

13 DEAR HUNTER

ASATO ASATO

ILLUSTRATION:
Shirabii

MECHANICAL DESIGN:
I-IV

86

[EIGHTY-
SIX]





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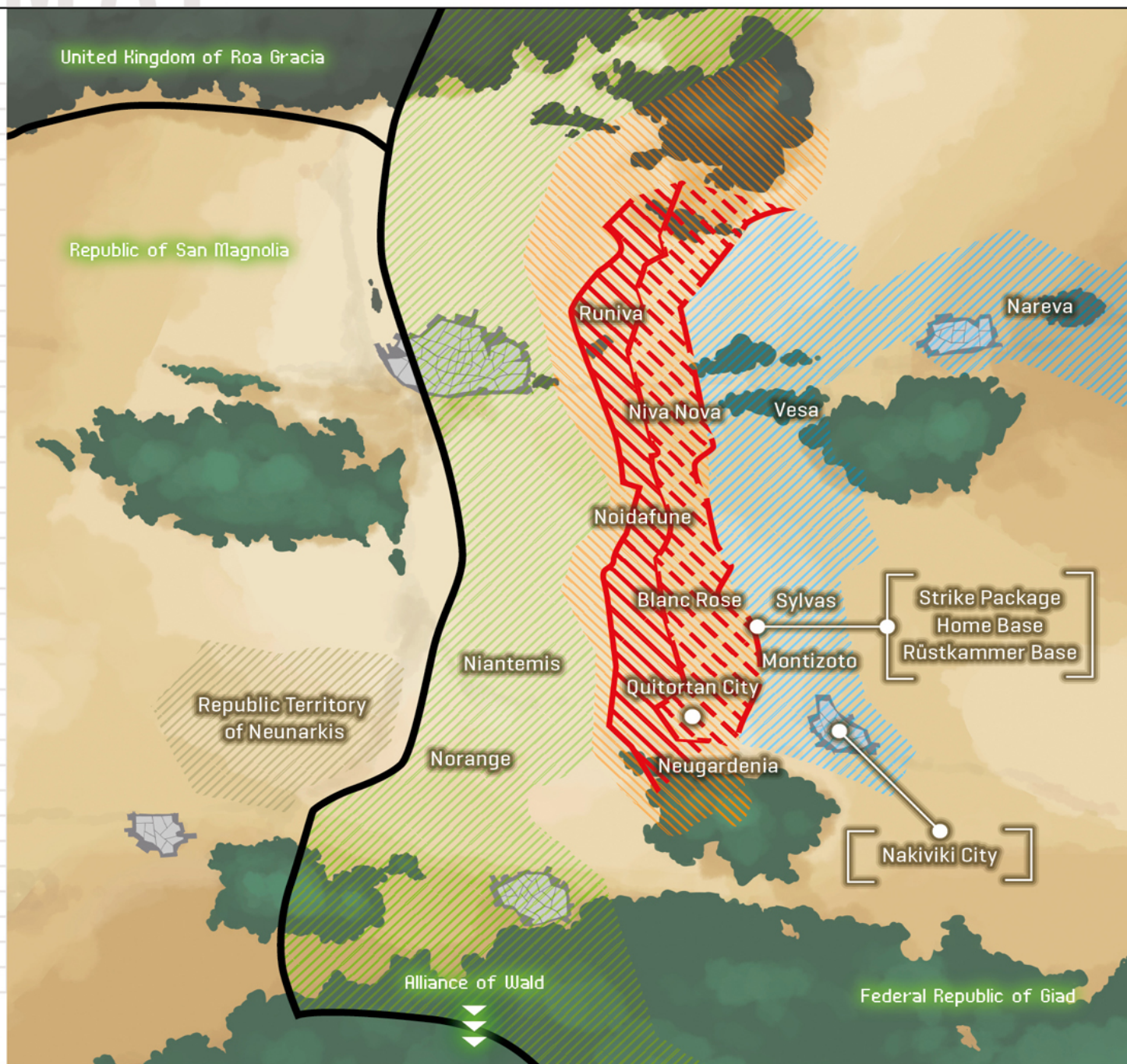
MECHANICAL DESIGN:

I-IV









NEW YORK





[OUTLINE]

-  Former Border
-  Saentis-Historics Line
-  Logistical Support Deployment Area for the Western Front Army
-  Combat Territories
-  Production Territories
-  Combat Territories Currently Under Legion Control

Shinei Nouzen

A young man once 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 Eighty-Sixth Strike Package and leader of the Spearhead squadron. Ranked captain.



Vladilena Milizé

A Handler girl who once fought alongside Shin and the Eighty-Six. Later reunited with Shin and his group and volunteered in the Federacy's army as a Republic soldier, becoming tactical commander. Has currently been withdrawn from operations and is away from the front lines. Ranked colonel.



Frederica Rosenfort

An orphaned daughter of the old Empire of Glad, where the Legion were developed. She cooperated 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. Her blood is the key to stopping the Legion forces, making her indispensable for the coming operation.





Raiden Shuga

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. Vice captain of the team.



Theoto Rikka

Personal Name: Laughing Fox. Was severely injured and lost his hand, leading to him stepping down from the Spearhead squadron.



Shiden Iida

One of the Eighty-Six and a subordinate of Lena's following the departure of Shin and his group. He heads Lena's personal guard, the Brisingamen squadron. Is "incompatible with Shin on a genetic level."



Rito Oriya

An Eighty-Six boy and captain of the 7th squadron, Claymore. Was once a member of a squadron Shin belonged to.



Claude Knot

Platoon captain in the Spearhead squadron. A distinctive boy with red hair and striking eyes. Has an Alba half brother.



Olivia Aegis

A young male officer with a feminine appearance who has been dispatched to the Strike Package from the Alliance of Wald. He serves as an instructor for a new weapon-control system.



Kurena Kukumila

A young woman of the Eighty-Six and an exceptionally skilled sniper. She finally confessed her feelings for Shin and moved forward.



Henrietta Penrose

Lena's best friend. In charge of researching the Para-RAID system. Nicknamed Annette.



Yuuto Crow

An Eighty-Six commander of the 4th squadron, Thunderbolt. A taciturn but skilled pilot with exceptional survival skills.



Reki Michihi

A young woman of the Eighty-Six who joined the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package, like Rito. She captains the 5th squadron, Lycaon, and she is very quiet and sincere.



Tohru Ranshi

Took over as 3rd Platoon captain after Theo left the unit. A good friend of Claude, who understands him perfectly.



Willem Ehrenfried

Chief of staff for the Federacy's western front. A cunning man, but he does care for Shin and his young comrades above all else.



Anju Emma

A young woman of the Eighty-Six. She appears graceful but shows a much more ruthless side during battle. Is in a romantic relationship with Dustin.



Dustin Jaeger

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



Grethe Wenzel

Ranked colonel. Brigade commander for the Eighty-Sixth Strike Package, who understands and supports Shin and his group.



Viktor Idinarohk

Fifth prince of the United Kingdom of Roa Gracia. Nicknamed Vika.



Lerche

The first Sirins, developed by Vika. She possesses the neural network of Vika's deceased childhood friend.



Yatrai Nouzen

A young man expected to become the next head of the Nouzen family. Leads the elite Crazy Bones Division.

The people probably do not know...that though love and curses
may seem to run contrary, they bear an uncanny resemblance
to each other.

EIGHTY-
SIX

ASATO ASATO PRESENTS

ILLUSTRATION/ SHIRABII

MECHANICAL DESIGN/ I-IV



86

— Dear Hunter —

Volume
THIRTEEN

86

[EIGHTY-
SIX]

The people probably do not know...that though
love and curses may seem to run contrary to
each other, they bear an uncanny resemblance
to one another.

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

13 DEAR HUNTER

ASATO ASATO

ILLUSTRATION: Shirabii

MECHANICAL DESIGN: I-IV

People grow indifferent, scornful, and afraid.

Of battle. Of death.

Of the other.

—*VLADILENA MILIZÉ, MEMOIRS*

PROLOGUE

WHEN I LOOK UP

It was like the palace made of moonlight from her favorite fairy tale. A pristine, pure-white, dazzling town. Unlike the big city she used to live in before, it was a newly built suburban commuter town. It had the wide, straight roads and clearly demarcated blocks unique to the Republic, lined with stylish buildings and elegant streetlights.

It'd been designed by young, talented artisans to serve as a home for new civilians who would raise the next generation of the country. Flowers bloomed around the plazas, parks, and uniform houses. It was a beautiful town, like something out of a dream—out of a fairy tale.

The Alba, who'd lived in this country the longest, and immigrants from other lands who'd been living in this country for many generations already saw the Republic as their homeland, and their cities had established relationships with one another. And so this new town was home to immigrants from the United Kingdom of Roa Gracia, as well as families like Citri's, immigrants who'd been there a much shorter time in comparison. The families who lived there belonged to many different races.

There was only one pure Alba family, in the home next door to hers—a family of immigrants from the Giadian Empire. Yes, her next-door neighbors.

Where her childhood friend, who was the same age as her—Dustin Jaeger—lived.

The Jaegers were nobility in the Empire, so Dustin was

raised with the mannerisms of a noble child. Despite being a boy, he conducted himself maturely and properly. He was confident but calm, soft-mannered, and kind. He would never treat younger children or girls cruelly, a far cry from the rowdy boys around the block who would tug on her hair or throw bugs at her.

Compared with them, he was a fairy-tale prince.

She liked him. Admired him, perhaps.

She would go to the garden and make him a crown or ring of flowers as thanks for helping her, and he would always agree to put it on. Knowing Dustin treated her like a princess, too, made her happy.

They'd go to school every day and play together when they went home. He would walk her home and wave goodbye, promising to see her the next day.

Until that night came.

When she woke up with a start, she found that she was in the prefab hut they'd decided to stay the night in the previous day. It was the management office of some bridge she didn't know the name for, built over a large river she didn't know the name to, either. Located on the city outskirts where people rarely passed by, the place was abandoned, with its staff having gone home hours ago. Last night, they'd picked the lock and sneaked in.

It was early morning, and despite some light snowfall, the sturdy architecture of Federacy buildings and the warmth of her friends kept the cold at bay. They had been her close friends and confidantes ever since their time at the Eighty-

Sixth Sector's lab, and she'd gathered to go on this journey now, before their time was up.

Still, the majority of them weren't here. They either hadn't found their way here, or they had no intention of joining Citri's group. The Republic citizens' evacuation point wasn't particularly hidden, but it hadn't been extensively publicized, either, so they were probably fine...

As she got up, pulling off the coat she used as a blanket, she found the other girls had just woken up, too. Kiki and Karine. Ashiha and Imeno, Totori and Ran and Shiohi.

...Wait. One of them was missing.

"Where's Totori?"

Karine, who had long, straight red hair, shook her head slightly. She was an older-sister figure to everyone, both in the laboratory and for this group in general.

"She left in the middle of the night."

Like a cat that realized its death was near, she'd wandered off to find a place to die in solitude.

No, not *like*. That's exactly what happened.

"...I see."

Still, if nothing else...

...she'd departed this deserted riverside on the outskirts of the town, leaving the emptied management hut behind her. She'd walked into the unpopulated darkness on her own, vanishing silently into the night. The fact that no one had to get caught up in her fate was, if nothing else, a small

comfort.

This was why they'd gathered here. Seeking that same fate.

Realizing someone else was missing, Citri glanced around, seeking the other person who should have been here, who accompanied them while aware of their fates.

“Where's Yuuto?”

Her friends held back a chuckle at how she looked like a baby chick searching for her parent.

“He's out to gather food. He said the morning market is probably open this time of day.”

“He told us he'd be back before the people in charge of the hut return, but he added that if he's late, we should wait under the tall tree over there,” Kiki said with a smile, sitting curled up and hugging her knees.

She had a petite figure and short, soft golden hair.

“I was surprised when you brought him along, Citri. What if he got caught up? But I'm glad he's here. Thanks to him, we can eat hot, fresh food.”

Since Citri and her group needed to avoid being seen, Yuuto both guided them and went out to buy them food along the way. Whenever possible, he'd stop by a stall and get them hot food. When they were away from town, he started campfires and made them tea or heated up canned food. There was even one time he killed and cut up a pheasant without using his gun.

Since Citri had no experience with skinning a fish, to say

nothing of hunting of any sort, everything he did looked like magic. And the hot food he served them helped warm both their bodies and hearts in the wintry climate of the Federacy, which was situated near the continent's north.

It was so good, it made Citri tear up the first night they had it. The warmth of the soup he made, so hot that she almost burned her tongue on it—coupled with the red glow of the campfire lighting up the darkness—struck her as both wistful and precious.

...These were the skills he had to learn when he fought on a battlefield that was far colder than the Federacy's winter and snow.

It was because he kept on fighting—not just against the Legion, but against the snow and darkness and the woods, against the cold malice of humanity—that even now, he could live on as a proud lone wolf in this freezing, snow-leaden world.

He was nothing like them, fawns who couldn't so much as start a campfire because they'd spent their days snugly in the darkness of a laboratory. He was a man who fought and survived.

For some reason, that realization left her feeling terribly... lonely.

“—Oh, you haven't moved yet?”

Even a building used only during the day on the Federacy's outskirts was well-built, and so the door opened without a creak. Yuuto peered inside.

Despite it being days since they left Sankt Jeder, his fair

features showed no signs of fatigue. His face looked completely collected and sober, which Citri found unbelievable given how groggy she felt.

He gestured in the direction he came from.

“It should be a while before the managers come here, but we should probably move out early just to be on the safe side. The town’s bigger than I assumed last night, and there are people going around here during the day— Wait, what?” He dubiously turned his eyes to Citri, who looked up at him in surprise.

“Nothing.” Citri shook her head.

Bright silvery hair. Slightly orangish, dusk-colored red eyes. He was like a pure, crisp moon, like the sole source of light burning in the dark of night. That’s what she thought of him.

CHAPTER 1

I UTTER THE NAME

The Federal Republic of Giad's combat areas were located in the northwest of the continent. During the dark days of winter, it wasn't spared from the Legion's tyrannical grasp. And yet the cold soil under the curtain of powder snow was harder than metal, making the four northern front lines relatively preferable. By contrast, the southern and western fronts were brutal. The snow that fell during night melted due to sunlight and the atmospheric temperature. The resulting water seeped into the land and turned the whole area into a quagmire.

It wasn't a sea of mud thick enough to impede the Löwe and Dinosauria, but it did slow down towed howitzers and supply trucks, and it tripped up the armored infantry. Any trenches they dug were full at the bottom with freezing muddy water, sapping away the soldiers' body heat, stamina, and morale.

And this was doubly true of the poor infantry soldiers who had to sit there, exposed to the cold in their metal-black combat uniforms and snow camouflage overcoats.

The steel army walked across the trenches. The final soldier who'd stayed behind to fight somehow managed to crawl out of the trench, only to trip over his numb, freezing legs and fall over. Before he could cry for help, a Löwe's stake-like leg crushed him. Its revolving machine guns roared, firing sweeping barrages at the fleeing soldiers. A moment later, 155 mm explosive shells rained down and exploded above the suppressed trenches, unleashing a

shower of self-forging fragments over the murder machines. This was the final artillery support the soldiers who just died had ordered.

“Now! Charge! Take it back!”

Such barrages were fired over several spots in the trenches, positioned to strike the advancing Legion from three directions. Infantry charged out from surrounding trenches, kicking up snow as they rushed, diving into empty trenches under the covering fire of their allies. They shot at Legion that survived the bombardment, aiming from close range with their rifles or otherwise using what precious few 88 mm anti-tank guns they had. The trenches they slid into were covered in equal parts slush and the blood and remains of their allies.

The Federacy’s unique trenches, which were perpendicularly bent to soften shock waves, and the steel and concrete anti-tank barriers were all worn out and crumbling from days of nonstop fighting. Their allied armored unit was pulled back to the rear, relegated to mobile defense, and wasn’t there to help them.

“There are no Vánagandrs to help us, and the artillery units have their hands full supporting everyone. So we’re the only ones who can protect this place!”

Stopping for a smoke became a habit of hers ever since the second large-scale offensive. She blew out a puff of violet smoke into the cold, snow-specked air. The artillery commander’s daughter, with her long black hair and black-rimmed glasses, looked over her battlefield covered in snow and mud.

Artillery units fought their battles by firing high-firepower ordnance, deployed dozens of kilometers behind the front lines. Things weren't as hectic as they were on the trenches built right before enemy lines, but so long as fighting continued on the front lines, requests for artillery support came in nonstop.

And so in what scant moments of pause they found between one battle and another, her subordinates had time to eat their proper meal for the day—combat rations consisting of a main dish of a meat pack, with biscuits they could dip and crumble into the sauce. In the meanwhile, she took her cigarette and got her share of caffeine from a cup of coffee substitute.

“Looks like everything's abuzz on your end, artillery girl.”

She glanced back, catching sight of a familiar young man—the commander of the armored division. The armored division, too, was called in to intercept the enemy wherever the infantry's trenches were being broken through, leaving them with little time to rest, but they seemed to have found some time to return for supplies and maintenance. Armored weapons were extremely heavy, which strained their engines, requiring maintenance equal to their operation time.

He had a cigarette between his teeth, and a noncommissioned officer walked over and lit it for him. His tanker jacket was faded from overuse, and fatigue was clearly visible on his soot-covered face. Behind him was his eight-legged mechanical mount, encased in mud up to its underbelly.

“Right back at you, armored kid. Doesn't look like the scraps' offensive is dying down anytime soon.”

“Sadly. This one’s gonna last awhile.”

He curled up the corners of his lips, a cigarette in his mouth and his eyes mirthless. The long battle was exhausting him, but there was no end in sight nor was the situation tipping in their favor. He wouldn’t be able to keep going if he didn’t at least force a smile.

“I wasn’t keeping count, so this is just me eyeballing it, but...I have this feeling the Legion’s numbers have only increased since this offensive’s started.”

The artillery commander’s daughter frowned. “I guess the Legion that used to be Eighty-Six finished their massacre in the Republic.”

“And they’ve changed their methods on top of that. This isn’t them just throwing big numbers at us to pressure our front down. They’re watching how we fight back and luring out the less organized units, sending in their main force there to break through them. That’s how they’ve overrun sectors with a lot of reservists multiple times already.”

To make up for the massive casualties they suffered in the first large-scale offensive, the Federacy military had to rely on reservists and cut down on their training time. Soldiers with insufficient education and training were also less disciplined and organized. They couldn’t compare with veteran soldiers who spent the last decade surviving the Legion War.

They made small but significant errors in judgment and were easily rattled or perhaps simply unlucky. The new soldiers fell apart in situations where experienced soldiers were able to hold on.

“And to take back that lost footing, veteran units have to throw themselves into danger and lose troops. The flights to heaven have been awfully crowded since last year’s large-scale offensive. Too many to send back, too. Those who don’t make it in time end up packed together and frozen.”

If it wasn’t autumn, I’d have slid a bug down your back by now.

When Vika told him this, it took Shin a second to realize why he said it—before it dawned on him that Frederica must have told him her real identity of her own accord.

Her true background was information they didn’t disclose to others out of concern for her safety, but if Frederica herself had decided to tell him, he wasn’t going to disagree with that choice. Vika seemed to understand that, so his talk of sneaking bugs down people’s backs was just a joke.

...Except his words prompted Lerche to charge at Shin with a poor frozen butterfly in hand, so Vika only treated it as a joke because he couldn’t find a bug even after looking for one.

Either way.

“—Oh. You already know where the *base* is. So you were already drafting the *plan* when the satellite bombardment cut you off.”

Since he was already in on the secret, Shin saw no need to hide *everything else* from him. Shin called a meeting for some made-up reason and was now seated at a table with Raiden and Vika.

“We already decided on the operation’s name, what units would participate, and its date before the second large-scale offensive happened. But now that the situation’s changed, we need to reexamine our information, and we’re reformulating which units should take part.”



Operation Overlord.

Its goal was to seize a Legion command position and use Frederica's blue blood as an empress to configure who had command rights over the Legion. Since the murder machines were still carrying on the Empire's dying will, she could order them to shut down or self-destruct. It was a grand operation aiming to put an instant, decisive end to the Legion War. And with the second large-scale offensive surrounding all humankind and pushing them against the wall, it was their last chance to turn the tables at the eleventh hour.

"The free regiments we were hoping to include in the operation ended up being deployed across different fronts to compensate for casualties, and they can't be moved... Problem is, we don't have much time to prepare."

Prior to the meeting, Shin had checked on progress with Joschka, who told him the elite divisions under the major nobles, kept out of combat so far as reserves, were being sent into battle. On top of that, the nobles were considering conscripting more soldiers to make up for their insufficient numbers.

The Strike Package for Operation Overlord, and so once Lena returned, he wanted Frederica to tell her and Grethe the truth. As brigade commander and tactical commander, Grethe and Lena would need time to consider the operation. And besides, having to withhold the truth about the possibility that the war could soon be over weighed on him. Being able to confide in Vika about the operation made him feel the slightest bit guilty, however.

He got the feeling that Lena could end up becoming oddly

jealous if he didn't tell her soon.

With this concern—which was both strange and inconsequential in the grand scale of Operation Overlord—crossing Shin's mind, he looked over at a map of the western front displayed on a holo-screen. Raiden raised a brow, apparently sensing what he was thinking, and Shin decided to kick him in the ass later.

“Recently, several corps-size Legion forces have appeared on the western front. These forces aren't the same size as the ones that wiped out the Republic... If I had to guess, a surviving country to the west or south must have fallen.”

It must have been a country from the southern or far west countries—which they hadn't been able to establish communications with—or perhaps an eastern, far eastern, or southwestern country.

Vika scoffed. “New units have appeared on the United Kingdom's eastern and western fronts, too. The one on the eastern front is probably the one that destroyed the Fleet Countries, but we don't know where the one on the western front came from. Your assumption that a country must have fallen is likely correct.”

“Even a large country like the United Kingdom and a mountainous one like the Alliance are being pressured. It only makes sense that smaller countries would end up falling... The Federacy isn't going to last for much longer, either.”

Even just holding their positions resulted in a mounting death toll, while the enemy's numbers only increased. Even with refugees joining the conscription pool, they were starting to scrape the bottom of the barrel in terms of how

many trainees and reservists they had. The Federacy truly wouldn't last long.

Eventually, they'd end up in a situation much like when Vika used all his remaining Alkonost units to retake the Revich Citadel. Right now, their only choices were to either throw themselves at a breakthrough solution, reckless though it may be, or wait until the enemy ground them down to nothing.

“Yeah... So we have to pick the bare minimum of forces we'll need and confirm the information we have. Once we have that, we'll make our move.”

This was the first time she was entrusted with having to explain things like this.

“This is about our plans for the time being. The Strike Package won't participate in operations on any of the fronts.”

Gathered in HQ's briefing room were the captains of the 1st Armored Division—like Michihi and Rito—and their lieutenants, as well as Shiden, who was the captain of HQ's defensive unit. And standing before them and giving the briefing was Kurena, who seemed rather excited. Claude and Tohru were also there to offer extra information if needed in place of Anju, who was absent.

“So we'll remain in training until we're informed of our next operation... We can't all get time off, but in between training, we'll take turns to rest.”

“Oooh.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.”

“Also, engineers from the western front’s forces will be coming to set up a new reserve position in the strip of the Zasifanoksa Forest that’s next to the base. We won’t be helping with the construction, but we can stay up to date on its structure.”

Mitsuda, commander of the 5th Battalion, raised his head.

“Reserve position? I thought the western front’s army was spread along the reserve position on the Saentis-Historics line. Are they setting up a reserve position for the reserve position?”

“The Saentis-Historics line became the new main line after the reinforcement work was done. They don’t want to fall back any farther than this, but they do need to set up a position they can retreat to if it comes down to it.”

“...Oh. They’ll reach the fields and factories if they fall back anymore.”

All fronts in the Federacy, the western front included, had been forced to pull back to the very edge of the combat territories. Since the Federacy had the largest territory in the continent, they still had land they could retreat to in terms of sheer surface area. However, the next time they’d be forced to do so, they’d be in the production territories, where the farmland and factories that supported the Federacy’s vast population were.

A front’s army included tens of thousands of troops. Placed over a stretch of land, they would take up a hundred kilometers, including the rear ranks. They’d end up occupying the entire outer circumference of the production

territories.

“So they have to be prepared for everything,” Michihi said, looking up at the ceiling.

Indeed, resolved as they were to defend their homeland, they had to be prepared for the worst.

Locan, the 7th Battalion’s commander, raised a hand. “I understand training for the operation, Kurena, but what about supplies?”

“About the Reginleifs’ parts, we’ll be supplied the bare minimum we’ll need on the next shipment.”

The Strike Package was deployed in a rotation, with one of the four armored divisions on leave. During that time, that division’s Reginleifs were sent back to the factory for inspection and overhauling. But now all four divisions were to deploy to the operation together, with every spare unit and those scheduled for inspections being sent out. This plan was meant to resolve the issue.

The captains all responded negatively to the words *bare minimum*, so Claude appended, “They don’t have enough to deliver the amount we need, but Supplies and Arsenal are busy like crazy right now. Colonel Grethe had to do a lot of convincing to secure us this shipment, so no complaining. Also, try not to wreck your units.”

The captains nodded with strained smiles, but Shiden piped in:

“Roger that, I guess, but if yer gonna ask someone not to wreck their unit, you might wanna talk to your captain first, Claude boy.”

“True enough. I’ll let him know.” Claude nodded nonchalantly.

But this was no joke; she really would have to tell him not to do anything reckless with his unit going forward. With that thought in mind, Kurena took over the briefing again.

Shin looked coolheaded, but he was actually really prone to letting the blood go to his head... This was something Kurena only realized recently.

“Er, and about getting new troops. The Vargus civilians are finishing training over in Fortrapide City, so they’ll join us, mostly as accompanying infantry. Other units aren’t in a position to lend us their infantry anymore.”

“...Mostly as infantry?”

The captain of the 6th Battalion, Kunoe, sighed. It was almost like the new troops were meant to compensate for Processors who might die in the battles to come.

“I hate this... I thought I was used to this, but seeing our friends die still hurts.”

At least until Operation Overlord starts, Kurena thought.

The details were still undecided, so they couldn’t tell the others yet, but eventually, they’d inform all the captains and Lena, who wasn’t here. They needed to let Grethe know, too. She was a colonel, meaning she wasn’t a noble, but she didn’t know about Frederica’s identity. As brigade commander, she needed to be informed about the operation.

Shin and the others had spoken to Frederica and decided to wait and see how Ernst and the other top brass of the

military would respond. But before that, Kurena would need to ask Bernholdt to arrange a meeting with the new Vargus recruits, and she'd need to check the defensive formation, too...

Whoa...

Being commander meant you were really busy, as it turned out. Kurena frowned, trying to keep her expression out of sight.

“...Like you said, if we can identify the communications satellite, we'll be able to confirm if the base...if Zelene's information is true or not.”

Operation Overlord hinged on the authenticity of the base, making it the most crucial bit of information when it came to boosting the operation's chances of success. Shin brought up the communications satellite Zelene had mentioned as one possible clue, and Vika nodded.

“If the Rabe moves in to operate in its place in case it's lost, that would imply the satellite is in scheduled communications with the base, even if via relay. If that's the case, locating the satellite shouldn't be that hard. After all, when the satellite bombardment happened, the Federacy was able to notice the change in how many satellites were up there.”

Artificial satellites remained in orbit and floated at a high altitude, hidden above the horizon. This made them difficult to detect, but depending on how strong a radar's output was, it could spot satellites from a great distance, and under certain conditions, they could even be seen with the naked eye. If any satellites that remained in orbit after the second

large-scale offensive existed in records dating back to the start of the Legion War, it was likely the satellite they were looking for could be among them.

“If we can identify both the base and the satellite, we’ll be able to record how long their transmissions take. Indeed, if we can identify a transmission, we’ll be able to confirm it’s between the base and the satellite...and if we’re lucky, we might be able to directly transmit a shutdown order to the satellite from outside, without taking the base.”

If the satellite was caught on radar, that meant it was within range for transmissions to reach it. However...

“That’s impossible, isn’t it?” Shin promptly cut him off.

“Probably.” Vika nodded, unaffected.

If it was possible to transmit to the satellite and update command ownership over the Legion from anywhere, Zelene wouldn’t have mentioned the base as the key to shutting down the Legion. And given they hadn’t deciphered the communication encryption the Legion used, falsifying a transmission would be difficult. And of course, a military satellite’s security wouldn’t be easy to crack.

Raiden, however, cut into their words. “Wouldn’t you be capable of that? Intruding and falsifying.”

“I won’t say I’m not, but... Come to think of it, Milizé asked me something similar not long ago. If I’d have spent the years I worked as a commander on the front and improved the Sirins, developing their artificial intelligence, I might have been able to do that. But if I’d focused on that, the United Kingdom wouldn’t have lasted. So I told her that I had no intention or time to do so.”

It was possible technologically speaking, but he lacked the resources to do it. Hence, he could do it, but he wouldn't.

“Stop saying complicated—”

“Hacking into the communications satellite would likely take me that much time. Would you like for me to step away from the fighting to do that?”

His homeland couldn't survive for years, so clearly, they couldn't wait for that. Even knowing this, His Highness asked that question. Raiden shrugged.

“No, we need you here. We've got Lena and Major Zashya to function as commanders without you, but they can't fix up the Sirins.”

“Running your mouth, aren't you?” But even saying this, Vika flashed an amused smile.

Come to think of it, Shin had stopped hearing them call Vika by their nickname for him: *Your Highness*. Pondering this, Shin put the conversation back on track.

“We'll need to confirm the satellite is actually working first... Won't that be enough to confirm the base, too?”

“It'll be better than nothing, and that's the Intelligence Department's work regardless... By the way, have you heard of how the Intelligence Department got the Merciless Queen, with how she refused to answer anything confidential, to actually talk?”

“Mm? No.”

“Torture doesn't work on the Legion, does it? They must have forced her somehow, then.”

Vika had an expression like he just heard a truly funny joke.

“They used coercion... They read out the names of important figures who’d died or gone missing in the Imperial faction’s last resistance one by one, then had Zelene repeat the names to identify who was a Shepherd and who wasn’t.”

“ ... ”

Speaking the names that Shepherds had in life was a violation of protected information. And so if she was able to repeat a name, it wasn’t one, and if the protection prevented her from doing so, it would identify that name as a Shepherd. However...

“...Isn’t that just a lot of busywork?”

Shin had no idea how many people were listed, but the important figures would likely take a long time to read out. Imagining it painted a rather silly image.

“The interrogators took turns over several days, and it made Zelene overheat, causing her issues a few times. All they were doing was testing for ways to question her, so you can sympathize with her for when the real questioning begins. Formulating the right questions would take considerable time, too.”

“Gotta feel bad for ’em...both for Zelene and the people questioning her.”

Shin had to agree. But on top of that, he came to a realization.

“...They could use that method to get her to expose the

name of that base's commander unit. If there's a recording of their voice anywhere, some old transmission or anything, I'll be able to tell if they're really in the base—"

Raiden and even Vika looked apologetic for some reason.

"We can't know for sure if the commander unit for that base is necessarily from the Imperial faction, but yes, that could work."

"So they'll keep reading out the names of Imperial soldiers they've confirmed are Shepherds, then have her say if they're the commander of the base. That's extra stupid work."

This meant that Zelene would be forced to repeat that stupid image over and over again. Shin did think he wanted to go see her once before the operation. But now...he felt like he needed to hear her complain.

"But, Shin, would *you* be all right doing that? Getting close to the front lines and that base put a strain on you."

The distance between the active battle zones and the base was still far relative to the Eighty-Sixth Sector. And with the Sheepdogs active, which hadn't been a problem back then, the wailings of the Legion were much stronger now. Indeed, since the second large-scale offensive started, there'd been more instances where the strain felt too much to bear.

But Shin replied with that in mind. Yes, it was harder on him, and he appreciated the concern, but... Well, if he insisted on digging his own grave.

"Yeah. So handle my paperwork for me for a while, *Vice Captain* Shuga."

“What?! Why, you...!”

“...If that’s all it takes to get the load off you, that’s good, but we can’t afford to have you collapse before the operation. Zelene trusts you, so having you question her would be ideal. And having you move away from the fighting for a while is efficient since it’ll give you time to rest, too.”

Ignoring Raiden’s complaints, Vika casually gave his advice, to which Shin shrugged. The Strike Package would certainly participate in Operation Overlord. Shin had no intention of staying out of that operation, and he doubted any of his comrades wanted that, either.

They were Eighty-Six, after all. They trusted only in their own strength and that of their comrades, and they resolved to fight to the very end. The meaning of their battle had changed for each of them since they left the Eighty-Sixth Sector, but the will to fight on remained the same for all of them.

And so as their commander, leaving the unit for even a short time was a choice that Shin couldn’t afford to take, both in terms of keeping up with his training and maintaining the unit’s morale.

“I can’t do that.”

Upon spotting Anju returning from the base’s annexed maneuvering ground alongside Dustin, who was in his tanker jacket for the first time in a while, Frederica hurried over to confirm his return to duty. He was exempt from operations and training for the moment due to the Republic of San Magnolia Relief Expeditionary Force.

“Ooh, Dustin. Are you well enough to be out and about already?”

But once she asked that, Frederica realized what had happened and curled her lips up into a smirk. She didn't need to hear an answer to see he was doing well enough.

“...My, my.”

He was already clearly tired on his feet. He was too exhausted to even lift his head, and Anju, who contrasted him in how unaffected she looked, cracked a strained smile.

“He's gotten pretty rusty. He's motivated enough, but his body isn't keeping up with his mind.”

“Much to my shame...”

“I told you, you can get back in shape and work on your reflexes, but it takes time to get used to it... What should we do, though? I don't think I can train with you every time, with the way things are now...”

She was free now because she'd had Kurena, Claude, and Tohru handle the briefing, but with preparations for Operation Overlord on top of her usual duties as platoon captain, she was quite busy. She was, of course, ready and willing to help Dustin get back in shape, but she couldn't do it at the cost of her responsibilities.

“Don't worry about me, Anju,” Dustin said, his head still hung from exhaustion. “I know how busy you are right now. I'll ask Yuuto or...Ichihi—whoever's free—for help, so I'll manage.”

He brought up the names of his fellow 6th Platoon members, but he was so tired, he couldn't pronounce the

second name right. And with how bad his mental state was, he ended up blurting out his unfiltered thoughts.

“I mean, ideally, I’d love to have you help me train...but we eat together every day, and we hang out when we’re free. And we put up those dried flowers together, and making bouquets together was fun, so honestly, I’m good for now. I can’t take any more of your time.”

“D-Dustin?!”

Anju glanced between Frederica and Dustin in a flustered manner, and hearing her panic, Dustin finally looked up and recalled Frederica was there. Frederica, meanwhile, appeared a bit stumped on how to respond to this stream of gushing, and she eventually decided to smile with all the kindness of the Holy Mother.

“It seems you two are happy together every day.”

“Oh gosh...!” Anju ran off, red in the face.

Dustin, left behind and with his face every bit as flushed as hers, stood stock-still with Frederica staring at him.

“...Being happy together every day is all fine and dandy, but I will have you know Anju is a big sister to me. Make her cry, and regardless of what Shinei will do, I will personally throw you out to the Legion.”

“You heard about that...?!” Dustin looked at Frederica, aghast.

“Of course I did. I was made aware of every little detail, bikinis included.”

Dustin slumped to the ground in despair.

“—Anyway, that’s all we know for now.”

“I’ll check up on the operation’s progress status with Joschka later, and I’ll report what we know and give him our advice. If the major nobles are still grumbling about which forces to pick, I’ll have Ernst put them in their place.”

“True to your words, you’ve grown strong. Using your bloodline and backing like that.”

“...That’s only because we don’t have the time or leisure to be picky about our methods,” Shin replied with a glare, but not one directed at Vika.

His foster father was Ernst, the president of the Federacy. Knowing him, he’d resist the idea of further conscription, which was fine, but his job wasn’t to turn ideas down all the time. So in place of conscription, he’d force the nobles to hand over their troops.

If he was going to preach his ideals of not sacrificing children, of not sacrificing people, of putting his life on the line to defend what’s worth protecting, it was about time he put some effort into saving people without having to take losses.

But that thought made Shin wince. There was another reason Ernst didn’t approve of Operation Overlord.

“There’s also...Frederica.”

With time running out and not enough soldiers, the military’s top brass could make a move to keep the new Imperial faction, who posed a threat to Frederica’s safety, in check. During the operation itself, the Strike Package would always be around to protect her—using their achievements

thus far and Shin's importance as a reconnaissance unit—but this time, the Onyx and Pyrope nobles would be sending out their subordinates. This meant Pyrope units would be in the operation, too.

In all likelihood, this included the new Imperial faction's units—the units loyal to Archduchess Brantolote, who sought to supplant the former Imperial line. Of course, the Federacy wouldn't go around openly exposing the empress's survival to the new Imperial faction, but anything could happen on the battlefield. They would have to assume things wouldn't go as planned, and there was a chance they would find out.

“Can't we say she died in battle?”

“We could, assuming that would work...”

They could handle the slander of bringing a young Mascot girl to the battlefield and getting her killed, but they couldn't be sure that would actually shake off any questioning that followed.

“...Vika, at worst, could she seek refuge in the United Kingdom?”

“You're asking me that knowing it's a volatile proposition. Don't be unreasonable.”

He couldn't consent to it, after all. His Highness grumbled with a sour expression and, with that same expression still, appended:

“To begin with, we shouldn't be having this discussion without her present. She has come to terms with things in her own way, and we should not ignore her resolve. Just like

how you...”

You, the Eighty-Six, would not want others to make light of your pride.

Shin fell silent for a moment. It felt like a long time ago now, but it'd been only a year ago that they were taken in by the Federacy, and Ernst, Grethe, and the Federacy's people hurt their pride in what they believed were acts of kindness. And he was doing the same thing without even realizing it.

“...You're right.”

“I will participate in considering countermeasures, though... But yes, if the major nobles end up bringing forth their strongest units, we can expect the Nouzen clan's infamous Crazy Bones Division. Since they like being conspicuous and vying for glory so much, we can probably push all the troublesome issues onto them afterward.”

The fact that he came up with a suggestion right off the bat showed that His Highness was being relatively magnanimous this time. As Raiden and Shin stared at him, Vika gracefully shrugged as if to say this was just what they deserved. Not Shin and Raiden, but rather the infamous, conspicuous Crazy Bones Division.

“All I'm saying is that you lot do not seek glory as it is, so you may as well let them take all the credit for better or for worse. They may not want it, but in the end, they reap what they sow.”

Surely, Marquis Nouzen and Marquess Maika weren't so old and senile that they'd let the heroic Eighty-Six steal all the glory from their family, with the situation being what it

was.

At least, that's what a certain Nouzen youth said with a brave face and a hint of smugness.

Joschka shrugged in a friendly manner, a smirk he couldn't restrain on his lips. They were discussing the outcome of the forces that would be participating in Operation Overlord.

"It's not just Shin; the entirety of the Nouzen clan will be coming out to the front. Isn't that right, Division Commander Yatrai Nouzen of the Nouzen clan's prided, elite Crazy Bones Division?"

"...I think it's a better use of that elite unit compared with being worn out while fighting in the mud," Yatrai grumbled, waving a hand in displeasure. "And it'll be a joint operation with the Pyropes, so we won't be going out alone. That's why House Maika, with its claims of neutrality, decided to send out your Strix Division, too."

But this wasn't much of a retort against Joschka, who replied with a grin. They were close in age and both military officers, meaning they knew each other well enough to talk occasionally, but in the end, Yatrai was an Onyx and a Nouzen, at that. He couldn't stand Joschka.

"Good for you. Despite already being close to the current family head, the youngest child of a branch family gets to be successor. That'll do wonders for your prestige."

"Nooooo!" Yatrai grabbed his head and shouted.

Sipping tea elegantly with an unconcerned expression beside Yatrai was his fiancée, a daughter from a major

Nouzen branch family and vice commander of the Crazy Bones Division. She raised her head, calling up the controls for the holo-screen that broadcast news in the background and raising the volume. This cut off Joschka and Yatrai's argument.

“Pardon, Princess. Were we loud?”

“No, Sir Joschka,” she said, her eyes fixed on the screen.

Her lush black hair was done up and wavy. Her black eyelashes hung over her jet-black eyes.

“It's just...the contents of this news are a bit disturbing, with regards to public order in the civilian front.”

Speaking of reinforcements, Rito recalled something.

“Shouldn't Yuuto be back by now? I guess fractures take a long time to heal...”

Saki, who was Yuuto's substitute commander of the 4th Battalion in his absence, grumbled like a cat, “His injuries are already mostly healed, though.”

Saki had long black bangs, which hid her golden catlike eyes, and a lithe, feline physique that made the origin of her Personal Name, Grimalkin, abundantly clear.

“But apparently, they still can't send him into battle right after he's been discharged from the hospital. He's supposed to go home for rest and recuperation.”

Normally, a patient would remain under the care of doctors and nurses while in serious condition, and once they

were past that point, they would be sent to heal at home. That was normally the situation, at least.

“But we’re Eighty-Six; our home is this base. When he called me last time, he said they weren’t letting him go back to base because they knew he’d do something reckless during his recovery period. It happened because he ignored the nurses when they scolded him for moving around too much.”

“...Yeah, I’d say he earned that lack of trust,” Tohru remarked.

“Honestly, I really need him to come back sometime soon.” Saki fell over grumpily. “Being substitute commander doesn’t suit me... Don’t you know when he’s supposed to return, Kurena?”

Kurena nodded, sensing Saki’s gaze. She didn’t know, of course, but either Shin or Grethe were bound to know, as they were both commanding officers.

“I’ll ask.”

I have to avoid populated places.

And despite coming to that conclusion, when her consciousness cleared somewhat, she could hear the sound of countless people speaking. She looked around, her head still hazy.

They were in the corner of a plaza early in the day. The sunlight glowed through the cold, clear air of a winter morning, with countless people moving about in that scarce light. Adults clad in warm coats and capes, small children

running around with their scarfs trailing after them. Stalls were set up, selling metallic and glass-made ornaments for the Holy Birthday, which was coming up at the end of the month, or blocks of golden butter and large cakes with sugar sprinkled on them like powder snow.

No good. We have to get away from here.

She couldn't rendezvous with the others, and she didn't have enough time to stay with them, either. And at the very least, she also didn't want to get uninvolved people caught up in it.

But for all those intentions, she couldn't stand anymore. Unable to muster the strength to slip to the side of the civilian traffic, she unsteadily sank to the aged flagstone road. She felt bad. Her vision was swimming, she was breaking into a cold sweat, and her consciousness was fading again.

The foreign objects hidden inside her body were rapidly maturing, threatening to eat her from the inside out even now.

There was no time left. In the truest sense of the words, not a single moment.

But she lacked the strength to get up or even crawl away, and her crumpling body couldn't even produce a sound anymore. Even her sense of duty to at least move to where there were fewer people, along with her fear of her impending fate, was melted away by the slow, dull churning of her thoughts.

A darker shadow fell over her hazy, dark field of vision. She managed to look up, finding a figure kneeling before

her. A woman several years older bent over in concern, having spotted her curled up on the ground.

“What’s wrong? Are you anemic? Should I take you somewhere where you can lie down? Maybe I can get you something warm to drink?”

Her voice sounded genuinely concerned. Suddenly, all the passersby seemed to look at her. No one raised their voice in annoyance. A stall owner approached her to help, and an old lady got up from a bench to give her somewhere to lie down.

Aaah. I don’t want to get them involved. They’re nice people; they shouldn’t get caught up in this.

With all her mind, she forced her throat to move, uttering a single word.

“Run...”

That was the final word she ever spoke.

The black dog seemed to have intuited that Lena’s recuperation period was about to end. It loitered around her more possessively than ever before, as if to say, *You’re leaving already? Stay longer!* Lena was loath to leave it—and was a little, no, extremely inclined to take it with her, but she knew she couldn’t because Shin would be jealous.

But as it frolicked around her, she looked up at a news broadcast from the western front.

Since the sanatorium didn’t want to burden the minds of its patients, news programs—and especially those that dealt

with the war—weren't broadcast in places open to everyone, like the dining hall. But at the same time, people grew anxious when they were entirely shut off from the news, so only one of the lounges allowed these broadcasts.

Since she was about to return to service, Lena had decided to come to the lounge and check the TV, but unfortunately, the black dog rushing in after her blocked the screen with its large body.

“...An explosion?”

“In Garenike City...a town on the southern side of the old Imperial border,” a sergeant sitting nearby appended. “There was an explosion at the morning market.”

The dog blocking her field of vision finally moved away, its tail wagging happily, allowing Lena to somewhat see the screen. The newscaster kept talking, their words running as subtitles at the bottom of the screen.

The cause of the explosion was unknown, but an investigation was ongoing under the assumption this could have been an accident.

Yuuto brought back all sorts of foodstuffs, as well as a rechargeable radio he'd acquired ahead of time. He bought it to stay up to date on the state of the war, but thanks to that, everyone was able to listen to song programs and drama readings when they took breaks from their long trek on foot.

Listening to the radio while Yuuto went out at mornings to get food from nearby towns was a small, simple pleasure for Citri. Last night, they slept in an old, unused tunnel. It

was off the road, meaning people weren't going to pass by even during the day, and so they were able to stay put even after the break of dawn. Imeno, who was chubby and always reminded Citri of a chiffon cake, leaned in and asked a question of Ran, who was more serious and interested in the responsibility of watching over the radio in the mornings.

“Say, Ran, can't we change to the drama reading like always?”

Ran agreed and reached out to change the station. Right then, the news broadcast that was playing at the time moved to the next topic.

And hearing the broadcaster's words, Ran, Imeno, and Citri all froze. Because what they just heard was the news they feared most.

“An explosion...incident...”

“...In Garenike City.”

“Isn't that...near the house that took Saya in...?”

Saya, one of their friends from the laboratory—one of the Actaeon. The last one they'd called to join them on this journey, who didn't join them in the end.

Citri covered her face in grief. She'd called her so this wouldn't happen. She knew Saya, out of everyone, didn't want this to happen.

“We didn't make it...!”

“You're new around these parts, boy. Must be one of the evacuees from the territories, yes? You sure bought a lot.”

“Yeah, my little sisters are tired and cold, but they get hungry just the same, so I have to do the shopping.”

“Ah-ha-ha, being the big brother of the family must be rough. Gotta take care of your kid sisters, though, eh?”

The lady running the fried-bread stall didn't doubt Yuuto's made-up story, and he stuffed some of her freshly baked bread into his rucksack. Some had sea trout and mushrooms in cream, while others had sugared fruit. Feeling their heat through the bag, he made his way back to the tunnel on the city outskirts where Citri and the rest were waiting.

Though his steps were fast, he didn't walk so quickly so as to arouse suspicion. The abandoned tunnel was far enough that people wouldn't normally approach it. But he wanted to deliver the buns while they were hot, both because he didn't want to waste the stall lady's goodwill and because keeping everyone's stamina up in the cold weather was the natural course of action.

And besides any common sense during winter, Citri and the girls were especially thankful when he brought back hot food, and it put him in a very...strange mood. Warm, plain food from a stall and heated-up canned meals made them incredibly grateful—somehow, despite sleeping outdoors for so long, no one in Citri's group knew how to start a campfire.

...They were different. The wiretap children were all different from Yuuto and the other Eighty-Six, who were tempered on the battlefield. Unlike them, who survived by stepping over the corpses of their comrades, their hands were unsullied by blood and death.

“...Mm.”

He stopped in his tracks, hearing the news broadcast from a radio in the street. An explosion in a city in the capital's area. What made him frown wasn't the incident in and of itself. Citri had already told them there were more Actaeon than the seven who set out on this journey. And of the many Actaeon, not all of them necessarily met their ends in secret—like Totori, who had sneaked away in secret the other day, did.

It was possible one of them could end up dying in front of people—and at worst, those people could be caught up in their fate. This was something Citri and the girls never said out loud, but Yuuto suspected as much. This was why he'd entrusted Amari with reporting the situation to the Federacy military.

What drew his suspicion were the reporter's words: *unexplained explosion*. He had Amari report the Actaeon to the army, so this shouldn't have been “unexplained,” like no one knew anything about the Actaeon.

“Did they not get the report? Did anything happen to Amari—?”

No.

“—They're doubting my words.”

He may not have fled from the front lines, but going missing without approval would be considered desertion. And they wouldn't take a renegade soldier's testimony seriously.

...It was all for nothing.

Shaking his head once, Yuuto walked away.

“—One of the eastern countries must have fallen, then.”

In addition to the conclusion and advice about the command base, Shin informed Joschka about the increase in Legion numbers on the western front. Joschka grumbled over the Resonance.

“The pressure on the western front as well as the adjacent fourth southern and fourth northern fronts has increased. Likewise to the nearby first northern and southern fronts. Legion attacks on the second and third northern and southern fronts are getting more frequent, too. We can probably assume they sent any remaining forces there as reinforcements.”

Shin narrowed his eyes. Things were worse than expected. In the Republic, his ability could extend as far as the former Imperial territories, but it wasn't vast enough to cover the entire land surface of the largest nation on the continent. He did expect the enemy's numbers would grow on one or two of the other fronts, though.

Joschka growled in a troubled manner. **“We really have to move up the operation, no matter how difficult it might be. At the rate the Legion are going, we won't have four months of time to spare.”**

If any of the surviving human nations were to fall, the Legion forces fighting that nation would join the fight against other fronts. And if that country was already stretched to its limit, the reinforcements would end up pushing them over the edge, destroying that next country and leaving the remaining Legion forces free to take to another battlefield. If that cycle were to repeat enough times, the Federacy's fronts would collapse. And even if not,

they wouldn't have available forces to send for Operation Overlord, leading to its defeat.

“We'll have to go for conscription after all.”

“Maybe, as a desperate measure. We wouldn't want to end up scraping the bottom of the barrel, but it will at least give us the numbers to make up for the armored units we don't have during the operation.”

Scraping the bottom of the barrel—in other words, soldiers without stamina or talent, who weren't counted on to complete any operations. They were expendable troops who could only be expected to stand up straight, walk, and maybe squeeze the trigger a few times.

Still, with enough numbers, they'd make for a fighting force. A bullet's efficacy wasn't influenced by morale or skill, and having enough people shooting could even compensate for low accuracy. Expendable soldiers also didn't require any selection processes, and high numbers meant there was no need to spend time training them, either...but of course, anyone sent out to fight was expected to die.

It would mean that even if the Federacy invoked a draft only for the duration of Operation Overlord, they would have to expect vast casualties.

“So your extra information about the base is appreciated. Oh, and ask the prince if he can provide us with some Sirins. We'd like to send them on recon runs around the base.”

“I'll let him know.”

“...Between this and tracking the enemy’s movements, I’m sorry I have to ask you for so many errands.”

Shin made to respond but was briefly distracted by a memory. The one who’d call the final shots on Operation Overlord wasn’t Joschka but someone much higher, and yet...

“That’s fine by me, so long as we get to keep custody of her for the duration of the operation.”

He sensed the suggestive smile behind Joschka’s reply. **“I don’t mind personally, but...she better not mysteriously disappear once it’s all over. The battlefield’s a chaotic place, so if she happens to go missing, we can’t go looking for her.”**

Shin keenly picked up on the implication he made. If she went missing during combat, she wouldn’t be pursued anymore... No. They wouldn’t *let her be pursued* anymore. If nothing else, the only value Joschka—or rather, Marquess Maika’s house—had for Frederica was as a tool to put a stop to the Legion War, and they had no interest in giving the Brantolote archduchy any further authority.

“Of course. And if she were to die in battle, that would just cause irreversible damage.”

“That would be the worst. I know one mean, screeching auntie who’d cry nonstop if that happened. So you better be careful, Big Brother.”

Be very careful and prepare thoroughly, so that Archduchess Brantolote won’t see through your plan—you need to fake a clear, undoubtable death for her. Even

burning her unit would leave behind a corpse, so better to have a tank shell blow it to bits.

Shin thought back to the many terrible sorts of deaths he'd seen in the Eighty-Sixth Sector as Joschka brought up a question.

“Oh, and while we’re on the topic of running errands, I have one more thing to ask. There haven’t been any Legion that sneaked into Sankt Jeder’s surroundings, be it self-propelled mines or anything bigger, right?”

This was an odd question, Shin pondered. The capital’s position was set so it was surrounded by production territories, with combat territories on the outer circumference of that circle. In other words, the capital of Sankt Jeder was as far from the battlefield as could be. But he checked just like he was asked and confirmed there were no Legion there.

To be exact, he did spot a few, but they were incredibly far and hard to hear, and their voices were weak to begin with, plus they were up in the sky. So those were probably Eintagsfliege riding the wind or some such. Since the Eintagsfliege were lightweight and the flapping of their wings was weak, it wasn’t unheard of for that to happen.

As he took off the RAID Device, wondering why Joschka would ask him that, he passed by the lounge and heard Guren’s voice.

“...Whoa, not again.”

“It’s creepy, isn’t it? It’s been happening over and over,

but no one's declaring who did it or why."

Having tuned in to the news by coincidence, Guren and Touka talked over what they saw. Listening in to a snippet of the broadcast, Shin came to a realization.

"...So this is what he meant."

Joschka had been asking him about this. Explosions had gone off in the capital area and an adjacent central territory. At this point, they were being regarded as terrorist bombings; there'd been ten incidents since the first one in Garenike City, but the culprit behind them hadn't been discovered yet.

Joschka's concern that a self-propelled mine had entered under the cover of the Eintagsfliege's optical camouflage and sneaked as far as the capital made sense, then. It wasn't entirely impossible, but so long as he was on the western front, Shin would have surely sensed it, so that couldn't be the case. What's more, even someone who'd never seen a self-propelled mine would be able to tell it wasn't a human being. And if it was a self-propelled mine, the incident wouldn't have been reported as a terrorist bombing—it would have been reported as an attack by the constructs.

But that thought made Shin frown. It wasn't a self-propelled mine, but this was exactly why...

"...I imagine the people around the capital must be anxious."

Relative to a terrorist attack, there were few casualties. But that was just to say that some did die, and the thought of oneself or one's family getting caught meant that fact offered little peace of mind. Since the attacks were sporadic in both

time and place, it was impossible to know what the bombers were after and therefore impossible to avoid them.

I just hope we figure out what this is soon, Shin thought as he walked away.

The serial terrorist bombings were an unpleasant affair for those investigating them, too. They were completely inconsistent in terms of time, place, and how many people were around, like a series of explosions with no rhyme or reason to them. These were seemingly random bombings with no demands made or a single word of announcement. No recognized anti-government movements or other organizations to speak of claimed responsibility for them. There was no guessing at what the motives or objectives of the bombers even were.

The only thing the incidents had in common was that both eyewitness testimonies and roadside security-camera footage revealed that the culprits of these bombings were all girls in their late teens. And—

“Again, there are reactions of an explosive, but *nothing else*.”

No cord or fuse that would be attached to a bomb, no radio receiver or timer device. No ball bearings or nails that would normally be included in an antipersonnel bomb. Nothing of the sort was discovered at any of the scenes.

Because of this, there were very few direct victims of these incidents relative to a bombing. Only those directly adjacent to the detonation got caught up in the blast, and the people who tried to run and ended up trampled were larger in number. In some cases, the only one who died was the

bomber herself. They must have had explosives strapped all over their bodies, because they were blown to bits like they exploded *from the inside out*.

And when more precise security footage and eyewitness testimonies came in, the investigators became all the more confused.

“...The bomber said, ‘Run’?”

The bomber then blew up immediately after, but a nearby stall owner said he definitely heard her say that. Camera footage of another bomber showed her clearly avoiding populated places and going into an alley, where she then blew up. The girl was very unsteady on her feet, and as soon as she made the corner, her feet stopped near a stray cat, and she exploded.

This was, indeed, the most baffling part of it all. They went as far as to detonate explosives in the middle of a city, only to seek to avoid victims, with an unexpectedly low death toll that could only be explained by them trying to minimize how many got hurt. One girl blew up while hiding in an abandoned house, and one of them went so far as to blow up in the middle of a field with no one in sight.

But then an investigator peered at the face of the girl in one paused video.

“This girl... I’ve seen her somewhere before.”

His colleagues immediately looked up, curious, as he gazed pensively at the footage, his brows knit as he traced back his memory. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it, so this wasn’t someone he knew personally, but—

“It was recent... Right, it was a wanted-person directive. Yeah, one the army shared with us...”

And upon remembering it, he nodded. Even back then, he'd thought there was something strange about the girls.

“She was one of the Eighty-Six who ran away when they were rounding up the wiretaps.”

Amari instantly delivered the report like Yuuto asked, but the unpleasant MP wrote it off as a lie and ignored her pleas, instead focusing on Yuuto's “desertion.” He kept questioning her about where he was headed and what for, but if she'd have said he was heading “back home” to the Republic, he wouldn't have believed her. And if he wasn't going to believe a thing she was saying, she preferred to say nothing at all.

This apparently marked her as an accomplice, and she was restricted from leaving the recovery facility. This pushed back her return to Rüstkammer, and Amari had no choice but to simply loiter in the lounge with energy to spare.

She noticed a shadow cast in from the entrance to the lounge. Raising her eyes with her head resting on the table, she spotted that same unpleasant MP. He looked around and, upon spotting her, walked over with swift steps.

“...What? I already told you everything,” Amari said, her expression sour.

The MP replied with a stiff expression. Standing next to him was an unfamiliar older soldier who was, based on his rank insignia, his superior officer.

“True. I didn’t listen to you. I said I’d pass your report along, and I didn’t. Forgive me... Please tell us everything one more time. Everything you know, everything you’ve heard.”

“...I guess the Federacy isn’t a monolith after all.”

As they watched the news on the bombings, which had become a constant on TV, Annette said this to Theo as they had tea together, which they’d started doing more often. Theo turned his jade eyes to her. His colleagues eyed them coldly just the same, but their relationship wasn’t anything noteworthy.

Annette raised a slender brow and looked up at the food court’s large TV.

“They really mention a lot of different suspicious groups. ‘The noble liberation front’ this, ‘the purification church’ that... And yeah, the liberation front makes sense; it’s a group calling for the independence of territories the Empire occupied, but...”

“Yeah...” Theo heard things like this about the Federacy, or rather, the Empire. “They were on bad terms back when the Empire existed.”

The rivalries in the Federacy became more pronounced once one enrolled in the military. There was prejudice between former nobility and the civilians, the Onyxes and the Pyropes, and prejudice toward the Vargus, which Bernholdt had told him about.

And in the United Kingdom, there was the division between the vassals and the serfs, and within the vassals,

there was antagonism between the Iola and the Taafe. And even within the Eighty-Six, there was prejudice toward those with Alba or Imperial noble blood. Things had likely been similar within the Empire.

One's language, culture, social class, or the racial features they were born with. People were scorned and cast out for the most minor details.

“Kurena tells me they sent a military unit just out of rivalry with Shin's grandfather. If the army's top brass are still like this, it's probably the same all over the Federacy... Ah.”

Theo trailed off and turned around, realizing that the footsteps he'd been hearing in the background were approaching their table. A noncommissioned officer with a military police armband approached with a group of officers. They nodded at Theo and turned their eyes to Annette, who looked taken aback.

“Pardon us... You're Major Henrietta Penrose, yes?”

Having caught a transport flight from the nearest base to the sanatorium, Lena stopped at the capital for a connecting flight back to Rüstkammer. Upon arriving there, she was met with an unexpected reception.

“Er...?”

“Colonel Vladilena Milizé, I've been expecting you.”

He was roughly her age, meaning he was a special officer. A black-haired, black-eyed Onyx boy with a gaze that was both frank and somehow didn't allow for anyone to read his

intentions. He had a second lieutenant rank insignia, and despite him waiting for her, she didn't recall ever meeting him... Actually, no.

She suddenly recognized him. It was the adjutant of Commodore Willem Ehrenfried, the western front's chief of staff; he was always standing behind the commodore like a shadow.

“I ask that you follow me and don't resist.”

Dustin got to his feet in shock. The news was playing on a large TV screen in the Rüstkammer base's first dining hall. Three of the terrorist bombers were identified: Hina Shinaga, Saya Hiyo, and Yukiri Hakuro. All three were Eighty-Six who'd disappeared from their homes, and the police were searching for their peers who'd gone missing at the same time as key suspects. If any of them were spotted, they were not to be approached but immediately reported to the authorities.

The mug shots of several girls were shown, and one of them—a girl with flaxen hair and bright violet eyes. Fair, ephemeral, with kind facial features.

He could never forget her. Even a decade later and with her having aged, Dustin wouldn't mistake her for anyone else. She was his classmate...his childhood friend. A girl he assumed died after she was rounded up and taken to the Eighty-Sixth Sector along with most of his town in the space of one night.

“...Citri...?”

The newscaster expressionlessly read out her name. *Citri*

Oki.

Lena did not make it back on the day she was supposed to return—instead, notice of her arrest came in. The message itself didn't mention an arrest, but she was taken into custody against her will and locked up, making it essentially an arrest. This was obviously inappropriate treatment, given that she didn't know anything.

“...What is this? Why do this?”

As Shin drew on her in outrage, Grethe, who sat across the table from him, didn't fault him for his demeanor.

“A security issue came up. That said, Colonel Milizé isn't responsible for any of it... Captain, have you seen the news about the serial-bombing attacks?”

Shin knit his brow dubiously. Checking the news during breakfast was part of his daily routine, so he was broadly aware of it... In fact, on the way here, he'd heard the news reported on the suspects when he passed by the lounge.

He didn't realize, however, that Grethe avoided calling them terrorist attacks, though.

“Do you know why they're doing it?”

“Not why, but how... You can ask her for the details and talk to me later.”

Grethe gestured with her eyes at someone he hadn't noticed sitting in the lounge suite. Amari. She got to her feet nervously. She'd been injured since the Mirage Spire operation and sent to recuperate in the capital. Come to

think of it, she was set to return to base soon, but he hadn't gotten word about her being discharged yet.

Her usual stern expression looked unusually flustered and weak this time, though.

"I'm sorry, Captain. I was going to report it; I didn't think it would turn out like this..."

"Amari, that's fine. Explain what happened. And..."

Someone else was set to come back from the capital at the same time as her, so if she'd returned, he should have returned before she did.

"...where's Yuuto?"

As she entered a room in the military HQ, Annette, who'd been sitting anxiously on the edge of a sofa, got to her feet.

"Lena!"

"Annette. You too...?!"

Lena caught her in a hug as she hurried over, and the two of them clung together for a moment. Seeing her friend's argent eyes soften slightly with relief allowed Lena to meet her with a reassuring smile, but then she turned around to the other person who walked into the room. Her attitude instantly went from relieved to authoritative.

"I demand an explanation, Second Lieutenant. What is the meaning of this?"

"It's a security measure," replied the young officer in a calm voice, despite having basically arrested Lena and taken

her to this small annexed building in the military headquarters in Sankt Jeder.

He placed her trunk and TP's carrier, which he'd taken out of her hands, next to the sofas and then continued. This was a lodging facility for high-ranking officials, with an attached suite bearing appropriately fancy furnishings.

"I believe this is my first time meeting you, Major Penrose. Allow me to introduce myself. Second Lieutenant Jonas Degen, affiliated with the western front's general staff headquarters. I serve as aide-de-camp to the chief of staff, Commodore Willem Ehrenfried."

He repeated the full name and affiliation he'd told Lena. But now, faced with two sets of silver eyes on him, he looked back at them and gave her his actual position, which he hadn't disclosed to Lena earlier.

"But at present, I operate as the Degen family's sole child, who works under the family led by Marquis Ehrenfried. In other words, my master, Willem Ehrenfried, is taking you into custody for your protection, and I am here to keep appearances in the eyes of the rest of the army."

Lena frowned. That certainly wasn't the right way of wording it.

"...Under his protection?"

"Yes. Protection." Jonas unapologetically nodded.

His features were sincere and youthful to the point of making him appear nearly baby-faced, but his cold expression masked his thoughts and emotions.

"I apologize this had to happen so suddenly. However,

this is all quite related to the two of you. The one who got the report neglected to tell their superior officer, and so we've fallen very much behind..."

"These aren't terrorist attacks. But it might be some kind of new self-propelled mine."

The commentator in the government-sponsored broadcast wore a severe expression, standing for how dangerous the situation had become. And what he said was equally severe.

"All the missing Eighty-Six were parts of the ten thousand Eighty-Six child soldiers we rescued a year ago. It's not unthinkable that a new type of self-propelled mine, one that's indistinguishable from a human, may have been among those ten thousand."

No, it is unthinkable. What an absurd idea.

Even regardless of Shin's ability, that theory seemed impossible, Theo thought angrily. His anger mostly came from the fact that Annette had been taken away right before his eyes, and he'd been powerless to prevent it. The MPs had conducted themselves courteously enough, but it stopped with their conduct. Annette had clearly been confused and scared at having been suddenly surrounded and taken away. Theo had tried to step in and stop them, but one of the officers predicted he would and moved in to intercept.

He'd asked the officer what this was about, but all the officer said was that it was a "security measure." Theo knew the military operated on a need-to-know basis, but emotionally, he wasn't satisfied with any of this.

Having seen the whole thing play out and aware of how chagrined he was, Theo's colleagues left him alone for now. But the program on TV continued prattling on, unaware of it all.

“Or perhaps it's some Legion biological weapon. Either way, it's possible that the Legion are mingled in with the large-scale, reckless criticism the military's faced since the start of the second large-scale offensive.”

He could hear his colleagues, who were likewise watching the large TV, mumble in annoyance.

“Biological weapon? What is he on about? It's not like some virus turns people into bombs.”

“No, he probably thinks they're monsters that came from some lab or something.”

“He watches too many movies. Has he ever even seen a self-propelled mine in real life? You'd have to be blind to mistake one for a person.”

Not only did self-propelled mines have no eyes, nose, or mouth, but their limbs also bent in impossible directions, and they crawled on all fours like animals. People got fooled by them in combat because battlefields were chaotic places and they were able to sneak up on them, but they weren't so well-made that anyone could mistake them for human after taking a good look.

“I mean, you wouldn't be able to tell if they actually designed them to look human...but the Legion can't make weapons that look like humans, nor can they make biological weapons.”

There was one anecdote that was passed off as a joke among Federacy soldiers. The Empire had forbidden the Legion from creating and utilizing biological weapons, to say nothing of the kind of “biological weapons” one might see in a movie.

And to keep these mechanical weapons, which were capable of learning and maturing, from coming up with loopholes, they were given an overly strict definition of what counted as a biological weapon. As a result, friendly units that only so much as carried a knife counted as breaking the protection, causing the Legion to force them to disarm. Because of this, the Legion, created to serve as weapons for the Empire, hadn’t been able to fight alongside Imperial soldiers.

“Besides, if there was some virus that could turn people into self-propelled mines, everyone fighting out there would be mines already. Especially the Eighty-Six—they’ve been battling them for years.”

“...Cut it out.”

As another soldier chided him, the soldier’s expression froze. He glanced at Theo awkwardly, but Theo simply raised his hand and waved it dismissively. This time, he didn’t say it was all good, though.

And the news program went on, still indifferent to the awkward atmosphere it created.

“We can presume, then, that conditions are similar on the front lines. In other words, it’s possible our Federacy soldiers have been unknowingly fighting shoulder to shoulder with self-propelled mines. For all we know, everyone on the front lines might be self-propelled

mines—”

“““No, that’s not possible!””” everyone in the room shouted in unison.

Watching commentators make such outlandish theories in a tense, overly serious manner did provide the soldiers on the front lines, who had little by way of entertainment, some levity.

“Wait, did you hear him, guys?! We’re self-propelled mines!” one soldier shouted in exaggerated surprise, and all the soldiers sitting around the radio gave a hearty laugh.

“Oh no, I’m gonna blow up! Mommy, I have to go to where the Legion are!”

Everyone cackled, hugging their bodies in laughter. They started bringing up the names of people who might actually be self-propelled mines—disliked commanders, selfish new recruits, or Republic volunteer troops.

—What if self-propelled mines really did get inside the country, though? That was where their families lived, and the thought of them getting hurt made the soldiers anxious. And so they needed to laugh the idea off.

Jonas spoke, his black eyes cold and emotionless.

“Surely, you’ve seen the series of serial bombings on the news. The culprits—albeit, those girls—are certainly the victims here...”

Amari spoke, her walnut-colored, Eighty-Six eyes wavering in sorrow.

“Those girls are called the Actaeon. The Republic used them—used Eighty-Six—to turn them into suicide bombs.”



The assorted proteins that made up the human body were composed of amino acids based on the RNA within the body's cells. When a virus invaded the body, infected cells started replicating based on the virus's RNA instead of their own. There were also fungi bacterium called diazotroph that synthesized nitrogen from the atmosphere to create ammonia, like small, elaborate, cell-size chemical plants.

Republic military researchers were able to use RNA to create artificial cells, protein-based structures that converted nitrogen into nitro compounds. Other artificial cells that coexisted with it had RNA that converted the nitro compounds and glycerin, which was the raw material fat was created from, into another substance.

Normally, when these two cells were placed inside a test subject's body, these two cell groups remained dormant, but once they became active, they spread to other cells in the body like a virus, injecting their RNA and transforming the cells into chemical plants that produced a certain chemical that was based on nitro compounds.

In other words—nitroglycerin. The raw material for creating dynamite.



Somehow, the Federacy was able to discover the top secret Actaeon research and associate it with the suicide bombings.

When asked why they did such a thing, Primevère only bit her lips. Researchers and high-ranking officials in the Republic military, as well as Republic government officials, had been taken in for questioning in a Sankt Jeder police facility.

“...We tried to re-create the self-propelled mines.”

She couldn't speak of the real reason in front of people who weren't her fellow Celena. No one could know about it, not the Federacy and not even their fellow Republic Alabaster and Adularia citizens.

—They did this to defend the noble Celena race.

The nitroglycerin-creating cells (dubbed “Dear”) were injected into the Actaeon. If they could implement it fully, there would be no need to train soldiers anymore or worry about insufficient troop numbers. There'd be no more need to consider if they were able or willing to fight, or fret about age or one's stamina. Anyone could work.

In the end, the Alabaster and Adularia who were subordinate to the Celena would become an ample source of people they could convert into weapons that would defend the country. So even if the Eighty-Six were to all perish before the Legion, the Actaeon could be used to defend the country. This was much more efficient and simple than the Eighty-Sixth Sector, which required both Processors and Juggernauts.

“Our country's armored weapons, the Juggernauts, have

fallen victim to self-propelled mines in the past. In which case, self-propelled mines could be effective at defeating the Legion, too.”

And so she couldn’t speak of its true purpose to anyone who wasn’t Celena. Instead of giving the actual reason, Primevére took the means—the utilization of self-propelled mines—and turned it into the reason.

The interrogator sitting before her didn’t enact any violence on her, but he gave off a vicious air that implied he would resort to it without any pangs of conscience if necessary. Because of this, she had no choice but to talk out of fear.

“The Eighty-Six were thankfully human-formed, and more intelligent than dogs or cats. By turning them directly into self-propelled mines, we’d be able to fight the Legion without having to rely on Juggernauts... What reason would we have to not develop this method, then?”

The staff of the laboratory in the refugee camps said as much, but Citri, Kiki, and the other Actaeon girls all knew that wasn’t true.

Yes, girls. The Actaeon were all girls in their late teens.

Women had a higher body-fat percentage than men, and larger adipose tissues in their chest, pelvis, and thigh regions than strictly required for survival purposes. In addition, their capacity for pregnancy—the act of carrying a different life-form within one’s body for an extended period of time—meant their bodies could exempt foreign objects from immune-system rejection under certain conditions.

And—girls were less useful than boys for fighting the Legion.

“What we are, Yuuto—we’re weapons to be used against Eighty-Six. When the Legion War ended, we’d be used to dispose of any surviving Eighty-Six.”

Looking just like the Eighty-Six, they would live alongside them—and, once the time came, detonate to kill their own.

“They were likely meant to be antipersonnel weapons. I’ve heard of an anecdote like this. A demonstration tape mentioned that if the Republic was to attack, they would fight back not just with their Republic soldiers, but with all creatures from everywhere they could find.”

This was all before Vika’s birth. It showed magnified footage of artificial cells rapidly devouring adipocytes to grow in size and eventually burst. Following that, a pig scuttered in a panic behind blast-proof glass, before rupturing in an explosion much larger than any explosives placed in its stomach could ever produce.

The Republic was an agricultural country that relied on stock farming. Their vast territory was, at the time, full of countless sheep, goats, cows, horses, and pigs—the number of livestock was significantly larger than the Republic’s population.

“Nitroglycerin. As is, it’s too unstable and reacts too easily, so like dynamite, a plasticizer is used to lower its reactivity. Either way, it lacks the force to damage an armored weapon’s frontal armor. Against the Legion, the Republic would have to use large numbers at point-blank range like the self-propelled mines do, and since nitroglycerin lacks

the necessary force, it must make up for that with some kind of trick. But when used against human opponents, all those flaws aren't a concern."

The Republic pushed the battlefield to the distant Eighty-Sixth Sector and the fighting onto the Eighty-Six. They didn't know the Legion had overcome their lifespan and thought the end of the Legion War was in sight. So if any countries survived, they'd need to begin *antipersonnel combat*.

Lerche spoke with an expression of disgust that she heard of such tactics being used across humankind's long history of combat.

"Soldiers do tend to let down their guard around women and children."

They'd come with a flower in hand or beg for candy. And once the soldiers approached, the woman and children would turn into suicide bombs, taking out enemy soldiers.

"No, Lerche." Zashya shook her head. "It's more than just that."

This was what the demonstration tape was about. It'd likely been distributed as a warning to other nations at the time, for if the Republic gained the materials needed for human experimentation...

"They would mainly be used on prisoners of war.... Imagine if a rescued prisoner suddenly suicide-bombed? Be it on the front lines or, worse yet, back on the home front, where it should be safe and peaceful."

Lerche knit her brow in displeasure. Vika finished the

explanation coldly.

“It could happen in the Federacy. They would start suspecting that presumed allies are, in fact, enemies. I doubt they made the thing infectious, but even still.”

“Colonel Milizé, Major Penrose, surely you understand. We must take you under our protection, both for your own safeties and for *this country to maintain its form as the Federacy.*”

Despite his words, Lena and Annette couldn't nod in agreement. They said nothing, their silence a clear rejection, but Jonas didn't so much as furrow a brow. They were frail Celena, and female officers at that. Even if they were to physically resist, they were as powerless as a pair of kittens to Jonas. Their silence alone hardly did anything as a form of resistance.

“As your guard and head attendant, I will assume full responsibility for your safety and comfort. However, I am a man, and it wouldn't be appropriate to attend to the needs of two ladies, so House Ehrenfried sent subordinates to look after you.”

A few female soldiers silently entered the room and bowed. They were all black-haired and black-eyed Onyxes, and every one of them had the fair but oddly forgettable features typical of former Imperial nobility. For generations, they'd disciplined themselves to serve as shadows to their masters, not seen unless it was required of them.

“They will serve as your shields, should anything happen. But on the off chance the situation requires you to leave this barracks, a few of them must always go with you.”

Fundamentally speaking, Lena and Annette were not to leave this room. The two didn't respond to this implicit instruction, but Jonas paid their silence no mind. Because just as he said earlier...

Grethe picked up the conversation after Amari, her expression stiff but her voice soft.

“We can't send Colonel Milizé to the front lines until the Actaeon incident is resolved. You do understand why, Captain, right?”

Grethe had no intention of bringing Lena back at this time.

Anger burned through Shin's thoughts, but he just barely managed to suppress it. Lashing out at Grethe here and throwing a childish tantrum would solve nothing. More importantly—

“...Still. This arrest is unnecessary. Can't we file a complaint?”

Grethe blinked slowly.

“Yes. Of course.”

“Demand that they act swiftly and diligently to resolve this, and that they confirm her immediate return once the situation is over. Tell them that the Strike Package's 1st Armored Division will not work under any commander but her.”

Leaving the office, he somehow managed to keep a front

of propriety and gently closed the door behind him. But then his anger flared up, and he couldn't stop himself.

“—Shit!”

The intensity with which he breathed the word out made Amari, who'd left the room with him, jolt. Seeing her flinch away from him, Shin forced himself to calm down. He exhaled and then asked again.

“Yuuto's RAID Device... He took it off during treatment, right? Did he have any other means of communication?”

The Actaeon asked Yuuto to take them home. As a fellow Eighty-Six, Shin could guess at what Yuuto was thinking and felt. Albeit, it came as a bit of a surprise that Yuuto, cold and emotionless as he seemed, had actually agreed to the request. But Shin didn't question the reasoning behind it.

They asked to go back home, after being deprived the right to return there. To the Eighty-Sixth Sector's battlefield. So had Yuuto contacted him and asked for help, Shin would have done what he could to provide it. Shin wouldn't have told him not to do it, and that was likely true of any other Eighty-Six.

Yuuto knew this. So why did he stay silent? Why did he hide it from everyone, like this was a betrayal?

“He couldn't take you along for this.”

Amari shook her head.

“We're fellow Eighty-Six, after all... If he'd told you or Saki, or anyone from the Strike Package, you'd have been seen as responsible for this. People would say the Strike Package colluded with the Actaeon.”

“Tch.”

Shin felt his breath catch. So this was what Yuuto feared. The Actaeon were Eighty-Six, and many people had already been lost. And Shin and the Strike Package were likewise Eighty-Six.

“He couldn’t let the Strike Package—all the Eighty-Six—take responsibility for this.”

Citri spoke, drawing her shoulders in. They were hiding in a crypt in the premises of an abandoned church sitting on the border between the Miana and the Nareva territories.

“I’m sorry, Yuuto. I didn’t mean for things to turn out like this. Neither did the girls who caused the bombings.”

Just this morning, the radio reported that another Actaeon girl blew up somewhere. Hearing the tragedy repeat itself, Citri and the Actaeon girls were all disheartened.

“We just wanted to go home before we died. To leave our new homes, so we don’t hurt anyone. That’s all we wanted; we didn’t mean anything else, and it turned out like this... So many people ended up dying because of us...”

Kiki carried on, looking like she was on the verge of tears.

“M-maybe we should have...killed ourselves. If this had to happen, maybe we should have all just ended it back when the Federacy took us in. That way, other people wouldn’t have had to die because of us. We knew that already, but—”

Yuuto cut her off, shaking his head.

“I know you didn’t want this. The information just didn’t get there in time. It’s not your fault.”

Federacy soldiers were much more diligent than the lazy Republic Handlers he knew ever were, and that had lulled Yuuto into forgetting the possibility the report wouldn’t be passed on. Grethe and the staff officers they worked with normally didn’t make light of the Eighty-Six, always listening to their reports and their opinions. And so he’d assumed all Federacy soldiers acted the same way.

Even though they made it clear that they only saw Eighty-Six as capable hunting dogs and nothing more.

But hearing Kiki’s guilty whispering, Yuuto paused for thought and continued.

“You know how Shepherds...how Legion commanders are often based on Eighty-Six?”

Kiki blinked dubiously. “...Yeah.”

“The Legion were able to overcome their set lifespans because they used the Eighty-Six as a base. Then doesn’t that mean all the Eighty-Six ought to have killed themselves before the Legion took them in, so as to keep the war from dragging?”

Kiki looked at him in stunned amazement. Citri gulped. Yuuto carried on, his eyes dropped in thought. His crimson, flame-like eyes seemed to shine from their very depths.

“If someone was to tell me that, I wouldn’t agree with them. I wouldn’t think it’s right, just rolling over and dying for the sake of all humankind.”

And so this wasn’t Citri and the other girls’ responsibility,

either. Nor did Yuuto think it was his fault for fleeing the Federacy without saying anything. He wasn't going to tell the girls they were at fault for not killing themselves, that their very existence was a threat to everyone around them and they ought to be locked up until they die.

Passing judgment on another... Yes, deciding someone's life for another—

“It isn't the right thing to say. At least, that's what I think.”



The Legion were doing more than just pressuring every front, looking for unskilled units to tear into and break through.

<<Unit composition for all Federacy fronts analyzed—shifting operation to second phase.>>

The Legion were originally made to substitute rank-and-file soldiers, noncommissioned officers, and junior officers, and even the commander units controlling the unified network of the entire Legion army didn't necessarily have the brain structures of high-ranking officers and commanders.

But among them was the Supreme Commander unit No Face, a Shepherd with the personality and memories of Republic Colonel Václav Milizé, a high-ranking commander. And he knew the blow that would lead the enemy army to collapse didn't have to be achieved through direct violence.

<<Prioritized target set. Focus on encampments with a majority of Republic soldiers. Encampments with a majority of reservists. Encampments with a majority of minority troops. In parallel, commence long-distance bombardment of rear areas.>>

Spanning the entirety of the Legion territories were train tracks capable of supporting their fourteen hundred tonnes of weight. The Morpho's mechanical, clawlike legs screeched over the newly built tracks as they made their way toward the Federacy's ten fronts.

One among them was known by the call sign Nidhogg. It was the same Morpho unit that had stalled the train during the Republic evacuation operation, and whose fire heralded the fall of the Republic. After being shot down by the Kampf Pfau, it was rebuilt in the month that followed, and it was now headed to its new theater of war in the Federacy's western front.

And its last words were:

It's our turn. Our turn. It's our turn.

Yes, it had the dying scream of an Eighty-Six. One who deliberately chose to become a Shepherd to take revenge on the Republic, to become a mechanical ghost occupying a murder machine's control unit.

His hatred was intense enough to cast his life away, and simply burning the Republic people alive was not enough to quell it. Its bloodlust had not yet been satisfied.

It reached its firing point, fixing its sights on the designated coordinates. Nidhogg was informed as to what lay in those coordinates. An impulse akin to laughter filled its Liquid Micromachine brain.

It's still our turn.

Our turn for revenge, for victory, for slaughter. We can go, right? I can get started, right? It's still our turn. From now on, it will always, always be our turn. Right?



Multiple Morpho appeared in the region surrounding the Federacy's territory. Its fire went past the firmly constructed front lines and the reserve formations built behind them, striking the supposedly safe, peaceful cities and villages with 800 mm shells.

CHAPTER 2

TO SEE EACH OTHER'S VISAGE

The investigation into the Actaeon was only beginning, so it would take time before official news of it would be passed along to the military and the populace. Still, two of the Strike Package's officers had been arrested. The Strike Package members needed an explanation as to what happened. And their reaction to what they heard were expressions of speechless disgust.

"...So that's why we found labs and operation tables in the internment camps during the Republic Relief Expedition," Siri spat out bitterly.

"First, human wiretaps, and now a suicide-bomb virus. What the hell is the Republic thinking...?" Marcel grumbled.

"It was originally supposed to be research on fertilizer," the head of the Reginleif research team said gravely. "It's really...offensive, you know?"

As an agricultural power, the Republic was an expert in para-bio technology. Researching nitrogen-fixation bacteria enzymes made sense, since they produced useful fertilizer, but they ended up creating the human-bomb virus as a by-product of that research. For researchers who'd initially been devoted to providing an abundance of food for the people, veering off in such a direction was indeed blasphemy.

Incidentally, the other by-products of their research were the agricultural growth plants that'd been used in the Republic, United Kingdom, and Alliance since before the

war, but that was neither here nor there.

“Oh, and, Second Lieutenant Marcel, the Dear cells aren’t an actual virus, so they’re not infectious. As far as we know, at least.”

Unlike a virus, the Dear cells didn’t self-replicate, instead producing nitroglycerin. As a result, they didn’t diffuse inside the Actaeon’s bodies or infect other bodies.

“We’re still waiting for the documents we seized to be fully examined, but as far as we know, they weren’t made to be contagious, so they wouldn’t spread through the Republic. Infectious biological weaponry doesn’t distinguish between friend or foe, making it hard to use. And especially with cells that turn a body into a bomb, the Republic won’t make them contagious even if there was a prophylactic treatment or a cure for them. It would be a risk to the Republic citizens themselves.”

“...?” Marcel looked shocked for a moment, but then nodded. “...Oh, I see. The Republic people wouldn’t want to be infected by the cells themselves, and even if they did, the risk of people next to them becoming a bomb would mean they could get caught in the blast, so they’d want to prevent other people from getting infected, too.”

“And the Actaeon did live with their new families for a year, and they were fine. A year is a pretty long incubation period for a biological weapon, and like First Lieutenant Shion just said, an operation was required to bring in the cells, so it’s highly unlikely they’re infectious... Oh, but, First Lieutenant Shion, do you remember any details about those facilities? Can you explain what you saw? Or maybe there’s gun-camera footage we can use...”

The head of research leaned in eagerly, likely hoping to gain information. Siri grimaced as he answered, and feeling unable to stay there any longer, Dustin silently got up from his seat and left the conference room.

After leaving, Dustin blindly walked around the corridors of the base, but it wouldn't take him to the person he wanted to find. Even so, he felt urged by something and walked around aimlessly with fast steps.

One of the girls who were on the run, one of the Actaeon who caused the serial bombings, was his childhood friend, Citri Oki.

Dustin never knew she found refuge in the Federacy. He'd unconsciously assumed she died and never searched for her, but now she'd likely been turned into one of the Actaeon suicide weapons.

Where was Citri now? Why were the Actaeon causing these bombings? Was she out there somewhere, seeking help?

I... Shouldn't I be out there? Shouldn't I find her, keep her from exploding, and actually save her this time...?!

Driven by impatience, he turned a corner without looking ahead and nearly bumped into someone. Second Lieutenant Perschmann, who managed to avoid him at the last second, glared at him with reproach. However, the emotion in her calm, green eyes soon turned to concern.

“What's wrong, Second Lieutenant Jaeger? You look terrible.”

“Nothing... Sorry.”

He must have appeared quite driven against the wall if she said that, but he had no idea how to explain it. He simply shook his head vaguely, and Perschmann seemed to understand his confusion. With a concerned expression, she took a wrapped caramel candy from her pocket, forced it into his fingers, and left.

Anju, who'd caught up to him since he stopped in his tracks, raised her voice instead.

“...Dustin.”

Right now, he didn't want to turn and face this voice. Dustin stood stock-still, turned away from her. He had no doubt that she was looking at him with her pretty blue eyes, bluer than the highest point in the sky, as she spoke with a kind tone, like she was gently touching an open wound.

...Much like Citri's eyes. Those pretty violet eyes that reminded him of the dawning sky.

“Do you know any of the Actaeon? Is it that girl you mentioned before? Citri.”

“She was my friend... My next-door neighbor and childhood friend.”

Dustin absentmindedly added that clarification, but it still made Anju gulp quietly. Dustin didn't notice it.

“She was always a nice girl. There's no way Citri would want to do anything like a bombing. She must be out there, looking for help. And even if she isn't...she wouldn't want to die in an explosion.”

Right.

“I want to...save her, somehow.”

Even though he didn't know where Citri was or if she was still safe.

Without noticing it, he'd gripped and crushed the caramel candy in his hand.

Wary of a counterattack from the Kampf Pfau, which were capable of a similar range as them, the Morpho only fired short sporadic barrages every time, but even those short barrages were a major threat to the civilians living in the territories. This meant that unlike the first large-scale offensive, an operation to eliminate the Morpho wasn't immediately issued.

The stress of being helpless in the face of enemy fire that could come at any time haunted the civilians of the territories nonstop. Flocks of independent evacuees swarmed away from their territories to the safer central and capital area.

A queue of vehicles carrying reservists on their way to the battlefield happened upon evacuees who, upon traveling the unfamiliar roads of the central region with trucks overloaded with supply materials, had gotten their vehicles stuck in a ditch. The reservists stepped outside to assist.

“...Looks like you won't be able to get it out on your own. Hey, get a car over here. Let's help them tow it out.”

“Which territory are you from, old man? Oh! I'm from there, too. What village?”

“Oh, thank you, good soldier. You really helped us out. Imagine running into a local all the way out here...”

As they noisily pulled the truck out of the ditch, they chatted about their home village.

“All right, old man, all of you take care on your journey!”

“You too, good soldier. Take care of yourselves!”

They waved at each other as if they were family. The evacuees and reservists parted ways, pondering about how good it was to meet a fellow local.

“—What’s this, mister? Enjoying life, I see, having so many cute princesses waiting on you like this. What, are you the illegitimate child of the late emperor?”

While they searched for cover under a bridge, they found that an old man was already set up there, greeting them in a joking manner. This was the first local whom Yuuto and his group interacted with since they moved west of the Nareva territory to a provincial city.

Compared with the capital and the cities in the central areas, Nareva was closer to a remote territory along the border, but since the Vesa territory sat between it and the battlefield, it was still far from the western front.

Of course, with the fronts falling back following the second large-scale offensive, the territory hadn’t received an order to evacuate yet. Perhaps the people here had all left of their own will, then.

“I see you’re living in class despite your age, too. The

people here seemed to have evacuated. Were there orders to do that? Or...”

“Oh, thank you, young prince. Yes, one of those scrap monsters, a Morpho, attacked the area. The area here is still safe, but the next town over got bombed, and it scared everyone into running to the capital.”

The bombardment they’d heard of earlier really was a Morpho attack, it seemed. Reports of those bombardments became more frequent on the radio than talk of the Actaeon, so the damage was likely severe. Things were worse than Yuuto imagined, though.

Either way, Yuuto frowned.

“You should probably run, too. A Morpho attack really could blow this town away. Its shots have extremely high velocity, so if it does shoot this town, you’ll have no time to run.”

“The capital might be big, but it’s not big enough for everyone. A woman my age doesn’t have many years left. I may as well stay here.”

...You’re a woman?

Perhaps because of how bony and sunburned she was, Yuuto had assumed she must have been a man. He felt apologetic.

Citri leaned in sheepishly.

“B-but, ma’am, you should still run. If you stay here... you’ll die.”

“True. But I chose to live in this elegance, with snowflakes

as my funeral flowers and the crows to sing my eulogy. A fine way to go. Finer than being hanged with a name I discarded.”

The old woman cackled. Her face and lips were tanned and withered, but her eyes alone shone red.

“And it’s all the same for you, isn’t it? You came all the way here, where you might die. I don’t know what *pleasure jaunt* you’re going on, but you came here of your own choice, eh? Then that’s a fine journey to go on. You may as well enjoy it, sweet princesses and you dashing prince.”

Nina put on the blackest clothes in her closet and went with her aunt, clad in mourning garments, to the national graveyard on the outskirts of Sankt Jeder, where the war dead slumbered.

They were attending a funeral for the husband of her aunt’s friend from her school days. He’d been drafted into the army and died. Since Sankt Jeder was on the north of the continent, the graves were all covered in snow during December. It was pure white and slightly bright, with a blanket of cold snow hanging over everything, just like that day she visited her brother’s grave and spotted a soldier his age.

Her brother’s friend Marcel said that was another friend of Eugene’s, Shin. Her favorite toy, a big cat doll, was a present from her brother and Shin. She asked Marcel to tell Shin to come visit Eugene’s grave together next time, and her aunt said she’d take them along on his next leave, but that next leave never came.

The Legion’s attacks grew more intense, and the Federacy

military finally lost. Ever since, lots of grown-ups had been fighting really hard...and died, just like her brother and the man this funeral was for.

The casket being lowered into the hole in the ground was especially light. There likely wasn't actually anyone inside. When her beloved brother died last summer, the casket had to remain closed, but now Nina, even as young as she was, realized that they were lucky there was anything left to bury.

“...Why do so many terrible things have to keep happening all at once?”

She heard someone else watching the funeral murmur, and those words hung especially heavy in her ears.

As one of the Republic volunteer troops, Claude's paternal brother, First Lieutenant Henry Knot, was part of a mixed unit of Federacy troops and Republic volunteers. After multiple supply runs, they'd become quite familiar with each other.

“...This position really is under concentrated attack...!”

The trenches were awfully cold, as they were filled with muddy water mixed with melted snow. Henry spat out those words as he dragged out an ammunition belt from an ammo box to reload a stationary heavy machine gun. The staccato of intermittent fire, meant to keep the gun barrels from overheating, could be heard from every corner of the battlefield.

Dozens of kilometers behind them, the artillery camp rained hellfire on the metallic wave pushing on them, but new units soon trampled over the remains of fallen Legion,

continuing the nonstop assault. The precious few 88 mm anti-tank guns fired repeatedly, assaulting the Löwe, which pressed on with superior numbers.

This position had been under attack for only a few days now, but in Henry's mind, it felt like it had been this way forever.

A nearby Federacy soldier laughed in a mocking tone. "The Legion used to be Eighty-Six; maybe they have a grudge against you guys, First Lieutenant!"

"Could be! Too bad you guys have to get caught in the cross fire, then!"

The excitement and tumult of the battlefield ran high. Their jabbing and joking was all done in shouts and was perhaps a bit too extreme to come across as banter, but the fact that they could exchange such hard barbs stood as evidence of their good relations. And better to vent their frustration at the hopeless state of the battlefield than to just put up with it silently.

"I mean, us Republic soldiers should make for good decoys! Our silver hair shines and all that!" one of his Republic soldier subordinates said in a joking manner—likely spoken in total desperation.

"Oh, we can't have the big country of justice send you out to be decoys!"

"If you're the country of justice, you should get a hero to swoop down and blow 'em all up!"

"A hero sure would be nice right about now."

"Maybe they're working on one in the secret research

institute.”

“But seriously, where’s our backup?! What are the Vargus wolfies doing?!”

“Is the eintopf we ordered getting delayed?!”

The snowy mud was chilling them to the bone while the Legion before them kept rolling over no matter how many they shot down. They had to joke and quip to blow off the fear and frustration. As cold and exhausted by battle as they were, seeing his men still had the cheer and morale to laugh and chatter made First Lieutenant Nino Kotiro, the most senior member of the battalion despite being the same rank as Henry, crack a bitter smile.

“Because we keep getting focused on, fire support and aid is constantly sent to us, and the surrounding units get ground down. Just hold out a little longer. Once you’re done, I’ll get you some hot coffee and eintopf!”

“Yes, sir!”

“But man, I can’t stand the first lieutenant’s homemade stew recipe; it’s always so spicy!”

“The hell did you just say?! It’s my wife’s best cooking!”

“How’s the eintopf over at your place, First Lieutenant Knot?! Bet you put in lots of pork!”

The troops ignored First Lieutenant Knot’s relatively serious retort. Henry almost burst out laughing at the joke and replied, as his stepmother often did make stew.

“Sorry, we use fish and eels instead! I’ll make it for you all someday; you’ll be surprised at how good it is!”

Like Jonas said, Lena and Annette weren't allowed to leave the suite room in the military HQ's annexed barracks, and they'd had their phones, information terminals, and RAID Devices taken away. Instead, they were allowed to watch the news and read newspapers, and indeed, when they demanded a newspaper be delivered to them, they were given the entirety of the daily paper. In other words, at least the higher-ups weren't preventing them from accessing public information and were intent on letting them go back to the front lines once this incident was resolved.

...Which made Lena, seated on the classy sofa in this high official suite, bitterly think they could at least let them get in touch with Shin and the rest. In the few days since she and Annette had been brought here "for their own protection," they'd examined the doors and windows in an attempt to escape, but everything was locked. Because of this, there was always someone in the corner of the room keeping an eye on them, either Jonas or one of the female soldiers working under him.

"I mean, this was all so sudden; I'm sure everyone's worried about us. I'm worried, too. Rüstkammer is close to the battlefield, and the Legion's offensive is ongoing."

Shin had been expecting to see her soon, and now he was being denied this, so he must have been worried. But even so.

"Even if they knew where we are, they're not reckless or hasty enough to charge in here. Those higher-ups are looking down on them!" Lena said, miffed.

"Hmm, no, I'm not so sure about that...", Annette whispered wearily.

Especially when it came to Shin, Annette could see him hurrying over like a loyal dog rushing to his owner. Shiden was suspect, too. And so was Theo, who was outraged at Annette being taken away like he was the one being affected by it... He was less of a dog and more of a moody cat, though.

“...Are you listening to me, Second Lieutenant Jonas?! At least give back our RAID Devices!” Lena eventually turned around to face Jonas, unable to ignore him any longer.

After ignoring the barbed insults Lena had intentionally said loud enough for him to hear, Jonas replied indifferently, “I’m afraid I can’t do that for security reasons.”

Yuuto’s message took much longer to take seriously than expected, so Amari decided, after some wavering, to give Dustin the note. It felt like if she waited any longer, things would spiral past the point of no return, and this was preferable to having him feel like he’d abandoned Citri unknowingly.

“Dustin... Listen.”

She called out to him from behind in the Processors’ common office. Dustin turned around, his silver eyes meeting hers in confusion.

As a member of the 1st Battalion, Dustin hadn’t spoken to Amari before. He was the sole member of the Strike Package who was from the Republic, which made him a bit famous. So it made sense Amari would know him, but given there were over a hundred members from other battalions, Dustin wouldn’t know her.

“Hmm...?”

“Amari Mill. From the 4th Battalion’s Scramasax squadron. I have a message for you from Yuuto.”

She had to wonder if maybe he also didn’t know Yuuto, the captain of the 4th Battalion, but thankfully, it seemed he recognized the name. He gave an “ah” and nodded, still looking unsure as to what this was all about.

“You were hospitalized with him, then... So what is it? And wait, Yuuto isn’t with you?” he asked, realizing something was off.

The only ones who knew Yuuto had left with the girls were the commanders and staff officers of the Strike Package, as well as the head of the research team, and that information wouldn’t have spread to members of another battalion. The operations commander, Shin, who was acquainted with both Yuuto and Dustin, likely wasn’t in a mental state to be sharing this kind of information, either.

“Yuuto had to go somewhere else, so he left me with a message. It’s just...you’re a Republic citizen, so if it makes your position worse, you can pretend you didn’t hear me. If you can’t come, that’s understandable.”

“Huh? What are you—?”

“Do you know a girl called Citri?”

His argent eyes widened in surprise and froze over.

“She has flaxen hair and purple eyes, and she’s pretty like a doll... You know her, right?”

Seeing his reaction, Amari nodded. Good. Yuuto said

Dustin wouldn't be able to come along, but Citri said he knew her. So Amari thought that, as friends, they should meet one last time before the end.

"Yuuto's with her. She's an Actaeon, and...she won't last long. She ran from home so no one would get caught up in it, but she wanted to meet her childhood friend...you...one last time before she dies. So Yuuto thought maybe you could come meet them— Whoa?!"

Amari jolted as Dustin grabbed her by the shoulders.

"Yuuto's with her, right...? Do you know where Citri is right now?!"

She was taken aback by how desperately his silver eyes bored into her, and she nodded, trembling.

"I know, of course."

Yuuto had told her that. How else would he have Dustin meet her otherwise? This was why she hadn't told anyone about the message Yuuto entrusted with her, not to anyone and of course not to the military police. After all, if they caught up to them, Yuuto fleeing the Strike Package to protect those girls would have been for nothing. She did say they were headed for the Republic, but she spoke while assuming no one would believe her, given the Republic was firmly Legion territory by now.

And after a decade of war and isolation, the military police likely wasn't aware of that. Because at present, the Republic's territory was limited to the constraints of the Gran Mur walls and the eighty-five administrative Sectors. But before that, the Republic's land bordered the Empire's, the Federacy's predecessor.

So it would be, on the edge of the Federacy's domains—not quite close to the current western front's defensive line, but past it.

“Their objective is Neunarkis, on the eastern tip of the Republic. To get there, they're going through the Vesa territory to the Niva Nova, Noidafune, and Niantemis combat territories. If they're on schedule, they should be around Vesa right now.”

The western front was currently stationed on the defensive encampment set along the Saentis-Historics line, which cut through the western combat territories. A section of that line was on the border of the Niva Nova combat territory and the Vesa production territory, which now stretched before Yuuto and his group. Vesa had been evacuated during the second large-scale offensive, becoming deployment ground for the western front's logistical-support line, but there were no signs of combat on its eastern edge, where it bordered the Nareva territory. All they saw were abandoned grain fields, hurriedly harvested before the evacuation, and the sloping hills typical to the Federacy's western countryside spanning as far as the eye could see.

It was altogether quiet, save for the sound of the wind brushing through the fields and rattling the treetops of nearby woodlands. Citri swallowed as she looked at the wintry hills in silence.

The towns and cities of Nareva, which they'd crossed on the way here, were deserted, as their inhabitants, too, had voluntarily left. But the sight of Vesa, fully evacuated and bereft of its populace, was a different kind of silence. In the midst of quiet that felt like it followed the end of all human

life in the vicinity, the only thing that remained were flocks of sheep freed from their enclosures by their owners, grazing on the distant hills like fluffy winter clouds shining in the pale sunlight.

Their radio had stopped receiving transmissions some time ago. With the voluntary evacuations, the transmission facilities were likely closed. The fact that they couldn't check on how the war was going was a bit concerning, but Yuuto thought Citri and the others were better off this way. Hearing about the deaths of other Actaeon girls and the people who'd been hurt in the process would only hurt them in kind, and they didn't need that kind of pain if they were to go on with this journey.

Either way, they would soon approach the front lines, where there would be operating transmission facilities, and by the time they got there, the other Actaeon would have likely fled to a place free of people. If things could just settle down like this...

“...Let's go.”

“Yes.”

Citri nodded, holding her long flaxen hair down against the cold wind.

Yuuto hadn't taken any communication equipment, including his RAID Device. But if Dustin knew where they were going, Dustin could send some kind of signal. A smoke bomb or a flare would be sufficient for informing them of Dustin's whereabouts. In fact, starting a fire to make smoke would do the trick.

This would be enough to tell Citri that he was there. That he came to save her.

Spurred on by this impulse, Dustin got to his feet. He dropped the clipboard in his hand without even realizing it, and Amari called out after him in surprise.

“Wait! Hey, Dustin!”

Dustin’s eyes were fixed solely on the gate to the Rüstkammer base, which wasn’t visible from the first barracks’ exit. He had his uniform and boots on, which was fine for the long march. He didn’t have time to gather materials for starting a fire, but he could just procure that on-site. As for a blade—he had his multi-tool knife on him now. He’d been taught to tell the directions by looking at the stars, so he didn’t need a compass and map. He needed to go out and find her, right now, right away.

Either way, he had to go. She told him to come find her, after all. So he had to make his way to Citri, whom he’d thought he’d never see again for some ten years now.

This time, he’d save her.

But then a cool, clear voice snapped him out of his boiling thoughts.

“Dustin, wait!”

She called out without thinking, stopping him in his tracks. But Anju couldn’t come up with any more words to say. She couldn’t bear the thought of him going. She’d overheard what Amari told him and knew she couldn’t let him go for his own sake. This went beyond Yuuto’s concern

that Dustin being a Republic citizen would drive him into a bad position. The Vesa territory was right behind Niva Nova, where the western front's defensive line was. Yuuto and the girl, Citri, were right behind the active battle zone with the Legion.

What's more, the Silvas territory, where Rüstkammer base was, did not border either Vesa or Niva Nova, so even if he set out now, it wasn't likely he'd catch up to them. At best, he'd link up with them at their destination, at Niantemis, the last stop before Neunarkis, at the Republic's eastern edge. And that area, too, was under Legion control now.

She couldn't let him go.

An Eighty-Six or a Sirin could possibly make that trip... but not Dustin. At his skill level, not only would he fail to return, it was doubtful he'd even make the one-way trip.

But despite knowing this, Anju stood still, unable to find the words. Because she knew that if he didn't go, it would hurt him. The fact that he abandoned Citri would be a scar on his heart. He called her his friend. Said he wanted to help her. Abandoning her despite that would leave an irreparable scar on Dustin's kind, fastidious soul.

And knowing this, Anju couldn't say anything else. She didn't want him to go, and at the same time, she didn't want to hurt him by telling him that. So she couldn't say one or the other.

But even so, Anju's expression as she stood there was enough to bring Dustin to his senses. She'd told him not to die, and he said he wouldn't. And once he calmed down, he realized how reckless he was for trying to go out with no

preparations, without seeing this would be a difficult journey even if he left with all the preparations in the world.

For neglecting to see that if he went out as he was, he wouldn't return alive.

Anju stood frozen in place, her expression contorted with anxiety and conflict. She knew she couldn't let Dustin go, and though she couldn't say anything else, she felt like she had to tell him he mustn't do it, and all the words failed her.

He didn't want to betray her... He couldn't bring himself to do that. So he managed a smile, somehow.

“I'm sorry. I won't go... I can't go on my own.”

He'd never be able to march through Legion territory. He wouldn't even reach the western front, because before he'd reach the Vesa territory, the chaotic traffic of the roads—with all the supply lines and soldiers being sent there and back—would impede him. And he couldn't report the situation to the Federacy army, either, as that would be exposing what Citri, a living Actaeon, and Yuuto, a deserter, were doing.

So either way, he couldn't go. He knew that.

“Don't worry. I haven't forgotten my promise. I won't die. I won't walk to my death.”

But if Citri left that message, she must have truly wanted him to come help her. If she told him where she was going, she must have truly intended to wait for him. Could he abandon her, then?

In exchange for protecting the Snow Witch's wish?

“I’ll find a way to be sneaky about this... I’m allowed to be unfair in that way. So don’t look like you’re about to cry.”

Those words finally made Anju’s expression twist in sorrow.

The village’s people all knew one another like family, and there were rarely ever outsiders, so they likely didn’t anticipate the possibility of theft. The most they did was lock the farm with a padlock to keep crows and cats from messing up the place.

Yuuto kicked open the door to the abandoned farm’s barn. It wasn’t a sturdy padlock to begin with, but with being old and rusted, it snapped and went flying, opening the door with surprising ease.

Maybe it was to block off violent intrusion, but the closed doors tried to keep outsiders out. As the door swung back, screeching, he opened it with a hand and looked inside. The blades and hoes used to tend to the fields were shining and in good shape, quite the contrast to the rusted padlock. They’d likely been maintained until just before the owners evacuated.

That thought made Yuuto feel apologetic as he helped himself to these tools, picking up a hatchet. So far, he’d avoided people since they had no weapons, but a blade like this was handy to have.

Citri peered curiously into the barn from behind him. She knew they were going to break in to get their hands on things inside the barn, but she didn’t expect him to kick the door in.

“Is this for fighting off bears or wolves or something?”

“Of course not.”

Yuuto shook his head slowly and motioned toward the spanning, harvested fields with the hatchet still sitting in its sheath. The view was typical of the production territories’ agricultural landscape, with towns dotting the horizon. This was also true of the Miana and Nareva territories they’d crossed on the way here. However...

“The Vesa territory is currently the area the logistical-support unit of the western front’s army is deployed in. They tore down any towns and houses that might get in the way of their work, so we might have trouble finding structures to take cover from the rain and the wind. We’ll need some blades to make a windbreak.”

They couldn’t start a fire in windswept weather. And a makeshift shelter wouldn’t do much to stave off the cold, so he’d avoid it if possible, but given no other option, it was better than nothing.

“Really...,” Citri murmured, her eyes round with surprise.

The girls then exchanged looks and bravely nodded.

“You said a blade, right?”

“I’ll carry it. We can help you make a shelter.”

Yuuto looked at them with surprise, taken aback by the sudden suggestion.

“I mean, if you need to make the shelters, too, that’ll be more of a burden on you, right? We have to help.”

And it was just like the old woman said. They were on their path because they chose to be here, and since they came so far, they might as well make it a fine journey.

This was, after all, their first and final journey.

“We want to try all the things you’re doing.”

It seemed Lena had her RAID Device and all her communication devices taken away during her “arrest.” The same was apparently true of Annette when she was “taken into protection.”

The audacity of using the word *protection*, Shin thought in indignation as he spent his free time after work in Fido’s standby space. He chose to remain here so he wouldn’t be seen by his subordinates in this mental state.

Once it became late and lights-out was approaching, he returned to the barracks, where he found Frederica standing pensively in the hall.

“...What’s wrong, Frederica?”

She turned to look at him. “’Tis not I. ’Tis Dustin and Anju...”

Shin nodded. Yuuto had reported, through Amari, that Dustin knew one of the Actaeon...which did remind Shin he’d forgotten to tell Dustin about it. Frederica seemed to notice this change in his expression and shrugged.

“You are too troubled to think of Dustin at a time like this. You could ask Kurena, Claude, or Tohru to handle it.”

“...Thanks.”

She was right; he honestly wasn't in an emotional state to be occupied with those two.

“Worry not, I shall handle it. If the need calls for it, I shall throw Dustin to the Legion in your stead.”

When Shin heard this, his mood finally lifted a little.

“Surely, I can't leave that up to you... Daiya would scold me if I did.”

He'd probably get mad at Shin for letting a little kid do his work for him. Daiya, who was younger than him by now, had been one to seriously get mad at things like that.

He was right to assume the worst and start working early. Thanks to that, despite Citri and the other girls handling the hatchet and other such equipment awkwardly, they were able to set up shelter before sundown.

“Wow, it's like a house...!”

“I can't believe we made this from branches and trees.”

It was only good to stay under for one night, and with branches covered in leaves, it hardly made for a hut, but Kiki and Karine looked upon it with excited eyes.

Shiohi and Citri somehow managed to start a campfire and took out food cans, while Ashiha and Imeno went out to gather twigs but were clearly playing together. They tore off the bark from naked trees and squealed upon discovering the hibernating ladybugs underneath, and they jolted

whenever a field mouse or something rustled in the underbrush.

“Hey, enough playing around. Dinner is ready.” Citri pouted at them.

It was only heated canned food and fried hard, heavy bread, but since she was able to keep the fire stoked all on her own, this counted as a perfectly valid “dinner” in her eyes.

The other four returned and sat around the campfire they’d dug into the ground. Karine volunteered to make them after-meal tea, brewing it from pine needles. Relaxing, Yuuto opened the map to confirm their course the following day.

“Right now, we’re in Vesa. To the northwest is the Runiva combat territory and the southwest borders with Niva Nova. Both have positions for the western front’s army set up there. Like I said at noon, Vesa is an area where the western front’s support units are deployed. There’s no civilians around anymore, but we’ll have to be wary of soldiers from here on out.”

They wouldn’t be killed if they were caught, but they would definitely be arrested and taken into custody. And since Yuuto was a deserter on the run, he would absolutely get into major trouble.

The girls huddled around the map, which had their planned route lined out with a colored marker.

“We can slip through the Federacy’s position and the Legion patrol line by heading into the virgin forest in the northern part of Niva Nova. This path is going to take us the

most number of days to traverse. After that, we'll go south through Legion territory into Noidafune, and then west to Niantemis."

He based his assumption that their journey would require less caution once they crossed the Legion patrol line on the events of two years ago. Back then, when Shin and his group passed through the territories. That, and the Sirins' multiple incursions into Legion territory also proved that small groups of human-size creatures were able to both infiltrate and operate behind Legion lines. With the Republic destroyed, the Legion had their forces focused on the western front and didn't leave troops just loitering around in their territories.

In this vast wilderness that spanned four hundred kilometers from north to south, a small group of humans, with their low heat signatures and diminutive size, would be difficult to spot with so many sloping hills, nameless forests, and patches of tall grass to hide in.

"Is there anything we should watch out for, too?" Imeno asked, tilting her head.

"There's a few things. Since we're moving closer to the Federacy's positions, you'll have to stay quiet, especially during the night. That's true in the Legion's territories, too. Noise travels far, especially after dark. If you have to light a fire on your own, make sure you dig a hole like I just did and light the fire in there."

This was something Yuuto and only a few Eighty-Six heard about, but there was an old Vargus anecdote about a night sentry who needlessly lit a cigarette, and its light resulted in him being sniped. Recalling this, Yuuto jokingly added, "So if you're going to make a fuss looking around for

bugs or small critters, you should get it out of your system while you still have a chance.”

Imeno and the others all responded with “yes.” Citri puffed out her cheeks grumpily and smacked him on the back, but the slap had all the strength of a tiny bird and failed to even jolt his shoulders.

Having to make sure the two Republic officers were protected meant that Jonas was away from his master’s side, but he did keep in touch with him. He asked about the ongoing investigation into the Actaeon while wondering how much he should tell Lena and Annette. At the same time, he was worried about the slight tinge of exhaustion in Willem’s voice, which only he would pick up on, owing to his long service.

“—Also, we found the body of one of the fugitive girls. It was a suicide. While not as useful as a living specimen, her body was sent to the technical-research institute’s anti-biological weapon department to be dissected under the pretense of an autopsy. They’re working on it now.”

“ ... ”

Jonas had to wonder if it really was suicide. Even if it was winter and the police and the forces garrisoned around the capital were actively searching for them, it was hard to believe that one would discover the corpse of someone suspected of committing suicide while it was fresh enough to be investigated.

Willem seemed to sense Jonas’s suspicion and laughed sardonically. He spoke in a rebuking manner, a tone Jonas

had heard when he was still a child early in his service but had rarely heard in recent years.

“It’s suicide, Jonas. We’re not in a situation where we can have our troops cross that line...and it’s uncouth to doubt the courage and resolve of a girl who chose to willingly end her own life before she became a living bomb.”

Since the virus used cell activity to synthesize nitroglycerin, the nonfunctioning cells of a corpse were useless for that purpose. But even if she knew that, choosing death would still be a terrifying, difficult choice to make for a girl who wasn’t trained to be a soldier or to serve as a master’s shield.

Jonas closed his eyes in shame. Coolheadedness and cruelty were two different things, much like how carefully scrutinizing information was different from suspicion that interpreted everything in the worst possible way.

“My apologies... So we’ll be disclosing accurate information to the press sooner than expected?”

“Honestly, I’d prefer not to reveal this at all if possible, but sadly, we can’t do that.”

“Misinformation and irresponsible rumors only caused unease and panic, especially among the masses. This was all the truer now, with public unrest being high across all society due to the worsening state of the war. This meant that delivering accurate news was the best solution to avoid that, but...delivering the information was difficult to do. False information about new self-propelled mines or biological weapons was too eerily similar to the rumors. Perhaps we should have forbidden them from airing that

program.”

“That much is inconsequential. Anyone could possibly come up with that. The real problem is that, of all things, the Republic is responsible for this.”

Jonas blinked at that surprising response. Unusually enough, his master let out a quiet but deep sigh on the other side of the Resonance.

“This would give the masses a clear evil to pin all the blame on...and in our current situation, that could lead to troublesome things.”

With the Morpho’s bombardment ongoing, the number of evacuees from the frontier territories steadily grew, and even the central territories around Sankt Jeder were running out of room to accommodate them. Almost all the vacancies in hotels and apartment buildings had been filled to capacity when the second large-scale offensive began.

For the time being, public facilities were opened up and converted to accept evacuees, but even those facilities were limited in number. Daily necessities and foodstuffs were becoming an issue, too.

After being sent out to help with building facilities, distributing food, and having to be overwhelmed with demands and complaints and appeals that he had to comply with for days on end, Theo was exhausted. With the lack of combatants on the front turning critical, the reservists weren’t the only ones being called there. Soldiers were being pulled out of support units, leaving units like Theo’s understaffed.

And so he wobbled over to the base's food court, intent on getting something sweet to drink in the form of caramel coffee. That was when he noticed it.

“...Huh?”

Both the café he was headed for, as well as the fast-food chain next to it, and indeed every store in the food court... had upped their prices across the board, albeit slightly. He wondered why while ordering his caramel coffee, and as he sipped on it, the question kept churning in the back of his mind until it suddenly occurred to him.

“Right... The territories...”

Following the front line falling back due to the second large-scale offensive, part of the production territories had to be evacuated, which meant the production of their agricultural land, livestock farms, and factories was also lost. The influence of that was felt two months later, with supply dropping in Sankt Jeder and prices hiking all over the capital area. This applied not only to crops, which were after their harvest season, but also to dairy products, meat, and daily necessities.

As she watched a news report stating some necessities had to be rationed, Lena sipped on the synthesized tea Annette brewed her.

Such luxury items were the first to be replaced with the cultivated starch from the production plants. This meant that going forward, they would either become preciously rare or be churned out of the factories, which stressed production numbers over quality. It was much like how terrible the synthesized coffee and tea had been in the

Republic, with the exception of products sold in a few rare shops in Liberté et Égalité's department stores.

"I doubt they'll start serving those plastic explosives as food anytime soon, but..."

Annette muttered this, apparently thinking the same thing. Lena cracked a faint, strained smile. During the two months of the first large-scale offensive, Lena had to eat the synthesized food blocks served in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. It looked like white clay and tasted like *void*, to the point that labeling it as food felt like a travesty. Annette probably felt the same and didn't want to have to eat that thing again for as long as she lived.

"The Federacy is much larger and richer in resources than the Republic was, and things never came to that while the Republic was inside the walls, so I doubt it'll happen here."

"That might be true, but that just means the Federacy's population is that much bigger. If the evacuation of the production territories doesn't stop and more farms and factories end up abandoned, production will keep going down, and the shortage will get worse. It's not impossible."

Lena pondered this for a few seconds. Annette was right. And then Lena shuddered.

What if that thing became their primary source of food again?

The voluntary evacuations following the Morpho attacks put the military's transport net, which was already heavily congested, in a worse position. Groups traveled the roads unsupervised and unregulated, with no instructions of what

paths to take or where their destinations were. They passed through trails they weren't allowed to wander into. Roads that were exclusive for military use and railroad tracks were clogged by refugees, and they gathered at supply depots, seeking aid, which obstructed military supplies from arriving and moving.

All this meant that soldiers had to be relegated to guarding and guiding refugees, which pushed the supply unit, already stretched to its limit, over the edge.

As a result, the second northern front under Lieutenant Colonel Niam Mialona, as well as other fronts, were set to experience delays in their supply runs. The ammunition, fuel, medicine, and reinforcements they required wouldn't reach them. This meant that units requesting supplies would have to account for the delays by making larger orders, which would further increase the supply unit's burden.

Without necessary troops and supplies, positions that would otherwise hold on would start falling, and wounded soldiers who would have survived with sufficient medicine would die. That would cascade into more soldiers being injured and dying to the constant pressure the Legion applied, which would then require units to demand more reinforcements, which would further strain the logistic units.

That said, with the state of the war being what it was, reservists died soon after taking to the front, so there was a constant shortage of troops.

“This is a headache. What are we supposed to do?”

Lieutenant Colonel Mialona finally sighed. Be it lack of supplies or reinforcements, their sole grace was that the

bare minimum of food supplies were arriving on time. The Federacy prioritized the army when it came to delivering the finest provisions, since high-quality meals helped boost morale. This was why the cities on the home front were suffering from a lack of food and a decline in its quality, while the soldiers on the front faced no such problems yet. Before long, luxuries like sweets, cigarettes, and alcohol would become precious commodities on the home front.

Her unit's young operator, standing by her side, spoke with a stiff, serious tone.

"You can get a hearty meal in the army. Maybe that should become the Federacy military's recruitment slogan, Princess."

"What century did you pull that idea from?" She couldn't help but smile bitterly at his black humor.

People enlisting in the army because they had no other way of filling their bellies was a situation that had never happened throughout the Empire's glorious history. Sensing the joking in the air, her lieutenant then added with a jovial tone:

"Maybe we should gather all these evacuees and use them as reservists. That'll relieve our lack of soldiers, lighten up the pressure on supplies, and resolve the food shortage back at the home front."

Lieutenant Colonel Mialona's unpleasant smile deepened. She knew this was just a joke, and yet.

"Don't be stupid, Hisno."

It appeared the great majority of Actaeon had gone into hiding in unpopulated places. The news reporting on bombing incidents that happened on an almost daily basis had died down and mostly been forgotten. This wasn't to say it wasn't mentioned at all, but there were simply no incidents to report on.

"That's why they ran away from home, according to what Yuuto said... I guess that's good, at least," Kurena murmured.

Shin and the other Processors didn't know the Actaeon girls, but they were still fellow Eighty-Six. They were all concerned about them on some level, and so they ended up watching the TVs in the lounges and dining halls for details about them. However, by now, the news was focused solely on the difficult fighting on the front lines and the chaos caused by the evacuations.

"I doubt none of them considered taking revenge on the Republic, but where they were evacuated to wasn't disclosed," Raiden said as he ate his traditional Federacy breakfast of steamed beans and bacon. "In which case, they wouldn't want to get innocent people caught up in their problem, and if they can avoid doing that, that's for the best."

"Yeah, at the very least."

"...But if that's the case..., " Shin murmured to himself, and Raiden and Kurena glanced at him but didn't say anything else. Shin didn't notice that.

The Actaeon went into hiding, and the bombing incidents were gone from the news, but Grethe said the investigation was still officially ongoing. And yet...for whatever reason it

may be, not having people who should be by their side present did take a toll on his appetite. But his acquired nature as a warrior instructed him to eat and keep up his stamina, so he gripped his fork tightly. He'd managed to swallow his indignation before, but having the lack of progress dangling in front of his eyes made it surge up again.

“Why isn't Lena being brought back?”

Yuuto told them that according to the Actaeon's own admission, much like real mines, they had a time limit set to their self-detonation, so as to dispose of them after enough time.

“The girls who ran have their time limit set to this December. This fits with Second Lieutenant Crow's testimony.”

The head of the research team came to Grethe's office to present the results of their investigation into seized documents on the Actaeon. This was, after all, not information they could tell the Eighty-Six as is.

“Also, this is putting it in a very cruel way, but they're only test subjects, not full-blown weapons. They simply used those girls without brainwashing or conditioning them, and the girls want to avoid hurting other people, too. If another incident doesn't happen, we can wait until New Year's to quietly disclose the facts and declare everything is safe.”

Assuming that over the course of this month, the girls would all stay hidden and blow up in secret. Grethe sighed softly. Indeed, it was a cruel way of putting it, and still...

“So it looks like everything will fizzle out safely. I suppose the reports of the Morpho ended up drowning out that news and was a blessing in disguise.”

If nothing else, those girls wouldn't be forced to have their good names besmirched.

“...But that said, even if we have to wait until the situation naturally fizzles out, I do want Colonel Milizé and Major Penrose returned to us. I think Captain Nouzen's patience with regards to Colonel Milizé is at its limit.”

Grethe knew Lena and Annette were under Willem's protection, which implied they were being kept safe and cared for...but Grethe hadn't disclosed the fact that Willem was behind it to Shin. Shin was doing a good job of putting up with it so far, but if he found out it was Willem, Shin would no doubt lose his temper.

“Well, I know you don't like the Killer Mantis, but I do understand why he made that decision,” said the head of the research team, sipping on extra-caffeinated coffee substitute that was thick like mud.

He was from the other family that developed the Reginleif—in other words, Grethe's family business—and was a childhood friend of hers who had an inseparable bond with her.

“You're in the same boat, Grethe. When things go awry, it's the king who gets hanged. Heroes who failed get sent to the gallows... Though, victorious heroes get sent to the gallows just the same. Either way...”

“...Yes.”

Grethe dropped her eyes. This was why Willem and the military's top brass were acting cautiously and keeping those two under custody.

“Depending on how this goes, they—particularly Colonel Milizé—might still be in danger. They could end up getting caught in the cross fire here...and that could go on to make things worse.”

Yuuto and the group's shelter for that day was a small, deserted village hidden deep in the woods, likely evacuated following the second large-scale offensive. Seeing the girls' expressions, filled with the temptation of sleeping in a bed for once, he stopped in his tracks, picked one of the civilian homes, and pried its nailed door open.

Thankfully, this town was off the highway and in a thick forest, making it too small to serve as a camp for a company of troops, so the odds of them being discovered here were slim. As evening fell, he pulled cloths over the windows, which were closed not by glass panes but by wooden planks, then he lit a discarded lamp. This village seemingly wasn't connected to a power grid.

Citri looked around the unfamiliar sight of a Federacy home on the western frontier with interest and clear relief.

“So this is what a Federacy countryside house looks like.”

“It's pretty different from the capital. From the Republic, too.”

They felt a bit guilty about invading someone else's home, but it had been a long time since they got to sit in a chair, by a table, surrounded by a wooden floor, walls, and ceiling.

The cooking stove's kindling looked usable, so Karine went ahead and lit it. As Yuuto watched the girls awkwardly light the stove and use the pot to make dinner from their canned food, he sank into thought.

Dustin didn't make it in the end. The plan was to meet up with him here in Vesa, but he either didn't get the message or heard it too late, much like how the Federacy military was late to react to the Actaeon.

And while Vesa was still within the Federacy's lines, once they crossed into Niva Nova, they'd be on the battlefield proper, making a rendezvous impossible. Even if Dustin did lose all his composure and hurried over, someone would have stopped him.

...Yuuto would have liked to have them meet if possible. Dustin...and Citri both wished for it, too.

Citri waited for the pot to boil with a pleased expression, unaware of Yuuto's thoughts. Kiki, Imeno, and Shiohi were around her.

"It's like a fairy-tale house. Like where the sick grandma lives."

"True! Either that, or the story with the hardworking dwarves or the baby goat brothers."

"And then there'd be a donkey with a chicken on its back crying outside."

Everyone casually looked over to the wooden window, and as if on cue, they heard some kind of animal crying from outside.

"...Is that a donkey?"

“I don’t know...”

Yuuto pondered that thankfully it wasn’t a wolf, and it was quite far away from the window, but he had no idea what it was. He had no idea what they meant by a donkey with a chicken on its back, either.

Ashiha, who had unevenly cut reddish hair and was the most cheerful of the group, said, “Oh, but that’s how my great-grandma used to live! Back when she was little, villages didn’t have electricity yet, so they had to use firewood to cook!”

“Really?”

“‘Cause I used to live in the boonies. When I was little, we had to walk a whole day to get to the next village over.” Ashiha smiled, her eyes creasing as she basked in the memories.

...Memories of the homeland that the Eighty-Six, Yuuto included, had forgotten over their time on the battlefield. Yuuto could only remember bits and pieces, so his hometown didn’t have much nostalgic value in his eyes.

“...What was it like?” The question slipped from his lips unawares.

Yuuto was probably the one most surprised at having asked such a question.

Have I...ever wanted to ask such a question?

As the girls’ eyes, each a different color, turned to him, Yuuto avoided looking into Citri’s violet ones, fixed his eyes on the lamp, and continued his question.

“Your hometowns... The places you want to return to.”

As operations commander and his lieutenant, Shin and Raiden—as well as Kurena and Anju, who were also among the first Eighty-Six to be taken in by the Republic—were recognized as the leader figures and were therefore quite busy. This included managing the armored divisions and planning for the next operation in secret. Despite not being able to fully take their places, the other platoon leaders of the Strike Package, including Claude and Tohrû, picked up whatever small tasks those four weren’t able to attend to.

Like, for instance, looking after Dustin, the weakest of the Processors.

Standing at the entrance to Dustin’s room, where he had shut himself off and refused to leave, Tohrû said, “Try to eat something, Dustin. You could at least come out at mealtimes.”

Sitting in his small room, as cramped as a corridor, Dustin remained seated on his bed and refused to raise his head.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Eat even if you don’t have an appetite. Eat even if they’re serving you those nasty synthesized rations or if you just saw something get blown to chunks. If you don’t, you won’t have the strength when the time comes.”

That was how things worked in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. The scrap monstrosities kept on attacking no matter how sick one got or how many people died, so they knew they needed to have their stomachs full of something so they could fight whenever the need arose. This would no doubt

be the same on the Federacy's battlefield, and Dustin was a Processor, just like Tohru and the rest. So Tohru had to come to Dustin's room to ensure he did what he needed to do.

"If you don't like people worrying about you and calling you over, I could bring Claude to stand here with his sour face. Come on, go get something to eat."

"...You're worried about me, too."

Tohru scoffed. "Yeah, I'm a captain in the Strike Package worrying about a soldier who can fight. Don't act all spoiled, moron."

He treated him as a fellow Processor, but Tohru wasn't going to buddy up with him. Shutting himself off in his room for today was tantamount to selfish behavior on the battlefield, especially toward *someone* who brought food to his doorstep every day without complaint.

Dustin looked at him with a feeble, bitter smile.

"Yeah, you're right... Then while I'm being spoiled, will you ignore what I'm about to say?"

He couldn't tell this to Anju. Nor could he tell Kurena and Frederica, since they could pass it on to her, and Shin, Raiden, and Vika were too busy. Marcel would listen but take this pointless story more seriously than Tohru would.

Tohru shrugged and then turned around indifferently, as if to say, *I'll listen to you, so come on*. Dustin started talking, faltering over his words.

"...She was a kind, pretty girl. A bit like a princess."

“You mean Citri?” Tohru asked without turning around, still walking ahead.

“Yeah.”

She was like a princess who loved fairy-tale heroes. When Dustin was younger, he was like a knight who swore loyalty to that princess.

“She was a princess I had to protect... That’s what I thought.”

But—

—*Dustin. You mustn’t look outside tonight.*

When his mother said those words, he could tell something was wrong by looking at her pale, slender face, so he obeyed and went to sleep that night without opening the curtain. He remembered it to this day. The eerie silence of the morning that followed.

When he left the house, Citri didn’t come out to greet him, and both she and her parents were gone. When he saw there was no one in the streets or the shops, he hurried to school. Running through the deserted town, he prayed, hoping he’d find someone there, that the place where he spent time with Citri and his classmates would still be there, unchanged.

But even when he got to school, there was no one around. He never cared much for the news before, but he started watching it desperately...and they said all sorts of weird things. That people of other races were enemies. Citri and her people were traitors. They spoke obvious falsehoods like they were the absolute truth.

But contrary to Dustin’s belief, everyone else around him

started believing the weird things the TV said. The stains weren't human to begin with. An unevolved lesser species. Swine in human form. Parts for a drone that fought the Legion.

Even though Citri and everyone else were actually human.

At the time, Dustin didn't know the words to correct everyone. All he could do was helplessly stare in stunned silence at a world gone mad. He couldn't commit to the role of a fairy-tale knight when he was needed most. That was why...

“This time...I want to save her.”

This was why he volunteered to join the Strike Package, to sweep away the Republic's sins—it was the penance he had to pay.

The Eighty-Six were driven out of the Republic to the Eighty-Sixth Sector, and only a few million people survived. They came from all sorts of places, and likewise, the Actaeon were from varied backgrounds.

Kiki said she was born in a town with many old steeples. Shiohi was born in a village where the mountains of the Alliance were visible. Karine grew up in the southern vice capital of Euztiria. Imeno spoke of seas of golden, swaying wheat, while Ashiha told with amusement of days spent looking after sheep. They all had families and friends.

Citri's turn came last. She spoke of moving to a new, pretty town and eventually of the childhood friend she grew up with—the kind, dependable boy next door who was like a

fairy-tale prince. Of how she waved her best friend good-bye one day, never to see him again.

“...That’s why I wanted to see him. So he wouldn’t worry about me.”

With a faint smile relishing sweet reminiscence, Citri cast down her eyes and finished her story.

...Have you heard of a man called Dustin Jaeger?

Dustin was Alba, but he was also of Imperial descent, so she’d been worried he might have gotten sent to the camps, too. But as she lived outside the rules, she overheard researchers speaking of the events of the Revolution Festival and mentioning his name, which made her only more concerned.

The final Revolution Festival, just before the large-scale offensive. The name of the student who gave the valedictorian speech.

—How long will this continue?!

He said this to the faces of all the Republic’s citizens. And if she was the reason he said that, if he felt like he’d abandoned or failed to protect her and openly opposed the Republic for it...

“I wanted to meet him, to make sure this wasn’t a curse on him...but if meeting him now would burden him with a curse in its own way, I think maybe it’s for the best we didn’t meet.”

Just knowing he was safe, that he survived both this offensive and the one before that...

“I’m...fine with that much.”

“ ...”

Yuuto had to ask himself if that was true. If there was nothing else he would have done, had he been in Dustin’s shoes. He, who couldn’t even shoulder a single curse.

“Hey, you’re last in line...” Imeno leaned in. “What was your hometown like, Yuuto?”

“I hardly remember it. I didn’t have the time to.”

Imeno gave a small “ah” and fell quiet, but Yuuto carried on. He tried to piece together what bits and pieces of that scenery lingered in his memories.

“I think my roots are from a region far away from the Republic. As I remember it now, we had different customs than the rest of town. So we were...not quite ostracized, but...”

For example, the kind of fairy tales he was told. The way they made tea. He could hardly recall his mother’s and relatives’ faces, but for some reason, the strong, sweet fragrance of that tea remained in his memories.

He had to throw everything away to survive. The yearly survival rate in the Eighty-Sixth Sector was 0.1 percent, but Name Bearers lasted longer, meaning fighting alongside the same Name Bearers for years was fairly common. Like Shin and the four other members of the Spearhead squadron, or Shiden and the Brísingamen squadron, or Claude and Tohru.

But Yuuto really was alone. The members of his last squadron and the acquaintances he knew beforehand had all

died. He truly joined the Strike Package with none of his comrades left alive.

“I probably just wasn’t lucky. To begin with, Name Bearers—surviving veteran soldiers—tend to get sent to the most heavily contested areas, and I think both me and all the people around me weren’t strong enough to protect others on top of ourselves.”

And so, still as weak as he was, without protecting anyone or even trying to protect anyone...he survived alone.

Since he never tried to protect anyone, no death ever hurt him, and even though he remembered others, he never truly felt for them. Without ever noticing the warped loneliness he felt.

—Maybe it’s best that I don’t meet him, so I don’t burden him with a curse.

I’m not sure about that. Never having to be hurt, but also having no one to think back on fondly. If that’s how I have to live my life, maybe...

“Having to carry the burden of someone’s curse...would have been better.”

Raiden thought that maybe Theo, who was stationed in a base in Sankt Jeder, knew where Lena was, but the answer he got from the other side of the Resonance was bad news.

“They took Annette, too...?”

“If nothing else, they’re not on my base. I think they’re in the army HQ, but I can’t make up a reason

to get permission to go there, and I don't know anyone there who could check... Did Lena and Annette get in touch with you guys?"

"No... And it's got Shin on edge. And I'll be honest, it's getting annoying."

It wasn't entirely terrible because Shin knew better than to let it show in front of the other members, but since he didn't care about appearances around Raiden, he made no effort to hide his feelings there. Anju being depressed over Dustin was one thing, but he kept his composure in front of Kurena, probably as some last bastion of pride. Albeit, Kurena did notice his foul mood and was worried about him.

"What is he, some anxious pet dog?" Theo laughed, amused. **"I kind of wish I could be there to see Shin like that."**

Owing to their long acquaintance, he came up with a very fitting metaphor.

"I guess I know how he feels, though. Seeing Annette get taken away like that makes me worried, too. Thinking back on it now pisses me off."

"Huh. I didn't know you two got along that well."

"We really don't. God, why does everyone keep saying that...?"

Theo seemed to be on good terms with his colleagues in his new base, and apparently, it was painfully obvious to their eyes, too.

Theo then took a breath and hushed his voice.

“...But for how much it ticks me off, I’m starting to think doing that to them might have been the right idea. Looking at things now.”

“Mm?”

“The town next to your base already got evacuated, so you wouldn’t notice, but... Over here in Sankt Jeder, the atmosphere both at the base and in town is pretty horrible.”

As he spoke, Theo glanced at the end of the hall, glaring at a few soldiers who looked like they had something to say. He didn’t care if they were scrutinizing his friendship with Annette or treating him as a wiretap for being Eighty-Six. Following the wiretap incident, the criticism directed at the government after the first large-scale offensive was turned at the Republic citizens and the Alba.

“With so many soldiers dead and refugees coming in, everyone’s pointing fingers at one another, looking for someone to blame. It’s annoying. They’re running their mouths about the Strike Package, too, saying you should just go beat the Morpho already. They basically want ten Shins, and ten of Anju, Kurena, and you, basically ten of every Processor to come and clean things up. And Lena, His Highness, and Colonel Grethe.”

“Theo, chill. Especially with Vika. Imagine having to handle ten of him—it’d be a nightmare.”

“Just add ten of the priest and the Open Sea clans, and it’d be perfect... Anyway, stuff like this is why Republic people like Annette are better off not being on this base. Everyone’s in a frenzy, and they’d definitely lash out at her.”

“...Was the Morpho bombardment that bad?”
Raider asked, lowering his voice.

“The bombardment on its own wasn’t that bad; it’s just that on top of there being a lot of refugees, now there are people who voluntarily evacuated and are fleeing here. People’s discontent and opposition to them is pretty big.”

“Mm? Why are they opposing the people who evacuated?”

It would make sense if it was the evacuees who were showing discontent, but before that thought could reach Raider’s lips, he sighed. That made sense. Theo hadn’t assumed this would happen, either.

“All the people who lived here to begin with won’t stop arguing...! They complain about them not knowing the language or how to read signs, or about how the stores are all crowded with people, or how all the libraries and parks are getting turned into shelters. Basically, they’re saying all these people are being a bother and should go away. It’s gotten to the point where they started saying the frontier people’s accents sound weird and that they look poor and dirty. And all the evacuees don’t like hearing that, so you get more fights and arguments.”

And fights and arguments meant more people got injured, be it the civilians who started the fights, the evacuees being picked on, or just unrelated people who happened to be around.

And even if not for any of these reasons, the residents of the capital felt that their daily peace was being disturbed by these refugees.

“People feel like their family’s livelihood is in danger, so even here at the base, lots of people end up seeing the refugees—and honestly at this point, all the people from the territories and the frontier—as criminals and pests. I’ve heard some people say outright that the government should mobilize the army to drive these farmers and foreigners out to the frontier.”

It felt like the Federacy, and the world at large, were being irrevocably...warped into something else.

The army’s transport network being in a state of chaos due to disorderly evacuee traffic and the subsequent reduction in the front lines’ ability to fight; the drop in production; and the clashes between the capital and central territories’ citizens with the refugees.

“...This is what they were going for,” Yatrai grumbled bitterly.

There were a lot of question marks behind the Morpho bombardment. With the development of the Kampf Pfau, the Morpho’s original purpose for development—launching concentrated attacks on fortifications and enemy camps—became difficult to accomplish. This made the railway guns just oversize, expensive decorations that only took up space, but instead, the Legion relegated them for a much more sinister method of attack.

“The Legion made another vicious play. Using the Empire’s weakness against it.”

The Federacy and its predecessor, the Giadian Empire, were multiethnic countries. This meant its people had different races, different cultures, and spoke different

tongues. On top of the disparity between the Empire's ruling class and the people, there were countless other fractures in its society.

In addition to the citizens and the Vargus, there were city people and farmers, the center and the periphery, conquering races and subjugated ones. For many years, the Empire had been divided into many small groups. This was intentional on the nobility's side, to keep the people from joining hands and rebelling.

The Empire becoming the Federacy gave everyone the title of "citizen," which masked those divisions. But those divisions were only hidden, not gone, and now they were rearing their ugly head again. The people of the capital eyed the outdated, uneducated people of the frontier areas with disgust and scorn. They, in turn, were furious and suspicious of the capital's people for living in comfort and luxury that was an entirely different world from the simple life in their hometowns.

And while that might have been a coincidence, the supply deficiency brought on by the front lines falling back coincided with the influx of evacuees—it was nightmarish timing. People sought reasons and causes for all the bad things that happened in their lives, and tying these people they had to welcome into their lives with those problems looked like clear and simple causality.

...Much like how terrible the timing of the Actaeon attacks was, but at least those concluded quietly with the girls' deaths, and the military's top brass were forced to hold back on disclosing the truth of what happened until the citizens calmed down somewhat.

Yatrai sighed in annoyance.

During Zelene's questioning, they were able to confirm which members of the royal faction's leaders were made into Shepherds. Much to his surprise, the prime minister and the generals under him weren't integrated into the Legion. Moreover, despite there being multiple commander units, they weren't members of the Imperial faction. Instead, they were only area commanders in that base.

So if nothing else, this attack wasn't orchestrated by generals from the Imperial faction. And at the same time, a civilian or Eighty-Six Shepherd—most of which were child soldiers—could not have come up with such a plan.

At best, Eighty-Six Shepherds knew how to lead a single armored division, making it hard to imagine they would understand the intricacies of wide, military-scale supply lines. It was doubtful if they even had a proper grasp of lines of communication, to say nothing of the weakness of a large, multicultural, and fractured society.

So if the Legion knew this and fired the way they did intentionally...

"It must have been a soldier, and a high-ranking one from a nearby country..."

Yatrai was a child when the war began, meaning he didn't know high-ranking commanders from his own country, to say nothing of another's.

His black eyes glinted as he glared at the blue glow of the holo-screen.

"...Who is this?"

The Legion were clearly focusing their attacks on formations with many reservists, soldiers from minorities conquered from other lands, and Alba. Each time they broke through and routed the people, a veteran unit had to come in and take back the land they lost. This cycle repeated itself over and over, and gradually, the veterans' feelings toward the reservists, minority people, and Alba their comrades died for went from sympathy to discontent.

Useless reservists. The conquered people will always be outsiders, when all is said and done. And, Republic scumbags, former Eighty-Six Legion are coming for your heads in revenge, and the Federacy has to get hounded for it.

Why is it always us?

The groups directly targeted by the Legion were the ones who took the most casualties. Concentrated attacks repeated themselves, they took great losses, rinse and repeat.

This didn't happen in formations manned by veteran Federacy soldiers of different races. They alone were constantly exposed to those terrible attacks, dying, and with this, the new soldiers gradually began to build up resentment not just toward the Legion, but also toward the veterans of the Federacy army.

They must have been using them as bait, stationing them in places where they were most likely to die. The veterans didn't want to die, so they put the others in the most dangerous spot instead. They conquered them and then treated them as second-rate citizens.

Why is it always us?

Nina's aunt hadn't given her permission to go outside for some time now. Whenever they did go out, she hid Nina with her body or under a coat, and she took care not to move to where it was loudest—where people were the most heated.

Nina already understood what she was doing and why—why she was trying to protect her.

“...Weißhaare.”

Someone uttered that word as they passed by them on the way to the market. The sheer enmity that person gave off made Nina shrink in fear. *White hair*. It was old Imperial slang mocking the Alba's silver hair. Kids from other classes or upperclassmen would occasionally say that word at school, too. The teacher always scolded them for saying a bad word, but they never stopped. In fact, a bad-tempered teacher even called her that one time.

A weißhaare spoiled princess, too cowardly to stand and fight.

But Eugene went to the army and died there. He wasn't a coward.

The streets were almost entirely full of what looked like evacuees from the territories, swinging their fists and shouting about something. They were short but well-built, their skin tanned and wrinkled. Their clothes looked antiquated to Nina, plain and poor.

They raised their voices and tried to get the attention of passing citizens, who regarded them with glances of annoyance and disdain. The evacuees were apparently citizens from the frontier territory right behind the second

southern front. They were displeased that the reserve position being built behind the front line led to their towns and farmland being torn down.

“The army just needs to hang on and not fall back! They don’t have the nerve to protect us; they’re cowards!”

“These are our homes, our fields! Do you support this atrocity?!”

Before long, some of the passersby started responding to their calls. Mockingly.

“Isn’t that because you Vargus manbeasts couldn’t protect us? Actions and consequences.”

This made the evacuees’ expressions instantly contort. This reaction spurred more people to cry out in ridicule. They were part of the audience, hidden in the crowd, but they spoke proudly like they were talking on everyone’s behalf.

“Right, actions and consequences. You reap what you sow. This wouldn’t have happened if you did your jobs and protected the border. Stop acting like victims when you’re good-for-nothing. And why are you going on about your fields when cities next to the capital are getting bombarded? It’s all discarded land now anyway.”

“Who are you calling manbeasts?! Don’t compare us to animals!”

“And discarded land...?! You invaded us, taking away our ancestors’ names and crops and lands and rights, and now you’re calling it discarded land?! You invaders!”

In their anger, someone started mentioning a centuries-

old grudge. This made someone else laugh outright. “That’s right, so kneel before your Imperial masters, you barbarian losers.”

“...Let’s go, Nina.”

Her aunt spurred her on, her expression stiff. She turned around and walked away from there as outright shouting finally erupted behind them.

Nina held on to her aunt’s hand, which was calloused from housework. Voices like these were all Nina heard in the capital nowadays. She was frightened, more so by that fact than the shouting itself.

With the interrogation about the Actaeon at an end, Primevére and her group were left in a detention center in Sankt Jeder. She assumed that investigation into the Actaeon’s biology was ongoing based on the documents the Federacy confiscated, and they were being kept in detention to keep them from running in case the results of that inspection required any further confirmation.

Sitting in her room, Primevére clenched her hands into fists. There was no radio or television in this room, but she could guess at the situation outside based on the attitude of the officer bringing them food and the snippets of conversation she heard from the hall. It wasn’t just the Alba who were being discriminated against; the Federacy’s people themselves were divided and growing incensed at one another. And everyone was looking for the right target to vent all those frustrations on.

So if, in this situation...

“The Republic gets branded as being at fault for the Actaeon...”

—She felt sick.

There was a market celebrating the Holy Birthday in front of Sankt Jeder. The girl was seated in the most crowded part of it, on a brick platform that a large fir tree was set on, watching the glittering lights pass by. Even at noon, the electric lights, sparkling star decorations, glass ornaments, and the people’s smiles shone bright.

She’d fled her new home and lived secretly in Sankt Jeder. The last time she was here, before she was taken in, she would have never imagined the atmosphere in this city could be so tense. Back then, Sankt Jeder looked peaceful, like paradise, a kind town. But once the thin veneer was off, it was no different than the lab in the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

But even so, this Holy Birthday market shone bright. Lots of people walked about, looking happy and joyful.

And so she couldn’t help but feel that it was unfortunate that they’d have to get caught up in her situation.

“...But I can’t do anything anymore... I can’t move.”

She felt so sick. Her field of vision was swimming, and her head was too hazy to fully compose a coherent thought, so she couldn’t move. All throughout her stomach and in her chest, the Dear cells had awakened and were reshaping her into a bomb, but she just couldn’t move.

And so...so she was here. At this festival brimming with people, all of who looked like they were enjoying

themselves. Parents walked with children, friends walked hand in hand, lovers nestled together in bliss.

“There’s nothing I can do to change this, is there...?”

Her doing this here would no doubt be a very effective way of taking revenge on the Republic. She got up, hugging the big bag of nails she carried against her chest, without wearing her coat, and started walking. Her new big sister had bought her that coat after dragging her around town all day shopping to find one that looked good on her. She couldn’t bring herself to take it along for this and removed it before coming here.

The sight of her walking with unsteady steps without a coat in this cold weather drew attention. People pointed, some shrinking away from her after matching her face to the pictures of the suspects shown all over the news.

But it was too late now.

“I’m sorry.”

She didn’t listen to her fellow friends from her hometown who’d implored her to join them and go home before time ran out, to go somewhere where they wouldn’t hurt anyone. She never even replied to their messages.

Kiki, who kept her smile up even in that hellish research laboratory. Karine, the responsible big sister of the group. Citri, who was as kind, gentle, and pretty as a fairy-tale princess.

She hated them.

She hated the fact that they could smile, carry themselves like big sisters, remain kind and pretty even in that hellish

research laboratory. They could have hated and held grudges against the researchers, but they didn't, and she hated that. She hated that the thought of revenge didn't even occur to them, that their pure, selfless integrity ran so deep.

And because she hated it so much...

...her revenge would ruin even that pure, selfless integrity.

"I'm sorry, everyone."

CHAPTER 3

HOW AM I TO ANSWER?

The Actaeon bombing in Sankt Jeder claimed the largest number of lives yet.

It was also the first Actaeon bombing carried out with clear malice. She exploded in the middle of a large Holy Birthday market, without avoiding people or issuing any warnings. What's more, the girl carried a large number of nails. These metallic fragments heightened the killing potential of her blast, and she'd intentionally walked into a crowd to blow herself up, deliberately picking a place of celebration, where people were allowed to be happy despite the difficult times.

And the worst part of all that, as if to precede this tragedy—the truth about the Actaeon had been disclosed to the public.

The Republic. Again, the Republic. Secretly developed suicide-bombing weapons. Suicide bombs using Eighty-Six as components.

Following this, the news coverage on the Actaeon resumed in full force, with people demanding that they be hunted down, that every last one of them was captured and disposed of as soon as humanly possible. Human-formed suicide-bomb weapons were dangerous enough by virtue of being indistinguishable from normal people, so anyone suspected of it should be arrested right away. Along with the terrible, inhumane Republic people who made them.

As he listened to such radio shows, Miel frowned, feeling a chill of inexplicable terror run through him. The news hadn't been so vicious when he first came to this country, nor had every show on the radio dripped with clear enmity and suspicion.

This was true of both the Actaeon and Republic people like Miel. It didn't feel like they were...hateful or scornful of the Republic, but more like...

“They're afraid of us...?”

Usually, the staff officers and battalion captains would set the TV in the dining hall to the morning news to catch up on recent events, but at this point, Shiden and her group couldn't stand to watch it. It was all reporting and arguing about the Actaeon.

“It's such a shitty mood,” Shiden whispered to no one in particular.

“I've seen this mood before,” Raiden replied. “Who did wrong, who's at fault, who're the traitors...and how you should punish said traitors.”

Yes, it was like when they were little in the Republic, and the early stages of the Legion War were all over the news.

Of course, back then, Shiden thought of it in simple terms. The Empire was the bad guy, and her now-late little sister parroted her. But Raiden had been kept safe in the Republic for longer, so maybe he saw what the news was like after that. How the people and the news fanned each other's emotions on.

“It’s like they’re looking for...,” Michihi whispered. “No, like they crave an enemy... An enemy that’s not the Legion, but one that’s more simple.”

An enemy that’s easier to one-sidedly trample—that’s weaker and fewer in number.

“...This is what Lord Willem feared,” Jonas whispered as TP approached the window, trying to open the half-closed curtain.

His black eyes seemed to be looking in concern past the room, to the base outside the lodging facility.

“...What do you mean, ‘this’?” Lena asked dubiously.

Jonas looked at her in confusion for a second before nodding. “Oh, right, you can’t hear it... The civilians are clamoring outside the base. Maybe they’re trying to make demands of the army HQ, or they’re just trying to agitate the passersby. ‘Tell us the truth. Apprehend anyone related to the Actaeon, the Republic people, the evacuees. Disclose the location of wounded and returning soldiers. We know they’re infected, so just exterminate them all.’”

Annette looked up at him in shock. Using the term *exterminate* on human beings was horrible enough, but what’s more—

“Wait... You can hear the voices from outside the base that clearly? With the window closed?”

“House Degen is a bloodline that carries that kind of power among the Onyxes.”

Superior combat prowess was the Onyx race's unique power, with some clans among them having particularly sharp senses. The family of Willem, the chief of staff—or rather, his old warrior clan's attendant family had this power as a result. Or perhaps they secured and kept hold of this power over time because of their position as attendants.

“Dear cells only behave similarly to viruses, but they're not capable of being contagious. But the civilians seem to believe the Actaeon are infected with a bomb virus, and there are loud voices demanding that those who are infected are dealt with. Or otherwise, that they let the civilians deal with them.”

In other words, discover, quarantine, and dispose of the “infected.”

But of course, since no one was actually infected, there was no one to discover or quarantine. The army and the police were occupied with disclosing accurate information, which made them come across as unconcerned about the “suicide-bomb virus” or, at worst, as attempting to hide information after the fact, which further angered the citizens. And the outcome of that was this situation.

“...There are already a few cases of victims of the bombings and their families hunting down returning soldiers and their refugees in what they call an Actaeon hunt. They were influenced by that theory that the origin of the virus is the Legion...and that everyone on the battlefield and all areas near it are already infected.”

The civilians were already harboring discontent at the displaced evacuees for eating away at their peace and abundance, so they clung to whatever reasoning let them lash out and expel them. They expanded the label of

Actaeon from the Dear cells test subjects and attached it to the territory evacuees, since they were disturbing their peaceful lives.

And then they appended it to the army staff, who kept letting them down and losing. If the infection originated from the battlefield, then those living in the capital area, far from there, must be clean. And since they were clean, they wouldn't need to be expelled—it was an easy logic to embrace.

Jonas narrowed his eyes. His keen hearing likely picked up on what Lena couldn't: awful words of rejection and anger repeated ad nauseam.

“It makes them think the Republic, with its many betrayals, is the true evil, and that evil should be expelled... that they're allowed to expel the Republic's people so long as they have a justified reason. This is what he feared.”

Meanwhile, the soldiers on the battlefield, who were all presumed to be possibly infected, didn't want to see themselves as targets to be expelled.

“...Human suicide bombs are just messed up. There's no way a virus can turn people into bombs.”

They weren't Actaeon. They didn't have some suicide-bomb virus.

“Are you sure they're not some kind of new self-propelled mine...? Maybe they just hid it well because it's indistinguishable from a human...”

After all, if they had a bomb in their body, surely it could

be taken out with an operation. If it was a disease, it could be cured. If they were originally humans, they could just say what happened, and everyone would be glad to help them, right?

But they didn't do it, so they must be some new model of self-propelled mine. Didn't it prove that they were some hostile weapon that couldn't be operated on and didn't obey humans? Right?

“And they all hid the case with the wiretaps, right? The Republic, the Eighty-Six, the high-ranking officers.”

When the chips were down, the major nobles, the generals who sat in the comfort of their safe offices in the capital...

“Maybe they're hiding something *else* from us. Something they don't want us to know.”

“—I wish they could take the bombs out of us with an operation.”

Pinning a worm onto a fishhook and throwing it into the water, Citri muttered this as she watched ripples spread over the water's surface.

They moved through the Vesa territory while avoiding the camps set up by the western front's army, and they were drawing closer to the defensive formation set along the Saentis-Historics line. But currently, they were in a deep ravine inside the woods, meaning their voices wouldn't travel too far, so Kiki and the rest were enjoying fishing while chattering loudly. Yuuto did warn them they might scare away the fish, but they turned out to be pretty

successful. In fact, Yuuto was the only one who was oddly unsuccessful.

Having apparently given up, he sat by the riverside without his fishing rod and looked at the water sparkling as it reflected the faint winter sunlight filtering down through the treetops. Hearing her comment, he glanced over at Citri, and she continued speaking.

She was quite proud of everything she did today. She made the fishing rod herself, was brave enough to pick up a worm from under an overturned rock, and pinned it to the hook without his help. So since she was capable of doing that...she wanted to talk about this, too.

Yuuto hadn't asked what clarity did to them in that research laboratory, probably because he could sense they didn't want to talk about it. And that consideration from him was why she wanted to tell him.

To tell him the story of their...of her weakness and her cunning.

“Like I mentioned at first, the Actaeon were given a set time limit, after which they would detonate, but the setting was incomplete.”

Mines activated by having pressure applied to them, but they also had a safety feature that made them explode after a set time, and this was much the same. Having mines remain buried in a battlefield long after the fight was over was dangerous, and digging up countless mines took time and effort. It was necessary at times to have one's weapons self-destruct so they didn't end up hurting the people of your own country.

But in the case of the Dear cells, the researchers weren't able to perfect this safety feature, both in animal and human experiments.

Yuuto returned his gaze to the glittering stream.

“...And that's why you all decided to run away from home before December.”

“Yes. Our time limit was set to this year's Holy Birthday, so we have no way of telling when in December it might happen. Honestly, it's gotten dangerous even earlier than that, so we should have fled sooner.”

As a safety measure, they were injected with activator cells that would interact with the Dear cells, awakening them after a prescribed time. But they'd activated ahead of schedule, making the Actaeon detonate at unpredictably early times.

If they were set to detonate in ten days, it could end up being several days earlier or several days later. And when set months or years ahead of time, the discrepancy grew even larger. A weapon that could explode unpredictably during transport or standby was a weapon that couldn't be used, but at the same time, there was no sending a person who'd been turned into a bomb onto the battlefield without a means of disposing of or detonating them. Especially if those people had been forcibly turned into bombs.

The detonation-disposal feature might have been workable had a mechanical component that triggered it been included, but the Dear cells were designed to sow doubt in an enemy country by being injected into people who would be taken prisoner. A mechanical component would be foreign to their bodies and therefore easily

detectable, defeating the purpose of the safety device.

“...To begin with, the Dear cells aren’t as simple as the Republic said all those years ago, when they threatened the Empire with turning animals into bombs.

“The activator for it has to be implanted surgically, and we were put to sleep during the surgery, so we don’t know exactly where the cell tissues were placed. And since the Dear cells are made from the Actaeon’s own cells, they aren’t considered a foreign object, and no scan can distinguish them.”

Citri and Yuuto couldn’t hear any birds, perhaps because they were so close to the battlefield, and it was so cold that they couldn’t hear any insects chirping, either. All they could catch was the murmuring of the stream, the occasional rustling of leaves in the distance, and Kiki’s, Ashiha’s, Imeno’s, and Shiohi’s voices as they played together.

“And even if there was some other way of spotting the Dear cells, there’s always the risk of us detonating during the inspection or the operation. The doctor and nurses trying to help us could end up dying, so I doubt the Federacy would even attempt to save us. And if it did, that’s all the more reason those doctors shouldn’t have to die...and more than anything...” Citri paused there.

She decided to tell him about her weakness and cunning. But even so, baring her foul nature for this strong person to see took courage.

“...I was scared the Federacy would treat us like guinea pigs, too. That they’d lock us up, cut us open, and kill us.”

So she ran, never telling a soul. She knew she’d die either

way, but nothing scared her more than being treated the same as in the Eighty-Sixth Sector's laboratory again. The idea of being locked up and killed was scarier than anything.

“You...were scared of dying,” Yuuto whispered softly next to her, so as to not be heard by the others.

She felt a tug on her rod. She caught a fish. She pulled the rod back, catching the splashing fish, and after mustering up the courage, she smacked it against a nearby rock to kill it. This would be their meal for the day.

The Federacy government didn't stop the free press. Calls demanding the Actaeon be hunted down were projected freely over the airwaves, reaching all over the Federacy. Even to the front lines, where the soldiers originally there mingled with troops from the frontier areas.

Isolate the frontier evacuees who come from areas infested with the new self-propelled-mine virus. Don't let the useless serfs, who only eat away at our food, threaten the people's safety anymore.

The soldiers from the capital area were incensed. They were out here, fighting and putting their lives on the line, while the ingrateful serfs threatened their families back home.

The soldiers from the frontier areas were incensed... They were out here, fighting and putting their lives on the line, while the invaders in the capital tried to expel their families.

And despite all that, they—*we* still have to fight to protect the serfs, the invaders.

Ever since the tragedy in the market, Shin had been hearing of increasingly worrying events, both on the front lines and on the home front. This made him all the more annoyed that he couldn't demand Lena's release.

The Federacy military was fracturing from internal discord. The split and enmity didn't target just the Republic people, but everyone from every direction. And if that enmity was to become violence—like, for instance, Lena getting hurt by the effects of it—the Federacy military as a whole would go out of control and lose all its order and integrity as an organization.

So to maintain the Federacy military's structure as an army and a fighting force, they couldn't return Lena to the front lines.

He wanted to end the war with her. But if Operation Overlord was to be carried out for certain, they couldn't afford to let the Federacy's military fall apart. And considering her safety, it was better to have her stay on the home front instead of sending her to the front lines, where it wasn't unthinkable for one of their own soldiers to aim a gun at her for being from the Republic.

But even knowing this, Shin couldn't restrain his anger. After all, this was being done against her will, her freedom was being infringed upon, and he could only idly look on. Lena wasn't the kind of person to want to be one-sidedly protected, and he didn't want to be deprived of her presence this way, either.

If it wasn't for his duties as commander—if him slipping away wouldn't affect the command and morale of the Strike Package as a whole—he'd have rushed over to take her back as soon as possible... This sense of responsibility weighing

on him so heavily annoyed him the most. The fact that he had to act the part of the responsible, understanding adult and couldn't go help her made him outraged with himself.

And on top of all that, he was angered that the only thing he could do was sit there and deal with his conflicted emotions.

“Dammit...!”

At this point, the reporting on the Actaeon was no different from the kind of news they saw in the Republic back in the day, when the Eighty-Six were blamed, excluded, and sent to the internment camps.

This scared Dustin.

If every show on the news and every civilian regarded them as enemies, it seemed increasingly likely the Federacy wouldn't try to save Citri and the others; instead, they would actually hunt them down and kill them. They would do what the Republic did: deem them as criminals and cattle, then murder them all.

With that thought in mind, he pored over a map of the battlefield, examining the route Yuuto had told him. Niva Nova to Noidafune, then Niantemis, and then to the Republic territory of Neunarkis.

“...Ha.”

A smile of self-derision spread over his injured, scratched lips. The estimated path Yuuto had told him... He couldn't make sense of it.

From the Vesa territory to the combat territory of Niva Nova. Then south to the combat territory of Noidafune, then west to the combat territory of Niantemis, and further west from there to their destination at Neunarkis.

Dustin and Amari would have to slip through both opposing armies to get there. It was doubtful they'd arrive on schedule, but Amari did tell him the waypoint they were headed for. But still, he couldn't see the route they'd take to get there. Even accounting for any detours available along that route, and the predicted positions of the Legion patrol units, which they would have to sneak past.

With just those instructions, Dustin couldn't meet them. He didn't have the navigation skills required to guess Yuuto's route.

“Ha-ha, right... All I can do is follow the path he gave me. Even if she asks me to come help her, I can't find my way...”

—How long will this continue?

Just shouting those words wasn't enough. It was never enough, but all he did was shout them. He did nothing else, simply blaming everyone else. He was all talk and incapable of action.

He lacked the means to reach her, the skill to survive the trip. And even if he did find them, how was he going to save her? Dustin didn't have the medical knowledge to extract the Dear cells.

—How long will this continue? How long will I stay like this? So powerless? So blind to how powerless I am? Blind to how I think like I'm doing something, but I haven't achieved anything?

He clenched his hands, the sound of the map crumpling in his grip resonating in his ears like mocking laughter.

As she stood in the dark, empty meeting room, looking at his back—which was hunched over in what appeared to be silent wailing—Anju finally made up her mind.

“...Dustin.”

Dustin wouldn't return alive on his own. Then she'd simply have to take him along with her. To guide and protect him as they headed to the place he sought, where his childhood friend was waiting. With her skills cultivated through her many years as a Processor, Anju could do it.

Cheat for me. Don't die.

Those words were poison for Dustin. Those words bound him like a curse, and as the one who put that curse on him with the face of love, Anju knew it was up to her to lift that curse.

“Dustin, listen...I'll come with you. I'll guide you there.”

They'd be treated as deserters, but she didn't mind. It wouldn't cause their comrades much trouble, either. She felt bad for Shin, who was torn between his feelings for Lena and his duties as commander, but in the end, she was just one platoon's captain. Her leaving wouldn't impact the entirety of the Strike Package's morale and fighting potential as much as his would.

She knew it. This was cheating. And not something as harmless as Dustin's modest, all too pure wish—but genuinely unfair cheating. It was betrayal, the kind there

could be no going back from. But if nothing else, this would protect Dustin's heart.

"We can still make it, I'm sure. If we go there together now...let's go save her."

Dustin didn't turn to face her for one long moment. But then he turned his cold, argent eyes to look at her.

—Together. Let's go save her.

You told me...to not die. To return alive, even if I have to cheat to do it... You put the curse on me, ordering me to abandon Citri. And yet...

"You're telling me that? This has nothing to do with you, Anju."

Yes, if he accepted Anju's help, he'd probably get to Citri in time. An Eighty-Six Name Bearer, and one of the most veteran of them all, could slip through the Legion forces and reach Citri's whereabouts.

Unlike Dustin, she could do that.

Unlike Dustin, she was strong.

And that was why this had nothing to do with her. His weakness, his frustration at how powerless he was, was something Anju was utterly detached from. And so if nothing else, her words—*I'll guide you there*—were like her holding his weakness and sloth up for display. He didn't want her to direct those words at him.

"I'm tired of having the witch's curse on me... Just leave

me alone.”

And only once he said that, he finally realized it. Only when he heard the sharp intake of breath behind him did the meaning of what he just said register in his mind. What letting his emotion and anger getting the better of him made him say.

He hurriedly spun around, only to find Anju had turned her back and run off. The sight of her long bluish-silver hair trailing behind her like an afterimage lingered in his eyes. And for this reason, Dustin couldn't see what expression she made in that moment.

He could only stand stock-still until Frederica hurried in to take Anju's place—having “seen” this, or perhaps simply realizing something was wrong—and angrily and aggressively called him a fool.

“**W**hat are you doing?! That's a minefield over there!” Henry barked angrily, spotting a soldier from another company drive young, inexperienced soldiers ahead into a minefield.

It was one corner of the front lines where there somehow wasn't any fighting. Despite that, the soldiers were all smirking as they replied, intent on using the fresh batch of newly arrived soldiers for target practice or to clear the mines.

“C'mon, we're just sending him back to Mommy.”

“We need to make sure they're not some of those new self-propelled mines, you know? If they make it back, they're a mine; if they don't, congrats, *they're all one of us.*”

“Come on, it’s just a little prank. They’re *odd-colored* anyway.”

Odd-colored. People whose skin color, hair color, or eye color didn’t match. They themselves didn’t actually believe these soldiers were self-propelled mines; they simply admitted, with a smile, that they were only doing it because these were people of a different race. They were having fun persecuting someone, openly using it as one of their few ways of having fun on the field of battle.

“You think you can pull pranks like this here? Hell, you think this is a prank to begin with? I’ll report it to the higher-ups. I’m not from your company; I don’t have to stay quiet about this. Try telling that to your battalion commander or an MP.”

He had to go that high up because, much to his amazement, even the captain and vice captain for this company were in on this. The soldiers eyed him with hostility, annoyed that he’d rained on their parade repeatedly.

“Aww, just shut up...!”

“Keep your nose out of our business, Weißhaare! You think you can talk when you’re from the *Republic*?!”

But their insults only emboldened him.

“Yeah, I’m from the Republic. And that’s how you know that when I say you’re going to regret what you’re doing, I mean it!”

The company captain looked taken aback when Henry shouted right at him. As he inched away from him, startled,

Henry thrust a finger at his face. He remembered hearing somewhere that pointing at someone kept them from blending in with a group as a faceless member with no responsibility, instead marking them as an individual who could be taken to task for their choices and actions.

“You—yes, you, First Lieutenant Kareli. Simoni Kareli. I heard you just got married, right?”

“What are you—?”

“Can you tell your wife what you just said to me? Can you boast to her that you chased people from other races until you drove them to get killed by the Legion? And what about when you have children? Can you tell them that Daddy abandoned kids their age to die just because of their race? No, you can’t. You won’t, First Lieutenant. And neither can you, or you, or you!”

He pointed at the faces of everyone present here. Everyone wore the same weird expression people had when their individual thoughts were painted over by the group they were in.

The soldier he’d named and singled out from the group averted his eyes in guilt, his face going red in what might have been anger. The blind anger of being pulled out of the safety of a group and backed down into individuality, where one could be blamed and shamed for their actions.

“I—I just don’t have to tell—”

“Are you stupid?” Henry cut him off mockingly. “You think people won’t find out? It came out when the Republic did it, and the whole country was trying to hide it then. But the world at large found out. So what you’re doing is bound

to come to light. Let's see you, then, when you get called demons for what you did. When you get called inhuman monsters for the rest of your lives!"

He'd started laughing without even noticing it. His lips curled up like a gash cut across his face, and he bared his teeth with a maddened glint in his eyes.

"And even if that doesn't happen...even if no one else ever finds out, you'll know it. Everyone else might not know, but you will. So there's no running from this. The truth will thrust itself before your eyes someday. You'll do it to yourselves. I—"

Yes, I...I'm part of the Republic, which drove out and slaughtered the Eighty-Six, even when it happened to my stepmother's family, Claude's family. I looked away and carried on with my life. And so—

"I'm the same! I abandoned my family. For ten years, I walked around like nothing happened, like everything was fine. But it wasn't fine—my little brother was still alive. And when I found out, I fell apart. I realized myself that I was scum who'd thrown his brother to the dogs and lived for ten years like I'd done nothing wrong!"

And that's why Henry couldn't forgive this. He couldn't pardon his own sins. He kept blaming himself for the fact that he'd looked away from the expulsion and slaughter.

"So there's no running from this. In ten years or so, when your children grow up, or when you just see some kid in town, the guilt will come crashing down on you like a hammer. There'll be no escaping it. You'll catch up to yourself someday. So stop this, before it comes to that. Before you become like me!"

“F-fine, I get it! Shit!” First Lieutenant Kareli said, looking at Henry with fearful eyes as he angrily stomped on the ground like an outraged child.

“I’m not in the mood anyway after all that shouting. Let’s stop this and not do it again. Satisfied?”

It seemed this attempt to placate Henry was closer to telling him to keep his mouth shut. He then glanced over at the young soldiers.

“...Sorry. Our prank went too far.”

Not that this could be written off as a prank.

As he left, the child soldiers followed. This was their unit, and they had no choice but to follow. One of them turned to look at Henry before they left. He was dark-skinned, with pale-golden hair and bright-colored eyes.

“—Weißhaare.”

Henry froze where he stood. The boy was right, and Henry didn’t get involved to come across as a hero to be thanked, but still.

First Lieutenant Nino, who’d hurried over upon hearing of this altercation and seen it all happen, placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. It was him who’d told Henry about Claude’s phone call, and the two started talking as a result.

“First Lieutenant... I understand.”

“...Yeah.”

“...Captain Nouzen.”

Shin realized that he must have really been visibly angry if a foreign soldier, Olivia, had to call out to him.

“Captain Olivia. I...”

As a soldier from another army, Olivia wasn't under Shin's command, and despite them both being the rank of captain, Olivia had been an officer for longer, to say nothing of him being older and an adult. Not that he was far enough in age to be his father...but he was like an older brother or cousin and, therefore, someone Shin could complain to.

“What should I do? I've been sitting still, waiting for this to resolve itself and for her to come home, but that hasn't happened. It's getting worse, in fact. I feel like I should have ignored orders to begin with and gone to take her back. Do I have to obey these orders all the time because I'm a commander, a soldier? I want to go save her, but if I do that —”

Me, as operations commander, as a commanding officer, as a soldier, as the leader of the Strike Package's Processors... But Lena's not here, and I want to go take her back...

“Does growing up and not being a child mean...nothing goes your way, and you can't do anything about it?”

Hearing Shin's truly childish question, Olivia replied concisely:

“Yes.”

His blue eyes looked hard and cold.

“Being an adult means you stop being a child under the protection of grown-ups. It means having things you need to protect that aren’t just your own well-being. It means you have to take responsibility for more things. It means you don’t just live for yourself, and that when you need to make sacrifices for your choices, you’re not the only thing you might have to sacrifice.”

“ ... ”

Just like that one-eyed major general, who’d done everything in the name of the Federacy, of the mission, of not letting child soldiers become killers. He took on that task, even though it meant leaving his wife and children behind. And he did it with the intent of entrusting the future his wife and children would live in to the Federacy military—to Shin and the Strike Package.

I want to tell him that I am a soldier. He was the one who told me to live properly.

“And yes, the reason you don’t know what to do right now is because you understand the weight of your responsibilities. Because you’re weighing the outcomes of your choices. You care for Colonel Milizé, and you care for your comrades, and you know you have responsibilities to follow...and on top of all that, you know you can’t expose Colonel Milizé to danger. You’ve already made your choice, knowing now is the time to wait and protect the place she will return to.”

“...But.”

He couldn’t tolerate it anymore. He couldn’t help but feel there must be a way to make sure everything went well for both Lena and the Strike Package, and he couldn’t tolerate

the fact that he couldn't find it.

“Captain, you saw the previous operation. There isn't always an ideal choice that makes everything turn out right. Sometimes, your only option is to pick the one choice that doesn't have the worst possible outcome.”

And sometimes, things came to the point where you simply had to accept that there were losses you couldn't recoup. He thought back to the Hail Mary Regiment, who'd lost their friends and their homes over and over until they couldn't take it anymore. He thought about their female commander and those boys whose names he never knew.

They couldn't take it anymore, and their actions led to catastrophe. They neglected to make the choice that didn't have the worst possible outcome, and they charged down the most terrible path.

...I thought the worst of them.

Only now, when he was backed against the wall himself, did he realize that. He didn't want to lose anymore. To not have anything taken away from him again, and having to put up with that impulse, hurt so much.

It only hurt so badly because he cared so much.

As Shin hung his head, Olivia regarded him with a strained smile.

“But all that said, you still need to vent your anger, right? Honestly, next time, you should do something to let off steam before you get that bad... For the time being, I got you permission to do some brawling practice in the maneuvering grounds. We can go for a round now, if you'd like.”

Managing something akin to a smile, Shin said jokingly, “I see. I’ll use your chest for that one, then, Captain.”

Olivia’s smile deepened. “That’s some odd nuance... Just letting you know, I’m not as good with antipersonnel combat as I am in armored combat. I’ll have First Lieutenant Shuga come along—”

“Raiden won’t be enough. You’ll need one, maybe two more people.”

Shin mockingly said something quite rude about Raiden despite his absence, only for Raiden to suddenly walk over and tell him bluntly, “Figured you’d say that, Shin...so I asked your beloved priest to come over and join in.”

Shin looked past him, shuddering, and saw him—the priest—looking less like a person and more like a grizzly bear that’d forgotten to hibernate, flexing his bulky, muscular arms.

Shin felt very overwhelmed all of a sudden.

Rito and the others could clearly see that Shin had a lot of pent-up frustration from Lena being in custody following the Actaeon affair. So perhaps as a way to let off some steam, Shin started having a friendly hand-to-hand brawl with Raiden, Olivia, and for some reason, the military priest, much to the shock and surprise of even the Eighty-Six.

The priest being a monster was nothing new, but Raiden was going all out, and Shin was definitely more savage than they’d seen him during training. Olivia fell out of the running first, antipersonnel combat not being his forte, but the boys and girls who’d gathered around to watch saw him

off with calls of “Good fight, Captain!” and “I’m surprised you challenged the cap’n to a fight when he’s in such a crappy mood.”

“...But man, the cap’n’s really in a foul mood today... Vice Cap’n Shuga’s putting up a good fight, even if he has the reverend helping him,” Rito grumbled, taken aback.

“Mmm, this is some interesting stuff they’re up to. Maybe I can help ya if honor allows it, Li’l Werewolf!” Shiden stepped up to the plate, chanting a line from a movie she saw at a film festival the other day, and joined the match. Raiden jumped up and charged Shin in tandem with her, rushing past the priest. At this point, Shin’s expression took on a shade of clear anger.

“We’re supposed to join in here, right?”

“Come on, let’s go, Marcel!”

“Me too?!”

And so Tohru, Claude, and Marcel also entered the fight, and with Marcel instantly getting knocked out, the battle became a four-on-one. But despite that, eventually, the eastern front’s Reaper was able to defend his honor and beat all of them back, and it didn’t even completely exhaust Shin. He was gasping for air, though.

The priest, who had moved strictly to defense once Shiden joined in, asked:

“Did you calm down some?”

“Yes. Cleared my head, for the time being,” Shin replied, wiping away sweat with his sleeve.

Tohru fell over and demanded Shin get them drinks, with Shiden pumping her fist and voicing her agreement.

“You’re asking me to brew you tea? Me? Of all people?”

Shin really did seem to have relaxed a little, because he was able to joke like usual. Raiden patted him on the back of the head from behind.

“Just don’t outright state you’re going to mix up the sugar with the salt.”

“No, with cornstarch.”

“I mean don’t play with food, moron. The way things are now, the guys in Supplies will have your head.”

Seeing this, Rito, who’d mostly kept his voice down as an onlooker so far, whispered:

“That’s actually not that bad. It’ll turn to, like, tea jelly.”

“That might have actually tasted nice, if it wasn’t Captain Nouzen making it...,” Michihi, who approached them, said with a strange half smile.

“...Maybe we should have Yuuto try it and tell us how it tastes when he comes back.”

Yuuto, who’d entrusted the information on the Actaeon with the Republic and left with those girls. He, who was now a fugitive on the run from the Federacy military and the police.

He knew this would happen, which was why he didn’t tell a soul and departed by himself, taking all the responsibility for it on his own. And yet...

Michihi smiled softly. “Yes... When he comes back.”

True to Yuuto’s statement, it took some time, but they slipped through the western front’s defensive line in the Niva Nova combat territory, as well as the Legion’s patrol lines. It was a brief and yet long trek.

They were now in the western side of the Noidafune territory, by now firmly within Legion turf, and stopped deep in a nameless forest on its northern fringe. They were by a large lake, also nameless save for whatever local name the residents who’d lived nearby once gave it. And scattered at the edge of that lake, by the shadows of the long tree and all over the branches, were white, long-necked birds.

Even Shiohi, whose drooping eyes tended to be sleepily half-open, looked at them with wide eyes as she whispered:

“...Swans?”

“There’s a few swans here, but...these are mostly geese.”

Or maybe ducks—Yuuto couldn’t always tell them apart. He’d seen fowl like these, which weren’t chickens, in the Eighty-Sixth Sector. They were edible if they hunted them down.

Some of the cattle and livestock that’d been freed during the evacuations likely ended up running because of the fighting that followed, leading to them gathering in Legion-controlled areas. This let them avoid animals like bears and wolves, which the Legion did recognize as offensive targets, allowing smaller livestock to live safely here even after the front line was pulled back.

Then again, foxes and birds of prey weren't targeted by the Legion, either, and these livestock were domesticated animals that were used to living under the care of humans. Yuuto pondered that finding prey probably wasn't a problem for any mountain cats or foxes living nearby.

But Yuuto didn't speak these violent thoughts aloud, so Citri and the others didn't know about them. Instead, they approached the birds, making quacking sounds at a flock of geese that were used to being cared for by humans, and grinned at them happily.

"They're so friendly!"

"So cute...and fluffy...!"

Oh...

After seeing this, Yuuto realized that it would be best to give up on catching one of them for dinner.

Not only was he incapable of saving Citri, but he also hurt Anju on top of that. He said something unthinkable to his precious girlfriend. That realization finally drove Dustin to a corner. Maybe he should have just rushed out to the battlefield to find her, even knowing he'd never make it. Considering the state he was in, maybe he should just betray Anju and set out, returning or surviving be damned.

He wanted someone to agree with him. Tell him he was right. But no one indulged him that way, so he called out to Amari again, seeking words that would spur him on. But the moment she saw him, Amari's eyes widened.

"...I'm sorry. This is a bit late to say, but perhaps I

shouldn't have told you after all."

"Did she say anything else? Did Citri say anything else?"

Their words overlapped, but he was unable to stop himself and kept going. He didn't care for her apology. Citri's words mattered more. He wanted to be told Citri blamed him for his powerlessness. That she said something that would send him charging to the battlefield without looking back, running until he exhausted all his strength.

"Did she ask why I didn't save her? Call me scum? Say I should just...die?"

Amari cocked her head a little. Dustin's expression was visibly awful, so she wasn't too taken aback by how incoherent he was being. But...

"She didn't ask to be saved..."

"Look, Yuuto!"

Citri hurried over to him, one of those birds—a goose or a duck—in her arms. Apparently, the goose had jumped into her arms for want of attention, and Citri looked as ecstatic as a child.

"It's really friendly! And spoiled, too. It likes getting pats. Come on, Yuuto, try patting it!"

Her pale-violet eyes twinkled with joy, and for the first time, he saw her make a truly carefree smile. He reached out almost unconsciously, spurred by her words—not for the goose looking at him with its black eyes, but for Citri's long flaxen hair. For her smooth, pale cheek under it, dirtied by

their long journey.

Citri's eyes widened in surprise, but she didn't run.

But the next moment, a bird on the lake—a real swan—let out a monstrous screech that one would never expect from its graceful form and flew away from the water. And despite the sound coming from another creature, it was a distress cry, and it made the geese flee in a panic. The one sitting in Citri's arms likewise flew off in a flutter of feathers.

“Ah!”

“Whoa!”

The two got out of the way, of course, and he pulled his hand away before he could touch her. The other geese all flew off around them, filling the area with feathers. It was almost like snow—except it was too fluffy and dirty. They peered at each other, looking absurd with feathers covering their head and hair.

And then Citri and Yuuto both burst into laughter at once. Both of them tried to laugh it off, to pretend they didn't notice that strange impulse that had guided them a moment ago.

Amari's expression looked dubious, like she was confused as to why he had to think about this in a way that made everything more complicated than it should be.

“She just said she wanted to see you. That she wanted to see her friend one last time... She was worried about you, what with the offensive. But after hearing you were fine, she said she wanted to see you before the end, because you were

her best friend... Oh, right.”

As Dustin held his breath, she continued, looking like she just remembered something.

“She said she wanted to apologize to you proper. For breaking a promise that you’d go to school and play together tomorrow. To apologize for disappearing.”

Those were words he didn’t expect. And...honestly, once he stopped to think about it, it was an obvious wish to make. It left Dustin stunned.

“...She wanted to see me for that?”

He hardly even remembered it anymore. He couldn’t even come up with the idea of her wish being something as simple and obvious as wanting to see a friend again.

How would I even save Citri? When did I start assuming Citri even wanted me to save her? I’m acting like I’m some kind of chosen one, some savior. Or some kind of saint of penance, shouldering the sins of the foolish. I treated Citri, and all the friends who got taken away from that new town, like they’re a tragedy that happened to me. I held them up like a banner, to show off that I’m on the right side, that I’ve known tragedy.



—How long will this continue?!

And yet he forgot those trivial but oh so precious memories he had with her and everyone all too easily. He forgot that she was a human being who once lived at his side, and he reduced her to a token to justify his actions and selfish attempt at atonement.

“I...”

The reporting on the TV and radio and the atmosphere of the capital outside the living room of Ernst’s estate and all across the Federacy were heavy with anger and misery. The hatred toward the heartless Legion was actually the lightest, and it didn’t stop with just disdain for the Republic’s actions. People of the Federacy were enraged at their own countrymen.

The Republic for developing the Actaeon, the government for trying to hide it, the Eighty-Six and returning soldiers for being infected, and generally, the fact that there was no telling who might be a ticking time bomb. The evacuees were nothing but pesky beggars, and despite their fleeing the farms and factories making everyone’s lives worse, they didn’t know their place and kept whining and shouting about injustices and discontent.

The many who died in the Morpho bombardments, the army that failed to defeat the Legion before things became so dire, the government, the nobles who controlled the army, the Vargus who were useful despite being nothing but cattle to be burned through in battle. And the so-called elite heroes, the Strike Package, were also good-for-nothing. Useless Eighty-Six.

Ernst let out a sigh akin to a breath of flames.

If they were going to shout at the saints on the cross for dying before they could save anyone... If they were going to curse those on the battlefield for being useless when they themselves remained in the safety of the home front...

Were they, the ones who only cared about blaming everyone else for being useless, not the most useless people of all?

“**I** got one! Look, Yuuto!”

When Ashiha hurried over to him, a chicken with a snapped neck in her hands, even Yuuto had to stare at her in surprise.

“You caught it?”

“A fox did!”

Just as it caught its prey, a large creature appeared out of nowhere, lording over it, and the fox had to leave its catch behind and flee.

...*Well.*

Animals competing over food was common enough in nature. And even if it left its prey behind, there was no guarantee the fox that ran off would come back for it.

“...Impressive.”

“Right?!”

Ashiha proudly held up the chicken she stole from the

fox.

“Whoa, awesome!”

“A real chicken. Where did you find it?”

“Wow, this is great! We can have an actual feast!”

Citri, Shiohi, and Kiki had just come back. Shiohi had been gathering firewood, while Citri and Kiki both carried lots of apples in their arms.

“We could add some apples...” Citri cocked her head excitedly. “And make a cake with the rest. We still have some sugar and bread; maybe we can cook something that looks the part.”

“We could slice them up, fry them, and put them in bread with sugar to make them more cake-like. What do you say, Yuuto?”

Yuuto did think that even with all that in mind, they picked too many apples...but then he blinked at Shiohi's question. A cake?

“Don't tell me you forgot.” Citri giggled.

“You're surprisingly flighty, Yuuto!” Shiohi appended.

“...Sorry. What do you mean?”

Seeing he really couldn't figure it out, the girls exchanged impish smiles and then said it on the count of three.

“““Today's the Holy Birthday!””””

For the last decade, the Federacy military tried to prepare special meals even on the front lines during the Holy Birthday. Molded meat steaks with traditional applesauce, and heavy cakes sprinkled with dried fruit.

But now there was no glossing over the reality of things.

One armored infantryman, Vyov Katou, eyed the fancy cake that was usually made with sugar and eggs, the likes of which he'd never seen in his hometown, and spoke reproachfully. Even though before now, they would gladly eat such luxury foods.

“For how self-important they act, the city people and nobles and Eighty-Six don't do anything for us. It's all their fault; that's why people keep dying left and right.”

A few of his comrades, sitting nearby, nodded in annoyed agreement. The Legion's recent assaults cost them many losses because of the useless armored division that lagged behind them and the cowardly artillery forces not offering them enough fire support. But these guys survived despite all that. Some of them were friends or acquaintances of his family from his hometown.

“Someone has to be guilty for this. It's got to be their fault.”

“—Honestly, the war should have been over by this Holy Birthday.”

Before he knew it, Ishmael realized that he'd been hearing things like this, which were more resentful than hopeful.

“We should have nuked them. We’d have beaten them if we just nuked them. It should have been over by now.”

“Apparently, that was the technical institute’s new secret weapon. Using that would have burned those scrap monsters away. But then the leviathan had to get involved.”

“And the Fleet Countries’ people were collaborators.”

This was idle gossip spawned from the Hail Mary Regiment affair, which had been maliciously contorted into material for distrust. With the air of doubt and suspicion already thick across the battlefield, this rumor spread like wildfire all over the northern front.

The Fleet Countries’ people were all outsiders. They resented the Empire for invading them. They weren’t really human, but monstrous descendants of leviathans.

Those insults, said behind their backs loudly enough to be heard, contained more fear than scorn, and that’s what the Fleet Countries’ people found the most eerie. These people all acted like wounded, frightened animals, scared senseless of the unknown.

And since they were wounded and frightened, there was no telling what their fear and self-preservation might drive these cornered animals to do next.

“**M**an, must be nice, being an injured soldier. Unlike us, they don’t have to fight!”

This time, Theo wasn’t the one who was told that to the face; it was a corporal with a prosthetic leg who was engaged in paperwork. The person who said it was a

reservist.

The corporal simply silently glared back at him reproachfully, and the reservist walked back to his friends with a smug, proud expression. He was greeted jovially, everyone praising him for having said his piece.

Theo was already used to seeing scenes like this. People around the base had been talking like this for some time now.

They're different. Different from us. They must have cheated somehow to unfairly enjoy this privilege. We're forced to put our lives on the line, and you cheats are the ones forcing it on us. That makes you traitors—you're the ones who should be out there, dying.

Theo bit his lip. He thought the Republic, the country that made the Eighty-Sixth Sector, had been somehow unique in its callousness. But even the Federacy, a country he thought was normal, turned out like this once the situation became bad enough.

It wasn't only the Republic. It was simply human nature. Once the gears of society started to unhinge, people were easily driven to scorn and exclude their fellow humans. In their reluctance to see them and those close to them suffer death or discomfort, they started forcing all those problems onto someone else as a form of justice.

“...And that's just—”

As she read up on a proposal to the Senate to send the refugees who were heading to the capital back to the front lines as reservists, paired with editorials agreeing with it,

Lena felt her breath catch. The proposal posited that the idea should be adopted to avoid the tragedy of drafting civilians. After all, the refugees were useless since they'd abandoned their duties in the production territories and were now nothing but idle parasites eating away at what little food was left.

Since the Federacy hadn't been a democratic republic for long, many couldn't read or write yet, especially those from the territories, where there were very few schools. The newspaper she was reading was printed in the capital area, for the educated class, and so they deemed they could openly discuss this as the majority of territory evacuees wouldn't even be able to understand it.

A certain sentence came to Lena's mind: *If no one lives by its values, the five-hued flag is just a piece of cloth.* Those values of freedom, equality, brotherhood, nobility, and justice were nothing but empty illusions. The face of the man who spat those words at her came to mind.

Maybe democracy was an idea that was too premature for humankind.

And that wasn't limited to just the Republic. It was true in this country, too, and perhaps everywhere in the world.

But then an unfamiliar low voice cut into her thoughts.

"This proposal hasn't been decided on by the Senate yet, but it's already been approved behind the scenes. They'll be sending in those from territories that produce the least, and poor citizens from the capital areas who've lost the means to live. Either way, it'll be the most 'useless' of refugees, so neither the Senate nor the people will object... How does hearing that make you feel, Silver Queen of the Republic?"

Lena turned around, finding herself faced with a black-haired, black-eyed young officer of about twenty years old standing silently by the door. He had a sharp, cruel gaze and the physique of a warrior, and he bore the unit insignia of a skeletal hand gripping a longsword.

Jonas, who stood behind her, swallowed audibly.

“Lord Nuzen—”

The man, however, raised his voice in a bellow without even regarding him with a look.

“Did someone say you’re allowed to bark?! Stand down, dog!”

Jonas fell silent. He retreated back to the wall, his face screwed up not in shame but likely out of concern for his master’s position.

Lena looked away from Jonas’s eyes, which regarded her with concern, to the young man, and she carefully replied in a low voice. Despite being in the same room and right next to Lena, the Nouzen man hadn’t looked at Annette at all ever since he entered the room. As Lena spoke, she looked into his cruel, spear-like black eyes, so unrecognizably different from the two other Nouzens she knew.

“I’m not sure what you mean by how it makes me feel.”

“I am merely wondering what it looks like to you, as a woman of the Republic, to see the Federacy’s own citizens clamoring for what would effectively spell the end of this country.”

“Is this your idea of sarcasm?”

The young man's lips curled into something akin to a sneer. She was truly relieved that even this minute gesture looked nothing like Shin.

“I suppose you would take it as such. My apologies, then. No, I merely wanted your opinion on it for future reference, to know what to do when the civilians admit in all but words that, in the end, our precious creeds have proved to be paper-thin veneers. Freedom and equality have been exposed as nothing but means for those who have everything to walk all over those who have nothing.”

Human rights were a privilege afforded only to the haves—this they exhibited to the have-nots. So they openly, loudly called those unfortunate enough to have no talent, education, or motivation by a new title—the useless—with their “wisdom,” which neglected to grasp that even the useless and the uneducated, the slothful and the weak, experienced discontent.

“In the end, the Federacy wasn't worth a damn. So how does it feel to you—a citizen of the Republic, which was able to keep its five-hued flag for three centuries—to see idiots who think they are smart fool other idiots into thinking the Federacy turned its haughty nobles into smart, capable citizens?”

Yatrai did think that democracy was an incredibly troublesome system. All must be their own kings. Everyone must take responsibility for their own lives. Of course, some people wouldn't be able to take that pressure. For example, those who'd spent their lives feeling defeated and helpless about carrying responsibility for their own fates, having ended up born under freedom and equality.

But if the Federacy wanted to maintain that freedom and

equality, with all the weight they demanded, they ought to form a framework to save them. A framework that would provide the weak and the incapable with some replacement that would give the useless some illusion of accomplishment.

Be it faith or patriotism, or even being an exhibit in the circus. Even more militaristic practices the Old Empire engaged in—like public executions, chariot races, and coliseum battles—gave the people a sense of justice, belonging, and enthusiasm.

Something that would at the very least satiate not just their empty stomachs, but also their sense of being.

And if one didn't keep these things in mind, society would eventually be overturned. A society reserved for those willing to study and succeed would eventually be overturned by those who didn't wish for those things.

And that would end with the people hanging the powerful king in the town square. With the needy executing the wealthy, who owned all. With those who had everything stirring up the ire of those who had nothing. A dagger cared little for how much one had as it slipped between their ribs. And anyone, no matter how ignorant or weak, could thrust a dagger.

And if one did not know that... If none of the civilians took responsibility and at least tried to maintain a facade of human rights, not even realizing that they were jeopardizing their own safety in the process...

“Personally, establishing a second Imperial government strikes me as more trouble than it's worth, but... Tell me, Silver Queen of the Republic. Can the people of Giad...”

Can humans as a whole...

“...be wise enough to bear the weight of freedom?”

Should freedom and equality be granted?

Lena thought for a moment and then said:

“I think the moment you called it foolish, you proved yourself to be just as much of a fool.”

Yatrai’s jaw tightened ever so slightly. “...Oh?”

“And so am I. Yes, people are foolish. I’m a fool, too. We may never be worthy of being called wise. Freedom and equality might be powerless illusions that we will fail to materialize into anything substantive to the very end. But still.”

Driven to give an answer, she felt like she understood. She could find the right words when confronted with this question. All this talk of human rights, freedom, and equality. Yes, they were all illusions, things without substance, and that’s why the civilians were all failing to protect the value of those illusions. They were empty words, devoid of any inherent value, and they only had meaning when each and every person in society gave them worth and acted to maintain them.

Like putting in the effort to live, as equality in the name of freedom meant equal duty. Like making the effort to reach out to others despite it, to live with a sense of brotherhood, nobility, and justice.

...I know that even I, deep down, have done things like this before. And I know exactly where I’ve done it—in the Republic. Somewhere, deep down, I looked down upon the

people who shut themselves off in a sweet dream, living in a country that closed its eyes and plugged its ears. I've thought foul of them so many times. And in doing that, I, too, am a fool.

“What we need is not wisdom, *Lord Nouzen*.”

She referred to him with a title unused in the Republic, with one used only by former nobles in the Federacy nowadays. But Lena intentionally did so. Because she was speaking to an anachronistic Imperial noble who thought he lorded over others, choosing to apply outdated noble logic in the current day.

People needed to try to live for their own sakes. To try to save those they could save. And—to try to not loathe those who could not help. To try to not drag down those who could help others. To not cast out and eliminate those struggling to live right next to you.

“What we need is not wisdom—it's kindness. To have the resolve and courage to hold on to at least the bit of kindness required to not wish others would disappear, even if we dislike and truly hate them. And indeed, the Federacy lacks that right now. And...you lack that kindness at present and will likely lack it going forward.”

Lena gazed right into Yatrai's eyes as she spoke. Her silver eyes burned as they peered into his noble Imperial night-colored eyes.

“Know your place, Imperial noble. That cold heart of yours...is the greatest foolishness there is.”

The western edge of the Noidafune combat territory did

indeed have little Legion presence, but that wasn't to say the Legion was completely absent. As Yuuto, Citri, and their group crept through the gaps in the Legion's supply runs and gathering points, they crossed east into the Niantemis combat territory.

In the past, it'd been Republic territory, annexed before then by the Empire a century or so ago. As Yuuto and Citri sat around a fire, hidden deep in a forest, Shiohi laughed. The overlapping leaves above them scattered the rising smoke, and since the campfire was dug into a hole, its light didn't spread too far. In the depths of this dark forest...

“We finally came this far, Yuuto... Thank you.”

When dawn rose the next morning, she'd vanished somewhere into the darkness of the trees.

The now-vacated mansion of a former noble couple who'd taken in a wiretap child was burned down. After all, the nobility were enemies of the Federacy people and may have colluded with the Legion.

Federacy soldiers who'd managed to escape the Legion's headhunts returned to the Federacy army's defense line, only to be rejected by every encampment and end up dying to the Legion anyway. After all, what if they hadn't escaped the headhunt but were instead traitors the Legion sent back in?

A position that'd cracked under the Legion's pressure and sent a distress call was abandoned by surrounding

Federacy units and left to die. It was a position that had many reinforcements, most of which were Republic and volunteer soldiers.

After all, the Republic soldiers and those who fought with them may have been turned into human bombs.

In a certain unit on the second northern front, all soldiers who'd been formerly serfs ended up killed. They'd been shot dead by fellow Federacy soldiers as they defended evacuee children rescued during the Roginia River restoration operation.

After all, the evacuees and those defending them might have been “polluted” by the Legion in some way.

And.

It truly wasn't a dramatic scene.

There was no massive bombardment that blotted out the sky. No lightning raining down from across the horizon. Nothing grand enough to mark the coming of catastrophe.

It was ordinary battle, the same metallic army pushing against the defensive lines, under the same artillery bombardment as the previous day and the day before. And the endless, countless shadows of machines rolling out over and over from the horizon was a grim reminder that it would remain the same the next day and the day after.

It didn't happen to a unit in a front-line position on the first line of the defensive formation, where the fighting was

at its fiercest. It was a unit that was on its way to the front lines as reinforcements that succumbed to despair first. Unlike those fighting directly against the Legion offensive under the whirring of bombardment, their morale pushed to its limit by zeal and excitement, they were still calm and thus more prone to having their spirits broken.

“Is that where we’re going now?”

It was like they were marching to their death. And indeed, many had died under that tidal wave of steel. They didn’t want to go there. They didn’t want to die. No. No. No.

After all, they were...

“They’re just dogs of the nobles.”

They were subjects. Vargus. Outsiders. Serfs. Speakers of different tongues and those of different races. Foolish, weak good-for-nothings. Strong enough to fight, but still good-for-nothing for resting on their laurels.

Was this who they were going to fight for?

The weak and foolish who did nothing but expect them to sacrifice their lives?

The strong and slothful who wouldn’t save them but still expected to use them up like cannon fodder?

“I’m not dying for them.”

And so.

And thus.

“We shouldn’t have to fight for them.”

By no means were those their true feelings.

They simply lost their nerve. Rather than prioritizing the soldiers fighting madly to stave off the enemy, or the helpless civilians from the home front or the homeland or their hometown—they chose themselves. That's all there was to it.

All those excuses were simply justifications they told themselves and no one else—so they wouldn't have to acknowledge that fact. A deception so they wouldn't have to face their own cowardice. An excuse they told themselves.

They made that justification because of the turmoil within the Federacy that had erupted as a result of their defeat in the second large-scale offensive and the Republic's many mistakes. In truth, though, it was the culmination of countless divisions, hostilities, and grudges that had been bubbling under the surface since the Federacy's formation.

The true trigger was every Federacy citizen turning their eyes away from the title of *land of justice*, which the Federacy held on to for a decade of war.

The soldiers stopped in their tracks and nodded to the others, affirming one another's discontent and self-preservation.

Why should we die for them? We can't sacrifice our dear comrades for them. Yes, that's right, that's exactly right. So we're right to abandon them. We shouldn't have to save those people.

Those same words and emotions spread from platoon to company, resonating like cries in an echo chamber. They

began referring to themselves not as “me” but as “us,” as the lines between individual and group grew vague, and personal fears mixed with the disgruntlement of others until there was no distinguishing the two, amplifying all the while.

After all, they're not like us. They're not on our side.

They're not like us—so whatever becomes of them isn't our problem.

They drew a line.

And as they became a group called “us,” a singular creature beset by the same fury, their decision quickly spread across the group without any rebuttal. The will of one individual was, in the end, nothing but the crackle of static noise in the face of the group's collective will. Especially when it came to things like justice and dignity.

Some of the reinforcements headed for the front line retreated. They abandoned *them* for the sake of *us*. A few platoons and companies began fleeing the battlefield.

A single butterfly, white and as thin as shadow, fluttered into the snowy dark.



Through the eyes of a Rabe flying twenty thousand meters above ground level, the Legion commander units grasped the way the Federacy's front line was beginning to subtly unravel. It didn't happen on any one front—it was happening on every front. With some time difference, all the Federacy's ten fronts were starting to fall apart, from the

first front lines to the formations behind them and even to the reinforcements heading their way.

They weren't struck by surprise by artillery fire or taken from behind by a Löwe. Nor were they forced to move to other trenches. The troops at the back of the defensive line could run if they so desired, and this was exactly why they were first to give in to fear.

<<Second phase of pressuring complete.>>

Of course, the Federacy's front was large, with just the western front spanning four hundred kilometers, so it hadn't fully been routed yet. A few infantry platoons or companies veering off were only drops in the bucket across the entire front line.

If the Legion could have finished them off at this point...

<<Shifting to third stage—forming a breach. Sending in heavy armored units.>>



Self-preservation was human instinct. With the metallic threat of the Legion charging at people, some were bound to run for cover. As one company fled, another followed. Seeing infantry leaving their trenches to run, soldiers from adjacent trenches did the same. Soldiers awaiting covering fire from a pillbox behind them fled, realizing the pillbox was empty. The first defensive line of the defensive formation abandoned their positions in the heat of battle, leaving the anti-tank guns and artillery positions that were

to provide covering fire.

Certain positions on each front, thinned out by the Legion's prolonged offensive, began to unravel little by little from the back.

And it was at those thinned-out spots that the Legion sent in their spearhead, their heavy armored units, which charged in with intensity and pinpoint accuracy.



It was a strip of the defensive line that was already heavily damaged by the Legion's attacks and in dire need of reinforcements. Said reinforcements didn't arrive, and to make things worse, the anti-tank gun positions on the second line were abandoned, leaving the trenches of the first line alone to deal with a swarm of Dinosauria.

They couldn't possibly defend against such an attack.

A few positions were broken through, unable to withstand the shock waves of the Dinosauria's charge and breaking under the pressure of its offensive. Much like water spouting out of a crack in a dam, gradually creeping in and increasing the crack until the dam burst, the Legion's heavy armored units crushed the trenches, invading the first defensive line and forming a bridgehead as they began swallowing up the surrounding formations and trenches from the flank.

There were no reinforcements. The second line that would offer covering fire for the forces intercepting the

invaders had fled. The artillery formation, unable to directly see the first line because its survey staff were missing in action, couldn't fire for fear of hitting friendly troops, and the armored units serving as mobile defense forces that would have beat the Legion back didn't arrive, either.

“No good, Captain... Every way we look is blocked off by friendly forces!”

“Shit...”

The armored division's commander gritted his teeth upon hearing the report of the scout. He was the leader of the armored division charged with mobile defense, which was stationed on the second line, behind the infantry position on the first line.

Any troops fleeing from the first line had to pass through the armored division, blocking the roads they went through. Their disorderly attempts to run hindered the armored division's movement, and since they were scattered all over the combat zone, they blocked the traffic in every direction. The strength of the armored division was in mobile combat, where they moved nonstop. Having to fight with scared soldiers running around them reduced them to nothing more than stationary turrets that were of no use at stopping the enemy.

The armored division, which boasted high mobility and firepower, was neutered by their own fleeing soldiers.

With no reinforcements, fire support, or armored units to intercept them, the Legion and the opening they made remained unchallenged, allowing more Legion to invade. Fearing that their way out would be blocked when the Legion started maneuvering around them and striking from

the flank, surrounding units began to run, inspiring other units around them to also flee for fear of being left behind.

Had the military still been functioning properly, this tear could have been fixed. But it remained untended and continued to expand.

“**M**ommy. Mommy. Wait. Wait.”

The sound of crying children filled the battlefield—a battlefield all the civilians had long since been evacuated from.

As one artillery soldier stopped and turned around out of reflex, a child’s silhouette descended and clung to him. A moment later, it exploded—a child-model self-propelled mine. Those were harder to come by on the Federacy’s fronts compared with injured-soldier models, but some of these common Legion suicide-bombing weapons had been creeping about the battlefield since ten years ago.

But despite them being a common sight, they scattered irrational terror into the air along with the blood and charred flesh of its victim.

“A—a kid just blew up!”

“They’re infected! They got as far as the front!”

“A new type of self-propelled mine. The kind that looks just like they’re human! They really sicced them on us!”

An artificial virus that turned people into bombs, new self-propelled mines that were indistinguishable from humans. The many conspiracy theories that spread

following the Actaeon incident accidentally overlapped with the child self-propelled mine, which these reservists weren't used to seeing, giving them more cause for panic and doubt.

The self-propelled mines themselves, as well as the commander unit that sent them to help secure the breakthrough and cause confusion among the fleeing troops, likely never expected the soldiers' panic to be this extreme.

Enemies that looked like humans and were indistinguishable from real humans really existed, hiding among their ranks. They looked and acted like humans but were coldheartedly seeking to kill them.

In which case—

In the midst of panic, the soldiers looked around, their eyes clouded with suspicion. For someone outside their group, outside “us.” Someone who wasn't one of them, wasn't their comrade, who was possibly an enemy.

Because they might be self-propelled mines, human bombs.

They weren't *potentially* enemies. They were real, true enemies who sought to harm them.

Even with the first line broken through and mistaken suspicions spreading, many units still stuck to their stations, and reinforcements hurried over to help their comrades on the first line. They clashed with fleeing and defeated soldiers as well as armored units blocking the roads. Both sides blocked each other's path or line of fire and were forced into a standstill.

The fleeing soldiers were not supposed to be there, but they refused to clear the path, leading to a stalemate. Voices from each side angrily called for the other to get out of the way. Everyone was on edge, be it from fear and panic or urgency and determination, and their words soon became cusses and shouts. And as their rough shouting spurred both agitation and resolve, the arguments flared up.

And in the end, someone whispered:

“They’re not our comrades anyway. For all we know, they’re the enemy.

“They abandoned our comrades. For all we know, they’re deserters, shameful traitors.

“If they’re going to stand in our way—it only makes sense to eliminate them.”

Soldiers clad in the same metal-black uniform turned their guns on each other, then pulled the trigger.

Fleeing soldiers fired on their allies.

Routed soldiers fired on their allies.

News of the situation arrived through multiple flustered reports of soldiers who saw this, the fire spreading in the midst of the panic and chaos of retreat. Misunderstandings, contempt, and subconscious malice intermingled, swelling into something unrecognizable.

With the enemy charging in right before their eyes, soldiers began killing one another, unable to trust their own comrades. Everyone became enemies, and the lingering fear

of death wasn't something the human psyche could endure for long.

Soldiers saw their compatriots shot to death by cowardly outsiders who fled the battle.

Soldiers saw people from their villages summarily executed. It was no doubt the handiwork of people they'd never gotten along with from an adjacent village.

Our comrades were killed by them. By nobles, by manbeasts, by serfs, by invaders, by outsiders, by deserters, by bossy seniors who let their tenure go to their heads, by good-for-nothing reservists. They killed us, our precious comrades.

They are the enemy. How are we supposed to fight alongside the enemy? They'll just betray us, just leave us to rot, just—kill us, just like the scrap monsters do. We'll never fight with them; we can't even stand breathing the same air as them.

The only ones we can believe in anymore is us!

The giant organization called the Federacy military was made up of countless members of different attributes and backgrounds. It granted them the illusion that they were on the same side. But at this moment, the illusion shattered. And they all fractured into countless little groups.



For the Republic officer called Václav Milizé, the adjacent Giadian Empire had been a latent threat, and as a colonel, he had a grasp of its structure and weaknesses.

<<Third phase of Federacy eastern front opposition complete.
Commence all-out assault.>>

Emotionlessly watching the Federacy army fall apart via the Rabe's reconnaissance, No Face gave the order.

In order to keep the people from uniting against them, the Empire had been structured so as to intentionally divide the people into multiple groups and foster antagonism between them. The different groups were subordinate to the different nobles, who remained united through common interests and bonds of blood.

The nobles, who served as a binding link to the people, were abolished by the revolution, but the many fractures that existed among the populace were left as is, creating a democracy in name only—which now collapsed in on itself.

For ten years, the Federacy had braved the war, owing to its vast land and great population, but in the end, their “victory” in the first large-scale offensive proved to be the cause of their defeat. With the war as their excuse, they ignored the internal pressures that'd been building in their country for months and years. The destruction of the Morpho was a brilliant achievement on the surface, but it was a meaningless feat in the end.

There was no immediate need to resolve these problems, and this was why the Federacy's people were blind to the fact that their country had been perishing until the very moment of its collapse.

The finishing blow came when they disclosed news of the wiretaps, of the Republic's betrayal, to the public. With their own hands, they spread the seeds of doubt, of collapse across the country. They planted in their people the

superficial belief that their fellow humans were now outsiders—that others were not to be trusted, splintering them into countless little groups.

<<1st Echelon, advance. Pursue the routed western front army.>>



The soldiers had discarded the title of the Federacy army, with all its illusions and presumptions, as well as its value as a binding link as a group. As an organization, the Federacy military fell apart, and perhaps, at the same time, the Federacy as a country came undone, too.

As this grim sight was displayed on the command center's holo-screen, the chief of staff, Willem, turned to face the superior officers and commanders of the western front's HQ. At this point, the Federacy military no longer functioned as an army. There was no resisting the Legion anymore.

And yet.

“A proposal, Lieutenant General. Request that the central region reserves and Vargus civilian units be deployed at reserve position Harutari. With their support—”

The western front's army had hundreds of thousands of soldiers, including logistical support, spread horizontally over a hundred kilometers.

If they were to fall back from the Saentis-Historics line on the eastern tip of the combat territories, all the farms and factories in the territory they would retreat to would be

crushed and turned into a battlefield. It would cut into their production capabilities, including food, which would be equivalent to a slow but total act of suicide.

But it would still be better than being wiped out here.

“All the western front’s forces are to fall back to the Harutari line.”

Similar decisions were made across the Federacy’s fronts. All fronts retreated to their reserve positions. Their current defensive formations, which were already built on the very edge of the combat territories, had to be abandoned as the order to fall back to the production territories was issued.

Everyone knew this was an act akin to suicide—but they had no other recourse.

“**L**ord Yatrai...”

“We have no choice but to deploy, do we? Shit.”

Yatrai walked down the corridor to the hangar with fast steps, followed by his tense lieutenant. His unit, the Crazy Bones Division, was to be included in Operation Overlord—in other words, they were supposed to remain on standby, not be sent out into defensive battle on any front.

But now that every single front had collapsed, the Federacy was at its end. The Crazy Bones Division and elite units from other noble houses would have to be sent in to forestall their total defeat, even at the cost of the operation that was their last hope.

“Is the capital’s Will-o’-the-Wisp Division deploying, too? Yeah... And I guess the Brantolotes would have to send in their Flame Leopard unit, too.”

Each faction stationed units on the capital outskirts, with the pretense of maintaining public order but with the implicit purpose of keeping one another in check. But things had fallen to the point where they really did have to help maintain public order. These were units that, in the past, conquered territories near the Imperial capital to keep the opposing factions in check and were never meant to be sent to the front lines, but at this point, they had no choice but to move out of the capital.

“It’s fine, though. We have enough people to maintain the peace, and we can cooperate on those grounds.”

If Archduchess Brantolote was so far gone that she prioritized political warfare at a time like this, people from within her faction would conduct a political purge. After all, it was doubtful they’d be in a position to entertain anything foolish or useless going forward.

Yatrai stopped himself from making an uncouth clicking of his tongue, but still, he spoke severely. House Nouzen had hidden in the shadow of the Empire’s puppet emperor, only to then escape a dog’s death by hiding behind the back of the president who promoted democracy.

It had failed to steer that democracy and its people under the pressure of the Legion War. Or perhaps, it had failed to do so because its eldest son had fled to another country, knowing of the upheaval that choice could bring on.

“I resent you, Marquis Nouzen, Lord Reisha. This time, the Nouzen House truly has lost its edge.”

Since the elite units that'd been left out of battle to protect the capital region had to be sent in, the Strike Package had no reason to remain on standby, either. The Strike Package was ordered to take to their closest battlefield, the western front.

“...Securing a retreat route?” Shin asked.

“Defending route Sylvas numbers four to seven. Recovering the retreating units from the Blanc Rose combat territory is our current mission.”

Grethe, who was seated at the desk, carried on coldly as she looked up at Shin.

“Colonel Milizé won't be returning yet. That doesn't mean you're allowed to back out because of that.”

“...Yes. I know.”

He'd told the late major general Altner that he was a soldier, with his own words. As an Eighty-Six, he decided that fighting to the bitter end was his pride.

Even so, his emotions howled at him to betray, because the Federacy had already betrayed him first, and his reasoning told him that making compromises in the face of unreasonable acts would only inspire them to demand he accept less and less.

Don't forgive betrayal. Fight with all your resolve.

...But he knew that the situation wouldn't allow him to adhere to his own desires. And so he clenched his teeth.

“I know. I'm an Eighty-Six, and a soldier.”

For the first time, he felt that this title, Eighty-Six, was a troublesome weight around his neck.

With the front lines pulled back to the production territories, the Strike Package's home base, Rüstkammer—which was located on the western tip of the Sylvas production territory—became the new front line. It was no longer a place that could host another country's royalty or the daughter of a powerful family.

As they boarded a small aircraft, likely sent under great pressure to Rüstkammer for this task, Zashya faced the officers who'd come to evacuate her and Vika from the base.

She faced them alone.

“His Majesty will not be coming. The house of unicorns cannot bear the shame of abandoning comrades and retreating to safety.”

Her tone and expression were cold, and it was clear she had no intention of relenting. She had her back to the door to the prince's room, which was empty, but the way she stood wordlessly made it clear she wasn't going to let anyone inside.

“Miss, please...,” one of the officers said, looking daunted.

“Did I give you permission to speak, plebeian?” she cut him off coldly, her eyes glinting with the faint color of lightning, the shade of the royal house. “I will be going alone, and you will accept that. This should be enough for your Federacy to claim that you've done your due diligence.”

Seeing the small plane approach, Vika took Frederica with him as he hid in Fido's container, where he alertly watched the events unfolding outside.

"Me staying here is hard enough, but you mustn't fall back, too. We need as many cards as possible in the Eighty-Six's hands so they do not easily abandon this base."

The key to saving the Federacy and all humankind. The empress was a card that had to be left in the hands of his comrades, the Eighty-Six.

"...And yet you send Zashya away?"

"She's my guarantee in case something happens, a person to run things in my stead... So long as she alone survives, even if me and my regiment are lost, the United Kingdom will be able to understand."

If the Federacy could retain that much respect, they wouldn't have to put up with the selfish requests of foreign nationals, even if they were royalty.

It was no longer a situation where they could entertain such things.

Frederica cast down her eyes... Vika, too, had just discarded a card from his hand. The serpent prince had fought alongside Shin and the others, remaining by their side. He was doing this so he wouldn't have to abandon them now.

"You have my thanks."

Fido let out an electronic "*pi*" in agreement. Vika scoffed at them both.

“You have no reason to say that. You too, clockwork contraption... I do this of my own will.”

As the tall shadow of a girl cast over him from behind, Dustin spoke up before she could say anything.

“I made my choice. I won’t make you cry.”

Even so, he knew somewhere in his heart that him saying this alone would hurt her. But he had no choice. He was a powerless, slothful coward who thought himself a saint, and he was incapable of doing anything until his unit had to move out. This was the only choice he could make, and he knew this would hurt her.

“At the ceremony for the Revolution Festival...”

Two years ago, during the Revolution Festival, when he still hadn’t questioned himself.

“...I asked how long this would continue. How long we, the Republic, would continue persecuting the Eighty-Six. At the time, I believed I’d never do anything like that. But that wasn’t true. We’re all the same. We all put what we hold dear on one side of the scales and everything else on the other. And since we didn’t have the strength to pick both, we tried to protect something we held dear.”

Both the Republic and Dustin were too weak, and they could only pick one.

“We chose to pass up on the Eighty-Six. Justice. Citri. We cast away things like love and connections. And in discarding those things we thought beautiful...”

Things that were fair and correct. Love and connections. And in casting them aside, they discarded something equally beautiful, correct, and indispensable.

“...people cast aside—justice.”

Anju didn't answer behind him. Instead, he sensed an air of unrestrained loathing—the kind of air that didn't feel like Anju at all. Dustin turned around dubiously, only to find Shiden standing there.

He froze up nervously. Shiden's indigo eyes narrowed, her brow furrowing as she looked at him like he was garbage.

“...Now listen here.”

“S-sorry! I thought you were Anju...”

Dustin became all the more flustered because he knew this wasn't someone he ought to have confused for Anju. Both were tall, yes, but Shiden was notably taller, on top of her physique being different and her hair shorter. And then there was the color of her skin, hair, and eyes.

“Yer lucky I wasn't Anju, dipshit. And that I'm not Kurena or Frederica or Li'l Reaper or Raiden.

“I won't tell them, and nothing you say can hurt me,” she spat out...casually making him realize he wanted to hurt her. As Dustin stood there, frozen, Shiden turned her back to him and waved.

“I'll pretend I didn't hear all that shit... Make sure ya think stuff through carefully by the time we get back.”

“...Anju.”

Anju, who stood stock-still in the locker room despite it almost being time to sortie, raised her head sluggishly upon hearing her name being called. Anju had been hurt like this ever since her argument with Dustin. Having heard about it from Frederica, Kurena approached, biting her lips.

Dustin was an idiot, and he was due for another splashing in cold water when they returned from this operation. Or maybe they could have the entire unit splash him with paint, like they wanted to do on Lena's first day. Just trying to wash it all off would probably give him a cold.

When they returned.

Anju cracked a feeble smile as her sky-blue eyes reflected Kurena. The same eyes filled with love for Dustin. The same eyes whose color Anju always hated.

“Kurena... I'm sorry I made you worry. I'm causing trouble for everyone, aren't I?”

Kurena shook her head, but Anju's smile remained feeble.

“I'm sorry. I...I'll probably cause you and everyone a lot of trouble in this operation. I'll probably just drag everyone down. I mean, look at me now. I'm supposed to be captain, but I just can't stay calm... I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm weak and helpless, but I keep pretending like I'm strong and capable...and I placed that curse on Dustin, which was why...”

Kurena had to cut her off.

“I—!”

I...I've always...

“I’ve always thought you were amazing, Anju. Because you could wish to be happy. You could wish to be happy with someone and tell them how you feel.”

Even on the Eighty-Sixth Sector’s battlefield of death and blood, where one’s death was predetermined at the end of a five-year period, where there was no telling if one would survive the next day.

And though they escaped the Eighty-Sixth Sector, she lost Daiya. Time and again, they were faced with the possibility of them being unable to hold on to their pride. But even so, she could tell another—*Come back to me. I will return to you.*

“That always scared me, and I couldn’t feel that way. So even if you’re weak—no, especially if you’re weak...”

Her sky-colored eyes didn’t waver once. Nothing Kurena said likely got through to her. But that was fine. She didn’t have to understand now; it could sink in later, when it hurt or maybe when she was finally in peace. She would understand. She would see that she really was the Anju she knew.

“...you’re amazing, Anju. I really think so.”

“**W**hat civilians remain in Fortrapide City are to evacuate, if possible, or otherwise seek refuge inside the base. We set up our position in the strip to the west of the Zasifanoksa Forest,” Shin said, serving as Grethe’s messenger while she was too busy with preparations for the operation.

“I’m well aware. I am a formal officer, after all,” Second Lieutenant Perschmann said with a brief nod.

As an offensive unit, the Strike Package was to depart and assist with the retreat of the western front’s army. In the meantime, Second Lieutenant Perschmann, along with the maintenance crew and base staff, would be engaged in building the defensive line to the west of the thick forest around the base.

Combat engineers were already present in Harutari to set it up as a reserve position, but now the Strike Package would have to rush to complete the operation...meaning it would end up being a little crude, but better than being incomplete. Even so, they were short on time.

“Put in a request for the Wulfsrin to help with setting up the fortifications... If necessary, I can leave Bernholdt or someone from his unit to help you with that.”

“We’ll be fine on that front. I’m sure the women who’ve raised five boys who’re like rowdy wolves will show what they’re capable of.” She cracked that joke without a smile. “I pray for your good luck, Captain. Return safely.”

For the first time, Shin saw Second Lieutenant Perschmann salute him perfectly in her combat uniform.

The Republic citizens had been evacuated to a territory by the name of Montizoto, which was adjacent to the Blanc Rose and Neugardenia combat territories on the southern edge of the western front. It wasn’t an area that would be in the direct line of combat, but with fronts falling back and reserve positions needing to be deployed, it was now in the way.

A call to evacuate deeper into the country was issued all over Montizoto. It was only a call, however—there were no trains or cars prepared this time. The Federacy didn't have the capacity to arrange for that anymore.

“Which means you have to do it by foot—evacuate by walking. I will escort you to safety, so older children should take the younger children by hand. Try to keep the little ones from crying for now.”

There were no other military police here. They'd all spread out across the city to guide others. The military police captain who was the head of the facility had gathered the children in one place, and as one of the older boys, Miel nodded earnestly.

A front's entire army numbered in the hundreds of thousands of men, vehicles, and cannons. Its retreat was therefore difficult, especially while fighting was still ongoing. Not all units could depart at once. The support units, which were in the most rear position, were the first to fall back, and the reserve units were sent in to secure their path.

In order to ensure the safety of the units retreating from the Saentis-Historics line, the reserve units traversed the Montizoto territory on their way to Neugardenia, and they passed by groups of evacuating Republic citizens along the way several times.

And as they passed them by, a thought occurred.

Didn't we rescue them to have them serve as reinforcements to begin with? With the front lines in a state of collapse and so many people dead, they can fill the

ranks. Same as how we're being used as cannon fodder now.

And so they stopped groups of evacuating citizens, requiring them—even children and infants—to turn back and return to the battlefield. For ten years, they'd been allowed to make decisions without legal grounds under the pretense of “ad hoc adaptation,” and now those powers were being misused.

Still, these were armed soldiers forcing unarmed civilians. The civilians couldn't resist...or they shouldn't have been able to. But incidentally, a group of Republic volunteer troops passed by. And a few among the refugees happened to have some small firearms. And now there was a group of Republic people who'd survived two large-scale offensives and were struggling to survive a third conflict.

Their resistance was fierce and violent. The reserve forces who aimed their guns without any intent of actually firing at anyone were met with an instant counterattack, swallowed up by the angry mob, and trampled before they could fight back.

All that was left in the wake of that conflict was anger at the Federacy military's oppression—and the discarded weapons of the reserve unit.

A revolt by a group of Republic citizens broke out in the Montizoto territory, along the southern edge of the western front's Harutari reserve formation. At around the same time, the leader of the Bleachers—Yvonne Primevére—and her comrades broke out of their prison in Sankt Jeder, raiding and taking over the private residence of a high-ranking

official in the Federacy. And despite all those unnatural developments, none of it was reported to the press.

Having taken the president of the Federacy—Ernst—hostage, the group declared their independence as the New Republic of San Magnolia, with the Montizoto territory and its adjacent combat territory of Neugardenia as their new land.

CHAPTER 4

THE GRUDGES LINGER

Kiki disappeared the morning of the previous day.

At this point, Yuuto was all alone with Citri. And Citri looked ill—her face was pale, her lips were pursed like she was enduring pain, and she constantly kept her distance from Yuuto. Her change was finally starting, it seemed.

“...Citri.”

He called out to her, but all she did was level a weary look at him. She was lying on a bed of conifer branches to maintain her body heat, with her head resting on a pillow of evergreen leaves.

“If we walk all day today, we should reach Neunarkis... Can you walk?”

“...Yes.” She nodded languidly and unsteadily got to her feet. “I’ll get there even if I have to crawl... I have to go back.”

The city of Quitortan, along the evacuation route in the eastern end of the Neugardenia combat territory. Much like other old Imperial cities, it was made up of narrow streets. As Shin peered at the silver-haired group standing behind a barricade in one such street, he spoke.

“—All 1st Battalion units. We will now commence the retaking of the old Quitortan district.”

The Republic insurgents' "declaration of independence" and occupation ended up adding more work for the Strike Package, meaning they had to divide their already-limited forces in half.

In other words, their original mission of securing the retreat route in the combat territory of Blanc Rose remained the same, but on top of that, they had to liberate the occupied cities of northern Neugardenia along the retreat route. In addition, they had to remove any obstacles in the way before the first unit to retreat, the 67th Armored Division, passed through.

"Our top-priority objective is removing all the barricades. As for the insurgents, they're amateurs. They'll probably fall apart the moment they're threatened. But if they ignore our orders, or if it seems we won't be able to remove them before it's time for the 67th Armored Division to pass, you can assume that you have no choice but to shoot to kill."

Cannon shells boasting an initial velocity of sixteen hundred meters per second naturally didn't have any nonlethal options. The Vargus troops tasked with recovering any surrendering insurgents also carried assault rifles loaded with live ammo. Given time and supply-chain restraints, they couldn't order any rubber bullets used for riot suppression.

Grethe, who was commanding the four armored divisions of the Strike Package from a command post set up in the rear, added:

"Just try to refrain from doing so unless strictly necessary. But if things come to that, I'll give the order."

Somewhere deep down, Shin and the others pondered

that, with the possibility of the front lines' complete collapse fast approaching, the situation had become so strained that there was no time to waste even talking about this, but Grethe remained earnest.

“You need to remember. You are firing on my orders. You are limbs, and I am the brain. The responsibility for pulling the trigger lies with me. This isn't something minor officers like you should be concerned with. Remember that.”

The maid got away, but they were able to take their primary target, Ernst, hostage. With this, the New Republic of San Magnolia and its citizens were untouchable to the Federacy, which would be forced to protect them.

Or that was their plan, but Primevére and her ten comrades watched the news with stunned eyes. The suppression efforts began in no time. They were in the president's modest estate, in its small living room.

“Why?”

She uttered that question, only for Ernst, a gun still fixed on him, to answer with the sardonic smile of a teacher admonishing a student.

“I'm not sure what you were expecting, but I have a vice president to fill my place... With me being unable to act, all my authorities transferred over to him. They can just dismiss me at this point.”

Even as he lost his status and stared down a gun's barrel, he looked completely undisturbed and spoke to Primevére with a tone that came across as chipper. It made the Bleachers' remnants shudder.

Looking around his trembling captors with his ash-colored eyes glinting like a will-o'-the-wisp, Ernst cracked a thin smile.

“If anything, I’ve been wondering when they’d fire me now that I’m not needed anymore, but my popularity kept me in office. Getting dismissed like this suits me just fine. It took them way too long to do it, if you ask me.”

Ernst Zimmerman had reached the position of president through the support of the people and the backing of the Onyx clans.

“—Apparently, he was a favored figure to support *ten years ago*.”

Seated in an armored infantry carrier, Joschka mused to himself as he listened to the news on the radio.

Ernst was the husband of the leader of the revolution, who’d been killed by the regime. Inheriting his wife’s will, he became the second leader of the revolution, a tragic hero who’d lost both his beloved wife and his child to the tyrannical royals in one fell swoop.

Exactly the kind of figure the masses would gravitate toward.

A man who, in his mad adherence to his wife’s ideals, voluntarily accepted the burden of becoming a statesman.

But Ernst was no longer needed.

Joschka got a glimpse at Ernst’s madness in the command center during the first large-scale offensive. His

inconsistent, contradictory idealism took the importance of human life to its logical extreme of affirming their death. Showing this madness of his so openly would hurt his soldiers' and subordinates' morale.

So discarding him at this point was acceptable—this was likely what the Onyx clans decided.

Those lowly, unsightly, cunning magpies who had plagued the Empire since its foundation. Those black rats who swarmed over anyone who reeked of power and wealth, only to abandon their prey once they grew weak and died, before seeking the next prey to devour.

“That’s the one thing I’ll thank you for, Yatrai Nouzen. Thanks to you, Princess Yuuna’s child doesn’t have to inherit the headship of your clan of shitty bastards.”

Assisting the retreating forces was the Strike Package’s primary objective. This meant that using high-explosive rounds might produce rubble that could block their path. And so...

“—Commence operation.”

The Reginleifs stormed in, swiftly gaining control over each block. The moment Shin declared the beginning of the operation, their power packs let out a high-pitched screech, which was the first blow. A ten-tonne machine moving at hundreds of kilometers per hour required considerable output. The loud roar of armored weapons deafened the ears and shook one’s stomach, and that alone was intimidating enough to force a timid soldier to yield.

And most of the Republic insurgents weren’t soldiers, but

complete amateurs.

With his monitor zoomed in, Shin could see the figures hidden behind the barricades stumble back. As Undertaker and his platoon closed in on them with a swift, headlong charge, the insurgents chickened out and began to flee.

The Reginleifs moved faster than an armored weapon usually would, but the troops they spotted carried assault rifles and portable anti-tank recoilless guns. Neither had the firepower to damage a Reginleif head-on.

But even so, a few of the insurgents stuck the barrels of their assault rifles over the barricades...only for most of their guns to remain silent. They'd either forgotten to load the first round or neglected to undo the safety... Common mistakes for amateurs who thought shooting a gun only involved pulling the trigger, and fresh conscripts who weren't used to handling automatics.

Undertaker, which led the platoon's wedge formation, reached the barricade. The insurgents likely believed they'd set the barricade up firmly, but it went flying with all the brittleness of a paper cutout. As the people behind it scrambled to get out of his way, Shin turned Undertaker around.

Between the Reginleif lording over them, taller and more intimidating than any tiger, and having to hear the roar of its power pack from up close, the people finally started fleeing in earnest, bumping into one another and falling over. He hoped to avoid a stampede, but the chaos had its advantages.

Having them flee into the streets would have made things tricky. Three units from other platoons fired their wire

anchors. Tachina's and Matori's units used the buildings on the side of the road as footing to swoop over the crowd's heads and block their path, while Sashiba's unit climbed up to a building's rooftop and fixed its smoothbore gun on the insurgents to keep them in check.

Sashiba, now positioned above them, ordered through the external speaker at full volume for the insurgents to get on their knees and put their hands behind their heads.

Seizing the insurgents was, as it turned out, all too easy.

"Infantry forces, recover the surrendering insurgents."

The female troops conscripted from the Vargus moved in to arrest them.

This was all according to predictions, but the insurgents in every city proved unable to resist the Reginleifs moving in. All that remained for the child soldiers was to go about this without having to dirty their hands. After ordering the standby military police who had joined them to move in, Grethe turned around.

"—Aide control staff, you can step down now. You're worried about President Zimmerman, right?"

She turned to Frederica, who looked more anxious about things elsewhere. She couldn't have her stay in the command post in this condition, and Grethe knew she couldn't tell a child concerned about her family to not worry.

"I think you're better off not watching what's going to go down there, but if you feel like you have to, do what you

must. If you want to tell the task force what the situation inside is like before they move in, that could be helpful.”

Frederica looked at her in surprise. The Strike Package, being a combat unit, had a different chain of command from the forces affiliated with the training base on the home front. This meant Grethe wasn't in a position to directly issue him orders, but—

“I can contact his base to ask Second Lieutenant Rikka to have a RAID Device on.”

The hundreds of thousands of the front's soldiers continued their retreat. With the logistical support having fully withdrawn, the requisitioned Vargus conscripts deployed to Harutari. The combat units moved into the areas vacated by the logistical support units and began their march as well.

Fundamentally, the army's march and retreat both progressed rapidly, with multiple units supporting one another as they moved. A minimal number of units was left behind on the front lines to fight off the Legion before progressing under covering fire from the second fortification line.

However.

The armored infantryman Vyov abandoned his position with his comrades and fled the deadly battlefield. But as he fled, he heard an unbelievable order.

The second northern front's army was to retreat.

In other words, they were running. All of them, the noble generals, the Vargus troops, the Fleet Countries' volunteer troops. They were going to retreat and do nothing to defend or save Vyov's homeland.

They're all abandoning our city!

Hiding in the Neikuwa hills with countless other renegade soldiers, Vyov bit his lips in frustration. They were traitors after all. This was why he abandoned them and ran.

But then a force of Löwe swarmed into this valley full of traitors, directed by the Rabe that had detected this spot full of enemies. They didn't even need to fire any weapons. Using their fifty-tonne bodies, they trampled both infantry and armored infantry alike.

Vyov and his comrades tried to flee, but the narrow terrain of the valley made them get in one another's way.

"Wh-where's the armored division?! They can defeat Löwe!"

Vánagandrs were the type of unit meant for defeating Löwe, after all, and with the Legion having intruded so deep in, the armored unit relegated for mobile defense was supposed to engage them.

"Why aren't they coming to help us...?! Those u—"

But before he could shout the word *useless*, a metallic leg crushed Vyov alive.

Despite many calls for support coming from the breakthrough point, Gilwiese and the Myrmecoleo Free

Regiment couldn't move from their position. The fleeing soldiers' panic only seemed to increase as time went by, but no matter how much Gilwiese and co. shouted at them to get out of the way, they didn't listen.

Of course, Gilwiese and his regiment couldn't stomp over them, so they could only remain seated inside their cinnabar-colored Vánagandrs, their frustration building. It was then that a Para-RAID call came in from the archduchy's ace division Flame Leopard, who were preparing to deploy.

“Still cheating death, mutt?”

Both the contents and the tone of the call were awful, but the one speaking was a colonel who was relatively friendly toward the Myrmecoleo Free Regiment, as members of the Brantolote archduchy went. Normally, Gilwiese would have laughed it off, but he wasn't in the mood, so he replied curtly.

“Sad to inform we're all still alive, Colonel. The deserters are getting in our way, so we can't deploy.”

“I'm aware. So I'm calling to tell you there's no need for backup anymore. Prepare to retreat.”

This left Gilwiese surprised. Behind him, he could hear Svenja, who'd been cowering silently so far, hold her breath. He knew a retreat order was issued across the front, but falling back to the second defensive line without waiting for the first line's infantry to retreat? Even if they were on the brink of complete collapse, they were going to abandon the first line while there were still soldiers fighting there, without even offering any covering fire for their retreat?

“Colonel, sir, that would...that would make the infantrymen’s morale completely plummet. We’ll have even more desertions if we do that.”

“I’d imagine so. But we have no choice anymore. I repeat, Major. Retreat. We’re abandoning the cannon fodder.”

A retreat order was given to *all* armored units stationed on the second defensive line for mobile defense. The soldiers ignored the principle of units moving in tandem, completely abandoning the first defensive line. However, with the combat zone full of deserters, they couldn’t offer any cover anyway, and if the disorderly swarm of soldiers were to reach the second defensive line, they would end up blocking the armored units’ retreat, too.

And so rather than reducing their expensive armored units to nothing more than stationary turrets that would be lost in combat, the armored units prioritized a retreat that would allow them to at least fortify and maintain the second defensive line.

At the same time, a retreat order was also given to all artillery forces and combat engineers. This left the first defensive line with nothing but abandoned infantrymen. Artillery fire on the enemy ceased; instead, focus switched to bombing any crucial facilities and collapsing bridges the Löwe could cross.

The infantry weren’t pleased with this development. Precious Feldreß and heavy artillery, along with the regular artillery and armored personnel with the technical skills to operate them, were worth more than a rank-and-file

infantryman, so their survival was prioritized. They knew this as basic logic, but now that they were all full of chagrin and mistrust, the logic did nothing to convince them.

The fact that those with technical skills—in other words, artillerymen, engineers, and armored personnel who'd been given more advanced education and training—were mostly former nobility and their subordinates only further fueled their anger.

The armored division that never came to their aid, the cowardly artillery unit, the engineers who were never really combatants. Why were those weaklings prioritized over the ones who put their lives on the line in combat?

We were the ones who paid all the sacrifices so far, who should have the right to return alive.

The order sapped what morale the troops who just barely held their ground in the defensive battle had left. More and more decided to flee rather than die as disposable pawns for the nobles.

Not that making that decision at this point meant they would actually manage to escape.

These were units that still remained on the front lines, preventing the breakthrough points from expanding and keeping the invading Legion at bay. Units that were still in the middle of intense combat. With the enemy right in front of them, they would immediately be devoured. They couldn't run.

So no matter how disgruntled they got or how much of their will to fight they lost, the troops who remained to intercept the enemy had to stand their ground if they didn't

want to die.

And so under the cover of this cold calculation, the armored divisions, artillery, and combat engineer units retreated with what few infantry they were able to recover.

In the end, the people of the Republic were nothing more than oppressors for the Eighty-Six. They didn't want to shoot them to death or needlessly hurt them, but they had no reason to treat them with any semblance of mercy.

They kicked away their barricades, aimed their laser sights at them, and when the insurgents fled into buildings, they unleashed a barrage of machine-gun fire to drive them out. They did aim above their heads, meaning their shots only resulted in raining them with rubble from the walls.

As one group frantically hurried out of a building, Shin ordered them to get on their knees and cross their arms behind their heads before setting out for the next block. Vargus troops followed him, performing body checks on the surrendered Republic insurgents before taking them away.

He kept his high-frequency blades on, their shrill screech scaring insurgents away, but they only ended up running to where the Vargus were waiting, whom they clung to, begging for help. Yes—he tried, with all his might, to make it so Grethe didn't have to order them to open fire.

They arranged the order with which they would seize the different blocks and when the Vargus would appear, making it so the insurgents would flee to where the Vargus were waiting even without the Eighty-Six actively herding them there. They used large speakers they were able to prepare for this operation to transmit messages all across the city,

ordering the insurgents to surrender at high volume. The tone of the announcements was imposing and overbearing, intended to spur a panicked person to reflexively obey.

The task of recovering those who surrendered was relegated not to the visibly combative military police, but the unit made up of Vargus women, which lulled the insurgents into thinking they wouldn't be mistreated and kept hidden the fact that, once out of the city, they would be roughly forced into transport vehicles by stern MPs.

Shin took a turn, and his optical sensor detected a young man carrying a recoilless gun on his shoulder. Undertaker instantly turned to face him, only for the young man to hold up not his large gun but instead a child. Perhaps this wasn't his intent, but it looked like he was using the child as a human shield as he begged:

“Wait, I have a child! A little boy!”

“Throw down your weapon and surrender! You won't be harmed so long as you don't resist!” Shin shouted through his external speaker.

The man threw down his recoilless gun and fell to his knees. If he was going to bring up at this moment that he had a child with him, he should have evacuated to begin with. The fact that he was so adamant about resisting that he brought a child to a combat zone, that he was trying to resist armed soldiers despite being a powerless civilian, that he joined this reckless revolt had all slipped from his mind now.

It wasn't just reckless and meaningless; it was outright harmful. This, coupled with the realization that the Republic finally displayed clear intent to defend itself, was a

headache and a half.

Shin could only grumble to himself and exhale deeply, trying to lower the pressure building in his mind.

Yes, at long last, the Republic's people embraced the will to fight and protect. To stand up to keep their families, loved ones, and children safe. And so there were some who chose not to flee.

Even as Reginleifs charged at them like monsters of pure violence and tyranny, they stood in their path, resisting with assault rifles, recoilless guns, and handmade incendiary bottles.

—*But so what?*

Dustin fired his laser sights at all of them at maximum output. The high-energy beam burned the skin upon direct exposure, making the insurgents flinch away or kneel, allowing the Vargus to close in and apprehend them. And while a few didn't flinch away despite the burns, Dustin drew on them with Sagittarius's ten tonnes of weight.

After all, he had no duty to preach about justice and humane virtue anymore. He couldn't save Citri, he idly looked by as his country became corrupt, and he believed he was doing something while doing nothing at all. He was weak, cowardly, and foolish, so any cruelty and brutality were just another drop in the bucket for him.

And so Dustin was the most merciless of all in this battle. So much so that his two Eighty-Six comrades from the 8th Platoon were trying their hardest to stop him.

“Dustin! Hey, Dustin! You’re going too far!”

“You don’t have to push yourself—just get back! These are your people! Don’t! Get! Carried away!”

But the only voice he couldn’t hear was Anju’s. Which only made sense—he hurt her, so she had nothing to say to him.

“Don’t worry. Our top priority is getting them out of the way, so don’t mind— Whoa.”

His console issued a warning, His optical sensor detected the silhouette of a mass requiring attention. He turned to look. A small group was hidden *in the narrow streets* of the Federacy city, carrying portable recoilless guns on their shoulders.

Every hair on his body stood on end. Before he knew it, he’d switched on the external speaker.

“—Don’t shoot! *It’s dangerous!*”

But they fired.

Dustin jumped away, evading the barrage of explosive warheads launched his way. The slow, unguided missiles missed Sagittarius, passing by its legs. But on the other hand, the group that fired the recoilless guns fell over, embroiled in flames.

Recoilless guns offset the intense recoil of a large missile by spewing flames from the back of the launcher. In order to ensure the backfire didn’t rebound and hit the user, these weapons were not to be used in closed environments.

The sight of his countrymen rolling on the ground on fire

made all the blood drain from Dustin's face. And at the same time, he was overcome with intense self-loathing at his inappropriate behavior in the middle of combat. Why did he just warn them? They attacked him, so why didn't he counterattack? Why didn't he pull the trigger?

“...Can't I even shoot to defend myself...?!”

Why am I...so weak...?

Dustin was clearly in a state of self-abandonment. Anju could tell, but she couldn't find the words. Because she was the one trying to keep him in place. She'd cheated, casting a curse on him, turning Dustin's own pure heart into a weapon against him.

Dustin's heart was too weak to protect others, too, which was why she'd been able to place that curse on him.

“...Just like a witch.”

She mocked herself. Ironically enough, it was the same as her Personal Name. It was Daiya who'd given her that title, but now it felt like a curse.

Weak people weren't capable of doing good, and yet they were perfectly capable of inflicting bad. Just like how Anju put that curse on Dustin.

If she could not be good or kind or just, then at the very least—

“Because...I'm a witch.”

Because I am an evil witch. A greedy witch.

—she would hold on to the thing she was grasping, so that it wouldn't be snatched away.

Her system blared out an alarm. She fixed her heavy machine guns on the approaching shadows as a chubby, amicable-looking middle-aged woman ran over to her.

“Wait, we surrender, so please help us—don't kill us!”

So the woman shouted as she ran over, but she was hiding an incendiary bottle behind her body. Anju felt worn down and desolate already, her blue eyes chilling to a freezing edge.

Even though they were upheld in name only during the Legion War, the international laws of warfare did determine that civilians must be protected. But only as long as those civilians remained noncombatants—so long as they didn't carry out attacks against soldiers.

—Congratulations, idiot. You just signed your own death warrant.

Without her realizing it, a thin smile played over her lips. The reticle moved, following her line of sight. With the flick of a finger, she switched to her secondary armament, the heavy machine guns, and prepared to pull the trigger. Someone's words wafted up in her thoughts before popping like soap bubbles.

—They killed my mom and dad, treating them like trash for target practice.

...Isn't this...what I'm doing right now? Treating people like trash for target practice? I don't have to do this, but now that I have the chance, I'm trying to vent, to lash out—

by shooting people?

She froze up in that moment. And at the same time, a reprimanding voice filled her ears.

“Cease your fire, Second Lieutenant Emma!”

That order, instilled in her mind through training, made her pull her finger away from the trigger. Just the heavy, resounding steps of the Reginleif were enough to make the woman jolt and flee.

“We didn’t issue any such orders, Second Lieutenant! Don’t act out of line!”

Shouting at her was one of the 1st Armored Division’s intelligence staff officers. With Lena absent, they’d taken over her duties with more staff officers than the other divisions commanding them.

The officer spoke with the stern, loud voice they used for orders and rebukes...but upon spotting Anju’s condition, they suddenly softened their tone. It wasn’t just because she’d stiffened in response to the call, but because she was clearly rattled and trembling.

“...Understood, Second Lieutenant Emma? You didn’t shoot. You did the right thing, and you didn’t shoot.”

Murder scared her. The reality of war did nothing to ease her into the idea of shooting someone, be they enemies, Republic citizens, or anyone else. And the officer said that Anju’s belief—this fear—was right and just.

“You’re a person on the side of kindness. You don’t want to hurt people or sadden those close to

you. And that's the right thing to do. The way you carry yourself is the right way to live. So you were right not to shoot. You did good."

And yet that was weakness, too. She was too weak to protect others, only capable of doing unsightly things.

"...!"

No. It wasn't that she was capable of doing evil. Her weakness simply made her get carried away, gravitate to the simpler—and evil—way out. She was weak, and she tried to use that weakness as an excuse—to tell herself she wasn't capable of doing good.

"...I'm—"

Weak. And a cheat. But if despite that, I'm able to stay on the side of kindness, on the side of the just, then I—

Watching the merciless suppression efforts in the news, Primevére realized what the Federacy was trying to do. They avoided blatant displays of brutality like killing unarmed civilians while making a public display of how they one-sidedly crushed the insurgents. As a warning to strike fear into others. Or perhaps this was like a coliseum match, or a circus, meant to satisfy the masses' hunger for palpable, satisfying justice.

"Th-this is inhumane... They're treating our Republic people like circus animals..."

The Republic people being hunted down were like martyr prisoners, while the Reginleifs were like wild animals or gladiators, and the Federacy people watching this were the

audience of the amphitheater.

As he watched this cruel Roman holiday that should have faded into the annals of history, Ernst furrowed his brow.

“You think you’re ones to talk? You threw the Eighty-Six into the Eighty-Sixth Sector, and you’re trying to trap Federacy soldiers on the front lines, and you think you get to say that? Oh, and you can spare me the ‘human-formed cattle’ hogwash. Even you people don’t really believe it. So yes, how could you people engage in such inhumanity?”

Primevére twitched at his remarks. If he knew this much, the answer for why was all too clear.

“To protect our families.”

Ernst regarded her silently, and Primevére raised her voice, growing enraged.

“Yes, to protect our families! So my precious children, my husband, my parents, and my siblings don’t die on the battlefield! That’s what the Eighty-Six were for! That’s what...labeling them as pigs in human form was for!”

If they didn’t reduce them to something inhuman—if they didn’t have to think that the Eighty-Six were someone’s children, husbands, parents, siblings, friends, lovers; if they had no way to defend their families but to fight—they wouldn’t be able to stand their own vileness.

And when one wanted to be blind to their own vileness, looking away only made sense.

“This is all the same; we’re doing this to protect our families! That’s all! If the Republic is in the way and can’t retreat, the Federacy has no choice but to fight! We have to

protect our families! We don't care for Eighty-Six or the Federacy, so long as our families are safe!"

As she hollered at him, tears spilled from her eyes. She spoke out of love for her family, her comrades, and her homeland, but it was just vileness coated with a thin veneer of love. The true form of that love was the evil that came when one placed the things they held dear against the things they didn't care for on the scales, then decided to discard the latter.

And this was vileness everyone carried within them, so why did this man look at her with feigned ignorance, blaming her like none of this applied to him? Why was he forcing her to be aware of it?

"Everyone's the same! The Federacy's the same! Everyone's fine with sacrificing and killing others so long as they're safe! That's just how things work!"

Ernst sighed softly, like a firedrake spewing out a stream of flame.

"—Could you please try to not irritate me?"

For a moment, what happened next didn't register in Primevére's mind, of course—or the other Bleachers'. A loud, dull *thud* filled the room, followed by Primevére spinning for a moment before crumpling to the ground.

"...Huh?"

The Bleachers froze out of reflex. Primevére had fallen to the ground like a broken doll, and she lay still. Her sprawled limbs were twitching as dull red spread over the carpet. Her head's shape had changed—her skull had caved in.

They didn't instantly register how the attack happened—that was how casually Ernst threw away the chair he had used to bludgeon Primevére before picking up her discarded assault rifle. He checked the chamber, then loaded the first bullet with an exasperated smile.

“Love, eh? Yes, well, I suppose love would do it. It is at the very core of humanity. I do know people have killed and discriminated in the name of love.”

None of the Bleachers fired at him. Some did neglect to load the first bullet, like Primevére had, but some of them didn't, and they could have fired if they pulled the trigger. But they were transfixed in place by the black anger burning in this firedrake's eyes as he calmly smiled at the sight of bloodshed.

“But...saying you don't care because of love. That you have no choice because of love. Using love as an excuse, as justification, without trying for reflection or improvement. Not even trying to better the vileness and unsightliness of humankind.”

He flipped the assault rifle over, gripping the barrel and holding up the gunstock. The gunstock of this collapsible assault rifle had the strength of a metallic pipe, with a weight of four kilograms, exceeding that of most bladed weapons. He held the gunstock's tip up like a bludgeon.

“So you speak of love when all you do is use it to affirm your own vile ways? If that kind of love is what defines humans—”

—then creatures like that deserve to perish.

Most of the noncombatants were a disorderly crowd who couldn't last against an armored unit. The 1st Battalion was able to take control of all Quitortan's blocks in no time. It was quicker and easier than when armed Republic soldiers had rounded up, restrained, and taken away millions of unarmed Eighty-Six.

Grimacing as he made that irritating association, Shin sent Grethe a report that the operation was complete. The other battalions sent similar reports from the other cities, too. The armored division that was set to pass through increased the speed of its march. Since they did so despite being ahead of schedule, the vehicles the insurgents were carried into had to wait until they passed.

What is it now?

Shin furrowed his brow. The armored division's retreat was higher on the priority list compared with ferrying away the insurgents, so the insurgents having to wait was understandable on its own. However...

“—Strike Package commander, I'm sorry, but if you don't hurry and get out of here, the next force will get stuck.”

As that question crossed his mind, he got a wireless message from the scout unit sent ahead of the armored division. Both had to communicate using the command post as a relay point, meaning there would be a time lag, so they cut the usual introductions and went straight to explaining the situation.

“The armored and artillery forces are fine, but the infantry at the end of the line are pretty much stampeding. They basically have no chain of command anymore. They're not sticking to the order of retreat, so if you don't want them to catch up to you, you need to hurry.”

Shin grimaced. He was informed, of course, that there

were deserters from the infantry unit when the Saentis-Historics line collapsed, but...

“You guys should prepare to get off the highway. If you don’t, that angry mob will surround you, and you won’t be able to move.”



The Federacy forces ignored established retreat theory, hurrying the armored and infantry forces ahead while only offering minimal artillery support to the infantry left behind in the defensive line. They rained fullbore gun rounds, which couldn’t compare with howitzers and had limited ammo, on all fronts.

The Federacy’s railgun, the Kampf Pfau, boasted long-range abilities that could be fired at the front lines while remaining a safe distance away. It had low accuracy that had to be compensated for by firing a large number of shells at once, but when it came to bombarding an entire battlefield, the width of its circular error probability proved effective.

But it had two fatal flaws: its great weight, which meant it could only move along the railway, and the slow movement of the spades required to offset its recoil.

Once the trajectory of its shots was reverse-calculated to determine its position, the Morpho began their counterattack. The Kampf Pfau deployed across the different fronts, as well as their crews, were exposed to a rain of 800 mm shells. The Kampf Pfau were meant to keep the Morpho in check by matching their superior range—which, of course, meant the Morpho were just as capable of counterattacking the Kampf Pfau.

The peacocks that offered artillery support to the front

lines were shot down one by one by lightning rained down from the giant butterflies. As the bombardment died down and silence descended on the front lines, a floating bridge filled the void of its predecessor, and Aranea units crossed the many rivers flowing through the battlefield. The metallic army stood over the horizon, waiting for the bridges to link the two shores.

And at this point, the Federacy no longer had the cannons that would keep that at bay.



The 69th Armored Division's scouts warning was accurate.

Shin and his group set up a defensive line away from the highway that served as the evacuation route, then watched as the routed infantrymen rushed through it in the same disorderly chaos one would expect of a swarm of mice or locusts. The highway was by no means narrow, but they filled it up like a black wave. They didn't walk in organized ranks, nor did they match the speed of their march, pushing through people and groups ahead of them. They had no way of telling which division and regiment they were passing by, and with the chain of command collapsed, they were nothing more than a mob of people.

The groups pushed one another for a time, picking fights and suspecting the others of being one of those new self-propelled mines. Their fear of nonexistent enemies made their pace slower as they kept arguing. A group marching on foot wasn't going to move fast to begin with, but their foolish behavior only served to further cut down their speed.

In the midst of their march, those who stayed behind in the trenches of the first defensive line just barely managed to hold on. They needed to recover as many infantry as possible while they held their ground, and yet.

“...They’re going slower than I expected.”

Shin held back the urge to click his tongue. Knowing the infantry wouldn’t stay away even if they told them to, the Strike Package deployed their defensive line in the Lyskiv Forest, hoping the rugged terrain of the virgin forest would deter them. The only ones passing through were those who had abandoned their allies and fled right away.

Even so, if they had acted quickly, the units holding on in the first defensive line may have been able to retreat before they got wiped out.

...*Why?*

Why weren’t the soldiers capable of keeping a cool head and maintaining basic judgment?

The ones hanging on in the first defensive line were mostly Vargus units. Despite being abandoned by the fleeing infantrymen and the armored units and artillery that had retreated, and the fact that they would be isolated once the remaining trenches and fortifications fell, the Vargus saw death in combat as an honor. They would face the metallic surge with smiles on their faces, firing their machine guns until their barrels burned red-hot, swinging their axes and swords until they chipped into nothing.

A Para-RAID connected from a pillbox—one that was relatively nearby but overall far from them, where a Vargus

unit was stationed.

“You, from the Zoto village. You still alive?”

“Oh, you’re the one from Gima Mima! You’re still hanging on, too?!”

They exchanged news, saying that an old distant relative or the youngest son from the house next door fell in battle. They leaned in excitedly, talking about how someone got hurt. As he laughed in satisfaction, his comrade from the village of Gima Mima spoke.

“The lord gave us the order to fall back, too. The scrap monsters’ main force will arrive soon, and it’s clear we won’t be able to stop them, so we should just retreat.”

“Finally, huh? Roger that. Except...”

That *except* was likely in reference to the scrap monsters’ main force: the large group deployed on the riverbanks. They had destroyed all the anti-tank impediments and were slowly crossing the river to where neither armored infantry nor armored weapon could stop them.

“I can’t see us giving them the slip. They’ve caught up to us now.”

The next bombardment hit his position, blowing away all the trenches.



And so the main force of the Legion’s 1st Echelon crossed the river and finished clearing all the mines and anti-tank

impediments. They formed an opening point, maintaining it as part of their forces encroached deeper into the Saentis-Historics line. They followed the scouting unit that had been sent ahead to secure their path, rushing into the defensive position. The only things standing in their way was the minimal rear guard who stood their ground, and mines and traps left behind.

The tidal wave surged forward, using its superior mass. The Legion's 1st Echelon swallowed up the retreat path, which was full of people, with some of the Legion using their momentum to enter the Harutari reserve formation.



The Strike Package, who were assisting the retreat to the Harutari reserve formation, ran into the tidal wave of the Legion's 1st Echelon. They knew what was coming thanks to Shin's ability, but there were just too many of them. They were able to withstand the attack thanks to the way the Federacy's cities were structured, but the other units consolidating the Harutari strip's defenses had to fall back—effectively leaving the Strike Package and the retreating units isolated in the midst of the enemy.

Watching the blips on the holo-screen, Grethe asked Shin a question. Their allies were falling back, but what of the enemy's movements?

“Is this the last of them, Captain? Or are there more?”

“There's more coming. The Legion are launching an offensive with a large unit at the back of the front. It's corps...no, army-size in scale. It's probably a second

echelon.”

“Army-size...?!”

In this case, the word *army* was used to describe a group made up of several armored corps. A collection of several armies was called an army group, and in the Federacy’s case, they counted as a front army, with the western front’s army being made up of two armies of five corps each.

In other words, reinforcements equal in number to half the size of the western front’s army were about to reach the Harutari defensive line.

Grethe made her choice. The Strike Package wouldn’t last the coming battle on such level ground without reinforcements. And if she had to choose between fleeing infantrymen who wouldn’t necessarily be useful anymore and the Strike Package, which still maintained its order as a unit, the latter was more valuable.

“—The mission is over. We’re falling back, too, while offering cover for the units present.”

The survivors of the rear guard who had stayed behind until now, made up mostly of Vargus, spread out and began to retreat. They moved in small units to remain hidden from the enemy. This was why they were passing through inconspicuous roads. There were *no infantry left* for the Strike Package to wait for.

“In order to avoid getting in other units’ way, the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Armored Divisions are to gather in Roitich City, where the Harutari line support unit is deployed. The 1st Armored Division is to gather in Nakiviki City, then head west and return to

Rüstkammer base.”

Soon after, instructions arrived from the division HQ. The Strike Package was to conclude their current mission, fall back, and make way to defend the Rüstkammer theater.

Took you long enough, Grethe grumbled to herself.

“With the Legion having encroached on the Harutari defensive line, the surroundings of the Rüstkammer base will soon become a battlefield. We’ll be fighting to protect our homes next.”

The commander of Miel’s orphanage was a beacon of kindness. He led the children, who were both foreigners and slow to run, even as soldiers from the front line were fleeing for their lives. But that kindness was the military police officer’s undoing.

They were in the plains of the Montizoto territory. With the retreat of the front lines happening faster than expected, the howitzers of the long-ranged Skorpion units sporadically reached as far as there. And then suddenly, the military police officer’s head—vanished.

“Huh?”

What did him in was the fragment of a shell, whose impact Miel and the other felt from afar. A 155 mm shell’s killing range was seventy-five meters—meaning that they almost certainly killed anyone within that range, but of course, its fragments could reach even farther than that while maintaining their force.

The officer’s head had been blown off instantly, reducing

him to a corpse that crumpled limply to the ground. One of the girls in his group froze, splattered over with the mist of flesh, blood, and bone.

Miel and his group all stopped in their tracks as well, having lost the adult who'd been guiding them.

Abandoned on a battlefield where howitzer fire occasionally hit, left behind by the other refugees because they were slower, Miel and the other children were isolated and trapped.

Since he'd lived there for a few months, it was only natural to call Theo over to confirm the floor plan for Ernst's estate—which made him bitterly realize that they were planning on storming in. So Theo thought as he stood in the temporary command post set up in the base's barracks module.

They intended to go in and swiftly eliminate the insurgents without regard for the hostage's—for Ernst's—life. The ones who'd called him, sectioned off part of the base, and were using the military's barracks module were the army, not the police. Even if the military was in a state of emergency, with all the fronts in a state of crisis and the capital in a state of political upheaval, the army had moved in to resolve the incident at Sankt Jeder despite not having the authority to do so.

The command post was full of red-haired, red-eyed Pyropes, as were the troops and noncommissioned officers sectioning off the base, and their unit insignia was that of a burning leopard. This was one of the armored divisions stationed near the capital, the Flame Leopard unit. The

Brantolote archduchy's elite unit, made up solely of personnel affiliated with them.

They were intent on a nighttime operation, so as to hide the fact that they were effectively abandoning the president to his fate. They evacuated all the civilians from the high-end neighborhood and kept the media away from the area.

The maid, Teresa, had escaped soon after the insurgents occupied the place, thanks to Ernst. Theo became angry upon hearing an officer say that things would have been easier if it was the other way around, but he wasn't allowed to so much as speak, much less share his opinion.

Once they were done with him, they drove him out of the command post like a dog. He stood in the hall, full of frustration and alarm. What was he going to do? He had to come up with something. He didn't want to just stand by and let this happen, just idly let someone he knew die.

His phone vibrated. It was a message from his current superior officer—it said to put on his RAID Device and remain on standby.

“...Roger.”

He wondered what this was about, considering the state of the capital, as he put on the silver ring he'd brought just in case. Someone instantly Resonated with him and spoke, panting.

“Theo...! Oh, what a godsend! You're near Ernst's estate, are you not?!”

Frederica's power to see the present state of those she knew. Just like she said, this was a godsend. *Perfect timing!*

“Frederica, good timing. Help me out!”

If they knew the state of the estate, where Ernst was, and what the Bleachers were doing, it might be possible to take control of the place without Ernst getting caught in the cross fire. Of course, he couldn't risk having the Flame Leopards and, by extension, the Brantolote archduchy learn of Frederica, but he could just say this was thanks to Shin's or His Highness's ability.

He could feel Frederica nod enthusiastically through the Resonance.

“Yes, correct, we must help each other, Theo. We must go inside—”

But what she shouted next caught Theo entirely by surprise.

“—and stop Ernst!”

Fighting as they retreated, all the units made their way to the gathering point in Nakiviki City. Each unit moved in order from the defensive line set up in the Lyskiv Forest northeast to the Kashine Foothills. After preparing their next defensive line in the abandoned city of Ruvokiv on the Kashine Foothills, Shin's 1st Battalion finally moved out of the Rishikiv Woods with their covering fire.

They moved north, avoiding the highways full of infantry, and made way to the eastern city of Farekiv. But then the 4th and 5th Battalions deployed along the foothills disappeared along with the hills themselves.

Immediately following that, Shin looked up through his

optical screen to the gray sky. Just as his radar systems detected something approaching, he felt the impact. A high-speed projectile with intense firepower.

“A Morpho?!”

“The Kampf Pfau...probably got destroyed.”

In order to destroy the Kampf Pfau in the back of the Federacy defensive line, the Morpho had moved to the very rear of the Legion’s 1st Echelon. There was no way Shin would be able to discern the moment a Morpho attacked with the wailings of countless Shepherds and Sheepdogs assaulting his senses.

Following that, more areas got bombarded—Farekiv City, where the 7th Battalion just arrived; once again in the Kashine Foothills; the Rishikiv Woods, which the 1st Battalion just left; and the highways the infantry marched on. As 800 mm shells rained down like divine thunder, the Legion armored unit charged at the 3rd and 4th Battalion in the Ruvokiv City defensive line while they were still rattled from the shock waves and fragments hitting them.

“Tch. 5th Battalion, Mitsuda is unresponsive. Taking command as vice captain!”

“4th Battalion, survivors are all prepared to attack. Fire once you have them in your sights!”

Covering fire launched from within the smoldering wreckage of the Kashine Foothills aimed at Ruvokiv City. Armored weapons fought while in motion, and that was the forte of the Reginleif, built for high-speed combat. They moved around rather than fortifying in one spot, so despite how heavy the impact on the area looked, they apparently

weren't damaged much.

“Michihi from the 3rd Battalion here. I'm unharmed—1st Battalion, keep up your retreat! We'll support you until you're done!”

“7th Platoon, likewise, we've got Farekiv City secured. Focus on building the def— Whoa!”

Another bombardment. These were long-range unguided missiles with low accuracy; meaning they hit both the key terrain and unrelated areas just the same, meaning the Reginleifs had nowhere to run. Between the shock waves and fragments, large amounts of sediment rained down from the collapsing hills, washing away and splitting up any units and squadrons unfortunate enough to get caught by them.

—They're aiming at this escape route.

Shin narrowed his eyes. This retreat road stood out because of the countless infantry moving through it. There was no point in taking out the Legion's forward observer units because they would get substituted by other Ameise, and there was a good chance a Rabe was observing this battle. It wouldn't take long before the 2nd Echelon joined the fight. So before that happened—

“All units, prioritize disengaging from the bombardment zone. Make your way to—” He called up the map, looking for a place the evacuating troops wouldn't choose. “North, to the Tohfar Mountains. Don't deploy for an ambush and try to keep engaging any enemy armored units to a minimum.”

The armored units they were seeing now were just disposable pawns to keep the 1st Armored Division pinned

down in the bombardment zone. So while they couldn't altogether ignore them, they could use the Morpho's own bombardment to beat them.

The staff officers commanding the 1st Armored Division made an addition, updating the map with several rendezvous points. They weren't telling each battalion to gather there, but for each unit to prioritize evading enemy fire rather than focusing on moving as a platoon or battalion.

As he listened to First Lieutenant Canaan Nyuud and the Longbow squadron reply over the staff officers' voices, Shin closed his eyes for a moment. The retreating 2nd to 4th Armored Divisions were spread out between the escape route along the Blanc Rose combat territory to Roitich City—in other words, it was probably that they'd also been hit by the Morpho bombardment. The Kampf Pfaus had likely been eliminated, and all the Morpho units that appeared fired all over the Harutari strip.

“Shit...”

White snow began to flutter down from the dull-colored sky.

With the irritating peacocks destroyed, the Morpho were able to freely strike at the Federacy's reserve position, only to stop upon receiving a report from their forward observer units and set their sights on a new target.

There were still fleeing soldiers and the units that were defending them in the bombardment zone, but firing to separate and isolate them would be easy. A Morpho was well-equipped to destroying the rats' nests, but it was too

large to eliminate every last skittering one, so there was no need for the Morpho to chase down units after they'd been scattered.

With the Kampf Pfau decimated, the Morpho no longer needed to change position, and they aimed their long barrels on the spot.

<<Radar reading detected.>>

...A radar reading?

The next moment, a bombardment of shells penetrated the Morpho's gigantic form—fired by *the last Kampf Pfau* the Federacy never deployed in any of the fronts, as a backup to counter the Morpho.

“How stupid are you, you dumb hunks of scrap metal? Did you really think we'd use all our aces for artillery support against the Morpho?!”

“That covering fire was meant to lure them out, too. Use this chance to take out as many Morpho as you can!”

It was a brave counterattack using their artillery forces as bait. The Kampf Pfau's operators, who completed their firing schedule with bloodcurdling expressions on their faces, instantly raised their spades to switch to another position, riding along the train tracks to vanish from the enemy's sights.

Without air superiority, the Kampf Pfau didn't have the means of confirming whether it hit its mark or not. But even if, at worst, it failed to take the target out, it kept the Morpho in check and suppressed their arrogant control over

the battlefield at the very least.

They may have been mass-produced at this point, but Morpho were still precious few in number. As the Morpho were wary of counterattacks, their bombardment became sporadic again. They began switching positions as well, moving their fourteen-hundred-tonne massive forms around so as to avoid being hit.

Having been spared from the shower of lightning and steel, the soldiers resumed their retreat.

A deafening exhaust noise, akin to a fearless dragon's roar, approached them from behind.

It was in one corner of the Harutari reserve position, supported by conscripted Vargus—old, female, and child soldiers, as it was inadvisable to send the artillery and armored division troops they'd recovered back out to fight yet. The infantry troops hiding within the trenches, attempting to hold off the next incoming wave of Legion, all turned around to look.

The noise was simply that overbearing.

“What's that?!”

“Shit. That's...!”

Those who didn't know that model had never heard such noise before. And those who knew it regarded it with both awe and loathing. The heavy, rumbling steps of its multiple legs quaked the ground like the galloping of a destrier. Its special, high-output power pack allowed its unusual weight to strike with surprising speed.

It wasn't a Vánagandr, and it wasn't Legion, either, of course. Once one heard it and laid eyes on it, they would never forget its presence. This loud, overbearing roar—

“Azhi Dahāka...!”

“The Nouzens finally let loose their man-eating dragons...!”

“Devour them!”

The operators all shouted out of their units' external speakers at full volume in unison, in an act of psychological warfare. The voices of men and women intermingled together in a battle cry that was both gallant and ominous as their metal-black forms strode past the trenches. Unlike a certain someone who conducted herself like an empress, the Onyx warriors didn't waste their time on something as meaningless as painting their units in their own colors. They didn't need such superficial embellishments to prove themselves, as the countless achievements they made on the battlefield spoke solemnly of their might.

Like a dragon baring its fangs, they attacked the Legion armored division from both flanks at once. They tore into them, devoured them with all the ease of closing a maw. They achieved this with their unnatural speed and the might it afforded them.

Azhi Dahāka.

Much like a Vánagandr, it was equipped with twin 120 mm smoothbore machine guns and stalwart armor. But the difference was it wasn't a two-seater, but a single-seat unit, where the operator handled both piloting and firing at once. And—

“Crawl and wait for our hooves to crush you, you pieces of useless scrap! The Crazy Bones Division is upon you!”

The Azhi Dahāka’s armor had a thickness that was not much different from a Vánagandr’s. Still, with its combat weight of seventy tonnes, this giant dragon used its legs to push the large Löwe into the ground *from overhead*. The impact of their *landing* and weight cracked the Löwe’s relatively thin top armor, smashing the Löwe into the snowy ground, where they twitched like dying insects crushed underfoot.

Having crushed the enemy, Yatrai operated his Azhi Dahāka to jump to the next target, with his lieutenant staying behind to swerve his turret and finish off the unfortunate Löwe with a close-range shot.

Yes, they *jumped*. Despite their weight, they leaped and jumped like warhorses, freely moving about the snowy battlefield. Despite being heavier than any Vánagandr or Löwe, they had a high-output driving system that was capable of moving that weight with speeds that rivaled the Legion. That was the Azhi Dahāka’s most striking feature.

But of course, that meant its fuel efficiency and maintenance costs were destructively awful. On top of that, its control system was extremely sensitive, and its power system was difficult to handle and prone to problems if its output dropped even a little.

It also required robust operators capable of withstanding its overly high, excessive acceleration and its intense inertia.

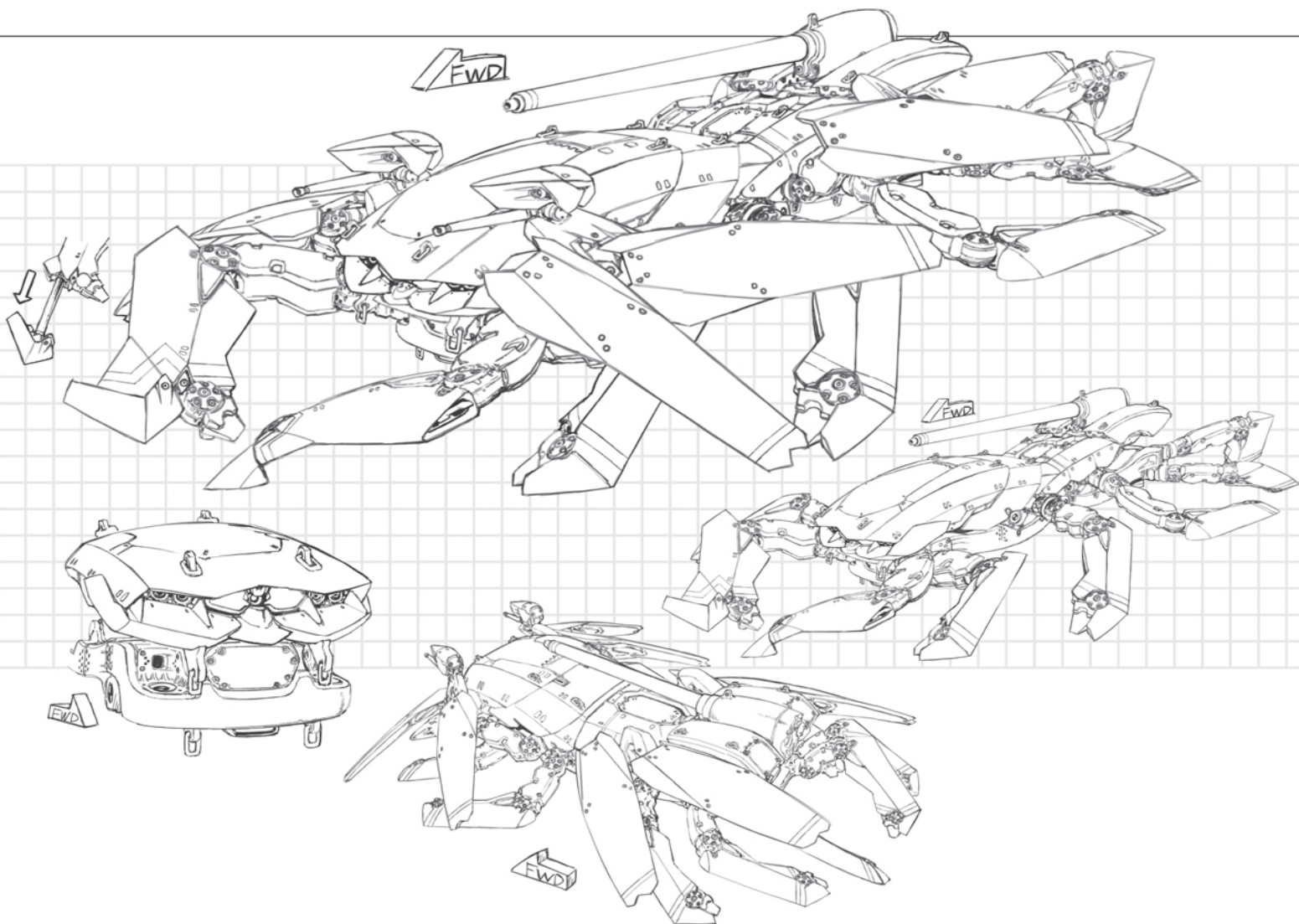
The machine weighed seventy tonnes because of its powerful driving system, the cooling system needed to match it, and the buffering system that kept the unit from

destroying itself. With these, it achieved an extreme amount of speed that would shake up any operator, making it impossible to control the machine with just experience and intuition.

This was a guaranteed monster, only created with the backing of the noble Nouzen clan's wealth and influence and controlled by their unique bloodline.

Having been struck from the flank, the Legion detachment was split in two as the Azhi Dahāka dug into them. Their vanguard had already been bitten into and was in the dragon's gullet, beaten down one after another by the Azhi Dahāka. Meanwhile, the two vanguard units of the Crazy Bones Division tore through the enemy group, slipped out of the enemy ranks, and then took a sharp turn to once again bite into the scrap monsters' flanks like hungry sharks.

FRIENDLY UNIT



[Nouzen-Clan-Exclusive Heavy Assault Type Feldreß]

Azhi Dahāka

[A R M A M E N T S]

120 mm Smoothbore Gun [×1]

12.7 mm Heavy Machine Gun [×2]

High-Output Speakers for Psychological Warfare

“Blade” Pile Bunkers on Rear Legs Operational

Deployable Armor [×8]

[S P E C S]

Manufacturer: Felswinzel Military Industries →

Rinsha Companies

Length: 11.9 m

Height: 3.1 m in total [not including legs]

A multifaceted monster equipped with superior destructive power, mobility, and defense. However, this makes it difficult to pilot, with low durability, fuel efficiency, and operating time. This led to more and more of its features being cut before arriving at the design for the Vánagandr.

While this is technically an old, outdated model, the Nouzen clan was able to use its personal wealth to modernize and mass-produce this unit. While the flaws mentioned above make deploying it mostly impractical, it is still humankind’s trump card, capable of crushing even Löwe with ease, and is strategically utilized at crucial points.

From the corner of his optical screen, Yatrai could see soldiers scurrying into the trenches to reorganize their forces. They were decisive and quick-witted enough to not waste the chance the Crazy Bones Division's arrival granted them. These weren't Federacy civilians, however, but Vargus beastmen.

As he landed a blow into the unarmored turret joint of an approaching Löwe, instantly dispatching it, Yatrai switched on the external speaker.

"You've fought well. Reinforcements will come soon. Hang on until then."

"...Understood."

The reply in the radio came after a pause of awe, or shame and humiliation at those who'd died... He didn't know what governor they fought under, but they did a bad job of disciplining these men.

"But we must make a request. The renegades who abandoned our brethren cannot be trusted. Please do not reuse them and send those of our own as reinforcements."

Yatrai let out a breath as he smirked. "Very well. But in exchange, hold this position until your dying breath, you lot."

"That goes without saying."

The radio transmission cut off there. His lieutenant, who'd remained silent during the transmission, spoke up instead.

"Lord Yatrai, the division of forces across each front, and the recovery and reintroduction of the artillery and armored troops, are all going according to schedule, but there's a delay in reintroducing the rescued soldiers back into the ranks."

The artillery and armored divisions that had begun to retreat first were all recovered and brought to the Harutari defensive line; at the moment they were preparing to have their units reorganized and reintroduced back into the fold. Meanwhile, the infantry unit that had begun to flee before the order was officially issued had long since arrived at the defensive line and were also to be sent back to fight. However...

As Yatrai remained silent, awaiting an answer, his lieutenant continued:

“They’re deserters. Cowards. They weep and scream like children that they don’t want to fight anymore.”

“Fools.” Yatrai laughed them off coldly.

Indeed, they were shallow-minded fools. They honestly believed deserting under enemy fire meant they’d escaped the battlefield.

“Tell them to gun them down one by one until they start shouting, *Yes, sir*. And that they are not to send reports like that ever again. What did we give them those Vánagandrs for? If those soldier dogs can’t discipline the roosters, it reflects poorly on us as cattle keepers.”

His lieutenant laughed. Yatrai didn’t know it, but the reason he was picked to be the next heir of the Nouzen clan wasn’t because of his family’s influence or his blood relation to Marquis Seiei. It was because he had a quality that was crucial in these war-swept times—cruelty and brutality fueled by pride and callousness that had been unmatched since the family’s founder.

A grandchild of mixed blood, whose only merit was his direct descendance to the current head, could not match

him.

“By your will, Lord Yatrai. My back is yours.”

While he wasn't on the battlefield, Theo was still a soldier, and the situation in the capital was dire. He needed to carry a pistol on his person. He cocked the slide, loading the first bullet. The Federacy's standard-issue sidearm was a small model with limited capacity, and he didn't have a spare cartridge with him, so he didn't have many shots. But if Frederica's words were true, there'd be no need to shoot anyway.

Still, to be on the safe side, he sneaked through the manor's window, his gun loaded.

“Wait, who's that?!”

“What are the guards doing?!”

He heard the Flame Leopard unit members raise their voices from afar. They had the area on lockdown to prevent the insurgents from escaping, but they didn't expect someone to come in from the outside.

Stepping over the floor, which was littered with glass shards, he rolled through the carpeted floor of the hallway. A moment later, he heard bullets hit the window frame from outside. The blaring of gunshots came a split second later, the shots traveling fast—this was a unique phenomenon in rifles. This was sniper fire, aimed at the entirety of the northern perimeter of the manor, the window included.

“...Whoa. They actually fired at me,” he whispered, keeping his head down.

Theo's infiltration had been spotted a long time ago, but

the Flame Leopards took time to report in and receive orders before attacking. This was likely because these noble units weren't so coldhearted as to shoot a Federacy soldier of their own accord. These were warning shots that weren't met to hit their mark but simply intimidate him.

“Frederica, where's Ernst?”

“In the living room. The Bleachers are...as far as I can tell, all there, too.”

Indeed, as Theo pressed his back against the wall, he couldn't hear any talking or footsteps. And while the president's private manor wasn't built so shoddily that whispers could be heard from afar, the blaring of a rifle's gunshot would still be audible. So if there were any guards on patrol, they'd have reacted to the gunfire by now.

...I should probably assume this place is empty except for the living room.

He still made his way there while wary of other noises. Indeed, the place was full of people. On top of hearing wet, sticky footsteps, he could practically feel the body heat of many people.

—Wet footsteps. Indoors.

He bitterly tried to imagine the situation inside. What's more, there was an ominously familiar stench in the air. For a while now, Frederica had been wordless, like she was holding back tears. He drew closer to the door's shadow and peered inside.

And then Theo gulped in shock. Frederica had told him the gist of what happened, and he'd guessed as much from

the stench of blood. And yet.

Standing in the midst of the Bleachers, who lay scattered on the carpet like objects, and brandishing an assault rifle with a bloodstained stock was an ash-colored firedrake, his head drenched in blood and his trademark suit covered in stains.

The snow silently fell, only to melt into mud from the heat of shells flying through the air, gun barrels turning red-hot and the exhaust pipes of armored weapons and trucks belching smog. As Reginleifs flew about the battlefield, they splashed through the mud, their white armor becoming coated with muck.

With the Kampf Pfau keeping the Morpho in check, their bombardments turned more sporadic. As Shin and the 1st Armored Division intentionally advanced through steep mountains, which impeded the movement of polypedal units, the Legion ground forces pursuing them also had trouble navigating the area compared with open terrain.

As they traversed ravines between precipitous cliffs, along unpaved roads littered with coiling tree roots and branches, even the small Reginleifs had to move in small groups. They kept traveling while confirming the terrain, so they could avoid running into a dead end, which meant they couldn't progress too quickly. Even if they wanted to descend to the foot of the mountains, the terrain there was too flat, and the place was covered with Legion remnants. They could only advance through the mountainous road, the sole silver lining being that the forested terrain kept them out of the Rabe's watchful eye.

Down on the surface, the deserters were still scattered all over the battlefield like hungry locusts. They rushed and congested the road paved for the Harutari defensive line. Worse yet, they tried to push into the Harutari line's trenches without contacting the garrison, and they ended up setting off mines, pushing away wire fences, and blocking lines of fire—effectively assisting the Legion's offense.

Shin couldn't restrain his anger at the sight. Why was everyone being so stupid? If they could see that the situation was going south, why were they so insistent on having their way? They let their own concerns, their fear guide their emotions.

Another unit began pursuing them. Finding a strategic spot, they set up a defensive line and intercepted the enemy's advance guard as they struck at another unit from the flank. Reginleifs were not effective at stopping in the middle of combat. Units stopping to set up a defensive line meant risking losses, but they had no infantry to rely on except for the Vargus troops escorting them. If the infantry cooperated with them, their chances of survival would have been better, but they didn't consider that.

Shin couldn't restrain his anger at this foolishness.

...Why?

They put their weakness and foolishness on full display, as if they were confident they could get away with anything. Even the thought that others might get caught up in the trouble they caused or that they might be endangering themselves was of no concern. They were getting carried away with their self-destructive behavior.

Why do you do this?



Upon hearing that its consort Morpho had been felled by that inferior Federacy railgun, Nidhogg's Liquid Micromachine brain seethed with memories of burning humiliation. That Federacy railgun. That inferior model, with its poor accuracy, smaller caliber, and lower initial velocity compared with a Morpho like Nidhogg. And despite all that, it was the long-distance cannon that had once defeated it.

—It defeated me. Once.



He could hear the familiar wailings of a Morpho from surprisingly nearby.

It's our turn. Our turn.

It was the voice of the Morpho that had dropped firebombs on the evacuation train in the Republic Relief Expedition two months ago. It was, surprisingly enough, only a few dozen kilometers away from Shin and the Spearhead squadron, within range of howitzer fire. The long-distance artillery cannon, boasting a maximum effective range of four hundred kilometers, had encroached so far that it was a stone's throw away from the Harutari reserve position.

It was too close to be aiming at the Harutari position. Which meant it was—

“Aiming for the Kampf Pfau?”

It didn't care for the infantry at its feet, even if they were routed troops, or for the Vargus who may be lying in wait somewhere, or for the Strike Package members located in front of the position.

It sang that it was its turn, wailing its dying words. It was likely a former Eighty-Six, one who chose hatred for the Republic above all else and tried to burn it all to the ground.

“...You killed so many.”

And it still wasn't enough. It still wanted to kill more. And now its enemy wasn't even the Republic anymore. It had its sights on the Federacy, which was unrelated to the internment and prosecution it had experienced in life, claiming it was “its turn.”

At this point, it wasn't even revenge anymore.

...You poor soul. The thought crossed Shin's mind coldly.

However, it wasn't the same mercy Shin felt for the Legion and the souls trapped within them, but a stronger, more intense loathing. This soul had forgotten the honor of fighting to the bitter end, and was consumed by vengeance... only to forget whom their hatred was even directed at. It was so overcome by its instincts as a combat machine that it let its hatred carry it away, sinking into meaningless slaughter.

In the end, he's just like them.

The same as the Hail Mary Regiment and all the deserters on this battlefield, who used their foolishness as an excuse to stop thinking, used their weakness as justification to let selfishness guide them. To be powerless and pathetic.

Unightly. Outright...infuriating.

Shin took a breath—the swift, sharp breath of a starved predator facing prey.

“1st Battalion, follow me. We’re striking at that idiot who showed their face on the front lines.”

But that said, the 1st Armored Division had been split up into small groups on their march due to the Morpho bombardment, meaning they weren’t organized into battalions—or even platoons, in some cases.

“Shin, what?!” Kurena, whose 5th Platoon had joined another group in the split, replied in surprise.

The units near Undertaker followed, regardless of their squadron affiliation. Thankfully, the three units from Shin’s platoon were close by and followed. Raiden’s 2nd Platoon also joined in.

“Kurena, you know what to do. Stay here.”

“Raiden, I’m counting on you!”

She did understand. With both Shin and Raiden away, she and Anju were the next in the chain of command. As one of the veterans from before the Strike Package was established, she had to stay around to take command of the 1st Armored Division.

“I’ll take care of things here. So you have to make it back!”

“They’re being reckless again... Lerche, cover for

them.” Vika sighed, ordering Lerche to help.

“That goes without saying.”

“No, one battalion won’t be enough. We’ll support your way out! 2nd Platoon, all units that can respond are to gather and link up with nearby units!”

“Aaah, what a pain! Nouzen, just sent you an updated map!”

Rito consolidated their surrounding troops as Marcel sent map data he’d swiftly pulled up. Shin was acting on his own accord, and Grethe reluctantly approved of it.

“Eliminating this target will be necessary for a certain retreat, Captain Nouzen. I’ll request a decoy to stall it. Take it out quick and get back here.”

“Roger.”

As that conversation took place, Anju’s mind wandered. Raiden joined Shin, while Kurena stayed behind. And what of her?

...Dustin.

If she was going to pick only Dustin, the right thing to do would be to see Shin off. This didn’t mean he would fail to make it back. Shin was strong and more than capable enough of fending for himself. He wasn’t as weak as Dustin and her, so surely, he’d take care of the Morpho and come back safely.

But after all...

Shin's a weak Reaper who can't fight alone.

So if someday, everyone abandoned him like Anju was about to, he'd just fight all on his own, then eventually become exhausted and die. Even in this battle, Shin might be reduced to a hero's death and never make it back.

And Anju didn't want that to happen.

—Big Brother looked a bit pitiful back there.

She knew Shin was actually weaker and less reliable than he seemed. This was why they couldn't let him, their kind Reaper, become everyone's hero. He wasn't strong enough to bear the weight of everyone depending on him, and they weren't going to contribute to him falling apart.

Me, I'm...I'm weak and unreliable, too. Weak and a cheater. But I can at least manage this... I can, on my own, save him. And protect those I wish to keep safe. Even if that's the kindness of a cheater, I can at least stick to that. Weak and unsightly as I am, I can at least do that.

Her eyes narrowed in resolve. Kurena and the units around her, Raiden's Wehrwolf and Shin's Undertaker—they all had autocannons with direct sights and tank turrets. They'd need a surface-suppression unit with sweeping range and indirect sights. On the other hand, Kurena, as temporary commander, had forces to escort her.

“Dustin, Yuu, you two stay here. Michihi, you come with me!”

“Roger that, Anju.”

“I'll link up with the 5th Platoon and take over covering fire for Kurena.”

Dustin alone remained silent. Assuming he hadn't heard her, she switched the Para-RAID only to him.

"Dustin, listen... You're pure, so—"

"...?"

He regarded her with what felt like confused silence. He said nothing, likely unable to accept what she was about to say. But if he just remembered it later and realized, that was good enough.

If it'll be what inspires you to remember what you are, of the self you're losing sight of, it's enough.

It looks like it hurts.

It's obvious you wouldn't forget about him.

He let her open up about the scars she wanted to lose. He affirmed her desire to not forget the person she loved. He was so pure, he wouldn't even ask her to forget about him.

If you do that, you'll never be happy.

He wished for her happiness. And though he was too weak to protect those words, that purity, right now...

"You're so kind, you can only live in purity. So you can't let yourself cheat... But for someone as kind as you, this is probably the only way you know how to live. You can't betray who you are."

I think that's a curse, but...I'm a witch, after all. A greedy, unfair witch.

"I'm an unfair woman, so I'll take advantage of that

kindness... Keep your promise and don't die.”

Because I promise I'll come back.



Since the Morpho had metallic legs in place of wheels, it technically could leave the rail. Its massive weight couldn't be supported by most ground foundation, sinking into the earth, and even if that didn't happen, it couldn't hope to travel as fast as it did on the tracks, but it was still possible. And so Nidhogg found a firm, paved military road it could slowly, gingerly move on.

It walked slowly, like an insect creeping along, but mere infantry knew better than to approach the gigantic dragon. As they ran in terror, trying to gain distance from it, it aimed its long-range radar at them, making their body fluids boil from the powerful radar waves for a spot of amusement as it waited for the faulty enemy railgun to shoot.

Come at me. I've come all the way here, to where I can't move. Shoot me. This time, I'll shoot back before you can land a hit on me.

Of course, its grudge couldn't reach the other railgun, and yet—a reaction on its antiair radar. High-speed projectiles detected.

—There!

With almost childlike glee, Nidhogg turned the bearing of its elongated barrel. Reverse-calculating the projectiles' trajectory, it started on identifying the Kampf Pfau's position. It ignored any rounds that were on course to miss

it by a wide margin and spread out its heat-disposal wings. Its consciousness, which remained clotted with the hatred it had died with, was submerged with the madness that came with accepting its instincts as a murder machine. It finished identifying the firing position. Its barrel trembled, adjusting its sights as it prepared to counterattack—

But then...

A tank shell fired at it from an entirely unexpected direction, striking it and rattling its sensors and mechanical thoughts.



His reticle followed his line of sight, intersecting with the Morpho's frame as Shin squeezed the trigger. His APFSDS shell hit it directly, causing its reactive armor to explode, covering the Morpho in black smoke.

Peering at him coldly, Shin spat out, "Idiot."

Pursuing a routed, defeated army to deliver blows to its exposed back was the most efficient way of inflicting losses, but doing so also disturbed the Legion's own ranks, and charging straight ahead without losing speed meant one's vigilance of their surroundings was lower. And to begin with, not all infantry units had fled, with some of them still fighting.

And in the midst of a battlefield where it was hard to tell friend from foe apart, a slow, dull railroad artillery appeared. Blinded by victory, it carelessly moved in, even getting off the rail tracks that would have allowed it to flee to safety. And it allowed itself this arrogance despite facing

the Eighty-Six, who'd been conditioned to fight the menacing Legion in defective aluminum coffins.

And being one of them, the Morpho knew this. But joining the army of mechanical ghosts, it'd grown arrogant and drunk with power, neglecting the vigilance the battlefield demanded. Despite all that, it still had the mindset of a disposable Juggernaut, a disposable Processor. It failed to grasp the Morpho's importance and value as a tactical weapon, complacently convincing itself it was worthless.

If so, then you're not the ghost of an Eighty-Six anymore. You're only basking in idle despair at the place where you were taken, not trying to go anywhere or be capable of anything—just another powerless, unsightly fool.

“Engaging the enemy. Colonel Grethe, you can tell them the Kampf Pfau doesn't need to distract it or keep it at bay anymore... As expected, this idiot was waiting for it to shoot so it can fire back.”

Grethe frowned from the other side of the Resonance. **“I'm going to have to ask you to relax, Captain. That kind of pointless report isn't called for.”**

“Roger,” Shin replied, but her words went in one ear and out the other.

His style was melee combat using close-range armaments—atypical for an armored weapon, it required extreme concentration. By now, Shin's thoughts were fixed solely on the enemy unit before his eyes.



Radar waves fundamentally traveled in a straight line, meaning their detection range narrowed on the surface over the horizon. And if one hid in the shadows of any hills, valleys, houses, or trenches, it was possible to evade Nidhogg's narrow detection range altogether.

Only once it was hit head-on with a tank shell did Nidhogg realize that armored weapons were approaching it. At that point, the enemy unit was already within two thousand meters of it, within the range of a tank shell. Conversely, the Morpho's prided long-range, elongated barrel, with its range of four hundred kilometers, meant that Nidhogg's enemies were too close to effectively aim at.

They were rapidly traversing those two thousand meters, too. These weren't the usual metal-black units with the Federacy flag. They had armor the color of polished bone, and a tank turret on their backs extending like a scorpion's tail. They crawled on four legs, like skeletons creeping in search of their lost heads.

—*Juggernauts?!*

No. Its database search called up another name—*Reginleif*. The Federacy's unique high-mobility combat Feldreiß. Nidhogg understood this, but the emotion that gripped it didn't go away. The Juggernaut. The same kind of unit it once used alongside its comrades, back in the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

The feeling of being attacked by fellow Eighty-Six, the illusion of being blamed by its comrades, made the ghost of a child soldier now known as Nidhogg shudder.

No. No, they aren't my comrades. My friends, my whole squadron got turned into Legion with me. They all feel the

same way. So they wouldn't— My friends wouldn't blame me!

I...

I did nothing wrong. I just wanted to get back at them, at the white pigs!

But its scream reached no one. The headless skeletons mercilessly rained cannon fire on it, which had become every bit the monster it was named after.

Guided projectiles rained self-forging fragments on it, and tank shells pierced into it from its flank. High explosives rammed into it, and machine-gun fire swept over it. The Liquid Micromachines that formed its barrel, the scales of its explosive reactive armor, and its six antiair autocannons were all rapidly reduced to nothing.

Despite being unable to properly align its line of fire on them from this range, it still tried to move its barrel. Rather than aim at them, it tried to escape their line of fire or perhaps splash the liquid metal that was charged with propelling the shells in its barrels. Its 800 mm railgun was fearsome and unmatched, but once it couldn't shoot, it was effectively useless. It could only stand there as the Reginleifs bombarded it with tank shells from three directions, each one of them an accusation of its sins.

Stop it. No more. Help me!

But no one—not even the red-eyed Reaper—could hear its screams.



The slow missiles had initially only been fired to serve as a decoy. The Morpho's antiair autocannons swerved to shoot and intercept the missiles as they flew through the air, a trail of flame left behind. But as the guns' sights and the Morpho's attention as a whole moved up, Undertaker and the other Reginleifs loaded with tank turrets fired at it from both flanks. This destroyed all six of the autocannons at once.

On his own, Undertaker would struggle to silence all the antiair autocannons, but fighting in a team with several units operating in tandem, they were able to eliminate the autocannons with ease.

Following that, the missiles overhead dropped their cluster bombs, and the 88 mm projectiles rained down on the Morpho after a delay. This intentionally triggered the explosive reactive armor, scattering explosions, flashes, waves of heat, and loud sound that blinded the Morpho's sensors.

In the meanwhile, Shin and his platoon's three units, along with Raiden's 2nd Platoon, split up into three and approached it.

"Artillery configuration units, half of you leave your ammo as is, and the other half, exchange your ammo to incendiary bombs."

Armed with explosive projectiles, artillery units were to counter the railgun's fire, while the incendiary bombs were to counter the electric wires it would soon likely deploy for melee combat. With high explosives hitting every time it tried to align its sights, the Morpho was unable to stop Shin's approach. The back of the unit trembled, and as expected, its radiation-expelling wings unfurled. It took aim at

Undertaker and his companion units, swinging its countless metallic whips down like bolts of lightning.

“—Incendiary bombs, fire.”

But then hellfire struck them, sending them limp and inert to the ground. The battle with the first Morpho, Kiriya Nouzen, already taught Shin that the close-range wires were weak to high temperatures.

With units drawing on it and all its means of attack lost, the Morpho began swinging its turret around with movements that seemed almost desperate. As it moved, it dragged the inert wires on the ground, trying to horizontally sweep at an approaching Reginleif—and purged all the wires halfway through the motions. The momentum of the swing sent the wires flying like countless arrows. The sweeping trajectory of that silvery torrent made the Reginleifs brake where they stood and duck to dodge it.

“Whoa!”

“That was close!”

But Shin alone was able to just barely slip through the torrent and continue his charge.

As the main force of the 1st Armored Division stayed behind to secure their way out, Dustin listened in on the ongoing battle through the Para-RAID. He didn't join the detachment that'd gone to eliminate the Morpho, of course. He lacked the skills, so much so that Anju had explicitly told him not to come along.

It felt presumptuous of him to feel jealous or envious.

Despite the battle only having started a short time ago, it was already approaching its climax. As the other Valkyries were forced to stop in their tracks because of the Morpho's desperate counterattack, Undertaker alone—as had become his trademark—lunged forward. The headless Reaper gambled on a one-on-one, relying on his transcendent combat skills, which none of the elite Eighty-Six, to say nothing of powerless Dustin, could hope to match.

...But—at that point, Dustin thought—he didn't save Citri.

For how strong Shin was, unlike Dustin, he didn't consider saving Citri, a fellow Eighty-Six.

You really are strong, Shin. Why didn't you...?

I...

—How long will this continue?!

I shouted those words, even though I couldn't change things, even though I was blind to how powerless I was.

Such thoughts haunted Dustin's mind, in the midst of combat and the middle of the battlefield. Despite being a Republic Processor who lacked the skill and experience of an Eighty-Six or a Republic soldier, he let anguish dominate his mind.

And in the sense that he let anguish distract him—yes, he was weak.

“Dustin!”

Who was it who called out to him in warning? By the time he snapped out of his thoughts, there was a shell approaching him from overhead.

“...Ah.”

The shell hit.

“Dustin!”

It wasn't a tank shell, but an unguided projectile, and while it wasn't a direct hit, it did strike from point-blank.

With a 155 mm shell that could blow a Vánagandr to bits on a direct hit exploding at his flank, Sagittarius took severe damage and got blown away. They were fighting in a thick forest in the steep mountains. Sagittarius rolled deep into the verdant darkness, disappearing past the veil of snow.

The Para-RAID cut off. His blip on the radar screen went out, too. Frederica wasn't back yet. His squadmate who shouted the warning, Yuu, instantly exclaimed:

“Kurena, we need to rescue him!”

Kurena examined her radar screen for a few seconds, looking over the blips for the units under her command, the enemy distribution, and the spots where enemy reinforcements and predicted ambushes were before making her call. She spoke with the sternness of a commander on the field, who had to instantly read multiple sources of information and think fast on her feet.

“We can't. If we cut into our forces any more, this entire area will fall apart.”

They were holding on, waiting for Shin and the others' return, so they could move to more advantageous terrain. If they let forces move out from their unit while they were

fighting to maintain a defensive line, all the forces under Kurena's command could end up being wiped out.

“I can go alone—”

“I can't approve that. This isn't a range where you can look for him and get back on your own. And we don't have time to wait for you to do that, either.”

Marcel picked up on the situation and analyzed the point where Dustin had crashed and the terrain there. It was a ravine that was deeper than it looked. There was no way to tell where his unit had rolled off to, or if it might have gotten caught on something. And if his unit was heavily damaged and crashed into a ravine, there was no way of telling if Dustin had survived. They couldn't afford to send Yuu into danger if Dustin was dead. If Frederica was there, they'd have been able to at least confirm if he was alive, but she wasn't.

One of the staff officers made an announcement: Dustin Jaeger was designated MIA. They were to continue their retreat.

“Your decision wasn't wrong, Second Lieutenant Kukumila... Don't make it harder on her, Second Lieutenant Kouzo.”

“...Roger.”

As she heard Yuu respond hoarsely, Kurena closed her eyes in regret for a moment.

I'm sorry, Dustin, Anju.

The wires were simply swung and released, making their trajectory straight without allowing for any tricks. And with his dynamic vision accustomed to melee combat with Grauwolf and even Phönix, Shin was able to easily dodge them.

In a split second, he was able to discern a path that would let him weave through the gaps in countless wires and slide Undertaker into that narrow region. As he moved, he input the command to switch his armament.

The enemy's 800 mm turret, with its hundreds of tons of weight, couldn't instantly change the direction of its swing. With nothing in his way, Shin swiftly strode past the cannon. With the thirty-meter long barrel now reduced to nothing but an expensive bludgeon, Shin crept into the dragon's flank. As he turned his eyes, spotting the silvery liquid metal bubble in the corner of his vision, his sights moved along with his gaze and aligned on the target.

“...I've seen this before, too.”

It could narrowly wind and coil the liquid metal forming its barrel to turn them into countless thin blades or convert them into spears that it could launch from its barrel. Undertaker fired HEAT rounds with a timed fuse, which burst and splattered the liquefied projectiles within the barrel. The Phönix he'd fought on the northern battlefield used its liquid metal armor to unleash projectiles in exactly the same way.

When the Morpho saw what was probably its trump card get effortlessly disposed of, its giant form oafishly and, this time, clearly cowered. It tried to crawl away on its legs covered in mud. The large dragon was desperately scrambling off, even though it could still try to kick

Undertaker away or beat it with its barrel.

It was weakness. The weakness of choosing hatred, letting hatred stain you but not even being able to follow through on that hatred.

“—Pathetic.”

It started swinging its barrel—not so much to intercept Shin but more like an infant batting their arms around in a blind, frightened tantrum—only for Shin to fire his wire anchor onto the edge of the turret. Leaping up, he reeled the wire back, traveling much farther than his usual jumping distance to reach the top of the turret.

As the toxic dragon Nidhogg crawled over the ground, looking up at the sky, the Valkyrie Reginleif lorded over it, with the blue, unreachable heavens at her back.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Nouzen’s being stupid and trying to beat it on his own again!” Tachina from Shin’s platoon cursed.

Raiden was inclined to agree. “He’s never going to learn, is he, the dumbass...?!”

He could relate to how Shin felt, but why wouldn’t he show some restraint? While he flaunted his strength by going one-on-one, Raiden was the one who had to take over command and offer him support. He held back the urge to click his tongue. If they were out of their units, he’d kick Shin in the ass right about now.

But then suddenly, one extra Para-RAID target joined the Resonance.

A creeping, black evil dragon, and a white flash judging from the heavens. It was like a scene out of myth. A warrior god or a hero slaying a dragon.

And it was for this reason that the routed soldiers looked upon this sight with eyes of anger and profound suspicion.

“If you can do that...”

If you're really heroes, if you're that strong, why won't you...why won't you people...?

Shin landed on top of the mostly perpendicular barrel, at the very tip of the spear. Undertaker descended its length by tumbling down as opposed to running, arriving at the opening between the wings on its back. As his unit was about to slide from the momentum, he thrust his pile driver down to brake, then used his blades to tear open the maintenance panel in the way.

The original Morpho had stirred and squirmed when Shin attached himself to it, trying to shake him off, but it appeared this ghost lacked the fighting spirit that Frederica's knight, Kiriya Nouzen, possessed. At the time, the Legion hadn't yet discovered how to turn themselves into butterflies to escape, and so the Morpho had resorted to shooting directly above the barrel to blow both itself and Shin away. This one didn't have that kind of firm resolve.

...Albeit even that young man, with his firm resolve, met his second death without ever taking revenge for his ruler.

Shin could hear a voice over the radio. It was the murmuring of an infantry soldier speaking through an emergency frequency common to all units.

“If you can do that... If you can beat a Morpho that easily...”

Why didn't you take it out sooner? Why didn't you protect the Federacy? Why...

...didn't you save us?

Shin couldn't suppress a sneer. *That's what they're saying?*

—You have power, too, after all.

These soldiers, and the survivors of the Hail Mary Regiment who'd howled in anger and hate as they disappeared in a flurry of bullets. Each and every one of them had power. Even those young men who couldn't save their friends with all that hatred burning through them—pinned the blame on someone else.

They could all point at another person and say it was someone else's fault, something else's fault. They had the power to condemn others and call them evil.

When it came to people... Even those without the power to save themselves had the power to push others down. The power to warp someone nearby into evil.

He remembered it still. The face of those young men, so united in their thoughts and emotions that he couldn't tell their faces apart. Those fearsome expressions of humans who had cast aside individuality to become parts of the group.

Seeing those horrible faces made Shin utterly terrified at the time— of this power that could make an entire country shout as one and of its outcome, which was the Republic and the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

With that kind of power, the Republic could have even destroyed the Legion if they really put their minds to it, but all they did was use it to knock the Eighty-Six down. And the outcome was the Eighty-Sixth Sector. Shouting at the top of one's lungs that it was all someone else's fault eventually brought the Republic to ruin, the Hail Mary Regiment to ruin, and now it was doing the same to these soldiers.

This is why we can't win. This is why we lose. This is why...you'll always be helpless.

He averted his gaze, and his reticle followed, aligning on the Morpho's processor. He switched to his primary armament, the 88 mm tank turret. As the silvery Liquid Micromachines bubbled, likely attempting to escape, Shin fixed his eyes on them and mercilessly pulled the trigger.

Fire—impact, and burst.

Flames billowed from the Morpho. Countless Liquid Micromachine butterflies soared off, abandoning their body. And somewhere within the unit, an independent circuit triggered a self-destruct sequence.

All this had been previously observed and confirmed. So Shin gave a brief order. And the Eighty-Six, already accustomed to hunting down Morpho, switched their ammunition type before he even said the word.

“Fire.”

As Undertaker jumped off the giant dragon's carcass, countless incendiary rounds ruptured behind him. The silver butterflies were caught in the inferno, and the hellish vision of one child soldier's screams lingered. As the Reginleifs calmly walked away from the burning dragon's

corpse, the Morpho self-destructed in a blinding flash that saw them off.

They arrived at some city ruins on the western part of the former Niantemis territory, fifteen kilometers away from the Federacy territory of Neunarkis. They were only one day's walk away from Neunarkis—and yet Citri lacked the strength to make even that short journey.

Niantemis was annexed by the Empire over a century ago, and the city ruins gave the impression that the paved, maintained Republic townscape had been refurbished into the form of a winding, mazelike city meant to serve as an Imperial stronghold. Only the sign of a train station from across the fence, where the tracks heading west cut off, stood as testament of this city's old homeland.

And yet seeing the name NEUNARKIS on that faded sign made Citri smile.

“Yuuto... We're in the Republic. This is the country where I...”

Where we were born.

CHAPTER 5

THE MOONLIGHT SHINETH

The Harutari reserve position was exactly that—only a reserve position—and the situation there was quite hectic.

When Shin heard that report, still angry despite felling the Morpho, his annoyance deepened further. The fleeing soldiers refused to return to combat, and units that did return refused to cooperate. The Vargus troops who'd joined the position first didn't trust the fleeing soldiers here, saying that the bastards who'd left their families to die shouldn't get any supplies. All their demands were inappropriate in this situation, and Shin was frankly sick of it.

He heard a soldier who'd meaninglessly connected to the emergency frequency utter the word *monsters* into the radio.

“...If we're monsters—”

What does that make you, then?

You only show off your weakness, show off your stupidity, and make the situation worse for everyone. You're nothing but harmful. We'd be better off without you.

His ability spotted another Morpho. It was causing trouble, too. Crushing it would be a good idea.

“All units. We go after our next prey. Follow me.”

Besides, these infantry who only knew how to cuss at everyone wouldn't follow them anyway. Then let them keep

hating. If they could gather in numbers the way the Republic had, it would be one thing, but as a minority, they couldn't do much. Even their hatred was worth nothing.

You're all too weak.

“Seriously.”

An impact struck his unguarded flank. It was a complete surprise attack, from a position where neither his radar nor ability spotted any hostiles, and even Shin went flying. Shaking his head and looking around, he spotted the Personal Mark of a wolfman—Raiden's Wehrwolf. Realizing he'd just been kicked, Shin felt all the blood go to his head.

“What are you—?”

“What are you doing?! What, after coming this far, you've started thinking you're God or something?!”

Raiden had upped the Resonance rate somewhat and shouted at the top of his lungs, which made Shin's ears ring. With Shin silenced by the sheer intensity of his anger, Raiden carried on:

“Just because people call you a Reaper or a king doesn't mean you need to let it go to your head. In actuality, you get depressed and back down from every little thing; stop thinking like a coward!”

“You—”

But he recalled the words he'd spoken with his own voice.

—A weak Reaper who can't fight on his own.

“No one here sees you as a Reaper or an ace anymore. If I had to say, you’re more of a stupid dog that doesn’t listen to what he’s told and never learns but has so much power to spare that it only causes trouble for everyone else! So stop throwing your stupidity around like that, dumbass!”

—You keep showing off your stupidity and causing trouble.

I...I’m doing it, too...

Seeing Shin had frozen up, Raiden suddenly flashed him a strained smile.

“—So a dog like you needs your master to hold your leash at all times. Go on—”

Her voice reached him.

She’d been connected to the Para-RAID for some time now, but he’d been too caught up in anger and outrage to notice it—that one and only silver-bell-like voice.

“—Her Majesty’s awaiting.”

She said, with a smile:

“I see you’re listening to me this time, Undertaker. Colonel Vladilena Milizé is resuming her command duties. I’m sorry I made you worry, Shin.”

Her RAID Device could have been taken away, and even if it wasn’t, its settings could have been erased or at least had

the data tags with the Strike Package's commanders, captains, and staff officers removed. It was clear that Zashya's loyalty in delivering it was significant.

The RAID Device itself wouldn't have been confiscated, as Zashya would have needed it to stay in touch with Vika and his regiment. She insisted on having a spare one when she had multiple spares—Jonas may have picked up on that, but the situation on the front lines being what it was, he did nothing about it. Perhaps he felt that keeping the Strike Package's Silver Queen idle at a time like this wasn't an option.

Jonas himself was currently serving as a staff officer for the western front, gathering and scrutinizing information. Meanwhile Annette acted as a contact point for the group that remained in the base, and Zashya assisted in commanding the United Kingdom dispatch regiment.

Lena was still in the fancy room in the barracks of the military HQ, which had been made into an impromptu command post by now.

"I'm sorry I made you worry, Shin. Although, honestly, are you hanging on?" she asked with a giggle.

Shin clearly was hanging by a thread. The Federacy army was falling apart, and he was getting caught up in it.

"...Lena," he uttered, his voice like that of a child who just got yelled at.

Her words hit him like a splash of cold water, calming him down. Having come to his senses, he realized how abnormal his thoughts had been so far, which was why he felt so scolded and scared. He shamefully asked himself

what he was doing, and he was frightened by the prospect of Lena blaming or growing disillusioned with him over it.



That's fine, Shin. I wouldn't get disillusioned with you over that. Because I was wrong, too. I've made countless mistakes. I thought I knew reality, that I've tasted enough tragedy and cruelty to be smarter than most. And I made mistakes. Many, many mistakes, and I'll probably stumble the same way going forward, too. I'm the kind of fool who trips over the same hurdles every single time. So even if you failed in a spectacular way, I wouldn't be one to fault you for it. You realize how much it hurts to fall on your own, so you don't need me blaming you to feel guilty about it.

“Shin, you were about to make your way to the next Morpho, right?”

She felt him stir slightly. *It's all right*, Lena thought, then carried on peacefully. His decision that it needed to be eliminated wasn't mistaken in and of itself.

“Yes, we do need to remove that enemy if we're going to ensure a safe retreat. But—do you think you can hunt it down? In your opinion.”

With the current number of troops, enemy distribution, remaining ammunition, and terrain. Did he make that decision after considering all the factors a commander ought to take into account?

Shin closed his eyes for a moment and paused. Lena asked him as squadron leader, and he correctly sensed the implicit trust in that question.

“We can do it.”

“...Colonel Grethe.” Lena requested approval, and her superior officer nodded.

“We’ll support this attack, too. Go on. However, before we do that. Captain.”

“I’m aware. Our top priority is returning to Rüstkammer,” Shin replied, his tone returning to its usual calm sharpness. **“But the Morpho is a major obstacle to the 1st Armored Division’s path back to the base, so we will eliminate it. Don’t worry, I’ve calmed down.”**

In order to prevent any needless confusion, the 1st Armored Division remained under the command of the staff officers, with Lena only taking command over the Spearhead detachment. Since the detachment was formed by nearby units that had followed Shin, its chain of command and affiliations were a mess. As he listened to Lena’s voice while she rapidly rearranged the detachment, Shin breathed out softly... To think he’d left the chain of command all messed up like this.

“...Raiden, thanks. You helped me.”

He couldn’t switch his Para-RAID settings from Lena, so he used the radio to tell him that.

“You know it.” Raiden scoffed at him. “Lena was going to give you that kick instead, but I stopped her. You should thank me for that, too. You’re lucky I was the one to hit you, because if you’d have been careless enough to shout at Lena, you’d have gotten depressed in the middle of battle and never recovered.”

“...Yeah.”

Looking back at how he conducted himself, he was frightened to acknowledge he’d actually acted that way. The

Eighty-Six, his allies—they weren't fools. Only *they* were weak, powerless, and better off gone.

And that thought was the very source of the division that angered him so much. He'd made the base, unsightly simplification that the people he marked as different were fools. It was an unconscious self-justification. One that would tell him they were discarding people for self-preservation—making him turn a blind eye to the arrogance, callousness, and narrow-mindedness of discrimination.

But he had that tendency within him just the same.

Them was such an ambiguous word. It could let anyone discard other people, brand them as evil, hostile, and harmful, all for having the one trait that everyone other than oneself had—the fact that they were different.

Without even realizing it, Shin had been doing the same thing the Republic did when it branded him and his comrades as Eighty-Six—the act of stripping away one's name and face.

Words lied. People lied. And he—he, not anyone else—constantly lied to himself. He kept trying to gloss over his weak, unsightly sides, and he showed off his foolish, intolerant, and cruel base nature like it was a form of justice and love instead.

“That's right. I am...weak, a coward, and a dumbass.”

He'd said it about himself once before, and he'd forgotten it. When push came to shove, he was foolish enough to forget.

Raiden chuckled. “Looks like you're back in form... The next one

isn't just your prey. Tachina was pissed that you gobbled that one up on your own, and I was ticked off, too. Focus on recon, you hear?"

"Yeah... Sorry."

What lay fifteen kilometers ahead was hidden behind the horizon while viewed from the surface, but from high elevation, it should have been visible. And so the two climbed the steps of a church's steeple on the outskirts of the ruined city, hoping to at least glimpse Neunarkis from afar.

It was an old, steep, worn-out spiral staircase. Yuuto knew there surely wouldn't be any self-propelled mines lying in ambush atop a steeple in an abandoned church. He let Citri—who nearly stumbled over her feet—go ahead and stood ready to catch her if anything happened.

In the end, none of the girls made it. They all wished to go home, believing they could make the trip. But it wasn't to be. If only Citri could last one more day, but fate wouldn't afford her that extra bit of time. Perhaps she should have just given up, but not now, when it was within her reach.

It was a long, steep staircase. Yuuto could make the climb without exerting himself too much, but being on the verge of breaking, Citri was gasping for air. When it looked like she was about to sink to the floor, Yuuto finally reached out to support her, knowing she wouldn't want this.

"Want me to carry you?"

"No. Let me walk—to the very end."

But that said, her legs wouldn't move anymore. So he lent

her his shoulder, supporting her weight. The staircase was narrow, and there was hardly enough footing for both of them to stand side by side, but her body was light enough that it wasn't an issue.

As she gasped for air, her long hair drenched with sweat despite the cold weather, Citri painstakingly climbed up one step at a time.

“...Hey, Yuuto.”

She spoke between labored breaths, her voice thick with pain. She didn't want to get anyone involved.

“If I tell you to go back, hurry and climb down the steps. If it comes to that, it'll be too late for me, so don't say anything and run down right away.”

Don't get caught up in this. She was so terribly pressed for time that she had to say this. Yuuto pressed his lips together. He could only hope she'd at least last the climb.

As he took the prescribed drugs that would stave off his fatigue and gulped down the terribly sweet liquid rations that would restore the minimum fluids and calories he'd require, Gilwiese prepared to move to his spare unit. As breaks went, this was a travesty.

His unit, overworked from countless battles, had to be serviced, and the front line didn't give him the time to refuel and reload his ammunition. The newly formed Harutari reserve position was being attacked by Legion from every direction, and the troops were desperately fending them off.

“You don't have to come to the next battle, Princess. Head

back along with the injured soldier.”

“...Y-yes, Brother.” Svenja didn’t retort and nodded, her face clearly exhausted and her lips red from her biting them too much.

She knew she’d only slow him down from here on out, and she lacked the strength to insist and argue.

Gilwiese’s Mock Turtle and the other indigo-colored Vánagandr were swiftly towed into the maintenance station for service, resupply, and cleaning the mud out from their joints... Though at this point, having their armor tarnished with filth was hardly a concern.

However, the Vánagandr he boarded next was a stainless crimson, like it hadn’t experienced any combat or participated in any battles. Its proud luster looked foreign and out of place in this losing battle, and it made the faces of the defeated soldiers passing by chill with disgust.

His audio sensor picked up on slurs being thrown their way. *Damn nobles*. Now wasn’t the time to care, though, so he ignored them. On the other hand, the Para-RAID brought a report from the artillery team in the rear. This, by contrast, was something that demanded his attention. The artillery unit was prepared to shoot and commencing suppressive fire.

—Good news. Hearing this, they set out.

“All units, we move out. While those scrap buckets are stopped by suppressing fire, we strike them from the flank.”

The small window carved into the thick stone wall

showed the sleet raining outside. Despite the season, it wasn't a blanket of snow that covered the battlefield and all the death it held, but sleet that melted as soon as it fell, forming black mud.

His hand, touching the stone wall, became covered in dust, his fingers tearing through old cobwebs. A bird perched by the window flew off, leaving filthy feathers in its wake. Something squeaked—perhaps a rat—as it fled.

Citri's face, pallid and sickly, her complexion pale even compared with the glow of the snow, was the only thing that remained beautiful on this spiral staircase.

“...Yuuto. Listen.” Her peaceful, serene face felt like it was letting him peer into some distant, divine land. “Thank you—for coming with me. For helping me every step of the way. For telling me we'll go together. I was happy. Really. I'm glad I met you. I—really was happy.”

“...Citri.” Yuuto cut her off with a word.

He couldn't stand to hear this. If she was speaking this way because he was here with her—if it was his fault that Citri had to say such pretty words at the very end—then he didn't want to hear it.

“If you actually feel that way, that's fine. And I do think you really feel that way. But is that honestly what you want to say now?” asked Yuuto.

...I wouldn't, if I was in your shoes.

He'd heard the cries and lamentations of countless Processors from the Eighty-Sixth Sector, and he'd heard the wailings of the Legion through Shin's ability. None of them

had such pretty words. So he wanted to give her at least this much. He could only bring her to the edge of her true homeland, the place she was born in, so at least—if he couldn't truly help her, truly save her, then he at least wanted her to have this much.

“I couldn't do anything for you. So at the very least, I can listen.”

At that moment, Citri turned to face him, and her pale expression crumpled and contorted to that of an infant on the verge of tears.

In the face of the now-headless military police officer and the realization they had no idea where to go, Miel was at a loss. He almost burst into tears the way a younger boy would have. But he was able to endure that urge. He was driven by his pride—the pride of being his father's son, the man who'd headed to the Eighty-Sixth Sector all on his own. And he knew that Theo—who'd been the same age as him when he was cast out to the battlefield—wouldn't have cried from this much.

Now's not the time to cry. It's too soon to give up. So don't give up. Don't give up. Don't give up.

He roughly rubbed away the tears building in his eyes and got to his feet. He grabbed a scoop of earth, wet with the officer's blood, and stuffed it into his pocket half-unconsciously. This man had protected Miel to the very end, and Miel needed to bring him along. So he'd take this much, at least.

“Miel, the officer—”

“Don’t worry. Let’s keep going! We can still walk, so let’s keep going!”

Miel nodded to his friends, who didn’t let go of the hands of the younger children despite their fear. He looked around—there were groups of retreating troops every which way. If they followed them, they could make it to safety.

Keeping his eyes fixed on one group of soldiers so as to not lose sight of them, he followed. They were a group of kids, meaning they’d probably lose them soon, but there were other units all around for them to follow. They kept moving, comforting some of the kids who were so tired and scared that they eventually broke into tears.

But as they kept moving, they ran into a powerful, pure-white unit. This was a stroke of luck—this was a Feldreß that only one unit in the Federacy army possessed, quite similar to the Juggernaut that Theo had rode in during his time in the Republic. A Reginleif.

The Strike Package!

“Please stop!”

Miel took off his coat and flapped it as he ran into their way and shouted so the howl of the Reginleif’s power pack wouldn’t drown out his voice.

“I’m looking for Theoto Rikka! An Eighty-Six! Do you know him?!”

Miel knew Theo wouldn’t be on the battlefield, of course. But if they knew Miel was an acquaintance of his, maybe they’d be less inclined to ignore and abandon him. He heard a loud clicking of the tongue, and an annoyed voice spoke to

him. Theo never told him anything about it, but Miel at least knew that he was an Alba from the Republic; an Eighty-Six would react badly to him.

“Aaah?! I don’t know who that is. Maybe they died already, probably in the Eighty-Sixth Se—”

“No,” a second Reginleif cut the first one off, which made the angered Processor go quiet. “I’ve heard of him. I think he was one of the Reaper’s people from the 1st Armored Division.”

...Apparently, Theo worked under someone with one scary nickname. Miel was surprised, but he kept his expression unmoved, to seem like he already knew.

“Oh, the headless Reaper. In that case...”

The two red optical sensors turned to look at Miel like a pair of lone, crimson eyes.

“...we should probably take him along. He looked really pissed earlier.”

“Hopefully, this helps put him in a good mood... Hey, you kids.”

The Reginleifs’ optical sensors scanned over Miel and the Alba orphans huddled around him.

“We won’t protect you, but we’re willing to take you along. No crying or complaining, though, or we’ll leave you where you stand. Got it?”

Behind them, a transport machine whose name he didn’t know gazed at them with its optical sensors’ artificial gaze.

Words spilled from her trembling lips.

“...I don’t want to die.”

Those words dropped to the cold, freezing stone along with the tears running down her cheeks. They moved like pearls down her pale face.

“I don’t want to die. I’ve never wanted to die. My stepparents, Mr. and Mrs. Muller—they were kind to me. My new little sister, Kaniha, was sweet and adorable. I wanted to live with them, to go to school again, to tell them how grateful I was.”

But she didn’t do it. She couldn’t do any of it.

I’ve only lived with her for one year—would Kaniha remember me? Are my stepparents worried about me, or do they resent me? Do they resent me for lying, for not telling them the whole time that I’m not human anymore, that I got turned into a bomb, a biological weapon?

“I wanted to go back to my hometown, not to this empty place I don’t even know. I wanted to meet everyone again—my mother, my father, my schoolmates, Dustin. I wanted to grow up, to go visit the United Kingdom, where my parents were born.”

To go away, far away, as far as her whims would carry her, to the distance.

I wanted to go there with you.

“I don’t want to die, I don’t...!”

The tears fell. Citri wept, her expression screwed up and her tears streaming freely.

...When Kiki and others left at the very end, they did it so they wouldn't get the others caught up in their ending—and probably so they could cry where no one would see them. Because they didn't want this. All this time, they wanted to cry. To scream out that they didn't want to die. But they couldn't scream. Their cries reached no one.

As Citri sobbed wordlessly, on and on, Yuuto patiently waited. He told her he could at least listen, and he wanted to grant her this. For all he knew, Citri could explode at any second, but he didn't care if he got caught up in it.

As the surge of emotions subsided and the sound of her sobbing finally died down, she roughly wiped her tears and pursed her lips. She sniffled one last time, then whispered a thank-you, her voice hoarse.

“I'm fine now... Let's go.”

The bloodstains came from the corpses of the Bleachers lying on the floor, with the weapon being the now-bent gunstock of the one Ernst was holding. He hadn't used the gun to shoot them, nor had he used the bayonet, which wasn't attached, either. He'd beat them repeatedly with the gunstock as a bludgeon until they became still, hitting their bodies until skin tore and blood flowed.

The gruesome sight made Theo freeze. In terms of sheer gore, he'd seen more horrific deaths on the battlefield. But he was witnessing human bodies destroyed by violence that was so insistent and unrepentant, which even murder machines like the Legion didn't engage in.

And despite that, Ernst simply turned to face Theo with the smile of a father spotted by their child with his hand in

the cookie jar.

“Oh, sorry you had to see this. That’s no good—a grown adult lashing out in anger.”

“...!”

“Is Frederica with you, too? I guess she’ll really look down on me after this... Give me a moment—I’ll tidy things up. It wouldn’t do for me to make such a mess and leave the cleanup to someone else, would it?”

Saying this, Ernst casually returned the assault rifle back to its standard grip and tilted it toward the floor, pressing it against the head of an Alba woman lying there—this was Primevére, if he recalled, the Bleachers’ leader. Her head was caved in and bleeding, but Theo could still hear her faint breathing. She was alive. And Ernst had his gun fixed on her head.

“Ernst, uh, wait... You don’t have to kill her!”

The men had all been armed, so while his self-defense was excessive, one could say he’d been compelled to fight back. But none of the Bleachers were moving, so there was no need to hurt them any further. He could just let the Flame Leopards handle the rest.

“True, but there’s no point in keeping them alive, either. Like I said, this is me lashing out.”

“Lashing out...?!”

“After all, nothing matters to me anymore. Nothing. And since nothing matters, well, I do think everyone ought to live as they want to, but when noisy flies buzz in my ear when I’m already in a foul mood, I’m going to crush them. They’re

a nuisance, after all.”

As Theo looked at him, stunned, Ernst smiled.

“What, haven’t you noticed? I thought Shin definitely saw it, which is why he dislikes me. Thinking it was just him being a rebellious adolescent makes me happier, as your guardian.”

“...!”

Theo had noticed, of course. He’d frankly always been scared of Ernst on some level. The way he said these things with frightening seriousness, damning everyone, everything, and even himself. Claiming he wished to see himself and the world fall to ruin...with his black, void-like eyes, which saw no value in anything.

But if he showed his true nature off, everything would end. If everyone knew him for the empty monster he was instead of the title he’d been granted as hero of the revolution, the Federacy would completely lose its form. Nothing could be more eerie or scary to oneself and to others than someone who found no value in anything.

But more than anything, Ernst would be branded an unsalvageable monster, a murderer, and Theo didn’t want to see him end up like that.

“Ernst, you can’t. Stop—”

But Ernst wouldn’t turn to look at him anymore. Theo’s words seemed to bounce off him, never reaching the man’s heart. And yet...

Before Theo entered the estate, Frederica had filled him in about the details of what happened and asked him for

help. At the very end, she asked him for something. Her voice was desperate, like a child on the verge of tears.

“Theo. Theo, please say it. I know you have no intention of calling him that, but just for now, at this moment, think of it as my words, spoken in my stead...!”

Frederica had lost her birthright, country, and everyone around her. And while it hadn't been by Ernst's hands directly, she couldn't bring herself to call him that. She could not forget nor forgive the deaths of her young knight and her other caretakers. A puppet ruler though she may have been, the people around her still had sworn their allegiance to her as empress.

And so she couldn't express that she accepted the man who'd killed her family, the leader of the revolution who slew her vassals. Rather than using that title, she called him a paper pusher, and that was likely her way of resisting, of protesting...against herself.

She knew she couldn't call him by that title, but some part of her did want to. Having ascended to the throne as an infant, she didn't know the real person's face. And so she had to resist herself.

If that conflict's been eating away at Frederica, then why should I, a bystander who's older than her, who's never had that kind of conflict, let it stop me?

On that night they expressed their desire to return to the battlefield, Ernst came home despite being busy with work, because he wanted to celebrate the Holy Birthday. He came home with his arms full of pamphlets and reference

materials for schools, having taken time out of his busy schedule to consider their futures.

At that moment alone, this firedrake—with his falsehoods and eyes of void—didn't look like he was lying. And that's why—

“**J**ust stop it... Dad.”

And then like the word was woven of purest magic—the raging firedrake froze.

“Y-you...”

His hands fell limp, the assault rifle with its gunstock bent slipping from his fingers. It fell bluntly, harmlessly to the floor next to Primevére.

“You can't say that—that's not fair...”

His expression crumpled, looking like he was about to burst into tears.

Ernst was the oldest of the adults Theo knew, apparently old enough to have fathered a child who would have been older than Theo. But now he looked at Theo—and at Frederica, watching them from afar—with the expression of a small, lost child.

“I would have liked to have filled that role for you. I know you were left in my care in place of your real parents, but if you could bring yourself to call me Dad, I'd have wanted it. But calling me that now, at this point, in this place... It's not

fair...!”

He slowly covered his face with his hands. His bloodstained hands. His hands, which had still sought to deliver the killing blow to the woman at his feet. The hands his children held on to, just barely stopping him from swinging them down.

“It’s not fair. I can’t betray you. What father would I be if I betrayed two of my own children, trying to stop me together with tears in their eyes? I’m—”

His sobs slipped between his bloodied fingers, along with his tears.

“I’m your dad, after all... I’m not allowed to make you unhappy...!”

At the top of the steeple, the bell that was supposed to be there was gone now, leaving a vast stone floor and large windows covered in sleet. The windows surrounded the whole room, offering a view of all cardinal directions.

Citri approached the window facing west. It was almost dusk, but thick, black clouds blotted out the sunset glow. In the distance, over the empty plains of what would have been Neunarkis, hung a mist full of sleet. She looked out to the distance, her eyes red and puffy from crying too much and her cheeks stained with tears.

“—I always thought that city was like a palace made of moonlight.”

Her hometown. The city, consumed by the Legion, that she longed to return to.

“It was my favorite fairy tale, you know. A prince living in a lunar palace made of the golden light of the full moon. Every night, the spirits of the starry sky that were reflected in the lake would cross a bridge made of a midnight rainbow to meet him.” She turned to face him, smiling through her enfeebled lips and her pale complexion. “If that prince really existed, I’m sure he’d be a lot like you, Yuuto.”

Yuuto smiled despite himself. “...That’s the first time anyone ever said anything like that about me.”

People did say he was like a Juggernaut. A few times, even. They called him a combat machine who had no emotions, like a Legion, a Juggernaut. Because he always looked at things coldly, accepting everything as it was. He was able to survive, but he wasn’t strong enough to protect others, and it always seemed like everyone by his side had a way of dying and leaving him behind. And so without ever letting any of them linger in his heart, he survived the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

“...The first time,” Citri said, giggling. “Then I’ll say it more. Your hair is pretty, like the color of the moon, and your eyes glow like nostalgic fire.”

Citri, blind as she was to Yuuto’s worst traits, kept speaking of him in terms that didn’t fit him, with words so beautiful that they caused him pain. He never tried to shoulder any curses, but being cursed would have been preferable to this. Presented with the cowardly self-effacement, those words felt so much heavier.

Like a beautiful, cruel fairy of the starlit lake.

“I’m the first girl who ever said anything like that about you. So you’ll probably never forget me. I will—”

—*be your curse, then.*

For a moment, Yuuto closed his eyes. And then he managed something akin to a smile.

“Right. Let’s go together, Citri.”

Citri smiled blissfully. “Thank you.”

Who were those words directed at?

Her slender fingers reached for her hair, undoing one of the ribbons holding it tied together. He accepted the ribbon and, after a moment’s hesitation, kissed the back of her hand. This was his oath, his way of saying—*I have accepted your curse.*

Citri smiled and, holding that smile, took a step back, then another. This really was the end.

“And let me ask you to do one more thing. Don’t look at what’s about to happen. Don’t look at me.”

I want you, of all people, to remember me as I was. To think of me as pretty.

“...Yes.”

He turned on his heels, like he was shaking free from her gaze. Behind him, he could feel Citri lean out through the window, like she was returning to the heavens. She did it so the stone steeple—and its spiral staircase—wouldn’t crumble before Yuuto could get off.

An explosion rocked the spiral staircase’s gloom, its rumbling traveling through the walls.

Yuuto never turned to look.

They rendezvoused with the remaining force at their gather point in Nakiviki City within the Montizoto territory, then headed northwest before looping back to Rüstkammer. Shin left Undertaker—overused from the trip back—with its designated mechanics, Guren and Touka, and stood in the hangar’s corner. As he sipped on a mug of soup that civilian volunteers from the supply team had given him, Second Lieutenant Perschmann approached Shin.

“It’s good to see you back, Captain.”

“We’ll be deploying again as soon as maintenance is complete. How’s the fortification setup going?”

“It’s finished. I have the map right here, and we’re preparing to distribute data containing it to all Reginleifs. We’ll be handing out copies to the Wulfsrin who’re already in position.”



He spread out the map and began memorizing all the trenches, anti-tank impediments, and artillery positions drawn on it as he asked more questions. The engineers and heavy-machine-gun handlers already retreated. That just left—

“What about Fortrapide City’s civilians?”

“The engineers couldn’t take them along, so we’re having them stay at the base. The city is confirmed empty,” Second Lieutenant Perschmann said.

“We’ve got our families and the little ones all huddled in one place, Captain,” a female Vargus soldier who’d come with her appended.

Many of the Wulfsrin boys, who were in their early teens, were moving about the base as runners and combat-engineer staff. Those younger than that were small children who were of no use on the battlefield, but they had to be evacuated, too.

Or so Shin thought, but then the female soldier coolly continued:

“The little ones are still Wulfsrin. We raised them not to start bawling if a shell lands. Even if the civilians panic, the little ones’ll calm them or at least keep them in one place, so you can rest easy.”

So they weren’t targets for evacuation, but rather in charge of keeping the peace in the shelters. It was only now that Shin thought the tradition of having the Vargus as border guards was a pretty terrible one. Meanwhile, the female soldier started talking in a phony, coquettish

manner.

“By the way, Captain, what’s your age range? If you’d like, you could try fooling around with an older woman like me after this.”

She was joking, of course. This was just her way of trying to break up the mood and give this young officer a moment’s reprieve; he must have felt so much stress, exhaustion, and fatigue after hours of fighting and retreating while slogging through mud, with only a defensive battle with no end in sight coming up.

And it worked; Shin snickered. It was only a brief exhaling of air, but he was able to laugh, even if it was a bit forced.

“Sorry, but I have a girlfriend. Try someone else.”

“I did think that someone like you might have a woman, or two, or three, or four. That’s why I said, ‘fooling around.’”

“I only have one, plus it’s one of this base’s commanders. And a queen on top of it all.”

He’d be in trouble if he had a second or a third girl. This made the soldier straighten her back at once.

“Aye, I’ll keep my mouth shut. If I pick a fight with Her Majesty, she might have my head chopped.”

For some reason, Perschmann nodded stoutly next to her, in a way that seemed to say, *Wise decision*.

Upon returning to the main force, she heard that Dustin

was MIA.

Through their long time on the battlefield, the Eighty-Six adapted to keep grief and concerns out of their minds during combat. It was only this warrior's capacity that kept Anju composed.

“—I see. Roger that, Yuu, Kurena.”

Her grief felt lighter than she expected. And of course, she didn't feel any anger, either. Yuu and Kurena weren't responsible for what happened, after all. Nor was she incensed at this world for being so terribly cynical.

She exhaled sharply.

There were no miracles in this world. No salvation to be found. Any salvation that someone—that God—granted was nothing short of unreliable whimsy in the end. And so...

And so...

“I won't ask you to save him.”

She didn't know if it was God or fate or whatever else, but she never had and never would find the words to beg with. If all she did was pray for Dustin's salvation, she'd spend her life bemoaning the fact that she didn't save him. If she was to rely on miracles, she'd live her life begrudging the fact that her prayers went unanswered.

I refuse to live like that.

I refuse to live my life standing still and waiting for salvation to come to me. I won't resent what happens, be it from the hand of the world, God, or fate.

Aah, but...

“...Daiya.”

I wish I could have gone with you.

“Dustin.”

I wish you could have returned to my side.

Please. Okay...?

“Come back to me, Dustin.”

As the fighting went on, the routed soldiers were still returning slowly. In between the mud and fallen trees, outstretched hands clad in metal-black uniforms emerged, crying for help.

“—How many of them are there?! It’s not funny anymore!”

With his unit’s legs, the young commander of the armored division kicked away the self-propelled mine disguised as a wounded soldier. The metallic self-propelled mines had different radar readings compared with Vánagandrs. With the support console’s security system and alarms, a Vánagandr was unlikely to mistake them.

Of course, even with the radar, there was a chance of one slipping by and blowing up, but with so many of the scrap monsters around, things were already dangerous enough. Unlike infantry and armored infantry, the armored unit was protected by thick plates that allowed them to brave some risks.

After all...

“Wait. Don’t leave me behind...”

“Stand back, infantry! All these are self-propelled mines—just ignore them!”

The routed soldiers who’d slowed down their pace froze upon hearing his shout. They’d likely heard a comrade’s voice. Or maybe they were just good people who couldn’t bring themselves to abandon someone in need. Indeed, some of the soldiers who turned around had faces, discolored with mud and clotted blood, that looked like they were on the verge of tears.

“...You’re sure they’re self-propelled mines, right? We don’t want to leave someone behind again...”

The commander of the armored division held back the urge to click his tongue... They had to abandon someone. An injured soldier who couldn’t keep going. Another unit who’d stayed back to keep fighting. This made the soldiers reluctant to ignore a voice calling for help...and that drew the self-propelled mines to them.

“Yeah, these are Legion...so you’re not abandoning anyone. There isn’t anyone for you to save.”

The entire front had fallen apart, with retreating troops all over the battlefield. There were many real injured troops left behind. Many people who had no choice but to abandon an injured ally and flee.

And these weapons were made to take advantage and predate on that chaos, on that guilt.

Self-propelled mines, by design, directly targeted good

people who tried to alleviate the guilt of betraying their comrades and fleeing.

They embodied malice, mocking those with a conscience and a kind heart, rubbing in the fact that those who didn't have them were more likely to survive.

...Dammit.

“We’re not going to let you get the better of us, you shitty pieces of scrap metal.”

Cussing at them, the commander of the armored division moved in the opposite direction of the infantry forces heading to the Harutari reserve position, then turned his Vánagandr's bearings to face the mechanical swarm pursuing them.

The area around Rüstkammer, the Zasifanoksa Forest, was a mixture of conifer and broad-leaved trees—flora that was typical of the Federacy. The past governor of this area had left it mostly untouched, using it as hunting grounds, so it'd grown into a forest with uneven ground interlaced with tree roots and branches that impeded human passage.

They used these natural obstacles, reinforcing them and cutting away any parts that would hinder their defense. They dug trenches that were like scars etched across the soil, setting up anti-tank trenches, pillboxes, and metallic anti-tank impediments.

Through her optical screen, she could catch the morning sun shining down through the treetops and glimmering against the anti-tank impediments. Seeing this familiar forest, which they visited so many times to train, hunt, and

fish, changed in this way made Michihi's heart stir.

Michihi, and all the Eighty-Six for that matter, had no memories of their homeland. But if they could, seeing their homeland turned into a battlefield would no doubt feel like this sort of anxiety.

Seeing precious memories, the places one thought back on, turn into a scenery of death and blood.

It really is scary... This base became a home for us to fall back to. But that's exactly why...

“Who do they think they are, stomping all over our backyard? This is our base. Our home.”

This was the forest they walked through during march training, where they hunted so many times, went fishing, played around. It was their backyard. They knew every river and valley and incline, how each tree grew, every nook and cranny in this forest.

The forest we lived by for six months is sure to side with us.

The Reginleif squadrons hid in unfamiliar defensive installations set up on the familiar ground of the forest, connected to the Alkonosts and Vargus troops cooperating with them via Sensory Resonance. Somewhere in the trees, Undertaker lay in cover, with Shin carefully listening to the cries of the approaching Legion.

“All units, they're coming... We engage the enemy first at point 934. One hundred fifty seconds later, the enemy's advance guard should be in range. It's probably an armored division.”

Saying this, the Strike Package's Reaper smiled coldly.

“They’re confident they’ve won, so they’re not even sending out anyone to scout ahead. Let’s beat their smug faces in and send them packing.”

The Vargus troops who weren't aware of his ability fell to confused silence. Meanwhile, the Eighty-Six, Sirins, and Bernholdt's unit—which had served at Shin's side for a long time now—all calmly responded. **“““Roger that.”””**

They accurately opened fire on the spot he instructed. That was the opening shot of the battle of Rüstkammer base.

The aluminum armor and internal bulletproof fiber was able to stop most of the shell fragments, but not all of them.

“The RAID Device... Yeah, it's dead.”

The quasi-nerve crystal that served as the core of its features was cut in half by a shell fragment. What's more, his unit was heavily damaged and out of commission, his assault rifle's chamber was broken, and his body was aching all over from blows and sprains. He couldn't hear out of his right ear—the eardrum must have ruptured.

But on the other hand, if the RAID Device hadn't taken that shell fragment, it would have cut across his neck, killing him. His right leg, where his pistol was holstered, wasn't on the receiving end of such a miracle, with a fragment painfully embedded into his flesh.

“...I should count myself lucky I still have my pistol, I guess.”

It was no good for fighting the Legion, but it was useful for killing himself. The radio was, as always, useless due to Eintagsfliege jamming. He recovered his knapsack from his unit and began trudging through the unfamiliar Federacy woods.

A thicket rustled, prompting him to turn on his heels swiftly, only to find a seven-year-old girl in uniform. For a moment, he was confused, but then he realized she must have been a Mascot. A symbolic daughter the Federacy employed to keep soldiers from betraying the army. She must have strayed from her unit or perhaps been discarded.

As he froze, she looked up at him, but her small lips didn't part. Her upward gaze wavered, expressing her emotions, but she couldn't ask him for salvation. She'd been abandoned, left behind on the battlefield by the soldiers who should have been her family.

But he couldn't blame them for it. After all—

“...I can't save you, either.”

I'm weak, and just looking after myself is taking all I have. If I try to help a child, I won't survive.

So it wasn't his fault. He had to leave her behind. And he'd already abandoned Citri once—what was another one on the list? He'd already abandoned someone once, so he may as well keep leaving people to their fate. He was a despicable bastard who betrayed Anju's wish, so he may as well try to live like a coward, only to fail and die.

The girl looking up at him had no pistol on her, nor was she in any shape to wander the battlefield. He looked away from this girl, much weaker and younger than him, his

conscience blaming him. He had to look away from the sheer guilt of it all.

After all, I'm...I'm...I am...

Dustin, listen...

But then a voice crossed his mind. A kind, serene voice. A pair of eyes he thought were prettier than the highest spot in the sky.

You're pure. I know you don't like cheating.

I...

—So tell yourself you're doing it for me. And come back.

Am I going to make even those words into a curse? Convince myself that they're for me? Those words that wished for me to return alive so badly that they tried to shoulder the burden of my shame and cowardice?

Am I going to turn your words, the words of a kind witch, into a curse, too? Am I going to turn those words into a lie just so you won't hate me?

—You can't let yourself cheat.

It's just like you said. I hate cheating and cowardice. I can't forgive myself for doing that.

—Keep your promise and don't die.

—Come back to me.

But you said you'll be there to take me back. That you'll take me back. Even if I can't save anyone, even if I

abandoned someone once, the least I can do is not make you mourn. To be someone not just I, but someone as kind as you won't be ashamed of.

Weak as I am, I can at least do that. I can at least strive to do that!

“Come here.” Dustin extended his hand.

The girl looked between his hand and face, confused.

“Come here. We'll go back together!”

For a second, the girl looked like she was on the verge of tears. She ran over, and he caught her and picked her up in his arms. This would be faster than keeping up with the walking pace of a little girl, and it wasn't like his pistol would be any good for fending off the Legion. They'd just have to hide, wait for them to pass by, and follow the retreating army.

He couldn't fight. If the Legion stood in his way, he wouldn't be able to drive them off. He simply wasn't strong enough to do that.

But even the weak, despite their weakness, had their ways.

“Just stay quiet for a while, okay? I promise I'll take you back to safety.”

Because if nothing else, I have to return to safety.

A duck or goose that still unfortunately remembered what it'd been like being tended to by humans approached

Yuuto, who beat it dead with a stick and cut it up. Whatever sensibility that would have made him averse to seeing blood after the events of this day had been worn down a long time ago.

He was in the Legion territories, in an area where the Ameise were patrolling and looking about, lured in by the sound of the explosion. Despite this, he returned to the woods to hide and lit a campfire in a small pit that concealed its glow. He used the fire to cook the meat.

This was a method of conserving stamina on a winter battlefield. Or at least, that was his intent. But now that he was all alone, with no one's voice nearby, he finally realized it wasn't the only reason.

A crow landed next to him with a flutter. It must have been hungry, so far from the front lines with no humans to provide it with scraps. Yuuto threw it a piece of meat, but rather than eat it and run off, it stayed on the spot, pecking on the ground.

A crow. A scavenger that fed on the flesh of the dead.

“—Hey.”

The crow couldn't have possibly understood his call, but it cocked its small head curiously like it did.

“Come tomorrow, won't you go and eat her?”

Or maybe the rats would get to her remains by tonight. And that would be fine, too. He said he'd take her heart along, but he wished her lingering flesh could become sustenance for the birds taking flight or the animals crawling about. Somewhere within that cycle, she'd eventually find

her way back to her hometown. She'd be able to see the whole world, just like she wished to.

He didn't make her a grave. She asked for him not to see her, after all, and Eighty-Six didn't have graves to begin with.

And she and her friends were Eighty-Six. They kept going, reaching their final destination.

Same as me.

A full day and night had passed, but all ten of the Federacy's front lines were still locked in combat. A personnel officer from far in the Rüstkammer base told Lena he'd take over for her, so she should get some rest. Lena agreed and turned off the Para-RAID.

The tactical staff officer who was originally supposed to replace her was injured earlier and had to be hospitalized. The fighting had become so severe that stray bullets reached as far as the command post at the back of the defensive line.

She was told to rest, but Lena's mind was too alert and awake for her to get any sleep. The state of excitement made her body prioritize sending blood to her head, so even her neglected stomach didn't show any signs of hunger.

But still, eating something small to have at least something in her belly and closing her eyes for a bit would be better than nothing. Having decided that, she picked up TP, which was sitting quietly at the corner of her desk, and walked to the bed in the adjacent room. Having experienced the first large-scale offensive, TP had keenly learned to discern when states of emergency were beginning, and it

always stayed by Lena's side so as to not get separated from her if something happened.

Jonas entered the room, carrying pasted-together, printed-out maps of the Rüstkammer theater and the surrounding combat zones that Lena demanded earlier. At this point, the Federacy's communication networks were completely jammed due to the large amounts of data that was being transmitted at all times. There were no real-time maps Lena could obtain right now, so having paper maps she could write on was quick and useful.

"The numbers of the surviving units in each sector are unclear at the moment, Colonel Milizé. With combat ongoing, they've all been in a hectic state, making it impossible to con— Ah?"

Jonas flinched—TP had pounced at him, hissing in intimidation. TP's back was arched, and its tail and fur were standing upright, its fangs bared like an angry little lion. It was completely prepared to fight. Jonas, who had no recollection of doing anything to antagonize the small creature, inched away from it, confused.

This absurd sight was so far removed from the tension of a command post in the heat of battle, Lena was taken by surprise and nearly burst out laughing. She looked away, withstanding the urge.

Or rather, Jonas seemed to somehow not realize what he did wrong, but in truth TP was acting exactly as expected. Jonas honestly deserved it.

"TP loves me, so given you harassed me so much, it's only natural he'd be aggressive around you."

“Ah...! Still, I understand that you’re unhappy with what happened, but it was by no means harassment...” Jonas seemed offended by the implication and rushed an explanation.

“You say that after forcing a woman away, locking her up in a room, and leaving her confined, anxious, and afraid?” Zashya remarked coldly. “Forget harassment, this is outright abuse. The actions of a pimp, an enemy of all womankind.”

“A pi—?!”

Seeing Jonas turn outright speechless from the accusation, Lena couldn’t help herself and laughed, picking TP up in her arms. Laughing helped pull her mind out of the tension of the battlefield, and she thankfully realized this made her fatigue and hunger rise up to the surface.

“Let’s go, TP. Forget about this bully and let’s sleep together.”

“*Meow.*”

“I am not a bully...!”

TP suddenly purred. And after getting flustered over something inconsequential for a while, Jonas looked quite exhausted in his own right. Compared with the other three commanders, Lena was single-handedly managing a workload that would have taken multiple staff officers to handle, so her exhaustion was understandable.

As Lena ignored them and made her way to the bedroom, Annette walked over.

“Just give it up, Second Lieutenant. You’re a bully and an enemy to all womankind and a scary person... Here you go,

tea. You must be tired; something sweet should wake you up.”

“Thank you, Major... Ugh, it’s bitter! What did you put in this?!”

“Oh, sorry about that,” Annette said, her voice completely monotone and very unapologetic. “I must have mixed up the sugar and the instant coffee.”

“They’re the opposite colors, for crying out loud!” Jonas jabbed, overly serious.

He’d fallen for her prank without even realizing it, which just stood to show how much he wasn’t thinking straight. Smiling sarcastically, Lena gave him one parting remark.

“You need to get some rest, too, Second Lieutenant. I’m sure your master will order you to do so before long.”

And with that said, Lena vanished into the bedroom to take a nap.

The platoons and squadrons—and in some rare cases, even individuals—who’d drifted away from combat in between the retreat and the Morpho bombardments made their gradual return to Rüstkammer base over the course of three days.

There wasn’t a spare moment to put them back in their original units or platoons. After some time to rest, they were organized into impromptu squadrons and sent to whatever spots didn’t have enough hands on deck. Frederica, who’d returned to the command post, started by confirming the safety of missing soldiers whose faces she knew, but soon,

she had to be sent to help grasp the situation across the front line.

Yes, Ernst was safe. Despite how important an issue the attack was for the Federacy, no one really paid it any mind right now, because everyone was too busy and tense.

The Reginleif research team members were added to the maintenance crew in the hangar. The infantry and armored infantry who fled to this base were immediately sent out to reinforce the defensive line, and the facility staff members and drivers also joined in. Despite being soldiers, the inventory staff helped unload the injured.

The Eighty-Six told one another stories of how the priest came out of retirement with a rifle in hand, shooting until he ran out of ammo only to eventually pick up a rock and use it to finish off a self-propelled mine. The fact that they could joke even at a time like this was evidence of how combat-hardened they were.

“...But, Captain, if you piece all the stories together, the only way they make sense is if there’s five priests running around.” Bernholdt shuddered at the mental image.

Everyone present laughed. All of them were out of ammo and out of fuel, and they were hiding in a natural basin, hugging their assault rifles. With shell fragments and bullets whizzing over the surface, they couldn’t stand up. Fido returned, loaded with ammo, fuel, and also heated-up combat ration packs, graciously placed there courtesy of the supply team. There was no time for meals during combat, so even if the combat rations went a little cold, it was better than having them unheated.

One Processor boy from another armored division, whose

name Shin didn't know, opened a packet and downed its contents. His face was emaciated and exhausted, since he'd only gotten a few winks of sleep in between maintenance and supply, and he had to keep up his energy with these rations, which didn't qualify as meals.

"I wish we had five of him. It'd be nice if he split up and we'd have more of him."

"He won't, and it wouldn't." Mika shook her head.

"If he could do that, he'd be a bigger threat than the Legion," Raiden added.

Both had weird half smiles on their faces, probably out of fatigue. Still, they were smiling. They joked around and had the energy to laugh.

We can still fight.

Shin finished his modest excuse for a meal just as Fido finished supplying the Reginleifs. He picked up his assault rifle and, while still crouched, somehow managed to slide into Undertaker's cockpit. New orders came in from Lena. Meaning—

"I guess we can go and see if the priest really split in the fight. Looking forward to it."

Checking the situation in each position and moving in to help where necessary. This was Shin's implicit order, and someone—once again, an unfamiliar voice—cackled.

"Roger that. Let's say we're heading out to help our splitting, dividing priest, Reaper Captain."

"He doesn't need our help; the Legion aren't enough to

take the priest down. The part about him throwing rocks wasn't made-up, if you ask me."

A self-propelled mine probably wouldn't expect to be beaten by something as primitive as a rock. Hearing Shin speak in a pitiful and completely serious voice, everyone else solemnly crossed themselves and brought their hands together in prayer.

And then someone connected to the Para-RAID. The stern voice of their Queen once again reached the battlefield.

"Handler One to all Spearhead detachment units!"

In the midst of the storm of bullets, Shin and the others exchanged looks with a smile. No more confirming the situation. Now they were given the honor of fighting under Her Majesty's orders once more.

After the military physician ardently refused to prescribe him any more drugs, and his subordinates and the maintenance crew worked together to basically pull him out of his unit, Gilwiese had no choice but to nap.

The situation was reaching a point where he, as regiment commander, had to let his deputy take command for a while so he could rest. This was because they'd recovered the fleeing infantrymen at the Harutari reserve position; as a result, the armored units were given more freedom to act, and the combat engineers and transport units were able to secure open routes, allowing support and supplies to flow properly and the troops to launch counterattacks.

However, the routed soldiers wandered about in places where they didn't belong, and their confused state meant they didn't contribute much to the army.

If we could just get them to fight, the armored units—we descendants of armored knights—wouldn't be overtaken by these lumps of scrap metal.

The state of the battle was gradually starting to swing in their favor. Once he got some sleep, he'd set out to push the enemy back.

Just you watch, Gilwiese thought firmly before fatigue finally pulled his mind into the quagmire of slumber.

“—Get out of the way, you hulking oaf! An oversize dragon like you won't stand in the way of House Nouzen's Wild Hunt!”

Still, Dinosauria were the Legion's trump cards, and they were an opponent that challenged even the Crazy Bones Division—certainly not the kind of unit Yatrai could get away with calling a “hulking oaf,” and yet.

Probably deeming that the time was right to flee, the Legion's heavy armored units were finally beaten by the Crazy Bones Division. With bloodthirsty laughter and howls, the division pursued the retreating enemies while being conscious enough to avoid straying too far.

They maintained an offensive formation, facing the enemy force, which advanced in a wedge formation, and tearing into them head-on. Having the Harutari formation at their back afforded them freedom of movement. There was no fear of them charging too deep into enemy lines,

only for their allies to fall apart, isolating them.

The Azhi Dahāka had very poor fuel efficiency, so getting isolated behind enemy lines was especially fatal for it. Unless its allies' defensive lines were stalwart, even this man-eating black dragon couldn't fly freely across the battlefield.

Yes, unlike the fragile, broken Saentis-Historics line, the Harutari reserve formation was stalwart *now*. And this was because the routed soldiers who came here had cattle guards with guns fixed on them, giving them no choice but to fight. When it was their own lives and the lives of others hanging in the balance, even those cowards fought like hell.

They resisted the metallic surge with all the desperate scurrying of panicked rats, supported by the experience and foolhardiness of old and female wolves. It was brittle resistance, but effective for the time being.

...How things would go on was a question Yatrai didn't think about and honestly didn't care to know in that moment in time.

“Lord Yatrai, you’re letting your emotions show.”

“No one’s listening except you, Vice Captain... But I know. I’m just tired, is all.”

Nouzen blood blessed him with robust stamina that most people couldn't match, but piloting an Azhi Dahāka, with its intense mobility, in such prolonged defensive combat without pause took its toll even on him. As Yatrai sweated from the heat of the cockpit and the excessive amount of adrenaline pumping through his brain, his vice captain seemed to smirk.

“You always were too tall for your own good. There’s a hot shower and cold ale waiting for you when this is all over, so just bear with it a little longer. Or would you rather have me as a way of relaxing yourself?”

“Hey, cut that out,” he replied tiredly.

She’d fought alongside him for as long as he did, so there was no telling how fatigued she was. Or how tired he was, for that matter. Despite that, the maiden, as fair and much more vicious than any courtesan of legend, laughed at Yatrai’s dull reaction, her voice too lovely for the battlefield.

The battle dragged on, and the date and year changed—January 2, year 2151 of the Stellar calendar.

The fighting on the third northern front was finally winding down, and news of that was spreading across the other fronts. The media reported on it as well. Commanders on the other nine fronts encouraged their troops, and soldiers egged on their comrades, saying they only needed to fight a little longer, and then kicked fleeing soldiers—who interpreted the news and improving situation as a sign to try to run again—back into the trenches.

The next day, January 3. Slightly before midday, the fighting in the Rüstkammer theater finally died down as well. The Eighty-Six had been able to defend their new hometown.

As Shin heard the Legion from surrounding sectors also begin to fall back, he breathed a long sigh of relief. Fighting continued to rage all over the western front as a whole, but still.

“Lena, Colonel Grethe, the enemy forces are retreating from the Rüstkammer theater, and there are no signs of them launching another attack. The back of the enemy lines and units in every theater are starting to fall back as well. The battle over the western front should end soon.”

“Roger that. I’ll report it to the higher-ups, Captain... Can you still keep going, stamina-wise? Can we rely on you to gather intel on the enemy movements across the front for a while longer?”

Several days of combat had passed, and despite Shin’s ability being a necessary precaution in case the Legion launched another attack, Grethe’s voice carried a tinge of concern. *You can say no if you feel like you can’t.*

Shin closed his eyes. Honestly, he’d have liked to get some rest immediately if he could, and he was so fatigued that just closing his eyes now made his consciousness start fading off into sleep. However—

“It’s possible...assuming you could get me something special to motivate me.”

He suggested candy in an offhanded manner, to which Grethe smiled.

“Acceptable terms... You heard us, Colonel Milizé. Could you arrange him a prize?”

Lena was flustered at having the conversation directed at her so suddenly. **“Aah, hmm, yes... I’ll kiss you when I get back, Shin!”**

...This was spoken through Para-RAID, and not by the Processor himself, so it wasn’t picked up by the mission

recorder this time. But hearing Grethe and the staff officers who were listening in stifle their laughter left him perplexed.

The immediate fighting ended, and the Legion were retreating. Anju could only watch with a vast sense of disbelief.

...It's over?

I survived.

Just that thought made her head spin, like reality was growing distant.

But Dustin's gone.

But Dustin never made it back in the end.

So why did I survive?

Her warrior's mind was able to hold on to a sliver of composure, given the end of combat hadn't been announced yet. If nothing else, all the grief and regret she felt didn't surge up in the gaping hole torn into her heart.

She opened Snow Witch's canopy and wobbled out of the machine—a reckless, meaningless act that could result in grave danger, but no one stopped her. And in the end, fighting all over the area died down. There were no stray bullets or shell fragments flying around to shoot through her.

“Anju... Anju!”

That call pulled her out of her thoughts, and she saw

Kurena hurrying over. She hopped between broken concrete and fallen trees like a rabbit and sprinted over to her. Some vague part of Anju's mind pondered that it was dangerous running outside her unit. What if there were unexploded shells lying about?

Kurena grabbed Anju's hand roughly, pulling her along. She looked like a child about to burst into tears.

"Come! Hurry!"

"Kurena, what's wrong?"

Her voice came out flat, almost off-key, which seemed to finally push Kurena into crying outright as she pulled her hand.

"Just come with me, quick!"

No, in fact, she'd been crying ever since she hurried over.

"Dustin came back!"

"...!"

The shock made Anju freeze for a second. All the emotions she'd kept bottled up rose to the surface. She pulled her arm out of Kurena's grasp almost roughly, then ran along the path Kurena had just come from.

The momentum of Anju pulling her arm out of her grasp, coupled with fatigue from the battle, made Kurena stumble back.

"Ow!" she yelped, but her lips were curled into a smile.

Thank goodness... Really, thank God.

Tohru, who was passing by, approached her with a sardonic smile and offered her a hand, which she gladly took.

“All right?”

“Yeah. It’s all right now.”

Both me and Anju.

When Kurena, with her sniper’s eyesight, spotted Dustin, he was still relatively far-off; by the time Anju hurried over to him, he’d just arrived at the gate to Rüstkammer base. The moment he saw her, his dirtied face softened into a smile. But at that point, Anju stopped in her tracks.

“—Dustin.”

She had no idea what to say. She hadn’t been there with Dustin when it happened, and she didn’t go looking for him, either. She prioritized her duties as a commander in the Strike Package over him. So she had no idea what to tell Dustin, who’d come back on his own.

Dustin, however, simply smiled at Anju, who stood frozen before him. It was a carefree smile.

“Anju... I’m glad you’re all right. I only made it because of you.”

“...Eh?”

What does he mean by that? I wasn’t there for him, I didn’t look for him, and I didn’t do anything for him.

“I heard your voice telling me to come back... You wished for it, right?”

“...!”

“That wish reached me. It made me feel like I had to make it back. That’s how I stayed alive and came back here. I may have cheated, I may have been so weak that I had to resort to cheating, but knowing you were waiting for me kept me going... It’s thanks to you. Thanks to your words.”

—So tell yourself you’re doing it for me. And come back.

—Don’t let your purity drive you to death and return to me at all costs.

“I’m back, Anju... I told you, didn’t I? I won’t leave you behind.”

I won’t make you grieve.

“...!”

The emotions surging up filled her heart. She felt something warm run down her cheeks. Unable to manage any words, Anju was driven into her surviving beloved’s chest, holding on to him. Her arms wrapped around his back, and as he felt her silent tears, Dustin thought:

Anju told him to cheat. But she didn’t tell him to abandon others or discard his sense of justice. All she wanted was for him to return alive. All she wished was for him to avoid following that justice, that sense of mission, the arrogant, presumptuous ambition to save anyone and everyone until it drove him off the edge.

Even if he ended up beaten and broken, unable to save

anyone. Even if he had to drag himself back, powerless and weeping—she would always accept and take him back.

That's all she was trying to do.

Once she calmed down, Anju looked down, spotting a small seven-year-old girl who'd been clinging to Dustin's leg the whole time.

"Who's this, Dustin?"

"Oh..." Dustin paused for thought, then jokingly picked the girl up. "She's our daughter. Yours and mine."

"What are you saying...?!"

She poked him gently, but Dustin was so thoroughly exhausted that it was enough to make him wobble and sit down on the ground. Deciding he was probably fine if he had enough cheer in him to joke around, Anju ignored Dustin and looked at the girl at eye level. Siri, who'd been watching over from afar, deemed the time was right and approached to collect Dustin, throwing him over his shoulder like a sack.



“You’re a Mascot, right?” asked Anju.

The girl nodded timidly... She explained, her voice thin and nervous from speaking to someone she didn’t know, that the nice mister saved her.

“I see. The man is very sweet, but I know you must have been scared on the battlefield. Good on you for being brave... Come here. We’ll get you something warm to eat at our base.”

“...I can come in?”

“Of course.”

The girl looked up at her, surprised, and Anju nodded with a smile. A little Mascot girl, all on her own on the battlefield. Her unit must have abandoned her.

“Dustin—our precious comrade—brought you here, after all. So let’s go back.”

To our home.

“**G**od, what a battle...”

“I’m surprised we made it through alive...”

They had, after all, just experienced both that chaotic excuse for a retreat and days of fighting in a state of confusion, with platoons, battalions, and armored divisions mixed together.

Claude, who nodded at Suiiu from the 4th Armored Division, was seated next to Saki, who looked exhausted.

They had no idea why the two of them were together, given they were in different battalions, or how they ended up mixed in with the 4th Armored Division.

Looking around the beaten pillbox in the combat-worn forest, they unwillingly noticed the ones in the corner.

“...There’s still Republic people here.”

“We’ve been fighting for days; why haven’t they run yet...?”

Republic refugees were huddled together in the corner, admittedly trying not to get in anyone’s way. They’d been in the middle of evacuation when the front lines fell apart, and they got caught up in the fighting. They somehow managed to get to Rüstkammer’s defensive line, then were recovered and sent into trenches or pillboxes so as to not cause any trouble by loitering about. With all the bullets and shell fragments flying around, many of them couldn’t move deeper into the defensive line.

Up until today, they’d been told to simply remain put and stay out of everyone’s way. Still, it was only a temporary ad hoc solution, and noncombatants couldn’t be left in a frontline base or its trenches.

“The transport staff should arrive to deliver supplies soon, so we can ask them to take those people back.”

“They won’t like it, though. Not that we should care.”

All that talk about new self-propelled mines or suicide-bombing viruses, and the Republic all being traitors. As Claude pondered how they were going to handle them going forward with those ideas, Suiu smoothly got to her feet.

“If the transport staff is coming to collect them, we should probably round everyone up. Bring the ones in the trenches over.”

“Think you can do that? A captain like you is going to have places to be after this, right?”

“It’s cool, er...Claude, was it? You’d rather not talk yourself into trouble while you’re tired as it is, right?”

The fatigue had made him lose his temper in the middle of battle and throw away his glasses, meaning his argent eyes were now exposed. Suiu spoke while sneaking a glance at his eyes. She then shrugged, as if to say there was no choice.

“I am a captain, after all. Leave it to me.”

But regardless, despite her being an Eighty-Six tempered by the battlefield, she was still smaller than a boy like Claude—or compared with Saki, her limbs were petite, and her shoulders were slender. Claude and Saki exchanged a confused look.

“...We just said a captain would have other places to be.”

“And if we just said yes and dropped everything on you, our position would look bad.”

“So with that said...you can leave all the dirty work to us, milady.”

Claude offered his hand in an exaggerated manner, which made Suiu break out in laughter. It felt like the first time in a while that they joked around.

—If you don’t smile, you lose, after all.

Kurena said that once, and Claude thought this rang true. So he was going to laugh, even if he had to fake and force it. He wasn't going to lose hope, weep, and lament anymore.

He must have looked really funny, because Suiu held her stomach, laughing. She nodded, wiping tears of laughter with a fingertip.

“Wow, that was so dashing, I almost fell for you... All right, I'll be counting on you, my knights.”

“—You could have called us your Prince Charmings,” Saki said earnestly.

Suiu laughed again.

Rito turned around in surprise, spotting a flash of long black hair out of the corner of his eye.

Milan's optical sensor followed his gaze, noticing the figure of a girl walking away. Her curly hair flowed down her slender back, and she wore a pair of sturdy boots that were too big for her lanky ankles. Her long hair flowed in the snowy wind as she approached a group of Republic citizens.

Even a girl wouldn't be that thin after living on the battlefield for as long as an Eighty-Six. And she wasn't a Wulfsrin girl, either; the Vargus had a bulky skeleton and stature, owing to generations of being soldiers. All the people from the nearby towns had long since evacuated, and since she had black hair, she couldn't have been a Republic citizen, given they'd expelled anyone who wasn't Alba.

Which meant she must have been—

He switched on the external speaker and hurriedly called out.

“...You!”

The girl’s gaze alone turned to look at him. Languid, listless blue eyes.

“You’re Actaeon, aren’t you?”

He should have upped the speaker’s volume, so he could warn the Republic people. But he kept it low, like he was scared of them finding out.

The girl came to a realization and smiled at him.

“Oh, you’re Eighty-Six, aren’t you? From the Strike Package.”

Just like me—Eighty-Six.

Different from me—Strike Package.

“Good. I’m glad you get to live on.”

Unlike us, who are going to die. Fated to die, no matter what.

“...!”

“That’s good. So... Please. Just let me do this.”

She smiled. Her blue eyes, so exhausted and resigned, had a twinge of lament to them. She implored him with the empty, mirthless gaze of a witch, even her tired hatred ground to nothing from persecution and fleeing.

“Just say you didn’t see me. Pretend you didn’t notice me. At least let me have—my revenge.”

Revenge against the Republic, which made me into an Actaeon.

Rito gritted his teeth.

“—I can’t.”

He opened the canopy. He didn’t think those words should have been said through a speaker, with his face hidden in his unit.

“I can’t. I don’t want to let you become a killer. Even if this is revenge and you want this, I don’t want you to kill people.”

Like Lieutenant Aldrecht, who became a Shepherd to take revenge; like his ghost, which went around slaughtering the Republic’s people. He’d turned into a murder machine to avenge his wife and daughter and, despite that, froze up at the very end because he never forgot his daughter’s visage.

Rito had no way of knowing what Aldrecht had fought at the very end. Was it grief? Regret? Emptiness? If nothing else, he wasn’t satisfied. He’d discarded his humanity, the peace of death, the hope of going to meet his wife and daughter—but what he gained at the end of it all wasn’t fulfillment and satisfaction.

And he didn’t want that to happen to this girl. He didn’t want her to die with only regret and emptiness and sorrow crossing her mind.

“You’re Eighty-Six, just like me, so I...don’t want you to experience this sorrow.”

The girl’s mouth hung open, and she blinked once, then twice. And then she smiled, as if to say she had to comply. It was their first meeting, but seeing a boy, younger than her,

wave her down like they were old comrades caused her to smile at him like an older sister hearing her younger brother make an excuse.

“In that case, stop me from killing them. There’s no time left.”

You kill me.

Oddly enough, he wasn’t conflicted about it at all.

“Okay.”

This is what Cap’n Nouzen always did. Exactly what he did to comrades who were about to die.

He took out the assault rifle his unit had for self-defense, extended the stock with swift motions, and aimed. A rifle’s bullets had faster initial velocity and a heavier weight, making them more reliable than a pistol’s.

He aligned the sights with the girl. She closed her eyes with a smile.

“Thank you.”

“Yeah.”

He pulled the trigger. Shot through the chest from close range, the girl crumpled to the ground with a smile.

And then...

The heat burning through his mind, all the thoughts and perceptions and judgments, everything was blown away.

...Huh?

All the colors he could see changed into a dizzying, haphazard swirl. Dots of white and black filled one side, and then the colors stopped changing. Ah, no, red spread over the speckled ground. Crimson spilled in random patterns over the white of snow. A sharp noise echoed in his ears—he knew this sound, but the blankness in his head kept him from remembering what it was.

Shot through, he tumbled off his unit and slammed on his side into the snowy mud without bearing himself. But at this point, Rito couldn't tell what was going on. The impact of his fall made him face another direction, and he could see military boots approaching his field of vision. They stopped right in front of him.

He couldn't look up, but he heard a voice from above. He couldn't grasp the emotion or meaning of those words anymore.

“Murderer.”

“...?”

i am rito

an eighty-six

so i am not a killer

Hearing footsteps approach from between the broken trees, before Lerche even turned around, her sensors focused on the sound of the voice calling out to her and

Ludmila. The footsteps implied the body weighed roughly a hundred kilograms, and it was the voice of a woman. Her voice was oddly upset, and her tone came across as alarmed.

“Y-you two. Are you Eighty-Six...? No, what do I call you? Are you with this boy...?”

“Ah, no, we are not Eighty-Six,” Lerche said and turned around.

If this person assumed the word *Eighty-Six* was a disparaging one that should not be used, she must have been from the Republic. Having reached that same conclusion, Ludmila turned her head and optical sensor to look at her as well...

“What’s more, the Eighty-Six themselves wear that name with pride. That title is not a mark of shame, but...”

But then Lerche trailed off as the woman came into view. At that moment, Ludmila felt her nonexistent heart freeze over with shock.

The woman was young, short, and slender. But the reason they had calculated her weight as heavier was because someone else was in her arms. Her slender arms, her chest, her cheeks, and even her moon-colored hair were stained with red, and the woman was sobbing.

“I’m sorry. I...I couldn’t save him. I heard his voice, so I knew he was there, so I should have come closer. I couldn’t save him, I didn’t make it, he’s so small, but I couldn’t protect him. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry...”

Lerche stood beside Ludmila, her Emerōd eyes as wide as they could be. Ludmila didn’t have a feature that would

make her shudder, and yet she trembled, freezing up, and tried to call his name.

“Sir...”

Stop.

Lerche, don't.

Please don't remind me of his name, of that fact.

Once... When was it? Yes, it was the previous me. He looked at me with fear. He said he didn't want to die, that death scared him. In looking at us, this person made that realization. And that put me at ease, the knowledge that this person would not die the way we did.

And yet this person...

“**S**ir...Rito...”

Having us, birds of death, call his name would only be an ill omen and a disservice. And so Lerche, who had made an attempt to not call people by their names, spoke his name with a dumbfounded expression.

The bird of death that would never call the living by their name called his name—it was clear, without a doubt, that the boy was dead.

Held in the woman's arms with his skull shattered from a gunshot, its contents, his life, and his personality spilling out—was Rito Oriya's dead body.



Being nearly half buried in the snow-specked mud turned out to be a blessing. Henry crawled out along with the subordinates who'd hid with him in the same place—the same trenches—for roughly half a day.

“...How many made it?”

First Lieutenant Nino, the company commander who'd sat beside him in the trenches, sighed at that question, his face dirty and emaciated.

“You, me, this boy right here, and about ten troops or so.”

“Me too, for what it's worth. And seven of my men.” First Lieutenant Kareli wobbled over.

In other words, these twenty or so men were the sole survivors out of two companies numbering four hundred troops in total, the rest either routed or dead.

There was no sign of any Legion or friendly troops in sight as they looked around the battlefield, which was covered in corpses and wreckage.

“The western front—or rather, the Harutari reserve position managed to stave them off. Let's take this chance to rendezvous with the closest position...”

But then he saw First Lieutenant Nino grimace and the child soldier stiffen. This made Henry pick up on the hints.

“...Right. No position would accept a Republic soldier, would they?”

And though he left it unsaid, they weren't likely to take in the child soldiers, who were a minority in the Federacy.

First Lieutenant Nino shook his head. "It's not about you. I doubt anyone's going to let other units join them at this point. They think everyone but themselves is the enemy... Everyone feels this way now."

"None of them were willing to rescue or offer covering fire for us...," First Lieutenant Kareli said bitterly. "And they knew our unit got left behind here."

But that said, the Legion's scavenger units, the Tausendfüßler, would come before long. And even if they didn't, it was only a matter of time until the next Legion offensive began. If they were going to survive, they'd need to return to their army's territory. And yet...

When the realization hit Henry, he got to his feet. It took a moment's hesitation, and he had to swallow his guilt, but he steeled himself. His life wasn't the only one hanging in the balance here, and he didn't want to make Claude angry anymore.

"Let's go to Rüstkammer base—the Strike Package's home base."

His subordinates eyed him dubiously. First Lieutenant Nino raised an eyebrow, and First Lieutenant Kareli looked alarmed. But Henry carried on, undisturbed. This was one thing he could believe in, even in this situation. Even in a situation like this, Claude and the Eighty-Six who fought alongside him...

"I have a little brother. I'm sure they'll take us in."

The president, Ernst Zimmerman, returned to his estate for recuperation, with his vice president taking over his duties, finally making the decision to approve forced conscription. Starting with evacuees from the territories; minorities and serfs who didn't know how to write their names; people from extremely poor territories; the lower classes of the capital region; and finally, even the wealthy, educated citizens of the capital, who'd been idly watching by while thinking themselves exempt from this duty.

When the first group got drafted, the group after that didn't act against the law, instead agreeing with it, thinking they themselves were a capable part of the population and different from the weaker, good-for-nothing groups.

And because of this, when it was their turn to be drafted, the group that was conscripted before them and were by now trained soldiers ruthlessly rounded them up, burning with revenge. The new recruits were looked down upon, treated roughly—the ones who were drafted first and the ones who got drafted later held a deep, reciprocal loathing for each other.

Not for the Senate, which decided the drafting; nor the major nobles standing at the top brass of the military. It was the same method the Imperial nobles once used to keep the people under control.

And Ernst couldn't stop their scheming. His position as president remained unchanged, along with all the responsibilities that came and would come with it, but all the power and authority had been transferred to the vice president, without reverting back to him.

“...That, on its own, is the result of my conduct thus far, so I can understand that.”

Confined to his home under the pretense of recovery, Ernst smiled in his living room, now clean from bloodstains. But despite his house arrest, his maid, Teresa, was allowed to return and was by now the only person to listen to him.

She stood stock-still, her lips pursed, the identical twin sister of his late wife. Looking away from her, Ernst leaned deep into his armchair, sighing. His wasn't the face of a firedrake that had grown weary of the world, but simply that of a powerless father.

“It may be too late to say it now, but I really don't think it was necessary. The draft and isolation of the Republic people are unavoidable by now, and I frankly don't care about it, so let them do that if they must—but I wanted to at least keep my children safe.”

The scales that had once been balanced because nothing was placed on them now held a weight called *familial piety*, tilting it firmly to one side.

The 1st Armored Division, which was once composed of seven battalions, took losses that required it to be restructured into four battalions. Among the battalion captains, Mitsuda, who led the 5th Artillery-Configuration Battalion, died in battle. And—

“The investigation into the soldier who shot Rito is underway on the back lines.”

Raiden spoke, trying to keep his voice even, and Shin nodded wordlessly. He looked unaffected, but he was actually keeping his lips pursed. Raiden himself had to suppress his own grief and anger, too.

Rito had been like a little brother to them. They never thought he could possibly die, and yet he met a tragic, violent end.

Yes, a gruesome death. Rito did not die in combat. Of all things, it was a human—a Federacy soldier—who killed him. The culprit was one of the survivors of the units that fled during the battle. The woman who'd carried Rito's body said soldiers from his own unit were the ones who caught the soldier, and they tried to resuscitate Rito but ended up just standing there as it was clear he was beyond saving.

Grethe said that the soldier would be held accountable and punished for his actions. Likely to be executed by firing squad. A Federacy soldier may have killed Rito, but the Federacy military itself did not condone his death.

That was a small comfort for Raiden—Shin likely felt the same way.

“The soldier's commanding officer sent us an apology letter. Colonel Grethe said we don't have to force ourselves to read it—”

“An apology, right? I'll look over it, then.”

Grethe must have read it first, so it probably contained an honest apology and not just excuses, and Shin didn't feel inclined to coldly turn that down. He didn't want to use Rito's death as a reason to treat all Federacy soldiers as a heartless evil. Picking up on Shin's implicit intentions, Raiden closed his eyes.

“...Right. Let me read it later, too.”

Because honestly, if he was to read it now, he'd just feel

hatred toward them. He sighed, trying to vent out the indignation filling his heart, and resumed the briefing.

“The 2nd and 4th Armored Divisions need to have their battalions restructured, too. The 3rd Armored Division will have to be disbanded, and its remaining troops will be organized into the other three divisions.”

The 3rd Armored Division had been hit directly by the first Morpho barrage. What’s more, their division leader, Canaan, was MIA, alongside his Longbow squadron, meaning it was this armored division that took the biggest losses out of the four. Its numbers had been reduced to the point where it couldn’t function as an armored division, and as such, its survivors would have to be used to recover the losses the other divisions took.

However.

“But about the 3rd Armored Division...the survivors from Canaan’s missing group just returned.”

“—I thought this time, I was going to die for sure.”

Canaan returned with the survivors from his squadron—overall, there weren’t enough of them to make up a single squadron. Canaan spoke, his expression exhausted, as the last few soldiers dragged themselves into base. Apparently, they were the final.

As he sat next to his Reginleif, which was so badly beaten that even Shin was shocked he actually made it back like this, he gave a thumbs-up and pointed.

“Plus... I think he was a battalion captain sent over to your

group, right? I don't know what he was doing so close to the front or why he was all alone."

“Jaeger.”

Turning around, Dustin smiled faintly when he saw the golden-haired and red-eyed boy who'd disappeared with Citri. He'd escaped the Legion territories all on his own, without so much as a pistol. What's more, he had to trudge through the snowy northern battlefield, needing to avoid his own army's soldiers since he was considered a deserter. After such a difficult journey, even Yuuto was visibly haggard and exhausted.

And though Yuuto himself probably wasn't aware of it, his eyes were warped with anger so intense, it couldn't be translated into clear emotion—it couldn't even become tears.

“I'm sorry. I got your message, but I couldn't go.”

“That's fine.” Yuuto shook his head. “She knew she was making an unreasonable request.”

Dustin nodded in silent understanding. Now he saw that she hadn't been pointing out or blaming him for his helplessness. She knew it was unreasonable, but she still wanted to meet him—to see him one more time. Even on the brink of death, Citri was still kind and sweet.

“May I...? Should I ask how it went?”

“She went out with a smile. She cried and got scared along the way, but at the very end, she smiled.”

“Really? Then that's...a good thing, right?”

If, at the very end, she felt like she could punctuate her life with a smile... Dustin couldn't tell if that was true yet. Perhaps he'd never find the answer for as long as he lived.

Yuuto watched his vague nod with the discerning eyes of a crow before saying, "She left me with a memento."

But contrary to his words, he didn't take it out of his breast pocket—a light-violet hair ribbon, same as the color of her eyes. He'd realized that a strand of her long flaxen hair was coiled around it and carefully folded the ribbon up, so it wouldn't drop.

Dustin looked back at him. Yuuto unconsciously clenched his right hand, the same hand that held on to her one last time, and flashed a slightly provocative smile.

"You can't have it. I'll be the one who takes her along."

I will be your curse, then.

Yuuto did feel he'd be better off with a curse cast on him. Maybe he was wrong to feel this way—and maybe he was right. He couldn't really tell. And when that curse was placed on him, it was incredibly painful.

But he didn't want to have that curse lifted.

He'd probably never forget her, for as long as he lived. The girl he didn't save—and yet who smiled at him at the very end.

Yuuto's declaration made Dustin crack a pained smile. That went without saying, after all.

“Yeah, you should be. I’m not qualified to do it.”

Not me, who couldn’t—who failed to choose her.

Not me, who chose someone other than her.

“I already have the Snow Witch’s curse on me. The Snow Witch took her aim and shot me down. So I’m not qualified to take Citri’s hand anymore.”

The gentle curse that the kind witch placed on him—a curse that drove him to survive.

Dustin exhaled, chuckling with a hint of contempt. Yes, that went without saying—he didn’t have to go out and announce it. But Yuuto didn’t pick up on that nuance.

“Besides...she left it for you. Because you were the one who was with her in her final moments, and no one else. She decided she’d become your curse to carry.”

Didn’t she?

Yuuto smiled softly. It was a pained smile that stood for the tears he didn’t know how to shed yet.

“...True.”

Words and wishes. Prayers and emotions. All things people directed at one another were curses. They bound one’s legs, keeping them from going on, warping their path forward. They made one take wrong turns, even changing their soul in definitive ways at times.

Could the curses one accepted despite that at least be called love, then?

The Federacy capital of Sankt Jeder couldn't withstand the worsening public order borne of the clashes between the residents and the evacuees. Destabilizing factors were able to take the president of all people hostage, showing that the capital's police lacked the teeth to uphold the peace.

And with that pretext, a few divisions were deployed in Sankt Jeder and its outskirts. Among them were the Brantolote archduchy's Flame Leopard Division and the Nouzen marquessate's Will-o'-the-Wisp Division. At the same time, the media was being suppressed. Demonstrations, gatherings, and protests were forbidden. There were crackdowns on civilians walking after sundown, with the formal reasons being maintaining blackouts and keeping up the public order.

The citizens felt suffocated by their life being overturned in the space of one night, at the sight of crimson and black uniforms controlling their city, but there was nothing they could do. This wasn't the police, but the army, and armored divisions at that. Even if they grouped up, unarmed civilians couldn't fight them off.

And so all they could do was wait, their frustrations building up without an outlet.

But on the other hand, there were those who regarded the majestic sight of armored weapons—heroic, crimson Vánagandrs—lording over Sankt Jeder with a sense of genuine relief. Those who were used to being ruled, who took obeying the dominion of the former nobles as a given.

This meant they didn't have to do anything anymore. No need to make decisions, to shoulder responsibilities. They

wouldn't have to engage in the tiring, bothersome act of using their own will and responsibilities to lead their lives.

If they did that, the other citizens wouldn't have to ask them why they wouldn't act like them. The other civilians wouldn't call them lazy and good-for-nothing anymore. The other civilians wouldn't blame them for everyone being unable to live peacefully. They wouldn't be faced anymore with the powerlessness of having to abandon others.

It would all be so much simpler. So much more peaceful.

We shouldn't have become the Federacy. We shouldn't have become citizens.

The Federacy no longer had enough people to send military police to what was, on paper, a backwater evacuee sector. Thanks to that, the people of the Republic didn't have to live while surrounded by guns. But despite that, the Republic people had to face what was effectively an internment.

The discrimination of the Eighty-Six and the ineffective Republic volunteer soldiers. The wiretaps and the Actaeon. A declaration of independence that almost seemed to have been coordinated with the Legion's attack.

Suspicious and accusations piled up, leading to the surrounding citizens building up a wall that surrounded the evacuee sector. The Republic's people were closed up by fences, like livestock, with vigilante corps being established to keep the people from straying outside them. The citizens acted as if by isolating and shutting off the Republic people, they'd be able to excise the calamity that was upon them. That maybe, if they did that, even the Legion would

eventually disappear.

Like an attempt to pass the buck. Like escapism.

“...Why did it come to this?”

The Republic people were stunned as they looked up at the fence—a fence built in a hurry, but still much too high. The height of this wall stood for the sheer intensity of the Federacy people’s hostility. The sight of this enmity put in tangible form, thrust before them so blatantly, was a horrifying one. It was the kind of malice that a normal person would hide out of shame, but it was displayed with such brazen, collected indifference that it scared the Republic people into stunned silence.

Everyone around them was, by now, nothing but animals and demons in human form. These weren’t people...and maybe there were no people left across this whole wide world.

“We just wanted to live in peace.... A peaceful life—that’s all we asked for...”

“**T**he Actaeon are all presumed dead, and the Bleachers’ remnants have all been exposed. However, given the state of the war and home front, we will need you three to stay in the military headquarters base.”

In other words, Second Lieutenant Jonas Degen maintained the facade of a cold expression while he kept his regret and conscience suppressed. Having already seen through this mask, Lena, Zashya, and Annette faced Jonas with expressions that were equally as cold.

“We have no problems with you commanding the Strike Package. We will leave the RAID Devices with you, and you are free to contact them daily. We will provide you with any necessary intelligence needed to command the war, including for the Rüstkammer theater, and I will join as a staff officer going forward.”

Jonas kept his eyes fixed on Lena, who remained silent. No matter how she may have felt about it, as a Federacy soldier, Jonas couldn't allow Lena to do this.

“But we cannot approve your return to the Rüstkammer base. Colonel Milizé, Major Penrose, I'm sure you two are aware of the army's collapse and how it has caused a decline in the standard of living. More than anything, the fear of being overrun by the murder machines has been weighing on the people, and the civilians are looking for soldiers to vent their frustrations on. We cannot return you to the front lines, in the name of your personal safety.”

And as Republic soldiers, Lena and Annette knew all too well what civilians in search of someone to vent their frustrations on were capable of.

“Commodore Ehrenfried.”

Willem understood with bitter clarity that during the third large-scale offensive, the Federacy military completely lost its function as an organization. The Federacy, its military, and its soldiers all broke apart out of terror, splintering into factions.

The nobility, which once ruled over the people by monopolizing might and violence and kept their vested interests in place through bonds of blood, had been

abolished in the revolution. This meant the only thing remaining that kept the Federacy united—the people’s perception of other citizens as their comrades—had been shattered by the citizens themselves.

By now, the Federacy was only a wreckage, a country in name only. A large mass of people that didn’t coalesce into a nation. People who only found fault with one another’s differences, too occupied with scorn, enmity, and suspicion to cooperate—an unsightly aggregate of small, powerless groups.

And the same could be said of the military. It had fractured into groups that hated and saw one another as enemies. Federacy soldiers and volunteer soldiers; Vargus and citizens; former nobles and former commoners; territory folk and city folk; veterans and reservists.

“Commodore, this is my decision. My order, my responsibility, and my crime.”

And with that knowledge in mind, the lieutenant general who commanded the entire western front’s army gave his order. He issued the order to Willem, who’d been relieved of his position as chief of staff earlier and was unable to make that order himself.

It was to ensure that the Federacy soldiers who could not be expected to cooperate, to unite, or to even fight in the same trenches at this point would still carry out their duty to defend the nation.

An order to ensure that they would be able to stave off the Legion invasion in the future, even if just barely.

“Understood? You were not involved in this decision. You

objected to your cruel superior and was relieved of your post as a result. Only one commander made the wrong choice in the face of this predicament, and no fault lies with the western front's army as a whole."

...And yet Willem thought that was just escapism dressed up as self-sacrifice. Idleness masked as coldheartedness. Resorting to cruelty was the easy way out, and stooping to thinking like this wasn't something nobles and commanders like them were allowed to do.

"You think this is escapism, don't you, Commodore?" the lieutenant general asked sharply.

Willem peered back at his superior unintentionally, surprised that he'd read into his thoughts so clearly. The lieutenant general stared directly at him, his crimson eyes burning.

"And that is exactly what it is. This is escapism, an unforgivable act of idleness. Which is why you must fight on."

The burning, crimson eyes of a Pyrope—a Pyrope to oppose Willem, an Onyx.

"Mock me as lazy and idle, a pathetic old dog who fled his responsibilities. Earn enough merit to do that... I don't have enough time left, but you still do. Enough time to fight off the escapism, the idleness, the intolerance ruling over this country."

You, who can recognize foolish escapism for what it is.

Willem closed his eyes, displaying his consent and respect to this old general.

“Yes, sir.”

“No,” Lena replied coldly. “That’s not all there is to it, is there, Second Lieutenant? If anything, *this* is the real reason.”

An Eighty-Six shooting a civilian, and a young girl at that.

The moment he saw that, that armored infantryman instantly fired on the Eighty-Six. This was the natural reaction of a proud soldier, obligated to defend the weak civilians. He almost felt bad he couldn’t use his heavy assault rifle, since it was dysfunctional after long combat, and had to resort to his spare assault rifle. The 12.7 mm rounds were more than enough to blow the Eighty-Six away, though.

But when the girl’s body exploded the next moment, the armored infantryman realized his mistake. And though he understood what he did wrong, there was no reversing what happened. The Eighty-Six had fired on an Actaeon, which meant he’d only been trying to defend civilians from a self-destructing weapon...and the armored infantryman shot him dead for his efforts.

He killed him, and there was no undoing that. He was a killer, and worse yet, this wasn’t just murder—it was fragging, killing a fellow soldier. And the army hated fraggers above all else.

The soldier couldn’t accept that.

As they pinned him down and blamed him for his actions, he refused to admit anything. *I am not a killer*, he said. It

wasn't fragging. That Eighty-Six killed a defenseless girl. She just happened to be an Actaeon, and maybe he was only trying to make it seem like she was a threat to justify her death.

So I may have killed him, but it wasn't a murder, and it wasn't fragging.

And so before he was handed over to the MPs, the soldier found a chance to give the footage to one reckless war photographer who'd sneaked onto the battlefield. To tell the public that he did nothing wrong.

To tell them all that I saw what I saw, so it only made sense for me to shoot.

The people's families were taken away, and they were once again placed under a regime of bayonets and military boots. And the reason for that were two defeats in quick succession. The Federacy was, by now, fully surrounded by the murder machines, and they were creeping closer moment by moment, with no one to stave them off. The situation was sheer terror.

And that was why the Actaeon hunts would not die down.

The real Actaeon girls were all dead already, but once someone pointed at another, saying they were infected, no one could stop the people from moving in to expel that person. The government repeatedly announced that there were no new self-propelled mine models or suicide-bombing viruses, but the attacks on evacuees, minorities, families of soldiers, and injured soldiers didn't stop.

It wasn't just that excising the rumors was difficult; it was

because the idea of a new self-propelled mine or a suicide-bomb virus gave people a justified reason to drive undesirables away. It was a convenient tool for venting their anger in the guise of justice.

A Celena girl whose brother enlisted and died in battle was driven out of school. Families that adopted Actaeon or wiretap children were subjected to verbal abuse and harassment, forcing them to leave town. Minorities lost their homes to arson, and hotels that housed evacuees were subjected to so much harassment that they had to give up and stop running their establishments as evacuation sites.

And that all led to a worsening in the peace, further increasing the citizens' discontent and anxiety. The Actaeon weren't enough anymore. The people needed a clearer crime, a more defined evil to pursue. Unforgivable, unsalvageable sinners, a different "other" they could loudly and proudly blame for everything.

Like the Republic, for instance. Or like...

...the elite unit of heroes who'd been saved by the Federacy but failed to prevent this defeat. The ones who hurt people—as wiretaps, as Actaeon, as Legion.

The combat-crazed berserkers born of the Republic, of the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

The TV broadcast framed it as shocking footage—it was the moment Rito shot the Actaeon girl. That moment alone, with no context. It'd been pulled from the armored infantryman's optical sensor. As Raiden got to his feet, shocked by how the army let this leak, the newscaster continued his report with misguided outrage and elation.

Video evidence of the Strike Package—of Eighty Six—killing an innocent. Divisive evidence that they, too, were enemies.

The Eighty-Six were humankind's archenemy.

They willingly became Legion, joining the ranks of the murder machines.

They colluded with the Legion as wiretaps.

They turned into Actaeon, killing countless innocent civilians across the Federacy.

And in the midst of combat, they killed civilians. They'd likely killed countless Federacy soldiers thus far. And that's why the Federacy started losing one battle after another as soon as they appeared.

We lost because of them.

They're traitors. They turned their backs on humankind, becoming animals intent on hunting us down. The biggest sinners of them all.

...They're the ones who killed Rito.

It was a Federacy soldier who took his life, and yet the Republic people intentionally overlooked that fact and made themselves the victims. Just like the Republic people, they painted themselves the victims while remaining willfully ignorant of their own crimes.

“...Is this some kind of sick joke?”

Each front's chief of staff and vice commander—including the western front's chief of staff, Willem Ehrenfried—were dismissed from their posts one after another. The same reason was given every time: insubordination. All of them were promising generals, either subordinate to or seen as the future successors of their front's supreme commander.

After pushing away their most promising successors, every single front HQ gave the order.

“Since I’m the Queen of the Eighty-Six, you’re keeping me here in the capital as a hostage so they stay in line. To coerce them to obey the Federacy military’s will, though they’re bound to feel outraged, resentful, and even inclined to rebel.”

With the Eighty-Six becoming both an outlet for the people’s frustration at defeat, and targets of their suspicion and distrust, they could no longer return to the Federacy, nor could they fight alongside Federacy soldiers.

“To keep the Eighty-Six from betraying or opposing you. To ensure they remain your weapon for fighting the Legion, like they have until now. That’s why you’re holding me hostage.”

“...Li'l Reaper.”

He was still annoyed by that nickname even now, but he was used to it. Hearing Shiden call him, Shin turned to her, his eyes fed up as ever. Shiden, however, wasn't looking at him; instead, she was peering dubiously out the window, at

the eastern sky.

“Are those transport planes? Is it just me, or are they different from the ones we usually see?”

It wasn't even a question of if they were different, since there were no flights scheduled that day. There was no sign of busywork on the base's runway, meaning they hadn't received updates on any emergency landings, either.

Shin approached the window, becoming suspicious. The planes really were different, not just in terms of model, but in sheer numbers, too. They flew in a formation of ten aircraft, coming in from the east, where the bases around Sankt Jeder would be.

It seemed they had no business in Rüstkammer, and they were rotating from a good distance away, their flanks turned. The doors to their elongated fuselage opened outward. Shin recognized this structure. These weren't cargo planes; they were *bombers*. They had the same mechanism as the bombers that'd gone on a suicide attack on the United Kingdom's snowy battlefield.

...What were bombers doing there?

Were they preparing to drop bombs so far *behind their own army's front line*?

But then a moment later, it dawned on him. And the realization made his every pore open and every hair on his body stand on end.

“—Colonel!”

He connected with Grethe, too annoyed to fiddle with the Para-RAID's settings. Normally, he wouldn't contact Grethe

directly, instead deferring to her aide to inform her he was looking for her, but now wasn't the time.

“Captain Nouzen?! Is it the Legion...?”

“No, but this is urgent! Have the entire unit and all the Vargus units called back! Right away!”

She associated the urgency of his words and his direct call with his ability, but Shin cut her off. The fact that she trusted him enough to listen to him despite her confusion was something Shin was sincerely grateful for. They were also lucky that the intermittent Legion attacks that had lasted since their retreat died down last night. This gave the Strike Package time to gather, and Shin wanted to avoid the unit members having to see this in the middle of battle.

“I'll handle recon in the meanwhile—please take control of the unit as brigade commander before they start speculating or splitting off because of misinformation!”

There were a lot more people this time around compared with *back then*. Keeping everyone gathered would take experience, skill, and know-how. Being late to handling the initial reaction was something they had to avoid.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Shiden, who had noticed what he was saying and turned around. She was shouting into the Para-RAID—**“gather, group up, tell the others”**—while ordering researchers and civilian workers who didn't have RAID Devices to run. Even the slightest loss of information, even a single person unwilling to share intelligence and work together, could be fatal for what was about to come.

There came the signal for the unscheduled approach of aircraft... He could feel Grethe leave her desk, likely having been informed by the runway's command tower. He could hear her gasp in disbelief upon looking out the window as she, too, realized what was happening.

“We’re being cut off from the Federacy mainland. The western front... All the Federacy’s fronts are about to be made into the Eighty-Sixth Sector!”

The metallic birds unleashed their explosive entrails. Bombs fell from the sky, raining over the rear of the front line. They plummeted, sticking into the land. They didn’t explode, and this was because they weren’t meant to be dropped down on enemies from overhead.

Dissemination mines.

A weapon that triggered upon detecting a human, a vehicle, or a tank—and, in so doing, hindered the coming and going of military units. And countless of them had been released and laid far behind the Strike Package’s home base at Rüstkammer, the Vargus people’s barracks in Fortrapide City, and the Harutari reserve line.

Just as the Republic once set up walls and *minefields* to ensure the Juggernauts and their “Processor units” wouldn’t be able to retreat from the battlefield.

Only once the first layer of lines was set—and the western front’s army and all Federacy front armies were blocked from retreating—was the order relayed. As all the unit members stood before her, Grethe did not hide it from

them.

Going forward, the Strike Package was to defend the Rüstkammer base to the bitter end. They were not allowed to retreat. The same order was handed down to all units across all fronts. This, of course, led to an outburst of anger and discontent, but with the minefield trapping them on the battlefield, their complaints wouldn't reach the other side.

They could not return to their peaceful homes.

They would have to fight off the Legion's invasion to protect the people who cut them off, and the soldiers on the battlefield had no way to survive but to obey their orders and fight. The other side had control of their supplies and way out, while the Legion were charging at them from before their eyes. They didn't have the means or chance to rebel against their distant homeland.

Their forward path was closed off by the Legion—their backs fenced off by the malice of humankind.

This situation was no different from the Republic battleground once called the Eighty-Sixth Sector.

AFTERWORD

It feels like I never have enough space for idle chatter here, doesn't it? Hello, everyone, this is Asato Asato. An extra-thick 86—*Eighty Six*, Volume 13, is here for your reading pleasure!

- The subtitle:

It's not *Deer*, but *Dear*. And *Jaeger* means "Hunter" in German. And so it means, "To My Dear Hunter"—Citri's feelings for Dustin. Though, they never reach him.

- The chapter titles:

This time, I used *waka* poetry as the theme. Incidentally, Citri's name references the plover in the poem used for Chapter 5's title:

Prologue: When I Gaze Up to the Distant Heavens, Is the Spring Moon, the Same as Mount Wakakusa

Chapter 1: I Utter the Name, Asking the Gull, If My Beloved Still Lives (Source: *Kokin Wakashu*, Proofread and Annotated by Umetomo Saeki, Iwanami Shouten, January 1981)

Chapter 2: We Departed, Vowing Never to Forget, to See Each Other's Visage in Our Hometown's Moon

Chapter 3: How Is the Gull, Who Lives Not in the Capital, to Answer One's Fears

Chapter 4: As the Grudges Linger, I Ask the Gull, for My Beloved

Chapter 5: The Moonlight Shineth, as the Plover Crying Out My Feelings, Leaves the Shore of Okitsu (Source: *Shin Kokin Wakashu*, Part 1, Proofread and Annotated by Jun Kubota, KADOKAWA, March 2007)

Now, for some thanks.

To my editors, Tabata and Nishimura. I'm glad every chapter, from one all the way to five, made you scream. I did it!

To Shirabii. Yuuto and Citri look so good on the cover. I wish I could stare at them forever...!

To I-IV. The Azhi Dahāka is just too cool. I really regret we couldn't show it in the anime. I'd love to see it in motion...!

To Somemiya. Lena and the tiny Eighty-Six in *Magical Girl Regina* ★ *Lena* are so cute, I'm always excited to see them. It's just an explosion of adorableness. The Magical Girl Saint ★ *Magnolia* is gorgeous, too!

And to all the readers who read this volume. The next volume kicks off the last arc of 86. It's the final arc, with Shin, Lena, and the Eighty-Six having matured enough to face the enemy from the beginning of the series: the malice of humankind that seals off the battlefield—the malice they once yielded to.

The final arc is the Eighty-Sixth Sector arc. I invite you to see it to its conclusion.

Music playing while writing this afterword:
“Haikyo to Rakuen” by Akiko Shikata