drop your map on the ground!” she heard him order.

“What?!” Lena yelled, dazed, looking up at the man.

He had the advantage now. He was already pointing his gun at her while she was still trying to steady herself after his blow. What had he just said? Why hadn't he already shot her dead?

"Drop your map on the ground," the man repeated. "I am giving you one more chance."

"Oh please," Lena snorted.

"Quit being so paranoid!" the man shouted in frustration. "Are all Terra Unionians like you? I could have shot you after that last trick of yours, I still could, but you're still alive!"

"Insulting me will only make me shoot you sooner!" Lena announced and aimed her gun at him again.

"So if you're going to shoot me, you may as well show me your map," the man said. "What have you got to lose? What could I possibly do with your map that would change this situation in any way?"

Lena weighed up the options for a moment. There was sense to his words, but why should she trust him? He was Hirundian; *the enemy*. Why should she even bother to hear what he had to say? Why hadn't she already shot him?

Why was she betraying the entire country of Terra Unionia this way?

"Fine," Lena finally said without knowing why. She noticed that agreeing with the man calmed her nerves a little. "I'm going to take my map out of my chest pocket."

The man nodded but without lowering his weapon.

Lena took her map, held it for a moment so that the man could actually see it was not another weapon. Then she threw it onto the ground between them.

The man switched his gun from one hand to the other, but still pointing it at Lena, until he knelt down slowly to pick the map up off the ground.

"You have to open it," Lena told him.

The man opened the map and Lena knew what he could see. In the dark, the contours of the terrain would be presented as red lines on the map's surface and the border would glow as a dashed blue line against an otherwise dark background.

"What is this?" the man asked her.

"What did I tell you?" Lena said. "Your map is a fake. It's the only explanation."

"Your map has the border in the wrong place."

"Nice try," Lena snorted.

The man folded the map up and threw it back near Lena's feet. Lena sighed. She knew she wouldn't be able to get rid of the man without shooting him. Why couldn't he just leave?

An awkward silence fell upon them once more. Lena didn't know what to think. She was no longer horrified by this Hirundian, she was simply even more perplexed at the unexpected turn of events. Why were their maps different? Where were they exactly?

"We will never agree on which side of the border we are now," Lena said.

"That's most likely the only thing we can agree on."

"So?" Lena asked.

"So what?"

"So what now?"

The man took a deep breath and looked at Lena for a moment. Lena thought she saw a glimmer of doubt and hesitation on his face; emotions she could relate to.

"I don't know," the man finally said.