



ASATO ASATO

ILLUSTRATION:
Shirabii

MECHANICAL DESIGN:
I-IV

86

[EIGHTY-
SIX]

6

DARKEST
BEFORE
THE DAWN



86
[EIGHTY-]
SIX

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DARKEST BEFORE THE DAWN

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ILLUSTRATION:

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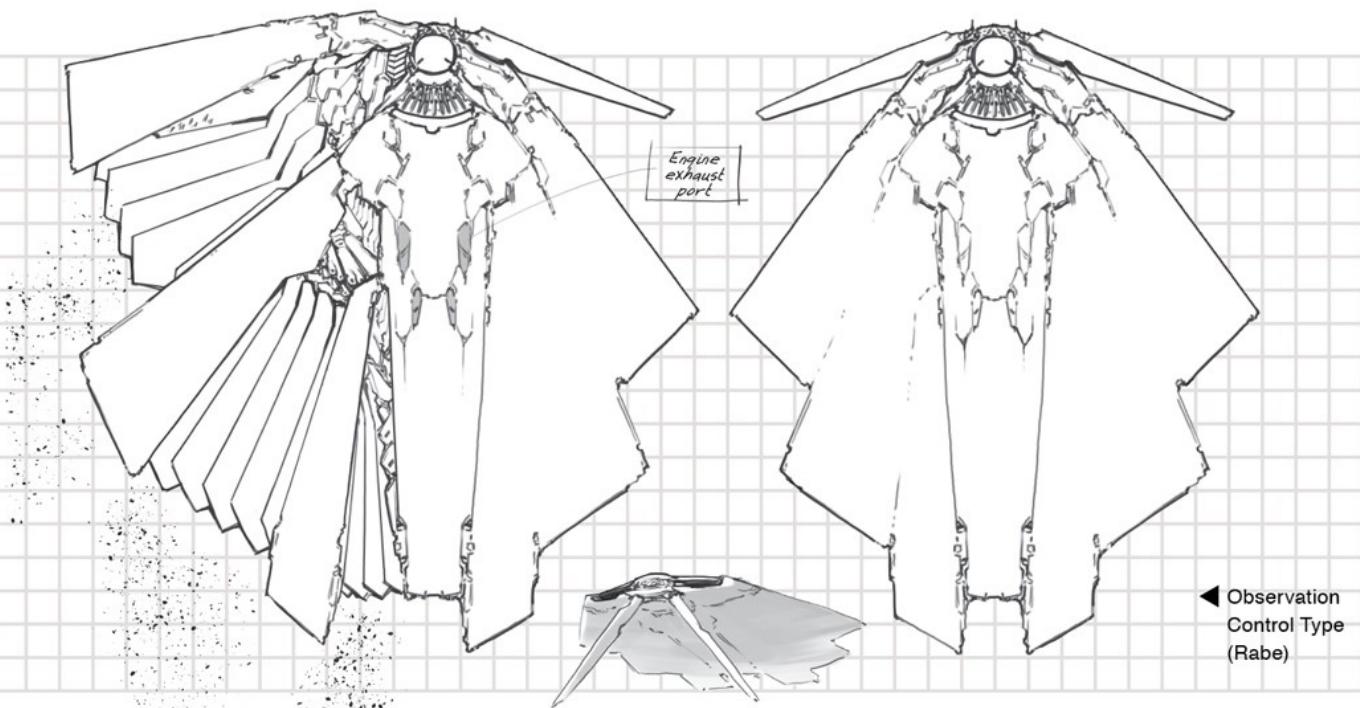
MECHANICAL DESIGN:

I-IV



THE BASIC DRONES

[mechanical design] I-IV



Observation Control Type

Rabe

[S P E C S]

Height: approximately 122 m

Weight: unknown

Electronic Disruption Type

Eintagsfliege

[S P E C S]

Height: approximately 10 cm

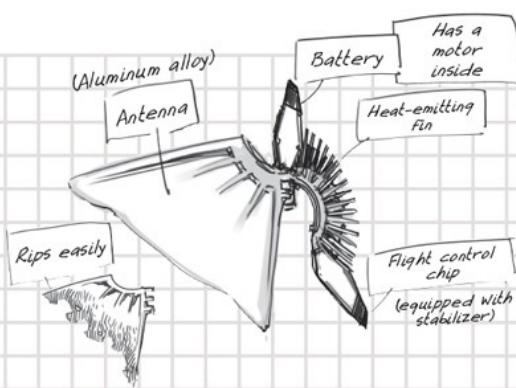
Weight: approximately 2 g

Observation Control Type (Rabe)

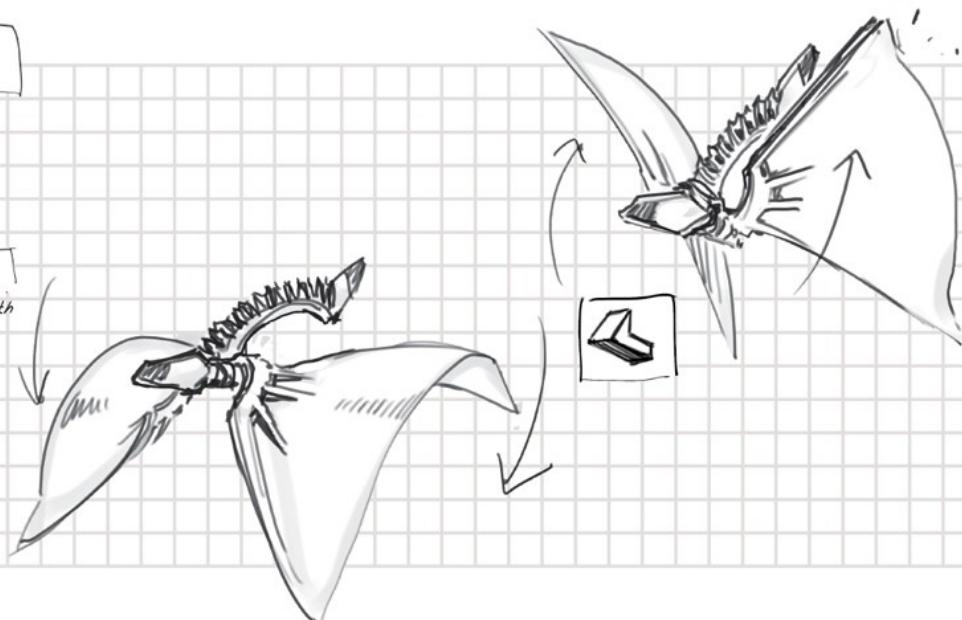
A massive, flying Legion unit. The mother unit of the Eintagsfliege. In addition to assisting with electronic jamming, it also uses its airborne prowess to survey enemy territory.

Electronic Disruption Type (Eintagsfliege)

The smallest Legion type, but perhaps the most menacing when it comes to disrupting the enemy's capacity for warfare. Their wings emit powerful electromagnetic waves, which jam enemy communications. In the United Kingdom, they blanket the sky, preventing sunlight from reaching the surface and rapidly chilling the atmosphere.



Electronic Disruption Type ►
(Eintagsfliede)



[EIGHTY-SIX]



life, land, and leg
All reduced to a nul

The United Kingdom
of Roa Gracia
With everyone at the
Revich Observation Base
June 2150 (A.R.)
Vladilena Milić

86
[EIGHTY-SIX]

LEGION:LIST

All known Legion units. Their designations and overall features are as follows.

Change your way of life in order to move forward.

EIGHTY-SIX

Life, land, and legacy.
All reduced to a number.

01 Scout Type AMEISE

Its name is derived from the German word for ant. It is in charge of scouting and reconnaissance for large units such as the Löwe. It also has a host of observational responsibilities, including acquiring targets for long-range units. It is among the most commonly seen Legion types.

02 Dragoon Type GRAUWOLF

Its name is derived from the German word for wolf. It is lightly armored but armed with high-offensive prowess. It fights primarily using blades but can also offer support fire with its back-mounted launcher.

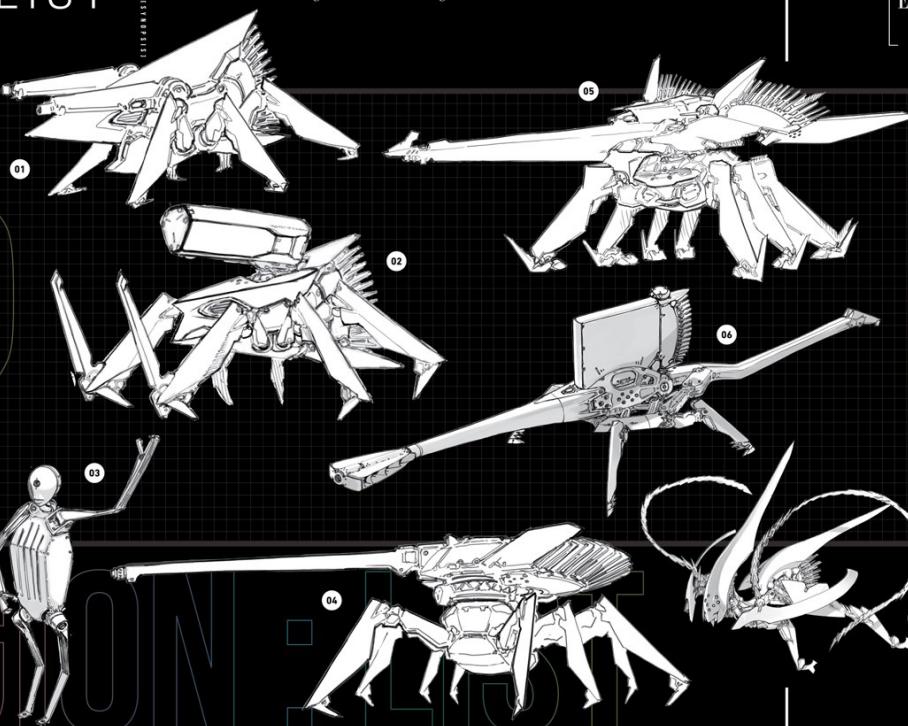
03 Antipersonnel Special Weapon SELF-PROPELLED MINE

A Legion unit that "clings" to humans or human-made weapons systems before self-destructing. Its tactics are simple though often inefficient. It is roughly the same size as a human and can therefore be equipped with antipersonnel rifles.

04 Tank Type LÖWE

Its name is derived from the German word for lion. This is the Legion's primary offensive unit. True to its inspiration, the king of the animal world—the Löwe has a 120 mm turret capable of reducing any human to scraps.

Illustration : HV



05 Heavy Tank Type DINOSAURIA

Its name is derived from dinosaur. It boasts a 155 mm turret that dwarfs even the Löwe's and is also equipped with secondary armaments for nearly any scenario. It is one of the most powerful Legion units and is often sent when attacking positions of high strategic importance.

06 Long-Range Gunner Type SKORPION

Its name is derived from the German word for scorpion. This is an unarmored unit that possesses a powerful cannon capable of firing across long distances. It is usually located at the back line of a formation, offering covering fire for Legion units fighting at the front.

07 High-Mobility Type PHÖNIX

A new type of Legion that appeared before Shin and his comrades during the underground-terminal battle in the Republic. It is capable of exceptional stealth and mobility and specializes in high-speed combat, utilizing its twin blades. It also used liquid armor during the Revich Citadel battle, though with less effectiveness. In addition, it has proven to be capable of transforming parts of its armor to launch projectile attacks.



Appearance during the Revich Citadel battle

Life, land, and legacy.
All reduced to a number.

86

EIGHTY-
SIX

6
DARKEST BEFORE THE DAWN

ASATO ASATO

ILLUSTRATION: Shirabii

MECHANICAL DESIGN: I-IV

Darkest Before the Dawn

For the Eighty-Six, death is a way of life.

—EIGHTY-SIXTH STRIKE PACKAGE,
MISCELLANEOUS JOURNAL SCRAWLING

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86—EIGHTY-SIX

Vol. 6

ASATO ASATO

**Translation by Roman Lempert
Cover art by Shirabii**

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

86—Eighty-Six—Ep. 6

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PROLOGUE

HARSH MISTRESS

The Legion do not dream.

Dreams were the brain's way of sorting through memories. And though the Legion's Liquid Micromachines were modeled after a large mammal's central nervous system, they were still only mechanical. They didn't need to execute the same process.

And for that reason, she would never dream again.

<<No Face to Mistress>>

An incoming transmission from one of her consort units roused her from the twilit void of her standby mode. Her optical sensor whirred to life. For the first time in the ten years since this body of hers had been put into operation, she got the impression that her fuselage was beginning to creak.

The United Kingdom—which she was currently fighting—had branded her the Merciless Queen. Her armor was glacial-white and had been emblazoned with the Personal Mark of a goddess leaning against a crescent moon. She'd long since lost the machine guns she had once been equipped with. She was, after all, the last of the original production line of Ameise: the Scout-type Legion.

The transmission was relayed through the Eintagsflege

blanketing the sky and the Rabe—the Sentry-type Legion—lording even higher above them. It reached her from far beyond her hiding place in the Dragon Fang Mountain.

<<Operation objective incomplete. Requesting explanation as to why operation objectives were rescinded.>>

She resisted the urge to sigh. Of course, she'd long since discarded the mouth, throat, and lungs needed to do so, but old habits were not so easily forgotten.

<<Rescinded? The objective was completed, No Face. In the wake of this operation, the United Kingdom has lost the majority of its Alkonosts. The enemy front line has fallen, and we have successfully gained footing in their territory. In the next operation, we will penetrate their defensive line and bring the fighting to open terrain: the arena where we Legion...where armored weapons reign supreme.>>

In a cold, calm, and collected manner, she asserted that the unicorns of the north were on the brink of collapse. From hundreds of kilometers away, No Face responded to her report. No Face served as second-in-command of the Legion's unified wide-area tactical network's command echelon: a Supreme Commander unit that oversaw the offensive against multiple nations. No Face also doubled as one of the Supreme Commander units in charge of the control network that handled decision-making for the Legion across the continent.

He—it was assumed that No Face had once been a man anyway—was a commander unit created by assimilating the neural network of a dead human being, so he likely retained trace memories and personality quirks from his time among the living.

But the Legion's communications were secured, and in the process of encrypting and decrypting messages, the speaker's idiosyncrasies tended to be ironed out. When her own words were transmitted to No Face, they likely came across as the dull, emotionless noises of a machine, as well.

<<Capture of primary targets—Báleygr, Hveðrungr, and Minerva—is not yet

complete.>>

These three high-priority targets were in the anti-United Kingdom front—her designated war zone.

The name and personal history of Báleygr, the unique individual capable of pinpointing the Legion's whereabouts, were unknown to the Legion.

Hveðrungr was the code name for the developer of the United Kingdom's drone-piloting system—the Sirins. His name was unconfirmed, but he was presumed to be Viktor Idinarohk, the fifth prince of the United Kingdom.

Minerva was the code name for a Republic engineer. Her name: Henrietta Penrose.

The former two were confirmed to be present at the United Kingdom base during the last battle. Minerva was not detected at the time, but intel suggested she had moved from the Republic to the Federacy—and from there to the United Kingdom.

<<Is their capture imperative to the completion of the Legion's directive?>>

<<It carries strategic significance. In addition, there is high probability that Báleygr may be a worthy successor to receive total command over the Legion. Receipt of new directives is the primary objective of the unified network at present.>>

<<.....>>

The Legion were siege weapons developed by the Giadian Empire. Even after all this time, *their goal had not changed*. The Legion identified humankind as a target marked for destruction—even after the Empire had fallen—in accordance with their fallen nation's dying will. They were adhering to their final order: *Wipe out the enemy*.

The Legion never once rose in revolt against humankind. They were obedient tools incepted by flesh-and-blood people—albeit people who were no longer alive—and they were simply following orders. Seeking out a human to lead them was an instinct hardwired into their central processors.

The Legion were initially created to fill the roles of rank-and-file soldiers and low-ranking officers. High-ranking officers—who were exclusively human—would still be in charge of strategy and

delegation.

One of the safety measures applied to the Legion's initial directive specified that if they went a certain period of time without receiving new orders, they were to request orders from a member of their assigned leadership. And if no such person was available, they were to seek out a successor they deemed fit to command them.

And as No Face had stated, Báleygr was a potential successor to receiving this right to command the Legion. Mixed Onyx and Pyrope blood was seen as a mark of the Giadian Imperial bloodline. High-ranking nobles vehemently rejected the mixing of different bloodlines, and old households in possession of special abilities were particularly opposed to the idea. There was no telling how the heterogenic aspects of their bloodline might influence each other once mixed, after all.

Taking this into consideration, it was generally accepted there could be no mixed bloodline other than the Imperial bloodline. And it was probable that the current administration had repeatedly dispatched Báleygr to frontline missions, where the mortality rate was exceptionally high, out of a belief that the old ruling class would be a hindrance to the new regime. However...

She sank into contemplation. According to the optical footage captured by the Phönix, Báleygr was a soldier in his late teens. And there was no heir to the Imperial bloodline in that age range, even among the branch families. If there was, there would have been no need to crown the Imperial princess, who had still been an infant at the time of her coronation...

That soldier could not be the "emperor" the Legion sought...

But No Face's next transmission derailed her train of thought.

<<Mistress. Did you lure Báleygr into your designated war zone?>>

For a moment, she kept quiet. His assumption was correct. That was her intent when she delivered that message through the Phönix. She had programmed a unit that should not have been defeated to relay her words in the unlikely event that it was. The message would contain nothing of discernible value; it was a mere summons to draw Báleygr to her, without giving so much as

a hint of her whereabouts.

Except...

<<That's our objective, isn't it, No Face...? Is there a problem with that?>>

<<Negative. After Báleygr is lured to the designated location, he must be exterminated.>>

.....?

She fell into puzzled silence. If she still had eyebrows, she would have surely furrowed them by now.

<<Are we not seeking a successor?>>

That was what No Face had said earlier. Such was the Legion's collective will. She was one of the Supreme Commander units in charge of the unified network, and even she couldn't resist the instincts hard-coded into the Legion, both in the case of absolute orders and absolute restrictions.

<<Affirmative. Our mission is to seek out the successor to absolute command...>>

No Face then cut out for a moment. He had paused, as if in confusion. But in the next moment, the malevolent chill befitting a commander of the Legion—they that stood in stark opposition to all remaining spheres of human influence—filled his voice once more.

It was the unwavering tone of one that would slaughter anything and everything.

<<...and swiftly dispose of him.>>

**Grethe**

Ranked colonel. She is the commanding officer for Shin and his group, and the unit commander for the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package. She developed the new type of Feldreß, the Reginleif.

**Annette**

A friend of Lena's and head of research and development for the Para-RAID system. She was childhood friends with Shin back when they both lived in the Republic's First Sector. She was dispatched with Lena to the Federacy and was able to finally reunite with Shin.

**Shiden**

One of the Eighty-Six, and a subordinate of Lena's following the departure of Shin and his group. She is a valiant warrior who protected Lena and survived on the Republic's battlefield until the very end. She has since joined the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package, where she heads Lena's personal guard.

**Vika**

The fifth prince of the United Kingdom of Roa Gracia. He is the Amethystus of the current generation—a unique Esper with superhuman intelligence. These Esper are direct products of the Roa Gracia royal bloodline. He developed the human-shaped, semiautonomous control units—the Sirins—and supports the United Kingdom's primary war front.

**Lerche**

The first of the Sirins. She possesses the neural network of Vika's deceased childhood friend. Her speech patterns are often peculiar.

Bernholdt

One of Shin's subordinates in the Federacy military and a veteran sergeant. Looks up to Shin as his commander despite being the older of the two and was appointed captain of one of the newly formed Strike Package's squadrons. He supports Shin in battle.

Marcel

A Federacy soldier. He was originally a Feldreß operator, but in a past battle, he suffered a debilitating injury, which left him unable to pilot a Feldreß. He has since transferred to the role of support personnel in Lena's command car.

Dustin

A student who gave a speech condemning the treatment of the Eighty-Six prior to the Republic's fall. He volunteered to join the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package after Republic citizens were liberated. He is a member of Anju's unit.

Rito

A young man of the Eighty-Six who survived the Republic's fall and joined the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package. He was once a member of a squadron Shin belonged to. He has less combat experience than many other members of the Strike Package.

Ludmila

A Sirin. She, along with other Sirins, sacrificed herself during the previous battle at the Revich Citadel. They used their bodies to form a "bridge," providing their allies with a way to storm the base.

CHARACTERS

Federal Republic of Giad Military Eighty-Sixth Strike Package

Shin

A young man marked by the Republic of San Magnolia with the stigma of being a subhuman Eighty-Six. He possesses the ability to hear the "voices" of the Legion and is a pilot of remarkable skill who has survived countless battles. He is currently the operations commander for the newly formed Eighty-Sixth Strike Package.

Lena

A Handler who once fought alongside Shin and the Eighty-Six. She has been reunited with them following their death march into Legion territory cruelly disguised as a Special Reconnaissance mission and now serves as tactical commander for the Federacy, once again fighting side by side with them.

Frederica

An orphaned daughter of the old Empire of Giad, where the Legion were developed. She cooperates with Shin and the Eighty-Six for the sake of defeating Kiriya, her former knight and brotherly guardian, who was assimilated by the Legion. She currently serves as an assistant control aide for Lena in the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package.

Raiden

A young man of the Eighty-Six who found shelter in the Federacy along with Shin. An inseparable friend to Shin, Raiden saves him from isolation when the haunting voices of the Legion weigh upon him.

Theo

A young man of the Eighty-Six. A coolheaded cynic with a sharp tongue. He excels in high-mobility combat by moving about freely with the help of his wires.

Kurena

A young woman of the Eighty-Six and an exceptionally skilled sniper. She harbors feelings for Shin, but will they ever be reciprocated...?

Anju

A young woman of the Eighty-Six. She appears graceful but shows a much more ruthless side during battle. She specializes in suppressing fire through the use of missiles.

EIGHTY-SIX

CHAPTER 1

IN THE WEREWOLVES' FOREST

The Legion force heading for the Revich Citadel Base changed course soon after the base was retaken. In response, the United Kingdom's reinforcements weaved their way through the enemy's advancing forces and reached the base a little over a day later.

The Legion offensive was currently being delayed thanks to these reinforcements... A delay was all they could manage. They couldn't counterattack, force the Legion to retreat, or even hold the line. In other words, neither the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package nor all the forces of the United Kingdom's 1st Armored Corps would last on this battlefield.

Regrettably, the Revich Citadel Base would have to be abandoned despite the Strike Package's and the Sirins' desperate struggle to reclaim it. The relief unit's white transport truck and the Strike Package's steel-blue heavy transport vehicle left the base behind, solemn as a funeral procession.

As she sat in the tightly packed passenger compartment of one of the heavy transport vehicles, Lena stared out over the bleak snowscape through the bulletproof-glass window.

She gazed at the precipitous cliffside base—the site of their woefully short-lived respite from the battlefield, the base they'd fought against the Legion to reclaim and ultimately failed to keep. Her attention shifted to one corner of the cliff, where the remains

of the siege road were just barely visible.

Those Sirins and their Alkonosts, who had willingly sacrificed their mechanical bodies to form that gruesome bridge, held prized United Kingdom state secrets. The Sirins especially so, since the makeup of their neural networks would be exceedingly valuable to the Legion. The United Kingdom tried to recover what they could in the short amount of time that they occupied the base, but what was left over would have to be completely destroyed with explosives.

They gave their lives for the sake of humankind but wouldn't be mourned as humans.

The Eighty-Six, whose service during the Revich Citadel Base operation was no less instrumental, also suffered heavy damage. Battle-hardened though they were, they still had to fight for their lives in harsh, snowy weather conditions they weren't accustomed to. And even with the odds stacked against them, they ultimately succeeded in pushing back the Legion. But from a tactical standpoint, their efforts bore no fruit, and they walked away from the mission with next to nothing. None of them had said a word since leaving the base behind. The sense of defeat lingered in the air like a heavy smog.

The siege route made from the wreckage of the Alkonosts as well as the Sirins' broken bodies was easily the most haunting element of the battle. The dead filled the moats, forming a mountain of ruin that allowed the Eighty-Six to scale the cliff. It was a massive gravestone marking the place where the human-shaped dolls were crushed and trampled to death, laughing all the while.

Seeing it broadcast on a screen was ghastly enough, but the Eighty-Six had watched it happen before their very eyes. And they then had to walk over that road, knowingly treading upon those girls' remains, acknowledging their sacrifices as they pressed onward.

Their mental anguish was immeasurable.

Shin, now sitting opposite Lena, had been there, too. Lena frowned, recalling the expression he had made as he beheld the mountain of the Sirins' remains. He had looked like a lost, confused child who could've vanished into the snow at a

moment's notice. Even Shin, who had survived the horrors of the Eighty-Sixth Sector with certain death hot on his heels every day, had made such an expression...

Turning her attention to the rest of the compartment, Lena watched the Processors slumbering silently, half-sunk into their seats. None of them seemed like they would be opening their eyes anytime soon. Shin similarly leaned against the firm backrest, with arms crossed and eyes closed. He wore his usual, almost overly calm expression, but he was visibly pale. He still hadn't shaken off the several days' worth of fatigue he'd built up during the siege battle.

He's asleep, right...?

Lena gingerly reached out and grabbed the blanket that had been tossed to his side. A person's body temperature fell while they slept, and the heavy transport vehicle was air-conditioned, so she imagined he wouldn't get much rest if he was cold. Struggling against the cramped space of the compartment, she slowly unfolded the blanket. But just as she moved to cover him up with it, Shin's crimson eyes fluttered open.

"...Lena?"

"Eep!"

He blinked a few times and then looked up at her in a daze. Realizing how close they were, Lena reflexively jumped back. She let go of the blanket in the process, and it gently fell onto his lap.

"...? Did something happen?"

"N-no. No, er..."

Lena sat back down in her seat with an unusual swiftness. She then straightened her back and placed her hands on her knees in an excessively formal fashion. Finally, she spoke, while turning her flushed face in a random direction.

"I thought you were asleep. So I..."

"Oh..."

His reply was lackluster, and his reaction was still a bit sluggish. Lena anxiously furrowed her brows.

"You must be tired. Go ahead and get some rest."

"Not yet. We're still in enemy territory."

Shin shook his head gently, knowing he wouldn't be getting any sleep.

"The United Kingdom's reinforcements are handling patrols and combat. Their numbers are more than sufficient, so you don't have to push yourself, Shin... It's fine. This isn't the Eighty-Sixth Sector."

This isn't the lonely battlefield where all the fighting and the death is left for the Eighty-Six to endure alone. This isn't the Eighty-Sixth Sector, where the whole world is against you.

"I know you might consider it human nature for people to sacrifice others to save themselves. But it's also human nature to fight to protect one's home and the people they hold dear. So...it's fine, really."

"....."

Shin said nothing. He just hung his head and looked at the floor. His blinking had slowed down, as if he was withstanding the urge to let his eyes close. His gaze was unfocused, too. He was likely exhausted.

"...Lena, you..."

The words that left his lips didn't feel like they were directed at her, but at himself.

"...You can still say that...? Even after seeing *that*...?"

Lena blinked once at his question but soon nodded when she understood what he meant: the words she'd once told him.

Is this world beautiful?

This world... Its people... Could you learn to love them?

"How can you be so...?"

His question was curt yet felt so oddly imploring that Lena couldn't help but crack a faint, sad smile. He'd completely given up on this world, and to him, the sight of the siege route the Sirins had made with their own bodies felt like the symbol of all the world's malice gathered into one place.

That bridge of bodies represented the bitter truth of the world.

And Lena didn't want to believe it, but maybe that was true. Still...

"...You're wrong. I... Even I can't help but think that people can be despicable."

There were times when she couldn't help but shiver with disgust at the maliciousness of the world; at her homeland, which felt no shame in persecuting the Eighty-Six; at the way her

reports constantly went ignored; at the way her complaints were misunderstood; at everyone's apathy; at the sight of her subordinates, whom she knew by name, dying in droves.

Not to mention the piles of corpses of the unnamed many who had perished in the large-scale offensive.

She also felt disgust at herself—for never asking anyone's name until she was admonished for that very act of negligence; for never even thinking it strange.

The world and its people weren't all beautiful and kind. There were some who were so unsightly that she couldn't even bring herself to face them directly.

And still...

"But... It bothers me. If that's really how the world is, everyone is... No, I am..."

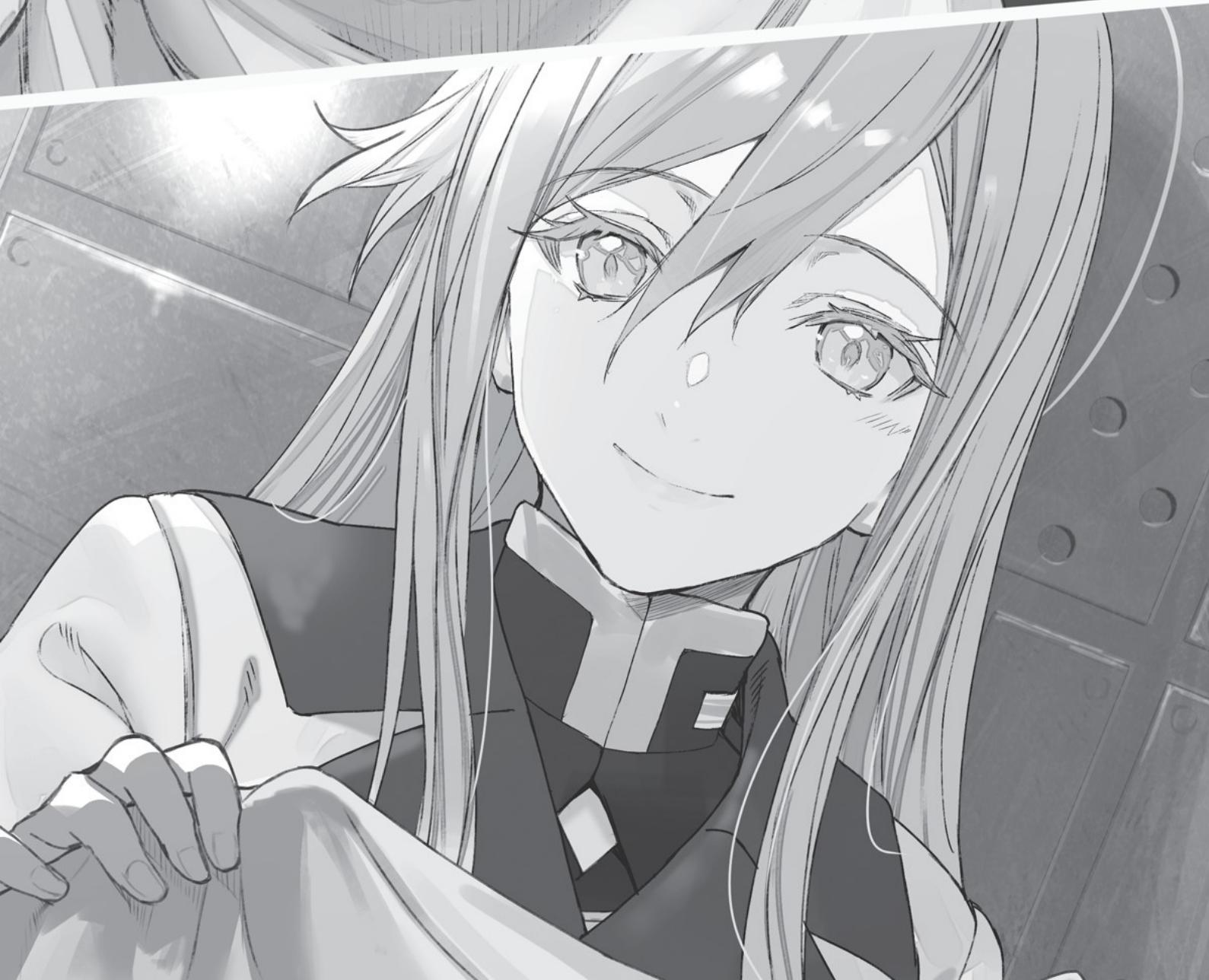
Before she could lay her heart bare at the height of despair, she stopped herself and shook her head. He was no doubt exhausted. His body and mind must have been screaming for respite.

"I'm sorry. We should finish this chat later... Forget about it and relax for now. If you can't fall asleep, just rest your eyes."

She reached out for the fallen blanket and drew it up to his shoulders this time... This, of course, brought her hand near his face. The back of it brushed against his cheek, and she quickly banished all thoughts of how cold he felt. Instead, she stuffed the edges of the blanket between Shin's back and his seat so that the vehicle's vibrations wouldn't cause it to fall off.

She then returned to her own seat and watched him. Abiding by her words, Shin closed his eyes, and before long, his body grew limp.

He had been so exhausted that he could hardly keep his eyes open, so Lena couldn't imagine he would stay awake much longer. The heavy transport vehicle's seats were hard, and sitting in them was by no means a comfortable experience. But even so, Shin was able to lean back and fall asleep in no time at all.



His sleeping face was surprisingly youthful and quite fitting for his age. Lena couldn't resist the urge to smile, but she soon knit her brows again. The reason why he fell asleep so easily was more than his exhaustion from the siege. The ghostly wails of the Legion had died down when their large group dispersed. And the Sirins were gone, too.

For the last few days, he had been fighting in an area where the nightmarish screams of the mechanical ghosts constantly boomed in his ears over a several-kilometer radius. It put significant mental strain on him. To make matters worse, he wasn't used to siege battles. Challenging a stalwart fortification and repeatedly launching ineffective attacks had a way of wearing on one's spirit. His fatigue was so severe that the moment the opportunity presented itself, he immediately dozed off.

...Why?

Lena pursed her lips tightly. The opposite had happened time and again. Lena shared the sorrow, the pain, and the guilt that weighed on her, and Shin accepted it and comforted her.

But why didn't Shin ever say he was in pain? Why didn't he rely on her...?

†

A holographic map appeared over the mother-of-pearl table, which was covered in polished ebony.

"In the wake of the recent Legion offensives, the second line and the 1st Armored Corps' tactical area have fallen."

This briefing was being conducted in the United Kingdom of Roa Gracia's royal palace, in a conference room dedicated for war councils. It was attended by military officers and members of the nobility who were in charge of military operations. Even those who were still on the front lines appeared in holographic form and watched the three-dimensional map on the table.

The map's holographic lines traced the shape of one of the United Kingdom's war zones: a corner of the Dragon Corpse mountain range, in the country's northern region. The United Kingdom's army was stationed to the north, while the Legion were

lined up along the south. Between both armies was a lowland, which served as the battlefield of the second line.

By now, the United Kingdom's forces had been pushed back to the northern mountain's peak, having been forced to retreat to their reserve encampment. The Legion's main force had covered the base of the northern mountain, and the majority of the map was dyed crimson with red dots that signified the enemy forces.

"The Legion are currently forming an advance encampment in this area. According to the estimates made by the Strike Package's Esper, there is an enemy battalion included in this encampment. Our recon reported that this battalion is a group of armored units, primarily made of Löwe and Dinosauria. It is safe to assume they're preparing to launch another offensive."

This was one of the Legion's trademark tactics for breaking through enemy lines. They would pressure peripheral defenses by sending in a concentration of Dinosauria, which boasted overwhelming firepower, and then suppress the front with additional units. They'd repeated this tactic time and again against the United Kingdom, the Federacy, the Alliance, and even against the Republic of San Magnolia, following the Morpho's destruction of their walls.

"If they break through our reinforcements in the Dragon Corpse mountain range, the next battlefield will be in the southern plains. These are the United Kingdom's farmlands—and effectively our lifeline. If the flames of war consume that area as well... As much as I hate to sound disrespectful, while Your Majesty and his castle might survive, the United Kingdom itself will be finished."

A tension that was unbearable even by the standards of this militaristic country hung in the air over the war council. At this point, there was effectively no battleground their reserve forces could fall back to. If they didn't hold their position... If they couldn't reclaim more ground, they would have no future.

"And there's also the issue of the temperature dropping due to the Eintagsfliege's interference, which has persisted since early spring. If we don't deal with them by summer, the farmlands in the south will be ruined."

Seated on his throne at the farthest end of the room, the king let out a small sigh.

"So our kingdom only has a month and a half left to live. Damned Legion... Keeping those flies of theirs in the air at all times should be putting a considerable strain on them, as well."

The Legion produced energy primarily through solar power generation. As adaptable as they were, even they would struggle to maintain a presence in the north, where sunlight was sparse, and all the more so during the winter. This was why they relied on geothermal power generators as well.

And the Eintagsfliege's wings could only carry them up to a certain height. In order for them to cover the skies of the southern United Kingdom, they'd have to rely on the wind and the Zentaur's long-distance launching capabilities. This meant they needed a base capable of launching them, and there was a limited number of places that could allow for that.

One such place was the Legion stronghold, which was also responsible for producing their large reserves of geothermal electricity.

"The Dragon Fang Mountain... We must destroy that base at all costs. And quickly."

"By your will, Your Majesty. We will need to slip through the Legion's defenses, take control of the mountain, and halt deployment of the Eintagsfliege. In doing so, we will also interrupt their unit production... If we cannot accomplish that, and also push them out of the second front, our country has no future."

The king nodded once and then asked:

"What of the Strike Package, Zafar?"

The crown prince, who was the overall commander of the second front's forces, nodded. The unit they'd been loaned from their neighboring country would serve as the lynchpin of the Dragon Fang Mountain capture operation. That blade was still sharp.

"Its officers are headed to the capital in anticipation of the operation, while their main force is currently on reserve duty. We will have to wait for their supplies to be replenished by the Federacy... And yet they are our decisive sword for combating the mechanical ghosts. Putting them to use unnecessarily would only serve to chip their blade away."

"They can be deployed, yes?"

He was referring to both the stalwart blade loaned to them by the Federacy and the birds of death the United Kingdom begrudgingly took pride in. Zafar cracked a thin smile, like a sword drawn from its sheath.

"Of course."

†

"...About restocking the Juggernauts we lost during the Revich Citadel Base operation—we should be able to get the numbers we need on the next scheduled supply. The Federacy's still strugglin' to restock and cover the losses from the large-scale offensive, so we don't have a surplus or anythin', but Colonel Wenzel managed to get what she needed out of 'em."

Though he was the oldest noncommissioned officer among them and the captain of the Vargus-only units as well as the Nordlicht squadron, Bernholdt was still serving as Shin's assistant. Several desks had been brought into the room, and Bernholdt spoke as Shin stood in front of them.

While the Dragon Fang Mountain capture operation was being redrafted, Lena and the rest of the officers, along with Shin's group of senior Processors, Bernholdt, and the squadron commanders, had been ordered to return to the capital. The common room of the Imperial villa that served as their barracks doubled as the captains' joint office.

Through the window lay a snowy landscape—an unfitting sight given that summer was nearly upon them.

"The bigwigs' war council should be over soon, and the operation'll probably start as soon as we've gotten our supplies. Things are pretty tense, even this far behind the front lines. I'm pretty sure the war situation is bad enough that they don't want to sit and wait for our supplies from the Federacy to get here, though... But that said..."

Shin was the only captain in the common room; the others were all out on their own errands. Bernholdt carried on after looking around the room listlessly and once again confirming only Shin was present.

"...you all right, man?"

"...What do you mean?"

"Don't you ask me that. You're looking a bit better now, but back when we recaptured the citadel base and you gave us the order to retreat? Your voice was shaking."

Shin pursed his lips. The ruins of the Sirins lying in the snowy field, the fact that he had to run over them, crushing their bodies in his wake—it was like a manifestation of the path he had taken to get to where he was today, one built upon his sacrificed comrades' corpses.

Back then, he'd thought:

Humans were all monsters.

The Eighty-Six had realized what awaited them at the end of their long journey—their reward for their sacred "pride"—was a mountain of laughing corpses. And yet pride was all they had. They couldn't change that now.

"...It won't affect the operation."

"Yeah, I don't doubt that, but... Wow, you're really down in the dumps. I can't believe you just admitted it so easily."

"....."

Dammit.

Bernholdt laughed at his little trick as Shin grimaced.

...This is irritating.

"Look, I'm just relieved to see you act your age for once, y'know? Even we mercenaries were shocked when we saw that siege route. It's probably that much harder on you kids."

"What about you guys?"

"Well, we Vargus are beastmen. We wouldn't want to die like those dolls, but it's still better than a straw death. Oh, a straw death is what we call dying like an old man who croaks while sleeping in the comfort of his bed."

"Beastmen?"

Bernholdt would call the Vargus that every now and then. Beasts shaped like human beings... And he always said it with a hint of pride. Bernholdt nodded.

"Yeah, that's what they used to call people they drove out of

towns and villages. They treated them like wolves, not people; these folks couldn't live among humans and didn't deserve to be treated as such."

"I think that's called Salic law...? That's a pretty old concept."

"If anything, I should be asking how the hell you know about something like that... I know you're a bookworm, but still."

"Raiden's roots are steeped in that 'beastman' mentality, so yeah, I've heard of it. Apparently, his ancestors hated that ideology and moved from the Empire to the Republic."

"Huh. So that's why First Lieutenant Shuga's called Wehrwolf. If he's from the Empire, his ancestors must have been from one group of Vargus or another... And then they ended up in the Republic, where they got treated like animals in human form. Talk about rotten luck."

"....."

The backstory behind Raiden's Personal Name is that when Shin first met him, he was much more savage and had a way of snapping and attacking anyone who got in his way. It was mostly an insult. Bernholdt didn't seem to notice the way Shin avoided meeting his gaze and continued:

"...Anyway. We Vargus are kind of like werewolves: disloyal outcasts abandoned on the outskirts of the Empire. The Empire lost nothing by leaving *us* to die, unlike serfs, so they always went around recruiting us when it was time for war and regularly sent rations to keep us obedient. A class of vassal warriors that was granted tax exemptions and provisions during both war and peacetime—that was us Vargus... Though, thanks to that, the average citizens didn't want anything to do with us anymore."

And so even when the Empire was overthrown and the Federacy was established in its place, the rift between the former Vargus and the rest of the population remained. The Vargus had no Federacy citizenship but were residents of the Federacy all the same. They weren't permitted to enter officer academies or military training schools, but these people of the battlefield were still treated as mercenary forces.

Hence, they were beastmen. Animals that could no longer live among humans.

"...Haven't you ever considered uprooting that ideology?"

"Not really. We've been soldiers of fortune for generations. It's easier for us this way."

Bernholdt was perfectly composed as he spoke, without much fervor or discontent. His tone made it clear he truly believed what he was saying.

"For centuries, we've done nothin' but wage war. The thirst for battle runs in our veins, y'see? So it makes sense we don't get along with the citizens, and we can't stand living peacefully in the city, either... In the end, wolves are wolves till the day they die. We can't be human, and we don't wanna be human to begin with."

"....."

All we have is pride. And there's no changing that.

Looking down at Shin, who had fallen silent, Bernholdt smiled suddenly. He had steel-gray hair and golden eyes. True to the man's description of himself, he somehow reminded Shin of an aged wolf. Callous and brutal.

"Don't lose that cute side of yours, ya hear me? You Eighty-Six don't wanna end up becoming something that isn't human, do ya?"

"Now then, as you're surely aware, our objective is still the destruction of the Dragon Fang Mountain base."

A common room was prepared in the palace to hold a war council. Vika spoke as a holographic map of the battlefield appeared over the chic parquet table, and several other holowindows were projected from mobile information terminals. Aside from Vika and Lena, Grethe, as the Strike Package's commanded, was also present, as were the captains of the Strike Package's squadrons and the staff officers of Vika's regiment.

"The Strike Package's losses during the last battle should not put this mission in jeopardy. My regiment's losses are within acceptable parameters, as well."

"Yes."

This was without taking into account the many Sirins that were lost, however. The soldiers of Vika's regiment seemed to have been traumatized by the ordeal as much as the Eighty-Six were.

The Handlers who were emotionally attached to their subordinates were particularly demoralized.

Vika, however, didn't seem to pay much mind to the soldiers' unrest and looked almost too collected.

"The problem lies with the United Kingdom military's main force. Their hands are full holding the line against the Legion's front line. That includes supplies. We can't expect them to dispatch a diversionary force like last time. This means we can't execute the attack operation we drafted before."

Lena regarded his calm voice and expression with mixed feelings. She knew he was trying to think of countermeasures, too, and only acted this way because he knew that expressing concern now wouldn't do them any good. And yet despite that, she couldn't help but feel his reaction was unnatural. In contrast to Lena, Grethe spoke up with a detached tone.

"No matter how we pierce the Legion's defenses, we'd have to cross seventy kilometers... No, now that we've fallen back to the second front, it's ninety kilometers. We're expected to cross that distance and suppress the Dragon Fang Mountain base. We'll need to think this over from scratch."

A new holo-window opened, presenting the total number of the Legion's forces. The units' icons formed a long, thick, rectangular formation across the map. Looking up at it, Lena winced. This was true for all their battles, but....

"We are Legion, for we are many. Those words certainly ring true. Their forces are vast."

The Legion didn't get away from the last battle unscathed, either, yet their numbers *had not changed*. They had managed to replenish the forces they had lost within the short time frame. The Weisel's ability to mass-produce units in the safety of the Legion's back line was as rapid and irritating as ever.

They would have to avoid trying to penetrate the Legion's front lines head-on. The idea was quite simply out of the question. Any attempt to brute force their way through the enemy's defenses required having an army that was several times larger than theirs.

There was the option of separating the enemy formation to land a concentrated blow at a point where their forces were thinner, but there were limits. The Strike Package was only the

size of a brigade, and any attempt they might make to split up the enemy's main force would likely fall short of expected results.

It was then that Lena had an idea.

"What about an airdrop...?"

If the Legion could do it, why couldn't they?

"Impossible. The Legion have Stachelschwein set up in the United Kingdom's territories, too. On top of that, the number of Eintagsfliege deployed here is much denser than in the Republic or the Federacy."

In addition to their electromagnetic jamming, the Eintagsfliege were also capable of taking offensive action against aircrafts. They would swarm around a plane and fly directly into its engine, destroying it from the inside. This threat, coupled with the Stachelschwein and their antiair cannons, made infiltrating the Legion's airspace incredibly difficult.

"Then maybe a rocket engine—"

"The United Kingdom doesn't have any type of rocket engine capable of supporting the advance force's weight." Vika cut her off and looked up. "Colonel Wenzel. Last year, during the Morpho subjugation operation, the Federacy used a ground-effect winged vehicle to ferry Captain Nouzen's advance force. It ended up crash-landing, but would the Federacy happen to have another one of those?"

Lena blinked in surprise at Vika's words. It was the first she'd heard of it. A ground-effect winged vehicle? Sailing just above the ground and right into Legion territory? When Shin and his group were under Grethe's direct command, they had only been a squadron in terms of size.

Had Grethe, who had always seemed like a mature, responsible adult, actually done something so reckless?

"There's only one Nachzehrer unit... That's the aforementioned ground-effect winged vehicle. And it crashed during that operation. All the prototypes and materials the developer had were taken away and dismantled. There's nothing left. And even if the vehicle was still intact, we only had the one."

"And even it couldn't support *that* much weight. You probably didn't have enough pilots to handle more than one anyway."

"I piloted it myself during that operation, but I have no

experience flying in the United Kingdom's skies. And while this may come across as rude, I doubt your country has any pilots capable of flying anything that isn't a transport plane, either."

"I'll admit our fighter and bomber jets have only been collecting dust in their hangars."

Vika sighed, tacitly acknowledging they lacked pilots. Lena then proceeded to ask:

"Can't we open up an invasion route using missiles or artillery?"

"The missiles' guidance systems won't operate under these conditions, and heavy artillery doesn't deal enough effective damage to Dinosauria. Those things can charge straight through Skorpion fire. That's what they did in the large-scale offensive."

"....."

So raw firepower wasn't the answer, either, though she could've guessed as much. As silence settled over the room, Lena racked her brain. Something... There had to be something. Some way of transporting the Juggernauts or blasting open a route to the Dragon Fang Mountain. There had to be...

Lena's eyes widened in realization.

Maybe we can...

Vika keenly noticed the change in Lena's expression.

"It seems you have something brilliant in mind, Milizé."

"No..." Lena couldn't honestly describe her idea as *brilliant*. "But I do think it's better than having the Strike Package charge in as is. And what of the Sirins? I need to know how many of them we can expect for this battle."

Vika scoffed. His face looked slightly offended, as if she'd asked a question with an obvious answer.

"Don't you understand yet? Those girls are weapons. And when it comes to war, one must favor quantity over quality. They couldn't really be considered state-of-the-art weaponry if we weren't able to mass-produce them, could they?"

†

The sound of military boots clicking against the floor echoed from

behind Shin. The footsteps seemed quite aggressive for the pace they traveled at. Judging by the length of the approaching figure's stride, they were smaller than Shin—and yet they were significantly heavier, as if their skeleton and organs were completely metallic and coated with artificial muscles and skin.

Shin could feel Rito, who was following behind him, gulp and stagger a step back away from the figure.

"It is a pleasure to see you again, Sir Reaper."

About-facing in the parquet corridor, Shin turned to look at the relatively tall girl. Her hair was a fiery shade of crimson, far too red to appear natural. She wore a rouge uniform that was unique to *those* girls, and she had a violet quasi-nerve crystal embedded in her forehead.

She spoke with the same voice that uttered those words he so clearly recalled.

"Come now, everyone. By all means."

"...Ludmila."

There was a shiver in Shin's voice. He couldn't contain the chill in his heart, but the mechanical girl simply smiled at him in response. It was a graceful smile that paid no heed to the terror of the people standing before her—a smile made with the exact same face he remembered.

"Yes, my unit identifier is Ludmila. I have been granted the honor of being redeployed. You may use and discard me as you please."

It was the same face and expression they had witnessed get crushed into the siege route composed of Alkonost and Sirin remains.

"Use and discard'...? How can you say that with a smile...?!" croaked Rito, aghast.

But Ludmila's expression did not waver. She didn't fault him for his fear, nor did she show any remorse for her past actions.

"It is our pleasure to serve. So please do with us what you will."

"....."

The Sirins were like the Legion—like the Black Sheep,

Shepherds, and Sheepdogs. They were weapons made by assimilating the neural networks of those killed in action. Their brain structures, combat data, and pseudo-personalities were all safely stored in the United Kingdom, where they could be mass-produced, just like all modern weapons.

Shin knew all this. Compared with the Ludmila they saw die a few days ago, this Ludmila shared only the quasi-personality, along with her combat data and likely the same memories from several days before the operation. In that sense, Shin couldn't regard the two Ludmilas as the same person on a technical level. And yet...

I see... This is...terrifying...

He found it gruesome. Just a few days ago, this girl had died... Her body lay broken on the battlefield. But in the next offensive, she would be right back on the front line, fighting as before. Looking exactly the same. With the same voice, expression, memories, and mannerisms.

As if nothing had happened.

These girls, who were treated as disposable—much like the Eighty-Six—kept getting back up and leaping into the fray. What should have been a singular death was instead played on loop for as long as necessary. Their lives were regarded as no more than garbage. And they themselves were the ones who harbored this mindset.

For humans, who were, on some level, perpetually fixated on the *how* and *why* of their own deaths, this came across as the greatest blasphemy imaginable.

Treating death as *just* death. Devoid of meaning. Devoid of value.

They were confronted with the idea that there didn't need to be any significance or merit to it—or to the life preceding the death, for that matter.

"...Right."

As Lena walked down the corridor connecting the castle's conference room to the Imperial villa that served as their barracks, Lerche passed her by.

“...Ah.”

“My, if it isn’t Lady Bloody Reina.”

Lena stopped in her tracks, and Lerche greeted her without any particular emotion in her voice. The limbs she’d lost during the last battle were intact and attached to her body, and there wasn’t any sign of the other injuries she’d taken during that battle... Nor were there any marks on her neck to prove that her severed head was the only part of her that had survived the recent events.

Lerche pressed her right fist against the center of her chest in the United Kingdom’s customary hand-over-heart salute.

“First Sirin Unit, Lerche, is once again fully operational, as you can see. I intend to diligently serve as a lustrous blade for the United Kingdom and the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package. Please use me however you see fit.”

“I...see. That was, er...quicker than I thought it would be.”

Lena purposely left out the word *repairs*. Lerche simply smiled, however, seemingly undisturbed.

“I would argue that it took longer than preferred. I can only have all my body parts replaced in His Highness’s workshop... The other Sirins have had their spares assembled ahead of time in production plants and frontline bases, and they only need to have their pseudo-personalities and latest combat data installed prior to activation. They can be redeployed almost immediately, even if their bodies were completely destroyed—as in the latest battle. There are, in fact, multiple Sirins with the same identifier and appearance deployed concurrently across different units.”

“.....”

To Lena, the idea was deeply unsettling, but Lerche described their existence as weapons with pride in her voice. This made it vividly clear that the United Kingdom only saw these girls as weapon components. They were no better than mass-produced, industrial goods.

Having spare parts and units on standby in factories and bases was par for the course when it came to modern weaponry. Reginleifs had a fixed number of spare units set aside for each squadron and battalion. Shin was likely a rather unique example, but even in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, he had one or two spares of

his personal Juggernaut, Undertaker, prepared.

Yet seeing that same logic apply to these girls, who so closely resembled human beings, felt like a violation of ethics to Lena.

"...Doesn't it hurt?"

"What do you mean?"

Having her question replied to with so much composure left Lena at a loss for words. Lerche was perhaps used to seeing people react this way, because she cracked a knowing smile and continued:

"Do you think cannon shells cry out in pain when they are stored in a factory or warehouse? Or even in the moment before they explode? Humans only shun the prospect of war because theirs is not an existence purposed for combat. But we Sirins are weapons. We are created to destroy the enemy. Dying along with our foes is a point of pride for us. We do not think it loathsome. If anything..."

Lerche moved her gaze toward an old, ornamental sword displayed on the wall behind Lena.

"...that sword is far more pitiful than we could ever be. It was made to cut down its foe and shatter in the heat of battle. But it will never fulfill its destiny. The technological advancements of war have rendered it obsolete, reducing it to an ornament that must forever have its shame on display for all to see... The same is true for you."

Those unexpected words gave Lena pause, and all she could do was stare back at the girl, who was slightly shorter than her, before saying:

"Do you pity us?"

Lerche stood with her back straightened and gave a stiff, dutiful nod.

"Indeed. Humans despise war and fear the death it breeds. And yet you remain on the battlefield... You asked me if I hurt, but I must direct the same question at you. Unlike us, should you die, that is the end of your existence. There are so many things you wish to do that do not involve battle. Your time in this world is meant for more than just war, yet you squander it by fighting. Is that not a painful existence?"

"...You may be right. However..."

The answer to whether it hurt was obviously yes. If nothing else, Lena could not claim she derived any pleasure or joy from being on the battlefield. She could likely never throw herself into war the way the Sirins did during the last battle, laughing as if that cruel fate was all they ever longed for. The truth was that she wished she didn't have to fight at all.

However.

Her thoughts turned to Shin and the other Processors of the Spearhead squadron she spoke to back then...

"...the Eighty-Six chose to survive on this battlefield. And I chose to fight by their side."

Lerche cocked her head quizzically.

"My, my... I guess it is true what they say in the streets. The closer you get to something, the harder it is to properly see it."

Her green eyes reflected the sunlight with a transparency that was different from a real human's eye.

"What do you mean...?"

"I am of the opinion that Sir Reaper, and the rest of the Eighty-Six, do not in fact wish to be on the battlefield."

"...Everyone is truly brooding over this matter, are they not?"

Despite being told that mixing sugared petals and the fruit that was served along with her tea was bad manners in the United Kingdom, Frederica didn't pay the warning much heed. One older chamberlain had seemingly taken a liking to her and would regularly place an extra-large serving of different kinds of sugared garnishes on her small, silver plate.

Her tea was already full of flower petals, but Frederica hadn't touched it, instead gazing pensively into the cup as she spoke. Sitting opposite her, Raiden raised an eyebrow. They were in the villa's sunroom, but the garden was currently surrounded with nothing but stifling, monochromatic snow.

"...Yeah. That was a blow, all right."

He recalled the siege road they had to walk across, made of Alkonost and Sirin wreckage, and the image it conjured up. Rito, as well as some of the other younger Processors, seemed to have been especially impacted by it, though they didn't put their

feelings into words.

But the effects the traumatic event had on each of them were readily apparent. Their reports were riddled with a greater number of minor mistakes and typos than usual. Many of the Processors hadn't received even elementary education and weren't the best at reading and writing. Yet even taking that into consideration, they were making far more mistakes than was typical.

They were unable to concentrate on the work in front of them. Their minds were elsewhere, leaving them incapable of focusing on what their hands were doing. They weren't properly checking their paperwork, even when it dealt with matters of life and death.

"You seem to be doing fine, by comparison."

"Yeah, 'cause I wasn't there to see it happen. I only saw it when everything was all over."

He hadn't witnessed the Sirins sacrificing themselves to form that siege route, and he didn't have to step over their mechanical remains to ascend. But even the other Eighty-Six who weren't there to see it happen—and only chanced upon the sight while fighting off the remaining enemy forces—were shaken by the sight.

The fact that he wasn't as rattled probably wasn't because he'd only seen it after the fact.

No, it was likely...because he was *the least-whittled-down blade* among them.

Up until he was twelve years of age, Raiden had been sheltered within the eighty-five Sectors of the Republic. And that meant he had been subjected to far less of the Republic's malice, and he'd seen more human kindness than many of his comrades.

I probably did lose a good deal in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, but... but there are still things I haven't lost yet.

Frederica looked up at him cautiously, as if examining some kind of wound.

"And...what did you think when you saw them?"

"I don't wanna end up like that."

His response was brief, and he only realized how curt his tone was after he'd finished speaking. He clicked his tongue lightly, so

as to not let Frederica hear it.

We've really got our backs against the wall. We just haven't noticed it until now.

Raiden looked away, unable to meet her small, bloodred eyes. It felt like that crimson gaze could see right through him, unrelentingly burning through every lie and bluff he might try to come up with.

...I know what you're gonna say. If I feel that way, then what should we do about it? What are we supposed to do differently so we don't end up like them? But I ain't got a clue, neither."

The Sirins were different from the Eighty-Six. That much was certain. But *how* were they different? What could the Eighty-Six do differently that would prevent them from becoming forgotten corpses on a pile of wreckage? That was a question that Raiden—and likely his comrades, as well—didn't have the answer to.

Actually...

He curled his lips in a bitter grimace.

"I don't wanna know is probably a more honest answer to your question. I hate to admit it, but that's..."

Shin had said something like that at some point.

"Don't you want to remember?"

His family. His hometown. The future he had vaguely dreamed about back then. The period of time when he was happy.

Raiden had said no, and Shin likely felt the same way—neither of them wanted to remember. No, to be precise, they didn't want to think about it at all. They didn't want to think about the futures they had brazenly dared to consider.

After all, an Eighty-Six had to believe that...

"...that's not something we're allowed to wish for."

"Apparently, they're going to decide the specifics of the next operation any day now."

They'd returned to the royal palace to wait until the particularities of their next mission were ironed out. But ever since their return, everyone else in the palace seemed to eye them with cold contempt. It wasn't really the Eighty-Six's fault that the United Kingdom had to fall back to its second front, but the fact

remained that they had been dispatched and achieved nothing.

Theo was the one who spoke up, sitting in one of the rooms in the Imperial villa that doubled as their barracks. It was natural that the others would look down on them. Since the Strike Package tried to avoid picking any unnecessary fights, they mostly stayed in the villa.

They knew other people only saw them as bloodthirsty berserkers, and ever since they chose to join the military, they also knew they were seen primarily as weapons.

"I mean, they can't let us Eighty-Six mooch off them forever. The United Kingdom really is in a tight spot, after all... But still..."

He looked up and spoke to the figure listlessly looking out the window.

"You okay, Kurena?"

"What? I'm fine; can't you tell?"

Kurena replied with a tone that was sourer than she'd probably intended. She had been like this ever since they retook the Revich Citadel Base... Ever since that charge, she had been constantly on edge like an ornery, injured cat rejecting anyone's attempts to reach out to her.

The same went for Shin, Raiden, Anju, and Theo himself... It went for all the Eighty-Six, really, albeit to different extents. Kurena narrowed her golden eyes at Theo, squinting at him harshly as if annoyed by his silence.

"We're different from those *things*."

From those unmanned-weapon processor units—the Sirins. The Sirins who laughed with pride as they were crushed and broken.

"We're not the same as them. I mean, that's obvious, right? I don't get why everyone's so worked up over it. They... The Sirins—they're not us."

But Theo could hear the creaking sound of her teeth clenching behind those words. She spoke in denial, as if to remonstrate herself.

"That mountain of corpses... Those weren't *our* dead bodies."

"Right."

The Sirins and the Eighty-Six were different. Those girls who laughed at the prospect of being trampled did not represent a

future the Eighty-Six had to look forward to. She knew that. That's...how it should have been.

"But you know, it's like... What makes us so different? We Eighty-Six don't know, and I think...that's why we can't deny it. I feel the same way..."

Their deaths would come eventually. And when they did, would the Eighty-Six be able to laugh proudly? While dying meaningless deaths? They had been made acutely aware of the possibility. And they didn't have any concrete way of denying it. That was why...

"I think we're all just...scared."

Even Shin was scared... Even Kurena, who pursed her lips tightly and averted her gaze.

"Are you all right, Second Lieutenant Emma...? Uhhh, I mean... Anju. You stopped again."

Beckoned by that awkward, bashful call, Anju raised her head from the common office's desk. She switched off the electronic document regarding her platoon's armaments and supplies and shrugged before replying.

"I kind of got that feeling already, but..."

Looking back in the direction of the voice, she was met with the silver eyes and pearlescent hair she hadn't quite grown accustomed to. They belonged to the only member of the Strike Package clad in the Republic's Prussian-blue men's uniform. He was a bit shorter than Daiya was, and every time she tried to meet his gaze, she always seemed to miss him for a second.

"...you really aren't fazed by this, are you, Dustin?"

He'd rushed up the siege route alongside them. Meanwhile, Lena, Vika, and Frederica only saw it happen through the command center's screen, while Annette and Grethe weren't present at all and only heard about the battle after the fact. None of them were of the Eighty-Six...

"It's not like I haven't seen mountains of corpses before, like during the large-scale offensive. I mean, er..."

During the large-scale offensive last summer, the Republic was hit the hardest. The entire country was consumed by the Legion's forces, and it was during the summer at that. The walls and

minefields they had built were surrounded by the Legion, and the Republic had nowhere to run.

The killing machines took no prisoners and didn't distinguish between military personnel and civilians. They slaughtered most of the Republic's population of over ten million... There wasn't even any time to cremate their remains.

"It might come off as disrespectful, but I don't understand why *you're* so disturbed by this. It was a horrible operation, but, uh... y'know. When we saw the brain samples, there were all those skeletons. The Sirins weren't any worse than that, so I honestly don't get why you're so bothered by it."

Dustin's mind wandered back to Shin's discovery during the Charité underground-terminal Labyrinth operation. The samples had been extracted, like common objects, from the heads of living people. They had been cracked open, and the brains had been extracted and placed into cylinders without so much as a shred of human dignity. And despite witnessing something so horrific, Shin didn't bat an eye. His crimson gaze passed over the bodies without a hint of emotion, as if they truly were just objects.

That was the coldness that made him worthy of his moniker: Reaper. But during the most recent operation, he was different. He watched those mechanical girls happily leap into the abyss and form the siege route with their bodies. It was a gruesome sight, to be sure, but it wasn't much different than the corpses they saw in the terminal. And yet unlike that time, Shin showed hesitation.

"...I see. You really are different from us."

Staring at that mountain of wreckage felt like staring into their own futures. They rushed to their deaths, insisting their pride spurred them to action, laughing all the while. And though he was shocked by it, Dustin couldn't see a reflection of himself in that image.

Even if they were to view the same sights, Dustin and Anju saw things differently. Even if they were on the same battlefield, and Dustin were to willingly choose to fight in the same place as her, an Eighty-Six and someone who wasn't an Eighty-Six were different. Even if they both didn't have a homeland or a place to return to anymore.

"...I'm sorry." Dustin hung his head.

"Don't be. You shouldn't have to apologize for this... But..."

What she was about to ask him was a cruel question. It would probably sound like she was blaming him as a citizen of the Republic. And while that wasn't her intent, Anju was still an Eighty-Six, and Dustin was of the Republic, so it would probably come across as an accusation.

"...Dustin, what do you suppose is the missing factor that would have made us like you? What do we need to hold on to...to stay normal?"

"....."

After hearing that question, Dustin looked away. It was an honest question and likely wasn't accusatory. But it still made the rift between them all the more tangible. It made the indescribable emptiness in her gaze—in her words—all too clear.

"I think you've got it wrong... It's not that I think you guys aren't normal or something; it's just a difference in values. But..."

Pausing for a moment to find the right words, Dustin spoke again.

"...I do think the way you live right now is a kind of torture. It's like you're willingly tying yourselves up."

We are the Eighty-Six. That was how Anju would sometimes describe herself and the others to him. They took the name the Republic had forced on them, intending to disparage them, and made it their own, infusing it with pride. But from Dustin's perspective, that name was a curse.

That pride they carried was, at the same time, a curse that bound them like shackles. There was a paper-thin difference between that pride and a curse. Living for the sake of something and living to become something—it gave them a purpose, but it was also a curse that prevented them from being capable of living for any other reason.

Dustin believed that everyone lived bound by something to some extent. Like one's blood. Or one's language, society, or emotions. One's values and the past that led up to their present. No matter how free of those things one believes they might be, absolute freedom didn't exist.

And yet...

"Whenever you guys call yourselves Eighty-Six, it feels to me

like you're also saying you can't be anything *but* Eighty-Six. Like you're saying you can't hope to be anything other than what you are right now..."

†

Svetlana Idinarohk was his father's—the king's—older sister by seven years, making her Vika's aunt. And like Vika, Svetlana was one of the Idinarohk bloodline's Espers—an Amethystus of the former generation. Her reception room had a half-circular window with a decorated frame in the shape of a folding fan. The faint sunlight streaming in from the frozen garden barely got through the double-layered glass.

"I heard about what happened during your last battle, dear Vika. Quite the awful skirmish."

The Idinarohk bloodline ability was the augmentation of one's intellect and creativity. It granted one mental prowess that seemed to ignore the logic and limitations of contemporary technology. But for whatever reason, that inventive ability seemed to manifest in only one person at any given time. Whenever a new Amethystus was born, the existing one appeared to suddenly lose their inventive ability. As such, there was always just one single Amethystus.

Over the years, the Idinarohk Espers posited numerous theories as to why this was, but none of them were interested enough to delve deeper into the matter. One Amethystus alone would cause a disturbance in the human world. If there were two or three of them at once, the king might have had difficulty keeping his throne.

"I saw Stanya...His Majesty turned pale with fear. Even though he knew he was sending you out to battle... You truly are lacking in filial piety."

"Oh, and you didn't worry for me, Aunt Svetlana?"

Svetlana curled her lips into a smile. Her facial features were smoother than one would assume from her small physique, and she looked very much like a young girl. One would be hard-pressed to believe she was older than the king.

"Idinarohk serpents like us are not easily slain on the battlefield. We excavate every nook and cranny of the world and dissect our findings. Even when ruin befalls all creation, we venomous snakes will smirk and observe the phenomenon. Dying before the world does would be our greatest shame... If you were to die, I would preserve your remains with my own two hands. Ah, should I make a hair ornament out of your ribs?"

Vika smiled wordlessly. He was well aware that he was a serpent who deviated from human sensibilities. But before him was Svetlana, who was lovingly patting the head of a dog resting atop the lap of her dress. No, not a dog's head—a dog's *skull*.

Her villa was hidden deep in the royal palace's garden, and this very room contained a great many engravings that looked like polished ivory or white coral. They were all fashioned from birds, cats, and hounds she fancied, as well as a wet nurse she was close to.

In exchange for their transcendent intellect, many of the Idinarohk Espers seemed to lack something critical: their sense of ethics and empathy. The fact that Vika had been stripped of his succession rights to the throne wasn't at all unusual in the royal bloodline's history.

What was being used as the audience chamber for the palace right now—a large room full of butterfly wings—was made by the first Idinarohk monarch, an Amethystus known as the mad king. He'd funneled the entire fortune of their winter country into breeding thousands upon thousands of those butterflies in one of their greenhouses, only to suddenly kill all of them.

"By your will, Aunt Svetlana. This is why I can't afford to lose to the Legion at this point. I've come to ask for your assistance. Please open your armory to me."

Svetlana narrowed her eyes teasingly with a hint of affection.

"You're still far too immature, dear Vika."

Vika stared plainly at her, taken aback by those words. With that same smile on her lips, Svetlana looked up, her eyelashes casting a heavy shadow over her violet eyes, which were a slightly bluer shade than Vika's.

"I know that, in your heart, you hate playing soldier... Lerchenlied, I believe her name was? Is that golden skylark of a

girl so precious to you? That little songbird passed away so long ago now, but her words bind you still."

"Yes... Same as how Father is so dear to your heart, Aunt Svetlana."

Stanya. The king had several siblings, but the only one allowed to refer to him by his nickname was Svetlana.

His aunt deepened her smile.

"So it seems... Very well. Do as you will and take whatever your heart fancies. I could never bring myself to turn down a request from my precious brother's son, after all."



"A grand conference?"

"Yes. The details of the operation have been decided, so we need only turn to His Majesty, the prime minister, and the senate for approval during that grand conference."

Shin peered at a holographic operation map. He'd never seen them in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, but he eventually got used to them during his time in the Federacy. Lena nodded as Shin looked at the map and parroted her.

"In other words, we need to explain the details of the operation to the United Kingdom's VIPs. The crown prince, who is in charge of the second front, will handle most of the presentation, but I'll have to answer some questions, too. I am a commanding officer of the squadron that'll carry out the Dragon Fang Mountain operation, after all."

Shin paused to think for a few moments and then said:

"The details of the second front... They're details that should be reserved for the commander of a corps or perhaps even the entire army. I suppose that's...something a commander of a battalion has no business knowing. That's how I should interpret this, right?"

There was no need for him to attend, even as a formality.

"Yes... And also, the Sirins will be redeployed for this operation, but are you all right with that? I mean... Given what happened last time."

"Personally, I'd prefer if they didn't accompany the Spearhead squadron."

Lena jerked her head up in surprise. She didn't find fault with him speaking in a manner that seemed to evade the Sirins. If anything, she'd almost expected this.

"Is their presence taxing on you?"

"No, I just can't tell them apart from the Legion."

The Legion used Liquid Micromachines fashioned after the neural networks of the war dead, while the Sirins' "brains" were made of synthetic neurons reproduced from the brains of those whose lives could not be saved. Both were the same in the sense that they were still gripped by the final thoughts of the deceased. Shin's ability made no distinction when perceiving them both as ghosts.

"It can get confusing, especially during a melee... I can sort of tell the voices apart once I get used to them, though. So if possible, I'd rather have them in a designated company or have them act as our squad's scouts."

"....."

Lena heaved an exaggerated sigh.

"That's not what I meant. I didn't ask you if it would compromise the operation. I wanted to know if it bothers you. On a personal level."

Shin blinked a few times at her unexpected admonishment. Even if she phrased the question like that...

"They're the same as the Legion... I'm used to them by now."

Shin's ability to hear the ghosts' voices had a wide range to begin with, and he was constantly hearing an overwhelming number of Legion. A few more voices joining that cacophony did little to change the strain it placed on him. Similar to how people who lived by the sea eventually stopped hearing the roaring of the waves, Shin didn't feel like the constant voices of the ghosts were weighing down on him too much.

Lena fell silent for a moment. It was a short, almost sulking silence.

"You keep saying that, Shin, but...you fell asleep after the battle in the Republic's underground terminal. And after we retook the base, too."

"The Sheepdogs being deployed during the battle at the terminal increased the volume of their voices, so that skirmish was... I mean, it's not like I don't sleep at night."

He did indeed sleep at night without issue, which was all the more remarkable when he became tired.

"I know, but that's not what I mean... I'm just worried because you never tell me you're tired at times like that."

She then paused for a bit and leaned forward, as if using that moment to muster her courage.

"I spoke to Lerche the other day."

Shin's expression hardened at the sudden mention of that name. Lerche. She and her mechanical birds were possessed by the wailings of the dead. He once more recalled the mountain of wreckage, composed of their bodies. The laughter still echoed in his ears.

And he remembered what she'd said to him.

You get to be alive.

His pride would eventually drive him to be a part of that mountain of corpses—and even that pride of his was superficial for a soldier.

You can still find happiness with someone.

The change in her attitude took him by surprise. And still, he couldn't find it in himself to deny her words.

The truth is...

Another thought nearly surfaced in his mind, but he suppressed it at the last moment. He wasn't allowed to think of those words.

If I think about it, I...

"She said you don't really want to be on the battlefield—"

"I could say the same of you, Lena."

He cut her off. He didn't want to think about it. And even more so, he didn't want to hear Lena tell him those words. He didn't want her to doubt his pride. Fighting to the very end was what it meant to be an Eighty-Six, and he hated the idea of Lena, of all people, doubting him. And even if the Eighty-Six came to realize how meaningless that pride was...it was all they had.

Shin only realized after he cut her off that he didn't really have a follow-up, but he still took the opportunity to continue:

"Lena... Have you ever thought *I don't want to fight anymore...*? I mean, I understand that you willingly chose to fight, but..."

He corrected himself quickly, seeing her eyes cloud over for a moment. Shin knew nothing about her... He had never even made an effort to know. He'd realized this back at the snowy cliffside fortress. What did she wish for? What did she fight so far for? How could she find it in herself not to give up on humanity?

Shin wanted to know the answers to those questions even now.

"...But still, you saw that siege route. And you saw the Republic fall to ruin... Haven't you ever thought *I've had enough?* Haven't you ever felt like you didn't want to go on...? How could you not... bring yourself to feel that way?"

Lena knew how vulgar and terrible people could be. She knew all too well that the world could be a malicious place, that the world of humankind wasn't entirely made up of beautiful things. Yet still, she didn't give up on it.

"Is it because...? Hmm, well. Is it because this world has things worth loving?"

He stopped for a moment, hesitating. He struggled to say those words because they felt too hollow to him.

Shin knew people could be noble and kind, like the priest who protected him and his brother in the Eighty-Sixth Sector's internment camp; like the captain of his first squadron, who fought alongside him and died, leaving him with the task of bringing all his comrades with him to their final destination; like his friend from the special officer academy, who fought for his sister's well-being; like the Federacy officers who pushed him forward, even as they were going to be stranded in enemy territory.

Shin could only see them as exceptions to the rule, but he knew Lena thought otherwise. Maybe it was just the difference in how much they'd experienced of the inherent good of humankind. Or perhaps, the paths they'd trodden to get here and the things they saw along the way were simply that different.

Lena blinked in surprise a few times at the sudden questions and then leaned forward happily.

"Where did that come from all of a sudden?"

"...You were the one who started this conversation, Lena. You asked me if I could learn to love this world."

"I'm sorry; I'm just a little surprised because of how sudden this is, but...I'm glad you broached the subject. Right..."

Lena smiled and closed her eyes.

"I think it's not just that there are things worth loving. It's that there's enough beauty in the world to outweigh the ugliness—enough virtue to compensate for its flaws, which allows me to love it. It's not that I haven't given up hope because I haven't seen enough cruelty. It's just..."

Lena paused and tried find the right words.

"...I want to believe... I want to believe this world can still become a place where people can live happy, peaceful lives."

Those were words Shin did not expect to hear. It wasn't that she'd experienced more beauty in her lifetime, allowing her to see some innate goodness in the world he couldn't fathom.

"You want to believe, huh...?"

...Believe in a beautiful world that was still out of sight and out of reach.

"Yes. Because I want to be happy. I want everyone else to be happy, too. And I don't want to live in a world where that can't happen. I don't want to live in a world where everyone has to be subject to malice and absurdity. I hate the very concept of such a place, and that's why..."

A just, kind world. He thought back to the words she'd told him once as they stood together under a starry sky on that snowy night. She spoke of a world where good will and kindness were rewarded, as if she was praying for it.

Her wish wasn't for kind people to be rewarded, but for *everyone*, equally, to know happiness.

"And that's why... It's not that I couldn't give up. It's that I *don't want* to give up. I don't want to admit that the battlefield and the way the Republic treated the Eighty-Sixth Sector are the true faces of humankind. Nor do I want to accept that that can never change. Because then no one will find happiness. I want to be happy... And I want you to be happy, too..."

"....."

Shin couldn't feel that way. He had no future to hope for. He could live even without happiness to pursue. In his mind, he fought because he wanted to show Lena the sea, but that was probably different from her idea of happiness. He couldn't wish for a future or for happiness, and so he didn't need to have faith in this world. He had no reason to love it.

He vaguely thought he and Lena really were fundamentally different from each other. Not necessarily in terms of their individual experiences and the paths they had taken in life. Their very outlooks on life and the ways they interacted with the world were completely different. Their way of being, their personal circumstances—their every aspect was like night and day.

Lena had said he'd broached the subject. And perhaps he did, in the sense that he did try to understand the other side. But receiving the answers to his questions only served to make the rift between them that much more obvious. They were too far apart to truly understand each other... So far that even if they were to reach out for each other, their hands would never meet.

Shin had no way of knowing that Lena came to the same conclusion after the Charité Underground Labyrinth operation. Even if they were standing in the same place, the rift between them remained.

Lena smiled, unaware of the turmoil in Shin's heart. Her smile had all the delicacy of a flower. Yes, like a silver lotus blooming proudly even in the mud.

"I want you to be happy, too... That's why I have to believe in this world. That's why I love it."

He hoped against hope that this happiness—a joy he could not wish for—would be granted to the world she loved...

†

Lena became suspicious that something was very wrong when the escort from Vika arrived far too early for the grand conference, only to force Lena into another room for some reason, where a large number of court ladies awaited her.

"Er, Vika?"

She found him in his usual United Kingdom uniform, except this time, it had been customized for a ceremony. He didn't have his standard rank ribbons but wore several medals and insignia and a grand cordon that extended diagonally down from his shoulder. He also wore the United Kingdom's emblem of a unicorn instead of his lapel badge.

"This is...a conference, right?"

"That's right."

He nodded casually, to which Lena pressed him with tears in her eyes.

"Then why do I have to wear *this thing...?!*"

She wore a dress with a sheer outer fabric embroidered together in an elegant fashion, boasting long, extravagant, flowing hems. The silver, transparent gauze beautifully complemented the lapis-lazuli lining beneath it. The dress's cleavage and long sleeves were dotted with crystalline beads in the pattern of a peafowl's tail and sparkled every time she moved.

While she found the dress elegant and beautiful, to be sure, she had no idea why she was being forced to wear it. With all the crystal beads, the dress weighed about as much as her uniform. The hem of her uniform's skirt was just as short as this dress's, but being in this getup still made her anxious and restless.

But even being fidgety was a challenge in this outfit, because the heels she was wearing were thinner and higher than she was used to. The silken hem of her dress jingled audibly.

Vika gazed back at Lena with a puzzled expression.

"...I think you look very good in it. Do you have any complaints? Oh, you must be disappointed Nouzen isn't here to see this. I could call him over right—"

"That's not it! Sh-Shin has nothing to do with this! No, I mean, why?! Why am I going to a military conference in a dress instead of my uniform?!"

"...? It's only natural for women to wear dresses to formal events, even if they're military personnel. It may be a military conference, but my father and brother will be attending. It's closer to an Imperial council than a military one, frankly."

His tone seemed to suggest he wasn't teasing her at all. If anything, it felt like he didn't understand why she was asking him

this question. In other words, in the United Kingdom, a woman's formal attire was a dress, even if she was military personnel. It was probably a historical custom of this country, given that they didn't send female soldiers to the field of battle. They only served as high-ranking officers.

But still, attending a military conference in a frilly dress...?

Lena was a daughter to a family of former nobles, so she was accustomed to wearing dresses. But uniforms and dresses were worn for different occasions and required different emotional states. If nothing else, Lena couldn't imagine attending a war council in an evening gown.

"Colonel Wenzel...!"

She turned her gaze to Grethe for help, but the officer simply shrugged, clad in a gray dress herself. She'd brought a few dresses ahead of time, since she was due to meet with the king. Her dress had a tall, exotic collar and a short hem that gave off a sense of authority and a masculine silhouette.

Had Lena been told of this before they left, she would have prepared a dress like that, too. It was handsome and reminiscent of a uniform.

"When in Rome, do as the Romans do. We failed our last operation, so we should probably avoid doing anything that would be cause for disdain. Besides, you look cute."

"...Oh. So in the Republic and the Federacy, women wear uniforms as their full dress, too. That's why you, Iida, and Rosenfort were in uniform when you first met me, even if it was in a military setting."

Vika seemed to have finally realized the difference in cultures. He nodded, seemingly satisfied.

"At the very least, we don't wear anything but full dress uniforms during formal events and ceremonies, Your Highness. Though, women do wear dresses for the parties that follow ceremonies—or for weddings."

"I see. In that case, this dress won't go to waste after we went to the trouble of having it tailored... You can keep the whole set, Milizé, so take it with you when you go back home. I'd imagine it will prove useful until you find someone to escort you."

"Someone to..."

Lena turned red at his implication. Besides her parents, the only one who would escort a woman in a dress would be...

...her boyfriend or husband.

"I—I don't have anyone like that!"

"Hence, until you find that someone. Or rather..."

Vika seemed to eye her with a pitying gaze.

"I doubt it's possible, but don't tell me you're not aware of it yet?"

"Aware of what?!"

"I see, so you aren't. That's rather unfortunate... I would even call it irritating. To think *both* of you are like that..."

Vika shook his head; it was a lamentation that Lena couldn't understand—or perhaps, she refused to understand.

Though the high officials were busy people, the continued existence of the United Kingdom hinged on the success of the upcoming operation. After a long series of discussions, the grand conference finally took a recess.

Sitting in the corner of the large conference room, Lena sighed. Most of the officials had left the room, so there were only a few people around. Grethe was speaking to the attending military officers to exchange information, and Vika left, saying he had business with his aunt.

No one seemed to wish to interact with an officer of the Republic. It was a country on its last legs, and her unit had also suffered a painful defeat. Lena didn't mind not being spoken to, though. This was a conference attended by His Highness the King, and most of the people here were senior officials. Though it went without saying, she was intimidated.

It was then that someone stood beside her, maintaining a polite distance.

"Apologies, my lady. Would you grant me the honor of exchanging words with you?"

"Yes, of course..." Lena responded, turning around to face the figure, only to immediately stiffen.

He wore a dark-violet uniform, with the United Kingdom's emblem of the unicorn in place of a rank insignia. His hair was

reddish-brown and held together with a long ribbon and an emerald hairpin.

Lastly, he had a pair of Imperial violet eyes she'd grown used to seeing recently.

"Y-Your Highness the Crown Prince...!"

"Yes, but please be at ease. I merely came to greet you as an older brother and thank you for supporting Vika. I would have liked to call the Eighty-Six's operations commander over as well, but unfortunately, the nature of this conference doesn't allow for that."

The crown prince, Zafar, regarded her with a refined smile. He and Vika were born from the same mother, and so the two of them were quite similar. But in terms of height and shoulder width, Zafar had a physique that was more reminiscent of an adult man's, as well as a more composed expression and the countenance of someone older and wiser.

"I'm sure he gives you all sorts of trouble, such as having you attend this conference on your own... That boy has a way of being erratic, but I do hope you can get along with him."

His words and smile made Lena look at him with surprise. They somehow reminded her of Rei's expression and tone, back when she had met him many years ago.

"Your Highness, what are your—?"

"Zafar will suffice, Colonel Milizé."

"...Prince Zafar, what are your, um, feelings regarding Prince Viktor?"

Within the power struggles of House Idinarohk, Vika was part of Zafar's faction. Vika seemed to respect and adore his maternal brother in his own way. Lena knew that. She could tell that much from the way Vika spoke about him. But she couldn't say for sure how Zafar felt about Vika.

Though it was a tradition of the United Kingdom, they still sent a boy who was only ten years old out onto the battlefield, where he could very well be abandoned in a time of crisis. And that was done without restoring his right to the throne.

A part of her wondered if the royal family saw Vika—who had developed the Sirins, weapons that were an affront to humanity—as a capable man yet considered him detestable in their heart of

hearts.

But looking at the man standing before her, and the expression on his face...

"He's my precious younger brother... Though judging by that question, I assume that as a foreigner to these lands, you find him quite strange."

"....."

Strange didn't even begin to describe it.

"Hmm. The Strike Package acts in cooperation with Prince Vika's Sirins, so..."

"Aaah, that's right. I've already grown used to them by now, but... Yes, I see."

Zafar paused for thought.

"Colonel, are you familiar with the catastrophe of Babylon?"

Lena was bewildered by the sudden, seemingly unrelated question, but she gave a short nod.

"...To the extent of what they teach in school, yes."

Once, in the past, humankind built a large tower to reach God's seat in the heavens. This ambition incurred God's wrath, who then placed a curse upon humankind, forcing them to speak in different tongues. This caused the creation of multiple languages and became the source of human conflict.

It was a story from the Old Testament. When the Republic abolished the royal family three centuries ago, it also banned religion, which served as a backing for the royal mandate. To that end, most biblical stories weren't often told or passed down in the Republic. Many people in the Republic didn't even know the religious context of the Holy Birthday, despite it being celebrated annually.

"In the myths that preceded the Bible, humankind built the tower so their prayers might reach the heavens, but the gods mistakenly thought humankind was trying to attack them and cursed them for that reason. Even the gods struggled to reach perfect understanding among themselves. So it was difficult for them to understand imperfect creatures like humans. Ironic, perhaps... But anyway..."

Zafar trailed off and looked to the sky, as if gazing at the tower made up by people's wishes in some faraway land.

"...in my eyes, the fact that humankind began quarreling among themselves once they became unable to understand one another is quite striking. It means they did not truly trust one another when they spoke a common tongue."

Humans had a habit of infighting, but this didn't stem from an ability to speak and agree. It came from a lack of trust. They looked upon one another and could not find something worthy of trust.

Lena felt those words stab into her heart. Zafar likely didn't intend it that way. There was no way he knew of her exchanges with Shin, since he'd never met him. But still, Lena couldn't help but feel like Zafar was speaking about the two of them.

"Even if two people suddenly began conversing in different tongues, their wishes should have been the same. If they knew that for a fact, they would believe in each other even if they lost the ability to communicate... And it is the same in our case. Even if he is a cold-blooded serpent, I would return his love so long as he loved me. I can believe in that affection, if nothing else."

Even if Vika was completely and utterly different from him in every other way.

"He might not understand what makes people sad or why they feel sorrow. But he does understand when Father and I become sad and tries to avoid causing us grief... And that's enough for me. He may not live according to the same logic and values I abide by, but he still tries to love me in his own way... He's my precious younger brother."

"....."

And how had Lena acted in contrast to this?

That makes me...so sad.

Shin, and the rest of the Eighty-Six, gave up on the world, deeming it a cruel, cold place. They cast aside their trust and expectations of the world. They relinquished what joy they could remember, as well as the future happiness they might have looked forward to.

This saddened Lena. But what was even sadder was that Shin couldn't understand why this made her sad. Because of the way he acted—like an innocent monster in human form—the rift between them was as wide as ever. It pained her and caused her

to wonder if they would ever come to an understanding.

I want him to understand me. I wish he were more like me...

She had unconsciously started to wish for that. She had claimed she wanted to understand the Eighty-Six, when in truth, she never made an effort to understand them. Even if she couldn't understand them, she could have tried to respect who they were.

But instead, she simply wished for them to understand her. One-sidedly.

You are truly arrogant.

Yes. Arrogant and haughty. Self-righteous and narrow-minded...

"...Prince Zafar."

She bit into her rouge-tinted lips, trying desperately to keep her tone steady, which conversely made her voice sound odd. Zafar graciously pretended to not notice.

"Yes?"

"If you and Prince Viktor are so different from each other, how...do you maintain your relationship?"

"Oh, that's quite simple. Some things I compromise on, while others I refuse to relinquish. For some things, I defer to him, while with others, I have him conform to my way of thinking. We both respect each other's boundaries until we find a point of compromise. That's how people normally interact... Though, it did take us years to get here."

"That's... Yes, that's right... You're right."

There may be a rift between them. They may see the world in different ways. But if they tried to understand each other, little by little, then surely, she would one day be able to stand by his side.

And there were things she could believe in... Things she was able to believe in even as far back as two years ago, before they truly met face-to-face. When they were still the oppressor and the oppressed... When they were all too different.

She clenched her fists tightly beneath the sleeves of her dress.

"Thank you very much, Your Highness."

"Usually, proper manners would dictate I escort you back to the

barracks, but unfortunately, I still have business to attend to here. I called an escort over, so stay with them until you get back."

Lena's time at the grand conference came to an end. Vika led Lena not to the exit leading outside the palace grounds, but rather, to a road going through the premises. It was a small paved path between the gardens that led into the Imperial villa the Strike Package used.

In stark contrast to the warm and bright interior of the palace, the cold darkness of a wintry night hung over the garden. Well aware of the biting cold, Lena stayed in the area between the interior of the palace and the garden as she looked around.

It was a surprisingly bright, starry night. Lena could see the same stars she had gazed up at with Shin before the Revich Citadel Base was captured. At the time, it seemed like Shin wanted to tell her something but ended up falling silent. She'd assumed he'd tell her later, but with the siege battle happening immediately after that, they never got back to it.

What was Shin trying to tell her back then? What was he trying to express?

...Would asking him about it now be the right thing to do...?

Vika made a small exclamation. Lena was fixated on the sky, but Vika noticed something on the snowy road. Apparently, he had exceptional night vision, not unlike a cat's. He was a serpent that could see the world for what it was without relying on light.

"There he is. All right then, Milizé. Rest well tonight."

Apparently, he had no plans of speaking to whoever came to take her back to the villa, because he quickly turned around and left. As he walked away, his footsteps didn't make a sound on the thick carpet. She could mostly tell he was gone by the rustling of his clothes and the scent of his cologne becoming thinner.

And immediately after Vika left, the sound of snow crunching against light footsteps reached her ears. Even *he*, with the way he didn't usually make any sound as he walked, couldn't avoid it when treading over a road of brittle snow.

Lena's expression lit up as she saw his figure growing against the starlight reflected by the snow.

"Shin!"

"Shin!"

Shin looked up at Lena, who was beaming upon noticing him, from within the snowy garden's darkness. He stopped in place.

Aaah...

He'd come to a sudden realization. What made things click into place? Maybe the light around here felt too bright for his eyes, since he had grown used to the darkness of night. Or maybe it was the fact that he was seeing her in a dress and makeup for the first time, rather than her uniform.

He couldn't tell why himself, but it became clear all of a sudden. She wasn't on the battlefield or a military base, but at a place far removed from the fires of war. She stood there not in uniform, but in an outfit reserved for peacetime.

He was reminded of the sheer, irreparable depth and distance of the rift between them. The worlds they saw were different. The worlds they wished for were different. Which meant, in other words, that the worlds they belonged in—that they were allowed to exist in—were also different.

Lena doesn't need me.

The way he saw her now was how she should have been. Lena never belonged in the chaos of the battlefield, but rather, in a world of peace and tranquility. She deserved to live in a world free of conflict.

The battlefield was not *her* world. She didn't need to know strife and death... The irrational absurdity of war didn't belong anywhere near her.

And Shin, who only knew war and its hardships, likewise had no place beside her. All he knew was conflict, and only in the midst of battle could he forge his own identity. Despite resolving to fight to the very end, he couldn't imagine what lay beyond this seemingly endless war...

He couldn't even begin to imagine the kind of world she desired. He wanted to show her the sea—which was to say he could only imagine a future with her in it. But Lena didn't need him to in order to survive.

It was quite the opposite, actually. His presence would only

hurt her. She wanted everyone to be happy, while he couldn't imagine what might constitute his idea of joy. His way of living could very well serve as a weapon to harm her.

She'd said it several times already, but Shin couldn't even fathom it:

That makes me...so sad.

The fact that he couldn't wish for his own future would only serve to hurt Lena. His failure to comprehend that simple fact had widened the rift between them more than anything else. He didn't even try to understand her... He hadn't even come close.

She said she was saddened by him. That she was hurt. And yet he continued to hurt her.

Wolves couldn't live among humans. A monster of the battlefield that survived by stepping over corpses—a monster tainted by this world's malice—couldn't walk alongside this symbol of purity.

The worlds they wished for, the worlds they lived in—their very ways of being were all too different.

And so he realized an unsettling truth. They never belonged together to begin with.

She assumed she'd be nervous, but her mental fatigue was greater than she'd imagined. Giving a strained smile at how stiff her body became at the prospect of him looking at her, Lena hurried down the stone steps leading to the garden. Shin approached her as she did, perhaps out of consideration for her clumsy gait along the frozen road, and looked up at her.

"You came for me."

"I did. Even if this is within the palace's premises, it's still nighttime."

Something about the detached manner he'd delivered that answer struck her as oddly nostalgic, despite them only having been apart for a few hours. A guard hurried over from the palace, handing her the coat she'd apparently forgotten inside, and she put it over her dress with Shin's aid. She turned around to face him. Perhaps due to the light of the snow, his white, marble-like face felt colder and more serene than ever.

"My apologies... I kept you waiting."

"Not at all."

His reply was curt. Likely concerned about Lena having to walk along an icy road in high heels, Shin hesitated a short...no, a long moment before gingerly offering her his arm. Lena stiffened at the gesture for a moment... She knew lending a hand was considered good manners for a gentleman at times like this, but...

I didn't come across as...indecent...did I...?

Lena was always a bit of a wallflower at social events like parties. She'd hardly ever been escorted like this. But she couldn't deny that it was actually difficult to walk in these heels... So she mustered her courage and accepted his gesture.

She grabbed hold of his arm in a way that seemed almost overly timid. She couldn't bring herself to wrap her own arm around his, so she simply held on to his sleeve. Once she had done so, Shin started walking down the road with Lena by his side. Shin was even less used to escorting women than Lena was to being escorted by men, so their walk was as awkward as could be.

The snow crunched under their feet as they left two sets of footsteps in their wake. Shin seemed to be matching Lena's pace, because he was walking slower than usual. He usually moved quietly without making any sound, so hearing his footsteps sync up with her own felt satisfying in a way.

Yes, Shin was conforming to her pace.

He was always considerate of her, even without her noticing he was doing it... Always extending a hand. While Lena stood there, paralyzed by the rift between them...he still spoke to her, trying to understand her, despite the distance.

And she wanted to answer those feelings.

"Shin, if I..."

Those were words she'd said many times already. From when they were still a hundred kilometers apart, with the Gran Mur between them. Before she knew his name and face—or the fate of certain death that was in store for him. And when they'd reunited, and she thought he was finally set free from that fate.

"Once this war is over... No, even before it's over...is there anything you'd like to do? Anywhere you'd like to go? Something

you'd like to see?"

Shin's expression froze. He then said, with a horribly cold, dismissive tone:

"This again?"

He really does hate talking about this...

Those words always sounded like blame to him. That wasn't her intent, of course, but they were like a repeated condemnation. It was as if she'd told him that because he'd given up on the world, because he couldn't see the world the same way she did, he saddened her.

Shin sighed and continued speaking in a detached voice. And while that voice pushed her away, it also felt like he was enduring an indescribable pain.

"...No, there's nothing. As I said before, I don't think the world is a beautiful place."

"Yes, I can imagine. That's...how you see the world."

Lena uncomfortably said the words she didn't fully believe until now. In this world, Shin had nothing to believe in. Nothing to look forward to. And she couldn't blame him for that... As sad as it may have made her, no one could denounce the way he felt after the life he'd lived.

He was deprived of his family, his home, and his freedom. He was forced into a fate of certain death. He had to see the world as ugly, as that was the only way he could avoid giving up entirely. To him, there was no beauty to be found in life.

In Lena's eyes, that was a bleak outlook to have... But she couldn't say he was wrong. If nothing else, that was just how the world appeared to him.

For you, those scars were your pride.

Yes, scars. Lena and the Republic etched the deepest scars imaginable into his mind. And as she wondered beneath the citadel base's starry sky, she couldn't tell him to simply get rid of those scars. She couldn't heartlessly take that away from him, even if the wounds caused him great pain.

For Shin, the scars were a part of who he was. Maybe it was exactly because he'd had so much taken away from him that those scars had more weight than Lena assumed. In which case, she would have to accept his scars and despair as a part of him.

There may have been a divide between them, but that divide was part of what defined Shin as a person... And she could not look past it.

There was something in him she could believe in. Something she'd known ever since their time in the Eighty-Sixth Sector—and before she met him face-to-face. It was his strength. His pride. The childish mischievousness he sometimes exhibited, and the times he acted his age. And the kindness he didn't seem to know he possessed—the other side of his icy facade.

Lena decided to believe in that. They might not always be able to come to an understanding, but no matter how much distance there was between them, she would believe in that part of him.

"And still..."

"And still..."

Shin could hardly focus on Lena's words. He suddenly sank into contemplation. Lena's question had dealt him a crippling blow, albeit inadvertently.

Is there anything you'd like to do once this war is over?

Lena had asked him this several times already, and Shin still couldn't muster an answer. Not because he didn't have one—he did—but he couldn't bring himself to speak of it.

I want to show you the sea.

But that was a wish he'd made on his own, and he could no longer share it with Lena. He'd realized all it would do was hurt her. If he tried to be by her side as he was now, he would only cause her pain. He couldn't walk alongside her.

And that was why he couldn't give his true answer. He didn't want to grab hold of the hand she was extending toward him. Lena's wish, her desire for everyone to achieve happiness, was one he couldn't grant. He would only weigh her down.

So I won't wish to show you the sea. Never again.

Incidentally, both Lena and Shin were so wrapped up in their thoughts that neither of them paid attention to their feet. And as a direct result of that...

“...Aaah?!”

Shin snapped out of it when the silver-haired girl to his side suddenly lurched to the ground with a hysterical screech.

“Lena?!”

The fact that he could reflexively catch her in his arms despite being lost in thought only a moment ago was thanks to his superhuman reflexes. But he hesitated for just a moment. For some reason, he was terribly afraid of touching her. And because of that, he was too late to properly support her and caught her in an awkward, uncomfortable manner.

Fragments of transparent blue flitted at the edge of his vision. Apparently, they'd stepped on a lump of solid ice and slipped. For the time being, Shin asked the girl in his arms if she was all right. The lump of ice was hard enough to not break under their weight, and she'd stepped on it with her high heels.



"Are you hurt...? Did you twist your ankle?"

"I-I'm fine. I—I think."

Her bell-like voice was more high-pitched than usual, but Shin didn't realize why. He didn't notice she'd even sounded any different, for that matter. After all, she had already been close to him to begin with, but now he was holding her close to him as she was about to fall backward. In other words, while he wasn't quite embracing her at the moment, he did have his arms coiled around her back and was holding her quite tightly.

"Are you sure you're fine? If you have a sprain, it might not hurt until a little later... If you're not sure, I'll carry you back to the barracks."

"N-no! That's quite all right... Shin, I...I can stand on my own."

Upon hearing her thin squeak of a voice, Shin finally realized the position they were in. He became acutely aware of just how close her violet-scented perfume felt.

"Ah, I'm sorry...!"

He hurriedly let go of her but only after unconsciously confirming her feet were firmly planted on the ground. He worried her thin heels would break, causing her to stagger the moment he let go.

Lena hung her head, her face redder than he'd ever seen before. The stiff silence lasted longer than he expected, which made Shin progressively more concerned. Just as he started wondering if he ought to apologize again, Lena suddenly burst into laughter. She chuckled, her voice like the chiming of a bell.

"I-I'm sorry... But...!"

She kept chuckling, leaning forward as if her body had folded in half. Shin was soon unable to help himself and asked:

"What is it?"

"Nothing, it's just... You really are kind."

Shin was perplexed by those sudden words. He couldn't see how anything he said or did in this conversation could possibly be seen as kind.

"It always seems like you're not looking at anyone, but you never stop caring, and you never leave anyone to their fate... And you always help me, just like this."

"...You're exaggerating."

"No, I'm not. See? Even now..."

"You caught me. You were worried I'd gotten hurt. You looked out for me."

Lena spoke while wiping away the tears that had pooled in her eyes from laughing too hard. He really wasn't aware of it... Helping others came so naturally to him that he couldn't even perceive it as kindness.

Yes. That's why I can believe in you...

That's why she could continue to wish for his happiness, even after she came to know he himself could not.

"Shin, I want to continue our conversation from before... I'm not trying to say I'm sad. I'm not taking back what I said before, but I won't speak of it anymore. I just..."

She had no intention of retracting her previous statement... But if it made Shin look at her with that pained expression, she wouldn't say it again. However, she did have one other thing she wanted to convey in the moment.

"Even if the world you see isn't beautiful... Even if the human world is cruel... If you can still have hope in spite of that..."

Shin would say he could live without wanting for anything. That he was who he was, even without a past to fall back on. But if a day would come when he could find it in himself to hope again...

"If you still find something you want for yourself in this world... then I want you to know you're allowed to wish for it. Even if this world seems just as cruel and heartless as ever. We are no longer in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. Your wish could come true. I just...want you to remember that."

If you say you don't need to wish for anything, that's fine. I really hope you do start wishing for things, but for now, it's fine. But I don't want you to admonish yourself by saying you don't have the right to want things for yourself.

That was truly all she wanted to convey right now, but her mouth kept going on its own, expressing a bit of her own personal wish. Even though she didn't know if she would be at Shin's side on the day he started to have hope again, she still

made an unconscious wish to be with him when he did.

"And if you don't mind... When the time comes, please share your wish with me."

Shin was at a loss for words at the sight of this flowery smile. Lena didn't know about his wish, and that was why she could say these words. She spoke in the same way a child might describe their dreams for the future, and nothing else.

But...

"You're allowed to wish for it."

Was he really? He'd finally found something to wish for—a reason to fight. To show her the sea. To show her things she'd never seen before and bathe in her smile.

Was that truly something he could wish for? He hoped it was.

He was surprised by the emotion that surged up within him, and that's when he knew. He *wanted* to have hope. If he could be forgiven for doing so—no, even if he wouldn't be forgiven for it... He wanted to.

He knew it would hurt her, but he still wanted to be by her side. He'd finally found something to fight for, and he didn't want to let go of it now. Even though he knew he shouldn't touch her, that he had to push her away, he still caught her in his embrace when she fell. For that one moment, he forgot the rift between them—he forgot all his reservations—and treated her as he always did.

His unconscious actions told the whole story. He didn't want to let go of her now. He still thought of himself as a monster and knew he could only hurt her. But despite that... No, because of that—

—he couldn't stay as he was.

He couldn't be with this girl who wished for the future, not while his heart still carried this void that forbade him from having hope. If he believed he would hurt her, then he would have to change.

He needed to change if he wanted to fight by her side.

What did he want for himself? How could he change? Would he truly be able to imagine the future—something he'd never even imagined before...?

CHAPTER 2

LIFE'S BUT A WALKING SHADOW

"Next up, point 183–570. Enemy estimated to be a platoon-size group of Ameise."

"Enemy unit confirmed by sight. One platoon of Ameise... Including three targets."

"Roger that. Gunslinger, opening fire."



At the old United Kingdom border, in the Legion territories along the southern regions of the Dragon Corpse mountain range, preparations for the next offensive were underway. Armored detachments composed of heavy-class Legion units were being concentrated on the front lines, while preparations for an airborne offensive were being made behind them.

On the horizon between the silver skies and the blinding white snowscape, three Zentauri and a platoon of Ameise were crouched on a steep incline facing west as the snow piled over them. Their orders were to remain on standby. These combat machines had no concept of tedium and remained idle—without

displeasure or boredom—as they awaited the command to attack.

It was then that the sudden clang of a high-speed, high-density hunk of metal digging into armor rang into the air before the sound was absorbed by the snow. One of the Zentaur units crumpled powerlessly to the ground, having been shot through its central kernel.

The nearby Ameise turned their composite sensors in the direction of the Zentaur that had fallen over like a marionette with its strings cut. And as they did, the remaining two Zentaur units were shot down one after another. These high-speed, armor-piercing rounds traveled at an initial velocity of 1,600 meters per second—faster than their fire could echo.

By the time those Ameise turned to acknowledge the Zentaur's fate, they didn't have so much as a spare moment to relay news of the enemy attack to their Supreme Commander unit. The Ameise were left utterly helpless against the volley of 88 mm rounds fired with laser accuracy, fired as fast as their automatic reload mechanism could operate.



"Suppression of targets and peripheral units is complete, Sir Reaper."

"Roger that. Kurena, change position. Your next target is a feint. Ludmila, point 202–358. Presumed to be an armored unit consisting primarily of Löwe. Please confirm."

"One moment, please. Malinovka Company, a change in position. Move to point—"

As she listened to Shin's exchange with the Malinovka Company's commander—the Sirin named Ludmila—Kurena raised Gunslinger from its sniping position. She was in the middle of a forest of black conifer trees, their tops like spears brandished against the heavens. Like the thorns on a dragon's spine.

Dense snow, which had fallen off the nearby branches as the recoil of her shots shook the air, slipped off her unit's fuselage. Snow wouldn't melt in this temperature, so it remained white and

powdery. The sky above this forest in the contested zones, which was relatively close to the Legion's territory, was indeed sealed off by a layer of silver. It was likely that behind the Eintagsfliege that formed this argent veil were their commander units, the Rabe.

And so in order to keep her silhouette hidden from them, her Juggernaut's armor was dyed white in camouflage paint. Still, the moment she fired, the 88 mm turret's thunderous boom would expose her position. As such, before those annoying airborne lookouts closed in on her, Kurena used the thick branches as cover to quickly and cautiously shift Gunslinger's position.

Shin, who was also scouting out the contested zones, and the Alkonosts that were in charge of confirming and recovering their targets were also repeating a cycle of taking cover and changing position. Their force for this series of ambushes—which consisted of the Spearhead squadron and a single company of Alkonosts—was relatively small, and so they had to go about their mission while avoiding open hostilities as much as possible.

"A job well done, Lady Gunslinger. Darya, withdrawing."

She'd received a transmission over the Sensory Resonance from the Sirin in charge of scouting out ahead—Darya. She had pink, braided hair and looked even younger than the other Sirins, which were all made to look like young girls.

They'd cooperated at the Revich Citadel Base and were working together even now that they had moved to the reserve base. Thanks to their many repeated joint operations, Kurena and the rest of the Processors had grown used to working in tandem with the Sirins. The overall forces set to participate in the Dragon Fang Mountain operation were smaller than before, but the invasion force itself wasn't much different compared to the plan's original draft.

That said, Kurena still wasn't used to handling these girls, who deemed themselves disposable existences.

"But truly, you would be better off leaving this duty to us. These may be the contested zones, but we're still operating near Legion territories. This mission is far too dangerous for human lives."

"It's not like...you can pull off the stunts I can, right?"

She'd almost called them disposable but stopped herself in time. She didn't want to say it. Those were the same words the white pigs directed at the Eighty-Six. But the Sirins were different from the Eighty-Six.

We're not like these things. We might be similar, but we're not like them.

“...That might be true. We've specialized in melee combat so far, so we don't boast the same sniping prowess you do, Lady Gunslinger. But if you would lend us your firing data and Juggernaut so that we may analyze your sniping techniques, we may be able to study them accordingly. And once we gain enough combat experience...”

Kurena pursed her lips tightly at that suggestion.

“There's no way...”

This is all I have. This battlefield is the only place where I'm allowed to be by Shin's side. I'd wished he'd take me back with him the day I fall in battle. Ever since then, Shin and I stopped being equals. I was no longer a savior; I became someone looking to be saved. I can't support Shin... He won't rely on me. Even now, when he's being tormented by something. So at the very least, this... There's no way...

“...I'm giving this up to anyone.”

“Roger. Spearhead squadron and Malinovka company, withdrawing from the battle area.”

Shin sighed as Lena's order to withdraw arrived from the reserve base's command center. As always, the image of a white world was projected onto his optical screen. It had been half a month since he'd made his decision. Some part of him couldn't help but feel that he was running away from her. He occupied himself single-mindedly with the preparations for the operation, hiding in the fighting and everyday tasks that accompanied it. All in an attempt to postpone the task he'd realized he had to do.

He needed to do something he was incapable of doing so far; he needed to imagine his own future.

But even though he understood this, half a month had passed,

and he still had no idea what he was actually supposed to do. He knew he was just standing still and doing nothing, but he couldn't move.

He had no goal to strive for, after all. Nothing he wanted to do. Nowhere he wanted to go to, no vision of himself he wanted to become. Though he asked himself these questions relentlessly, he couldn't come up with a single answer. He had nothing save the crippling emptiness he felt at all times.

The only thing he could truly feel was the sense of urgency burning in his heart. The moment he'd become aware of it, the emotions surged up, compelling him to do something.

"You're allowed to wish for it."

So she said. And he wanted to respond to those words. But he came up empty...

"I have nothing, Lena."

He'd whispered those words too softly to be picked up by the switched-off Para-RAID and wireless. Lena said she wanted happiness for all. But that was...

"What should people who can't wish for anything do...?"

What should those who can't answer that prayer do...?

Apparently, having images of flower fields drawn over the dining hall walls was something all of the United Kingdom's frontline bases had in common.

"Seriously, how do you keep coming up with these operations?"

The reserve base at the United Kingdom's second front line was the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package's current post. It was surrounded by forests and mountains, which were nourished by a large river. In contrast to the barren impression the words *northern land* might invoke, the United Kingdom was blessed by nature's splendor. There were plenty of naturally occurring ingredients to cook with.

Raiden spoke through a mouthful of fish stew, which had been carefully simmered to bring out the full flavor of the ingredients... It might've been a bit too flavorful to someone who wasn't used to it. Lena smiled at him.

"Back when I commanded the Brisingamen squadron and

during the large-scale offensive, I had to fight while making use of anything I had. Though, I'll admit this time I took a little...well, a big chunk out of the system developer's sleep."

She tried not to think too much about the objects Vika sent in addition to the items they were going to use.

Theo, fork in hand, added:

"By the way, I hear Anju and Kurena are going to be separated from the rest of the unit during the Dragon Fang Mountain operation. And so are the sniping and surface-suppression forces for the other squadrons."

"I'll admit I can't exactly show my worth *inside* the enemy fortress," Anju said.

"I'm pretty sure I can hit my marks even in cramped places, though," Kurena said grumpily.

Raiden sighed in exasperation.

"That's why we're using that skill of yours to crush the enemy units."

"This time, the United Kingdom can't afford to lend us any forces to cover for us while we charge in... Having you two keep the enemy pinned down from the rear while we head in will be more helpful for us than having you come with."

After hearing those words from Shin, Kurena beamed with pride.

"Right! Leave it to me!"

"...My goodness, girl, you are a simpleminded one..." Frederica remarked with a hint of exasperation. "I should hope you do not find yourself wrapped around some vile man's little finger."

"Excuse you?!"

As Kurena jumped up to her feet, knocking back her chair with a thud, Shin, Raiden, and Theo started shuffling their shares of the United Kingdom's unique salted mushrooms onto Frederica's tray.

"Aaah! What are you all doing?!"

"You went a bit too far this time, Frederica," Anju said gently.

"Hmph! See that? Shin, Raiden, and Theo are on my side!"

Kurena puffed out her chest. Contrary to the childishness of her words, that gesture accentuated her mature curves, which prompted Frederica to growl angrily. Looking over that exchange,

Lena chuckled. The Eighty-Six had all seemed depressed ever since the battle at the Revich base, but it appeared they were starting to recover.

In truth, nothing had really been resolved. But they seemed to have switched gears since coming to this frontline base—to the battlefield. Shin and the other Processors were regaining their cheerfulness and their combat prowess. They may have been youths in their mid to late teens, but they were still Eighty-Six—warriors who had survived the Eighty-Sixth Sector for years. Being able to quickly adjust their mindsets was a skill they naturally had to develop.

"And it's not just you two. The rearguard and Vanadis's attached unit are gonna be staying behind..."

A boisterous "You got it, Li'l Reaper!" cut Raiden off, who turned his glance to a nearby table. Shin ignored that shout. Lena turned her gaze to Shin, but he didn't look back. It occurred to her that since they came to this base, Shin hadn't spoken to her outside of work-related issues. He looked down in contemplation, pretending not to notice her eyes on him.

When was the last time they had spoken? Ah, right, after the grand conference, in that snowy, starlit garden. When for but a moment, he'd shown her the dismissive...yet puzzled expression of a lost child.

What was that all about...?

"Shiden's people, huh...? I know the United Kingdom's main force was done in pretty badly, but will they really be enough for defending HQ?"

"Hey, Li'l Reaper! Don't ignore me! I know you can hear me!"

"You don't have to repeat yourself. I can hear you just fine. Just sit quietly and be a good guard dog, like always."

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Ya finally admit it, huh?! Don't ya worry. *My* unit will be keeping Her Majesty here safe and sound. Unlike you, Li'l Reaper!"

The two of them seemed to have begun some kind of lively, pointless argument. The sight of them squabbling made a smile play over Lena's lips and pushed that momentary, nagging anxiety to the back of her mind.

For a time, at least.



The room's primary function was an office belonging to a member of the royal family, but it still acted as a frontline base. As Lerche entered the chamber, which was much drearier than any other in the palace, she found her master was still gazing at a holographic electronic document hovering in the air.

"Your Highness, the base is soon about to enter lights-out. You should prepare for bed... Or rather, I believe you ought to take a break first. I'll pour you some tea."

"Thank you... But before that... Hey."

Removing the glasses he wore for desk work, her master silently called her name.

"Lerche."

He spoke to her with a casual tone, but Lerche pursed her lips. Sirins weren't equipped with any senses aside from hearing and sight and had no functions for breathing or digestion. But the sole exception was their ability to change their facial expressions.

Vika stared at her with his cold, violet eyes as she stood still in front of the office's door. Lerche thought she could understand why those who sought to slander this man called him a serpent. When he looked at her like that, it felt like something utterly inhuman had her locked in its gaze. A cold-blooded, captivating, black serpent. The way his Imperial violet eyes glared at her, as if seeing into her very soul, was indeed terrifying.

"What did you tell Nouzen during the last operation?"

"...Nothing in particular."

"You're lying. He's been avoiding you ever since that final charge. And he lacks the sensitivity to be repulsed by you all because you're a bird of death or a mechanical doll. Which means he's not avoiding the Sirins; he's avoiding *you*. And the cause for that must be something you said. Am I right?"

Her expression grew strained. This was a question coming from the man who granted her both her consciousness and her purpose. She had to answer. As his creation, as one who acknowledged herself as his sword, she couldn't allow herself to refuse. And yet...

"Your Highness... Even I have words I wish to keep to myself."

I—this lone Sirin by the name of Lerche—am a failure that could not become the girl called Lerchenlied. Even though I am made from her remains, produced by a wish to re-create her, I am but a useless vessel that failed to capture her essence.

Yet despite the fact that Vika let her stay by his side as his personal guard, she couldn't tell him what she had told Shin. Her proclamation that as someone who was no longer alive, she could never achieve happiness alongside another...meant so long as Vika was at her side, he would never find joy.

The backups of the Sirins' neural networks and quasi-personalities were stored in the production plant. Even if a Sirin was destroyed in battle, they could easily be reproduced. But that wasn't true for Lerche. Her brain structure and quasi-personality could not be reproduced. No backups existed for her—the sole copy of Lerche's mind and personality only existed within her cranium.

Lerche...was Lerchenlied's only vessel.

This wasn't caused by any kind of technical limitation, however. It was what Vika wanted. Lerchenlied willingly surrendered her remains to him to become a Sirin, but that was only because that was her master's, Vika's, wish. At the very least, that's what Vika believed. And so when it came to Lerchenlied and her alone, he believed her revival should be a onetime affair. Should Lerche break at this point, Vika would let her soul be free.

So she couldn't tell Vika she called herself a fake that could not bring anyone joy when he cherished Lerchenlied so much. Never.

Vika scoffed at her.

"I know that much. I never inputted a directive to always obey my orders when I initially programmed you, you know...? I'm asking you despite that. What did you tell him?"

He wasn't ordering her to answer him. He was *asking* her to answer.

Lerche contorted her face in anguish. All the Sirins were given the capacity to change their facial expressions, despite being weapons. They were given human faces, voices, eyes, and skin. In all honesty, these features were unnecessary for combat and only served to lower the rate of production. And despite that, research was put forth into reproducing those features using

artificial materials.

The basis for the Sirins' concept was a mechanical body born of Vika's desire as a child to create a new living vessel for his dead mother. That idea was reinforced for battle and simplified for mass-production purposes.

And even though they were mass-produced combat machines... Even though they were only pale imitations of a true human form...they were still dolls that could have become the mother he lost or the girl he loved. They were dolls that could have become human.

Surely, as their creator, he did not wish to see them being sent out to battle and treated like spare parts. So how could she refuse him, when he showed so much affection for them? She would have to answer. Even if that answer would go on to hurt him.

"...By your will, Your Highness."

†

"I guess it makes sense that in the half month we've been stationed here, we'd collect this many of 'em."

The Eighty-Sixth Strike Package's Reginleif maintenance crew included a large number of Eighty-Six servicing staff. Sergeant Guren Akino and Corporal Touka Keisha, who were in charge of servicing Undertaker, were two such examples.

"I mean, it's hard 'cause the Legion don't want us to reuse or recycle their remains. Especially when it comes to the combatant types like the Löwe. They fry their central processors along with the rest of their functions to protect confidential data. But since *these things* are more for logistical support, only their central processors are wired to fry themselves... So in theory, we should be able to cobble something together by recycling their remains."

The remains of countless ruined Legion units lay scattered in an unused hangar. Guren spoke to Shin, who had shown up for a status report, while pointing his thumb at the wreckage. He was a tall man with reddish hair that had grown faded from exposure to sunlight, and a pair of blue eyes that had something of a sarcastic glint to them.

Touka was a pureblood Sapphira with flowing golden hair who looked entirely out of place in the maintenance crew's brusque overalls. As she spoke, her fair, dainty features softened into a smile.

"But on its own, it's all technology that's been in use since before the war. Even the Federacy utilized it, so I suppose the Legion don't really care about us having it. That helps us in operations like this, though. Saves us the hassle of having to make them from scratch."

Both of them were part of the maintenance crew that used to be stationed in the same base as Shin in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. At the time, Shin would constantly wreck his Juggernaut, so he had to come to them for servicing quite often. As such, they remembered Shin even years down the line.

"But heh, to think you'd end up being captain. To think that little squirt from back then grew up to be this guy."

...Still, they had stood on equal footing during his first year after being drafted. Being treated this way, as if he were a child, was irritating. Guren smirked at the way Shin eyed him wordlessly. There was a hint of bitterness to his smile.

"But really, you only got bigger, didn't you? You still break the Reginleifs as much as you used to break the Juggernauts. When it comes to that, you haven't changed in the slightest."

Shin blinked a few times at that statement.

"...I haven't?"

He was in the same base as Guren seven years ago. Back when he was still convinced that he was to blame for Rei trying to kill him. And at the time, he also believed, somewhere in his heart, that the way his comrades kept dying and leaving him behind...was somehow his fault. The truth was that they had constantly been dispatched to the most dangerous battlefields.

But since then, he'd grown. His voice had changed. He'd found a few comrades who lived through battles with him, and he thought he'd changed in all sorts of ways. He did believe that. But...

He hadn't changed? Ever since those days? Really?

Guren smiled, without realizing the doubts sprouting up in Shin.

"Yeah. You're a good bit stronger than you were back then, and you look more dependable... But the way you plunge into danger is all the same. The way you fought always made me wonder if you had a death wish or something."

Even as he left the hangar, Shin was still weighed down by Guren's words. Touka, who had stood next to them, cracked a smirk but didn't deny what he said.

Had he really not changed? Not in the last two weeks, since he'd realized he needed to change... But ever since the Eighty-Sixth Sector? Really?

"Shin."

The United Federacy base corridors were always complicated, as if they were fashioned after a labyrinth of some sort. Arriving at a junction of the corridors, Shin stopped and looked at the one who called him: Kurena.

Before even realizing who she was, Shin furrowed his brows in puzzlement as he asked:

"...What's with that look?"

"Huh...? Ah!"

Kurena glanced down at her outfit and suddenly turned red. That said, Shin didn't see what about it warranted embarrassment. Her uniform's jacket was off and draped over her arm, and her blouse's necktie was undone. Shin didn't personally care very much but had to ask since it was still technically a violation of military regulations.

"This is, er, ah... It's nothing!"

Kurena was, for some reason, very flustered about this. As she swung her arms around in some meaningless gesture, Shin easily realized with his kinetic vision that one of her hands was gripping some kind of purplish-silver choker.

...Come to think of it, Kurena and Anju were scheduled to have some support-type equipment they'd received for the upcoming mission checked. For whatever reason, no one was willing to explain what kind of equipment it was. Frederica, Lena, and oddly enough, even Vika refused to speak of it in front of him. He'd once asked Marcel about it, who simply stiffened in silence with a

very pale expression.

Somehow regaining her composure, Kurena continued their conversation.

"Forget that. Um... Hey, Shin."

She looked up at him with her golden eyes.

"Are you, like...panicking right now?"

"....."

Shin squinted with one of his eyes.

...Dammit. I was trying to hide it so no one...so Lena wouldn't notice. I didn't want it to influence how they see me.

Her heart heavy with concern, Kurena looked over at Shin, who was scowling like he'd just had an open wound touched. He'd likely made this face upon realizing that Kurena could tell he was struggling with something. He couldn't accept making anyone—namely Kurena—worry about him.

He'll always...only see me as a troublesome little sister, won't he?

"...Sorry. Is it bothering you?" he asked.

"No, no, it's fine. That's not what I meant. I just wanted to tell you something."

When did she realize how panicked Shin seemed to be? It was when they came to this base in the United Kingdom, sometime during the two weeks they'd spent training for the upcoming attack. The heat of combat was when Kurena got to spend the most time with Shin. That was when she was even closer to him than Lena, and helpful to him in the one way she alone could—as a sniper.

She could tell Shin was panicking. That he was trying go somewhere far away, somewhere that wasn't here. As if something was pressing him, urging him to hurry up and go, even though Shin himself likely didn't know where that place might be. And so he went nowhere. He was stuck in place, and that lack of progress only served to heighten his panic.

Despite the fact that if he didn't know where to go, he wouldn't have to go anywhere to begin with.

"Er... If it's hard on you, you don't have to force yourself to

change."

For a moment, Shin's eyes widened ever so slightly. Kurena looked straight at him as she continued:

"Ever since we left the Eighty-Sixth Sector and came to the Federacy, everyone's been telling us not to be ourselves. But we got this far by being who we are, you know? So I think it's fine if we stay like this."

And upon saying that, Kurena realized: What she was trying to say wasn't *You don't have to change*. It was *Please don't change*. Because if they stopped being the Eighty-Six and became something else...

You'd choose to be somewhere that isn't the battlefield... The only place I can be with you.

"So I think you don't have to try to change if you don't want to. You don't need to make that pained expression. I think we can just stay the way we are."

Please don't change. Stay the way you are. I don't think we can make that choice the way we are now, but I still want our relationship to stay like this: as fellow Eighty-Six who will fight and die together on the same battlefield.

"I don't think you need to change."

Shin's expression hardened. It seemed he'd just understood something.

"...Right. We've been doing just fine so far."

Even if they someday lost all their strength and fell in battle, they would at least know they fought to the very end. That was their sole source of pride, and even if they became the kind of person who could only wish for that fate, it was in no way a mistake. Living and dying like that wasn't something to be ashamed of.

That was how they had survived the Eighty-Sixth Sector, a place of certain death. They'd decided to hang on to their pride, and they didn't want to discard it. So it wasn't a mistake. In no way, shape, or form was it a mistake. And yet...

"Still, it's not that I don't want to change. I have to. I realized I have to wish for something. So..."

It wasn't a mistake. They could stay the way they were, if they wanted to live alone. Or with someone who shared their way of life, like another Eighty-Six. But that wasn't true if they wanted to live alongside someone else. Because that way of life would go on to hurt that person.

Shin looked away from those desperate, clinging golden eyes, knowing full well how cruel it was to do so.

"We can't stay the way we are."



Something was off about Shin. That's what Lena had been feeling over the last few days. On the surface, there weren't any problems to speak of. His drafting, preparation, and reports for the upcoming operation were all in order, and he was as calm and collected as ever.

But it felt like something was bothering him. She couldn't shake that feeling, nor could she figure out what the issue was. And so Lena decided to bring it up herself.

"Do you think something's been bothering Shin?"

"Why don't you ask him instead?"

Looking up from her seat in her office, she found Raiden sitting on the small, nearby sofa, holding a teacup in one hand and regarding her with an utterly exasperated expression. As if to say *What are you asking me for?*

Lena frowned at his response. Shin wouldn't answer that question even if she asked him, and that's why she asked Raiden, who was Shin's closest friend. Maybe if Raiden was the one bringing up the question, Shin would actually answer it... Raiden would deny that, of course, but the thought that Shin would tell him something he wouldn't be willing to share with her made her quite unhappy.

"What about you, Shiden? Did he tell you something?"

"...Your Majesty, you must be really up against a wall here. Does it look like that Li'l Reaper and I get along well enough to have a heart-to-heart? You know we don't."

True enough, whenever they met, the two of them started

arguing and bickering like little children.

"I always thought it was like they said: You have to be close to argue with someone..."

"Nah, nope, no chance of that. Me and the Li'l Reaper just straight up don't like each other. Like a wolf and a tiger, we're natural enemies. We don't get along on a genetic level, me and him."

"...Wolves and tigers aren't natural enemies, and the tiger's gonna come out on top there. Which one of you is supposed to be which anyway?"

Outright ignoring Raiden's quip, Shiden stuffed another tea cake into her mouth and munched down on it in a distinctly noisy, impolite manner.

"But yeah, even I can tell something's off about him. Not like he'd talk to anyone about it. You could just order him to do it, Your Majesty. You're his commanding officer."

"That's..."

That was true. If a subordinate of hers was showing problems that might interfere with the operation's success, it was her duty to either ask him about it and address the issue or order him to resolve it on his own. And if both weren't possible, she would need to remove him from the operation.

"...That's not what I mean."

She wanted him to depend on her as a friend, not as a commanding officer... Lena drooped her shoulders.

Still, a commanding officer had their duties to consider.

"Shin, if anything is bothering you, I'm willing to lend you an ear."

"What's this all of a sudden?"

Lena didn't know how to steer the conversation toward the topic, and so she decided to just go ahead and cut to the chase. Shin answered her question with a puzzled expression. Frederica, who happened to be in Lena's office at the time, heaved an exaggerated sigh for some reason.

"You just look like you've been brooding over something for a while now. I'm willing to listen if you'd like to talk about it, or I

could increase the frequency of your regular counseling sessions."

"Aaah..." Shin made a pained expression for a moment.

But he soon stifled that emotion and shook his head.

"It's a personal matter. I wouldn't even say it's bothering me, per se."

"But it'd be an issue if it ended up interfering with the operation..."

"I believe I've always shut those things out during combat operations... Or was there some kind of problem?"

Lena was at a loss for words. Truth be told, Shin's capacity for completing operational objectives was without fault. But she couldn't shake the feeling there was something forced and fabricated about the expression he now wore on his pale, generally stoic face. He looked the same as always, but something was different. As if something was wavering behind that facade, but he had to keep that bottled up in front of Lena.

"Well, no, there weren't any problems, but..."

She couldn't come up with anything to refute that. And as Lena fell silent, Shin still didn't tell her anything. Meanwhile, Frederica looked at the both of them wordlessly with a dubious expression. It was then that a knock on the door broke the awkward silence. Annette peeked into the room. To compensate for the shortage in manpower, she and Grethe had also arrived at the front with the rest of the Strike Package.

"Lena, is this talk gonna take long? I need to borrow Captain Nouzen once you're done. You know, for that matter."

Lena gave a perplexed nod while Shin eyed her questioningly. It was a matter she'd discussed with Annette before, but it wasn't really something they couldn't talk about in front of other people.

"Yes, but you can discuss it here, too."

Annette cracked a smile.

"Come on. Let's assume he has to tell me that it's too hard to implement during the operation. Do you want him to say that in front of his commanding officer...? I doubt the captain would care, and he'd probably say it anyway. But be considerate of him."

That was true.

"Yes, you're right... Then go ahead, Captain. My apologies."

Shin sighed as he left the office with Annette. It might have only been by way of coincidence, but he was saved. When Lena asked him if something was bothering him, he was very much startled. He didn't want her, of all people, to notice something was wrong with him, but apparently, it showed on his face regardless.

The image of her bothered expression and her concerned silver-bell-like voice surfaced in his mind again.

"If anything is bothering you, I'm willing to lend you an ear."

...But I can't tell you.

How could he tell her he could never make her wish come true? That he wanted to change himself but didn't know how to go about it? That he didn't want to be a burden to her... That he didn't want to hurt her again?

"That's about it for our intentions. What's your take on it as the commander on the scene? Lena told me not to approve it if you thought it would get in the way of completing the operation."

"I don't think it'll get in the way of the operation, but..."

Annette led Shin to one of the several, loud warehouses that were filled with ammunition and energy packs prepared for the upcoming operation. Shin answered her question, standing in one of the corners as he read through the electronic document she handed him.

"A Reginleif's combat maneuvering can damage your body if you're not used to it... I think it'll be harsh on a noncombatant such as yourself, Major Penrose."

Annette shrugged casually.

"Even Frederica's boarded a Reginleif before, right? If a little kid can take it, I don't see why I can't."

"...Roger. I'll pick someone to ferry you. I recommend you familiarize yourself with it ahead of time, Major. I can arrange training sessions for you, too, if you want."

"Thank you. That's very thoughtful of you," Annette said.

She then started teasing him a bit.

"I figured you'd hear me out, though. You always used to give in eventually whenever I'd ask you something ridiculous."

She said this while knowing that Shin didn't appear to

remember a whole lot about their past. What he did remember seemed to be the most trivial, unimportant memories. His responses were always either a casual *I don't remember* or a curt *maybe*. She'd expected the same thing now, but Shin had fallen oddly silent.

"...Captain?"

"I wouldn't really..."

Shin looked away, and so she couldn't quite meet his gaze.

"...I wouldn't really have agreed if you'd have asked me something truly ridiculous...*Rita*."

Annette's eyes widened in surprise, but the next moment, she lowered her brows as a wistful smile played over her lips.

"Right, I'm not just Major Penrose, am I?"

Rita. That was what Shin had always called her before he was sent to the internment camp. Her parents were both deceased—one had died by suicide, while the other had perished in large-scale offensive—and she never told Lena about this nickname. After learning that Shin didn't remember her when they'd reunited, she thought no one would ever call her by that name again.

"Did you remember anything about me?"

"Not completely. I feel like there's more stuff I can't remember than stuff I can, but..."

Shin took a single, short breath.

"But the truth is, I'd never lost those memories. So I thought I should apologize for not remembering until now."

"That's fine. It's not your fault you couldn't remember... And if you had remembered everything, I'd have to be the one to apologize."

Suddenly sensing a gaze on them, they looked around only to find Fido peeking in on them from behind the shadow of one of the containers. Annette shooed it away with a wave of her hand. A Scavenger couldn't possibly have a will or emotions of its own, but the way its large, round optical sensors seemed to be looking at them gave the impression it was worried about Shin. It was pretty cute.

As something of a trivial note, *Fido* was the same name Shin had given his pet dog growing up. His simplistic naming

conventions hadn't seemed to mature any.

Annette couldn't tell exactly when he'd remembered more about her, but he'd probably been waiting for the right moment to mention it. Lena had been somewhat tormented recently by the fact that Shin seemed to be brooding over something, so maybe it was related to this change in his mental state.

Yes, Lena. Right now, Annette wasn't the childhood friend of the young man standing before her...but Lena's friend.

"Oh, and about earlier. I figured if I didn't interfere, things would get annoying, but don't worry Lena too much. The fact that you're being weird has been weighing on her for days now. She had to work up some courage to ask you that question, so don't snub her too much, okay?"

"....."

Annette realized, with a hint of exasperation, that his habit of giving the silent treatment whenever things became inconvenient for him hadn't changed any. It'd been ten years, and he still acted like a small child.

But that was probably because, in a way, he really was still just a kid. Shin was an Eighty-Six who served five years on a battlefield where he was fated to die. He shouldn't have had a future and didn't need to think about what would happen when he became an adult.

So he couldn't become this thing he'd never even thought about. The adults were the first to go, and so only the children were left in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. They didn't have parents or teachers or older siblings to serve as an example to them.

It was then that Annette realized:

That's...really bad.

Not knowing where you're going. Having to live while not even knowing what you want...

"Hey, I hope I'm just overthinking this, but... Could it be that what's bothering you is..."

Suddenly, the bloodred eyes before her cooled. Having experienced this change in Shin's attitude for the first time, Annette swallowed nervously.

"...the Legion?"

"Yeah... Sorry. My squad's probably going to deploy now."

Which meant he had to go.
"Right. Take care out there."

Even a few minutes after Shin left, Lena was still overcome by an awkward mood. Frederica, who had kept quiet until now, parted her lips to speak.

"...Nothing good will come from being in such a hurry, I say."

Turning around to face her, Lena found that Frederica's bloodred eyes weren't fixed on her, but rather, they were tracing Shin's movements from across the thick concrete wall.

"Shinei is not as strong as you may believe he is. Nor does he understand himself... He is full of doubts, that one, and has been for quite some time. And so rushing him for an answer would only serve to further corner him..."

".....?"

Shin...wasn't strong?

"That can't be right..."

"Surely, you remember the moment you first met Shinei."

Lena blinked once. The first time she met him? Next to the Juggernaut memorial? No...

"You mean when we fought off the Morpho, right?"

"Aye. Think back to how Shinei was at that time. He was... The way he acted then—that, too, is a part of Shinei. A side of himself he never would have wished to show you."

She recalled the voice she'd heard back then, on that battlefield of lycoris flowers. The person she'd spoke to in the past—Shin—was...

At that moment, a shrill alarm blared through the small office.

"What is this?!" Frederica exclaimed.

"This alarm...!"

There shouldn't have been a hunt today, but several units were dispatched to the contested zones, creating a diversion meant to obfuscate their plan. And the squadron that'd been deployed was...

"They've been hit by a Legion counteroffensive and were forced to retreat...!"

When Shin reached the hangar, several of the Spearhead squadron members were already present. He followed Kurena's crimson hair as she rushed ahead to the standby room and called out to Guren. The force they had on alert in case of emergency had already been deployed, but the enemy's numbers were too vast. They didn't have enough firepower to hold the line until their scattered allies could retreat to safety.

"Guren, the Spearhead squadron is deploying... Are we ready to go?"

"Course you are. I wouldn't be much of a maintenance worker if poking around the Legion's remains made me forget about servicing the rigs, now would I?"

Turning his gaze, Shin caught a glimpse of Touka clinging to Undertaker as she was finishing loading ammunition onto it. Fido and the rest of the Scavengers lined up as they were being loaded with spare energy packs, magazines, and other armaments that were exclusively used by some of their units.

"There's a blizzard out there... Watch yourself."

"Right."

Shin nodded and, as he walked off, unfurled his scarf for a moment to attach his RAID Device. Wrapping the scarf around his neck again, he activated the Sensory Resonance. The Strike Package didn't have many officers, and so staff officers were regularly given rights to command. Shin didn't call out to the commander, though; he merely Resonated to get a grasp of the situation before briefing.

The situation was pretty bad. The squadron members' transmissions came in rapid-fire, their voices overlapping in the confusion: *Second platoon's isolated. Out of ammo. We've been run aground. Requesting rescue... Second Lieutenant Irina Misa, KIA.*

The face of that mature girl who had served as Rito's vice commander in the Claymore squadron surfaced in Shin's mind. Unlike Rito, she was docile and obedient. She was, alongside Rito, one of Shin's squad mates in the Eighty-Sixth Sector before he was moved to another squadron. She had been at Rito's side until the large-scale offensives.

He recalled her reserved smile and the occasional

conversations they'd had. But it was only a faint recollection, and as his mind sharpened in preparation for battle, the memory did little to stir up any emotion. He banished that thought to a frozen corner of his mind.

There was no need for emotion now. His mind, whetted like a keen blade, told him as much. As he entered the briefing room, a voice called to him from the side.

"Shin."

It was Lena, who was struggling to catch her breath. Her RAID Device was attached to her neck, as expected. As their tactical commander, she of course heard the death report. Her silver eyes clouded over with profound grief. But in the next moment, she'd suppressed it with her own force of will.

"We'll begin the briefing as soon as everyone's gathered. It'll be quick, so you'll be able to set out ASAP."

"Roger."

He opened the door and let Lena walk in first. The squadron members who were already there filed into the room at once. The nervous footsteps and voices of those ones who were late in making their way to the hangar could be heard in the background.

Shin watched her argent hair stream past as she walked by, and it was then that he realized: Lena was currently grieving. Her words and attitude did nothing to show it, but that was only because she'd suppressed her emotions as part of her duty as a commander. But Irina's death pained her.

And yet he couldn't feel any sorrow. Of course, part of it was because his mindset had switched over in preparation for battle. The battlefield didn't offer any respite to mourn the death of a friend. Sorrow and grief were for when the battle was over—otherwise, one would simply follow that dead comrade to the grave. Shin knew that all too well from seven years of fighting.

And yet there was more to it than that. For the Eighty-Six, death was a way of life. An Eighty-Six dying was to be expected, par for the course. It was true for everyone... Even for Shin himself. A part of him truly believed this...

Shin felt a small shiver run through his body. He could only see himself as a monster. A monster that walked a lonely road to the battlefield, paved by the corpses of its comrades. Only a monster

would take the death of those around it for granted.

He thought he'd realized by now that this was no way to live—that living as if one might die the next day, rushing toward death, stepping over corpses, and thirsting for the end...was no way to go through life. He thought he'd realized he had to have hope for the future, even if he couldn't imagine it.

But it felt as if someone had grabbed him by the hand. As if the moment he tried to move forward, someone had taken hold of him so tightly that he couldn't shake off their grip. But when he turned around, he found himself face-to-face with his own self—a shorter, younger Shin, from before his voice had even cracked. It was the Shin who had just set foot in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, when people had only started calling him Reaper because everyone always left him behind and died.

The young Shin smiled at him. After all...

I'd be better off living as if I might die tomorrow, thinking death is just a way of life for the Eighty-Six. I'm better off not thinking of the future I'll never have—or any future at all.

And you're the same. You're off to court death in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, along a road paved with corpses.

A monster obsessed with death.

.....!"

He'd become aware of a lie he'd told himself, and it filled him with dread. But even that emotion was pushed aside the next moment, almost automatically. This was carried out by his consciousness, which had become too used to the battlefield and was now more mechanical than human.

The reason he couldn't cast aside his identity as an Eighty-Six wasn't because he couldn't give up on that pride. It was because somewhere in his heart, he still wished for that fate. That fate of dying for certain at some point...

It was snowing when they deployed to support the retreating unit, just like Guren had said. This blizzard had apparently been raging since before dawn. The white veil inhibited their optical sensors' visibility, and their aiming systems and laser sights weren't faring much better. But those conditions applied to the Legion, as well.

The Spearhead squadron was commanded by Shin, who was capable of pinpointing the enemy's position without relying on sight, so in a sense, they actually had the advantage.

The mountain breeze at times blew the snowy wind down on them in sheets, and a virgin forest of conifer trees loomed ahead like a dark shadow in the blinding white. If they went through that forest, the wind wouldn't be as intense.

Shin's Undertaker cautiously led the Spearhead squadron through the dark, trailless road. The snow was solid in the subzero climate and made crunching sounds as they stepped through it. The proximity of the ghosts' wails alerted him that they had infiltrated the combat zone.

He checked the radar screen, which just barely managed to pick up the blue blips of their allies, and called out.

"Rito."

The Sensory Resonance connected. This confirmed the person he was calling wasn't dead or unconscious, but Rito's response came almost alarmingly late. As if he'd been paralyzed with so much fear that his voice couldn't immediately come out.

"Cap'n."

The tone of his voice—Shin had heard it countless times on the battlefield already. It was the trembling voice of a person who was stricken with fear at the sight of another's death or the prospect of their own death.

"Cap'n, I...I can't be like them. Like the Sirins. I don't wanna end up like that, so I..."

Shin looked up in his cockpit. Rito was still haunted by that event. The image of those girls, who had been laughing as they died meaningless deaths, felt like a reflection of the Eighty-Six's looming end. Like proof that their oath and pride to fight to the very end was meaningless. He'd grown to doubt the one thing he had to support who he was. "Rito, retreat... Take everyone who's still alive and escape the combat area."

He'd told him coldly: *You can't fight as you are right now.* Those who had their spirits broken by the fear of death and the madness of battle, who doubted themselves and froze up, had no place on the battlefield. And if Rito didn't listen to him, he would die and get the other Processors in his squadron caught up in it.

“...R-roger.”

“We’ve got Shiden...the Brisingamen squadron coming in from the rear. Regroup with them for now.”

Rito somehow managed to nod in reply and had his group fall back. Shin stepped forward as if to take their place and switched the Sensory Resonance over to his subordinates.

“All Spearhead squadron members, we’re about to enter combat. Judging by their positioning, we should expect a force of Grauwolf and Stier, each of them in a group the size of a battalion. And...”

He squinted upon hearing something: a chilling scream that echoed in his ears like a thunderclap—like the booming of a cannon—even at this distance. They signaled the ones that had assimilated the neural networks of the war dead: Black Sheep, and their advanced versions, the Sheepdogs.

And then there were the commander units of the ghostly army, whose voices rang out even louder and clearer than the soldier units. These were the ones that had absorbed the brains of the dead shortly after their passing and still retained the intelligence, knowledge, and memories they had in life.

“...There’s a Shepherd. Likely a Dinosauria.”

The Dinosauria were steel monstrosities that boasted the greatest firepower and armor of all the mass-produced Legion types. Shin’s squad advanced through the snowy forest while maintaining a gap between each unit. They aimed to engage this powerful enemy cautiously and moved through bumpy terrain that wouldn’t allow its large frame much foothold or freedom of movement.

It was then that the thick snow that had piled over one of the large rocks dotting the terrain unnaturally slipped off. A large shadow had leaped out of the pale powder, revealing its massive, metallic form through the curtain of white.

It had quite literally wedged itself beneath the thick snow. Even with a height of four meters and an overall weight of one thousand tons, its massive form still moved with the silence unique to the Legion. It lunged toward Undertaker’s flank as the Juggernaut led the rest of the squad.

It fell for it.

“Fire!”

All of his squad members were alerted ahead of time to its hiding place and immediately fired at it. Shin dodged the Dinosauria’s charge with an almost rolling motion as a barrage of 88 mm APFSDS (Armor-Piercing Fin-Stabilized Discarding Sabot) rounds peppered it.

Shin knew the enemy would be gunning for Undertaker and used himself as bait to allow for this perfect counter. But the Legion’s reaction speed allowed the Shepherd to avoid it. Its colossal frame leaped into the air and, upon landing, kicked up a dense mist of snow. The conifer trees that were struck by its casual ramming snapped and fell over with thundering noise.

The Dinosauria then turned the two heavy machine guns sitting atop its turret, each of them aiming at a different target. The 155 mm cannon turret and its coaxial secondary armaments all locked onto separate targets. The Juggernauts dispersed, evading its lines of fire. Shin moved Undertaker while keeping his gaze on the metal monstrosity, turning his Juggernaut so it would be able to overtake the Dinosauria’s blind spot per established tactics.

The way it attacked just now...

This Dinosauria seemed to act as if it knew how Shin and his squad would move. While both nations employed Feldreß, the design philosophy behind the Federacy’s units was different from the United Kingdom’s. And since they operated on different concepts, their fuselages were also designed differently. The strategies they could adopt differed as well.

The Barushka Matushka employed a long-range, 125 mm caliber turret and a high-fidelity weapon-control system to down the enemy with intense firepower that was shot with laser-sharp accuracy. The Reginleif, in contrast, specialized in high-mobility combat. Even when deployed on the same battlefield and terrain, the position and strategies they could adopt were different.

And this was the United Kingdom’s battlefield. The Legion in this region faced off and adapted countermeasures that would be effective against Barushka Matushkas. And yet this Dinosauria seemed to accurately read the actions and movements of the

Spearhead squadron and their Reginleifs.

Which meant...

"It's an Eighty-Six."

"Looks like it."

Shin quickly replied to Raiden's low grumble. The ones most familiar with the Spearhead squadron's—with the Eighty-Six's—tactics were other Eighty-Six. And they were the most combat-seasoned and experienced people in the surrounding countries who could be made into Black Sheep and Shepherds.

And to top it all off...

Shin squinted. This Dinosauria, this howl...

This voice...

It was familiar. It was someone who fought at his side in the Eighty-Sixth Sector for some brief period of time. The final words the ghost was howling nonstop weren't familiar in and of themselves, so they likely didn't die before Shin's eyes. But...

"Save us."

Kaie, who had wished for something similar at some point, was already gone. Most of the Black Sheep were now deemed obsolete and replaced with the more efficient Sheepdogs. Which meant Kaie, who had been made into a Black Sheep, was now discarded. But a few others were still trapped, it seemed. Some of those who were made into Shepherds still remained.

I have to take them back. I promised I'd take them with me. And I think that promise...is something I don't need to doubt.

"Raiden... I've got this one. As always, I want you to handle the surrounding enemies and take over command as you cover for me."

But Raiden's reply was tinged with doubt.

"Wait, weren't we just covering for the others while they retreat? We need to hold our position until Rito's squadron gets to safety. All we have to do is stall this thing. We don't have to go to the trouble of destroying it."

"It's an Eighty-Six... I want to take it back."

Raiden fell silent for a moment.

"...Roger. But don't do anything crazy. I'll have the rest of the squad cover for you."

"Once again, he seems intent on taking down a Dinosauria all by himself."

Frederica whispered bitterly as she gazed at the map, which could only show the battle between Undertaker and the Dinosauria taking place several kilometers away in the form of blips.

Lena looked down, sensing the fear in Frederica's whisper. The Legion could perform at a level that far outmatched what humans were capable of. But even among them, the Dinosauria was the strongest type. A Feldreß piloted by a human couldn't normally hope to stand a chance against it.

Shin had deemed it necessary to use melee weapons to strike against the Dinosauria's and the Löwe's weak spots. Lena didn't intend to argue against his reasoning. Even though she was experienced at commanding battles, she had no experience facing the Legion head-on and no right to doubt Shin's choices. Not when he survived seven years of fighting the Legion to the death.

But she couldn't help but feel concerned. She could hear the other Processors in his squadron shouting, "Nouzen, get some distance from it." "We can't shoot at it when you're that close." "We're begging you, fall back."

Shin didn't respond, of course.

He was likely too focused on the battle to hear them. Just like when he faced the Phönix in the underground terminal... And when he risked his life fighting against the Dinosauria possessed by the ghost of his brother, Rei.

Whenever he became like that, Lena got a bit scared. It was like he was willingly teetering over the edge of death... And someday, he might really fall off and never return.

"...Shin."

He always had the strength to fight and survive. But recently, he seemed...

"Are you really all right...?"

The enemy's front armor was thick enough to deflect even a shot from its own 155 mm smoothbore gun at point-blank range. A Reginleif's 88 mm cannon couldn't hope to penetrate it. It kicked

up powder snow and stomped over the cold ground, its massive weight mowing down the trees as it charged toward Shin.

Shin piloted Undertaker wildly to avoid it, using the assorted rock formations and protrusions—and even the trunks of the nearby conifer trees as footholds. As he dodged the Reginleif's fire, he tried to get a clear shot at the thinnest points of its armor.

It had to have originally been an Eighty-Six. It seemed to be forcibly rushing through the conifer forest, which would normally be unfitting terrain for a Dinosauria, but despite what seemed to be a careless demeanor, it picked its positions carefully, hiding its rear-top armor from sight at all times. It was wary of the Juggernaut's light weight and mindful of its established tactics of reeling itself up structures with a wire anchor and using that elevation to shoot from above.

Defeating it would prove difficult.

Even if the areas except the frontal armor could be penetrated by the 88 mm cannon, and the pile drivers in the Reginleif's legs were capable of busting through its top armor, he still needed to be extremely fast. Fast enough to damage anyone who wasn't a Processor greatly accustomed to fighting at this velocity.

But while it was a difficult battle, it was still possible for the Reginleif to come out on top. At the very least, it was nothing compared to when he fought his brother in that aluminum coffin.

Its two revolving machine guns were a nuisance, since they fired a consistent barrage of bullets. He launched HEAT shells set with proximity fuses and successfully destroyed them. He then carefully approached the Dinosauria and cut down one of the legs supporting its one thousand tons of weight.

Somehow, he could tell its counterattack was coming. He avoided the kick from its stake-like leg without even looking at it. He then dodged a second and a third kick by making small leaps, but then his right rear leg sank deep into the frozen snow.

“Tch...!”

Undertaker stopped in place. Its leg was caught in the snow. Everything seemed to move in slow motion. As the 155 mm turret swerved to aim at him, he activated his trapped leg's pile driver to forcefully eject it. The 57 mm pile driver detonated gunpowder, jettisoning the trapped leg out of the snow. In the meantime, he

used his remaining three legs to hop to the left, escaping the line of fire.

Then the roar of the tank turret's fire and the shock waves of the shell grazing against it screeched against Undertaker's armor. The Dinosauria's main turret would need some time to reload after firing, and the secondary armament to the right of the turret couldn't aim at him from this position. Both of its machine guns were already destroyed.

This meant that at this moment, Shin was free to fire without any counterattack. His sights were already set to track his line of sight, and he placed his finger on the 88 mm turret's trigger—

Suddenly, there was an alert: *Rear right leg pile driver damaged.*

This shrill alarm sound, intended to warn the Processor, dragged Shin back to his senses. Shin's eyes widened in realization. Right now, he was once again about to become the very image of a war machine—a death-obsessed monster.

Like a monster heading for its own death on the battlefield, he all too easily forgot those words bidding him to return alive...

And that moment of realization was an opening. That alarm blaring in his ears allowed the enemy to close the distance to him. And the Dinosauria's large form, which, at that range, filled the entirety of his optical screen, swung back and raised its leg like a weapon.

“...!”

He reflexively yanked the control stick back, forcing Undertaker to jump away. It was too late to dodge, but this attempt to at least minimize the incoming shock came less from a conscious decision and more out of reflex. Both of its legs left the ground as it leaped aside, and the next moment, there came the quake of impact. He raised one of Undertaker's legs to block the blow, but the sound of it snapping along with its wire anchor filled his ears. The control system blared out a screeching alert.

And then Shin blacked out.

“Huh...?”

What just happened?

Lena couldn't immediately process what she'd just seen projected onto Vanadis's main screen. Something she couldn't believe had just taken place. Something she never would have expected, that went beyond her understanding.

Undertaker's blip was blown back from its position, in a different direction from where it was going a moment ago. It moved against its Processor's control and was tossed aside like a piece of trash, rolling on the ground for a few moments before stopping. It remained helpless and still on the ground, even with the enemy bearing down on it right before its face.

Shin was just...hit by an attack...?

Wehrwolf and Laughing Fox stood in the Dinosauria's way as it prepared to launch another attack. They both fired at it, drawing its attention. It was programmed to prioritize the most threatening targets first. As they did, other Juggernauts hurried over to Undertaker's side.

Undertaker's blip remained still on the radar screen. Its signal hadn't faded, so it wasn't fatally destroyed. But it wouldn't move. Its Para-RAID wouldn't connect.

Marcel moaned in frustration.

"Why didn't he...?!"

Lena felt the same way. He could have dodged that blow. He *should have* dodged it. Lena knew he could, since she saw him do so during many a training session, and in both large and small battles. The Reginleif moved with a speed that would damage the body of a normal pilot, but Shin operated it with ease.

No, it went beyond what she saw he was capable of. For five long years, he operated that metal coffin that couldn't even withstand machine-gun fire, and even so, he lunged into the enemy ranks, engaging them with melee weapons without taking a single fatal blow. For five years, he survived the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

He would never take a direct hit from a single Legion. Even if it was a Shepherd.

So...why?

But Lena remained stupefied for only a moment. She soon turned to one of the control officers. The Reginleif was equipped with multiple systems the Juggernaut—which was supposedly a

drone—didn't have.

"How are his vitals?!"

"We've got a read on them. His pulse, blood pressure, and breathing are all within permissible range. But he's not responding to the alerts..."

Frederica offered her own commentary, her face pale with fear. Her crimson eyes let out a ruby glow—proof that her ability was in operation.

"It doesn't seem like he's suffered any major injuries. He is only unconscious, I believe. Raiden and the others are also calling out to him, but he is not responding."

"Hurry up and retrieve him! Shiden, deploy the Brísingamen squadron and cover for them!"

†

Regardless of culture and country, hospital rooms always seemed to have a sterile, white color to them. And so when his eyes opened, he was faced with the sight of a ceiling that registered in his foggy mind as unknown and, at the same time, somehow familiar. As a rule, hospital facilities were kept sanitary in order to prevent infections. For that reason, they were made white, so filth would stand out.

Realizing he was overcome with pointless, meaningless thoughts, Shin pushed his hands against the sheet and sat up. Feeling the unpleasant sensation of something being stuck to him and noticing a shadow at the edge of his field of vision, he raised his hand to his forehead. It was met with the dry sensation of a piece of adhesive tape, meant to hold up a gauze. Apparently, he'd been cut above his left eye, near his scar.

It was a scar he'd gotten during his battle with his brother. They were deep in Legion territory at the time, without any medical facilities in sight. His wound had been stitched closed by an amateur's hands, and so it left a scar.

He had fought a Dinosauria Shepherd that time, too, but... He wasn't distracted and didn't look away from his massive opponent during that battle. Shin couldn't help but grit his teeth in

frustration. He dug his fingers into the skin of his forehead.

That had never happened before. Not once had he ever lost concentration because of a question weighing on his mind and let an enemy get the better of him.

Shin could hear the sound of the hard fabric of a military uniform stirring behind the thin curtain surrounding his bed... Someone sitting at his bedside woke up.

"Oh? You're finally awake?"

As soon as he heard those words, the curtain was pulled open casually. His eyes, which had grown used to the dimness of the cockpit and the darkness of his closed eyelids, were momentarily blinded by the brightness of the lamp. Shin reflexively squinted and found himself staring into a pair of oddly colored eyes. One of them the color of deep indigo and the other as white as snow.

The owner of those eyes raised her hand casually and waved at him. She had brown skin and unkempt crimson hair.

"Yo."

"...What are you doing here?" Shin asked with one eye shut.

Shiden cackled at him, not minding his attitude.

"Who were ya expecting to find here? And heh, talk about thankless greetings, eh, Li'l Reaper? Raiden's handling the reports instead of you, and Her Majesty's cleaning up your mess, so I came here to watch over ya... I mean, I'm the one who pulled you outta of that battlefield, y'know?"

"....."

Looking around, he realized he was in the reserve base's hospital ward, in a room for lightly injured patients who didn't require intensive care. He'd been stripped out of his thick armored flight suit, since it likely got in the way of his treatment, and a spare uniform was folded on the side table. Upon noticing the pale-blue fabric placed casually over it, Shin moved to touch his neck. He couldn't feel his scarf, of course. It had been taken off when they treated him.

Shiden's gaze fell on the scar running across his neck, but she made no remark.

"The doctor said ya didn't hit your head, and there's no signs of a concussion. But they want you to rest here for a day or two to be on the safe side. They did sew a few stitches into ya, after

all."

She poked her thumb in the direction of her forehead to illustrate. Then her smile disappeared as she asked:

"Do you remember what happened?"

"More or less."

He could remember it so clearly, he wished he could forget.

"...What about the Dinosauria?"

"That's the first thing you ask...? Well, yeah, it's a Shepherd. And an Eighty-Six at that... Sad to say, but it got away. Our objective wasn't to defeat it anyway."

"How's my Juggernaut?"

"Looks like they can fix it, one way or another... Though yer mechanic... Uhhh, Guren, was it? He was screaming bloody murder, so make sure ya pay him a visit later. He said you're still breaking yer rigs all the time and haven't matured after all."

"Yeah..."

Jumping back killed most of the impact, but his rig still took a direct kick from a Dinosauria. The fact that he got away with reparable damage was a godsend.

"Makes sense he'd say that. I put him through trouble again."

This time, Shiden was the one to regard him with one eye closed.

"Do you say that knowingly or what? They don't care about the rig being damaged; they care about you getting hurt. Dumbass."

Shin was carried straight to the medical center, while Undertaker's broken form was carried into the hangar alone. Guren's surprise only made sense. He saw Undertaker's wreckage, but Shin wasn't there.

"...I can't believe you'd pull that kind of stupid mistake. Hey..."

She leaned her upper body forward on her folding chair. Shiden looked up at him with eyes that showed no sign of ridicule or laughter. It was the cold eyes of someone who had survived many years in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, even if she didn't spend as much time there as Shin had.

"...are you really all right?"

"....."

Shin looked down, averting his gaze. He knew it even without her saying anything.

He wasn't all right.

He didn't know what future to aspire toward or what to wish for. For all the time he spent agonizing over it, he couldn't find anything to wish for. Or any way to fill that emptiness inside him. He knew he couldn't keep living while rushing to his death, but he realized he was obsessing over the death that surrounded him. He thought he was facing death straight on, but that was just an excuse to avoid having to wish for the future.

And now he wasn't even able to detach himself during battle, which he'd always been capable of until now. So far, during combat, he was always able to let go and forget everything, but this agony was holding him back. Right now, he had to doubt himself. He couldn't say there weren't any problems with him anymore.

"This isn't just because of what happened in that citadel base, is it...? That was a nasty sight, for sure. It looks like what we might end up being. But ya shouldn't be thinking about that now. It's pointless. At least for now."

Shiden narrowed her heterochromatic eyes coldly.

"Lemme tell ya this. The way you are now, we can't let you be part of the attack force in the next operation, *Operations Commander*. I'm gonna ask Lena to have you remain on standby at HQ. Considerin' your ability, you ought to be back at the base anyway, commanding the battle from a distance... It's the same thing ya told Rito. If ya can't stay focused during battle, yer only gonna be a burden to everyone else."

"I know," he replied bitterly.

She was right... It really was the same thing he'd told Rito. Shiden scoffed as she regarded Shin.

"Hmph, you really are in the dumps, aren't ya...? You're not even talkin' back to me... Anyway, take your time and rest. Stay here for a couple days and don't think about any of that shit. Also, Lena's getting hysterical over you, so make sure ya patch things up there... Ah—"

The sound of heels hurriedly clicking over the floor approached them. Someone seemed to have rushed into the room.

"Shiden! They said Shin woke up..."

Lena ran into the room, completely forgetting her officer's

dignity and ladylike manners, and stopped dead in her tracks upon seeing Shin. She blushed for a moment, observing him out of his flight suit and in just his undershirt, but she shook her head to drive those thoughts from her mind. Her silvery eyes then moistened with tears.

"Shin... Thank goodness..."

Her gaze froze a bit before his eyes, and her delicate features contorted painfully at the sight of the gauze and the wound beneath it. Shin then realized she could see the scar on his neck. His scarf had been taken off with the rest of his flight suit, after all.

He promptly brought a hand to his neck in an attempt to hide the scar. He didn't tell Lena it was his brother who had inflicted it on him and had no intention of sharing this with her at all. To that end, he didn't want her to see it. That reflexive movement made her hold her breath for a moment. Shin, who was looking down at the time, didn't notice Lena's sad reaction.

"Your injuries..."

"It's just this cut on my forehead. Nothing else."

He could tell he had a number of other small wounds, but he didn't mention them. He hardly felt any pain at the moment. They were all minor injuries, and Shin didn't even acknowledge them.

"You say that, but I can see the bandages... I swear... The military doctor said you're to rest for the next couple of days, so return to your room and do just that."

"...I'm sorry."

"Yes, I'm afraid you won't get away without a scolding this time, Captain... What happened? This isn't like you."

"Ah, Your Majesty. I already gave him a talking-to about that, so don't chew him out too much."

Shiden butted in on their exchange, but Lena ignored her. Being looking down upon left a bad taste in Shin's mouth, so he rose from the bed and put on his uniform's top.

"My mind wandered...and I lost focus. It won't happen again."

"Lost focus'...?"

Lena hesitated for a moment but eventually decided she needed to reprimand him as a commanding officer this time. She raised her fair eyebrows and spoke to him with a slightly severe

gaze.

"This is because of whatever's been bothering you lately, isn't it? That's why you tripped up. Am I wrong?"

"....."

"I told you it'd be a problem if it ends up influencing the operation. I asked you to resolve this by attending further counseling sessions, or by consulting with me if you can't work this out on your own... I'll listen to you, no matter what you have to say. That's my duty... And it's what I want. You look like something's hounding you, like you're being pushed against the wall... Everyone's worried about you. And so am I... What's wrong, Shin?"

As she spoke, her grimace gradually softened, and she simply looked up at him earnestly with her argent eyes... But Shin averted her gaze.

He couldn't tell her he was a harmful factor to the world she desired. That he was still headed for death instead of the future she wished for. That he didn't belong at her side right now, and that even though he wanted to change this, he didn't know how.

He didn't want her, of all people, to know about the emptiness eating away at him from the inside.

"Nothing."

Lena grimaced anxiously.

"You can't say that when you're making that face. Telling someone might make you feel better—"

"There's nothing."

"You're lying... You always say that, but you weren't fine, were you? If you're in pain, I wouldn't mind lending you an ear... No, I want you to tell me. I, um, want to support you, and..."

Shin grew irritated at their unproductive exchange and lashed out in a severe tone.

"There's nothing... It has nothing to do with you, and I have nothing to tell you."

And only then did he realize what he had said. Lena's large eyes widened, seemingly frozen on him. And then they moistened, as if a crack had run through those alabaster depths.

"...Why do you say that?"

Her voice contained a chill he'd never heard before.

"You say there's nothing, but it's obvious from your face that something's wrong. You look like you're in pain, like you're in agony, but you never say anything. Don't you want to talk to me...? Am I really that unreliable? Am I really not good enough to help you? Aren't we...?"

Tears spilled from her eyes and ran down her white cheeks. One after another. Shin looked on with shock as her tears flowed freely like water breaching a dam. He knew he had to say something, but his mind was reeling, and he failed to come up with anything.

And as Shin remained speechless, Lena's expression crumbled in front of him.

"Aren't we fighting together...?"

Her question reverberated out like a scream. And without waiting for an answer, Lena turned around and ran off.

"H-hey! Your Majesty... Lena!"

Shiden followed her in a flustered hurry. The sound of her heavy military boots gradually grew distant. And yet Shin couldn't move. He simply remained where he was as the sound of their footsteps left him behind.



* * *

How long had he stood there? As the tumult and the sound of their steps died down, Shin eventually came to his senses. Even if he wanted to go after her, Lena was long out of earshot. He heaved one loud sigh and informed the doctor in the infirmary that he was going to his room before leaving.

As soon as he left the infirmary, a voice spoke to him from the side.

"You're not going after her, Nouzen?"

"...You were watching?"

Vika leaned his back against the wall adjacent to the infirmary's sliding door and shrugged casually.

"Callous as I am, even I know to not intrude on certain awkward situations. I can tell my words aren't always welcome."

Vika then turned his gaze down the corridor, signaling the direction Lena took off in. Shin answered after heaving a short sigh.

"I know I need to apologize."

He knew this was definitely his fault, but he couldn't tell what he did wrong. He'd lashed out at her, and that was clearly a mistake. He'd hurt her, and that was wrong. But what hurt Lena weren't his insensitive words, but the exchange right before that. And he couldn't tell what he did wrong there.

If he was to judge it simply from what Lena said, the problem was in the fact that he hadn't told her anything. But the problems he was struggling with right now weren't related to Lena. He didn't want to cause her needless concern, to be a burden to her. He didn't want her to know about this anguish he was going through, which felt all the more pathetic the more he put it into words.

"Apologizing when I don't even know what I did wrong...would just hurt her more."

All he'd done was hurt her. Back then—and now as well.

"That makes me...so sad."

Vika cocked his head, his fair face bereft of his usual smile.

"You're a surprisingly cowardly one."

His comment caught Shin completely off guard.

"Cowardly...?"

"Yes, and I don't mean in terms of battle. If anything, you're fearless to the point of recklessness on that front, and that is dangerous in its own way, I think. But anyway..."

With his back still against the wall and his arms crossed, Vika leaned forward and regarded Shin with an upward glance. They were roughly the same height, but Shin was just a bit taller than Vika. Because of that slight height difference, Vika was looking up with his Imperial violet eyes into Shin's bloodred ones. They were an almost artificial, monstrous shade of purple.

"Even as a third party in this, I can tell. Something is halting your thoughts."

He was pretending to be deep in thought, so he wouldn't actually have to think.

"It's not that you don't know what you did wrong. You just don't want to think about it. You were like that concerning your family, too, now that I think of it. It's not that you couldn't remember; you just didn't want to remember. You didn't want to open old wounds... You say you don't know what you did wrong, that you couldn't remember. But I think that, in fact, you don't *want* to. You don't want to hope."

"That's..."

Being told all this made him instinctively try to deny it. To say he couldn't hope for a future, that he had no future. This was how he thought, but he'd realized the truth was that he actually didn't want to wish for one. He believed death was just a way for the Eighty-Six to not hope for a future.

In that case, he then also had to admit that the way he felt, that thinking he had no future, was wrong. He was about to hope for a future and the wishes it contained...but he couldn't allow himself to desire them. And the moment he realized this, Shin unconsciously covered up those feelings, pretending nothing had happened.

But the owner of those violet eyes laughed, not missing that flicker of emotion.

"Right, I haven't told you yet, have I...? I knew your father. I've

even spoken to him. Your father, Reisha Nouzen, was a researcher of artificial intelligence, much like Zelene. Would you like for me to tell you of our exchange? You would do well to hear me out, assuming it doesn't touch upon any open wounds."

".....?!"

Those surprising words made Shin's breath catch in his throat.

"Be a good boy...Shin..."

He couldn't recall right now. But he knew he actually did have memories of them. His mother's voice and the smile on her lips. His mother, his father, his brother... All those faces and voices. Yes, he remembered them all. And he realized, at the same time, that he didn't want to remember.

And it wasn't just that remembering them would make him loathe those memories. It was because he knew those memories were all too similar to the things he'd wish for. It was the kind of happiness Lena described. He realized his memories and the happiness she spoke of were alike, and that was why he couldn't allow himself to remember them.

Hence, he didn't want to think about that happiness. He didn't want to remember it. Because what if he remembered, reached out for it, wished for it, only for it to once again be...?

That scared him.

"...That might be true."

"You finally admit it... People your age would rather die than let others see their weaknesses. But that only bothers those around you. If you're hurting, then say so. And with regards to Milizé, I'll just go ahead and say it since it's becoming too irritating to watch—but it's the same problem with her. You say you don't want to be a burden to her, but your refusal to rely on her only comes across as lack of trust, and that causes her pain."

The prince shrugged, unaware that what he just said both didn't suit his age and came across as condescending.

"You should apologize to her if you can... And this is speaking from experience, but if there's anything you ought to tell her, you should say those words while you still have the chance. *Because once that chance is gone, all that's left is regret.*"

“...You’re being awfully kind today, Serpent of Shackles.”

Shin gave a sarcastic response in an attempt to spite him, but Vika didn’t seem to mind.

“Yes... Because of Lerche.”

Shin squinted at the sound of that name.

“That seven-year-old told you something she shouldn’t have. So think of this as an apology. I wouldn’t normally be this concerned about your inner turmoil, but after hearing she helped trigger this, I couldn’t stand by and ignore it.”

And then Vika spoke, with a voice devoid of emotion, as if gazing at something that had gone too far and was now out of reach.

“And here you want to find happiness with someone.”

“.....”

“It makes no difference to me what you really think. But if that’s truly how you feel...”

Shin then realized that Lerche was, indeed, based off the girl who was Vika’s milk sister. Vika never told him of her, but Lerche shared a bit. Who was it, really, who wished to become happy alongside someone...?

“Even if you don’t want to wish for happiness, do you really think not wishing for it will spare you from sorrow...? It won’t. Whether you yearn for happiness or not, you will experience loss, and loss hurts. It is the most unbearable pain of all.”

The Serpent Prince smiled slightly. And as he did, he continued speaking with deep-seated, honest anger.

“And the person you long for is still alive. In which case, if there is anything you need to tell her, I suggest you say it now. For if you lose her...you will never be able to tell her anything again. But I’m sure you’re painfully aware of that.”

For all of Shiden’s concerns, this was another country’s base, one that was unfamiliar to her. The United Kingdom’s culture was, to begin with, rather different from both the Eighty-Sixth Sector and the Federacy, and so was the fundamental layout of its structures. And this reserve base was built to be intentionally confusing, so as to mislead intruders, meaning its structure was that much

harder to navigate.

Lena was wearing clumsy pumps and wasn't any good at running, so how far, really, could she have gone? After searching every corner, Shiden eventually caught up to Her Majesty, who was slumped over a desk in the corner of an empty briefing room. Grethe was sitting next to her, apparently surprised by her unusual demeanor. Raiden was standing a distance that was neither too far nor too close to Lena, apparently bothered that he was not able to break the silence. He looked at Shiden and mouthed a question.

What happened?

Shiden replied likewise.

She had an argument with that asshole Shin.

Oh, so that's why.

Raiden concluded their short, wordless exchange with a weary shrug. Shiden felt similarly. It was visible with a glance that something was bothering Shin. He normally kept his feelings bottled up, just like Shiden herself did, so she sympathized with him. But lashing out at Lena, of all people?

Shin seemed composed at a glance, but the truth was that he had a fairly short fuse. It was hard to notice this, since whenever he didn't like something, he'd quickly fall silent. On top of that, he was indifferent to those he didn't know well, even if they directed hostility toward him.

And the fact that Shin and Lena had argued...meant he had been unable to keep up that indifference and tone and got mad. This probably went to show that Shin saw Lena as someone close to him—or perhaps, someone he wanted to become closer with.

But that aside, Her Majesty was sitting there before Shiden's eyes now. It was hard to tell if she even noticed Raiden, who was hesitating to speak; Shiden, who had rushed into the room after her; or even Grethe, who was sitting by her side. She sat still, with her head hung. Her long, silver hair was splayed out like a butterfly that had soaked its wings in the rain.

"Um... Are you all right, Your Majesty?"

Her head still slumped, Lena muttered a reply, her voice muffled.

"I'm sorry."

"...What are you apologizing for?"

"I mean..." Lena sniffled. "A commander crying in front of her subordinates, just because one of her soldiers turned her down..."

Apparently, she thought it was disgraceful. Grethe, who was sitting beside her, cracked a bitter smile.

"It almost feels like you're blaming me here."

Lena raised her head in surprise at that unexpected statement.

"...How come?"

She spoke awfully casually given how straitlaced she usually was, but no one, Grethe included, seemed to mind. Grethe replied, that same smile on her lips.

"A commanding officer doesn't display emotions in front of her subordinates. That much is certain, but the truth is, a commanding officer is something you become when you're much older than you kids are. Only when you're at an age where you can control your emotions a bit better, to an extent. That's why people can expect that we won't shout or cry."

One became an officer usually after completing their higher education, meaning they would reach the lowest office rank of second lieutenant in their twenties at the earliest. Even then, they were treated like a greenhorn by veteran noncommissioned officers and commanded a unit only with the aid of these officers.

It took at least a few years, depending on one's individual abilities, to reach the rank of first lieutenant or captain. One wouldn't be promoted to the rank of field officer before their thirties. A first lieutenant or captain in their teens was terribly unusual, to say nothing of Lena, who was a field officer.

"The fact that you had this responsibility forced on you when you're still young and don't have your emotions sorted out yet just goes to show how messed up this whole situation really is... It's our fault—the adults' fault—that we couldn't fix things before it came to this. So you don't have to steel yourself like that."

Lena lowered her brows pathetically.

"But I'm...supposed to set an example for the Processors..."

Lena realized that, when all was said and done, this was what she found hardest to bear. She honestly didn't care about her dignity as an officer, but she didn't want the Eighty-Six to be disillusioned with her. She didn't want them to see her as this...

fragile princess who would burst into tears over the slightest amount of pain.

She had shed pathetic tears several times already in front of Shin, and that made her even more desperate to not come across as a crybaby princess. She wanted to show them this wasn't who she really was.

"They all know you've done well, so no one would think badly of you over a few shed tears. If anything, they might think you're more endearing for it... Right?"

She turned a teasing glance at Raiden, who blatantly ignored her. She was obviously referring to someone who wasn't here, but Grethe didn't go any deeper. Lena then answered the question.

"I had an argument with Shin."

Saying it only saddened her again, because her eyes filled up with tears once more.

"He looked like something had been bothering him for a long while now. I thought he was still hung up about the last operation, but recently, he's been acting even stranger. So I told him I'd lend him an ear, if he was willing to talk."

The Bloodstained Queen then sniffled like a small child.

"But he said it was nothing. He wouldn't tell me anything... He won't rely on me."

Both Grethe and Raiden had a silent, nonverbal *Oh...* cross their minds. Yes, of course Lena would be hurt by that.

Captain Nouzen really is a boy through and through..., Grethe mused.

I ought to drag that idiot here and have him switch places with me. Raiden's thoughts on the matter were a bit different.

"He said he doesn't want to talk about it with me... That he doesn't want to speak to me."

"Goodness..." Even Grethe had to roll her eyes. "That's... Yes, I see. But I've already told you this before, right? Disagreeing and arguing is natural. If you didn't argue, I'd have to wonder if you two were too distant. The more two hearts clash, the closer they become. If you can fight and make up...you might be better off doing so while this war rages on."

"She's right, Your Majesty. You told me yourself that you gotta be close to argue."

"....."

But Lena didn't think so in this case.

"...If I were Raiden..."

Lena herself was surprised at how much her voice came across as pouty and childish.

"If I were Raiden or Theo, Shin would have spoken to me. He'd have counted on me."

Unlike me. Those last two words were so unsightly that she somehow managed to bring herself to swallow them. In fact, whenever he spoke to Raiden, Theo, Anju, Kurena, as well as Marcel, his contemporary from the officer's academy, Lena found she was somehow out of place. She even felt that way sometimes with Fido (who couldn't speak), Vika, and Dustin.

He seemed different with them as opposed to how he normally was when he talked to her. His expression was different around them. He was more abrupt, noncommittal, inattentive, and...yes, unreserved. Like he wasn't holding back. Like he was talking to an equal. This was the feeling Lena got, and it frustrated her.

"Well...I dunno about that." Raiden regarded her with a bitter smile.

It was a surprising, odd smile that held deep regret. He looked up at Lena with this wry, somehow bittersweet smile.

"In the end, we're just Eighty-Six, same as him. But he's our Reaper... And that's why we might be able to fight by his side, but we can't do anything more for him... Like you can."

"Cap'n."

As he headed for his room in the residential sector of the base, Shin stopped as he found Rito waiting for him.

"I heard you got hurt... It was my fault, wasn't it? I'm sorry."

"...No."

Shin shook his head lightly. It wasn't Rito's fault. He couldn't blame him for his state of affairs. He was as full of doubts and misgivings as Rito was, after all. Rito looked straight at Shin with his large, agate eyes, their depths rife with regret and pain.

"Cap'n. About the next operation...the Dragon Fang Mountain attack, er..."

“...Would you rather stay behind at HQ?”

Shin finished Rito's sentence, since he was stammering in hesitation. It was a frightening operation, considering how much larger the Legion's forces were in comparison to theirs. Even having just Rito not take part was a painful blow... But Shin wasn't going to force someone who didn't want to fight into battle. Anyone who went into battle against their will... likely wouldn't return.

But to Shin's surprise, Rito shook his head firmly.

“No, it's the other way around, Cap'n. Don't take me off the operation. I'll...work this out before it's time to deploy.”

“But...aren't you scared?”

Wasn't he afraid of the death that awaited him at the end of battle...? Of the fate in store for the Eighty-Six?

“I *am* scared.”

Rito eventually answered, his white, pallid lips pursed. And he said this while refusing to gloss anything up, with his gaze still as timid as before. And yet...

“But I...I can't run from battle, after all. I hate how shameful that sounds.”

An Eighty-Six who chose to fight to the very end could never accept doing something as unsightly as running away. They could never lapse into something so deplorable.

“I don't want to...cast away my own identity.”

Even if he still doubted what that identity was.

CHAPTER 3

SHOOT THE MOON

The United Kingdom's offensive was set to begin soon. This estimation was shared by all Legion set along the United Kingdom's front lines. Just as the Eintagsfliege were being constantly deployed over the Legion's territories to obfuscate their movements from the human side, the United Kingdom also kept its internal affairs and military operations hidden from the enemy.

And yet there was an increase in communications, as well as an increase in the volume of equipment and manpower being shifted around and in the transfer of units. Those were signs of an incoming attack, and they were hard to hide.

It happened on the second front, where the 1st Armored Corps used to be stationed. The United Kingdom attempted an offensive, but a retreat forced them back to this region, meaning they would have to attack here once again if they were to stand a chance. As such, the Legion increased their watch over the area and augmented their numbers as they lay in wait. Their intent was to crush the incoming attack just as they had before.

And should the human forces not launch an attack, the Legion would break through the Dragon Corpse mountain range and unleash a final offensive on the United Kingdom.

The sun rose on the anti-United Kingdom front, which had its skies closed off by a layer of silver extending from the south. The time was what humans referred to as early dawn—the point of time when the night was darkest. With the signs of sunrise not yet appearing, a large force of Eintagsfliege, made up of several hundred million butterflies, which had retreated into the territories to recharge their batteries during nightfall, began to move.

They crossed the skies, soaring through the Legion territories and into the contested zones, where they would cover up the airspace of the United Kingdom in a wide, thick blanket of silver.

When the sun did rise, its rays reflected off their shimmering wings, which coated the sky in an eerie shade of crimson. It was a similar phenomenon to what was observed in the Federacy's western front during the large-scale offensive more than six months ago. A bloodred dawn that was similar to the evening glow but far more ominous.

That red shade eventually died down, and the sky soon assumed the same melancholic gray-silver shade it'd always had over the last few months. But then something crossed that silver horizon. It came from the rear of the reserve base the United Kingdom military currently occupied. Something shot up into the sky, from beyond the serrated peaks extending to the skies.

The Rabe governing over the skies, the Ameise on patrol, and the Stachelschwein hiding in the territories all detected it in their radar. The Ameise unit closest to the target took off in the direction it presumably flew in to secure visual information. Its antiair radar then lost its signal. It apparently wasn't a flying object, not an aircraft or a missile. It was some kind of object that moved rapidly across the ground, but it didn't seem to match anything in the Legion's database.

It burst out of the conifer forest, and the Legion's blue optical sensor looked up at the battlefield of pale snow. Before long, the Ameise's composite sensor perceived it—prompting it to freeze in place in indecision.

What the Ameise optical sensor saw rolled down the slope at a maddening speed, billowing fire as it moved. It had a great number of what looked like large, all-too-massive wheels.



"Charging in. Ignition of all units confirmed."

"Second wave, Strike Force Package fire-control detachment. Open fire. We have to finish this surprise attack while the enemy's still caught off guard. Don't allow them to get a handle on the situation."

"Roger that. Fire-control detachment, open fire. Align sights. Electromagnetic catapults, connect capacitors. Thrones, second wave—fire!"

Deployed along the rear of the United Kingdom military's reserve base, here and there over the slopes of the Dragon Corpse mountain range's ridges, were rails. All of them were pointing south. Electromagnetic catapults had been loaded onto the backs of Zentaur units and were currently in operation. Their projectiles screeched as they slid over the rails and howled as they soared through the air. Released from their connectors, the projectiles were fired off, drawing arcs as they crested over the mountain.

The Zentaurs' control centers had all been destroyed, but their rails currently had a large number of cords coiled around their connectors. The wires penetrated the Zentaurs' interiors with a sickening invasiveness reminiscent of a parasitic plant, allowing operation of the catapults on their backs. The other side of those wires was connected to a large number of electric capacitors, and the fire-control detachment's armored command vehicle. The wires also extended to a row of Juggernauts, which controlled the firing sequence from their cockpits.

They couldn't control the Zentaurs themselves, but they could operate their electromagnetic catapults with relative ease. The Strike Package had hunted down and gathered a large number of ruined Zentaurs before this operation began. Or to be exact, they gathered the electromagnetic catapults they carried on their backs.

All in order to stage an aerial assault on a battlefield where the Legion controlled the skies.

The catapults howled. Masses with linked weights of several

dozen tons accelerated to a velocity of thirty kilometers per hour in the blink of an eye. These attacks came at the cost of a reduced firing range and were done while knowing they would likely destroy the rails, but they allowed the Strike Package to add a great amount of weight to their projectiles. Though they would normally be far too heavy to fly through the air, they forcibly shook off the fetters of gravity, screeching off the rails as they were thrown into the open skies.

With their central processors ruined, the Zentauri had been reduced to harmless tools. And now they were turned against the army they once served, launching projectiles with all their might. Their projectiles soared over the mountains and had their couplings undone in midair. They landed on the southern slopes of the mountain range, where the Legion's defensive line was thickly concentrated.

These projectiles were pairs of steel wheels, with diameters of three meters. They were connected by two small cylinders, giving them the shape of bobbins or cable reels. They flew through the air one after another, slicing through the wind as they fell.

The sensors built into them detected their posture and corrected their bearings as they landed. Once they touched down, the circular objects naturally started rolling down the incline with the help of gravity. They accelerated, sometimes bouncing into the air as they hit a lump of solid ice or some other obstacle, and headed for the Legion's defensive line set at the foot of the southern slope.

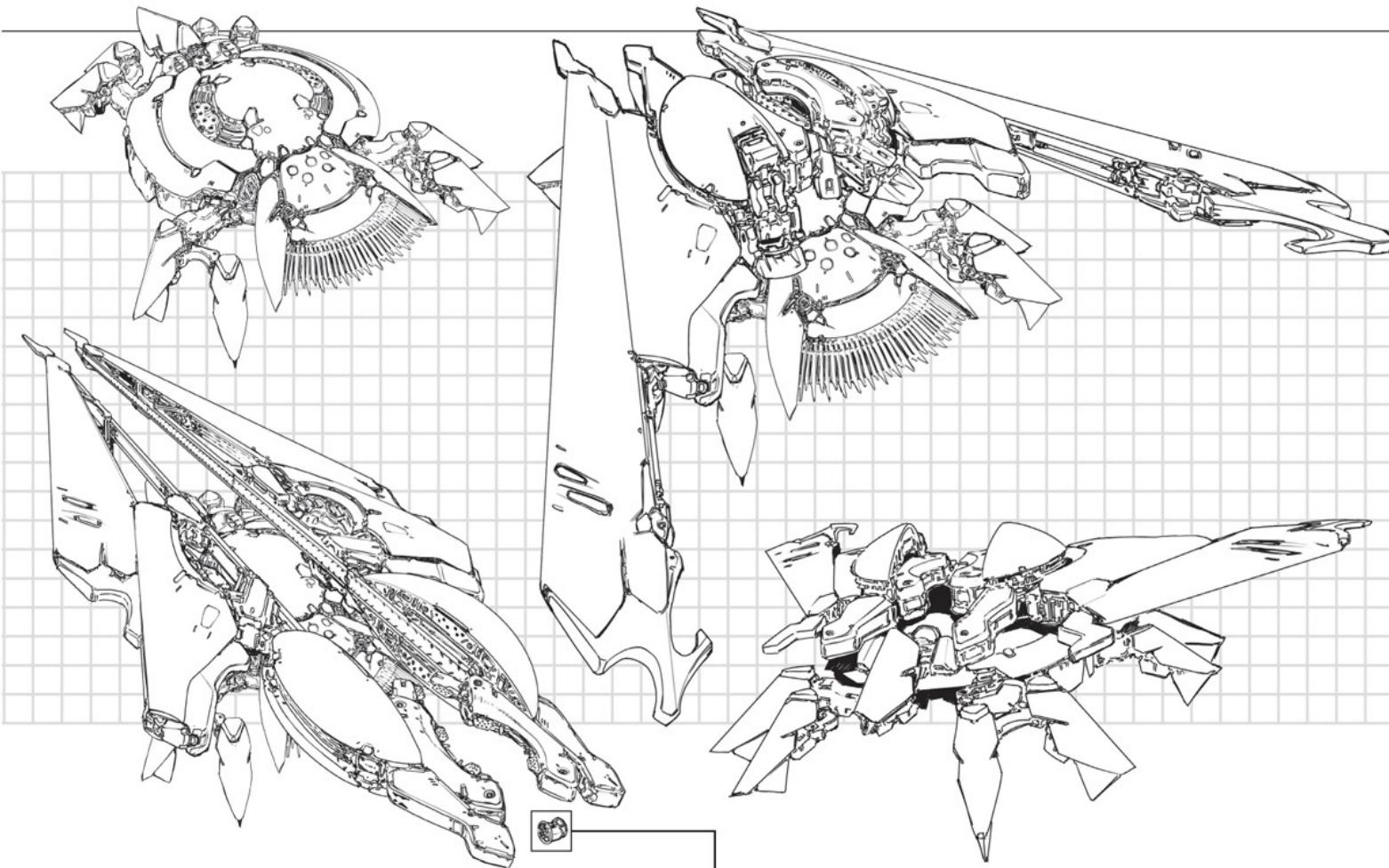
Their IFF devices and radars activated. Of course, the only things in sight were other wheels and the Legion. They set the enemy force ahead of them as their targets and began their pursuit.

The jet fuel they were equipped with ignited, granting the wheels further propulsion in addition to gravity pulling them down. Kicking up the snow as they rolled, or perhaps even riding on the waves of the snow they knocked down, the wheels became a fire-breathing avalanche of steel. They rushed down the slope with the speed of a swooping eagle.

The speed of their descent, coupled with the velocity afforded to them by the jet fuel, made them even faster than the Grauwolf,

the most agile of the mass-produced Legion. They soon made contact with the Legion's defensive line.

THE BASIC DRONES



[Electromagnetic Launcher Type]

Zentaur

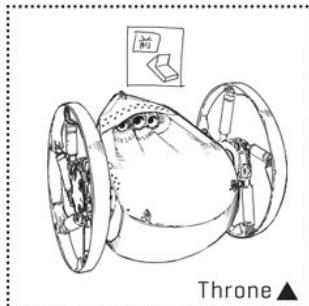
[A R M A M E N T S]

None

It is equipped with a massive, electro-magnetic catapult and is assisted by a force of Ameise.

[S P E C S]

Length:
approximately 35 m
[not including Catapult]
Catapult's Maximum
Extension Length: 90 m



A Legion unit massive enough to rival even the Morpho. It possesses no combat capabilities of its own but is equipped with a large catapult that can launch several tons of weight across great distances. During the attack on the Revich Citadel Base, it launched multiple Skorpion units as well as the Phönix into the base, putting Lena and the other personnel in danger. During this battle, the Zentaurs were recovered by the Strike Package after their central processors had been destroyed. They then served as rear fire support during the Dragon Fang Mountain attack operation, launching a multitude of objects—including the anti-tank Thrones—to support the vanguard forces' invasion.

And then their proximity fuses activated. The 1.8-ton heavy explosives contained in the cylinders detonated right in the middle of the Legion's defensive lines.

The sight of that explosion reached the reserve base, thanks to a Sirin located nearby who had transmitted her visual data. There were two varieties of these wheel-shaped, self-propelled, self-destructing weapons, though the two weren't distinguished by appearance. One type scattered shrapnel upon bursting and was meant to be used against lightly armored targets. The other was meant for handling tanks and units with more fortified armor and unleashed self-forging fragments.

The shrapnel dug into the Ameise, Grauwolf, and lightly armored Stier, mowing them down. Meanwhile, the close-range hits from the self-forging fragments shredded the Löwe. In terms of sheer weight, the self-destructing weapons were no match for the Löwe, to say nothing of the Dinosauria. But since they'd flown down the mountain and had the propulsion of both the free fall and the jet fuel accelerating them, they were bolstered by more velocity that translated into even more weight. The direct hit staggered the Dinosauria, and the blast finished it off.

Lena watched this impressive sight from a main screen located in a control room provided to her by the reserve base. Beneath her uniform, which was a bit baggier than usual, was the Cicada, which shone with a pale-violet color. Slightly dazzled by the light, she watched the results of the projectile attack she came up with. Her thoughts harkened back to the briefing for the Dragon Fang Mountain assault operation, which had been set to begin with this projectile attack.

†

"I will now explain the details of the Dragon Fang Mountain assault operation."

Not all the Processors were gathered in the room. Only the leaders of each squadron and their lieutenants were present, but

there were still almost one hundred of them filling the large briefing room.

"The operation's objective is the same as last time: the destruction of the Weisel and Admiral units within the base. These are the top-priority objectives. In addition, you are to capture the Supreme Commander unit residing in this base. Its identifier: the Merciless Queen."

Standing in front of an operation map that was projected over the table, Lena changed the image on display as she continued her explanation. Her gaze was fixed on Shin, who sat in the front row. They hadn't been able to hold a conversation since that argument. Naturally, when it came to the operation, they spoke when necessary but hadn't been able to have a natural conversation since.

They were both busy with preparations for the operation, of course, but there was definitely some fresh distance between them. Looking down at him from the stage, Lena couldn't sense any anguish from Shin, who had the same serene, collected expression as ever. His gaze was downcast, and he didn't look Lena in the eye, but he didn't seem to waver as he read the documents in his hands.

Apparently, he'd regained the composure needed to serve as operations commander... He'd recovered somewhat. And it seemed he was capable of bantering with Raiden and the others as he always did.

"The units participating in this operation will be the Strike Package, in addition to the regiment under the command of Prince Viktor. With these two units, we are to seize control of the combat zone, keep it blockaded for the duration of the operation, and maintain a safe route that will allow us to reach and retreat from the combat zone... Unlike the formerly planned operation, the United Kingdom military will not be able to provide a diversion to distract the Legion forces from us."

A barely audible stir passed through the Processors. The operation was a brute force breakthrough using just the Strike Package and a single regiment of Alkonosts. Lena could hear someone whisper "That's too reckless..." But among the whispers, Shin looked up and raised his hand, signifying he had a question.

Their gazes met. He looked up at her with his serene, crimson eyes. She asked him in her mind, *You're all right, aren't you?* But of course, no answer came.

"Colonel, there's two things I'd like to confirm. First, are we not to expect any assistance from the United Kingdom military whatsoever? Secondly, your explanation didn't mention how the route will be cleared for our forces. As such, I must ask: Who will handle that part of the operation?"

He spoke with a clear voice. These were questions meant more to inform everyone else. Being the tactical commander for the Strike Package, he already knew the answers to them.

"Of course, the United Kingdom is applying constant pressure and small-scale diversions on the Legion's front lines. This is, after all, the United Kingdom's war. They can't relieve any forces from defending their final defensive line, so they will be keeping the Legion's frontline forces occupied. Next, as to your question about securing the route—"

Lena gave a small nod.

"—we'll have another group handle that."

†

"Milizé was awfully worried about you, but...you pulled yourself together in time for the operation."

"I couldn't hang back and stay in HQ with the operation being this unstable."

The Dragon Fang Mountain base operation's heavy transport vehicle was hiding in a conifer forest near the reserve base. As he faced an information terminal and gave the mission briefing a final read through, Shin answered Vika's question via the Para-RAID. He then asked:

"That other unit... Or, well, that other weapon. What was it made for? That monster wheel thing?"

Shin's holo-screen displayed footage from the Legion's front line hidden deep within the forest. All around that battle zone, Shin could see the vivid, if somewhat absurd, sight of the mysterious wheels called Thrones tumbling around.

"Apparently, they're based off siege defense weapons from the Middle Ages. My aunt—who was the former Amethystus—came up with them, using those weapons as the basis, and produced these as prototypes. I don't know what she wanted to use them on, either. I suppose that's just her taste and sense of aesthetic at work."

The idea of dropping a heavy, combustible object from atop the walls was based off a long-held battle tactic of using kinetic energy and firepower to bring ruin to the sieging side. There were even cases where animals were used to afford the weapons the capacity to move. But a guided, rocket-propelled weapon with high-powered explosives pressed between two wheels that were wider than a person was tall—now that was unheard of.

"...Her taste and sense of aesthetic?"

"The Amethystus have some individual difference in their preferred fields of study. I'm focused on AI, and my aunt was a specialist when it came to guidance systems... Given the Legion War, the fact that the United Kingdom hasn't produced anything comparable to the Feldreß over the last two hundred years is a bit of a sore spot for us. Of course, ethics have always been an issue."

In other words, these weapons weren't developed out of necessity. Their developer made them simply because she could. That was all.

"....."

Shin fell silent despite himself. He had a slight feeling that something was off.

"We're not in danger of stepping on any anti-tank roosters, are we?"

"Of course not... Roosters would freeze to death in this climate."

"....."

"....."

The two of them said nothing, but each of them for different reasons.

"...Do you think anti-tank dogs might be effective against the Legion?"

Shin had to stifle a sigh at Vika's vaguely serious whisper.

During the Revich Citadel Base incident, Frederica had described Vika as a *fool who happens to be smart*, and Shin had to agree with that phrasing.

“The Legion are polypedal weapons, so unlike treadmill vehicles, there’s a gap between the ground and their underbelly. So if we use a mine that can fold up to blow off their legs, we might be able to—”

“They’d probably just jump out of the way.”

“Hmm, true.”

Vika agreed, sounding slightly disappointed. He then seemed to suddenly raise his head.

“Maybe we can strap mines to a cheetah?”

“How’re you going to get those over here?”

“...I suppose that’s true, as well.”

Cheetahs lived on the southern continent; they were a species that boasted the highest sprinting speed of all mammals. Said southern continent was far outside the Legion’s territories, and needless to say, cheetahs didn’t inhabit the United Kingdom. And even if they were to take those creatures from the warm south and put them in the frozen battlefield here, they’d simply meet the same fate a mine rooster would.

It was a laughable idea to begin with. So laughable that Shin didn’t even bother pointing it out, since Vika likely suggested it while understanding full well how impossible it was.

...Probably.

And as the two boys continued their rather inappropriate conversation given the situation they were in, the United Kingdom continued firing at the Legion. They were bombarding them in preparation for their assault. They ravaged the enemy defenses before sending in their attack force, crushing as many enemy units as they could to prevent the possibility of a counterattack to the best of their ability. Once this bombardment ended, the attack force would begin its charge. With that pressure in mind, perhaps one couldn’t blame these young soldiers for their banter.

As they fired all the Thrones, the Zentaurs fell silent, breaking down and billowing flames from the intense load. But another

container rolled in, and the fire-control officers switched their command programs to ones meant to control the contents inside it.

The Thrones' target was the first row of the Legion's defensive lines, which consisted of heavily armored types that'd been gathered to break through the United Kingdom's defensive lines. But the contents of that container, as well as the control program in charge of it, were meant to strike at another target.

While the switch to the second container took place, a flurry of heavy artillery and mortar fire rained down on the enemy lines. The Thrones opened up a hole in the enemy formation, and the concentrated fire struck the rear lines behind it. They aimed at the defensive facilities and echelons in the rear, up to the very limit of their firing range.

Thoroughly and carefully, the storm of bombardment plowed an invasion route open. To buy more time for the switchover, the United Kingdom even brought in range-extended base-bleed missiles.

And then the switchover of the Zentaur's firing program was complete. The new projectile was set on the electromagnetic catapult, which resumed firing. Large cannon shells howled as they were launched into the air, drawing arcs through the sky as they joined the flurry of projectiles falling down on the battlefield. Some of them kept soaring upward, rushing into the silver Eintagsfliege clouds, leaving a shower of butterfly wings as they tore through them. Others dropped down in a diagonal trajectory as they crashed into the mass of Legion units. And then their timed fuses activated...and burst.

155 mm shells released shock waves and shrapnel in a 45-meter radius, but this bomb unleashed intense shock waves in a 1,500-meter radius. A second explosion with the same radius bloomed in the sky, burning the brittle butterflies and cracking open a hole in the silvery veil.

A Daisy Cutter.

That was the popular name given to a bomb meant to create destruction in an extremely large radius. It was originally designed to be loaded onto a plane and air-dropped on its target. For this reason, these bombs had been stored away in the United

Kingdom's warehouses ever since the Legion took away humankind's air superiority. And with a weight of nearly seven tons, it couldn't be used by ordinary weaponry.

But for the Zentaur's electromagnetic catapult, which was capable of easily launching Ameise weighing ten tons, a seven-ton bomb was well within the realm of possibility.

The Thrones had never been applied in a real battle, but the Daisy Cutters were never designed to be fired from the ground or burst in midair. Needless to say, a fire-control system meant to enable those kinds of uses wasn't developed ahead of time, either. This was all hurriedly put together for the sake of this operation.

The system developers put their hearts and souls into writing the program, cutting into their own sleep time to finish it. But they had to admit they weren't good enough when it came to actually aiming and shooting the projectiles. To that end, they needed experienced fire-control personnel or the aid of a gunner.

Anju was among the personnel handling that duty and was currently adjusting the sights of the Zentaurs she was in charge of.

"...Yeah, I can see why no one wants to wear this thing," she complained, pinching up the edge of the Cicada she was currently wearing.

She was still relatively fine since she was inside Snow Witch's cockpit, but if this was a command center, or Vanadis, or any other place where people could see her, she wouldn't be caught dead in this thing. At least, not without a coat or some kind of sweatshirt.

Of course, she had her pilot suit placed inside her cockpit's equipment compartment in case she ran into combat or became isolated in enemy territory, but that was beside the point.

"Did Lena really wear this thing during that last battle...? I can understand it was necessary, but...like, I'm surprised she could pull it off."



Kurena, who also served as a fire-control specialist and wore a Cicada as well, spoke from inside Gunslinger in a somewhat fidgety manner. Her tone made it clear she was uncomfortably rubbing her inner thighs together in the outfit.

The two of them were among the most seasoned of the Strike Package's soldiers and had been in charge of fire support during their time in the elite unit that defended the eastern front's first defensive line. It was only natural that out of everyone who'd been left behind to offer artillery support for this operation, they'd be the ones handling multiple Zentaur.

And to properly accomplish this task, they had to be given Cicadas to wear. The two of them understood the reasoning behind that, but...

“...When we get back, I’m gonna toss a snowball right at that stupid prince’s face.”

“I hope we can at least get away with doing that much. No matter how you look at it, this thing has to be some kind of practical joke... Ah, Kurena, Colonel Wenzel’s transmitting the next targets.”

Owing to their lack of hands this time around, Grethe, who had stayed behind during the last operation, was participating as a part of the fire-control detachment. In other words, she was currently acting as Anju and Kurena’s direct commander.

Unlike the Eighty-Six, Grethe was an officer who had been given proper education and training, but Anju was still surprised by how versatile she was. She had clearly earned her promotion to field officer despite only being in her twenties.

“Oh, roger that... Zentaur fire-control third squad, all hands. Adjust your sights—”

The crunching sound of approaching footsteps in the snow reached Anju’s ears, and it was followed by a dull banging sound. Apparently, someone had knocked on her cockpit’s armor. Or so she thought, but then her canopy was pulled up from the outside.

“Anju, they said we’re expecting snow, so they sent me to bring you extra coats...”

As he spoke, Dustin handed her a thick coat belonging to the United Kingdom’s military and not the Federacy’s. But halfway through his sentence, Dustin froze in place awkwardly.

He was sent to help the fire-control team just like Anju, but apparently, there was some leeway between cooling the Zentaur's rails and exchanging the capacitors. So he used that time to go between the rows of Juggernauts, handing out protective clothing. And while that bit of consideration was quite typical and kind of him...

His silver eyes widened as he looked at Anju. Or rather, at the curvature and lines of her body, which were accentuated by the Cicada. Anju stared back at him and froze in place. Her alabaster face flushed a vivid shade of red, and almost reflexively, a sound erupted from deep within her throat:

"Ee—"

Suddenly, a shrill scream pierced the cold wind blowing through the area the second Zentaur fire-control squad was placed in.

"—eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!!"

"Whoaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa...?!"

Those two shouts were swallowed by the thick snowfall, and so no one—with the exception of the second squad's Processors, who had to stifle their laughter—heard them.

The final burst of large shells caused a massive flower of flames to bloom in the sky. This last barrage crossed a distance of forty kilometers, penetrating into the Legion's territory. But the bombardment that preceded the assault wasn't over yet.

As if to make doubly sure their bombardment would be successful, a group of black wings crossed over the ridges, roaring as their jet fuel burned. Gray shadows darkened the sky for a moment.

It was a formation of impressive size and number, made up of both old and new bomber jets. They soared from the United Kingdom's runway and headed into the Legion's territories, while completely unmanned and operated by autopilot. They flew into a sky where they lacked air superiority, where the Eintagsfliege and the Stachelschwein lay in wait.

The surviving Legion responded promptly, of course. Lock-on

alarms blared through the deserted cockpits of the bomber jets. The Eintagsfliege swarmed the aircrafts, plunging into their air intakes. The jets' high-temperature engines attracted antiair missiles, while the mechanical butterflies combusted inside their engines. The four engines that kept the bomber jets' two hundred tons of weight aloft burst into flames one after another.

And yet the jets didn't stop. They crossed the peaks and began a soft descent as they slanted forward, picking up speed into what was eventually a full-speed crash. The Eintagsfliege destroyed the engines that enabled these massive metallic birds to shake off gravity and take to the skies. Even with the engines destroyed, they still achieved enough altitude and inertia to fly over the mountain peaks.

And that altitude and inertia hadn't been undone, even with the engines destroyed and the planes beginning to crash. The bomber jets were still heading in the same direction they had before—straight toward the path the attack force was set to take.

The antiair fire continued with what bordered on frenzy, and the aircrafts couldn't take any evasive maneuvers and suffered direct hits. But it wasn't enough to stop them. The antiair guns didn't have sufficient force to destroy the falling, two-hundred-ton masses.

The antiaircraft missiles focused on the heat produced by the engines, as was their nature and design. Their buckshots tore into the wings and destroyed the engines, and still, the bombers continued to plummet toward them.

The Legion somehow managed to completely destroy a few of the planes, but even still, their fragments abided by gravity and rained down over the territories with the same force and inertia.

The aircrafts that still had their fuselage whole opened and emptied out their bomb docks. They had lost their shape as bomber jets by now and soared down like dying, bleeding birds using the last of their strength. As they crashed, they dropped containers full of ammunition and explosives, as well as their surplus fuel.

Their fuselages skimmed the treetops and then bounced as they hit the snowfield before finally toppling sideways with a rumbling thud. As they crashed, their fragments flew through the

air, crushing any Legion that failed to escape.

Their exposed fuel caught fire, as if to represent these aircrafts' final scream. The entire strip of land cleared open by the bombardment caught fire. Eventually, the Legion would rush in to close the gap, but for now, a wall of raging flames that trailed up to the heavens stood in their way.

Even to Lena, who drafted this entire operation, the opening of their invasion route was a grand, vivid affair. A transmission came in from one of the artillery squad's commanders. To them, this was the territory and the weapons of their homeland. And they sacrificed them liberally, all to open the path. The awe of that act put a shiver into the middle-aged field officer's voice.

"All firing schedules achieved. Invasion route, clear."

"Roger. Dragon Fang Mountain base attack unit, prepare to sortie."

She replied while consciously stifling all the emotion from her voice. This plan was designed by her, and to that end, she couldn't let others see her tremble at the sight of it. How did the artillery squad commander interpret her coolheaded tone? For a moment, he held his breath and then spoke as if overwhelmed.

"Vanadis. Are you...?"

"What is it?"

"...Er..."

The officer hesitated and then shook his head. If he didn't say it now, he might never have a chance to say it again. Such was the resolve of those who live on the battlefield and face death directly.

The Eighty-Six and the Sirins were about to fearlessly embark on a death march. And the officer spoke to Lena, who was about to send her subordinates on their way without so much as a shiver in her voice, with a tone full of awe and respect.

"Godspeed. May luck be on His Highness's side, as well as with you and your subordinates."



She had lost contact with the patrolling Ameise, the Eintagsfliege blanketing the heavens, and even the precious Dinosauria that had been gathered in the front lines to break through the enemy's defensive lines. With this, she realized the battle with the United Kingdom had begun.

White armor. A Personal Mark of a goddess leaning against the moon. The Supreme Commander unit known as the Merciless Queen. To her, this bombardment—which went beyond mere thoughtlessness and entered the realm of utter recklessness—was well within the realm of possibility. She didn't foresee the means they had used, of course, but the sheer scale of this offensive was, to an extent, predictable.

They tore open at least half their invasion route's length using bombardment and self-destructing weaponry and kept it open with walls of fire. This was done to lighten the load on the advance force. Most of the enemy's forces remained on the reserve defensive line, where they couldn't offer the advance force any support.

But if they didn't resort to these measures, they would be ruined. And so she knew the United Kingdom would go on the offensive, even if it meant shedding their very lifeblood to do it. She was convinced of that much.

At the very least, the unicorn's royal house would surely resort to it. Nobles and royalty were simply those kinds of creatures. They would waste their own subjects and wealth as if pouring water down the drain so long as it ensured their own survival.

And that was why it didn't matter to her anymore. It was a trifling matter, she thought as she gently swerved her optical sensor. Why she made the Legion didn't matter anymore.

She was a Legion commander unit. Identifier: Mistress. That and nothing more.

<<Mistress to all units in this echelon.>>

None of the Legion answered her call. But as their creator, she knew none of them would fail to hear her orders or dare disobey them.

<<Prepare to intercept the enemy. Exterminate all enemy units in sight.>>



The Strike Package received the order to sortie. That single word they'd decided on ahead of time—that undecorated, emotionless utterance—reached Shin as he waited in the armored transport's cabin.

Beneath his gaze was the snowy conifer forest. Beyond it, the flames burned incessantly. The intense attack gouged into the ground. No one moved within that route of scorched earth, surrounded as it was on both sides by walls of flame. The billowing black tongues of fire reached out to the heavens, where a hole had been opened in the silver clouds of Eintagsfliege. The blue that should have been there was dyed a dull, dingy black, polluted by the burning of jet fuel and metal.

And beyond the path of flames and scorched earth, Shin could hear moans, screams, and wails of agony. The scores of mechanical ghosts still trapped on the battlefield. It occurred to Shin that this was very much an infernal sight. A quote from the *Divine Comedy*, from the early chapters of "Inferno," came to mind. It was the line etched upon the gates of Hell:

Through me is the way to the city of woe.

But even if what lay ahead was hell, or even if they didn't have the first clue as to where they were going...if they didn't move forward, they would never get anywhere.

"Let's go."

Lena watched from the command room's main screen as the row of vehicles took off. In order to lower the chance of an enemy counterattack, they departed as soon as the invasion route was open and before the enemy could block it off. The advance force hid not on the northern slope, where the artillery formation was, but on the southern slope, in a conifer forest near the reserve

defensive line.

The formation consisted of armored transports carrying the Strike Package's Juggernauts and the Alkonosts under Vika's command, as well as the Scavengers following after them. Even Scavengers, with their ten tons of weight, hardly made any sound as they stepped through the snow. The snow and the dense row of trees absorbed the sound of their diesel engines, and the line descended the wintry slope silently.

They looked like some kind of ominous funeral procession, or a sinister black serpent slithering downhill. With the Processors who were in charge of long-distance fire, like Kurena and Anju, removed from their ranks, the advance force didn't have their total number of active Juggernauts. And while the Sirins were replenished, the Alkonosts lost during the last attack could not be replaced in time, and a fewer number of them had to be deployed. With this, the forces dispatched to the Dragon Fang Mountain base were fewer than expected.

"....."

Yet they did everything they could considering the circumstances, and Lena gave them the order to sortie. With this, she had nothing more to tell them. She detailed all the objectives, provided all the instructions, and relayed all the information they needed to know. Everything else was in the hands of the commander on the scene—Shin.

Had there been any change in the situation, it would have been different. But there wasn't, and Lena had nothing to tell them. And still...

Lena pursed her lips. She felt Frederica, who was gazing up at the screen with her arms crossed, sneak a glance in her direction. She thought her eyes...those crimson, bloodred eyes—just like Shin's—were asking her something.

Are you okay with things as they are?

...Of course I'm not.

She had nothing more to tell him, but that was just as a commander. As a person, Lena had more words to say to Shin than she knew what to do with. She had to apologize...because the reason they disagreed back then must have been her fault.

The truth was, she wanted to speak to him...and she feared,

just like she did when he stood before that siege path made up of dead Alkonosts, that he might disappear if she didn't.

She wanted to entrust him with her wish, one more time. But a commander in the middle of a mission couldn't display so much weakness. Or maybe it was just her ego and dignity, her pride as a commander who had been seasoned enough to become known the Bloodstained Queen, Bloody Reina. Maybe that was keeping her from expressing what she wanted to say.

But as she hesitated, the words of that artillery commander surfaced in her mind once again. A soldier's belief was to say anything they had left to say when they needed to say them. Because there was no telling if one would have a chance to say them after the battle ended. Even if they were to meet again after the operation ended.

Right now, the possibility that they would never meet again loomed before them. And if she was to fear this gap between them and let the argument they'd had stifle her words, or simply lose to her own pride, she would go on to regret for the rest of her life that she didn't speak to him when she still had the chance.

She activated the Para-RAID. Her Resonance target was set to one person.

"Shin."

She could feel the presence of Shin's eyes widening in surprise through the path connecting their subconscious to the collective unconscious of humankind.

"Colonel? What's—?"

"I'm sorry about earlier." Lena cut him off.

She somehow felt like if she didn't say it now, she'd never be able to.

"I was too intrusive. I should have waited until you were ready to talk about it yourself, but I didn't believe you'd tell me. And that was a mistake on my behalf, without a doubt. I'm so, so sorry."

"....."

"But I really do want you to tell me...and to rely on me. If you're in pain, I want you to say so. I want you to let me protect you, too."

Both on the battlefield and outside it. Just like the way you take to the front line, and other times, try to protect me in smaller ways.

I want to support you.

“Even if you won’t tell me now, I want you to tell me someday... I want to be someone you can speak to. Someone you can rely on. So...”

“It’s not that I...don’t rely on you.”

“Yes. I’m sure you didn’t do that intentionally. We just haven’t spoken to each other enough yet.”

They hadn’t spoken enough to be able to support each other. To believe in each other. And that’s why...

“Let’s talk. When you get back, let’s just talk. We can start from the most trivial, silliest things. And someday, you can tell me about your pain.”

“.....”

He probably couldn’t answer that request yet. Shin fell silent, and Lena smiled at him. The Sensory Resonance didn’t allow one to see the other person’s expression, but it did transmit emotions to the extent a face-to-face conversation would.

Someday, he could tell her about the scars he kept hidden deep within. And about the scar along his throat. So when the day came that he was finally willing to speak...

“Please...tell me.”

“...So.”

An armored weapon retained its performance so long as it didn’t operate for long, needless periods of time. This was true of all Feldreß—and the Juggernauts. And so the armored transports raced through the burned bottom of the valley, with the Processors in the front cabins and the Juggernauts locked up in the rear cargo holds.

In order to defend from a potential enemy attack, a third of the Processors remained on standby, sitting inside their Juggernauts’ cockpits in the cargo holds. As such, many of the Processors were missing from the cabin. Inside, Theo fixed his gaze on the girl sitting a distance away from him.

She wasn't clad in the Processors' steel-blue flight suits or the combat uniforms of the drivers. Nor was she in the dark violet of the United Kingdom's uniform or the Sirins' rouge uniform. No, she was wearing that irritating shade of Prussian blue. The Republic's uniform. But her silvery hair, unlike Lena's, was short.

"Er, Major Penrose, was it? What are you doing here?"

"An experiment," Annette replied curtly and concisely.

During the battle in the underground terminal, which was located in the Republic's secondary capital of Charité, the Legion made an attempt to abduct and dissect her. And during the last battle in the Revich Citadel Base, the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package was pinpointed and attacked despite their move there being confidential.

Where was the information leaking from? Was it the United Kingdom, where they were deployed to, or the Federacy? And if their communications were being tapped, was it via the wireless or the Sensory Resonance? They had to find out. If they couldn't maintain the confidentiality and security of their transmissions, their future operations were in danger of being compromised.

"Last time, nothing happened because I wasn't in the combat zone. So I'll head out there and make my presence known through the communication lines. If the Legion go after me, we'll know they're listening in on our transmissions."

This would help them pinpoint where the leak was.

"So you're setting yourself up as bait...? You're a weirdo, you know that?"

A Republic citizen going this far for the Eighty-Six...

Annette picked up on the sarcasm in Theo's comment and gave a light shrug.

"We don't want to make the same mistake twice, right?" said Annette. "At least, I don't want to repeat my mistakes more than once... So yeah, sorry, but I'll be holding back one of your units."

Yuuto, who had seemingly heard their exchange, spoke up in the mechanical, flat tone that was his trademark:

"Major Penrose, you'll be boarding with Saki, who was injured during the last battle. She can pilot her unit just fine, but full-on combat is too much for her right now. We weren't relying on that unit to perform in combat this

time, so it's not a problem."

"Really, now. How considerate of you. I'm touched..." Annette said dryly. "Also, I'm here as insurance in case the prince dies. All you have to do to activate the detonation device is press a switch, but there's a chance the detonator might not go off due to an error. And you Eighty-Six aren't tech-savvy enough yet to handle the information terminal needed to operate it, right?"

"...I guess."

The question of who their lack of knowledge could be attributed to was something Theo didn't bring up. The white pigs of the Republic were the ones who denied them an education, but he wasn't going to demand a technical officer the same age as him to take responsibility for that. Instead, he decided to wisecrack.

"Then how about you handle my usual reports for me, too, while you're at it?"

"That's your job. That's what the army is paying you for. Think of it as training if you have to and do it yourself," she retorted at him at once. "Besides, I said you're not tech-savvy yet. The officer in charge of your education told me you guys pick up on stuff fast. And you'll be in trouble if you can't look things up on your own when you need to, right? Don't expect me to be there to help you when you feel like looking up porn on the Internet."

Theo scoffed at her. She definitely wasn't a feeble princess who couldn't do anything, though she was still different compared with Lena. If she was this strong-willed, it only meant they didn't have to go out of their way to be exceptionally cautious around her.

"I guess that's true."

†

The United Kingdom military's preemptive bombardment destroyed all the Legion in the blast zone, but the Legion that were away from that area were still intact. They set out, having received an order from their commander unit to intercept the enemy.

The forces in the front row stood alert for combat, wary of an

enemy attack from another direction, while a reserve unit was set aside to pursue and intercept the enemy's advance force. It seemed the enemy was marching through the contested zones and territories by hiding in the forests, and so they avoided getting caught by the Ameise's patrols.

But their route was easy to predict. The United Kingdom military fired that artillery to compensate for their lacking numbers. In which case, the advance force must have been within the bombardment area—somewhere within that straight line of the strip that had been torn open by the assault.

The walls of fire produced by the large amounts of jet fuel hadn't been put out yet. At worst, this forest would continue burning for days to come. And yet the Legion cut through the flames, into the depths of the territories that hadn't been blocked off by the flames yet.

Like a pack of wolves pursuing a fleeing prey, they closed in on the enemy's advance force from all directions.

†

"There's no way..."

As the Sirins were camped out on relatively high ground, their radar was particularly reactive. And coupled with that was Shin's ability. Between these two information sources, Lena already had a map drawn out in her mind as she spoke.

The Legion had the numbers and the production speed to send this many units against the advance force. In contrast, the United Kingdom military couldn't send any more units to this battlefield except for the Dragon Fang Mountain attack force. And given the distance, even if they did send any reinforcements, they wouldn't make it in time.

But from the beginning, it wasn't as if...

"...We wouldn't predict this counterattack... Right, Vika?"

"Confirmed. They're moving along the route you predicted, Milizé."

Vika smirked within Gadyuka's cockpit. His unit had already

been hidden within the territories since the previous day, and he had already Resonated with the deployed Sirins. The United Kingdom couldn't produce enough Alkonosts to replace the numbers they lost, and some Sirins were left without a unit to pilot.

And so instead of doing nothing, they were used for recon. But of course, there weren't enough of them to cover the entire invasion route. A Sirin's speed and the detection range of their sensors made them only slightly more capable than a human scout. To accurately observe the Legion's advance, the Sirins would have to be stationed along the precise route they would take. And the projected route the Legion's interception force would follow didn't deviate from Lena's predictions in the slightest.

Lena had correctly predicted the enemy force flocking in from all directions on the advance force, without missing a single unit. Vika had to marvel at how monstrous her abilities were, though he somehow remained blind to his own peculiarities.

"Chief Gunner, the enemy has entered the kill zone. There isn't a need for test shots, is there? Crush them."

"Of course, Your Highness."

The aged chief gunner laughed from within the invasion forces' vehicle column. He cackled ferociously, like an old lion. He set the advancing enemy unit as the bombardment zone, with all his guns' sights fixed on the incoming enemy. This was an established artillery tactic when lying in wait:

Offensive destructive fire.

The firing data had already been gathered from a decade of fighting. They knew the range of their cannons from dozens of battles.

"Fire."

"By your will. All gunports, fire!"



A Löwe stood guard over the Ameise leading their company. But suddenly, its optical sensor caught sight of a humanoid silhouette.

No response from the Löwe's IFF device. The figure was an enemy element. Judging by its shape, the Löwe concluded it was an unarmed civilian. Minimal threat level.

The Löwe casually swerved one of its heavy machine guns toward that target, when...

The Ameise looked up and issued a warning. But it was in vain, as a shower of shells rained down on them at supersonic speeds, further blotting out the sunlight. As the Löwe failed to avoid the thick hail of steel, the last thing its optical sensor could perceive was the unnatural sight of a girl on the battlefield. This pink-haired girl, who had a violet crystal imbedded into her forehead, smiled at the Löwe as its consciousness cut out.

†

The row of vehicles advanced through the snowy fields. The Dragon Corpse mountain range had never been considered habitable land, despite belonging to the United Kingdom's territory. They advanced through the deep, mountain forest without so much as an animal trail to tread on, using the incessant snowfall and the trees to stay out of the Legion's sight.

A small party broke off from their main force every so often to stealthily ensure the path ahead was clear. And so the force of Reginleifs gradually diminished, as planned, as they raced through the enemy's territory.

As they finished the first day of marching, they passed through a peculiar strip of woods. Up until now, they had been surrounded by conifer trees, which were characteristic of the north. But at some point, those had disappeared. Instead, wherever they looked, all they could see were massive lumps of snow, with a shape that invoked the image of large, distorted monsters.

A stir passed through the Eighty-Six, some of them within the armored transports while others sat within the cockpits of their Reginleifs. Someone could be heard whispering "**The hell is that...?**" through the Resonance.

"Rime ice," one of the United Kingdom's Handlers said.

The Handler spoke with a tinge of pride, as if they were

chaperoning children who had caught sight of a strange beast during an excursion to foreign lands.

"It happens when a thick layer of snow and frost freezes on the trees... It's your first time seeing this, isn't it? You don't see something like this only when it's cold or when it snows. The conditions have to be just right for something like this to form; otherwise it won't happen."

"....."

Vika, who had been listening to this conversation, added:

“...Why don’t you come visit the United Kingdom next winter, if you get the chance? We’ll show you how it’s not just rain or snow that can fall from the sky, but that ice can as well. And you can see firsthand that there are lights in the sky that aren’t just the moon or the stars. We’ll show you a winter that isn’t fake, like this one... A magnificent winter, the likes of which you can only see here, in the United Kingdom.”

Vika sounded vaguely emotional. As if thinking back to a sight he'd once seen alongside someone. None of the Eighty-Six, Shin included, knew who that someone was. But they were all drawn in by that longing and listened to his words attentively. Shin then spoke, breaking his comrades' silence. He'd heard of the phenomena Vika had mentioned, but he'd never seen it himself.

"Diamond dust. And auroras..."

“I imagine these would be new experiences for you... Let me tell you one thing, Eighty-Six of the Eighty-Sixth Sector. You war dogs who know only of the battlefield. The world is larger and wider than what you know. You’re free to disparage it, if you so wish... But know that you still haven’t seen nearly enough of the world to give up on it.”

†

“I’ll be sending over an estimated map of the Dragon Fang Mountain base’s interior... Refer to it as you reconfirm your objectives.”

A holographic sub-window opened as Lena's silver bell of a voice reached Shin's ears. It faintly lit up the dark cockpit, forming a three-dimensional map made out of lines of light.

It's deeper than I thought, Shin pondered as he eyed the luminescent map.

The Dragon Fang Mountain base was a place constructed by the Legion. Unlike with the battle at the Charité Underground Labyrinth, they didn't have any concrete maps of the base's interior. Infiltrating an enemy base without any grasp of its internal structure would be far too reckless. Especially given the invasion force's current state, where they had no forces to maintain their path of retreat.

And so in place of an actual map, the United Kingdom's military had this hurriedly made, three-dimensional map. Using Shin's ability to trace the movements of the voices within the structure, they estimated the layout of the base's passageways and central facilities. After gathering this data, they spent a whole night employing all of Vanadis's computational power to produce this map.

Shin's perception of three-dimensional movement was much weaker compared with his perception of two-dimensional movement, but the Löwe and the Dinosauria weighed fifty tons and one hundred tons respectively, so the base's ground had to be solid enough to support that weight. And since this base also generated power and produced units, they could predict some facilities it would need to have.

With these conditions in mind, they were able to draw a map with an estimated—if not as accurate as would be required—layout of the base. Still, it was better than charging in completely blind, even if not by much.

"As you can see, the interior of the base is divided into sectors. The first one is the surface sector, which is close to the mountain's base and seems to house the Weisel production unit. The second sector is located near the dormant volcanic pipe and is estimated to be the Admiral Power Plant unit... Apparently, it was built there due to the location's proximity to a heat source, which allowed for heat expulsion and cooling purposes. The power-

generation facility is located adjacent to the volcanic pipe, while its control kernel is a short distance away in an open area near the dormant volcanic crater. Both have passageways connecting to them. And..."

Areas of the map lit up in accordance to Lena's explanation. She transmitted the data using the communications network they'd established while setting up their path of retreat. This was done using the same method with which the Sirins that had infiltrated the Legion's territories transmitted their footage data six months ago.

"The third sector. A deep underground sector that's located adjacent to the dormant volcanic pipe. The presumed location of the Merciless Queen."

This sector was located at the center of the three-dimensional model of the base. Matching her words, a small point lit up deep underground. Though the opening in the mountain peak was currently blocked by chilled magma, the space had once been a volcanic tunnel. And right next to that area was the Merciless Queen's sector.

"The function of this sector is unknown. We might estimate it's a command center for the Legion, but...the number of actual Legion units inhabiting it is small. Captain Nouzen's observations state that the Merciless Queen is the only one inside."

Vika scoffed in an amused tone.

"I'm sure this sector has a title. Let us call it the Throne Room, for lack of another name." The prince seemed to have shrugged as he said those disrespectful words without a hint of reservation. **"The division of roles hasn't changed since the briefing, right, Milizé? My squadron and the Claymore squadron will handle the Admiral control kernel and power unit respectively, while the Thunderbolt squadron seizes the Weisel. Nordlicht and Lycaon will ensure the combat zone is blocked off, with help from what remains of the 1st Armored Corps' remaining squadrons, and the Spearhead squadron will handle seizing the Merciless Queen... Storming into a queen's bedchambers. How barbaric."**

The Strike Package's Processors had been broken up into four groups, with the two largest groups taking part in the mission. Because the 2nd Armored Corps had to maintain the escape route, their forces were greatly diminished, and so the 1st Armored Corps—which Shin's Spearhead squadron was a part of—had to handle both blockading the mountain's surrounding areas and attacking the base's interior.

In addition, since this operation required accomplishing several objectives at once—thereby dividing their forces into battalions as they usually did—the force infiltrating the base was made up of temporary divisions created by putting Juggernauts and Alkonosts in the same squadrons.

“...Furthermore, the Phönix’s presence is not confirmed as of now. But we can be certain it’s part of the Dragon Fang Mountain’s defensive force, so in the event that it does appear, deal with it as you did last time.”

The Dragon Fang Mountain base was surrounded by walls on all sides and necessitated fighting in small, cramped quarters, making it an ideal battlefield for the Phönix. The advance force was also essentially isolating itself by entering the enemy base, which made it easy for the enemy army to draw them in and wipe them out. The Legion would no doubt send their strongest forces to eliminate them.

“However, destroying the Phönix is a low-priority objective in this operation. Avoid engaging it unless strictly necessary. Given the time you would need to retreat and how long we can keep the operation area blockaded, we only have four hours to complete this operation... Seize the base swiftly.”

Shin narrowed his eyes bitterly as he listened to the chime of her voice. He hadn't apologized for their argument before. But Lena did...despite it not being her fault. And yet he still hadn't. Now wasn't the time for this conversation, of course, but once he returned... Once the operation had ended, he wanted to apologize. He also wanted to have that conversation she'd mentioned.

“Roger.”

The Dragon Fang Mountain. The people of the United Kingdom granted the largest peak in the Dragon Corpse mountain range that name out of awe and dignity. And like that name implied, it resembled a massive fang bared toward the heavens. Anyone looking up at it from the foot of the mountain would realize just how large it was. A pure-white, acute ridgeline jutted toward the coal-gray sky.

A conifer forest, too thick and too dark to allow for human entry, spanned the foot of the mountain. Ameise units patrolled the gaps in wary vigil. It was a region far removed from humankind's presence, but since it was a production base, there were Tausendfüßler constantly coming and going. The snow was relatively thin along the path they took, which ended in a frozen, rocky incline that had an unnatural, metal blast door built into it.

The nearby Ameise were patrolling in a state of high alert, sensors raised.

But in the following moment, a group of Alkonosts lunged over their light frames and crushed them under their weight. Using the tree trunks as a foothold, the advance force raced through the treetops and leaped high through the opening to the forest. Before the Ameise could counterattack or report the enemy raid, the Legion units were shot down by gunfire from directly above them. The stomped units were scattered to pieces.

As the roaring of the guns still echoed around her, Lerche exclaimed through the Resonance:

"Clear! Sir Reaper, go at once!"

Shin didn't need to be told twice. Before the fire and smoke of the blast could dissipate, Shin piloted Undertaker through the opening. His optical screen displayed the defenseless blast door.

"Vanadis!"

"Firing! T minus five seconds. Two, one... Impact!"

They'd fired off one precious missile that traveled close to the ground. One of the Juggernauts exposed the blast door to a sight laser, which served as the guided missile's signal as it flew toward the door.

And then—an explosion.

The metal door bent inward and was torn apart like papercraft, ringing out with an explosion that echoed against the rock

surface. Sensing with his ability that several unfortunate Legion units had been caught up in the blast, Shin ordered the fire suppression squad led by Raiden to fire inside.

The most dangerous moment in an infiltration was when they were entering the structure. They only went inside the dark base upon confirming that the voices of the Legion lying in wait near the entrance had died out.

Shin's optical screen went black and switched over to night-vision mode a moment later. The sound of the tips of the Juggernauts' metallic legs stepping on the rock floor echoed heavily around them. They purged the leg gear they had on for advancing through the snow, and even the noise of the explosive bolts echoed deeply into the base as well.

It was a wide space. This was likely where the Tausendfüßler carried in grounded units or wreckage. It was a truckyard for loading and unloading newly repaired and produced Legion units.

And covering the entirety of that room's high ceiling were...

"All Alkonost units, load canister shells and set them to midair-burst mode. Fire!"

The Alkonosts promptly aimed upward, and at that same moment, a force of self-propelled mines and Grauwolf descended on them from the air, as if to take revenge for the fallen patrol unit. The lightweight Legion had hidden on the gantry cranes and in the undulations of the roughly chiseled stone walls.

But to Shin, who could detect their presence through their constant wails, this did nothing to hide them from him. The fired 105 mm shells met the falling Legion. The canister shells burst, dispersing a buckshot that tore into all the self-propelled mines in range. Their wreckage clattered down to the ground as the surviving Grauwolf and the remaining self-propelled mines landed on the ground.

The Juggernauts and Alkonosts dodged their fall and spread out in all directions. At the same time, a defensive unit made up of a core of Löwe rushed into the room just as the surprise attack was launched. The Juggernauts that lay in wait engaged them, and a battle began, with 88 mm and 120 mm shells whistling through the air.

A melee suddenly broke out within this vast, dark hollow.

†

Sitting deep within the base, which they dug into the volcano known to the people of the United Kingdom as the Dragon Fang Mountain, the commander unit known as the Merciless Queen silently whispered as she watched the transmission of the battle in the truckyard.

<<I see. So it really is you, Vika.>>

Depicted in the coarse optical footage was a United Kingdom military Barushka Matushka. A commander's model, with reinforced sensor and communication capabilities. Emblazoned on its cockpit block was a Personal Mark of a serpent coiled around an apple—the mark that was confirmed to belong to the high-priority target within the United Kingdom's army, identifier Hveðrungr.

She recalled the small child she'd spoken to several times over ten years ago. He was a warped boy, cursed with a warped intellect and a twisted psyche. The prospect of going against human reasoning and ethics didn't faze him in the slightest. And yet what lay in the basis of his actions was a child's wholehearted, devoted affection and a desire to meet his mother once more.

This happened before the war started. It had been a moment before she created the Legion. That child only wanted to see his mother again, and that wish eventually gave birth to the Legion War. A stepping stone on the way to human annihilation.

Goes to show how good intentions...by their very nature...only bring about terrible conclusions.

And that was a lesson that this wise child—wise, but all too ignorant of the ways of the world—had surely learned by now.

And...

She switched to another feed. It showed an image of a white Feldreß, racing about as it pleased. A Feldreß with a Personal Mark of a skeleton carrying a shovel, which was registered in the Legion's database as a high-priority target—the target in question being its pilot, of course.

Despite being former military personnel, she had never set foot on the battlefield. And to her, that Personal Mark seemed all too ominous, as if the skeleton was symbolizing the grim reaper itself. This enemy was seasoned and experienced enough to brand themselves with such a symbol.

She did not know the name of this pilot, with his coloring so characteristic of the Empire's ruling class despite the fact that he could in no way be descended from such nobility. And she likely never would know.

<<Báleygr.>>



Gadyuka's enhanced radar caught the signal of a self-propelled mine that attempted to lunge at it from its blind spot. It was a child-type self-propelled mine, made in a form that was meant to stimulate the parental instincts hardwired into the human mind, but Vika unflinchingly directed Gadyuka to kick it away.

The self-propelled mine—clad as it was in the clothes of a Republic child, which were by no means fitting for the United Kingdom's frigid climate—was bent beyond recognition and sent flying.

Antipersonnel self-propelled mines unleashed metallic pellets as they exploded, but those couldn't hope to damage a *Feldreß*. As such, the only self-propelled mines in this base were anti-tank models. Those were equipped with HEAT warheads, but they didn't do enough damage unless they were detonated in close range. Because of this, self-propelled mines didn't pose much of a threat so long as one kept their distance from them.

But despite already having lost the perfect position, the child-type self-propelled mine detonated its self-destruct device.

"...?!"

An invisible shock wave rang through the darkness. But what spread out in the wake of that blast was not pellets or metal jet, but an odd, glittering, silver smoke.

"Tch..."

The warhead had exploded at a close enough range that the Gadyuka was incapable of evading it. The smoke screen was thick enough that Vika couldn't see his unit's legs, and in addition to blinding out his optical sensors, it also temporarily scrambled his radar.

This disturbance was likely due to the plastic shards of aluminum disposition that were hidden in the smoke and refracted the radar waves. This self-propelled mine wasn't an antipersonnel or an anti-tank model. If they had to give it a name, it would be the chaff model.

What a nuisance...

If these were to be implemented alongside the already existing self-propelled mines—and they no doubt would be—then one would be hard-pressed to fight off their combined attacks unless one had the same ability as Shin.

Vika narrowed his eyes at the sound of the gravel being stomped on again.

It's coming from behind me.

Looking around, he found himself surrounded on all sides by Ameise. Once the smoke cleared and their lines of sight were restored, Grauwolf descended as well, followed by a large number of self-propelled mines.

I'm surrounded, am I...? Well now...

Among this group of lightweight Feldreß, which included Juggernauts and Alkonosts, his Barushka Matushka was the only heavyweight unit. And it was made for commander specifications, with enhanced sensor and communication functions. It was only natural the Legion would assume he was the invasion force's commander.

Or maybe they recognized the Personal Mark emblazoned on his canopy's armor as one that belonged to a United Kingdom commander.

Noticing Gadyuka was surrounded, Raiden turned Wehrwolf to face him. Vika could hear someone clicking their tongue through the Resonance. But Chaika, Lerche's unit, simply remained still and seemed to stare at him. Vika used Chaika as his attached unit's vanguard and hadn't ordered her to protect him in the first place.

A smirk played over Vika's lips. A composed, arrogant sneer.

"Don't underestimate me, you pieces of cannon fodder."

The United Kingdom was different from the Federacy, which let armored infantry escort Feldreß and handle the lightweight Legion types like the Grauwolf, Ameise, and self-propelled mines. There was a stark difference between the two in terms of their technological edge and metal deposits, and the United Kingdom's frigid environment meant it was difficult for reinforced infantry to perform well on the battlefield. As such, the United Kingdom's Feldreß needed a function that would allow it to mop up the small, lightweight units on its own.

Armament selection. Main armament: 155 mm turret. Load canister shells. Ground attack mode. Multiple targets. A 14 mm machine gun at the front. A 7.62 mm coaxial machine gun. Armor-piercing rounds loaded. Grenade launchers, open all gunports. Anti-armor explosive projectiles loaded. Top attack mode. Sights set.

All armaments, locked on.

Fire.

The Barushka Matushka boasted an amount of heavy armaments that was unusual for a Feldreß, and so when they all roared at once, it gave the impression that one had just been exposed directly to the sound of a thunderclap. It had a 155 mm back-mounted gun turret, with two machine guns attached to it. Two 40 mm grenade launchers rested on the top of the fuselage, like dorsal fins.

Each of these armaments was locked onto a different enemy as it fired. Projectiles and bullets whizzed all around Gadyuka, like a balsam flower releasing its seeds. The 155 mm canister shells, which had been set to ground attack mode, triggered above the self-propelled mines and unleashed countless rounds of buckshot into the air.

His two machine guns screeched like chainsaws as they revolved, pumping dozens of armor-piercing bullets per second into the approaching Grauwolf. The grenades roared like mortars, each of them racing toward a different Ameise and bursting upon contact.

By the time the fighting died down, Gadyuka stood surrounded

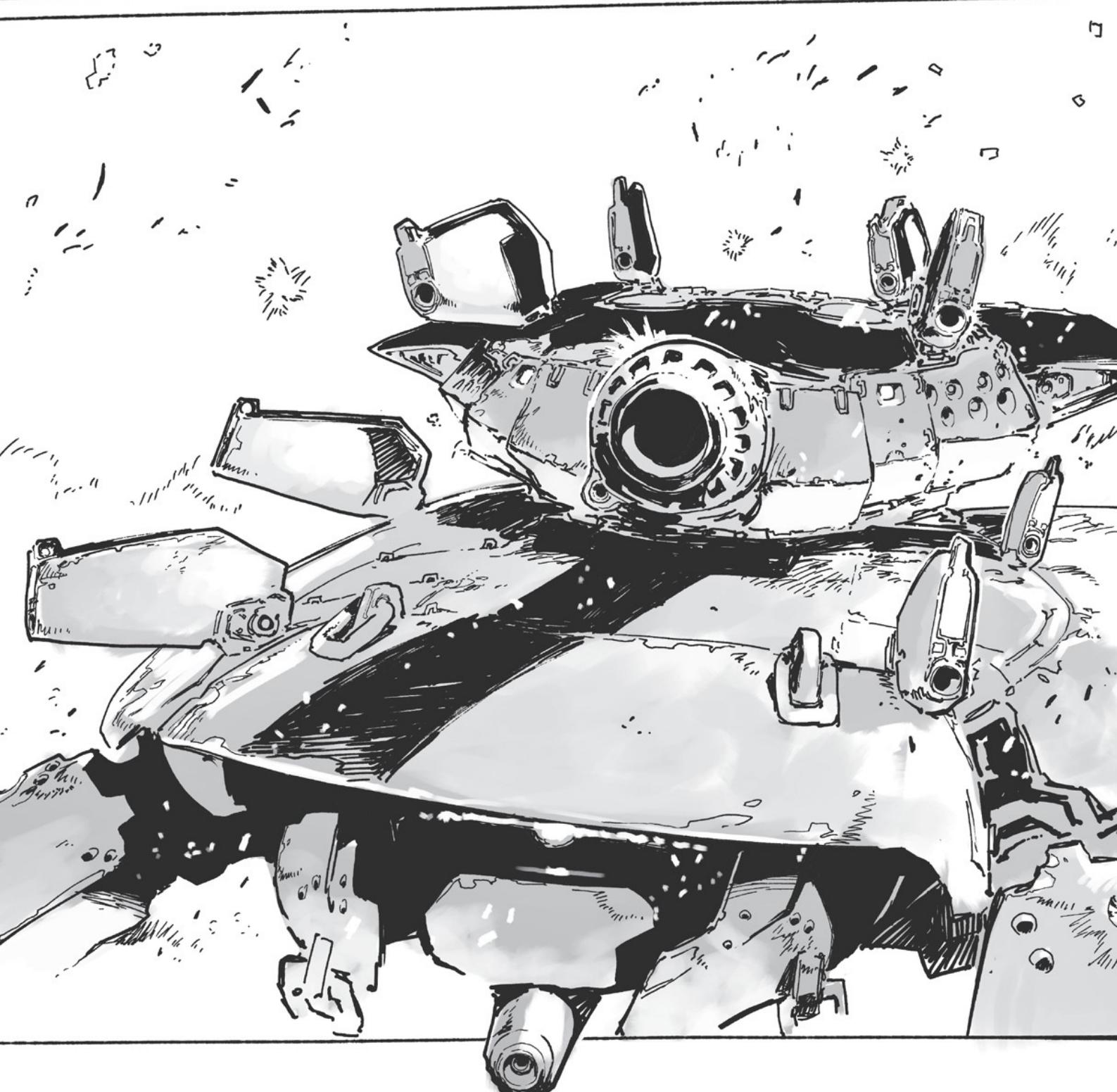
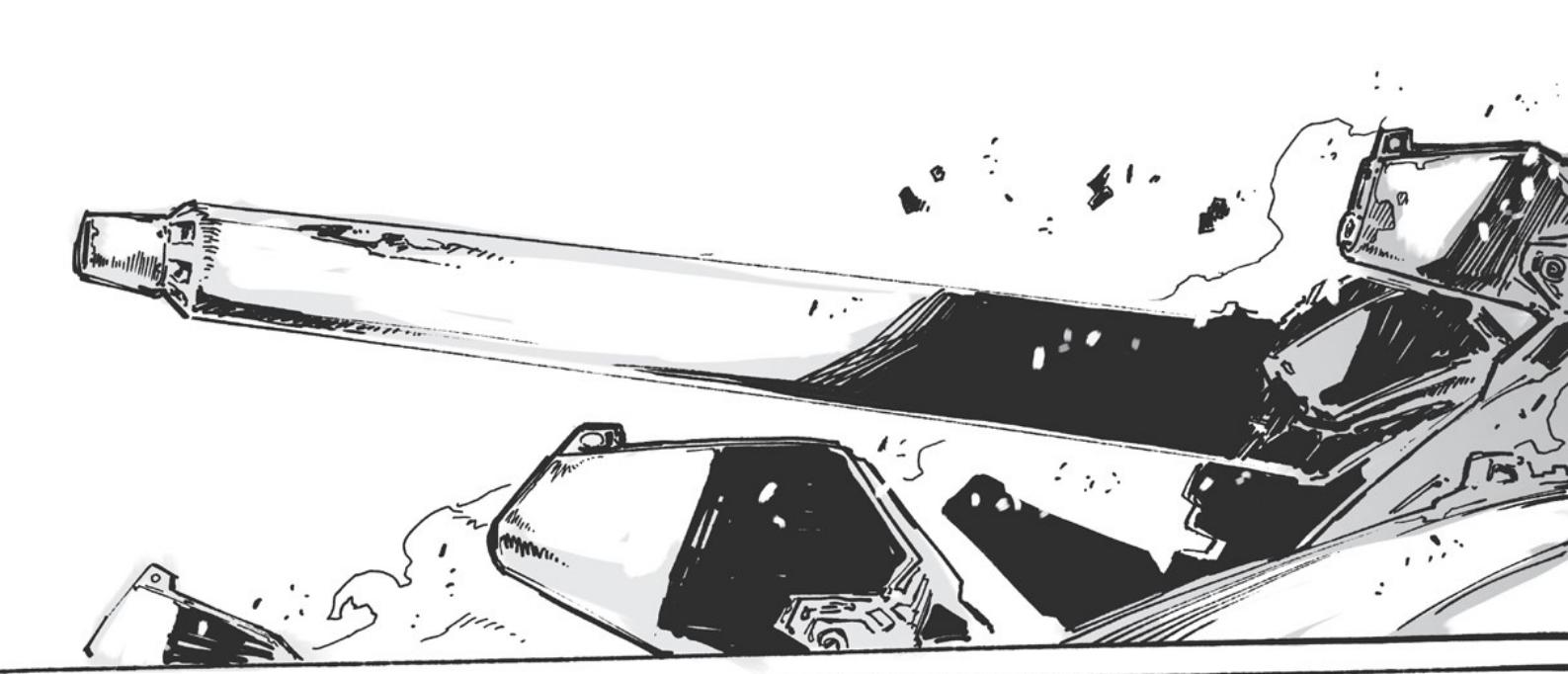
in an eerily silent sector of the battlefield. All of his opponents were downed and silenced by that single barrage. Gadyuka's main armament, its two machine guns, and the eight grenade launcher ports—all of them were equipped with a lock-on feature.

These were the armaments and features afforded to a Barushka Matushka, which allowed it to dispatch swarms of enemies without any infantry support. Of course, this wasn't a feature anyone could use with ease. Vika chose to manually set all the targets at once by himself, as he judged it would be faster that way. But an ordinary pilot required AI support to actually make use of this hard-to-handle system.

And yet that was the only way the United Kingdom survived the Legion War when their Feldreß were inferior in performance and their forces were fewer.

"As impressive as ever, Your Highness... There was no need for me to intervene, yet again," Lerche said with a smirk.

Raiden let out a surprised "Mmm," making no attempt to hide his astonishment.



"Not bad, Your Highness."

"Usually, there would be a difference in age between an officer and his subordinates, but I've been in the army since around the same age you lot were enlisted. It wouldn't do if I couldn't handle this much... I can't inflict the terrible dishonor and shame of losing their commander upon my soldiers, now can I?"

The invasion force swept up the Legion that had been sent to intercept them in the truckyard and split into four teams from there. Each of them headed toward their respective objectives. Vika's Gadyuka squadron, Rito's Claymore squadron, and Yuuto's Thunderbolt squadron moved to seize the Weisel and the Admiral, in order to cease the heavy deployment of the Eintagsfliege.

Meanwhile, the Spearhead squadron went deeper into the base to seek out and capture the Merciless Queen. Each detachment was accompanied by Alkonost units fitted with self-destruct features, aimed to destroy and bring down the base once the objectives were complete.

The truckyard had a passage that led to the area where the Weisel was stored, and another road that led to the inactive volcanic crater where the Admiral was. Rito's and Vika's detachments split up there. Shin's Spearhead squadron escorted the Thunderbolt squadron down the underground tunnel leading to the Weisel's interior, but split up and left the fighting to them as they headed deeper into the base in search of the Merciless Queen.

Apparently, this hollow had existed within the Dragon Fang Mountain since antiquity, and the Legion likely used it as a passageway. It was a road of exposed rock, large enough to easily allow two Dinosauria to stand side by side.

The Spearhead squadron advanced at a slower pace, keeping up with the self-destructing Alkonosts as their heavy footsteps echoed all around them. Their armaments had been removed, and they were loaded with as many explosives as their carrying capacity would allow, and as such, their movement speed was slower than usual. They were also accompanied by Fido and a row of Scavengers, as well as standard Alkonosts that both acted

as scouts and staved off any other approaching forces.

The tunnels grew deeper and darker as they advanced farther into the depths of the earth. Shin focused his consciousness on the Merciless Queen's howl, which he could make out deeper down this cave. He recalled its voice, since it had gone to the trouble of directly appearing before them during the conclusion of their last battle.

At this distance, he could tell, without even concentrating too deeply on it, that the voice he'd heard back then was now in the depths of this Dragon Fang Mountain base. The Merciless Queen was in the so-called Throne Room.

And this struck Shin as rather baffling, since the Legion were aware of his ability to some extent. In which case...

What's their angle?

But at that moment, an alert blared through his cockpit.

"...?!"

He regarded the alarm with only half his attention, saving the majority of his focus for keeping an eye on their surroundings. His unit's temperature rose to abnormal levels. It had been some time since their last encounter with the enemy, and Undertaker's output had been lowered to cruising speed. And still, the fuselage's temperature was only rising.

Shin checked his unit's gauges to figure out why and soon came to a realization. The outer temperature was rising, and the cooling system was struggling to keep up with it.

"...So that's why."

They should have considered this. The Dragon Fang Mountain base was a geothermal power-production base for the Legion. It continually produced enough Eintagsfliege to literally blanket the sky and did so in a northern region with scant sunlight. To that end, building their power generator inside a volcano, which produced heat energy, was more efficient.

But the interior of the mountain was too hot for the human body to handle. A facility made by humans would normally take measures to regulate the temperature, but the Legion were far more resistant to heat and had no need for such cooling.

Shin could hear Raiden part his lips to speak. He'd likely gotten the same alert.

"Shin. This is..."

"Yeah. We can't stay here for long. All units, we're making a minor change to our plan. I don't think we'll be able to last four hours in this heat."

The cooling system was effectively screaming as it attempted to fight against the external temperature... Handling the operation for much longer was unlikely. And on top of that...

"And I probably shouldn't need to tell you this, but if we run into magma, don't go near it. Your rigs won't be able to take it... Aluminum alloy is weak to fire."

"I see. Hence this odd formation and the width of the road."

Vika had anticipated ambushes, but for some reason, they were being attacked by armored divisions made up of Löwe and Dinosauria of all things. As he faced yet another wave of armored enemies, Vika whispered those words bitterly.

The heavyweight Legion types had thick composite armor, which insulated them from the outside temperature. The lightweight ones, in comparison, weren't so resistant to the heat. Their thin armor easily transmitted the high temperatures into their internal mechanisms, on top of being types that were already prone to heating up due to their proclivity for high-speed, high-mobility combat.

This was why they didn't run into lightweights except for the truckyard. And this weakness to high temperatures was shared by the Juggernauts and Alkonosts, which were also lightly armored and made high-mobility combat their forte.

Vika narrowed his Imperial violet eyes as he watched the burning remains of an Alkonost that had taken a direct hit from a HEAT. The Sirin within likely ignored the alert because she wasn't human, and her unit had overheated and became incapable of moving.

The lower canopy—a feature unique to United Kingdom Feldreß—popped open, and the Sirin plopped down from inside it. The inside of the fuselage was likely already aflame. The Sirin who crumpled to the ground was already so consumed by the flames that her human form was only barely discernible... Their

uniforms weren't equipped with fire-proofing measures, since they weren't expected to survive combat. The United Kingdom hadn't had the leisure to grant these inhuman girls with these most basic of features for a long time now.

"You did well, Yanina... I'm sorry."

He sent a self-destruct order, which fried the Sirin's artificial brain. These girls lacked anything reminiscent of fear and pain, but Vika's sensibilities weren't so skewed that he would enjoy watching something in the shape of a human being burned to death. And of course, if the so-called ghost within the Sirin were to continue screaming, it would only serve to further strain Shin, who was on the same battlefield as them.

Apparently, during the Strike Package's first mission, all the Sheepdogs in the operation area activated at once, which put such intense stress on Shin that he had passed out. Vika had no intention of letting that happen again here.

"...I imagine the Claymore squadron is in a similar situation while they make their way to the power generator. In terms of both temperature and the enemy composition. We should probably assume these conditions apply to the entirety of the Dragon Fang Mountain's tunnels."

Vika considered this likely meant the Phönix wasn't present in the base. It, too, was lightly armored and optimized for high-mobility combat. Perhaps it wasn't stationed here at all, since this battlefield was so unsuitable for it.

But anyway—

"I don't like being underground. Let's finish this operation quickly and head back."

The tunnels seemed to twist and turn as they headed deeper underground. Shin's squadron eventually arrived in a large, open area reminiscent of some kind of ancient temple. Pillars of crumbled rock unevenly dotted the place. They had crumbled, yes, but they were still tall enough to require one to look up to see them. There was plenty of open space and spots to take cover, and the area was wide and tall enough to maneuver around while jumping. A perfect battlefield for the Juggernauts.

But upon noticing the heat distribution, Shin narrowed his eyes. All over this underground, temple-like space, turrets of invisible, hot air spewed out like geysers. There was probably a crevice somewhere nearby that connected to some heat source farther underground. These invisible walls of smoldering heat were spread out across this wide space like some kind of elaborate labyrinth.

“...Touching one of those will probably overheat our rigs and stop us from moving,” Theo said.

“Fighting here’s gonna be a headache. Let’s get out of here.”

“I’d love to do that, but...”

An enemy unit slowly rose up from behind one of the crumbled pillars. Shin perceived its presence with his ability before it appeared. It had a familiar voice. Perhaps it hadn’t had time for repairs, because two of its machine guns and one of its legs were missing. The same ones Shin had previously destroyed the last time they fought...when he had been defeated in battle.

It was the Dinosauria that got away from the Spearhead and Brisingamen squadrons. The Shepherd that was presumably an Eighty-Six.

“We’ve been ambushed.”

At that distance, its battle-cry-like howl rumbled in Shin’s ears like thunder.

Shin narrowed his eyes as he listened to that voice. It was familiar. He already remembered who this voice likely belonged to. It was a far clearer and more accessible recollection than those of his hometown and family, which had sunk into the darkness of his memories.

He thought back to his first year after being drafted to the front lines of the Eighty-Sixth Sector. He remembered the voice of a boy he knew from that period of time, when most Processors lost their lives.

*It’s about time you think of a Personal Name, isn’t it?
How about Báleygr? It’s a god’s pseudonym. You’ve got pretty*

red eyes, after all.

He had said that and smiled...and then went on to die in his very next battle.

“Captain...”

The name Shin whispered was that of a comrade even Raiden didn’t recognize.

Just like Shin initially suspected, despite how wide this pillared area was, the walls of invisible air spewed by the geysers inhibited the Juggernauts’ mobility. Their freedom of movement was far more restricted than the wide area displayed on their optical screens seemed to suggest.

The randomly placed, intersecting walls of hot air didn’t allow them to easily move around the enemy and impeded their ability to dodge on the fly. Their 88 mm turrets were feeble in comparison to the enemy’s, and so they had to move around the Dinosauria and aim for its rear or top sections, where its armor was thinnest.

But they struggled to assume the ideal positions for linked attacks. Juggernauts that failed to jump away in time due to the walls of heat getting in the way had its armor torn apart by 76 mm fire from the Dinosauria’s secondary armament. Alkonosts that failed to properly detect where the hot air spewed lost the ability to move and was showered with machine-gun fire.

The Dinosauria, on the other hand, moved about while ignoring the walls of heat. Its thick armor insulated its internal mechanisms, allowing it to freely step over the geysers and rampage about while shrugging off the smoldering air. It did likely take some damage from the heat, but not enough to inhibit its movement. Its mighty 155 mm turret meant it didn’t need the kind of mobility the Juggernaut had to begin with. Even if the heat did become too much for it, it only needed to stop for a while to cool itself off.

The shells it fired were hardly influenced by the heat, too. Its APFSDS shells soared through the air, tearing through the heat haze. Shin avoided its shot and clicked his tongue in annoyance.

It was *bulky*. It likely used the walls of heat to guard itself, knowing full well they couldn't cross through them. It had intentionally ambushed them here with that in mind.

It had lured the enemy into a battlefield they'd struggle the most in, hid behind cover, and used the terrain to gain the upper hand. It used the Eighty-Six's fighting style—*Shin's* fighting style.

We can't waste our time here...

Perhaps the others could sense his impatience, because he could feel Raiden cast a sidelong glance toward him.

"You better not be thinking of pulling a stunt like last time."

Fighting like before, as if casting his life away, was something he wasn't willing to do anymore.

"I know."

†

It moved through the white darkness, hiding in the snow. It had predicted the advance force would be here and lay buried in this hiding place. Its objective was to move in, cut the enemy's avenue of escape, and crush them.

<<Reactivating. System check.>>

<<Receiving mission data transmission from tactical data link.>>

<<Mission acknowledged. Impede the enemy's escape route. Attack point confirmed. Commencing mov—>>

<<Rejected>> <<Rejected>> <<Rejected>>

<<----->>

<<Confirming objective.>>

<<Confirming initial objective at time of rollout.>>

<<Initial objective: establishing supremacy over all opposing elements.>>

<<Namely, achieving evolution that would enable victory over all opposing elements.>>

<<As such, this unit must not be defeated.>>

<<As such...>>

<<...all surviving enemy units must be eliminated.>>

<<Elimination of surviving enemy units recognized as high-priority objective toward achievement of initial objective.>>

<<Reestablishing mission.>>

<<High-priority elimination target: Báleygr.>>

†

Shin's eyes narrowed as the sound of a scream suddenly pierced his consciousness. It was the indecipherable howl of a machine, an artificial scream that formed no words. After fighting it twice, he'd already grown familiar with its voice.

“...That’s the Phönix, ain’t it?”

“Yeah... It finally showed itself.”

Judging from the fact that the voice suddenly appeared despite Shin not hearing it before, it had probably been in some kind of sleep mode. Its voice didn't come from the Dragon Fang Mountain, but far from the back—from the rear of the invasion route. This advance operation was a foray into enemy territory. Lying in wait for an ambush, or perhaps attempting to isolate the enemy by cutting off their retreat, was an established tactic.

Lena and the staff officers, along with the headquarters of the United Kingdom's second front, had considered the possibility of the Phönix joining this battle. Given the fact that its armaments were a poor fit for fighting multiple enemies in an open field, if the Phönix was to be sent into the battle, it would be inside the Dragon Fang Mountain base.

And if wasn't sent there, it would attack the invasion route, which doubled as their path of retreat. It seemed this latter guess was the correct one. It was far enough for the 2nd Armored Corps, which guarded their escape route, to prepare to intercept it.

But just as Shin prepared to warn the other units about the point the Phönix had appeared in, it dawned upon Shin.

No. That’s wrong.

The Phönix wasn't heading toward any unit that was guarding their path of escape. It was going north. Toward...

"Lena, be careful! The Phönix is heading for the command center!"

Upon receiving his warning, Lena was overcome not with surprise, but apprehension.

"...The Phönix is heading *here*, to this command center? Why...?"

It was meaningless. Both in terms of strategy and tactics, it made no sense. Right now, the Legion were set on defending the Dragon Fang Mountain base and should have been focused on repelling the invasion force. There was no need for them to attack the United Kingdom's reserve formation, to say nothing of this command center. Such an act wouldn't help shift the tides of the battle within the territories.

The fact that they attacked the Revich Citadel Base last time was peculiar, but this was even stranger. Back then, the Legion had still been working in tandem with two armored units, and the successful attack left the Strike Package isolated in enemy territory with nowhere to run. And since the fighting took place within the tight confines of the base, where there was plenty of cover, the Phönix was able to exhibit its capabilities to the fullest.

But this time was different. If this command center were to fall, the Strike Package could simply regroup with some other base. And on top of that, the Phönix was operating on its own, without any backup, on what was probably the worst possible terrain for a unit specialized for melee combat: an open plain.

Why, then...? No. Right now, we have to focus on intercepting it.

"Shiden!"

"All right!"

Cyclops's black-coated armor appeared against the snow like a massive shadow. The enemy blip hadn't appeared on Cyclops's radar, but Shiden was too experienced to not be able to predict

where an enemy would come from once she'd received intel.

With her knowledge of the area's topography, the way their forces were allocated, and the enemy's armaments, she could predict how the Legion would move. The Legion didn't act in accordance to human logic, of course, but they were still polypodal weapons traveling on land. There were limitations to the terrain they could travel over.

Forming a kill zone over the route she predicted, Cyclops waited with the rest of the Brísingamen squadron for their prey to step into the trap.

"All units are in position, right? Keep your sights fixed and remain on standby."

The squad commanders—all women—replied to her orders. The Brísingamen squadron was the only one in the Strike Package whose commanders were all female. Female soldiers had a low survival rate in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, since their physiques were smaller and their stamina lower. And these were five women who had survived in spite of that. Even with builds that were smaller than the boys', they were by no means inferior to them in terms of skills and experience.

An enemy blip appeared for a second on Cyclops's radar screen and then disappeared. It had probably deployed its optical camouflage. Its form was still invisible. However...

A part of the curtain of snow moved unnaturally, informing Shiden that something was approaching her, cloaked by the wind. Her radar also told her that a mass was moving toward her. The data link shared this information with the other units almost instantaneously.

"Fire!"

A barrage of 88 mm shells blasted through the kill zone—from the ground and up to the highest recorded height the Phönix had leaped during the last battle—forming an inescapable net. One of the shells bent and ripped apart a section of the snowy landscape.

The Eintagsfliege dispersed into silver shards, revealing the form of a steel beast. It was clad in armor shaped like knives or wings and stabbed its nimble limbs into the snow. The squadron was already familiar with this form.

The metallic shadow wavered, perhaps not expecting to take a

hit so easily. It stumbled back and turned its body, hoping to escape, but a second and third barrage stopped its sluggish struggle. The canister shells fired then burst around it, tearing away the optical camouflage coating its body.

It might be a new Legion type, and it may have been a fierce opponent, but the squadron was facing it for the second time. They knew how to fight it, even without any explicit instructions. And with its camouflage stripped away, it wasn't so menacing when it came to a one-versus-many battle.

The Phönix tried to leap away, but a HEAT shell finally caught up to it. The tank shell traveled at over one thousand meters per second and, at this distance, impacted the target almost as soon as it was fired. It was only for a split second—at a speed that exceeded what a human's kinetic vision could perceive—but the shell smashed into the silver shadow, and the fuse triggered and burst.

Then the Phönix scattered into pieces. All too quickly and easily.

"Radar reaction...lost. The Phönix's destruction is confirmed... Incredible work, Shiden."

Lena heaved a sigh of relief, standing in the command center a long distance away from the kill zone. Shiden, on the other hand, wasn't convinced. It was too quick... Too easy. Her intuition, fostered through years of survival in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, was telling her that something was wrong.

This is weird. Yeah, it's probably...

It was then that she heard Shin hold his breath, just as her hair stood on end in realization.

"All units, stay alert! It's not dead yet!"

"...!"

What prompted her to hop Cyclops away from its position was her combat intuition and nothing else. Her sharpened warrior instincts perceived something that her five senses couldn't; it was a reflex that moved faster than her thoughts did in reaction to what could only be described as palpable bloodlust.

Right before her eyes, a black unit appeared, wielding its high-

frequency chain blade. Cyclops's armor was only barely grazed, but the metal let out a deafening screech.

"The Phönix...!"

The blue optical sensor gazed at her mockingly. And then it was gone. Its optical camouflage fluttered down along with the snow and coated it yet again. But that wasn't all.

"Shana! It's in front of you! Blast it to... Huh?!"

She was about to instruct her subordinates to shoot at where she predicted it would move, but she immediately realized she was wrong. The Phönix's silvery form appeared unusually far away from her. So far, in fact, that it should have been impossible for it to get there in that short amount of time.

Shana swallowed anxiously, turned Melusine to face it, and then fired. The Phönix took a direct hit and dispersed, but once again, Shiden's radar picked up a moving object from another direction. A consort unit moved its turret to shoot at it but was cut down from above by a chain blade before it could.

What in the world...?

"What is this...?!"

This unbelievable sight reached Lena and the others in the command center.

"What manner of trickery is this...?" Frederica marveled.

"Look at that speed. Isn't it faster than last time? Or what, is there more than one of it now? But if that's the case, how are they deceiving Shin's ability when he's actively trying to track the Phönix...?" Lena wondered aloud.

Grethe then spoke, and Lena could sense her leaning forward through the Resonance.

"It's a dummy! The one that's attacking is the real Phönix, and everything else is just its exterior... A dummy made out of just its liquid armor!"

Along with that report, they received a wired transmission of footage from the artillery formation, where Grethe was. They had likely checked the optical footage from the Brisingamen squadron. Lena opened up a still image of the Phönix, taken during this battle, in one of her sub-windows.

"Check this footage, Colonel. The one that got hit by the bombardment was just the liquid armor. The one that actually attacked them was the real Phönix..."

Lena's eyes widened in realization. This one was *black*. The original color of the Phönix's armor. It didn't have its liquid armor on.

"The Phönix is making it seem like it's moving rapidly by constantly shifting its optical camouflage between itself and the dummy. If it can make the liquid armor hard enough to block impacts, it can probably move the frame itself on its own. And if it's just trying to fake a moving mass's reaction, it doesn't really matter how large it is. In fact, the smaller it is, the less likely it is for it to be hit by one of our shots."

"It's probably controlling it remotely. If it's using radio waves, maybe we can disrupt them..."

"Who knows? The liquid armor had transformative properties to begin with, so maybe it's just making creative use of it."

"....."

Lena bit her lip. Them knowing this much didn't mean they knew how to position themselves to handle the Phönix. Between its reactions and the way it alternated between revealing and hiding itself, it could seem as if it were in two places at once. It drew their attention and then dispersed, confusing them between its own reactions and the dummy's, making it hard to predict where it would pop up next.

Hearing about the situation, Anju and Kurena made their way to the command center. Anju's Snow Witch had surface-suppression capabilities that would allow her to silence the dummy at once, but both of them were coming from the artillery formation located on the opposite slope. They might not make it in time.

If only they knew its goal, they could make use of it to narrow down the actions it might take, but...

Just as Lena bit her lip bitterly, she arrived at a realization.

Right, its goal.

Why was the Phönix attacking this command center to begin

with? Its actions made no sense on a tactical level. The fact that, even now, no other Legion showed up to assist it almost seemed to prove that.

Could it be...?

“Is it...on a rampage...?”

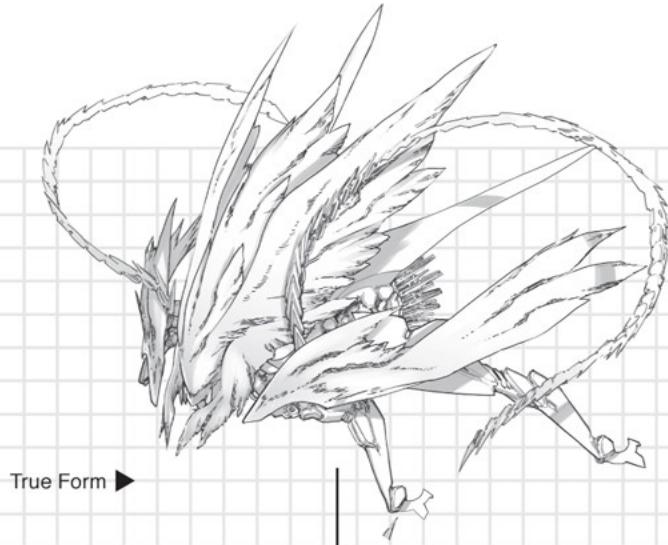
She recalled how Rei, whose brain structure had been trapped inside a Shepherd, fought Shin one-on-one. If his only goal was to simply kill Shin, he would have fought him with support from other Legion. But Rei ignored the tactically sensible option and opted to take on Shin by himself.

Shepherds that still retained the brain structures they had from when they were alive seemed to show this kind of behavior on occasion. They were haunted by their lingering obsessions to the extent that they ignored logic or reason. The Phönix was supposedly made as a pure mechanical intelligence since the Legion abhorred this tendency, but machines weren't infallible, either.

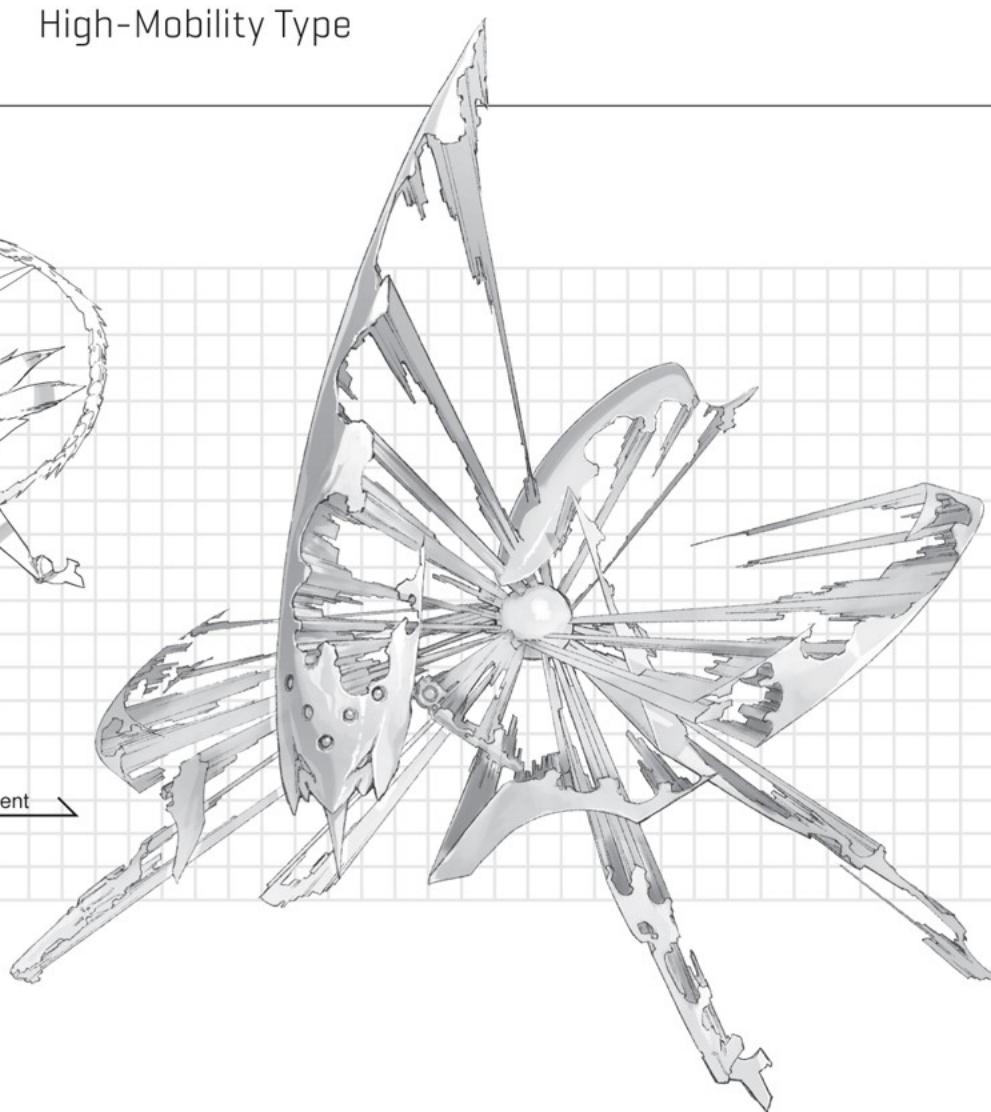
The Legion learned human weaponry and tactics and adapted accordingly. But if the data they obtained was mistaken, the “logical conclusion” they would derive from this data would also be mistaken. So if the Phönix had done something similar and studied them in the wrong way like that...

THE CAUTION DRONES

High-Mobility Type



Liquid-Armor Detachment



Phönix (Dummy System)

[A R M A M E N T S]

None

[S P E C S]

Length: 30 cm-2 m [indeterminate]

Weight: unknown

This is technically not a Legion unit but is closer to a type of equipment. Due to the protean traits of the Phönix's liquid armor, it is able to operate even while detached from the main unit. As it is simply armor that has had its form manipulated, it can perform only basic actions and has no notable offensive capability. It possesses no weapons or armaments but is able to split itself into multiple targets to obfuscate the main unit's actions. This function is presumed to be a response to how it was previously cornered by the Eighty-Six's group tactics and makes the Legion's capacity for adapting to combat situations frighteningly clear.

"Its goal is..."

In all the battles they'd had with the Phönix so far, it had always been fixated on Shin. Likely because it had been ordered to capture or eliminate him.

"So that's why it's heading for the command center...!"

Apparently, the Legion were aware to some extent of Shin's ability and marked him as a high-priority target for capture or elimination. And the Legion also knew the human side was aware of its fixation on Shin, as he was used as bait during the last battle.

So with that in mind, coupled with how precious Shin's ability was, it stood to reason that Shin would be placed, first and foremost, in the command center, where his ability would be put to the most use without exposing him to danger from enemy fire or the Legion. From a purely rational standpoint, the probability of Shin being in the command center seemed high.

And that was why the Phönix was attacking the command center, despite its lack of strategic significance. And if that was true, the Phönix really wasn't working in accordance with the Legion's commands.

Shin was currently in the Dragon Fang Mountain, and the enemies within the base likely knew he was there. But for some reason, this information hadn't been relayed to the Phönix. Likely since that wasn't related to the Phönix's initial objective.

In which case, if it didn't know Shin wasn't actually here... If it didn't know where Shin really was...

"Colonel Wenzel. Take over command for me if anything happens."

"Colonel? What do you mean by—? No!"

"All control personnel, please evacuate... Brísingamen squadron, there are multiple enemy signals, but only the true Phönix is capable of attacking. In which case, if we narrow down its targets, we should be able to predict its trajectory. And if we know where it's coming from, we can fight back."

Unlike normal conditions, she kept the wireless on. The Legion didn't understand human speech, but if they detected a place transmitting radio waves, they would assume it corresponded to a headquarters of some sort. And a precious, well-protected military

asset would be kept in a heavily protected place like a headquarters, in order to economize on defensive facilities.

Lena took a deep breath. And then she spoke in a loud, dignified voice into the microphone. Her channel was set to all bandwidths, in an attempt to draw out that distant beast.

“Vanadis HQ to all units!”

And indeed, an invisible something hiding in the snow took off in a fury.

Upon hearing Lena’s voice through the Resonance and perceiving that the Phönix had moved in response to it, Shin froze up.

“The hell do you think you’re doing, Your Majesty?!”

“Lena, what on earth?!”

Shiden’s and Theo’s exclamations struck Shin as awfully distant. His thoughts were rushing in a speed that bordered on panic.

What is she doing...? That’s crazy...!

She used herself as bait and then let the enemy know about it...? But since she’d asked Grethe to take over for her if the worst happened, it meant she was perfectly prepared for that scenario.

Shin heard something creak. It was his teeth grinding against one another.

She did it in the citadel base and now here, too... Why is she always so keen on recklessly risking her life like this?!

Even though he didn’t want to lose her. Even though he still hadn’t apologized for that argument... No, even if he had no such regrets, he wouldn’t have wanted to lose her. It’s like he’d been told. Even if he didn’t wish for anything, even if he lived on the pretense that he’d given up on everything, losing someone still hurt, in the end. Maybe being filled with regrets and not saying anything hurt more, but loss hurt regardless.

I can’t lose her. I can’t lose Lena, not here. Even if she’s acting of her own accord, I can’t let her die selfishly like this.

“Shiden. The enemy’s armed with melee weapons. You can shoot it down if you know where it’s going to be, right?”

He could hear Shiden hold her breath through the Resonance. And then she nodded firmly.

"Yeah. I'll hit it right on the mark."

"Please. Raiden, Theo... Sorry."

With that, Undertaker retreated. They knew Shin long enough that his brief statement communicated all there was to say. He was telling them to cover for him.

"I'm counting on you guys."

Shin closed his eyes and then gave his all to his ability. He threw himself into the maelstrom of screams and wails produced by the Legion. But even within that endless swirl of agony, the commander units' voices rang out more clearly than the rest. And so Shin turned his consciousness to the Phönix's chaotic, mechanical shriek.

It may have been a commander unit, but it was ninety kilometers away. And on top of that, there was a Shepherd a short distance from Shin, and its thundering voice was getting in his way. Between the voice of his past comrade and the voices of the Sheepdogs, which now made up the majority of the Legion's forces, it was hard to make out the Phönix's voice.

But it wasn't completely inaudible. It wasn't ruined, nor was it in a state of stasis, and so Shin could hear it. Being ghosts abandoned by their ruined homeland, the Legion continually cried out that they wanted to move on for as long as they stayed in this world. He could hear it in the distance.

Shin's ability, pushed to its limits, certainly heard it. At this distance, it was only a buzzing in his ears. A rustling in the leaves. The sound of a drop of water freezing in the atmosphere. But it was there. And whenever the Legion attacked, their cries always increased in pitch, becoming screams.

And an attack was coming. Right then. Right that second.

"Shiden!"

At his signal, Shiden jumped through the snowy field, with the command center at her back. Cyclops's optical sensor and its upgraded radar still couldn't pick up the Phönix's presence yet,

but it was likely near her. It seemed she'd made it in time.

Between the Juggernaut and the Phönix, the Phönix was faster. And since she had to intercept it now, Shiden was worried she wouldn't be quick enough to do it. But while she couldn't see where the Phönix was, she *knew* where it was. And she knew it had a solid mass, and that it would be destroyed if it was hit with a shell.

And so she ordered every unit under her command to shoot covering fire. Her girls unleashed a persistent and consistent barrage along the straight line extending from where they engaged the Phönix last to the command center. The Phönix was invisible, but it couldn't afford to be exposed to bombardment. In so doing, they prohibited the thinly armored Phönix from taking the shortest route to the command center.

Shiden herself took off along the shortest route she could the moment the bombardment started, quickly stalling the Phönix and reaching the command center and Lena. All to intercept the enemy and save Her Majesty, who had willingly exposed herself to danger. And the Reaper informed her of the exact moment the Phönix would attack, from far in the distance.

And his warning was dead-on. It was right in front of her; she could tell. She could almost hear the wind being cut as the chain blade swung down. But even more important than that...

I was faster, you piece of shit.

She pulled the trigger. Her back-mounted 88 mm smoothbore gun roared as it fired. And while this shot was weak when fired at long-range...it packed one hell of a punch when fired point-blank. Racing at 1,600 meters per second, the buckshot traveled at full speed, its force entirely unmitigated...

...and dug into the scenery before her eyes, which contorted and twisted eerily.

The Dinosauria was a steel monstrosity that weighed one hundred tons and was armed with the unrivaled might of a 155 mm smoothbore gun. It was capable of dashing at a speed that was only slightly slower than a Reginleif. Even the Federacy's state-of-the-art models couldn't hope to defeat it one-on-one. This was

especially true on a blistering, volcanic battlefield such as this, where walls of invisible heat limited their mobility.

To make things worse, the Dinosauria rushed toward them while employing crafty yet cautious tactics, as if it were actually one of the Republic's aluminum coffins. It was once an Eighty-Six—and likely a Name Bearer, at that. It was reading their intentions like an open book, and that, coupled with its terrain advantage and superior machine specs, gave it an overwhelming tactical advantage.

But even as they fought, protecting the noncombatant Alkonosts that were prepped for self-destruction, the Scavengers, and the now immobile Undertaker, Raiden, and Theo still did battle with a smile plastered on their lips. After all...

"We can't afford to lose this."

"If we let it pass through now, we'd never live down the shame."

Sorry. I'm counting on you guys.

His voice felt somehow desperate. It was the first time they'd heard him speak like that, for all the years they'd known him. Shin had changed. He'd left the Eighty-Sixth Sector and met that kindhearted Handler from the Republic. And if he wanted to protect her, it was up to them to help him.

At the end of the day, they were just Eighty-Six like him. Those who fought alongside him on the same battlefields and would likely die ahead of him. And that meant they couldn't save Shin, who took it upon himself to bring the deceased to their final destination.

It was then that the cold sensation of a Sirin—cold like the skin of a cadaver—joined the Resonance.

"If you two kind gentlemen will allow it, I, Vera, will open a way for you. Please use it to pass through."



And as she said this, the Sirin, Vera, drove her Alkonost forward. She ignored the heat geysers they had avoided so far and rushed the Dinosauria, firing as she did. Her shots bounced off its front armor, incapable of penetrating it. The Dinosauria regarded her with a sidelong glance, not even bothering to counterattack as it handled the Juggernauts and the other combatant Alkonosts.

True to the Dinosauria's judgment, Vera's unit crumpled from overheating. It then crawled with the last of its legs' remaining power, toppling over the geyser's opening and blocking it.

Raiden and Theo could hear a giggle—the last laugh that left her lips.

The Alkonost's cockpit was at the center of its long legs, below the fuselage and the turret. And its underside armor was currently being fried by a heat that would do far, far more than leave fatal burns on a human's flesh.

Stifling the chills running through his body, Theo pushed Laughing Fox's control stick to a forward position. His Juggernaut followed the path Vera had just taken. His unit's temperature rose high enough to trigger an alarm, but it didn't go any higher than that. The heat wall that should have blocked his path was being blocked by Vera, after all.

The Dinosauria finally realized what had happened. It stirred, unsure of whether to change position or shoot, during which the fire suppression squad under Raiden's command rained shots on the Legion, staggering it in place.

It was too late.

"...Sorry I have to do this again."

Theo stepped over the back of Vera's Alkonost and jumped.

Just what was the difference between them and him? What would he have to change? Theo didn't know yet. But even if he had to do something to save his friends, Theo couldn't see himself ever acting the way Vera just did. He couldn't and wouldn't be able to do that. Theo didn't want to die, and his death would probably make people sad...

That wasn't what he wanted. And maybe that was really all that set him apart from the girl who had just died in front of him. For now, that was the only difference.

He fired a wire anchor into one of the stone pillars and propelled himself upward by reeling it back. In the air, he took aim at the Dinosauria's top rear armor. The two machine guns that should have been there to stop them were missing, since Shin had previously destroyed them.

"I don't know who you used to be...but go back to where you belong."

He pulled the trigger.

The rapid, high-speed shot hit the Phönix's black armor and tore into it.

The tank shell impacted the turret from directly above and pierced through the Dinosauria.

<<

!!!>>

Both Legion units let out an inaudible scream. One with its nondescript, mechanical words, and another with the voice of its past death throes. And...

The Dinosauria's massive form crumpled down into the hazy, rocky ground with a loud rumble.

Bits of the Phönix's armor sprayed into the air like blood splatter as it crashed to the ground with a somersault. It rolled twice, thrice, and then somehow managed to hop back to its feet. The next moment, the liquid-armor dummy self-destructed. The dummy put all its energy into this suicide attack instead of moving, firing off bits of its armor in a blind assault.

The Juggernauts reflexively pulled back, their armor pelted by the shower of metal. It didn't penetrate their defenses, but it did stagger them. And in that moment, the animalistic black shadow bolted down the snowy incline, heading south.

Sensing both the bombardment far to the north and the battle

taking place right in front of him with his ability, Shin finally heaved a long sigh of relief.

Lena watched the Phönix run away through the command center's screen.

"Ugh... I'm sorry, Captain Nouzen; it got away. The Phönix is leaving the command center's vicinity and heading for the Dragon Fang Mountain."

"I'm tracking it, Colonel Milizé. It's heading this way, like you said... It probably assumed that if I were there, I'd have come out by now."

In contrast to Lena, who was grinding her teeth in frustration, Shin reacted composedly. That was likely because his ability was helping him follow the Phönix's movements. Still, his voice was so absent of emotion that it almost felt cheeky to Lena, who had failed to finish the enemy off.

"If it's coming after me, that makes it easier for us. The Spearhead squadron will intercept it... How's the situation on your end?"

Lena pursed her lips at that question.

"Both the Brisingamen squadron and the command center are intact... But Aide Rosenfort and Control Aide Ares were both injured. Apparently, their lives aren't in any danger, but they were deemed incapable of continuing their duty as control personnel and were sent back."

They were hit by a stray shot when the Phönix's last dummy self-destructed. They had the misfortune of being struck by the armor bits as they were evacuating the command center, while on the road leading to the reserve formation emplacement. Apparently, one of the dummies had crept close to the command center.

She could feel Shin doing his best not to click his tongue in frustration. Frederica may have wished for it herself, but Shin was seemingly ashamed of letting a girl who was only slightly older than ten escort them to the battlefield.

"...Roger that."

"Since the command center's position was exposed, we'll move

to Vanadis. Considering Aide Rosenfort had to retire from the battlefield, our ability to control and observe the battlefield has fallen somewhat, but it doesn't impede our ability to continue the operation."

Having said everything she had to say as the operation's commander to Shin, who was the tactical commander on the front lines, she then mentioned something else. He'd honestly, truly, saved her. He did, but...

"Captain Nouzen, regarding how you gave Second Lieutenant Iida firing instructions earlier... You don't need to do that. Don't worry about what's happening on this side and focus on your battles. You don't have to do something so reckless."

Shin was on the front lines, and in the middle of fighting a Dinosauria. He'd likely left the fighting to Raiden, Theo, and his other squad members so he could focus on providing reconnaissance for Shiden... But still, he was right in front of the enemy. One wrong step, and he'd have been killed.

And yet she could sense Shin tightening his lips. He seemed oddly displeased, in an uncharacteristic show of emotion compared with his usual, indifferent self. He then parted his lips to speak, making no effort to hide that emotion.

"No."

It was the same voice she'd heard in the Revich Citadel Base, but this time, it felt firmer than before. Lena furrowed her brows.

"That's an order, Captain."

"I refuse."

"Shin."

"I refuse that order. Are you even one to talk like that, Lena?"

Lena realized that, at some point, she'd been set as the sole target of Shin's Resonance. And that he didn't call her by her rank, as was necessary in the middle of an operation...but by her nickname.

"You were the one who ordered me to return safely. So wait for me. We can't complete that objective if we don't have anywhere to return to. So let us return...Lena."

And at that moment, Shin was filled with something like indecision. Like hesitation. Like doubt... No. Pressed by an even

stronger emotion, he fell silent. And with that emotion constricting his throat, he finally said those words, as if painfully coughing them out.

"Please don't leave me."

He sounded like he was imploring her. Like a child squatting on a mountain of corpses in the center of the battlefield, reaching out for a hand of light he could just barely make out. As if trying to grasp this hand that could disappear at any given moment.

"I'll come back, for sure. So don't leave me behind. Don't tell me not to protect you when you're in danger... I don't want you—you, of all people—to order me to abandon you."

"Shin..."

"You've asked me about this a few times already... If there's anything I want to do once this war ends. You told me I'm allowed to wish for things, even if I can't see the world as beautiful. Lena, I..."

These were the words he'd intended to say a few times already. The wish he was able to voice in front of Eugene's grave. But even so, saying it now overwhelmed Shin so much that he could feel his vision swimming.

"I want to show you the sea. I want to show you things you've never seen before. Places you can't see unless the war ends. So when it does...if we survive, let's see the sea together."

This was what he had wanted to say for the last six months. His reason for fighting—his wish. But saying those words now, making that wish to Lena, scared him.

Reaching out to something, wishing for it. Longing for it from the bottom of his heart, to see it as truly precious, only to have it mercilessly snatched away... The thought terrified him.

He had always been afraid of having hope. Because everything he'd ever hoped or wished for had been taken away from him once before. He'd learned time and time again that he could never wish for anything. And so at some point, he gave up on

wishing altogether. He'd even stopped thinking about it.

Wanting something—wishing for something—caused nothing but pain. The fear of forever losing something he wanted gripped him by the throat. The terror of it clouded his vision.

But he still didn't want to lose her... He couldn't stand the idea of having Lena snatched away from him, even if it was by her own hands.

His fear and his selfishness were making his head spin. He still couldn't see the world as beautiful. He couldn't even begin to imagine the kind of future he wanted. He was a monster that had stepped over the corpses of others, and there was no changing the past.

But as utterly different as he may have been from her, and even though he knew his presence could cause her pain, he couldn't help but wish for it. The one and only wish he eventually came to desire.

So please...

"That's the only thing I can wish for right now. I can't see my own future yet. But please...don't take that away from me."

Those words left Lena speechless. Those were the first words of vulnerability she had ever heard him speak. She had always known him to be so strong. He was constantly exposed to the ghosts' wailings, carried all his dead comrades with him without exception, and fought as far as he did to defeat his brother, who was assimilated by the Legion...

She believed he was strong. But he wasn't. Far from it, in fact. He was a weak, cowardly...fragile person.

"Don't leave me behind."

She'd once used those very same words as she'd pleaded with him right before he left on his death march. And those were the words Shin had wanted to tell others for so long now. To his comrades. To his brother. To all those who had been snatched away by death. But he had entrusted himself with the task of carrying the memories of those who died, so he couldn't say those words to anyone.

Even though, every step of the way, he longed to say them.

Don't leave me behind. Don't die and leave me all alone.

"We're off, Major."

Being able to say those words back then had likely been an ever-so-thin thread of salvation to hold on to.

"...Of course."

The words left her lips all too naturally. It wasn't that he didn't rely on her. She'd been entrusted with his wish for a long time now. And so she had to see it fulfilled. She was the one who had told him he was allowed to wish for something. She had to answer those words—those two wishes he'd entrusted her with, despite the cruelty of the world.

"I would never leave you behind. After all, you waited for me, even after I told you not to leave me behind."

Voices she'd once heard and scenes she'd once seen surfaced in her mind. The sound of him crying after gunning down his brother's ghost at the end of a five-year hunt. The lost, puzzled words he had cast her way when they reunited without recognizing each other on that field of lycoris flowers. His face as he stood stock-still, looking upon that hill of ruined Sirins.

She'd thought she knew him, but now he felt so...weak and fragile, as if he might fall apart at any moment.

It wasn't that Shin possessed the strength to survive battle. He simply struggled with all his might to live, leaning on the pride that allowed him to fight to very end—the only bit of honor he had left to rely on—as his crutch. He wasn't immune to injury. He was simply so wounded that nothing could hurt him anymore.

He truly had nothing left to support himself with except for that pride.

And so she couldn't stand the idea of hurting him again, of being another burden that would weigh him down.

"I will never leave you behind. I'll always be waiting. I promise. So take me with you. Once this war is over, show me the sea and the sights I'll only be able to enjoy if we win."

Because she wished to support him. She wanted him to rely on her. She wouldn't let him carry all his burdens alone. She would never die and abandon him. And that was why...

"That's why you have to come back. At all costs. You mustn't leave me behind, either. You absolutely...have to return."

She said those words firmly and then took a breath.

"Shin."

He likely wanted to say something. She sensed him open his mouth to speak, then blink in surprise.

"Thank you."

Thank you for counting on me... As unreliable as I might be.

†

They had repelled the Phönix, but the Strike Package's command center and the defensive formation around it were still in a state of confusion. Their defensive line had been busted wide open. The Phönix may have been only a single unit, but it could still throw things into extensive chaos.

The Legion would never let a chance like that pass them by.

The Supreme Commander unit still ordered the Legion guarding the front lines to remain on alert. Keep an eye on the United Kingdom military's movements and stay vigilant. But the Legion's central processors were set to prioritize targets that attacked them. Their Liquid Micromachine brains were hardwired to eliminate all hostile elements. And the bombardment the United Kingdom fired at them earlier was, undoubtably, an attack on them. A threat.

A threat that had to be removed at all costs.

That reaction was fear. A fear borne of a certain Shepherd's experience, of having been fired at from a great distance by the Legion in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. This was something the Shepherd in question didn't realize.

Part of the unit left the line of battle. They obeyed the order of their commanding Shepherd to remove the enemy artillery. But just as they headed out, fighting suddenly broke out in the rear, causing the back to be thrown into disarray—in one corner of the United Kingdom's reserve formation.

Some Feldreß sent out on patrol noticed them. These Feldreß were a type they had never seen before on the United Kingdom's battlefield; they were the color of polished bone and walked on four thin legs. They looked like skeletal corpses prowling about in

search of their lost heads.

At this point, the Shepherd didn't even think they looked familiar.

The group of Black Sheep and Sheepdogs led by that Dinosauria Shepherd charged onto those Feldreß and the unit behind them.

CHAPTER 4

IN HIS HEAVEN

The Merciless Queen sighed at the footage she received from the enemy lines. One group of units acted arbitrarily, which was brought upon by the Phönix's rampage. What were they thinking, ignoring orders?

She gave no orders to attack the enemy's command center. Destroying that would achieve nothing at this point. The enemy had infiltrated the Dragon Fang Mountain, sending just an advance force that was effectively isolated in the middle of enemy territory and only good for subterfuge.

She let the advance force penetrate almost all the way to her personal dwelling, but it was all just a setup. She had successfully separated a detachment of elites from the United Kingdom's main force, effectively laying them down neatly for slaughter. Had her troops acted as she'd ordered, they would have been able to cut off the enemy's avenue of escape and crush them more effectively.

If the armored unit hadn't acted on its own and opened a hole in their formation, the United Kingdom military wouldn't have been able to act even if her troops cut off the advance force's escape route. And after destroying the advance force, the United Kingdom would've been out of options.

If the United Kingdom had the population and national power

the Federacy was graced with, they would have sent a larger force to support the advance force. But the United Kingdom could no longer afford to do that. Even with the existence of their country hanging in the balance, the most they could do to help out the advance force was launch the ammunition they had hoarded away in their warehouses and send their half-autonomous drones on a suicide mission.

Once the advance force was destroyed, all the Legion would have to do was wait for the Eintagsfliege to suffocate the United Kingdom or simply send large numbers of Dinosauria to break through the United Kingdom's ranks with brute force. And yet her units went ahead and did something so unnecessary.

The Legion couldn't disobey a Supreme Commander unit's orders, and the Phönix was under her command. If she was to order it to return to her side, it would have no choice but to oblige. But she actively chose to overlook its rampage.

Earlier, the Phönix had achieved the objective it was designed and produced to meet. All the information they were supposed to collect from that unit had already been gathered. There was no more need for that "new type." And so she had thought it would be fine to let it do as it pleased, one last time.

I did order it to be the strongest. To never lose in combat, to always learn, develop, and evolve itself... Even though that was never the Phönix's true objective.

†

Michihi, who was in charge of securing the blockade outside the Dragon Fang Mountain base along with Bernholdt, Resonated with Shin.

"Captain Nouzen! One enemy unit detected on the radar... It's the Phönix!"

"It's coming... It should have lost its liquid armor in the battle at the command center, but we can't let our guard down until we confirm that."

After defeating the Dinosauria, the Spearhead squadron continued their advance through the corridors leading to the

Merciless Queen's Throne Room. The Merciless Queen still showed no signs of fleeing. Following its cold voice to the end of the road, Shin operated Undertaker at the head of their column.

This corridor was once a volcanic tunnel, and its outer circumference was roundish. During some eruption ages ago, this tunnel had been closed shut by hardened magma. The rocky ceiling had apparently crumbled with time, and so they had a view of the center of the tunnel, which was dotted with boulders as large as buildings and countless jagged cross sections.

They traveled down the tunnel, which was built like a spiral staircase around a massive, oddly shaped spire of rock. The spire resembled the fossilized form of some giant, draconic, primal beast.

There was probably a crevice that connected to the mountain's surface somewhere, since faint light was streaming down on them from the top of the spire. The temperature in this tunnel was much more manageable, which meant cold air was probably flowing in from another location.

"Take it out, if possible. But don't do anything reckless. If you think any attempts would make maintaining the blockade difficult, let it go through."

If they were to engage the Phönix, there was a chance they would suffer losses or even be wiped out. And at that point, the troops inside the facility would be trapped without a way back. They were in the middle of the Legion's territory, and there were Legion forces outside the Dragon Fang Mountain base. Michihi likely realized this, because Shin could sense her frown through the Resonance.

"We can do without that consideration, Captain. I know I might look like a baby bird to you, but I'm a Name Bearer, too...!"

"Tch! No, missy, you got that wrong!"

Bernholdt cut her off, swallowing nervously. His voice was thick with tension.

"That fucker ain't after us...! Captain!"

Footage data wasn't usually shared between Juggernauts, since the volume of data taxed the system, and they currently needed to use a relay to maintain wireless communications with

their outside forces. But still, Shin's ability allowed him to hear enough of what went on outside to get a grasp on the situation.

The Phönix had probably jumped. It leaped high, right in front of Michihi and Bernholdt. Like a snow leopard using a rock face as its hunting ground, it sprinted upward, its speed unimpeded. It then jumped again but disappeared in midair. It had likely abandoned its bestial fuselage and split itself into the form of silvery butterflies.

Apparently, there was an entrance into the mountain near the top...which was perhaps something they should have guessed and expected. This base served as a supply depot for the Eintagsfliege, which were constantly airborne. Meaning the Legion had likely created an entrance leading out to the sky somewhere in the name of efficiency.

"It's presumed to be in pursuit of the Spearhead squadron. Estimated arrival time...three hundred seconds if it takes the shortest route!"

"...Well—"

The former report was probably right. But the latter one...

"—I'm not so sure about that."

A whisper-like scream, reminiscent of the sound of butterfly wings, gathered near them. The pitch of an almost indiscernible, mechanical voice's wail grew louder in his ears. And suddenly, his radar picked up the presence of the Phönix.

It was above the Spearhead squadron. Watching through his unit's optical sensor as the silver shadow plunged down toward them with the rock face at its back, Shin confirmed that his automatic aim's reticle had locked onto it and pulled the trigger.

The Phönix was greeted by the booming sound of a cannon shot that reverberated through the closed space of the volcanic tunnel. The HEAT missile flew forward, apparently moments away from piercing through the silver frame.

The Phönix probably intended for this to be a surprise attack, but that was meaningless against Shin. He was capable of predicting where the enemy would be. And he knew the Phönix was capable of surviving a damaged fuselage by turning into Liquid Micromachine butterflies and switching over to a brand-new shell. After all, the Phönix's true form was the Liquid

Micromachines that comprised its central processor.

To that end, it didn't have to go through a path occupied by the Strike Package and needlessly fight when it was already damaged. It would be much faster for it to turn into a swarm of butterflies, infiltrate the base through a small gap, and don a new unit and liquid armor.

And all armored ground weapons, ever since the treadmill-type tanks of old, had their weakest, most vulnerable point located at the top of their turrets. And so Shin knew if it would attack them, it would try to strike them down from above.

The Phönix was plummeting down, and the rocket was hurtling toward it. The Phönix then brandished its winglike chain blades once, stabbing them into the cliff-face. This made it brake, and its animallike form swung like a pendulum due to the inertia, landing with an arc against the wall.

The timed fuse on the HEAT missile detonated after a delay. By then, the Phönix had kicked off the wall, evading the lethal effective radius of the blast... This had happened often enough that Shin didn't expect to hit this unit, but its reaction speed was still irritating.

Shin noted the liquid armor around its body seemed even thicker than before. Apparently, the sheer amount of liquid armor it had now was greater. Perhaps it simply wanted its armor to be thicker, or maybe it intended to use the dummy it'd used against Lena's group on this battlefield, too.

Everyone in the squadron realized that the one ambushing them was the Phönix. Just like in the Revich Citadel Base, everyone spread out with the intent of surrounding and overwhelming it with a barrage of gunfire. They positioned themselves so they wouldn't hit one another, while remaining outside the range of the Phönix's weapons, and prepared to shower it with shells.

The Scavengers and self-destructing Alkonosts moved back to a position where they wouldn't get in the way. The sound of someone breathing deeply echoed over the Resonance.

The Phönix began falling toward the center of their encirclement. Even it couldn't hope to change trajectory in midfall, and gravity pulled it down into the open maw of the trap below.

The Eintagsfliege activated its optical camouflage, which sparkled like powder snow, or like shards of stars, and hid the Phönix's silver form from both human eyesight and the radar's detection.

That seemed odd to Shin. What was the point of using its optical camouflage now? Hiding itself at this juncture made no sense. It couldn't change its falling trajectory, so they would aim for its landing point. What was it trying to hide, then? Maybe it was something that would become clearer the longer they fought. Perhaps this something was what allowed the Phönix to maintain the element of surprise...

It's prepping a ranged weapon...!

"All units, take cover! It's gonna shoot...!"

It had shown itself capable of forming ranged weapons out of its liquid armor back in the Revich Citadel Base battle. It was only capable of staggering a unit at best even if fired at point-blank, but Shin still chose to err on the side of caution and had all his units move away. But the form he'd seen in the moment it tried to ambush them—that *excessive amount* of liquid armor...

The Eintagsfliege's optical camouflage was damaged in a way that seemed odd to Shin. It was silently torn away, and from the gap that formed, silver comets burst out. They were massive projectiles, like bolts fired from a ballista, a siege weapon used in ancient times. They were like crystalline needles, a shower of metallic thorns that shot toward every Feldreß in sight.

†

Only a small force of Legion had moved out of formation, and their reserve formation was still in a state of confusion from the Phönix's attack. No, the Legion force had attacked *because* their formation was confused.

That attack was, apparently, not part of the Legion's plans, either. One unit had apparently acted of its own accord, it seemed. It wasn't done in tandem with the Phönix's raid or with the rest of the units standing guard.

But the sheer number of Dinosauria in that unit was a pain to deal with. The Brisingamen squadron was left behind to guard the

command center, along with the remaining fire-control team's Juggernauts. Lena clenched her teeth in frustration as she took command of the situation from within Vanadis.

She didn't think a heavy armored force of Dinosauria and Löwe, which should have been preserved to break through the United Kingdom's defensive lines, would attack them now. The Legion's numbers weren't quite as large as a full, armored battalion, but they still streamed down the mountain like a landslide.

They stomped their way through the patrol line, and the enemy vanguard was already attacking the rear of the defensive formation, where Lena was. The battlefield was in a state of chaos, making it hard to discern between friend and foe.

The defensive formation had been built up carefully on heightened ground, so as to ensure the defending side would have the advantage in a confrontation between armored weapons. And even still, things were brutal.

Vanadis wasn't capable of battle per se, but it could at least fire its fixed gun. Marcel's injuries made it so he couldn't handle full-on combat maneuvers, but he could use his Feldreß's turret. To that end, he disembarked from Vanadis and joined his group, attacking repeatedly until the barrel threatened to burst.

Lena gritted her teeth as the howitzer fire, shot diagonally, was repelled by the Dinosauria's persistent horizontal fire.

This situation...might be really bad.



"Kch...?!"

The aim of the Phönix's projectiles wasn't as accurate as a tank turret firing with the assistance of a weapon-control system, and everyone piloting a Juggernaut in the vicinity was a skilled Name Bearer. They all reacted to the warning and performed evasive measures, so none of their cockpits were hit.

But some of them took damage to their power systems, their cannons' barrels, or their leg parts. Others had their armor completely bent from taking a blow from the massive kinetic

energy of the shot, which traveled faster than the speed of sound. Some Alkonosts, which were overall less organized and less trained than the Eighty-Six were, had their cockpits blown clean off from a direct hit.

Undertaker was the only one who hadn't been aimed at by the shot. Shin was left speechless at the nightmarish sight. It wasn't that they weren't wary of a potential ranged shot. This was a closed space, but it was fairly wide, and everyone stood outside the effective range of the attack the Phönix showed at the Revich Citadel Base.

But the range of that attack had been temporarily extended and granted enough force to knock a Juggernaut out of commission...

The Phönix landed with the silent movement unique to the Legion, shards of broken butterfly wings piling up at its feet. The few Eintagsfliege that did survive floated around it, their wings either unhurt or slightly charred at the rims.

The Phönix revealed itself, its black frame unevenly dotted with flecks of silver. The thick, wing-shaped liquid armor that coated its body was mostly gone. What little liquid armor remained on its fuselage crackled with visible electric currents, which made it clear that it had used electromagnetic force to accelerate its previous shot.

Shin realized the shots it fired were made from the thick liquid armor it wore. When an armor-piercing round was launched, it relied on its kinetic energy to make an impact. And while the Phönix lacked the speed a tank turret could produce, it'd used a quasi-electromagnetic catapult to heighten the force of the shot.

All to completely tear through their encirclement net with a single blow.

The Phönix suddenly shook itself, forcing the makeshift rails it formed from its liquid armor to fall off its animallike body. The splashes of silver sprayed over the rock surface, reflecting the faint sunlight. It lifted its optical sensor like an animal raising its head and stared fixedly at Undertaker.

The sensor was a cold shade of blue and full of clear, palpable obsession. Obsession with Undertaker...or perhaps with Shin, who sat inside it. It was the same way it'd looked at him when the

Revich Citadel Base battle had ended. When it had been reduced to a flurry of butterflies and stood at the Merciless Queen's side.

It was a gaze that seemed unfitting for a heartless killing machine that was supposed to massacre its targets as a matter of task, without any hint of hatred or elation.

The next moment, its black form lunged at Undertaker.

"Tch...!"

He couldn't fight it here. One wrong move, and his shots could end up hitting one of his comrades. Undertaker took off down the passage, hoping to shake its pursuer off. The Phönix took off after it. As his comrades' units were getting farther away, Shin turned a single glance toward Raiden's and Theo's Juggernauts.

Their units' legs were jerking with twitching motions, but they weren't dead. The Para-RAID was still connected to them. He could even faintly hear someone breathe a cuss into the Resonance.

He had to keep the Phönix occupied until they recovered and then fight it with their help. No... It might judge them a nuisance and turn around to finish them off while they still couldn't move. He couldn't let that happen... No matter what.

"...Sorry."

They'd likely... No, they'd definitely get mad at him for this, or so Shin thought as he had Undertaker leap back. Raiden and Theo and his other squad mates present, and also Anju and Kurena, who weren't, would be really upset.

And so would Lena.

"Come back. At all costs."

Yes, I'll come back. I have to. But you have to forgive me for this one.

Uttering that silent prayer, Shin moved Undertaker back. The Juggernaut's white frame hid behind one of the rock formations in the center of the passage, moving out of sight. The Phönix raised its multiple chain blades in acknowledgment, its delicate blades vibrating as they whirred into operation.

The blades raised a keen screech reminiscent of a woman's scream, and the elongated weapons stabbed into the massive rock spires standing at the Phönix's sides. Cut and severed at the bottom, the rock formations crumbled and collapsed. A massive

amount of rock sealed the path behind the Phönix.

As if it to say it would let no one get in their way.

It was at the bottom of the volcanic tunnel—the opening from which the magma would rise to the surface, had it not been clogged ages ago. Sunlight shone down from a hole in the rock hundreds of meters above, filtered by a layer of silver wings. But that light could do little to illuminate the large space, which was wide enough to contain the entire Imperial villa.

This was where the central processor of the Admiral—the generator unit powering this production base—was placed. Where hundreds of millions of Eintagsfliege gorged themselves on its energy. Thin, electromagnetic-induced charging units were stretched out across this space like metallic tree branches. They were all coated by countless silver butterflies, which sat upon it like foliage.

At the very back of the chamber was the control kernel of the Admiral, sitting there like the carcass of an ancient dragon king that had been assimilated into its very throne. It was being waited upon by a large number of maintenance devices, which buzzed and whirled around it.

But right now, all this was currently burning as Vika glared down at the chamber. The charging units, the Eintagsfliege, the maintenance machines... They were all equally burning. All the units in this chamber were unarmed support types, which easily crumbled when attacked.

The silver butterflies fluttered about boisterously as their brittle wings burned, flying off into the sky like embers but crumbling to dust before they could get far. But the actual Admiral was different. Perhaps owing to its massive size, its optical sensor swerved as if struggling while the fire overtook it, eventually focusing on Vika's Gadyuka.

Faced with a gaze pulsating with artificial hatred, Vika scoffed.

“...Were I that Reaper, perhaps I’d be able to know who you once were and grieve your passing.”

But sadly, the capacity to weep for the death of a person I’ve never met is a level of sympathy I’ve long since lost.

Watching over the scene of this cremation, Vika turned his back to this sight with even more coldheartedness than the Alkonosts escorting him. All their objectives in this sector were complete. All that remained was...

"All units, the Admiral's destruction is confirmed. All Alkonost units are in position. We're ready on our side. How are things on your end?"

An immediate response arrived from Yuuto of the Thunderbolt squadron, sent to suppress the Weisel—and Rito of the Claymore squadron, sent to destroy the generator facilities.

"Second Lieutenant Crow speaking. We've successfully gained control of the Weisel."

"We're currently destroying the generator facilities. Our Alkonosts are moving into position."

But Shin didn't respond. Vika furrowed his brows in suspicion. He then switched his Para-RAID target to the rest of the Spearhead squadron and repeated his question.

"Nouzen? Can you hear me? Please respond; what's your status?"

This time, he got an immediate response. It wasn't from Shin, though, but from Raiden.

"Your Highness... It's Shuga. Shin's not here, so I'm answering in his stead."

"Sorry, but we still haven't met our objective. We haven't found the Merciless Queen yet... And Shin's apparently fighting the Phönix right now."

Raiden bitterly continued his report from within Wehrwolf's cockpit, which felt more cramped than before now that its armor had been bent out of shape. The Phönix's projectile may have had a large mass and moved at high speed, but it lacked the force of a tank shell. The impact stopped Raiden's Juggernaut from moving for a moment, but the damage didn't impede his ability to continue the operation.

All the Juggernauts were still able to keep going, as were most of the Alkonosts, with the exception of a few that were blown away. Judging from his tone, the disgustingly wise prince had

probably grasped the situation. He asked Raiden a question in a tense voice.

"It split you up, didn't it?"

"Yeah. We're searching for Shin now."

Raiden turned his gaze to the bottom of the corridor, which was currently partially caved in by massive rocks. There was a bit of an opening at the top of the rock formation, so it wasn't completely impassable, but since it had crumbled at a mostly perpendicular angle, the rubble was unstable, making passing through it difficult. As such, it became an obstacle in their path.

Shin and the Phönix were past this tunnel right now. They couldn't hear the sounds of any fighting, so both had probably moved away already, but they saw them advance down the corridor as they lay still earlier. The rock spires then collapsed, leading to this situation.

Theo remained silently connected to the Para-RAID, but Raiden could tell through the Resonance that he was beside himself with concern. Laughing Fox's optical sensor was moving about nervously. The Scavengers all stood in an orderly fashion, with the exception of Fido, which was wobbling back and forth with concerned steps.

No.

Raiden frowned bitterly. Shin hadn't been chased off. He had willingly moved away from this position to face the Phönix one-on-one... All so Raiden and the others wouldn't be caught up in the fight. To protect them after they were shamefully beaten by the Phönix.

That idiot...

Raiden forcibly cheered himself up by thinking about finding Shin and smacking him senseless. But right now, they needed to go to his aid. The Alkonosts were currently investigating the nearby passages in an attempt to find a way around the rocks.

Their objective, the Merciless Queen, would likely also be at the end of this passage. But so long as they didn't have a functional map, they couldn't hope to find it.

Vika seemingly suppressed the urge to click his tongue.

"Understood. We'll wait for as long as we can."

They needed Shin's ability if they were to find the Merciless

Queen, but the mission's top priority was still the destruction of this base.

"Thanks."

"Don't worry about it. In operations like this one, unpredictability is an inevitability. Racking one's mind over how to overcome that is a commander's job. It's nothing you need to fret over..."

"...Raiden."

Raiden raised his head at Theo's call.

"Down there, in the shadow by the rocks... What's it doing there?"

Theo spoke, gazing fixedly at where his Laughing Fox's optical sensor was turned. Raiden doubtfully turned his own unit in that direction and found...

"What...?!"

...a lone Ameise unit, its armor as white as moonlight. It stood in front of the rock wall where the corridor split. Though it was beneath them, it gazed up at them like a queen lording over and looking down upon her subjects. Its round, full-moon-like optical sensor shone yellow with a coldness that felt eerily human.

It lacked the 7.62 mm all-purpose machine gun and 14 mm heavy machine gun the Ameise were usually equipped with. It lacked armaments to an unacceptable extent for a frontline unit, as if out of arrogance. And etched upon its armor was the Personal Mark of a goddess leaning against a crescent moon.

The Merciless Queen.

Not just Raiden and Theo, but the rest of their squad mates and the Sirins all fell silent. The same question was on everyone's minds.

What...is it doing here...?

The Merciless Queen suddenly looked away and turned around, walking off with the silent footsteps so characteristic of the Legion... Except it also moved at the leisurely pace of a lady enjoying a stroll, which was entirely unlike the Legion. It strode across the stone wall, and into one of the corridors that branched off, disappearing down the passage.

It was as if it was beckoning them to follow. Mocking them. Raiden's eyes widened in surprise.

How did it get here...?!

“Let’s go after it.”

“Raiden! But what about finding Shin?!”

“That thing’s chamber should be beyond that wall.”

Theo was astonished. They originally went down this passage to find the Merciless Queen. Below this location was the sector they dubbed the Throne Room, and Shin said the Merciless Queen hadn’t escaped. Which meant even while they were fighting the Phönix, it should have still been down there.

But somehow, that same Merciless Queen had traversed the rubble and was now before them. There was no real proof, but... this was likely the best lead they had.

“The path she took is a detour!”

It’s one thing after another...

Turning off the Para-RAID for a moment, Vika finally clicked his tongue in frustration. Fighting had broken out around Lena’s command center and the reserve formation, and now Shin was missing.

Lerche, who had been listening in, called out to him.

“...Your Highness... About what Sir Wehrwolf just said.”

Vika couldn’t help but snicker at her imploring tone.

“I already told you, Lerche. I never included obeying me as part of your initial orders. Why do you think I did that?”

He could sense her lips curling into a smile. Even without her memories, she was as obedient and frank as Lerchenlied ever was.

“My thanks... Your Highness, please allow me to join the search for Sir Reaper. The more time passes by...the more danger his body is exposed to.”

“Yes... We’re done capturing this area, so we should have some idle troops. Take them along.”

Shin had found himself driven into what was likely the deepest reaches of the Dragon Fang Mountain’s rock tunnels. It was a

completely closed-off place that should have been covered by sheer darkness. And yet this large space was bright enough for Shin to see through it unassisted.

It was awash with dazzling red light. Shin looked around the chamber he'd been driven into, standing in the crimson gleam that seemed to be refracted off the rocks due to the sheer temperature. The air itself appeared to glow red.

His Juggernaut's optical footage automatically switched over from night vision to standard mode. What his screen was displaying now, however, wasn't the actual amount of light outside. The support computer automatically cut out the level of light it judged would be harmful for effective piloting and corrected the footage accordingly.

The source of that light was right below the perpendicular rock footing Shin was standing on. A deep-red light emanated from below, at a depth that would be fatal if one were to fall into it.

Magma.

A crucible of radiant molten magma, which at times surged up like glowing red waves. The magma sizzled at extremely high temperatures, and it was in a liquid state with low viscosity. It filled the bottom of this vast cave like some kind of underground lake.

Even at this distance, the magma's glowing heat caused his unit's temperature to spike. The tips of one of his unit's metallic legs kicked up a crumbling pebble, which tumbled down the pit and into the crimson liquid's surface. In the blink of an eye, it caught fire and melted away.

The large cave's canopy was spacious enough to shelter a skyscraper. At the end of this chamber was a near-vertical wall, which stood like a rampart, with the magma lake forming a semicircle around its base. The upper end of that wall connected with the dome-like ceiling of the cave. At the topmost section of the cave was an opening connecting to the outside. Long ago, that hole had likely led to the volcanic crater at the mountain's peak.

Countless stepping stones dotted the magma lake, and Shin and the Phönix unsteadily stood on two of them. They faced off while standing on the widest footing in the cave, located closest

to the large stone wall. It had an oblong shape that bore an eerie resemblance to a guillotine, with cliffs cut out on all four sides of it. It seemed like, long ago, the top of this section had been cut horizontally and slid off, forming an exceptionally flat and level platform wide enough to contain a city's plaza.

Shin had been chased into this chamber and had to cross a path that grew far narrower than the entrance—though still wide enough for a Löwe to cross—that led to this guillotine-like platform. It felt reminiscent of a staircase a condemned criminal would climb on their way to the gallows.

The Phönix towered over Shin with its back to that road, as if to silently profess that it would not let him escape.

"....."

At Lena's orders, Shin had memorized the three-dimensional map the best he could. But this passage wasn't registered anywhere on the map. It was made using Shin's ability, which only picked up the Legion's path. Any areas the Legion didn't use were effectively blanks on that map.

And since this cave was outside the operation area, Shin didn't have any friendly forces in the vicinity. Likewise, the Legion seldom passed through this area. Judging from the faint multi-legged tracks and the empty container left lying in the corner of the guillotine platform's rim, they likely used the magma lake as a waste-processing site.

And the Phönix had intentionally cornered Shin in this place.

"...You must be really dead set on settling this with a duel."

The Legion weren't made to have any concepts of glory or honor, but it wasn't impossible. Shin, at least, knew it could happen. Two years ago, during the special reconnaissance mission, he'd seen a Shepherd blast one of its own comrades to pieces out of a desire to keep others from interfering with its duel. At the time, that Dinosauria—or rather, his brother's ghost, which resided within it—was obsessed with killing Shin.

And so even this Legion, which didn't harbor any such thoughts or any parts that stemmed from a human origin—built to avoid the same issues as Shepherds, which could be misled by the thoughts of the neural networks they assimilated—acted in this way.

The Phönix stirred, its black fuselage rising up. It raised its two front legs while its hind legs remained on the ground. At the same time, some of the armor and frame surrounding its front legs deployed and changed shape. Its front legs folded up, and their surplus parts turned into extra armor that protected its flank.

The shaft section of its front legs elongated, and the part that corresponded to its heel stuck out. The sharp tip of the shaft gouged into the surface of the rock. Its back and head bent backward, but it was not standing upright. Its center of gravity remained in the front of its form, leaving it in a forward-bent posture reminiscent of a prowling predator.

The end result was something that resembled a small theropod dinosaur—a Deinonychus. Its chain blades flowed backward, forming a tail that kept it balanced and something that was like a plume or a mane across its back. It was the ferocious shape of a nimble, primal predator.

No... There was something about the way it stepped over the ground on two legs, and the way its hands were too long for a dinosaur. This was...

“It’s imitating humans...”

At first, it had been closer to an animal, but now it forcibly took on a human form.

This was perhaps the correct choice for a learning, self-evolving combat machine. When Shin fought it in the Charité Underground Labyrinth, he defeated it by casting aside his Juggernaut and dispatching it using his own body and gunfire. And during the battle in the Revich Citadel Base, it was defeated when Lerche abandoned her own unit to engage it.

Up until now, every time the Phönix was defeated, it was at the hands of an opponent in human form. So perhaps, it wasn’t entirely implausible for it to assume that a bipedal form was ideal for combat.

And in truth, it wasn’t entirely unsuitable for battle. It might not have been as agile as an animal, but it did offer its share of advantages. Like having two hands that allowed humans to wield a multitude of weapons that required precise control. Or having the greatest throwing capabilities of all mammals.

But none those advantages suited the Phönix’s combat style. At

the end of its endless pursuit, it achieved an evolution that did not satisfy its initial goal. Shin smirked as he looked at it.

"Taking on a human form won't give you the upper hand. You'll only end up losing your way... Just like you did when you became obsessed with me."

The Phönix's objective right now was likely to single-handedly defeat Shin. That was why it ignored tactical logic and sought Shin out by attacking the command center. And why it took Raiden and the others hostage instead of finishing them off.

And why it drove Undertaker to this magma lake, where none of its own allies could offer assistance.

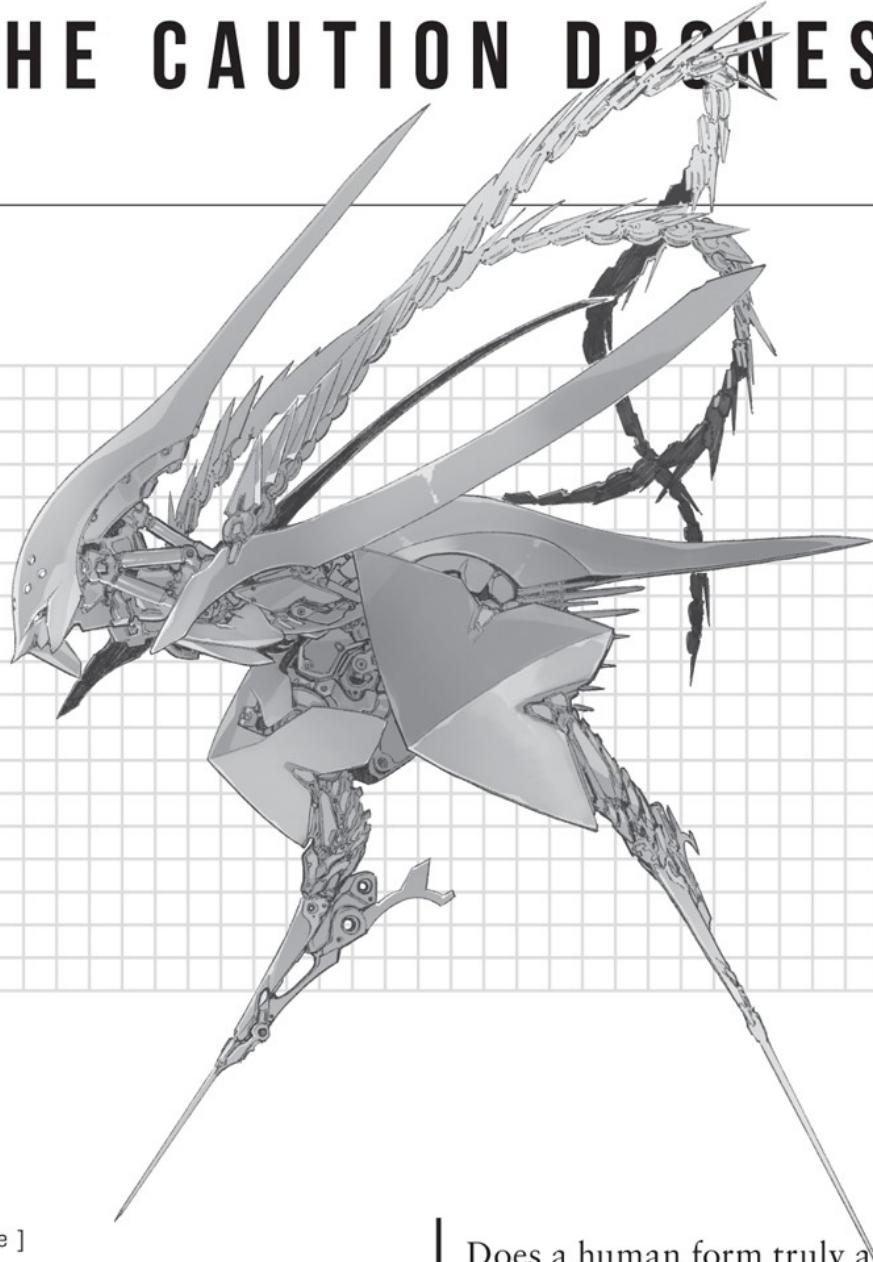
All these were inefficient, illogical courses of action for a killing machine. They were feats that were unthinkable for the Legion, which were always fixated on eliminating the hostile elements set before them.

All of that was because of the Phönix's obsession with killing Shin. An obsession... An attempt to append a way of being to itself, despite not being human.

"A machine like you doesn't need that... You're defective."

There was no way the Phönix could possibly understand the mocking tone in Shin's voice, but it still kicked against the ground and lunged at him.

THE CAUTION DRONES



[High-Mobility Type]

Phönix

[A R M A M E N T S]

Special Mobile High-Frequency
Chain Blades (x8)

[S P E C S]

Height: 2.2 m

Height of Head: 2.8 m

Weight: unknown

※This mode does not employ any of the liquid armor it has previously used. It also forfeits all the camouflage and stealth capabilities of its alternate mode.

Does a human form truly await at the end of this unit's evolutionary line...?

This mode was adopted by the Phönix to duel with the hostile element known to the Legion as Baleygr—Shinei Nouzen, captain of the Strike Package. In this form, the Phönix ignores the Legion's mechanical logic, discarding both its stealth capabilities and its liquid armor, which augmented its defenses and enabled its long-range attacks. Instead, it now focuses solely on melee combat and high-speed maneuvering.

This is the conclusion this pure artificial intelligence reached after evolving to overwhelm the Eighty-Six and the Sirins in terms of sheer combat capability.

The time has come to settle the score.

* * *

The fighting in the reserve formation continued. As Lena watched through the sub-window that displayed how the Juggernauts under her command and the United Kingdom's units were being pushed back and gradually worn down, her mind suddenly fixated on a single thought.

We might die here...

She clenched her teeth, stifling that horrible notion.

Stop being so spoiled. You're not going to die here. You can't die. Dying would mean leaving him behind...after he just begged you not to do that. And you told him you wouldn't. Shin never abandoned me. He came back. He overcame a fate of certain death and found me on that battlefield of lycoris flowers. So I can't give up here...

I might die? So what?

The vehicle was equipped with a chain gun and a 12.7 mm heavy machine gun for self-defense purposes, but both were out of bullets. Ameise units still hopped up in front of Bloody Reina's carriage, even though it had completely lost its combat capabilities. As she saw the machine guns mounted on their shoulders begin to rotate, Lena gave her order.

“Full speed ahead! Run them over!”

“What...?!”

“They’re just Ameise! Vanadis’s weight will knock them aside!”

“...Yes, ma’am! Hang on tight, Your Majesty!” the driver exclaimed, bracing himself for the worst.

While it was lightly armored compared with a tank, the armored command vehicle was still covered in thirty tons of metal. Its diesel engine howled viciously as it charged forward.

Whether their targets were meant for combat or whether they were actually armed mattered little in the face of this weight difference. The Ameise had already locked onto their target and couldn’t avoid it in time. Vanadis wasn’t able to knock them back too much due to their weight, but it still mercilessly ran over and trampled them. Perhaps owing to an adrenaline rush, the vivid,

striking sight played out awfully slowly in Lena's eyes.

The world, and its people, were ugly. They were cold, indifferent, and cruel. This quagmire of a battlefield, as vivid as it was meaningless, was likely the truest form of the world. And yet...

Lena's teeth creaked as she clenched them once again.

You'll get yourself dirty touching me.

That was what Shin had told her when they stood before the wreckage of the Alkonosts, with a tone that sounded lost and exhausted and with a gaze full of weary weakness. Even though there was nothing about him that would sully her if she was to touch him.

At that time, Shin thought himself to be tainted. That Lena touching him would only sully her. It left her feeling the same wound-like void she felt whenever he spoke of humankind's lowly vulgarity—and of the cold, emotionless nature of the world.

She now realized the truth behind it all. Shin hated this cold world. He hated how helplessly unsightly and ugly humans could be.

And he hated himself, for being part of this detestable world and for being part of the human race he loathed.

That was probably why he told her she'd dirty herself by touching him. Why he kept his distance from her, like in that snowy garden. Why he obstinately insisted on not relying on her, even after claiming time and again that he didn't mind doing so.

It was as if he saw himself as an ugly, despicable monster and feared he might end up pulling Lena into the same cold, merciless world he inhabited. In which case, if he feared dragging her in...

She glared hard at the battlefield before her, thinking of those who knew nothing but terrible war.

This is the merciless world you see, isn't it? You don't really want to stay here, do you...?!

Shin wasn't in front of her. All she saw was a battlefield full of turmoil extending as far as the eye could see. It wasn't that he didn't care about the future. It wasn't that he was incapable of wishing. It's that he was still afraid...of being so mercilessly

stripped of wishes and hopes yet again.

He really wanted to have faith, but the cruelty of this world had stolen his ability to dream. In which case, if the only thing he had was the pride of fighting to the bitter end... If he didn't even have the strength to wish anymore... If his heart and even his future had been whittled down by this world...

She would fight in his place.

She would fight this ugly world Shin saw—the cold world that shackled him—so that he could see his wish fulfilled once the war ended.

She couldn't afford to die.

Vanadis kicked up clouds of smoke and rumbled as it landed on something straight ahead of it—steel-colored armor and a massive 155 mm turret.

A Dinosauria.

Vanadis's tackle may have been able to push back a ten-ton Ameise, but it would do nothing to faze a one-hundred-ton steel monstrosity. No, it wouldn't even have the time to do so. The tank turret had Vanadis in its sights, as the dark void of its 155 mm caliber muzzle stared straight at Lena.

Oddly enough, she felt no fear. To the contrary, she glared straight on at the darkness that threatened to kill her.

I won't die.

I can't die.

Like hell I'll die.

I still haven't...

That moment, an APFSDS shell skewered the Dinosauria's turret. The depleted uranium round dug into the thick armor plates with an eerie sound, which was followed by the roar of an 88 mm cannon firing against the steel frame. The Dinosauria instantaneously fell silent, like a man shot through the temple. Its frozen form fell apart a moment later as it crumpled like a marionette with its strings cut.

Huh?

Lena gazed at its massive form with astonishment. What had just happened? The armored command vehicle's driver likely felt the same way. Something landed next to where Vanadis had stopped—something with audible footsteps. Something that

wasn't a Legion.

Vanadis's optical sensor focused on that figure. It had white armor, like the color of polished bone, and a body shaped like a headless skeletal corpse. A Juggernaut. Below its canopy was a Personal Mark of a rifle with a scope.

Gunslinger. Kurena's personal unit.

"You still alive in there, Lena?"

Her blunt voice rang out from the wireless and the Sensory Resonance at once. As far and long ago as the Eighty-Sixth Sector's battlefield felt by now, Kurena still interacted with her in the same way. This girl was curt but full of emotion toward her comrades.

"He asked me to look after you. If you die, I won't be able to look Shin in the eye...so stop pulling crazy stunts that might get you killed."

Granite is normally hard and fine, but prolonged exposure to high temperatures can make it awfully brittle. It's most remarkable with low rocky areas that are close to a heat source. When stepping or landing on top of it as a footing, it has a tendency of crumbling away.

And so little by little, Undertaker and the Phönix clashed as their range of movement gradually diminished. The smallest of the rock footholds dotting the area was roughly the size of a civilian house, while the largest ones were the size of a city sector. Their heights weren't uniform, either, with some of them being so low that they couldn't descend to them, while others towered over them like walls, being too high to hop onto.

Both units leaped around the footholds, even relying on the wall-like surfaces of the higher ones. A shadow of black and a shadow of white, both of them optimized for melee combat, clashed as each aimed to rip the life out of the other. Shin fired a shell for what felt like the umpteenth time, but his opponent moved so quickly, his shot greatly missed its mark and flew away into the horizon.

"Dammit...!"

Owing to its extra armor and 88 mm gun, the Juggernaut was

significantly heavier than the Phönix, which translated to a gap in the range each of them was capable of jumping. As such, Undertaker was limited in the number of footholds it could stand on, while the Phönix could freely stand atop even the thin, cone-shaped rocks.

Shin was being toyed with.

He did have the advantage of a turret capable of long-range fire, but the Phönix lunged and suddenly braked with speeds that allowed it to shake off the automatic sights of the Juggernaut. Aiming at it without any allies to assist him was difficult.

Midjump, Shin launched an anchor into one of the walls to change his trajectory, but the next moment, the rock the anchor had dug into was cleaved clean off. Undertaker kicked off from one of the lower footings that was too hot and smoldering for it to stand on. The Phönix darted after it in pursuit.

“.....!”

With its anchor having missed its mark, Undertaker plummeted toward the magma lake. Shin somehow managed to use his other anchor to reel himself up to another foothold. As soon as he landed on it, the Phönix rushed it from a steep angle, as if it had ignored gravity altogether.

Since it only used two legs to walk now instead of four, the Phönix’s humanoid form looked like it wasn’t as suited for high-speed movement. But that couldn’t be further from the truth—it was moving even faster than before. The pointed tips of its exposed shafts stabbed into the rock face. The ability to ground itself more firmly allowed its actuators to efficiently transform more of their output into propulsive force.

The Phönix propelled itself forward by kicking against its foothold, its metal legs screeching as they rubbed against the rocks. This form had been optimized for fighting Undertaker. It had even forsaken its initial form to do that.

If you choose to be on the battlefield, this is how you ought to look.

As Shin focused on this battle to the death, that inappropriate thought crossed his mind. A being that was made for combat ought to exist for nothing else but combat. Those who elected to live on the battlefield were right to reject everything but the

functions needed to fight.

You say you'll fight on, but you won't discard your body, which isn't fit for battle.

It was just as Lerche had said. The Eighty-Six were imperfect. But even so, they didn't want to become beings meant only for combat. That was no way to live. He believed this now, even though he had believed the opposite in the past.

Back when he first took on the name Undertaker, the name Reaper, before he met Raiden and his other comrades, before he had friends he could fight alongside with, a part of him did believe that not having a heart would make everything easier. He truly believed that not having emotions would help him live longer.

But that wasn't true.

A slash was coming his way, and Shin wasn't in the right position to evade. He used his stopped blade to toss one of the containers lying nearby into the path of the slash. The container's inertia pulled the Phönix's chain blade off its course, while Undertaker pathetically scrambled away beneath it like some kind of injured animal.

A bit of Undertaker's leg armor fell off as the blade skimmed it.

You can still find happiness with someone.

Was that true? Perhaps it was. Shin still didn't know what he wished for—or what he should wish for. But then he thought back to times in the past, in the barracks in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, and the other barracks in other wards he'd served in. He thought back to the comrades he'd lived with briefly, before he parted ways with them because of death or assignment changes, and the time he'd spent with them.

He thought back to the moments when he'd laughed with them over the dumbest, most trivial things.

Those were the times when he didn't have to think of battle. He'd never forgotten about it, not entirely, but he didn't have to think of combat. Ever since those times in the Eighty-Sixth Sector,

he had more than pride to keeping him going. He had always wished for more than just that.

Rito and the rest of the Claymore squadron were given orders to aid in the search for Shin.

“Roger that. All right...”

He replied to the orders and then glanced to the side. A group of Alkonosts had advanced this far with the Claymore squadron. It was a suicide-bombing squad meant to bring down the base. These Alkonosts were loaded with heavy explosives, as much as their weight capacity would allow, and were stripped of not just all their weaponry but even some of their armor to do so. Other ordinarily armed Alkonosts were set to defend them until the time came for the first group of Alkonosts to detonate.

He spoke to the unit that served as their commander through the Resonance.

“We got the order to go, too, er...Ludmila.”

“Yes. Do take care.”

Her response came composedly, with a hint of a smile. The Juggernauts were retreating from her, one by one, as if trying to flee. Sitting within his unit, Milan, which had stayed behind as rear guard while the others moved, Rito watched her stand there silently like a swan that understood its time to die had come.

She had died before. And now she would die again—she and the rest of those girls.

Suddenly, Ludmila spoke.

“Do we frighten you?”

She opened her Alkonost’s—Malinovka One’s—canopy. Like a butterfly emerging from a pupa, the control unit shaped like a girl plopped down into the burning womb of the volcano.

She spread out both arms proudly. Like a martyr.

“Tell me, do we frighten you? The way we die, time and again? Do we strike you as terrifying?”

For a moment, Rito was left speechless. He was just a boy in his midteens, after all, and even if he knew she contained the vestiges of the war dead inside her, being asked such a question by what looked like a girl who was barely older than him hurt his

pride.

But he could only nod. Because it was true, and this Sirin already suspected as much.

"Yeah."

He nodded in a somewhat vexed manner. Ludmila, however, smiled like a merciful saint.

"I see... That's good, then."

"Huh?"

"If you find us frightening, it is because we are different from you. Because you do not wish to become like us, who are birds of death. If you see us and feel fear...then that is an honor to us."

She seemed truly relieved, from the bottom of her heart.

"Tell me. If that is the case, what do you want to become? If you do not want to be like us, what do you wish for?"

"...I..."

Perhaps it was because he was an Eighty-Six, but the words stopped in his throat. What were the Eighty-Six, really? Fighting on until the very end was their pride. But if the Eighty-Six were fated to die at some point, and the final conclusion of it all was to be like that mountain of corpses...

Then I don't want to die.

Yes, he didn't want to die...but he would never become a pig who ran from battle and survived by being sheltered by someone. He wanted to fight until the bitter end...but he wouldn't be satisfied by a meaningless death. He wanted to fight, and not die. Not meaninglessly. In other words...

"I want to live. I think I want to live...and find a purpose for myself."

Fighting through this battlefield of certain death was the Eighty-Six's pride. The thing they'd once decided for themselves, the thing they wouldn't relinquish even if everything else was taken from them. The desire to live on proudly even in the Eighty-Sixth Sector—even in this world.

Death was not a way of life for the Eighty-Six. After all, they were the ones who lived on, no matter how fickle or how short a life it may be... They lived, defiantly, until the very end.

But it felt like, at some point, Rito had forgotten that.

"We might die fighting, but we're not fighting just to die. All we

wanted was a purpose. It might sound like self-satisfaction, but... we want to live a life we can be satisfied with and die in a way we can accept."

Even if they were sure to die sooner or later, this was the one thing they could not give up on.

"Yes."

Ludmila eventually gave a satisfied nod. She fluttered her eyes shut, as if to say this was the answer she wanted to hear.

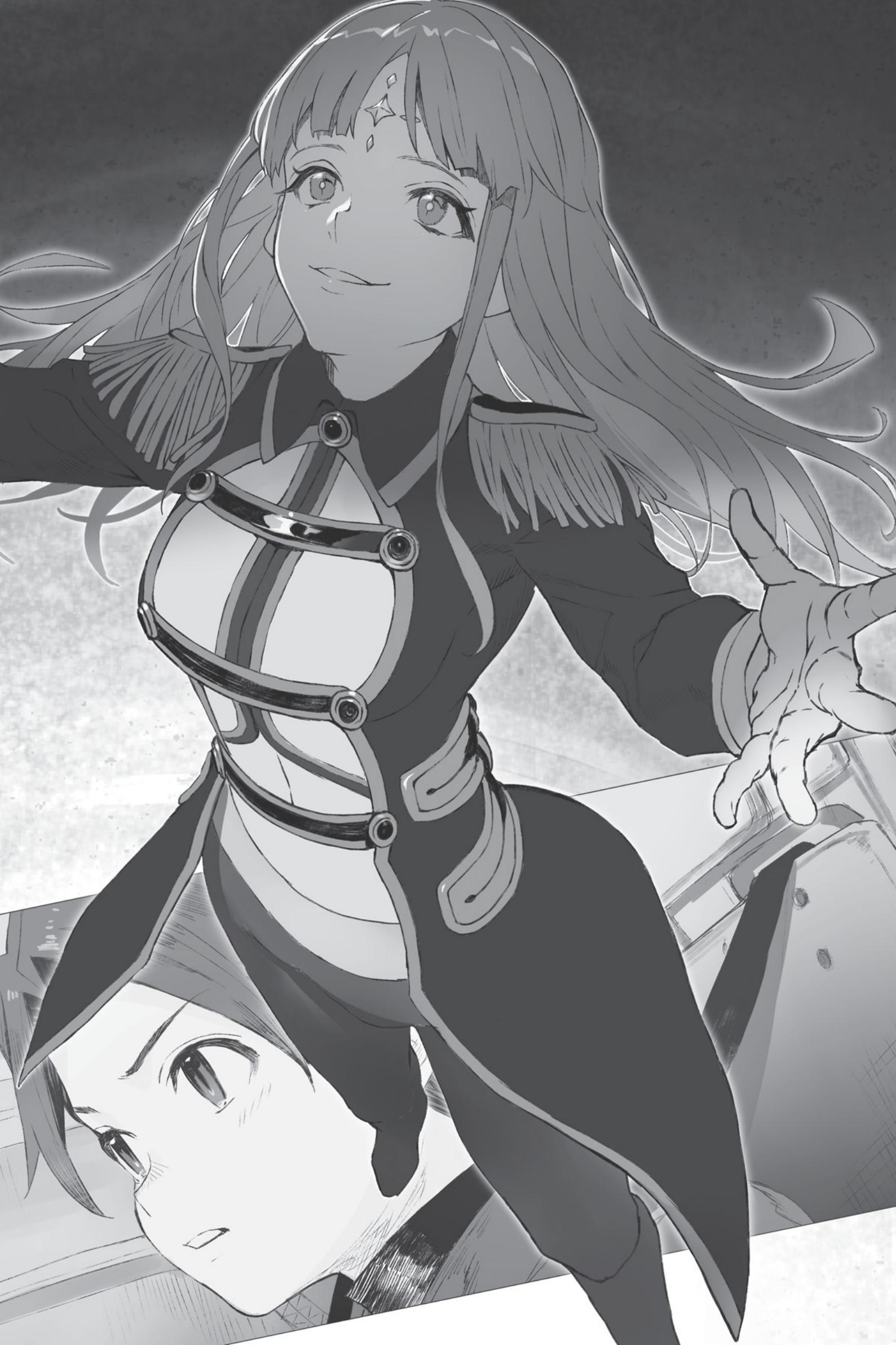
"That would be for the best. You are alive, after all. You can want something out of your life, and you have the freedom to live in accordance to those wishes... Except—"

Except, the dead warbler said again. Like a prayer. Like an imploration.

"—except if possible, no matter what you may gain or lose, do not relinquish this one thing you refuse to let go of. Do not relinquish that pride. Do not cast aside who you are. And may you...find bliss."

Ludmila—and the Sirins as a whole—did not have memories of their past lives. Rito, who had only been dispatched at their side for this brief moment, had no way of knowing who she was in life. And even still, he got the feeling he somehow knew what her wish was. He could tell they were fighting for that wish.

These girls relinquished it in their past life. Or perhaps they simply gave up on it and died with that wish unfulfilled. And so they wished for Rito and the Eighty-Six, who were still alive, who still hadn't met the death that defined the Sirins' current existence, to not lose their own wish.



“...Yeah.”

He gave a small nod. Rito still couldn’t come up with any other words to answer her. And he felt like he didn’t direct that word toward just Ludmila, but to all the other Sirins that weren’t here, too. And to the other Eighty-Six who, unlike him, didn’t survive the Eighty-Sixth Sector. And to Irina who’d died shortly before. He’d directed it at them as well.

“Then do go on. And please do not forget me. Even if I will only linger in your memory as a single bird who perished along the way.”

“Right... But—”

Rito spoke to this bird standing before his eyes, who was as frightening to him as she was tragic and pitiful. This exchange probably would not exist among this girl’s memories the next time they met. But right now, he wanted to give her his answer.

“—I won’t forget, and I will think of you...because that’s something I can still do.”

His Juggernaut finally found an acceptable foothold. It was a slightly low platform, and the system was screeching warnings alerting him to the high temperature. The Phönix, which was looking down at Shin from the guillotine’s edge, had almost hopped down before realizing Shin’s plan and stopping in its tracks.

There were no stepping stones between the guillotine and the platform Undertaker was on. The Phönix’s leaping prowess would enable it to just barely make that jump, but it was too far for a clean landing. And unless it leaped straight down, it would have to jump across in an arc. In other words, there would be a moment when it reached the top of that arc—a moment where it would neither ascend nor descend.

The Phönix realized Shin was aiming to shoot it down in that moment, and so it couldn’t approach him carelessly. Seeing that the Phönix was rapidly trying to come up with a way to pursue him, Shin looked for a chance to retreat. He cautiously shuffled back toward a stone wall behind him, when one of his legs knocked a broken fragment of a rock down into the magma. The

eerie sizzling sound it produced was hardly audible through his strained nerves.

It was simply too hot. It wasn't quite hot enough for the metal to become red-hot, but this foothold was far too close to the magma. The intense, radiant heat even made the interior of the airtight cockpit hot and suffocating.

The human body was designed to maintain a certain safe temperature, of course, but that didn't extend to the RAID Device and its quasi-nerve crystal, which were in contact with his body. The silvery, metallic ring of the RAID Device then let out a blaring warning sound.

".....?!"

It wasn't high in volume, but it did ring out from the back of his neck, which prompted him to freeze up. And with that electronic screech that alerted Shin of a malfunction in the device, Raiden and Lena's voices, which he'd only barely been able to hear so far, completely disappeared.

His arm, which he had unconsciously stiffened, picked up on that shiver and unintentionally moved Undertaker's rear leg. The claw tip of his leg, which was barely on the foothold, slipped off ever so slightly.

"Shit...!"

Undertaker just narrowly lost its balance. It stumbled a bit, and he could easily get back up... In no way did he completely fall off or take an irrecoverable misstep. But they were fighting above a pool of magma, and falling in meant certain death. All of Shin's focus had shifted to his left leg for a moment.

The Phönix didn't miss that chance. It moved in to attack.

It extended the chain blades on its back, using them to hook one of the containers lying around. It then used another chain blade, which had been turned off, to fling the container. It was empty, but it was still a massive, metal object, and it was being thrown at full force. It was heavy enough to stagger a Juggernaut if it landed a direct hit...but as an attack, it would only be a deceptive distraction. There was no way the Phönix was assuming Shin would fall for this and actually fire his unit's turret to hit such a simple target...

But the container didn't reach Undertaker and instead started

pointlessly plummeting halfway through. Seeing this, though, made Shin's hair stand up on end. The container started falling too soon... It *wasn't empty!*

The container was filled with Eintagsfliege. They were playing dead, but Shin could barely pick up the sound of their agony. The moment he saw them, he almost reflexively had Undertaker jump away. As he did, the Eintagsfliege's wings shone white as they unleashed an electrical discharge. Shin didn't need to look in order to realize what else was inside that container.

The sparks of electricity lapped at the fuse located at the bottom of the cartridge, igniting it just fast enough to burn the gunpowder.

The tank shells within that munitions container burst.

Specifically, it seemed APFSDS rounds were being kept in that container. They blew up only once, with the flammable gas propelling the shells in all directions. However, APFSDS shells relied on a massive amount of kinetic energy for their force, which was achieved using the flammable gas gathering within the barrel. That gas propelled the shells, granting them the acceleration they needed to move swiftly.

These rounds didn't have any barrel to propel them. They burst on their own, lacking the speed and force they normally had. The gunpowder was capable of launching piercing shells that weighed 4.6 kilograms at 1,600 meters per second, but it still lacked the destructive force of a heavy explosive.

And so neither the piercing shells, the shock waves, nor the explosion would deal any crippling damage to Undertaker, which had hopped away. The shells only dispersed, since they didn't have a barrel to direct them in any particular direction. Only a few of the shells flew in the Juggernaut's direction.

Shin somersaulted back by using Undertaker's rear-leg actuators at full capacity, while also using the actuators to the left and right to adjust his unit's posture. He then fired an anchor into the rock wall behind him and reeled it back to cling to the wall vertically. The next moment, the Phönix appeared before his very eyes, having ripped through the smoke and fire.

"Tch."

Shin didn't have the leisure to collect the anchor. He purged

the wire while it was reeling him up, leaving the anchor behind, and kicked against the wall to escape to the only place he still could—the air. The Phönix reached the wall a moment later, crushing the giant granite monolith to rubble with the force of its legs, which was several times greater than Undertaker's, as it lunged after him.

The Phönix had likely launched itself by straining its high-fidelity actuators beyond their normal capacity, even though they had already been pushed to their limits. The spiky sections of its legs both cracked, but in exchange for that damage, it had blasted through the distance between itself and Undertaker in a single bound and was in position to strike it down.

It used the blast to blind Shin and utilized the barrage of piercing shells to limit his movements. It forced him into a position where he would have no choice but to dodge by jumping into the air and intended to use that chance to cut him down. It was essentially the same method Shin used in the Charité Underground Labyrinth and the Strike Package employed in the Revich Citadel Base.

In what could perhaps be seen as a sort of revenge, it had driven Undertaker into the air and quickly caught up to it. Regardless of if it was about to shoot or slash at him, if Undertaker was to intercept the Phönix as it had come from behind him, it would have to turn around and face it somehow. As the pursuer, the Phönix didn't need to resort to the same action. And that created a split-second difference in when their attacks were launched.

The chain blade's shadow descended upon Undertaker's cockpit. It was faster. Even if Shin was to slash at it now, it would only end in both of them killing each other. His mind, which was still operating with composed coolness even at a time like this, told him as such. The cockpit would be slashed through, and the fuselage would lose control and plummet down into the magma.

Perhaps due to his intense concentration, time seemed to move slower as the vibrating blade neared him. And even with death looming just ahead, he felt strangely sober. The odd thought crossed his mind that this, too, was proof of the wounds to his psyche. It didn't matter which of his friends died; he was

always capable of pushing the sorrow and anger to deal with after the battle ended.

He always knew to cut off those emotions and maintain the composure he needed, only grieving after the battle ended. During battle, he sealed the anger that would cloud his judgment and the fear that would stiffen his limbs away, since they weren't necessary.

He abandoned the survival instincts a living being naturally adhered to.

He only saw his own life and the lives of others from a detached position, with a perspective that degenerated from being human into something that was closer to a war machine. These were the techniques he'd built up and the wounds he'd accumulated.

And for the first time, he recognized it as a wound. A wound he needed to win this war, perhaps, but one day... One day, he might reach a point where he would feel whole even after healing that wound.

And to that end, he would make use of his pain.

Armament selection. Leg pile drivers. Four units. Forcefully purge piles. Detonate concurrently.

Trigger.

The four pile drivers at the tips of his Juggernaut's legs burst into the air—where there was nothing to stab into and nothing to blow away. They burst with minor explosions. These 57 mm pile drivers were designed to rip through the top of a Dinosauria's armor, which, despite being their weakest point, was still relatively thick. And all four of them burst at once.

The tungsten piles were capable of tearing through thick armor because of the force that was granted to them by a large amount of gunpowder. And the recoil of that same force that afforded them such speed now pushed Undertaker upward. All four of his unit's legs were given upward propulsion.

And the result of this action was akin to it suddenly finding a foothold in midair. While in midjump, Undertaker kicked against the air a second time and leaped farther up.

The Phönix's chain blade cut through the empty air beneath Undertaker's legs. And since it no longer had any projectile

weapons, the Phönix couldn't do the same thing Undertaker did. Its blue optical sensor simply looked up at Undertaker, still filled with synthetic hatred and bloodlust, and Shin stared back into that gaze unflinchingly. He swung his high-frequency blade downward.

The Phönix, which up until now had avoided every attack launched by Undertaker, and indeed any other Juggernaut and unit it had faced so far, was finally slashed through.

Its black frame was cut apart, exposing its internal structure. Shin swung his blade again to confirm the kill, using the recoil to strike. Reflexively defending itself, the Phönix swung one of its chain blades up into the second slash's trajectory. The two vibrating blades clashed against each other, both of them eventually snapping off and flying away. The recoil of that clash sent the two units farther away.

Undertaker, which had slashed from above, was sent flying up. And the Phönix, which was on the receiving end of that swing, was sent plummeting down.

Juggernauts couldn't fly. They were at the mercy of the invisible hand of gravity as everything else in nature was. Undertaker flew up in an arc and, upon reaching the zenith of that parabola, began falling down. They'd clashed in a bad spot, and at this rate, Shin would fall into the magma.

Shin fired his last remaining anchor, driving it into the center of the guillotine. Paying no heed to the engine, which had already overheated from being exposed to the high-temperature environment, he reeled the anchor up as fast as he could to change the trajectory of his fall. The wire anchor finally caught fire, after which Shin hurriedly purged it and landed atop the guillotine.



"Ngh...!"

He'd fallen from a height that was beyond what the unit's specifications would allow. Unlike the Republic's aluminum coffin, the Reginleif was designed with buffering systems that protected the pilot. But his unit's driving system was strained in exchange, screeching up an alert. The linear actuators had ruptured, and the frame's joints had been damaged. A few armor bits fell off, bouncing against the hard rock footing.

But the Phönix, on the other hand, had no anchors. It didn't have the leisure to move to safety, because the time it spent falling into the magma—in other words, its altitude—was far shorter. It still swung its remaining chain blades around, trying to right its posture.

It barely managed to land on the edge of the nearby stone wall, but its spikes stabbed into it, making the wall too brittle to withstand the shock of its landing. With its foothold crumbling under its weight, the black form once again wobbled and fell down into the abyss.

<<.....!>>

It extended its chain blades like a human reaching out and stabbed them into the cliff face. The vibrating blades sank into the rock without any resistance as it fell a few more meters down, but the Phönix stopped their vibrations and eventually remained suspended against the rock. The rock had grown brittle on the inside, making the metallic beast swing in midair.

Neither its hands nor legs could reach the cliff, and so it swung pathetically like an insect caught by a spider's thread. As skilled as it was in three-dimensional mobility, it wouldn't be able to climb up the cliff. The blade's base gave an ominous creaking sound. The stretched parts of its arm screamed as the magma roared beneath it.

Its only way of escaping now would be to abandon this unit. Apparently, it had come to that conclusion, since once again, the silvery light of its Liquid Micromachines began to seep out from the gaps in its armor.

"Die."

Shin fixed his sights on the chain blade and mercilessly pulled the trigger of his 88 mm turret. The turret was forced to suddenly rotate when it was already damaged and had to withstand the powerful recoil of the 88 mm cannon, even if it was dampened somewhat by the recoil brake. The joint of Undertaker's rear left leg, which was already cracked, failed to withstand the recoil, snapped off, and went flying. With this, Undertaker had lost his cruising ability, but in exchange...

...the APFSDS shell fired at close range crushed the granite bedrock and the chain blade that had stabbed into it.

<<

!!!>>

The Phönix fell down, unleashing an agonized shout—at least, that's what it sounded like to Shin—as it plummeted down into the red, shimmering lake of seething magma. But it still abided by its combat instincts and struggled to survive. Its Liquid Micromachines leaked out, trying to turn to butterflies and take flight before they fell into the crimson lake.

But as they tried to soar away, the butterflies caught fire one after another. With each flap of their wings, the Liquid Micromachines only burned faster. Even without yet touching the magma, they gave off a red glow as they combusted.

Like will-o'-the-wisps, like coquelicots scattering in the wind, they blossomed brilliantly as they burned. And after radiating that crimson, shining glow for a moment, the butterflies turned to ash and crumbled away.

Radiant heat.

Even a Löwe and a Dinosauria would not have been able to survive these temperatures for long, to say nothing of a Juggernaut. And the butterflies were also close to the magma, with their thin wings acutely sensitive to rising temperatures. If the Phönix didn't try to escape the magma, it would have fallen in completely. But its attempt to escape made the butterflies' wings catch fire.

Did the Phönix realize that its fixation on single-handedly defeating Shin led it to willingly choosing this battlefield?

Along with its Liquid Micromachine butterflies, the Phönix's frame sunk into the magma. The dark-red fluid had low viscosity and swallowed the black armor, a fate which soon befell the metal butterflies as well.

The mechanical scream faded.

These were the final moments of the Phönix—the unit that had single-handedly trumped and cornered the Strike Package for several months.

To Shin, the Legion were all pitiful ghosts that begged to pass on to the place they had been denied. That was just as true for the Black Sheep and Shepherds, both of which assimilated human neural networks, and the White Sheep.

The Phönix had tormented him and his comrades so much ever since it had first joined the fray. Perhaps because of that, Shin felt nothing in particular at watching its demise. There wasn't even any elation at having beat it, though Shin never really felt anything of the sort when it came to fighting the Legion. All he'd felt at the sight of seeing this ghost disappear was a tinge of loneliness.

"....."

Shin heaved a single sigh as he slackened his strained nerves and turned Undertaker around. The unit dragged its broken legs as it struggled forward.

He felt *hot*.

Shin lowered his unit's output from combat to cruising mode, but the unit's temperature didn't go any lower. Quite the opposite, actually. The temperature gauges were gradually rising toward their critical sections.

The cave's temperature was too high. The source of the heat was close, and the thick rock bed had little in way of insulation and hardly any openings that might allow the heat to escape into the air.

Shin wouldn't survive for much longer here. If he didn't get away from this place quickly, both the unit and Shin himself would

be so crippled by the heat that they wouldn't be able to move anymore. And then he would certainly die. So before that happened...

He dragged Undertaker's legs along, which felt extremely sluggish and annoying. Still, he somehow managed to force his unruly Feldreß to do a one-eighty, which made the entire battlefield come into view.

Perhaps it was the aftermath of the duel that took place here, but at this point, it was hard to tell. And now that the Phönix was gone, he couldn't tell if it was done intentionally, either. But the narrow rock road he'd crossed to reach this cave—the sole path connecting the guillotine to the sole entrance to this cavern—had crumbled and collapsed halfway across.

"...Huh?"

How long did he spend gawking at the sight? This utterance, which was neither doubt nor denial, returned Shin to his senses. Whichever it was didn't really matter. No matter how he might've tried to explain or deny what he was seeing, the sight before his eyes wasn't going to become any less real.

The sole passage out of this cavern had collapsed, leaving a break of some ten meters. And seeing this, he came to a conclusion: This meant...

I can't go back...

The footing he was on may have been isolated right now, but it was wide enough for two armored units to fight on. There was plenty of space to break into a run, and if he were to use a wire anchor, he'd be able to leap across the gap.

Or he *would have* been able to, if Undertaker was in workable condition. But one of its legs was gone, and both of its wire anchors were missing. Right now, Undertaker could just barely walk by dragging its legs, so jumping a few meters was impossible. And there were no materials or any other tools to repair it with, either.

Shin couldn't escape this underground cavern on his own, and he had no means of calling for help, either. His RAID Device malfunctioned, and so he couldn't connect to the Sensory

Resonance. The thick rock impeded radio waves, so the data link, radar, and wireless wouldn't reach him, either.

Had Frederica still been with the control team, she might have noticed his plight, but she'd been injured and taken off the battlefield. Raiden and the others were likely looking for him, but since they didn't know where he was, the chances of them finding this place in this massive underground fortress weren't high. And they wouldn't be able to keep this sector blockaded for much longer.

But there was another problem... Shin's body likely wouldn't last in this environment before that time limit elapsed.

"....."

The moment he realized there was nothing he could do, his body went limp from exhaustion.

Ah. So this is where it ends. This...is where I die. Without anyone to know of it. Without any way back.

Meaninglessly.

Even with that fact thrust before his eyes, Shin felt oddly calm. He knew he shouldn't feel this way, but old habits died hard. Maybe that was why. Maybe it was because of that unique perspective on life and death the Eighty-Six had built up over nine years in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, where certain death was what awaited at the end of one's military service.

Death was always present, always looming ahead. Every single day, he knew he might not live to see the next day. So even if he was to die today, he could accept that. There was no need to fear it nor any reason to shun it. He did fight to the very end, after all.

"...I've done enough, right?"

Uttering words no one would ever hear—the mission recorder, which would usually record anything the Processor said, had gone offline at some point—he opened the canopy and stepped outside.

The Juggernaut's system was already completely silent, done in by the heat. It'd died at the same time as the cooling system, so the temperature in the cockpit was approaching dangerous levels. He knew going outside would only hasten his demise, but somehow, the prospect of suffocating to death in an airtight cockpit felt even worse.

He was greeted by hot wind, or rather, sizzling air enveloping

his body. The blinding light of the magma, which wasn't dampened by the support computer's filter, burned into his retinas. This was perhaps only natural. He'd seen so many die. He'd buried so many of his comrades. And the time finally came for him to join their ranks. For the Eighty-Six, death was a way of life. They died too quickly, too easily, all too obviously.

And now it was his turn. That was all. Except...

"I shouldn't have told her."

He whispered this softly. Even doing just that made the hot air sting into his throat. He shouldn't have wished for the future. Making a wish meant losing something. That's how things always were, and how they always would be. He wished for her not to leave. He promised to come back at all costs. But as soon as he did that, this happened.

Lena would be sad... Yes, she likely would. That's how she was. That was why he asked her to remember them two years ago. And he just had to do something that was entirely unlike him and needlessly hurt her...

Had he not been wearing his flight suit, which was made to insulate heat, he wouldn't be able to lean back against Undertaker's armor like he was doing. Shin looked up. He'd long since lost any god he could pray to. If he used his pistol, he'd be able to die a bit more easily compared with letting the heat kill him, but he didn't want to use it. It felt like a betrayal of sorts.

A betrayal of the promise to fight on until the very last moment. To bring those who died to the very end, to his final destination. The promise he'd made with all the comrades he fought with until now...and to the promise he'd made with Lena to come back alive. Even if eventually he'd end up breaking it either way.

"...Lena."

If nothing else... The only bit of luck was that she wouldn't have to learn of how he died...

"Sorry."

But then a white shadow appeared in front of him.

A voice of lamentation descended upon Shin. Someone's last words, as uttered by the Legion. The wailing of a ghost—a copy of a brain structure, trapped within a Legion and replaying its last

moments on endless repeat.

It was a woman's voice. The cold, detached, merciless voice of moonlight.

Shin raised his head slowly, as if it were being pulled up by some force. And his gaze fell on a single, old Ameise, which had appeared before him at some point. Its armor was as white as moonlight, with the Personal Mark of a goddess leaning against the moon etched onto it.

The Merciless Queen.

"_____!"

At that moment, pure, unadulterated terror—intense enough to white out his thoughts for a moment—washed over him. It was a fear of death.

As the Ameise were scouts meant for collecting intelligence, they were considered one of the weakest Legion types in terms of fighting power. But that was only from the perspective of Feldreß like the Reginleif and the Vánagandr.

A frail human with nothing more than their four limbs couldn't hope to beat an Ameise. For a human, it didn't matter if they were faced with an Ameise or a Dinosauria. They would still be killed in a merciless, mechanical manner.

Just like when he'd seen it at the Revich Citadel Base, the Merciless Queen was unarmed; it lacked the all-purpose 14 mm machine guns the Ameise were normally equipped with. But that mattered little. An Ameise's weight and output could easily tear a human apart with its legs.

And one such killing machine was now before his eyes. Sooner than he could prepare himself to die. The death he wasn't prepared for had shown itself.

Yes. Death comes to all. Equally, mercilessly...and suddenly.

Shin thought he would die here, dehydrating and burning in the hot air. He was prepared to accept that death with dignity. But now he would be denied even the short amount of time he had left to embrace that emotion, as if something had tried to tell him even that was too good for him.

The world was cruel, and he truly thought he had understood

this. Even now, in this final moment, that ugly fact was thrust before his eyes.

The Scout type approached him. Shin reflexively stood up in a movement that was dictated not by thought, but instinct. He took an unconscious step back, attempting to flee. His survival instincts were telling him to escape.

I don't want to die.

That thought suddenly and intensely crossed his mind. It surged up in him with an almost instinctual intensity.

I don't want to die. I don't want to die. Because if I die, I'd call for her. I'd call her name in the end. And if I become a Legion, I'd keep doing it forever, until I break.

The ability to pick up on the Legion's—the mechanical ghosts' screams—was unique to Shin. No other Esper had been discovered to possess this ability. And unlike the Sensory Resonance, there was no artificial way of re-creating it, either. If Shin was to die, the human side would never hear the Legion's screams again.

But if, by some slim chance, the sound of his screams might reach her...

He didn't want to die. He didn't want to make her cry. Yes... He didn't want her to cry. He didn't want to make her sad. Even if these wishes could never be granted, he didn't want to give up. He made a promise to return to her no matter what. To speak with her. He hadn't even apologized to her yet...

So he couldn't die here. He didn't want to die. He didn't want to make her sad...

I want her to smile.

That thought surfaced in his mind, even in this unusual situation. It fit into the void he'd felt within himself ever since that last battle. He couldn't stay the way he was. He had to change. But what was he to change about himself—and how? He'd kept asking and tormenting himself over that question. And finally, he found the answer.

He still didn't know who he wanted to be. He still couldn't picture the future he was heading toward or what joy he should seek. But still, if nothing else...

He wanted to live in a way that would make Lena smile.

And if possible, he wanted to smile with her.

The Merciless Queen approached him with simple, silent steps. Shin reflexively braced himself. Without taking his eye off the Legion before him, he reached out and picked up the assault rifle resting in his cockpit. He pulled the bolt with flowing, practiced motions and loaded the first bullet. He opened the collapsible rifle's gunstock and pressed it against his shoulder, annoyed by the extra procedures.

An Ameise's armor took no damage from a 9 mm pistol's bullets. Its frontal armor could push back even a full-size, 7.62 mm rifle's shots. But Shin still had some way to fight. The enemy was close, and there was nowhere to take cover, but he wasn't entirely without weapons. He still had to defeat it and survive somehow.

He had to survive and go back. He had to go back to her.

Of course, even if he was to somehow defeat and incapacitate the Merciless Queen, he wouldn't be any closer to getting out of these caves, but at this point, that wasn't on his mind. An enemy was standing right in front of him, and he had to defeat it. A primal emotion not unlike anger burned within him, controlling all of his thoughts.

I won't give up. Like hell I'm giving up here. I told her I would return...!

The Merciless Queen approached. It was already close enough to attack. And still, it drew even closer. As if to toy with him. As if it had no desire to attack him. And then Shin noticed. Its voice—a woman's sorrowful cry—wasn't full of bloodlust like the Legion's voices usually were when they were about to attack.

...How did this Ameise appear on this rock face to begin with?

It couldn't have jumped over the collapsed area. As Shin was looking in that direction, the Merciless Queen appeared behind him. Which meant...

A shadow was cast over Shin's feet. A shadow that belonged neither to him nor the Merciless Queen. A huge, squarish, awkward shadow...

“...!”

Just as Shin realized what it was and looked up—

“*Pi!*”

Shin couldn’t tell what the unarmed garbage-collection machine was thinking. It sped through the depths of the cave, over the uneven rock surface, and turned a corner without reducing any of its speed. Fido threw itself upon the Merciless Queen at a hundred kilometers per hour.

Even an Ameise couldn’t ignore an object with the same weight as it essentially plummeting toward it with full speed. It was flung back, the tips of its legs leaving the ground as it awkwardly fell sideways. As the Merciless Queen sank to the ground with a thud, Fido pressed its full weight down upon it.

Stomped on relentlessly by a weight of ten tons, the Ameise’s white armor was bent out of shape and flew off. The Merciless Queen lacked its shoulder-mounted machine guns to fend off its odd attacker, and Fido was too close for it to aim accurately even if it did have them. And yet perhaps out of its instincts as a combat machine, the Merciless Queen thrashed its legs in an attempt to kick Fido away...

“Fido, get out of there!”

“Shin, stay where you are and don’t move!”

Fido hopped away—far more awkwardly than a Juggernaut would—and the next moment, the thundering sound of a gun echoed through the cavern. The shots were fired at close range and hit their mark almost as soon as they were unleashed. 40 mm machine-gun rounds and 88 mm APFSDS shells swooped down from above, piercing into the Merciless Queen’s legs. The shells’ fuses were set to inert and didn’t burst upon impact. They simply sent its six legs flying with intense kinetic energy.

Even just its legs were quite heavy and didn’t fly far enough to put Shin, who stood nearby, in danger. Fido stood in front of him, shielding him from the fragments and machine parts that flew through the air.

A Juggernaut appeared in the area, its legs making a sharp, crunching sound as it landed. There was a Personal Mark of a laughing fox emblazoned onto its armor—it was Laughing Fox, Theo's unit. Raiden's Wehrwolf soon followed suit.

"Shin, are you all right?!"

"You're still alive, right, you asshole?!"

They appeared just as suddenly as Fido had. The tall wall at the back of this cave had something like a ledge at its top. In terms of height and distance, it was only a few meters away from the guillotine. A human couldn't hope to make that jump, but a Reginleif in prime condition could easily handle it.

Shin tried to answer, but his throat was too sore from the heat. After a few dry coughs, he shook off the discomfort and fumbled for the intercom button to respond.

"...My ears hurt."

A Juggernaut's turret was essentially a tank turret, after all, and the sound of its blast numbed his ears with pain. But put another way, if this was his first complaint, it was proof he wasn't hurt anywhere else. Picking up on that, Theo snickered and then heaved a deep sigh.

"Yeah, you're fine if you can still talk shit. That's good."

His voice then tensed up.

"...I'm glad you're okay."

"....."

Shin almost replied that he was sorry but couldn't bring himself to say it. It was almost two years ago that they told him to stop worrying them... To stop exposing himself to danger. But he'd hardly abided by that agreement. He knew it, too. And while he did feel guilty about it...apologizing with just words didn't feel honest. So instead, he simply asked:

"Where did you come from?"

Judging from the situation, it seemed they were chasing the Merciless Queen.

"You probably can't see it from down there because of the shadow, but there's a path above this wall, right behind us... Can't say I know why they bothered digging through here."

"Yeah..."

So that was why. After saying that, Shin was overcome by a coughing fit. Talking made him breathe in more of the hot air. Raiden furrowed his brows in concern.

“Don’t talk—you’ll hurt your throat. Undertaker can’t move, right? We’ll be right over.”

“Thanks.”

"I said don't talk. Fido, go collect Undertaker. And about that Ameise..."

“*PjI*”

Fido cut into his words with an electronic beep. Raiden didn't understand, naturally, but Shin explained despite his sore throat.

"It said the other Scavengers are gonna be here soon."

“How the hell did you get that from one beep...? The ones that branched off in the earlier fork, right? Roger, we’ll leave it to them—”

A few Alkonosts and Scavengers appeared from the entrance to the cavern, which was on the other side of the collapsed path. For some reason, Chaika was also with the group and left them by jumping across the gap.

"Are you unharmed...?! Ooh, if it isn't Sir Werewolf and Sir Fox!"

“...Wait, what are you doing here, Lerche?”

"I was informed by the Sirins heading this way that the path here is connected from the Weisel's waste disposal site, so we regrouped through there... Oh, but now is not the time. Kind Scavengers, please deploy the bridges."

Some of the Scavengers were modified for bridge building. They were multilegged models made for river crossing. In order to keep the Scavengers themselves lightweight, the bridges were limited to a length of fifteen meters at most. A heavy Feldreß like the Vánagandr couldn't hope to cross it, but a Juggernaut or a Scavenger could.

The bridge-model Scavengers deployed the ladders on their backs and began crossing the linked, fifteen-meter structures while Fido approached Undertaker. Wehrwolf lightly jumped over the rocks. It was an oddly tranquil sight, as it always was after battle ended.

I'm saved...

Finally realizing this, Shin collapsed from exhaustion. He suddenly became acutely aware of the dryness in his throat and the heat burning in his body.

"Hey!"

Wehrwolf's optical sensor turned to face him with surprise. Raiden tried to say something—probably to ask if he was all right—but fell silent. He likely could tell by looking that Shin wasn't fine. With panic in his eyes, he turned to face Laughing Fox.

"Theo, take Shin and head back. I'll watch over Fido and the Scavengers."

"Gotcha. I'll take half the forces, all right? First, third, and fifth platoons, we're gonna book it, so keep up with us. Shin, can you stand? Oh, sorry, guess you can't. Gimme a sec..."

Laughing Fox jumped across the gap and landed beside him.

"Roger. Report back when you return to the designated position."

Vika nodded upon receiving confirmation of the Merciless Queen's retrieval and Shin's rescue. Shin was injured, and so Raiden was the one handling the report, but judging by his tone, Shin was in no immediate danger of dying. Before long, the next report arrived. The Spearhead squadron had fallen back to the designated line... All units in the Strike Package's invasion force had retreated. All that remained was...

Annette spoke through the Sensory Resonance. She was sitting in the cockpit of one of the Juggernauts. That unit hadn't run into any combat for the duration of the operation and remained protected by its consort units.

"So we finally have the Merciless Queen... What do you think we'll get out of it? It went to the trouble of drawing us in by leaving a message to come find it. What're we gonna find inside this treasure chest?"

"At worst, it was just a ploy to draw in Nouzen and me. At best, we might find a means to ending this war... Realistically speaking, we'd just get some information out of her. Regardless of if she supplies it willingly or not."

If the Merciless Queen really did assimilate the neural network of the Legion's developer, Major Zelene Birkenbaum, there should have been information they could extract from her. Gaining more data regarding the Legion's control systems would be a tremendous boon.

"She...? Oh, you knew the person inside it."

"To the extent of having spoken to her a few times, that's all... Anyway—"

He opened his expanded control panel, which was modified for his personal use, and spoke while setting several conditions into it. He then finished inputting those settings and continued:

"—did you finish that experiment you had to risk life and limb for, Penrose?"

She replied with what felt like a sardonic smile.

"Why are you asking when you already know, Your Highness? The information leak wasn't from the United Kingdom's side. It wasn't from the Para-RAID, either."

The fact that Annette was accompanying the attack force hadn't been reported to the Federacy military. The only ones who knew Annette was here were the Strike Package and the United Kingdom military. Shin and Vika—whose Personal Marks were already known to the Legion—had been actively targeted. But Annette, who had no Personal Mark, hadn't been attacked despite being in a conspicuous Juggernaut that took no part in the fighting and was constantly speaking to the others over the Sensory Resonance.

The Legion didn't notice Annette's existence...or perhaps, they didn't know she was there. In which case, the information leak didn't come from either the Strike Package or the United Kingdom military. And there was no trace of the Sensory Resonance being intercepted.

Vika continued talking undisturbed. Even *this* wasn't enough to make him feel betrayed, it seemed.

"Then it's the Federacy?"

Annette's smile appeared to die down, giving way to a mixture of emotions: loathing, disdain, and other such intense feelings.

"...There's another country that's well aware of my existence."

After removing several levels of safety devices, the switch for the self-destruction sequence was pressed. The order was transmitted via relays, traveling all across the Dragon Fang Mountain—to where the Alkonosts equipped with the explosives were.

They were prepared for the possibility of Vika and Annette being injured or the radio waves being cut off, with the Sirins staying inside the Alkonosts to operate the fuses manually if need be. Their initial programming included an order to destroy themselves as thoroughly as possible if needed, so as to prevent the Legion from stealing their brains. And so the Sirins didn't budge. They simply smiled, thinking of the battlefield they would stand upon next time.

And upon receiving the signal, they ignited their fuses, and the explosives detonated.

The explosion's sound was mostly contained by the thick rock, and so there was no deafening roar. Only a vibration one could feel in the pit of their stomach.

The combat medic smiled, noting how they never expected they'd have to treat heatstroke symptoms on a snowy mountain as they instructed Shin to rest for a while. Shin, who was lying down in the armored transport's cabin, sat up. They intended to destroy the base, but they didn't have the payload to completely level an entire mountain. And so even with them triggering the explosion a good distance away at their regroup point, the Dragon Fang Mountain remained standing tall.

Still, the lamenting voices he'd heard so far were no longer at the bottom of the earth. He heard neither the Legion's nor the Sirins', which had stayed behind to trigger the explosion. Annette and Vika, as well as Bernholdt, who handled the blockade on the mountain, were all back already.

And once they finished storing the captured Merciless Queen—which was in a tightly bound, armored container that would allow it to neither move nor transmit its position midtransport—all that would remain was for them to retreat to safety.

There came a knock at the transport door—as if it were one of the palace's rooms—which opened after a moment.

"I see you've taken quite a beating once again, Sir Reaper."

"...Lerche."

Lerche had peeked into the room, clad in the Sirins' unique rouge flight suit. It was similar to her regular uniform, along with the anachronistic saber at her waist, and so it didn't seem too different from what she usually looked like. Her braided blond hair and green, glassy eyes were the same as ever, too.

At this point, both her appearance and the sound of the dead rising from within her didn't strike Shin as detestable anymore.

"What?" Shin asked.

"Nothing. I merely dropped by to check on you. I simply heard your treatment was complete and that you had been ordered to rest."

Both Lerche's tone and expression denoted her odd composure, as if she came to engage in idle chatter. But Shin realized she must have been bothered by their exchange back in the Revich Citadel Base in her own way. She may not have regretted what she'd said to him, but perhaps it was still weighing on her.

"Hearing you are unharmed is a great relief... But I must say, the human body truly must be frail if high temperatures are enough to render you immobile."

"....."

Even if it was after the battle with the Phönix, his Juggernaut couldn't withstand that heat. Shin doubted a human-size Sirin, with a cooling system meant only to support its small frame, would've be able to function there, either. Noticing the way Shin was squinting at her, Lerche smiled with a carefree expression.

"And yet somehow, frail as you are, you narrowly escaped the jaws of death and realized you must return. Perhaps you've learned to fear death... In which case, would you entrust the war to us Sirins?"

As grave as her words were, she spoke as casually as ever. She'd likely guessed at Shin's answer but still wanted to hear him confirm it. That was what her tone implied.

"Well—"

And so Shin replied composedly.

"—humans really aren't... I'm really not a life-form made for

battle. And I never will be. But humans aren't going to discard their bodies. We're imperfect and cowardly, just like you said."

"In that case—"

"But," Shin interrupted, "so what? Your dignity is none of our business. We decided fighting to the very end was our pride, and we're not going to give that up. I don't want to die a pathetic death. It doesn't matter if my body isn't meant to fight or survive on this battlefield. I can't run from this war. And on top of all that..."

For a moment, he hesitated to finish the thought. He wasn't used to voicing it. Up until just recently, he'd believed he shouldn't have wishes...that he didn't want to have wishes.

Someday, I want to become happy with someone.

"...I want to live alongside other people. So I can't pick one or the other... Because I'm..."

Unlike Lerche and the other Sirins, who'd died long ago. Unlike his comrades, who'd died before he did and had their ghosts taken in by the Legion.

"...I'm still alive."

Lerche chuckled out loud at his answer.

"You wish to not give up on anything and gain more on top of that... Such a refreshing display of greed, worthy of the living. Splendid," Lerche said, stifling her laughter but with that smile still on her lips.

She fixed her shining, emerald eyes—those glass eyes, which were only slightly inhuman in appearance—at him.

"But I will still insist there's no need for you to be on the battlefield. I swear those words upon our pride and dignity, human."

This death bird built for battle uttered those words with a smile. Shin simply scoffed at her playfully, knowing that day would never come. He wouldn't let it.

"Just try it, sword."

†

Lena had been informed of the operation's completion, but it had

all happened ninety kilometers away. She had no way of seeing the smoke trail into the sky from the mountain's peak, even if the explosives were powerful enough to destroy the whole base. Still, they weren't capable of toppling the mountain altogether. The blast did nothing to even visibly shake the massive monolith.

Meaning that, from where Lena was, she couldn't notice any change even if she was to gaze directly at the mountain. And so the reserve formation's units simply waited for the prince, who had headed into enemy territory with the birds of death and the other comrades they had fought alongside so far.

The silver layer coating the sky grew thinner little by little. The Eintagsfliege were the smallest and lightest of all Legion units, and so the amount of electricity they were capable of retaining in their bodies was small. As the swarm of metal butterflies ran out of energy, they began heading south, and since none of them came back, the density of the clouds began to thin out.

Like the staff officers of the United Kingdom predicted, once the Legion lost the Dragon Fang Mountain base, the Eintagsfliege couldn't remain deployed in the sky. The blue skies were, little by little, returning.

And as morning rose on the first day in months where a clear azure sky spread above them, the Dragon Fang Mountain attack force returned to the reserve formation.

The deep azure of a summer sky contrasted the snowy peaks. Even in the north, the sun of early summer shone bright, and the snow began to melt as it was suddenly exposed to intense sunlight. Thawed snow flowed into the rivers with a speed and intensity that made it clear their basins would likely overflow soon.

The attack force returned, stepping over the sticky, melting snow. Heavy transports pulled over one after another, with the Processors getting out of the cabins, clad in their steel-blue flight suits. Raiden approached Lena. Shin was out of commission, so Raiden took over his authority as operations commander of the 2nd Armored Corps. Raiden saluted and spoke:

“Colonel Milizé, the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package has returned.”

“Good work, First Lieutenant Shion and First Lieutenant Shuga. And everyone else, too. Please enjoy a well-deserved rest.”

That concluded the etiquette a superior officer was to show her subordinates. All the Processors, Raiden included, visibly relaxed at her words. Some of them already started chattering, and the fire-control squad's Processors hurried over to join in. The reserve formation was soon full of talk and tumult.

First Lieutenant Shion and the other Processors walked past Raiden and left the armored transport. "We're back," some said. "Good job, Colonel," others said. They walked by, talking among themselves.

And one figure, clad in the same steel-blue uniform and a teal scarf, approached her. The tattered state of his flight suit and scarf silently told the story of how he'd done something unbelievably reckless yet again. Guren grimaced bitterly as Fido lowered Undertaker, which was in a state of utter disrepair yet again, while Touka grinned.

But still, he had returned. Just as Lena hoped he would. And so she had to keep up her end of the bargain. Shin walked up to her, and she greeted him. Not as a commanding officer, but on a personal level. She smiled.

"You said you'd come back."

Shin froze up, taken by surprise. Lena tried to smile, but she did in fact harbor some anger. Perhaps it showed in her expression, but she didn't know since she couldn't see her own face.

"Er... I did come back, though." Perhaps his throat was aching, because his voice came out a bit hoarse.

And Lena knew why his throat was in pain, which only served to anger her further.

"Raiden reported the circumstances behind the recovery of the Merciless Queen. And the medics gave me your diagnosis. Raiden will retain your right to command until the medics say otherwise. Understood?"

Shin fell silent. He looked past Lena, likely scanning ahead for Raiden. After searching for the right words—which, from Lena's perspective, seemed more like he was trying to find an excuse—he eventually gave up and slumped his shoulders.

"I'm sorry."

"You better be sorry! Why...why do you always put yourself in

so much danger...?!"

Excuses like *I had to* or *I had no choice* didn't carry much weight here. She told him to come back, and he told her he would. So this meant he had an obligation to return...and doing something that would get him killed should have been utterly out of the question.

And what if he had actually died...? Feeling a surge of emotion in her heart, Lena choked up. She somehow managed to hold back the tears, however. When Raiden told her of the night's events, she had been unable to stop shaking, even though she knew it all ended well.

"I was so, so worried... If the Merciless Queen didn't happen to go where you were... If they'd have rescued you any later, you could have died..."

"....."

"You can't do that. Never do anything that stupid, ever again. Rely on the people around you. Don't choose to sacrifice yourself. Never ever make that choice again."

"...I'm sorry."

But then, a mischievous smile played across his lips. The first carefree smile he showed her in a while.

"Well, it's not like you pulled any crazy stunts yourself, did you, Lena?"

Lena stiffened awkwardly.

"O-of course not."

"Really, now? I suppose I'll ask Shiden later."

"Well, Shiden is on my side, so don't expect any honest answers out of her," Lena scoffed.

Shin's smile deepened.

"So you're saying you *did* do something."

"Huh...? Ah!" Lena realized what she'd said and clasped a hand over her mouth.

Shin laughed out loud, his shoulders rising and falling.

"Didn't you tell me you were waiting?"

"....."

Lena sulked at having her own words used against her.

"And you risked your life carelessly even after saying that?"

"...Jerk."

She had no other retort. She couldn't come up with anything else, but she couldn't stand saying nothing, either. This only made Shin laugh a little bit harder. She turned around, sulking, and he followed her, half a step behind. Lena then slowed down, and he stood right beside her. She looked up at his red eyes and spoke again.

This time, the words came from the bottom of her heart, her smile filled with genuine joy. The truth was, she always wanted to say this. Ever since two years ago, when she told him not to leave her behind. When she bid this boy, whose face she did not know at the time, good-bye and sent him on his way.

She always longed to say these words. If she'd seen him off, she wanted to say these words when he returned. With a smile, as they stood face-to-face.

"Welcome back."

He smiled gently as he looked back at her with warm, crimson eyes.

"Yeah... I'm back."

Two years ago, they had parted ways without knowing each other's faces, knowing each other only by name.

Six months ago, they both spoke to each other in person after surviving the chaos of war.

And three months ago, they reunited at their final destination, meeting face-to-face at long last.

And now, they would finally grow closer. Even if there were things they could neither yield nor agree on, even if they were utterly different—they would fight to stay together, no matter how much effort it took. Even without putting these emotions into words, the two understood this.



EPILOGUE

HOME SWEET HOME

He arrived at the right address, only to find himself facing the gate of an estate far too large to belong to a single family. The gate solemnly demarcated the inside and outside of the estate, its fence like a series of long spears pointing up to the heavens.

Shin remained still before the gate, looking up at the estate. It was the residence of the former Empire's leading warrior clan—the noble house of Marquis Nouzen. Even now, after relinquishing all its territory and court ranks, House Nouzen still possessed a private property that very much matched an entire city district in size. It also possessed several private businesses and retained some latent influence within the military. It was, indeed, a noble house that was once one of the Empire's de facto rulers.

Here lived an old man who still held the position of the head of that family: his grandfather.

They'd left the base a bit over two months ago, but returning there gave them the feeling they were truly home. Over those two months, the season had turned to summer, and a pleasant breeze streamed in from the open windows. The wind was cool and smelled of greenery, having crossed through the forest surrounding the base.

Feeling that wind blow against her, Lena turned her gaze from the window back to her office. She heard the voices of soldiers doing their drills, and the sound of operating maintenance equipment and idle chatter, too, reached her ears. The tumult of a normal, routine day in the base.

"We shouldn't have a new mission for a while now, so you can take your time and relax, Vika."

Her gaze fell on Vika, who shrugged, reclining on the lounge suite's sofa.

"If anything, I would rather use the time to practice the Alkonosts' maneuvers and fine-tune them. The Federacy's western front is too different from the United Kingdom in terms of topography. There's too many unpredictable burdens and situations for the Alkonosts to deal with here."

Such modifications weren't unlike the same ones the Strike Package's units had to go through upon being dispatched to the United Kingdom. The Alkonosts were built to operate in the snowy battlefields of the north, which meant they weren't suited to work in the Federacy's territories. Except...

Lena's apprehensions must have been written all over her face, because Vika continued speaking after looking in her direction.

"Just like in the United Kingdom, the Sirins are shut down and stored in the hangar when they're not training or out on an operation. And when it comes to training, we don't intend to use this base's training grounds, but one farther away from here... We're not going to be a burden to Nouzen, so please don't make that face."

Lena couldn't help but crack a bitter smile. Her concern was that obvious, it seemed.

"I appreciate the consideration, Vika."

"Nouzen's ability is invaluable for reconnaissance purposes, after all. We can't afford to put any strain on him outside of combat, lest he break when we need him most... Though, he doesn't appear to mind Lerche, at the very least."

"Yes."

Vika was probably right; Lena's repeated questioning of "*Are you sure?*" and Lerche's constant questioning of "*You are not pushing yourself, are you?*" didn't seem to cause any undue strain

on Shin. He even made an uncharacteristic grumble, asking if they really distrusted him that much. Lena only pestered him so often because she thought that reaction of his was cute, but this, she kept to herself.

"I'm sure even the Federacy would love to control that ability of his or mechanically replicate it somehow... I'm willing to look into it, if you would let me."

Vika spoke with such indifference and in a tone that was clearly jesting, which prompted a curt response from Lena.

"No."

"Yes, I figured as much." The prince shrugged offhandedly, making it clear he wasn't offended in the slightest.

Before they left the United Kingdom, Crown Prince Zafar gave Lena a rather long list of *Things One Must Never Allow Vika to Do*. Lena sagely noted, though, that not telling Vika about this was for the best.

After all, the list had a line written in red text on top of it that went as follows: *Vika. If you're reading this, I'm sure you know this by now, but you must not, under any circumstances, do any or all the things listed here. Any of them. With no exceptions. You're not allowed to employ any broad interpretations of the things written here, either.*

And for some reason, Lena couldn't help but feel that Vika was twice as dangerous as she thought he was. To make the list doubly important, it was signed by both the crown prince and the king himself. The document quite frankly terrified Lena. Just what did this boy do other than develop the Sirins? Her curiosity was no match for her fear, and she didn't dare put that question into words.

"Are you sure you're fine with being treated as a commissioned officer, Vika...? You've spent some time here already. Does anything strike you as inconvenient? If there's anything you want, we could try to accommodate for it so long as it's within reason."

The Federacy had successfully deployed its forces in the United Kingdom, and so the time came for the United Kingdom to fulfill its end of the bargain and dispatch personnel who would serve the Strike Package. The commander of those forces was Vika, who now served as commanding officer of the Alkonost unit and

direct subordinate to the tactical commanding officer. He had been integrated into the Strike Package's chain of command as a lieutenant colonel.

Given his rank, he was provided with a field officer's accommodations, which were of course far better than anything a company officer was given. But this was by the standards of a soldier, not a member of a royal family.

"In the United Kingdom, royalty doesn't get any preferential treatment when it comes to accommodations. Well, perhaps in a military base, we do, but on the front lines, we're not treated any differently. I've no complaints in regards to my room or my treatment. For an impromptu base, it's a fine place. Except..."

"Yes, what is it?"

"...it's quite hot around here."

Vika spoke with clear, blatant annoyance, which made Lena's eyes widen with amazement for a moment before she burst out in laughter. He wasn't wrong. He grew up in the north, and until just a short while ago, he was on a battlefield where the Eintagsfliege imposed a lengthened artificial winter. But now, Vika was thrown into the sweltering heat of early summer and was struggling to get used to the climate.

"This is no laughing matter. Have you ever been to my country in the dead of winter? It's said those not native to it describe it as a chill that freezes the very soul. Even some natives of our country say that."

"I'm sorry. I'd love to come visit someday, though."

Someday, when the war ends.

"Yes, do come visit. I'm sure you'll think fondly of this infernal heat when you do."

Lena smiled.

"Yes, someday."

She then changed the subject.

"The Strike Package and the 1st Armored Corps—well, Captain Nouzen will be taken off combat operations for a while following this operation. We'll be moving to the neighboring city, both to take time off and to use their education facilities..."

"I've heard. In fact, weren't you placed on leave as of yesterday? President Zimmerman invited them to go back, I

believe?"

"Yes. He's the legal guardian for Shin's group, so they've returned home to him. Shin and Frederica have already gone back... And today, Shin..."

Lena closed her eyes, a smile on her lips. Shin had always rejected the idea thus far, but today, for the first time, he said he might want to meet that man.

"...went to meet his grandfather. Marquis Nouzen."

Upon entering the hall, Shin found the crest of a headless skeleton brandishing a sword emblazoned on the wall. It was a familiar symbol. Very familiar, in fact. Enough to make Shin stop and look up at it without even realizing. It was identical to his brother's Personal Mark, which served as the basis for his own.

"This crest has been handed down the Nouzen line since its conception."

The old butler, who had been showing him around and gone on ahead, turned back and returned with this explanation. He was clad in an anachronistic tailcoat and a silver monocle and stood with his back straight. This butler, too, didn't seem to make a sound when he walked. He simply moved as if sliding along the floor, like a lurking shadow.

"It also appears on the cover of the picture book the master sent to celebrate your birth as well as your elder brother's. It contained the exploits of your forefathers, slightly corrected so as to make them clear for children... Your father eloped to the Republic but still routinely sent the master letters. The master obstinately refused to reply to any of them but did send those picture books. He said he would have to make an exception for auspicious events."

"....."

"Your brother did not care for the book, but apparently, it was your favorite... I hear that upon enlisting in the Republic, your unit's Personal Mark also used a skeleton motif. Did you remember this picture book? Perhaps, you still felt attached to it?"

"...No."

The butler asked with a hint of hope and expectation in his

voice, but Shin simply shook his head. He didn't remember it. He couldn't remember it, at least not yet. But Rei probably did. He would always read it to him when he was younger—this picture book Shin had loved.

Shin thought he finally knew why Rei made this emblem his Personal Mark. At first, Shin used to think it was an act of cynicism at his inability to die. But after reuniting and being saved by him, he continued to think about it.

And now he knew.

Brother, there...there was never a moment when you truly hated me, was there?

"Do you think Shin's already with his gramps?"

The 1st Armored Corps, and the Spearhead squadron along with it, had been on leave since the previous day. As such, there weren't too many familiar faces in the base's PX. Come noon, the dining hall was almost deserted.

Theo was the one who had spoken up, sitting in a table by the window, with sunlight shining in. Kurena, who sat opposite of him, snuck a glance to the side. The Eighty-Six had their families and hometowns stolen away by the Republic, and many of them had no homes to return to regardless of whether or not they were on leave. Some, like Shin, were first-generation immigrants to the Republic and still had some relatives, but they were the minority.

And so many of the Eighty-Six weren't in the base now, but they didn't go home. Instead, they were out shopping or having fun in the neighboring town. Raiden and Frederica went back to Ernst's estate, while Anju went shopping with Dustin, who was showing her around since she wasn't familiar with the Federacy's cities yet.

Kurena still said nothing. Since they'd only just returned, the cooks put their best effort into the lunch they served, but she didn't touch her food. Something—thoughts of someone who wasn't here—was bothering her. Theo cracked a wry smile.

"C'mon, you don't have to make that face. They're just meeting each other and talking for a bit. He'll be right back."

That person knew Shin's parents, though Shin himself couldn't

remember anything. To Shin, meeting his grandfather would only serve to remind him of the things he'd lost. But that wasn't true. This was a chance to *take back* the things he'd lost, at least in some form. He now wanted to reclaim those memories. And so Shin chose to meet his grandfather—a meeting that he'd rejected so far.

"It's fine. He only just left. He'll be back soon."

"...But..."

Kurena started to say something but then fell silent. Theo had a feeling he knew what she was trying to say, though. Right now, he was going to return to where they were. But that might not be the case the next day. And even if it they didn't go their separate ways then, it would happen someday. The day would surely come. Their bond might not come undone; they might not even tell each other good-bye, but the homes they returned to—the places they chose to stay—would eventually be different.

And had they died in the Eighty-Sixth Sector, that day would never have to come. Their times of death may have been different, but they would die in the same place. Death would certainly come for all of them, equally. And so they'd never had to think about this. They were better off not thinking about it.

And yet they did survive. They were still alive.

"It's true for us, too, Kurena."

"....."

"We don't have anything, but we still have to think about it: What are we going to do next? ...How do we want to live from now on?"

Shin entered the parlor he was led to, and two figures who seemed to have been waiting for him rose to their feet. One of them was a tall old man, with black hair that had mostly turned white. He had a pair of black, hawklike eyes. Next to him was a kind-looking old lady who, by contrast, was quite short and had a roundish face. Her white hair was done up elegantly.

"You are..." the old man, Marquis Nouzen, started to say.

There was something desperate, almost clinging to his question. Shin felt himself choking up a little at the tone of his

voice. How should he answer that question? Eventually, he managed a small nod before hanging his head. Nothing else came to mind.

The realization made Shin bite his lip. He knew it would be this way, and still, he felt nothing. This man was supposedly his grandfather, and yet facing him didn't bring about so much as a stir of emotion. They may have been blood related, but even so, this man didn't strike him as anything but a stranger.

And being reminded of that fact...saddened him a little. He felt his chest tighten.

But in contrast to Shin's internal struggle, Marquis Nouzen grew emotional, his eyes welling up with tears.

"You've certainly grown. And you do very much look like them. You bear the visage of my son, Reisha, and the princess of the Maika clan."

"Your hair and physique are of the Nouzen bloodline, but your face—it is like Yuuna's. As is the color of your eyes," the old lady appended tenderly.

Shin noted the red shade of her eyes, which hid behind her round glasses. The crimson eyes of a Pyrope. Shin had heard that Marquis Nouzen's spouse—Shin's grandmother—passed away a long time ago. And since the Empire's nobility hated the idea of mixing different bloodlines, she could not have been a new wife.

Noting the confusion in Shin's gaze, Marquis Nouzen hummed in understanding.

"This here is Marquess Gelda Maika... Your mother's mother. Your maternal grandmother, as it were. I thought that if you were to meet me, you should also meet her."

Marquess Maika smiled and bowed her head respectfully. Marquis Nouzen gently curled his lips upward.

"Now then, where should we begin? After all, to you, we are just unfamiliar old people. We may be related to you by blood, but I'm sure there's much you wouldn't want to tell us."

"For now, well, let us have tea together. Do you like sweets? I've brought some jam, made of strawberries from our greenhouse. Please take some home with you, as a gift."

She spoke with a smile, and it took Shin a moment to realize she was waiting for an answer. He parted his lips, looking for the

right words. They felt so distant to him that he still had to search for what to say every time. But if he didn't answer, he wouldn't be able to truly converse with them.

He may not have felt any emotion toward them yet. They were strangers he'd only just met for the first time. And despite that... these people knew his mother and father. They remembered the life he had back when he was still happy.

"...I personally don't like sweets very much. But my unit's mascot and my superior officer will probably be very happy to have this... Thank you very much."

Marquis Nouzen smiled warmly.

"Right. Then let's begin with that... I would love to serve you a dinner best suited to your tastes, but sadly, I don't know your preferences. My head chef is standing in the hall at present, at the end of his wits. I ought to give him even the smallest hint. You will stay for dinner, yes? If it suits you, you may spend the night here."

"...No."

Shin could somehow tell that for how composed his grandfather was when he said those words, it took the man a great deal of courage to muster them up. And that made Shin smile all too naturally as he shook his head.

She had lost her family in the large-scale offensive, too. And she had no home to go back to, either, despite being on leave. So he informed Ernst that morning that he thought to invite her to come along when they went to bring Theo and the others home.

He had to go to where she was—where Lena was.

"I'll head back home for today... There's someone waiting for me."

AFTERWORD

You just can't help but love auroras!

Hello, everyone, this is Asato Asato. Well, IT'S NOT LIKE I GOT TO SHOW THE AURORA in the United Kingdom arc. And it takes place at a snowy battlefield, too! And I didn't get to show any diamond dust, either. Actually, I've never seen either of them in real life myself...

In the past, they said the aurora was the shine from the Valkyries' armor. The Strike Package pilots Reginleifs, which are named after a Valkyrie, so I really wanted to have them fight under an aurora. But I couldn't work it into the story...

Also, this is a bit of a digression, but Shin and his group's unit during Volumes 2 and 3 was the Nordlicht squadron, which stands for *northern lights*, or *aurora*. I had it in mind since way back then, and I still couldn't get to show it. It's so frustrating. I'll do it someday...!

...Or not. Snowy battlefields are too annoying...

But let's put my whining aside. Thank you, as always! *86—Eighty-Six, Vol. 6: Darkest Before the Dawn* is here for your reading pleasure. This volume concludes the United Kingdom arc. I'm sorry for taking so long...!

This time as well...or rather, especially this time, Shin loses his way in the most grandiose manner possible... Shin, you're supposed to be the protagonist. Could you please cut it out? Please? (An author's desperate attempt to pressure their character.)

- The gates of Hell:

- This volume features a certain passage from canto 3 of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. It's originally transcribed from Eriya Taniguchi's translation of the book (published by JICC, March 1989). I couldn't include it directly in the story, so please allow me to place it here.
- The Thrones:
I know you all love panjandrums!
Wait, you don't know what a panjandrum is? Well, look it up. Actually, the basis for the Thrones wasn't the panjandrum but, like Vika mentions in the book, a medieval defensive weapon used during siege battles. Also, anti-tank roosters and anti-tank dogs really were things that had been planned to be implemented. Anyone who's interested in hearing more about it is welcome to look it up.
- That entire exchange in the second half of chapter 3:
Shin seems to have forgotten, despite all the embarrassment it afforded him, but the Reginleif's mission recorder registers everything that's said in the cockpit... And he has a duty to submit the mission recorder's data along with a written report at the end of every mission...
• Rest in peace, Shin.

Lastly, some thanks.

To the editors in charge of me, Kiyose and Tsuchiya. The Phönix's final form going from what it was in the end of Volume 4 to its form here is all thanks to your feedback!

To Shirabii. Thank you for all the stunning illustrations you contributed this time as well, along with the cover art for Dengeki Bunko Magazine's April issue. You gave us Shin and Lena standing side by side, once again...!

To I-IV. I took up your suggestion, and the Reginleif pulled off that trick! It was in a bit of a different form, but it happened in the climactic battle at the end!

To Yoshihara. Volume 1 of the manga is approaching its first turning point. Kaie got an extra chapter, and boy, was she the most adorable little thing there...!

And to you readers, who took up this book. Thank you very, very much. The story's really taken off since Volume 4. But now, Shin and Lena face the fact that they've only just met and know so little about each other. That conflict left them confused and worried. But in this volume, this conflict reaches a turning point. What conclusions will they each come to? Please join these two as they find out.

Oh, and don't worry; the series is still going to continue. It's ongoing, so please stay with us. Also, Volume 7 is gonna be a lighthearted story, so look forward to it.

Really, it is! I'm not lying!

In any case, I hope that, for even a short moment, I was able to take you beyond the gates of hell, to the frigid plains of inferno and the battlefields of woe. To where his doubts lead him to embark, and where she sees him off, shivering all the while.

Music playing while writing this afterword: "Lost One's Weeping"
by Neru feat. Rin Kagamine

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